



Doing Urban Fantasy Right

"The patterns of brick in the buildings suggested vague faces, the fireplugs that hunched beneath snow caps were like cossack trolls. It was all alive and watching, awareness in the details . . . This was no place of dead stone and bare pavement, though thousands might walk its streets by day and believe so. This was an ecosystem, vital and aware, of interdependent life, of predators and prey and parasites."

-- Megan Lindholm, *Wizard of the Pigeons*

The phrase has become cliché: the "urban jungle." [The city](#) is a place of wildness, a place of danger, a place of hothouse feeling and the Unknown. In short, the urban is the fantastic, both to those who live there and those who see New York (or London, or Chicago) glisten only on their movie screens. Whether the perception is true hardly matters -- because in fantasy, in magic, perception is truth. The following, then, is what I perceive as some keys to the interaction between cities and spirits, to be shown to your players in glimpses or in glory. The first rule of properly impressive fantasy, of course, is to hint, to allude, to start the story in the disingenuous pretense that your listener already knows it, especially when he doesn't. I won't do that in this column, but I encourage you to watch it happen in the books I reference here. Read them, if you haven't, and see the lights of Tir Nan Og glint along the skyline.

"I once heard lightning whistle over Chicago. There was a thunderstorm over the Loop, and I was on the South Side at the university, right near the site of the first atomic pile. There'd be a flash on the northern horizon, and then, seven seconds later, not thunder, but this high-pitched moaning scream."

-- Fritz Leiber, *Our Lady of Darkness*

The key to urban fantasy, even more than traditional fantasy, is its location -- by definition, it's got to happen in a city. It has to have a sense of place; the players have to be able to see it in their minds' eye, feel it in their bones, hear the horns and motors, smell the asphalt and exhaust. (This is why I recommend you run urban fantasy in a city your players know well -- your home town, say.) Location is the foundation for the magic -- either as contrast (modern cities versus traditional beliefs) or as evolution of the story (ancient myths become, or energize, urban legends). The sense of place has a direct role in the story, or in the game -- the location has to, quite literally, conjure up an image. An illusion. A glamour.

This magic evoked by a physical place is its *genius loci*, the "spirit of the location." The ancients believed that every well, every river, every grove of trees, every mountain, had its own deity, its own persona. The naiads and dryads become the spirits of skyscrapers and city parks, brooding or helpful depending on their nature. For example, the spirit of the Empire State Building might be an old king, surrounded by younger knights and princes -- paint it as the Fisher King or Jupiter or Charlemagne. The spirit of Griffith Park in Los Angeles might be a caged beast of Aztec legend hemmed in by the city, a slumbering feathered dragon -- or it might be the spirit of Apollo, looking at the stars from his temple, the Griffith Park Observatory. Even if the *genii loci* don't have names and agendas in your game, the places should feel magical -- the [trickster](#) energies of the Las Vegas

Strip; the dark majesty of the Hancock Tower; the serpentine sensuality of New Orleans' French Quarter.

"I still hold . . . that the suburbs ought to be either glorified by romance and religion or else destroyed by fire from heaven, or even by firebrands from the earth."

-- G.K. Chesterton, *The Coloured Lands*

But what about places that just don't feel magical, even (or especially) if you've lived there your whole life? The suburbs may have the jobs and the shopping malls, but they don't really have the magic. How you use them in your game depends on your vision. If the suburbs are bland, at least they're safe -- they're the normal world, contrast to the cities' eldritch allure. They're where "once upon a time" begins, and where "happily ever after" ends. Or, of course, they're the Dead Zone -- the desolate moor, home to the barrow-wights of dead Indians, or the hungry spirits of cornfields plowed under. Drive around a housing development, no matter how boring, at 3 a.m. -- are the burglar alarm lights blinking messages to each other? Are the Wal-Marts brooding tombs, grasping for pennies and breathing out the pale odor of banality?

"The definition of a fairy-story -- what it is, or what it should be -- does not, then, depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of Faërie: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country."

-- J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories"

So if the city is Faërie, where are the faeries? In addition to the *genii loci*, urban fantasy can speckle the city with various Seelie and Unseelie, usually living in bohemian idleness in a hip neighborhood, lurking in the [subways](#), or dwelling in the parks and forest preserves round about. This is all well and good, and the citified sidhe can run the gamut from the Romantic (Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* and Charles de Lint's *Jack of Kinrowan*) to the postmodern (Robert Weinberg's *A Logical Magician*). However, rather than simply transferring the Gentry to Minneapolis, try evolving them. What do the stresses and stimuli that produced the fairy-faith in medieval England produce in urban America? (Well, [UFOs](#). But let's ignore that for now.) As I've mentioned [before](#), fairy tales are horror stories at heart -- tales of the uncanny. The redcap, waylaying travelers and dyeing his cap in their blood, becomes the mugger indistinct in his hooded (and dark maroon?) sweatshirt. The troll under the bridge becomes the homeless madman in his box. Tommyknockers become the Mole People living in subway tunnels. (Real fairy tales are seldom politically "progressive" -- if that's an issue with you or your players, you might be better off personifying the *genii loci*.) Fairy rings are graffiti, the Wild Hunt is gangstas on a drive-by, and so forth. The more helpful household fairies might require the occasional sacrifice of a sock from the dryer and the last Pop-Tart.

"I had some errands to run, so I left home, and, while walking down the street, my eye was caught by something on the sidewalk. It was a dollar bill held down by a colorful bird feather and cowrie shell . . . This was in an area swarming with street people, and yet it remained untouched until I picked it up."

-- S. Jason Black, in *Urban Voodoo*

Which leads us, by way of offerings to unseen beings, to the other great component of fantasy -- magic. I've previously mentioned [sacred geometry](#) and its role in urban design; it can combine with the *genius loci* as the secret ley line map of the city. All those street grids, marked off like [chessboard](#) squares, all the kabbalistic signs in license plates and lottery numbers -- the city is always alive with magic. The music of the spheres echoes in car alarms and cell phones. Your game can draw in sacred dramaturgy enacting urban legends for power (flash your lights at your enemy's car and they'll die), updated traditions ethnic (Chinatown feng shui, and voodoo in the Haitian neighborhood) and mythic (as with Las Vegas' Frazerian Grail-king tropes in Tim Powers' *Last Call*), and mystic Words of Power like PED XING and LAX and glyphs like the Red Hand and the Green Walking Man.

"Where are the temples and cathedrals of today? They are the banks, insurance company headquarters, shopping centres, structures which, more often than not, affect adversely the health of their occupants."
-- Jean-Marie Gobet

Even [mightier sigils](#) exist, of course. The great idols of the city are the emblems seen by worshipers every day -- the Golden Arches, the Swoosh, the Good Hands. Are they all but aspects of Hermes, lord of commerce and god of a thousand faces? Or are they all signs of invisible powers -- Reddy Kilowatt the new form of Hephaestus, the green Sinclair dinosaur Geb the old god of the earth, Joe Camel tobacco-loving Baron Cemetaire. Gods gain power from belief -- or, as we say now, market share. It's even possible that your city openly flaunts its paganism -- Ceres looks down from the Chicago Board of Trade, Vulcan gazes out over Birmingham, Alabama, and Hermes' caduceus shines from every hospital in America.

"To Frankie that quarter-moon sky looked darker and all the iron apparatus of the El taller than ever. The artificial tenement light sweeping across the tracks made even the snow seem artificial, like snow off a dime-store counter. Only the rails seemed real, and to move a bit with terrible intent."
-- Nelson Algren, *The Man With the Golden Arm*

Where there are gods, of course, monsters aren't far behind. Fritz Leiber's "Smoke Ghost" and *Our Lady of Darkness* present new horrors, born of urban angst and skyscraper weight. Roaches and pigeons scavenge food and information, and serve unknown beasts deep in the sewers (as in the movie *Mimic*) or the tops of skyscrapers (as in the movie *Q*). Rats -- what can't you do with them and their subterranean lord? And outside the animal kingdom there are still more Things. Fiery elementals in trash cans, toxic krakens beneath polluted rivers, gremlins crashing hard drives and draining batteries, wraiths blowing like newspaper along the sidewalk, burned-out cars growling to unlife, knife-wielding shadow-men in the dark alleys, thrumming mechanical spiders in elevator shafts and basement generators, blank-eyed commuter zombies, smog lowering and alive, neon basilisks blinking to each other in static cracks -- anything omnipresent can be ominous. So be careful -- it's a jungle out there.

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