

Imagining beyond Visions: Opening up the *Omgevingsvisie* Amsterdam 2050 for Transformative Futures

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Abstract

Despite the promise of vision documents to make city planning more ambitious and future-oriented, current planning systems often lack the capacity for transformations towards more sustainable and just socio-spatial futures. In this essay, we examine the limits of visioning as a dominant practice in urban planning by looking at its underlying style of anticipation. Through an analysis of the vision document of the city of Amsterdam, *Omgevingsvisie* Amsterdam 2050, we illustrate that visioning relies on a closed style of anticipation. This style frames the future as a continuation of existing trends to be managed through consensus-building. Instead, we argue that visioning needs to be complemented with practices of imagining with an open style of anticipation, engaging with a plurality of futures through contestation, experimentation, and affective knowledge. This essay concludes by exploring what embracing imagination in city planning could look like, opening up potential futures for Amsterdam beyond the *Omgevingsvisie*.

Introduction

In 2021, the municipality of Amsterdam published its *Omgevingsvisie Amsterdam 2050* [translation: *Vision on Physical Space Amsterdam 2050*, hereafter *Omgevingsvisie*]¹, a document outlining the vision for the city's future. The preamble of this document contains an explicit invitation to the people of Amsterdam to actively participate in shaping the city (15). As urban planning scholars and residents of Amsterdam, we gladly take up their invitation, which comes at a time when deep engagement with urban futures is urgently needed. While times of intersecting social, ecological, and political crises call for transformations to more sustainable and just socio-spatial systems, current city planning practice often *maintains* rather than *challenges* or *transforms* the status quo, especially when responding to crises that are non-linear, interdependent, and politically contested (Stead & Albrechts 2023).

We explore this difficulty of generating transformative change in city planning by focusing on a dominant instrument in contemporary planning: the practice of visioning, particularly revolving around the production of vision documents such as the *Omgevingsvisie*. Visioning is the collective practice of creating normative statements about a desired future, which can subsequently orient different actors to work towards this shared vision (Kesar & Ache 2024). It was introduced in planning in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a way to make planning more ambitious and participatory, centering collective desires for the future rather than the predictions offered by tools such as model calculations, risk assessments, and trend analyses (Gaffikin & Sterrett 2006; Kesar & Ache 2024; Muiderman et al. 2020). However, whilst visioning has been successful in setting out a long-term strategy and connecting various people around a common goal, it struggles to enable futures that deviate from the present trajectories responsible for today's polycrisis (Ache 2017; Kesar & Ache 2024).

Building on Ben Anderson's (2010) framework of anticipatory action, this essay argues that visioning lacks transformative potential because of its *closed* 'style of anticipation', locking in the future around existing path dependencies through the ontological and epistemological assumptions about the future underlying this practice. While a closed perspective on the future could be useful for different actors to collaborate on realizing a desired future, we propose that visioning needs to be complemented by practices of imagining with an *open* style of anticipation. As a process of "*seeing, sensing, thinking, and dreaming*" about a plurality of alternative possibilities (Yusoff & Gabrys 2011, 516), imagination may create opportunities for radically different futures (Moore & Milkoreit 2020).

We illustrate the limits of visioning, as well as the possibilities for more generative imagination that can be found in its margins, through an analysis of the *Omgevingsvisie*. This vision document is created by the city of Amsterdam to meet the legal obligation for municipalities, provinces, and the national government to outline the aspirations for the use, development, management, protection, and conservation of the physical environment (Omgevingswet, Chapter 3). In 277 pages, the *Omgevingsvisie* discusses the challenges the city is facing, its vision for the future captured in five strategic pillars, and subsequent details of *what* this will entail, *where* this will apply, and *how* this development will be structured. Grounding our argument in an analysis of this vision document, we explore how city planning might better fulfil its mission to *make better places* (Healey 2017) if it embraced the potential of imagination to anticipate a plurality of futures open for negotiation, disagreement, and transformation.

In what follows, we first theoretically distinguish the open and closed styles of anticipation. Thereafter, we discuss how these styles appear in the *Omgevingsvisie* and explore possibilities for imagination within and beyond this document.

Open and Closed Styles of Anticipation

To understand why visioning is limited in creating pathways for radically sustainable and social future cities and why imagining might be a necessary complement, we turn to Anderson's (2010) work on anticipatory action. Anderson (2010) provides a framework to unpack how different kinds of anticipatory actions, including city planning, relate to the future and what futures they make possible. He argues that anticipatory action is shaped by three components: styles, practices, and logics. *Styles* refer to the ontological and epistemological foundations of how someone relates to the future, the assemblage of "*knowledge practices, forms of social action, and normative frameworks which underlie and help organize future imaginaries*" (Groves 2017, 32). Different styles of anticipation may clash, for example when the technocratic style of a government body aiming to control the redevelopment of a piece of land meets the more affective and embodied relation to the future of residents (Groves 2017). From these styles follow certain *practices* to make the future tangible (Anderson 2010). Anderson discusses three practices, which he calls calculating, prefiguring, and imagining, the latter of which he sees as an umbrella category that also includes visioning. We, however, distinguish the practices of visioning and imagining to be able to analyze their different styles of anticipation. Lastly, Anderson (2010) explains that practices lead to concrete anticipatory actions, such as

planning decisions, which are justified through *logics*, such as precaution, preemption, or we may add, transformation. For Anderson, this framework helps to reflect on how we currently relate to the future and whether we might want to relate differently.

While Anderson (2010) does not specifically connect certain practices to logics or styles of anticipation, we follow other scholars such as Muiderman et al. (2020) that *do* argue that the ontological and epistemological foundations of future orientations lead to particular practices and logics of anticipatory governance. Particularly, we argue that the practices of visioning and imagining in city planning lead to different logics of what action is needed *because of* their different underlying styles of anticipation.

To be able to distinguish between the styles of visioning and imagining, we call these styles ‘closed’ and ‘open’. In a closed style of anticipation, which we will link to visioning, there is a clear image of what the future will be. This allows us to prepare for and to some extent modify these expected events. For example, the expectation is that sea levels will continue to rise, which requires measures to prepare for this event and to mitigate its consequences. An open style of anticipation, in contrast, relates to the future as a temporality that is by definition uncertain, unpredictable, and constantly unfolding. This style, which we will connect to imagining, assumes that the ‘best’ future is not already legible to institutions but will require “*sustained engagement with changing urban realities*” (Kesar & Ache 2024, 60). The main differences in the logics, styles and anticipatory actions between visioning and imagining are summarized in Table 1, which we will develop further in the remainder of this essay through an analysis of the *Omgevingsvisie*.

Practices	Visioning	Imagining
Logics	Preparing for the future	Transforming the future
Styles	Closed (linear future, extending past trajectories, reactive)	Open (seeking emergent alternative possibilities, generative)
	Mainly predictive, rational knowledge	Including experiential and affective knowledge
Anticipatory actions	Results-oriented	Process-oriented, focus on learning
	Consensus-building	Contestation
	Abstract language	“Concrete utopias”

Table 1. Differences between visioning and imagining in terms of logics, styles, and actions.

Visioning as Foreclosing Futures

Having established the differences between open and closed styles of anticipation, we now turn to the practice of visioning in planning to understand how this practice is shaped by a closed style and what this means for planning better future cities. The term ‘visioning’ has gained popularity in many disciplines and fields since the 1990s, yet its meaning often remains vague and the term is applied to a variety of approaches (Van der Helm 2009). While visions appear as ideologies in politics or as aspirations in the field of personal development, the term is most prominently featured in business and organizational theory where it is used as a strategic tool (Van der Helm 2009). It is also in this context that Kesar & Ache define visioning in planning as the production of a normative “statement highlighting what is to be achieved in the future” aimed at “changing the attitude and behaviour of actors by taking up the role of a framework of orientation” (2024, 51).² As abstract and broad guidelines, visions captured in vision documents connect various actors involved in shaping spatial futures—from various city planning departments to developers, investors, politicians, and citizens—in coordinated and strategic efforts to work towards a shared goal (Gaffikin & Sterrett 2006).

Such vision documents, including the *Omgevingsvisie* of Amsterdam, are often characterized by a closed style of anticipation. This style forecloses future possibilities by constricting the options that are considered. One way in which vision documents do so is by conceptualizing the future as a temporality that extends from current trends that mostly lie outside of one’s control. The *Omgevingsvisie*, for example, starts by looking back at the trends that have been noticeable over the last ten years. The expectation is that “*Trends zetten door. (...) Het wordt steeds duidelijker wat de richting daarbij zal zijn.* [translation: “*Trends continue. (...) It becomes increasingly clear what their direction will be.*” 42]. The vision is then positioned as a response to these external factors, particularly the expectation that the city will continue to grow in population. The increase in residents, visitors, and foreign capital creates the perception that the city government is increasingly “*out of control*” [translation: “*grip verloren*”] and that regaining such control would also provide opportunities that the city might benefit from (14). By framing these trends as external factors posing threats to the current ways of living, the future is not seen as a space of possibility but rather as a risk the city needs to manage and prepare for.

Taking this reactive attitude as a starting point for visioning, there is a risk of locking in the future around these expected trends, making this style of anticipation ‘closed’. From this perspective, measures to radically

break from expected trends and existing policies are not considered. We see this logic of continuation in how the *Omgevingsvisie* builds on existing policy instead of setting out a new direction (17, 158). It also continues this policy into the future, as the five main strategic pillars outlined in the vision are meant to provide a framework for future development, as something to hold onto [translation: "*houvast bieden*"] and against which all new policies need to be tested. Thus, future action of the municipality becomes locked in around these frames with little room for experimentation outside these boundaries (Marquardt & Nasiritousi 2022).

Another way in which future possibilities become foreclosed is through the language of consensus. Because the five strategic pillars of the vision have to encompass all of the municipalities' policies, they need to act as abstract umbrella categories that all city departments can agree on and that are supported by other actors such as politicians, citizens, and developers. In the document, we can read that the vision must be "*coherent*", providing a general course of action to 2050 (17). This framing of coherence obscures that blanket terms used in the vision such as 'green' or 'inclusive' hold multiple, often contested, meanings at once. These umbrella categories absorb and neutralize the variety of potentially conflicting agendas that are part of everyday planning practice and may obfuscate unequal power relationships (Kallis et al. 2009).

As a result of this vision document, the future of Amsterdam is mainly anticipated as a turbulent temporality impacted by external threats that needs to be controlled and prepared for through visioning as a consensus-building and trajectory-setting practice. The *Omgevingsvisie* is not the only vision document with this style of anticipation, as a review of more than 30 vision documents across European cities found that these documents lack challenging and ambitious visions, and instead present manageable and consensual stories (Ache 2017). Importantly, this closed style of anticipation may at times be valuable to coordinate effective and rapid action in large organizations. Creating systemic change also requires many actors to work together towards a shared future. In current times, however, the need for fundamental transformations towards more sustainable and just cities implies that the future will take a shape that is still unknowable from within the current system (Osterweil et al. 2025). To acknowledge this uncertainty while still holding on to the agency to transform our living environments into the places we desire, we turn to imagining as a complementary practice with an open style of anticipation.

The Possibilities of Imagination

Similar to ‘visioning’, imagining often lacks a clear definition and is used as a label for many different practices. We define imagination as a social, collective process of “*seeing, sensing, thinking, and dreaming*” (Yusoff & Gabrys 2011, 516) to understand the present and create a plurality of alternative possibilities (Moore & Milkoreit 2020). Compared to visioning, this definition contains several elements that express a more open style of anticipation. First, imagining is conceptualized as a constantly evolving process. In an open style of anticipation that sees the future as open-ended and uncertain, the future cannot be predicted or even imagined from the present, but we can engage in a process of constantly re-imagining and re-evaluating emerging possibilities. Practices of imagination are thus not primarily about producing useful end-results but about learning from the process (Stirling et al. 2023).

Second, while vision documents present a consensus about what the future should be, imagination aims to keep imaginaries plural. Only when we have multiple imaginaries of the future can we have productive conversations about what we want and do not want (Benjamin 2024). An open style of anticipation therefore does not mean that we cannot engage with the future, or only formulate our wishes in abstract terms. Rather, we are encouraged to be specific, playing with ‘concrete utopias’ (Bloch 1954) that are not end-states but starting points that can be contested and adapted. Through contestation around a plurality of options, we can also make underlying power relations explicit and open to change (Eisenhauer 2023). Lastly, in such processes of learning and deliberating, practices of imagination draw not only on the rational and predictive knowledge used for visioning, but also embrace the epistemological value of experiences, dreams, and affects.

We have illustrated that the *Omgevingsvisie* is predominantly based on a closed style of anticipation. Yet, it also offers glimpses of an open style, particularly through the participatory process that was part of the development of the vision and included practices of imagination (263-265). The municipality facilitated conversations about the future of Amsterdam with diverse participants, such as experts (by experience), entrepreneurs, school children, and advocacy clubs. During the ‘*toekomstestafette*’ [translation: ‘*future relay*’], professional storytellers translated the ideas of citizens about what they would need in the city of 2050 into 150 short stories. Furthermore, the city asked curators to organize discussion sessions within the municipality’s ‘*Atelier van Verbeelding*’ [translation: ‘*Studio of Imagination*’] and commissioned an exhibition in the public library. In these participatory practices,

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transformative ideas about the city's future were discussed, including ideas of commoning and citizen's assemblies (264). It seems that these practices encouraged a variety of people to explore and discuss multiple concrete futures beyond the constraints of past or present policies.

However, the epistemological value of this process of imagination is not fully captured in the *Omgevingsvisie*. The co-creative activities are only briefly summarized at the end of the document and are not explicitly tied to the main text. This is very different from how trend analyses have been used to justify and frame many of the city's choices throughout the text, creating the impression that this citizen participation was merely an add-on to already 'designated imaginaries' (Vainio 2021). Whereas the *Omgevingsvisie* notes that the conversations with different people of Amsterdam "generated a plurality of thoughts, ideas, and themes for the future of Amsterdam" (265), it continues to summarize the "*rode draden*" [translation: "*main points*"] (265) in consensual language that flattens the richness and diversity of the ideas. Thus, these practices of imagination seem to lose their transformative potential in a document informed by a closed style of anticipation.

At other times, open and closed styles of anticipation seem to clash within the document, such as in one of the five strategic pillars called "*samen stad maken*" [translation: "*co-creating cities*"] (58). On the one hand, the vision document argues that the municipality needs to set boundaries ("*kaders stellen*", 58), and only within these boundaries is there space for initiatives of other stakeholders. This constricts the imagination to the pre-defined requirements set by the municipality, making it difficult to propose transformative ideas beyond these frames. On the other hand, however, the aim to co-create cities is connected to an open style of anticipation. Calling for "*open design*", the *Omgevingsvisie* argues that the future needs space for organic development, shaped by the municipality and a broad range of societal partners (253-254). In this way, the city aims to be able to adapt to changing needs of residents in the future and to allow for the development of spontaneous and unpredictable activities (254). It is a way of developing cities that values co-creative experimentation and learning from what emerges in such spaces (58, 254). This process-oriented way of developing fosters continuous imagination beyond what can currently be envisioned to adapt to changing possibilities and needs, which fits an open perspective on futures.

To summarize, the *Omgevingsvisie* is mostly structured according to a closed style of anticipation, noticeable in the reactive framing, consensual language, and the suggested need for clearly defined boundaries and pillars

for long-term development. Yet, particularly in the pillar about co-creation, this style of anticipation is also implicitly contested when calling for open design. We end this essay by imagining ways forward for city planning through embracing the friction between different styles of anticipation.

Imagining Possible Ways Forward

If imagining offers a complementary practice of anticipation to visioning, how might spatial planning embrace this going forward? As imagination is unpredictable and open-ended, answering this question requires acceptance that there will be no definitive answers and that the possibilities might be constantly changing. Yet, the power of imagination also lies in seeking the possibilities of alternative futures in the present and building concrete utopias that can be constantly contested, developed, and adapted. We therefore challenge ourselves and you, the reader, to think about the question: What if cities were not only obliged to produce an *Omgevingsvisie*, but also an additional planning instrument dedicated to imagination: an *Omgevingsverbeelding* [translation: *Imagination for Physical Space*]? How can we conceive of a living set of future imaginaries as a public iterative imagination infrastructure, designed to keep futures open and contestable while still producing concrete possibilities?

First of all, the imagined instrument of the *Omgevingsverbeelding* could advance the ambition of the *Omgevingsvisie* to become a "*levend document*" [translation: "*living document*"] (58). In fact, it would not even have to be a document but could take a flexible form. The *Omgevingsverbeelding* could be built from stories, scenarios, prototypes, conflicts, and reflections, as well as proposals for concrete utopias to experiment with ideas in the current urban fabric. It can include representations of the participatory process of imagination the city organizes, showcasing the different imaginaries that are being generated and reflecting on the questions or tensions that arise. The *Omgevingsverbeelding* might also be represented in multi-sensory ways in exhibitions, walks, immersive experiences, or public performances, taking seriously the experiential and affective dimensions of imagination.

When the current assessment framework of the *Omgevingsvisie* is a consensual framework that all policies have to fit, we might consider how the idea of the *Omgevingsverbeelding* can become a starting point for political deliberation and contestation. We propose that the *Omgevingsverbeelding* would not take external constraints and trends as its starting point, but could instead center the question of what kind of city Amsterdam wants to be, allowing for imagination of potential futures outside of these constraints. To complement the five strategic pillars of the vision

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document, the *Omgevingsverbeelding* could, for example, offer a living set of multiple competing imaginaries that can be discussed and debated, each with specific proposals for smaller concrete utopias. Whereas the *Omgevingsvisie* is revised every couple of years, the *Omgevingsverbeelding* could run on shorter iterative cycles.

This approach benefits from a physical space that functions as an imagination infrastructure (Robinson 2023). We therefore suggest making the municipality's '*Atelier van Verbeelding*' a permanent infrastructure that is not limited to the participation process of the *Omgevingsvisie* but would continuously provide space for participation and contestation. Where the *Omgevingsvisie* is introduced as a 'steering instrument', 'agenda', or 'assignment', the city also wants to see the document as an 'invitation' for co-creating the development of the city (15). The process of the *Omgevingsverbeelding* can explicitly invite artists, scholars, residents, or other actors to the *Atelier* to engage with the ideas about the future in different ways: critiquing them, exploring their consequences, or experimenting with their possibilities. At the same time, the *Omgevingsverbeelding* could draw upon the imagination that already exists in the city, which the *Omgevingsvisie* calls the "*vrije ruimte*" [translation: "free space"] (161). In their words: "*what matters is looking with compassion and precision to what is already there and what grows, and how citizens give meaning to their own lives and living environments*" (253). As cities are being imagined and enacted by various actors and in different places, invited or uninvited (Savini & Bertolini 2019), the city could incorporate and epistemically value the knowledge of these anticipatory actions in a potential *Omgevingsverbeelding* as a formal planning procedure, expanding the definition of who makes the city.

Our imagined *Omgevingsverbeelding* would also ask for a shift in the role of civil servants to incorporate imagination into planning. While times of crisis may make planning systems inclined to seek stability and a shared direction, the call for imagination requires a new practice for civil servants, what DRIFT has called, in an essay reflecting on the changing role of civil servants in transitions, as the "*transformatieve ambtenaar*" [translation: "transformative civil servant"] (Diercks et al. 2024). This new transformative role involves replacing prediction with imagining and giving space for learning from experimentation (12). Furthermore, it entails an ambition to work together with concrete initiatives that are already in transformation, instead of relying on official participation channels (11). The *Omgevingsverbeelding* could be a way to let civil servants and residents imagine and contest multiple possible futures before these are translated into the steering instrument of the *Omgevingsvisie*.

In the end, our argument is not to completely remove the *Omgevingsvisie* as a planning instrument, as spatial transformations do benefit from a clear direction and shared goal. We argue visioning needs to be complemented with imagining to avoid locking in the future around narrow trends or frames. Our argument is thus mostly a call to critically reflect on how we relate to the future and what we enable or disable in doing so. While we can already find opportunities to do so in the margins of the *Omgevingsvisie*, we may take up these opportunities in imagining a completely new planning instrument: the *Omgevingsverbeelding*. Only when we treat the future as open and uncertain do we, as inhabitants of Amsterdam, actually feel the agency to take up the invitation in shaping the future we want for our city.

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Endnotes

- 1 In this essay, we use the original version of the *Omgevingsvisie* that was published in 2021. An update of the vision document in 2025 has since become available.
- 2 For further information about the development of visioning in planning, see for instance Shipley 2000; Shipley & Newkirk 1998.