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Cyberpunk Cities

Science Fiction Meets Urban Theory

Carl Abbott

Abstract

The science fiction subgenre of cyberpunk developed in the 1980s and 1990s with a strong interest in urban settings. A reading of important cyberpunk novels shows the way in which the ideas of formal urban theory, such as the idea of global cities, cities as communication systems, and the Los Angeles school of urban studies, have been incorporated into this facet of popular culture. The analysis suggests that science fiction can help planners to understand the influence of a range of social theories on public understanding of planning issues.

Keywords: *science fiction; cyberpunk; global city; urban theory*

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I want to start with the sort of thing that science fiction is known for. John Shirley's novel *City Come A-Walkin'* (2000) opens with a compelling metaphor—idea—extrapolation. A tall figure in trench coat, hat, and shades comes stalking into Stuart Cole's down-market bar in San Francisco's tenderloin. It is The City, the over mind and avatar of San Francisco itself.

Cole [stepped outside and] listened to the city . . . What he was looking for was there. It was the presence of the city, the gestalt overpattern uniting its diversity, the invisible relationship between the broken glass in the gutter and the antenna on the limousine. . . The presence was there, outside. But the personality, the sense of willful intelligence supporting the hum of city activity . . . was indoors, embodied in a man waiting in Cole's club. (Shirley 2000, 30)

"City" draws energy from the psychic activity of "hundreds of thousands of very fallible people" and from the electronic currents of the metropolis along its "electrical neural channels, the interlinked buildings and the loci, the nexus." City takes human form at night, commandeers televisions during the day, and controls the networks of wires and pipes that constitute the infrastructure of the city. Shirley depicts a gritty San Francisco of seedy rock clubs, porno shops, and cheap apartments and makes its avatar a manipulative, seductive, and dangerous tough guy—a literal cybernetic punk. It's fighting the suburbanization that's undermining the concentration of energy that keeps it alive and ends up a "beautifully verminous, sweetly squalid, supple but hard-edged *presence*" that trades blow for blow with the Mob (Shirley 2000, 127, 129, 149).

John Shirley was present at the beginning of what has been called cyberpunk science fiction. When he wrote *City Come A-Walkin'* in the late 1970s, he was as far into the punk scene as you could go and still produce a coherent novel—rock musician, omnipresence in the underground scene in Portland, wildman, writer. Fellow novelist William Gibson (2000) has called him "cyberpunk's patient zero, first locus of the virus" of hot-edged, plugged-in science fiction.

Why should serious scholars of American urban development pay attention to an overwritten piece of pulp fiction that is stuffed with gratuitous violence, padded with extraneous chase scenes, and permanently stranded in the genre ghetto of science fiction?

The answer is that *City Come A-Walkin'* and much other science fiction has important clues to the ways that Americans think about urban life and urban development. Science fiction is not really about predicting the future. Instead, it's a format for serious and sometimes outrageous reflections about the past and present. Like other imaginative writers, SF practitioners hold up mirrors to their own experiences and

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social surroundings. The difference is that science fiction uses mirrors that are distorted with extrapolation and speculation. The result is like a fun house—reflections that obscure some aspects of “reality” but highlight others.

I take as given that the only way that we can think about the future is through our understanding of the past and present. Every story about a possible future, whether a demographer predicting population ten years hence or a speculative writer imagining the next millennium, is a projection of some aspect of human history. In every instance, the concepts that we deploy and the behaviors that we imagine derive from our experience of the present . . . and from our knowledge and interpretation of the past.¹

Readers have long known that the problems and worries of the day quickly find their way into science fiction: stories about technology as a cure for economic depression in the 1930s, allegories about the Red Menace in the 1950s, responses to the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, environmental disaster scenarios in recent decades. These connections are a staple for science fiction criticism, which pursues the lines of influence and argument among politics, social change, and fictions of the future. Writer and critic Samuel Delany (1999, 343) has argued that “SF is not about the future It works by setting up a dialogue with the here-and-now, a dialogue as rich and intricate as the writer can make it.” Thomas Disch (1988, 91) writes that “science fiction is not about predicting the future but about examining the present.” Those who ignore the past, in other words, can have no conception of the future.

As the fun house metaphor suggests, there is a special value in looking at science fiction. Science fiction writers utilize accepted narratives of the past and common understandings of the present to frame their visions of the future, but they do so in extreme forms. Their futures are far reaching in time, crammed with speculations about new technology, and full of serious and satirical extrapolations of social trends. Just as historical analysis is one of the tools available for real world planning (Abbott and Adler 1989), imaginative analysis of future histories can play a role in framing planning issues. Science fiction is thus a particularly interesting and useful way to surface some of the implicit understandings that lie beneath the surface of our society, and even our scholarship. One specific goal of this article is to suggest ways to introduce such theory to students and readers by using fictional sources in conjunction with the standard academic literature. A second is to highlight one of the ways in which the ideas of planning and social science make their ways into popular culture.

A number of scholars have been exploring the assumptions and ideas about U.S. cities that are embedded in speculative fiction, using the mirror of SF to better understand what Americans think about themselves. Mike Davis (1998) has written about Southern California disaster fictions, arguing that they betray an underlying social unease that Los Angeles boosters and public officials have long tried to

ignore. Max Page (2005) has examined the repeated fictional destruction of New York and I have elsewhere considered the urban implications of atomic age apocalypse stories (Abbott 2006a), both with the goal of understanding the dimensions and character of American anti-urbanism. Eric Avila (2004) has shown how the fears and motives of white flight to suburbia can be read in space invasion movies of the 1950s.

For planning educators, science fiction can be a tool to engage students’ imaginations. Many of us use mainstream novels and films in the classroom as a way to give depth and immediacy to planning issues (Leigh and Kenney 1996). Planning students (at least those in my classes) are frequently comfortable with speculative thinking. They grew up playing Sim City and video games, they watch science fiction movies and television, and they’re familiar with the fantasies of Japanese manga and animation. To start a conversation about the power of nostalgic middle class ideals in American culture, for one example, ask why Sunnydale, California, the fictional town that Buffy the Vampire Slayer repeatedly saved from the forces of evil over several television seasons, has bungalows, cemeteries, and a cute downtown but no slums or shopping mall—and why it resembles the town that was ground zero in the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

Science fiction can also contribute to planning pedagogy by offering insight into the social and cultural assumptions that constrain the possibilities of plans and planning in the specific context of the contemporary United States. Thinking about speculative futures does not help planners write better findings on a zoning variance application or facilitate a community meeting about bicycle planning. It does help students and educators to deepen their “understanding of human settlement as it relates to planning based on knowledge of the relevant concepts and theories from . . . social sciences . . . including knowledge of the social and spatial structure of urban and regional systems . . . and effects of globalization” (Criterion 4.2.1. [a] of the Planning Accreditation Board standards for graduate planning programs). Speculative fiction is also one of many ways to “anticipate and envision future changes to society and the built environment” (Criterion 4.2.2 [d]).

Readers who remain skeptical might note that urban planning and speculative fiction about urban futures both emerged from the crisis conditions of late nineteenth-century industrial cities. The last decades of that century produced a wave of cataclysmic thinking (Jaher 1964) ranging from Josiah Strong’s statistics-laden attack on immigrant-filled cities in *Our Country: Its Present Crisis and Possible Future* (1885) to Ignatius Donnelly’s dark fantasy of urban anarchy in *Caesar’s Column* (1891). On the optimistic side, the same context also produced Jules Verne’s posthumously published technological fantasy *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (1996) and Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1889), a positive utopia that inspired a political movement in the United States and

helped to fertilize the imagination of Ebenezer Howard as he worked on *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898).

In addition to utopian and dystopian narratives, moreover, planning history and theory has long accommodated what we might call design science fiction. The Radiant City of Le Corbusier, the Broadacre City of Frank Lloyd Wright, and the fantastic Arcologies of Paolo Soleri are all extrapolations of the possibilities of new technologies and new cultural values. As Robert Fishman (1977) has written, these are urban *utopias*. Their presentation is pictorial rather than verbal, but their purpose is to speculate about the sort of city we might build if we were to take certain innovations (like the telephone and automobile for Wright) and think through their possible implications. It is no accident that Hugh Ferriss's dreamscape drawings of a future Manhattan in *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929) and the great Fritz Lang movie *Metropolis* (1927) share the same visual rhetoric—because both are types of science fiction.

Science fiction thus marks a far end in the array of ways that planners can think about the future. As Dowell Myers and Linda Kitsuse (2000) have very usefully described, planners construct the future with a variety of methods. They project current patterns and utilize trend lines to forecast future conditions. They develop verbal and graphic scenarios that show the likely effects of different planning assumptions. They engage in planning as the construction of persuasive stories about the future (Throgmorton 1996). In most instances, these efforts and exercises are heavily empirical, involving the adjustment of key variables within structured models of land use or transportation demand. However, much of their value may lie in opening planners and citizens to a wide range of future possibilities. Citing the pioneering commentary by Warren et al. (1998), Myers and Kitsuse include a role for science fiction as one of the more radical and comprehensive means for accomplishing this latter goal.

As a contribution to the conversation about urban futures, I want to use science fiction set in the early and middle decades of the twenty-first century to uncover a particular set of ideas about the problems and character of American cities that have currency and imaginative resonance. There is no claim that the ideas and images of science fiction are accurate reflections of objective circumstances, but they influence the public imagination and therefore help to construct the environment for planning.

At the center of my particular discussion is the subgenre commonly known as cyberpunk science fiction (Warren et al. 1998). Emerging in the 1980s, a set of writers tried to integrate “the realm of high tech and the modern pop underground.” Continuing to quote SF writer Bruce Sterling (1986, xi, xiv), cyberpunk combined “visionary intensity” with attention to cultural minutia and “willingness to carry extrapolation into the fabric of daily life.” It blends ideas about the potential of information technologies with nighttown visions of urban life

and a hard-driving rock-and-roll sensibility. Female characters channel Joan Jett, not Stevie Nicks. William Gibson, one of the key figures in the field, cites Lou Reed as an influence. Bruce Sterling describes *Schismatrix* (1986) as “bare bones, like a Ramones three-minute pop song: we’re not going to have any pretentious light shades of pale guitar noodling here, it’s going to be ‘Sheena is a Punk Rocker,’ blam, blam, blam, let’s move on” (McCaffery 1990, 228).

The early cyberpunk fiction of the 1980s is a circumscribed subgenre in which the plot lines and sensibility of the down-and-out detective story are used to tell stories that posit direct machine-brain interactions that often lead to ventures or adventures in virtual realities. The heroes are computer hackers, weary cops, marginal musicians, and streetwise young women. Their opponents are corrupt executives, crooked cops, and psychopathic enforcers. There is careful attention to the *details* of daily life: language, fashion, architecture, drugs. The telling is always fast-paced. And the lines blur. Some of the human protagonists are cyborgs with physical and neural enhancements. Sometimes the computer network spawns its own self-aware intelligence. In the 1990s, the genre lost some of its distinctiveness, contributing much of its sensibility and many of its coinages to the field at large. Some writers added nanotechnology and the manipulation of biologically coded information to electronic data systems. The shared interest is to explore the implications of information-based or programmable technologies.

The influences on this sort of science fiction are multiple. Literary cousins and progenitors include William Burroughs and Philip K. Dick, with their marginal heroes and interest in altered states of consciousness. More direct influence is the *noir* approach to crime novels and movies that is closely associated with California. One of the most curious spin-offs is Jonathan Lethem's *Gun, With Occasional Music* (1994), which follows all the conventions and plot elements of the classic *noir* detective story but takes place in a near-future Oakland of designer drugs and sentient genetically engineered animals. The mob enforcer is a young punk kangaroo who throws a mean punch.² If you look closely at cyberpunk stories, you'll also see the shadows of Joan Didion, Robert Stone, Don DeLillo, and especially Thomas Pynchon, whose novels walk the edge between the mainstream and the fantastic.

William Gibson, an American transplanted to Vancouver, is the best known of the cyberpunk writers. Starting with *Neuromancer* in 1984, he initiated a long series of overlapping novels and stories about “console cowboys” and “street samurai” who move back and forth between cybernetic and material underworlds. John Shirley has already been introduced. Neal Stephenson (who still writes in longhand) has contributed *Snow Crash* (1992) and *The Diamond Age* (1996). Bruce Sterling has been a key figure as writer, anthologist, and advocate. Names on the margins include Linda Nagata, Nicola Griffith, and Pat Cadigan.³

What sort of urban world do these writers construct for the 2030s or 2050s?⁴

First, it is a world that world city theorists would find familiar. Over the past twenty years, urban scholars have responded to the growing scale of global flows of goods, capital, and labor by arguing that the world economy is centralized within a small number of world cities or global cities (Friedmann 1986, Savitch 1990, Sassen 1991/2001). This view was clearly stated by John Friedmann (1987, 493), whose concern was to explain “the contemporary system of global capital accumulation and its spatial articulation through a system of ‘world cities.’” World cities are characterized by concentrations of international banks, multinational corporate headquarters, and supporting experts. Decisions are made about the allocation and use of capital on a world scale and transmitted through hierarchically organized institutions and communication networks housed in smaller and secondary cities. World city “command posts” radiate “a web of electronic conduits and air corridors across the globe” (Savitch 1990, 150). The greater the availability of telecommunications, argue theorists such as David Harvey (1989) and Manuel Castells (1989), the greater the concentration of control functions and the consequent power of world cities.

Some writers have pursued this topic by trying to measure and describe the evolution and structure of the world hierarchy. Taking a historical approach, Anthony King (1990, 7) has explored the ways in which the world city system emerged from the linked development of colonialism and industrial capitalism, finding colonial cities “instrumental in creating the space in which today’s capitalist world-economy operates” by introducing western values, capitalist business organization, and industrialized systems of production.⁵ Geographers such as Paul Knox and Peter Taylor have worked to develop precise measures of the degree to which specific cities are engaged internationally and the patterns of influence among such international cities (Knox and Taylor 1995, Taylor 2003, Taylor and Lang 2005).

Other scholars have focused on the internal consequences of the world city system. Saskia Sassen’s *Global Cities* (1991/2001) remains one of the most detailed presentations. She has described New York, London, and Tokyo as a sort of three-headed capital of the world economy, “centers of finance . . . [and] for global servicing and management” (1991/2001, 324). Sassen’s work is also representative in its attention to the internal consequences of world city status, including the rearrangement of land uses in the service of corporate elites and the emergence of a supporting class of low paid service workers to tend the everyday needs of that elite. She is among a number of scholars (Ross and Trachte 1983, Savitch 1988, Beauregard 1989) who have examined the inequities of dual labor markets for elite workers and support workers, the costs of office core expansion, and the assimilation of immigrants as phenomena exaggerated by the intensity of change within world cities.

The cyberpunk genre developed contemporaneously with world city theory, and its authors have most often set their stories in the global cities of Tokyo, New York, and London. These are the nerve centers, control centers, information nodes—the places you need to be to stay in touch, to be part of the action. Whether your work as a cyberpunk protagonist is legitimate or illegitimate, these are the places where the bosses live and operate. Cyberpunk cities are fast-paced and often dangerous to individual characters, but they are the centers of economic and social change. They are places of motion, change, and opportunity that are exciting and deadly at the same time—the bigger and faster the better for plot twists and vivid action.

Here is one example of many: William Gibson opens *All Tomorrow’s Parties* (1999, 4) with squatters in the dark corners of the Tokyo subway system, one of whom is also plugged into commanding knowledge of the global communications matrix. That character remarks that “It’s all going to change. . . . We’re coming up on the mother of all nodal points. I can see it, now. It’s all going to change.” Gibson thus places Tokyo, of all possible points in real space and cyberspace, as the center of the future. Nicola Griffith’s *Slow River* (1995) uses the setting of the London Docklands to represent that city as an economic decision point. Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* (2003), set in London, New York, Tokyo, and Moscow, revolves around the hyper-communication of advertising, branding, and style.

These are the socially bifurcated cities that Sassen has deftly pinned to the specimen board. Some cyberpunk protagonists are members of the corporate elite and its business service auxiliaries. The fictional protagonists fit into the global city model. Some are suppliers of specialized services. They are advertising consultants, media stars, market analysts, journalists, programmers, but always operating on the economic margins where fads, fashions, and feuds can make or break careers. At the other end of the socioeconomic scale are bicycle messenger, pizza delivery kid, private detective, bodyguard, and other marginal service workers. The contrast provides food for thought about the future of planning, for these are imagined cities in which the professional and managerial middle class—historically the core constituency for urban and regional planning—has lost its economic and political relevance.

Another warning signal for thinking about the future of planning is the fact that government is nearly as absent as the middle class—or present only to be bamboozled by the multinational puppet masters. In *Snow Crash* (1992), Neal Stephenson depicts the federal government as simply one among many competing multinational organizations that has a hard time standing up to Mr. Lee’s Greater Hong Kong (also see Warren et al. 1998). For urban planners, whose work remains deeply tied to government programs and regulations despite strong efforts to more fully engage with private market mechanisms and to foster nongovernmental community action, this is a sobering (even if satirical) way to envision the future.

Second, these world cities—in theory and in fiction—are places where communication not only drives the plot but takes over the very fabric of buildings and infrastructure. Sterling, Gibson, and others have taken to heart the admonition of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Stephen Izenour (1972) to learn from Las Vegas. They use strong visual images to picture neon cityscapes full of blaring advertisements, street vendors, bars, shops, and crowds and recycle the dreamscape of Las Vegas in their real and virtual settings. There is loving attention, as Dani Cavallero (2000, 138) writes, to “detail and assemblage The aesthetic and psychological impact of their sprawling megalopolises derives from both a keen eye for the minutiae of settings and architecture and a concern with the multifarious ways in which these fragments coalesce.” Gibson supports the view by noting that one of the inspirations for *Neuromancer* was the video arcades along Vancouver’s Granville Street. He has described his work as “stitching together all the junk that’s floating around in my head,” mental junk that he accumulates by browsing thrift shops for entertainment (McCaffery 1990, 140).

In Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* the Metaverse infinitely reproduces the Las Vegas Strip, the district that epitomizes a real city that has been helping to “start the twenty-first century” (Rothman 2002). The Metaverse is the virtual world where characters take on cybernetic identities. They can chat, plot, fight, or enjoy themselves. But they do so along a nearly infinite highway that in different parts is a super Broadway, a hypertrophied Wilshire Boulevard, and a vast suburban commercial strip. One can create buildings, parks, signs, “as well as things that do not exist in Reality, such as vast hovering overhead light shows.” The heart of the Metaverse, its Downtown, is “garish and brilliant, like Las Vegas freed from the constraints of physics and finance.” It is “a dozen Manhattans, embroidered with neon and stacked on top of each other” (Stephenson 1992, 23–24). Some people visit simply to ride up and down the Street, looking at the sights. It’s a place, after all, just like the Ginza or Times Square or Piccadilly.

William Gibson’s vision of future San Francisco centers on the Bay Bridge, where a spontaneous squatter town has accreted after a quake rendered the bridge unusable. Squatters have built and bolted all sorts of secondary structures to the frame of the bridge, created their own social rules, and manage their own barter economy.

Its steel bones, its stranded tendons, were lost within an accretion of dreams: tattoo parlors, gaming arcades, dimly lit stalls stacked with decaying magazines, sellers of fireworks, of cut bait, betting shops, sushi bars, unlicensed pawnbrokers, herbalists, barbers, bars. Dreams of commerce, their locations generally corresponding with the decks that had once carried vehicular traffic; while above them, rising to the very peaks of the cable towers, lifted the intricately suspended barrio, with its unnumbered population and its zones of more private fantasy. (Gibson 1993, 25)

The Bridge is home to a cross section of the bad and the good, drug addicts, and thieves, but also eccentrics and dropouts and artists. It is a squatter town equivalent of the Strip, but also a metaphor for the excitement and risks of art. At night it glows with scrounged and recycled lights. To a Japanese anthropologist, it is a place of discovery and magic: “Fairyland. Rain-silvered plywood, broken marble from the walls of forgotten banks, corrugated plastic, polished brass, sequins, painted canvas, mirrors, chrome gone dull and peeling in the salt air” (Gibson 1993, 62–63).

In conceptualizing cities as communication systems, science fiction writers touch on a long-established theme in urban theory. A generation ago, for example, Richard Meier tried to frame *A Communication Theory of Urban Growth* (1962) while Seymour Mandelbaum (1965, 1972) used communication theory as a framework for understanding the functionality of historical and contemporary urban systems. More recently, William J. Mitchell (1995, 1999, 2003) took time from his quite respectable day job to publish three imaginative books that combine description of new communication and information technologies with speculations about their impacts on human behavior and built environments in both near and far futures. The title of the second volume—*E-Topia: “Urban Life, Jim—But Not As We Know It”*—pays direct homage to the world of television SF. His forecasts and projections are much more firmly grounded than *Star Trek* transporter rooms and cyberpunk adventures, but he is engaged in the broad enterprise of speculation and extrapolation.

Third, cyberpunk SF largely accepts the world that Andre Gunder Frank has envisioned in *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998), a book that argues that China and South Asia have been the center of gravity in the world economy for most of the past two millennia, with the recent rise of Europe and North America a short term aberration. For the coming century, he sees the rise of Japan, the Asian “tiger economies,” and the growth of China as a natural rebalancing of the world system. This is a view shared in part by Manuel Castells (2000), who pursues a somewhat different analytical track to argue the simultaneous rise of the Asia-Pacific region in contrast with the decline of the former Soviet Union and the increasing information-isolation of much of Africa.

Highlighting Asian connections and influence is one more installment in the deeply ambivalent history of North American attitudes toward East Asia. Americans have marveled over the possibility of East Asian markets, viewed Asia as a prime ground for religious missionization, used Asian workers as cheap labor, acquired Pacific colonies and possessions as stepping stones, and asserted American national interests by fighting five Asian-Pacific wars since 1898 against Spain, in the Philippines, against Japan, in Korea, and in Vietnam. At much the same time, Americans have feared the impacts of Asian immigration, leading to formal restrictions on immigration

from China and then from Japan. A lurid “yellow peril” literature of the early 1900s was revisited in warnings 1980s about the power of Japan (Prestowitz 1988) and in the present century about the economic and military power of China (Barnett 2004).⁶

Embedded in this complex background of attitudes, the cyberpunk century revolves around the Pacific economy. Its protagonists bounce back and forth across the big ocean, connecting Asia and America with the flight paths of airliners and passenger rockets. To New York and Tokyo, Neal Stephenson adds Shanghai in *The Diamond Age*, Bruce Sterling adds Singapore in *Islands in the Net* (1989), and Linda Nagata adds Saigon in *Limit of Vision* (2001). On this side of the Pacific, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Vancouver, and Seattle are favorite sites for cyberaction. Gibson’s (1996) *Idoru* is typical, taking its star-struck teenaged protagonist (Chia Pet McKenzie) from Seattle to Tokyo, where she interacts with a pop music star from Taiwan, mobsters from Russia, and Japanese-American recording technicians from Tacoma and San Francisco. (The science fiction part deals with a computer-generated pop “star” who begins to take on a life of her own.)

In another Gibson novel, the daughter of a yakuza overlord is hustled off to London for her safety at the start of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1989). London is dynamic and interesting, but “it isn’t Tokyo.” It is the past rather than the future. In England, fragments of the past are meticulously preserved in “the very fabric of things, as if the city were a single growth of stone and brick, uncounted strata of message and meaning, age upon age.” The London economy endlessly recycles antiques and junk as “a major national resource.” In Japan, the same rubbish is dumped into Tokyo Bay as landfill for the expansion of the city (Gibson 1989, 33, 5–6, 131). There is an element of truth to this characterization, for Tokyo is indeed rebuilt on the ruins of the 1923 earthquake and 1944–45 fire-bombing. But Gibson is after more, the sense that the Japanese are a society that—like Americans—happily plow under their past in the pursuit of the future.

The theme of Pacific ascendancy can be serious or satirical. China is the new technological leader in Greg Bear’s *Queen of Angels* (1990). Agents of the New Hong Kong space habitat are drugging and abducting San Francisco workers in Richard Paul Russo’s *Carlucci’s Edge* (1995) and the city’s Asian Quarter is the most vibrant and most threatening part of the city, revisiting the cultural construction of Chinatown as a danger zone where anything goes (Shah 2001). In Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992), in contrast, Mr. Lee’s Greater Hong Kong is a chain of mini-mart outposts that double as fortified safe houses. Mr. Lee’s co-owns UCLA with the Japanese in a send-up of Los Angeles real estate fears.

To connect this sort of science fiction to more mainstream writing, think about Thomas Pynchon’s semi-fantastic *Vineland* (1990), whose plot moves between California and Japan. Or recall Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1974). That

admirable book anticipates cyberpunk settings as it careens through the emergent Pacific Rim economy circa 1970—from Vietnam to the East Bay to the American Southwest and Mexico. In its trans-Pacific world, Samoan immigrants muster out of the Coast Guard to work for the petty gangsters; San Francisco flight attendants smuggle pot from Bangkok; South Asian women spin topless in seedy bars; Japanese military brides work for Filipino dentists; and the outlaw hero draws inspiration from Native American warriors and East Asian warrior religion.

For planners, the multicultural cities of Robert Stone and Neal Stephenson are a pressing challenge. At the theoretical level, it is easy to agree with planning theorists like Leonie Sandercock (1998, 2003), who argue for the cultural and intellectual creativity of ethnically diverse “mongrel” communities. At the practical level, planners face challenges of ethnic transition in communities like Compton, California, that change from white to African American and then to Latino (Camarillo 2007), in places like Monterey Park, California, where Chinese Americans, Latinos, Anglos, and new Chinese immigrants have had to negotiate shifting politics (Fong 1994, Saito 1998), or in Vancouver, British Columbia, where land use issues were the lightning rod for resentments and fears about wealthy Chinese immigration in the 1980s and 1990s (Ley, Hiebert, and Pratt 1992).

Fourth, cyberpunks also internalize the world of Mike Davis (1990, 1998) and other southern California dystopians, for poor, beat-up Los Angeles is the favorite city of dystopian futures. In the world as envisioned from Hollywood, it is the battleground in *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2* (1991). Philip K. Dick set his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in San Francisco, but moviemakers shifted the setting to Los Angeles when they filmed the story as *Blade Runner*, understanding that the Southern California metropolis has seemed to epitomize the future. In turn, that movie has become an overworked source of metaphors for Los Angeles, reinforcing the popular image that it originally drew on.

Future Los Angeles is commonly divided even more deeply than Saskia Sassen or Manuel Castells fear, with a protected elite, a marginalized and struggling middle, and the feral poor. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle in *Oath of Fealty* (1982) focus on the socially and economically competent who have isolated themselves in a vast arcology and severed all but predatory relationships with the surrounding city. Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*, for another example, anticipates a city of burbclaves, each of which hires mercenaries, claims national sovereignty, and enters into security treaties with neighboring burbs. “Under the provisions of The Mews at Windsor Heights Code,” says a Deputy of Metacops Unlimited who has just snared a straying skateboarder, “we are authorized to enforce law, national security concerns, and societal harmony” on the territory of White Columns. “A treaty between The Mews at Windsor Heights and White Columns authorizes us to place

you in temporary custody until your status as an Investigatory Focus has been resolved.” Another cop translates: “Your ass is busted” (Stephenson 1992, 44).

In the common backstory, the unprotected families of the downwardly mobile middle class live in constant crisis. The polarized and decrepit Los Angeles in Cynthia Kadohata’s *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* (1992) is set in 2052. This future L.A. is leading the downward spiral of the American economy. A new highway system looms unfinished over the landscape, started “before everything ran out of money, back at the beginning of the century.” Now “hardly anybody was as rich as they’d once been” (Kadohata 1992, 2, 8, 33, 124). While the college-age protagonist Francie lives off dead-end service jobs, her acquaintances make do with petty crime and an off-books barter economy. The family house, bought by her great-great-grandmother, is now “in a section of town largely abandoned by anyone who mattered to the country’s economy.” Francie sometimes wakes to the smell of burning buildings not too many blocks away. Meanwhile, the people of “richtown” (her term for places like Brentwood) are increasingly moving to “camps,” communities “enclosed by high metal fences and guarded by uniformed, armed men and women.”⁷

Kadohata’s previous novel dealt with Japanese Americans struggling to reintegrate themselves into American society in the 1950s. For this second book, she imagines a young Japanese American woman in the mid-future rather than the near past. There is nothing comprehensive about her portrayal of American in the 2050s, for Kadohata is more interested in character than the sort of detailed extrapolation found in much science fiction. She posits unimpressive technological changes: Foamite floors are soft and warm and a pipeline from Alaska helps relieve water rationing, but people still wait at bus stops, use TV remotes, read newspapers on paper, and wait in line at City Hall. Parking fees remain the biggest student issue at the college. Indeed, the lack of fundamental change is central part of the message. The city is not incapable of reforming itself. Fifty years hence, Los Angeles is exhausted, a pale reflection of the more exuberant twentieth century—even more exhausted than in Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* (1970), whose alienated character Maria Wyeth has much in common with Francie. Francie’s coming-of-age search is not to find where she fits in this a fragmented and enervated society, with its vanishing middle class, but to determine whether she is actually “alive”—capable of choosing alternatives and shaping herself by moral choices (Comer 2003).

Societal disaster is even starker in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) where the extinction of the middle plays out in fire and blood. Lauren Olamina grows up in a collapsing Los Angeles. In 2024, the internal combustion era is over, with rusting vehicles cannibalized for metal and plastic and three-car garages turned into rabbit hutches. In this quiet apocalypse, potable water costs more than gasoline. To be clean is to make

a target of yourself, so “Fashion helps. You’re supposed to be dirty now” (Butler 1993, 18). Middle-class families live in constant fear inside walled suburban cul-de-sacs. Adults venture outside on jobs or errands, but only in daylight and always on watch: “That’s the rule. Go out in a bunch, and always go armed” (Butler 1993, 8). Lauren’s walled street of eleven multiethnic households is somewhere in the San Fernando Valley, a sad survivor of the Valley isolationism described by Mike Davis. The whole community learns to handle guns; the only safe respite from the tiny community is a group excursion for target practice in the surrounding ravines. Lauren’s neighbors live to themselves, growing as much food as they can, home-schooling each other’s children, and acting as a volunteer fire department and security watch, for police protection is now fee-for-service.

Lauren’s tiny neighborhood, and others like it, is squeezed between the privileged and the desperate. The rich live in protected communities or mansions protected by multiple walls, while the poor squat in burned-out houses: “Up toward the hills there were walled estates—one big house and a lot of shabby little dependencies where the servants lived . . . we passed a couple neighborhoods so poor that their walls were made up of unmortared rocks, chunks of concrete, and trash. Then there were the pitiful, unwall residential areas . . . squatted in by homeless families with their filthy, gaunt, half-naked children.” And it gets worse, farther up into the brown California hills: “There are always a few groups of homeless people and packs of feral dogs living out beyond the last hillside shacks. People and dogs hunt rabbits, possums, squirrels, and each other. Both scavenge whatever dies” (Butler 1993, 9, 38).

Butler’s chaotic future Los Angeles embodies the angry despair with which many observers approach the burgeoning cities of the third world. Despite many scholarly efforts to explore and analyze the self-organizing capacities of residents in the vast informal suburbs that surround many Latin American, African, and Asian cities, the popular image in films from *Los Olvidados* (1950) to *City of God* (2002) and in widely circulated magazines (Kaplan 2000, Packer 2006) remains one of social disorganization and physical squalor with few hopes for improvement (Davis 2006). *The Parable of the Sower* simply brings this war of all against all across national borders into American backyards. It does so just a step more extremely that a “realistic” mainstream novel like T. Coraghessan Boyle’s *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), where successful members of the information elite decide to wall off their subdivision in the Santa Monica Mountains at the same time that Mexican immigrants are living in semi-starvation in nearby ravines.

We can conclude by circling back to the fun house metaphor. This article tries to show that the exaggerations, extrapolations, and distortions of science fiction give us clues about the implicit understandings that lie beneath the surface of our culture, and even our scholarship. Because it places its

characters on the margins of society, the particular subfield of cyberpunk fiction adds additional twists to more common space opera and galactic adventure stories of the *Star Wars* variety. At least since the middle of the nineteenth century, journalists and novelists have assumed that visits to society's margins (e.g., Orwell 1937) and characters living at its frayed edges (e.g., Crane 1893) offer the opportunity to challenge the stories that validate the established hierarchies of class and race. With protagonists who have fallen from the middle class—or never quite reached it—many cyberpunk stories are implicit criticisms of the power of large economic organizations built on their ability to control flows of information.

In many of its facets, cyberpunk also celebrates the power of the “Los Angeles school” of urban studies, sharing the interest in finding a *new* urban model to replace old industrial Chicago, and they find that model in metropolitan California. Science fiction has always had an affinity with American mythologies of the frontier. Some writers simply transport the metaphor into the future, some structure plots around a westward quest, and others buy into the expectation that the relatively young and flexible society of western North America is the most natural place to locate stories about social and cultural change (Abbott 2003, 2006b). They see the Pacific Rim and its cities as the sites where civilization will change—for better or worse—frustrated by the end of old frontiers, revitalized by the unfolding of new ideas.

We do not have to agree with all the expectations of a Pacific future, or with all the fears of a fully bifurcated city, or with the substantive claims of the Los Angeles school to acknowledge their resonance. The issue, for example, is not whether the L.A. folks are right or wrong, but that they are claiming attention and erecting signposts that many people are noticing and sometimes following onto new avenues of investigation. As Robert Beauregard comments, the idea of a radical break in urbanization is less an empirical hypothesis than a metaphor and a call for attention: “Empirical justification is tangential to what is really at stake. More important is the work that the claim does in focusing attention, mobilizing ideas and research, and challenging the community of scholars to re-think the wisdom they have so patiently acquired” (Beauregard 2006, 220). In this light, we can understand the appeal to imaginative writers, for the idea of a *new* Los Angeles not only promises action, dramatic contrasts, and new sorts of conflicts to embody in headlong prose but also certifies their stories as part of the cutting edge.

These writers also share the postmodern/L.A. school fascination with the problems of communication in a fragmented and contingent society. Its imagined cities are big, bad, bifurcated, and baffling. But they can also be spirited and specific, sometimes sinful, sometimes suspenseful, but always stimulating. Cities are great machines for facilitating and channeling communication—and for frustrating communication when race and class intervene.

William Gibson does not always display a sense of humor, but *Pattern Recognition* amounts to a big joke about communication. Its characters are fascinated by a mysterious set of film clips that circulate on the Web. After weaving grand theories about new approaches to the cinema, they discover to their chagrin that the clips are fragments from surveillance cameras, not pieces of art. But wait, there is a second joke. The pieces do fit together, but as a map of an imaginary city. Peel back the many concealments of multinational capitalism and what do you find?—a souped-up version of Sim City (Skeates 2004).

This article has examined ways in which specific urban theories are embedded in a specific subcategory of recent science fiction. Reading and discussing science fiction, whether cyberpunk novels or work from other thematic streams, will not help a planning student learn how to model transportation demand or a practitioner to write up findings on a conditional use application. Science fiction does, however, have the capacity to engage our imagination in thinking about present problems and future challenges, a heuristic function that derives from its willingness to take economic, social, and cultural patterns a step beyond their common sense extensions.

Because the cyberpunk subgenre draws on ideas that ascribe power to technological change and global capitalism as all-encompassing forces, it offers relatively little direct guidance for planners. However, it does suggest the need for flexibility, for seeing plans as reflexive processes intended as frameworks for responding to inherent instability. It also suggests the value of creating opportunities for spontaneous and informal social institutions by loosening building codes, preserving low-rent commercial spaces, and making information infrastructures as ubiquitous and cheap as possible.

Other topics of interest to planners can also be addressed through many of the different facets of science fiction not explored here. DeWitt Douglas Kilgore (2003), for example, has used science fiction to examine ideas about the possibilities of an increasingly heterogeneous society as linked to changing patterns of race relations in the United States, a concern that fits directly with arguments for retooling planning as a multivocal undertaking. Forthcoming work by John Cheng uses science fiction to explore the meanings of professional expertise—a topic of perennial interest in the fields of planning theory and ethics. Pamela Sargent's (1986, 1988, 2001) trilogy about terraforming Venus and Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy raise another set of basic ethical questions about the tradeoffs of environmental regulation and protection.⁸ My recent book (Abbott 2006b) explores these same narratives of planetary terraforming to probe the ideas about the character and capacities of government and its ability to make effective plans, both in parallel and contrast to the lines of thought developed by James Scott (1999). Some powerful writers (Le Guin 1974, Robinson 1990) have similarly probed the possibilities of moving from large and inclusive governments to systems of civic life that depend on local contact and direct

participation along the lines suggested by theorists of community-based planning.

I want to end with Thomas Pynchon's complex and compelling novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, originally published in 1966, which in many ways is a forerunner of cyberpunk thirty years early. Pynchon's protagonist Oedipa Maas is a Bay Area housewife who quits a Tupperware party to become executor for the estate of sunbelt real estate tycoon Pierce Inverarity. As she begins to explore southern California, Oedipa sees San Narciso, the quintessential California community, as pure communication system: She "looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, into a vast sprawl of houses . . . The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had." What's more, "San Narciso had no boundaries. No one knew yet where to draw them. She had dedicated herself, weeks ago, to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America" (Pynchon 1999, 12, 147).

► Notes

1. See the efforts of Richard Neustadt and Ernest May (1986) to get policy makers "thinking in time"—that is, to help them surface and understand the historical knowledge and assumptions that unconsciously shape their ideas about future possibilities.

2. Unlike most science fiction writers who are interested in the substance of their future world, Lethem is most interested in playing with the limits of the detective genre. Also see Davis (1990).

3. "Cyberpunk" itself is as much a marketing term as a fully accurate descriptor, and "urban noir" science fiction might do just as well. However, "cyberpunk" has helped this particular set of writers to differentiate themselves from earlier science fiction by emphasizing electronic engineering over mechanical engineering and implying that they would never be seen with a plastic pocket protector. The "punk" part also differentiated them from "New Wave" writers of the 1960s and 1970s who had a greater interest in issues such as feminism and environmentalism.

4. This following list of four points complements the earlier study by Warren et al. (1998) in which the authors also identified several elements in cyberpunk futures with relevance to planning. Their attention to themes such as surveillance systems, cyborgs, and nanotechnology leans more heavily to technological changes than does this discussion. It is a pioneering discussion and well worth comparing with this article.

5. King's analysis links with dependency theory as applied to developing nations, understanding primate cities and new industrial centers in such countries as recipients of orders from London, Tokyo, Paris, and New York (Meyer 1986).

6. Western Canadians have shared many anti-Asian attitudes and actions with the people of the western United States. See Glynn-Ward (1921) and Roy (2003).

7. We can assume that Kadohata, of Japanese American ancestry, picked the term "camp" to recall the internment experience of 1942–45 and relishes the inversion of the image as the elite pull barbed wire around themselves rather than stringing it around others.

8. Terraforming is the manipulation and engineering of alien ecosystems to be more suitable for human habitation and use.

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