

# What if we designed for humanity rather than humans?

– A speculative take on the future of urban food production.

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As a designer you often hear yourself saying — Human first, advocating the individual's needs. In this project we asked ourselves — What if we design for Humanity rather than for single individuals. How would that change the way we approach things?

It is a fact that urban food production will be an integrated part of the city and that it will affect us that lives here. But how?

Imagine this; What if the streets of Stockholm would close in summer — not for people wanting to enjoy a glass of chilled rose in the sun but because bees and other pollinators need a calm resting place during the busy season? And now let's take it up a notch. What if our cities catered primarily to plant comfort (and not human comfort), in order to strengthen and secure domestic food production in a volatile world?

Urban food production is interlinked with ideas of self-sufficiency that truly is many things combined. It has to do with how we grow things, what we grow, how we take care of the harvest and how we make the most out of it by minimising food waste. There are examples and attempts at an experimental scale but there is still no example where urban food production is implemented at large. This is still an unseen future.

## Setting the scene

By selecting a group of skilled designers, architects, sustainability experts and urbanists we decided to conceptualise and visualise that future. The intent — to spark conversations on what shape urban self-sufficiency might take 30 years from now.

We named the project Norra Matgårdsstaden, a play on the current name of our testbed neighbourhood Norra Djurgårdsstaden in Stockholm and the Swedish word for food; mat.

In order to make a speculative design feel plausible one needs friction, things that make you feel a bit uneasy.



We therefore imagined a global food crisis. A complete lack of wheat and other grains in Europe. Fierce resistance among citizens all around the world to accept self-sufficiency. Even deeper segregation between communities. Feeling a bit uneasy yet? Good.

In addition to creating friction, these parameters are ultimately designed to make us question this potential future and trigger ideas and actions to create something better, less horror-inducing.

### Looking ahead, to 2052.

A lot can happen in 30 years. The easiest way to get a real feel for it is to look back in time. What happened in your own life in 2012, 2002 and 1992? Try it! Do you remember these years with a smile or a cringe?

To build on this, from a food perspective, we kicked off this speculative project with a picnic full of the trappings of the 1990's. Taco pie! Pasta sallad! 'Smells like teen spirit' by Nirvana or if you're Swedish; 'Himlen runt hörnet' by Lisa Nilsson!

From here we would start discovering the details of our future scenario. In order to make it relatable as well as engaging we decided to let the aesthetics have spiritual undertones, elements of superstition and folk craft. To create a somewhat familiar image, yet in a new, future context.

Here is how we choose to describe it:

"The year is 2052. Following the global food crises back in the 2020s, the Harvest Festival has replaced Christmas as the biggest, most celebrated holiday of the year. Children receive gifts. Decorative ornaments, inspired by produce, are everywhere. People rejoice. It is a celebration of what, literally, is needed to sustain life."

### Timeline and provocations

By researching, talking to experts, prototyping and not least through speculation, we built a timeline. It was to act as a vessel for our project findings and the purely speculative elements, stretching from today to 2052. Each activity and workshop provided insights and ideas that ultimately altered the content of the timeline.

Made up of equal parts educated guesses (based on what the researchers, experts and our fellow citizens shared with us) and fictive provocations to trigger dialogue, we had our foundation.


Each provocation is essentially an open question — Is this what we want the future to look like? How do

we make it happen? Or how do we avoid ending up here? They are challenges to ourselves to create a better future.

*A few provocations  
to trigger your  
imagination:*


*| Life in the city |*

Food production happens everywhere. Many citizens choose to be directly involved by collecting, producing and refining foods. Some condominium associations rent out their facades as vertical farm land and others contribute by farming the city's strategic green areas and forest gardens.



*| Infrastructure |*

In a referendum the Swedish population vote to ban insects as a source of protein. This paved the way for other investments to make urban food production a reality. Favouring farming techniques for both above and under the surface of the sea, on roof tops, on buildings and in caves.



*| Crops |*

We enjoy a variety of edible microorganisms (fungi) since they are a good source of nutrition, take little space when grown and are unaffected by the notorious extreme weather, that is known to ruin harvests, since they are grown in caves and basements.

## Collective memory

Throughout time food has traditionally been celebrated all across cultures. When much of the world moved from farming to an industrialised society the majority of us forgot the hard work needed to literally put food on the table, and with that the reason to celebrate it diminished.

In the old Swedish farmer society, the harvest was celebrated with Mickelsmäss and it was one of the biggest holidays of the year, it was when the harvest was brought in and barns, cellars and lofts were filled to the brim with food. Just as in the old times our future harvest festival is celebrated at Mickelsmäss, the 29 September. The dishes served at harvest festival tables in 2052 are different but the spirit is festive — just as it used to be.

## Taste the difference

The future we have created requires entirely new thinking. For example; No wheat means a need for innovation and the abundance of jellyfish becomes a resource. This means the dishes served at the harvest festival of 2052 are different. Portion sizes decidedly smaller (less processing, higher nutritional content) and the ingredients are new.

In order to engage citizens and policy makers in the conversation about our possible futures we as designers must orchestrate an experience. We need to play with the familiar and the new, create recognition and provocation.

Our exploration of food for the harvest festival led to five small dishes, each highlighting one or several aspects of urban food production 30 years from now.

- A 2052 version of the classic baked Swedish wheat based cinnamon roll became a steamed cinnamon, rice flour and banana-bun. In our scenario this is made possible by resilient rice varieties that can grow in brackish water. Also, tropical and nutritious fruits (like the banana) and spices are grown in aquaponic greenhouses on rooftops using excess heat from residential and commercial buildings.



- An invasive species of jellyfish has made herring almost extinct. Thus, we eat it.
- We also eat nutritious seaweed, some of which is used to clean polluted shores.
- Traditional yet forgotten local crops like Gråärt aka. Field pea are brought back thanks to their resilience to harsh weather conditions, and to boost biodiversity in the cities.

We invited a group of food industry experts to our studio to eat, discuss and explore what we can expect to eat in 30 years time. The talks taking place while tasting were just as important as the taste of the snack.

### The power of making speculative design tangible

There were a number of experiential and tangible artefacts that came together for us when we brought our work to the residents of our testbed neighbourhood. This, the snapshot of a harvest festival in 2052, combined a festive table as the centrepiece, the timeline, findings, insights, even crafts for kids and of course the steamed cinnamon bun.



The constellation of objects were interlinked on multiple levels, and together they shaped the overall story of what might lay ahead — even in terms of taste and celebration — if we decide to implement urban food production.

Making speculative artefacts and future prototypes is a balancing act. They should include the right amount of comfort and discomfort, vision versus friction, utopia versus dystopia. The future is just as complex as the world today. Yet by visualising possible futures we create the tools needed to act on these plausible realities, these speculative design futures. Being able to see, touch and in this project, also smell and taste the future opens up new avenues for ideation and exploration.

## A starting point

An artefact — whether an edible bun, a built structure or a fictive timeline — illustrates a moment in time and is never finished. It should be viewed as a starting point to imagine and to start building the future.

The signals, contexts and initiatives discovered during a process like this can be mind blowing. Things we once thought were pure fiction unravel and become reality in front of our own eyes. Rice is already grown on a trial basis north of Stockholm. The same with tropical fruits thanks to aquaponics.

Stockholm has already seen initiatives around bee friendly zones over the last five years. During the course of the project, the west coast of Sweden experienced a jellyfish invasion. War made everyone aware of supply chain fragility...

The future cannot be stopped. Only by envisioning it can we be part of creating it.

And not unlike the pollinator we as designers need to facilitate what is yet to come, making sure ideas are mixed and discussed in order for us all to envision new possible futures.