

THE CITY IN THE IMAGE OF SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA

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The City in the Image of Science Fiction Cinema

by Gregory Beck

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the modern city is influenced by a range of forces which act on its physical and social composition. While primarily shaped by the impact of technology in the 19th century, the form of the contemporary city is without a definitive future. Within the context of understanding the formative role of the visionary, this essay will focus on the function of film in shaping the city of the future.

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Introduction:

THE CITY IN THE IMAGE OF SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA

The intent of these essays is to broaden our understanding of the city as both a conceptual idea and a physical network of forces which are constantly reshaping its future. This exploration will focus on the relationship between three issues which address the nature of influence and change in the evolution of the contemporary urban environment.

The first issue relates to our understanding of the processes which effect the future form of the city. While culture and technology continue to influence the nature of the urban landscape, the future of the city is without a definitive form. How can society become engaged in the search for an appropriate form for the city?

A second issue concerns the effect of the film medium on our concept of the urban environment and its future. As an influential communications medium of wide public access, films may play a role in shaping the future form of the city. Within the genre of Science Fiction, a number of films have delineated alternative futures of the urban landscape. How have these visions influenced our understanding of the future city?

The third issue relates to the role of the non-traditional designer within the film medium. Architects and planners form only a small part of those engaged in proposing alternative urban futures. What effect can artists and others working in film have on the future of the city?

In drawing attention to the medium of Science Fiction cinema, these essays will examine a range of films in which the future of the city emerges as a dominant theme within the context of the story. In developing a framework for understanding these images, the following hypothesis form a conceptual base.

[] The image of alternative urban environments presented through the medium of Science Fiction film creates a setting in which society can collectively become engaged in the evolutionary process of finding its future.

[] The actual process of visualizing the future is itself an intrinsic and vital link in the search for an appropriate form of the future city.

[] Specific Science Fiction films have had a galvanic effect on our conception of the urban future— fusing concepts and images from disparate sources (architecture and urban design, science and technology, art, literature and other media) into an "experiential" vision of the future.

[] In the process of synthesizing traditional ideas with new concepts, these films draw on a visual language from the past while proposing new images related to present and emerging technology.

[] While reasserting the concept of the city as the dominant setting for social interaction within our culture, these films provide an opportunity to project current ideas and explore the impact of alternative technologies on the physical and social composition of the future urban landscape.

[] Cinematic visions are able to shape the future of the city by creating a powerful synthesis of what may happen. In creating popular expectations about the future, films mold our imagination with images about the future which are unavailable in any other medium of communication.

Notes on the Exhibition

The work contained in *The City in the Image of Science Fiction Cinema* will be presented in two parts. In addition to the formal documentation contained in these essays, the research will form the basis for a traveling exhibition. The intent of this exhibit is to communicate the academic research contained herein to a public audience.

The exhibit, scheduled to open in Boston in the Fall of 1986, will present a range of photographic images and supporting material relating to the films themselves. The written work contained in these essays will be integrated into a catalog which will accompany the exhibit.

A complete description of the exhibition is contained in the appendix of this document.

Part One:

THE CITY AND ITS FUTURE

Introduction

The City is a *character*. Its past is romanticised. Its future is fantasized. Its present form contains at once a static record of its history and the dynamic elements which shape its future.

The character of a city is determined by a synthesis between its physical structure and its social complexion. It evolves out of a dialog between the forces of past and present. It expands, holding its form in memory while being thrust into an uncertain future. And now, to this cacophony of forces at work on the character of the city, comes a new voice. One which brings vision to the process of evolution: film images of future environments.

Architects and planners have traditionally focused attention on the present physical and social needs of the urban environment. With the dynamic technological and social changes of the 19th and 20th century it became increasingly necessary to conceptualize the future of the city beyond the incremental changes which had characterized its historical development. While clearly a self conscious act of faith in the viability of the city as a cultural institution, future visions were also an affirmation of our potential to *create* the future. We can predict economic impacts and industrial outputs, forecast population trends and advances in technology. But statistics do not create a vision of the future.

The process of visualizing alternative futures of the city is phenomenon specific to the 19th and 20th centuries. The heritage of its contemporary form, born out of the radical transformations of the industrial revolution, emerged in the mid-19th century as an intrinsic process in shaping the form of the city. Presented through

a range of formats- literature, drawing media, expositions and, as we will see, in film, these visions created a means to assist decision making about the future of the city. These images represented theoretical, speculative or even imaginary visions of what the city could be. In the evolution of the pre-industrial city, the future was essentially an extension of the past. In the 19th century, the future of the city took on an identity of its own which could be moulded by the visions of its society. For the first time the urban environment was conceived of as a dynamic form without a definitive future, its society collectively engaged in the process of its own evolution. The need for finding an appropriate future for the city became a process of *inventing* the future of the city.

The History of the Future

The physical and cultural transformations brought about by the industrial revolution had their most visible effects on the nature of the urban landscape. The dawn of what Reyner Banham termed the "First Machine Age" created a bewildering array of changes at a scale and pace unseen in the history of the city. The impact of technology became the dominant theme in the reshaping of the city. The emerging culture of the machine promised much- a new city of industrial productivity and social equality. The concept of progress emerged as the primary motivation in the development of the city. It soon became apparent that the effects of progress, while literally exploding the growth and density of the city, could also produce negative effects on the quality of life in the urban environment. A new understanding- a new vision of the city, was needed.

Architects and planners, the traditional designers of the city, were not the only proponents of a new vision. Exercising the freedom of their respective roles, novelists and artists were the first to speculate about the effects of technology on urban form and propose alternative visions for the future. Utilizing the popular

media of the time, novels and popular magazines began to depict the future of the city in the age of industrialization. In the first of many attempts to look into the future, novels such as Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward" (1888) predicted the changes in American society one hundred years hence. Magazines invited readers to explore the future between their covers. While literature provided an essential framework for public discussion about the future, the nature of the medium left formal manifestations of the vision to the imagination.

In the late 19th Century, American and European artists, architects, and urban theorists began to visualize the city under the influence of emerging technology. Although initially preoccupied with social implications, these visions soon embraced the formal aspects of the built environment. These images began to articulate the impact of new forms of transportation, communication and construction on specific places in the urban environment. The intent was to find an appropriate formal language which expressed the social and technological transformations of the modern city. The image of the future, characterized in fiction and reality by the machine, became the ultimate symbol for the form of the city.

Initially these urban visions transplanted the most radical aspects of the new technology on to the existing fabric of the city. William Leigh's rendering of the "Visionary City" (1908) depicted the future of New York City as a dense composite of structures interwoven with a multi-layered network of walkways and railway lines. The new urban "street" never touches the ground- as the city pushes upward, public transportation has necessarily evolved into a three-dimensional entity. The city of Manhattan, the quintessential symbol of urban progress at the turn of the century, became fertile ground for a host of futurist visions.

The architectural renderings of Hugh Ferriss, romantic and ethereal in style, became inextricably linked with the image of the future. In "The Metropolis of Tomorrow" (1929), Ferriss presented a series of real and ideal projects which focused on potential forms for the urban landscape.

The established traditions of urban development in Europe were also bending under the impact of the technological revolution. In 1914 Italian futurist Antonio Sant'Elia published "La Citta Futurista", a series of dramatic renderings which proposed a new architecture for the city. For Saint'Elia and a host of others, architecture was the vehicle for a revolution in society. The past, represented by romantic buildings with decoration and classical forms, was seen as repressive and inappropriate for the new society. Machine-like and functionally articulated, the expressive images of Saint'Elia were to influence the generation of designers who later formed the Modern Movement in architecture.

Major expositions also provided a popular vehicle for visualizing the future of the city. The World's Colombian Exhibition (Chicago, 1893) presented a showcase of industrial inventions- steam-powered engines, elevators and a range of other mechanical wonders which promised to reshape the form of the city. For the first time the public was able to experience the physical effects of the new technology. While these exhibitions initially presented a temporary format for industrial inventions, the exhibition sites themselves evolved into experimental city forms which the new technology could produce.

The 1939 New York World's Fair, inspired by the epic theme "Building the World of Tomorrow", presented an array of futuristic images and forms. The future of the city was detailed in the "Futurama", a vast scale model of a typical urban center in the year 1960. Produced by industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes, this exhibition was to influence a generation of urban planners.

The future of the city continues to be a theme of literature and architectural rendering. Following traditions established in the 19th Century, contemporary visions, while limited in public accessibility, continue to suggest their viability in shaping our conception of the urban future.

The visionary medium of the 20th century: Film

Although providing an important role in our understanding of the city up to the present day, visions articulated in the print media are inherently limited in their scope and influence. What emerged in the early 20th Century was an entirely new vehicle for affecting change in the urban environment. Motion pictures had the potential for rendering the future in a provocative new way. Unique to this medium are three mechanisms which empower film with an exceptional ability to transmit ideas.

The first relates to the essential nature of the film experience. While demanding of the viewer a suspension of disbelief, cinema creates a state of mind which heightens the "reality" of the time and place rendered in the film. Although not a substitute for real-world experiences, the effect of film is to capture the essence of a story and render it in a tangible context. By allowing us to "live" in the future as if it already existed, film provides an opportunity to evaluate the social and physical consequences of a particular vision.

A second attribute of film relates to its accessibility. Cinema is a democratic medium which invites participation by a wide public audience. The visions of architects and other designers working in print media communicate mainly to other professionals, leaving the public largely unaware of their work.

Third, the genre of Science Fiction film provides a format for non-traditional designers to continue engaging in the process of visualizing the future of the city. While artistic visions of the future were popular in the 19th Century, the effect of their work began to decline at the turn of the century. The projections of architects and others traditionally responsible for the form of the city began to take hold in the early part of this century. While providing a more "rational" outlook on the future, these visions also began to take the form of actual proposals for the city. Within the realm of Science Fiction cinema, directors, set designers,

industrial designers and a host of other "visual futurists" could engage in proposing alternative futures for the city.

In exploring the impact of film, it is important to understand that visions of the future in every medium are works of fiction. In developing a framework for the rendering of a story, film creates a setting in time and place. Essential to our understanding of the story, the physical environment of the film typically forms a backdrop to other events which are more meaningful. In films which deal with future environments, the setting may become as important as the events which occur within it.

The advent of film allowed society to explore possible futures of the city in a collective and entertaining setting. Indeed, in the early part of the 20th century the act of "going to the movies" must have seemed to be in itself a futuristic experience.

It is somewhat unfortunate that all films which deal with the future are placed in the category of Science Fiction. Although a cinematic extension of traditional visionary projections in other media, the genre of Science Fiction films have been misunderstood and delegated to the role of fantasy. The intent of this study is to explore films which focus attention on the physical and cultural aspects of the city. While in many cases these films suggest advances in science and technology, it is clearly not the primary motivation within the context of the story.

However they are categorized in the cinematic medium, specific Science Fiction films have had a galvanic effect on our conception of the urban future. Fusing concepts and images from disparate sources— traditional renderings of architecture and urban design, advances in science and technology, art, literature and other media from the 19th century, these films created a vision which influenced the form of the city in the 20th century.

In tracing the nature of this influence, it is possible to relate concepts and images from specific films directly to built examples in the city. For example, the vertical

scale and plastic articulation of the interior spaces in the film *Things to Come* (1936) is strikingly similar to the atrium spaces in a number of recent hotels developed by the Hyatt Corporation. However, this attitude underestimates the generative effect these film have on our understanding of the urban future.

The influence of these visions affected both the general public and those professionals involved in the design of the city. In forming public expectations about the future, these films provided a benchmark which professional designers were obligated to respond to.

In the process of inventing alternative futures for the urban landscape, Science Fiction films affect the evolution of the city. The future of the city will never be the same.

Part Two:

MAN, MACHINE AND THE CITY. TWO VISIONS

Introduction

"As the mist began to clear" wrote German director Fritz Lang on his first visit to Manhattan in 1924, "a city of immense proportions began to emerge. Filled with light and energy, the towering spires of buildings pierced the clouds while everywhere people and machines raced about..." For Lang, the City of New York became a symbol for the social conflicts inherent in the modern city, and the inspiration for a provocative urban vision he was later to present in film.

While there exists a range of Science Fiction films which articulate the formal composition of the future city in depth, two examples may be singled out for the intelligence and influence of their vision, as well as the contrasting historical positions which they occupy in the development of this genre of filmmaking. Viewed together, the films *Metropolis* [1927] and *Blade Runner* [1982] encompass virtually the entire spectrum of cinematic visions of the City. In these films the City emerges as an integral character within the framework of the story. It is the very nature of this character—both the strength of its physical setting and the particular relationship which the actors have to these environments, which create a realistic context for imagining the future of the City. The physical and social urban environment which these two films project is at once familiar and radically different. The dynamics generated by these enigmas gives the films a three-dimensional texture, a quality which moves the experience of the film beyond the individual images which it presents.

Fritz Lang's vision of the city in *Metropolis* established cinema as the definitive medium for articulating the future of the urban environment in the 20th Century.

The theme and visual language of the film have influenced virtually every other film on the subject to date. The urban future of *Blade Runner*, a vision of Los Angeles in the year 2019, is the most recent film to explore the future of the City. Borrowing in theme and image from *Metropolis*, the use of technology and contemporary production techniques sets *Blade Runner* apart from other films of its generation.

The Future Comes of Age: *METROPOLIS*

New York City: 2000AD. Shift Change. Deep underground, uniformed workers march in step into giant elevators- slowly, without emotion they pass compatriots who have finished their work period. Shift change. Elevator doors open and the workers move into position amidst the giant machines they tend- a vast mechanical complex of pistions, wheels, gauages, steam and sweat. Shift change. High above the ghetto of machines rises a City of light and air- METROPOLIS. Majestic skyscrapers pierce the clouds while airplanes glide playfully around the skyline. In rooftop gardens, children of the rich engage in games of skill and romance...

A provocative vision of the future, the urban landscape of *Metropolis* is both enlightening and disturbing. Based on director Fritz Lang's impressions of his first visit to New York City in 1924, the film portrays the future of the City as a symbol of technological achievement and turbulent social stratification. Although ultimately resolved to some degree at the conclusion of the film, the conflicts projected in this film reflect the concerns of a society attempting to understand the role of progress, and of individuals, in the contemporary urban environment.

In placing this film within an historical context, we must understand it as the product of a society in transition. A society which, at the dawn of the 20th century, viewed with increasing suspicion the impact of the "first machine age" on the urban landscape. It is interesting to note that the cities of Lang's Germany, and indeed all of Europe, had not begun to reach the density of construction which which was emerging in New York City at the turn of the Century. [history, more...]

The emerging medium of film invited a range of artists and designers to visualize the future of the city. The son of an architect, Lang was raised to carry on the family tradition. Although he ultimately rejected architecture as a career, Lang's

relationship with the design field prepared him for expressionism and its creative use of physical surroundings.

Upon its release in January, 1927, *Metropolis* created sharp reaction on both sides of the Atlantic. One of the most popular films of its time, it raised both the thematic content and visual impact of silent films to a new level. It is important to note that the film no longer exists in its original form, the initial three hour production having been cut to under two hours shortly after its European debut. With several scenes deemed unacceptable for the American audience, the film was edited further before its release in the United States. The film as seen today, at times disjointed and confusing, represents about sixty percent of the original production. [Re-released in 1984, a new version of the production, complete with soundtrack and computer-enhanced color effects, is said to contain all the original footage which exists.]

Although popular with a moviegoing public experiencing their first vision of the future, some critics at the time were uneasy with the radical urban implications of the film. Science Fiction author H.G.Wells, reviewing the film for the *New York Times* (April, 1927), wrote

"I do not think there is a single new idea, a single instant of artistic creation, or even intelligent anticipation, from first to last in the whole pretentious stew. That vertical city of the future, we know now is, to put it mildly, highly improbable. This vertical social stratification is stale old stuff. So far from being a hundred years hence, 'Metropolis', in its form and shapes, is already as a possibility a third of a century out of date"

It is not surprising that Mr. Wells, through a later vision of the city in the film adaptation of his novel *Things to Come* (1936), proposes an entirely different relationship between culture and technology in the future.

As suggested in the introduction to this essay, we may view the medium of Science Fiction film as a cinematic extension of traditional forms of visualizing the future of the city. The city in *Metropolis* is built upon this tradition. In the form of its buildings we see the bold simplicity and exaggerated verticality of Saint'Elia mixed with a romantic interpretation of 19th century engineering achievements. It is also clear that this is not a new city, but rather one in evolution. Our first views of the city delineate a base of pre-existing buildings in the tradition of the Chicago frame system— rectangular structures with simple, punched openings and little decoration. There is a suggestion of setback zoning, although most of these buildings rise vertically [as was typical of development in New York City during the 1920's] without interruption. As the "new" city begins to emerge above this traditional fabric of streets and buildings, the skyline is radically transformed. Here, in what we take to be the center of *Metropolis*, rises a broad, domed structure which seems to be several hundred stories in height. Its wide, articulated base, fluted midsection and winged top projections present a significant departure in the architecture of the city. The social conflicts of the working class is portrayed in the film as a struggle to partake of this Utopia.

Set high above the broad avenues of *Metropolis* is an extended network of streets crowded with a multitude of public conveyances. Supported on triangular legs and connecting the city at various levels, these additional layers of vehicular circulation are reminiscent of a host of previous visions of "streets in the sky". Notably similar to William Leigh's renderings of the "Visionary City" [1908], its development in *Metropolis* suggests a parallel relationship with the architectural polemics of the era. This concept of the city as a three-dimensional network has been the preoccupation of numerous urban design schemes since the 1920's. For example, its theme is integrated into both the visionary renderings of Ferriss and actual urban proposals by Le Corbusier and other prominent architects.

The film provides little information concerning the nature of urban life at the ground level of *Metropolis*. The dynamics of the script emphasize the contrast

between workers who live and toil far below the surface, and the masters of the city who live in splendor above. The film does suggest that the "city" of the workers lies *below* the complex of machines which power the urban network above ground. Has a expressionist metaphor which details the social realities of the modern city, this film presents a powerful image of the impact of technology on the form of the urban complex.

The Evolution of the Contemporary City: *BLADE RUNNER*

Los Angeles: 2019AD. Gas explosions erupt on the horizon. Jet powered cars glide toward the city, its angular silhouette emerging from the darkening mist of the horizon. Looming over the familiar skyline of the City rises structures of immense scale- a dense cluster of round towers and angular structures. Dwarfed and forgotten by the new city above, the streets below are in chaos: jammed with traffic and crime, the life of the city speaks its own language...

The vision of the city in *Blade Runner* creates a striking portrait of the evolution of a 20th century urban complex. Although the scale of the city has responded to dramatic shifts in technology and population, its overall composition suggests an incremental process of development based on the form of the pre-existing city. The infrastructure of the urban core, outdated and decaying, has not been replaced but rather modified as necessary to keep pace with the changing needs of the population. The physical composition of the environment has responded to the stratified culture of the city: the tension of life on its streets is in sharp contrast to the placid life in the towers above. It is an image of a city in transition. The story of a city on the verge of self-destruction.

The film's contrasting vision of Los Angeles in the near future is a direct descendent of the city of *Metropolis*. Loosely based on Philip K. Dick's novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?", its theme and visual impact owe much to its counterpart from the silent era. Guided by the extraordinary vision of industrial designer and "visual futurist" Syd Mead, the city of *Blade Runner* emerges as a provocative arena for the urban drama of corporate dominance and individual survival. Initially conceived of as "San Angeles", the city was developed as a megalopolis covering the western seaboard from Los Angeles to San Francisco.

The opening titles of the film suggest that much of the population has moved "off-world", presumably to escape the physical and moral decay of cities on earth. The city is now composed of only the giant corporations which fuel its economy and the multitude of misfits who must survive on its streets. Although not a post-apolitic vision, the city is portrayed as a bleak landscape of pollution, social disorder and crime. Its multi-ethnic residents speak a language particular to the city- a strange mix of Chinese, Spanish and English. Deadly robots indistinguishable from humans- Replecants, have returned to the city in search of their corporate creator. Special police forces- Blade Runner Units, are sent to track them down.

The architecture of the city in *Blade Runner* is influenced from the past as much as it projects a future urban image. As we approach the city from the air in the opening sequences of the film, the foreground is composed of the industrial and suburban development which typically surrounds major metropolian areas. Gas fires from oil refineries light the sky, while the familiar pattern of suburban residential development spreads to the horizon. The pre-existing base of the city consists of traditional high-rise structures- simple rectangular forms which are intended to duplicate the actual skyline of Los Angeles. As in *Metropolis*, unexplained [corporate?] forces have pushed the form of the city to a new plateau of articulation and density. The vertical scale of the city has increased geometrically, dominating the familiar skyline with structures 150-200 stories in height. Massive pyramidal buildings, vaguely Mayan in form, suggest a further development of the current trend toward architecture as corporate image-making.

This vertical intensity of development seems only to further stratify the social complexion of the city. Buildings reach for secure heights above the chaos and decadence of the street. Although clearly seperated, the function of the city requires a complex of transportation and communication systems between all levels. Both the density of construction and the need for security preclude any physical link similar to the "streets in the sky" of *Metropolis*. Here technology plays a critical role. The development of a V/STOL [vertical takeoff and landing] vehicle

in *Blade Runner* creates an invisible network of corridors high above the overcrowded streets. Although a potential nightmare for Air Traffic Control, these "spinners" are able to lift vertically from the street and land on rooftop pads throughout the city. A longstanding dream of urban futurists from the visionary plans of the 19th Century to fantasies from recent pages of *Popular Science*, this personal mode of transportation finds an appropriate context in the city of *Blade Runner*.

In an environment dominated by the dual cultures of corporation and consumption, we find evidence of their influence in numerous formal aspects of the city. The facades of several structures have been transformed into giant video screens, advertising everything from the newest form of robotic clone to the everpresent Coca-Cola. Opportunities for mass-communication reach new levels with the presence of large audio/video blimps which float overhead and preach the pleasures of a journey "off-world".

In counterposition to these elements of the city which are clearly of a future time, the film subtly details a presence from the past. The apartment of the principal character in the story is a curious mix of organic decoration and modern conveniences. Filmed on location in Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis house [Los Angeles, 1924], this "timeless" setting suggests an intriguing relationship with the visual vocabulary we associate with "the future". The workshop of a genetic engineer is housed in a delicate structure with a skylite artium and exposed elevator reminiscent of 19th Century cast iron buildings. Background filming was done at the Bradbury Building [Los Angeles, 1893].

In broad scope and intimate detail, the city of *Blade Runner* represents the quintessential contemporary vision of the city of the future.

The art of cinema, exclusive of its science and embracing the influence of fiction, is an appropriate medium for developing future models for the city. The films *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*, separated by half a century of technological advancement and cultural awareness, represent an entire spectrum of cinematic visions of the future. As an extension of the 19th century tradition of presenting alternative futures in other media, these films represent the "state of the art" in the popular understanding of the city and its future. Fully realizing the potential of the medium, these films present an influential framework for continuing discussions about the city. While provocative in their images of the future, these films also suggest a range of attitudes about our conception of the contemporary urban environment.

Film and the City

The city of *Metropolis*, while essentially a product of the 19th century, emerged as a model for social awareness in the cinema of this century. The social and physical realities of the city under the influence of the machine age become the essential character of the film. Although seemingly timeless when viewed today, *Metropolis* was certainly understood as a future vision upon its release in 1927. Clearly a product of the 21st century, the form of the city in *Blade Runner* reflects similar concerns of social stratification and urban density.

Part Three:

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

Introduction

While *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner* occupy seminal positions in the cinematic history of the city, a number of other films have proposed alternative urban futures. Although lacking in both articulation of scope and influence of vision, these additional films are important reference points in our understanding of Science Fiction cinema as a productive medium for conceptualizing the future of the city. Influenced to varying degrees by visions rendered in other media, the range of images of the urban environment in these films provides a new understanding of the medium.

Three years after the European release of *Metropolis*, American filmmakers made their first attempt at visualizing the future of the city. A light-hearted musical set in New York City circa 1980, *Just Imagine* (1930) presented images of the city as a theatrical set piece for a romantic interpretation of the future urban experience. Here the vertical tendencies and increasing density of Manhattan in the 1920's are extrapolated into an endless landscape of skyscrapers, suspension bridges and avenues. In this ocean of urban development, highrise structures extend to the horizon while their massing and articulation carefully respect the limitations of setback zoning. Broad avenues, wide enough to be freeways, form a dense network of automotive circulation.

While clearly an attempt to capitalize on the images and popularity of *Metropolis*, this film renders the future of Manhattan as a literal extension of its existing form. Within the context of a forgettable script, it is not surprising that the film's attitude about the city represents a passive alternative to more radical visions of the

urban future. The city in *Just Imagine*, as an antidote for a society in the midst of the Depression, suggests a blissful future

The city became a character of serious consideration once again in the British production of H.G.Wells' *Things to Come* (1936). In this post-apocalyptic vision of 2036, the non specific city of "Everytown" becomes the symbol for a new social order shaped by the new technology. The city, carved into caverns deep underground, contains a dazzling array of soaring atriums and moderne interiors which support a new urban morality: the machine and the city in service to mankind. The sets for the film, designed by director William Cameron Menzies, are also attributed to Bauhaus artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. While the actual relationship Moholy-Nagy had with the production is unclear, the architecture of the film reflects the aesthetic ideals set forth by the Bauhaus. Machine-like forms and smooth, undecorated surfaces highlight the interior.

By necessity a city comprised primarily of interior spaces, the main public space is a dramatic atrium with glass-enclosed elevators and soaring balconies. Suspended walkways form a labyrinth of mazes which connect various levels within the city. In the only example of its kind in the genre of Science Fiction cinema, the film details the construction of this generic city ("Everytown") after a long war has rendered the surface of the planet uninhabitable. Giant machines manufacture and install pre-fabricated building components in a process strikingly similar to contemporary construction techniques.

The architecture of *Things to Come* is intended as the ultimate manifestation of a new society in this vision of a technocratic Utopia. Amidst a great deal of moralizing about the future of mankind, the film suggests that the form of the city and its culture are predestined by the impact of the machine. For a society poised on the edge of global conflict, the future of "Everytown" was the future of their town.

After these two films, future visions of the city would not play an important role in cinema until the mid- 1970's. In the forty intervening years, Science Fiction films (and cinema in general) were preoccupied with the horrors of global war and the potential effects of nuclear holocaust. As a barometer of public concern in an age of conflict and uncertainty, films of this period question the very nature of "the future". The optimism of the past quickly disappeared and the future of mankind, much less that of the city, came into question.

Reacting to the political and scientific paranoia of Cold War America, Science Fiction films of the 1950's explored the unpleasant possibilities of alien invasions (i.e. the Communists) and attacks by radiation-crazed beasts. Searching for answers, society again found hope in the realm of science. Coinciding with new developments in rocket technology, Science Fiction cinema discovered the future in a different place- outer space. Until now generally misnamed, the genre of films dealing specifically with science had finally come into its own.

With the social unrest of urban American in the 1970's, the city and its future once again emerged as a character in film. The first in a series of contemporary visions which articulate the future of the city, *Logan's Run* (1976) depicts a placid urban environment where city and culture are in equilibrium. Set in the year 2274, the image of this city is the antithesis of *Metropolis*. Unrefined structures of modest height and suburban density rise from a park-like setting filled with green spaces and aquatic ammenities. The form of the city is an eclectic composition of buildings which fail to evoke any anticipation about the future. -Simple rectangular structures reminiscent of contemporary speculative office towers dot the landscape. A reproduction of the DisneyWorld hotel, complete with monorail, resides in the background.

A similar landscape pervades the urban future of *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (1979). Intended to be a vision of Chicago five hundred years in the future, the city is a patchwork of structures vaguely familiar in form. Similar in formal attitude to the city of *Just Imagine*, this film renders the distant future as

an extension of the present. In both of these films the city forms a casual backdrop for an even more dismal script.

Two other films project future urban environments located in distant places. The city of *Outland* (1980) is a desolate mining outpost on one of the moons of Jupiter. A compact megastructure housing workers, support facilities and mining operations, the complex is similar in concept and form to an off-shore drilling rig. Self-contained and isolated in the icy vacuum of space, the architecture of the city is literally a vast machine which supports the physical needs of its inhabitants. The form of the city responds with cool efficiency to its life-supporting role and quickly dismisses any romantic ideals about future life on another planet.

This dense complex of functionally articulated structures is reminiscent of the machine-inspired architectural visions of the 1960's. In renderings such as Archigram's "Plug in City" (1968), the city is conceived of as a three dimensional aggregate of components which respond to the pragmatic requirements of the city.

The city of the future takes a giant leap into the past in the second installment of the Star Wars trilogy, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). In this romantic vision set in an unspecified era ("a long, long time ago"), the City of Bespin floats magically in the clouds above an alien planet. Delineated as a funnel-like form of immense proportions, the city is comprised of art deco inspired buildings and moderne interiors. Forming a dramatic silhouette of sharp spires and rounded tops, the skyline of the city forms an image of the traditional urban center.

While intentionally a work of fantasy, this film suggests the validity of any cinematic "future" approached with intelligence and creativity. The form of the city, delineated by conceptual designer Ralph McQuarrie, contains familiar urban images held in weightless suspension by an unspecified technology. Both the romantic context of the film and the skillful articulation of this city render it conceptually believable

These films provide an important contribution to the art of visualizing the future. Although less influential than the urban visions of *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*, the very act of their existence suggests a continuing need for their development. Essentially reactive in nature, the majority of these films respond to ideas and images extracted from the current form of the city. By presenting a range of alternative images, they effectively continue the cinematic process of finding the future.

Conclusion:

FILM AND THE CITY

In developing an understanding of the mechanisms which effect change in the composition of the urban environment, it is clear that film plays an important role in shaping its future. The need for visualizing the future, emerging out of the social and technological transformations of the Industrial Revolution, found an appropriate vehicle for expression in the contemporary medium of Science Fiction cinema.

By developing a democratic context in which society could engage in the process of finding its future, visionary films in the genre of Science Fiction have influenced the form of the urban environment. Although a process traditionally deligated to architects and planners, the emergence of the film medium allowed a broad public to participate in the design of the city. Although small in number, these films continue to mold our conception of the urban future. Synthesizing concepts and images from a range of sources, Science Fiction films have provided a unique opportunity to experience alternative visions of the urban landscape.

APPENDIX

Exhibit Summary
December 1, 1985

THE CITY IN THE IMAGE OF SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA

This exhibition will explore the image of Architecture and Urban Design in Science Fiction films of the last 50 years. It will present a range of films and related material which articulate past and present visions of the urban future. The intent of the exhibit is to broaden our understanding of the City as both a conceptual idea and a physical network of forces which are constantly reshaping its future. Through a detailed presentation ranging from preliminary sketch to finished film, the exhibit will provide an entertaining and provocative look into a powerful visual medium which continues to influence the form of the urban landscape.

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- [] Theme
- [] Exhibit Material
- [] Installation
- [] Schedule
- [] Expenses
- [] Funding Sources

GREGORY BECK, AIA 10 GARDEN COURT STREET NO. 7 BOSTON 02113 [617] 723-4842

[] THEME

Introduction

"The future cannot be predicted, but futures can be invented"
Dennis Gabor, "Inventing the Future"

The City is a *character*. Its past is romanticized. Its future is fantasized. The search for a comprehensive understanding of the City and its future requires a dialog between the static elements of its past and the dynamic forces which shape its future.

It has been argued that of all those engaged in visualizing the future of the City, the authors of Science Fiction have delineated the most "accurate" image of what the urban environment will be like. Avoiding a lengthy debate, it seems fair to suggest that many contemporary models of future urban environments are generated by people working outside the traditional design fields. The most powerful of these images are created in Science Fiction films. As an influential medium of popular culture, films provide a unique setting with which to collectively explore our future. By nature an art form which demands the suspension of belief, films can mold our imagination with alternative visions of the social and physical composition of the City which are unavailable through any other medium of communication. This exhibition will, for the first time, present images and issues directly related to the City in film, and its past and present future.

The Films

] "The Future comes of Age: Early Visions"

Metropolis [1927]
Things to Come [1936]

] "The Evolution of the Contemporary City"

Blade Runner [1982]

] "The City of Tomorrow"

Outland [1980]
Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back [1980]

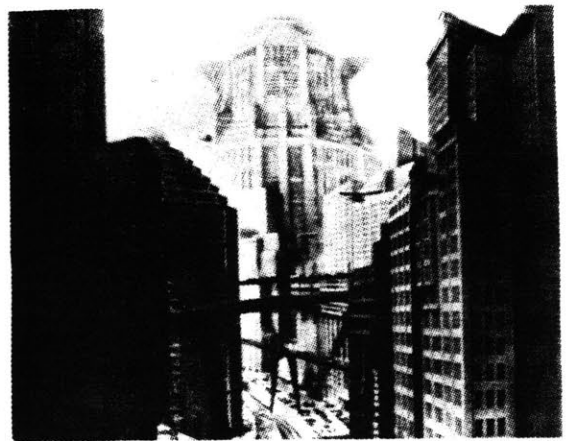
The Films

] "The Future Comes of Age: Early Visions"

The City and its future emerged as a subject of cinematic interest soon after the medium itself began to reach the public on a large scale. Two classic films from this period suggest a startling and sometimes prophetic vision of "the City of Tomorrow". Until the dawn of *Metropolis*, the fictional vision of the City was limited to books, plays and popular magazines. With this film (and several others that followed), the audience was launched into a powerful vision of the future which it had only imagined before. These films forever changed the way we visualize our future. They forever changed what our future was to become.

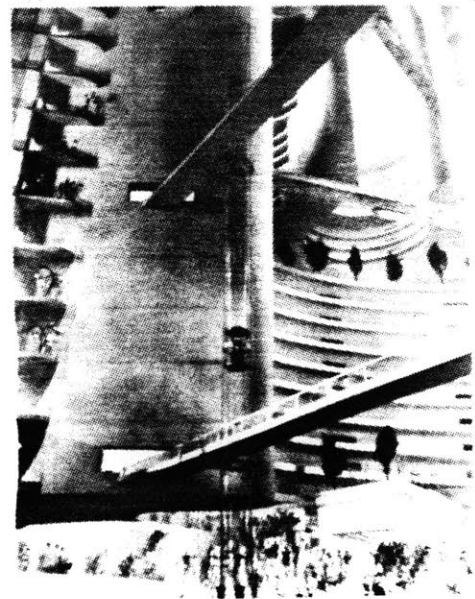
METROPOLIS [1927]

Fritz Lang's tour de force creates a fascinating vision of New York City in the year 2000 (although it could be NYC ca. 1985!) Here the forces of technology and society have layered the City as a machine, its form a symbol of the struggle between its towering monuments of progress and the social stratification of workers who toil far below its surface. Based on Lang's childhood memories of the City, this film thrusts the architecture of science fiction cinema into the 20th Century.



THINGS TO COME [1936]

The City of Tomorrow built upon the ashes of World War Three, this post-apocalyptic vision anticipates the concerns of future generations. Here the New City is designed to embrace the New Technology and fulfill the New Moral Order of civilization in the year 2036. A dazzling array of architecture and interiors which support a new urban morality: the machine and the City in service to mankind.



Other films of interest: *Just Imagine* [1930]

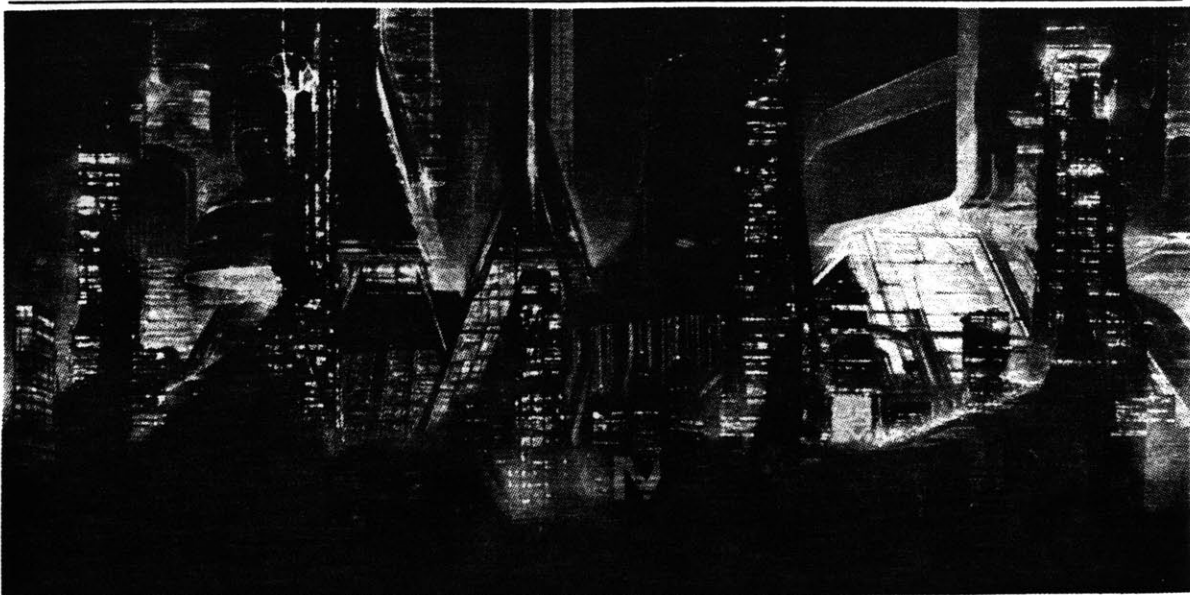
The Films

] "The Evolution of the Contemporary City"

Curious to the art of visualizing the City is the inverse relationship between the "future" time one designs for and the plausibility of the vision. The risks here are extreme. Early cinematic visions of the future portrayed a City filled with light and hope, a symbol of humanity and purity drawing all to its center. Contemporary visions often have a less optimistic outlook. Amidst a great deal of discussion about the validity of a particular approach (which this exhibit will address), it is clear that each has had a tremendous impact on how we visualize the urban environment of our future.

BLADE RUNNER [1982]

The quintessential vision of the Architecture of the City, this film creates a provocative and visually stunning image of Los Angeles in the year 2019. Here the future Metropolis has become vertically stratified in the extreme- its present center overshadowed by structures of immense scale, its social composition fighting for life on the lower concourse.



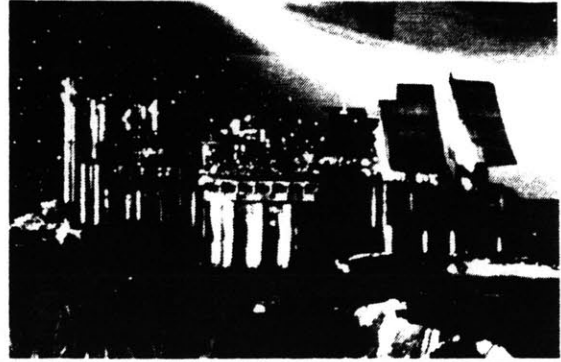
The Films

] "The City of Tomorrow"

These films articulate the architecture of the City in some distant time and place. Here we have the liberty to project beyond known limits, to dream of a society and a place which has not existed before. Here we often find ourselves back in familiar territory- popular images from the past fused with a "kink" of cinematic logic to suggest a new order in society or a fantastic advance in technology.

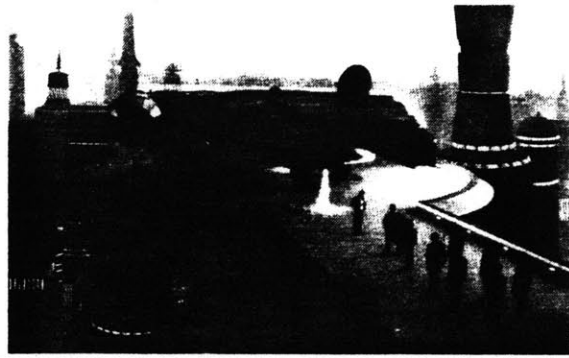
OUTLAND [1980]

The City as an island on the desert of one of Jupiter's moons. Archigram's Walking City finds a home in the icy vacuum of space. High-tech, low touch. The machine of the City at its most efficient: "...and the heart is a fuel pump".



STAR WARS, THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK [1980]

Wookiee! The perennial search for the Force leads our heroes (i.e. the contemporary urban dweller) to the City of Bespin, floating romantically in the clouds above an alien planet. In this future [ca. 3000+ AD] we can look forward to art deco skyscrapers and moderne interiors- the City of Light [and the City of *Metropolis*] at last!



Other Films: *Logan's Run* [1976], *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* [1979]

[] EXHIBIT MATERIAL

The essence of film lies in its final product. The nature of its presentation does not usually leave any trace of its conception or production. In an attempt to fully understand these images and their impact on our vision of the City, this exhibition will examine the entire spectrum of their creation, from screenplay notes and preliminary sketches to production renderings and the final images on film. This exploration will enrichen our understanding of the finished images and provide a depth of meaning which has up to now eluded this influential medium.

] Artwork [preliminary list]:

Background information [Introduction to exhibit]:

Historical overview of 18th and 19th Century urban visions; brief explanation of film production techniques [text; photographic reproductions, photostats, size 12"x18"]. Information in this section to be detailed at length in the catalog.

Artwork from the films:

Metropolis and Things to Come

- Notes from the screenplay [text]
- Enlarged still frames [black+white reproductions, typical size 18"x24"]

Blade Runner

- Notes from the novel and screenplay on which it was based [text]
- Conceptual drawings, sketches and paintings [original work, typical size 15"x30"]
- Matte paintings (intricate background renderings used in the actual production of the film) [two original paintings, size 24"x40"]
- Enlarged still frames [color reproductions, size 18"x24"]
- Model, Los Angeles cityscape [original set piece complete with interior lighting, 40" high]

Outland and The Empire Strikes Back

- Notes from the screenplay [text]
- Conceptual drawings, sketches and paintings [photostatic reproductions, size varies, up to 15"x30"]
- Matte paintings from *The Empire Strikes Back* [two full size color reproductions, size 24"x40"]
- Enlarged still frames [color, size 18"x24"]

Exhibit Material/continued

Other Films:

Notes on other films of interest [text]

Enlarged still frames [black+white and color reproductions, size 18"x24"]

] Video

The heart of the exhibit will be a two part video installation which will present segments from the films themselves.

Part One: A 12-15 minute video compilation of all the films of interest to the exhibition [including several not detailed in the exhibit itself, i.e. "other films of interest"]. Music overlay from the soundtracks of the films. Continuous playback on a 25" color monitor.

Part Two: An interactive [touch screen] videodisc system which will allow random selection of edited segments from the major films within the exhibit. Utilizing a computer-intergrated menu display, this system will invite the user to explore individual topics or scenes of interest, with instant access to an extensive catalog of real-time and still images. This disc-based information system will also allow high resolution freeze-frame imaging, useful for extended study of specific images which may normally take up only seconds of screen time. User-activated playback on a 19" touch screen color monitor.

] Slide Images

Abstract impressions of the *contemporary* City [Boston, New York City, San Francisco, etc.]. As a counterpoint to the celluloid environments on film, these images will suggest an intriguing relationship between what is real [i.e. built] and what is imagined [on film]. Continuous projection of approximately 50 color and black+white transparencies will be presented on a large screen above the exhibit area.

] Catalog

This document will serve as a permanent reference to the material in the exhibit while extending the polemical base of the work itself. It will contain a series of essays by academics, architects and film critics who will address issues related to architecture, cinema and the future of the City. In addition, it will present an overview of the people responsible for these visions, including the production designers, set and special effects designers and the new breed of "visual futurists". Intended as a guide for further study, the catalog will also contain technical information related to film production and an extensively annotated film biography.

Size: 8.5"x11" [horizontal format]

32 pages, double sided; 80 lb. stock, with cover; wire bound

30 halftone illustrations + 30 line drawings.

Exhibit Material/continued

Sources [Preliminary list]

The following corporations and individuals will provide artwork and related visual material for this exhibition:

The Ladd Company, Burbank, California

Warner Bros., Inc., Burbank, California

Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, Beverly Hills, California

Lucasfilm, Ltd., San Rafael, California

Ackerman Archives, Hollywood, California

Syd Mead, Inc., Los Angeles, California

Ralph McQuarrie, Berkeley, California

[] INSTALLATION

The exhibition will be presented in a series of modular panels which will accommodate a variety of installation methods and allow for efficient packing and shipping. The artwork and text portions will be assembled in a flat, composite panel which will be protected by a plexiglas cover. A free standing, vertical space-frame "column" will secure the video monitors and related equipment, and allow viewing from numerous angles within the exhibit area.

] Exhibit panels:

- 15 composite panels
- Size: 30"w x 44"l x 1.5"d
- 1/4" perforated metal backing panel with clips provided for custom mounting of artwork and text
- Original artwork mounted directly to backing panel; photographs and text drymounted on foamcore and secured to backing panel
- 1/4" plexiglas cover over entire exhibit panel
- Brackets provided for mounting directly into wall or panel, or hung from above.

] Video column:

- Vertical, self-supporting tubular steel framework
- Size: 36" square footprint x 6'-6" high
- Metal shelf supports for video monitors and related equipment
- Hinged panel provided for access to video/videodisc playback equipment

Installation/continued

] Consultants

An exhibit of this scope demands expertise from many areas. The following people will consult the production and display of the exhibit material:

Etan Manasse, Etan Manasse, Inc., New York City

Mr. Manasse is an exhibit and industrial designer with extensive involvement in exhibits of this nature. He has designed exhibitions for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service [SITES] and other major exhibitions.

Fritz Frauchiger, Los Angeles, California

Mr. Frauchiger has curated numerous shows in the Los Angeles area, including an exhibit dealing with models from films titled *Movie Miniatures* at the ARCO Center for the Visual Arts [1982], and several exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. He will coordinate the acquisition of specific pieces for this exhibition.

Larry Gallagher, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Mr. Gallagher is a filmmaker and Director of Video Production, Educational Video Productions, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA. He will assist in the production of the video and videodisc segments of the exhibition.

[] SCHEDULE

Boston, Massachusetts: September–October, 1986

The exhibit will open at the Boston Architectural Center, 320 Newbury Street, Boston [a 700 sq.ft., two-story gallery located in Boston's Back Bay].

Negotiations are currently underway to place the exhibition in additional locations, including New York City and Los Angeles.

[] EXPENSES

] Exhibit Material

] Installation

] Catalog

] General Expenses

] Exhibit Material

Artwork

Original renderings, production sketches, matte paintings, models, etc.- At this time most of the artists and/or film corporations have agreed to donate this material for the exhibition.

Cost of reproduction [photographic and photostatic] where original work is inaccessible

Video

Part One: Video compilation- purchase of source material, editing at Educational Video Productions, MIT, on 3/4" videotape

Part Two: Videodisc- source material from above, edited at EVP/MIT, 1" video transfer to videodisc

Slide images

35mm slide production and processing

] Installation

Exhibit panels: 15 composite sheet metal and plexiglas panels for artwork/text mounting. Custom fabrication

Video column: Self-supporting tubular steel framework for video and slide projection equipment. Mfg.: Unistrut Corporation

Model case: Wood base and plexiglas cover, size 36"x36"x50". Custom fabrication

Video presentation

Part One: Video compilation

Sony KV-25XBR [25" high resolution color monitor, external speakers]

Sony VP-5000 videocassette deck [industrial grade, 3/4" playback, continuous repeat]

Part Two: Interactive Videodisc

Sony PVM-1911 [19" color monitor with touch-screen]

Sony LDP-1000A VideoDisc Player [industrial grade, computer interface]

Cables and patch cords

Slide Projection

Kodak ATS Slide Projector
[industrial grade 35mm, zoom lens, continuous
repeat]

Descriptive graphics, general text and artwork
description [typesetting/photostat/mounting]

] Catalog

Reference document: 32 pages, 8.5"x11"
format, b+w illustrations, initial run: 500
copies- additional copies at the expense of
individual gallery locations

] General Expenses

Organization fee [Gregory Beck, curator:
Fritz Frauchinger, Los Angeles
coordinator,] Assistance: one additional
person for exhibit assembly Travel:
Mr. Beck for two weeks in Los Angeles
area [spring, 1986] to gather material,
handle shipping

Packaging and shipping [LA-Boston]

Copyright fees [for use of film clips]

Insurance: Initial exhibit covered under
BAC policy. Additional sites to be
underwritten by individual galleries.

Storage and Exhibit assembly space [rental,
one month prior to Boston opening]
Transportation [van rental]

Advertising, promotion, direct-mailing
announcement, exhibit poster, opening
reception- the BAC will cover these expenses.

TOTAL

] Exhibit Material:

] Installation:

] Catalog:

] General Expenses:

Total Expense: [Pending final estimates]

[] FUNDING SOURCES

] Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Council for the Arts: Videodisc development/production expenses

] Boston Architectural Center: BAC gallery installation and promotion expenses

] The National Endowment for the Arts

Design Arts Program: Individual Project Fellowship [pending, award date: February, 1986]

] American Institute of Architects: Exhibit travel expenses

] Corporate (in-kind or monetary) support: [pending]

* NOTE: At the completion of the useful life of this exhibition [approximately eighteen months], the video playback and slide projection equipment will be donated to the Boston Architectural Center, a non-profit School of Architecture.

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