The Power of Literature in the Imagination of Urban Dystopia

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the dystopian genre has gained prominence as a literary field, offering a way to explore how fictional worlds are constructed and how they connect to the history of urbanism and architecture (Ferreras Savoye, 2011). Any discussion must begin by defining dystopia in relation to its conceptual opposite, utopia, and in dialogue with related notions such as ustopia and uchronia. Clarifying these terms not only frames the theoretical ground of the analysis but also provides the tools to interpret the worlds imagined in the most influential works of the genre (Meneses, 2016).

The term "utopia", coined by Thomas More in the 16th century, emerged as an imaginative response to the shortcomings and injustices of his time. In *Utopia*, More describes an island society that achieves harmony and collective well-being by abolishing private property, ensuring fair distribution of resources, and encouraging intellectual growth through art and reading. Happiness, peace, and justice form the foundations of this ideal world, and the absence of conflict signifies the triumph of social progress. Utopia, therefore, functions both as a social critique and as an aspirational model (Alam et al., 2019; More, 2003).

Dystopia emerges when this utopian optimism gives way to disillusionment and pessimism. While utopia projects an ideal order, dystopia envisions degraded societies ruled by totalitarian powers, where individual freedoms are stripped away and human life unfolds under oppression, fear, and alienation. Though fictional, these imagined societies are rooted in genuine anxieties, often arising from critical reflections on the social, political, and technological trends of their time (Levitas & Sargisson, 2013). Dystopian narratives not only portray ruined or post-apocalyptic settings but also anticipate future conflicts and conditions already visible in contemporary life. The growth of the genre in the twentieth century is closely tied to historical circumstances, including economic crises, political instability between the wars, the devastation of two world wars, and the rise of totalitarian regimes (Bartoszewicz, 2025). Each of these contexts shaped the themes and forms of landmark dystopian novels. Works such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and George Orwell's *1984* established the canon of the genre, with their imagined architectures exemplifying the symbolic and political role of space in oppressive systems. Later crises, from the oil shock of the 1970s to the global financial crisis of 2008, continued to sustain the genre's pessimism and its warning function (Reinert et al., 2016).

Understanding these imagined worlds also requires attention to the complex interplay between utopia and dystopia. Margaret Atwood captures this dynamic with the term "ustopia", emphasizing that the two are inseparable. Every dystopia embodies a utopia for those in power, just as every utopia can conceal exclusion or repression for those left on the margins. "Ustopia", then, makes visible the simultaneous presence of well-being and suffering, privilege and subjugation (Hanno, 2023).

It is also important to distinguish dystopia from uchronia. While both envision alternative futures, uchronia begins with the alteration of a specific historical event—a "what if?" scenario—that reshapes the course of history. Dystopias, by contrast, do not rely on revisiting the past but extrapolate their scenarios from tendencies already present in the contemporary world (Anistratenko, 2018).

Taken together, these concepts and their historical evolution underscore the power of dystopian literature as a lens for reflecting on architecture, urban design, and the symbolic construction of power. By imagining alternative environments, dystopian narratives invite readers to examine their own surroundings with a critical eye and to consider their potential for transformation.

2. State of the art

As noted earlier, dystopia has traditionally been associated with literature; however, over time, the genre has expanded its influence to a wide range of artistic and cultural forms. Evidence of this impact can be seen in the many film and television adaptations of landmark novels such as *Brave New World, Fahrenheit 451, 1984*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. These works have been brought

to the screen at different historical moments, often preserving a shared urban and architectural aesthetic shaped by the events of the twenty-first century (Meléndez Galán, 2023; Muñoz González, 2021).

A particularly relevant case is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. While the 1990 film adaptation garnered little attention, the 2017 television series became a global cultural phenomenon. This success can be explained by the persuasive force of storytelling as a communicative strategy, where narrative, emotion, and identification with characters operate as mechanisms of social resonance (González-Oñate et al., 2025). In the Spanish context, press reception studies show how the adaptation reactivated public debate and reframed the novel as a feminist symbol, shaping the public reception of Atwood's work and its interpretation in the Spanish cultural sphere (Velasco Montiel, 2025). Although less directly concerned with urban and architectural questions, the series broadened debates around control of the female body, surveillance, and the repression of rights. It is also essential to recognize the differences between the novel and its screen versions, differences that inevitably shape their visual interpretations (Dafir, 2025). Both, however, rely on existing urban settings, transformed through cinematic techniques into a dystopian atmosphere.

The reach and popularity of the series demonstrated the genre's potential to catalyze social movements, particularly those linked to feminist education and to imagining plausible yet threatening futures. In this way, both the novel and its adaptation have heightened public awareness of latent risks and encouraged collective reflection on the scenarios societies may face. At the same time, dystopia has transcended literature and film, extending its influence into other forms of art, into video games, and even into the vocabulary of social and political discourse, where it shapes new modes of representation (Menegotto, 2020). Recent studies highlight how cross-platform storytelling sustains cultural relevance and reframes representational debates in contemporary media environments (Higueras-Ruiz & Pérez-Rufí, 2024). Such diversification corresponds to what recent scholarship on transmedia world-building highlights: the ability of narratives to expand across multiple platforms while maintaining coherence and consistency, thereby reinforcing their cultural impact (Gispert de Chia, 2024). This breadth underlines the vitality of the genre and its continuing ability to inspire critique, protest, and reflection.

Within dystopian studies, the analysis of architecture has emerged only recently and remains a relatively minor field of inquiry. Architecture and urbanism frequently appear in dystopian narratives as essential tools of totalitarian regimes, functioning as instruments of control, surveillance, and oppression. Nevertheless, in academic research, this dimension remains fragmented and underexplored. Most studies of dystopian literature have focused on political regimes, mechanisms of social repression, and the dynamics of power. At the same time, questions of urban and architectural design have been primarily relegated to the background (Macleod & Ward, 2002). This theoretical gap justifies and motivates the present research, which adopts an exploratory approach to examine the strategies by which architecture supports the consolidation and endurance of oppressive systems in dystopian fiction.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, interest in dystopia and in the architecture of control has been further revitalized. The emotional and social impact of the health emergency, coupled with the imposition of exceptional restrictions and surveillance measures, reignited debates about the limits of state intervention in private life and in citizens' mobility, evoking comparisons with fictional dystopias (Dwivedi & Wansbrough, 2022). The reception of series such as Utopia, released by Amazon Prime in 2020, which are built around global health threats and conspiracies, revealed the audience's sensitivity to fictions that directly mirror collective experiences. Its reception, however, was controversial, and the series ended after a single season of eight episodes in the same year it premiered.

The academic study of architecture and urbanism in dystopian literature is therefore of undeniable importance for understanding how mechanisms of control and resistance are shaped and represented in imagined worlds

3. Methodology

The methods employed in this study are a bibliographic review and critical analysis, used to clarify how urbanism and architecture function as instruments of subjugation within totalitarian systems. To this end, a review of works belonging to the dystopian literary genre was undertaken. The selection of novels was guided by specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, designed to focus the scope of the research.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:
1. Novels are classified as part of the dystopian literary genre.
2. Depiction of a population subjected to a totalitarian regime that restricts individual freedoms.
3. The presence of a figure of power that exercises coercion over the population.
4. Representation of alternative societies that remain plausible in relation to reality.
5. Evidence of a regime that employs architecture and urban planning as instruments of control.
6. Detailed descriptions of buildings and urban settings within the fictional world.

The exclusion criteria were as follows:
1. Narratives centred on non-human societies.
2. Strictly apocalyptic scenarios.
3. Absence of explanations regarding the organisational structure of the government.
4. Lack of descriptions of the mechanisms used for supervision and domination of the population.

Applying these criteria resulted in an initial corpus of works, which was subsequently refined to a final selection of four novels: *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brave New World*, and *1984*.

The selected studies help to illuminate how architectural and urban spaces contribute to the imposition of discipline and social control. For instance, Klementina Šarlija highlights the strategic use of mirrors in domestic interiors in *The Handmaid's Tale*, showing how they restrict both identity and visibility for the lower castes (Šarlija, 2024). Nóstos Atelier, an academic initiative exploring architecture and literature, analyzes how the manipulation of light in the protagonist's room functions as a psychological mechanism of domination (Muñoz Vidal & Sol Jódar, 2022). Similarly, Maroua Bouaffoura emphasizes the redefinition of boundaries between domestic intimacy and privacy, underscoring the state's control over both public and private space (Bouaffoura, 2012). Mauricio Durán Castro examines how the modern architecture depicted in *Fahrenheit 451* and the interior layout of homes facilitate manipulation and social isolation through new technologies (Castro, 2010). Ana Sofía Pereira Da Silva, in turn, identifies in *Brave New World* the role of architecture in ensuring systemic stability and well-being (Pereira Da Silva, 2011), while Fabiola López Durán offers a comparative study of urbanism and social stratification in *Brave New World* and *1984*, stressing the links between urban design and population control (López-Durán, 2013). Hanna Houda Axelsson focuses on *1984*, illustrating how power is embodied in the pyramidal form of the omnipresent ministries and in the monumental architecture that readers envision as part of the regime's destructive actions against history and heritage, a strategy to sustain its discourse and secure its permanence over time (Axelsson, 2023).

These studies show that space is never a neutral backdrop in dystopian worlds; it is a technology of rule. Their converging insights justify an urban and architectural reading that renders visible the material infrastructures, spatial codes, and everyday geographies through which authoritarian projects are normalized. Together, they highlight the growing recognition of architecture as both a symbolic and material instrument in dystopian literature.

Among the selected works, *The Handmaid's Tale* was chosen for in-depth study for three reasons: first, its spatial imagination is anchored in a real, nameable urban fabric (metropolitan Boston), allowing a precise reading of how existing infrastructures are repurposed for domination; second, its architecture-of-control is explicitly gendered and biopolitical (the Red Center, the Wall, the Waterford household, clothing codes), aligning directly with our research questions on the disciplining of bodies through space; and third, its contemporary salience—amid

renewed debates on democratic backsliding—makes it a privileged case for examining how authoritarian logics colonize everyday urban life (Atwood, 2017; Mudde, 2022).

The analysis is organized into three sections: a synopsis to establish the narrative context, an examination of the regime that subjugates the population, and an exploration of how urban settings and architectural design serve as tools of social and individual control. Figure 1 presents a symbolic illustration of the analytical process, employing metaphoric associations to depict how narrative elements, social structures, and spatial settings converge in the interpretation.

Figure 1. Conceptual layout of the methodology
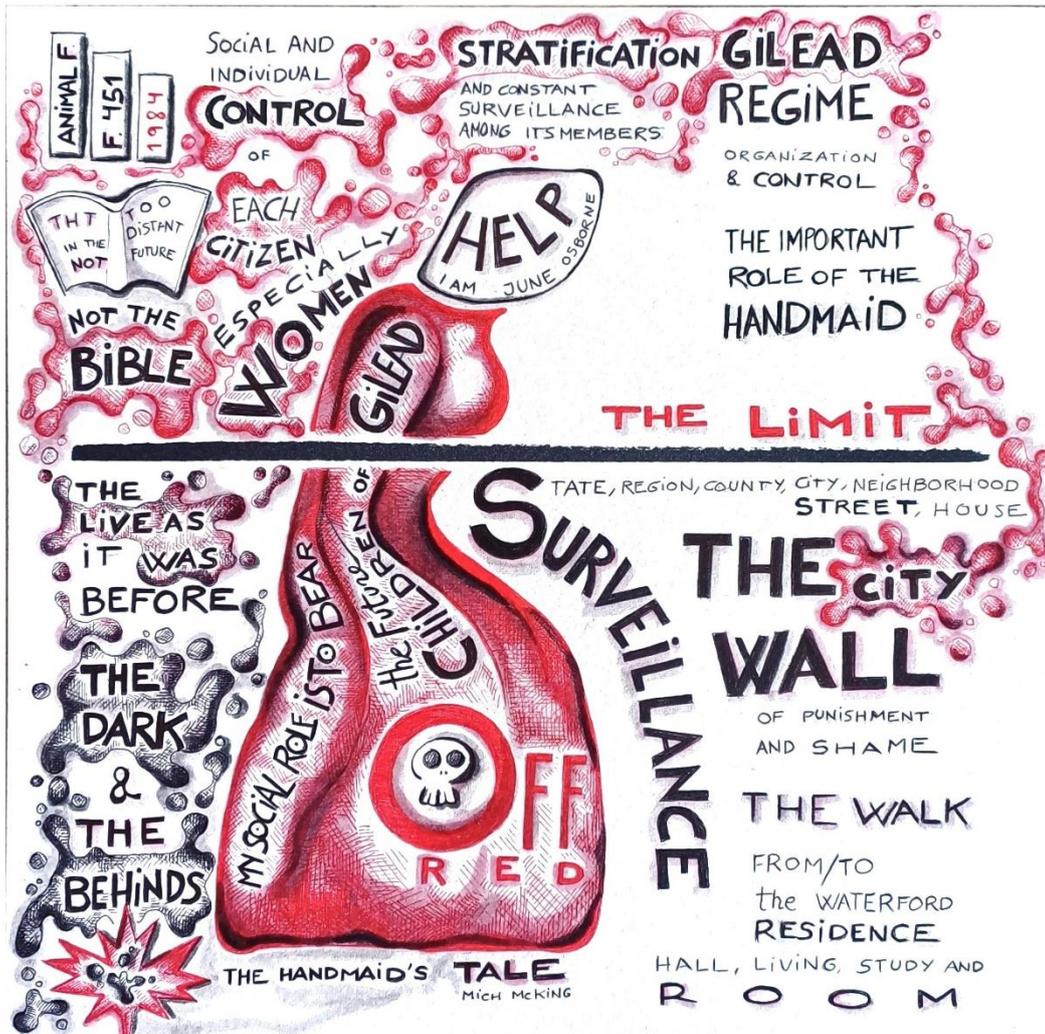
Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

4. Analysis

4.1. Synopsis of the novel and narrative context

The novel is set in the Republic of Gilead. This fictional state emerges after the collapse of the United States, following a coup d'état staged by an extremist group known as the Sons of Jacob. A totalitarian theocracy takes control. Motivated by the conviction that American society had fallen into moral decay, the movement uses a fundamentalist and selective reading of the Bible as the ideological basis of its new political order. Scriptural passages are manipulated to enforce strict social control, progressively stripping away the rights and freedoms of citizens, particularly those of women.

One of the main catalysts for the rise of this regime is the fertility crisis that affects not only the United States but the entire world. An environmental catastrophe has dramatically reduced reproductive capacity, provoking collective fear of human extinction. The extremists exploit this fear, presenting infertility as divine punishment for society's "sins". In doing so, Gilead's leaders cast themselves as saviors tasked with restoring order and "traditional values."

Once in power, Gilead abolishes the U.S. Constitution and eliminates all civil rights, including freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, and the right to due process. Political authority is concentrated in a Council of Commanders, ruling without any form of democratic representation. The social structure is profoundly hierarchical and patriarchal in nature. Women lose all autonomy and are stripped of economic, social, and reproductive rights. They may only occupy roles assigned by the state, such as Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, or Marthas (household servants). In the case of forced labourers, they may be sent to the Colonies, areas devastated by contamination.

At the center of the narrative is June, the protagonist, known within Gilead as Offred, a name that denotes her belonging to Commander Fred Waterford, whom she serves as a Handmaid. Before the regime's rise, June lived an ordinary life. After Gilead seizes power, she attempts to flee to Canada with her family but is captured. Following a period of training and indoctrination, she is assigned to the Waterford household as a Handmaid.

From that moment, June's freedom, identity, and very existence are subjected to the will of Gilead, serving as a surrogate womb for the ruling classes. Her personal identity is erased, along with her real name and ties to her past. Handmaids are regularly subjected to a ritual known as the Ceremony, in which the Commander has sexual intercourse with them under the supervision of his Wife, in an attempt to achieve conception. This act, sanctioned by the regime, is in fact a state-legitimized rape disguised as a sacred mission to secure reproduction and the survival of society.

June's inner struggle between survival and resistance drives the emotional tension of the narrative. Her secret encounters with Nick, the household chauffeur, as well as Serena Waterford's coercion to turn to Nick in the hope of conceiving, awaken feelings long repressed—hope and the longing for freedom. The existence of a clandestine resistance network known as Mayday further sustains the possibility of change. June dreams of joining this movement and contributing to the downfall of the regime. However, before she can do so, she is abruptly arrested by two Guardians and taken into a van, leaving the ending unresolved and intensifying the atmosphere of uncertainty and danger.

Through June, the reader gains not only an intimate perspective on the events of the story but also a lens through which to perceive the transformation of the urban and architectural fabric of metropolitan Boston.

The novel stands as a sharp critique of religious extremism and authoritarianism, warning of the dangers posed by the erosion of rights and the instrumentalization of religion to justify oppressive policies.

4.2. Study of the regime

A defining feature of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that the totalitarian regime is imposed on a preexisting society whose people still carry memories of the past. This distinction is crucial: the citizens of Gilead have lived through the transition and ultimately the consolidation of the regime's absolute power.

The novel thus portrays a dystopia closely bound to the present, where individuals are acutely aware of the control exerted over them and of the loss of their freedoms. The population is neither oblivious to the past nor resigned to its current role under subjugation; instead, they experience and suffer the cruelty of their new reality. To understand this dynamic, three key aspects of the regime must be considered: social stratification, the central role of the Handmaid, and the pervasive surveillance among members of society.

4.2.1 Social Stratification

The novel illustrates the regime's power through a rigidly stratified order. Men primarily exercise social authority, while women are further divided into castes based on their value to society. Within this hierarchy, women themselves participate in maintaining power and subjugation. This caste system has become the regime's main instrument of control.

At the top are the Commanders' Wives, whose freedoms are drastically restricted—reading and writing are forbidden—and whose identities are defined solely by their husbands' roles in the state. Their position is reduced to that of wives maintaining the household, though they still belong to the privileged ranks of Gilead. Alongside them stand the Aunts, women granted authority by the state to instruct and discipline future Handmaids. Aunt Lydia, June's principal trainer, embodies this function, encapsulated in her chilling reminder: "The Republic of Gilead… knows no bounds. Gilead is within you." This phrase captures the regime's claim to omnipresence.

Other women, unable to conceive, are relegated to the role of Marthas, serving as domestic workers in Commanders' households. Control extends even to clothing, with each caste distinguished by prescribed colors that allow for immediate identification. Commanders and their aides wear black, signifying power and prestige; Wives wear long, concealing blue dresses, evoking the Virgin Mary; children are dressed in white, symbols of purity and innocence; Marthas wear muted green garments, marking their status as servants; and finally, Handmaids are dressed entirely in red, representing fertility and blood. Their attire consists of long-sleeved gowns, cloaks, gloves, and shoes, all in a rich, vibrant red. Most distinctive is the mandatory white bonnet, designed to obscure their faces, restrict interaction, and force them to look straight ahead. In this way, clothing not only identifies and stratifies but also enforces control, extending into the urban and architectural settings in which the story unfolds.

4.2.2. The Figure of the Handmaid in Gilead

Within this system, Handmaids lose all identity. Stripped of their names, they are identified solely through the households they serve, adopting the prefix "Of-" followed by the Commander's name. This practice deliberately dehumanizes them, reducing them to reproductive instruments for the ruling class. Their role is singular: to bear children for Gilead's elite. Once they fulfil this duty, they are reassigned to another family, perpetuating the cycle.

During training, Handmaids are taught the behaviors expected of them, including speech, gestures, and conduct. Their movements are tightly controlled. The only outings permitted are those related to basic domestic needs, and even then, they must go in pairs to ensure mutual surveillance. Interaction is closely monitored, and distrust is systematically encouraged. By compelling them to watch one another, the regime destroys solidarity and entrenches obedience, effectively preventing rebellion or alliance.

4.2.3 The surveillance

The state ensures its authority by claiming knowledge of everything that occurs among its citizens, maintaining power through fear and distrust. Every member of society is expected to monitor others and report any deviation from the regime's principles. Those accused of betrayal are arrested, tortured, and forced to provide information. The presence of informants, embedded in roles ranging from Commanders' aides to Marthas within households, ensures infiltration even into private spaces. The ever-present possibility of being watched by the Eyes instils a constant fear that any act deemed subversive will be detected. In this way, the regime entrenches terror as a mechanism of control, guaranteeing that rebellion remains unthinkable.

4.3. Urban setting and architectural design

In the novel, Gilead's urban organization reflects a radical reconfiguration of the inherited city. Boston and its surroundings appear stripped of their original vitality and remade into a homogeneous, tightly controlled space devoid of freedom. The urban core loses traditional meeting places—squares, markets, community venues—eliminated as potential risks to the

regime's stability. As a result, the city lacks a genuine public center and is transformed into an instrument of surveillance and hierarchical order: urban space no longer enables collective encounters but instead enforces social distance.

In residential districts—especially those tied to the Commanders' elite—the planning is openly segregationist. The area around the Waterfords' house, akin to the residential neighborhoods near Harvard University in Cambridge, is profoundly altered. Access is regulated through checkpoints and inspection posts that restrict movement, ensuring that only regime officials or those with a designated place of residence may circulate. This urban design reinforces class isolation and makes visible the spatial hierarchy to which each social group is assigned.

Streets, emptied of communal life, become monitored corridors. Military patrols and official vehicles dominate them, maintaining continuous control over every movement. Pedestrian use is restricted, essentially limited to Handmaids and the security forces. Handmaids must walk in pairs, dressed in red robes and white bonnets that narrow their field of vision—constraints that not only inhibit interaction but also subject them to a permanently surveilled, sensorially limited urban experience. The street ceases to be a space of free passage and becomes a stage for control and discipline.

With respect to buildings, the novel emphasizes the resignification and reuse of preexisting structures. Institutions such as schools, libraries, universities, and churches are stripped of their communal function and repurposed as reeducation centers, barracks, or sites of repression. Architecture becomes a symbolic instrument for erasing the past: monumental concrete forms and the suppression of elements loaded with collective memory generate an urban landscape in which architecture operates as a direct expression of authority. Each redefined façade proclaims the supremacy of the regime and its will to rewrite the social functions of the built environment.

Inside the home, extreme social hierarchy takes spatial form. Commanders' residences are expansive, with private gardens designed for the Wives' leisure and garages that signify prestige and power. These houses consolidate the image of patriarchy as the locus of authority and show how domestic layouts become expressions of hierarchical dominance. Around them, more ordinary structures—shopping centers, commercial avenues—are likewise transformed: shops no longer have names and are identified only by pictograms, erasing the symbolic richness of written language and reducing the urban landscape to a simplified repertoire of signs that limits free interpretation.

A paradigmatic urban example of this resignification is the Wall. Once a simple brick structure—perhaps separating properties or adjusting to changes in elevation, an unremarkable urban element—after Gilead's rise, it acquires a sinister role as the site where the bodies of those who defy the regime are publicly displayed. Left hanging for days, they serve as a warning while turning the Wall into a monument to punishment and death.

The transformation of the Wall and other public spaces into instruments of intimidation and social control demonstrates the regime's capacity to rewrite the meaning of everyday architecture. Buildings and urban elements thus lose their former memory and value, taking on functions aligned with a logic of fear and submission. Those who once knew their earlier uses end up accepting, through imposition or the need to adapt, the new meanings—contributing to a form of collective amnesia that consolidates the regime's hegemony. In this process, the city itself becomes a rewritten text, a deliberately reshaped landscape designed to erase the past and solidify the dominant ideology. The Wall, in this sense, epitomizes urban space organized in the service of terror: "Those bodies hanging on the Wall remind me what happens to anyone who defies Gilead."

Reusing existing infrastructure enables the regime to consolidate its rule quickly without having to build from scratch, while also facilitating a broader erasure of memory. By subverting original functions and removing the visual and symbolic traces of the past, inhabitants who once knew those spaces gradually accept their new roles and meanings, to the point that earlier uses fade or become uncomfortable to recall.

Accordingly, architecture and urban planning in Gilead do more than shape physical space; they operate as active instruments for conveying subliminal messages of power, control, and subjugation, producing an urban landscape that reinforces enclosure and constant surveillance.

From the urban core to the domestic interior, every spatial scale reflects patterns of social control, segregation, and the suppression of collective memory, configuring a territory in which everyday life is entirely subject to the order imposed by Gilead.

As June summarizes in a key passage: "Things can change so quickly—buildings can be torn down or turned into something else—that it becomes hard to remember them as they were."

With this reflection, Margaret Atwood underscores how architecture and urbanism, far from static, adapt and are reconfigured according to the demands of their historical moment—even becoming, tragically, active components of totalitarian theocracies. In such a society, inhabitants do not simply use buildings; they often become spectators of an environment that reshapes their identity and their collective memory.

4.3.1. The Use of Boundaries in Gilead

The theme of boundaries permeates the novel, from the social and urban fabric of Gilead to the intimate interiors of the Waterford household. Privacy, in its conventional sense, is eliminated; the regime recognizes no truly private sphere, particularly for women.

This blurred line between intimacy and control is most evident in the Ceremony. Conducted in the Commander's bedroom, this space—ordinarily private—is transformed into the setting for a ritualized act of reproduction, carefully regulated and surveilled by Gilead. As Offred explains, "The Ceremony is not sex; it is ritual.", an act that strips intimacy of its personal meaning and subjects it to institutionalized, patriarchal control.

Childbirth is another moment of total exposure. What should be a profoundly personal experience becomes a collective ritual. Offred recounts how Wives and Handmaids are assembled to witness the delivery, turning a private act into a public spectacle: "When a Handmaid gives birth, all the Wives must attend... the birth becomes a show." Through such practices, Gilead exerts absolute control over the female body.

Spatial organization in homes and the broader urban design reinforce these boundaries according to social rank. June knows precisely where she is allowed to be and with whom: "I can't go into certain places alone; I must be accompanied." This delineation of movement underscores the state's claim of ownership over her body and mobility, from the street to her room.

Handmaids experience the strictest limitations, only entering spaces when authorized by a superior or protocol. Their restricted access underscores their status as property. By contrast, Wives enjoy slightly greater autonomy, able to stroll through gardens or visit one another, yet their mobility remains confined, marking them too as subordinated, albeit privileged. At the top, Commanders like Waterford face no real restrictions, moving freely throughout the city and even crossing borders without hindrance.

This contrast reveals how spatial and social control sustains Gilead's hierarchy: freedom is distributed along lines of gender and class. Boundaries, therefore, do more than define physical space; they embody a gendered ideology of oppression. Women, in particular, endure varying degrees of restriction depending on their social role. Mobility, privacy, and intimacy become instruments of domination, securing absolute control over women and reproduction. These boundaries, imposed through law and reinforced by fear, uphold and perpetuate the totalitarian structure of Gilead.

4.3.2. The adaptation of buildings

At the beginning of the novel, we witness one of the earliest and most revealing architectural transformations: the conversion of a sports complex and adjoining school into the so-called Red Center. A space once devoted to education, play, and children's socialization becomes a site of confinement, indoctrination, and training for future Handmaids, wholly redefining its original meaning and function.

The gym's broad, high-ceilinged interior is meticulously reorganized so that the cots where the women sleep are laid out in a strict grid with wide intervals between them. This spatial strategy prevents intimate conversation or conspiracy, reinforcing psychological isolation and submission to the regime. The arrangement amplifies sound, rendering any attempt at quiet speech a risk—

grounds for punishment—and erasing even the intimacy of a whisper. Spatial reorganization here serves less a functional purpose than the disciplinary aims of social control.

The transformation of this former school and sports complex into a site of indoctrination lays bare the perversion of the everyday into a landscape of fear and surveillance. The contrast highlights the regime's symbolic violence: it does not merely appropriate existing infrastructure for efficiency's sake; by assigning it a new meaning, it actively participates in erasing collective memory. Those who once associated these places with learning and play soon acclimate to their new uses.

4.3.3. The Waterford residence

From June's perspective, the Waterfords' house is described with precision. Its exterior reflects a late-Victorian idiom markers of the past that acquire a new meaning under Gilead. Although the original architectural composition remains, the interior has been adapted to project power and control, with a rigid hierarchy and a closed, claustrophobic atmosphere. Every architectural and decorative detail seems to reaffirm the family's social standing in line with Gilead's strict norms.

The regime promotes restrained ostentation within Commanders' homes. The goal is to signal rank through wealth and refinement while avoiding any display of excessive consumerism, consistent with its puritan ideology. This austerity is rendered as spacious yet sober rooms, a muted palette, and a play of light and shadow that conveys solemnity and chill. Elements such as chandeliers in the foyer, stained glass with biblical motifs at the entrance, and carved wooden staircases evoke the building's former distinction. However, in the new context, they serve as symbols of submission and power (Moldovan, 2020).

One detail that stands out in June's account is the presence of mirrors. In the former society, mirrors were ordinary household objects; in Gilead, they take on an unsettling symbolism. Restricted to the use of Commanders and Wives and treated as potential weapons. They also signal control over identity and self-perception. The absence of mirrors for Handmaids denies them even the simple act of recognizing their reflection, severing a fundamental link to their former identities and their humanity. Mirrors become both a privilege and a mechanism of exclusion (Herrera, 2019).

Interior organization is equally telling. Houses are divided into clearly hierarchical rooms, and circulation is strictly regulated. Domestic spaces are often sealed off from the outside, isolated from the neighbourhood and the wider city, which heightens the sense of confinement. Each member of the household—Commander, Wife, Handmaids, Marthas, other servants—occupies a specific, delimited place, and movement between rooms is controlled to prevent overlap among domestic castes. The Marthas' rooms sit near the kitchen so they can work without passing through ceremonial spaces. In contrast, June's room, upstairs and set apart, limits her visibility and contact with the household's "masters," reinforcing her subordinate, nearly invisible status.

A paradigmatic example is the living room. Once the heart of social life - a site of gatherings and conversation - it becomes a stage for authority: symmetrical arrangements, noble materials such as velvet, the black leather armchair reserved for the Commander, and an overall austerity designed to project distance and power. Sparse furnishings, deployed almost as set pieces, serve an appearance of modesty that in fact underscores discipline and prestige. The living room's social use is transformed into a kind of "throne room," where visitors adopt prescribed roles and servants remain standing hierarchy marked even in the most ordinary routines.

Taken together, this process of resignification and spatial segregation erases the collective memory of the home. Those who knew its former uses - or once lived there freely - are progressively forced to accept the new functionality. The house is no longer a refuge or the center of family and social life; it becomes a site of control, a physical extension of the regime's values, where the past is forgotten or unrecognizable and where previous meanings are deliberately silenced by Gilead's new normal.

4.3.4. Offred's room

Among all the spaces in the house, the room assigned to the Handmaid most starkly embodies Gilead's logic of control and depersonalization. Even the approach marks a difference: one must climb a steep spiral stair and pass through a narrow corridor, an interior sequence that underscores the Handmaid's isolation from the rest of the dwelling. The door's exterior lock makes clear that this is a space of control rather than refuge.

The furnishings are strictly minimal bed, a wardrobe, a table, and a chair. All selected to prevent any possibility of self-harm or resistance. The removal of the ceiling fixture from the room, for instance, speaks to obsessive surveillance: "There's nothing to hang yourself from, Aunt Lydia says; there's no ceiling light. The only light comes from the window." The room is deliberately unstimulating, a neutralized environment designed to negate individuality in keeping with the regime's values.

The most telling element is the window with its seat. Its value lies in the fact that the light it admits is the only thing that humanizes the space: "The window is placed so that, in the morning, the light wakes me. Sometimes I think it's the only grace I have." At the same time, the absence of objects or decoration focuses all attention on that light, heightening the drama of confinement and intensifying June's sense of silence and isolation.

She is acutely aware of the loss of a "room of one's own": "It's not my room… not a room of one's own in any sense. Nothing in it belongs to me. It's only the place where I am." The state turns the room into a cell that provides only what is necessary for survival, stripping away anything that might carry personal meaning and transferring control of the individual to the space itself. The adjoining bathroom follows the same logic. Anything that could pose a risk is removed, leaving only the bare minimum, in line with what the regime allows a Handmaid to possess. Even in the most private sphere, Gilead demonstrates that controlling space is equivalent to controlling the individual and her identity.

5. Main findings

An interdisciplinary reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals the architectural and urban strategies through which totalitarian contexts consolidate social control and perpetuate authority. Atwood's narrative offers a sharp critique of how urban planning, spatial delimitation, and the manipulation of the domestic sphere are systematically instrumentalized to enforce oppression, segregation, and the erasure of individuality.

The novel shows that urbanism is not merely a functional device for organizing space; it is also an instrument of social and governmental stratification. The siting of Commanders' residences, separated from the rest of the urban fabric, illustrates how hierarchy is inscribed into geography itself. These residences act not only as centers of authority but also as barriers that prevent unsupervised contact or spontaneous interaction. The resulting city ceases to be a space of encounter and becomes instead a mechanism that legitimizes class divisions, relegating Handmaids to the status of a lower caste, their presence tolerated only in controlled routines of circulation.

Equally significant is the construction of physical and symbolic boundaries that regulate movement and privacy in exhaustive ways. Checkpoints, surveillance points, and restricted areas multiply, blurring the distinction between public and private realms. The reach of control extends into the households of Commanders, where even interiors are marked by rules, designated roles, and protocols of movement. Handmaids' mobility is confined to narrow, supervised paths, leaving their interior life—their memories, fantasies, and imagination—as the last fragile enclave of autonomy. In this way, space itself becomes the primary agent of discipline.

Another recurrent strategy is the resignification of preexisting architecture, a practice typical of regimes that manipulate memory and the built past to consolidate their legitimacy. The former school and sports complex, repurposed as a training and indoctrination center, epitomizes how familiar spaces of education and leisure are stripped of their prior identity to impose new functions of obedience. Likewise, the Wall, transformed from a banal urban structure into a site of public execution and intimidation, condenses within its materiality the permanence of violence

and the institutionalization of fear. These examples show how the regime weaponizes the very fabric of the city to rewrite collective memory.

Finally, the novel subverts the concept of dwelling, depriving it of its traditional associations with intimacy, refuge, and self-identity. Domestic interiors, far from offering comfort or protection, are redesigned to inhibit any form of insubordination. The Waterfords' house exemplifies this transformation: a space where June inhabits rooms and corridors as an outsider, forced to follow prescribed paths and barred from entering forbidden thresholds. Even her assigned bedroom, stripped of objects and carefully arranged to eliminate opportunities for self-harm or resistance, reflects how the home is recast as a site of psychological and material confinement. In such spaces, the possibility of symbolic appropriation is denied, underscoring the totalitarian aim of controlling not only bodies but also the meanings of the environments they inhabit.

6. Discussion

Dystopian literature such as *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates how architecture and urban design are never neutral backdrops but active participants in the exercise of power. Built spaces encode ideologies, embody authority, and regulate everyday life, shaping not only the physical environment but also the social and political practices that occur within it. This dynamic is not limited to Atwood's fictional Gilead: the way cities and buildings are appropriated, contested, and redefined continues to resonate in contemporary societies. The following subsections explore how symbolic structures, protective barriers, and public streets serve as sites of power and resistance, drawing parallels between the novel and real-world urban experiences.

6.1. Institutions of Power

In Atwood's dystopia, architecture itself becomes a symbolic arm of governance. The Wall is perhaps the most striking example: a banal pre-existing structure redefined as a site of punishment, spectacle, and collective intimidation. Similarly, the Waterford residence illustrates how domestic interiors are reordered to stage rituals of power and reinforce patriarchal hierarchies. These spaces are not neutral backdrops but deliberate instruments of meaning, where design and function merge to embody authority.

It is from this perspective that real-world landmarks can be re-read as contested symbols of political order. For example, the U.S. Capitol, originally conceived as a neoclassical emblem of democratic unity, became after the January 2021 assault a site of fracture, visually and symbolically marked by polarization, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Dual role of governance buildings as symbols of unity and confrontation
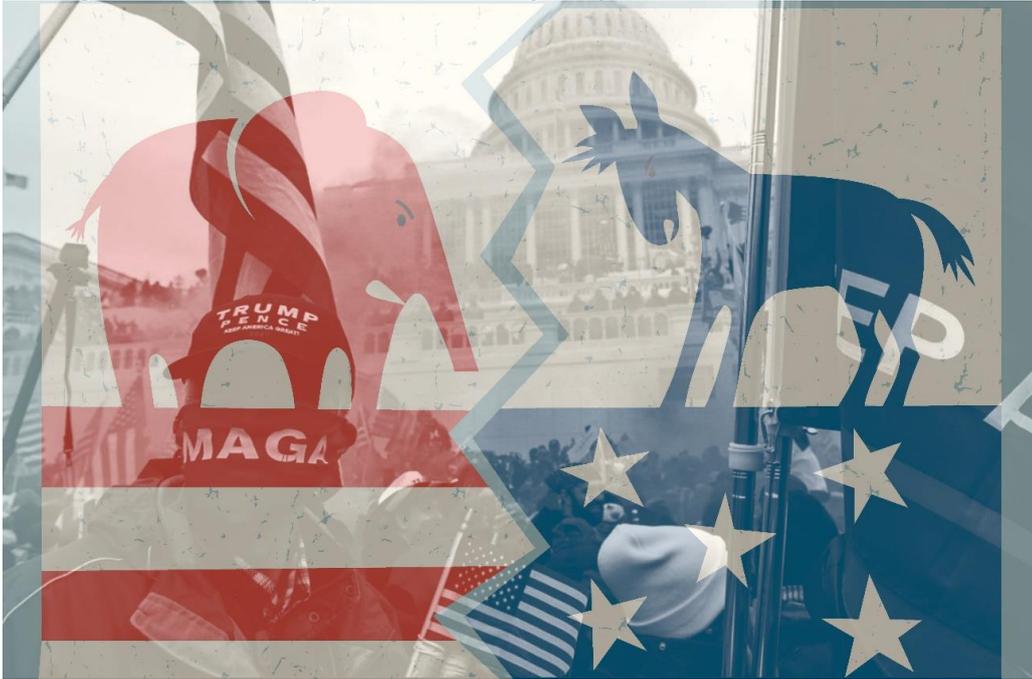
Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Yet the attack on the Capitol is not an isolated episode: the storming of the Bundestag's steps in Berlin in 2020, or the invasion of Brazil's National Congress in Brasília in 2023, similarly reveal how parliamentary buildings, designed as architectural landmarks of civic union, can be appropriated by extremist forces to dramatize rupture. Each event underscores how monuments of unity are re-scripted as stages of confrontation once their symbolic authority is challenged. Much like Atwood's fictional spaces, where walls, rooms, and domestic interiors are repurposed to discipline and surveil, here monumental architecture is visually reframed as an arena of confrontation, its intended unity fractured by the very forces it was built to embody.

The symbolic layering of such spaces reveals how architecture not only houses political processes but also becomes an active participant in shaping collective imaginaries. In Gilead, the urban fabric is redesigned to enforce surveillance and hierarchy; in contemporary democracies, congresses and parliaments exemplify how political architecture may crystallize both democratic ideals and their contestation. These sites thus illustrate the duality inherent to political monuments: they may serve as focal points of unity, yet they can equally become emblems of division.

In light of Atwood's dystopia, such landmarks can be read as urban reminders that democratic space is precarious. Their architectural presence embodies ideals of openness and common purpose, but their recent use as backdrops for violent contestation underscores the ease with which symbols of unity can be re-scripted as instruments of confrontation. This tension highlights the continuing relevance of Atwood's novel: the politics of space, whether fictional or real, remain central to the negotiation of power, resistance, and collective memory.

6.2. Boundaries of Control

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, spatial boundaries are not mere geographical markers but instruments of subjugation. The Wall of Gilead stands as a paradigmatic example: an ordinary urban element resignified into a stage of punishment, fear, and social control. Similarly, restrictions on women's movement—delimited streets, rooms, and entrances—demonstrate how architecture and urban planning can be weaponized to regulate bodies and reproduce hierarchies. The materialization of limits is thus inseparable from the symbolic power they acquire, transforming built space into a language of authority.

Urbanism and architecture, in these cases, do not simply demarcate territory; they embody ideological projects. A wall is at once infrastructure, symbol, and performance: it separates, it communicates power, and it dramatizes political intent. In both Gilead and contemporary democracies, such material boundaries reinforce the message that sovereignty is secured through spatial division, while simultaneously revealing their fragility—the fall of one wall becomes the prelude to the rise of another.

Seen through Atwood's dystopia, the lesson is clear: built space is never neutral. Boundaries, whether in the form of walls, borders, or urban barriers, condense political visions and transmit them to the collective imagination. They remind us that architecture can operate not only as shelter or function but as an enduring instrument of ideology—at once fragile in its materiality and powerful in its symbolism.

This logic is not confined to fiction. The image of walls continues to structure contemporary political imaginaries, as illustrated in Figure 3. The superimposition of the Berlin Wall—a monument to Cold War divisions—and the figure of Donald Trump evokes the persistence of exclusionary politics that crystallize in the material form of boundaries. While the Berlin Wall now survives as a memory of oppression and collapse, Trump's advocacy for a border wall exemplifies how the same architectural motif is repurposed to legitimize new regimes of fear and separation.

Figure 3. Walls as materialized boundaries of exclusion and control

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

6.3. The Streets as a Contested Space

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the street is one of the most regulated environments. Women are allowed to walk only along prescribed routes, in pairs, and under constant surveillance. These walks are stripped of spontaneity: they are not opportunities for social exchange but carefully orchestrated routines that reinforce vigilance and hierarchy. The urban street, usually a space of circulation and interaction, is reduced to a corridor of discipline where movement itself becomes a performance of submission.

Yet, as the image in Figure 4 illustrates, streets are never fully emptied of their political potential. The juxtaposition of feminist protests from the twentieth century with contemporary

"March for Life" demonstrations exemplifies the enduring contestation of public space. Different groups, defending opposing visions of society, inscribe their narratives upon the same urban setting. In doing so, they transform the street into a stage where ideological battles are made visible and collective identities are negotiated.

Figure 4. The streets as a powerful, yet neutral, space of power

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

This duality mirrors the logic of Gilead: while the regime seeks to monopolize the meaning of movement and visibility, the street remains a latent arena of resistance. In real-world cities, public thoroughfares embody the same ambiguity. They can be regulated through policing, surveillance, or urban design, but they also harbor the potential for dissent, solidarity, and collective mobilization.

Today, however, this potential is increasingly contested. Many governments are deploying new strategies to regulate protests—restricting permits, introducing "protest zones," monitoring social media to anticipate mobilizations, or adopting surveillance technologies that map and track demonstrators in real time. These measures aim to contain the unpredictable power of the street, reducing its role as a platform for dissent and recasting it as a problem of public order. In this sense, contemporary attempts to silence the street echo Atwood's fictional Gilead: they remind us that control over urban space is inseparable from control over political voice, and that the struggle for the street is ultimately a struggle for democracy itself.

6.4. Universality Beyond Gilead

The dynamics explored here extend far beyond Atwood's fictional Gilead. Throughout history and across geographies, architecture and urban planning have repeatedly been mobilized to embody authority, enforce control, and project ideological narratives. Monumental institutions such as the Reichstag in Berlin, the Kremlin in Moscow, or the Palace of Westminster in London serve not only as seats of governance but also as urban symbols of national identity and political legitimacy. Walls, from the Great Wall of China to the Israeli–Palestinian barrier, have long materialized logics of exclusion and protection, simultaneously defending and imprisoning those they claim to safeguard. Streets, meanwhile, remain contested terrains: from the Arab Spring in Cairo's Tahrir

Square to the protests in Hong Kong or Santiago de Chile, public space continues to operate as a vital arena for political expression and confrontation.

As these examples suggest, the architectural strategies of power and resistance are not confined to any single nation or period. They reflect a universal condition in which built environments become instruments through which societies negotiate authority, belonging, and dissent. Recognizing this universality underscores that the politics of space is inseparable from the politics of human rights and collective futures.

7. Conclusions

The novel's relevance grows when we recognize how near its hypothetical dystopia lies to our own reality—both in its proximate timeline and in the events, it engages with—even though it was published in 1985. This proximity highlights the importance of cultivating critical thinking about the present and the immediate future. It is fitting to close with the motto June recites, already inscribed in her wardrobe by another Handmaid: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.

The Handmaid's Tale provides a compelling fictional framework for reflecting—within an academic lens—on the ideological and political dimensions of urban and architectural space under totalitarian rule. It shows with precision that control over material and symbolic space is indispensable to the consolidation of such regimes, and that territorial domination is inseparable from the suppression of bodily autonomy and personal identity. Atwood's work forcefully demonstrates that the command of territory is inextricably linked to the control of bodies and the erasure of individual subjectivities (Siddiqui et al., 2022).

A critical reading of the novel makes clear that Gilead's mechanisms of subjugation operate first through education and institutionalized indoctrination, as seen in the systematic training of Handmaids: "What we are meant to learn is how to behave. What we are meant to become is 'interesting' women... We are taught to be submissive, to obey" (Atwood, 1985). Indoctrination is reinforced by the alteration and restriction of language, which fosters uniform, biased thinking: "Language is not only a tool for communication but also for mental control, for imposing a single vision of reality" (Atwood, 1985).

The gradual implantation of fear and the removal of stimuli that might foster socialization lead to the erosion of individuality and collective identity, curtailing the exchange of ideas and intensifying mutual surveillance: "We trust no one, not even ourselves. Any one of us might be an informant" (Atwood, 1985). This dismantling of prior memory and history produces a persistent sense of loneliness and estrangement: "Everything now is a reconstruction; even my memories feel alien" (Atwood, 1985).

Architecture emerges in the novel as an essential instrument of power, materializing structures of hierarchy and segregation. Urban organization amplifies class distinctions, relegating Handmaids to a peripheral, constantly watched category: "Houses are distributed by rank: the Commanders here, the Angels there, the Marthas and the Handmaids elsewhere—always under watch" (Atwood, 1985). The boundaries imposed in both public and private space define permitted mobility and circumscribe each group's sphere of existence: "There are doors I will never reach, rooms I am not allowed to enter" (Atwood, 1985).

At the same time, the removal of places for gathering and reflection within the urban fabric ensures the dismantling of organized resistance and fosters isolation. The regime adapts existing buildings and erects new ones with the explicit purpose of intimidation and display of power: "The Wall is a permanent reminder of what happens when someone defies the rules" (Atwood, 1985).

Ultimately, we witness a thorough subversion of the concept of home. Dwellings—traditionally refuges of privacy and identity—are turned into aseptic, controlled spaces stripped of intimacy, as the protagonist succinctly puts it: "My room is not mine. It is empty of anything that is mine— even of myself. Only the light keeps me company." (Atwood, 1985).

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