

# IMAGININGS: A DIY GUIDE TO ARTS-BASED COMMUNITY DIALOGUE



OREGON STATE  
UNIVERSITY  
2016 IMAGINING



## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE

HELLO@USDAC.US | USDAC.US

January 2019

Dear Citizen Artist,

Thank you for downloading *Imaginations: A DIY Guide to Arts-Based Community Dialogue*, the **U.S. Department of Arts and Culture's** latest publication. By using the USDAC's resources and taking part in our actions, you're joining thousands across the U.S. who understand that to thrive, democracy needs all our voices and all our creativity.

If you would like to take a further step toward honing and deploying your skills in building cultural democracy, please be sure you're on the USDAC mailing list. Just add your name and email at our **website** and we'll keep you updated on relevant resources, conversations, and actions.

The USDAC is a *people-powered department*—a grassroots action network inciting creativity and social imagination to shape a culture of empathy, equity, and belonging. It's through your participation that this guide has been made possible. We are grateful to all of those whose inspiring words and creative ideas you will read in this guide, and to each and every one of you!

Please feel free to contact us. You can always reach us at [hello@usdac.us](mailto:hello@usdac.us).

Together we create!

*The USDAC*

### TOGETHER, WE CREATE.





# A ROADMAP TO IMAGININGS: A DIY GUIDE TO ARTS- BASED COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

---

<b>PART ONE. IMAGININGS: A BRIEF HISTORY.....</b>	<b>PAGE 1</b>
How Imaginings started. USDAC Cultural Agents (2).	
<i>For any reader, setting the context before diving into the details.</i>	
<b>PART TWO. IMAGININGS BASICS: PRINCIPLES, PARAMETERS, PRACTICES.....</b>	<b>PAGE 3</b>
Starting out as you mean to go on. Right-sized (3), intentional (4), inclusive (4), interactive (5), ethical (5).	
<i>Clarify these basics and you're on the right track. For everyone hosting an Imagining.</i>	
<b>PART THREE. OPPORTUNITY &amp; IMPACT: WHY &amp; WHEN TO HOST AN IMAGINING.....</b>	<b>PAGE 6</b>
What your Imagining can accomplish (6). Past USDAC Imaginings (7).	
<i>Examples from USDAC Cultural Agents and other Citizen Artists: read to be inspired.</i>	
<b>PART FOUR. LEARNING YOUR COMMUNITY.....</b>	<b>PAGE 10</b>
Demographic resources (10). Interviews (11).	
<i>Essential for your planning group, grounding your Imagining in local history and knowledge.</i>	
<b>PART FIVE. PLANNING YOUR IMAGINING.....</b>	<b>PAGE 13</b>
Building a core team (13). Planning for real (14). Promoting your Imagining (15). The Imaginings Toolbox (15). Entrance activities (15). Welcomes (16). Performance (17). Guided conversations and small groups (17). Next steps (18). Performance/celebration (19). A sample Imagining (20). Evaluation and follow-up (20).	
<i>Essential for your planning group, ensuring all bases are covered.</i>	
<b>IN CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>PAGE 22</b>
<b>DOWNLOADS.....</b>	<b>PAGE 22</b>
<b>ABOUT THE USDAC.....</b>	<b>PAGE 23</b>

CITIZEN ARTISTS IN LAWRENCE, KS, PERFORM AS "THE GRAYS," AN ANTI-IMAGINATION GROUP WHOSE ANTICS DREW PEOPLE TO THE 2014 IMAGINING



# PART ONE. IMAGININGS: A BRIEF HISTORY

**IMAGININGS ARE ARTS-INFUSED GATHERINGS FOR COMMUNITY VISIONING, INVITING DIVERSE GROUPS OF ARTISTS, ORGANIZERS, AND OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO ENVISION THEIR COMMUNITIES' FUTURES WITH ART'S TRANSFORMATIVE POWER SHAPING ALL ASPECTS OF COMMUNAL LIFE.**

## WHERE DID IMAGININGS COME FROM?

The USDAC was launched with the performance of an October 2013 press conference by Deputy Secretary of Arts and Culture Norman Beckett (aka USDAC Chief Instigator Adam Horowitz). Beckett said that

*For too long, we've believed that everything that counts can be counted, ignoring the vital role that cultural diversity and exchange plays in advancing equity and democracy... Today, we start to close the gap. Today, it is my great pleasure and honor to announce the launch of the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture.*

*This Department is itself a collaborative work of art that asks you to play your part by deploying the resilience, resourcefulness, and imagination of artists at their*

*best... Together, we are the USDAC. Together, we create the world we wish to inhabit. Together, we spark a movement dedicated to cultivating equity, empathy, and social change through creative action.*

In the year of planning that preceded the USDAC's launch, the public good emerged as central to the USDAC's aims. For too long, arts and culture had been treated as a narrow special interest, mostly of concern to the direct beneficiaries of arts funding and all those who wished to be part of that cohort. But as our **Statement of Values** says,

**Culture is created by everyone.** *The art, customs, creative expressions, and social fabric of every community and heritage contribute to the vibrancy and dynamism of our common culture. Our cultural institutions and policies should reflect this, rather than privileging favorites.*

How to shift from a consumer culture in which art is just one special interest to a creator culture in which everyone can engage the full transformative power of arts and culture and every community can benefit from that vibrancy, creativity, and connectedness?

More than five years on, that is still our collective challenge. We've learned that when facing such a challenge, the capacities cultivated by artists are essential assets. To catalyze culture shift, we have to be resourceful and creative, improvisational and emergent, dynamic and collaborative. No one can provide a blueprint for shifting to a social order of creativity, equity, and justice. The path has to be made, step by step, by the people who will walk it. But we can offer tools, inspiration, encouragement, and companionship along the way.

**EVERYTHING CREATED MUST FIRST BE IMAGINED**, including our collective future. Social imagination is a prerequisite to positive social change. We have to be able to envision social values, arrangements, and aims different from current norms. We need to imagine desired futures in much the same way that artists envisage new creations.

The catch? In a society marked by pressure to leave things to the experts, social imagination doesn't necessarily come naturally. It is a muscle that can only be developed through use.

**How to go about that?** We started with the larger context for public dialogues. Many people have demoralizing experiences with conventional planning processes: perfunctory public hearings where everyone lines up for hours to get two minutes at the microphone to address decision-makers who may not even be listening; polls and charrettes and focus groups designed by agencies with specific outcomes in mind, making it hard to find space for what really matters in people's lived experience. We needed an attractive and engaging approach that would encourage and support social imagination. It would have to give true value to first-person experience rather than privileging credentialed expertise. It would have to be flexible, with tools that people could adapt to their own needs and use in their own ways.

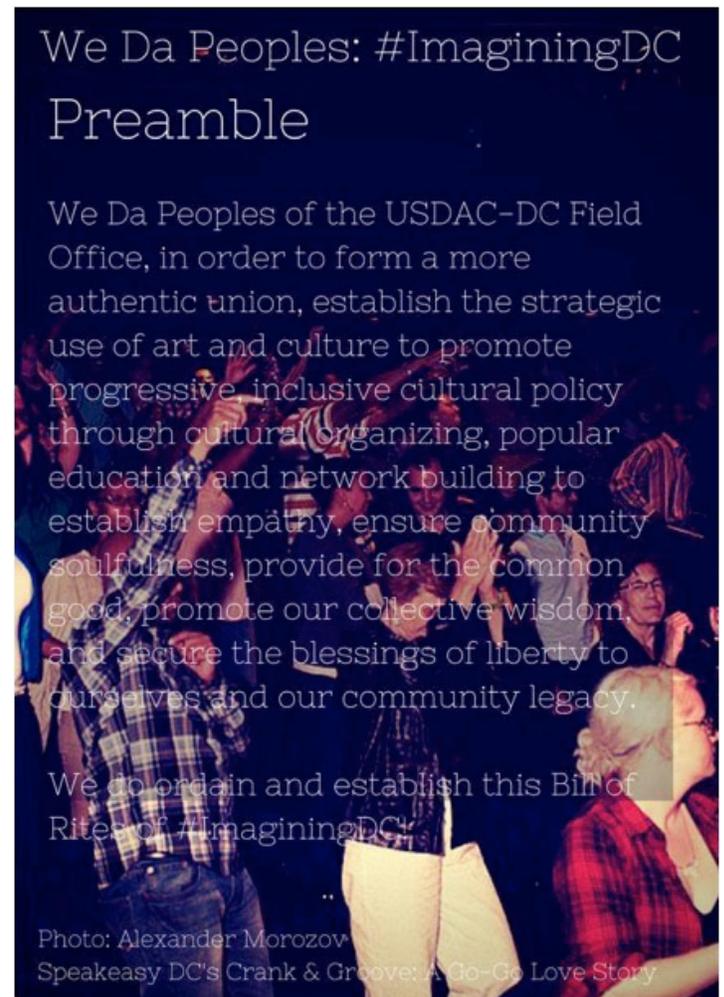
It takes a village to raise a good idea. Our first step was finding people committed to the people-powered department's values, then supporting their capacity for social imagination and local organizing by sharing tools and knowledge. Together, we would cultivate empathy, understanding, and equity, seeding the national conversation that could fuel a movement for cultural democracy.

**IN 2014, WE PUT OUT A CALL FOR THE USDAC'S FIRST COHORT OF CULTURAL AGENTS**—volunteer cultural organizers—and were amazed that more than 100 people across the U.S. applied for fewer than two dozen posts. There

was no financial compensation, but plenty of value. Cultural Agents formed a learning community, strengthening their understanding of cultural issues and organizing along with practical skills such as promotion and facilitation. At the end of the learning process, Cultural Agents would spearhead public gatherings using arts-based methods to envision their communities' futures: vibrant, equitable, infused with arts and culture. Part performance, part facilitated dialogue, part celebration, these gatherings brought together groups of artists, organizers, and other community members to imagine what their neighborhoods (and the world) might look like in 20 years, when art's transformative power has been fully integrated into all aspects of public life. Community members were invited not only to dream together but to catalyze collaborations to help make their dreams real.

Naturally, we called them *Imaginings*.

After supporting three rounds of Cultural Agents and Imaginings, we've learned enough about Imaginings frameworks, techniques, and approaches to give you, Citizen Artists, all you need to do it yourself. Welcome to *Imaginings: A DIY Guide to Arts-Based Community Dialogue!*





# PART TWO. IMAGININGS BASICS: PRINCIPLES, PARAMETERS, PRACTICES

**IMAGININGS CAN VARY WIDELY, FEATURE MANY TYPES OF INTERACTION AND ART FORMS, ENGAGE PEOPLE IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS. IT'S A POWERFUL FRAME WITH A LOT OF FLEXIBILITY.** But regardless of the specifics, these basics will help put your Imagining on solid footing.

**There's an old saying that has helped to shape the USDAC: start out as you mean to go on.** It's infinitely easier and more effective to ensure that your Imagining is shaped from the get-go by your most important values and principles than to have to go back and repair the damage that comes from postponing them.

If you aim to work in diverse community, for instance—with participants of multiple ages, backgrounds, races, religions, orientations, abilities, and so on—you'll find it far easier to be sure that your earliest organizing efforts and planning team reflect that goal than to start out with a homogenous group and try to change that later. The invitation to help shape something is always more meaningful than a plea to fix something you had no hand in creating.

Here are a few characteristics to help shape your Imagining from the outset.

**RIGHT-SIZED: FIGURE OUT THE BEST SCALE FOR YOUR AIMS AND GO FROM THERE.** The Imaginings led by USDAC Cultural Agents between 2014 and 2016 were mostly medium- and large-scale public gatherings open to the residents of a neighborhood or other community. Some had 30 participants, others nearly 300. The right scale for your community will depend on the aims, the space, the structure, and what you can learn about local habits of participation. You can use prior experience with community meetings and events to guesstimate attendance and plan accordingly.

For example, if your Imagining includes dividing up for small-group discussions with report-backs to the whole group, more than 100 participants might make for a very long reporting session. Fifty people in a gym made to hold many hundreds can feel sad; on the other hand, trying to cram too many people in and still have a real dialogue is impossible. If you use a big space, try to find one that is somehow modular and can be made to feel more intimate if necessary. When it comes to scale, what's most important is to reach beyond your immediate circles: it's safe to say that any Imagining should be larger than if it were populated entirely by people you already know.

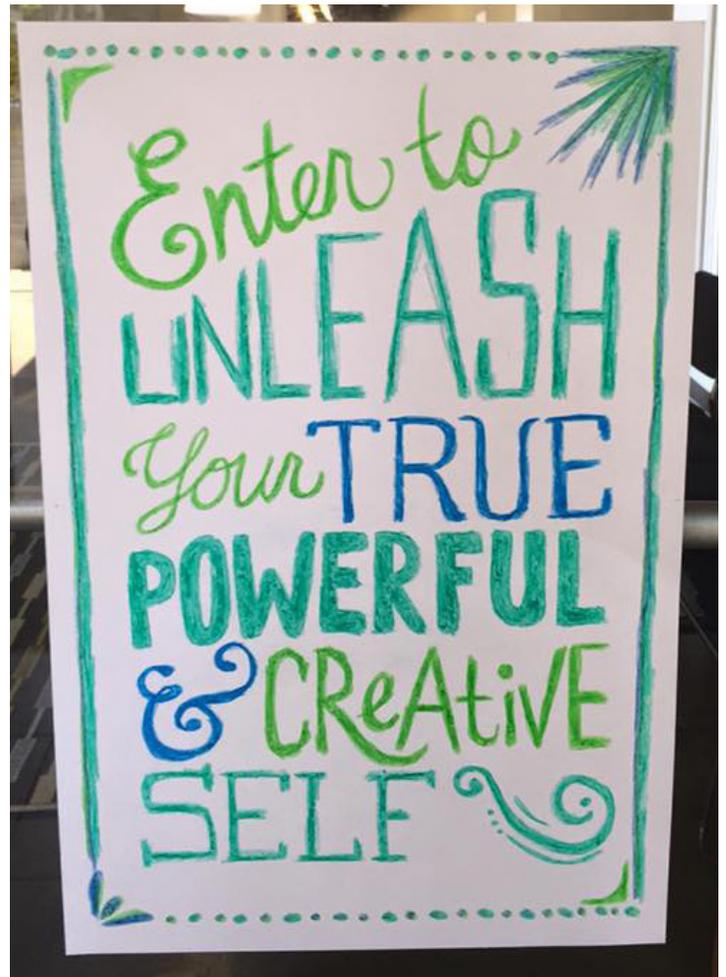
Many readers of this guide will want to work at a substantial public scale, holding an Imagining to engage community members in addressing displacement as housing costs rise in their neighborhood, or to kick off citywide planning for a public art project or festival. But most of the ideas and techniques described in this guide can also be adapted to small-scale Imaginings such as hosting your neighbors or the members of one local community group. If it feels best to start small, don't be daunted as you read tips in this guide for set-up or promotion intended for larger Imaginings in public spaces. Just take what you need and save the rest for if and when you want to go bigger.

**INTENTIONAL: THE ART PART OF AN IMAGINING ISN'T AN AFTERTHOUGHT. THE AIM IS TO GIVE EQUAL VALUE TO CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION AS TO THE DESIRE TO COMMUNICATE, UNDERSTAND, AND COLLABORATE.**

As noted earlier, many conventional planning processes are perfunctory. Some are required rather than desired, so the folks hosting them may not do more than go through the motions—perhaps holding a public hearing is a requirement for passing a City Council resolution or some type of public process is required before a mural project can be approved.

In contrast, Imaginings are intended as what we call “serious play,” infusing creativity, fun, and meaning into a gathering with a serious purpose. This mix attracts participation and also stimulates participants’ social and personal imaginations. The underlying principle is this: when we invite the whole person into dialogue—body, emotions, intellect, and spirit—what results is much fuller, more meaningful to everyone, and more likely to have impact on what happens next. It's not that arts-based events are the only way to invite and engage all that people can bring, but they are definitely some of the best ways. Why? Because they weave pleasure and purpose so seamlessly, it's hard to tell the two apart.

**INCLUSIVE: IMAGININGS EMBODY RADICAL INCLUSIVENESS, MAXIMIZING WELCOME, ENGAGEMENT, AND POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FOR A WIDE RANGE OF PARTICIPANTS.** Conventional approaches to planning often create barriers to participation. Not everyone feels comfortable with the same way of doing things. Every type of gathering is a specific cultural form with its own implicit and explicit rules about how to behave. So, for example, sitting quietly for hours in a hearing-room waiting to give two minutes of testimony is a taste seldom acquired by people who don't have a really strong motivation to do so. People who don't feel comfortable with that framework are



**FROM THE 2015 DECATUR, GA IMAGINING**

likely to conclude it's not intended for them, and simply stay away.

In contrast, a well-planned Imagining invites everyone to take part, using language and approaches that will reach most people, even those who may have reason to be skeptical. If you're hosting an Imagining, carefully consider whom you're hoping to attract. If you hope certain voices will be present—young people, for instance, or recent immigrants—try to partner with organizations they trust, taking the time to personally invite them into the space so everyone feels welcome. Effectively building participation begins long before the Imagining is actually scheduled and designed. It can start with inviting a range of people to take part in the earliest planning, or even before that, with interviewing members of different community groups to learn what people care about and how to build right relationship with their communities.

The space you choose for a public Imagining matters too, as do the efforts you make to accommodate people in comfort. For instance:

- Is the space you've chosen easy to get to? Is there adequate public transit and/or parking?
- Is the space you have lined up wheelchair accessible? Is there an ADA bathroom on the premises?
- Are children welcome at the event? If not, it can be easy and rewarding to coordinate volunteer or rotating child care at or near the event location.
- Do you need interpreters?
- Is the space you've chosen inviting and easily accessible to those you are hoping to involve? Is there any reason people may not feel welcome there?

**INTERACTIVE: IMAGININGS ARE PARTICIPATORY, NOT PASSIVE VIEWER EXPERIENCES.**

A well-planned Imagining gives everyone a way to fully participate in the entire event, not just show up and watch. Whether participants are young or old, from similar heritages and backgrounds or very different, new to the community or old-timers, there's a way to engage all in sharing stories; co-creating a map or temporary mural, co-authoring a manifesto, pledge, or a poem; or taking part in musical, theatrical, or dance performance. (Many such ideas are described in "The Imaginings Toolbox" in Part Four.)

**ETHICAL: IMAGININGS ARE PLANNED WITH AWARENESS OF ETHICS, BUILDING EQUITY, RECIPROCITY, COURTESY, AND COMPASSION INTO EVERY ELEMENT.**

One thing that turns people off about much conventional planning is the lack of reciprocity. Participants are asked to invest their time and share their ideas, observations, and feelings, but have no control over how their contributions are used.

A worst-case scenario can feel like exploitation: *I showed up, answered all their questions, and all that came out of it is that they can say they consulted the community before coming up with a plan that doesn't actually reflect my views. I'm done with this!*

A best-case scenario can feel like a fair exchange and equal partnership: *The facilitators told us exactly how our ideas would be shared and also explained their own stake in the process. The way they reported on the Imagining made me feel my ideas were respected. I'm staying involved!*

If everyone's participation is welcomed equally, if everyone is treated with the same attention and courtesy, if everyone is encouraged to speak for themselves, ask questions, and express their perspectives, your Imagining will have a solid ethical foundation.



FROM THE 2014 BAY AREA IMAGINING

# PART THREE. OPPORTUNITY & IMPACT: WHY & WHEN TO HOST AN IMAGINING



PREPPING FOR THE 2014 IMAGINING IN PHOENIX, AZ

## WHY AND WHEN TO HOST AN IMAGINING? AN ARTS-BASED PUBLIC DIALOGUE MAKES SENSE WHEN YOU WANT:

- to draw people out of their ordinary comfort zones to connect with each other and try something new;
- the community to explore its stake in a problem or opportunity and expand the range of possible responses;
- people to show up fully as thinkers and doers, collaborators and creators, Citizen Artists and civic activists; and/or
- people to talk about something important and to enhance the experience by making it fun and exciting as well as thoughtful.

**NO TWO IMAGININGS ARE EXACTLY ALIKE.** Each is shaped by the people who plan it, the participants, the community in which it is based, and the reasons it is being held. But regardless of how it is structured, every single Imagining aims to ensure that:

- Everybody feels heard and connected and has a positive experience.
- Visions are generated of a future infused with the power of art and culture.

- Everybody has an experience that integrates dialogue and art.
- Everybody learns about your cultural organizing and the work of the USDAC and knows how to get involved.
- Everybody has the opportunity to work on putting the Imagining's visions into practice.

## BEARING THESE AIMS IN MIND, IT'S WITHIN EVERYONE'S POWER TO ENSURE THAT AN IMAGINING EMBODIES A CULTURE OF BELONGING AND POSSIBILITY. BUT TOWARD WHAT ENDS? WHAT CAN AN IMAGINING ACCOMPLISH?

- Imaginings can use the power of arts and culture to bring people into contact, creating an act of collective imagination that includes a diverse cross-section of the communities, neighborhoods, town, or city engaged. Often, Imaginings bring together people who might not otherwise meet or interact but who discover they have something in common and something to learn from their differences.
- Imaginings can engage arts and social change practitioners along with other community members who may bring

very different gifts, breaking down a perceived art-life barrier. Knowing that everyone is welcome helps create an experience people will want to repeat.

- Imaginings can feature creative expressions from members of multiple cultural communities. Collective imagining expresses and connects our common humanity; our differences add richness to whatever we create together, leading to more and better relationship.
- Imaginings can produce visions of a future the participants desire, whether that turns on a short-term question such as creating a new public art project; a medium-term question such as addressing displacement in neighborhoods undergoing gentrification; or a much longer-term inquiry. The Imaginings hosted by USDAC Cultural Agents used a frame of 20 years into the future, prompting people with questions such these:
  - How might we move art and culture from the margins to the center, sparking a local movement for cultural democracy?
  - What would our community look like if the **USDAC Statement of Values** were fully enacted here?
  - What would this community look like if the transformative power of arts and culture were brought to bear on our greatest challenges?
- Imaginings can kick off an ongoing cultural organizing effort such as a **USDAC Outpost**, generating inspiring visions of possibility and giving people ways to stay connected and work together.
- Imaginings can yield high-quality documentation that can effectively share your accomplishments and visions via social media, publications, video, and more.

**IMAGININGS CAN RESPOND TO PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES. A FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE OF CULTURAL DEMOCRACY IS THAT EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE A SAY IN THE DECISIONS AND CONDITIONS AFFECTING THEM.** Mostly this aim is not yet a reality. Often,

significant decisions and actions are set in motion, affecting people without recognizing their right to a meaningful stake. For example:

- Local government and business groups receive a large grant to develop a town's main street in the hope of creating jobs and prosperity, but no one has consulted the artists and others who are already settled into storefronts along the street.

- Developers and city leaders create a plan to build a new sports stadium in a part of town that's home to a longstanding Latinx community. The plan is released with fanfare, tax credits, and financing, but no one has engaged those whose homes and sites of public memory would be destroyed.
- A statue of a confederate general stands in the town square. Many residents are offended by what they see as a monument praising injustice, but no one is responding to their concerns.
- An economic development scheme offers incentives for businesses to relocate to a neighborhood with many vacant storefronts. Stores are filling up and rents start to rise as newcomers are drawn to the neighborhood while it is still affordable. Who's proposing zoning, rent control, incentives for businesses already located in the neighborhood, and other interventions that can keep longstanding residents anchored there?

Each of these examples is ripe for an Imagining. Instead of merely reacting, people can bring their creativity and caring to a space that welcomes everyone, dreaming together of what they do want, and beginning to organize themselves to make it happen.

**BUT IMAGININGS AREN'T ONLY FOR PROBLEM SITUATIONS.**

What if the arts council in your community decides to create a cultural plan and you want to make sure they have the broadest possible input? What if an inclusive conversation about local cultural life is needed first: what's strong, what needs attention, who's engaged and who's not? What if your community has been experiencing extreme weather events and forest fires and you want to bring people together to prepare creative response? (Be sure to check out *Art Became The Oxygen: An Artistic Response Guide* if this sounds appealing; you may even want to use your Imagining to kick off the formation of a special kind of **USDAC Outpost**, an Artistic Response Circle.)

**YOU CAN LEARN ABOUT PAST IMAGININGS HOSTED BY USDAC CULTURAL AGENTS [HERE](#).** Below are a few examples offered to show a range of possibility. Each includes a link to read more:

- **IN MAY, 2015, CULTURAL AGENT JON HENRY HOSTED THE HARRISONBURG, VA, IMAGINING**, which took place outdoors in Ralph Samson Park. An artist set up his easel and, beginning with a backdrop of the Shenandoah Valley, took suggestions from participants as to what might be

added to picture the future they desired. An African drumming circle opened to include anyone who wanted to pick up an instrument. A local poet wrote a spoken word piece incorporating all that was shared during the Imagining—and more. Jon explained that many different groups had come together to support the Imagining:

*Stan Maclin, director of the Harriet Tubman Cultural Center, was our lead co-organizer. He's been very influential in the town and the state organization on confronting white supremacy and developing culture and connection for the local African American community. Through him I learned about Steve B.I.K.O [the poet]. Larkin Arts—our local arts store/arts organization—helped with advertising and supplies and that's also where we had all of our meetings, so they were good. And then Southerners On New Ground, a regional LGBTQ organization in the South, helped do a lot of outreach. And the James Madison University Sculpture Department promoted the Imagining too.*

- IN JUNE 2015, JUST TWO MONTHS AFTER THE BALTIMORE UPRISING CALLED NATIONAL ATTENTION TO THE DEATH OF FREDDY GRAY IN POLICE CUSTODY, CULTURAL AGENT DENISE JOHNSON HOSTED THE **WEST BALTIMORE IMAGINING**. Denise explained what the Imagining revealed through interactive exercises, performances, and exhibits:

*Folks are at a place where they want to find a way to address and improve the community. Not only the physical aspects of the community but the way that the community interacts with itself. They want to find a way to move from just services—the community being serviced—to a community that is more interactive with one another, to have a more powerful voice in terms of what they really want. I've heard people say we have to find a new narrative to talk about community and that has to be a narrative of what's important to us. Why can't we access certain resources in our community? Why is it so difficult? People want to move forward and think in a different way—in a more powerful way—and be bold enough to ask for what they want.*

- IN OCTOBER 2015, **CITIZEN ARTIST JESIKAH MARIA ROSS**, A LONGTIME COMMUNITY MEDIA ACTIVIST AND DOCUMENTARY PRODUCER BASED IN DAVIS, CA, JOINED WITH OTHERS IN HER DAVIS MANOR NEIGHBORHOOD TO PLAN how to make their suburban neighborhood “more fabulous.” “We transformed a street into a festival space,” jesikah explained.



**JESIKAH MARIA ROSS AND DAVIS, CA, POLICE CHIEF DARREN PYTEL AT DAVIS MANOR #DARETOIMAGINE EVENT**

*From 4-8 pm greeters welcomed people and invited them to roam through five Imagination Stations [derived from the USDAC's #DareToImagine action that fall; download the Toolkit [here](#) and learn more.] The first was a giant neighborhood map, where they could add their names and some skills or interests. There was Curious Corner, where people could talk about how we might improve our neighborhood. We had an Intersection Imagination Station where we printed out copies of the different intersections in our neighborhood and invited people to draw what they'd like to see in those spaces.*

*The one people loved the most was the Time Travel Cabana, a guided journey to the future to see how we had made the Davis Manor this amazing place. We had a circle of hay bales with a Moroccan tea table in the middle, a parklet with a giant seesaw. Then we had a big potluck and let people know that we were going to gather all of the information and have a community meeting as a next step, report back and figure out what we wanted to do. Most people came early and stayed the whole time—about 100 at the peak.*

- IN SUMMER, 2017, THE CHARLESTON RHIZOME COLLECTIVE MOUNTED “**CONNNECTED: IMAGININGS FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION,**” A FIVE-WEEK EXHIBIT AND INTERACTIVE PUBLIC PROGRAM AT THE CITY GALLERY (RUN BY THE CITY OF CHARLESTON OFFICE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS). Map-based “Imagination Stations” (piloted, as noted above, in our October 2015 National Action, **#DareToImagine**) were used to engage a wide range of Charleston residents in arts-based activities inviting them to consider “where we belong and promote an awareness of our rights to remain here. We are promoting a travel in the past, marking the roads of today with our places of living, worshiping, shopping, learning and public transportation, so that we can learn about our future.” Rhizome member Debra Holt noted that “People came back two or three times in case they missed something the first time or in case something got them the first time, they wanted to come back and see it again. And a lot of people signed our petitions too.” Rhizome member Gwylene Gallimard added that people responded enthusiastically to all the other participatory elements too: “All the papers we had, there was something could be written, a petition or a question to answer or the book of grievances, the register of dreams, they were all totally filled up.”



**VISITORS TO CONNNECTED: IMAGININGS FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION IN CHARLESTON, SC, 2017**

# PART FOUR. LEARNING YOUR COMMUNITY



THE PLANNING TEAM FOR THE  
2015 WEST BALTIMORE IMAGING

**WE RECOMMEND THAT EVERY IMAGING REST ON A FOUNDATION OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WHERE PEOPLE EXPLORE AND LEARN TOGETHER, SHARING WHAT THEY DO KNOW AND DISCOVERING WHAT THEY NEED TO LEARN.**

**EVERY COMMUNITY REVEALS ITS STORY IN MULTIPLE WAYS.** There's a top layer of events and observations—demographics, income statistics, and so on—the types of things that anyone can easily learn by consulting some of the resources listed below. Then there are the types of knowledge that must be gleaned from direct observation: walk around the neighborhoods, talk with people, pay attention to what you see. Who's on the streets? What are they doing? What are they not doing? Finally, there's information held by culture-bearers that must be sought respectfully: what stories tell the history of this place? How are people connected here? What strengthens that bond and what weakens it?

If you've lived someplace for years, decades—even generations—you may feel you know it pretty well, and you may be right. What's difficult is to know *what you don't know*. In many communities, part of the story may be hiding in

plain sight. For example, imagine a community in which two distinct neighborhoods stand side-by-side, separated only by a thoroughfare or railroad tracks that residents seldom cross. Sometimes “everybody knows” that they are just not welcome, that it's best to stay on your own side of the tracks. But not having crossed over, they don't really know what they might find. How things got that way and how they can change are two important questions that require research: deep listening, openness to having your assumptions challenged, seeking the questions that are hidden by readymade answers.

It's convenient to start with readily-available information resources, so long as you then go beyond them. Here are a few suggestions:

**DEMOGRAPHIC RESOURCES.** Numbers can't tell the whole story, but they can have surprising power. Every community has resources that help to describe its demographics and inventory its assets. Most are highly imperfect, often undercounting immigrants and low-income people. But they can also be surprisingly useful. The way people who live in a community estimate population demographics can be far from accurate: it's easy to exaggerate the categories

you know best, for instance, and thus underestimate others. Knowing the data—and getting people’s reactions to them—can shatter some unhelpful assumptions.

- At the U.S. Census website, **QuickFacts** gives you an easy way to learn something about who is living in your county.
- Most towns’ Chambers of Commerce have downloadable or hard-copy packets to acquaint prospective businesses with the community’s assets.
- Check local government websites too: they almost always have a newcomer’s section or downloadable information resources.
- If there’s an arts council or other cultural umbrella organization, they may also have compiled information on cultural life—generally listing organizations, venues, classes, and so on.
- Most libraries have state, city, and regional WPA Guides (*The American Guide Series*—there are lots of online resources and you can often buy cheap copies through **Bookfinder.com**). These are compilations of oral history, neighborhood lore, and information from many sources compiled in the 1930s for this country’s largest public service employment program. Most of the guides incorporate oral history-based information from nearly 90 years ago. If you live in one of the communities where there is a guide, you will learn some surprising things about local history.

- Many communities have general historical societies, and quite a few also have specific ones. (Google “Black historical society” or “Chinese historical society” and lists will come up.) Also ethnic associations (google “Italian American Association,” “Native American Center,” for instance, or “Puerto Rican Association”). Local history or specific ethnic studies departments at nearby higher-education institutions may have helpful resources too.

Try having the core group planning your Imagining divide up exploring demographic resources, then have people present summaries of what they’ve learned and talk together about whether the research has changed their ideas about the place they live, and what that might mean. To make it even more interesting, before you consult the resources listed above, make your own guesstimates—without looking anything up—about local population demographics. Who lives in your community? Guesstimate race, ethnicity, age, gender, income, and so on. Then compare your ideas with what you can find from external sources. With your team, discuss which guesstimates were accurate or not, and consider why. If there were gaps, what can you do to learn more about and involve the communities you don’t perceive as accurately as those that are more familiar?

**INTERVIEWS.** Every community is home to culture-bearers with a lifetime of experience in local neighborhoods, gathering-places, and customs. These people aren’t necessarily the directors of organizations or agency



**YOUNG CITIZEN ARTISTS TAKING PART IN THE 2014 ST. LOUIS IMAGINING**

executives. Theirs are the names you'll only learn by asking around: "Who really knows this place?" "If you want to understand what's really going on around here, who would you ask?"

Start with open minds and a manageable number of interviews. Gather the core group helping to plan your Imagining and together build a list of knowledgeable people. It doesn't have to be huge: identify two or three individuals for each of you to interview, starting with basic questions:

- Please share the story of your time here. When did you (or your family) arrive?
- When you think about how things have changed, what comes to mind? Can you share one or two things from the past that you miss? One or two more recent developments that you welcome?
- Why are you here now? What's the best thing for you as an individual about the culture of this place? What's the biggest challenge?

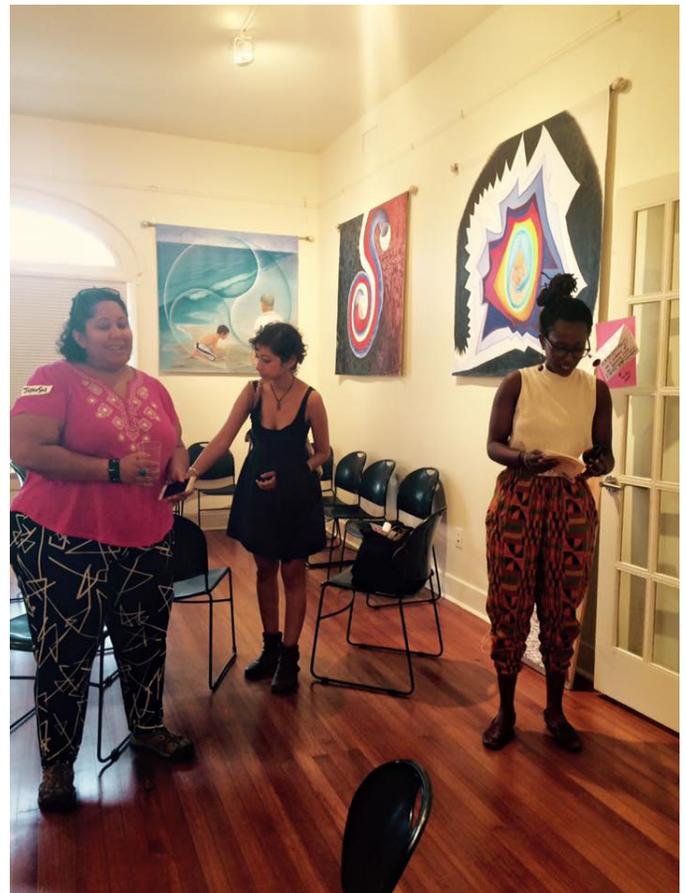
Taking notes should suffice, but if you wish, ask permission to record. Either way, you'll want to share highlights and interesting information with other members of the core group, either as written notes (or interview transcripts) or via oral presentation at a group meeting.

Any of the suggested questions is likely to lead to more. Remember that the interviewer's best tool is a three-word sentence: "Tell me more." If you give it time and space to unfold, your interview will yield what you need to know.

The interview process is a good recruiting tool too. If in the course of an interview, someone shows a lively interest in your Imagining idea and seems informed and engaged, it makes sense to invite that person to take part in crafting the Imagining. A warm and welcoming interview can also help to assure an interviewee that your Imagining is being undertaken with real openness and a real desire to partner, and that can lead to connections that will help you ensure inclusive participation.

Be sure to ask each interviewee who else should be involved. You might ask something like this: "Who would you go to in this community if you really wanted to get something done?" Add those names to the list of potential interviewees, and keep going as long as people have the energy to schedule and share more interviews. Once you've completed what feels like a substantial number of interviews, ask yourselves if any key communities are missing, and schedule more conversations if needed.

Once your interviews have touched on main groups within the community your Imagining is targeting, sharing what you've all learned should give you a realistic idea of who people are, what they care about, and how to approach engaging them in your Imagining.



SETTING UP FOR THE 2015 NEW ORLEANS IMAGINING

~Welcome  
to 2036~

**PART FIVE.**

# **PLANNING YOUR IMAGINING**

## **BUILDING A CORE TEAM**

When we asked USDAC Cultural Agents to share their best advice for successful Imaginings, many of them emphasized having a solid core team of at least three or four people to handle planning and coordination. A core team is likely to contain multiple types of skill and information, make better decisions, and share the work so no one is overburdened. It takes careful choice and cultivation to build a good core team: picking solid team members, inviting everyone's voice, offering thanks, providing guidance as needed. Here are a few nuggets of wisdom from Cultural Agents:

- *Start with a "we." What are the passions/wants/needs of the people on your team? These are the people whose energy you'll be relying on. It makes sense to link the USDAC work to pre-existing interests/endeavors of the core team for that solid start. [Cultural Agent Kara Roschi, Phoenix, AZ]*
- *Make sure early on (at least three months out) that you have your team of volunteers. Have a meeting with volunteers to get at a core team in that neighborhood. Get that list and do Google hangout or informal face-to-face meetings to start planning. [Cultural Agent Betty Yu, Brooklyn, NY]*
- *Reach far. As you plan your Imagining, first reach far outside of your established network of friends and allies. Encourage (ask) that everyone you have on your planning team invite folks from their communities. Make space and offer creative incentives for young people to be there. (Their vision of the future is much different than us older ones.) [Cultural Agent Dave Loewenstein, Lawrence, KS]*
- *Find your people. Feed them when you meet to plan. Body & Soul. [Cultural Agent Roseann Weiss, St. Louis, MO]*
- *Assemble your team at a few face-to-face meetings. Go around the circle and let them share their passion/vision/hope. One thing. Have everyone give themselves a title based on something they love to do in the world. You'll be modeling the Imagining in miniature. The more you help this core team identify themselves as central, the stronger your Imagining will be. But as central as the team is to actualizing an Imagining, you will need to shepherd and guide the process. People will look to you for leadership, so don't push it out too much this first go-round. This will make the team feel cared for, supported, and more comfortable. [Cultural Agent Lynden Harris-Carrboro, NC]*

The best core team members have as many of the following qualities as possible:

- **ACCOUNTABLE:** they do what they say when they say unless a true emergency arises, and then they let everyone know as soon as possible.
- **COMMUNICATIVE:** they read team communications, keep folks apprised of their progress, show up on time and ready to take part in team gatherings.
- **CONNECTED AND RESPECTED:** they are known within their own community (and possibly beyond), and people trust them. Their presence will help others feel comfortable taking part.
- **INCLUSIVE:** they want the broadest possible participation and are genuinely eager to do what it takes to engage people.
- **CREATIVE AND COLLABORATIVE:** they are happy to brainstorm possibilities, add their own ideas, and collaborate to come up with the best approaches for the Imagining.
- **SKILLED:** they have something useful to bring, such as the ability to write or design promotional materials; a local network that can help find a space, supplies, and so on; experience with other successful participatory community dialogues; or experience managing volunteers.

## SHARING THE WORK

At the outset, everyone on your core team will work on research, planning, and recruitment. As advised earlier, you'll split demographic research and conducting community interviews, then come together to share what you've learned as a basis for designing the Imagining. All of these are shared activities.

As your Imagining draws closer, you'll need to specialize more. Ideally, your core team will include at least these four:

- **IMAGINING COORDINATOR.** This is the person who provides overall leadership and coordination for the event, making sure all core team members are looped in, bringing them together as needed to ensure that things move along, providing the support and affirmation they need to feel recognized and effective in their roles.
- **PROMOTION COORDINATOR.** This is the point-person for invitations, flyers, press releases, PSAs, and everything else your team does to promote participation in the Imagining. This individual doesn't have to be a great writer

or graphic designer, just someone who can find and mobilize others who possess those skills, coordinating the folks who actually execute promotional materials. If you want to document your Imagining—important if you see it as the kickoff for an ongoing process of working together to put people's visions into practice—the promotion coordinator should also oversee photography, video, and/or any other documentary approach.

- **VOLUNTEER COORDINATOR.** Throughout the lead-up to your Imagining and at the event itself, the core team will be managing quite a few volunteers. They may include greeters; small-group facilitators; performers; leaders of artmaking experiences; or providers of decorations, refreshments, and other supplies. The volunteer coordinator doesn't have to do all the coordination singlehandedly; that person can set things up so each small team is self-organizing within overall guidelines, regularly checking in on progress and working together to resolve any issues.
- **SET-UP AND TAKEDOWN COORDINATOR.** If your Imagining is a larger public event, set-up and takedown can be complicated, especially if you are featuring a performance and need sound equipment or other tech. This person supervises a team of folks who can set up the space according to plan, with specified areas for entry/registration, refreshments, presentations/performances, artmaking, and so on; and who can take everything down efficiently, returning equipment, disposing of refuse and recycling, and ensuring all is clean and secure.

In our experience, it's best to fill and clarify these roles before recruiting too many other volunteers. We like to use a simple volunteer agreement that spells out everyone's responsibilities and working relationships. There's a model volunteer agreement in the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder**; feel free to adapt it or use your own.

## PLANNING FOR REAL

When your core team has a solid foundation of working together and has reached out to a wide range of other community members—when you've had your initial conversations about the core values and impacts desired for your Imagining—it's time to call your first open meeting, bringing in other volunteers to plan and execute the Imagining. You'll find an annotated sample agenda in the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder**; feel free to adapt it as you wish.

In the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder** you'll also find a Planning Proposal Form that is a useful guide to planning any event or project. Starting with goals and objectives, following the form will lead you and fellow planners through all the important questions that need to be addressed as you plan your Imagining: a description of activities; how it will be promoted; who you'll partner with and how; how you'll know if it was successful or not; what resources you'll need; where contributions or earnings will come from; a list of potential issues to work through; and a timeline to plot the steps toward your Imagining.

## PROMOTING YOUR IMAGINING

Not every Imagining needs to be open to the general public. If your Imagining is focused on the residents of a particular neighborhood, or the people involved in a specific school, place of worship, or community organization, you will probably want to use the methods of promotion that are organic to that community. These might include putting flyers on people's doorsteps; using online and physical bulletin boards to invite people; asking folks to announce it at services at their churches, mosques, temples, or synagogues; and/or activating a **phone tree**.

But if your Imagining aims to draw on a sizeable neighborhood or community and everyone is welcome, you may want to seek publicity through newspapers and newsletters, local radio or TV, and other mass media. In the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder**, you'll find resources for promotion. Read through the **Media checklist** first, as it lists the steps to effectively engaging media: choosing an approach that captures attention, sequencing your promotional steps, and so on. You'll also find a Press Advisory template you can adapt with details about your Imagining and send to editors and reporters.

## THE IMAGININGS TOOLBOX: ELEMENTS YOU CAN USE TO BUILD YOUR IMAGINING

No matter the scale, location, or intentions that shape your Imagining, you will need to include each of these elements:

### ONE OR MORE ENTRANCE ACTIVITIES.

Entering a new space can be unsettling. Every Imagining begins with an antidote to discomfort: a warm welcome and an invitation to immediate engagement.

**GREETERS.** The first welcome comes from greeters stationed near the entrance. Greeters can be folks who sign up specially to greet or other volunteers not needed for their main roles during the half hour or so people are arriving (e.g., those whose main focus is set-up and takedown, for example, or who will be facilitating small groups when that action starts). They should greet each individual or group on arrival, exchange names, and direct people to the registration table and to any participatory activities available.

**REGISTRATION.** Volunteers should be seated at a clearly marked registration table. If your event is large, you may want to divide up the task to avoid long lines. For example,



PROMOTING THE 2015 BOSTON IMAGINING

three people could be stationed behind the table registering folks by last name, with signs indicating where to stand for A-H, I-Q, and S-Z. For follow-up, you will want to capture participants' names, emails, phone numbers (and if you plan to send anything by mail, postal addresses). We hope you'll also want to invite them to engage with the USDAC, especially if it makes sense for your post-Imagining plans to take part in National Actions such as the **People's State of the Union** or join the USDAC network by forming an **Outpost**.

**NAME TAGS** are essential to help folks get acquainted. It's a fun entrance activity to invite people to create their own. As each person registers, provide a blank name tag. Have a table near registration with markers, stickers, and any other supplies for writing and decorating one's name tag. At the USDAC we make up our own titles (check out the USDAC **National Cabinet** for inspiration). You can invite people to do the same when they create their name tags, writing their first and last names and a title of their choosing (e.g., the Empress of Empathy, Minister of Limericks, or the Secretary of Poetic Justice).

If you plan to have small-group discussions as part of your Imagining, you can assign people to groups at registration by pre-numbering name tags. Say you anticipate eight small groups. Number the blank name tags 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, then repeat the sequence until all are numbered. As you give them out at registration, people will be divided into roughly equal-sized groups.

**ENTRY EXPERIENCE.** When people arrived at the **West Baltimore Imagining** in April 2015, they were asked to write or draw something relating to either of two questions: "Tell us about your community" or "Give us an image about what you would like to see in your community." Cultural Agent Denise Johnson explained that "Most people wrote down words like love—more love, less violence—helping each other more. Many people drew images of flowers and added symbols to those flowers." These were posted for all to see. In July 2014, Citizen Artists in **St. Louis** posted signs outside their Imagining reading "Abandon All Hopelessness You Who Enter Here!" At several Imaginings, participants entered through a portal to the future—some type of archway labeled "to the future." Whether it's the way you shape and decorate the physical space or the ways you invite people to contribute ideas or images as they arrive, an entry experience can ensure that people feel grounded in the space and ready for whatever comes next.

Many USDAC Imaginings have used a series of artmaking stations to engage people. As part of the October 2015 **#DareToImagine** initiative, in **Salt Lake City** USDAC National Cabinet Minister of Cultural Scholarship Paul Kuttner and his team set up a choice of arrival activities in Sorenson Unity Center ArtPark:

*At one tent, they could take part in photography project called "OurSLC Claim It!" which asks residents to make "claims" for what they want in their neighborhoods*

*and public spaces. These claims will be used to inform four youth-created public art projects. At another tent, they could share a story with the West Side Storytelling Project, an oral history initiative collecting local stories for a new library special collection. At another tent, they could fill out a survey asking for their opinions about local development. Or they could grab a stone, write their dreams on it with oil pastels, and add it to a cairn being constructed in the Center's Garden. Finally, if they were there at the right time, they could join a "walking conversation" to a nearby river confluence with **Seven Canyons Trust** and **Jane Jacobs Walk**.*

## WELCOME

### WELCOMING REMARKS OFFERED AT THE BEGINNING OF YOUR IMAGINING WILL SET THE TONE FOR THE ENTIRE EVENT.

Decide who should welcome people (a single individual or several people, each taking part of the job) and how. Some Imaginings open with a song as everyone takes a seat, with remarks when the song ends. Others call everyone together, with music or spoken word to follow. Regardless of the type of welcome you offer, be sure to include these elements:

- **ACKNOWLEDGMENT.** Be sure to include an acknowledgment of Indigenous lands in your welcome; you'll find easy instructions and relevant resources in a free downloadable USDAC publication, **#HonorNativeLand: A Call and Guide to Acknowledgment**.
- **CONTEXT.** Why are you hosting this Imagining? Who helped create it? What will happen with the ideas and stories people share during the Imagining? To maximize reciprocity, be transparent in letting people know your aims, their roles, and the rewards. We'd also be grateful if part of your context-setting was to explain that Imaginings originated with the USDAC and encourage people to check it out for themselves: [usdac.us](http://usdac.us).
- **PARTICIPATION.** To build interest and excitement, be sure to let people know that their participation makes the Imagining. Encourage everyone to enter in with enthusiasm. Assure people that the basic Imagining ground rule is to treat everyone with equal respect and that all are welcome to participate in every aspect.
- **WALK-THROUGH.** Briefly walk people through plans for the Imagining so they know what to expect.

## PERFORMANCE

### MANY IMAGININGS FEATURE ELEMENTS OF PERFORMANCE TO RAISE THE ENERGY BEFORE DIALOGUE BEGINS.

**MUSIC.** Coming right after the welcome, a short performance by a solo musician or ensemble can infuse your Imagining with celebration and spirit from the outset.

**SPOKEN WORD/POETRY.** A brief reading by a solo poet or group of performance poets can be a rousing introduction, especially if their work connects with the Imagining's theme. In **Stockton, CA in June 2015**, Cultural Agent Natalie Crue featured youth poets in her Imagining in a way that made a huge difference:

*The young people were from an organization called **With Our Words**, run by Aaron and Tama Brisbane. They performed slam poetry twice during the event, two poems at the beginning and two at the end. Their energy and the words that they shared—it was just so incredibly powerful. What they had to say gave me the fuel to go that whole entire event. Being there and really going for it and putting their all into their work and having the courage to perform in a space where at other points in time they weren't even invited. Even if they were in silence, more powerful than what they had to say is the statement that they were willing to cast all of that aside and go for it. I live for that moment.*

**VIDEO.** You can find USDAC videos [here](#). Feel free to screen all or part of any at your Imagining to help set the context and show people what art and culture can do. Or screen your own short, inspiring videos.

## GUIDED CONVERSATION/ SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES

### THIS IS THE HEART OF AN IMAGINING, THE PART WHERE PEOPLE ARE INVITED TO SHARE THEIR VISIONS:

hopes and concerns, worries and aspirations relating to the future of their community. There are many ways to engage people.

**STORY CIRCLES.** This is one of the USDAC's favorite dialogue modes. A Story Circle is a small group of individuals sitting in a circle, sharing stories from their own experience focusing on a common theme. Every story has a beginning, a middle, an end, and a teller. Imagine starting this way: "Let me tell you about the time..." Whatever story each person wants to tell is just fine. As each person in turn shares a story, a larger, richer, and more complex story emerges. By the end,

people see both real differences and things their stories have in common. A Story Circle is a journey into its theme, with multiple dimensions, twists, and turns. Story Circles are an especially good way to have a respectful conversation despite differences, because the basic guidelines ensure that everyone has the same amount of uninterrupted time and every story gets full attention. In each Story Circle, once everyone has had a chance to share a story, the group reflects together on what was revealed.



THE 2014 DC IMAGINING

Each Story Circle starts with a prompt, a theme or question to inspire people to share stories. For example, this pair of prompts could yield a lot of illuminating stories:

- Share a story of something you saw that gave you a glimpse of what needs work to help this community's future live up to its promise.
- Share a story of something you experienced that showed you the transformative power of arts and culture in this community.

The prompts you use will depend on your Imagining's intentions. Do you want to shine a light on a specific issue such as gentrification and displacement, race, or gender? Your prompts might focus on the experiences that have given people a sense of belonging—or its opposite—in their communities. Do you want to invite people to dream together about creativity and the community's longer-term future? Then you might want your prompt to be something like this: tell a story about something you experienced that

gave you a glimpse of what this community would be like if we really invested in art's transformative power.

The optimal Story Circle size is six to 10 people, and each Circle needs a facilitator. So if your Imagining is large, you'll want to guesstimate the number of participants and be sure to train an adequate number of facilitators. You'll need to plan on setting up circles in breakout rooms or—if what you've got is one large room—with space between them to reduce sound-bleed. In the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder**, you'll find detailed Story Circle instructions. Story Circles are the main event in the USDAC's annual **People's State of the Union National Action**; learn much more about them and download the complete PSOTU Toolkit there.

**VISUALIZING THE FUTURE.** Many Imaginings have used arts projects to spark imagination and visualize a positive future. For example, in **July 2014 in Brisbane, CA**, Cultural Agent Beth Grossman framed her Imagining as a gathering of citizen journalists twenty years in the future. Together, they created a newspaper portraying Brisbane in 2034 with arts and culture “at the core of all of its initiatives.” Seating themselves at tables dedicated to specific issues (e.g., environment, education, civic life), participants wrote, drew, collaged, and integrated their visions into the *Imagining Times*. In May 2015, at the **Philadelphia Imagining** hosted by Cultural Agent Julia Katz Terry, participants were asked to write a new call-and-response Pledge of Allegiance. Here are a few lines:

I pledge allegiance  
to one planet in the cosmos  
to all beings in the universe  
to the people of the people of this beautiful melting pot  
of colors  
to my sisters and my brothers  
to myself and others  
to love  
to the freedom to be me

Any art form can be used this way. In **Boston**, Cultural Agent Christlene DeJean and her team based their Imagining on afro-futurist sci-fi, integrating many elements into a futuristic experience:

*One of the people in my team is a space design expert. The way she's seeing the space is: the outside greeters are playing the role of asking questions to give a speakeasy feel but a playful vibe, not an exclusionary vibe. But once folks enter the space, they feel like they entered 2034. There are dividers in the room, so*

*we're using those to play with colors and make it look futuristic. We have a call for artists who have artwork about what they envision the future to be. We also thought about having projections of sci-fi films. We're bringing in Sweetie's Radio, an artist collective that has a monthly radio show. They're bringing their radio show to the Imagining and featuring an artist there. The USDAC Imagining template is very broad, so we're using our sci-fi hack. A person in our group works with folks to build a sci-fi workshop, so we're working with them on the Imagining. We're working with folks to imagine future food and drink. We're asking folks to dress up like the future.*

The possibilities are limitless. Imagining participants can create a large-scale map of their community incorporating all the art-infused features that should be there in a decade or more. They can compose and perform a new community anthem. They can use a form of **Forum Theatre** to act out solutions to current problems—and much, much more.

The Toolkit for the USDAC's 2015 #DareToImagine National Action contains many suggestions and resources for creating pop-up “Imagination Stations” to engage people in creative dreaming, so be sure to **download a free copy**.

**CONNECTING WITH ACTIVISTS.** In June 2015 in New York, Cultural Agent Betty Yu and her team hosted “**#Imagining: Creative Strategies to Fight Gentrification in New York City**,” the largest Imagining to date. It was divided into two “acts.” ACT 1: Opening: “Spotlights” highlighted organizers, cultural artists and performances, featuring brief presentations from groups such as **Take Back The Land**, a national network of organizations dedicated to elevating housing to the level of a human right, and **Sandy Storyline**, sharing stories of displacement and recovery in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. ACT 2 engaged everyone in interactive storytelling, collective artmaking and community building, inspired by what they'd experienced in ACT 1.

## NEXT STEPS

**WHATEVER SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES YOU CHOOSE, THE MAIN POINT IS TO GIVE PARTICIPANTS AN EXCITING AND GENERATIVE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE GLIMPSES OF THE FUTURE THEY DESIRE.** When people return from their small groups to the group of the whole to share what they've experienced, leaders will have an opportunity to synthesize what folks have learned into a shared intention. It's not possible to create anything resembling a blueprint

based on an hour or so of collective experience, but you can start to sketch out the frame of a shared vision.

For example, imagine you use the two prompts suggested earlier to focus Story Circles:

- Share a story of something you saw that gave you a glimpse of what needs work if this community's future lives up to its promise.
- Share a story of something you experienced that showed you the transformative power of arts and culture in this community.

Try this: when you bring the Circles back together into a group of the whole, instead of a detailed report-back (e.g., "someone said this, then someone said that"), ask a representative from each Circle to add to a list of values or covenants for local cultural organizing, based on the stories they heard. Prompt them by asking something like this: "What's one lesson you learned about from your Story Circle about what's essential to this community's creative future?"

People might say "Acknowledge the contributions of all groups in building the community to date, and make sure we continue to engage and recognize every one." "Learn the histories that aren't part of the official version, and keep connecting the present and past to build our future."



### PROMOTING THE 2014 LAWRENCE, KS, IMAGINING

"Connect with the things people are already doing—community gardens, community celebrations—rather than imposing something on them." And so on. After all the Story

Circles have reported, open the floor to general additions to the list.

If your Imagining is framed around an inquiry into what needs doing to energize creative community, you might want to focus the report-backs with a prompt like this: "List up to three things the folks in your group think are absolutely essential to jump-starting culture-shift in this town."

**CLOSURE.** When you have a pretty substantial list of values/ covenants or things that need doing, the final step is buy-in. Try something that connects people, such as asking people to turn to someone else and share what they might like to do to act on all they'd learned at the Imagining. Give each person a minute or so, then switch. Open the floor to a few minutes of sharing, inviting people to pop up and say what has them excited right now and what they'd be interested in doing.

As the Imagining draws to a close, tell everyone the date and place you have lined up for a follow-up potluck a month from now. Ask people to stand or raise their hands if they want to come to that gathering to continue the conversation about how to put their values into practice. Let everyone know they will be receiving details by email.

## PERFORMANCE/CELEBRATION

### THE FORMAL PART OF THE IMAGINING IS OVER AND IT'S BEEN A SUCCESS!

Be sure to build in time for something informal that allows people to linger, connect, and celebrate together—perhaps an interactive musical performance such as a sing-along or drum-along, music for dancing, time to partake of food and drink and meet even more people, time to have one last fun experience at an Imagination Station.

Certain artists can provide a seamless way to segue from the formal Imagining to whatever follows:

- Some poets are skilled at collecting words and phrases in the course of large-group discussions, then weaving them into a poetic finale.
- Some musicians use a basic eight-bar blues format in a similar ways, writing a catchy chorus and weaving people's own words into successive verses.
- Some dancers are adept at collecting gestures from participants during an Imagining, then teaching everyone a simple gesture dance (usually one that can be performed either seated or standing) that embodies the spirit of the Imagining.

All of these can be tremendously satisfying: people hear snippets of their own conversations or see moments of their own movement returned to them as art. This amplifies the Imagining's power to make everyone feel heard and welcomed.

Regardless of the elements included in your Imagining, the Event Checklist in the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder** will be a useful document, helping you ensure all the necessary tasks are covered.

## A SAMPLE IMAGINING

**HERE'S A BASIC ANNOTATED SCHEDULE FOR A TWO-TO THREE-HOUR IMAGINING.** Yours can be longer or differ in many ways, but bear in mind that if you try to go shorter than two hours, your Imagining may lack depth.

**SET-UP** (1-2 hours before, depending on the complexity of your plan): Equipment, supplies, chairs, and other elements are put in place by half an hour before the start-time. Final preparations for registration, refreshments, artmaking stations, trash/recycling, etc. are completed in this period.

**EVENT BEGINS** (20 minutes prior to announced start time): Arrivals, greeting, registration, name tags.

**WELCOME** (15 minutes): Everyone is called together and seated in one big group. The host welcomes people and explains briefly what is going to happen. In your welcome, be sure to explain a little bit about the USDAC and encourage people to learn more. You'll want your welcome to include an acknowledgment of Indigenous lands as noted above and guided by #HonorNativeLand.

If you include performance at this point in your Imagining, allow 10 minutes additional.

**GUIDED CONVERSATION/SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES** (30-60 minutes, depending on the activity): Host introduces whatever process you're using for this part of your Imagining (e.g., Story Circles, visual the future through artmaking, etc.) and then people go into small groups, dividing either by counting off, using pre-numbered name tags, or self-selection, depending on what you've got planned.

**NEXT STEPS AND CLOSURE** (30 minutes): Reassemble into the large group for sharing and discussion of what comes next.

**CLOSING PERFORMANCE** (10-15 minutes): Formal event ends. Thanks to all.

**AFTER-PARTY** (at least 20 minutes, usually longer). People are encouraged to stay around for refreshments and

socializing, which can include music, dancing, or whatever you like.

**CLEAN-UP/BREAKDOWN.** (1 hour) Everyone willing and able pitches in to return the space to its original condition.

## WHAT COMES NEXT?

**LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: EVALUATING YOUR IMAGINING.** Response from Imagining participants can help guide your plans for next steps—future gatherings, cultural organizing, participatory arts projects. In the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder**, you'll find a document called "Imagining Outcome Evaluation." At the top, it offers a short list of questions that can be used to create an online questionnaire (for instance, a **Google form**) where people can add their responses and suggestions. Once you set up the form, all you need to do is send a link to participants, inviting them to respond to the Imagining no later than a deadline you set. Be sure to share the results with the whole Imagining team, talking together about what it all means and how you wish to move forward.

Scroll down in that "Imagining Outcome Evaluation" document and you'll find a longer and more detailed set of questions to share with the Imagining team. Gathering their response as insiders to the process will be just as useful in future planning as compiling response from folks who attended.

If you used the Planning Proposal Form in the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder** to guide your discussions in planning your Imagining, you now have a great tool for deeper evaluation:

- With as many members of your team as possible, go back to each section of the form and review what you anticipated.
- Then explore how what actually happened may have differed from plans and expectations.
- Finding a gap doesn't necessarily mean anything went wrong: perhaps your hopes or expectations were too modest in some respects—more people turned out than expected, teaching that next time you'll need to have extra chairs and supplies on hand in case turnout is larger than anticipated.
- But if there were problems, exploring them in retrospect can help you head them off next time. For example, your intention was to make everyone feel welcome—all ages, backgrounds, occupations, orientations, abilities—but you've learned that a couple of the small groups working on

arts projects were uncomfortable for certain participants, who felt like their contributions weren't welcomed. That teaches you to do more screening of small-group leaders to be sure to pick individuals with the desired qualities of openness, warmth, and acceptance, and to be sure to train leaders in advance to be aware of group dynamics and keep them welcoming.

- Be sure to take good notes on your evaluation. At the end, write out clear and straightforward statements of the learnings you want to take away for future gatherings or projects, and make sure to look at them the next time you start to plan.

**ENGAGING FOLLOW-UP.** How much you follow up on your Imagining depends on intentions. If your Imagining is very specific—for example, if its main aim is to generate ideas for a cultural planning process or design a public art project—your next steps may be to convey the results to the specific groups that can act on them.

But most Imaginings have broader purposes such as engaging a community in imagining itself some years in the future when artistic and cultural creativity is given its true value in the life of a city or town. For any Imagining where the focus is that type of collective dreaming, we've recommended going into the event having already scheduled a follow-up gathering such as a potluck and discussion of next steps, getting people engaged in acting on ideas the Imagining generated.

If a significant number of people turn out to your follow-up event, it's best to move pretty quickly to identify action steps and assign a small working group to look into each one, carrying out any needed research and preparing alternate scenarios for group action. That way people won't burn out on endless discussions; instead, there will be easy ways for them to take on meaningful roles in moving the Imagining into action. In the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder**, we've included a how-to on forming working groups, equipping them to engage everyone in a way that saves valuable large-group time for essential discussions and decisions.

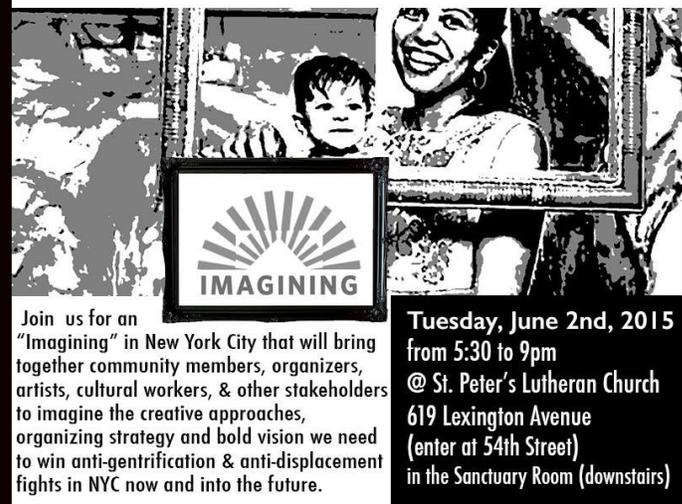
To build awareness and engagement, you may also wish to produce something that shares the Imagining with folks who weren't there as well as those who were.

Indeed, some Imaginings have been followed with a published report to the entire community: for example, here's one from the **2014 St. Louis USDAC Imagining**. Here's a short **video featuring footage from the 2014 USDAC**

**Imaginings:** might a video be the best way to get people engaged following your Imagining?

## #Imagining: Creative Strategies to Fight Gentrification in NYC

An arts-infused event to envision our community in 2034



Join us for an "Imagining" in New York City that will bring together community members, organizers, artists, cultural workers, & other stakeholders to imagine the creative approaches, organizing strategy and bold vision we need to win anti-gentrification & anti-displacement fights in NYC now and into the future.

**Tuesday, June 2nd, 2015**  
 from 5:30 to 9pm  
 @ St. Peter's Lutheran Church  
 619 Lexington Avenue  
 (enter at 54th Street)  
 in the Sanctuary Room (downstairs)

Organized by the US Dept of Arts & Culture



The USDAC is the nation's newest people-powered department, leading creativity in the service of empathy, equity, and social imagination.  
 For more info: [www.usdac.us](http://www.usdac.us)

Sponsored by  
 New Sanctuary Movement NY



RSVP: [www.imaginingnyc.eventbrite.com](http://www.imaginingnyc.eventbrite.com)  
 More Info: [ImaginingNYC@gmail.com](mailto:ImaginingNYC@gmail.com)

**INVITE TO THE 2014 NEW YORK CITY IMAGINING**

## IN CONCLUSION

We began this guide by saying that “no one can provide a blueprint for shifting to a social order of creativity, equity, and justice. The path has to be made, step by step, by the people who will walk it. But we can offer tools, inspiration, encouragement, and companionship along the way.”

The USDAC coined the term “Imaginings” for visionary arts-infused community dialogues, but we were by no means the first ones to bring arts-based approaches to public conversations. The information in this guide is freely available to all to use as you wish, provided you credit the USDAC if you share or quote from these materials.

We do have one ask, though: wherever your Imagining takes place, whatever its aims and approaches, please consider connecting with the USDAC. We’d love to talk with the folks who planned your Imagining about forming an **Outpost** and staying connected with a network of like-minded artists and activists in other parts of the U.S. We’d love to share USDAC National Actions such as the annual **People’s State of the Union** with your community. Please consider sharing the names and emails of your Imagining participants with the USDAC so we can keep people posted on upcoming events and resources. Feel free to get in touch anytime at [hello@usdac.us](mailto:hello@usdac.us).

Although we happily accept **donations**—the people-powered department relies for support on people like you!—all of our guides and toolkits are free to download and use, and we’re always happy to hear from you with questions and comments.

We gratefully acknowledge the work, wisdom, and goodwill of the USDAC’s **organizing team**—generations of Cultural Agents, Regional Envoys, Action Squad members, and Office of Instigation members—of the **National Cabinet**, and of the many thousands of Citizen Artists nationwide who have **enlisted** in this national network.

## DOWNLOADS

The USDAC how-to materials referenced in this guide can all be found in the **DIY Imaginings Public Folder**, as follows:

### DIY IMAGININGS EVENT RESOURCES:

- [Imaginings Outcome Evaluation](#)
- [DIY Imagining Event Checklist](#)
- [Sign-in Sheet](#)
- [Story Circle Instructions](#)

### DIY IMAGININGS PLANNING AND MEETING RESOURCES:

- [Working Groups](#)
- [Holding Space Principles](#)
- [Sample Imagining planning agenda](#)
- [USDAC Planning Proposal Form](#)
- [Model Volunteer Agreement](#)
- [Working agreements](#)

### DIY IMAGININGS PROMOTIONAL RESOURCES:

- [Imagining Press Advisory Template](#)
- [Media Promotion Checklist:](#)



THE 2014 SAN ANTONIO, TX, IMAGINING



# ABOUT THE USDAC

---

**THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE (USDAC) is a network of artists, activists, and allies inciting creativity and social imagination to shape a culture of equity, empathy, and belonging.**

To create a just and welcoming world, all of us need social imagination, the capacity to envision and enact change. Yet as a society, we've failed to prioritize the programs and policies that cultivate creativity, empathy, and collaboration. Social institutions seldom allow us to show up as whole, creative humans. Too often, the stories we're asked to accept limit possibility, depicting us only as consumers and workers rather than creators and communicators.

**Together, we can rewrite these stories. We affirm the right to culture and pursue cultural democracy that:**

- welcomes each individual as a whole person
- values each community's heritage, contributions, and aspirations
- promotes caring, reciprocity, and open communication across all lines of difference
- dismantles all barriers to love and justice

**To advance this vision, the nation's only people-powered department\*:**

- Engages everyone in weaving social fabric and strengthening communities through arts and culture
- Builds capacity and connective tissue among socially-engaged artists and cultural organizers
- Generates momentum and public will for creative policies and programs rooted in USDAC values
- Infuses social justice organizing with creativity and social imagination

Art and culture are powerful means of building empathy, creating a sense of belonging, and activating

the social imagination and civic agency necessary to make real change. When we feel seen, when we know that our stories and imaginations matter, we are more likely to bring our full creative selves to the work of social change. That not only makes our work more effective, we have more fun.

Our national actions invite everyone to perform a future infused with the transformative power of arts and culture. Our local organizing helps communities dream aloud and turn their dreams into reality. We connect people across regions in an ever-expanding creative learning community by sharing vital information, generating inspiring actions, and devising cultural policies and programs to catalyze a profound culture shift in the service of social and environmental justice. Together, we're creating new narratives of our power and possibility and scaling up strategies for equity and belonging.

The USDAC is not an outside agency coming in; it's our inside agency coming out! Radically inclusive and vibrantly playful, the USDAC offers pathways of engagement for any individual or organization eager to deepen a commitment to creativity and social change.

Culture shift is an all-hands-on-deck effort: whether you're already performing this work or new to creative organizing, join the people-powered department today!

**THIS IS AN ACT OF COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION. ADD YOURS.**

\*The USDAC is not a government agency.