This work is an act of salvage and care. We draw on fragments of the unlived futures that are present in science fiction (sf) to consider how we might collectively inhabit or repurpose built space. Where do we go from here? Perhaps our direction cannot be singular. In response we offer an assemblage text with multiple routes through and ways of reading – an act of collective repurposing. We choose messy multiplicity over the illusory unity of the sole authoritative voice: the single story

In James Tiptree Jr’s Your Faces, O My Sisters!, the protagonist’s only recourse is to reject the presumed supremacy of the ‘real world’ and to escape into another, more utopian space, not by following the settler-colonial trajectory of finding a ‘new world’, but rather by remaking the streets under her feet. This is what Davina Cooper calls ‘utopian prefiguration’ in her essay ‘Towards an Adventurous Institutional Politics: The Prefigurative “As If” and the Reposing of What’s Real’ (2020) – in which the revolutionary subject insistently behaves as if the utopian future is already in existence.

Architecture is based on the ideology of progress with its promise of building a better future. This was largely accomplished by disregarding the existing and adopting the colonial attitude of the blank slate or the tabula rasa. The future was built on the annihilation of the existing. This ensured inflicted its wounds on the planet

On the tenth floor she stepped out from the stairwell onto the vast floor of a machine shop. The large room was lit by sunshine from the windows all around. The rusting hulks of die-cutting machines striped the cracked linoleum floor with shadows. Chango wandered in this gallery of disused mechanisms, running tentative fingers across the dusty, corroded flanks of forgotten tools, their intricate purposes a mystery to her. The rave-in had been in the north building, they had never even ventured here, had never laid eyes on these arcane devices, had no knowledge of them nor desire to find out. To the ravers, an abandoned building was simply a place to hang out for a while. To Chango, each was a world unto itself, a landscape to be savoured.

It was built in the last century, when prosperity must have excused ugliness. The halls had once been blank and identical, the stairwells featureless tubes of concrete block and iron stair rail. Now living ivy worked its way toward the sky at the top of the stairs, where someone had turned a trapdoor into an open skylight; wisteria cascaded down to meet it from the roof. Things peered from the leaves: grotesque carved wooden faces, old photographs of people, ... faded postcards.

We expect science fiction to provide us with more than a seat at the table. We expect it to overturn the table, to transform it into a barricade, to set the table on fire. We expect sf to challenge us, to shake loose possibility, to construct new worlds, and dismantle systems of oppression and exclusion.

‘I don’t think utopia needs hope at all. Hope yearns for a future. Instead, we dream in place, in situ, in medias res, in layers, in dimensional frequencies’

Jayna Brown, Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds, 2021
In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, what was once the subway system has now been appropriated by a group of street children. Using a tape recording and a projector, the children create an ‘illusion of a battalion of feral children’, which appear as ‘a sea of screaming children’s bodies’. Their digitally multiplied voices drive away the threat of violence. “She remembered her grandmother’s words: ‘The centre pole is the bridge between the worlds ... reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. She thought of the building she was in. The CN Tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of the tallest centre pole in the world ... For like the spirit tree that the centre pole symbolised, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived. The tower was their ladder into this world. She could call the spirits to help her. She wouldn’t have to call very loudly’”

Creatures whose strangeness shows us the strangeness in ourselves

“Lin’s bulging mirrored eyes saw the city in a compound visual cacophony. A million tiny sections of the whole, each minuscule hexagon segment abrade with sharp colour ... Each visual fragment, each part, each shape, each shade of colour, differed from its surroundings in infinitesimal ways that told her about the state of the whole structure”

A chaotic spilling of past and present
Beyond Gender is a research collective that investigates the radical potential of science fiction to subvert the gender binary. Our practice involves: collective reading, the playing of games, collaborative writing and mutual care. For more information on our practice and publications, see our website: beyondgender.space

Utopian possibilities are being enacted in the here and now

‘Ficto-criticism was deliberately non-completist: it was diffident, allusive, touching upon ideas and approaches and opening them up, and then leaving much unsaid. It could be windy and full of holes, a ruin, barely standing up, and yet – and yet ... it revelled in its own constructedness’

Hélène Frichot and Naomi Stead, ‘Waking Ideas from Their Sleep: An Introduction to and of Architecture’ in Writing Architectures: Ficto-Critical Approaches, 2020

‘Science fiction is simply a way to practise the future together. I suspect that is what many of you are up to, practising futures together, practising justice together, living into new stories’

adrienne maree brown, Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, 2017

United in joy, galvanised by anger and protected by friendship, we draw closer to each other through, by and with science fiction. We fiction ourselves into being as an ever-shifting collective, a multitude, a crew

‘The impossible attracts me because everything possible has been done and the world didn’t change’

Sun Ra, How High the Moon, 1960

‘There is no way I can be happy in this society, in this skin. I am committed to Uneasy Street. I like it; it is my idea that this street leads to the future, and that I am being true to a way of life which is not here yet, but is more real than what is here’

James Tiptree Jr, 1976

‘A utopian demand for another world, one which can be felt through the soles of our feet

Citational salvage: a method to re-encounter texts and flourish in a new direction