Back to the Future

by Martin John Brown

I have always loved the future. Only now can I see that *The Jetsons* was satire and *Star Trek* was allegory; as a kid I took them quite in earnest. I was excited by the airbrushed paintings on the cover of *Popular Science* (I recall "BLIMPS MAKE A COMEBACK—IN TITANIUM!") and saw no nuclear irony in ads like this one, from an old *Scientific American*: "In the foreseeable future, cargo-carrying missiles can be expected to fly shipments anywhere in the world, hours faster than the fastest jet planes."

I spent whole days in my mundane suburban bedroom—all sheetrock and cheap molding, the tiny faces of three-pronged outlets my only audience—drawing blueprints for the house I'd have someday. My pad was somewhere between George Jetson's and Captain Kirk's. No need for stairs when gravity beams sucked you from floor to floor. No need for a kitchen when there were space-economizing food pills. No need to learn the half-Windsor knot when I'd be wearing a jumpsuit.

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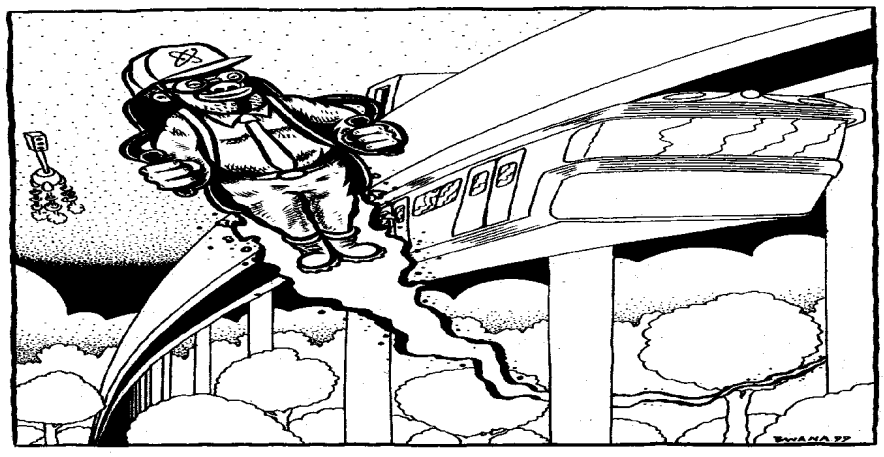

There was a serenity to it all, because they were bachelor digs. It was just me and my humming gadgets, in a metal tree-house above the world. I'd stroll out on the verandah, strap on my jet pack and leap off to my destination. For formal occasions there was a monorail, which sped me down an avenue of glistening towers 1,000 stories tall. I knew a little, but only a little, about drawing in perspective, so all my lines converged, like train tracks in the distance, into a single radiating point: the very promise of the future.

It wasn't a cold world—it had 64 colored-pencil colors—but it was clean in an unearthly way, and geometrical. The only things I drew without a ruler were squiggles in the sky: birds. There was no conflict between man and nature here. We had our world, and they had theirs.

Recently I bought a house and realized it had none of the amenities I once expected. It seemed a good time to check how much progress had been made. How soon could I expect my monorail?

It turned out most of the things I dreamed of were already passé. Jet (or, technically, rocket) backpacks were tested in the 1950s and '60s. They worked, but creating lift without wings consumed huge amounts of fuel, so flights were limited to about 30 seconds. By the 1970s, longer flights were possible, but the military funders had lost interest. Development basically stopped.

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There are still a few jet packs around. You can hire Kinnie Gibson, a Hollywood stunt man who performs as "The Rocketman," to fly in to your event for sheer spectacle—like Michael Jackson did at the end of his "Dangerous" tour. The flight is short but sweet. "There's nothing that compares to it," Gibson says. "Once you take off, it's so smooth. It's like you're flying" instead of sitting inside a thing that flies.

As for food pills, they're pretty much here. "We can compress a lot of nutrients into a one-inch cube, and you could pop three or four of those per day," says Louis Grivetti, a professor in the nutrition department at UC Davis. Things like this are made for the usual client—the military. The problem is, "there is a bizarre rule of thumb," Grivetti says. "As you make things more nutritionally dense, the taste goes way downhill. The people that talk up this stuff don't eat it."

With jumpsuits, a technology that has long been available, the question was why they hadn't become more commonplace. They are "the silliest thing in the world," declares Anne Bissonnette, curator of the Kent State Museum and its collection of costumes. People don't want to sit in restroom stalls with all their clothes pushed down to the floor. She does see a brighter future for another sci-fi staple, though: the tunic. "It's a middle ground between womenswear and menswear," she says, noting its historical use in the Indian army.

As for the world of the future being cleaner, I was laboring under the compulsive delusion that true cleanliness is even possible. "Have you ever heard of the law of conservation of matter?" growls Warren Winkelstein, professor emeritus of epidemiology at UC Berkeley. "The world is no different than it ever was—it's just that the matter has been moved around." He confesses the world seems more cluttered than ever to him.

Back in my house, I still watch *Star Trek* a lot but am suffering my own comeuppance. Gravity-beam elevators have become irrelevant as I struggle with the primitive goal of installing a single three-pronged outlet in each room. My big dream now: a laundry chute.

I'm not alone in my retreat. Disney recently renovated its Tomorrowland, replacing earnest exhibits like the all-plastic House of the Future with a retro, tin rocket-style playland. The nostalgia doesn't stop there: Just outside the Disney World fence in Florida is the conglomerate's newest production, the town of Celebration. It's a place you can actually live if you have the money and are willing to submit to Disney-dictated bylaws about lawn care and curtain color. Its environmentalist and New Urbanist pretensions are betrayed by the high frequency of two- and three-car garages. Instead, the main theme is the memory-fantasy of a Norman Rockwell small town.

It's all a bit sad because, like long-forsaken lovers know, reliving a processed past is as hollow as it is pleasant. The past can never come again, so the rapture comes set in a thick frame of despair. Dreaming up new flesh is harder and headier, since it comes charged with hope and danger. (I wonder if this isn't the fatal flaw of environmentalism—lamenting the world we have lost rather than dreaming of the one we might gain.)

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At least one city in the Northwest hasn't given in. In 1997, Seattle citizens fed up with the city's cosmic traffic problems passed an initiative requiring the local government to create an "elevated" city transit system with "rubber wheels"—in short, a monorail. City elders and *Seattle Times* editorialists seemed genuinely embarrassed at this grass-roots transportation planning, asking "Just what were Seattle voters smoking?" and calling the monorail a "phantasm."

The law created a public corporation called the Elevated Transportation Company to build and operate the system. It started working from scratch, with little money—the initiative provided no public funds and anticipated substantial private involvement in the project—and, until recently, little respect.

In the years since novelty monorails like the short, existing one at Seattle Center were built, technological improvements have made the systems less bulky and potentially driverless—a big cost savings. Unlike the street-borne light rail fashionable with professional planners, monorails have the subwaylike advantage of bypassing traffic jams. "Until you get out of traffic, you're still stuck in traffic," Seattle activist and cab driver Dick Falkenbury explained to the *MIT Technology Review*.

Monorails are now a realistic transit option, with systems in Sydney, Australia, and Vancouver, British Columbia, and eight in Japan. This spring, Seattle's Elevated Transportation Company solicited "expressions of interest" from major construction and engineering firms. It received 14 responses, including one from a consortium that will privately finance and operate a public monorail system in Las Vegas. Although it's still far from being built, the Seattle monorail project is now a serious possibility.

You have to dream it before it can be a reality. Plus, there's nothing like a legal mandate to get a project moving. So look for my own initiative in the 2000 election: "The state of Oregon shall furnish each citizen with a tunic and a next-generation jet pack, utilizing gravity-beam technology for lift, steering and propulsion." ■

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