

03 Letter to My Son

Aim for completion of this task by: **Sunday 02/11/25**

This task is linked to the Input (Contexts) wk03 talk on Tuesday 14/10/25. In that session, we introduced the ideas of Speculative Design and the role it can play in designing the future.

You will have received a scan of an article by Barbara Flanagan by email that featured in the magazine book Design is ...

The scan is also available on the Blackboard space for the INPUT (Contexts) module :: Read Research Reflect folder.

Read this

Read Barbara Flanagan's Letter to My Son, make notes as you go along and consider the tasks below.

Think about this

What are the pertinent dates in this fictional piece?

What year was it written? In what year was it published? How old was her son when it was published and how old is he now?

What elements of the letter have become real since it was written? Think about generalisations as well as specifics in her letter.

Is her letter accurate? If so why? If not, why not? Do you think the predicted changes are for the bad and good.

Write / plan

Imagine you have a daughter or son born in 2020. Also imagine you are writing a letter in 2025 for them to read in 2035. What would you write about? What can they expect? Think about the positive and the negative.

Plan out a letter in bullet points or use sketchnotes - it's not necessary to write out the letter in full. Keep everything to one side of A4.

Reference

Busch, A. (ed.) (2001) Design Is: Words, Things, People, Buildings, and Places at Metropolis. New York: Metropolis Books.

Written Date: August 21, 2000.

Publication Year: 2000 (published by Metropolis Books).

Future Setting: The letter imagines the world in the year 2020.

Son's Age:

- At Publication (2000): He was 15 years old.
- Now (January 2026): He would be 40 or 41 years old.

Elements of the Letter That Have Become Real:

- Ubiquitous digital communication: She describes people "harassing each other by cell phone" and "buying more equipment on E-bay", which reflects our modern digital saturated reality.
- Renewable Energy Transition: The shift toward solar power and thin-film photovoltaics (PV) aligns with the current global expansion of solar technology.
- Climate Change Urgency: The letter's focus on global warming, melting polar caps, and environmental security accurately predicted the central role of climate change in 21st-century politics.
- Touch and Interactive Surfaces: Her description of "electronic surfaces coming alive" and controlling computers by "touching places on its screen" is now standard in smartphones and tablets.
- Localized Sustainability: The "Slow Food Movement" and the rise of locally grown, seasonal food have become significant cultural and agricultural trends.

Accuracy of the Letter:

The letter is partially accurate but not literally predictive — it succeeds as speculative fiction rooted in emerging trends but overreaches in extrapolating extreme or unfeasible outcomes.

Why It Is Partially Accurate

Flanagan grounded her predictions in observable 1980s – 1990s trends:

1. She referenced British Petroleum's 1990s push for photovoltaics, predicting cost reductions that came true.
2. She drew on 1990s road pricing experiments (Singapore's EZ-Pass-style system) to imagine mileage limits.
3. She noted the 1990s rise of e-commerce and brand consolidation (Wal-Mart as a "category killer") to forecast subscription-based consumption.

Why It Is Not Fully Accurate

Inaccuracies stem from extrapolating trends to extreme, politically or technologically unfeasible levels:

1. Political consolidation: The "North American Republic (NAR)" (merging the U.S., Canada, and Mexico) never materialized—geopolitical and cultural barriers prevented this.
2. Extreme travel restrictions: While travel is being discouraged for climate reasons, there is no global "annual mileage allotment" or "sublet permits" for cities like New York.
3. Meat ban: Meat was not banned in 2007; while plant-based diets have grown, meat consumption remains widespread.
4. Smart Skin ubiquity: While smart home technology exists, "Spray Skin" that crystallizes into structural, multi-sensory surfaces is still science fiction.

5. Intellectual property collapse: Copyright laws were not overturned in 2002; platforms like Spotify and Netflix now compensate creators, and piracy is regulated (unlike Flanagan's vision of "no royalties").

Are the Predicted Changes Good or Bad?:

Flanagan's 2020 is a mixed bag — her predictions blend progressive sustainability goals with troubling concentrations of power and loss of freedom:

Positive Changes

Clean energy transition: Free, solar-powered energy addresses climate change and reduces pollution—a clear win for the planet.

Local, healthy food: Village farms eliminate processed, global agribusiness food, improving public health and reducing carbon footprints.

Smart technology for efficiency: Smart Skin and energy-efficient homes reduce waste and enhance comfort.

Community-focused living: Village-based life fosters social connection and shared resources, pushing back against isolation.

Negative Changes

Loss of freedom: Mileage limits, travel permits, and restricted city residency (e.g., New York sublet permits) infringe on personal liberty.

Corporate monopolization: Three mega-brands (TruTrust, Lifelong Products, Commitment Corp.) control most consumables, eroding competition and consumer choice.

Social stratification: "Servant towers," gated cities, and "foodists" (marginalized people forced to work on farms) create a rigid class system.

Technological dependency: Implanted ear appliances, mood-altering "SYKE music," and Smart Skin create a world where people are trapped in sensory environments — silence becomes a scarce commodity requiring "rehab."

Democratic erosion: Commercial bureaucracies replace elected officials ("home rule"), meaning citizens "vote for products rather than people"—a loss of political agency.

Write:

What you'll celebrate (The good)

- ① Kind tech.
 - { AI doctors.
 - Smart homes ...
 - AR tools
- ② more forest. clean rivers. electric cars.
- ③ Study. → Art
 - { music
 - art
 - science. team up with kids from different countries.
- ④ Warm Communities.

What you'll navigate. (The hard).

- ① Info overload → echo chamber.
- ② extreme weather.
 - { heatwaves
 - Sudden storms
- ③ mental stress. → everyone seem 'perfect' online.
but anxiety is common now. slow down.
- ④ privacy risks.
 - { phones.
 - school. → say 'no' to apps that want too much

Hope.

- { Cherish real moment.
- use tech to create, not just scroll.