

The Architectural Novum in Science Fiction Narratives of Urban Space

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This study presents a monograph on science fiction (SF) literature’s engagement with built space through its portrayals of novel architectures and cities. Employing both narratological tools of literary analysis and architectural, urban and social theories, I examine seven British and American SF novels: Robert Silverberg’s *The World Inside* (1971); Christopher Priest’s *Inverted World* (1974); J.G. Ballard’s *High-Rise* (1975); China Miéville’s *The City and the City* (2009); Adam Roberts’ *The Real-Town Murders* (2017); Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017); and Gabrielle Korn’s *Yours for the Taking* (2023). In my analysis, I show how these texts employ innovative urban structures to reflect and estrange real-world architectural concerns, including utopian visions, layered or partitioned cities, and climate change’s effects on urban environments.

Darko Suvin uses the term “novum” to refer to the innovation at the center of a given SF narrative, which elicits in the readers cognitive estrangement. Following Suvin, I define **the architectural novum**: a new and estranging form of building or urban social organization. This work examines three types of architectural novums: **the vertical city**, **the layered city**, and **the climatically-changed city**. Each of these types is analyzed through two or three literary case studies where the novel urban space is central to the narrative, defining the plot, the characters, and the chronotope—Mikhail Bakhtin’s term for the intrinsic connectedness of space and time in literary narratives. As I show, the architectural novums serve as grounds for these SF narratives to explore how the architectural and social designs of cities shape their dwellers’

subjectivities, their knowledge, and their perceptions of space and time. Through this narrative analysis, I examine how SF narratives reflect the challenges faced by our real-world cities as a result of climate change, political upheavals, technological advancements, and social inequalities. As our real urban environments transform due to new and unfolding conditions—both technological and social—the insights offered by SF narratives of novel urban space become increasingly relevant.

The built spaces that humans create and inhabit are crucial in shaping humanity. Our cities influence us through their physical shape, or ontology. Different places induce us to feel and to behave in specific ways (e.g. feel safe or unsafe, act in an official or casual manner), street design encourages or inhibits our movement in space, and the city in which we live can promote an identification between dweller and dwelling-place. At the same time, physical architecture is not the only defining element of urban spaces. How we establish knowledge of ourselves and of our cities—the epistemology of space—is often more substantial than the physical space we inhabit. Residents of a city may see themselves as part of their built environment, identifying with the ethos of their city, and imagine themselves as either controlling it or being controlled by it. Furthermore, people choose to see, notice, and move through certain areas of the city while avoiding others, placing more value on certain social layers of the city. Our cities, and therefore our identities, can change significantly regardless of the ontological environment.

On the ontological level, too, a changing urban landscape is an inevitability. This is especially true in the times of climate change—a reality of cities reflected in SF narratives where urban spaces are or have been transformed by environmental catastrophes. In the face of such risks, built spaces need to be maintained over time by their occupants, in strategies that either reject urban change or accept constant adaptability. By maintaining or adapting their cities, occupants maintain or adapt their own identities. In so doing they act upon both space

and time: by molding their city's architectural and social environment, they strive to ensure that the city will have a future. The maintenance of architectural space thus epitomizes the intrinsic connectedness of space, time, and subjectivity.

In each of the literary texts discussed in this work, the architectural novum defines the narrative's chronotope and characters, highlighting one major architectural issue or question: the influence of built space on the minds of its inhabitants; the significance of spatial epistemology and its manipulation; and the maintenance of built space through environmental risks. Each architectural novum also aligns with a particular literary genre, in addition to SF: utopia, detective fiction, and climate fiction.

In **chapter 1**, the architectural novum of **the vertical city** is analyzed through two classic SF texts of the 1970s: Robert Silverberg's *The World Inside* (1971) and J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975). The chronotope of *The World Inside* is dominated by towering buildings called "urbmons," each constituting a separate world and housing hundreds of thousands of people. *High-Rise* presents a much smaller-scale version of this world, taking place in a development project of several forty-floor high-rise buildings. The narratives take place almost entirely within the vertical cities and are focalized through several different residents, who rarely, if ever, leave their buildings.

The vertical city is defined here as an isolated and utopian space; it is thus discussed in conjunction with the literary genre or mode of **utopia** and in light of the utopian tradition within architecture, from architects of the Italian Renaissance to modernists like Le Corbusier. As a utopian space, the vertical city engages with how built spaces enact significant influence on their dwellers, shaping both their physical existence and sensibility. Through this isolating architectural novum, *The World Inside* and *High-Rise* interrogate the effects of built space on its human population and on the individual's body and mind.

Contemporary cities in general are vertical spaces, extending from the street level both

upwards in skyscrapers and downwards with underground trains. But this urban vertical extension paradoxically contributes to a spatial experience of horizontality. Each apartment in a building is a separate horizontal box, lacking the internal vertical structure of a multi-level, single-family house. Urban verticality is therefore seen as distancing one from oneself, as well as from urbanism, since, according to Michel de Certeau, the city is defined by the free mobility of people throughout its streets. The architectural verticality of the city also reflects and replicates class hierarchy, imagined on a vertical axis of high and low.

In SF, the architectural novum of the vertical city presents an extreme version of real-world urban verticality. As I show, this novum constructs a specific chronotope defined by five interconnected elements: **vertical hierarchy**, **isolation**, **efficiency**, **largeness**, and **temporal fluidity/stasis**. In all these elements, the vertical city is based on the Western tradition of utopia, imagining the self-contained space of the city as the setting where one may perfect humanity—both as a society, and as individual subjects. As part of the utopian vision of its architects, the vertical city must be perfect and unchanging in its space, time, and subjects. It therefore requires that its residents be utopians who elevate themselves above their old human existence and become **posthuman** subjects. These posthuman subjects are defined by their built environment and entangled with it, so that characters and chronotope become mingled. In this way, the utopian narratives of vertical cities offer an estranging portrayal of architecture's real-world effects on residents, suggesting that novel architectures can transform humanity into novel beings. The architectural novum of the vertical city is thus employed to criticize real-world utopian visions of creating psychological unity through architecture. In the two novels analyzed in this chapter, imagining humanity as a single entity sharing the same ideology and living in highly-efficient spaces dangerously produces posthuman subjects as well as posturban environments that negate the plurality and changeability of cities.

Chapter 2 discusses the architectural novum of **the layered city** through China

Miéville's *The City and the City* (2009) and Adam Roberts' *The Real-Town Murders* (2017). In both novels, the urban environment is separated into different epistemological layers. Despite their non-physical nature, these layers are central to characters' lives, defining their world and controlling their mobility much more than any ontological limits do. *The City and the City* presents an architectural novum that is not based on novel technology, but wholly on social organization and collective agreement: two cities are geographically positioned side by side and even overlap in parts, but are treated as entirely separate, with residents of each city avoiding and ignoring the other. *The Real-Town Murders* portrays a similar spatial separation, but one based on technology: the physical city stands empty while most of the urban population remains indoors, connected to virtual reality. Even when disconnected, most people use augmented reality and thus experience the city through an additional digital layer.

These novels of layered cities combine SF with **detective fiction**, a literary genre based on the epistemological process wherein a detective character investigates a mystery and establishes the knowledge of what happened. The investigation is often mapped onto space: in urban detective stories the detective commonly acts as flâneur, wandering the city in search for the truth. Through the combination of SF worldbuilding with the plot of a detective investigation, the architectural novum of the layered city raises questions on the epistemology of space: what layers of a city are known to us? How does our knowledge or understanding of a space affect the physical reality of space? And how can this urban knowledge be manipulated?

Both *The City and the City* and *The Real-Town Murders* are narrated through the perspectives of detective-flâneur figures, but the urban mobility of both is hindered by the layered cities' epistemological limits. In *The City and the City* the detective must explore only one city at a time, regardless of the geographical nearness of locations relevant to his investigation. In *The Real-Town Murders* the detective is unable to use virtual reality, limiting

her work to the mostly-empty physical world; furthermore, her use of augmented reality opens her up to extreme surveillance, which further impedes her investigation. This architectural novum thus highlights the power of spatial epistemology to affect the use of space, much more than physical boundaries.

The investigation plot further illustrates the significance of spatial epistemology. Both novels present spatial mysteries that lead the detectives to question the very nature of their cities. In *The City and the City*, a body is found in one city, but the victim was a resident of the other city—a significant spatial violation in this fictional world. In *The Real-Town Murders*, a body is found inside of a brand-new, robotically-constructed car. In each novel, the detective attempts to solve the spatial mystery by raising the possibility of a new spatial rules: the possible existence of an unknown city or social group, and the possible manipulation of physical space through teleportation technology.

These new perceptions of space do not rise coincidentally; as the detectives reveal, the goal behind each of the murders in the novels was to influence the detective—and indirectly, the readers—towards an alternative epistemology of urban space. The mysteries emerge as metafictional crimes, with the culprits using the detective investigation plots to construct new spatial rules. In *The City and the City* the culprit wishes to make people believe in the existence of a secret city between the two known cities, and in *The Real-Town Murders* the culprit aims for people to believe in the existence of teleportation, a technology that would revolutionize the physical world. The detectives in both novels eventually uncover this attempted manipulation, but the conclusion still underscores the malleability and fragility of urban epistemology. Unlike built walls that maintain a city's ontological boundaries, urban epistemology is maintained only through social norms and continued collective agreement. In both novels, it becomes clear that without urban dwellers continuing to believe in a certain version of their city, it would not exist.

Chapter 3 expands the analysis from looking at the characteristics of a single architectural object or space to examining how built space transforms over time. This chapter analyzes the architectural novum of **the climatically-changed city**: a precarious and risky urban space, transformed by novel environmental phenomena, which is nevertheless regularly maintained through both architectural and social means. This architectural novum is presented through three case studies: Christopher Priest's *Inverted World* (1974), Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017), and Gabrielle Korn's *Yours for the Taking* (2023).

These texts combine SF with **climate fiction** (CF), a literary genre that deals with extreme environmental phenomena resulting from the climate crisis. Many climate fiction narratives engage with perceptions of risk: rather than depicting a single apocalyptic event, they reflect climate anxiety that permeates slowly. In narratives that present such risk cultures—or **chronotopes of risk**, as I term it—characters constantly anticipate yet another disaster and wait for climate conditions to worsen. However, when climate fiction is combined with SF, which employs technological and social innovations, risk can be reconfigured into maintenance. In the climatically-changed city, characters are faced with constant climate risks but are also able to use innovative means to maintain their built and social environment, ensuring its survival into the future. Through this architectural novum, architecture is discussed not as a stable spatial object but as a temporal entity that changes over time: cities are affected and changed by natural causes but also by the maintenance efforts performed by their dwellers.

In *Inverted World*, a city is continuously moved on wheels and train tracks in order for its residents to survive within a strange, hostile world. The novel is narrated through the perspective of a city resident who works at maintaining its movement while also investigating the nature of his world's risks. In *New York 2140*, a community of characters, all residing in the same apartment building, work together to maintain and improve their city, which has flooded due to melting ice caps and is at constant risk of devastating storms. In *Yours for the*

Taking, an enclosed space is constructed on the bones of New York City to protect the people inside it from the exacerbating climate conditions outside. This isolated city is planned as a utopia that needs to be socially maintained, its residents manipulated to remain placid and to believe that the future is “theirs for the taking.” In all three novels discussed in this chapter, urban dwellers perform sustained maintenance work, and this maintenance allows their city and the people in it to survive.

I posit that by focusing on the day-to-day tasks of maintenance—both architectural and social—these narratives construct **chronotopes of maintenance**. In such a chronotope, space is precarious and risky, but time is defined by the maintenance that characters perform, moving in a controlled, human pace. The performance of maintenance and care work provides characters with agency, and thus the temporality of waiting and anticipating future risks becomes imbued with purpose. Within a chronotope of maintenance, a narrative of future human survival and persistence in the face of horrifying environmental circumstances is still possible.

However, as arises from comparing the narratives of *Inverted World*, *New York 2140*, and *Yours for the Taking*, a chronotope of maintenance does not offer a simple solution to the climate crisis. I argue that these novels present the spacetime of maintenance as problematic in three major ways. First, the ability to maintain one’s city—and thus to have agency over one’s space and time—is often unequally distributed. Some characters are left unable to maintain their own survival either because their conditions of risk are too severe to maintain or because maintenance is already taken care for them by others. Furthermore, maintenance can operate in two opposing ways: it can be based on change, on constant adaptability and the renegotiation of spatial conditions; or it can resist change, instead maintaining the present conditions as part of a utopian vision of perfect space. Narratives of **change-based maintenance** can provide a model for a real-world approach to the climate crisis and offer an optimistic view of humanity’s

future by focusing on humans' agency to act upon their world. But narratives of **change-resistant maintenance** reveal how complete human authority over space and time can be harmful, replicating the anthropocentric approach that caused climate change in the first place. Finally, even narratives of change-based maintenance reflect a problematic capitalist approach that glorifies the constant grind and Sisyphean labor necessary for urban maintenance. While a work-focused life is positive and productive for some characters, for others—particularly those only engaged in physical labor—it can be a harmful, narrow existence. The chronotope of maintenance can therefore, instead of offering a method for mitigating climate change, also emphasize the problematics of contemporary climate discourses that prioritize resilience and human agency.

Across these chapters and by analyzing seven different SF novels, this work examines how SF narratives employ architectural novums to reflect and to challenge real-world built environments. Through the novums of vertical, layered, and climatically-changed cities, these texts illustrate how urban environments are shaped not only by physical structures (ontology), but by spatial imagination and knowledge (epistemology). In analyzing the different narrative elements of these SF novels, this dissertation highlights the importance of architectural and social maintenance as well as of urban change. The discussed SF texts present positive cities as dynamic spaces defined and negotiated by multiple subjectivities and epistemologies. The future of cities—both real and imagined—therefore relies not on their endurance as static monuments, but on their ability to adapt through the collective efforts and active engagement of their diverse inhabitants.