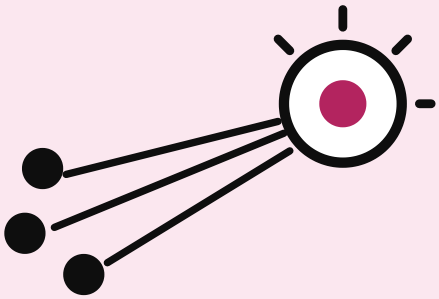
Theory

Image of the future

The idea that shared images of the future steer a society: when they are vivid and positive they drive it forward, and when they fade, it declines.



In Spanish
Imagen del futuro

Origin
Polak (1955)

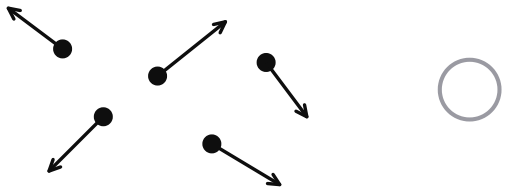
What problem it addresses

Explains why it matters which futures we imagine and tell, not just which futures we calculate.

An example

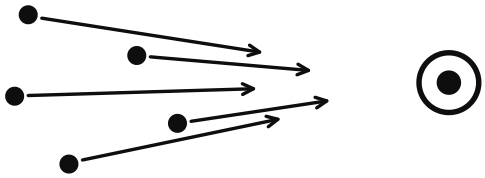
Imagine two communities with the same resources for the next ten years.

A fading image



No one shares an idea of how things could be better; everyone looks after their own. **No shared direction.**

An image that pulls



There is a concrete, shared vision of where to go; decisions line up with it. **Shared direction.**

For Polak, the image of the future doesn't just describe a change: it helps make it happen.

Why it happens

1 

We imagine the future before we build it.

2 

A shared image steers many decisions at once.

3 

If the image fades, the shared direction is lost.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Before proposing solutions, build with the team a concrete, shared image of where it wants to go.

Avoid

Selling an optimistic vision that no one can deliver.

Don't fall for it

Ask which images of the future dominate your sector: they also shape what you design.

1955

What the research says

Polak reviewed the history of the West, from classical Greece to modern democracy, and observed that major changes were preceded or accompanied by positive images of the future (Polak, 1955).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** It is a historical, interpretive thesis that is hard to test with data. Elise Boulding translated it into English in 1961 and published an abridged version in 1973.

Connections

Used in

- Causal layered analysis (CLA)
- Design futures
- Speculative design
- Experiential futures

Authors and works

1955	**Fred Polak**	Formulated the theory in De toekomst is verleden tijd.
	Elise Boulding	Translated it into English and spread it in futures studies.

Sources

Original sources

- Polak, F. (1973). The image of the future (E. Boulding, Trans. & Abr.). Elsevier. (Original work published 1955 as De toekomst is verleden tijd)

Last reviewed: October 25, 2026

Atlas público de diseño, de Adriana Ojeda. Texto e ilustraciones bajo licencia CC BY 4.0.