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Exploring How Metaphors of Change Prefigure Futures in Public Policy, Social Movements, and Community Projects

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1 Introduction

Spaceship earth, doughnut economics, growth addiction, nurturing community ecosystems, transformation pathways, all represent terms we come across in work with sustainability and the environment. These terms are arguably *metaphorical*, that is, they draw meaning from one thing to help us understand another. This chapter builds on conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) to discuss how various metaphors employed in sustainability initiatives and movements not only

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Metaphors are pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action—George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, 1980.

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function as linguistic devices, but play a role in the prefiguration of alternative futures, bridging desired ends with thinking, action, and being in the here-and-now.

Conceptual models on systemic transformations tend to position world-view, paradigm, and their influence by metaphor constructs at the deepest leverage of change (Davelaar, 2021). In the face of contemporary and persistent societal challenges lie a natural necessity for deliberate and purposeful change towards desired futures—involving new ways of thinking, doing, being, relating, and imagining in this world (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2024; Scoones et al., 2020; West et al., 2024). Actors, initiatives, and movements seeking to enact transformations into alternative futures operate on the edge between two worlds: the world as it is, and the world they aspire to create (e.g. Senge, 1990; Seyfang & Smith, 2007; Swilling, 2019). As futures are open-ended (e.g. Horst & Gladwin, 2024), change strategies differ across initiatives, and actions situated, transformative practices might look very different depending on context.

This chapter seeks to elicit, contrast and discuss the metaphors-in-use to guide change in three diverse and distinct deliberate transformation initiatives: the 100 *climate neutral cities mission* by the European Commission; *degrowth* as an academic and social movement, and *transition towns* as a representative community grassroot project. Prefiguration—that is, the achievement of means–ends coherence in thought and action—may play out differently depending on context.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: Sect. 2 provides a brief background into metaphors of change. Section 3 introduces the three selected cases with emphasis on their metaphors-in-use. Section 4 analytically compares the cases and their metaphors. Section 5 integrates observations and claims from the previous sections into a discussion on how metaphors of change might prefigure transformations from a backcasting perspective. Section 6 summarise the main findings and provide conclusions and ways forward.

2   Metaphors of Change

Metaphors are more than just a matter of words or language. They are cognitive devices underpinning the very frames within which we make sense of and engage in the world. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) illustrated in their seminal book how our ordinary conceptual system—in terms of how we think and act—is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Two classical examples involve *up is good*, and *affection is warmth*, which build on our experiences (e.g. associating the affection from a parent to temperature) and create complex systems of meaning that characterise individual and cultural frames. Moreover, viewing and talking about organisations as machines normalise emphasis on efficiency, control, rational planning, and hierarchical structure. Approaching organisations as organisms rather bring attention to adaptation, environment and interconnections (Morgan, 1980; Scott & Davis, 2006).

Metaphors can work in both the direction of reducing something more complex or abstract into a particular frame and may as well open up and pluralise something initially conceived of as simple or unambiguous. Metaphors that stick tend to be persuasive because they offer an entry point—or shortcut—into grasping abstract or complex phenomena by strategically drawing from something more familiar (Flusberg & Thibodeau, 2023). They transfer meaning from one domain to another, making the unfamiliar more understandable. For example, we often borrow metaphors from computing to conceptualise the brain as an information processing device, or from war to describe political discourse—attacking opponents, winning debates, or shooting down arguments. Such metaphors do more than describe; they uphold particular frames, norms, and rules, shaping not only how we talk about something but also how we act within it (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Work on sustainability and the environment comes with a wealth of metaphors. Some are deliberately chosen and designed, whereas others are more subtle. Kenneth Boulding's (1966) space ship earth is an early example, where the earth is conceptualised as a shared vessel with finite supplies. Doughnut economics (Raworth, 2017) conceptualises humanity's safe and just operating space as the area between two concentric boundaries: an inner social foundation and outer ecological ceiling,

represented by the inner and outer edges of a doughnut-shaped diagram. Most would however agree that the planet is not de facto a spaceship, nor are we living in a baked doughnut. What these metaphors do effectively is that they package complex scientific and moral imperatives into graspable concepts that guide thinking and action. They also tell stories of boundaries, limits and constraints (see Leach et al., 2010). More subtle use of metaphor may include the framing of transformation strategies as a matter of *pathways*—inviting imagery and vocabulary of roads, journeys, crossroads, and dead ends.

In this chapter, any metaphor part of a deliberate change effort is referred to as a metaphor of change, to distinguish between the general metaphors part of everyday language, and particular conceptual metaphors used to guide and motivate action in a certain direction.

3   Case Studies

Below, metaphors used to narrate, embody and enact alternative and desired futures in selected cases are surfaced, presented, and discussed. It is also stressed that metaphors naturally become part of a wider discourse, that is, a patterned way of talking about, understanding and structuring reality.

3.1   EU Cities Mission

The EU Cities Mission, formally, the mission to achieve over 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030 provides a strategic agenda by the European Commission. The initiative is deliberately framed as a mission, a metaphor reminding us of the moonshot but in this case to inspire bold action on climate change as a collective endeavour bringing together cities, sectors and actors around a shared and meaningful objective. As with the moon landing, it was by the public considered unrealistic when announced by John F. Kennedy in 1961, and there was no ready-made plan on how to achieve the mission by the end of the decade. Ursula von der Leyen has described the European Green New Deal,

within which the EU Cities Mission is part, as Europe's man-on-the-moon moment (European Commission, Brussels, 2019). The initiative draw from Mariana Mazzucato's concept of mission-oriented innovation (Mazzucato, 2018) and transformative innovation policy (European Commission. Joint Research Centre, 2023).

The metaphor carries an expectation of a transformative achievement of something that has never been done before, which may lead to significant technological development as well as a changed perspective on our place and this planet (Cf. The Blue Marble)—as missions set a tone of a grand challenge and collective purpose. When encouraging cities to join the EU Cities Mission, climate neutrality becomes a society-wide quest requiring innovation, creativity, and "moonshot" courage. To what extent is the choice and use of a mission metaphor central in achieving systemic innovation and a paradigm shift in urban development and ways of living towards climate neutral, smart, and inclusive cities, whose form is not known in advance but emerge through process?

Climate neutrality may at first be understood as giving a sense of balance or harmlessness. But it means net-zero carbon emissions, and much practical effort is technically oriented towards accelerating a transition decarbonising urban energy and transportation systems. The mission blends technological and social imaginaries, with top-down policy, coordination and technological intervention—complemented with mantras such as "by and for the citizens" and "co-creation processes" hinting towards more bottom-up and human-centric change processes. Here, cities become arenas or places where all sectors and actors intersect and interact. By employing accessible and inclusive metaphors such as mission, journey, hubs, contracts, the EU initiative frames an otherwise complex and technicist mix of policies on energy, transportation, buildings, and infrastructures into a compelling mission of transforming cities into sustainability by 2030.

Within the mission umbrella lie initiatives such as pilot cities and experimentation hubs. These position cities as living laboratories where new solutions and policies can be tested, evaluated, and scaled. Cities become pioneers, taking the lead, moving faster than others, exploring unchartered terrain—an extension of the metaphor. The mission also employs climate city contracts, an agreement that each city signs

committing to climate neutrality including a co-created plan with local stakeholders. Contracts may be more literal than metaphorical, but they evoke ideas of a social pact or partnership. Journey metaphors are also used in their communication, where the mission is depicted as a collective voyage with milestones—requiring navigation and adaptation given challenges and surprise that arise along the way.

Early evidence on its communicative impact involves cities celebrating their role of being among the 100 chose ones and a showcasing of their mission labels. Critics argue the mission upholds a bold intention while also mobilising mainstream actors—and as incrementalism within existing bureaucracies will not do. What the case does is providing a concrete example of how metaphors help promote ideas, muster, and mobilise social momentum at scale.

3.2   Degrowth Movement

While the EU Cities Mission to seeks inclusivity in terms of framing and actor involvement, they are less critical towards dominant cultures, structures and practices. In that regard, the degrowth movement may be increasingly counter-hegemonic (Hamilton & Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2023) by contesting deeper held assumptions, values, beliefs, discourses—and so metaphors of progress, well-being, and change.

At its core lie the term degrowth (Latouche, 2004) which has been termed a missile word—a jolty term piercing the complacency of pro-growth discourse. By taking the well-established concept of economic growth that is generally seen as positive, and put a negation in front of it, established conventions are challenged. It challenges the central held metaphors that equal up with good and more with better. The movement builds on earlier critique on resource-dependent economic growth on a finite planet (Boulding, 1966; Daly, 1973; Meadows et al., 1972). And rather than being agnostic towards solutions or arguing for decoupling, the movement asks critical questions on forms of whether growth at all is good, for whom, and why—and suggests an alternative development ideal.

Metaphorically, the economic system can be treated like a living organism that can grow—quantitatively and qualitatively—with generally positive connotations. Growth is good, healthy, upward, and even natural. Stagnation or shrinkage means failure, weakness or death. As a result, any alternative to the positive growth story faces a cognitive uphill battle. In their book *The Case for Degrowth*, Kallis et al. (2020) nuance this view and explain growth as possessing cyclical, perpetual, and compounding rhythms. Cyclical processes are also natural and not viewed negatively.

To this come a longer conversation, where degrowth proponents continuously put efforts on explaining that degrowth is not recession, but a planned and purposeful activity to downgrade and down scale life into well-being, harmony, conviviality, sufficiency, and meaning beyond destructive material consumption and accumulation. The danger rather lies in ignoring or negating the role of growth as structuring economic and societal activity and its implications for humanity and the planet (Parrique, 2019), to which critique of capitalism often follow (e.g. Feola, 2019).

Degrowth comes with a host of additional metaphors reframing economy and society within their discourse. A prevalent one is the *addiction* metaphor coined by Serge Latouche, diagnosing the problem of our societies as a term of addiction to growth—like a drug. Or endless expansion of GDP according to Edward Abbey being classified as a *pathological dependency*. Both examples cast the current paradigm as inherently self-destructive and in need of intervention and cure—calling for withdrawal, rehab and reversal into a new everyday life, on a societal level. These metaphors provide a stark contrast to the idea of growth as good, positive, and natural. Other metaphors used include the *stepping out of the growth bubble*—including warning that bubbles may burst, the necessity of *stepping off the growth treadmill,* or *slowing down to a snail's pace*.

Degrowth in contrast to the EU mission project less prevalent in mainstream politics. The movement focuses on critique in the search of a different metric and logic for evaluating progress and success. The degrowth movement may be conceived of as increasingly counter-hegemonic, which by some is argued to be its strength, but by some its

weakness. It invites critical conversation on the role of GDP while challenging the big institutions working on global trade, financial stability, development and industrial growth—such as the World Bank, IMF, WTO, OECD, Federal Reserve, the G7, or G20-meetings or World Economic Forum. With equal emphasis, the degrowth movement is also present in sharing and repair circles and other forms of bottom-up engagement outside dominant institutions.

Degrowth metaphors function prefiguratively in the sense that they invite for and embody deviating processes from materialist lifestyles, in search for simplicity as a present virtue and critique of an established development paradigm. In the process of surfacing and questioning deeply held beliefs and conceptual root metaphors (e.g. up is good and more is better), the movement tends to mobilise some groups while risking excluding those who find it too radical. The movement relates to and critiques mainstream growth discourse, to reframe its broader structures, narratives, and assumptions.

The third and last case of Transition Towns is a more grounded grass-roots example that instead of bashing, taming, or corroding the existing seeks to escape incumbency and instead focus on escaping and building up safe alternatives on the side (Cf. Wright, 2010). They seek to inspire local action and frugal innovation in the here and now. The transition town movement is a usual suspect in this context and well-researched (e.g. Aiken, 2012; Smith, 2011; Taylor, 2012), and function well to make a point and propose a third alternative in this analysis from a basis of their metaphors-in-use.

3.3 Transition Towns

Transition towns, originating in Totnes, UK in the mid-2000s is a global network, seeking to empower and equip bottom-up grassroots and communities with concrete practices to transition away from fossil fuel dependence toward resilience in the face of climate change and resource depletion.

The concept of transition town is a prefigurative element and arguably metaphorical. It casts the community as being "in or of" transition, an

ongoing journey from one state of being to another. Rather than mission, revolution, planned decline, or collapse, it is a guided and phased deliberate purposeful change. Their frontperson, Rob Hopkins, frame the transition movement as being a matter of steps, pathways, stories of travel from a problematic present to a post-carbon future (Hopkins, 2008). By using a simple and concrete language associated with transition, radical change is sought to be feasible and inviting, as a matter of practicing better and hopeful futures in the here-and-now. They maintain optimism that communities have resources and capability to act and can move forward together, also through difficulty.

Resilience is a key concept, borrowed from ecology, characterising the ability of a system to withstand, absorb, and recover from shocks. Resilience is portrayed as a development ideal, rather than degrowth (case 2) or climate neutrality and sustainable development (case 1). They encourage communities to enhance local resilience, by developing local food production, renewable energy, and community skills—to withstand external crises like oil price spikes, economic recession, or climate impacts. The ecological metaphor brings a holistic, natural systems perspective to community development—emphasising diversity, decentralisation, and balance.

Transition towns have a long record of positive visioning work, crafting rich narratives and persuasive images of towns as gardens with tress, fruits, vegetables and animals; local economies as strong webs; and neighbourhoods as villages. Transition towns embody a transition period into futures where we are more connected to each other, nature, and the places we live. Settlements can be net exporters of energy, seasonal and local food, and urban landscapes characterised by permaculture. This paints an imagery of connected places (social bonds), diets in season (living with nature's cycles), and urban landscapes of food production (town as garden).

These images guide practices such as community gardens, tool-sharing libraries and local currencies. Under an umbrella of transition and resilience, transition towns prefigure being and acting towards healing or strengthening the community fabric, like enhancing an ecosystem's biodiversity and restoring soil health. Through embodying and enacting values of community self-reliance and sufficiency, actions are encouraged

towards, e.g. planting vegetables and installing solar panels. Change is gradual and led from the bottom-up in terms of what can practically be done, while aiming towards a fundamentally different destination (not just greening cities or shrinking economies), emphasising community resilience to merge individual and collective agency.

Transition town has led to community-led social innovations through frugal means. Repair cafés, oil awareness sessions, seed swaps, celebration events on local culture, and storytelling evenings. These activities function symbolically for the futures they seek to build through meaningful action in the present. Moving beyond critique, pilots, or experiments, transition towns host an assembly of conceptual metaphors and images that help people enact radically different futures involving new socio-ecological bonds, thereby living post-carbon futures. Success is however not guaranteed and stability as well as scaling is complex and dynamic, building on local–global learning processes, contextual fit, attachment to place, cohesion, available resources, political support, and more (Feola & Nunes, 2014).

4   Contrasting and Comparing Cases and Metaphors

Below, central metaphors of change identified in the three cases are discussed alongside their overall (transformational) ambition and prefigurative efforts, as summarised in Table 1.

The metaphors used by the EU Cities Mission, the Degrowth Movement, and the Transition Towns initiative provide rich insights into how each movement conceptualises transformation and mobilises action. While all three aim to respond to contemporary sustainability challenges and enact systemic change, their metaphorical framings in terms of style and scope diverge, providing increased possibility to compare and contrast their underlying assumptions about agency and change.

The EU Cities Mission employ metaphors of mission, moonshots, piloting and journeys, drawing from technical, goal-oriented and strategic concepts. These metaphors emphasise directionality, coordination, shared ambition, and a positioning of transformation as a collective,

Table 1 Summary of common metaphors-in-use, exemplary overall (transformational) ambition, and types of prefigurative efforts in the three selected cases. *Source* Authors

Case	Common metaphors-in-use	Exemplary overall (transformational) ambition	Types of prefigurative efforts
EU cities mission	Mission and moonshot. Collective journey and endeavour to climate neutrality. Hub, labs, pilot, experimentation and frontrunner cities.	Climate neutrality in 100+ European cities by 2030, establishing these cities as innovation hubs, for other cities to follow suit by 2050. Ancillary benefits include improved air quality, reduced noise pollution, sustainable urban mobility, energy-efficient buildings, inclusive and participatory governance.	Climate city contracts: Breaking from business-as-usual by bringing 2050 climate goals to present decision making and development processes. Inspires bold action by invoking historical task, encouraging systemic innovation and risk taking, by and from within existing systems. Aligns actors under shared goal, legitimisd through mission labeling; rallying multi-level governance, researchers, citizens, private sector actors etc. to collaborate and create shared roadmaps.
Degrowth movement	Degrowth as provocative inversion of growth metaphor. Society is addicted, growth as disease. Slowing material throughput – health and balance rather than speed and growth, living well with less.	Overthrowing growth-based model of economic development, societal progress and overall success. Ecological sustainability, social equity, democratic participation well-being beyond GDP; staying within planetary boundaries. Deliberate downscaling of economic production and consumption in rich countries, reimagining prosperity, promoting just and regenerative futures. Slowness as care elaborated via a snail metaphor.	Paradigm critique, exposing current economic model as myth-based and self-destructive. Opens space to think and live economy differently into post-growth societies and planned phasing. Experimentation with post-consumerist lifestyles, adopting simple measures to detox now.

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Case	Common metaphors-in-use	Exemplary overall (transformational) ambition	Types of prefigurative efforts
Transition towns	Transition and journey, community moving from oil dependency to sustainable future. Resilience and emphasis on the local and the ground. Towns as ecosystems, resilience-oriented development.	Community resilience and self-sufficiency/reliance: ecosystem. Local economies, circularity, weaving social fabrics, roots and soil, growing local, energy descent, re-localisation. Inner transition, revived culture and caring and regenerational-socio-ecological relationships.	Empowers community agency and adaptation, accessible, constructive, inviting. Motivating ordinary people to act in the here-and-now on an everyday, simple basis, planting the seeds of the future. Global and planetary changes handled through hope, transformation as possible adventure of revival, overcoming fear, sense of belonging, momentum and inclusive participation. Prototype future solutions now, suburbs becoming food forests. Toolboxes for change, co-creation, empowerment.

time-bound, and bureaucracy-led process. The moonshot metaphor positions the policy initiative as a (post-)historic achievement that required institutional alignment, bold experimentation, risk taking, and a mobilisation of deep technical expertise. This framing and associated metaphors align with systemic prefiguration within existing structures via tools such as climate city contracts and innovation hubs, where widened collaboration and experimentation is legitimised but ultimately managed from the top-down.

In contrast, the Degrowth Movement radically subverts dominant metaphors associated to progress. Portraying growth, particularly in rich countries, as form of addiction or disease and illusory objective being a pathological attachment to endless accumulation. Through metaphors of detox, slow down, living well with less, re-purpose, degrowth open a space for radically re-thinking prosperity and well-being. The movement's metaphors are both critical and reconstructive: by both critiquing and dismantling economic orthodoxy they also propose alternative imaginaries grounded in sufficiency and planetary care. Prefigurative efforts, while less apparent than in EU Cities Mission or Transition Towns, are enacted through everyday practices experimenting with ways of post-consumerist living, aiming to embody post-growth futures in the here-and-now similar to transition towns and grassroot communities alike, while also working towards changing dominant institutions and macro-scale economic transformations.

Transition towns occupy a third space, combining metaphorical elements of journeying, ecosystems and local rootedness. Their central metaphor of transition conveys both movement and becoming—shaping communities towards agents of adaptive and regenerative change. Rather than describing cities as economic machines that need growth to sustain, or as sites for innovation, transition towns portray towns as living systems, thriving through diverse local interconnections. The ecological metaphors of roots, seeds, soil, and resilience emphasise interconnection, circularity, and care, while fostering hope and belonging. Unlike the strategic orientation of EU Cities Mission or rupture manifested in Degrowth, Transition Towns increasingly rely on culturally resonant and emotionally supportive metaphorical landscape that encourage practical action and inner transformation at the community level. Prefiguration is

expressed in the everyday way of being and co-creating in community gardening, tool-sharing, and re-localised economies from the grassroot level.

EU Cities Mission and Transition Towns share a generally optimistic "it is possible" framing. Missions can succeed—we made it to the moon—and transition towns have a reachable destination evidenced by the fact that several towns and communities already manage. Here, the obstacle is rather a matter of pace and scale given the width of the challenges ahead.

5   Metaphors as Prefigurative Devices in Transformations

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrated over 40 years ago, we argue that metaphorical distinctions may have significant implications in societal transformations, as illustrated in the above cases. Also, on a level above the particular cases lie their general type of initiative—policy, critical movement, or community project—which also likely influence their orientation and use of metaphor. They reflect distinct theories of change in terms of their primary orientation: working within the system, against the system, or alongside existing systems.

The EU Cities Mission risk reinforcing technocratic control, a top-down logic and ecological modernisation towards green growth if not critically examined, even as it seeks to stimulate systemic innovation. The Degrowth Movement offer a paradigm critique but may struggle with broader resonance partly due to its critical orientation strengthened by provocative metaphors. Transition Towns, in contrast, encapsulate several messages from the degrowth movement but offer increasingly emotional and practically grounded pathways in, while lacking structural leverage or institutional power.

There are links or traces of the metaphors-in-use in the respective case's transformational ambitions and prefigurative efforts. The metaphors become represented and embedded through being and action, to the extent metaphors possibly can be viewed as tools or devices that influence the transformative impact of action and initiative. When metaphors

render futures increasingly imaginable and emotionally resonant, they provide guidance in larger mobilisation efforts including motivating action and commitment. They can also mediate tensions between individual agency and systemic change.

Throughout history, dominant metaphors have structured societal development and stabilised certain worldviews: the machine metaphor of the industrial age enabled standardisation and top-down control; emerging ecological metaphors reframe the economy as embedded in the biosphere. Paradigm and other forms of deep leverage shifts often hinge on the adoption of new metaphors—those that make the invisible visible, challenge assumption, and open up novel trajectories (Davelaar, 2021; Hamilton & Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2023; Inayatullah, 1998). The power of metaphors possibly comes from its capacity to reframe reality and make a new normal–making the unimaginable imaginable, the abnormal normal, or distant close. They lower barriers to collaboration through inclusive language, promoting alignment, and through raising ambition–by making the intangible accessible, underpinning shared stories, and a sense of being part of something bigger together.

For practitioners and changemakers interested in the art of deliberate and purposeful prefiguration of desired futures, backcasting and anticipation provide two possible methodological frameworks that may be useful but remain underdeveloped in terms of their relation to prefiguration and metaphor. Backcasting seeks to articulate desired futures and figure out ways of getting there (Robinson et al., 2011). Originally, the approach was developed as a complement to forecasting, and in particularly principles-based backcasting (Holmberg, 1998) hold several similarities with prefiguration. However, most contemporary backcasting work overlook the power of metaphor and prefigurative possibilities to dissolve temporal boundaries between the present and future. Similarly, anticipation work has advanced understandings of imaginaries, narratives, and temporalities (Fuller, 2018; Muiderman et al., 2020), but largely overlooked the role of metaphor as a constitutive tool in how futures can be imagined, communicated, and enacted.

A well-chosen metaphor can unite diverse actors, inspire commitment, and anchor complex goals in resonant stories. Poorly chosen metaphor might equally backfire and constrain action. Moreover, metaphors are

not fixed—they evolve with practice and context and can be refined as new needs and understandings emerge. In this sense, they are both symbolic and strategic. Across the three initiatives explored in this chapter, it was illustrated how metaphors not simply reflect prefigurative practices but help constitute them. Moonshots in the EU Cities Mission generate a sense of urgency and shared ambition, while soil and roots in Transition Towns invite for grounded, regenerative change. The Degrowth movement's metaphors of detox and addiction challenge the dominant economic development paradigm and challenge deeply held root metaphors that up is good and more is better.

As we navigate an era that of systemic change, being mindful of the metaphors that are historically inherited and intentional in those that are created becomes a crucial act. In a spirit of prefiguration, metaphors offer building blocks that bring futures that are not yet there to the here and now. If it is true that "in order to change the world we must change the story", then metaphors are foundational to that change.

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