

Science Fiction Cities: How our future visions influence the cities we build [abridged version]

For over a century, science fiction filmmaking has presented us with depictions of our future cities. Some have been bright, shiny and positive, while others have been dark, dirty and rough. As we look forward to a 21st century filled with massive mega-cities, we must ask how are our science fiction visions influencing the cities we build.

The vertical city

The vision of a future city with no middle class, where the super-rich live high above the poor workers who toil in the depths, has gone on to influence a century of cinema and architecture. For much of the 20th century the vertical city idea became intrinsically interlinked with dystopian science fiction visions. The rich lived at the top and the poor scrambled about on the grim streets below.

Gulf futurism

One of the strangest ironies in 21st century architecture is the growing influence films such as Blade Runner are having on real-life constructions. The recently termed movement, gulf futurism, describes a very particular brand of architecture and urban design that is powering through the Middle East. What is perhaps most striking right now is the tendency for some of these grand futuristic cities, such as Dubai, to be influenced so explicitly by science fiction visions profoundly entrenched in dystopian perspectives.

A dystopia of gentrification?

Spike Jonze's 2013 film Her, telling the story of a romantic relationship between a man and his computer operating system, presents a clear, bright, and spacious future Los Angeles, entirely dominated by gentrification. The world is primarily white and upwardly mobile, with a small amount of other ethnic minorities interspersed in the background. The reality of Her can be seen as a "dystopia of gentrification". If there were not a hidden underclass maintaining this shiny future city, then we have an entirely homogenized future that has effectively eliminated all cultural and class differences.

Flying cars, hyperloops and the future of urban transportation

One of the many prescient futurist visions in Steven Spielberg's Minority Report is the film's clever depiction of mass transportation in 2054. The film presents a city dominated by an expansive MAG-LEV system upon which private cabins autonomously transport citizens from place to place. One of the biggest drawbacks of this compelling idea is that it would involve such a massive reframing of current urban design models that it is ultimately a little hard to see coming to fruition.

Coming out two years after Minority Report was Alex Proyas' I, Robot set in a slightly earlier 2035 timeframe. The film presents one of the most realistic future transportation systems seen to date. While its cars still mostly look like cars, they contain heads-up-displays and voice controlled systems, all technologies that are well on the way to mainstream adoption.

The smart city, aka the surveillance city

Some are suggesting the term "smart city" could be interchangeable with "surveillance city", as many of these technological innovations inherently require large-scale data

collection on everything and everyone inhabiting the space.

Mass surveillance in current-day Chinese cities is turning the country into a gigantic social experiment. There are already estimated to be over 200 million surveillance cameras installed in the country. Facial recognition systems are installed in many public areas, tracking criminal activity and citizens the state is hunting. Police officers are even being fitted out with facial recognition glasses to track crowds and identify wanted criminals.

The Songdo experiment (“built from scratch”)

While most modern cities are built on top of centuries of development and culture, there are some cities around the world that are being built from the ground up. Songdo, south of Seoul in South Korea, is one of those gigantic social experiments. Built from scratch over 10 years and costing well over 40 billion dollars, this development was conceived to be the world's smartest city.

Sensors are built into everything, managing traffic flow and energy use. Garbage is managed via elaborate pneumatic tubes that send trash directly from each house to an underground waste facility. Forty percent of the urban space is reserved for green parks, and electric vehicle charging stations are everywhere.

Songdo was planned to be completed by 2015 but it is still a work in progress, half-built and reportedly struggling to convince people to move in.

The world as one giant mega-city (the planetoid city)

The biggest city in the world currently is Tokyo, with around 37 million people. A recent population projection study from the University of Ontario estimated by 2075 the three largest cities on Earth will be Kinshasa in Congo, Mumbai in India and Lagos in Nigeria, all with populations numbering over 57 million.

Perhaps the most absurd vision of a megacity takes this idea to its logical conclusion. Coruscant in the Star Wars universe is a planet taken over by one massive single city. It is a profound vision of what has been called an ecumenopolis, the hypothetical concept of a planetoid city.