

IMAGINING URBAN FUTURES

INAUGURAL FESTIVAL OF THE
URBAN FUTURES STUDIO

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IMAGINING
URBAN
FUTURES



Universiteit Utrecht

MARCH 16 & 17, 2017
UTRECHT, NL



AT DE VRIJE WOLF,
A FORMER PRISON IN UTRECHT'S CITY CENTRE

INTRODUCTION

On March 16th -17th 2017, the Urban Futures Studio hosted Imagining Urban Futures: a two-day academic festival during which academics and practitioners from a range of fields and disciplines discussed the future of our urban environments.

The programme aimed to investigate an urgent question:
“Why is it so difficult to imagine new, positive urban futures?”

We are convinced that this is now a crucial question. To arrive at non-linear transitions that will create radically different — read: more sustainable, liveable, equitable, innovative — urban environments, we need to overcome our crisis of the imagination.

But where are these new imaginaries to come from? What are they about? Which languages, images, calculations, and other media do we have at our disposal with which to make such new Future Worlds conceivable and attractive? And how does imagination work in the first place?

To begin working towards answering these complex questions, Imagining Urban Futures involved a broad range of activities, spread out over two days and multiple locations.

These activities included:

- a conference programme with keynote lectures and workshop sessions,
- the presentation of the Post-Fossil City Contest finalists,
- an excursion to Overvecht, and
- the inaugural lecture of Maarten Hajer, Director of the Urban Futures Studio, as Professor of Urban Futures at the Faculty of Geosciences at Utrecht University.

This report provides an overview of the activities of Imagining Urban Futures and reflects on the progress made during the festival to answering the questions posed above.





CONFERENCE

"Imagination is what enables us to transcend our current constraints, what liberates us, what allows us to innovate." - Richard Bronk

CONFERENCE

The conference programme of Imagining Urban Futures took place at De Vrije Wolf, a former prison in Utrecht's historic centre. To stimulate participants in their imaginative thinking about the future, the Urban Futures Studio asked the designers of Studio KNOL to transform this former prison into an inspiring space for liberating ideas and breaking through old barriers and out of one's box.

As a symbolic kick-start of the day, visitors were asked to literally break through a wall formed by the dictum "There Is No Alternative".



Once this wall had been broken through, the conference began with two keynote lectures by Richard Bronk (London School of Economics) and Nick Dunn (ImaginationLancaster) whose diversity of background, experience, knowledge and perspective complemented each other to provide a comprehensive overview and foundation upon which to begin imagining urban futures.



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

RICHARD BRONK: "COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY: IMAGINATION, REASON AND THE NEED FOR DIVERSITY OF RESPONSE"

Richard Bronk is a Visiting Fellow at the European Institute (L.S.E.), with a career spanning finance, central banking and university teaching and the author of 'The Romantic Economist - Imagination in Economics'.

Bronk opened the conference with a keynote that provided a philosophical foundation for the day. In this plenary, the nature of the imagination, the role it plays in innovation and economics, and how it interacts with reason in conditions of uncertainty was discussed.

In a presentation whose style reflected the intellectual pursuit of Bronk, the intersection of philosophy and economics, many diverse disciplines were drawn upon to weave a narrative about the relationship between reason and imagination. Calling on a range of ideas from Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Keats, to economists like Keynes and Mill, Bronk finds that: "We have all too often overlooked that reason and imagination are both essential...neither is complete or effective without the other."

There is a core tension in this relationship, however. While "reason can neither deduce futures yet-to-be-created, nor predict novelties as yet unimagined, imaginaries can be equally dangerous.." This paradox was elaborated on further to explain that there is a challenge posed by imagination, which can both work to liberate us and allow us to innovate, however, it can also result in almost violent uncertainty if not employed correctly.

The way forward is in creating a link between uncertainty and imagination on the one hand, and reason and rationalism on the other. In this balanced approach, imagination enables a necessary escape from the illusion that there is a single rational answer to how we ought to live (the idea that "there is no alternative"). Reason, then, can serve as a "diagnostic tool" with which to "stress-test" these new and fanciful ideas in order to carefully anticipate their consequences.

Bronk therefore advocated for a 'reasoned imagination' in order to strike a balance between the uncertainties we face, the potential of human imagination, and the rationality of modern political economic thought. This results not in a dogmatic preference of one approach over the other, but rather leads to a "diversity of response".

"Radical innovations do violence to established modes of experience and create great uncertainty for those involved." - Richard Bronk



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

NICK DUNN: "URBAN FUTURES: PALIMPSEST OF THE IMAGINATION"

Nick Dunn is Executive Director of ImaginationLancaster, and Professor at Lancaster University, where he is also Chair of Urban Design.

Professor Nick Dunn's keynote posed a series of challenging questions to the audience about how – and by whom – urban futures are imagined. Travelling through the history of imagining urban futures, Dunn demonstrated the ways in which our thinking about urban futures is often rooted in the past.

Furthermore, he argued that while most of our culture's future visions tend to excel at projecting technological visions of the future, the underlying social dynamics and power structures are often not addressed. The presentation contained a vast repertoire of images to illustrate this 'history of urban futures' clearly.



Futurama, New York World's Fair, 1939.



Banksy, East India Dock Road, East London, December 2011.



Stratiform Structure Module, Takenaka, 1972.

In our current age of mass-media and explosive visual cultures, the problem is not, Dunn argued, that the ideas we have are unattainable, but that they are not that imaginative to begin with. In Dunn's own words: "we are not actually being radical enough". While the technology to create elaborate and immersive imaginaries is available to us, we struggle to arrive at truly innovative ideas. Instead, we tend to look to the past for visions of the futures: "we find ourselves struggling, grasping for radical alternatives for urban futures or resuscitating the ghosts of previous ideas."

Dunn therefore argued that more visions, more ideas and more radical imaginations about the future are necessary, particularly ones that include social characteristics of the city. He called for a careful analysis of the hidden power structures underlying the "dominant futures presented at us", and the production of truly innovative imaginaries that can serve as platforms around which to stage participatory debates and discussions about urban futures.

WORKSHOPS

In the afternoon, four parallel workshops attempted to overcome the current crisis of the imagination and draw up narratives of possible future worlds, each tackling a particular dimension of urban futures:

1. Future Urban Deltas

with Henk Ovink, Piet Hoekstra, Esther Stouthamer, Marc Bierkens, Han Meyer, Frank Biermann, and Maarten Hajer.

2. Governance by Experiment

with Rob Raven, Frank Alsema, Sladjana Mijatovic, Bram Heijkers, Gert-Joost Peek, Suzanne Potjer and Martine de Jong.

3. The Path-Breaking Potential of African Cities

with Mark Swilling, Jochen Monstadt, Janez Potocnik, Gert Jan Kramer and Jesse Hoffman.

4. The Post-Fossil City: A Call to Arts

with Nick Dunn, Luca Bertolini, Peter Pelzer and Wvyske Versteeg.

Each of the workshops will be elaborated on in the next pages, with specific reference made to the imagined future discussed in each of them.



WORKSHOPS

FUTURE URBAN DELTAS

with Henk Ovink, Piet Hoekstra, Esther Stouthamer, Marc Bierkens,
Han Meyer, Frank Biermann, and Maarten Hajer

"50% of the world's aquifers are beyond tipping point... we should be more scared." Henk Ovink began the workshop with this uncompromising introduction to the problem.

The workshop focused on the challenges posed by rapid urbanisation in delta areas. The various speakers (ranging from geophysical experts to design researchers) indicated a multiplicity of problems: population density in urban delta's, land subsidence and associated loss of ecosystem services, flood vulnerability, decreasing availability of fresh water, the vulnerable location of the urban poor in this context, as well as the magnifying force of a changing climate on all of these.

As Ovink poignantly noted, "we don't need new disasters to get to more urgency". Rather, what is required is a more refined, transdisciplinary understanding of the complexity of the issues mentioned above. A delicate balance was struck, then, between academic expertise on particular problems and the exploration of practical, design-based tools for putting solutions in place. Central to this discussion were two key relationships: the science-policy interface, and stakeholder engagement.

What is the imagined future? How can we reach it?

The complexity of the challenges posed by future urban deltas requires a radically transdisciplinary approach. The imagined future, then, is one which includes better engagement with urban delta stakeholders, a stronger relationship between science and policy and new forms of integrated planning. For this, first a rethink of urban development and political practice in delta regions is necessary.





GOVERNANCE BY EXPERIMENT

with Rob Raven, Frank Alsema, Sladjana Mijatovic, Bram Heijkers,
Gert-Joost Peek, Suzanne Potjer and Martine de Jong

“What happens next after the experiment is over?...” Rob Raven began the workshop, focussing the workshop on the outcomes of experiments in contemporary cities and their impact on urban innovation and governance.

This workshop began with an introduction of the central features of experimentation as a way to face urban challenges. The role of experiments is increasingly important to test new ideas and visions and to contribute to a new way of urban governance that helps cities achieve and accelerate processes of urban innovation. However, the emergence of this ‘governance by experiment’ also raises a fundamental question: how will a multitude of small experiments be able to address the big challenges that cities face, such as climate change, social inequality and economic fragility? The discussion that followed these presentations circled around this core question.

Two cases of urban experiments were used to explore the idea of ‘governance by experiment’. These were the experiments of ‘Buiksloterham’ in Amsterdam and the ‘Binckhorst’ in Den Haag, which both explore innovative ways of development. In the first half of the workshop, participants split up in groups and interactively sought to find out what made these experiments successful and what were their main challenges. In the second half, everyone came together to discuss how experiments can and should interact with their broader environment: how can experiments be embedded in the institutional environment and how can experiments learn from each other?

The discussion gave a sense of what ‘governance by experiment’ entails, and also exposed its various dilemma’s. One such dilemma discussed was the high personal investment experimentation. Bram Heijer of Binckhorst noted: “Of all the people here, only Frank [from Buiksloterham] and I are not paid by some employer while attending this workshop.” This sparked a discussion about whether and how city governments can set the right conditions for experimentation and whether they could play a role in helping experiments learn from each other.

What is the imagined future? How can we reach it?

A future is needed that emphasizes collective and inclusive learning, where multi-layered challenges are addressed on multiple levels of governance, where innovation is fostered, and where interdependency is acknowledged and respected. We need experiments to facilitate and speed-up processes of learning, participation and urban innovation.



A wooden ladder with five rungs is leaning against a bright yellow wall. The wall features large, bold, black sans-serif text. The top part of the text reads 'overnance b' and the bottom part reads 'experiment'. The ladder is made of dark wood and is positioned diagonally across the frame. The floor is a light-colored, slightly textured surface.

overnance b
experiment

WORKSHOPS

THE PATH – BREAKING POTENTIAL OF AFRICAN CITIES

with Mark Swilling, Jochen Monstadt, Janez Potocnik,
Gert Jan Kramer and Jesse Hoffman

“The challenge is to learn in the blink of an eye...” Mark Swilling reflected on the pace of innovation and change in the context of African cities.

The workshop began by painting a picture of the unique energy transition in Sub-Saharan countries. Special attention was paid to the ramifications of the transition to decentralised energy production with the expected growth of the urban populations in Africa to be three times that of today by 2050.

In this workshop there was a consensual recognition of just how unknown the future is in this context: we cannot predict the way in which African cities will develop. Whether these cities will develop through conventional fossil energy sources or leapfrog to renewables, the conditions of development will be radically different from historical transitions in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, a better understanding of the emerging local energy economies will open new opportunities for creating inclusive and viable cities. The second half of the workshop explored, from an interdisciplinary perspective, what these local energy economies may look like and how this will impact future cities in Sub-Sahara Africa.

What is the imagined future? How can we reach it?

A future is needed where rapid growth of decentralised renewable energy production and investment in rural communities as well as cities, and the whole spectrum in between, has resulted in a radically different pattern of urban development that is less central and more equitable. For this we need, as Jochen Monstadt predicted in the workshop, “hybridity, heterogeneity and creativity of actual delivery systems ... [will] survive and contribute to the fabric of urban futures”.

“We are not trying to deconstruct an old system, we are trying to build a new one which doesn’t exist and we want to do it right.” - Mark Swilling



WORKSHOPS

THE POST-FOSSIL CITY: A CALL TO ARTS

with Nick Dunn, Luca Bertolini, Peter Pelzer and Wytske Versteeg

"Scientists want to make things especially specific, while designers are always working to make things concrete. This bringing of worlds together is very difficult." David Hamers, of both the Design Academy Eindhoven, the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, introduced the complexity of the dialogue.

The workshop explored the need for fresh and provocative ideas about the future of the city: What will it mean to live, work, and move around in these post-fossil cities? How will our cities become not only post-fossil but also pro-urbanity, in the broadest sense of the word: places that sustain natural, social, economic, and creative life? The premise of this session was that we need artists and designers to help us imagine the post-fossil city. We need images that spark our imagination, lead to collective action and depict the trade-offs that different urban futures contain.

In order to instigate this discussion, four of the 10 finalists of the Post-Fossil City Contest, run by the Urban Futures Studio, were asked to present their ideas, and feedback was given in small groups with the aim to improve the entries and learn at the same time about the role of imagination in shaping the urban transformation.

The projects discussed were: the Symbolic City, Cow on Tour, The People of Petrotopia, Sun City's City of Silence (for an elaboration on the projects see www.postfossil.city). Discussions in the breakout sessions are all on tangible, concrete ideas for the projects, while also building into more rich and broad discussions about the role of the imagination. The richness of the future imagined in this workshop is a reflection of the diversity of perspectives, creativity and imagination of the entries of the Post-Fossil City Contest. This can only be summarized in the context exhibition itself - opening on June 14th in the Stads Kantoor in Utrecht.

What is the imagined future? How can we reach it?

A future is needed where there is a multiplicity of imagined possibilities. For this we need to include the arts and the creativity and imagination that comes with this transdisciplinarity.



POST – FOSSIL CITY CONTEST

“The future is plural – there are pluralities in how we go forward.”
- Nick Dunn



The evening of the first day of the Festival featured a public event hosted by the Urban Futures Studio at Kytopia where the finalists of the Post-Fossil City Contest were announced. Within the context of Imagining Urban Futures, the evening offered another medium, method and discipline for imagining the future; a more artistic approach, in contrast to the academic nature of the conference programme during the day.

The event was an important intermediate moment in the Urban Future Studio's Post-Fossil City Contest; a competition that invited the global creative community to submit innovative and inspiring ideas and visions for the city that is no longer reliant on fossil fuels. The Urban Futures Studio asked creative thinkers and makers to take the problems of our current cities as a starting point, in order to imagine the everyday texture of the post-fossil city. In Kytopia the 10 finalists were announced, each received €1000, to further develop their ideas leading up to final exhibition.

Head of the Jury, Maarten Hajer opened the evening reporting back the jury considerations, with Peter Pelzer hosting the evening, which included presentations of the ten finalists and a Q&A with Peter Steijn, theme Director of Healthy Urban Living for the Municipality of Utrecht.

The final works will be displayed at the Post-Fossil City Exhibition in Utrecht's Stads Kantoor, opening on June 14th 2017. On June 22nd, the winner of the Post-Fossil City Contest will be announced. The winning project will receive €10,000 to fully materialise their idea.

COW ON TOUR
Designers Anastasia Eggers en Ottonie von Roeder invented a concept that makes it possible to tap your own milk from a cow around the corner.



PEOPLE OF PETROTOPIA
Petrotopia is not a green ideal image, but a dystopia. The damage has already been done in this post-fossil city: the streets of Utrecht are filling up with water.

CITY OF SOUNDS AND SILENCE
Theatre collective Sun City creates a soundscape of the green city. Is electric mobility making the city silent again, so we can hear birds singing again?

SENSORIAL TIME TRAVEL
Gasoline. Remember what it smelled like? Artist Jamillah Sungkar makes it imaginable what it is like to live without 'fossil smells'.

SYMBOLIC CITY
How do you clean up a dirty city? By envisioning the urban form of the city as clear-cut pieces of a puzzle, according to Walter Breukers en Jaap Godrie.

90 LETTERS FROM 2050
Onur Can Tepe and Esther Estevez want to make an interactive machine that spits out letters from 2050. Whoever reads them will dare to dream big for the future.

HET DEVIES 2039
This submissions brings a green Amsterdam to life in a newspaper of the future, Het Devies 2039, made by a team of architects, designers and urbanists.

POST-FOSSIL CITY CONTEST FINALISTS



SOLAR ENERGY IN PUBLIC SPACE
According to Tom van Heeswijk and Sabrina Lindemann, solar energy will be produced in any kind of public space in the city of 2050.

POST-FOSSIL AFRICAN CITY
Designer Blake Robinson is focussing on the sustainable opportunities for fast developing cities in Africa.



PLATFORM CITIES & CITY PLATFORMS
Ordering rides using Uber, or renting a room through Airbnb: in 2050 this will all be peanuts. Cities will be completely packed with smart services, says Michel Erler.



OVERVECHT EXCURSION

"We have to connect our imaginaries of preferred urban futures to experimentation in the here and now. What really matters is the evolutionary potential of the present rather than waiting for some cognitive consensus of the future." - Mark Swilling

OVERVECHT EXCURSION

FROM THE UNIVERSITY INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD: APPLYING THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE URBAN FUTURE STUDIO*f*

On the second day of the Urban Futures festival (Thursday March 17th), an excursion to Overvecht offered an opportunity to experience first-hand the 'evolutionary potential of the present': concrete projects which exemplify the future potential of this neighbourhood.

A select transdisciplinary group of practitioners, scientists, policy makers and other stakeholders visited Overvecht to witness new stories about the future of this neighborhood as they are unfolding in the present, with the idea that in present innovation you can see glimpses of the future.

The idea of the excursion was to provide an applied mission statement of the Urban Futures Studio: to take the abstract ideas discussed during the conference the day before, and make them concrete and tangible by showing what they mean in real practice. Overvecht offered an ideal place to do this. It is a typical modernist neighborhood developed in the mid-1900's that now faces many challenges: health, unemployment, safety, social cohesion, unsustainability. At the same time, there are many projects and initiatives in Overvecht that deal with these challenges and by that help to create a new future for Overvecht. By visiting some of these projects, the group was able to see, touch, hear and feel the opportunities and tensions of working towards a new future.

In three groups, the participants visited three projects in which they could experience different visions of the future for Overvecht, and their methods to get there:





OVERVECHT EXCURSION

RESEARCH BY DESIGN: Atelier Utrecht & HIK Ontwerpers

Two designers presented their different visions for the future of a particular place in Overvecht: the shopping centre. Their perspectives, approaches and visions differed greatly: one, a local designer, started from the bottom-up with the neighborhood and the people in it; the other, a designer from Belgium, was commissioned to do a research project on the development of the shopping centre. In the discussion between them and the participants, frictions came up about the challenges of developing this kind of space, which echoed the questions posed during the conference: Who's future is being created? Who is involved? Who decides?

URBAN EXPERIMENTS: FLAT MET TOEKOMST (MITROS)

A visit to one of the eight apartments of the 'Apartment Building of the Future' ('Flat met Toekomst') of the Utrecht housing association Mitros. In this apartment building, Mitros is experimenting with 'zero on the meter' or: carbon-neutral living. The visit showed participants a microcosm of the challenge of experimentation: how can a small experiment like this contribute to the major challenge to make the whole neighborhood of Overvecht sustainable? An experiment such highlights the evolutionary potential of the present, but also shows the tension between 'incremental' and 'radical' change, as discussed in the conference keynotes.

CITY GAMING: DISCOVER OVERVECHT GAME (PLAY THE CITY)

The opportunity to experience the evolutionary potential of the present was offered through a game, 'Discover Overvecht'. This board game was developed to have newcomers and existing inhabitants as well as other stakeholders of the neighborhood experience what's already happening in the neighborhood. The game focuses on social cohesion and on re-framing Overvecht in a positive way. The visit involved playing a part the game, introducing participants to the neighborhood through engaging with it rather than hearing or reading about it.





INAUGURAL ADDRESS

“This is an era in which ‘radical incrementalism’ has a chance. That presupposes lots of experimentation and the application of mutual learning at system level.” - Maarten Hajer

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

In his 'openbare les', the traditional way of accepting a professorship at Dutch universities, Professor Maarten Hajer formally accepted the distinguished position of Chair in Urban Futures and outlined the research programme of the Studio. The talk is entitled 'De macht van verbeelding' (The Power of Imagination).

Cities are places of confrontation, interchange, dynamism, diversity, creativity, vulnerability, opportunity, collaboration - The lecture began by explaining the city as a place where material and biophysical aspects and the cultural and social aspects of life come together. This coming together manifests itself into a double challenge: that of both climate change and social inclusion: "In this sense, it means connecting the climate challenges with the development of a new notion of urbanness. This represents a major design challenge."

Hajer builds on these ideas to set the conceptual background for the creation of the Urban Futures Studio: "The city is at once our most impressive act of cultural creation and a monster threatening to devour us. Can we tame this monster and channel its energy? Oddly enough, I think we can. This is under the assumption that we 'think big': that we look further back than is customary, and further ahead, and with a little more pluck. It is under the assumption that we use a



"I am convinced that change in our time will not result from governmental control, but through collaboration between unexpected agents of change." - Maarten Hajer



INAUGURAL ADDRESS

city's complexity as a point of departure. And under the assumption that we dare to think outside of the existing frameworks."

Daring to think outside existing frameworks, for the research of the new Urban Futures Studio, means using the idea of imaginaries and fictional expectation to study and examine the future, in the plural. Asking questions like: "Which fictional expectations can we find in the present? Which fictional expectations are dominant? What gives the expectations their power and influence? How do concrete imaginaries spread? In short, how does the power of imagination work?"

The addressed introduced the three core concepts for the work of the Urban Futures Studio:

- researching imaginaries of the future
- exploring Techniques of Futuring
- understanding transformative capacity

Summarizing the aim of this by concluding: "My research will not be purely analytic. The Urban Futures Studio is not a laboratory. I expressly see the Studio as a place where the university actively contributes to considering social processes. This is the tradition of transdisciplinary research, not only do we collaborate with various disciplines, but social actors are also directly involved in the dynamics of the research.

I hope that here at Utrecht University, our methodology will become more robust in the years ahead."

Examples of the Energetic Odyssey and Nordic City project as examples of initial testing of new methods, like experiments and research-based design, in which 'soft spaces', or informal and non-traditional spaces, of politics with 'unexpected agents of change' can lead to innovation.

The lecture finishes with a discussion about the way that the Urban Futures Studio has been created to work on "the domain of the 'in between'".

To deal with the current challenges of the future city (energy infrastructure, "Climate neutral" living, and mobility), a move beyond functional differentiation is necessary. "What I now fear is not that the challenge is insurmountable; what I fear is that – fearing too much uncertainty – we will address the challenge in a segmented, sectoral fashion."



CONCLUDING REMARKS

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Following an imaginative, stimulating and challenging two days, some conclusions can be drawn about key messages from the festival and some reflections for the next steps forward from here:

- The importance of imagination was widely recognized. In the context of our deliberations we agreed that the merit is in finding ways to connect reason and imagination.
- A multiplicity of imagined futures not only fosters creativity and innovation but also inclusiveness and participation in the choices made regarding the future. We will deepen our effort to try and understand techniques that are in use and help develop new ones.
- The dialectic between radicalism and incrementalism was explored in every session of the conference. Therefore, is “radical incrementalism” the way forward? How does such a ‘massive small’ approach work? How can we make it into a truly transformative force?
- It is necessary to continue to “be imaginative about imagination” and the role that this can play in conceptualizing and developing urban futures. Here the new way of staging events has to be taken into account. As from now on, there is no default for us, only tailor-made solutions.
- Collective learning is core to enhancing the transformative capacity of cities. This requires transdisciplinary approaches, in which universities interact with societal stakeholders also in defining their research questions.
- Transdisciplinary collaboration requires intensive effort to bring together coalitions beyond the obvious participants. Being open, imaginative, frank and courageous helps in this regard, we find.
- The “evolutionary potential of the present” is a central way of seeing the future in the now - in this way we can connect current developments to imaginaries of the future.
- While bits of the future can be excavated, and valuable initiatives can be identified, systemic change does not occur by itself. It is the interplay between imagination, knowledge and public policy that can create new futures.



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The Urban Futures Studio is a transdisciplinary institute devoted to the study of positive urban futures and of ways to get there. It investigates what we call 'Techniques of Futuring'. It conducts empirical research on existing practices, but also helps to initiate new experiments. The Studio is convinced that innovative thinking starts in 'crossovers' between distinct disciplines, and in coalitions of new and old agents of change.

Find out more at www.uu.nl/ufs



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