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Critical design and the critical social sciences

: or why we need to engage multiple, speculative critical design futures in a post-political and post-utopian era

Damian White

We, anxious citizens of the affluent global North have some rather conflicted attitudes to *futuring*. In the broad realm of culture, "futures" have never been more popular. In the realm of politics, it is widely believed that those who engage in utopian speculations, are "out to lunch or out to kill[1]."



Joseph Gandy Architectural Visions of Early Fancy, in the Gay Morning of Youth, and Dreams in the Evening of Life Sir John Soane's Museum

If you look at the highest grossing movies of the last decade – *Avatar*, *The Hunger Games*, the endless *Marvel Comics* spins offs, science fiction dominates the box office. The most bone-headed Hollywood movie can conjure up CGI visuals and glimpses of future civilizations unthinkable a generation ago. The visual skills of mainstream cinema may have reached new heights, as the narrative quality has never been lower.



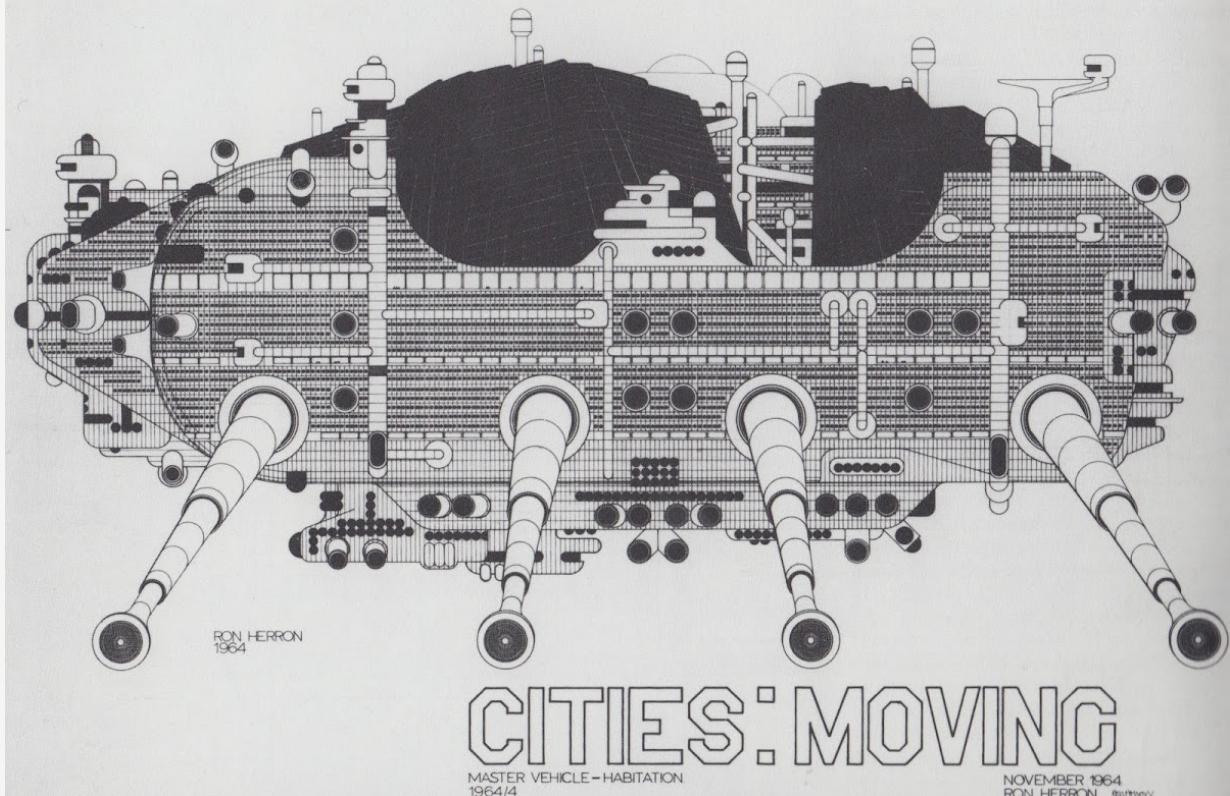
Naboo: Star Wars: Episode I The Phantom Menace Lucasfilm 1999

But, if you can work your way through the paper-thin-multi-market-tested-lowest-common-denominator quality of so much popular sci-fi, and tread carefully around the latest zombie/vampire dystopia, you still find creative works that pose sociological and philosophical questions of real substance.



Ronald.D.Moore Battlestar Galactica 2003-2009.

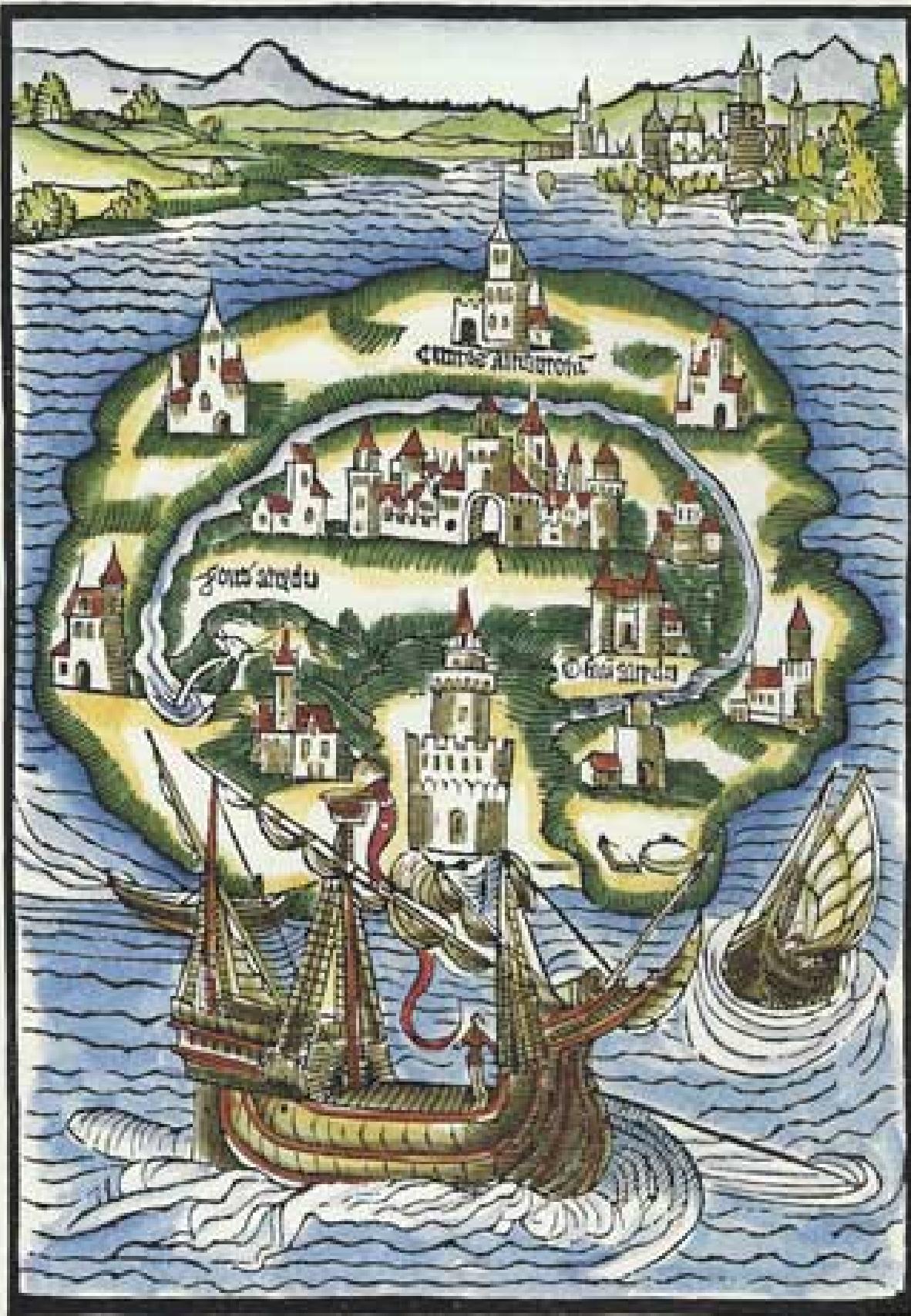
Thoughtful reflections on widening inequality, class struggle, climate crisis, human-animal-machine relations, trans-humanism, the future of sexuality, surveillance and militarism can all be found in all manner of places. Consider Ronald Moore's *Battlestar Galactica*, the sci-fi novels of Ursula LeGuin, the Mars trilogy of Kim Stanley Robinson, films such as *District 9*, *Gattaca*, *Elysium* or *Snowpiercer*, the graphic novels of Alan Moore or Hayao Miyazaki's stunning retro-futurist animations. All these currents – and many others – have used *futures* as a narrative backdrop to open up debate about worlds we might wish to inhabit or avoid.



Ron Herron, Archigram (1964).

In the "real world" of contemporary politics, no such breadth of discussion can be tolerated.

"Futures" once played a very significant role in Western political discourse. Western political theory: from Plato onwards can reasonably be read as an argument about optimal forms of institutional configuring.



The island of Utopia in Thomas More, Liellus vere aureaus nec minus
salutaris quam festivus de optimo reipublicae statu, deque nova insula
Utopia, Louvain 1516. Wormsley Library, Oxford.



SOVIET CITIES ON THE moon?

Science Digest Feb, 1958.

For much of the twentieth century, different capitalisms confronted different vision of communism, socialism, anarchism, feminism, black liberation, fascism. Rich discussions equally took place as to the possible merits of blended systems: from the mixed economy and the welfare state to "market socialism", mutualism to populism, associationalism to corporatism. Since the end of the Cold War, it would be hardly controversial to observe that the range of debate about political futures that can occur in liberal democracies has dramatically narrowed.

Of course, it would be quite wrong to believe that utopianism has gone away in the contemporary United States. *Pax Americana*, *The Rapture*, or a vision of the good life spent pursuing *private utopias* centered around the consumption-travel-hedonism nexus celebrated by "reality TV" is all alive and well.



All manner of further media tell us social problems can be dealt with on an individual basis. It is seen as the hallmark of intelligence to embrace *Wired Magazine* digi-topian tech-fix thinking. Do we really need to *solve poverty* when we could simply *program our google glasses* so that we just *stop seeing those grubby moochers!*

But the idea that there are social, technological, ecological or political issues that might require collective solutions, new forms of institutional innovation, democratic experimentalism or perhaps transformations of our social relations is often met with complete incomprehension by the smart people. That there are pressing public issues that might require public debate about public futures or that political debate might draw its vitality from *clashing visions of different futures* has faded fast in our post-political and perhaps even post-democratic era.

Social Futuring

If a serious discussion of material political futures has been largely foreclosed in the world of politics, it is interesting how talk about futures and even utopias is stirring in some radical parts of design and in some emerging quarters of critical theory, critical sociology and the critical social sciences. Let's take one snatch of this conversation – my home



discipline of social theory and sociology.

It was a figure no less than H.G. Wells (novelist, futurist and serious contender for the first chair in Sociology at the London School of Economics), who argued in 1906 that "the creation of Utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the proper and distinctive method of sociology. [2]" Now, even if it has to be acknowledged that mainstream sociology has never been particularly comfortable with fulfilling this charge, the "return of the repressed" has occurred time and again in sociology and social theory.



H.G.Wells 1866-1946

Futurist speculation runs through the writings of all the founding fathers of sociology. Marx's vision of an egalitarian future that would be governed by the maxim "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" needs little introduction. No less compelling though is Max Weber's icy dystopian fear, that an increasing bureaucratic modernity could give rise to an "iron cage of rationality." For Weber, there was every likelihood that we could end up with a technocratic future governed by "specialists without spirit; sensualists without heart."

Less well known is Emile Durkheim hope, that the dislocations of "industrial societies" might be somehow stitched back together through some kind of

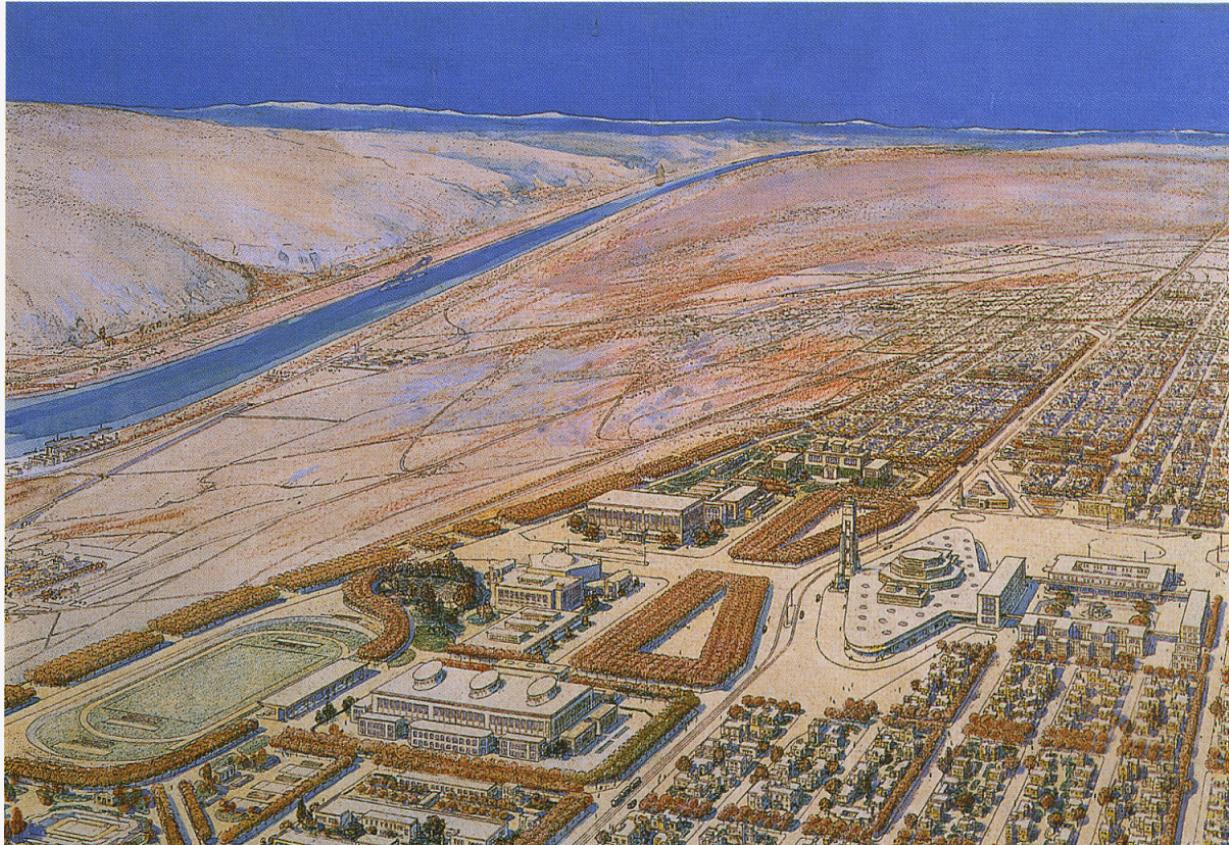
associational corporatism. Durkheim hoped that isolated individuals might be brought back into social life through engagement with civic institutions, professional groups, trade unions and the like. He further suggested that if these forms of sectional representation were given formal standing, in a reconfigured polity, we could envisage a new kind of associational democracy that represented individuals and groups.

The writing of Patrick Geddes anticipates the substantive concerns of much last twentieth century green politics. In *Cities in Evolution* (1915) Geddes advocated an ecologically and socially sensitive form of civic planning that could give rise to a new vision of urban democracy situated in a critical regionalism. These future discussions may well have been disregarded in mid-20th century sociology but they were never fully blocked. They leaked out in all manner of ways: from conventional discussions of scenario planning and systems thinking (that draws so much from organizational sociology) to the outright utopian longings of critical theory.

Moreover, it is striking how leading contemporary figures in the critical social sciences: from Erik Olin Wright to David Harvey, Roberto Unger to Ruth Levitas, have insisted we must place not just futures, but serious concrete material proposals for reconfiguring our social and political relations back on the agenda [3].

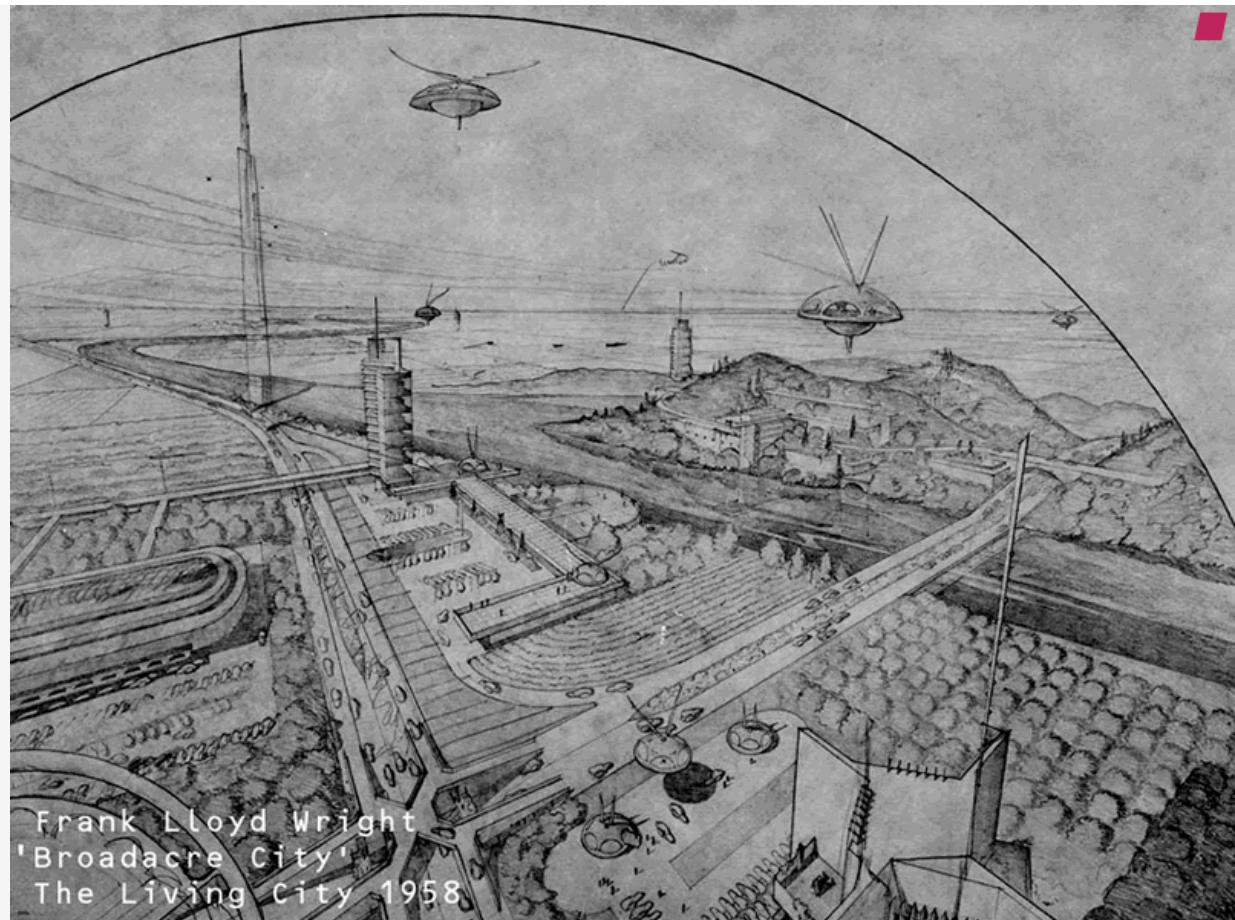
If the question of utopia for sociologists has often been treated like everyone's favorite, drunk Uncle at Christmasnot to be engaged with too much but Christmas wouldn't be the same without him.....the world of design has frequently embraced the drunk uncle or found itself to be the drunk uncle!

Design Futuring



Tony Garnier Cite Industrielle 1905/1918.

Design is important for thinking about futures simply because it is one of the few remaining spaces in the academy that is completely untroubled by its devotion to futures. Prototyping, prefiguring, speculative thinking, doing things differently, failing... and then starting all over again are all core component of design education. This is perhaps why Jan Michl observed that a kind of dream of functional perfectionism [4] has haunted all matter of design practice and design manifestos in the twentieth century.



Now, of course, futurism and design have come together with very mixed results in the Twentieth Century. Early modernist architecture, industrial design and utopianism were almost indivisible. From Russian and Italian Futurism to Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus, utopian idealism ruled. Design utopias have acted as powerful historical forces, sometimes to stimulate change and sometimes to recoil from it.



Het Schip by Michel de Klerk Amsterdam 1920. A housing co-operative commissioned by the socialist group Eigen Haard by Janericloeb

I51 The easy link that was once made between utopia, design and "emancipation" was decisively challenged by the Holocaust and the subsequent disasters of authoritarian modernism – from Robert Moses to Pruitt-Igoe.



Pruitt-Igoe (Architect: Minoru Yamasaki). First occupied 1954. Demolished March 16, 1972.

There are certain forms of authoritarian design utopian thinking about the future that are dead and need to stay dead. However, the matter does not end there. There are design utopias and *there are design utopias*. And as a growing body of radical designers and architects have suggested, design utopianism by bayonets and bulldozer is not the same as embarking on modes of design futurism as a materialized invitation to political debate.

Evoking the possible virtues of design futurism will, of course, immediately generate alarm bells for all good humanists trained with their critical superpower to root out and instantly squash modes of technological determinism and instrumental rationality with the force of a revolutionary key stroke. It will send shivers down the spine of that army of grad school radicals who learned in Post Structuralism 101, that to be radical is to resist "cookbooks for the future" and "blueprints"; keep everything open; propose nothing and critique everything. Such suspicions are not to be disregarded. Alan Lie was not entirely off base when he declared, "design is how we can be dominated by instrumental rationality, and love it, too"[6].

However, perhaps it needs to be recognized that the last twenty years of keeping everything open, proclaiming for *radical democracy! Cosmopolitics!* "The Event" hasn't exactly worked out so well either. Perhaps "thinking politically" does require thinking about futures and thinking seriously about transformations of social relations and material relations.

Perhaps we were wrong to think that politics is foreclosed by making material propositions. Perhaps the reverse is true: material propositions provide the basis for doing politics. For without concrete material propositions for doing things differently, do we really have anything much to debate in the radical democracy?

Perhaps doing "good futuring" requires engagement with design because social relations are not *sui generis*, as Durkheim was wont to claim, or primarily textual as Derrida occasionally asserted. If Haraway and Latour are correct, that we live in entangled social, material, hybrid worlds[7]; if we are beset by a whole series of socio-ecological and socio-technological problems, perhaps we need to think about forms of politics that propose *socio-ecological* and *socio-technological* solutions? Design utopianism is not a replacement for social critique, but design could *potentially* add much needed material content to social critique.

But how should we future?

Critical Design, Speculative Design, Architectural Utopianism, Re-directive Practices....



Michael Sorkin Studio: Sidewalks of New York <http://aeon.co/magazine/technology/can-nyc-be-completely-self-reliant/>

There are presently very different ideas circulating through radical design. The

radical Architect Michael Sorkin has demanded a return to design utopianism pure and simple. The condition of utopia, Sorkin suggests, is important because "it proposes its own realization, a deliberation with an outcome." Sorkin argues that design utopianism is potentially of central importance for reviving a radical material politics with real material content because:

"Utopian thought is the only way of speculating concretely about a projective connection between architecture and politics. To design utopias is to enter the laboratory of politics and space, to conduct experiments in their reciprocity. This laboratory – unlike the city itself – is a place in which variables can be selectively and freely controlled. At the point of application of the concrete, utopia ceases to exist". [8]

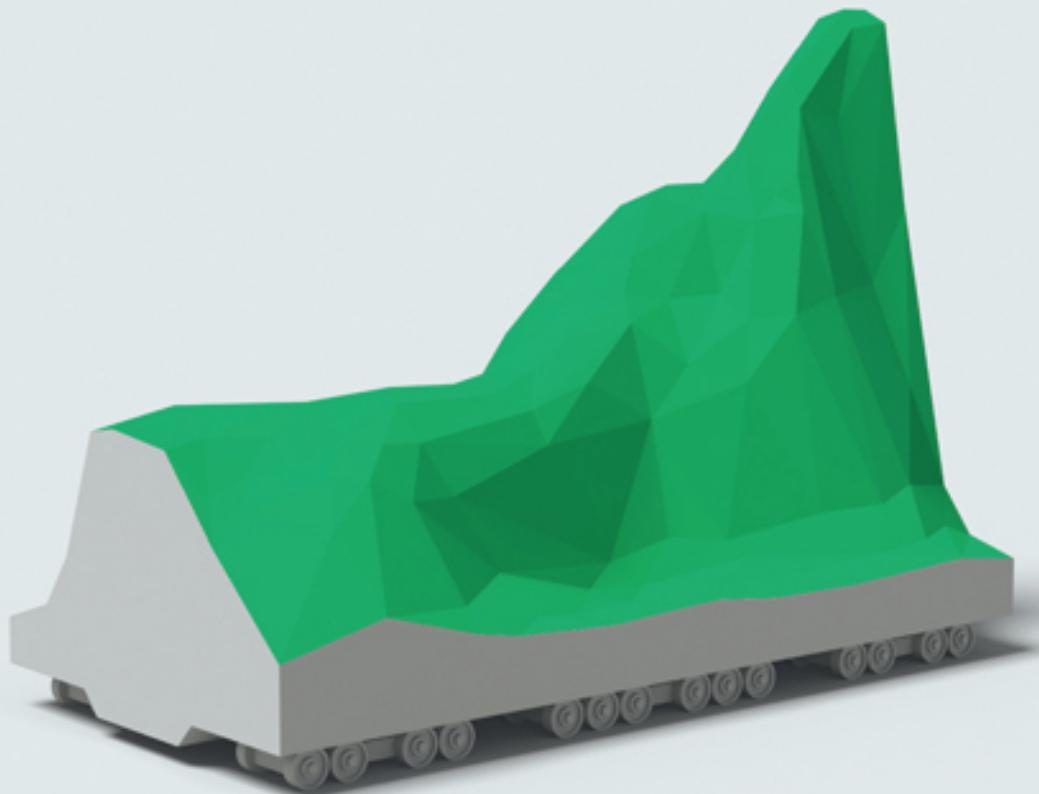
Moreover, if we think of the utopian imaginary as *disposition*, as opposed to the *blueprint*, we might well get a little further in our speculations. Sorkin makes a plausible case for the centrality of a utopian, ecological and political architecture of the future as a kind of materialized political ecology. His intervention can also remind us that hostility to design utopianism or any discussion of embarking on "big moves" in urban planning, public housing, alternative energy provision and the like, can itself function as a kind of "anti-politics". It can merely re-enforce the status quo, ensuring that nothing of substance is ever discussed in the political arena.



Michael Sorkin Studio: Sidewalks of New York <http://aeon.co/magazine/technology/can-nyc-be-completely-self-reliant/>

SPECULATIVE EVERYTHING

DESIGN, FICTION, AND SOCIAL DREAMING



ANTHONY DUNNE & FIONA RABY

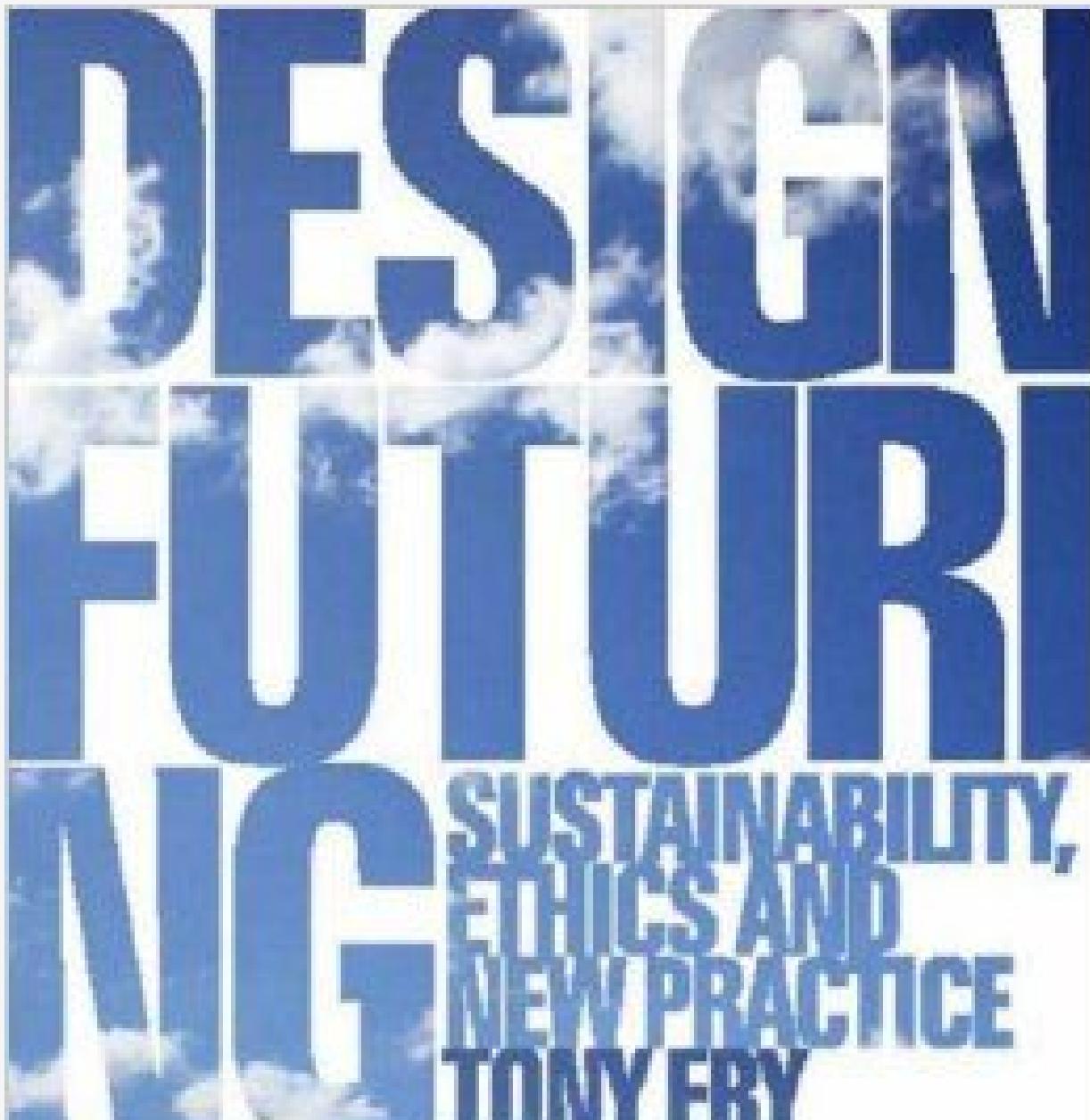
A very different view of design futuring can be found in the writings and work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. For Dunne and Raby critical or speculative design should hover somewhere between conceptual art and agit prop, using design to "pose questions" to a critical public [9].

propaganda

Tony Fry makes some rather different arguments for why design has to be central to any serious future politics. Fry has observed that our contemporary hybrid worlds are thoroughly designed socio-ecological worlds. And these designed worlds are full of social relations, institutional forms, political

economies, infrastructures, and designed items that are literally *de-futuring* the planet through their reckless social and ecological impacts. In no uncertain terms Fry argues conventional design has been central to the current defuturing project. Designers have failed to fully understand the disaster of a hyper-consumer economy. There is a failure in design education to recognize that design objects take on a life of their own. As Fry notes

"designed things go on designing (be they designed to do so or not)". [10]



An inability to think structurally also ensures that design is mostly unable to see

that unsustainability or defuturing is ontologically structured into the very 'habitus' we occupy. Fry argues, then, that we need to embrace a form of social design futuring which is interactive and on-going. Fry argues that a critical design futurism has to involve the continued, relentless search for re-directive practices at multiple spatial scales. This will involve systematically retrofitting and redirecting our personal *habitus*, our homes, our cities and our broader socio-ecological systems to reclaim the future. This will involve a search for 'the quality economy' and new modes of service design. But it will also ensure that in the future design needs to involve not just making, but unmaking. We will need eliminative design.

From a very different angle, Erik Olin Wright and his colleagues have, for nearly two decades now, argued that the critical social sciences should take the exploration and empirical examination of real world utopias seriously. Wright, here, is not talking about setting up Fourier's phalanstère, but "empirically examining cases of institutional innovations" that exist in the here and now, and that potentially "embody in one way or another emancipatory alternatives to the dominant forms of social organization.

[11]" Wright advocates a form of critical sociology that has little to do with the ungrounded speculative metaphysics that defines so much contemporary critical theory. Rather, he suggests revolutionary work involves deploying a kind of critical, but practical and pre-figurative analysis of "hard-nosed proposals for pragmatically improving our lives." We need to honestly appraise the strengths and weaknesses of concrete proposals that exist now: from unconditional basic income, to appraisals of the Mondragon Co-operative movement, participatory city budgeting to different kinds of associational governance.



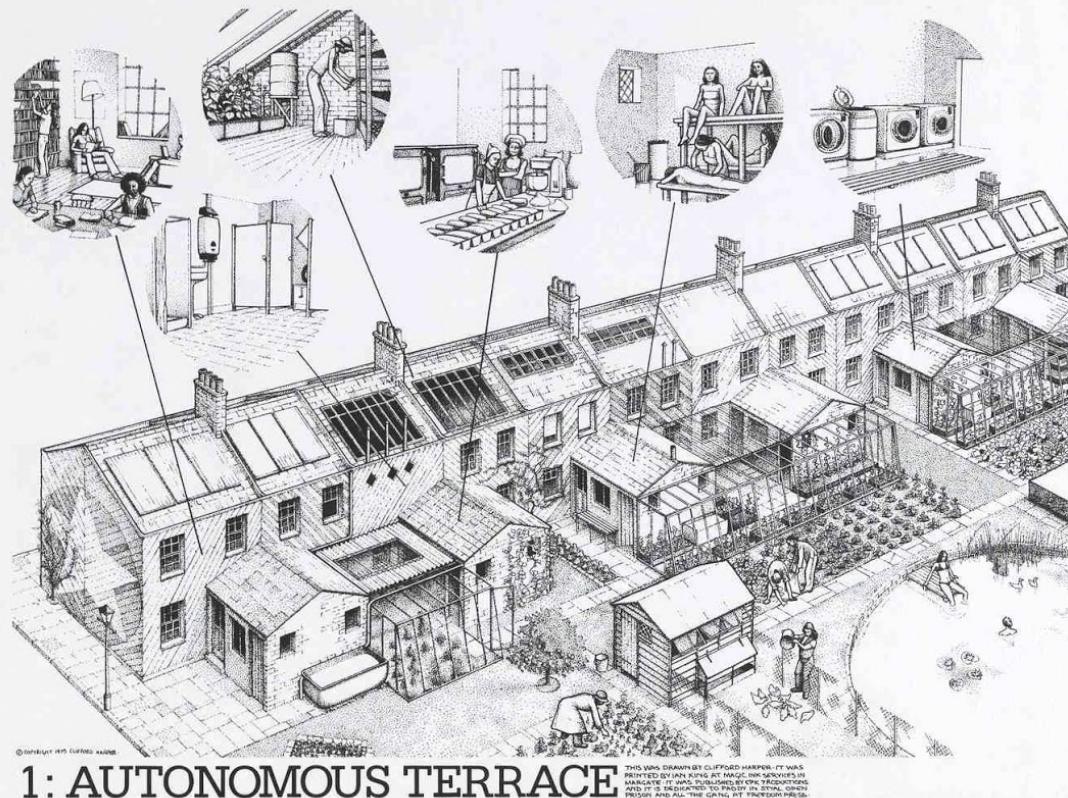
Whilst Wright never actually uses the word *design* to describe what he is up to in his writings, his demand for concrete programmatic thinking resonates with John Dryzek's call for a critical political science concerned with producing and evaluating discursive institutional designs.



Quinta Monroy in Iquique, Chile, designed by Alejandro Aravena. Photograph: Takuto Sando/Elemental

Further points of convergence between design and the critical social sciences open up when we recognize that design is not reducible to the activities of professional designers. As thinkers from Herbert Simon, to Colin Ward have argued, if we see design as a much more generalizable human capacity to act in the world, prefigure and then materialize, the reach and potential of future orientated forms of social design for material politics can be read in much more interesting and expansive ways.

The writings of Colin Ward and Delores Hayden can be fruitfully engaged with here for the manner in which both of these critical figures have drawn productive links between design histories of vernacular architectures and the social histories of self built housing, infrastructure and leisure facilities. Both demonstrate that there is nothing particularly new about the current interest in making, hacking or sharing. There are many "hidden histories" of working men and women embarking on forms of self-management, building co-operative enterprises and networks of mutual aid. In doing so they have turned themselves into designers of their own workplaces, communities and lives [12]. Such experiments in what we might call "worker centred design" continue to resonate. Attempts by trade unionists to define new modes of ownership with socially useful production (as represented by the Lucas plan), and the recent spate of factory takeovers in Argentina, all indicate that workers can be designers[13].



Illustrations by Clifford Harper for 'Radical Technology' 1976.

All manner of interesting potential convergences between critical design, futurism and social critique can additionally be found in the many experimental forms that contemporary urban-ecological activism has given rise to. Consider experiments in urban food growing, forms of tactical or pop-up urbanism, guerrilla gardening and open streets, attempts to experiment in solidarity economies, experiments with urban retrofitting or distributed energy systems or experiments with part finished public housing (that can be customized by their residents). All these currents have the potential to draw design activism and design-oriented social movements into direct engagement with critical theory, political economy and the critical social sciences.



Illustrations by Clifford Harper for 'Radical Technology' 1976

Let us conclude then, that perhaps we do live in worlds where utopias have had their day. If we understand utopias to be static, a-historical projections of "the good society" that have already been grounded, prefigured and preordained in "Nature", "History," "science", then we are probably done with that discourse. If we value democracy, if we want to live in a world marked by a vibrant public sphere that can generate the possibilities of hope and human betterment, then we need futures.

Without futures, and without serious propositional clashes between different materialized futures, we have no politics, and we have no democracy. We merely have millimetric policy disputes that end up as the technocratic attending to marginally different versions of the status quo.

We can sense these dangers at the moment when we look at the state of our increasingly illiberal democracies. The problems mount: from climate change to spiraling inequality; from crumbling infrastructure to a surveillance state that has no bounds. Yet, our political culture is fixed and frozen. As such, we find ourselves in a culture that can happily spend \$250 million dollars per Hollywood movie to create the next sci-fi fantasy but finds it is beyond its imaginative capacities to design superb, sustainable, public housing. We can build fabulously elaborate multiplayer online fantasy games, where gamer avatars can have sex with their elf girlfriends, but providing web platforms that give working people more democratic control over their workplace is a fantasy too far. The potential of self-driving cars or the rise of Artificial Intelligence can be endlessly debated. But the idea that we might be able to regulate our financial institutions is presented as a process as mysterious, dangerous and futile as the attempt to locate Lord Voldemort's horcruxes.

Yes, there are future visions still engaged with in mainstream political debate. But what are they: The endless continuation of the neo-liberal present; apocalyptic modes of environmentalism; dystopian fears of the return of the caliphate.

We can do much better than that. Can't we?

I have tentatively tried to suggest in this post that one productive route towards generating multiple visions of futures could be cultivated through an alliance between critical forms of design, critical theory and the critical social sciences. To develop this discussion will not be easy. Through engagement *both may have to become something quite different.*

We need the capacity, which critical forms of design have, for flights of fantasy, for saying the unsayable, for proposing absurdities. Yet we also need critical social sciences that can engage seriously with design as an equal partner. Design is integral for thinking about futures because design has to propose, prefigure, speculate, prototype, anticipate, fail, revise, fail and sometimes succeed. But design can't do it alone. Broader forms of reconstructive political economy, reconstructive institutional analysis, reconstructive anthropology, geography, philosophy, psychology, history, aesthetics and cultural interventions alongside

design will all be required to move us forward. This alliance will be difficult to broker at an institutional level but it will also be difficult to broker at the level of the imagination, For it can only emerge if we find ways of being alert to the reconstructive possibilities and potentialities that may exist in the present.

As Hannu Rajaniemi has observed: "Things will appear the same – unless you know how to look

[1] As Russell Jacoby memorably observed in *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* Basic Books, 1999.

[2] Cited in Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Institution of Society* Palgrave, 2013,p.xi.

[3] See variously E. O. Wright, (2010) *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London: Verso, 2010; Levitas (Op Cit); David Harvey, (2000) *Spaces of Hope* University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh; Roberto Mangabeira Unger What Should the Left Propose? (Verso, 2005).

[4] Jan Michl "On the Rumor of Functional Perfection" *Pro Forma* 2, 1990-1991 (Oslo, Norway), pp. 67-81.

[5] See Owen Hatherley "Imagining the Socialist City" *Jacobin* 15-16, 2014.

[6] Alan Liu *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge, Work and the Culture of Information* 2004 p. 236.

[7] See Damian White and Chris Wilbert (eds) (2009) *Technonatures: Environments, Technologies, Spaces, and Places in the Twenty-first Century*. Wilfred Laurier Press, Waterloo for an elaboration of this argument.

[8] Michael Sorkin: *Harvard Design Magazine* "Eutopia" Issue 31 Fall/Spring 2007 p.7.

[9] Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby *Speculative Everything* MIT Press, 2014.

[10] Fry, Tony (2009) *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice* London, Bloomsbury. p.30.

[11] E. O. Wright, (2010) *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London: Verso, 2010 p. 1.

[12] See Chris Wilbert and Damian White (eds) (2010) *Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility. The Colin Ward Reader*. AK Press, San Francisco. Dolores Hayden, (1980) What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like? Speculations on Housing, Urban Design, and Human Work *Signs* Vol. 5, No. 3, Supplement. Women and the American City Spring, pp. S170-S187.

[13] Marina Sitrin et al *Horizontalism*; Nora Räthzel, David Uzzell and Dave Elliott "Can trade unions become environmental innovators? Learning from the Lucas Aerospace workers".

[14] Cited in Honor Harger, (2013) "Things will appear the same – unless you know how to look" <http://futureeverything.org/2013/02/honorharger-2/>

