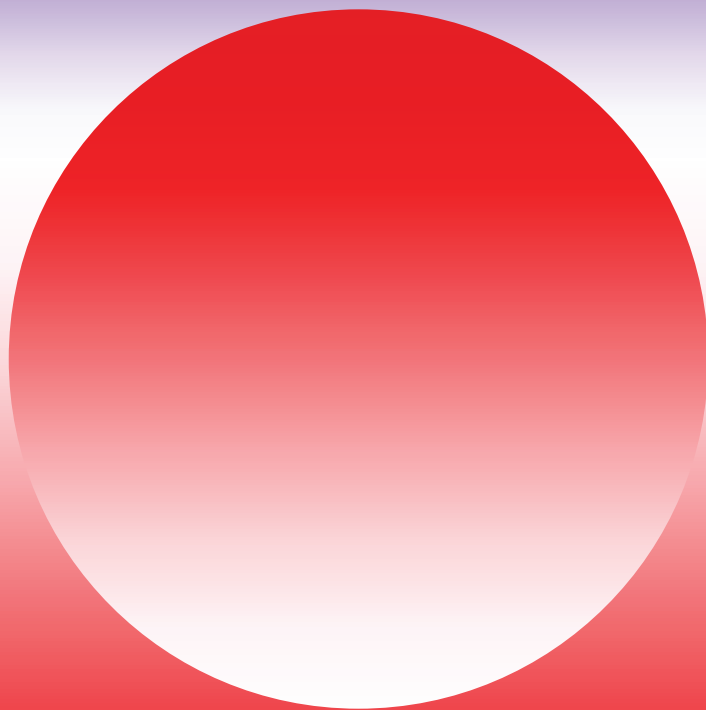An essay by Michiel Schwarz
With 7 principles for civic design

Future is a verb

From future shock to future-making

waag🔥futurelab

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Preface
By Marleen Stikker & Max Kortlander

~~their imagination~~
our imagination

~~their rules~~
our rules

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our future

My mother taught me about the notion of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' from a young age. *Watch what you say about yourself – it might come true*. It was a lesson rooted more in practicality than superstition: If I expected a certain outcome, imagined it, or even found it inevitable, I was more likely to make the decisions that would lead me there. Each step along the way would be less likely to be questioned – *it's all in line with expectation, after all*.

Futurologists are the prophets of today, not for their ability to foresee the future, but rather for their capacity to make *us* see *their* future – the future they imagine *for themselves*. This happens when Elon Musk tweets that the cars of tomorrow will be in tunnels; when Mark Zuckerberg announces the inevitability of his metaverse; and when Amy Webb makes a prediction in front of a crowd of tech developers that later comes to fruition. It's tempting to look at these examples and think *Wow! They can predict the future*! But in reality, the future follows from the prediction – not the other way around. What often masquerades as prediction is instead a clever discursive tool that moves markets, people, and resources obediently towards a particular imagination.

As Michiel Schwarz, pioneer of sustainist culture, writes in the following piece, imagination is the key to making the future. We should not be steered by the imaginations of individuals, companies, regimes, or seekers of power and profit. Instead, our future should be built upon a shared imagination based on commonly held values like openness, fairness, and inclusivity that we develop deliberately, together.

The key is this: We can all imagine. Every single one of us has an imagination. And whether we're conscious of it or not, we can all imagine futures that *could* be and *should* be. Imagination is an inherent superpower within all of us, and we should make use of it as such. We can imagine a future, not only to speculate, but to imagine, act, and build a shared future together.

How, then, to do this? Prophecies direct our gaze and our actions in a particular direction. Instead of directing our gaze at centers of accumulating power, we should instead refocus and distribute our gaze to what is around us and what is local. This the direction Michiel Schwarz has us look, viewing developments through a 'sustainist lens'. We can imagine civic-led and locally-grounded futures, rooted in communities and connected through shared values and concerns. We can co-create these futures together, making use of co-creative methods, open technology, and sustainable development practices to build a future that is our own within the boundaries of people and planet.

Waag Futurelab works to bring about a better world by enacting practical change in the present. One way we do this is by organising expeditions to an ideal place called planet B. Imagine what would happen if we were allowed to completely redesign a planet. How would we do that? What would we take with us? What would we leave behind? What social, environmental, and technological structures would we build to create an open, fair and inclusive world? We don't wish to merely speculate, but rather to develop solutions for here and now on planet Earth. To spark our shared imagination, we at Waag Futurelab asked Michiel Schwarz to share his perspective on creating such a future.

The time to build a better shared future is now.
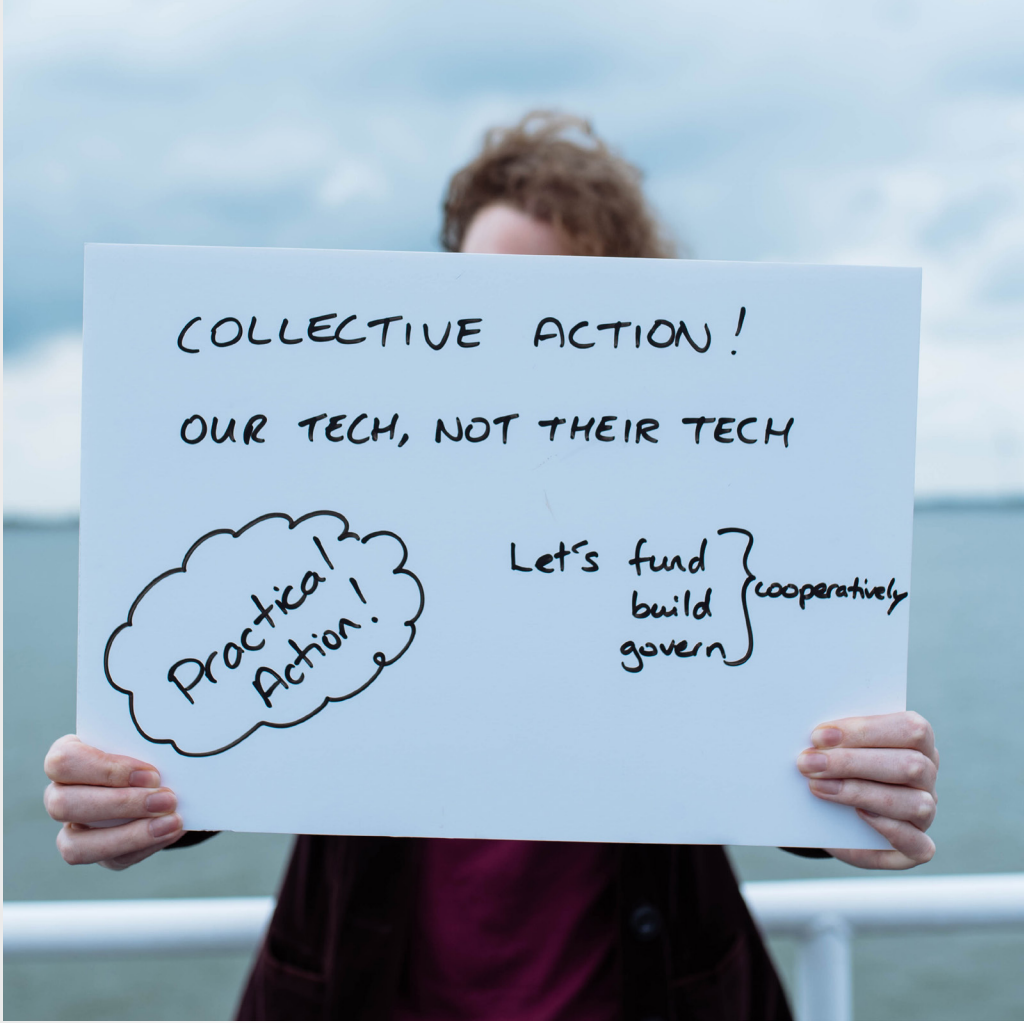Let's get started – share your imagination with us!

The future is not yet written. We are writing it now.

— Rebecca Solnit [1]

Future is a verb

From future shock to future-making

An essay by Michiel Schwarz
With 7 principles for civic design

0. Enter the future

COLLECTIVE ACTION! OUR TECH, NOT THEIR TECH. So reads the hand-written slogan presenting a public programme of *Waag Future Lab* in 2021.[2] The operative word here is OUR. That will be my premise, my entry point: let's embrace the principle of *'our'* and apply it to the design of the future.

As citizens and as communities we need to reclaim the future – a future that's more sustainable than the one now being thrust upon us by global players and corporate networks. Hence: *our* future, not *their* future. But what is *our* future? And who writes it? Such questions imply that we need to take a stand — on how we view the future, what kind of future we want, and how to get there.

To make the future ours, and bring it into the civic realm, we need to shift perspective — from a passive to an active mode. From the future as something that happens to us, to something we can collectively create. Hence the subtitle of this essay — from *'future shock'* to *'future-making'*. Here we may follow the dictum of science fiction writer Bruce Sterling that "the future is a process, not a destination". Such an outlook can empower us to see the future as something that's not fixed, but always in the making.

Embracing an active, if not activist, mode turns the future — *our* future — into a collective design challenge. It makes explicit that futures are not givens, they are shaped by people and circum-stances. They are always, in some form or another, 'designed futures.' In this essay I wish to explore how we can (and must) bring the design of the future into the civic realm.

This essay aims to refocus how we address *our* futures. It challenges us to become co-designers of the future. In doing so it recasts our relationships to our environment, to our technologies and to the public sphere. How might we take the future into *our* hands? The question calls for a civic design agenda that makes the future ours.

The perspective of sustainism

We need to take a position. Thinking about the future without a perspective on where we are, and where we're going, is akin to looking endlessly into a crystal ball. So let me tell you where I'm standing from the outset: my point-of-view stems from what I have called *"sustainism"* — the emerging 21st century culture where sustainable values and connectedness are changing how we shape our lifeworld. Sustainism, a word which I coined with Joost Elffers in our 2011 sustainist manifesto to capture a new cultural era.[3] New discourses are called for whenever culture is in transition. We need new language to navigate the future land-scapes we are making, and a vocabulary that helps us to make *our* futures visible.[4]

Our collective challenge then is to change the terms of debate and create new prospects for designing our futures. Sustainism calls for futures that are more connected, more localised, more collaborative, more human scale, as well as more environmen-tally sustainable. Sustainism will be my 'lens' for exploring how we might design for better futures (and what we wish to mean by 'better futures'). It furnishes us with a way of looking and a way of seeing; hopefully it will inform new ways of doing.

1. Into the landscape: walk the walk, talk the talk

It was a late summer's day when I joined a so-called Future Walk around the Amsterdam Science Park. The concept of 'walks to the future' had been conceived by Amsterdam's Waag Future Lab as part of its public programme on designing alternative futures.[5] As the organisers phrased it, the overall issue was *"How can we envisage a future designed around public values and civic technologies, aiming to build a more open, fair, inclusive, and sustainable world?"*

Expedition #1, concisely entitled *FUTURE*, marked the start of the three-year project. It included a series of DIY collective walks, during which participants would reflect on the kind of futures we envisage, for example in urban neighbourhoods or for life on the North Sea coast; and to dialogue about themes such as digital data, biodiversity and the design of technologies. Our collective walk, entitled *Dear Earth*, had us address issues of sustainability and our living environment, both natural and human made.

Exploring futures in walking mode appealed to me. To make public walks the prime form to kick off Waag's Future expeditions was a masterstroke.[6] Embarking on a walk makes us aware of our position; it makes us orient ourselves and navigate our surroundings. As any walker will know, each route or path one takes embodies a located view of where you are and which direction you're facing. In our explorations as much as in real life, our starting point and our direction of travel matters. Moreover, the very act of going for a walk makes tangible that the future begins somewhere, in the here and now, rather than in some distant place ahead of us.

the future begins in the here-and-now; not in some distant place

During that September afternoon, on the outskirts of the of the city, I found myself in a modernist landscape scattered with labs, science and tech startups, and university buildings. Right in the middle of the science park was a 70-metres high data tower, the so-called AMS-IX internet exchange (one the largest data transport hubs in the world).

The route had us meander first between the high-tech research buildings. Then it led us to the wild plants garden, called Anna's Tuin & Ruigte, a one-hectare permaculture project and living lab.

The so-called *ruigte* — referring to rough areas of wild nature — was in fact a small nature area with wild plants, birds, bees, insects, and other living organisms. In the middle of this urban haven of 'wilderness' we found a community garden, a dome constructed of recycled material and a food forest.

The walk also took us past some of the rough edges of the terrain, where the green polder was still tangible. Guided by a set of cards with probing questions on what would make for more sustainable futures, we turned our focus to our relationships as humans, with the plants, flowers, the soil, and the local bees. But equally we could not escape the technologies that surrounded us, the technological landscape. The huge data tower — as a 21st century high-tech church tower — was a mighty reminder that the digital world is far from invisible, with enormous impact on our environment and our natural resources. It made me wonder: What kind of park was this? And who owns it? Who has control over the land on which the research labs are built, and the soil which forms the humus for the living organisms that also inhabit this place?

Viewing our lifeworld

Our future walk gave us a particular vantage point — literally — from which to view the manifestations of our current techno-logical culture as well as our place in the natural environment. The landscape through which we were wandering can be seen as a microcosm of what shapes our lifeworld — a web where humans, natural elements, and technologies are intertwined. The bees in Anna's 'rough garden' and the data tower in the Science Park are all part of a wider ecosystem, and so are the roots of the plants and the physical infrastructures. We're so used to dissecting the world into discrete and separate areas — nature versus technology versus human experience versus data versus the planet — that we often overlook their essential interconnections.

How we see the future hinges on our collective perception: It all depends on how you, or rather *we*, look at it (that idea, by the way, has informed much of my sociological work[7]). For me the walking conversation (*wandelgesprek*) in the Science Park reinforced my view that our connections to technology and to nature and our living environment need to be designed in

concert. Such a perspective (call it an ecosystems view) has us focus on the crossovers and interdependencies. The entire breadth and depth of the landscape — biological, human, environmental, technological — then becomes the frame of reference for designing more sustainable futures.

At the heart of such a stance is a relational approach whereby the nature of our relationships becomes the key to designing futures. Interconnectedness is one of the key features in my sustainist perspective. Sustainism shifts our focus towards social and ecological qualities of sustainability, and it prompts us to develop forms of (what I and others call) 'sustainist design'.[8] It also connects to a notion of circularity where people and technologies are as much part of our ecologies as is nature and the earth.[9]

Food and culture in place

Later that same week, in September of 2021, I had reserved a spot in another of Waag's Future Walks, this time in an urban neighbourhood. Entitled 'Lab & Kitchen' the event was designed around a collective evening meal as the setting for exploring the future of food issues, our connection with the soil, and with local culture. Conceived as another collective exploration and experience, the gathering started in an open square amidst a residential area in Amsterdam New West.

Here I found myself with some eighty people, in the Deyssel neighbourhood, a place that in recent years had seen a number of successful community-led revitalisation initiatives. We walked over to a public green with a locally managed greenhouse for growing vegetables and a genuine fruit orchard (*Fruittuin van Moerkerken*). Set up for the event was a so-called *CoLaborative Kitchen*, with outside makeshift preparation areas, canvas canopies, and long dining tables.[10]

It soon became clear that the event was to be a *hands-on* experience. We began to prepare small parts of the courses, from making plant-infused oils and pickling vegetables to mixing spices to grating beets that had been cooked in soil with hot stones. Each kitchen table had a food-related theme, ranging from land ownership and local food sourcing to multicultural neighbourhood chefs and food commons. We

dialogued with growers, farmers, cooks and local residents, as well as activists involved in developing alternative futures for our food system. That evening, for example, I was introduced to the cooperative non-profit Land van Ons — an apt name meaning *"Our Land"* — whose participants buy up agricultural land to bring it into civic ownership with the aim of increasing biodiversity.

By the time we all sat down to eat, many hours into the evening, it was clear that the dinner event had turned into a collective conversation, an encounter with what a 'sustainable food future' might look like. We touched upon the sources of the food on our plates, the routes from farm to table, cultural habits and culinary histories, agricultural politics and the techniques behind our (all vegetarian) dinner. In the process we essentially recast the whole ecology around food — connecting it not merely to sustainable production, organics and environmental impact, but also relating it to community-support, human scale and issues of cultural diversity. As I commented on camera when I was interviewed at the end of the evening, *"the new practices and initiatives tell the story"* — they are giving us another conception of our food system.

Shifting the ground
The sight of a possible future that was evident in the collaborative kitchen reflects a certain cultural perception of sustainability and our role in it. Here was a real-life experience that reflected an alternative view of our relationships with our surroundings, with nature, with our technologies, and with each other. Our notion of a 'better future' was grounded in a set of common values which included human-scale, localised, respect of nature and community. Such attributes are among the pillars of what I have called a culture of sustainism. It made me think of the words of American writer and farmer Wendell Berry, who called eating *"an agri-cultural act"* — something that is deeply embedded in culture, our values, and *our sense of place.*[11]

We had shifted the ground, perhaps literally. And our perspective. From a globalised and dislocated view of our food system, we had come down come *'down to earth'* and had recast it in a *local* frame. The encounter in the Deyssel neighbourhood gave us a view (and a taste) of what a localised

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food system could be, and it showed us the qualities of a *local ecosystem*. The notion of local is to be taken here not as a geographical marker, but as a value in itself, a quality. To be local then, also implies to be grounded in place, embedded in community, and sustained by local relationships and personal bonds that make the places we inhabit meaningful to us. Activities such as the CoLaborative Kitchen provide pointers for developing embedded forms of local design — that is, design that builds on local engagements, local sources, the connection to neighbourhood, and a sense of place. In my view we need to revalue and revive 'the local' in such a sustainable (sustainist) mode and make it part of our civic agenda for the future.[12] More about that later.

Changing the narrative

Words matter. Take, for instance, our use of the word 'ecosystem.' Conventionally, from biology, it refers to a community of organisms interacting with each other and their environment. In the context of design for the future, I wish to employ it in its broadest sense: as a network of complex interdependent parts resembling an ecological system, but not limited to organic or biological elements and including social features.[13] Such a notion of ecology enables us to take a more systemic approach. One that connects to the original root of the word "eco" from the Greek word oikos, meaning household in the broadest sense of the word. A house or home for which we can take collective responsibility. Our home is both the planet and the places we inhabit. It leads us to a more integral frame for ecosystem design with an eye for the essential interconnections between human actions, technologies, and the natural environment. Thus the whole landscape in its breadth and depths comes into view — from the roots in the soil and the natural environment, to our data infrastructures, technological systems, and our institutions of governance.

A discourse focused on ecosystems and the 'local' can help us reframe the issues and open sustainable paths. We face, one could say, a poverty of language for envisaging alternative futures and story lines. In our interconnected world we need new words and concepts — and new meanings for old words — that can bring into focus more human-centred, integral, and socially sustainable prospects. Hence my notions of 'sustainism'

envisaging alternative futures and story lines

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to give a name to a new cultural era (after modernism and postmodernism) and 'sustainist design' to formulate new design criteria that come with that.[14] The idea of sustainism casts sustainability as a *cultural* paradigm and mindset, with values that are both socially and environmentally sustainable. If the concept of sustainability is the future we envisage, then sustainism is the culture that makes it possible.

2. Interlude: Beyond future shock

What about the future?
What can we know and what can we do?

'If only we could *know* the future'. This has been the prevailing concern for those who, over the last century or so, have looked into the future in an attempt to foresee what the world holds in store for us. They go by different names: futurists, futurologists, future modelers, and future watchers. By now we have built up a veritable 'history of the future.' The academic field of future studies has become an academic discipline. Over the last decades a growing number of people and institutions have presented themselves as futurologists – future researchers — accompanied by a range of methodologies that try to chart the future.[15]

What have they shown us? Most future studies — be they developed by think tanks, corporations, governments, or academic institutions — have been framed as forecasts. *"Fore-cast"* is an interesting word: it makes explicit that we are casting our present-day projections onto tomorrow. But can we really ever *know* the future?

In many a forecaster's frame, addressing the future is typically seen as a kind of time travel into unknown territory. We can develop alternative scenarios but they simply remain potential futures that may or may not come about; only time will tell where we end up. As some have phrased it 'the future is a foreign country' — a kind of place that we can only really know once we reach it. Such a view makes the future, by definition, indeterminate. The adverse effect of such a position is that it turns us into passive bystanders. All we can do — so it appears — is to wait until the future hits us. At best we can warn the world of the dangers of an impending future.

Perhaps the most telling is the account of the American sociologist Alvin Toffler, who gave us the term *Future Shock*. In his influential 1970 book bearing that title, he warned that millions of people "would face an abrupt collision with the future".[16] In his international bestseller of the time (with more than 6 million copies sold), he saw the future coming at us as "a roaring

current" which we could no longer handle due to the high acceleration of change. "Future shock," writes Toffler, is "the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future".

The majority of forecasters appear to view the future to be set up by the past. In this deterministic mode they believe that we can chart a more or less linear path, a trajectory that can be extrapolated from current and past circumstances into the future. And in doing so, the forecasters, more often than not, have looked at technological change as the dominant driver of the future. Social factors (the people) and environmental concerns (the planet) have long remained largely outside the future watchers' field of vision. But even with a more encompassing take on our technological culture, forecasters have frequently been way off the mark as 'unforeseen', or should I say 'unseen' developments, jolted the trajectory of the future in a different direction. Beyond that, some feel that, given the acceleration of change, we are now past the point where we can extrapolate from the present. Toffler saw the phenomena of future shock as a psychological state of people and entire societies that arises from "the realisation that we can no longer trust the future to be like the present and the past."

What matters most, however, is not so much whether the predictions of the forecasters are right, but rather how they have framed the future. From the perspective of design, the very idea of future shock is problematic. The shock of the impending future (to follow Toffler's narrative, one final time) paralyses us, condemning us to an essentially passive mode. Moreover, future shock locks us in an objectified, globalised frame where we —people — stand outside. We become like astronauts, passengers in a space ship, endlessly circling the globe. And even when they/we gather data about the future, it seems that we are unable to change its course. Designing for a better world needs a shift in perspective — from observers of the future-unfolding to active participants in shaping our futures.

From nouns to verbs
Again, our words matter. The very idea of 'the future' sees it (yes, it) as a state of affairs, a point in time, a given. In most modern languages 'future' is a noun — an entity which we can classify

If we really want to shape our world, we have to change our point of view and our perspective. We must not be passive observers as the future unfolds, but active participants in shaping our future.

and analyse, and which objectifies reality. It's taken as
unproblematic, something that is what it is – as in the saying
"A rose is a rose is a rose" — whatever you choose to name it.

From a design perspective, the question is not what the future *is*,
but how it might *become* a future. Put differently, we need to
abandon our noun-based narrative of the future and embrace the
idea of future as a verb. Or rather, futures, in the plural. Futures
as verbs that can be conjugated put us in an active mode.
Loosely borrowing here from American writer Robin Wall
Kimmerer's account of indigenous languages, a noun is trapped
by its definition; a verb releases its being from its bondage
and lets it live.[17]

The shift from nouns to verbs is more than a play on (or with)
words. Take, for example, the words community and communi-
ty-building. The former is a categorisation, the latter turns it into
a process, something that is alive, a movement. In the context
of urban futures, we have witnessed a similar shift in the terms
of the debate, from *'the city'* to *'city-making'* (*stadmaken* in
Dutch), with its roots in the placemaking movement.[18] In a
similar vein, the narrative around the *'commons'* has turned
increasingly to the idea of *'commoning'*, underscoring that
sustaining a commons is an active process open to design

**from 'the future'
to 'future-making'**

Going from nouns to verbs marks a change of perspective
— from 'the future' to 'future-making.' That transition activates
the entire process of shaping our futures. It puts us, people,
back in the driving seat. That changes everything. From the
question of whose future we are making to who is included or
excluded; from what we value to the models we use in designing
our futures. As we address the important challenges of our
times, let's start to think in terms of *future-making*.

3. Zooming in: future-making and our civic design

There's good reason to be concerned about our future. It's clear to many that the current globalised, growth-driven development path to the future is economically, socially, and environmentally unsustainable. We cannot sit by idly, thinking that all will be well on its present course. To get into action requires us to change the question from "What is the future?" to "How to create the future we want?". We need to reposition ourselves, redirect our gaze, and become active participants in creating a more sustainable world. In other words, we need to learn what it means to become *future-makers*.

The idea that we collectively can 'make' the future opens the path to re-imagining what it takes to create a more sustainable world (as well as to debate what we wish to mean by 'sustainable'). Futurologists' focus on extrapolation and forecasting has given way — at least partly — to what we envisage as possible futures. Recent research has seen a turn towards so-called *'futuring'* — a verb — to generate a diversity of *imagined* futures.[19] Its central thrust is that our imaginations can help us in the present to find a course of action to reach the kind of futures we aspire.

The sustainability movement has long given us a prospect of actively working towards a 'better future.' It requires, in the words of Transition Town co-founder Rob Hopkins, that we move our perspective From *What Is, To What If* (which is also the title of his latest book).[20] This implies a shift in focus — from imagining ideal worlds to the practices leading to such worlds, and with it, from knowledge about the future to relevant know-how for making desirable futures.

Designing for sustainist futures
Embracing future-making turns our concerns for a more sustainable world into a design challenge. To have an impact on our lifeworld, we need to connect our futuring to designs for our technologies, infrastructures, and institutions. It all starts with re-imagining what's possible and what's needed, and it means that we must bring purpose and (sustainable) values explicitly into our design practices.

The designers' equivalent of the *'What If'*-question that Hopkins asks us, is what international design consultancy IDEO has been promoting for many years, by phrasing questions in this form: *"How might we design for…?"* Such a reformulation shifts our problem frame towards the qualities and attributes, social and environmental, that we wish to design into our future products, services, places, and systems. Some years ago, with the publication of the *Sustainist Design Guide* (2013), Diana Krabbendam and I opened the debate on a number of key 'sustainist' values and qualities that, we argued, ought to be incorporated in our design briefs to achieve more sustainable futures — qualities such as sharing, localism, human scale, as well as concern for nature and the planet.[21] Our plea for sustainist design is of course just one among many that — over the last decade — have argued for a shift in focus towards more sustainable and more regenerative design approaches. [22]

"who owns the future…?"

One way to gauge what a sustainist design approach to future-making could mean in practice is to look at the practices of 'placemaking' and 'citymaking'. The placemaking movement has become a global phenomenon where community initiatives design their own public spaces. Building on more than a decade of experience, there is now a considerable body of practice in urban placemaking where civic and community initiatives have taken greater control and ownership of their living environment. Communities of practice have been built around civic engagement, co-design, and place-based design. Under the heading of 'engaged urbanism' we have seen a range of methodologies and approaches emerge for collaborative practice Some have advanced the term 'tactical urbanism' to denote civic initiatives that have intervened in the design of our public spaces, whilst others have coined the idea of the *'civic city.'*[23] In line with the activist call 'Who owns the city,' we must ask "Who owns the future?" and "Who makes the future?"

Civic design modes

Developing civic modes of future-making requires us to redesign the process of designing itself. It has us rethink and recast what and who are involved in design — in its practice and the roles played by designers as well as civic groups. What designers do and how thus becomes a matter of debate. In fact, it has already shifted over the years — think of the rise of social design and

design thinking. All of this enforces the idea that we need to redirect our design agendas towards civic and sustainist values — be they concerned with the food system, climate impact, health systems, mobility, or our physical and digital infrastructures. In each of these fields — as we gauged from experiences with placemaking — we need to find out how we can incorporate socially sustainable qualities such as local-embeddedness, community engagement, and human-scale into the way design.

Equally, such civic strategies open the path to different forms of co-design. The last decade has seen a wealth of social practices where various community groups have successfully become part of the design process, collaborating with professional designers and planners. This movement can be seen as part of the recent turn towards forms of *social design*, where social groups as well as social impact become explicit parts of design practice. Co-design and co-creation have been buzzwords in many debates of late. The challenge is to give them a more central role in our future-making practices where, one way or another, we can all become 'makers'.

All this connects constructively to the still growing international makers' movement, especially around digital technologies. We can view such developments as human-scale and hands-on versions of future-making. Like the 'reclaim the city' strategy of the placemaking movement, much of the makers' community is driven by the idea of reclaiming control of the technologies we use, opening them up, and making them our own. 'If you can't open it, you don't own it' (to cite one of the aphorisms used by the activist developers of the Fair Phone and others). In a similar vein, the open source movement has argued for open standards, and public rather than corporate or state control.

The makers' movement, a worldwide force, is a natural ally for developing know-how in support of civic-led strategies for designing our futures, especially in local contexts. *Fablabs*, open data platforms and similar initiatives have pioneered such design modes built on open sharing and collective ownership.[24] We can build on these. There are ample successful innovations to learn from; for instance, WikiHouse, an open platform for open source construction launched ten years ago, creates affordable blueprints for people to build their own homes with local materials

and local know-how.[25] Here sustainable values connect with open civic technologies that counter the dominance of big-tech and corporate futures. Such initiatives are exemplary for a growing number of design practices with civic and ecological values at their core, aimed at building futures that truly can be called 'ours'.

civic design requires social infrastructures such as commons and shared ownership

A civic-led, community-centred design approach to sustainable futures requires us to develop new forms of social infrastructures such as those organised around commons and shared ownership. Think of public digital infrastructure for example, turning the internet into a public good, a public utility, which could partly be community-owned, like local solar power that is shared in a neighbourhood.[26] Or new cooperatives which are emerging in a wide range of domains, from community food cooperatives and self-built housing to insurance and financial schemes. In the domain of our food, Community Supported Agriculture is by now well established internationally. (We experienced some of its fruits we in our Lab & Kitchen event).

That such a movement is not just a theoretical exercise or an academic quest can be seen in the impressive growth of commons-based initiatives that are hosted by community groups across the globe. Commoning — as a mode of collective stewardship over resources — has a long history on which we can build. It's a sign of the times that we're witnessing a resurgence in cooperatives in many domains – from energy and housing to care and financial systems. In recent years, cooperative models are becoming a leitmotiv in different domains (to cite Waag director Marleen Stikker).[27] Dutch weekly De Groene Amsterdammer calls it the *'Collective Revolution.'*[28] The growing number of local civic actions — sustainist in my terms — heralds the emergence of a movement that is shifting the debate on making our futures.[29]

Here one of Waag's own projects comes to mind, exemplifying some features of the kind of civic design practice that I'm advocating. *Dutch Skies* (in Dutch, 'Hollandse Luchten') is a citizen platform for measuring the air quality of the environment near the North Sea Canal (west of Amsterdam), especially the industrial zone around the steelworking plant of multinational Tata Steel. Using open hardware and a network of sensors, data

is collected and mapped by local citizens. This approach has been called 'citizen sensing.' *Dutch Skies* is part of Waag's Smart Citizens programme — as counterpoint to the technology-driven idea of 'smart cities.' We can view it as a promising experiment in citizen science and citizen engagement. It's already being shared and replicated, in different domains and locations, and can act as a model for a collective civic approach to tackle ecological and social issues.[30]

4. Re-focus: localisation and systems change

We live in a globalised world. In the everyday, however, we mostly live our lives locally – nearby, rather than far away. Over the last decade or so we have witnessed a revival of all things local — from local do-it-yourself housing and locally-sourced food to local currencies and local ownership of land. This movement is not a return to the old local village, the small-town mentality or the parochial; rather it reflects a movement to redefine 'the local' and to recast it into new forms. How might we design for more local futures?

Towards localist forms of future-making

In my sustainist view, 'local design' requires us to redirect our ways: to design with the values of local community and local qualities at the centre. This goes beyond local as geographical marker or a physical location. Rather, 'local' refers to the inherent qualities and values that come with doing things locally and in the neighbourhood — the value of nearbyness, the local personal connections, the ability to meet in community, and building (local) community.

nearby relations as key to local design Closeby relations are key. Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo may have set an example for us here — her concept of a "15-Minute City" (*Ville du quart d'heure*) sets out to design self-sufficient communities with shops, schools, workplaces, and cultural places that are just a walk away. It represents a shift in perspective. Mayer Hidalgo has called it an "ecological transformation" whereby the city is recast as a collection of neighbourhoods.[31] This hyperlocal approach is now being taken up in other cities.

We may wish to use the word *localism* here — as an outlook to connect place, local community, and local landscapes. *Localism* favours not just the use of nearby resources, it also encourages place-specific knowledge, local self-reliance, and distributed forms of governance, whilst at the same time seeking to connect to a sense of place, identity, and community. Local can also mean human scale, a scale where people can dialogue and be heard. The idea of *localism* and the accompanying adjective 'localist' shift the paradigm and change the practice of doing things locally.[32]

Local future-making and local design are embedded in place, both materially and socially. We cannot rely on blueprints if we wish to localise our designs; that would be counter to their place-based, situated nature. Focusing design onto truly local qualities is a 180-degree turn from the conventional approach to planning, where global and universal designs (and technological solutions) are scaled down for local situations. In a sustainist view of localisation, the direction of travel is from the small to the big (where needed; eqully from bottom to top, instead of the other way around. In our sustainist design approach, we intro-duced the criterion of proportionality (rather than scale).

A starting point for opening paths to truly localist designs could be to adopt a *principle of localisation* — 'What *can* be done locally, should be done *locally*'. That would set us on a path whereby we are obliged to first develop nearby design solutions at the local scale, and only when they fail look for non-local, larger-scale designs. It turns on its head the dominant frame which usually takes us from universal knowledge and solutions — or global technologies for that matter — that are then applied to (if not thrust upon) local settings. Instead, the ground rule to follow: 'Localism first'.

"what can be done locally, should be done locally."

Embracing such a localist subsidiarity principle — underpinned by local engagement and community involvement — could spur on new forms of locally-embedded civic design. The point of departure is to find the smallest aggregate scale that can create impact. That could be the street, a neighbourhood, or a collabo-ration between local inhabitants.

To develop localist design approaches we don't have to start from scratch. Here I think, for example, of the Doughnut Economics model with an important role assigned to the house-hold, or urban placemaking initiatives such as the City at Eye Level that have the street as their starting point.[33]

Spreading not upscaling

The best examples of localist sustainist designs have been community-driven, bottom-up and small-scale. They are, by nature, place-specific. But how can we share the experience of one situation with other communities and places? Replication doesn't work, clearly not all communities and local ecosystems

are the same. Yet ,as we know from recent experience (think of knowledge networks and successful exchanges between citizen groups across cities) many civic projects that are working in one area also have real potential elsewhere.

The old ways of upscaling, simply by growing in volume or multiplying the same identical solutions, are no longer appropriate in the socially embedded practice of future-making. Instead, we need approaches that tap into the networked nature of sharing. Drawing from experiences of citizen-led participatory projects in the London Borough of Lambeth, Civic Systems Lab concludes: "This kind of scaling is a proliferation, the adoption and adaptation of an idea or core model in new contexts, rather than the original project necessarily expanding."[34]

In fact, the very word 'upscaling' is rather misleading here. Some have suggested 'outscaling' rather than 'upscaling.' But scale is not what matters, it's the capacity and reach of the whole system that can grow in a networking way. Individual elements in any network may be limited in their dimensions, but in their connections and scope, they can have real impact. That's exactly what has fuelled the growth of the so-called civic economy over the last decade, as witnessed by the surge in local, citizen-driven initiatives (which I view as a successful form of localist future-making). The essential lesson is spreading, not scaling.

Localist futures meet systems change

Take all of this as an open invitation to develop (new) approaches that can bring localist practices into a global frame. We need to connect the micro-level of design and social action to major issues such as climate change and the energy transition. Joost Beunderman (of the London-based architecture and research group 00) has called this the "micro-massive" challenge: to connect hyperlocal designs to global challenges and systems change. He calls for experiments with alternative frameworks such as public platforms that can work across different levels, impacting both the small and the large.[35]

A recent project on *Trees As Infrastructure* (by Dark Matter Labs and Lucid Minds, London) provides us with an insightful example of what such an approach for localist and sustainist future-making might look like (in this case in our cities). It

advances a platform through which urban nature becomes a benefit rather than a liability. It turns nature into a critical part of local urban infrastructure, alongside civic infrastructure such as bridges, roads, and rail, enabling alternative cost-benefit analyses of investments, profitability, and sustainability.[36]

Moving urban trees from the category of 'costs' to those of 'benefits,' transforms them into valuable assets in the locality. Urban nature thus becomes a civic asset, something we, as citizens and local authorities, can invest in. The model thus provides decentralised and locally embedded financial instruments, technologies and infrastructures for the re-appreciation of nature in our cities and urban policies. In other words, the *Trees As Infrastructure* platform recasts the value and place of nature in urban future-making.

By focusing on local value and local assets, the model also questions established economic frames and propagates forms of governance based on stewardship. It would be interesting to explore what such an approach to local value and local assets might mean for social domains such as care, safety, energy and food, or strategies for technological innovation. It could help us, once more, to move from dislocated, transactional models to relational approaches. Place-based evaluations could enhance practices of locally embedded sustainable design. Moreover it suggests that it's possible to develop hyperlocalist designs for urban infrastructure, with the city as ecosystem. With such a framework we could make local futures whilst taking into account larger systemic concerns.

In terms of our relationship to nature, the Trees as Infrastructure project also reveals how 'green' features and technological infrastructures can be designed within a single framework. It makes it possible to assess the value of nature as part of our living environments rather than as an externality. In doing so, it rejects the idea that natural environments and the earth belong to a separate domain, divorced from the world of humans, our constructions and our technologies. We may call this a 'grounded' approach to sustainability – grounded both in place as well as in the land, the soil, and the planet.
As we merge localist place-based approaches with environmental strategies, both become grounded in the earth. It

amounts to an ecological and social design approach that re-focuses on the earth and the land under our feet. "We need to 'land on earth'" says the anthropologist and philosopher Bruno Latour. He speaks of a "terrestrial" perspective where we humans and nature (and, in fact, all non-human life) co-exist.[37] A similar attitude can be seen in initiatives such as the Embassy of the North Sea that challenges us to take the 'voices of nature' into account as we design our futures.[38] Such considerations shift our gaze and our focus, making our sustainable design strategies less anthropocentric.

5. Making the future ours – towards a civic agenda

To take the future in our hands. That stance amounts to nothing less than a call for a shift in seeing and in doing — *from future shock to future-making*. A change of perspective towards *'our futures'* can lead us towards more sustainable and civic-led practices. In many domains, as we have seen, such a transition is already happening. Witness the growing number of initiatives over the last years that — in my terms — represent a sustainist approach to future-making: locally and embedded in community, as well as more sustainable. That gives us hope.

Of course, a turn towards civic modes of future-making is not a panacea. But it can help us to recast the issues and alter the terms as well as the participants of the debate. That in itself could be an antidote to the top-down, global-led, techno-logy-driven frames by which the dominant players (read: big business, big tech, big finance, big government) are currently shaping 'the future' on our behalf.[39] Changing our perspective and re-focusing on future-making open paths to other imaginations. They shift the public discourse and questions the underlying values of our actions.

Action perspective

Making *our* future requires a civic agenda. That's where I wish to conclude this exploratory essay. I will do so in the form of seven 'principles' for civic future-making. The *civic design principles* advanced below, are to be seen not as a set of rules, but as lines of sight that can help us to change perspective and spur us into action.

How to 'read' these principles, and how they might be translated into practice, depends on who you are, and where you stand. For designers, they provide cues for values and criteria to be brought into our civic designs. They are pointers that challenge designers and non-designers to be(come) more engaged; and to think through the social and ecological impacts of our inter-ventions, both locally and globally. Policy makers could employ these principles as starting points for developing more sustai-nable, inclusive and fair strategies, within and across policy domains, and in doing so raise issues of institutional redesign. Adopting an ecosystems perspective challenges us to develop

sustainist future-making: local, community-embedded and more sustainable.

challenge designers and non-designers to be(come) more engaged

technological, social and environmental policies that work in concert. Here localist solutions and decentralised forms governance become guiding principles. And for each of us, as citizens, neighbours and stewards of our planet, they can be read as a set of ideas and ideals, that can activate us and make all of us into co-designers.

Our futures

From future walks to design principles, that's where my exploration journey has taken us. Focusing on our futures and the idea of *future-making* has charted a path towards more civic-led and locally driven design strategies. Viewed through a 'sustainist lens,' I have reframed and recast how we may create more sustainable and inclusive futures — in terms of our collective perception, the values incorporated into our designs, as well as the leading cast of players included in future-making.

Envisioning futures, and our roles in realising them, has prompted us to ask not only where we we wish to be going, but also where we stand. Literally, because our imaginations and actions always start in a specific place. Our local position determines how we view our situation and how we wish to address the challenges we face. In the ongoing struggles for our future, I see a revival of localism. Whatever the terms we use, our frames of reference and our design practices would be well served with a fundamental recast — redirecting our view and our actions, focusing on local qualities, local values, local engagements and local interventions. Such an outlook provides us with a concrete challenge — for designers, for policy makers and for citizens. And it also may vindicate the view on history that change on fundamentals, even globally, always begins in local situations and local action.

Whoever you are and wherever you stand, take the principles formulated at the end of this essay not as solutions but as points of departure. They aim to inspire alternative practices for designing more sustainable futures. Our futures.

This essay started with a quote by the American writer Rebecca Solnit. Let me end here with what she wrote in one of her essays on the power of activism and civic-led change: "We write history with our feet and with our presence and our collective voice and

vision."[40] The same holds for making our futures.

The shift in perspective towards future-making and civic values has given us a design agenda. Now we need turn it into an 'action-perspective' that can lead us to new practices. Our futures are located in the here and now. Let's rewrite them.

Making our future

Seven civic design principles

1

Take a position
Look critically at where you stand

To reclaim our futures requires us to shift perspective. And to redirect our view towards regenerative strategies which are socially embedded and environmentally sustainable. That means taking a position. We must take a stand on the social and ecological qualities we wish to incorporate in our designs. Civic modes of future-making have us reconsider *how* we design, for *what*, for *whom*, and *with whom*. Civic design means that engagement of (local) communities is encouraged and supported right from the outset.

2

Make tech our own
Design with social and ecological values in mind

In our futures, *our* technologies need to connect with our purposes and our values, and be open to our collective control. That calls for design processes that are more driven by social and ecological values (countering the logic of big tech). Technological innovation needs redirecting towards open public technologies and locally embedded designs. That requires investment in community technologies, community-owned public infrastructure, and civic research & development. We need new (sustainist) models to assess our technologies for their social impacts on our living environment as well as the planet.

3

Make your future local
Embrace qualities of nearbyness & local engagement

Making your (and our) futures truly local requires investing in (new) forms of local design. Maximising *localist* qualities — such as nearbyness and local community engagement — must be a key requirement of our design strategies and institutional practices. The ground rule of 'localism first' should be guiding. Applying this subsidiarity principle means that any solution ought to be sought first on the local and neighbourhood scale.

4

Build communities of practice
Act collaboratively and reward commoning

Changing our practices is key. Building communities of practice is essential in reclaiming our futures. It requires collaborative models and forms of *civic engagement* that turn citizens into co-designers. We need to invest in commoning and commons-like institutions for civic design. Developing community-led design solutions requires a re-focus on shared *know-how*, rather than knowledge, driven by best practices instead of theory.

5

Recast infrastructures as ecologies
Embed your designs in nature and community

Charting more sustainable futures asks for an *ecosystems* approach, where technologies, people and institutions are as much part of our ecologies as is nature. Design strategies ought to be grounded in community and place, as well as rooted in nature and the earth. Designing infrastructures — physical and social — thus becomes an ecological question. In such an approach we need to amend our assessment models and policy frames to value nature as well as human assets in other than monetary or economic terms.

6
Design for place, think in systems
Connect hyperlocal design to systems change

We need approaches that can cross over between place-based localist designs and generative systems change. It means focusing on how we can design for sustainability at the hyper-local level in such a manner that it contributes to sustainable futures on a systems level. Like the aphorism 'Act locally, think globally', we need to *'Design for place'* whilst thinking in terms of systems change. That calls for new models, formats and institutional designs that enable us to connect the small and the local to the large and the global.

7
Spread not scale
Share practices and networks for impact

Spreading not upscaling is the operative phrase in building capacity and achieving greater impact of civic modes of future-making. That requires focusing on networking and proliferation to extend the reach of our civic design practices across locations and situations. It calls for new forms of collective intelligence and new frameworks to build a body of sustainist design practices that can be shared. We need to apply open innovation to future-making.

Notes and references

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4   This is taken up in my *A Sustainist Lexicon: Seven entries to recast the future — Rethinking design and heritage* (Architectura & Natura Press, Amsterdam, 2016).

5   **https://waag.org/en/project/ expeditions-planet-b.**

6   Walk towards the future with Waag. **https://waag.org/en/event/ walk-towards-future-waag.** The idea of outside events, such as walks, was prompted also by the Covid restrictions on inside public gatherings set by the Dutch government during much of 2021. Civic walks as a form of engaged research built on the concepts and experiences of city maker/ placemaker (stadmaker) Floor Ziegler.

See **https://floorziegler.nl**. In part prompted by the Dutch governmental Covid restrictions on inside public gatherings during 2021.

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13 Oxford English Dictionary.

14 *Sustainist Design Guide*. See note 3 above.

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Colophon

About the author
Michiel Schwarz is an independent future thinker, cultural researcher and curator. He introduced the term 'technological culture' to the Dutch public debate, and is the co-creator of 'sustainism' naming the 21st century postmodern culture of sustainability, networks, sharing and localism. Among his books are *Sustainism Is the New Modernism* (with Joost Elffers), *Sustainist Design Guide* (with Diana Krabbendam) and A Sustainist Lexicon. He is co-founder of the social design hub *The Beach* in Amsterdam Nieuw-West and is currently Fellow of the Utrecht University of the Arts HKU. He holds a PhD in the sociology of technology from the University of London.