

# Visions of Bulgarian urban futures: applying the Literary Method of Urban Design

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## ABSTRACT

This article explored the application of the Literary Method of Urban Design to three Bulgarian cities—Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo, and Ahtopol—by drawing upon local and national literary works to envision these cities future development. Through a three-step process, the method selects novels that reflect each city's cultural, historical, and environmental identity, extracts thematic elements from the narratives, and projects these themes onto speculative urban futures before displaying the results as lively scenario art. Using Anton Donchev's *Time of Parting* for Plovdiv, Emilian Stanev's *The Peach Thief* for Veliko Tarnovo, and Zdravka Evtimova's *Vassil* for Ahtopol, the article demonstrates how fiction can guide urban planning and futuring. Common themes, such as the integration of nature into urban life and the preservation of cultural heritage, emerge across these three case study Bulgarian cities. However, the unique challenges faced by each city—be they social, environmental, or economic—are also highlighted, perhaps illustrating the method's flexibility in addressing specific urban issues. The article emphasizes the pedagogical potential of this method for students of design, geography, and literature, offering a multidisciplinary approach that fosters creative thinking and critical engagement with urban challenges. Ultimately, the Literary Method of Urban Design showcases how fiction can inspire innovative, sustainable, and inclusive cityscapes for the future.

**Keyword:** futurity, cities, literary, urbanism, Bulgaria, Europe

## Introduction

In applying the Literary Method of Urban Design to Bulgarian cities, this article embarks on a journey through three distinct urban landscapes, each inspired by a seminal literary work. This method involves a three-step process, whereby novels that capture the cultural, historical, and environmental character of a place are analyzed and then creatively projected onto future urban scenarios. The intent is to bridge the narrative world of fiction with the potential realities of distant urban planning, allowing the nuances of storytelling to inform visionary urban designs. Some writers have attempted cultural deconstructions of historical imaginaries of Bulgarian urban settings (see for example, Kaneva, 2007, Todorova, 2009, or Radev, 2010) but this paper attempts an artistic reconstruction based upon local literary inspiration (rather than a cultural deconstruction).

The three steps can be conceptualized as follows (see diagram one). As you see, the steps lead to the presentation of a textual and graphic scenario.

Step 1: Selection of a city

Step 2: Selection of a literary work

Step 3: Forecast the future of the selected city using the themes and ideas present in the literary work.

Presentation: Present the Forecasted future via textual and graphic narrative.

**Diagram 1.** A top-to-bottom linear conceptualization of the Literary Method of Urban Design.

The first step in this method requires the identification of a novel or literary work that captures key themes resonant with the city's historical and cultural identity. This work serves as the lens through which the city's current challenges — be they environmental, social, or economic — are examined. In this article, three Bulgarian cities, Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo, and Ahtopol, are examined through the works of Anton Donchev, Emilian Stanev, and Zdravka Evtimova, respectively. These novels, selected for their rich narrative exploration of identity, conflict, longing, and connection to nature, offer deep insights into the future trajectories of these urban areas.

The second step involves an in-depth analysis of the chosen literary work to

extract themes, symbols, and narratives that can be transposed onto the city's urban fabric. For example, Anton Donchev's *Time of Parting*, with its focus on religious and cultural tensions / interactions, inspires a future vision of Plovdiv as a city that reconciles its diverse past through inclusive urban spaces and ecological regeneration (whilst also referencing the social / cultural vexations caused by the Great War, as covered by the likes of Miller, 1983). Similarly, Stanev's *The Peach Thief* invites a reimagining of Veliko Tarnovo as a city that economic growth with environmental sustainability, while Evtimova's *Vassil* lays the groundwork for transforming Ahtopol into a nature-loving town closely connected to Strandzha Nature Park.

The final step involves the projection of these literary-inspired themes onto a speculative future for each city. This step fuses fiction with pragmatic urban design and scenario art elements, proposing cities that not only preserve their cultural heritage but also embrace sustainability, resilience, and inclusivity. Plovdiv might evolve into a hub of cultural exchange along its restored urban woodlands and dense apartment blocks; Veliko Tarnovo could become a resilient riverine city with eco-tourism and green infrastructure at its core; and Ahtopol

may thrive as a model of biophilic design, blending its historic architecture with nature-centered urban aspirations.

Through this process, the Literary Method of Urban Design envisions Bulgarian cities of the future as places where literature, art, nature, and urbanism converge, guiding their transformation into spaces that honor their past while preparing for the environmental and social challenges of tomorrow.

### **1. Case Study One: The Future of Plovdiv as Inspired by Donchev's *Time of Parting***

The novel *Time of Parting* by Anton Donchev (1964) explores the deep religious and cultural conflicts between different Christians and Muslims in Ottoman-ruled Bulgaria (for more history on this, see Crampton, 2005; Cremin, 2013; Bechev, 2019). Set in the Rhodope Mountains, near Plovdiv, the novel delves into themes of identity, loyalty, and the painful process of change. Plovdiv, as one of the oldest cities in Europe and a historically significant crossroads of cultures (as explored in Radev, 2010), is an ideal candidate for an urban design fiction based on these themes.

In a future scenario inspired by *Time of Parting* – see figure one – Plovdiv would become a city that grapples with questions of identity and coexistence, finding ways to

embrace its diverse historical legacies while addressing modern social and environmental challenges. The novel's exploration of the tensions between different religious and

cultural groups can be reflected in a city that fosters unity through diversity, creating spaces for dialogue and cultural exchange.



**Figure 1** The Future of Plovdiv (by the author) inspired by Donchev's *Time of Parting*

Plovdiv is often referred to as the "City of Seven Hills" due to its unique geographical landscape, built upon seven syenite hills. These hills historically shaped the city's cultural and architectural identity, making it a symbol of continuity between ancient Thracian, Roman, and Bulgarian eras. Figure one depicts a futuristic vision of Plovdiv's architecture on one of these hills, blending Christian domed building motifs

with the Balkan-style extended family housing of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (a style outlined by Todorova, 1996 and Cremin, 2013) whilst making a nod to the ecofriendly nature of pedestrianism and the regeneration of urban woodlands. The buildings stand integrated with the natural rock formations, harking back to pre-Slavic Bulgaria, and are adorned with greenery that merges the urban landscape with the various

woodland and forest zones of the nearby mountain ranges, symbolizing a future where sustainable living and historical heritage coexist (in the vein advocated by Rees, 1995, Newman & Kenworthy, 1999), Register, 2006, and Lehmann, 2010). The depiction highlights the potential of Plovdiv's hills to support eco-architecture that embraces the natural environment while maintaining the city's iconic aesthetic. The depiction also suggests that if the city can embrace its pre-Slavic roots, it can also turn the page on Slavic – Turkish relations (which Donchev's novel so vividly describes in brutal clarity), since the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bulgarian architecture in figure one is also redolent of – and contiguous with – similar 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman architecture.

Plovdiv's future, inspired by the natural landscapes of the nearby Rhodope Mountains (written about by Donchev), would be one where the city reconnects with its surrounding environment. The Maritsa River, which flows through Plovdiv, would become a focal point for environmental regeneration. Riverbank restoration projects would play a key role in transforming the river from a polluted industrial zone into a vibrant ecological corridor (also see case study two, below). This space would serve both environmental and social purposes,

providing areas for recreation, cultural festivals, and open-air markets that reflect the city's diverse traditions.

Urban agriculture and permaculture practices could also be central to Plovdiv's environmental future (as proposed for other cities by Lehmann, 2010). Drawing on the agricultural imagery in *Time of Parting*, this vision would see the city's residents reclaiming abandoned waste spaces for community gardens and food forests. These projects would not only address food security but also promote sustainability and self-reliance, echoing the novel's themes of resilience in the face of adversity.

Plovdiv's future would also be shaped by the novel's exploration of identity and conflict. In a city with a long history of religious and cultural conflict / diversity (on the history of such, see: Kosev, 1969; Todorova, 1996, Mazower, 2004; Crampton, 2005; Daskalov, 2011), Plovdiv would become a model for peaceful coexistence. Inspired by the novel's occasional utterances toward dialogue and understanding, the city could establish cultural centers dedicated to fostering dialogue between different religious and ethnic groups. These centers would host events, workshops, and exhibitions that celebrate Plovdiv's diverse history while promoting tolerance and

mutual respect (which have at times been recipes of success in the development and prosperity of other Balkan cities over centuries past (see Glenny; 1999, and Hupchick, 2002).

Politically, Plovdiv could experiment with a form of governance that prioritizes inclusivity and dialogue. Just as likely though, if we extend into the future the tensions in the novel, there will be a growth in ethno-nationalism as Bulgarian Slavs assert their control to marginalize or push out the influence of the town's remaining Turkish or Muslim inhabitants. Which type of governance will prevail into the late 21<sup>st</sup> century can not be known now but hopefully, with the continued rise of liberal ideas coming in from Bulgaria's EU partners, local councils would be structured according to cosmopolitan European ideals to ensure representation from all the city's diverse communities. This would work to ensure that decisions reflect the interests and values of the entire population. The city's future would be one where differences are not only tolerated but celebrated, and where citizens are actively engaged in shaping the future of their communities.

## **2. Case Study Two: The Future of Veliko Tarnovo As Inspired by Stanev's *The Peach Thief***

In the case of Veliko Tarnovo, one of Bulgaria's most historically significant cities, the novel *The Peach Thief* by Emilian Stanev (1965) can be employed to project a future that is not only steeped in its past but also responsive to its socio-environmental evolution. *The Peach Thief* revolves around themes of moral conflict, the human spirit's resilience, and the quest for freedom during times of hardship. Set in World War I, the novel depicts the relationship between a Bulgarian woman and a Serbian prisoner of war, challenging societal and national boundaries.

This story conveys a strong sense of personal and collective struggle, as well as loss, love, and resilience. Applying these themes to Veliko Tarnovo allows urban planners to consider how the town's past struggles — as well as its history as the medieval capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire and its revolutionary roles in the Modern Period (see Kosev, 1969, Todorova, 1996, and Baeva, 2011, Daskalov, 2011) — can inform a forecast of the city's future urban development.

A major thematic concern in *The Peach Thief* is the tension between individual desires and societal constraints. For Veliko Tarnovo, this tension could be interpreted as the need to balance the

preservation of historical heritage with the desire for modern urban expansion and sustainability. The city's iconic architecture, such as Tsarevets Fortress, represents its deep connection to national identity and collective memory, yet the desire for development and modernization creates an inevitable conflict. Drawing from the novel, urban designers could prioritize a future where Veliko Tarnovo becomes a city that honors its past through adaptive reuse. The preservation of historical buildings could be paired with innovative green technologies, such as solar energy, to integrate sustainable living into the town's medieval structures, reflecting the resilience that runs through Stanev's narrative.

Another key aspect of *The Peach Thief* is the subversion of boundaries, be they national, moral, or personal. Veliko Tarnovo's future can take inspiration from this idea by promoting a sense of openness and inclusivity in its urban design. The novel highlights the transformative potential of human relationships that transcend political divisions, offering a framework for a more globally connected Veliko Tarnovo. As Bulgaria continues to engage with international markets and the European Union, the city can anticipate a

cosmopolitan future that welcomes diverse cultural influences while maintaining a softer version of its unique identity. A focus on creating shared public spaces — such as riverside plazas, civic parks, community centers, and cultural hubs—could foster this sense of openness, encouraging interaction across national, ethnic and social boundaries.

In addition, *The Peach Thief* places great emphasis on human connection with natural beauty. This relationship with nature suggests that Veliko Tarnovo could embrace a greener, more ecofriendly future, where urban planning respects the natural landscape (see figure two). The steep hills and meandering Yantra River that define the town's geography could play a central role in a vision for an ecologically sustainable city. Creating green corridors, enhancing internationally-renown public gardens, and promoting pedestrian-friendly pathways along the river can help the city harmonize with its natural environment, reflecting the novel's underlying themes of nurturing and survival



**Figure 2** The Future of Veliko Tarnovo (by the author) as inspired by *Stanev's The Peach Thief*

As in other alpine regions of Europe, global warming is accelerating the melting of mountain ice in Bulgaria, particularly in the Rila and Pirin and Balkan ranges, where glaciers and snowpacks are shrinking at unprecedented rates. As temperatures rise, the melting ice contributes to increased water runoff during the warmer months, compounding the effects of climate change. Simultaneously, some seasons in Bulgaria are experiencing more frequent and intense rainfall due to shifting weather patterns, leading to sudden, heavy downpours. These rains, combined with the excessive runoff from melting ice, overwhelm rivers such as

the Iskar and Maritsa, causing flash floods that threaten local communities, infrastructure, and agriculture. The compounded impact of rising temperatures and extreme weather is creating a dangerous cycle of flooding and environmental degradation across the country's mountain regions.

The scenario in figure two, though, suggests this extra water energy can be harnessed during floods by special super-flow hydro-mill devices that can be retrofitted (Dixon, *et al* 2014) to convert flood energy into electricity which is then

stored in long-lived batteries to power the town over ensuing months.

Politically, Veliko Tarnovo could adopt a form of governance that prioritizes social inclusion and community well-being. Inspired by the story's focus on personal relationships and hidden desires, the city's future governance could emphasize the importance of personal well-being and emotional health in urban planning. Public spaces would be designed to encourage social interaction and connection, with plazas, parks, and community centers providing opportunities for residents to come together and form meaningful relationships across various age-groups, across various ethnicities, and across various languages (as advocated for other cities by Joss *et al*, 2013).

In conclusion, by using *The Peach Thief* as a lens, Veliko Tarnovo's future can be envisioned as a dynamic blend of tradition, eco-technology, resilience, and changing patterns of sustainability (which has been a recipe for social regeneration in other cities, says Brenner & Schmid, 2014). The Literary Method of Urban Design enables the city to draw on the emotional depth and ethical reflections of the novel to create a future that honors its past, embraces

inclusivity, and seeks love for and tolerance of nature

### **3. Case Study Three: The Future of Ahtopol as Inspired by Evtimova's *Vassil*.**

We now come to applying the Literary Method of Urban Design to the future of Ahtopol, a town nestled along Bulgaria's Black Sea coast, through the award-winning short story *Vassil* written by Bulgaria's favorite living writer Zdravka Evtimova (2012). *Vassil*, with its themes of resilience, connection to the land, and personal renewal, offers a profound narrative to inspire the restoration of Ahtopol as a town deeply linked with the surrounding natural beauty of Strandzha Nature Park (as evidenced in Dimitrov, 2008).

Ahtopol, a small fishing town known for its historic charm and proximity to Strandzha, has the potential to evolve into a biophilic city—a city that weaves nature into its very fabric (see, for example Beatley, 2011), enhancing the well-being of its inhabitants while safeguarding ecosystems. Evtomova's story focuses on themes of perseverance and transformation, with characters grappling with the past and their relationship to place. These ideas can be transposed into urban design, where the restoration and preservation of the natural

environment become central to the town's future (see figure three).

Strandzha Nature Park, located right nearby Ahtopol in southeastern Bulgaria along the Black Sea coast, is the largest protected area in the country. The park is known for its rich biodiversity and unique blend of temperate and Mediterranean ecosystems. Strandzha is also home to ancient forests, wetlands, and diverse landscapes that harbor rare and endemic species of flora and fauna, including the endangered eastern imperial eagle, otters, and an array of bat species (states Dimitrov, 2008). The park also preserves significant cultural heritage, with ancient Thracian sanctuaries, burial mounds, and Slavic and Turkish folkloric traditions intertwined with natural spirits

Strandzha faces several environmental problems that threaten its rich biodiversity and ecosystems. Key issues include illegal logging, which contributes to deforestation and habitat destruction, and unregulated tourism that disrupts wildlife and damages natural landscapes. Additionally, the encroachment of agricultural activities and urban development has led to fragmentation of habitats, putting pressure on endangered species. Pollution from nearby towns, including Ahtopol, plus agricultural runoff also affects the water quality of the park's rivers and wetlands, harming aquatic life. Climate change exacerbates these challenges by altering the park's delicate ecosystems, threatening species' survival and the overall health of the park



**Figure 3** The Future of Ahtopol (by the author) as inspired by Evtimova's *Vassil*

Drawing from the values found in *Vassil*, the town of Ahtopol can disengage from the destruction of Strandzha by initiating projects to rewild areas of park (as well as areas of the town) that have suffered from degradation, thereby promoting biodiversity and creating green spaces that seamlessly integrate with urban areas. The town can also push forward to create new eco-tourist resorts and public buildings that are fully sustainable, clean and Green, and provide citizens a way to daily note their ecological surrounds (see figure three). Similar regimes are examined as possibilities for other European cities in Tzoulas, Korpela, & Venn (2007). By embedding green roofs, living architecture, vertical gardens, and tree-lined pathways, Ahtopol would foster a biophilic urban environment that reconnects residents with nature.

Ultimately, by using the Literary Method of Urban Design and drawing from the narrative of *Vassil*, Ahtopol can be envisioned as a place where biophilic design and the recovery of Strandzha Nature Park work hand-in-hand. This future would embrace ecological sustainability, cultural heritage, and community engagement, transforming Ahtopol into a model of

environmentally conscious development on the Black Sea coast.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In summary, this article applies the Literary Method of Urban Design to three Bulgarian cities—Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo, and Ahtopol—using literature as a guiding force for re-imagining their future urban development for the rest of this century. Each case study demonstrates how themes from selected works of Bulgarian fiction can be translated into urban design principles that respond to contemporary challenges. Despite the distinct characteristics of each city and the varying corresponding literary inspiration, certain communalities and differences arise.

A common theme across all three case studies is the emphasis on integrating nature into urban spaces. Whether through Plovdiv's eco-architectural regeneration of one of its "Seven Hills", Veliko Tarnovo's green infrastructure to adapt to increased flooding, or Ahtopol's biophilic design centered around the Strandzha Nature Park, all three cities seek to harmonize urban life with their changing natural environments. This convergence highlights the Literary Method's capacity to address environmental concerns such as sustainability, resilience,

and climate adaptation, while fostering a deeper connection between residents and their landscapes.

Another shared theme is the role of cultural and historical identity in shaping future urban designs. Plovdiv's multicultural past, Veliko Tarnovo's position as a cultural stop-over, and Ahtopol's natural heritage links all emerge as essential elements to be preserved, tolerated, and celebrated. The cities are envisioned as spaces where history and modernity and futurity coexist, reflecting the importance of dialogue between past, present and future in urban planning. However, notable differences exist in the specific future challenges each city faces and how this Method might address them to transform them in the future (as table one, below, summarizes).

Plovdiv's future is shaped by the reconciliation of religious and cultural conflicts, inspired by *Time of Parting*. Veliko Tarnovo's scenario, drawn from *The Peach Thief*, focuses on the delicate balance of creating new adaptive eco-technologies that invite rather than repel tourists, while

Ahtopol's transformation, guided by *Vassil*, emphasizes community engagement in ecological restoration. These distinct thematic focuses illustrate the flexibility of the Literary Method of Urban Design to address unique urban challenges.

The strengths of this method, particularly in pedagogy, are evident throughout the article. For design, geography, and literary students, the Literary Method of Urban Design provides a multidisciplinary framework that bridges storytelling with urban analysis. It fosters critical thinking by encouraging students to draw connections between literary themes and real-world urban scenarios, enhancing their ability to approach urban challenges creatively. Moreover, this method enriches the study of geography and urban design by embedding national, cultural and environmental dimensions into forecasting the future. As a pedagogical tool, the method not only nurtures holistic thinking but also inspires innovative visions for the sustainable cities of tomorrow.

**Table 1.** A summary comparison of the various Bulgarian Case Study urban futures predicted by the literary method of Urban Design

Potential Urban Futures as Inspired by Reference Text	Case Study 1: The future of Plovdiv inspired by Donchev's "Time of Parting"	Case Study 2: The future of Veliko Tarnovo inspired by Stanev's "The Peach Thief"	Case Study 3: The future of Ahtopol inspired by Evtimova's Vassil"
Prime Socio-environmental problem(s)	Ethnic divisions, natural resource conflicts	Degradation of riverine environment	Destruction of natural wetland ecosystems
Prime Change Agent(s)	Amelioration of ethnic divisions, eco-architecture	Innovative and attractive eco-technology	Community involvement in ecological restoration
Can change agent avert social disaster / eco-catastrophe?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Positive / Inspiring Forecast?	Yes	Yes	Yes

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