Introduction

Architecture, Science Fiction and Re-imagining an Alternative Future

Nic Clear

Professor of Architecture

Dean of School of Arts and Humanities

University of Huddersfield

n.clear@hud.ac.uk

Abstract

This introductory essay argues that we are in a period of great change initiated by the intersection of three great challenges: climate catastrophe, technological convergence and the need for social justice. The response to the current Covid pandemic suggests that we are poorly prepared to face such transformations and may struggle to find appropriate solutions in the face of fear and resistance to the unknown. A central role for the arts in setting a progressive agenda will be in the communication of alternatives and perhaps by turning to forms of speculative fiction, such as SF, we will able to embody possible solutions into more tangible forms and encourage greater acceptance of the radical decisions that society undoubtedly needs to make.

Keywords

Speculative Fiction, climate catastrophe, what-if, otherness

"If artistic avant-gardes and social revolutionaries have felt a peculiar affinity for one another…., borrowing each other's languages and ideas, it appears to have been insofar as both have remained committed to the idea that the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently."

David Graeber (2015, p88)

We are currently witnessing the confluence of three dramatic processes: climate catastrophe, technological convergence and the global movement for social justice. These changes are bringing about epochal transformations that will profoundly affect the way we live and need to be fully reflected in the way we think of future forms of architecture. Despite statistics showing that human society is more prosperous and people live longer than ever before (Hurari 2015), the divisions between rich and poor are more extreme than at almost any point in recent human history (Piketty 2015). The distribution of those resources impacts specific communities in a disproportionate manner, particularly in the 'planet of slums' of the global South (Davis 2009).

The ongoing effects of two hundred and fifty years of industrial activity under capitalism are causing catastrophic changes to the Earth's climate and biosphere, with some claiming we have already entered a sixth period of mass extinction (Morton 2018) that capitalism is itself incapable of addressing and that alternatives to a market-led approach need to be at the heart of the solution.

Further innovations in technology will accelerate these changes and add to the precarious nature of our lives, as we have to face the wider social challenges presented by Artificial Intelligence, greater levels of automation, developments in genetics and synthetic biology, and the ubiquitous implementation of nanotechnology. These technologies will alter the way we work, if we work, how we communicate, and where we live in terms of the viability of those places to support human inhabitation. These transformations will also impact how we see ourselves through our identity and agency, and while this may be liberating for some, it could result in further extremes of prejudice.

Dramatic change often leads to widespread anxieties, and we are witnessing those concerns playing themselves out in terms of racism and xenophobic nationalism, economic polarisation and attacks on progressive values. Many believe that problems of equality, social justice, and climate catastrophe are linked to the same phenomena, the global economic system of late-capitalism, and this is exemplified in our approach to the built environment. At such times, it is often difficult to imagine alternatives, the current dominance of narratives of fear and exclusion are used as an excuse for keeping things as they are or imagining a return to a fictive past when things were perceived to be better.

The current Covid pandemic has brought into sharp focus several issues that are essential in understanding our ability to cope with the effects of any future global climate crisis. The pandemic has shown the fragility of our current infrastructure, especially when dealing with large numbers of chronically ill or displaced people, and the need to rethink economic and material support outside of the narrow conceptions of the market. It has shown the importance of collective engagement and ingenuity, and has demonstrated that acting quickly and decisively are the most effective means of addressing immediate problems.

The pandemic has also demonstrated that achieving political consensus seems virtually impossible and that the impact of such a disaster is not uniform as it is those who are already vulnerable that are the most likely to suffer the greatest hardship. It has also shown that in the face of overwhelming evidence, there are those who wish to carry on as 'normal', even if the effect of this on others is devastating, and it has warned us, once again, of the dangers of mismanagement and exploitation by those who use any circumstances to further their own personal gain.

Given that it seems increasingly unlikely that we can address climate catastrophe and stop our dependence on fossil fuels, thereby limiting further warming to 1 – 1.5 degrees and will face temperature rises of 3 – 4 degrees, to what extent are we prepared to deal with the catastrophic consequences that will entail? It is clear our world is changing in profound ways, and the spatial implications of these events are what artists, designers and architects need to understand as an integral part of the built environment. We need to create and represent how alternatives might work and what they might look like.
A central responsibility for the arts, as part of an ethical climate and socially progressive agenda, is in the ability to translate and embody abstract ideas into tangible narratives that can be widely understood and disseminated. Writers, artists, and musicians have been at the forefront of ways of 'enframing' the narrative of environmental politics and climate catastrophe by creating stories, objects, sounds, interventions and actions that allow us to engage with and make sense of these seemingly un-representable issues as part our own lived experience. The principle challenge facing the arts and architecture, in particular, is not how to make these narratives public but to empower others to develop their own narratives and stories about creating change.

The creation of narratives through aesthetic activities and play is how we already build an understanding of the world from childhood onwards. As architects and designers, we can use materials to make resonant objects and images, to tell spatial stories in the communication of our ideas, and it is in the telling of those stories where the real battle of climate action and social justice may be won or lost. But for architects, this will require a thor-

ough analysis of what we do and how we do it and perhaps a complete transformation of the idea of what an architect is and how they should be educated.

The uncertainties surrounding the future have tended to result in popular narratives that are nihilistic and reductive, if only for dramatic value, and It is clear that alternatives are necessary if we are to make positive sense of the increasingly complex technological opportunities that shape the world around us and the range of possible outcomes that we face.

Architectural design and Science Fiction (SF) share an important characteristic in that they both conceptually take place in an imagined future and potentially ask 'what-if' questions about the way we inhabit those futures (Shaviro 2016). In architecture, the conclusions drawn often seem prosaic though the effects can have far-reaching implications for millions. Many contemporary SF texts deal with more radical forms of futurity through imagining extreme forms of technology and otherness involving different expressions of identity, agency and new forms of collective action. While they may seem quite fanciful, such conceptions also have a direct significance to the type of built environment the future may hold.

When the need to reconcile individual aspirations with collective forms of action and responsibility takes on global significance, many authors have recognised the need to provide a narrative framework within which alternative forms of otherness can be situated within speculative and progressive versions of society and culture.

While this approach has found its way into other disciplines, within architecture, such speculative approaches are still treated with suspicion, and for many 'speculative' is used as a negative term rather than an acknowledgement of a progressive and way of asking difficult 'what-if' questions. When SF is invoked in architecture, it is more usual to simply describe a dystopian version of the future as it is preferable to be accused of cynicism or irony rather than be considered naïve and optimistic. If other critical discourses may embrace SF in terms of its ability to conceptualise alternative systems, they often

do not address or even seem interested in the specific types of spaces in which these futures might occur.

This issue of AIS explores how some architects embrace forms of SF to represent the intersections of these technological developments and forms of otherness and, most importantly, articulate those ideas by creating progressive architectural design positions and representing architectural ideas.

One of the objectives for a progressive speculative architecture would be to provide the visual and spatial forms that animate these narratives, giving them an immediacy and tangible presence that text alone is unable to communicate. We are living in an age of great social and technological transformation: our spaces, societies, interactions and even our bodies are being transformed, and the spatial consequences of our networked societies need to be fully explored as an integral part of the newly framed utopian architecture of the future.

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