

# Why Every Company Needs a Futurist-in-Residence

by Jennifer Lo



**RECENTLY, I STEPPED INTO** a futurist-in-residence role for a major tech company that was eager to infuse ‘futures thinking’ throughout an already innovative organization. This initiative, aimed at exploring what the next 10 to 15 years might bring, allowed me to leverage the full spectrum of a futurist’s tools as well as those of an organizational designer—simultaneously exploring their design question while teaching and integrating foresight capabilities.

Being a futurist means spotting signals that may only be whispers today but could become profound shifts tomorrow—shifts that companies will have to be prepared to navigate. When playing this role, my IDEO colleagues and I use a mix of facilitative, creative and analytical tools that not only identify emerging patterns, but also embed foresight into the organization itself, helping shape the culture to be more forward-facing. Following are some of the tools we use.

**1. IDENTIFYING AND TRACKING SIGNALS OF CHANGE.** This is the primary activity of any foresight work and is focused on spotting glimpses of the future that exist in the world today. A signal might be a new idea, behaviour, technology, social context or business model that may seem insignificant now, but if it scales, could redefine industries or the world at large. Recent examples I uncovered for clients include everything from the resurgence of ‘dumb’ phones to the emergence of four-day work weeks to big tech’s greenhouse gas emissions

surges fueled by the expansion of AI. Grasping these subtle shifts enables teams to broaden their perspectives and think beyond what is currently happening.

**2. MAPPING DRIVERS OF CHANGE.** Tracking and mapping broader trends and underlying drivers of change — like the climate crisis or the rapid rise of large language models (LLMs) — gives further context to signals and reveals potential structural shifts influencing social, technical, environmental, economic and political systems—ultimately shaping how organizations adapt, innovate and respond to emerging opportunities and risks in the future. Understanding the why behind these changes allows teams to build flexible strategies grounded in a deep awareness of external forces.

**3. CONSIDERING DIFFERENT FUTURES.** Imagining a range of possible futures challenges teams to consider different potential outcomes and to design tangible steps the company can take to either grab opportunity or avoid risk. Although it’s important to imagine ideal or preferred future scenarios to create a transformative vision for the future, it is just as critical to explore potential futures with extreme uncertainty or disruption to stress-test ideas. Imagining ‘what if’ scenarios like ‘What if AI became the standard for all customer service?’ or ‘What if customers demand ownership of their data?’ stretches a team’s thinking to identify resilience strategies and become more nimble.

## Designers who go after ‘used futures’ are at risk of building yesterday’s dreams without realizing they’re already stale.

**4. PREPARING FOR DISRUPTION.** Identifying and interpreting emerging paradigms helps organizations to anticipate market or strategic shifts before they disrupt, making it possible to proactively invest in nascent opportunities or manage the decline of legacy approaches or systems. It minimizes risks associated with abrupt change and encourages continuous innovation, ensuring the organization remains competitive and able to seize new growth opportunities as they arise. It’s all about building confidence in making strategic choices.

**5. CREATING ARTIFACTS FROM THE FUTURE.** A future news headline, a mock product or an immersive experience can make abstract concepts concrete, spark discussion and inspire strategic actions that could be aligned with longer-term goals. Sometimes the most powerful stories or artifacts of the future are those that are the most mundane, like a job description or a transportation ticket set 15 to 20 years into the future. These visions bring the future to life and enable teams to embed future-thinking into strategic choice making.

### The ‘Used Future’ Trap

To build bold, forward-looking futures, we must look backward—not to recreate the past, but to navigate the future with intention. History provides more than context; it offers structure for creativity, a stress test for credibility and a mirror through which we anticipate consequences. When we weave these insights into our foresight practice and design efforts, we can imagine futures that are rigorous, plausible and transformational, drawing on the past to shape scenarios that inspire action and meaningful change. Years from now, when futurists look back on today, they will be reading the signals we left behind.

Personally, I’ve been waiting for a housekeeper-robot since I was a kid. Growing up with a Jetsonian vision of push-button dinners and automated cleaning, I imagined coming home to a house managed by a trusty humanoid helper. In hindsight, that glimpse of the future wasn’t a bold vision of what could be in 2040; it was a 1960s dream.

In our pursuit of future-forward thinking, we often find ourselves recycling outdated paradigms. This phenomenon, known as the ‘used future,’ refers to the adoption of established ideas and models without critical examination

of their current relevance or efficacy. First introduced by **Sohail Inayatullah**, a pioneer and leading voice in the field of futures studies, used futures are ideas about the future that we inherit without criticism, ideas that resonated in the past but are no longer fit for our emerging realities.

The image of a humanoid robot tidying the home is just that: a nostalgic picture of tomorrow that distracts us from the more systemic innovations we need today. Given our current context, we should look more at redesigning entire systems for living, rather than just one-off gadgets for individual efficiency.

As a futurist, I am fascinated with the concept of the used future. Many leaders and organizations I work with unintentionally operate on autopilot, constantly recycling old beliefs and assumptions about what people want, what ‘good’ or ‘better’ looks like or what technology should enable. Even futurists unthinkingly adopt concepts developed in different contexts and timelines, leading to solutions that are inappropriate or even detrimental to current needs. Designers who go after ‘used futures’ are at risk of building yesterday’s dreams without realizing they’re already stale. This is evident in many of the ‘redesigned’ systems we see in today’s world:

- Urban planning that continues to favour car-centric infrastructure despite growing awareness of the benefits of pedestrian-friendly and sustainable transportation.
- Educational systems that still mirror the industrial revolution’s factory model, emphasizing standardization and conformity over creativity and critical thinking.
- Healthcare that focuses on acute, episodic care, neglecting holistic, preventative and community-based wellness and public health approaches.

Each of these systems carries the DNA of an older, ‘used’ future that doesn’t fit the reality we’re living in or the expectations we have for the future. Most attempts to redesign or evolve these systems and so many others are myopic and incremental at best—more akin to remixing previous fixes than driving paradigmatic change.

## You don't need a time machine to imagine what could be; you simply need a prototype.

It's an easy mindset to slip into. Over many years of doing futuring work with clients and graduate students, I've returned to the same exercise. I ask them to close their eyes and imagine the year 2040. Almost invariably, their minds leap to the familiar—flying cars, corporate dystopias and neon-lit cityscapes of sometimes decades-old popular culture. The futures they could imagine are limited by inherited visions of what could be.

To break that loop, I've started changing the prompt. Instead of 'What does 2040 look like?' I ask, 'What does your birthday in 2040 feel like?' Suddenly, the answers are different. They talk about who they hope would be there, where they would be and what they would be doing. The future becomes grounded in something personal, emotional, and ultimately, human. That's where real futures thinking begins. The key is to notice when you are repeating someone else's vision of tomorrow and get curious enough to imagine your own.

How, exactly, can you sidestep the used future? Here are five techniques that are helpful:

### 1. Identify Emerging Signals

Looking past today's dominant narratives means tuning into faint signals of the future, early indicators of change that hint at what might be plausible tomorrow. These signals are not trends yet; they're provocations, cultural artifacts, early-stage experiments or subcultures operating at the edge.

Consider IDEO's Future of Automobility project from 2015. Introduced long before autonomous vehicles hit city streets, this work mapped a world where vehicles were shared, adaptive and integrated into a broader urban ecosystem. It didn't ask, 'How do we make cars better?' It asked, 'What happens when we stop designing around car ownership?' By interpreting early shifts in technology, social behaviour and city planning, the team envisioned new mobility platforms that anticipated today's transformations in transportation infrastructure. Witnessing the most recent 'carriage-style' entries into the autonomous market in the Bay Area, it's impossible to miss the similarities between what IDEO imagined mobility could be and where it is today. To avoid the trap of the used future, we need to

be less obsessed with forecasting with certainty of what will happen and far more courageous in noticing signals for what is possible, no matter how speculative it feels.

### 2. Question the Framing

Used futures often sneak in through the front door, via projects that frame the problem to be solved using assumptions, categories or language that come from the past. That's why it's critical to ask: Is this work going after incremental improvement or transformational reimagining? 'Better-than-today' efforts may optimize the status quo, but 'future of' briefs open the door to strategic reinvention.

IDEO's collaboration with **Conservation International** initially focused on protecting biodiversity hotspots. Through reframing, the team moved from traditional conservation messaging toward building a new cultural paradigm: helping people recognize nature as a source of emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. This new context led them to think of *nature* as their client, shifting the way conservation is valued and communicated in human-centred terms. It was a significant reorientation of purpose rather than just a new message.

### 3. Prototype Tangible Futures

It's hard to unlearn the futures we've inherited unless we see, touch or experience alternatives. Prototyping tangible futures helps us push beyond habitual thinking and brings speculative ideas into experiential form. This might mean creating speculative artifacts like newspapers from the future, designing future rituals like a daily huddle with your AI agent, or simulating entirely new systems.

At IDEO, teams often use tangible futures techniques to prototype new products, services and new ways of behaving. When teams work on 'future of health' projects, prototypes might include a mock clinic that embodies an alternative care model, a future policy pamphlet or the interior of an autonomous ambulance. These prototypes for interactions are tools for stress-testing assumptions and unlocking insights, creating momentum that stakeholders can react, iterate and imagine together. You don't need a time machine to imagine what could be; you simply need a prototype.



## By telling stories about a preferred future where people thrive, we can build the collective resolve to make them real.

### 4. Create Human Narratives

Too many future visions centre on technology, markets or efficiency and miss the beating heart of change: human lives. Human-centred narratives illuminate the values, desires, tensions and trade-offs that define meaningful futures. They help us imagine what the future brings as well as what it will feel like to live in it.

In several IDEO projects that reimagined the future of aging, teams resisted the common narrative of decline and dependency. Instead, they co-created stories with older adults that ranged from reimagining retirement as an opportunity to engage in lifelong purpose to redesigning death to helping the elderly live with intention, right up to the end. These future narratives inspired new product and service ideas and reshaped social attitudes and policy conversations. Narrative is a strategic tool. By telling stories about a preferred future where people thrive in just, inclusive and life-affirming ways, we can build the collective resolve to make them real.

### 5. Design Nascent Paradigms

Sometimes it's not enough to design for a new future; we also have to design the conditions and new thinking that make shaping nascent paradigms possible, reorienting how we define progress, value and success

In our Beyond the Bag Challenge, IDEO worked with start-ups and major retailers to help define what it means to design solutions that restore and renew natural systems rather than deplete them. The collaboration led to a range of alternatives to single-use plastic bags, including biodegradable options and systems for recirculating bags. Within months, several prototypes were launched in major retailers and key markets.

Avoiding the used future in design means embracing techniques that encourage not just imagining transformative futures, but also those that help us surface and question possible outdated visions, as well. If we don't notice the used future, we risk creating innovation theatre, polishing legacy ideas instead of surfacing the truly new needs, emotions and possibilities. By consciously moving beyond old visions of what is possible, we open ourselves to a broader spectrum of possibilities, enabling designs that are not only innovative but also deeply attuned to the evolving context of our world.

### In closing

In today's volatile and complex world, companies need futurists not just as advisors, but as strategic enablers who build futures literacy across an organization. Investing in the future means investing in the people who can help organizations see a wide array of futures clearly and act on uncertainty with confidence—helping turn that uncertainty into strategic possibility. **RM**

---

**Jennifer Lo** is Senior Director of Design Futures at IDEO and a Lecturer at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health.