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Urban Imaginaries and Climate Change: A Way to Take Care of the City.

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Abstract:

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh identifies climate change as *"a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination"* (Ghosh, 2016, 15). The difficulty of imagining climate change involves our profession, maybe more than others. As designers, planners, and landscapers, our role is to imagine solutions for the future. But *how can we design a future for our cities without an unambiguous picture of the slow and steady disaster we live in?*

The concept of city curation intertwines practice, technology, and policy, among other things. It considers the environment and communities broadly, encompassing both the anthropic and the natural (Kopitz et al., 2023). As professionals—but also as *'only'* citizens—we have the deontological duty to *take care* of our cities. So, even if we cannot predict the future, each of us can be prepared to prevent, anticipate, and cope with what may occur.

Viewing the future as an unwritten story, we actively contribute to shaping it each day. Through the use of *urban imaginaries*, we have the opportunity to explore uncharted possibilities and experiment with what lies ahead. Crafting narratives about future environments serves as a powerful tool to capture attention and evoke responses. *Speculative fiction* not only fuels creativity but also serves as a practical design tool for addressing climate change. Cities such as Amsterdam with its *'Green Infrastructure Vision 2050'* and Singapore with its 2030 *'City in Nature'* plan are embracing the use of *imaginaries* to drive positive change.

With the support of two case studies, this paper combines ideas, theory, and practical examples to explore a simple but powerful question: How can we use imagination and care to create cities that are better prepared for the future? Through this lens, it invites readers to consider urban planning not just a technical challenge but a profoundly human one—one that asks us to imagine, care, and act with purpose.

Introduction

This paper is built on the two concepts of imagination and care, which can help us rethink the future of cities, especially as we face the immense challenges of the climate crisis. It explores how the ways we imagine the world, both collectively and individually, can shape the spaces we live in and how a sense of care can guide us toward creating cities that are more sustainable, nurturing, and resilient. By examining these concepts and how they are put into practice, the paper aims to show how imaginative thinking can inspire real, lasting change in urban planning.

The first part of this paper takes a step back to explore what we mean by "imaginaries." These are not just dreams or far-off ideas—they are the mental frameworks that influence how we see the world and how we design for it. Built from stories, symbols, and cultural references, imaginaries shape both personal and collective visions of the future. This section draws on a variety of perspectives, from architecture to cultural studies, to show how imagination is more than a creative process; it is a tool for shaping reality. It also explains how the act of imagining allows us to

confront problems, break down old ways of thinking, and envision entirely new possibilities for the cities we live in.

The second part focuses on the climate emergency, which is framed not just as an environmental challenge but as a "crisis of imagination." Borrowing from Amitav Ghosh's idea that our inability to imagine the future is a cultural failure, this section examines how uncertainty and unpredictability make it hard to plan for what is ahead. However, it argues that this crisis also forces us to rethink how we approach urban design. Rather than focusing solely on technical solutions, we must embrace creativity and care, finding ways to imagine futures that are not just livable but also deeply connected to the well-being of people and the planet.

Finally, the paper turns to two real-world examples to see how these ideas play out in practice: WOHA's Singapore 2050 master plan and Amsterdam's Green Infrastructure Vision 2050. Singapore takes a bold and futuristic approach, using science fiction imagery to inspire collective action and optimism about what cities could look like. Amsterdam, on the other hand, focuses on practical engagement, using digital maps and data to involve communities in creating a greener future. By comparing these two cases, this section shows how different tools and approaches can shape urban imaginaries in meaningful ways. It also raises questions about what it means to design for care—how we build not just for now but for generations to come.

Imaginary as a concept

The term imaginary refers to a collection of elements associated with various factors, encompassing both tangible and fictional aspects. Prescientific conceptions, science fiction, religious beliefs, artistic productions, and all the other systems through which humans' invent other realities' contribute to the creation of the imaginary. Due to its complex genesis and interactions, obtaining an unambiguous definition of the term is not easy. What is certain, however, is that the imaginary is shaped by the tensions and relationships that humans have with their surroundings. This reality is then transformed into a mental representation, and the resulting abstract content—the imaginary—has a concrete and constructive impact on reality. The imaginary is, therefore, a set of mental representations based on visual images and linguistic systems. The construction of this element directly results from exposure to visual media, including films, animated shows, television series, video games, and various internet sites, as well as written metaphors, symbols, narratives, and stories (D'Amato, 2007).

Imagination, as a mental process, plays a crucial role in creating the imaginary. It is the act of projecting thoughts forward into a plan for a future that does not exist as an actual reality. Thus, imagination serves as the means by which our designer minds visualize the invention. Here, to invent is regarded as a generative act closely tied to factual reality and an exercise of creation through thought. To invent means to think of something that did not exist before, envisioning the solution to a real problem (Proverbio, 2016).

Traditionally regarded as an 'irrational intuition' or a 'frivolous activity,' imagination, as quoted by Jane Rendell, is a productive activity and should be viewed as a positive component in the design process. With this perspective, Jane Rendell challenges the role of imagination in architectural design. Despite the historical opposition to imagination, she presents counterarguments to redefine spatial imagination in design as an active and critical research

environment integral to the design process. Spatial imagination enhances our understanding of the urban environment and shapes the experiences of both the nurturers and the designer. The sensory and perceptual engagement stems partly from the human capacity for imagination. Furthermore, in the production process, imagination is considered the key to prefiguration, acting as a tool that allows for a visual abstract image – imaginary – of the design outcome (Rendell et al., 2007).

To avoid misunderstandings, it is crucial to clarify that imagination should not be confused with fantasy. While fantasies and visions of alternative or utopian futures are aspects of imagination, imagination itself is a creative process of individual and social deconstruction and reconstruction of reality (Lindner et al., 2019). Imaging is a speculative method and an interdisciplinary process through which reality is questioned, unpacked, and, in some ways, rethought (Coleman, 2018). Imagination is an essential component of the design process. As designers, we navigate between two extremes: collective imagination and personal imagination. These two aspects are closely linked and inseparable as they contribute to an individual's background. If the set of symbolic representations, beliefs, and myths of a group or a general collectivity constitutes the so-called collective imagination, then as architects, we must also incorporate more academic and scientific notions that enable us to identify and address both personal and collective needs. During the imaginative process, architects rely on a set of solutions—imaginations—that arise not only from knowledge gained through education or professional practice but also from external influences and insights. It is essential to introduce the concept of non-academic knowledge, which encompasses non-technical ideas learned through other channels yet applied in professional practice. This knowledge is primarily acquired through exposure to diverse media, such as written narratives and dynamic portrayals in films and television series. Returning to the definition of imaginary, it is evident that it encompasses a range of elements through which individuals' invent other realities', shaped by the complex interplay of human interactions with their environment (D'Amato, 2007). Imaginary is, therefore, a collection of mental representations based on visual images and linguistic systems. Its construction directly results from exposure to visual media and/or literature, and the power of imaginaries lies precisely in their visual characteristics aspect.

Built on the same assumptions, urban imagination is a tool for exploring the diverse meanings associated with the city. It involves the construction and transformation of a place's public culture. Urban imagination encompasses the processes that shape the narratives connected to a space, whether they arise from within or are formed externally. It invites reflection on the politics of imagination, including who can participate in this process and who is represented in the city's life. Cities are intricate spaces that defy a singular understanding. Each assumes as many forms and meanings as its inhabitants. Grasping even a fragment of these requires imagination and creativity, along with an awareness that cities are not merely material entities but also lived, represented, and perceived spaces. Each dimension offers limitless possibilities for defining, inhabiting, and transforming the city. Investigating the so-called urban imaginaries is a way to face contemporary challenges and question the architecture profession. Starting with a critical analysis of the book "The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries", edited by Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner, the purpose is to explore the role of imaginaries in architecture and their part in shaping the future urban society (Lindner et al., 2019). Urban imaginaries, like imaginaries in general, are linked to different fields. Due to the interconnection between various disciplines, it is essential to investigate their dialogue to grasp their complexity. Urban imaginaries are vital tools that promote creative thinking and problem-solving, especially when information is limited. This element will be explored in depth to gain insights into the various ways climate change affects architecture.

The Climate Emergency and the difficulty of imagining

The challenges posed by the climate emergency require an approach that goes beyond simple problem-solving. Instead, we need to adopt a way of thinking that resembles the narrative construction of imaginative scenarios. When Amitav Ghosh, in "The Great Derangement," identifies climate change as a "crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh, 2016), he underscores how constructing a future imaginary in times of crisis is not simple. According to the same author, recognition outlines the transition from ignorance to knowledge. However, he continues that understanding what we identify does not necessarily mean understanding what we identify, as understanding does not play an active role in recognition (p.10).



Figure 1. A series of images from a heavy rainstorm during the 2023 flooding in Lugo (Ravenna, Italy) – Ph.Valentina Labriola (2023)

Building on this reasoning and applying it to the climate emergency, one might suggest that we are possibly in a subsequent phase where we have—perhaps—recognized it and now need to redefine it. We are facing a significant and irreversible change that, nevertheless, can be addressed and pursued if we look beyond the present and strive toward the future. Regarding this visionary aspect—which means envisioning and projecting into the future—Ghosh argues that at the heart of the climate emergency lies a profound imaginative and cultural failure. According to the author, it is futile to deny that the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and, therefore, of imagination (p.14).

However, why does this happen? According to experts, the unpredictability of the climate emergency is at the root of our inability to address it. Rules, routines, and the familiar provide us with a sense of security and help us envision the future. However, this does not apply here because, evidently, the climate crisis has no rules, is driven by randomness, and is therefore unimaginable. The challenge of conceptualizing and narrating the climate crisis stems from its unpredictable nature, complicating its definition and creating a sense of detachment from the issue. The absence of explicit imagery for a slow and ongoing disaster further exacerbates this difficulty. This communication challenge extends across various sectors, including architectural design. How can

we create solutions for a crisis that is not entirely tangible? Should we view climate change as a crisis or as an opportunity to rethink design attitudes? This extended crisis requires rethinking customary dynamics and reconsidering professions in a transversal way. This involves not only adapting the design process in favor of solutions—if they can be called that—that are more hybrid and open to change but also introducing tools, primarily digital, that can promote more immediate dissemination and, hopefully, a simpler understanding of current phenomena. In this context, the potential use of imaginaries as a design tool could become a subject of deeper study.

The dissemination of images of speculative projects provides a crucial entry point for reimagining urban life and beyond. These images serve as tools for spreading imaginaries, enhancing their collective imaginative potential through diffusion via digital technology. As discussed later in the paper, the use of virtual images associated with the Singapore 2050 plan not only facilitated understanding but also fostered the creation of a collective imaginary. While the city's green imaginary influenced the project, this was further enhanced and made more impactful by the new design. In this context, technological tools played a fundamental role as mediators between virtual and real environments in envisioning green futures. The use of digital media for project visualization is not intended solely for an expert audience but can engage a broader public. Imagining urban environments on virtual platforms—suspended between past, present, and future, and sometimes ambiguous in their spatial rooting within specific or generic settings—allows for closer interaction with the possibilities of alternative urban futures. In times of uncertainty, the representation of possibilities plays an educational and calming role, encouraging understanding and engagement with current events. Having an image of the future urban environment to which one will belong helps convey a collective imaginary of care for cities, as representations of potential futures enable people to connect with these visions and their transformations.

Urban Imagination: Take Care of the Cities

Quoting Elke Krasny, the concept of "care" in architecture reflects the interdependence between human life, the built environment, and the natural world. Architecture, as a form of shelter, provides the foundation for essential human activities such as eating, resting, and connecting. However, it also requires continuous care—through cleaning, repair, and maintenance—to sustain its function and purpose. This concept of care extends beyond mere upkeep, reflecting a deeper relationship between people and their built environments. Care in architecture involves attentiveness to the needs of those who inhabit spaces, ensuring they remain safe, functional, and nurturing over time. It also emphasizes a harmonious balance between the built and natural environments, fostering a sense of responsibility for the resources and ecosystems that sustain architectural practice. By embracing care as a guiding principle, architecture can cultivate spaces that not only support life but also nurture connections, resilience, and long-term well-being. To address these challenges, architecture must adopt a practice of "critical care," one that integrates ecological, social, and political considerations. This entails designing spaces that not only support human life but also prioritize sustainability, equity, and environmental stewardship. A caring architecture acknowledges its role in social reproduction and planetary health, positioning itself as a transformative force capable of fostering resilience, justice, and interconnected life (Krasny, 2019).

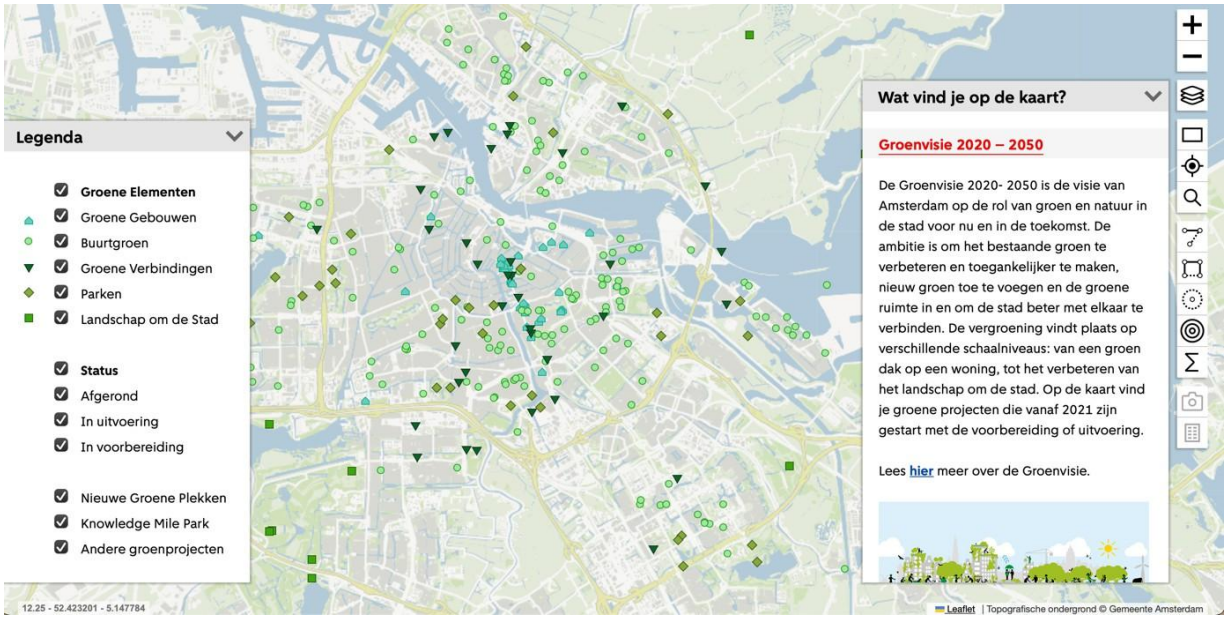


Figure 2. "Amsterdam Green Vision 2020- 2050" in the green database - https://maps.amsterdam.nl

Care has always played an implicit role in architectural and urban planning. From safeguarding individual bodies to protecting communities and natural environments, the concept of care permeates urban design, even when it is not explicitly stated. Viewing care as a spatial concept involves rooting practices that engage both human and non-human entities, highlighting the complex network that enables the production of care itself. In the contemporary urban context, the role of technology is fundamental. Digitalization, which supports urban infrastructures, societies, and policies, opens new possibilities for care interventions while simultaneously raising questions about the ethical and material implications of these solutions. Cities described as "smart," "connected," "sustainable," or "cognitive" represent urban imaginaries that are deeply tied to technological promises. These concepts pledge to enhance human and non-human well-being, offering concrete responses to global challenges such as the climate emergency. However, tensions arise between technological imaginaries and the material experiences of everyday life.

A striking example is Amsterdam's green plan, which utilizes digital databases to map, mediate, and maintain urban nature. Here, maintenance is viewed as a form of care and vice versa. While innovative, this approach disrupts sustainability practices in the present, complicating the distinction between what is real and what is virtual, as well as the current environment and the possible one.

These tensions also arise in how future cities are envisioned. Generative programs utilizing image databases to create new urban visions often replicate existing cultural imaginaries, such as the notion that a more connected city is inherently more attentive and "caring." However, these representations are not hyper-realistic; they draw on tactile and material practices, like architectural drawing, which contrast with the digital aesthetic of connection cities. If we view architecture as a "condition for care," it becomes evident that creating more compassionate cities requires going beyond simple digital imagination. We must investigate how care can be represented, designed, and implemented, tackling the complexities of the relationship between imagination and practice. Only by doing this can we elevate urban imagination toward cities that are genuinely more sustainable, healthy, and capable of "doing good."

Between Reality and Imagination

But what are the potential means for disseminating urban imaginaries? In this final section, the paper presents two cases where imaginaries, data planning, and media intertwine in radically different ways. In both instances, imaginaries contribute to the construction of 'projected futures,' fostering an ongoing dialogue between the real and the imagined in these narratives' construction.

The first example is WOHA's futuristic master plan for the city of Singapore. Conceived in 2009, the masterplan had precisely urban imaginaries as its central theme. The subtitle "Architects Save the World and Bring Joy to Millions" has a saving tone, and the architects are referred to as 'Slartibartfast', a clear allusion to Douglas Adams' novel 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy'. The aesthetic mood is intentionally reminiscent of science fiction movies in order to amplify the imaginary of cities of the future that are intended to be promoted. With the motto "DON'T PANIC! SLARTIBARTFASTING SINGAPORE," the team, composed of the previously mentioned WOHA design studio, the National University of Singapore, and special guests such as the School of The Arts: Singapore, Blackdesign, and Obilia, aimed to design a sustainable future for the city. Mimicking Slartibartfast, the designers confronted the significant challenges facing Singapore to propose a plan that could address the future's obstacles. Rather than perceive changes as calamities, they see them as opportunities—a design challenge. The project presented by WOHA suggests the concept of "care," stating that "architects and urban planners re-emerge from oblivion and return to their roots of benevolent megalomania."

Also, the "Amsterdam Green Infrastructure Vision 2050" advocates for the development of a more sustainable urban environment by addressing the challenges articulated by the "United Nations' Sustainable Cities Initiative," which have subsequently influenced the "European Union's strategic focus on greening cities' as a pivotal opportunity. The plan, which is disseminated through brochures and open-source maps, underscores the importance of community engagement in caring for urban spaces, particularly those identified and cataloged for maintenance in relation to their green spaces. The maps serve as the primary medium for communication and dissemination of the plan; they are interactive and incorporate narratives that address current issues while proposing visionary solutions for the future. In paraphrasing Aroussiak Gabrelian, one may posit that the abstraction of the world illustrated through these maps facilitates the envisioning of diverse potential environments through imagination. Furthermore, the accompanying narrative framework serves as a significant vehicle for sharing conceptualizations that, once established, transition into collective knowledge and support for the initiative (Gabrelian, 2017).

Comparing the two cases, it is possible to observe that in Amsterdam, the narrative imagery is complete and understandable, though the media support is lacking. The maps, while informative about the changes, are extremely attractive yet not fully comprehensible to no specialists. However, the digital twin effectively allows navigation of the entire nation. In contrast, Singapore, in collaboration with WOHA, aims for wide dissemination. The media used are straightforward and immediate, serving as perfect vehicles for the intended imagery. The incorporation of a sci-fi aesthetic positions the project in the future and fuels an already ingrained collective imagination. All the media employed to communicate the vision for Singapore 2050 contribute to the futuristic imagery promoted by the public administration. It is clear that the collective imagination shaped by these media is conveyed; however, it may also be true that the success of previous plans and the

ongoing implementation of the 2050 plan results from a network of imaginaries that have emerged from the plan itself, evolving into projects and ultimately into built environments. While it is unlikely that all the elements showcased in WOHA's video will reflect the reality of Singapore in 2050, the positive imagery it presents serves as a design tool for creating initiatives aimed at healing the city both environmentally and humanely.



Figure 3. "Architects Save The World And Bring Joy To Millions: Singapore 2050" by WOHA. Screenshot from YouTube - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCYD2AGsRGc&t=312s

Conclusion

This paper has explored how imagination and care can transform the way we plan and shape the cities of tomorrow, especially in the face of the growing challenges posed by the climate crisis. Urban planning is about much more than buildings or infrastructure—it is a profoundly human process that requires us to think creatively and empathetically about the future we want to create. By framing the climate emergency as a "crisis of imagination," this paper has emphasized the need to break free from conventional ways of thinking and envision bold, thoughtful possibilities for our urban environments.

Imagination is not an extravagance—it is a tool that allows us to see beyond immediate obstacles and consider what could be. When paired with care, it becomes a powerful force for creating cities that prioritize well-being, sustainability, and resilience. The two case studies examined—Singapore's futuristic 2050 plan and Amsterdam's Green Infrastructure Vision—highlight different approaches to using imagination in planning. Singapore's sweeping, sci-fi-inspired vision sparks collective excitement about the future, while Amsterdam's grounded and practical strategy focuses on fostering community engagement and environmental stewardship. These examples show that there is no single formula for imagining better cities, but they all demonstrate how creativity and care can turn ideas into action.

Ultimately, this paper argues that urban planning must be reimagined as an act of care. Cities are not just physical spaces; they are places where people live, connect, and grow. If we want to create truly sustainable cities, we must move beyond short-term solutions and consider how to design spaces that nurture both people and the planet. Imagination gives us the ability to dream, and care ensures that those dreams are rooted in responsibility and empathy. By embracing this mindset, we can create urban environments that do not just react to challenges but actively inspire hope and foster belonging. Ultimately, the future of our cities depends on our ability to imagine together and care deeply—for each other, for our surroundings, and for the generations that will follow.

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