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Self-Perpetuating Urban Space in Kim Stanley  
Robinson's *The Gold Coast*

Bachelor's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education  
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Using the language of spatial practice and architecture, fictional cities tell the story of the worlds they inhabit, physicalizing its society's values, culture and politics in their urban fabric. The sprawling megacity of Kim Stanley Robinson's 1988 novel *The Gold Coast* is no exception, extending Reagan Era neoliberal values and amplifying trends of deregulation to the year 2027. This 1988 novel constitutes one part of the *Three Californias Triptych*, which imagines three alternative urban and political futures for Orange County, California. While the triptych's two other novels, *The Wild Shore* and *Pacific Edge*, are post-apocalyptic and utopian reimaginings of society, *The Gold Coast* presents an Orange County which is recognizable, yet defamiliarized. The iconic sprawl of the Los Angeles metropolitan area is extended both vertically and horizontally, with counties enmeshing to form a dense, homogenous urban area. The novel's attention to physical space is particularly apparent in the nine chapters which chronicle the area's evolution from prehistory until 2027, written by the protagonist Jim McPhearson in the style of a critical history.

Although the novel centers on the daily life of Jim, a teacher and self-proclaimed poet, together with his friends and family, the built environment is the novel's narrative undercurrent, determining the trajectory and quality of life of every character in the book, as well as every other citizen in the fictional Orange County. Most chapters are structured as typical days in the lives of its characters, which weave together to form a tapestry of what life is like in a society defined by the unstoppable momentum of an unregulated free market. The novel's emphasis on city life and city development makes *The Gold Coast* attractive as the object of an urban-oriented analysis, an approach some scholars have advocated for as it may provide a better understanding of the relationship between culture and the built environment in both fiction and the real world (Abbott 123-24; Collie; Lehan; Shaw). In this paper, the novel's urban environment is interpreted using urban sociological theories, which show how

these spaces change the ways Orange County's citizens socially interact socially and civically, as well as how spatially coded values affect the attitudes of the space's users.

Through the lens of urban sociology, a cycle can be identified in *The Gold Coast* where the replacement of public land with private development contributes to the structural reproduction of social inequality, the de-democratization of culture, and a weakening of civic society, while strengthening the hierarchies that benefit from these values. As a result, urban space becomes an actor that reinforces the urban development policies of Orange County, as resistance against further development is pacified, and those who build and benefit from the development become more powerful.

### **Space as a Producer of Culture**

*The Gold Coast's* megacities and megastructures echo the world of William Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy; malignant, grey, and corporate-owned (Bukatman 141). Its gordian knot of freeways, a prototypical feature of cyberpunk literature from the 1990s, signifies ecological collapse (Burgess 279). The novel is full of references to overpopulation, overconsumption and social inequality, all of which may explain why some scholars have argued that this Orange County of 2027 is, in fact, a cyberpunk world (Moylan 204; Seyferth 4). Cyberpunk is a subgenre that pays particular interest to urban issues associated with the late twentieth century, materializing these as lawless, multi-layered concrete slums inhabited by poor masses, surrounded by surveillance equipment and private police who protect the properties of powerful corporations (Clute 67; Collie 248-49; MacLeod 239). Giant advertisements entombing structures suggest a capitalism gone awry, and the dichotomized nature of buildings, either monumental and clean, or cramped and grimy, point to an economically divided public.

While *The Gold Coast* tangents some of these same themes, its world is perceptibly less gritty than most cyberpunk literature. Even though corporate power dominates this future, Orange County has held on to its middle class, and archetypal elements of artificial intelligence, cyber-networks, or body- and mind-modification are not featured. Instead, Robinson presents readers with a future that is in many ways deceptively similar to the Orange County of today, and particularly to the Orange County at the time of its writing in 1988. The defamiliarizing element of the 2027 rendition seems to be scale: its malls are familiar, yet larger. Its freeways are familiar, but wider and more numerous. The novel has

replaced the real Orange County's continuous sprawl of detached single-family homes with towering condos (Robinson 559). Rather than fully conforming to cyberpunk-tropes, *The Gold Coast* is a realistic dystopian vision of the future that extends anxieties related to neoliberal society into urban space.

Although it may seem self-evident that such urban development would be a symptom of culture and policies, many urban sociologists would argue that the reverse is equally true; that the built environment is itself an actor. In the field of urban sociology, theories have identified a cyclical relationship between the built environment, structures of power and culture (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 130-40; McCann 167-82; Mitchell 30-36; Petrescu and Trogal 1-13). Lefebvre popularized a theory in his influential book, *The Production of Space*, which argued on the one hand that cities are shaped by their means of production and the hierarchies created by the subsequent division of labor, but concurrently that cities themselves contribute to the reproducing these structures ( 130-85, 190-194). Lefebvre pointed to two aspects of space which he argued made space function as a means of control, domination and power (26).

The first aspect is representations of space, referring to the abstract mental conception of space by architects and planners, encompassing blueprints and plans as well as the theories that underpin them, which can range from ideas of aesthetic beauty to schemes for maximizing sales by strategically placing stored goods. Representations of space is the aspect most controlled by those in power, so by understanding how space is represented within a city, it is possible to discern underlying cultural systems such as values, ideologies, and structures of power (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 33-46; McCann 172). In *The Gold Coast*, the prevalence of consumer-oriented or economically productive representations of space, such as office buildings and freeways, hint at structures of power which favor capital, and a culture which values economic growth.

The second aspect of space, lived space, encompasses mental perceptions of space by its users. It is through lived space that cultural systems are transferred to users of a space. For instance, property owners may create a fence, which in terms of representations of space aims to reinforce the concept of property ownership. In lived space, users may perceive the space in this intended way, or in unintended ways such as by experiencing aesthetic displeasure, a sense of exclusion, or associative uneasiness at the fence's connection with the crime that necessitated its existence. Lefebvre illustrates the transfer of values by pointing to architect Frank Lloyd Wright's designs, whose homely qualities reproduce a communitarian familial

way of life in alignment with his own Protestant values. He argues that lived space has a socializing effect that over time induces people to change their habits and beliefs to accommodate their space's imbued values (43-44, 190-94). On the scale of a city, such developments become culturally transformative, which is arguably the case for *The Gold Coast's* economically productive spaces.

From this perspective, Orange County's economically productive spaces can be considered to be producers and reproducers a culture that values materialism. Spaces that do not align with the value of economic growth are replaced by spaces that do, reinforcing the hegemonic culture's profit-orientation. This is exemplified by the replacement of public spaces, such as parks, squares and sidewalks, with pseudopublic spaces, which are private properties that in some ways function as public spaces – malls, in the case of *The Gold Coast* (Mitchell 132). This erosion of public space is comparable to a real-world paradigm shift in the 1980s identified by Gabriela Rendón and Miguel Robles-Durán, as they noted in *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture* that “(the post-war twentieth century ideals [of producing urban land which benefits society] gradually morphed into the consolidation of the global neoliberal project” (212). They answer the question of how a movement towards a small elite extracting monetary value from the land at the expense of the public could occur by pointing to the socially reproductive nature of space, in which a culture can accept negative outcomes for themselves if they are conditioned to do so through spatially established hierarchies or values (211-13). Such a phenomenon is illustrated clearly in *The Gold Coast*, most evidently in the large-scale replacement of public space with private and pseudopublic space.

Evidence for a lack of functional public space is found throughout the novel. While *The Gold Coast* hosts no mention of public squares or public buildings, there are references to sidewalks and a single park. The park is featured when the protagonists search for a place large enough to play softball, which they locate in Ortega, California, nearly 200 kilometers outside Orange County (Robinson 390). This suggests that there are token parks, albeit small or few in number. No explanations are offered for their scarcity, although a parallel development may offer a clue as to why: the often-referenced privatization, destruction, and development of all of Orange County's national parks. The justifications for these socially and ecologically regressive policies are captured in a passage where Jim reflects on the sale of Cleveland National Forest, the last untouched land in Orange County:



This, to Jim, is one of the great disasters of the last twenty years: the federal government's decision, under immense pressure from the southern California real estate lobby and the OC Board of Supervisors, to break up the Cleveland National Forest, on the border of Orange and Riverside counties, and sell it for private development. A good way to help pay the interest on the gargantuan national debt, and there wasn't really any forest out there anyway, just dirt hills surrounded by a bunch of communities that desperately needed the land, right? Right. And so, with the encouragement of a real estate developer become Secretary of the Interior, Congress passed a law, unnoticed in a larger package, and the last empty land in OC was divided into five hundred lots and sold at public auction. For a whole lot of money. A good move, politically. Popular all over the state. (Robinson 356-57)

Most of these justifications are either directly or tangentially tied to economic growth and can be applied as easily to a park as they can to a forest. The non-economic argument that surrounding communities "desperately needed the land" is shown to be false when, during a conversation between Jim and his real estate broker-friend, it is revealed that office buildings and a giant mall are to be built there, rather than homes. Furthermore, office buildings in Orange County have an occupancy rate of twenty to thirty percent, showing that they are not needed, but instead that they are speculative properties intended for profit maximization (Robinson 357, 543). The underlying logic for building such structures, that land is an economic resource which constitutes "a good way to help pay the interest", and that it was "just dirt hills", is what Lefebvre would consider a bourgeois argument. Rather than consider the city as an oeuvre, a complete composite of beautiful architecture, landscapes, parks and gardens, it is considered as a rational and economically productive product.

The replacement of the forest with office buildings and a mall exemplifies the single-minded pursuit of profit in representations of space, which Lefebvre argues manifests itself as a homogenized urban landscape (18-21, 75). This future Orange County is undeniably described in terms of uniformity. When the protagonists discuss how they believe there are only five types of street in Orange County, Jim's friend Tash comments that the commercial streets are indistinguishable from one another, adding that "they made a one-mile unit and then just reproduced it five hundred times" (Robinson 538); words that conjure imagery of factories and assembly lines. At another point, Jim notes that thirty years after the undeveloped pastures of Irvine Ranch were sold, the area became identical to the rest of

Orange County (Robinson 377). Some key descriptive words are frequently applied to Orange County: mallsprawl, autopia and condomundo (a compound of condominium and the Spanish word for world), painting the picture of a homogenous blurry urban mass (Robinson 420).

As for the only other type of public space in *The Gold Coast*, sidewalks, there are indications that these are sub-par and rarely used. One of the historical chapters describes how the growth of the urban area made anything other than driving a private car impracticable, which is supported by Jim who considers that he can't reach anywhere on foot (Robinson 559, 618). The resulting lack of utility leads to fewer pedestrians, which is made evident when, during a visit to Cairo, Jim and his friends exclaim that they can't believe how many people are actually walking, and again later, during a discussion of what types of street exist in Orange County, when Jim's friend Tash interjects that none of them have pedestrians (Robinson 500, 538-39). Although sidewalks have not been dismantled, urban planning to accommodate walkability has not been prioritized, making the lived space functionally unviable. The resulting underutilization triggers cultural changes as people move from the sidewalk's public realm to the privacy of the car. One such change is that the perception of sidewalks become unfavorable, evidenced by Jim's reflection that "pedestrians are suspicious" (Robinson 618). Because no further comments are made on this subject, any explanation as to why pedestrians are suspicious is conjecture. However, worsening perceptions of sidewalks in the real late twentieth century Los Angeles provides a good comparison.

This research found that as sidewalks increasingly became the domain of impoverished people – the people who could not afford homes or cars – they came to be considered unsafe (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 53, 94, 229-63). Urban theorist Jane Jacobs observed a feedback loop in which fewer pedestrians on the sidewalk would lead to fewer eyes on the sidewalk, making them verifiably unsafe. Thus, underutilization transforms the perception of danger into actual danger (108). A perceived lack of utility and safety, as well as a lack of alternatives to the automobile, naturally reproduces automobile dependence. Such an automobile dependence is referenced throughout the novel, and is blamed by Jim for what he considers the death of community, as he notes that in his life "Only the car remains constant, and the hours spent in it each day. The real home, in autopia" (Robinson 574-75, 612, 645). The fact that Jim considers his car his real home shows the degree of automobile-dependence in this future. Such dependence may contribute to the production of social and physical atomization, which research in the real world has shown is the case. As individuals

are isolated within the bubble of the automobile and within urban islands separated by freeways, the sense of community corrodes (Francis et al. 402; Gregor 121-22; McGeady 48-51).

The replacement for both the sidewalk and the park is the pseudopublic mall. Malls are described in Jim's critical history as the functional equivalent of villages, adding that "Once you parked at a shopping center, you could return to a life on foot" (Robinson 587). The implication is that although sidewalks are unattractive, the idea of pedestrianism, or perhaps of social public space, is desirable. Additionally, malls are described as having imitations of park-like features, such as fountains, plastic trees and bonsai gardens (Robinson 331, 619). Yet unlike public space, pseudopublic spaces are designed by property owners, and the representations of space they create embed them with a different set of values (Goss 19). The pseudopublic space only mimics the public space in so far as it results in increased profit, meaning the mall-as-a-village is a veneer constructed to falsely imitate a previous social formation for the sake of nostalgia. For instance, while a normatively ideal public space is inclusive and democratic, the pseudopublic space is fundamentally undemocratic and exclusive, which means that the replacement of public spaces with malls in *The Gold Coast* contributes to a lack of informed citizenry and a lack of civic engagement – civic atrophy, in essence (Mitchell 230-36; Butler 33).

### **Civic Atrophy in Pseudopublic Space**

Public spaces are important instruments for democratic expression and collective identity, as their unmediated nature means that they can circumvent the echo chambers present in traditional media technologies, as well as create group cohesion for political activism (Mörtenböck and Mooshammer 257-60). Mörtenböck and Mooshammer have identified public space as an essential component of grassroots organization, mentioning the Arab spring protests, Ukraine's Maidan uprising and the Occupy movement as major examples (257). However, it should be noted that public spaces often do not live up to the normative ideal described by many theorists – an Agora-archetype in which public activities and democratic representation for all may occur – because public spaces have historically been subject to the exclusion of unwanted groups and the exercise of state control (Mitchell 131). Nevertheless, as cultural theorist Don Mitchell points out in his book *The Right to the City*, functioning public spaces, however flawed, are a critical aspect of democratic societies

and a physical expression of democratic values (8, 129-37). He formulates the dangers posed by the decline of public space as the “steady erosion of the ideal of the public, of the collective, and the steady promotion of private, rather than democratic, control of space as the solution to perceived social problems” (137). This movement towards privatization can be socially reproductive, both in a direct sense as the ability to organize against such a movement is weakened by a lack of public space, as well as in an indirect sense, as the absence of public space is culturally internalized and thus considered less valuable and worthy of protection. The fact that Jim notes that the sale of the Cleveland National Forest was popular may indicate the latter.

The replacement for the public space, the pseudopublic space, is both undemocratic and unequal. These spaces, controlled by security guards, create a dichotomized lived space that is perceived to be safe by high-consumption groups and unsafe by undesirable groups. In real pseudopublic spaces, scholars have identified activists, homeless and minorities as targeted groups for exclusion, leaving a narrow band of middle class and often white consumers to constitute a contrived public (Bickford 361; Davis 226; Mitchell 172). There is not enough evidence in the novel to substantiate that minorities are unwelcome, but for political activists there are signs that this is the case, as the activity of hanging up anti-war posters by Jim and his friend Arthur is shown to be covert; they dodge security guards and risk jail to reach mall shoppers with their political messages (Robinson 330-32). Although minorities are not shown to be excluded by force, the malls in *The Gold Coast* are exclusionary by way of visual cues. Jim, standing in a mall, reflects that “The luxury surrounding him, he thinks, is a deliberate, bald-faced denial of the reality of the world” (Robinson 515). The reality Jim references is the wide-spread global impoverishment in *The Gold Coast*. Sociological research has found that when impoverished communities are faced with spaces that are inaccessible to them through cost, such as the luxury Jim describes, the experience of inequality is exacerbated. To the impoverished, this luxury suggest that the space is not for them, and thus, entering such a space becomes an act of transgression (Dinzey-Flores 241-44).

One consequence of this exclusion is that the idea of who constitutes the public in the minds of Orange County’s citizens can be controlled by the space’s corporate owners. Shoppers never see impoverished people, but are instead exposed to a filtered, curated version of the public. As a result, they unaware of the inequality present in their society, which is evidenced by the fact that even a politically active and social justice-oriented member of

society such as Jim, while aimlessly entering a new neighborhood, is surprised to discover extensive poverty within Orange County (Robinson 613-14). Consequently, it is presumable that the middle- and upper-class mall shoppers who are not politically active, and who do not have public spaces in which to experience the existence of a public that includes poor people, are likely to be ignorant of these groups' issues or their very existence.

Ignorance becomes an attribute transferred to the consumers, whom the protagonists derogatorily nickname "sleepwalkers", sometimes also called "mall zombies" (Robinson 331, 529). The sleepwalkers, who are described as spending their entire life indoors, are referred to by Jim's friend Arthur as people who "don't know a fucking thing", with this ignorance being the justification for why Jim and Arthur target them with a political poster campaign (Robinson 331). Particularly illustrative of the sleepwalkers' ignorance is the fact that they are unfamiliar with the reinstatement of a military draft, which makes them vulnerable to be recruited by recruitment officers in malls to serve in one of America's many ongoing wars. Arthur and Jim are antagonized by the sleepwalker culture, eventually coming to believe that there is nothing they can do to make the sleepwalkers more informed or civically engaged, leading them to conclude that terrorism is the only way to induce change (Robinson 331-33).

The sleepwalkers' cultural movement towards willful ignorance and superficiality is reflected in their cultural products, as Jim notes how their poetry is "Flashy, deliberately ignorant, concerned only with surfaces, with the look, the great California image, reflected in mirrors a million times..." (Robinson 529). Significantly, Jim's statement includes spatial terms such as surfaces, and qualities that may be associated with malls, such as mirrors and a marketable California image, which references the interconnected nature of space and culture. However, an argument can be made that the sleepwalker culture is primarily influenced by the development of new technologies, rather than by accommodation to lived space. Burgess, in her paper on the role of highways in the *Three Californias Triptych*, "Road of Giants", suggests that the self-driving cars, and perhaps other technologies, may be responsible. She points to the lyrics of a song on the radio:

You are a carbrain  
 You're firmly on track  
 You're given your directions  
 And you don't talk back  
 You're very simply programmed

And you don't have much to say  
 And you're gonna have a breakdown  
 It'll happen some day (Robinson 639)

Burgess argues that these lyrics indicate that citizens are losing their autonomy due to an overreliance on technology, such as the self-driving cars that run on magnetic tracks inlaid in freeways (280). However, such technologies are dependent on space, as the freeways themselves are forms of spatial practice. By forcing citizens into an automobile-dependent lifestyle, these freeways are responsible for the lack of autonomy citizens experience, rather than self-driving technology. The self-driving cars are a convenience, but not a determiner of what lifestyles are possible, and although this technology may reinforce car culture, it is not responsible for its genesis. Instead, the self-driving cars may be considered a product of values that are produced within the pseudopublic space: convenience, consumption, and mindlessness.

As a note of nuance, it is difficult to argue that space is the only, or even the most important, actor in producing and reproducing the sleepwalker culture. A holistic view would instead consider space as one piece of a larger puzzle, albeit an important piece considering the substantial emphasis on it in the novel. Forgetting that spaces are not only producers of culture, but the product of culture, removes any agency on the part of the citizens of Orange County. Mitchell argues that in real life, corporations develop exclusionary and undemocratic practices in pseudopublic space not because they seek to create these spatial attributes, but because they can maximize profits by catering to a middle class desire for spaces which are secure, controlled, and contain their ideal public (135-39). From this perspective, the replacement of public space with pseudopublic space is a desired outcome for many Orange County citizens, which may explain the popularity of replacing the Cleveland National Forest with, among other structures, a giant mall (Robinson 588). That is not to say that space is not an actor which produces culture, but that it is also an agent for the hegemonic classes of society, which in this case are corporate land owners as well as the middle class, who use space to reproduce the dominant values of materialism, convenience, willful ignorance and apoliticism.

## **Conclusions**

In describing what he considered to be a dogmatic belief in the value of growth during the 1980s, essayist Edward Abbey wrote that “Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell” (Abbey 21). These words apply equally to *The Gold Coast’s* Orange County, as Robinson’s cyberpunk-like world extrapolates the 1980s trends of privatization, destructive land use and corporate preeminence until they approach a dystopian conclusion. This paper has identified a number of mechanisms responsible for the continuation and reinforcement of these cultural and structural trajectories by applying theories from urban sociology to the reading of this novel, particularly theories relating to the self-reinforcing nature of space.

One such mechanism is the cyclical relationship between Orange County’s widespread civic atrophy and the replacement of public space with pseudopublic space. Parks are few and small, and sidewalks are unpracticable and negatively perceived. Although public squares go unmentioned, in a city where replacing national forests with unused office space and mega-malls is popular, the allocation of land for squares seems improbable. Lacking public space, the citizens of Orange County have no place to see and interact with a public that reflects the county’s diversity. Its middle- and upper-class citizens are not exposed to impoverishment, and the poor are excluded from participation in the pseudopublic spaces, which isolates citizens from the realities of their society, contributing to a general state of ignorance. This process underlines the novel’s narrative, as the protagonist unsuccessfully attempts to fight this ignorance, initially peacefully, but eventually coming to believe that violence is the only vehicle for change in such a society.

At the heart of this self-reinforcing process of cultural pacification is the pseudopublic mall, designed and policed for the purpose of consumption. Because democratic dissent is prohibited in such a space, Orange County lacks open and free arenas for democratic participation, further frustrating the protagonist and contributing to a societal state of ignorance. The emergence of a depoliticized sleepwalker-culture unlikely to resist the status quo illustrates how, as many of Orange County’s citizens spend significant amounts of time in malls, they internalize the space’s embedded neoliberal values, which include individualism, materialism, and growth. This reinforces the hierarchies which benefit from these values; corporate landowners generate revenue and expand their land use practices, the middle class maintain a lifestyle of convenience at the expense of a sense of community, and the poor are sequestered and muted. In these ways, spaces are responsible for predicating the society Jim

considers evil, acquiring the narrative role of antagonist by producing and reproducing inequality, weakening democracy and dissolving civic society.



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