

# On the Look-Out for a New Urban Uncanny

## An Interview with China Miéville

Lars Schmeink

In May 2013 I was approached by an online magazine whose mission is the reporting of anything that defines our urban living experience and challenges our notions of what it means to be a city dweller. My proposal to them was that I would write an article series on the influence of science fiction and real life in the city. How do authors of sf imagine the city of the future? How much of what sf imaginary produces can really be made possible? I undertook to write three essays on the realistic aspects: design prospects of arcologies, changing building materials that can be grown, and future modes of transportation. For the final article in the series, I wanted to extend my scope to visions in the science fiction and fantasy community that were extreme, going beyond the cyberpunk high-rise with neon lights. Coming up with an author's name that best represented contemporary urban sf&f for me wasn't that hard. China Miéville's fiction is full of cities and all aspects of urban life. To my mind, Miéville was the ideal conversation partner to talk about extreme visions of cities, the future, and our interaction with both. This is the extended and (almost) unedited version of that conversation. The original article series can be found at [www.bettermagazine.com](http://www.bettermagazine.com).

**Lars Schmeink:** Most of your novels are decidedly set in urban environments and in many cases, it feels like the cities themselves are not just the backdrop of where the story takes place. It almost seems, like the cities become characters in your fiction. Is that a valid assessment?

**China Miéville:** This is one of those things that people point out to me, but that is not really a conscious choice, in the sense that I say: "Now to make the city a character". So in some ways, that makes me rather bad at answering this particular question. Why is the city a character? All I can do is post-facto theorize, but I suppose it is because I am a city creature. I have lived in cities pretty much all my life. I find them endlessly kind of fecund and inspiring. That sounds a bit cliché but it is true. I think I am interested in them, because they do intrude. To a certain cast of mind, which many of us have, many of us

who live in a big city, our surroundings intrude on our lives. For example, if you live in London, it isn't that you get on with the business of living and the backdrop happens to be this place called London. It is that you are living in London. Living in London is a thing. Similarly with—I am sure—a lot of other big cities. So it intrudes into your life, it has an agency in a very direct way. And obviously when that translates into fiction, it means that this intrusion can manifest in the city becoming a character. I think that is a short-hand for having a sort of intrusive agency, which I think is how we experience cities. So it would seem to me the most paradoxically realistic way of depicting a large city whether or not it is one that really exists.

**LS:** Let me pick an example out of your fiction. In *Un-Lun-Dun* this intruding agency is not one but really two different sets of the city. You reveal the city to have an underbelly, a darker and unknown side. Would you say that every city is always two-sided?

**CM:** Yes, this is probably the case. But it is not just cities either. It is just mostly cities that I am interested in. All cities have a kind of less formal side to them. Call it an underside, call it an underbelly, call it an alternative—whatever: One of the things that is interesting when you are looking at a really old city, is that it has these less regimented and less planned aspects of the city. Because what we are really talking about here are those things which are not planned. Those irregular aspects have obviously had many centuries to breathe and to grow, so they are very clear in old cities full of history. So when you wander around Paris, Berlin, New York, London or Havana or wherever, you can see the official stuff. But when you look for it, there is also the obvious unofficial stuff, which is kind of growing like weeds. What is interesting to me is the extent to which that will grow anyway, even in cities which are almost deliberately designed to preclude it. Even when you go to new cities, it is there. What exactly am I talking about? For example, in the UK there was a very kind of conscious program to design and build new cities in the Fifties and so on, which *prima facie* would kind of militate against that unofficial-ness because their whole *raison d'être* is to be organized and planned. And yet the thing about it is, that that kind of counter-growth will come up in new and surprising ways. As a writer, what you are doing is, you are depicting the underbelly of London or Vienna or whatever—but you get no brownie points for that, because that is actually pretty easy, you know. I mean really. It is lovely. I am fascinated by it, but it is a very simple thing to do. In a way, what is more counterintuitive and more intriguing, is trying to

think about an underbelly of somewhere like Milton Keynes, or somewhere that is much more designed in a strict and regimented way. That is a much more provocative project.

**LS:** Are there any other examples for this? Any surprising developments in city planning that would undermine such an unofficial side?

**CM:** Yes, what is interesting in London at the moment is that there has been a massive growth in a particular highly bureaucratized urban planning. That expanded enormously when it came to the Olympics. There have been attempts to drive this giant city in the same way as these much smaller new towns to efface that capability for the unplanned and to neurotically plan everything. And of course, what is interesting about that is—it won't work. If you go to East London, the main area at the moment to create pedestrian zones, zones of this and zones of that, where everything is highly bureaucratized and regimented ... I don't want to be too nostalgic, because in ways this improves on certain areas, but it also massively loses in other areas. And I think it is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the way cities grow and change. What is interesting for me over the next two decades is the extent to which that counter-city is to grow up in unexpected ways, because it will be like weeds growing up in the cracks and the concrete in these zones which have been designed to preclude it. Now I think the weeds will win, but I don't know how yet. So I am very excited to find out.

**LS:** This seems to be a trend in large urban centers, to actually re-open spaces that had been lost before and re-zone them for something different. In Berlin it happened 15 years ago with the former border zones, in Hamburg it happens right now with parts of the city that used to be custom zones of the industrial harbor. They are reclaimed as commercial and pedestrian zones, reworked and tightly controlled by city planning.

**CM:** I don't know about anywhere else, but it is certainly happening here in the UK. I would not be surprised if it happened everywhere else too, even though we are certainly a vanguard here in the UK. This is obviously associated with the near liberalization of the city. These zones are privatized space, but they are privatized space that pretends to be public space. Many of these zones are owned by companies. They look like streets, well they look like fucking ugly streets, but they pretend to be streets. But actually they are private thoroughfares. And that is when we had the Occupy London situation and so

on. The notion of what it is to be a citizen in a city is changing because these privatized spaces are not merely very ugly; they are not merely an attempt to bureaucratize that which cannot and should not be bureaucratized; they are also privatized, they are commodities. You are walking through commodities like you are walking through a fucking can of Coke. And when I say that the weeds will win, I don't want to sound like the Pollyanna—to me this is a catastrophe. What has been going on in London in particular with this specific model of reclamation of space—it is catastrophic. It is a terrible thing, but I am not an apocalypticist. I do think that a sense of the unclaimable nature of cities in general will always pull against this regulatory drive. There is a spirit of the unplanned. But there is no question that it is more embattled now than it was forty years ago. So I am very interested in what will happen in, say, the next twenty years or so, in terms of the shape that it will take. And aesthetically, what I am interested in, is the extent to which that will start to manifest in new aesthetic representations of a kind of new form of the urban uncanny. We all know what the old form of the urban uncanny is, you know back streets and the forgotten shops under the arches—or whatever equivalent there is in Germany. But in London we know what the urban uncanny has looked like for the last century or two. And that is starting to shift, because the uncanny or the forgotten places may well be the kind of large warehouses that have been built in the late Eighties at the edge of an industrial estate next to a McDonalds.

**LS:** Interesting. The uncanny of physical space, of geographical space, provides a good transition to another of your stories. In *The City & The City* characters live in a split-geography and have to learn a new form of cognition, they have to adapt their senses to un-see specific locales. It seems like an aspect of the uncanny to defamiliarize your cognition ... can you tell me, what inspired this idea of a duality of space?

**CM:** The first thing to say is that it is not a wholly original idea. There are plenty of examples in science fiction of split cities, including split cities where one section of the city can't see the other city. There is a Gordon Dickson story—called “Delusion World”, I think. Some of these—I don't mean to sound defensive—but some of these I did not know about until after I had written the book. And then I would find them, which is fine. Anyone who thinks they've invented a completely original idea is kidding themselves. *The City & The City* is basically predicated on stuff I found partly through my academic research. I do a lot of work on borders and questions of nationhood

and statehood and so on. To put it very glibly, the thing you are looking at: a national border, or a state border, is a completely absurd thing. It is absolutely absurd. You take the field or a mountain or a city street and you say: There is a line here, an infinitely thin line and one centimeter to this side of that line you are in one place and one centimeter to the other side of it, you are in a completely different place and everything is different. The law is different. An action, which will get you put in prison there, will not get you put in prison two centimeters to your left. It is completely absurd, but: it is also a very real absurdity. It is not absurd in the sense that it does not exist. It very much exists. It exists to the extent that it will kill you if get on the wrong side of it. And this is a truism. I realize that I am not saying anything very sophisticated about this. What I was thinking was, that if you think about borders as these kind of absurdities that have literally the power of life and death, then our traditional conception has always been to think of a border of two countries as sort of like skin rubbing up against each other. I was just thinking, what if you had it rather like a membrane, so they bleed through and can get past each other? But they still do the same job, even though they are overlapping. And once I had thought of that ... I have long been interested, partly academically and partly in fiction, in questions of law and taboo—my first degree was in anthropology and you talk a lot about taboo and social norm and so on, and the kind of internalization of these social mores. I liked the idea of almost teasing the reader—especially readers of some of my other work who would probably default, my hope was, in the initial reading to thinking in terms of quantum slippage or magic or something like that—and then slowly letting them emerge into thinking that this is psychology, this is society. That is the nature of the uncanny there—there is room for interpretation, but that is the way I conceived of it. And once you are there, once you think of taboos ... One of the things I remember very vividly about anthropology that I love: sometimes we take taboo very seriously like—you know, people talk about the such and such taboo, meaning that people will not do whatever it is. But in fact, the interesting thing about taboos on the ground is, that they are breached all the time. People break taboos all the time. What you've got a lot of the time is, you assert the taboo and then you find a way around it. So the thing about the “unseeing” in *The City & The City* is not that it works by everyone obeying it, but that it works by everyone kind of cheating all the time. That is an important point for me, because it changes the nature of taboo. “Unseeing” is not the same as “not seeing”—obviously. In terms of the interpenetration of the border, people are the key. The vectors for state borders are sometimes the individual citizens. Once you think of a citizen that

is a few centimeters this side of that line and another that is a few centimeters on the other side—but if you think of it, their statehood goes with them, it encompasses them. So that is the model.

**LS:** You say, “that is the model”—do you mean that someone would actually try to make it work? Is it supposed to be put into action?

**CM:** To my shock, subsequent to me writing the book—I think coincidentally, I don’t think anyone is deliberately riffing off me—I have actually seen in one or two places, a model of citizenship like this. For example, in disputed zones like in Jerusalem, it has been proposed that one might actually have this kind of model of permeated citizenship, so that two different people on the street belong to two different cities and adhere to different laws. My feeling is, that *The City & The City* is not a blueprint. Quite the opposite. It is intended to be, for me, plausible, because it is an exaggeration of real life politics, but the idea that it would seem to be a good way forward, is pretty extraordinary to me. There is no part of it that is intended as a sort of proposal. It is intended as a kind of uncanny extrapolation of the political logic of borders. There are a thousand split-cities in the world. A thousand different ways ... on one level, we will do this all the time. To me, whatever fantastic element there is in *The City & The City* is to me a fairly minor exaggeration and extrapolation of real life, both in terms of psychology and politics and so on. That is my own feeling of this. I tried to write things so that other people can have different interpretations, and that is fine, but that is the way I always thought about it.

**LS:** Actually, Beszel/Ul Qoma is not the only dual city in your fiction. In the novel *Embassytown*, the title giving city is part of a larger and very alien urban environment. In this enclave, citizens are confronted with this insular feeling because of what is around them: the other parts of town are incomprehensible. You describe a living and breathing city, in which buildings are living entities that have emotional attachments and even agendas, such as when they become addicted. Is that an extreme vision of how you might imagine a city in the future? Is this kind of living city a model for where we are headed?

**CM:** I know there is a lot of talk about living architecture and bio-mimesis and so on ... And my response to when people moot it as a possibility is: “sure, ok”—you know. I mean, I am very pro and into “cool ideas”. So, when someone says that in the future skyscrapers are going to grow and exude their own integument and exoskeleton and there will be kites and all this ... I’ll be

like: “ah, sounds awesome”. But I am not very into futurology, I am not really into projection. For a couple of reasons: one is that it profoundly does not seem to be science fiction’s job. I think, science fiction writers on the whole are not futurologists. There is a split between a minority of writers who think that one of the things that science fiction is good at, is predicting the future and then the rest of us, who think, that whatever else we do, we suck at predicting the future. That is fine by me, and I don’t feel there is something wrong with it at all. And if people take inspiration from some science fictional ideas and go and build stuff—great! Wonderful! I am not opposed to that. From a kind of personal, social and political point of view, I mean, one can make certain predictions, certainly, and I am happy to do that. But: the thing is, when we talk about the future of the city and we talk about living architecture and so on and so forth ... I mean obviously, you can’t talk about the future of the city without talking about the future of the political economy of the city and the future of the political system. And the problem with some of these debates, and I am not saying you are doing this, but this is what often happens, is that it strips out government, profit, economics, politics. It is like this: will we have living architecture? Well, unless we radically change the social system we are in, we are only going to have living architecture if someone thinks he can make a profit from living architecture. And a big fucking fuck-ton of profit. Now, if they do, then maybe we are going to have living architecture. But then the question is: Are these simply going to be cool big building, or are we looking at exactly the kind of zones we were talking about earlier? These privatized zones like Canary Wharf in Central London? The key issue may very well not be that this skyscraper is growing and shrinking. The key issue may very well be that ordinary citizens of London might not be allowed in it, unless they show their ID. Or unless they can prove they have a certain amount of money or something like that. This may be a zone under a localized version of corporate martial law. That seems to me much more socially important than the question of whether or not it is growing. Now, I like the cool stuff, the growing architecture and so on ... But if we are talking about real world extrapolations—if we are talking about genuinely “the future of the city”—I think that what is far more interesting to me are these questions of political economy. So at the moment the future of London as an example is being dictated by an ongoing battle between grassroots localism and corporate gigantism. That is the key issue, not whether or not we are going to succeed at bio-mimesis. All of those things are important but I think they become important as adjuncts to the political-economic struggles.

**LS:** So, utopian thinking needs to be grounded in socio-political realities? No dreaming of extreme visions of future cities?

**CM:** If you want people to riff in terms of blue-sky thinking and utopian ideas, I am very happy to do that. And I love the idea of, for example, living buildings—absolutely love them. Do I like the idea of little neighborhoods made by kind of nano-swarms of reconfiguring house-bots, yeah love it. Love it to bits. But all of this becomes a function of the struggles on the ground, the struggles around economics and politics and profit. And so, when people talk about “let’s riff on the future of the city” I always need to say: “well, can we define our terms?” Are we talking about blue-sky utopian games, which I am very happy to play? You want to go there, I will talk to you about submerged cities in giant submersibles, roaming the seas, love all that stuff, love it. I love the utopian tradition. But if we are talking about likely extrapolations in the next fifty years, all revolutions in building materials are vastly less important than who’s in power and what they are doing. On terms of how do we get to the utopian ... If I say, I love the idea of a submerged “crab city” that is a giant twenty story cyborg of mollusk synapses and bio-concrete. I love that idea. There is the blue-sky thinking. So, how do we get there? Well, we are not going to get there without a radical transformation in the politics and economics of the world. So if we are really talking about it in any other way than this is a cool idea, and I have no objection of thinking about it in those terms, I love thinking about it in those terms. I could give you a list of really cool-ass city ideas that I would love to live in. I could probably do it in the next two minutes: giant crab city under the water, cities on rails, fractal rails moving around so you can reconfigure them, I fucking love that stuff. I can feel novels coming up. But: the moment one says how do we get there, then the real world intrudes, and that is really all ... My plea is to the readers, it is to say that the moment when the real world intrudes, that is when we are talking politics, whether we like it or not.

**LS:** Thank you for the interview.