

# SCAFFOLDING CHANGE: REFLECTIONS ON ENABLING COLLABORATIONS IN SERVICE TO PLACE

AUGUST 2025



**REGEN**  
MELBOURNE



# WHY THIS GUIDE?

In this guide, we explore...

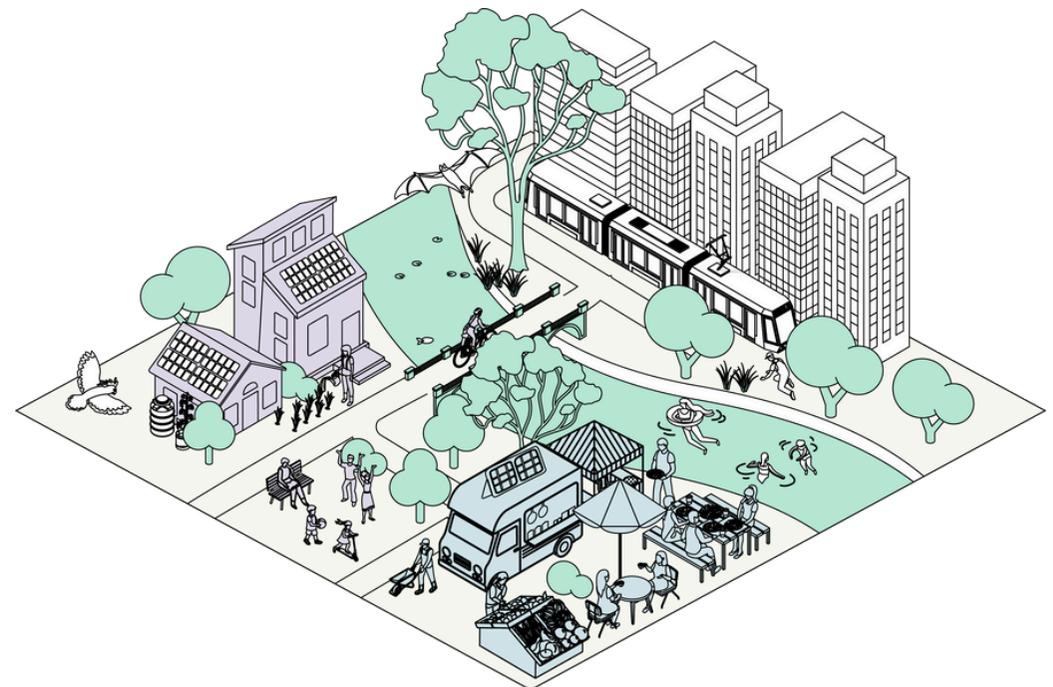
- how we think about the term “infrastructure”, as the scaffolds (tangible and intangible) that move ideas, resources and relationships.
- three key elements of Regen Melbourne’s transitional infrastructure (the Collective Vision, Portfolio of Earthshots, and Systems Lab) and how they have scaffolded collaborations for systemic change.
- how we co-developed a Collective Vision on the backdrop of a city in crisis and continue to use this as a strategic direction for place
- how ambitious goals (Earthshots) and nested strategic pathways for action can catalyse new partnerships and energy for change
- the role of action-research being embedded in the Systems Lab, and how experimentation and learning about new governance, investment, narratives and measurement practices can shift systemic conditions

This document forms is the first output of a year-long learning exchange as part of the innovation collaboration learning community led by Regen Labs called WEAVE Regen Economy Systems Lab, and commissioned by Social Enterprise Australia, as part of the Australian Government’s Social Enterprise Development Initiative. The insights shared in this piece serve as a basis for future exploration and learning exchanges between place-based initiatives in a time that necessitates bold collaboration. Any errors or admissions are Regen Melbourne’s alone.



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# WHAT DO WE MEAN BY INFRASTRUCTURE?

In systems change work recently, there has been an increased use of the term ‘infrastructure’. What is it that we’re gesturing towards with this term, and why is it useful right now?

When thinking about traditional forms of infrastructure, often what comes to mind is pipes, ‘poles and wires’ and roads. What these infrastructures are doing, while taking different material forms, is creating movement and exchanges between and towards something else. Moving water from reserves to houses, people from A to B, and so on. To generalise, ***infrastructure enables things to move and enables exchanges between things*** – beyond the physical things we often think of, these things can equally be ideas, connections, resources, types of knowledge and so on.

Social infrastructure is commonly referenced in **urban planning**, where it includes physical places and associated services and networks that support the wellbeing of our communities. Spaces such as libraries, public pools and parks are physical infrastructures that offer value and locations for exchange in the public realm. Usage of the term infrastructure has also emerged in more expansive ways like **imagination infrastructure**. In this context, the use of infrastructure is provoking what is required for something ‘intangible’ like imagination to *move* towards something else (in this case, social change). This work draws on **Brian Larkin’s definition** of infrastructure as “material forms that allow the possibility of exchange over space”.

At Regen Melbourne (RM), we often refer to our work as establishing needed *transitional* infrastructure. Regen Melbourne is an engine for systemic collaboration across Greater Melbourne. Founded at the end of 2020, in the wake of the Black Summer fires and in the midst of the COVID-19 lockdowns, our work is to articulate, influence and reorient prevailing systems so that Melbourne can become a beacon city for resilience and regeneration. This includes rebalancing the economy to ensure social justice, equity and environmental wellbeing form the foundation of our city’s future. Our goal is to not only prevent further damage to the planet and reduce human suffering, but to move towards a regenerative posture where people and planet thrive in balance. In the face of cascading social and ecological crises, now and into the future, we must pursue more creative and ambitious responses to move us towards this goal. These responses must come from epic collaboration across all parts of our society. No one silver bullet or section of the economy can remake our economic system; it will take a coordinated effort with many entry points.

This is where our definition of infrastructure comes in: a big part of our work is to spot or create opportunities and structures that allow for new forms of exchange among people, ideas and resources. Our assumption is that new formations then facilitate new forms of decision-making that move us towards the next economy.

So, when we at RM say ‘infrastructure’, we’re referring to the tangible and intangible scaffolds we create to move *things* and *relationships* towards something with intentionality – for us, this focuses heavily on people, ideas, aspirations, resources, types of knowledges and opportunities.

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# THREE KEY 'INFRASTRUCTURE' ELEMENTS FOR TRANSITIONS WORK

As mentioned, infrastructure can often bring to mind fixed structures and hardened surfaces – easy to imagine. At times, we lean into this association, as we believe that structure is needed to create coherence and effectively tilt a system. And yet, we are often reminded that a purely mechanistic view of the world can only take us so far. In these moments, we remember that not all bridges are made out of steel or concrete. Humans have endless creativity, constantly finding ways to create 'infrastructures' that enable flows and exchanges. Bridges can be temporary, bridges can be a tree that has naturally fallen over a stream, bridges can be invitations to think in a new way.

By drawing on *transitional infrastructure* as a term to refer to our work, we play into the two-fold meaning of transitional: first, that our work is oriented fully towards bridging the world as it is now and a desired future world that centres justice, thriving and a balance between people and planet. Second, our work is transitional in the sense that as an entity, we see our purpose and function as deeply necessary right now, but not forever: we, too, will shift and transition as and when the system evolves.

Over the last five years, it has increasingly become clear that there are three key structural elements that we rely on at RM. These elements scaffold different types of exchanges between people, ideas and resources, creating movement in our place towards the goal of a regenerative Melbourne.

These elements are:

- Collective Vision** A community-defined direction, supported by holistic measures, which sets the agenda for change and enables our social license
- Portfolio of Earthshots** Wildly ambitious projects for our city, defined as strategic, action-oriented transition pathways to a resilient and regenerative future
- Systems Lab** An action-research platform which uses knowledge and experimentation to test and enable new systemic conditions for place-based change

Each of these elements has developed over time, and the three are deeply interrelated. Within each of these elements are many examples of nested activities that would also constitute 'infrastructure' on their own in a more specific way (e.g., **workshops**, **walkshops** and **pilot initiatives**, to name a few). Together these three elements, and their associated activities, provide the scaffolding that enables collaboration for coherent, directional change.

What follows is a deep dive into the three elements and describes for each:

- What it is (as of mid-2025)
- Its origin
- The conditions which supported its emergence
- What we find this element enables



# COLLECTIVE VISION: A NEW DIRECTION FOR PLACE

## WHAT THE COLLECTIVE VISION IS

The Collective Vision names what it is we are working towards in Greater Melbourne by describing what a Regenerative Melbourne means. A Regenerative Melbourne is:

KNOWLEDGEABLE

FULL of LIFE

CONNECTED through  
CULTURE

AFFORDABLE

ENABLED

COLLABORATIVE

As an element of RM's infrastructure, the Vision scaffolds an agenda for change and enables a civic mandate by nature of the participatory process through which it was created.

The Vision, when developed, was accompanied by the Melbourne Doughnut, an illustrated version of the Doughnut Economics framework. The Melbourne Doughnut serves as a compass for directing us towards a regenerative future in Greater Melbourne where the needs of people and planet are kept in balance. It is a localised interpretation of the Doughnut, with Melbourne-oriented elements added (e.g., Arts & Culture as part of the Social Foundation, the 'Reconnecting to Country and Each Other' dynamic ring). This qualitative model provided a foundation for developing more measurable goals for Greater Melbourne through the Greater Melbourne City Portrait, a model that sets quantifiable social and ecological targets for a place.

### VISION FOR MELBOURNE

#### a REGENERATIVE MELBOURNE is:

KNOWLEDGEABLE

EVERYONE has ACCESS to KNOWLEDGE as CUSTODIANS of the ENVIRONMENT and SOCIETY



FULL of LIFE

A NETWORK of NEIGHBOURHOODS that SUPPORT THRIVING COMMUNITIES & NATURAL SYSTEMS. WE can SWIM in our RIVERS, PLAY & LEARN in NATURE, GROW FOOD in our CITY



CONNECTED through  
CULTURE

WE are PROUD of our DIVERSITY of CULTURE as DRIVERS of CONNECTION and CREATIVITY & we LIVE as MUCH a PART of the LAND as the LAND US



COLLABORATIVE

WHERE we DO what WE LOVE for our LIVELIHOODS and WE are VALUED for our CONTRIBUTION



AFFORDABLE

EVERYONE has SECURE, SAFE, COMFORTABLE HOUSING POWERED by CLEAN ENERGY and QUALITY LOCALLY GROWN FOOD



ENABLED

OUR ECONOMIC & GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS ENABLE these VISIONS to COME to LIFE



## HOW THE COLLECTIVE VISION CAME ABOUT

The Vision and the Melbourne Doughnut were created in early 2021 together with over 500 people and 50 organisations. This process followed an initial exploration and series of talks during 2020 about the possibility of localising Doughnut Economics in Greater Melbourne, exploring whether the framework could guide a new vision for the city. The Greater Melbourne scale was selected because it represented the geographic unit, or definition of place, that was unified by a shared lockdown experience.

The development of the Vision and Melbourne Doughnut involved five large, interactive community forums held on Zoom, 15 leadership interviews, six roundtables and countless hours of data analysis. Against the backdrop of the Black Summer aftermath and COVID-19 lockdowns, we co-created an ambition for Greater Melbourne, setting out the purpose: to live in balance between people and planet. And through this community-based research process we explored what a regenerative Melbourne could look like.

The outputs of this process were released in a rare break in lockdowns in 2021 as part of a large Melbourne Knowledge Week event at which Kate Raworth was a keynote speaker. For a full breakdown of the participatory process, see the [Towards A Regenerative Melbourne](#) report.



The Greater Melbourne scale was selected because it represented the geographic unit, or definition of place, that was unified by a shared lockdown experience.

## CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORTED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLLECTIVE VISION

A number of critical ingredients existed that supported the development of the Vision:

<p><b>Context was everything</b></p>	<p>The 2019-20 Black Summer was a catalytic moment that laid many conditions for how we were able to organise and mobilise. In 2020, there was smoke lingering across the city, giving Melbourne some of the worst air quality in the world. For the first time for many in the urban environment, the realities of climate change were on their doorsteps. This was followed immediately by COVID-19, when Greater Melbourne experienced a new-found sense of geographic identity by having lockdown boundaries drawn around the city. The experience also surfaced and highlighted the cracks in our social systems by the vastly different experiences of households throughout the public health crisis. These double crises and the uncertainty that they brought enabled a new type of conversation about what was needed and what might be possible to reorient the future of the city. The context set a new appetite for a more radical type of vision for our place, a departure from ‘business as usual’, which aligned to the ambition outlined by Doughnut Economics.</p>
<p><b>Aligned global patterns of activity</b></p>	<p>Melbourne’s conversations about Doughnut Economics began right around the time that Amsterdam released the first ‘City Portrait’, a model for downscaling the Doughnut framework to the geographic scale of a place. At the same time, a number of other cities began to explore how Doughnut Economics could inform localised recovery from the social and economic impacts of COVID-19.</p>
<p><b>Related local activity leveraged to support this work</b></p>	<p>Leveraging existing events and networks (Small Giants’ conversation series, Sustainable Living Festival and Melbourne Knowledge Week) meant that new audiences were brought into the creation of the Vision. It also meant that energy and attention weren’t too fragmented across many events and their associated logistics. This was especially important at a time when online events were flooding the calendars of locked-down Melburnians.</p>
<p><b>A core group, a catalytic grant and a network of volunteers</b></p>	<p>Following the early discussions that identified the opportunity to localise Doughnut Economics in Melbourne, five organisations joined together to develop an approach to this process. This group continued to coordinate what became a nine-month community-led research process. These five organisations were Small Giants, Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation (LMCF), City of Melbourne, Coalition of Everyone and Circular Economy Victoria. Catalytic grants from LMCF and City of Melbourne supported a portion of this core group’s time. Wrapping around this was a network of dedicated volunteers who facilitated online community sessions and supported the synthesis from these sessions into the creation of the Vision and Melbourne Doughnut.</p>
<p><b>Strategic advisors</b></p>	<p>Signals emerged throughout the vision process that there was energy across the city for a bigger conversation about the need for economic transformation. Based on these signals, a parallel process was designed to seek input and advice from an economists roundtable, as well from a number of influential Melburnians. This convening formed the first advisory circle around Regen Melbourne to steward the Vision into a next phase of activity. More detail about the partners involved in this phase of work, when philanthropic support came in and how we sequenced the activity following the visioning are outlined in <a href="#">Regen Melbourne an Evolving Journey</a>.</p>

## WHAT WE FIND THE COLLECTIVE VISION ENABLES

<b>Civic mandate and social license</b>	<p>There is permission for RM to foster bold action by nature of having a Vision that was collectively co-created with a large number of individuals and organisations across sectors. Likewise, the Vision directly asks for radical transformation of Greater Melbourne, including the systems that shape its health and impact on the world. Building on this, RM's constitution as it became an established not-for-profit was specifically designed for the organisation: "to facilitate and lead the strategic development of the regeneration of Greater Melbourne and to support and promote the transition of Greater Melbourne toward a more sustainable future." This is a unique value proposition that would not have been possible or practical without the Vision as a foundation to the work.</p>
<b>Relational connection</b>	<p>Sharing stories and visions for how we want to experience our places, surfaced through different facilitation prompts (e.g., meditations, visuals, dialogues), can be a unifying experience. By centering the potential for the transformation of our place during our connections online, we found we created a relational field that extended beyond individual identities or professional titles.</p>
<b>Multiple entry points</b>	<p>The Vision and Melbourne Doughnut were each created as living artefacts of the same process. At times, we hold these elements closely, and at times we lead with the Vision on its own, and at times we lead with the Doughnut. This enables flexibility in talking to audiences who are interested in the full-scale economic transition (which the Doughnut speaks to) and those who are interested in how it feels to live, work and play in a city they love (which the Vision speaks to). In this way, we have created a broad-scale ambition that has entry points for a multiplicity of actors to participate in and adapt/adopt as their own.</p>
<b>Shared orientation</b>	<p>By having the Vision co-created as the first thing we did, everything from there followed with directionality and intentionality. This approach set the parameters and scaffolding for the evolving strategy, formations of collaborations, invitations to join the work and development of the Earthshot model to act as pathways towards this Vision.</p>
<b>Connection to a network outside Greater Melbourne</b>	<p>By grounding the visioning process in the Doughnut Economics framework, we connected into a global network via Doughnut Economics Action Lab (DEAL). The process also enabled us to connect with Australian partners similarly pursuing place-based regeneration; including Regen Sydney and Regen Gippsland.</p>

# PORTFOLIO OF EARTHSHOTS: AMBITIOUS SHARED GOALS AND PATHWAYS TOWARDS A NEXT ECONOMY

## WHAT THE PORTFOLIO OF EARTHSHOTS IS

Earthshots are declarations of intent to solve complex social and ecological challenges. They are the transformations we organise our work around, acting as pathways towards the safe and just space, and require ambition of possibility, coherence of a collective response and agitation of the current system.

It's useful to track the language of "Earthshots" back to "moon-shot" - the declaration of the goal to get to the moon in the 1960s. At the time it was not known how, nor did the technology, innovation, funding or sector organising exist to make it possible. Yet by setting the wildly ambitious goal, new collaborative formations came together, new solutions were created, new ways of working accelerated and humans landed on the moon.

In our context, going to the moon is not the goal. Instead, we're looking at wildly ambitious goals that can ignite new ways of operating, and ultimately new conditions for our city systems to thrive in balance between our straining planet and providing all humans what they need to thrive.

As a portfolio we work across three layers of the city: rivers, food and streets. The history of our place is held here, the culture of our place comes alive here and the intersection between the three is where we can see the highest potential for radical transformation.

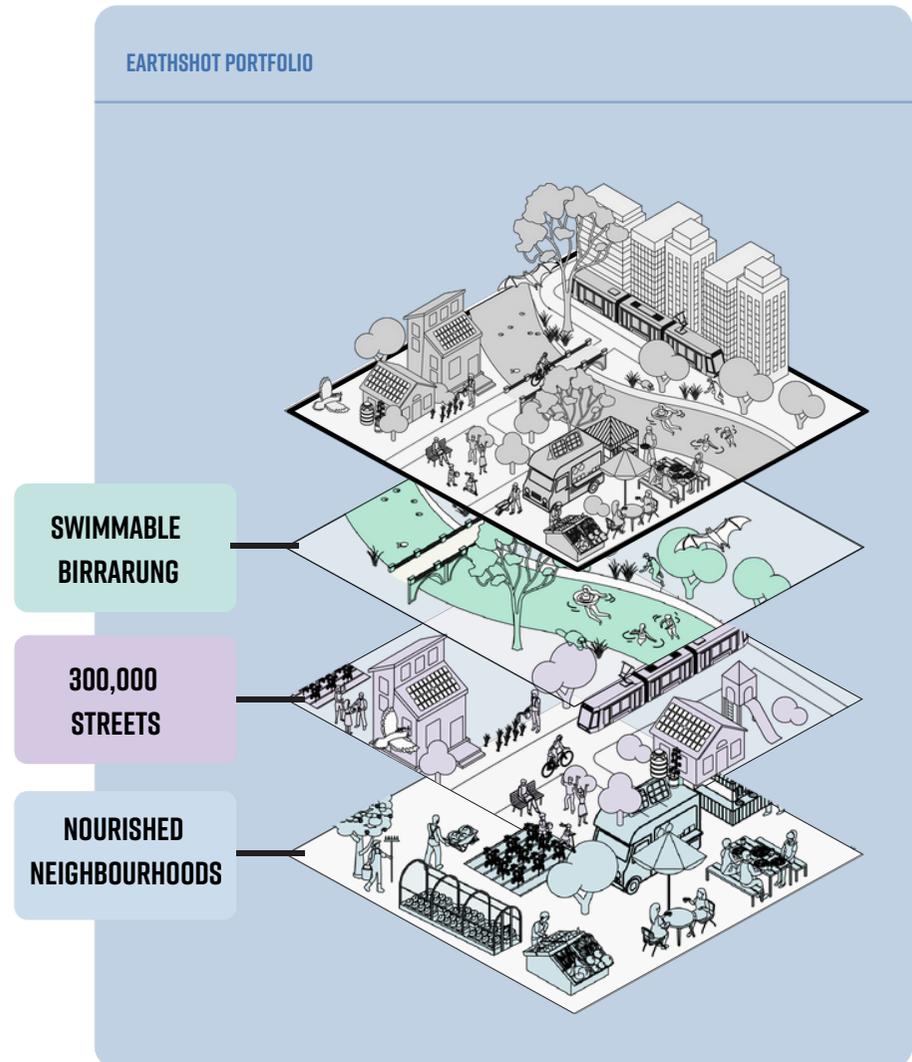
The Earthshots are:

- **A Swimmable Birrarung:**  
Regenerate the water source from source to sea
- **Nourished Neighbourhoods:**  
A resilient food economy for Melbourne
- **300,000 Streets:**  
A city of participatory truly livable streets

Each Earthshot has a dedicated convener role who works across their respective, and deeply connected, ecosystems to orchestrate new partnerships and new incentives, excite creativity and ambitions and stay attuned to the systemic opportunities at play. Being constitutionally in service to the Earthshot and Greater Melbourne allows for this role to have a different systemic vantage point than is possible in many roles.

To find out more about the underlying theory, structures and purpose of Earthshots dive into 'What on Earth is an Earthshot'.

### EARTHSHOT PORTFOLIO



## HOW THE EARTHSHOTS CAME ABOUT

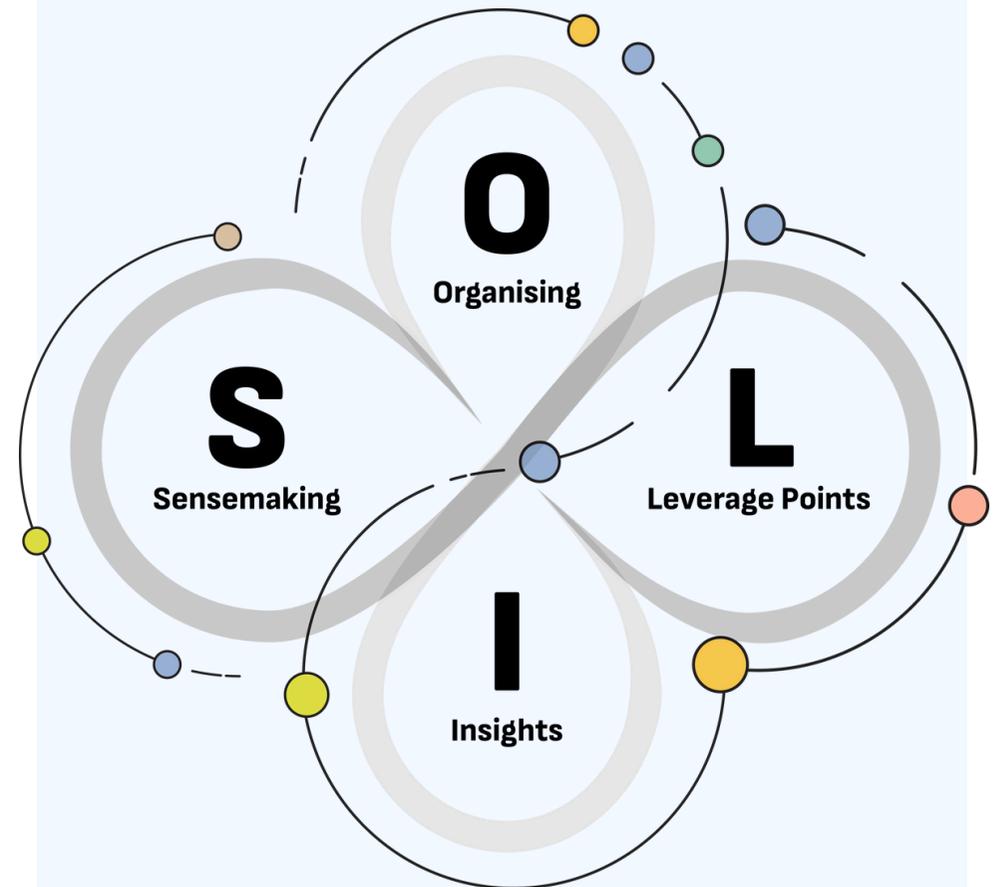
The Earthshots came about to respond to the energy for new forms of action that could move our city closer towards the Collective Vision. The ultimate goal of balancing the needs of people and planet is big and long-term. To move towards this goal, we identified the need for action oriented pathways that we could co-create to channel energy and create movement. The Earthshots were designed to be more 'bite-sized' and tangible (though still pretty ambitious!). We reflect in more detail about why the emerging strategy oriented towards the Earthshot framing in the [Evolving Journey](#) overview from 2023; we also dive into more detail about mission-oriented innovation and how this model started becoming a more intentional framing for our work in this [Tools and Frameworks](#) piece.

As a process, we developed a new methodology called SOIL for shaping Earthshots; this borrows from many existing frameworks, contextualising them to place and purpose. The SOIL methodology outlines the phases of work that go into establishing an Earthshot, and reflects the non-linear, multidimensional roles that our convenors are playing at any given time:

- **Sensemaking:**  
Hyper-relational pattern spotting of emerging energy and activity around an identified challenge area, coming from engaged organisations and individuals working to solve our major social and ecological concerns
- **Organising:**  
Creation of new formations of collaborative partners, new relationships and new ways of working, based on an understanding of the gaps or silos across and within sectors
- **Insights:**  
Generation of actionable knowledge that iteratively informs the roles and direction taken towards the shared goal
- **Leverage Points:**  
Catalytic new projects or support for existing projects which, because of their orientation or collaborative formation, unlock directional, systemic transformation

The details of how this methodology was developed can be found in [Shifting SOIL Conditions](#) and a deeper dive into the component parts that make up the different phases is included in [SOIL: the Essential Ingredients](#).

### THE SOIL METHODOLOGY



## CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORTED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARTHSHOTS

A number of critical ingredients existed that supported the development of the Earthshot framing:

<b>Existing networks and collaborations</b>	<p>The emergence of RM was already built on existing networks and strong collaborative ties. This enabled access to a broad range of stakeholders and built legitimacy for the exploration and development of a new model for organising across the city.</p>
<b>Time and space to take an iterative approach</b>	<p>The initial philanthropic support to develop a small team in 2021 enabled an emergent and iterative approach to RM’s activity; this included space to develop the strategy and execution of the Earthshots model. Whilst still very short term and limited, coupled with the convenor roles attached to each Earthshot (roles which developed over time, not all at once) it meant we had the capacity to convene to build trust while surfacing insights around the framing of the Earthshot. This meant that as much as possible, there was a broad basis of input to the orientation of each individual Earthshot without jumping to immediately obvious solutions.</p>
<b>Initial energy around a Swimmable Birrarung</b>	<p>The Earthshots strategy and practice evolved over years, and continues to do so. It is only in 2025 where the three landed as an interconnected portfolio. The first Earthshot shaped was the Swimmable Birrarung, which is a powerful, joyful and experientially directional goal. This unlocked a lot of energy, momentum and rapid learning cycles about what makes for a good Earthshot which was then embedded into our strategy, narrative and practices in the development of the Streets and Food portfolio.</p>
<b>A team of systems ninjas</b>	<p>There is a growing theory and practice base around mission- oriented innovation which we have adapted, adjusted and contextualised into our own practice in order to be responsive to the needs of our place. The lead convenors we have recruited are able to do this alongside bringing deep sector expertise in their subject matter.</p>
<b>Thematics tied to place</b>	<p>It’s not an accident that we’re working across rivers, streets and food. There is rich history and culture interwoven into all these layers in Melbourne that coalesce interest, aspirations and agendas in a more place-based way.</p>

## WHAT WE FIND THE EARTHSHOTS ENABLE

<b>An ambition for bold action</b>	<p>It is easier to be bold when there is a collective backing a goal rather than a single organisational response or campaign. The goals of the Earthshots are intentionally ambitious, because we have to be to affect the social and ecological change required. We have seen that a new gravitational pull is created by setting new, positively- oriented frames on systemic challenges.</p>
<b>System boundaries for organising</b>	<p>The Earthshot scaffold creates pathways for action for a broader set of actors to engage with, while creating nested activity around technical, social and cultural challenges. To move towards the Collective Vision, Greater Melbourne needs to be broken down into smaller system boundaries; the ‘stacked’ nature of the three Earthshots together allows a fuller view of the city as a system, while retaining coherence at an individual Earthshot level in a dynamic system.</p>
<b>Coherence not consensus</b>	<p>Systems change isn’t linear or unidirectional; rather, it involves multiple actions happening concurrently, connected in their purpose, yet often guided by different localised theories of change. Focusing on coherence creation towards forward-leaning action, rather than consensus building, enables a more dynamic, ecosystem- wide response. Having an overarching goal within each Earthshot which has many entry points creates coherence of purpose.</p>
<b>Grounded action connected to systemic needs</b>	<p>Each of our current Earthshots required over a year to establish its framing. In this time, scanning and sensemaking were led by the respective lead convenors, supported by subject-matter experts, the broader team and practical field experience to understand what the most effective re-frame of a systemic challenge might be. By doing so, the root causes and systemic opportunities were centered as a framework to inform a response. This has ensured that, as much as possible, the activity set developed in our project and partnership responses are deeply grounded in action with a through-line to a systemic condition that needs to shift.</p>
<b>New (unusual) partnerships</b>	<p>Tangible flows that have emerged as a result of the Earthshot model include: new partnerships between unusual actors (e.g., the Container Deposit Scheme and Yarra River Keeper Association), unlocking of new resources (e.g., pro-bono support from a major communications agency directed to the annual Riverfest) and a shift in the authorising environment (e.g., The Big Swim 2050 being announced in the City of Melbourne strategic plan, after the council had previously rejected the idea).</p>

# SYSTEMS LAB:

## KNOWLEDGE, LEARNING AND EXPERIMENTATION TO SHIFT SYSTEMS CONDITIONS

### WHAT THE SYSTEMS LAB IS

The Systems Lab is an action-research platform that explores how to shift conditions in our systems to facilitate place-based change. The work of the Lab starts with an understanding that our current systems present barriers to progressing towards a more regenerative economic future, in Greater Melbourne and beyond. These include (but are not limited to) shortcomings in the ways that decision-making occurs (who decides, and based on what objectives), how capital flows (who controls it, and for what ends) and how knowledge is generated and applied. The Lab focuses on a set of enablers identified as necessary through real-world projects.

The Lab instigates, hosts and coordinates collaborative experiments. These experiments test new approaches, models, tools and interventions that facilitate new ways of working in relation to each of the enablers. These experiments build knowledge about the effectiveness of the interventions and their potential to unlock deeper change that can accelerate place-based initiatives. As such, the work on each of the enablers is designed as an action-research stream, in which we:

- 1) Diagnose existing barriers in the system;
- 2) Experiment with new and innovative interventions in place-based projects (Regen Melbourne's Earthshots); and
- 3) Disseminate learning across the field to facilitate broader adoption of effective models.

#### SYSTEMS LAB ENABLERS

Enablers	System Change Aspirations	Current Conditions / Barriers
<b>Measuring What Matters</b>	Holistic measures of progress that centre long-term social and ecological wellbeing in decision-making	Societies measure what they value. It is therefore not surprising that our primary measures of progress in Australia, and globally, are driven by narrow, short-term definitions of economic productivity. Within this frame, social and ecological outcomes are understood and counted as externalities rather than as central objectives of our economic system. This pattern is driven by, and reinforces, our dominant social, economic and political narratives and impedes our ability to define, track and shape progress towards a more regenerative future.
<b>New Urban Governance</b>	Governance models that enable inclusive, effective and adaptive decision-making in line with our current and future challenges	How we make decisions affects our ability to collectively adapt to change. Our existing modes of governance concentrate power and constrain constructive debate about how to respond to current and future challenges. At the same time, the nature of participation in democratic systems is shaped by the individualistic aspirations perpetuated and underpinned by social, economic and political narratives.
<b>Systemic Investment</b>	Investment paradigms that facilitate capital flows towards systemic activity in service of place-based regeneration	Our financial and investment systems, even those with a sustainability or impact focus, are geared to simple, linear relationships between investments and outcomes, costs and benefits. A mismatch remains between the urgent need to deploy finance in service of regeneration and the amount and quality of money flowing towards genuinely systemic action. Hence, capital deployment is often limited to treating symptoms rather than solving for deep-rooted causes.
<b>Collaborative Research Practices</b>	Research and learning practices that serve the wellbeing of people and planet by centering collaboration and diversity	Information flows more rapidly than ever, yet we remain beholden to narrow definitions of expertise and exclusive ownership of knowledge. Our academic institutions operate in silos and measure impact in ways that do not inherently serve the public good. The lack of cross-sector collaboration and the resulting knowledge-action gap impede our collective capacity to respond to critical local and global challenges.
<b>New Narratives of Place</b>	New approaches to defining social, economic and political narratives that empower local communities	Across the world and in our city, dominant social, economic and political narratives centre economic growth as the primary goal. These narratives perpetuate values, mindsets and practices that are extractive and individualistic at their core. This cultural foundation puts extreme pressure on the wellbeing of people and natural systems, and fails to prepare us to respond to the impacts of such pressures.

## HOW THE SYSTEMS LAB CAME ABOUT

Initially the Systems Lab was oriented specifically around research, acknowledging the need for both action and wisdom/knowledge in regeneration work. The 'RM Lab' emerged from a series of conversations between Regen Melbourne and Professor Lauren Rickards, a climate adaptation expert who has also explored the relationship between research and impact. These conversations recognised that research institutions across Melbourne and Australia need to find new ways to collaborate and be in greater service to the places where they operate. One avenue identified for this purpose was the possibility of creating an external organising function, centered in Greater Melbourne, that could draw together knowledge which is often held in institutional silos. Instead, an opportunity was identified to explore ways in which critical knowledge could support transformation towards a regenerative future for the city.

The Lab's purpose and structure were initially guided by a group of aligned academic researchers from a number of Melbourne-based universities who came together in an advisory capacity; this group evolved into the Research Council, an advisory group with representatives from seven universities.

The development of the Greater Melbourne City Portrait in 2023 was the first major project of the RM Lab; funding from LMCF enabled RM to hire a Director of Research to lead this work and research activities linked to the emerging Earthshots.

From the City Portrait experience and the early Swimmable Birrarung sensemaking, it became clear that other enablers, beyond research and knowledge, were required to support place-based transformation. We began to explore what was needed to address policy, storytelling and media, governance and capital flows. Through an iterative process from mid-2024 to early 2025, which included consultation with the Research Council and a number of international collaborators, we landed on the set of five enablers included in the current Systems Lab scope (focusing on narrative, measurement, governance, capital and research collaborations), as well as the framing and remit of the Lab in relation to the Earthshots. Within this, we recognised that the Lab in full must take an action-research approach, but that naming research collaborations as an enabler would continue to explicitly support creative ways to approach research and orient its purpose in line with the Collective Vision.



## CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORTED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SYSTEMS LAB

A number of critical ingredients existed that supported the development of the Lab:

<b>Existing relationships and a restless sector</b>	<p>Rich and deep relationships across an existing knowledge sector, through university partners in Greater Melbourne, supported the original formation of collaborators that developed into the Research Council. Our formation of a loose (initially) research focus within RM coincided with intrapreneurs within these spaces seeking more cross-institutional collaborative opportunities to be in service to the city where they live and work.</p>
<b>A dedication to long-term systems change</b>	<p>Among collaborators and some catalytic funders, we identified a shared recognition that, coupled with the action orientation of the Earthshots, there needs to be a dedicated and resourced space that attends to long- term terrain shifts. This is required for RM's work to be truly systemic.</p>
<b>International partnerships</b>	<p>International partnerships with the likes of Doughnut Economics Action Lab (DEAL), Dark Matter Labs and Transcap Initiative have reinforced and informed our action-learning agenda. These partners expressed interest in learning alongside the 'sandpit' of Greater Melbourne as a place; RM's structure allows for particular thematic questions to be examined and brought to life through experimentation in an urban environment.</p>
<b>A team of systems ninjas</b>	<p>Initially managed through a volunteer academic role, we quickly realised that a more robust Lab manager function was required. Enabled by grant funding to develop the City Portrait, we recruited an experienced practitioner to manage the then Research Lab. As the Lab expanded, we recruited individuals who are able to span boundaries across sectors and knowledge systems, each bringing individual content matter expertise with a bent towards collaboration and learning.</p>

## WHAT WE FIND THE SYSTEMS LAB ENABLES

<b>Intersectionality</b>	<p>The Lab provides a cross-cutting approach to our work, where we can ask how each enabler or thematic (narrative, governance, etc.) shows up in the context of a river system, a food system and a street system.</p>
<b>Bridging between theory and practice</b>	<p>The Lab's methodology is practically and tangibly providing a connection between concept and practice. In areas like systemic investing, we are able to test emerging ideas within our Earthshot environment; this allows us to mutually progress knowledge production within emergent fields and support directional change in the Earthshots, including the ability for our partners to do work on the ground.</p>
<b>Access to research institutions</b>	<p>Through the Lab, we are able to form deeper partnerships with universities who work on longer time horizons and who are looking for practical, place-based ways to partner for impact. By playing a connective role, the Lab enables collaboration across institutions and new formations that support high-impact research. Because the Lab is intentionally not set up to replicate the function of universities, it reduces the perception or risk of a sense of competition.</p>
<b>A mandate for the long term</b>	<p>Dedicated attention to long-term shifts is required for an economic transition to be attended to effectively. The Lab's orientation towards long-term change reduces the risk of distraction by short-term events. It also complements the near-term responsiveness required by the Earthshots navigating current conditions in the system.</p>
<b>A view outside of Melbourne</b>	<p>The learning posture of the Lab is resonating with partners, aligned organisations and potential funders who see the Lab's potential to inform related activities beyond Greater Melbourne. While the Earthshots are grounded specifically in Melbourne's context, the enablers explored within the Lab reflect broad systemic needs mirrored across Australia and globally. As such, the Lab offers a universal relevance that enhances connection with place-based activity in multiple places.</p>

# BUILDING AND LEARNING TOWARDS A REGENERATIVE MELBOURNE

Establishing Regen Melbourne as *transitional* infrastructure has been an iterative process. Our current framing of the three elements outlined above has taken shape over a five-year period. We anticipate that it will continue to evolve as we better understand the systems within which we operate – and which we seek to change – as well as the relative effectiveness of our responses to and within these systems. To this end, we consistently seek opportunities to learn with peers and partners grappling with similar questions and challenges. Only through collaboration and a multiplicity of approaches will the ambitions that we seek – first articulated through our Collective Vision – become a reality.

