

Ray Bradbury: Imagining the City of Tomorrow

Over seven decades, Ray Bradbury's unique creative vision has reflected our contemporary landscapes in the mirror of our possible futures.

WHEN FUTURE SCHOLARS COME TO survey the history of 20th-century and early 21st-century urban thought, they may well find one of the period's most important minds to be a writer who is neither an architect, nor a planner, nor even—at present—widely recognized as a commentator on these subjects. Ray Bradbury, who recently entered his 88th year, not only has never formally studied any urban discipline, but, like Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs, has never acquired a college degree. Yet, for the greater part of a century, Bradbury has been boldly envisioning the landscapes that await all of us.

Bradbury is one of America's great artists, and he stands alone. No school can claim him; publishers, critics, and librarians strain to categorize his works, which elude conventional classification. He is a popular writer who first made his way in pulp fiction and has seen his work converted into comic books, yet his gifts soar into the highest reaches of literary endeavor. (His honors include the National Medal of Arts and a Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award from the National Book Foundation.) He has been called a science fiction writer, but his creations are anchored in metaphor rather than scientific description. He has been labeled a fantasist, yet his stories and essays go to the heart of some of the most pressing political, technological, and social realities of our time.

Precisely because he is such a towering imaginative writer, his purely literary inventions and highly individual style have overshadowed the value of his perceptions as a

thinker. However, his work as a cultural essayist, social observer, and speculator is of great substance, connecting with urgent urban and environmental issues. He has addressed our relationships with towns, cities, technologies—and change itself.

To see how Bradbury fits into urban debate, we need to consider the ancestry of the urban profes-

sion through buildings and the infrastructures woven around them. A medieval cathedral, a Mayan pyramid, a classical Greek temple, a New England Puritan village, and an early 20th-century skyscraper all communicate not only their makers' materials and tools, but their values and aspirations. This is why, paradoxically, the future can date. The futures conceived by Cold War Marxists and Victorian British imperialists are both now obsolete, and buildings designed in the 1930s as avant-garde symbols of tomorrow are period pieces today.

The morphing of urban disciplines from the general and speculative to the narrow and immediate is illustrated by comparing Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723) with any architect of the past century. Wren not only was an architect, but was also a professor of astronomy, a mathematician, a technologist, a political activist, and a cofounder (and president) of Britain's national academy of science. His contributions to scientific research had the respect of Isaac Newton.

Finding a contemporary counterpart for Wren is difficult; our present civilization does not expect urban designers to concern themselves with the nature of the universe or the grand evolution of society.

As a visionary of the future, Bradbury has built a brilliant career by acknowledging that we all hunger for intimations of things to come, and of things that might have been. As the design disciplines increasingly have become more down to earth and less speculative, societies have sought a broad sense of the urban future elsewhere: in philosophy, religion, popular science,



sions. Urban design has always been about more than habitats: it is a language in which we articulate our dreams of the future. But this function can be obscure. While our monuments, homes, and offices visibly incorporate varying forms of nostalgia, how such artifacts represent the future is far less clear.

How the past is interpreted is shaped by how the future is perceived. Politicians honor historical currents that support the philosophic vision they wish to perpetuate or create, projecting their hopes

economics—and imaginative writers. Among these, Bradbury has uniquely engaged the problems, creative opportunities, and possible futures of the city.

He was born in 1920 in Waukegan, Illinois. In 1934, his family moved to Los Angeles. On graduating from high school, he sold newspapers while writing his early tales. The books of fiction that established his reputation were *Dark Carnival* (1947), *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), *Dandelion Wine* (1957), *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962), *The Illustrated Man* (1951), *The Golden Apples of the Sun* (1953), and *The October Country* (1955).

Bradbury's poetic voice, inventiveness, and distinctive view of life transcend his genre material. He brought to science fiction and fantasy an unexpected seriousness and technical sophistication. Bradbury stood apart from, and in a sense above, many of his contemporaries in mainstream fiction by tapping into folk images that they disdained, but which held undeniable power for millions of readers. A Bradbury story that seemed to be simply a genre adventure piece about space travel might turn out to be a meditation on human nature, dignity, love, or our deepest fears. Conversely, he would infuse apparently mundane situations with the eeriness of macabre fiction, creating haunting metaphors for universal aspects of the human condition. Working in these different forms, he has crafted a prolific, multimedia body of work, including television, motion pictures, and theater.

Bradbury's urban preoccupations, readily discernible just beneath the surface of his fables, overlap conspicuously with major topics in current urban debate: the vital processes of town, city, and community; the impact of technological change; the fragile physical environment; the dual relationships with the past and the future; and

the survival of human values in a mass culture. His essays, collected into books like *Yestermorrow: Obvious Answers to Impossible Futures* (1991), deal more explicitly with these issues. He codesigned the American Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair and the original Epcot Spaceship Earth exhibit at Walt Disney World, and has served as a consultant to a Los Angeles-based architectural practice, the Jerde Partnership.

The urban, ecological, and technological themes in Bradbury's work are significant not just because he helped pioneer their introduction into popular fiction, but because of his original philosophical perspectives, which relate strongly to contemporary urban problems. His originality revolves around two main points: his optimism about human capability and his tendency to view all development through a moral lens.

Regarding the first point, much early 20th-century science fiction, which trumpeted technological wonders, was emotionally and politically simplistic. Later, more sophisticated writing in this genre became negative toward technological progress, especially after the world entered the atomic age and also became more widely aware of ecological challenges. These growing reservations about technology and the environment resonated in an antiurban tradition not only in science fiction but in American culture generally. As historians of ideas, Morton and Lucia White show in their classic study *The Intellectual Versus the City*, that American writing has for generations sustained a vigorous pessimism toward cities, along with profound misgivings about technology and the capacity of humankind to impose large-scale technological projects on the natural world.

In spite of this concern, Bradbury believes passionately that humanity is destined to progress through

vast technological enterprises. He has been a lifelong supporter of the space program and maintains that with sufficient will, there is little limit to what human creativity can accomplish. This philosophy is summed up in his short story, "The Toynbee Convector," in which an inventor convinces the world

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that he has devised a way to visit the future, using a procedure so complex that it will offer only a single opportunity to penetrate the veil of years. He embarks on this journey through time to determine whether tomorrow is going to be as dreadful as present environmental and political crises suggest. The world eagerly awaits his report. He returns with good news: in the future, the leaders of nations will come to their senses and work together with scientists, technologists, and philosophers to create a planetary civilization that is clean, humane, secure, and beautiful. At the end of the tale, we learn that his report was accurate inasmuch as the events he described do indeed come to pass. But it is also revealed that he lied about traveling through time. He made no such excursion. He fabricated the whole story because he was convinced that humanity could and would solve its problems only if it could be convinced of its power to choose its own future.

The logic of the story could well be disputed, not least because it could be argued that an impression of inevitable progress might tend to encourage complacency rather than determination to succeed. But

like most of Bradbury's work, this story presents a parable rather than an argument. Its interest is as a thought-provoking metaphor rather than a literal description.

This leads us to the second point around which Bradbury's work revolves: his perception of all development in moral terms. Technological change, new scientific knowledge, humankind's development of awesome powers that result in both marvelous and dreadful consequences—all this is, for him, grist for constant moral evaluation. To apply engineering ingenuity illuminates the cosmos truthfully only if it is filtered through the prism of human values.

Accordingly, while Bradbury is an optimist about humankind's incalculable potential for greatness, he is also a fierce critic of technologies, cityscapes, and cultural products that he believes represent a forgetfulness of human context. His famous *Martian Chronicles* stories are less about space travel than about the perception that humanity has an unstoppable drive to expand, innovate, and implement enormous projects, and that it is folly to deny this feature of the human spirit. But equally, the stories counter the delusion that technological know-how and gigantic budgets make humanity immune to blundering. In the Mars tales, although humankind makes the interplanetary leap, it takes with it to the alien landscape all the crassness, ugliness, prejudice, weakness, and bigotry that has plagued it on Earth for millennia.

Similarly, Bradbury's prophetic novel *Fahrenheit 451* warned of a now disturbingly familiar future society in which remarkable machineries provide mindless entertainments to a population severed from the knowledge and literature of its past. In his novel *Dandelion Wine*, the rituals of small-town life unfold as a poignant distillation of age-old human experience. For Bradbury, the towns, cities, highways, entertainment

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media, malls, and public spaces that we build, no less than our spacecraft, are expressions of the myths by which we choose to live. In his romantic eyes, urban design encompasses science, technology, and acts of administration, but is ultimately a humane art, joining with religion to give meaning to our lives. Where we build and how big or small we build are not as important as whether the result celebrates our humanity.

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