

Solarpunk: Imagining and working towards hopeful futures

15-minute conference presentation paper. 6 image slides plus 7th slide containing images and my research contact details

EASA2022 P072 Hopeful chronopolitics: contemporary art and ethnography.

Tuesday 26 July 12:00-13:45 BST (British Summer Time / Ireland time) [Tuesday 26 July 9pm-10:45pm / 21:00-22:45 AEST]

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Author Bio:

Ivy Scurr (she/her) is an anthropology PhD candidate at the University of Newcastle (UoN), Australia, researching Solarpunk as a movement engaging with the current climate crisis and the need to imagine hopeful alternative futures to work towards. She completed a Bachelor of Social Science at UoN where her honours research project investigated activism and community building in the Australian anti-capitalist environment movement. Ivy grew up in various parts of regional NSW before moving to Newcastle in 2007. Ivy's mix of experiences in manufacturing trades as well as environmental and social justice activism directly informs her research. You can follow her current project at ivy-solarpunk.com

Paper Abstract:

This paper presents a discussion of solarpunk as a movement focused on imagining and working towards hopeful futures. The paper is based on my ongoing digital ethnographic fieldwork with solarpunk artists, writers, and activists from around the world, exploring their responses to climate crises and the prevalence of dystopian thinking. Solarpunk is a global distributed movement shaped through and enabled by digital social media technologies through which solarpunks connect to share their perspectives, skills, climate news, tech developments, art and fiction. Solarpunks draw upon this diversity of shared resources, experiences, and cultural knowledges to inform their imaginings of hopeful futures built around the core values of environmental and social justice. Solarpunk art and stories are an example of radical imagining, involving a rethinking the ethics of how we relate to each other, other non-human beings, our economic and institutional frameworks, and the physical environment. The ethics of relation these solarpunk imaginings promote is explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-colonial, drawing upon different Indigenous perspectives that centre kinship and reciprocity with the entire more-than-human web of life we are embedded within. These principles inform how technological and social changes work together to address climate and social issues in solarpunk futures. In this paper, I interrogate how imagining hopeful solarpunk futures is more than escapist fantasy. I argue that solarpunk, whilst global in its constitution, incorporates practical community empowering processes whereby solarpunks work within local communities to collaboratively envision more positive futures for their local areas and the potential paths to implement these futures.

presentation script - Solarpunk: Imagining and working towards hopeful futures [approx. 15 minutes]

So just to start, Hi, I'm Ivy. I use she and her pronouns. And I would like to acknowledge the unceded lands of the Awabakal and Worimi people from which I am speaking to you today. I would like to pay my respects to country and to the elders that hold cultural knowledge and have cared for this land for thousands of years and will continue to care for this land for thousands more. The nation of Australia is built upon ongoing illegal colonisation and genocide of land and peoples, which all white people here including myself have benefited from. We also need to acknowledge and address that, and work with First Nations people to dismantle this colonial system, recognise Indigenous Sovereignty, and work together to care for country and people and non-human life.

The slides that I am showing along with this talk are intended to provide a taste of some of the artworks and aesthetic cues that are part of the solarpunk movement, embedding different solarpunk ideals and relations to specific contexts and issues. My hope is that they supplement the verbal content of my presentation to help with a more immersive reflection on my arguments about solarpunk and hopeful imagination.

slides and image descriptions are provided at the end of this document (pages 6 to 9)

I'm going to talk about Solarpunk, which is focused on responding to climate change and dystopian thinking, drawing on a diversity of experiences and cultural knowledges as well as developments in technology to think through how our futures could be different – and much more liveable for all

Solarpunk is an emergent fiction genre / social movement / subcultural grouping / orientation that has been growing since around 2010 – that incorporates art and fiction and essays and a range of other things both online and offline

My research has been following solarpunk over the last few years and engaging with the various online spaces, stories, essays, and offline activities solarpunkers share info about online – It's a kind of weird way to do anthropology, but necessary to engage with such an important and timely phenomenon engaging with our current issues that is distributed globally and connected through online technologies

Fundamental to solarpunk is rethinking the ethics of how we relate to each other, our physical environments, our economic and institutional frameworks, the non-human ecosystems that we are embedded within, and our possible futures

Rather than just an escapist fantasy, this can be a practical community empowering process – working within local communities to collaboratively envision more positive futures for their local areas and the potential paths to implement these futures.

This provides a way of thinking that helps us move beyond abstract political and economic arguments to paint a picture of what the alternative future(s) could actually look and feel like that people can relate to

Solarpunkers are thus engaging in what Khasnabish and Haiven (2014, 2015) have termed 'radical imagination' through their practices of imagining and sharing alternative futures to inspire and inform responses to environmental and social justice issues. Solarpunk stories and art with their embedded values and principles form an invitation and inspiration to radical imagining that activists and communities can explore and co-create, facilitating conversation between local and global alternative visions and ways to bring them into being.

An excellent example of the intersections between imagined futures, art, and real-world actions to empower local communities is the work of solarpunk collective Commando Jugendstil.

This collective has several short stories published in solarpunk anthologies that explore local community members in Milan taking action in the immediate and near future to make their world more solarpunk. As valuable a contribution as these fictional stories are for influencing the overall solarpunk genre, it is not the primary focus of the collective.

Commando Jugendstil have put much of their energy into social projects, where they have been involved with a wide range of voices in local communities to explore the issues affecting these communities and the future changes each community wants to see.

In Milan the collective has worked with local neighbourhoods to share knowledge about what sustainability developments are possible, and gather ideas from community members about what they would like to see in the future to make their neighbourhoods more sustainable and liveable. They then created visions and stories of what the neighbourhoods could be like to live in with the suggested changes so that people could better relate to the potential future neighbourhood. They also worked with local residents and social cooperatives to implement real world changes to start the steps towards that future vision, such as helping set up urban gardens.

The collective has also worked with the UK Transition Town Network and the community of Reading. As in Milan, they organised meetings with the people of Reading to gather ideas about what they would like to see in a solarpunk future for their town. The collective then collated these ideas and transformed them into a book set in that future Reading to distribute

amongst participants so that they can see and relate to how their ideas and wishes can be implemented in the near future and act as a further spark to motivate transition actions.

Along with the community imagining and fiction writing exercise, the collective also worked with local residents who run the volunteer community owned Reading Hydro company to paint a solarpunk mural on the new Hydroelectric Turbine House that had recently been built by the volunteers. This collaboration resulted in a community cultural artwork combined with a community owned and run renewable energy generator, a particularly solarpunk achievement.

Regarding their approaches to writing different solarpunk futures, the founders of Commando Jugendstil noted:

“When we do the projects, we try to focus on the end-state. Because it's a speculative design exercise. You find the end-state that people like, and they want to buy in. ... This is what I want my neighbourhood to look like in 30 years. And then you retrace the steps. ... We try to skirt around the apocalypse by assuming that there will be global action to pair with the local action that we write, that we talk about with the local community.”

“In the stories that we write as fiction, instead we try to focus on people doing concrete actions, basically like tomorrow. Sometimes we push the technology a bit [into the near future] ... and we pretend we could use it straight away. But I think what we do slightly different from a lot of other solarpunk writers is [write about] communities doing something now to prevent the apocalypse from ever happening. And to prevent gentrification, or to prevent greenwashing. A preventive action to make the solarpunk future possible. Which is at the same time creating a little nugget of solarpunk future, sort of.”

Commando Jugendstil argue: “the stories that you tell help define the reality in which you live. ... by seeing yourself into that world, into that story, you kind of want to make it happen. Like you see how it could be. You have a clear picture of what does it mean in a practical way. And then you can start tracing back your steps to get there, to get to that result.”

As part of my research, I have engaged in this future visioning process for my home city. For those who do not know it, Newcastle Australia is a regional partially post-industrial city that hosts the largest coal export terminal in the world (and certainly the southern hemisphere). Its former largest employer was the BHP steelworks before that shut down at the end of the 90's – a large scale disruption that was not managed well by state or federal governments. Newcastle is staring down the spectre of worsening climate impacts as well as transitioning energy, manufacturing, and employment sectors which threaten livelihoods and lifeways if not managed well and proactively.

So, what could a solarpunk future for Newcastle look like?

Yes, the climate has continued to destabilise, but we got enough critical mass and action on structural change that we managed to limit the worst of it. There was a massive, coordinated shift away from all fossil fuel use, particularly for electricity and transport. Coupled with this a halt to all destructive mining practices that are currently causing ecological destruction and a rethinking of how resources to make things are allocated and recycled.

We implemented the principle that anything needed to live a healthy life cannot be sold for a profit or withheld from those who do not have money. A lot of jobs are filled with different people rotating through on a part time basis. This does not mean that people cannot specialise, but all necessary tasks are shared among the community while also allowing

people to focus a decent chunk of their energy on their preferred interests. Another key change is embedding democratic decision making within local and regional communities.

The changes required to adapt to destabilisation of climate and the global economy necessitated large scale reworking and retrofitting the built environment. Aspects of this are incorporating a range of things into the buildings we live in to withstand storms and weather extremes, localised energy generation, water harvesting, food growing, improved physical accessibility, and more accessible communal spaces. These built environment changes happened at the same time as massive ecosystem remediation and restoration work to help all the struggling ecosystems we are embedded within cope with the shocks of both climate destabilisation and degradation from our past extractive practices.

All of these changes are also embedded within a wider process of decolonising the continent known as Australia and properly working with the First Nations people on whose land we live.

So, what is this solarpunk Newcastle/Muloobinba actually like to live in for someone like me?

I live in housing that has been retrofitted or replaced with insulation and other elements to be actually appropriate for the climate conditions. There is local and flexible manufacturing of medical items and medication, locally available healthcare that actually covers all health needs and is properly tailored to individual circumstances, proper accessible and useful public transportation, There are borrowable vehicles for when public transport doesn't meet your accessibility needs or when you need to move furniture or something, totally free education at all levels, local repair workshops to fix and upgrade tech and machines to keep things going or recycle their components.

Because of the principle of living necessities being free I am able to split my weekly and monthly time between research, teaching, community jobs, local and regional ecological remediation, personal hobbies, participating in community level democratic meetings, and not have to constantly stress about whether I can afford to live. I get to take time off some of my commitments when needed or wanted to temporarily focus on others. The city is accessible by all with free public transport and mixed-use zoning in most parts of town, no-one is frozen out of things due to poverty or disability.

I'm not constantly in a huge rush to meet deadlines set by funding constraints and profitability, which means being able to actually have time to participate properly in community and family. I'm not constantly dreading what horrible shit the ruling government are doing or about to do because they are actually representatives answerable to local communities rather than an insulated elite.

There is generally a greater variety of people and activities and other stuff all blended together without it all having to be a hectic scramble for survival, along with greater integration and sharing of population and resources between cities and towns and regional areas with an emphasis on sustainability and repairing the environment.

We are still dealing with exacerbated climate destabilisation but hopefully the worst of this is plateauing and starting on a repair trajectory long-term, and ultimately I'm not left feeling alienated from a whole bunch of the city and the people in it as we are all valued parts of a diverse multi-species community that values the needs and insights of people and other beings who are all very different.

Doesn't that sound like a more inspiring future to live in? The next steps are talking with other folks so that our future visions are informed by a range of local community

perspectives, as well as finding the opportunities to start actually making our current Newcastle more closely resemble the principles that underpin the solarpunk future Muloobinba I have briefly sketched out.

This gives a brief illustration of how solarpunk imagining provides a way of engaging with local and global issues, so that we can rethink the ways that we relate to our environments as well as the current challenges and possible responses to them. Solarpunk recognises the scope of the issues we collectively face, but it refuses pessimistically giving into to the logics of capitalism and instead creatively explores other ways of being and provides opportunities to think through the potential permutations of more hopeful and liveable alternative futures. This is a crucial contribution – hope and openness to relating with others in our destabilised world as a guiding light to counter the dystopian trajectory of the status quo.

This paper is built upon inductive analysis emerging from my PhD fieldwork. What I have explored here forms part of a draft chapter in my thesis. I welcome feedback and reading suggestions that any of you might have. Hopefully, there's that word again, this has given you something interesting and inspiring to think about. Maybe you have heard of solarpunk before, maybe you have a new thing to research. I look forward to continuing conversations with you in questions and after this session. Feel free to drop me a line via the contact details on my final slide.

Slide Image Descriptions

Slide 1

Slide contains four images of cityscapes.

Top Left: Rangsit campus green roof;

Bottom Left: Sunqiao Urban Agricultural District plans;

Top Right: Wakanda city centre;

Bottom Right: Wakanda streetscape



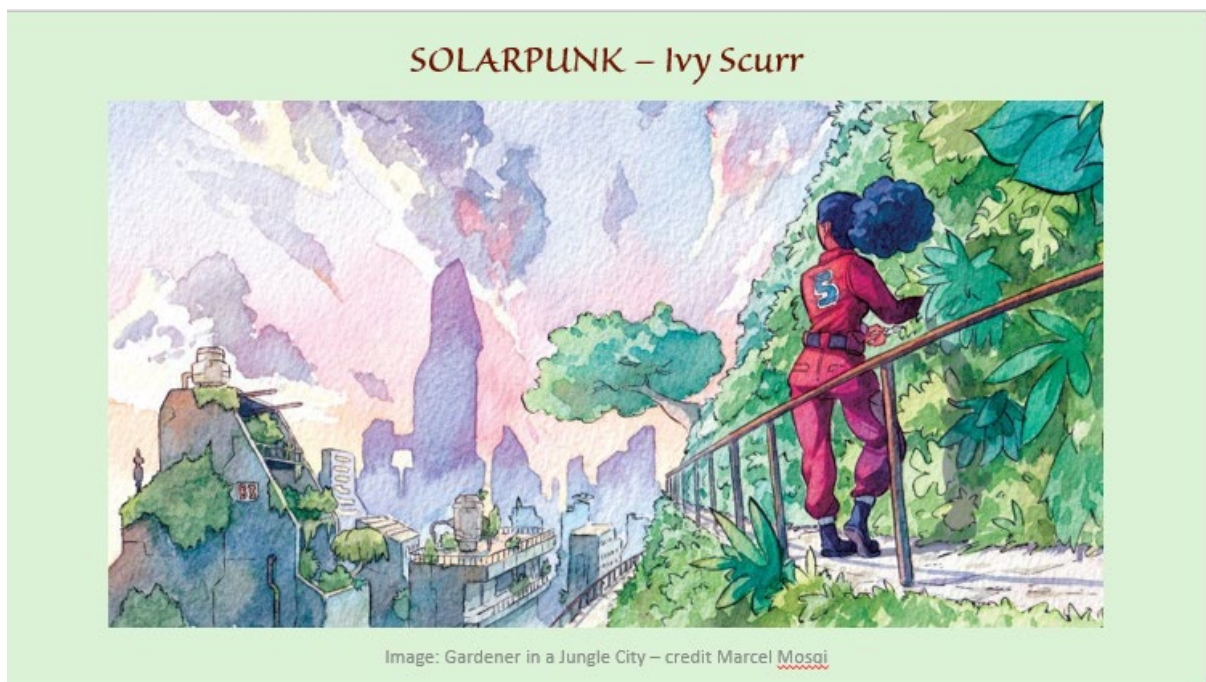
Slide 2

Slide contains one image of a farm with flying balloon wind turbines and a city in the distance. It is a screencap from the 'Dear Alice' Chobani Commercial



Slide 3

Slide contains one image of a dark skinned person in a red jumpsuit/overalls with textured hair, tending a steep hillside covered in plants and looking over a greened cityscape. Image is titled 'Gardener in a Jungle City' credited to Marcel Mosqi



Slide 4

Slide contains one image of a person with long loose hair in a wheelchair with a potted plant in their lap, with a slightly decaying greened cityscape in the background. Image is the cover artwork for the 'Rebuilding Tomorrow' anthology and credited to Geneva Bowers.

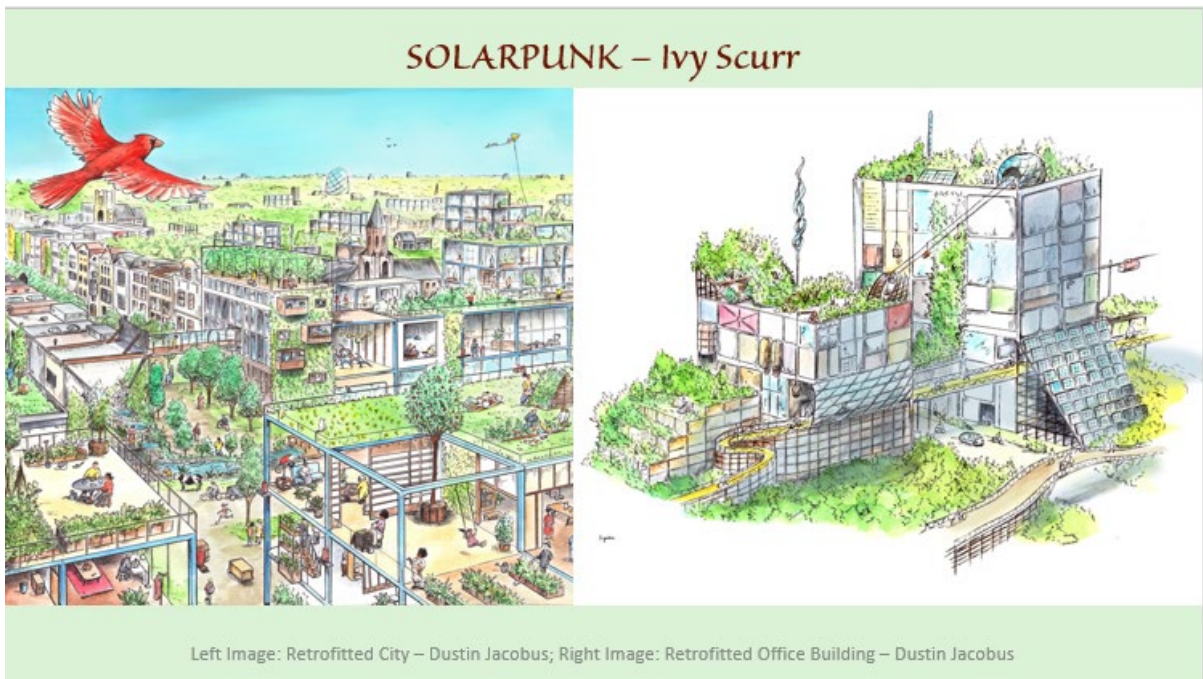


Slide 5

Slide contains two images of retrofitted and greened city buildings.

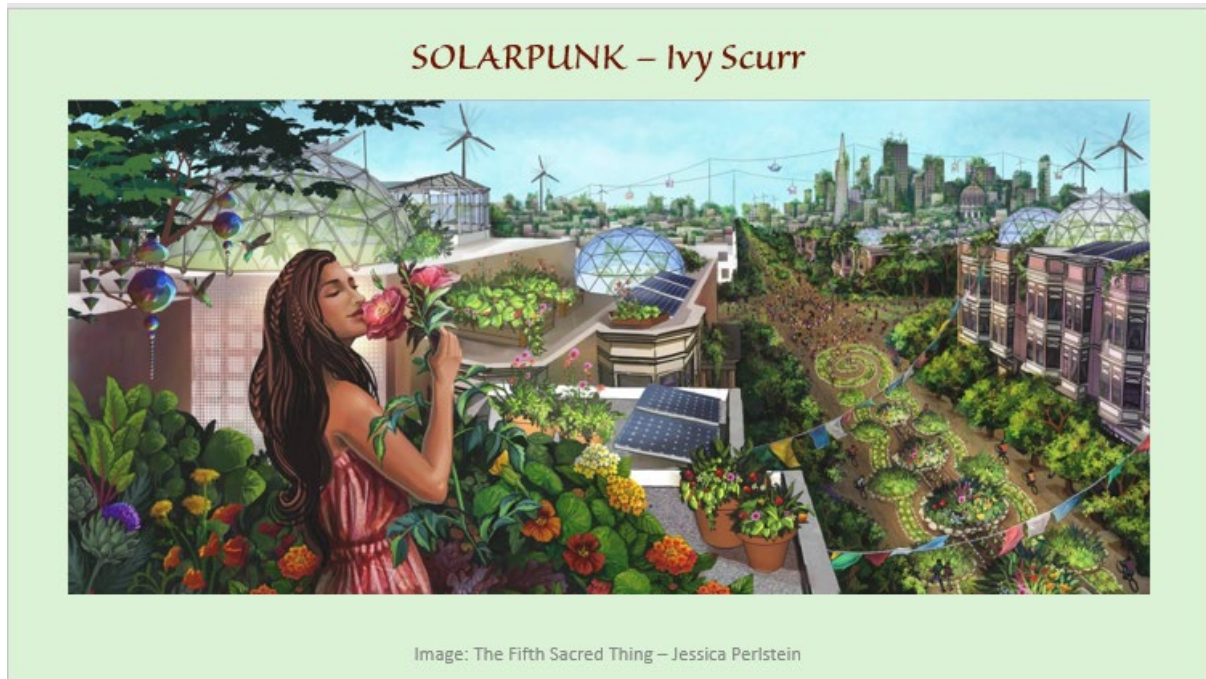
Left Image: Retrofitted City – Dustin Jacobus;

Right Image: Retrofitted Office Building – Dustin Jacobus



Slide 6

Slide contains one image of a woman smelling flowers in a rooftop garden with a reworked and greened city in the midground and background. It is titled 'The Fifth Sacred Thing' and was created by Jessica Perlstein for the now-abandoned project to adapt the book of the same name into a film.



Slide 7

Slide contains three images and text of Ivy's contact details.

Left Image: 'Solarpunk' by Rita Fei depicts a person sitting on a roof in a green future city as birds fly past;

Centre Image: quote from Adam Flynn's 'Solarpunk: Notes Toward A Manifesto', solarpunks.net that states "I am a Solarpunk because the only other options are denial or despair";

Right Image: 'Refuse Dystopia' by joan_de_art on reddit depicts a DIY retrofitted multi-story house that has solar panels, rooftop plants and beehives, rain barrels, and a community garden.

Ivy's contact details:

Website: ivy-solarpunk.com

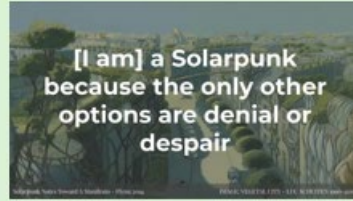
Tumblr: solarpunkphd.tumblr.com

Instagram: [ivy_solarpunk](https://www.instagram.com/ivy_solarpunk)

Twitter: [@Ivy_QS](https://twitter.com/Ivy_QS)

Email: solarpunk_phd_project@yahoo.com

SOLARPUNK – Ivy Scurr



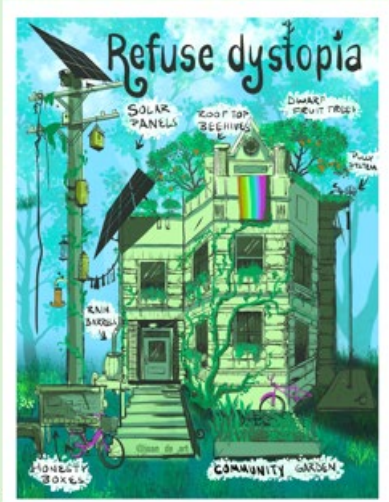
Website: ivy-solarpunk.com

Tumblr: solarpunkphd.tumblr.com

Instagram: [ivy_solarpunk](https://www.instagram.com/ivy_solarpunk)

Twitter: [@Ivy_QS](https://twitter.com/Ivy_QS)

Email:
solarpunk_phd_project@yahoo.com



Left Image: Solarpunk – Rita Fei; Centre Image: quote from Adam Flynn 'Solarpunk: Notes Toward A Manifesto', solarpunks.net;
Right Image: Refuse Dystopia by [joan_de_art](https://www.reddit.com/user/joan_de_art) on reddit