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# Sustainability in the Pluriverse: Learning from Global Futures

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## Abstract

If the project of making architecture is a project in building the future, it is worth asking what imaginations inspire such futuring. This paper argues that discourses of architectural futurity can be augmented and inspired by discourses in global futurism. While bearing similarities to science fiction, these global futurisms are an impetus to re-frame the discourse of architectural sustainability in radical ways. The essay brings together scholarship in global futurisms from Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay with post-colonial anthropologist Arturo Escobar's concept of the 'pluriverse.'

As the ambitions represented by the UN sustainable development goals enter into dialogue with speculative storytelling traditions from across the world, such dialogue reveals that there is not a singular or universal practice of sustainability which the design disciplines can easily adopt. The stark contrasts between western science fiction and global futurism are a reminder that sustainable architectural futures can be imagined as technological fixes to an existing global order, or within very different social, economic, and political frameworks.

As an example of one such fiction, this essay discusses "Reunion," a novella by New Delhi born Vandana Singh, for its inspirations for architectural practice. In particular the novella describes an experimental settlement called Ashapur, as well as an infrastructure which combines technologically-oriented futures with one which privileges community with both human and non-human relations. Next, this essay makes some tentative associations between certain architectural practices and discourses in global futurism in order to argue for the many possible futures already lying latent within global architectural practice.

## From the Future to CoFutures

When we talk about the future, what future are we talking about? The big-F Future is an image that congeals from combined discourses of entertainment, advertising, financial speculation, government policy, and any number of other discourses. If we take these discourses as evidence, *the Future* has occupied our imaginations for some time, forming a collective if not stable image; we might expect technological or aesthetic innovation while existing sociopolitical or economic structures remain intact, becoming a future very like the present. Literary theorist Fredric Jameson warns us that the project of imagining the future is always at risk of “coloniz[ing] the future” according to the dominant perspectives and privileges of the time in which such a future is described (Jameson, 2007, p. 228). However, given the spectre of climate change, growing inequalities, and a precarious public realm, the need to imagine new sustainable and equitable ways of living has never seemed more urgent.

While the western worldview still dominates the big-F future, existing storytelling traditions from around the world open up a pluriverse of possibility for sustainable and equitable futures beyond western forms of knowledge. The field of architecture is also not monolithic, and many architects from many subject positions continue to seek out new forms of practice which re-frame the relation of humans to each other and to the environment. This paper suggests a partnership between such global futuring and marginal architectural practices, seeking to place these into dialogue with one another in order to understand how radical, complex possibilities for sustainable futures are already being imagined, and how they might help us think about architectural practice in the present.

As a way of including the field of architecture within radical imaginations of sustainable futures, I am not the first to suggest that architects might learn from reading science fiction (SF) (Butt, 2018). However, within SF scholarship, there is a sense that it might be time to retire the denomination 'science fiction.' As John Reider reminds us, SF is historically entangled with colonialism; it emerges from a set of 19th century discourses that, for all their claims to enlightenment rationalism, shelter explicitly racist and exclusionary rhetoric (Rieder, 2008). Furthermore, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay argues that 'science fiction' is a recent designation for a type of speculative literature that has existed long before its being named by a western marketplace (Chattopadhyay, 2016). Chattopadhyay's ambition to "recenter" SF away from western, Anglo sources is to reclaim speculative literature from its entanglements in colonial, problematically techno-optimistic history, advocating for an attention to futures emerging from the rest of the world (Chattopadhyay, 2014).

After Mark Dery coins Afrofuturism in 1994 (Dery, 1994; Eshun, 2003), an aesthetic expression centring the African diaspora's experience and expectations for the future, more attention has been focused on futurisms from across the globe,

now also including South Asian (Banerjee, 2020; Khan, 2021), Indigenous (Dillon, 2012), Gulf (Pinto, 2019), Latin American (Brock, 2021), or Asian (Chan, 2016) futurisms, among many others. Beyond various global cultures, other oft-marginalized voices claim their own spaces in the future too, including feminist (Cuboniks), crip (Kafer, 2013), or queer futurisms (Beyond Gender Research Collective, 2021). This proliferation of futures does not congeal into a singular mass deserving of a definite article – *the* future. Rather they affirm the possibility of what Chattopadhyay describes as CoFutures; CoFutures are complex, coeval – they arise separately from different sources, and com-possible – they are possible together, requiring "solidarity" in "recognition of difference" (Chattopadhyay, 2020, 2021). While they might bear similarities to SF, these global futures do not rest upon the same epistemological foundations, and as such, open up possibles foreclosed by a more carefully delineated SF, especially as they develop from marginalized worldviews and suggest the possibility of more just and sustainable relationships between human communities and with the more-than-human world.

To seek out other futures, we need to seek out other worlds in the present. As anthropologist Arturo Escobar reminds us, we already inhabit a pluriverse (Escobar, 2018); 'the' world is as much a misnomer as 'the' future. Different people have very different histories and everyday lives, and each point in the plurality of the present also harbours and nurtures its ideas about what the future can be:

"To think new thoughts, by implication, requires stepping out of the epistemic space of Western social theory and into the epistemic configurations associated with the multiple relational ontologies of worlds in struggle. It is in these spaces that we might find more compelling answers to the strong questions posed by the current conjuncture of modern problems with insufficient modern solutions... can design practice contribute to broadening, and drawing on, the rich spectrum of experiences that should be considered viable alternatives to what exists?"(Escobar, 2018, pp. 68–69)

While the project of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is the future story occupying the discipline in the present moment, as Escobar reminds us, the idea of development, which we see in such terms as 'sustainable development,' is often already a colonial project in its imposition of a global order on local practices. Escobar reminds us that we cannot see 'sustainability' as a universal signifier, and that sustainable practices cannot be universalized. However, if we understand the SDGs in their potential to inspire a drastically different relationship with the world and with each other, then we can see that such hopes are only augmented by their correspondence with other forms of radical futuring.

If the aim of the SDGs is really to 'leave no one behind,' we cannot only talk about a people's material sufficiency. What good is it to preserve diverse peoples while losing their stories, their worldviews? Following design theorist Tony Fry, Escobar goes so far as to call development practices "defuturing" in that they foreclose possibilities for the future in the erasures of the globalist project in the

present (Escobar, 2020, pp. 138–148). Within the architectural discipline, we have such defuturing projects as Bjarke Ingels' Masterplanet, like its fore-bearer in Buckminster Fuller's Spaceship Earth (Letkemann, 2021), which proposes a singular world-wide master plan for sustainability. Liam Young rightly calls this project a "continuation of the colonialist project that has already master-planned the planet in its own image" (Fairs, 2021). That is, we have already reached a world determined by hubristic techno-scientific solutions, and the architectural discipline must be careful lest the imagination of architectural sustainability only proceed from more techno-scientific hubris.

Global futurisms help the spatial practitioner to question the epistemic foundations of their own discipline, to unsettle preexisting ideas about the future, and to ask different questions about what architectural sustainability is and what it can be. After all, a discipline exists to discipline its adherents, to reproduce its own ways of knowing (Lykke, 2010, p. 20). For the discipline of architecture to change, the conscientious architect needs to seek out new ways of seeing, the "optical devices" made possible by listening to *other* stories (Haraway, 1992). As an extension of the attention and care which architects already direct to 'the site,' we might also see the stories of and hopes for the future as a part of that 'site.'

## Vandana Singh's Reunion

Reunion, a novella by New Delhi born Vandana Singh, was first published in 2019 (Singh, 2022). This novella supplies radically different perspective of the climate crisis and the role of designer or technologist in the organization of one specific community, but also supplies a chance to think past the collapse of the present's socioeconomic framework, and find ways of learning from marginalized voices. The sustainable future that Singh imagines is about understanding human relationships with one another, with marginalized people as well as with a marginalized more-than-human world, and about cultivating a relationship to technology that serves community instead of capital.

Singh tells the story through the late-life reminiscences of Mahua, a character descended from Santhal people of eastern India. Through Mahua's eyes and through her actions, we see dramatic social shifts as society moves from what Singh terms the "age of Kuber"<sup>1</sup> – a period "madness of the mid twenty-first century" – through a "Great Turning" in the development of a network of experimental communities to replace the city (Singh, 2022, p. 351).

Through Manua's eyes, we see our own age as "the old megapolises die through the combined machinations of extreme weather and human greed"(Singh, 2022, p.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Hindu pantheon, Kuber is the divinity associated with wealth and treasure.

360). The fears which haunt our own present are a reality for Mahua, as she observes Mumbai becoming an archipelago again:

"the sea has reclaimed the city – fish now swim in what was once Charni Road, and crabs and mussels have taken up residence in the National Stock Exchange. The fisherfolk ply their boats and barges in the watery streets." (Singh, 2022, p. 342)

However, the character is instrumental in her future India's adaptation to a changed climate. In her motivation "to move civilization away from self-destruction," Mahua introduces new models for India's climate adaptation, including for architecture and urban infrastructure. In the story, a younger Mahua develops an open data infrastructure for a connected city called "Sensornet." Although recognizable as the ubiquitous sensors and big data we see in other smart city plans, her project arises from very different ambitions; the "embedded intelligence agents" she develops arise out of the "desire to be companionably present with the non-human and the inanimate." In a departure from the smart city as we know it, the open data infrastructure is not about the efficient transfer of goods and capital, but of a sensitive relation to the more-than-human ecologies that also make the city home (Singh, 2022, pp. 352, 354, 348).

As the character's life progresses, she grows to question the city entirely. In her pursuit of a balanced ecological community, "...the city isn't the right idea for what we're trying to do." She asks how much of our everyday environments are intended to perpetuate an existing way of living:

"why would we want to live in a city as it is now – when people don't have any time for anything but work? There's constant stress, people don't know each other, don't care either, where democracy is sham?... a megapolis is beyond the scale of human social adaptation." (Singh, 2022, p. 354)

In response, Mahua develops an experimental settlement, a "basti," called Ashapur as a model for a type of community living which is more attuned to a sensitive relationship between people and the non-human world. She describes how each of the few houses in the settlement is:

"dome-shaped to reduce the impact of the storms, thick walls of clay, straw and recycled brick.... a marriage of the ancient and the modern. The walkways follow the natural contours of the land. The vegetables cascade off the walls on vines." (Singh, 2022, p. 341)

Some of these innovations are familiar to an architectural audience, from traditional clay building techniques to the re-discovery of long-standing Indigenous practices now branded as permaculture; I write this article only a few kilometres from Andels Samfundet, an ecovillage on the outskirts of Hjørtshøj, Denmark, which features adobe houses, on-site agriculture, and a well-developed and thriving infrastructure for community (<https://www.andelssamfundet.dk/>). Like the community in

Hjortshøj, Singh devotes considerable attention to the organization of the settlement:

"inner roads for people and bicycles, the outer ones for busses that connected them to the greater city. Here there was room for groves of jamun and neem trees, for gardens on the building walls and roofs. Each domicile held families related by blood and by choice, up to 50 people under one roof, cooking together in large common kitchens."(Singh, 2022, p. 358)

While introducing these architectural practices, Singh pursues a rhetorical twist whereby, rather than seeing these often marginalized practices as of an abandoned past, these be read as *future* practices. That is, she is re-framing ancient practices as images of what the future could be.

Singh also introduces the prospect of technological community infrastructures; networked "sun towers" collect and distribute energy to all bastis in the network,<sup>2</sup> and each basti is "embedded with sensors that monitor and report a constant stream of data – temperature, humidity, energy use, carbon storage, chemical contaminants, biodiversity"(Singh, 2022, p. 343). Importantly, such data does not feed into the algorithmic maw of big tech, but like the character's earlier "Sensornet," is open and shared among other networked bastis in order to monitor and maintain the ecological health of the settlements. Singh also intensifies the different strategies in order for the reader to see how it would develop into global settlements:

"connected by green corridors, each settlement embedded with sensors, farm towers replacing conventional agriculture. Such settlements would spring up in different parts of the country and the world. Former agricultural lands would return to the wilderness, or to subsistence farming, repairing the damage done to the biosphere's life-maintaining systems."(Singh, 2022, p. 355)

The Hindi word 'basti' means dwelling, and refers to any place people might dwell, but has gained a pejorative sense in referring to village or slum dwellings.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, however, this pejorative sense is re-appropriated in the new form of settlement. The original occupants of Singh's fictional basti are marginalized people – refugees from Bangladesh fleeing the rising seas. In this sense, the basti is a site of "marginal resistance" (353) in that it learns from tribal societies in India, and also grows from broad coalition of people excluded from authority in the present rather than from supposed expert knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> This technology is better developed in another Ashapur story, Indra's Web (Singh, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> As the word comes into English, it only maintains this pejorative sense. My thanks to Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay for a fruitful discussion of this word in Hindi, Bengali, and its derivations from Sanskrit.

That is to say, Singh's vision of the future is also about agency. In a thinly veiled critique of how our public spaces are increasingly administered by private interest, Singh's novella shows that a sustainable community needs to develop new infrastructures for collaboration, sharing, communication, and to leverage technology for a community's benefit. In the story, the bastis are made possible by new political organizations in concert with the new spatial environments, the scale of each house and village corresponding to scales of political negotiation, while the global scale is managed by the collective digital infrastructure. Notably, in Singh's story, the collective governance is substantially inspired by the Santhal tribal people<sup>4</sup> in governing through consensus, community, and in prioritizing "reverence for the web of life"(Singh, 2022, p. 365).

Singh's is one of many imaginations of future community that ask for a different kind of architect and a different kind of architectural practice. She shows one image of what that community might look like, but Singh's story also shows storytelling as a synthetic practice – one that includes architectural speculation alongside political, social, economic, and technical speculations. Taken together, these speculations argue that, if we should drastically alter our relationship to the more-than-human world, we can't live in the same way, nor work from the same assumptions. Singh asks us to reconsider the basis for community, for transportation, and infrastructure for sharing and accountability, even, if necessary, to the extent of questioning the city as the apotheosis of human settlement. Instead, the primary goal of Singh's architecture is being "companionably present" with each other and with the more-than-human world. But Singh does not stop there. Her character Mahua is a model for spatial practitioners too, as much as for what she does as for what she doesn't: Building political alliances with a community means rejecting centres of authority and capital, especially as the representative building of that "Age of Kuber," the Mumbai Stock Exchange is underwater. Working together with Indigenous knowledge means that the spatial practitioner must understand different ways of valuing the world, and of organizing one's place in it.

## Global Futurisms in Architecture

Singh's future, though inspiring, is only one possibility lying latent in the pluriverse of possibilities explored within global futures. Even if we are inspired by a vision of a form of human settlement which takes the well-being of people and planet as its primary goal, what Escobar reminds us about is that it is not workable to replace one master narrative with another, solutions arrive locally, each within its own context.

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<sup>4</sup> The Santhal people are tribal people from eastern India, especially in the Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha states.



By advocating for architects to pay greater attention to global futurisms, I am also suggesting that we learn more about the pluriverse of practices already within architecture, many which find resonance with movements in global futurism. The more the discipline empowers such pluralistic voices, the better the discipline evolves new strategies for addressing climate change. While it might be tempting to dismiss speculative storytelling as fantasy, these practices also affirm the many real avenues for futuring within our own discipline.

In one project drawing upon themes in Afrofuturism, Nigerian-born Olalekan Jeyifous produces an imagination of his own neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York as, resisting gentrification, it develops self-sufficient communities around food and water production and exchange (Budds, 2020; Also see: Summers, 2021; *Olalekan Jeyifous (@kidcadaver) • Instagram photos and videos*). The project's striking images play upon familiar SF tropes in speculative technology, but what is notable about them is not necessarily their aesthetic or technical innovation. Instead, these collages are developed from Jeyifous' own photos of his Brooklyn neighbourhood, and thus have a unique resonance not as an abstract possibility, but in historical continuity to the present day – we can see how that future might grow out of the material of the present. Though the Black and Latinx communities who have long called Brooklyn home are now facing gentrification, these images reaffirm not only the continued presence of these communities, but also shows them reclaiming the space in a “postcapitalist” intervention (Budds, 2020); the Brooklyn of the future, they claim, will include a future for people of colour, while also hinting at urban agriculture systems with new technologies and systems to capture and store water and to grow and distribute food within the neighbourhood. While such a project suggests a radical vision for the sustainable cities and communities championed by the SDGs, the post-capitalist implication also calls into question what economic growth and responsible consumption might look like. The work of the architect in this case, like in Singh's story, is to build and nourish community, rather than to serve capital.

Another vector for pluriversal futures in architecture is the reassertion of Indigenous spatial knowledge in a post-colonial practice. The Gathering Circle by Anishinaabe architect Ryan Gorrie reclaims the shore of Lake Superior as a place of Indigenous gathering, especially poignant in a city and a country which has long suppressed Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. (*Spirit Garden | Brook McIlroy*) The pavilion takes on a spatial and material order that is in contrast to the colonial powers in Canada, carving out a space unique to the communal and ceremonial practices of the Indigenous people of the region. For these peoples, the circle is a potent form to encourage discussion and building consensus, while the structure itself is an adaptation of traditional wood-bending techniques.

Gorrie also invited Indigenous craftspeople to construct the ceremonial space with rough-hewn wood in a renewal of the Indigenous tectonic culture; material assemblies of the pavilion are marked by strategies of tying and bundling rather than cutting and fitting. In this case, in an echo of Grace Dillon's reminder that Indigenous

scientific literacies are shaped by the diverse environments in which they are found (Dillon, 2017, p. 472), this project also suggests a tectonic literacy that rejects the alien invasion of Western tectonic and material cultures and which embraces the traditional knowledge of the land while staking a categorical claim to the future of the site. The imagination of sustainability on this site is both a reminder that Indigenous storytelling and futuring traditions proceed from a deep knowledge of the lands in which they are found, the sustainability they represent cannot be universalized, but is nested in a deep commitment to care and community with that land.

## Conclusion

Vandana Singh's Ashapur stories join other speculative futuring traditions from across the world to suggest that a pursuit of the SDGs is not a singular pursuit, but one which must be in dialogue with local communities, attuned to the unique needs, the unique knowledge, and the hoped-for futures of local communities across the globe. Singh reminds us that architectural sustainability is often not about novelty and technological invention, but rather, that futures might arise equally from traditional forms of knowledge and ways of being. Importantly, she shows that these are incompatible with an infrastructure that is owned and administered by a small elite, or by the imposition of western practices into diverse local contexts. Instead, Singh describes spatial practices that grow from a broad coalition of people excluded from authority in the present rather than from supposed expert knowledge. Her vision of the future is about agency, about spatial practice in new political alignments together with local communities. The sustainable futures imagined from the knowledge of marginalized peoples offer just such a possible partnership for the architect or spatial practitioner, even, as Ryan Gorrie shows, to the level of the material and tectonic cultures appropriate to each place.

If architectural practice is to evolve sustainable possibilities and practices beyond existing disciplinary frameworks, it might be time both to empower the diverse subjects already in practice, and to pursue broad coalitions with other ways of knowing about the world. After all, if the goal of sustainable practice is to work towards the prosperity of the more-than-human world as much as supporting all the different lives that humans have, then it is worth probing how much of the knowledge and practices we have are oriented towards preserving a status quo. If we are truly to follow the guiding principle of the SDGs – to "leave no one behind" – then as a discipline, architects must also be willing to embrace other worldviews, to probe their own personal histories rather than the origin myths of modernist practice, and to seek out radical futures to pursue. The storytelling traditions in global futurism are a potent tool-set to do just that.

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