

Understanding a Future Yet to Take Shape: The Worlds of Butler, Le Guin and Atwood as Prism for Building (in) Society

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Abstract

An issue on narrating shared futures ('How will we live together?') implies being able to conceive of a mutual and shared experience. The history of shared heritages often contains other figures in the margins: those who were not seen as part of the dominant cultural narrative, or whose contribution to its heritage went unacknowledged. The holistic view of the 2018 Davos declaration on *Baukultur* embraces a more integral view of the built environment and society. In order to explore some of the cultural narratives that shape our past and envision a shared future, this article takes a closer look at three science fiction authors and how their stories draw lessons from the past into a narration of possible futures. Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood have each envisioned futures that draw from contemporary developments and expand them to an

overarching logic as the setting of their tales. Rather than directly examining (un)built heritages, this article examines the underlying cultural logic of building on the past. If architecture provides a foundation for a shared (and inclusive) future, the stories constructed by these authors show how the built environment resonates with societal principles, aiding or hindering particular collective values.

Keywords

Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood

'How will we live together?' This is a question that has been asked throughout the history of architecture, with particularly salient moments providing many different visions of a shared future. The question has resulted in utopian projections and idealist projects, and it marks a great deal of architecture's history, particularly since the nineteenth century. These possible futures, whether sketched out in broad contours or in great detail, often demonstrate salient features of their own time. In this manner, the visions materialised in architecture – whether they remain on paper or come to be realised – share features with science fiction narratives, which build on a (recognisable) societal logic in order to envision other futures or alien worlds. In this article I explore the underlying cultural logic of a shared future through this dual perspective of architecture and the extrapolation of future worlds in a selection of science fiction novels from 1972 through 2013. In so doing, I aim to gain insight into current, holistic perspectives in architecture and heritage, such as the Davos declaration of 2018, which explicitly approaches 'building culture' as a holistic activity, stating that '*Baukultur* embraces every human activity that changes the built environment'.¹

The departure point of an issue on narrating shared futures also means being able to conceive of a mutual and shared experience, thereby acknowledging that it is possible to tap into a shared, communal, or intersubjective understanding. In this sense, one must be able to apprehend a recognisable cultural logic in the project or in the narrative. In this article, a series of future visions by Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018), Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) and Octavia Butler (1947–2006) provides a coherent narrative of societal habits in relation to the built environment, thereby offering a foundation for a shared (and inclusive) future. The stories constructed by these acclaimed authors help to show how the built environment resonates with societal principles, aiding or hindering particular collective values.

Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that the shared futures envisioned in architecture have also been marked by exclusions. For example, the narrative of modern architecture may have been aimed at the masses, but its realisations were often only available to a more privileged group of clients. In other words, the history of shared futures often contains other figures in the margins: those who were not seen as part of the dominant cultural narrative (or indeed of the envisioned future), or whose contribution to its history went unacknowledged. Finally, a rising awareness of the many non-human actants that are (or should be) part of a shared future has also shifted these visions from strongly human-centred to a more inclusive approach, taking into account a variety of lifeforms.

Rethinking the future: recalibrating modernism

The twenty-first century has seen a number of shifts in architecture debates, which arguably are founded on recalibrations of modernist thinking that took place from the 1970s onward. Central issues that were taken on in the past fifty years include a reevaluation of ‘the presence of the past’ (the theme of the first architecture biennale in 1980), a revisiting of the built environment in relation to the social fabric, and the multiple perspectives that are expressed in different cultures and contexts.² Many of these issues were first raised in the context of postmodernism, a term that in architecture was explicitly positioned as a counterweight or reconsideration of modernism, which was felt to be lacking in symbolic richness and awareness of context. All in all, these shifts in thinking constitute a plea for resituating architecture and its impact in the (expanding) context it affects. This approach resonates with the Davos declaration of 2018, which positions societal values and the built environment in relation to each other. As such, the discussion of cultural heritage and the built environment has become broader than specific buildings, and instead

are fundamentally entangled with questions on shared values. In this article, they will be addressed as expressions of the cultural imagination, as conceptual structures and material artifacts that help to define societal logic.

In this context, the increasing attention given to questions of climate change and the impact of architecture is hardly surprising. A holistic perspective on the built environment and cultural heritage must by necessity include urgent challenges such as the effects of climate change, particularly given the large impact of building on global emissions.³ A heightened awareness of particular contexts and environmental concerns was present in the architecture debates of the 1970s, but in recent years has become increasingly fundamental.⁴ Issues of ‘site’ or ‘context’, both important conditions in architecture, are expanding to a general question of ecologies and entanglements. While the environment has been present in architectural debates in recent history, it is now rapidly transforming from ‘background’ or ‘precondition’ to an active understanding and logic that underpins every step of the design process.

As an expression of the cultural imagination, architecture is perhaps more rooted in a conceivable reality than science fiction. That is to say, the implication of the architectural drawing is usually (but not always) the possibility of building. At the same time, both architecture and science fiction articulate societal values and concerns. As such, there are relevant ideas to be gleaned from science fiction novels, particularly those set in a recognisable yet distinctive future. These novels often pick up on contemporary developments and magnify particular features; they provide believable future scenarios for a world yet to be shaped. In this manner, they also reflect the societal values shaped in and with the built environment, which are to be found at all levels, as also emphasised in the Davos declaration: ‘*Baukultur* encompasses existing buildings, including monuments and other elements of cultural heritage, as well as the design and construction of contemporary buildings, infrastructure, public spaces and landscapes.’⁵ From the perspective of *Baukultur*, the cultural imagination is present both in exceptional works of architecture and in the everyday environment.

The three authors selected for this article, Ursula K. Le Guin, Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler, represent a critical perspective within their own domain and in the context of architecture, albeit all from a North American viewpoint. Le Guin and Butler were both from the west coast of the United States, and Atwood is from the east of Canada. The writings examined here show their North American roots, yet their narratives also provide more generally applicable questions of how society works – or could be envisioned differently. They share a feminist approach, and have each written out many possible futures, on earth

and beyond. They have each envisioned futures that draw from contemporary developments and expand them to an overarching logic as the setting of their tales. Their stories serve as warnings, to present possible societies, and to reflect on the pain of historical atrocities.⁶ Overall, their stories examine the cultural narratives that shape our understanding of a shared past and a shared future, and their approaches show a heightened awareness of structures of subjugation, exclusion and power, drawing lessons from the past into a narration of possible futures.

The works selected for this article serve to tease out particular narratives that help to situate how we bond with our built environment, indeed, how we understand our heritage through multiple lenses of historical coincidence, of cultural narrative and of social context. The stories are reflections on their own time, refracted through the prisms of alien worlds and uncertain futures. In this, they provide a cultural imaginary that brings the present into sharper focus. Moreover, in combination with an architectural perspective, they are a powerful example of how the cultural imagination is articulated in multiple iterations across disciplines.

The efforts of science fiction to give form to the inconceivable consequences of climate change are unmistakable (certainly since the 1970s), even if at a distance in either time or space. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, novels of speculative or science fiction have provided social critique and evocative visions of possible futures, and as such they provide a cultural imaginary to envision what we may have found important, or dismissed, or torn down.⁷ Certainly the works highlighted in this article show an awareness of the tenuous relationship between humans and the environment, and their inclusion of ecologies and incorporation of climate change in their narratives may be remarkable to those who feel the urgency of this topic is recent. Yet one must also bear in mind that by the 1970s, there were already groundbreaking publications such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and the Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth* (1972). Yet while the knowledge has been present and available, it can become more tangible through the cultural imagination. This article therefore focuses on elements in the story that align with broad narratives that may not yet have come fully into focus, based on evocations of a society that is expressed not only in its conventions but also in its material reality, in artifacts and in the built environment.

Settings and contexts

From today's perspective, Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy is perhaps the most immediately recognisable, both in terms of the built environment she describes and its potential transformation. The series comprises *Oryx*

and *Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *Maddaddam* (2013).⁸ The narrative takes place in some unidentified future, and it describes the aftermath of a global pandemic from different perspectives. In *Oryx and Crake*, the reader follows the events leading up to the pandemic and its aftermath through the ruminations of Jimmy, who calls himself 'Snowman'. Through Jimmy, the reader learns that genetic manipulation has become common, that there are now spliced animals such as 'wolvogs' and 'rakunks' roaming the land. As a result of these genetic manipulations, increasingly dangerous microbes are circulating and treated with the utmost vigilance. In *Oryx and Crake*, a world emerges that is strongly drawn along lines of what we would now call big pharma and big tech, where corporations do cutting-edge research to expand their profits, and where those who are part of these corporations (with genetic splicing and microbial and immune research) are under constant surveillance within the compound. Others live outside in the dangerous and unruly 'pleeblands'. Those outside need to scrounge and scavenge, eking out a living from gathering and cultivating small patches of land. Here, the early twenty-first-century world provides countless freedoms and ease for a privileged class, but is equally defined by restrictions, with walled and guarded compounds under constant threat of biological contamination.

The society described is far from the type of 'living together' discussed in current debates, yet it draws out lines already visible today: gated communities and the privileges of wealth and access, versus those who survive in the margins. In *The Year of the Flood* the reader becomes more familiar with the pleeblands, primarily through a religious group called God's Gardeners, who live on abandoned rooftops. In their religion, the pandemic is presented as a biblical cleansing and called the 'waterless flood', and their saints include a number of well-known ecologically-oriented thinkers of the twentieth century such as James Lovelock and Rachel Carson.

The buildings and infrastructure described in the trilogy, especially in *The Year of the Flood*, are likely familiar to those currently living in the US or Canada, or perhaps even many other globally-oriented cities. Atwood's large-scale mass extinction event may have seemed somewhat remote when the books were first published between 2003 and 2013, but after the global pandemic of 2020–22, the books ring eerily familiar in their details of hygiene, distancing and disinfectants. The remaining population rebuilds life in the detritus of the cities, reimagining the everyday environment through small-scale interventions. God's Gardeners are vaguely reminiscent of the ecofeminist movement and of 1960s communes that sought to return to nature, combined with eco-Christian elements

that reconcile scientific progress with stewardship of the environment.

In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, published ten years earlier, walled compounds play a similarly prominent role in the residential environment.⁹ Here, a version of California emerges that is largely privatised and that is also deeply marked by social inequality and climate change. The privileged class is secure and has access to amenities, while less fortunate people who still own property cluster together in walled neighbourhoods and grow their own food to supplement costly store-bought goods. Clean water is increasingly scarce and more expensive than gasoline, and services such as the police and the fire department come at a cost. Those who do not own property are seen as drifters and referred to as the 'street poor'.

The protagonist Lauren Olamina is the daughter of a preacher, and her observations are interspersed with the verses that form the beginnings of what will become Earthseed, a religion that assumes people will eventually migrate to space. Through Olamina's journal, Butler paints an evocative picture of the late-twentieth-century city fallen into ruin, where the neighbourhood is walled off by necessity: 'Crazy to live without a wall to protect you. Even in Robledo, most of the street poor – squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general – are dangerous.'¹⁰

In the *Parable of the Sower* three types of environments play a central role and define the chronology of the book. First, the spaces of the former city, which have increasingly become gated enclaves, where families and friends group together. There are occasional references to a vaguely traditional architecture that appears to include a variety of influences from the broader southwest United States and western Mexico. Second, the transitional space of the highway, rarely used by motorised traffic, but still the main connecting arteries between the cities of the west coast of the United States. And third, a self-sustaining type of farmhouse, situated in and protected by the landscape. This is the environment Olamina eventually reaches after she has travelled north along the highway, finding people along the way who are interested in her views on Earthseed. Other spaces also play a role throughout the book – an implied corporate area that oscillates between traditional industry and contemporary service, a vaguely militarised version of the motor home that serves to both house and protect its occupants, and the occasional gang-demolished ruin – but the main areas of the narrative are clearly grafted onto contemporary (or late twentieth-century) California.

Compared to these eminently recognisable environments, Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*, a novella first published in 1972, is far removed from what we know.¹¹ The story is set on a planet twenty-six lightyears

from Earth, a distant logging colony. From the beginning the narrative is coloured by a tone of domination, of disregard for anything other than the (male) self. The reader is dropped into the life of an off-world colony where an army and loggers are at work. Earth has no more (or very little) wood, and humans have turned to other planets for their resources. In the first chapter, Captain Davidson, a member of the military staff is thinking about the women who have just been brought in as brides or as 'recreational females', and at the same time thinking about how to keep the 'creechies' in line. 'Creechies' is the derogatory word the military use for the indigenous Athshean population, a small and furry green humanoid they have enslaved and generally consider stupid and slow. Davidson considers the environment something to be tamed and used for resource extraction. This attitude is subtly present in the buildings of the colony: barracks and prefab cement slabs, nothing of aesthetic or cultural value. While one could argue that this is due to the architecture being merely a functional backdrop to the narrative, I would say that rather, it is meant to show something about the current (then 1970s) world. Or as one of the ecological specialists in the crew notes to Davidson: 'You want to make this world into Earth's image, eh? A desert of cement?'¹²

The novella alternates between different views throughout the chapters, shifting from the military and coloniser perspective, to the scientific or anthropological perspective of trying to understand the indigenous population, to the Athshean perspective. This allows Le Guin to contrast the different and often opposing habits, emphasising the culture of dominance and colonisation in the human world to highlight what we might see as a more nature-integrated approach to environment in the alien world. The homes of the Athsheans are largely ensconced in the ground, built into hollows and the shoulders of the trees in the forest. The Athsheans wonder at the destruction that comes along with the 'yumens' (in their own language), describing how they cut down all the trees and leave nothing but beach (as they have no word for desert). These reflections serve to highlight the extractive logging already taking place in many areas of North America at the time. The habits of the Athshean community seems more akin to what was known at the time of jungle-dwelling tribes of South America. Whether these are direct inspiration is less important than the manner in which Le Guin taps into the imagination of a society based in care for environment from the perspective of being part of the environment rather than dominating it.

Overall, the three authors emphasise the importance of collective action and the common good. Whether concerning the destruction of an ecosystem on the planet Athshe, the destruction of a community in future California, or

rebuilding a community in the wake of a pandemic, one of the key values put forward is care for those around us, for understanding the interconnection between people and their surroundings.

Past tense and future perfect

These narratives all highlight different ways of relating to the environment, providing a clear view of the dangers of abstracted and self-centred thinking on the level of the individual, and of extractive capitalism as a system. Topics such as exclusion and domination are incorporated in the scenarios, and are emphasised in the structures they envision their characters to be living in. The narratives build on the mutual interaction of society and environment: having walled-off sections of the city in order to keep out others reduces the ability of those living inside or outside to empathise with each other. The wall constructs an artificial boundary that increasingly becomes part of the actions of the society it serves.

The narratives of these novels show a resonance between environment, architecture and the cultural imagination. Their environmental constellations reflect back societal habits and how they are shaped by design decisions. The narratives thus help to examine how particular buildings are seen to embody particular values. Octavia Butler's work, for example, shows a heightened sensitivity to exclusion and the potential danger of groupthink. Her sensitivity runs to the use of – and care for – the land. Whether intentionally or not, she may be the most eco-conscious of the three writers addressed in this article, though each has clear and unmistakable positions on the care for the planet. They show the type of awareness that Donna Haraway might call 'situated knowledge', which highlights the importance of 'other voices' in providing important new and complementary forms of knowledge not predetermined by dominant narratives.

What writers like Le Guin, Atwood and Butler potentially add to disciplinary debates on cultural heritage, is to highlight implicit societal values and preconceptions that may be linked to architectural and urban qualities. Their narratives offer a coherent worldview that makes the entanglement of society and its built environments clear. Through these scenarios, the historical continuity of our built fabric is placed in the critical view of unforeseen futures. Both Butler and Atwood present recognisable environments that have been repurposed or have transformed due to fundamental changes and ruptures in society. In *The Year of the Flood*, we are reintroduced to the late-twentieth-century city, but now from the perspective of living on rooftops. In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy lives in wooded areas along the shore, and takes shelter from storms under the remains of twentieth-century infrastructure like crumbling bridges.

For Atwood, 'living together' is expressed best in the structures of God's Gardeners, which recapture some typical utopian features such as an equitable distribution of labour and shared communal spaces. They are a vegetarian religious sect, living in a commune on the rooftops, and share the responsibilities of cultivating the garden and foraging for food.

In Atwood and Butler in particular we can read the traces of the late twentieth century and of concerns about an increasingly stratified society, where the privileged class can retreat behind the walls of gated communities and compounds. They are the only ones who can afford luxuries (such as personal enhancement in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*) or even basic necessities (such as interventions by the fire department, which come at a fee in Butler's *Parable of the Sower*). Those left outside of the compounds are left to their own devices, and by necessity survive on handouts or by scavenging, and they scrounge together their food and shelter, living in the margins and on outskirts of the cities. These themes are recognisable as fictional counterparts to concerns voiced by many scholars, concerns that the fabric of society is no longer shared but rather isolated in small heterotopic and homogeneous communities.¹³ In Atwood's trilogy the restrictions and surveillance are sometimes aggressive (including strip-searches of women entering the compound) but mostly more insidious: mail being read, computers being confiscated. In this she reflects concerns of her time, when the Internet was already broadly in use and the power of big tech and data collection was on the rise. In Butler's work, the restrictions are a combination of negligence (the absence of police and fire department intervention) and aggression: trespassers coming to steal fruit off the trees and valuables from the homes, or simply vandalise, preferably by arson.

All of these books provide a spectrum of architectural environments that can show us some of the values implied in their material forms. Butler's parables provide a rural perspective, back to the land. Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* takes the ruins as its departure point, but although she adds a feminist perspective to the late-twentieth-century buildings, she uses the rubble as foundation for envisioning her new society. Le Guin's forest takes in the ecological concerns of the 1960s and 1970s, and expands them to a coherent logic of a symbiotic relationship with the forest in alien surroundings. In fact, the manner in which Le Guin creates a language and social order that aligns with the ideas of the community as a whole is akin to the holistic approach of the Davos declaration.

Heritage: everyday presence and cultural imagination

The Davos declaration suggests that we not only examine

what is of value in our histories and traditions, but also that we understand the cultural imagination at work, that we gain insight into the mutual interaction between the built environment and the society it co-creates. More than anything, these science fiction narratives allow us to enter a different world and envision other relations to the environment, built and otherwise. Atwood describes a city after a pandemic has caused full societal collapse and buildings and infrastructures are no longer maintained. The series shows human communities working in the margins of what was once constructed. Butler returns to what might seem a pastoral ideal with the self-sustaining household in a remote area, yet is grounded in feminist approaches of working together to provide for the community.¹⁴ And Le Guin uses an alien community to highlight the differences between the logic of dominance and extraction versus a more integrated approach to environment and resources. All three include fundamental changes to the earth's climate.

What these stories show beyond the particular narratives of a feminist, egalitarian, embedded and entangled perspective, is that there are cultural and material expressions particular to a time and a context. In this, they provide a specific, concrete expression of the type of holistic approach legible in the Davos statement on building culture. Stories such as those of Le Guin, Butler and Atwood offer us precisely this type of integral narrative: the environment and the social structures are intertwined, presenting us with a view to our own 'collective unconscious'. A future policy approach to heritage may benefit from taking into account not only existing architectural examples and a historical survey, but also the cultural imaginations present in literature and pop culture, as additional expressions of the fundamental question: how do we wish to live together, and how will we shape the future?

The powers of observation these three authors apply to constructing the worlds they can envision, draw out the more hidden logic of power, of dominance, of the threats inherent to placing one perspective and one group above others. Le Guin clearly describes the abuse of power that is fed by a system of colonisation. When we seek to articulate a way of living together that applies to the common good, Atwood and Butler also show how insidious some of the small, seemingly insignificant decisions can be. Butler, in describing the corporate towns beginning to arise, shows how the public good, the shared services and the idea of solidarity are easily dismantled in favour of security when society is under siege, and when food and clean water are scarce.

As such, these three authors reflect on the underlying habits and conventions through which society and

the built environment shape each other. If the stories of Le Guin, Atwood and Butler present us with futures we hope to avoid, they also extrapolate the hidden habits embedded in our built environments. They offer a challenge to architecture and heritage thinking to include the more complicated entanglements between the built environment and collective values. They provide an image of what is needed for 'resolving the challenges facing our living environment with shared responsibility and cooperation for the common good'.¹⁵

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Notes

1. Davos declaration 2018, 'Towards a high-quality *Baukultur* in Europe', <https://baukultur--production--storage.s3.amazonaws.com/baukultur/2022-06-09-081317--davos-declaration.pdf>.
2. Paolo Portoghesi, ed., *The Presence of the Past* (New York: Academy Editions, 1980); Denise Scott Brown, 'On Architectural Formalism and Social Concern: A Discourse for Social Planners and Radical Chic Architects', reprinted in *Oppositions Reader: Selected Essays 1973–1984*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998 [1976]), 317–30; Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (New York: Academy Editions, 1977).
3. United Nations Environment Programme, *2021 Global Status Report for Buildings and Construction: Towards a Zero-emission, Efficient and Resilient Buildings and Construction Sector* (Nairobi, 2021), <https://unep.org>.
4. Bart Decroos, Kornelia Dimitrova, Sereh Mandias and Elsbeth Ronner, 'Ecology & Aesthetics', *OASE* 112 (2023), 3–10.
5. Davos declaration.
6. Atwood's well-known book *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985) is a cautionary tale about freedoms that are easily lost, set in a future New England under a patriarchal totalitarian regime; Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) presents an anarchist utopia as a thought experiment; Butler's *Kindred* (New York: Doubleday, 1979) is an exploration of nineteenth-century slave society through the eyes of a twentieth-century Black woman who travels back in time and experiences the slavery of her ancestors firsthand.

7. Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012).
8. Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); *The Year of the Flood* (New York: Doubleday, 2009); *Maddaddam* (New York: Doubleday, 2013).
9. Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993); followed up by *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Seven Stories, 1998).
10. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 6. The way the neighbourhoods are described recalls Mike Davis's book *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage, 1992).
11. Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Word for World is Forest* (New York: Berkley Books, 1976 [1972]).
12. Ibid., 14.
13. Thomas Piketty addresses the social inequality related to the accumulation of capital in Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Sherry Turkle discusses the social isolation that derives from technological advances in Turkle, *Alone Together* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).
14. Additionally, Butler's *Parable of the Sower* addresses the risks of privatisation in a capitalist society gone astray. At first, towns are innocuously privatised, but this leads to a system of exploitation and indentured servitude.
15. Davos Baukultur memorandum 2023, <https://davosdeclaration2018.ch/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/06/2023-05-11-132341-davos-baukultur-memorandum-en.pdf>.

Biography

Lara Schrijver is professor in architecture theory at the University of Antwerp, Faculty of Design Sciences. Her research focuses on twentieth-century architecture and its theories. Her work has been widely published in architecture journals and she has served as editor for *Footprint Architecture Theory Journal* and *OASE* as well as for the *KNOB Bulletin*. She was co-editor of *Autonomous Architecture in Flanders* (2016), of three editions of the annual review *Architecture in the Netherlands* (2016-2019), and editor of *The Tacit Dimension: Architecture Knowledge and Scientific Research* (2021). Her most recent book is *Oswald Mathias Ungers and Rem Koolhaas* (2021).

