

Mega-Cities

The Fifth Horseman of Arcology

Bellamy Fitzpatrick

“...the city is not fitting human habitat. Architecturally, in form and function, they resemble nothing so much as endless aisles of battery hen cages.”

—Dion Workman, *Thinking Like A Forest: Towards an Agricultural Counter-Revolution*

It is pessimistically seductive to perceive a recently announced Chinese government plan to construct the apotheosis of urbanity—a mega-city centered around the capital of Beijing—as our herald of the end times.

Currently under construction, the massive city is projected to occupy an area of 82,000 square miles and house an estimated 130 million people.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are joined here by the forgotten Fifth Horseman of Arcology (a combination of the words architecture and ecology, indicating a massive structure designed to densely contain a huge quantity of humans in a mostly or entirely self-contained and artificial environment).

But Apocalypse, like the Revolution and the Rapture, stubbornly recedes every time we think we catch a glimpse of it on the horizon. No absolution comes; we remain mired in the end of history we were promised, a perpetual decomposition for which we are too often too anxious or sick ever to be present and toward which we feel only a tenacious sense of delay, a perpetually deferred end that promises nothing but more of itself and, as yet, never fails to deliver.

The Chinese state has named its still-fetal deity Jing-Jin-Ji—a string of abbreviations for the Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei regions to be joined—and declared it will be the governmental center of the country and “the vanguard of economic reform.” To give a sense of scale to the baffling figures above, the slated population of the mega-city would be ten percent of China’s current population.

The projected area would be a continuous urban expanse approximately the size of New England or Kansas. China’s millennia-long venture of homogenizing a diversity of human beings, some famously resistant as James C. Scott highlighted in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, will frighteningly accelerate if all goes as promised.

A trope of Civilization is to have each new horror ushered in presented as necessary and appropriate through some appeal to an abstract Common Good. In this case, *The New York Times* reports the mega-city “reflects the senior leadership’s views on the need for integration, innovation and environmental protection.”

China’s rulers promise integration, a civilized watchword meaning increased discipline and dependency in the population; innovation, a vague term meant to propagate humanist myths of moral, social, and epistemic progress; and environmental protection, a mendacious distortion implying that human isolation from most nonhumans composing the biosphere is desirable for both those humans and nonhumans.

Promises are made that the city will close the wealth gap, but there is no discussion of what underlies the concept of wealth itself—the dispossession of most human beings of their ability to create and perform basic life activities for themselves. Through rhetorical omission, the mere possibility of other ways of living is precluded.

When encountering proposals for the new and strange, science fiction and fantasy are a source of inspiration and speculation. Indeed, arcology has been imagined by diverse thinkers across various genres, such as in the bleak

“41st Millennium”—the setting of a variety of non-video, tabletop games—where there is a decidedly anti-humanist tale regarding the future potential of Civilization.

In spite of a galaxy-spanning human empire possessing high technology, most humans in the 41st Millennium live poor, nasty, brutish, and short lives, many of them crammed into “hive worlds,” planets consisting entirely of arcologies sitting atop ecologically devastated and polluted landscapes. With their massive populations, these hive worlds are as much production centers for armaments as they are production centers for human bodies, all of which are needed to continue prosecuting humanity’s endless xenocidal wars against a variety of alien species.

So dense are the populations, and so bleached their habitat, that they must import massive shipments of food from other planets, called agri-worlds, whose entire surface is devoted to agricultural production and whose populations consist almost entirely of viciously exploited workers. Planet Earth, called “Holy Terra,” is so developed that the entire surface is one continuous city, an ecumenopolis.

Is such a pessimistic imagining so far from the present proposal? Chinese citizens interviewed by popular media express concern, if not despair, about increased development, citing a host of already existing problems related to overcrowded urbanity. The list includes commutes lasting up to three hours within the city; overcrowded schools and hospitals without the logistical capacity to perform their services; and the regular flooding of poorly built apartments.

In no articles discussing the proposal, including the critical ones, is there even acknowledgment of the well-documented psychological findings of the correlation between urbanity and schizophrenia. Speculated to be due not only to pollutant exposure, stress, and inferior diet, but also to raw human density. There is actually a difference in urban-induced schizophrenia incidence in proportion to city population, so we can deduce that psychosis would obtain at unprecedented levels in this planned megalopolis. Zoologist Desmond Morris, in *The Human Zoo*, famously compared city life to that of caged animals, suggesting that we can observe similar tendencies toward erratic and hostile behavior in both scenarios of captivity.

Most seriously, access to water is already anticipated as a long-term problem for Jing-Jin-Ji. The massive alienation and devastation implied in the urban form is laid bare. The fundamental element of life will become a scarcity, one ostensibly to be solved through massive canals and a potential desalination plant. Here, the illogic reveals itself again.

Malthus famously considered humanity’s great failing to be its inability to understand the exponential function of population growth and thus the tendency to fall prey to overconsumption and overpopulation. But perhaps the deeper failure is the pathological insistence on deploying the same logic, existing in the same alienated relationship in which everything is objectified, regardless of what results it yields, year after year, civilization after civilization.

Thousands of years of progress have brought humanity to living in battery cages, psychotic and water-starved, toxified and lonely, slaving for money to buy bottled oxygen—and the response is to build larger, denser, and faster.

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