



Projections for the nineties

Cleaning up the environment will gradually cease to be the goal; holding the line will be about all we can hope for

Predicting the future — myths and realities

In one sense, no one can truly predict the future. Who, at the beginning of the 1970s, could have foreseen OPEC, Watergate, or the Anita Bryant crusade? In another sense, we predict (or at least forecast) the future all the time; it's a necessary and vital job. Should I rent for another year or buy now and hope that housing prices hold up? How many hospital beds will AIDS patients in my city need next year? Should I work for a small company or a larger, more conservative one? All these questions require us to make guesses — to some degree educated guesses — about the future and our place in it.

We need to have some idea about what the future holds — unfortunately, much of what we hear about the future is bogus or inaccurate because it is based on false assumptions. As we begin a new decade, this is particularly true. Here are three common myths that distort our view of the future — and three realistic approaches that almost always work.

Wishful thinking

This is the fallacy of talking about what we'd like to have happen as though it necessarily will happen. Any gay agenda for the '90s is bound to stress a cure for AIDS — it's something very much to be desired. But our desires alone, unfortunately, do not make things happen. People who commit the fallacy of wishful thinking can cause much unintended mischief: "I think the number of AIDS cases will decline (because I'd like it to)" is a falsely optimistic prediction that could even distort planning.

Corporate scenarios

For at least the past 50 years, American corporations have put forth bright, Jetsonian tableaux of life that (not coincidentally) happen to feature their products. *Yesterday's Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future* (Summit Press, 1984) contains numerous examples of corporate future scenarios. Most are quite funny in retrospect: the General Motors "Futurama" exhibit from 1939 (see sidebar) and Ford's 1957 Moonport (with tailfinned rockets) are two of my favorites. Yet, there are people who still take this stuff literally, instead of merely as playful imagination.

Change for change's sake

This is the line of analysis that assumes we'll be happy to scrap a reasonably efficient way of doing things for something new, untried, and (usually) vastly more expensive. Despite AT&T's science-fiction advertising in the 1960s (see "Corporate Scenarios" above), picturephones have never gotten established because the benefits don't come near the costs. Another innovation that seems to be perennially just around the corner is the personalized, FAX-type newspaper that prints out in our living room every morning. Rather than pay \$40 to \$100 a month for such a service, though, I suspect that most of us will continue to buy the daily paper for 35¢ and skip over the parts we don't like. *Megamistakes: Forecasting and the Myth of Rapid Technological Change* by Steven Schnaars (Free Press, 1989) is must reading for anyone who is too easily seduced by "high-tech."

Fortunately, though, not all future forecasting is based on emotion and illogic. There are a few common-sense guidelines we can follow in making some realistic assumptions, among them:

Demographics

As Steven Schnaars points out, demographic predictions almost always work. Even after disease and accident, most of us will still be here 20 years from now — and we'll be, by definition, 20 years older. Thus, it takes no great leap of faith to predict that, barring nuclear war or some other cataclysm, the number of American retirees will skyrocket after 2000 A.D. because the oldest "Baby Boomers" will be approaching 60 then.

California/Bellwether

In the '50s, California got a freeway system and vast tract housing first. In the '60s, student unrest, swinging singles and other manifestations of the emerging Baby Boomers. In the '70s California led the nation in the formation of "Gay Ghettos." In the '80s, unfortunately, snarled traffic and crack cocaine. Social trends seem to hit California first. Alvin Toffler's prescient book *Future Shock* (see sidebar) uses quite a bit of California-watching to make its predictions.

Voting one's wallet

This works quite well to predict future presidential elections: the party in power stays in power if the economy is good, it loses if the economy is bad. The one exception to this was 1976, when Jimmy Carter (barely) beat Gerald Ford despite an improving economy. Most political analysts credit Carter's win to the number of people who voted for him and against Gerald Ford because they were mad at Ford for having pardoned Nixon. The "voting one's wallet" analysis would put a Democrat in the White House in 1992 only if some kind of "Bush Recession" precedes the election.

In the next section, I'll use these and other trends in a forecast of your daily life in the decade to come.

A snob's guide to the '90s

It's a long row to hoe, those of us who wish to be and remain truly pretentious. We need to time our acquisitions of the right consumer goods at just the right time — not so early that our friends and acquaintances are unfamiliar with them but not so late that everyone else has one and the impact is lost.

Our plight is compounded by the damnable talent of American consumer capitalism to take perfectly good, expensive (and thus desirable) items and make cheap knockoffs of them. Take Gucci-striped luggage, for example. When new, it was ultradesirable and available only in the finest boutiques. Then it hit the department stores and became somewhat less desirable. Then some really horrible adaptations got into the discount houses. Now the stuff will get you laughed out of any Greyhound terminal in America.



E. Ann Hinds

Fortunately, by following a few simple principles we can predict which items are going to be hit by premature mass-acceptance. High technology that calls too much attention to itself is always suspect. Digital watches, which were quite in demand 15 years ago, are now at the bottom of the heap of timepieces, socially speaking. Beware of investing in anything that is readily copiable and already shows too much popularity. Here's a list of things that I predict will be truly tacky by 1998:

- vanity license plates
- sunroofs and moonroofs (the truly sportif will own convertibles)
- gold credit cards (the truly elite will be into Amercurium)
- anything country, except the music
- cutesy telephone-answering machine messages
- (for men) suspenders
- (for women) the Colonel Sanders-type silk tie
- home cookware with uninsulated handles
- serious discussion about coffee beans

On the other hand, a number of things which are now considered quaint or "out" may come to be seen as desirably rare over the next 10 years. These include:

- rotary-dial telephones
- manual typewriters
- liberal-arts college educations
- large collections of 33-rpm records
- pre-1974 cars (not only are they antiques, but their high-compression engines require leaded gasoline, or a substitute therefor)
- the two-week vacation.

Don't say you haven't been warned.