

Co-Designing Futuring Capacities in Municipalities: Futures Bazaar Goes National

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Submitted: 28 October 2025 **Accepted:** 24 February 2026 **Published:** 13 May 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Urban Futures in Times of Disruption” edited by Oksana Zaporozhets (Humboldt University of Berlin / Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography – IfL), Annegret Haase (Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research – UFZ, Leipzig), and Fenna Imara Hoefsloot (University College London), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i525>

Abstract

In an era marked by overlapping crises, including climate change, democratic erosion, digital disruption, and socioeconomic inequality, municipalities increasingly serve as frontline actors in shaping adaptive and inclusive urban futures. This article examines how Futures Bazaar, a participatory futuring method, can develop future literacy and resilience within municipal governance. Drawing on survey data from a multi-case study involving 13 Swedish municipalities, based primarily on responses from organisers coordinating the events across municipalities, and complemented by an in-depth survey of participants from one workshop, this study analyses how Futures Bazaar workshops engage civil servants, policymakers, and citizens in co-creating tangible future scenarios to address locally defined societal challenges. Framed within theories of participatory design, co-creation, and strategic foresight, the article explores how futures are imagined and negotiated in municipal contexts, and how this reshapes the agency of local actors in future-making. The findings show that Futures Bazaar functions as a temporary yet transformative space for challenging institutional path dependencies and stimulating systemic thinking. Through playfulness, prototyping, and dialogue, the method helped unlock participants’ imagination, enabling them to move beyond existing constraints. However, the study also identifies critical frictions, such as organisational inertia, limited policy integration, and the exclusion of marginalised voices that constrain the method’s long-term impact. By investigating how municipalities can navigate challenges through design-led speculative engagement, this study contributes to a broader understanding of urban planning as both a technical, imaginative, and democratic practice. It argues that participatory futuring tools like the Futures Bazaar can help realign urban governance toward more anticipatory, inclusive, and situated future-making practices, provided they are supported by institutional commitment and structural anchoring.

Keywords

co-creation; design methods; futuring; municipal governance; participatory design; speculative design; strategic foresight

1. Introduction

The public sector and municipalities increasingly face complex challenges in a rapidly changing world marked by societal, environmental, and technological uncertainties (Sjöblom, 2024). These challenges include climate adaptation, demographic shifts, digital transformation, and evolving citizen expectations (Frantzeskaki et al., 2018; Lindvall, 2023; OECD, 2024). Addressing these issues requires innovative and forward-looking approaches that strengthen resilience and enhance strategic decision-making in municipal governance. Accordingly, public organisations need to strengthen their capacity to anticipate change, adapt, and act under conditions of uncertainty (Sjöblom, 2024).

Existing research in futuring and design demonstrates the importance of collaborative methods in fostering innovation and addressing societal challenges (cf. Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Dunn, 2022). However, despite these recognised benefits, their systematic application within municipal governance remains underexplored. Studies have emphasised the need for tools that integrate citizens' voices into strategic decision-making processes while preparing communities for future uncertainties (Dunagan & Candy, 2017; Dunn, 2022; Manzini, 2015).

Futuring is here understood as a set of practices aimed at systematically exploring multiple possible futures to support reflection, learning, and strategic decision-making in the present. Rather than predicting outcomes, futuring involves engaging actors in imagining, discussing, and materialising alternative futures. In municipal contexts, futuring is applied as a participatory and exploratory practice that supports long-term thinking, anticipatory capacity, and collective sense-making.

In line with this, this article explores how Futures Bazaar workshops (Cuttica & Candy, 2022) contribute to resilience-building in the public sector. Futures Bazaar employs participatory methods to co-create future scenarios with diverse stakeholders, bringing together citizens, experts, and decision-makers to prototype tangible artefacts representing alternative futures. Through this process, the workshops create a shared space for learning, reflection, and innovation.

As a participatory method within the design and futures fields, Futures Bazaar combines speculative design, scenario work, and prototyping, making abstract ideas of the future more concrete and accessible. It operationalises this by creating physical artefacts from imagined futures, which are exhibited in a so-called futures market (the bazaar). This enables reflection, discussion, and shared learning around alternative futures and their implications (cf. Cuttica & Candy, 2022). Futures Bazaar has been used in various contexts to support critical and creative futures thinking. The method emphasises accessibility and inclusivity, allowing both citizens and decision-makers to participate as active future-makers rather than passive recipients of future scenarios (Dunagan & Candy, 2017).

The concept of the Futures Bazaar is not yet widely established in the academic literature, but the method draws on principles of participatory design (Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Røiseland, 2021; Sanders & Stappers, 2008), strategic foresight (Barendregt et al., 2024; Bock et al., 2016; Pólvora & Nascimento, 2021; Szczepanikova & Van Crieking, 2018), and co-creation (Light, 2021; Sanders, 2000; Sanders & Stappers, 2014). Through this combination, the Futures Bazaar offers a distinctive space for engaging diverse stakeholders in envisioning and co-creating preferred futures (see Andersen et al., 2021; Barendregt et al., 2024; Bisht, 2017; Light, 2021; Lundmark et al., 2023; Sjöblom, 2024). It prioritises co-creation, learning, and reflection as drivers of transformative change. Furthermore, it integrates systems thinking and exponential thinking to address complexity and explore disruptive trajectories beyond incremental development, encouraging participants to explore innovative solutions to complex challenges (cf. Bason & Austin, 2022; Dunagan & Candy, 2017).

By investigating how Futures Bazaar, as a participatory method designed to engage stakeholders in envisioning sustainable futures, builds municipal capacity to address national and local challenges, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on participatory design and futuring by extending its application within municipal governance.

In January 2025, 13 municipal and public service actors across Sweden organised simultaneous Futures Bazaar workshops as part of a coordinated national initiative led by three municipal innovation leaders. The municipal or public service actors involved varied in size, governance structures, and prior engagement with participatory methods. Each actor arranging a workshop selected a future-oriented theme relevant to their local context, ranging from climate adaptation and ageing populations to digital transformation and community resilience. The initiative marked the first large-scale application of the Futures Bazaar method within the Swedish public sector, serving as both an experiment in participatory futuring and a strategic effort to build local capacities for future resilience and innovation. Based on this initiative, this study investigates how Futures Bazaar strengthens future literacy, resilience, and innovation capacity in municipalities. It focuses on how this participatory method can address national challenges within municipal contexts, such as climate adaptation, digitalisation, and social inclusion, enhance municipalities' capacity for envisioning futures, and foster citizen and civil servant engagement in local governance. The overarching goal is to generate empirically grounded insights into how speculative and participatory methods can support municipal responses to complex, future-oriented challenges.

Responding to the identified research gap, the present study examines Futures Bazaar as a participatory futuring method in municipal governance, contributing empirical knowledge on how such practices are enacted, negotiated, and constrained in real-world public-sector contexts. Accordingly, the study addresses the following objectives:

1. Examine Futures Bazaar's implementation across municipalities;
2. Explore organisers' and participants' experiences of its value and limitations;
3. Analyse conditions enabling participatory futuring to support municipal learning and resilience.

Beyond its methodological contribution, this study also speaks to questions of agency and disruption in urban future-making. By temporarily reconfiguring who is invited to imagine, articulate, and negotiate possible futures, the Futures Bazaar can be understood as an intervention that unsettles established

planning routines and expert-led foresight practices. Rather than producing fixed visions, it foregrounds future-making as a negotiated and collective process where agency over the future is redistributed, contested, and made visible.

The article is structured as follows. First, an overview of relevant background and prior research is provided. Next, the study's methodological approach, including data collection and analysis, is outlined. This is followed by findings on the applications and outcomes of the Futures Bazaar. Finally, the discussion contextualises the findings, and the conclusion outlines implications for policy, practice, and future research.

2. Background

This study is informed by research in futuring and participatory design. Futuring methods, such as scenario planning and speculative design, emphasise the co-creation of visions for preferred futures (Candy, 2010; Curry & Hodgson, 2008).

2.1. Participatory Design Initiatives in Municipal Governance

Participatory design, rooted in democratic ideals originating from Scandinavian design practices in the 1970s, seeks to empower participants by involving them directly in the design process, ensuring that solutions are equitable and inclusive (Ehn, 2008; Simonsen & Robertson, 2013). It is widely used to engage stakeholders, particularly citizens, in co-creating solutions that impact their communities. Participatory design emphasises collaborative processes where designers and users jointly contribute to the development of public spaces, services, and policies. Such initiatives often rely on strong local partnerships and active citizen engagement to enhance public value and community identity (Eker, 2021).

According to Pólvara and Nascimento (2021), co-creation, combined with participatory methods, plays a vital role in stimulating broad social engagement. Their research shows how speculative design and foresight can be integrated into policy labs to enable experimentation and citizen input (Pólvara & Nascimento, 2021). In parallel, Røiseland (2021) emphasises that opening space for multiple perspectives and actively challenging singular assumptions about the future is crucial for cultivating participatory methods in futures work, a prerequisite for equitable and pluralistic planning.

2.2. Futuring and Futures Bazaar as Methods in Municipal Work

Futuring, or strategic foresight, is a methodical practice of exploring multiple possible futures to support decision-making and better prepare for change. In this article, foresight practices refer to structured yet exploratory activities, such as scenario building, horizon scanning, and speculative design, that help organisations reflect on uncertainty rather than predict outcomes (OECD, 2025). Given the accelerating pace of societal and technological change, municipalities increasingly rely on anticipatory methods to navigate uncertainty and plan strategically (OECD, 2024, 2025). Participatory foresight, in particular, is valuable for municipalities because it helps to identify trends and uncertainties, surface diverse perspectives, strengthen preparedness, integrate sustainability, improve policy flexibility, build legitimacy, develop long-term strategies, and foster innovation through co-creation and citizen participation (Nascimento et al., 2016; Rosa et al., 2021).

Previous research on the use of futuring methods has identified both significant advantages and notable challenges associated with participatory futuring in the public sector context. On the one hand, participatory foresight has been shown to increase the capacity to anticipate and prepare for future challenges by enabling the exploration of alternative futures, trend identification, and strategic planning (Rosa et al., 2021). Such methods also strengthen the legitimacy and anchoring of decisions, as citizen and stakeholder involvement makes outcomes more responsive to local needs and enhances democratic buy-in (Dixon et al., 2018). Rosa et al. (2021) show how participatory foresight projects in regional contexts produced citizen-generated artefacts (scenarios, narratives, and visions) that influenced mission-oriented policy agendas by exposing alternative futures and pressing assumptions, underscoring that meaningful participation can expand legitimacy and reflexivity in innovation policy. Furthermore, long-term strategies developed through inclusive futures work tend to support sustainable development, helping public sector actors to address immediate concerns while also considering intergenerational equity and systemic resilience (Dixon et al., 2018; Rosa et al., 2021).

On the other hand, previous research has shown that applying futuring and the Futures Bazaar can be resource-intensive, requiring substantial time, expertise, and financial investment (Dixon et al., 2018). Competence development is another challenge, as municipal staff may lack experience with futures methods, scenario work, or participatory facilitation (Rosa et al., 2021). Moreover, participation in workshops does not automatically translate into systemic transformation. Ensuring all residents can engage equally, attending to power imbalances, and linking participatory events to formal policy are essential to avoid tokenism or superficial inclusion (Dixon et al., 2018; Rodela & Lundmark, 2025; Rosa et al., 2021). Finally, implementation remains a persistent challenge: Without mechanisms to carry insights forward into policy and practice, the potential impact of foresight exercises is significantly reduced (Rosa et al., 2021).

Several countries successfully use futuring in the public sector. For example, the UK Government has a Futures Toolkit which includes several futuring methods and tools, demonstrating how governments can embed futures thinking into policy processes to enhance robustness and strategic flexibility. However, to be effective, these methods have previously been proven to require institutional support, facilitation expertise, resources, and mechanisms to translate insights into concrete policy and practice (Rosa et al., 2021).

Previous research has shown that integrating co-creation, participatory design, and futuring methods presents a promising foundation for the public sector to engage more robustly with uncertainty and complexity. However, it has also been shown that success depends on institutional support, process legitimacy, and effective translation of futures insights into action (cf. Bason, 2017; Dixon et al., 2018; Manzini, 2015). The Futures Bazaar, as a participatory futuring tool, offers potential for engaging citizens in envisioning and co-creating sustainable futures, but further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of participatory futuring methods in municipal governance and to develop actionable insights for their implementation. This study begins to address this need by empirically examining how the Futures Bazaar method was implemented and experienced across a national initiative involving 13 municipalities, focusing on both organisers' cross-municipal perspectives and participants' experiences of the workshops.

The concepts used throughout the article are applied pragmatically rather than exhaustively. Rather than offering comprehensive theoretical accounts, the study employs these terms as analytical lenses to interpret how participatory futuring practices were enacted and experienced in municipal contexts.

2.2.1. The Futures Bazaar Workshop Format

Compared to other participatory foresight approaches, the Futures Bazaar is distinctive in its combination of a bazaar-like, open format, the use of tangible speculative artefacts, and a nationally coordinated initiative implemented through locally adapted workshops. The Futures Bazaar workshop in this study followed a structured yet flexible format designed to support participatory futures explorations. Each workshop is organised around a locally defined future-oriented theme and typically engages municipal employees, local stakeholders, policymakers, and, in some cases, citizens in envisioning future scenarios. The workshops followed a consistent structure, including the following elements: an initial introduction framing the future challenge, warm-up activities encouraging imaginative thinking, scenario-building exercises focused on a defined future horizon, hands-on prototyping using craft and design materials, and a concluding “bazaar” where participants present and discuss their future artefacts. Through this combination of dialogue, playfulness, and materialisation, abstract futures are made tangible and open for collective reflection.

3. Methodology and Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the potential of Futures Bazaar as a tool for municipal work and for fostering future resilience. The study adopts a practice-based and exploratory research approach, informed by participatory research principles, empathising collaboration between researchers and practitioners, and close engagement with real-world challenges in municipal contexts (cf. Reason & Bradbury, 2008). By closely engaging with the municipal context and studying an ongoing participatory initiative, the study aims to generate insights that are both contextually relevant and practically applicable.

While the initiative involved 13 municipalities organising Futures Bazaar events, the empirical focus of this study is primarily on the organisers’ perspectives across the national initiative. The organisers coordinated and facilitated the workshops locally, thereby providing a cross-municipal view of how the method was adapted, implemented, and reflected upon in different contexts. The participating municipalities were recruited through an open call coordinated by the initiative organisers, rather than through a formal sampling strategy designed for research purposes. To complement this organiser-focused dataset, the study includes a more in-depth participant survey from one selected workshop, providing illustrative insights into participants’ experiences with the method.

3.1. Data Collection

The primary data collection for this study consists of two qualitative surveys, one with the organisers and one with participants at one of the workshops, providing complementary perspectives on the process and outcomes.

As complementary data, the author conducted participatory observations during two online meetings with the various organisers of the Futures Bazaar workshops (one before the event and one after, 60 minutes each), as well as two of the workshops to document interactions, decision-making processes, and emergent dynamics. The two workshops were video recorded in their entirety (390 minutes of video recordings), and 247 images were collected. Detailed field notes were maintained to capture qualitative nuances. These materials were analysed to contextualise survey findings.

The surveys were sent out digitally to all organisers responsible for coordinating the workshops, as well as to participants in one selected workshop. In total, 11 organisers responded to the survey, corresponding primarily to one organiser per municipality, with some organisers having responsibility for multiple local workshops within the initiative. In addition, 16 participants from one Futures Bazaar workshop, out of 32 workshop participants, responded to a participant survey. No systematic demographic or professional background data were collected from participants, as the survey focused on reflections on the workshop experience rather than participant characteristics. The organiser survey constitutes the primary dataset of the study, capturing reflections across multiple municipal contexts, while the participant survey serves as a complementary and illustrative dataset providing deeper insight into how the method was experienced at the workshop level.

3.2. Data Analysis

The collected data from the surveys were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2022) to identify recurring patterns and themes across the open-ended survey responses, particularly relating to imagination, participation, institutional constraints, and perceived future capacity building and resilience in municipal work.

The analysis followed these steps:

1. Familiarisation with the data through transcription and repeated reading;
2. Initial coding to identify meaningful segments;
3. Theme development by clustering related codes;
4. Refining themes to ensure they accurately represent the data;
5. Interpretation of themes and contextualisation within the broader literature on participatory design, strategic foresight, systemic innovation, and municipal resilience.

In the analysis, particular attention was paid to tracing how meanings articulated in the empirical material were progressively abstracted into higher-level analytical constructs. Initial manual coding focused on recurring patterns in the open-ended survey responses. These codes were grouped into preliminary sub-themes based on conceptual similarity and shared emphasis. In a subsequent analytical step, these sub-themes were further clustered into broader thematic categories that captured more general patterns across cases. This iterative movement between data, codes, and themes enabled the development of analytically coherent categories while remaining grounded in participants' formulations.

All quotes from the surveys were translated from Swedish into English with the support of ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot, and, where necessary, adjusted by the authors to preserve meaning and nuance.

The study focused on participants' reflections on the process and perceived value of the Futures Bazaar rather than on systematic documentation of the speculative artefacts themselves or the observational data. The observational material was mainly used to contextualise and interpret patterns identified in the survey data, supporting the development and refinement of themes rather than generating separate analytical categories.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical research standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. Participants, in all data collection, were informed about the study’s purpose, their role, and how their data would be used before the data collection began. All data are anonymised, and no sensitive information was collected beyond what was necessary for understanding workshop interactions. The study provides in-depth insights into specific municipal and public service contexts. The participatory nature of the research may also introduce biases, as participants’ involvement in co-creation may influence their perspectives on the process.

4. Results

The analysis progressed through an intermediate layer of sub-themes, which served as a conceptual bridge between empirical expressions in the survey material and the broader analytical categories presented below. The thematic analysis of the survey responses from Futures Bazaar organisers revealed several recurring themes that highlight both the strengths and dynamics of the workshops. Six recurrent core aspects emerged in the open-ended survey responses: “ideas,” “future,” “fun,” “together,” “participants,” and “create” (see Figure 1). The prominence of “ideas” and “create” underscores the workshops’ strong focus on creativity, innovation, and hands-on exploration, where participants actively generated new concepts. The frequent mention of the “future” shows that the workshops successfully engaged participants in imaginative and forward-looking thinking, aligning with the overarching goal of fostering futures literacy within municipal contexts. The term “fun” suggests that the sessions were perceived as enjoyable and energising, highlighting the role of playfulness and engagement as enablers of learning and participation. Meanwhile, “together” and “participants” emphasise collaboration and co-creation as central components of the method, illustrating how Futures Bazaar facilitated collective exploration among diverse actors.

These recurring aspects were grouped into intermediate sub-themes (middle row in Figure 1) based on shared meaning and analytical relevance. In a final step, the sub-themes were synthesised into three overarching analytical categories, which structure the presentation of the results. To deepen the

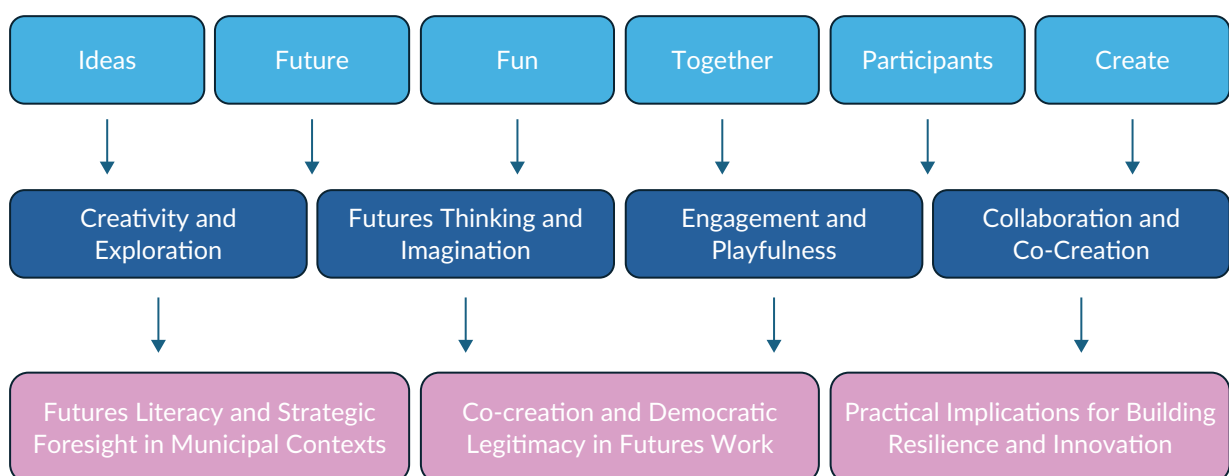


Figure 1. The analytical model illustrating the progression from survey-derived themes to overarching analytical categories.

understanding of these dynamics, the survey results were complemented by participatory observations, follow-up meetings, and workshop documentation. This approach enabled tracing how ideas, practices, and interactions unfolded across different contexts and organisational levels. Through this combined analysis, three broader thematic categories were identified that cut across the various materials. Figure 1 visualises the analytical movement from empirical material to higher-level conceptual interpretation.

By integrating theories of participatory design, strategic foresight, and co-creation, this study organises the results around three themes:

1. Futures Literacy and Strategic Foresight in Municipal Contexts
2. Co-Creation and Democratic Legitimacy in Futures Work
3. Practical Implications for Building Resilience and Innovation

4.1. Futures Literacy and Strategic Foresight in Municipal Contexts

Empirical evidence from the organising participants in the Futures Bazaar initiative highlights the importance of creating a space for unbounded ideation as part of municipal futures work. Several organisers highlighted how the playful and imaginative setting enabled participants to think beyond existing constraints. As one organiser reflected: “It was inspiring to be able to think freely without immediately having to limit oneself by practical obstacles.” Another emphasised the role of playfulness in supporting creative thinking:

The playfulness in the setup and the future fluff [craft materials and playful objects] as de-dramatising props made it easier for the participants to think anew, freely and differently. When it is extra important, then it is extra important that it is fun.

At the same time, organisers acknowledged the challenges of balancing open-ended brainstorming with actionable outcomes. One noted:

This time, they got to brainstorm completely freely on things that actually do not exist today, that might exist in the future. I think we would need to be a bit more limited to actually bring out solutions that we can continue working with.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that the workshops functioned as a practical arena for *futures literacy*, an opportunity for participants to train their ability to imagine and articulate alternative futures beyond present constraints. The process of open-ended exploration was experienced as both liberating and generative, fostering creativity and new perspectives on future possibilities. Participants likewise emphasised the empowering aspect of the workshops: “It was liberating to be able to fantasise about a perfect future...and that we as a municipality can help shape it. We must not lose that thought.”

The reflections also indicate an awareness of the inherent tension between imaginative freedom and strategic direction, underscoring the methodological challenge of transforming exploratory thinking into insights that can meaningfully inform municipal planning and long-term capacity building. As one participant expressed:

The thought of shaping rather than meeting the future was inspiring. I felt less inclined to accept that things “are as they are” and more eager to challenge things that previously had been “truths one just has to live with.”

Organisers also reflected on how prototyping helped to concretise abstract ideas about the future. To illustrate what was generated during the Futures Bazaar workshops, one group of participants developed a speculative future scenario imagining a society where the elderly population is valued and a society where citizens’ well-being is a given. Based on that scenario, they developed prototypes of their futures artefacts (see Figure 2). One of the organisers noted: “When we started creating physical prototypes, our ideas became much clearer; it helped us see what could actually be possible.”

Another one stated:

It is exciting to experience how powerful a futures prototype can be for making visible our thoughts about the future and fundamental premises for problem-solving in the future...The power of prototyping as a method for making visible thoughts, assumptions, driving forces, is important to make visible both what will be new in the future, but also to put a finger on what will remain, things that are human and that have shaped us as individuals and as a society over a very, very long time.



Figure 2. Images of four examples of the created future artefacts exhibited at the bazaars.

At the same time, participants appreciated the openness and creative affordances of the method, while also emphasising the need for stronger integration between imaginative practices and formal strategic processes. As one organiser reflected: “We came up with lots of exciting ideas, but what happens now? How do we take them further?” Or as expressed by a participant: “I wished for one more step in the form of: ‘Here we have a brilliant idea. How do we make the impossible a little more possible?’” Another highlighted the challenge of translating prototypes into actionable steps: “I thought a lot about ‘and now then, or what happens next, how do we take these prototypes further into the organisation?’” Organisers also pointed to the need for structured follow-ups to embed ideas institutionally:

To take the prototypes from the workshop further within the organisation, a structured follow-up with division of responsibilities is needed, as well as resources and budget to support the development.

A recurring reflection among the organisers was the challenge of translating creative ideas into concrete actions. Many expressed a desire for clearer links between the ideation process and actual implementation.

As one put it: “It would have been useful to end with a planning session where we concretised the next steps for the best ideas.” Or as a participant expressed it: “Maybe work a bit more with the question ‘how do we take this further right now?’; so that it doesn’t stop at fun prototypes.” This pattern indicates that while Futures Bazaar effectively stimulate imagination and creativity, a gap remains between idea generation and operationalisation. This was also highlighted in the survey by an organiser:

What worked less well during the workshop was a lack of clear follow-up and implementation of ideas, as well as an imbalance between creative freedom and structure, which meant that some participants needed more guidance....To maximise the effect going forward, a clearer follow-up plan, more structured guidance, and the inclusion of more perspectives could improve the process.

The balance between creative freedom and structural follow-up appears to be delicate; too much openness risks losing direction, while too much structure may stifle innovation. Future iterations could therefore include built-in mechanisms for prioritising, developing, and implementing ideas beyond the workshop setting.

While the method succeeds in unlocking creativity and new perspectives, participants also stressed the importance of follow-up mechanisms and clearer pathways from ideation to action. As one of the organisers mentioned: “A week after the workshop, I have been stuck on the thought of how we can turn the ideas from the workshop into concrete actions and changes, so that they don’t just remain theories.” A participant quote aligns with this: “I find it difficult to see how one moves from visionary thinking to carrying out a real change. Which method can be used to move forward? Or is that not the purpose?” These reflections underscore that participatory foresight not only requires imaginative capacity but also institutional mechanisms to translate futures thinking into action.

4.2. Co-Creation and Democratic Legitimacy in Futures Work

In the analysis, Futures Bazaar emerged as a platform for dismantling hierarchies and fostering open dialogue between municipal representatives and citizens. As a co-creative format, the method enabled forms of interaction that temporarily challenged established roles and routines, thereby enhancing democratic legitimacy by amplifying diverse societal voices in unique ways. Several participants in the survey emphasised the unique role of the method in facilitating interactions that would not typically occur in formal settings. One organiser noted this in relation to the playfulness of the method:

Playful and rewarding for creating dialogue and collaboration. Professional playfulness opens up for creativity, which is fun, but how do we land this in the everyday life of more people?...The power of being able to arrange things together with others without formal structures. Fun! More of that!

The emphasis on playfulness points to how the informal character of the setting lowered thresholds for participation and collaboration compared to more formal municipal contexts. A participant expresses: “How important it is that we talk to each other across responsibility boundaries/area boundaries. This is an excellent way to also get colleagues to raise their gaze and not just be stuck in the present.” Together, these reflections suggest that the playful environment enabled a different kind of conversation, more relaxed, imaginative, and open, where participants could highlight things they might not otherwise have voiced. Coupled with the collaborative mood of the session, this atmosphere fostered openness, as one organiser

noted: “Togetherness. Getting to know each other in an important conversation about how we want to create the future.” Another organiser emphasised: “There is power in collaborating across municipal borders. There is power in gathering different ages in futures work.” These accounts highlight how Futures Bazaar temporarily created conditions for cross-boundary interaction and shared ownership of future-oriented discussions. In line with this, the analysis also highlighted the importance of working together and creating a shared sense of ownership over the process. Many organisers stressed that combining different perspectives was central to the value of Futures Bazaar. As one put it: “The importance of brainstorming together, and finding shared positive images that we together can work towards for a better world/future.” The format enabled participants to collectively explore alternative futures beyond formal roles. It created a temporary arena where cross-sectoral encounters could take place, broadening participants’ understanding of municipal challenges and possibilities for transformation.

This emphasis on co-creation and shared ownership was also reflected in the participants’ assessments of what they took away from the workshops. As one of the organisers put it:

The participants took with them several important insights from the event: a sense of engagement and participation, a new understanding of futures work, and the value of collaboration and diversity of perspectives.

From an analytical perspective, this indicates that the co-creative setting supported learning across professional boundaries and fostered mutual understanding between participants who might otherwise rarely collaborate. However, the organisers also identified challenges in maintaining balanced participation. Some noted that not everyone found it easy to engage fully and that certain participants required more guidance to navigate the process. Others expressed a wish for a broader inclusion of perspectives, especially from citizens and actors outside the municipal organisation: “There was also limited time to really dive deep into all the ideas, and more perspectives from other groups, such as residents, could have enriched the discussions further.” These reflections point to limitations in how far the co-creative ambition was realised in practice.

A few organisers also observed that group dynamics sometimes led to unequal participation, with some individuals dominating discussions while others remained more silent, and that some ideas got stuck early in the process:

The participants got stuck in earlier ideas. Something that was addressed during the creation of prototypes. It could be handled well by emphasising that the fluff should be used and that they are allowed to change the purpose of the objects. We also received constructive criticism that we should give them time to write off old ideas.

Rather than indicating a failure of co-creation, these observations highlight the active role of facilitation in shaping participation and reopening the space for alternative perspectives. While co-creation was a strength of the Futures Bazaar format, it also demands careful facilitation to ensure that all voices are heard and that participation is genuinely equitable. The need to actively counter dominant ideas and voices illustrated how power relations can persist even within participatory formats. The above quote does not explicitly state that some took up more space than others, but it shows that certain participants dominated the conversation with pre-existing ideas, which required active facilitation to create space for other perspectives.

At the same time, challenges remain in ensuring equitable participation. Despite the method's potential, several of the organisers reflected on difficulties reaching marginalised groups or those not already engaged in municipal processes.

Some noted that while Futures Bazaar was inclusive in format, the actual diversity of participants varied significantly depending on local context and outreach efforts. Without active strategies for inclusion, such as collaboration with local community groups or tailored invitations, certain perspectives risk being underrepresented. Moreover, structural and institutional constraints were cited as barriers to truly equal participation. One of the organisers remarked: "I think they took with them that it is possible to use other methods, but I don't think they themselves will pick it up and do something with it. We are too immature." The reflection points to a perceived gap between participatory engagement and organisational capacity to act on the outcomes. Or as another organiser expresses it:

The prototypes themselves are perhaps difficult to take further, and not necessarily something any of us who participated would work with. But we all work with societal challenges in different ways, so the discussions and input that emerged, especially during the map sheet, are something we can all take further in our work.

Taken together, these reflections point to a gap between the creative energy generated during the Futures Bazaar and the institutional capacity to act on it and the institutional conditions required to sustain their effects. As one participant puts it, "We should do this around a specific issue in my administration. I thought that these are questions and a method that I WANT to work with!" However, while participants found value in the discussions, the lack of clear ownership or follow-up mechanisms risks limiting the long-term impact of the ideas. This underscores the importance of embedding co-creation processes within structures that can sustain and implement outcomes, rather than treating them as isolated participatory one-off events.

4.3. Practical Implications for Building Resilience and Innovation

A prominent theme in the analysis was that Futures Bazaar was perceived as contributing to municipalities' capacity to manage uncertainty by fostering a culture of continuous learning and experimentation. The method appeared to support resilience-oriented practices by encouraging municipalities to step outside routine planning frameworks and explore unconventional ideas. As one organiser explains: "Creativity and fun are needed. Practising for the future needs to be done continuously; we need to try new things." Another emphasised: "More long-term thinking is needed when it comes to our society and our planet." Similarly, a participant reflected: "In the afternoon, I realised how important it is to think outside the box. Are we doing something that really benefits the future? Have we taken in perspectives from the municipality's different operations?" Together, these reflections point to an articulated need to legitimise experimentation, challenge established patterns, and create organisational space for creative reflection within public institutions.

Yet, several civil servants reported challenges in adapting the method to rigid bureaucratic structures or established routines:

Just the crazy shapes were a bit scary, and some said, "Good thing my boss isn't seeing me now..." There is a fear where I work that creative activities will be perceived as a waste of taxpayers' money.

This reflection illustrates how organisational cultures dominated by control and efficiency logics (Bason, 2017) can constrain the space for more open, creative ways of working. Another participant noted that while the workshops generated energy and ideas, connecting these outcomes to formal decision-making processes proved challenging:

I realised the importance of not only engaging the participants during the workshop, but also of following up and ensuring that the ideas lead to concrete changes. It's easy to get enthusiastic in the short term, but long-term commitment and the right resources are required for the ideas to be implemented.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that even though the workshop generated many insights and ideas, their organisational uptake was perceived as uncertain without a clear allocation of responsibility or implementation. As one participant expresses it: "Once again, everything comes down to the municipal management and what they are interested in pursuing." Analytically, this points to a recurring organisational tension: While there was enthusiasm for creative and participatory formats, established governance structures and managerial priorities limited their translation into sustained action. This helps explain why creating durable space for more open, experimental ways of working remained challenging despite the positive experience of the method.

5. Discussion

The findings from the Futures Bazaar workshops indicate that participatory and design-based approaches can enhance municipal capacity for foresight, innovation, and democratic engagement. While the workshops generated creativity and collective learning, their longer-term impact appears to depend on embedding outcomes within organisational structures. Futures Bazaar functions as a tool for enhancing municipalities' futures literacy, creativity, and democratic participation. By engaging diverse actors in imagining alternative futures, the workshops foster shared learning, collaboration, and exploration of unconventional ideas. While barriers and challenges were described by participants in the Results section, this Discussion brings these observations together to interpret their implications and to outline conditions for addressing them in future participatory futuring initiatives.

5.1. *The Tension Between Imaginative Freedom and Institutional Constraints*

Strategic foresight has become an increasingly vital tool for municipalities aiming to navigate complex societal challenges. The capacity to anticipate and adapt to future scenarios is crucial for ensuring sustainable development (Szczepanikova & Van Criekinge, 2018). According to the OECD (2025), building anticipatory capacity through strategic foresight enables public institutions to transform challenges into opportunities by adopting a forward-thinking approach. As such, the Futures Bazaar methodology offers a participatory framework through which municipal actors can actively explore future challenges and opportunities through speculative design activities. As the findings show (see Section 4.1), Futures Bazaar workshops created spaces for imaginative, forward-looking thinking, enabling participants to explore alternative futures beyond current policy and organisational constraints. By engaging in hands-on activities such as prototyping and speculative design exercises, and by making abstract ideas tangible, municipalities were able to identify potential risks and opportunities, making futures work more action-oriented. These

practices support what has been described as “futures literacy” (Dunagan & Candy, 2017; Miller, 2018) and thereby enhance the participants’ capacity to anticipate, reflect on, and negotiate pathways for action. Through this approach, municipalities can strengthen their ability to make strategic decisions and foster a culture of anticipatory governance (cf. Barendregt et al., 2024).

As demonstrated in Section 4.1, the participants highlighted prototypes as a way of concretising and visualising abstract ideas about the future. These reflections illustrate how the act of prototyping operates as an epistemic and material practice that connects imaginative exploration with critical inquiry. By materialising abstract ideas, participants were able to make implicit assumptions visible and collectively negotiate what futures might be desirable or feasible (cf. Dunagan & Candy, 2017; Light, 2021). Thus, prototyping operated not merely as a creative exercise but as a situated foresight practice, linking speculation with organisational reflection.

At the same time, imagination alone proved insufficient. Participants repeatedly noted the tension between imaginative freedom and actionable outcomes. Without mechanisms for follow-up, clear responsibilities, and integration into strategic processes, insights risked remaining exploratory. Analytically, this tension points to a central paradox in participatory futuring: The same conditions that enable openness, creativity, and experimentation also risk detaching futures work from institutional decision-making. This tension echoes Bason and Austin’s (2022) concept of the “design paradox,” where creativity must coexist with administrative accountability. In this sense, Futures Bazaar can be understood as a form of temporary and situated disruption in planning practice. Rather than replacing existing decision-making structures, it momentarily suspends dominant logics of expertise, efficiency, and feasibility, allowing alternative futures to be explored. However, such disruption remains fragile and reversible, and its impact depends on whether insights generated through the process are subsequently taken up within institutional settings.

This analysis suggests that participatory futuring does not automatically translate into organisational change. Embedding participatory futures work within existing planning structures, while maintaining its exploratory character, emerges as a critical condition for sustaining organisational learning and democratic legitimacy (cf. Bason, 2017; Røiseland, 2021).

5.2. Co-Creation as Democratic Potential and Its Fragility

A central feature of Futures Bazaar is its participatory approach, fostering collaboration and emphasising inclusion and co-creation in strategic planning. In line with participatory design traditions (see Ehn, 2008; Simonsen & Robertson, 2013), the method extends co-creation into the temporal dimension of governance by inviting diverse actors to imagine and negotiate possible futures. Through its participatory and imaginative character, the method reconfigures agency in future-making, enabling participants to engage with questions of legitimacy, responsibility, and collective orientation that are typically reserved for expert-led planning processes.

Futures Bazaar can be seen as operating not merely as a participatory workshop but as an experimental governance arena where democratic imagination and social learning are enacted in practice. The setting temporarily suspended hierarchies and enabled cross-boundary interactions. This aligns with participatory design research that views co-design as an “infrastructure of participation” (Björgvinsson et al., 2012), fostering situated collaboration and shared meaning-making. As the findings show, the organisers in this

study emphasised the shared ownership and collective visioning, as well as the unique role of the method in facilitating interactions that would not typically occur in formal settings. Thus, Futures Bazaar may serve as a platform for temporarily unsettling hierarchies and fostering open dialogue between the actors. This form of co-creation enhances democratic legitimacy by amplifying diverse societal voices and challenging unilateral conceptions of the future (Røiseland, 2021).

However, participation was not always equitable. While Futures Bazaar opens up participatory spaces, it also risks reproducing existing power relations if institutional logics, resource allocation, and agenda-setting remain unchanged. In some workshops, certain voices dominated, while marginalised perspectives, particularly those of residents, were underrepresented. Analytically, this points to a core tension in participatory futuring: While the format aspires to inclusivity, it may simultaneously reproduce existing power relations if issues of access, facilitation, and representation are not actively addressed. These moments of openness were fragile and required deliberate facilitation to be sustained beyond the workshop. While the temporary suspension of formal hierarchies can spark creativity and engagement, the key challenge lies in translating this energy into lasting institutional practices without re-inscribing established exclusions. In this sense, Futures Bazaar functions both as a space of democratic potential and as a testing ground for more inclusive and dialogical forms of municipal foresight work. Its democratic promise is therefore conditional rather than inherent, highlighting the need for deliberate facilitation, diversity-sensitive recruitment, and inclusive design strategies to ensure co-creation genuinely reflects a plurality of voices.

5.3. When Futuring Becomes Organisational Learning

Taken together, the findings highlight both the promise and fragility of co-creation in municipal futures work. While Futures Bazaar supported innovative thinking and cross-sectoral dialogue, its democratic and organisational impact was contingent on institutional readiness, facilitation capacity, and follow-up structures. Co-creation formats like Futures Bazaar can enhance legitimacy and dialogue, but their democratic potential and learning potential depend on sustained accessibility, responsiveness, and organisational commitment.

The practical application of the method and its effectiveness varied depending on local contexts, needs, and organisational readiness. While the findings show that workshops generated a great deal of enthusiasm and ideas, a lack of structured responsibility often risked leaving outcomes unrealised. This illustrates the recurring tension between innovation and implementation: Creative ideas are welcomed, but without institutional mechanisms, they rarely inform policy or planning (Pólvora & Nascimento, 2021). Analytically, this tension can be understood as a structural rather than a procedural issue, where participatory formats are introduced without corresponding adjustments to decision-making routines and accountability structures. Thus, municipalities with prior experience in participatory and design-oriented methods tend to integrate the Futures Bazaar more seamlessly into ongoing innovation or strategic planning processes, while others encounter challenges in adapting the method to existing bureaucratic structures and managerial routines. There is also a risk that workshop outcomes may not translate into concrete policy changes without clear mechanisms for implementation and follow-up (Pólvora & Nascimento, 2021). This organisational tension mirrors what Bason and Austin (2022) describe as the “design paradox” in public sector innovation, where creative methods are welcomed rhetorically but rarely embedded in practice. Rather than a lack of ideas or engagement, the constraint lies in how organisations authorise, prioritise, and

sustain experimental knowledge. The variation between municipalities highlights both the flexibility of the method and the fact that its transformative potential depends less on facilitation quality alone and more on institutional embedding.

The Futures Bazaar workshops thus offer municipalities a promising approach for building resilience and fostering innovation. However, their long-term effectiveness depends on internal commitment, follow-up structures, and the recognition of experimentation as a legitimate part of governance. Without these enabling conditions, the method risks becoming an isolated event rather than a catalyst for systemic change. More broadly, operating at the intersection of experimentation and institutionalisation, the temporary design intervention of Futures Bazaar opens new spaces for collaboration and imagination, yet its long-term impact depends on municipalities' ability to absorb and sustain these practices. Institutional readiness, facilitation competence, and leadership are therefore not supplementary but constitutive conditions for translating creative participation into lasting organisational learning (Bason & Austin, 2022).

5.4. Implications for Municipal Resilience and Learning

Previous research has shown that futuring practices (i.e., Futures Bazaar) can be resource-intensive, requiring substantial time, expertise, and financial investments (Dixon et al., 2018). The findings indicate that the integration into existing municipal structures often proves difficult, as it requires adjustments to established routines, roles, and decision-making logics. This suggests that participatory futuring challenges not only practices but also underlying institutional assumptions about legitimacy, efficiency, and authority.

By engaging multiple actors, municipalities can explore interdependencies, test assumptions, and co-create alternative pathways for action (Light, 2021; Szczepanikova & Van Criekinge, 2018). However, participation in futuring workshops does not automatically translate into systemic transformation. Without explicit attention to power relations and inclusion, participatory formats risk reproducing existing hierarchies under the guise of openness. Ensuring that all residents can engage on equal terms, attending to power imbalances, and linking participatory events to formal policy processes are essential to avoid tokenism or superficial inclusion (Dixon et al., 2018; Rosa et al., 2021). Without such considerations, the transformative and democratic potential of participatory foresight risks remaining symbolic rather than structural.

When adequately supported, Futures Bazaar can strengthen municipal resilience by enabling actors to step outside routine planning frameworks, question assumptions, and experiment with unconventional ideas in a protected setting. Such spaces function as temporary arenas for organisational reflection, where dominant problem framings can be suspended and alternative futures explored.

However, these gains are fragile without institutional anchoring. Implementation emerges as a recurrent hurdle: Without concrete mechanisms to carry insights forward into policy and practice, ideas generated through futuring exercises may fail to influence decision-making, thereby reducing their potential impact (Rosa et al., 2021). Clear pathways from ideation to implementation (including follow-up, accountability, and integration into governance frameworks) are therefore essential.

Overall, while futuring and the Futures Bazaar hold significant potential to support strategic planning, innovation, and participation, their ability to create lasting change depends on systematic integration into

municipal operations. This integration requires not only competence development and organisational commitment but also a reconfiguration of how experimental knowledge is recognised, authorised, and acted upon within municipal governance. Future research should explore scaling and systematic integration into municipal decision-making and empirically assess contributions to resilience, innovation, and democratic legitimacy.

6. Conclusion

This study has contributed to research on participatory futuring and municipal governance in three main ways. First, it provides empirical insights from a nationally coordinated initiative involving multiple municipal actors. Second, it conceptualises the Futures Bazaar as a temporary design infrastructure that creates a civic co-creation arena at the intersection of experimentation and institutional governance. Third, it identifies key conditions, such as organisational readiness, facilitation competence, and follow-up mechanisms, which shape whether participatory futuring can support anticipatory governance and democratic legitimacy in municipal contexts. In an era of overlapping crises, municipalities increasingly act as frontline actors in shaping adaptive and inclusive urban futures. This study demonstrates that the Futures Bazaar offers a temporary yet transformative space for exploring alternative futures, challenging institutional dependencies, and stimulating futuring literacy as a collective and situated capacity. By engaging civil servants, policymakers, and citizens in co-creating tangible scenarios, the method unlocks imaginative capacity, enabling participants to move beyond present constraints while simultaneously exposing tension between exploratory freedom and institutional responsibility.

For municipalities considering adopting participatory futuring methods such as the Futures Bazaar, the findings suggest that transformative potential depends less on the creative format itself and more on the surrounding conditions. Institutional anchoring, structured follow-up mechanisms, facilitation competence, and inclusive participation practices emerge as critical enablers for translating temporary futures-oriented workshops into sustained organisational learning and anticipatory governance. Achieving transformative impact requires balancing creative exploration with structured implementation, fostering institutional readiness, and including diverse voices. When these conditions are met, workshops can serve as both a learning platform and a catalyst for systemic innovation, helping municipalities navigate uncertainty and build resilient, adaptive, future-oriented strategies.

The workshops foster collaboration, co-creation, and democratic legitimacy by enabling participants from diverse sectors and roles to engage in shared problem-solving, materialise abstract ideas, surface assumptions, and collectively negotiate desirable and feasible futures. At the same time, the study identifies critical frictions that limit long-term impact. Organisational inertia, limited integration into policy and strategic processes, and underrepresentation of marginalised voices can prevent insights from informing action. These frictions point to underlying power asymmetries and institutional path dependencies that shape whose futures are imagined, prioritised, and acted upon. Without deliberate facilitation, structured follow-up, and institutional embedding, the method risks remaining at the exploratory stage.

By integrating participatory methods, co-creation, and strategic foresight, the Futures Bazaar demonstrates how municipalities can move beyond conventional planning toward more imaginative, inclusive, and democratic approaches to future-making. Participatory futuring tools like Futures Bazaar can serve as a

learning platform, a catalyst for systemic innovation, and a means to realign municipal decision-making toward inclusive, forward-looking, and resilient strategies. In this sense, the Futures Bazaar can be seen not only as a participatory futuring method but as a temporary civic infrastructure that enables new forms of agency in urban future-making. Its disruptive potential lies less in radical outcomes than in its capacity to reconfigure roles, expectations, and imaginaries around who can legitimately speak about the future. Whether such moments of disruption lead to longer-term transformation depends on institutional anchoring, follow-up, and political and organisational support.

Acknowledgments

I am truly grateful to all the participants and organisers of the Futures Bazaar Goes National initiative, and would like to thank the informants participating in the surveys and interviews. I would especially like to thank Sara Tunheden, Karin Lycke, and Max Larcombe, who initiated the national initiative and who let me be part of this project.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Södertörn University and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot have been used in this article for some proofreading, language checking, and suggestions for shortening individual sentences. In addition, all quotes from the surveys were translated from Swedish into English with the support of ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot, and, where necessary, adjusted by the author to preserve meaning and nuance.

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