

## Liminal Futures: Landscapes of Innovation in the High-Tech Industry

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### Abstract

The future of access to information and telecommunications is often talked about as anywhere and everywhere, as pervasive and ambient, ubiquitous and always on. Yet the high-tech industry is not everywhere. Its marketing headquarters and Research & Development sites are located in certain places and not others: Silicon Valley, the Thames Valley, Silicon Fen, historic proximity to the defence industry, and within easy reach of global transport hubs such as Heathrow. The landscapes of high-tech industry, the everyday places where the future gets made in design studios and in business strategy meetings, are therefore very particular.

The future is made in everyday practices and places, from PowerPoint presentations to notes made whilst on a train. The future is situated in practices and places; it's always local to the landscapes of its rehearsal and ongoing production. Future-making is entangled in landscapes. For example, the future of anywhere and everywhere telecommunications is made in landscapes that do not resist telecoms infrastructure, where radio signals propagate easily, where the proliferation of ICTs are at their densest, and where a future of pervasive information access seems an unimaginative, obvious possibility.

But what of other landscapes? What of landscapes of mountain and sea, which resist the propagation of radio signals and optical fibre? What futures might be imagined in places where anywhere and everywhere do not hold for television or telecoms, but where local specificity and mutability are crucial? Different landscapes might participate in the production of different futures.

Set in contrast to the mobile telecoms industry near London, this paper will explore the generative potential of Orkney, an island archipelago off the north coast of Scotland, as a site for future-making in the high-tech industry. Not only does its topography resist a future of ubiquitous access, but its temporality is also radically different to those at the centre of the industry. For instance, high-tech companies on Orkney work within, not a dense proliferation of mobile phone masts, but a dense proliferation of five thousand year-old prehistoric monuments, from stone circles to chambered tombs; their everyday experience includes these enduring technologies.

This is not about an ethnography of users, but an ethnography of high-tech designers and managers and their creation of user futures. It concerns future-making practices and processes inside industry, and how they might be done differently in different places.

Rather than remote landscapes being at the edge of the high-tech industry, this paper proposes that such landscapes can participate at the centre of future-making. Through dialogues between what is thought of as the periphery and the hub, between universal futures and liminal futures, perhaps more innovative and more locally specific high-tech futures might be imagined and made possible.