Back to the Future: The City of the Future and its Architecture in Science Fiction Films

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Abstract

This paper investigates the portrayal of future city and its architecture in science fiction films tracing how this image has changed over time. Films such as Metropolis (1927) and Blade Runner (1982) predicted a future not far from our current time. Comparing the images in these films to our current built environment would give insights about how accurate these predictions were and how reliable science fiction films are in predicting the future. Whether these visions were close to reality or not, it is evident that seeing cities through the eyes of filmmakers opens many theoretical debates about the future of the city and its architecture giving important insights to architects and planners to read and manage their cities in a different critical way. Since the production of the earliest science fiction films in the silent film era, few films have been produced again, this paper identifies these films and examines different versions of future cities in these films through a case study. The investigated case study is Blade Runner (1982 and 2017) where a comparative analysis between the architectural signifiers and their significances is conducted. It can be seen that the prediction of future architecture has changed over time which is attributed to the differences in motives and significances behind implementing these architectural elements across different versions of the same film. This paper attempts to raise attention toward the mutual relationship between film and architecture and the role science fiction films play in predicting the future of our city and its architecture.

Keywords: architecture, science fiction, future city, blade runner.

1. Introduction: The Relationship between Film and Architecture

The production process of both film and architecture requires inspiration, innovation and imagination, leading to both of these creative disciplines becoming inseparable - with film showcasing what could be possible in architecture with different rules, regulations and budgets. This similarity is not seen in their cultural impact, however, it could be argued that architecture can be seen but not noticed whilst film changes cultural opinion and shapes the public's collective picture of cultures and professions (AL-hakeem and Alshadoodee, 2021). With the professions of filmmakers and architects being similar with differing impacts on the cultural consciousness, they are generally portrayed in film with similar traits, namely passion, determination, self-motivation and arrogance; but with differing conclusions on what those traits bring (Grice, 2017).

   Architects have their own role to play in the production of film. In production and set design where they are responsible for choosing and designing the built environment for the action, creating context which is vital to understanding a film in its entirety. The closeness between the architecture and film industries has led to many architects switching over to filmmaking as their profession, such as Hans Poelzig whose 1920 film The Golem [Figure 1] was seen as so important by architecture critics that the film was under analysis whilst still in production (Dilman, 2000).
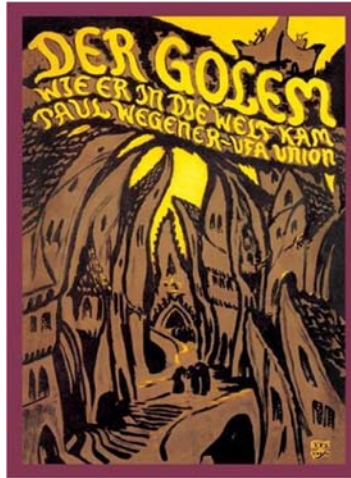
Figure 1: Poster for The Golem (1920)

The evolution of filming techniques and software has led to benefitting architects and their designs (Boake, 2007), giving unique opportunities to explore unseen relationships with time and space. These opportunities have cultivated delightful ideas within architects including the likes of Le Corbusier, Bernard Tshumi and Rem Koolhaas. Film and architecture are ostensibly interlinked with the design of sets and the built environment assisting in the telling of a story, not only providing context for the actions taking place but also being a passive and ever-present narrative tool (Seredenko, 2021). The choice of architecture builds connotations in conjunction with the plot and can be used to display the differing aspects of society, as it does in real life, as well as being a tool to communicate the personality, mood and intentions of characters.

Rattenbury (1994) argues that due to the difference in process between film and architecture, where film is linear whilst architecture is not, the similarities are exaggerated and can clearly be seen where film showings are a special event in need of celebration whilst architecture is constantly risking remaining unnoticed. Film, therefore, plays a major role in introducing novel architectural ideas and debates to the public, assisting in clarifying these ideas in simple and digestible ways. It has been noted that films such as The Fountainhead (1949) [Figure 2] introduced the public to the modern ideology, in addition to the role played in understanding current architectural debates whether through the lens of drama or documentary. Film is instrumental in finding the future of architecture by showing us visions of future city and allowing experimentation of different ideas in many different conditions.

Figure 2: Poster for The Fountainhead (1949)

2. The Portrayal of the City in Science Fiction Films

Most of the influential and inspirational science fiction films feature the built environment as a prominent backdrop, playing the role of an agent for stories and messages of political, economic, ecological or technological values. The image of the city has developed and evolved through the history of cinema being seen as both utopian and dystopian, but always holding its themes of grandiosity and inescapability (Abohela. 2020).

Figure 3: Poster for Metropolis (1927)

The nature of science fiction as a genre leads to dystopian themes prevailing as the genre asks questions on the flaws in our current society and expands them to explore what these flaws could look like if left without solutions (Fajbíková, 2014). However, in response to the dominant dystopic visions, there is also utopian science fiction such as Just Imagine (1930) and Things To Come (1936) which were a response to the impact of the dystopic vision shown in Metropolis (1927) [Figure 3]. Representation of the future as a utopia or dystopia is one of the main strands in Sci-Fi Films. With its meaning as no place, the utopia suggest alienation from the status quo. As for dystopia, which is a derivative of utopia, it implies abnormality. Thus, the depiction of the future city as a utopia, represents the embodiment of our far teched hopes. On the other hand, the future city as a dystopic proposition could be considered a criticism of the current urban system and its associated socioeconomic implications. In both cases, they represent reflections on current challenges our societies are facing. The utopian or dystopic depiction of future city and its architecture is loaded meaning signifying specific aspects of the society.

This utopic or dystopic representation is visualised through, either the cyber construct or the domination of the Asian city (Abohela. 2020). The use of cyberspace in a built environment is a favourite of the cyberfiction sub-genre, utilising a digital environment to maintain order within a city. Through the use of disembodiment these spaces are abstracted by technologies such as virtual reality in Ready Player One (2018) [Figure 4]. The Asian model is generally seen through the dystopian lens in the cyberpunk sub-genre due to the efficiency with which the model can convey overpopulation and oppression. However, the Asian model is inspired by the image of current cities that are credited with being vibrant and evolving, becoming major players in various global exchanges such as politics, economy and technology.

Figure 4: Cramped living area which virtual reality provides and escape from
(Source: Ready Player One, 2018)

3. *Architecture of the City of the Future*

Over the past century, the portrayal of architecture within science fiction cinema from Metropolis (1927) to Space Sweepers (2021) has played an important role in storytelling and disseminating ideas, with dystopian and cyberpunk films being among the most discussed and analysed in regards to architecture. Within these films, there are many architectural elements which can be labelled as signifiers as they imply particular messages about the society, story and action of a motion picture. The foundational science fiction film for the idea of future city is Metropolis (1927) with its most obvious signifiers being that of skyscrapers and a multilevel transport system has an obvious influence on later works within the science fiction genre (Desser, 1999). Looking closer at the signifiers of Metropolis shows many architectural influences (Bauhaus, Art Deco and Gothic Expressionist), and large geometric forms which repeat with purity and exactness to dazzling heights.

Just Imagine (1930) used similar signifiers with different framing to convert the dystopic themes into a utopian meaning [Figure 5]. The architecture of the film still contains skyscrapers and a multilevel transport system, however, they are presented in a bright and sophisticated manner with their design rooted in the ideas of Hugh Ferriss and Raymond Hood (Neumann, 1999).
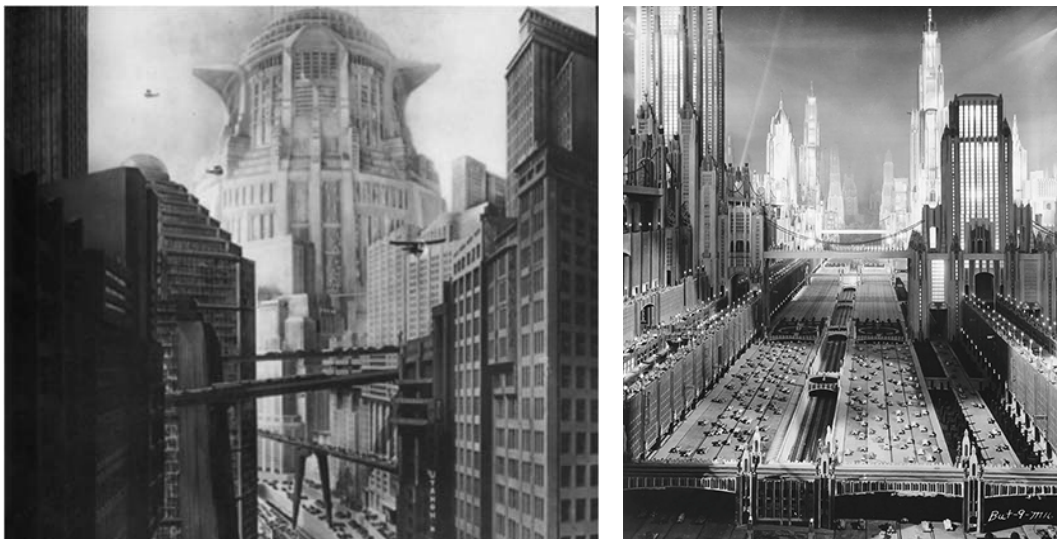

Figure 5: Left - Cityscape from Metropolis (1927) Right - Cityscape from Just Imagine (1930)

The inaugural cyberpunk movie Blade Runner (1982) uses grandiosity and scale to set itself apart, with the massive scale of buildings stretching to multiple city blocks and sloping over more. The superimposition of different architectural typologies from various cultures signifies the globalised society present within this future version of Los Angeles generating a post-modern image using the concept of retrofitting with the juxtaposition of the old skyscrapers of the modern-day surrounding the new megastructures (Sobchak, 1999).

The backdrop of the popular Batman series is the gloomy and nightmarish Gotham city, the films from 1989 - 1997 are more fantastical and experimental in their architecture than the four films after (2005 - 2022) which are firmly rooted in the present day. Batman (1989) showcases a variety of architectural styles, from early American brownstone buildings to modern Brutalism, Gothic and Italian Futurism (Neumann, 1999), giving the view of the city as a lawless and chaotic mess with a blatant disregard for the need for building codes, height limits or zoning regulations [Figure 6].

Figure 6: The streets of Gotham City
(Source: Batman, 1989)

Batman Returns (1992) transforms the presence of Gotham by introducing heavy ironwork alongside its integration between giant buildings and the statues that adorn them, giving a darker feel to the city. Batman Forever (1995) and Batman and Robin (1997) lean into the ever-present statues exaggerating them to the extreme with some influence from Greek, Egyptian, Neo-classicism and Modern architecture.

The Star Wars series (1977-2005) takes place among many locations which differ in their architectural styles to signify differences in several conditions for each planet (Craven, 2003). The universe of Star Wars is built around a few key locations consisting of Coruscant, Naboo, Otoh Gunga and Tipoca. Coruscant is a multilevel megacity spanning an entire planet, the transportation system is located around the tops of massive skyscrapers from which it is impossible to see the ground, all of the skyscrapers are futuristic in style which, alongside the bottomless visage from where the action takes place, implies that the city has lost its heritage and any trace of its historical architecture [Figure 7].

Oppositely the city of Naboo is flush with classical architecture and greenery which flaunts its smaller population and connection to tradition, Otoh Gunga contrasts this with its sweeping form which with its lack of rectilinear symmetry signifies that it is not friendly towards humans should be found, although it glitters like a cluster of jewels within its surroundings of dark waters creating hope for those who would lay their eyes upon it (Craven, 2003). As for Tipoca, the architectural designs are rooted in massive offshore oil rig structures, however, the silhouette could be mistaken for that of an alien vessel from classic science fiction films showing that it is out of touch with the rest of the universe.

Figure 7: The skyline of Coruscant
(Source: Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith, 2005)

With similarities to the presentation of Los Angeles in Blade Runner and Coruscant in Star Wars, the portrayal of New York in The Fifth Element (1997) is dominated by high-rise buildings where the ground is hidden from view [Figure 8]. The architecture in this version of New York is very mechanical with previously hidden infrastructure such as subway shafts and city utilities being brought to attention, the development of the city both above and below what was already there creates unique vertical canyons that with the bright and vibrant colour palette brings chaos and confusion to the identity of the city (Hanson, 2000).

Figure 8: Cityscape of New York
(Source: Fifth Element, 1997)

A more technologically advanced city could be seen in Spielberg's Minority Report (2002) [Figure 9] where his version of Washington DC is rooted in science fact, rather than science fiction (Hanson, 2004). Accordingly, this version of future city is relatively credible. Green areas and historic row houses have been maintained, though new buildings have the transport networks for magnetic levitation vehicles built into their facades. Governmental buildings are metallic and reflective with a hostile tone, whilst all of the interiors of buildings are as transparent as possible.

Figure 9: Highways integrated into future city
(Source: Minority Report, 2002)

4.   Significances of the City and its Architecture in Science Fiction Films

The implementation of architectural elements in science fiction films has a major significance to the feel and connotations within films, and specific signifiers emphasise different themes. Exaggeration of altitude within the built environment gives a visual metaphor for social status (Yu, 2008) and brings with it themes of the struggle between economic classes. It is noticeable that the metaphor is expanded with an individual's social status determining how far up a structure they belong, always with the richest and most powerful individuals residing at the top of megastructures with interesting and grandiose architecture, whilst the poorest and societal outcasts would reside on the dark and dingy ground level with uniform but often dilapidated architecture (Stanić, 2021).

No matter where a protagonist begins in science fiction cinema, whatever their residence, work or ideology conveys to the audience it is the architecture that surrounds them that the filmmaker uses to truly communicate their personality. Modern architecture has been used throughout the history of science fiction cinema to convey imprisonment and entrapment (Farro, 2016), and is a common signifier of an evil personality, whereas the heroic characters are traditionally accompanied by vernacular and classical styles which would also be used to convey peace and relief.

The post-modern style has found an ironic existence in science fiction cinema as a signifier for retrofitting in addition to the implications it has on social and economic status. The post-modern architectural signifier can also be seen as a shell or a façade to cover up flaws leading to individuals accompanying the style being seen as secretive and/or manipulative.

Marketing and its integration into future city, especially in the form of billboards are an exceedingly important signifier in science fiction cinema which conveys the social, economic and technological aspects of a society, with specific meaning derived from what is broadcasted, films such as Equilibrium (2002) and Blad Runner (1982 and 2017) make the most out of integrating billboards within the built environment to signify specific aspects of the society (Perić, 2020).

5.   Revisiting the Future: the case of Blade Runner (1982 vs 2017)

As architecture and society as a whole has developed, so have the predictions made by science fiction films. To gain an understanding of how these ideas have developed, we can look at films that have been remade or continued after a long departure from the franchise. Some of the most notable franchises that can be compared in this fashion are Dune (1984 - 2021), Robocop (1987 - 2014), Total Recall (1990 - 2012) and Blade Runner (1982 - 2017).

Out of the four franchises listed, three are remakes whilst only Blade Runner gained a wholly new entry into the franchise, making it unique in how the new entry has to build off of what has been provided by the previous film, whereas all the other franchises considered had the opportunity to completely reinvent themselves.

Taking elements from noir and science fiction, Blade Runner (1982) was the first motion picture in the cyberpunk genre, depicting the world as it could become if certain societal issues such as population growth and class separation are ignored, unlike many works to precede it, Blade Runner offers no solutions, only warnings (Webb, 1992).

Blade Runner 2049 (2017) is set 30 years after the original film, presenting many of the same issues without any improvement in their condition and still not offering a solution to any of the major societal issues present throughout the two films.

The most obvious architectural signifier present in Blade Runner is the monumental scale with huge megastructures culminating in the centre of Los Angeles which co-exist with older skyscrapers. These large-scale monoliths house companies such as the Tyrell Corporation, who have so much power and funding that it manifests into this impressive feat of architecture which screams out oppression.

The headquarters of the Tyrell Corporation [Figure 10] is a simple building despite its strong presence, with the design being similar to that of a Mayan temple which signifies that the head of the Tyrell Corporation has power similar to what a Mayan king holds (Sparks, 2020). The monumental scale is kept in Blade Runner 2049, though there is more focus on the skyscrapers within the city rather than the monolithic megastructures, with Tyrell Corporation no longer existing and many people have left to go off-world meaning that there is less need for the massive structures to stand proud over the population with just the standard skyscraper being enough to loom over the population and keep them in their place.

Figure 11: The Wallace Corporation headquarters, looming over the Tyrell Corporation headquarters obscured by smog
(Source: Blade Runner 2049, 2017)

The Tyrell Corporation headquarters still exists, just in different hands now the real estate has been encroached upon by skyscrapers in another showing of power and presence having weakened. The new power in the city is the Wallace Corporation, and they have built a monolith larger than any that has come before, despite its massive size the building is difficult to make out through the pollution present in the air of Los Angeles [Figure 11]. Whilst the Wallace Corporation wishes to follow in the footsteps of the Tyrell Corporation, the style of architecture is difficult to make out showing that they do not have a clear path, though with the context from the rest of the movie we can reasonably decipher that it shares the style of the Tyrell headquarters.

Marketing in Blade Runner (1982) is a straightforward affair with billboards covering every available surface, these billboards are digital allowing the advertising to be animated and change when required [Figure 12], this mass of

simple marketing tags each building showing the complete domination of space that corporations hold in Los Angeles.

Figure 12: A blimp carrying a billboard advertising travel off world
(Source: Blade Runner 1982)

In Blade Runner 2049 marketing has gotten bigger and better, not only do logos and adverts for corporations line every building but also three-dimensional holograms have become a staple allowing corporations to exert control over the airspace between buildings, suffocating any free space that a person could possibly use [Figure 13].

Figure 13: Holographic billboard among the skybridges of Los Angeles
(Source: Blade Runner 2049, 2017)

The architectural style in Blade Runner is a combination of Modern and Classical styles where a key theme in the design is retrofitting, where the current buildings are kept but adapted to the needs of what is being added to them. This style creates an alluring composition of buildings covered by webs of pipes, ducts and technological debris (Neumann, 1999).

This simple idea is implemented within the movie to such a masterful degree that it has made the film one of the most discussed and influential of our time. The retrofitting has made the architecture adapt to the growth of buildings, for example, the Bradbury Building has been forced to bloat its supports to extraordinary sizes to accommodate the extra load from the additional weight of the building giving its byzantine columns [Figure 14] an obese quality which in addition to the wear patterns show how unsustainable the retrofitting style is, requiring regular maintenance.

Figure 14: Bloated Byzantine columns supporting the Bradbury Building
(Source: Blade Runner 1982)

Blade Runner 2049 utilises a very different architectural style to that of its predecessor, whilst it holds some homages to the original Blade Runner the vast majority of the buildings shown are designed in a Brutalist style. This style depicts a socialist approach, however, this is at odds with the society we see within the film (Clemoes and Sweitzer, 2017) which is firmly in the grasp of late-stage capitalism where every inch of available space is controlled by corporations. The muddiness of the air helps to reveal this dichotomy where despite the fact we are being shown brutalist constructions, the smog surrounding them is restricting our view and clouding the meaning these buildings used to have [Figure 15].

Figure 15: Smog filled Los Angeles skyline and LAPD headquarters
(Source: Blade Runner 2049, 2017)

The architectural signifiers that Blade Runner (2049) carries over from Blade Runner (2017) tell a story of advancement and optimisation, in the billboards, skyscrapers and monumental scale. The buildings are larger and more numerous, and the billboards have transcended the need for sitting on the face of a building or vehicle. The similarities tell that within the Los Angeles of Blade Runner there is a need to surpass what has come before, but with this need comes a loss of humanity. The core concept of the Blade Runner franchise is the question of what it means to be human, is it enough to be born that way, can you gain or lose humanity through your experiences and actions? These questions cannot be answered by the architecture alone, but they do give some vital clues.

Where the two films differ gives us an odd juxtaposition, the architecture of Blade Runner and its retrofitted style which pulls from all ages of architecture is very individualistic in concept but depicts a society where all people matter and need to be supported, stretching the available resources as far as they will go to provide for all. Whereas in Blade Runner 2049 the Brutalist-inspired design should give us a tight-knit society that provides for all, however, it instead shows a dearth of care for the common person and the ideals held within the style of these designs, covering them up in any way possible be it through billboards or pollution.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigated the connection between architecture and film, highlighting the impact film has on popular opinion and by extension how it influences architecture. Through critically analysing the image of future city and its architecture in Sci-Fi films and a comparative analysis between the architectural signifiers and their significances in two versions of Blade Runner, it can be concluded that architecture in film plays a major role as a reflection and commentary on societal developments. On the other hand, film provides a testing ground for innovative visions and it is the realm in which a different approach to the art and practice of architecture can be realized.

The question of how realistic are the visions of future cities and their architecture in science fiction films was investigated through analysing visions predicting our current era. These visions acted as alarms for change which should be avoided. Fritz Lang's Metropolis or Ridley Scott's Blade Runner were visions of what modern society was heading to which explains the dominance of the dystopic visions of the future. These visions witnessed insignificant changes when films such as Blade Runner was produced again in recent times.

Blade Runner (1982) has an eastern-inspired style built around retrofitting of existing buildings, that whilst appearing individualistic at first glance actually represents the globalisation of design and economics. Blade Runner has five key signifiers present, in its skyscrapers, massive scale, billboards, classical styles and modern styles.

Blade Runner 2049 (2017) builds upon some of the key signifiers, the skyscrapers, massive scale and billboards pushing them further towards the extreme. The film changes up the architectural style, trading in the eastern-inspired retrofitted modern and classical styles in favour of a western-inspired brutalist design that whilst it should represent more socialist ideals is actually used in an effort to show a more individualistic society.

Blade Runner's predictions have come closer to becoming fulfilled, specifically in the increase of skyscrapers and how advertising is becoming more invasive, though it went further in its prediction than we have reached in real life. The massive scale and retrofitting style are yet to be seen and do not seem to be practical in current society.

The predictions that Blade Runner 2049 makes are not as far-fetched as the originals were upon its release, although the massive scale is not likely to occur within the timescale of the next 30 years. The advertising shown within the film seems a lot more likely to occur with corporations fighting for our attention in increasing amounts. The architectural style is also a more believable outcome with the willingness to demolish and rebuild in current society. However, the architectural style is likely to be more modern than the brutalist style depicted in the film.

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