Science Fiction Cities

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Episode 2: The Second

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Look again and the picture is far more interesting. Cities certainly perish on the science fiction screen and page, but they also grow, thrive, and decline in complex and intriguing ways. Hit the science fiction section at your local library or used bookstore for the pure pleasure of browsing the covers. Among the exotic planetscapes, cosmic vistas, and battling starships are cities seen from above and below, from near and afar. Cities soar in the distant view of foregrounded heroes and shelter beneath transparent domes like gigantic snow globes. Tiny humans and all manner of other creatures clog crowded street corners and thread their way among the intricate towers, tunnels, sky bridges, wiring, and plumbing of the coming metropolis. Artists bathe their visions with the patina of fantasy or the shimmer of high-tech.
We – the majority of humankind – already inhabit an urban world and share an urban future. Cities are home to a majority of our planet’s population, and they’re gaining a greater edge over the countryside with each passing year. The world crossed the 50-50 threshold between city life and rural life in 2008 according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. China passed the same milestone at the end of 2011 with an official count of 691 million city dwellers. By the end of the century, the worldwide ratio is likely to be 3 to 1 or even 4 to 1 – or 75-80 percent urban – the balance already reached in Western Europe and North America and exceeded in Australia.

Since our mundane future will be so decidedly urban, it is no surprise that the science fiction imagination has generated cities by the bucketful. Cities are background and setting for stories on and off future earth, often assumed as a natural part of coming society. They are sometimes an active part of the plot, places whose characteristics are essential to a story’s contests and conflicts. Sometimes they become actors in their own right, intervening and shaping as well as framing the action. The future, the native homeland of science fiction, will be an urban future for all foreseeable generations. It’s like a syllogism:

Science fiction is about the future.

The human future will be urban.

Therefore: Science fiction should be about urban futures.

What’s a city, by the way? With lots of small variations, historians and archeologists agree that cities are big, densely developed, and full of difference – different types people, jobs, neighborhoods, and economic activities. They are also points of exchange that influence people outside their boundaries, as anthropologist Michael Smith emphasizes. People come to cities to trade goods, services, ideas, and their own labor. More than anything else, a city is a device for making connections, so large space stations like Babylon 5 and Pell Station in C. J. Cherryh’s Downbelow Station are cities. Most of all, cities are systems for creating innovation and change, because the best way for any of us to come up with a new idea is to bring us in contact with strangers and their strange opinions.

There is some resistance to an urban orientation in science fiction. Critic Gary Wolfe argues that cities are basically antithetical to the science fiction imagination. Cities, he suggests, represent confinement, limitations on possibility, the known rather than the unknown. They are stasis rather than change, contrary to the science fiction spirit of adventure and discovery (and certainly city-as-limitation has been a regular theme since Arthur Clarke’s The City and the Stars). This position goes beyond a simple negative evaluation of city life (cities as jungles, cities as sources of eco-catastrophe) to a larger position that, in effect, cities are useful only to serve the spaceports that allow authors to launch their stories into unfamiliar territory.

I argue the contrary – that cities can also be front and center as vividly imagined worlds whose characteristics play active roles that help to structure the arc of the story, forcing and constraining the choices that the characters make. For earthly cities, for example, the Los Angeles of Octavia Butler in Parable of the Sower and the Bangkok of Paolo Baciagalupi in The Wind-Up Girl fill the bill. Their state of physical and social decay is an essential drive force for their developing plots. New Crobugon is as much a force in China Miéville’s novels as London was for Charles Dickens. Cities are sentient actors in Greg Bear’s Strength of Stones and John Shirley’s City Come A-Walkin.

As we think about SF cities, consider additional syllogisms that suggest two of the basic
and inclusive ways that SF approaches cities. One strand derives from the technological/design imagination and its ability to think up cities whose form and function depend on and express new technical possibilities. The second approach is the desire to explore the future of social and cultural systems that find their most developed and conflicted forms in cities. Together the physical and social imaginations create two big clusters of city types.

Science fiction is about the implications of new technologies.

Cities are the most complex of technological artifacts.

Therefore, science fiction is [often] about the physical and technological possibilities of city-making.

Science fiction tries to explore the future of human society.

Cities are the central organizing system for human society.

Therefore, science fiction is [often] about complex life in future cities.

The first strand reaches back to early efforts to imagine the shape of ideal cities, both fantastical schemes like Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1602) and bureaucratic prescriptions like the Laws on the Indies that the Spanish crown promulgated as a guide to laying out colonial cities. The impulse continued in the proposals of early industrial era reformers like Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, who were engrossed with schemes for social betterment through rethinking the physical structure of settlements. These were the ‘utopian socialists’ whom Friedrich Engels pointedly criticized for ignoring the primacy of the social and economic relations that determined spatial patterns.

More directly, much science fiction stretches and extends the ideas of twentieth century design utopians. Ambitious and self-confident architects and planners like Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Constantinos Doxiades, and Paolo Soleri would never have thought of themselves as offering science fictions. Nevertheless, their versions of ideal cities – to be realized in the future – tilt toward the fantastic. Many SF writers, from Robert Silverberg to J. G. Ballard, have adapted and explored the implications of Corbusier’s ‘radiant city’ and Paolo Soleri’s visionary self-contained megabuildings that he termed arcologies.

In the second strand, SF draws on urban studies and social science. Nineteenth century fears of cities as cauldrons of social disorder and political chaos fueled the urban dystopias that appear again and again in imagined futures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The loosely grouped set of cyberpunk writers from the 1980s and 1990s reflected critical urban theory around cities as communication systems and the effects of economic globalization. Samuel R. Delany has acknowledged that the Unlicensed Sector in *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) is ‘a Jane Jacobs kind of thing’ while drawing the subtitle from the work of Michel Foucault.

I’m a historian and urban studies specialist who has been exploring science fiction scholarship for the past decade. After finishing one book on frontier narratives in U.S. science fiction, I’m now engaged on a mirror image project about the different types of city that keep reappearing in speculative fiction – deserted cities, feral suburbs, city as machine, city as bazaar. We keep telling variations on a number of received narratives (or parabolas, to apply Brian Attebery’s term) like the ‘escape to freedom from the confining city’ story or the ‘ultimate highrise’ story. If anyone would like to share their favorite SF city or city type, I’d be glad to hear from you.

**Works Cited**

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**Bio:** Carl Abbott has taught history, urban studies and planning at Portland State University (Oregon) in five decades (not fifty years!). In addition to several books about history and planning in North American cities, he is the author of *Frontiers Past and Future: Science Fiction and the American West* as well as several articles on science fiction in urban history and planning journals and in *Science Fiction Studies*.

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