Science Fiction Cities: How our future visions influence the cities we build
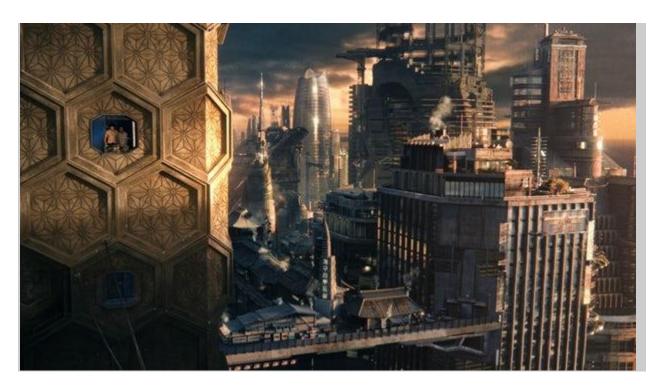

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July 28th, 2018

The future city in the film Cloud Atlas(Credit: Warner Bros)

For over a century, science fiction filmmaking has presented us with depictions of our future cities. Some have been bright, shiny and positive, while others have been dark, dirty and rough. As we look forward to a 21st century filled with massive mega-cities, and extraordinary technological innovation, we must ask how are our science fiction visions influencing the cities we build, and what can we learn from some of these prescient fictional texts?

In the beginning, there was Metropolis

The grand-daddy of all futuristic urban visions is inarguably Fritz Lang's towering work, *Metropolis*. While the film itself, both aesthetically and thematically, wasn't particularly novel at the time, its holistic vision of a future city with no middle class, where the super-rich live high above the poor workers who toil in the depths, has gone on to influence a century of cinema and architecture.

At the time the film was not at all well received, by both critics and audiences. Famed sci-fi author H.G Wells even penned an infamous critique of the film suggesting it plagiarized his 30-year-old story, *The Sleeper Awakes*.

"I have recently seen the silliest film. I do not believe it would be possible to make one sillier … It gives in one eddying concentration almost every possible foolishness, cliché, platitude, and muddlement about mechanical progress and progress in general served up with a sauce of sentimentality that is all its own," Wells wrote.

Aside from the film's starkly prescient dystopian narrative, the architectural aesthetics presented were undeniably derivative. A compelling mash-up of futurist, art-deco and gothic architectural styles. Despite these obvious antecedents, *Metropolis* has been profoundly influential due to its comprehensively realized depiction of future city life. Not only was almost all 20th century science fiction cinema inspired by it, but so were a whole host of architects, designers and planners.

Metropolis toyed with a dystopian vision of a vertical city. This idea suggests that our future mega-cities will be dominated by massive skyscrapers. Our urban footprint will not spread

outward but instead we will build taller and taller buildings that will ultimately encompass all aspects of a human society within a single tiered building.

For much of the 20th century the vertical city idea became intrinsically interlinked with dystopian science fiction visions. The rich lived at the top and the poor scrambled about on the grim streets below. This literal depiction of a class-based hierarchy has been richly portrayed in a variety of interesting science fiction texts, from J.G Ballard's *High Rise*, to more recent stories such as *Altered Carbon* and *Elysium*.

Down below with Blade Runner

The elephant in the room here of course is *Blade Runner*, probably second to *Metropolis* in a list of the most influential science fiction urban visions ever portrayed. *Blade Runner* riffed off *Metropolis*' futurist vertical city vision but extrapolated a stunning depiction of street-level urban life in the future. Grim, permanently dark and wet, this vision of future urban decay is filled with lived-in detail.

This street-level future is noisy, dirty and jam-packed with a mashed-up sense that each new technological innovation we come up with will live alongside everything that came before it. This important idea stands the film apart from more speculative future visions that design sci-fi

cities from the ground up. Instead, the world of *Blade Runner*, is a dense industrial jumble, and perhaps all the more realistic for it.

Taking us through the looking glass, one of the strangest ironies in 21st century architecture is the growing influence films such as *Blade Runner* are having on real-life constructions. The recently termed movement, gulf futurism, describes a very particular brand of architecture and urban design that is powering through the Middle East.

Dubai, the dystopian city of the future ... today

Inspired by video games and big Hollywood cinema, this new wave of big oil-led design is dominated by multi-billionaires developing stunning futuristic worlds. Dubai is a hot bed of gulf futurist architecture and Syd Mead, one of the key designers behind *Blade Runner*, even visited the city back in 2005.

Mead was quoted as saying, "The Middle East is a fantastic example of how reality is catching up with the future as the size, scope and vision of some of the region's projects clearly show. I would like to be a part of the region's horizon and help shape it for a better tomorrow."

Life imitates art, and then art imitates life. This eternal back and forth can be seen explicitly in the evolution of our cities over the last century. What is perhaps most striking right now is the tendency for some of these grand futuristic cities, such as Dubai, to be influenced so explicitly by science fiction visions profoundly entrenched in dystopian perspectives. Steve Graham, an academic with a particular focus on cities and speculative fiction, sees a somewhat unsettling trend playing out in some of these new, large-scale architectural visions.

"There's a really startling and disturbing similarity between a lot of these sci-fi vertical dystopias and the current practice in, say, the Gulf, where the elites inhabit their penthouses and fly around in helicopters and business jets while literally thousands of workers are dying every year to construct these edifices," explains Graham.

Her: A dystopia of gentrification?

Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her* posits one of the more interesting future city visions seen in recent times. The film, telling the story of a romantic relationship between a man and his computer operating system, presents a clear, bright, and spacious future Los Angeles filled with bespoke objects. The timeframe depicted is not clearly specified in the film but many have hypothesized it is most probably around the mid-to-late 2020s.

The most immediately noticeable thing about *Her's* future Los Angeles is that, despite its skyline being dominated by a sprawl of high-rise buildings, there is a conspicuous lack of cars. Apart from one particular scene set on the street showing a traditional taxi cab, this LA of the future is filled with spacious and efficient subways, high-speed trains, and expansive human-centric walkways, reminiscent of New York's famous High Line. The city here is not a CGI bonanza, but rather an artfully constructed collage of parts of current-day LA with parts of Shanghai.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Her's* future vision is what it doesn't show. The Los Angeles in the future presented here is one entirely dominated by gentrification. The world is

primarily white and upwardly mobile, with a small amount of other ethnic minorities interspersed in the background, but all are presented as denizens of this clean, crisp and spacious world.

At one point our central character, given the name Theodore Twombly, commutes to the beach, passing a massive shipyard filled with shipping containers. This is as close a look "behind the curtain" as the film is willing to go, suggesting some kind of enormous supply chain is necessary for this future city to function. But one of the most pressing unspoken questions raised by *Her's* future city is whether that supply chain is entirely automated or whether this reality is enabled by an unseen underclass.

Either way, the reality of *Her* has can be seen as a "dystopia of gentrification". The comprehensively upper-class world implies that if there were not a hidden underclass maintaining this shiny future city then we have an entirely homogenized future that has effectively eliminated all cultural and class differences. Everyone has been ensconced in a universe shaped by hipster urban designers.

Flying cars, hyperloops and the future of urban transportation

One massive takeaway from the future city presented in *Her* is that futurists and science fiction designers are still grappling with the question of how we are going to transport people around these massive megacities. K.K Barrett, the production designer on *Her*, suggested the reason that film avoided showing cars was partially pragmatic.

"We looked in a number of different cities and finally landed in Shanghai for some of the bigger exterior shots with the big buildings and the circular walkway that was elevated above the

street," says Barrett of the inspiration behind the film's human-centric design decisions. "That eliminated the need for showing traffic, which I didn't want to do because cars would have dated us into some time period, and we couldn't afford to make a hundred cars."

A great deal of 20th century science fiction promised a future where cities were infested with flying cars. From the sky highways and elevated traffic jams of *The Fifth Element* or *Back to the Future Part 2*, to the dated yet iconic "Spinners" in *Blade Runner*, it seems almost inevitable our future will be in the air. While quadcopter-styled transportation is certainly being rapidly developed, and in some cases deployed, the idea of a flying car as taught to us by science fiction is quickly becoming one of those dated ideas that will possibly never happen.

Aside from the increasingly amusing idea that cars in the future will have steering wheels and still be piloted by human beings, it is becoming increasingly clear that urban transportation in the future will most likely involve autonomous pod-like devices that in no way need to resemble our current conception of cars.

One of the many prescient futurist visions in Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* is the film's clever depiction of mass transportation in 2054. The film presents a city dominated by an expansive MAG-LEV system upon which private cabins autonomously transport citizens from place to place. One of the biggest drawbacks of this compelling idea is that it would involve such a massive reframing of current urban design models that it is ultimately a little hard to see coming to fruition. However, the autonomous pod-like nature of these vehicles offers one of the few future city depictions that, in the light of current technological innovations, seems actually predictive rather than fantastic.

Coming out two years after *Minority Report* was Alex Proyas' *I, Robot* set in a slightly earlier 2035 timeframe. The film presents one of the most realistic future transportation systems seen to date, with its depiction of autonomous cars looking to be eerily accurate. While its cars still mostly look like cars, they contain heads-up-displays and voice controlled systems, all technologies that are well on the way to mainstream adoption.

One of the biggest differences between these two films' visions of future cities comes in the way these vehicles get around their given metropolis. While *Minority Report* demands a future where entirely new, custom MAG-LEV highways are built so its vehicles can move around and over a city, *I, Robot* presents an urban center where roads are still roads but they are now mostly underground. There are still streets as we understand them today, but the further one moves into the center of the city, the more vehicles are shifted out of sight, leaving large, spacious pedestrian-centered urban spaces.

While the scale of *I, Robot's* underground highways may sit firmly in the realm of science fiction, the reality of underground mass transportation is not at all unreasonable. Elon Musk's large investments into the development of Hyperloop transportation is undeniably paving the way for some kind of accessible underground system. Perhaps the most tangible aspect of the technology is coming in Musk's major work creating the Boring Company, a startup determined to develop advanced tunneling and construction methods, initially focussing on Hyperloop tunnels and pathways for pedestrians and cyclists.

The smart city, aka the surveillance city

The biggest buzzword floating around the world today in regards to modern urban design is "smart city". The idea essentially encompasses any number of new forms of information and communications technologies in order to optimize the running, management and simple livability of a 21st century city. Some smart city innovations can be relatively innocent, such as the way Barcelona has instituted traffic lights than can synchronize with public buses and emergency vehicles. On the other hand, some are suggesting the term "smart city" could be interchangeable with "surveillance city", as many of these technological innovations inherently require large-scale data collection on everything and everyone inhabiting the space.

One of the prevailing ideas presented in *Minority Report*, and becoming more real by the day, is the vision of a future where every citizen is tracked moment to moment as they inhabit a city. This, of course, is presented as a consumer-friendly surveillance system, geared towards offering customized ads designed to cater uniquely to each individual's needs. Sound familiar? It's better than getting a barrage of ads about things that are irrelevant to you … isn't it?

Interestingly, the real-world has actually stepped past the vision of *Minority Report* in so far as Spielberg's idea of mass surveillance depended on omnipresent iris scanning. Instead, in reality, between smartphones and facial recognition, modern technologies have transcended the cutely primitive idea of iris scanning.

Mass surveillance in current-day Chinese cities is turning the country into a gigantic social experiment. There are already estimated to be over 200 million surveillance cameras installed in the country. Facial recognition systems are installed in many public areas, tracking criminal activity and citizens the state is hunting. Police officers are even being fitted out with facial recognition glasses to track crowds and identify wanted criminals.

The Songdo experiment

While most modern cities are built on top of centuries of development and culture, there are some cities around the world that are being built from the ground up. Songdo, south of Seoul in South Korea, is one of those gigantic social experiments. Built from scratch over 10 years and costing well over 40 billion dollars, this development was conceived to be the world's smartest city.

Sensors are built into everything, managing traffic flow and energy use. Every household is constructed with built-in IoT controls and garbage is managed via elaborate pneumatic tubes that send trash directly from each house to an underground waste facility. Forty percent of the urban space is reserved for green parks, and electric vehicle charging stations are everywhere.

Songdo was planned to be completed by 2015 but it is still a work in progress, half-built and reportedly struggling to convince people to move in. One report has described the city as resembling a "Chernobyl-like ghost town", while a journalist perhaps less hyperbolically called it "eerily quiet". The story of Songdo suggests no city can simply be built out of nothing. At worst it will turn into an abandoned museum, and at best it will quickly become technologically outdated.

The world as one giant mega-city

Despite many different smart cities being built from scratch around the world, it is our massive megacities that will arguably dominate the future urbanscape. These megacities, containing tens of millions of people, will mostly be located in emerging nations that are currently underdeveloped and ill-equipped for the oncoming rapid urbanization they may face.

The biggest city in the world currently is Tokyo, with around 37 million people. A recent population projection study from the University of Ontario estimated by 2075 the three largest cities on Earth will be Kinshasa in Congo, Mumbai in India and Lagos in Nigeria, all with populations numbering over 57 million.

Perhaps the most absurd vision of a megacity takes this idea to its logical conclusion. Coruscant in the *Star Wars* universe is a planet taken over by one massive single city. It is a profound vision of what has been called an ecumenopolis, the hypothetical concept of a planetoid city. Of course, the Star Wars vision of this massive city is depicted in almost utopian terms, with the word "coruscant" itself actually meaning glittering or sparkling. Coruscant's ground-level is rarely depicted in the *Star Wars* movies but when we do briefly see it we get a pretty standard *Blade Runner*-esque mess of neon and grime. Even the utopian leanings of *Star Wars* can't put a gloss on the underside of a gigantic megacity.

So where to from here?

Despite the glut of different sci-fi futurist depictions of our future, it feels almost harder than ever to predict what our world will look like in 50 years. Will we live in vertical shanty-towns immersed in utopian virtual reality worlds à la *Ready Player One*? Or will income-inequality accelerate into a divided world where the rich live in the clouds atop massive skyscrapers while the poor scramble around on the dirty slum-like streets? Will new technologies free us up from menial work, or will they contribute to creating a dystopian world where we are slaves to devices and constantly surveilled?

Join New Atlas journalist Rich Haridy in a conversation exploring cinema's stylized visions of future cities in Melbourne on Thursday the 9th August. The discussion will bring together a filmmaker, urban planner, researcher and technologist, to explore how science fiction both reflects and influences our real-world cities. This panel discussion is presented in association with the City of Melbourne and the Melbourne International Film Festival. Tickets are free but must be pre-booked.

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