



## **Absent futures in Gothenburg's jubilee architecture**

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# ABSENT FUTURES IN GOTHENBURG'S JUBILEE ARCHITECTURE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the relation between architectural design, on the one hand, and social imaginaries of time, on the other. It does so in the context of ongoing research on the futures imagined and enacted in the architectural structures emerging in time for Gothenburg's 2023 quadricentennial jubilee. The argument focuses on the ways in which conceptions of the future are absent, particularly when juxtaposing the 2023 jubilee with the Gothenburg's 1923 tricentennial jubilee. As such, the paper seeks to engage with recent scholarship on temporal approaches to design.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the city of Gothenburg celebrates its quadricentennial jubilee. The festivities were originally planned for 2021, but the global pandemic caused the jubilee to be pushed forward in time. Ironically, the same happened in 1921: The tricentennial jubilee was also delayed by two years, in part due to an unforeseen global pandemic. Indeed, time seems to be out of joint.

The delay notwithstanding, the legacy of the previous jubilee ended up being considerable, not least in terms of architecture and urban development. New neighbourhoods were planned and built – either leading up to, or on the back of, the 1923 jubilee – and a host of public cultural institutions were established. Following the tradition of Great Exhibitions, the 1923 celebrations consisted in part in exhibiting the best of what that time could offer in terms of science, technology and other progressive human endeavours.

For 2023, there is no such great exhibition. Nevertheless, one may however speak of a new jubilee architecture emerging. Gothenburg has traditionally been lacking in high-rise buildings, but now a host of high-rises are nearing completion. Moreover, while these developments do not adhere to a municipally-sanctioned unified programme, one may nevertheless explore the extent to which they represent a certain *zeitgeist* or contemporary “structure of feeling”. (Williams, 1977) As such, one may repose the famous question posed by architect and urban theorist Camillo Sitte (2010: 208) – *was ist der Kunst unseres Zeit?* – and reverse it: What is the time of our art?

This paper constitutes an early formulation of provisional themes emerging from a research project on Gothenburg's new jubilee architecture. As hinted above, these developments are interesting markers of the contemporary – in particular when compared with the modernist sentiments of 1923. Given what we know about the modern approach to notions of progress and planning, as well as its general outlook on the future, one may juxtapose such 1923 imaginaries with those of the present.



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The argument of this paper is structured as follows. After a brief comment on the background, methods-related approach, and contribution of this project, the text will then – in section three – outline different approaches to the relation between design and social imaginaries of time. The argument will then, in section four, focus more specifically on *architectural* design and its relation to conceptions and time. It will do so by reviewing Peter Sloterdijk’s discussion on Crystal Palace as the harbinger of the end of history trope. Section five will revert back to the object of this research project – the jubilee architectures of Gothenburg – examining them in the context of socio-theoretical accounts of contemporary temporalities. These will include the Mark Fisher’s work on lost futures, as well as Jean-François Lyotard’s argument about the loss of meta-narratives. The paper ends with a short conclusion.

## BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

In this project, as the saying goes, *time of the essence*. For one, the deadlines of the research are non-negotiably tied to the year 2023. (Hence the early formulations presented in this paper.) Moreover, on a conceptual level, conceptions of time constitute a key interest. Again, this is partly because the juxtaposition between the two jubilee sentiments will invariably involve an examination of different notions of time.

There is a further time-related concern at play here. In a sense, buildings – even new ones – are always ruins, which reflect a moment in time that has already passed. Given the time it takes to complete these wonders of art and engineering, and given the fact that the world moves on while blueprints remain fixed, architectural structures are inevitably obsolete upon completion. This bleak reality is somewhat more pronounced in the case of the new jubilee architecture. These structures were planned before the covid-19 pandemic, before the new habits of working from home, and before the concomitant slump in demand for commercial real estate. (Chaffin, 2022; Oliver, 2023) They were also planned before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the rise of energy and resource uncertainties, and the suspension of the long-standing negative interest rate economy. As such, the events of the past few years have highlighted the need for foresight and anticipation within the design professions that shape the built environment.

These twin concerns – the imaginaries of the future, as well as the foresight practices, of architects and planners – are at the heart of the current investigation. At this point, however, the project is located in the in-between space in which it is too early to draw any conclusions from the ongoing interviews with the designers of the jubilee architecture. Due to this absence of the voices of these design professionals, the scope of the paper is

broader, not focusing specifically on the time-related practices of the professions, but rather on imaginaries of time among users and broader publics.

Thus, the objective of the paper is to explore the relation between architectural design and conceptions of time, paying particular theoretical attention to the notion of absences. It will do so by discussing selected architectural designs with reference to social theory.

As such, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions within broader design studies on the relation between design and time. However, the argument is not primarily interrogating *experienced* time, either through slowing down technology (Hallnäs & Redström, 2001), through designerly experiments with complex and non-linear conceptions of time (Pschetz & Bastian, 2018), or through focusing on the experience of time as an existential concern. (Rapp et.al., 2022; Odom et.al., 2022) Rather than focusing on *temporal experience* in the context of time-related designs, this paper places a greater emphasis on design – specifically architectural design – as bound up with *temporal thought*. Thus, the focus is on how design may act as conceptual metaphors that underpin contemporary imaginaries of time.

## DESIGN AND CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson seek to show how our modes of thought operate on metaphors – on “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”. (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003: 5) In the 2003 afterword to their original 1980 argument, they point to one key problem in the reception of their book – the tendency for readers to focus on linguistics and therefore misinterpret their idea of metaphors as being *conceptual*. Thus, metaphors are not solely linguistic expressions; not “a mere matter of words”; not solely about the ways in which we talk. Rather, metaphors are at the very heart of conceptualization and reasoning. (245) Thus, we reason by making use of “inference patterns” which transpose one conceptual domain to another conceptual domain. (246)

However, this is not a purely abstract endeavour: “The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect”. (3) Metaphorical mappings “are shaped and constrained by our bodily experiences in the world” (247), and this is where design comes into the picture. If indeed our thought is shaped by metaphors in which we borrow from mundane, everyday artifacts, then design is enmeshed with modes of thought.

For the same reason, Lakoff (1986) points out that his work on metaphor was about not “figures of speech” but “figures of *thought*”. Sociologist Johan Asplund (1979: 146-170) uses that same term when reconstructing the Marxist schematic of base and superstructure. Figures of

thought operate in between the material realities of technology and economy, on the one hand, and the discursive level of speech and text. While the latter may be ephemeral, figures of thought tend to be inert, and thus persist over long periods of time. As such, Asplund's proposition may be used as a way to conceive of the relation between design and culture – one in which neither the “base” nor the “superstructure” act as the only determining or explanatory factor.

So, with respect to the question of time, one may imagine how specific “artifacts of clock-time – clocks, calendars, watches, and so on” (Odom et.al., 2022: 151) shape our immediate experience of time. However, the above-mentioned perspectives suggest that there is also another way of approaching the relation between design and conceptions of time. Indeed, designs can be tied to broader figures of thought, which – as Asplund suggests – operate on a longer time-scale, beyond the immediate user experience. As we shall see, some of these may engage with the question of time.

Social theorists have approached this relation between designs and social imaginaries in different ways. Philosopher of science Michel Serres provides one such approach, pointing to the ways in which history has implied a “the parallel development of scientific, philosophical, and literary trends”. (Serres, 1982: xi) This also implies a connection between technological designs, on the one hand, and social imaginaries, on the other. Serres' paradigmatic example is the relation between the steam engine, the science of thermodynamics, and the social theory of the mid- to late-1800s. In this story, engineer Sadi Carnot plays a crucial role in defining the engine as a device that exploits the heat difference between two reservoirs of hot and cold. As Manuel DeLanda explains; “a century after it was born as a concrete assemblage, the steam motor was given a completely abstract description by Carnot”. (DeLanda, 1991: 142) This turned the motor into a conceptual metaphor, which in turn could be incorporated in social thought. Thus, it would later act as a conceptual device used by the likes of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche.

Read Carnot starting on page one. Now read Marx, Freud, Zola, Michelet, Nietzsche, Bergson, and so on. The reservoir is actually spoken of everywhere, or if not the reservoir, its equivalent. But it accompanies this equivalent with great regularity. [...] Each particular theoretical motor forms its reservoir, names it, and fills it with what a motor needs. I had an artefact, a constructed object: the motor. [...] Question: in the last century, who did not reinvent the reservoir? (Serres, 1982: xix)

In other words, when a new, influential design like that of the steam engine appears, it is not a “simple addition

of a new brand of machines”, but “a complete break with the conceptual models of the past”. (DeLanda, 1991: 273) This, by the way, also goes for the shift from the motor age to the computer age: Although it is still early days, one can already trace how the digital has transformed the conceptual models of social theory. (Palmås, 2019)

Here, one may note that such conceptual breaks also imply the rise of new conceptions of time. Indeed, just as thermodynamics is bound up with notions of time, so too is Marx's social theory wedded to a particular conception of social time. Thus, designs – in this case, *technological* designs – can be bound up with social imaginaries of time, operating as conceptual metaphors, even though such designs are not strictly “artifacts of clock-time”.

Another theorist who operates who traces these kinds of metaphoric connections, paying closer attention to design “proper”, is philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. As Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta write, Sloterdijk's work is characterized by

an urge to ground what Hans Blumenberg called metaphorology in philosophical anthropology. For Sloterdijk, in distinction to Blumenberg, this metaphorology is not just preconceptual, or postconceptual, it is also visual, iconic. In Sloterdijk's work we find a continuous play among image, imagination, and imaginary that shuttles back and forth between what we experience and see, and what we can imagine or cannot imagine because we have not seen an image of what it could be like. It thus entirely logical that the three volumes of *Sphären* are filled with images and reproductions [...] (Elden & Mendieta, 2009: 6)

For instance, this connection between designed artifacts and intellectual history is evident in volume two of the Spheres trilogy, *Globes*. (Sloterdijk, 2014) In this study, Sloterdijk traces the European history of imagining the cosmos on the model of the perfect, unified, abstract globe. This history starts off as a globe-shaped conceptions of the divine, and then, Sloterdijk suggests, morphs into the globe-shaped modern market society. The artifacts invoked include maps and ornamental designs, but they also architectural designs. Indeed, there is one particular design that looms large in Sloterdijk's body of work. In the next section, we turn to that architectural design, and the conceptions of time bound up with it.

## CRYSTAL PALACE AND THE END OF HISTORY

Much like Serres dwells on the relation between the steam engine and 19<sup>th</sup> century modern social thought, Sloterdijk dwells on London's Crystal Palace. For him, it is this structure – built in conjunction with the 1851 Great Exhibition – that serves as the harbinger of the modern worldview. More specifically, he credits Fyodor Dostoevsky for having discovered “the crystal palace metaphor as an emblem for the final ambitions of modernity”. (Sloterdijk, 2013: 176) However, before we get into the details of this argument, let us first review the history of the building.

First, one must understand the context of the 1851 Great Exhibition. Conceived in the context of the social unrest of 1848, one can construe it as a counter-revolutionary building, inasmuch as it served to sell liberalised global trade to the masses. (Murphy, 2012) On this account, it was a great success. The cast iron and glass structure was experienced first-hand – first in Hyde Park, then in Sydenham, south London – by a great number of visitors. Indeed, some of them travelled from afar to see the spectacle. As a part of the Great Exhibition, the selling point of Crystal Palace was the great number of goods exhibited in the building. The structure was a demonstration of the wealth of commodities and resources that could be brought to the imperial centre, through liberal trade. Even after the move to Sydenham, the structure was used as an exhibition space and concert hall. However, beyond these exhibits and events, visitors were impressed by the architectural structure as such:

Observers described the building as fairy-like, incomparable, disappearing into the distance, with light pouring down, the interior resembling open air, an endless and shadow-less space, glass-covered vacuum, transparent and fragile. (Margolius, 2002)

Ironically, this aesthetic effect was the result of a building approach in which engineering triumphed over architectural finesse. Joseph Paxton, its designer, was on a tight deadline, and had to rely on mass-produced, prefabricated, standardised elements in the construction of the palace. In the end, this approach proved highly effective. “Never before had so much space been enclosed with so little”. (Margolius, 2002) This feat of engineering would usher in a new era which redefined the very terms of designed enclosures and interiors.

This is the point that Sloterdijk uses as a springboard for his analysis. The very experience of such a vast interior captured the modern political imagination, and the architectural ideas realised in Crystal Palace transmuted into models of social thought. The architecture of the palace served to reassure the citizens of the European

imperial centres that for them, life on the open globe would be safeguarded by a protective, immunising shell. Having seen images of the steel and glass structure, they could imagine a rich nation as a vast Crystal Palace – one which permits global trade, while retaining the separation of haves from have-nots.

The imaginaries produced by the palace also spread to pre-revolutionary Russia. There, it was introduced in the political imagination by becoming a blueprint a socialist, science-led future. In Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What is to be done?*, published in 1863, the revolutionary heroine Vera Pavlovna dreams about the re-organisation of social life, structured around “a huge, huge building”. There is already, Pavlovna asserts, a building that hints at what is to come; “the palace that stands on Sydenham Hill: cast iron and glass, glass and cast iron — nothing else”. In socialism, then, everyone will live in a Crystal Palace, “for all an everlasting Spring and Summer, an everlasting joy”.

Not everyone shared this enthusiasm about what was to come. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, published the subsequent year, the protagonist rants about the horrors of modern rationality, distilling his critique into an assault on the idea of a Crystal Palace future. In the words of Sloterdijk, Dostoevsky showed that this design “held the essence of Western civilization, as if in a final concentrate”. (Sloterdijk, 2013, 28) Thus, Dostoevsky did not dismiss the validity of Chernyshevsky's prediction of a future modelled upon Crystal Palace. Rather, he was horrified by the power of imagination projected by the structure, fearing that it would thrust humanity into a dire predicament. As Marshall Berman (1982: 235-248) points out, Dostoevsky was fond of the idea of modernity as an *adventure* – we should follow the developmental paths unveiled by engineers, “no matter where they might lead”. (242) Chernyshevsky's vision, on the other hand, suggested a modernity as *routine*, with identical Crystal Palaces rolled out infinitely in the countryside.

What's more, Dostoevsky feared that this sorry state of routinised affairs would last forever. In his diaries published as *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, Dostoevsky describes his experience of having visited Crystal Palace.

Yes, the Exhibition is astounding. You feel a terrible force which has united all these numberless people here, from all over the world, into a single herd; you become aware of a colossal idea; you feel that something has already been achieved here, that there is victory, triumph here. It's even as if you begin to feel afraid of something. No matter how independent you are, for some reason you feel terrified.

‘Hasn’t the ideal already been achieved?’ you think, ‘isn’t this the end?’

This passage echoes the sentiments expressed by the ranting protagonist in *Notes from the Underground*; the one who fears that reason and collective rationality will quash the will and whim of the individual. Dostoevsky continues:

You look at these hundreds of thousands, these millions of people obediently streaming here from all over the earth – people coming with a single thought, peacefully, insistently and silently crowding into this colossal palace and you feel that something final has been accomplished, accomplished and brought to a close. It’s a kind of biblical scene, something from Babylon, some kind of prophecy from the Apocalypse being fulfilled before your very eyes.

Sloterdijk (2014: 170) reads this sentiment as a statement of the “end of history” motif, the one that Fukuyama (1992) would rehearse after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Here, it is important to remember that Fukuyama’s argument was not a mere celebration of the triumph of Western capitalism – Fukuyama also rehearsed Nietzsche’s cautionary account of the “last Man” for whom the future is no longer tied to a struggle. Sloterdijk’s point is that Dostoevsky voices the same concerns, and does so in an argument intimately tied to a particular architectural design. Thus, visionaries like Dostoevsky and Chernyshevsky saw that “after the expiry of combatant history, social life would only take place in an expanded interior, a domestically organized and artificially climatized inner space”. (Sloterdijk, 2014: 170) Under such conditions, there would no longer be any historical events. More specifically, there would no longer be any capital-H Historical events, history would no longer have any direction. Life would still go on, but time would for all intents and purposes stop. What’s worse, this would last forever, in a “everlasting” manner.

The case of Crystal Palace is instructive for understanding how Sloterdijk conceives of the relation between design, on the one hand, and conceptions of time, on the other. However, it is also useful as a backdrop for the inquiry into Gothenburg’s jubilee architectures. As hinted in the introduction, the 1923 jubilee was borne out of the Great Exhibitions era that started with London’s 1851 exhibition. Indeed, in photographs from the 1923, one can see how ball bearing manufacturer SKF exhibited a giant globe, suggesting a future of foreign market conquest.

Nevertheless, the end of history motif that Sloterdijk traces back to Crystal Palace also looms large over the

2023 jubilee. The next section will explore this theme in further detail.

## LOST FUTURES

The motif of the end of the history hints at a loss: The loss of the idea of a future that is open and subject to radical breaks with the past. This motif has been discussed by several theorists, but Sloterdijk is unique in tying it to the metaphors of a particular architectural design. In recent cultural theory, there is an alternative formulation of this motif – one which primarily originates from an analysis of developments in music culture, but nevertheless resonates with the concerns of this paper.

Starting some ten years ago, cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2013) and a host of British writers sought to map the contemporary cultural condition under the heading of “hauntology”. The term itself is borrowed from philosopher Jacques Derrida, a portmanteau of “haunt” and “ontology”, suggesting that there is something spectre-like about the nature of reality. The concept can be used as a way of analysing mediated culture – when we are listening to a recording of an artist, perhaps one that has passed away, we are listening to a spectre. We are listening to an entity that exists, yet does not exist; to an entity that is present yet absent.

In the extended meaning of the term, however, hauntology denotes something more specific: A sense of being “haunted” by memories of alternative futures, a sense of loss of a dream that failed to materialise. In architecture criticism, this sentiment is found in the revalorisation of British brutalist architecture (Hatherley, 2008; Murphy, 2012), but equally in music criticism. Fisher (2013), along with music critic Simon Reynolds (2011), is particularly interested in music that deliberately seeks to capture the sense of past futures; a sense of the future as it was experienced in, say, the 1970s. Such music is, in turn, particularly significant in the context of a popular music scene that no longer seeks to invent music that represents a radical break with the past. During the latter half of the 1900s, popular music generated a proliferation of ever-new genres. In the new century, new music regressed into constant attempts to sound like something from a particular period of the past. Retro became a superfluous term, because all music became retro.

While one may argue with this analysis of music, the broader critique of contemporary culture is clear: We are, Fisher suggests, living in a decelerating culture. The experience of modernity as a sense of all that is solid melting into air (Berman, 1982) – a permanent state of impermanence – is now only detectable in relation to the rapid obsolescence of digital devices. In the case of

the arts, and even more so in relation to political ideas, we seem to be stuck with what we already have. Thus, citing social philosopher Franco Berardi (2011), Fisher argues that we have experienced a “slow cancellation of the future”, in turn echoing the Raymond Williams’ (1989) suggestion of a “widespread loss of the future”.

To what extent is this thesis of a loss of a future applicable in the context of the 2023 jubilee architecture in Gothenburg? To explore what has potentially been lost, one must first revisit the futures posited during the 1923 jubilee. Crucially, the Gothenburg jubilee was not a high modernist affair, even though it coincided with the publication of the publication of Le Corbusier’s *Vers une architecture*. Rather, it served to align Gothenburg’s architecture with the neoclassical ideals that Le Corbusier railed against. Indeed, as Nicholas Adams writes, the 1923 jubilee “signalled a change in the architectural style of the city”, in which there was “a much-debated return to a monumental classical order”, which “held sway over the next decades”. (Adams, 2014: 50) Nevertheless, this neoclassicism was tied to a modern temporal imaginary of progress. Indeed,

the exhibition sought to show how the historical traditions of technology related to both present practices and a vision of a modernized Sweden. Thus, in the great hall (formed in the shape of a Greek temple) exhibitions demonstrated historical and contemporary technological techniques side by side, providing the continuity of the past and present and, by extrapolation, future. (49-50)

Such a programmatic account of the future is not presented in the context of the present jubilee. In that respect, one may indeed speak of a lost future, in line with Fisher’s argument. There is another sense in which current developments resonate with his conception of a decelerating culture. The neoclassicism established during the 1923 jubilee subsequently became a recognisable interwar aesthetic idiom, even outside of architecture. In the current debate on architecture in Sweden – and in Gothenburg in particular – neoclassicism is pitted against modernism. Some observers would say that this debate is ultimately a clash between alternative “retro” aesthetics. The antagonists are both looking back in time, arguing about which past to revive. Indeed, one may indulge oneself in a Fisher-esque thought experiment: If we could travel back in time to the 1950s, and show photographs of today’s modernist high-rises to a modernist architect, would that person believe that the building really is a building from the future?

Still, such a thought experiment is somewhat misguided. Today’s “modernists” tend not to align themselves with the high modernist ideals of the 1950s, especially as such ideals have long been dismissed as obsolete. In his

foreword to Jean-François Lyotard’s (1984) *The Postmodern Condition*, Fredric Jameson points out that architecture was first in line to move beyond high modernism. Its leading figures were revolutionaries; “proponents of innovations in form and transformations in architectural space that could be expected in and of themselves to transform social life”. (Jameson, 1984: xvii) This project failed, and the result was an “overpopulation of the shoddiest glass boxes in all the major urban centers in the world”, effectively meaning that “high modernism can be definitively certified as dead and as a thing of the past”.

Incidentally, Lyotard’s argument from 1984 is also a relevant companion for making sense of the absence of programmatic futures in the 2023 jubilee. This absence is, to a great degree, a reflection of the political economy of the jubilee. Whereas the 1923 jubilee was a private affair producing public spaces, the 2023 is a private affair producing private spaces. Lyotard’s original argument was about the production of knowledge, but the thrust of the argument is still applicable in the context of jubilee architecture. In 1923, the metanarratives of emancipation and totality were still at play in the design of grand plans for the city. Today, we seem to have retreated from such ambitions.

Interestingly, Lyotard has been proven correct in his prediction that something would eventually fill the void left by the loss of the old metanarratives of progress. A new metanarrative is emerging, in which humanity will eventually leave the earth. (Lyotard, 1992; Lyotard, 1997) Thus, today’s hopes and dreams of a radically different future are increasingly projected onto private endeavours to inhabit the moon, Mars and beyond. This kind of “capitalist eschatology” (Palmås et.al., 2022) may be driven by a select few tech entrepreneurs, but increasingly attracts interest from broader commercial domains, including architecture. It makes complete sense that SOM Architects – the designers of Karlatornet – have entered this space. The 245-metre skyscraper may be the highest building in the Nordics, but the work that SOM is now showcasing in festivals is related to space architecture. (Benetti, 2022)

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has outlined some preliminary thoughts on how to examine the relation between the architecture of Gothenburg’s 2023 jubilee and contemporary conceptions about the future. By presenting designs as capable of acting as conceptual metaphors, it has reviewed the social imaginaries of time imbricated in historical structures such as Crystal Palace. It has also sought to tie the 2023 jubilee architecture to contemporary concerns about absent or lost futures.

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