

# **From visioning to crafting futures?**

## **Surveying the expanding literature on future making**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the increased use of the concept of “future making” within futures studies and in related disciplines. Specifically, it reviews contributions in this journal and surveys the literature on future making that these contributions cite. In so doing, the article explores the cross-disciplinary roots and stakes of the concept. The key proposition of the text is that the recent popularity of future making signals a shift within futures studies: Metaphorics of design and craft are challenging the dominance of metaphorics of vision, and designerly methods are increasingly making their inroads in the field.

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of “future-making” is making waves. Indeed, a quick search at Google Ngram shows the meteoric rise of the concept. During the past twenty odd years, it has been successively introduced as a topic of conversation in various social scientific disciplines: In sociology (Adam and Groves, 2007), Science and Technology Studies (Suchman, 2008), anthropology (Appadurai, 2013), design studies (Fry, 1999; Ehn, Nilsson and Topgaard, 2014; Yelavich and Adams, 2014), and organization studies (Comi and Whyte, 2018). During

this time, the term has also become considerably more prevalent in this journal. While there are no instances of the term in the first forty years of its existence (1968-2008), it featured in no less than 17 articles in the 2024 volumes of *Futures*.

This short communication briefly surveys the literature on future-making. It is in part a rapid response to the extra-ordinary number of recent articles referencing the concept. Primarily, however, the article presents a proposition that warrants further investigation: Does the proliferation of “future making” represent a shift in the dominant metaphor used in the study of futures? Are metaphors of vision and sight (as in “visioning” and “foresight”) increasingly coexisting with metaphors of design and craft (as in “making”)? Is there in fact an ongoing design-ification of futures studies?

The article will revisit the first instances of the term in this journal (section 2) and then move on to explore how the term emerged in other disciplines referenced in this journal (sections 3, 4 and 5). As will be evident, the concept has slightly different connotations – corresponding to different stakes and debates – in each of these fields. The article will then (section 6) discuss how these different connotations of the term have informed the interdisciplinary discussion within futures studies, thus potentially changing the orientation of the field.

A brief note on method: For reasons of brevity, the review focuses on contributions to futures studies published in the *Futures* journal. Contributions in other futures studies journals are outside of the scope of this text. The review also includes uses of the term in other disciplines – anthropology, design studies, organization studies, sociology and STS – that are referenced in *Futures*-based discussion on the concept. Contributions have been compiled through searches of terms “future making” (with and without hyphen) as well as “make”/“making” in

Web of Science, in Google Scholar, and in this journal. (Thus, related debates on, say, the sociology of expectations are outside the scope of this review.) The identified texts were then checked for relevance (in relation to the concept in question), categorized and arranged in scholarly fields and publication dates. They were subsequently read and analyzed with a particular attention placed on the specific use and context of the term within each particular field.

## **2. The first instances of “future-making” in *Futures***

The first article in this journal to reference future making is Patokorpi and Ahvenainen (2009), and this early contribution situates the concept squarely in the context of intra-disciplinary debates on the meaning and purpose of futures studies. Thus, the authors use “future-making” when discussing tensions between descriptive and design-based approaches: While the descriptive approach stipulates that “futures studies should be a ‘science of prediction’”, the latter implies a “proactive future making”, in which “futures studies is an instrument for design, which means that it is an instrument for planning and decision making processes with multilateral participation” (129).

In outlining their abductive design approach, the Patokorpi and Ahvenainen reference Herbert Simon. This makes perfect sense, as the “making” aspect of “future making” can productively be understood through Simon’s (1996) famous distinction between natural sciences and design sciences. While the former merely describes the state of the world (or, in this case, the likely future), the latter devises “courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” (Simon, 1996: 130). A natural scientific approach emphasizes that futures are somehow there to be known, a design science approach emphasizes that futures can be *made*.

Another early contribution within this journal is that of Rossel (2012: 235), which also mobilizes future making in the context of long-standing discussions within futures studies. Thus, the term is used to present a constructivist critique of the Ansoffian tradition of weak signal scanning. Here, the “making” of “future making” should be understood in the context of “sense-making”: The problem of signal scanning is not one of merely registering weak signals, but in analysts’ and organizations’ capacity to make sense of them in the context of biases and extant frames of interpretation.

As such, in these early uses of the concept, “future making” emerged at a time when the field of future studies was moving on from predictive ambitions and positivist assumptions, thus “expung[ing] the impediments of the past” (Sardar, 2010: 177). Indeed, Holopainen and Toivonen (2012) uses the term as shorthand for the metamorphosis of the field: “A change of focus has taken place in futures studies since the late 1980s”, and “the primary object is not to identify the most probable state of affairs in the future” but to generate “preparedness for many different futures and ‘making the future’” (198).

However, during this same period, the term was also mobilized in contributions to *Futures* that opened windows towards developments in adjacent domains, such as design studies, sociology and anthropology. In this category of articles, we find design theorist Tony Fry’s (2011) article on urban design, pointing back to his earlier (1999) work on future-making. There is also sociologist Barbara Adam’s (2011) review of the sociology of Wendell Bell, referencing her own use of the term in Adam and Groves (2007). Similarly, Roberto Poli (2014), references anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s (2013) use of the term. What, then, were

the contexts and stakes of “future making” in those disciplines? The following will discuss these articulations of the concept in a chronological order.

### **3. Future-making in design studies and STS**

Arguably, it is Tony Fry (1999), a design theorist, who presents the first sustained engagement with future making via the dual notions of defuturing and futuring. For Fry (1999: 14), defuturing and futuring are competing “projects of future-making” that oppose each other in the battle of ‘sustain-ability’. His interest in unfolding these opposing future-making projects is to both show how design has been implicated in making the world we inhabit unsustainable, and how design can be re-learned and redirected towards the development of sustainable futures.

Here, the term “defuturing” has two meanings: First, it denotes the name of the present condition of unsustainability. Second, it also denotes a mode of inquiry into that condition to identify the “the actual means by which futures are taken away” (or negated), with a view to creating “an ability to learn to see, read, think and make otherwise” (Fry, 1999: 286).

Futuring, then, emerges as a counterpart possibility to defuturing once the negated futures of our defuturing condition have been revealed and dissected. By using the gerund form, Fry (1999: 141) emphasizes that, contrary to the thinking of futurists, the future is not a void to be filled but an unfolding trajectory ever conditioned by the weight of the past.

Subsequent contributions to design studies present a broader discussion on design as future making, with two major anthologies published in 2014 (Yaleva and Adams, 2014; Ehn, Nilsson and Topgaard, 2014). The former of these does not present a programmatic account

of what future making entails yet highlights how notions of craft may be mobilized when considering how futures are made. While the latter anthology follows a more stringently defined idea of future making, it is not the one proposed by Fry (1999). Ehn, Nilsson and Topgaard (2014) instead reference an STS-based conception of the term, previously introduced by Lucy Suchman, Endre Dányi and Laura Watts (2007).

The STS-infused notion of future making proposed by Suchman and colleagues emerges out of their critique of innovation. In opposition to economics-oriented approaches, they argue that innovation cannot be “measured in terms of the number of ideas that are locked in place through their materialisation as patented artefacts” (Suchman et.al., 2007: 3). Innovations should be evaluated in terms of how they open the possibilities for several alternative material-technological futures. Here, they leverage Andrew Barry’s proposition that inventiveness is “an index of the degree to which an object or practice is associated with opening up questions and possibilities” (Barry, 200: 211, cited by Suchman et.al., 2007). As such, technology may be both inventive and anti-inventive; it may open as well as close future trajectories. Here, the reader may note significant overlaps with Fry’s conception of futuring and defuturing.

#### **4. Future-making in sociology and anthropology**

In sociology, the notion of “future-making” emerges from Barbara Adam’s longstanding work on the sociology of time, more specifically in *Future Matters* (Adam and Groves, 2007). The thrust of this sociological argument hinges on the “uneven relationship” (xiv) between action, knowledge and ethics. Contemporary societies are capable of actions whose consequences stretch far into the future, about which we know very little. Hence the need for an ethics of

such future-making. Thus, Adam and Grove's early contribution focuses on "the problematic relation whereby current future-making extends far beyond any capacity to match our concern and responsibility to the temporal reach of our actions". (203)

This sociological engagement with the question of future making can productively be understood as a part of its wider concern with modernity. In this account, the rise of modernity produces a shift in the perceived ownership of the future. In recognizing that Gods do not make futures, the moderns construed themselves as producers and managers of an open future. In particular, "experts in future making" (80) took precedence, "producing futures to blueprints". Therefore, the future that moderns abstractly imagine as empty and theirs to make, is in fact getting crowded – "a territory congested with intended and unintended consequences of our own and predecessors' dreams and desires" (Adam, 2010: 367). Future making begets future taking.

For these reasons, the sociological account of future making can be tied to a particular understanding of power. Urry (2016) suggests that power involves "power to determine – to produce – the future" (17). Alternatively put, "power should be viewed as significantly a matter of uneven future-making" (189). The uneven distribution of such power can play out within communities and nations, but also in the relation between the rich and poor world.

The theme of uneven social distribution of capacities to shape and imagine futures also features prominently in Appadurai's (2013) anthropological account of future making. However, if the sociological engagement with future making hinges on classic sociological notions of action and power, the anthropological approach hinges on the central anthropological notion of culture. Thus, Appadurai's work reorients the gaze of the

anthropologist – from culture as understood through “the lens of pastness”, towards a “general point of view about humans as future-makers and of futures as cultural facts”. (298)

## **5. Future-making in organization studies**

In the field of organization studies, one of the major contributions to the fleshing out of future-making as a distinct concept is provided by Comi and Whyte (2018). Their contribution is situated within a broader ‘practice turn’ in organizational analysis (Simpson 2009; Whittington, 2006), which spawned influential research agendas and approaches attentive to the everyday doings of organizational actors, notable among which is strategy-as-practice (Johnson, Langley, Melin, and Whittington, 2007; Li and Jarzabkowski, 2025). Before the practice turn, research on strategy—the foremost future-oriented management practice—had been dominated by economics-based frameworks wherein “the future” tended to feature as a deferred stable state or temporal domain that could be more or less known or anticipated (Doganova and Kornberger, 2021). With the advent of strategy-as-practice, the focus shifted from strategy as calculated image of, and planned conduit to, “the future” towards strategizing as a situated activity in organizations, which opened the way to investigations, such as that of Comi and Whyte (2018), aimed at unpacking the processes and mechanisms through which futures are imagined and made in strategy practice. One could argue that the practice turn in strategy research, then, represents a shift from a prescriptive ambition to envision, perhaps even force, “the future” towards a more descriptive ambition to understand how futures are made and materialised in practice.

Drawing on an ethnographic study at an architectural firm, Comi and Whyte (2018) propose “future-making” as a fruitful conceptual category for the analysis of how practitioners orient

themselves towards the future, distinguishing it from other existing categories, namely foreseeing, future perfect thinking, and wayfinding. In their account, future-making represents a distinct and alternative perspective in that it foregrounds the crucial role of practices of making that support the imagining and stabilizing of the future through concrete material means, such as prototyping and visualizing. Since then, organizational researchers have taken up and broadened the concept, showing how future-making is “fundamentally entangled within textures of practical knowledge” in the context of entrepreneurship (Thompson and Byrne, 2022: 247), or further conceptualizing it as a form of inquiry that entails “making sense of possible and probable futures, and evaluating, negotiating and giving form to preferred ones” (Whyte, Comi and Mosca, 2022: 1). In fact, recent contributions to *Futures* that engage with future making tend to do so with reference to this organizational literature.

## **6. Concluding discussion**

This concluding section will explore what the recent interest in future making may mean for the *Futures* readership. First, it is important to note that the concept of future making has emerged in different ways in design studies, sociology, STS, anthropology, and organization studies. As one might expect, each discipline has discussed future making in relation to its own key concepts, such as innovation (STS), power (sociology), and culture (anthropology). For scholars working in the interdisciplinary field of futures studies, it is useful to keep these divergent stakes in mind when engaging with contributions within these adjacent fields.

When it comes to the intra-disciplinary uses of the term, there are two general points to consider. First, it seems the notion of future making has served particular intra-disciplinary purposes, with early *Futures* contributions using the term when making constructivist arguments. Second, it seems more recent contributions to *Futures* tend to make use of the

organization studies reading of the term, thus importing a practice orientation, as well as a keen interest in the artifacts involved in the making of futures.

Indeed, the use of future making in the context of organization studies is particularly interesting. Whereas the field of strategy has historically moved from prescriptive approaches to more descriptive ones, the recent interest in future making also opens the door to more interventionist approaches. Indeed, in recent contributions to the debate on the “rediscovery” of the future in sociology, sociologists tend to underscore the interventionist opportunities granted by the term future making (Halford & Southerton, 2023; Esposito, 2024).

This, together with the designerly lineage of the term, suggests that future making implies another metaphor of the study of futures. This metaphor can be described in terms of design (note the reference to Simon’s “design sciences” above), as well as in terms of craft (in the sense of making). Thus, material practices have become front-staged. Conversely, this implies that the idea of “seeing” the future – as in “foresight” and “visioning” – is now less dominant as the key metaphor for futures studies.

The prospect of an ongoing shift in the dominant metaphor – from seeing to design and craft – warrants further investigation. What does this shift mean for the field? Is the composition of the scholarly community around futures studies changing? Is the field increasingly populated by scholars in – or influenced by – design? In short, is there a design-ification of futures studies underway?

Here, it is tempting to compare the rise of future making to that of “design thinking”. During the past twenty odd years, designerly methods have informed the theory and practice of

business innovation, all under the umbrella term “design thinking” whose popularity seems to have dimmed in recent times. Today, future making – both as a concept and a set of practices – looks set to follow a similar trajectory, though in proximity to ideas and practices related to foresight.

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