

Sensorial Machinations: JACCC and Ico as Melded Utopias and Dystopias

Aiyo (Ariel Levy)

SCI-Arc History of Architecture 3

6 April 2023

The idea that a positive element and a negative element must both exist simultaneously as counterparts to one another is a concept that many philosophers have long expressed thought over; can light exist without dark? Or heat without cold? Through all of the waking moments of our respective lives, we are dunked into a spectral tank of emotions both positive and negative: some find cheeriness in a job promotion, anxiety in public speaking, and sadness over the loss of a family animal, but all of those are established with a certain fading temporality. The essence of our built urban fabric, however, is something that must be faced head-on at all times of this wake for as long as its physical presence lasts. As you walk the streets of dense cities, you'd be exceptional to not feel the mental effects of the approaching dystopian, lifeless, concrete constructs that fill our sensations day and night. Many of us seek refuge in the bliss of the few manufactured utopian green spaces still left standing in these bustling environments, but would that still hold true if those spaces were not so scarce and limited? Pre-exposure to the negative emotions of this concrete reality has the potential to magnify the intensity of the positive emotions we experience thereafter in those green spaces, though, are the forced implications of such emotionally-priming designs on entire populations ethical, especially when played at in the hands of government or other elite power? Through immersion of the brutal stone and serene garden moments of LA's Japanese American Community and Cultural Center (JACCC) and Fumito Ueda's video game *Ico*, that first idea of positive and negative pairs turns to ask us if we are able to genuinely establish such utopian gardens without also creating their urban dystopia counterparts.

It is undoubtable that the buildings which surround us in our daily lives hold a great deal of power over the way in which we operate: these magnificent structures not only restrict us

physically through material presences that carve limited access and public ways to the general population, but also emotionally through their urban fabric and inorganic elements. In the case of Los Angeles, its JACCC serves as excellence for this: the center exists as a sort of cold, approaching dystopian pocket reality with select moments of blissful relief through organic garden spaces, just as Fumito Ueda's video game *Ico* does in its virtual setting. In engaging with either of these two, the dystopian human experience is one pushed beyond merely the geometry of the buildings; they begin to push into what authors Gernot Böhme and Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul call the "...qualities of the atmospheric: 'neither subject nor object – yet not nothing' ..."

Since these articulations do not presuppose concrete space, but effectively inscribe themselves into the void, they remain reliant on the experiencing subject, that is, human beings in their bodily presence. The space of bodily sensing – a sensing that reaches out into the indeterminate expanse – takes shape through such articulations.¹ You can start to imagine how JACCC and *Ico* act as complex volumetric atmospheres through their impenetrably stiff bricks, stone, and concrete make the whole of the sites feel cold and unresponsive; the contextual malleability of our bodies even makes lighting and whipping winds feel abrasive and degrading; their landscapes exist in a discomfiting uncanny valley of a familiar organic that is twisted by a manufactured, almost synthetic, appearance of the aforementioned materials; both largely restrict access to the above or below experiences out of reach but not out of sight or imagination; and the scales of the buildings in relation to our being is many times over as we follow bands and grids to the top of the towering, pagoda-like JACCC [Fig. 1] or *Ico*'s monolithic, tiled castle set on an even larger ocean cliffside so enormous that its

1. Böhme, Gernot, and Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul. *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.

scale is imperceivable [Fig. 2]. All of these, both material and not, work in union to create an immersive experience that is much more impactful and therefore one that more deeply latches onto the human body.

Light, color, texture, sound, temperature, as duo Sarah Robison and Juhani Pallasmaa discuss in their science research book *Mind in Architecture*, are direct contributors to the way in which a physical body experiences architecture and therefore how that mental body experiences architecture, as well as the way the architecture itself functions as a mechanism:

Like our body, a building is a series of interrelated systems, each possessing its own identity and offering a particular array of affordances. The mind is nested in the body and the body is nested within the contexts of room, building, city, earth, universe. We could say that our body has, nested within it, at least four bodies: our physical body, and the more ephemeral, but equally real, emotional body, mental body, and social body.² As are our own bodies, every experiential moment of architecture is linked in some manner, and so there lies self-curiosity in what these performing architectural functions are in both building and human body. As one gazes upon the distant, inaccessible windows of the JACCC or the never-to-be-explored thresholds of *Ico*, curiosity inspires about what lies behind those thick building surfaces. The community center and castle hold respective architectural mechanisms so large and complex, but never seen, and so the experiencer cannot even perceive their role as existing within it; it overpowers them, and, like a dream that you are revoked from being allowed to experience, you are further imbued with your position that is lack of power and minuscule scale. In regards to *Ico*, "...his [Fumito Ueda's] intention wasn't to capture exactly what a castle looks like, but what one feels like, what a dream or a fantasy of a castle might be."³ With that, it's

2. Robinson, Sarah. Pallasmaa, Juhani. "“KNOW THYSELF”: OR WHAT DESIGNERS CAN LEARN FROM THE CONTEMPORARY BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES,” “BODY, MIND, AND IMAGINATION: THE MENTAL ESSENCE OF ARCHITECTURE,” “NESTED BODIES,” *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2015), 9-32, 51-74, 137-160

no surprise that the works of Giorgio de Chirico [Fig. 3], a founder of surrealist art, Gerard Trigness [Fig. 4], and Minoru Nomata [Fig. 5] served as inspiration points for Fumito Ueda in developing *Ico*, and are likely experiential concepts for the JACCC as well; all of their paintings depict mountainous buildings that feel as though they could really exist, but in a slightly twisted reality of our own; they are all unsettling in that they are legible as being magnificent productions which surely required much invested power to create, but exist not for human rationality or for humanity in itself.

There is also a certain sense of emotional priming that comes into play when experiencing the safe havens that are the limited exposure of gardens after having first endured all of the emotionally negative plays of both JACCC's and *Ico*'s dystopian elements. Renowned author Jonathan Haidt explores the notion of how negative emotions can actually make our positive emotions more pleasurable lengthily throughout *Pursuit of Happiness*; his 5th chapter proves most useful here as it discusses how the juxtaposition of contrasting emotions can magnify the intensity and appreciation of one another.

...it really is the journey that counts, not the destination. Set for yourself any goal you want. Most of the pleasure will be had along the way, with every step that takes you closer. The final moment of success is often no more thrilling than the relief of taking off a heavy backpack at the end of a long hike.⁴

To elaborate further, a drink of water at the end of that long hike will always be infinitely more satisfying than a drink of water not following that arduous task. The JACCC fairs well at performing this same feat: the experience consistently exposes you to its brutal nature, and you

3. Martin, Gareth Damian. "Investigating the Origins of the Last Guardian's Architecture." Eurogamer.net. Eurogamer.net, December 13, 2016. <https://www.eurogamer.net/investigating-the-origins-of-the-last-guardians-architecture>.

4. Haidt, Jonathan. "The Pursuit of Happiness," "The Uses of Adversity," *The Happiness Hypothesis* (Great Britain: Basic Books, 2006), 87-111, 141-168

only get to inaccessibly and mesmerizingly stare down to its rejuvenating garden at the very end in the far back of the site [Fig. 6]. Humans may have an innate connection to nature, but the deprivation of sufficient green spaces in the urban fabric of cities like Los Angeles make them even more valuable and emotionally spiritual when experienced, and so, to a degree, this dystopia has already manifested itself into reality. For some, as Manfredo Tafuri discusses of Laugier's naturalism, the very essence of nature is not to actually disregard the anti-organic anyway, but, rather, to strike balance between it and the organic to create a symbiotic relationship that doesn't necessarily pit them as competing to kill one another: "Laugier's call to naturalism is an appeal to the original purity of the act designing the environment, and at the same time it shows an understanding of the preeminently antiorganic quality of the city."⁵

Professor and writer Andreas Huyssen calls out the spawn of dystopia as entertainment-oriented architecture that has risen from globalization and neoliberalism. In his research, this form of mass consumption of entertainment has created isolation and self-disconnect that allows people to embrace and feel content in their aloneness, and it is a model which has worked well in major cities so far as they continue to thrive and have heaps of tourists who are thrilled by the gratifying and exciting media that lures them in.⁶ In fact, we've seen this effect in action at a great intensity quite recently with the Covid-19 pandemic: the intense lockdowns of 2020 gave glimpses into alternate realities of the bustling urban cities as we know them, with many having been desolate while everyone internalized themselves inside those buildings and adapted to a more solitude lifestyle. Conveniently enough, writer and video editor Evan Puschak compares

5. Tafuri, Manfredo. "Reason's Adventures: Naturalism and the City in the Century of the Enlightenment." Essay. In *Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development*, 1–40. MIT Press, 1977.

6. Huyssen, Andreas. "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 11-29

these desolate pandemic scenes directly to the realities of Giorgio de Chirico's paintings that inspired *Ico*, a convincing message that, for those short few months, "...it was possible to see what we built through alien eyes. What kind of species would make such monuments? What drove them to design their world like this? What forces and desires gathered them into communities of such extreme density?"⁷, a direct callback to the idea that these magnificent architectural experiences are uncanny in existing not for human rationality or for humanity. In his writing, Haidt also explores "hedonic adaptation", which is the relevant idea that repeated and prolonged exposure to positive emotions can dull the experience that a person derives from them.⁸ The recent pandemic had and still has forced people into states of greater appreciation for positive emotions due to their increased states of loneliness, and *Ico* quite almost predicted this gesture with its experience of the young boy, Ico, grabbing the hand of Yorda, the mysterious non-human girl he is always alone with, repeatedly throughout the experience as being the only thing to fill that deep loneliness and unforgiving manner, according to game director Ueda in an interview.⁹ When there is nothing else to turn to, one grapples on to a spirited gesture even as small as this, and the same can be said for the blissful emotions of the gardens vs brutal environment. *Ico* is, in essence, almost an extrema of what the current status of Los Angeles's and JACCC's approaching dystopia can further develop into if its progression is allowed further into material reality.

Overall, there is substantial evidence that a predisposition to the negative emotions of a brutal architectural reality can magnify the positive emotions of a garden architecture reality

7. When The World Became A De Chirico Painting. YouTube, 2020. <https://youtu.be/FkPmiUFZyu8>.

8. Haidt, Jonathan. "The Pursuit of Happiness," "The Uses of Adversity," *The Happiness Hypothesis* (Great Britain: Basic Books, 2006), 87-111, 141-168

9. Suttner, Nick. "Ico," *Shadow of the Colossus* (Los Angeles: Boss Fight Books, 2016), 7-17

experienced thereafter, and so the pairing of a corresponding mixed dystopia and utopia of these elements will perform in the same emotional manner. However, this is not to say that positive and negative emotions and utopia and dystopia cannot exist without one another, as we already see elements of these existing on their own in our daily lives; one does not require sadness to feel happy. Even from an economic standpoint the utopia and dystopia do not require each other:

“They served to prove that there was no disparity between the value accredited to nature and the value accredited to the city as a productive mechanism of new forms of economic accumulation.”

Manfredo Tafuri tells in his writing of the politics of organic and anti-organic spaces¹⁰;

economically it matters not which “-topia” the population subscribes to, so long as they are buying into the picturesque narrative. And, undoubtedly most important, we must factor in the mental effects of intentionally crafting a dystopia for this purpose of emotional magnification.

All of the previously sourced authors are not naive to not factor this in; they too warn of the adverse mental effects that can naturally result through creation of dystopia: Jonathan Haidt warns of the growth of PTSD¹¹; *Mind in Architecture* reminds us that, for as provocative as negative emotions can be, they alone do not contribute to well-being.¹² And, in a more systematic light, Annie Ring, Henriette Steiner, and Kristin Veel urge architectural designers in their book *Architecture and Control* to keep in mind the different sides that play roles within an architectural setting, for exploitation and abuse of power is a real reality that plagues not only

10. Tafuri, Manfredo. “Reason’s Adventures: Naturalism and the City in the Century of the Enlightenment.” Essay. In *Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development*, 1–40. MIT Press, 1977.

11. Haidt, Jonathan. “The Pursuit of Happiness,” “The Uses of Adversity,” *The Happiness Hypothesis* (Great Britain: Basic Books, 2006), 87-111, 141-168

12. Robinson, Sarah. Pallasmaa, Juhani. ““KNOW THYSELF”: OR WHAT DESIGNERS CAN LEARN FROM THE CONTEMPORARY BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES,” “BODY, MIND, AND IMAGINATION: THE MENTAL ESSENCE OF ARCHITECTURE,” “NESTED BODIES,” *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2015), 9-32, 51-74, 137-160

dystopia but our world as it already is.¹³ Andreas Huyssen regards this too with increased isolation yielding a population that is increasingly more easy to be manipulated¹⁴; and Manfredo Tafuri as well as he warns us of the illusions of freedom and the way beings can taint themselves out of good faith by following the wrong reasons¹⁵, just as the JACCC did in its original days of “community” being defined as profits by the first board members which were all corporate figures, and Ico with the castle’s queen who stored children away in sarcophagi to “protect” them but instead stole their bodies to lengthen her own life, and just as our material world designers and world organizers may do if we are complicit. Given these ethical concerns and especially the not unlikely mental and emotional consequences, I see it only fit that we do not forcibly impose such a reality onto all and instead leave it for those who seek out this emotional rollercoaster of a melded dystopia-utopia, be it once or regularly, to voluntarily admit themselves into these controlled experiences through films, video games, or other future experiential mediums.

13. Ring, Annie. Steiner, Henriette. Veel, Kristin. “Part 1: Surface Phenomena of the Broad Present,” “Part 3: Control and Resistance,” *Architecture and Control* (Boston: Brill, 2018), 9-83, 167-242

14. Huyssen, Andreas. “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia,” *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 11-29

15. Tafuri, Manfredo. “Reason’s Adventures: Naturalism and the City in the Century of the Enlightenment.” Essay. In *Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development*, 1–40. MIT Press, 1977.

Bibliography

- Böhme, Gernot, and Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul. *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
- Haidt, Jonathan. "The Pursuit of Happiness," "The Uses of Adversity," *The Happiness Hypothesis* (Great Britain: Basic Books, 2006), 87-111, 141-168
- Huysen, Andreas. "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 11-29
- "Illustration + Digital Enhancement Ico: Ico: Sie Japan Studio." cookandbecker.com, n.d. <https://www.cookandbecker.com/en/artwork/2004/ico-ico-sie-japan-studio.html>.
- Martin, Gareth Damian. "Investigating the Origins of the Last Guardian's Architecture." Eurogamer.net. Eurogamer.net, December 13, 2016. <https://www.eurogamer.net/investigating-the-origins-of-the-last-guardians-architecture>.
- Ring, Annie. Steiner, Henriette. Veel, Kristin. "Part 1: Surface Phenomena of the Broad Present," "Part 3: Control and Resistance," *Architecture and Control* (Boston: Brill, 2018), 9-83, 167-242
- Robinson, Sarah. Pallasmaa, Juhani. "'KNOW THYSELF': OR WHAT DESIGNERS CAN LEARN FROM THE CONTEMPORARY BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES," "BODY, MIND, AND IMAGINATION: THE MENTAL ESSENCE OF ARCHITECTURE," "NESTED BODIES," *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design* (Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 2015), 9-32, 51-74, 137-160

“Structures-1: Minoru-Nomata.” Nomata, Minoru, n.d. <https://www.nomataminoru.com/structures-1-en>.

Suttner, Nick. “Ico,” *Shadow of the Colossus* (Los Angeles: Boss Fight Books, 2016), 7-17

Tafuri, Manfredo. “Reason’s Adventures: Naturalism and the City in the Century of the Enlightenment.” Essay. In *Architecture and Utopia Design and Capitalist Development*, 1–40. MIT Press, 1977.

Trignac, Gerard. “Le Defile Des Fous.” Warnock Fine Arts, n.d. <https://www.warnockfinearts.com/gerard-trignac-products/le-defile-des-fous>.

When The World Became A De Chirico Painting. YouTube, 2020. <https://youtu.be/FkPmiUFZyu8>.

Reference Images



Figure 1: *Ico and Yorda at a vantage overlooking ruined bridge in the mist*



Figure 2: *Building corner and roofing underside, JACCC, Los Angeles, 2023*



Figure 3: *Ico Cover Art, inspired by Giorgio de Chirico, cookandbecker.com, Japan, 2001*



Figure 4: *Le Defile des fous, Trigness Gerard, Warnock Fine Arts, 1986*



Figure 5: *Structures-I*, Minoru Nomata, 1993



Figure 6: *The garden*, JACCC, Los Angeles, 2023