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Speculative urbanism and concrete fictions: The future as a resource

ABSTRACT

Urban practice has become increasingly speculative about the future. If there is a world where utopias are literally a commodity, bought and sold as little pieces of dreams, it is here. Full of futuristic and visionary images about the way the world and its buildings should look, buildings, neighbourhoods and entire regions seem afloat in space, free from the constraints of the lived world. They do seem to have a clear source, however, derived largely from fictional scenarios of the future of humanity. While apocalypse, paradise, utopia and dystopia are the moral anchors for several speculative fables, the city is evoked as double-edged – at once the pinnacle and tipping point of human choices. This article demonstrates how speculative fiction limits the idea of the urban future and with it restricts choices we make in the present. If fiction is another mode of activist expression, it is being sculpted and shaped in concrete and glass as well.

KEYWORDS

architecture
planning
future
cities
urban
sci-fi
speculation

INTRODUCTION

Both fiction and fact are rooted in an epistemology that appeals to experience. However, there is an important difference; the word fiction is an active form, referring to a present act of fashioning, while fact is a descendant of a past participle, a word form which masks the generative

> deed or performance. A fact seems done, unchangeable, fit only to be recorded; fiction seems always inventive, open to other possibilities, other fashionings.
>
> (Haraway 1989: 4)

Fiction is both a tool of urban engagement and integral to what such engagement means. It would be impossible to work in the realm of urban practice without the creative freedom and imaginative inventiveness embodied within fiction. One of our earliest moves when working in Dharavi, the so-called 'notorious slum' of Mumbai, was to create a fictive image. We photoshopped a street from Dharavi, with one from Tokyo, and created a holistic and entirely imagined habitat. By linking the streets of a futuristic and technologically advanced city with what is commonly perceived as a dystopian urban story, we tried to complicate the slum narrative in both directions. Dharavi thus could not be reduced to the idea of a slum and in fact shared features and typology with landscapes far removed from the idea of a shanty town. At the same time, we rediscovered the urban story of Tokyo through its own very complex self-definition of being a technologically advanced, but typologically anachronistic, landscape. These became the basis of our arguments about incremental development and our attempts at revitalizing related urban planning practices.

Our fiction about Dharavi in Mumbai and Shimokitazawa[1] in Tokyo became the touchstone for an exercise that formed the basis of the 'Mashup Workshop' in which many similar images were created – connecting streets of Dharavi to several others from European and Latin American contexts. The 'mashup' exercise is an extension of our world-view that activism, engagement and practice owe as much to fiction as they do to anything else – that speculation, fantasy and contexts are all part of very real, inhabited and definite worlds. It emphasizes that it is possible to act afresh by visualizing our worlds afresh. This point cannot be overstated, especially because in this article we critically interrogate one form of projecting into the future by pointing out how little bandwidth we dedicate to the concept of the urban, thereby restricting our choices drastically. We critique not just in the capacity of being practitioners – by pointing out how problematic some fantasies can be – but by being firmly dedicated to the act of speculation and projection in our practice as well. We endorse Haraways' observation wholeheartedly that it is precisely fiction that opens up the way of more effective action.

Our mashup images were counterpoints to those being circulated by urban developers, who produced their own inventions – utopias of an imagined and anticipated urban future that promised middle-class securities and dreams. Those sprung from anxieties about the present, which were exclusively portrayed as dark, depressing spaces, lacking basic amenities in which social life was racked by violence and impending apocalypse.

This is a composite image of Paraisopolis in Sao Paulo, a favela that sits within the folds of the city and borders this condo and other similar habitats. Images such as this, of the favela juxtaposed against a shiny high-rise building, have become ubiquitous in power-point presentations and newspaper articles on urbanization.

The problem with them is that they reduce discussions on urbanization to binary oppositions – for example, of the high-rise and the slum. The former represents the ultimate aspiration attributed to urban citizens and the latter represents its darkest manifestation when unfulfilled. Several contemporary narratives, especially those in films (which we discuss later in this article), use

1. Shimokitazawa, a neighbourhood in Tokyo, is known for its narrow streets, low-rise and high-density typology that has come to define its special character. Its residents resisted a development plan floated in 2004 by the local authorities. URBZ team members organized an 'Urban Typhoon' workshop in the neighbourhood as part of public debates around its development during that time. Dharavi, in Mumbai, is the poster settlement of Mumabi's slum districts where URBZ set up an office in 2008. That was also the year we held an 'Urban Typhoon' workshop responding to several proposals and master plans being floated to redevelop Dharavi. 'Urban Typhoon' workshops are organized by URBZ on invitation by local residents and groups interested in participating in urban planning projects, especially when they are not officially part of the discussions, but are directly affected by the proposals.

Figure 1: Collage of Mumbai–Tokyo by Matias Echanove.

Figure 2: Collage of Mumbai–Tokyo by Matias Echanove.

the physical reality of slums as a spectacular stage for all types of narratives ranging from classical gangster scenarios to political sci-fi.

The rhetorical response to such 'realistic' imagery, using the emotional twang of inequality to ultimately make way for hasty urban practices, has caused more harm than good. For example, neighbourhoods that may only need some basic upgradations, some small practical solutions, come to be perceived as dystopian and degraded, needing a total makeover. We were involved in civic discussions in both Shimokitazawa in Tokyo (2004) and Dharavi in Mumbai (2008), where issues of physical and social safety, congestion and density were evoked to a high pitch by the authorities and others keen on wholesale redevelopment. When confronted with practical and cheap solutions to many of these problems they were dismissed as being impractical or not up to contemporary standards. However, as was evident to most local residents, in the case of Shimokitazawa a contract for a road construction project and in the case of Dharavi the real estate value of the space in the heated land market of the city emerged as the real reasons for the ambitious planned makeovers of these neighbourhoods. Such moves are part of a common urban story with cities as varied as New York and Manila having their own pet fables of a similar nature – essentially linked to speculative takeovers, a theme we have explored elsewhere (Echanove and Srivastava 2011).

Production practices of cities and built-forms are often invisible since they present themselves as the context within which the game of equity can be played. In reality, they produce the context. Speculators, financers, government authorities, construction companies, architects and planners initiate projects that are infused by the most cherished values of the day. Sustainability and equity are the current catchwords. In countries like India, the value of equity has special currency. Any new venture is presented as a site of hope, dreams and visions and the people who are involved in its construction are seen to be repositories of those values – at least at the level of intent. A slum-free city – and thus a more equitable city – is every urban planner's dream in India.

Figure 3: A highly circulated image used by Ricky Burdett for the Urban Age project and Pedro Gadhano for MoMA's Uneven Growth *book cover.*[2] *Image source: http://www.theplanningboardroom.net/living-in-the-endless-city-new-report-reveals-the-dynamics-of-the-21st-century-city/. Accessed 11 August 2015.*

2. The Urban Age Programme is a global forum engaged in urban planning discussions and urban policy-making all over the world. Ricky Burdett is the Director of the Urban Age Programme. Pedro Gadahno curated the exhibit - 'Uneven Growth, Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Mega Cities' – in which URBZ participated. This was as part of his tenure at MoMA, where the exhibition opened in October 2014. The image is taken by Ricky Burdett and was used as the cover of the exhibition catalogue.

However, what happens in the process of implementing this vision is more complicated. This is true of all levels: in the form of raising funds (credit-based financial arrangements linked to speculation) or in the actual construction (cutting costs by using cheap and abundant labour) or by ignoring existing social realities (that most Indian middle-class and elite residents need an army of service providers who somehow never find cheap affordable housing in these newly created spaces). These processes actually produce more inequity at all levels – financially (more credit inequality), in terms of geographical takeovers (no place for slum dwellers who are often the construction workers on those projects) or social marginalization (promoting a cheap, service-based low-wage economy, where the service providers have to exist but remain invisible). Thus, every new urban project comes built-in with mechanisms in place that create a spatial logic and a way of life that is the opposite of what is stated or intended. This contradiction is at the heart of urban planning practices throughout the world as everyone has to deal with the issues of finance, labour and scarce land in some way or the other.

Therefore, what emerge are urban contexts that somehow do not fit into the official story of the planned project. The settlement outside the planned space where service providers live starts off as temporary sites. That is where the construction labourers move to and continue their lives, providing new services to the growing city. Eventually of course the neighbourhood, more often than not referred to as an unwanted and unfortunate slum that just 'happens' to be there, becomes part of some future project needing a total makeover. It is for this reason that we need to interrogate the word slum very carefully. The word hides a huge variety of habitats within – from villages, to enterprising collective factories, to artisanal workshops – all of which have somehow become increasingly anachronistic because they do not fit into an idealized urban space as we understand and define it today.

Our work involves opening up the idea of what it means to be urban and use this as a starting point to address what are perceived as major urban problems of the day – unplanned sprawl of shanties, overcrowding, lack of affordable housing and poor civic infrastructure. The dominant mode of reacting to these problems is by making over what are considered problematic neighbourhoods (quickly declared as slums) into more appropriate urban habitats that fit into the accepted image of the urban norm.

Our research and practice over the years has questioned the validity of such moves (Echanove and Srivastava 2011), especially when they over-ride several other more reliable approaches, in particular those that validate incremental urban development practices that build on existing energies within a neighbourhood, harness the capacity of residents to increase their incomes over a generation in the same place, and over a period of time enhance the physical quality of their homes and streets. Such practices emerged mostly in the 1960s in Latin America and managed to become part of development strategies all over the world, but were abandoned to make room for direct urban development projects mostly in the form of mass construction of cheap housing blocks. While a number of reasons are cited for this change of course,[3] our hypothesis is that the direct development mode was buttressed and fortified by the belief that they represented moves towards an acceptably appropriate urban future. Their visions of mass housing projects, absorbing large populations into gigantic metropolises, fit into the notion that urban futures are inevitably about such moves.

3. See Bredenoord Jan, Paul van Lindert and Peer Smets edited volume *Affordable Housing in the Urban Global South*, for a detailed discussion on this theme (2014).

Incremental urban development on the other hand produced patterns and landscapes that were more varied and complex – of improved favelas, of better-equipped but still village-like urban habitats, unpredictable transformation of rural landscapes, none of which would pass the gateway of the grand imagined urban future for humanity at large: a future that is typically characterized by monumental skyscrapers in a hyper-urbanized world, complete with high-tech transport and Wi-Fi communication systems.

Of course, behind such circulation of images there is always a political economic system at work. Much of our critiques are made on grounds of the economic benefits that direct urban development, led by real estate players who generate urban forms that mostly suit their own needs to create high exchange value. They do this at a huge cost – of use value to nothing. In spite of pouring investment in land development, the proliferation of slums has not been curtailed, nor has higher density been achieved. The city of Mumbai lost 7 per cent of its population in the years when more skyscrapers rose than before (Echanove and Srivastava 2011). In fact, even with massive capital investment, a contemporary global city like Shenzen in China still has to contend with the fact that half of its population lives in officially designated urban villages that are not foregrounded in the 'drawing room' futuristic areas of Shenzen (Hao 2012). Our argument has been that the default urban setting in India and in the world at large still remains what we refer to as 'homegrown', in which residents or user efforts dominate, especially outside the frame of state- or private-player-led efforts. But these are quickly undervalued because they appear anachronistic to the acceptable notions of what urban futures should be. Greater efforts need to be made that open up our notions of the urban future so that more inclusive, diverse and practical choices about the present can be made. This article is a move in that direction, by attempting to interrogate the accepted but rather limited notions that circulate today and explore more productive ways of imagining urban landscapes.

USEFUL FICTIONS

The apocalyptic slum and the glitzy cloud-kissing city are both powerful but useful inventions of the collective imagination that need interrogation. They are commonly found in art, literature and design practices, but are in particularly high concentration in science fiction films. In fact, sci-fi films overlap substantially with the imaginative arc of the architectural studio; even similar special effects and software are used to communicate projects and ideas in both spaces (Burke and Tierney 2007).

In movie lore, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) is the fountainhead of subsequent futuristic urban imagery in cinema. The director is known to have been inspired by his first glimpse of New York that bloomed into his gigantic futuristic, art-deco cinematic city in which a twisted class war and biblical themes came together to carry forward a strange tale of control, love and human choices (Minden and Bachman 2002). The authors point out that the imagery in the film – tall skyscrapers, looming giant urban landscapes, machines merged with built forms – is said to be inspired by the futurist Italian architect Antonio Sant'Elia, but the film's own design influenced the art-deco movement substantially in Europe and America as well. This interplay of early twentieth-century architectural movements and cinematic representations produced a set of images that became hugely influential, continuing to be the

template on which notions of urban futures kept echoing through the twentieth century. Widespread notions of the city remain anchored to similar or related visions.

The city, thus, very much remains entrenched as the alter ego of the rural: a very twentieth-century and industrial idea (Leeds 1994). If we detach such a notion of the city as we have imagined it in the twentieth century (thanks in no small measure to movies like this one) and actually take a hard look at the way urban forms actually proliferated in the contemporary world, we see a gap that needs to be filled in more creatively than simply by a temporal logic of urban development where everybody would eventually catch up.

The actual processes through which cities relate to density and space, how they create habitats, their relationship to what they call home in different parts of the world, the surprising ways in which they use transport and mobile systems rarely become the starting points of imaginative reconstructions that circulate in the media and, subsequently, in our minds. Research emerges year after year from India, Europe, China or Africa, which reveals complex patterns of urbanization, unexpected directions that people take in shaping and using habitats that certainly does not point towards the vertical, speedy, hyper-dense spaces that presently haunt our stories and minds (Brenner 2004; Kaufmann 2014; Echanove and Srivastava 2014). Such research reveals that villages are becoming a part of urban living, populated forests, and high-technology rural habitats are as much a conjoined living reality as mobile phones and the Internet, and populations are circulating and moving in unexpected directions, including towards the rural. Thus, the urban landscape of the future may be much more varied than we imagine. The reason why it takes much longer for these observations to become the knowledge stock and springboard for imaginative constructions is because they challenge very deep taken-for-granted notions about the future.

REPRODUCING THE FUTURE

In the following section, we refer to the work of the renowned architect Zaha Hadid. Our focus is not on its merits in architectural terms as much as its location in the discourse that falls within the purview of this article: of public discussion and the social imagination that surrounds it.

Travel writer Nicola McCormack, who showcases twelve architectural statements about the future on the travel site Concierge.com (2009), makes frequent references to sci-fi, alien space crafts, space age and other such words that suggest the future is really something that architects evoke in terms very familiar to the world of sci-fi films. This is what she has to say about one of Zaha Hadid's creation at its conception:

> [Once Hadid] has finished with it, the Chaoyangmen neighbourhood of Beijing will look like an alien spacecraft. Her latest project, Galaxy SOHO, due for completion in 2012, is an undulating series of buildings and bridges, plus a garden and atrium, that flow into one another to create a retail and office development covering nearly 3.5 million square feet. The structure, in northeast Beijing, will contrast sharply with its staid surroundings, including the nearby Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Space-age buildings don't come cheap, but if the cutting-edge stadiums built for the Olympics are any indication, tourists will be arriving by the

> busload to get a snapshot of Hadid's mother ship. Oh, and just in case you didn't notice, Galaxy SOHO is based on Old Beijing's traditional courtyards – no, we can't see it either.

This is what Zaha Hadid herself had to say about the building, when it was completed:

> The design responds to the varied contextual relationships and dynamic conditions of Beijing. We have created a variety of public spaces that directly engage with the city, reinterpreting the traditional urban fabric and contemporary living patterns into a seamless urban landscape inspired by nature.
>
> (Lee 2013)

The image below on the left is one that accompanied McMormack's piece and was probably the design sent to the client while the right is from the gallery of images from Hadid's website.

From Figures 4 to 5 is a shift in perspective that marks the journey from how the media frames the work in the idiom of sci-fi imagery, to a more identifiable, standard commercial reality. Hadid's descriptions sound distinctly ordinary, notwithstanding her attempts at framing a regular concrete and glass monument in terms of nature and the environment. Then we have Figure 3 featuring the structure against the traditional urban fabric of the city that is theoretically evoked by the architect (reinterpreting the traditional urban fabric) when it was proposed. It reveals yet another disjuncture in which the structure is located: the lived reality of the existing city.

These three images reveal the loop in time, which entraps the building all through its journey. For the building to have been created at all, Figure 4 – with its clear pitch onto the speculated upon future – had to exist in precisely

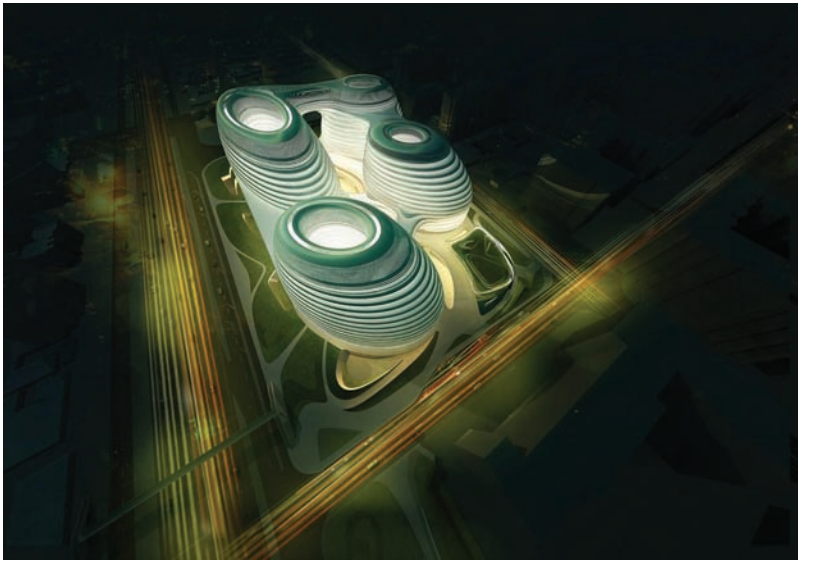

Figure 4: Galaxy Soho proposed, http://news.everychina.com/wz40d5be/concierge_cities_of_the_future.html. Accessed 12 August 2015. Photo Credit: Iwan Baan.

that form. It had to erase the surrounding context to present itself as relevant mainly to the future. The subliminal message seems to have been that it *was* the future. Sooner or later the surrounding urban fabric would decay and fade away, becoming as irrelevant as its symbolic evocation in the design proposal. As McComarck points out, there was no real trace of the existing fabric in the design itself to start with.

Substantial capital is raised for similar creations that claim to be relevant to a context shaped by the idea of the future. It is this powerful collapse of intent and action that produces landscapes that seem to exist somewhere in between a special-effects studio and a real-lived space. The palm-frond islands of Dubai, the cloud-kissing skyscrapers of Seoul, internally connected by technologically savvy mobility systems, have much in common with the urban imaginaries showcased in old Hollywood blockbusters like *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), *The Fifth Element* (Besson, 1997) as well as more recent ones that showcase a city of the future, like *Total Recall* (Verhoeven, 2012). Together they produce powerful mythologies, which makes speculating on that future a part of an economy as well. It must be said at this juncture though that we are not arguing for a less speculative and imaginative future, but simply one that is not repressive of other viable possibilities, which are probably less expensive, more inclusive and also environmentally friendly; our grouse is with the limited vision of the future that is imposed upon us.

Anthropologist Marliyn Strathern (2005) suggests that the future is a version of oneself, idealized and improved upon by a preferred set of values. Like kinship relations, imageries of the future multiply yet remain firmly limited by all that goes into their actual production. In her work on new reproductive technologies, she elaborates on how the future is speculated upon, interfered with, improved upon, but ultimately limited by who we are and what we do in the present. And since there is some element of reality that always eludes – since scientific knowledge is constantly evolving – the element of surprise and the unpredictable has to be constantly factored in, there are, almost reliably so, unexpected consequences.

Specific aspects of technological change, especially because they are so impactful, become the raw material for speculating on the future. In the process, creative thought, imaginative constructions and reconstructions from a wide variety of sources – artistic, literary, mathematical and scientific – contribute towards the actual inception of new ideas. When Arthur C. Clarke spoke about how the Internet would become a reality in 1964, he based his predictions on the latest scientific developments of the day, buttressed by his imagination. And so his constructions, which seem so self-evident today, came with powerful convictions about the capacity of technology to face challenges of all kinds (Crow 2014). In this case, the biggest barrier to communication was conceived as physical distance. As technology started to break these firewalls, narratives that mythologized the breakdown of physical distance started to shape the future of communication.

However, an anthropological reading of communication technology suggests that the Internet impacted the realm of social relations in more unexpected ways. It managed to shake another major barrier to communication – humanly created social hierarchies. After all, the biggest barriers to communication are not necessarily physical, but social distance as well, especially when skewed in terms of power and status. What the Internet and other technologies of communication also did – along with making instant connection a reality – was to change the way humans relate to each other in their

own homes, backyards and neighbourhoods. And if social distances did not change, no amount of improvements in technology would manage to break down those barriers.

Commercial uses of communication technology play well with such an awareness and make 'friendship' itself a merchandise of its workings. Therefore, even as Orwellian predictions about the darker side of these technologies continue to provide us with critical fodder, the Facebooking and social networking of the web provide ways in which everyone relates to each other – at least in the so-called virtual realm – as equals, as if there were no socially constructed barriers. When the future is envisaged from this vantage point, communications embedded in social relations become the starting point of understanding distance and proximity – in which space itself becomes a complicating factor.

Visually, Figure 6 above exposes the distinct urban spaces that the other two images erase. These spaces are physically in the same realm, but in all likelihood belong to socially and economically different universes. This is what explains the three distinct images of the same Hadid building in three different representational contexts. First we have the purely speculative design assuring the client that this really belongs to the future. The future itself is understood to be something derived from the agreed upon mythologies of all who exist in the present.

Our images of the future are derivative from science fiction, but science fiction is also derived from other speculative sciences. In this context, technologies about transport, communication, theories about consumption, visions about spatial challenges in the future, all of these feed our notion of what the future may be for us. However, there are certain practices that finally crystallize these assumptions into a definite object, an artefact. Unlike the realm of fiction and the imagination, such a crystallization of the future into our material world enters our space riding on a political economy, which has its own ramifications as an object that has stepped outside a speculative space of one kind (the creative) into a speculative space of another kind (a political economy that hinges on the future in financial and imaginative terms).

If the final version of the building (Figure 4) in this case approximates an alien spacecraft in the public imagination, there is a reason it does so: it conveys a very strong and viable idea. The second image (Figure 5) shows it to be what it is: a standard commercial complex responding to the needs of a rich client. The third image (Figure 6) reveals the juxtaposition of differing contexts that make up the space in which it actually exists. In the photograph it looks as though the future has imposed itself on the present, which may well have been the intention to start with.

Citizens' groups in Beijing have criticized the building and it has subsequently become controversial.[4] The main grounds of critique are that it is decontextualized from the surroundings and does not pay heed to the larger urban fabric in which it is embedded. It could well be that the context is not one that exists but which will emerge in the coming decades. It could well be that the particular building will help to re-evaluate the urban fabric around it and stimulate and instigate changes there that new buildings will emulate.

Our arguments are not in any way meant to critique the design and architectural dimension of such works within their respective traditions of practice, but to simply engage with them at the point they intersect with ours – as practitioners involved with dealing with urban contexts in the present as well as the future.

4. http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2013/aug/02/zaha-hadid-destroying-beijing-heritage.

Figure 5: Galaxy Soho, http://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/galaxy-soho/. Accessed 12 August 2015. Photo Credit: Iwan Baan.

Figure 6: http://www.dezeen.com/2012/11/15/galaxy-soho-by-zaha-hadid-architects-photographed-by-hufton-crow/. Accessed 12 August 2015. Photo Credit: Hufton and Crow.

FUTURE AS RESOURCE

Choices about the future mainly emerge from the existing stock of knowledge available, which ultimately reflects political and economic arrangements that shape them. The future is a resource for a wide variety of people. Studies on risk, insurance, speculation and finance show how it has been made into a commodity playing on fears, insecurities and knowledge systems about the world at large. What we choose to highlight, or what is ignored, pretty much indicates our priorities in a given situation.

For instance, the environment is now a powerful point of concern and therefore gets attention when anyone makes a speculative bid at its altar. Thus, a building that can demonstrate its environmental relevance in the coming decades can justify its high costs and choices of construction material in very concrete terms. Practices as diverse as the medical insurance industry, finance for industrial production and monetized trade-offs against carbon credits are part of the same universe. Speculation and the dominance of exchange value in transactions are the hallmarks of such an economy.

In the world of real estate this has of course evolved into a level of specialization of its own. Scholars such as David Harvey point out how the global economic crisis is essentially one connected to real estate finance and the runaway importance of exchange value and speculative returns (2012). Speculation in urban practice is not only an economic activity of exchange but relies squarely on the ability to map, calculate and visualize the processes of making a building, neighbourhood or city in monetary terms. Capital follows the most convincing trails of promise, and cities today are becoming all about fulfilling that promise – transforming themselves in bits and pieces into attractive, desirable pieces of utopia in which fantasies about technology, lifestyle and human progress coalesce into a powerful aesthetic.

The future itself has become some sort of a special effect in architectural interventions without engaging with it in a scientific and informed manner. This article does not make a case against imaginative, artistic and creative speculation on the future per se – no architectural project exists without them – but it does seek to highlight the very limited ways in which this future is evoked, especially when it is oblivious of unintended consequences and ignorant of the scientific knowledge in which those projects are embedded in. When it comes to visualizing and then investing in the future, both architectural and movie studios (in particular) seem to be operating from stock-imagery that can do with a reboot or an update about what constitutes the urban. While classic films like *Blade Runner* (1982), *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1983) or *2001 Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968) have had massive amounts of research invested in constructing their visuals and imagery, it would not in any way cancel out their brilliance if we were to point out that the speculative science of urban futures they derive their visions from needs to be critically updated.

It is one thing when science fiction writers play around with ideas of technology and stretch concepts, evoking settings in tune with the unfolding plot. It is quite another when the story has to be actually mounted on the screen. Then every narrative needs a setting, which is conjured in ways that rely a lot more on the skills of place-making – involving architects, set designers and other conjurers. They may recede into the background of the story, but are registered intensely by viewers, especially other place-makers like architects and designers, who in turn rely on the collective acceptance of these portrayals as a starting point for new evocations of a place for a project they

have in mind. In a certain kind of speculative cinema, the world that is in store for humanity (once it has survived apocalypse, that is) always seems crowded and dense with cities that are dizzily tall and have flying cars swooping in and out – in narrative after narrative. It is from this mythic space that the grandiose architectural proposal emerges, safely couched in such collectively endorsed imagery. Even sophisticated narratives like the *Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999), which deal with the interior space of virtual realities and do a great job of that within the structure of the psychological space they inhabit, become rooted in similar urban symbolism when translating those sentiments in specific places: high-rises abound, speeding cars appear, even when they are reflecting inner states.

At the same time we also see the shadowy urban underside in both sci-fi cinema and urban discourse alike. They both feed on each other. The slum is also a part of the invented future – as a moral lesson. In this, a slum-flavoured apocalypse is the major challenge that civilizations have to survive if they want to enter the nation of the future to start with. *District 9* (Blomkamp, 2009) and *Elysium* (Blomkamp, 2013) were two recent movies that presented dystopic urban imagery in which the working binary that urban practitioners casually employ – the slum/shanty versus the high-rise/privileged suburbia – was expanded onto an epic scale. Just as the ideal urban future is all glistening verticality and dizzying mobility, the failed urbanscape is a colossal extension of the slum into the future. (Of course, there is also the third element that is beyond this binary and stands as a utopian ideal of its own – the natural environment as the supremely idealized habitat, which was evoked most potently in *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) as an anti-man-made utopia, where nature itself became abstracted into an omniscient presence at once the source of myth, culture, the sacred, habitat, resource and spirit).

In the case of *District 9* the discourse is complicated. It is a powerful and brilliant representation of race and power, while evoking a setting that is influential in terms of thinking about the dystopian slum in an extreme way (Greenfield 2010). In fact the makers of the same film are behind *Elysium* (2013), into which they literally transport their slum setting – in a more futuristic context. *Elysium* continues their spirited effort at commenting on class and ethnic reality by parodying the privileged suburban ideal very clearly. However, it would be pertinent to mention that notwithstanding the moral tilt of the story, which is clearly against the cloud-based utopian habitat in the sky, there are serious overlaps between cinematic and real-life architecture that have been documented as part of the making of the film. Along with the critique of race-inflected suburbia, the film also inadvertently manages to sell the idea of the utopian habitat and its glorious buildings as well, especially since it derives its inspiration from actual structures, or from those about to be created. According to Campbell-Dollaghen,

> The movie… is a barely veiled critique of the current divide between rich and poor. But a new viral ad portending to be the sales website for Armadyne, Elysium's real estate development corporation, illustrates just *how* current… If you look closely, most of the homes and buildings touted on the Armadyne website already exist. And if they don't already exist, they were already imagined.
>
> (2013)

If urban utopias are up for sale in the present or the future, there is an underlying fear that is simultaneously evoked to sell those utopias. This fear

gets narrativized as the degraded habitat as seen in *District 9* or similar post-apocalyptic scenarios.

Portraits of degraded habitats seem to take urban theorist Mike Davis's observations in his seminal work, *Planet of Slums*, to heart (2006). His own commentary makes no less imaginative and inventive leaps as he prophesizes about the state of the world:

> Night after night, hornet like helicopters and gunships stalk enigmatic enemies in the narrow streets of the slum districts, pouring hellfire into shanties or fleeing cars. Every morning the slums reply with suicide bombers and eloquent explosions. If the empire can deploy Orwellian technologies of repression, its outcasts have the gods of chaos on their side.
>
> (Davis 2006: 206)

Right from the strongly worded title to the streams of statistics and descriptions that make up his argument, we see a rather distanced understanding of the urban reality he chooses to describe. He says too much about slums, putting an enormously varied bunch of habitats in one very problematic and ill-defined category. Reality can be spectacular at times, but we should not mistake complexity for chaos. Understanding the dynamics of urban development in rapidly growing cities requires an analysis of the *speculative* and *intensive* processes that produce the extreme apocalyptic slum narrative. From a radical Marxist standpoint, notions of equality, social justice and universal rights, disconnected from a critical understanding of the relationship of production that creates inequality and injustice in the first place, are mere ideological tools, reflective of bourgeois values and relations of exchange (Harvey 2001). To his credit, Davis does provide a global perspective on the issue of habitats in terms of poverty and the false security of liberal economics connected to it. Few scholars have been able to pull out the issue of the political economy of housing from pure audit-based analysis to locate it so strongly in the space of contemporary economic and political practices as he has managed to. Unfortunately, in the process of doing so, he homogenizes the world of slums too simplistically. His arguments follow a kind of apocalyptic trajectory, ending with scenarios of wars and rioting making his imagery converge effortlessly with cinematic representations of similar habitats in the films discussed above.

We put the spotlight onto his work only to show that the spacecraft architectural ideals that shape futuristic cityscapes we started with go hand in hand with a widely acknowledged anxiety: behind the eternal sunshine of the spotless, brightly illuminated glass and chrome buildings of futuristic cities exists an urban unconscious that is connected to poverty, grime, darkness and instability. Cities of the future, in their utopian ideals, try and keep as much distance as possible from the darkness that contemporary urban landscapes also embody. Both of these extreme representations are limited and problematic.

CONCLUSION

> No one has ever been modern. Modernity has never begun. There has never been a modern world. The use of the past perfect tense is important here, for it is a matter of a retrospective sentiment, of a rereading

> of our history. I am not saying that we are entering a new era; on the contrary we no longer have to continue the headlong flight of the post-post-postmodernists; we are no longer obliged to cling to the avant-garde of the avant-garde; we no longer seek to be even cleverer, even more critical, even deeper into the ëera of suspicioní. No, instead we discover that we have never begun to enter the modern era. Hence the hint of the ludicrous that always accompanies postmodern thinkers; they claim to come after a time that has not even started!
>
> (Latour 1993: 47)

Bruno Latourís observation is key to his understanding of the contemporary world as more complex, hybridized, multi-dimensional and directional. It provides a theoretical justification for our argument as well. To visualize humanity as being hyper-urban in the future is rooted in the belief that we are inevitably and increasingly becoming urban in a specific way and that this is a fixed unchanging condition.

Scholars like Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2014) and Anthony Leeds (1994) have argued rigorously against such a position that treats urbanization as a rigid marker of modernity between the late nineteenth and twentieth century moving towards full bloom as we race ahead in time through the twenty-first. For Leeds most human civilizations have always been urban, even when a majority of their populations lived in villages. According to him, they were integrated into revenue and taxation systems and were thus urbanized, class-based systems in which a wide variety of habitats coexisted along several trajectories. Brenner and Schmid point out to the several methodological and conceptual flaws embedded in the idea that we have entered or are entering an urban age.

Reading them through Latourís lens further explains how ludicrous future-looking place-makers look. Their conception of a hyper-urban time awaiting humanity is a fantasy no different from neo-medieval narratives that permeate much of contemporary popular culture ñ from video games to soap operas (Eco 1973; 1986; 1990). In the end they all collectively show how non-linear, hybrid approaches to both modernity and urbanity are very much the lived reality for most of us. Yet when it comes to the future, such complexities get substituted by textures and aesthetics that are limited to space-age conceptions of infrastructure and the compression of human choices into narrowly defined categories.

What we need though are concepts, methods and techniques that are more appropriate to the way urban practitioners work. Since our questions emerge from our urban practice we would like to conclude our discussion with approaches to the issues in question. As practitioners and part-time storytellers ourselves, we feel it will be a huge help in our daily modes of engagement to help open up possibilities for urban transformation in more creative ways. Otherwise our work, and the work of several others like us, will be reduced to the narrowest agendas of slum upgradation projects and affordable housing initiatives. They may simply get dismissed as being anachronistic to the dominant apocalyptic visions that the world seems to be so fond of: one that pointlessly keeps encouraging architects, master planners and governments to continue producing rather old-fashioned cities and buildings – concrete fictions as it were – in the name of a half-baked and badly visualized future; one in which assumptions about the future do tend to be limited and inspiration about technology and cities continue being derivative of creative and imaginative sources like literature and cinema.

The reading of data from India indicates that urbanization patterns here are definitely more complex than popularly envisaged. The presence of village-like habitats in grand metropolises like Mumbai and the increased connectivity through mobile phones into the countryside, along with a cheap railway system, has produced circulatory movements that defy easy categorization (Echanove and Srivastava 2014). This means that when we relate to different neighbourhoods in Mumbai we are immediately aware of their connections to other places in the country. A neighbourhood like Dharavi reveals embedded histories from a village in Tamil Nadu, 1000 plus miles away.

How do we relate to this complexity when talking about appropriate urban choices for the city at large and for its several marginalized communities in particular? We do not see a *District 9*-style apocalyptic landscape even while we do see problems and issues that need addressing especially with regard to civic infrastructure. At the same time, we need to convince authorities that the urban patterns that emerge in these places can be fortified with a different imagination that does not have to destroy the present to convert it into a futuristic habitat.

Our engagement with Mumbai convinces us that one way in which our work in neighbourhoods like Dharavi can make sense is when the city at large with its multitude of neighbourhoods creates its own mythologies of places as well. Our practice, which we call Urbanology, is really a space in which all interested players can find a suitable place to work and imagine together. Le Corbusier, the grand patriarch of definitive structures, made an interesting point. He said that in order to be a good architect you need talent but in order to produce a good programme for a neighbourhood you need a genius. The genius for us is certainly not the individual master but the essence of the place itself – the Genius Loci if you please.

A good programme – in the world of urban practice – is a deeper vision, a narrative at large, within which the planning and visualizing of a place unfolds around its genius loci. This is a creative act in a genuine sense as it means relating to a place and its people in a manner that aligns the energies and talents of the skilled practitioner with the skills of all those who use or occupy it. The programme is essentially a convincing story. It is told before a physical intervention is projected or built. The genius loci emerges through the experiences and narrations of the users and needs to be collectively evoked.

Thinker Francois Choay echoes poet and linguist A. K. Ramanujan when she points out that forms of preservation through recreation are similar to the transmission of myths. Myths have historically been oral retellings but with the imprint of a new voice and personality every time. This plasticity of form, in which the quest for permanent structures, discursive or otherwise, is not being pursued, is what allows for truly creative architectural practices, as well as powerful and relevant myths, to emerge. When neighbourhoods like Dharavi are disempowered, erased and ultimately substituted for totally different forms and spatial organization, they are cut off from the ongoing process of evolution. Inspired by Ramanujan, we end this article with a lighthearted take on *District 9* via Dharavi to make this point. At the end of the day, a place like Dharavi cannot be so easily disempowered, as our little story below suggests:

> If the aliens hadn't found their way to District 9 in Johannesburg but turned a few latitudes east, across the Indian ocean, over a tiny sliver of

land jutting out obscenely and defiantly off the v-shaped south-Asian sub-continent, their fate in cinematic history would have been something else.

Imagine the spaceship hanging over the hot and humid city of Mumbai, specifically over its most mythified neighbourhood – Dharavi.

Its enterprising residents would have absorbed the presence of the craft and its seafood resembling occupants with relative ease. The metallic tentacles of Dharavi's legendary recycling industry, would have eventually penetrated the most sophisticated barriers and shields to slowly and steadily dismantle the alien structure for absorption into a million-dollar industry that does not allow even the most ordinary piece of scrap to go unsold. How could tons of exotic metal be left to hang in mid-air? Notwithstanding any degree of technological superiority … bits and pieces of the metal would have found their way into spare body-parts of second-hand cars, ships, toys and assorted machinery. The unusable celestial leftovers may be left to hang in space with no one caring much for aesthetics. Instead somebody would start a little sight-seeing tour by making an improvised crane-bridge to take curious onlookers and tourists for a closer look.

And what of the aliens themselves?

They would have managed to build a tiny little habitat between the crevices of the impossibly dense habitat. Maybe on the toxic watery edge of the mangroves … (for the complete version see http://www.airoots.org/2009/12/prawn-district-dharavi/).

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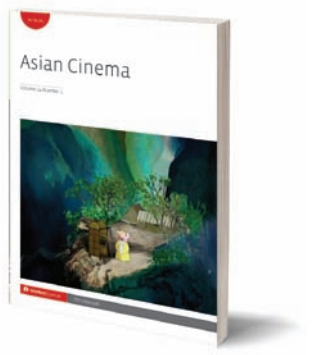

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