RENERNG NTHE GUNNE Lisette van Beek

A catalogue of transformative university practices in Northern Europe Utrecht University 2024

WHY THIS CATALOGUE?

The ecological crisis and growing social injustices imply the need for radical transformations. Universities have a unique potential to drive radical change through their research, education and public engagement.

So far, universities are not living up to this potential. While science excels at understanding the problem and technical solutions, it fails to define just and equitable strategies. The growing climate anxiety among students also suggests that teaching climate literacy alone is no longer enough.

But there is hope. All over the world, transformative university practices are being initiated, demonstrating that an alternative university is possible. This catalogue is an attempt to capture some of these practices, with the aim to inspire future collaborations, initiatives and institutional change.

Let's reimagine the university together!

Lisette van Beek, October 2024.



THE INITIATIVES

This catalogue is a **collection of inspiring examples of transformative university practices.** The examples were selected based on their innovative and transdisciplinary character and their efforts to generate transformative change in the ecological crisis. Transformative university practices typically involve a mix of research, education and public engagement and do not fit within these existing categories. The initiatives were therefore structured into **'what if' questions,** imagining how the university could be otherwise.

The initiatives were collected through field visits at seven Northern European universities and 50+ interviews with academics, university staff and students. The choice of geographical scope was based on institutional reputation and the possibility for future collaborations between Utrecht University and other European universities within train travel distance. The catalogue is by no means systematic. It is simply intended to inspire.

THE PROJECT

The catalogue is part of the project <u>University in a Changing Climate</u>, a oneyear postdoctoral research project (2023–2024) carried out by dr. Lisette van Beek under supervision of prof. dr. Maarten Hajer. The project also involved the blog series <u>Climate University Express</u>, which features some of the initiatives presented in this catalogue, and a two-day workshop. The project was funded by <u>Pathways to Sustainability</u>, strategic theme of Utrecht University.

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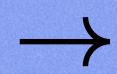
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What if the university turned citizens into change agents?



The growing climate anxiety suggests that climate literacy is no longer enough; universities have the capacity to empower students and the broader community to become 'agents of change'. But what could this look like in practice? How could universities provide the necessary knowledge and skills to drive positive change?

The Centre for Environment and Development Studies (CEMUS)

KEY LESSONS

- Empowering students to design their own education strengthens their capacity to become change makers
- Student-designed courses are typically more critical, transdisciplinary and experiential compared to traditional sustainability courses

WHAT is the initiative?

<u>CEMUS</u> is a student-initiated centre at Uppsala University that offers transdisciplinary sustainability courses that are coordinated by students.

WHY was it initiated?

The centre was initiated in the 1990s at Uppsala University. It emerged from two students who were disappointed by the lack of interdisciplinary sustainability courses and set up a new course.

HOW does it work?

About 15 courses on sustainability are offered on the bachelor and master level, which are defined by their transdisciplinary approach and critical perspectives on sustainability. Courses often actively involve artists, activists, policymakers or entrepreneurs. The student-coordinators are supervised by lecturers and facilitators who assist in course design and assessment. Some of the courses are mandatory to the university's MSc Sustainable Development programme.

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Photo: Lisette van Beek



The Occupy Climate Change! course



KEY LESSONS

- Identifying existing local grassroots initiatives can generate agency and hope
- By creating an online atlas, learnings from the various grassroots initiatives can be shared more widely

WHAT is the initiative?

Occupy Climate Change! is a free online course centered around climate justice and hope. The course is offered by the Environmental Humanities Laboratory at KTH, Stockholm and the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain.

WHY was it initiated?

Two climate stories tend to prevail: the story of individual lifestyles and the story of state agreements (COPs). The course offers an alternative; the story of local grassroots initiatives, making visible the collective climate action that is already happening. It is aimed at generating hope and agency, making participants feel they can be part of the change.

HOW does it work?

The course enrolls about 30 participants from all over the world, including students, journalists, activists etc. Their core assignment is to identify grassroots initiatives in their own city, conduct research and develop an entry for the <u>Atlas of</u> <u>the Other Worlds</u>, an open-access living archive that gathers cases of various urban grassroots and municipal initiatives that are tackling climate change. The course also involves creative storytelling exercises to ignite imaginative exploration into the future, creating a space to explore both fears and hopes for the future.

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Active learning on environmental politics

KEY LESSONS

- Students are often more aware of diversity issues such as queer politics or the male gaze
- By using experiential and creative learning formats, students can better connect theory with practice



WHAT is the initiative?

Teachers at Lund University apply 'active learning' in education on environmental politics

WHY was it initiated?

The idea of 'active learning' emerged from the observation that universities are not fulfilling students' learning needs. Most courses do not take into account the diversity in classrooms in terms of cultural background, language, gender, knowledge and skills.

HOW does it work?

The active learning pedagogy is based on student-centered and experiential learning. It uses the potential of the diversity that is available in classrooms by making space for students to learn from each other. Students have a high degree of agency in selecting topics and assignment formats. A range of non-standardized forms of assessment are also applied such as film reviews, art works and videos. It is applied in various courses including Everyday Europe where students study cases of Lund and Malmö through field trips with walking tours and sound walks.

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The Social Justice and Community Action Programme

KEY LESSONS

- Universities have a unique capacity to bring students, professionals and community initiators together to generate positive social change
- Flexible study programmes enable professionals to participate in university education at their own pace

WHAT is the initiative?

Social Justice and Community Action is a parttime Masters programme at the University of Edinburgh for professionals and university graduates working on social justice issues.

WHY was it initiated?

University programmes are typically inaccessible for those without university degrees, limited time and/or financial resources. But students, community initiators and professionals often have a lot to learn from each other when it comes to social justice and community action.

HOW does it work?

The master offers a flexible study program that can be easily adjusted to participants' needs. The programme is online by design and participants can take time off whenever necessary. This allows participation of community and professionals who typically already struggle to juggle work and activism. Participants learn what social justice means in theory and practice and develop a variety of skills to make positive change, such as building policy advocacy campaigns.



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B.

What if the university empowered marginalised communities?



The value of local and indigenous knowledges for just transformations is increasingly recognised. But these communities often face social injustices, violence and ecological degradation. Current research practices tend to be extractivist; treating the communities as data resources rather than improving their livelihoods. What if universities empowered marginalised communities, keeping their traditional knowledges and practices alive?

Revitalising indigenous hunting knowledge and practices

KEY LESSONS

Non-extractive research requires:

- Researchers to be humble and open to alternative ways of knowing
- Mutual trust, which is only possible in long-term partnerships
- Active and continuous participation of communities in the research, including co-designing study methods, joint data collection and analysis

Researchers at Lund University coll

WHAT is the initiative?

Researchers at Lund University collaborate with indigenous hunters in the Colombian Amazon to revitalise their knowledges and practices.

WHY was it initiated?

Indigenous communities are the rightful owners of large areas of Amazonian forest ecosystems. But the traditional knowledges and practices that protect these forests are rapidly disappearing.

HOW does it work?

Innovative methods are used to keep indigenous knowledge alive, including participatory mapping and collective archiving (see picture). The indigenous communities are also actively involved in the research process as co-investigators, local research coordinators and workshop organisers.

Photo: Torsten Krause



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Empowering agroecological visions through participatory art

KEY LESSONS

- Participatory art can be a powerful means to express visions, especially for those who are illiterate.
- Using art as a method can help to develop non-hierarchical relationships between researchers and local communities

WHAT is the initiative?

Emma Johansson at Lund University uses visual art as a research method to empower agroecological farmers' visions on sustainable futures in Tanzania.

WHY was it initiated?

Agroecology is a traditional farming practice that is centered around a synergetic relationship between people and nature. But as agricultural modernisation is expanding in Tanzania, agroecological visions and practices are at risk of disappearing.

HOW does it work?

Emma aims at empowering agroecological farming communities through participatory visual art, in which communities can express their visions of sustainable futures. She uses a combination of painting and participatory scenarios. The paintings are used as a starting point for discussions between different stakeholders about agricultural futures in Tanzania.

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Photo: Emma Johansson

The Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA)



KEY LESSONS

- By weaving together alternatives, researchers can contribute to supporting local communities and movements in their alternatives
- Actively working with communities and movements can open-up new imaginations and research on alternatives to our current unsustainable development from the various grassroots initiatives can be shared more widely

WHAT is the initiative?

The <u>GTA</u> is a process weaving 'alternatives', collectives, social movements and intiatives that challenge and replace dominant systems that reproduce inequality, exploitation and unsustainability at local, regional and global levels.

WHY was it initiated?

The ecological crisis and deepening inequalities require a radical rethinking of the dominant regime. There is a range of radical alternatives emerging, but they often remain disconnected. GTA seeks to create spaces for collaboration and exchange to build a critical mass of alternative ways which can support the conditions for the radical systemic changes we need.

HOW does it work?

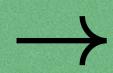
The GTA is an attempt to connect these alternatives, create solidarity and strategic alliances between networks, movements and initiatives. It is an autonomous and decentralised network, with a number of 'weavers' who actively commit and participate. Various events and gatherings are organised, such as an Assembly where different movements and communities come together.

Photo: Vasna Ramasar

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What if the university imagined radically alternative futures?



As the planet becomes more inhabitable, it has become difficult to imagine what a sustainable and just future could look like. Through their scientific knowledge on technological, social and cultural change, universities have a unique capacity to explore alternative futures. How could universities mobilise their knowledge to imagine new pathways towards a better future?

Envisioning multispecies futures

KEY LESSONS

- Providing both actual and virtual environments for experiencing nature can enhance human understanding of other species' needs
- Applying creative methods to foster awareness of the need for multispecies transitions is a promising direction for future research

WHAT is the initiative?

MUST is a transdisciplinary research project in which researchers collaborate with ministries, businesses, cities, regions, companies and local communities to envision multi-species transitions.

WHY was it initiated?

Ecosystems worldwide are declining. An underlying cause is our relationship with nature; viewing nature as a resource to benefit human wellbeing.

HOW does it work?

This project aims to understand and reimagine the relationship between humans and other species in an urban context. A wide range of events are organised, including sound walks, festivals, stakeholder dialogues and keynote speeches. The first MUST festival took place in June 2024 in Turku, Finland, with an immersive program to reimagine urban living through a multispecies lens.



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Photo: Christopher Raymond

The Outgrow the System documentary



KEY LESSONS

- Mapping emerging radical practices and ideas can help to create imaginaries of alternative economic systems
- By working with creative producers, researchers can help to democratise conversations about economy, ecology and democracy

WHAT is the initiative?

Outgrow the System (2023) is a documentary that explores what an alternative economic system might look like by celebrating emerging examples of radical ideas and practices worldwide.

WHY was it initiated?

"Change the system, not the climate" is a commonly heard phrase, but what does that look like in practice? While alternatives to our current economic system are emerging all over the world, they remain dispersed and disconnected. This documentary aims at capturing these alternative ideas, perspectives and practices that have the potential to change the world.

HOW does it work?

The documentary is directed by Cecilia Paulsson and Anders Nilsson and is based on the 'Scenario 2030', a research project led by researcher Julia Fries. The documentary features radical ideas and practices that reimagine the economic system worldwide, such as doughnut economics, economic democracy and degrowth. This way, the documentary explores how we could support new economic structures to emerge. It has had more than 90 screenings in over 20 countries.

Photo: Cecilia Paulsson

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Drama Labs



WHAT is the initiative?

<u>Drama Labs</u> is a new model of Urban Living Labs which uses theatre-based methods for engaging with conflicts and tensions in urban transformations.

WHY was it initiated?

Urban Living Labs are increasing in popularity to experiment with practical solutions for sustainable cities. But they often fall short in accommodating diverse and conflicting interests.

HOW does it work?

Drama Labs aims to move beyond 'solutionism' and explores complexity and conflict through applied theatre. Researchers work together with theatre partners and city governments to respond to local challenges. Participants gain access to embodied forms of expression of emotions and stories that are often left untold. The method has been translated into toolkits for urban policymakers to better accommodate conflict in participatory processes.

KEY LESSONS

- Applied theatre can help accommodate emotions and conflicting perspectives in sustainability transformations
- Exploring tensions and conflicts can improve relations between city governments and citizens

Photo: Cecilie Sachs Olsen

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The Carbon Ruins exhibition

KEY LESSONS

- Participatory world-building allows for new ways of knowing about the post-fossil transition and can activate hope
- Expertise on particular technologies or climate risks can contribute to the perceived credibility of speculative narratives



WHAT is the initiative?

Carbon Ruins is a 'museum of the future' that transports visitors into a future in which the post-fossil society has happened, initiated by researchers at Lund University.

WHY was it initiated?

As Amitav Ghosh argued, we live in a crisis of imagination. The Carbon Ruins exhibition aims at imagining the future afresh, exploring diverse tools to imagine the future.

HOW does it work?

Carbon Ruins – an Exhibition of the Fossil Era – was initiated by researchers at Lund University as part of the CLIMAGINARIES project, a threeyear collaboration between four universities. The museum of the future is set in 2053, in which the world has successfully transitioned towards a post-fossil society. It involves recognisable objects that have become obsolete in the transition, such as hamburgers and frequent flyer cards. The objects and stories are based on climate science and were generated in collaboration with diverse experts. The museum exists as a mobile exhibition, an online educational tool for schools and an audio exhibit.

Photo: Håkan Röjder

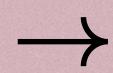
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D.

What if the university opened-up technocratic policymaking?



Environmental policymaking is often criticised for its rationalist, technocratic and managerial approach, favouring cost-effectiveness over equity and justice. What if universities opened-up policy debates, bringing in diverse perspectives on climate justice? And what does this mean for the role of academics?

The Climate and Transition Council

KEY LESSONS

- An interdisciplinary and independent science-based council can be powerful to bring in marginalised perspectives into climate policymaking
- There is a trade-off between speaking with one voice and diversity of perspectives

WHAT is the initiative?

Researchers across Danish universities formed an independent, voluntary and self-organised <u>climate council</u> focused on contributing to Danish debates about the green transition from an interdisciplinary, global and justice-based perspective.

WHY was it initiated?

Climate policymaking tends to be technocratic, overlooking questions of justice at local to global levels. The aim of the Climate and Transition Council (KOR) is to supplement existing science-based voices in the Danish climate policy debate by putting climate justice at the core.

HOW does it work?

The council exists of a small team of Danish researchers across the social, technical and natural sciences and humanities. They pluralise perspectives on climate justice by publishing various reports and news articles and organising events. Their reports and analyses have been taken up by parliamentary politicians, civil society organizations, public authorities as well as private companies.

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Photo: Jens Friis Lund



The Just Transformations project

KEY LESSONS

- When working with vulnerable communities, researchers need to be aware that their research is always affecting the community
- Arts-based methods can help to make sense of complex concepts like transformation and justice



WHAT is the initiative?

Just Transformations was a research project at Linköping University to better understand how the fossil free transition could be made more inclusive and just.

WHY was it initiated?

Local communities that are historically heavily dependent on the fossil industry are negatively affected by the climate transition. Their voices often remain left unheard in climate policy.

HOW does it work?

The research aimed at opening-up perspectives on just transformations by studying three case studies of Swedish cities, which are dependent on the fossil fuel industry for local employment. Apart from traditional social science research including interviews and focus groups, the researchers experimented with arts-based methods such as photography, music videos and textile art. The art-works and research outputs were shown in an exhibition, where policymakers were also invited to widen their understanding of justice perspectives in transformations.

Photo: Veronica Brodén Gyberg

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The Just Transitions Graduate School

KEY LESSONS

- In knowledge co-production, more actors is not necessarily better; it is about creating and finding appropriate instruments for cross-sectoral learning
- Engaging with changes of and through policy requires perseverance and adaptivity

just» transitions

WHAT is the initiative?

The Just Transitions Graduate School at Linköping University brings together policymakers, PhD students and researchers to explore climate justice in a urban and regional context.

WHY was it initiated?

Public sector organisations are locked into rationalistic and technocratic policymaking on climate change, with little connection to social policy and climate justice. The graduate school aims at enhancing knowledge on just transitions and reinventing the knowledge base informing climate policy.

HOW does it work?

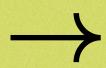
The graduate school involves seven PhD candidates from a wide range of disciplines who are all partnered with a public agency. The PhDs aim to intervene in their particular urban context by experimenting with alternative learning spaces connecting science, policy and society. The graduate school also organises a set of courses, in which policymakers, researchers and PhD candidates learn with and from each other about just transitions. Through these interventions, the graduate school hopes to change governance structures.

MORE INFO

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E.

What if the university brought art, academia and activism together?



It is at the intersection of art, academia and activism that new ways of knowing and relating to the ecological crisis emerge. But universities offer little space for encounter and limited support for those working at this intersection, such as artist-researchers and scholar-activists. What if the university was a meeting place where art, academia and activism could come together?

POLLEN

KEY LESSONS

- By blurring boundaries between art/academia/activism, new understandings, ideas and networks can emerge
- Working on the intersection of art, academia and activism is often misaligned with expectations and responsibilities within academia



WHAT is the initiative?

POLLEN (Political Ecology Network) is a network with a biannual conference for political ecologists that aims at spurring cross-fertilisation between academia/activism/art and Global North/South.

WHY was it initiated?

Political ecology is not only confined by a research agenda and analytical approach, but also the knowledges and perspectives of social movements. The network therefore aims to facilitate interactions between political ecological research, other academic fields and civil society.

HOW does it work?

The bi-annual conference brings together those who work at the intersection of academia, art and activism around diverse topics related to socioecological justice. At POLLEN24, keynotes were not only provided by academics but also Indigenous activists (see picture). The programme also involved an exhibition of artsbased research and the conference was held simultaneously at three locations to improve inclusivity.

Photo: Lisette van Beek

MORE INFO

pollen2024.com politicalecologynetwork.org

Puistokatu 4, Helsinki



KEY LESSONS

- Putting diverse actors together in the same building can result in new ways of thinking and collaborations
- Commitment of members, house rules and a shared vision are critical to create a sense of community and stimulate collaborations

WHAT is the initiative?

Puistokatu 4, a Space for Science and Hope, is a co-working space in Helsinki that brings together researchers, entrepreneurs, artists and activists to generate change in the ecological crisis.

WHY was it initiated?

Discussions on sustainability tend to be held in silos within corporations, public policy, universities, activist or artist communities. While not a university initiative, Puistokatu 4 shows how to bring these perspectives together, inspire hope and stimulate new collaborations.

HOW does it work?

Puistokatu 4 was set up by two foundations who share the same vision; reimagining the good life within planetary boundaries. The co-working space opened its doors in 2022 and consists of three floors: an extended living room with a restaurant and library, a floor for 'agents' (activists, artists and entrepreneurs) and a 'science attic' hosting about 40 researchers from over 30 disciplines. The founders actively promote interaction by organising seminars, social events like yoga and book clubs and facilitating meetings between researchers and external actors. It has stimulated various new projects and collaborations, such as a biodiversity course for CEOs.

Photo: Joel Haapamäki

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The Anthropocene Laboratory



KEY LESSONS

- Bringing together artists and academics from a wide range of disciplines can result in new perspectives on possible futures
- Keeping the right balance
 between an experimental and
 emergent process and ensuring high quality research can
 be challenging

MORE INFO

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WHAT is the initiative?

The Anthropocene Laboratory is an interdisciplinary research programme that aims to develop scientific understanding and synthesis of the Anthropocene biosphere, by working across the sciences and the humanities, engage with actors outside of academia to stimulate change, and help foster a new generation of transdisciplinary sustainability scientists.

WHY was it initiated?

Anthropogenic pressures are drastically changing the Earth's biosphere. This urges the imagining of alternative pathways, in which our relationship with the planet is revitalised. It is time to mobilise and provide new insights through collaborative learning, offering guidance on how to redirect societal development towards a sustainable future.

HOW does it work?

The small team of the Anthropocene Laboratory creates meeting spaces and organises events for academics, artists and societal actors to explore sustainable futures, generate hope, and support biosphere stewardship. The programme also involves two research projects:

- The Intertwined Biosphere: reimagining how to research how life coevolves on the planet
- 2. The Empirics of Hope: collecting empirics to support knowledge and action for restoring human-nature relationships.

Photo: NicoElNino

Læderstræde 20, Copenhagen

KEY LESSONS

- By sharing the same building, NGOs and academics can experiment with new ways to stimulate public dialogues on sustainable futures
- OSOS, think tanks, and researchers often work with different timeframes, which is a challenge that requires attention in collaborations.









plastic change

WHAT is the initiative?

Læderstræde 20 in Copenhagen houses think tanks, NGOs, and a University of Copenhagen research center committed to developing a platform on sustainable and just futures.

WHY was it initiated?

Universities, think tanks and NGOs tend to engage with politics in very different ways, but their complementary knowledge and experience can benefit each other to generate positive change.

HOW does it work?

Læderstræde 20 is a joint initiative, supported by the Villum Foundation, VELUX Foundation, VKRF, and KR Foundation, to create a green office community with a shared vision to strengthen the dialogue on sustainability transformations. It hosts NGOs, think tanks, and a humanities research center for applied ecological thinking - all committed to creating synergies for the green transition. NGOs benefit from the available academic and specialist knowledge, while academics learn about various ways to influence policymaking. Many public events include workshops, discussions, labs, and presentations of new research results.

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