

## NOVA INSULA UTOPIA

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### Attending to islands

Recent years have brought islands – existing and yet-to-be-build – to the center of the stage in Denmark.

In late 2018 the existing island of Lindholm some 100 kilometers south of Copenhagen became the symbol of the then right-wing government's immigration policies, as it was planned to be a deportation center for rejected asylum seekers. The small island functioned as a research station for The Veterinary Institute of the Technical University of Denmark, which were conducting research on exotic viral diseases in animals. The isolation the islands new inhabitants was deliberate. "We're going to minimize the number of ferry departures as much as at all possible [and] make it as cumbersome and expensive as possible", stated one of the politicians in charge, and the New York Times reported that "Denmark plans to house the country's most unwelcome foreigners in a most unwelcoming place"<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that the proposal stirred a heated public debate, accused of being unnecessary symbolic politics. Since then a new government has been elected and the plans abandoned.

Also in late 2018, the plans for Lynetteholmen<sup>2</sup> was revealed. The large island was presented as not only a new neighborhood for our ever-increasing need for urban housing, but also an embankment to resist rising water levels. Similarly, nine artificial islands by Avedøre powerplant south of Copenhagen will provide land for new businesses while at the same time provide flood protection. Both projects have long time frames (planned completion dates 2070 and 2040 respectively) yet are entirely realistic and feasible. Presented as images of clearly defined islands complete with strategies for how to establish the new land (based on the city's need for dumping excess soil from its many construction projects), the islands received mixed responses.

It is intriguing and perhaps somewhat unnerving that such different uses and intentions for islands all seem to understand the island as a binary, finite form. Lindholm was deliberately perceived as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/03/world/europe/denmark-migrants-island.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lynettelholmen.com/>

site of isolation and otherness with little interaction with its surroundings. Following a series of workshops with local architects and planners, Lynetteholmen has been adjusted to incorporate more frayed edges towards the water, and without doubt, closer inspection and possible realizations of the projects will reveal more nuances. Nevertheless, all projects in their current unrealized state remain clearly demarcated islands, presented visually as geometric patterns of objects separated from the surrounding sea.

The two planned island projects, Lynetteholmen and Avedøre Holme have a solution to their own problems built into them. The islands will give rise to a growing city and population consuming more resources, but presumably they simultaneously prevent floods and other catastrophes caused by climate changes. Paul Virilio's warning that technology is predisposed with its own potential accident<sup>3</sup> is turned inside out: The solution is attempted built into the problem. This project acknowledges the need to find such solutions, but suggests to go one step back in doing so.

Nova Insula Utopia asks questions rather than propose solutions. What is an island if seen as having a non-binary relationship to its surroundings? What is an island if understood as an artistic problem of combining technology and accident, intent and force?

### **Forces of creation**

Structures are in a constant state of flux, in an ever-changing symbiosis between accumulation and deterioration. Raimund Abraham has it "While you build the wall, you shall destroy the stones"<sup>4</sup> and Willy Ørskov<sup>5</sup> reminds us that building up and breaking down are not just opposites but also necessary forces of creation. It seems ever-more relevant that architects work within these opposing, yet productive forces. As our climate changes and people need (or desire) to live more densely, fruitful ways of imagining new habitats could very well be to explore this condition. Nova Insula Utopia is an artistic symbiosis between additive and subtractive fabrication logics, between solid casts and perforated plate structures. It combines digital fabrication with material craft. The process of making and negotiation is inseparable from its form and intent. The project is a result of a close collaboration between two architects, whose working methods have been interwoven.

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<sup>3</sup> Virilio, Paul, *The Original Accident*, Cambridge: Polity, 2007

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Raimund, *[Un]built*, Wien, 1996

<sup>5</sup> Ørskov, Willy, "Aflæsning af objekter", Copenhagen, 1966

The main exhibition piece, a model of Nova Insula Utopia, and all of the small prototypes are amalgamations of two fabrication processes (CNC-milling and traditional plaster turning), two sides (up and down) and two material states (solid and void). The amalgamation results in a final, solidified object, but does not give priority to any of the fabrication processes, sides and material states. Thus, the project presents models of an island which can be read upwards down or downwards up through a mirror, suggesting that the viewer herself imagines a possible inhabitation. Likewise, the models show clear traces of the two fabrication methods, but does not erase or attempt to hide any of them in the final, solidified plaster object. Solids and voids suggest what they are, of course, but solids can also be imagined to be hollow and inhabitable, whereas voids can be imagined to be filled with water.

The Nova Insula Utopia drawings are a result of an exchange process in which unfinished drawings were passed back and forth between us, cancelling out conventional perceptions of creation and destruction. Marks, which to one of us were meaningful and necessary were changed or erased by the other. The agreement was to give up artistic ownership and transform any given drawing into a new state by means of disfigurement.

Nova Insula Utopia is inseparable from the working process in which the intentional and the unintentional were given equal value. The outcome is prototypes of an island in which forces (of nature, material characteristics and human interaction) constantly reiterates our understanding of the island as a stable object or place.

### **Contribution**

Colonizing outer space is the focus of much research and investment currently. Large investments are made into getting there first, and making uninhabitable places livable. But we have large, unexplored potentials much closer by. Imagine that we could find sustainable ways of inhabiting the spaces of oceans, seas and harbors, making good living conditions for people. Islands of inhabitation, which produce energy, nurture civilization, culture and produce alternative forms of inhabitation.

In support of UN-Habitat's New Urban Agenda, BIG has revealed islands of a floating city, Oceanix City. concept to withstand natural disasters while housing up to 10.000 inhabitants<sup>6</sup>. A collection of hexagonal platforms moored to the ocean floor can produce its own power, fresh water and heat, designed to grow, transform and adapt organically over time. A modular maritime metropolis. Architects, writers and artists have always liked to dream of islands and used them as working material for imagining new futures. Just like BIG, albeit at a smaller scale, with the Nova Insula

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<sup>6</sup> <https://oceanix.org/>, accessed October 8th, 2019

Utopia project we intend to contribute to a discourse which, throughout centuries have continued to imagine new utopian islands.

Obviously, we owe respect to Thomas More's "little, true book, both beneficial and enjoyable, about how things should be in the new island Utopia"<sup>7</sup> The Isle of Death painting by Swiss Symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) has also been of great inspiration, as have Kenzo Tange's 1960 proposal for man-made islands in Tokyo Bay. Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas' ideas of the city as an archipelago has influenced how we think of our island as just one out of many.

Nova Insula Utopia is a manifest for giving form to new inhabitation. An island which is eaten up by an internal structure, like a hermit crab or an abandoned cocoon. Scaleless, it's model is simultaneously alike to a coral reef and an organism of algae. It sounds and smells comes from the ocean. Its rhythm is in tune with the tide. It is a seaweed harvesting plant, an obsolete oil rig, a birth clinic and a crematorium at one and the same time.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utopia\\_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utopia_(book))