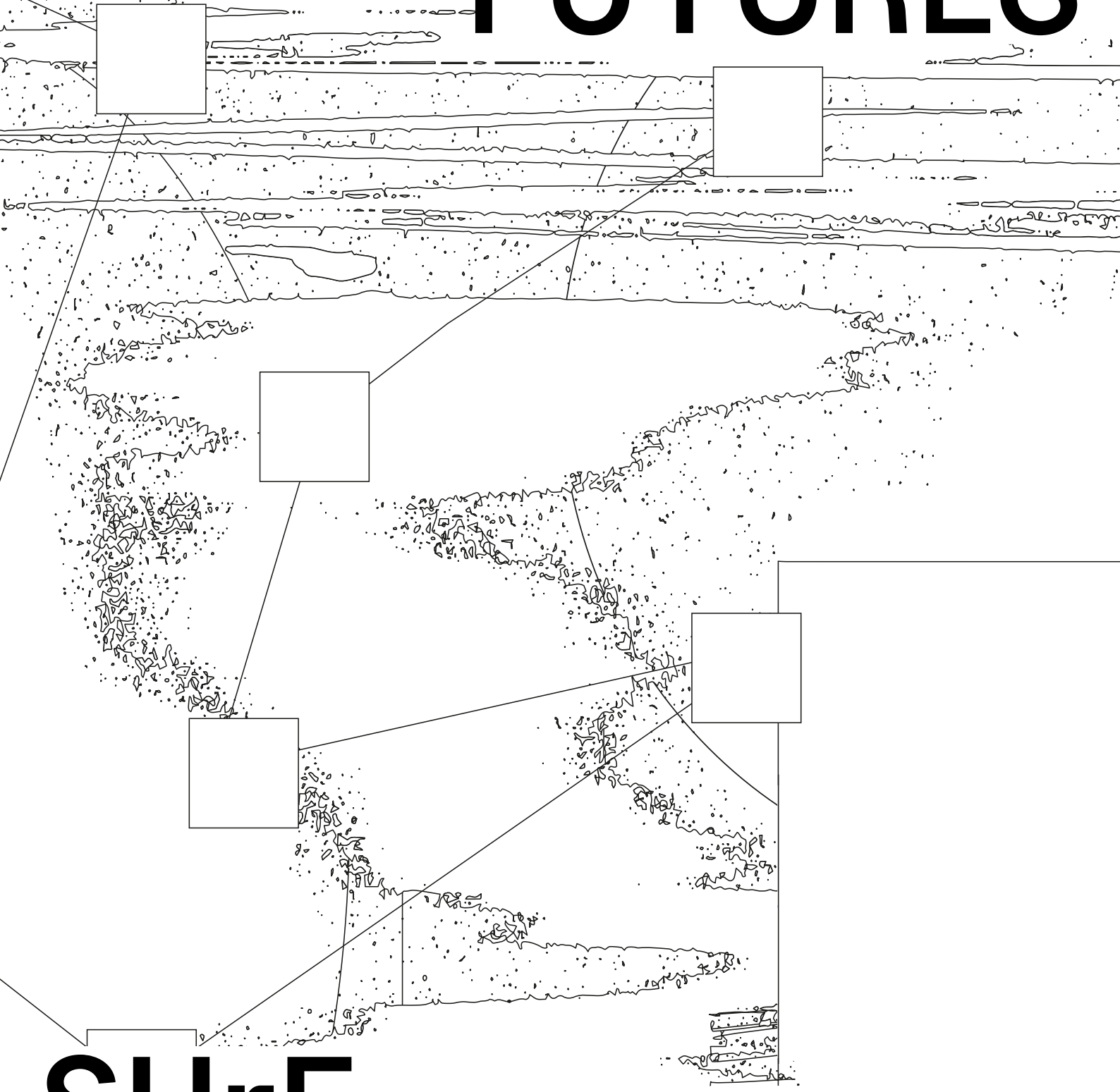
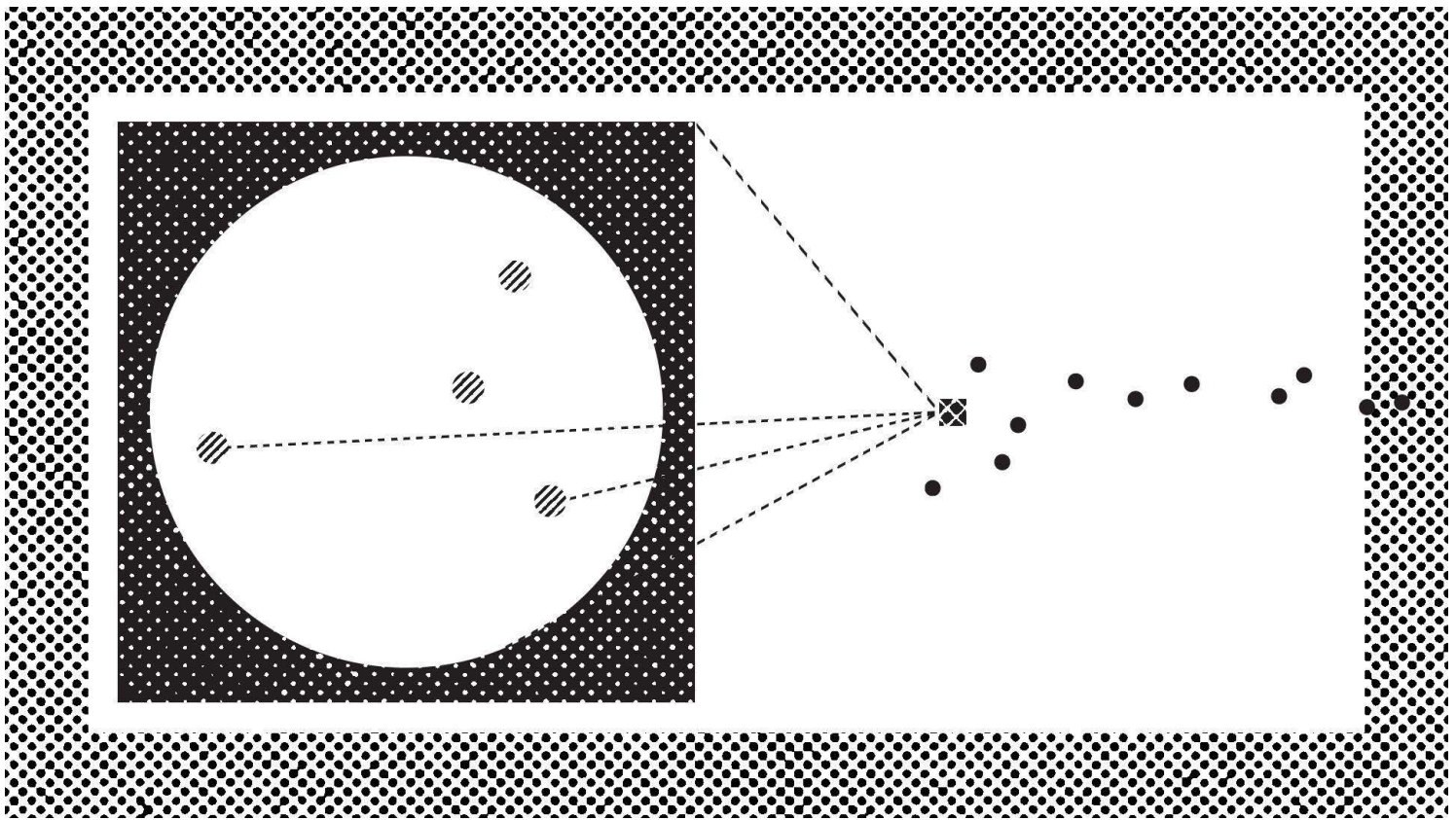


# COMMUNITIES AND FUTURES



**SURF** [Pilot package]



## DESIGN BRIEF

Even when systems fail, life goes on. The Communities and Futures approach, developed as the “Mediterranean Speculative Approach,” addresses future implications of major global shifts (technological, economic, political, and environmental) in local contexts through speculative and futures-oriented design practice. Within this methodology, it is important to engage the local community through a whole range of possible future scenarios. Community members participate not merely as “consultants” but as active collaborators throughout various stages of the design process, contributing visions, scenarios, design concepts, and feedback at multiple levels of engagement.

The methodology is based on a traditional design process, beginning with introductory lectures about the approach, followed by (1) research on a specific theme and development of a (2) future background story as a speculative narrative context for community responses, communicated through (3) designed outcomes, presented to the wider public and (4) evaluated in the present/real world. This process is shaken and stirred by a series of tensions, identified during the SpeculativeEdu project, which can open paths for critical reflection that leads to informed experimentation, better conceptualization, deployment, and evaluation of not only designs, but the debates that surround them.

Given the different time scales and scopes in which these projects may unfold, ranging from a three-day workshop to a full-term project, certain compromises are unavoidable. Communities (of different types and scales) may therefore be involved in different capacities. In longer, more sustained projects, the local community should be involved as an equal partner. In shorter projects, when direct collaboration may be limited, communities should not be treated merely as abstract examples of case studies from which responses to new conditions are extrapolated. Instead, they should also be regarded as experts and evaluators, whose perspectives meaningfully inform the work.

Multidisciplinary workshops have proven particularly generative for this practice. They use critical and speculative design as a shared platform for dialogue and collaboration among participants from varied academic backgrounds and introduce alternative educational models that move beyond slow and constrained curriculum-based academic programs. The approach is particularly suited to Master’s-level students who bring specific skills in collaboration and group dynamics from their previous education. At a time when many young people are finding themselves increasingly unable to conceive of a future, let alone a preferable one, the workshops aim to cultivate their social imagination: their collective capacity to think otherwise. Individual Master’s-level projects, by contrast, have shown particular promise for open-ended explorations in which students assemble their own tailored set of methods, techniques, and tools, specific to the needs of each project.

## DURATION

- Master’s level thesis (individual)
- One semester-length project (Master’s level)
- Workshop (3-5 days) (Master’s students, multidisciplinary teams/groups)

## LEVEL OF STUDENT

Master’s students and above, and early-career practitioners.

This approach is best understood as an attitude or position, rather than a rigidly defined methodology. Nevertheless, certain characteristics define its basic framework. It interacts continuously with related practices, fields, and disciplines, drawing on methods, tools, and approaches that are accessible and appropriate in a given moment. These may include fictional narratives, film language, screenplays, storyboards, user testing, interviews and questionnaires, games, or media and pop culture formats such as candid camera setups, elevator pitches, observational comedy, or stand-up.

## OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTATIONS

- 1 Definition of the theme, followed by a broad mapping of related systems and stakeholders.
- 2 Addressing detected tensions through the creation of speculative (near-) future scenarios.
- 3 The design of things towards (and in) those futures.
- 4 Collaboration across different disciplines.
- 5 Participation of local communities, people, and associations.
- 6 Exploration of global trends through their local implications
- 7 Facilitation and transfer of designers' methods, tools, and techniques within local contexts.

## DELIVERABLES

- 1 One narrative Background Story (up to 300 words) related to the research theme.
- 2 One+ narrative Scenario (up to 600 words) that illustrates how people live in those futures.
- 3 One+ Design Concept emerging from those Scenarios (illustration, text, diagram, plot...)
- 4 One+ communication artefacts (objects, videos, illustrations, diagrams...)
- 5 Evaluation of the project in the local context and reflections on the present. A short project summary and 3–5 images.

## REFERENCE PROJECT

*The Last Mediterranean Skipper* (Ivica Mitrović and Oleg Šuran, 2018) uses a speculative design approach to address the automation of work and labor in the Mediterranean and Southeast European context. In the near future, automation is expected to result in fully autonomous cruising sailboats, fundamentally challenging all related professions. The project tells the story of “the last skipper”—once a romantic and highly valued occupation—brought to extinction by automated sailing systems.

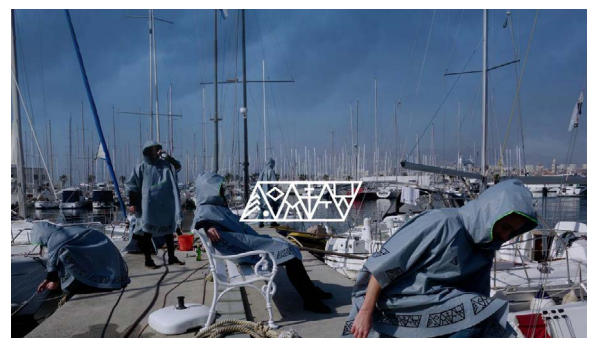
The scenario speculates that by 2035 all commercial sailboats will be fully automated, leading to the disappearance of the skipper profession in the Mediterranean. As a result, former skippers turn to jobs in ports such as sailboat maintenance, management, and tourism operations. Guests sail on fully automated boats, following pre-programmed routes. The project presents surveillance footage from the sailboat of the last Mediterranean skipper, who attempts to hold on to the identity and romance of the profession.

The project confronts scientific rationality with social perceptions of the skipper occupation. It is presented as an ethnographic collection (from the future), combining interviews with automation scientists and long-time skippers, speculative surveillance footage, and artefacts from the present, including non-automated boat models and archival, private-collection photographs of skippers with their guests. The project achieved broad visibility in local and national media and sparked extensive discussion within the local community (scientists, skippers, and designers). It can be understood as a starting point for building community resilience in response to the global phenomenon of automation.

*The Future Is Unwritten* (Alejandra Robles Sosa, 2019) is a Master's-level project that explores textile materials and clothing as time-travel analogues—messages from the past that carry personal worldviews, as well as political and geographical contexts. Local makers and craftspeople from the city of Split were invited to reinterpret skills rooted in historical practices and project them into a future technological context. A sailmaker, a seamstress, and a crochet craftsperson were invited to make a suit resistant to the Mediterranean winds “jugo” and “bura” using locally sourced materials. Reused sailcloth donated by a local sailmaker, for instance, was transformed into a raincoat. These textile “messages” are imagined as travelling through time to future inhabitants of Split, encoded through handmade data and patterns informed by local and global cultural references. The project's meanings—its message, process, and materials—can be decoded through an accompanying glossary.



*The Last Mediterranean Skipper* (Ivica Mitrović and Oleg Šuran, 2018)



*The Future Is Unwritten* (Alejandra Robles Sosa, 2019)

## KEY STAGES

Phase 1 [20% project duration]	Phase 2 [20% project duration]	Phase 3 [50% project duration]	Phase 4 [10% project duration]
Theme: Gathering data to lay down firm grounds for the project, imagining what might happen in the near future ("what if").	1 Setting the stage / Background story: "What happened in the world" and detecting tensions that help to "stay with the trouble" in the process. 2 Community response / Scenario: Local response to the "new normal".	1 Design concept: Specific stories as case studies, designing for future tensions. 2 Communication: How to tell these stories to others – what are the takeaways?	1 Reactions/ evaluations/actions: What do others think about these futures / how can we prepare for the future?

## DETAILED SCHEDULE

### PHASE 1

This step consists of an inquiry into the selected theme in order to establish the foundations of the research and the project.

The project theme may be predefined by the workshop leader or it may be selected by the student. The scope can vary—from broad themes (e.g., tourism and climate change) to more focused ones (e.g., tourism and climate change → urban/public transport).

The theme should be situated within the future implications of major global shifts (technological, economic, political, and environmental), with a particular focus on the periphery, away from dominant urban and technological centers. Workshop leader should discuss proposed themes both in the local context (What was? What is? What are the plans for the future?) and in the participants' own lived contexts and experiences. Participants should map the theme broadly, drawing on pop culture, design, architecture, art, and other relevant references.

### PHASE 2

#### 1 Setting the stage / Background story

This step focuses on discussing and imagining what happened in the near-future world of the project, how this world is changing, what is the main focus of change, what is the "new normal," and what are the local community responses/reactions.

Participants write a future scenario based on the project THEME in the form of a BACKGROUND STORY. They speculate about probable (expected and projected) near-futures in their local context, looking approximately 20-30 years ahead. The local context is the place of focus—the participants' neighborhood, town, or region—where they understand how people live and how global changes might manifest in everyday life. Participants are asked to anticipate possible or forthcoming crises and their implications at the scale of the city, neighbourhood or quartier.

The background story may take the form of a short written narrative (approximately 150-300 words), optionally accompanied by a storyboard, diagram/map, or animation. Participants present 2-3 possible local futures for group discussion and select one to develop further.

Questions the background story should answer:

- Where (location, global → national → regional → local)?
- When (time frame or horizon)?
- What happened (events, transformations)?

Participants use the tensions framework to expand and challenge early thoughts and findings, helping to sharpen the theme. Although tensions are introduced at this stage, they should be revisited throughout the entire process, as indicators of emerging issues, contradictions, and opportunities.

Reference: <https://speculativeedu.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Beyond-Speculative-Design.pdf> (Chapter 4)

#### 2 Community response / Scenario:

The next task is to focus on understanding local community response/reactions to the developed near-future context.

Participants find, locate, and map present bottom-up groups and communities (NGOs, activist initiatives, networks of individuals or experts... ) that demonstrate forms of resilience in relation to both current crises (identified in the THEME) and possible future scenarios (developed in the BACKGROUND STORY). These are referred to as "communities of resilience and action."

Participants consider how this community has responded, or would respond, to future crises. If such communities are not presently visible, the participants look for “weak signals” that might indicate how similar groups could emerge in the future, and imagine/speculate accordingly. It is a narrative, a SCENARIO (up to 600 words) that serves as the setting for the further development of the project.

### PHASE 3

#### 1 Design concept

Let’s design! This step focuses on designing and communicating future speculation(s).

Participants develop a design concept that emerges from, responds to, or is inspired by the community response SCENARIO. A design concept is the central idea – a future speculation – that articulates one key element of the community’s future. It may consist of sketches, mood boards, storyboards, images, and written descriptions that define the direction of the design. It functions as a case study of a local future.

At this stage, the focus shifts to the concrete elements of everyday life in the future. What could be learned from this community that might help build different, more resilient futures?

#### 2 Communication

The next task is to focus on how to deliver the story to others – how to embody the concept, communicate, and present it to the public.

Participants consider how they will communicate concepts or future speculation to the public, audience, or local community. The aim of this stage is to shift attention from the project or object’s internal logic towards how others might perceive, interpret, or react to the speculative outcomes.

Participants design and communicate the future speculation as a service, object/artefact, system, or strategy. They build a scenario and populate it with people, objects, services, and events. Whenever possible, it is important to test ideas with the community or groups that the scenario revolves around. It is also important to return to the core ideas and identified tensions, which should structure the communication as much as they shaped the concept.

### PHASE 4

This step asks what the public and the local community think about the futures that were created and how these projects can help us prepare for those futures. It considers the outcomes of the project: what we learned, how the work resonates beyond the project, and what participants take away from the process.

In longer or more extensive projects, this stage focuses on identifying real-world outcomes:

- What long-term impact could the project have?
- How might it contribute to building community resilience or creating pathways toward more just and preferable futures?
- How did it facilitate the transfer of methods, tools, and techniques from designers to the community?
- Can it generate change—from small, local shifts to broader transformative effects?

In shorter educational projects, the emphasis is on reflection:

- How did the process deepen understanding of speculative practice?
- What did it reveal about current systems, structures, and everyday realities?

A well-rounded project should include:

- clearly identified and well-articulated understanding of local communities and the crises they face and will face in the future,
- well-detected and relevant tensions,
- deep research grounded in the chosen theme,
- a well-written scenario that logically emerges from earlier phases,
- a presentation that communicates the project effectively,
- a public response substantial enough to inform further development—or, ideally, to spark real-world actions or community initiatives

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Mitrović, Ivica, Mia Roth-Čerina, and Tonči Čerina, eds. 2023. *Designing in Coexistence: Reflections on Systemic Change*. Croatian Architects’ Association.
- Mitrović, Ivica, James Auger, Julian Hanna, and Ingi Helgason, eds. 2021. *Beyond Speculative Design: Past-Present-Future*. Arts Academy, University of Split.
- Mitrović, Ivica, and Dora Vanette, eds. 2025. *Reclaiming Hope: Navigate (Un)Certainty, Imagine Better Futures*. The Centre for Creativity, Museum of Architecture and Design.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2017. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Suvin, Darko. 1979. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. Yale University Press.

### PROJECTS

- Homo Aquaticus*. Ivica Mitrović and Oleg Šuran <https://www.sameasiteverwas.hr/adriatic-melancholy-of-homo-aquaticus/>
- Life After Tourism*. Ivica Mitrović and Oleg Šuran <https://interakcije.net/en/2019/02/23/life-after-tourism/>
- Post Workers Theatre*. Dash Macdonald, Demitrios Kargotis, and Nicholas Mortimer <https://www.postworkerstheatre.com/>
- Dalmeatía*, Tina Listeš Arsur, Giulia Constanzo <https://surfutures.eu/pilots/community-resilience>
- “Mycellaneous” ways of living*. Diego José Valdivieso Benavente, Huajie Zhang, Nicolás Raigoso, Beini Mo, Malena Paz Del Zotto, and Carmen Framiñán Galán *Super Choque Studio*. Luiz Carlos De Souza Junior, David Hazan, Ye Li, Alessio De Nicolò, Mona Abolghasemi, and Nima Ahmadi
- Suinus Popolusque Romanus*. Denise Beretta, Noemi Capparelli, Matilde Cirafici, Francesca Curati, and Claudia Pezzini <https://www.sameasiteverwas.hr/community-resilience-as-a-hope-for-the-future-politecnico-di-milano/>