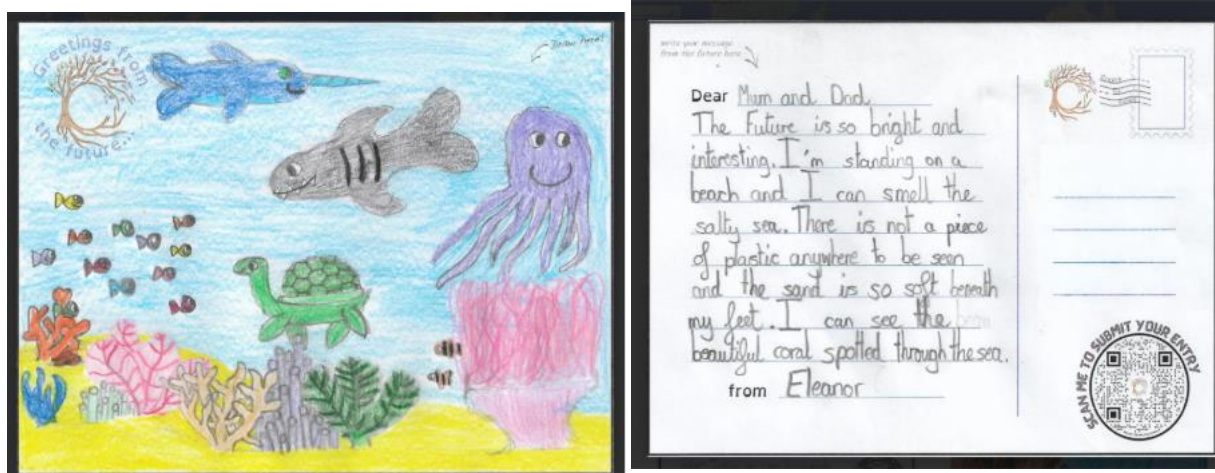


Postcards from the Future

A creative foresight technique to inspire and guide present-day action



Postcards created by kids for the [Create the future org](https://www.create-thefuture.org/)

What Is Postcards from the Future?

‘Postcards from the Future’ (PfF) is a creative, participatory futures method used to engage different groups in imagining and articulating possible futures. Participants are asked to depict their future imaginaries or aspirations through drawing, collaging, and/or writing. For example, they might design a postcard motif that visualizes how a space—such as their home, neighbourhood, city, or region—will look in the future. Additionally (or alternatively), participants may describe their imaginaries by writing a postcard or letter from their future selves to a loved one. Time horizons typically range from 10 to 50 years.

This method is used in different contexts—future studies, strategic planning, and speculative design—to gather views about the future beyond those of “experts,” mostly focusing on ideal futures or futures that are somehow better than the present. Thus, PfF is proposed by different types of organisations—non-profits, community organisations,

public institutions, and private companies—as a tool for utopian thinking about the future. Topics often include environmental and climate change education¹, citizen participation in local and urban development², or product/process development³.

While an increasing number of scholars across disciplines are engaging with future studies and with ways to imagine more just futures, there is still little evidence of PfF being used as a participatory research method to explore possible futures, at least in anglophone academic literature.

Examples from Research

Paraschivoiu et al. (2023) used PfF to explore ideas about the future use of AI in the built environment. Participants chose between 13 postcards with images of futuristic buildings (e.g. shape-changing benches or office desks) and wrote a message from their future selves imagining they had interacted with the chosen design. A pre-made design was used because the researchers sought to explore complex technological interactions with the built environment.

Other participatory futures work uses arts-based methods such as sketching, drawing, and collaging to think about the future—for example Törnroth et al. (2022) with utopia sketching, or Gannon and Naidoo (2020), where participants create multi-modal “aspiration artefacts” through images, photos, audio/video, and text.

Additional inspiration comes from *Narrative Futuring*—a text-based approach to documenting ideas about the future in narrative form (Sools, 2020)—and from community visioning and scenario building (Gidley et al., 2009; Gunnarsson-Östling et al., 2012). These practices share the premise that imagining profound socio-environmental change requires challenging existing narratives and predetermined trajectories.

Why Postcards from the Future in a Feminist Research Project?

The development of policy-relevant future scenarios is often left to “experts” in public and private institutions, reproduced by “there is no alternative” discourses that justify the exclusion of alternative visions and marginalized groups. If the future is understood as a *public good*, imagining it should not be left to a select few (Bourgeois et al. 2024). *Participatory futuring*—involving the public in imagining the future—is therefore a way to reclaim the future and introduce diverse knowledges, needs, and desires into future planning (Bourgeois et al. 2024; Johansson 2021).

Participatory action research that imagines plural futures beyond what is considered probable or possible within current systems is also a decolonizing tool (Priyadharshini 2024; Bourgeois et al. 2024). According to Priyadharshini (2024, p.15), the aim is “to move away from modes of visioning the future that are rooted in the actual, in the order of the present and towards speculation, towards desiring more, desiring better and above all, desiring otherwise.”

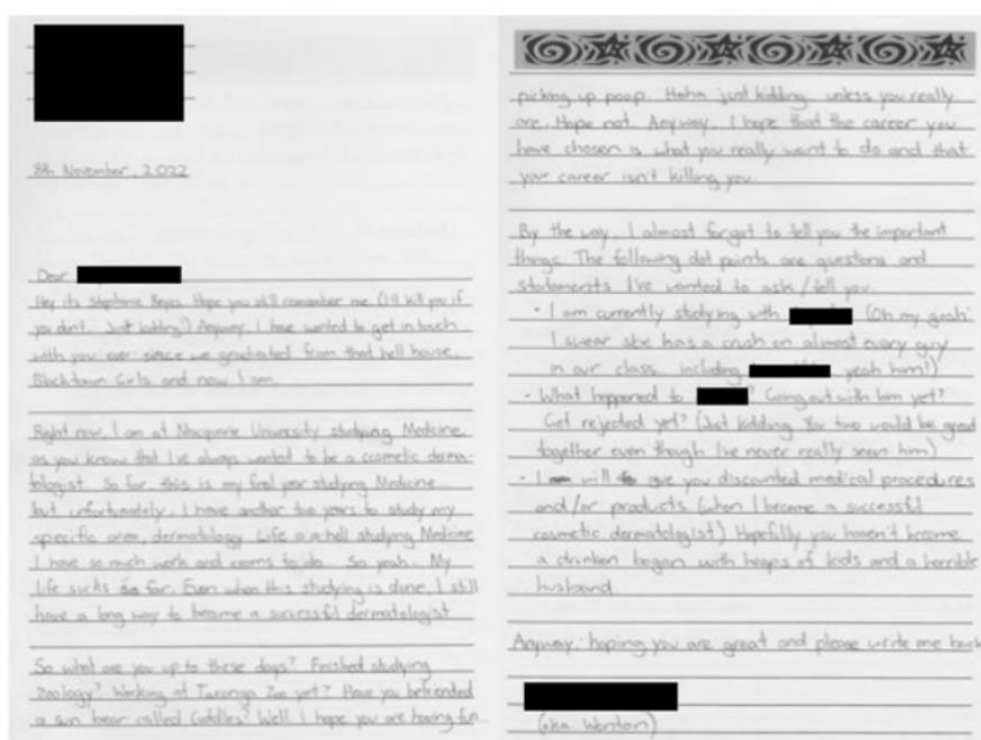
PfF empowers participants to imagine their future creatively and independently of dominant narratives. Collective discussion of postcards may reveal shared concerns, hopes, and needs, further strengthening a sense of collective entitlement to future visions.

Why Postcards from the Future for Studying Climate-Related Health Vulnerabilities with Migrants?

Imagining alternatives to dominant, Western, “rational,” and technocratic futures can help marginalized communities reclaim agency in shaping the future. This is particularly relevant in environmental planning and climate adaptation, fields often characterised by technocratic approaches. Community participation in imagining future climate adaptation can contribute to more equitable urban development pathways (Gidley et al., 2009).

Opening reflective spaces where people begin from their own positionalities, concerns, and desires is a feminist and radical approach to planning for urban climate and health justice.

In IMBRACE, a key aim is to explore embodied knowledges and situated practices of climate adaptation. PfF supports this by exploring migrants' needs, visions, and imagined pathways toward more just and health-resilient futures. Through this creative method, the project will identify what immigrants value as necessary elements of a climate-resilient future that aligns with their own needs and desires.



Letter to the future from participants in Gannon & Naidoo (2020)

Implementing Postcards from the Future in IMBRACE

Most PfF exercises involve writing to a familiar person from a future point in time (5–20 years ahead). Some prompts ask participants to write to their current selves or to a future relative. In IMBRACE, participants will choose freely whom they wish to address.

Each participant designs and writes a postcard to themselves from the future (approx. 2040). They imagine that important positive changes have taken place regarding their ability to cope with extreme weather events, and their future self wants them to know about these changes. The postcard may describe life in the future, everyday experiences and feelings, and the changes that allow them, their friends, relatives, and neighbours to feel well, protected, and healthy during extreme weather.

The front of the postcard is designed through drawing or collage. Participants draw on cardboard or drawing paper, depicting a scene from the imagined future. Collage materials are also provided to support participants who are less comfortable drawing.

Participants must be able to speak and understand the language, but may receive help writing. They can write in the language they feel most comfortable with, and researchers or interpreters can assist with translation. Participants who prefer not to write can dictate their message to a facilitator.

The workshops follow strict ethical principles prioritising participants' rights and comfort. The purpose of the project, voluntary participation, and consent procedures are clearly explained. Postcards will only appear anonymously on the project website. The goal is to create a respectful and supportive space where participants feel safe, valued, and in control of their stories.

Workshop Structure

A 1- or 2-day workshop (max. 10 participants) is proposed, divided into two parts of no more than 1.5 hours each.

Part 1

- Explanation of objectives and method.
- Group discussion about concerns and fears related to extreme weather (heatwaves, flooding) and their effects on daily life, health, and coping capacities.

- Exploration of worries about increasing frequency of extreme events.
- Brainstorming future scenarios (2035–2040) focusing on how homes, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and the city might adapt to protect health and well-being.
- Creation of a visual representation (drawn or collaged postcard) depicting their imagined future.
- Participants present their imagery and its meaning.
- Writing a message addressed to a relative or friend describing life during or after a future climate event, highlighting both positive adaptations and possible dystopian elements.
- Time for completing postcards with facilitator support.

Part 2

- Participants present their completed postcards, explaining the theme, imagery, meanings, hopes, or visions.
- Optional reading of their written message.
- Group discussion with questions, comments, and comparative reflections.
- Identification of common themes, differences, and challenges in reaching imagined futures.

Materials Needed

- Postcard-sized thick paper
- Colouring pens
- Collage materials (magazines, scissors, glue)
- Index cards with guiding questions (translated if needed)
- Recorder
- Chart paper for visible live notes

Bibliography

Bourgeois, R., Karuri-Sebina, G., & Feukeu, K. E. (2024). The future as a public good: decolonising the future through anticipatory participatory action research. *Foresight*, 4(26). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1108/FS-11-2021-0225>

Gannon, S., & Naidoo, L. (2020). Thinking–feeling–imagining futures through creative arts-based participatory research. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 47(1), 113–128. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00330-6>

Gidley, J. M., Fien, J., Smith, J. A., Thomsen, D. C., & Smith, T. F. (2009). Participatory futures methods: Towards adaptability and resilience in climate-vulnerable communities. *Environmental Policy and Governance*, 19(6), 427–440. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.524>

Gunnarsson-Östling, U., Svenfelt, Å., & Höjer, M. (2012). Participatory methods for creating feminist futures. *Futures*, 44(10), 914–922. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.06.001>

Johansson, E. L. (2021). Participatory futures thinking in the African context of sustainability challenges and socio-environmental change. *Ecology and Society*, 26(4). <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-12617-260403>

Metzger, M. J., Murray-Rust, D., Houtkamp, J., Jensen, A., la Riviere, I., Paterson, J. S., Pérez-Soba, M., & Valluri-Nitsch, C. (2018). How do Europeans want to live in 2040? Citizen visions and their consequences for European land use. *Regional Environmental Change*, 18(3), 789–802. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-016-1091-3>

Neuhoff, R., Simeone, L., & Laursen, L. H. (2023). Forms of participatory futuring for urban sustainability: A systematic review. In *Futures* (Vol. 154). Elsevier Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2023.103268>

Paraschivoiu, I., Dziabiola, M., & Meschtscherjakov, A. (2023). Postcards from the Future: Speculating the Future of Built Environments with Citizens. *ACM International Conference Proceeding Series*, 215–226. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3593743.3593784>

Priyadharshini, E. (2023). Speculative Method-Making for Feminist Futures: Insights from Black Feminist Science and Afrofuturist Work. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 38(115–116), 14–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2024.2335631>

Sools, A. (2020). Back from the future: a narrative approach to study the imagination of personal futures. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 23(4), 451–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1719617>

Sools, A., Triliva, S., Fragkiadaki, E., Tzanakis, M., & Gkinopoulos, T. (2018). The Greek Referendum Vote of 2015 as a Paradoxical Communicative Practice: A Narrative, Future-Making Approach. *Political Psychology*, 39(5), 1141–1156. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12474>

Törnroth, S., Day, J., Fürst, M. F., & Mander, S. (2022). Participatory utopian sketching: A methodological framework for collaborative citizen (re)imagination of urban spatial futures. *Futures*, 139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.102938>

Tussyadiah, I., & Miller, G. (2020). Imagining the Future of Travel: Technology and Sustainability Transitions. *E-Review of Tourism Research*, 17(5).