

Fragments from Fiction, Reflections for Planning

At a recent reading seminar hosted by the Danish Town Planning Institute, participants gathered not around a plan or a project, but around two works of speculative fiction by Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* and *The Word for World Is Forest*.

The conversation moved between literature and practice, raising a simple but radical question: What might speculative fiction offer to the way we think about and shape cities?

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Planning is often imagined as a forward-moving act – defining problems, proposing solutions, shaping futures – grounded in clarity, structure, and direction. Yet, the realities it engages – cities, landscapes, and the beings that inhabit them – are anything but linear. They are layered, relational, and uncertain, held together in assemblages of intricate narratives. In this context, speculative fiction offers not answers but invitations: a way of thinking otherwise. What worlds are revealed to us when planning is approached through fiction or acknowledged as fictive? Which questions come into focus, and which assumptions begin to loosen?

Le Guin's "carrier bag" proposes another kind of practice; one that gathers rather than directs, knitting together relations, uncertainties, and stories. It holds needs, voices, and temporalities together not as determinate conclusions, but as constantly shifting processes shaped by community, alterity, and multiple perspectives. This article follows that proposition. It does not move toward a single conclusion but acts as a container: a collection of fragments, reflections, and observations from our collective conversation, offered as a point of departure for further thought. Held together, they suggest that planning might be understood not only as the making of plans, but as the ongoing practice of holding and reconfiguring the relations that constitute the city.

Uncertainty

Planning often seeks to reduce uncertainty – through data, projections, and controlled scenarios. Yet the city is inherently messy, instead unfolding through overlapping temporalities, incomplete knowledge and shifting conditions. What if uncertainty is not seen as a constraint to overcome, but as something to work with?

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Not as a risk, but as a condition for adaptation and change. The resilient city may not be the one that eliminates uncertainty, but the one that learns to inhabit it – transforming it into the ground for new ways of living and planning.

The master plan, the singular vision, the promise of progress. A city shaped by authorship, direction, growth and resolution. Who is such a city for, and whose notion of a city does it represent? Against monistic and dominating narratives, Le Guin's carrier bag offers another way of seeing, feeling and telling the city. A place where incremental change, community, relations, and diverse perspectives are thought with. What happens when planning becomes a container holding more than one vision, a process without masters, an ongoing work continuously unfolding?

The word for world is forest

Not as a metaphor, but as a proposition; a means of thinking where the environment shifts from backdrop to the condition for life. Can changing our vocabulary suggest a different world; a different approach to thinking about our cities? Property planning often begins by dividing land into uses. But what if we instead began by asking what relationships already exist? What if the word for world was care; maintenance; home? Perhaps the limits of planning lie not only in what we do, but in the words we begin with.

Dreaming

Dreams can neither be calculated nor replicated; their power lies in their ability to affect through feeling and experience, as theory to give the world meaning and as a practice of creating new worlds. In Ursula K. Le Guin's story, dreaming holds the possibility of giving new substance to the world, shaping how we situate ourselves

within our lived environment and imagining new visions of the future. As planners, perhaps our role is not only to dream alternatives to the barren dream of growth, but also to become interpreters of the dreams of other beings.

Time

Time in the forest doesn't move in straight lines and refuses to follow determined trajectories. What is past is always present in today's time, and what is to come has already been decided in the seeds that took root last spring. As planners and designers of possible futures, what time do we design for? How do we come to grips with the uncertainty that follows an indeterminate future and a past constantly being rewritten? Perhaps our pen tips must forget old habits of drawing lines that always run forward and instead play with scribbles that run backward or in circles – narrations of strange temporalities for us to occupy.

"We don't need to understand everything," writes Donna Haraway, and planning might benefit from heeding that call. If city plans have long been shaped by a modern desire to define, structure, and resolve, the reflections gathered here offer other orientations – ones that allow uncertainty, multiple perspectives, new vocabulary, and shifting temporalities to remain in play.

Perhaps this is why, as a parting note, our hosts urged us to carry forward Le Guin's speculative fiction and to begin our own reading groups within our professional circles – an attempt to draw others into loosening reality's grip on the future. An invitation to a practice resembling a carrier bag: one that gathers fragments, stories, and temporalities – not to resolve them, but to hold them for a moment, and then carry them forward to uncertain and surprising places.