

What Happens to Shared Visions? Surveying the Literature for Strategies to Preserve and Disseminate Participatory Futures

Jessica Meharry
School of Design
DePaul University
Chicago, IL, USA
jmeharry@depaul.edu

Hillary Carey
Just Visions
Oakland, CA, USA
Hillary@justvisions.co

Abstract

Participatory futures (PF) projects that aim to redirect and reimagine systemic challenges are gaining traction across many different contexts. Similar to participatory design (PD) practices, PF projects involve participants co-creating shared visions of a better situation, though PF positions these future states as much longer-term. We are interested in understanding what happens to these shared, long-term visions, because they could be a valuable artifact to act with. Yet most futures workshop structures discard the long-term vision at the end of the engagement, rather than preserving it as a valuable artifact and outcome. This paper reviews PF literature across multiple disciplines with a focus on the forms that visions take and how those visions are shared following workshop activities. Through our assessment of 222 papers, we found that only 13 papers documented and clarified how and why the visions were carried forward. Based on this review, which builds on previous PF reviews, we identify three primary goals for vision-sharing: *extend the audience*, *offer new perspectives*, and *motivate wider action* toward a better future. Drawing on insights from our final set of exemplar papers, we propose that researchers and practitioners can better leverage the potential of form-giving and vision-sharing to lead to action following workshop activities.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design.

Keywords

participatory futures, design futures, visioning, co-creation

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1 Introduction

Participatory futuring (PF) activities are joyful and creative ways to gather and develop diverse perspectives on the past, present, and future of a challenge. Over the past two decades, there has been an increase in engagement of broader publics in futures thinking, particularly through participatory methods [15]. PF co-creation workshops that aim to shift the future trajectory of an issue are used in various fields, including ecology, city planning, and emerging technology. As Ramos et al. [54] state, PF “aims to democratize and encourage long-term thinking, and inform collective actions in the present.” Exploring future possibilities through hopeful visioning about long-term outcomes and their impact can inform strategic directions.

However, much of the documentation about PF projects fails to describe how co-created visions are shared with a wider audience beyond the workshop participants following the activities. This absence suggests an assumption that collective imagination is reserved only for those directly engaged in such activities. Participants themselves will hold a shared vision and a changed perspective on pathways forward, yet this new knowledge and motivation may not translate to others. This lack of dissemination and translation may limit the potential to effect lasting change beyond the workshops that are typically part of PF projects. Therefore, we survey the contemporary literature to ask: What happens to co-created visions following PF activities? This research question examines the staying power of workshop visions to endure beyond the moment of co-creation, aiming for a more lasting impact.

In this literature review, we sought to clarify and organize the form-giving practices for visions that are created and shared. We gathered papers through the search terms “participatory futures,” “collective imagination,” and “co-speculation.” Additionally, in the past eight years, there has been substantial research about PF as a body of literature and community of practice [4, 5, 14, 15, 20, 22, 29, 32, 35, 38, 46, 54, 59, 63]. These reviews focus on the strengths of PF approaches, imperatives for PF work, recommended PF practices, and questions about the impact of PF. With our contribution, we draw on these works and narrow our focus to the form-giving and vision-sharing component of futures activities.

2 BACKGROUND

Participatory futuring (PF) methods seek to expand the range of people invited to shape the future, thereby democratizing access to future thinking [8, 11, 19, 26, 41–43, 47, 49]. PF workshops bring people together to debate and envision a better future, then develop actionable pathways toward sustainable and equitable futures. Ollenburg [48] defines PF practice as inherently oriented

toward change-making as “a normative and dialogical process in search of social transformation.” Furthermore, Gidley [25] positions PF as a process that “facilitates empowerment and transformation through engagement and participation,” enabling participants to gain greater agency toward their individual or shared futures.

Participatory design has always been oriented toward exploring “alternative futures” by fostering democratic change [17]. These participatory approaches prioritize the active co-creation of designing more desirable futures [55]. Light [39] has addressed the politics of anticipating and creating futures, and previous PDC conferences have featured situated action involving “prototyping futures” of more-than-human sustainable smart cities [12]. While participatory design often collectively imagines a shared future, that future is typically a near-term vision. In contrast, PF focuses more on long-term visioning. This paper focuses on long-term future visions that stretch our thinking beyond the next five or ten years rather than the near-term future visions created through most design practices.

The foundational “Futures Workshop” structure, used in both PF and participatory design, employs collective practices to imagine a preferable future vision and then identifies immediate next steps to move closer to it [16, 37, 60]. Compelling visions motivate people toward change by creating tension that increases our dissatisfaction with the present, making us more willing to move toward something better [33, 61]. However, the Futures Workshop structure does not prioritize the creation of stable, ongoing visions that last beyond workshop activities. We propose that this represents a missed opportunity to leverage the aspirational visions that communities envision for themselves.

Our focus is on how PF projects seek to give form to co-created aspirational visions, making them tangible so they can last after the workshop. These representations could take on many manifestations, such as how the Civic Imagination Project describes “the worldbuilding process focuses on harnessing the creative energies of invested groups to conjure shared visions of complete worlds [...which] might then take multiple forms—novels, comics, games, virtual reality, audio dramas, etc.” [52]. The tangibility of visions brings ideas from conversations forward into further debate, transporting an imagined future into the present and laying a foundation for further development and action [13]. The creative use of form-giving increases an idea’s durability and translatability, offering new opportunities to explore alternative and critical futures [30]. Visions offer a narrative and creative way to understand a challenge and express hope for change, especially for complex issues like the wicked problems many of these PF projects tackle.

3 METHODOLOGY

We conducted a systematic literature review [34] of the PF literature to understand how projects utilize the co-created visions after the workshop activities have ended. Between August and September 2024, and again in September 2025, we collected papers that described primary research projects related to the practice of participatory futuring. We used several queries to search EBSCO, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. We used these terms: “participatory futuring” (135 papers), “participatory speculation” (63), “co-speculation” (31), “collective visions” (11),

“co-imagining” (6), “bottom-up futures” (3), “collective futures” (2), and “public futuring” (2). Additionally, we identified an additional 66 papers from the citations of the original set. We reviewed all disciplines published in central databases, compiling 222 papers on participatory futuring and co-speculation. We used a combination of AI-assisted analysis (via the service SciSpace) and our own assessment. We then narrowed our focus to 72 projects that specifically created collective, aspirational visions. We analyzed those to identify projects where visions were described as actively shared following workshop activities. This resulted in a surprisingly small final set of 13 papers. (Note: A single project was described in two papers, but we count this as one paper for a total of 13 [1, 2].) With that set, we sought to understand why and how these projects shared co-created visions with broader audiences.

In this paper, we distinguish between two types of goals of PF activities: *co-creating* a shared vision and *gathering feedback* on a predetermined vision. This paper focuses on projects in which groups of people develop a shared future story, rather than those in which researchers develop a future story and invite others to respond to it, which is a significant portion of design futures research. Additionally, this study focuses on realistic and aspirational visions of the future rather than fantastical concepts untethered to earthly constraints. We also focus on *preferred* future situations rather than just plausible or possible scenarios. Therefore, we focus only on papers and projects that engage a diverse group of people in imagining an aspirational future together.

4 Findings

With our 13 final papers, we cataloged how each vision was given purpose beyond the workshop, focusing on the form it took, who it was shared with, and for what purpose. (See Figure 1)

4.1 Diversity of forms

Visions need to be given form in order to be shared, whether through text, images, multimedia, or enactments. We found a surprising diversity of forms in the final papers. Particularly creative and engaging approaches included a radio show [2], a magazine [18], videos [7, 56], and paintings [36]. In most cases, after the initial ideas were co-created in participatory workshops, researchers asked a smaller, specifically skilled set of people to give form to the shareable vision, rather than maintaining continuous collaboration with the whole group. For example, Gerber [24] created props based on the participants’ co-created collective visions, and Johansson et al. [36] commissioned artists to create paintings from the collective visions.

Researchers sometimes describe the rationale behind form choice and the process of form-giving [2]. Yet they rarely discuss the impact of form and its potential as a powerful means of persuading people to pursue better futures. Exceptions are Pollastri et al. [53] who facilitated the co-creation of fictional topographic maps of future cities—a form imbued with complexity and incompleteness to “leave room for subjective interpretations and questions.” Similarly, Baumann et al. [7] chose video because it is “particularly powerful for visualizing the more nebulous concepts and for additional community recruitment.” To continue exploring the translation of visions into shareable formats, there may be more to learn about

Name	Author(s)	Date	Form(s)	Shared with	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; font-size: 0.8em; margin-bottom: 5px;"> encourage public participation support inclusion foster discussion develop new knowledge shift perspectives generate ideas about the future increase futures thinking raise awareness obtain feedback inspire action identify and influence action </div>															
					PARTICIPATION			PERSPECTIVE				ACTION								
20:30 Brussels Talks: Fiction as a method, fiction as a space for participation	Anthoni et al.	2021	radio show	City residents			X			X										
Infrastructures of the imagination: Community design for speculative urban technologies	Baumann et al.	2017	collages, video	Public presentation to local planning committee of stakeholders			X	X				X							X	
Festforward: Participatory design futuring and world-building for equitable digital futures in performing arts festivals	Elsden et al.	2023	magazine	500 people who work with cultural institutions and artist collectives			X			X										
A methodological path to foster inner peripheries' sustainable and resilient futures: A research experience from Southern Italy	Galderisi & Limongi	2024	exhibition	Planning meeting attended by stakeholders and open to citizens					X										X	
Participatory speculation: futures of public safety	Gerber	2018	exhibition, event	University members and community members			X													
Participatory futures methods: Towards adaptability and resilience in climate-vulnerable communities	Gidley et al.	2009	stories	Locals												X		X	X	
Maroochy 2025 Community Visioning & Action - A Case Study of Anticipatory Action Learning Practices in Use Within Maroochy Shire, Queensland, Australia	Gould	2005	vision statement, action plan	Communities, local government, planners									X					X	X	
Participatory future visions of collaborative agroecological farmer-pastoralist systems in Tanzania	Johansson et al.	2023	paintings	Larger group of researchers at a different convening	X	X										X				
The (Un)sustainability of Imagined Future Information Societies	Pargman et al.	2017	scenarios	Partners, policy makers, students, researchers, convention attendees			X									X			X	
Envisioning urban futures: from narratives to composites	Pollastri et al.	2017	atlas	Broadly shared on the web (now no longer accessible)	X		X						X							
Meditation, Geomedicine, and Anticipatory Cities: Emerging Issues and Visions of Futures without Non Communicable Diseases	Sharpe et al.	2024	video animation	Broadly shared on YouTube						X	X							X		
Citizen-Participatory Scenario Design Methodology with Future Design Approach: A Case Study of Visioning of a Low-Carbon Society in Suita City, Japan	Uwasu et al.	2020	scenarios	Citizens of the city were surveyed												X				
Young 2.0: advancing an inclusive framework for co-creating futures with youth	Wikberg Nilsson	2024	personas, scenarios	Municipal leaders			X		X											X
TOTALS					1	1	8	1	2	2	2	3	4	4	4	5				

Figure 1: Chart detailing the final set of 13 papers with descriptions of how each vision was shared—focusing on the form it took, who it was shared with, and for what purpose

form-giving from non-participatory design futures, where compelling, high-fidelity images and objects provoke designer-driven ideas about the future (e.g., [3, 10, 31, 44]).

4.2 Purpose of sharing visions

We sorted the intended purpose for sharing vision into three categories: ‘*extend the audience*,’ ‘*offer new perspectives*,’ and ‘*motivate wider action*,’ all of which include additional subcategories within each.

4.2.1 Extend the audience. In eight of the final set of papers, the goal of sharing visions was explicitly stated to ‘*extend the audience*’ of the projects by enabling more people to participate in discussions and interactions. Within this category, we identified three subcategories of objectives: ‘*foster discussion*,’ ‘*encourage public participation*,’ and ‘*support inclusion*.’

All of the projects had a goal of sharing visions to ‘*foster discussion*’ [2, 7, 18, 24, 36, 50, 53, 62]. Within this goal, we see variation and creativity in the choice of form for the shared vision, designed to intrigue participants and provoke conversation. Through a series of participatory workshops, Elsdén et al. [18] created a fictional, local, cultural magazine “designed to stimulate conversations about equitable and sustainable digital futures in performing arts festivals.” Researchers mailed 500 copies of the magazine to people who work with cultural institutions and artist collectives to “shift and inform present conversations.” This magazine serves as a platform for exploring various stories and ideas about the future of festivals and the role of digital technologies.

Anthoni et al. [2] fostered discussions with broader audiences through a radio show, *20:30 Brussels Talks*, about the future of Brussels, in which residents used sustainable and inclusive strategies to address climate change. By facilitating a series of five co-creation workshops and guiding additional development with artists, they designed a participatory process to “trigger imagination and conversation on what we want for our cities,” co-creating a future fiction that serves as a “tool to evoke change.” This “talk show of the future” continues to live online so that new audiences can “hear people from the future sharing about their lives, hopes and fears” [65].

Baumann et al. [7] were influenced by the participatory design concept of engaging with publics [9] when carrying workshop outputs forward past the workshops themselves. Researchers presented seven design fiction collages and one final video to a local planning committee of stakeholders to “to provoke dialogue about long-term strategies for developing new technologies” that serve the common good and reinforce local identity in a historically black neighborhood in Los Angeles. The organizer of the community group stated that this was “the first time I’ve seen [the university] do something significant... where urban planning and community values and taste are brought together.” This project was part of a larger “constellation” of participatory activities that explored other creative forms, including games, gallery shows, and “urban furniture” [6, 57]. In another project, Gerber [24] created a “scene” featuring backdrops and props for each of three distinct futures of public safety, co-created through a series of workshops and conversations with community members in St. Louis, Missouri. During a culminating exhibition and event, participants were invited to take part in scenes, playing the role of a public safety official. Members of the public were prompted to consider which elements they would want to exist in the future.

We created one subcategory, ‘*encourage public participation*,’ for projects that explicitly stated the goal of engaging wider publics. With their fictional topographic maps and scenarios, Pollastri et al. [53] sought new types of conversations that would allow “controversies, diversities and conflicts” to engage different groups of people in thinking about future urban living in the UK.

In an effort to intentionally expand the types of people they engaged beyond their initial workshops, Johansson et al. [36] specifically sought to include people who could not read or write in future visioning processes, an approach we labeled ‘*support inclusion*.’ These researchers used participatory approaches for “co-creating future visions with farmers and pastoralists that are currently engaged in agroecological practices.” Researchers then commissioned artists to create paintings depicting those visions of sustainable agroecological futures in Tanzania. With these approaches and the resulting paintings as artifacts, researchers sought to provoke dialogue about long-term strategies for developing sustainable food systems.

4.2.2 Offer new perspectives. Our second category, ‘*offer new perspectives*,’ builds on the goal of democratizing participation to more intentionally change people’s awareness and ideas about a given topic, specifically the future of that topic. Researchers create conditions to support reflection and critical thinking through a range of design activities. Within the final set of papers, we made six subcategories of the researchers’ goals: ‘*obtain feedback*,’ ‘*raise awareness*,’ ‘*increase futures thinking*,’ ‘*generate ideas about the future*,’ ‘*shift perspectives*,’ and ‘*develop new knowledge*.’

Four projects sought to ‘*obtain feedback*’ [26, 36, 50, 58]. Gidley et al. [26] succinctly state that the goals of their scenario thinking workshop were to discover what community members thought about climate change adaptation, explore the complexity of those issues through dialogue, gather ideas for adaptation, and build awareness of the possibility of multiple future paths based on action and inaction. Researchers gave the co-developed workshop scenarios to two local writers, who then created more detailed scenario stories. Community members provided feedback on these stories during a one-day workshop. Following the workshop, the scenario stories were provided to participants so they could continue discussions. The stories were included in a report that was distributed to local schools, community groups, government agencies, and business organizations.

Pargman et al. [50] sought feedback on their “scenario skeletons” about the sustainability of future information societies in workshops with partners, policymakers, students, and researchers. They also interacted with attendees at a sci-fi convention in Stockholm to further develop the scenarios. Uwasu et al. [58] facilitated PF workshops focused on energy visioning in low-carbon cities. Following the workshops, researchers presented four co-created scenarios to citizens along with a survey to assess how open people in the present day would be to the needs and desires of future generations. They received over 400 responses to help them assess “whether ordinary people would support the opinions of future generations.”

Three papers sought to ‘*raise awareness*’ [28, 53, 56]. In a project focused on strategic visioning for a town in Australia, Gould [28] outlines that the vision took the form of an imaginary narrative plus an action plan and was presented to the shire council and the mayor. Pollastri et al. [53] shared co-created visions on the internet in the form of an atlas to “invite readers to explore uncharted spaces for further discussion” around livable cities. Researchers described the future visions as “explorative scenarios, rather than plans that provide clear directions or strategies” to allow space for uncertainty, subjective interpretations, and questions.

A goal of two of the projects was to broadly ‘*shift perspectives*’ of community members or leaders. Galderisi & Limongi [23] presented their co-created future vision of a peripheral region in southern Italy at an exhibition attended by stakeholders and open to all citizens through a public discussion. Their outputs included a hybrid systems-topographic map as well as a set of goals, strategies, and actions. Wikberg Nilsson [62] shared personas and scenarios with municipal leaders to “convey the insights gained and cultivate a shared vision and concrete action plans for inclusive and attractive service offerings and community spaces,” after which they succeeded in their goal when “the municipality chose to distribute resources more evenly across both urban and rural areas.”

Two projects shared the related intention to ‘*increase futures thinking*’. Baumann et al. [7] sought to “establish infrastructures of the imagination” for long-term strategies and alternative models of innovation. Sharpe et al. [56] used an animated video to help people “imagine the future” with fewer non-communicable diseases. In a related subcategory, two projects named the goal of helping the larger public by using workshops to ‘*generate ideas about the future*’, which were then shared more broadly. Elsdén et al. [18] sought to “support world building” around “equitable and sustainable digital futures in performing arts festivals,” and Anthoni et al. [2] wanted to spark imagination about future living in Brussels.

Finally, in Baumann et al.’s [7] project about imagining future urban technologies that serve the common good, researchers explicitly chose to ‘*develop new knowledge*.’ They shared visions with external audiences to prompt thinking about “formal and conceptual unknowns” and to “create shared vocabularies tied to local worldviews.”

None of the final thirteen papers specified a goal of *inspiring hope*, yet this outcome is described in the larger body of PF literature [59] and could be an important way to offer new perspectives. This may be an overlooked and underutilized beneficial outcome of vision-sharing. Participatory processes can foster shared personal and collective optimism, creating a sense of what Logie et al. [40] describe as “critical hope,” an outcome that can nurture resistance to negative discourses. These kinds of hopeful experiences can also strengthen interpersonal bonds and empathy, enabling collective imagination and novel thinking [59].

4.2.3 Motivate wider action. In the ‘*motivate wider action*’ category, we found that several projects aimed to facilitate motivation and inspiration, helping people clarify which actions to take (and avoid) to achieve a better future. We created two subcategories where the goal is to ‘*inspire action*’ [7, 26, 28, 56] and more specifically ‘*identify and influence action*’ [23, 26, 28, 50, 62]. We make the distinction here between general inspiration and specific action items because some papers mention both as goals. This finding aligns with previous scholarship that links PF to human agency. Ramos et al. [54] state that PF approaches increase futures literacy, which “becomes an important precondition for people to then act in new or different ways.”

Four of the papers sought to ‘*inspire action*’. Through their animated video, which can still be viewed online, Sharpe et al. [56] attempt to leverage increased awareness and futures thinking to drive behavioral change around non-communicable diseases. Gidley et al. [26] used co-created stories about a future impacted by

climate change to shift reactions from passive acceptance to more proactive, co-evolutionary adaptation.

Finally, five of the papers used vision-sharing to ‘*identify and influence action*’. Pargman et al. [50] sought to influence regional sustainability planning processes. In another paper, Gould’s [28] in-depth community-engaged project focused on creating a vision statement with a narrative that included “long-term, future-orientated policy options and consultation frameworks” for government planners and community members. Galderisi & Limongi’s [23] project about the future of development in a periphery area in Italy resulted in a “shared vision for local development, capable both of framing already existing initiatives and increasing synergies between individual initiatives and better directing them towards the pursuit of common objectives.” Wikberg Nilsson [62] shared their co-created scenarios and personas with municipal representatives to spark discussion about future city planning. They then obtained a commitment from the representatives to diversify and enrich services available to community members. More than a year later, the implementation of the ideas was ongoing.

4.3 Discussion

Projects that work alongside communities and groups for an extended period have more potential to demonstrate impact. With this literature review, we are only beginning to identify the mechanisms for how future visions can have an impact. Importantly, our final categories don’t address larger structural aspects, such as those in which success stems from being tied to a broader initiative and the inclusion of key stakeholders. It follows that those researchers focused on participatory visioning may focus on the early stages of Moore et al.’s [45] framework for social-ecological transformation, “preparing for change”, rather than the whole journey of taking action, navigating, and institutionalizing that enables system transformation.

We also acknowledge that researchers have different intentions and goals. As Barendregt et al. [5] state, “Not all participatory futuring processes aim for change in the same way, nor do they mobilize the same theory of change. Some processes explicitly aim to be transformative, while others may be more ameliorative.” Some emphasize futures literacy as the primary outcome, using visioning as a means to bring people together, but “the scenarios themselves are less important than the futures literacy developed using them” [15]. Therefore, researchers must be clear about their intentions; otherwise, processes will bog down because of “tensions between those who hold to the radical goals of institutional reinvention and those who believe piecemeal reform is their best hope” [27]. Moving forward, we encourage researchers to be clear and intentional about these aspects of PF projects.

5 Conclusion

Upon reviewing the literature on participatory futuring, it is evident that shared PF visions encourage people to think differently and intentionally about the changes they wish to see. To promote agency toward future decisions and create a shared understanding, PF methodologies gather desires for better futures and use those to strategize change, leveraging the intelligence of everyday people who are at the center of challenges. PF is a proven approach

to increasing awareness, building relationships, and influencing action.

After exploring what happens to collective visions after the workshop, we conclude that most workshops are not primarily designed to create a vision and share it with others, as evidenced by their subsequent lack of use. However, when visions are shared in creative or strategic ways, they take a variety of forms, including narrative storytelling through illustration and text, interactive public events, complex maps, and scenarios. These tangible formats bring the collective's ideas into broader use. That usage may spark new discussions, influence community perspectives and planning, or encourage more people to take action around a specific cause.

It is not an easy task to share visions with a larger audience. Researchers devote so much effort to the initial stages of visioning that there may be little energy left to preserve and share their visions. It is challenging to capture the attention of people outside the workshop. Additionally, visions aren't always compelling and cohesive enough to share—as evidenced in several of our final examples, where researchers brought co-created scenarios to artists and writers to make visions clearer, more tangible, and more compelling.

Despite these challenges, we believe sharing visions offers more opportunities for researchers and participants to contribute to systems change. Collective visions of ideal future outcomes, created through group activities and facilitation, ask people to think differently and specifically about the change they want to see [19, 21], advancing our thinking about the types of interventions that are needed. Visions of an ideal future are powerful because they make us more aware of what is not yet good enough about the present [33, 51, 61], and have the potential to increase awareness of systemic challenges. We encourage further and more refined use of PF methods that push beyond the boundaries of individual workshop activities and seek to bring about the better futures imagined by participants. We invite researchers to: take visions more seriously by giving them form, disseminating them, and turning them into active artifacts; connect visioning to purpose, intention, and a theory of change; and follow through to determine if and how the visions last beyond the participatory processes themselves.

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