Architectural Responses in Alternative Realities: The Politics of Space through Fiction in Architectural Education

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Introduction

IN a remark in "Exegesis," Philip K. Dick writes "[t]he core of my writing is not art but truth" and that his fiction writing is the creative attempt to describe what he discerned as the true reality, and that his fiction is "a creative way of handling analysis" (506). Based on this idea, this paper explores how science fiction can function alongside the various applications of storytelling in architecture, such as scenario-building to communicate design ideas (Thompson) or to allow non-specialists to express their spatial experiences through content analysis (Ro and Bermudez). In fact, Frascari argues that narrative in architecture is "a crucial condition for making sense of both the individual experience of architecture and social interactions that take place in it" (224). Frascari's approach on storytelling seems to respond to a fundamental quest of architectural education to include the individual, the social and the political in the design process and ensure that architecture is not limited to self-referential projects (Noschis; Brown and Moreau-Yates).

CJ Lim (19) combines architectural visions with speculative scenarios, seeing the prophetic nature of SF works in an effort to explore the climate emergency. However in this paper we base our exploration more on the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's claim that science fiction has foreseen "every possible and impossible variation of future urban society" (160-61), not because of the writer's prophetic skills, but as a tool to understand their contemporary society and politics. The paper aims to discuss the introduction of SF narratives within post-graduate studies in architecture, aiming to stimulate students' analytical tools and creativity, while fostering the exploration of alternative ways of representation. We present links created between the possible futures for a city that the students create as part of their work and SF narratives in

comics, films and books. The paper presents the way the students created amalgams of otherworld images with familiar worries and disquietudes (Sobchack 109) and how this exercise enhanced their learning experience. By examining the work they produced from their initial explorations until the final resolution of their architectural proposals, the paper aims to contribute to a fruitful discourse of enriching analytical and creative tools, which support understanding but also help students to position themselves in the world and the political situation.

A Learning Challenge

Today in the UK, the most common way to become an architect consists of five years of studies split in two parts, 3 years of undergraduate studies and two years of postgraduate studies. Between the two parts, students work in architectural practices, which creates a big challenge upon their return for their postgraduate studies: the students come with more knowledge, but also trapped in practice routines, struggling to balance technical requirements and creative approaches. The structure of the Portsmouth School of Architecture consists of different design studios (groups) and each studio sets their own agenda in order to meet the learning outcomes required both by the curriculum and the professional bodies (RIBA and ARB).

The learning outcomes of the first year design modules can be summarised into (1) research and analysis (manmade and natural environment, cultural, social and economic context), (2) exploration of different options in response to the research and observations, (3) technical, environmental and functional resolution in detail, and (4) representation of these ideas (communication). The technical nature of the requirements of the project, combined with the experience in architectural practice, was limiting the explorative nature of the students and we needed to introduce a process of re-learning and re-discovering of their own creativity. In addition, we have noticed that students needed to regain confidence in making independent decisions, experimenting and to be willing to take risks.

A Scenario-Based Syllabus: The Assignment

Within this context, in order to stimulate an alternative approach to analysis and understanding a place and push the students to escape pragmatic constraints and be visionary we examined the possibility of science fiction narratives as tools that will

allow them to imagine their alternative realities. Students are required to explore the possibilities of existing sites and create proposals that respond to current issues. Student projects are speculative and in a way, the computer-generated images that they produce represent alternative realities for that place. However, these ideas will never become, they remain a fictional piece of architecture and an alternative reality for the specific site. The question then is, if these are imaginary alternatives that attempt to resolve today's problems, may should we ask future architects to reflect on probable or improbable future problems.

Borrowing from the Double Layered Asymmetrical model introduced by Goldschmidt (Salama 133-35), we divided the year in four interweaving parts. Part 1 consisted of group work on collecting and evaluating information about a given urban context (Liverpool, Newcastle, Belfast). The second part was a "What If…?" scenario where students had to take inspiration from SF texts (novels, films, comics) and apply these to the urban context they were working. Students were working on the first two parts in parallel, but the other two parts were revealed in stages. The third part required students to design a response to the scenario they have set-up on a city level, a strategy to survive the problems the scenario created and then to focus on a key building that they had to design in more detail. The final part, required from students to reflect on the probability of their scenario and reflect on what will be the function of the building in case the imaginative scenario does not work.

The fact the traditional stage of analysing the context was combined with the "What if…" scenario took the students outside of their usual routines. While there was a freedom in the scenario and their inspiration (natural disasters, scientific experiments that went wrong, zombies, animal attacks, asteroids, black holes, and dystopian post Brexit worlds), the students had to make the scenario site specific. The scenario had to be illustrated, enforcing students to situate their narratives within the specific city and to demonstrate their representation skills. This way their observation about the city was not a passive recording but an active process, as they had to incorporate these into their narratives. The last part of the story always led to a narrative about people surviving, showing their understanding of the nature of the problem and exploring the concept of architecture as a shelter (Ellin).

Once they had presented their disasters and dystopian visions, they would receive the third part of the assignment. Borrowing from Max Brooks's *World War Z,* students had to work within a "tenth man scenario" (Brooks 34); in other words, a

client (the council, an individual or a funding body) an architectural proposal which would ensure the safety of the citizens or some citizens in case of that unprecedented crisis. Once this part was completed, students had to explore the final stage of the project, which went back to reality and students had to rethink their designs to avoid a 'White Elephant' (Shariatmadari), a building that is costly to maintain but because the predicted attack is not occurring remains useless. Even in this case though, the building would need to be able to transform and retain its original function.

Drawing Alternative Realities

Students explored the imaginative through different mediums and a variety of representation techniques (hand drawings, physical and digital collages, sketch-up models), in order to present the experience of the destruction and survival of Liverpool-Birkenhead, Newcastle-Gateshead and East and West Belfast. The students adopted different points of view within these narratives, in some cases integrating themselves in these worlds and in others remaining a narrator. This type of narrative allowed students to "live" the dramatic implications of the disaster, but also to become part of the socio-political context of the different cities of investigation.

James Telotte (93) says that SF imagery becomes attractive to the spectator because it takes familiar elements and places them in an unfamiliar setting and students followed a similar strategy. Since the projects had to link to specific cities, the students went into depth to make sure that the imaginary alternative was linked to key elements of the city. to explore, identify and use the elements that constitute the image of the city according to Kevin Lynch landmarks, nodes, edges, districts, pathways in order to anchor the stories to the place. The Liverpool Guildhall, the Newcastle bridges, the river Lagan become elements of a wider narrative and are populated with activities. The analysis is not a collection of photos and statistics, but they become a vivid place where people run, gather, hide or try to define boundaries. In a similar way to SF films the students instinctively explored the macro scale of the city down to the microscale of the human factor and discovered the links of the two.

Beyond their understanding of the place, the change of scales shows how the SF narratives were an excellent tool for students to immerse themselves into the problem before imagining a solution. This was an alternative way of applying role playing in architecture, which, according to Anthony Jackson and Chris Vine, places

the learners "within the dramatic fiction" and requires them to interact with the various issues and "make decisions in the midst of 'crisis'" (6). This immersion supports a thorough understanding of the problems they 'experienced' and helps define solutions that focus on the people that will use the buildings.

Another important outcome in the exercise is the way the SF narratives provided a safer environment to explore difficult political topics. For example, when working in Belfast, the speculative nature of the scenarios allowed students to approach the religious division of the city and explore the visible and invisible segregations. Furthermore, the scenarios questioned utopian architectural visions and generated discussions on authoritarianism, and architecture's role of serving the ones in power. The speculative scenarios and the consideration of different characters in the narrative expanded the students' perception of the way architecture affects everyday life. Close to JG Ballard's position on science fiction, students were looking at their present, from Brexit and the social divisions because of the referendum, the tendency for fortification of cities, to the climate emergency and the need for alternative social structures, projecting their emotions into the future.

The visualisation of the crisis also becomes a medium of synthesising the brief for the architectural solution. The students understand that they are not just responding to a building typology—for example, a house, a hospital or a school—and that they need to escape the preconceptions linked to space and its use. They understand that they need to find solutions that not only protect people and communities from zombies and natural disasters. They create structures where people have to co-exist and they need to think of the possible tensions of enclosure, limited food supplies, and reduced energy sources. The understanding and the evaluation of the problems supports students in articulating a critical narrative for a given location and at the same time initiates a briefing process and determines functions.

The playful set-up of the scenario allowed many students to escape their preconception of what is a proper architectural drawing and project. The SF set up also initiated an exploration of new ways of representation, as they needed to escape traditional drawing techniques and create a spectacular, even if dystopian, new world, taking references from comics and movies. Furthermore, it provided the students with an opportunity to add to their final images the drama of the initial crisis.

An important challenge and limitation in the process has been that students

were not always open to the idea of stepping out of their routines, "squeezing the scenarios" within more traditional architectural means of representation. Despite the expected reluctance, even the weaker students produced their visually strongest work during this process. This was also evident at their comments for the evaluation of the module. This exercise has also been an opportunity for the tutors to discover an alternative way of approaching the topic, beyond our original conceptualisation. While in the beginning we saw this exercise as a warm-up, to help students to ease into the challenging years of operating in a post-graduate architectural environment, the realisation of the possibilities soon transformed the exercise as the spine of the project in our studio. In the second year, we expanded the part of the creation of the visual scenarios, requiring students to explore in detail their SF ideas.

Conclusion

SF narratives proved to be a valuable educational method to reintroduce students to exploration, speculation, discovery, and to them to explore their potential. Despite initially conceived as a warm-up tool and a confidence building operation, the narratives supported students in gaining a deeper understanding of the design process and the urban context that they were called to analyse and respond to. The students' evaluation provided evidence that students enjoyed the "what if…?" scenarios and working within these playful approaches.

This exercise had a dual effect. On one hand it looked relaxed and a warming up, on the other hand it was a step out of the comfort zone of students of architecture, who after three years in university and a year in practice realised that they could not go back to their usual working routines. Furthermore, the immersion into the narrative and the setup of these alternative worlds required from them the exploration of different scales at the same time. This also led to the use of alternative representation language early in the project and a greater attention to detail.

There are always limitations in these exercises, especially in the cases of weaker students who cannot see the value of the medium and they do not try to understand the process. While many of them found a way to create a narrative based on the resources provided, some remained reluctant to push the narrative to its limits and went back to default positions regarding architectural projects. However, looking back to the work of the past three years provides us with confidence that the students

who engaged with the process, regardless of their representational skills, managed to infuse new ideas into their projects.

We are still investigating the idea of requesting a graphic novel as the final submission instead of an architectural portfolio, in order to release students from the anxiety of typical drawings. This educational activity shows that SF narratives and architecture can work together to communicate ideas about a place and trigger the imagination about the future of our urban society. SF alternatives of existing cities becomes a transformative tool that stimulates exploration and enhances the learning process, because it becomes a tool to understand the complex process of the production of space, the spatial inequalities and the exclusions created by architectural interventions, while re-discovering skills and re-learning the creative processes of architecture. Strong visuals combined with a contextualised narrative lead to a deeper understanding of the city and the human experience, demonstrating that cross-medial learning can lead in many cases to an architectural educational happy end, despite the dystopian futures that initiate these ideas every year.

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