

# The Girl and the Infrastructural Sea: Storytelling and Speculative Design

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**Speculative design has long been a method for architects to explore unrealized futures and generate critical debate. To broaden the debate's reach and thus maximize the hypothesizing potential of speculative design, designers must find methods of communicating ideas to an extended audience and cultivate a shared vision; a starting point from which a dialogue can begin. Storytelling can be a powerful method for making speculative design accessible to all. This paper presents a case-study for bringing a seemingly remote future into examinable proximity through fable and speculative design.**

*"Once upon a time, in the place where land and sea met, a woman laid an egg with a baby inside..." from 'Ovala'*

## **METHODOLOGY: SPECULATIVE DESIGN + STORYTELLING**

Speculative design has long been a method for architects to explore unrealized futures and generate critical debate. Speculative design provides a means of framing problems; it critically proposes alternative scenarios and poses what-if questions to instigate thought and reflection on what the future may hold. This kind of critical reflection is necessary in a rapidly changing world, as future scenarios are often closer than they appear. The practice of speculation and reflection can aid informed decision-making in the present. To broaden the debate's reach and thus maximize the hypothesizing potential of speculative design, designers must find methods of communicating ideas to an extended audience and cultivate a shared vision; a starting point from which a dialogue can begin.

Storytelling, can be a powerful method for making speculative design accessible to all. "Humans are storytelling organisms who individually and social lead storied lives."<sup>1</sup> By providing characters and situations which put the envisioned setting in a human context, speculative design can create a shared vision in which everyone can participate. Sheila Danko, in describing a methodology for utilizing storytelling in the design classroom, explains that, "well-crafted stories, selected with deliberate intent, bolster skills in listening, enhance interpretive abilities, and motivate people to action."<sup>2</sup> In a

2017 interview, Liam Young summed up the potential of fiction in to communicate to the public in a way that traditional modes of architectural communication do not:

In traditional architecture, you spend years developing fluency in reading and construction sections and plans, but the rest of the world doesn't know how to work with such media... Speculative architecture moves beyond these codified languages into one of fiction because of people's extraordinary ability to understand the ideas embedded in it."<sup>3</sup>

Utilizing the communicative power of storytelling provides a point of entry for the public to the speculative worlds created by designers.

Furthermore, far from simplifying the speculative design project, storytelling in media from outside the traditional architectural repertoire can add depth and complexity to the imagined worlds in which these projects exist. In their 2013 book, *Speculative Everything*, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby describe the effect of external media on their own speculative sculptural work, using film and photography "to extend the imaginative possibilities of the physical prop, adding more layers and opening up more possibilities."<sup>4</sup> Exploring projects in different media can add new dimensions, creating richer, more detailed imagined worlds to inhabit.

This paper presents a case-study for bringing a seemingly remote future into examinable proximity though speculative architectural visualizations and one of the oldest forms of storytelling, the fable.

## **CASE STUDY: THE GIRL AND THE INFRASTRUCTURAL SEA**

In the not so distant future, increased storm-action and a 1-meter sea level rise will inundate the barrier plain and place New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Lake Charles, and Houston directly on the Gulf of Mexico. Our multidisciplinary design team, emC&young, sees this problem not as a possibility, but as an inevitability; an impending reality. When the sea rises and the distance between the disparate conditions of the city and the sea disappears, how will the built environment and human occupation respond? What happens when the remote becomes the proximate? What is the architecture of the shifting ecotone and what modes can be used to envision it in a future which has not yet materialized? How does a practice leverage

the landscape, when the landscape itself is changing? These are the questions explored by 'Coastal Caretakers', a project which envisions a re-purposing of the infrastructure left exposed after sea level rise for the dual purpose of human occupation and coastal care.

Several such structures as elevated highways, bridges, train trestles, etc. exist along the flood endangered Gulf Coast. Bridges and other structures left protruding from the risen water could be fitted with nets to capture the sediment deposits of the Mississippi. Over time, these deposits are layered, treated, planted, and then re-deposited to actuate the formation of barrier islands. This environmental adaptation initiates regrowth of the coastal plain, the storm-proofer for these communities. The caretakers of this operation live out in this remote, isolated water-world, tending the nets and farming the re-captured soil.

As a speculative project, its primary purpose was not problem solving through architecture, but instead an act of problem defining through multiple disciplinary lenses: infrastructure, agriculture, landscape ecology, and architecture.

This project found another life and another audience when novelist Moira Crone wrote the fable 'OVALA' inspired by and set in this this new world created by the Coastal Caretaker project. OVALA is the story of a young girl caught between seemingly incompatible worlds, between the wild and the tame, between the natural and

the manmade, between the city and the sea. It imagines what the future looks like when, inevitably, the lines between these worlds are blurred. The story weaves layers of allegorical meaning, reaching a moral conclusion about the danger of over-categorizing, of oversimplifying, of seeing things as black-and-white and unchangeable.

OVALA made a speculative design project more universally accessible through one of the most enduring forms of folk literature, the fable. Stories are universal, and have the potential to communicate to a wide audience. Allegory has been used throughout history to highlight the folly of humans, and to allow the reading of multiple, layered realities on several scales simultaneously through a process of interpretation. Much like architecture, fables can be read literally (ontologically), and they can also be read through the lens of representation.

The fable of OVALA is presented in the following appendix, along with supporting images created by emC&yong.

#### APPENDIX: THE FABLE OF OVALA

##### 1

Once upon a time, in the place where land and sea met, a woman laid an egg with a baby inside. The infant was within the shell for many days, until one morning when she woke with a terrible emptiness in her chest. Thrashing around, she cracked her home, and

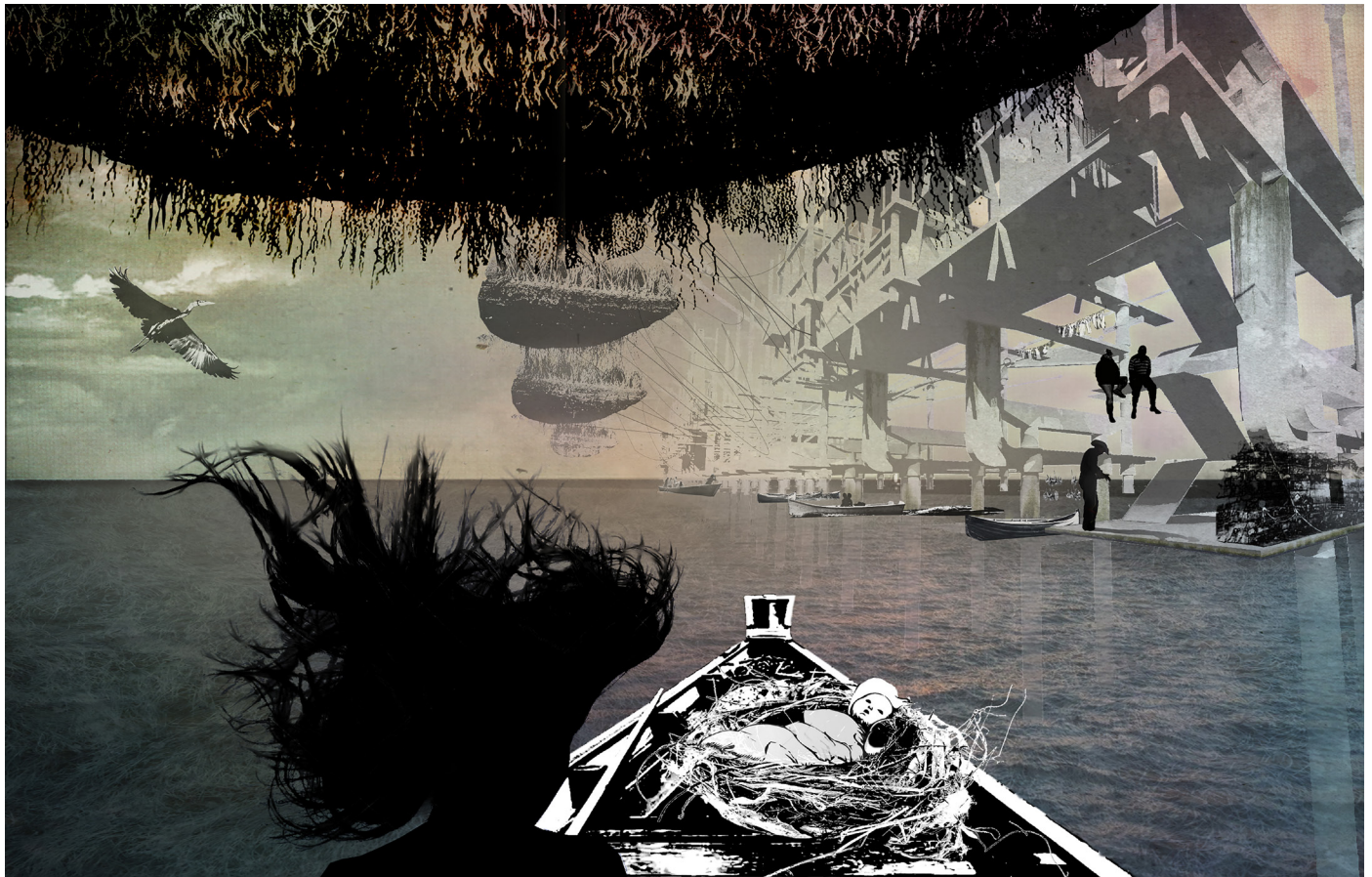


Figure 1: Ovala and her mother flee from the Vizier.

burst through. She discovered she was in a nest, on stilts, above water, with a beautiful mother watching her. Her people, the Caretakers of the Coast, marveled to see her, and called her Ovala.

When word spread of her unusual birth, the Vizier from the Walled City appeared. In his deep voice, he said he'd have to take Ovala for a while. "Stay right here," he commanded her mother, "I'll get a cradle. She doesn't belong in a nest!"

Her mother took Ovala in a narrow boat and rowed out into the wide waters. Lying on her back, the child saw the grasses of the marsh, and a great heron high above, following them. Dark square clouds appeared. Her mother came to a platform and tied up the boat. She pulled on a rope to bring one cloud in close. It wasn't a cloud, though, Ovala saw, but a field of green, suspended in the sky. Upon the field lived a very old man, who was planting.

Ovala's mother told the man, "I'm hiding from the Vizier. He wants my child. Why?"

"To study her," he said.

"What for?"

"They are curious about everything that happens here," he said.

With great clatter the Vizier arrived in a mechanical bird. He called down as he snatched the child, "Disobedient! You'll never see her again!"

"Perhaps, perhaps not," the old man said. Ovala's mother wept.

2

The scholars in the Walled City picked Ovala up and put her down and turned her over. They found strange nubs on her shoulder blades, said her hands would be claws, and announced, "We can't study her. There's no category for her---she too much of one, not enough of the other."

The Vizier's wife longed for a child, so he brought Ovala home.

Ovala loved the couple, even though they were strict. They believed there was only one way to live--- in brick boxes on paved streets behind the Wall that kept them safe from water, seas, and storms. The earth was always below the sky. There were no patches of green in the air, just parks between the buildings on the ground. Ovala went to those parks every day and played until she was too tired to play anymore.

When it rained, she ran out into it. The Vizier's wife said she would get sick doing that. After every cloudburst the Vizier's crews

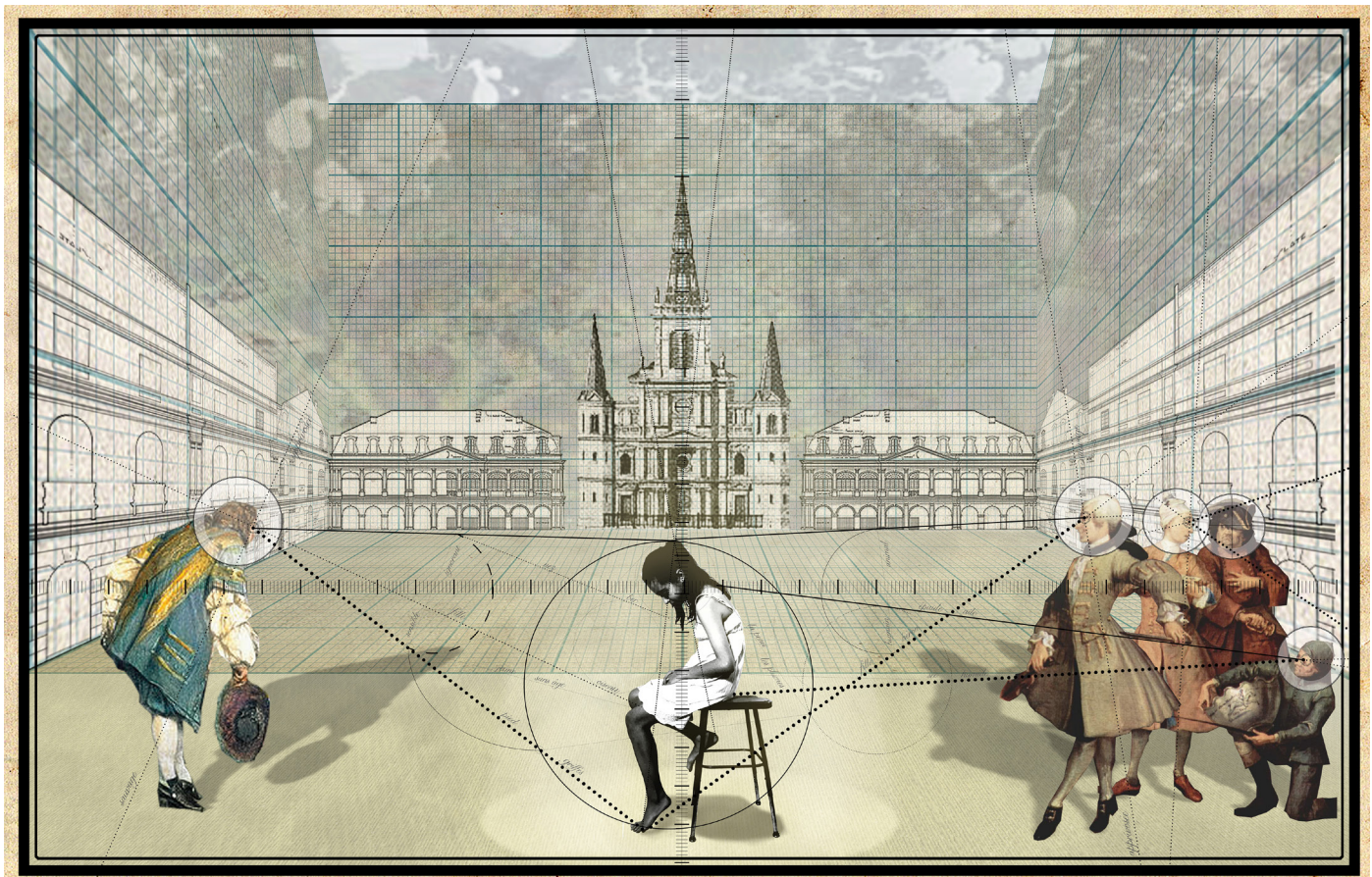


Figure 2: The Categorization of Ovala.

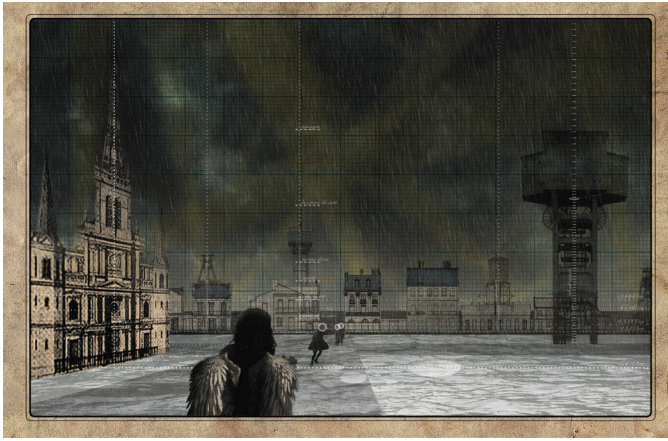


Figure 3: Storms inundate the Walled City.



Figure 4: Ovala's homecoming.

pumped away the puddles quickly as they could. The citizens praised the Vizier's men for keeping the streets dry as bones.

In school, Ovala learned to sort and separate. Rich was to be kept apart from poor, tall apart from short, loud from soft, great from small, Walled City from the Coastal lands, dry from wet-- many, many rules. Ovala was taught the Caretakers of the Coast were enchanted, or crazy. They lived in houses above the water, traveled everywhere in boats, farmed on soils they caught from the Gulf and suspended their fields in the air like great carpets, roots hanging down. Why not just build a Wall?

But often Ovala dreamed of earth above sky, of water under land, of horizon upon horizon in layers, of her first mother, of the heron who followed them, and the old man.

### 3

The morning she turned twelve, Ovala woke feeling an extreme itchiness on her back. In the mirror she saw dark feathers coming out in two spots between her shoulder blades.

She stayed inside her room all day. When the Vizier and his wife came in at dusk to check on her, they saw the feathers. Ovala pretended to

doze. The Vizier said, "No one will accept her like this. We'll wait until they grow out, then get them cut away. It will hurt."

"Tell them to cut off her feeling then too," his wife said.

When they were gone, Ovala went to her window. Through the shade, she saw huge shadows in a strange, greenish sky. Passersby ran in fright, because the heavy clouds burst open. Rains fell harder than ever, flooding streets, and parks, and houses.

The Wall began to crack. The Vizier's men worked all night repairing it. Eventually, the flood did subside. The Vizier said, "The hundred year storms are here. It might not hold next time."

That evening Ovala went to the windowsill again. With her very long fingernails, she slit the shade wide open, threw up the sash. She glimpsed a great heron high above, hovering, but quickly, he was gone. She burst through the window, and strolled with glee in the deep puddles still in the streets. She climbed to the top of a building, unfurled her perfect wings—for they had finished growing in the night--- and flew south.

Soon, below her, she saw patches of green suspended above the waters, and fine necklaces of lights in the marshy seas.

She'd found her first home. She saw her mother waiting for her with the old man in the suspended field. She settled there, as if she'd never left, almost. The Caretakers fished and sang, planted the fields. The people called her "good luck," and no one trimmed Ovala's wings.

### 4

The storms came, stronger and stronger, battering everyone. Where the Caretakers lived, the winds were fierce and the water rose. The hanging fields swayed, never fell.

The city fared worse, for the Wall cracked often. The Vizier's men worked for years fixing it, but could never finish the job. Eventually he grew tired. The couple went looking for Ovala, as they longed for her in their old age.

Ovala was a young woman now. She missed things about the Walled City ---the certainty in life, her childhood friends, even how "this" was always distinct from "that." When the couple came, she asked the Vizier if they would take her wings away if she were to visit. His wife said, "Just an operation, darling, then you will be a beauty."

"No," Ovala's mother said. "She was born with them. Leave her alone!" The two mothers were about to come to blows. Ovala was torn, wanting both to be happy.

At that moment, the great heron, who had been watching all this time, flew in and landed. He was astonishing, with fine white feathers on the sides of his face. He said to the Vizier and his wife: "The storm far out in the Gulf coming now is too strong. The only way to save the city is to let the Wall crumble, for you will all drown inside it. To the old man, he said, "The hanging fields are well established. It's been a hundred years. You have cared for the coast and cultivated it. You have built new land. It's time. Lower them. They will protect the city."



Figure 4: Walled City dwellers and Coastal Caretakers living in the infrastructural sea.

Her mother said to the Vizier, “If Ovala can stay, we’ll lower the fields.”

“How shall we live with no Wall?” The Vizier asked the heron.

“With water flowing in and out. Your houses beside rivers, canals. Otherwise, you will perish. I have seen far, and seen this.”

The Caretakers took the bargain, for love of Ovala. They dropped the hanging fields upon the waters. The Vizier’s men in the city dug canals and made ponds where the streets and parks once were, and took the Wall down.

The Great Storm came. The new lands slowed its approach. The Walled City let the water in. When it receded, they had survived. When the sun returned to the Coast, the Caretakers walked out upon the marvel they had created, and began again to farm —on their new earth this time.

Ovala stayed at the coast, but visited the Vizier’s family often. When all was well, the heron visited her, and said:

“Follow me, on a world flight. From high above, you will see how one kind of land and life might merge seamlessly with another---without tragedy. I’ll show you a little of the future. It’s your destiny to show others.”

She obeyed. Taking off into in sweet currents of air, she felt home at last, for she was his daughter.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Carol Lauritzen and Michael Jaeger. *Integrating learning through story: the narrative curriculum*. Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers, 1997.
2. Sheila Danko, “Humanizing Design through Narrative Inquiry,” *Journal of Interior Design* 31, no. 2 (2006): 13.
3. Liam Young. “What is speculative architecture? FAQ by Liam Young.” Interview. *Strelka Magazine*. June 1, 2017. <https://strelka.com/en/magazine/2017/06/01/what-is-speculative-architecture>.
4. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative everything: design, fiction, and social dreaming*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013. 100.