



Faculty of Design

2023

Figurations of a Shared Future: The exercise of creating collectively from images

Mahecha Vesga, Diana María, de la Rosa Munar, Juan Alfonso and Arias Herrera, Juan Carlos

Suggested citation:

Mahecha Vesga, Diana María, de la Rosa Munar, Juan Alfonso and Arias Herrera, Juan Carlos (2023) Figurations of a Shared Future: The exercise of creating collectively from images. In: Proceedings of Relating Systems Thinking and Design Volume: RSD12, 06-20 Oct 2023. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/4906/>

Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.

The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at repository@ocadu.ca.



**Relating Systems Thinking and Design
(RSD12) Symposium | October 6–20, 2023**

Figurations of a Shared Future: The exercise of creating collectively from images

Diana María Mahecha Vesga, Juan Alfonso de la Rosa Munar, and Juan Carlos Arias Herrera

Weaving and knitting as an ancestral approach to reflecting and envisioning the future

Many indigenous communities in Latin America conceive weaving as a philosophical representation of the act of creation and the interconnectedness of our systemic reality. For them, weaving and embroidering are intrinsic to inhabiting a place and necessary to understand the world. This paper presents the experiences facilitated by a community in the town of Chía, Colombia, where the act of weaving and embroidering over photographs of their environment was used to establish conversations regarding the specific needs and intentions of a community.

This article presents the preliminary results of a research-through-creation project currently in development, which focuses on the collective creation of future envisioning with the community of the town of Chía in Cundinamarca, Colombia. The project attempts to overcome the urban visions of the future that we produce as a community, framed in certain common ideas of what is needed, such as mobility problems, infrastructure or the loss of public space, in order to empower communities to reflect on their common vision of a desirable future.

KEYWORDS: systemic design, community, future, weaving (tangles)

RSD TOPICS: Culture & Society, Methods & Methodology

Introduction

Although the exercise of speculating about the future is a common human trade and central to the maintenance of cohesion of any social group, these projections are framed, most of the time, in pre-existing imaginaries and languages, constructed and promoted by government, advertising and media as 'basic needs'. These needs, as stated by Escobar (2007), have the issue that they can be constructed externally to the community, and they might not respond to their collective views of the future.

Furthermore, the current social infrastructure development process is characterized by the systemic disappearance of spaces where it is possible to collectively imagine a future. Although each individual seems to be clear about what they expect from their context, most of the time, these expectations are not the product of a true community relationship.

In the case of the Chía community, as in that of many others, although government institutions promote spaces for community dialogue to understand their needs and expectations for the future, these projections are built through discussions based on the intentions and policies of the current government allowing very little space to wander outside the framework. Furthermore, once built, these projections are based on the sum of individual opinions expressed in a group and not on the possibility of collective community thinking.

In this way, many of the future projections that communities unconsciously propose assume already institutionalised visions, where there is no true community character but rather a group projection of the individual's desires.

For this reason, one of the premises of our research is that it is essential to generate spaces for dialogue to produce community projections in which the future is not predefined by the institutional logic of the present. The central question of the project that gave rise to this article is, precisely, how to generate future projections that are produced by the community (or that simultaneously produce a sense of community) and that go beyond the codes of already established views or norms. To answer this question, we propose using systemic design and imagery as a core practice.

Therefore, together with the community of the House of Culture in the city of Chía, in central Colombia, several research-through-creation workshops were held, focusing on the collective intervention of archival photographs.

The collective workshop focused on the intervention of an image, allowing the production of future narratives that escaped pre-established discourses. Because it is an "uncommon" medium for the community, the intervention of images allowed us to generate fictions of the future that, although they cannot be understood as viable social projects, do reveal an understanding of the community in the present and a way of naming and narrate through the *figuration* of a shared future. This notion of *figuration* could be described as both a process of becoming tangible as an image (configure or give a form) and a collective construction of the future (to figure a future).

The exercise of creating collectively from old images of the city generated a space to imagine beyond the instrumental nature that is commonly required of future statements. Therefore, this article focuses on highlighting the political power of the exercise of collective crafting or manufacturing.

It is also important to state that one of the researchers has lived in Chía for more than 11 years, where she has been accepted and welcomed as part of the community. This experience has allowed here to recognise the social transformations of the region and the challenges they face as a community prior to this research.

The investigation began as a process of analysis of the different changes that the city's infrastructure has had over the years. This step—from analysing the effects of the transformation of space into the population to trying to think collectively about our relationship with that same space as a community—resulted in the proposal for a scenario of collective reflection aimed at thinking about the form in which we perceive the transformations of our social space and of ourselves as a community.

The proposal was to define this collective space as a series of fictionalisation exercises of imagined futures that would allow us to think about the past, see the present and propose visions of the future, using design and photography as central media. The goal was to generate conversations that could help us promote good living in the community.

Research context

Land management in a municipality like Chía, where the population density is increasing due to its proximity to Bogotá and the lack of land suitable for building in the latter, means that the common recreational spaces for the population are becoming increasingly smaller, traffic is problematic, and the city's infrastructure is not sufficient. It is there where the interest arose to investigate the multiple possibilities that design has to identify the tensions or problems that we have as inhabitants with space and its accelerated growth.

In Colombia, the Plan of Territorial Organization (POT) determines the use of land, infrastructure and the planned development of an area. During the first stage of this research, we found that the municipality's POT proposed in 2016 was suspended in 2019. This decision responds to a lawsuit filed by a group of citizens who were concerned about how the 2016 POT approved a series of decisions without adequately socialising them with the community (Rincón, 2020).

Although the construction of scenarios and policies that allow us to reflect on the implications of community action in our country are determined by Law 2166 of 2002, which regulates citizen participation and the obligation of it for the implementation, participation and approval by the community of government decisions, we believe these fall short, since the community role becomes of a supervisor of an 'empty ritual' and fulfils an institutional role where state entities communicate the decisions but do not have greater influence in the approach (Aguirre-Nuñez, 2018).

For this reason, the policies proposed by government entities do not resonate with the community, which is constantly disenchanted of its leaders and their initiatives since there is no thought of joint construction in the future (Castañeda, 2020). The main cause of the community's lack of interest in the spaces provided by government entities is that they consider that their time, knowledge, and experience are not valued.

From the current mayor's office of Chía, in an exercise to gather information for the construction of the new POT, the community was asked through the social network Facebook, "how did they imagine Chía in the year 2035?" 188 responses were obtained, the vast majority focused on finding solutions to problems such as mobility, infrastructure or the loss of public space.

Some of the responses were:

From what I see, with a lot of crime with the streets destroyed, and it is a garbage dump... plus there are huge potholes and because the drivers don't want to fall on them, they end up throwing their cars at pedestrians.

Stop so many constructions that are destroying its historical heritage, and by 2035, I see it with better pedestrian paths, with more cycle routes.

Another mockery of participation. Unfortunately, I have already seen, lived and analysed the way this administration acts, and then said that they did take the municipality into account. It makes me sad; it's sad how they play with the will of the people.

Above all, with excellent roads.

When analysing these imagined projections of the city, it is evident that the urban visions of the future that we produce as a community in spaces like these are framed in certain common places, such as mobility problems, infrastructure or the loss of public space.

Furthermore, although the exercise of the mayor's office allowed participants to speculate about the future, it is formulated in restrictive terms since it asks about a collective future, but through a process of individual reflection. In other words, these projections are based on the sum of individual opinions and not on the possibility of collective community thinking. This mechanism does not allow for the construction of a deliberative scenario, nor does it propose future projections outside of the languages that the institutional framework already manages in advance.

As Laura Quintana (2019) points out, "In particular, the conflict is neutralised because the space is closed so that truly other interpretations of reality can appear, that is, other social realities, which counteract the dominant visions and their unequal effects" (pp. 2-9). The objective of this research, therefore, is to design spaces and experiences that encourage the speculation of community futures through design and collective creation.

Why propose a collective dynamic through design and creation?

Design has sought well-being through reflection and ideation of artefacts that allow us to improve humanity's relationship with the world. The proposal is based on the vision of co-design, speculative design, and systemic design to observe how these could provide scenarios and experiences that help us configure new ways of understanding the world and how we relate to it and with it. In this case, it was important to think about how the methodologies of design and collective creation could allow us to establish new ways of relating and living.

In the model proposed by de la Rosa and Ruecker (2020), the vision of systemic design is addressed to deliberate on possible futures through value mapping and subsequent construction of prototypes as a reflective and deliberative exercise that allows us to speculate about the future. In this model, the community is understood in its diversity, fostering deliberative spaces where the knowledge and values of each of the participants enhance future projections, allowing the identification of the tensions that can occur.

Although this model proposes the mapping of values as a methodological process, in this research, we propose the creation and intervention of images as a central methodology to generate future projections and identify with them the desires of the community. The main reason for proposing the intervention of images as a form of reflection is to attempt to overcome the simple discursive level that is promoted in other spaces, such as those mentioned above. The discourse around the future tends to repeat imaginaries coded around aspects that the community has learned to identify as problematic. Because it is a strange medium for the majority, the intervention of images allowed us to generate future fictions that reveal an understanding of the community in the present and a way of naming and narrating themselves through the figuration of a shared future.

In a conference at the Higher School of Art and Design of Valencia in 2016, Ezio Manzini identified that "there is a need to build collectives to design with the community and for the community, generate the conditions, create a more favourable environment, discover the importance of place and our agency in inhabiting". This allows us to see the power of co-design for the construction of relational, community, and reflective spaces

where other possible futures can be imagined. In this context, society becomes “a laboratory of new ways of being and doing” (Manzini, 2015, p. 132)

Community relational spaces are important for several reasons. First of all, these spaces allow us to strengthen community ties and promote solidarity, cooperation and mutual care. Secondly, they promote the active participation of community members in decision-making and in the collective construction of projects and processes. And third, they allow everyone's voices to be heard and taken into account, promoting inclusion and equity. In conclusion, these spaces encourage the active participation of community members in the collective construction of their own destinies (Escobar, 2016). This is why community relations can be the basis for the collective construction of alternative life projects.

In the presented work, the relational experience occurs in different moments: at the selection of the image, in the intervention, in the times that are taken in the affections and conversations that are interwoven in the making. In the middle of the practice, we rethink ourselves; we give ourselves a pause, a moment to reconfigure the way we understand our living in the municipality. It is in the midst of those pauses and fissures that we allow ourselves to imagine and speculate about the future since the relational exercise leads us to uncomfortable conversations that occur thanks to the diversity of the group, allowing the experience and collective reflection to be enhanced.

The construction of relational spaces mediated by collective creation can be a tool to encourage critical reflection on issues that afflict society and encourage collaboration between different groups and communities. Almost two decades ago, Nicolas Bourriaud pointed out how relationships have become full artistic forms that represent objects that can be explored and experienced, seeking to create new forms of social interaction (Bourriaud, 2006).

Weaved futures

Together with ten women inhabitants of Chía, we carried out the workshop focused on the intervention of some photographs from the municipal library archive through weaving. Traditional practices of knitting or sewing in a group could generate new ties and relational spaces. As Tania Pérez Bustos describes in *Textile Gestures* (2021),

weaving invites us to listen attentively and think about what is being woven. On the other hand, experimenting with the image allowed us to separate it from its notion of a memory postcard, to begin to think with them, and not simply about them (about their contents). In this way, the images made it possible to spark conversations that are detached from common future scenarios.

The purpose is to generate new conversations that could help us reflect on and promote a notion of good living in the community. This exercise aims to give the community a voice and produce collective projections in which the “future” is not codified in advance by the institutional and neoliberal logic of the present.

The participants of the workshop were women between 35 and 80 years old; all of them integrated into the space organically, as they had the time, the willingness and the desire to reflect on living in a community. At first, although for some of them the exercise of weaving photos did not show immediate meaning and purpose, they were open to experimenting. Over time, they themselves began to propose new forms of intervention with photographs and times for meetings and discussions. To date, we have woven over 75 photos, each one linked to a particular story, loaded with memories and desires that reflect the past and the present—and allow us to lay a foundation to plan our future as a community.



Image 1a and b: In the middle of the practice, we take a break, a moment to reconfigure the way we understand our living in the municipality.

The montage

An essential part of the process was the assembly of the images to display them to the general public. This exercise involved a series of dialogues and collective decisions. It was very important that our role did not imply the centralisation of decisions nor determining the position of the images to present our visions and desires. Ten of us deliberated how and where each of the intervened photographs should go. That is where the dissolution of hierarchies and power relations is evident since the process occurs in the midst of attentive listening to the other and making decisions together, proposing, listening and deciding.

We realised that our photos could be grouped into various thematic categories, ranging from portraits to landscapes, from family scenes to images of bicycles and architecture. Each of these categories represented a vital aspect of life in Chía, a reflection of the richness and diversity of our environment and the way we experience it as a community. However, as we debated how to organise these images in the final montage, we came to the conclusion that Chía is not limited to defined segments or categories. Each of these images was an essential piece in the tapestry that constituted our town and our collective experience in it. As a result, we decided to break with any preconceived structure and assemble the photos completely randomly. These narratives go beyond the representation of a moment in time; They become an intersection between memory and longing. By intervening in these images, we unlock

their potential to reveal new intentions and desires that might otherwise have remained hidden.

In reference to the interpretation presented, the French historian Nicolas Bourriaud mentions that "It is the horizon from which the image can have meaning, showing a desired world, which the viewer can then discuss, and from which his own desire can arise." (2006, p. 24) It is there where the montage becomes an essential part of this research because through it, the visions of the future that we build as a community begin to be configured. The connection of the images, despite being random, shows the multiplicity of inhabiting and the actors who converge there to reconfigure the voices that promote new scenarios of discussion and action in the territory. According to Walter Benjamin, it implies an understanding of history and culture as a series of fragments, constellations, and discontinuous moments rather than a linear, continuous narrative. This perspective fosters a richer and more complex understanding of how elements of the past relate to the present and future in the human experience.



Discussion

How did the exercise of weaving photographs and generating conversations around them allow the emergence of stories and fictions of community futures?

Photos are triggers for fictions and conversations because by weaving and observing them, other ways of seeing and understanding our home are fostered. These were not future stories understood as projections of an idealised future, as occurred in the institutional exercises mentioned at the beginning, and the future is not shown as a time different from the present and the re-reading of the past. Therefore, they do not appear as linear moments clearly distinguishable from each other. These were not executable projects but rather fictions, even utopian ones, of future projections. Moreover, they were a future that emerged among community stories and not in individual projections.

The research allows us to deliberate on the transformations of the municipality that we can promote through our collective actions. Transformations that range from the use of public spaces to actions that allow us to improve good living. In the process, the importance of building relational experiences that allow achieving new agencies in the way of understanding and seeing the territory is evident. Our knowledge and experiences of the world allow us to see and engage in conversations of different kinds—in the midst of stitching the photos and observing what is conducive on an emotional and gestural level, and what projections and desires are created.

As it is an exercise that is not mediated by the rules or times of government, more than ten workshops have been held in which approximately 75 photographs have been used. Each photo is accompanied by a story that reflects the past, the present and us, and allows laying the foundations for planning for the future.

What is common between these future fictions?

- We find that our relationship with the municipality goes beyond passive dwelling since each intervention on the photographs and position in the montage leads us to reflect on our agency in it.
- Concern for the other emerges in the doing; the individual vision is diluted to make way for listening and understanding the other. These relationships allow

us to understand ourselves in the present, know our past and think of ourselves outside of individuality to project possible futures.

- You can continue making more images, and you can always think of different modes of montage, each of which will imply other ways of fictionalising the future.

Systemic design allows us to see the framework and effectively organise actions that help us promote new community visions that are built from the community and for the community.

We abandon design's vision of a 'problem solver' to propose strategies where multiple systemic visions allow us to see and build new agencies in making decisions about the future we want as a community.

In conclusion, we consider that the power of this research lies in finding ourselves, feeling ourselves, listening to ourselves and understanding ourselves under other times and dynamics, which allow us to reach conversations, visions and reflective seams where the future is built from recognising ourselves in the present.

References

1. Aguirre-Núñez, G. (2018). *Citizen participation in a neoliberal context: 'empty ritual or real power'?*. Master's thesis, Aalborg University, 2018.
2. Alcaldía municipal de Chía. (Mayo de 2021). *¡Participación Segura y Activa!, rumbo hacia una transformación del Territorio*. Obtenido de <https://www.chia-cundinamarca.gov.co/index.php/4762-participacion-segura-y-activa-rumbo-hacia-una-transformacion-del-territorio>
3. Alcaldía municipal de Chía. (Julio de 2021). Resultados de la estrategia de participación ciudadana en la etapa de diagnóstico. Chía, Cundinamarca, Colombia.
4. Bourriaud, N. (2006). *Estética relacional*. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo editora S.A.
5. CARRERAS PLANAS, C. (2016). John Dewey: "En el principio fue la experiencia. *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, vol. 21, núm. 72, pp. 69-77.
6. Castañeda Suárez, J. S. (2020). Límites y desafíos de la participación ciudadana en la revisión de los planes de ordenamiento territorial: Una mirada al caso de Chía, Cundinamarca . *PP&D Política Pública y democracia* , 23.

7. Catalunya, F. p. (0626 de 2022). *Design Toolkit*. Obtenido de <http://design-toolkit.uoc.edu/es/disenho-especulativo/>
8. Chía, A. m. (Abril de 2021). *Alcaldía de Chía*. Obtenido de <https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=alcald%C3%ADa%20de%20ch%C3%ADa>
9. de la Rosa, J. A., & Ruecker, S. (2020). Uso de prototipos para producir mapas futuros sistémicos de alta resolución. *Bitacora 30 Univerisdad Nacional de Colombia*, 87-100.
10. Didi-Huberman, G. (2010). *¿Cómo llevar el mundo a cuestras?* España: Museo Nacional Centro de arte reina Sofia.
11. Didi-Huberman, G. (2010). *Lo que vemos, lo que nos mira*. BUENOS AIRES: MANANTIAL.
12. Escobar, A. (2007). *Post-development as concept and social practice. Exploring Post-Development: Theory and Practice, Problems and Perspectives*, 18-32. Routledge.
13. Escobar, A. (2017). Diseño para las transiciones. *Etnografías contemporaneas* , 32-63.
14. Manzini, E. (2015). *Cuando todos diseñan: Una introducción al diseño para la innovación social*. España: Experimenta.
15. Osorio Ardila, G. A., Rincón, L. M., & Muñoz Reyes, J. (6 de Febrero de 2020). *CARTA ABIERTA AL ALCALDE DE CHÍA*. Obtenido de El periodico de Chía : <https://elperiodicodechia.com/chia/carta-abierta-al-alcalde-de-chia/>
16. Quintana, Laura y Fjeld, Anders. 2019. "Reinstitucionalización, formas de vida y acciones igualitarias: reinenciones de lo común hoy contra el capitalismo neoliberal". *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 70: 2-9. <https://doi.org/10.7440/res70.2019.01>.
17. Rincon, L. M. (11 de Marzo de 2020). ¡ UN NUEVO POT PARA CHÍA! ¿ CÓMO LO HACEMOS? *El periodico de Chía*, pág. 1.

Authors

Diana María Mahecha Vesga

Candidate for a Design Master at the National University of Colombia, graphic designer and photographer. Currently researching the powers of Design and creation to build community. Community relations allow giving voice to the community to produce collective projections of the future. Instructor of SENA - National Learning Service. dmahechav@unal.edu.co

Juan Alfonso de la Rosa Munar

Design professor and researcher at Universidad Nacional de Colombia and Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, current research in social transformation through design practices who look into the future and create strategical plans for a collaborative future. This interest is supported by participatory practices, action research, and co-design as a tool to reflect on future intentions, unintended implications, and social values that lead the actions of the community.

jadelarosam@unal.edu.co

Juan Carlos Arias

PhD in Art History, University of Illinois at Chicago, Professor, School of Communication and Visual Arts, Politécnico Granacolombiano, Bogotá, Colombia. Visual artist and researcher. PhD in Art History, University of Illinois at Chicago. Director of the Center for Collective Creation TINKUY, at the Politécnico Granacolombiano in Bogotá. Graduate Professor at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. juancariash@gmail.com