

DESIGN FUTURESAPING

Poster by Anab Jain, Jon Ardern and Justin Pickard, Superflux

So, we've got a networked, interactive, increasingly speculative futurity. It's got user-centric Google maps rather than officially certified paper road maps. It's not some Marxist road to utopia, it's a navigable global sprawl.'

Bruce Sterling, 'Designer Futurescape', Make Magazine 18

DESIGN FUTURESAPING?

Design futurescaping is a hybrid practice pioneered by Superflux, in which the tools and insights of critical design are deployed in the service of a rich, nuanced, and collaborative form of foresight research and communication.

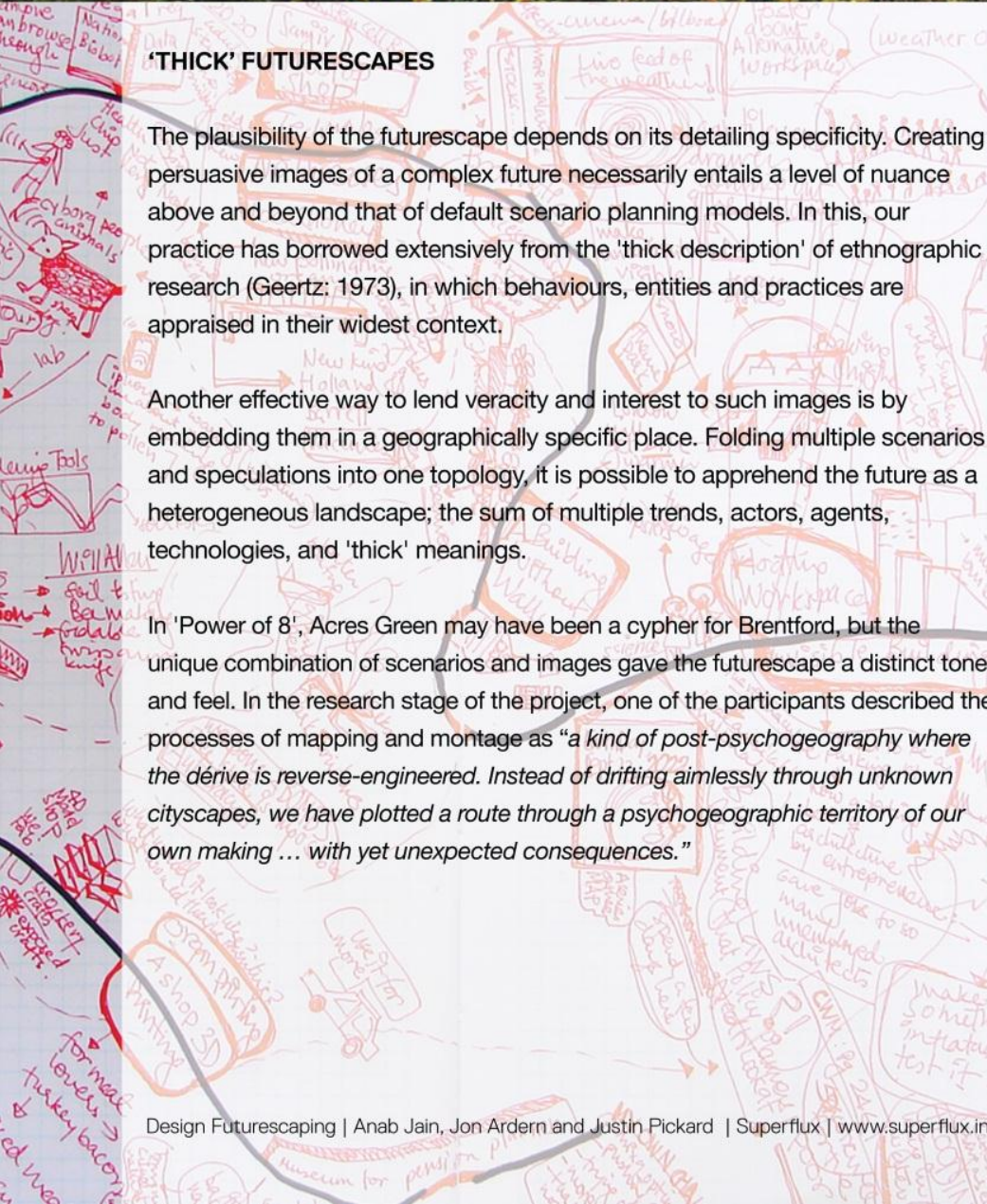
We use collaboration, co-creation, and storytelling to collate fragments of an unevenly-distributed futurity. Embracing the organic, the messy, the partial and the partisan, these fragments of the future are fuel for visions of a hybrid, humane alternative to the deterministic, policy-driven, 'business-as-usual' consensus future.

'THICK' FUTURESAPES

The plausibility of the futurescape depends on its detailing specificity. Creating persuasive images of a complex future necessarily entails a level of nuance above and beyond that of default scenario planning models. In this, our practice has borrowed extensively from the 'thick description' of ethnographic research (Geertz: 1973), in which behaviours, entities and practices are appraised in their widest context.

Another effective way to lend veracity and interest to such images is by embedding them in a geographically specific place. Folding multiple scenarios and speculations into one topology, it is possible to apprehend the future as a heterogeneous landscape; the sum of multiple trends, actors, agents, technologies, and 'thick' meanings.

In 'Power of 8', Acres Green may have been a cypher for Brentford, but the unique combination of scenarios and images gave the futurescape a distinct tone and feel. In the research stage of the project, one of the participants described the processes of mapping and montage as "a kind of post-psychogeography where the *dérive* is reverse-engineered. Instead of drifting aimlessly through unknown cityscapes, we have plotted a route through a psychogeographic territory of our own making ... with yet unexpected consequences."



CASE STUDY: POWER OF 8

superflux.in / work / power-8

"The Power of 8" was an experimental futures project, using collaborative design methods to explore and highlight concerns around climate change, food production, and the environment. Through a series of three intensive workshops, and later a wider public engagement phase, we adopted a narrative approach to building a collective scenario, representing the possible futures of Brentford in London, through the fictional community ecosystem of Acres Green.

NETWORKED FUTURESAPES

This holistic, ethnographic approach lends depth and nuance to our visions, but, more than that, it is a necessary tool with which to appraise and describe a future ever-more deeply entangled in inter- and intra-dependent networks of people, artefacts, systems, and services.

Writing in the early 1990s, Bruno Latour used a copy of the newspaper as fodder for his description of Actor-Network Theory, encountering this networked world through the news stories of the day:

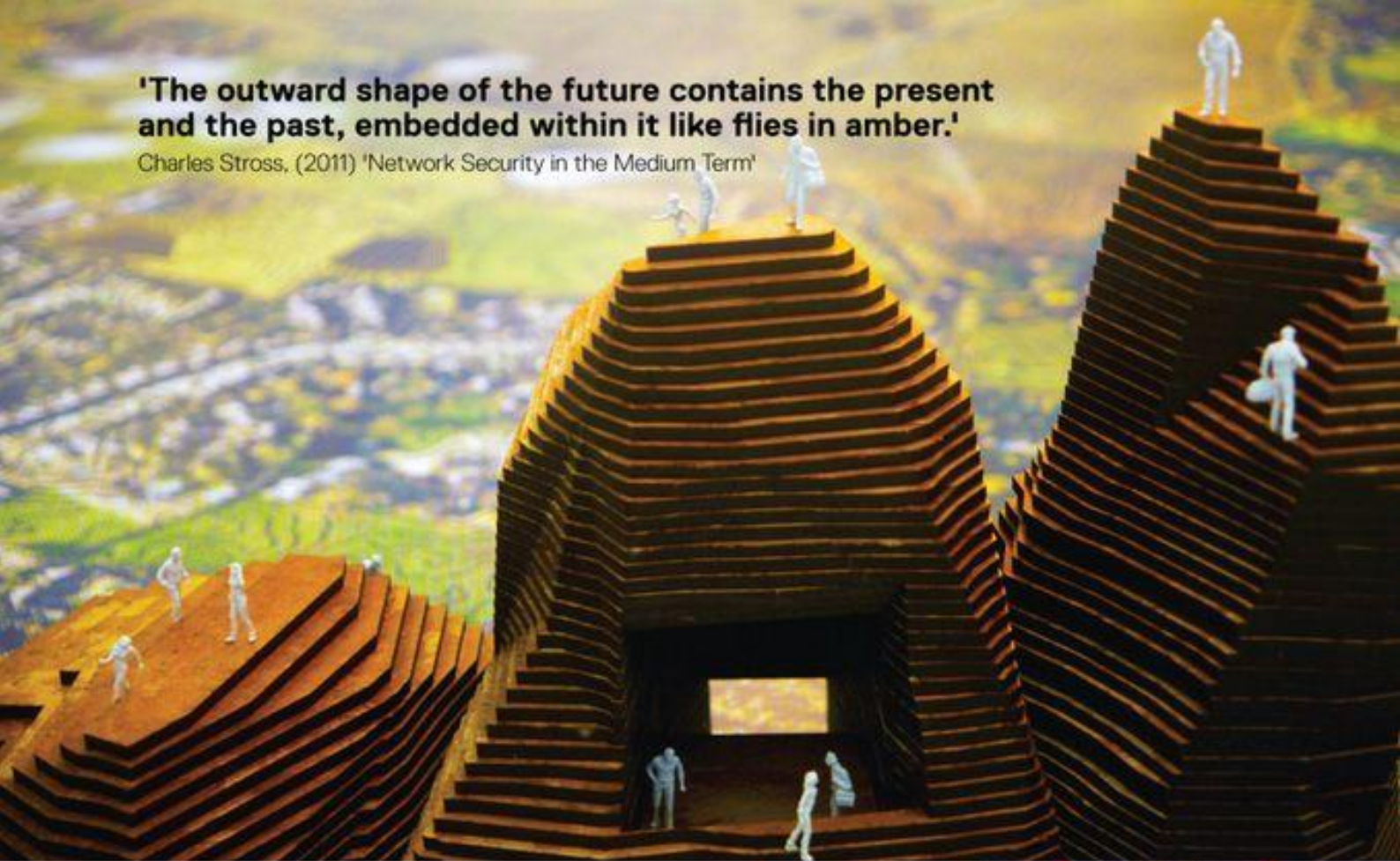
'On page eight, there is a story about computers and chips controlled by the Japanese; on page nine, about the right to keep frozen embryos; on page ten, about a forest burning, its columns of smoke carrying off rare species that some naturalists would like to protect; on page eleven, there are whales wearing collars fitted with radio tracking devices; also on page eleven, there is a slag heap in northern France, a symbol of the exploitation of workers, that has just been classified as an ecological preserve because of the rare flora it has been fostering!' (Latour, 1993)

As in our explorations of design futurescaping, the totality resists representation. Only by anchoring this hybrid, complex reality in the local, the specific, can we begin to grasp its meaning and significance.



'The outward shape of the future contains the present and the past, embedded within it like flies in amber.'

Charles Stross, (2011) 'Network Security in the Medium Term'



FUTURESCAPING AS MONTAGE

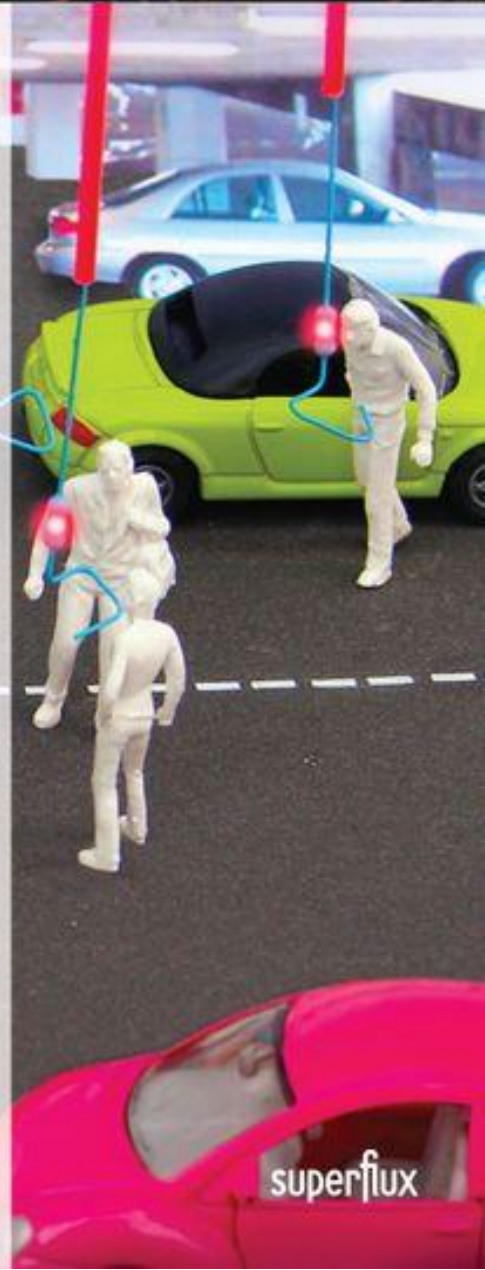
In its visions of the future, science fiction literature has tended to fall too easily into outright utopia or dystopia. Our lived experience of the everyday tends towards the ambiguous and the ambivalent. How can we reconcile the need to reflect the mundane with the possibilities and potentialities of the coming decades?

In design futurescaping, we have begun to answer this question through the techniques of montage, combining multiples perspectives, media, and modes of presentation to capture and present visions of the future, assembled from fragments of the present and past.

On the methodologies of montage, as Lebbeus Woods notes;

'we have not seen much use of photomontage as a design tool since the work of the Russian Constructivists, the Bauhaus and, somewhat more recently, Archigram. It has the immediate advantage of employing the familiar and, by selection and rearrangement, transforming it into the new. At the very least, this enables us to see new potential in the existing and obviates the need to begin – in the usual utopian sense – from scratch.' (Woods, 2010)

In our design futurescaping projects, we have made extensive use of this kind of montage, combining video sketches, graphic mock-ups and physical artefacts and design fictions to hint at a totality that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.



CASE STUDY: LITTLE BRINKLAND

superflux.in/work/little-brinkland

Following three inhabitants of a fictional neighbourhood in the then-future world of 2012, this project envisaged a plausible future for our working lives. Extrapolating from contemporary trends in emerging technologies, economic dis-intermediation, and demographic shifts, we developed a cluster of challenging, speculative scenarios, layered in space.



FUTURESCAPING FOR ENGAGEMENT

As a practice, design futurescaping is also predicated on the need for public engagement, and we have sought to reflect this by embedding consultations and co-creation sessions directly into the structure of the design process.

Certainly, drawing on diverse perspectives and visions can present its own challenges. Where participants in a conventional design workshop would understand the reason for their participation, their aims and responsibilities, in something as potentially open-ended as design futurescaping, there are many unknowns. The building of trust is a crucial part of the process, as collaborations focus in, negotiating their way towards a shared vision. As participants engaged in conversation and brainstorming, there was an increased awareness of contrasting values and ideologies entailed in their own practice.

On another level, there are allowances made to open the design process to the general public, inviting them to contribute through the collaborative annotation of poster templates, physical prototyping in lego and fibreboard, and, more broadly, by soliciting suggestions at 'open day' events and through social media. With a strong emphasis on the agency afforded by notions of DIY futures and open toolkits, we project forward from extant trends, technologies and processes, devising believable prototypes to engage the public in a direct and stimulating way.

Individual artefacts and design fictions act as anchors for the futurescape, providing a catalyst for public discourse and debate. Necessarily speculative, at a semiotic level, they operate through connotation, mobilising a web of links, topics, and associations. Here, they act, first, at the level of the tangible, showcased in exhibitions and events, later experiencing a mediated afterlife in digital archives, websites, and social media.

