Real Utopias – envisioning the future, today?
Socially Creative Spaces

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The possible is the future of the impossible
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Introduction

The world is a strange place. On the one hand, there is now an amazing human capacity to shape and transform it, making real what previously seemed fiction. Some of the most extraordinary expressions of dream, desire and human creativity are now part of our daily lives. On the other hand, there are many reasons that continue to justify our disquiet, discomfort and indignation.

One of the last human development reports of the United Nations (UNDP, 2010) concluded, among other things, that only from a formal point of view we can say that most contemporary societies are democratic, that social inequalities remain and income disparities are increasing, and that there is also growing evidence that current patterns of production and consumption are unsustainable from an environmental point of view. Portugal, in turn, is today a country characterized by strong social inequalities, low levels of interpersonal trust, an increasing unemployment rate, high job insecurity (mostly affecting young people), educational levels below EU average values and low levels of mobilization, civic and political participation (Carmo, 2010, 2011; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

Such a grim diagnosis can only translate the failure, or perverse distortion of some of the most ambitious promises of modernity, namely, equality, freedom, lasting peace and domination of nature (Santos, 2002). It's precisely the feeling that it is necessary to transform this reality in the direction of greater equality and social justice, substantive forms of citizenship that effectively contribute to the construction of more democratic political processes and an environmental system that does not compromise future generations, which urges us to critically question what exists and to seek alternatives. We enter, therefore, into the domain of utopias. This word, whose death has been announced several times – by those who argue that after all 'there is no alternative' (famous expression coined by Margaret Thatcher and known by its acronym, TINA) – is at the center of our reflection. More precisely, we are interested in understanding how places (community produced spaces) devise and produce utopias.

We believe it is precisely at a time like this, when the possibility of constructing alternative social imaginaries is viewed with suspicion, although it is an increasingly urgent need, that it is necessary to put back on the agenda the debate around utopias. But what are we talking about when we talk about utopias? It is this question that we seek to answer in the first part of this text. Then we look in more detail at how

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geography has addressed this issue and, finally, from a citizen perspective – in a political sense connected to the construction of the city – committed to emancipatory transformation, we seek to identify a set of analytical dimensions that help us to understand better what we call socially creative spaces. We assume that arts are essential for the production and appropriation of these spaces, as they often anticipate the future and broaden the possibilities for expressing human imagination and creativity.

What exists before the utopia? What are the necessary conditions for its emergence and the construction of the project? Who are its protagonists? How can utopias escape the menacing specter of dystopia? Can utopias be made? These are some of the issues that motivate our reflection and around which we built the present text.

1. (Real) utopias, the (modest) impulse of desire

It is manifestly impossible, within this brief framework, to take care of all existing perspectives around the utopias problematic. Hence, our goal is not to do a literature review but rather to construct a clear narrative, though necessarily partial and incomplete, that allows us to safely 'navigate' in the 'troubled waters' of utopia.

Due to the fact that it's not our intention to make the history of the concept (see Goodwin and Taylor, 1982; Kumar, 1991; Levitas, 1990; Lledó, 2003; Paquot, 1996), we articulate our narrative from recent contributions. Notwithstanding, we consider important to note that this approach is situated within a tradition that, giving utopia a fundamentally positive role in the transformation of society, found in Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) and Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) two of its most relevant figures. The former, whose work The Principle of Hope (1986) would become a classic for the study of utopias, argued that the utopian impulse, i.e. the propensity to desire and imagine alternative ways of being and existence, is a basic human aspiration resulting from the fact that human experience is characterized by need and desire. Utopia transmits an impulse that is both critical of the current sociopolitical reality and anticipates alternative positive futures. He also questioned the traditional division between the real and the imaginary, as reality, just as he conceived it, includes the horizon of future possibilities (always plural and dependent on human agency for its materialization). The latter, in Ideology and Utopia (1955) reflected on the dialectical relationship between ideology and utopia. While ideology corresponds to the set of ideas aimed at preserving the existing order (e.g. neoliberal ideology), utopia translates the negation of that order and the proposal of a new one (e.g. socialist utopia). It is precisely nonconformity and, at the same time, the ability to challenge the circumstances of the present that constitute the human capacity to transform society and change the course of history, ascribing new shapes and meanings to it.

Nearly two decades ago, Fernandes (1996) reflected, from a sociological point of view, on what he called militant utopias (are there any which are not?). Some of his ideas deserve to be recalled because they constitute an important starting point for our reflection. For him, "utopias are born of a state of incongruity with the social reality in which they occur" (Fernandes, 1996: 12), i.e. they are beyond reality and seek to break with the established order. However, he also stresses that they are not mere projections of human desires because, although transcending the existential context in which they crystallize, they do so from problems that are inherent to that same existential context. As Eagleton points out (2000), if a transformed
future is not anchored in the present, it becomes a fetish that can hinder its own fulfillment. Utopia thus implies a commitment to change the circumstances of the present based on a critique of what exists, expressing desires and providing answers to human concerns. Without being "strange fantasies or images to the social world" (Fernandes, 1996: 13), utopias seek to overcome concrete social (and spatial) situations, projecting human aspirations into reality. In short, utopias, as expressions of alternative social imaginaries, are powerful tools in the service of transforming the existing order. Also meaning the recognition that people, individually or collectively, have the ability to take their lives in their own hands, utopia becomes not only an "open door to social production" (Fernandes, 1996: 17) but also, we would like to add, to the production of space, i.e. the invention of new geographies.

John Friedmann (2000), in turn, defined utopian thinking as the ability to imagine a future away from what we think the present his. In other words, a way to, based on imagination, break with everyday experiences, projecting a future informed by a set of values one considers to be important. Moreover, he suggests that utopian thinking has two inextricably linked moments: critique and constructive vision, or what we would like to call project. The first is oriented towards some aspects of the present considered unjustifiable (philosophical and/or politically) like, for example, social injustice, inequality and discrimination, oppression or ecological devastation. The second corresponds to the proposals aimed at responding to the issues that were criticized. It is important to note that visions are always subject to debate, to different interpretations and arguments, and can rarely be grounded in empirical evidence as the future may constitute a rupture with the circumstances of the present. For that reason, they are necessarily political.

A similar view was defended by Rothstein et al. (2003), for whom utopia functions as a kind of beacon that guides and gives meaning to human action, i.e. a vision that mirrors the ideals underlying the notion of human progress and development. Above all, it represents the desire not to lose the ability to think how everything can be different, as the loss of that ability would make us unable to transform existing circumstances. As for Hayden and Chamsy (2009), utopia corresponds to the delimitation of the frontiers of the political and its construction involves three stages. First, it implies a critique of the present, then, the imagination of what does not yet exists and, finally, it requires forms of thought and action that do not restrict the possibilities of realization of a given alternative social imaginary. Finally, Ruth Levitas (1990), attributed to desire, as common denominator, a central role in its definition of utopia. She did so on the grounds that, despite historical differences in terms of contents, forms (e.g. literary genre, political essay, community) and functions (e.g. political critique, psychological catharsis, social alternative) of utopia, they are all expressions of desire. As such, the concept of utopia should be defined so that we can explore those differences, without losing sight of the central role of desire in its construction. Therefore, the definition of utopia as "an expression of desire for a better way to exist" (Levitas, 1990: 9), reminds us that whatever we may think about utopias, we learn much about the experience of what is living under certain conditions by reflecting on the desires that those conditions create and are not able to meet.

While attributing utopia a positive role in the historical transformation of societies and places, it is also necessary to recognize the existence of important critiques that should not, or cannot, be ignored. After all, the neglect and hostility suffered by those who have not yet abandoned the utopian desire, was not generated in a vacuum. The fact of being dubbed unrealistic and naive for not giving up on what for many is
just an impractical and delirious dream, an escapist fantasy or pleasant but inconsequential entertainment, is not the result of mere chance.

There are several reasons contributing for that. According to Eagleton (2000), for instance, all utopia is at the same time dystopic, insofar as the act of overcoming a reality that we are given is, in itself, severely limited by that same reality. Since we can only overcome the present in the context of the possibilities that it puts at our disposal, we risk betraying our own imagination the moment we formulate it (words and concepts do impose limits to our capacity to express ourselves). In other words, utopia requires not only that one transcends the places where utopia projects itself but also overcoming the subjects that conceive it. As a corollary, he adds, true utopia is the one we cannot yet articulate. That is why utopias often reveal themselves as "antiseptic and odorless places, intolerably sensitive and refined, where natives struggle for hours with the efficiency of its health infrastructures or the ingenuity of its electoral system" (Eagleton, 2000: 33). More times than we would like to admit, utopias have merely been pathological fantasies or "reified myths" (Fernandes, 1996: 23) which degenerate into instruments of manipulation. And this seems true even if, as Jacoby (2005), we reject the notion that fascist ideologies, movements and organizations or religious fundamentalisms can be considered utopian and circumscribe utopias to what is progressive, egalitarian, emancipatory and socially just.

In the same vein, Rothstein et al. (2003), taking as a starting point the contingent and unpredictable nature of society, suggests that utopias are highly regulated precisely because they are unable to deal adequately with unpredictability. In this utopia darkly rendered dystopia, obedience and subordination are the basic principles and the propensity for violence and intolerance easily transform it in some form of totalitarianism (Chamsy and Hayden, 2009). Furthermore, especially in the developed western world, capitalism in its neoliberal version presents itself as the 'essence' of the natural order of things and tries to ontologically recover reality in an immutable and eternal fashion. After all, we have reach the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992). We live today, is Eagleton (2000) who reminds us, a perverse fantasy telling us we do not need to look at the future because, although we cannot immediately discern its contours, it already exists in the form of an incessant repetition of the present that exhausts the horizon of future possibilities and thus there is no room for utopia, 'there is no alternative'. The end of history prohibits critical thinking and cancels the alternative imagination of the future, generating an anti-utopian world. Under this scenario, utopia is seen as "a pathological decrease of reason and imagination that must be vigorously treated with powerful and repeated doses of realism, the inoculation of pragmatism and the shock treatment of cynicism and Machiavellianism" (Goux, 2006: 96).

Paradoxically, this process of destruction of utopia is simultaneously lamented as it reflects a sense of loss of imagination, a hollowing out of democracy, a weakening of critical thinking and an abandonment of an emancipatory dream; however, it is also celebrated, in that represents a departure from the forms of abstract totalizing and speculative thought, close to regimes that are totalitarian, indifferent or hostile to difference and individuality (Chamsy and Hayden, 2009). At the same time we witness the necessary reinvention of utopia, the renewal of utopian thought. The abandonment of the dystopian legacy is visible through the emergence of some utopian proposals characterized by greater reflexivity, pluralism, by being explicitly political-normative, and suspicious of essentialist and deterministic conceptions of reality, while
remaining committed to the utopian desires of radical social transformation, human emancipation and expansion of creative possibilities beyond the existing real (Munck, 2009).

Recently, Santos (2012: 212), for whom the utopia is "the exploration, through imagination, of new human possibilities for collective and individual life, based on the refusal of the need of what exists, just because it does exist, in the name of something radically better that is worth fighting for and to which humanity is entitled", described in a very eloquent manner the spirit of change of our time, stating that:

Utopia is returning, but this time through concrete social initiatives and experiences, which, despite their limited scope, completely break with the dominant models of social and political life and demonstrate in practice the human capacity to build more equitable ways to live and relate. For that they are called realist utopias, the beginning of the construction of other future not elsewhere, but here and now. If it is true that utopias have their time, our is the time of realist utopias. It is now clear that any innovative idea is always utopian before becoming a reality (Santos, 2012: 212).

In addition to the Portuguese sociologist, Erik Olin Wright (2010) has also been using the term real utopia in a way that seems, in fact, very close. For this author, real utopia is founded on the idea that the possible (in pragmatic terms) is not something independent of our imagination, but shaped by it, real utopias are "utopian ideals that are anchored in the real potential of humanity, utopian destinations that have intermediate accessible stops, utopian institutional designs that can inform the practical tasks of navigating in a world that has imperfect conditions for social change" (Wright, 2010: 6). From the study of a number of cases, namely, the participatory budget in Porto Alegre, Wikipedia, the Mondragon cooperative and unconditional basic income, the author supports the idea that utopia takes shape and becomes real through concrete actions and sociospatial relations.

In *Utopies Réalisables* (2000), Yonna Friedman describes an axiomatic that identifies the required properties as well as the limits of achievable utopias. Only from a collective consent built on a shared dissatisfaction, he says, it is possible to build utopias that are not imposed or paternalistic and articulate non-competitive forms of sociability. Utopia is no longer (only) the desired objective and (also) becomes the collectively traveled path, resembling both Holloway's (2002) initial 'scream', i.e. a rejection of the present that is both an active energy in search of another reality, as well as the famous situationist expression that covered the walls of Paris on May 68 – 'be realistic, demand the impossible!'. Real utopia is not a specific space or place but rather a movement or flow which can, in turn, create new spatial possibilities (Robinson and Tormey, 2009), that is, new geographies based on different sociospatial relations.

In light of these perspectives, which somehow seem to signal the renaissance and renewal of utopia, it can even be said, glossing Mark Twain, that the news about the death of utopia were clearly exaggerated. Nevertheless, as stressed by Levitas (1990), the semantics of utopia is a battlefield, a terrain of struggle in which power relations, contradictions and conflicts, are constantly being summoned and negotiated. Perhaps due to that fact it is not surprising to find that, long before the authors we have just evoked, Antony Giddens (1990), the theoretical and conceptual father of Tony Blair's politically sponsored third way, had already spoken about the need to build a utopian realism capable of combining emancipatory politics with self-
fulfillment. Despite apparent similarities, it is not the same thing we are talking about, and the reversal of the terms used already denounces it. Whereas Giddens places emphasis on a realism that is necessarily grounded in the present and in the established order, necessarily limiting visions of the future, and is configured with the goal of improving the present instead of transforming it, Levitas, sees utopia as a project open to the future but not looking forward to its arrival to begin its process of construction.

To conclude this point, it seems important to note that the path trodden so far not only allowed us to unravel some of the 'secrets' of utopia, its contradictions, limits and challenges but also to realize that despite the obstacles and uncertainties, when facing a crossroad obliging us to take an option, we are convinced that the way forward is real utopia. If nothing else, "because many of our dreams have been reduced to what exists, and what exists is often a nightmare, to be utopian is the most consistent way to be realistic at the beginning of the 21st century" (Santos, 2012: 212).

2. Geographies of utopia

The relations of geography and utopia are not new. However, it is mostly at the urban level, of cities, metropolitan areas and the multiple interwoven socio-spatial relations that shape them, they acquire greater relevance. The sociospatial (re)construction of the urban also seems to mirror the process of renewal and reinvention of utopias that we described earlier. As Pinder (2002) underlines, cities are both real and imagined spaces, made of dreams, hopes and fears, as well as social practices and multiple materialities. Therefore, he adds, questions about the ways through which cities are imagined and constructed are fundamental to understand urban experiences, their spaces, and to see how can they be conceived and lived in different ways. As such, it is mainly from the city that we try to understand how geography has come to relate to utopia.

In the classic The City in History (1998), Lewis Mumford reminds us that the first utopias in greek classical antiquity were essentially urban. In fact, the civitas was in itself a utopian construction. Moreover, as suggested by Baeten (2002), utopian schemes that sought to resolve a wide range of problems arising from urbanization and industrialization in the 19th century, such as Ebenezer Howard garden city, the Broadacre city of Frank Lloyd Wright, Corbusier's radiant city or the industrial town of Tony Garnier, were also designed as planned utopias inscribed in the social construction of urban space. The functionalist view of cities sought to introduce order in the busy, sometimes chaotic, life of large metropolis. For Fernandes, (1996: 18), these utopian aspirations "reflect the difficulties of life born from social and physical constraints, and the desire for refuge in the illusions of a planned future". MacLeod and Ward (2002) point out, in turn, that the garden-city model, for example, was based on an organic set of interconnected small communities within the framework of a decentralized society in order to fight, peacefully and harmoniously, the adverse effects of industrial capitalism. Moreover, the modernist paradigm that had Corbusier as its main figure, was mainly aimed at the elimination of difference and the construction of a rational city, an effective machine for living. In short, although embedded in different conceptions of what should be the city, its form and its functions, those models were mainly based on the projection of ordered spatial forms (Ellin 1999; Lynch, 1981). Pinder (2002) argues that these spatial forms offer different opportunities to harmonize and organize
societies in a manner likely to remit all their problems to another time and another space. Spatial transformation was privileged since it was assumed that changes of spatial form would be accompanied, in a deterministic and mechanical way, by social change; something that now seems very naive. Urbanism was therefore understood as the key to change society until the mid-20th century.

In the second half of the 20th century, however, the spatial form lost its centrality in the design of urban utopian models. Not only because the economic and political conditions, more uncertain and unpredictable, were no longer favorable to the implementation of such projects but also because their focus on functional homogeneity was viewed with suspicion as it seemed unable to meet the needs of increasingly complex societies (see Jacobs, 1961). In addition, the desire to shape urban social space according to abstract universal principles, thus denying the diversity and uniqueness of cities and their neighborhoods, was seen as inherently oppressive (Sandercock, 1998). By denying dynamics of social processes, modern urban utopias metamorphosed into what today are the multiple dystopian geographies of contemporary cities. Unfortunately, Harvey (2000) suggests, current urban creative thinking is no longer focused on how cities and urbanization processes can be transformed in order to promote social justice or a progressive political project but in how those who have power and wealth can erect barriers and walls around themselves that make them immune to all the problems associated with life in large metropolises. Cities seem to be mainly produced and organized as strategic axis in a global network designed to facilitate capital accumulation, where the main role of urban space is to promote competitiveness and enable economic productivity (Purcell, 2008). As a result, operations of territorial marketing, the promotion of flagship events and processes of privatization and urban gentrification, in conjunction with major development and urban regeneration projects, have acquired a growing importance. They are fundamental for the new role of cities as far as they are particularly effective in attracting investment and highly skilled professionals, the promotion of technological innovation and the expansion of the finance-real estate sector.

The paradoxical nature of urban utopias we now identified contributed to the emergence of alternative proposals exploring its limits and contradictions and help us to rethink them. Indeed, many of the citizens' initiatives and social activisms in countries like Holland, Italy, Germany, France and the UK are anchored in alternative spaces. In Italy, for example, since the 1990s there has been a proliferation of centri sociali, i.e. autonomous and anti-authoritarian spaces conceived as laboratories for cultural innovation and political subversion, Leoncavallo in Milan being the oldest and largest center (Membretti, 2007, Parker et al., 2007). Theoretically, spatial utopias have also reinvent themselves in the form of temporary autonomous zones (Bey, 1991), corresponding to areas or spaces allowing the reconstruction of alterity, celebrating autonomy and challenging hierarchy, initiatives in which individuals shape their own contexts and create new desires, thus escaping the attempts to impose order from above, configuring spaces marked by autonomy and plurality; dialectical utopianism (Harvey, 2000), meaning not a static spatial shape or an emancipatory process but a sociospatial strategy projecting different geographical trajectories for human development; and temporary utopian spaces (Curran, 2009), referring to unmediated autonomous spaces that temporarily escape the prevailing neoliberal socio-economic context. Without needing to be grandiose projects, they can operate more modestly as non-institutionalized small-scale experiences in which, above all, what is valued is the processes of their construction. What unifies these
proposals is the rejection of the monolithic logic underlying modern utopias and especially the refusal of contemporary neoliberal cities, thus recognizing the need of 'cities for people, not for profit' (Brenner et al., 2012).

As suggested by Tormey (2005), these approaches reject a priori or transcendental imperatives raised by a single subject, do not seek a new axiomatic imposing itself to social life, nor conceive resistance as the affirmation of a definitive alternative. They correspond to spaces that are horizontally produced and appropriated, resist to modernity's codification, homogeneity and uniformity and that, moreover, reject privatization, regeneration, the democratic deficit or the strong ecological footprint of the neoliberal city. In doing so, they are also welcoming creativity, contingency, uncertainty and a constant (re)negotiation of sociospatial processes. In contrast, its protagonists seek to claim the possibility of constructing a space that, while breaking the hegemonic order, restores their autonomy and vitality. However, as Curran (2009) concludes, these spaces do not exhaust nor intend to replace other forms of urban intervention aimed at transforming power relations and promoting social emancipation. Instead, they try to merge with existing paths, exploring and expanding the range of possibilities for intervention and eventually create new opportunities for collective action. We are particularly interested in observing how these projects and practices may have a wider expression, configuring new cities anchored in the production of socially creative spaces.

3. Socially creative spaces

Socially creative spaces are products of local communities, bearers of identity and memory, and constituent elements of urban places. Under certain conditions, local communities develop the ability to rethink themselves, to develop critical thinking about the places they produce and simultaneously constrain them. In other conditions, they limit themselves to adopt models imported from other locations or times reproducing what happens in different contexts, i.e. copying and adapting rules and procedures that were neither defined for nor shaped by that community. It is the first case we are interested in discussing: the transformation of places and the reasons that stimulate it. The socio-spatial relations leading to utopia seem to be mainly rooted in critical thinking and in the possibility of constructing a specific vision for place, though necessarily framed by a general contextualization.

From a critical (geography) approach in which territory is seen as an active agent of social dynamics, vision is essentially connected to the modes of production of new spaces and reuse of the old. Critical thinking allows one to question existing spaces (and territorial networks). Do they constitute barriers to the development of places? Fragment local communities? Promote encounters and relationships? Decrease or increase distances? Separate or assemble? Welcome or exclude? Critical thinking also allows one to design the production of new spaces and define the roles they will play, the meanings they will assume and how they can change the daily life of local communities.

Often, in the social sciences, visions are seen at the macro-scale (of society) and, at the meso/micro scale of places, they are rarely discussed. Specific or particular visions entwining ideals set by society/culture, with a relatively general and abstract framework, and the contingencies of place, where
everyday relations of proximity marked by emotions, feelings and often ambivalent and paradoxical circumstances, can change societal visions turning them into projects.

But in the field of real utopias, what changes are we talking about? Change what's wrong or what can possibly be better? One can change as a reaction – counterposing or avoiding adversities – or follow a path outlined by values and principles. It is these values and principles which, in contradictory situations, allows us to identify priorities (e.g. close the small neighborhood school to provide better educational resources in a bigger school or maintain the former, privileging the value of neighborhood relations).

An important aspect of this discussion is the notion of change associated to equilibrium. This notion translates an implicit defense of an 'inevitable' (or 'natural') trend towards equilibrium and the 'correction' of imbalance, that is present, for example, in the concept of territorial cohesion. In this perspective, tension and conflict arise as negative, as local community disfunctions or divisions and factors of place fragmentation. In another perspective, not centered on equilibrium, tension and conflict are precisely seen as stimuli for transformation – the confrontation between an established sociospatial order and another that emerges as an alternative, proposing new social relations and geometries of power. This latter point of view, that we share, privileges unrest, antagonism and contradiction as factors of dynamism, of 'creative destruction' (Harvey, 2007; Schumpeter, 2003 [1943]).

Change may thus point to the recovery of equilibrium (resilience) or for conflict management, harnessing the energy coming from those tensions to produce socially creative spaces. In this second perspective, change corresponds to social innovation, advancing, on the one hand, responses to unmet social needs promoting the strengthening of inclusion, self-esteem and social justice, and entailing, on the other hand, the transformation of sociospatial relations and geometries of power, privileging principles of solidarity, reciprocity and cooperation (overlaid on competition, hierarchy and subordination).

Migrations, an increasing flow of information and the confrontation of different ways of life, intensified the differences and the diversity of places as well as tensions and conflicts. The increasing complexity of places (even more accentuated by the increasing levels of uncertainty in the functioning of economic systems) transforms sociospatial relations and the ways one looks at them. New forms of socio-cultural appropriation of space are created and as a result creative practices that threaten the 'norm' (outraged cities, all over the world, illustrate well this process) are produced. At the same time, changes are very fast and ever more ephemeral.

However, awareness of change seems to correspond, in most cases, to big breakthroughs that allow one to abandon certain values and destroy certain institutions, replacing them with others, thereby transforming the modes of production and appropriation of space. But change also takes place through small steps, deeply or superficially. In changes at the surface – 'changing something so that everything remains the same' – hegemonic powers adapt to new circumstances (e.g. income support). Instead, profound changes, even though step by step, involve changes in sociospatial relations, i.e. hegemonic groups lose control and power over space via the efficacy of resistance (protest and revolt) and subordinate groups gain power and appropriate new spaces (e.g. gender equality). From the perspective of geography, particularly regarding the production of socially creative spaces, it is important to understand how does territory facilitates or hinders profound social changes, or even the extent to which it makes superficial transformations look deeper. For
instance, place fragmentation (pierced by major highways, 'invaded' by exclusive gated residential or business communities, etc.) and the elimination or privatization of public space are processes that greatly hinder profound social changes. Especially because they prevent or hinder proximity relationships (based on solidarity, commitment, complicity, etc.), hence diluting local identity, but also because they hinder 'communication', the circulation of information and debate. Along the same line of thinking, the reinforcement of proximity networks and communication emerge as crucial levers for social transformation and the production of socially creative spaces.

One of the factors which we consider crucial in the production of socially creative spaces is artistic expression, especially because it facilitates communication, overcoming the barriers of verbal discourse, thus allowing greater expression of emotions, feelings and affections, anxieties and aspirations. Moreover, arts show a special ability to (re)construct symbolic meanings, either through territorial brands that make up the sense of belonging to a place or by way of the distinction and valorization of people, activities, organizations and places as a whole, thus expanding their external recognition (Roy-Valex, 2010). Festivity and celebration underlying crucial moments and sities within places also seem to be relevant in this sense (André et al., forthcoming).

In 1790 Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, already stressed the central role of arts for social change, arguing that art contributes to the advancement of culture as it is an important vehicle for communication and at the same time, produces ideas, through representations of the imagination; science, on the other hand produces concepts built on reason, and together – ideas and concepts – are the pillars that organize thought (Schaeffer, 1992).

But it is only in the late 19th, early 20th century, that European revolutionary movements widely appropriated art, using it as an instrument for the realization of utopia. The Bauhaus, founded in Berlin by Walter Gropuis in 1919, is an interesting example of this transformation (Bradley 2007). Art associated with anti-capitalist ideologies expands in the 20th century, with Dadaism or Surrealism. Both artistic movements challenged the rationalism driving capitalist development, either showing the weakness of its underlying logic, or stressing the role of the unconscious and the senses. Although strongly repressed during the Second World War, these conceptions of art emerge again and acquire great importance on the social changes of the 1960s, especially by criticizing bourgeois society. But in the 1960s and 1970s arts were also associated by other means, to change and social innovation, conveying not only critical thinking but also proposals for change. The music of Bob Dylan or Joan Baez, in the US, or Malangatana's painting in Mozambique, are impressive examples of this dual role of the arts (André et al., forthcoming).

Despite the important social progress brought by the progressive democratization of fine arts, especially evident in the last 50 years, the expansion of neoliberalism from the 1980s onwards represented a 'step back', making art a highly valued commodity, that is, incorporating it in the logic of capitalist production. Within a territorial framework, especially in cities, art is often mobilized to express critical thinking, while at the same time being used as a commodity, a critical tool for the valorization of places, through architecture, museums, art galleries or festivals. In fact, the social function of art in western contemporary societies is very ambivalent (André and Carmo, 2010). This does not, however, prevents one to recognize the immense potential of arts for the production of socially creative spaces. The increasing
access to culture as well as to new modes of artistic production, particularly through the Internet, extend political engagement through cultural democracy, essential condition for individual and collective emancipation (Caune, 2006). The following figure summarizes the essence of our thinking about the central role of the arts in building real utopias.

To finalize our reflection, we leave you with a challenge. A table with a column to be filled, the one of real utopia. Summarizing the discussion presented in this text, the table combines the underlying vision of real utopia to action strategies based on arts. We propose that each one 'fills' the column based on their own reflection and known examples.

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