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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 related disciplines. Specifically, it surveys articles in this journal and charts the extra-futures studies interventions that these contributions cite. In so doing, the article explores the cross-disciplinary roots and stakes of the concept. The text suggests that the recent popularity of future making within *Futures* signals a new tendency within futures studies: Metaphorics of design and craft are challenging the dominance of metaphorics of vision.

1. Introduction

The concept of “future making” is making waves. Indeed, a quick search in 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 academic disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, design studies, and organization studies. During this time, allusions to future making have also become considerably more prevalent in this journal. While there are no instances of “future making” in the first forty years of its existence (1968–2008), it has since then featured in a total of 87 articles, with 25 of them being published in the 2025 volumes of *Futures*. Four out of the five articles engaging with the concept have been published during the past five years (2021–2025).

This short communication briefly surveys these interventions dealing with future making, seeking to provide a rapid response to the increased prevalence of the concept. It explores three questions: First, what is the extent of this increased prevalence? Second, how is the concept mobilized in contributions to the *Futures* journal? Third, given the multi-disciplinary orientation of the journal, what meanings and connotations of the term are imported from nearby disciplines in the social sciences? In inquiring into these questions, the article uses the *Futures* publication record as an entry point to explore the different connotations of future making. Finally, the text will ask a series of questions that warrant further investigation: Does the proliferation of “future making” represent a shift in the metaphorics used in the study of futures? Are metaphorics of vision and sight (as in “visioning” and “foresight”) increasingly coexisting with metaphorics of design and craft (as in “making”)?

The article will first briefly outline how the *Futures* articles on future making have been compiled, read and analyzed (Section 2). Next, it will review the first instances of the term in this journal (Section 3), and then move on to explore how the compiled *Futures* articles have mobilized ideas from sociology and anthropology (Section 4), design studies (Section 5), and organization studies (Section 6). As will be evident, the concept has different connotations – corresponding to different stakes and debates – in each of these fields. Finally, the article will discuss how these different connotations of the term have informed the interdisciplinary discussion

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within futures studies (Section 7), thus potentially changing the orientation of the field.

2. A note on method

Structured as a short communication, this survey of the literature on future making focuses on contributions published in the *Futures* journal from 1968 to 2025. The corpus of articles was compiled in the following manner: First, a search for *Futures* articles containing “future making” (with and without a hyphen) was conducted. At the time of the search, these strings yielded 119 articles, with the earliest published in 1971. One of the articles (a pre-print) was removed from the corpus since it would not make it to publication during 2025. The articles were then assessed based on whether the text engaged with the concept of future making, or whether the search produced a false match (eg. simply featuring the string “... future, making...”). The resulting corpus of 87 articles (see appendix) were then arranged by date (see Table 1 below) and examined with a view to tracing the referenced origin of the term in the article.

The articles in the corpus were read and analyzed, starting with the earliest contributions, thus tracing the historical emergence of different meanings attributed to future making. This approach implied identifying other sources that were cited alongside the term “future making”. In so doing, influences were identified from within futures studies, as well as from adjacent fields (sociology, anthropology, design studies, and organization studies). These adjacent fields in turn served as analytical categories. Though formally outside of the corpus, commonly reoccurring references in adjacent fields were studied, with a view to understanding the original context of use. Readings and interpretations were shared among both authors.

3. The first instances of “future making” in *Futures*

The first article in this journal to engage with the concept of “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, Patokorpi and Ahvenainen (2009) 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 Rosset (2012: 235), which also mobilizes future making in the context of long-standing discussions within futures studies. Here, future making is used to present a constructivist critique of the Ansoffian tradition of weak signal scanning. Accordingly, 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.

These connotations to the term “making” feature earlier in the publication history of *Futures*. For instance, the work of futures studies scholar Mika Mannermaa is referenced in more recent contributions about future making (Veenman et al., 2023; Veenman and Kaufmann, 2025). Indeed, while Mannermaa (1986) stops short of using the precise term “future making”, he is nevertheless very close to it: In stating that “futures research is basically a normative activity” (659), he suggests that futures scholars should embrace this fact and recognize “the element of ‘making the future’ made possible by the contingent nature of the future” (664).

As such, early uses of the concept “future making” emerged at a time when the field of futures 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) use 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, particularly sociology and anthropology. In this category of articles in the corpus, we find sociologist Barbara Adam’s (2011) review of the sociology of Wendell Bell. Similarly, the corpus contains Roberto Poli’s (2014) mobilization of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s (2013) use of the term. What, then, were the contexts and stakes of “future making” in those disciplines?

4. Sociology and anthropology: power as uneven future making

In sociology, the notion of “future making” emerges from Barbara Adam’s longstanding engagement with 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).

Table 1
Number of future making articles, in absolute numbers, published in *Futures*, by year.

Year of publication	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Number of articles	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	3	1	8	1	11	8	11	15	25

This sociological engagement with future making can productively be understood in relation to classical categories such as modernity and power. The rise of modernity produces a shift in the perceived ownership of the future. As moderns construed themselves as managers of an open future, “experts in future making” took precedence, “producing futures to blueprints” (80). 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). Therefore, as Urry (2016) suggests, 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 theme of uneven social distribution of capacities to shape and imagine futures also features prominently in Appadurai’s (2013) anthropological account of future making.

To the extent that issues of power and agency feature in the *Futures* debates on future making, it reflects these sociological and anthropological concerns. Indeed, these influences are evident within the corpus of articles, with references to Adam, Groves, Urry, and Appadurai becoming more prevalent in the late 2010s and early 2020 s. However, during this same period, there is also a parallel development. As we shall see in the next section, the term is also used with references to design studies.

5. Design studies: future making against defuturing

The first article within the corpus to reference future making via design studies is Duggan et al., (2017), and in the early 2020 s, several articles in the corpus reference design scholars. Here, two major edited volumes on future making stand out: Yelavich and Adams (2014), and Ehn, Nilsson and Topgaard (2014). Some of this work – notably Tonkinwise (2014), cited in the corpus by Brassett (2021) – highlights the influence of design scholar Tony Fry.

Arguably, it is Fry (1999) who presents the first sustained engagement with future making. Even though it is outside of the corpus identified for this article, Fry (2011) references this work in his *Futures* article on urban design. Fry (1999: 14) deploys the twin terms of defuturing and futuring – the first one denoting the closing off of possible futures, and the second one being a “project of future-making” that opposes the first (cf. Esposito, 2024). Through these terms, Fry shows 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.

Crucially, 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). Due to the influence of Fry’s work, the design studies-influenced engagement with future making tends to also engage with the idea of (de)futuring: For a recent survey of this literature, see Celik and Kaya (2025), featuring in the corpus.

6. Organization studies: future making as practice

As mentioned above, the sociological, anthropological and design studies-influenced readings have been central to the *Futures*-based discussion on future making. More recently, however, there has been an increased predominance of references to work from organization studies. This body of work often focuses on future-making *practices* – see for instance Priebe et al. (2025) and Schütz de Rivera, L. et al. (2025) in the corpus. This is because the key contributions about future making in organization studies – such as Comi and Whyte (2018), Thompson and Byrne (2022), Whyte, Comi and Mosca (2022), and Wenzel (2022), all cited in the corpus – are situated within a broader ‘practice turn’ in organizational analysis.

This turn implies an increased attentiveness to the everyday doings of organizational actors. 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 known or anticipated (Doganova and Kornberger, 2021). With the advent of strategy-as-practice, the focus shifted away from strategy as calculated image of “the future”, towards strategizing as a situated activity in organizations. This paved the way for investigations into how futures are “made” and materialized in strategy practice, foregrounding concrete material means, such as prototyping and visualizing (Comi and Whyte, 2018).

Recent contributions in the corpus (Schütz de Rivera et al., 2025) leverage this practice orientation, while at the same time highlighting another aspect of the organization studies treatment of future making which is more normative in character, with future making understood as “making sense of possible and probable futures, and evaluating, negotiating and giving form to preferred ones” (Whyte, Comi and Mosca, 2022: 1). The tension between these approaches – and what it may mean for the *Futures* community – will be discussed below.

7. Concluding discussion

This brief survey of the future making literature published in *Futures* has highlighted different findings. First of all, as shown in Section 2, there has been a marked rise of articles referencing the concept. Second, in terms of content, the earliest uses of the term future making referenced scholars within the futures studies field. However, over time, influences from other disciplines fed into the conversation, bringing with them key stakes and concerns inherited from these disciplines. For scholars working in the interdisciplinary field of futures studies, it is useful to keep these divergent stakes in mind.

How is the remarkable emergence of the future making concept affecting debates within futures studies, as evidenced by the *Futures* publication record? Here, there are three points to consider. First, the notion of future making has served particular intra-disciplinary purposes, with early *Futures* contributions using the term when making constructivist arguments. Second, the recent uptick in organization studies-influenced readings hints at a stronger practice orientation, as well as a keen interest in the artifacts (such as

prototypes) involved in the making of futures. However, and this is the third point, the debate around future making in organizations has surfaced a tension between such a practice orientation (Wenzel, Cabantous and Koch, 2025) and increasing efforts to refine and delimit the concept of future making by conceptualizing it in more normative terms as a form of value-based inquiry. The latter approach emphasizes that future making should represent “an emancipatory inquiry aimed at imagining and reifying desirable futures” (Comi, Mosca & Whyte, 2025: 2467), which signals a lurch towards more interventionist approaches. Thus, not only do references to future making imply a closer attention to how actors in the field engage in the ‘making’ of futures – it is also the case that the future making approach invites a form of engaged research where researchers themselves partake in discerning and bringing about desirable futures.

Taken together, these three points suggest that the literature on future making invokes a particular metaphor for engaging with futures studies. Through concepts like “foresight” and “visioning”, the field of futures studies has traditionally been tied to the metaphor of “seeing” the future. With future making, another metaphor is invoked, with connotations to design (as understood through Simon’s “design sciences” above), as well as craft (in the sense of making, foregrounding practices that materialize futures).

This prospect of a potential metaphor shift – from not just seeing, but also designing and crafting futures – warrants further investigation. What would such a tendency mean for futures studies, within and outside of the *Futures* journal? Is the composition of the scholarly community around the journal changing? Is the field increasingly populated by scholars in design studies, or by scholars and practitioners influenced by designerly perspectives? (See Navarro Aguiar and Palmås, 2025; Navarro Aguiar and Palmås, forthcoming, for parallel cases.) In any case, it is quite likely that this trend will continue – we have yet to reach peak future making.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ulises Navarro Aguiar: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.
Karl Palmås: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Neither of the authors have any interests to declare.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.futures.2026.103877](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2026.103877).

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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