

The Future of New Zealand's Cities as Forecast by the Literary Method of Urban Design

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Abstract

An exploration of a novel design method (called the Literary Method of Urban Design) is attempted and applied to three New Zealand cities. This Literary Method uses local or national literary works as a lens to forecast urban futures. Working with this Method, this paper interprets the city of Christchurch through Samuel Butler's 19th century novel *Erewhon*, the city of Napier through Herbert Guthrie-Smith's ecological book *Tutira*, and the city of Auckland through John Mulgan's interwar novel *Man Alone*. These case studies highlight how literature can inform urban sustainability, offering insights into technological progress and restraint, environmental adaptation, and communal resilience. The findings suggest, generally, that literature -- as both art and foresight -- provides a powerful tool for reimagining cities in response to 21st century challenges. In this paper, specifically, the findings indicate that New Zealand futures may well be prosperous in some cases, but also catastrophic in others. Even in the catastrophic cases, though, the literary texts explored can offer a pathway to urban survivability.

Keywords: Literature, Art Design, Future Cities, Urbanism, New Zealand

Introduction

Here in this article, I set out a series of urban case studies from a distinct geographical area, that is New Zealand, as processed through a new conceptual relationship between literature and art, that is the Literary Method of Urban Design. Despite its name, the Literary Method of Urban Design is less a technical process of designing urban settings, and more an artistic project aimed at utilizing the wisdom of literature to predict the grave challenges and hopeful opportunities as the 21st century proceeds. For New Zealand cities, as in other nations, this included the real and impending environmental and climate tragedy. By the articles' end, I'm hoping the reader will see the Literary Method relies just as much on art as it does on literature, design or social studies.

Unlike traditionally technical urban design methods that purportedly focus on functionality, the Literary Method of Urban Design emphasizes imaginative forecasting by intertwining social narrative and scenario art. By engaging with well-known national literary products set within urban environments, this approach not only offers some form of aesthetic experience for its users but also encourages a more radical reflection upon the social possibles of urban life. As most New Zealand cities are located on -- or very close to -- the coast, this pattern is followed in the selection of these cities, all of which are located next to the sea. All of them also serve as port cities, importing industrial products in exchange for the primary produce, agricultural products, which forms the main trade of New Zealand's economy. At this point, I will also presage the case studies outline below by

acknowledging the importance of sheep-farming and the wool trade for the historical growth of New Zealand’s economy and upon the economic growth of the three case study cities discussed below, as well.

Also, as with the case of most New Zealand cities, even those right next to the sea, these cities are not faraway from highland ranges. This geographical commonality of these chosen New Zealand cities (and most other New Zealand cities) – that is urbanism between the sea and the mountains – means that urban expansion is usually only able to occur into elevated / hilly zones. The exception in these chosen cities is Christchurch, which has an expansive plain between it and the Southern Alps some forty miles away. Still this is close enough for Christchurch citizens to be affected by the mountains – as we shall see in the second case study listed below.

Taking into consideration these features of New Zealand’s urban geography and economic history, this paper works through the above listed steps to arrive at conclusions which indicate that New Zealand’s urban futures may well be prosperous and positive, in some cases, but also catastrophic and worrying in others. Even in the worrying catastrophic cases, though, the literary texts referred to for inspiration can offer a pathway to survivability.

As noted in Marshall (2023), the Literary Method of Urban Design consists of three core steps including 1. Select a literary work, 2. Select a city, and 3. Apply the themes from the selected literary work to create a graphic scenario of the future for the chosen city.

A fourth step would involve the manner by which the plan is represented to an audience, which might be via architectural plans, urban maps, or in the case of this paper, visual and textual narrative. If put into diagrammatic form, the method might visualized as follows (see Figure 1, below).



Figure 1 Steps in the literary method of urban design.

Previously, this Method was applied to many urban settings in Europe and Asia, where its creator had been working. The results were then presented in the references above and their associated scenario art exhibited at the Museum of London (Olarewaju, 2018), the Bauhaus (Klassik Stiftung Weimar, 2023) and the Tartu University Art Museum (University of Tartu Art Museum, 2024), the latter as part of Tartu's celebration as 2024 European Capital of Culture. For this illustrated expository, I've chosen three different urban settings based on three distinct literary works from my native homeland, each of which features the selected city either as a backdrop or a central element in the narrative. These are 1. A future scenario for Christchurch inspired by Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, 2. A future scenario for Napier inspired by the Herbert Gutrie-Smith book *Tutira*, and 3. A future scenario for Auckland inspired by John Mulgan's novel *Man Alone*.

This set of three novels were selected because they were written by New Zealand residents or citizens who display obvious intimate connection with New Zealand’s landscape and culture, and because all three reference the corresponding selected cities in a way which describes their economic setting and urban geography. Also, because a major part of the plot-line -- or the main characters --

are (partially or fully) based in -- or have links with -- these cities and their hinterlands -- they serve as deep and rich reserve of information to construct a proper “social picture” of the chosen cities. The novels also exude themes which are very social in nature related to how the characters interact with either the natural landscape, with community members (human and non-human) and with indigenous peoples and native flora and fauna. Each novel also has the various characters working to find solutions to the geographical, environmental, and social problems that they encounter -- sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

Incidentally the fourth step indicated in the diagram above (Diagram One) has -- in this paper-- been facilitated in its visual mode by the help of AI generative art tools. For this paper, this means all of the art has been processed through the OpenArt software program after being penciled by the author, scanned into online form, then prompted by this pencil drawing. A grand series of artworks then emerged and were reiterated many dozens of times until one that conveys the ideas in the textual narrative of the urban future emerged. This emergent image was then taken into Paint Shop Pro software and edited heavily by the author, to fully convey the textual narrative as artistically and sociologically / environmentally / geographically judged by the author.

The Future of Christchurch as Inspired by Butler’s *Erewhon*

Samuel Butler travelled from England to Christchurch in late 1859 aboard the sailing ship *Roman Emperor*. Trekking across the vast tussock plains of lowland Canterbury, Butler set up a sheep station in the shadow of the Southern Alps (Armstrong, 2012) When he had time, he explored deep into the mountains’ remote inner valleys, plotting out for the first time a number of passes between Canterbury and Westland. When not exploring, Butler also took to speculating about Darwin’s newly published theory of evolution, writing articles about it in the Christchurch press (see Macdonald, 1926). Butler entertained the idea that there will come a day when machines will soon perhaps begin evolving like animals and plants do but that they may do so far more rapidly and quickly (as explored by Turbil (2019).

After nearly five years in New Zealand, Butler cashed in his land and sheep for a handsome profit then sailed away from New Zealand. Living in London, Butler indulged his passions for the arts, especially painting and novel writing (Jones, 1959). In 1872, he published his first novel *Erewhon*, subtitled *Over the Range*, about a Utopian land discovered via an Englishman’s journeying alone across a vast mountain range. *Erewhon* is actually an anagram of ‘Nowhere’. Despite this suspiciously placeless title, it’s likely Butler dreamt up *Erewhon* as he pondered what was on the other side of the New Zealand mountains where he kept his sheep (Jones, 1959, Armstrong 2012).

The story involves a lone English explorer surpassing a highland range who then falls into the hands of the native people of Erewhon. The natives welcome the stranger in a congenial and curious manner -- except for one thing. When Butler revealed his pocket watch, the people of Erewhon tear it from him in anger and throw him in prison. Before too long, though, the King of Erewhon pardons the explorer, and we learn that his Kingdom had long ago forsaken and forbade machines as unnecessary and inherently risky. The people of Erewhon also feared machines not for what they were capable of -- but how they could perhaps evolve to be so intelligent that might take over the whole land Thus, Butler presages our contemporary anxieties regarding AI by more than a century and half.

Though not fond of machines, the people of Erewhon were very well disposed to caring for plants, valuing them – at least philosophically – on some parity with humans, and trying to encourage their welfare within the land (see scholarly explorations in Paradis (2002). Inspired by this loathing of machines, and the love of plant, the following image of future Christchurch – see Figure 2 -- is offered up as a prediction of the city's future.

Here future Christchurch is redolent with an urban woodland but has no place for advanced technology. A careless reader might admonish the people of Erewhon as irrational technophobes hardly worth emulating. However, Butler informs us that the Erewhon had technology roughly equivalent to the 13th century, and by this time, the 'medieval industrial revolution' has washed over his own homeland, ushering in a grand series watermills and windmills, all rather radical but sustainable forms of technology that improved food security and allowed medieval populations to thrive. Thusly, future Christchurch, if it follows the path laid out in Erewhon, might be bereft of automobiles and AI but it will have plenty of healthy food to feed the population and will be powered by renewable forms of energy which pollute neither the air or water. If Cantabrians of the future build such an urban future, it's because they've learnt from Erewhon that they'll probably stand a likelier chance of survival and freedom than cities living under through climate change and malevolent intelligent machines.



Figure 2 The future of Christchurch inspired by Butler's *Erewhon*

Source: Marshall (2025a)

Of course, the question arises how we get from here to there; from the Christchurch of today to the Christchurch shown above. Again, Butler's *Erewhon* offers a roadmap, suggesting the transition must be very gradual, proceeding as serenely and sedately as the growth of the trees of Christchurch's urban woodlands itself. *Erewhon*'s English explorer realizes that if his late 19th century homeland was to instantly de-industrialize, committing itself only to the machines of medieval times, it would likely prompt much unemployment and perhaps starvation and misery. However, Butler noted whilst living in Christchurch that New Zealand was rural society, a kind of agrarian utopia in the making,

If the nation then – or now – only selectively adopted certain ‘appropriate’ technologies - not taking it on board willy nilly at the behest of pushy industrialists, or politicians engrossed by the myth of progress, then it might serve as a model for how industrialized England could slowly disentangle itself over many years and gradually de-industrialize -- or at least purge itself of ever-smartening machines.

Future Napier Inspired by Herbert Guthrie-Smith’s *Tutira*

Tutira is a well-known New Zealand documentary book published in 1921 (Guthrie-Smith, 1921). It explores -- in great detail -- the environmental changes of one particular farm landscape, Tutira, from the 1880s to the 1920s. Tutira, the farm, is located some twenty-five kilometers north of the coastal city of Napier, comprising a run of land from the Hawke’s Bay coast to the highland lake called Tutira. More generally, ecologists in the early 20th century (Gleason & Guthrie-Smith, 1922) and into late 20th century as well (Wynn, 1997) saw Tutira as a magnificent case study of the impact of European settlement on a colonized landscape and also a detailed look into the longterm relationship between farming and nature.

One effect that Guthrie-Smith observes is the way native plants have been pushed out of the lowland parts of the landscape to form refuges in the upland areas or around boggy areas. In his book, he indicates these refuges are like isolated botanical citadels perched faraway from gnawing teeth or scurrilous invaders. Though he does not state so explicitly, Guthrie Smith’s description evokes the manner which Highlanders had to find refuge in the Scottish uplands as the English encroached into his native homeland in medieval times, as well as the way resistant Māori kingdoms also had to find refuge in new Zealand’s interior highlands to find refuge from British invaders in the 19th century.

A century after *Tutira* was published, we now realize that human impact is so pronounced at the global level, that human settlements are becoming endangered by it. Just as Guthrie-Smith noted anthropogenic disturbances pushed native New Zealand plants into botanic refuge “citadels” above lowland Tutira, so the people of the nearby city of Napier will -- in the future -- be pushed by sea level rise into abandoning their low lying city environs to rebuild upon higher ground (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 The Future of Napier inspired by Guthrie-Smith’s *Tutira*

Source: Marshall (2025b)

The Future of Auckland as Inspired by John Mulgan's *Man Alone*

The two case studies above feature sheep farming in some way and this is hardly a surprise given the importance of sheep farming to the economic and cultural history of New Zealand. As explained in prior studies (see Marshall, 2024), along with canon fire and deceptive legal practice, British colonies across the globe were also dependent upon sheep farming, no more so than New Zealand where introduced Merino and Romney found the New Zealand environment, once felled of trees, was much to their liking.

Like the case studies above, our third case study also features sheep farming, *Man Alone*, first published in 1939 follows Johnson, an Englishman whose mind is scarred by the First World War, and who drifts across the world as a lone traveler to Auckland. Though New Zealand was regarded as a land of opportunity, Johnson arrives as the Great Depression hits the country. Things were okay for a while but soon he is laid off from work and gets sucked into the Auckland riots of 1932. He ends up bashing a cop in the face to protect himself.

Like the other rioters, Johnson is moneyless and purposeless. He sympathizes with the rioters but their penchant for violence invokes memories of the Great War, reminding Johnson. he's seeking a quieter, more stable life. In light of this, Johnson journeys to the countryside to become a shepherd. The sheep serve to symbolize not only economic security -- for the nation as a whole and for Johnson as well -- but also of the burdens of living in society, for their care requires constant vigilance as well as being lock-downed to a certain place.

In sheep country, Johnson briefly enjoys a sense of fellowship with fellow farmer folk yet he cannot escape a sense of isolation and restlessness. These emotions push him into an affair with his boss's wife. The affair ends disastrously when Johnson's boss confronts him violently -- and Johnson is forced to slay the man in self-defense.

Johnson then goes on the run, retreating into the hilly wilderness of New Zealand's North Island. Mulgan here vividly describes the environs where Johnson's survives hidden as a fugitive, emphasizing his solitude but also his tenacity to adapt, to stay alive and to keep moving. Johnson realizes he's going to have to get on another ship sooner or later and get clear out of the country; escaping the land that was supposed to be his escape.

As the story winds down, Johnson sails to Europe, seeking to join anarchists fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Johnson figures that if his whole life is to be one of struggle and conflict, he might as well fight in fellowship with like-minded folk in the pursuit of freedom (as analysed by McNeill, 2012)

Whilst the book's title, *Man Alone*, evokes the struggle of one man against the world, it was not Mulgan's choice but that of his London publisher. Mulgan had in mind another title entirely "Talking of War" which would have neatly tied together Johnson's Great War experiences with his personal struggles and the war drums sounding once again in the late 1930s. As such it might have offered readers a chance for reflection on the relationship between war, individuality and freedom as European powers drew up plans for conflict again (or so says O'Sullivan, 2012).

Alas, the novel was all but physically destroyed by the War it may have been presaging since the storehouse used by its London publisher was bombed in the blitz of 1940 and all but a few copies were burnt away by the ensuing fires.

The novel had a post-war rebirth in New Zealand, republished by a Waikato publisher to much critical acclaim. However, this was only after Mulgan found himself alone in Cairo after having fought for both British and New Zealand regiments all across the Mediterranean. It is there, on the evening of Anzac Day 1945, New Zealand's WWI memorial day, and with WWII coming to an end, Mulgan overdosed on morphine (Brown, 2011).

If *Man Alone* suggests that war prompts a special kind of fellowship between men usually isolated from society, then we might dream that the future of Auckland is at some kind of war. Let's suppose it's not a fight against another nation, though, but a war against impending climate tragedy.

In *Man Alone*, shepherding, sheep and sheep's wool symbolized security and stability. This theme is reprised for future Auckland (see Figure 4) where the use of sheep's wool -- as roof covers -- provides Aucklanders some security and stability from global emergency of climate change. Woolly insulation can keep homes warm during winter, obviating the need for fossil-fueled heating. Wool can keep homes cool during the summer, drastically cutting down the need for powered air conditioning.

Recently, in the United Kingdom, a battle for home insulation has erupted on the streets as 'insulation' eco-warriors battle against climate catastrophe by calling on the state-sponsored insulation of each and every home. Even the United Kingdom's Head of State, King Charles III, came out in sympathy for their goal (see Burford, 2021; Rowlatt, 2021). As New Zealand's king (and as a proponent of organic farming, see Horowitz (2022) Charles III might also be happy to see New Zealand sheep as organic lawn mowers, quietly and sedately trimming urban lawns and fertilizing its renewal with their manure.



Figure 4 The Future of Auckland inspired by Mulgan's *Man Alone*

Source: Marshall (2025c)

Acknowledgements

The digital images in Figure 2 to Figure 4 included in this article were produced using the following software programs, both of which utilize "AI", Openart and Paintshop Pro. The exact rendering process differed for each image, but generally the image was initially pencilled or penned onto paper, then scanned into a computer and edited in PaintShopPro, then colorized, then the

resulting image was used as an image prompt in OpenArt before a suitable rendition appeared. Then an image was chosen, put back into PaintShop pro and edited and rearranged and fixed up manually in a digital form.

Conclusions

Can New Zealand’s urban futures be predicted by the Literary Method of Urban Design? The provisional answer is quite possibly. (However, allow me to write part two of this article around the year 2100 confirming more assuredly, yes or no). Of course, rather than being a scientific forecasting process, the Literary Method of Urban Design is a way of scraping any wisdom – the old fashioned way – from the cultural products of a nation and then projecting it into outlining and addressing the problems of now so that future cities are a more likely to be livable. In this case, we identify Literary Method as an ‘art; or a ‘craft’ rather than a science.

In this case, the wisdom of *Erewhon*, *Tutira*, and *Man Alone* suggest that urban settings might be in for trouble as environmental change becomes more real, more urban, and indeed, more tragic. The *Erewhon* case study suggests, as a remedy that urban folk might readily experiment with foregoing their reliance on technology to address such tragedies whilst the *Man Alone* case study suggests that traditional New Zealand technology coupled with a sense of communal fellowship will likely do the job as well. Maybe though, environmental change will be so rapid that there will be little time to halt the sea from sweeping away New Zealand’s towns, as predicted by the *Tutira* case study. These and other similarities can be summarized in tabular form in the following way (see Table 1.)

Table 1 A Comparison of the Potential Futures of Each Case Study City.

Potential Urban Futures as Inspired by Reference Text	Case Study One City of Napier Inspired by <i>Tutira</i>	Case Study Two City of Christchurch Inspired by <i>Erewhon</i>	Case Study Three City of Auckland Inspired by <i>Man Alone</i>
Positive Future?	Not really	Yes	Yes
Can catastrophic environmental change be avoided?	No	Yes	Yes
What are the major change agents?	Relocation of citizens/ city	‘Retrofication’ of technology	Use of appropriate insulation technology
Can the change agents help the city survive the climate emergency?	Maybe	Yes	Yes
Chance of urban prediction narrative being wholly, right?	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Chance of urban prediction being wholly wrong?	Low	Low	Low

To further develop the Literary Method of Urban Design, future research should explore its applicability beyond New Zealand by testing it in a diverse range of international urban settings. Expanding this method to countries with distinct literary traditions, historical trajectories, and urban challenges would provide valuable comparative insights. For example, applying it to South West Asian cities could reveal alternative perspectives on postcolonial urbanism, while testing it in Scandinavian towns might highlight different ecological and technological responses. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaborations with environmental scientists, urban planners, and cultural historians could refine the method's predictive capacity and enhance its impact on policy-making. Finally, longitudinal studies assessing how urban futures envisioned through literature align with real-world developments over time would further validate the approach and offer practical guidance for sustainable urban transitions.

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