

The expert view: how to imagine the future of cities and towns

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THE FUTURE OF THE ORCHESTRA

Arizona State University's Center for Science and the Imagination brings writers, artists and other creative thinkers into collaboration with scientists, engineers and technologists to reignite humanity's grand ambitions for innovation and discovery.

The center serves as a network hub for audacious moonshot ideas and a cultural engine for thoughtful optimism. We provide a space for productive collaboration between the humanities and the sciences, bring human narratives to scientific questions, and explore the full social implications of cutting-edge research.

Image: [Arizona State University](#)

Ed,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about how we can use imagination to inspire a compelling vision of the future for our cities and towns. I found [your interview of September 2025 on this subject on the BBC on Radio 4's One to One series](#) very interesting.

Could we start with an overview of your current areas of focus at the [Center for Science and the Imagination](#) (the CSI), in particular the areas that relate to cities, towns and urban development?

Ed: Thanks for the invite. The Center for Science and the Imagination (CSI) at Arizona State University has a mission of inspiring collective imagination for better futures. All our work is designed to invite people to imagine more hopeful futures and to tell stories about futures we might actually want to live in.

We give people tools to do this, using storytelling techniques like world building and, at a more basic level, to build what we call “imaginative capacity”. This is the first step of giving people of all ages permission to imagine the future and then start to build confidence and agency whilst recognising that imagination is a team sport. The only way we'll get to these futures is if we start to imagine them together.

We have a long running interest in climate futures, which of course has many intersections with urban development. We've done a few projects on energy transition, and as part of our books collection, [The Weight of Light](#) and [Cities of Light](#) are collections that explore solar energy and, in the case of [Cities of Light](#), what would happen in cities in the Southwest United States if we got things right and we made a successful transition to renewable energy. This book imagines the future and asks what it would feel like to live in this new energy world, what new problems might we face, and where will this new energy infrastructure be located – will it be centralised or decentralised?

We have a new climate futures book coming out in early December 2025, which is called [Climate Imagination](#). It is a collection of hopeful climate futures that is global in scope. It includes original speculative fiction from four different regions around the world, and nonfiction contributors from many places. Many of the stories and nonfiction pieces this book covers address urban futures and urban development.

Cities and towns are always going to part of our future. I like to say (as I mentioned in the BBC interview which you mentioned) that the future is going to be mostly going to be the same. Cities and towns adapt and change gradually over time, with every new building and technology an addition or a layer that goes on top of all the other existing structures and layers that are already there. History has a way of surviving even against the most brutal attempts to eradicate it. The future will also be the past, and the cities where we will live in the future are in many ways going to be similar to the cities we inhabit today.

Every time we imagine futures, whether we are focusing on something like AI's role in our lives on planet Earth or space exploration and potential new colonies on other worlds, the urban side of things comes into it because that's where we live. Cities and towns are how we organise society and civilisation and they are infused into all of our projects in different ways.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview about your activities at the CSI, Ed. There's a lot going on! The point you make about the future being broadly the same as today resonates with me, whilst I appreciate that changes over time add up, and of course some cities and towns expand and grow faster than others. And talking of space, I remember [speaking with Melodie Yashar of ICON about space architecture](#).

It's super to see that the [books published by the CSI](#) are available to download for free on the CSI website. Speaking of books, I know that in 2014 you co-authored the book [Hieroglyph](#), which challenges us to be ambitious and think big. Is there enough imagination today, by people representing all aspects and from all backgrounds, about what our cities and towns could and should become?

I see and get involved in discussions about specific urban matters – be it improving planning regulation, restructuring city boundaries, better linkage with nature, disaster resilience or how to make streets more people-centric. All entirely valid and worthy initiatives. However, in these detailed reviews I don't see much in the way of Imagination Forums and discussion across society about new ideas and futures. Appreciating that everyone has responsibilities for what they're trying to do day-to-day, how can we fit in greater use of our imagination? You mentioned just now that imagination should be something for everyone to practice. I often see more of it in children; I wonder if it gets drawn out of us as we get older.

Ed: I completely agree with your observation. I think we have organised school and the workplace to be largely about discipline and structure, and as a result we more or less drum imagination out of people. We are told not to daydream, to not think about our own ideas – we should focus on what “the organisation” (be it school, a business or another form) wants us to think about. This approach can be effective for the organisation of factory workers or farmhands – which is, in essence, a 19th century management model. However, it's not the training that people need to navigate today's world of accelerating change and transition.

I think we need to be teaching people to use their imagination more. Everyone is imaginative. Imagination is an ignition system for foresight, and for empathy and resilience. We use it all the time in small ways, yet we have effectively self-censored ourselves to only imagine things in certain ways that we think are allowed and safe. On the whole, we don't want to be vulnerable or to take risks. It can be difficult to invite people, especially adults, to imagine hopeful futures and positive change because we are conditioned to not do that because we might get hurt, we might be disappointed. We are to varying degrees trained to be cynical, which is bad for us individually and collectively.

There is only a small privileged percentage of humankind that feels empowered to truly imagine the future, and those tend to be people whose ideas become wildly successful. We need to invite everyone to imagine their futures and feel empowered to imagine them, which is partly about education. It's about changing how we think of imagination in academia and the workplace and saying that it is good to hope for positive change. The more effective thing we can do is to articulate a positive vision and be confident in it.

Gareth: This point about inviting people to use their imagination makes me think about, without trying to be overly critical, some of the “consultation processes” that cities and municipalities follow (and have done for a long time) to “engage” people about change and new developments in their local areas. As I mention in [my October 2025 Newsletter edition](#), I wonder if cities and municipalities should be bolder and more imaginative about how they involve people, including inviting people to use their imagination. There are some good case studies out there showing how it can work. I've talked to people like [Gil Peñalosa](#), the founder of [8 80 Cities](#) and [Cities4Everyone](#), and others about examples around the world where society has been successfully engaged and involved, and leading initiatives, from small scale to large scale (both are equally valuable). Maybe we can try harder on this.

What can we do to expand the involvement of all of society to imagine futures for their cities and towns? I include in this thinking about small, simple and essential yet often unachieved actions, I'm not really thinking about a future of flying cars and teleportation (not yet anyway).

Ed: I agree, there are some great stories of using our imagination out there – you just need to know where to look, which requires you to be curious to go searching for them. Keep in mind that we are not conditioned to pay attention to good news – bad news grabs most of the headlines. Yet there are a lot of positive examples out there when you start to pay attention, particularly at the local level.

For example, [the Transition Network](#) provides some wonderful stories of communities around the world who have come together to reimagine what their whole community is for and to think of new and regenerative economies, and rethinking urban life.

I believe that when we give people agency and power to act, they will do good things. An example is participatory budgeting, which can be really effective for cities, towns and local areas. There's a high school in the City of Phoenix, where I am based, that has run a participatory budgeting process with its students, for which it provided them with funds to take action. The students took this monetary responsibility seriously – they conducted a process and decided to replace some of their water fountains with water bottle refilling stations – a purposeful micro-level change which was an eco-friendly decision and a responsible decision made by these young people, something that would live beyond their own time at the school as a small yet lasting contribution to their community.

When we give people a chance, they can achieve wonderful results. We don't create enough of the structures to make this happen. I think civic imagination is another big piece to focus on. Today, too many people lack faith in the civic fabric. We know there is polarisation and negativity out there, but we need positive thinking to change things. When you look at the big issues we face, most people agree about most of them. There are shared values and shared notions of what we all want. It's a question of starting with this premise, rather than focusing on what pushes us apart.

Gareth: Some great points here, Ed. The Transition Agency has some great examples. I have followed the participatory budgeting processes of several cities for a number of years. Your point about engaging young people at school reminds me of a programme that has been operating in the UK for many years, which I used to be part of, called [Young Enterprise](#) – one of their streams of work gives high school students agency to undertake real-life projects.

I used to live in Paris and I continue to be on the distribution list for the participatory budgeting process this city operates. I don't vote in it nowadays because I don't live there, but it's great to see it still adds value. In fact, as I have mentioned in one of my blogs on my Urban 2.0 Newsletter, information about the next batch of citizen-voted programme of activities for Paris for 2026 is available for people to see online.

It's about citizens and local people. They know what's good and what's required for their local areas, don't they.

Ed: I agree. There are many organisations offering guidance for holding imagination-type activities, but they are not always thought of as part of the civic fabric. To give you an example of applying imagination to a particular activity, we have a new free book, which we published in October 2025, called [Sound Systems: The Future of the Orchestra](#). The conversation for this book began with an external collaborator who noticed that during the COVID-19 lockdowns there were many beautiful buildings in big cities that stood unused, and they are wonderful and useful pieces of infrastructure. He started thinking about things like climate change and how these infrastructural resources could be used in different societal ways as we emerged from the pandemic.

For example, in Phoenix we have a lot of challenges with heat in the summer – and we are not alone in this. Making shade and cooling available through public buildings could help mitigate some of the worst health outcomes, and that public-health use could complement, rather than detract from, the economic and cultural roles that a building like a symphony hall plays in a city. Freeing your mind gets you thinking: “What is an orchestra for, and how can it help community resilience? What would the future of an orchestra look like when we think about it as being more than a vessel for classical music?”

There are many examples like this that we don't see because we don't look for them, yet there are often small groups of people who keep these types of things going that are “hidden in plain sight”. When you look at cities that have a sense of character and uniqueness, they often maintain traditions that are old, sometimes hundreds of years old. I think of examples like [the Water Court in Valencia in Spain](#), which is a great tradition for communally managing water resources that's thought to date back more than one thousand years. There are many ways for cities to imagine themselves into the future, and for everyone to participate. If we build connections in the right way and invite more people to think of it as a past, present and a future practice, we can shift the frame and mindset and we can see some powerful results.

Gareth: It's interesting to think about the past, present and future. I remember reading about techniques described by Jane McGonigal, a director at [the Institute for the Future](#) in Palo Alto, including one to "[remember the future](#)", through which we think of aspects of past events and "project them" forwards into the future. It works.

How much do you think we should invest in learning about the past – from history stretching back hundreds of years and longer to recent times? On this point, I find it interesting to look at the evolution of cities and towns around the world over time, and what their evolution can teach us for today and the future.

There are many examples of people who were involved in urban design and construction in the past who showed great imagination to create great outcomes – nature-based, physical and social – that display beauty and longevity, many of which still exist today. Many such examples can teach us valuable insights yet, too often, we don't make the time to learn about them, and we end up relearning afterwards.

Ed: We need to find the time to learn from the past, which I appreciate is a challenge in our busy lives.

One of the interesting things about urban planning and architecture is that it is a form of memory, like layers built up over time. It's one of the longest-range activities that humans undertake, to plan and design and construct places. Urban planning, including the infrastructure to serve our urban places, we plan to last for at least 100 years, maybe many hundreds of years. We can use history to discover different ways of being part of a community with one another.

We tend to approach urban planning in a businesslike and non-flashy way. But decisions made in urban planning will have long-lasting and profound effects on the places we inhabit together. When we talk about what we are going to do with a local area or its transport network, we are spending a lot of time in the future even if we don't realise it. When we do it right, we achieve great outcomes. Many of our collective mistakes come from failing to think about the long term. If we thought more carefully about the long term, we would be more stringent in our review of choices. We shouldn't be saving a penny or cent today to lose many pounds or dollars tomorrow. Too often, because of short-term pressures we do future discounting backwards. When we think properly about the impact of what we do today on the future, as anticipated benefits that could increase in value over time, we look at them differently.

Gareth: Thanks for these thoughts, Ed. Your point about spending more time thinking about outcomes and benefits for the long term makes me think about the value of good, interactive scenario planning exercises for civic matters that are undertaken with all of society and inviting people to use their imagination.

What about setting goals and metrics: is it appropriate whilst people to use their imagination to also talk about which targets and metrics we should set and monitor?

I am an advocate of using a manageable set of meaningful targets, with the right thresholds and triggers for taking any corrective action, to work towards and measure ourselves against. I see accountability for action as key as well. I have talked with a number of people involved in urban development about this point ([including the urbanist, Alain Bertaud](#)). Do you have any thoughts on whether and how targets can be used with our imagination for the future of cities and towns?

Linked to this point, I wonder about the global goals of [the Sustainable Development Goals](#) (the SDGs), which are set to be renewed / replaced / updated in 2030, and there is also a UN-led initiative called [Beyond GDP](#). Can our thinking and imagination for cities and towns inform the global goals and their next iteration?

Ed: The right metrics, including global goals like the SDGs, can be very useful. There are two key points to make sure they work well. First, we should think of metrics as tools to help us stick to the commitments we make. Whilst metrics are important because we need to pay attention to the things we care about, we tend to be good at coming up with values but bad at sticking to them and persisting with long-term goals. The right metrics can help us stay the course.

The second point is that there is a risk of getting too focused on a specific number and losing the essence of the future we are trying to create. For example, one of the motivations underlying our [Climate Imagination](#) book is that many people have spent decades trying to organise and motivate large-scale collective change to address the climate crisis, but we haven't achieved what was hoped for so far – not because we didn't have the right metrics or because we didn't have scientists working on it or warning us – we did, and we do. Our experience with climate metrics shows that one of the challenges is that if we focus on the metrics (some in the climate field have devoted entire careers to it) but we don't have a compelling narrative about what the future looks like by achieving them, it is hard to bring about coordinated large-scale action. When we talk about changing one number to another number, for example to lower or increase a target, it does not present a compelling story by itself to people, and it doesn't show us what it will feel like to live in that future and how it will make the future better. This has been a problem for the environmental movement for decades – too much of it has been about negative numbers. So, for metrics to help us imagine how the future could be better than the present, we need ways to help push us beyond short-term barriers and to avoid keeping the problem too narrow.

For this point, I often use the metaphor of the yardstick. We have a lot of yardsticks for the futures we don't want. However, we don't have many yardsticks to help us measure whether we're getting closer to a better and a more positive future. This isn't about being utopian – the future isn't going to be perfect, but it will keep improving if we work together. We need more stories to show positive yardsticks. We need the “protopian future” of the next 50 years of the town or the city that you live in and the region you live in. Everybody should be telling these stories – we can't just be consumers of someone else's view. We need young and elderly people to tell them. Metrics are important to help us keep track of progress, combined with what you might call the spirit of these futures, which is not easily quantified.

Gareth: Thanks for this advice, Ed. I've been talking with people connected with the media recently about ways to engage people including holding positive and compelling discussions and debates. You mentioned narratives, which reminds me of [a discussion I held with Andy Revkin](#), Environmental Journalist and Founder of [Sustain What](#), in which we talked about how narratives can be used well or they can be misused (they can paint the wrong picture sometimes). The positive mindset and framing is aligned with an initiative I co-lead with [Professor Ilan Kelman](#) of [UCL](#) and [Ana Prados](#), a scientist at [UMBC](#), called [Disasters Avoided](#). We are collecting examples and true stories of disasters that have been and are being avoided – from a national scale through to a micro level, all are important.

I'd like to talk about imagination's role in policy now. If we can imagine a good future, how should policy and governance leverage it (noting all our economic, budgetary and resource constraints)? I often talk with people about how bureaucracy can get in the way of progress: urban planning for example is in some places a labyrinthian maze that takes too long to go through, but we don't know how to fix it. How can we get positive change happening with policy by using imagination?

Ed: I'm glad you raised the point about policy. Policy is one of the places where speculative fiction and telling stories about the future we want can have the most impact. At the CSI we have a series called [Future Tense Fiction](#), through which we publish original speculative fiction set in the near future and accompanying response essays by policy experts, scientists, engineers, other kinds of researchers. We publish this fiction and nonfiction in [Issues in Science and Technology](#), the house magazine of [the National Academy of Sciences](#) in the US. I wrote an essay for their Winter 2025 issue called "[Step into the Free and Infinite Laboratory of the Mind](#)," which makes the argument for speculative fiction as an incredibly useful and also cheap tool to imagine better futures that could be policy futures.

Policy making is a kind of speculative fiction, but it usually becomes very technical which makes it quite exclusionary. As a result, difficult to get people to engage with or care about, even those who are going to be directly affected by it. Even the experts can feel siloed – the structural engineer will say they don't understand philosophy and the politician will say they don't understand the data charts. Everybody is in their lane. A good science fiction story can, to quote one of our longtime collaborators, [Neal Stephenson](#), literally put everybody on the same page.

It can be much more inclusive by creating a mutually informed debate or conversation about what the future should look like. The story doesn't have to be completely factual, it can be invitational and ask, if something like XYZ were to exist, how would we want it to work, who should own it, where should it be located, who should pay for it and so on.

A good, well-crafted story has the speculative specificity that invites people into a tangible, visceral imagination of the future, which is another problem that policy deliberations often have. If they're completely abstract, they're not related to the real lived experiences of people whose lives will be changed by whatever policy is being talking about.

Science fiction can be a useful tool to allow experts to talk to one another in better ways and to allow the broader public to engage in meaningful conversations early in the process, rather than being restricted to comments and reactions only after a path forward is agreed upon.

Gareth: Thanks for the examples of useful and cheap tools for policy makers to use.

Some of us in urban development circles see local people as the experts of their local areas, with professionals such as planners and engineers being advisors who can provide options for review based on what the local experts describe they would like to see.

I can see how imagination can be part of this loop. This point goes back to the “consultation process” I mentioned earlier, and how an unengaging approach is too often followed, with people being asked to “stay in their lanes”, as you say.

Given all of this, in addition to what you've described so far, Ed, are there any other pointers for people involved in cities and towns – including policy makers, people working for city and municipal authorities, those who represent community groups and not for profits, businesses and academia and of course citizens – to get started with imagining futures in an engaging and encompassing way that inspires change?

Ed: *There are a few things everyone can do. One is to spend some time living in the future, which is something that Jane McGonigal, who you mentioned earlier, has done some great work on. We can engage in little “futures games” or simulations. Pretend to have a time machine and imagine, as a group, you are living in 2040: what is your daily life like, what are the things you want to see in your community by then? Simple acts of invitation and giving people permission to imagine what the future could and should be like can be powerful.*

For some simple exercises, one thing we can do is “take three hops to the future.” Imagine a future success condition for something you're working on today, or soon. What does total success look like to resolve a problem that people have been complaining about? What does the great outcome look like, say, 15 years from now? Linked to this, what could be a key mid-point status check of our present state and the envisioned future condition to see if we are on track? This might involve the metrics we talked about earlier: What would show that things are moving in the right direction? Finally, what's the first step to get it all started that we could take now? Working backward through these questions, we can create a simple yet compelling and imagination-fuelled timeline, which can invite people to work towards this future.

There are lots of futures exercises and activities that prompt people to use their imagination and step into the future. Often all it takes is spending just a few minutes on a regular basis trying to live in the future. Imagination is a muscle. The more you practise it, the better you get. Creating time to use imagination and creating space and the right permission structure to do so can be very powerful. And we imagine better together. Getting together with other people of all ages and from different walks of life and different perspectives can be very powerful.

We all need to get better at imagining hopeful and achievable futures together and to come up with futures we agree on. Plus, as we discussed earlier, we should spend time reviewing and understanding the past and thinking about things from the past that we want to carry forward and learn from. History is a great resource because it gives us lots of stories to think through and with, including stories that help us understand what has given people a sense of identity. Thinking about what we want to carry from the past and present into the future helps us with the idea of adopting a conservation mindset, to retain the things we care about.

Gareth: Your point about imagining total success for something we are working on reminds me of [one of my discussions with the cognitive psychologist, Gary Klein](#) about ProMortems and PreMortems. I appreciate the other exercises, too.

Thanks for your time to discuss how to use our imagination, Ed. I am reminded about the work of Jane Jacobs including her book, [The Death and Life of Great American Cities](#) (which has wisdom for everywhere, not only America), including her point that a city is not defined by its buildings, it is defined by the interactions and activities of people within its streets and neighbourhoods.

It's great to see that many of the books you mention published by the CSI are available for free on [the CSI website](#). I look forward to receiving updates from [the CSI mailing list](#) also. I'll be applying ideas for imagining better futures into my urban work, including tying it to the principles I describe in my [Urban 2.0 framework](#).

Urban 2.0 principles (by: G Byatt)

