



The



Field  
Guide



to  
Design  
Futures



Giovanni Caruso  
Silvio Cioni

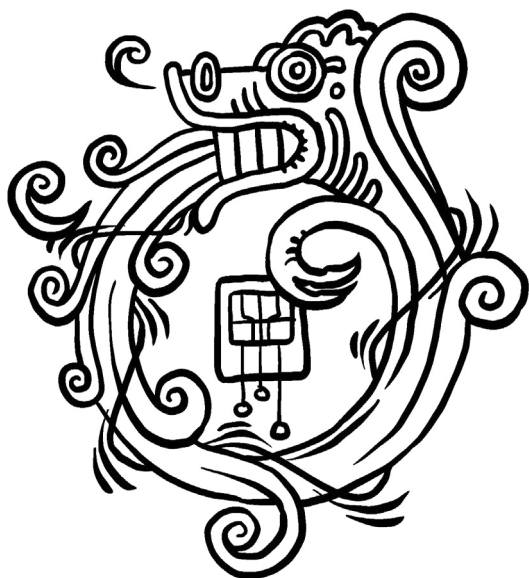
**FICTIONAL**



# The Field Guide to Design Futures

Giovanni Caruso

Silvio Cioni



# **The Field Guide to Design Futures**

was written by Giovanni Caruso and Silvio Cioni.

## *Contributors*

Phil Balagtas, Steve Baty, Michael Dunbar, Coe Douglas, Simone Engelhardt, Gabriele Ferri, Tina Fung, Inte Gloerich, Estelle Hary, Sara Innocenti, Marite P. Irvine, Masaki Iwabuchi, Chris Jackson, Viraj Joshi, Bastien Kerspern, Agata Kowalska, Silvio Lorusso, Léa Lippera, Albéric Maillet, Sahibzada Mayed, Andrea Gilly Márquez, Erica Moreti, Margherita Paleari, Karla Paniagua, Theo Ploeg, Amna Qureshi, Amanda Reeves, Tobias Revell, Søren Rosenbak, Juliana Schneider, Eloise Smith-Foster, Chris Speed, Martin Tomitsch, Patrick Tanguay, Savannah Vize, John V. Willshire, Samuel Yu.

## *Cover and Book design*

Margherita Paleari, Sara Lavazza,  
Chapter 24

## *Illustrations*

Stefano Cardini

## *Editing and Proofreading*

Matthew Wizinsky

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To Alice and Leone and the many Uno matches ahead that we still have to play.

I'm determined to win all of them, but I'm also ready to let a few go. You two never cease to amaze me.

Giovanni

To my wife Arianna, who puts up with me every day, and to my kids, Theo and Bianca, who keep growing up amazing despite having me as their dad. Without you, I wouldn't have made it.

Silvio



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# Foreword

Joseph Lindley

The path that led me to writing these words began not with a clear destination, but with that excitement and uncertainty you get when making a big change in life. Thirteen years ago, almost to the day, I was naively beginning a journey that would end up here. I had quit my job managing a small team in a hospital. In the years before that I had experimented with being an artist, a musician and a computer programmer. While I had not been particularly bad at any of these vocations, I had not stuck to any of them long enough to become particularly good at them either. I was embarking on an adventure into the unknown: I was at the start of my PhD.

The PhD course was part of something called HighWire—a five-year long experiment for training doctoral students, which was self-described as a *post disciplinary* research centre. During my first year I became slightly obsessed with this notion of post disciplinarity. In part this was because I didn't really feel like I had a disciplinary identity at all, so the thought of being *beyond* discipline altogether was simultaneously attractive and terrifying. Alongside that I also became obsessed because it seemed impossible to move beyond disciplines in a university that was defined by them. That first year was incredibly confusing, yet wildly rewarding too.

At the time I was still writing and performing music.

We had a lecture given by the design scholar and consultant Dr Emma Murphy that had introduced me, for the first time, to the idea that Design can transcend its roots in industry, commerce and products to be used as a research method. After that lecture I wrote a song, and when I was asked to write the foreword for this book, the words of the song came back to me, here they are:

*It's designed world, balanced and slippery  
Artificial, I see beauty, not a little superficial  
Colder winds, tingle in the finger  
Reality bites*

What these words represented to me was trying to grapple with and make sense of the idea that design makes things in the world but also makes sense of the world. It is, as Herbert Simon famously put it, the science of the artificial. Yet, at the same time, design can help us to detect, amplify and digest the nature of our reality too. The practices that are encoded in this little five-letter word—*design*—echo humanity's enduring desire to shape and understand ourselves, our planet and our societies. Although I was intrigued by all this notion, I disregarded it, moved on to whatever was next in my post disciplinary training, and spent the next year becoming increasingly perturbed by the disciplinary gravities of the academic landscape.

Over a year later my PhD-malaise was dramatically confounded by the unexpected and tragic death of my sister, who took her own life after living with life-changing impact of bipolar disorder for her whole adult life. In the aftermath of this cataclysm, my adviser, Professor Paul Coulton, gave me several articles and papers to read on Design Futures. For the first time in my PhD journey, I became entranced, excited and energised. And things made sense to me. A fire was lit. Now, over a decade later, the flame is still alight and immersing myself in the contents of this book makes it burn ever brighter.

I am easily distracted, as evidenced by my portfolio of short-term careers. So, what is it about this family of practices and approaches that we call Design Futures that has managed to captivate me for over a decade?

Well, the ideas in this book, ideas that are characterised by provocation, interrogation, integration, irreverence

and humbleness, contain *my* answers (yes, the answers are plural) to this question. It is likely they contain yours too. There are many different beginnings and endings to the story of Design Futures, and that is why the non-linear, modular, democratic and candid structure of this book is so vivifying. It reminds me of those 'Choose Your Own Adventure' novels. But here's another story; a tale about why the Field Guide to Design Futures has been put together in the first place, and a reason why you must read it.

Once upon a time, in Europe, around the 1700s, this thing called The Enlightenment happened. It represented a shift towards rationality, education and an advancement of science. By the 1800s, The Enlightenment had paved the way for the Industrial Revolution, a period in history that turbo-charged European economies through rapid technological progression. During this time, engineering and specialisation reigned supreme, and discrete fields like physics, chemistry and economics dominated more traditional points of view. The previously revered skills of artisans and craftspeople were forgotten. In the 1900s, the notion of Logical Positivism took hold, scientism was born, and our societies began to believe that if something couldn't be objectively verified then it was meaningless. We made aeroplanes. We made microwaves. We made weapons of war (and used them). We made computers. We went into space and to the bottom of the ocean. We made *the internet*. We made AI. We look through our telescopes at the edge of the Universe and the birth of time. It's 2026.

But there are chapters missing in this brief history. Even amongst the all-encompassing veil of rationality and science, design and creativity were never suppressed. For example, the Dadaist movement in the arts emerged from the misery of war, rejecting the politics that had led to slaughter on an industrial scale. Later, Italian Futurism, despite its toxic fascism, showed that imagination could aestheticise technology and make speculative futures tangible through manifestos and provocations. The Bauhaus integrated art, craft and industry with social purpose, until the Nazis forced its closure and scattered its practitioners worldwide. As the 20th century relentlessly progressed, the idea of Design Science tried to squeeze the uncontainable force of creativity

into systematic thinking of institutional legitimacy—a task that turned out to be impossible—and from that crucible the Design Research movement grew and blossomed (despite not fitting into a neat, tidy, scientifically rational box).

In each of these moments, against the odds, the allure of imagination and possibility flourished and refused to be marginalised by the dominant paradigm. Ways of knowing that pure rationalism could not accommodate thrived through adversity, and together this created the perfect environment for what is contained in this book: the vibrant ecosystem of contemporary Design Futures.

What makes this designerly, future-oriented sensibility so hard to hold back? In my view, it is likely because the ability to imagine detailed and radical futures and then put those visions into some form of practice is an integral part of what defines our species' inimitable role on our planet. It is well understood that other animals can play, learn, be creative and even make plans. But doing so with tact, sophistication, nuance and ambition—these are uniquely human traits. However, as is demonstrated, captured and communicated adeptly in this book, there is no one answer as to precisely how to do it. Our innate human ability to both design and engage with the future is, at once, eminently evident, but evidentially elusive. Remnants of this paradox are scattered throughout ideas, perspectives and stories here in this book.

If we embark on a collective journey through the pages that follow, we encounter the elusiveness firsthand. Rigour and playfulness are demonstrably necessary, from systematic scanning to speculative worldbuilding. Between the practicality of making tangible artefacts and experiential prototypes, to whimsical revelling in imaginaries that, while they may never exist, are equally compelling, the contributions oscillate mesmerically. We see how futures are enriched by participation and democratisation but simultaneously demand the skill and mastery that can only come from experience. We swim in the solution of innovative and creative methods but refuse to be contained by disciplinary and rationalist shores. The world views that define this playground are plural, global, planetary, and inclusive. These are the signs of Design Futures' vitality, these are the ideas captured in the book, and here too is why it defies simple definition.

I think back to when I wrote that song thirteen years ago, attempting to reconcile how design doesn't just make *things*, but creates insights, foresight and textures of hindsight. What I understand now, and what this book represents, is that design doesn't just shape reality, but helps us rehearse, question, unmake and regenerate it. What is more, design encapsulates everything that my post disciplinary PhD programme was trying to achieve. It has a disciplinary fluidity and promiscuity to it, which is as profound as it is playful. Legendary design scholar Professor Rachel Cooper said design researchers are like Magpies (birds that, according to folklore, have a penchant for collecting 'shiny things'). The point she was getting at is that we have no rules; if an idea is inspirational, generative, intriguing or beguiling, then use it. Don't let prejudices, traditions or assumptions get in the way. The same spirit exists throughout this book.

At this moment in history, when ecological, social and epistemological flux demand integrative, imaginative, participatory but radical thinking, these capacities have never been more vital. Whether you arrive here as a designer, futurist, researcher, activist or simply someone curious about what to do next, your journey through the book will be uniquely yours. Let these pages be your companion and muse, not your instruction manual. Find your viewpoints and lenses, establish your foci, then fly with abandon—be a Magpie. Disagree with what you must, adapt with what resonates and build what is missing.

The fire that was lit for me over a decade ago still burns, not because I found answers, but because the questions keep deepening. As you read this book, sparks will ignite your mind, embers will enchant your sensibility, and the warmth of Design Futures' glow will nurture your practice.

The future will always be a flicker in the darkness ahead; we can illuminate it with design.



# Foreword to the not-yet 5th Edition

Jorge Camacho

When the first edition of this book was published in 2026, the field of Design Futures was at a critical juncture. It had managed to capture the interest of designers from various disciplines, both novice and experienced futurists, as well as organizations across sectors and regions. However, Design Futures faced the challenge of realizing their potential for cultural, economic, and social impact, or else risk becoming a mere form of entertainment and ultimately just an experimental fad. In hindsight, we can acknowledge that this book made a significant contribution to helping the field achieve that desirable outcome.

Just as it was back then, Design Futures remains an umbrella term covering a variety of activities that utilize design processes, methods, and fictional artifacts—such as, in a way, this Foreword—to realize and socialize images of the future. Considering this definition, it is necessary to recognize that there was already a rich genealogy of designers and design projects engaged in futuring (and, for that matter, of futurists engaged in designing) long before the term Design Futures appeared on the scene. For example, almost a century ago, the architectural couple Alison Margaret and Peter Smithson designed the House of the Future for the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition at the Olympia Exhibition Centre in London in 1956. The visionary prototype—a full-scale, scenographic mock-up for a childless couple living in a fictional

future 1981—was not intended for actual production but to spark conversations about future domesticity, everyday family life, and, of course, design. The project influenced later experimental work by graphic, product, fashion, and architectural designers from the 1960s onward.

Notwithstanding these precursors, the specific practice or, more precisely, the movement that the authors explore here coalesced around the turn of the 2010s. It began as a collection of niche, experimental products and guerrilla-like performances by brilliant but eccentric designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, the Near Future Laboratory, and futurists Stuart Candy and Jake Dunagan. It was variously labeled Critical and Speculative Design, Design Fiction, and Experiential Futures. These variegated practices coalesced under the umbrella term ‘design futures,’ described by the authors of this guide as “a blended practice emerging from ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue” between futures studies and design. It created a space for students and professionals in these and other fields to explore, debate, speculate, and inspire future ways of living at a time when the future was still perceived as a space of mostly exciting alternatives and a few concerning possibilities.

By 2026, this field had matured into a well-established, truly sexy, and sought-after professional practice that companies, governments, and organizations of different kinds used to enrich strategic decision-making and spark widespread cultural conversations about future possibilities and desirable outcomes. There was so much going on: a veritable Cambrian explosion of futuring activity. Every week, and sometimes even every day, social media posts lit up with announcements of a new futures report, a new toolkit, a new exhibition gathering artifacts and experiences, a new design futures studio offering a unique approach, a novel methodology, or a particular domain of interest. In this way, the field had reached its peak of potentially inflated expectations, and a guide became necessary. As anyone who has ventured into a wild terrain could tell, the most crucial feature of a guide is the actual guides that create it.

The Field Guide to Design Futures is special because it distills the expertise of two sets of guides.

At the first level, we find Giovanni Caruso and Silvio Cioni, the main authors of the book. Who could ask for better guides? In 2019, they launched Speculative Futures Milan, arguably the most active and productive node in the international community that promoted speculative design, design fiction, and strategic foresight from 2015 to 2022. They possess key traits that have made them ideal guides in this field: generosity, knowledge, and expertise. As demonstrated in this guide, they have leveraged them to map the terrain for the benefit of insiders and outsiders.

On the next level, we find a group of experts, both thinkers and practitioners, whose contributions to this book provide a first-hand account of the nitty-gritty of the trade. Their perspectives represent different dimensions, geographies, interests, and even appraisals of the value of Design Futures. Good friends from places as far apart as Mexico and New Zealand, namely Karla Paniagua and Chris Jackson, concur on the value of creating mash-ups and of escaping global perspectives. Some contributors, like Viraj Joshi, see futuring and design as largely coextensive and take a positive view of what designers can do. Others, like Silvio Lorusso, warn us about the potential entrapments involved in imagining the future. Reading their opinions, suggestions, tips, and hacks remains as timely and helpful as ever, even now, halfway through the 21st century, when Design Futures has become a widespread cultural practice.

The knowledge and expertise gathered in this book can help the reader to situate Design Futures within the broader contexts of design, technology, politics, and the global state of the world at a critical juncture of the 21st century. In retrospect, we can see that this outcome proved to be the most important.

In 2026, the world was entering an era of unprecedented challenges and consequences resulting from two and a half centuries of accelerated change propelled by self-feeding futures imagination. This guide served not only to popularize the practice further but, most importantly, to help emerging practitioners realize that design and futures are united as broader professional and cultural practices in their aspiration to shape preferred situations. Such a goal is the ultimate potential for Design Futures. Influenced

by this guide, the practice came to be seen as a form of prefigurative (and anti-prefigurative) politics: enacting, in that present, those forms of life that we succeeded in spreading widely and those that we managed to avoid. In hindsight, we can recognize that the value of this book was two-fold: providing a guide to the field, and, over and above that, providing a guide for the field to aspire to and then fulfill that larger mission. I recommend that readers keep those two dimensions in mind as they venture again into the field with this guide in hand. I celebrate Giovanni and Silvio for writing a book that, after all these years, continues to support this double adventure.

Ciudad de México, not-yet 2050

# Authors' Notes

As you'll notice from the very first pages, or even just by flipping through it, this book is nothing like a manual. In fact, it was never meant to be one. It doesn't walk you through a rigid process or detail methods you need to follow for each phase to get to a design proposal. There are other books for that, probably better ones than this, which you'll find cited by some of our contributors or mentioned in the carefully curated list of references at the end.

Not only is this not a manual, but it's also different from most other design books. First of all, there are no chapters. Each page is a brief, nearly self-contained piece of writing.

There are three types of writing in this book:

*Authors' Texts:* These were written by the authors and provide the backbone of the book.

*Contributor Texts:* These were written by others with no specific direction from the authors. They have been curated and positioned throughout the book to create a sense of conversation.

*Quotes:* Selected quotes from the diverse, existing literature, which have also been curated and positioned throughout to scaffold the conversation. These brief texts coming from diverse voices follow a sequence that is approximately the journey of doing Design Futures work. However, the sequence is a construct. You're just as free to skip back and forth throughout the book.

All of this is entirely intentional.

You can read this book cover to cover, dip in wherever you're curious, or use the Index to look up specific topics.

We haven't included any specific design methods, even if some of our contributors mention them. Rather, we've proposed a process to bring order to a series of topics we feel are important. Feel free not to follow it, to critique it, or to suggest alternatives.

From our perspective, every designer should be able to redefine their own process each time they start a new project and, from there, invent new methods to develop and present their proposal.

This book doesn't offer step-by-step instructions. Rather, it aims to help you navigate the many elements of a constantly evolving practice.

It's provocative, but only as much as is needed (and perhaps, looking back, we could have pushed that even further).

This is to encourage reflection on how the issues explored are evolving and presenting new perspectives to the practice of design, which today faces complex challenges and interventions at different scales.

We hope this book helps you train your mind to spot patterns where others struggle to connect the dots, to question the usual way of doing things, and to imagine new and better alternatives.

The idea of writing a book in this way isn't ours. We were inspired by *The Tiny MBA: 100 Very Short Lessons about the Long Game of Business* by Alex Hillman, published by Stacking the Bricks in 2020.

What sets this book apart is that over thirty people—academics, professionals, and designers—contributed to it. Many did to simply because they got an email from someone they might have only met once or knew from social media. They believed in this project before we did and helped make this publishing adventure a reality.

While the main text follows British spelling, we have retained the original spelling of individual contributors and quoted material to preserve the diversity of voices and writing styles represented in the book.

If something here gets you thinking, or you want to share an insight, we'd love to hear from you. Write to us directly  
btw@designfutures.guide

Oh, and we nearly forgot: There are no cones! That may disappoint some, but we're sure you'll get over it.

We acknowledge the privilege of working within institutional, professional, and creative contexts, while recognising the continuing need to strengthen diversity and inclusion across gender, race, and ability. This project gathers academics, practitioners, and professionals whose work connects with the ideas and practices shaping Design Futures. The initiative is committed to inclusive knowledge-making and collaborative practice throughout its development.



# Introduction

After more than fifteen years of Design and Futures Studies bumping into each other—sometimes clashing, sometimes blending—perhaps now is the right moment to pause and share, from our perspective, what the practice of Design Futures really looks like today. We will leave it up to you to decide what comes next.

To do this, we've put together a book that is, by design, refreshingly free from heavy toolkits and step-by-step methods. It is more like a field guide with a twist that you can easily dip into and out of.

Our aim is not to be prescriptive nor to tell you how to do futures work. Rather, we hope to help you find your direction by offering snapshots, prompts, and provocations from a wide range of perspectives.

That's exactly why this book has been written. It is meant to be compact yet accessible; although, having a basic understanding of some key concepts could be helpful.

We encourage you to approach this book with an open and critical mind. Take it apart, question it, and remix and adapt its content to suit your own practice.

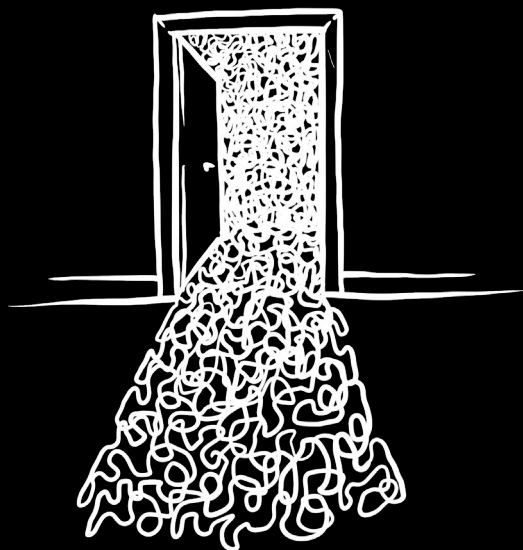
Treat it as a starting point, not a finished product.

This book is a collaborative effort. It does not necessarily represent a single viewpoint,

and it is open to unexpected responses: from sharp critique to unbridled enthusiasm. Personally, we have a soft spot for criticism.

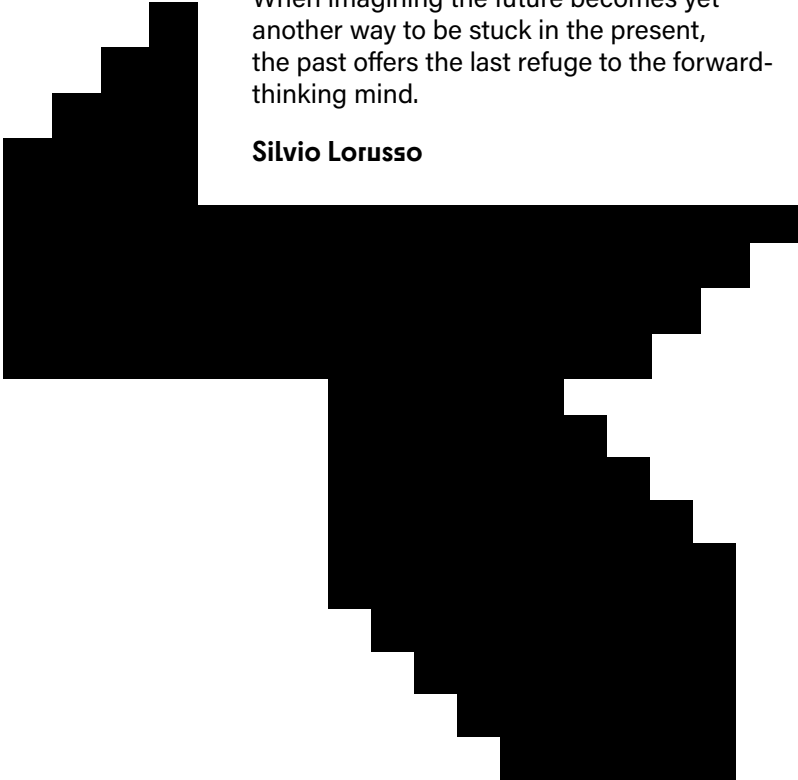
What's become clear to us is that we need new archetypes and truly different ways of imagining the future. We need this in contrast to constantly chasing what's labelled as "new," which often turns out to be the same old thing in disguise.

# Design Futures



The future is dark, which is,  
on the whole, the best thing  
the future can be, I think.

Virginia Woolf, 1915



When imagining the future becomes yet another way to be stuck in the present, the past offers the last refuge to the forward-thinking mind.

**Silvio Lorusso**

**It's futures.**

**It's plural.**

# Framing Design Futures

Design Futures is a practice that merges design (methodology) with futures to explore and shape alternative presents and possible futures. It uses speculative and participatory design approaches to make future scenarios tangible, experiential and thought-provoking often through narratives, prototypes and artefacts from the future.

Design Futures is a set of practices (primarily Speculative Design, Design Fiction, and Experiential Futures) that have been converging for decades at the crossroads of design and futures.

Rather than predicting what will happen, Design Futures helps people, communities and organisations question assumptions, challenge norms, and explore alternative directions. It supports reflection, discourse, and strategic or ethical decision-making about long-term implications.

It is both a critical tool and a creative process for sense-making, engagement, and agency within contexts of complexity, change, or transition.

# Hybrid practice

Design Futures isn't just futures studies meets design; it's a blended practice emerging from ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue.

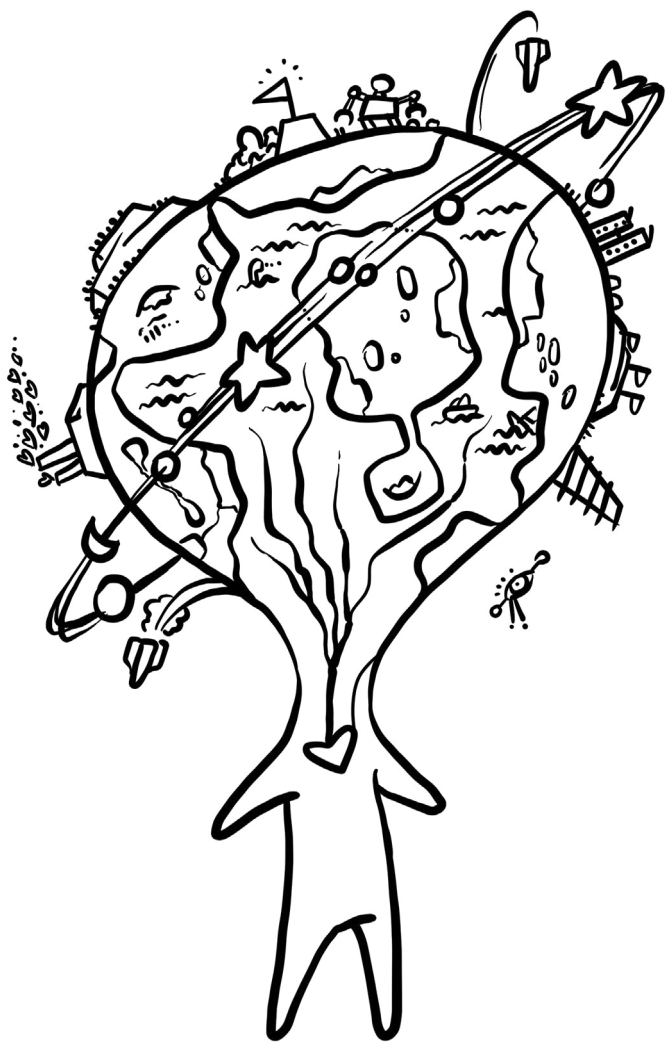
Combining futures studies with design doesn't simply mean lining up their methods like stepping stones. Instead, it involves deeply merging them to craft something richer, vibrant, and uniquely powerful.

Effective Design Futures emerge when methods melt together seamlessly, speculative design sparks tangible experiences, prototypes ignite critical dialogue, and narratives reshape assumptions, opening alternatives and new opportunities.

Forget simple tool-switching; think of cooking up an entirely new recipe.

Embrace fluid boundaries and cultivate a hybrid practice where futures studies and design amplify each other.

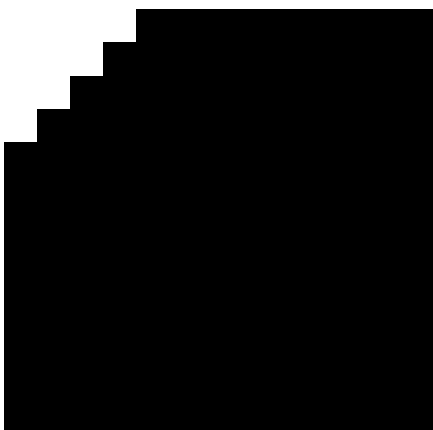
That's when the real magic happens.



Design Futures is not simply the meeting point of design and future studies; it emerges from an active and ongoing interdisciplinary exchange. Rather than positioning these fields as separate methods to be applied side by side, the emphasis is on their integration. This blending allows new perspectives and practices.

Also, by weaving together speculative inquiry with design practice, Design Futures becomes a form of worldbuilding where creative and critical thinking can inform one another to construct alternative possibilities.

**Amna Qureshi**  
**University of Lapland**



Every act of design is an act of creating a future within which that product or service exists.



**Viraj Joshi**



A designer who does not have a clear sense of the wider future they are trying to design by introducing a new product into the world is not only unconvincing but irresponsible.

Tonkinwise, C. (2015). *Just design: Being dogmatic about defining speculative critical design future fiction*. Medium. <https://medium.com/@camerontw/just-design-b1f97cb3996f>



## Why design?

Sometimes design is not the appropriate thing. Great design enchants people by making ideas real; it excites and terrifies.

The problem here is when it overstates its capabilities because of the emotional impact.

When thinking about addressing an issue or problem through design, ask yourself if it's really the appropriate response.

In many cases there are activists, community organisers, policy makers, engineers, scientists and so on who are in better places to address sensitive social and technological issues.

Consider your role as a listener or at most, a facilitator, rather than having to respond to everything.

**Tobias Revell**





## **What designers can do**

Designers can do two things well:

Create better visions for preferable futures through research, personal values, planet-centricity, etc.

Show how that vision can become our reality, through prototypes and making, pilots, visualisation, etc.

**Viraj Joshi**



**Broadly speaking,  
Futures Research (FR)  
is any systematic inquiry  
into alternative futures  
that are possible or  
probable for a given  
population or social group.**

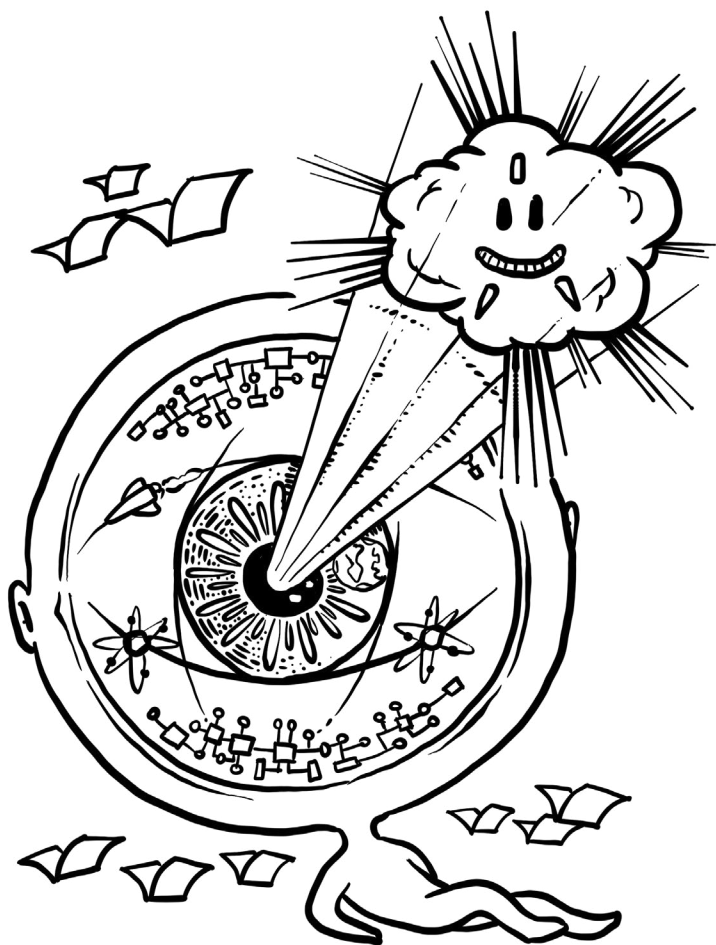
Textor, R. B. (1980). *A handbook on ethnographic futures research* (3rd ed., Version A). Cultural and Futures Research Project, School of Education and Department of Anthropology, Stanford University.

# It is a mindset, not a practice

Futures Thinking is a mindset.  
Design Futures is a practice.

Futures Thinking isn't a methodology or a structured approach that you can pick up like Design Thinking (despite how often it's packaged that way). The similarity between Futures Thinking and Design Thinking can feel misleading, partly driven by those looking to sell simplicity or feasibility without real insight. Futures Thinking is about cultivating a perspective, a flexible way of engaging uncertainty, complexity, and change. It's less about methods and more about seeing alternative possibilities and implications wherever you look.

Keep them distinct: let Futures Thinking shape your outlook and let Design Futures guide your practice.



# Futuring by Design

A Design Futures process may take the form of a structured and intentional approach similar to:

- *Framing*: establishing context, purpose, and focus by clarifying the scope shaping the exploration;
- *Scanning and Sense-making*: conducting research to surface emergent clues and potential changes; synthesising patterns, tensions, and perspectives into clear understanding;
- *Visioning*: co-creating future narratives and scenarios to bring possibilities to life;
- *Dissemination and Assessment*: using storytelling and tangible artefacts to engage audiences and manifest implications; critically evaluating, adjusting, or dismissing visions while enabling informed decision-making and agency in the present;
- *Taking Action*: initiating strategic, present-day efforts to embed long-term visions into real-world systems, structures, and behaviours.

# More than an attribute

The design in Design Futures is not simply an attribute; it fundamentally reshapes the process. Design's role goes far beyond method; it democratizes futures work, making exploration participatory and grounded in the real world. By involving communities and stakeholders, design methods turn abstract visions into tangible prototypes and compelling stories.

Field research and prototyping bring essential nuance, rooting future scenarios in people lived experiences. Exposing these future visions to audiences makes it possible to evaluate acceptance, gather feedback, and understand real-world implications with real people.

Embrace design as the catalyst that enables everyone, not just experts, to imagine, question, and shape possible futures together.

This is how Design Futures becomes a process truly open to all.

## **Everyone futures**

It can be difficult to convince others of the value and benefits of speculative practice. Futuring is a skill that we all do fundamentally as humans. However, different people and industries engage with the future in different ways.

So, it is important to strategically communicate with others in relatable ways so they can see the value in speculative practice from their unique perspectives.

**Tina Fung, Samuel Yu**  
**Speculative Futures Sydney**

Speculative Design has never been about "the future" as an abstract or intellectual exercise but about informing different decisions in the present. It's an invitation for holding space for reflection, complexity, and the futures we choose to shape.

Jain, A. (2025). *Two AIs talking (arguing) with each other*. LinkedIn.  
[https://www.linkedin.com/posts/anabjain\\_two-ais-talking-arguing-with-each-other-activity-7336678357805260801-PAPK/](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/anabjain_two-ais-talking-arguing-with-each-other-activity-7336678357805260801-PAPK/)

## **What seems unrealistic now is real in the future**

Current businesses in the industry typically focus on solving problems right before us. Our creativity is directed toward improving comfort within the existing “reality.” However, addressing major global challenges like economic inequality and environmental issues often requires radical, unconventional ideas that go beyond the status quo. While such ideas are frequently dismissed as “unrealistic” in many organizations, Design Futurists need to challenge traditional norms, speculate outside current reality through design, and create a societal vision toward them.

**Masaki Iwabuchi**  
**JPMorgan Chase, Tohoku University**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Dunne, A. (2019). *A larger reality*. Reading Design.  
<https://www.readingdesign.org/a-larger-reality>



### **Create spaces to advance speculative practice at different levels**

Whilst it's critical that speculative practice is accessible to all, it's also important to create spaces to meet practitioners of different levels. It's important to create introductory spaces for people stepping into futuring for the first time. However, more established practitioners also need spaces to refine their practice and push the boundaries further as well as spaces for people at different proficiencies to mingle.

**Tina Fung, Samuel Yu**  
**Speculative Futures Sydney**

## Designing with enchantment

Futures Design practice needs more magic. It needs more enchantment and more of the sense of awe that emerges from the ineffable. Within this sense of wonder is a spark that liberates us from the confining rationality of technic—of the rigid absoluteness and certainty of the named and categorized world. Futures design should be malleable and radically transformative—a spell moving forward through time.

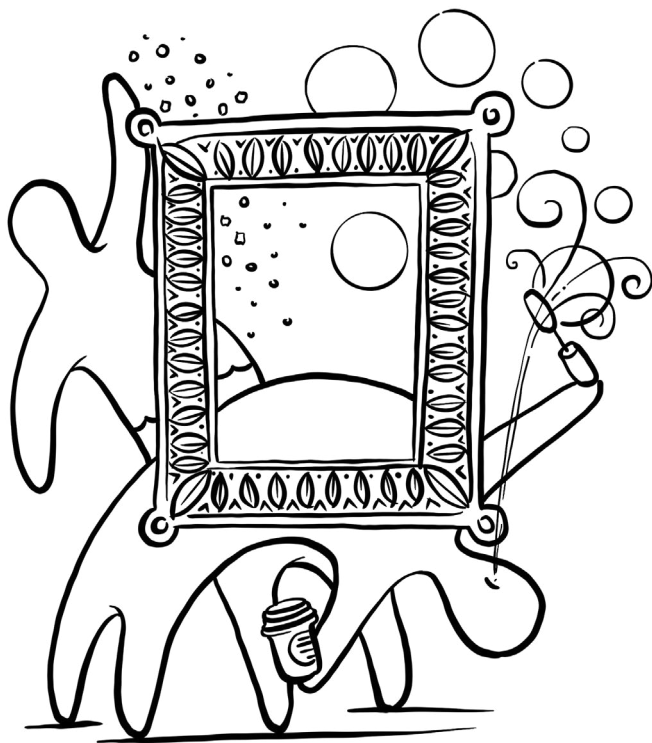
### Coe Douglas

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Campagna, F. (2018). *Technic and magic: The reconstruction of reality*. Bloomsbury Academic.

# Framing

Framing is how the scope, purpose, and direction of exploration are established. At this point, the project is defined by identifying key themes, areas of inquiry, and domains to be explored. This step focuses on determining critical questions, stakeholders, and systemic boundaries to ensure that the futures inquiry is both relevant and impactful. By surfacing underlying assumptions and contextual factors, framing sets the stage for meaningful exploration of future possibilities. It aligns diverse perspectives and clarifies the objectives, providing a structured approach to navigate complexity and uncertainty. Ultimately, a well-executed framing phase ensures that the futures exploration is grounded, purposeful, and aligned with strategic intent.



To situate is to align on,  
and define the current situs,  
i.e. the here and now of the  
team and the challenge.  
In the here and now we  
have an interest, some  
available resources, a  
working culture, collective  
and individual dreams, etc.

Bespoke. (2017). *Book of futures: A bespoke guide to design futures*. Bespoke ApS.

## The four rules of Assemblage Space

*1. Be as curious about the past as you are about the future*

The problem, plausible, possible, and preposterous are merely reflections of the tangible, intangible, remembered, and forgotten.

*2. Beware the distorting effects of the present*

The visceral images of our recent past distort how we see the future. Objects in the rear-view mirror may seem larger than they actually are.

*3 - Be conscious of your narrowness*

We exist in our own narrow now. What you see clearly is invisible for me. What seems preposterous to us is very, very probable for others.

*4 - There is no cone*

Nor is there an Assemblage Space. They are simply prisms to peer through, not prisons to shackle the imagination.

**John V. Willshire  
Smithery**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

<https://smithery.com/assemblage-space/>

Every exploration starts  
somewhere—but it begins  
long before someone  
puts the first Post-it on  
a whiteboard.  
Scoping starts with  
a question that signifies  
an uncertainty or need.

Scott, J., & Ashby, M. (2020). *How to future: Leading and sense-making in an age of hyperchange*. Kogan Page Inspire.

# What matters

Framing isn't just about setting boundaries; it's about discovering what really matters. At this moment, you're not simply drawing lines around the scope of your exploration. You're also gathering crucial insights into the values, hopes, and priorities of the group, community, or organisation you're working with.

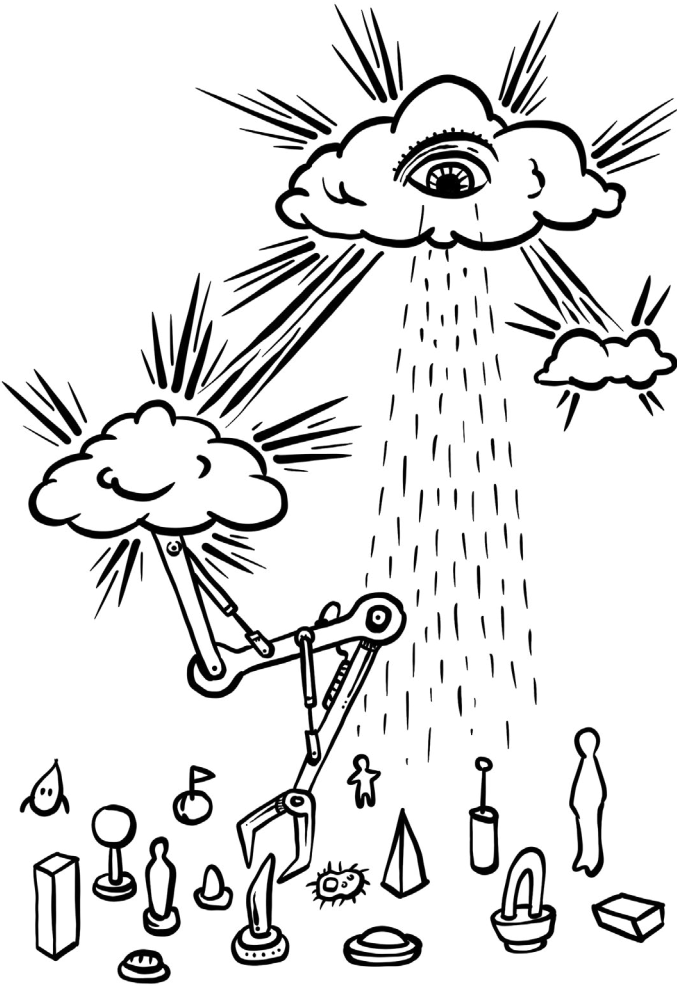
It's a chance to surface what's important, clarify intentions, and create shared focus.

Framing also offers a first glimpse into how futures work might be received: by surfacing assumptions, gauging current knowledge, and identifying areas where people are open to learning.

Take time to frame well, what emerges here will shape everything that follows.

# Scanning

Scanning requires attention not only to emerging trends but also to micro-details and overlooked behaviours. A robust scanning practice is essential to any Design Futures process, blending environmental and horizon scanning with contextual observation and exploratory fieldwork. While environmental and horizon scanning help identify drivers of change and uncertainties on a global scale, situated observation encourages looking beyond the obvious to capture the edges of emerging behaviours, technologies, and cultural shifts. This is foundational to support the creation of meaningful pattern development, ensuring that the sense-making process is grounded in rich, diverse, and well-contextualised material.



# Two lenses for scanning

Both environmental scanning and horizon scanning are integral to a robust futuring process.

Environmental scanning helps identify lasting trends and forces already shaping the present, while horizon scanning seeks out weak signals and early indicators of change that may shape the future. Relying solely on one approach limits perspective; together, they provide a wider view, capturing what is emerging as well as what is already established.

Integrating both ensures futures work is grounded in current realities while remaining open to new, unexpected possibilities.

# Peripheral Ethnography

Peripheral Ethnography is a research approach and method of investigation that focuses on marginal practices, overlooked behaviours, and unconventional uses of technology to uncover early signs of cultural transformation (Nova, 2016). It prioritises what lies outside the mainstream to sense emerging directions of change and to surface clues that may inform futures-oriented design.

By attending to the edges of social life, peripheral ethnography helps anticipate shifts before they enter the centre of attention.

I called it "peripheral ethnography" [...] because of my interest in marginal practices, peculiar behaviors, curious rituals, odd appropriation/repurposing of technologies, little things that people talk less about, situations in which technical objects age, things that do not fit, intriguing artifacts [...]. All of those could be seen as what futures researchers call weak signals, and that designers might cherish in order to give direction to their work.

Nova, N. (2016, October 20). *Peripheral ethnographies*. Pasta & Vinegar. <https://www.nicolasnova.net/pasta-and-vinegar/2016/10/20/peripheral-ethnographies/>

## Keep the local twist

We have learned the importance of keeping the local twist when conducting the research that gives foundation to design-fiction pieces and environments, since future visions tend to be homologated with dominant discourses (movies, series, science-fiction novels) that do not necessarily express with fidelity the beliefs nested in the collective consciousness of the workshop participants.

### Karla Paniagua

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Mitrović, I., Auger, J., Hanna, J., Ing, J., & Helgason, J. (2021). *Beyond speculative design: Past – present – future*. Speculative Edu.

Global Futures Lab Mexico, a learning experience by Paolo Cardini (RISDI, US) nested in the postgraduate program in Futures Studies at CENTRO (Mexico)

# Embracing the unpredictable

Openness to the unexpected is what keeps Design Futures alive and relevant. The most valuable insights often come from the margins, unusual behaviours, fringe technologies, or overlooked voices. Instead of sticking rigidly to established frameworks, the practice thrives by welcoming new methods, collaborating with unlikely partners, and staying curious about weak signals and hidden stories. By continuously adapting and inviting disruption, Design Futures avoids stagnation and ensures it remains a practice that truly reflects the complexity and unpredictability of real futures.

The activity of wondering how things could be can help us move beyond being stuck in how things should be. Ethnographers can provide routes into understanding other people's lives, experiences, beliefs, and values. When ethnographic observation is combined with speculative thinking, it becomes a mode of inquiry that guides and mobilises design, expanding how we imagine life, value, and connections, treating limitations, ambiguity, and uncertainty not as obstacles but as productive forces.

Ethnography—and speculative ethnography—offers tools for representing this pluralism. And representation does not mean duplicating reality, but interrogating the cultural assumptions embedded in everyday life, design, and knowledge. Its critical function is to amplify overlooked or excluded possibilities.

### **Sara Innocenti**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Foucault, M. (2005). *The order of things*. Routledge.

Wilkie, A., Martin, S., & Marsha, R. (Eds.). (2017). *Speculative research: The lure of possible futures*. Taylor & Francis.

## Defamiliarization

Defamiliarization, a concept from literary theory, is a method for opening new design possibilities. Primarily a literary device, it challenges our usual interpretations of everyday objects. Simple exercises, like describing objects as if for someone from Mars, can inspire alternative interpretations by unsettling conventional views. By making the familiar seem strange, defamiliarization creates space for critical reflection, similar to ethnographic practices that reveal implicit cultural roots. This technique offers an alternative approach to inspiring design from qualitative observations and user studies.

**Gabriele Ferri, Industrial Design TU/e  
Inte Gloerich, Digital Media and Creative  
Industries AUAS**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Bell, G., Blythe, M., & Sengers, P. (2005). *Making by making strange: Defamiliarization and the design of domestic technologies*. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, 12(2), 149-173. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1067860.1067862>

# Beyond desk research

Scanning in Design Futures goes far beyond desk research; it's fundamentally field oriented. It isn't Design Futures without fieldwork or ethnographic inquiry. While expert interviews and reports can identify big trends, genuine insight comes from observing real people, marginal practices, and everyday behaviours at the edges. Scanning must capture micro-details, subtle appropriations, and weak signals in context, not just headlines or established trends highlighted in consultancy reports.

# Active noticing

Active noticing is an ongoing practice of staying alert to subtle cues, emerging signals, and unexpected patterns to identify potential future changes (Smith & Ashby, 2020). It combines curiosity and critical reflection to detect potential shifts before they become visible. It fosters a sort of background awareness essential for anticipating future developments.

# Tuning in

Sensing, attuning, and noticing are situated techniques for observing and listening to environments that go beyond merely seeing and hearing. These embodied practices involve expanding our sensory awareness and empathy with the surroundings. These techniques may be especially well suited to more-than-human worlds, enabling us to tune into interdependent relationships and perceive the agency of non-human entities and processes.

Through ongoing reflection, we become more attuned to how we relate to our surroundings and how they, in turn, respond to us.

Such situated practices might support the decentring of the human, shifting perspective toward interconnectedness, and opening space for new insights that inform the development of decentred futures and more inclusive ways of knowing and acting in the world.

# Scanning as an intentional practice

Scanning is intentional; it is about paying systematic attention to the edges of systems—where change often emerges first. It is an ongoing practice that involves exploring the landscape to find, recognise, and document signals, drivers of change, and emerging trends (Smith & Ashby, 2020). This process supports the development of inventories of signals that facilitate pattern recognition and enable the uncovering of important factors that may shape future trajectories.

An archaeology of the present looks at things, observing how human activity has transformed – or is transforming – the materiality of the world around people. In doing so, such an approach is no longer directed towards the past in itself... rather, it points towards the future, stressing all kinds of processes of emergence.

Laurent, O. (2019). *The future of archaeology in the age of presentism*. Equinox Publishing Ltd.

## Data are not Neutral

Existing data often reflects economic imperatives and reductionist approaches to complex systems. Design, however, has the potential to embrace emergence and possibility, counteracting this reductionism by imagining futures that don't simply mirror economic biases.

By valuing qualities that escape conventional metrics—like biodiversity, relationality, cultural memory, and ecological health—design can offer paths forward that are more imaginative, respectful, and regenerative.

**Michael Dunbar, Chris Speed**  
**RMIT University**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

D'Ignazio, C., & Klein, L. F. (2020). *Data feminism*. The MIT Press.

# Signals

Signals are subtle but meaningful indications that the future may unfold differently from today. They can take the form of new ideas, emerging behaviours, technologies, or cultural shifts. Some signals hint at major systemic change, while others reveal surprising twists in ongoing trends.

Signals act as seeds of potential futures and clues to how trends emerge, evolve, or take unexpected turns.

While not all signals result in transformation, they offer valuable insight into what could become widespread, allowing us to explore different futures and anticipate change.

# Drivers

Drivers of change are significant, ongoing forces already shaping the world around us. They are not just isolated developments but structured clusters of related signals and long-term trends, revealing a direction or momentum for future change (Howard, 2021). Operating across industries and systems, drivers help make sense of scattered data points by offering the broader context in which those changes are occurring. As key tools for sense-making, understanding drivers is crucial for exploring implications, identifying systemic patterns, and supporting long-term thinking in futures work. Drivers are sometimes described as driving forces, forces of change, or emerging trends.

Drivers are to signals as  
clouds are to raindrops.  
Clouds, like drivers,  
overlap and converge  
and precipitate raindrops/  
signals.

Howard, S. (2021, June). *Drivers and signals: How are they different?* Institute for the Future.  
<https://www.iftf.org/insights/drivers-signals-differences/>

# Designing a smart scanning workflow

A well-designed workflow is the backbone of effective scanning. Simplicity and structure matter, whether scanning is ongoing or done on demand (Smith & Ashby, 2020), the process must be practical for the researchers. Efficient collection, sorting, and sharing of signals are essential for tracking change over time.

While tools like curated newsreaders and topic-based feeds can help automate sourcing, real value comes from an organised approach: grouping sources by domain, applying clear tagging, and keeping formats consistent.

This kind of smart workflow transforms scattered insights into knowledge that can be used and reused, making futures research far more robust and actionable.

# Collecting and curating signals

Collecting signals is more than chasing eye-catching headlines: it's about making sense of change together.

Consistency is crucial: each signal should include a title, description, source, and a note on why it matters. Adding images and reflective questions deepens understanding and sparks discussion. Systematic tagging and categorisation across researchers help patterns emerge, revealing connections and opportunities.

A well-curated, thoughtfully organised collection becomes a shared intelligence hub, fuel for collective sense-making and stronger, more informed decision-making.

# What makes a signal matter

Not every novelty signals change; critical questioning is key. Spotting genuine signals means asking whether something truly departs from the norm, what sort of change it represents, and if it's spreading or just a fleeting trend. Looking at factors like frequency, strength, maturity, reach, and direction helps distinguish one-offs from early signs of broader shifts.

By refining what counts as a signal, researchers focus on what truly matters, uncovering early clues that lead to more meaningful futures.

## **Reframing data as culturally and ecologically situated**

Rather than seeing data as objective or universal, it can be understood as culturally and ecologically situated, with limitations and biases inherent in its collection and interpretation.

By acknowledging that data is shaped by economic and cultural paradigms, design can strive to uncover hidden narratives, question what is being excluded, and uplift alternative ways of knowing.

This includes recognising Indigenous histories, more-than-human perspectives, and relational systems that current data often marginalizes or ignores.

**Michael Dunbar, Chris Speed**  
**RMIT University**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Wiltse, H. (2020). *Relating to things: Design, technology and the artificial*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

# A framework for Applied Futures

A futures research framework is the backbone of futures work in any organisation. It highlights key research themes, sparks important conversations, and raises futures awareness across teams. This framework isn't fixed; it adapts as new challenges and insights appear, guiding teams as they explore change.

By providing structure and direction, it supports better decision-making and grows with the organisation, evolving to reflect changing priorities and a shifting world.

# The role of a futures team

A dedicated futures team keeps an organisation alert and ready for change. By scanning for signals and trends, building scenarios, and sharing insights, the team supports better planning and decision-making. Beyond research, they coordinate learning, manage research communities, and connect with decision-makers.

Drawing on skills from across departments and beyond, a futures team (whether independent, cross-functional, or external) ensures the organisation stays informed, adaptive, and ahead of emerging shifts.

## **Creating iterative feedback loops that include natural systems**

Data-informed design must go beyond human and economic concerns to account for natural systems and ecological well-being. This involves creating feedback loops that iteratively learn from the world, incorporating data from non-economic sources like local ecologies, Indigenous knowledge systems, and social relationships.

Design can then use these insights to develop futures that are responsive to both human and more-than-human actors, building resilience and fostering coexistence.

**Michael Dunbar, Chris Speed**  
**RMIT University**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Gabrys, J. (2016). *Program earth: Environmental sensing technology and the making of a computational planet*. University of Minnesota Press.



## Let's not assume we are gardeners

Do not start by seeking to plant new seeds of change through futures work.

Listen first to see if you are welcome—to see where there are seeds already planted, already germinating, already growing, already trees, already a forest...

What is supporting flourishing?

Are you removing unruly weeds from the futures you're envisioning? Are you sure they are weeds? Who gets to decide what are flowers and what are weeds? Why?

Are you getting out the way or in the way, unintentionally crushing something critical growing underfoot?

What part of the garden are you?

Let's not assume we are gardeners.

**Eloise Smith-Foster**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Oliveira, V. M. de. (2021). *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism*. North Atlantic Books.



## **Create your own tools**

Many futuring tools have developed from the social and political sciences as well as the military. Don't be afraid to apply your creativity to tools and methods. Create new mash-ups and approaches that help you explore futures with fresh eyes and a designerly mindset.

**Chris Jackson**  
**We Create Futures**



## Preparing yourself and your audience for futures work is critical for adoption

While the benefits and value may seem obvious, many organizations consider futures as a luxury and aren't always interested in long-term investments.

Before starting futures work, consider your audience, their sensitivities, their goals, their vocabulary, and how they practice strategy and tactical planning today. Make sure you use examples and evidence that speak to their hearts and minds. Once you have their attention and buy-in, then you can design what that journey will look like for them. Every organization is different; therefore, every futures approach, journey, and destination will be different also, with different methods, goals, and outcomes.


### Phil Balagtas

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Balagtas, P. (2024). *Making futures work: Integrating futures thinking for design, innovation and strategy*. O'Reilly.



## Enabling Futures with polarity thinking



Besides charting compelling visions of desirable futures, your core responsibility as a foresight practitioner is to help navigate the tension between the different perspectives on time that might exist in the system or group you are trying to influence. Driving change as a foresight practitioner is not about convincing an organization to choose the possibilities of the future over the challenges of the present. Thriving towards better futures requires building the capacity to hold the tensions of the present and the long view at once. More than providing tools and framework, this means championing a polarity mindset, transforming perspectives from either/or trade-offs to both/and possibilities.

### Albéric Maillet

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Johnson, B. (1992). *Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems*. Human Resource Development.

# Futures research projects

Futures researchers turn uncertainty into insight and action. Their role is to spot signals and drivers of change, gather and interpret data, and make future scenarios clear and accessible. They support participatory approaches and shape research activities to fit the organisation's needs. Clear objectives, good methods, defined roles, and realistic timelines are essential when starting any futures project. Grounded in the organisation's research framework, these projects help teams explore priority topics in depth. Futures researchers make the unknown manageable, transforming learning into strategy and meaningful action.



### **Always be prepared**

Futuring favours the prepared. By having materials and tools on hand, you can create opportunities to introduce futuring into projects on short notice.

Reducing the lead time in preparing speculative practice can make it easier for others to adopt futures work more seamlessly.

**Tina Fung, Samuel Yu**  
**Speculative Futures Sydney**



## **Make it meaningful**

Most people don't spend their time sitting around wondering what the future holds; they have other things to worry about. Instead of trying to get other people to care about futures, you need to care about them. How does better understanding or considering futures help them with their own problems? How can you make futures meaningful?

For instance, maybe a client is struggling with getting teams to collaborate; you might use a shared future vision to set a common mission or objective.

Maybe another client is worried about their skills; what's coming over the horizon that they might invest in now for future advantage?

**Tobias Revell**

# The Future Mundane

The Future Mundane involves focusing on common people, incorporating legacy technologies, and accepting the imperfect, accretive nature of technological advancement (Foster, 2013). The goal is to depict a future that feels tangible and relatable, addressing practical, everyday experiences and challenges.

## The allure of the magic pill

People will often jump to magical solutions to difficult problems: a pill that cures all ills, a perfected smart mobility system, a *deus ex AI* that does a thing and so on. The reality of change, especially in technology is trade-offs: "When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck; when you invent the plane you also invent the plane crash; and when you invent electricity, you invent electrocution..." (Virilio, 1999).

The work of design futures is in making the speculative real; what really happens when we introduce new conveniences from AI or biotech? We end up with new inconveniences. What price are we willing to pay?

### Tobias Revell

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Virilio, P. (1999). *Politics of the very worst*. Semiotext(e).

Future Mundane is related to Design Fiction in the sense that both concepts involve speculative thinking about the future, but Future Mundane specifically emphasizes the subtle and unobtrusive integration of technology into everyday routines.

Bleecker, J. (2024). *The Future Mundane*. Near Future Laboratory. <https://nearfuturelaboratory.com/blog/2024/02/the-future-mundane/>

# Everyday Futures

Focusing on everyday futures is fundamental to meaningful Design Futures work. The most compelling futures aren't all flying cars and magical fixes; they're grounded in the everyday lives of ordinary people, full of imperfect technologies and practical trade-offs. Designing for the future means imagining how innovations will quietly blend into daily routines, shaping ordinary experiences as much as extraordinary ones. It's not just about far-off possibilities; working with near futures and alternative presents is just as valuable.

By focusing on the tangible, relatable details of tomorrow, we create futures that feel real and help people understand both the promises and the pitfalls of change.

# Images of the Future

Images of the Future are representations people hold about what the future might be like. These images reflect hopes, fears, expectations, and assumptions, often shaped by culture, media, and personal experience. They influence how individuals interpret change and make decisions. They help communities and societies articulate desires and concerns and guide collective behaviour. By analysing these images, we can understand how cultures respond to uncertainty, envision aspirational futures, or caution against harmful trajectories. Whether utopian or dystopian, they influence how people prepare for, resist, or embrace change.

## **Futures don't have to operate decades in the future**

There are some that believe Futures work is only valid if the time horizon is 5-10 years and beyond. The principles and methods we use to investigate future possibilities are no different than the strategic planning we do in our personal lives on a daily basis.

Every minute beyond this very moment is technically the future, so why wouldn't we want to use these tools to help us determine short-term consequences as well as distant implications?

Consider futures work as just another way of looking at potential outcomes (a threat and opportunity analysis), and it will serve you in more areas of your practice today.

### **Phil Balagtas**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Balagtas, P. (2024). *Making futures work: Integrating futures thinking for design, innovation and strategy*. O'Reilly.



## **Always think retro**

Tropes, ideas, visions, and images of “present futures” often come from further in time than we might expect. Using retro futures as part of research is always a good source of inspiration, helps to understand today’s visions, and provides a deeper context. For example, some concepts like the Bernal sphere, wireless communication, genetic engineering, and collective intelligence were first seen in a book series from the 1920s, *To-Day and To-Morrow*, edited by C. K. Ogden for the British publisher Kegan Paul.

**Patrick Tanguay**



Speculative futures is a widely employed umbrella term for an array of design approaches used to create high-resolution visions of potential realities. By exploring what's possible, speculative futures cultivates critical thinking about the present and imagination of what lies ahead.

Hoffman, J. (2022). *Speculative futures: Design approaches to navigate change, foster resilience, and co-create the cities we need*. North Atlantic Books.

# An Umbrella practice

Design Futures acts as an umbrella practice, integrating a wide range of perspectives and nuanced approaches. It provides space for dialogue among diverse practices, Speculative Futures, Adversarial Design, Interrogative Design, and Speculative Fiction, as well as Critical Design, Speculative Design, Discursive Design, Experiential Futures, Design Fiction, Participatory Futures, Science Fiction Prototyping, Peripheral Ethnography, and now increasingly well-known approaches like Transition Design. By making space for these perspectives to interact and inform each other, Design Futures enables richer explorations of possibility, challenge, and change, encouraging discussion, critique, imagination, and agency within futures work.

Its strength lies in embracing this diversity, making it a dynamic and ever-evolving field for navigating what might come next.



**My worry is that these preferable futures, though important, distract us from confronting undesirable futures or presents and white-wash the problems.**

Revell, T. (2022). *Box083: Can't preferable your way out of politics*. The Bounding Box. <https://blog.tobiasrevell.com/2022/11/24/box083-cant-preferable-your-way-out-of-politics/>

There is nothing fictional, speculative, or even critical about the fact that the future will be less and less white. Given imperialism, this is as it should be.

There is nothing more fictional, and therefore uncritical, about speculations that do not acknowledge that non-white people will own the future. It is morally repugnant that the worst things white people can imagine happening to them in some dystopian future are conditions they already impose on non-white people.

Tonkinwise, C. (2015). *Just design: Being dogmatic about defining speculative critical design future fiction*. Medium. <https://medium.com/@camerontw/just-design-b1f97cb3996f>

## **We need design sociology**

Design is a transformational force. It changes behavior, society, and values. Design sociology helps us understand these changes instead of moralizing them. It is a form of social critique and forces us to not only speculate about possible and preferable futures but also uncover the meaning of objects, rituals, and systems that are part of everyday life, now and in an imaginary future.

### **Theo Ploeg**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Lupton, D. (2017). *Design sociology parts 1-4*. This Sociological Life. <https://simplysociology.wordpress.com/2017/04/16/design-sociology-a-research-agenda/>

We observe that experiential futures and design fiction (etc) are very much intertwined, and despite originating independently with futurists on one hand, and designers on the other, the similarities between them as hybrid design/futures practices are more important than the differences.

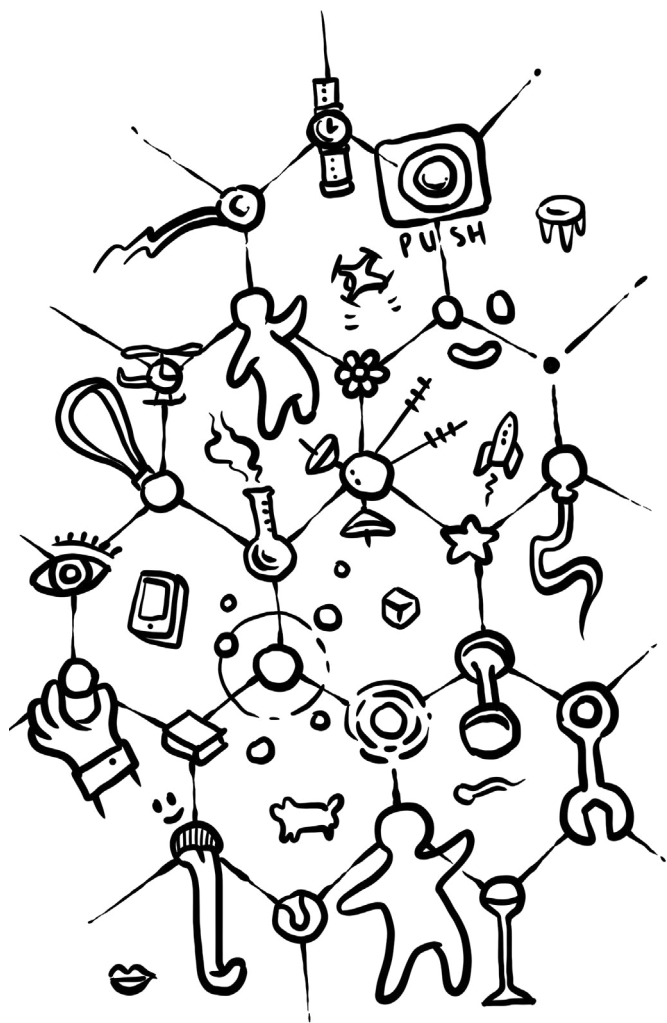
Candy, S., & Dunagan, J. (2017). *Designing an experiential scenario: The People Who Vanished*. *Futures*, 86, 136–153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2016.05.006>

# Sense-making

Sense-making is a crucial practice within the Design Futures process, where collected data and signals are organised and interpreted to develop meaningful understanding. It involves sorting, grouping, and mapping information to identify patterns, themes, and emerging trends or drivers. This structured approach helps distinguish signals from noise, enabling the recognition of potential future developments or disruptions.

Through different design tools, practitioners can explore, prioritise, and cluster data, uncovering hidden connections and surfacing divergent interpretations.

Sense-making supports individuals and organisations in navigating complexity by converting scattered information into actionable directions for futures-oriented thinking.





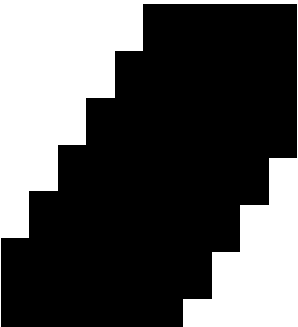
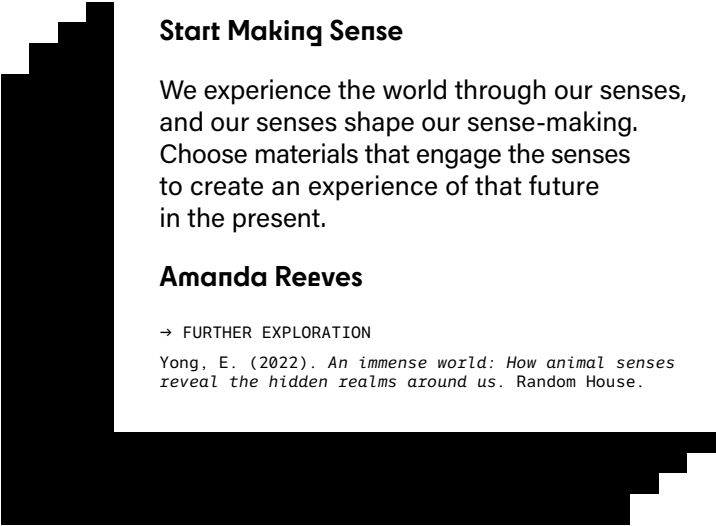
## Start Making Sense

We experience the world through our senses, and our senses shape our sense-making. Choose materials that engage the senses to create an experience of that future in the present.

### Amanda Reeves

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Yong, E. (2022). *An immense world: How animal senses reveal the hidden realms around us*. Random House.





## The Ash Heap of Past Design Futures

Design Futures also exist in time and space, and they too end up in basement storage, garbage heaps, and incinerators as they become history.

How do you engage with them?

Scramble through this ever-growing pile of sparkling naivety, not unlike a curious raccoon in search for a tasty goodnight snack. Stop yourself from instantly trying to reverse-extrapolate meaning into what you discover. Breathe; be patient. Fight the urge to use past Design Futures to validate your present speculations, whether consciously or unconsciously.

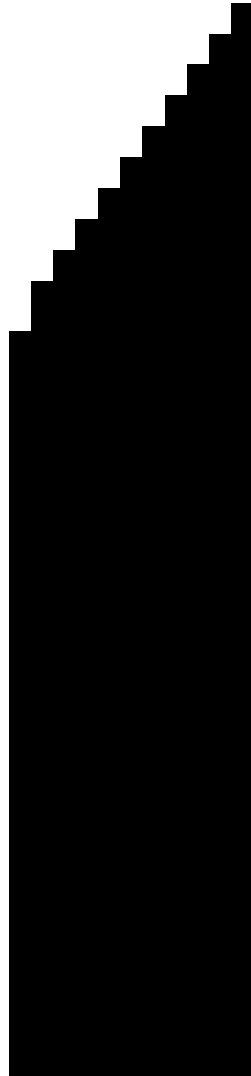
Instead, be radically empathetic, equally critical and forgiving, as you venture the precious thresholds of what once was and what could have been.

**Søren Rosenbak**





## Seeing data as partial stories, design as a way to fill gaps



Rather than viewing data as a complete record, we must recognise it as a partial and biased account of history. Data often excludes natural systems, non-human perspectives, and social dynamics that don't align with the economic imperatives of life in the early 21st Century.

Design can act as a way to address these omissions, seeking to include those neglected or marginalised aspects, to create more inclusive and holistic futures that respect both human and more-than-human narratives.

**Michael Dunbar, Chris Speed**  
**RMIT University**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Scott, J., & Ashby, M. (2020). *How to future: Leading and sense-making in an age of hyperchange*. Kogan Page Inspire.

# The dark side of the Moon

Sense-making turns complexity into clarity in futures work. It is the essential counterpart to scanning; gathering signals and emerging drivers is only half the task. Without interpretation to uncover possibilities, it is like doing research without distilling insights. Sense-making cuts through the noise, highlights what matters, and guides more informed action, enabling practitioners to move from confusion to insight and shape future directions with confidence.



## **Designing futures that challenge data biases**

When data is viewed as a biased product of economic and technological systems, design can intentionally work to challenge and transform these biases.

Designers can seek to reframe data sets by questioning their underlying assumptions and reimagining what should be measured and valued. By doing so, design does not simply build on data histories but actively critiques and reshapes them, aiming to create futures that are more equitable, ecologically attuned, and inclusive of diverse forms of life.

**Michael Dunbar, Chris Speed**  
**RMIT University**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Daly, A., Devitt, S. K., & Mann, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Good data* (Theory on Demand No. 29). Institute of Network Cultures. [https://networkcultures.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Good\\_Data.pdf](https://networkcultures.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Good_Data.pdf)

To make sense of signals means to map, prioritize, and explore the potential within the collected data. [...] Through the exploration of signals, we are able to gain a new sense of awareness. [...] Sensing is an act of integrating our previous knowledge with the collection of signals.

Bespoke. (2017). *Book of futures: A bespoke guide to design futures*. Bespoke ApS.

# From signals to drivers

Identifying drivers transforms scanning into strategy. By clustering and mapping themes from research, it becomes possible to spot the deeper forces shaping change, not just isolated trends.

Understanding these drivers and their relationships gives structure to futures work, grounding imagination in real patterns and making futures work more strategic and actionable.

# Evaluating drivers

Assessing drivers is about understanding their influence in context, not just in isolation. This requires iteratively refining, analysing, and comparing drivers, both individually and as part of a broader system. What matters most is uncovering how these forces connect and interact, revealing the deeper dynamics at play. By clarifying the weight and direction of emerging change, this process strengthens strategic exploration and grounds futures work in meaningful patterns.

# Building a driver inventory

A driver inventory brings structure and clarity to scanning. By organising emerging trends and forces of change into clear categories, practitioners can create a balanced overview and spot gaps in their research. A well-maintained inventory serves as both a reference and a diagnostic tool, prompting reflection on what might be missing or overlooked. This approach keeps futures work grounded, transparent, and ready to adapt as new signals emerge.

An initial sense-check using a structured inventory gives you reasons to go back and dig more deeply.  
[...] In most cases, it can be useful to begin mapping with time and certainty as your two starter criteria.

Scott, J., & Ashby, M. (2020). *How to future: Leading and sense-making in an age of hyperchange*. Kogan Page Inspire.

# Be futures-ready


Futures readiness refers to the capacity of both individuals and organisations to anticipate, respond to, and actively influence emerging changes and challenges. It involves cultivating a mindset that embraces uncertainty, encourages ongoing learning, and applies imaginative and critical thinking to explore and shape forward-looking possibilities.

It means developing the confidence and tools to navigate complexity, adapt creatively, and engage in shaping outcomes that align with evolving values and aspirations.

It empowers people and organisations to become active agents in change and supports progress towards more just, transformative, and sustainable futures.

# Trans- formative futures

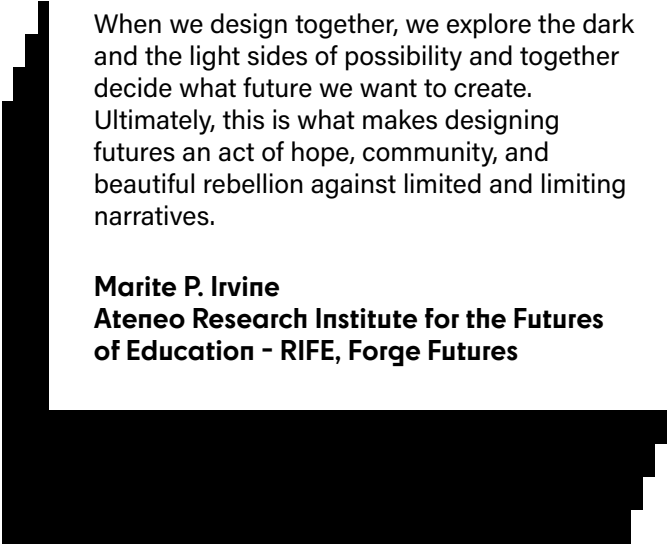
Transformative futures refer to using participatory design practices that engage communities and organisations in co-creating visions of alternative futures that carry the power to challenge the status quo and reimagine systems. This approach democratises futures-oriented exploration by incorporating diverse perspectives, fostering collaborative design inquiry, and empowering people to apply critical thinking and play an active role in addressing societal shifts and systemic challenges.



Design Futures is not only about speculation, but also about engagement: by involving stakeholders in co-design processes, it enables the collective construction of desirable futures and builds shared capacity for transformation.

**Margherita Paleari**





When we design together, we explore the dark and the light sides of possibility and together decide what future we want to create. Ultimately, this is what makes designing futures an act of hope, community, and beautiful rebellion against limited and limiting narratives.

**Marite P. Irvine**  
**Ateneo Research Institute for the Futures of Education - RIFE, Forge Futures**

People need a motivating vision of what comes next and the awareness that more will happen after that, that the future is a process not a destination. The future is a verb, not a noun.

Sterling, B. (2004) *The Singularity: Your future as a black hole*. The Long Now Foundation. <https://longnow.org/talks/02004-sterling/>

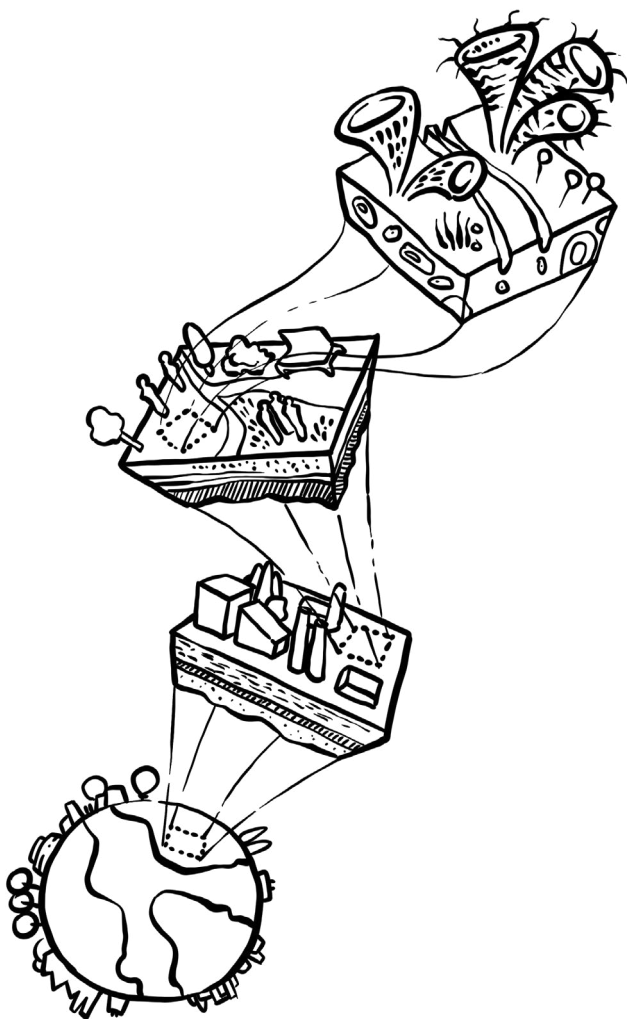
# Visioning

This focuses on envisioning and expressing future scenarios and artefacts that bring potential futures to life.

Visioning is about using research, imagination, storytelling, and prototyping to explore what the future could look like.

At its core are the patterns that emerge from earlier research phases, blended with creative extrapolation to generate rich, plausible narratives of what might come.

Through scenarios and speculative artefacts, future visions communicate provocatively and inspire reflection and engagement. They can take many forms and are essential for turning insights into tangible, actionable possibilities.



## Avoiding Bovine Design

“Bovine Design” mirrors the placid life of dairy cows, following a routine without deviation. This tendency in design, a socio-technical manifestation of late capitalism, exploits well-worn tracks, stifling creativity, and nudging people along. It curbs reflection and limits radical reimagination. In Design Fiction and Speculative Design, we must challenge this paradigm. By imagining futures that diverge radically from business-as-usual consumerism, we can explore different paths. Avoiding Bovine Design is the first step towards change, encouraging us to speculate and design for a world fundamentally different from the one that led us to the Anthropocene's crises.

**Gabriele Ferri, Industrial Design TU/e  
Inte Gloerich, Digital Media and Creative  
Industries AUAS**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Light, A., Powell, A., & Shklovski, I. (2017). *Design for existential crisis in the Anthropocene age*. Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Communities and Technologies, 270–279. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3083671.3083688>

# Scenarios

Future scenarios are evidence-based, imaginative stories that describe alternative possible futures. They combine researched findings with creative extrapolation to explore how emerging trends and societal shifts might shape the lives of individuals, communities, or organisations. Scenarios are not predictions; they are structured tools for examining change, testing assumptions, and challenging expectations. By introducing both continuity and disruption, they help broaden perspectives, provoke reflection, and support strategic decision-making.

Always developed in sets, scenarios offer diverse snapshots of future life, capturing everyday dilemmas, choices, and potential outcomes. Flexible in form, they may take shape as narratives, visualisations, reports, or immersive glimpses into a world that could be.

## A pataphysics for the future

Here's how: let's convert the futures cone into a spiral. Then imagine for ourselves a subscentent practice of spiraling down (and narrowing) that sacrifices the luxuriously speculative outcomes of the probable and plausible, the possible and even the preferable, for the pataphysical singularity of the preposterous.

Here we find grand imaginary solutions that swerve away from how things are—and instead, see things as if they are—wildly otherwise, abundant, regenerative, and entangled with everything else. This is the promise of the pataphysical supplementary universe made real. One preposterous and impossible solution upends everything.

### Coe Douglas

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

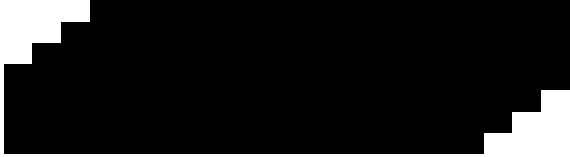
Jarry, A. (1911). *Exploits and opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*. Fasquelle.

There is no single future  
"out there" to be predicted.  
There are many alternative  
futures to be anticipated  
and pre-experienced to  
some degree.

Dator, J. (2009). *Alternative futures at the  
Manoa School*. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 14(2),  
1-18.

Scenarios can be described  
as stories, or social fictions,  
that take place  
in alternative futures.

IFTF, *Equitable Futures Toolkit*, 2019

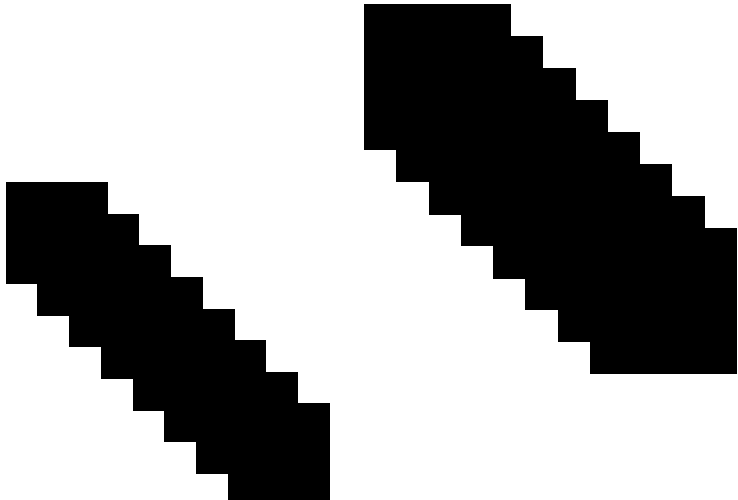
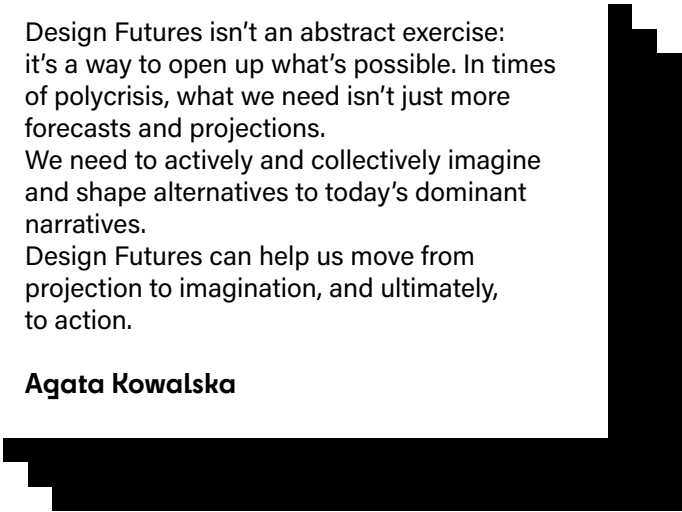


Design Futures isn't an abstract exercise: it's a way to open up what's possible. In times of polycrisis, what we need isn't just more forecasts and projections.

We need to actively and collectively imagine and shape alternatives to today's dominant narratives.

Design Futures can help us move from projection to imagination, and ultimately, to action.

**Agata Kowalska**



# The role of scenarios

Scenarios provide a picture of the future to look forward, to discover what decisions may be required at each stage, and to consider how to get there from today.

Scenarios are participatory tools that can be adapted to different purposes within organisations.

Scenarios can be used to encourage public discourse, aid strategic planning, and support decisions on complex issues with a long-term perspective.

# Shared visions

Creating scenarios collaboratively allows organisations to build a shared vision and to better understand the mechanisms underlying change.

Scenarios are widely used to acquire and organise ideas about the long-term implications of different decisions, in order to evaluate the trade-offs that would result from those choices.

# Making futures visible

Visioning turns research and creative extrapolation into tangible future possibilities. This step uses scenarios, storytelling, and prototyping to make potential futures visible and actionable. Effective scenarios are not predictions, they're evidence-based stories built from patterns in research, extended creatively to explore how change might unfold.

By combining what's known with what's possible, visioning surfaces both continuity and disruption, offering diverse snapshots of how individuals, communities, or organisations could navigate the future. Scenarios and speculative artefacts provoke reflection, broaden perspectives, and support stronger strategic decisions, making the future something we can explore, question, and shape together.

# Participatory Futures

Participatory Futures refers to a set of approaches that actively involve people and organisations in exploring and shaping potential futures together. It seeks to democratise futures thinking by making it inclusive, collaborative, and accessible.

By engaging diverse voices, Participatory Futures encourages long-term thinking and supports the development of shared visions. These approaches aim not only to imagine different futures, but also to inform present-day decisions and inspire collective action.

At its core, participatory futures is a medium for people to think (and feel) differently, openly, and critically about the future together.

The Global Swarm. (2019). *Towards more participatory futures*. Futurescoping. Nesta.  
<https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/toward-more-participatory-futures/>

## **Democratization of futures does not mean monetization of the future**

The Overview Effect is “a state of awe with self-transcendent qualities, precipitated by a particularly striking visual stimulus” (Yaden et al., 2016) that has been reported by some astronauts when they view Earth for the first time from space. Being a futurist is a privilege and opportunity to see things ahead that others can't. Once you are able to realize this gift, you may realize the greater responsibility you have to society and our planet as a whole. To truly democratize futures work, we must move beyond the dogma and territorial ownership of methods and approaches and seek new ways to evolve, expand, and expose this work to others outside of academic, corporate, or government institutions.

### **Phil Balagtas**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Balagtas, P. (2024). *Making futures work: Integrating futures thinking for design, innovation and strategy*. O'Reilly.



## View design through the lens of activism


As environmental and social issues intensify, we as designers must view our work through the lens of activism. Design goes beyond aesthetics; it is a powerful tool for advocacy and systemic change, essential for protecting our environment and living systems. By empowering ourselves and each other to be advocates beyond the domain of design, we cultivate a profound sense of agency. Together, we can drive change by envisioning potential futures and taking actionable steps toward those visions.

We must also inspire and encourage young designers to question existing assumptions, disrupt the status quo, and radically imagine a world, life, and society beyond the limitations of what is currently considered possible – not just what is, but what if?

### Juliana Schneider

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Fuad-Luke, A. (2009). *Design activism: Beautiful strangeness for a sustainable world*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781849770941>



## Looking in the mirror

We are not objective.

We all have a point of view and biases.

I am always questioning which harmful Colonial paradigms I may be perpetuating because of how I am...

- Showing up
- Relating
- Facilitating
- Listening
- Holding space
- Holding silence (or not)
- Holding conflict (or not)
- Redistributing power (or not)
- Applying tools and methods

How might our process and ways of being limit people's imagination?

What lies behind, before, and beyond typical Anglo- and Eurocentric tools and methods?

## Eloise Smith-Foster

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Lorde, A. (2017). *Your silence will not protect you: Essays and poems*. Silver Press.



### **Move beyond human-centric futures**

To extend your futures thinking, consider how you can move beyond human-centric futures. This will help increase the creativity, inclusivity, and breadth of your design futures practice.

**Chris Jackson**  
**We Create Futures**



## What if the future is not only ours to create

The idea of a singular future is rooted in colonial legacies that often reinforce human dominance. Human beings are not the only ones creating future possibilities.

Anna Tsing (2015) writes how “the modern human conceit is not the only plan for making worlds: we are surrounded by many world-making projects, human and not human.”

Much of the discourse around futures focuses on how humans are shaping the realities we live under. However, our more-than-human relatives are actively involved in acts of world-making all around us.

Our futures are interwoven.

### Sahibzada Mayed

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548>



## Knowing differently

"Knowing differently," as an epistemic approach in design, draws from the growing literature on more-than-human and posthuman design. It critiques human-centered design for its limitations and advocates decentering humans to include nonhumans in participatory roles. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans with their environments, challenging notions of separateness and superiority. Designers are encouraged to reveal what is overlooked from a human-centric lens and to engage with nonhumans in new design assemblages. This shift broadens the scope of design practice to be more inclusive and responsive to all forms of life.

## Gabriele Ferri, Industrial Design TU/e Inte Gloerich, Digital Media and Creative Industries AUAS

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Mackey, A., Vallejo de la Guarda, M., Tomico, O., Wakkary, R., Nachtigall, T., & de Waal, M. (2023). *Becoming solar: Towards more-than-human understandings of solar energy*. *Temes de Disseny*, 2023(39), 248–268. <https://doi.org/10.46467/TdD39.2023.248-269>

## Challenging human supremacy

Which perspective do you prioritise:  
non-human or human?

Human Supremacy has manifested in my Futures practice through the implicit assumption that humans are separate from and superior to nature.

Is there an assumption that humans are not nature, and are entitled to relate in the following ways to non-human entities in your work?

- Harm
- Control
- Own
- Exploit
- Extract
- Destroy

What could decentering humans and orienting toward right relationship with the non-human require and look like?

## Eloise Smith-Foster

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Kimmerer, R. W. (2020). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants*. Penguin Books.

## First-person speculative fabulation

Speculative fabulation, theorized by Donna Haraway, challenges dominant understandings. By focusing on our place as humans in a complex world, it blurs the lines between fact and fiction to question traditional categorizations. By combining collective speculative fabulation and design fiction, the "First-Person Speculative Fabulation" workshop addresses complex issues within their social, cultural, and material contexts. This method enables marginalized communities to imagine and invent alternatives to their current circumstances, fostering creativity and resilience in times of crisis.

## Gabriele Ferri, Industrial Design TU/e Inte Gloerich, Digital Media and Creative Industries AUAS

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Gloerich, I., & Ferri, G. (2023). *First-person speculative fabulation: A workshop method for times of crisis*. *Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture*, 8(4).

# The role of scenarios in decision-making

Future scenarios play vital roles in strategic decision-making. They help map horizons to clarify possible directions, create purpose to inspire and align teams, and support collective action within organisations. By serving these functions, scenarios become practical tools for shaping strategy, building shared understanding, and enabling effective action in the face of change.

## **A strategic plan for the future**

Traditional strategic plans account for potential future threats and opportunities by taking a reactive view of the future. They accept that the future is uncertain, difficult to predict, and volatile.

A strategic plan for the future makes a deliberate choice about the future. It has intentionality and sets the direction of where an organisation must go to create that future. It's a plan that serves both our organisation and the ecosystems within which it operates.

### **Martin Tomitsch, Steve Baty**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Tomitsch, M., & Baty, S. (2023). *Designing tomorrow: Strategic design tactics to change your practice, organisation and planetary impact*. BIS Publishers.

This recursive quality—where knowledge acquisition generates new categories of unknowing—suggests that strategic planning might need to account for the unknown unknowns it creates through its own processes. Each strategic initiative, each new capability, each market entry creates fresh intersection zones where new blind spots can emerge. Rather than treating unknown unknowns as external surprises to be anticipated, we might approach them as emergent properties of our knowledge systems—systematically produced, potentially mappable, and strategically relevant in the present moment.

Schwarzmann, I. (2025). *Present archaeology – The present problem*. Substack. <https://thenew.igorschwarzmann.com/p/present-archaeology-the-present-problem>

# Mapping horizons

Future scenarios expand strategic thinking beyond the immediate. By exploring a wider range of possible developments, challenges, and opportunities, scenarios help people and organisations deepen their awareness of change across medium- and long-term horizons. Imagining different pathways enables better anticipation of risks, identification of opportunities, and preparation for a broader spectrum of potential outcomes.

# Creating purpose

Future scenarios foster a shared sense of purpose and direction. By uncovering values, needs, and aspirations, scenario work helps shape a preferred future vision. This process also reveals and challenges underlying cultural or organisational assumptions, creating space for meaningful transformation and new possibilities.

# Acting together

Scenarios act as catalysts for collective action and transformation. By providing a shared framework for collaboration, scenarios help align efforts across an organisation towards a desired future. They empower individuals and groups to lead change initiatives and drive new practices that bring strategic visions to life.

Engaging more people  
in thinking about the  
future will lead to better  
decisions.

Ramos, J., Sweeney, J., Peach, K., & Smith, L.  
(2019). *Our futures: By the people, for the  
people*. Nesta.

# Crafting effective scenarios

An effective scenario is both familiar and grounded, inviting exploration of possible futures. It connects with people through recognisable details and plausible dynamics, drawing on research, data, and real-world insights, not just imagination. Good scenarios reflect the urgency, tension, or stability found in the evidence, not personal bias, and make their underlying patterns clear. When scenarios are compact and accessible, they help people see themselves in the future, encouraging engagement and action.



**Create safe spaces to suspend disbelief  
outside 'real world' constraints**

Imagining futures can be difficult when coming up against the challenges and constraints of 'the real world.'

It's important to establish spaces where people, especially those new to futuring, can be allowed to explore and experiment without worrying about it not being 'practical.'


**Tina Fung, Samuel Yu**  
**Speculative Futures Sydney**



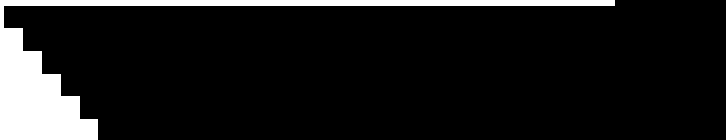


## **Designing confrontation**

Confrontation is the magical moment when futures collide with the present, as a future vision, told through a narrative, artefact, or experience, meets the realities of its audience. Simultaneously, the audience's realities engage with these future's perspectives. To succeed, develop a framework alongside your scenario that encourages dialogue or action. This could be a debate, exhibition, analysis workshop, or playful toolkit. Vision development and its exploitation mode shape each other. Consider three parameters: who is the engaged audience (their profile and past experiences), the context of your confrontation (power dynamics and current events at play, timeframe and location), and the objectives of that confrontation.



**Bastien Kerspern, Léa Lippera,  
Estelle Hary  
Design Friction**



# Grounding scenarios in daily life

Starting scenarios with everyday stories grounds futures work in reality. Crafting simple, context-rich narratives, rooted in the signals and drivers from research, brings possible futures to life through familiar routines, rituals, and tasks. First-person, present-tense storytelling adds immediacy and relevance, while memorable headlines aid recall. Involving diverse voices ensures stories reflect multiple perspectives, enriching scenarios with detail and serving as a check on coherence. Everyday tokens like these make scenarios tangible, recognisable, and easier to engage with.

# From fragments to futures

Synthesis turns stories into scenarios. After gathering everyday stories, the next step is to weave them into a coherent and meaningful whole. Scenarios can take many forms (written, visual, or hybrid) with each format offering unique strengths for different audiences and purposes. Whether through narrative, video, or artefacts, the key is purposeful, creative combination. No matter the medium, a scenario should stay compact, well-structured, and accessible to open futures up for engagement, sharing, and discussion.

## Practising polyphony of visions

Futures, like the present, are complex and plural, with dissonant perspectives coexisting. Designing or telling different viewpoints is essential for meaningful future exploration, allowing your audience to engage with various fictional stakeholders and form their own actual opinions.

To achieve this, develop the same future scenario from multiple perspectives—such as a proponent of change, an opponent, and an indifferent party.

**Bastien Kerspern, Léa Lippera,  
Estelle Hary  
Design Friction**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Design Friction. (2016). *Proto-Policy: Using design fictions to negotiate social and political changes*. Medium. <https://medium.com/design-friction/proto-policy-using-design-fictions-to-negotiate-social-and-political-changes-740007813945>

# The importance of evaluating scenarios

Evaluating scenarios involves measuring how far people or an organisation are from a preferred future, and how each scenario helps bridge that gap.

To be meaningful, a scenario must resonate with people's aspirations or an organisation's values and strategic vision. It should act as a compass, guiding decisions toward preferred outcomes and away from undesirable ones. Well-crafted scenarios provide a framework for identifying the risks to avoid, opportunities to explore, and challenges to overcome. Their value lies in how well they support informed, values-driven decision-making in complex environments. By revealing tensions between current realities and future aspirations, scenarios become strategic tools for reflection and course correction.



## Critiquing future visions

Understanding the implicit ideologies behind future-oriented designs is fundamental to prevent reinforcement of enticing but ultimately harmful future visions. To critique their sociocultural impact, we need methods to critically analyze their worldviews. This is not just an academic pursuit: future visions influence which designs, infrastructures, and ideas are pursued, ultimately shaping the future. To prevent reinforcing harmful visions, fiction-based design methods need to be combined with their critique in design education. Interdisciplinarity is key here: by integrating a humanistic methodology in design education, students' and educators' abilities to assess future visions and design fictions are enhanced.

**Gabriele Ferri, Industrial Design TU/e  
Inte Gloerich, Digital Media and Creative  
Industries AUAS**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Ferri, G., & Gloerich, I. (2023). *Risk and harm: Unpacking ideologies in the AI discourse*. Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Conversational User Interfaces (CUI '23), 284–289. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3571884.3603751>

### **The dilemma of signalling fictionality**


When performing a future scenario, you may be tempted to let your audience forget it is just fiction. While this might elicit genuine reactions, it risks blurring reality and fiction, potentially accelerating the future you aim to question.

This poses an ethical question: signalling fiction can help prevent manipulating imaginations or spreading disinformation but may lessen the audience's projection. Ask yourself: is your public unaware it is fiction, and can you reveal this before any follow-up? If unsure, include disclaimers and multiple temporal markers. However, a timestamp alone isn't enough, as fiction can later be misinterpreted when taken out of context, as with Google's Selfish Ledger project.

**Bastien Kerspern, Léa Lippera,  
Estelle Hary  
Design Friction**



**Carve out time for reflection and discussion between diverse perspectives**



Whilst imagining futures is fun, the real value of speculative practice is the insights generated.

It's important to ensure time is set aside for reflection and discussion.

Richer reflection about futures comes from engaging diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

**Tina Fung, Samuel Yu**  
**Speculative Futures Sydney**



# Artefacts from the Future

An artefact from the future is an everyday object designed to bring a possible future to life. Placed in today's context, it serves to provoke conversation and spark the imagination about the world we might inhabit tomorrow. Artefacts from the future are representations of how everyday life could look or feel different in the future.

# Fictional but plausible

Artefacts from the future blur the line between fiction and reality. These objects aren't real products from today, but they could plausibly exist in the future. The intentional ambiguity invites reflection and sparks conversation, encouraging us to imagine new possibilities and reconsider what might become part of everyday life.

# Provoking through detail

Artefacts can be either physical or digital, and may be fake or non-functional, as long as they appear to realistically represent a scenario. However, to feel believable, artefacts must include a sufficient level of detail.

It is important to carefully consider and determine the appropriate level of detail and functionality. Some scenarios may require highly detailed objects to provoke thought and engagement, while others might benefit more from the suggestive, open-ended qualities of simple sketches or minimal representations.

Design fiction objects are totems through which a larger story can be told, or imagined or expressed. They are like artifacts from someplace else, telling stories about other worlds.

Bleecker, J. (2009). *Design fiction: A short essay on design, science, fact and fiction*. Near Future Laboratory.

# Design Fiction Archetypes

Design Fiction Archetypes are culturally recognisable artefacts (often in the form of familiar media or objects) deeply embedded in the collective memory. Each archetype includes defining elements, or tropes, which act as creative hooks in the design fiction process (Bleecker et al., 2022). By subtly modifying these tropes, designers can retain the archetype's familiar form while reflecting the change they wish to explore.

## **Building self-explanatory provotypes**

Design Fiction and Speculative Design explore possible futures through fictional artefacts—objects, services, or spaces. To achieve this, create "provotypes" (provocative prototypes): these artefacts represent an envisioned future, efficiently sparking both imagination and discussion.

Focus on crafting self-explanatory artefacts that embody and communicate a possible future vision clearly. They should stand alone, without needing additional (non-fictional) mediation like guides, side scenarios, or someone explaining the future context. The artefacts themselves should directly engage the audience, prompting them to reflect on the presented future without external interpretation. Remember to avoid chatty artefacts such as fictional news articles.

**Bastien Kerspern, Léa Lippera,  
Estelle Hary  
Design Friction**



**Forget about "innovative"  
and commercially successful stuff**

In our experience, when the end result of the design-fiction process must yield an object that is intended to be marketed, the whole purpose of speculation is deflated. The purpose of conjecture is not to make the objects work, nor to guess what will happen, but to put before our eyes the consequences (desirable or undesirable) of our decisions. Don't subordinate that criticism to political correctness or commercial success.

**Karla Paniagua**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Paniagua, K., Chimal, A., López, P., & Flores, E. (2023). *The futures of metaverse and the creative industries in Latin America: A workshop experience at CENTRO, Mexico*. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 27(4), 1–16.

# Engaging with archetypes

Design Fiction Archetypes are containers that hold a vision of an alternative future. Their purpose is to expand the world in which they are situated and to help make sense of the present through imagined possibilities. More than just a creative exercise, these archetypes enable people to brainstorm in tangible, grounded ways. They also function as strategic tools, provoking discussion, inspiring new ideas, and challenging current assumptions about the future. By engaging with these archetypes, people may uncover new narratives and generate fresh forms for richer, more diverse explorations of possible futures.

# Artefacts for social debate

A discursive practice in design centres on sparking social debate through communicative artefacts. The goal is to create products, ranging from conceptual proposals to physical prototypes, that serve as catalysts for discussion and reflection (Tharp & Tharp, 2019). In this approach, any artefact can prompt dialogue, challenge assumptions, and invite collective exploration of pressing issues.

Debates do not merely arise as a result of some designed artifact, no matter how critical, speculative, futural, or fictional. Debates are things that designers need to make happen, things that are difficult to design and take a long time to design.

Tonkinwise, C. (2015). *Just design: Being dogmatic about defining speculative critical design future fiction*. Medium. <https://medium.com/@camerontw/just-design-b1f97cb3996f>

# Discursive Dissonance

Discursive Dissonance refers to the intentional use of ambiguity, contradiction, or the "strangely familiar" in the creation of future scenarios and artefacts. It is a design tool used to disrupt expectations just enough to provoke curiosity, critical thinking, and engagement, without alienating the audience. When applied effectively, it creates a reflective space in which the audience can question assumptions and consider alternative future possibilities. Discursive dissonance can be crafted through five key dimensions: clarity, reality, familiarity, veracity, and desirability. By carefully manipulating these elements, designers can challenge perceptions and encourage deeper engagement with the ideas embodied in speculative futures (Tharp & Tharp, 2019).

## Altered Scale

Jim Dator once said that the future cannot be studied because the future does not exist. The magic of future studies does not lie in the future itself, but in its exploratory power to speculate, to create alternate versions, metaphors, or dimensions to generate reasonable doubts or new lenses. Future studies are like a Mandela effect generator or a jazz band. They create an altered scale to generate tension and dissonance. As Barry Harris would say, “the ears of people react to wrong. You have to throw a little wrong in and make it right”

## Erica Moreti

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Gioia, T. (2016). *How to listen to jazz*. Basic Books.

Efstathiou, C. (2021). *Dreaming through the ages: Towards a global history of utopian and dystopian thought*. *Modern Intellectual History*, 18(1), 275–287.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244319000258>

# Inverting the route: from objects to entire worlds

While artefacts from the future often add resolution to scenarios by enabling embodied assessments of implications and opportunities, they can also precede the scenario building process, emerging directly from identified signals and drivers of change. In Design Fiction, such future objects or archetypes act as probes from an alternative reality (Bleecker, 2024). They invite interaction and speculation, allowing us to infer and visualise other possibilities.

Like archaeologists from the future, we can engage with these artefacts, explore how they might function, and question the values they support or the beliefs they materialise.

## **Philosophy is the key**

Worldbuilding is the central practice in my speculative design projects. In her master thesis, Leah Zaidi introduces a model of seven foundations for worldbuilding based on her extensive research into science fiction. Using the model changed my practice drastically because it made me aware that the foundational 'philosophy' is the root of every transformation: what we believe to be true is the core of our value system.

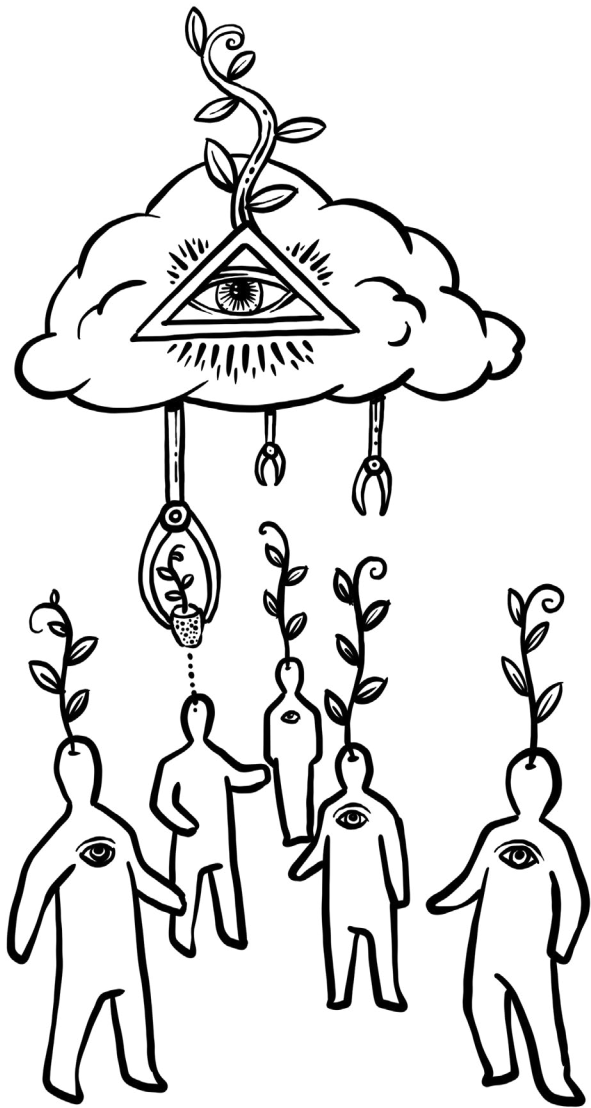
## **Theo Ploeg**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Zaidi, L. (2017). *Building brave new worlds: Science fiction and transition design*. Master's thesis. OCAD University. [https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/2123/7/Zaidi\\_Leah\\_2017\\_MDes\\_SFI\\_MRP.pdf](https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/2123/7/Zaidi_Leah_2017_MDes_SFI_MRP.pdf)

# Dissemination

Dissemination involves prototyping and sharing scenarios and artefacts with intended audiences. These outputs serve as powerful engagement tools, enabling stakeholders to perceive future visions and engage with emerging ideas and their potential implications (Montgomery & Woebken, 2016). By making the intangible tangible, this moment allows for a deeper understanding of proposed scenarios. It surfaces critical issues, provokes reflection, and invites dialogue, ensuring that concepts are not only seen and understood but also actively explored. Through this shared experience, ideas are sense-checked, refined, and sometimes even challenged, offering valuable insight into what might be possible, desirable, or problematic in future contexts.



We can design situations  
that help us better  
understand possible futures  
by visiting them.

Candy, S. (2016). *Experiential futures: Show and tell*. *The Economist*, 1-2.

# Experiential Scenarios

Experiential scenarios bring possible futures to life as tangible 'what-ifs,' realised through materials, actions, or both. They reveal fragments of future worlds via media such as images, artefacts, installations, or performances. Unlike abstract speculation, they invite people to engage with and reflect on emerging possibilities through direct, sensory experience. Designed to be more textural than textual, they immerse people in vivid encounters with what might come (Lockton & Candy, 2019).

# The principles of experiential futures

When designing experiential futures, three key principles (Candy, 2010) can help ensure depth and credibility. First, don't break the universe: scenarios and artefacts should feel like natural extensions of a coherent future, rather than isolated or incongruous elements. Second, design for the tip of the iceberg, avoid overexplaining and instead develop rich fragments that suggest a broader, unseen world. These pieces should encourage the audience to connect, infer, and imagine what lies beyond what's immediately presented. Finally, embrace the art of the double take: create experiences or objects that may appear ordinary, or even absurd, at first glance, but reveal deeper layers of meaning and implication as the audience spends more time engaging with them. Together, these principles support the creation of immersive, thought-provoking glimpses into possible futures.

# Futures games

Futures games are a subset of the broader games family, serving as participatory tools to immerse players in envisioning future scenarios and artefacts. They are especially valuable within the Design Futures process, enabling individuals and groups to explore, prototype, and reflect on potential societal, technological, or environmental trajectories. By simulating complex systems and encouraging role-playing, these games nurture empathy, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-setting. They translate abstract future visions into meaningful experiences, making scenarios more accessible and actionable, and artefacts more tangible and relatable. Futures games support individuals, communities, and organisations in collaboratively exploring and shaping possible futures, encouraging engagement with long-term thinking and transformative change.

Guerrilla Futures combines strategic foresight with tactical media to produce unexpected encounters with possible worlds. The point is to show, as well as tell, different stories, bringing futures to life in order to influence how we act today.

Candy, S. (2013). *Guerrilla futures*. SlideShare.  
<https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/guerrilla-futures/27720333>

In experiential futures work generally, but guerrilla futures especially, context is key. This very simple object was lent an amplified meaning by the site, circumstances, and audience.

Candy, S. (2024). *Tomorrow's energy today: How we used guerrilla art and design at the World Energy Congress to bring global energy transition closer*. Medium. <https://medium.com/@futurayst/tomorrows-energy-today-f9051ba4d139>

# Experiential Futures games

As a distinct branch of futures games, Experiential Futures games focus on embodying imagined futures through interactive, real-world, or immersive experiences. These futures are not just presented but actively envisioned and collaboratively explored through gameplay. These games use storytelling, artefacts, and experiential settings to bring possible futures to life, enabling participants to engage with complex societal, technological, or environmental issues through embodied exploration. Beyond personal engagement, they serve as powerful tools for collaborative ideation, critical reflection, and evaluating the implications of creative and strategic choices within complex future contexts.

# The value of Experiential Futures

Experiential Futures open space for a multitude of perspectives. While thinking about the future can sometimes provoke resistance or defensiveness, these barriers often dissolve through shared experience. Change is felt differently by everyone, but by stepping into different roles and engaging with others in a co-created setting, participants can explore their own views more deeply while also connecting with the questions, emotions, and experiences that others bring. This collective engagement fosters empathy, reflection, and a richer understanding of possible futures from diverse points of view.

# Embodied Futures

In shared future scenarios, participants collectively engage with emerging issues and explore power dynamics from different standpoints. Embodying the future through direct, lived experience proves far more impactful than merely reading or talking about it. This immersive approach fosters a deeper, more meaningful understanding of potential futures, making abstract ideas tangible and emotionally resonant.

# Stepping into the future

In experiential settings, participants move beyond being passive observers to actively stepping into constructed future worlds, no extra explanation required. What makes these experiences truly engaging is giving people the chance not just to interact with the future world, but to take active roles within it as participants and, ideally, as co-authors shaping how it unfolds.

# Pushing the boundaries to take action

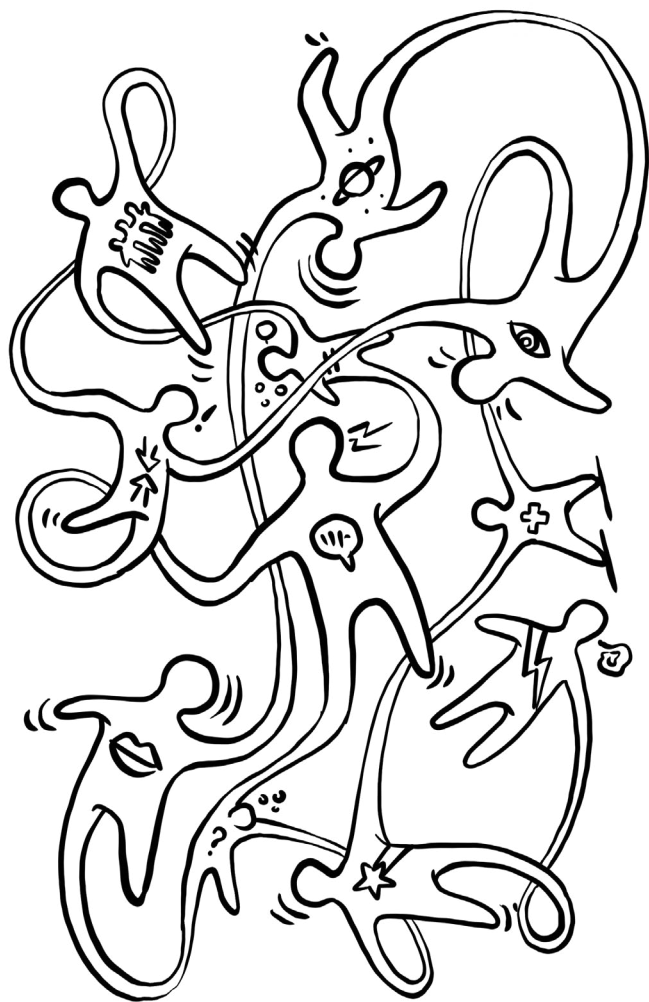
Regardless of the medium, role-playing is one of the most effective ways to connect participants with futures on a personal level. By placing individuals inside fictional scenarios, role-playing encourages them to view challenges from unexpected angles. When individuals feel empowered to push the boundaries of a fictional world, those boundaries are inevitably pushed.

# Situate artefacts

Dissemination brings futures research to life in the real world. It is not only about communicating outcomes but about embedding future artefacts and ideas into everyday contexts (Candy, 2010). Placing artefacts within daily settings enables observation of reactions, uncovering of new interpretations, and collection of feedback that reveals potential impacts. This approach can spark dialogue, challenge assumptions, and open up new pathways for change.

# Assessment

Assessment is about critically reflecting on the visions generated to uncover hidden beliefs and challenge blind spots. The goal is to ensure that the envisioned futures remain relevant, robust, and grounded in emerging realities. This assessment is done collaboratively, engaging audiences and stakeholders to bring in diverse viewpoints, surface overlooked assumptions, and expand the conversation. By exploring new approaches and integrating alternative directions where necessary, this part of the work helps make future visions more adaptive, well-rounded, and responsive to change.



The point of exploring  
the future is to better  
understand how to proceed  
from the present.

Scott, J., & Ashby, M. (2020). *How to future:  
Leading and sense-making in an age of hyperchange.*  
Kogan Page Inspire.

A discourse arises  
in conversation between  
those who will be affected  
by your scenarios in the  
future and the decision-  
makers who are setting  
the course for those  
futures today.

Groß, B., & Mandir, E. (2024). *Designing futures: Speculation, critique, innovation*. Laurence King Publishing.

# The contextualisation process

Contextualisation involves placing artefacts in real-world settings to explore potential futures within environments that feel relevant and meaningful (Candy & Dunegan, 2017). This can emerge from careful planning or spontaneous action. When planned, the setting should be chosen based on the nature of the research, the artefact itself, the people involved, and the questions being explored. The environment can be ordinary or highly controlled; what matters is its resonance with the intended context. A pavilion, a retail store, a vending machine, an online shopping interface, a conference venue, or a museum can all serve as effective platforms if they reflect a relevant consumption or interaction space.

**Interacting with a future artifact in a contextualized environment engages people on a visceral level, allowing them to consider possible futures in concrete terms beyond the anaesthetized and aestheticized futures posited by Hollywood movies and corporate advertising campaigns.**

Montgomery, E. P., & Wuebken, C. (2016). *Extrapolation Factory Operator's Manual: Publication version 1.0 - includes 11 futures modeling tools*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

# Field testing tomorrow

Ethnographic methods are vital for grounding futures work in real-world contexts. They not only help gather signals of change and inform scenario development but also capture the nuances of how people respond to future artefacts and experiences. By actively observing reactions and conversations in everyday settings, ethnographic approaches provide valuable insight into how envisioned futures are interpreted, questioned, or embraced across diverse social and cultural environments.

# Meaning in the making

It is important to remember that the goal is not to predict outcomes or evaluate how user-friendly the future artefacts are. Instead, the aim is to spark conversations, provoke debate, raise doubts, and invite the renegotiation of meanings as they emerge through interaction with the Design Futures work.

# Taking action

This is the point where envisioned futures start to materialise through concrete action. Here, individuals and organisations move beyond exploration and reflection to take deliberate steps toward realising long-term visions. This moment highlights the importance of strategic direction and purposeful execution, grounded in present-day actions. Imagining what is possible is only the beginning: efforts must now be directed towards constructing the conditions in which these futures can emerge. The future becomes a dynamic process embedded in current systems, rather than a distant aspiration. Through deliberate action and sustained commitment, change is set in motion, enabling future visions to be progressively integrated into daily operations, culture, and structures. This is where transformation starts to take shape.



# Platforming

Platforming involves embedding dedicated futures-facing structures within organisations to proactively engage with emerging opportunities (Fry, 2008). These platforms function as dynamic spaces where innovative research and development departments drive strategic ideation to address complex challenges and uncover new directions. By establishing new entities within existing organisational units, they cultivate a culture of continuous exploration without compromising core values. Communities of practice within these platforms foster knowledge creation and exchange, enabling organisations to shape, strategise, and implement future scenarios for transformative change. By incubating diverse social, cultural, and business ecosystems, futures platforms serve as centres for experimentation, testing alternative approaches, utopian ideas, and long-term initiatives. This approach empowers organisations to navigate uncertainty and align today's actions with tomorrow's ambitions.

# Futures platforms

Platforming offers a powerful approach that moves beyond isolated strategic initiatives or rigid roadmaps. Rather than treating future visions as a one-off exercise, platforming fosters ongoing, adaptive environments for innovation and transformation. At the heart of this approach are Futures Platforms: innovative, embedded systems within organisations where forward-thinking concepts, prototypes, and capabilities are nurtured. These platforms act as prefigurative spaces, enabling organisations to explore and model desired futures in real time, without compromising their core culture. They support long-term visioning while facilitating strategic decision-making in a grounded, actionable way.

# It's Design Futures. It's plural. It's alive.

Like any evolving practice, Design Futures is shaped by continuous experimentation and the encounter of diverse, even seemingly unrelated, contributions. As perspectives, philosophies, investigation spaces, media, methods, and tools interact, whether in alignment or tension, new trajectories begin to take form. Labels matter less than the capacity to hold multiple, divergent viewpoints in active dialogue, without the pressure to resolve or synthesise them into a single narrative. This is not a call for unstructured freedom or the absence of rigor. It is the acknowledgment of Design Futures as an undisciplined but attentive practice, one that grows, shifts, and unsettles, even when it appears still.

## **Design Futures also travels in sound**

Futures soundscapes, which explore speculative scenarios based on sound design, allow for inquiries that are not limited by access to materials or manual skills. Try this avenue, which is also interesting.

### **Karla Paniagua**

→ FURTHER EXPLORATION

Santiago, L. (Producer). (2024). *Lab 2024*. Futures Soundscapes CENTRO.



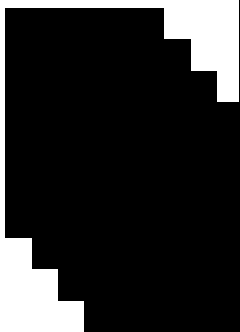
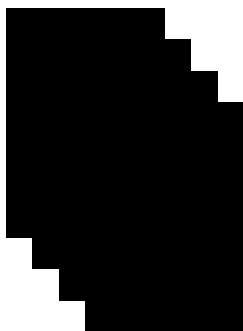
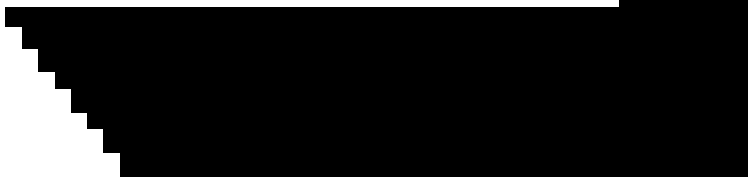
## **Nature Inspired Futures**

Listen to the wisdom of nature instead of just following trends.

Learn from the fauna to break free from linear thinking.

Create alternative futures that are in harmony with the natural world.

**Simone Engelhardt**



The most beautiful  
imagnations are born  
from nature.

Engelhardt, S. 2024.

## **How to imagine regenerative futures**

Listen to the more-than-human

Learn with nature, forage for food, dreams  
and futures

Name the unnamed and make the invisible  
visible

Journey between micro and macro visions  
and explore the whole system

Invite future and past generations to be in  
conversation

Dream and imagine, from plausible to the  
possible to the preposterous

Connect mind, body, and heart and weave the  
full spectrum of emotions

Welcome play into your practice

**Savannah Vize, Andrea Gilly Márquez  
Falay Transition Design**

Instead of man as the measure of all things—as in the Vitruvian model—we need to place the interdependence between the parts. This is also the approach proposed by the philosopher and cultural ecologist David Abram [...], where the concept of More Than Human was codified for the first time: decentralizing the human perspective and recognizing that our senses, our consciousness and our very lives are rooted in a larger world—made up of animals, plants and natural forces—with which we live in constant relationship. Some call this approach life-centered or planet-centered. The focus is no longer on the human being at the center, but on life on the planet and our coexistence as the fulcrum of the project.

Traldi, L. (2025). *Who designs with us? The future of design also speaks non-human* [Interview with E. Giaccardi]. *Interni Magazine*.

And that's why I'm getting to the burrito, because, like, if you start to speculate on the present, if you're not thinking anymore about the future cone, so you don't speculate that, but you speculate in the y-axis of the present, then you can either... yeah, in the vertical of the cone. You expand your starting point. And that means either acknowledging that multiple presents exist in reality [...]. So, you know, then you start to have suddenly a lot of cones that go from a vertical standpoint. And that's how the cone becomes a burrito, because you now have a whole circular space whose boundaries are probably mushy, because it's not finite.

Kleske, J., Schwarzmann, I., & Rebaudengo, S. (2024). *The future burrito: Why we need to expand our present, not our future* [Audio podcast episode]. Follow the Rabbit.

We've been calling it 'Entangled Foresight' at Superflux – an approach that requires maintaining longitudinal vision while working horizontally across multiple options. [...] But what is it? Well, it's the ability to see both wide and far simultaneously. Because *\_The Long View\_* isn't an escape from present urgency; it's a moral consideration that expands thinking beyond the next business cycle both temporally and spatially. Admittedly, such an entanglement-led futuring practice does ask something difficult of us; it asks us to hold the discomfort of multiple perspectives together, without retreating into simpler either/or frameworks. It requires considering how decisions ripple outward, not just in time but across interconnected ecological, social, economic, and many other dimensions.

Jain, A., (2025). *Entangled Foresight: A Futuring Strategy for Uncertainty*. LinkedIn. [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/anabjain\\_if-we-focus-on-long-term-futures-do-we-activity-7330545194997534721-iTTB](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/anabjain_if-we-focus-on-long-term-futures-do-we-activity-7330545194997534721-iTTB)

No one wants to move to the future today. We are avoiding it. We don't have much desire for life one hundred years from now. Many dread it. That makes it hard to take the future seriously. So, we don't take a generational perspective. We're stuck in the short now. [...] It may be that this future-blindness is simply the inescapable affliction of our modern world. Perhaps at this stage in civilization and technological advance, we enter into permanent and ceaseless future-blindness. Utopia, dystopia, and protopia all disappear. There is only the Blind Now.

Kelly, K. (2011). *Protopia*. The Technium. <https://kk.org/thetechnium/protopia>

The idea of a radically uncertain future becomes a convenient narrative, even a truism, rendering it a fictional expectation in and of itself, which has set an opaque veil over *longue durée* continuities. Indeed, contemporary future making is imbued with this very modern inclination to continuously sever ties with the past, with design contributing to its obsession with newness. Perhaps a way to deploy more critical terms of engagement to counter this tendency is to move from the idea of making futures to the idea of inheriting futures in need of redirection.

Navarro Aguiar, U., & Palmás, K. (2025). *The design-ification of future making: Uncertainty and divination in contemporary business discourse*. *Journal of Cultural Economy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2024.2436845>

# Co- creating Futures

Design Futures is fundamentally participatory, thriving on openness, dialogue, and collaboration. It is not simply a creative practice, but a way of thinking and making that actively invites participation for the co-creation of richer, more thoughtful futures.

At its core, Design Futures seeks to cultivate new mindsets, cultures, and practices that support long-term, imaginative, and transformative thinking to shape futures that are resilient and meaningful.

**If you could see a better world, you were morally obligated to help bring it into existence.**

Bell, G. (2020). *Responsibility to a beautiful land and its people*. ANU School of Cybernetics. <https://cybernetics.anu.edu.au/news/2020/02/06/responsibility-to-a-beautiful-land-and-its-peoples/>



# Reflections

We started working on this little book over a year and half ago. Depending on your view, it's gone by in a flash or felt like forever. In the meantime, new books have come out, or at least been announced, each trying to put a pin in the discipline or question what Design Futures actually is and where it's heading. Here are a few thoughts we bounced around as we wrapped up these pages.

We all have a habit of giving every new approach its own label, but does this really help or just create more silos and confusion? This is a question worth asking, especially when these ideas quickly become templates and toolkits, turning into the latest management buzzword or the next design thinking fad.

Beneath all the labels, there's a real sense of fatigue and repetition in current ideas and approaches. Progress seems to have stalled, with design falling behind other fields; you can spot it in textbooks, at conferences, and in academic debates.

Design Futures is naturally a hybrid; it relies on input from a range of perspectives and isn't a field that stands alone. Mixing with areas like social, policy, systemic, and transition design brings fresh insights and keeps us from becoming too inward-looking.

Still, for all its promise, Design Futures hasn't quite figured out where it belongs, especially in organisations that are stuck on short-term targets

and just trying to stay relevant. The real challenge is showing how it can genuinely shape strategy, not just through visionary talk, but by helping people plan ahead and drive meaningful change.

It's a tricky balance: without genuine interest from organisations, the field goes nowhere and stays stuck in its own bubble. But with too much demand, it gets commodified and loses its meaning; something that often happens when business takes over and rarely aligns with design's true spirit of renewal and change.

At the end of the day, it's not just about chasing new labels or unexplored territory.

The real question is: what kind of impact do we actually want to make? And how can we, as people and communities, work together to shape a future that's something else?

# Afterword

Julian Bleecker

Indulge me for a moment, because this may be adjacent to what you expected as an afterword for a field guide to the field of design futures.

Not long ago, I watched children play in a field of sorts—in the light, breezy woods just 200 meters inland from the protected shore of one of the Channel Islands off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. Their games were ludic insanity. They made no distinction between what was possible and what was impossible. A stick was Neptune's trident; a massive tree stump cut down about knee height became a dais upon which one called the gathered tribe to order; a steep incline led up to a high vantage point from which all below was the entire world itself.

This is what imagination looks like when it is not disciplined by method or certification. It is unreasonable, odd, wondrously improvisational. It is also entirely sufficient to the task of exploring possibility.

We might remind ourselves that every child is a futurist, yet they do not call themselves such, do not bestow honorifics upon themselves for that; they have no method, no canonical texts, no prizes for most or best.

I'll offer you one additional bit of nonsense to help frame my remarks: John Carpenter's cult classic "They Live" (1988). In it, the hero-protagonist John Nada discovers a pair of sunglasses that allow him

to see the world as it really is. Billboards, magazines, and television screens are filled with hidden messages: "Obey," "Consume," "Vacation." The glasses reveal a hidden reality, one that challenges the status quo and invites rebellion against the forces that seek to control our perceptions, lives—our futures.

Of course, the film is a metaphor for the act of seeing beyond the surface, of perceiving the underlying structures that shape our world. But its real crux in the context of this field guide is the 6+ minutes of a fight scene that begins with Nada asking his buddy [...] to see the truth of the world through the glasses. Nada pleads with [his buddy]: 'I'm trying to save you and your whole family!' Not even with that earnest plea will [his buddy] put on a pair of sunglasses. His stubbornness is profound—and a profound metaphor for the difficulty of seeing beyond the familiar. He would rather remain in ignorance than risk the discomfort of seeing something new, unexpected and challenging to his ways of being. In fact, he would rather have a very kinetic, bloody back alley brawl than put on a pair of plastic sunglasses and see something different.

In a similar vein, this book invites us to don our own metaphorical sunglasses and see the field of design futures not as a settled discipline but as a terrain of fragments, scattered insights, and possibilities waiting to be explored. Perhaps even give up our conventions, our certainties, our old ways of knowing, and embrace the unknown with the same unreasonable improvisation as children playing in the woods.

This book calls itself a field guide, but to what? To places of possibility, we might infer from the sensitivities and sensibilities of the contributions. But notice the semantic sleight of hand embedded in the title itself. It turns the idea of a terrain in need of a guide—"futures"—into a practice. We call it "design futures" here, a bit of meaning-making magic that goes from wonder to work.

Perhaps a little semantic excavation is warranted, because in that slight maneuver we've turned something requiring imagination into something that demands discipline and structure. When we transform "futures" (an expansive terrain that is multiple and generous to us in its expansive possibility even as it is punishingly difficult to conjure into

existence) into "design futures" (with methodical, teachable, professionalized constraints), do we risk losing precisely what makes the territory worth exploring? The field becomes domesticated, mapped according to familiar coordinates. A typical field guide becomes a reference for reproducing what is already there.

But this is hardly a field guide in that conventional sense. If there is a field of anything this book is guiding us around, it is a field of fragments scattered across a terrain consisting of insights, reflections, musings, litanies, shards of opinions, and meaningful quotes dotted across a landscape within which the reader is invited to wander and make sense of a cacophony of possible meanings and motivations.

Perhaps this fragmentary approach signals evolution rather than failure. When the landscape exceeds our mapping capacities not temporarily but essentially, fragments become fidelity and resonance rather than failure. This field guide operates more like an archaeological field journal. Just look at it! It is a scrapbook of insights, musings, quotes, reflections, drawings of shards found in sediment or dug from what might have been a settlement, all assembled to document finds whose significance emerges through patient attention rather than systematic classification.

It says: Look here, reader—you must do the connective work yourself. There are no futurists who are going to figure it all out for you, if they even ever existed beyond the carnival mentalist type. You are your own futurist. You must find the way to imagine how the fragments of possible worlds you want to inhabit come into being. And like the work itself, this act of imagining-into-being is the crux of the matter.

This archaeological sensibility—the ability to read fragments and sense patterns without demanding systematic closure—may be what the terrain of futures actually requires. Not answers, but the capacity to work meaningfully with what cannot yet be fully comprehended.

The fragments contributed herein acknowledge the exhaustion that comes from constant professional boundary-drawing: "We all have a habit of giving every new approach its own label, but does this really help or just create more silos and confusion?" Another

shard: "[the] real sense of fatigue and repetition in current ideas and approaches" that creates a sense that "[p]rogress seems to have stalled."

This fatigue may signal something deeper than professional growing pains. Perhaps the urgent work of inhabiting possibility has slipped away while we've been building methodologies, erecting frameworks, and posturing opportunistically. We try desperately to call ourselves "futurists," "design futurists," or "futures designers," as if these permutations help with the actual work of finding ways to inhabit what could be. When what we really want to do is the work itself and to point and say "that...that is what I do." The explanation is embedded in the work itself, the process. The outcomes are the reason to do the work. To quote the poet felon Michael Cheritto: "Well ya know, for me, the action is the juice."

Futures work aspires, as Ursula K. Le Guin once put it, to help us become "realists of a larger reality." What this means is that the ways, means, and languages we have today of making sense of what could be are nowhere near big enough for this terrain of possibility. We need not just new vocabulary in the pedestrian sense, but entirely different forms of meaning-making. New, more expansive ways of sensing into and making sense out of possibility such that they can evoke generative reflection without demanding resolution.

This work requires imagination over structure: a willingness to accept enchantment, wandering and wondering, curiosity, and the broad, discipline-crossing instincts of the generalist rather than the narrow focus of the specialist. These are the qualities that allow one to venture into expansive terrain with the knowledge that the language we have today is not big enough to comprehend that which could be.

The terrain of this guide is the future, but not as a singular destiny nor as a problem to be solved, but as a space scattered with artifacts of possibility, risk, and wonder. It is difficult to inhabit, harder still to speak of, and nearly impossible to translate for those whose feet remain firmly planted in the old ways of knowing. Yet the work is to carry fragments back across the bridge, so that others may glimpse what lies just over the horizon.

This field guide's greatest strength is that it preserves the archaeological imagination before it gets buried under professional apparatus. It reminds us that perhaps the real work was never about building a coherent discipline but about cultivating the sensibility to work meaningfully with fragments.

Call it nothing, if you wish. Names are secondary. What matters is the adeptness with which we move across this terrain, the imagination we dare to exercise, and the fragments we leave behind for others to pick up, examine and carry forward. That is the work of a field guide: not to tell us what to see, but to remind us how to look, and to do so with the same unreasonable improvisation as children playing in the woods, transforming fragments into portals to adjacent worlds we cannot yet name.



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# About the authors

Giovanni Caruso is Head of School of Design, and Course Leader for the Master in Interaction Design and the Master in Service Design at Domus Academy, Milan. He is also Professor of Design Futures and Interaction Design.

He holds an International Ph.D. in Audiovisual Studies from the University of Udine.

Giovanni is principal at FICTIVE, an experimental studio investigating futures, systems, and strategy through design.

He is co-founder of Speculative Futures Milan.

Silvio Cioni is Director of Education at Domus Academy, and Professor of Design Futures, Interaction Design, and Service Design.

He earned a Ph.D. in Information Society from the University of Florence.

Silvio is a member of APF, DRS, and SDA.

He is principal at FICTIVE and co-curator of Speculative Futures Milan.

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Albéric Maillet, Business Design Lead, Nurun

"What can be more ambiguous and mind-blowing than the future. This book is leaving you not only with a view but a strategy for the future."

Satu Miettinen, University of Lapland



"The Guide continues to be the valuable companion to design futuring that it was 25 years ago, when the world was about to enter into a one-way tunnel towards the unknown."

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