**As Plain as Spilt Salt: The City as Social Structure in 'The Dispossessed'**
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> "Abbenay was poisonless: a bare city, bright, the colours light and hard, the air pure. It was quiet. You could see it all, laid out as plain as spilt salt."[1]

This is how Ursula Le Guin describes Abbenay, the most populated city on the moon of Annares in *The Dispossessed*, written in 1974.

As plain as spilt salt.

Perhaps brushed off our fingertips after being pinched out over the steaming plate, the leftover grains from an already small measure now scattered onto the table-top, barely there at all. Salt is small enough to be overlooked. A city like spilt salt would be modest, unassuming.

This image of the low-rise, stark, and restrained city is jarringly at odds with the vision of the city we are used to confronting in science fiction. As an architect, it seems that the scope of science-fictional references I am expected to make, that are approved canon in the words of geographers Kitchen and Kneale, is limited to little more than Ballard and Blade Runner.[2] No chance of those cities being overlooked. While there is a growing call for the study of sf within urban studies and architecture, by scholars such as Carl Abbott, Natalie Collie, Lucy Hewitt and Stephen Graham,[3] the unassuming, everyday spaces of feminist sf are often lost in the shadows cast by the dystopian high-rise.

As noted by Graham, the vision of the high rise urban future has become almost ubiquitous.[4] It is a ubiquity which denies the possibility of alternative images of the future, and in doing so also denies the futures they contain. It becomes as inescapable as capitalism, and conditions us to consider the future as synonymous with rapid vertical urbanisation. To step outside this canon is to revel in alternatives, architecture which is not as vast as empires, but is as plain as spilt salt.

*The Dispossessed* provides a plethora of such social, economic and architectural alternatives. In fact, drifting into view alongside Annares, sits the more familiar science fictional city of gleaming towers and power hierarchies, the city of A-Io. It is an urban manifestation of the principles of a capitalist nation on the planet Urras, orbited by the communo-anarchist moon of Annares. There are maps of both the planet and moon included as part of the paratext of the novel and they sit on facing pages, a diptych which frames the following text as a dialogue between these two socio-economic systems. In these maps the moon has been scaled up and the planet scaled down to create a visual parity, where each map acts as a distorted mirror of the other. In doing so, the unassuming city of Abbenay is depicted as a small but hefty counterweight to the shimmering images of the futuristic city.

A city like spilt salt would be modest and unassuming.

As plain as spilt salt.

The salt lies glinting on the table top, as it catches the light. Look closer at a single grain and see a tiny crystal, hard and bright. A crystal formed from pools filled with ocean spray, slowly evaporating off hot earth, a distillation from our primeval homes. Salt is the

complexity of history boiled down to single points of white. Salt is utility. A city like spilt salt would be refined, functional, no more or less.

Literary and political theorist Frederic Jameson talks about Le Guin's narrative process of world-reduction in *The Dispossessed*, as a process of simplification which acts as a precondition for us to be able to imagine inhabiting a world without capital.[5] The world depicted is sparse in both its narrative and architectural form, stripped back to only what is necessary for survival. In this harsh environment, we would not waste the carefully cultivated timber of the hollum tree on construction or build using the metals which must be exported to Urras in vital exchange. So, the Annaresti work with that which is common or drawn easily from the ground, in an architecture of stone and mud. A technologically advanced civilisation which chooses to use building materials familiar to the hands of our ancestors.

In this the architecture reflects our protagonist Shevek's temporal principles that time is cyclical as well as linear. This architecture has derived from innovation and development, of both construction technologies and socio-political upheaval, but this notion of linear progress necessitated a return, a revolution of rediscovery. It is a form of construction which reflects an understanding of architecture as a social product and a radical valuing of acts of maintenance, like the art of Madeline Ukeles; where to clean, to mend, to maintain are understood as acts of creation, and acts of renewal. According to Alessa Johns this focus on process is a common trait in feminist utopian fiction,[6] and a corresponding 'care-ethic' is noted by Karen Franck in much urban design established on feminist principles.[7]

Some utopian studies scholars such as Tom Moylan, John Fekete, and Nadia Khouri, have critiqued Le Guin's situation of her utopia in such a world of scarcity, arguing that it reduces

utopian possibilities down to a binary opposition between material abundance and moral excellence.[8] I would argue that there are still some small moments of poetry, which hint at an aesthetic or creative abundance, to be found within the utility of architecture on Annares. One such moment is held within the stark symbolism of the wall around the space port which opens the novel.

> "There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important." [9]

As Samuel Delany has noted in his close reading of this paragraph, this description implies a society where the technology for block cutting is available but has not been deployed.[10] For Delany, this prompts assumptions of a refusal of technology which distracts from the more critical commentary within the paragraph; the creation of a boundary wall which encloses all space beyond Annares. But rather than implying a rejection of technology I read this as a wall constructed over time, a cairn which marks the symbolic edge of the world. It is an act driven by psychological necessity rather than structural function. As such, the blocks remain uncut because any greater use of material or labour is unnecessary, the act of careful placement of stones over time is its function. As with all architecture on Annares the wall has been stripped back to its basic utility, be that social, political or poetic. This wall can be allowed to degenerate to a pile of stones, because these are sufficient to hold the symbolic function as boundary. A line drawn which separates here from there, us from them.

A city like spilt salt would be refined, down to an idea.

As plain as spilt salt.

The saltshaker on my parent's kitchen table is ceramic, glazed in stripes of blue and white and chipped at the top. The salt occasionally scatters from the base where the cork plug has cracked and split. It is part of a set, with a teapot and milk jug, passed down the table and worn from frequent use, intimate parts of the life of the house. Salt is everyday and domestic. A city like spilt salt would be home.

Le Guin gives us very few descriptions of the architecture of Annares. There are the schools where the sun streams in from high windows to teach children lessons about possession of natural resources, the mass dining halls where everyone is entitled to sustenance (although some places have more frequent desserts), a university where classes are set up by student demand, and crafts workshops which open out onto the streets. But the spaces described in greatest detail are the dormitories' and the partner dwellings. The significant moments of life on Annares are played out in domestic space. The everyday, the modest and unassuming, is shown to be significant.

All buildings on Annares are of a domestic scale, a single storey, no building or function raised above another. There is no sense of the power theorised Michel de Certeau, and Louis Marin where the looming tower which stands over the individual, there is no view out from the penthouse down to the insignificant streets below.[11] This commitment to spatial equality extends to the design of the residential dormitories, each provides the same level of comfort and a space is always available if you should need one. An Annaresti moving from one posting to another is liberated from the fear that there might be no place to rest. They will always be accommodated, and more importantly perhaps, accommodated in a place which is

intimately familiar. It is a radically egalitarian approach to design, which transforms anywhere into home.

I read this as a resident of London, where crippling rents and mortgage payments have resulted in residents being driven from their homes, establishing patterns of spatial segregation on economic, class and racial lines. From here, the comfort offered by the social provision of home and the startling freedom granted by the liberation from financial obligation present in the architecture of Annares, is utopian indeed.

Within the novel, the argument for shared housing is made on grounds of resource scarcity and the efficiency of communal living. But as Dan Sabia notes in his discussion of the community politics in *The Dispossessed*, communal patterns of living when realised in housing also act to normalise and promote communal practices, actively shaping and supporting acts of mutual aid.[12] This flattening of hierarchies between individuals and dwellings extends to the layouts of communities, with the intention that no town or city be more central than another, a pattern of decentralisation that Carol Pearson identifies as being common to feminist SF.[13] While the intention that all places and all inhabitants are equal is discussed by Sarah Lohmann as precondition to its operation as a complex utopian system.[14] Any form of hierarchy, spatial or social presents resistance to feedback and change, so the level skyline on Annares is both symbol of equality, and the source of an ability to redress inequality where it surfaces.

This is the act of permanent revolution, the expectation and requirement that the inhabitants of Annares identify and resist the establishment of power structures, that they continually overthrow forms of social oppression. This cannot be a centrally organised or delegated

effort, rather it must be enacted from within communities or the homes of individuals, incorporated into the activities of everyday life. It is a continually domestic act.

A city like spilt salt would be home.

As plain as spilt salt.

A damp fingertip is pressed into the table top to pick up the spilt grains of salt and brought up to the tongue. Salt brings out the flavour which was hidden underneath. But salt is fickle, too much and we must throw out the dish and start again. Salt is anything but plain. A city like spilt salt would not be to everybody's taste.

The anarchist principles enshrined within the society of Annares should support the wilful development of individual taste, of the pursuit of art, a practice made for no-one but the work itself. As discussed by Laurence Davis, Le Guin is acutely aware of the dangers of reducing art to its social function, so art is taught on Annares as a basic technique of life.[15] But this is counter to the needs of the community and requires the artist to deny a posting in a vital service, to resist the pressures of moral obligation and of social approbation. There is space within the partner dorms to hang up Takver's metal mobiles made in her spare moments, but Bedap's satirical play results in a series of manual labour postings, and the artist who throws over social custom entirely for their art must become a nomad.

While the principles which founded Annares demand permanent revolution, there is no stable place for the true anarchist artist. There is no revolutionary homeplace, as described by bel hooks, no place outside to regroup and resist.[16] In an environment of scarcity, design is seen

as excess. The streets of Abbenay seem to make room for the crafts-people. Wire-making and textile workshops are open to passers-by in a lively street scene which would delight Jane Jacobs. But Shevek's orange blanket is a source of consternation; what function is served by its orange colour? And even when this excess is naturally occurring, in the superfluous exuberance of leaves on a tree, Khouri observes that the moral aesthetic judgement is ingrained so deep that the delight found is tinged with guilt.[17]

In a society of communal ownership, design is a refutation of equality. To differentiate this object from another is to create a hierarchy of preference, to invite a desire for possession. Within the confines of our capitalist present, this co-opting of design as commodity has been decried by architects. Douglas Spencer charts how the attitudes to design in *The Dispossessed* is echoed by architects such as Superstudio,[18] who aimed to overthrow the consumer system of objects by announcing that 'Until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs… design must disappear'.[19] The continuous monument envisaged by Superstudio, an extensive support structure inhabited by a nomadic humanity, is the architectural reality of Annares.

It is an architectural utopian vision realised, and yet I must admit to a sense of cultural loss when imagining a built environment which has sacrificed the joyful excess of design. Perhaps a city like spilt salt *should* not be to everybody's taste.

As plain as spilt salt.

To spill salt is to be careless with something valuable. My grandmother would anxiously scrape the salt up from the table top to throw a pinch over her left shoulder, to ward off the

evil attracted by the waste. It sets off a pattern of movement, a ritual response. To spill salt is to act. A city like spilt salt would change.

Stolidly built in stone and brick, the physical fabric of the buildings of Annares resists casual modification although the radical freedom of its anarchist precepts might seem to call for it. In his mould manifesto, the architect Hunderwasser called for the radical freedom for every individual to be able to construct their own home, however precarious the resultant structures might be.[20] A truly anarchist form of spatial autonomy, the inherent variation between skills, structures and materials would be incompatible with Le Guin's anarcho-communism.

There is no suggestion that the radical equality of the dormitories could be compromised by differential design. However, on Annares, those who want to live in a partnership, can choose to move out of the dormitories and build a space for themselves. This then is architectural change in response to social need, rather than individual will or taste. In the partners' truck trains, where rooms are added onto one another in a straggling chain, the individual may exercise spatial autonomy. It is a partial enactment of what Henri Lefebvre and later David Harvey term the right to the city, a resistance to spatial inequality alongside a reclamation of the city as a co-created space.[21] I am tempted to extrapolate from this one small example of architecture as a response to the vagaries of individual needs, to hope that Annares might also accommodate the building of dwellings which respond to other kinship and family structures, to the needs of those of different ages and mobilities. While the standardised dormitories provide equality, I long for the architecture of Annares to also provide spatial equity.

To do so, the design of the buildings would have to respond to site as much as they do to the needs of their inhabitants. A standardised design copied from one place and reproduced in

another does not provide the same quality of space. The glazed office block which has become the ubiquitous architectural form for modern corporate power is foolish enough in London but becomes simply devastating in terms of infrastructural demand and energy consumption when exported to Dubai. We ignore the demands of site at our own cost.

So what of the housing of Annares, which valiantly strives for equality and equity? Here too there must be site, there are the agricultural plains, and the barren lands which Shevek travels through in times of famine. There are the remote villages where people wear jewellery and the city where the trolley cars rumble past. The dormitory block might face the rising sun to be bright in the mornings, be on a natural hill to catch small gusts of wind which ripple through, be set out alone where the quiet is palpable, or reached at the end of a long street thrumming with activity.

This is the challenge Le Guin sets down. If I desire the architecture of Annares to be both equal and equitable it must suit every individual and be placed in any location, without differentiation which might lead anyone to conclude that one was better than the other. She forces me to confront this impossibility and then to laugh at the fact I had hoped it would be any more possible than a traditional blue-print utopia. I am forced to realise that the architecture of Annares must be a negotiation, like its society, a pull between the two poles of the individual and the community.

A city like spilt salt would change.
Perhaps the designers of a city like spilt salt need to change.

Through all of this the planet of Urras has hovered behind me, the capitalist counterpoint to Annares' anarcho-communism, replete with overwhelming shopping streets and alienating tinted glazing. Here architecture is both art and product, as ornate as a Faberge egg, exuberant in aesthetic delight and heavy with the encrusted symbols of wealth. I must acknowledge that the slick renders of upcoming developments I walk past so frequently on hoardings around building sites in London, the visions of our urban future which we are being sold, would sit comfortably alongside the architecture of Urras.

So the architecture of Annares and Urras presents us with urban extremes. They ask me, as an architect, to make a moral decision as to which I want my work to tend towards. They ask if I would give up architecture as art, if it meant that architecture could never be co-opted as commodity. Or, perhaps it is more useful to sit alongside Shevek on the transport at the conclusion of the novel, not yet arriving at a determined destination, but setting out a journey towards one and away from the other.

Towards a city as plain as spilt salt.

Salt is modest,
Salt is domestic,
Salt is refined,
Salt is anything but plain.
To spill salt is to act.

Notes

[1] Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (Harper Collins, 2009), 84.

[2] Rob Kitchin and James Kneale, 'Lost in Space', in *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, 2002, 1–16.

[3] Carl Abbott, 'Cyberpunk Cities: Science Fiction Meets Urban Theory', *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 27, no. 2 (2007): 122–31, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0739456X07305795; Natalie Collie, 'Cities of the Imagination: Science Fiction, Urban Space, and Community Engagement in Urban Planning', *Futures* 43, no. 4 (2011): 424–31; Lucy Hewitt and Stephen Graham, 'Vertical Cities: Representations of Urban Verticality in 20th-Century Science Fiction Literature', *Urban Studies* 52, no. 5 (2015): 923–37.

[4] Stephen Graham, 'Vertical Noir: Histories of the Future in Urban Science Fiction', *City* 20, no. 3 (2016): 382–99.

[5] Fredric Jameson, 'World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative', *Science Fiction Studies* 2, no. 3 (1975): 221–30, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4238971.

[6] Alessa Johns, 'Feminism and Utopianism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 174–200.

[7] Karen A. Franck, *A Feminist Approach to Architecture: Acknowledging Women's Ways of Knowing*, *Architecture: A Place for Women* (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1989); cited in Mary Ann Beavis, *Women and Urban Environments: Feminist Eutopian Visions of the City* (Institute of Urban Studies, University of Winnipeg, 1997).

[8] Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000); John Fekete, '" The Dispossessed" and" Triton": Act and System in Utopian Science Fiction (" The Dispossessed" et" Triton": L'Acte et Le Système Dans La Science-Fiction Utopique)', *Science Fiction Studies*, 1979, 129–43; Nadia Khouri, 'The

Dialectics of Power: Utopia in the Science Fiction of Le Guin, Jeury, and Piercy (Dialectique Du Pouvoir: L'utopie Dans La Science-Fiction de Le Guin, Jeury et Piercy)', *Science Fiction Studies* 7, no. 1 (1980): 49–60, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239310.

[9] Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, 1.

[10] Samuel R. Delany, 'To Read The Dispossessed', in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 105–66.

[11] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 2011); Louis Marin, 'Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present', *Critical Inquiry*, 1993, 397–420.

[12] Dan Sabia, 'Individual and Community in Le Guin's The Dispossessed', in *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*, ed. Laurence Davis and Peter G. Stillman (Lexington Books, 2005).

[13] Carol Pearson, 'Women's Fantasies and Feminist Utopias', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no. 3 (1977): 50–61, https://doi.org/10.2307/3346349.

[14] 'The Dispossessed - Part 1 w/ Sarah Lohmann', Utopian Horizons, accessed 1 December 2018, https://soundcloud.com/user-494053335/the-dispossessed-part-1.

[15] Laurence Davis, 'Morris, Wilde, and Le Guin on Art, Work, and Utopia', *Utopian Studies* 20, no. 2 (2009): 213–48, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20719947.

[16] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 2014).

[17] Khouri, 'The Dialectics of Power'.

[18] Douglas Spencer, 'The Alien Comes Home: Getting Past the Twin Planets of Possession and Austerity in Le Guin's The Dispossessed', *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's*, 2005, 95–108.

[19] Adolfo Natalini, 'Inventory, Catalogue, Systems of Flux… a Statement', *Lecture Delivered at the Architectural Association, London* 3 (1971); cited in Peter Lang and William Menking, *Superstudio: Life without Objects* (Skira-Berenice, 2003).

[20] Friedensreich Hundertwasser, 'Mouldiness Manifesto against Rationalism in Architecture', *La Arquitectura Del Siglo XX: Textos*, 1958, 448–55.

[21] David Harvey, *The Right to the City*, 2008; citing Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).