

Sister Cities: Corporate Destiny in the Metropolis Utopias of King Camp Gillette, Thea Von Harbou, and Fritz Lang

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By the start of the twentieth century, many cultural, political and economic critics were torn by a profound ambiguity regarding the growing power of industrialism. While they were dismayed by the traumatic consequences of “progress” on “traditional” social and economic networks, they were also inspired by the raw productivity of corporate industry. Eventually, many alleviated their internal tension by exercising a faith that a better world, even a perfect world, could result if the “factory model” were civilized and harnessed to the common good by ethical and efficient business practices, and then elevated to its rightful, indeed inevitable, supreme authority — empowering it to resolve any systemic conflicts by remaking society, especially urban society, in the harmoniously operated image of incorporated industry. Their visions of the corporate future are here characterized as part of an “anticipatory tradition” in which modernity is imagined as the predestined replacement of unjust, inefficient, and otherwise outmoded social and economic structures.

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, speculation about the future of human society, and about the future of the buildings and cities that would provide a stage for that society, seems to have been issued everywhere, from all quarters. In addition to the usual cast of novelists, patent salesmen and politicians, prophetic visions were also crafted by titans of industry, clergymen and artists, and were offered to the public in forms as serious as revolutionary manifestoes and as frivolous as promotional trading cards packaged with margarine or humorous postcards from cities “in the future” (FIG. 1). Indeed, such a copious amount of speculation was produced and consumed during this time that it became for a while the most popular form of literature in the United States.¹ Its impor-

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FIGURE 1. Postcard, ca. 1909, revealing a view of future Boston.



tance in Europe is attested to merely with the names of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Albert Robida.

Perhaps thinking about the future and offering opinions regarding its emerging form — as if one could, with great concentration, just make out its basic outline through a dense but not wholly impenetrable curtain (FIG. 2) — was a natural coping response to the overwhelming waves of change that had swept through Paris, New York, Cairo, Tokyo, Istanbul, London, and countless other places over the proceeding century. Indeed, entire cities and landscapes had been born, remade and destroyed as industrial manufacturing and transport systems, new ways of building and tearing down, and many other technological phenomena developed at an unprecedented scale and with unheard-of speed — all under the diminishing influence of traditional authorities such as religion and the family.² Social, economic and political life was, in the language used by Anthony Giddens in his 1991 book *The Consequences of Modernity*, being “disembedded” from its previously local, human-scaled contexts.³ This uprooting was often experienced as destabilizing, even violent.

Of course, fervent speculation about the trajectory of these “modernizing” processes was not only a potential source of comfort for those on the receiving end of these changes. “Making sense of it all” also serviced a need for rationalization among societies that were actively supporting the painful growth of industry at the expense of other people, particularly in the context of empire. Imagining and/or promising ideal future developments as compensation for the dislocating, destructive effects of industry placed those effects in the context of a larger narrative with a story arc culminating in a “happy” ending. In the United States, for example, the rise of industry both corresponded and coordinated with westward expansion and the subjugation of the



FIGURE 2. A curtain is slowly drawn back to reveal a towering city of the future, much to the astonishment of a bourgeois, nineteenth-century gentleman in search of distant but attainable insight. From Albert Robida, *Le Vingtième Siècle* [The Twentieth Century] (Paris: 1883). Image used by permission of the Maison d'Ailleurs: Museum of Science-Fiction, Utopia, and Extraordinary Journeys; Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland.



FIGURE 3. “Morning of a New Day,” Henry François Farny, 1907. Note the steam engine and the group of Native Americans, here separated by an uncrossable chasm. The Indians are traveling on horseback across the mountains in the dead of winter, with their children in tow, in the opposite direction of the train. Most likely, viewers are meant to understand that they are fleeing west, away from “civilization” and into the obscurity of the past. Permanent Art Collection, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. Used by permission.

“savage,” who was often depicted in art and popular culture as momentarily frozen, “stupefied” by the sight of industrial technology, before turning to flee into the oblivion of history — where old, “traditional” ways of life belonged (FIG. 3).⁴ Such painful triumphs of “progress” were framed by many Americans, often with some sincere ambivalence, as tragic but inevitable incidents along the inexorable path of national destiny. Meanwhile, in Europe, as Jane M. Jacobs related in her 2004 essay “Tradition is (Not) Modern: Deterritorializing Globalization,” a similarly hard and fast line was often drawn between the old, receding world of “tradition” and the contemporary or future ascendance of “modernity,” in order to cast the favorable light of destiny upon “scientific” colonial powers and their role as enlightening agents in the otherwise dark, ignorant, backward world.⁵

But even while such binary dichotomies as old/new and traditional/progressive served as convenient tools for validating the suppression of “others,” they exacerbated anxieties on the home front, where the rise of industry and its attendant imperative to remake whole landscapes was not proceeding in the clean, orderly fashion its imperial spokesmen may have suggested to Indian audiences. The incompatibility, real or imagined, of the “traditional” and the “modern,” and the belief that the ultimate outcome of their collision was a foregone conclusion, left many “industrialized” people feeling that they had been left behind or were in imminent danger of being so.

DIVINATION METHODS

Unsurprisingly, the future that was imagined and predicted in the face of such complex and asymmetrical “progress” was celebrated by some as promising while lamented by others as apocalyptic. In both cases, however, these rhetorically tuned visions of tomorrow usually had a great deal in common, embedded in what I.F. Clarke identified as a “pattern of expectation.”⁶ Indeed, this pattern might be fairly described as an evolving “tradition of anticipation” — an example, perhaps, of what Nezar AlSayyad has called “traditions of the modern,” which ironically defy the modernist binaries of old/new, traditional/modern, local/global by transmitting across cultural and national lines as adaptable but essentially coherent, collaboratively delineated, self-reinforcing structures of meaning — as deterritorialized traditions, but traditions nonetheless.⁷ The transnational *fin-de-siècle* “modern tradition” of anticipation was marked by a surprisingly consistent body of recurring themes and tropes extrapolated from the rise of industry and its dependent and enabling technologies. These were conceived, quite naturally, as the imagined fulfillment in one way or another of every trend then understood, rightly or wrongly, as gaining momentum in the recent past and immediate present. In this important sense such extrapolation was not, of course, primarily “a static legacy of the past,” but rather, as AlSayyad has also suggested of traditions generally, “a model for the dynamic reinterpretation of the present.”⁸ Furthermore, it was an alchemical formula for projecting one’s agency into an uncertain future.

It should perhaps be no surprise that predictions about the high-tech future, whether positive or negative, were made



FIGURE 4. “That great city of the future will be one enormous edifice.” Illustration of the future New York City drawn by William Robinson Leigh, and published with Hudson Maxim’s article of scientific prophecies, “Man’s Machine-Made Millennium,” *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, November 1908.

by the “rational,” “methodical” means of extrapolation. The inventor, chemist, and would-be prophet Hudson Maxim provided an archetypical example of such sooth-saying science in a 1908 article “Man’s Machine-Made Millennium,” in which he argued that “No man is able to foretell the future except from his knowledge of the present. . . . Every atom in existence follows a course mathematically exact. . . . There is no haphazard in nature. . . . Our lives are part and parcel of the great cosmic procession.” While he admitted that knowledge of its trajectory could be ascertained, he also declared “there is much we can predict with degree of assurance. It is safe to predict that man’s advancement from now on will be vastly more rapid than it is has ever been before.”⁹ He defined this advance as scientific and technological, and predicted that the

future would be a definitively urban one, in which farmers would abandon the countryside to gather in towns, and the individual towers of New York would be traded in for a single whirring, glowing edifice where all the benefits of science would be applied to engineer, with eugenic precision, a perfect society (FIG. 4).¹⁰

For Maxim and for countless others, the future would be, for better or for worse, *more* technological and *more* industrial, characterized by the increasing expansion of the scientifically crafted factory model of production into the political, social, cultural, and even biological realms of human society. In the words of Howard Segal, this was not merely to “be a sheer proliferation of machines and structures but an increasing use of technology in establishing and maintaining an entire society.”¹¹ And this, it was understood, would happen most powerfully and most visibly in cities, where buildings and public spaces were expected to transform into both the products of and sites for mass production, and where civil authorities were expected to grow increasingly dependent on that great doctrine of progress, Scientific Management. This would not only be bureaucratic practice, but also government policy, bearing particular weight on the “modern” means and ends of de-localized, centrally planned, and rigidly structured urban societies.

INDUSTRY AS THE SOLUTION TO INDUSTRIALISM

A number of the least optimistic assessors of the future made dire warnings of impending disaster and apocalypse, and then followed up by proposing helpful solutions. Often, and importantly, these solutions were designed to tap into the power of the same technological trends that had caused, or were expected to cause, all the trouble in the first place. One such constructively critical vision was created by King Camp Gillette, a man whose ideas and beliefs are largely forgotten to us now, even though his name was, and still is, among the most commonly recognized in the world (FIG. 5). As his biographer Russell B. Adams Jr. related, Gillette was born in 1855 in small-town Wisconsin to an inventor father who lost everything in the Chicago Fire of 1871.¹² From that point onward, young Gillette was forced to look after himself, or so the legend goes, and endured a long series of ups and downs as a competent but not terribly successful inventor until 1895, when he had an epiphany while shaving. For many weeks he had been dwelling upon a bit of advice given him by a business mentor: the key to perpetual profits lay in inventing something that would be used for a short time and then thrown away, only to be replaced and used up again.¹³ In a flash of genius, Gillette invented the disposable safety razor, and today his brand, which still bears his name, is worth more than \$20 billion.¹⁴

But what many do not know is that this man, whose trademarked visage beamed out from packaging and ad-

FIGURE 5. *Portrait of King Camp Gillette. From K.C. Gillette, World Corporation, 1910.*



King C. Gillette

vertisements as a veritable poster-child of industrial capitalism, was a hardcore political and cultural revolutionary. In 1894 he published a book entitled *The Human Drift* which outlined in detail his belief that the traditional structures of democracy were being slowly crushed by the tyrannical power of modern industry, and that the only way to prevent the calamity of a hostile corporate takeover on a national or global scale was to overthrow the existing world order and preemptively replace it with what he called a United Trust. This trust would be a single, all-powerful corporation that specialized in absolutely everything — the monopoly to end all monopolies. Its role would be to provide the whole population with meaningful employment and every necessity of life from the cradle to the grave. The trust's character and destiny would be controlled by its legions of employees, whose right to vote in company matters lay in their status as stockholders — this would be the new citizenship. Every company and government in the United States would be destroyed by this giant. All of their former employees and citizens would be folded into the corporate monolith's swelling ranks until nothing and nobody else was left. At last the wasteful, brutal competition of the capitalist era would be replaced by cooperation, and corporate industrialism would be guided to achieve its full potential as the compassionate but supremely powerful liberator of humanity: "United Intelligence, Material Equality."¹⁵

In Gillette's utopia the key word was "corporation" (FIG. 6). This was for good reason: to accommodate the massive manufacturing and distribution systems that industrialization had brought to bear since the Civil War, and to finance the enormous communications and transport systems that made them operable, American companies had been steadily growing in size and complexity, culminating in

the rise of incorporation as the dominant mode of operating in the industrial economy, nationwide. As Alan Trachtenberg recounted in his book *The Incorporation of America*, what began as a way of partnering private companies with government money for public infrastructure projects eventually mutated into a system that empowered private capitalists to leverage vast amounts of resources with limited personal liability. This helped create regionally or nationally scaled companies with totally uninhibited appetites for growth. That growth was both horizontal, in the conquest of competing companies and the creation of new markets, and vertical, in the acquisition of raw materials and the elimination of middlemen.¹⁶

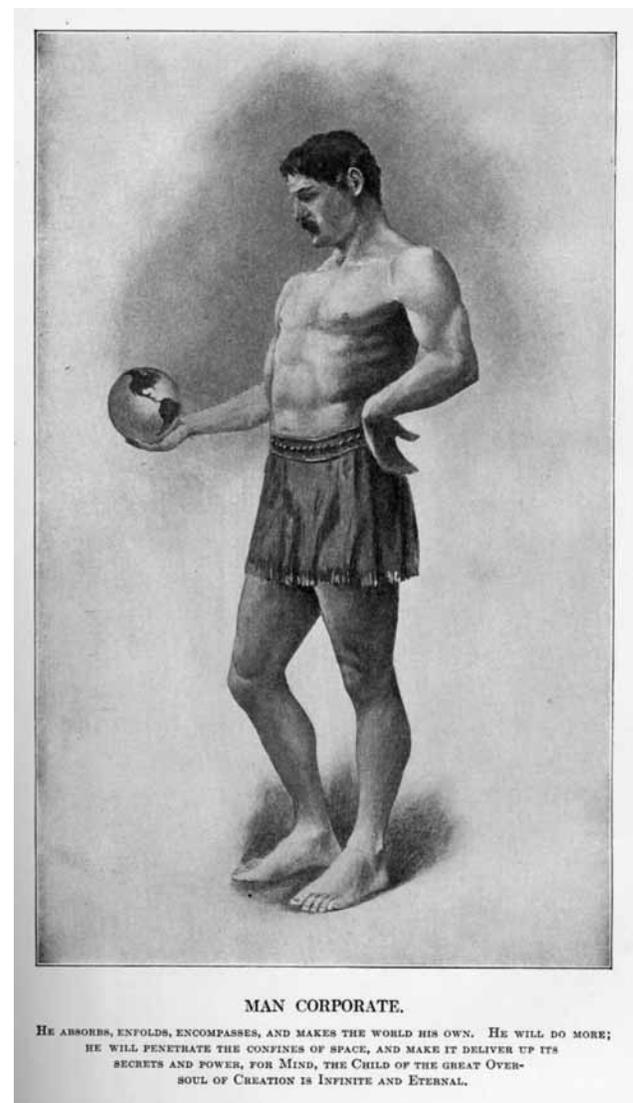


FIGURE 6. *An illustration revealing incorporation personified, even deified, as an athletic Herculean figure gazing at the globe in the palm of his hand. This is certainly no burdened Atlas. From K.C. Gillette, World Corporation, 1910.*

For such organizations, size itself became an asset — a way of doing business — and steady expansion from the close of the Civil War to the eve of the 1929 crash led to a country in which two hundred corporations held nearly 60 percent of capital assets, including land, buildings and machinery.¹⁷ “The system of corporate life,” railroad executive Charles Francis Adams Jr. wrote in 1869, is “a new power, for which our language contains no name.”¹⁸

For reformers such as Gillette, the awe inspired by these changes was naturally marked by a deep ambivalence concerning the destruction of countless livelihoods tied to smaller, localized networks of commerce. Yet it was not atypical that in 1894 Gillette turned to corporate industrialism itself for the solution to his grim forecast of national collapse. Many of those who criticized machines for bringing wretchedness to the processes of production, or who attacked corporations for failing to sufficiently care for their vast armies of laborers, argued that the problem lay not in the machines or the industrial processes per se, or even in the power of corporations, but rather in the clumsy, ham-fisted practices of immoral businessmen and incompetent managers. Henry George, a reformer whose 1877 book *Progress and Poverty* had sold two million copies by the start of the twentieth century, wrote in 1883 that the “greater employment of machinery” and “greater division of labor” resulted in “evils” for the working masses, “degrading men into the position of mere feeders of machines.” But his proposals to alleviate these problems and restore the balance between laborers and their management were nonetheless tied to a commitment to maintain machines as a wholesome part of an ideal, reformed “corporate industrial world.”¹⁹ Such reform, it was argued, would not only be good for the workers but also for the capitalists. Frederick W. Taylor, the Pennsylvania foreman and originator of Scientific Management — the principles of which amounted to, in the words of Trachtenberg, “the absolute subordination of ‘living labor’ to the machine” — argued that his workers were the happiest of all workers, for factories run under his principles were the most efficient and rewarding, as everyone and everything was in its right place.²⁰

Taylorism, along with the closely related concepts of Fordism, proved to be powerful tools in the imaginations of those who desired to reform the industrial corporate model without losing its power to generate wealth. These thinkers saw the megalithic strength of incorporation not as a force to be diminished or otherwise limited, but as an inspiration, as a potential ally that only needed to be civilized, to be transformed from a dictatorial tyrant into something that was at once both paternalistic and productive.²¹ Furthermore, many of them believed that in the end the overwhelming strength of corporate power could not be successfully resisted — its ascendancy was inevitable, so it could only be improved, and this only with great effort.

Gib Prettyman, in his 2001 article “Gilded Age Utopias of Incorporation,” argued that many of the most passionate

late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century advocates of reform understood incorporation as a crucial link between the present and the future, between imperfect existing commercial culture and utopian possibility. From Edward Bellamy to King Camp Gillette, from Laurence Gronlund to Charles Caryl, many thinkers held “joint stock companies, trusts, syndicates, or other versions of commercial incorporation at the center of their utopian imaginations.”²² They possessed a “vivid perception of incorporation’s revolutionary power,” and saw in it not only the mechanism for transformation but also the power for total and permanent transformation of the sort that would, for the first time, bring true unity to the world.²³

Kenneth Roemer, in “Technology, Corporation, and Utopia: Gillette’s Unity Regained,” elucidated the at times perplexing, at times intuitive Victorian logic that the painful friction caused by modernity’s intrusive and abusive relationship with traditional life could be best resolved by eliminating the latter as a step toward pacifying the former — removing the last vestiges of the inevitably doomed past to accelerate industry’s final transition to something balanced and whole and less volatile.²⁴ The truth was inescapable, the conclusion predestined: as one of the enlightened future characters from Bellamy’s influential 1888 utopian novel *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* explained to his Victorian audience: “Oppressive and intolerable as was the regime of the great consolidations of capital, even its victims, while they cursed it, were forced to admit the prodigious increase of efficiency which has been imparted to the national industries, the vast economies effected by concentration of managements and unity of organization.”²⁵

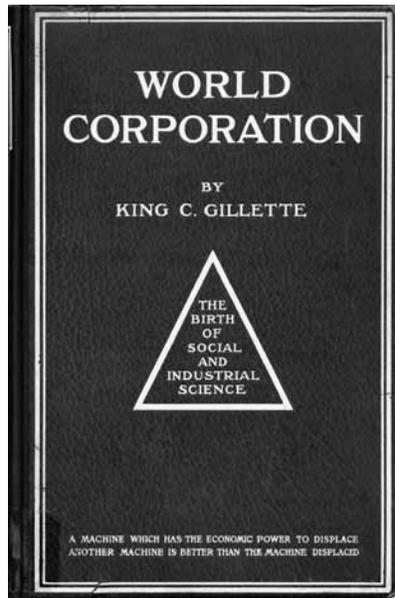
And so Gillette, feeling that the ascendancy of the corporate model in the economic, social and political spheres was as promising as it was inevitable and dangerous, sought to control and perfect it rather than fight or even mitigate it. As he wrote in 1910:

*Corporations will continue to form, absorb, expand, and grow, and no power of man can prevent it. [They] are the actual builders of a cooperative system which is eliminating competition, and in a practical business way reaching results which socialists have vainly tried to attain through legislation and agitation for centuries. To complete the industrial evolution, and establish a system of equity, only requires . . . support of “World Corporation.”*²⁶

THE MODEL CITY AS MODEL FACTORY, AND VICE-VERSA

Gillette’s vision of the future America under an all-powerful monopoly, published three times from 1894 to 1924 — and three times changing its name, from the United Trust to the World Corporation and finally to the People’s Corporation — was an archetypal extrapolation of late-nineteenth-century

FIGURE 7. *The cover of Gillette's World Corporation, published by the New England News Company in 1910. The pyramid is used by Gillette as a symbol of the stable power of corporate hierarchy as social hierarchy.*



cultural, political and economic trends taken to their furthest extremes (FIG.7). As his imaginary company expanded in all directions, every town and city would be completely abandoned; the entire population of North America would be, to use Gibbens's term again, "disembedded" and relocated to the United Trust's corporate headquarters in an enormous new city near Buffalo in upstate New York (FIG.8). This mega-city, powered by Niagara Falls, would be called Metropolis — an old name, the etymology of which leads to the ancient Greek for "Mother City." There, the rational efficiency of industrial processes under Scientific Management, so potent in the factory, would be injected into every sphere of human life.

Because factories were made more efficient when machine parts were standardized and made interchangeable, the whole new world built by the United Trust would also have standard, interchangeable parts. As Gillette wrote in 1894:

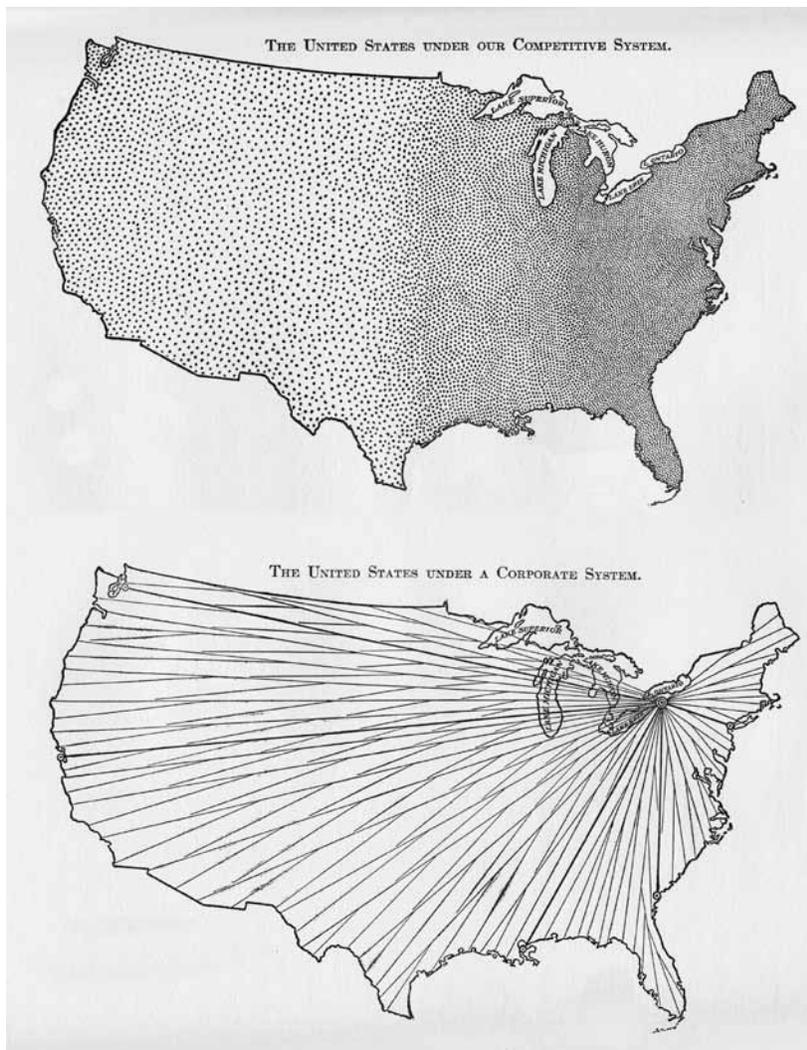


FIGURE 8. *Gillette's illustration of population centers in the United States before and after the rise of the World Corporation and the establishment of its Central City of Metropolis near Buffalo, New York. From that new "Mother City," the great monopoly would exploit the continent for resources and recreation. From K.C. Gillette, World Corporation, 1910.*

*These four great materials, structural steel, fire-brick, glass, and tiling would constitute the most important industries on which the building of "Metropolis" would depend. . . . In "Metropolis" there would be upward of a hundred million rooms; and, of these rooms, hundreds of thousands would be exactly the same in dimensions.*²⁷

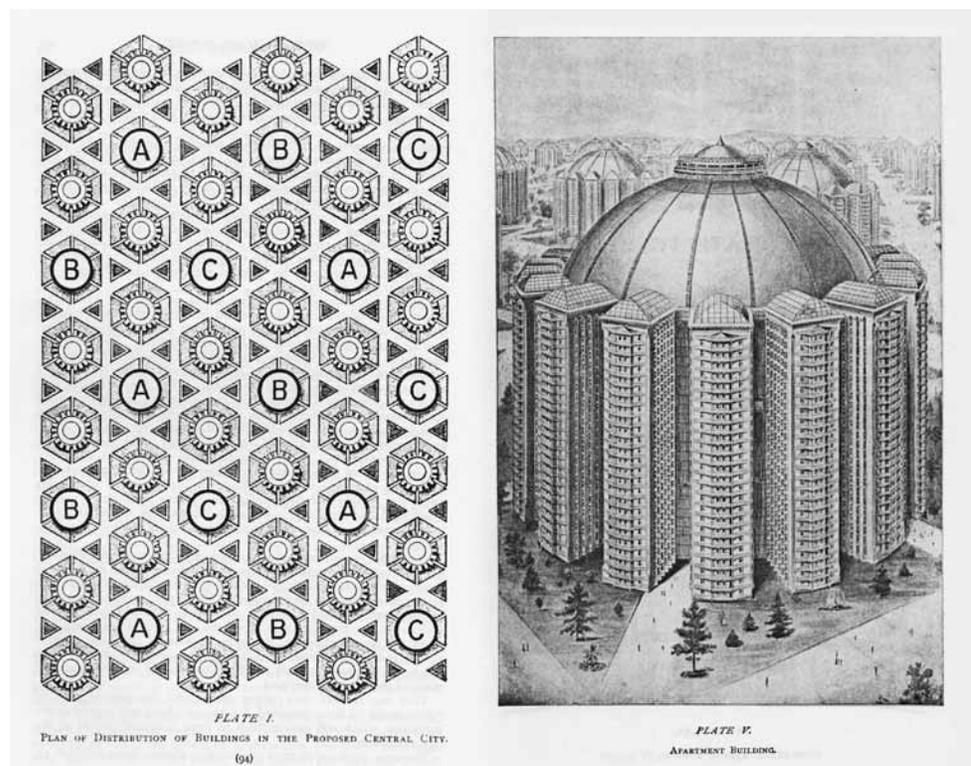
An urban plan for the city published by Gillette in *The Human Drift* showed an unmitigated, gearbox-like orthogonal grid of pedestrian pathways punctuated by round apartment towers, and interspersed with schools, amusement buildings, and communal kitchens (FIG. 9). These mass-produced, essentially prefabricated homes and civic structures would be entirely devoid of ornament save colored porcelain tile applied as a hygienic waterproof cladding. The buildings would be climate controlled, scaled to defy any existing design tradition outside the world of commercial highrises and mammoth factories, and hooked up to a vast underground world containing multiple levels for the citywide passage of energy, water, food, vehicles and pedestrians. These tidily hidden urban networks would serve, in perfect humming efficiency, the countless family apartments as well as the fountain-filled, skylit communal dining atriums that made up the core of each hive-like tower (FIG. 10). In form and function, this city would be the ultimate industrial product — not merely a collection of "machines for living," but a factory for living.

Gillette dispersed his steel, glass, brick, and glazed-tile towers in a park-like landscape, where the fireproof buildings,

constructed explicitly in line with emerging skyscraper technologies in New York and Chicago, were equally dispersed for air and light in a clearly egalitarian spirit (FIG. 11).²⁸ It was an urban planning paradigm that offered the most obvious — and perhaps single-minded — solution to the slums and overcrowding that so plagued the noxious and congested industrial city. But, as such, its formal and functional genetic material would continue to crop up through much of the twentieth century, not least in Le Corbusier's famous Contemporary City scheme, proposed a little less than three decades later (FIG. 12). It is worth noting that Le Corbusier's vision resonated with Gillette's for reasons that go considerably deeper than the fact they were both composed of a repetitive grid of high-tech, industrial-grade towers connected by mechanized transport systems. The Contemporary City also revealed a belief that corporate industry could be a suitable model for social life — segregated, as it was, according to rank in the capitalist hierarchy, like a giant office block or factory. It mirrored in its urban form "the inequalities in the realm of production."²⁹

Additionally, the schemes of both Gillette and Le Corbusier imagined a flat plane that would define their city's respective sites (although Le Corbusier acknowledged the idealism of this feature), obscuring every contour and crevice in the land. Such monumental abstractions almost seem calculated to defy preindustrial building practices as much as possible for maximum visual effect, to hammer home these cities' status as utopias, as places that would have been

FIGURE 9. Plan and elevation of Metropolis, revealing the design and layout of the city's endless residential quarters. The lettered buildings in the plan are A) schools; B) recreational facilities; and C) food storage and preparation centers. Gillette rather ingeniously arranged the structures so that every apartment building is centrally located in a set of three "necessary buildings," and each necessary building is centrally located to six apartment buildings. From K.C. Gillette, *The Human Drift*, 1894.



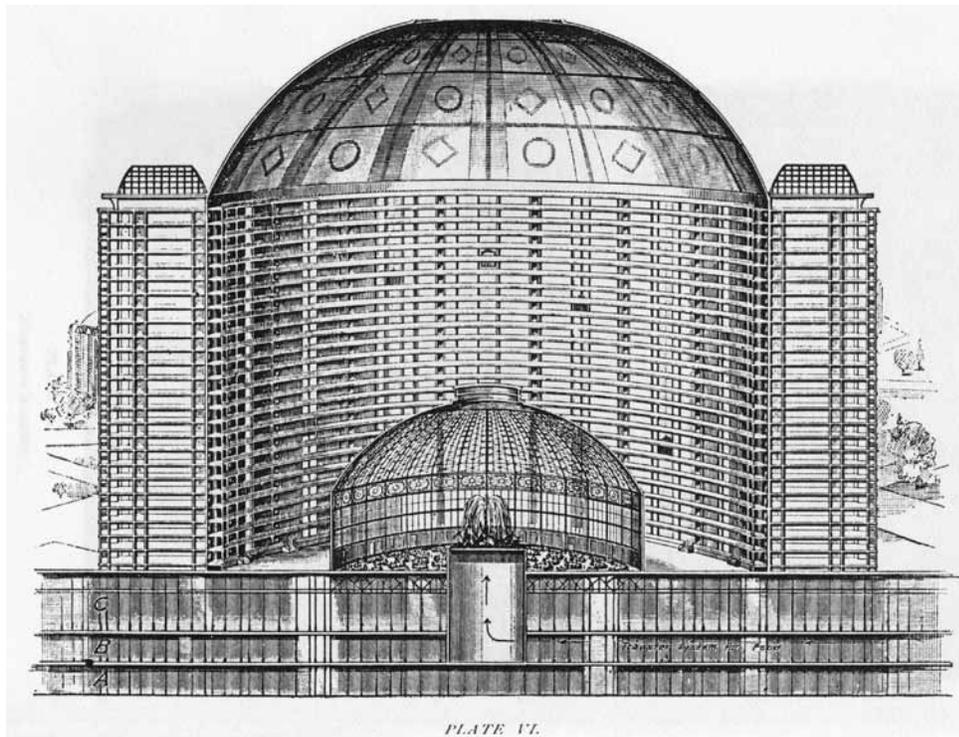


FIGURE 10. Section of one of Metropolis' residential beehive towers, featuring apartment stacks, an inner skylit atrium courtyard, and a glass-covered communal dining hall with fountain. Also shown are the stratified layers of the urban platform that makes up the base of Metropolis — each level is reserved for, in descending order, C) pedestrian transport; B) mechanized transport; and A) sewage, water, hot and cold air, and electrical systems. From K.C. Gillette, *The Human Drift*, 1894.

impossible to imagine, let alone build, before the power of applied science shattered tradition and demanded a new way of living. Indeed, both Gillette's *Metropolis* and Le Corbusier's *Contemporary City* seemed bound to elucidate,

even to honor, the technologies that were supposed to make them plausible and desirable. They were scaled so much in favor of industrial processes and machines that human bodies seem strangely out of place among their towering masses, and no natural form or process seems to leave its mark on their design or construction. As such, they reveal another old/new binary along the lines discussed by Jane M. Jacobs:

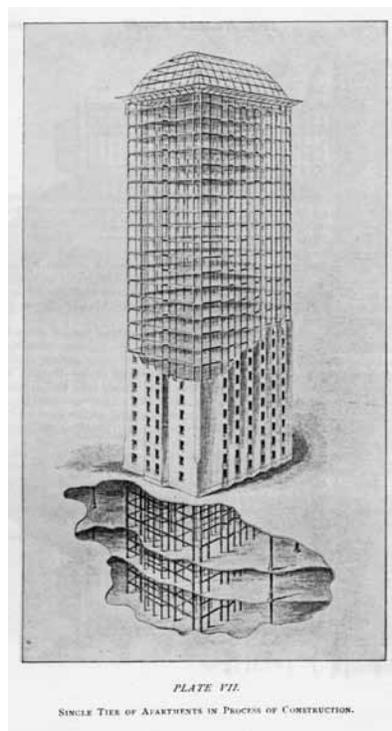


FIGURE 11. Part of a Metropolis apartment tower in the "process of construction," designed and built "upon the general plan of modern office buildings." From K.C. Gillette, *The Human Drift*, 1894.

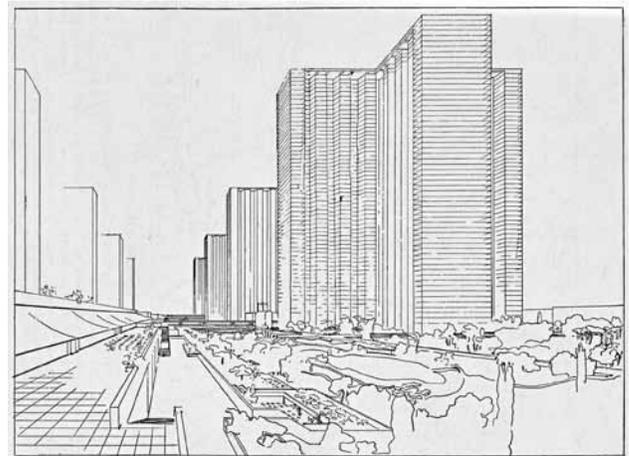


FIGURE 12. A drawing of Le Corbusier's scheme for a "Contemporary City," as developed for the Plan Voisin of 1925. It reveals a grid of supersized glass-and-steel towers set in a perfectly flat, parklike landscape serviceable exclusively by mechanized transport. Image © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/FILC, used by permission.

the “natural” vs. the “synthetic.” And they call to mind the architectural visionary Hugh Ferriss’s sublime 1929 paean to the scientific city of the future: “Building like crystals. Walls of translucent glass. . . . No Gothic branch; no acanthus leaf: no recollection of the plant world. A mineral kingdom. . . . Forms as cold as ice. . . .”³⁰

To Gillette, such a world was the culmination of industrial corporate progress. It manifested the full power of Ford and Taylor and Carnegie finally tamed and then fully unleashed — a harmonized, pacified world remade by industry into an image of industry. Where once citizens enjoyed the *Rights of Man*, now stockholders would earn a return on their investment; where once a national Congress was made up of an electoral body that was at least diverse in interests and inclinations, now a corporate board of directors would sit united by corporate priorities and values. Indeed, the whole American map — the whole continental landscape — would be united.³¹

To kickstart his company, Gillette chartered it in Arizona and then leveraged some of his razor-blade fortune to offer Theodore Roosevelt a million-dollar advance to take the presidency of World Corporation. The offer was reported in the *New York Times* on September 25, 1910, and Roosevelt turned him down. Afterwards, Gillette’s vision languished, even as his enormous fortune grew. His books never produced the legions of supporters for which he longed, and his Metropolis passed back into the obscurity from which it had hardly emerged.

METROPOLIS AS DYSTOPIA, REFORMED

Of course, not everyone believed that the march of industrial incorporation — inevitable or not — would lead to social harmony, to utopia. Indeed, a small minority of visionary reformers, such as William Morris, wanted to soften or scale back the influence of industry, even abolish it altogether.³² A number of others believed corporate growth was indeed irresistible, but that it was naïve to believe paradise would be the result. Some offered satirical views of tomorrow in which technology and the power of industry were seen to shine with great promise only to sicken and collapse into a nightmare as the universal and non-negotiable failures of human nature intervened, and as the newfound power of machines and massive capital were used to exacerbate the darkest and most persistent problems of human society.

The mysterious author Comte Didier de Chousy, for example — whose true identity remains unknown to this day — published in 1883 a book entitled *Ignis*, which told the sordid and sensational tale of a group of capitalists who form a massive company to tap the heat at the earth’s core, using it to power not only electric generators and steam-powered transport, but also to construct and operate an enormous mass-produced glass-and-steel city named Industria.³³ At the core

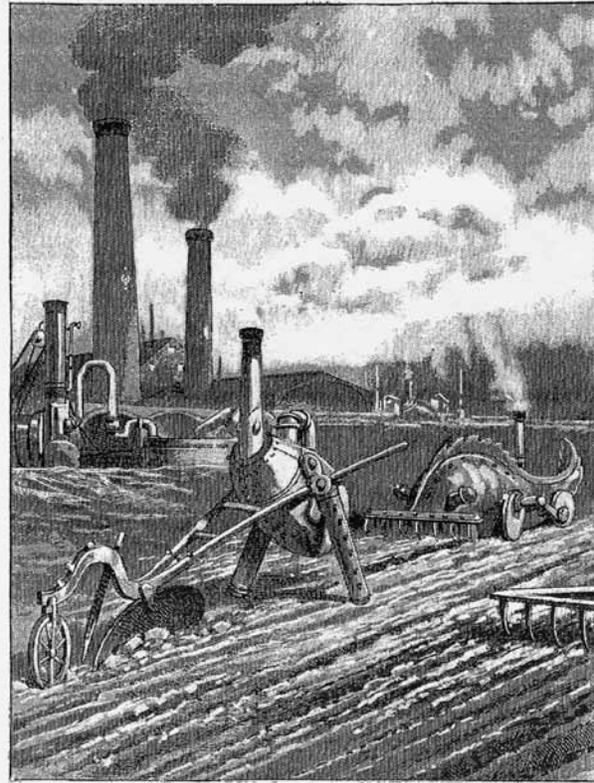


FIGURE 13. An automaton mired in serfdom on a mechanized farm, servicing the city of Industria in the dystopian world of *Ignis*. This drawing was published when the novel was serialized in the journal *La Science Illustrée*, Vol.18, 1896, p.93. Courtesy of the Maison d’Ailleurs: Museum of Science-Fiction, Utopia, and Extraordinary Journeys; Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland.

of the venture toils a robotic underclass designed to replace the African slaves who had proven too effective at resisting the company’s abuse. These metal “atmophytes” are subject to grueling, serf-like labor in underground factories and farm fields, and eventually grow tired of their cruel overlords (**FIG. 13**). Taking advantage of a weakness in the corporate leadership caused by a religious dispute, they rise up and destroy the city of Industria, shattering its crystal villas and razing its locomotive-shaped temple. The whole venture is consumed by the fire of its own making.

Deep anxieties about the failures of imperfect human beings and their imperfect creations virtually define pessimistic, satirical visions such as *Ignis*. They also stand them in stark opposition to schemes such as that of Gillette, who acknowledged the failure of the current system, yet insisted it could be reformed and redirected to produce an ideal society. Yet even the most critical of these future visions shared with Gillette’s Metropolis a fatalistic assumption that tomorrow would be increasingly mechanized — that more and more realms of human experience would be recast in the mold



FIGURE 14. The high-tech skyscraper city of Metropolis from the 1927 film by Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang; pictured at the center is the tall headquarters of the corporate elite that run the city. Copyright F.W. Murnau Foundation/Transit Film, Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek: Museum for Film and Television. Used by permission.

of the factory, where efficiency was a code of conduct, and Scientific Management the law of the land. One such vision, which at first seems to share the pessimistic view of *Ignis* but ultimately aligned with the optimism of *The Human Drift*, was released to the public two years after the publication of Gillette's *The People's Corporation*. It also offered a Metropolis, a "Mother City," run by a corporate oligarchy and built to industrial specifications. Yet it suggested that the desired transformation of capital into a paternalistic caretaker could be a long time coming.

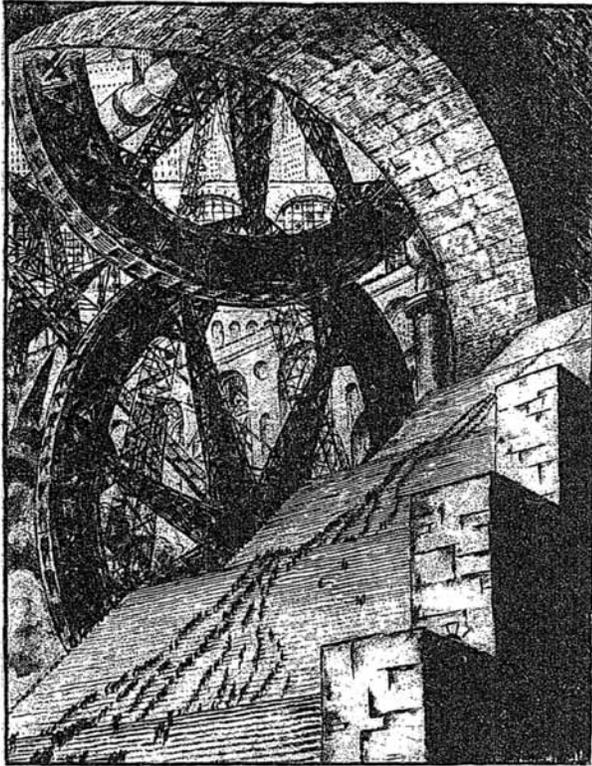
Ostensibly set in the year 2000, the 1926 German film *Metropolis*, written by Thea von Harbou and directed by her husband, Fritz Lang, took audiences to a dystopian world where a pampered corporate elite rules their urban empire from a huge tower powerfully evocative of centralized command-and-control (FIG. 14). The glowing city's thirsty power grid is serviced by a permanent underclass — a proletariat imprisoned in subterranean tenements and subjected to brutally exhausting and dangerous labor conditions, made all the worse by incompetent middle management (FIG. 15). In a scene powerfully reminiscent of reformer Henry George's claim in 1883 that mechanized labor "degraded men into the position of mere feeders of machines," the protagonist of the film — a young member of the corporate elite — witnesses a terrible accident in which a machine overheats and burns its attendants. The trauma of seeing this disaster induces in the hero a poetic vision of the machine as a temple to the pagan god Moloch, who consumes workers as fiery sacrifices. "She wanted living men for food," von Harbou wrote of the machine-city of Metropolis.³⁴

Like Gillette's city of the future, and even Chousy's *Industria*, this Metropolis had enormous underground chambers

for infrastructure and industrial services. Like Gillette's city, this Metropolis took the high-tech architectural trends of New York and Chicago and extrapolated them to bombastic proportions.³⁵ But unlike Gillette, Lang and von Harbou filled this future cityscape with a society haunted by the present. Instead of a unified utopia, this Metropolis was the stage



FIGURE 15. The very tall but otherwise low-tech subterranean tenements inhabited by the laboring underclass of Harbou's Metropolis; the pedestrian scale and humble, seemingly organic building materials convey the "primitive" conditions of this neighborhood, casting it in sharp contrast with the motorcar- and aeroplane-filled canyons of the shining city above. Copyright F. W. Murnau Foundation/Transit Film, Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek: Museum for Film and Television. Used by permission.



A Vision of the Machine Age.
A Drawing by M. V. Dobuzhinsky.

FIGURE 16. “A Vision of the Machine Age,” drawn by Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (here M.V. Dobujinsky) and published with Edward Allen Jewell’s essay “Machines, Machines! The Futurist’s Cry,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, December 11, 1927.

for a soap opera of luxurious excess and murderous ineptitude: an industrial morality tale. Its sublime, over-the-top grandeur was powerfully rendered by the Russian-Lithuanian expatriate artist M.V. Dobuzhinsky as a Piranesian conflation of a sacrificial temple on the scale of Teotihuacán with the industrial, the urban, and the Imperial Roman (FIG. 16). His drawing was published with a December 11, 1927, *New York Times* piece entitled “Machines, Machines! The Futurist’s Cry,” in which the author, Edward Allen Jewell, specifically contrasted the dire notes of Lang’s film with the swaggering, belligerent optimism of the Italian Futurist manifesto, and suggested “Out of the age of the machine may arise incalculable benefits, if also it may seem an age that threatens to exact a price.”³⁶

But at the end of *Metropolis*, von Harbou’s narrative pulls out of its apocalyptic downward spiral to conclude in such a way that it falls more or less in line with the optimistic ideas of reformers like King Camp Gillette. The young protagonist of the film manages to drag the class-combatants of his factory town — all of whom, including its wealthy capitalist leaders, had been suffering as a result of poor management



FIGURE 17. The film *Metropolis* reaches its climax, as capital and labor are reconciled thanks to the protagonist’s ability and willingness to act as the “heart mediating between the brain and the hands.” Copyright F. W. Murnau Foundation/Transit Film, Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek: Museum for Film and Television. Used by permission.

practices and senseless mob violence — to the portal of an ancient cathedral and there reconcile his shaken corporate peers to their put-upon workers (FIG. 17). He becomes, as the film famously attests, “the heart mediating between the brain and the hands.” This resolution was and remains characterized by many film and cultural critics, particularly on the political left, as kitsch, naïve, and insufficiently kind to the “brainless” underclass — and was even recanted later by Lang himself, who in 1965 said he had come to understand that “the problem” with industrial societies “is social, not moral.”³⁷ But von Harbou’s ending fell perfectly in line with many ideas that had long been circulating among those who wanted to purge the ills of industrial society not by destroying the power of capital, but by reforming its behavior — by paternalizing and leveraging the power of industrialism itself to make social progress without impeding material progress. This, according to Henry George in 1877, meant a reconciliation in industrial societies of “social law with moral law.”³⁸ This meant kinder management, which for Taylor went hand in hand with more efficient management. Thus it meant, ultimately, the fulfillment, rather than the abolition or hindrance, of industrial, corporate evolution.

EVERYTHING IN ITS RIGHT PLACE

Such imagined corporate urban utopias of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, whether breathlessly exuberant as in the case of Gillette, skeptical as in the case of Chousy, or cautiously optimistic as in the case of Lang and von Harbou, were embedded in an anticipatory tradition which included

among its practitioners not only utopian novelists and filmmakers but also influential architects such as Le Corbusier, as well as world-famous global capitalists and reform-minded politicians and activists (FIG. 18). Its diverse but inter-related body of visions held in common many assumptions about the “inevitable” character of the social, economic and physical future, most clearly expressed by the industrial, high-technology city managed by a bureaucracy of authorities whose priorities and principles corresponded with the needs of mass production.

In *The Poverty of Historicism*, Karl Popper argued that a dogmatic faith in the inexorable, uncompromising, globally predestined rise of “modernity” transformed its adherents into the “midwives” of history.³⁹ Most of the contributors to the modern “tradition of anticipation” seem to fall wholly or partly into this category: unable to change the ultimate course of events, about which they more or less agreed with each other, they merely worked in subtly different ways to make the changes as painless as possible by suggesting improvements, or perhaps by criticizing unresolved problems. But there was never any question of an alternative paradigm for human society. The Machine Age was preordained. Centrally important to such conceptions of past and ongoing history as a process of unfolding modernist destiny is Jane M. Jacobs’s “vibrating couplet” of modernity’s conceptualization of the premodern — this is the either/or, before/after binary of evolutionary paradigm shift, the two mirroring sides of which are “both co-dependent and mutually exclusive.”⁴⁰ The “modern” requires that the foil of “tradition” exist, and be vanquished, or at least on the wane, in order to position itself as modern. The power of this conceptual binary was not, and is not, limited to the interior of cinemas or the sketchpads of utopian dreamers. In the fields of architecture and urban planning this understanding of “modernity” begs the designer to take for granted, on authority, the unstoppable and irreversible eclipse of even vaguely preindustrial, human-scaled communities, and to understand their own “traditions of the modern,” not as traditions, but as their alternative: “honest” and “natural” expressions of present conditions, or even of the emerging future.

Whether the “obsolete” human-scaled cities of the “past” were to be totally abandoned, as in the case of Gillette, or buried deep underground, as in the case of von Harbou and Lang, the early-twentieth-century technological visionary believed that the vacuum they left would be amply filled by the mechanized, incorporated city of tomorrow. There, industrial-grade managers, operating under the protective arm of “limited liability,” could at last fully adopt and implement the principles not only of efficient factory regulation, but also of good government, which were increasingly understood as one and the same: reformed practices for rational, productive, profitable, and equitable human resource management, in every sense of that ambiguous and problematic term.

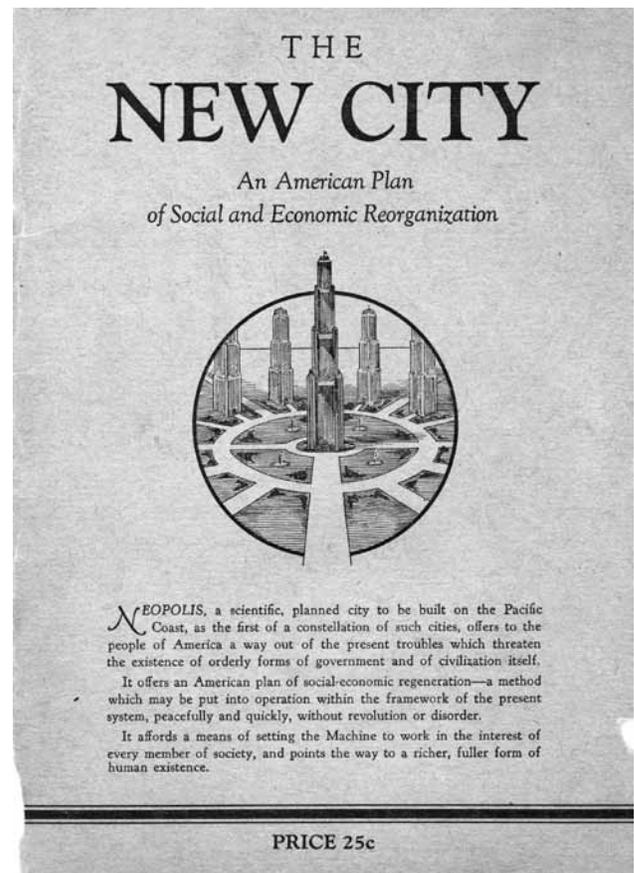


FIGURE 18. This final example is an obscure political pamphlet published in 1938 in Seattle, Washington, by an unknown group that described itself only as “The Neopolitans.” Like Gillette, the group called for a corporate model of political, economic and social reform, executed in a new model city of high-tech skyscrapers on an egalitarian urban grid. The urban plan, however, seems more evocative of Lang’s and von Harbou’s *Metropolis*: a series of highrises radiate out from a domineering central tower, where total control is wielded by a benevolent corporate elite. Courtesy of the John Hay Library, Brown University.

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