Imagine Chicago

understand imagine create

Ten Years of Imagination in Action
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Imagination as a Social Movement

All around the world, people are coming together in their localities to imagine and create new possibilities for their collective future. Despite their differences in age, background and perspective, what they share is a faith in community and in its civic spirit, the idea that together, using our minds, hearts and hands, we can help to shape the world we live in. Powerfully, perhaps unknowingly, they are the leadership of a new movement — a movement of social imagination.

‘Imagine’ — the word itself — calls us to connect to potential, wonder, the power and the beauty of the unknown. It arouses within each of us feelings of hope and opens a limitless space of creativity and possibility. Imagination is the realm of the future, utterly democratic, not determined by current arrangements. As a movement, imagination draws upon peoples’ deepest urge to be connected and to contribute to a larger purpose. It brings people together meaningfully to talk and listen with one another, to share their personal and collective aspirations. Such communion is generating the energy and commitment required for transforming dreams into realities.

Imagine Chicago sees itself as a catalyst in this movement, one of the sparks to light the kindling already in place in peoples’ minds and spirits. Our work over the last ten years has supported the organic sprouting of Imagine initiatives on six continents. While each self-organized Imagine effort is distinct, since it is responding to its own unique context, all the efforts reveal a few common convictions: that human beings can unite around shared meaning; that each person’s contribution is vital to a flourishing community; and that creating a culture of public learning and civic engagement that connects generations and cultures is at the heart of self- and social transformation. These beliefs translate into positive and inspiring images, ideas and actions.

What makes imagination so important today are the same factors that challenge it. Violence and terror, massive inequalities, the widespread destruction of nature, the alienation of human beings from each other and from themselves, the extinction of diverse languages, cultures and ways of meaning-making, the colonization of images by mass media: these forces threaten human society, human sensitivity and human sensibility at an unparalleled scale and pace. When Imagine Chicago was gearing up in 1993, Yankelovich Associates reported that 85% of Americans had lost confidence in the future. Even citizens of the world’s superpower feel victimized and lack confidence in their leaders. The existence of injustice offers a constant invitation to work towards justice. Ronald Marstin defines justice as “fundamentally a matter of who is included and whom we can tolerate neglecting.” Imagine Chicago believes that the city’s vitality depends on creating an economy in which everyone’s contribution is valued. A movement of imagination is necessarily inclusive: Each and every human being possesses the enormous gift of imagination. No matter what institutional authorities like the media, market or schools tell us, imagination (like learning) is neither a commodity nor is it scarce. In fact, the movement relies upon the power of our collective imagination. Our tremendous human diversity — the variety of dynamic identities we possess — is vital for both the conversations and the actions of creating a positive future. The greater the diversity of the people involved, the stronger the movement of imagination, and the more likely a balanced and just future for ourselves and our children.

Like imagination itself, this movement has not been planned or controlled, nor can it be. Rather, it is part of a growing culture of civic spirit manifesting itself in a variety of forms: eco-cities, intentional communities, learning cities… People all over the world are forming vital connections between being, thinking and doing, in order to support a more just present and future.

We invite you to be a co-creator of this movement, to uniquely contribute your talents to inspiring a collective imagination that enlarges the human spirit.
What you are holding in your hands is a possibility publication. It operates on many levels at once:

- First, it shows you what has been possible. It serves as a documentation and celebration of Imagine Chicago’s work, as well as the work of other Imagine projects and like-minded organizations and efforts.
- Second, it shows you how it can be possible. It offers a series of tools and resources for those of you interested in carrying forward, strengthening, or launching your own contribution to the Imagination movement.
- Third, this publication asks you what else is possible? Throughout it, you will find a number of questions, to invite you to think, partner, and create with us, on evolving the Imagination movement further and forward.

In all of these ways, this publication is meant as an inspiration, to awaken or energize your appreciation for the power of possibility and its vital role in nurturing hope, action and commitment in all of us.

This publication is dynamic and ever-growing. You will find a space on our website <www.imaginechicago.org/posibility_publication.html> devoted to it, where you can post additional stories, images, tools, resources, questions and dreams, and engage in conversations with those who, like you, have faith in possibility.

I dwell in possibility.
- Emily Dickinson

Words have the power to both destroy and heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world.

- Buddha

Throughout this publication, you will notice that we are using a different kind of language to share ideas about human beings and communities. Words like ‘problem’, ‘need’, ‘lack’, ‘illiterate’, ‘uneducated’, etc. do not appear in our vocabulary. Rather, you will find a repertoire of other words: ‘hope’, ‘possibility’, ‘create’, ‘power’, ‘relationships’, ‘connections’, ‘imagination’, ‘commitment’. (You’ll even discover some words in different languages, from different contexts, which capture these aspects of the human spirit.)

At Imagine Chicago, we are convinced that our words will (and do) shape our thoughts and actions. They will either expand our minds and hearts to collectively dream and to actualize our shared dreams, or they will make us feel inadequate, unworthy, and incapable of realizing our full human potential. Language is necessarily interactive; it is grown and enriched by the kinds of contacts we make as interdependent human beings. If what we say is what we see, then simply by altering our words, we may uncover entirely different worlds — dynamic new possibilities of being, relating and living together. Language therefore is more than just a medium of communication. It gives us the power not only to express who we are, individually and in community, but also to frame the common space we inhabit, the best of what we can be and become.

We invite you to “listen” to the language in this publication. The words we have chosen are the vocabulary of a movement that places its faith in the generosity, curiosity, diversity and creativity of the human spirit, a movement animated by generative words that come alive in each of our places, hearts and deeds.
What can one person do in a movement of hope and imagination? More than you can imagine...

If that one person spends one day talking to two people about what they could create... \((1 + 2)\)
And if the next day, those two people each talk to two different people... \((1 + 2 + 2 + 2)\)
And if the next day, those two people each talk to two different people... \((1+2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2)\)
And so on, and so on...

Then, in 10 days, 2,047 people will be talking about creative ideas for your city's future...
In 15 days, 65,535 people will be talking about even more possibilities...
**In 20 days, 2.1 million people will be talking about hope and imagination in your city...**

The mathematical equation for the power of two is \(x = n \times 2^{(d+1)} - 1\), where \(n\) is the number of people you start with (in our case, just 1 person); \(d\) is the number of days, and \(x\) is the total number of people who are involved in the process. The equation assumes two things: First, that once a person tells two people, they are not telling anyone else; and second, that there are no repeated conversations. Both of these assumptions are unlikely to be true in reality, of course, as we are likely to talk to more than two people and we are likely to continue talking to them (and others) about possibilities for the future.

How quickly a public conversation about hope and imagination can emerge in our communities! **In Imagine Nagaland, in 2001, more than a thousand interviews happened in a matter of months!**

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**Bringing the Inside Out**

Removing Our Masks: Working From Our Inner Strengths

Make masks of construction paper or paper mache, and whatever other materials are available.

Decorate the outside of the mask – using colors, cloth, leaves, beads, feathers, stones, shells, etc. – in a way you think describes you as others see you. It may have wild colors and designs, to show your energy and enthusiasm; it may be neat, ordered and symmetrical, to show your planning skills and organization; it may be sparse and neutrally colored, to show your calm and simplicity. Think of how others see you and try to represent these understandings with the materials you have.

Then on the inside of the mask, draw or write down some of the gifts or talents you have that people may not or do not know about. Also draw or write the sources of your inner strength: What gives you hope? What motivates you to do the work you do?

When finished, share your mask with a partner and discuss together:

- What environments, relationships, conditions, opportunities, make it possible for you to take off your mask and be more fully yourself?
- What might it mean to bring your hopes, gifts and strengths into more public view?

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You think that because you understand ONE, you understand TWO, because one and one makes two. **But you must understand AND.**

- Sufi proverb
A Mother's Story

Bliss Browne is the founder of Imagine Chicago. This is the story of what inspired her to begin to imagine.

In 1991, when I met Robert Spence, I was working at First Chicago as a corporate banker, pastoring an Episcopal parish, mothering three young city kids, participating on numerous civic boards, and reaching the end of a Kellogg national fellowship on spirituality and leadership. I was living in competing worlds which shared little common vocabulary and held each other in great suspicion. Chicago, my home city, reflected this “divided imagination” – manifested in patterns of racial, economic, social and political segregation.

It was a winter’s day when I attended a church service in Washington DC at Christ House, an infirmary for homeless men. During the intercessions, we prayed for a man named Robert Spence who was scheduled for major surgery the next day. The priest later announced that Robert would be the sacramental minister. He looked frail as he stood up, lean, weary, missing many teeth. As he offered me the bread of communion, I was moved to tears and felt deeply connected to him in a way I couldn’t explain.

I had always assumed that people connect out of common interests or strengths. But I understood in that moment that our most profound connection is based in a common vulnerability; our common bond is not necessary to construct, only to recognize and accept. Robert and I were able to bless one another out of a common poverty and willingness to be present to one another. My life going forward was radically changed by that recognition; I began actively to seek the company of the vulnerable as a place of particular blessing. And to imagine a just future where life flourishes for everyone.

As a mother, I was especially heartbroken over the many young lives in our city being lost to despair, violence and drugs. So I organized a conference on “Faith, Imagination and Public Life”, gathering in lots of well-known city pioneers and social innovators. I wanted to understand the imagination that had shaped Chicago over the last century – and stimulate a broad group of civic entrepreneurs to re-imagine Chicago as a whole. People introduced themselves by describing an image that had particular authority in their lives. By the second day, people were willing to dream, to describe images of Chicago’s future ultimately worthy of human commitment.

The image that came to me was of the recycling symbol, not just as an image of ecology, but as a representation of God’s economy, in which nothing and no one is wasted. I began to imagine a city...

- where everyone is valued.
- where every citizen, young and old, applies their talents to create a positive future for themselves and their community.
- where hope comes alive in the flourishing and connecting of human lives.
- where young people and others whose visions have been discounted, develop and contribute their ideas and energy.

Within three days, I set aside a 16-year corporate career to begin the work of discovering ways to bring the vision to life. Once I committed myself, serendipity stepped in. That very week, I got invited to go to Jerusalem and think about holy cities, what is necessary to create a city of peace and justice. Some weeks later, I went on an eight-day silent retreat, hoping for a clear word to surface about how to move forward.

One thing that emerged from the silence was a simple phrase: “think like a mother.” I interpreted that inner word to mean that it was not necessary to create anything, only to stay open and present to what would emerge naturally. This new work would likely require hope, attention and faithfulness to life’s promise and mystery more than it would require ambition and strategy.

Following the retreat, the bank from which I had resigned offered me an unexpected nine-month severance package. I took that happy surprise as confirmation that I was on the right track, that this was indeed a pregnancy of sorts. Sara Ruddick suggests that motherhood is a sustained response to the promise embedded in the creation of new life. I asked my husband what he thought we would need to do as parents of a new “child” whose gift was imagination. He answered profoundly, “That would be the easiest possible child to raise. All we’d have to do is listen.” He was right.
Imagine Chicago's Core Assumptions

- All individuals have a particular vocation, a unique gift to contribute, the sharing of which is essential to the flourishing of our common life.
- It is possible to create organizations that are consonant with our deeply held values and that make productive use of individual talents.
- Connecting those organizations and individuals can bring greater meaning and purpose to individual efforts. The sum is greater than the parts.
- Friendship provides a good working model for the kind of relationships necessary to develop a vibrant city — connected and committed individuals who recognize, appreciate, and celebrate each other's unique gifts.

A City of Friends

The foundation for Imagine Chicago’s work has been friendship. Friendship is a relationship among equals, people who delight in each other’s company, take risks together, laugh, lean on each other. Good friends accept us as we are and hold us accountable to the best of what they know we can be. Friends deepen our capacity to love and our confidence that love is possible. **What might it mean to use friendship, rather than “service”, as the model for public life?**

In September 1992, a group of friends – across a wide range of ages and professions – came together as a “design team” to explore bringing friendship into public life in Chicago. How could we bring alive a new imagination for Chicago’s future that would build community, unleash energy and imagination and lead to a positive future in which everyone would be able to contribute their unique resourcefulness and creativity?

Two key ideas emerged from many months of conversation which ultimately shaped the design of what became “Imagine Chicago”. First, the project should attempt to discover what gives life to the city, and second, that it should provide significant leadership opportunities for youth, who most clearly represent the city’s future. The MacArthur Foundation supported the effort to design the project’s first phase, test its viability, and get the project organized and institutionalized. From September 1992 to May 1993, the team designed a process of intergenerational civic inquiry as the starting point for engaging the city of Chicago in a broad-based conversation about its future.

Imagine Chicago bet on teenagers, who wanted to learn from city leaders how to make a difference, as its first public leadership team. They proved highly effective in creating a space in the city to talk about what mattered and what was possible. Subsequent Imagine Chicago partners have included a wide range of individuals and institutions: grassroots leaders seeking to improve their neighborhoods and learn from the innovations of other committed citizens... public schools working to establish stronger community partnerships... teachers wanting to renew their vocations... immigrant and faith communities committed to exploring the promise of democracy and American pluralism... school children and parents struggling to understand and impact the systems/communities of which they are a part. All have been willing to expand the community to which they belong and to find ways to apply their imagination, talent and commitment within the communities in which they live.

Participating in civic projects that bridge traditional divides of race, class, age and geography expands our circle of friends in surprising and interesting ways. We begin to understand ourselves as part of a broader community from which we can learn. What we are able to understand and accomplish grows as does the community to which we belong and from which we draw courage to ask challenging questions and to act.

All over the world, communities are struggling to name what they value and to organize partnerships through which those values can be lived. Partnerships require understanding and acknowledging that we don’t have all the answers ourselves, that we depend upon one another, a difficult shift for many professionals who have been trained as experts with answers. What will develop confidence that by working together, being vulnerable, we can accomplish a greater good? One way is for us to experience inspiring and productive conversations with uncommon partners that expand what’s possible for our lives. In such encounters of constructive difference, we discover that our learning communities are much bigger than we thought — that the stranger can become a friend.
Imagine Chicago’s Key Organizing Principles

- We work in partnership with local individuals and organizations, encouraging participants to find ways to connect their particular gifts to the community where they live. When projects build the capacity of both individual and institutional participants, an innovation can begin to change the whole system.

- We build where life and energy are already at work, involving people who want to make a difference. We use positive questions to help them identify the foundations in their own experience upon which even greater possibilities can be built.

- We create opportunity for constructive interactions across boundaries. This expands the community to which people belong and are accountable. Not only can more be accomplished, new ideas can arise out of uncommon partnerships.

- We identify individuals who are committed to being change agents in their organizations and communities, and help them make a difference by connecting them to opportunities and effective tools. These resources emerge from socially constructive processes and questions that enable people to share and leverage their commitment and experience.

- We keep the whole in view, intentionally building an intergenerational and intercultural network of individuals and organizations committed to developing a vital citywide community and a positive future for Chicago’s children.

- We expect the best from everyone and hold them accountable. When dreams are shared, and ownership of action steps claimed, the likelihood increases that the imagined dream will come to birth.

Invitational Questions -

What inspires you to engage in ‘imagine’ work?

What connects us to each other in strengthening and continuing this work?

How can inspired imagination transform our lives and communities from the inside out?

Share Your Thoughts, Add More...
Imagine Chicago is about vision, creativity and inspiring citizens to make positive change. It is about investing in one’s community. It is about building relationships with others across the social, economic, racial, ethnic and generational divides that so often keep us apart. It is about building communities through these relationships, transforming not only individuals but also the neighborhoods, towns, and cities in which we live and grow.

This is a profoundly hopeful mission, and indeed, if one word characterizes Imagine Chicago’s work, it is “hope.” Across its varied projects and programs, Imagine Chicago insists on asking unconditionally positive questions to jog individuals out of more conventional, problem-focused mindsets, reawaken their belief that positive change can happen, energize people’s commitment to creating what they envision in the places they call home.

While this overarching frame guides all of Imagine Chicago’s work, the groundwork was laid in one of Imagine Chicago’s most successful projects: intergenerational interviewing. A decade ago, Imagine Chicago launched a process whereby urban adolescents met, interviewed, and conversed with a wide range of adults who were recognized as providing the city’s “civic glue.” Guided by adult mentors, these young people asked probing, expansive, and intentionally positive questions about Chicago’s history, culture, resources, and possibilities for change.

These interviews were influenced by an approach called “appreciative inquiry.” Part research method and part philosophical orientation, appreciative inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University. It has been an effective lever for motivating change within the non-profit and for-profit sector. Imagine Chicago applied this tool to larger public spaces like neighborhoods and cities. Over a period of many months, the organization orchestrated powerful, one-on-one conversations between adolescents and adults about the city’s past and about visions of its future. Both youth and adult participants later described these conversations as “energizing,” “rejuvenating,” and “transforming.” The stories conveyed in these small group interviews were shared in a series of civic forums where Chicago citizens convened and began devising projects to bring about positive change in specific neighborhoods and public institutions. Inspired by this earlier work, similar “Imagine” processes have taken place in specific neighborhoods of Chicago and in towns and cities around North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia.

While much in Imagine Chicago’s approach is new, it springs from very fertile ground. In addition to the “appreciative inquiry” approach already mentioned, intergenerational interviewing shares important principles with the fields of youth and community development, and civic dialogue. Briefly describing key tenets of these fields may clarify Imagine Chicago’s particular contribution, though broad strokes inevitably do disservice to the complexity of the fields surveyed.

Intergenerational interviewing and youth development. Intergenerational interviewing sees young people as important assets for the communities in which they reside. By seeing urban adolescents as contributors to the public good rather than “problems to be fixed,” Imagine Chicago upholds a central tenet of the youth development field. Concisely put, youth development specialists argue that to be “fully prepared,” adolescents must acquire a broad set of “competencies” across cognitive, emotional, physical, civic, social, cultural, and vocational realms. Youth-serving organizations must partner with other institutions (schools, community groups, families, and so forth) to provide the “inputs” necessary for adolescents to acquire these competencies. These inputs include things like access to basic care and services; high quality instruction and training; opportunities to develop caring relationships and social and strategic networks; and challenging, age-appropriate opportunities for meaningful involvement in community life.
By conceiving of young people’s contribution to civic life as critical to their own personal development, Imagine Chicago’s work falls on the end of the youth development spectrum chiefly concerned with youth civic engagement. Youth civic engagement programs differ considerably. Some stress involvement in voting and other forms of political participation; others emphasize voluntary service in community institutions and causes; still others urge youth to redress social and civic inequity. Yet a common belief underlies these strategic differences: to strengthen young people as well as communities, young people must regard themselves as civic actors and be equipped to carry out meaningful, sustained, civic work.

Intergenerational interviewing entails strengthening young people’s skills, dispositions, and civic capacities. Adolescents are trained in how to conceptualize and conduct interviews, listen respectfully, gather and analyze data, utilize social networks, and participate in community conversations. By definition, this work must be done in partnership with adults. By interviewing adults who have rich histories with the life of the city, young people become inspired to imagine their own life in the city in new ways. Thus, instead of linking their future success to “growing up and getting out” of the neighborhood, young people become inspired to invest in the places where they have been raised and commit to making these places better. Adults, in turn, feel motivated by young people’s hope, energy, and vision. Building relationships between adults and young people fuels a shared commitment to a particular geographic place. This contribution links Imagine Chicago with another important field: asset-based community development.

**Intergenerational interviewing and asset-based community development.** Intergenerational interviews focus participants’ attention on a community’s strengths, resources, and capacities rather than the problems and deficits. Interview questions urge participants to think as expansively as possible – beyond specific organizations, neighborhoods, or interest groups – to imagine their city as a whole. These processes involve people who are typically divided by ethnicity, class, age, and countless other dimensions. The public learning processes that grow out of these interviews identify a collected sense of community resources. Projects that grow out of these processes seek to strengthen particular civic institutions (for example, schools or museums), fueled by an energized group of citizens motivated to bring their vision into being.

This aspect of Imagine Chicago’s work resonates with positive visioning processes utilized since the 1970s in cities as diverse as Roanoke, Virginia; Savannah, Georgia; Houston, Texas; and Chattanooga, Tennessee. Lodged within city planning processes, these large-scale public processes have involved diverse citizens across a host of communities and sectors. Neither “top down” nor “bottom up”, but rather “center out,” city-wide visioning processes have also involved strategic planning for the policy and resource change deemed necessary.

Visioning processes share an asset-based approach to community building that drives change work in primarily low-income communities across the United States. Through “community mapping” and other stock-taking processes, neighborhood residents survey existing services, broadly identify resources (human, physical, financial, and so on), and strategically organize for expansion and improvement of services offered. Traditionally, this work has been neighborhood-based, adult-led, and focused on improving material resources and services. Increasingly, however, “hybrid” organizations linking youth and community development have urged the meaningful inclusion of young people in community change efforts. This newer arm of the community-building field also calls for broadening the types of community resources surveyed, and identifying a host of less tangible assets communities may build upon to enrich the lives of their members.

Imagine Chicago joins these efforts by its emphasis on intergenerational partnership and its focused appreciation of the cultural, historical, and spiritual resources citizens can draw upon. More uniquely, perhaps, Imagine Chicago highlights the importance of public conversation to fuel the imagination, creativity, and hope that will motivate citywide efforts. In this respect, intergenerational interviewing calls to mind a third burgeoning field: civic dialogue.

**Intergenerational interviewing and civic dialogue.** Imagine Chicago’s work reflects a belief that citizen voice is an essential part of shaping public life. Indeed, imagination-spurring civic exercises are conceived as part and parcel of the democratic process. Intergenerational interviewing is one among many vehicles for engendering public dialogue on important civic issues. Imagine Chicago’s particular process begins with discussion among...
a small group of individuals, but it eventually leads toward more public forums where larger groups of people come together to talk, reflect, and organize for change.

Over the past decade, as theorists and practitioners have lamented declining public involvement in civic life, a host of organizations have sought to orchestrate responsibly facilitated forums where citizens come together to reflect, discuss, and debate matters affecting the public good. Differences in content, style, and end goal abound. Some efforts facilitate public discussion of contentious moral issues, like abortion. Others address issues that continue to divide American society, like race relations. Still others address policy problems on the local, regional, or national level. Some public forums are face-to-face, while others use new technologies like the Internet to extend conversation beyond geographic boundaries. Some direct dialogue toward concrete action for change; others see dialogue itself as a worthy democratic product.

Imagine Chicago’s intergenerational interviewing process affirms the power of citizen dialogue. Its emphasis on building relationships across traditional divides helps young and old learn from each other. In so doing, Imagine Chicago enlarges the community of citizens who are inspired to act on behalf of the public good.

Challenging Questions

Looking holistically at how Imagine Chicago’s work intersects with various fields, one might argue that the organization’s strength lies not so much in its uniqueness, but in its ability to weave together complementary strands across fields that clearly have a lot to say to each other. Imagine Chicago’s most distinctive contribution lies in its emphasis on the “front end” of the change process: inspiring hope to act in the first place. By highlighting the importance of hope, vision, and creativity, Imagine Chicago reminds citizens across diverse communities, political perspectives, and strategic change orientations that catalyzing change – in individuals, institutions, and communities – requires first and foremost cultivating hope in those who must participate.

The following questions must be kept in mind if the public learning processes you hope to engender are to lead to positive, sustainable change:

- **What constitutes “high quality” intergenerational interviewing?** And how can we tell if it has made a difference?

- **How can the individual transformation generated by the interviewing process lead to change on larger levels?** What specific relationships, practices, and institutionalizing strategies must be put into place to ensure that individual change carries over into the public realm?

- **What practices and supports must be in place to keep young people meaningfully engaged in community change efforts?** What work must be done with adults to enable genuinely reciprocal partnerships with youth?

- **How can communities sustain the energy, enthusiasm, and passion generated by positive visioning processes?** How is hope kept alive when visioning confronts very real inequities and deprivations? How can hope infuse and nurture the implementation of specific action for community change?

Answering questions like these will not be easy, but there is, happily, a growing community of individuals and organizations who are committed to tackling them. Imagine Chicago enriches this community.

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A Conversation with the Future

Imagine Chicago’s primary interest, from the beginning, has been to create intergenerational learning communities which develop imaginative, effective citizens — people who can think independently and act with others to effect positive change of their own design, who have skills, hope and courage to actively shape the future of their community. As a starting point, Imagine Chicago’s design team initiated two parallel pilot processes in 1993-1994 for engaging the city of Chicago in a broad-based conversation about its future: a citywide appreciative inquiry and a series of community-based and community-led appreciative inquiries. Both were intended to gather Chicago stories and commitments, discover who and what gives life to the city, and to provide significant leadership opportunities for youth, who most clearly represent the city's future. The premise was that young people could be agents of hope and inspiration, if they were freed from the negative stereotypes in which they held themselves and were held by others.

The citywide interview process involved approximately 50 young people who interviewed about 140 Chicago citizens, who were recognized by members of Imagine Chicago's design team as “Chicago glue”. These included artists, media executives, civic and grassroots leaders, politicians, business and professional leaders, and other young people. The interviewees represented over half of Chicago's neighborhoods. Young people were principally recruited from existing youth initiatives (Chicago Area Project, Chicago Cluster Initiative, Public Allies, the Urban Teacher Corps, local schools), but also became involved through friends and family members. In the community pilots, Imagine Chicago collaborated with local organizations.

Each pilot incorporated a combination of action and reflection, skill building and creative analysis. In the citywide pilot, interviewers were given modest coaching in interviewing skills and equipped with a set of appreciative inquiry questions created by the Imagine Chicago design team (see box, page 13). They were encouraged to also ask questions that arose for them throughout the interview, and to engage the interviewee in as personal and positive a conversation as possible. As part of the interview process, young people also sent a follow-up thank you letter to the interviewee, summarizing the conversation, what they had learned and their appreciation for the interviewee's contribution to the life of the city.

The community-based pilots offered a number of diverse examples of how appreciative inquiry could be practiced. For example, the Lawndale and Little Village pilot took place with almost no advanced notice or training; yet, twenty younger children, in the company of Urban Peace Corps volunteers, interviewed local community builders across different ethnic communities. The young mentors were sufficiently energized by the process to conduct the training and implementation of a similar process in Grand Boulevard. In that pilot, a dozen or more elementary children from an urban housing project were involved in community interviewing and visioning exercises.

With the African American Leadership Partnership, a coalition of 62 black churches on the South and West sides of Chicago, intergenerational appreciative inquiry was linked into community assessment and outreach by local churches. The Woodlawn Organization used the process to reconfigure their community outreach programs to include teenagers as organizing partners. Appreciative inquiry gave them a way to focus their community organizing strategy around positive issues.

All of the pilot interview projects broadened the participants’ views of what was possible, both within themselves and within the city. Looking into the face of a young person, adult leaders found themselves thinking hard about the future and what they could do to ensure that it would be a bright one for the coming generation. Young people learned the power of their own commitment and how to make a difference. Positive intergenerational civic conversations bridged the experience and wisdom of seasoned community builders with the energy and commitment of youth searching for purpose. They yielded deeper insights into the collective future of neighborhoods and of the city as a whole, and paved the way for a wide spectrum of work with Imagine Chicago.
Appreciative Inquiry questions are always positive questions around affirmative topics. In asking and answering them, we get focused on what has life, meaning and value.

When communities use Appreciative Inquiry, they share in a way that stretches collective vision. By bringing their valued experiences into public view, they become civic actors by choice and can act on behalf of what they value. People see themselves as subjects of a system they can actively transform rather than as objects of a system that constrains their imaginations.

To design good appreciative inquiry questions, remember to:

1. Allow questions to evoke ultimate concerns: ask about high point stories, most valued qualities, etc.
2. Use positive questions that build on positive assumptions; i.e., "What about this neighborhood makes you especially glad you live here?"
3. Give a thought-provoking, appealing definition of the topic; e.g., "A leader is anyone who wants to help at this time."
4. Present questions as an invitation; use expansive, positive, feeling, experiential words.
5. Enhance the possibilities of storytelling, by asking questions that focus on personal experiences.
6. Phrase questions in a conversational, friendly tone, and listen eagerly as you would to a close friend.
7. Ask open questions to which you do not know the answer, expecting to learn something surprising and wonderful.
8. Value the experience of the person being interviewed.

For more resources on Appreciative Inquiry, visit the AI Commons: http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu

HUMAN SYSTEMS GROW TOWARD WHAT THEY PERSISTENTLY ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT.
- David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney

THINK POSITIVELY!
the power of the right question

✓ The person who sets the question sets the direction and has the power of a change agent. (Consider the difference between asking a police chief about crime vs. asking about community safety.)

✓ Images of the future are powerful. We move in the direction of what we can imagine.

✓ Negative images and conversations weaken us mentally and physically; positive images strengthen us and what we can accomplish.

✓ Positive communication is essential to mental health and requires practice. We are surrounded by negative vocabulary and need to replace it with self-confidence and community affirmation.

✓ Positive images of youth are essential to creating a social culture in which young people are encouraged to make a contribution. Because many people now see young people as problems to be solved or criminals to be feared, we need to showcase positive stories and images of what young people value and can accomplish and contribute.

✓ Human systems want to move in a positive direction (like plants seeking the sun). Positive questions and feedback create energy — like the sun, they literally make it possible to live and to grow. Young people can help create this positive environment and also hold others accountable to doing so. This requires leadership and courage.

✓ It is important to name and claim what’s working as well as what needs work. This is a place from which you can build.
“I am writing to invite you into a process which I think holds great promise for our city. Imagine Chicago is about to begin its first series of Chicago conversations, in which we hope you will participate. The intent is to get Chicagoans thinking and talking with each other, across generations, about their Chicago stories and hopes, in a way which inspires collaborative action.

Picture Ma and Pa Streeter’s makeshift wooden shack where the Hancock building now stands. Think of those whose dreams for Chicago became reality. Aaron Montgomery Ward, who fought hard to keep the lakefront clear of any building or obstacle that would make it inaccessible to citizens... the designers of the Columbian Exposition of 1893, who wanted to showcase this city’s pride, power, and hope for the future... Jane Addams, who saw the possibility of building urban community and including those who had been left out... Nancy Jefferson, who helped people make and claim their place in the city... What a long way we have come because of many people’s visions for, and commitment to, the future of the city of Chicago.

What are your own hopes for this city? What are you in the process of helping to create? What are your thoughts about the city as you walk along the lakefront or listen to the Symphony? What has been the high point of your life in Chicago and why? What do you plan to do to make the city better than it already is? What do you want to leave for the next generation of citizens?

We are especially hopeful that you, who have been a keeper of the city’s promise, will share your Chicago visions and experiences with a young person who is eager to listen to and learn from your experience. Your doing so will encourage and inspire those who are committing themselves to this volunteer civic process, grounded in hope and personal accountability.

I will call in a few days to seek a 45 minute appointment for a young adult to engage you in a conversation about Chicago. We hope you will have time to share your images and ideas with us.”

Sample Invitation Letter

IMAGINE CHICAGO
INTERGENERATIONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
(1993-1994)

1. How long have you lived in Chicago? In this community?
   a. What first brought your family here?
   b. What is it like for you to live in this community?
2. When you think about the whole city of Chicago, what particular places, people or images represent the city to you?
3. Thinking back over your Chicago memories, what have been real high points for you as a citizen of this city?
4. Why did these experiences mean so much to you?
5. How would you describe the quality of life in Chicago today?
6. What changes in the city would you most like to see?
   a. What do you imagine your own role might be in helping to make this happen?
   b. Who could work with you?
7. Close your eyes and imagine Chicago as you most want it to be in a generation from now. What is it like? What do you see and hear? What are you proudest of having accomplished?
8. As you think back over this conversations, what images stand out for you as capturing your hopes for this city’s future?
9. What do you think would be an effective process for getting people across the city talking and working together on behalf of Chicago’s future? Whom would you want to draw into Chicago conversation?

Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart...
Try to love the questions themselves...
Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them - and the point is to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.

- Rainer Maria Rilke
Nothing pleases me more than to see people smile. The chance to meet new and interesting people, to visit downtown Chicago, was what first drew me to Imagine Chicago. I was a member of the DuSable Youth Leadership Council, and we were participating in the citywide interview project.

My most interesting interview took place with Tom Cookins, a Chicago city planner. He was what I envisioned the typical downtown executive to be, with his dark business suit and stern face. In the interview, I asked him to close his eyes and paint me a picture of Chicago. This question revealed a vibrant side of him. He said, with robust passion, “Tim! You know where you are by the smell! Pizza and pretzels on Michigan Avenue, Garrett’s Popcorn on State Street, hotdogs at Wrigley Field — a food lover’s paradise!” During our interview, I think Tom found a way out of the finite, stressful and monotonous world of budgets, deadlines, objectives and agendas, and rediscovered the infinite possibilities we all had as children.

My most shocking interview was with Gertrude Nielsen. Her simple act of generosity helped pay my way through college. To this day, I have no idea what I said to give her any reason to care about me once I left the room. However, I did learn one of life’s most critical lessons at this time: “Always be at your best because you never know who’s watching.”

Halfway through my freshman year of college, a chaotic chain of events set my life in a tailspin. My grades were not what I deemed acceptable. The tragic loss of beloved friends and family was compounded by the burden of trying to adapt as an African-American to a racially homogeneous college campus. I found myself in a rut of deficit thinking, focusing on what was going wrong instead of what was right in my life, and how I could make it better. After some tremendous soul searching, I realized I had gotten away from the appreciative frame of mind. I started asking everyone from the maintenance staff to the college president what made them feel good. Infused with positive energy, I was asked to sit on many college committees and was awarded the coveted President’s Award in Human Relations. After graduation, I was offered the chance to direct a new effort, Imagine Detroit.

Running my own Imagine project was very difficult for various reasons, mainly because I was in a city where I knew absolutely no one! I felt like a politician before election day, meeting with schools, community groups, clubs, other non-profits and even the Detroit police department, to solicit support. I gave up many nights and weekends to make sure the program was a success. There were some fantastic outcomes. I witnessed another promising young black man so impress his interviewee, that he too was offered a scholarship for college. A middle school student, who interviewed the director of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, was offered a chance to bring students from his school to the Symphony for a private concert and time to play music with some of the world’s greatest instrumentalists.

I feel I have gone full cycle in the Imagine circle of life. I was a teen participant, who then grew into a volunteer and later into a seasoned veteran, to help Imagine Chicago on clutch projects and conferences. I have been the director of Imagine Detroit. And recently, I was entrusted with starting an Imagine project in Kragujevac, Serbia, with Katrina Pavlik, a former staff member of Imagine Chicago. Within three weeks, the youth participants created an Appreciative Inquiry protocol, administered over 150 interviews and started brainstorming a service project to maximize the input received from the interviews. Katrina and I worked to develop a core group of youth, who will continue the Imagine lineage. If all of the youth in Serbia are as dedicated as these, it will soon be an exciting place to visit.

In the realm of non-profit work, Appreciative Inquiry helps me keep a tight grip on reality, because it reminds me of what I am fighting for. We live in a world of extreme and contagious cynicism. We tear people down, without realizing the full effect of our attitudes. By using Appreciative Inquiry, we can express ourselves without the fear of cynical annihilation; we can reestablish community ties and bonds. To identify the core of what is positive in our lives, and in the lives of others, gives us a unique perspective on how the world works and some insight into how we can make it better. At a young age, we can become builders of the human spirit.

- Tim Wilborn can be reached at <thebrownsugahdaddy@hotmail.com>.
Youth: Focus on the Future

“It is an important message to young people that they can do wondrous things.”
- Greg Darnieder, citywide interviewee

Youth are the future. What has become a trite expression carries with it a deep truth: youth have the power to bring the future to the present. The promise of the future is visible in their eyes and in their hands; they embody hope.

Adults, in face-to-face conversations with youth, discover their city's future is no longer an abstraction but an urgent reality. The abilities of young people to see with fresh eyes, to play, and to ask honest, open questions, disarms the cynicism that passes for sophistication. When interviewees in Imagine Chicago's intergenerational interview process were asked to describe the image that best summarized their hope for the city's future, they most often responded by pointing to their young conversation partner and saying: “You!”

Imagine Chicago has modelled the core philosophy that youth are integral and indispensable to any effort seriously committed to focusing on positive community futures. Imagine Chicago’s staff has always been largely comprised of young adults, including Chicago Public Allies <www.publicallies.org> and university interns. By virtue of their energy, curiosity and eagerness to learn and to act, youth have the potential to call adults to account for the hope that is in them and inspire them to action.

Imagine Chicago considers youth the most natural allies in the work of imagining and creating hopeful community futures. Throughout Imagine Chicago’s history, we have continuously sought to carve out spaces for youth to assume their natural and generative role. While not always an easy task, given certain social expectations and dominant attitudes, we have found that the leadership of youth has helped Imagine Chicago grow in dynamic and profound directions. We urge you, who are interested in imagination as a social movement, to embrace this most remarkable resource in every aspect of your work. A good place to start is by contacting local youth organizations interested in expanding opportunities for youth leadership and action.

Tim Wilborn designed the following tool to introduce youth in Imagine Detroit to Appreciative Inquiry:

The Power of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is more than a process, it’s a way of life. How you ask a question can very well determine the type of feedback you receive. To prove it, I’ll need two volunteers.

1. Have one of the volunteers leave the room.
2. Ask the volunteer remaining in the room, “How has your week been?” (More than likely, the person will answer; “Fine,” or “Okay,” or some other one-word response.)
3. Have the first volunteer sit down. Ask the second volunteer to come inside the room and ask them, “Tell me something good that happened to you this week?”
4. Ask the participants in the workshop if they could hear the difference in the two responses.
5. Go to the board and write, “Tell me three things about yourself” and “Tell me three things that you like about yourself”.
6. Ask the students what type of response they think people will give to the first question versus the second question.

How to Use Appreciative Inquiry

1. Ask participants to write down 2-3 questions they could ask a complete stranger on the street and get a positive response.
2. Once they have their questions, pair the youth up and have them ask each other the questions they have written, and take notes on the answers to share with the whole group.
3. Bring the group back together and ask, “From the questions you just asked, what new things did you learn about the person you just met?”
4. “What questions got the most feedback?”
Assessing Intergenerational Inquiry: Content and Impact

After a first round of appreciative interviews were completed, how did Imagine Chicago articulate what happened and what it meant for future work?

Imagine Chicago carried out three interrelated sets of assessments in its city-wide and community-based intergenerational interview pilots: 1) understanding the content of the conversations — the ideas, information, images and initiatives shared by interview participants; 2) determining the impact of the interactions — the experiences of the conversations, the kinds of relationships and feelings emerging from them; 3) evaluating the implications for future work. These assessments were ongoing, done at multiple stages, with a range of participants.

Our first level of assessment came out of the specific thoughts and experiences shared in the interviews. An adult mentor was present at each intergenerational conversation to take notes. Immediately following the interview, the mentor discussed with the interviewee highlights of the conversation and noteworthy perspectives. The interview transcript was typed up within a week. This provided the basis for the thank you note written by the young person, as well as an integrative learning opportunity. At several month intervals, groups of young interviewers gathered to discuss what stood out for them from multiple interviews and their current thoughts about Chicago and its future. They then compared responses across multiple interviewees and neighborhoods. It was in such a conversation that the “themes of the interviews” were named by the young interviewers. A further content assessment was done by a volunteer team of graduate students who read through and evaluated all the interview transcripts. They clustered the appreciative questions around the three main stages of Appreciative Inquiry: “valuing the present”, “envisioning the future”, and “co-creating the future”. They interpreted the overarching themes to see what they told us about peoples’ experiences and their conceptions of Chicago’s future. A unique portrait of the city emerged, characterized by diversity and duality, with multiple layers of relationships, and many, many new possibilities.

Our second level of assessment approached the interview processes as a series of learning experiences. To gain an understanding of what the conversations meant for interviewers and interviewees, Imagine Chicago conducted a formal evaluation with several participants from all of the pilots. Three impacts were particularly noteworthy:

1. Shared Identity: The conversations brought people together, across boundaries of age, race, experience and geography, to reflect on their relationship to the city as a whole. They began to see commonalities among their visions for the city’s future and felt encouraged by their respective commitments.

2. Intergenerational Partnership and Accountability: The interview conversations opened up lines of communication between the generations. Both young people and adults commented that they gained an appreciative understanding of the other generation.

3. New Possibilities and Methods of Civic Conversation: Appreciative inquiry as a tool/perspective also made an impact on participants. Learning to ask and answer positive questions, and to actively listen, was a welcome shift for many participants. The conversations also infused public spaces with constructive and creative possibilities.
Building Blocks to the Future

Intergenerational appreciative inquiry proved very inspiring and motivating. Adult commitments were refreshed. Hope came alive. New possibilities for engagement were imagined and shared. Asking positive open-ended questions was successful in establishing a lively sense of shared civic identity, creating effective methods for constructive intergenerational dialogue, and expanding the sense among the young people that they could make a difference. But the dialogue only took the first step – of understanding what was possible, and imagining where that could lead in the future. There was no structure within which to create that future. Imagine Chicago learned that the appreciative intergenerational interview process would be much more effective if it happened within structures that could move more readily to action, around ideas for which individuals could take personal responsibility.

Imagine Chicago has designed its subsequent initiatives to give participants a chance to be city creators in more concrete and sustained ways and move from dialogue to action. That involves working with individuals who are embedded within institutions (e.g. parents, teachers, young leaders within community organizations, museum staff, etc.). Program initiatives are designed to be personally engaging and meaningful, build the capacity of the organizations involved around their core mission, and lead to visible community outcomes for which individuals are accountable both to the project team and the organizations they represent.

This approach involves Imagine Chicago in three interrelated activities:
* designing frameworks for community and organizational innovation with positive and empowering assumptions, that build skills through hands-on experiences and create accountable structures and networks for moving forward key ideas which emerge from the groups;
* developing innovative programs which test and showcase tools and approaches that can be used by community groups to inspire and sustain civic engagement and action;
* building dynamic collaborations between institutions (represented by interested change agents), which enable them to accomplish their central mission and build their long-term capacity — in addition to creating something of benefit for the city as a whole.

“People struggle because they believe something better is attainable.”
– Bill Ayers, citywide interviewee

“We want a city in which people ask, ‘What am I responsible for?’ ... The future of our city depends on everybody.”
– Franklin Cole, citywide interviewee

Invitational Questions -

What is the particular value of intergenerational learning?

How can interview content be used to stimulate further civic dialogue?

How can intergenerational processes transform existing structures and relationships?

Share Your Thoughts, Add More...
Freeing the Spirit of Hope and Imagination

Chicago is a living exhibit of imagination and resourcefulness, of civic spirit at work within individuals and among institutions. The physical and social infrastructure manifests the creativity, choices, and investments of citizens from generation to generation. Where hope is alive and connections abound, the inventory of the possible expands. Individuals and groups share vision and invest energy and resources. New buildings are developed, new businesses started. Parents organize a neighborhood arts club where children learn to express their dreams and ambitions. Teenagers set off for college, planning to return to serve their communities. Life is honored, community expands.

Hope is the vital energy that builds confidence and encourages investment. Hope brings enormous value to the future of the city. Hope, the willingness to celebrate what can be, generates remarkable resources for creative connections. Hope alone is realistic because it perceives the scope of our real possibilities. Hope does not strive after things that have no place, but after things that have no place as of yet, but can acquire one.

Above all, hope is a choice — not a feeling. We can tune ourselves to the frequency of hope by the questions we ask and the questions we live. Consider: What dreams or whispers are at the heart of your own life that may be seeking your commitment? What do you want to learn? What impresses your heart right now? What small change could you make that might make a big difference? How could you make solidarity with a stranger a daily practice? Who might stand with you? What will it take for us to create a just economy, a global community, in which no one is wasted, in which violence and addiction have lost their power?

Imagine Chicago’s work is living proof that peoples’ highest aspirations are possible to translate into action. Some of our practices and tools for freeing the spirit of hope and imagination include:

- Involving the “public” in learning communities that motivate change, make information available in an accessible way, and respectfully engage marginalized participants, including young people.
- Tapping into the lived experience of community members and finding ways for them to collaboratively and positively inquire about their experiences.
- Asking provocative, constructive questions and listening to responses with respect, delight, confidence, and relaxed high expectations.
- Celebrating and communicating the past, as an inventory of possibilities for the future.
- Encouraging participation and leadership from multiple generations, so that a vision of the future is present and highly visible.
- Connecting individuals, institutions and systems with common values and goals.
- Minimizing models of control and dependence, by encouraging personal initiative, and validating each individual’s and organization’s skills, knowledge and values.
- Integrating artistic expression into actions, so that people discover themselves as creative agents.
- Recognizing spirituality as a primary resource for hope.
- Re-enchanting and expanding the language of citizenship to include civic imagination, civic literacy, and learning for public life.

Taken together, these practices help to connect individuals, groups and the city as a whole in a way which is personal but can renew whole systems from within. Together, we can create a culture of public learning and action, which continuously energizes and harnesses hope and imagination as resources for public good.

Where there is no hope, the people perish.

- Proverbs, 29:18
Looking out the windows of Chicago public housing, some see a bleak picture of despair. The ‘projects’, as they are often known, are viewed as over-populated minority communities, plagued by crime, inadequate education, and insufficient employment opportunities. Leslie Welch, however, saw a different vision — of hope and possibility for herself and her community.

As an adolescent, Leslie struggled against feelings of being unneeded and unloved. Yet, she did not allow despair to have the final word. She got involved in a youth development program organized by the Chicago Area Project. The program encouraged young people to take control of their surroundings, by speaking their minds and maintaining a positive attitude.

Through the Chicago Area Project, Leslie was invited to an Imagine Chicago focus group in 1993 to test the viability of the intergenerational interview process. “I remember she asked all the tough questions,” recalls Bliss Browne, “and I realized her leadership could help us think through the answers.” Bliss asked Leslie to lead the youth forum the following week which field-tested the interview questions. Leslie saw Imagine Chicago as a means to fulfill her goals to go to college and help her community move beyond oppressive socio-economic limitations.

It was also around this time that Leslie found inspiration in a deep faith. Prayer, along with church and community organization leaders, became a support system for her. They helped her sustain a spirit of hope as she pursued her dreams.

Despite her strong commitment, Leslie faced challenges every day. “The environments that I lived and worked in were completely contrasting. I would go to some lofty office of a multi-millionaire and have a conversation that would open the possibilities. Then, I would go home to a two-flat with a ‘For Sale’ sign in the front. My family was struggling, and I could see drug dealers all around my neighborhood. It was hard.”

Leslie, however, was not one to give up. Her faith and her work with Imagine Chicago enabled her to develop a sense of responsibility to her community. She made deep connections with her interviewees, and began to understand that isolation which separated people from different walks of life also restricted possibilities in her community. Leslie started having informal conversations with her own family and neighbors, harvesting seeds of possibility wherever she went. She discovered conversations were powerful and effective tools: “If civic leaders and ordinary citizens don’t talk, the process is not going to work. We have to talk to each other.”

As she continued to contribute to her community, Leslie accomplished one of her goals: she went to college. The challenges of college life did not hinder her involvement as a young leader. Her unwavering commitment to work for the common good resulted in her being invited to serve as a member of Imagine Chicago’s founding board. She developed and ran workshops on Appreciative Inquiry, so that other young people could also have strategies for asking positive questions. She travelled to Baltimore and Dallas to help launch Imagine projects in those cities.

Leslie also served as co-chair on the national board of Youth as Resources in Chicago for two years, working with city leaders to develop policies and initiatives that directly incorporated young people into leadership roles in the life of a city. Interacting with political and civic leaders might intimidate some young adults, but Leslie’s strength and spirit prepared her to sit at the table and engage in powerful conversations.

Today, as Resource Development Coordinator of the Chicago Area Project, Leslie continues to motivate and inspire hope in the people and places she touches. She believes that if individuals maintain a sense of possibility, and continue to engage in dialogue with one another, positive changes will emerge. “It’s not about who has more money or who has less money. It’s about people. When we talk and listen, other people can identify themselves in us. We’re not so different.”

- Leslie Welch can be reached at <lesliw_cap@yahoo.com>.
Hope Rocks

In community, people name and claim their fears and hopes and take responsibility for both. In April 2000, the Council of Aboriginal Leaders met in Perth with Bliss Browne to share stories of being dispossessed, of having their culture destroyed, of searching for identity. Dawn Gilchrist, an aboriginal health outreach worker, decided to open the next gathering by passing around a painted rock: “As the rock comes around, I invite you to name something in your life this week that has given you hope.” By the time the rock had moved around the circle, it was almost too hot to hold. Dawn gave the rock to Bliss as a gift.

The next weekend, at a teacher retreat in Chicago, Bliss opened the circle with Dawn’s rock, asking, “What is one thing in your classroom this week that has given you hope?” As the teachers shared their stories, hope gained power. Later that year in Greece, conference attendees who heard the story decided to gather rocks on a nearby beach and then share their stories of those with whom they planned to claim hope. Dawn’s hope has now circled the world!

Dream Tree of Transformation

Following the appreciative inquiry process between young people and adult leaders, Imagine Chicago hosted a citywide “Imagination Celebration” to which all interviewers and their interviewees were invited, in order to disseminate the findings of the intergenerational interviews. The celebration room was organized into small intergenerational table groupings. Each table had interactive, arts-based activities to further develop the themes coming out of the interviews. As the appreciative inquiry process had already broadened both the youth’s and the adults’ views of what was possible, for themselves and for the city, it was important that the Imagination Celebration strengthen and expand their renewed hope and commitment and focus it into concrete actions.

The culminating activity of the day was the completion of a large (8’x 8’) Chicago dream tree. The “leaves” of the tree were drawn in advance by young interview interpreters who read several interview transcripts and inscribed on the canvas the core vision they caught from each interviewee. For example, written on these leaves were phrases like: ‘a city without hopelessness, where kids can be happy’, ‘discipline, determination and honesty’, ‘creative tension: the arts in Chicago’, ‘connections for partnership’, ‘the skyline – tremendous energy and potential’, and more.

The “trunk” border was defined by common themes emerging from the interviews as interpreted by another group of young people who read all the interview transcripts. The categories included inner strength, the power of commitment, common life, and livelihood for all.

At the end of the Imagination Celebration, each participant was invited to summarize their vision. On a small piece of paper, each wrote one thing they would do to move the city in the direction of their own expanded vision for it. Those commitments were then shared and stuffed into fruit pods sewn onto the tree canvas, becoming the seeds for spreading the ideas and vision further.
Hope In Shackles: Challenges for Freeing the Mind, Body and Spirit

In Chicago, hope faces some serious enemies. Discrimination by race, economic status and ethnicity has become institutionalized in housing, neighborhood demographics, and political boundaries. Many people are isolated within segregated communities and mindsets and can’t imagine themselves as meaningfully connected to others who are different. Isolation leads to a loss of imagination about what is possible.

Apathy, addiction and violence are symptomatic of the loss of hope. For the most educated, cynicism, which erodes hope and creativity, passes for sophistication. Negative images dominate in the mass media and play an influential role in the cancerous internalization of disorder and decay. All over the world, there is a well-acknowledged “confidence gap” with respect to institutions, politics and leadership. Without confidence in a viable future, personal investment makes no sense.

Freeing our minds and bodies to recover a spirit of hope may require several levels of unlearning. For one, we need to evaluate the discourse of contemporary social, economic and political development work. Deficit-based evaluation, judgment, and labelling (“poor”, “underclass”, “lost generation”) turn people into objects and victims and hinder the emergence of hope and of community. An imagination movement must shift and re-enchant language to reclaim our creativity and power as subjects who create both words and actions that can enable the greater flourishing of human life.

On another level, we have to work to unlearn the mindset of division and hierarchy which seeks to rank and separate people by race, gender, class, religion, language, culture, and educational attainment. How can we instead generate and practice a language of inclusion and help to create constructive experiences of difference? What experiences stretch a sense of ‘we’ and ‘our’ (instead of reinforcing ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ thinking?) How can we demystify the role and burden of the ‘professional’ in favor of expecting that everyone’s contribution is valuable and necessary to creating a vital future?

The difference between life as a problem to be solved by experts, and life as a mystery to be embraced by everyone, is distinct. Throughout this publication, you will discover how Imagine Chicago is developing frameworks, language and networks to cultivate hope as a resource for public good that involves everyone. The stories and images suggest how hope can come alive and be sustained without institutionalizing it. As you read, notice where resistances arise in you, as well as what inspires you and opens you even more to the powers of imagination and hope.

You must be the change you wish to create in the world. - Mahatma Gandhi

Invitational Questions -

How does a focus on hope fundamentally redefine work with communities?

What catalyzes hope in us, individually and collectively?

What sustains hope, in the face of trials and obstacles?

Share Your Thoughts, Add More...
imagine...

Stretching the Boundaries of Citizenship

Around the world, the modern experience of citizenship has sometimes been reduced to voting, paying taxes, lobbying the government for (or against) a particular policy, or requesting resources from a government body. Many feel disenchanted with this “thin democracy” and excluded from any real decision-making and control over the future. And so they have turned to other personal or social matters and left the political game for the select few to play — an attitude which fuels disaffection, apathy and hopelessness, rather than generating a sense of self-efficacy and community transformation.

To constitute a rich culture of democratic participation requires imaginative, effective citizens — people who can act with others to effect positive change of their own design, people with the commitment, skills, persistence and courage to actively shape their community’s future. Over the last 10 years, Imagine Chicago has been exploring what it means to be a citizen and how the boundaries of citizenship can be expanded.

Part of the stretching of citizenship has come from Imagine Chicago’s support of learning communities that make it possible to have positive, constructive experiences with people from different cultures or neighborhoods, among different professions, or across generations. Interacting in situations that may be new, unnatural, or unusual for us helps to challenge our prior assumptions and beliefs. We engage in deeper levels of learning in order to resolve these ‘disturbances’ and to regain a sense of balance and meaning. Reflecting on what is happening in these diverse exchanges, and sharing these reflections with each other, leads to the development of new understanding, skills, values and attitudes. Many times, the learning we gain from dissonant but constructive contexts can take us into new directions and help us to transcend our limitations, fears and insecurities.

The Greeks in early Athens recognized that cities and citizens are constituted through public conversations. As we name what we want for our communities, and work together on behalf of those hopes, we come to realize that each of our futures is intimately connected with others; we find language which bridges difference, and we expand our sense of the community to which we belong. As we move to the edge of our narrow circles to engage in this broader conversation and action, we find ourselves standing at the center of a much larger circle.

Finally, citizenship is stretched by our sharing in public why civic engagement matters. Imagine Chicago encourages discussion of what motivates us to act in community, valuing whatever inner or ‘spiritual’ strength sustains a commitment to the common good. For citizens to actively shape the future, they must see purpose in and derive meaning from their work. Rather than ignore this deepest desire, Imagine Chicago has sought ways to ignite it and to make it public. It is this elevation of what makes us human that takes citizenship, in a movement of imagination, to a whole new level.
WHO IS A CITIZEN LEADER?
Local community residents, of any age, with vision and commitment. These citizen leaders from Chicago neighborhoods come together in a shared learning process that helps them exchange ideas, encourage each other, and learn from one another, using a Community Innovation Guide framework of organizing questions designed by Imagine Chicago.

WHAT DO CITIZEN LEADERS DO?
1. Participate in a leadership development process that enables them to design and implement imaginative community projects. A citizen leader class can be city-wide or based in a single neighborhood.
2. Recruit and lead a local project team of at least six members.
3. Prepare a proposal for a community innovation.
4. Create the project with their team.
5. Document, publicize and sustain the project so as to inspire even greater participation and innovation in the community.

WHY DO WE NEED CITIZEN LEADERS?
Locally organized citizen groups — including young people — can make a visible difference in their own community, in ways that experts, governments, and social services cannot. This program helps to increase asset-based leadership by community members and expand civic participation.

HOW DOES CITIZEN LEADERS WORK?
A local “citizen leader” group has the chance to propose an imaginative project, which makes visible the core values and assets of the community, and which develops leadership and participation locally. The innovation can strengthen existing networks, such as a scout group or a parent club, or can generate new networks. The more an innovation builds on and strengthens already existing projects and structures which are working well, the better the project tends to work.

For example, a group of teens might organize a directory for their neighborhood, which would link young adults to positive programs and volunteer opportunities. Or an intergenerational team might create a community service or neighborhood history program out of their local community center. Citizen leaders submit proposals for community innovations that meet the following criteria:

- contribute to a positive community future.
- require creativity and commitment.
- leverage the human resources of the community.
- reinforce the involvement of members of the local community.
- increase the positive self-esteem of residents.
- will be sustained by members of the community.
- can lead to more innovations.
- give community members responsibility for the planning, implementation and evaluation of the project.

Citizen Leader projects are of value, not only to one community, but also to a larger network, as they expand the “bank” of working innovations that communities can use as inspiration for getting citizens involved.
In 1996, a group of citizens from Austin (a neighborhood in Chicago) participated together in the Citizen Leaders Program. Their initial project was an intergenerational softball league, so teenagers and older residents could get to know each other without fear. That initiative inspired block clean-ups before the games and team barbecues after them. Ultimately, conversation among neighbors led to the creation of block clubs, community gardens, intergenerational sports programs, and a youth club. With support from a local community organization, these block leaders helped launch a neighborhood-wide program to bring residents together to collectively address important issues. The Every Block is a Village <www.ebvonline.org> program they started is now an organization of 68 block clubs, each with resident ‘citizen leaders,’ which organizes around issues like community cleanliness, economic development, and youth opportunities. A weekly sharing of stories, about what has happened, what needs to happen and how it can happen, continually strengthens the process, while the visible outcomes and growing volunteer commitment attract other neighbors who see it is possible to make a difference.

Every Block is a Village has worked hand-in-hand with the community-based Westside Health Authority, producing networks for employment opportunities, childcare, transportation, and community health and safety. Together, they have nurtured community pride, trust, and commitment. In 2002, they created the Westside Health Authority/Every Block is a Village After-school Program. The program fosters relationships between high school and elementary school students through reading, arts/crafts, outings, and movie nights. Through EBV online, neighbors can connect to each other and citizens across the world. In all of their community initiatives, Every Block is a Village exemplifies the idea that each citizen can and must contribute to their neighborhood’s wellbeing. The practices and values of EBV are now being actively shared with at least three new Chicago neighborhoods who have been inspired by their example.
Meeting the Challenges to Citizen Leadership

When members of a community have struggled for change and not succeeded, a fear of failure can paralyze people from taking the (perceived) risk of imagining and creating again. Hope is costly; it involves acknowledging real failure and disappointment, and still being willing to work on behalf of what is not yet visible. Citizens of an imagination movement must become ‘learning activists’, seeing failure as a learning experience and exploring how community strengths can be utilized to overcome potential pitfalls or conflicts. A focus on collective assets and strengths enables citizens to re-orient themselves towards what works instead of what doesn’t.

A second challenge for citizen leadership is a learned dependency on experts, government services, or external agents that can stifle and obstruct community-rooted imagination and action. Too often, we have placed our trust in institutions and resources beyond our reach. This includes the belief that money is what makes change happen. Nurturing a different sense of citizenship (and by design, a different sense of democracy) requires an increased personal and public accountability to each other and to our places, and a recognition of vision and commitment as driving forces for change.

People who understand themselves, their strengths and their spirit, and who are committed to sharing their understandings with families, neighbors and friends, are powerful agents of change. This extends ‘citizen leadership’ to everyone: young people, parents, grandparents, business owners, artists, teachers, and so on. While government services need not be discounted in this process, making the shift from dependency to accountability/responsibility means that those internally-rooted in their communities will be the keepers of what counts.

Another challenge comes from those who do not believe that certain communities are capable of positive change. Communities themselves have a kind of collective imagination and mindset, often shaped by media images of the community, which may have been internalized. Some organizations and communities are held up as always moving forward; local residents assume, “If we did that, we can do the next thing.” Positive images become the basis for attracting more engagement and money. In other communities, only negative happenings seem to attract attention and get magnified; people imagine things getting worse. (Sometimes, this mindset extends even to countries and continents).

People find hope by being connected to things that are bigger than they are. To have a different future, communities must have hope that they can move forward as a whole, not just as individuals or small collectives. That requires positive images and mindsets, as well as connecting multiple institutions and individuals within a community, so that the sum ends up being greater than the parts. How can we work together to connect to bigger wholes from which we can draw and sustain courage?

Invitational Questions -

How does dissonance change us from within, so that we act from without?

How do you connect self-change to systemic change and social justice?

How do new understandings of citizenship help us in building communities of faith in civic spirit?

Share Your Thoughts, Add More...
Imagine Chicago is a catalyst for creative connections, especially those which result in the development of a civic identity for individuals and organizations. To cultivate hope and to actively engage people in identifying with and creating a positive and hopeful future is a critical part of our mission. Imagine Chicago has particularly challenged individuals and groups to generate meaningful opportunities for those who have not been involved as civic actors, to discover ways to link their considerable gifts to the communities in which they live. This is important, both as a matter of social justice and as a foundation for reinvigorating democracy. Democracy depends fundamentally on our freedom to create, to participate in shaping the discourse and institutions by which we live.

How can we reconstitute our identities as owners and creators of Chicago’s future? Imagine Chicago encourages people to think of cities as a constructive context, where meaning is created through connections. Ideas and actions emerge out of uncommon dialogues and innovative partnerships that bridge racial, cultural, generational, and geographical boundaries. Imagine Chicago’s frameworks foster inclusion, model positive communication and harness hope. How do we do that? By encouraging people to see community, not as a given, but as a set of systems constantly under construction, and governed by the values, choices and activities of individual citizens and groups. Imagine Chicago listens and encourages the articulation of what is possible and practical.

A good example is Imagine Chicago’s civic literacy program, “Reading Chicago and Bringing it Home” (see opposite page). We offer public school parents, who have often been objects in a depersonalized system of education and welfare, the opportunity to understand and shape the systems at the heart of a city’s life and a family’s budget — transportation, energy, education, food, communication, wealth creation, recreation, housing, health. We see parents as subjects who contribute, so we treat them as such by respecting their intelligence and interest in learning and their commitment as involved parents. By learning to read their city, they re-envision themselves as community leaders and thinkers, not as objects or victims. Acting as agents of change within their families, their schools and their communities, engages them and reshapes their self-understanding as citizens. Re-imagining and consequently re-organizing, their relationship to the city and its systems shifts power away from unresponsive bureaucratic structures to families and neighbors who act on their values.

In this and other initiatives, Imagine Chicago encourages participants to shift from being “objects” of city life, in a city which is an IT, to being “subjects” (I decide, I create, I connect, I think) within a city which is a WE. It’s important not only to learn to think “WE” but also to live “WE”. So Imagine Chicago designs and facilitates imaginative partnerships for developing civic identity and effective citizenship skills. In this way, organizations, as well as individuals, experience being part of a WE, who act together to create a positive future.

In the last ten years, Imagine Chicago has seen whole families imagine and create new ways to enrich their own lives and the future of their communities. We have seen schools reorder themselves as centers of imaginative community education, and teachers rededicate themselves and renew their commitment to their vocations. People are experiencing themselves as creators of life and meaning, not just inheritors of a fixed set of information, institutions and systems. They are coming alive as citizens.
Gerardo Camacho and his wife Agustina have lived in W. Humboldt Park on the near north side of Chicago for the past five years. There they raise their children: Guadalupe (13), Vanessa (8), Eduardo (6), and Monica (9 months). Gerardo’s job requires him to work the third shift, returning home in the early morning to spend a few hours with his children and then sleep until his next shift. In his experience, it is common for parents with busy work and family lives not to have time to be involved in school and/or community activities. Gerardo and Agustina are not such parents. The older Camacho children all attend Alfred Nobel Elementary School. Aside from taking them there and back, Gerardo and Agustina knew little about the school and maintained few connections to it. But they did know that they wanted to ensure that their children would grow and learn in safe, creative, and stimulating environments. The school coordinator offered them the opportunity to get involved in Imagine Chicago’s Reading Chicago and Bringing it Home parent development program. “From what Ms. Lopez said, it sounded interesting. We decided that it might be a good way to discover new resources to help our children,” recalled Gerardo. Reading Chicago and Bringing it Home met monthly in locations such as the Chicago Botanic Garden and the Chicago Historical Society. Parents learned, in interactive workshops, about systems central to both family and city life — like transportation, energy, education, communication. Each topic featured one core skill essential to city living (map skills, budgeting, using public transportation, primary health care, reading a bill, computer literacy). Parents designed family activities to do with their children that reinforced key ideas and learning methods. Through research, discussing life experience, visiting museum exhibits, hearing presentations, and sharing ideas with parents from other cultures and neighborhoods, participants had the opportunity to think through what makes a family and city work.

At the first meeting, Gerardo and Agustina were observers, listening to Imagine Chicago staff describe the program. As other parents asked questions, they realized that many were dealing with the same issues, despite differences in race and culture. Encouraged by both participants and facilitators, they began to actively engage in workshops and field trips. Slowly, yet steadily, new conversations were taking place on various levels. “Through my experience in the parent program, I learned that if you work at something, there is bound to be some change. When we got home from a meeting, we would take time and talk to each other about what we learned. We were able to open up discussions with our children about what they did and how they learned,” said Gerardo. Better communication in the family resulted from these efforts.

As graduates of the program, Gerardo and Agustina have set several goals for the future. They look forward to hosting a variety of conversations, in order to foster a neighborhood culture where people of all traditions and ethnic groups can continue to discuss their interests: “A few people can accomplish a lot, but they are just a start.” In addition, they want to inspire others to contribute to various levels of community work. “We as a community might be small, but if we stick together, we can be a stronger force.” With this vision in mind, Gerardo ran for the parent representative position on the Nobel School’s Local School Council and won the election. Most importantly, Gerardo and Agustina hope to set an example for their children, so that they grow to feel the same hope for the future and open up infinite possibilities for their own lives.

The full curriculum of “Reading Chicago and Bringing It Home” is available at www.imaginechicago.org/parent_dev.html
Making Civic Connections

In 1996, the National Endowment for the Humanities challenged communities to start a national conversation about “American Pluralism and Identity”. Imagine Chicago launched Making Civic Connections, a series of intergenerational public forums linking community values to issues of civic identity and participation. Community groups discussed and discovered what they had in common as Chicagoans and as ‘Americans’.

Program organizers began by contacting religious and cultural organizations including “newcomer” communities and inviting them to participate with an intergenerational team which included a humanist from their own community. The invitation resulted in 19 teams, including participants from the Zoroastrian, Kampuchean Buddhist, Somalian, Laotian Christian, Filipino, and Native American communities, just to name a few.

Throughout the summer, ‘community scholars’ led intra-group preparatory conversations in which each group discussed and documented their own ethnic, religious, historical, and cultural identity around the question: “How do we want to be known in the city?” The Mexican community, for example, thought that “while there are greater employment opportunities in the U.S., racism and discrimination are key factors reducing the quality of life and the advancement of the Mexican community.”

As part of these initial conversations, some groups even drafted “declarations of independence” as a way to identify the rights and values most important to them.

Three communities then combined into groups to have conversations in local venues, such as a library. These meetings were open to the public, and each conversation was designed around a series of organizing questions. Certain key national documents were used to further stimulate discussion.

This program brought many voices to the table who may not otherwise have an opportunity to be heard. Participants could reflect in public and frame common concerns. They were invited to share their perspectives on topics ranging from “Remembering the Tests of History” and “Considering Chicago as a Testing Ground for Democracy” to “Imagining Chicago’s Future Together”. Conversations were initiated around opening questions, like “Why does the U.S. Constitution begin with the phrase, ‘We the people?’” The intent was to provide an uncommon opportunity for substantive dialogue about how the city’s future gets created out of the best of our collective inheritance. One Filipino leader commented, “For the twenty years we have been in Chicago, we have only been talking in our community organization about survival. Now we have been asked what we have to contribute to the city. It is an exciting question that we are now asking ourselves.”

One of the most engaging moments of the program occurred with participants from Chicago’s Baha’i Community, Haiti’s Tenth Department Organization and the Muslim Social Scientists Group. Group introductions fueled subsequent conversations about the slave revolt in the Haitian community, the history of Islam, and fundamental beliefs of the Baha’i faith. Soon members of each team were actively engaging in a discussion about the strength of diversity and the place of religion in a “secular” society.

The conversations built better understandings within and among groups, and also set the stage for various joint community efforts. As Harry Fouché, of Haiti’s Tenth Department Organization stated, “From these exchanges, we are not only learning from each other, we are also discovering who we really are ourselves.”
**Expanding Urban Imagination with Museums**

At the Chicago Historical Society (CHS), history comes alive in a way that one can engage it in public conversation. In *Making Civic Connections*, 125 people, representing 19 distinct newcomer immigrant groups in Chicago, gathered together for an evening at CHS. There, they discussed unresolved questions that produced profound American struggles, including a tragic and pivotal civil war. Abraham Lincoln himself spoke (represented by scholar/actor Michael Krebs), repeating his speech on “The Last Best Hope of Earth.” He addressed questions raised in the chief sentence of the Declaration: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal” and noted continuities between the revolutionary Declaration and the continuing political and social revolution. The audience, both as communities and general public, engaged “Lincoln” at crucial stages along the way, raising questions from their own experiences. Such an exchange brought historical issues critical to American identity into a current and powerful conversation between the past and the present.

Understanding systems as constructed over time requires learning about what has been, as well as imagining what can be. Museums are “public spaces” which showcase historical and cultural perspectives about life in a given place. They invite public conversation and engage their viewers in thinking through ideas and issues in an interactive way. The process of exhibit creation itself, for which museums are best known, moves from understanding to imagining and creating. Museums help us make connections, think differently, see more. Imagine Chicago has been intimately connected to local museums throughout its six-year history as external partner for the Urban Imagination Network, a seven-school, six-museum partnership focused on improving reading comprehension and helping expand urban imagination.

When the Urban Imagination Network was first established, the only connection between the schools and the museums in the partnership was the standard field trip experience. In a school system driven by test scores, there was a citywide trend to separate reading process from reading content. Visual arts were an isolated experience of the occasional arts class. Parent involvement in schools included only limited activities such as attending report-card pick-up night. For participating museums, work with schools meant primarily teacher and student workshops and occasional parent involvement as field trip chaperones.

The Urban Imagination Network gave schools a much bigger window into museums. As schools partnered with one museum each year, teachers came to see how the museum worked and how to make greater use of this resource. One of the goals of the project was to bring the exhibit approach into the schools, to reduce the distance between museum and school by creating hundreds of museums — the classrooms and hallways within the participating schools. While at first the power of the museums as unique and remarkable collections of knowledge enhanced the project’s attraction to students, teachers, and parents, the project ultimately demystified the museums. The participating schools came to understand that a museum is a way of showing and sharing knowledge, just as their own students’ exhibits are. Teachers learned to organize their work with a museum independently. Museum educators began to call on partner schools to help clarify an exhibit plan or identify programs needed for city schools.

The museum connection was especially important to enhancing family learning. When parents in the Urban Imagination Network studied transportation issues, they did so at CHS, beginning by deciding what items they would have chosen to put in their wagon as a pioneer on a long journey. Reading first person narratives of a pioneer journey helped build a personal connection to the artifacts in the exhibit hall on pioneer life in Illinois. A second activity involved thinking through the relationship among refrigerated railroad transportation, farming and the development of Chicago as a stockyard and mail order center. The activity opened up parents’ understanding of the many connected systems that constitute a city’s life. By seeing (and touching) historical objects that showcased the ways transportation had changed over time, parents could more readily imagine choices for changes in the future. This led to examining the citizen action transportation plan being debated currently in the state legislature. The museum connection helped bring the city connection alive.

Don’t let the focus on cost, or durability, or aesthetics destroy the major point of the museum: to be used, to be understood.

- Donald A. Norman
Media and technology can be useful tools for documenting and disseminating the actions and insights that emerge from imaginative community processes. They can potentially expand the conversation to include more images and voices and enrich the levels of understanding and kinds of actions undertaken by communities. They can facilitate the opening and sharing of many stories and forms of human expression. They provide a mechanism for people to share publicly what is personally important to them. Yet media and technology can also distort, discredit and discourage. What should those of us engaged in creative and constructive intergenerational citizen work consider when enlisting media and technology?

One point of reference is who controls the media and technology. This relates primarily to power over content. An Imagine effort might consider how and whether it is able to influence and shape the content of the media or technology used, or whether decisions related to that content are necessarily out of ordinary citizens’ hands. For example, Imagine Chicago has worked in partnership with a few of Chicago’s local newspapers, sharing good stories and enlisting their interest in covering positive stories that showcase what is possible. In St. Louis, the editorial board of the largest paper decided to create an “Imagine St. Louis” section in the newspaper to highlight issues and related resources for action on matters of local concern.

A second point of reference is who uses the media and technology. Are the media and technology available to and usable by a diverse range of citizens in the community or are they the exclusive privilege of a few? Electronic based communication can be expensive, or require specific skills and training to use, and relies on a particular kind of infrastructure or climate. These (and many other) factors will inform an Imagine project as to which audiences will be engaged and included by virtue of access to specific media and technology, and which will be excluded by the same.

A third point of reference is who creates the media and technology. Images are powerful. Those who create images also communicate their biases and perspectives. People make choices when they produce media and technologies and those choices reveal what they believe to be true — about individuals and communities, about realities and possibilities. There is no such thing as ‘objective truth’ in newspapers, televisions, textbooks. We must therefore raise to consciousness underlying assumptions and biases and ask: Are the images and ‘truths’ (with a small ‘t’) represented nurturing, or hindering, hope, imagination and action?

Another reference point for evaluating media and technologies is their impacts on us, individually and socially. Communications media — where not only the answers, but also the questions are given — can diminish creativity and often bury peoples’ self- and social knowledge, as it facilitates the consumption of ready-made images instead of the creation of original ones. Current research suggests that certain media and technologies have a debilitating effect on children, as well as adults, not only in terms of encouraging violence and materialism, but also by fundamentally re-shaping brains, weakening cognitive learning and damaging social relationships.

Today, the variety of existing media and technologies lie on a spectrum of energy, infrastructure, power, money and literacy requirements: Satellite television and the world wide web... radio and newspapers... music, dance, puppetry, storytelling, painting, etc. Embedded within this spectrum are also other axes: from global to local, from elite to ordinary. Given the desire for inclusive and open conversation in Imagine work, a range of communication approaches is necessary. The key, of course, will be discerning the use and value of a particular medium or technology, in appreciation of the context, the people and place involved, the questions being considered and the task at hand. The more we can employ a diversity of media and technology, the greater our chances of expanding public imagination and the movement as a whole.

If you are interested in the impact of images and stories on people, families, communities, cultures and the world, “Images and Voices of Hope” is a series of locally organized, international conversations exploring these topics. To learn how to participate, visit <www.ivofhope.org>
The Generative Powers of Civic Dialogues

“An unanswered question is a fine travelling companion. It sharpens your eye for the road.”
- Rachel Remen

Stereotypes, judgments, defensiveness, fear and a priori decisions about whose opinion counts often sabotage conversations before they even begin. What makes constructive, creative dialogue among ‘ordinary’ people possible?

Imagine Chicago sees three interconnected powers as vital for civic dialogue. First is the power of positive framing. Human beings are full of potential, rich in strengths and talents, with energy and vitality to dream and create. Even complaints mask a deep desire for change. Conversations therefore do not need to be about what our problems or needs are, but about how we can harness our capacities to improve our lives and make our communities even better. Stating affirmatively what we value, what we hope, what we want, enables us (as well as others) to understand and act on behalf of that vision. Reframing negative comments into positive desires can provide a way out of traps and into possibilities.

Second, citizen conversations are invigorated by the power of inspiring questions. We can investigate anything — trouble or joy. The questions we ask set the agenda and determine what we find. Honest, open questions, asked in a spirit of friendship and genuine interest, enrich and deepen dialogue. They can clarify confusions and open up new images and understandings. Questions invigorate the imagination and stimulate learning and shared understanding. At a time in which the answers in hand are not sufficient for the challenges at hand, asking the right questions becomes even more urgent.

We find that wonderful things happen when people stop thinking of themselves as a collection of needs... when they reject the negative image of being identified in terms of their needs, problems and deficiencies.”
- Jody Kretzmann

Invitational Questions -

How do we structure civic dialogues in ways that stimulate civic imagination and make constructive use of research?

How can communities sustain the energy, enthusiasm, and passion generated by positive visioning processes, when implementation struggles begin?

How do we maintain a focus on the positive when challenging situations of injustice or exploitation?

The third generative power is active listening. Genuine dialogue is creative; something new happens in the “in-between” space that listening creates. When citizens listen deeply to one another, they honor each other and cultivate the trust and relationships so crucial for joint action to occur. They start not only to see, but also to ‘hear’ the possibilities for their collective future.

“...listening questioning trust sharing friendships listening

Share Your Thoughts, Add More...
Weaving Visions into Realities

All of Imagine Chicago’s initiatives use a common approach that moves from idea to action in a generative cycle:

- **Understand** what is (focusing on the best of what is)
- **Imagine** what could be (working in partnerships with others)
- **Create** what will be (translating what we value into what we do)

All three processes feed into and out of each other; the interdependent relationship makes them powerful in transforming individual and community visions into realities.

**Understand**

All of Imagine Chicago’s work begins with and is grounded in asking open-ended, asset and value-oriented questions about what is life-giving, what is working, what is generative, what is important. Asking positive questions encourages the sharing of best practices and the articulation of fundamental values. For example, in working with parents, we have explored questions like: What is something your child has accomplished that you are especially proud of? What about your family is especially effective in encouraging children to learn? What interests you most right now? Generating a shared understanding of constructive and creative values and practices helps to reveal the positive foundation on which even greater possibilities can be built.

**Imagine**

New possibilities are inspired by interesting questions or stories which stretch our understanding beyond what we already know. When we articulate and hear from others what works and matters, we readily imagine how even greater transformation and innovation can happen. In a learning community, collective imagination continually expands. Young parents sharing stories of how they are each caring for their children leads others to good parenting practices. A youth and elderly worker sharing their stories of making a difference can lead to a new intergenerational project. As Oliver Wendell Holmes suggested long ago, “A mind once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimensions.” The stretching of our imaginations, through dialogue, experience and reflection, enables us to transcend so-called impenetrable ‘barriers’ and to discover new paths.

**Create**

For imagination to lead to community change, it needs to be embodied in something concrete and practical — a visible outcome that inspires more people to invest themselves in making a difference. The stories and images we are sharing throughout this publication are examples of such outcomes — from the place-based innovations of Citizen Leaders, to the renewed dedication of Chicago Public School teachers, to the expanded public commitments of young people and parents.

What the Understand-Imagine-Create cycle builds upon is the link among positive questions,
positive images and positive possibilities. The best of what is, shared in a generative dialogue, generates creative opportunities to think about what can be.

David Cooperrider’s research on the relationship between positive image and positive action enumerates the many ways in which we create the world we believe in (for example, the familiar Pygmalion effect in education and placebo effect in healing). If we see ourselves, and others see us, as inept and impotent, then we feel marginalized and hopeless about our role in the world. On the other hand, if we claim our hope and power, and take inventory of our capacities and potential, we begin to nurture real-world actions that demonstrate our power and help to expand and enrich our communities.

In an Understand-Imagine-Create cycle, the gaps between ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’ collapse, as people think and do, and think and do, again and again. Elitism and expertism, which tend to shut many people out of the conceptual conversation, cannot survive in this process; nor can the privileging of one set of experiences and skills over another. Instead, in understanding, imagining and creating, it is assumed that everyone has the capacity to think and act, and each person’s experiences, ideas and actions are valuable for the whole.

If there is any moral imperative I live by, it is this: To create is a blessing, and a responsibility. To suppress creativity in ourselves or in others and to quell or ban imagination is a desecration of the human spirit... I believe that when we engage in the creative and imaginative process, we can venture into the holy, for we bring whoever we are into that flow.

- Sarah Stockton

A Wish

Along a dusty road in India, there sat a beggar who sold cocoons. A young boy watched him day after day, and the beggar finally beckoned to him.

“Do you know what beauty lies within this chrysalis? I will give you one so you might see for yourself. But you must be careful not to handle the cocoon until the butterfly comes out.”

The boy was enchanted with the gift and hurried home to await the butterfly. He laid the cocoon on the floor and became aware of a curious thing. The butterfly was beating its fragile wings against the hard wall of the chrysalis until it appeared it would surely perish, before it could break the unyielding prison. Wanting only to help, the boy swiftly pried the cocoon open.

Out flopped a wet, brown, ugly thing which quickly died. When the beggar discovered what had happened, he explained to the boy, “In order for the butterfly wings to grow strong enough to support him, it is necessary that he beat them against the walls of his cocoon. Only by this struggle can his wings become beautiful and durable. When you denied him that struggle, you took away from him his only chance of survival.”

May the walls of your cocoon, be just thick enough, to allow you to struggle, just long enough, to emerge, the beautiful person, I already know you to be.
Stories are the narratives of life, spanning the centuries and connecting the generations. They are the vessels in which we carry our shared adventures and most precious memories.”
- International Storytelling Center

Since its inception, Imagine Chicago has drawn upon the power of stories and storytelling for creating new possibilities for the future. Stories, like the ones told throughout this book, have not only stimulated our imaginations, but also strengthened our senses of self and community. Understanding why stories are important and how to improve our capacities for storytelling is vital to any effort to nurture hope and imagination.

Why Are Stories and Storytelling So Powerful for a Movement of Imagination?
Stories are fundamentally different from the abstract and fragmented information of much of what we learn in school. Stories bridge the Cartesian divide between feeling and reason. Stories connect to us emotionally, experientially and naturally; they are intimate and often contain deep, holistic truths about our purpose and meaning in life. Unlike textbook knowledge, stories do not purport to be universal, standardized, or replicable for everyone. Rather, they validate and celebrate the specificity of experience and context.

As a form of oral communication, storytelling opens up a space for building relationships, in a way that does not happen with text or visual images. Storytelling improves our skills for articulating our own — and listening for others’ — experiences and ideas. We become more sensitive to each other and to our unique and diverse contexts. By sharing our stories, we are sharing our lives and meaning-making. Stories thus bond us to one another, and lead us in the direction of generative dialogue rather than divisive debate.

Stories are interpretations of experience. Embedded in storytelling is the opportunity for co-creation. Where we are, when we are, how we are, who we are — as tellers and listeners — makes the stories what they are. We co-create our stories and we mutually determine the impact and the value of our stories. The medium really is the message! In this way, storytelling has the potential to spark creativity, energy and hope, the heart of Imagine work.

Storytelling Tips on the Web
<www.creatingthe21stcentury.org>
<www.storytellingpower.com>

In 1998, Imagine Chicago partnered with British Airways to design an intergenerational conference to inspire their executives and improve their coaching skills. 350 BA executives joined 400 members of the Chicago Children’s Choir for a shared day of intergenerational learning at the Field Museum of Natural History. Executives brought objects from their 83 countries of origin that represented music making, community building activities, and everyday life. The children prepared for the day by learning repertory from all over the world — Irish ballads, African hymns — to welcome the executives to their city. Young and old worked together in pairs, visiting museum exhibits and designing questions for one another that focused on seeing and understanding more about global connections and their own lives.

What contributed to the day’s success as a learning venture? Enthusiasm, risk, dialogue, ritual, fun, creativity, music, object-based learning, reflection, networking. It tapped into the lived experience of community members regardless of age. It engaged multiple generations in posing questions and in common reflection on them. It connected actively to all the senses. People sang, listened, painted, felt and smelled objects, ate together, and sometimes held hands as they moved through the museum. The conference blurred the boundaries between personal and professional by reminding executives (many of whom have children) that adults can play more and children are vital learning partners. Lastly, it developed strong individual and institutional connections between partners. For the Field Museum, the event developed the capacity and confidence to turn the entire museum into a hands-on community learning center.
**Accelerated Learning**

A movement of imagination seeks to expand the vision of what's possible by increasing citizens' collective potential for learning. Here we share a method called Accelerated Learning, whose principles can play a useful role in engaging citizens and developing community capacity.

The Accelerated Learning process is set in a Six-Step M*A*S*T*E*R Plan:

1. **Motivate Your Mind**: Motivation is key to learning. What you learn should be meaningful for you, so take time to understand the personal benefits of the learning experience.

2. **Acquire Information**: Identify your various learning strengths so you can readily get whatever information is necessary for the learning process.

3. **Search Out Meaning**: Create personal meaning from the information; interpret and understand why it is relevant to you and your community.

4. **Trigger the Memory**: Now that the issue is relevant and meaningful, it will likely be ‘locked down’ in your long-term memory. You can trigger the ideas and emotions you have by categorizing them, by storytelling, by making acronyms, learning maps and music, etc.

5. **Exhibit What You Know**: Share what you are learning and doing publicly; try role-playing, making a poster, drawing or newsletter, or creating a song.

6. **Reflect on How You've Learned**: Look back on your learning processes and ask questions like: How was the learning experience? How could it have gone better? What's the significance of this for me?

Accelerated Learning takes into account life factors that traditional educators are often reluctant to accept. It posits that learning occurs in a fun environment, where we feel both relaxed and challenged. Visuals, games, and music can help to stimulate such creative learning spaces. Accelerated Learning reminds us that learning occurs far beyond the walls of schooling. It asks us to think about how learning spaces in our homes and communities can cultivate wisdom, character, commitment and responsibility. Most importantly, Accelerated Learning shows us how to harvest the confidence and skills necessary to transform citizen vision into a visible difference.

**Open Space Technology**

In Open Space, groups self-organize to create their own agendas and activities. Shared leadership and diversity are celebrated, as each and every person within the group has a meaningful role and responsibility.

Open Space Technology typically begins by the group sitting together in a circle. Their time together (be it three hours or one week) is divided up into discrete time periods (usually 1½ hours each). Each person in the group is asked to identify the issues they most want to discuss. When someone proposes an idea, s/he is agreeing to host the discussion — not to answer the question or give the solution, but simply to help facilitate a conversation about that topic. The topic, its time slot, and the location for the discussion, are all posted on a large chart visible to the entire group. (The number of topics per time slot varies, depending on the size of the group and time and space constraints). Each small group will report on its discussion to the whole group at the end of the meeting.

Once all the topics are posted, the different members of the group move around and join discussions according to the Law of Two Feet and the Four Principles. The Law of Two Feet asks each person to use their two feet to go to the spaces where they can learn and make constructive contributions. If they feel unable to contribute or learn in a given space, they may move flexibly and freely to another one. The Four Principles, which guide Open Space Technology are:

1) Whoever comes is the right people.
2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
3) Whenever it starts is the right time.
4) When it's over, it's over.

The system encourages dialogue, listening and questioning. It draws upon self-motivation and mutual respect to think through ideas and generate actions. Since each person takes responsibility for the outcome of the gathering, gone are the anger, guilt and finger-pointing that often plague group meetings. They are replaced by passionate learning through personal and collective sharing. In this way, Open Space Technology complements Imagine Chicago’s belief that citizens can catalyze and create their own spaces for civic dialogue and action.
Imagine Chicago’s Organizational Challenges

Imagine Chicago is a tiny organization. Our maximum staff size has been six people (this summer). We function primarily as a catalyst and external partner in networks that share resources and lead to social innovation. They encourage learning by bringing together different discourses, practices and understandings around common goals.

Just as knowledge is not fixed, Imagine Chicago as an organization is flexible, with a multi-skilled work force held together with information technology and a wide network of partners. Structure follows vision. What this means in practical terms is that projects (as well as Imagine Chicago as an organization) are first constituted by organizing a “design team”. Imagine Chicago does not formalize institutional structure and then decide what to do. Rather, it invites interested individuals, and those they recommend, into brainstorming sessions to explore ideas.

Imagine Chicago as an organization did not apply to become a legal entity until 18 months after the first design team was constituted and had field-tested a pilot project worthy of public support. Subsequent initiatives have emerged only when there has been enough interest, commitment and support to move forward. Then projects formalized and sought funding.

Design processes have lasted from weeks to months. In many cases, the ideas and partnerships discussed have gained such power that they have moved forward as volunteer projects when outside funding was not forthcoming.

As in many effective postmodern organizations, Imagine Chicago depends on relational factors — including a spirit of giving and volunteerism (manifest not only in its active board, but also in the many highly experienced volunteers who contribute invaluable professional services and ideas). Permeable boundaries allow for responsiveness, variable work roles, and a high degree of production, innovation and diversity. Authority resides in the ability to add value through knowledge creation and application in a changing mosaic of project teams.

Boundaries are permeable and relationships continually expand, so the mission must be clear. Challenges of managing diverse and loosely coupled projects include developing and maintaining a coherent sense of purpose; effective communication (for example, in gathering information about ripple effects); and decision-making in the absence of clearly defined roles.

At Imagine Chicago, the role of the organizational leadership team has been to:

- Anchor the organization with a clear mission.
- Communicate the mission and build ownership around it from diverse constituencies, who then devise unique implementation strategies by working in partnership with the organization.
- Prioritize opportunities for creative involvement.
- Manage tasks that weave various voices and projects together.
- Secure necessary organizational resources, including staffing and funding.

The success of organizational leaders depends on their abilities to inspire trust and engagement, to speak multiple languages (of the diverse communities that constitute the organization), to model the mindset, and to weave meaningful connections between people and ideas.

Thank You!

Imagine Chicago would like to thank its board of directors, past and present:

Scott Bernstein  Helen Arnold Massey
Rebecca Blank   Barbara Young Morris
Dennis A. Britton  Funmi Olopade
Bliss W. Browne  Susan Quandt
Don Bushman  Joanna M. Riopelle
Mary Ellen Carroll  Therese Rowley
Nancy B. Cobb  Barbara O. Taylor
Celeste Garrett  Alaka Wali
Rev. John Haughey, S.J  Leslie Welch
Richard Heise  Emory Williams, Sr.
Bud Ipema

The Dream Team! Summer 2002 Imagine Chicago staff
Diana (in absentia), Shilpa, Bliss, Edith, Vicky and Yasmeen.
Funding Partners in Mission

What do funding partnerships, which can help create and sustain a movement of imagination, look like at their best?

Imagine Chicago has been blessed with extraordinary funding partners, in spite of never having had a development person on our staff. We have looked for partners in mission rather than program funders, who are prepared to make multiple year commitments consistent with multiple year change processes. Securing such commitments has made it possible for Imagine Chicago to concentrate its staff resources and time on project development, implementation and evaluation.

1) What makes a good funding partner?
From Imagine Chicago’s experience and perspective, our best funding partners:
- Show profound respect and enthusiasm for grantees, which in turn creates in us the courage to do difficult work;
- Ask good and provocative questions, including questions about what long-term outcomes we are trying to accomplish and how we can tell if we’ve gotten there;
- Encourage articulation of the next appropriate step, which builds on what has already been created. They are not out to fund something different just to be sexier, but rather to encourage our next bold steps, even where outcomes are uncertain;
- Are as interested in learning, as they are in success. They hold us accountable, but make us feel we have a partner committed to our own growing edge. Good funders realize we learn from mistakes – where we struggle, where we get stuck. They are with us in a learning network;
- Communicate a very high level of trust in us as an organization struggling to make something challenging work. They’re investing in the struggle to make it happen, not some formulaic programmatic agenda on their side, of which we are a little piece;
- Connect us to others from whom we can learn and to whom we can contribute.

2) What can funders do to help support the development of civic imagination as a movement?
- Bring interested parties, including other funders, into conversation about:
  √ why this work matters;
  √ what helps it happen well;
  √ what it needs.
Such learning forums are strengthened by including not only interested intermediary organizations, but citizen activists who are often untapped resources. Invite each person to bring a young adult with them. Think together about different levels of possible and expected impact.
- Fund development of e-learning networks to create workable models for sustained informal learning which stimulates and connects social entrepreneurs and civic imagination across the city, country and world.
- Identify and make visible interested partners in the funding community, so individual organizations don’t have to search web sites to figure out who in the funding community cares about these issues.

Thank You!
Imagine Chicago would like to thank our many exceptional funding partners:
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Chicago Annenberg Challenge
Spencer T. and Ann W. Olin Foundation
Surdna Foundation
David K. Hardin Generativity Trust
Kellogg Foundation
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Illinois Humanities Council
Chicago Community Trust
Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies
W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation
British Airways
Commonwealth Edison
Chicago Sun-Times Foundation
Loyola University
Peoples Energy Corporation
Kenilworth Union Church
Christ Church Winnetka
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Fetzer Institute
CCT Young Leaders
Polk Bros. Foundation
Harris Bank
Illinois Workforce Advantage
Equity Trust
Leo S. Guthman Trust
Bank of America
and many generous individual friends.
Renewing Education

“The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside.”
-Dag Hammerskjold

The Teacher Renewal Program was a vital element of the Urban Imagination Network, a six-year partnership in which Imagine Chicago paired six museums with seven Chicago public schools to improve reading comprehension and strengthen learning connections among children, parents, teachers and administrators. Personal renewal retreats were created for teachers to renew their vocations, connect to the natural world, and participate in an inspiring learning community of their colleagues.

We teach who we are. Great teachers bring energy, concern, meaningful connections, and an openness of mind and heart to their classroom. These qualities help them be present to their students and colleagues and to facilitate their own and each other’s learning. The Teacher Renewal Program offered space and time for teachers to deepen their vision and commitment to learning, and to gain perspective on the fears and stresses that inevitably arise within a standardized and depersonalized education system.

The Teacher Renewal Program was held at the Chicago Botanic Garden, a public space that quickly became “sacred ground” for the teachers. Content was organized around seasonal themes; reflection work included a variety of large group, small group and solitary settings with an abundance of arts-based and outdoor activities. The two year series of quarterly weekend retreats:
- gave teachers time to build trust and to speak from their hearts rather than accepting conventional images of “being too busy” to attend to their own learning;
- provided opportunities for teachers to articulate and explore their own experiences and gifts;
- offered ways for teachers to “reframe” their experience so they could understand and respond to it more deeply, as an opportunity for personal integrity;
- helped teachers develop their own language, images and methods to explore “spiritual” development themselves and with their students;
- reconnected teachers to natural cycles so they could appreciate what supports life, and recognize that the teaching vocation offers opportunities for entering daily into an organic cycle of renewal and growth.

This effort differed from other professional development efforts, because it was not focused on professional competence or teacher retention (though it supported both). Imagine Chicago believes that content alone cannot create an environment for learning. Instead, good teaching and learning happen from the inside out; teachers need to be passionate students in order to inspire a love of learning in others. The Teacher Renewal Program engaged and impacted teachers’ intellectual, affective and spiritual lives, challenging them to re-envision the purposes and practices of education, to rediscover the “heart” of teaching. This meant listening for and sharing their own inner strength, balance and resiliency. Engaging in arts and play also fueled teachers’ innate creative capacities and reminded them of the importance of play for their students. Developing habits of reflection and awareness helped teachers realize that silence may be as important to learning as speech. What often resulted was a spiritual re-awakening in which joy and love were discovered.

As one teacher summarized eloquently, “I used to bring conditioned love for myself and my students into the classroom. My love for my students was conditioned on how well they paid attention, how well they performed. My love for myself depended on many of the same things. Now I try to bring unconditioned love to my classroom every day.”
Living from the Inside Out

How do we keep from choking on the world’s despair and cynicism and instead serve as agents of hope and healing? One way is by trying to live “from the inside out”, continually reflecting on and sharing who we are and what we believe, knowing what and who sustains our inner strength. From that place of perspective and hope, we can do practical things that contribute to the common good, putting together our unique desire to make a difference with that of others.

As meaning-making people, we need transcendent connections and a sense of purpose. That requires spiritual disciplines that nurture our inner lives and connect us to a generative source that calls us beyond our fears and failures. And it requires communities from which we can learn, draw courage and recognize that our individual effort is leveraged and exalted when put together with others.

The best learning, and living, happens from the inside out for both individuals and institutions. We learn most powerfully when education begins with what’s inside — with our questions, innate talents, personal ways of seeing — rather than with pre-programmed ‘expert’ answers to someone else’s questions. Our lives have integrity when decisions flow from our values and not from what others expect from us. Action is most effective when we take time to reflect before we act. We enrich public life when we create images of hope and possibility rather than consume pre-packaged media images of violence and despair. Living from the “inside out” also suggests that we must act to really learn. To validate what we believe, we need to experiment with what works, take risks, to learn for ourselves. Spiritual introversion has to give way to living the values we have chosen, being accountable to the hope that is in us. We have to take who we are and get involved with what’s around us, without taking on issues and responsibilities that rightly belong to others. When we operate from wholeness and hope, our lives radiate outward. They become sources of healing and inspiration to others. We learn to trust people to take responsibility for their own issues and resources, to do our share but not more than our share, to encourage everyone to play their part in a way that gives life to the whole. Imagine Chicago is a project born of faith, that lives out of an imagination about human life and community that says everyone’s gifts are necessary to our common life; we cannot live without each other and thrive.

What will make enough of a difference? All of our continuing to listen to what impresses our hearts and speak the truth of that… all of our sharing with each other the questions we are living… all of our taking the risk of acting and learning from our mistakes… all of our hearing and sharing with each other stories of how ordinary people continually are able to make an extraordinary difference. Every voice is important. So is space for reflection. It is up to everyone to create the way forward.

Invitational Questions

How do you take rich imagination and powerful visions and translate them into activities with visible outcomes and impacts?

How do you generate and sustain peoples’ commitment in this process?

Share Your Thoughts, Add More...
Imagine Chicago sees itself as an organically growing and voluntary process of partnership rooted in a specific place(s). Imagine CHICAGO. We aim to channel and multiply the energy of what’s in place, recognizing and honoring the natural and human ecologies which constitute that place as a living system, while creating learning communities which nurture civic understanding, identity and ownership among a very broad population.

Why has Imagine Chicago, and why have so many other Imagine efforts, focused on cities? Cities echo creation. They are a living symbol of the human ability to imagine and to create, to turn visions into tangible products. Cities are a living and dynamic inventory of human capacity and diversity. They concentrate forces of darkness and light, corruption and possibility, hope and despair. Boundaries are pushed in a city — literally and figuratively. The breadth and depth of cities stretch our personal boundaries and our collective boundaries. We experience the intensity and energy of the human spirit in a city; at the same time, the fear, violence and tension of cities can alienate us from one another and from our common humanity.

Most importantly, cities cannot be ignored. Though they cover only 2% of the earth’s surface land area, they house 46% of the world’s
In 1993, Imagine Chicago organized a series of public forums for six downtown churches on the city as context for God’s imagination. Having recognized that our city suffered from a ‘divided imagination’, we were interested in stimulating more people to think about Chicago as a whole. Over eight evenings, we discussed different dimensions of the city’s life. Nathan Mason, an artist, suggested we commission eight local artists (including a 15-year-old newly arrived Polish immigrant and an 82-year-old African American grandmother) to conceptualize and create Chicago’s “body”. At the start of each session, the artists inspired us to re-member the city as a whole living body by symbolizing and reconnecting the different parts. Chicago’s beauty, diversity and vitality included images and representations of Chicago’s arts and architecture, sports and work, neighborhoods and natural settings, and its many people, young and old, famous and infamous, of all ages, shapes and colors.

The inclusion of the arts community as a key resource in this early Imagine Chicago initiative permanently shaped our thinking about the importance of the arts in inspiring imagination for public good. Imagine Chicago has subsequently integrated the arts in multiple ways, in all of its programs — using dance, music, visual arts, community performance, masks, quilt-making, paper mache and other media — to inspire and express vital understandings and connections. In the Urban Imagination Network, Imagine Chicago’s most extensive and long-term initiative, multiple arts media were integrated across the whole curriculum of schools involved in the program. Citizenship depends on being able to understand, imagine and create. Those processes can be effectively cultivated with great delight by encouraging artistic expression of what we understand, including what we see and hope for our city.
Scrap Mettle SOUL (SMS) is a community performance group of artists, teens and adults who live in Chicago’s highly diverse Uptown neighborhood. SMS is a place where people encounter their neighbors and their neighbors’ issues.

The company is comprised of African and European Americans, Latinos, Asians and a spectrum of people from rich to homeless, ages 4 to 93. SMS operates after-school activities and story-gathering workshops in Margate Park where local residents of all backgrounds and ages learn to tell and create Uptown stories for performance. The annual show, staged in the park gym, is the result of four months of weaving together local stories, movement, dance and music.

In 2002, Imagine Chicago worked with SMS on story gathering around health issues in the Uptown. In May 2002, a 75-member cast presented “The Whole World Gets Well”. A key character was a community-created scarecrow named Shim.

“\n\nWhen PC Gooden-Smiley stuck a scarecrow in the garden of Buttercup Park and dressed it in Halloween clothing, she didn’t anticipate the consequence of her action,” said director Richard Geer. “I doubt that the people who over the next months dressed Shim in different outfits – for Christmas, St. Patrick’s Day, Gay Pride – were thinking about what they were enacting. The scarecrow gave them a chance to create together, to be each other’s audience and appreciate each other as they redressed the image to mirror all the different people in the neighborhood.”

Almost a year after PC brought Shim to life in Buttercup Park, Shim was beheaded. PC sadly toted Shim’s remains off to the trash. The next day, Shim was found still headless but halfway back to the garden, as if s/he were crawling home. Back to the dumpster for Shim, but the next day, s/he’d managed to throw a leg over the lip of the dumpster. Clearly, Shim’s work wasn’t done.

In the play, headless Shim goes everywhere, and everywhere s/he goes s/he fits right in — because s/he hasn’t got a brain. In the play’s climax, Shim attends a contentious community meeting where many sides are engaged in a shouting match, typical of Uptown. They are fighting for turf and money and the future of this place. It is an important argument, but argument is all this place has been hearing for decades.

In the middle of it all, Shim begins to dance. At first, s/he is an interruption, an unwanted hindrance to an already difficult situation, but s/he persists and someone laughs and someone else begins a little to dance, and pretty soon everyone joins in, singing, shouting and laughing together.

“Yes, we can never all agree, and yes, we can still be connected;” said director Geer. “The power of the arts is this deep process that says ‘yes’ and ‘yes’ and ‘yes’ again, that trusts the capacity of the human heart to be broken and torn open and thereafter to hold more.”

As part of the “Udaipur as a Learning City” process, Shikshantar: The Peoples’ Institute for Rethinking Education and Development has been working with children, young adults and their families to generate learning parks of possibilities throughout Udaipur (a city in Rajasthan, India). The “parks” are self-organizing spaces of learning that organically grow in different neighborhoods, in which people come together to creatively explore their questions, form new friendships, and unlearn debilitating attitudes/expectations. The participants in the parks range in age from 3 to 70; yet they are all co-learners, each with valuable experiences and ideas to share. Significantly, there is no compulsion, competition or coercion (rewards or punishments) in the learning parks.

“Learning Parks of Possibilities”

What kinds of possibilities have emerged in the learning parks? Multiple expressions of individual and community potential, mostly in Udaipur’s local language (Mewari), like the creation of puppets, wallpapers, newsletters, songs, skits, dances, musical instruments, drawings, gardening, cooperative games, local festivals... Notably, none of the parks’ activities have used money; rather, people have harnessed the unique energy and materials already existing in themselves and their communities. To learn more about learning parks and Udaipur as a Learning City, visit www.swaraj.org/shikshantar
Redefining Imagination Resources

Who or what is an imagination resource?
Where are existing spaces of imagination?
How can we generate more resources and spaces for liberating imagination?

A dominant definition of what constitutes a preferred “resource” is something or someone new and sophisticated, with lots of education or money. Such a definition severely constrains community imagination. In fact, people and places often excluded from citizen leadership and civic dialogue initiatives can be especially powerful resources for learning and imagination. An imagination resource can be any individual, family, group, space, relationship, question, condition, value, technology, medium, language, lifestyle, art, music, culture, structure, process, etc., through and by which those living in a locality (like a city or a neighborhood) are able to interact, understand, learn and imagine together. Thus, everything either is or can be an imagination resource.

A similar argument holds true for spaces of imagination. The spaces of a family home, a street corner, a park or garden, a forest or lake or mountains, an office, a local store or business, a movie theater, an artist’s studio, etc., are all physical spaces where imagination often flourishes. But we can also think about “space” in other ways: conceptual space, spiritual space, emotional space, relational space, contextual space… For example, the kind of space that emerges through conversations with friends, or when viewing a painting, or when singing, or when laughing with siblings, or when riding a bicycle — these spaces are also all potential spaces in which learning and imagination can grow.

The difference between any resource/space and an imagination resource/space is our approach to it. What do we appreciate it for? What does it offer us? What values or convictions do we draw from it? How does it inspire trust? Does it enable us to take risks and make mistakes, without fear or undue anxiety? How many diverse kinds of connections are opened up by virtue of it?

This way of redefining our selves and our communities expands the notion of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD). Our ‘assets’ include all those imagination resources and spaces, which enable reciprocal relationships within our communities, and which help to reinforce our individual and collective motivation and spirit. It is upon the foundation of these ‘assets’ that we establish the best of who we are today and grow a sense of hope for the future.

As creators of an imagination movement, we have the power to define and redefine resources and spaces, which means that we can constantly generate more of them. They are infinite. The more our perspective is oriented toward possibilities in each and every person and place, the more resources and spaces we can see and cultivate. As these spaces and resources are connected to one another, in a dynamic, organic whole ecology, they help to broaden and deepen a movement of imagination. They also lead the way towards unlimited relationships and actions for public good.
Imagine Englewood if...

It was a typical summer day in Englewood: kids were playing on front lawns, older residents were sitting on their front porches sharing stories, and at a distance a group of teenagers was involved in a heated basketball game. It was on a day like this that Jean Carter-Hill, a long-time resident of Englewood, made her usual visit to the Boulevard Arts Center. As she looked at the art pieces on display, something caught her eye – a flyer for Imagine’s Chicago Citizen Leaders Program. Jean decided it was something that she would like to try. From that moment on, neither she nor her community would ever be the same.

Jean discussed the program opportunity with her long-time friend, Helen Arnold-Massey. They agreed that the program could produce significant results. Their church, Mount Carmel CME Church, agreed to serve as the required fiscal agent for a neighborhood innovation they would design and create. “We all knew that something needed to be done,” recalled Jean. “We just hoped the Citizen Leaders Program would show us how.”

Within no time, the Englewood community had a team of neighborhood leaders, youth representatives, and interested citizens all seeking ways to transform Englewood. Every month, Jean picked up seven team members from Englewood and drove to Imagine Chicago’s downtown office. They decided on the slogan, “Imagine Englewood if…”, in hopes that it would inspire their neighbors to think creatively about their community. Jean and Helen decided that for their project, they would sponsor Family Health nights in which families could come together for a nutritious meal, discuss health issues and take a walking tour of the whole neighborhood. “We walked around to see what was going on, what was there and what needed to be done to make it a better place to live,” said Jean. They would then share the celebrations of the community like promotions, retirements, and graduations before each meeting began.

After gaining new leadership tools and resources, the group hosted meetings throughout Englewood. Once people started hearing about the program, more and more people wanted to participate. Helen and Jean, working with Imagine Chicago, led Citizen Leaders classes just for Englewood residents. Many community innovations were created. Citizen leaders from the first IEi class became mentors and board members for the next class.

But after a year, people gradually lost interest in the Citizen Leaders meetings. “The spirit was dying… I didn’t want that to happen,” said Jean. She decided to introduce “Make a Difference Day” to the Englewood community. Participants went on group tours to key locations in the community, such as parks, youth centers, and medical facilities. The organizing team collaborated with the Department of Human Resources and the Park District to provide each participant with information about community assets. The event concluded with panel discussions for children, teenagers, and adults about urgent issues, including education, health care, and safety. The day not only connected 750 Englewood residents to community resources, but it also ignited a desire to collaborate and create a community that its citizens could be proud of.

IEi continues to thrive. It has many new partners including The Jewish Council, Rebirth of Englewood, Youth Possibility, Community Action Policing Services, and Nicholson School. IEi has also been visited by an international team of community activists from Birmingham, England. Developing and sustaining Imagine Englewood if... has taken Jean and her peers on a journey, in which they have redefined what it means to be part of a community. “Initially, I thought that people didn’t care. But over the years, I have realized a lot of people do care, but they don’t know what to do,” said Jean. “People just need to communicate, connect and collaborate. It is only then that they will feel differently towards each other and be able to transform the communities they call home.”
Your City’s Learning Ecologies

An “ecology” is a diverse and complex set of agents, processes, relationships, partnerships and actions. It is a web and system, or a series of networks within networks. In ecologies, there is no “above” or “below,” no “first” or “last”, no hierarchies at all.

Every city has many kinds of ecologies: social, natural, psycho-spiritual, intergenerational, artistic, etc. These ecologies are not separate from one another, because the individuals, relationships, actions and resources which comprise them are not separate. A ‘learning ecology’ brings all of these ecologies together, since learning is intrinsically embedded in all of them.

Understanding and assessing your city’s learning ecology begins with place-rooted vision building: individuals and collectives co-create a shared vision of how they want to live together, in the present and in the future. This vision is based on the unique contexts of the place, the personalities of the people, and the energy and spirit that emerge when they come together. Imagine Chicago’s founding vision was of “a city where nothing and no one is wasted”; a vibrant, diverse and connected economy and society. Imagining this city led us to rethink possibilities, roles and responsibilities, resources and assets, to work on behalf of a city in which imagination flourishes everywhere, in everyone.

Think about the many different systems and sub-systems of your ecology: individuals, families, neighbors, neighborhoods, organizations, religious groups, work-related groups, bio-regions, cultures, languages, etc. What are obstacles and dangers to imagination and action? What are key opportunities/resources?

Mental Mapping

A map is an interpretation of what someone thinks is important. Different maps of the same city might focus on tourist sites or bicycle paths, sacred places or transportation routes. Someone understanding a community brings with them a “mental map”. It may focus on crime and abandoned buildings or engaged citizen groups and local resources. How we see things influences how we act.

A Community Map of ________________
In 1996, Imagine Chicago, in collaboration with religious, community groups, and cultural institutions, created a civic project about place as community symbol of the sacred in ordinary life. Through events, conversations, exhibits, lectures, poetry readings, tours, writing workshops and public rituals, participants clarified and went public with their thoughts about “sacred spaces and public places”. The project revealed important linkages between spirituality and public life and the community-creating power of ‘sacred spaces’ in the life of the city.

Humans have long identified sacred spaces. They have done this for no ulterior purpose at all. Most people are able to name places and events of intrinsic worth. When we raise a glass or sing a song, we do not ask, “What are we doing this for?”

It is for this very “lack of reason”— that sacred places shed a light on community and civic life. Community, itself a mystery, is created among people who stand together in sacred places, and it can extend to many others who look toward those places from afar. The decay of such places in consciousness seems a feature of “decaying” cities.

Great cities of the past treasured sacred places as basic to their common life. Asian and pre-Columbian cities in America were built as ceremonial centers. They were cosmic in design, exemplifying the axis mundi which joined heaven and earth and underworld, their apertures trained to the movements of the spheres and solar bodies. The classical Greeks and Romans found both the context and the metaphor for fulfilled human life in the city, where the highest human virtues were required and cultivated. Since these virtues included wisdom and justice, required arts of freedom and invention, and could require sacrifice and death, they were touched by the divine. Civic shrines marked places where such qualities had eminently appeared. These places were included in the education of the young for citizenship and public happiness.

To classical cities the Biblical peoples brought their sense of pilgrimage through time to the holy City. God, who was not confined in space or time, had been encountered and wrestled in places and events along the way, and had entered history to create virtues of faith, hope and love. Places of blessed memory became the goal of pilgrimages. People walked together from station to station, finding precedents and a Presence.

Sometimes such places were utterly separate from human hands: glaciers, shaking mountains, living waters, canyons. Sometimes such places were created by events: unplanned encounters for which people took the shoes off their feet because they stood on holy ground, after which they waited to recover or reform their sight, from which they undertook previously unimagined things. Sometimes such places had been built and dedicated. Temples and monuments were erected when possible on the site of an awesome un-built space or over a preceding shrine.

Lovers of the city regularly describe streets and fountains, colonnades and squares as places in which fully valued persons interact in ways which overcome the invidious comparisons of race or class or role, where all are seen to enrich the body politic. The enjoyment of such city places bears witness to a self-transcending character of public life.

Much depends on holding sacred places and public spaces together in consciousness. Where sacred spaces deprecate public places or suggest withdrawal from public life, they lose much of their own power and content. Where public places are swept clear of every expression of the sacred, there may be lost the mystery of freedom on which citizen arts and public good depend. Public discourse is reduced to numbers, expert pronouncements and sound bytes.

Inspiring moves both ways. Sacred places are more truly sacred by reference to public life, and public places become more truly public by some remembrance of the sacred. Dangers have always been recognized. Private and group sacralities can be used to turn controversies into religious warfare or crusades. Against this there are legal restraints, to which must be added two practical counsels: That space or story sacred to any community, which has thereby been created, be respected by all and profaned by none. That such symbols be distinguished from any public interpretations and proposals which follow and in which prudent differences may be expected.

Needed once again are pilgrimages from place to place of human dwelling, pausing at the sacred notes of each, but not stopping until they arrive at places held by all in common. That is city living.

Written as an invitation to “Sacred Spaces, Public Places” by Dr. Richard Luecke, who was Project Director of Imagine Chicago in 1996-1997.
The Whole-Sense City

“Think of your city now (and when you were a child). What stands out for you, locates you there? What are the city’s sights? Sounds? Smells? Tastes? Touches? What words and images come to mind to describe your city as a whole?” Share at least three answers to each question exploring the different aspects of your city. Share your answers with a group of 6-8 people and see what you learn about how others experience the same place right now.

“Now imagine you are in your city as you most hope it to be, in the year 2022, when perhaps your children are (or would be) as old as you are today. What do you see? What are the sounds, smells, tastes and touches of life in your city in the future? How do you think your children feel about the city?” Again, share at least three answers to each question. Compile these answers into a common list and share with your whole group. Notice what is most important to your Imagination team about the city’s future. Imagine the kinds of initiatives — the ideas, events, images, people and personalities — that were critical for bringing about this healthy future. What ‘great battles’ were fought within and among people to make this future possible? Who were among the key players in nurturing this state of being? How? What did they do? What can/will each person present do now/this week/this year to move the city in the direction of their own dreams for it?

A Shared Language of Imagination

let us create a vocabulary born of our unique and diverse contexts, to be shared amongst us in this work we love

a few examples...

(from India) Swaraj <swah-rahj> has two literal meanings: ‘self-rule’ and ‘rule-over-the-self’. Self is understood in a holistic sense, as an intricate web of links, between the individual, family, community and cosmos. It is a reflective and active Self, whose potential is infinite and whose commitment is to justice, balance, meaning and wholeness. Swaraj is a state of being and relating in which the Self is free in a spirit of love and, at the same time, intimately and organically connected to all Life.

(from East Africa) Kuumba <koom-bah> is creativity in community. Each of us is asked to do as much as we can, in the ways we can, given our unique gifts, talents and strengths. We are given the responsibility of leaving our community more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

What words or symbols from your place help to capture the spirit of hope and possibility? How does your unique place expand the vocabulary and imagery of imagination?

Invitational Questions -

What becomes possible when we begin to see our ‘place’ (our sense of purpose, our sense of belonging, our sense of location) in new ways?

How can you connect your self, your uniqueness, to your ‘place’, to grow the imagination movement in new directions?

Share Your Thoughts, Add More...
Imagine Chicago shares knowledge and inspiration through talks, workshops, free web downloads, and an open door and email policy. To date, Imagine and Imagine-like projects have organically emerged on six continents (that is, without IC's control or direction). And the movement continues to grow... Listed below are some of the Imagine initiatives currently established or in the process of development, of which IC is aware. We know there are others which share a similar spirit and commitment. Each process has a distinct character, having tread its own unique path through its particular context. Imagine Chicago is hoping that, as a result of the gathering of these projects in September 2002 in Chicago, a global learning network of Imagine projects will be established that will facilitate an ongoing exchange of ideas and other resources.
Imagining... Time and Space to Ask Yourself (and Others):

Where do you call ‘home’?
To what community(s) do you belong?

What do you see as particular strengths of your community?

What changes would you most like to see in your community's future?

Circle the ideas you are most excited about and committed to working on.

Which of your strengths/skills/talents can help you move forward on these ideas?

How can the ideas build on existing community assets?

Whom do you consider your most likely allies/partners?

How do you envision involving members of multiple generations?

What are your key concerns/expected obstacles in moving forward? How do you plan to overcome them?

What will you do next (today/this week/this year) to begin implementing your vision?

What friend can you immediately share your vision with and ask to hold you accountable for moving toward it?
What Stimulated My Imagination:

Some Key Insights I Take from Reading this Book:

Ways I Hope to Apply Those Insights:

Common Threads Which Relate to Other Experiences/Learnings in My Life:

Key Questions I Now Have:

While reading, I was...

√    surprised by...

√    inspired by...

√    concerned by...

√    helped by...

Share your responses with a global community online at <www.imaginechicago.org/possibility_publication.htm>
“We need to grab within our creativity and resolve to make a difference.”

-Congressman Danny Davis
“Imagine Chicago is a process aimed at bringing people to a realization, that making a difference in the future of Chicago is both a personal choice and a public responsibility. We hold the promise of the city’s future in our thoughts and actions – the choice to realize this promise is ours.”

- Mary Ellen Carroll, Imagine Chicago Founding Board Member