

Imagining urban green space in transformative environmental change

- *To what extent does the great corpus of creative work on cities relate to the planning and building of 'real' urban spaces?*
- *To what extent might we be able to draw on this to inspire and support 'transformative / transitional' movements towards sustainability?*

INTRODUCTION

So, as you have heard, I trained in Geosciences, Engineering Geology and then worked in a few different policy settings before settling in to my interdisciplinary (and often transdisciplinary!) role at UCL. While I have always striven to be literate and creative and take pride in my other writing projects, I will note now that I have no formal training in literary studies or any closely allied field and want to apologise in advance for any unclear language or unusual conceptual jumps. Please do feel free to ask me to clarify.

What I will talk about is something that has been on my mind for some time, but this work is in the very early stages. I am bringing it to this session as much to communicate the ideas as to discuss its potential and get feedback on possible methods and future directions.

I would like to begin with **** A RELEVANT TANGENT **** I have just returned from a very well-regarded Summer School on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (this very anthropocentric ways of describing human-nature interactions) and was struck by an observation during our discussions. I spent 1.5 weeks living closely with a small group of early-career Ecologists, Biologists and Physical Scientists. Many of the deeper thoughts that we shared during this time came to us inductively through our practical experience and (probably comparatively undirected) further reading – yet somehow allied incredibly closely with the clearly well-studied and much better articulated conceptual work touched upon during the last two days. This includes a discomfort with human-centred value systems and a need to recognize that nature has an inherent value, alongside a regard for humans as just one part of the global ecosystem. We simply didn't have the knowledge or language to articulate them as beautifully as they have been in this room. Given the already articulated urgency for new ways of engaging on the current environmental and social crises far outside of traditional disciplines, I thought this was particularly notable and am happy to expand further in questions and further conversation.

GOAL

Just this century, we have passed an unprecedented point in global urbanisation, where more than 50% of the population now lives in urban areas, a proportion that (according to the latest UN statistics) is expected to increase to 68% by 2050. In the current context of expanding urban settlements and accelerating global environmental change, there is increasing pressure for cities to play central roles in response to an array of interconnected global challenges as they become more and more critical as spaces influencing the quality, sustainability and equitability of global development. (Scene set by Andrew this morning).

A key part of this challenge is ensuring the presence of open space and particularly green space in cities. As I will allude to later, these spaces are seen as important for a wide range of ecological and social reasons. In practical terms here, I am referring to any part of the urban environment that is defined by plants and water, such as park, gardens, street trees, but also blue spaces including lakes and rivers Wiechert, who I will also refer to later in this paper, describes urban green space as *“ a site where nature meets the city, a space that embodies various scientific epistemologies and taxonomies, as well as other cultural ideals.”*

As a launch point, and to summarise very briefly the predominant view of urban green space through time in urban planning (particularly in Europe and North America), I refer to a quotation by Maria Kaika (City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City):

“In modernity’s Promethean project, the nature/society dialectic has always been at the center of efforts to create a better society by creating a better urban environment. From the attempts of the 18th and 19th century to create a “sanitized city”, to the early 20th century’s strive for a “rational city”, to the contemporary quest for a “sustainable city”, inspiration is sought for in ideas about the “greening” of the city and reducing pollutants of all kinds emanating from urban life.

So, our motivations for urban greening have already been on quite a journey, seemingly always intertwining the practical needs of a growing city with the predominant philosophical (and inevitably socially derived) bases guiding urban planning and development. From this point of departure, this paper will discuss in quite general terms an aspiration to summarise the depiction of urban green space across a range of creative formats (fiction, film, visual art) and consider the ways in which this relates to (or might relate to) contemporary visions of ‘urban green space’ in urban design and planning.

ATTENTION

As a scholar, practitioner (and just generally as a person living on earth!), I am increasingly interested in transformative environmentalism. In environmental studies of various kinds, 'transformations / transitions' to more sustainable and environmentally friendly ways of being and connecting with the world are now common currency. For the first time, even high-level policy actors such as the influential 'Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services' are enshrining language which foregrounds the need for real and transformative change in to their 'reviews of the evidence' and policy recommendations.

However, in the movement towards 'transformations / transitions' there is often a wide gulf between intention and action. Some of this due to practical limitations, some due to a lack of motivation, some due to a lock-in to our current ways of being and doing and some due to the lack of a shared vision of a desirable future. I am interested in considering the power of fiction to provide inspiration for possible futures, which go outside the 'usual'. (I am fortunate here to be able to refer back to the Kim Stanley Robinson interview that Amy quoted yesterday, which summarises the current climate very effectively: "[What's hard is imagining plausible way of getting from here to there](#)"). Are there ways to consider urban green space, drawing on "[all of the unique abilities of \(science\) fiction to incite imagination-filling conversations about alternative futures.](#)" [Wakkary et al, QUOTE]?

The idea of 'transformations / transitions' (encapsulating the need for fundamental changes to society and a move towards understanding and managing complex problems, is based on inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, which is one of the reasons that I am so pleased to be speaking about it in this setting. The proposed work will be drawing on ideas from deep ecology (in considering the grounding of 'transformations / transitions' in a new understanding and reorientation of human relationships to the natural world); and approaches from ecocriticism (in considering the interdisciplinary and analytic orientation) and environmental communication (in formulating the methods of inquiry and engagement). In considering the place of creativity in urban planning it also draws on some of the key principles of 'design fiction', which "[relate to representations of the future from science fiction to design scenarios that detail "people, practice and technology"](#)" [Wakkary et al, QUOTE]

NEED

In our day to day lives we frequently see representations of cities 'yet to be'; popping up in the news, printed across hoardings for new developments and buried in the pages of lifestyle magazines. Increasingly these aspirational images include and even integrate open and green spaces, but these do not always seem to come from the same inspired minds as the built environment that surround them. There seems to be a (only recently shifting and evolving) disconnect between the visions that many planners have had for our built spaces and those that we have for our open and green spaces (and ultimately the links these provide to a wider global ecosystem).

Since our early days as an urban species, we have crafted stories and images to reflect our wildest imaginings of cities of curious form, and in magnificent settings; underwater, in the sky, even other planets. Now we are faced with what feels like a more prosaic challenge: to ensure that our current, terrestrial cities are in appropriate shape to sustainably house a global cohort of urban dwellers in a way that is sustainable and appropriately connected with the global ecosystem that supports them. I propose (as others have before me!) that a (re)focus and (re)engagement with a range of fiction portraying urban green space might provide: *"a powerful, creative and playful way to reason about what we are to do in the future."* [Reeves, QUOTE]

There is a growing interest in this kind of orientation in urban planning, often formulated in terms of collective and participatory engagements, which draw on an iterative process of imagining and experiencing to develop and make 'seen' shared visions for the future. This brings to mind a quote by Otto: *"I need to illustrate a feeling or experience so that people can say, "Does that seem like something we want to be going toward?""* [Otto, QUOTE]

SATISFACTION

My preliminary work has sought to understand the way in which we currently imagine urban green space in cities and how these visions are presented through different media formats.

This approach is proposed to comprise two elements:

- 1) A brief overview of urban green space in futures fiction (fiction, film, visual art) – noting the scope of description and any major themes to which this is often allied (i.e. wildness, utopia)
- 2) A reflection on depictions of urban green space in contemporary planning documents and the consultative and marketing materials related to these (text, images) – noting the scope of description and any common themes to (1)

This relatively loose approach has been influenced by my own previous academic work in the physical and social sciences and tends towards a methodology of developing a large corpus of work, which is then ‘thematically’ analysed.

Fiction

- Scope of description: At present the scope of this observation is limited to a small review of books and survey articles contained in two key texts (‘Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism’ by Eric Otto and ‘Urban Green Space and Gender in Anglophone Modernist Fiction’ (a doctoral thesis) by Nora Larissa Wiechert) drawing upon a range of Anglophone literature across genres explicitly including science fiction. Drawing on earth-based fiction.
- Major themes emerging include:
 - Utopia vs Dystopia, on which we had much discussion yesterday and today and which I will not labour any further on conceptually at this point. It is notable that, within this small sample, that there is a perhaps expectedly strong alignment of the green with the utopian (there certainly could be green dystopias, but we begin to get in to questions of dystopia – how, and for whom?)
 - Wildness and rewilding
 - Non-human actors (engagement with)
 - Environmental challenges (biodiversity, pollution, climate change etc.)
 - Health (calming influence, mental and physical health inc. ability, mobility)
 - Food and nutrition
 - Prosperity in a more general sense as well as in an economic sense

- Social engineering and control ('instructed in culture and engage in safe activities', 'elicit certain types of behaviour')
- Sense of place
- Aesthetics

Contemporary Planning

- Scope of description: The scope of observation is limited to a brief review of images and supporting documentation from around 20 major global projects proposed in the last 20 years. Most of these are spearheaded by large design / architecture / engineering companies with a global operating remit and have been captured at a stage of initial rendering. Many are in Europe and North America, with other examples coming from the Middle East, Africa and Asia.
- Major themes emerging include:
 - Unsurprisingly, utopia! The way in which developments which focus on urban green space are portrayed lean heavily on the general sense that desirable future living is 'green'
 - Environmental challenges (biodiversity, water etc.)
 - Health (calming influence, mental and not really inc. ability, mobility)
 - Social engineering and control
 - Sense of place
 - Aesthetics ('proportion and proper expression in architecture')

Summary points

Prevailing ideas around urban green space:

- Quite traditional ways of visualising planning and use of spaces mixed with a range of high tech (but debatably sustainable) superficial installations:
 - Linear infrastructures
 - Green roofs and walls
 - Parks

Creative visions of real cities:

- Certainly, there is building evidence of creative integration of green space in to contemporary urban planning, however, there are questions around the extent to which these plans draw from an anthropocentric and built environment dominated experience

and the extent to which they are genuinely transforming the function and use of urban green space.

As we can see, there are some interesting connections and disconnections, even at this quite thematic level. The 'possibilities' of green space are presented in a much more limited way within planning, with a focus on aesthetics, social connection and sense of place, with more limited discussion around health and environmental factors.

I am still left with hanging questions around how far our current planning approaches go towards representing something truly visionary, which cuts more deeply across the other 'possibilities' or aims to tie these together.

Three brief reflections in particular emerge against Otto's work:

Utopia / Dystopia:

- I particularly like Otto's framing of utopia as *"visionary glimpses of how our real world could be changed"* [Otto, QUOTE] and can't help but consider the possibilities of engaging with some of the current work on 'transformations / transitions' through their view to an objective of *"socio-political change by means of the aesthetic representation of a paradigm shift."* [Otto, QUOTES]

Sense of wonder:

- The planning images presented can invoke a *"sense of wonder, to the affective experience of the marvelous"* [Otto, QUOTE] through the scale and aesthetic character of the proposals. Could these be key to generating truly 'transformative / transitional' ideas?

Cognitive estrangement:

- Is an dominant technique of fiction, which seems more patchily and rarely employed in planning. While Otto notes that *"it is fitting that works of environmental utopian and dystopian science fiction - employ cognitive estrangement prominently towards and environmentalist end"* [Otto, QUOTE], in the 'real world', the currently of cognitive estrangement could benefit from further insights.

VISUALISATION

The paper sought to briefly summarise some initial thoughts around a piece of work on urban green space in future cities and the extent to which the creative visions of real cities is (over)influenced or limited by expectations of what is socially desirable and what is physically or economically possible.

Ultimately it hopes to consider possibilities for using fiction to push the boundaries of urban planning, influencing creative and 'transformative / transitional' urban planning for green space, particularly in participatory planning exercises - using fiction to push 'transformative / transitional' urban planning. I already have some experience in developing engagement here, including as test of a GI visioning workshop at the 'Infrastructures for Troubled Times' workshop in Brighton in 2018, and the ongoing development of 'Infrastructure Safaris' ("*the act of walking and moving through the city becomes a pivotal issue in the re-imagining of urban green space*" [Wiechert, QUOTE]) as a method for engaging my sustainable infrastructure students with urban planning in a more holistic and creative way.

ACTION

My final call for actions from the audience in relation to reflections and inputs on the ideas presented today, in particular:

- Scoping down the approach: Framings and focus
- Choosing source materials: The possible scope of materials across fiction, film, visual art and means of effective selection. Should these focus on the literal 'future', or can they be spatial or otherwise 'other'?
- Close reading process: Not at all familiar for me, but possible to be applied?
- Critique against: Transitions / Transformations, Deep Ecology, Ecocriticism etc.

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