



(3D model and rendering by Jim Albea – <http://home.hiwaay.net/~jwalbea/>)

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Distributed Floating Cities: A Laboratory for Exploring Social Utopias

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Abstract: This essay proposes a novel approach in the attempt to find one or more versions of Utopia: A distributed matrix of hundreds or thousands of cities that float on the oceans, holding physical life-support technologies and high standards of living constant across all cities, and making slight variations in the social fabric from city to city, based on local resident preference. This is not so much a blueprint for any one type of utopia, but rather, a design for a testing laboratory to allow individual people and whole societies to find their *own* versions of 'Utopia', using the Scientific Method on a grand scale.

Why bother? Because floating cities (by their very nature) put a buffer of several hundred or even thousands of miles of ocean between differing ideologies, so we can hopefully avoid the sort of political frictions commonly brought about by close proximity. As constructed “communities of intention”, floating cities allow people of a similar mind to live near one another if they so choose. Much like the Internet, these communities can form along shared interests and ideals, rather than along geographic features or ancient trade routes.

As a sea-based city grows, it will draw energy and nutrient resources from the sun, wind, and sea. It will produce more physical area, food and energy for its growing population, as well as more economic opportunities. However, unlike a land-bound city, a floating city can self-replicate, then split apart. It can go through a process of 'budding' to produce smaller 'seed colony' copies of itself, and these may split off and float away in new directions, both physically and ideologically. Rather than letting a city grow beyond its social or physical carrying capacity, (and suffering through waves of crime, unemployment, social dissension or overcrowding), the people of a floating city can simply start a new colony at sea (or on land) according to their new definition of a common utopian goal.

The core idea is to create a controlled laboratory environment, where you hold most of your variables constant, and change just a few things. In this case, we attempt to hold life-support and living standards constant (and high) for all people. In a biology lab, it's common to see dozens or hundreds of Petri dishes with the same substrate of nutrients, while some other factor is manipulated in a controlled fashion. In this proposed planet-wide sociology lab, the 'Petri dishes' would simply be large scale floating cities that were each home to somewhere between 5,000 and 150,000 people.

Once adequate life-support needs have been established at a high standard of living for all people, everywhere, one can no longer blame continuing social failings on poverty, inequity, and so on. The ideas that knit together the individual societies may then be examined in a more rigorous way, and we can begin to explore the ideologies that either make a society function well...or don't. We need to create environments where everyone has enough personal space, food, water, sanitation, energy, shelter, education, health and time to pursue their own ideas of fulfillment and growth.

In the next 50-100 years, as we begin to move off of the planet and out into space, this planet-wide utopian testing lab will hopefully provide us with pointers toward more functional (and fun!) societies. The body of knowledge produced by hundreds of these cities running simultaneously over many decades should provide us with a much better understanding of just what sorts of social systems tend to produce extremely happy people, vs. only moderately happy people, vs. extremely disgruntled people.

Once we truly understand those social dynamics more clearly, perhaps we'll finally find a path out of the constant in-fighting and politics that have been slowing us down for millennia. Perhaps, once we've learned how to make sure that most of the people are pretty much happy with most of their lives for most of the time...perhaps we'll begin closing in on this concept of what utopia is...or can be.

There probably isn't *ever* going to be the “One True Utopia®” brand of living that people often denounce as absurd and unattainable. But it may mean that at some point in the future the majority of people are able to learn and grow and discover their own personal version of Utopia...and that's certainly going to be a lot nicer than what we've had up until now.

Bio: Patrick Salisbury is a Design Scientist living in the San Francisco Bay Area. He works on creating solutions for social problems such as traffic congestion, homelessness, poverty, hunger, water shortage, and poor education. He is the Founder of Reality Sculptors -- <http://reality.sculptors.com/>