



# Sustainable imaginaries and the green roof on Chicago's City Hall



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## ABSTRACT

The concept of an imaginary has a long history of describing a society's collective understanding of how the world works. This article introduces the concept of the *sustainable imaginary* as a society's understanding and vision of how resources are being used and should be used to ensure socio-environmental reproduction. Incorporating John Allen's modalities of power makes it possible to see exactly how those resources are being used within and outside of city government. This article employs the sustainable imaginary via the example of the green roof on Chicago's City Hall. This structure exemplifies appropriate relationships within and with city government, the ways in which imaginaries are performed and reiterated, and how local environments interact with global discourses to produce specific discursive and material outcomes.

## 1. Introduction

The ever-increasing importance of local government within systems of environmental governance has been noted for decades (e.g., Andonova and Mitchell, 2010; Betsill and Bulkeley, 2007). This is due in part to the failure of national governments to act on issues such as climate change (Bulkeley, 2010), in part to the existing role of local governments in providing services such as water and trash collection (Otto-Zimmerman, 2012), and also due to a healthy dose of self-promotion since being seen as green has become desirable (Cidell, 2015). Critiques of this sustainability shift call it the "sustainability fix" (While et al., 2010) due to its business-as-usual mindset, as well as the uneven distribution of benefits and costs of environmental programs to disadvantaged populations (Agyeman and Evans, 2004; Lubitow and Miller, 2013). The larger question then becomes, how is "sustainability" being imagined by local governments, and what consequences are there for their subsequent decisions about using their resources to (re)produce the environment?

I approach this question through the framework of the *sustainable imaginary*, defined as a society's understanding and vision of how resources are being used and should be used to ensure socio-environmental reproduction. Briefly, an imaginary describes a society's collective understanding of how the world works. Political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, and others have used the imaginary as a framework for work on everything from nuclear power to backyard chickens. Imaginaries are not "imaginary" in the sense of being made up or unreal – they are collectively held beliefs and understandings that not only explain how the world works, but *do work* in the world, including setting visions or goals for the future.

Because the imaginary has been described as "simultaneously deep and vague" (Mayes, 2014, p. 271), I incorporate John Allen's work on modalities of power to explain "how resources are being used and should be used." Allen emphasizes that power itself is not a resource, but an ability to mobilize resources in order to get something done. His multiple modalities, including persuasion, negotiation, authority, and seduction, emphasize that there are different kinds of power with different spatialities. Here, I consider how the City of Chicago drew on different modalities to achieve certain sustainability goals and implement elements of their overall imaginary. This article therefore introduces the concept of the sustainable imaginary as a way to understand the contexts in which environmental decisions are made and new environments result, using the green roof on Chicago's City Hall as an example.

First planted in 2000, the rooftop garden, as it is officially called, has come to represent a variety of different discourses: bringing nature into the city, reconstructing the built environment to reduce negative effects on humans and non-humans, international prestige from being "green," and more. Visually, the roof has been reproduced in photographs by National Geographic and in United Nations documents as an example of best practices, meant in both cases to spark innovation and creativity among other local governments (Klinkenborg, 2009; UNEP, 2014). Tours of the rooftop by local, national, and international groups have inspired individuals and organizations to start up similar projects from Minneapolis to Melbourne. Chicago's subsequent implementation of a sustainable incentives program has spread green rooftops across the city, with the original site demonstrating the economic and planning feasibility. In other words, the green roof on City Hall has become the focus of an *imaginary* of urban sustainability. At the same time, it

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illustrates how different modalities of power had to be employed both within and outside of city government, including seduction, authority, and inducement, to get the garden built.

In order to develop the framework of the sustainable imaginary, this article brings together existing work on imaginaries from a variety of different fields. The first section therefore reviews existing work in order to lend more rigor to the definition of a sustainable imaginary, including the importance of creativity and the visual. It also explicates Allen's different modalities of power and explores their role in different imaginaries. The subsequent section puts the definition of the sustainable imaginary to use via an analysis of an iconic element of urban sustainability: the green roof or rooftop garden on Chicago's City Hall. I consider two levels to the socio-environmental reproduction of this particular sustainable imaginary: the roof itself, and Chicago's larger project of urban sustainability or greening. Here, we will see that the sustainable imaginary consists of using city resources in terms of staff time and externally-obtained funds, through authority, persuasion, seduction, and inducement, to produce a visible symbol that is to be reproduced discursively and materially by the public and private sectors. We will also see that the imaginary includes not only defining what "resources" and "socio-environmental reproduction" mean in this specific case, but what "green" and "roof" might mean as well. In conclusion, the City Hall green roof exemplifies appropriate relationships within and with city government, the ways in which imaginaries are performed and reiterated, and how local environments interact with global discourses to produce specific outcomes.

Throughout the article, I focus not on residents or downtown workers, but city government staff, as the "society" that holds the common understanding represented by this particular sustainable imaginary. There is a continuum between [Jasanoff and Kim \(2009\)](#) on the one hand emphasizing how the elite or the state develop and promulgate a singular imaginary, and [Strauss \(2006\)](#) arguing for a focus on the individual, plural imaginaries that result from a diverse population (see also [Kamola, 2014](#); [Mah, 2012](#)). My approach is in the middle, considering the imaginary as a combination of the goals and understandings of the individuals who comprise local government, and the city's official position on environmental matters. For this reason, I rely on interviews conducted with members of local government—who sometimes spoke in their official capacity and sometimes as individuals—triangulated with city documents and media coverage about the green roof. Considering the imaginary as a bridge across scales can enhance our understanding of the role of local government in environmental sustainability.

## 2. Imaginaries as understandings

As a collectively-shared understanding, an imaginary encapsulates three time periods at once: the past, or how things got to be the way they are; the present, or how the world works here and how; and the future, or how things should be and what we should do to get there. [Castoriadis \(1987\)](#) emphasized that the imaginary is not so much an image or representation of the "real world", but that it is the real world for all intents and purposes. How we collectively understand and imagine the world is, for us as human beings, the world:

"on the one hand...people manage to solve these real problems, precisely, to the extent that they do solve them, only *because* they are capable of the imaginary; and, on the other hand...these real problems can be problems, can be constituted as *these* specific problems, presenting themselves to a particular epoch or a particular society as a task to be completed, only in relation to an imaginary central to the given epoch or society".

[Castoriadis, 1987, p. 133](#), italics in original

For example, whether we understand the US foreclosure crisis of the late 2000s as the outcome of insufficient regulation or as irresponsible borrowers overspending their means, we will respond with different

policies and different futures. Imaginaries therefore produce winners and losers ([Davis, 2011](#); [Jasanoff and Kim, 2009](#)). At the same time, an imaginary is more than a narrative explanation of how things got to be this way or how they should be different. The imaginary is the source of the problem *and* the solution. We can only come up with solutions or improvements based on what we already know to be true and the existing tools we have. Without the collective taken-for-grantedness that the imaginary represents, we would not be able to understand the problems we currently face (the "actual" imaginary, according to [Castoriadis](#)) or envision ways to solve them (the "radical" imaginary).

To begin with, an imaginary includes a commonly-held understanding about how some element of the world functions right now, as well as how it got to be that way ([Eaton et al., 2013](#); [Mah, 2012](#); [Phelps et al., 2011](#)). For example, the neoliberal imaginary puts responsibility in the hands of individuals in explaining how and why growing numbers of people are in poverty, while ignoring larger structural and historical forces. A progressive imaginary would understand poverty not as the outcome of poor choices made by individuals, but a consequence of years of unjust political economies that need to be changed at a fundamental level. Which understanding you have is obviously going to shape your proposed solution to the problem (or even the extent to which you consider it a problem at all). At the same time, which understanding you have is not based on a specific text or practice, but a combination of material-discursive elements and practices that are widely shared by a social group—not collected or codified, merely assumed as true.

Those imaginary-shaping elements and practices also include the physical environment. People draw on familiar elements of their surroundings in order to understand natural and social processes and to inspire creative ways of shaping those same processes: "inhabiting a specific natural environment with, as it were, a given 'supply' of image-types, limits yet projects the creative aspect of the imagination... Creativity begins with the familiar" ([Peet and Watts, 1996, p. 267](#)). In other words, a society's understanding of existing and appropriate relationships between humans and the environment varies based on the characteristics of that environment. Conflict can result when, for example, actors with an environmental imaginary developed in the humid Global North tell actors in an arid zone of the Global South that their farming practices are degrading the soil, without taking into account existing local practices based on centuries of inhabiting that place ([Davis, 2011](#)). A shift in the environmental imaginary that takes into account the physical constraints of the setting would be more productive for both household livelihoods and the ecologies of which they are a part ([Irrarázaval, 2012](#); [Mitchell, 2011](#)).

The importance of the surrounding environment in shaping an imaginary demonstrates how material objects and practices are the means by which an imaginary is incarnated or presented, whether architecture that grounds globalization in specific places ([Kaïka, 2011](#); [Grubbauer, 2014](#)), backyard chickens that help homeowners to enact alternative food production ([Blecha and Leitner, 2014](#)), or the ways that academics research and teach about "the global" ([Kamola, 2014](#)). There can be a strong visual component to imaginaries, the "image" side of "imaginary" that grounds it materially, provides creative inspiration, and is likely to go unchallenged because of the power of the visual ([Castoriadis, 1987](#); [Grubbauer, 2014](#); [Ross, 2013](#); [Shim, 2014](#)). For example, the practice of constructing office buildings in Vienna in a clearly international style brings to ground a *globalized* economic imaginary, making globalization visible in the urban landscape ([Grubbauer, 2014](#)). Furthermore, "one can imagine how typified images of infrastructures or green spaces could serve the same purpose" ([Grubbauer, 2014, p. 353](#)), as we will see in the case of Chicago.

At the same time, imaginaries also tell us how things *should be* in the future. For example, the biofuel imaginary envisions a future where we can continue to enjoy the lifestyle we have in the Global North after giving up fossil fuels ([Eaton et al., 2013](#)). Other imaginaries offer a dystopian future in which societies collapse without fossil fuels,

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