

# Design fiction localised

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## Abstract

This paper presents results of an ongoing research aimed at analysing design fictions created in the Baltics. This research is put forward with purpose of rendering the geography of design fiction more complete and fostering appreciation for diverse worldviews and a pluriversal imagination. The paper introduces the method of design fiction, offers a concise overview of its history, and explains its functionality and use. It discusses the necessity to increase visibility of design fictions from diverse geographical and cultural contexts and places a particular emphasis on Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Four examples of design fictions generated in this region are presented, all of which are related to a recurring topic of interest in this region: a confident and even intimate relationship with nature. The paper demonstrates that these design fictions reflect (on) one or more of the following factors: 1) arguably nation-wide societal beliefs, assumptions or concerns; 2) a specific natural or artificial environment typical to the area in consideration; 3) a personal lived experience of the author in the given context.

## Author keywords

Design fiction, critical design, diversity, localised, futures.

## Introduction

Design fiction as a medium for creative expression as well as a research tool is becoming increasingly popular. It is a trend that ought to be cultivated as this kind of reasoning is of political significance. Design fictions are propositions of alternatives; however, they are not projects or designs to be implemented, nor hypothesis to be verified. Rather, they are "advanced with the consciousness that it is an inadequate, subjective and pictorial manner of conception, whose coincidence with reality is, from the start, excluded" (Vaihinger, 1925, p. 268). The purpose of design fiction is "to suspend disbelief about change" (Sterling, 2017, p. 18), to offer new insights and perspectives.

This paper discusses the significance of geographical locality and cultural context of design fiction and aims to counteract the occasionally criticised Western "neo-liberal worldview" (Thackara, 2013) that dominates this branch of design practice. The author claims that fictions generated in various locations can increase the diversity of our collective imaginary and illustrates it by analysing four examples of design fictions created in the Baltics (term used to denote three countries in North-Eastern Europe, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). The insights communicated through these fictions have the potential of being relevant and applicable also elsewhere; however,

the purpose of this study is not to claim any kind of universal knowledge, as it would be contrary to the author's aspiration of promoting the pluriversal imagination, as formulated by Arturo Escobar (2018, p. 21). Rather, the value of this ongoing research lies in discovering and fostering appreciation for this rich ecosystem of design fictions that are both a result of and a food for our collective imagination.

The examples discussed in this paper are not an exhaustive overview of design fictions that are produced in Baltics and present embeddedness in the local context. It is merely a selection that supports and illustrates the argument, while also complying with the restrictions of the paper length.

## History of design fiction

Employment of design fiction as a tool for research, reflection, and inquiry is not only a present-day phenomenon. One of its most significant episodes in design history has been the radical design movement that took place in Italy and Austria in the 1960s and 1970s. Collectives and designers such as *Superstudio*, *Archizoom*, *Memphis*, *Alchimia*, *Haus-Rucker-Co*, Walter Pichler, Hans Hollein, among others, conceived utopian and dystopian visions that were presented by means of various media, such as photocollage, video, drawings and writings, but also tangible objects, performances and exhibitions. They challenged modernist values and worldview and refused the idea of design and architecture as tools in service of the industry, used to promote consumerism and conformity. Their method was aimed at "introducing strange bodies into the system [...] in order to draw attention, arouse interest [...] and inspire actions and behaviours" (Superstudio, 1969). These projects were not intended as proposals for alternatives to the existing reality, but rather—as radical and critical reflections on this reality (Dautrey & Quinz, 2015, p. 24).

The next crucial episode in the history of design fiction is the emergence of the critical design movement in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. Critical design follows in the footsteps of radical design and its "primary intention is to make us think: to raise awareness, expose assumptions, provoke action, spark debate, and even entertain in an intellectual way like literature or film" (Raby, 2008, p. 94). It also employs fictional objects and stories in order to reflect on a vast range of topics, such as implications of technological development, the impact of the material environment on the society, aspects of professional and civic ethics, industry and consumerism (Jakobsonsone, 2022). The term 'critical design' was first coined by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 34), who were among the very first to practice and theorise this approach. They were soon followed by others, such as James Auger & Jimmy



Loizeau, Noam Toran, Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, Tobie Kerrigde, *Sputniko*, Thomas Thwaites, Revital Cohen & Tuur Van Balen, *Superflux*, *Near Future Laboratory*, and many more.

However, not all designers who produce critical work in form of design fiction, outside the realm of industry and marketplace, identify themselves with the term 'critical design', hence many other denominations are in use to describe this practice, such as speculative design, design fiction, design futures, interrogative design, adversarial design, and discursive design (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 11). Many practitioners refuse to be associated with critical design as defined by Dunne & Raby, because Dunne & Raby conceive it as the opposite of the so-called affirmative or conventional design. Although "the direction of this thinking is appealing, its present formulation is [...] vague [and attaches] strong value judgments to it: affirmative design is [...] amoral [...], while critical designers are described as moral agents who seek to change society for the better" (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2013, p. 3299). Design fiction as a tool and approach, however, is not discussed similarly. It is more about envisioning alternatives but without attaching value judgements to them.

### Functional fiction

The approach of fiction and speculation is still gaining relevance and is increasingly considered a useful instrument in generating and communicating new knowledge. Speculative design can be employed as a method of inquiry since it "has transcended design and become a contribution to the world of research" (Boserman, 2019, p. 125). Critical design that involves creating fictional products and scenarios can also provide valuable insights for diverse commercial design practices "if adopted by the designer as part of a critical mindset" (Jakobson, 2019, p. 561). And this method of visioning can prove useful in activating stakeholder reactions, considering that "compelling future-oriented visions are needed to inform and inspire projects in the present" (Irwin, Kossoff, & Tonkinwise, 2015, p. 8).

Design fictions and design futuring have a political significance as well, for "without serious propositional clashes between different materialized futures, we have no politics, and we have no democracy" (White, n.d.). It is within these alternative, critical design environments that the conformity of mainstream design is acknowledged and problematized (Dunne & Raby, 2001, p. 58), and prevailing ideologies<sup>1</sup> and dominant social paradigms<sup>2</sup> are challenged. It can be argued that design fiction is necessary because Western societies have ceased dreaming (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 1). Faced with unsolvable problems, designers too seem to start realising that there will be no more 'technological fix' and that we need to change our values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 2). This is where design fiction plays an important role. Fiona Raby claims that "this kind of design has a value within future decision-making processes", and therefore calls them 'functional fictions' (Raby, 2017, p. 41–42). This term is conceived as the opposite of 'fictional functions', which, according to Raby, characterises many existing, commercial products that may be desirable, but have functions with "no relationship to reali-

ty" (Raby, 2017, p. 41). This point of view situates design fiction within the problem-solving design paradigm, even though it acknowledges a different kind of 'usefulness' and 'functionality'. Design fiction can offer other perspectives and worldviews, other points of view that allow us to notice both the unusual and the ordinary that otherwise remain unseen.

### Giving voice to the periphery

Lately, awareness in academia of the limitations of the current knowledge production has been growing, followed by an ambition to decolonise knowledge through encouragement of other-than-Western perspectives. It has been widely acknowledged that not only the realities, but also peoples' experiences of reality in various parts of the world can be diverse, and hence such are the imaginaries of our collective futures as well.

Design fictions are predominantly (but not exclusively) future related: they attempt to envision a reality that is credible, but different from the actual one. They are often provocative as well, allowing us to question our collective future without suggesting the preferable path to follow. Design fictions offer insights on potential alternatives that expand our understanding of the world and challenge our assumptions about it.

This paper presents an ongoing work of filling in the blanks in the geography of design fiction, which itself is the result of the imagination. This endeavour builds upon the author's preceding research of critical and speculative approaches in design, and Tony Fry's assertion that there is a false "assumption that, like thinking, imagination is intrinsic to the mind." Instead, according to Fry, "[t]he 'stuff' of imagination comes from what one's being-in-the-world has been exposed to as the basis of what the imagination assembles, transforms and reacts against in its process of prefigurative construction" (Fry, 2022, p. 15). The same applies to the critical potential of design fictions, as one and the same thing can seem unusual and provocative for certain cultures and absolutely mundane for others (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2013, p.3299).

However, in the attempt to decolonise knowledge there is an increased interest for the communities of Global South, while the Eastern regions (the post-Soviet and post-socialist space) of Europe have been almost entirely overlooked (Müller, 2018); or, instead of being viewed as a place where considerable knowledge can be (and is) generated, they have been used merely as research subject (Jehlička, Griviņš, Visser, & Balázs, 2020). In addressing this issue, the paper proposes an analysis of selected design fictions developed in the Baltic countries that can in certain respects be linked to the local context. The research methodology includes unstructured interviews with designers in question and a review of their writings in relation to the selected projects. These sources, aside from the researcher's interpretation of the fictions' form and content, also allow tracing the designers' intentions and motivations, revealing their interest in research questions and design solutions that are determined by their natural and artificial environment and personal experiences. This research shows how lived experiences in combination with physical surroundings and social habits characteristic to the region translate into design work and allow to arrive at place-specific discoveries.

1 This refers to the writings of Dunne & Raby who discuss the role of designed object as the medium of ideas, values or, in other words, ideologies: "[...] all design is ideological, the design process is informed by values based on a specific worldview, or way of seeing and understanding reality. Design can be described as falling into two very broad categories: affirmative design and critical design." (Dunne & Raby, 2001, p. 58)

2 Dominant social paradigm is a term for a constellation of common values, beliefs, and shared wisdom about the physical and social environments which constitute a society's basic worldview (Dunlap & Van Liere, 1984).

## Local stories

A design fiction can be tied to a specific context and based or determined locally in various ways. The examples discussed further represent fictions that reflect (on) one or more of the following factors: 1) supposedly nation-wide societal beliefs, assumptions or concerns; 2) a specific natural or artificial environment typical to the area in consideration; 3) personal lived experience of the author in the given context.

Although many more examples can be given, this paper, due to the limit of length, focuses on only one of the recurring themes for designers in the Baltic region: nature and people's relationship with it. Baltics, along with Scandinavia, is characterised by a relatively low population density compared to the rest of Europe, and by "beliefs of the close ties between the natural and social environments" (Agarin & Grīviņš, 2016, p. 245). Some authors, drawing from the political, social and ideological occurrences of the past couple of centuries, even claim that "the natural environment of the Baltic peoples was actually a national environment" (Sikk & Andersen, 2009, and Agarin, 2009, as cited in Agarin & Grīviņš, 2016, p. 246). The nature seems to be abundant and very meaningful in the Baltic region, and people's peculiar relationship with it also manifests in the topics chosen and approaches taken by designers further described.

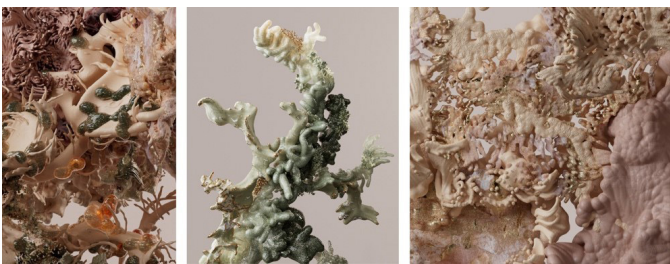


Figure 1. Aistė Ambrazevičiūtė, computer renderings of fictional lichens.

For several years, Lithuanian architect **Aistė Ambrazevičiūtė** has been carrying out an interdisciplinary research and design practice that focuses on lichens as a source of new knowledge. As she later realised, her creative practice had been defined by her fascination with nature, in particular, with the wild forests of her homeland: "After my walks [in the forest] I always had plenty of dried lichens at home and it inspired me to document and imitate, play, deconstruct that emotion in 3d space" (Ambrazevičiūtė, 2021, p. 98). She has studied the biology of lichens, their behaviour as a species as well as separate plants, their materiality, form, logic of construction and growth patterns. Her objective is to explore the "grammar of lichen" and to build her own "alphabet of design" inspired by that of nature (Ambrazevičiūtė, 2021, p. 98). By means of 3D design software, she then creates an enticing but entirely fictional virtual universe of incredibly intricate volumes and shapes that all comply with the grammar of lichens (figure 1). However, unlike other organic forms and constructions that are quite common throughout the history of architecture and design, these creations are not aimed at being adopted for real-life objects and buildings; instead, they remain virtual and fictional, without ever assuming any

specific scale, materiality or function. For Ambrazevičiūtė, this project is more about "searching for unexpected and scattered manifestations of beauty" (Ambrazevičiūtė, 2021,

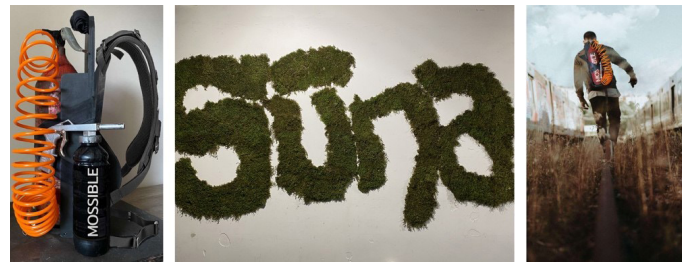


Figure 2. Viesturs Reinis, Mossible.

p. 98). Nonetheless, it is not a mere imitation of visual characteristics, but also an attempt to reveal the "hidden wisdom" of nature (Ambrazevičiūtė, n.d.).

Similarly, the project *Mossible* by Latvian designer **Viesturs Reinis** manifests the author's personal and familiar relationship with local nature<sup>3</sup> that is expressed by his ongoing interest in moss, considered both for its material and ecological characteristics, and its perceived symbolic meaning (Reinis, 2022, p. 14). In this work, he conceives a fictional product: a device that would allow to create graffiti by using a mash made by mixing water and desiccated, crushed moss, instead of paint. The object is supported by a use-case scenario that, in videos and photocollages, depicts a graffiti artist in action, and it is exhibited along with a realistic reproduction of a graffiti tag in moss (figure 2). Reinis's work seeks to change people's rather negative attitudes towards graffiti by turning it into a tool for capturing CO<sub>2</sub>, filtering fine dust and lowering temperatures in cities. When explaining his conceptual approach, he draws parallels (Reinis, 2022, p. 7) with the speculative design project *Pigeon d'Or* by Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen (Cohen & Van Balen, 2010). In this project, Cohen and Van Balen consider pigeons as part of the solution for the problems they cause in the city: by use of synthetic biology, they develop bacteria that can modify the metabolism of pigeons in order to make them defecate soap, thus cleaning the surfaces instead of making them dirty. For the sake of the argument, it is worth noting that this fiction too is influenced by a specific context—Belgium<sup>4</sup>, where pigeon breeding and races have historically been particularly popular. Hence, we can observe how these very similar topics, both involving purification of the built environment, are approached from two different perspectives that both draw inspiration from local culture and personal experiences.

In their project *Arion Vulgaris*, Latvian designers **Tina Alise Drupa** and **Jana Ločmele** tackle the complex ecological, ethical and emotional issues related to the Spanish slug: an invasive species that causes serious threat to horticulture in Latvia and elsewhere. There are various methods of containment and elimination of Spanish slug in gardens, but most of them can be considered emotionally disturbing, especially for present-day gardeners (Jakubāne, Pilāte, Stalažs, & Ruņģis, 2022, p. 31–46). Hence, almost like inviting us to some sort of therapeutic session, Drupa and Ločmele challenge our imagination even further by offering a scenario that posits people as natural

3 Reinis is based in Latvia, and furthermore, his hobby reportedly requires him being in the woods. (Reinis, 2022, p. 14).

4 Although currently based in London, Tuur Van Balen is originally from Belgium (Cohen & Van Balen, About, n.d.).

predators for Spanish slugs in a speculative attempt to re-establish equilibrium in the ecosystem. This fiction builds upon the local tradition of gardening and that of pickling as a method of preserving home-grown food for the long winters. Designers propose fermenting Spanish slugs to make them edible for humans, but they materialise this fiction in a very traditional and locally recognisable kitchen scene, thus hinting at how our habits, perception and worldviews oftentimes change faster than our material environment (figure 3).

The choice of the topic for this fiction is clearly prompted by the popularity of gardening in Latvia. Throughout the times of scarcity—both during the Soviet occupation, the transitional period in the 1990s after the fall of the USSR, as well as the crisis of 2008 and the one caused by Covid 19—gardening has been an important source of sustenance and has provided a sense of sovereignty to people in this region. Aside from food provisioning, gardening as an activity and the garden as a place are intimately bound to people's identities providing connection with knowledge and legacy transmitted across generations.



Figure 3. Tina Alise Drupa & Jana Ločmele, Arion Vulgaris.

The project *Sartorial space* by the Estonian architecture practice **b210** also proposes engaging in a close and intimate relationship with nature. From local sheep wool that is otherwise discarded by the industry, they create an object that can be described as something between a piece of clothing and a nomadic shelter housing one person (figure 4). These architects imagine a future world where “owning land and real estate is less attractive and people's freedom and mobility have increased”, where “our own space also accompanies us” and “adapts to the body and environment” (b210, n.d.).



Figure 4. b210, Sartorial Space.

Aside from the material used, this fiction seems locally bound also in terms of geographical specificity—a sparsely populated region where one readily gets a feeling of privacy whenever out in nature. This allows designers to suggest that this shelter, which might seem rather individualistic, would actually encourage cooperation and refusal of real estate ownership, since “only someone [...] who doesn't feel the need to defend their personal boundaries” (b210, n.d.) would be willing to share more with fellow humans.

## Conclusions

This research into the relationship between the designers' environment, societal or personal beliefs, experiences and the products of their imagination as content for design fiction, is advanced with the ambition of promoting awareness of diversity in knowledge, worldviews and perception in various geographical regions. The author does not claim that all the fictions of a particular region are related only to certain topics, nor that the same subjects could not be considered for design fictions elsewhere. Rather, it aims to show how design fictions can be locally inspired and determined, and it uses concrete examples as illustrations for this claim. These examples are all related to the local context and personally relevant issues; they stem from designers' own experiences, as well as local culture, traditions, upbringing, etc.

Designers' own descriptions and comments on their reasoning and intentions play an important role in this research as they clearly reveal the significance of lived experiences. These experiences are certainly not universal, and nor are the visions and fictions generated as a result. Interviews carried out during this research demonstrate that designers themselves often do not even realise or pay attention to this diversity: for them the issues tackled in their work seem rather obvious. In a broader context, however, certain designs can seem quite radical and offer a new worldview or paradigm, and in any case—increase diversity.

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