

Tyrus Miller\*

## Expressionist Utopia: Bruno Taut, Glass Architecture, and the Dissolution of Cities

I

This essay focuses on the visionary artistic activity of the German-born architect and theorist Bruno Taut during and shortly after World War I. In such works as *Alpine Architecture* (1919), *The City Crown* (1919), *The World-Master Builder* (1919), and *The Dissolution of Cities* (1920), Taut developed a number of architectural visions that were not simply elaborations of a new architecture or new urbanism, but also schemata of a total spatial disposition to produce a utopian “new man.” As he argued in his *Architektur-Programm*, published in late 1918, “The direct carrier of the spiritual forces, moulder of the sensibilities of the general public, which today are slumbering and tomorrow will awake, is architecture. Only a complete revolution in the spiritual realm will create this architecture.”<sup>1</sup> As Taut’s statement for a 1919 exhibition in Berlin of “Unknown Architects” clearly indicates, he fully identified the utopian social future with the future of architecture, as if both were simply expressions of the same spiritual-historical forces: “We call upon all those who believe in the future. All strong longing for the future is architecture in the making. One day there will be a world-view, and then there will also be its sign, its crystal—architecture.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in his 1919 book *The City Crown*, Taut formulates a total reciprocity of urban space with social experience, so that a more organic organization of the city becomes the typological image of communal happiness and harmony, as it was in the *phalanstères* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian socialist Charles Fourier. “Architecture,” Taut writes, “becomes the crystallized image of human stratification. The entire city is accessible to everyone; and people go to where they

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Taut, “A Programme for Architecture”, in: U. Conrads (ed.) *Programs and Manifestoes on 20<sup>th</sup> Century Architecture*, 1975, trans. Michael Bullock, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Taut, “New Ideas on Architecture,” in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Architecture*, p. 47.

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are drawn. There is no conflict, because people who have the same opinions always find each other.”<sup>3</sup>

Already in an article published in *Der Sturm* in 1914, “Eine Notwendigkeit” (A Necessity), Taut had expounded his view that new, modernistic tendencies in the arts, which emphasized the construction [*Aufbauen*] of images from abstract elements, implied a renewed relation to architecture that could unify the bewildering proliferation of new forms: “There is a necessity implicit in this new art that requires the union of architecture, painting, and sculpture.”<sup>4</sup> In turn, he posits architecture as the super-art that can incorporate each of the innovations of modern painting and sculpture and bring them together in a higher synthetic unity:

The building should contain rooms that will embody the characteristic manifestations of our new art: the light compositions of Delaunay in large glass windows; on the walls, the cubistic rhythms—the painting of Franz Marc and the art of Kandinsky. The columns of the exterior and interior should await the constructive sculptures of Archipenko; and the ornament will be created by Campendonck. The collaborators herewith are by no means finished. They should all act independently, as is thoroughly possible in an architectural organism—in order that the whole constitutes a splendid overall timbre.<sup>5</sup>

By the time of his 1918 “Architektur-Programm,” written under the influence of the revolutionary upheavals following Germany’s defeat in World War I, Taut would even more fervently insist that only architecture could lead art into a new synthesis that would redeem its spiritual and social role from chaos:

Today there is no art. The various disrupted tendencies can find their way back to a single unity only under the wings of a new architecture, so that every indi-

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Taut, *Die Stadtkrone* [1919] (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2002), p. 66. English translation: Bruno Taut, *The City Crown*, ed. and trans. Matthew Mindrup and Ulrike Altenmüller-Lewis (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Taut, “Eine Notwendigkeit,” *Der Sturm* 4/196-97 (February 1914): pp. 174-75. English translation: “A Necessity,” in *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, ed. Rose-Carol Washton Long (New York: G.K. Hall, 1993), p. 125.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Taut, “Eine Notwendigkeit,” p. 175; “A Necessity,” p. 126. Translation modified.

vidual discipline will play its part in building. There will be no frontiers between the applied arts and sculpture or painting. Everything will be one thing: architecture.<sup>6</sup>

The capacity of architecture to synthesize the arts could in turn, in Taut's view, provide a new spiritual unity for a turbulent age, insofar as it could "strive for the concentration of all the national energies in the symbol of the building belonging to a better future" and "demonstrate the cosmic character of architecture, its religious foundations, so-called Utopias."<sup>7</sup>

Imagining this utopian horizon on an expanded scale in *The City Crown*, Taut counterpoised to the chaotic and unplanned growth of the modern metropolis and industrial city a vision of a highly organized, spatially and experientially coherent disposition of construction and functions, all symbolically magnetized by the "city crown" at its center, which lifted itself above any functional use to symbolize transcendence. The new city was envisioned as an architectural-urbanistic *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art), which in the process of shaping society and space in a utopian image, would also unite and spiritually redeem the arts, which in modernity have fallen asunder from an earlier religious unity exemplified by the Gothic cathedral. Other of Taut's works of this period, however, most notably *Alpine Architecture* and *The Dissolution of Cities*, imagine a fantastic modulation of the English Garden City movement's basic idea of disaggregated, suburban development. Taut's visionary texts imagine the dispersion of building across the earth, into agrarian areas and into the mountains, thus artistically prefiguring the reunion of alienating divisions between city and countryside, and eventually the closing all divisions that separate man, nature, and cosmos. In what follows, I describe the elements of Taut's developing utopian vision during the period of 1914 to 1921, but more importantly also I consider the larger contextual conditions that supported the formation of this expressionist architectural utopia and Taut's fairly sudden abandonment of it in favor of more sober, functional projects in the mid-1920s until the end of his life.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruno Taut, "A Programme for Architecture," p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

## II

Bruno Taut was born in 1880 in Germany and died in 1938 in exile from Nazism in Turkey, where he was a professor of architecture in Istanbul and made several significant contributions to the architecture of the administrative city of Ankara. Early on in his career, he was strongly influenced by the Garden City movement of urban planning introduced in Great Britain by Ebenezer Howard at the turn of the century. As noted, Taut would later radicalize certain Garden City precepts concerning the decentralization of cities and the balancing of built and green open space, making them elements of his utopian, anarchistic visions of a new harmony of architecture, earth, and the cosmos. Taut was a leading figure in the left-wing, independent socialist “activist” movement of artists and architects that formed during the revolutionary ferment in Germany following its defeat in World War I. He was a key organizer of the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Work-Council for Art), founded in Berlin in 1918, as well as the instigator of the esoteric “Crystal Chain Circle” of architect-artist correspondents who, unable to build in the difficult post-World War I circumstances, sought to develop visionary architectural ideas on paper, in sketches and descriptions shared among each other.<sup>8</sup> He lived and worked in Berlin and in Moscow in the interwar years, where he dedicated himself especially to building housing in consonance with the municipal socialist politics of interwar Germany and Austria, and in Japan following the coming to power of the National Socialists in Germany, which threatened Taut as a leftist architect considered by the Nazis to be a cultural Bolshevik.

A particularly important date in Taut’s architectural career was 1914, when he constructed one of the most important actually-built examples of expressionist architecture, his Cologne Werkbund Exhibition Glass House, which was sponsored by the glass industry. Drawing inspiration from the visionary writer Paul Scheerbart, whose novels contain architectural fantasies that merge technology and aesthetic experience in marvelous constructions, Taut designed an elaborate domed and faceted pavilion of colored glass dedicated to Scheerbart and including commissioned inscriptions by Scheerbart about the wonders of glass architecture, such as “Das bunte Glas / Zerstört den Haß” (Colored glass /

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<sup>8</sup> For documentation of this circle’s activities and correspondence, see *Crystal Chain Letters: Architectural Fantasies by Bruno Taut and His Circle*, ed. and trans. Iain Boyd Whyte (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985).

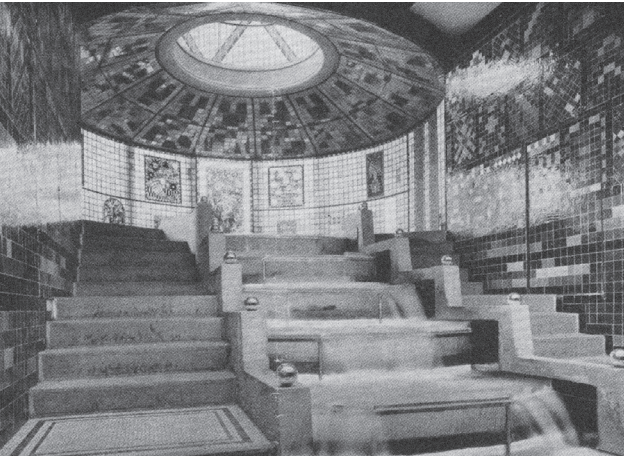
**Fig. 1:**

Bruno Taut, *Glass House*, from Paul Scheerbart's article "Glass Houses" in the *Technische Monatshefte*, 28 March 1914.



Destroys hatred) and “Das Glas bringt uns die neue Zeit; / Backsteinkultur tut uns nur leid” (Glass heralds a new age / The culture of brick brings only sorrow). Taut’s Glass House, as Reyner Banham argued, is a masterpiece for its design and use of material: “Both structurally and visually this is the most brilliant combination of glass and steel achieved by any architect in the years immediately preceding 1914. ... [I]ts rare qualities suggest that it was produced in a moment of genius that Taut was unable to repeat.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1960), p. 81.

**Fig. 2:**

Bruno Taut, *Glass House* (interior view)

But Taut's ambitions for the piece went beyond architectural intentions into a quasi-religious utopian realm of spiritual regeneration through architectural design. He spoke of it as an immersive architectural environment in which a viewer's trajectory through the building would be like entering a kaleidoscope and having a child-like experience of wondrous play in a built space. Describing the descending path from the entrance to the lower sections of the building, Taut wrote:

The cascade's downward trail leads the eye to a purple fabric-line niche with a screen, upon which rhythmically shifting kaleidoscopic images are projected. The beauty of the images reminds the viewer of childhood. Until now, what the eye sees in a kaleidoscope had never been successfully projected onto a screen, since in the projected image the mirrored parts of the image are usually obscured by the opacity of the tube that holds them. This is the first time that such clear kaleidoscopic images have been projected.<sup>10</sup>

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As the architectural historian Iain Boyd Whyte has argued, Taut's Glass House was in itself a kind of manifesto-building that performatively demonstrated its own aspiration to transcend architectural materiality and materialistic aims in

<sup>10</sup> Bruno Taut, "Glass House: Cologne Werkbund Exhibition 1914," in *Glass Architecture*, in *Glass! Love!! Perpetual Motion!!!*, eds. Josiah McElheny and Christine Burgin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 103.



favor of a sublime play of light, color, and spiritual qualities. In a retrospective article from 1921, Taut underscored that his relation to architectural materiality embodied not merely a compositional approach, but furthermore an architectural ontology that conceived of architecture spiritually:

[F]rom a spatial perspective, architecture or building is nothing other than the bringing of light. Glass is light itself, and wood and stone architecture have always striven to bring light, so “glass architecture” is nothing more than the final link in the chain of building. The history of glass architecture is therefore the history of architecture itself.<sup>11</sup>

Light, in Taut’s view here, is the very being of architecture, which till recently has appeared to us only through a veil of heavy, opaque materials; glass architecture now allows the transparent essence of architecture to shine through. As Whyte sums up, “the *Glashaus* was both a refutation of materialism and a model for a new, non-materialistic architecture.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Detlef Mertens notes the aim of Taut’s building to reshape and spiritualize the inner self through the experience of his architecture. Such individual experience of a new spiritual-aesthetic totality, in turn, prefigured broader utopian transfigurations of mankind in a “New Man.” “[F]or Scheerbart and Taut,” Mertens writes,

glass architecture created a new environment for new kinds of experience, for a new subjectivity. The Glass House provided an immersive artistic environment—a total work of art integrating glass construction, glass art and mosaics—which induced an altered state of consciousness as the subject dissolved empathetically to be at one with the world.<sup>13</sup>

Taut’s conception of glass architecture even implied a pedagogical vision, as is typical of utopias, in which the “training” of new utopian subjects to form and generalize the future “New Man” is always a critical task. With his 1910 and 1913 exhibition pavilions, built for the German cement and iron industries respectively, Taut aimed for the aesthetic education of his visitors into the characteris-

<sup>11</sup> Bruno Taut, “Glass Architecture” in *Glass! Love!! Perpetual Motion!!!*, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> Iain Boyd Whyte, *Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Detlef Mertens, “Glass Architecture” in *Modernity Unbound: Other Histories of Architectural Modernity* (London: Architecture Association, 2011), pp. 17-18.

tics of industrial materials. As Matthew Mindrup writes, “Contrary to his simple, pragmatic housing developments in Berlin and Magdeburg, Taut’s exhibition pavilions were conceived as mechanisms to create vivid optical and partly haptic experiences of the materials they were intended to market.”<sup>14</sup> With his 1914 *Glashaus* Taut goes even further in his aesthetic pedagogy, drawing upon the figure of the child, playing with the glass materials of an architectural kaleidoscope assembled through constructive tinkering:

[W]e win over children, who have been thrust into this cold, joyless life, through play. Our building is play. ... And we make children into our master builders with real playthings (for example my glass construction kits with colorful, nearly unbreakable glass blocks). These master builders see with emotion, and when they are grown-ups they will build with and through us, even if “we” are dead.<sup>15</sup>

Implicitly, these children are the bearers of the utopian task of constructing, like Taut, an architectural kaleidoscope within which the creative work-play of a utopian future will be anticipated. However, as Walter Benjamin noted, the kaleidoscope (and more generally, the notion of kaleidoscopic experience) carried a particular symbolic valence with respect to architecture and the city. This optical toy, which was invented in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, had for example been seized upon by Baudelaire to metaphorize the aesthetic sublimation of shock experience in the metropolis, with its constantly changing stream of visual intensities, constellations of bodies, and interpenetrating perspectives and shapes. Accordingly, Baudelaire imagined the man of the crowd, with the modern artist as a special instance of the type, experiencing urban life as if he were a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness.”<sup>16</sup> We might then see Taut’s *Glashaus* as an attempt to construct a haven where harried city-dwellers could retreat from the urban exterior into a sheltered interior; yet rather than eluding the shock experience of the outside, they would receive it in a glittering, aesthetically transfigured form. The experience to be had inside Taut’s glass pavilion would, in this view, function as an aesthetic *pharmakon* against the onslaught

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Mindrup, “Introduction: Advancing the Reverie of Utopia,” in Bruno Taut, *The City Crown*, ed. and trans. Matthew Mindrup and Ulrike Altenmüller-Lewis (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Bruno Taut, “Glass Architecture” in *Glass! Love!! Perpetual Motion!!!*, p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), p. 9.



of metropolitan shock: a weakened dose of the same poison, refined, filtered, and reconfigured by the transparencies of colored glass.

Notably, however, Benjamin employed the kaleidoscope metaphor critically, to call in question the ideological function of modern aesthetic experience which creates an apparent order from a disintegrated, fractured social experience—with its constantly renovated forms constituted by the reflecting mirrors that capture appearances from the churning shards of material life. Although Benjamin was a great admirer of Taut's hero Scheerbart, and fervently advocated in his writings the virtues of glass architecture,<sup>17</sup> he judged the aestheticizing utopias of expressionists such as Taut to be regressive and reactionary, in need of a shattering shock to release their pent-up forces:

The course of history, seen in terms of the concept of catastrophe, can actually claim no more attention from thinkers than a child's kaleidoscope, which with every turn of the hand dissolves the established order into a new array. There is profound truth in this image. The concepts of the ruling class have always been the mirrors that enabled an image of "order" to prevail.—The kaleidoscope must be smashed.<sup>18</sup>

For Benjamin, in contrast to Taut, glass signified the possibility of a depthless, zero-degree experience correlative to basic material properties of clarity, lightness, and smoothness, such that, he would claim, "objects of glass have no 'aura.'"<sup>19</sup> Closer, then, to the glass curtain walls of the Bauhaus and the skyscrapers of Mies van der Rohe than to expressionist crystal cathedrals, Benjamin valued in glass architecture not its ability to "enrich" experience with kaleidoscopic light-play, but rather its experiential "poverty": the glass house's disenchanting transparency, its abolition of secrets and traces, its exposure of the interior to

<sup>17</sup> For further discussion of Benjamin, Scheerbart, and glass architecture, see Tyrus Miller, *Modernism and the Frankfurt School* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 35-76.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 164.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 734.

the social space outside. The utopian possibilities of glass could, in Benjamin's view, only be unleashed when it was unburdened of any nostalgic utopia to renew experience in an aesthetic preserve of colored glass.

### III

Already partially explicit in Taut's single Glass House was a larger utopian vision in which modern metropolitan experience and subjectivity might be spiritually transfigured through its encounters with glass architecture. The visitor to the Glass House should become more childlike, more creative, more connected to the spiritual phenomena of light, which connects our visible world of space with nature and the cosmos and metaphorizes our access to timeless, intelligible essences, according to the schema of Platonic and neo-Platonic metaphysics and theosophic esoteric doctrines that were influential among the artistic avant-garde of the time. However, it is not until Taut takes the step from architectural design at the level of individual building to urban planning and the redesign of cities along visionary lines that he engages fully the utopian imaginary of total social, anthropological, and metaphysical change through architecture. His visionary schemes go in two polar, but complementary directions, though both converge on the utopian goal of using "architecture to overcome national and social differences,"<sup>20</sup> a utopian moment that, as Manfredo Tafuri has expounded, had a broad if short-lived moment of existence in the larger unfolding of modern architecture and urbanism.<sup>21</sup> The first of Taut's directions is to imagine a total organization of city-space around a sacred built center, "the City-Crown," that serves as a kind of magnetic field holding all functions of the city, and all spaces where they are carried out, in its symbolic sway. Taut's complementary but opposite direction was to project, in a set of conceptual architectural works encompassing both visual art and literary invention, the "dissolution of cities." According to these latter works, buildings and population would be dissemi-

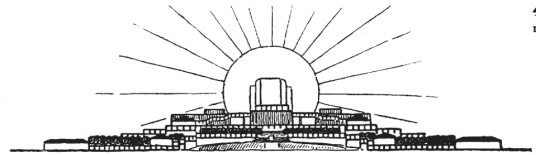
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<sup>20</sup> Ulrike Altenmüller, "The City Crown: A Utopianist's Vision of a Better World by Bruno Taut," *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, no. 2 (2013): p. 134.

<sup>21</sup> See, Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1976; Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf, New York: Rizzoli, 1986; Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987.

**Fig. 3:**

Page from Bruno Taut, *The City Crown* with graphic view of model city



42. Ansicht  
nach Osten

Während die Ausgänge von Schauspielhaus und kleinem Saalbau auf großen Freitreppen (besondere Auffahrtsrampen sind nicht eingezeichnet; die Zufahrt zum Wirtschaftshof in der Mitte würde durch eine tunnelförmige Auffahrt erfolgen) zu baumbestandenen Plätzen führen, schließt sich rechts und links der beiden großen Bauten ein Gefüge von Höfen, Arkaden und Gebäuden an, das je nach Lage und Bestimmung variiert. Vom Opernhaus, dessen Begleiter das Aquarium und das Pflanzenhaus mit der stillen Schönheit der Fische, Blumen, erlesenen Gewächse und Vögel sind, führt ein gedeckter Säulengang mit mehrfachen Treppen über einen ebenfalls arkadenumschlossenen Teichhof und von dort erst zum Wagenhalteplatz, als würdiger Ausklang nach dem Kunstgenuss und würdiger Aufklang vor ihm. Am äußeren Platz schließen sich Museum und Zentralbibliothek an, ernste Bauten mit zwei Obergeschossen, die nicht zu groß gehalten sind, weil in der neuen Stadt hoffentlich nicht jene Massenaufspeicherung von allem und jedem, was nur alt ist, und von allem möglichen fragwürdigen Neuen stattfinden wird, wie es die heutigen Museen leider zum Überfluß zeigen.

Die lebendige Kunst bedarf überhaupt keiner Aufstapelung; sie soll hier nicht mehr im Museum ihr kümmerliches Dasein fristen, sondern mitwirkend und sich einordnend das Ganze durchziehen.

Durch Kolonnaden mit Museum und Bibliothek verbunden stehen in Gärten an Kaskadenteichen zwei Lesehäuser, deren Gärten mit denen der Kaffees und Restaurants zusammenhängen. Die äußersten ausstrahlenden Ecken sollen Konsum- und Kaufhäuser enthalten, welche auf sozialwirtschaftlicher Grundlage beruhen und wie die Restaurants und Kaffees nur ein Obergeschoß haben, damit sie zu den niedrigen Wohnhäusern überleiten. Sie haben besondere Wirtschaftshöfe.

Die beiden westlichen Ecken des Areals enthalten das Gleiche, nur sind

5 Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*

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nated out into the countryside and nature, to engender a new organic unity of humanity, the earth, and the cosmos.

Taut's *The City Crown*, published in 1919 with overall authorial and editorial responsibility by Taut and additional textual material from Paul Scheerbart, Erich Baron, and Adolf Behne, developed a concept of city organization based on the concentric, radial garden city, but with deeper utopian aspirations to overcome the social and spatial disorder of the modern metropolis or industrial city. In their afterword to the English translation of Taut's book, the architectural historians Ulrike Altenmüller-Lewis and Mark L. Brack underscore the pivotal role of *The City Crown* in Taut's architectural thinking and practice. "*Die Stadtkrone* can be seen," they write, "as a turning point where Taut's social and spiritual agendas became equal to the pragmatic and aesthetic impulses found

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in his work.”<sup>22</sup> Underscoring Taut’s social and political concerns is, in fact, a reference to the new city as a reinvented *polis*, as a space not simply to reproduce a bare material and biological functioning, but to produce and clarify shared conceptions of “the good life.” “A new idea directs all these heads and hands,” Taut writes, “the model of the new city. A deep desire directs us all: according to Aristotle, we want cities in which we can live not only safely and healthily, but also happily.”<sup>23</sup> The specifically utopian dimension of the city-construction, however, is that it lifts the city up from the conflictual realm of politics and the class struggle, into a spiritualized community conjoined in their common enjoyment of the new city. Taut declares his conception on behalf of socialism, but qualifies this as another sort of socialism than that pursued by parties and labor unions, as a “new form of Christianity” that projects its utopia of ethical and spiritual *Gemeinschaft* beyond the chaotic *Gesellschaft* of the modern, industrial city:

Socialism in the non-political, supra-political sense, far removed from every form of authority is the simple, ordinary connection between people and it bridges any gaps between warring classes and nations to unite humanity—if one philosophy can crown the city of today, it is an expression of these thoughts.<sup>24</sup>

This thought is expressed architecturally, above all by the high, central construction of the “city crown” itself, the tallest building of the city, which, “entirely void of purpose, reigns above the entirety as pure architecture.”<sup>25</sup> This pure architecture offers an experience of the sublime in which practical purpose can be suspended, in favor of a religiously-tinged aesthetic communion that has as its sole content the utopian overcoming of conflict in a new collective, architectonically objectified harmony and transcendence:

Emanating from the infinite, [light] is captured in the highest point of the city. It shatters and shines on the colored panels, edges, surfaces and concavities of the crystal house. This house becomes the carrier of cosmic feelings, a religiousness that reverently remains silent. ... The brilliance, the shining of the pure and the transcendental, shimmers above the festivity of the unbroken, radiating colors.

<sup>22</sup> Ulrike Altenmüller and Mark L. Brack, “Afterword: *The City Crown* in the Context of Bruno Taut’s Oeuvre,” in Bruno Taut, *The City Crown*, p. 149.

<sup>23</sup> Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, p. 55; *The City Crown*, p. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, p. 60; *The City Crown*, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, p. 67; *The City Crown*, p. 89.

Like a sea of color, the municipality spreads itself around the crown, as a sign of the good fortune of new life.<sup>26</sup>

Taut's expressionist utopia is problematic, however, or even perhaps reactionary, for its attempt to overcome the contradictions of industrial society and the modern city with a spiritualized, visionary architecture inflated to a total socio-spatial utopia. Its problematic nature, however, lies less with its positive content, despite the attempts by some critics, such as Wolfgang Pehnt, to depict Taut's utopia as *völkisch* and proto-fascist.<sup>27</sup> More serious is its vagueness and emptiness, its indulgence in a rhapsodic, pseudo-mystical rhetoric that belies Taut's lack of serious engagement with either the intensities of theological experience or the social dynamics of building and planning, and his satisfaction with a confected mishmash of both: "Infused by the light of the sun this crystal house reigns over above the entire city like a sparkling diamond, a sign of the highest serenity and peace of mind. In its space, a lonely wanderer discovers the pure bliss of architecture."<sup>28</sup> Emil Fader's hostile review of *The City Crown* in 1920 formulated precisely the problem of Taut's underlying utopian premise, which his text, for all its florid paeans to glass and light, could not protect from critical exposure: the assumption that buildings could, of themselves produce spiritual experiences that would in turn be generalized into universal culture. As Fader tartly observed, "To lift the cultural level of the people with beautiful architectural designs is an impossible thing."<sup>29</sup>

#### IV

Taut's *Alpine Architecture*, a portfolio of 31 watercolors with text, at once modulates certain of the ideas of *The City Crown* and offers a self-criticism of them [Figure 4]. Most importantly, rather than maintaining its vision of utopian transcendence within the inherited, if heavily spiritualized form of the garden city, it now explodes the form of the city altogether—in a sense, expanding the garden city to the ends of the earth, but in doing so, accepting the absence of calculation of symmetries and districting intrinsic to city planning, in favor of a utopian

<sup>26</sup> Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, p. 69; *The City Crown*, p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Wolfgang Pehnt, *Expressionist Architecture* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> Taut, *Die Stadtkrone*, p. 69; *The City Crown*, p. 90.

<sup>29</sup> Emil Fader, quoted by Matthew Mindrup, "Introduction: Advancing the Reverie of Utopia," p. 22.

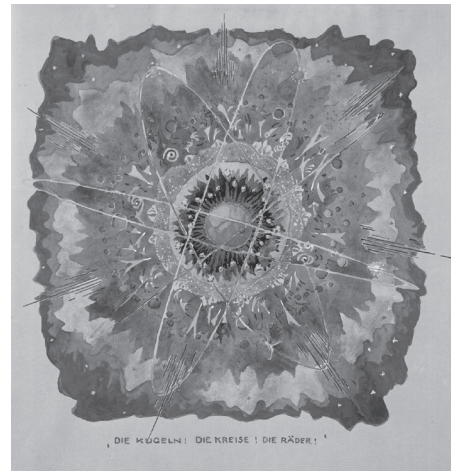
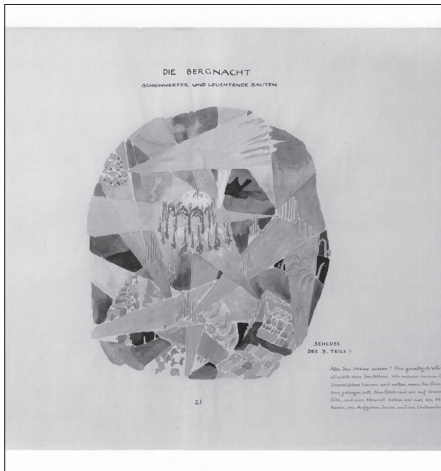


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**Fig. 4:**  
Bruno Taut, *Alpine Architecture*  
("Snow, Glacier, Glass")

dialogue with the earth and cosmos themselves as the measures of architectural form and dwelling.





**Fig. 5 (left):**  
Bruno Taut, *Alpine Architecture*  
("The Mountain-Night")

**Fig. 6:**  
Bruno Taut, *Alpine Architecture*  
("The Spheres! The Circles! The Wheels!")

*Alpine Architecture* is divided into five sections, referencing the five-part division of symphonic music, and is composed of illustrated panels progressing stepwise towards more and more cosmic dimensions: 1. Crystal House, 2. Architecture of the Mountains, 3. Alpine Building, 4. Building on the Earth's Crust, 5. Astral Building. Revealingly, in the third panel of the first section, Taut self-referentially criticizes his own previous lack of utopian radicality, in maintaining the form of the city itself as a limiting container for his vision:

This Crystal House is not intended to be a "crown"! And certainly not a "City's Crown." Bruno Taut has no right to place the Most Sublime, the Void above a city. Architecture and the vapour of cities remain irreconcilable antitheses. Architecture does not allow itself to be "used." Not even for Ideals. Every human thought must become silent when Art and Delight in Building speak—far away from foundries and barracks.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Bruno Taut, *Alpine Architecture* (along with Paul Scheerbart, *Glass Architecture*), ed. Dennis Sharp, trans. Shirley Palmer (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), pp. 121-122.

From this self-criticism, Taut begins to imagine the mountains as the space for this crystal architecture of transcendence, which in turn will allow a transfiguration of the surface of the earth and, as in Scheerbart's utopian "asteroid novel" *Lesabéndio*,<sup>31</sup> a new relation to the celestial firmament. [Figure 5, Figure 6]

In the third section, on "Alpine building," Taut expounds the social utopia that this centrifugal movement from cities to mountains allows one to imagine:

Preach: the social Concept: the Brotherhood of Man. Get organized! and you all can live well, all be educated and at peace! ... Harness the masses—for a gigantic task, in the completion of which each man will feel himself fulfilled, to be the humblest or the most exalted. A task whose completion can be felt to have meaning for all. Each man will see his own handiwork clearly in the common achievement: each man will build—in the true sense. All men will serve the one concept, Beauty—as the image of the Earth that bears them.—Boredom disappears, and with it strife, politics and the evil spectre of War.<sup>32</sup>

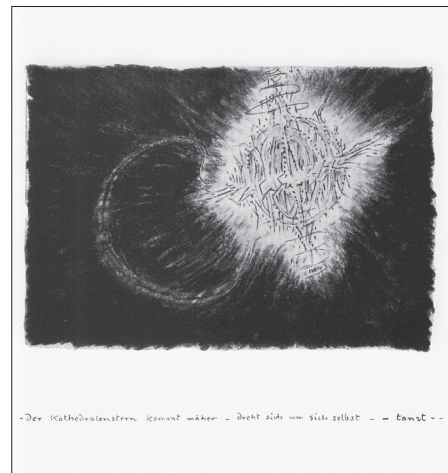
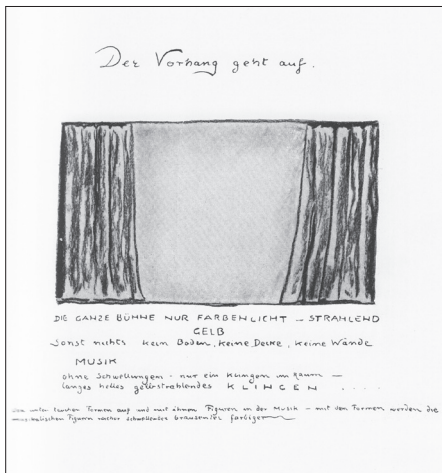
This is a universal "socialism in an unpolitical, superpolitical sense," in which the construction of a cathedral of mankind in the Alps offers a form of work in which economic alienation is overcome in the aesthetic transfiguration of the surface of the earth. From there, it is possible for Taut to imagine even more cosmic extensions of architecture to the stars themselves, as with the "cathedral star" and the "cavern star" of the last section. This reaches its final end in mystical namelessness and nothingness, which is implicitly defined by Taut as the absolute limit of architecture—a metaphysical force of change which through earthly building and cosmic imagination extends to the very limits of the universe.

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Taut subsequently added two further works to *Alpine Architecture*, to constitute a trilogy of related utopian works, rehearsing in different forms more or less the same narrative of the passage from disorganized cities to organized nature to transcendence in the transfigured cosmos. The first of these, *The World-Master Builder*, was an experimental theatrical work that imagined a theater

<sup>31</sup> Paul Scheerbart, *Lesabéndio: Ein Asteroiden-Roman* (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986); English translation: *Lesabéndio: An Asteroid Novel*, trans. Christina Svendsen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Wakefield Press, 2012). For further discussion of Scheerbart's *Lesabéndio*, see my chapter on Walter Benjamin in *Modernism and the Frankfurt School*.

<sup>32</sup> Bruno Taut, *Alpine Architecture*, pp. 125-126.



**Fig. 7 (left):**  
Bruno Taut, *The World-Master Builder*  
("Curtain")

**Fig. 8:**  
Bruno Taut, *The World-Master Builder*  
("Cathedral-Star")

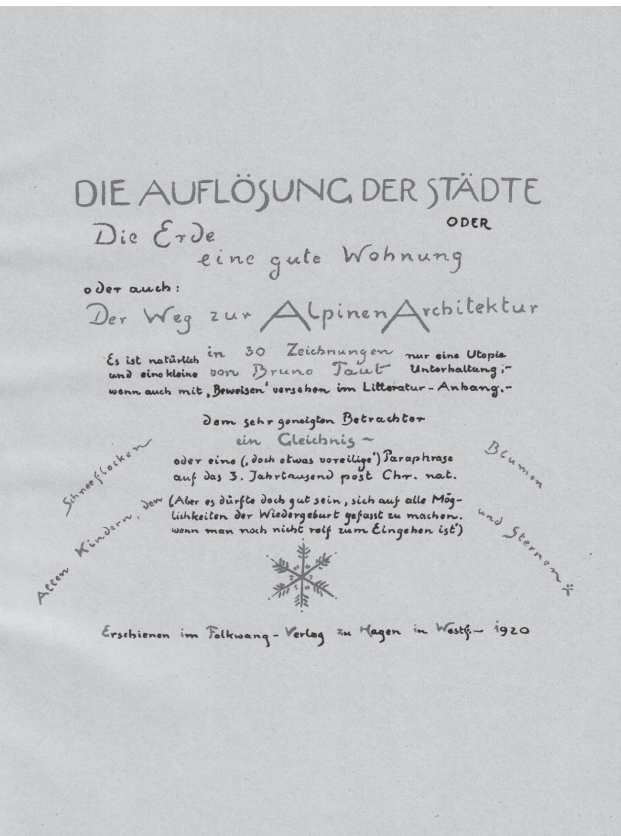
in which architecture would be the principal dramatic agent and would exemplify the workings of “the creating and dissolving principle behind things, the ‘world-master builder’ effective in the cosmos.”<sup>33</sup> The work goes from curtain opening to curtain closing, and in between, earthly architectural forms arise, collapse, and become atomic forms that spin out into space, interact with the stars, then return to earth as light that animates the crystal houses of the new architecture built in the countryside and mountains.

The other work, *The Dissolution of Cities, or, Earth a Good Dwelling, or even: The Road to Alpine Architecture*, as the title indicates, explicitly references the cosmic drama of *Alpine Architecture*.<sup>34</sup> [Figure 9] Composed of 30 colored ink-draw-

<sup>33</sup> Bruno Taut, “Über Bühne und Musik: Nachwort zum Architekturschauspiel,” in Taut, *Der Weltbaumeister: Architektur-Schauspiel für symphonische Musik* [1919], ed. Manfred Speidel (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1999), n. p.

<sup>34</sup> See also, for example, the bibliographic cross-reference in drawing 28 to *Alpine Architecture* in Bruno Taut, *The Dissolution of Cities, or, Earth a Good Dwelling, or even: The Road to Alpine Architecture* (Hagen: Folkwang Verlag, 1920).

**Fig. 9:**  
Bruno Taut, *The Dissolution of Cities*  
(Title Page)



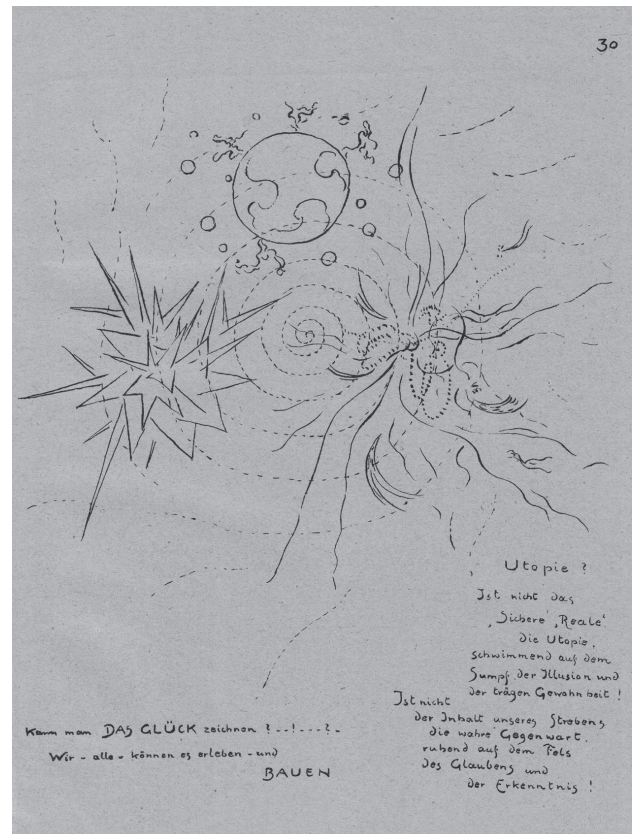
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ings, the book also includes a “literary appendix” comprising 82 pages of quotations from literary and political authors from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman to the anarchists Peter Kropotkin, Gustav Landauer, and Leo Tolstoi and socialist founding-father Friedrich Engels. The work begins with an image of the collapse of cities, captioned with the texts “Let fall the built vulgarities! Houses of stone make hearts of stone. Now our earth blooms.”<sup>35</sup> On the principle that “Other contents of life create other forms of life,”<sup>36</sup> Taut advocates a breaking of boundaries of cities and their subdivided districts in favor of open, organic space. Expressing a clearly anarchist sentiment in the rhetorical question “Who now wants to draw borders?” Taut expounds the anti-urban, anti-political sentiment of his utopian vision:

<sup>35</sup> Bruno Taut, *The Dissolution of Cities*, drawing 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, drawing 7.

**Fig. 10:**  
Bruno Taut, *The Dissolution of Cities* (“Utopia?”)



The great spiders—cities—are now only memories out of an earlier time, and along with them, states.—City and state, one with the other, have died.—In place of the fatherland, the homeland has arisen—and each one finds it everywhere that he works. There is no more city and countryside, and also no more war and peace. One recognizes no abstractions to which one grants power over life, work, happiness, and health.—From natural belonging-together in activity and living, common interests emerge.<sup>37</sup>

In the immediate post-World War I situation in Central Europe, such utopian imaginings could draw on real points of reference in the contemporary environment, such as the anarchic manifestations of the Russian Civil War and so-called “War Communism” (1918-1921); the popular uprisings and socialization

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, drawing 12.



of land during the shortlived Soviet Republics in Hungary and Bavaria (1919); and the emergence of “gypsy urbanism,” spontaneous organization of squatter dwelling and garden cultivation on the outskirts of European cities such as Vienna (1918-1923).<sup>38</sup> These real dynamics of a chaotic and revolutionary period inspired Taut’s utopic conclusion that the social and spatial structures presently under strain and in some cases collapsing might lead to a higher, more harmonious order, rather than to a restoration of the same after the crisis.

Taut thus insists on the reality of his visions and concludes the drawings with an explicit address to the question of their “utopian” nature. If “utopian” implies something that is impossible and nowhere, he rejects the designation, for, he insists, the dynamics of dissolution depicted in his visionary books are present in the world now, even if their issue and meaning is still unsettled. He thus addresses the rhetorical question “Utopia?” as follows:

Is it not the “certain,” the “real” that is utopia, swimming in the swamp of illusion and lazy habits! Is the content of our striving not the true present resting on the rock of belief and knowledge!<sup>39</sup> [Figure 10]

## V

In conclusion I want to pose the question, though I can only schematically allude to an answer, of the significance of these utopias, in light of their short existence and Taut’s own relatively complete abandonment of them in favor of a functionalist orientation by the mid-1920s. The architectural scholar Manfredo Tafuri offers an incomparably insightful and lapidary formulation when he writes, “The utopia in the pure state of Taut is without a future, precisely because the future is its subject.”<sup>40</sup> By this Tafuri means that the utopian energy of Taut’s visions—and those of other architects, urbanists, and artists at this critical moment at the end of World War I and the revolutionary turmoil that followed in Europe—depended on their *anticipatory*, future-oriented quality. But the fictional-utopian events projected in Taut’s cosmic-architectural graph-

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of “gypsy urbanism” in Vienna, see Nader Vossoughian, *Otto Neurath: The Language of the Global Polis* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2008), p. 27ff.

<sup>39</sup> Bruno Taut, *The Dissolution of Cities*, drawing 30.

<sup>40</sup> Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, p. 104.



ic narratives were only credible so long as the “future” had not manifest itself in the historical field of actual politics, policy, and action.

Left-oriented artists and architects, as well as mystically-inclined anarchists, soon had to confront two key fields of facts: first, by 1922 or 1923, it had become abundantly clear that the all-embracing revolution that would transfigure everything and foster in a New Man had not arrived and would not in any foreseeable time-frame. Yet at the same time concrete historical events such as the Russian Revolution and the consolidation of the Soviet Union following an anarchic Civil War, the installation of social municipal governments faced with socialist problems such as housing shortages, and the overall rationalization of society, mass political organization, and industrial concentration during the Weimar Republic prior to the Great Depression had set new practical tasks for architects and urban planners, rendering such utopian visions as Taut’s ethereal and obsolete.

It is true that Taut’s visionary question of “the dissolution of cities” after World War I had been taken up in a renewed debate between “urbanist” and “de-urbanist” architects and planners of the Soviet Union during the first Five-Year Plans. As James H. Bater notes, this debate also well-exceeded the practical articulation of planning guidelines and bore some of the utopian traits of the earlier period, in which practical building was constrained by limited opportunities to realize projects:

Out of the debates of the late 1920s there emerged two principal and opposed schools of thought about the future Soviet socialist city. Some of the underlying assumptions of the revivalist and garden-city movements can be subsumed in the urbanist and de-urbanist schools respectively. The vast majority of schemes propounded under these labels was simply utopian. Many presumed complete reconstruction of the existing urban system. Most assumed almost unlimited financial resources.<sup>41</sup>

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Yet while the intense ideological tension and social violence of this period in the Soviet Union was also accompanied by grand utopian hopes, Taut found little traction for his ideas and was out of touch with the spirit of Moscow during

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<sup>41</sup> James H. Bater, *The Soviet City: Explorations in Urban Analysis* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 22.

his sojourn of 1932-33. Although he was better received in Japan and Turkey following his escape from Hitler's Germany, his activity in exile reveals little of his earlier visionary impulses.

From today's perspective of historical hindsight, we must view not just Taut's expressionist visions and anarchistic fantasies, but also seemingly more grounded expressions of the age, such as the great socialist housing projects of Frankfurt and Vienna and the Soviet debates on industrialism and agriculture, as equally ruined monuments of utopian dreams out of a distant past. Perhaps only this profound leveling of historical perspective, this groundtruthing of the utopian dreamscapes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, will allow us to approach the utopian visions of this period anew, taking fresh measure of their historical magnitude, significance, and imaginative pathos.

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