Geography, urban design, and architecture

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I stand in a doorway, on the threshold of home. If I reach out, I can feel the timber and paint of the door under the surface of my fingers and hear voices from the room beyond, aware of the thickness of the wall on either side which marks the line between inside and out. In this everyday space, I confront the depth of intimacy and the vast echoes of complexity present in all spatial encounter. The chipped paint resonates with the patinas of care in other homes, the pencil marks of the heights of growing children or the tacky residue of deep-fried comfort. Alongside this are the lives that have been warped or shaped to allow this seemingly benign door to come into being: the abrupt break in the creaking growth of timber, the violence of petrochemical extraction, the divisions which are inherent in any spatial separation.

Any such moment of engagement with the spatial disciplines including architecture, urban studies, and geography as well as the fields of interiors, landscapes and environments, reveals them to be dizzying in scale. They require the simultaneous contemplation of the incomprehensibly vast and the breathtakingly mundane. These are vertiginous delights that are shared with science fiction (sf) as it asks us to inhabit the minutia of lives other to our own and confront the expanses of deep space and time, all while clinging on to the thresholds of our own experience. This chapter is an attempt to explore sf through these shifting scales. It will focus on scholars from the spatial disciplines who have engaged with sf literature, to reflect on how the design and representation of setting in sf informs us about the power structures and patterns of behaviour within the fictional world, and provides a unique site from which to confront our own situatedness.

As described by philosopher and spatial theorist Elizabeth Grosz in *Architecture from the Outside*, "Fantasies about the future are always, at least in part, projections, images, hopes, and horrors extrapolated from the present… In this sense, they are more revealing of the status and permeability of the present than they are indices of transformation or guarantees of a present-to-be" (Grosz 2001, 49). A growing body of scholarship reflects on the 'hopes and horrors' which shape the architectures of sf, including the work of Carl Abbott (2016) and Paul Dobraszczyk (2019) which undertakes typological analysis to understand how specific tropes such as the vertical or floating city reflect lived urban experiences and inform design practices. Rather than focusing on the interplay between worlds constructed in concrete and in print, this chapter will follow the call set out by geographer James Kneale in the preceding volume of this companion, who asks "what it is we are trying to do with our descriptions of place" (2009, 431). It will move through spatial scales, lingering in turn at the scale of the planetary, the city, the neighbourhood, the building, the room and the doorway, to consider what we do with descriptions of place in sf. This folding inward from the expansive to the intimate revels in sf's capacity to expose the 'permeability of the present', to see the world as continually built and unbuilt moment by moment. As a genre founded on such multiplicity of worldbuilding, it is here that we can ask how we are shaped by the worlds which we encounter, and how we might shape them in turn.

The planetary

In Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (2013) the inhabitants of Silicon Isle scale mountain ranges of e-waste that have been dragged in by ocean currents and the tides of corporate outsourcing of responsibility. These are new landmasses shaped and formed by the built-in obsolescence of each successive iteration of apparent technological advancement. Resources have been

extracted only to be redeposited in locations that are deemed sufficiently elsewhere, in a global relocation of ground. This the scale of the planetary in sf, a perspective which demands that we confront the global implications of everyday actions.

> They lined up, washed and brushed their teeth... and the white foam… slowly collected in a square pool, from where it flowed into a waste pond covered with an iridescent oil film, and then, combined with the industrial and residential wastewater from elsewhere on this island after many twists and turns, plunged without hesitation towards the open sea.
> (Qiufan 2019, 68 [2013])

The representation of place in *Waste Tide* is founded on an understanding of how extractivism, racialised geo-politics, and climate crisis shape space and time, as the deep time of oil and the ongoing histories of colonialism are materialised in the constructed surface of the present, insidiously accumulating and seeping into our collective futures.

As a genre, sf is uniquely able to operate on scales which extend far beyond our contemporary moment, in works like Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series (1979-1983) or Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930) which explore histories and futures of Earth which span millennia. It is here perhaps that we can truly acknowledge the geological time of human impact, present in the laying down of new layers of ground which have irrevocably reshaped the world we live in. In 'Environmental Futures, Now and Then' sociologist Lisa Garforth outlines how the narratives of sf which engage with planetary futures, such as John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) or Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985), work to make environmental crisis thinkable. Garforth traces how scientific and science fictional narratives of environmentalism are intimately entangled, and how sf establishes an accessible point for engagement with complex systems, while also providing narrative exploration of the "ethical, metaphysical and even utopian possibilities of a climate changed world" (2019, 19). By providing characters with whom we can empathetically engage, who are located within the sprawling and often intangible webs of human and non-human interconnectedness, these planetary future fictions provide us with a critical space to confront the implications of our actions and their iniquitous impact.

In his work on environmental justice, Kyle Whyte invites readers to consider how the concepts of apocalyptic finality often implicit within discussions of the Anthropocene and climate emergency would be received by Indigenous persons who see their societies as "already having endured one *or many more* apocalypses" (2018, 236). For Whyte, it is imperative that there is a recognition of the entrenched nature of colonialism, capitalism and industrialisation that create underlying conditions of domination which disempower Indigenous people. Sf and storytelling can be an integral part in this process, supporting an allyship that is "open to the often post-apocalyptic and ancestrally dystopian spaces of Indigenous spiralling time, intergenerational dialogue, and science (fiction)" (2018, 237). As Indigenous Nations Studies scholar Grace Dillon describes, in an essay about two-spirit sf, these survivance stories are about "persistence, adaptation, and flourishing in the future, in sometimes subtle but always important contrast to mere survival" (Dillon 2016, 9).

This critical worldmaking potential, bound up in sf's capacity to engage with both the incomprehensibly vast and the deeply situated, is addressed by geographer Kathryn Yusoff in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018). In this, Yusoff draws on N.K Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015), a narrative which explores the interconnectedness of racialised

exploitation and the geological transformation of a future earth. Her reading of this fictional work feeds into a call for the urgent examination of "world making as a geophysics of being," a recognition of how economies and histories of power including colonial practices are delivering "a new geochemical earth" (2018, 13). Here, Indigenous genocide and settler colonialism are understood as parts of wider extractive-logics, a racialised geo-social matrix which is insidiously pervasive and purposefully occluded. Rather than distinguishing between environmental and social justice, Yusoff demonstrates how sf can assist in recognising our situatedness within such overlapping and interconnected planetary issues, and support the construction of worlds otherwise.

The city

The city of Abbenay in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) is described as the most central city of the planet of Annares, its built form and scale reflecting and supporting the anarcho-communist principles of the society it contains. Here low-rise structures serve as a symbolic reflection of the abolition of power hierarchies, while a bustling public transport system replaces the individualism of private vehicle ownership. It is a radically egalitarian representation of urban space which strives to continually redress spatial and social inequality through the provision of communal dining and collective housing.

> Abbenay was poisonless: a bare city, bright, the colours light and hard, the air pure. It was quiet. You could see it all, laid out as plain as spilt salt.
> Nothing was hidden…
> No doors were locked, few shut… It was all there, all the work, all the life of the city, open to the eye and to the hand.
> (Le Guin 2002, 84 [1974])

This depiction of an intentionally utopian urban environment serves to cast critical light onto lived issues of spatial injustice, where the rampant escalation of commercial land value results in urban segregation and the forced displacement of communities along gender, race and class lines.

Such critical utopianism can be powerfully deployed within urban studies and planning, as demonstrated by political scientists and urban studies scholars Christine Hudson and Malin Rönnblom. In their work, feminist sf texts including Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women* (1986) were used as the source material for discussions with women's groups, finding that these fictions provided a common language through which personal experience could be expressed, making "the gendered, racialized and sexualized power relations of the city visible" (2020, 7). As Hudson and Rönnblom note, the subordinate position of marginalised communities and individuals suppresses both spatial agency and the capacity to critique power structures. As such, the scope of possibility presented within sf narratives provides vital materials from which we can imagine and construct urban alternatives.

While critical utopias offer worlds where spatial inequalities are redressed, much urban dystopian fiction serves to make visible power hierarchies through extrapolation. As urban historian Carl Abbott notes, they reveal the "implicit understandings that lie beneath the surface of our society" (2007, 4). In particular, Abbott describes how cyberpunk works such as Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992), Nicola Griffith's *Slow River* (1995) and Cynthia Kadohata's *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1992), provide visceral images of urban segregation. In these fictions the soft boundaries drawn within cities are solidified, and the

pernicious fragmentation of urban environments has created isolated enclaves of privileged indifference.

It is such separation and segregation which Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre argues must be resisted in *Le Droit à la Ville*, where he discusses the urgent necessity for forms of citizenship, to assert to the right to the city for all marginalized subjects (1968; cited in Merrifield 2013). For Lefebvre, this claim to spatial agency is more readily asserted when it is underpinned by an awareness of the urban which transcends that of an individual city. As part of this process of expansive imagination Lefebvre draws upon the world-encompassing city of Trantor in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series (1951-1993). Urban theorist Andy Merrifield expounds how such a reference serves to "open up our *perspective* on thinking about urban life, … to live with that starling *immensity*, to make it our own. We might then be able to think more clearly about politics — about *prospective*, progressive politics under planetary urbanization" (2013, 910). Merrifield discusses how Trantor offers a way to imagine a city beyond the built expressions of transport infrastructure or population density, and instead consider the urban as being defined by the "sheer simultaneity of activities, of events and chance meetings" (2013, 916). The city scale in sf draws upon this critical mass of encounter to create settings of heightened spatial intensity. Here, the tangible effects of dispossession and segregation expose the necessity of resistance to their more subtle manifestations in the cities we inhabit.

The neighbourhood

The neighbourhood community described in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) centres on a collective dining room which acts as a 'home for us all,' which is the largest building of this small agrarian community. It is neither distinctly a place of work nor of leisure but a space of being together, designed to accommodate all inhabitants. In this future of 2137 there are no cities, no centres of power or control, rather this place is part of a wider network of radically de-centralised and loosely anarchist communities. For Connie, a Hispanic woman who travels here from 1970's Harlem, this radically egalitarian society provides momentary escape from a life where she is subject to domestic, racial and sexual violence, and incarcerated in an asylum.

> The room they entered took up half the dome and was filled with long tables seating perhaps fifteen at each … Some panels in the ceiling of the dome were transparent and some were translucent, although from the outside she had not seen any difference… "Some you can see through and some not, because some of us like to feel closed in while we eat and some – like me – want to see everything. The fooder is a home for us all. A warm spot."
> (Piercy 1986, 75 [1976])

Piercy's depiction of community recognizes that acts of coming together are made possible through the geographic proximity of a neighbourhood and the architectural construction of public space, but also through the recognition of how race, gender, disability, and economics impact the making of places of mutual care.

This understanding of place is discussed by geographer Doreen Massey in relation to the imagery of the science fictional city, stating that "amid the Ridley Scott images of world cities, the writing about skyscraper fortresses, the Baudrillard visions of hyperspace… Much of life for many people… still consists of waiting in a bus-shelter with your shopping for a

bus that never comes" (1992, 8). For Massey, descriptions of urban disorientation risk disregarding ongoing histories of displacement and dispossession by considering these conditions to be intrinsically associated with urban capitalism. Instead, she suggests the consideration of 'place' as something formed from social relations, which acknowledges that factors including sexuality, race, class and gender are deeply implicated in how we inhabit and experience space. Drawing on bell hooks who describes home as a place where it is possible to discover "new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference" (1989, 36), Massey suggests that place can be understood as a source of identity, security and belonging without being physically bounded or enclosed, and that these shifting constructs of connectedness might be understood as 'meeting places.' This is an idea of neighbourhood based not on physical proximity but on the common identification of place, and the act of coming together.

The construction of meeting places, and the possibilities for connection that they engender is explored by Joan Slonczewski in *A Door Into Ocean* (1986). On the ocean world of Shora there is no pre-existing land which is available for inhabitation, rather each community must construct and maintain a raft made from oceanic plant life which is grown and spun into building materials. Each of these rafts represents the literal making of place for the groups it sustains, a conscious and materially manifest act of being together. They are drifting and dispersed neighbourhoods, mutually sustained by the ocean from which they are made. As noted by architectural theorist Katie Lloyd Thomas, this establishes and reflects a form of social construction based on an intimate awareness of the inhabitant's role in a web of interconnected relations and impacts, of ocean and ocean dweller (2017). In this science fictional space, the scope of such meeting places is expanded to include the non-human, to construct social relations which are both rooted in place and resolutely held open.

The scope of such meeting places to accommodate human diversity and difference, and the possibility of creating a 'home for us all' as described in *Woman on the Edge of Time* is directly addressed by critical design and disability studies scholar Aimi Hamraie in their examination of Universal Design. As Hamraie details, Universal Design aims to recognise that architecture is never value-neutral, but generates "conditions of inclusion or misfit depending on what kinds of bodies are included within the scope of the 'universal'" (2017, 85). In response, Hamraie turns to speculative fiction which can "disorient taken-for-granted assumptions about the place of marginalized life in the future" (2020, 414). They draw on Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993), which depicts the permaculture reclamation of urban spaces amid a post-apocalyptic setting. Here permaculture acts of urban gardening, de-paving, and rewilding are supported by a wider social commitment to valuing human biodiversity. These acts of valuing are made manifest in architectural design and also in property and economic relations which centre marginalized people including those with disabilities. For Hamraie, works of sf like this invite urban planners to subvert economic and eugenicist logics by providing an image of neighbourhood where disability is valued difference.

The building

Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) is set in the hollowed-out city centre of a future Toronto. This city has suffered an economic collapse prompting the government and support services to withdraw, leaving a gang boss in control of the urban centre, his power symbolically reflected in his location at the top of the CN observation tower, dominating all he surveys. In order to challenge this control, Ti-Jeanne draws upon Caribbean-Canadian

healing and spiritual practices, the knowledges her grandmother has carried as part of a diaspora community and deep understandings of this place. This way of knowing allows Ti-Jeanne to reinterpret the CN Tower, and in doing so reclaim her spatial agency by redeploying the symbolic power it contains and channels.

> Ti-Jeanne thought of the center pole of the palais, reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. She thought of the building she was in. The CN Tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of the tallest center pole in the world. Her duppy body almost laughed a silent kya-kya, a jokey Jab-Jab laugh. For like the spirit tree that the center pole symbolized, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lives and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived. (Hopkinson 2001, 221 [1998])

In *Brown Girl in the Ring,* a structure which had been an expression and manifestation of corporate and economic power is refashioned into a centre pole that acts as a point of connection to other worlds. This narrative offers an exploration of the symbolic interpretation of a single built structure, examining the power relations which led to its construction, its role within a shifting socio-economic landscape, and the subversive possibility which surfaces when multiple readings of place are recognised as co-existent.

Such symbolic and material power relations manifest in the built environment are considered by urban studies scholars Lucy Hewitt and Stephen Graham in their analysis of sf representations of urban verticality, which draws on the work of William Gibson, H.G. Wells' *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899) and J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975). As they note, in these novels "the vertical implies hierarchy; deployed in spatial terms the vertical highlights and concretises inequities" (2015, 929), while the ability to look down from above confers a sense of power to the observer that is far from ethically neutral. When considered in relation to the rapid proliferation of high-rise structures in urban centres which serve as symbolic reflections of corporate power or individual wealth, Hewitt and Graham suggest that these fictions provide critical ground to examine "uneven social geographies of vertical mobility" and resist the entrenchment of economic segregation (2013, 83).

This segregation is particularly apparent in contemporary developments with two separate entrances: one for private residents and a second entrance for social housing tenants popularly referred to as a 'poor door.' In their study of one such building, urban planners Francesca Ansaloni and Miriam Tedeschi draw on Ballard's *High Rise* to examine the emotional and ethical implications of socio-spatial segregation built into the fabric of a single building (2016). The hierarchy created by exclusionary spatial arrangements which prevent occupants of different tenures mixing is also written into the scale, form and materials used in the fabric of the building. As they describe, an obscured entrance down an alleyway constructed from poor quality materials implies a social stigma which is borne and internalised by those who are forced to occupy this space. At the scale of the building, sf demonstrates the complex inter-relation between built space and the body, the ways in which power is expressed in architecture and the impact this has on those who inhabit it.

The room

In Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1979) the established social patterns of habit are undergoing a radical shift, as the power of the men in the cities is challenged by the new understandings of place developed by the hill women.

These shifts of power which reshape the world are visible within the textures of one woman's living space. Carefully protected from the rising damp and dew, this room is lined with books, neatly packed together to form the surface of the floor, spines up so that they can be identified. Gaps are formed where books have been removed to be read, and their absence is a marker of the shifting relations between the interior worlds of the reader and the domestic space they inhabit and shape.

> She remembered the floor very well from the summer when Seja had been re-arranging it. Books. Hundreds of them, stacked at different thicknesses within rectangular wooden sections… Now she noted that Seja's reading had rendered the floor pretty uneven in places. Two children's books, open by the door, had left a gap that a French grammar was failing to fill and next to two texts on plant diseases right near her reach was a long hole whose bottom, Alaka could see, was the dark earth itself.
> (Gearhart 1979, 19)

In this room, institutional repositories of knowledge are relocated into the domestic, and the intellectually abstract is understood through the materially tactile. In this intimate and personal space, the visitor must tread carefully, learning to walk a landscape of another's mind.

This is an understanding of home as a manifestation of individual identity, expressing and supporting a way of being which may sit in an uneasy tension with the world beyond its walls. As detailed by architect David Fortin in his analysis of home in science fiction, "home might then be considered as an adverb modifying our world experience, the hyphen between us and our environment… a constant re-engagement with the self through architecture" (2011, 210). For Fortin, sf works such as Philip K Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), provide vivid depictions of home spaces as an expression of ongoing struggles between the self and the wider environment, a place where spatial identity is in the process of being reworked. As such, these fictional domestic settings also provide an allegorical site where conflicts between comforts of the known and the shock of the alien can be negotiated and expressed.

However, such architectural self-determination relies upon the existence of a room of one's own, with access to property and spatial agency neither controlled nor forcibly withheld. This assumption is fiercely critiqued in works such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), which is set in a near future where Indigenous people in North America stage a revolution to reclaim their territories. As Fortin notes, the narrative strand in this novel which focuses on a young architect in Mexico City provides Silko with an opportunity to expose the economic privilege of domestic architecture and its associated self-expression (2014). Here, the ideal of an intimate and personal space, a room where comfort can be held in balance against the external unknown, is revealed to be deeply contingent on dominant power structures and neo-liberal capitalism.

The constraints on transgressive, counter-hegemonic, and imaginative sites for self-determination within existing planning and design frameworks is addressed by urban planning scholar Faranak Miraftab, who reflects on the power and potential of acts of 'insurgent planning'. Inspired by anticolonial scholars and activists of liberation, Miraftab presents such practices as insisting "on citizens' rights to dissent, rebel, and determine their own terms of engagement and participation" in purposefully transgressive actions which challenge and disrupt existing frameworks of planning that are based on a mediation between

the state, market, and individual (2017, 282). For Miraftab, these acts of insurgency are intimately entwined with the acts of imagination inherent in science fiction, referring to *Octavia's Brood* (2015) as a key example. The stories in this collection respond to the legacy of Octavia E. Butler, including fictions such as *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) which trace the continual re-establishment of a community which embraces the power of change. As described by Walidah Imarisha in the introduction to *Octavia's Brood*, such visionary fiction is "vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born" (2015, 4). The power of such imaginative self-determination is visible in sf at the scale of the room, in these spatial chinks in the world machine.

The doorway

In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) the possibilities contained within an individual doorway are expanded, folding space to create a connection between here and there without the passage between. This doorway in particular leads from the Greek island of Mykonos to a house in West London, through which step Nadia and Saeed alongside other individuals and families. To those outside the police cordon which soon surrounds them, they are suspended in transition from one place to another, held on the threshold. But the doorways through which they passed each retain the possibility of connection with all the places they have travelled from, and to all those who might step through them.

> The agent gestured with his head to the blackness of a door … drawing close she was struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it did not reveal what was on the other side, and also did not reflect what was on this side, and so felt equally like a beginning and an end…
> (Hamid 2017, 98)

Through its focus on a mundane and familiar spatial device, *Exit West* draws attention to the everyday violence of all other forms of bordering, particularly national borders which enforce the incarceration or exclusion of migrants, refugees and those seeking asylum. This is an understanding of place which demands resistance to architectures of spatial coercion and control that demarcate imagined lines of difference.

For feminist geographer Sophie Lewis, the door, like the border, is a technology devised to "hold, release and manage" that which it contains, acting as a threshold mechanism which controls access to both the other side and to the in-between (2019, 166). Lewis draws on science fictional works including Octavia Butler's 'Blood Child' (1984), which explores the development of new forms of multi-species kinship and reproduction, to consider how boundaries such as the skin as a bodily envelope and constructs of gender can be understood as permeable and transmutable. For Lewis, bordering technologies are designed and deployed with political, social, and environmental intent in support of a powerful fantasy of separation. In their place Lewis calls for the creation of "desired or needful openings" which are "conducive to flourishing" allowing movement across and in-between (2019, 167).

It is such conceptual or theoretical openings between sf and the spatial disciplines that this chapter seeks to celebrate; it is in the continued blurring of all forms of imaginative construction, written or built, that we can establish new ground conducive to our mutual flourishing. In his discussion of the poetry of sf, Samuel Delany uses the phrase "the door

dilated" (2011, 142) to demonstrate how the everyday of the science fictional world can be wondrous, how it can, with a simple three-word phrase, conjure into being new technological developments and scientific methods. Just as importantly, it also creates new ways of relating to one another, new thresholds of interaction and ways to move between them. Geographers Rob Kitchin and James Kneale map out how sf opens up sites from which to "contemplate material and discursive geographies and the production of geographic knowledges and imaginations" (2002, 9). As they detail, there are already recursive relationships between science fictional depictions of built environments and their manifestation (2001), but the expressions of these relationships is not limited to those within the spatial disciplines. Rather, as expressed in Pamela Zoline's 'The Heat Death of the Universe' (1967) small everyday actions are how buildings, neighbourhoods, cities, and worlds are lived and created, and each egg cracked on the kitchen floor contributes to the state of the universe. By understanding space as something that is continually enacted and performed by all of its inhabitants, we are all agents in the construction of our built futures.

> She goes to the refrigerator and takes out a carton of eggs, white eggs, extra large. She throws them one by one onto the kitchen floor which is patterned with strawberries in squares. They break beautifully.
> (Zoline 1995, 217 [1967])

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