

# From Prediction to Transformation: Using the Future to Change the Story of Today

Imagine the Unthinkable. Dream the Impossible.

By Sohail Inayatullah



Figure 1

We think about futures in many contexts and the future of cities is often on our minds these days. Figure 1, for example, shows the future of a city in Australia. It is a prediction. We can interpret it differently - is this a wonderful clean future with very little traffic? We can also question it, asking where are the humans? Where is nature? We can also take a different view of the future of the same city. Figure 2 is drawn by an 11 year old. In her future, the city is more pedestrian focused. There are even skywalks. But most significantly, she is in that future. The future is about future generations - tomorrow's children. But when we explore different perspectives, the future is opened up and we can ask: what type of city do we wish to live in?

There is certainly a fun aspect of Futures Thinking. Science fiction, imagining the unthinkable and dreaming the impossible. Linking the impossible with reality are the words of Nelson Mandela, who said: "It always seems impossible until its done."

But there is also a rigorous aspect of Futures Thinking. This is important as it disciplines the field, structuring how we think. In Futures Studies, there are four important approaches. The



Figure 2

first is predictive. In this, we seek to make precise and we hope accurate predictions of what will come. How many computers will there be in 2030? What percent of cars on the road will be driverless? Will humans reach Mars by 2050?

Governments, corporations, nongovernmental organizations, social movements, and individuals all seek to predict. They want to know what will happen. This is partly so they can make better decisions, but often it is to reduce anxiety, and to make the world a better place.

A second aspect of Futures Thinking is interpretive. We are less concerned here about predicting and more focused on meaning, on gaining insight from predictions of the future. We understand that people actually understand the future differently. Some see the future as more of the same, business-as-usual. Others see the future as full of difficulty, as a world of danger and pain. Still others see the future as transformative, where everything can and will change. The impossible will become possible. And finally, others wish for the future to be past, when times were simpler, and when the world was easier to understand. Interpretations also differ by cultures and nations believing them to be either linear or cyclical.

A third approach is critical. In this perspective, it is not prediction or individual or social interpretation that is important, but what is not being said - the hidden assumptions behind what we research, what we focus on. For example, one may imagine the future as business-as-usual because one is in a position of economic privilege. Another person or organization may be in difficulty and thus see the future as dystopian. Where one stands can determine what one sees. In this approach, the role of the futurist is to question all assumptions as to energy use (coal or solar), or the type of marriages (human - robot?) that we will have in the future. The questioning challenges what we consider as normal.

The final approach to the future is action learning. In this approach we move from vision and ideas to strategies.

<b>Prediction</b>	<b>Control the future - what will happen?</b>
<b>Interpretation</b>	<b>What do you mean? We see the future differently based on where we stand.</b>
<b>Critical</b>	<b>What are the assumptions behind what we believe?</b>
<b>Action Learning</b>	<b>How we create the future we wish for.</b>

If we wish for a greener, walkable city, with deep democracy, engagement, what do we do next? How do we create this future? Do we petition city government? Do we start a neighborhood green committee? Do we have social media campaigns? The future in this last approach is used to change today. The future makes a way to make a difference.

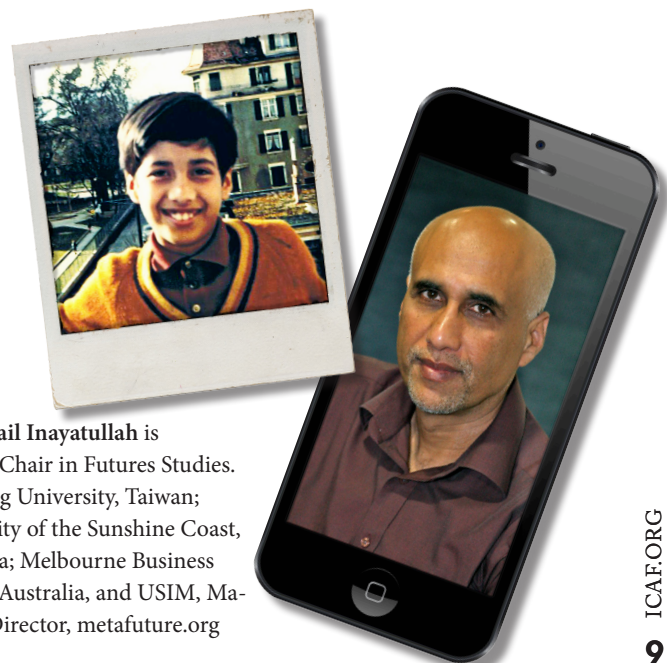
This completes the cycle: from prediction to interpretation to critique to action. An example of this approach that is easy to understand is as follows: a researcher asked young children to predict the future. They drew images of robots in the kitchen. If one only focused on prediction, then the conclusion could be that the automation is everything! while this may indeed be the case, he went a step further, and asked: what do you mean by robots in the kitchen? They responded: I want to spend more time with mommy and daddy. The question was then not about new technologies, but about creating community - about the future of the family.

A third level critical analysis would be focused on asking challenging questions. Well, besides robots, how else can we spend more time with the parents? At this stage, scenarios can be developed. (1) Well, if we all chipped in, then the dishes would be done sooner and then we could all have family time. (2) Well, let's pay one of the kids to do the dishes. They get an allowance and parents are less tired. (3) Well, we could take turns cleaning the kitchen. (4) Ok, let's just buy a robot. Finally, we decide what needs to be done. What is the best plan of action forward?

As in all innovative work, there can be resistance. People may not wish to help do the dishes. The contribution of Futures Thinking is we search for the narrative or the metaphor behind their views. For example, the metaphor could be: it is not fair, I always have to do the dishes? Thus, the real issue, then becomes how to create a fairer society. In the move from the current to the desired future, we need to find the story that is blocking. We then search for a better metaphor that can create a better strategy and way forward. One could then create a new story of "taking turns" - everyone gets a go, both to wash dishes and to rest. Or one could find an exchange metaphor - i.e. you rub my back and I'll rub yours, i.e. you do the dishes and I'll do the garbage. Or one can use time to create more wealth and just purchase a robot.

Ok, it keeps on coming back to the robot. Maybe the future is really about new technologies. Even if ultimately it is, it is the meanings we give to new technologies that will be critical - are they our servants, friends, pets, will we co-evolve with them? This depends on how we see them - what our story of ourselves and technologies is, and can be different.

Futures Thinking thus is about going deeper, asking questions, and finding solutions to today's problems, and creating opportunities to create different tomorrows.



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# ChildArt



The Road To The  
**FUTURE**  
CREATIVE PATHWAYS



## Editor's Corner

This special issue on futures thinking celebrates the 20th anniversary of the founding of ICAF - the International Child Art Foundation. We are most grateful to Professor Sohail Inayatullah (based in Taipei and Sydney) for his guidance and to our Guest Editor Mr. Sudhir Desai (based in Bangalore) for bringing this issue to life. Thanks also to the contributors for sharing their knowledge and wisdom with our young readers.

ICAF can also mean "I Create A Future." Children are creators and ICAF transforms them into global citizens of the future. Today's rising parochialism and nativism imperils ICAF's very existence. To the past two decades as many as 5 million 8- to 12-year-olds children have produced original art under ICAF programs, but this is not enough because total world population in this age group is about 660 million. ICAF must grow, but this is not possible without your help. So please donate today at [www.icafe.org/support/](http://www.icafe.org/support/). Together we can paint a brighter future for all.



Ashfaq Ishaq, Ph.D.  
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