

Participatory Melbourne

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION TOWARDS A COMMON GOOD

OCTOBER 2023



Context

We live in urgent and challenging times. Times where social capital and participation are fragmented and on the decline. How we collectively make decisions will define our ability to effectively shape and adapt to this rapidly changing world.

Unfortunately, many micro and macro trends create a precarious context for collective decision making. These include a rising mistrust in institutions of all kinds, ambiguity about our collective goals, a lack of agency and a common lack of connection to people and place. Most attempts to “engage” individuals in collective decision making (in our businesses, communities and our politics) are therefore perceived to lack meaning and integrity.

These “below ground” trends of course also contribute to significant “above ground” challenges, including rising loneliness, social isolation, social fragmentation, the polarisation of discourse, and mental health concerns. This set of conditions then manifest as broader, global civic challenges alongside climate change and geopolitical tensions.

In order to tackle the many interconnected challenges of our times we need to begin by re-creating a collective sense of purpose. Without this, despite our many disagreements and differences, our ability to navigate these complex times is greatly diminished. The risk ahead is of further social fracture, fear-driven responses, an intractable status-quo and deep-seated division when faced with the multiple crises the next decades can expect.

To prevent the worsening of our fragile civic health and move towards the best of our collective power, we need greater participation in the collective pursuit of the common good. Through a deeply systemic approach, this is what Participatory Melbourne is seeking to achieve; a more robust and resilient participatory city.



Introducing Participatory Melbourne

(Phase 1)

Participatory Melbourne was conceived and brought to life by the Menzies Foundation, the Coalition of Everyone, the Australian Leadership Index (Swinburne University) and Regen Melbourne.

Joined together by a shared belief in the importance and power of participatory and collective leadership as a way to navigate a pathway to a safe and just future, Participatory Melbourne was created as both a research and action project.

Phase 1 of the project was a research and insights process. This phase included: interviews and research, small group workshops, a community Citizen's Assembly, a major Design Forum, analysis and design work.

Over the last 6 months, in conversation with 40+ organisations and multiple individuals, we have explored the nature of active participation, barriers and enablers, and what a robust and resilient participatory city means for Greater Melbourne.

Our work has explored three core questions:

- 1 How and why is active citizenship and participation relevant to a resilient city?
- 2 What are the barriers to civic life across our economic system?
- 3 What are the major forces at play, either supporting or undermining a more robust and resilient participatory city?

Major Insights: Framing the Work

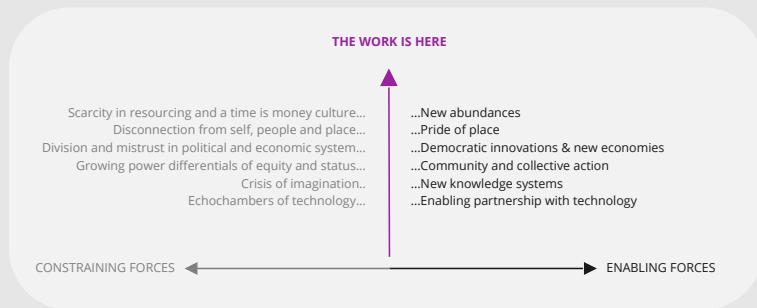
Through Phase 1 we discovered three core insights:

A more robust and resilient participatory city requires people to be re-empowered to make their own active decisions across all aspects of their lives — including in their communities, their work and how they are governed;

Active participation is a necessary component for us to feel part of society, to reconnect to those around us, to walk side by side with those we disagree with, and to improve our economic and democratic systems;

New forms of collective leadership are emerging but require significant and active support to thrive.

Furthermore, we discovered and explored a broad range of barriers and enablers to greater social cohesion and resilient systems; we surfaced competing and co-existing forces that both constrained and divided us and enabled our shared pursuit of a shared future.



Creating New Pathways of Action

In order to better navigate these challenges, it was recognised that we needed new **Pathways of Action** — themes that can create more coherent action across multiple domains of our lives; from how we negotiate with our neighbours through owners corporations, to how we design our businesses; how we value labour and each other as citizens of this place to how we leverage alternative community finance and economic models; and of course how we engage with our democratic institutions through our voting in elections and referendums.

Participatory Melbourne recognises that in order to cultivate the conditions for a more robust and resilient civic life we need to recognise and support the many actors working towards this goal — as well as recognising that these diverse actors make up a definable, yet evolving, ecosystem. We have identified the need to strengthen this participatory ecosystem; the interconnected, interlocking projects and activities that work towards collective decision-making in urgent times. It is not enough to have a plethora of siloed and segmented activities. We need to move towards a more coherent ecosystem of activity, acting in concert, with both power and precision.



PATHWAYS OF ACTION
co-created during Phase 1,
seek to begin this process

Bonding Neighbourhoods: creating capacity for citizens to informally contribute to and connect with neighbours and neighbourhoods, revitalising a feeling of belonging.

Activating the Commons: supporting the ability for participation in collective assets (natural ecosystems, sporting clubs, community centres etc), encouraging greater social cohesion and trust.

Rewiring Value: exploring ways of refocusing the market by shifting conceptions of value away from solely financial capital, and creating opportunities of greater participation in shaping and being active in the workforce.

Realigning Institutions: holding the state to account by deepening innovations for the plurality of decisions we need (and the citizenship we want), so that the voice of citizens can be seen in the actions and decisions carried out by our institutions.

The Opportunity From Here

Following on from Phase 1, in order to progress insights into action, we have identified five opportunities to build the systems infrastructure and (cultural) capabilities for a more robust and resilient participatory city:

- 1 Existing activity needs further amplification.** Projects that create opportunities for inclusive, collective decision making are endlessly inspiring. However, in light of the structural challenges, many examples remain local in nature and their potential for systemic influence is low.
- 2 Connectivity between initiatives can deepen impact.** Unique alliances across sectors can enhance the ability for participatory activity to have meaningful systemic impact. And there is a need to build collective power across participatory activity.
- 3 New resourcing is required to unlock the potential.** The convening and collaboration required to support systemic work is rarely resourced well. This is the case in the participatory ecosystem too.
- 4 There is a need for a model that connects and expands** the diverse range of participatory activity across the economic spectrum (household, commons, market, state). The idea of a robust and resilient participatory city speaks to a systemic reset of how we organise and govern the commons, the market and the state, while shifting how we value household activity. There is a need to build collective power across participatory activity.
- 5 There is a need to identify new collective and potent intervention points** to tilt the system towards participatory engagement in pursuit of the common good. In a noisy system and a culture of busy-ness, it can be difficult to identify the most potent work required.



Next Steps

Participatory Melbourne, as a collective research and action project, is a response to these systemic gaps and opportunities. Through a model of participatory activation and a culture of diverse experimentation and evidence-based action, we believe we can take strides towards a thriving civic life and a culture of collective decision making for the common good.

From here, Phase 2 is designed to validate our findings and insights from Phase 1 with a wider audience (Greater Melbourne), bring rigour and evidence to the model via quantitative methods and active validation, and set up for a rollout of transformative projects in 2024.

We look forward to continuing to strengthen the bonds between organisations and actors currently working in this space, and exploring new potential partnerships, whilst also paying attention to the emerging forms of leadership alive and well in Greater Melbourne.



We look forward to your participation, in whatever form that may be.