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Abstract

Tony Fry's *Disappearing Cities* is a catalogue of loss and deprivation, a litany of the many ways in which the contemporary city might meet its end. However, to the active reader, the book is an invitation to critical engagement with the legacy of Western modernist urbanism. It reveals that the infrastructures that currently support the city are precious and precarious and asks readers to understand how much an ethical practice of architecture rests on mitigating risk, and how much this is undermined by contemporary epistememes. Most importantly, it asks the reader to become an active storyteller *with* Fry, revealing and intervening in the ontological assumptions that structure contemporary urbanism.

Litany of Loss: Review of *Disappearing Cities* by Tony Fry

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Disappearing Cities is the latest book by Tony Fry, a prolific author, design theorist, philosopher, and educator, and currently an adjunct professor at the University of Tasmania. Departing somewhat from his prior work on design futures, design philosophy, ethics, and conflict, this book continues his more recent explorations in fiction and fictocriticism as literary modes to express philosophical positions on the city.

Disappearing Cities describes the disappearance of 52 fictional cities, each briefly sketched from different viewpoints, ranging from an omniscient narrator to the personal focus on those affected by a city's disappearance. Reading through the litany of terrors that befall each of these, whether rapid destruction or slow loss, the reader can become somewhat overcome with grief; although the tone is journalistic or matter-of-fact, even somewhat stiff, the steady repetitions of loss become a kind of meditation on disappearance, deprivation, and disaster, becoming almost funereal. This mournful tone seems to be one of Fry's intentions.

The 52 stories are divided into three chapters: "Disappearance by Natural Nature," "Disappearance by Unnatural Nature," and "Disappearance by the Purely Unnatural." Each of these chapters is further subdivided into separate causes. "Disappearance by Natural Nature," for example, includes cities affected by earthquakes, storms, and disease; although, leaving aside slippery definitions of nature, one could already wonder whether humans building a modern city in proximity to risk makes the disaster entirely "natural." The next chapters include disappearing cities due to many reasons, including climate change, conflict, extractive industry, toxicity, disease, and human error or hubris.

Although Fry's book is billed as a kind of future fiction, these are not abstract scenarios. Natural disasters happen in the "real" world, and as Fry also points out, these are often exacerbated by a changing climate. One recent UNDRR report notes that, globally, between 2000 and 2019, there were "7,348 major disaster events recorded, claiming 1.23 million lives, affecting 4.2 billion people (many on more than one occasion), resulting in approximately us\$2.97 trillion in global economic losses" (UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2020). The report also notes that this number has risen drastically in this most recent survey due to climate change, and although the human cost is calculated in lives and dollars, ecological costs are not considered, which may

mean the total impact of these disasters is incalculable (UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2020). Like Fry, we may also add unnatural disasters to “natural” ones, where real-life disappearing cities may include Pripyat in Ukraine, near the Chernobyl disaster; toxicity in Louisiana’s Cancer Alley; and the disappearance of cities in Gaza as a result of the ongoing genocide in Palestine.

Though the cities in Fry’s book are fictional, they suffer events that are largely intensifications or extrapolations of disasters that have occurred or could occur in “real” life, removing the story from mere fiction and placing it in the territory of warning. The fictional Rangerville, for example, sits atop a mine and is being swallowed by an ever-expanding sinkhole—a fate actually suffered by Kiruna in Sweden. Likewise, other cities across the globe are contemplating their fate as a consequence of changes in climate and environmental conditions; Jakarta, for example, is rapidly sinking not only as a result of rising seas, but also as a result of significant groundwater extraction. I’m sure many readers could add several other cities contemplating their fate to this list.

The book also includes a few more speculative sketches that align fictional cities more closely with science fiction: the “smart city” Sphere Beta and the AI-created Alpha City¹² are victims of their own success, and, as in the city of E. M. Forster’s *The Machine Stops* (1909), the needs of the inhabitants are met to such a degree that the citizens struggle to maintain their own sanity or any trace of the sociability appropriate to a city.

Fry’s preface refers to Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, where each fictional city represents an aspect of Venice, the narrator’s home city. Like Calvino’s novel, Fry gives each city a fictional name. However, in Fry’s book, the cities cannot be understood as representations of a single “real” city, but they carry enough familiar cues to allow the reader to relate the fictional cities to those from their own experiences. The book is not about the disappearance of a single city, but rather an elegy for what has come to be called “the” city—the widespread, generic urbanism reproduced as the legacy of Western, modernist imperialism.

In doing so, Fry is exploring some dimensions of the most prevalent form of settlement in the 21st century, particularly the complex interconnections between vastly different systems of geology, climate, culture, society, politics, economics, and ecology, which are held in precarious harmony in “the” city. The book draws out the substantial risks that might be invited when the delicate balance of such complexity is upset, and particularly explores the ways in which the modern city has presumed to alter environmental conditions to make them more amenable, an approach that can only be understood as a temporarily forestalled or redirected risk. In some way, a leitmotif of the

book is the limited understanding of “city-ness” as conceived in the reproduction of “the city” in Western modernity, and one of the many demands the book makes of the reader is to consider other, perhaps more robust, modes of collective settlement.

This position on the modern city connects to Fry’s theoretical work on the “ontological metrofitting” of cities (2017). There, Fry proposes that,

Effectively what is starting to be identified is that by degree, and in varied ways, more and more cities will become “broken.” Brokenness, as a precondition of disaster, is not necessarily an obvious condition reducible to built fabric or infrastructure in visible need of repair. It can be equally evident in a failing operational metabolism, social ecology, system of governance and inability to manage a crisis of structural unsustainability. (Fry, 2017, pp. 3–4)

In that work, he argues for “remaking the ruin” of the modern city, first by intervening in the ontological positions that structure and inform design intentions, understanding that “the health of cities, environments and people is indivisible. This relation seems an obvious foundation for design, enfolding as it does the directive actions of the life of the body, the city and all elements of the total environment” (Fry, 2017, p. 2).

If that work made a theoretical intervention in favor of an ontological shift in understanding, his book *Writing Design Fiction* (2022) may also be understood as a companion work to *Disappearing Cities*. This book includes a novella about relocating the fictional city of Harshon, portrayed in its “death throes” due to sea-level rise and heat pressure, and its citizens must be relocated to a newly-built city nearby. The fiction takes place between the years 2052 and 2080, as the story of the relocation is told through the perspectives of citizens, politicians, and logistics and planning professionals. The story includes a discussion of some of the background forces that have made the move necessary—an extrapolation of “real-life” trends mixed with more far-reaching but increasingly likely events: intensified urbanization, climate change, and rapacious capitalism, combined with a breakdown in the authority of the Westphalian nation-state and the emergence of neo-city-state governance.

While, as in *Disappearing Cities*, Fry explores the root causes of a city’s misfortune, the construction of New Harshon also examines the “ontological metrofitting” of the city: the settlement is founded on principles of utility and modesty, rejecting consumerism in favor of a socio-cultural richness with robust social services and greater attention to the environment in foodscapes and ecologies of waste and reclamation.

Fry describes the task in *Writing Design Fiction* as a second-order design fiction differing from earlier works of design fiction and introducing a way of reading *Disappearing Cities*. Earlier definitions of design fiction argued that speculative fiction revealed avenues for exploration in design as it (largely) responded to technological advancement within the frame of modernist teleology (Bleecker, 2012; Sterling, 2005). Later works in speculative design also take up the invitation from a science-fictional premise to probe possibilities and critical positions for design (Dunne & Raby, 2013). By contrast, second-order design fiction not only asks the reader/designer to consider how design responds to external change, but also to seek an “opening” in the intellectual positions that construct “design” itself. The ontological metrofitting of New Harshon is certainly a chance to change the “ground” of the city—the literal material substrate, but also the grounding social, cultural, political, and economic assumptions, the foundational values and principles of the city.

Disappearing Cities does not attempt the ontological metrofitting of the cities it describes, but its didactic tone insists that the reader considers the ontological ground that has produced each disaster in the first place—more often than not, the villain is revealed to be human greed, neglect, or indifference. In this way, the book partially aligns with speculative fictions such as those described as critical dystopia, cli-fi (or climate fiction), and cli-fi’s upstart little sibling, solarpunk. Cli-fi refers to the literary movement that centers on climate change and human relations with the environment, thus describing a vast range of literature (Glass, 2013), whereas solarpunk first emerged within the Latin American context and is actively engaged in describing alternatives to rapacious capitalism and Western imperialism.¹

One of the speculative fictions recommended by Fry at the end of *Disappearing Cities* is Kim Stanley Robinson’s masterful *The Ministry of the Future* (2020), which explores the consequences of climate change and proposes an agency for intergovernmental cooperation tasked with preserving the future. In this way, Robinson’s novel, like much of his prolific work, not only dramatizes the human and ecological cost of climate change, but also intervenes in the systems that have produced such destruction and proposes alternatives. In this way, it aligns more closely with works categorized as solarpunk.

Fry’s *Disappearing Cities*, however, does not discuss the amelioration of the root causes of the death of cities, but instead asks us to sit with the loss, deprivation, forced migration, predatory behavior (disaster capitalism), financial crisis, and destruction of homes and livelihoods of their inhabitants. One could be tempted to read Fry’s work as a critical dystopia in the sense outlined by Tom Moylan (2000). Very simply, works in this speculative register confront potential dystopias, presenting them as a warning, as something to

¹ For an extended discussion of speculative currents in design and architecture and their relation to recent speculative fiction, see Letkemann, 2026.

avoid. And Fry does accomplish this, as the work reveals the interconnected dimensions that have produced each catastrophe.

However, the reader of the critical dystopia understands not only the conditions that have produced the unfavorable situation, but also how such situations might be transformed. If Fry's earlier work explored some of these openings, in *Disappearing Cities*, he leaves their search to the reader. If I am generous, I would suggest that Fry is inviting the reader to follow Donna Haraway's advice on the "anti-elitist" reading protocols of SF, namely "re-writing as one reads (...) not so much to make them come out 'right,' as to make them move 'differently'" (1992, p. 326).

That is to say, *Disappearing Cities* is not a book for a passive reader: Fry asks the reader to actively engage in uncovering the reasons and circumstances of each city's disappearance. Although the prose is matter-of-fact and almost clinical, the empathetic reader is provoked to visceral and emotional reactions on occasion and left with a sense of loss and regret. However, the reader is also invited to explore alternatives to the outcome Fry describes, suggesting the reader's intervention not only in design and planning, but also in the ontological assumptions that support design and planning decisions.

This invitation to the reader is further underscored by dimensions of the language that actually undermine human agency in the design process. Although the reader occasionally meets people personally—Gordino and Amira from Cathora, who must rebuild their house after a cyclone, or Daniel from Loree, who will not leave the land where his wife Carol is buried despite increasing heat—there is not much focus on human agency. More often than not, where human agency is represented, it appears as a faceless and shadowy group acting behind a passive grammatical voice ("the decision was made...").

There are a few active characters, or characters whose decisions make a difference: one example is the developer of "Las Venus," who, in the mode of Naomi Klein's disaster capitalism (2007), takes advantage of a real estate move. Thus, decisions *are made*, but we do not know who made them, and such a compositional choice obscures the intentions and actors behind these choices, making the city seem more like a natural material process subject to anonymous action rather than the outcome of a socio-cultural *milieu*. This choice obscures Fry's intention to reveal the ontological ground beneath contemporary urbanism, and although a canny reader may wish to intervene, the opportunities for systemic intervention are hidden from view.

In the end, *Disappearing Cities* reads like a catalogue of premises for fictional futures, but does not fully explore these futures as works of speculative fiction might, so the reader does not find a thoughtful consideration of

whether and how such disappearance might be addressed, raising questions about the role of designers in proposing futures. I suspect that this invitation to become an active reader is Fry's intention. Such an invitation transforms a catalogue of loss and deprivation into a mode of critical engagement with the legacy of Western modernist urbanism. It reveals that the infrastructures that currently support "the" city are precious and precarious. It asks readers to understand how much an ethical practice of architecture rests on mitigating risk, and how much this is undermined by contemporary epistemes. Most importantly, it asks the reader to become an active storyteller *with Fry*, to reveal and intervene in the ontological assumptions that structure contemporary urbanism. □

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