

Dorling, D. (2016) *Stranger things have happened: A Review of Alan Marshall's Ecotopia*, The Times Higher, November 24th, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/review-ecotopia-2121-alan-marshall-arcade>

Ecotopia 2121

A Vision for Our Future Green Utopia – in 100 Cities, by Alan Marshall

London as an eco-village? Treehouses in Accra? Danny Dorling lauds beautiful and bold what-ifs

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Bucolic Brum: Birmingham is painted as the future green heart of England, a city of elegant towers surrounded by a rejuvenated forest through which pass new canals

Can you imagine the Emirati city of Abu Dhabi decades after Indian guest labourers have risen up to secure democracy in the city and won citizens' rights for all residents and a sustainable future? Can you see a future in which the great-grandchildren of today's slum dwellers of Accra, the Ghanaian capital, live in homes on stilts or in trees above the threat of

flooding? What of the city of Almaty in Kazakhstan, currently the smog-filled home to 2 million people: can you predict what life will be like there in the distant future if things *don't* turn out for the worst?

It is because you probably can't answer any of those questions that this book has such great value. Abu Dhabi, Accra and Almaty are just the first three of Alan Marshall's 100 cities. For each, the environmental studies scholar paints a different possible – and sometimes plausible – scenario. Each scenario is also literally painted, in most cases by Marshall himself, resulting in 100 beautiful images of “what might be”.

The year 2121 is chosen because it is sufficiently far away that we should expect life then in each city to be very different. Nearer to home for many readers, Birmingham is painted as the future green heart of England, a city of elegant towers surrounded by a rejuvenated forest through which pass new canals, with windmills on their banks.

A barrage built across the river Severn – the eco-bridge – powers Bristol and Cardiff by 2121. London is still home to a Royal Family, but Queen Maria prefers her garden to her jewels, people can vote from the age of 10 and the centre of England's capital has been turned over to a giant eco-village in which pensioners teach children lessons of actual worth.

If this sounds far-fetched, imagine someone in 1911 being told that in 2016 banks would dominate the London docks and that most children in London would go to university but many would still not be able to find a job. But in Marshall's vision, by 2121 a car-free Oxford has become a far happier city. Plymouth is a centre for Luddites; an outlier in a world in which to be green is to be normal. In Wolverhampton, blue-collar workers are now green-collar workers who live in the city with the cleanest air on the planet: all fanciful, all unlikely, all possible.

I have one criticism of *Ecotopia 2121*. It begins with a world map that still has London at its centre, which is surely not how we will still draw world maps more than a century from now. At first I also thought that New Zealand was missing, which seemed odd, as that is where Marshall grew up before working in 10 countries and 25 cities to really educate himself. Look carefully, however, and you'll find New Zealand where it really should be on the map.

Ecotopia 2121 pays great attention to detail and achieves what few academic books do: it presents what is most important as entertaining as well as educational. Although it will not be to everyone's taste, very few academics ever produce anything as stunning and imaginative as this. You can [see some of the images here](#).

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