Alterlivability

Speculative Design Fiction and the Urban Good Life in Starhawk's *Fifth Sacred Thing* and *City of Refuge*

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Abstract This article responds to two diverging notions of "livability": the normative New Urbanist imaginary of livable cities, where the urban good life manifests in neoliberal consumer cultures, green gentrification, and inaccessible infrastructures, and the feminist and disability concept of livable worlds, such as those in which nonnormate life thrives. Whereas the former ought to broaden its notion of "lives worth living," the latter would benefit from a more specific theory of design—the making and remaking of more livable worlds. In response, this article offers the concept of "alterlivability," a design philosophy grounded in permaculture ethics. Drawing on two novels by ecofeminist writer Starhawk—*The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1994) and *City of Refuge* (2016)—the article explores the genre of speculative design fiction for its insights into prototyping more livable futures in the Anthropocene. Starhawk's novels illustrate alterlivability as a set of political commitments, design methodologies, and spatial forms that place disabled, racialized, and poor people at the center of alterlivable worlds.

Keywords livability, urban design, speculative fiction, prototyping, sustainability, permaculture, disability

> Perhaps it is time for all of us to reconsider our loyalties, to consider what might further human survival. Our work is not just sawing the legs off the ladders, but building the structures that can replace them.
> —Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*

The late twentieth-century North American "livable cities" movement imagines future cities as dense, compact, and sustainable. While urban governments promote livability improvements to counteract climate change, however, critics question livability's neoliberal sustainability politics, particularly its tendency to emphasize individual

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accountability, harness market forces, and result in "green gentrification."[1] These critiques dovetail with research on urban beautification and modern eugenics.[2] Indeed, so-called livable cities often shape the urban good life in relation to normative (White, nondisabled, nonfat, and middle class) embodiments deemed worthy of life.[3] Although urban planners invoke livability as progressive, a critical livability concept must address uneven distributions of benefits across populations, in addition to showing how philosophies of life shape design praxis.

Reading livability alongside Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's "alterbiopolitics" and Michelle Murphy's "alterlife,"[4] this paper theorizes *alterlivability* to craft alternatives to neoliberal, eugenic, and colonial world-building. Rather than take capitalism for granted as inevitable, alterlivability conjures visions of livability in spite of (what Anna Tsing calls) "capitalist ruins."[5] I frame alterlivability as a "material-discursive" phenomenon naming entangled ideologies, practices, and built environments.[6] In so doing I urge urban planners to expand their notions of lives worth living, and push humanities scholars to theorize how livable worlds materialize through design.

Whereas capitalist livability defines the urban "good life" as a consumable commodity, feminist and disability scholars call for counter-eugenic futures in which lives currently devalued are made to thrive. But while these "alternative, livable relationalities"[7] imagine paths beyond our current lived conditions, the tensions between these aspirations and the built realities of so-called livable cities reveal that *imagining* the status quo otherwise is insufficient for preventing oppressive urban design practices. Given the capitalist and ableist logics guiding urban design, an alterlivability design praxis is needed that, in ecofeminist, permaculture designer and novelist Starhawk's words not only "saw[s] the legs off of ladders," but also can "build the structures to replace them."[8] Speculative design fiction offers a key site for exploring alterlivable world-building.[9] By removing realist constraints (such as capitalism), this genre narrates world-prototyping as prefigurative politics.[10]

Whether invoked by urban planners or humanists, livability offers prescriptive design *blueprints*, or outcomes of completed design decisions, for desired futures. By contrast, *prototyping*, the domain of alterlivability, is an incomplete, iterative, and frictioned

1. Checker, "Wiped Out By the 'Greenwave'"; Dale and Newman, "Sustainable Development for Some"; McCann, "Livable City/Unequal City." For further discussion of these debates, see below.

2. López-Durán, *Eugenics in the Garden*.

3. "Life unworthy of life" is a Nazi eugenicist term indicating embodiments that were deemed to have no right to live. See Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*; Hamraie, "Enlivened City."

4. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 165; Murphy, "Alterlife."

5. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

6. Hamraie, *Building Access*, 107.

7. Puig de la Bellacasa, "Making Time for Soil," 692.

8. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, 134.

9. Speculation is a rich resource for feminist and disability scholars. See Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*.

10. Boggs, "Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power."

process. In this article I analyze fictional representations of alterlivable prototyping in two speculative fiction novels by Starhawk: *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1994) and *City of Refuge* (2016), both of which center on postapocalyptic California.[11] Starhawk illustrates alterlivability as a set of political commitments, design methodologies, and spatial forms that privilege vulnerable populations and embody the principles of permaculture, an alternative to industrial agriculture that emphasizes sustainable, self-sufficient ecological and social systems. I show that, using pedagogical narration, Starhawk draws on her work in this design movement to explore fictional design prototyping as an ongoing commitment to environmental and social justice.

I begin with a brief background section on the livable cities movement and develop a theoretical framework for alterlivability by drawing on feminist and disability theories. Then I analyze *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *City of Refuge* for their representations of alterlivable design. I show that alterlivability is not simply a matter of additive liberalism, in which cities expand to include more populations; rather, it is an iterative process in which new ways of living otherwise unfold to transform sociopolitical relations and material practices.

Philosophies of Livability

The livable cities movement emerged in the 1980s to define the characteristics of a good city.[12] Proponents in North American cities such as Vancouver, British Columbia, and Austin, Texas, touted small-scale, walkable, and dense neighborhoods with farmers markets, parks, and sidewalk café seating—the opposite of suburban sprawl. In the 1990s, however, livability became the focus of neoliberal urban development in the United States and Canada. While maintaining the aesthetic and social vision of walkable neighborhoods, livability came to mean privatized mixed-use housing, greenway-centric development, and condominiums promoting density. Aligned with the urban planning profession's overwhelming emphasis on economic growth, livability is now dominated by rationalist economic frameworks that calculate the value (and risks) of particular populations to urban economies. Real estate research about "what makes a city livable" also disseminates neoliberal livability through indices published by economic magazines, global finance organizations, and even public health authorities quantify the relative "good life" each city can offer.[13]

Critical geographers differentiate between urban planners' goals (such as economic revitalization) and livability's material outcomes for devalued populations. Some frame livability as an "empty signifier" for prevailing development trends.[14] For others,

11. The novels are part of a trilogy that includes the prequel *Walking to Mercury*, which addresses activism in the 1960s and 1970s but does not engage design themes.

12. On the histories of livability described here, see Hamraie, "Enlivened City," 35–36.

13. Ling, Hamilton, and Thomas, "What Makes a City Livable?"

14. Wetzstein, "Intervention."

livability reinforces neoliberal governance by aligning what is considered "livable" with White, middle-class interests.[15] Highlighting connections to so-called sustainable luxury and consumption, geographic case studies point out that livability can cause "green gentrification" when new parks and greenways raise property values, pushing out low-income residents.[16]

New Urbanist livability advocates rely on historical and cultural narratives about urban spaces to prove that "because growth is inevitable, it must be shaped into the most intelligent possible form," manifested in mixed-use neighborhoods and efficient regional planning.[17] Some claim that urban form ought to supersede concerns with structural inequality. In *Where We Want to Live*, Ryan Gravel, designer of the "Beltline" greenway project in Atlanta, Georgia, argues, "the problem with the way we have been building cities over the last sixty years is . . . not only the physical separation of people by income, race, and age . . . The real problem is . . . [that] generations of people . . . grew up with the shopping mall as the highest standard of how we build our cities."[18] While framing shopping malls as the epitome of urban homogeneity, Gravel does not consider structural racism, slavery, or segregation as producing what he describes as "neighborhoods [without] people who were significantly different from ourselves."[19] He discusses "White flight" in race-neutral, consumer-centric terms—"the massive suburbanization in the second half of the last century when people with mobility left the city and created an entirely new lifestyle for themselves"—rather than the result of racist policies or decisions.[20] His claims render segregation as a neutral accident of infrastructural development or consumer preference.

On social issues with clear infrastructural elements, such as disability accessibility, New Urbanists are ambivalent or resistant. In their *Smart Growth Manual*, Andres Duany and Jeff Speck argue that inclusive design (such as stair-free entrances) prevents the goal of building dense, townhome-style housing (which necessitates stairs). They claim that accessibility "can conflict with other worthwhile goals, notably historic preservation and affordable housing."[21] Invoking "affordable housing" pits accessibility against the needs of lower-income people, while ignoring that disabled people also need accessible and affordable housing. Recalling Gravel, traditional development considerations, such as zoning, historical preservation, and architectural aesthetics, come to outweigh analyses of structural inequality.

15. Ley, "Liberal Ideology."

16. McCann, "Livable City/Unequal City"; Godschalk, "Land Use Planning Challenges"; Curran and Hamilton, "Just Green Enough"; Checker, "Wiped Out by the'Greenwave.'"

17. Duany and Speck, *The Smart Growth Manual*, section 1.

18. Gravel, *Where We Want to Live*, 15.

19. Gravel, *Where We Want to Live*, 15.

20. Gravel, *Where We Want to Live*, 19. On segregation as the result of racist policies, see Erickson, *Making the Unequal Metropolis*.

21. Duany and Speck, *The Smart Growth Manual*, section 14.5.

Critical geographers respond to livability by raising questions about "life" as related to class and race inequality. As Katherine Hankins and Emily Powers observe, "If we examine city spaces that are lauded as highly livable, we can get a sense of who is able to live and how."[22] In addition to infrastructural development, New Urbanist livability emphasizes individual and consumer action against climate change: riding bicycles, taking stairs rather than elevators, and growing food.[23] Human bodies become energy sources for active transportation. Thus, livability opens up bodies as arenas for (human) energy resource "extractivism," which Macarena Gómez-Barris describes as "converting life into commodities."[24] Although dominant sustainability paradigms, such as bicycling infrastructure, mitigate resource use, they do not curtail extractivism from marginalized forms of life.[25] For example, livability economizes life through calculations of productive and unproductive bodies: a frequent argument for walkability, for example, is that it counteracts obesity, and thus decreases insurance costs for employers.[26] Fat bodies are represented as stores of excess energy awaiting extraction through active transportation. Consequently, livability seeks to eliminate obesity (and fat people) from cities.[27] Additionally, accessibility and habitability are often peripheral to sustainability. Similar to mainstream sustainability advocates who (according to Stacy Alaimo) demonstrate "hidden attachments" to the "abled, hyperfit body," livability improvements such as "walkability" infrastructures may reduce accessibility for disabled people by building cities where fitness, rather than rest or access, is central.[28]

Livability thus streamlines populations and spaces. Urban greening, beautification, and exercise promotion reproduce twentieth-century eugenic efforts to revitalize and beautify cities by eliminating supposedly undesirable (disabled, unemployed, unhoused, and fat) bodies and "cleaning up" supposedly "toxic neighborhoods."[29] According to Leslie Kern, economic revitalization has "commodified" the "key principles of feminist urbanity," such as "interconnectivity and mixed use," excluding a focus on "social justice and the equitable distribution of these benefits of city living."[30] Whereas livable cities evoke conviviality through activated public spaces and walkable cities, they take for granted the bodies able to access such spaces. As earlier examples demonstrate, these raced, classed, gendered, and ableist dimensions of livability are unacknowledged by New Urbanists, who frame their preferred types of growth as positive urban development.

22. Hankins and Powers, "Disappearance," 846.

23. Hamraie, "Enlivened City."

24. Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, xix.

25. Tsing, "Threat," 51.

26. Hamraie, "Enlivened City," 44–45. Also see Murphy, *The Economization of Life*.

27. Andrews et al., "Moving Beyond Walkability."

28. Alaimo, foreword, ix. On walkability and ableism, see Hamraie, "Enlivened City"; Imrie, "Disability and Discourses of Movement and Mobility."

29. López-Durán, *Eugenics in the Garden*; Hamraie, "Enlivened City"; Kern, "From Toxic Wreck to Crunchy Chic."

30. Kern, *Sex and the Revitalized City*, 197.

Livability, Otherwise

Alterlivability draws on feminist and disability theory to redefine livability's biopolitics, political economies, and theories of design. It aligns with Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's theory of "habitable worlds": "eugenic worlds" aim to streamline and optimize populations, whereas habitable worlds anticipate life as heterogeneous and build infrastructures to support diverse ways of living-being.[31] Nonnormate disabled lives, Alison Kafer argues, are often understood as suffering and in need of elimination; by contrast, "accessible futures" define disabled people as part of what makes future human life sustainable.[32] As Kim Q. Hall argues, disability and difference ought to be central to "insight about how the border between the natural and the unnatural is maintained and for whose benefit. It means understanding a sustainable world as a world that has disability in it, a perspective that recognizes the instabilities, vulnerabilities, and dynamism that are part of nature cultures."[33] Following Hall, centering disability in sustainability transforms the concept of livability by defining life as complex, nonstandard, and open to change. But habitable worlds name the outcome of desired futures, rather than the design philosophy or prototyping process that can explain how to arrive there. I offer the concept of alterlivability to capture the iterative, messy process of prototyping livable cities otherwise. This concept builds on previous work by María Puig de la Bellacasa and Michelle Murphy. Puig de la Bellacasa devises "alterbiopolitics" as care ethics in relation to Starhawk's (nonfiction) writing on the permaculture movement. According to Puig de la Bellacasa, the prefix "alter," meaning "otherwise," captures "world-making relationalities—that would, in the words of Starhawk, cultivate 'power-with' and 'power-from-within' rather than 'power-over.'"[34]

Alterlivability reorients the power of urban design by placing livability into explicit contact with permaculture, particularly principles of regeneration and biodiversity as alternatives to shallow sustainability. By some accounts permaculture originated in Australia in the late 1970s through the work of Dave Holmgren and Bill Mollison, who developed methodologies for growing ecosystems that learn from and adapt to existing conditions.[35] In contrast to mainstream monocultural agriculture, which typifies the Plantationocene's racist, capitalist, and eugenicist treatment of life, permaculture favors polycultures: self-maintaining forests ecosystems model the conditions for flourishing life.[36] Core permaculture principles—environmental observation, energy storage, self-regulation and feedback, producing no waste, using natural patterns to design

31. Garland-Thompson, "A Habitable World."

32. Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 149–69.

33. Hall, "Cripping Sustainability," 438.

34. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 165.

35. Grayson, "A Short and Incomplete History of Permaculture." Holmgren and Mollison are sometimes framed as adopting a neocolonialist approach to agricultural knowledge and failing to credit Indigenous knowledge. The social permaculture movement attempts to remedy erasure of Indigenous knowledge.

36. Haraway, "Anthropocene."

interactions, designing interdependence rather than segregation, using and valuing diversity, valuing the marginal, and responding to change creatively—convey a "regenerative" design philosophy, wherein ecosystems are dynamic, complex, and emergent.[37] Beyond planting forests in deserts or collecting rainwater for irrigation, permaculture includes the perspective that diversity and attention to marginal life are central to a thriving ecosystem. Furthermore, the "social permaculture" movement forwarded by Starhawk and Pandora Thomas (leader of the Black Permaculture Network) argues that this diversity imperative ought to apply to human relationships.[38] They posit that racialized and disabled people ought to be central to environmental design because they are most at risk of climate-induced harm.[39] Following Starhawk's imperative "to grow soil" as a web of relations, social permaculture adopts what Puig de la Bellacasa calls "bioinfrastructural" design,[40] merging nature and culture in community organizing projects such as "Earth Repair" and "City Repair" to transform gardening into placemaking and antigentrification work.[41] Social permaculture thus challenges the shallow environmentalism of resource preservation by proposing that commitments to marginalized life must shift structures of interaction and decision making.

Alterlivability built from social permaculture departs from the livability movement's emphasis on optimizing already-privileged life for economic growth. But most social permaculture theories are not informed by feminist or disability perspectives on "lives worth living." In their focus on repair they often emphasize bodily and environmental brokenness. Murphy contrasts the "economization of life" (life maximized for economic growth, often toward eugenic imperatives) with "alterlife," or "life already altered, which is also life open to alteration."[42] Whereas eugenicists would devalue life disabled by toxicity, Murphy follows Eve Tuck's concept of "suspending damage," refusing to treat harmed populations as "broken and conquered."[43] Alterlivability combines feminist disability insights about accessible futures with Murphy's alterlife to enable new regimes of valuation surrounding built spaces. As Starhawk's novels will show, recognizing that the residents of car-dependent neighborhoods are harmed by urban planning does not necessitate creating conditions that gentrify these neighborhoods and displace residents. Likewise, it is possible to acknowledge that toxicity produces disability without pursuing sustainable infrastructures that exclude or eliminate disabled people. Alterlivability thus accounts for the conditions under which life is already harmed by the environment, and nevertheless finds ways to thrive.

37. David Holmgren, "Twelve Principles of Permaculture," permaculturepriniciples.com/principles.

38. Starhawk, "Social Permaculture," 88–91; Starhawk, *The Empowerment Manual*. For example, by analyzing Indigenous appropriation within permaculture. See Hardland, "Permaculture and Indigenous Cultures."

39. Starhawk, "A Wild and Diverse Earth Activist Training!"; Thomas, "Social Permaculture."

40. Puig de la Bellacasa, "Encountering Bioinfrastructure," 27.

41. Darwish, *Earth Repair*; The City Repair Project (website), cityrepair.org/.

42. Murphy, "Alterlife," 497.

43. Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 416.

Speculative Design Futures

Speculative design fiction illustrates alterlivability as design praxis. Prototyping—a speculative design methodology—creates new worlds by revising elements of the present reality. But "world-making," Susan Yelavich contends," is "not only possible but is also the essence of what design does. Design acts otherwise."[44] Prototyping does not simply make new worlds by paving over existing ones; it interrogates through "design friction" and conflict.[45] In the trial-and-error processes of speculation and prototyping, infrastructures are politicized and contested; consequently, all invoked futurities are not automatically more livable or progressive. Alterlivability requires evaluating the consequences of each iterative alternative.

Speculative fiction designs new social realities. Literary scholars describe imagined cities as laboratories for technologies (as in science fiction) and social structures (suggesting a genre of "social science fiction").[46] As Carl Abbott writes, urban fiction emerges from a "desire to consider future social and cultural systems that find their most developed and conflicted form in cities."[47] He notes, however, that urban designers also use speculative techniques to imagine the future needs and possibilities of entire populations, to prioritize future outcomes, and to speculate on mass human behaviors in designed spaces.[48] Admittedly, urban planning responds to the world as it is, taking economic structures as inevitable. Given their realist constraints within a capitalist system, when urban planners engage in speculation, ideology is often taken as nonexistent. Likewise, some speculative urban fictions "ignor[e] the primacy of [capitalist] economic relationships that truly determined spatial patterns," such as gentrification.[49] Similarly, livability-centered planning predicts economic futures according to existing systems of power. In contrast to the speculations of "finance capitalism," alterlivability offers anticapitalist speculation, what Aimee Bahng calls "speculating from the margins."[50] Radical speculative fictions highlight the frictioned relations of decolonization and anticapitalism: "speculation as a modality more fundamentally rooted in inconclusive reflection," where the priority is not "tidy resolution" but "inventing other possibilities (alternate realities, upside-down hierarchies, and supernatural interventions)."[51] Nonrealist speculative mediums thus disorient taken-for-granted assumptions about the place of marginalized life in the future.

44. Yelavich, introduction, 17.
45. Marshall, "Afterword," 245; Forlano and Mathew, "Design Friction," 7–24.
46. Abbott, *Imagining Urban Futures*, 11.
47. Abbott, *Imagining Urban Futures*, 7.
48. Abbott, *Imagining Urban Futures*, 8.
49. Abbott, *Imagining Urban Futures*, 7.
50. Bahng, *Migrant Futures*, 2, 23.
51. Bahng, *Migrant Futures*, 8.

Alterlivability in *Fifth Sacred Thing* and *City of Refuge*

Starhawk is most known to environmental humanists in reference to the work of Donna Haraway (whose "Cyborg Manifesto" references Starhawk's *Spiral Dance*),[52] Isabelle Stengers (who adopts from Starhawk her concept of "reclaiming"),[53] and María Puig de la Bellacasa (who uses Starhawk's work to theorize care).[54] Lesser known outside of the permaculture world is Starhawk's ecofeminist permaculture work, including her book *The Earth Path* (2004) and her design school (Earth Activist Training). That Starhawk, a designer, activist, and theorist of regeneration, has written two speculative design *novels* is significant because she uses fiction as a pedagogical and strategic tool. Characters learn permaculture principles, test design prototypes, practice social permaculture in decision making, and redefine theories of livability.[55] As Starhawk writes in the afterword to *City of Refuge*, "the job of fiction is not to espouse a position but to deeply explore a question, through the actions and behaviors and realizations of the characters . . . [The books] are not meant to be prescriptive, but rather, to experiment with possibilities that are easier lived in fiction than in real life."[56] This understanding of speculative fiction as a tool for activist design prototyping distinguishes Starhawk's novels from the feminist speculative fiction canon that includes Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which also include themes of global climate devastation, human engineering, and authoritarian governance.

Specifically, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *City of Refuge* dramatize design prototyping and permaculture as alterlivable challenges to dystopia. What most distinguishes Starhawk's novels, however, is that fiction mirrors and shapes her work as a designer and permaculture teacher. Thus, while fiction allows her to imagine utopias and their limitations, the novels also have the potential to shape nonfictional approaches to urban design. Here, I examine the novels' use of design prototyping in two ways: first, as a design activity taught and undertaken by the characters, and second, in the novels' plot structures, in which unfolding scenes offer new alterlivability prototypes.

Hopelessness and Dystopia

Set in 2048 on the US West Coast, the two novels look back on the previous twenty years, using near-term history to explore the frictions between an unlivable Anthropocene, neoliberal livability, and regenerative alterlivability. In *The Fifth Sacred Thing* resource extraction has left California "dead from years of abuse and from climate change," "dust storms," and the practices of large corporations "stockpiling grain and

52. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

53. Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism."

54. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*.

55. While scholarship on the *Fifth Sacred Thing* focuses on feminist utopianism, ecofeminism, and hope, it does not address these design themes. See Fancourt, "Accessing Utopia"; Haran, "Redefining Hope as Praxis."

56. Starhawk, *City of Refuge* (hereafter *COR*), 662.

seed and medical supplies."[57] After a global disease outbreak, wealthy elites called the Stewards seize power and instate a fundamentalist Christian government. As resisters living on this society's margins explain to visitors from a faraway utopia, the government mandates "family purity," "spiritual purity," and "racial purity," alluding to histories of eugenics and slavery in the United States.[58] The purity laws reflect the Stewards' philosophy of life, in which streamlining and optimizing bodies enables them to extract resources from human and nonhuman beings.

Throughout the novel Starhawk uses engineered life—genetically modified humans and foods, biological warfare, and water rationing—to signify unlivable Anthropocene conditions, illustrating Tsing's observation that the Plantationocene comprises "simplified ecologies designed to create assets for future investments—and to knock out resurgence."[59] The regime manifests in specific built environments: sprawling concrete developments, large-scale factories, farmlands turned to desert, and oceans filled with landfill waste. Eugenics is thus spatialized. Designated as soulless for failing to be productive, former citizens are slated for biocapitalist extraction in work camps and brothels. Their children become purchasable trophy wives, soldiers, athletes, workers, entertainment, and bodies designed to withstand torture. The creation of new life is also racially economized: Isis, a queer Black woman, describes being "bred. You know, engineered" as a competitive runner who is also forced to have sex with the Stewards.[60] First-person accounts reveal the Stewards' repeated the captivity and rape of Black women to produce enslaved bodies, a reference to slavery in the US South. Both the Stewards' victims and their agents take these conditions as inevitable.

Designing Possible Utopias

In *The Fifth Sacred Thing* Starhawk contrasts the dystopian Steward regime with the utopian city of Califia (a future San Francisco), which resisted colonization by the Stewards.[61] The reader first encounters Califia through elder and activist, Maya, described as disabled and Jewish. Through a third person limited perspective, Maya observes the city as a character in her own story, embodying nurturing and regeneration: "Look at it! Maya paused again, breathing heavily. The city was a place of riotous flowers and clambering vines, whose boughs are heavy with ripening fruit"[62] In Maya's telling, Califia's regeneration is also affective and aesthetic: it "has a beautiful beating heart. It cares for its own, and for the stranger. Its streams run with clear water, and the trees that line its

57. Starhawk, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (hereafter *FST*), 297.

58. Starhawk, *FST*, 298–99.

59. Tsing, "Threat," 51–52.

60. Starhawk, *FST*, 185.

61. The name "Califia" recalls Calafia, a mythical Black Muslim warrior queen of California who appears in Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo's *Las sergas de Esplandián* (circa 1500).

62. Starhawk, *FST*, 2.

pathways bow under the weight of fruit anyone is free to pick"[63] Thus, Califia represents an ethos of hope, presaging the genres of solarpunk[64] and "visionary fiction" (which Walida Imarisha frames as "fantastical writing that helps us imagine new just worlds").[65] Urban design, permaculture, and magic affiliate humans and nonhumans in the transformation of energy, land use, transportation, housing, and governance.

Whereas Claire Colebrook asks, "what is life such that it is able to generate a species capable of destroying all life?"[66] Starhawk counters that this same species can create systems that regenerate life through permaculture design ethics: care for the earth, care for people, and care for the future. As Puig de la Bellacasa writes, "in permaculture practices, ethical obligation is related to avoiding and remediating the neglect of the earth's needs."[67] Califians identify with the ethical responsibility to reclaim ruined urban spaces. In the city's foundational (design) narrative, four elderly women (the "Cuatro Viejas") take sledgehammers to streets and to "liberate" the soil from pavement (a permaculture practice known as "depaving"). This approach contrasts with nonfictional livable cities, where increased development may, ironically, produce more paving and construction. Removing concrete regenerates soil life, regrows wild forests full of fruit trees, and restores springs. The Cuatro Viejas' noncompliant action, in turn, spurs further design prototyping. Depaved spaces become "food forests" with layers of edible plants and trees arranged together into self-sustaining systems that solve the problem of hunger by making communal food available in every season. To borrow from Natasha Myers, the gardens "vegetalize" the city through human-plant conspiracies that counteract toxicity and scarcity.[68]

Califia thus responds to defeatist "misanthropocene" thinking with "abundant futures,"[69] or "participatory, experiential infrastructure that offers room for enchantment."[70] The city resists fear-based strategies for addressing climate change that can distance humans from the nonhuman world. As Holly Jean Buck suggests, strategies that "enchant humans-in-nature" by creating immediate connections to nonhumans—such as urban gardening, depaving, and rewilding—can overcome Anthropocene defeatism.[71] While many of the characters also practice magic (for example, by entering traces to channel nonhumans' interests in Council meetings, or by performing healing rituals), permaculture strategies for enchantment offer explicit prototypes for alterlivability.

63. Starhawk, *FST*, 11.
64. Lodi-Ribeiro, *Solarpunk*.
65. Exangel, "Visionary Fiction."
66. Colebrook, "Post-Anthropocene," 12.
67. Puig de la Bellacasa, "Ethical Doings," 165.
68. Myers, "From Edenic Apocalypse," 35–66.
69. Collard, Dempsey, and Sundberg, "Manifesto."
70. Buck, "On the Possibilities of a Charming Anthropocene," 370, 376.
71. Buck, "On the Possibilities of a Charming Anthropocene," 373.

Starhawk combines realist and nonrealist elements to imagine alterlivable utopia. In crafting Califia as an apparently utopian setting, she removes capitalism as a structure shaping access to livability: anticapitalist property relations, labor, access to resources, and social life informs Califian society. According to Califia's Declaration of the "Four Sacred Things," life cannot be economized, bought, or sold.[72] Califia also resists the Stewards' eugenicist "Racial Purity" laws by centering racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Most leaders are people of color and elders. Children learn at least three languages, and "lessons and Council Meetings are always signed as well as spoken, so the deaf are easily integrated into public life."[73] Califia's cultural diversity thus includes disability alongside race and ethnicity, signaling the place of "polycultures" within Califia: diverse forms of life are nurtured, regardless of their biocapitalist value. Although some of these elements would be difficult to implement in nonfictional cities, the combination of familiar phenomena (such as renewable energy and linguistic diversity) with utopian anticapitalism makes the latter appear more achievable.

Permaculture ethics also shape Califia's built environment. The city is a place of abundance: solar panels, wind turbines, and magical earth crystals provide energy for everyone. When sea level rise floods downtown, Califia transitions away from car-centric transportation to accessible paths ("Trackways") and flying gondolas accessible to bicycles, wheelchairs, and pedestrians. At first glance these designs read as New Urbanist fantasies of the livable city, with the emphasis on close-quartered density, sustainability, and multiple forms of mobility. Yet the absence of capitalism renders different outcomes both in terms of design and social relations. In real-world livability developments, such as Atlantic Station in Atlanta, Georgia, planners purport to design spaces that are public, and therefore accessible to all. However, as geographers have shown, such spaces prioritize particular individuals, such as consumers seeking luxury goods.[74] Unlike such developments, all features of Califia are public and free to use. They do not depend on access to wealth-centered housing or neighborhoods, because all Califians are housed. As a result people who are most at risk of displacement by gentrification—including people who are disabled, elderly, and do not work—are given primary access to the city. The city's "ethical doings" thus include both the traditional permaculture emphasis on "avoiding and remediating the neglect of the earth's needs," and also a social framework of valuing human biodiversity as a necessary component of more-than-human survival.[75]

Califia is designed with the inclusion of marginalized people at the center of its regenerative urban ethic. The city rejects capitalist and ableist imperatives for

72. The four sacred things are earth, air, water, and fire. The fifth sacred thing referenced in the title is spirit.

73. Starhawk, *FST,* 49, 47.

74. See Hankins and Powers, "Disappearance."

75. Puig de la Bellacasa, "Ethical Doings," 151–69.

productivity: every citizen earns a basic income and is not required to work to be recognized as part of the community. With their basic needs met, citizens such as Maya's grandson Bird, a disabled, queer, multiracial Black man, participate in the city without the requirement to contribute economically. Unlike livable cities where able-bodied fitness is the norm, disability is everywhere in Califia. All three of the main characters—Madrone, Bird, and Maya—have physical and mental disabilities resulting from injury, chronic illness and overwork, and aging. All three struggle with internalized ableism, making claims such as "I still have use of my legs," "I am not lame," or "I am no cripple."[76] Nevertheless, the city works toward accessibility: "Streets, pathways and new buildings are designed to be accessible for wheelchairs and those with mobility problems. Retrofitting all of the city's three story Victorians would be an undertaking beyond the city's capabilities, but any citizen who becomes disabled can have their own home rebuilt."[77] But while health care is free and while gondolas provide access to the upper hillsides, this society does not completely overhaul its inaccessible structures. Rather, it replicates the existing methods of "retrofitting" to make spaces accessible on a case-by-case basis. This individualization of disability accounts for disparities between social structures and the main characters' internalized ableism. Nevertheless, Califia reverses typical utopian narratives in feminist speculative fiction that often imagine futures in which disability has been eliminated.[78] By making disabled people (and the structures required for accessibility) central to the imagined future, Califia defines disability as valued difference. In this way permaculture design principles shape philosophies of urban lives worth living.

Alterlivable Frictions

While Califia is at first represented as an alterlivable eco-utopia, Starhawk uses internal monologues and dialogues to put this society into friction with the surrounding conditions of unlivability. Maya qualifies her observation of Califia as a utopian "place of riotous flowers" by thinking, "You'd think we had plenty of . . . land, plenty of water. Whereas we've simply learned how not to waste, how to use and reuse every drop."[79] Similarly, Madrone, a queer, multiracial Black woman who works as a healer, contrasts the city's apparent successes with the Steward-engineered ecosystem. Speaking in a council meeting about the Stewards' biological warfare tactics, she argues, "We're living in a toxic stew . . . Don't let the flourishing of the gardens and the clarity of the waters delude you. There are still chemicals in the Bay . . . It's not surprising that we have recurring epidemics. If anything's surprising, it's that we're doing as well as we are."[80]

76. Starhawk, *FST*, 10, 143, 169.

77. Starhawk, "Vision of the City."

78. On eugenicist tropes in speculative fiction regarding disability, see Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 69–89, 149; Allen, *Disability and Science Fiction*.

79. Starhawk, *FST,* 3.

80. Starhawk, *FST*, 51.

Both Maya and Madrone draw attention to what Murphy calls "alterlife," life already altered but searching for ways to live on. Madrone experiences toxicity firsthand in her own chronic illness. She suggests that permaculture gardening alone does not resolve historical legacies of toxicity and pollution that are resulting in epidemics in Califia. Thus, Califia's permaculture utopia is an imperfect iteration of designed survival in a ruined world.

Alterlivability also manifests in the frictions between toxicity and world-building projects premised on care. Califians use permaculture for "calling forth alterlife," imagining ways beyond environmental apocalypse through a methodology of "reclaiming."[81] Isabelle Stengers, borrowing the term "reclaiming" from Starhawk, argues, "Reclaiming means recovering what we have been separated from, but not in the sense that we can just get it back. Recovering means recovering from the very separation itself, regenerating what this separation has poisoned. The need to struggle and the need to heal, in order to avoid resembling those we have to struggle against, are thus irreducibly allied. A poisoned milieu must be reclaimed."[82] Reclaiming, in other words, does not mean restoration or cure. Instead, Califians reclaim urban planning as an alterlivable method that dispenses with the Stewards' fixation development and capital accumulation. Retrofitting the existing built environment to meet the needs of the new society (rather than building new developments) allows Califians to avoid development-based extractivism, gentrification, and dependence on the Stewards.[83] Yet these spaces remain imperfect, sometimes inaccessible, and nearly always embedded in the "toxic stew."

As Starhawk further prototypes the concept of alterlivability in the narrative, she challenges the Califians' beliefs about their society. In another prototype, Starhawk contrasts Califia with other resistant communities that Bird and Madrone visit on their travels. Bird had previously escaped incarceration by the Stewards with the help of two Hillboys, a community of resisters who live in the desert by surviving on chestnuts and small amounts of water. Madrone reverses Bird's journey by traveling south to learn healing techniques from the desert-dwellers. Starhawk renders Bird and Madrone through the characteristics of their nonhuman namesakes to illustrate how ecosystems regenerate. Bird, the musician, sings, travels, and organizes others. Madrone, the healer, is an understory tree and so-called "pioneer species," which can grow entire forests from one stump after a fire and provide shade for smaller bushes until a more vibrant ecosystem emerges.

Throughout their travels, Bird and Madrone share stories of Califia to inspire hope, but their encounters with other resisters challenge them to think differently about livability. Both use pedagogical narration to teach permaculture. In the desert, Madrone meets the Hillboys, who survive scarcity by stealing and foraging. Conversations

81. Murphy, "Alterlife," 494–503.

82. Stengers, "Reclaiming Animism."

83. On retrofit in Califia, see Drapeaud, "Founding the Feminist Utopia."

between Madrone and the Hillboys illustrate permaculture pedagogy. First, the Hillboys share details about the Steward regime, including the devastated environment and purity laws. Most of what the reader learns about this regime comes from dialogue with the Hillboys. In response, Madrone describes Califia using pedagogical narration and instruction: "We don't just plant a garden," she explains. "We create an ecosystem that can sustain itself as much as possible with a minimum of outside energy—including our own."[84] Illustrating design friction, Madrone's perceptions of the Hillboys as living in scarcity are shattered, however, when she meets the Melissas. These apiarists live among and care for bees that pollinate chestnut trees necessary for the Hillboys survival. The Melissas embrace what Murphy frames as "entanglement, kinship, and responsibility": by caring for and becoming physically and psychically bonded with the bees, they share both the "symbiosis of multispecies being" and "the material enmeshments of chemical exposures" in which bees can account for their environmental conditions by producing healing honey.[85] After the bees call Madrone to join the Melissas, she gains the ability to communicate with them and produce honey medicines with her body. The Melissas personify Tsing's distinction that livability is "never exclusively a human issue; like all other forms of life, we can only live successfully by living together with others."[86] In her becoming-bee, staunchly independent Madrone becomes interdependent with other beings, and her ability to regenerate life reaches beyond permaculture to forms of organizing that become more salient in the next book.

The most explicit challenge to Califian utopianism appears when Madrone and Bird come upon the self-identified "Monsters," a group of people with congenital disabilities resulting from living in a nuclear testing site long thought to be abandoned.[87] Starhawk's descriptions of the Monsters recalls Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks* in which a nondisabled outsider is initiated into a group of disabled circus performers who declare her "one of us!" From Bird and Madrone's perspectives, the Monsters appear as having "faces oddly distorted," to be "missing a hand or an arm;" one woman has a congenital amputation, another person a cleft palate, and a pair of twins both have hump backs.[88] The Monsters immediately challenge the Califians' perspectives. Morton, whose body is described as "end[ing] at the hips," explains their home to Bird: "It's livable. . . . For us. Yeah, there's probably still radiation."[89] "We work to heal the land" with magic and regenerative agriculture, clarifies Rhea, who has a cleft palate.[90] The Monsters embody what Gómez-Barris frames as "heterogeneous forms of living that are not about destruction or mere survival within the extractive zone, but about the

84. Starhawk, *FST*, 296.
85. Murphy, "What Can a Body Do?," 7.
86. Tsing, "Threat," abstract.
87. Starhawk, *FST*, 93.
88. Starhawk, *FST*, 92, 91, 94, 99.
89. Starhawk, *FST,* 92.
90. Starhawk, *FST*, 92–93.

creation of emergent alternatives."[91] Not only do they live in a community on condemned land that they regenerate, but as people whose bodies take shape through toxicity, the Monsters also embody alterlife. They are not, in Murphy's words, "waiting for apocalypse—apocalypses of many kinds have already happened, livable worlds keep being snatched away."[92] The Monsters insist that the land is still habitable: by approaching the apocalypse through regeneration, they carve out space for bodies deemed "injured, disturbed, or 'abnormal' . . . in fields such as ecology, toxicology, and epigenetics" to "push back against the eugenic residues that calculates lives worth living."[93] In their radical embrace of disability, the Monsters challenge Califian exceptionalism and ableism, particularly narratives of impairment and toxicity as lack or disqualification.

Despite appearances the Monsters' territory is habitable and accessible, designed by and for disabled people. Their alterlivability is even more radical than that of the Califians: while Bird and Madrone are both disabled and lived in Califia, a disability-inclusive society, they react with shock when they encounter the Monsters. Bird is initially surprised by Morton, but soon recognizes his own disablement (he "hadn't realized what a toll enforced immobility [in the prison] would take on him").[94] He learns strategies for organizing and survival from the disabled "Monsters" that he uses in *City of Refuge*. But Madrone, a healer with chronic illness, continues to treat the Monsters as potential patients, feeling "a temptation to return and help them," rather than accepting their differences.[95] Starhawk turns a critical lens onto the Califians by shifting to the third person to describe these encounters.

Building a City of Refuge

Another iteration of alterlivability appears in *City of Refuge*, when Bird and Madrone travel to Angel City (a future Los Angeles) to "build a city of refuge in the heart of the enemy's territory." *City of Refuge* enters into more direct conversation with urban planning discourses than *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. Angel City's structure illustrates class hierarchies: Bird and Madrone pass the "wealthy haunts of the Primes [Steward leaders] near the university," the "tree-lined streets of Beverly Hills," "giant apartment buildings that housed techies and professionals," and "crowded tenements of concrete that towered toward the sky."[96] While for the rich, the city is largely car-centric and sprawling, working class people walk and bike by economic necessity due to a lack of public transit, rather than fitness imperatives.[97] This architectural and scenic imagery, which closely

91. Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 4.
92. Murphy, "What Can a Body Do?," 5.
93. Murphy, "What Can a Body Do?," 8.
94. Starhawk, *FST*, 209.
95. Starhawk, *COR,* 184.
96. Starhawk, *COR*, 206.
97. Starhawk, *COR*, 196.

resembles present-day nonfictional Los Angeles, reinforces the story's location in the near-term, possible future, lending realism to the design interventions that follow.

In *City of Refuge*, the reader learns that the Stewards rose to power as a result of events sparked by so-called livable urban development. An area called the "Death Zone" was formerly "Harmony Village," a livability development that housed a "popular spa, with natural hot springs," where "enterprising New Urbanists had renovated the old hotel."[98] Connecting livability to green gentrification, Starhawk writes,

> In the 2020s, the area became the site of one of the last great venues of the old regime. Developers pushed out poor people and built a shopping mall along the street front, with high-rise condos behind. Two years of construction noise had done in the spa, and the new buildings blocked the sunlight from the gardens of the older houses. Many of the more stable residents left, and the area fell into decay once more. Harmony Village opened its doors in 2025. The developers pocketed a fortune, in part by skimping on the cement in their concrete. The shortfalls became evident when the earthquake hit. Walls crumpled, and roofs fell in. Doubly unfortunate, Harmony lay in the direct path of the toxic fumes that decimated the city.[99]

The Stewards used this event to seize control of the government. In other words, the Stewards' regime and the violence that followed were a direct consequence of livability-centered gentrification and development.

Starhawk's use of Harmony Village as the Death Zone's setting places concepts of regeneration and alterlivability in direct conversation with the New Urbanist livable cities movement, suggesting that spatial design has consequences and must be reclaimed if life is to flourish. When Bird and Madrone enter the Death Zone, they find "collapsed buildings, canyons of ruins separated by dry ravines of asphalt backed with rubble, utterly deserted."[100] These scenes reveal the necropolitics of capitalism: office buildings full of the skeletons of the poisoned, still sitting at desks, surrounded by dust.[101] Yet the Death Zone harbors conditions for new life to flourish: a Chinese Tree of Heaven (typically considered invasive and undesirable) and thistles, dandelions, and lamb's quarters—all nutritious and medicinal plants that flourish as wild weeds—are found "growing in the dirt that's blown into the cracks" of pavement and serving as metaphors for regeneration.[102] Devalued plant life catalyzes alterlivable resistance.

In the Death Zone, Bird and Madrone combine learned lessons from Califia, the Hillboys, the Monsters, and the Melissas. A comrade asks, "nobody goes into the Death

98. Starhawk, *COR*, 208.
99. Starhawk, *COR*, 208.
100. Starhawk, *COR*, 208.
101. Starhawk, *COR*, 210.
102. Starhawk, *COR*, 207.

Zone . . . How can you show people an alternative in a place they're afraid to go?"[103] Yet Bird and Madrone find this site ripe for regeneration because the Monsters have taught them that it is possible to occupy seemingly toxic territories without being noticed. They continue the Califian permaculture practice of removing concrete, composting, and building soil. They plant seeds, summon bees for pollination, and tap into the city's water lines to help the plants grow.[104] Because the Stewards' control of water is central to their control over life, Madrone and Bird reclaim water from the guts of the city's pipe infrastructure, allowing it to flow without ration. They use the skeletons left behind to design a tunnel-like "Gateway of the Dead" that leads into a "Womb of Rebirth," a courtyard featuring sculptures signifying hope and welcome for new members of their community.[105] With small-scale gardens and decorative structures in place, they recruit people away from life in debt to the Stewards and convince them to join the city of refuge.

In this design process, Starhawk again turns to themes of friction, conflict, and diversity. Unlike the Califian utopia, where racial and bodily diversity are allowed to flourish, in the Stewards' territory, there are few disabled people: most have been euthanized or forced to work to death in camps. People of color exist, but work in subservient positions due to the Racial Purity laws. In this setting, the Califian's simultaneous use of American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken English to communicate, coupled with their dark skin, make them dangerously conspicuous. Despite discontinuing the use of ASL, Bird uses his apparent disability and dark skin to his advantage by dressing as a disabled busker.[106] This allows him to reenter Angel City and sing songs with coded messages that he uses to recruit others to the city of refuge. Those who decode the messages arrive at the Gateway of the Dead. Passing through, they find unexpected gardens, free living spaces built into the ruins, and a growing community of people building political power. Such design elements are pedagogical and affective: they convey passage from unlivable dystopia into alterlivable prototyping.

To demonstrate alterlivable design, Starhawk once again adopts pedagogical narration. First, Bird and Madrone teach the defectors about permaculture principles and encourage them to work. In one scene residents clear space for a plaza: "With four adults working together, they could lift heavier chunks of rubble. Madrone rigged levers and Bird made rope slings to haul some of the bigger boulders. While the grown-ups worked, the children were set to stomp clay and sand together into a kind of natural cement called cob."[107] This pedagogical scene provides technical directions for natural building, a common permaculture practice. It clearly delineates materials, roles, and

103. Starhawk, *COR*, 200.
104. Starhawk, *COR*, 276.
105. Starhawk, *COR*, 222, 328–9.
106. Starhawk, *COR*, 291.
107. Starhawk, *COR*, 318.

steps toward an outcome. The third-person perspective also adds social commentary on the city's evolving structure:

> Forming the Refuge out of rubble had resulted in an odd, organic city plan of small, open squares linked by narrow corridors, like a walled medieval town or an ancient casbah. It offered surprise after surprise, like opening a set of nested boxes, each revealing a new mystery. This next plaza was wider, and someone with a strong sense of geometry had divided it into a mandala of alternating patches of quinoa and bush beans, surrounded by beds of the extremely drought-tolerant chia. Surprising, really, how much they could actually grow in this space.[108]

These descriptions point to the affective possibilities of designing the city of refuge, where design results in wonder and hope about regeneration. From Madrone's close-limited perspective, "we're no longer a bunch of refugees, huddled in the ruins, she thought. We have a culture. We are a city."[109] But because the residents are still healing from the trauma of life under the Steward regime, the city of refuge is not a conflict-free utopia. In one scene, "a huge argument broke out [over how to design neighborhoods], that threatened to escalate into a fistfight."[110] When community members quarrel over resources, or vestiges of racist and eugenicist beliefs, Bird and Madrone facilitate a social permaculture process that teaches design and communication skills. They guide the community to set up workers' "guilds," schools, and other social structures to address the needs of this new society.[111]

So successful is the city of refuge that it builds a massive population without the Stewards' notice, and this population leads public revolts that eventually lead to the downfall of the government. In a final scene of permaculture design, instituted on a broad scale, an omniscient narrator reveals the outcome of previous permaculture training. Following the successful revolution,

> Crews fanned out into the city, tearing up the streets, sculpting the land to capture and hold the rain, liberating the pipes for water. They planted groves of citrus trees and started new groves. On the drier slopes of the hills, they set saplings of olives that could live for a thousand years, underplanted with fragrant hedges of lavender and rosemary and thyme. They resurrected the sad trickle that had once been a river, brought it out of the imprisoning concrete to nourish cattails and sedges and birds.[112]

Affectively and aesthetically, this scene connects the City of Refuge to Califia, turning to tactics of depaving and rewilding. Like the madrones, bees, and chestnut trees that

108. Starhawk, *COR* 398.
109. Starhawk, *COR* 333.
110. Starhawk, *COR* 336.
111. Starhawk, *COR*, 399.
112. Starhawk, *COR*, 659.

facilitate life on the margins of the Stewards' regime, life already-altered becomes the progenitor of refuge and regeneration.

Despite these successes, some accessible elements of habitable worlds and accessible futures (so central to *The Fifth Sacred Thing*) appear to drop out of *City of Refuge*. The focus rests instead on designing permaculture solutions oriented toward a more lasting revolution. This shift in perspective lends the impression that radical inclusion is more possible within a utopian, anticapitalist society than in one closer in historical memory to the Steward regime. But this point also underscores the role of prototyping in the narrative: rather than strive for utopian purity or perfection at each stage, Starhawk tests scenarios for world-building in an already-colonized, already-toxic world.

Conclusion

Livable cities aspire toward futures characterized by hyperfit bodies, verdant plant growth, and mixed-use zoning. Visitors to such cities may perceive them as utopian. Like Califia, where clear streams of water flow, food grows abundantly, and streets stage diverse social scenes, livable cities may appear to embody a liveliness that counteracts suburban sprawl. In both realist and speculative cities, however, perceptions of livability are shaped by narrative and representation. Design narratives of urban greening may promise sustainability while eclipsing gentrification. Activated public spaces may exclude people who are racialized, poor, fat, unhoused, and disabled from representations of the good urban life. Despite advocating for infrastructure as a tool for healing cities, New Urbanist theories of livability, smart growth, and urban diversity often preclude an analysis of structural inequality. Thus, livability is a value assigned to built environments that materialize through specific values and practices, not a self-evident concept with universal meaning.

Feminist and crip philosophies of livability, by contrast, define livable worlds as those in which social and environmental justice are coextensive imperatives. Alterlivability is the term that I offer to reclaim livability as a justice-driven and anticapitalist design method that commits itself to the ongoing work of prototyping, trial-and-error, friction, and revision on the way to better urban futures. By highlighting alterlivability as design praxis, I foreground the nonstandard urban forms, agents, and values that can render cities as regenerative, and thus resist New Urbanism's exclusionary approach to livability. Starhawk's speculative design novels, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *City of Refuge,* dramatize permaculture as a nonutopian prototyping practice that can inform antieugenic design in support of the most marginal forms of life. The novels thus bring alterlivability theory to bear on critical sustainability concepts, showing that permaculture principles provide useful alternatives to New Urbanist economic and social imperatives.

As speculative design fiction demonstrates, imagining the future is an unfinished project, the beginning of a story rather than its culmination. These points about speculative design fiction also have implications for urban planning and design practice.

Although urban planning is field driven by capitalist development objectives, alterlivability offers urban planners tools for more careful analyses of the good urban life, coupled with a design praxis centering prototyping and experimentation. Building on existing efforts to desegregate cities on the basis of race, class, and disability, Starhawk's novels invite urban planners to subvert economic and eugenicist logics. Alterlivability can thus challenge the racial and economic displacements that produce housing insecurity, the "hostile architectures" (such as divided bench seats) that prevent public sleeping, or the resource extraction and construction processes that create toxic environmental conditions. Crucial to this theoretical and political transition, however, is the recognition of life as livable beyond economic calculations regarding extraction or productivity. As alterlivable designs in Starhawk's novels demonstrate, urban design can draw on disability, race, and gender as unexpected sources of knowledge about building urban spaces and communities that subvert capitalist imperatives. For urban planners committed to more just worlds, alterlivable prototyping, politics, and ethics can thus grow the soils for the worlds to come.

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