

IMAG40: GUEST GUIDANCE NOTE 1: USE OF IMAGINATION IN FUTURE VISION

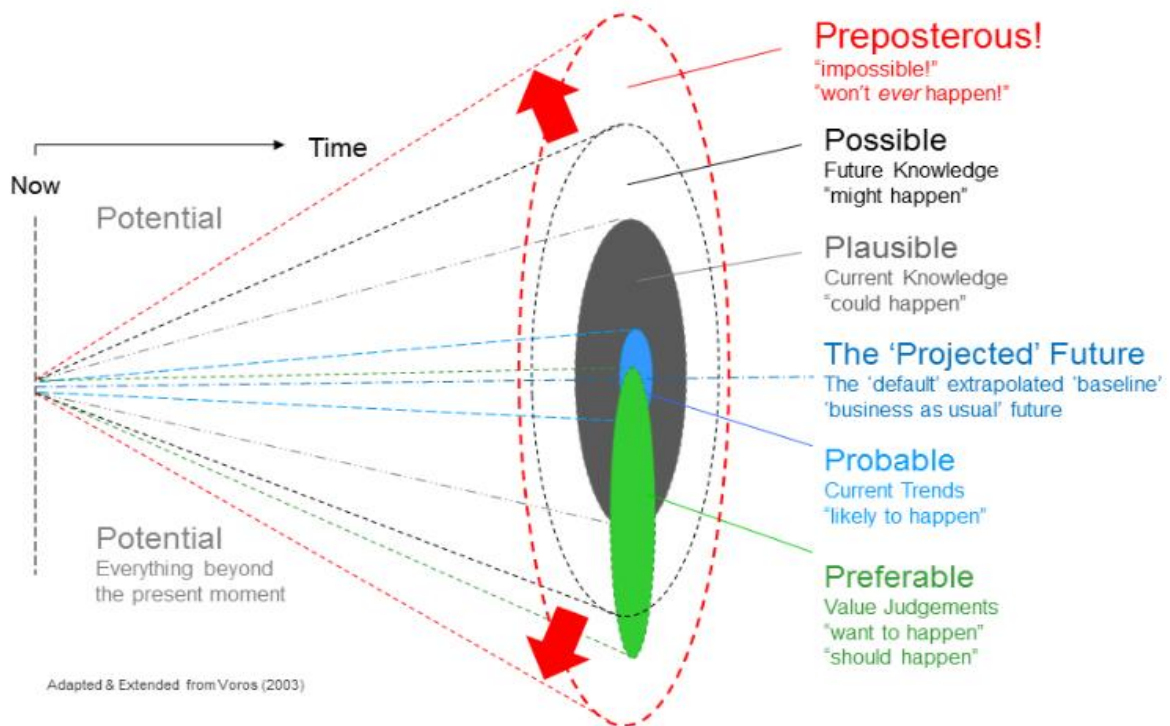
THE PREFERABLE FUTURES FRAMING OF THE PODCAST SERIES

The following notes are a grab bag of background information aimed at helping IMAG40 podcast interview guests make sense of the future visualisation themes of the project. Please feel free to skip these notes if for whatever reason you don't think they are relevant to you. In the final event, anything you have to say as a guest during podcast interview, and the way you choose to say it, will be greatly valued.

Whilst not expecting guests to turn into futures and foresight experts overnight, I want them to be aware that we are trying to achieve an **imagined**, preferable futures framing across all episodes of the series. If guests are unfamiliar with these sorts of concept, have a look at the 'Futures Cone' graphic reproduced here. There are also links to a couple of short online articles on futures and strategic foresight categories provided by futures thinker Joseph Voros.

One place to start thinking imaginatively about the future is the realisation that not just one but a range of unknown potential futures could eventuate. As Ian Lowe, Australian author and professor of science, technology, and society is quoted as saying:

'Remember that the future is not somewhere we are going, it is something we are creating. Every day we do things that make some futures more probable and others less likely.'



Within the 'possible' to 'preferable' futures range of the potential futures cone described by Voros, it is the 'preferable' futures area marked in green which is of greatest interest to the podcast series. A **preferable future** in a futures context can be defined as one which contains what we **want to happen** or what we believe **should happen** as outcomes to achieve a better future for human communities, human civilisation and other species. What would such a preferred future look and feel like? How might such a future differ from the other potential futures existing within the cone? These are the sort of overarching questions which will help structure the imaginative core of the podcast series.

Equally, envisaging a preferable future requires that we incorporate value judgements, ethics and morality within our future and foresight considerations. For instance, by envisaging a society we would be proud to pass on to our children or children's children as one simple metric of what is considered preferable.

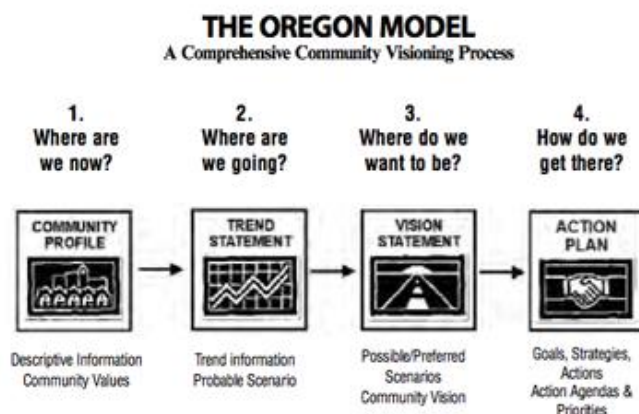
Joseph Voros articles: a short [primer on futures thinking](#) and use of the [futures cone graphic](#).

When viewing the Voros cone and reading his articles, two other aspects of futures thinking methodology are worth considering. One involves the conventional extrapolation of existing trends from business-as-usual models of economy, governance and development. That leads to a default **projected future** within the Voros cone diagram. It is intended that this sort of extrapolative approach will be given only passing reference in podcast episode topic discussion.

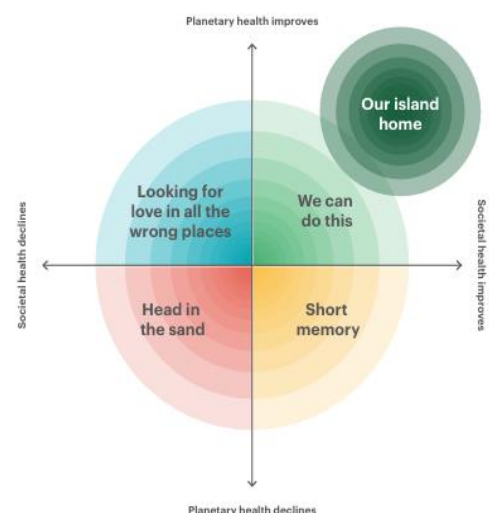
The latter approach has a limited application of imagination to envisage future possibilities. Inevitably it would also waste limited interview time pointing to the litany of failures of conventional development models. What is needed most in episode discussion is the use of imagination to bypass the litany and to point to novel, bold and urgently required system level reforms which could help counter the litany.

A slightly more expansive and imaginative futures and foresight extrapolative process involves searching for, analysing and projecting the implications of ‘signals’ from the future in the present. Those signals comprise observable, innovative initiatives, processes or mindsets in the here and now. They herald potential early signs of trends and outcomes that could come to pass in a range of **possible, plausible or probable** futures. Such ‘signals’ futures thinking is used in risk assessment, strategic foresight and community visioning scenario building exercises. Two graphics depicting the latter approach are given immediately below.

On the other hand, **preferable** futures thinking starts from the imagination of a preferred end state(s) underpinned by moral and ethical values. Such imaginative visualisation may then work backwards to the present day - and map or ‘backcast’ a path of intermediate steps toward achieving that preferable future or futures. This form of futures thinking includes imaginative leaps, visualisation and backcasting exercises. It is this latter, potentially moral and ethical values-based approach to futures thinking which is of most interest to this podcast project.



NFP sector generated scenarios taken from a report by the Climate and Health Alliance Australia, 2021



As implied by the futures cone graphic, the two approaches to futures thinking just described, extrapolative and values based, are inter-related. They are both represented within the cue/stimulus questions provided to guests to help structure their talking points in the recording of their ultimate podcast interview. See IMAG40: GUEST GUIDANCE NOTE 3 - PREPARING TALKING POINTS FOR PODCAST INTERVIEW. It also follows that the various methods suggested below could be combined when thinking about potential futures. For instance, scenario building with backcasting. Or ‘time machine’ with ‘letter or report’ from the future.

SOME METHODS TO ASSIST PREFERABLE FUTURE THINKING AND DESCRIPTION

SCENARIO BUILDING – based on projecting ‘signals’ of the future from the present and thinking through their implications for future development outcomes. This futures approach employs imagination and can incorporate ethical and moral values consideration as well. It has been a popular method used in various forms of community visioning consultations over the years. The graphic above, depicting the so-called Oregon model of community visioning, outlines one sequence of community engagement in which scenario building is employed.

In Australia, a fairly recent (2021) example of scenario building by the Climate and Health Alliance (Australia) was aimed at community engagement on the link between planetary and public health as manifested by climate disruption. A graphic of the final scenarios generated is depicted above and can be found in the full report on the exercise [Australia in 2020 – possible alternative futures](#) prepared by the Climate and Health Alliance (Australia).

The UK Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) has also utilised imaginative futures thinking recently. Their report [Social Visions for a Low Carbon Future](#) (2024) showcases an interesting mix of imaginative visioning and scenario building to anticipate the features of possible low carbon lifestyles which could be present across various international communities in 2050.

SOME OTHER FUTURE IMAGINATION METHODS

[LETTER OR REPORT FROM THE FUTURE](#) and [LETTER/REPORT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS](#)

These two written exercises that can stimulate the imagination to create and visualise possible and preferable futures. The first, requires visualising a future imagined state and describing it in as much detail as possible in an imaginary letter or report sent ‘back’ in time to someone or oneself in the present.

The second exercise requires the writing of a letter or report to an imagined inhabitant of a future society, perhaps a present-day child or younger relative. The letter/report writer describes some current trends they are observing, both negative and positive, and projects the outcomes of those trends into the imagined future - perhaps also using a framing of [RADICAL HOPE](#). A form of hope which is rooted neither in unrealistic optimism nor doomsday pessimism about the future.

The [TIME MACHINE TRAVEL EXERCISE](#). There are many variants of this method of stimulating future oriented imagination. The key idea is that an individual is asked to imagine using a time travel device to transport themselves to a future time, perhaps 10, 20, 30 or even more years ahead. Upon arrival in the imaginary future, the individual is asked to describe as vividly as possible the changes they see there. The imaginary changes that will have transpired across the intervening years, along with some of their imaginary implications. In order to describe their imaginative visualisation in more depth the ‘time traveller’ might describe the sights, sounds and smells and other impressions on an imaginary walk they make in the future world. Or they could describe their own or somebody else’s imagined activities in the future world by way of a [DAY IN THE LIFE](#) storyline.

Another imaginative stimulation exercise, the [MIRACLE QUESTION](#) is drawn from the field of solution focussed therapy. It could be repurposed to imagine the achievement of progressive, community level reforms. The miracle question is usually put in some form such as:

‘Imagine you dream of a better preferable future. What do you see, hear and experience in your dream state regarding that future? When you wake up, you realise that the changes you dreamt of and wanted to see transpire in your own life and in that of your community or wider society, have largely taken place. What do you now see, hear and experience around you in your imagined waking state – which confirm your conviction that your preferable future has eventuated?’

Finally, the method of [BACKCASTING](#) is useful in helping to think about the intermediate stages or goals that might be required to move us from a present day, business as usual state to an imagined preferable future. As the name implies, the process is to start with your imagined preferable future and work backwards to create intermediate steps to achieve it, one objective at a time.

The question to ask here is: What step, goal or objective would need to have been achieved immediately preceding the point I am considering? Then repeat that question/answer until sufficient steps have been created back to our present point in time.

SOME PODCASTS EMPLOYING IMAGINATIVE FUTURES THINKING

If you have time, listen to some episodes from a great imaginative futures podcast series created by UK based Rob Hopkins, founder of the [Transition Network](#)/Transition Towns movement. The series is entitled [From What if to What Next?](#) (2020-2024). A short, three minutes [animated video compilation](#) of clips from some of the episodes is available. As is a text based manifesto of preferable future development ideas entitled the [Ministry of Imagination](#) This was compiled from the 100 episodes produced for the series.

UK wildlife broadcaster Gillian Burke's podcast [If I Ruled the World](#): also uses future vision imagination in her discussions with a wide spectrum of innovative guests and preferable future thinkers, as suggested by the podcast title.

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