SOME ARCHAEOLOGICAL NOTES ON FUTURES STUDIES

The Janus Maneuver

Hindsight, foresight, and futures studies

Everyone, it seems, is a futurist now. Here are some loosely gathered thoughts on why an archaeology of design may be a missing foundation. These are notes – so expect inaccuracies and mistakes of memory (hopefully minor).

After Janus – the divine principle of looking both back and forward to gain perspective on the threshold between past and future.

The future continues to grow – as a matter of concern. Strategic foresight and scenario planning, once the fringe pursuit of Cold War strategists and oil-company planners, has gone thoroughly mainstream. The World Economic Forum and the big consultancies now call foresight essential rather than nice-to-have. The 2025 *Growing Foresight* study, produced with the World Futures Studies Federation, counts a swelling profession of practitioners; World Futures Day fills a twenty-four-hour global conversation; "Chief Futurist" has become a plausible job title; and a small industry of trend reports and scenario decks circulates through boardrooms and conference halls, and beyond.

I welcome this. For most of my career the long view had to be smuggled into strategy under cover of darkness; that it now walks in the front door is good news. I have spent nearly 50 years years looking in what is taken as another temporal direction, backwards, though more accurately, as I have always been concerned to stress, archaeologists like myself actually work with remains and with a view to the future. Here, then is a friendly, archaeological perspective on this popular field: an appreciation, a concern, and a foundation.

What the field of futures studies actually is

"Futures studies" is not one thing but several braided traditions, and it helps to untangle them. There is **forecasting**, the oldest reflex – the attempt to say what *will* happen, refined by Herman Kahn and the RAND analysts into something more disciplined than prophecy. There is **scenario planning**, which Pierre Wack and his colleagues at Royal Dutch Shell turned in the 1970s into a craft of structured imagination: not predicting the future but rehearsing several of them, so that an

organisation is not ambushed by the one that arrives. There is the now-ubiquitous **futures cone**, first sketched by Trevor Hancock and Clement Bezold and popularised by Joseph Voros, with its gradation of the possible, the plausible, the probable and the preferable — four words that have done more to discipline loose talk about "the future" than any amount of theory. There are **Jim Dator's laws** from the Hawaii school: the future cannot be predicted, because it does not yet exist; but alternative futures can be imagined and preferred futures envisioned — and any useful idea about the future should at first appear ridiculous.

Closer to my own practice, there is the work of my colleague Riel Miller at UNESCO on **anticipation and futures literacy** — the insistence that "using the future" is a *capability* to be cultivated rather than a forecast to be purchased, and that, well handled, uncertainty becomes a resource rather than a threat. There is **speculative and critical design** — Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, the design-fiction practitioners — who make futures *material*: objects and props you can argue with. And there is Sohail Inayatullah's **causal layered analysis**, which drills past the headline "litany" of trends, through systems and worldviews, down to the layer of myth and metaphor — and warns that most of us are quietly living a "used future" borrowed second-hand from someone else.

To its credit, the field of futures studies also keeps up a vigorous self-critique. Ziauddin Sardar's provocation that "futures studies is futureless" — that it bears its fruit in the present — still stings productively, as does his long-standing worry, and that of today's decolonising-futures work, about who gets to *colonise* tomorrow. The best of all this loosens the grip of the present, makes uncertainty workable, and widens the space of the thinkable. I have no quarrel with it. A good deal of my own consulting lives happily inside this tent.

An archaeologist's concern

And yet. Spend time in this field and you notice something strange in a discipline supposedly devoted to time: it has almost no past. And the concept of temporality is extraordinarily The arrow points relentlessly forward. The past, when it appears at all, is a launch pad to be escaped — a baseline, a trend line to extend, a legacy to disrupt. At its weakest the field becomes what its own best thinkers warn against: extrapolation in a smart suit, the trend deck mistaken for thought, foresight sold as a product. There is a tyranny of the new in it, an assumption

that the future is mostly a matter of what is arriving rather than what endures.

What is missing is hindsight — and not as nostalgia, nor as history ("what happened in the past"). Even the field's sharpest anti-predictionists, who rightly insist the future cannot be foretold, rarely treat the *past* as a live resource for making futures. They look forward without looking back. To an archaeologist who insists that we always work with remains, this is a professional irritation, and an opportunity. For it turns out that the thing the field most lacks — a worked-out philosophy of time, materiality, and how knowledge is made — is exactly what four decades of archaeological theory and practice have been building.

A foundation: an archaeology of design

The Janus we work under is not a logo applied to a consulting playbook. Janus, the Roman god of doorways, was given two faces because you cannot pass cleanly through a threshold while looking only one way. Behind that image lies a research paradigm with a long pedigree, and it is worth setting out, because it is what makes archaeologically-informed foresight more than design foresight with a history lesson attached [Link] [Link].

It some ways, it began in the 1980s, in two books written with Chris Tilley – the “red and black” books, as they got called, that helped turn archaeology from its

soft humanities and social-science orthodoxies toward something more situated and plural. The point was to model human societies as long-term genealogies of complex, living, adaptive systems, and to put *agency* – the capacity to make a difference, or not, in the ongoing work of worldbuilding (better, "worlding") – at the centre. That move carried a sharp critique of teleology that I have pressed ever since: the human story has no direction, no purpose, no end. There was no agricultural revolution and no urban revolution; the ancient city-state is a "zombie concept"; technology has never, on its own, instigated change; and modernity is not the destination toward which history was traveling. If the past was not a march toward the present, the future is not a march onward from it. Foresight, on this footing, is grounded in non-linear complexity and path-dependency, not in the extension of a curve.

The second layer in this archaeology is the deceptively simple proposition at the heart of *Experiencing the Past* (1992) and *The Archaeological Imagination* (2012 and extended in 2019): archaeologists do not recover the past; they work with *what remains*. And what remains is not "back there," over and done. Multiple pasts are around us now – archival traces that behave like memory, haunting, orienting, constantly reframing our lives and the stories we tell to make sense of things. This is the *actuality* of remains. Hindsight, then, is not background; it is live material. An organisation, a community, a landscape is a deposit of present pasts, and to design its future is to work *with* those remains, not to leave them behind. This is the precise sense in which foresight begins in hindsight.

The third layer is ontological. With Bjørnar Olsen, Christopher Witmore and Tim Webmoor I argued for a *symmetrical archaeology* – symmetry between people and things, past and present, the human and the non-human – set out in *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* (2012), with a lineage running through Whitehead and Bergson, Michel Serres and Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. Just as we, working with what remains, craft knowledge and build our world, so people in the past, in their dealings with things, built theirs. For foresight this yields a material, more-than-human account of organisations: "corporate DNA," heritage, infrastructure and the life of artefacts are not metaphors but the actual stuff of which institutional futures are made. Futures are material assemblages, which is why prototypes and objects, not only forecasts, do the real work.

The fourth layer concerns how knowledge is made. In *Experiencing the Past* (1992),

in *The Craft of Archaeology* (with Randall McGuire, 1996) and the conversations gathered in *Archaeology in the Making* (2013), I made and then documented the case that archaeology is a *messy pragmatics* – against method, immersed in the contingencies of funding, careers and institutional politics, far from the tidy procedure of the textbooks. Knowledge is crafted, not discovered; we are part of what we seek to understand. This is the root of the term we now use for the whole approach – *creative pragmatics* [Link] – and of its corollary for foresight: futures are *made and rehearsed*, in workshops, scenarios and prototypes, not predicted. The scenario is not a lesser substitute for a forecast; it is how futures-knowledge is properly built.

A fifth layer is easy to misread. I am highly skeptical of *narrative*, because narrative typically locks things down and stops us imagining how things might be otherwise. *Storytelling* – the performance of more-than-narrative that animates the archive – is another matter. The concept framing is of telling stories *with* the past, not *of* it. A current project with Gary Devore (*Antiquity: speculative scenarios*) conveys ancient lifeworlds not through a single storyline but through some forty-five personae and scenarios: speculative fabulation grounded in evidence. This is close kin to Inayatullah's myth layer and to Dator's alternative futures, but it brings to them an archaeologist's craft of layered time.

And a sixth layer: performance. From the early 1990s, thirty years of collaboration with Mike Pearson and the arts company Brith Gof (and its other art director Cliff McLucas) produced *theatre/archaeology* – the rearticulation of remains as real-time event – and *deep mapping*, the layered description of multitemporal places that reaches back to the chorography of the early-modern antiquarians. In the Reinwardt Lecture of 2012, "Let me tell you about Hadrian's Wall," I argued that heritage itself is best understood as *performance design* – staging, dramaturgy, props, player-performers. For foresight this means futures that are staged, prototyped and experienced; the scenario-story and the design sprint are forms of theatre in which a community rehearses what it might become.

A bridge – speculative-design

These foundational layers were already doing futures-facing work in the museum more than a decade ago – and this is the bridge that connects my archaeology directly to the speculative-design wing of futures studies. Between 2012 and 2016 at Museum

Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, curator Annemartine van Kesteren ran a remarkable series of exhibitions, *Design Column*: each took a live matter of public concern and gathered works of speculative design that proposed ways of dealing with it. My role was to supply the commentary – the essay that set each concern in a longer frame – and the series contributed to the catalogue collection *Changemakers: The Transformative Power of Design*.

The point is precise. Speculative design – the tradition of Dunne and Raby, of design fiction – is now one of the most generative quarters of futures studies, exactly because it makes futures material and debatable. My experience at Boijmans shows an archaeology of design already curating and theorising that practice from the inside, and bringing to it what design-futures often lacks: a critical, historical, material depth – the long view that asks not only "what might we provoke?" but "what remains, what returns, what becomes of what was, what is this a continuation of?" It was, in effect, archaeologically-informed speculative design before the label existed.

Archaeological foresight – why this is distinctive

Pull the layers together and they form a single philosophical geology, which Connie Svabo and I, with colleagues Tamara Carleton and Chunfang Zhou have named *creative pragmatics* – the hybrid of scholarship and art, the performance of knowledge, applied beyond the academy as "applied archaeology, applied humanities." [Link] What makes it a distinctive, arguably unique, contribution to futures studies is not that no one else attends to the past – some do – but that here the philosophical geology is *native and fully worked out*, while remaining dynamic, in metamorphic process. The field's better instincts gesture toward exactly these things without grounding them. Riel Miller's anticipation wants the future used rather than predicted; an archaeology of knowledge-as-craft tells us what that means and how to do it. Speculative design wants futures made material; the archaeology of things supplies the ontology and the historical depth. Inayatullah's myth layer wants the deep story; archaeological mythography is a foundational practice of telling stories with layered time that reaches back beyond early modernity into antiquity and even prehistory. Dator and the futures cone insist the future cannot be predicted; an archaeology of non-linear complexity explains why, and *what to do instead*.

Archaeologically-informed design foresight, in short, is a distinct paradigm in which hindsight and foresight are a single operation — the Janus operation — and in which futures are crafted from the material remains of the present.

Some summary thoughts

Compressed into a working creed — here are some pointers for a futures practice that remembers it has a past:

1. **Foresight begins in hindsight.** You cannot pass through a threshold looking only one way. Researching where we have come from is not a preface to strategy; it is part of it.

2. **The future cannot be predicted — only prepared for, imagined, and rehearsed.** Treat anyone selling certainty about tomorrow with the suspicion they have earned.

3. **Treat the future as material, not forecast.** It is something to be made, prototyped, curated and inhabited — modelled in stories and objects you can argue with — not a curve to be extended.

4. **Anticipation is a capability to cultivate, not a product to buy.** The aim is to make a community more futures-literate, not to hand it a report.

5. **Mind the deep time.** Respect path dependency, the long present, and the slow variables that outlast every quarter's trend.

6. **An organisation's past is its richest design resource** — its material culture, heritage, accumulated know-how, its "corporate DNA." Read the deposit before

redesigning the site.

7. **Ask whose future.** Futures are plural and political; an honest practice widens the circle rather than colonising tomorrow on behalf of the few.

8. **Strategy is kairos as much as chronos.** Cultivate the judgement to seize the ripe moment, not merely the analysis to map the trend.

9. **Grow futures literacy in communities, not just forecasts in boardrooms.** The durable work is shared, distributed and learned together.

The future has a past

Janus presided over beginnings — over January, over doorways — precisely because this divine principle understood that every threshold has two sides, and that you orient yourself by holding them together. The popular field of futures studies has taught a great many people to look up and out, to widen their sense of the possible; that is a real gain. My small, stubborn contribution is to ask them also to look back and down — into the ground, the archive, the accumulated material life of the institutions and communities they hope to change. The future, it turns out, has a past, and treating that past as a live resource rather than dead weight may be the most practical foresight of all.

Janus as Venus. Giulio Romano (early 16th century).