EDUTOPIA – New Methods for the Design Studio

EDUTOPIA - Nove metode za projektni studio

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Abstract Situating itself within the theoretical and methodological framework of the ongoing "EDUTOPIA – Utopia as Educational Practice in Architecture: New Methods for Envisioning Transformational Change" research project, the paper builds on the hypothesis that architectural and spatial education can and must move beyond technical and product-focused training towards the development of transversal and critical thinking. It suggests that this should be done predominantly by employing speculative and utopian modes of thinking and methods of practice. Taking as a broader aim the need to equip future practitioners with the means of not only producing built space but also addressing and engaging with urgent social and spatial challenges, the methods developed for the design studio within the scope of the project aim to integrate insights and approaches from architecture and urbanism with those of the humanities fields. Developing a framework for experimental design studio assignments, the project brings together creative methods from utopia, fiction, and other speculative and narrative-based forms.

This paper brings forth both the methodological structure of the project, some of the initial findings as well as some ongoing outputs from the design studio. Exploring the discursive and speculative potential of the architectural discipline and placing focus on its potential to actively engage with a larger array of both spatial and societal topics, EDUTOPIA treats the design studio as a space for critical inquiry and imaginative world-building – a place for problematizing, and not merely problem-solving. Focusing more on systems, processes, and interconnections, rather than finalized and embodied products the methods and approaches developed through the design studio assignments aim to challenge conventional pedagogies and expand the role of spatial education in preparing students for spatial practice as a form of societal and cultural engagement and transformation.

Keywords spatial education; utopia as critical method; utopian pedagogy; speculative design; design studio.

Sažetak Situirajući se unutar teorijskog i metodološkog okvira istraživačkog projekta „EDUTOPIA – Utopia as Educational Practice in Architecture: New Methods for Envisioning Transformational Change", rad polazi od pretpostavke da arhitektonsko i prostorno obrazovanje može i mora nadići tehnički usmjerenu nastavu i fokus na izgrađenu formu kao krajnji rezultat te se usmjeriti prema razvoju transverzalnog i kritičkog mišljenja. Predlaže to prvenstveno ostvariti primjenom spekulativnih i utopijskih načina promišljanja te odgovarajućih metoda rada. Polazeći od šireg cilja osposobljavanja budućih stručnjaka ne samo za oblikovanje izgrađenog prostora nego i za suočavanje s gorućim društvenim i prostornim izazovima te aktivno uključivanje u njihovo rješavanje, metode razvijene za projektni studio u okviru istraživanja nastoje povezati spoznaje i pristupe arhitekture i urbanizma s onima iz humanističkih disciplina. Razvijajući okvir za eksperimentalne zadatke u projektnih studija, Edutopia objedinjuje kreativne metode preuzete iz utopije, fikcije te drugih spekulativnih i narativnih formi.

Tekst koji proizlazi iz inicijalnih faza ovog istraživanja predstavlja metodološku strukturu projekta, neke od njegovih početnih nalaza te pojedine rezultate koji nastaju u okviru projektnog studija. Istražujući diskurzivni i spekulativni potencijal arhitektonske discipline te naglašavajući njezinu sposobnost aktivnog uključivanja u širi spektar prostornih i društvenih tema, Edutopia promatra projektni studio kao prostor kritičkog propitivanja i imaginativnog oblikovanja mogućih svjetova – mjesto za problematizaciju, a ne samo za rješavanje već definiranih problema. Fokusirajući se prije svega na sustave, procese i međusobne povezanosti, a manje na dovršene i materijalizirane forme, metode i pristupi razvijeni kroz zadatke projektnog studija nastoje dovesti u pitanje konvencionalne pedagoške modele te proširiti ulogu arhitektonskog obrazovanja s ciljem pripreme studenata za prostornu praksu shvaćenu kao oblik društvenog i kulturnog angažmana i transformacije.

Ključne riječi prostorno obrazovanje; utopija kao kritička metoda; utopijska pedagogija; spekulativni dizajn; projektantski studio.

1 Introduction – Architecture as a Critical and Discursive Practice

Within the contemporary context architecture – as a spatial discipline which focuses predominantly on the production and innovation of built forms – is being increasingly recognized as a field which exerts a significant effect on our overall environment. And while the engagement of architectural discipline in the efforts to mitigate the effects of climate crisis and to address some of the most relevant socio-spatial issues of today is steadily increasing, the focus is often geared only towards employing architecture's technical side by developing more sustainable building practices. This is done either through the reuse of existing building stock and materials, by designing carbon neutral or even carbon negative structures, or through designing smart buildings and cities which develop and integrate innovative technologies aimed at optimizing various aspects of utilities consumption, infrastructure, and mobility. And while these goals and attempts are noteworthy, by focusing on and employing predominantly the engineering aspect of architecture, these approaches often neglect the potential of the discipline's social, political, cultural, and economic role, as well as its discursive, artistic and transdisciplinary side. They therefore fail to employ architecture's potential to act as a discipline for critical and reflective spatial and societal visioning through imagining and proposing new futures and ways of living for our (built) environment and its inhabitants – human or other.

Although architecture, as a creative spatial discipline, is often broadly perceived as inherently "utopian" due to its projective nature, future oriented outlook, and its assumed intention to create an improved condition, it lacks some of the main utopian attributes. Within practice, the majority of architectural production operates within existing regulatory, economic, and cultural constraints, more often engaging in incremental adaptation rather than the critical rehaul and reimagination of socio-spatial conditions. In many cases, especially in the case of large-scale projects which are often described as "visionary" or even "utopian", architecture often does not question or challenge the status quo. Rather, it tends to operate as another layer which enforces and solidifies already existing systems of power. In that sense, utopia is less an intrinsic quality of architecture as a discipline, but more a specific and intentional mode of inquiry that must be deliberately activated. From an educational perspective, most architectural schools – especially those which are more technically focused –base their curriculum on developing problem-solving, rather than problematizing skills, teaching students how to solve specific predetermined briefs and assignments, with little room left for questioning or reflection.

Focusing precisely on this experimental and speculative – utopian – side and potential of the architectural discipline, the ongoing research project "EDUTOPIA – Utopia as Educational Practice in Architecture: New Methods for Envisioning Transformational Change"[1] aims to develop and test novel ways of re-establishing the critical and discursive role of architecture in imagining the futures for our (built) environment(s). Situating the research within architectural and spatial education, the project builds on the hypothesis that education can and must move beyond technical and product-focused training towards the development of transversal and critical thinking, predominantly by employing speculative and utopian modes of thought and methods of practice. Taking as a broader aim the need to equip future practitioners with the means to not only produce built space, but to also address and engage with urgent social and spatial challenges, the methods developed for the design studio within the scope of the project integrate insights and approaches from architecture and urbanism with those of the humanities fields. Developing a framework for experimental design studio assignments, the project aims to brings together creative methods from utopia, fiction, and other speculative and narrative-based forms. Exploring the discursive and speculative potential of the architectural discipline and placing focus on actively engaging with a larger array of spatial and societal topics, EDUTOPIA treats the design studio as a space for critical inquiry and imaginative world-building – a place for problematizing, and not merely problem-solving. Focusing on systems, processes, and interconnections, rather than finalized and embodied products the methods and approaches developed through the design studio assignments aim to challenge conventional pedagogies and expand the role of spatial education in preparing students for spatial practice as a form of societal and cultural engagement and transformation.

As a research project, EDUTOPIA operates on two distinct yet interconnected levels: it explores how utopian thinking can inform the pedagogical structure of architectural and spatial education, while also developing concrete ways of teaching students to actively employ utopia as a critical method of thinking and imagining within their own spatial disciplines. Instead of approaching utopia as merely an idealized model of a distant future, the project engages with it as a methodological framework within which students learn to speculate, narrate, and critically reimagine socio-spatial conditions which they encounter or are confronted with. Our central question therefore is not how to design an ideal future (city), but rather how to teach students the methods to imagine and develop critical utopian narratives of alternative socio-spatial realities, which move beyond the obvious and probable, but still remain attentive to the conditions of their present context. While the EDUTOPIA project is now only in its initial stages, the aim of this paper is to establish some of its benchmarks and starting points.

The paper builds on the concept of utopia, which in the framework of the research is not seen as an individual fancy, but as a critical method for reflecting on our own past and present with the aim of envisioning a better or

1 EDUTOPIA – Utopia as Educational Practice in Architecture: New Methods for Envisioning Transformational Change is a post-doctoral research project led by dr.sc. Jana Čulek at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb. The project is funded through the DIGIT Seal of Excellence under the Synergies Program of the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education, and Youth and the World Bank (DIGIT.2.2.01.001.)

different future. After creating a framework for defining utopia as a critical method, the paper examines it within the context of (architectural) pedagogy. Observing utopian pedagogy as an approach which often appears outside of architectural education and situates itself more commonly within the humanities and social sciences fields, the paper speculates on potential ways in which some of these approaches and methods could be translated into architectural and spatial education, and through which means. This process is structured through the reflection on some of the main approaches and methods developed for the EDUTOPIA project. Lastly, the paper lays out the initial and ongoing design studio assignment within the scope of the project – Utopian Laboratory Ilica - reflecting on the structure and aims of the course, as well as some of the early student outcomes.

2 Developing Utopian Pedagogy

2.1 Defining Utopia as a Critical Method

Approaching the topic of architectural and spatial education through the framework of utopia as a critical method, requires a short reflection on how utopia as a concept is understood within the framework of the EDUTOPIA research and this paper. When examining the utopian impulse to envision a society and space which is in some way better than our own, we see that it can be dated as far back as Plato's Republic (Mumford, 1922; Manuel, Manuel, 1997). The name of this impulse, however, at least in the scope that we recognize it in today, was first established through the 1516. literary work of Thomas More which describes the imaginary island Utopia (Manuel, Manuel, 1997). As a creative, critical, and speculative form utopia has developed predominantly within literature, but has also appeared in other creative disciplines such as architecture, art, and more recently – film and the graphic novel. The name itself – utopia – deriving from the ancient Greek topos, meaning "place", and the prefix ouk meaning "not", automatically defines it in spatial terms as "a place which is a non-place, simultaneously constituted by a movement of affirmation and denial" (Viera, 2010,4). In addition to utopia as a concept describing a more perfect place outside of our own, several other correlated concepts have appeared in the last several centuries such as that of dystopias, anti-utopias, critical utopias (James, 2003; Vieira, 2010), and heterotopias (Foucault, 1967). And while the depictions of these other 'topias' and the alternative worlds they envision differ from the ideal utopian image, the majority of them is based on the same intention – to pose a critical reflection on a specific historical and spatial context, its social and spatial forms[2] (Čulek, 2022), with the aim of depicting an alternative futurescape.

Throughout centuries, utopias have offered some of the most innovative, thought-provoking and critical solutions which, albeit mostly not indented for immediate realization, created a much-needed trigger and inspiration for long term transformational change. However, proposing a fixed and encompassing definition for utopia as a form presents itself as difficult, given that what constitutes a utopia often varies according to the creative field within which it emerges, but also the historical period in which it is created. Within recent decades there have been various attempts to frame it within the architectural field (Coleman, 2005; Choay, 1997), critical theory (Jameson, 2005; Marin, 1984) and within literature (Claeys, 2020; Vieira, 2010; Levitas, 1990, 2013; Suvin, 1979).

Building on these insights, within the context of the EDUTOPIA project, utopia is therefore defined not as a finished product or an idealized image of a perfect world, but as a critical method which simultaneously reflects on, and opens up, the context within which it is situated, while proposing an alternative for it. Through the topics it addresses and the social and spatial forms it develops, utopia becomes bound to the socio-spatial and historical context from which it emerges. Actively addressing this context utopia becomes a tool for rethinking our (built) environment and societies with the aim of creating a critical reflection on their past and present and offering a speculative alternative for their future. Avoiding focusing on only isolated aspects and processes of the built environment, utopias employ their critical and creative capacity to encompass a much wider array of spatial and societal implications and forms which they often address through the combined use of textual and visual narratives – making them a valuable tool in addressing today's context of complex poly-crises. Acknowledging the complexity, multifacetedness, and diversity ingrained in today's society, as well as all the negative repercussions and connotations tied to the production of totalizing narratives, this paper argues that novel ways of employing utopia as a critical method within spatial practice still can and need to be researched, developed, and evaluated.

2.2 Utopian Pedagogy

Acknowledging utopia's capacity for addressing complex socio-spatial issues and its value as a tool and method in various creative practices, it is also relevant to address its potential as an educational model. When examining today's approaches in architectural education, we can detect two main avenues based on the focus of the institution itself: the first, in

2 The concepts of social and spatial forms build upon both the concepts of form from architecture as well as those from comparative literature – specifically those of Caroline Levine (2015) who proposes to "broaden our definition of form to include social arrangements". They therefore include all manners, configurations, organization principles, and repetitive patterns of the behavior of humans or other living things, and as such do not generally have a tangible spatial manifestation. They also include cyclical and other rhythms, societal and other hierarchies, political, educational, health and other systems and groups, as well as theoretical concepts which describe or refer to human behavior such as industrialization, alienation, mass production, religion, and others. Conversely, spatial forms include all types, scales, and manners of forms which have a physical manifestation in space such as buildings, cities, infrastructure, structural systems, geography, planets, objects, etc. (Čulek, 2020, 2022, 2023).

which employs a [1] "problem solving (application)" approach that relies more precisely on methods which provide solutions for specific predefined problems and are more akin to "hard science disciplines" , and the [2] "problem framing (development)" approach which focuses more on investigating abstract problems which rely more on a "hunch" instead of relating "to an existing or established field of knowledge and methods" (Helmersen, 2021). The first is more akin to a client brief and prepares students for the practical side of building-based architectural practice. By offering a set of defined spatial requirements intended for a specific function at a predefined location as an assignment, this approach teaches students practical design skills and the implementation of standards, norms, and defined technical solutions. Conversely, the second approach is often based on abstract philosophical notions and – in some cases – does not even require a spatial solution from the students, but merely a theoretical and conceptual speculation or scenario. These types of assignments are often nominally aimed at the development of research skills, critical thinking, and creativity, but sometimes fail at providing students with methods of implementing these new skills and knowledge within the "real world". And while both sets of skills are of outmost importance for the future spatial practitioner, it is in fact the overlap and simultaneous use of these two approaches within the framework of the design studio which is often lacking. This convergence of speculation and critical examination with the envisioning of concrete and possibly implementable solutions and strategies is precisely that which could educate and equip future experts and practitioners to actively envision and create positive transformational change within the global environment.

2.2.1 Utopia as Process or Destination

When examining utopian pedagogy[3] as a specific field, especially within the context of the last several decades, two distinct forms of utopian teaching appear – one which focuses on the methodological aspects of utopia and what it affords as a form, and the other focusing on the prescriptive outcomes it depicts. The two often have many names, depending on the author which discusses them. But this paper will focus on two perhaps most illustrative opposing nomenclatures, namely "utopia as process" versus "utopia as system" (Webb, 2013 based on Levitas, 2007) and "utopian archaeology" versus "utopian architecture"[4] (Webb, 2017). Webb describes "utopia as process" as "open-ended", "fluid and partial", "exploratory", "playful", and "critical" with its main aim being that of "critical demystification – uncovering, unveiling, unmasking the operation of power so that new, open partial, fluid, spaces of possibility can emerge" (Webb, 2013, 282). Similarly, the concept of "utopian archaeology", derived from the works of Frederic Jameson (2005) and Ruth Levitas (2013) also focuses on the process of uncovering and unearthing what is already there – making things and connections evident, to provide them a space of becoming. "Utopia as system" is conversely described as "representational", "totalistic", "normative", "prescriptive", and "instrumental" (Webb, 2013, 281) and often alluded to as problematic or "bad", due to its seemingly prescriptive nature and content which aims to propose actual alternatives to its contextual social and spatial forms, practicing thus the "indignity of speaking for others" (Webb, 2013, 283).

In today's architectural context, the "utopia as system" or "utopia as architecture" is most commonly addressed through pejorative terms, abandoned as a method or approach due to its seeming totalitarian, rigid, and prescriptive overtones. The utopian has, as Webb proposes in the terms of Jameson, "shifted away from the 'utopian form' and towards the 'utopian wish'", and is "no longer concerned with constructing systems and programs but seeks to uncover the diffuse, varied and ambiguous utopian impulse to be found in subjective human experience" (Webb, 2017, 553; Jameson, 2005). An alternative path to uncovering potential reasons for this shift away from a more prescriptive form of utopian narratives, aside from the most common interpretation which links it to the disillusionment and failure of the modern movement and utopia following the atrocities of the Second World War, is offered by Ford and Svensson (2024). Reflecting on a contemporary return to the topic of utopia "in scholarship across the political spectrum" (Ford, Svensson, 2024, 562), they link the gravitation towards the "utopia as archaeology" and "utopia as process" – or what they critically term as "good utopias" with the capitalist condition of the perpetual present and "the prison of the now" (Ford, Svensson, 2024, 574) in which the goal is one of constant reinvention and replication of the present. But similarly to Webb, who calls for a combination of both approaches if we are to see or envision any actual change, Ford and Svensson also state that "to reclaim the essence of utopia, education must combine imagination and action, and openness with direction, imagination, and struggle [...] sinking head-first into the dialectical tension between denouncing and announcing" (Ford, Svensson, 2024, 568).

Utopia as Process		Utopia as System
Utopia as Archaeology		Utopia as Architecture
"Good" Utopia		"Bad" Utopia
Open-ended		Representational
Fluid and Partial	**vs**	Totalistic
Exploratory		Normative
Playful		Prescriptive
Critical		Instrumental
Unvieling		Blueprint

Figure 1 Comparison of Utopian Concepts, Source: Jana Čulek, 2025.

3 The term utopian pedagogy was coined by Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (Webb, 2013).

4 It is important to note that the concept of "utopian architecture" which Webb refers to is not related to the field of production, but rather the process of its creation. When discussing "utopian architecture" Webb discusses a process of utopian pedagogy which focuses not on the process of uncovering and problematizing, but one which offers concrete solutions or "blueprints".

2.2.2 Approaching Architectural Education

Considering that most scholarship on utopian pedagogies does not stem from the architectural field and is therefore more focused on developing approaches for teaching and for designing curricula, it is important, within the framework of this paper and the context of the EDUTOPIA research project, to re-situate this topic within the context of the architectural discipline. Given the specificity of the architectural teaching process – one which requires transferring to students a combination of critical and imaginative as well as practical skills, the question arises: is it really possible to address spatial and architectural education within the context of utopian pedagogy without employing the approaches of both "utopia as process" and "utopia as system"? The answer of course, which also aligns with what Webb, as well as Ford and Svensson call for, is – no. One of the main goals of "utopia as process" and "archaeology" is to untangle and open-up one's context, allowing for new things to occur within it just through making them evident as a possibility. But how do these possibilities play out if one does not propose, at the very least, a type of framework or direction? As Webb also concludes, within the process of opening up and "creating space", it often occurs that "one seems to be left with is the practice of creating spaces devoid of content ('radically open') and lacking direction ('always in process')", urging us to pose the question: "what actually happens in these spaces?" (Webb, 2017, 559).

Drawing a parallel between "utopia as system" – sometimes also "blueprint utopia" – Webb addresses one of the perhaps most common misconceptions about these types of utopias: namely that they are created as set instructions which impose the will of an individual onto the many. Noting that "architectural blueprints [...] do not arrive as an authoritarian imposition from above" but that they are rather "the outcome of a long iterative process of consultation and collaboration", he proposes that – within this framework – the "role of the utopian pedagogue is guiding and directing this iterative process" (Webb, 2017, 560). As a method of doing this, he proposes the process of "convoking[5] the radical imagination, animating, enlivening, drawing together, and building on the inchoate utopian imaginings" (Webb, 2017, 561). And as a method for this process, he proposes the construction of narratives and storytelling stating that "the issue is not simply to exhume what has been buried – it is how to take dreams, desires, hopes and fears and tie them together to construct a narrative that resonates, motivates and guides" (Webb, 2017, 562). Combining both the process of questioning, uncovering, "denouncing and announcing", projecting, and visioning, he proposes to: "...call this vivid image a blueprint and let us say that the role of utopian pedagogy is to guide and direct a collective and collaborative process of memory- and story-making, pulling together – through a process of convocation and extrapolation – disparate inchoate dreams and yearnings in order to produce something new; a substantive utopian vision." (Webb, 2017, 562)

Reintroducing storytelling and narrative as both a practical and creative method into the process of architectural education and the design studio, therefore, also allows us to more productively access utopia as a critical and creative tool and method. But aside from its utopian potentials, storytelling as a method employed within architectural and spatial education has great potential. It is multifaceted and makes use of "creativity" through the development of "content", "communication" through the "expression" of the story itself (verbally, visually, or textually), and "reflection" which occurs through the "interaction with others" (Lee et.al, 2023, 3). And while storytelling has been increasingly used in recent years as a method within architectural and urban design studios, it is still most commonly employed as a way of representing the student's work which was developed in response to a set brief, as a way of summarizing the research and analysis process preceding the design, or as a method of justifying one's design decisions. But, as is evident from its potential within utopian pedagogy, storytelling and narrative as design methods also have numerous benefits for students, including the improvement of their "creativity and communication skills", allowing them to "develop unique design approaches and methods in a coherent manner", enabling them to "emphasize spatial sequence and spatial experience rather than form-oriented architecture", while also improving their "decision-making and problem-solving abilities" (Lee et.al., 2023, 2). As the EDUTOPIA project hopes to demonstrate, storytelling and narratives – especially when conceived through the critical utopian format – in the context of architectural and spatial education also enables students to imagine and construct more complex systems of ideas, introduce topics and methods from other disciplines, while allowing them to develop overall more responsive and critically positioned proposals.

2.2.3 Developing Pedagogical Instruments

Learning from both the insights of utopian pedagogy, as well as a broader understanding of utopia as a critical method, the EDUTOPIA project evolves through developing and employing an array of interrelated pedagogical and design instruments whose aim is to operationalize utopian thinking as both a critical and projective practice – embodying bot the "archaeology" and the "architecture", the "process" and the "project". By developing novel pedagogical approaches and design methods, the research aims to position itself as different from standard architectural and design pedagogy and practice, which mostly prioritize problem-solving, and often depart from a clear and well-defined designed task. The courses developed within the scope of the EDUTOPIA project, while aiming to depart from specific real-world sites and conditions, will however not begin with specific problems, programs, or end-goals in mind. Rather, these will also be uncovered and defined through the process of both critical reading and speculation together with the various speculative scenarios.

Through a series of planned design studio courses and workshops, the project will develop and employ both site-

5 Webb defines 'convoking' through the work of Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) as a process of "call[ing] something which is not yet fully present into being" (Webb, 2017, 561).

based analytical exercises as well as narrative and design techniques which will prompt students to iteratively move between the process of diagnosis and uncovering, and that of speculation and design. Additionally, the project will aim to establish a continuous feedback process which will encourage the students to continually reframe and question both the problems and contexts they are dealing with and the proposals they devise – to both problematize and problem-solve. Guided to think and act utopically through a staged and iterative process of critical reading and speculative strategizing, instead of merely creating abstract and idealistic design projection, the project will teach students that design speculation and critical inquiry function as a complex, intentional, and iterative entanglement through which we simultaneously reflect on our present socio-spatial conditions, and imagine scenarios for different emergent futures.

3 Utopian Laboratory Ilica

Building on the concept of utopia as a critical method, but with the consideration that criticality and the process of "opening up", questioning, and making evident should not be considered the final results of any utopian pedagogical exercise, and that these should in fact require some format of visioning and a proposition of a better future, this paper reflects on the initial design studio assignment which took place within the framework of the EDUTOPIA project. The design studio titled "Utopian Laboratory Ilica" was held together with prof.dr.sc. Mia Roth Čerina at the Faculty of Architecture in Zagreb, with students of the third semester of the Master program and within the format of the "Istraživanje, seminari, projekti: Arhitektura" [Research, Seminars, Projects: Architecture] course. The overall course which the "Utopian Laboratory Ilica" is part of is conceived as a collection of design and research studios which vary in topic and scope, each developed individually by a member of the teaching staff, with students freely choosing a group based on their own interests and available topics. With its relatively open format, this course presented itself as an ideal initial testing ground in which some of the starting hypothesis of the EDUTOPIA project could be tested within the standard format of architectural education, but without the need to conform to already predetermined programmatic assignments. It is important to note, however, that at the time of writing this paper, while the course has been finalized, the process of reflection and evaluation is still ongoing. This paper therefore offers only an initial reflection on its results and successfulness in conveying utopia as a critical method and as a pedagogical approach in architectural and spatial education.

The locus of the first iteration of this design studio was the Ilica street in Zagreb which was chosen for several reasons. Namely, as one of the longest streets in the city of Zagreb, it was given as a location due to its size, relevance, and heterogeneity. Spreading from the city center – its main square – all the way to its western periphery, it encompasses an array of scales and typologies varying from historical inner-city blocks, through large public spaces, parks, more contemporary housing, various public buildings and institution, to

Figure 2 Map of Zagreb with the Indication of Ilica street, Jana Čulek, 2026.

functioning or abandoned industrial sites, single-family dwellings, unbuilt areas, and large infrastructural surfaces. Additionally, it forms perhaps the clearest border between the lower and flat part of the city and its hilly and mountainous area, together with its parks, forests, and green recreational zones. In other words, the street is rich enough in content to provide the students with an array of possible avenues for research and design without offering any obvious or predetermined paths. While it provided students with a concrete location from which they can begin their inquiry, it also became merely a location which is heterogenous enough to bring onto itself any type of topic and explore an array of utopian avenues which could theoretically also be transposed to other parts of the city or other urban environments.

3.1 Defining Utopian Topics

Within the framework of the course, the students were divided into four self-formed groups, each focusing on one of four predetermined overarching topics. The topics – Habitat, Process, System, and Care – were defined as a continuation of a set of findings from my doctoral dissertation which examined a set of 20th century architectural and literary utopias. They were derived from the topics of housing, production, technology, and governance,[6] which were identified through the research as four overarching topics of the majority of utopian narratives (Čulek, 2023). But considering that in today's context we are much more aware of our connection and interdependence with all manners of living beings, as well as non-living systems, within the context of the course and the EDUTOPIA research project these four themes are conceptually expanded to include today's broader and more complex understanding of our world.

Housing therefore expands to the concept of [1] Habitat, including within its scope not just the space of human habitation, but that which is inhabited by other living

6 These initial four topics have already been used as a framework for two separate iterations of short design-based workshops with interdisciplinary students from the Urban Studies postmaster specialist program of the Deltalab Center of the University of Rijeka. The results of one of the workshops have been published in the special issue of the Sociology and Space journal (Čulek, 2025).

beings. The concept also considers that different species and lifeforms require each a specific set conditions in order to sustain themselves. These conditions – unlike the often spatially focused ones developed through housing – provide not only the physical possibilities of life and inhabitation, but also societal and institutional ones.

Production becomes [2] Process, which widens the concept of work and production from those exclusively creating new, useful, and consumable results, to also include their byproducts. Through the scope of Process, surplus, and waste, as well as other – perhaps non-physical – byproducts of work and production such as speculation, or debt are investigated and speculated upon, considering both their effect and potential within the (built) environment.

Technology, which is widened to the concept of infrastructural [3] Systems, stems from the contemporary change in the scale and use of different aspects of technological innovation. Developing as a broadening of the concept of technology – which is here seen as a basic building block of every infrastructural system – this topic takes into consideration not just individual objects or products of innovation and innovative technologies, but how they work together – observing technology as something which is often developed precisely in service-of and for the need of supporting or creating larger infrastructural systems. In other words, innovation today is no longer geared towards individual objects or technologies, but rather occurs in the scale of systems, through which it is also implemented.

And lastly governance was expanded to the concept of [4] Care which, starting from an entirely different power-relation, seeks to give agency to and include within a collective system those commonly overlooked, marginalized, or underrepresented.

Although by the end of the semester, each group of students developed a final speculative scenario based on their own sub-themes which were closely related to the spatial and social context of the space and time from which the projects arose, these were elucidated from the four assigned overarching topics. In this way, the framework of the topics develops as a methodological approach which could potentially be reused in other formats and design studios, and generate a different set of results, depending on the investigated site, as well as the proclivities and interests of the involved students.

Figure 3 Diagram of the Utopian Topics, Jana Čulek, 2025.

3.2 Course Structure

3.2.1 Critical Contextual Reading

The Utopian Laboratory Ilica course was structured in three thematic parts – Context, Methodology, and Imagination – each lasting roughly a third of the semester. All three parts were observed and developed through one of the four overarching topics, where each topic was investigated by one group of students. In the first part of the course – titled Context – the students were introduced both to the physical context they would be working in, as well as the theoretical and conceptual global context through which they would frame their speculative interventions. They were introduced to utopia as a critical method and to a theoretical framework of today's complex socio-political, ecological, and spatial context through a given set of readings which they were asked to reflect upon through both text and diagrammatic drawings. Through the readings they were introduced to concepts such as "subnature" (Gissen, 2009), "third landscape" (Clement, 2004), "chthulucene" (Haraway, 2016), "critical zone" (Latour, 2020), "broken world thinking" (Jackson, 2014), "infrastructure space" (Easterling, 2014) – which aided them in understanding the complexity and interconnectedness of today's local and global context. Within this format, the students adopted contemporary theoretical and spatial concepts that helped them observe, map, and analyse the given location (in this instance the Ilica street), it's occurring social and spatial forms, stories, living, non-living, human, and non-human inhabitants and protagonists, its present, past, and unrealized futures. It is important to note that within this analytical process, the students were encouraged to switch their primary focus from a typical architectural form-based analysis of the assigned location, and focus rather on phenomena, conditions, and patterns which

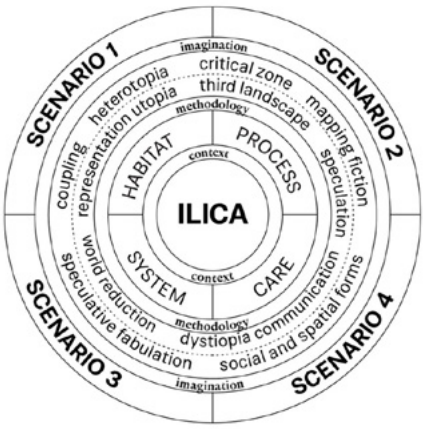

Figure 4 Diagram of the Course Structure, Jana Čulek, 2025.

are commonly overlooked in architectural research, but are made more evident through the application of the learned theoretical concepts. While working within their smaller groups, students were assigned to deal with segments of the location, which they choose themselves based on their overarching themes and the theoretical concepts they adopted through the reading. On the level of the entire cohort, they were also required to create a collective analytical drawing of the investigated space based on their research and observations which would later be used as a base for the development and depiction of their speculative scenarios.

3.2.2 Developing Utopian Methodology

The second part of the design studio – titled Methodology – built on the knowledge and concepts from the first block with the aim of setting up the main conceptual and methodological framework for the students' speculative scenarios. Structured similarly as the first block and consisting of both a set of reading assignments paired with practical and design-based group-work, this part of the semester was aimed at creating the initial speculative scenario proposal, together with a preliminary methodological approach which took into consideration the already acquired knowledge from the first part of the course. Within this block, the students worked in the space of Ilica by employing various utopian, narrative-based, and speculative research-based design approaches stemming not only from the architectural field, but also from literature and other creative disciplines. From their assigned readings they learned about methods such as "world reduction" (Jameson, 2005), "coupling" (Lateral Office, 2011), "medium design" (Easterling, 2018), "speculative fabulation" (Haraway, 2016), "critical design" (Dunne, Raby, 2013), and "speculative mapping" (Ait-Youati et.al., 2022). Seen as the intermezzo moment of the design studio, this part intended to bridge the acquired theoretical knowledge and spatial and conceptual analysis with the students' design ambitions and intentions through devising the most appropriate and productive design approach for both developing and representing their speculative scenarios. After finalizing their critical reading of Ilica and identifying the topics and phenomena of interest, they continued through a process of "diagnosing" and "reconstructing" (Shor, 1977) and of "denouncing and announcing" (Webb, 2017, 568) both found and new social and spatial forms. By offering students an array of utopian creative approaches, many of which also dealt with similar theoretical concepts that they have already been investigating, this section of the course aimed to create productive pairs of "concept-and-method" which would aid them in the further development of the speculative scenarios.

3.2.3 Imagining Speculative Scenarios

The third and final segment of the course – titled Imagination – dealt with the development and refinement of the four theme-based speculative utopian design scenarios. Employing the learned and developed utopian and narrative-based design approaches, the students created four speculative scenarios, each of which was situated within one of the four predetermined utopian topics – Habitat, Process, System, and Care. The developed scenarios needed to consider their own potential social and spatial impacts, both on the given context, its wider environment, and its current and future inhabitants, visitors, and users. Developed as a continuation of their collective analytical drawing, the students also depicted the potential spatial implications of their speculative scenarios on the collective drawing, considering the various potential interrelationships of their proposals, their overlaps, connections, or collaborations. Arising from the four assigned utopian topics and based on the observed and analyzed elements of the socio-spatial context and forms of Ilica, the students created an alternative utopian narrative of the street's potential future through visual and textual storytelling – employing thus throughout the process both the aspects of "utopia as process" and "utopia as system". By creating this parallel future, the students observed the space of Ilica through different scales, through the perspectives of different protagonists and users, and speculated about the development of the proposed interventions and scenarios over time. Their end results – the speculative utopian scenarios – although based within a real physical location – did not need to be designed exclusively in the format of a (new) building or built space. Rather, they were encouraged to also consider new ways of using existing spaces, propose new types of spatial, social, or infrastructural system, or merely propose novel interrelationships of already existing social and spatial forms. This continuous correlation of both social and spatial forms therefore became necessary in speculating upon possible futures and allowed students to continuously remain aware of the correlations and potentials of architecture with the social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological context in which it is situated.

3.3 Approach to Evaluating Outcome

While the Utopian Laboratory Ilica was just the first iteration of a design studio format which was developed during the entire course of the EDUTOPIA project, the student results coming out of the course will serve as analytical material to address and evaluate the potential of using specific utopian methods within the format of architectural and spatial education. The outcomes and student reflections for each design studio will therefore also be assessed, and the subsequent iterations will be modified according to results of the analytical reflections performed after each course. The outcomes of the studios will be approached through a comparative qualitative analysis. The first analysis and reflection on the overarching methodology and its success in conveying critical utopian methods and approaches will focus on the first iteration of Utopian Laboratory Ilica and the four speculative scenarios created by the four student groups. The analysis will evaluate both the process of the design studio with its sequential assignments, as well as the students' final output which included drawings and texts of the speculative scenarios and reflections on theoretical and methodological readings.

Through the qualitative analytical process, each speculative scenario will be treated as a situated experiment in utopian thinking and design. They will be evaluated in relation to how the student group critically read and interrogated the Ilica street as a complex socio-spatial context, as well as how they positioned themselves in regard to this reading through their speculative scenarios. The comparison, which will subsequently be performed on student outcomes, will be structured through four main criteria, namely (1) the manner in which each group constructed a critical reading of the given site, and how they understood it as an interplay between social and spatial forms occurring and manifesting across past and present; (2) the extent to which their critical readings were informed and integrated with the theoretical concepts and themes they were introduced to through their reading assignments, and how they mobilized these concepts to expand the scope through which they interpreted the space of Ilica. The evaluation will also consider (3) the extent and nature of speculative reasoning which the students performed, which will be examined through the narratives and scopes each group has developed, and the extent to which these narratives remain either grounded or productively depart from the identified present conditions. Lastly, the works will be assessed by (4) identifying the capacity in which each group moved away from mere critical interrogation towards speculative articulation, focusing specifically on how the groups translated their analysis into specific socio-spatial scenarios through scales of intervention, the use of new or modified social and spatial forms, and by establishing a precise spatio-temporal relationship with the present state of the context.

The measured outcomes will thus not be relatable to a standard measure of academic "success". Rather, what will be evaluated is the degree to which each project produced a coherent shift in analytical and projective perspective, expanding with it the horizon of possible socio-spatial interventions. Serving as qualitative indicators, the analyses of the student outcomes will allow for a comparative reading of how the different student groups operationalized utopia as a critical and projective design method.

4 Preliminary Outcomes – Employing Utopia as a Method for Critical Reading

While the course was finalized in the process of writing and editing this paper, and the students have already finalized their speculative scenarios, the following section of the paper will reflect only on the first segment of the design studio. In this segment, which focused on the critical reading of Ilica street through the lens of their chosen utopian topics, the students began to develop the concepts and methodological approaches for their speculative scenarios. Consequently, the following section of the paper will provide a short reflection on some of the topics the students engaged with within the scope of their groups, based on the provided readings and the on-site analysis, as well as how they employed this new knowledge and insight in developing their speculative design scenarios. The four groups, working under the utopian topics of Habitat, Process, System, and Care, consisted out of three or four students respectively, with all the course deliverables being assigned on the level of the groups. This way, collective work and conversation between students was encouraged from the very beginning, which assisted them in navigating both the assigned readings as well as the analytical and design work. Additionally, the collective analytical drawing of the chosen sites served as an additional layer of negotiation on the level of the entire student group, urging them to discuss both spatial and conceptual overlaps, interferences, and complementarities of their work.

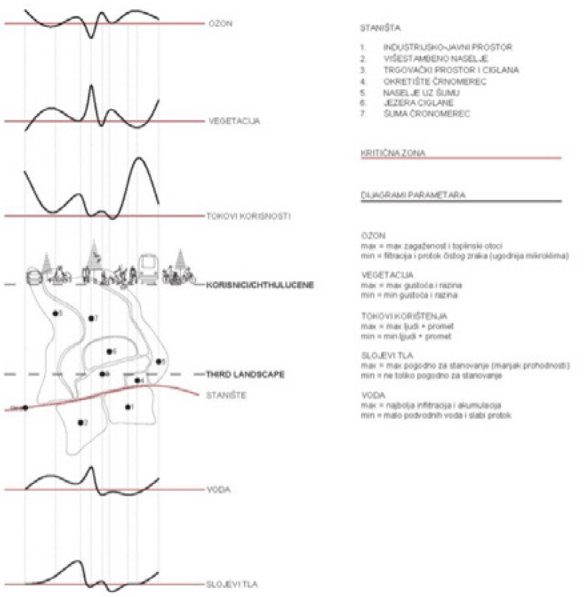

Figure 5 Diagram of the Critical Zone of Črnomerec, Source: group Habitat.

4.1 Engaging with Utopian Topics

4.1.1 Six Habitats of Črnomerec

Choosing to engage with the area of Ilica street which unfolds around the end of the Črnomerec tram line, the Habitat group[7] developed their analytical narrative around six identified coexisting habitats, ranging from forest and artificial lakes, through industrial and infrastructural areas, to housing. Reading the space through the combination of three theoretical concepts, namely that of "critical zones" (Latour, Wiebel, 2020), "third landscape" (Clement, 2004), and the "chthulutcene" (Haraway, 2016), the group engaged in mapping the different socio-spatial, as well as temporal layers of the identified habitats [Figure 5]. Including the temporal aspect – or rather the layers of site-specific socio-spatial history, such as shifts in use and ownership, major construction works, earthquakes and other – they employed an innovative way of interpreting the concept of the "critical zone" which included elements that are perhaps no longer evident, but have had a major influence of the current condition of the site.

7 The Habitat group consisted of students: Marija Mazotan, Ema Šibila, Leon Antun Slivar, and Sara Bukvić.

Acknowledging this multiplicity of coexisting and neighboring habitats as a positive hallmark of space and identifying it as a relatively unique condition in the wider city area, the group continued to develop the concept and methodology for their speculative scenario in line with this found heterogeneity. Their intent was to find ways of fostering this diversity and perhaps allowing it to occur in other areas of the city, which, at the moment, are much more homogenous regarding the divergence of their socio-spatial conditions and inhabitants.

4.1.2 Mapping Invisible Byproducts

Examining one of the more centrally located parts of Ilica street, the Process group[8] relied in their critical reading on the concepts of "subnature" (Gissen, 2009) and "hyperobject" (Morton, 2013) – both of which steered them into examining the more intangible and often overseen aspects of space – namely the olfactory and auditory byproducts of our daily lives and cycles of production. The group developed a highly detailed identification and categorization system for the numerous sounds and smells occurring in the area around the British square. They visually mapped these sensations and experiences within the collective drawing and provided further categorization for numerous aspects: the sources of the sounds and smells, their areas of their influence, the nature of their occurrence as either anthropogenic or biogenic, and even assigned values of pleasantness or discomfort which they cause. Through the process of mapping these byproducts on-site, they managed to produce an intricate depiction of the space and identify areas with different ranges of interest and comfort [Figure 6].

As they explained in their text, "reading the space through the concepts of Gissen and Morton implies the abandonment the concept of the image of the city as an aesthetic object, and the acceptance of its invisible, uncomfortable, and non-human layers", further defining that while "subnatures teach us that architecture and urbanism must acknowledge the value of that which is suppressed and foul [and that] hyperobjects reveal to us that the Ilica street is just one part of the enormous network of material and temporal relations which go beyond the human scale" (Process group, 2025) – offering thus through their analysis a potentially replicable analytical method for observing the non-spatial aspects of urban environments and how they emerge from temporal cycles of use. The group continued to develop their speculative scenario through the use of small-scale physical interventions whose role was to either intensify or disrupt some of the auditory or olphactory sensations which they identified in the area.

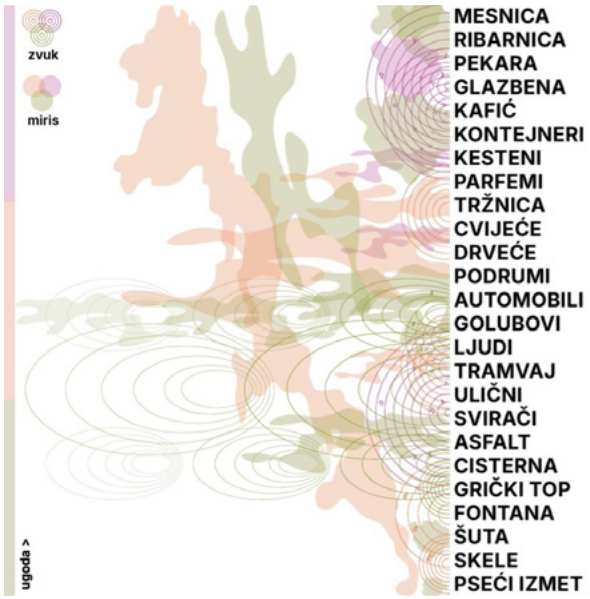

Figure 6 Diagram of Byproducts, Source: group Process.

4.1.3 Tracing Information Systems

The Systems group[9] chose to investigate the intricate system of information flows within public spaces. Focusing predominantly on Keller Easterling's concepts of "spatial software" and "active forms" (Easterling, 2014), they identified these flows as important political and social actors, hypothesizing the connection of how information is transmitted with both the configuration and programming of a specific public space. Identifying the Ilica street as both an "infrastructural spine" as well as an "urban element which connects some of the city's most relevant public spaces" (Systems group, 2025), they observed the spread and delivery methods of various types of information within the urban fabric and how vary across different forms of public space. As examples of two radically different yet similarly concentrated information zones they chose two squares which connect to the Ilica street – the Ban Jelačić square and the Franjo Tuđman square. In the first, the individual was identified as having the role of an information receptor – solely receiving a curated set of information, while in the second, the individual takes on the role of the transmitter of information through participating more actively in various activities in the spate itself.

Through their critical reading, public space became a type of information hub in which collective perception is shaped through a combination of media, advertising and sensory stimuli. In it, the Ilica street begins to act as an infrastructural information channel connecting the different public spaces and creating a network of invisible interactions. As they explain, the "facades become advertisements of simplified binary code, its recognizable spatial accents become the image of foreign rhetoric and its ground becomes a network of a complex infrastructural system which, over time, generates spatial changes in which people play the role of both recipients and transmitters of carefully controlled information" (Systems group, 2025). Within their speculative scenarios the group decided to envision several different spatial methods which would allow for the mitigation of some of the negative and over-burdening effects of this identified constant stream of information.

8 The Process group consisted of students: Ria Ivandić, Anja Pisačić, and Tea Pintar.

9 The Systems group consisted of students: Patrik Štefiček, Zino Marković-Juričak, Mia Mezić, and Laura Grancarić.

4.1.4 Looking for Care

Lastly, the group which engaged with the topic of Care[10] within the context of Ilica street focused their critical reading and continued to develop their speculative scenarios around the notion of collective responsibility for our (built) environment. By performing one part of their critical reading of the space through a process of walking the Ilica street, they observed multiple instances of the street's inhospitable – and sometimes even dangerous – pedestrian character: with numerous signs warning the passerby of varying dangers, a majority of vacant or abandoned street-level shops and businesses, torn-down facades, and open communal areas mostly filled to the brim with cars. They observed in detail some of the most problematic zones of the street and the socio-spatial decay which continues to spread on the ground level.

Working with concepts such as "broken world thinking" (Jackson, 2014) and "spatial agency" (Awan, Schneider, Till, 2011) they began to hypothesize that solution to some of today's spatial issues of Ilica street such as vacancy, abandonment, and decay "lie within the space itself", in the process of care and the development of a "greater sensibility for what a specific space is and what it [and its users] need" (Group Care, 2025). However, instead of addressing these issues through a more traditional approach which would involve both programmatic and spatial regeneration, they decided to accept the lessening needs of these street-level spaces and are intent in employing them as a new potential for widening the public sphere – both spatially and conceptually. Taking the built street level as an extension and widening of the public realm, they aim to both map and engage with possible new futures which will together – and not against – this change role of the "main street".

4.2 An Ongoing Reflection on Outcomes

As is evident from the outcomes, the students have clearly demonstrated that they have, although having some initial struggles, moved away from conventional methods of architectural and urban analyses towards a critical reading which took into consideration not only spatial forms and programs, but also various social forms and non-physical aspects of the observed space. Widening their focus from purely architectural aspects of Ilica, they managed to include in their critical readings the various background dynamics, systems, byproducts, networks, and processes, which aided them in developing their speculative scenarios. It is particularly interesting that most student groups chose to investigate aspects of Ilica which were in fact not easily detectable or even visible, employing thus from the very beginning of the course a speculative, creative, and narrative aspect to their work. The process of uncovering unseen or previously undetected socio-spatial aspects of the site, as well as the process of creating previously unidentified connections – such as the olfactory or auditory connections with the overall spatial ambiance; or different modes of both transmitting and receiving information in regard to the spatial and programmatic configuration of a given public space – is also very much in line with the "utopia as process" or "utopia as archaeology" approach, situating their critical readings strongly within the intended outcomes of the course. Their developed speculative scenarios built upon these critical readings and topics addressed in them – and aimed to engage with the Ilica street in innovative ways, providing speculative futures which consistently addressed the overarching topics of their respective groups.

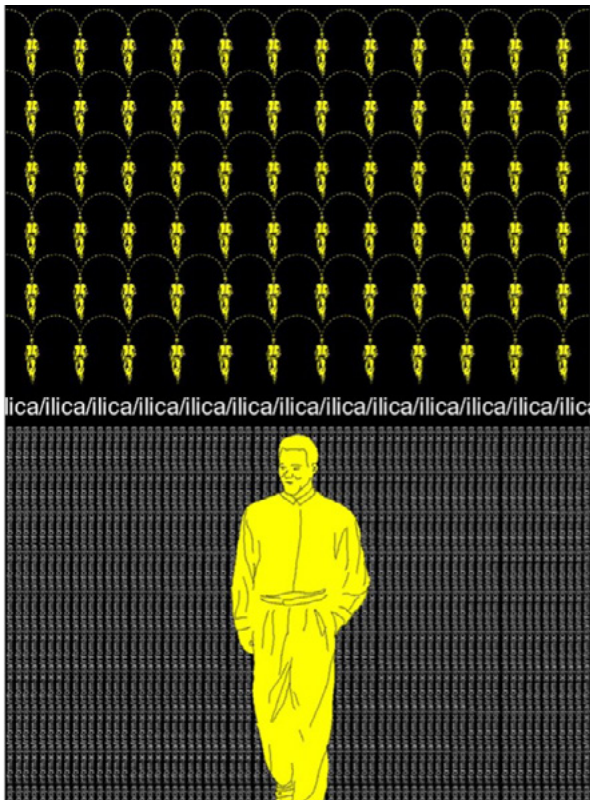

Figure 7 Diagram of Information Transmission, group Systems.

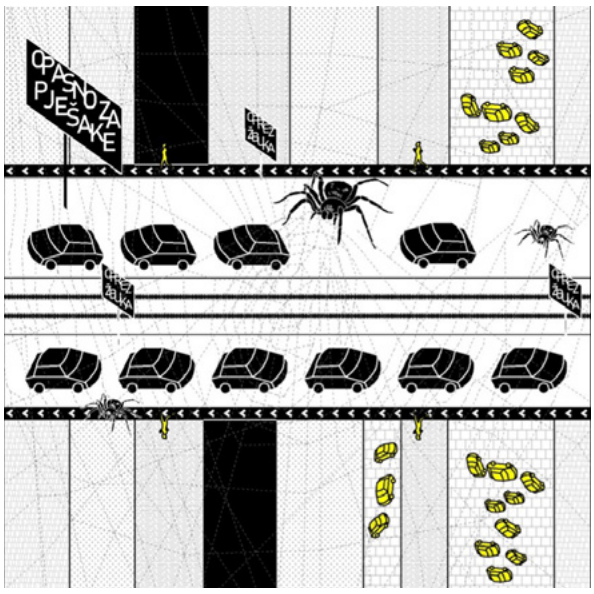

Figure 8 Diagram of Overlooked Spaces, group Care.

10 The Care group consisted of students: Paula Budija, Helena Čačić, and Antonio Drandić.

5 Conclusion

The utopian-based approaches which will continuously be developed and adapted within the context of the EDUTOPIA research project, aim to innovatively and holistically address the complex socio-spatial issues of today. Putting into question the totalizing form of historical utopian narratives, but still retaining some prescriptive capacity, both the methods developed within the framework of the research and the student projects which were developed as part of it will aim to establish that using storytelling-based, fictional, and utopian approaches in architectural education and practice is productive beyond just envisioning creative yet impossible solutions, and that these approaches can be seen as a legitimate and overall more successful way of understanding and addressing the numerous spatial and societal issues of our time.

Re-adopting utopia as a method, especially within the context of architectural education, aims to allow for a contemporary attempt in innovative, comprehensive, large-scale and long-term visioning, through which we could potentially imagine and test out-of-the-box approaches for our complex global contexts. Using narrative-based visual and textual approaches which are developed with the tools stemming from the utopian genre of multiple creative disciplines, together with a precise methodological structure, architecture as a discipline could stand to engage more actively and productively in conversations regarding our wider spatial, climatic, cultural, political, economic, and societal milieu with the aim of fostering positive change which goes beyond simply modernizing the building industry.

Using interdisciplinary approaches, mostly converging with the fields of literature, film, sociology, architecture, philosophy, and urban planning, the developed methods aim to teach students and a new generation of spatial practitioners how to problematize and offer new insight into some of today's most pertinent issues related not only to the built environment, but also on the overall societal level. They will aim to foster a more comprehensive, holistic, and multi-disciplinary understanding of the (un)built environment which goes beyond the process of building or planning, and which examines, predicts, and plans for possible long-term developments and effects that projects can trigger and engender not only on the spatial but also on the wider societal and cultural level. Testing and implementing new methods on an educational level is done to assure the widest perceived impact through the process of training and educating future generations of spatial practitioners.

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