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On Science Fiction, Heritage Architecture and Other Demons: In Conversation with Moira Crone

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Abstract
This conversation with Moira Crone was inspired by her science fiction novel *The Not Yet.* The interview opens with a question regarding the capacity of architectural heritage to carry past and present values, as well as our stories, and help us make sense of the world. With an emphasis on the historic French quarter in New Orleans, Crone explains why the preservation of the city's most famous neighborhood was necessary for the plot and how in reality this preservation takes place. She discusses the difficult and cruel history of plantation homes in Louisiana, as well as moments in which the strict racial hierarchies broke down, creating possibilities for different ways of co-existence among its inhabitants. Crone unpacks her ideas about archetypical architectural spaces like the theater, and the subversive role it can play in contemporary or imaginative societies. The interview concludes with a discussion about science fiction's connections to architectural thinking and the author's creative process.

Keywords
Moira Crone, science fiction, novels, contested heritage, New Orleans

Author Moira Crone is known for novels and short stories that exemplify the spirit of the New South.[1] We were especially intrigued by her science fiction novel *The Not Yet* (2012), which portrays cultural and contested architectural heritage, while imagining distant future societies. [Fig. 1] Set in the year 2112, the plot takes place primarily in the city of New Orleans, the enclaves surrounding New Orleans, and the new Walled Urb of Re-New Orleans, located at the edge of the United Authority Protectorate (what used to be the United States). In the novel Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River have merged, flooding major portions of the mainland. Humankind has managed to extend its life expectancy considerably, hoping to reach eternal life. This has become possible through a surgical procedure that adds a protective prodermis to the body and delays the process of aging. This possibility is strictly available to the societal stratum of Heirs, who control the country. Two other groups comprise the society of the novel: the Not Yets and the Nats. The Not Yets are sponsored by the Heirs and spend their early life trying to acquire the trust that can afford them the surgery. The Nats are condemned to a mortal life. The spatial division between these three societal rungs are very strict, the rules of conduct highly controlled and prescribed. For example, a Not Yet cannot touch an Heir or address them unless explicitly asked so. The story is narrated through the perspective of Malcom,

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a Not Yet whose work is to perform at the theater. The book has been inspiring for the spatial imagination, as it has been used in architectural studios and eco-futurism classes.[2] Here we wanted to learn more, from the author herself, about her understanding of the connections between imaginative world making, architecture, contested heritage, and writing.

The Sunken Quarter and its significance

Angeliki and Aleksandar: It comes as no surprise that *The Not Yet* has been inspiring for the spatial imagination given how it depicts space: New Orleans in particular. The well-known Louisiana city is transformed into a bunch of islands, inhabited by the Heirs. Floodwalls and levees protect these islands from the rising waters, while keeping Not Yets and Nats away. The urban environment is distinctly different from the way New Orleans looks today. Yet, there is a part of the city that is not flooded, in your story. A levee keeps the Old River from flooding New Orleans's historic French Quarter, known in the narrative as the Sunken Quarter. Malcolm, the protagonist of the story, is mesmerised when he first lays eyes on the Quarter and the way the spine of the cathedral (which is recognisable as the St. Louis Cathedral) catches the light.

We feel that, like us, you see architectural heritage (like the French Quarter) as a carrier of cultural, social, ecological values. You trust that architectural heritage protects our past and present stories; stories through which we make sense of the world. We speculate that this may be the reason why you have chosen to keep this old part of the city, the city's heart, intact. In a narrative where it would have been possible to flood it – at least this is what we feel as readers – you chose not to do so. What more than a point of reference does the architecture of the Quarter offer you in creating the dystopian future world of your novel? Why do you spare the Quarter and its architecture from the water?

Moira: At the time I wrote the novel, it made sense to keep the Quarter intact given its character as some centre for pilgrimage, where people go to have a good time, let go of their normal puritanical restrictions. The Quarter still has this quality for people all over the country. It's a place where you let your hair down, where you don't have the same kinds of rules: you drink on the street, for example, or people wear costumes. America is a very strict place in a lot of ways, in term of its puritanical and Protestant ethic, and people still have those social rules. But the Quarter has never been that way. For example, during Prohibition, when drinking was illegal in the United States, there were literally hundreds of speakeasies in the French Quarter. They just completely ignored this law, as if it were in another country, as if it were Cuba which was also attractive to tourists because drinking was legal, during that period. So, I had the idea that it would be economically feasible or useful for what's left of New Orleans in the far future to preserve the Quarter for the purpose of bringing people there.

Second, I think it is a shrine in a way, the thing that people in the city will always save, the identity of the city. In the Quarter the buildings can become extremely dilapidated. There is constantly a mould problem, a crumbling problem – because there are layers of stucco on top of very old bricks. Stucco and bricks were used because there was a fire in the eighteenth century, which led the government at the time to implement a rule regarding building materials: no wooden structures were allowed in the Quarter. And even though it's really hard to maintain this kind of architectural materials in such a damp climate, as water is constantly seeping up from beneath, people do maintain them. The built environment, in a way, becomes a lived environment. It is almost alive, because you constantly have to feed it, to take care of it. This is also true for some of the wooden structures uptown. They're maintained in such a way where almost everything about them is new, but the old design remains. This is why I talk about a shrine-like quality. This kind of approach reminds of the Shinto temples in Japan. Shinto temples are made of wood, so they don't last that long. The claim is that this is a 1400-year-old temple, but actually every piece of wood in it gets replaced every twenty years.[3] There is something similar in a lot of New Orleans's buildings that people maintain in this kind of religious way. The preservation of the Quarter feels like a regional practice of devotion.

The Wooden Palace and architecture with historical references

Angeliki and Aleksandar: Besides the strong presence of the French Quarter in *The Not Yet* you also employ architectural spaces that remind us of some strong historical precedents. For example, the Wooden Palace recalls images of big plantation houses, surrounded, as you write, by oaks and even some fields of cane. To us it is fascinating that you use a reference of architectural heritage like that and make it evolve into, what we call in this issue of *Footprint,* an inclusive place for shared futures. In the privacy of her Wooden Palace, the Heir Dr Greenmore studies books she is not supposed to study and discovers information about people's old ways of living, their beliefs about religion, family and love. She slowly falls in love with Malcolm, who is a Not Yet. She sheds her prodermis – something completely inconceivable – to make love to him. She rebels against the established regime by refusing to show up to her standard yearly appointment for the

Fig. 1: Moira Crone, *The Not Yet.* Second Edition. New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press: 2024. Cover Design: Kevin Stone.

renewal of her prodermis. In the microcosm of the Wooden Palace, a place steeped in history, you offer a possibility to assess the past, present and future impact of a heritage site on the (re)creation of shared cultures and memories. Why do you imagine all these events and a place reminiscent of a plantation house?

Moira: There's the general horrible story of the plantations and slavery, as we all know. Then, there are variants, things that happened, particularly after the Civil War, that broke down some of the barriers in the plantations. For example, in cases when the patriarch had died or was very severely wounded, there would be a disruption of the usual social order in the plantation, because to maintain these properties there had to be a whole lot more interaction between African Americans (now freed men) and their former owners. So, there were areas in this society where the relationship between the races was negotiated differently. Louisiana is a unique place because there's more interaction and more intermarriage historically among black people and white people than anywhere else in the United States. The reason is that many, largely Catholic, men (since Louisiana is a Catholic society) who had a black mistress, recognised their children and their children inherited money. This created a whole society of mixed-race people, now called the Creole society. Unlike much of the South, in Louisiana it was more common, as it was in the Caribbean. Because the Wooden Palace, in the plot, doesn't have a patriarch or somebody pushing the rules and making sure everybody stays separate, some boundaries are renegotiated. There are rules that determine the interaction, a lot of rituals and a very high level of intricacy, but at the same time there is also mixing among the people.

Angeliki and Aleksandar: So, you find it natural that this mixing of people would happen in a place reminiscent of a plantation house, because historically this kind of mixing has taken place there?

Moira: Indeed, there are some precedents. There was an incredible amount of brutality in the plantations, of course, but I think this brutality did break down at various times. For example, the Melrose plantation, in the Natchitoches Parish in Louisiana. This plantation was run by a woman of colour, a black woman who inherited it from her white husband. Of course, we cannot know what it was really like when she ran the plantation, but the strict hierarchical structure broke down, at least to a degree, according to African Americans who lived there. There are many features of that plantation that make it feel like an African village. For example, some of the architecture is African in origin. When you go there, even now, you see a lot of things that look African. For example, the cows are grazing under shade trees, which you don't usually see in America. Here most cattle graze on open pastures with no shade or very few large trees. In the Melrose plantation there are also buildings with extremely high-pitched roofs and very deep eaves, which are also not common in the US.

There is a famous painter, Clementine Hunter, a self-taught black folk artist, who lived and worked in the Melrose plantation. She started painting in her late fifties. She depicted all these scenes from her childhood, creating environments that again look like an African village, and communicating a sense of community: people in groups going to church, or working together, for example. [Fig. 2]

For the theme of this issue of *Footprint,* I think you will very much appreciate the fact that there is a piece of architecture in the Melrose plantation called the Africa House. [Fig. 3, 4] Some people have speculated it's the only example of truly African architecture in the United States, because it was built by African artisans, though others have disputed this. In any case, if you look at the building, it obviously has enormous resonance with African architecture and the designer was familiar with African building styles. It has a thatched roof that overhangs the entire second story. So, nobody walks on the balcony outside the second story without being in this deep shade. It's of earthen materials and it does not look like American or English architecture at all.

I also think of the French architecture that was originally constructed in New Orleans and Louisiana in the eighteenth century. The deep eaves were very common, and so were roofs that overhung the second storey of a house, keeping the first and second storey cool. The first storey would be out of brick and the second storey would be wooden. Those houses also incorporate African ideas. It is also what you see in the Caribbean, in Key West, in Saint Martin's, in Cuba. The plantation architecture that came later, with its neoclassical white Greek columns, is out of place, not particularly harmonious with our climate and actual society. These were, in a sense, later temples to the wealthy families. This architecture was meant to allude to the great temples and highly cultured, stratified societies of antiquity. The grandiosity was a political statement made by slave-owning men who wanted to glorify their position and display their wealth.

The theatre and its subversion

Angeliki and Aleksandar: As readers with an architectural interest, we were highly fascinated, and maybe surprised, by the way you used the space of the theatre in your narrative. The theatre is an archetypical architectural space. Its significance socially and culturally is described even in

Fig. 2: Everyday work in the Melrose plantation, with the Africa House in the background. Clementine Hunter, *The Wash*, 1950s, oil on board. Source: Minneapolis Institute of Art, The Ethel Morrison van Derlip Fund. © Clementine Hunter Estate and Cane River Art Corporation.

the very first surviving architectural treatise by Vitruvius, dating back at the first century BC. The theatre has historically been the place to educate, to inform, to express political opinions or oppositions, to feel catharsis, to be part of the community, to prepare to go to war (soldiers in ancient Greece would go to the theatre before heading to battle). In the novel there is a striking scene in which the Heirs go to the theatre, where the Not Yets perform, to see someone dying in real time on stage. Why are you imagining this dystopian scenario in the space of the theatre? What do you see in this archetype of heritage architecture that sparks a future scenario like that?

Moira: Let me start by saying that the idea of the Heirs watching an actual death as if it is a performance, came from a movie by Luis Buñuel, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. There is a scene where people can't stand to watch each other eat, but they watch each other use the bathroom. This is a bizarre concept, you know. It is surreal and sort of just absolutely disgusting. But the people in the film are bored beyond belief, and are seeking titillation, stimulation. The Heirs in the novel are constantly looking for novelty, to see something that they have never seen before. And of course, there are so many examples in ancient history of people watching carnage, like in the Colosseum and all those stadiums all over the Roman Empire. I was thinking about a stadium, really, more than a theatre, but a stadium with very steep seats. The space where the Heirs go to watch someone actually dying is inside a high-rise. I was thinking of the ruins of the hotels associated with the current casinos on the Gulf Coast, essentially skyscrapers. There are real theatres inside these buildings which can host thousands of people, for concerts by famous artists. I assume they don't have quite the same feeling as the intimacy of a theatre where you can actually see the people performing or see their physical bodies up close. The zeal of the audience, as I describe it, came very much from the ideas of what went on in ancient Rome. Because the Heirs' whole lives are bent on never dying, watching a person die becomes the most fascinating form of entertainment, the irresistible glimpse of the forbidden.

Science fiction and its architectural possibilities

Angeliki and Aleksandar: Science fiction is a unique literary genre where our own past histories merge with present concerns to form an improbable vision of future societies. What prompted you to write a science fiction novel?

Moira: I have always very much admired people like Margaret Atwood. And I really love this book called *The Children of Men* by P. D. James, which was also a departure or deviation from the work that she usually did. P. D. James was mostly a mystery writer and did not write another science fiction novel, but I think this is one of her best works. It is set in England, and it has the interesting premise that for twenty-some years, there have been no people born. There's infertility all over the world and nobody knows the cause. The novel explores how the society deteriorates under these conditions. I always loved this book and then I had a dream, about a woman who is much older than the male companion that she is with, and they are together in a restaurant on Magazine Street in New Orleans. In my dream a voice came to me and said: 'She's two hundred years older than he is.' So, I guess I just started-thinking of how a society deteriorates not if people are not born, as is the case with *The Children of Men*, but if people do not die.

In the beginning I was very reluctant to write the book. I didn't think I knew enough about the genre. I published chapters of it in *The New Orleans Review,* which is a small magazine run by Loyola University. And for the first time in their history, they got letters. People wrote to the magazine asking to read more of this. So, I started writing again and I published a second instalment in the magazine, but then I stopped because I had not read any science fiction really. Not because I do not appreciate science fiction. On the contrary, I personally think it to be the most inventive form of literature and probably the most useful. So, I sat down and read a lot of it. And I got ideas from writers such as P. D. James and Margaret Atwood and other people that I really admired first for their work in other genres. And then I read *Dune* by Frank Herbert and many works by Philip Dick, whose writings I love, and Ursula Le Guin and, one of my favourites, Octavia Butler. All these gave me a lot to work with and finish the novel. I have not written another science fiction novel since *The Not Yet* either, though I am working on one now.

Angeliki and Aleksandar: In depicting the city of New Orleans as sunken, there are many evocative descriptions of third floor balconies that have turned into porches on the water, or the protagonist navigating his way through the water and seeing the roofs of the camelbacks – a characteristic housing tye of the city – slightly protruding from the water. The descriptions are so poetic and so believable. How do you build these spatial images?

Moira: I actually had the chance to look into real life urban examples: cities like Venice and Prague. I had visited Venice and I had looked at how these buildings had survived various changes in sea level. As you probably know, palazzos and streets there have sunk considerably over the years. Also in Prague, where I used to teach in summer schools, there are actually several storeys below the current street level that exist in almost every building in

Fig. 3: Africa House, one of the earliest buildings built by black people with an interesting roof reminiscent of an African design, constructed circa 1820, Melrose Plantation, Natchitoches, Louisiana. National Register of Historic Places NRIS Number: 72000556. © Library of Congress / public domain.

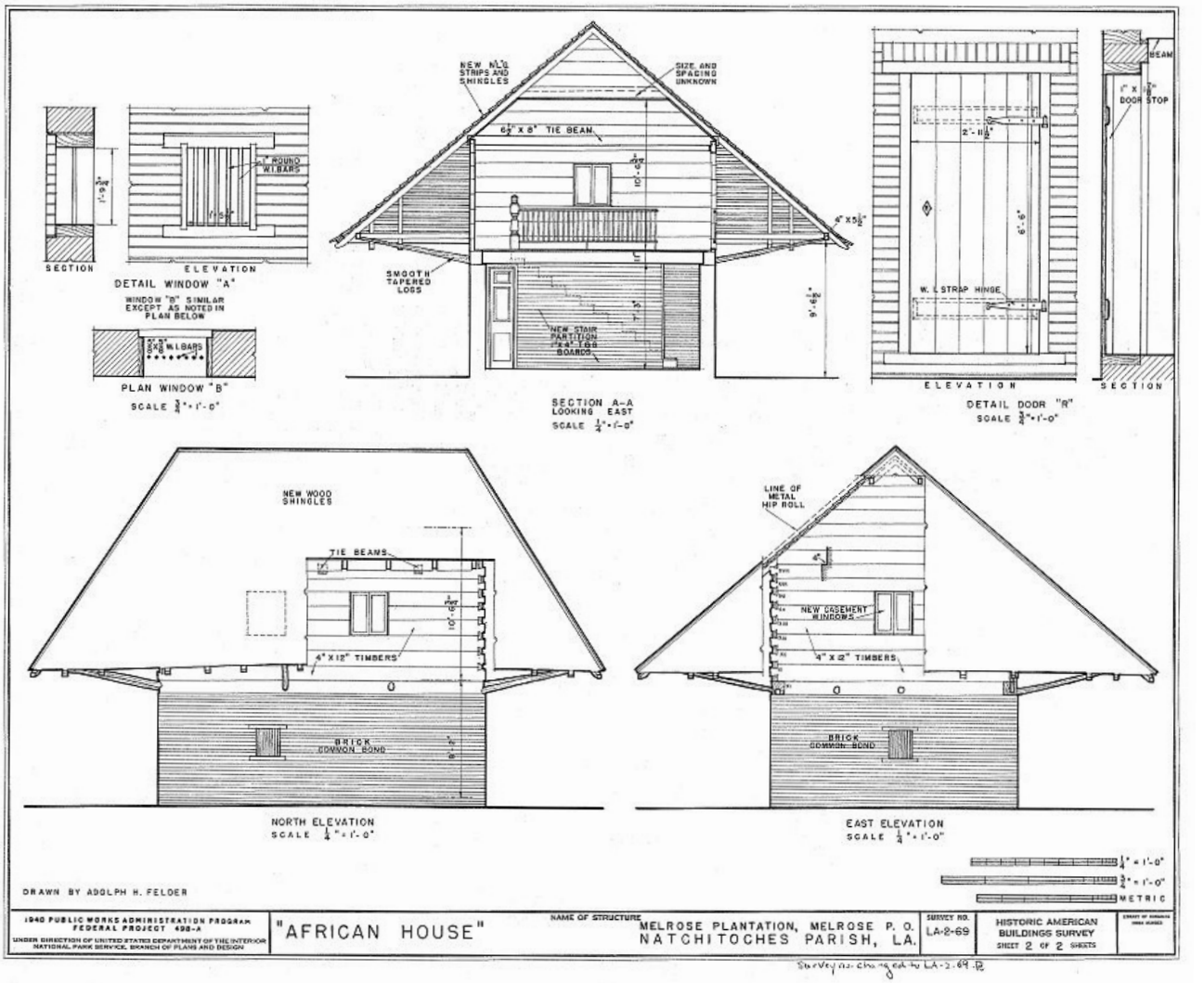

Fig 4: Africa House, elevations and sections, Melrose Plantation, Natchitoches, Louisiana. National Register of Historic Places NRIS Number: 72000556. © Library of Congress / public domain.

the old town. They raised the street level because of the Vltava river, which has flooded the city at different occasions over the centuries. So, the level of the street has been altered radically over a very long time, and the former first storeys of the stone buildings became basements. Those were the kinds of ideas I had as I was writing it and imagining New Orleans flooded. It had nothing to do directly with hurricane Katrina. I finished a draft of the book long before the hurricane, but it was published afterwards. People saw it as a commentary on the destruction the hurricane caused, though in reality it was not.

Creative process

Angeliki and Aleksandar: Finally, we are inspired by the fact that you are both a writer and a painter. We are curious about your creative process, whether you use your painting as an inspiration for your writing or the other way around.

Moira: This is actually a bit hard to describe. Let me begin by saying that the reason I started painting is because it gives me, it has always given me, so much pleasure. I have now, more or less, spent the last four years just being a visual artist, focusing exclusively on painting. Writing is a very hard task. You sit in a chair for months, or years, and at this point in my life I didn't want to sit in a chair for another ten years, let's say. Maybe I even lost my patience with writing a little a bit. When I work on a painting, I will see something that indicates a narrative. Actually, sometimes, I make paintings based on things I have researched for novels. I tend to use collage. I take a lot of digital photographs, I print them out, and I use these images – that come from my environment – in the paintings. Then the works usually have a narrative reference and I tend to see a story that emerges from the unconscious, what you might call the back of your mind. I have come to trust feeling more than the rational part of my awareness in the creative process. I really can't say why this is, but I think maybe because I have trouble hearing. I am spending a lot of energy processing verbal stuff, and it gets exhausting, and I think the rest of my mind has just started to take over. I like the idea that when you start painting you don't know where you are going, what is going to happen. In a novel you have to prepare, you have to plan and so forth. In reality, though, I feel the two arts, and all the arts, are one endeavour. When I was teaching creative writing and short story writing I tried to get people to use another medium to express the structure of the tale, the goal being to recognise the sisterhood of the arts, and the way that prose has structure, as does music, and of course painting, architecture… all are related. In reality my writing and my painting are the same activity, just the emphasis is different. A great deal of visualisation and intuitional thinking went into the design of the world of *The Not Yet*.

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Notes

1. For more information on Moira Crone's work and biography see her personal website: https://moiracrone.com/bio/.
2. We first came to know about *The Not Yet* through the Option Design Studio 'Speculative Urbanism and Imagination of City Futures through Science Fiction' (ARCH 5000) that associate professor Traci Birch ran at the School of Architecture of Louisiana State University in the autumn of 2020. We had the chance to participate in online reviews and see the students' experiments with cartographic exercises inspired by the novel.
3. The process is called *tokowaka*.