

Black Panther's Utopian Project: The Innovative Potential of Fiction and Speculation by Non-Architects

El proyecto utópico de *Black Panther*. El potencial innovador de la ficción y la especulación de los no arquitectos

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Abstract

From games to film to literature, images of utopia in media have been successful in generating fictional worlds with high aspirational values. The process of creation for these utopias is not unidirectional; unlike typical design methods, designing for fiction requires a cyclical approach wherein creators draw inspiration from the real world and, in turn, use them as the basis for their own process of innovation. The final product—'fictional' and 'utopian' in nature—then influences the field from which it drew inspiration.

For architecture and urban design, the ideation of fictional utopias and futures facilitates place-making for and inclusion of groups of people who are often excluded or oppressed by the architectural project. The participation of non-architects in the creation of utopias generates ideas and learning for mainstream architecture and its adjacent fields. In this sense, the process of fiction creation mitigates exclusivity and eliminates architecture's barriers to participation.

Using Hannah Beachler's fictional city of Wakanda for *Black Panther* (2018) as a case study, we argue that utopian ideation by non-architects has the potential to create immense possibilities for their design principles to be adapted into real life architectural projects. In our academic paper, we question: How does a production designer with a non-architectural background draw inspiration from Zaha Hadid's futuristic buildings to create an utopian city at the intersection of tradition and technological innovation? Furthermore, what can architects borrow from a non-architect's fiction? Finally, by way of its design process, how does fictional architectural ideation differ from intra-disciplinary speculation?

Keywords: utopia, fictional architecture, speculative design, Hannah Beachler, Wakanda.

Resumen

Desde los juegos hasta el cine y a la literatura, las imágenes de la utopía en los medios de comunicación han sido exitosas en la generación de mundos de ficción con altos valores aspiracionales. El proceso de creación de estas utopías no es unidireccional. A diferencia de los métodos típicos de diseño, el diseño para la ficción requiere un enfoque cíclico en el cual los creadores se inspiran en el mundo real y, a su vez, lo utilizan como base de su propio progreso de innovación. El producto final, ficticio y utópico en su naturaleza, entonces influye en el campo del que obtuvo la inspiración.

En la arquitectura y el diseño urbano, la conceptualización de utopías y futuros ficticios facilita la creación de espacios por y para la inclusión de grupos de personas que a menudo están excluidos u oprimidos por el proyecto arquitectónico. La participación de los no arquitectos en la creación de utopías genera ideas y aprendizajes para la arquitectura convencional y sus campos adyacentes. En este sentido, el proceso de creación de ficción mitiga la exclusividad y elimina las barreras de participación en la arquitectura.

Utilizando como caso de estudio Wakanda, la ciudad ficticia de Hannah Beachler para *Black Panther* (2018), argumentamos que la idea utópica de los no arquitectos tiene el potencial de crear inmensas posibilidades para que sus principios de diseño se adapten a proyectos arquitectónicos de la vida real. En nuestro ensayo académico nos preguntamos: ¿Cómo se inspira un diseñador de producción, sin formación arquitectónica, en los edificios futuristas de Zaha Hadid para crear una ciudad utópica que está en la intersección de la tradición y la innovación tecnológica? Más aun, ¿qué pueden aprender los arquitectos de la ficción creada por los no arquitectos? Finalmente, a través de su proceso de diseño, ¿en qué se diferencia la idea de una arquitectura ficticia a la de una especulación intradisciplinaria?

Palabras clave: utopía, arquitectura ficticia, diseño especulativo, Hannah Beachler, Wakanda.

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Introduction

In 1922, Le Corbusier first presented plans for la Ville Radieuse, an urban masterplan for central Paris which represented an indisputable ideal of personal freedom (Montavon, Steemers, Cheng, and Compagnon 2006). Though never realized, it was published in 1933 in a book of the same name. He believed that well-ordered linearity was key: skyscrapers, housing blocks, and green space should be organized in long lines radiating out from the center. This arrangement would maximize public space while optimizing the density of living space. It was to be a utopia: executed through its architecture.

As any utopia, by definition, involves the imagining of a societal ideal, it thus relies equally on architecture in order to become spatially and conceptually tangible. Architecture and design have long histories of enmeshment with utopian ideation—from Ledoux's Royal Saltworks at Chaux to the City Beautiful movement—architecture is a demonstrated and crucial tool in speculating, generating, and enacting utopianism. It is this speculation, which already exists to some degree in any creative environment, that is central to the spatialization of utopia. Designing for fiction requires reflexivity: inspiration must, in a certain way, be drawn from an abstraction of real-world observation. We argue that the creative reimagination of existing worlds for utopian projects generates an opportunity for contribution to the design disciplines by way of speculation.

But what of this speculation about creative works outside of architecture? We seek to investigate the heightened potential for this contribution

from creatives outside of design: when novelists set stories in fictional, utopian settings, or when filmmakers imagine their worlds' sets.

For architecture and urban design, the ideation of fictional utopias and futures facilitates place-making for and inclusion of groups of people often excluded or oppressed by the architectural project. The participation of non-architects in the creation of utopias generates ideas and learning for mainstream architecture and its adjacent fields. In this sense, the process of fiction creation mitigates exclusivity and eliminates architecture's barriers to participation.

Through an analysis of Hannah Beachler's portrayal of the fictional city of Wakanda in *Black Panther* (2018), we argue that utopian ideation by non-architects has the potential to create immense possibilities in terms of the adaption of their design principles in real life architectural projects. In our academic paper, we question: How does a production designer with a non-architectural background draw inspiration from the 'architectural real' to create a utopian city at the intersection of tradition and technological innovation? Furthermore, to what extent is this process of inspiration cyclical—what can architects borrow in return from the non-architect's fiction? Finally, by means of its design process, how does fictional architectural ideation differ from intra-disciplinary speculation?

This paper is broadly organized into three sections: utopia or fiction versus architecture or reality, the example set by Beachler's Wakanda, and the potential reinvention of design strategies informed by non-architects' speculation. First, we

investigate the historical relationship between architecture and utopian ideation and identify tensions between the real and the fictional. Second, we provide a case study of Hannah Beachler's *Wakanda*, in which we identify design strategies that focus on social programming and highlight the importance of the real in the fictional when speculating. We, therefore, recursively consider the contributions made to the discipline of architecture by Beachler's speculation. Lastly, we propose a speculative design model of the built environment that relies on creatives outside the discipline.

Development

The Potential of Utopia

Le Corbusier's aim with the *Ville Radieuse* was a utopian reimagining of the city; Ledoux had no commission or site in mind when he designed his idealist *Saltworks*; Frank Lloyd Wright's *Broadacre City* was a theoretical antagonism to what he saw as wrong with the move to suburbia. While hypothetical at the point of conception, each proposal was eventually borrowed from by designers to come. We are left, though, to wonder whether these projects, when actually realized, would really have executed the designer's original intention. In *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (2013), Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, credited for popularizing critical and speculative design through their practice, state that the idea of utopia is far more interesting when used as a stimulus to keep idealism alive. It should be a reminder of the possibility of alternatives: somewhere to aim for rather than build. Setting aside for a moment the question of whether utopia can actually ever be attained, thinking of architecture as having *utopian potential* or a *utopian dimension*, enables a more productive way of considering how utopia could enrich architecture (Coleman 2014). In this way, utopian thinking becomes a process or framework rather than an aspirational final product. Grounding aspiration in speculative design strategies allows systemic barriers to be broken, possible futures to be imagined, and large-scale solutions to be considered for fundamental societal challenges. Coleman (2014) goes on to argue that literary works and architectural treatises strong-

ly suggest architecture's dimension of utopia. Those imagining specifically and solely for fiction are freed of the constraints that bind architects in real, built projects.

Appropriating the Real

In imagining their fictional worlds, various authors implicate themselves in what we are here calling a cyclical process of imagination. For example, Coleman believes that utopia's vocation is to act upon reality (2014). Furthering that line of thought, Dunne and Raby (2013) present literary examples of speculative design thinking in their scholarly work. They argue that Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) exemplifies the construction of a speculative design project: all her inventions are based on actual research subsequently extrapolated into imaginary but not far-fetched fictions. The research Atwood undertakes in imagining her fictional worlds involves understanding the real in order to reinterpret it.

Architecture can also be used more literally to fuel fictional projects. Take Lebbeus Woods' film credits: he is credited as the 'conceptual architect' of the film *Alien 3* (1992) and as the 'inspiration for the interrogation room' in *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) (IMDB). In each case, Woods' drawings were translated to film sets with varying degrees of similarity. The real facilitates the fictional—the designer appropriates and reimagines elements of their real, lived environments to develop fictional worlds. In this way, architecture—both built and hypothetical—provides the design lexicon with which those outside of it can play.

Analysis: Hannah Beachler's Wakanda

We believe that *Wakanda*, a fictional country, home to the Black Panther in the Marvel Comics Universe, is one of the most successful utopias due to its access to a far greater audience than any other film, and its role in generating a dialogue on good governance, heritage conservation, sustainable design, and ideal city planning. Our selection of *Wakanda* is determined not only by its general popularity but by its design process and architectural representation. Through this case study, we delve deeper into the design process of Hannah Beachler: production designer

and creator of Wakanda. Born to an architect father and an interior designer mother, Beachler studied fashion design and film. Without any formal training in architecture, urban design, or city planning, she created Wakanda; thereby playing an elemental role in shaping a new discourse on what architects and planners can learn from fictional cities.

Reconciling Tradition and Technology

The case of Wakanda is remarkable not just for its architectural project, but also its social project. Though utopian in nature, it is not detached from its real-world socio-temporal context. Beachler actively recognizes a variety of contemporary issues and presents a critique of present-day problems, both social and spatial. The process of fictional innovation allows a designer to offer solutions to urban challenges by means of production design, ultimately represented through the agency of film. These issues range from sustainable transportation and clean energy to zoning, land use, and preservation of traditional crafts. Like many global metropolitan cities, transportation forms an integral part of Wakanda's capital: the Golden City. The portrayal of the Golden City's transit systems utilizes aspirational, futuristic technology—like magnetically levitating trains and cars powered by vibranium (an imaginary metal)—to solve urban mobility problems. The emphasis on sustainability and reliance on technology to represent an ideal future is a typical pursuit of the futuristic design process. Wakanda, however, stands out by integrating technology with tradition; its buses are technologically up-

graded and retrofitted while retaining their original character (Image 1). These buses, colloquially called trotros, exist today in several African countries. In a recent interview, Beachler (2018) says, "The Wakandans didn't just chuck that idea [of the 'trotro' buses]... They took the bus, and said, 'how do we make it so we're not letting off emissions? How do we make it so it doesn't flood the city?' So we took the bus and kept tradition over technology."

The production design for Black Panther remains grounded in the past while looking optimistically towards the future—it does not replace the old with the new but finds alternative ways of reconciling both in order to create a new utopia. Though seemingly straightforward in applying technology to problem-solving, designers of Wakanda are cognizant of the repercussions of abruptly disposing objects and practices which have been an integral part of people's lives. An attitude such as this can be extrapolated to better understand broader questions concerning public memory and nostalgia—always centered around *the people*.

Human-centered Approach to Reprogramming of Buildings

A human-centric approach is evident in Beachler's (2018) design process. She confirms, "When I designed Wakanda, the first thing I researched were (the) people. Not the technology, the people." Undertaking a rigorous ethnographic exercise, Beachler created a five hundred-page document called the 'Wakanda Bible'. The Bible became a



Image 1: Streets of the Golden City bustling with new-age trotros as shops display traditional African baskets.

cardinal charter for everything Wakanda; it described the people, their ancestry, language, clothing, traditions, and rituals as well as the city, its buildings and their functions. It served as a dictionary for all agencies involved in creating Wakanda—from the director and cinematographer to the costume designer and actors. Beachler's anthropological approach peaks when human-centered programs turn into buildings that are well ingrained within the city fabric. The epitome of this design process is the creation of Records Hall in the Golden City. Located just outside the palace, the Records Hall is a repository that maintains records of an individual's personal history and ancestry. It houses a function which ensures that a person is always able to trace back to her / his origins: where they came from, who their forefathers were. More than anything, the Records Hall safeguards the person's identity so that the individual is always aware of their roots. On being probed about the necessity of such a building in the city, Beachler (2018) explains, "Being a Black American, you're not African. Sometimes you're not even American. You're that hyphen. You're in between and you don't really have a place often [sic] ... There's an erasure... (Wakandans needed a Records Hall) because

they know everything about their past. It will never go away in this city and that was truly the most important thing to me because I don't have that, but I could give it here in this fantastical world." According to Toldson (2018), many conclude that Black progress is reserved for fiction; even then, the process of creating utopia gives agency to its designer to invent new, unprecedented building programs which make it possible to include groups and people who are otherwise excluded or oppressed by city planning and architecture in real life. Architecturally, Wakanda's building program is not separate from its building form; it is equally important to examine the spatial (and visual) representation of Wakanda's social project.

Reappropriation of Contemporary Architecture

In the pursuit of creating an Afro-futurist utopia, one that infuses African culture with technological advancements, Beachler draws inspiration from the real-world architecture of Zaha Hadid. The late British-Iraqi architect is known for rejecting orthogonal geometry in her work and using parametric design to create fluid spaces through curvilinear forms. "That's what I wanted people to feel for the modern architecture in



Image 2: Zaha Hadid's Wangjing SOHO in Beijing.



Image 3: Wakanda's Golden City.

Black Panther—very voluptuous, very curvy, no hard edges and the spaces feel both very large and intimate at the same time,” Beachler (2018) says. Buildings in the Golden City have circular forms such that spaces within are devoid of any sharp edges; “every single space is a circle that helps calm and relax. It also represents this continual journey that we’re on—this life cycle of birth and death that has many representations on this continent.” Two of Hadid’s projects: the DDP Building in Seoul and the Wangjing SOHO in Beijing (Image 2), became the primary references for Beachler. Their influence is visible in the movie (Image 3). However, the choice of Zaha Hadid’s architecture as a primary influence for building-design in the Golden City is not only a matter of futuristic, utopian representation but also of cultural reappropriation towards building an Afro-futurist aesthetic. Beachler adopts Hadid’s forms but infuses them with traditional African elements: earthy tones on building exteriors, thatched roofs in houses made of mud and bamboo, and earthen streets lined with shops selling woven African straw baskets. Such design decisions ensure that architecture is not limited to form-making; that there is an emphasis on the importance of architectural gestures—regardless of how insignificant they may seem on the surface—which situate the project within a broader historical and socio-cultural context.

Conclusion

When striving for progress—be it social, creative, or technological—speculative design provides the opportunity to enact and consider utopianism through its processes. Integrating a utopian

dimension into architectural ideation might be its most useful application. Having seen how unrealized, utopian grand plans such as the Ville Radieuse have had an impact on the discipline, it is now time to involve new genres of creatives and thinkers in the process of architecture if we are to effectively confront today’s pressing issues.

The Afro-futurist movement, revived through *Black Panther* and derived from a combination of historical and contemporary references, is beginning to influence a new discourse on city planning and architecture—one where planners and architects are learning from those outside of their professions. Whether it is aspiring for transit-friendly, walkable cities without cars (Kuntzman 2018), or natural resource management (Sow and Sy 2018) and community organizing (Lessons from Wakanda: What Black Panther Raises for Black Organizing n.d.), there are plenty of lessons to be learned from Wakanda. Beachler was inspired by Zaha Hadid’s architecture; Zaha Hadid, in turn, was influenced by Constructivist architects, artists, and graphic designers. She drew references from the works of pioneers such as Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksander Rodchenko, and, particularly, Yakov Chernikhov, whose depiction of utopias through drawings is greatly recognized. With every iteration of ‘influenced’ utopia creation, there is a change: either in its architecture, city planning, governance, or social enterprise.

The learning from and creation of fictional worlds is, therefore, cyclical: designers are influenced by the utopias they themselves once influenced. Production designers, screenwriters, and authors

of fiction speculate based on what they have experienced. They reappropriate this experience to imagine new possibilities and solve what they perceive to be problems. Fictions, necessarily spatial, are thus inspired by architects. Fiction writers conceive built environments which, in return, influence the boundaries of architecture. The cyclical process of utopian ideation is dependent on each actor improvising while designing; while the nature of change driven by architects is more form-based, designers trained outside the conventional fields of architecture and urban planning are often able to instill a strong social program in their fictional worlds. The success of Wakanda relies on the intertwining of its social project with its architectural project; any attempt to divorce one from another would have lessened its impact.

We argue that we, as architects, often find ourselves restricted by the large-scale spatial and urban challenges that the discipline necessarily presents; thus, we often turn to pragmatic solutions. Architecture has historically had to assert its independence from adjacent fields such as science, fine art, and engineering. However, the key to radical design innovation and societal problem solving may now lie at the collaborative intersections made real by works of fiction.

"Wakanda Forever." 

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