

As plain as spilt salt: the city as social structure in The Dispossessed

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY)

Open Access

Butt, A. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1762-2768> (2021)
As plain as spilt salt: the city as social structure in The
Dispossessed. Textual Practice, 35 (12). pp. 2005-2020. ISSN
1470-1308 doi: 10.1080/0950236X.2021.1974536 Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/94580/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1974536>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

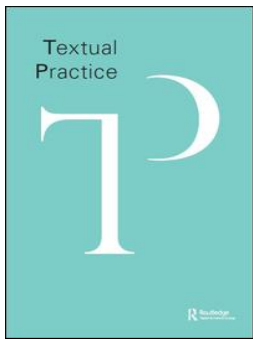
All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



As plain as spilt salt: the city as social structure in *The Dispossessed*

Amy Butt

To cite this article: Amy Butt (2021): As plain as spilt salt: the city as social structure in *The Dispossessed*, Textual Practice, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2021.1974536](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1974536)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1974536>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 14 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 124



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

As plain as spilt salt: the city as social structure in *The Dispossessed*

Amy Butt

School of Architecture, University of Reading, Reading, UK

ABSTRACT

Set against the soaring skyscrapers of much canonical urban science fiction (sf), the single storey structures of Abbenay in Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* might be easily overlooked. But, as this paper argues, the sparse description of this city 'as plain as spilt salt' offers a rich and complex vision of architectural possibility. This paper dwells within this moment of description, drawing on personal association alongside architectural and literary theory to consider how this image of a city might cast strange new light on embedded aspects of architectural practice. It explores how the sustained consideration of the built spaces of feminist sf can provide designers with an empathetic appreciation of how the built environment reflects and informs social relations.

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

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 8 April 2020; Accepted 9 August 2021

KEYWORDS Science-fiction; fiction; SF; design; architecture; cities; *The Dispossessed*; Le Guin

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 K. Le Guin describes the most populated city on the moon of Annares in *The Dispossessed*. While *The Dispossessed* ostensibly follows the life of the Annaresti physicist Shevek as he travels between worlds and works on a device which will enable interplanetary communication, this paper will remain resolutely grounded. It will inhabit Abbenay in this fleeting moment of description, drawing on architectural and literary theory and practice alongside personal reflection to consider how this bare

CONTACT Amy Butt  amyvictoriabutt@gmail.com

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

and bright built environment reflects the revolutionary ideals at the heart of Annaresti society.

Annares is defined by revolution; the revolution which led its adherents to leave the planet of Urras to establish a society on the moon which orbits their former home, and the permanent revolution which is the foundation of their collective utopian endeavour. They are the wilfully dispossessed, striving to inhabit an anarcho-communist² social and economic structure which rejects all notions of ownership and relies upon social pressure to establish patterns of mutual aid and collective responsibility. But this is not a linear narrative of social progress. Rather, as the subtitle to the novel suggests, Annares is ‘an ambiguous utopia’, a complex image of utopian becoming³ continually situated in referent motion with the world they left behind and the image of the society they hope to become. This paper will explore how this ambiguous utopia of hard-edged idealism and collective care is architecturally expressed and enacted, revelling in the startling clarity and subtle contingency of a city as plain as spilt salt.

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 are 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, restrained city is jarringly at odds with the vision of the city we are used to confronting in science fiction (sf). As an architect, it seems that the scope of science-fictional references I am expected to make is limited to those contained within the ‘canon of “approved” authors, novels and films’ in the words of geographers Rob Kitchin and James Kneale, a field that is dominated by the work of J.G. Ballard and *Blade Runner*.⁴ 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, Stephen Graham, Lucy Hewitt, and Kathryn Yusoff⁵ the unassuming, everyday spaces of feminist sf are often lost in the shadows cast by the dystopian high-rise or the strip-lit cyberpunk city.

As noted by Graham, the representations of the vertical urban built futures are so prevalent as to become almost ubiquitous.⁶ But, this is a ubiquity which denies the possibility of alternative images, the low-rise or small-scale, and in doing so it also denies the futures they contain. It is an image that becomes as inescapable as capitalism, and conditions us to consider the future as synonymous with high-density urbanisation. In her work, Le Guin challenges us to resist any such foreclosure of the future and to hold

open the scope of possibility. For Le Guin, any totalising vision should be greeted with scepticism, even when the gleaming towers are presented as an urban utopia. Rather she asks us to ‘adjust to a dimmer light’ and develop an attentiveness to a utopianism of process which is passive and participatory.⁷ It is a call to revel in alternatives, to explore an 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 the moon of Annares, is the planet Urras. It is a planet of nation states, whose cities fit more comfortably with the science-fictional city trope of looming towers and stratified hierarchies. The city of Nio Essaia, the capital of the nation of A-Io, is redolent with expressions of power which speak to its governing patriarchal capitalist ideologies, present in glass-fronted corporate high-rises, gender separatist university enclaves, lavish museums of hoarded treasures, and sensorially overwhelming shopping streets.

While firmly entrenched, these structures of power are neither totalising nor unchallenged. There are protests and riots on the streets of Nio Essaia which express resistance from within, while the presence of other nations states on Urras and the further congress of planets beyond⁸ serve as perpetual reminders of alterity. As the oppressed inhabitants of Nio Essaia work at revolution the diplomatic representative from the planet Terra, who stands as an inhabitant of an alternate or future Earth, is startled by their dissatisfaction. When compared to the resource scarcity and rampant inequality on Terra which has legitimised acts of aggressive inter-planetary colonialism and exploitation, A-Io already seems like ‘paradise’. While Urras and Annares seem to define themselves in relation to one another, these other places and ways of being hover at the edges of the text, complicating this dichotomy with myriad ideological possibilities, each of which offers critical context to the others. This Terra’s ‘paradise’ is found wanting by those who live there, more so when viewed in the moonlight of its revolutionary children.

In many ways the novel plays with the allure of a dichotomy, opening with maps of both the planet and moon which sit on facing pages, each a distorted mirror of the other. They form a diptych which frames the following text as a dialogue between these two socio-economic systems, or two ways of being in the world at one specific moment in time. But to map the extents of the worlds of the text is also to acknowledge the possibilities which exist beyond its edges. Like all maps, it is a slippery account of power and subjective value expressed in presence and absence, scale and orientation. To create visual parity between these two worlds the moon has been scaled up and the planet scaled down, a rejection of the notion that the relative import of an ideology is proportional to the land it occupies or the numbers of individuals who attend to that way of being. The importance of the unassuming city of

Abbenay on Annares is inflated by its presence on the page to more accurately reflect its symbolic occupation of space. It is a small but potent counterweight to both Nio Essaia, and to the shimmering images of the urban futures it echoes.

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 you see a tiny crystal, hard and bright. Each crystal formed from pools filled with ocean spray, slowly evaporating off hot earth, a distillation of 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.

This restrained utility is part of the utopianism of Annares for Le Guin. It is a deliberate counterpoint to the promises of blueprint utopias, worlds of lush plenty which are sustained in a perpetually fecund present. In contrast, Annares is a world stripped back to that which is necessary, its barren landscape providing no respite from its radical premise as an anarcho-communist enclave. The absence of plenty removes the possibility of redolent ease and ensures that fundamental questions of survival are present in the everyday. Such unflinching clarity lays bare the critical nature of the utopian impulse; the questioning of possibility and the weighing of value.

This critical reflection is made possible, in part, by the arid expanse of Annares itself. As discussed by literary and political theorist Frederic Jameson, Le Guin's narrative process of world-reduction in *The Dispossessed*, is a process of simplification which acts as a precondition for us to be able to imagine inhabiting a world without capital.⁹ It is not simply a counterpoint to the profligacy of A-Io, but a landscape which both symbolises and necessitates the Annaresti abhorrence of excess. In this harsh environment, the carefully cultivated timber of the hollum tree would not be wasted on construction, nor would 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. It is a technologically advanced civilisation which chooses to use building materials familiar to the hands of our ancestors.

Le Guin has expressed a desire to explore an ideology of 'balance-in-motion and rhythmic recurrence' in her work, to dwell in alternatives to an assertive ideal of utopia.¹⁰ The architecture of Annares reflects both Le Guin's ideals of recurrence and makes manifest Shevek's temporal principles that time is cyclical as well as linear. Here innovation and development, of

both construction technologies and socio-political upheaval, have necessitated a revolution of rediscovery. The apparent simplicity of the structures of Annares exposes the fallacy that progress can be correlated to complexity. Rather, these architectures of stone and mud are the product of collective construction and ongoing maintenance, carefully carved and compacted into being, designed to reflect and necessitate acts of mutual aid. This is a form of construction which reflects an understanding of architecture as a social product and presents a radical valuing of acts of maintenance, like the work of the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles; where to clean, to mend, and to maintain are understood as acts of creation and acts of renewal.¹¹ According to Alessa Johns this focus on process is a common trait in feminist utopian fiction,¹² and a corresponding 'care-ethic' is noted by Karen Franck in much urban design established on feminist principles.¹³ These structures are not only an expression of the Annaresti abhorrence of material excess, but a celebration of the delight of caring sufficiency.

Several 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.¹⁴ This dichotomy of plenty and scarcity accommodates and perhaps encourages an oversimplified reading of Annaresti utopianism as analogous to the sanctimonious poverty of the hermit. But this apparent dichotomy is troubled by the challenges that such scarcity makes on moral excellence, how much easier to share much in a world of plenty than to starve together in times of famine? It also overlooks the abundance in other forms which are present within Annaresti society: the presence of music, literature, plays and poetry which are made possible in part by the social valuing of these art-forms beyond and outside of any commercial value.

Amid the low stone dwellings there are small moments of spatial 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ For Delany, this prompts assumptions of a refusal of technology which is conceptually confusing and 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. In this light it is an act driven by psychological necessity rather than structural function. As such, the blocks remain uncut because that use of material or labour is unnecessary, the act of careful placement of stones over time is its function. It is a collective performance, made possible by the continual individual acts of maintenance which accumulate to represent a shared ideal. As with all architecture on Annares the wall has been stripped back to its basic utility, be that social, political or, in this case, 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. The focus on these spaces reflects the social utopianism of the Annaresti, founded on principles of mutual aid and expressed in the equal distribution of resources – be that food or shelter, and the right for individual self-determination and self-expression through art and academic practice. 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 with no building or function raised above another. There is no sense of the power theorised by Michel de Certeau and Louis Marin where the looming tower stands over the individual, there is no view out from the penthouse down to the insignificant streets below.¹⁷ 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. More importantly perhaps, they will always be 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 devastatingly high rents and privatisation of social housing 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 they are also designed to engender patterns of domestic life oriented towards a sense of collective kinship rather than private individualism. 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.¹⁸ Thus the social ideals of Annaresti society are written into its architectures of home. 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. It is a pattern of decentralisation that Carol Pearson identifies as being common to feminist sf.¹⁹ As a built form, this radical de-centring and flattening symbolically reflects an intention that all places and all inhabitants are equal. But it also provides the tangible measure against which the realisation of the utopian ideal can be judged. As discussed by Sarah Lohmann, it is a precondition to its operation as a complex utopian system which incorporates critical reflection.²⁰ For Lohmann a 'complex' utopian system is one which is continually adjusting in response to feedback, an attribute evident in the skyline of Annares which acts as both a symbol of equality and a critical baseline which provides the ability to identify and redress inequality where it surfaces, projecting above the rooftops.

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 bring them 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 and the pursuit of art, a practice made for no one but the joy of 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 practices are taught on Annares as basic techniques of life.²¹ Art is not required to serve the desires of the wider community which might risk the establishment and entrenchment of an ideological style and curtail the radical strangeness of true self-expression. But this refutation of art as solely a social practice means that the lifework of the artists often runs counter to the needs of the community. It requires the artist to deny a posting in a vital service, to resist the pressures of moral obligation and social approbation, and choose work which may be of value only to themselves. In this environment of scarcity both art and design can be seen as excessive, a reckless expenditure of resources of material and time. As Khouri observes, even when this aesthetic excess is naturally occurring in the superfluous exuberance of leaves on a tree, the moral aesthetic judgement is ingrained so deep that the delight found there is tinged with guilt.²²

So, there is space within the partner dormitories for Takver to hang up her metal mobiles, sculptures of movement whose shifting intricacy seem the very manifestation of permanent revolution, but they must be made in her spare moments between work postings. Meanwhile, the satirical plays written by Bedap result in his continual estrangement from the communities he lives within, and he is pushed ever outwards into a series of manual labour postings. The tension between individual and community is forcibly present in these moments of artistic practice, as the artist who throws over social custom entirely for their art must become a nomad. Abbenay makes room for the crafts-people with wire-making and textile workshops open to passers-by in a lively street scene which would delight urban planning activists like Jane Jacobs,²³ but there is no mention of the artist's studio. 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 bell hooks, no place outside to regroup and resist.²⁴

This moral judgement is not simply a product of the material scarcity of Annares; 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, and Shevek's orange blanket is a source of consternation; what function is served by its orange colour? Within the confines of our capitalist present, this co-opting of design as commodity has been decried by architects and designers. In their work on speculative design Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby note that the spectacle of design is all too often deployed as a tool to stoke the desire for consumption. They call for an alternate form of design practice, focused not on problem-solving, but which strives to take on a social or political role as a 'form of dissent expressed through alternative design proposals'.²⁵ In their discussion of design products Dunne and Raby argue that making the possible products of such imaginings tangibly present within the world removes them from behind the wall which separates the imaginative construct from the real and opens them for consideration. The presence of these objects hints at the malleability of reality, blurring the edges of possibility. But while the slippery status of a physical object, as both the product of a fiction and present in tangible reality, places the worlds they conjure less resolutely in the realm of the imaginary and thus imbues it with the power of counter-factual presence, I would argue that the resultant imaginative engagement of the viewer is not dissimilar to that of the active reader of sf. Following Darko Suvin's definition of sf as the literature of cognitive estrangement,²⁶ sf texts also offer a site of fresh strangeness from which to reflect on the world as it is experienced. Similarly, the fragmentary nature of either an object or a description offered within an sf text both rely on the construction of an absent paradigm as described by Kathleen Spencer,²⁷ the imaginative evocation of the entire life-world where such objects and places are everyday, woven from the glimpses shared and the reader's own experiences and memories.

The scope for manifest change inspired by the active engagement with sf is discussed by utopian sf scholars including Angelika Bammer²⁸ and Walidah Imarisha for whom 'all organising is science fiction'.²⁹ For Imarisha the space of the sf text can be claimed as a site to 'dream as ourselves',³⁰ to liberate the imagination and gather the resolve to sculpt reality. The active reading and writing of sf is similar to Dunne and Raby's acts of speculative design in that both ferment and realise the remaking of the world, resisting the relegation of utopian possibility to the realm of fiction. But by calling for such imaginings to be made tangible, Dunne and Raby also speak to the specific responsibility and agency that designers hold in the construction of worlds, the ability for such concerns to be manifestly made present in design practice.

This critical attitude towards design as a function of political and social being in the world, both its representation and its construction, is reflected in the attitudes towards design in *The Dispossessed*. Douglas Spencer charts how the reluctance to engage in aesthetic work beyond the

demands of strict utility which pervades Annaresti society is echoed by architects such as Superstudio,³¹ 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.’³²

The continuous monument envisaged by Superstudio, an extensive support structure which takes the form of a grid that over-sails mountain ranges and oceans and is inhabited by a nomadic humanity, is the effective architectural reality of Annares.

So, the architecture of Annares is an architectural utopian vision realised, and yet I must admit to a sense of loss when imagining a built environment which has sacrificed the joyful exuberance of design, and a resistance to the idea that such a sacrifice might be a corollary of equality.

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.

In his work on utopianism, Jameson builds on the work of Ernst Bloch to delineate the distinction between blueprint utopias which offer a vision of a perfected state of being attained at the end of progress, and the utopian impulse which manifests in a striving for better and calls for perpetual revolution.³³ For Jameson, while literature may be used to depict a blueprint utopia novels can also be understood as ‘a determinate type of praxis’,³⁴ eliciting a utopian impulse in their readers through the radical act of disjunction which demands reflection on its own conditions of possibility. This quality of reflection is engendered most potently in what Moylan terms critical utopias, including *The Dispossessed*, which dwell in conflict or ambiguity and ‘reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream’.³⁵ These critical utopias make manifest the desire for a world made otherwise, while also offering depictions of the sustained activism and agency necessary to re-imagine that possibility into being.³⁶

For Le Guin, Annares is an attempt to imagine a utopia of process. As such, it does not offer an image of settled resolution, instead it confronts the tensions between such continual revolution and the entrenchment of patterns which resist change.³⁷ Shevek’s journey to Urras is one such moment of

conflict; an act of rebellion within a society whose truest form is one of revolution. It is an act that reflects the importance he places on the words and thoughts of the scholars of Urras, and in doing so suggests there is value to that which was left behind, lost, or simply held outside of Annares which is anathema to many Annaresti. As such this journey is an exercise of individual agency acting against both the social consensus and the insidious consolidations of power which occur within collective groups. By exposing the creeping limitations on individual freedom, Shevek's journey makes visible the wider entrenchments of position in Annaresti society, where those who strive for change are driven into exile, and words meant to inspire revolution are transformed into doctrine.³⁸ It is a vivid warning against the complacency of habit which allows power to gradually accumulate, an acclimation to the world as it is which muffles the call to revolution.

Stolidly built in stone and brick, the physical fabric of the buildings of Annares might be read as a potent manifestation of the act of settlement, of entrenchment within a pattern of living. The materials of their construction and their squat heavy forms resist casual modification when the radical freedom of its anarchist precepts might seem to demand it. In their permanence, these structures speak more to the stasis of the blueprint utopia than the shifting malleability of the utopian impulse. 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 and dangerous the resultant structures might be.³⁹ But this truly anarchist form of spatial autonomy with its inherent differentiation based on skills, structures and materials would produce such vividly varied results, and make such iniquitous demands on its occupants that it would be incompatible with the *communitas* of Le Guin's anarcho-communism.

There can be no suggestion that the radical equality of the dormitories can 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.⁴⁰ 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 and resolutely refuses to settle within this novel. 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 blueprint utopia. I am forced to realise that the architecture of Annares must be like its society, both a negotiation between the two poles of the individual and the community, and an acknowledgement that the continual process of making and remaking is not a compromise but a choice to move beyond this dichotomy.⁴¹ This refusal to settle is what Bammer describes as the replacement of the 'idea of utopia as something fixed ... with the idea of the utopian as an approach toward, a movement beyond set limits into the realm of the not-yet-set'.⁴² As Shevek notes, the time spent together on this journey is the edifice we are building with our lives.⁴³

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 glossy 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.

Seen as a dichotomy the architectures of Annares and Urras ask me, as an architect, to make a moral decision as to which I want my work to be. They ask if I would give up architecture as art, if it meant that architecture could never be co-opted as commodity. But I return to the maps which open this novel and the universe beyond these two worlds hinted at by the space which surrounds them, and revel in the fact that the answer to an either-or question can be a refusal.⁴⁴ Instead, I choose to join Shevek on the transport at the conclusion of the novel moving between Urras and Annares, wilfully holding open the utopian horizon of possibility. Not yet determining a destination, but journeying 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 K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (London: Gollancz, 2002), p. 84.
2. This social structure has also been described as anarcho-syndicalism. In the novel the distribution of resources and labour is calculated by a central authority and appears to be based on a balance of social need, individual skills and personal interests, which results in work assignments from 'DivLab'. But, in line with anarchist principles each individual can refuse a placement or develop a lifework of their own devising, although this might meet with social pressure and run counter to their internalised principles of mutual aid. They can also set up a 'syndic' which is a collective focused on a specific practice which is then allocated resources. There are syndics for art and academic practice as well as all other forms of labour including theatre collectives and the university department of theoretical physics.
3. The narrative of *The Dispossessed* grapples with the when of utopianism. As described by Fran Bartkowski: 'Utopian thinking takes us into questions of time and tense – the futures perfect that must be imagined even as they must change shape as they become the present.' Fran Bartkowski cited by Kathi Weeks in Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), p. 262. The relationship between the individual chronology of Shevek's experience, the narrative structure, the theories of time present in the narrative, and the implications this holds for the utopian imaginary are discussed further in a number of texts including Chris Ferns, 'Future Conditional or Future Perfect? The Dispossessed and Permanent Revolution', in Laurence Davis and Peter G. Stillman (eds), *The New*

- Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed* (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2005), pp. 249–62.
4. As Kitchin and Kneale note, sf scholarship within geography, architecture and urban studies has historically focused on a limited range of texts which might be referred to as an 'approved canon' which most commonly includes the work of J. G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, Frank Herbert, and H.G. Wells. While there has been significant work to both expand and dismantle this canon, including the critical work within the book edited by Kitchin and Kneale to which this is the introduction, the focus on these apparently seminal texts persists. Rob Kitchin and James Kneale, 'Lost in Space', in *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction* (London, New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 1–16.
 5. Carl Abbott, 'Cyberpunk Cities: Science Fiction Meets Urban Theory', *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 27.2(2007), pp. 122–31; Natalie Collie, 'Cities of the Imagination: Science Fiction, Urban Space, and Community Engagement in Urban Planning', *Futures* 43.4(2011), pp. 424–31; Lucy Hewitt and Stephen Graham, 'Vertical Cities: Representations of Urban Verticality in 20th-Century Science Fiction Literature', *Urban Studies* 52.5(2015), pp. 923–37. Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
 6. Stephen Graham, 'Vertical Noir: Histories of the Future in Urban Science Fiction', *City* 20.3(2016), pp. 382–99.
 7. Le Guin, 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be', *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), pp. 80–100.
 8. This novel can be read as part of Le Guin's Hainish cycle of novels, set in a sf universe which includes the wider interplanetary group known as the Ekumen.
 9. Fredric Jameson, 'World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative', *Science Fiction Studies* 2.3(1975), pp. 221–30.
 10. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*.
 11. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Manifesto For Maintenance Art 1969!*
 12. Alessa Johns, 'Feminism and Utopianism', in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 174–200.
 13. Karen A. Franck, 'A Feminist Approach to Architecture: Acknowledging Women's Ways of Knowing', in Ellen Perry Berkeley and Matilda McQuaid (eds), *Architecture: A Place for Women* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).
 14. 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', *Science Fiction Studies*, 1979, pp. 129–43; Nadia Khouri, 'The Dialectics of Power: Utopia in the Science Fiction of Le Guin, Jeury, and Piercy', *Science Fiction Studies* 7.1(1980), pp. 49–60.
 15. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 5.
 16. Samuel R. Delany, 'To Read The Dispossessed', in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), pp. 105–66.
 17. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Louis Marin, 'Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present', *Critical Inquiry*, 1993, pp. 397–420.

18. Dan Sabia, 'Individual and Community in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*', in *The New Utopian Politics*, pp. 111–28.
19. Carol Pearson, 'Women's Fantasies and Feminist Utopias', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2.3(1977), pp. 50–61.
20. 'The Dispossessed – Part 1 w/ Sarah Lohmann', Utopian Horizons. <https://soundcloud.com/user-494053335/the-dispossessed-part-1> [Date accessed: 1 December 2018].
21. Laurence Davis, 'Morris, Wilde, and Le Guin on Art, Work, and Utopia', *Utopian Studies* 20.2(2009), pp. 213–48.
22. Khouri, 'The Dialectics of Power'.
23. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).
24. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).
25. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), p. 160.
26. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).
27. Kathleen L. Spencer, "'The Red Sun Is High, the Blue Low": Towards a Stylistic Description of Science Fiction', *Science Fiction Studies*, 1983, pp. 35–49.
28. The role of utopian sf including *The Dispossessed* and utopianism more broadly in feminist activism and transformative practice is discussed extensively in the roundtable dialogue which forms the conclusion to Bammer, *Partial Visions*, pp. 241–99.
29. The short stories contained within *Octavia's Brood* explore the significance of sf 'visionary fictions' in social justice movements by inviting activists, artists, educators and organisers to produce works which write new communities and new futures into being. Walidah Imarisha, 'Introduction', in adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha (eds), *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2015), p. 4.
30. Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood*, p. 5.
31. Douglas Spencer, 'The Alien Comes Home: Getting Past the Twin Planets of Possession and Austerity in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*', in *The New Utopian Politics*, pp. 95–108.
32. Adolfo Natalini, 'Inventory, Catalogue, Systems of Flux ... a Statement', Lecture Delivered at the Architectural Association, (1971); cited in Peter Lang and William Menking, *Superstudio: Life without Objects* (Mila: Skira, 2003).
33. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005).
34. Fredric Jameson, 'Of Islands and Trenches: Naturalization and the Production of Utopian Discourse', *Diacritics* 7.2(1977), p. 6. As discussed in Peter Fitting, 'The Concept of Utopia in the Work of Fredric Jameson', *Utopian Studies* 9.2 (1998), pp. 8–17.
35. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), p. 10.
36. The active role of the utopian imaginary as a vital part of social change is discussed further in Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). As debated by Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, the 'when' of utopia is both located on the

- horizon and enacted within the present moment. Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson, 'Utopia in Dark Times', in Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (eds), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 13–28.
37. The extent to which *The Dispossessed* successfully presents a utopia which holds open the 'horizon of historical possibility' is discussed further in Laurence Davis, 'The Dynamic and Revolutionary Utopia of Ursula K. Le Guin', in *The New Utopian Politics*, pp. 3–36.
 38. The development of a counter-revolutionary tendency on Annares which 'gives reign to the very impulses it was designed to reign in' is discussed further in James Bittner, *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (Wisconsin: UMI Research Press, 1984), p. 120.
 39. Friedensreich Hundertwasser, 'Mouldiness Manifesto against Rationalism in Architecture', *La Arquitectura Del Siglo XX: Textos*, 1958, pp. 448–55.
 40. David Harvey, *The Right to the City*, 2008; citing Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).
 41. The conflicts and challenges of making architectural work outside of capitalism and the associated patterns of resource consumption are also explicitly addressed in the architectural short fictions within the collection *Gross Ideas: Tales of Tomorrow's Architecture*, Edwina Attlee, Phineas Harper, and Maria Smith (eds) (London: Architecture Foundation, 2019).
 42. Bammer, *Partial Visions*, p. 9.
 43. 'So, looking back at the last four years, Shevek saw them not as wasted, but as part of the edifice that he and Takver were building with their lives.' Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, p. 276.
 44. 'Will you choose freedom without happiness, or happiness without freedom? The only answer one can make, I think is: No.' Le Guin, 'A Non-Euclidean View', p. 19.

Acknowledgements

This article builds upon work presented at the 'Worlding SF' conference at the University of Graz in 2018, my thanks to all of those involved in this wonderful event. My thanks to the sf communities at this conference and those I am privileged to continue to be part of including LSFRC and the Beyond Gender Research Collective for the thoughtful collective discussions of Le Guin's work. Particular thanks to Francis Gene-Rowe, Glyn Morgan, Katie Stone, Sarah Lohmann, Sinéad Murphy, and Sing Yun Lee for their company in Graz, and their shared enthusiasm and critical insight which has inspired my research and practice in so many ways. My thanks to Maggie Butt and David Roberts for your encouragement to revel in the more poetic aspects of this work, and to the anonymous reviewers for your constructive comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.