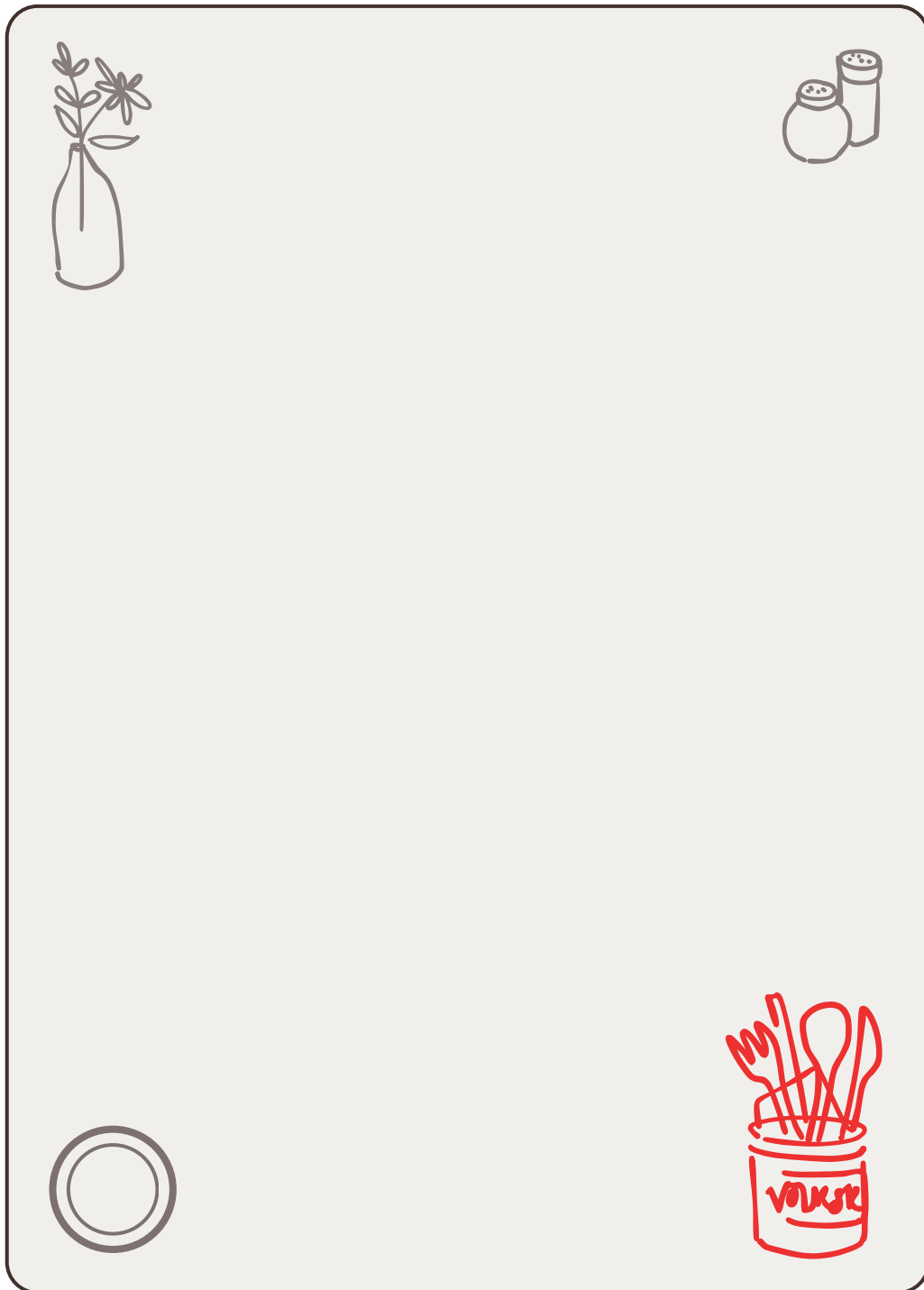# Setting the table

Collective storytelling about the future
with a community, Volkskeuken

Setting the table:
Collective storytelling about the future with a community, Volkskeuken

MSc Thesis Strategic Product Design
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Dedicated to all the home cooks who give people a reason to gather around the table

Summary

This research investigates the integration of community storytelling and speculative futuring within Volkskeuken, a communal dining initiative at Verhalenhuis Belvédère (VHB) in Rotterdam. Set against the backdrop of Rotterdam's multicultural landscape, Volkskeuken becomes a fertile ground for exploring how collective storytelling can evolve from a tool of reflection into a method for imagining and shaping more inclusive and interconnected futures.

Volkskeuken is a community-driven initiative where shared meals facilitate storytelling and connection among the diverse residents of Rotterdam. While its current storytelling practices focus on personal and historical narratives, this research explores how speculative storytelling can extend its role to envisioning shared futures. Grounded in literature on design futuring, participatory design, and storytelling, the study situates itself within contemporary debates on equitable, community-driven future-making.

Engaging with Volkskeuken chefs, volunteers, and organizers, the research followed an iterative process, first exploring the past and present, then imagining possible futures. The first half of the study examined individual pasts, establishing a foundation of community values and lived experiences through active participation, narrative analysis, surveys, and semi-structured interviews.Through interviews, observations, and surveys, the first half of the study explored individual pasts to uncover the narratives, values, and lived experiences shaping Volkskeuken. Chefs shared personal migration stories, cultural traditions, and motivations rooted in family, memory, and care. Four themes emerged (legacy and documentation, food as love and connection, creativity and adaptation, and process and nourishment) highlighting Volkskeuken as both a space of cultural preservation and a platform for community-building. These themes now serve as aspirational lenses for imagining collective futures. In the second half, participants took part in scenario-building and backcasting workshops to reflect on their evolving roles and relationships, and to envision Volkskeuken's future within and beyond its walls. Storytelling became a relational tool for transformation, allowing the community to explore shared aspirations, reimagine identity beyond fixed cultural labels, and ground future possibilities in desired connections, with each other, with the neighborhood, and with Rotterdam at large.

The study concludes that relational capital is not a byproduct of community design, but a prerequisite for meaningful co-creation. When design methods align with a community's relational rhythms and values, they can surface deep motivations and empower collective agency. Speculative storytelling that centers who a community wants to become—rather than just what it wants to do—offers a powerful pathway for long-term, inclusive futuring. Volkskeuken's future lies not in fixed outcomes, but in the strength of its evolving relationships.

Motivations & Acknowledgements

The motivation behind my project was rooted in a desire to explore how change can emerge from the ground up, without being directed by policy, institutions, or structural powers. I wanted to understand how communities create their futures not just through formal frameworks but through organic, relational processes that take place in everyday moments like cooking together and sharing stories. My thesis became a space for me to reflect on and reimagine design as a tool for enabling collective futures.

I was introduced to VHB in the fall of 2023 through one of the artists who contribute as an organizer. Our initial meeting took place at VHB, over coffee and a Volkskeuken lunch with other organizers. I was warmly welcomed: "You are part of this community now; you are always welcome." This moment was pivotal, as it set the stage for my integration into the community. Given that I had been in the Netherlands for less than a year and was not yet fluent in Dutch, I could not fully engage in Dutch-speaking events. However, I found resonance in the magic of the Volkskeuken kitchen. I began volunteering, assisting chefs, and eventually cooking as a chef. Witnessing how each day's meals came together through the collective efforts of over a dozen people, I wanted to explore how I could further contribute to VHB's dynamic ecosystem.

Thus, I owe my deepest gratitude to the Verhalenhuis Belvedere community. The relationships I built there became a continuous source of inspiration. From my very first conversations, they taught me, "Don't think too much about it, just go and do it, try it out, and learn from there" to my experiences volunteering in the kitchen, every moment deepened my understanding of the organic process of community-building. Whether I was chopping vegetables, washing enormous pots, or stuttering through Dunglish (Dutch-English), I was constantly reminded of the power of simple, everyday actions.

I would also like to extend a special thanks to my chair and mentor, who encouraged me to step into this realm of thinking with curiosity and care. This thesis became more than just an academic project; it became an exploration of how design can facilitate change that is not only systemic but also deeply human and relational. Thank you for offering me the space to explore ideas that felt personal and underexplored, and for supporting me in transforming the questions I had carried throughout my master's into a final expression of my journey.

Lastly, I am deeply grateful to the dear friends who spent countless evenings philosophizing with me, helping me navigate complex ideas, and ultimately making sense of the questions I set out to explore. Your support and insightful conversations allowed me to dedicate the necessary time and energy to this thesis and bring it to completion.

Glossary

Futuring - approaches for exploring, shaping, and influencing potential futures through systematic methods and/or participatory engagement. Futuring can involve both analytical techniques (such as forecasting and trend analysis) and more experimental or critical approaches (like speculative design and experiential futures). Rather than merely predicting the future, futuring focuses on the actions and decisions that create it.

Speculative Design - specific approach within design futuring that uses designed artifacts, scenarios, and experiences to explore and provoke critical discussions about alternative futures.

Participatory - approaches and techniques to emphasize inclusivity, collaboration, and shared ownership of outcomes by engaging stakeholders (particularly those who are directly affected by the issues being addressed) in decision-making, planning, research, and design processes. **Participatory futuring** - processes that aim to actively involve non-designers in envisioning and shaping future scenarios.

Publics - people that are engaged in or affected by a particular issue, activity, or process (i.e., local communities, marginalized populations). "those who are potentially victims of the future" **Expert** - stakeholders acting through professional roles and having specialized knowledge, skills, or experience in a particular field or subject area.

Protagonists of the future - individuals or communities who are positioned as active agents in shaping what lies ahead, those who do not merely respond to future changes, but who play a central role in imagining, influencing, and creating those futures.

Storytelling - a process of creating and sharing narratives that reflect individual or collective experiences, values, and aspirations.

Narrative - a structured (beginning, middle, end) account of participants placing characters (real or fictional) in an experience to communicate emotions and perspectives.

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Part 00: Grounding

In order to explore futuring through collective storytelling with a community, the study is set within the context of Rotterdam and the landscape of existing literature. I further define a case study to explore in part 1 and part 2.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context and Background

The Volkskeuken at Verhalenhuis Belvédère

This study takes place in Rotterdam, a multicultural port city shaped by a history of migration and post-WWII labor demands. Rotterdam's cultural richness is a source of vibrancy and creativity, yet it also faces significant challenges, including racial discrimination. Recent efforts, such as the city's action plan "Samen Leven in een Stad" (2023–2026), aim to address these issues by fostering opportunities for inclusion and equity (Dorp et. al., 2023). Within this complex social fabric, community initiatives play a crucial role in bridging divides and celebrating diversity.

In Rotterdam's neighborhood of Katendrecht, one such initiative is Verhalenhuis Belvédère (VHB), a community space deeply rooted in storytelling about migration and heritage. VHB serves as a platform for connecting Rotterdammers from various backgrounds (native Dutch citizens, refugees, first-generation immigrants, and descendants of migrants) through art, culture, and personal narratives. The organization's mission focuses on making "people, communities and the changing city visible to each other and to a wide audience, contributing to the cultural and social development of the city" (Belvédère, 2012).

Central to VHB is the Volkskeuken, a communal dining initiative where sharing food becomes a catalyst for connection and understanding. Unlike traditional restaurants, the Volkskeuken offers no set menu. Instead, visitors, neighbors, locals or anyone passing by are welcome to enjoy a home cooked meal, created by the chef of the day, a rotation of various volunteers in the community. The Volkskeuken invites diners to come with open minds, fostering connections through shared meals and the stories they inspire. It is a space where the door is always open, and community bonds are strengthened not only through the act of eating together but also through the exchange of experiences and traditions. Sharing food also means sharing the rich cultural heritage that people bring to Rotterdam. Past celebrations, such as those featuring Bulgarian folk music, Yiddish jazz, Thai Light Festivals, and Iranian New Year, are just a few examples of how storytelling is woven into the fabric of the community, with each event offering a unique glimpse into the traditions, histories, and memories of its participants. This dynamic environment is grounded in storytelling, which plays a vital role in shaping collective identity and fostering a sense of belonging.

Through this study, I explored Verhalenhuis Belvédère's Volkskeuken as a case study for collective storytelling about the future with a community.

1.2 Literature Review

This study explores how community storytelling about the future can help a community gain a better understanding of itself and reflect on the future. Central to this inquiry is the notion that telling stories about the future might foster a deeper sense of collective identity and also strengthens the social capital necessary for communities to take action. Design futuring, with focus on speculative design, offers a framework for imagining preferable futures aligned with community values, while participatory design emphasizes inclusivity and shared power in the creation of those futures. Collective storytelling enhances this process by deepening emotional resonance and creating connections among people. This literature review aims to explore the potential and limitations of these interconnected approaches, highlighting how they contribute to communities' understanding of their own futures and capacity to build the social capital needed to address future challenges.

Design Futuring

The contemporary world is facing multiple crises – climate change, economic instability, and social inequality – that generate significant uncertainty. These challenges demand innovative, inclusive approaches that help communities navigate complexity, adapt to changing conditions, and foster resilience. Design research has increasingly emphasized imagining and debating alternative futures through approaches like speculative design, discursive design, and design fiction, collectively referred to as "design futuring" (Kozubaev et al., 2020). This umbrella term encompasses methods focused on exploring future alternatives and creating future possibilities that reflect the needs and aspirations of diverse communities (Fry, 2009). By engaging in design futuring, communities can proactively shape their desired futures, moving beyond reactive responses to challenges and embracing a vision-driven approach.

In this process, the futures cone provides a valuable framework for mapping types of futures and highlighting differences between imagining probable and preferred futures (Dunne and Raby, 2013). Adapted from Voros, Dunne & Raby illustrate an iteration of the Futures Cone in Figure 1, emphasizing that while probable and plausible futures often dominate decision-making, design futuring offers a space to collectively redefine preferable futures, those that align with the values, needs, and aspirations of specific groups. (Dunne & Raby, 2013). However, many critical researchers and practitioners argue that the notion of 'preferable' futures is shaped more by powerful actors, such as governments and industries, rather than by individuals as citizen-consumers, leading to a future that reflects the interests of those in power rather than a collective societal consensus (Dunne & Raby, 2013; Ramos, 2017). In response, design futuring can help confront these power imbalances, opening up possibilities, and provoking discussion to actively shape preferable futures.
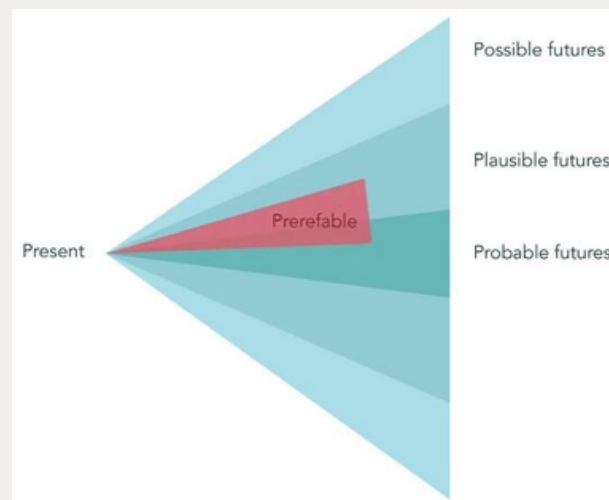
Figure 1: Futures Cone (Dunne & Raby, 2013)

Various contemporary design practices seem to have integrated design futuring, using different techniques and tools, though not always under its original terminology. Specifically, Lee et al. (2024), describes the "form-giving capability of designers in making prototypes, building scenarios, and generating visions is highly appreciated for their futuring aspects" (p.56).

Speculative design, as articulated by Dunne and Raby (2013) in Speculative Everything, expands the role of design beyond problem-solving to provoke thought, challenge assumptions, and inspire new ways of imagining the future. Unlike traditional design, which often focuses on creating functional solutions for immediate needs, speculative design, typically taking form of objects or artifacts, scenarios, and narratives to explore "what if" questions, offers a platform for critical reflection and debate about possible futures (Barendregt & Vaage, 2021; Dunne & Raby, 2013). By presenting alternative realities, speculative design invites individuals and communities to engage with complex issues (i.e., ethics, politics, and sustainability) from new perspectives, fostering dialogue about the kind of future they desire. This approach highlights how design can transcend its practical applications to serve as a tool for collective imagination and inquiry, bridging diverse perspectives and inspiring proactive, socially constructive visions of the future.

Participatory approaches to Design Futuring
Increasingly, design futurists are realizing an essential aspect of design futuring is its participatory approach, which recognizes that envisioning and creating futures is most effective when the voices of diverse publics are included throughout the futuring process (Barendregt et al., 2024). Publics include people (i.e., local communities, marginalized populations) that are engaged in or affected by a particular issue, activity, or process. By adopting participatory methods such as workshops, visioning sessions, and co-creation activities, communities can articulate their needs and desires and co-develop actionable strategies to achieve their envisioned futures (Candy & Dunagan, 2017). This approach

enhances the relevance of futuring projects by ensuring they reflect the lived experiences, aspirations, and values of the people involved. As Farias et al. (2022) describe, Participatory Speculative Design (PSD) takes this approach further by shifting the focus from the artifacts produced to the design process itself, emphasizing collaboration and mutual learning. PSD challenges the traditional boundaries of speculative design, where the authority of the designer over the outcome aims to be reduced, and allows for diverse publics to take on leadership roles in the creation of speculative futures. Participatory design futuring should, therefore, involve more inclusive processes which communities can actively engage in exploring, defining, and co-creating future visions.

Addressing Exclusion and Power Imbalances in Participatory Futuring
Despite the growing emphasis on participatory approaches in futuring, there remains a disconnect between theoretical frameworks and their practical application, particularly in collaboration with public institutions (Lee et al., 2024). Scholars such as Bisht (2017) argue that a critical examination of power dynamics is essential to ensuring that participatory futuring does not replicate existing hierarchies. Without careful attention to how power is distributed within these processes, participatory efforts risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

In some participatory futuring projects, power hierarchies are reinforced by the prioritization of professionals and experts over public citizens, often limiting participation to individuals who fit predefined categories based on occupation, age, or expertise (Barendregt et al., 2024). This selective approach excludes diverse perspectives and often marginalized groups defined by race, class, and gender. The Gemeente Rotterdam defines diversity as the inclusion of residents from various racial, cultural, religious, and migration backgrounds (Dorp et al., 2023). While this definition reflects an intent to recognize social difference, it often remains surface-level when not paired with structural attention to power and inclusion. However, Barendregt et al. (2024) highlight that participatory futuring frequently overlooks deeper engagement with these identity categories, despite their historical association with marginalization. By neglecting these dimensions, organizers risk perpetuating systemic discrimination, reinforcing imbalanced power dynamics, and excluding those whose lived realities could meaningfully contribute to shaping future outcomes.

The Risks of Tokenism in Participation
When participation is structured in a way that limits the agency of public participants public agency, it risks becoming performative rather than substantive. Arnstein highlights how participatory futuring processes often grant participants a platform to "have a voice," but without ensuring that their contributions will meaningfully influence final decisions (2019, p. 25). Instead, participants' input is frequently mediated by organizers, funders, and decision-makers, diminishing their actual impact. As a result, participants are often engaged only in the

middle stages of the process, "where their contributions are sandwiched between organizers' goals and expert analysis, assessment, and translation" (Barendregt et al., 2024, p. 8). This constrained involvement not only reduces the effectiveness of participatory methods but also leads to frustration with formalized engagement processes, ultimately discouraging future participation (Arnstein, 2019).

Toward More Inclusive and Impactful Futuring Practices
To address the challenges of tokenistic participation and concentrated decision-making, scholars stress the importance of distributing the power to define and shape participatory processes. Arnstein (2019) cautions that without this shift, participation risks becoming tokenistic. Mitlin (2021) emphasizes the importance of recognizing identities as dynamic and evolving, shaped through participation rather than fixed by predetermined categories such as ethnicity, age, or gender. This perspective invites a more expansive and inclusive view of citizenship, one that acknowledges individuals' multiple and shifting affiliations. By allowing for the expression of these plural identities, participatory processes can become more reflexive and grounded in the lived realities of diverse participants, ultimately broadening the assumptions on which such processes are based. Similarly, Barendregt et al. (2024) highlight that inviting people into participatory futuring processes can formally recognize them as stakeholders, validating their roles and contributions. They suggest that framing individuals as "subjects of the future" helps to acknowledge the evolving nature of people's identities and roles within society, fostering a more dynamic and inclusive approach to participation. In practice, Kozubaev et al. (2020) advocate for participatory futuring to be seen as a multi-stage, iterative process, rather than a one-time consultation. Through sustained interactions that invite participants to engage with speculative futures across different stages, collaborations between publics and experts can foster deeper and more continuous involvement. As Farias et al. (2022) outline, this involvement can take many forms, ranging from spectatorship and reflection to shared creativity, authorship, and ultimately, ownership. These participatory modalities span levels of influence from non-participation to involvement, collaboration, and leadership, emphasizing the need to consider how much power non-designers hold within the process. By designing participation structures that empower publics to actively shape desirable futures, practitioners can create more inclusive, dynamic, and ultimately transformative participatory futuring practices (Barendregt et al., 2024).

At the heart of this study is the right of publics to shape their futures. By fostering participatory practices that center collective intelligence, emergent identities, and dynamic engagement, design futuring can move from being a symbolic exercise of broadcasting ideas about the future to a transformative process of creating circumstances that allow the collective intelligence and imagination of communities to emerge and be acted upon.

Storytelling as a Tool for Participatory Futuring
A story can be understood as a purposefully constructed narrative that unfolds through a sequence of events, adhering to the principles of cause and effect (Mourik et al., 2021). Osatuke et al. (2004) further add that for a narrative to be meaningful, it must have a clear structure (beginning, middle, and end) along with an active protagonist driven by intent and a defined moral or evaluative perspective. The dynamic process of crafting and conveying stories takes many forms, from oral traditions and art to modern media such as films, podcasts, or comics (de Nooijer & Sol Cueva, 2022). In this study, storytelling refers to the process of creating and sharing narratives that reflect individual or collective experiences, values, and aspirations, resulting in a narrative, defined as a structured account in which participants place characters—real or fictional—within a sequence of experiences to convey emotions and perspectives.

While storytelling can encompass personal, historical, or imaginative narratives, it is increasingly recognized for its future-oriented applications in participatory engagement and vision building (Mourik et al., 2021). It plays a critical role in communication, persuasion, and problem-framing, and is also an important tool for knowledge transfer and cultural preservation (De Nooijer & Sol Cueva, 2022). Sol Cueva (2025) further explains that by incorporating diverse perspectives and situated knowledge, storytelling captures local contexts and enables communities to shape narratives that reflect their values, needs, and lived experiences. This process helps empower communities to define their futures, increasing the chance that their voices are heard and their experiences acknowledged.

In this sense, storytelling becomes a key tool in participatory futuring by engaging individuals and communities to collectively build meaningful and relevant futures, bringing together diverse desires and needs into shared, cohesive stories (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). Milojević and Inayatullah (2015) further expand on the role of storytelling in futuring through the concept of "narrative foresight." This process uses storytelling as a method to construct alternative futures, creating intentional, future-oriented, and transformative narratives. Narrative foresight relies on double-loop learning, which challenges people to rethink assumptions and see situations from entirely new perspectives. By fostering these reframed visions, storytelling opens new possibilities for the future.

Similarly, within both participatory futuring and storytelling futures, critical attention is increasingly being paid to how power operates from who gets to imagine the future to whose voices are amplified and whose are left out. It is important to acknowledge how dominant narratives about the future often reinforce inequities and sustain limited, one-dimensional understandings of human potential (Milojević and Izgarjan, 2014). To address this, Milojević and Izgarjan advocate for "constructive storytelling," a process of reinterpreting and retelling stories to foster new avenues for communication that, in turn, promote more just and

equitable futures. In participatory futuring, this approach requires constant reflection on the process to ensure that the storytelling structures do not perpetuate existing power dynamics but instead challenge and disrupt them. Senehi (2010) further emphasizes that "constructive storytelling" can be inclusive and foster shared power and mutual recognition. It creates opportunities for openness, dialogue, and insight, ultimately bringing issues to collective consciousness and positioning storytelling as a tool for social change. Dobroć et al. (2023) also highlight storytelling's ability to help communities make sense of complex challenges, particularly in contexts of uncertainty, such as climate change or social inequality. By transforming abstract problems into relatable narratives, storytelling helps communities chart pathways toward preferable futures, providing them with the means to navigate complex issues.

In each of these instances, storytelling serves as more than just a means of communication. It holds potential as a powerful sense-making tool, opening space for diverse opinions to be actively included, fostering inclusivity and amplifying the perspectives of marginalized groups. Storytelling as a tool for design futuring might create room to enable communities to shape their own futures while addressing social inequities and fostering participatory engagement in futuring processes. This perspective highlights storytelling's dual function, as a reflective practice that reinforces shared history and values and as an active tool that empowers communities to co-create their futures (Gearty, 2015). By fostering collective imagination and aligning efforts, storytelling could open pathways to inspire communities to take charge of their futures. This participatory approach may present ways "subjects of the future" to bridge the gap between reflection and transformation, offering the means for storytelling a tool for bottom-up change.

Exploring futuring through collective storytelling with a community
The integration of speculative futuring and storytelling presents a powerful opportunity for communities to critically examine their past, engage with their present, and actively shape their desired futures. Mazé (2019, p. 26) echoes the arguments of contemporary philosophers, such as Grosz (1999), who challenge the limitations of dominant scientific forms of knowing—like causal or statistical thinking—saying they fail to capture the critical aspects of the future. In line with this, Rajchman (1999) advocates for alternative frameworks that embrace creative practices like design and storytelling, moving beyond deterministic constraints to unlock new pathways for action. These approaches, as Mazé (2019) suggests, offer more than speculative thought; they invite people to experience and emotionally connect with possible futures, transforming abstract visions into tangible, actionable ideas. This aligns with Candy's (2010) argument on experiential futures, which emphasizes that grounding abstract futures in concrete narratives not only deepens their emotional resonance but also fosters greater personal investment in their realization. Dunagan et al. (2019) further highlight this idea, underscoring the importance of concrete narratives in making future scenarios more tangible

and impactful.

The intersection of speculative futuring and storytelling does more than help communities imagine the future, it encourages them to engage in the critical process of co-creating it. By weaving together cultural depth and emotional engagement, storytelling not only amplifies the impact of futuring methods but also strengthens collective agency. As communities reflect on their lived experiences and aspirations, there is room to explore the tools to drive bottom-up change that resonate with their unique needs and collective hopes. These methods might invite a shift from passive reception to more active participation in shaping potential futures. While there is an intriguing possibility that speculative storytelling could play a role in transforming community engagement, the extent to which it might influence real-world change remains uncertain and invites further inquiry.

There is a significant opportunity to enhance the integration of storytelling and speculative futuring with community contexts by articulating approaches that connect the emotional depth of shared narratives with the exploratory potential of future methodologies. Storytelling excels in fostering emotional resonance and creating shared meaning, as it roots community experiences in collective values and relationships. On the other hand, speculative futuring emphasizes the exploration of possibilities and long-term strategies for addressing complex challenges. However, while rational, structured approaches to design futuring often overlook the emotional and affective aspects of human experience, storytelling can bridge this gap by engaging both the emotional and rational dimensions of community members (Mazé, 2019; Sol Cueva, 2025; Candy & Dunagan, 2017). Frameworks that effectively link these two approaches remain open to exploration.

Chapter 2: Study Scope

2.1 Problem Statement

Problem Definition

At the heart of the Volkskeuken community, storytelling plays a vital role in fostering connection, cultural exchange, and shared meaning-making. However, while these practices encourage reflection on past experiences, the potential for using storytelling as a tool for participatory futuring has not yet been fully explored. This research aims to address this gap by investigating how community members can come together to co-create narratives that not only reflect on their shared histories but also articulate their collective aspirations for the future.

By integrating speculative futuring with existing storytelling practices, this study seeks to create opportunities for community members to not only recount shared histories but also to imagine and shape their future together. In doing so, the Volkskeuken community may begin to recognize that their identity is not just defined by their cultural past, but also by the futures they co-create. This process would aim to foster emergent identities and inclusive spaces, shifting from reflecting on past experiences to co-creating a shared vision for the future (Mitlin, 2021).

Opportunity Space

At the heart of storytelling's transformative potential lies its capacity to foster collective imagination, a shared vision that inspires action and aligns diverse community efforts. By offering a sense of meaning, continuity, and purpose, storytelling enables community members to collaborate toward shared goals, building social closeness and facilitating future cooperation (Fowler et al., 2023), parallel to what Mitlin (2021) describes as relational capital. This collective alignment is critical in driving bottom-up change, as it grounds aspirational futures in the lived experiences and values of the community.

This study builds on Volkskeuken's unique capacity to connect the past, present, and future of its community members. As a rich cultural space for communal dining, it provides an ideal setting for experimenting with storytelling as a tool for collective imagination. This study seeks to connect past narratives with future aspirations, offering a way for the community to bridge the gap between its historical context and desired futures. By exploring how grassroots initiatives like the Volkskeuken can surface local aspirations, this research aims to co-create tangible visions for the community's future.

Research Question

Understanding how storytelling operates within the Volkskeuken community reveals its significant role in fostering connection, cultural exchange, and shared meaning-making. I aim to explore the idea that through collective storytelling, community members may not only reflect on their past experiences but also begin to envision and articulate aspirations for their collective future. This prompts an exploration of how collective storytelling could encourage communities to better understand themselves and engage in shaping their futures. Therefore, this study poses the following research question:

How can collective storytelling about the future help the community better understand itself and reflect on the future?

In this context, enhance refers to the ability to facilitate the creation of shared future narratives and to position community members as "protagonists of the future" (Barendregt et al., 2024), thus increasing their sense of agency in shaping what comes next. The term "protagonists of the future" refers to individuals or communities who are not passive recipients of future changes, but rather active agents who imagine, influence, and create those futures. As the Volkskeuken already demonstrates that storytelling is a powerful tool for connection, this research seeks to explore how it can also serve as a vehicle for imagining futures together.

2.2 Study Design and Approach

Study Design

This study took a participatory and generative design approach, drawing from speculative futures and community storytelling methodologies. This two-part structure allows for a deeper exploration of both the community's existing practices and the potential of storytelling as a tool for participatory futuring, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of how collective narratives can influence future-oriented community action as shown in Figure 2:

Part 1: Exploring Individual Pasts – Establishing a foundational understanding of existing narratives, community values, and lived experiences.

Part 2: Creating Collective Futures – Engaging the community in envisioning and shaping shared futures.
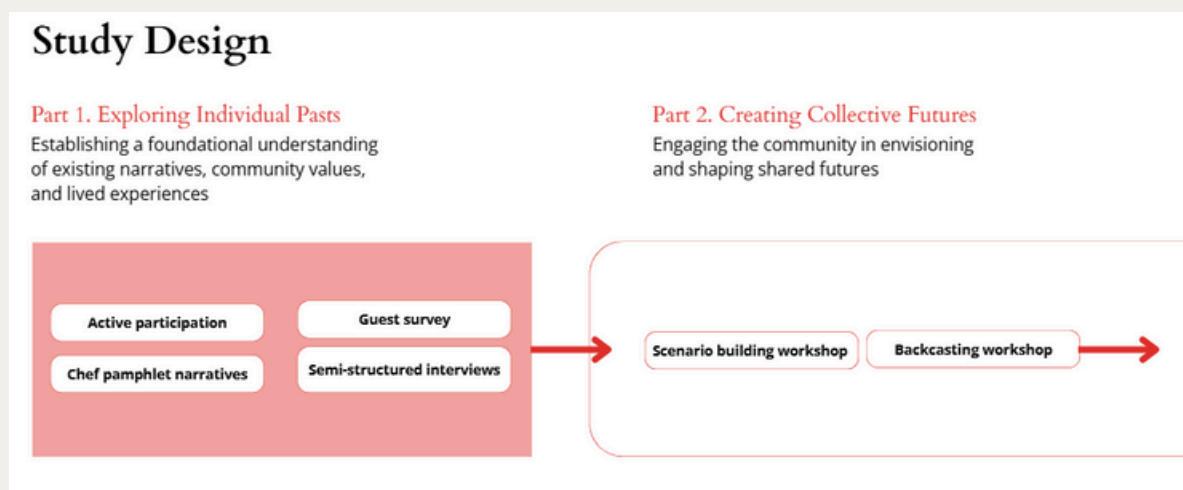
Figure 2: Study Design

This two-part structure is essential for addressing the research question because it first grounds the study in an understanding of the community's current realities before facilitating an active process of futuring. Drawing inspiration from Camargo's (2023) guidelines on the role of design in community care, Part 1's activities were focused on building the capacity to intervene, nurturing relationships, and "earning" the right to participate. Content from Part 1 provided insights into the personal narratives that contribute to the collective Volkskeuken identity, revealing key themes that inform the community's aspirations.

This approach aligns with the principles of action research, recognizing that sharing stories of community-driven initiatives not only fosters learning for those directly involved but also has the potential to inspire broader change and agency (Gearty, 2015). These findings then serve as context for defining an intervention in Part 2, where participants build on this understanding to co-create alternative futures through scenario-building and backcasting workshops.

By combining reflection with imagination, this structure aligns with generative and participatory design research (Sanders & Stappers, 2012), fostering a co-creative process in which participants move beyond storytelling as documentation toward storytelling as a means of transformation. As Sanders and Stappers (2012) note, generative methods "give people a language with which they can imagine and express their ideas and dreams for future experience. These ideas and dreams can, in turn, inform and inspire other stakeholders in the design and development process" (p. 8). In this study, the two-part framework explores how collaborative storytelling might not only reflect existing narratives but also facilitates a deeper collective reflection on the future, enabling the community to better understand itself and envision potential pathways forward.

Participant overview matrix
As a space that celebrates Rotterdam's migration history, the Verhalenhuis Belvedere community shares cultural heritages from multiple continents, spanning several generations. Figure 3 provides a glimpse into the dynamic between native and migrant backgrounds within the community. Migration backgrounds are categorized in this diagram as refugees, first-generation immigrants, second- and third-generation Dutch citizens, and native Dutch citizens, highlighting how stories of heritage are passed across generations and reflecting the diversity of people involved in the various roles of this community.
This comprehensive overview also outlines the number of participants I worked with and their roles within the Verhalenhuis Belvédère. To respect the public and familiar nature of the setting, the identities of all participants have been kept anonymous, with references made only to their roles in the study.
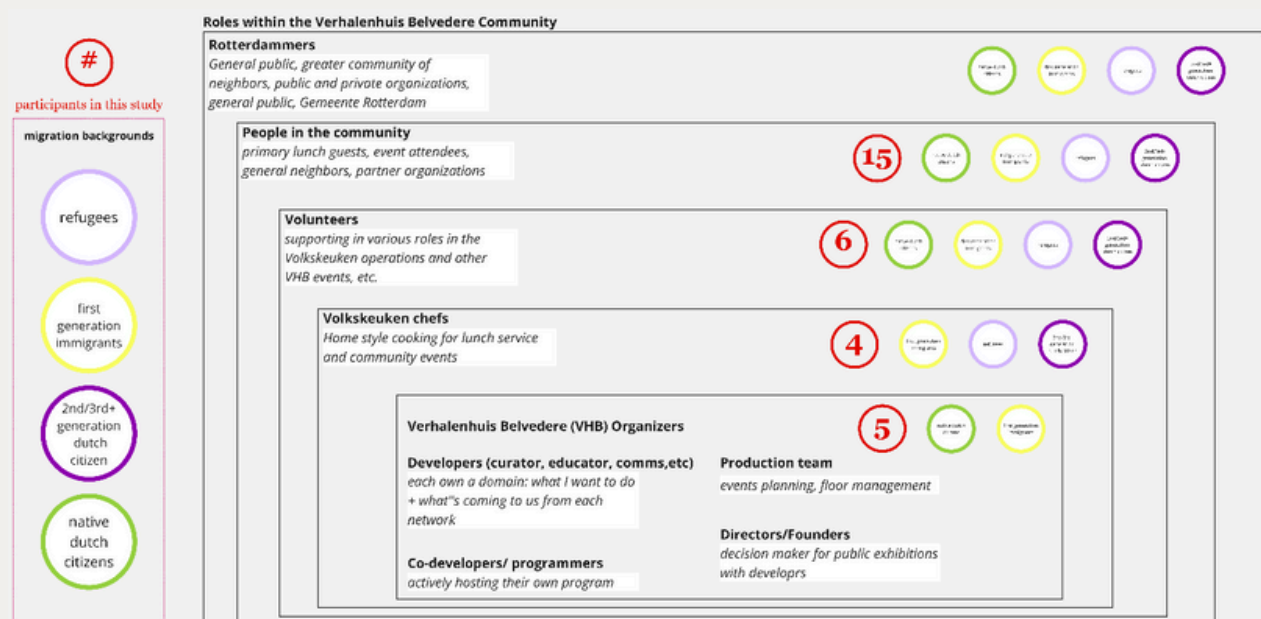
Figure 3: Participant Overview matrix

Part 1:
Exploring individual pasts

To understand how collaborative storytelling can enhance community agency over its collective future, it was essential to first uncover the existing narratives, shared values, and everyday experiences that shape the Volkskeuken community. This initial exploratory phase (Part 1) focused on investigating how individual and collective stories contribute to the community's identity and cultural meaning, laying a grounded foundation for imagining future directions.

To do so, I employed four design research methods that each addressed a specific subquestion related to the guiding inquiry: How do individual stories and daily experiences within Volkskeuken help reveal the community's identity, shared memories, and cultural meaning? Active participation allowed me to observe daily operations and informal interactions, revealing embedded practices of storytelling and community-building. Pamphlet narrative analysis examined how chefs' personal migration stories are expressed through cooking, highlighting the role of food in cultural continuity and belonging. Guest surveys explored how visitors perceive their experiences in terms of emotional connection, cultural exchange, and memory-making. Semi-structured interviews with chefs provided deeper insight into how culinary practices serve as tools for expressing values, negotiating identity, and shaping communal aspirations. Together, these methods surface a multi-layered picture of the present-day Volkskeuken, one that bridges personal history with collective meaning and sets the stage for future-oriented co-creation in Part 2.

Chapter 3: Activities

3.1 Active Participation

Aim of activity

The aim of this activity was to establish a foundational understanding of the daily operations, interactions, and dynamics within the Volskeuken community. By immersing myself in the day-to-day functions, I sought to observe how storytelling, cultural exchange, and community-building are embedded in the operations of Volskeuken.

Participants

While there were no formal participants in this activity, it was essential to engage with a variety of community members, including the chefs, volunteers, and guests of Volskeuken. Coordination and communication with the Volskeuken production team were crucial for organizing my participation in the program. This ensured my active involvement alongside the chefs and volunteers as they went about their daily work.

Methodology

My role and approach as a participant in the community

As a Volskeuken volunteer, I had already developed a general familiarity with the history of the organization, its events, and its operational structure. Shifting my role from a participant with personal interest to an embedded researcher, I introduced my motivations through a formal letter in the community newsletter. In this letter, I addressed key questions: "Who am I? What is my thesis concerning Volskeuken? Why am I doing this?" This outreach helped familiarize the community with my increasing presence and clarified my research intentions. To understand how collaborative storytelling can enhance community agency over its collective future, it was essential to first establish a foundation of the VHB community's existing narratives, challenges, and aspirations. This required a research approach that went beyond passive observation. Active Participation was chosen because it allowed me to engage with the community in an authentic and reciprocal way, ensuring that my presence was not extractive but contributive. In discussions with organizers, I remained conscious of maintaining a balance between what I hoped to learn and what I could contribute. My role was to integrate into the day-to-day activities of Volskeuken, not as an outside observer but as someone embedded within the rhythms of its operations. This meant stepping into their world, not just watching from the sidelines. To do this effectively, I approached my time at Volskeuken as a learner, a student of its history and culture, and the people who make it what it is. As Candy and Dunagan (2017) suggest, empathy and a willingness to build upon the existing knowledge and experience of those I was working with were essential. Similarly, Camargo's guidelines on research with community care articulate the importance of building the capacity to intervene, " to gather member's interest and support in a project" (2023, p. 88). I followed Camargo's principles under this capacity to intervene, first contributing to earn the right to participate by

joining various activities, followed by building reliable relationships through frequent interactions.

Types of Participation
In the first few months of the study, volunteering in the kitchen became my primary way of participating. I worked anywhere from 4–10 hours per week, assisting chefs, working with other volunteers, and getting to know the guests during lunch service. I worked with the Volkskeuken production team to schedule shifts throughout late September to early December. In total, I had the opportunity to work with 5 different chefs for a total of 10 lunch services. My participation aligned with the principles of action research, which seeks both to generate research evidence and to foster learning outcomes for participants and communities (Gearty, 2015). This meant that my role in Volkskeuken was not just about data collection but about active engagement in the community. Through this approach, I could begin to understand the subtleties of how the team, the guests, and the volunteers all interact and contribute to the essence of Volkskeuken.

This wasn't simply about observing, it was about being present, building relationships, and contributing meaningfully to the space. It was important to me that this involvement felt mutually beneficial, not extractive. For example, I didn't ask every chef I met to participate in my research. Sometimes, it wasn't the right moment (i.e., they were open about struggling with personal matters that day, focused-or even stressed with the lunch rush). I tried to respect those boundaries, focusing instead on embedding myself in the daily dynamics of Volkskeuken.

Attending Volkskeuken events was equally significant. These gatherings gave me a deeper understanding of the guest experience; what motivated visitors to come, what they valued most, and how the space fosters connection. I didn't just observe these events but engaged with the stories and cultural experiences they offered. Many events centered around a collective theme where the Volkskeuken's narratives of chefs complemented a range of performers and artists. Some examples of events that Volkskeuken contributed to include: a Greek tavern night, where musicians performed while Volkskeuken cooked and served a traditional Greek meal; a neighborhood tour featuring the historic Chinatown, followed by a communal lunch where guests gathered to reflect; and a Mid-Autumn Festival celebration, which included several performances and traditional holiday snacks and desserts. This allowed me to see that there were multiple modes of storytelling, bridging individual identities and cultures into a collective one. In these moments, I could see Volkskeuken's unique role as a place that nurtures both personal and collective connection. From September to December, I aimed to go to VHB at least once a week if I was not already there to cook, whether it was for lunch as a guest, to simply work on my thesis in the space, or just to say hello and chat with people in the community. I also attended approximately 15 events in the first few months of

the study to observe how the Volkskeuken complemented the variety of public community events at VHB.

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Responsibility
Active participation required a commitment not only to research activities but also to the values and people that define Volkskeuken. Following Dunne and Raby (2013), I recognized that my role was not to dictate futures for Volkskeuken but to amplify the possibilities already present. This required sensitivity to what was happening around me, a willingness to improvise, and an ability to recognize when to step back and let others take the lead. As Candy and Dunagan (2017) describe, I needed to balance the grounded, everyday realities of Volkskeuken with an openness to the abstract possibilities for its future. Ensuring that my presence contributed to the community on its own terms, beyond the parameters of my research project was a commitment to ethical participation.
Ultimately, my participation was about finding ways to contribute meaningfully while respecting the autonomy and agency of those around me. I wanted to understand the subtleties of how food, storytelling, and connection come together at Volkskeuken, and to learn from the ways these dynamics evolve through the contributions of the people who pass through its doors. By being present in the kitchen, at events, and in the broader Volkskeuken ecosystem, I aimed to deepen my understanding of what makes the space work, while ensuring my presence was additive rather than disruptive.

Data collection and analysis
I took notes to gather an understanding of the following phenomena and dynamics: Volkskeuken day to day operations, chef's workflow, environment, motivations for cooking, and strengths of sharing food here. Using Miro, I gathered these notes for a foundation of context to build later research activities (guest survey, semi-structured interview).

3.2 Chefs' Pamphlet Narrative analysis

Aim of activity

The aim of this activity was to analyze the personal narratives of chefs at the Volskeuken, as presented in their pamphlets, in order to better understand how the individual stories of migration, cooking, and community engagement are framed and shared within the organization. By examining these narratives, I aimed to uncover how the chefs' backgrounds, motivations, and connections to food shape the communal experience and sense of belonging at the Volkskeuken.

Participants

The Volkskeuken had a collection of over 30 chefs' pamphlets that were displayed on the main floor. Pamphlet copies of the featured chef that day would be placed on each dining table for guests to read. Initially, I asked the Volkskeuken production team to help identify the main chefs who regularly cook at the Volkskeuken since they are most familiar with the rotation of people coming in and out. I started with "active chefs," cooking at least once per month (n=10). Because some chefs recently became more consistent in cooking at Volkskeuken, I also asked the Volkskeuken production team to identify the 'occasional chefs', cooking at least once every few months (n=11) to see if their stories were consistent and confirm themes from the initial round of analysis. All chefs in this pamphlet analysis are first generation migrants to the Netherlands.

Methodology

Each chef at the Volkskeuken has a pamphlet featuring their personal story, detailing their migration journey, their connection to cooking and sharing food, and their involvement at the Volkskeuken. These narratives are created through interviews between the VBH organizers and the chefs, then written into pamphlets alongside photos the chefs have chosen to share.

Narrative analysis was chosen as a key method for the Volkskeuken chef pamphlets because the pamphlets served as structured yet personal accounts of the chefs' migration journeys, motivations, and relationships with food and community. By analyzing these narratives, I aimed to uncover how storytelling within the Volkskeuken already functions as a means of identity-building, connection, and shared experience. This analysis provided insights into the existing ways in which the community represented itself, which was necessary before exploring how collaborative storytelling might further strengthen agency and collective vision.

Data collection and analysis

All pamphlet stories were transcribed from Dutch to English using DeepL. I then conducted an analysis using the *Analysis on the Wall* method (Sanders & Stappers, 2012) on Miro (Appendix A). Analysis on the Wall is a visual and collaborative technique for making sense of qualitative data by externalizing and organizing fragments, such as quotes, themes, or observations, on a large surface. Rather than conducting a line-by-line narrative analysis, this method allowed me

to extract and work with key insights from participants' cooking stories in a more structured and comparative way. Given the small sample size (six to seven participants), this method proved effective for identifying relevant information without becoming overwhelmed by the full narratives. I mapped each chef's motivations and aspirations as post-it notes in Miro, which I then grouped and rearranged to spot emerging patterns.

To structure the analysis, I organized insights across three temporal categories: cooking in the past, cooking in the present, and cooking in the future. This allowed me to compare recurring themes, exploring the conditions that influenced their motivations in each period. By visualizing and clustering insights across narratives, I could better understand how past experiences influenced their journeys to becoming Volskeuken chefs.

3.3 Guest Survey

Aim of Activity

The aim of collecting guest surveys was to understand the guests' experiences at Volskeuken and explore how they perceive the meals and community interactions. I wanted to understand what guests enjoyed about their time at the Volskeuken, how they would like to experience the meal again, and what memories or emotions they took away from the experience.

Methodology

While chefs have their own intentions for cooking and sharing food, a big part of continuing to do so is receiving some kind of internal and/or external validation, in various forms. Often mentioned during my visits, chefs and VHB organizers have echoed the sentiment "When you see people enjoying the food you made, there's no better feeling" (chef). I wanted to explore what guests enjoy the most about their time at the Volskeuken and what they take away from it.

Participants

Anonymous guests (n=15) of the Volskeuken participated on the day that I surveyed. Generally, lunch guests can be anyone from the organizers and volunteers to people in the community and Rotterdammers in the greater public (as described in Figure 3 from 2.2) I had introduced myself to each table of guests to explain what and why the survey was there and left guests open to respond if they chose. The aim was to survey guests from multiple lunch services, gathering at least 20 opinions. However, the first intended lunch service had zero guests (only catering lunch to a private group that day) so all responses come from one lunch service. The consequence of not reaching the target of 20 responses and of only surveying one lunch service is that the findings may not fully reflect the diversity of guests who attend on different days. Factors such as the menu, day of the week, or guest demographics may influence responses, so this narrower dataset may limit the generalizability of insights. Despite this, the responses gathered still provide valuable, grounded input into the guest experience, though with an awareness of these contextual constraints.

Data collection and analysis

To gather this information, I designed a simple survey (Appendix B) with three open-ended questions, giving guests the opportunity to reflect on their experience in detail. A two-checkbox option was included for more straightforward responses. A simple a5 printed sheet was left folded at the dining table between the flowers and salt and pepper shakers to provide guests with the invitation to open if they wanted. The survey was available in both Dutch and English.

Fifteen handwritten responses were collected during one lunch service, with assistance from the VHB team in deciphering handwriting and translating Dutch responses. The translated feedback was recorded in a spreadsheet. Although I initially applied Analysis on the Wall to

identify broader trends and specific perceptions, this step ultimately proved unnecessary. The responses were already highly consistent, and the themes emerged clearly and repetitively enough that direct analysis from the spreadsheet was sufficient to surface the key insights.

3.4 Semi-Structured Chef Interviews

Aim of Activity

By interviewing the chefs of Volkskueken, I aimed to understand the chefs' perspectives on their contributions to both cultural values and the broader communal experience, as well as to understand the lasting impact they hope to have through their culinary practices.

Participants

I aimed to speak with chefs who had been cooking at the Volkskeuken regularly, at least once a month, and who had lived in Rotterdam for over three years. This criterion ensured that the chefs were deeply familiar with the space, its operations, and the community dynamics. Given their longstanding engagement with the Volkskeuken and their time living in Rotterdam, their insights would also provide a nuanced and informed perspective on the future direction of the organization, as well as their contributions to the broader cultural landscape of the city. Ideally, speaking with five to seven people would have allowed for a broader range of perspectives in addition to increasing the likelihood of identifying recurring patterns. This sample size would also encourage a diverse group and capture a variety of insights. However, due to logistical constraints and differing personal schedules, I was only able to interview four chefs throughout November. While this reduced the sample size, the interviews still provided valuable insights into the community's dynamics.

The participants (n=4) for this study were selected based on my pre-existing working relationship with chefs at the Volkskeuken, developed through collaborative cooking experiences both prior and during this study. All chefs are first generation migrants, having lived 8-20 years in the Netherlands.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were selected for this activity because they allow for both flexibility and focus, enabling in-depth exploration of participants' personal stories and views while addressing specific themes related to the research question (see Appendix C for interview guide). This approach was particularly suitable for understanding complex motivations, values, and aspirations, as it encouraged open dialogue while still providing structure. By using interviews, I aimed to facilitate conversations that would uncover not only the chefs' personal experiences but also their broader visions for the future of Volkskeuken and the role they play within the community. By engaging with the chefs, who are key contributors to both the culinary and cultural identity of Volkskeuken, I sought to explore how their individual stories, when shared collectively, can influence the community's sense of agency and vision for the future.

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Using Miro for "analysis on the wall," I conducted a thematic analysis to identify patterns related to the chefs' motivations and values

in cooking at the Volkskeuken (Appendix D). These patterns were then clustered into themes that highlighted the ideas most important to the chefs, offering insights into their future aspirations and hopes, goals they wish to achieve or are motivated to pursue through the Volkskeuken. These themes served as the foundation for Part 2: Creating Collective Futures.

Chapter 4: Findings of Part 1 Exploring Individual Pasts

4.1 Results

Part 1 first uncovered the existing stories, values, and dynamics that shape Volkskeuken's present identity to set the foundation for exploring how these narratives inform aspirations for its future. The results are structured chronologically, first looking at past narratives through chefs' personal histories (pamphlets) and observation, then examining Volkskeuken's present dynamics through observation, guest survey, and chef interviews. Finally, I identify emerging themes that point toward future aspirations and opportunities for growth through chef interviews.

Looking at the Past: pamphlet + observations
Findings from pamphlet analysis and observations reveal how the Volkskeuken enables chefs to bring their cultural histories and personal migration stories to the table. Their culinary practices reflect both preservation and adaptation, demonstrating how food serves as a living archive of identity, belonging, and memory. The chefs' pamphlet stories emphasized deep inspiration from their family traditions and cultural heritage. For many, cooking is an emotional practice tied to personal history. One chef shared how her grandmother "*instilled in her a great love for cooking and food*" (CP5, pamphlet, October 2024), while another explained, "*I cook just like my mother, mostly from my heart*" (CP2, pamphlet, October 2024). The connection between food and storytelling was also evident, with one chef describing her passion for reviving historical recipes and forgotten dishes, stating, "*I love food with a story*" (CP1, pamphlet, October 2024), and another recalling the significance of "*cooking together and talking about life, just as she had always done with her mother, grandmothers, and aunts*" (CP19, pamphlet, October 2024).

Through their cooking, chefs bring parts of their heritage into the present, providing guests with the opportunity to taste and understand cultural traditions in the present. Observations also revealed how this focus on preserving and sharing food traditions not only connects people to the past but also opens the door for future possibilities. Sharing food at the Volkskeuken becomes an important space for a lot of Rotterdammers to connect with their heritage. Through Rotterdam's historical waves of migration (from colonial migrations to post WWII labor migration) there are generations of Rotterdammers who have assimilated to Dutch culture on various levels. In one event I participated in, David Zee, a chinese-dutch descendent shared the significance of the Katendrecht neighborhood as the original Chinatown of Rotterdam. In the early 1900s Chinese labor workers were majority men who then married Dutch women, having children who then grew up with two heritages. The history of the

neighborhood in which the Volskeuken and Verhalenhuis Belvédère are located becomes visible through stories like David's. By the 2nd and 3rd generations, places like the Volskeuken hold significance for bringing a sense of home back through a familiar meal. By opening its doors to Rotterdammers for cultural exchange, Volskeuken remains firmly rooted in its historical context while creating space for continuous adaptation and growth.

Looking at the Present: Active Participation + survey + interview + pamphlet
In the present, a closer examination of Volskeuken's operations and culture through active participation, chef pamphlets, chef interviews, and guest surveys provides a foundational understanding of existing narratives, community values, and lived experiences. The interplay of food, space, and storytelling reveals how Volskeuken fosters inclusivity and a sense of belonging. Chefs' personal storytelling, the open kitchen design, and the intimate dining setting serve as key elements that bridge personal histories with collective community experiences. By creating an environment where diverse voices are shared and acknowledged, Volskeuken actively sustains and evolves its role as a communal hub that reflects and nurtures the lived realities of its members. Two central themes emerged from this multi-method exploration of the present-day Volskeuken: the inclusive dynamics that shape the environment, and the powerful connections that form between chefs, guests, and cultural narratives.

Inclusive dynamics
Through active participation, it became clear that Volskeuken fosters a warm, inclusive atmosphere where food and storytelling intersect. The approachable open kitchen and the chef's personal touch (i.e., serving guests directly, adding flavorful and visual details to the presentation of each dish), create an environment that invites both interaction and connection. Guests are introduced to the chefs' personal journeys, often through the chefs' pamphlets and direct storytelling during meal service, which gives them a chance to engage with the cultural narratives behind the food. The data captured by the surveys attested to similar themes. Guests emphasized their appreciation for the homely feeling (i.e., vintage tableware, upholstery and lighting, photographs displayed) and inclusive nature of Volskeuken (i.e., active hospitality from the Volskeuken team). Chef interview confirmed the positive environment that makes being a part of the Volskeuken a valuable experience beyond simply cooking. *"Because of the people around there, I feel like a family and they are very Giving me a lot of energy and encouragement"* (C4, interview, November 2024). *"Because I really like the people then, the atmosphere because they're very, They're not afraid of different cultures and then, that's what I feel like more inclusive"* (C2, interview, November 2024). These practices highlight how Volskeuken's present structure and values support the ongoing goal of creating a welcoming space where people feel seen and heard, no matter their background.

The Volkskeuken encourages anyone with a desire to share their culture and cuisine to create a home-cooked meal. In fact, the pamphlets revealed that not all Volkskeuken chefs cook full-time, many work full-time in other fields. This open door invites everyone to feel at home. One chef reflected, *"From the moment I started cooking at Belvédère's Volkskeuken, I reconnected with my own roots and learned the diversity of Chinese cuisine"* (CP8, pamphlet, October 2024), while another emphasized the deep personal significance of Volkskeuken, saying, *"Now in Holland I often cook with M, also in the Volkskeuken of Verhalenhuis Belvédère. Here, my third home"* (CP5, pamphlet, October 2024). At its core, Volkskeuken is not just about food but about creating a welcoming and inclusive space, as another chef noted, *"Food is very important ... it is a way of being welcoming"* (CP9, pamphlet, October 2024).

Power of Connection
The present state of the Volkskeuken nurtures opportunities for connection between the chefs and guests. While a strong emotional connection to the past shaped their approach to food, the pamphlets revealed how chefs at Volkskeuken also use cooking as a means of self-expression and sharing their heritage with their Rotterdam neighbors. A chef interview with C4 emphasized how the Volkskeuken invites people to open their minds and mouths. They exclaimed, *"The world is bigger than what you see, babi panggang, there are many, many things and try the sambal I cook for two days. I asked them, please, try the sambal already. Even though it's something new, it's something at least different, you know? I feel lively if I have that kind of thing I can do for people"* (C4, interview, November 2024).

The social dynamics between chefs and guests are integral to the experience, with moments of connection occurring when chefs personally serve meals, share stories, and receive heartfelt gratitude from guests who often walk up to the open kitchen to thank them before leaving. These interactions highlight the power of Volkskeuken not only as a culinary space but as a hub for meaningful cultural exchange and evolving traditions.

Looking towards the Future: Chef interviews
Semi-structured interviews with chefs revealed several recurring themes that offer insight into Volkskeuken's evolving role. Through analyzing these conversations, four key themes emerged: legacy and documentation, food as love and connection, creativity and adaptation, and process and nourishment. These themes reflect how Volkskeuken operates as both a space of cultural preservation and a potential site for experimentation and future-making. Identifying these patterns in chefs' experiences and aspirations provides a deeper understanding of how Volkskeuken might continue to expand its participatory and storytelling practices in ways that further empower the community.

Each theme surfaced through reflections from multiple chefs, who described their motivations, challenges, and hopes for the future. The following sections illustrate these

themes, drawing direct connections between their perspectives and the broader role of Volskeuken.

Legacy and Documentation

A recurring priority among chefs was the desire to preserve and share the cultural and personal histories embedded in their cooking. Participants viewed food as a medium for introducing others to their heritage, emphasizing the importance of passing down traditions and ensuring they are not lost. This theme highlights Volskeuken's role as a living archive, a space where storytelling, memory, and culinary knowledge converge. C3 described cooking as a means of cultural education, illustrating how Volskeuken enables chefs to serve as narrators of their culinary traditions: *"I use as much as possible traditional recipes, I don't do a mix between recipes or kitchens. I'm aware that if I serve the food, for example, Uh, [specific culture] dish that I serve the food with a fork and a spoon. And if people ask for a knife, I don't allow them. If they ask for chopsticks, I don't allow it, because it's [specific culture food]"* (C3, interview, November 2024). Similarly, another chef addressed how food can shape perceptions of [specific culture], underscoring its role in cultural representation. "*Food is a very important part of culture. If they taste our food, they make an idea about us... The West imagines the [specific culture] in a certain way, but I want them to see that we are civilized with food, how we eat, how we respect it*" (C1, interview, November 2024).

Beyond representation, documentation emerged as a critical tool in sustaining culinary traditions beyond the moment of cooking itself. C2 emphasized the necessity of recording practices to ensure their longevity. *"Even if you cook for 100 people, if it's not documented, then no one knows. Documenting is really important"* (C2, interview, November 2024). These reflections suggest that Volskeuken functions not only as a kitchen but also as a platform for cultural preservation. Documenting culinary practices ensures that future generations can access and learn from these traditions, reinforcing the role of Volskeuken as a site of intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Food as Love and Connection

Another significant theme was the emotional and social power of food. Many chefs described cooking as an act of care, a means of fostering connections, and a responsibility to ensure that no one goes hungry. C4 captured the spirit of a shared community, *"It's nice to share culture... because you live in the same community. We have to share everything."* This idea of sharing extended beyond interpersonal relationships to include a sense of environmental stewardship, as another chef emphasized the ethics of food waste: "*If you have extra, you share with people... The Earth gives us so many things, but don't waste it. Take advantage of it, and give back*" (C4, interview, November 2024).

The sensory experience of food also played a role in how chefs engaged with others. C1 made a parallel connection between their culture and Dutch culture when meeting guests, "All the time I hear, *"Dit is mooi uit" That's beautiful from the outside. Oh yes, mooi uit. All the time. I hear this"* describing how aesthetics influence perception, underscoring the idea that food communicates meaning before it is even tasted. *"In our culture, we say 'the eye eats before the mouth'"*. These perspectives indicate that, for many chefs, cooking was more than sustenance;it was a means of cultivating relationships, promoting inclusivity, and creating a sense of belonging within Volkskeuken.

Creativity and Adaptation
While tradition and connection was central to many chefs, another emerging theme was the role of creativity and experimentation in the kitchen. Participants expressed a desire to draw from different influences and embrace adaptability. C2 mentioned the collaborative exchange of techniques within Volkskeuken. *"Everyone has different ways to do it. Some ways I don't know, maybe they're faster, maybe they're easier"* they thought. For C1, they explained *"I have complete freedom. I can do what I want,"* deciding what they feel like cooking and getting ingredients the same morning before lunch service. At the same time, creativity was not just about improvisation, it was also about continuous learning. C2 reflected on how exposure to different culinary traditions expanded their knowledge, explaining *"because there are so many different backgrounds, different cultures, I can learn. More knowledge is better for you as a chef."* At the table, a couple of chefs mentioned the value of creativity with presentation when serving the food. C3 described how they *"...also think in colors. There needs to be something red inside the dish, something yellow, and something brown and green or white, but it must be colorful."* The way chefs present the food adds taste to the meal. These insights reveal that Volkskeuken is not only a site of cultural preservation but also an experimental space, where chefs blend tradition with innovation, fostering a dynamic and evolving culinary environment.

Process and Nourishment
The final theme centered on the intentionality of cooking and its impact on well-being. Chefs spoke about the importance of being present in the process, appreciating the time and care that goes into food preparation. C4 described cooking as *"...something I live in the moment. I cook in the moment. That process, it's a flow".* Similarly C3 described how they use ingredient preparation as a slow activity to do while watching tv at home the day before cooking. Taking the time to prepare is *"not only about the tradition of the food, but also how we cook it, how we cut, how we prepare"* not something to be rushed. C1 pointed out the time-intensive nature of cooking in their cultural context. *"In our culture, housewives spend a lot of time cooking for their families, two or three hours for one meal,"* emphasizing the labor and dedication involved. These reflections suggest that cooking is not just about producing food but about engaging with the process in a meaningful way. The emphasis on slow, intentional cooking reinforces Volkskeuken's role as a space where food preparation is valued not only for its outcome but for the relationships and practices it nurtures.

the relationships and practices it nurtures.

These emerging themes illustrate Volkskeuken's dual role as both a space for preserving culinary heritage and a platform for co-creating new possibilities. The chefs' reflections highlight how Volkskeuken facilitates the transmission of cultural knowledge, while also encouraging creative expression and adaptation. The emphasis on community, care, and nourishment suggests that Volkskeuken functions as more than a kitchen, it is a relational space where food, people, and stories intersect.

4.2 Discussion

In exploring individual pasts, I engaged with multiple roles within the Volkskeuken community, chefs, organizers, guests, and volunteers. Through reflective interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations, I examined how personal narratives and daily practices are expressed and sustained through the communal setting of shared meals. These interactions revealed that Volkskeuken is not only a space for food and conversation, but also a living archive of cultural identity and relational meaning.

Chefs did not explicitly position themselves as future-makers, but their stories showed how everyday actions—cooking, sharing traditions, nurturing relationships—contribute to shaping the community's evolving identity. In interviews, they reflected on migration journeys, family legacies, and personal motivations, often through the language of ingredients and recipes. These narratives underscored how identity within Volkskeuken is fluid and participatory, shaped more by ongoing practice than by fixed self-definitions.

In contrast to the more performative storytelling during lunch service, one-on-one interviews allowed for slower, more personal reflection. These dialogues revealed how chefs make sense of their experiences in open-ended ways, offering insight into how storytelling influences Volkskeuken's collective ethos. In this context, storytelling is both sensory and relational, embedded in flavor, memory, and connection.

The results of Part 1 surfaced four central themes that consistently emerged across interviews with Volkskeuken chefs: **legacy and documentation, food as love and connection, creativity and adaptation, process and nourishment.** These themes transcend individual experiences; they reflect shared values, aspirations, and tensions that shape Volkskeuken's identity as a dynamic and culturally layered community.

Taken together, these themes form the conceptual foundation for Part 2. Rather than treating them as fixed categories, they are reframed as aspirational lenses, touchpoints through which the community might imagine new practices and collective futures. This marks a pivotal shift in the research: from reflection to projection, from describing what is, to exploring what could be.

The insights from Part 1 establish a grounded basis for participatory futuring by rooting the next phase in emotional resonance, cultural memory, and community values. What I carry forward is not only the content of these stories, but also the way stories emerge through connection, care, and shared experience. Part 2 builds on this momentum by inviting participants to move from memory to imagination. The four themes are introduced as "theme cards" in the first activity of the scenario-building workshop, allowing participants to revisit their aspirations and use them as creative prompts for envisioning possible futures.

Limitations

Although this phase provided valuable groundwork, certain limitations shaped its scope. Conducting only four in-depth chef interviews meant perspectives were limited, and time constraints restricted broader engagement with the community. The nature of kitchen work also posed challenges, as participation was dictated by practical demands. Additionally, flu season further constrained availability. A more extensive literature review on ethnographic research ethics might have provided insights into adapting research methods to better align with the community's workflow.

Part 2:
Creating Collective Futures

The insights from Part 1 laid an important foundation for the next phase, shifting from reflection on individual pasts to actively shaping collective futures. By exploring personal histories, I uncovered how Volskeuken fostered inclusion, strengthened connections, and served as a platform for cultural storytelling. These findings not only highlighted the deep emotional and social significance of Volskeuken but also revealed aspirations for its future, suggesting that their evolution needed to balance tradition with innovation, personal storytelling with communal exchange, and cultural preservation with new possibilities.

With this understanding in place, Part 2 builds on these insights by engaging the community in participatory futuring. Specifically, this section details two collaborative workshops designed to explore future possibilities: scenario building and backcasting. These were guided by two subquestions: How can collective storytelling through scenario building support the community in expressing aspirations and envisioning emotionally grounded futures for Volskeuken? And, Through backcasting, how can imagining shared futures from the perspective of 2040 help the community identify key values, relationships, and actions needed to shape its long-term trajectory?

To explore these questions, Part 2 introduces a structured process for imagining and shaping the future through two interconnected workshops. The first, a scenario-building workshop, invited participants to generate possible future trajectories, expanding on the aspirations identified in Part 1. The second, a backcasting workshop, invited participants to work backward from envisioned futures to determine concrete steps that could bring them to life. Through these activities, Part 2 aims to explore how imagining and sharing stories about possible futures open possibilities for the community to reflect on its values and shape its collective direction.

Chapter 5: Activities

5.1 Workshop 1 (Scenario Building)

Aim of activity

Workshop 1 (Scenario Building) aimed to explore how collective storytelling could support the Volskeuken community in expressing aspirations and envisioning emotionally grounded futures. Drawing on the themes surfaced in Part 1, the workshop provided a creative structure for participants to imagine the future of Volskeuken in 2040 through shared narratives. By engaging in speculative futures, participants were encouraged to think beyond current constraints and imagine multiple possibilities for Volskeuken's role in 2040. This approach not only enabled them to envision new ways of fostering exchange between chefs, guests, and the surrounding neighborhood, but aimed to help them recognize their own capacity to shape Volskeuken's futures. Through scenario-building, the workshop sought to transform abstract aspirations into concrete, emotionally resonant narratives.

Participants

Workshop participants included various organizers within VHB, as they are deeply embedded in daily operations. Given their close interactions with guests and chefs, their perspectives would complement prior insights uncovered from the chefs and guests. They each contribute to the collective narrative based on their own network of collaborators and the programs they facilitate. To ensure a more balanced view, the workshop was also opened to include volunteers, who support the organization from a different position, often on the receiving end of daily decision-making but integral to its smooth functioning. The goal was to assemble four to eight participants to capture a diversity of experiences and insights from various positions within the organization. On December 17, 2024, the workshop was held at Verhalenhuis Belvédère in Rotterdam, with five participants attending in person: four organizers (of various roles), and one volunteer. This mix provided a comprehensive range of perspectives — bottom-up, strategic leadership, and hands-on support.

Methodology

Overview

The workshop was designed to foster reflection on Volskeuken's current format and to explore its future through storytelling and scenario-building exercises (see Appendix E for discussion guide). Scenario building was chosen as a method because it opens up the possibility for participants to construct multiple visions of the future rather than predicting a single outcome (Rasmussen, 2008). This approach aligns with the research question by providing a collaborative space where community members can articulate shared future narratives and potentially see themselves as active protagonists in shaping them.

Part 2 required a method that could encourage reflection on past experiences into creation of tangible future possibilities. Scenario building serves this purpose by bridging internal and external worlds, helping participants establish a shared set of assumptions about the environment in which Volkskeuken operates (Holst, 2004). By situating storytelling within a scenario-building framework, the workshop aimed to enhance community agency over its collective future, not only by communicating values, visions, and strategies but also by cultivating a sense of ownership over the ideas discussed (Rasmussen, 2008).

Moreover, scenario-building encourages participants to step beyond present-day limitations, explore emerging opportunities, and reimagine their roles in shaping Volkskeuken's evolution. By constructing speculative futures, participants were not just envisioning possible trajectories for Volkskeuken but actively engaging in a process that made abstract aspirations more concrete. This approach aimed to help them see themselves as active agents in Volkskeuken's unfolding narrative, exploring their capacity to shape its future. The primary aim was to engage participants in envisioning futures for Volkskeuken that aligns with the aspirational themes emerging from interviews with the chefs. The latter Workshop 2 (Backcasting) will explore ways to transform envisioned futures into actionable steps.

Structure
Over the course of 90 minutes, the workshop facilitated three main activities:
1. Drawing participant attention to chef's aspirations that sit alongside preserving cultural heritage (drawing on insights derived from the chefs' interviews in Part1).
2. Inviting participants to imagine these aspirational themes in action through scenario-building and storytelling, using personal narratives as a means of grounding abstract ideas in lived experience (Nielsen, 2004; White, 2000).
3. Encouraging participants to reflect on how the emerging narratives connected to their own values and how these could shape the present and future of Volkskeuken.

By engaging in storytelling, participants were not merely reflecting on possible futures but actively constructing them. This process aligns with the goal of enhancing community agency by facilitating the creation of shared future narratives and fostering a deeper sense of participation in shaping Volkskeuken's trajectory.

Theme Cards
Before the workshop, I created theme cards drawn directly from Part 1's four aspirational themes (legacy and documentation, food as love and connection, creativity and adaptation, and process and nourishment), outlining descriptions of each aspiration and providing examples from the chefs' interviews (Figure 4).

Food as Love & Connection

- Cook and share food as a way to spread love and honor people
- Create connection between guests, chefs, and volunteers
- Share to ensure no one goes hungry

This theme emphasizes the emotional and social power of food to create bonds.

Cooking and sharing meals is seen as an act of care and love, bringing people together and fostering inclusivity.

It also underscores the importance of ensuring that no one goes hungry, promoting a sense of collective responsibility and compassion.

-CHEF'S EXAMPLES-   *-ASPIRATIONS-*

Legacy and Documentation

- Document the process of cooking and sharing food
- Share how personal stories connect to culture and traditions
- Showcase how we eat (with what cutlery, if dishes are eaten mixed vs. separately, etiquette)

This theme focuses on preserving and sharing the cultural and personal stories tied to food.

It highlights how Volkskeuken can act as a living archive of culinary traditions, memories, and traditional practices.

By documenting the cooking process and storytelling in various medium, the community ensures that future generations can access and learn from this rich heritage.

-CHEF'S EXAMPLES-   *-ASPIRATIONS-*

Process and Nourishment

- Enjoy the process of slow cooking and being present
- Cook to nourish and promote health
- Emphasize sustainability and avoid waste

This theme centers on the physical act and intentionality in cooking and sharing food.

It highlights the importance of being present and enjoying the process of preparing food, emphasizing the value of slow cooking.

Nourishment goes beyond physical sustenance, promoting well-being and connection to the community and environment.

-CHEF'S EXAMPLES-   *-ASPIRATIONS-*

Creativity & Adaptation

- Learning from each other's cultures and creating something new
- Freedom to try new things and experiment with ingredients
- Encourage innovation and playful cooking
- Emphasize presentation and creativity in plating

This theme celebrates the freedom to experiment and innovate in the kitchen.

It highlights how creativity in cooking, from ingredient selection to presentation, keeps food culture vibrant and evolving.

This adaptability invites the community to learn from each other, blend traditions with new ideas, fostering a playful and dynamic culinary space.

-CHEF'S EXAMPLES-   *-ASPIRATIONS-*

Figure 4: Theme cards

I started the workshop by presenting the aspirational theme cards as a lens for participants to envision the future of Volkskeuken. The goal was to invite participants to reflect on these themes, connecting them to their own personal experiences, and to identify any insights, questions, or connections that arose. This phase encouraged participants to think critically about the future while grounding the conversation in their own experiences and knowledge of Volkskeuken. Following this, a brief sharing session allowed for collective reflections, fostering a deeper shared understanding and preparing the group for the next activity.

Scenario Building

For this activity, I created pre-made scenarios based on the four aspirational themes identified in Part 1. Each theme was translated into a narrative scenario that offered participants an unfamiliar world to explore through storytelling (Figure 5). Rather than asking participants to build scenarios from scratch, which can introduce pressure to create a "perfect" or overly polished vision, the use of pre-made prompts provided a tangible point for them to build and shape into meaningful possibilities within each imagined future.

Participants engaged in a creative scenario-building exercise aimed at exploring the aspirational themes in action, set in the year 2040. The year 2040 was selected as it is far enough in the future to allow for imaginative possibilities, yet still within a tangible timeframe for participants to envision concrete changes (Rasmussen, 2005). Each theme was transformed into a scenario, providing participants with a world to explore through storytelling.
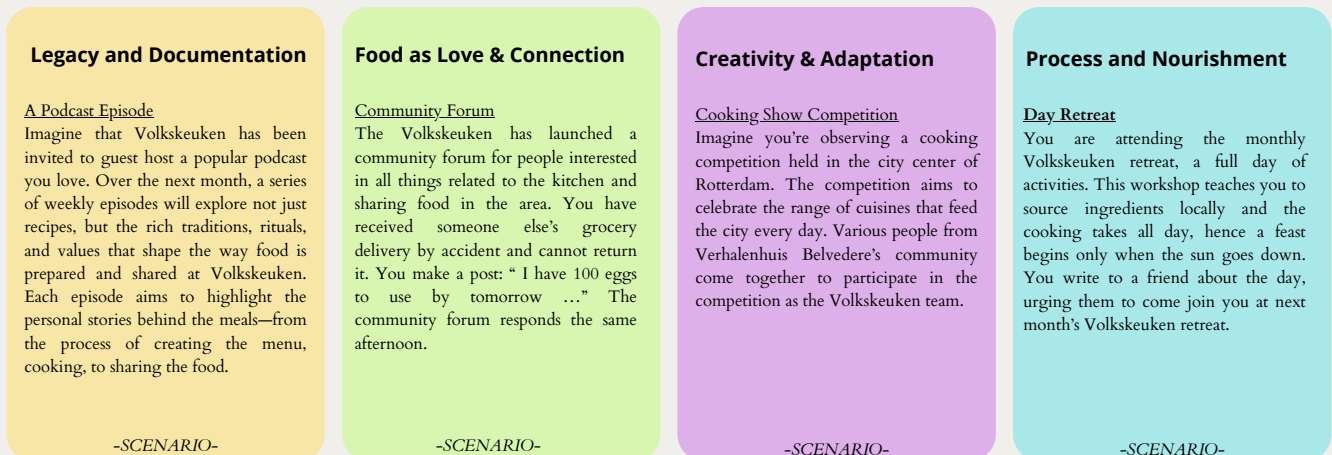
Legacy and Documentation

A Podcast Episode
Imagine that Volkskeuken has been invited to guest host a popular podcast you love. Over the next month, a series of weekly episodes will explore not just recipes, but the rich traditions, rituals, and values that shape the way food is prepared and shared at Volkskeuken. Each episode aims to highlight the personal stories behind the meals—from the process of creating the menu, cooking, to sharing the food.

-SCENARIO-

Food as Love & Connection

Community Forum
The Volkskeuken has launched a community forum for people interested in all things related to the kitchen and sharing food in the area. You have received someone else's grocery delivery by accident and cannot return it. You make a post: " I have 100 eggs to use by tomorrow …" The community forum responds the same afternoon.

-SCENARIO-

Creativity & Adaptation

Cooking Show Competition
Imagine you're observing a cooking competition held in the city center of Rotterdam. The competition aims to celebrate the range of cuisines that feed the city every day. Various people from Verhalenhuis Belvedere's community come together to participate in the competition as the Volkskeuken team.

-SCENARIO-

Process and Nourishment

Day Retreat
You are attending the monthly Volkskeuken retreat, a full day of activities. This workshop teaches you to source ingredients locally and the cooking takes all day, hence a feast begins only when the sun goes down. You write to a friend about the day, urging them to come join you at next month's Volkskeuken retreat.

-SCENARIO-

Figure 5: Scenario Cards

Each scenario was designed to help participants bridge the gap between the speculative and the practical. These scenarios were intentionally designed to be unfamiliar from Volkskeuken's current practices, encouraging participants to think beyond the daily to day and stretch their imagination. They were tasked with selecting a scenario that resonated with them most strongly and reflecting on its key elements (such as the characters, events, and emotional landscapes) that could shape the future of Volkskeuken. Using a guided template, participants were asked to reflect on the following prompts:

- Who are the key characters? Think about the people or entities at the heart of this story.
- What's happening? Describe the actions, events, or decisions unfolding in your scenario.
- How do these details reflect Volkskeuken's role and potential? Consider how the scenario embodies Volkskeuken's values, mission, and community aspirations.

This structure enabled participants to brainstorm and record their ideas, ensuring that they fully explored the characters, actions, and emotional dynamics that could shape Volkskeuken's future. By encouraging participants to immerse themselves in the scenarios, the workshop invited them to experience potential futures not only as distant projections but as tangible, possible realities that are connected to their personal and collective experiences.

Postcard
To bridge the gap between speculative scenarios and actionable futures, participants were asked to share their imagined futures using a postcard format with a brainstorm template (Appendix F). Typically, the community has postcards featuring various photographs of cultural events on one side. This familiar and accessible mode of storytelling allowed participants to express their future visions in a way that felt personal and approachable. The postcard format was chosen specifically because it is a concise and familiar format, enabling participants to communicate a narrative as they might share any lived experience with a friend, making the future more relatable and grounded in real-world emotion.

The use of postcards served not only as a way to document ideas but as a creative tool to translate speculative futures into something personal and tangible. By inviting participants to write about their imagined Volkskeuken event, the exercise aimed to ground abstract visions in their own lived realities. This approach allowed participants to connect their personal aspirations and values with the community's future, making the speculative process more accessible and meaningful. The goal was to transition from abstract speculation to actionable ideas, helping participants see themselves as active contributors to the community's future trajectory.

Through this activity, participants were encouraged to step outside their day-to-day experiences and envision Volkskeuken as more than just a community space. The postcard format aimed to foster imaginative thinking about its potential to become a platform for exchange, not only within the community but also with neighboring neighborhoods and organizations. This exercise encouraged participants to reflect on how Volkskeuken could strengthen its role in creating emergent opportunities and fostering relational connections. Ultimately, the postcard activity was designed to make speculative thinking personal, allowing participants to express and communicate the evolving future they hoped to help shape.

Reflective Discussion
At the end, the group reconvenes to share their postcards and discuss their envisioned futures. The reflective discussion provided an opportunity to explore key questions, such as:
- What elements of the imagined future felt particularly significant or exciting?
- What challenges or tensions emerged in the scenarios, and how might they inspire new ways of working at Volkskeuken?
- What common themes or values emerged across the different scenarios?

The primary goal of this discussion was to facilitate a collective reflection that would help participants move from abstract future possibilities to concrete ideas. By engaging in this dialogue, participants were encouraged to consider how their individual stories could inform shared goals for Volkskeuken's future, aligning the personal with the collective vision. This reflective process was intended to uncover actionable insights and foster collaboration, guiding how Volkskeuken could evolve in a way that reflected both the aspirations of its chefs and the broader community.

Data collection and analysis
The workshop was documented through a combination of audio recordings, handwritten field notes, artifacts (postcards) produced, and a narrative account of my observations. Audio recordings were transcribed. Handwritten field notes were taken throughout the workshop to capture participant interactions, while physical artifacts, including annotated theme cards and postcards summarizing future scenarios, provided tangible insights into the participants'

thoughts. Additionally, I maintained a narrative account to document my observations and reflections.

The analysis drew from a variety of data sources, including quotes from the transcriptions and the written postcards, to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives.. This approach was informed by the concept of "double listening" (Denning, 2001), which emphasizes the dual nature of storytelling. One story is the explicit narrative shared by the storyteller, while the other is the story created by listeners in response to their own contexts, problems, hopes, and aspirations. By applying this framework, I was able to consider both the direct narratives participants shared and the underlying insights they expressed. Specifically, I focused not only on the content of the postcards and conversations but also on the subtler, emergent themes that participants communicated in response to the questions and scenarios posed. For example, when participants discussed challenges or opportunities, I listened for both the surface-level responses (the "explicit" story) and the deeper, context-driven meanings they implied, which revealed their personal stakes, desires for change, and vision for Volskeuken's role in the community.

To identify recurring themes, I used the "Analysis on the Wall" method through Miro, which allowed me to visually organize and analyze the data (Appendix G). This process generated insight into core values, imagined possibilities for Volskeuken's future, and shifting perceptions of roles. Special attention was paid to moments of strong reactions, which highlighted crucial subjects that sparked significant discussion. These discussion points were crucial in understanding the values participants wanted to preserve and their openness to adapting new ideas in the future.

5.2 Workshop 2 (Backcasting)

Aim of activity

The Backcasting Toast Workshop aimed to provide a practical, creative space for participants to explore how imagined futures for Volkskeuken could be realized. Stepping into the year 2040, participants were invited to envision the key milestones, relationships, and actions that would shape Volkskeuken's evolution. By combining backcasting with storytelling, the workshop focused on identifying the people, values, and actions essential for the future. Using the celebratory format of a toast, the workshop encouraged participants to articulate their visions in a narrative-driven way, fostering reflection on how community relationships could drive collective action and translate abstract aspirations into concrete, shareable goals.

Participants

The workshop participants were intended to represent the mix of roles that make up the Volkskeuken. Chefs, guests, volunteers, were all invited to participate on the premise they would be able to share their perspectives on what it means to be a part of the Volkskeuken community. Their various contributions to the Volkskeuken would invite a balanced scope of understanding how the Volkskeuken runs. The goal was to assemble 4–8 participants. On January 30, 2025, the workshop was held at Verhalenhuis Belvédère in Rotterdam, with five participants attending in-person. Participants were all Dutch natives, 4 of which live in the neighborhood, 1 of which live in the greater Rotterdam. Although they all primarily have a volunteer role for this study, they have all held multiple roles in the Volkskeuken community – from being a guest, to volunteer, chef, host, production roles at VHB. Their roles have evolved as they have been active in the community from a range of 4 months to 10 years.

Methodology

Overview

The workshop offered a dynamic way to combine storytelling and backcasting to help participants envision Volkskeuken's future and reflect on how it could unfold (see Appendix H for discussion guide). In participatory futuring approaches, backcasting is a method used to work backward from a desired future, identifying the steps, actions, and conditions needed to achieve it (Lockton & Candy, 2019). Backcasting creates an environment for imagining a diverse range of futures for participants to then consider in terms of what to avoid and what to pursue (Lockton & Candy, 2019). This helps to bridge the present with an incomplete but aspirational vision of the future, and help foster a sense of agency by showing how alternative trajectories can be shaped through collective effort (Robinson et al., 2011).

To set the stage as if it were 15 year later, in 2040, storytelling in the form of giving a toast seemed appropriate as it often takes an outlook of looking backwards and acknowledging a significant occasion. A toast is a special occasion speech that invites reflection, not to inform or persuade but to acknowledge, honor, commemorate, and/or celebrate (Leon, 2023). This format was chosen because it invites participants to step into the mindset of 2040 and reflect on the journey that led Volkskeuken to that moment in an engaging and personally

meaningful way. This particular form of backcasting helps pinpoint key people, milestones, and values, making it an effective tool for articulating the social fabric of Volkskeuken's future.

While the toasts were personal, the act of sharing them became a collective moment of reflection. Each toast offered a window into imagined futures, and together they sparked dialogue about the relationships, efforts, and values that could shape Volkskeuken's evolution. Through this shared exchange, participants identified key actors and interconnections, revealing how the community's capacities are built through collaboration. In this way, the workshop helped translate abstract aspirations into a more coherent, collectively imagined narrative, moving from individual visions to shared possibilities for change.

Structure
Over the course of 60 minutes, the workshop facilitated three main activities:
1. Framing the future: Participants were placed in the year 2040 and introduced to achievement theme cards (Figure 6), which framed aspirations as accomplishments, helping them think reflectively about Volkskeuken's growth over the next 15 years.
2. Crafting future narratives: Each participant created a personalized toast to celebrate Volkskeuken's 2040 milestone, identifying key events and figures that shaped its evolution.
3. Sharing and discussing visions: By sharing their toasts, participants contributed to a collective vision for Volkskeuken, discussing which values and traditions should persist and what actions were needed to achieve them.

The workshop surfaced the idea that Volkskeuken's future is not predetermined but actively shaped by those who participate and act within it. Storytelling served as a tool for collective future-making, inviting participants to co-create shared narratives and envision real-world possibilities rooted in community values.

Achievement theme cards
To establish a forward-looking mindset, the workshop was set in the year 2040. Aspirational theme cards were reframed as "achievement cards" (Figure 6), allowing participants to reflect on what had been accomplished between 2025 and 2040. This shift grounded the conversation in a sense of progress and continuity, helping participants process the imagined impact of their actions.

Food as Love & Connection

- Cooked and shared food as a way to spread love and honor people
- Created connection between guests, chefs, and volunteers
- Shared to ensure no one went hungry

This theme emphasized the emotional and social power of food in creating bonds.

Cooking and sharing meals was seen as an act of care and love, bringing people together and fostering inclusivity.

It also underscored the importance of ensuring that no one went hungry, promoted a sense of collective responsibility and compassion.

~FROM 2025-2040~   *-ACHIEVEMENTS-*

Legacy and Documentation

- Documented the process of cooking and sharing food
- Shared how personal stories connect to culture and traditions
- Showcased how we eat (with what cutlery, if dishes are eaten mixed vs. separately, etiquette)

This theme focused on preserving and sharing the cultural and personal stories tied to food.

It highlighted how Volkskeuken has acted as a living archive of culinary traditions, memories, and traditional practices.

By documenting the cooking process and storytelling in various medium, the community has ensured that future generations can access and learn from this rich heritage.

~FROM 2025-2040~   *-ACHIEVEMENTS-*

Process and Nourishment

- Enjoyed the process of slow cooking and being present
- Cooked to nourish and promote health
- Emphasized sustainability and avoid waste

This theme was centered on the physical act and intentionality in cooking and sharing food.

It highlighted the importance of being present and enjoying the process of preparing food, which emphasized the value of slow cooking.

Nourishment went beyond physical sustenance. It promoted well-being and connection to the community and environment.

~FROM 2025-2040~   *-ACHIEVEMENTS-*

Creativity & Adaptation

- Learned from each other's cultures and created something new
- Had freedom to try new things and experiment with ingredients
- Encouraged innovation and playful cooking
- Emphasized presentation and creativity in plating

This theme celebrated the freedom to experiment and innovate in the kitchen.

It highlights how creativity in cooking, from ingredient selection to presentation, has kept food culture vibrant and evolving.

This adaptability invited the community to learn from each other, blend traditions with new ideas, fostering a playful and dynamic culinary space.

~FROM 2025-2040~   *-ACHIEVEMENTS-*

Figure 6: achievement cards

Individual story creation (imagination)

Participants were invited to envision Volkskeuken in 2040 and imagine what they would be celebrating. These personal reflections included key milestones, traditions, and aspirations, painting a picture of how the community might evolve over time.

Toast format

Using a template (Appendix I), participants crafted their stories in the form of a celebratory toast, a format chosen for its reflective and commemorative nature. A toast seemed like an appropriate and familiar format given the nature of the Volkskeuken being a place for gathering and celebration. This structure encouraged participants to step into the mindset of 2040 and narrate the journey that brought them there. In doing so, they implicitly engaged in backcasting, identifying pivotal actions, values, and shifts that helped shape their envisioned future.

Sharing stories and group discussion

The sharing of toasts was a key activity designed to create a collaborative space for reflection and discussion. While each toast was personal, the goal was for participants to collectively co-create a unified vision of Volkskeuken's future. Through informal sharing, participants contributed their ideas, each adding a layer to a larger, collective narrative. This exchange helped to identify common themes, shared aspirations, and values to be preserved, while also exploring areas of potential growth and change.

Following the storytelling, group discussion aimed to further refine and solidify a shared vision. Participants were encouraged to identify and discuss the values, traditions, and actions they wanted to see persist in the future of Volkskeuken. Through this process, participants collectively identified key milestones and actions required to bring their unified vision to life. The discussion also provided space for participants to align on concrete steps that could be taken to begin working toward the desired future.

The collaborative process was structured to lead to the creation of one finalized, co-created vision of Volkskeuken in 2040. The goal was to offer participants not only a shared understanding of what Volkskeuken could become, but also actionable insights. The final co-created vision could then serve as a roadmap, guiding future decisions, actions, and community initiatives aligned with the collective aspirations of the participants.

Data collection and analysis
Data collection and analysis was performed similarly to 5.1 workshop #1 (scenario building). The aim of the analysis was to see if the workshop was able to generate potential milestones, relationships, and key moments that could shape Volkskeuken's trajectory. To analyse this workshop, the audio recording was transcribed and coded for further "analysis on the wall" to identify broader themes of emotional motivations to prompt participants to contribute to the community's future aspirations (Appendix J).

Chapter 6: Findings of Part 2 Creating Collective Futures

6.1 Results

The workshops allowed me to explore how collaborative storytelling and futuring methods could enhance community agency by creating shared narratives and offering concrete pathways for Volkskeuken's continued evolution. The following chapter first describes each workshop's findings and reflections generated followed by evaluation of the tools in each workshop.

Scenario Building Workshop

The first workshop explored the role of scenario building as a method for envisioning the Volkskeuken's future, using storytelling as a tool for collective reflection. The session was designed to engage participants in imagining possibilities for Volkskeuken in the year 2040, through creating emotionally resonant narratives.

Findings and reflections

Aspirational Theme card reflection: Using theme cards representing chefs' aspirations, participants engaged in a guided discussion, associating each theme with their own stories and experiences. This exercise revealed a nuanced understanding of the ways Volkskeuken invites chefs to share their narratives, the varying levels of openness among guests to engage with these stories, and the ways in which Volkskeuken's format either supports or hinders these interactions. Through this reflection, participants critically examined their role as facilitators for connection between people in the Volkskeuken.

Postcards from year 2040: The pre-made scenarios themselves prompted strong reactions, making very clear what is important for Volkskeuken's organizers to maintain and to foster. Regardless of the scenario participants chose to build their imagined future, all participants had a strong idea of the kind of engagement that would embody the future Volkskeuken. A few participants were eager to lean into the (especially in the Day Retreat and Food as Love & Connection) scenarios, imagining how the format could invite exchange of personal stories with each other but also with the surrounding neighborhood and organizations in addition to the Volkskeuken community (Figure 7: Group A Postcards). For three participants, the format of their scenarios invited a rich range of connections, within the community as well as the surrounding network (the neighborhood: neighbors, businesses, public spaces). *"We eat together but we also invite people who live around that we think they can join to the dinner so it's a big festival"* (O4, workshop 1, December 2024)

Aspiration	Food as Love & Connection (V1)	Process & Nourishment (O1)	Process & Nourishment (O4)
Postcard letter	Over the past months, something amazing started namely the community Forum with the Forum, we're sharing even more food and stories. I think Belvédère really became a great example for others by organizing this for the neighborhoods and for Rotterdam even. I hope we can exchange more in the future such as plastic bags or certain services or even start food cultures. Learn people how to cook healthy cultural diverse food.	Hi, Kris. jammer dat je er niets bij kom zijn vorige week. we hebben een hele fijne dag gehad. We begonnen met uitwisselen van onze favoriete gerechten die je moeder of oma voor je maakte. en toen zijn met elkaar. we make a menu together. daarna zijn we boodschappen gaan doen. en met koken en met elkaar eten. *(Too bad you didn't get to be there last week. We had a very nice day. We started by exchanging our favorite dishes (e.g., your mother or grandmother made for you) and then we were with each other. We made a menu together. Then we went shopping. And with cooking and eating with each other.)* Postcard image: [described as] "Together"	Dear friend. I have to send you this lovely card that I bought at Verhalenhuis down there. This was the first time I attended an event there and I loved it so much, you must join next time. I learned so much about food and how to prepare it. It didn't feel like I was learning but all that I experienced stuck in my head and of course, I experimented at home and best of all I met so many interesting people who I can call new friends, we will meet every year during the retreat. Join next time. Postcard image:[described as] Picture of Verhalenhuis

Figure 7: Group A Postcards

Two participants deviated from the scenarios, strongly rejecting the digital formats these futures take place in to further emphasize the importance of what's present already; an analog, face to face environment that invites personal connection inside the Verhalenhuis (Figure 8: Group B Postcards). Anticipating the rapid developments around the Katendrecht neighborhood (i.e., next door the Migration Museum will open in 2025) and increasing digital consumption, Volkskeuken's environment becomes more important than ever. *"I got a bit annoyed by the podcast and the contest because there are like digitizing and making layers between the face to face encounter. So I think it's important to well, everything becomes more digitized. We need to stay super analog."* (O2, workshop 1, December 2024)

Aspiration	Legacy & Documentation + Creativity & Adaptation (O2)	Food as Love & Connection (O3)
Postcard letter	Hey, I had a night without looking at my phone yesterday! There was somebody cooking (without robot help), the servers were human. There were no screens in the venue. It was amazing! Just like how our forefathers did it! groetjes,	17th December of 2040 Hi dear friend. I have something wonderful to share. I just had lunch in the Verhalenhuis and it was just as if I was there back in the year of Still so warm and personal atmosphere, and the food so great. I was in heaven. Love O3.

Figure 8: Group B Postcards

Group discussion: The final discussion surfaced some key insights from participation in this workshop. With the various scales of imagining what is possible for the future Volkskeuken, participants reflected upon their roles and relations within the community, Volkskeuken's role in relation to the greater Rotterdam, and their capacity to think about Volkskeuken's future.

Workshop 1 was a moment to examine Volkskeuken's own roles and relations within the community. Participants reflected on how the Volkskeuken introduces chefs and facilitate space to share chefs' stories. Organizers reflected upon *"How do we support chefs in telling their own stories, beyond their migration identity? How do they want to be introduced?"* Participants

grappled with how to create more agency for chefs in these moments. As V1 (workshop 1, December 2024) noted, *"It would be nice if you could help or stimulate them... cooks are quite shy when presenting their food."* This prompted suggestions around more intentional pre-event conversations with chefs, asking them how they'd like to be introduced, what images they want to share, or what kind of story they feel comfortable expressing that day. O2 shared their own approach, *"What do you want to tell today?" a simple but significant way of inviting stories beyond their past. This reflection extended to questions around preparation. V1 asked, "Do we discuss that beforehand with the cook?"* suggesting a need to co-create those moments rather than letting them default to awkward improvisation.

This led to broader philosophical questions: Is Volkskeuken's goal to transmit correct knowledge about food and culture, or is it enough that people show up, eat, and hear a bit of a story? O2 shared an anecdote where a chef had to repeatedly explain how to eat a traditional soup to guests unfamiliar with the custom. *"She really had to explain how to eat it because the rice has to be in the soup."* O4 acknowledged, *"It's nice if people really try to eat as it should be. We don't get mad if it doesn't work for you, as long as you try."* To which O3 (workshop 1, December 2024) responded, *"Sometimes I think that's enough."* O1 (workshop 1, December 2024) added, *"It's more than if you didn't come."* These layered perspectives suggest that inviting interaction between chefs and guests, however imperfect, holds its own value.

Workshop 1 also sparked reflection on Volkskeuken's identity within the changing fabric of Rotterdam. Participants questioned how to maintain openness, curiosity, and inclusion in an increasingly complex social landscape. V1 pointed to the evolving world around them, *"the state of the world, wars, that kind of stuff"* and raised the question of how Volkskeuken should respond, if at all. Is sharing food enough? Should Volkskeuken make political or social statements? Or is it most powerful as a space where people feel welcome without explanation? V1 posed the question to organizers, *"How are the values of the Verhalenhuis being transmitted... to the volunteers, to the people who come to eat?"* What they try to maintain is a clear message that *"We listen to everyone, we're open to everyone's story. We maybe don't even agree at first or whatever, but everyone is welcome. I think when you say that, then it's clear"* (O3). While participants recognize *"That's a perfect scenario of the reality doesn't exist,"* organizers echoed the desire to preserve the qualities that make the space unique—a face-to-face, analog environment. Especially against the backdrop of digital saturation, global conflicts, increasing loneliness, participants reaffirmed the Volkskeuken remains a platform that offers citizens of Rotterdam a place to engage with each other.

The scenario-building workshop brought long-term questions into focus, particularly among older organizers who recognized that their involvement may not be forever. This sparked conversations around succession, evolution, and continuity. What needs to be preserved, and what can evolve? Who will be involved? While the imagined events through each participants'

postcards prompted a dozen more ideas during discussion, organizers noted that initiatives must emerge from real community desires, such as the creation of Poffa's cooking studio, born from chefs requesting more time in the kitchen. Participants observed, ideas are abundant but successful development depends on genuine interest and the willingness of chefs and volunteers to be involved. A powerful question emerged, "Do our people, our chefs and volunteers, want to do more?" (O4). These questions brought focus to dynamics between organizers and the community, revealing the organizers' sense of responsibility to engage in more frequent dialogue with the community so they can understand collective goals and capacities to act upon said goals.

Discussion around long-term thinking also posed questions to Volkskeuken's capacity to foster emergent identities. Participants began imagining a Volkskeuken where cultural labels aren't fixed. O2 expressed hope that one day, the event won't be introduced as "Chinese kitchen" or "Palestinian kitchen," but simply as "Volkskeuken." It's not about categorizing identity, they emphasized, but about allowing chefs to decide what story to share on any given day. O2 recounted a moment with Chef X, who returned from vacation and said she felt Dutch for the first time: "So when Chef X cooks, when can the '[Chef X's cultural origin] Volkskeuken' change into the 'Dutch Volkskeuken'?" These questions suggest an emerging vision of identity as fluid and self-defined—a direction where Volkskeuken might support chefs in expressing the fullness of their experiences, without the weight of cultural framing.

In all, the discussions revealed grounded perspectives on the community's role in the present and future. Participants not only reflected on what Volkskeuken is, but also asked who it's for, what it can become, and how they can carry its values forward.

Tools and Methods evaluation
By integrating speculative futuring into a familiar storytelling format, the workshop successfully shifted storytelling from recollection to a tool for transforming collective futures. Opening the workshop with the aspiration cards served as a powerful entry point for dialogue. Although the discussion around them extended beyond the scheduled time frame, the extra minutes created space for participants to process their thoughts out loud and draw connections between their lived experiences and desired futures. This extended reflection set a strong foundation for the postcard storytelling activity.

The pre-made scenarios, which were deliberately distinct from their everyday experiences at the Volkskeuken, proved useful as participants quickly connected with the scenarios and interpreted them in imaginative ways, bypassing the often-paralyzing pressure to develop "perfect" narratives from abstract prompts.

The scenario-building session was particularly effective in grounding abstract aspirations in emotionally resonant, concrete narratives. Postcards, as a format, encouraged concise expression of participants' imagined futures while reflecting their core values and desired relationships. The act of crafting a postcard helped participants distill their visions and articulate the kinds of connections and transformations they hoped Volskeuken could enable. The result was not just a collection of imagined scenarios, but a collective portrait of future possibilities open for collective discourse. The values within these postcard narratives inspired deeper reflection within the group of participants.

This method encouraged participants to move beyond present-day constraints and envision Volkskeuken not just as a community dining space, but as a platform with the potential to build new connections across neighborhoods, communities, and organizations. The speculative framework, anchored by aspiration cards, pre-made scenarios, and postcard storytelling, surfaced possibilities that may have otherwise gone unspoken. By making these imagined futures both personal and tangible, the workshop helped participants reimagine Volkskeuken as a space of evolving potential and collective purpose.

Backcasting Workshop
Findings and reflections
Toast activity: The workshop opened with a toast activity inviting participants to imagine themselves at a 2040 celebration. However, instead of creating new events for the 2025-2040 period, participants primarily recalled actual past experiences with the Volkskeuken, often projecting these stories into a future context. While the activity diverged from its original intent of crafting fictional events between 2025 and 2040, it still surfaced valuable reflections about what participants cherished most and hoped would endure in the Volkskeuken. Their stories, though rooted in memory, offered insight into how they see themselves contributing to Volkskeuken's future and how its values might evolve over time (Appendix K).

Group Discussion: Rather than imagining new or unfamiliar possibilities, participants emphasized what already works and what should continue. While discussing the Volkskeuken's collective strength in relationships, they surfaced possibilities for the future and opportunities for participation within and beyond the immediate community.

In envisioning desired futures for Volkskeuken, participants began by reflecting on their current roles and relationships. As V3 (workshop 2, January 2025) shared, *"You can't do everything... you learn to trust everybody's capability or incapability."* This mindset laid the groundwork for imagining futures rooted in collaboration and mutual support. A clear example came from V4 (workshop 2, January 2025), who expressed a desire to build stronger relationships between Volkskeuken volunteers and Katendrecht neighbors. V4 noted, *"If there are more volunteer hours than needed, maybe find a kind of a pool in this area where you can contribute to other things."*

This relational aspiration became a springboard for backcasting. Importantly, participants weren't seeking to formalize a rigid plan. Instead, they explored what might be possible— together. Working backward from this desired relationship, participants brainstormed different possibilities among each other's capabilities, such as using van transport or walking to bring neighbors to Volkskeuken. They also considered using the Volkskrant to promote such initiatives. From these conversations, V4 could introduce this idea of a flexible volunteer "*pool system*," an informal structure to enable volunteers to bring neighbors together in the Volkskeuken. The backcasting activity thus succeeded in activating long-term thinking through relationships rather than abstract goals.

These values of collective care and reliance on each other's capabilities were not only discussed but embodied during the workshop itself. When V5 (workshop 2, January 2025) mentioned needing to leave for a bike repair, V2 (workshop 2, January 2025) offered, *"I have a van, I can take your bike."* Moments like this underscore that Volkskeuken is more than a space to cook or eat, it is a living community where people can show up for one another.

This relational ethos is reflected in how roles emerge organically. Rather than recruiting Rotterdammers to join through formal marketing, participants spoke of *"mond-tot-mond"* (word of mouth) as a self-selecting process that brings in people aligned with Volkskeuken's values. V5 described how *"People with the same kind of search for doing something for the community in a nice way"* find themselves joining here. There was a deep trust in this organic process as V3 described, *"The job finds you, or you find the job. Or you find the people, or the people find you."* Participants found the absence of fixed roles or structure as a strength. *"That's the most important quality of the whole thing, it's just happening. There's no schedule. There's no design" V6* (workshop 2, January 2025) *added.*

Participants debated to what scale Volkskeuken serves the greater public. While V2 pointed that the community is *"...a part of Katendrecht but too less apart of Rotterdam, and that is a pity. "* other participants would argue that Volkskeuken serves not only as a neighborhood gathering space but also as a source of broader social connection in Rotterdam. V6 reflected on their day to day in their 70s, *"You don't contribute very much to the community when you're on pension, but it's nice to have something here, to still be busy with, to be part of a community that contributes to something important and nice. I'm very glad I can be. I think because I'm doing this in Belvédère, I'm also contributing to the whole city."*

One value all participants agreed Volkskeuken must sustain is the ability to foster connection. Volkskeuken was described as a counter-space to isolation. V3 described, "When you enter this building, you give up isolation. You can find yourself, and you can find somebody else." Through shared tasks, food, and conversation, participants emphasized the space's power to foster connection. V2 echoed, when "I see people here [Volkskeuken] and I see people at home, there's a

difference for me." The Volkskeuken invites people to learn more about each other. V4 adds, *"The different cultures bring understanding. I think this kind of being together, you can understand about each other's problems."* This included what V4 called *"friendly confrontation,"* the ability to have meaningful interactions across social divides: *"Within these walls, it changes. Then you will talk to everybody. You get to learn. You tell each other stories. As soon as you get to know people, it's almost impossible to hate them."*

Workshop 2 reinforced the impact of Volkskeuken relational strength, turning Rotterdammers, neighbors, guests, into part of the community, and ultimately combatting greater social issues such as loneliness and discrimination.

Tools and Methods evaluation
The backcasting workshop offered valuable insights, both through its outcomes and its limitations. The initial toast from the future, intended as an imaginative entry point into 2040, did not resonate as expected with participants. While the intention was to spark storytelling inspired by the achievement cards, participants did not connect these elements into their narratives unlike in workshop 1. Contributing factors likely included time constraints and communication challenges, as well as a possible misalignment between the activity's structure and participants' readiness or familiarity with such speculative exercises. I speculate the introduction held too much content at once and required more space to read and discuss for the participants to relate to the achievement cards.

Notably, the open participant criteria, limited to being part of the Volkskeuken community and able to participate in English, allowed for an inclusive group, but also, no prior context was gathered to tailor prompts or framing. In hindsight, more pre-consideration of participants' backgrounds, particularly age-related perspectives, could have helped shape a more accessible entry point. For example, the comment from participant V6, *"Well, I don't think I'll be around!"* reflected a disconnection from the idea of projecting 15 years into the future and highlighted the need for tools that feel personally relevant across generations.

Despite the toast activity's limited engagement with future thinking, it revealed a core tension: T*o what extent do structured, future-oriented tools like backcasting fit within a community grounded in spontaneity and emergence?* The participants made clear that Volkskeuken thrives on informal, relational dynamics, and this raises broader questions about how formal planning tools can (or cannot) adapt to such environments. This remains an open and generative question for future workshop design, not just for Volkskeuken, but for similar grassroots or self-organizing communities.

Interestingly, while the structured backcasting did not unfold as originally planned, moments of success emerged organically. For example, discussing origins of engagement with

Volkskeuken led participants to reflect meaningfully on existing relationships and imagine the kinds of connections they'd like to see in the future. From this relatable and personal starting point, participants were able to identify the powerful role their relationships played in driving their involvement. When V4 shared a desire to build stronger bonds between volunteers and local Katendrecht neighbors, this relational goal became the basis for a backcasting exercise that felt both grounded and productive, demonstrating that starting from personal or collective desires, rather than abstract scenarios, may be a more effective entry point into speculative futuring.

Overall, the workshop revealed that speculative exercises like backcasting require more scaffolding, especially for older participants or those less familiar with long-range thinking. This workshop's methods revealed a disconnect between the tools provided and participants' readiness to engage in abstract futuring, underscoring the need for more accessible framing and grounding in personal relevance in future iterations.

6.2 Discussion

Part 2's workshops to create collective futures revealed several layers of understanding for the Volkskeuken, Starting with helping the community better understand itself, participants were able to gain a better understanding of how Volkskueken may move toward the future. The workshops which infused speculative futuring into familiar storytelling formats guided participants to move beyond storytelling as recollection and toward storytelling as a means of transforming their collective futures.

Helping the community better understand itself
Within both workshops, participants navigated the process of understanding their roles and relations within Volkskeuken's community. Workshop 1 prompted organizers to reconsider how they facilitate guest and chef interactions, weighing the balance between respecting cultural eating customs and embracing experimentation. The discussions led them to envision a future where Volkskeuken might not rely on cultural labels for each chef, allowing them to express their identities freely and authentically. Additionally, the workshop emphasized the importance of maintaining strong communication with chefs, ensuring their needs and desires are understood. Meanwhile, Workshop 2 encouraged volunteers to reflect on their collective potential by recognizing each other's strengths and limitations. This understanding laid the foundation for actionable steps towards a future where volunteer-Katendrecht relations are strengthened, using backcasting techniques to envision and work toward this future. Together, these workshops sparked meaningful dialogue about the roles that shape the trajectory of Volkskeuken.

Beyond the walls of Volkskeuken, participants increasingly recognized their community's role within the broader social fabric of Rotterdam. As tensions rise across the city's social landscape, they saw Volkskeuken as a rare and vital space where people from different backgrounds can meet, share stories, and build mutual understanding. This aligns with Rotterdam's action plan Samen Leven in een Stad (2023–2026), which confronts racial discrimination and promotes inclusion, and echoes Belvédère's (2012) assertion that public spaces play a key role in making diverse communities visible to one another. Through Workshops 1 and 2, participants reflected on the responsibility of maintaining an open, inclusive space, not just through shared meals, but by fostering deeper connections and actively addressing societal issues such as loneliness and discrimination. These discussions sparked critical questions about whether food alone can sustain meaningful connection, and whether Volkskeuken should adopt a more active stance in shaping social change. In doing so, they began to see Volkskeuken as more than a dining venue, it became a glimpse of Rotterdam's potential for integration and community resilience. The speculative narratives developed during the workshops challenged identity-based categorization, instead embracing emerging and fluid expressions of self. This reflects Dobroć et al.'s (2023) argument that storytelling can help communities reframe complex social issues, enabling a shift toward inclusivity and collective empowerment.

Helping the community gain a better understanding of how it may move toward the future
Building on participants' understanding of Volskeuken's role within and beyond its walls, this understanding created space for participants to think about evolving relationships beyond past histories, nurturing aspirations for more meaningful connections: between chefs and guests, between Volskeuken and its neighborhood, with greater Rotterdam, and with related organizations. These desired relationships were grounded in shared values such as learning from others, exchanging resources, fostering creativity, contributing meaningfully, and focusing on the joy of the cooking process.

Part 2 also revealed Volskeuken's emerging capacity for long-term thinking. While the community has a strong foundation in empathetic, relationship-centered practices, there is potential for developing further connection to the latter skill, long-term thinking that fundamentally links their motivations for moral intergenerational justice, the understanding that we have an ethical obligation to consider the wellbeing of future generations (Krznaric, 2020, p. 80). Organizers acknowledged their proximity to retirement, hinting at a need for long-term thinking. In discussions about what is important to preserve and how they might evolve alongside the changing city of Rotterdam, there was a lingering desire to maintain the current essence of the Volskeuken experience. Similarly, the backcasting workshop revealed underlying tensions around imagining long-term futures, particularly when those futures extend beyond the participants' current involvement. This tension is rooted in the very nature of Volskeuken: if its essence lies in its unplanned, relational character, then the application of structured methods like backcasting must carefully navigate the risk of undermining that spirit, even as it seeks to support future-oriented thinking.

Approaches to collective storytelling about the future
Part 2 centered around collective storytelling as a powerful method for shaping the future of Volskeuken. By infusing speculative futuring into familiar storytelling formats, participants moved beyond storytelling as mere recollection and began using it as a tool for transforming collective futures. The scenario building workshop helped translate abstract aspirations into concrete, emotionally resonant narratives, while the postcard activity offered a creative format to express imagined futures grounded in shared values and relationships. Although the "toast" narrative format was less successful in this instance, the discussion that followed organically led into a backcasting exercise rooted in a participant's desire to build stronger connections between volunteers and the Katendrecht neighborhood. This moment revealed the potential of beginning speculative exercises not with abstract goals, but with a focus on who, the people and relationships that matter, before asking what communities want to do. By surfacing relational motivations such as collaboration, inclusion, and care, participants were better able to imagine meaningful future possibilities. Rather than defining speculative futures through fixed concepts, participants in both workshops continuously envisioned Volskeuken's evolution through desired relationships, between chefs and guests, with neighbors, across

greater Rotterdam, and with related organizations, making clear that the community's future directions lie in the strength and intentionality of its connections.

Limitations

It would have been interesting to explore how neighbors (not necessarily members of the community) from Katendrecht and volunteers would have reacted to the scenario-building workshop. Perhaps the backcasting workshop would have been more appropriate for organizers and chefs. There were many combinations I could have considered in selecting participants. It would have been valuable to not only incorporate the chefs' interview insights into the workshops but also involve them directly in Part 2. However, as with Part 1, I recognized—through both personal experience and conversations with organizers—that asking chefs to commit additional time was impractical. Although I considered holding workshops while cooking together, it became clear that facilitating such activities during busy kitchen hours would be too hectic. Still, chefs remain central to the future of Volkskeuken, as their desires significantly shape its evolution. In future iterations, I would explore how to adapt speculative futuring and storytelling tools to better align with the chefs' natural environment and rhythms. The workshops with organizers and volunteers were still highly valuable, as their ongoing involvement plays a crucial role in sustaining Volkskeuken. More broadly, futuring exercises should be embedded within the everyday practices of a community. Rather than relying solely on formal workshops, researchers should look to storytelling formats that emerge organically, through informal conversations, shared meals, or spontaneous reflections that fit within existing communal flows.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1. Contributions

Contributions to the community

Storytelling about the future allowed participants to move beyond past histories and towards shared aspirations for the future. Through this study, participants developed insights that helped them better understand themselves and their evolving role within both the community and the broader city of Rotterdam. By 'setting the table" for the relationships they value and the connections they hope to cultivate, Volkskeuken is not just preparing meals but also setting the foundation for a more inclusive and interconnected future. The study highlighted Volkskeuken's capacity for future thinking, rooted in empathy and relationship-building, with potential for further growth in long-term, relationship-driven planning.

In terms of actionable outcomes, I ideated 12 future concepts that could be implemented to suit the collective aspirations of chefs, volunteers, and organizers. These concepts were distilled into four distinct directions, which were then mapped onto a matrix to evaluate which aspirations each concept could address (Appendix L). The "Skill Sharing Workshops" emerged as the most relevant direction for all roles within Volkskeuken, aligning with its core values and addressing collective aspirations such as fostering collaboration, exchanging resources, and promoting affordable and healthy cooking. This format invites chefs and volunteers to host workshops on topics of their own interest, allowing for flexibility and a range of practical and creative themes. The workshops not only encourage trust and participation across the community but also bridge cultural barriers by educating participants on factors like dietary restrictions and culinary adaptations, contributing to cultural preservation and knowledge transfer (De Nooijer & Sol Cueva, 2022). By adapting to the community's evolving needs, the skill-sharing workshops provide a platform for diverse voices, helping to meet the aspirations of chefs, volunteers, and organizers alike.

During a final meeting with organizers, they expressed appreciation for the clarity and organization of the visuals presented, which helped them quickly grasp the concepts. They found the matrix evaluating the four design directions particularly effective, comparing it to restaurant reviews with a star-rating system. This fresh perspective validated and clarified their ongoing efforts and encouraged them to continue implementing the ideas discussed. The organizers were especially excited by the skill-sharing workshop concept, which they had previously explored with one chef but had not yet fully developed. However, my research goes beyond merely reaffirming their intentions. It revealed a broader potential for this concept, highlighting that it could address a wider range of needs within the community,not just those of the chefs, but also the volunteers, neighbors, and other people within the community. Supported by the collective insights from the study, the organizers recognized the potential of the skill-sharing workshops to become a permanent program, fostering

collaboration across different roles and ensuring the initiative is more inclusive of everyone's aspirations within the community.

As I concluded my study with Volkskeuken, it was important to express my gratitude for their hospitality and collaboration throughout the process. In a printout to the community, I created a brief survey to thank the community members, share insights into my findings and optional links to further explore future concepts. The survey highlighted a variety of aspirations for Volkskeuken's future, which I aimed to validate through two simple questions: "Which qualities do you think best represent the Volkskeuken experience?" and "What benefits do you hope Volkskeuken will continue or develop for future generations?" The responses (n=5) confirmed that the qualities of the Volkskeuken discovered through this study (feeling cozy like home, feeling welcomed, organic discovering by word of mouth, understanding and connecting with different people, working together, contributing to the community, learning from each other, and serendipitous interactions) resonate with the greater community Appendix M. Responses to the latter question affirmed the range of aspirations (focus on cooking process, getting creative, learning from others, exchanging resources, and affordable & healthy cooking) uncovered in this study as well, with greatest hopes for the Volkskeuken to develop affordable & healthy cooking for future generations.

Contributions to design research

This research contributes to design research by highlighting the power of collective storytelling and relational dynamics in speculative futuring. By infusing speculative methods into familiar storytelling formats, participants moved beyond storytelling as mere recollection, using it instead as a tool to imagine and shape transformative collective futures. In working with the Volkskeuken community, the process began not with asking what the community wanted to do, but who, focusing on the desired relationships they hoped to build or evolve. This emphasis on relational motivations, such as aspirations for collaboration or greater inclusion, allowed future possibilities to emerge more meaningfully. Rather than basing speculative futures on abstract concepts, participants in Part 2 of the study continually defined Volkskeuken's future through desired interactions, such as between chefs and guests, Volkskeuken and its neighborhood, the broader city of Rotterdam, and related organizations. These evolving relationships formed the core of how futures were imagined. In broader contexts of futuring and design research, this work shows that creating collective futures requires relational capital. If design researchers aim to co-create futures with communities, we must first attend to the relationships that shape collective agency and imagination. volving dynamics of agency and participation within Volkskeuken.

Future Recommendations for collective storytelling about the future
Design Futuring Methods That Center Relationships, Not Just Actions
To meaningfully engage communities in imagining and shaping collective futures, design research must center relational dynamics, not just what communities do, but who they do it with, and why. Futuring methods should be designed to surface and support relational motivations such as mutual care, trust, and shared purpose. Surfacing the relationships participants value and desire are the foundation of co-creation. Rather than starting with abstract visions or predetermined goals, designers should create space for communities to imagine futures through the lens of evolving connections: between individuals, groups, and the broader ecosystems they inhabit. This approach reframes collective storytelling not as speculative fiction, but as a relational practice, one where futures emerge from the aspirations, tensions, and synergy that bind people together. Building relational capital is thus not an outcome of design, but a prerequisite for transformative futuring.

7.2 Personal reflections

My role participating in the community

While design futurists may initiate collaborations with communities for various reasons, I found that demonstrating "skin in the game" was an essential step in fostering trust, also resonating with Mitlin's (2021) emphasis on building relational capital. In order to engage a community with participatory research, it took a level of vulnerability. On a personal level, I found connection to the community and shared my own stories with people at Volkskeuken. I spoke informally with several members of the VHB team to identify the Volkskeuken as a community I genuinely resonated with and wanted to contribute to. Speaking candidly about my own curiosities ("How can my skillset in design research contribute to the future of Volkskeuken?") and sharing my assumptions on how design and research could contribute to the community ("Volkskeuken currently bonds over sharing stories of collective pasts, I think it's very complementary to explore ways to bond over creating stories of collective future(s)") opened up the possibility for this explorational study. The organizers really listened to my intentions to work from the bottom up, therefore, welcomed and coordinated so I could continue "contributing to earn the right to participate" (Camargo, 2023) starting in the kitchen. While my intention was to ensure I could start and end this study with a good relationship with the Volkskeuken, there was always a fine line of questioning whether I was simply taking up their time throughout Part 1's research phase. It was only until part 2, when I reflected the findings back to the organizers for the first time and held workshop 1, that I felt reassured I was offering something valuable throughout the process of this study and not simply building up till the conclusion of it.

Intention to Outcome

While pursuing the Strategic Product Design masters program here, I became familiar with developing practical strategies and action plans for the organizations move into the future, often through the lens of systems, business models, and institutional infrastructures. I only understood future-oriented work within hierarchical structures where future directions comes from the top-down, rather that collective culmination. However, through this thesis, I chose to explore a different orientation toward future-making. I was curious how change begins when it is not initiated by policy, institutions, or structural powers? Before formal initiation, who are the people, and what are the conversations that inspire desired change? This thesis became an opportunity to study how communities imagine, build, and nurture their futures from the ground up. It offered me an insightful complement to strategic design, a more relational, collective approach to the question of who gets to be and gets to act as protagonists of the future. In that sense, yes, I learned what I wanted to learn, and perhaps more. I explored a softer, more emergent logic of change, and gained a deeper appreciation for the informal, sometimes overlooked spaces where futures quietly begin to take root.

This exploration also deepened my personal practice. As a resident of a global city, I find urban contexts especially compelling. They contain both spaces where like-minded people can nurture shared values, and spaces where completely different walks of life converge. I'm constantly drawn to the intersections between these worlds, and I'm deeply concerned with how we navigate the complexity of living together, walking the fine line between differences that divide us and those that connect us. This thesis helped me see how design can not only shape large-scale futures, but also tend to the micro-level dynamics that sustain everyday life. It reminded me that futures are not only imagined from above, they are co-created on the ground, in living rooms, street corners, and shared moments of care.

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Appendix

Appendices are located in a separate PDF document. Appendix overview is provided below.

Appendix A: Chefs' pamphlet stories

Appendix B: Guest survey + responses

Appendix C: Semi-structured interview guide

Appendix D: Semi-structured interview analysis

Appendix E: Workshop 1 (Scenario Building) discussion guide

Appendix F: Postcard format

Appendix G: Workshop 1 (Scenario Building) Analysis

Appendix H: Workshop 2 (Backcasting) discussion guide

Appendix I: Toast template

Appendix J: Workshop 2 (Backcasting) Analysis

Appendix K: Toasts

Appendix L: Contributions to community (ideation + final concept)

Appendix X: Final survey + responses

SETTING THE TABLE

Collective storytelling about the
future with a community, Volkskeuken

Crystal Mah | TU Delft Master Thesis | March 2025