SUMMARY PAPER 2

'Creative Communities: Design, Technology and Wellbeing'

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Overview:
It is possible to transcend the restrictions of mundane imagination by the use of creative imagination. This change allows us to explore a range of possible futures based on the richness and diversity of current experiences and perspectives rather than a simple extrapolation of current trends from a single perspective. Use of the creative imagination is likely to generate more attractive future possibilities than use of processes based on mundane imagination. There are many tools which can be used to do this. The Centre for Social Innovation based at Glasgow School of Art is synthesising and developing these approaches further.

Key ideas:
- **Mundane imagination:** the extrapolation of existing trends towards probable futures based on what we know about the present, but magnified.
- **Creative imagination:** being able to synthesise and explore a range of possible futures based on the ability to empathise with a range of perspectives about the present.
- **Creative presents:** the use of creativity and design to make ideas visible through the development of collective intelligence.
- **1% design:** starting to explore and make tangible, through participative action research, an idea in the present even when the final outcome is not known.

Summary:
In opening, Professor McAra-McWilliam, drawing on Samuel Coleridge Taylor, distinguished between the mundane and the creative imagination.

The mundane imagination, which she related to current methods of planning usually proceeds by extrapolation of currents trends into the future. Often, this approach pays scant attention to the past and simply magnifies what is happening now – for example more globalisation, ageing, climate change. This reduces the future to a series of probabilities waiting to happen.

She contrasted this with the creative imagination, comprised of two parts. The primary component consists of perception (how we see the world) and empathy (an ability to see the world from the perspective of other people and disciplines). The secondary component consists of synthesis (the ability to make new sense from diverse perspectives) and inspiration (making a creative leap based on this new understanding).

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The use of creative imagination makes it possible to explore new possibilities through a fuller understanding of the past and the present. This allows important design questions to be asked, such as:

- What kind of future do we want?
- Are there adverse implications of some possible futures? An important point here is that futures which have benefits/appeal for some people, or in some circumstances, may have adverse consequences for others, or for the population as a whole. Examples cited by Professor McAra-McWilliam included the development of gated communities, and increased street surveillance.

Professor McAra-McWilliam then went on to illustrate this point with some rich research examples, comparing the abstract design of pristine future homes to the way in which people live now. These examples highlighted the fact that developing the art of possible futures is likely to be more effective if based on real people, real places and real time. She highlighted many tools which make this possible. Narrative tools which encourage people to tell their own stories include: diaries, cards, maps, photography of places, people, and activities. Design processes include co-research, co-design, and participatory design. All of this needs to be sensitive to context and is a way of enhancing collective intelligence and awareness of aspirations and possibilities.

Together such processes help to shift us from mundane futures to creative presents based on multiple perspectives on the art of the possible, which take account of both the past and the future, in a spirit of exploration rather than prediction. Importantly these methods are based on starting something now even when we don't know very much about it. In this way we can make visible ideas and refine these through iteration based on the development and communication of shared perspectives and connection.

Professor McAra-McWilliam then went on to illustrate this point richly with examples of her own work and that of others in the use of Information and Communications Technology to enhance informal connections in communities. For example, the development of an electronic notice board and associated technology to enable people to share information on everything from discarded furniture for recycling to lost cats and community meetings. She also illustrated some work carried out in Glasgow on patient pathways in stroke which enable more relevant and helpful support interventions to be developed, based on the patient's perspective. Yet another example highlighted the different perceptions people have about time with each having their own versions of the importance and chronological span of the past present and future.

Professor McAra-McWilliam concluded by saying that, in combination with others, staff at the school of Art were developing a Centre for Social Innovation (or perhaps Sociable Innovation!) where these approaches will be used to develop transformative design based on the creative imagination in the service of community and wellbeing. She invited anyone interested in this to get in touch.

She also highlighted that a follow-up seminar to this lecture would take place on Wednesday 31 January between 9.30am and 12.00noon, with details being emailed to participants following the lecture.