

Cities of Privilege: Speculative Architecture, Corporate Sovereignty, and the Martian Frontier

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Abstract

This essay examines how future cities may be imagined through contemporary visions of Mars settlement. It argues that the speculative urbanism of Mars functions less as a blueprint for alternative urban futures than as a reflection of the architectural and spatial logics of late capitalism. Through a comparative analysis of SpaceX's promotional visions of Martian colonization and the science-fiction series *The Expanse*, the article proposes *façadism* as a defining characteristic of these urban imaginaries: an architectural logic that privileges images of transparency, order, and collective purpose while concealing the infrastructures, labor relations, and forms of corporate sovereignty that sustain them. Drawing on theories of speculative finance, extrastatecraft, and capitalist realism, it shows how domes, pastoral landscapes, and iconic urban forms transform Mars into a stage for projecting civilizational renewal and future value. Rather than imagining radically new forms of urban life, these speculative cities rehearse the continuity of capitalism on a planetary scale.

“Mars is a mirror, not a crystal.”

—Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles*

When Elon Musk delivered a SpaceX update at Starbase, Texas, in May 2025, he shared his vision of establishing a self-sufficient Martian colony as a countermeasure to the uncertainty around humanity’s future. Citing wars, natural catastrophes, or “*something you don’t expect*”, he frankly discussed Mars as a backup plan to “*secure the future of civilization as quickly as possible*” (Starbase 2025). To conclude his presentation, Musk reflected on the idea of an amazing city on Mars— “*a new world, an opportunity to rethink civilization*”—followed by open questions to the audience on what form of government or rules Martians could choose for themselves after reexamining the societal systems left on Earth (Starbase 2025). His presentation not only calls into question which and whose civilization he means when he speaks of securing “its” future but also draws attention to how a Martian frontier operates within the same logic of colonial ideologies that came before (Becker 2025, 153). The recognizable narrative of a new world drives the imagination of a hard-won fresh start for a future society while obscuring the transnational economic appeal of such undertakings that give these projects momentum. In a strongly US-centric understanding of the frontier, off-world territorial expansion becomes tethered to a tradition of colonial story-world building that utilizes tried and tested imagery of a better world, one that is potentially self-governing (Eriksson 2023), and very much self-determined. This seems particularly evident in the imagery presented during Musk’s presentation. As part of the slide projection, he displayed virtual images of Optimus robots preparing Martian terrain for human arrival, commenting that “*that would be an epic picture to watch Optimus walk around on the surface of Mars*” (Starbase 2025). In a good-humored image that would speak to the hearts of his American fanbase, one of the slides depicted five robots sitting atop a steel beam as a reference to the iconic image of the fearlessness of the Empire State building workers. This heightened interest in iconicity on Musk’s part is reflective of the larger schemes driving speculative urbanism.

In the spirit of Ray Bradbury’s literary assessment that “*Mars is a mirror, not a crystal*” (1950), the current imaginary of Mars settlement should reflect the political and economic conditions that presently shape spatial planning. If Mars is a mirror, what, then, does it reflect about the emergent architecture of late capitalism? Building on a heritage of fictional Martian worlds that would manifest fears of invasion, anxieties of suburban life, or a growing necessity for additional resource extraction,

recent Martian narratives similarly replicate the dominant tensions that shape societies, or rather, the market tensions that would organize them. In the midst of intensifying climate breakdown, widening wealth inequality, and the consolidation of power in the hands of transnational technology firms, the growing appetite of a progressively unbridled global market seems to beg for a frontier rejuvenation. However, unlike with preceding formations of colonial cities, there appears to be a tension between this present speculative colonial enterprise and an imagined architecture that would serve to aesthetically cover it up, largely reflecting the preoccupation of modern mega-infrastructural design to obscure its own inner workings (Easterling 2014).

This article aims to examine the speculative urbanism of Mars through this tension, arguing that façadism plays a central role in the contemporary imagining of Martian cities, particularly by (speculative) financial actors. By analyzing the architectural prospects supplied by SpaceX and narratively resolved in *The Expanse* (2015–2022), the article maintains that these Mars imaginaries expose an anxiety about visibility—about what must be shown and what must remain concealed in order for the frontier to retain its utopian charge and, by the same token, for global markets to maintain their operability. Mars’ smooth glass domes, pastoral renderings, and monumental silhouettes function as façades thanks to which images of order and collective purpose are given superiority over the infrastructural dependencies and labor hierarchies that would sustain them.

Furthermore, these presumed architectures of the Martian city seem to find security in familiar forms. Although this could be explained as an organic continuation of Earth’s architectural heritage and an overall necessity to design proven durable constructions for austere environments, it would be more engaging for the purpose of this analysis to consider an alternative motivation. The fact that the guiding aesthetics of these cities are a mere amalgam of recognizable—thus marketable—styles may underline the core issue of architecture in late capitalism, namely that it cannot imagine a world outside of itself and therefore is bound to capitalize on former successful projects (Fisher 2009). Even though these aesthetics are plucked from the historical contexts in which they emerged, their collectively enhanced iconicity may secure a “*future value in the present, creating a...speculative temporality*” that feels at once unprecedented and already known (Vint 2019, 24). However, through an understanding of “*speculative fiction as a mode of critique...that probes the limits and immanent contradictions of speculative finance*” (Nilges 2019, 38), as a pairing, SpaceX and *The Expanse* are able to stage an urban political economy over time, dramatizing

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how settlements mature, stratify, and eventually confront obsolescence once their speculative promise wanes. Mars, then, rather than serving as a blank slate for alternative urban futures, becomes the stage on which late capitalism may rehearse its own continuity—projecting expansion while concealing the mechanisms that sustain it. It is, therefore, within this friction between exhibition and concealment that the speculative urbanism of Mars might be understood and, correspondingly, how it might inform the imaginary of future cities.

Depicting Mars, Projecting Anxiety

To capture both the essence and the nuance of this tension, it is vital to first return to the correlation between the formation of the Martian imaginary and historically prevalent expressions of societal power, fear, and desire. In the late nineteenth century, inspired by the work of Giovanni Schiaparelli, Percival Lowell's telescopic observation of 'canals' on the surface of the planet helped popularize an image of Mars as a vast hydraulic civilization. Through a set of semi-scientific publications between 1895 and 1908, Lowell played a central role in spreading the idea that the observed features on Mars—which he interpreted as a crisscrossing of engineered waterways—were evidence of an advanced civilization. He argued that the canals were carved as a survival strategy, diverting water from the polar ice caps to sustain a dying world through infrastructure (Guthke 1990, 355-56). Already reminiscent of the monumental civil engineering projects seen in the digging of the Suez Canal, shortly followed by the Panama Canal, the presumed familiarity of Martians' imperial undertakings touched on the very type of territorial management demonstrated by Western colonial empires. As such, the Martians' imagined struggles with ecological exhaustion could communicate fears of an overextension of imperial rule and depletion of resources leading to the death of industry. Moreover, with the publication of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898), Martians could push British imperial anxieties a step further through a narrative of colonial violence coming home. Part self, part Other, Mars seemed to mimic a feared horizon of the British empire.

Next in a significant line of Martian depictions is Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950). In a post-World War II landscape, the novel is "not a book about the future but about the then-present of 1950, not so much about the actual Mars but about the then-actual United States" (Crossley 2011, 8). Formulating a direct expression of nuclear anxieties, the stories map and interrogate the moral trajectory of mid-century US by confronting the pre- and aftermath of nuclear annihilation of Martian and human civi-

lizations. The shadow of the human-Martian war structures the narratives, while the architecture of Mars settlements conveys an uneasy nostalgia attached to American expansionism. Using Schiaparelli's canals as a "*major geographic feature in his story [h]is Martian cities largely appear as futuristic Earth cities, with tall shiny buildings, plentiful open space and park land, and cozy, comfortable homes*" (Hollander 2022, 160). Bradbury's anxiety around the containment of the Cold War solidifies a recognizable Americana in Martian architecture. This allows him to present modern suburbia's 'cozy, comfortable homes'—reproduced in porches and lawns—as a proxy for the American lifestyle to eventually posit the domestic as the ultimate victim of expansionist appetites.

Following the Mariner missions in 1965, the arid, largely lifeless depictions of Mars shaped a generation of speculative fiction forced to reckon with the absence of developed life. Notably, the plots of Philip K. Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1964) and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) resolved Martian habitation issues by going underground and using android colonists respectively. However, in a strong pull towards the projection of "*Earthlikeness*" elsewhere (Woods 2019, 7), Martian sf still maintained and returned to its mirror-like quality to channel ecological anxieties regardless of the new-found improbability of its human inhabitation. Given the understanding that the "*attraction of terraforming has little to do with its feasibility*" (Woods 2019, 7), ultimately, the speculative revival of above-ground dwelling may more openly respond to a need to play out urban anxieties.

Entering the 1990s, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* (1992) provides something of closure to the issues pressing *The Martian Chronicles* and gives way to fresher geopolitical anxieties. With the destabilization of the Soviet Union, the first IPCC assessment report in 1990 marking a 'greening' of politics following the end of the Cold War, and the advent of more scientifically substantiated images of space tied to the launching of the Hubble Space Telescope, *Red Mars* reflects a shift from fears of nuclear annihilation toward globalization and ecological crisis by staging debates over terraforming and corporate control on Mars. As Justin B. Hollander put it, "[w]here Bradbury employs the wit and imagination of a poet to paint his picture of Martian urbanization, Robinson uses the tools of the scientist and engineer to present a compelling vision of a settled Mars" (2022, 170). Integrating engineering, urban design, and environmental constraints, he offers two highly geometric settlement plans that may be coterminous with hegemonic visions of the grid city as the utopian urban form (Scott 1998, 55). These settlements correspond to different phases of Martian

habitation: Underhill, designed to accommodate the first colonists, and Nicosia, envisioned for a more advanced stage of urban development. While the former is located underground and features an orthogonal layout of brick-vaulted radiation-proof habitats organized around central gardens, the latter rises above ground as a triangular city composed of trapezoidal, color-coded buildings, tree-lined boulevards, and a transparent tent structure for controlled environmental conditions. The political implications of these idealistic designs crystalize in the novel's broader conflict between terraforming advocates and preservationists. As transnational corporations extend their power onto Martian soil in search of new opportunities for profit and investment, the settlements become sites where competing visions of environmental transformation and economic development can be contested. In this sense, Robinson anticipates the rise of neoliberal globalization, envisioning a world in which corporate authority increasingly exceeds that of nation-states. The geometric settlements then, may reflect the same power structures that underpin the slow violence of ecological degradation driven by market expansion.

Space Architecture and the Logics of Colonial Planning

Despite its potential to explore a fundamentally different world, Mars has long been imagined as uncannily familiar. From Victorian canals to new frontiers of globalization, the architecture of Mars tracks the evolution of an urban sensibility, building an image in the style of its own anxiety. However, this is not to say that an actual attempt at designing a Martian city would not be ridden with concerns around civil and civic anxieties. While critics such as Adam Becker have thoroughly argued that projects of Martian colonization—particularly those advanced by Musk—rest on technologically and economically unrealistic assumptions as well as on the fundamental uninhabitability of Mars (2025), this paper approaches such proposals as speculative constructs rather than near-term possibilities. In this sense, their value lies less in feasibility than in the ways they rehearse economic fictions tied to sentiment and identity (Vint 2019, 15) alongside inherited models of settlement and governance. In *The First City on Mars: An Urban Planner's Guide to Settling the Red Planet*, Hollander discusses the dual factors that would have to be accounted for in a “rational” approach to settling the planet. Parallel to scouting physically optimal locations, the design for the city must always plan for civic engagement and, by that same token, civic unrest. Examining the planning rules from antiquity to Britain's 17th-century Grand Modell and Spain's *The Law of the Indies* of 1573, Hollander argues that cities have historically been designed to foster civic unity

through plazas while minimizing the possibility of organized disobedience through features such as wide streets, as in the 1802 city plan for Sydney and its penal residents (2022, 22-28). These concerns with social cohesion and political order were inseparable from the broader imperative of sustaining imperial expansion. Since colonial cities functioned as instruments of expansion, extending and strengthening imperial networks, Musk's vision of what he describes as a "*multi-planet civilization*" similarly proposes a form of network expansion that seeks to extend the longevity of existing urban systems (Starbase 2025). Even in a purely speculative mode, then, the social anxieties of urban life remain embedded within these projections.

Consequently, the interdependence between core and periphery, when stretched across astronomical distance and delayed communication, reframes questions of governance and control. With this in mind, firms such as SpaceFactory AI exemplify how a design against civic anxiety may become embedded not only in urban design principles but in construction technologies as well. Winner of NASA's 3D-Printed Habitat Challenge (2017–2019), the company specializes in modeling habitat structures using indigenous materials for potential Mars or Moon missions. "*Reifying and reproducing a technopolitical hegemony inscribed in culture imaginaries of both the frontier and science fiction*" (Cirac-Claveras, as cited in Young and Doherty 2024, 178-9), the company's design philosophy alludes to the spirit of the opening credits monologue in *Star Trek: Next Generation*: "*to boldly build where no clear path exists. Our innovations bridge Earth and space, grounded in rapid prototyping and agile development. Unencumbered by convention and undaunted by the unknown, we are engineers of the frontier*" (SpaceFactory AI n.d.). Yet, as another part of their "Mission Update: Engineering at the Frontier" section informs, "*Our focus is solving the hardest problems in environments where failure is not an option*" (SpaceFactory AI n.d.). When failure is not an option, it bluntly communicates that any and all uncertainty must be engineered out of existence in a zero-tolerance environment. Consequently, the selling point of Martian settlement—"*[the] publicly performed visions of a future...infused with technological utopianism and libertarian individualism*" (Tutton 2021, 421)—might actually be mitigated by an architecture defending its inhabitants against the environment itself, thereby revealing one of many stress cracks in the Martian colony's 'utopian' façade.

However, as they also claim, the architecture for mental health is as mission-critical as resilient structures and mission-optimized layouts. In order to distance themselves from the cliché Martian dome and its connecting corridors, their proposed 'Marsha' habitats as seen in Figure 1—tall, isolated, elongated pods with stacked, ring-like structures—are meant to

“Space colonization is presented through political, economic, and social tensions produced by this planetary settlement.”

offer an Earth-like interior design, while the height should provide vantage points for humans to observe dynamic landscapes. Still, it could be argued that even this emphasis on mental and social health is framed within a managerial paradigm. By building upward, civic life would supposedly unfold in the isolated pods, while their tall, narrow form would reduce the need for machines to rove between them, minimizing unpredictability connected to each outward venture. Through this type of architectural visionary that is spiritually akin to Le Corbusier's high modernist insistence on sedentarization through the "*death of the street*" (Scott 1998, 109), potential disorder or insubordination could likewise be absorbed into design constraints, thus completing the multifold purpose of authoritarian and colonial planning under the guise of utopia. However, this time, the Martian conditions would push corporate fantasies of complete urban control to dizzying heights through a complete control of the settlers' resources, potentially establishing greater "*monopoly than any corporation ever enjoyed in a company town on Earth*" (Becker 2025, 145). With regard to the "*nascent field of space architecture [being] almost entirely speculative*" (Hollander 2022, 119) despite its best effort to respond to off-planet simulations with engineering ingenuity, even the architectural solutions offered by SpaceFactory AI mirror the atmosphere of late capitalism just as every Martian depiction that came before it mirrored its own cultural anxieties.



Figure 1. *Marsha habitat visualization*. Screenshot: author. Spacefactory, date unknown. spacefactory.ai/marsha

Reading these designs as responses to contemporary anxieties likewise helps explain their particular forms. If architectural imaginaries reflect and carry the prevailing conditions of their time, then the shape and form

of Martian architecture may be read against the climate of ecological precarity and financial volatility, not to mention an array of fears stemming from a guaranteed instability of tomorrow. In a world of geopolitical and economic unpredictability driven by the speculative value of goods, the Marsha project may stand as a yearning for an absolute containment of such ‘bubbles’, perhaps ironically reflected in the discrediting of the (in) famous Martian dome. Neither phallic- nor egg-shaped, but at the same time both, these pods can be read as visually symbolic of the desired fruitfulness of the frontier as well as the confident masculinity that is inscribed into the land’s conquest. The return to an older symbol meaning to denote a futuristic enterprise may mark a helplessness in deciding on what the future should look like, which is why it must return to its symbolical origins. This configuration of symbols extremely simplifies the imagined defense against the fatalism of the times to not only depict Martian architecture as a mere performance of iconicity but also to recognize the anxiety and confusion hiding behind that architecture.

SpaceX as ‘extrastatecraft’

It is precisely for this reason that the analysis turns to SpaceX and *The Expanse*. By bracketing the imaginary of Martian architecture inside a speculative timeline where the starting point is a corporate rendering of the future and the endpoint a narrativized collapse of the ‘Martian dream’, what emerges is a reckoning with the anxieties tied to the concept of perpetual market growth and expansion (Vint 2019). SpaceX represents the most visible and materially consequential actor currently advancing a long-term vision of Mars colonization (Eriksson 2023). Unlike purely speculative architectural proposals or distant science fiction futures, SpaceX’s Mars renderings are tethered to active launch infrastructure and state contracts in addition to global investment (Tutton 2021). Its promotional animations, like the one staged by Musk at Starbase, generate speculative value that speaks to investors and dreamers alike by selling a business plan to the former and a culturally relevant mythology to the latter. Ultimately, borrowing from Hugh C. O’Connell’s assessment of the “*more subtly insidious functions*” of speculative finance, SpaceX delivers a “*colonizing of the utopian sf form of imagining possibility, alterity, and radicality and substituting finance’s spurious utopian promises of individuality, mastery, and profit*” (2019, 137).

Regardless of the Martian image that the company is selling, what deserves attention in this promotional material is the evident shift from state-led space programs to privatized, corporate sovereignty in extraplan-

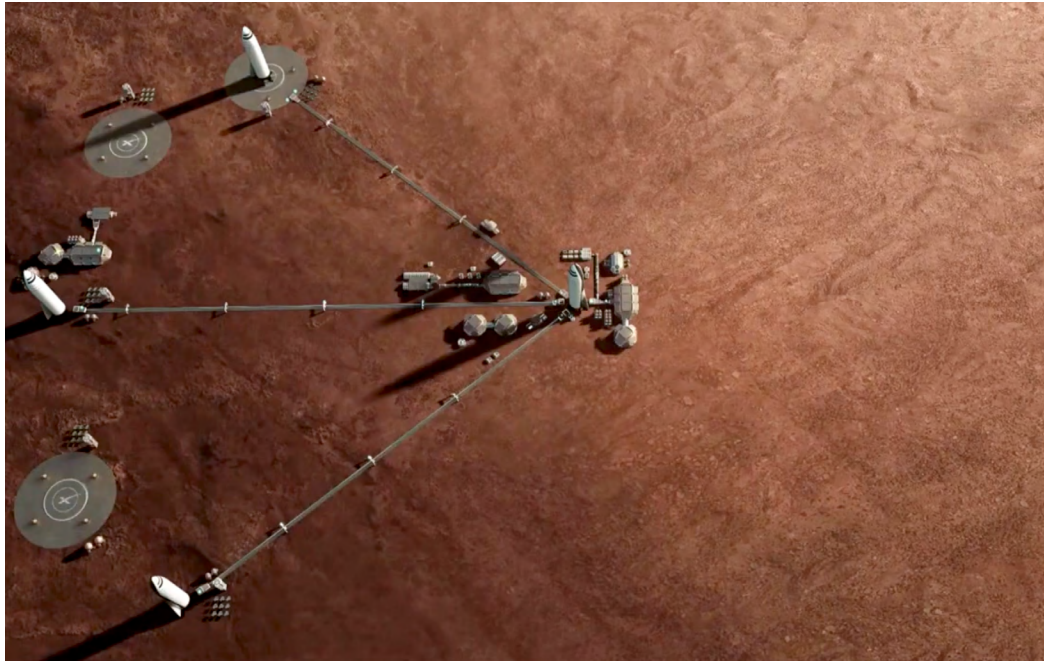


Figure 2. *SpaceX presentation*. Screenshot: author. Insider Tech via YouTube, 2017. [youtube.com/watch?v=zSv0Y7grzQM&t=37s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSv0Y7grzQM&t=37s)

etary planning. In the 2017 SpaceX promotional visualization of a future Mars settlement for an Interplanetary Transport System presentation, the emerging city is quite intentionally depicted from a bird's-eye view. Within seconds, the humble image of solitary launch pads seen in Figure 2 develops into an attached urban development expanding proportionately according to a square grid. What is visible from that vantage point is a matrix of infrastructure: greenery-filled domes, polygonal-shaped buildings connected through corridors, and a peppering of squares in between, presumably denoting solar panels. The city sits directly on the red regolith, visually contrasting the structures with the barren fragments of Martian dessert separating them. With the expansion of the city, the buildings take on more curious shapes, more greeneries appear, and a massive solar farm peaks out from the edge of the shot. In the final stage, captured in Figure 3, more high-rises seem to protrude from the grid while each bloc shuffles a combination of similar building structures. The rendering uses bright light, touches of glassy green, and a clean architectural surface to produce a utopian atmosphere of technological mastery and prosperity. Environmental constraints stemming from radiation shielding to resource scarcity are visually minimized, reinforcing the impression that engineering and capital investment have already resolved the major challenges of Martian habitation. Reminiscent of a computer matrix, the image is neat, symmetrical, and adverse to spontaneity or individualism. The sharp contrast between enclave and barren surface tells its own frontier narrative. Above all, the

“By subjecting this world to collapse, the story exposes the role of ruin and its absence in speculative urbanism.”

city is pre-planned, and since human survival will undoubtedly hinge on its infrastructural layout, the image successfully delivers a vision of urban totalization through infrastructure.

Until any terraforming project would, or could, ever be realized, the only type of city to emerge on Mars would be according to the “*formula of infrastructural technology*” (Easterling 2014, 10). In his observation of the phenomenon of ‘extrastatecraft’ in Shenzhen or Dubai, Keller Easterling

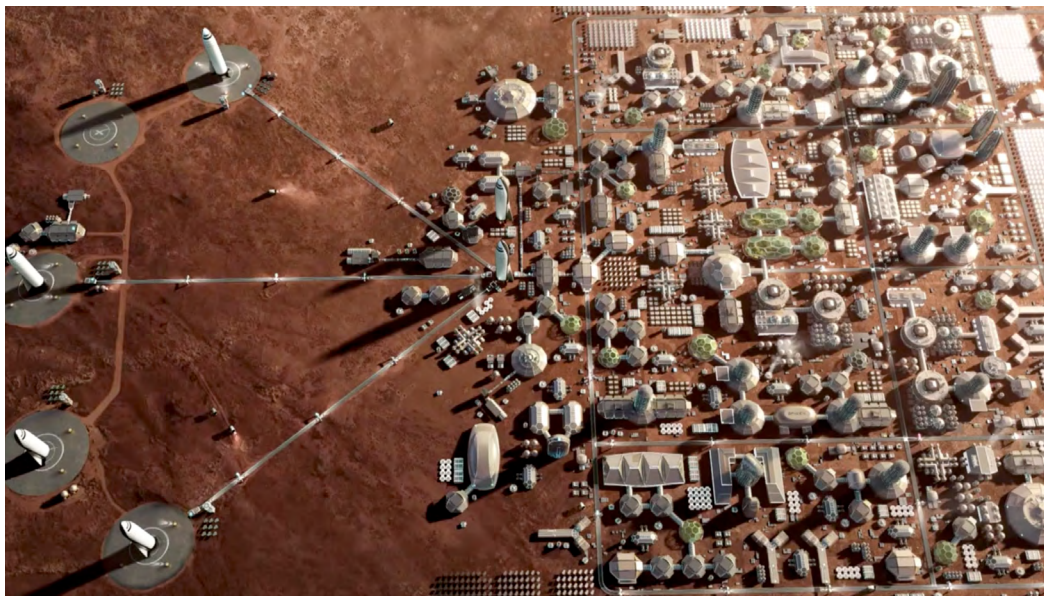


Figure 3. *SpaceX presentation*. Screenshot: author. Insider Tech via YouTube, 2017. [youtube.com/watch?v=zSv0Y7qrzQM&t=37s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSv0Y7qrzQM&t=37s)

postulates that “*buildings are often no longer singularly crafted enclosures, uniquely imagined by an architect, but reproducible products set within similar urban arrangements. As repeatable phenomena engineered around logistics and the bottom line, they constitute an infrastructural technology with elaborate routines and schedules for organizing consumption*” (2014, 9). What goes with this, “*infrastructure is then not the urban substructure, but the urban structure itself—the very parameters of global urbanism*” (Easterling 2014, 10). Given this understanding of the Martian city’s defining elements, the settlement is less about urban design than it is oriented toward a fantasy of spectacular homogenization of urban functionality. The repeatable spatial units such as domes, landing pads, and transport hubs serve the same function as economic zones or logistics hubs—to prioritize the optimal flow of goods, energy, and capital. Additionally, in Easterling’s framework, infrastructural spaces such as free zones often operate partly outside traditional state structures to encourage business (2014, 13). In that event, SpaceX would likewise seem to build towards such a political

and financial haven by envisioning an urban layout where the rules of settlement would emerge from infrastructure rather than conventional civic planning. Foregoing any notions of historic urban planning, this frontier life would likely be organized according to the schemes of maximized efficiency in place of a slow but deliberate discovery of the planet.

In perhaps the most telling reading of infrastructure that “[i]t is not the declared content but rather the content manager dictating the rules of the game in the urban milieu” (Easterling 2014, 11), the Martian city becomes hollowed out of its presumed content to instead stand as a mere representation of perfected planning. Upon looking at the city from a “God’s-eye-view” in order to grasp its utopian symmetry (Scott 1998, 57), it becomes clear that it rests on a frontier mythology that is romanticizable and, even more so, on a pedantic spatial organization that is fetishizable. Both are entirely bound to corporate wishful thinking in the sense that they must latch onto potent marketing formulas to foresee the market response to their product. With nostalgia—“for spectacular performance of American technological hegemony” (Young and Doherty 2024, 186)—on one side and a desire for order on the other, the recipient of the Martian settlement ad may escape from the hazards of the rapidly shifting global market into a more ‘predictable’ past while simultaneously remaining exposed to the same organizational logic that would exacerbate the capacity of that global market. Although nostalgia and desire are wholly constructed and may add an additional perceptive layer to how the future is imagined, they cannot stand on their own, as they may only modulate an existing cultural and political content (Jameson 1992; Berlant 2011). Without an actual content of the urban milieu, the Martian city acts as a façade for the inner workings of extrastatecraft projects.

At the same time, the way imagery has always enhanced the gravity of major enterprises adds dimension to Musk’s attachment to the ‘iconicity’ of images produced on and about Mars. The notion that “*iconic architecture has always been a resource in struggles for meaning and, by implication, for power and profits*” (Sklair 2017, 4) suggests that the production and circulation of such imagery should be understood as part of a broader symbolic economy in which architectural spectacle helps consolidate the cultural legitimacy of large-scale technological enterprises. Even if a façade of a city could not possibly imbue the Martian imaginary with a legitimate urban plan, perhaps at this stage of design, the inspiration for this imagery is otherly motivated. Examining the characteristics and forces behind what she calls ‘The Icon Project’, Leslie Sklair advances the idea that “[i]t is largely, though not entirely, in the power of a hegemonic class to redefine

taste or aesthetics to serve its own interests" (2017, 14). Similarly to visualization boards of modern housing developments, despite a substantial lacking in the proposed representations, such images nonetheless perform an important persuasive function—one that is rooted in the logic that *"the more successfully a building can convey consumer-friendly meanings and consumer-friendly design, ideally combining the comfortable with the spectacular, the more value it will have in the market"* (Sklair 2017, 3). The images allow audiences to imagine themselves inhabiting a space that, in material terms, remains largely speculative. But more importantly, the pervasiveness of shortcut exterior design that would strip the buildings of any identity serves to establish a gusto for such buildings as markers of modernity. From this standpoint, the SpaceX visualization may test the boundaries of its own desirability and determine whether or not alluding to the symbolism embedded in the construction of the Empire State Building eight years later at another SpaceX event is enough to maintain the project's attractiveness, if not yield greater audience enthusiasm. By superimposing a vision of architectural grandeur over an urban simulation, SpaceX borrows an iconicity until their Martian city may fully rely on its own to shape the tastes and aesthetics of future inhabitants.

It is also interesting to note how the visualization utilizes material and form to convey subliminal messages regarding the company that commissioned the project. In other words, how the dome sits comfortably within the interpretation that *"[g]lass, shiny metals, and spectacular shapes have been mobilized to convey messages of transparency, democracy, and consumer-friendliness in all building types"* (Sklair 2017, 5). Followed by the conclusion *"that buildings, spaces, and architects are iconic to the extent that they become famous and symbolize the variegated fruits of consumerism and express them symbolically and aesthetically in spaces that will encourage people to spend"* (Sklair 2017, 25-26), this could point to the possibility that SpaceX's city may try to lean on consumer trust that is established through a perceived transparency of the business, with the architectural aesthetic of the domes functioning as a visual metaphor for openness and reliability. What is more, by leaning into urbanist visions such as the Generic City conceptualized by Rem Koolhaas, this Martian settlement may be read as another awkward attempt to denote a transparency of layout as utopia. Koolhaas envisions an urban landscape *"liberated [...] from the straitjacket of identity"*, emphasizing instant, modular transformation of urban space (Braester 2013, 62-63). Skyscrapers, for Koolhaas, are both utopian devices in how they create unlimited *"virgin sites"* in dense cities and vehicles for spectacle, embodying the cyclical tension between erasure and reinvention

in urban design (Braester 2013, 63). Here, SpaceX flattens the city skyline to adjust to the Martian terrain but maintains the skyscraper's presence through an image of workers on a steel beam. This somehow unfolds the life of the utopian skyscraper in the horizontal, delivering Koolhaas' equally generic city emerging from the density of infrastructure on Mars—devoid of identity, whose one redeeming quality would be its readiness for transformation. So far, this may be the biggest and only selling point for the city that is not framed through a dream but through material consumption.

Terraforming, Brutalism, and Ruin in *The Expanse*

If the SpaceX visualization reveals the mechanism of a corporate imaginary of Martian urbanism grounded in infrastructural supremacy, iconic spectacle, and consumer trust, the science-fiction series *The Expanse* offers a counterpoint through which the durability of these assumptions can be tested. Based on the novels by James S.A. Corey (the joint pen name of Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck), the series is set roughly two centuries in the future in a Solar System where humanity has expanded beyond Earth. Space colonization is presented through political, economic, and social tensions produced by this planetary settlement. As a result, humanity is divided into three major political blocs: Earth, governed by the United Nations; Mars, by the Martian Congressional Republic; and the Asteroid Belt, whose inhabitants form a loosely connected movement under the Outer Planets Alliance. Within this tripartite system, Mars has developed into a highly disciplined, technologically advanced, military state. Its population lives primarily within domed cities and subterranean habitats, sustained by tightly controlled life-support infrastructures. Central to their identity is the long-term project of terraforming the planet, which produces a social ethos of collective sacrifice and civic duty, distinguishing Martian culture from the more politically fragmented societies of Earth and the Belt. Eventually, however, the project unravels once the speculative worth of the Martian frontier dwindles under the duress of better colonial prospects. Thanks to this narrative arc, the Martian urban economy is played out over time and, with that, may draw greater attention to the implicit structures and exclusions of real-world projects.

To start with the terraforming dream, Chris Pak explores how terraforming narratives frequently draw on pastoral motifs, blending nostalgia for agricultural idylls with the futuristic impulses of science fiction. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's classification of pastoral forms—love, labor, craft, and family idylls—Pak argues that science fiction condenses complex social meanings into symbolic landscapes such as wilderness, gardens, and farms

(2016, 59). Not limiting this reading solely to *The Expanse*, the pastoral imagery functions as a socio-technical experiment for imagining social order and, just as in Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*, simultaneously articulates an anxiety about technology and environmental transformation. However, there is something to be said about the inverted chronology of the project. Unlike historical pastoral imaginaries in which agrarianism precedes urban development, Martian settlement begins with infrastructure. The world promised by terraforming exists only as a distant future that justifies the present austerity of Martian life. Due to a perpetual elusiveness of this future, the project sustains a meritocracy mythology that the collective sacrifice will eventually be rewarded with a habitable world. Therefore, faith in the terraforming technology becomes central to this narrative.

In his account of the historical transformation between city and countryside, Henri Lefebvre argues that at a certain moment in capitalist development the traditional opposition between urban and rural space was reversed. The country ceased to function as an independent social world and instead became “*no more than—nothing more than—the town’s ‘environment,’ its horizon, its limit*” (Lefebvre 2014, 41). As villagers increasingly produced for the urban market, the path to economic freedom appeared to pass through urban exchange. Terraforming on Mars seems to extend this logic in the way the future pastoral is not an alternative to the city but a product of infrastructural expansion. Mars must first be urbanized before it can become pastoral, and it is the city dwellers who must produce for an imagined ecological utopia. Since tangible production runs on belief alone, *The Expanse* reveals the fragility of massive infrastructural enterprises in late capitalism—should the project cease to motivate the population, or should its economic justification falter, it risks being abandoned altogether regardless of its earlier emotional and financial investment. More crucially, when this ‘Martian dream’ is boiled down to the hope of the civilizational past becoming the future, it begins to reflect the unwavering appeal of nostalgia when the urban cannot sustain ideals beyond hard work. The yearning for the pastoral becomes a final attempt to infuse the urban milieu with content by broadening the cities’ horizons.

Notwithstanding, there is a lasting effort to maintain a sense of transparency through the Martian architecture itself to assuage the anxiety that the project is fundamentally artificial. Seen through a Brutalist framework, the cities not only follow the core tenants of the style but also its driving ethos. Emerging in the postwar period, one of the definitions of Brutalism proposed “*1, formal legibility of plan; 2, clear exhibition of structure, and 3, valuation of materials for their inherent qualities ‘as found’*” (Banham

1955, 357). The emphasis on exposition—famously associated with the term *béton brut* (“raw concrete”) used by Le Corbusier—was as much a style as an ideology. For theorists such as Reyner Banham, Brutalism sought to communicate honesty in a disavowal of nostalgic references to historical styles by its insistence that building materials should be exposed rather than concealed, leaving surfaces raw, structures visible, and the external skin of buildings bare of decoration (Banham 1955). Moreover, it came to be understood as an architecture capable of confronting the harsh realities of the postwar world, which is why it also came to stand as “*an ethic, not an aesthetic*” (Davies 2017, 277). Seen through this lens, the Martian architecture in Figure 4 echoes many of Brutalism’s underlying principles. Every wall, conduit, and pressure seal becomes part of a visible technological apparatus that makes survival possible. Due to a ‘clear exhibition of structure,’ the buildings inspire trust by remaining readable to their inhabitants: the sturdiness of the constructions acts as a reminder of the endurance needed to push the terraforming project, while the coarseness of the materials speaks of the struggle it welcomes. A telling conversation about the Martian ethos from the episode ‘The Weeping Somnambulist’ illustrates the significance of hard work on the red planet when Earth’s majority of inhabitants living on basic assistance—hence, without jobs—are called ‘takers’. Architecture thus both feeds into and becomes an extension of civic ideology—notably, that an aesthetic of honesty and endurance obscures the fact that labor has become culture.

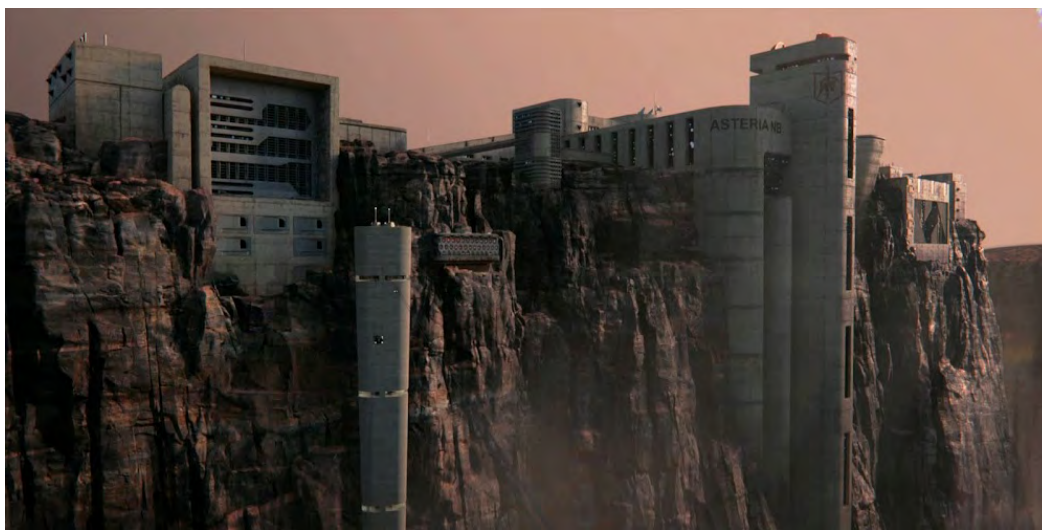


Figure 4. *Exterior of the Asteria Naval Base*. Image from humanmars.net, 2021. humanmars.net/2021/03/martian-colonies-in-season-5-of-expanse.html

Bringing the Martian dream to an end, the opening of the Ring Gates marks a decisive rupture for the terraforming project. The gates appear after the activation of a protomolecule structure beyond Uranus, forming a vast network of over a thousand portals connecting the Solar System to habitable, ancient, alien-controlled worlds across the galaxy. The slow, collective labor on Mars becomes economically irrational, and eventually, colonization replaces terraforming, morphing the pastoral from a delayed gratification to a denied one. For a final response to the worldbuilding of SpaceX's speculative finance (Vint 2019), as Mars gradually loses its social cohesion, skilled workers and scientists emigrate to new colonies while black markets emerge around advanced Martian technology. The speculative collapse of this Martian imaginary becomes a key to understanding the final issue of façadeism in the architecture of late capitalism.

By subjecting this world to collapse, the story exposes the role of ruin and its absence in speculative urbanism. Because the architecture of this Mars functions primarily as a life-support system, it lacks the historical layering of urban memory. With that, ruin seems inherently antithetical to advanced infrastructure, and therefore, its absence becomes particularly significant when considered alongside the contemporary fascination with urban decay (Lindner 2018). As Christoph Lindner argues, “[t]he post-Fordist transformation of industrial sites of production into dead zones (...) not only created ruins out of modern industrial architecture, but also generated a desire to see and experience these spaces” (2018, n.p.). The ruin then transforms into a space onto which contemporary culture projects a desire for “sites of interiority, memory, and haunting”, offering what he describes as an illusionary escape from the relentless temporality of neoliberal globalization (2018, n.p.). By contrast, the Martian world in *The Expanse* appears almost anti-ruinous. Paradoxically, this absence may intensify a latent cultural desire for ruin within the Martian imaginary. If “[t]he seductive appeal of that imaginary resides in the way ruins enable an illusion of escape from contemporary cultures of speed” (Lindner 2018, n.p.), then the opening of the Ring Gates may simulate the ruin of contemporary cities—through economic abandonment and uneven development—to stage a realized desire for urban historicity. Through a desire for history expressed in the nostalgia of an erecting New York City or terraforming project, *The Expanse* bookends SpaceX's corporate optimism for the iconicity of speculative urbanism with a longing to witness the ruin of that vision to finally develop the content of an urban milieu. In the end, when nostalgia could not bring the past to the present, a desire emerged to turn the present into the past.

Conclusion

Speculative visions of Mars reveal less about the architectural future of planetary settlement than about the cultural and economic conditions that shape how such futures must be imagined. By proposing a reading of SpaceX's vision and *The Expanse* as two ends of the same urban timeline within a duality of speculative finance and speculative fiction (Higgins and O'Connell 2019), the article aimed to explore the contemporary imaginaries of Martian urbanism as structured by a fundamental tension between what must be shown and what must remain hidden in the architecture of late capitalism. Characterized by an enduring anxiety, desire for predictability and transparency, nostalgia, and (financial) investment in iconicity, the speculative architecture navigates fears of expendability at the same time as its contradictory desires for history and an end of history. On one level, the projected Martian city promises clarity through orderly infrastructures or a communicated 'honesty' of design. However, this clarity operates precisely as a façade. Beneath this imagery lie the largely unarticulated conditions that would sustain them, ranging from corporate governance to the speculative flows of capital required to finance such ventures. At the same time, these images are saturated with references to the past. Familiar architectural forms, iconic silhouettes, and pastoral promises of future landscapes anchor the Martian city within recognizable cultural narratives to communicate stability and inevitability in order to attract investment despite the speculative city's paradoxical emphasis on adaptability to the volatile dynamics of expanding markets.

The result is an urban imaginary that projects clarity, order, and collective purpose at precisely the moment when the infrastructures shaping everyday life appear increasingly opaque and difficult to grasp. For this reason, Mars should not be understood as an exceptional case detached from terrestrial urbanism. Rather, the Martian frontier amplifies tendencies already visible in contemporary projects such as NEOM and The Line (a 170-kilometer linear city organized around high-speed transit), where the complexities of urbanism are similarly expected to be resolved through infrastructural totalization alongside AI and big data governance. In both cases, the city functions as a speculative object long before it exists as a lived environment, attracting capital through carefully curated visualizations that depict an urban order while leaving questions of labor, governance, environmental sustainability, and social difference largely outside the frame. Mars therefore functions as a particularly revealing mirror of contemporary urban thought. If the Martian city may tell any story about the future, it is about how capitalism continues to nurture a future thinking

conditioned by privilege to imagine escape, expansion, or a reinvention of a hazardous environment. The question raised by these visions is therefore not whether such cities can be built, but what alternative urban futures become difficult to imagine when the horizon of possibility is increasingly organized through the aesthetics and logics of speculative capital.

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