

## **“I am the architect of OUR future”: Future Search in Derry-Londonderry**

by Rosemary Cairns  
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The Hands Across the Divide statue in Derry/Londonderry, created in 1992 by Maurice Hannon, symbolizes Catholics and Protestants reaching out to one another in Northern Ireland.

More than 1,450 years of history are locked into the 17th century walls of Derry, also known as Londonderry, the only remaining walled city in the British Isles. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the divided city was a flash point for the Northern Irish Troubles and the British army patrolled the streets, gates and walls were an apt symbol because there was little shared agreement among citizens and their leaders. But today, its citizens and decision makers are keen to find common ground on which to rebuild. For three days in February 2009, as many as 100 stakeholders from across-the city and surrounding North West region worked together with the assistance of facilitator Sandra Janoff to develop a single shared vision and a plan for the city's future.

The Feb. 5-7 Future Search conference, “Changing patterns – changing outcomes: an internationally recognised city region harnessing its potential for the betterment of all”, was a major attempt to involve all sectors of society in developing a plan to address the city's need for physical regeneration and economic and social development. For Derry/Londonderry, where there had been much more “joined up” talk than action, Future Search was ideal. A highly structured, task focused planning meeting that ideally lasts for 20 hours over three days, Future Search focuses people on the future and common ground rather than past conflicts and problems. People tell stories about their past, present and desired future and, through dialogue, discover their common ground. Only then do they make concrete action plans. In effect, Future Search brings the “whole system” to life in the room, through the knowledge and experiences of the diverse participants.

The results were very positive. “The Future Search experience proved to be an excellent opportunity for a wide range of people to come together and set clear priorities for the regeneration and transformation of our City,” said the post-conference report on the city's website. “There was very substantial common ground with strong emphasis on equality, community engagement and partnership. The energy, positivity and optimism for the future of our city was very palpable and there for all to see.” Based on the identified priority areas and actions, the city's Civic Regeneration Forum now is creating sectoral working groups to move the plan forward.

### **Seeking a deliverable vision**

In 1999, the Good Friday agreement brought peace and a new government for Northern Ireland, led by two men who had once been bitter rivals. The city's regeneration was a priority for all residents. In 2003, the government created Ilex, an urban regeneration agency named for the evergreen oak, to symbolize strength and durability as well as growth and development. Ilex was asked to “create and promote a deliverable vision for regeneration of the Derry City Council area” that all stakeholders would work together to carry out.

In 2005, Ilex published an ambitious draft plan for Derry/Londonderry's regeneration. But planners, no matter how skilled and dedicated, could not develop and implement a shared vision on their own. Neither could anyone else - in a city that had been so divided for so long. In 2007, Ilex's new chair Sir Roy McNulty concluded that a comprehensive, shared, agreed vision and plan was needed, within which priorities could be set and implementation coordinated and monitored.

The question was how to achieve that in a way that fully and effectively involved everyone who had a stake in the city and region. It was exactly the kind of challenge for which Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff had designed their whole systems approach, Future Search, which enables large diverse groups to validate a common vision, take responsibility for action, and develop commitment to implementing it. Future Search had been used a decade earlier in Ireland, to create an integrated economic development plan for County Fermanagh which, like Derry/Londonderry, borders the Irish Republic. The Civic Regeneration Forum chaired by the Mayor, Councillor Gerard Diver, and administered by Derry City Council, already brought together a wide range of political leaders and interest groups with the goal of lobbying for the city's physical, social and economic transformation. But the kind of "joined up" vision that the Forum sought could only be developed together by a wide range of stakeholders including decision makers, community groups, businesses, unions, trade unions, young people, citizens and politicians – no one group could do it alone. So the Forum had high hopes for Future Search.

### **Preparing for Future Search**

The planning for the Future Search began in July, 2008 with a diverse group including elected politicians, civic leaders—local and national, business leaders and the community and voluntary sector. As is typical for Future Search events, much work was done before the conference ever began. In November 2008, a one day seminar, "Changing Patterns - Changing Outcomes", brought together more than 140 people from the private, public and community and voluntary sectors to explore how regeneration could promote equality city-wide.

They looked at how cities and regions elsewhere had created regeneration schemes that involved everyone, including the most vulnerable and difficult to reach. The key lesson was that old patterns change only when groups and communities are involved in making and measuring the impact of regeneration at each and every stage.

In December, a series of seminars reached out to various stakeholder groups, including young people, trade unions, the community, the City Branding Steering Group, businesses, Derry City Council, the media, and Strabane District Council. These sessions directly engaged a broader and larger group of people than would participate in the actual Future Search conference, thus ensuring that the diverse views held within the city and region were represented in the conference discussions.

Like Future Search itself, these seminars were forward-looking, encouraging people to think about what they wanted Derry to look like in five, 10 and 20 years. The Future Search began with people reflecting individually on the key experiences that had shaped their own lives, global society, the country, and Derry-Londonderry. Then, in 10 mixed groups, they shared their thoughts and created a timeline that depicted all four perspectives- personal, Derry~Londonderry, country and global. Then they moved to the present, exploring the key trends affecting Derry-Londonderry and the NW region that everyone needed to be aware of and depicting them on a mind map. Participants used colored dots, with different colors for each sectoral group, to show which issues and trends most

affected their sector. Globalization got the most dots by far (122), followed by community engagement (71) and education, equality, arts and culture and health (in the 30s) and technology (21).

### **Looking at how it all connects**

Next, in their 11 stakeholder groups (politicians, citizens, health and well being, young people, community, arts and culture, regional, economic and social infrastructure, education, and two business groups), they looked at how the key trends were connected, giving them a sense of the trends affecting the whole system.

“Prouds and sorries”, in which people identified aspects of Derry-Londonderry life that they were proud of or sorry about, allowed people to take responsibility for what was being done and what was not being done. By this time, people were finding the process very useful indeed. “[The] discussion developing is really healthy, not looking at things in silos but trying to see how it all links and connects”, said one group.

With all that work behind them, the participants moved into the future – to 6 February 2029, to be precise – to describe life in Derry-Londonderry and the NW Region as a result of what they began 20 years earlier. The purpose was to imagine a future that people were willing to work toward achieving, and the visions were grand indeed. Participants then looked at what principles and key features in the visions were desired by everyone present, so they could find common ground on which they to build a new future. All of that led naturally to the final step of the Future Search conference – group action planning, which answered the question: “what steps will you take to work toward your common ground agenda?”

The group reports were as varied and diverse as the participants themselves. In the finest Irish tradition, one group made its final report in verse, showing the sense of common purpose that had grown over the three days of Future Search.

"I am a story....I am 15, I am 75.  
I am Ordinary, I am Extra-ordinary.  
I am part of the ebb and flow in a developing community.  
I have borne witness to births, deaths, marriages, divorce, poverty, injustice, violence, imprisonment.  
I am resilient. I am stronger!  
I have lived many lives....I've been to wee school, big school and university of life.  
I have loved and I have lost.  
I have been on TV many times, from CNN to Top of the Pops to TV France.  
My story has global significance, and is told with Passion.  
My City is my past, and my future.  
It has shaped me - the politics, culture and religion.... I am far from finished  
I am the architect of OUR future"

*This story was prepared by Rosemary Cairns from the final report of the Future Search Conference and from information on the ILEX site, and reviewed by ILEX. You can find the full report of the Derry/Londonderry Future Search Conference at [www.yourcityyoursay.com/your\\_city.php?news\\_uid=64](http://www.yourcityyoursay.com/your_city.php?news_uid=64)*



‘It is an honor to be connected’:  
A note from Sandra Janoff, Facilitator of Derry’s Future Search

My most valued memories include statements that people made after the Future Search. After months of organizing this planning meeting, they were looking forward, with optimism, to building a healthy and prosperous city.

Here is one example: “I believe Derry has a great future and is on the cusp of real positive change,” says Janice Tracey, Chief Executive of the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce, following the Future Search. Janice has been actively involved in helping build a vibrant economic future for Derry for most of her adult life. “Derry is not a conventional city,” she says. “Things seem to be done differently here, whether it’s civil rights marches or traditional parades, reconciliation or regeneration.” Janice finds it difficult to put into words what it is about Derry that makes it special and draws people to it. Why do so many visitors seem bewitched by Derry? Finally she names it. “It’s all wrapped up in our people.”

In July 2008, I was privileged to meet and begin working with the dedicated and creative people who live and work in Derry. What was the experience like? At first I had to deal with a lot of skepticism. Not unusual, but in Derry there was a wellfounded reason for the cynicism people felt. Ten years earlier, many of the city’s residents had been involved in a year-long process of surveys, focus groups and community discussions that ended in a vision for the city. Expectations were high, but implementation was minimal and everyone was frustrated. People had put valuable hours in building strategies, but none had stimulated the change that was wanted and needed.

To overcome a widespread feeling that any city-wide process would only be more of the same, there would have to be notable differences in how people engaged the issue of social and economic regeneration. The major differences between this initiative and what residents had experienced previously are precisely the four core principles of Future Search:

1. All stakeholders across all sectors and demographic dimensions would be working together on a task of mutual concern in the same room for three days,
2. Participants would have the opportunity to explore the future of their city in the context of the Northwest region, Northern Ireland and the wider world,
3. The focus of their work would be on the future and common ground, not past problems and conflicts, and
4. Participants would take responsibility for what they were ready, willing and able to implement and make their commitments public.

Additionally, this would be, not a visioning conference, but an implementation conference to make actionable all that was desired and held dear.

In December, two months before the Future Search meeting, community meetings were held to inform and engage citizens in the wider initiative. Those who would be in the February meeting and those who would not be in the meeting, but would be involved in the implementation, were involved.

Energy started to build with renewed hope for change. The flood-gates opened and the number of people who wanted to attend doubled. Before we knew it, 120 participants committed to the process and “the whole system” gathered to confirm and implement their vision.

Cross-sector groups are now working on plans to improve the economic, physical and social and community aspects of Derry life. Their efforts include the following areas: education and skills, enterprise and employment, tourism, arts, culture and leisure, marketing the Derry opportunity, transport and infrastructure, citizenship and civic pride and health and well being. There is so much work ahead but the direction and commitment is clear. Success is now in the hands of the energized citizens of Derry in collaboration with their leaders and partners.

I am one of the many who have been bewitched by Derry. To me it is a place of wisdom and culture, opportunity and spirit, creativity, patience and persistence. It is an honor to be connected.

*For more information about Future Search, please visit [www.futuresearch.net](http://www.futuresearch.net). You can contact Sandra at [sjanoff@futuresearch.net](mailto:sjanoff@futuresearch.net).*