TOOLBOX **FOR XTOPIAS**
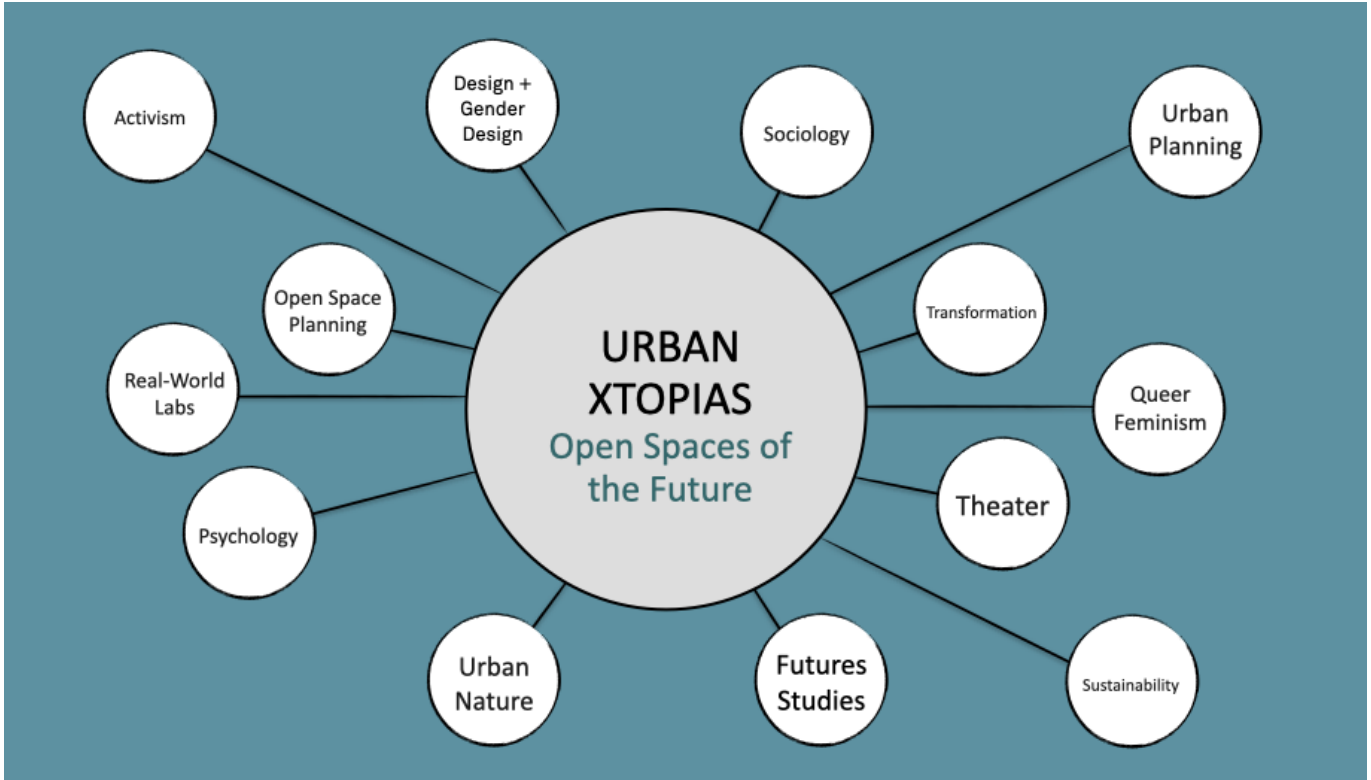
New tools for futurists

Our inter- and transdisciplinary team opened up a variety of perspectives on possible distant futures. How can people be motivated and empowered to actively shape the future?

Xtopias – **Foreword**

With the Toolbox for Xtopias, we invite teachers, educators, team leaders, funding providers, artists, activists and everyone interested in topics of the future to help shape tomorrow in a more democratic way. We invite you to incorporate the Xtopian approach in your everyday work: by making use of the different tools or by setting out on the exciting, joyful and challenging adventure of developing and implementing your own Xtopia.

The toolbox was developed as part of the project "Urban Xtopias: Open Spaces of the Future". Funded by the Robert Bosch Stiftung, our inter- and transdisciplinary team set out to find new ways of thinking about the extraordinary diversity of possible futures and new ways of motivating and empowering people to actively help shape them. We wanted to draw on the potential of utopias (being inspired by ideal goals) and dystopias (warning of social and political dangers) while at the same time emphasising the ambivalence (ambiguity, contradictions, nuances) contained in every vision of the future. This led us to develop the concept of Xtopia – a playful way to engage with the complexity of the future and to become actively involved in shaping tomorrow. This brochure brings together the experience we have gained over the last four years and is designed to help you develop Xtopias for the topics, issues and people you work with.
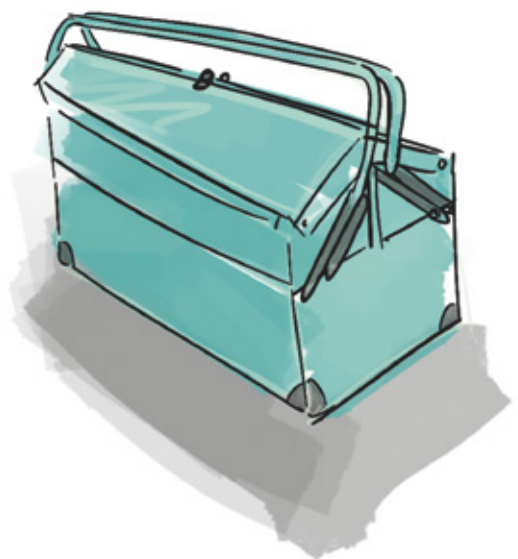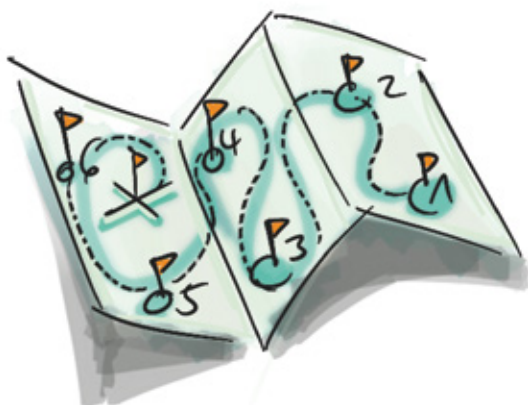
We hope it will provide you inspiration, encourage you to take some risks, allow you to enjoy the process and help you achieve your goals.

The Xtopias team

TOOLBOX **Introduction**

What is an Xtopia?

What are Xtopias for?

What is an Xtopia?

Xtopias encourage people to playfully develop and discuss their own new visions of the future, empathise with other perspectives and engage in critical reflection. As interventions aimed at transformative learning, they have the power to fundamentally change world views and perspectives.

In Xtopian interventions, topics and methods are systematically connected:
Ambivalent visions of the future, i.e. visions which contain both positive and negative aspects or on which people have differing views, make ideal topics for Xtopias. Xtopias are neither utopias nor dystopias, but rather something in between. After all, the future will be just as complex and contradictory as the present. This ambivalence is a starting point to debate and reflect on our own ideals and fears. As examples of such ambivalent topics, our Urban Xtopias project focused on the future of death, the future of work, and changing relationships between people and nature. The following double page briefly introduces a selection of these Xtopias. We will return to these examples to help illustrate the section on how to build an Xtopia. But Xtopias can of course encompass many other topics too. To promote holistic thinking, we recommend choosing core topics that are closely interrelated with other areas (e.g. social, environmental or technological issues).

These topics can be tackled using a wide range of methods: These may include guided activities such as facilitated workshops, digital interaction using a virtual whiteboard, and objects such as interactive exhibits and learning stations.

Integrating topic and method helps people think or feel their way into ambivalent visions of the future and even experience them in experimental form. This allows them to analyse and weigh up these different visions, explore how they relate to their own values and ideas about the future, and reflect on them in depth.

The methods used can be drawn from many fields, including educational theory, performance art, design thinking, museum pedagogy and social work. This range of approaches is particularly inspiring when a diverse set of partners are involved – for example from academia or civil society. The important thing when constructing an Xtopia is not the origin of the methods used but the way in which the method relates to the topic. As the following examples show, it is often worth combining several different methods so as to satisfy the various different requirements of the project.
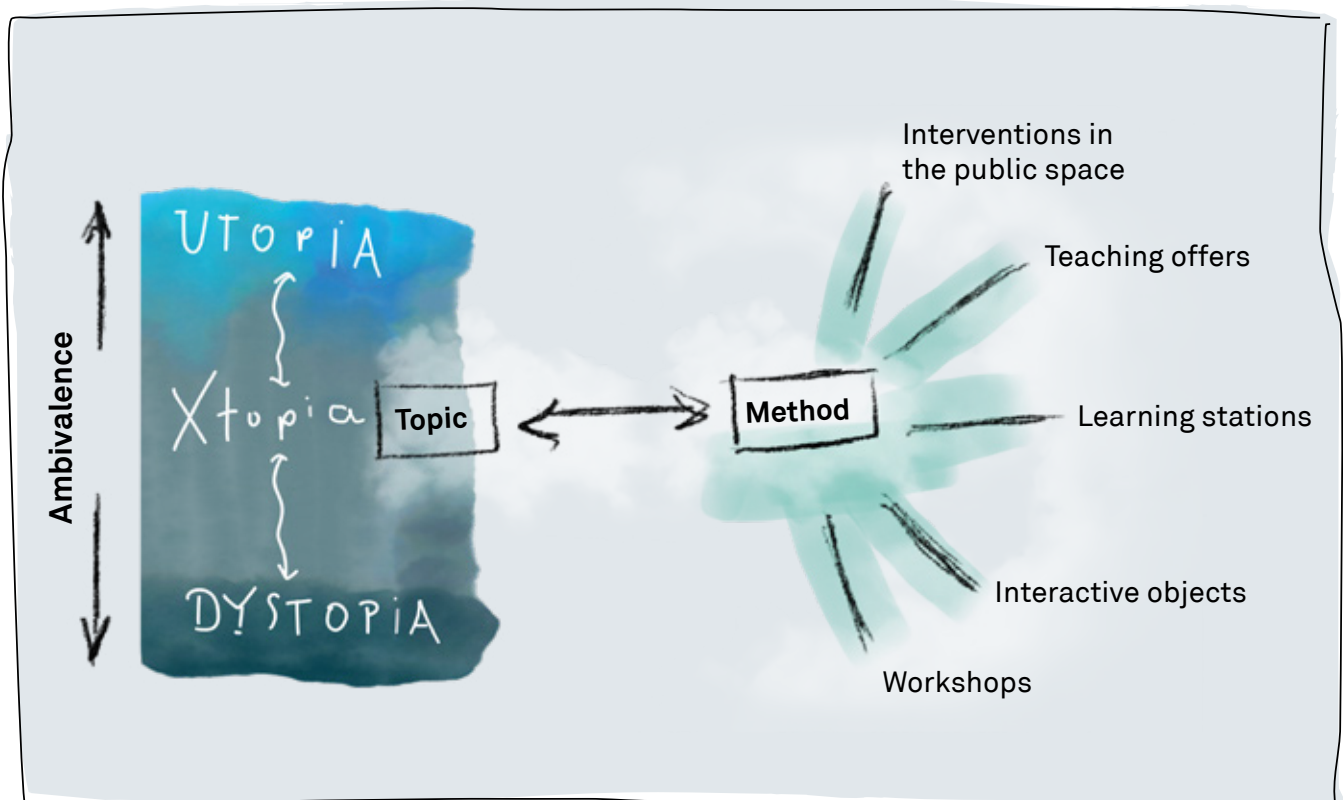
Examples from the Urban Xtopias project

The end of human dominance: The content of this Xtopia is a vision in which the human race gives up its dominance over the natural world. We developed an interactive "circuit training" course for use in

Foto: Tilmann Finner

Playful interactions at various stations dealt with future human-nature relationships.

public spaces (see toolbox) to bring to life this radical idea, inspired by discourses on "conviviality" and the "more-than-human" approach. Participants visited different activity stations, each illustrating aspects of different possible futures and inviting between 5 and 60 minutes of playful interaction. The activities included a role play on the perspective of bees, a fashion studio for clothing that grows on the skin and an audio drama about a future where "nature" is artificially manufactured. The stations were developed in design experiments by students working with university teaching staff (e.g. from the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam; see www. dasendederdominanz.de) The students themselves supervised the circuit training.

The primary educational aim of this Xtopia was for participants to consider our present relationship with nature in Germany and imagine more equal forms of coexistence, while also getting a sense of their own boundaries when it comes to the natural world. Research diaries, participant observation, a reflection wall by the exit and spontaneous conversations were all used to evaluate the training's impact on visitors.

Automento Mori ('Todomat' in German) is a repurposed ticket machine. It takes users to a future where people are more used to thinking about their own mortality. This "artefact from the future" is at once familiar and innovative. It helps users to think about their death in a more empowering and sustainable way. Around 20 questions enable them to input their wishes and decisions in multiple categories: body, ceremony, memory, possessions, data and secrets. Users can choose from different forms of bodily transformation after death, some of them still in the realm of fiction. They can also consider digital memorials along with current and possible future practices around physical and digital legacies. Based on the responses, Automento Mori prepares a to-do list to help the user prepare for their own passing. The list includes a QR code giving access to the machine's online "digital twin". That means users can dip in and out of the questions as they feel able and think about them in more depth if they wish. Automento Mori has been on show at the Museum for Sepulchral Culture in Kassel (our partner) since September 2023. The digital twin is available online (todomat.org). The educational goals (reflecting on what matters in life, openness to future practices around death) are explained in more detail in the next section.

Foto: Maximilian Beck

Automento Mori is called 'Todomat' in German, which is made up of the words „death", „to-do" and „automat". It is located in the Museum for Sepulchral Culture in Kassel.

The motifs that emerged from the children's joint work with the mood boards were then sprayed on the gym wall under professional supervision.

The future of work: This Xtopia was a two-and-a-half-day local workshop in which we examined the interplay between two extremely important processes of change: the future of work and the transformation to a more sustainable society. Real-life examples of this interplay were explored in the local neighbourhood, where we worked with our partner Spirit of Football. The main educational goal was to empower participants to develop their own path amid complex processes of change. Young people and adults were the planned target group. However, most of those who took part were children under 15. We therefore added numerous playful and movement-based elements. Combining artistic, creative activity with conversation remained central to the process. The use of mood boards (see toolbox) to open up discussion about the future proved particularly inspiring. By thinking their way into scenarios for the future of their neighbourhood, participants developed recurring themes, which they then sprayed legally onto the outside wall of the workshop venue (a sports hall). The local authorities provided organisational and financial support for the Xtopia, and dedicated graffiti walls have now been put in place around the neighbourhood. A local café helped us measure the impact of the project.
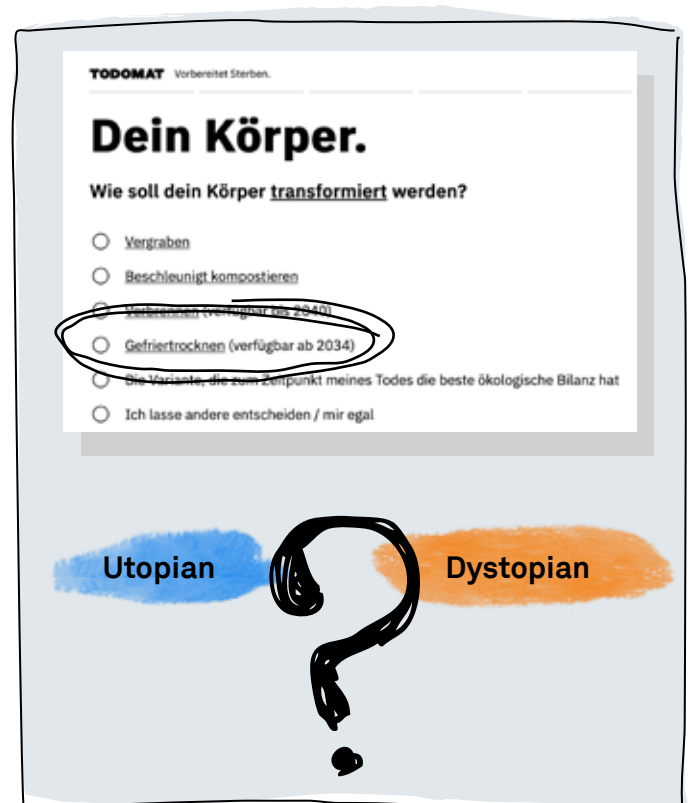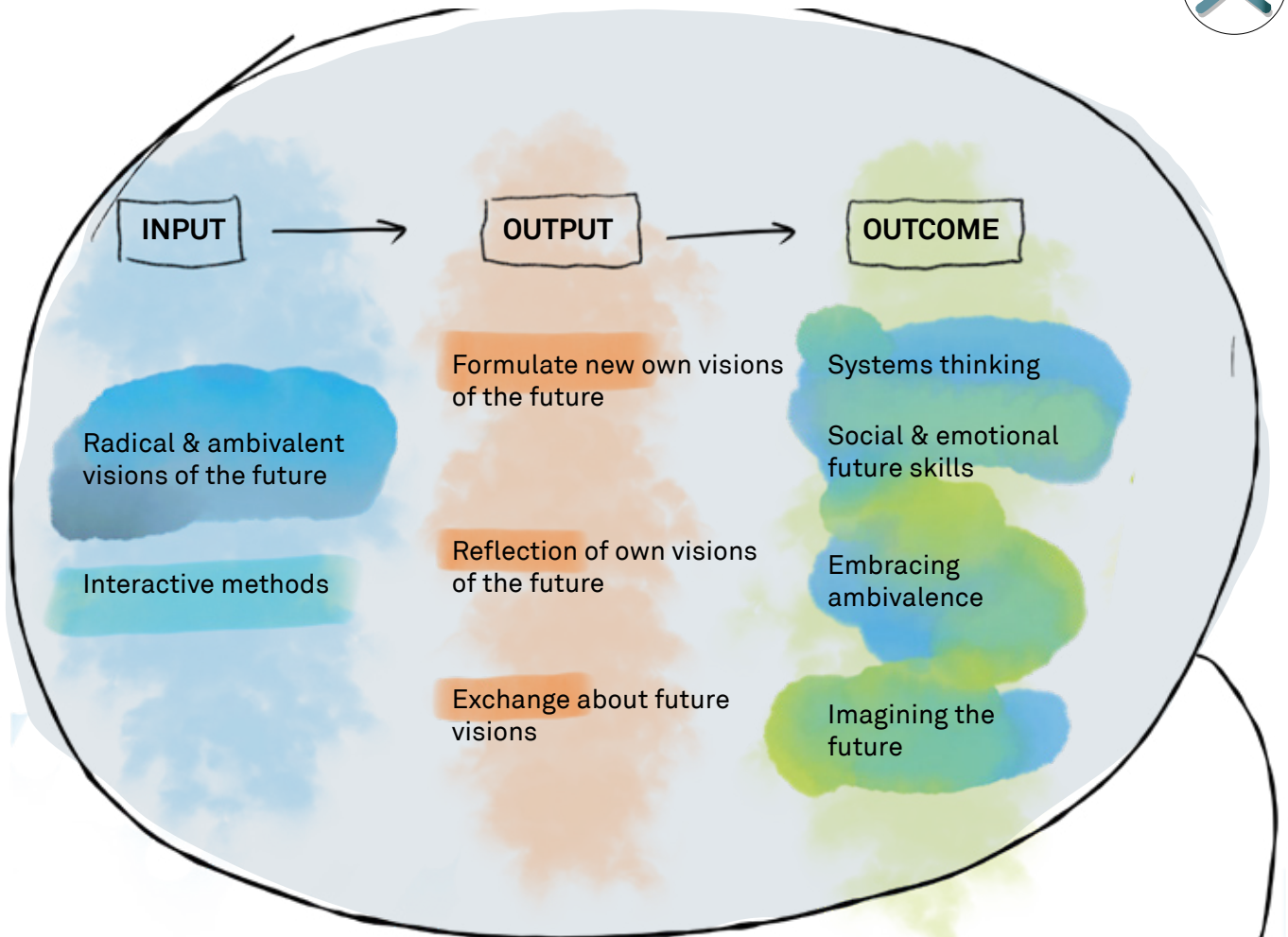
What are Xtopias for?

An Xtopia initiates transformative learning processes and trains people in important skills for the future so as to motivate them to actively shape sustainable development. Building Xtopias can help shape the future in a more democratic way.

Direct learning outcomes
While the topics covered and methods of interaction can be highly diverse, all Xtopias require the ability to discuss visions of the future. This is achieved both through presenting radical, ambivalent visions and encouraging participants to formulate their own. By focusing on the ambivalent aspects of the future, Xtopias also help us to think about how our own wishes for the future might affect others: Is my utopia your dystopia? At the same time, Xtopias enable people to re-evaluate excessive fears or idealised visions of the future and perhaps see these in a more balanced way.

Using some background information, Automento Mori encourages users to think about the options available for when we die. For example, it informs them about the environmental footprint of cremation and presents some alternatives that are less well known or do not yet (legally) exist, such as composting or freeze-drying.

INPUT → OUTPUT → OUTCOME

Radical & ambivalent visions of the future

Interactive methods

Formulate new own visions of the future

Reflection of own visions of the future

Exchange about future visions

Systems thinking

Social & emotional future skills

Embracing ambivalence

Imagining the future

Through imaginative and reflective interactions, Xtopias open up different ways of engaging with ideas about the future. The learning process can be transformative.

**Participation in futuring**

Educational goals

By presenting unfamiliar visions and inviting critical reflection, Xtopias can promote transformative learning. Fundamental assumptions, beliefs and values in relation to the future are challenged and changed, often in dialogue with others.

Automento Mori pursues two transformative learning objectives: Firstly, it encourages us to think about our own mortality so that we can initiate a conversation with those close to us and live a more conscious life, focusing on the things that really matter. It can help us practice gratitude, recognise where we are falling short and give us courage to change. Secondly, the machine is designed to get users thinking about how society could deal with death differently, for example in the interests of sustainable development.

Working towards these educational goals means practising a range of important skills for the future. We see three of these skills as elemental to participating in discourse on profound transformation processes:

Imagining the future: This means being able to avoid making path-dependent assumptions or simply reproducing dominant ideas about the future. Through imagination, we can develop alternative images, ideas and visions. This requires not only creativity and fantasy but also an interest in the questions of the future and a belief that the future is something we have the power to shape.

Imagining the future

Embracing ambivalence

Systems thinking

E.g. ability to dialogue

Future skills
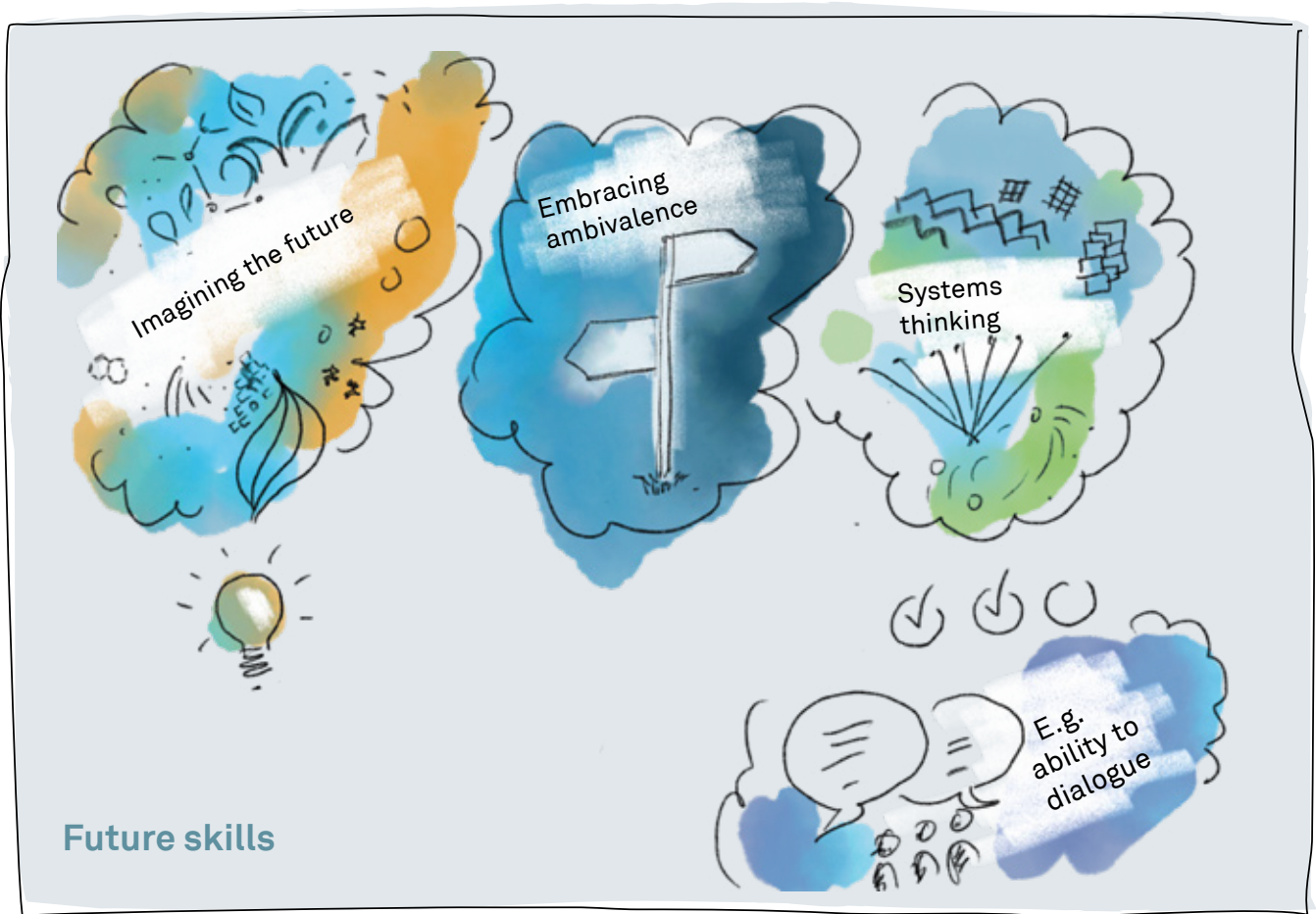
Embracing ambivalence: Xtopias focus on complexity and ambiguity. This means that they are designed to open people's minds to uncertain futures and ambiguous visions. In particular, the Xtopian method means accepting that the future is likely to be just as ambivalent and contradictory as the present. Accepting this ambivalence is both a more realistic approach and an exciting way to evaluate possible futures.

Systems thinking: An Xtopia has the potential to promote understanding of the world of tomorrow (and today) as a complex and diverse system in which various competing interests need to be negotiat-

ed. Shaping the future requires a perspective that recognises the interrelations between the many different areas of action and understands the scope for change. Xtopias can provide inspiration here and enable people to reflect on their own active role.

As well as these cognitive skills of the future, Xtopias also promote emotional and social skills that enable constructive dialogue with others: e.g. an emotional connection to oneself and the outside world, active listening skills and other communication skills and critical faculties.

TOOLBOX **Instructions for building an Xtopia**

Start

Goal
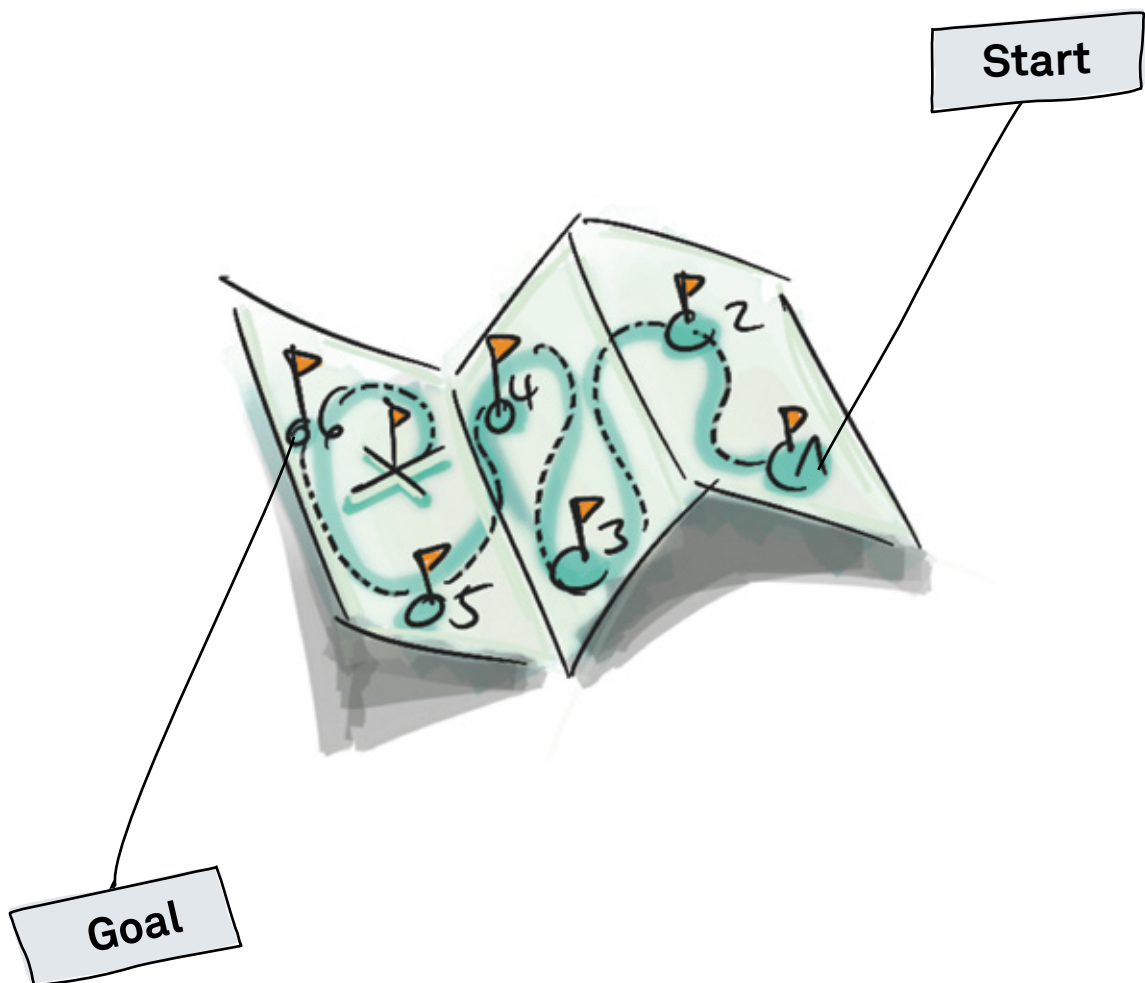
Instructions for building an Xtopia

We want to inspire you to create your own Xtopia. Let us now guide you step by step through the process. We will show you how to develop the idea, put it into practice and review the results.

The instructions are based on the experience gained over four years of transformative research on Xtopias: This included digital and physical prototyping and the lessons learned from four large series of interventions that we conducted in various contexts and evaluated formatively. In developing your own Xtopia, you may find that it makes sense to do things in a different order or that you are unable to implement every piece of advice. This was sometimes our experience, too. The format lends itself to an iterative design process rather than a rigid set of rules. Partners should be involved in this work at the earliest possible stage (see below).

1 Step 1: Create an Xtopia hexagon as a basis for your work

A challenge when developing Xtopias is not to get lost in all the exciting topics, contexts and potential methods that present themselves. We have therefore developed the Xtopia hexagon: a visualisation tool that helps you keep an overview and make good decisions.

The edges of the hexagon mark out six key fields: **The topic of the Xtopia (visions of the future), its educational goals and target audience, its context, possible partners for development and implementation, and evaluation components.** As you continue the development process, you compile key words for each of these fields. **In the centre of the hexagon, you can write down the different methodological elements that will be used.** You can then systematically link these to the key words for the fields to check you have met the requirements for all six sides. Use your preferred media, software and visual style for the hexagon. In the Urban Xtopias project, we used an online collaboration platform so that the core team and partners could all work digitally on the Xtopia. The archiving function also proved useful. As well as using text, you can also provide other forms of information, e.g. maps for the spatial context, mind maps for the topic, organisational charts for the partners and theoretical models for the educational goals. The priority is that all the partners involved in developing and implementing the Xtopia are able to use the information presented. Some elements that may seem trivial can in fact be crucial to the success of the Xtopia (e.g. child care, event invitation, food and drink) and should therefore be written down.

The order of the steps suggested below is just one possible approach. You may find some sides of the hexagon easier than others. If so, start with these. Often, the things you write down on one side will give you ideas for the other sides.

Xtopia hexagon
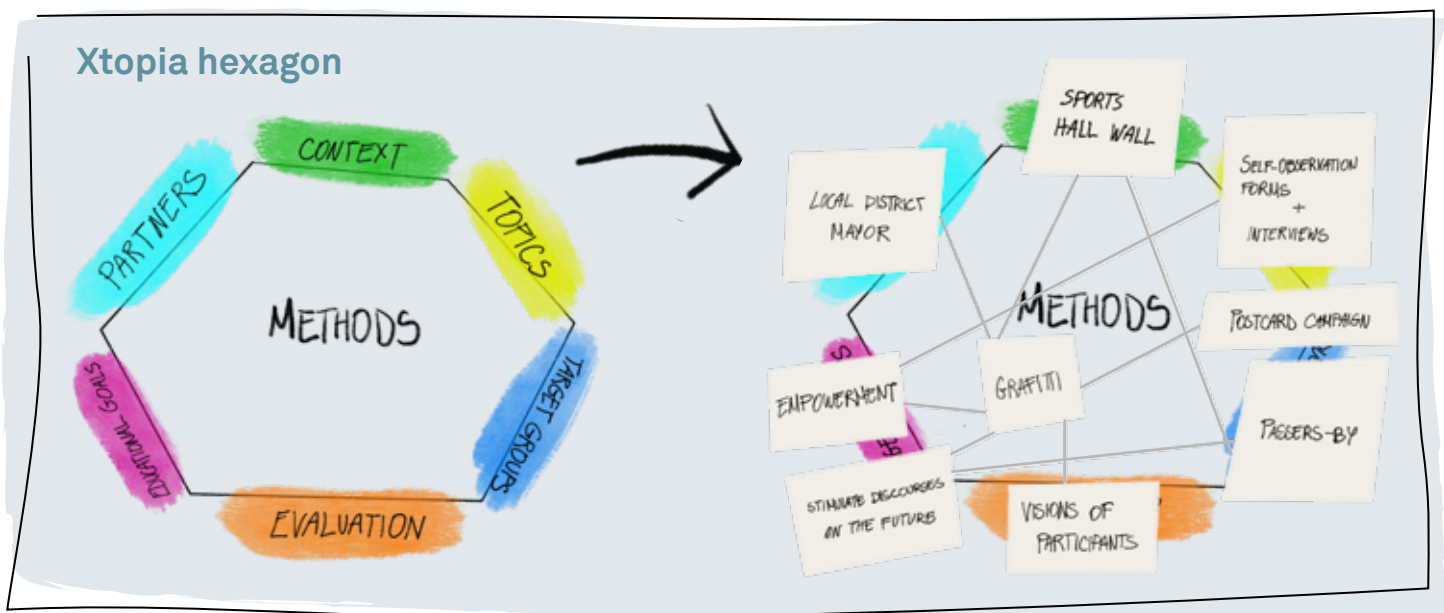
② Step 2: Choose a topic of the future and get creative

A particularly exciting task that often comes right at the beginning is choosing the topic: Your Xtopia should focus on one topic. This is not to artificially seperate topics you but to concentrate participants' thoughts and stop the event becoming unwieldy.

Figure 1 (Xtopia hexagon on page 11) shows the criteria we think are important: Choose topics that allow sufficient distance from the present day, that involve ambivalent aspects and that can be readily communicated to your target group. Identify their relevance to sustainability and societal transformation. Break down big questions for humanity so that participants can think them through using a manageable example. Explicitly link the core topic to visions of the future being developed in other fields and design it so that people are motivated to keep exploring the topic. Wherever possible, take into account the perspectives of marginalised groups (see below), as there can be no sustainable future without social justice.

For the hexagon, it is important to write down what makes the core topic a big and important one, but also to stay rooted in a concrete example.

In our work-themed Xtopia, our focus was to think about the changes emerging in the world of work (robots taking over many tasks, AI as an everyday tool, nursing crisis, etc.) together with sustainability transformations such as the energy transition or changing diets: What challenges and solutions could there be?

The content chosen at the start should not be set in stone; it makes sense to continuously review and adjust the Xtopia.

Xtopias have the following characteristics:

- ☐ They break with the present.
- ☐ They shine a light on differences, ambivalence and nuance.
- ☐ They foster communication.
- ☐ They raise big social questions, especially regarding sustainable development.
- ☐ They can be explored using concrete examples.

They link the core topic to other areas such as:

- ☐ Environment
- ☐ Technology
- ☐ Economy
- ☐ Infrastructure
- ☐ Society
- ☐ Politics

They motivate people to keep exploring them by being:

- ☐ Relevant to the world in which the target group lives
- ☐ Innovative, surprising and inspiring
- ☐ Multi-layered, raising new questions and revealing new perspectives
- ☐ Critical of how society currently works

They promote social justice, for example by including perspectives of:

- ☐ Economic disadvantage
- ☐ Gender diversity
- ☐ People of color
- ☐ People with experience of migration
- ☐ The Global South
- ☐ Neurodiversity
- ☐ People with physical disabilities

③ Step 3: Choose a set of methods

In most cases, you will choose a set of methods for your planned intervention relatively early in the process. This should be a good fit for your chosen topic and meet the following criteria:

→ It awakens interest: inviting, engaging and aesthetically appealing
→ It triggers interaction (passive observers are not enough!)
→ It triggers emotions and is therefore memorable
→ It is suitable for the envisaged space
→ It is ethical
→ Its impact among the target group can be evaluated

From this set of methods, you will then select a specific method as you continue to develop the Xtopia. You can borrow from other methods and constantly adjust the approach. Do not be scared to start again with a different method if you need to.

The eight tools presented in the toolbox are suitable methods for building an Xtopia; however, this collection is of course not exhaustive and is certainly not always suitable.

Make sure to take advantage of your partners' and your own experience with different methods. Write down the different elements of your chosen method in the hexagon. For example, you can note down the different phases of a workshop or game or the different elements of an installation. Depending on the kind of Xtopia you are creating, you can break down the different methodological elements by time, location or function.

In our work-themed Xtopia, for example, we planned a multi-stage workshop taking place over two and a half days. The final part of the method was to graffiti a large wall using templates the group had worked on together. The example illustration on page 11 shows this last phase and the connections to the other sides of the hexagon.

④ Step 4: Finish the Xtopia hexagon

Target groups

Xtopias should be able to reach as many different people as possible. Nevertheless, it is sensible to concentrate on one or a small number of target groups. Check that the groups are a good fit for your partners, topics, contexts and educational goals.

In the case of the work-themed Xtopia, we encountered a surprise: In contrast to what we had planned, the participants in the workshop were almost all children, who had become aware of the project through one of our multipliers. A second target group comprised passers-by and local residents of the sports hall where we sprayed the graffiti.

Transformative educational goals

With a successful Xtopia, you will encourage people to think more diversely and openly about possible futures, to engage with different visions and to discuss the contradictions and ambivalent aspects of these with others. You will enable them to break free from existing, dominant ideas about the future.

In our example, we aimed to empower the workshop participants in relation to their own career choices and ability to shape the future world of work. With the graffiti, we were able to reach passers-by and local residents indirectly with the hope of stimulating conversation and reflection on the future.

Partners

Xtopias are particularly exciting when they bring together partners from different fields, e.g. academia, education, local politics, art or business. On this side of the hexagon, write down the partnership that will support your Xtopia. If multiple partners are involved in significantly different roles, you can also write this down here (e.g. advertising, consolidation, practical aspects, evaluation).

Our work-themed Xtopia was supported by a partnership between our academic team and the "Spirit of Football" association along with local stakeholders from the fields of social work and public administration. In this case, the decision to work on an Xtopia together came before all the other sides of the hexagon.

Context

Your Xtopia will take place in a specific social and spatial context that will influence the impact it can achieve. You should lean into this context or at least consider it: How will my Xtopia change if I present it to people in a disadvantaged part of the city rather than to an academic research institute? How will the Xtopia work in a seminar room, at an art exhibition or in a graveyard? There are often practical and organisational aspects to consider, too. This applies whether the space you use is outdoors (e.g. weather and lighting) or indoors (e.g. access and keys). You can also write down other context-related factors, e.g. whether the Xtopia will take place as part of a large event or needs to be designed from the start to work for multipliers in very different locations.

The neighbourhood where we ran our workshop was chosen by our local partner. We then chose the thematic focus on the future of work due to the high rate of unemployment among the residents there. The local mayor gave us permission to graffiti the outside wall of the sports hall.

Evaluation

We consider the evaluation an integral part of Xtopias. After all, there is nothing trivial about inspiring people to think about the future in new ways. In the worst case, an Xtopia can have damaging effects, for example if it fuels fears about the future. We therefore highly recommend that you document at least some aspects of your Xtopia and its impact so that you can learn from experience (formative evaluation). Collecting data using documents that exist already (e.g. photos or partners' notes) or through participant observation usually has less impact on proceedings than a before-and-after survey, for example. On this side of the hexagon, write down what information you want to gather, and potentially what data protection rules you have to follow.

The evaluation of our work-themed Xtopia took place alongside the workshop itself. We recorded our impressions using self-observation forms. A year after the intervention, we also conducted two interviews with multipliers from the neighbourhood and used a postcard campaign to research whether passers-by had noticed the graffiti and what they had made of it.


⑤ **Step 5: Review, test and finalise the content of your Xtopia**

Once you have completed the six sides and the methodological elements in the centre, you should check how well all the elements of the hexagon link together. Some aspects may be very simple (do the partners have access to the target groups?), while others may reveal unexpected problems (e.g. relationship between spatial context and evaluation: do we have the right to photograph here?).

We recommend developing the Xtopia gradually, starting with prototypes, and to test it (preferably multiple times) along the way. This makes the workload manageable and allows you to check where any obstacles lie: e.g. in relation to the topic, scheduling, access to the target group, etc.

Having completed the work-themed Xtopia in Erfurt, for example, we developed the "Installation for Interconnected Thinking" (see toolbox). This condenses the most effective working step of this Xtopia into a new format to make it accessible to a larger target group.
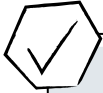
Checklist for developing an Xtopia

When you are developing Xtopias and bubbling with ideas, we have found that it can be easy to lose sight of whether what you are building still constitutes an Xtopia. The following checklist should help keep you on track. It can be used both to finalise an Xtopia and to evaluate a prototype (this working step is highly recommended).

Side of the hexagon	This side of the hexagon fits the Xtopian approach	It is compatible with the other sides of the hexagon
Topics The Xtopia addresses complex visions of the future on which society has different interpretations and views (ambivalence) and follows the other criteria described above.	☐	☐
Context The Xtopia engages with its social and spatial context.	☐	☐
Partners The partners are willing and able to implement the Xtopia in this form.	☐	☐
Target groups The Xtopia is appropriate for the target group (and potentially other target groups).	☐	☐
Educational goals The educational goals are transformative and relate to the future.	☐	☐
Formative evaluation The evaluation covers the most important and difficult aspects of the Xtopia.	☐	☐
Inside		
Methodological elements The methods actively involve the target group and satisfy all six sides of the hexagon.	☐	☐

Imprint

This brochure was created in the project "Urban Xtopias: Open Future Spaces".

The imagery on the cover is by Florence Iff.

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