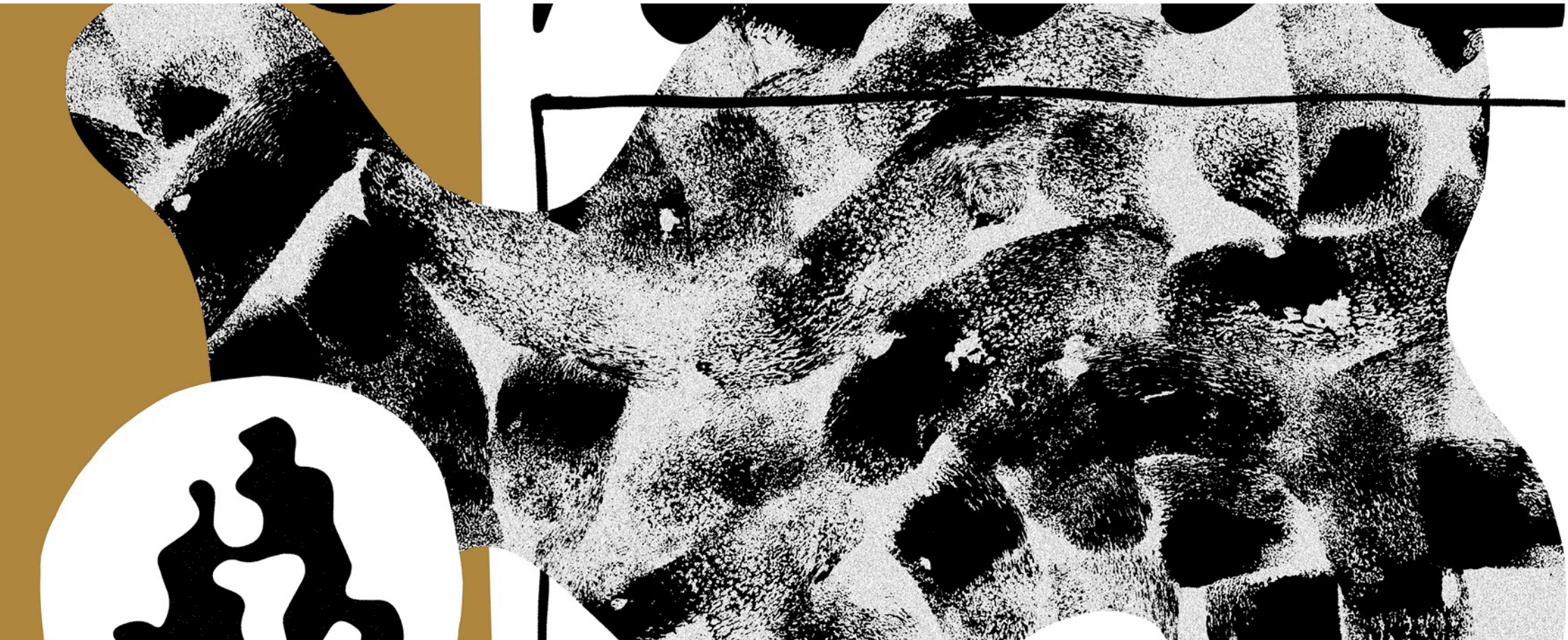


For Planning

On Imagination; The Refuge Word

August 2026 | By Moozhan Shakeri



Author: Moozhan Shakeri
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"Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last you create what you will."

— George Bernard Shaw

Executive Summary

The past two decades, imagination has become the watchword of urban planning and futures thinking. Crisis post-mortems diagnose failures of imagination, a growing ecosystem of programmes and funds promises to supply it, and the profession's flagship lectures call for its radical renewal. This report asks a question the discourse has not asked of itself: why this word, and not its nearest neighbour, creativity?

The distinction, I argue, comes down to accountability. Creativity, in its standard scientific definition, requires originality and effectiveness, judged by others; it can fail. Imagination carries no success condition; it cannot fail. Creativity's fall was partly warranted, as the creative-city era discredited it as a development strategy, while imagination's rise was partly a homecoming to a vocabulary planning had long been offered. But whatever the motive, the effect is that planning now adopts the ambitious rhetoric of creation while operating under the consequence-free parameters of imagination.

The report examines what this shift obscures. It argues that imagination is no natural equalizer but a faculty fed by knowledge, training, and resources, all unequally distributed; that visioning workshops reliably produce morale and consensus, but rarely concrete outcomes. The report closes with a call for an interdisciplinary reset. Cognitive science has spent decades studying how humans think about the future, and planning has yet to engage with them.

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1. Introduction

In 2009, when the Queen visited the London School of Economics and asked why nobody had seen the financial crisis coming, the British Academy assembled its economists and wrote her a letter, the failure "*was principally a failure of the collective imagination of many bright people.*"¹ In 2016, Amitav Ghosh gave the climate catastrophe the same diagnosis. The climate crisis, he wrote, "*is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination*"². Present-day failures are frequently attributed to a deficiency of imagination, while a reinvented, radical imagination is positioned as the primary antidote to future crises.

This report traces the aftermath of this paradox: how a critical diagnosis was turned into a bureaucratic product, one calling for "*routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination.*"³ In 2012 UNESCO began building a global programme to teach 'futures literacy'.⁴ In 2017 the city of Bologna opened a municipal Office of Civic Imagination.⁵ In 2019 Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Towns movement, published a book arguing that imagination should be "*fundamental to how our policy works,*" and later compiled a manifesto of policies proposed by a hundred guests

speaking as ministers of an imaginary Ministry of Imagination.⁶ In 2022 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation began directing tens of millions of pounds toward what it calls "*imagination infrastructure.*"⁷ The United Nations Development Programme now publishes a toolkit for "*Inclusive Imaginaries.*"⁸ Imagination has acquired offices, curricula, budget lines, job titles, and a manifesto from a ministry that does not exist.

In Britain, the watchword has lately reached the profession's own podium. The Royal Town Planning Institute reserves one evening a year for its most considered public statement, the Nathaniel Lichfield Lecture. In February 2025, Simin Davoudi told the assembled profession that a "*sclerosis of imagination*" had taken hold, borrowing David Harvey's phrase, and called for a return to utopian thinking enacted "*in the here and now.*"⁹ In April 2026 the lecture returned to the same ground, with Andy Inch pointing planners to the activist history of their own profession as a way of imagining radical alternative futures.¹⁰ Having dominated the discipline's primary public address for two consecutive years, this rhetoric can no longer be dismissed as a marginal trend. It marks the moment imagination took center stage in the field's self-definition.

The question here is not whether these programmes are sincere. Most of them are. Nor whether imagination matters; it clearly does. The question is why this word. Planning had another word available, an older one in the policy vocabulary, a word that had organised two decades of urban strategy: creativity. Yet almost nobody chose it. This uniform, unexamined preference deserves critical study. When a profession in crisis reaches, unanimously and without discussion, for one word over its nearest neighbour, the choice reveals what that profession wants, and what it seeks to avoid.

Notes

- 1 Tim Besley & Peter Hennessy, letter to HM The Queen on behalf of the British Academy, 22 July 2009: <https://www.ma.imperial.ac.uk/~bin06/M3A22/queen-lse.pdf>
- 2 Ghosh, A. (2018). *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*. Penguin UK.
- 3 Kean, T. H., & Hamilton, L. (2004). *The 9/11 commission report: Final report of the national commission on terrorist attacks upon the United States (Vol. 1)*. Government Printing Office.
- 4 Riel Miller (ed.), *Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century* (UNESCO/Routledge, 2018). Miller's interview with Climate-KIC: <https://www.climate-kic.org/news/interview-with-riel-miller/>
- 5 On Bologna's Ufficio Immaginazione Civica: "Civic Imagination Office as a platform to design a collaborative city," ServDes 2018, <https://ep.liu.se/ecp/150/053/ecp18150053.pdf>; participation figures from the office's own reporting, via resilience.org (2019), <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2019-03-07/bologna-the-city-with-a-civic-imagination-office/>

- 6 Rob Hopkins, *From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want* (Chelsea Green, 2019); the Ministry of Imagination Manifesto (2024), https://www.robhopkins.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Ministry-of-the-Imagination_compressed-1.pdf.
- 7 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, "Emerging Futures" programme and "imagination infrastructures," from 2022: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/imagination-infrastructures>
- 8 UNDP, *Inclusive Imaginaries: Catalysing Forward-looking Policy Making through Civic Imagination* (2022), <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/publications/inclusive-imaginaries-catalysing-forward-looking-policy-making-through-civic-imagination>
- 9 Simin Davoudi, 2025 RTPi Nathaniel Lichfield Lecture (6 February 2025, University of Westminster), summarised on the RTPi blog.
- 10 Andy Inch, 2026 RTPi Nathaniel Lichfield Lecture (16 April 2026, London), as described by the RTPi: drawing on the activist history of planning to imagine alternative futures. <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/events/nathaniel-lichfield-lecture-2026>

2. Imagination Discourses

It is tempting to speak of the imagination discourse as one thing. In reality, it comprises at least four distinct projects, each operating from a different institutional home with a different political agenda.

The Activist Imagination (Bottom-Up Resistance): Born within social movements during the austerity years, this is an explicitly anti-establishment force. Thinkers like Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish define it as a collective tool for communities to challenge current power structures and imagine life outside them. They define the radical imagination as "*the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be*"¹, and insist it is a collective process, not a private gift.

The Civic Imagination (Municipal Governance): This is the top-down adoption of the term by city hall. Here, local governments rebrand old public consultation into imagination departments, such as Bologna's Ufficio Immaginazione Civica, to run neighborhood workshops and manage public participation.

The Professional-Foresight Imagination (Expert Literacy): Housed in global agencies and think-tanks like UNESCO, this project rebrands failed predictive forecasting into '*futures literacy*.' It treats imagination as a professional competency, a strategic skill set acquired through expert-led workshops. Riel Miller, the architect of UNESCO's programme, states its premise plainly: "*The basic proposition is that the future can only be imaginary.*"²

The Philanthropic-Infrastructural Imagination (Funder-Backed Culture Change): The newest and wealthiest of the four, this operates through private grants, trusts (like Joseph Rowntree), and specialized consultancies. It embeds funded "*imagination activists*" directly into local council workforces to reshape organizational culture. Rowntree's 'imagination infrastructure,' for example, the practice collectives it supports, an organization called Moral Imaginations that ran an eight-week programme embedding "imagination activism" in a London borough's workforce, inviting council officers to imagine alongside future generations, and the more-than-human world.³

Four projects, four politics. Yet, they share a grammar. Each begins from the premise that the crisis is, at root, a poverty of imagination; too few visions of how things might be otherwise. Each proposes exercises that generate visions. And each treats the generating as itself a form of action, the workshop as intervention, the vision as deliverable. What none of the four contains is an account of either end of the act. Not the far end, the day after, in Žižek's sense⁴, the morning when an imagined future has to become budgets, land, procedures, and concrete. And not the near end, what imagining actually is, what happens, in the minds gathered around the flip-chart, when a room is asked to produce a future.

The far end, at least, gets conceded. We need, Mulgan writes, better theories of "*how ideas get 'thickened out' and mobilise implementers.*"⁵ The near end is not even conceded, because it is never noticed. This report is about the word that allows both to be deferred.

Notes

1Khasnabish, D. A., & Haiven, M. (2014). The radical imagination: Social movement research in the age of austerity. Bloomsbury Publishing.

2 Miller, R. (2018). Transforming the future: Anticipation in the 21st century (p. 300). Taylor & Francis.

3 Moral Imaginations (founded by Phoebe Tickell), "imagination activism" and the Camden Council programme: <https://www.moralimagination.com/imaginationactivism>

4 Slavoj Žižek on Occupy Wall Street: "What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then?" ("The Violent Silence of a New Beginning," In These Times, October 2011; the same warning appears in his address at Zuccotti Park, 9 October 2011.

5 Mulgan, G. (2020). The Imaginary Crisis (and how we might quicken social and public imagination). UCL, Demos Helsinki and Untitled.



M. C. Escher
Waterfall
1961

3. Two words, two contracts

Orwell once wrote: "*if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.*"¹ A profession's vocabulary is not decoration; what a field calls its central capacity determines what it can be asked to deliver. So, it is worth being exact about what each of these two words promises.

Imagination promises nothing. This is not an insult; it is the philosophical consensus about what the faculty is. To imagine something is to entertain it without asserting it, to hold a possibility before the mind with no obligation toward the world. Sartre, who wrote the strictest account, made the point structural: to imagine is to posit an object as not being there. The image is constitutively poor, it contains nothing more than what you put into it, and the act of imagining is an act of withdrawal from the real. "*For consciousness to be able to imagine,*" he wrote, "*it must be able to escape from the world by its very nature... In a word, it must be free.*"² Freedom from the world is not a defect of imagination. It is the definition.

Creativity promises a great deal. The research field that studies it settled long ago on what its literature calls the standard definition: "*Creativity requires both originality and effectiveness.*"³ Everything hangs on the second requirement. An original idea that is useless is not creative, only original. Csikszentmihalyi's account,

the most influential in the field, goes further: an act is creative only if it changes a domain, and whether it has changed the domain is decided not by the creator but by the field's gatekeepers⁴. Creativity, in other words, is audited. It requires a product, a judgment of value, and a verdict delivered by others. Imagination requires none of these. You can fail at creativity. It is not clear you can fail at imagining.

Planning itself once spoke the first language about its own work. Raymond Unwin, in 1909, described town communities "*seeking, as it were, freedom to become the artist of their own cities.*" Half a century later, updating Abercrombie's textbook, D. Rigby Childs could still write that "*when it is a positive force, town planning is a creative activity*", and he dated the profession's decline precisely to the moment it became, in the popular view, "*an administrative hurdle which had to be got over.*" The framing survives, albeit relegated to the margins of the debate. Wei Yang's 2024 Abercrombie Lecture⁵ names creativity, alongside compassion and selflessness, as the profession's founding spirit, and calls for planning's "*creative pillar*" to be rebuilt.

Here, then, is the asymmetry hiding inside two words that planners use interchangeably. One term names a capacity that must terminate in the world and submit to evaluation. The other names a capacity that is exempt, unfalsifiable, unauditable, complete the moment it is exercised. In the seminar room the two are treated as synonyms; the human element in any strategic exercise is simply called imagination. But the interchangeability has consequences. It allows the ambition of the audited word to travel under the immunity of the exempt one. Planning gets to adopt the rhetoric of creation while settling for the zero-risk territory of imagination.

Notes

1 George Orwells essay "Politics and the English Language" from the April 1946 issue of the journal *Horizon* (volume 13, issue 76).

2 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire* (1940; English: *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*).

3 Mark Runco & Garrett Jaeger, "The Standard Definition of Creativity," *Creativity Research Journal* 24(1), 2012, 92–96.

4 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (HarperCollins, 1996), and his systems model of creativity (1988; 1999).

5 Wei Yang, "Spatial planning reimagined: rekindling the founding spirit for the future," the 17th Abercrombie Lecture, *Town Planning Review* 95(1), 2024, 21–44

4. The Fall of Creativity

Creativity was not passed over. It was used up. In 2002 Richard Florida published *The Rise of the Creative Class*, and for the following decade 'creativity' was the busiest word in urban policy.¹ Cities competed for the creative class with bike lanes, arts districts, tolerance indexes. Creativity stopped naming a human capacity and started naming a development strategy.

But it quickly unraveled under sharp critical scrutiny. Jamie Peck's 2005 essay observed that creativity strategies had become "*the policies of choice, since they license both a discursively distinctive and an ostensibly deliverable development agenda*", while working "*quietly with the grain of extant 'neoliberal' development agendas, framed around interurban competition, gentrification, middle-class consumption and place-marketing.*"²

The strategies were elite-focused by design. For the two-thirds of the population outside the favoured class, Peck wrote, there were "*nothing apart from occasional tickets to the circus*," their exclusion justified by a "*deficit model of creativity*." The broader sociological indictment was swift. Boltanski and

Chiapello showed capitalism absorbing the countercultural values of 1968 into corporate management manuals. Andreas Reckwitz described a "*creativity dispositif*" where being creative became an inescapable obligation. Angela McRobbie exposed how the word was used to legitimize precarious labor.³ By 2018, the backlash culminated in a book titled, simply, *Against Creativity*, which argued that "*being creative today means seeing the world around you as a resource to fuel your inner entrepreneur.*"⁴ Even Florida acknowledged the fallout in 2017, admitting to a "*very deep dark side*" of his model, while remaining famously unrepentant: "*I will not apologize. I do not regret anything.*"⁵

Meanwhile the institutional machinery built in creativity's name, living labs, innovation ecosystems, triple and quadruple helixes, was accumulating its own critical literature. Participation that legitimizes predetermined pathways, citizens repositioned as unpaid research subjects, labs whose participants look demographically nothing like the neighbourhoods around them.⁶ Creativity had been proceduralized, and the procedures belonged to the funders.

By the mid-2010s, a planner looking for a word to describe collective invention had reasons to avoid creativity, and independent reasons to choose imagination. The term already had long standing in social science and in planning thought. C. Wright Mills had defined the "sociological imagination" as the basic quality of mind of the social sciences; Castoriadis had placed the imaginary at the centre of his account of how societies institute themselves; Lefebvre had made the possible a central category of urban thought; and Leonie Sandercock had been urging a "*planning imagination*" on the profession since the early 2000s.⁷ Adopting the word did not mean fleeing a compromised neighbour; it meant aligning with what planning, and social science more broadly, had been recommending for decades.

It is important to keep two things in mind here. No study has yet documented this change of vocabulary directly; the claim rests on convergent evidence, the dated collapse of one term, the dated rise of the other, and the definitional asymmetry between them and is offered as an inference. And because imagination had this independent standing, the taint on creativity cannot be the whole explanation. The word was pulled as well as pushed. For the argument of this report, however, the motive matters less than the effect. Whichever route led planners to the word, the word itself is the same, a vocabulary without a success condition.

Consider what was left behind with the discredited term. Creativity was easily hijacked because it promised measurable outcomes, and anything that promises results can be held to account, ranked, and bought. Escaping

that trap meant escaping measurement altogether. And words do not stay clean. The critique has already found the new vocabulary, a recent paper in *Futures* dissects "*elite futurism*" and the politics of "*disimagination*"⁸, which suggests the cycle is beginning again, one refuge further on.

Notes

1 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Basic Books, 2002); see also *Cities and the Creative Class* (Routledge, 2005)

2 Jamie Peck, "Struggling with the Creative Class," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29(4), 2005, 740–770.

3 Luc Boltanski & Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999; English: Verso, 2005); Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity* (2012; English: Polity, 2017); Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Polity, 2016).

4 Oli Mould, *Against Creativity* (Verso, 2018).

5 Richard Florida, *The New Urban Crisis* (Basic Books, 2017). The quoted remarks are from Frank Bures, "Richard Florida Can't Let Go of His Creative Class Theory," *Belt Magazine*, and a Guardian interview quoted there: <https://beltmag.com/richard-florida-cant-let-go/>

6 For example: "Exploitation as innovation: research ethics and the governance of experimentation in the urban living lab," *Regional Studies* (2021); "Living Labs Under Construction," *JCOM* special issue (2023); "Paving the road to sustainability and democracy? The promises and perils of living labs," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*.

7 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford, 1959); Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1975; English: MIT Press, 1987); Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity* (1962) and his "philosophy of the possible"; Leonie Sandercock, "Towards a Planning Imagination for the 21st Century," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 70(2), 2004.

8 "Imagination as contested terrain: Elite futurism, disimagination politics, and education futures," *Futures* (2026).



5. Faculty vs. Quality: The Problem of Equal Access

The deepest charm of imagination talk is its egalitarianism. Creativity, whatever the workshops claimed, always trailed an aristocracy, the genius, the artist, the creative class and its implied uncreative one. Imagination appears to have no aristocracy. Everyone imagines. Every child does it unprompted; no credential is required; the flip-chart is open to all. An imagination exercise flatters every participant as already equipped. This is what makes the word feel inclusive, and what makes questioning it feel faintly cruel.

The philosophy from which the discourse borrows its nouns says otherwise. The fashionable loanword "imaginaries" descends from a French lineage, Henry Corbin, and after him Cynthia Fleury¹, in which it sits inside a set of distinctions that the borrowing quietly dropped. Fleury distinguishes three terms. There is imagination: a cognitive faculty, a form of knowledge, in her glossary it is explicitly "*distinct from all fantasy*," a *savoir*. There is the imaginal: imagination operating at full discipline, becoming, in Corbin's phrase, a principle of reality. And there is the imaginaire: the loose image-repertoire, the drift of pictures,

what imagination degrades into when it is cut off from knowledge.

But as Corbin writes, "*whenever imagination strays and is wasted recklessly, when it ceases to fulfil its function of perceiving and producing the symbols that lead to inner intelligence, the mundus imaginalis... may be considered to have disappeared.*"² In this tradition, imagination is not the opposite of rigour; it is a rigour. This tradition possesses its own definition of failure. Planning adopted the word but left its rigorous standards behind. What circulates in the visioning room is, by the vocabulary's own internal standards, not imagination at all. It is imaginaire.

The psychology agrees with the philosophy and said so a century ago. Vygotsky's account of imagination is combinatorial: imagination builds with materials supplied by experience, and only with those. "*The more a child sees, hears, and experiences,*" he wrote, "*the more he knows and assimilates... the more productive will be the operation of his imagination.*"³ Imagination is stocked, and it is trained. Which means it is not equally distributed, because

experience, knowledge, and the leisure to elaborate them are not equally distributed. David Graeber made the political version of the point when he argued that structural violence produces "*extreme lopsided structures of imaginative identification*,"⁴ in which the imaginative labour of understanding how the world works falls on the powerless, while the powerful are spared it.

Imagination inequality is real. Its remedy is not simply providing more opportunities to imagine, but equalizing access to the raw material, the knowledge, experience, and leisure, that fuels the faculty. That is a long-term structural project, not an eight-week workshop. It operates on a timeline and scale that workshop culture is fundamentally built to ignore. Tamar Gendler's work on what philosophers call imaginative resistance adds a final constraint. According to her, people are frequently unwilling, or unable, to imagine worlds that violate their moral commitments.⁵ A visioning session for a contested neighbourhood is not a room of open futures. It is a room of resistances.

'Everyone can imagine' is true the way 'everyone can sing' is true. It describes the possession of the faculty, not the quality of what the faculty produces, and it is precisely the quality that the crisis-talk, with its demand for bolder and radical imagination, claims to be about. The inclusive framing and the ambitious framing cannot both be honest at once.

Notes

1 Cynthia Fleury, *Métaphysique de l'imagination* (Éditions d'écarts, 2000; reissued Gallimard Folio Essais, 2020)

2 Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal" (1964; English 1972)

3 Lev Vygotsky, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood" (1930; English translation in *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* 42(1), 2004).

4 David Graeber, "Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2(2), 2012; reprinted in *The Utopia of Rules* (2015).

5 Tamar Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *Journal of Philosophy* 97(2), 2000, 55–81.

6. The Workshop Machine and the Ratification Trap

Visioning has a track record. Almost nobody looks at it. The discipline's own reviewers established long ago that planning rarely evaluates whether its plans are implemented at all, let alone whether visioning helped¹.

Where someone did look, the results are instructive. Atlanta's Vision 2020, one of the largest collaborative visioning exercises ever run in the United States, consumed 4.4 million dollars; the evaluation found it had been very effective at generating conversation among residents, and had produced few significant actions and no plan capable of attaining the vision. The evaluator's title was a warning: proceed with caution².

The history explains the outcome better than any local failure could. Robert Shipley and John Michela, tracing where visioning in planning actually came from, found that it did not come from planning theory. It came from the corporate leadership literature of the 1980s, vision as a motivational instrument, absorbed by "*well-meaning and energetic planners*"³ who, as they put it, "*had learned about the visionary Ebenezer Howard in their planning*

texts and had read a Peter Senge book or seen a Stephen Covey video." Visioning was designed to produce morale. It produces morale. The mood-boosting that imagination exercises deliver to communities is real, and it is not nothing. It is also not creation, and a method built to motivate should not be surprised when motivation is all it makes.

The wider foresight industry fares no better under evaluation. A recent review of reviews of scenario planning found "*conceptual confusion, methodological chaos,*" and a scarcity of evidence on effectiveness so complete that none of the reviewed literature had evaluated outcomes at all⁴. Twenty years of empirical research by Philip Tetlock showed expert predictions performing roughly on par with random guessing⁵.

And when imagining is done collectively, a stranger problem appears; convergence. Participatory-futures research repeatedly shows how consensus processes sand away the very radical variations these exercises are designed to produce. Collective imagination does not multiply possibilities by the number of participants..

There is an even less flattering possibility. Adam Millard-Ball, studying municipal climate plans in California, found little evidence the plans caused anything. Cities were using them to codify what they were going to do anyway. Rather than guiding policy or pushing against structural limits, these visions act as retroactive stamps of approval that appear only after the outcome has been decided. Theoretical planning displays this exact dynamic. When Davoudi's prefigurative planning reaches for its evidence, it lists community land trusts, cooperative housing, community gardens, pop-up parks, initiatives that all pre-date the framework now claiming them, as she herself notes in passing "*while they may not be called as such*". The theory does not generate the initiatives. It renames them and counts the renaming as confirmation. Nobody in the imagination discourse has an answer to the ratification problem.

An older tradition drew the honest conclusion decades ago. Meyerson and Banfield's study of Chicago's public housing, in 1955, showed that plans do not function as set courses of action, politics does not accept the restraint. A later school of planning theory formalized what plans do instead: they are signals⁶. On this account a plan is information, a public display of intentions and possibilities that shapes the decisions of others, the output of strategic thinking rather than a script for it. The reading is deflationary, but it is at least an account: it names a real function and makes it testable. The imagination discourse has never engaged it, perhaps because a signal invites a question a vision does not: did anyone act on it?

What makes this collective blind spot so striking is that planning has already learned this lesson. The profession abandoned the comprehensive rational plan half a century ago, on cognitive grounds. Herbert Simon showed that no mind or bureau could survey all the alternatives, and Lindblom taught the field to muddle through. Planning accepted bounded rationality about the present. It now sponsors unbounded visioning about the future, the one domain where the mind's limits are most severe. The discipline forgot its own lesson at exactly the point where the lesson matters most.

Notes

1 Emily Talen, "Do Plans Get Implemented? A Review of Evaluation in Planning," *Journal of Planning Literature* 10(3), 1996; see also Laurian et al., "Evaluating Plan Implementation," *JAPA* 70(4), 2004.

2 Amy Helling, "Collaborative Visioning: Proceed With Caution! Results From Evaluating Atlanta's Vision 2020 Project," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 64(3), 1998, 335–349.

3 Robert Shipley & John Michela, "Can Vision Motivate Planning Action?" *Planning, Practice & Research* 21(2), 2006, 223–244.

4 "Types of scenario planning and their effectiveness: A review of reviews" (2023); see also Schoemaker et al., "Scenario planning and foresight," *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* (2021).

5 Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

6 Lewis Hopkins, *Urban Development: The Logic of Making Plans* (Island Press, 2001); Knaap, Hopkins & Donaghy, "Do Plans Matter? A Game-Theoretic Model," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 1998.



7. Externalizing Failure: The Convenience of Blaming Power

When imagined futures fail to arrive, critical theory has an explanation waiting, and it is always the same one: power.

The scholarly form of the explanation is the imaginaries literature. Sheila Jasanoff's "*sociotechnical imaginaries*", "*collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures*"¹, is a genuinely powerful framework, and its account of realisation is entirely political: imaginaries win by coalition-building, state investment, institutional stabilisation. The book's subtitle is the fabrication of power.

What the framework does not contain, anywhere, is an account of why most imagined futures fail when no one is blocking them. The imagining itself is assumed to be abundant and healthy; the only analytic question is which imaginary captures the state. The popular form of the explanation is Mark Fisher's capitalist realism. The "*widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it*"² Here even the felt weakness of imagination is externalised, the limit you experience is a

limit ideology built in you. The formula has been imported wholesale into urban studies. A 2025 paper in *Antipode* attributes the "*urban crisis of imagination*" directly to capitalist realism.³ Erik Swyngedouw's post-political critique diagnoses consensual visioning as depoliticisation, and then prescribes, as remedy, "*the construction of great new fictions*," reproducing in one sentence the exact leap from fiction to reality that the diagnosis never explains.⁴

One famous sentence shows how the power reading won. Everyone knows the line: it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Few know its original form. When Fredric Jameson first wrote it, in 1994, it ended differently: "*It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations*."⁵ The original held both explanations open, the world may be blocked, or our imaginations may be weak. As the line circulated, the second half fell away. By 2003 Jameson himself was quoting it as something "*someone once said*," without the final clause. By 2009 Fisher had made the short version

the final clause. By 2009 Fisher had made the short version the epigraph of an era, and its meaning had quietly inverted: what Jameson offered as a possible weakness in us had become a barrier built around us. The original sentence contained the very hypothesis this report asks planning to face. It was never disproved. It was simply edited out in transmission, because one clause flattered its audience, while the other held them accountable.

Franco Berardi is the exception among the theorists of blocked futures, which is why he is so regularly enlisted on the wrong side. His triad in *Futurability*⁶, "*possibility is content, potency is energy, and power is form*", does assign power a role. Power is "*the selection and enforcement of one possibility among many, and simultaneously... the exclusion (and invisibilization) of many other possibilities.*" But his diagnosis of the present is not that power has defeated possibility. It is impotence. Potency paralysed, a cognitive workforce disembodied and de-solidarised, connectivity replacing sensitivity until common action becomes unfeeling. "*Alternate possibilities are not defeated by either Donald Trump or the fascists,*" he insists. "*There is potency.*" Berardi names the middle term, the energy that carries a possibility into form, and the middle term is precisely what the demand for more imagination skips over.

Castoriadis, the other authority the discourse leans on, closed the gap by ontology: for him the radical imaginary simply is instituting, creation ex nihilo, an equation planning borrows while leaving the metaphysics that licensed it. And Ricoeur quietly removed imagination's halo altogether. To him, imagination redescribes the world, and it redescribes

as easily in the service of ideology, repeating what exists by justifying it, as of utopia⁷. The faculty is not intrinsically on the side of change.

Planning has produced its own most serious answer to this gap. Simin Davoudi's prefigurative planning, the position she brought to the Lichfield Lecture, developed in a 2023 paper, is precisely an attempt to close the distance between imagining and creating. Do not merely envision the alternative, she argues. Enact it, now, in the here and now. The community land trust, the cooperative, the reclaimed street as small performances of the future. And unlike the visioning consensus, her framework welcomes conflict. Dissent is not to be facilitated away. If any version of the imagination discourse takes creation seriously, it is this one.

Yet the escape from accountability reappears, this time not as an oversight, but as an explicit philosophical commitment. Davoudi distinguishes her Blochian "*concrete utopia*" from Erik Olin Wright's "*real utopias*" by rejecting the need for viability altogether, arguing that "*real possibility*" does not mean '*objective or viable*' possibility." By striking out the test of viability, failure becomes impossible to measure. Outcomes may be "*contingent, uncertain and potentially disappointing,*" but because Blochian hope is open-ended, it can never be defeated.

This echoes the same selective borrowing seen elsewhere. Ernst Bloch's original philosophy maintained a strict discipline: he distinguished concrete hope from mere abstract, wishful hope by grounding it in real, present tendencies. But by dropping that crucial distinction,

Davoudi removes the very mechanism that gave the concept its rigor. Without a reality test, any wishful thinking can pass for concrete hope, allowing planning failures to be forgiven in advance as the necessary price of the journey. The profession embraced this ambiguity without realizing what it conceded, as one admiring commentator noted, prefigurative planning "*manages the trick of being both real and unreal simultaneously*." That trick is simply imagination's old contract, dressed up in utopian language.

The power explanation is not wrong, it is merely incomplete, and conveniently so. If futures fail solely because power blocks them, then the visions were sound, the workshops well-designed, and the participants' capacities beyond reproach. Everything is flattered except reality itself. Any unrealized future offers two competing explanations: either the path was blocked, or the map was flawed. A rigorous discourse would hold both possibilities in view; this one has settled permanently on the explanation that demands nothing of itself.

Notes

- 1 Sheila Jasanoff & Sang-Hyun Kim (eds.), *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power* (University of Chicago Press, 2015);
- 2 Mark Fisher, (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*
- 3 Christophe Davis, "The Cancelled Future: Neoliberal Capitalism and the Urban Crisis of Imagination," *Antipode* (2025).
- 4 Erik Swyngedouw, "The Antinomies of the Postpolitical City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33(3), 2009.
- 5 Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (Columbia University Press, 1994), p. xii
- 6 Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2017), *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, Verso
- 7 Ricoeur, P. (1986). *Lectures on ideology and utopia*.

8. Asking imagination to do creativity's work

When a planner calls for bolder imagination, what is actually wanted is better plans with better outcomes, a demand that belongs, by definition, to creativity; novelty and effectiveness, submitted to judgment. But the demand is voiced in the register of imagination, the one register that cannot be audited. This is the category error at the centre of the discourse, and it persists because every party is served by it. It converts a failure of outcomes into a deficit of vision, which feels addressable. It supplies a ritual, the exercise, the lab, the vision document, that can be completed, so that something is achieved even when nothing is built. And it distributes blame with perfect kindness, since a collective failure to imagine is a failure with no one's name on it.

The comfort works at every scale. What the visioning workshop does for a neighbourhood, the flagship lecture does for the profession. Davoudi's summons to utopian thinking was addressed to a profession she described, in the same lecture, as suffering "*debilitating cuts to its powers and resources*"; what the summons offered was neither powers nor resources but the restored dignity of dreaming. And notice the words. What was lost she names,

in her own phrase, "*a socially purposeful creative activity*"; what she prescribes is imagination.

Critics might dismiss this focus on limits as just another form of capitalist realism, ideology dressing up resignation as intellectual rigour. But these constraints are cognitive, not political. They hold true even when the market has no skin in the game. When Daniel Gilbert and Timothy Wilson reviewed the psychology of prospection, they found mental simulations of the future systematically unrepresentative, essentialised, abbreviated, and de-contextualised, "*compared to sensory perceptions, mental simulations are mere cardboard cut-outs of reality.*"¹ People mispredict their own feelings about their own futures reliably enough that the error has a name. What is easily imagined is judged likely; what resists imagining is judged impossible, a bias that operates on lottery tickets as efficiently as on utopias.

None of this means alternatives to the present are out of reach. It simply means the instrument used to preview them is flimsy. Yet Vygotsky and Fleury both showed

that imagination is a stocked faculty, one anchored in accumulated knowledge, which means taking its boundaries seriously is the only way to refine it. Urging people to imagine harder is an empty substitute for method. The truly conservative move is refusing to interrogate the faculty altogether: a choice that guarantees future visions will remain just as thin as today's, while conveniently placing all the blame on the world.

Notes

1 Daniel Gilbert & Timothy Wilson, "Prospection: Experiencing the Future," *Science* 317 (2007), 1351–1354.

9. Towards an Empirical Reset

Thinking about the future is not an uncharted mystery. It is one of the most closely studied acts in cognitive science. Under the names prospection, episodic future thinking, and mental simulation, a substantial literature describes how minds preview what does not yet exist, by recombining memory, thinly, with systematic distortions. The near over the distant, the vivid over the likely, the easily imagined over the merely possible.

The research has even borrowed the profession's own word for one of its most robust findings: the planning fallacy, the tendency of planners of every kind to underestimate what their projects will cost and how long they will take. There is work on how single minds imagine, on what knowledge and training do to imagining, and on what happens when imagining is attempted by groups. Almost none of it has crossed into planning theory or planning education.

That is the engagement worth asking for. Planning is, before it is a profession, a cognitive activity. Every plan, every vision, every scenario begins as an attempt, by a mind, or a room of minds, to represent a future. How that attempt works, where it is strong, and where it reliably fails is knowable, and to a considerable extent already known. A field in closer contact with this literature would design its exercises differently, weigh its visions differently, and understand better why so many of its imagined futures

remain imagined. The political economy of unbuilt futures has been written, brilliantly, for forty years; the cognitive account of the faculty doing the imagining sits next door, unread.

Taking this approach would also resolve the question that opened this report. A profession that truly understands the faculty it keeps invoking no longer needs a buzzword that cannot fail. It can say creativity when it means actual creation, and imagination when it means deep understanding, and insist on the distinction. After all, that difference does not reside in the rhetoric. It lives in the cognitive instrument itself, and that instrument can be rigorously studied.



Seal on the Beach
hello@sealonthebeach.com