

Forecasting the futures of Argentina's Cities via the Literary Method of Urban Design

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Alan Marshall ¹

Abstract

This article applies a rather creative method, that is the Literary Method of Urban Design, to forecast the futures of three Argentinian cities: Tigre, Buenos Aires, and Mendoza. As per the Method's proposed processes, these futures are uncovered through the speculative help of key literary works of fiction. These works of fiction are: Leopoldo Lugones' *Strange Forces*, José Mármol's *Amalia*, and Antonio di Benedetto's *Animal World*. Using scenario art (in the form of graphic illustration of a cityscape), the study envisions how these cities might evolve in the far future in response to shifting social problems, politics and technologies. The Literary Method of Urban Design assumes that literature serves as a keen and nuanced speculative tool, revealing (potentially) how urban futures can be shaped by narratives both good and bad, positive and negative.

Keywords : scenario art, cities, design, literary art, futurity

Introduction

The Literary Method of Urban Design is an artistic and speculative form of design which some (for instance, Dunne & Raby, 2014) might call 'design fiction' (Dunne & Raby, 2014). The Literary Method uses literature to envision and present the futures of precise urban settings (that is real cities in the real world). It involves quite a structured – but malleable -- process whereby a city is selected in parallel with a novel (or series of short stories). The novel (or short stories) have to be -- in some way -- associated with or indicative of that city's culture, geography, politics, social form, or history. The chosen novel's themes, settings, and narratives are then reinterpreted and developed in an artistic and subjective way, into urban design scenarios set in the future. The resulting scenario art thus exists as a projection of the city's social, political, and environmental conditions for oncoming future decades. Through this process, then, literature acts as both a critique and a creative tool,

¹ Corresponding Author, email: citylittle@gmail.com



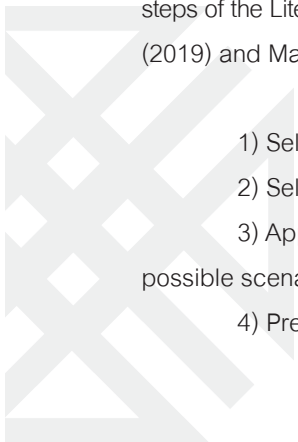
enabling those that use it to help (or challenge) those students and professionals dedicated to -- or charged with -- planning out our future cities and towns.

The Literary Method of Urban Design was first presented by Marshall (2018), Marshall (2019) and Marshall (2023) and it serves as an innovative, provocative, and gleefully non-quantitative urban design approach. Rather than relying solely on conventional urban planning models or data-driven projections favored by economists, urban managers, or mathematicians, the Literary Method engages with the thematic and narrative insights of literary works to forecast how cities might evolve. Literature, with its capacity to explore complex human experiences, has the ability to tell a good story that simultaneously uncovers social patterns and prejudices whilst envisioning alternative realities -- both at the personal level -- and also at the community, national or global societal level.

Thusly, literature uses stories with characters and settings to offers alternative ways for rethinking what humans can do – and the way they can deal with -- urban spaces. By drawing from fictional landscapes, imagined characters, and made-up social dynamics, the Literary Method of Urban Design allows professional planners, activists, architects, economists, politicians, and policymakers (and students who aspire to enter these professions) to anticipate where our cities are heading and to judge the desirability of their trajectory. The Literary Method's value also lies in its ability to provoke intensely personal critical reflection on the very local and urban-scaled intersections of daily life, governance, and commercial developments, that are welling up within -- and from -- various cities and the authorities and forces that control them, manage them, or influence them.

The Literary Method of Urban Design proceeds through a series of steps whereby its users can select a city and then a corresponding literary work associated with that city. They then inject the themes of that literary work to anticipate what technologies and societies may come in the future and the social responses that may come as well. The exact list of steps of the Literary Method of Urban Design may be numerically arranged, suggests Marshall (2019) and Marshall (2023) as follows (or presented in a flow chart; see diagram one):

- 1) Select a city
- 2) Select a work of literary art relevant to that city
- 3) Apply the themes of the selected work of literary art to give rise to a probable or possible scenario for the possible future of the selected city.
- 4) Present the scenario via some form of scenario art.



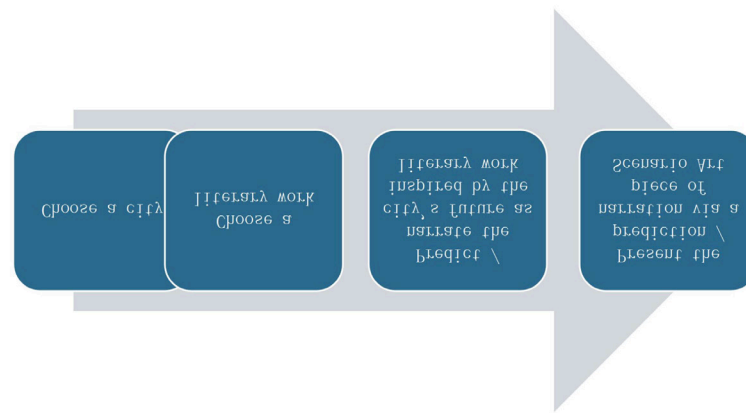


Diagram One: a flow chart of the steps of the Literary Method of Urban Design

Those who might want to use the Literary Method of Urban Design might be professional designers and researchers. Or they might be artists, social futurists, and urban studies experts. Most likely, though, they will be students of these or related disciplines whose instructors think the Literary Method will expand their working toolbox (or minds) and give them personal involvement in fields they don't normally explore (like graphic art, literary history, and most importantly in urban futures). As a design fiction process – with an arts-based approach as much as anything else -- the students and professionals using it will have to personally reflect on how they may select a suitable or relevant literary work. One factor they might like to consider is how the selected work may invoke an analysis or consideration of key social problems. Only then, a meaningful analysis could ensue regarding their chosen city. This process is more subjective than objective. Yet that's the point. This Literary Method implores students and professionals to get personally involved -- at an artistic and social level -- with exploring a city's potential futures. Such an approach draws upon and solidifies soft skills, such as empathy, cultural appreciation, explorations into the Otherness, as well as the interactions between social caretaking and aesthetics. Whether wholly subjective or not, the choosing of an appropriate novel might in some way be vetted – by the instructor or the student themselves -- so as to judge whether it is strongly, thematically, or geographically connected to the chosen city.

The artistic or cultural significance of candidate literary works might also be a good criterion from which to judge its usefulness in this Method, since literature which is somehow:



1) sophisticated,

2) respected, or

3) famous, will have traction, status and stature already within the minds of the local citizenry. Thusly, if this criterion is taken seriously, any valuable social insights from the novel will have been acknowledged already by

1) critics,

2) the Public, and

3) students and professionals, all before they even start using the Literary Method.

Additionally, a novel's narrative style — whether realist, fantastic, comedic, tragic, surreal, moralistic, romantic, or some mixture of all these — might be judged because this can influence the type of urban scenarios envisioned. Science fiction, for example, lends itself to technological foresight, perhaps, while historical fiction may provide continuity with past urban transformations, perhaps. All these genres are useful in some way or another, though, and users or teachers of the Literary Method should decide for themselves which sort of genre — and what specific work — they want to draw upon.

In the classroom, a pupil's passion for a particular piece might be a good criterion as well, since then the pupil will be very involved in the background research and formal art and design process. Users (or potential users) of the Method could also consider the depth of urban description in any potential candidate novel — and the extent to which the text engages with spatial, environmental, and landscape-based relationships. If there is limited time in the classroom, though, this might only be possible in a cursory manner. By following these criteria — all of which are suggestive rather than compulsory, the use of literature in each case study can be made more a little more systematic, or holistic really, ensuring that the selected works serve as insightful and relevant.

Any country with any kind of literary heritage deserves to be a testbed for this Literary Method but a country such as Argentina serves as a good 'guinea pig' since it has both a rich literary tradition plus well-established cities replete with numerous public policy and socio-environmental challenges. Thusly, three distinct case study cities located in Argentina have been chosen to test the Literary Method's potential efficacy: Tigre, Buenos Aires, and Mendoza. In this paper, each of these cities have the visual nature of their urban form forecast via three different Argentine literary works. These works are Leopoldo Lugones' *Strange Forces*, José Mármol's *Amalia*, and Antonio di Benedetto's *Animal World*. These novels thusly serve as the foundations for speculating upon the futures of the



above-noted cities (as set for one point during their future changing evolution; that is the end of the 21st century).

The Future of Tigre as inspired by Leopoldo Lugones' *Strange Forces*

Tigre started out life in the 19th century as a modest riverside settlement situated just north of Buenos Aires. As a modern 21st century city, Tigre occupies a distinctive geographical zone at the intersection of the Paraná Delta and several interconnected rivers. Since it is so close to Buenos Aires, the city of Tigre maintains close economic and demographic ties to Buenos Aires, serving as a commuter feeder to the capital. However, unlike its sprawling neighbor, Tigre has retained a more intimate, welcoming, semi-rural, semi-wild character.

Tigre's unique landscape of waterways and woodlands -- and also its surrounding agricultural zone — has long fostered respect and celebration from its human inhabitants. This celebration is reflected in the city's artistic landmarks, such as the fountain shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: A photograph of a fountain in an urban garden in Tigre, Argentina, titled "The Fountain of Earthly Delights" (sculptor: Ernesto Arellano). The fountain conveys, in part, the various connections between Tigre and its built and natural landscapes and its human and non-human members. (P. Fiadone, Published under Creative Commons on Wikimedia. 2024)



Leopoldo Lugones' collection of short stories, *Strange Forces*, works within the genres of fantasy, surrealism, horror and science fiction. The stories are separate but often interconnected in themes and events. Many of them involve how scientists have mistakenly created talking apes, super-intelligent animals, as well as monsters and madmen. A short list of Lugone's weird creatures would include:

- frightful artificial cyclops
- powerful horse ghosts
- parasitic forces in the human mind
- living mathematical forces in Nature
- toad prophets foreseeing the future
- mind-reading sea-serpents.

Through this bizarre set of characters, and the way they interact with humans, Lugones' stories pose ethical questions brought about by various scientific advancements and new scientific theories (Lugones, 1908). A recurring theme throughout the collection is humanity's relentless pursuit of control over evolutionary or biological processes — often with catastrophic or inexplicable outcomes. *Strange Forces* also explores ideas of interspecies communication, presenting scenarios where humans engage with incomprehensible entities or phenomena (Ortiz, 2012), thereby challenging conventional notions of knowledge and humanity's position in a wider world of potentially sentient, smart Earthly non-human beings (Monet-Viera, 2001).

Let's now move to what future scenario we can draw up from *Strange Forces*. By the late 21st century, Tigre has found itself to be a pioneering experiment in ecological urbanism, where science and nature interact in unexpected ways.



Figure 2. The Future of Tigre, A work of the author, In this piece of scenario art the living plant walking the streets serves as a mobile animated monument advancing the cause of non-human rights to the anthropogenic urban world. (Alan Marshall, 2024.)

Emulating some of the disreputable science in *Strange Forces*, scientists mess around with speeding up evolutionary processes to create hyper-productive Aloe vera plants that exude from commercial Aloe oil from their leaves in great quantities. However, there are unintended consequences and unanticipated complications. As Lugones' cautionary tales might forecast, the artificial steering of evolution has led in future Tigre to certain plant species' related to Aloe vera developing sentience. No longer content to be floral slaves to human industry, Aloe vera plants start roaming the town's streets and overtaking its buildings. Anybody trying to corral them is scared into hiding away as the plants whip their spiky vegetal tentacles in a menacing way.

However, all is not lost for human residents. In this speculative future (depicted in Figure 1), Tigre has introduced an innovative governance model known as the "Parliament of Many Beings," where not only humans but also the sentient Aloe vera can voice their interests. This radical approach to eco-democracy initially thrives, fostering a cooperative effort to sustain not only Tigre's newly smart Aloe plants but also the somewhat dumber woodland and wetland plants nestled around the town's rivers.

However, as time passes, unforeseen tensions emerge. Certain plant species begin to assert dominance in decision-making, triggering conflicts over land, sustenance, and water allocation. By the close of the century, Tigre stands as a city both respectful of, yet wary too, regarding its natural surroundings. Amongst and surrounding the city, it has become a place where the natural and urban worlds interact with out-of-control artificial evolution – all in ways that defy prediction. But the 'genie is out of the bottle' and despite reactionary human resistance, there's no going back to a time when Aloe plants and their kin weren't strong and smart agents in the city.

The Future of Buenos Aires as inspired by Jose Marmol's Amalia

Buenos Aires was founded by Spanish settlers in the 16th century and has evolved into one of the most important cities in all South America. Buenos Aires has experienced a range of transformations, starting off as a small fort before proceeding to be a colonial port and then onward to become the grandest city of independent Argentina.



Figure 3. Buenos Aires in the 21st century. A photograph of the city's inner Spanish colonial architecture on Bolivar Street, with a lively group of pedestrian tourists and commuters (City Government of Buenos Aires and published as "Creative Commons" on Wikimedia, 2024)

The city is famous for its broad avenues and grand neoclassical colonial architecture. However ever since Simone Bolivar roused Latin American states toward independence in the early 19th century, Argentina has been cursed by an episodic series of overbearing dictators, both civilian and military. It was these dictators, running amok with the public purse, that commissioned these grand avenues and ornate buildings and monuments (Morgan, 2023) for they wished to ride down amongst adoring crowds to impressive state palaces. For some modern-day Argentine citizens, this grand urban architecture is still source of pride but others see them as a symbols of showy over-the-top nationalism, as examples of vanity projects, and as the long shadowy reminders of past political oppression.

The first literary work capturing the 19th century origins of this dark dictatorial political landscape is *Amalia*, penned by José Mármol in the mid-19th century (1851). This novel provides an account of Buenos Aires under dictator governor Juan Manuel de Rosas. *Amalia* portrays the Rosas era as one of pervasive fear, malignant surveillance, and harsh suppression of opposition (Morgan, 2023, Hanway, 2010). Marmol in his 1854 novel depicts Buenos Aires as a darksome, fretful and severe (Stewart, 1996; Morgan, 2023; Piglia, 2000) since citizens fear they will be dragged from the streets -- or badly beaten up -- by the president's personal militia or his government's security forces. As Marmol's *Amalia* tries to show, the Governor's spies were everywhere. And after they made their reports to the Governor's

security office, reprisals and oppression was put into force. Just about anybody faintly suspected of arranging anti-government meetings or of expressing anti-government feelings would get hauled off to a secret prison and tortured. Sometimes they would stay there in jail just for a few days. Others would disappear there forever.



Figure 4. The Future of Buenos Aires by the author In a dystopian Buenos Aires of the future inspired by Marmol's Amalia, the city's grand Neoclassical facades loom over quiet tense streets patrolled by authoritarian enforcers, while eerie, retro-future Police carriages roll through the mist. (Alan Marshall, 2024)

If we use Amalia to predict the future, we might have to envision Buenos Aires as a city continuing to grapple with dictatorial and tyrannical tendencies (see figure four). Mármol's depiction of a heavily monitored and heavily policed society foreshadows the advanced surveillance mechanisms of the future. If Rosas relied on a network of spies and muscle to maintain his authority, future Buenos Aires governors might employ sophisticated digital tools to monitor public activities, then suppress dissent -- and so sustain power. This foreshadowing -- accompanied by Argentina's long history of military coups and dictatorships -- suggests that future Buenos Aires may be accurately visioned as a city always on the edge of being a Police State, characterized by an oppressive atmosphere. In this future projection of Buenos Aires, the streets are shrouded in mobile automated security systems and an all-encompassing surveillance network intrudes upon the personal freedoms and public behavior.



Future Mendoza as interpreted through Antonio di Benedetto's Animal World

The city of Mendoza lies at the foot of the Andes Mountains quite near the Chilean border. Mendoza was founded in 1561 by Spanish explorers and originally functioned as a halfway staging point on the journey between Buenos Aires and another important early Spanish town, Santiago (in Chile). The region's semi-arid climate necessitated the development of an intricate irrigation system, channeling water from the Andes to sustain both agriculture and daily life. This innovation transformed Mendoza into a flourishing center for farming, particularly in viticulture. Nowadays, the vineyards around Mendoza have international repute. The city nowadays thrives as a dynamic blend of its colonial heritage and energetic modern urbanism. Because it is so close to the Andes, Mendoza has a well-developed tourism industry as skiers and sightseers must pass through the city to get to the mountains.



Figure 5. Contemporary Mendoza, with a landscape dominated by 20th century architecture but punctuated by small isolated wild native flora.

(“itsmemartin” and published under ‘Creative Commons’ on Wikimedia, 2024)

The literary work chosen to predict Mendoza's future is Antonio Di Benedetto's *Animal World* (di Benedetto, 1977). This short story collection works with themes of existential turmoil, human estrangement, and the fragile divide between civilization and primal instinct. The series of stories in the book presents characters transforming into animals – either in supposed reality or in dreams – and they must grapple with deep psychological distress as they transform. Most of the stories blur reality and illusion; mixing up the real world with a world of hallucination (Arce, 2016). *Animal World's* exploration of animality forces the reader to question their perceived sense of control over their own supposed human rationality and

civility; raising the disconcerting point that primal animality will always be with us, no matter how civilized our societies become (a perspective analyzed by de Civi Furlani & de Manchón Gutiérrez, 1996; Varella, 2011, and Arce, 2016).

Utilizing this mixing-up of the animal world and the human world, we can use Animal World to investigate whether humans should force themselves away from animals or embrace them. As figure six displays, Mendoza has transformed into a city where reality and illusion intertwine, shaped by an uncanny fusion of human and animal life. In future Mendoza, humans accept they are animals, irrational and impulsive, and that they might as well make friends with -- and grant respect to -- fellow urban non-animals as their peers (rather than as underlings). This acceptance or celebration of the animal nature of humanity slowly creates an environment where distinctions between species and spaces no longer hold firm. Urban settings must be animated by animals, as much as civilized by citizens.

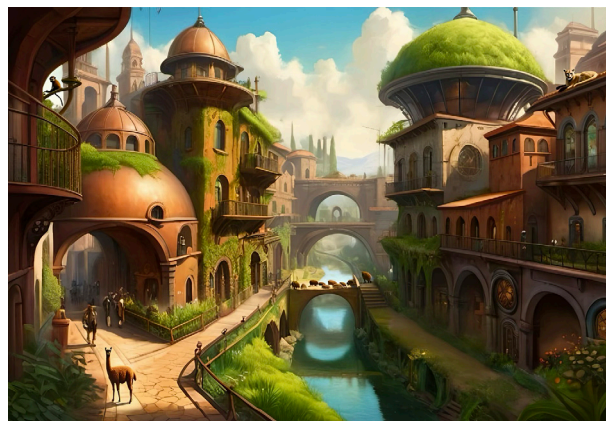


Figure 6. The Future of Mendoza :Mendoza's future presupposes the distinction between the animal world and the human world becomes more permeable – and since this is potentially related to past human occupations of earlier Mendoza, the future growth of the urban architecture become reo in nature as well. (Alan Marshall, 2024)

Over time, and by the end of this century, Mendoza's humans have surrendered rigid control, allowing nature to claim a presence within urban spaces. Wildlife that once existed on the periphery—confined to reserves and enclosures—now moves freely through the city. Birds construct nests along balconies, felines like pumas and jaguars navigate suspended pathways, and smaller mammals traverse footbridges, seamlessly coexisting with human inhabitants in a reimagined, untamed urban ecosystem.



The footbridges, rather than being strictly human passages, have become highways for all creatures. And human citizens walking among the animals enter a dreamlike state, growing ever unclear as to whether they are crossing from the human world into the animal world or whether those distinctions matter anymore.

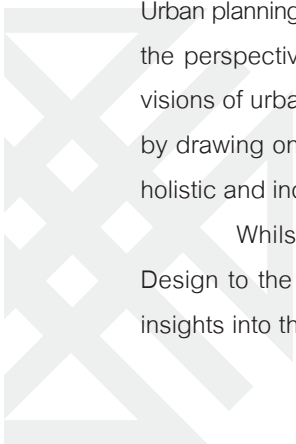
Unlike traditional cities that fight against nature's intrusion, Mendoza in the late 21st century welcomes it. It is an urban jungle in the truest sense, a city where the built environment is inseparable from the wild, and where inhabitants, human and animal alike, live in constant, shifting interaction.

Conclusion

While the Literary Method of Urban Design offers a rich and imaginative approach to forecasting urban futures, it might readily be critiqued for its supposed limitations. The key challenge in this regard is that literature often prioritizes narrative and metaphor over empirical data, which can make it difficult to translate literary themes into actionable urban policies (which are usually favored by city managers). To address this challenge, the Literary Method of Urban Design can possibly be combined with more traditional urban research methodologies such as social surveys or the mapping of infrastructure and demographic flows. However, it's probably just as well to assert that any critique of the Literary Method of Urban Design as lacking a quantitative framework overlooks the very purpose of its approach. This Method is not about predicting the future with supposed certainty so urban planners and politicians can feel confident about their plans. Rather it is more about outlining the potential social, ecological, and political challenges that urban populations may face.

In any case, statistical models of prediction, while often presented as objective, are shaped by selective data collection, biased methodologies, and the interests of those who control the tools of measurement and what information should be and is collected. Urban planning based on numbers alone risks reinforcing existing power structures, privileging the perspectives of technocratic elites while marginalizing alternative, community-driven visions of urban futures. The Literary Method, in contrast, operates outside this framework by drawing on the depth of human experience captured in literature, allowing for a more holistic and inclusive engagement with urban possibilities.

Whilst being quite subjective, the application of the Literary Method of Urban Design to the Argentinian cities of Tigre, Buenos Aires, and Mendoza offers fascinating insights into their potential futures. In Tigre, the citizens and the city adapt to the hubristic



mistakes of scientists and technologists, adapting to respect smart vegetal creatures into their urban world. In Mendoza, the citizens do the same with animal creatures, but the transforming agent is not science and technology but the mere acceptance of human animality. In Mendoza, people come to accept their animality as a mixed blessing but one that confers upon them an acceptance of the rights and welfare of all animals.

In contrast to Mendoza and Tigre, the future of Buenos Aires is not tied to nature at all but the technologies that enable the powerful to retain their status. Whilst all of these futures seem allied to currently developing social forms and realities, none of them are ideal from a social fairness or social stability sense, and one of them is perfectly dystopian (Buenos Aires). I contest that anybody using this same set of literary works to forecast this same set of cities might come to similar conclusions (and create similar visions).

Having acknowledged the above point, we can see the process of connecting these literary works to urban futures does provide useful insights – warnings, possibilities, and intellectual challenges.

The three works used in this article have sometimes been labeled as ‘science fiction’. Probably all three writers would warn against this categorization but let’s assume -- for a second -- what they believe in this regard doesn’t matter much. In the realm of science fiction studies, scholars such as Jameson (1981) and Suvin (1979) have argued that science fiction is a space to imagine alternative futures that critique present realities. The Lugones’ inspired future Tigre and the Di Benedetto inspire future Mendoza, for instance, might do this by suggesting humanity might have to enter into a new urban compact with non-humans, either via technological misadventure or by a change in humanity’s view of itself. The accelerated botanical evolution in future Tigre and the recognition of human animality in future Mendoza destabilizes our sense of human supremacy over nature and thus, perhaps, calls for the co-created non-anthropocentric design of our shared urban settings. Similarly, as many of the world’s cities face up to growing (or episodically successful) dictatorship and autocracy, the science fiction version of Buenos Aires derived from Amalia issues a dark visual warning of what lays ahead if citizens give up their fight against autocracy and uncritically accept surveilling technology.

Along with ‘science fiction studies’, the field of ‘futures studies’ offers yet another important lens to interpret these speculative urban designs. Scholars such as Bell (2003), Inayatullah (2004), Fry (2009), and Miller (2018) emphasize that futures studies is not about predicting a single future but rather exploring a range of possible, probable, and preferable



futures. Thusly, the scenarios for future Tigre, Buenos Aires and Mendoza presented above, are less singular and definite visions and more about potentially fleeting points of urban existence, and one where the boundary between human control, techno-power, and social form is fluid. These three Argentinian urban futures, should be seen as fleeting 'still shots' taken from an ongoing movie

In conclusion, applying the Literary Method of Urban Design to these Argentinian cities not only offers innovative ways of thinking about urban futures but also engages deeply with critical design and speculative thinking. These imagined cities serve as both cautionary tales and thought experiments, reminding us that the future of urban environments will be shaped by the intersections of technology, nature, culture, and politics. By engaging with the speculative, these case studies help us think critically about how we might hope for, strive for, and actively design better, fairer, more open, less oppressive urban futures.

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