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## ***FUTURE CITIES: ARCHITECTURE AND THE IMAGINATION (2019) BY PAUL DOBRASZCZYK***

Review by Thomas Kelly

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**Dobraszczyk, Paul. *Future Cities: Architecture and the Imagination*. Reaktion Books, 2019. 272 pp.**

In October 2016, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development held in Quito, Ecuador announced the implementation of the New Urban Agenda (NUA). This agreement established a global standard of guidelines on the principles, policies, and procedures for sustainable urban development over the next twenty years. It acknowledged, as centres of social, cultural, and economic activities, cities will continue to evolve as the most opportunistic spaces for human habitation on the planet. Rather than fighting against this, it recommended urbanisation be accepted as a method of resistance to climate change, through the adoption of adaptation design strategies that merge ecological initiatives with social improvement to create sustainable and inclusive cities for all.

In his fascinating, awe-inspiring, and at times somewhat controversial book, *Future Cities: Architecture and the Imagination* (2019), Paul Dobraszczyk, a professional writer, university lecturer, and research fellow at the Bartlett School of Architecture, explores the extraordinary possibility that plans for sustainable urban development and sociological change might exist in the narratives of speculative fiction. From submerged metropolises to soaring airships, underground bunkers to sky-high skyscrapers, post-apocalyptic landscapes to shanty-town settlements, Dobraszczyk constructs a persuasive argument about the usefulness of imaginary cities as experimental spaces for addressing the countless issues of equity, liveability, and sustainability to cities currently under construction. Dobraszczyk transports the reader on a breath-taking journey into the visionary architecture of Science Fiction and their various counterparts in contemporary reality. Moving from the beginning of the nineteenth century up to the early twenty-first century, the book critically examines every type of urban fictionality, interpreting them not as meaningless fantasy, but as a conceivable reality. Through this, Dobraszczyk succeeds in “grounding these imaginary cities in architectural practice” and expands our understanding about the role imagination plays in “how cities are perceived and experienced” (10). Drawing upon a diverse range of cultural and aesthetic materials: novels, films, drawings, photographs, sketches, paintings, cartography, digital artistry, and computer games, Dobraszczyk reconnects the fictional city with the real, showing how Science Fiction can be used to envision alternative possibilities for future cities beyond the empirical restrictions that typically govern the architectural and urban planning professions.

The result is a philosophical and culturally wide-ranging study into “representations of future cities” organised into “three thematic areas”: “unmoored” (submerged, floating, and flying), vertical (skyscrapers and subterranean), and ruins (salvaged and decaying) (18). Each of these sub-categories of fantastical cities is placed in the context of issues being discussed currently in architecture and urban planning in the real world. Dobraszczyk argues the alternative nature of these cities allows them to propose creative solutions to problems such as energy transition, water shortage, deforestation, waste management, air pollution, social division, gentrification, overpopulation, and others. The NUA has identified many of these as barriers to a long-term, people-centred vision of sustainable urban development that enhances both the liveability and quality of life in cities. For Dobraszczyk, it is almost ironic that the answers to these same issues can be found in the architecture of the imagination; a space often dismissed for its hyperbolic character yet an essential step for the visualisation of future cities.

This is what *Future Cities* is most successful at doing – acting as a compendium of imaginative architectures that can be useful for envisioning social and environmental transformations in urban futures. Where his argument becomes less convincing is in his political provocations for the human imagination to become a neo-Marxist weapon for fighting “the sterile alienating architecture of neoliberalism,” and its dominance over the spaces, places, and cities we currently inhabit (64). He builds upon the geographer Stephen Graham’s assertion that “real and imagined sci-fi cities [...] offer powerful opportunities for progressively challenging contemporary urban transformation” because they exemplify “the value of multiplicity rather than the homogeneity of urbanism under global capitalism” (395). Taking this as gospel, he makes broad claims about the adoption of a shared consciousness amongst disenfranchised communities recognising that their “vulnerability and connectedness” can inspire built environments that emphasise the forging of diverse and multiplistic relationships between people in an increasingly disordered world (67). This activism would lead to the complete dissolution of architecture and urban planning as regulatory systems, opening up the stage “to allow the users [...] to define (exactly) what a building should become” (214). This anti-capitalist philosophy is hardly new and perhaps overestimates the potential of these future cities for solving the biggest challenges facing contemporary global cities. Although Dobraszczyk poses valid questions on the intentions of those in charge of designing and creating cities, it is incredibly naïve of him to expect a revolutionary movement to originate from the works of speculative design fiction. This kind of grand utopian vision of community activism and widespread redevelopment Dobraszczyk proposes would lead to unregulated urban growth, deepen exclusionary divisions, and undo the environmental regulations and controls that have taken generations to put into effect. It would be a far more sensible suggestion to utilise the possibilities of the imagination to reform the relationship between architects and citizens that has been damaged in recent years encouraging them to work together to develop more socially progressive and climate-resilient cities.

In the first three chapters, entitled “Unmoored Cities,” Dobraszczyk does go some way to accomplishing this task by closely examining aquatic and aerial forms of urbanisation. He echoes the NUA with his criticism of environmental policies being “focused on mitigation rather than adaptation,” and that if cities are to remain suitable for human habitation, there needs to be a greater movement towards “long-term strategic planning, or reshaping urban governance and

socio-political life" that embraces complementary approaches to the unavoidable impact of climate change (23). Dobraszczyk proposes that imaginative visions can offer novel adaptive measures that can alter our decision-making strategies for preparing, surviving, and rebuilding cities in the event of environmental catastrophe. To illustrate this point, he compares different examples of climate-change adaptations from literary authors, visual artists, and architects. Dobraszczyk mentions Kim Stanley Robinson's post-apocalyptic novel *New York 2140* (2017), which depicts a half-submerged New York that has adapted to its flooded surroundings through the creation of island skyscrapers, interconnected with sky bridges and a thriving maritime infrastructure; and the Argentine artist and architect, Tomas Saraceno's prototype for floating spherical habitats in his marshmallow-like geodesic dome *Observatory/Air-Port City* (2008). In vastly different ways, these works all challenge the restrictive conventions that govern architectural practice, by presenting scenarios in which "architects might respond to buildings becoming partially or completely submerged" (40). This is the most effectively argued part of the book, encouraging the reader to abandon their scepticism and seriously consider these unconventional architectures as viable models for human habitation in a post-climate change future.

Dobraszczyk asserts that for adaptative solutions like this to become a universal practice in urbanisation there must be broader recognition of climate change as an inevitable moment in the history of humankind. This is a common westernised perspective amongst climate strategists that overlooks the ways environmental changes will impact non or semi-urban settlements particularly in less developed nations countries that tend to have lower urban population levels. For this to happen, we must completely abandon our survivalist perspective and develop architectures that enter into a state of "dynamic co-existence" with the transformed urban environments of the future (46). He quotes biomorphic materials like Newton Falls' *Autopia Ampere* (1970), an oceanic spiral-like metropolis grown from the calcium carbonate of its coral bedrock through electrodeposition; and, Lebbeus Wood's scheme for a floating city above Paris, that utilises the 'ceaseless motion and flux' of air currents to maintain its structural integrity. These spectacular projects break down the barriers between "natural and artificial" creating "fluid," "organic," and "hybrid" building materials that challenge the land-locked nature of human ecosystems (64). This is a remarkable perspective that imagines a post-climate change humanity thriving alongside nature through unprecedented engineering feats of integration and connectivity. However, it is incredibly naïve and optimistic of Dobraszczyk to expect the architectural community to be able adopt this process of material and structural symbiosis on a city-wide scale. The profession itself is founded on the manipulation of the natural world via a strong, physical barrier; a value system that would need to be radically overhauled before this state of total harmony and integration could be sustainably enacted. What is far more likely is that climate-tackling adaptations rather than as instruments of biological interconnectivity will only further highlight the widening inequalities and disparities between urban communities by becoming high-tech, ultra-privileged communes for global elites.

In the middle two chapters, "Vertical Cities," Dobraszczyk confirms this in his critical reflection on the development of multi-levelled cities, both above and below ground, which have exacerbated social polarisation and environmental degradation in urban communities. Vertical landscapes, he laments, are the tools of "globalized flows of capital," that have partitioning

society into super-tall skyscrapers, hermetical sealed spaces for “a tiny super-wealthy elite,” and subterranean realms for the incarceration of “the urban poor” (107). Buildings like the Dubai’s Burj Khalifa (2010) and London’s Shard (2009) serve as iconic symbols to the narcissistic character of architecture that prioritises wealth accumulation over social and environmental preservation. The few examples of green skyscrapers, he critiques, such as Ken Yeang’s Roof-Roof House (1984) and Stefano Boeri’s Vertical Forest (2014), are “smokescreens” for “greenwashing” the urban skyline by incorporating natural features as design embellishments rather than programmatic solutions to address the destructive cost of skyscraper forms (129). By focusing on the neoliberalisation of skyscraper geographies, Dobraszczyk outlines a pessimistic future of tall buildings as an ever-expanding system of “vertical stacking that tends to isolate inhabitants” inside socially segregated and environmentally destructive cities (139).

Dobraszczyk reserves his discussion of the anti-establishment possibilities of multi-layered territories for the urban subterranean. Domes, bunkers, and other underground and enclosed geographies are praised as populist communities and alternative modes of habitation for the marginalised, “homeless people seeking shelter, soldiers forced to inhabit bunkers, graffiti writers and urban explorers, street children hounded into sewers” (166). Underground spaces, he argues, are replete with “an air of impregnability and security,” whose sense of isolation and containment from the outside world, makes them well suited as countercultural settlements (141). Dobraszczyk cites the emergence of experimental utopias like Drop City, a collection of geodesic domes built in southern Colorado in 1965 modelled on those developed by Buckminster Fuller which housed a rural ‘hippie commune’ devoted to “ecological awareness and cosmic connectivity” (141). Underground bunkers and cities are often presented as the staging ground for revolution and subversion against the oppressive socioeconomic processes of the surface. In Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), the hidden worker communes beneath the city rebel against the wealthy superelites in the skyscraper utopia above; or, as sanctuaries against an environmental catastrophe like the infamous ‘depthscrapers’; an inverted skyscraper design first detailed in *Everyday Science and Mechanics*, 1931. Dobraszczyk argues imaginary representations of bunker and domed cities are not designed to restrict or contain but to foster deeper interconnections between “what is inside and what is outside” and, “what is above and what is below,” forming an enhanced vertical perspective into the otherwise rigidly stratified and isolated territories of modern urban life (166).

In the final section, ‘Unmade Cities,’ Dobraszczyk critically surveys examples of degenerative architecture and ruined urbanisation. He interprets them as part of an avant-garde crusade for an egalitarian system of architecture in which people are given the freedom and independence to create buildings entirely on their terms. Rather than a city-scaled architecture, built according to a top-down hierarchical planning model, Dobraszczyk envisions a movement of grassroots architecture, in which individuals adopt a user-built and designed – “in the hands of the many” – approach to the imagination of urban spaces (222). This places unequivocal confidence in the proletariat for destroying capitalism and its monopoly over private property and public space. He predicts that these “nomadic” and “free-spirited” environments would liberate people from the restrictive chokehold of “architectural modernism” and chart an alternative vernacular for designing cities that more accurately reflects the identities and experiences of its citizens (200).

Dobraszczyk's libertarianism takes on a racial dimension through his bizarre fascination for 'informal settlements' such as slum dwellings, squats, refugee camps, and other forms of poverty-stricken, dispossessed, and ramshackle peri-urban developments. He argues that these "unconventional structures" represent a subversive practice of "architectural salvage" – one whose anarchic location at the edges or liminal spaces of urban conurbations subverts the "top-down elitist conception of architecture" that demands people operate within the restrictive boundaries of building codes and planning regulations to construct their own homes (196). Shanty-town communities like Dharavi, one of Asia's largest slums located in central Mumbai, and Torre David in Caracas, a fifty-two storey skyscraper home to 3000 squatters are praised for the "inventiveness, adaptability, and resourcefulness" for their integration of equitable materials like ruins, rubbish, and wastes as a form of liveable design (214). Such a gross mischaracterisation of urban poverty as urban development places aesthetic appreciation above the social divisions and economic inequality of the unfortunate people who reside in the settlements. This fetishisation of slum-dwellings is a common argument in urban studies that interprets its unorthodox architecture as a prospective source of experimentation and innovation in urban culture and form. It is ivory-tower attitudes of acceptance like this that potentially risk normalising the presence of slum-housing in urban centres and create unnecessary distractions from the need to develop genuine solutions that protect and improve the lives of slum-dwellers.

Regardless of his questionable attitude to community planning and architectural innovation, Dobraszczyk reveals there are many lessons to be learned from the imagination that could be useful in solving the biggest threats identified by the NUA. Whether this be as inspiration for adaptive design solutions, warnings against anti-progressive spaces, or as motivation for community-driven forms of urbanisation, imaginative architectures are shown to be useful instruments for challenging the ways we plan, visualise, and construct the cities we currently occupy. If Dobraszczyk had focused on the strategic possibilities of world-building rather than acting like an anti-capitalist manifesto, the book would have conveyed its message on the creative power of the imagination in a much less controversial fashion.

## WORKS CITED

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## BIONOTE

**Thomas Kelly** is a PhD student in the English department at King's College London, UK. His thesis examines the sociopolitical and ideological objectives of vertical modernism from the perspective of future cities and architectural fantasies. Other research interests include Science Fiction and urban planning, the construction and perception of skyscraper geographies, and explorations of the relationship between real and imaginary architectures.