REPORT | IMAGINATION INFRASTRUCTURES | CLIMATE CHANGE

# Interrogating imagination infrastructure

As climate changes, economies stagnate or slow, and colonial patterns of exploitation continue — can creative, critical imagination navigate beyond today's multiple crises?

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# Executive summary

This report asks what forms of ‘imagination infrastructure’ might help foster a critical, creative imagination to take us beyond existing social arrangements and open-up pathways beyond and outside the current polycrisis.

To do this, we address 4 questions:

- What does it mean to think infrastructurally?
- What is ‘imagination’?
- What sort of infrastructures might support critical, creative imagining towards social transformation?
- What is needed from researchers, researcher-practitioners and funders to support this infrastructure?

We review literature and insights from across a range of fields to make a distinction between everyday imagining and the ‘creative, critical imagination’. We argue that, while the imagination can be cultivated in almost all settings, a creative, critical imagination requires appropriate time, space and resources to:

- enable people to unsettle their assumptions and challenge taken-for-granted narratives

- encounter diverse others, listen deeply, recognise and value each other
- engage with the distinctive specifics of place, history and possibility
- maintain distinctive, diverse ways of knowing over time, creating deep archives as future resources
- tell old stories and experiment with new stories
- mobilise alliances to realise shared collective visions.

We also argue that these conditions require an underpinning of economic, regulatory and legal processes that value and protect a diversity of imaginaries in the social ecology.

Those concerned with sustaining an imagination infrastructure adequate to these aspirations, will therefore need to ask:

- How is a plurality of images of the future being maintained or closed down by the social and cultural practices of our societies?
- How are encounters between diverse perspectives, experiences, and ways of knowing being encouraged or prevented? Where is this happening? What monocultures are being sustained?
- How are flows of imagination and ideas between spaces enabled and impeded; whose ideas are flowing and whose are stuck?
- How are diverse ways of knowing valued or neglected in different settings?

- How are repeated encounters enabled sufficiently to create new relationships, go deeply into ideas – or being disrupted and impeded?
- How are practices of slow attention and inquiry being supported or blocked?
- How are old stories being archived and held, and new stories being fostered?
- How are the transitions between thinking and action, relations between theory and practice, between action and governance, being enabled or blocked?
- How do legal and regulatory structures protect diverse flows of ideas or sustain and encourage dominant imaginations?

Defending and enriching a healthy imagination infrastructure will therefore be both the responsibility of, and an opportunity for, researchers, funders, activists and bureaucrats working in areas from the arts to law, from education to urban planning. Action and research are needed in all of these areas.

# 1. Introduction

The idea of ‘imagination infrastructure’ is increasingly part of conversations in the field of social and political change. It reflects a concern that new ways of thinking and imagining possibilities are required to address the intersecting crises of the 21st century. The metaphor of an imagination infrastructure implies that just as education, health and nutrition are sustained by social and material practices, so too should the imagination be sustained by an infrastructure of institutions and processes.

For a growing group of practitioners and policy innovators, the idea of ‘imagination infrastructure’ helps to articulate the range of resources required to support collective imagination. For academics, it provides a conceptual hook upon which to hang enquiries into the interaction between culture, the arts and social change. For those who have not yet encountered the term it is, at least, intriguing. Despite this, however, there is little agreement on what the term ‘imagination infrastructure’ means or whether ‘infrastructure’ can usefully be applied to the cultivation of imagination.

Given this, JRF asked us to talk with leading researchers and researcher-practitioners working across a wide range of relevant fields and to map the research literature, in order to:

- articulate more clearly what it might mean to think ‘infrastructurally’ about imagination

- identify resources or practices that might constitute such an infrastructure
- understand how this term helps or hinders efforts to sustain critical imaginative practices adequate to addressing pressing contemporary challenges.

Details of who we spoke to can be found in the methodology.

# 2. Background: what is the problem?

The term ‘imagination infrastructure’ was first used by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in the early 1990s to refer in a restricted way to cultural and media organisations. It next appeared in 2019, when Martin Mahony and Silke Beck at the Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU) Sussex used it to further articulate Professor Andy Stirling’s observations on the ‘stickiness’ of imaginaries (STEPS Centre, 2019). Sustained use of the term has been led by Cassie Robinson (inspired by a conversation with Indy Johar of Dark Matters Lab; Robinson, 2023), first at the National Lottery, where Olivia Oldham outlined emerging thinking, and more recently at JRF (n.d.). It is at JRF that imagination infrastructure has taken root as a concept around which to develop thinking and practice. These activities include:

- a community of practice (Imagination infrastructures, 2023) now numbering well over 900
- a collective imagination toolkit (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024)
- and annual imagination infrastructure (Imagination infrastructures, 2024) events where practice and thinking are shared and furthered.

The idea of imagination infrastructure is often yoked to a discussion of an ‘imaginary’ or ‘imagination’ crisis — that is, the thought that contemporary crises are attributed to a failure of

imagination. This is not a new idea. As long ago as 1996, systems theorist and Club of Rome author Donella Meadows argued that:

> "If we haven't specified where we want to go, it is hard to set our compass, to muster enthusiasm, or to measure progress. But vision is not only missing almost entirely from policy discussions; it is missing from our culture. We talk easily and endlessly about our frustrations, doubts, and complaints, but we speak only rarely, and sometimes with embarrassment, about our dreams and values."

Equally, the fields of futures studies and utopian studies have for most of their history been concerned with developing desirable visions of the future to guide social action. At the same time, the gathering environmental and nature crises have been described by writers as a catastrophic failure to imagine the possibility of radical, disruptive, global ecological change (for example, Amitav Ghosh, 2017) or as the failure to imagine the possibility of lives beyond modern, industrialised consumption (for example, Dougald Hine and Paul Kingsnorth).

More recently, the former political advisor and professor Geoff Mulgan has made the case that there is 'a widening gulf between what people think is possible or probable and what they think is preferable', and that at the institutional level there is 'a striking lack of institutions working to push the boundaries of social imagination' (Mulgan, 2020). What is lacking, he argues, are the institutions necessary to invest in both imagining and working through the new radically

transformed practices adequate to contemporary change.

The researchers we spoke to offered nuances on this perspective. For Ruth Wylie, Co-director of the Centre for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University, and one of our interviewees, however, the problem is not an absence of imagination. Her argument was that there is abundant imagination, but that it is being eroded by existing institutions. As she explained when we spoke with her: 'Look at any kindergarten classroom, it's just overflowing with imagination. And then, primarily due to our focus on standardised assessments, it's slowly beaten out of students as they go through. And then we look and say, why isn't anyone imagining anymore?'

Equally, for Vlad Glăveanu, Professor and Director of the Centre for Possibility Studies at Dublin City University, the crisis is not in a lack of imagination, but in the connection between imagination and action:

> "You hear this idea of the death of imagination. I'm not entirely sure we have that, because if you look at the cultural resources we have they are exploding. Go online, and your imagination will be fired up positively or negatively. I think the problem is the connection between those imaginations and concrete action."

Anasuya Sengupta, Co-director of Whose Knowledge?, offered a different analysis. She also argued that there is abundant imagination, but added that it is suppressed by dominant

voices:

> "I don't think there's a crisis of imagination. I think there's a crisis of whose imagination? So, it's as always with power. It's where are we seeing? What are we seeing? Who are we seeing, and who are we acknowledging, affirming, and considering important in this conversation."

Finally, Vanessa Andreotti, Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, argued that:

> "...'imagination', in and of itself, can also be part of the problem, in particular in conditions where dominant social imaginations are oriented toward sustaining existing relations of power."

She argued:

> "There is a way we can talk about imagination without idealization and romanticization of the imagination, looking at its problematic condition as well as its potential without seeing it as a solution to a predefined problem that also contains the imagination."

The crisis here may be with the form of imagination that is on offer. The crisis in imagination, in other words, can be diagnosed and defined in many, sometimes conflicting, ways.

Where there appears to be common ground, however, is in the idea that a particular sort of imagination is being suppressed, ignored or under-resourced; namely, a critical, creative imagination that thinks beyond existing social arrangements, draws on marginalised or suppressed perspectives and lived experiences, and can both perceive and create possibilities for social fundamental transformation.

# 3. What this report is about

Our aim in this report is to explore how the idea of imagination infrastructure might help foster a critical, creative imagination that can think beyond existing social arrangements and open up pathways outside the current polycrisis.[1]

To do this, we address 4 questions:

1. What does it mean to think infrastructurally?
2. What is ‘imagination’?
3. What sort of infrastructures support ‘imagination’ and, in particular, the sort of critical, creative imagining that might open up pathways to fundamental social transformation?
4. What is needed from researchers, researcher-practitioners and funders to develop our collective intelligence in this area?

# 4. What does it mean to think ‘infrastructurally’?

**“Movement is what distinguishes infrastructures from institutions … What constitutes infrastructure … are the patterns, habits, norms, and scenes of assemblage and use.”**

Berlant, 2022

The research literature on infrastructures invites us to think of infrastructures not just as questions of engineering but as products of and contributors to social practice. It describes infrastructure not only as ‘hard’ (for example, roads, cables, the global shipping of food) but also as ‘soft’ (the movement of information, circulation of people, news, education). It draws our attention to how all infrastructures are produced through and shape social practices (Larkin, 2013); as well as to the way that infrastructures require tending, care and maintenance (Amin, 2014; Berlant, 2022; McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008; Russel and Vinsel, 2018; Star and Ruhleder, 1996). It encourages us to notice how infrastructures can produce inequalities through being allowed to decay, and by pushing resources and materials to some places while starving others (Chachra, 2021; Facer and Buchczyk, 2018; Simone, 2004). And it invites us to pay attention to how infrastructures emerge through regulations and standards that govern pathways and movements, and that cluster and congregate matter and spread it out (Bottici,

2014; Bowker et al., 2019; Dedeoğlu and Ekmekçioğlu, 2020; Star, 1999).

Thinking infrastructurally, then, might mean asking:

- What is enabling or impeding flows of ideas, resources, people?
- What and whose routes are open or blocked?
- What standards or practices are governing the provisioning of resources to, and movement between different places?
- What explicit or implicit habits are shaping movements and encounters?
- What processes determine the flow of resources, and how?
- How is the infrastructure being maintained or eroded, and why?
- What practices of care or neglect does the infrastructure evidence?
- Who is accumulating resources or starved of resources in these processes?

# 5. What is ‘imagination’?

**“The imagination and the tangible are co-constituted. Value flows back and forth, not just from the imagination to the real world, but from the so-called real world to imagination.”**

Daren Okafo

Imagination is addressed in a wide range of fields, including but not restricted to: psychology, philosophy, decolonial theory, science and technology studies, sociology, ecopsychology, environmental science and futures studies. We cluster research in relation to imagination under the following headings:

- research from psychological perspectives
- research on social imagination
- research from decolonial perspectives
- research on ecological imagination.

## Research from psychological perspectives

For many years now, sociocultural psychology has shown consistently that imagining is neither an elite nor a specialised activity, but a critically significant everyday practice that is an innate

capability of all individuals (Zittoun and Gillespie, 2016a; Zittoun and Glăveanu, 2017). Imagination, understood from this lens, is not seen as an escape from reality but as a core cognitive function that shapes how humans understand the past and make the future (Lynch, 2020). This capacity is culturally and socially resourced: the images, cultures, practices of any society provide resources for imagination. As such, it is shaped by the societies and cultures of which it is a part (Fuist, 2021; Hawlina, Pederson and Zittoun, 2020; Jenkins, 2016).

## Research on social imagination

Sociology, science and technology studies, philosophy, design and urban studies all offer analyses of the 'social imagination'. Drawing on work in this area, we can think of the social imagination in 3 ways.

First, it is the ongoing daily acts of encounter where society is made and remade (see urban theorist Jane Jacobs' description of the life of a thriving city as a 'sidewalk ballet'; Jacobs, 2020. Equally, Vanessa Andreotti reminded us that 'the future depends less on the images we have in our heads than in our capacity to repair and weave relationships differently'. Seen from this perspective, the social imagination is negotiated and transformed daily, through micro interactions (Olufemi, 2021; see also De Certeau,1984; Unger, 2000).

Second, the social imagination can be thought of as the images produced by cultural institutions. Such images gather publics around them, constitute meeting points for communities and provide sites for debate and conflict. Philosopher Chiara Bottici calls this image-rich space, the 'imaginal'. She argues that this is the soil from which society is created, distinct from individual imagination and personal fantasy; it is a place for the creation of shared images that have effects in the world (Bottici, 2014). These images create common-sense assumptions about the possible. (See also the long history of studies of ideology and culture, for example, Silverstone, 1999; Hall et al., 2013.) The educator and anthropologist Michal Osterweil reminded us of the importance of cultivating this 'soil': 'Too often we are constrained, because of the immediacy and the urgency, to focus on the outcome we want as opposed to building the soil that the thing will grow out of in an open-ended way.'

Third, the social imagination can be understood through the lens of social **imaginaries** produced to coordinate particular projects and secure particular social futures. Research from this perspective has been dominated by studies of sociotechnical imaginaries as products of alliances of actors, with mutual interests in shaping particular forms of investment, research and action, and in organising joint action across a distance (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015). These imaginaries produce specific anticipated futures for societies that serve to retrospectively colonise the present, making certain behaviours inevitable and others unthinkable (Arora and Stirling, 2023). Such imaginaries may also be navigated analogically, bringing the retrospective and the prospective into meaningful conversation (Schwarz-Plaschg, 2018). These imaginaries

are not, however, always successful or secured, as Professor of Science and Technology Policy Andy Stirling reminded us, the pathways through which imaginaries are realised are always heterogeneous, contested and messy (Stirling et al., 2023).

## Research from decolonial perspectives

Decolonial research is a highly diverse field with many different traditions of working with imagination, whether recognised as dreaming practices, decolonial praxis, or Afro- and Indigenous futurisms. What we learn from scholars and practitioners working in these traditions is that practices of imagination are not neutral but are embedded in historic colonial power relations and patterns of thought. These patterns of thought require divestment and unlearning if conditions for new ways of imagining are to be created (Andreotti, 2021; Björkén-Nyberg and Hoveskog, 2023; Hartman 2008; Mignolo, 2021). For the epistemic justice campaigner Anasuya Sengupta, this means that imagination practice cannot be done well and powerfully ‘without looking at histories, without really examining privilege historically and ongoing’. Such epistemic reconstitution can be understood, in Dylan McGarry’s terms, as: ‘identifying how we might “unlearn” the enculturated ways of being that encourage and reinforce coloniality’ (Kulundu et al., 2020: 115). Such unlearning requires sites of community dialogue and praxis in which competing desires and purposes can be negotiated (Celermajer et al., 2024).

Vanessa Andreotti, however, argues that disrupting inherited patterns of imagination is not simply a question of resistance but requires a relational practice that resists inherited framings:

“It's about working with the world rather than managing, controlling, or putting the world into a template. My concern is that if we don't challenge the template form of imagination, we will continue to have practices of imagination that try to put the world into a template.”

## Research on ecological imagination

Although the concept of ecological imagination is used in many different, albeit potentially complementary, ways across different fields, it is currently vaguely defined. As well as being a generic term that is being applied to literature and art that takes an ecological theme, it has also been defined as:

- the capacity to perceive the relationships that constitute any object, in other words, seeing objects as processes and relations (Fesmire, 2010: 198)
- the distribution of imaginative capacity across humans and other beings (Banerjee and Arjaliès, 2021; Chao and Enari, 2021); Vanessa Andreotti, for example, described the imagination practices of communities in Brazil, particularly in the Amazon, as being ‘open to the land, imagining through and with land in its many layers, including our

bodies being land as well'

- and as the ethical responsibility of imagination towards environmental and ecological concerns (Fesmire, 2010).

As psychology increasingly takes an ecological direction, in recognising thought as shaped by the ecologies in which we live and as emerging from interaction with other beings and species, we might also see the 'ecological imagination' as a subset of the wider field of sociocultural psychology.

In all cases, however, the emerging idea of the ecological imagination draws attention to imagination as profoundly relational and as a process that is distributed across and emerges from the complex ecologies of human and more-than-human relations.

## Towards a definition of imagination

From these perspectives, we might offer a working definition of imagination as:

- a personal capability and social capacity that reframes and remakes reality
- which is resourced through everyday encounters, social imaginaries and the imaginal realm
- mediated by extended relations of the self with both human and non-human others at micro, ecological and planetary scales

- situated within historic relations of dominance and inequality, which marginalise non-dominant imaginaries and ways of knowing
- and which enables individuals, communities and societies, given the right conditions and opportunities, to think beyond and outside those historic relations.

# 6. What resources and practices nurture imagination?

The resources that support imagination as defined above are, in principle, endless. From the literature we have surveyed, such resources necessarily include, amongst other things:

- all of the cultural and social resources that an individual draws upon in their daily lives (Zittoun et al., 2020)
- everyday imaginative practices such as daydreams and wandering attention of individuals themselves (Zittoun and Gillespie, 2016a)
- the existing informational and cultural practices of each society (Appadurai, in UNESCO, 2000)
- the fabric of everyday micro-interactions in society (De Certeau, 1984; Zittoun and Gillespie, 2016a)
- the imaginal, the image-rich space structured by cultural organisations and traditions (Bottici, 2014)
- alliances of interested actors that intentionally promote and resist particular visions and trajectories of possible futures (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015)

- communal and democratic spaces designed to negotiate and contest different visions (Cooper, 2017)
- inherited and taken-for-granted patterns of thought and knowledge, and the intentional structures and practices of resistance and unlearning of these patterns (Andreotti, 2021; Kelley, 2003)
- diverse forms of knowledge, including embodied and place-based knowledge (Kulundu et al., 2020; Escobar, 2008; Mignolo, 2021)
- forms of knowledge such as dreams and visions (Asante, 2023; Chao and Enari, 2021)
- community practices and institutions that intentionally create encounters between different forms of knowledge (Daiute, 2017)
- the material and ecological communities in which and through which imagining is happening (Jasanoff, 2022)
- the experience of mobility and movement (Zittoun and Cangia, 2020)
- the human, material, animal, plant and other 'kin' to whom we are related (Haraway, 2016; Van Horn, Wall Kimmerer and Hausdoerffer, 2021)
- the planetary (Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011).

From this perspective, then, 'imagination infrastructure' means **everything**. If that is the case, however, it becomes a term so vague as to be unhelpful.

## What resources support a critical, creative imagination?

**"How you attach understanding the imagination to the social in a clear-eyed, systematic and non-reductive way has conversations to be had with earlier iterations of that kind of work, particularly the Birmingham Centre and Stuart Hall."**

Lisa Garforth

If we ask what might support a 'critical creative imagination', an imagination critical of existing social relations, creatively agile in opening up and exploring new possibilities, empathetic towards and capable of learning from multiple perspectives, we can get more specific about the resources that support it, and therefore the infrastructure needed to provide these resources. Focusing on this form of imagination makes sense if we are interested in the question of opening up new ways of addressing our collective predicament; as Vanessa Andreotti argues, there is a need to attend to 'the characteristics of the practices with the most potential to interrupt'.

To help us understand what might support such interruptive imagination, we can draw on the work of scholars in educational philosophy and research (for example, Maxine Greene, Elliot Eisner, bell hooks, Gert Biesta), in futures studies (for example, Sohail Inayatullah, Ivana Milojevic, Jim Dator, Richard Slaughter), in utopian studies (for example, Ruth Levitas, Davinia Cooper, Lisa Garforth) and in design, innovation and creativity research (for example, Geoff

Mulgan, Anthony Dunne, Fiona Raby). All of these have focused on the question of how a critical, creative imagination might be fostered. This literature points to the critical importance of favourable conditions:

- where familiar and taken--for-granted ways of seeing the world can be made strange, a practice supported by close attention to the world as well as through attention to obscured or marginalised views (Andreotti, 2021; Death, 2022; Greene, 1977)
- in which people can think and act like artists and makers of reality, having opportunities to create, to realise ideas and transform environments (Eisner, 1979, 2002; Hay, 2022), these being environments in which experimentation with reality is encouraged (Cooper, 2017)
- where people are valued and recognised; as Sangita Shresthova reminded us, 'if people don't feel seen as human beings, it's hard for them to open up about imagination'
- in which desire can be cultivated and critiqued (Garforth, 2021)
- where dominant future imaginaries can be challenged and the already existing diverse possibilities of the present uncovered (Benjamin, 2024; Celermajer et al., 2024)
- in which multiple and diverse visions of the future are presented; as Andy Stirling argued, 'the existence of a healthy, vital, multiplicity of imaginaries feeds infrastructures to become more diverse themselves'
- where new stories can be invented, in particular new stories that offer opportunities for enriching and making more complex assumptions about pasts and futures (Terry et al.,

2024)

- in which relationships situated in place and time can be developed over time (Chachra, 2021)
- where the processes not just the outcomes of imagining are valued (Kulundu et al., 2020; Zittoun and Glăveanu, 2017).

This combined work points in particular to the importance, for the cultivation of a critical, creative imagination, of creating spaces for people to encounter others with different perspectives and experiences.

As Professor of Sociocultural Psychology Tania Zittoun pointed out when we spoke with her: 'If you want to reopen the space for imagining and opening alternatives, then you need to give access to a diversity of resources.' Likewise, author and Professor of Media Education Julian Sefton Green explained: 'The more people have access to more different ways of doing things, the better. Imagination flourishes through conflict, contrast and comparison.' Equally, for Holly Fairbank, Director of the Maxine Greene Institute, through such practices, 'People are able to see things as if they could be otherwise. They see the world around them in new ways without making judgement. They are able to notice more deeply, listen more carefully.'

Pat Thomson, Professor of Education and scholar of creativity, points to the importance, not only of diversity and spaces of encounter, but also of time to slow down and go deeper into

other people's ideas. Echoing arguments made by Indigenous scholars such as Tyson Yunkaporta, Bawaka Country Collective and Ligia López López (Burarrwanga et al., 2019; López López, 2021; Yunkaporta, 2020; Yunkaporta, 2024), she argues that these modes of encounter can be learnt from First Nations communities:

> "As I understand it, periodically people would come from far-flung bits of country, and would spend the equivalent of two moons, so two months, talking. This was the way of sharing knowledge, of putting different knowledge together, of making knowledge. When I say talk, it was also in song and dance. This was about the transmission of knowledge to the next generation. It is what we whitefellas now understand as slow sustaining and sustainable scholarship."

We can also turn to insights from social movements and popular education practices which have intentionally set out to cultivate a critical, courageous creativity in pursuit of collective social change. This work tells us of:

- the **need for people to meet regularly over time and create shared cultural experiences and collective critique** (Escobar et al., 2024); we can think here of initiatives like the Black Panther educational projects (https://practice.malvinharrison.com/educational-programs/), Clarion Cycling Clubs (https://clarioncc.org/about-the-national-clarion/history/) and Socialist Sunday

Schools (https://www.nls.uk/learning-zone/politics-and-society/labour-history/), the Black Education Movement (https://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/collections/the-black-education-movement-1965-1988) in the UK and its Supplementary School System and initiatives from Southall Black Sisters (https://southallblacksisters.org.uk/) through to more recent groups including the African Rainbow Family (https://africanrainbowfamily.org/) and Sisters Uncut (https://www.sistersuncut.org/) or Hood Futures Studio (formerly MAIA (https://journal.maiagroup.co/archive))

- the **importance of opportunities for groups to analyse, together, the conditions of their lives** (Cooper, 2022; Freire, 2000) and through this, to develop what sociologist C. Wright Mills called a 'sociological imagination' that turns individual problems into social issues
- the **critical role of practices, ceremonies and rituals that maintain distinctive and pluralistic practices of imagining that are culturally transmitted over time** (Asante, 2023); such practices exist in all communities, and their diversity is critical to sustaining distinctive forms of lifeworld
- the **importance of encounters between groups and networks, beyond immediate localities, creating relationships of solidarity over time and space** (Deane-Freeman, 2021; Eseonu and Okoye, 2023; Olufemi, 2021); a creative critical imagination is fostered, this work suggests, through networked localism, rather than parochial globalism

- the **importance of sustaining archives and records to allow access to a shared history** as resources for new futures that can themselves be subject to reimagining (Hartman, 2008); this is particularly critical in communities whose archives have been ignored, neglected, or stolen by mainstream institutions (Bryan et al., 2018)
- the **role of governments and legal structures in preventing knowledge monopolies,** rethinking ideas of intellectual property and keeping open spaces for diverse forms of cultural production; as designer and architect Indy Johar argued: 'A function of the imaginative capacity of a society is itself an entangled value function. It's not divisible to you or me because it's societal. It's a societal asset. By implication, it is a non-divisible societal asset, and we do not know how to invest in non-divisible societal assets because we've seen everything through an individuated micro asset lens'
- **the importance of bridges between activist and bureaucratic networks**, and between insiders and outsiders, to create dialogue between emergent ideas and formalised power structures (Green, 2016; Mulgan, 2022; Smucker, 2017) in which (in the words of educator and activist Daren Okafo) people 'move between government and us'; and as Professor of Imagination Penny Hay argued, 'It's about making those processes and practices visible in order to inform policy and change'
- the **lively interrelationship of resistance and imagining**; as Anasuya Sengupta argued, everyday resistance entails 'holding the line and simultaneously imagining … The notion that some people do the imagining and other people do the challenging and doing is

> how activism has got divided. We have to acknowledge that many of us are simultaneously dreaming and doing. Dreaming has been one form of the resilience infrastructures of minoritised communities.'

Conditions for the creative, critical imagination require the space, time and resources necessary to:

- unsettle assumptions and challenge taken-for-granted narratives
- encounter diverse others, listen deeply, recognise and value each other
- engage with the distinctive specifics of place, history and possibility
- maintain distinctive, diverse ways of knowing over time, creating deep archives as future resources
- tell old stories and experiment with new stories
- mobilise alliances to realise shared collective visions.

Such conditions also require an underpinning of economic, regulatory and legal processes that value and protect a diversity of imaginaries in the social ecology.

## Assessing the infrastructure for imagination today

On this basis, the critical questions we need to ask of our imagination infrastructure (if we want to support critical, creative imagination adequate to addressing contemporary social

challenges) include:

- How is a plurality of images of the future being maintained or closed down by the social and cultural practices of our societies?
- How/are encounters between diverse perspectives, experiences, ways of knowing being encouraged or prevented? Where is this happening? What monocultures are being sustained?
- How/are flows of imagination and ideas between spaces enabled and impeded, whose ideas are flowing and whose are stuck?
- How/are diverse ways of knowing valued or neglected in different settings?
- How/are repeated encounters enabled sufficiently to create new relationships, go deeply into ideas, or being disrupted and impeded?
- How/are practices of slow attention and inquiry being supported or blocked?
- How/are old stories being archived and held, and new stories being fostered?
- How/are the transitions between thinking and action, relations between theory and practice, between action and governance, being enabled or blocked?
- How do legal and regulatory structures protect diverse flows of ideas or sustain and encourage dominant imaginations?

## Implications for policy and practice

Looking at these questions makes clear that a critical, creative imagination is not only fostered in schools and cultural organisations but also arises from infrastructures that afford particular ways of gathering, encountering, learning and creating **together** and across difference.

Specifically, they invite urgent attention to the role of social segregation in public spaces, to questions of where people gather. They demand attention to urban design and how cities shape encounters between different groups, and to property law and rights and the loss of public spaces of association. They draw attention to the impact of poverty on imagination, in particular as this is related to time poverty and the loss of opportunities for encounters, socialising, stillness, unlearning and reflection. They invite us to seek out examples of community encounters that offer rejuvenated practices of association. Tianna Johnson of Hood Futures Studio (formerly MAIA), for example, spoke of (Black) Central American cultural heritages of refuge and hospitality that inform the creative space ABUELOS:

**"Everywhere needs ABUELOS and things like it — libraries, public spaces and common land, land that isn't private. All places need a range of spaces for refuge and encounter — somewhere you can have a conversation."**

These questions also demand attention to **issues of media regulation** — including anti-monopoly policies and governance of algorithms. As Julian Sefton-Green explained to us: 'the

platformisation of decision making through Silicon Valley has absolutely created a homogeneity where what you want is diversity and variety'. Further to this, the interaction designer and researcher Dan Lockton drew attention to the biases built into AI technologies: 'They are trained on previously labelled images, often stock photos of what was labelled as the future'. This, Anasuya Sengupta warned, can be 'very deeply racialised, and indeed it's horrifying but unsurprising that some of the most extreme proponents of AI-as-utopia draw upon an ideological lineage that includes eugenics'. These questions also highlight that cultivating a critical, creative imagination is not separate from the world of human rights policy and regulation, or from how freedom of speech is protected.

These questions also, and of course, draw attention to **arts and cultural policy**, and the implications for collective imagination practices of the attacks on the arts in education and the consequent social stratification of participation in arts practices. They also call attention to wider questions of knowledge politics, including the disconnections between spaces of 'thinking' and spaces of 'acting', and to the future role of tertiary education — what is the role of universities and colleges and adult education in (re)creating gathering spaces across sectors, disciplines and communities?

As Ruth Wylie pointed out, creating conditions for a creative, critical imagination **will not be the work of any one sector of society, but all sectors**: 'These modes of social imagination need to be embedded throughout daily practice in schools, in businesses, in non-profits, in

community organizations. It's not up just to one entity to be doing this work.' Equally, political science researcher Manjana Milkoreit drew our attention to the need to embed these practices in political institutions which 'do not usually have any dedicated units that have responsibility for imagination to try and organise it collectively and deliberately within a society or within a city, or even internationally'.

Defending and enriching a healthy imagination infrastructure will therefore be both the responsibility of and an opportunity for researchers, funders, activists and bureaucrats working in areas from the arts to law, from education to urban planning. Action and research are needed in all of these areas.

# 7. What does this mean for research into imagination infrastructure?

**"Imagination infrastructure is really bubbling up in different directions with different terminologies. It reminds me of the space we were in before all the co-production papers where we realised everyone was talking about co-production but with many different terms. How can we have a collective conversation to understand the different frames, the different approaches?"**

Josie Chambers

Researching imagination infrastructure demands new practices. Such research needs, in the first instance, to reflect and embody the ultimate aim it is working towards: namely, the maintenance and health of the richly pluralistic, diverse and agentic imagination practice that we have called the 'creative and critical imagination'. It will demand research with a strong commitment to and engagement with place as a locus of dialogue. It will need to bring together different perspectives, and respect and value diverse forms of knowledge. It will need to develop theory and ideas alongside experimentation and practice, learning from doing and making as a way of learning. It will need to uncover deep traditions and respect marginalised imaginative resources, as well as surfacing what is already happening. And it will need to actively resource the participation in such research from those whose imagination and vision

are currently marginalised.

Funding such research will take institutional patience. It will require slower funding processes that play out over a longer time, to allow diverse communities time to get to know each other, time to learn to respect and value each other's perspectives, time to work through difficult tensions and time to experiment and play.

Such funding will, itself, require imagination. This includes openness to diverse forms of knowledge, unfamiliar research outcomes and research practices that rethink questions of 'impact' and 'scale'. It will require recognition that a healthy imagination infrastructure is concerned with building diverse perspectives, distinctive and locally relevant responses to specific situations, and sites of rapid, international and networked flows of imagination that allow networked localism to flourish.

Creating such funding processes will bring challenges. However, there can be few more important issues for research funding than the creation of democratic, diverse and thriving imagination infrastructures for the critical, creative imagination.

# Annex: note on the term ‘imagination infrastructure’

## Is ‘imagination infrastructure’ a useful term? What does it do for us?

In attempting to work with and through this term in this review of the literature, we have noticed that the idea of imagination infrastructure draws attention to the uneven structural processes by which imagination is provisioned. It usefully reminds us of the role of regulatory and legal structures. It also offers a metaphor that may be recognisable to policy-makers and can be acted on by invoking images of ‘critical infrastructure’. And it is a useful image that collides seemingly contradictory ideas (imagination/infrastructure) in ways that provoke new questions.

We also, however, have our concerns. Infrastructure is a concept deeply associated with modernity and is therefore a questionable term for nurturing ways of thinking and being that are intended to disrupt or question modernity. How the ecological and the infrastructural relate remains an open question. Infrastructure’s privileging of flows and movements also risks marginalising moments of stillness, and the role of institutions and organisations in creating sustained communities of imagination.

For us, we have concluded that as long as we recognise ‘infrastructure’ as just one among many metaphors, and that it invites or obscures our attention to particular questions, it is likely to serve a useful purpose. However, if it drives out other ways of thinking about imagination and reinforces a technocratic, centralised management approach to ‘imagination capacity’ it may in turn become part of the problem and another impediment to radical, collective imagination.

In the end, we suggest that we treat this metaphor lightly, use it with care and specificity, and keep ourselves open to other metaphors if we are interested in nurturing the highly social, relational practices from which many imaginations might grow.

# Methodology

This project was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and comprised interviews with 19 leading researchers and researcher-practitioners working on imagination, 3 workshops with academics and imagination practitioners, and a desk review of academic and grey literature. Any quotes without source references in the text are to the interviews conducted as part of the project; these were carried out over Zoom during 2024. The people we were in dialogue with were:

- Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Victoria, Canada
- Josie Chambers, Assistant Professor, Urban Futures Studio, Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, University of Utrecht, the Netherlands
- Holly C. Fairbank, Executive Director of the Maxine Greene Institute for Aesthetic Education and Social Imagination
- Lisa Garforth, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Newcastle University, UK
- Vlad Glăveanu, Full Professor of Psychology and Director of the DCU Centre for Possibility Studies at Dublin City University, Ireland
- Penny Hay, Professor of Imagination, Research Centre for Cultural and Creative Industries, and Reader in Creative Teaching and Learning, School of Education,

University of Bath, UK

- Sheila Jasanoff, founder and director, Program on Science, Technology, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, USA
- Indy Johar, co-founder of 00 (project00.cc) founder of Dark Matter Labs, London, UK
- Tianna Johnson, writer and Communications lead, Hood Futures Studio (formerly MAIA), Birmingham, UK
- Dan Lockton, Associate Professor of Imagination and Climate Futures at Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) and Director, Imaginaries Lab, the Netherlands
- Manjana Milkoreit, Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Oslo, Norway and coordinator of governance-related work for the Global Tipping Points Report 2023
- Michal Osterweil, Teaching Associate Professor in Global Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA
- Julian Sefton-Green, Professor of New Media Education at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
- Anasuya Sengupta, Co-director and Co-founder, Whose Knowledge?
- Sangita Shresthova, Director of Research of the Civic Paths Group, University of Southern California, USA
- Andy Stirling, Professor of Science and Technology Policy at the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex, UK

- Pat Thomson, Professor of Education and Convenor of the Centre for Research in Arts, Creativity and Literacies, School of Education, University of Nottingham, UK
- Ruth Wylie, Assistant Director, Centre for Science and the Imagination, University of Arizona, USA
- Tania Zittoun, Professor in Sociocultural Psychology, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

Thanks also to: Gabriella Gomez-Mont, Visiting Professor of Practice and Senior Policy Fellow, UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, UK. We are also grateful to Ash Amin, Emeritus 1931 Professor of Geography and Fellow of Christ's College, University of Cambridge, UK.

# Note

1. For anyone who pays attention to the news, there can be no doubt that we are living in a polycrisis (https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/03/polycrisis-adam-tooze-historian-explains/) — a coming together of multiple, at times seemingly unrelated crises that destabilise assumptions and require new ways of imagining, thinking and acting. Florida, North Carolina, Nigeria, Tunisia, Mexico, India, Nepal, Vietnam, Myanmar, Poland, Austria and the UK all experienced flooding (https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/18/climate/global-flooding-climate-change.html) in the closing days of the summer of 2024. Scientists warn that the human climate niche will contract dramatically with devastating human costs (https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01132-6) unless we change course. Economies are stagnating (https://www.ft.com/content/884f307b-0807-4c8b-8656-43fd33443ab4) or slowing (https://www.worldbank.org/en/research/publication/long-term-growth-prospects#:~:text=The%20growth%20rates%20of%20investment%20and%20total%20factor,the , and colonial patterns of exploitation continue to ravage landscapes and destroy people's lives (https://africanarguments.org/2024/04/colonialism-revamped-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo/).

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An annotated bibliography of texts referenced can be found here. (https://imaginationinfrastructures.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/files/2024/12/Imagination-Infrastructure-bibliography-with-abstracts-FINAL.pdf)

# About the authors

Ruth is a researcher, facilitator, artist and activist who specialises in green transitions. Keri is an interdisciplinary researcher working in the field of education, imagination and climate futures. Neither of us claims to be an expert in all of the different fields and disciplines that speak to the question of imagination infrastructure. Our aim here, is to do the field-building work of bringing them into dialogue in ways that, we hope, lays the groundwork for further collective elaboration by, and between those, working in each of these fields.

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