



PUBLIC SEMINAR

Future Cities: Architecture and the Imagination

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Future Cities and the Imagination

In January 2013, a photograph of a projected image on a smog-enshrouded high-rise building in Beijing became an internet sensation because it seemed uncannily reminiscent of the urban landscape seen in the 1982 film *Blade Runner*.¹ Notwithstanding the negative effects of excessive urban pollution on urban residents, *Blade Runner* tours are now being offered to tourists to cash in on this unexpected coming together of life and art; of the real and the imagined - a situation that has only intensified after the 2017 release of the film's much-lauded sequel *Blade Runner 2049*. This phenomenon demonstrates just how attuned we are today to the links between what we experience in real cities and the mental images we carry of imagined ones we have encountered in science-fiction films, novels and video games. It seems that in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, with their astonishing rate of growth in recent years, the futuristic visions of the past have already arrived, producing a strange mingling of past, present and future. Indeed, the urban landscape of perhaps the most 'futuristic' city today - Dubai - is already being used as a set for cinematic visions of the future, such as in the very first science-fiction film produced in the United Arab Emirates, *The Sons of Two Suns*, released in 2013.

The fundamental way in which we make sense of the future is through the imagination: to think of the future is, by necessity, to imagine it. Yet so

much of current thinking on the future of cities is instrumental in its nature, drawing on science-based predictions to map out possible scenarios and separating this empirical data from the rather more subjective predictions stemming from the creative imagination. Cities are always a meld of matter and mind, places that we are rooted in both physically and mentally.

Furthermore, in the digital age, the real and the imagined are already thoroughly intertwined - why else, after all, would tourists now be offered *Blade Runner* tours? Rather than cleave the imagination from reason, should we not explore how the two are entangled - how together they can open up rich possibilities in terms of how we think the future?

Imaginary cities

To imagine is to present in your mind's eye something that is absent. It's a conjuring act - a form of magic - in which new images are revealed to the person who imagines. Although always recognised as an important human faculty, the imagination only became ascendent in the Romantic period, as a reaction against the rise of scientific rationalism in the eighteenth century. As poet Samuel Taylor-Coleridge argued, for the Romantics, the imagination was like a 'master current' underlying conscious human experience - a powerful force that always threatened to overflow and disrupt the order of the rational mind.² Today, imagination is more readily associated with fantasy - the creation of worlds completely separated from 'real' life. Imagination carries a pejorative meaning of escape - of an unwillingness to accept the world as it is and a flight into fanciful worlds of make-believe; and with this, an association with immaturity and childishness. At best, imagination is viewed as a kind of ornamental embellishment

of the real, its products - the creative arts - a valuable, albeit unnecessary, way of softening the hard asperities of real life. Yet, the human imagination also carries with it a much more serious intent, namely to overturn and rewrite the rules of what the real actually is, or rather, how it is defined. By moving beyond what is given in the world - the things we perceive - imagination reaches for the unforeseen and for what has not yet been experienced. Thus, imagination can be said to prepare the ground for the 'real' and is always at work trying to transform it. Here, what is real and what is imagined are not two separate worlds, but ones that are always informing and transforming each other.³

But what has the imagination to do with cities - cities after all are being made out of materials that we can sense directly? It's no accident that the explosion of literature *about* cities in the nineteenth century coincided with the rapid growth of cities themselves, particularly those affected by industrialisation, such as London, New York and Paris. Once a city becomes so large and complex that it exceeds one's ability to comprehend it in a single mental image, then the imagination has to take over - to fill in the gaps in our mental perception of the vast urban environment.⁴ The London described in Dickens's novels is a city that melds imagination and reality - a kind of mental projection of the city superimposed over the real one. And we now experience London as a *product* of Dickens's texts, whether by engaging in walking tours taking in his literary landmarks or as we 'feel' the atmosphere of the city at certain times as somehow Dickensian. A similar transference of imagined to real is now happening in the *Blade Runner* tours now being offered to tourists visiting Shanghai. For every city we visit, we bring a prior imagination of that city, whether formed through paintings we've seen, films we've watched, novels we've read, or, more prosaically, through the guidebooks and maps we consult before setting foot on the ground. Think of Kafka's Prague, New York in the films of Woody Allen, Paris in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and its long-running musical counterpart. Indeed, many cities are dependent on the tourism generated by such texts, films and other images; not just in terms of the popularity of their landmark sites or museums dedicated to literary figures, but in the sense of the whole city infused by an imaginary that *attracts*.

Clearly then, the imagination is important in how cities are perceived and experienced; but how might it affect those that build cities, namely architects and urban planners? Firstly, both architecture and urban planning begin by seeking to picture what the city might become, that is, they *imagine* new possibilities for cities. Although architectural designs have to negotiate a host of constraints that simply don't apply to authors or filmmakers, they are still fundamentally imaginative works in that they visualise something that does not yet exist. Architectural visualisation - especially in the digital age - relies upon images as tools of persuasion that effectively present something that is essentially a speculation, a fiction. Yet, such images often fail to make us *feel* anything about their possible effects on the city. In the same way as the hyper-realism of CGI effects in blockbuster films often leave us cold, many architectural visualisations try to cover over the gap between fantasy and reality. Yet it is precisely this gap that allows the imagination to function - it alerts us to the difference between fiction and fact; between the world as we find it and the world as we want it to be.

When the imagination is at work, what is produced is not an image that bears no relation to the existing world, but rather a reworking of something, or rather some image, that already exists. In other words, there can be no imagination without a *past*; no conception of what is to come without what has already been. In this sense, history is critical as to how the imagination projects itself into the future: 'the desire for a good city in the future already exists in the imagination of the past'.⁵ Consequently, when considering the relationship between the imagination and future cities, past precedents will always be important because they almost always form the basis for more recent urban plans, no matter how unprecedented the latter may seem. The architectural imagination builds upon itself in a gradual process of accumulation, rather than through any clear breaks with precedent. Bringing past, present and future together in relation to the imagination of future cities has the potential to significantly enrich how we think about the relationship between the speculative and real, and between what has been, what is, and what is to come.

Future thinking

When one is confronted with the fact that the levels of human-produced carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere are now higher than they were 2.5 million years ago, how are we to think about the spans of deep history that separate us from this pre-human era? And how are we to think about the possible impacts of our collective actions in the far future? Even if the human race were to become extinct today, our legacy will live on for many thousands if not millions of years - not just in terms of the CO₂ we are pumping out in vast quantities into the atmosphere, but also the other deadly wastes we are producing, particularly radioactive ones where the half-life of some materials extends into the tens of thousands of years. Here, cities are particularly implicated in the Anthropocene because they are the main driving force of human activity on the planet today; over half of us currently live in cities; by 2030, that figure will probably rise to 70%.⁶ With such unprecedented urbanisation in the history of human civilization, the making (and unmaking) of cities today requires ever larger quantities of natural resources, energy-guzzling processes of construction, the destruction and despoliation of nature, and the generation of vast quantities of waste.

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has forcefully argued that the fact that human activity is already having a profound effect on the future of the planet leads to four primary conclusions. First, that the age-old distinction between cities and nature as two separate domains has collapsed; second, that human activity - and city building in particular - is equivalent to a geological force, the future effects of which we don't yet understand very well; third, that we need to think about our long history and future as a species; and, fourth, that there can be no-one who is exempt from the effects that our activity will have on the future world, even though it is the urban poor who are likely to be worst affected.⁷ All of this means that, in thinking about the future of our cities, the kind of timescales involved, the interactions between those players that produce the urban environment, and how cities will interact with the non-human world, all need to be radically reimagined in ways that are entirely unforeseen because they are completely unprecedented in human history.

What might help us along the road to this radical new type of imagination of cities of the future? To begin with, the imagination needs to be reinvigorated as a genuinely transformative human faculty. We must recognise that the imagination is key in how we 'pre-experience' alternative futures - how we can prepare ourselves for what might be coming. The sheer uncertainty about the possible effects of human activity on the future of the planet forces us to reach for the imagination in sketching out these alternatives. These will not be primarily predictive - believable outcomes based on what we know already; but rather a range of stories that allow us to *feel* what it might be like to live in the future. Scientists, climatologists and policy-makers may balk at the lack of objectivity in the creation of such stories, but it is clear that, in thinking the future, humans need narrative to make sense of a whole range of possible outcomes that can never be predicted with any degree of certainty. This story-based approach to imagining the future encompasses the metaphorical, the ethical, the aesthetic and the speculative, each contributing to a vision of not a predictive future, but one that is 'probable, preferred, or hoped for'.⁸

We already have an enormous body of speculative fictions out there to ferment this new kind of imagination - over a century's worth of science-fiction novels, films and comics, unbuilt architectural projects, and, more recently, video games and digital art. Indeed, architecture, and particularly speculative design, shares the same purpose as science fiction - that of imagining what the future might look like if certain tendencies in the present were played out or exaggerated in the future. Geographer Stephen Graham's recent work on vertical urbanism has argued that science-fiction cities are 'pivotal in constituting the materialities of contemporary cities' because 'built projects, material cities, sci-fi text, imaginary futures, architectural schemes and urban theories mingle and resonate together in complex and unpredictable ways'.⁹ As the example of the *Blade Runner* tours demonstrates, this intermingling is crucial to the power of science fiction in that it temporarily takes readers and viewers out of the real world they inhabit into an imagined one which is both alluring in its strangeness but also convincing in its familiarity.¹⁰ Thus, when we read a science-fiction text, watch a film or look at an image of a future city, we are not escaping from the real, but rather redefining its parameters by creating links

between imagined and real cityscapes that are already the ground of our own urban experience. In Graham's estimation, 'real and imagined sci-fi cities ... offer powerful opportunities for progressively challenging contemporary urban transformation' because they hold, at their core, the value of multiplicity rather than the homogeneity of urbanism under global capitalism, and they emphasise the forging of linkages rather than the cutting of ties in an increasingly fragmented world'.¹¹

Forging an imagination of the future that takes into account our newfound awareness of the Anthropocene will not be an easy task, even with the wealth of imaginative fictions we already have access to. How can architecture and urbanism evolve in more progressive ways when we've become increasingly aware of their destructive nature? Is it just a question of mitigating those tendencies, or is a more radical transformation required and, if so, is that even possible? Perhaps it is time to recognise more widely that architecture does not exist in the self-referential world it so often seems to. Buildings - and the cities buildings sit in - are always much more than the sum of their parts. Rather than simply being material objects, buildings are in reality a whole series of connections - between makers and users; between spaces and forms; between materials and mind; and between flows of all kinds - people, non-human things, facilities, information, time and so on. In thinking of buildings and cities as primarily about connections, we can open our minds to an almost infinite array of possible futures for them - futures that will be defined by how we connect up all manner of things, both material and immaterial, in the here and now. Such futures can never be predictive, but they can empower us because they will release us out into worlds beyond ourselves. In these strange new worlds - the imagined ones - connections we haven't yet been able to realise will suddenly make themselves apparent.

Mental ecologies

Political theorist Fredric Jameson's oft-quoted remark that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism directly challenges the poverty of the contemporary imagination in its inability to generate genuinely new possibilities that go beyond mere escapist fantasies.¹² Under the intense pressures of an accelerating pace of urban life and an equally

accelerating rate of urban development, there is a pressing need to reinvest the imagination with the kind of charge that is necessary for alternative visions to neoliberal capitalism to emerge and gain potency. Bringing together the experience and imagination of future cities has the potential to contribute to this process, where the contemplation of the future leads not to paralysis or cynicism but rather to new and hopeful beginnings.

But how can the intensely subjective world of the human imagination cohere into something that is shared? At the outset, it's important to remember that responses to imaginative texts and images of future cities are never entirely subjective. Whenever we watch a film or read a novel, we are already engaging in a two-way conversation - with the author or filmmaker; and, of course, we often watch films or read books together - whether in the darkened communal space of the cinema or in a local book group. In this already shared context, it is the attitudes of readers or viewers that define what kind of politics will come out of these imaginative engagements. Although collective action always risks diminishing the sheer multiplicity of individual human experience, this can be mitigated if we hold out openness to connections rather than closing them down. With this openness, the imagination can bring into being many new ways of thinking about the future, together with a rich variety of images of what our cities might yet become.¹³

What any image of a future city does is to provide a visualisation that forges a link between how we imagine the future city and how we relate to it as a real place. On the one hand, images of future cities are inevitably grounded in the urban environment we can already know and experience; on the other, they also push us to think about new ways of living and being in cities. This melding of matter and mind is important because it chimes with holistic ideas of ecology that are emerging in response to the awareness of our damaging effect on the planet. Ecology, broadly defined, is not just concerned with the relationships between humans and nature, but rather the coming together of individuals, social relations and the environment.¹⁴ In this reading, an ecology of the human mind is just as important as one that embraces the external world, because it is vital in resisting the tendency of contemporary capitalism - or any dominating worldview - to

constrain the human imagination. Thus, the imagination is already politicised because, as a faculty that only flourishes when set free, it inherently resists such subjugation. At stake is the cultivation of a kind of mental resilience to dominating world-views and, in this sense, it goes far beyond conventional ideas of resilience when applied to cities. Usually, when we talk about resilient cities, we refer to the ways in which the hard infrastructure of the urban environment might adapt to things that threaten it in the future, such as rising sea levels and greater incidence of flooding caused by climate change. Yet, there is much more to a resilient city than this; just like its physical infrastructures, the networks of the minds of its citizens need to develop resilience in the face of existing and future threats. This is not to induce a kind of paralysis of confusion or a detachment from feeling, but rather to encourage us all to forge connections with others in any way that promotes more openness to future cities that are hopeful, vibrant, inclusive, and optimistic.

NOTES

- ¹ For the Beijing image, see Dina Spector, 'Blade Runner or Beijing', *Business Insider*, 23 January 2013. Available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/beijing-smog-and-blade-runner-photos-2013-1?IR=T>.
- ² Quoted in Arnold H. Modell, *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), p. 126.
- ³ See Gaston Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*. Trans. Colette Gaudin (Putnam, CT, 2005).
- ⁴ David L. Pike, *Metropolis on the Styx: The Underworlds of Modern Urban Culture, 1800-2001* (Ithaca, NY, 2007), p. 36.
- ⁵ James Donald, 'This, here, now: imagining the modern city', in Sallie Westwood and John Williams (eds), *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memory*, ed. (London, 1997), p. 184.
- ⁶ World Health Organization, 'Global Health Observatory (GHO): Urban population growth', 2014. Available at www.who.int/gho/urban_health/situation_trends/urban_population_growth_text/en/.
- ⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The climate of history: four theses', *Critical Enquiry* 35 (2009), pp. 197-223.
- ⁸ Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys, 'Climate change and the imagination', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2/4 (2011), pp. 516-534.
- ⁹ Stephen Graham, 'Vertical noir: histories of the future in urban science fiction', *CITY* 20: 3 (2016), p. 388.
- ¹⁰ Darko Suvin, 'On the poetics of the science fiction genre', *College English* (1972), pp. 372-82.
- ¹¹ Graham, 'Vertical noir', p. 395.
- ¹² Fredric Jameson, 'Future city', *New Left Review* 21 (2003), p. 73.
- ¹³ Donald, 'This, here, now', p. 185.
- ¹⁴ See Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*. Trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London and New Brunswick, NJ, 2000; original, 1989).