NEW URBAN GOVERNANCE: ENABLING A THRIVING CIVIC LIFE

Part 3: The Importance of New Narratives for Community, Democracy and a Regenerative Melbourne

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REGEN MELBOURNE

BACKGROUND

The way we make decisions together defines our ability to navigate and adapt to a rapidly changing world. Yet, today we face a convergence of challenges that complicate collective decision making. Rising mistrust in institutions, diminishing civic engagement, erosion of democratic systems and the rapid pace at which technology reshapes our social fabric combine to create new obstacles for how we work together, not just locally, but on a global scale. Ambiguity about goals and limited community agency lead to disengagement and perceptions of meaningless efforts. These trends contribute to visible issues such as loneliness, social isolation, polarised discourse, and mental health concerns, which in turn fuel broader crises like inequality and geopolitical tensions.

Regen Melbourne's goal is to move Greater Melbourne towards a future where human needs are met within the bounds of the planet. When we describe a regenerative Melbourne, our vision specifically includes an "enabled" city, in which the wellbeing we seek is enabled by economic and governance systems that facilitate participation, agency, resilience, and cohesion.

Our work in New Urban Governance directly responds to a set of current conditions that are holding our communities back from a thriving civic life. In particular, the relationships between communities and our democratic systems are eroding at an ever-increasing rate, and a new approach to governing is needed, one that is responsive to the roles communities want to play in shaping their futures. Voting patterns in the recent federal election, which show diminishing support for the two major parties and a rise in support for independent candidates, suggest growing political disillusionment in Australia and an appetite for new sources of political inspiration and engagement. Likewise, we have identified a need for general understanding of democracy in practice to extend beyond voting to day-to-day activities, particularly at a local level.

In early 2024, Regen Melbourne created the Systems Lab, a platform to engage with these critical barriers and explore a set of enablers that can shift systems conditions and support regeneration. This is necessary to support our Earthshots and our broader ambitions for systems change in Greater Melbourne and beyond.

Our New Urban Governance stream within the Systems Lab, developed with and supported by the Menzies Foundation, builds on the Participatory Melbourne project that began in 2023. Through this work, it is clear that participatory governance isn't an isolated project. It is a core enabler that must run through all of Regen Melbourne's Earthshots. Within the Systems Lab, we are experimenting with models that provide new structures to support a thriving civic life, responding to conditions identified in Participatory Melbourne to promote adaptable and living systems where communities and the people within them feel truly connected to the decisions that shape their futures.

The Systems Lab: a research hub for systems change in Melbourne

A new participatory path: The evolution of the Participatory Melbourne project

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OUR EMERGENT WORK IN NEW URBAN GOVERNANCE

This 2025 report series summarises our initial work exploring the area of New Urban Governance, oriented around the central question of:

How can a stronger relationship between communities and democratic systems enable a thriving civic life for all?

Strengthening the relationship between communities and democratic systems requires shifts across core themes:
- Governance and Capital Mechanisms
- Emerging Community Leadership
- New Narratives of Community

In 2024, we formulated these themes into focused experiments, each with a driving question:

Theme	Question	Experiment
Governance and Capital Mechanisms	What mechanisms do we need to enable democratic involvement and collective action?	Application of Hum.Community as a digital, distributed decision-making and grant-making tool
New Narratives of Community	What are the changing narratives of community and community resilience in these urgent times?	Articulation of a new form of community narrative and refreshed approach to collective narrative-building reflective of current community identities, needs, and aspirations
Emerging Community Leadership	What new forms of community leadership are required to shift us to the future we need, not just the future that is currently possible?	Development of a set of community leadership archetypes based on forms of leadership visible in Regen Melbourne's Earthshots

Participatory Melbourne: Phase 1 report. Activating participation towards a common good

Each experiment built on and responded to the foundational diagnostic work completed under the Participatory Melbourne banner. Grounded in additional desktop and community-based research, these experiments tested new interventions in the field. Regen Melbourne's Earthshots now continue to provide a 'sandpit' for iterative learning, building on this initial work and helping us to understand the value of each intervention, including its potential to scale.

This piece focusses on the theme of New Narratives for Community, as we explore how more Melburnians can contribute to the stories that will shape the future our great city.

URBAN GOVERNANCE: A REVIEW OF THE FIELD

Our work sits within the broader context of evolving urban governance in Australia and globally. It is important to understand both the history of democratic participation and decision-making in our country as well as emerging new models in other cities and countries around the world. Appendix A summarises some of this context, from the complex governance systems of Aboriginal Australians, to colonial decision-making structures, to greater decentralisation in the 20th century through to the contemporary governance challenges of modern Australia.

SHIFTING TO A NEW MODEL OF URBAN GOVERNANCE

Our historical context can help us understand where we are as a society, and what our dominant cultures and governance systems have encouraged us to value and prioritise. But if we are to create new stories, for a regenerative city and a renewed era of democratic participation, then we need to understand what is required to shift direction into the future. The following section summarises what is emerging in contemporary literature and practice – locally and globally – as necessary to reorient us towards new models of urban governance in Australia. There are broadly four conditions necessary for positive change:

1. Revitalising democratic systems and rebuilding trust
2. Creating governance that enables community-led decision-making
3. New narratives: harnessing social imagination and storytelling as tools for changes
4. Strong foundations: fostering social cohesion and strengthening community resilience

Revitalising Democratic Systems

Democracy in Australia, as in many parts of the world, is facing significant challenges. Reports like the Civic Health of Australia and the Scanlon Institute's studies on community discourses about democracy highlight a decline in public trust in political institutions and alienation from decision-making processes. Voter volatility has risen, and traditional political parties are losing support, reflecting broader disenchantment with democratic structures (1).

A deeper understanding of how Australians perceive democracy is essential to revitalising democratic systems. While Australians generally value democratic principles, findings from the Scanlon Institute reveal that many feel excluded from decision-making processes, contributing to apathy and mistrust (2).

1. University of Melbourne (2023). Australian Democracy: Crisis, Resilience, and Renewal. Pursuit. Available at: Pursuit Article.
2. Scanlon Institute (2024). Strengthening Democracy: Understanding Community Discourses About Democracy. Available at: Scanlon Institute Report.

Data from the OECD (3) underscores the critical role of civic education in addressing these issues, as a well-informed public is more likely to engage in democratic practices and hold leaders accountable. Strengthening civics education was one of the immediate priorities identified in McKinnon's 2025 Institutional Reform Stocktake (4). This foundational knowledge fosters active citizenship, creating opportunities to rebuild trust and establish more inclusive democratic systems capable of addressing the complex challenges faced by modern societies. Understanding and addressing public perceptions of our current system is key to developing governance models that empower communities and ensure robust democratic participation (5).

In Australia, declining trust coincides with structural weaknesses in representation and increasing demands for greater inclusion and transparency. Experiments such as the Melbourne People's Panel (6) and Geelong Citizens' Jury (7) show how participatory models can bring citizens into the governance process and rebuild faith in democracy. Globally, programs like California State University's Town Hall Meeting Program (8) demonstrate the value of localised engagement, emphasising that democracy's resilience lies in connecting governance to the lived realities of communities (9). These models underscore the need to bridge the gap between communities and decision-making bodies (10), particularly when many concerns from the general population stem from the influence of corporations on government decision making and dissatisfaction with democratic processes – including 'not having a say' and lack of representation (11). Revitalising our democratic system requires repairing trust and agency and ensuring the story of our democracy is one that everyone can feel a part of and contribute to.

Creating Governance to enable Community-led Decision-making

The literature on community-led governance underscores the necessity of shifting from centralised, privatised systems to more decentralised, inclusive, and collaborative governance models. Whether it is through reclaiming urban spaces through democratic control over infrastructure, or advocating for a right to the city that empowers communities to manage their own environments (12), there is a call for participatory democracy where citizens actively shape the future of their cities, emphasising the importance of collective action in urban governance (13). This approach aligns with Elinor Ostrom's work on the commons, which highlights the importance of polycentric governance models (14). Ostrom argues that empowering local communities to manage shared resources ensures that decisions are more representative of the diverse needs of the relevant population.

3. OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2017), Trust and Public Policy: How Better Governance Can Help Rebuild Public Trust, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/978926426 8920-en
4. Daley, J., Krust, R., Institutional Reform Stocktake. Available at: https://a-ap.storyblok.com/f/3001038/x/6e320 7d44b/d_report-political-system-needs-an-upgrade-for-our-changing-world_-stocktake.pdf
5. Evans, M., Jennings, W., & Stoker, G. (n.d.). How does Australia Compare: What makes a leading democracy. Democracy 2025. Available at: Democracy 2025 Report.
6. MosaicLab (n.d.). Melbourne People's Panel. Available at: Melbourne People's Panel – MosaicLab.
7. newDemocracy Foundation (2016). *Geelong Project: Process Design Final Report*. Available at: Geelong Project Report (June 2016)
8. Spitzer, S. J., & Weber, L. M. (2023). Building Community to Promote Civic Engagement: The Town Hall Meeting Program at California State University, Fullerton. Journal of Political Science Education, 19(4), 627–648. DOI: 10.1080/15512169.2023.2216884.
9. Department of Home Affairs (n.d.). Strengthening Democracy Taskforce. Available at: Strengthening Democracy Taskforce.
10. University of Melbourne (2023). Australian Democracy: Crisis, Resilience, and Renewal. Pursuit. Available at: Pursuit Article.
11. Scanlon Institute (2024). Strengthening Democracy: Understanding Community Discourses About Democracy. Available at: Scanlon Institute Report.
12. Harvey, D. (2012). Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution. Verso.
13. Purcell, M. (2009). Recapturing Democracy: Neoliberalization and the Struggle for Alternative Urban Futures. Routledge.
14. Ostrom, E. (1992). Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action. Cambridge University Press.

The concept of reclaiming the commons is central to the shift towards community-led governance. Scholars such as David Bollier (15) advocate for reclaiming public resources and shared spaces as commons that are managed collectively rather than controlled by private interests. This idea aligns with Sheila Foster and Christian Iaione's (16) work on co-governance and the urban commons, which emphasises collaborative governance structures where communities manage resources like public spaces, utilities, and infrastructure. Their framework, detailed in Co-Cities, proposes co-governance models that prioritise both social equity and environmental sustainability. Models that exemplify this, such as the Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) projects in Turin, Barcelona and Brussels (17), demonstrate the power of community-driven infrastructure projects that focus on co-creating urban spaces with communities. In particular, they also demonstrate how participatory governance and collaborative planning can be successfully integrated into city management.

In the context of Greater Melbourne, this shift towards community-led management is essential to create a city that is both sustainable and rooted in the values of community ownership and shared responsibility. There is an opportunity to use models of regenerative democracy (18), which advocates for the integration of community-led regeneration in urban spaces to restore social and ecological well-being, building a foundation for flourishing societies through collaborative governance. This collection of literature illustrates the growing consensus that urban governance should empower communities to play an active role in managing resources, shaping policies, and co-designing urban spaces that reflect their needs and aspirations.

New Narratives: Harnessing Social Imagination and Storytelling as Tools for Change

Harnessing social imagination and storytelling offers practical tools for creating governance systems that are innovative, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of diverse communities. Imagination is powerful in bringing people together to envision better futures, leveraging creativity as a means to foster collaboration and practical solutions (19). Embedding such imaginative spaces into governance systems can enable citizens to co-create visions for their neighbourhoods that reflect both local needs and broader societal aspirations.

The role of storytelling in shaping governance is underscored by work on public narrative (20, 21), showing how shared narratives can unite communities around common goals. Regardless of political orientation, a governance model that prioritises storytelling can help bridge divides and make processes more accessible and relatable while inspiring collective action.

15. Bollier, D. (2014). Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons. New Society Publishers.
16. Iaione, C., & Foster, S. R. (2022). Co-Cities: Innovative Transitions Toward Just and Self-Sustaining Communities.
17. Urban Innovative Actions. (n.d.). UIA cities — projects. Available from 1. University of Melbourne (2023). Australian Democracy: Crisis, Resilience, and Renewal. Pursuit. Available at: Pursuit Article.
2. Scanlon Institute (2024). Strengthening Democracy: Understanding Community Discourses About Democracy. Available at: Scanlon Institute Report..
18. Casarejos, F., Rufin, C., & Engel, I. (2021). Regenerative Democracy for Envisioning and Fostering Flourishing Societies. Sustainability, 13(11), 5808.
19. Hopkins, R. (2019). From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want. Chelsea Green Publishing.
20. Monbiot, G. (2020). *The New Political Story That Could Change Everything* [TED Talk]. Available at: TED Talk.
21. Ganz, M. (2011). Why Stories Matter: The Art and Craft of Social Change. In The Handbook of Communication and Emotion: Research, Theory, Applications, and Contexts (A. J.

Indigenous perspectives, such as those from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (22), emphasise storytelling's role in fostering relationships with land, culture, and community. These insights align with broader calls for governance models that nurture connection, sustainability and shared responsibility. Practical tools like those outlined in the Common Cause Handbook and Framing the Economy demonstrate how values-based communication can transcend political divisions by focusing on universal principles such as fairness, community, and resilience. Several contributions to this field highlight the importance of inclusive narratives that reflect the diversity of voices in a city (23) like Melbourne, ensuring all residents feel represented in governance.

Building on these themes, scholars like Francis Fukuyama assert the role of trust and strong institutions in creating governance systems that can adapt to change and foster unity across societal divides (24). His emphasis on institutional integrity aligns with the need for narratives that build collective trust in governance. This strengthening can occur through approaches that craft narratives around universal values—such as fairness, care, and shared purpose— transcending ideological divides to foster a sense of shared purpose (25), without needing to delve into identity politics. Works around institutional renewal also remind us of the latent potential in institutions, suggesting they be rebuilt to serve as platforms for collaboration and collective imagination (26). Together, these perspectives highlight the need for governance systems that not only inspire hope and action but also rebuild trust and strengthen civic engagement across all sectors of society.

Fostering Social Cohesion and Community Resilience

Social cohesion, rooted in trust and mutual care, strengthens community resilience by fostering connections that enable collective adaptation and shared strength in the face of challenges. Urban communities in Greater Melbourne face mounting challenges, including rising loneliness, diminishing trust in institutions and weakened neighbourhood networks (27, 28). Some groups - such as migrants, carers, the homeless, and residents in disadvantaged areas - are disproportionately affected, further straining the social fabric. Reports like State of the Nation and Trust, Social Cohesion and Resilience: A Conversation-Starter for Australia reveal how declining trust and social fragmentation undermine the resilience needed to navigate environmental, social, and economic pressures (29,30).

Relational governance, grounded in Indigenous wisdom, provides a powerful framework for addressing these challenges. Thinkers like Tyson Yunkaporta and Ailton Krenak emphasise the interconnectedness of people, ecosystems, and institutions, highlighting that stronger relationships between communities and their environments are essential for resilience.

22. Simpson, L. B. (2017). As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance. University of Minnesota Press.
23. Adichie, C. N. (2009). The Danger of a Single Story [TED Talk]. Available at: TED Talk.
24. Fukuyama, F. (2014). Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
25. Haidt, J. (2012). The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion. Pantheon.
26. Levin, Y. (2020). A Time to Build: From Family and Community to America's Work Crisis. Basic Books.
27. Australian Psychological Society. (2023). State of the Nation Report: Social Connection in Australia 2023. Retrieved from https://psychology.org.au.
28. Global Access Partners & IIERA. (2021). Trust, Social Cohesion and Resilience: A Conversation-Starter for Australia. Global Access Partners.
29. Australian Psychological Society. (2023). State of the Nation Report: Social Connection in Australia 2023.
30. Global Access Partners & IIERA. (2021). Trust, Social Cohesion and Resilience: A Conversation-Starter for Australia. Global Access Partners.

Localised initiatives, such as the InterGen Project (31) and
Neighbourhood Connect (32), illustrate how fostering trust, reciprocity,
and mutual care strengthens the resilience of communities to adapt to
change.

Participatory approaches also enhance cohesion and resilience. Urban
living labs, as demonstrated in the CLEVER Cities Project (33), empower
communities to co-create tailored, adaptive solutions. Tools like Street
Epistemology (34) encourage open, respectful dialogue across diverse
groups, helping to bridge divides and foster understanding. As highlighted
in the National Resilience Project Report (35), governance that invests in
trust-building and community-led decision-making enhances both
adaptability and social harmony.

There is clearly a need for fundamental change in our urban governance
systems and new narratives that channel optimism, innovation and
inclusiveness. The integration of imagination and storytelling into
Greater Melbourne's urban governance could foster collaboration,
restore trust, and inspire collective solutions. By focusing on shared
aspirations and practical outcomes, this approach has the potential to
unite diverse perspectives and create governance models that work for
everyone. Further, by integrating relational governance principles,
supporting marginalised groups, and fostering participatory models,
Greater Melbourne can build cohesive, resilient communities capable of
navigating complex challenges while ensuring no one is left behind.

31. Fielding, K., et al. (2022). The
InterGen Project: Community-Based
Approaches to Intergenerational Social
Connection. University of Queensland.
32. Neighbourhood Connect. (2023).
Neighbourhood Connect: Strengthening
Community Bonds through Local
Networks.
33. ICLEI & CLEVER Cities Consortium.
(2022). Integrated Collaborative
Governance Approaches towards Urban
Transformation: Experiences from the
CLEVER Cities Project. ICLEI Europe.
34. Street Epistemology International.
(2023). Street Epistemology: Tools for
Collaborative Dialogue. Retrieved from
22. Simpson, L. B. (2017). As we have
always done: Indigenous freedom
through radical resistance. University of
Minnesota Press.
23. Adichie, C. N. (2009). The Danger of a
Single Story [TED Talk]. Available at: TED
Talk.
24. Fukuyama, F. (2014). Political Order
and Political Decay: From the Industrial
Revolution to the Globalization of
Democracy. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
25. Haidt, J. (2012). The Righteous Mind:
Why Good People Are Divided by Politics
and Religion. Pantheon.
26. Levin, Y. (2020). A Time to Build: From
Family and Community to America's
Work Crisis. Basic Books.
35. Global Access Partners & IIERA.
(2021). National Resilience Project
Report. Global Access Partners.

PART 1: NEW NARRATIVES FOR COMMUNITY

QUESTION:

WHAT ARE THE CHANGING NARRATIVES OF COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN THESE URGENT TIMES?

APPROACH:
Explore possible new narratives for community and demonstrate how communities can use narrative as a tool to increase their agency and resilience.

LEVERS:
Storytelling and media

COLLABORATION PARTNERS:
Good & Proper, Hinterland, Monash University (MADA)

CONTRIBUTING PARTNERS:
The Adaptive Practice, Amble Studio, Banksia Gardens, The Bridging Place, Centre for Public Impact, CERES, City of Melbourne, CoDesignCo, Hot House Community Projects, Initiatives of Change, Irregular (North West Melbourne Association), Lively, Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation Community Connector for Resilience, Monash University, Merri-bek Council, Mosaik Experiences, Municipal Association of Victoria, Past Futures, Swinburne SIRI Measurement Network, Swinburne University, Transition Towns, Turning Ground, University of Melbourne, Victorian Department of Health, Voicecraft, Westgate Biodiversity

ACTIVITIES:

- Synthesis and translation of insights gathered through Participatory Melbourne

- Review of current literature discussing the role of community-based narrative and storytelling

- Hosting a practitioner and community leader dinner to test emergent insights around the limitations to current narratives and what is required to shift these in future

- Collaboration with our partners at Good&Proper to translate insights into a story that captures an essence of a change in narrative and its role in enhancing community action and agency

- Testing and validation of this story with experts and community representatives through interviews and workshops and an exploratory discussion through a podcast episode entitled "Modern Maze"

- Developing projects within the three Earthshots to generate and surface new narratives about the city and new forms of democratic participation

OUTPUTS:
- **Narrative campaign story**
- **Exploratory podcast episode**
- **Earthshot projects that surface new narratives**

INTRODUCING A NEW STORY

The stories of communities are changing. Once seen as subjects, then evolving into consumers, communities are now more than ever seeking to be seen, heard and engaged as active residents and citizens. The insights from Participatory Melbourne tell us that new narratives are needed that truly represent the stories, ambitions and potential of communities today, including their desired relationship with governing institutions.

People's capacity and resources to imagine a different, more connected future is often inhibited by our current economic system and dominant media landscape. However, there are also emerging examples of self-organising communities that are motivated by creating collective outcomes for their community, bonded by the power of belonging to place.

We have an opportunity to harness the imagination and optimism of what communities are capable achieving through a shared vision. Narrative can bring together the values, beliefs and stories that shape how we see people and places, communities and cultures, ideologies and institutions. The creation of new narratives can facilitate deep debate, reflection and restructuring. New narratives also have the power to mobilise collective action and change social and organisational structures for and within communities. Narrative as a tool is accessible to everyone and is something people can participate in immediately from their own vantage point and set of experiences.

The next section of this paper contains an example of a new kind of story that reflects how the role and nature of community narrative has evolved and can continue to evolve over time.

WHERE HAVE WE BEEN

Storytelling has been central to connecting communities across generations, tying people to stewardship of place.	For a long time high rates of engagement in civic and community institutions reinforced and demonstrated values of collective care.	Post-industrial 'myths' tied to individualistic values, compounded by privatised urban environments, have distanced us from each other and from place.

WHERE ARE WE NOW

Experiencing grief for the loss of our old narratives, the 'myths' of modern society, because they feel irrelevant in the face of present challenges and existential threats to our futures.	Finding comfort and control with technology in its role in fostering shared emotions in small circles, yet the bonds it creates are limiting fuller views of 'outside' communities.	Needing to reframe/reclaim our narratives to meet new realities and shift from passive recipients to actors who bring new stories to life.

WHERE ARE WE GOING

Taking small steps of imagination practiced through action can remind us how to play the role of protagonists in our shared narratives.	The role of narrative is in helping to define values and needs, rather than creating one future story.	Linking 'bonding capital' to the ties forged by 'bridging capital' is a key to combating loneliness, polarity and to finding unique contributions in communities.

This is a story about evolving community narratives and the potential for narrative to act as a tool for building community agency and resilience. The story has been developed in collaboration with Good&Proper and translates our insights over 18 months of listening and sensemaking into a foundational communications asset, which can inform targeted campaign elements, calls to action and public-facing messaging about a regenerative vision for Greater Melbourne.

Combining a sense of urgency with one of hope, the story invites individuals and communities alike to take action towards defining the future they desire.

WHAT IS THE STORY OF YOUR COMMUNITY?

People once existed in tight-knit community groups that were largely governed locally, considering the needs of all members and the local environment. Now, our modern lives are somewhat more disparate and disconnected. Our communities are often defined by who shares our interests or beliefs, and we connect virtually as much as face-to-face.

The Australia that we know now is an outcome of decades of politics based on economic theories that define humans as self-interested individuals. These theories have in turn become our reality, making our default story one of 'me' over 'we' and promoting systems and institutions that too often favour the few. A 'fair go' simply hasn't been within reach for many, even as overtly discriminatory policies have fallen away. As a result, we're experiencing epidemics of distrust in institutions, social polarisation, loneliness and apathy. According to a study of over 4,000 Australians, more than 65% of us believe we're becoming more divided.

The incumbent forms of governance - traditional party politics across three tiers of government and a bureaucracy built around siloes and narrow success measures - are no longer reflecting or serving the needs of communities. We've privatised public spaces and essential services, weakened community bonds and built fences around individually-owned property. In the process, we have concentrated power in the hands of corporations and elites, for whom optimising for profit takes precedence over optimising for the common good.

Community agency hasn't disappeared altogether, but many of us feel alienated from the democratic process and we aren't leaning into this as much as we could. A sense of collective responsibility for our wellbeing has diminished, which changes how we choose to participate in decision-making and whether we think we can. When we feel powerless. It's much easier to complain about our local council on a Facebook group than it is to seek out ways to catalyse change.

Last year, the Scanlon-Monash Social Cohesion Index registered its lowest score on record. It found that just 33% of Australians "took pride in our culture and way of life", and nearly one in three of us believe our leaders abuse power "most" or "all of the time".

This has played out in real time across Greater Melbourne, where the physical form of our suburban sprawl has resulted in isolated and transient community 'islands' in which many residents don't even know their neighbours. At the same time, the promise of social media as a great connector has often had the opposite effect, to the extent that its use by young people is now being regulated because of well-recognised mental health impacts.

Economic pressures and housing affordability have driven down participation in communal activities. And the decline of traditional place-based community institutions, and funding for those institutions, has left many communities with fewer and fewer physical places to convene.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

Indeed, we are all connected to the places where we work, live and play, and the people who share these places with us — our local communities. This was especially apparent in the first few days and weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, which took hold as Greater Melbourne was still recovering from the devastating 2019-20 bushfires. This time highlighted another aspect of our current reality, our need to acknowledge and respond to disruptions that are becoming more regular and severe as a result of climate change and our global interconnections.

In this moment, an incredible thing happened across Melbourne: our communities came together. Neighbours checked in on neighbours they'd never met. Crowdfunding campaigns emerged to help prevent our beloved cafes, pubs, restaurants, community hubs and centres from shuttering. We baked bread, we delivered groceries, we shared resources, and we convened in new and imaginative ways. We also reclaimed privatised places for people, turning golf courses into public parks and car parks into social spaces.

We suddenly found ourselves living through an event that impacted and threatened each and every member of our community. Yes, the individualistic story that we've been told for so long came to life, leaving supermarket shelves empty and toilet paper in short supply. But after the initial shock, our instinct was to come together to find a way through. We shared meals with our neighbours, food banks doubled or tripled their donations, social enterprises collaborated to feed communities and volunteers delivered warm meals to the elderly and vulnerable. A new story of community began to emerge. And the Scanlon–Monash Social Cohesion Index peaked during this period.

Then the lockdowns dragged on. We were forced to stay at home, keep away from one another, limit our time outdoors and exercise extreme caution when interacting with others. And we mostly complied, despite enormous negative impacts to our mental and physical health and wellbeing. We made personal sacrifices to protect our communities, turning small acts of community-building in our local circles into habits and new ways of connecting with the places where we live. Even our institutions started to shift: the impacts of lockdowns were felt differently across social and economic lines, but responses to job losses and childcare closures emerged, softening the blow. Where this wasn't enough, new leaders emerged, such as young people organising food distribution in public housing towers.

COVID-19 won't be the last crisis to test the resilience of people in Greater Melbourne. It appears, however, in our communal response, the seeds of a new community story were sown in this time. The limits of our current story, and the social and economic structures that have influenced it, have been laid bare: high rates of food insecurity among students, increased levels of housing stress and persistent public protests against government decision-making were first tied to the COVID experience, but they haven't gone away. We can't unsee these challenges; they impact all of us, directly or indirectly.

And it's here we find the beginnings of what comes next. People are beginning to come together again, finding new ways of being in community, and new stories to tell.

This isn't about going back in time, about recreating an idealised past. The stories told in our modern history books only served some of us well, and aren't in tune with our current reality, globally or locally. Here in Melbourne, we feel the effects of climate change with each wild storm or heat wave. We face the ripples of political and social upheaval tied to global conflicts. We see diminishing trust in government as disinformation and misinformation influence elections and political debate. We not only need a new story, but also a new way of telling stories that can help to make sense of this uncertainty.

Some activists have begun to call for humans to reconnect with our inherent altruism. Our longer history points to our ability to cooperate – indeed, this is what has been required for us to survive and thrive as societies. This kind of mutual aid isn't foreign to us. In Australia, this might look like the traditional notion of 'mateship' — if only we're able to yank the distorted version of it out of the history books and reimagine it as a fundamental way of being together.

This idea suggests that we can rediscover the central facts of our humanity. Orienting community connection around the places where we live offers a place to start. We see examples of this from around the world and our own backyards. In the UK, a movement is emerging that encourages people to discard old "subject" and "consumer" stories, and instead adopt a new, collaborative, creative and caring citizen story instead. The point that this movement and many others are making is that leadership is not a position or a title we hold — it's something we do. The dominant narrative of our time has led us to believe that while the leaders lead, the rest of us must simply follow. We have an opportunity now to shift from being passive recipients of decisions made at the government and corporate levels to active participants of the communities we want to build and nurture.

The word 'citizen' as a verb, not a noun, is gaining traction, reminding us that we have active roles to play as members of communities where we live. Around the world we hear about the role of imagination; the idea that community must be reimagined to move beyond identities handed to us. Writing new stories asks us to centre relationships and care in shared visions for the future.

Closer to home, concepts of relationality and Indigenous knowledge systems identify that true healing and wholeness come from understanding interconnections between people, place, and ecosystems. This relational thinking speaks to the wholeness and healing that emerges when people step into each other's worlds and work collectively. It acknowledges not just the value of different viewpoints, but also the need for diverse views to guide us into our uncertain future. It's not one story that we need, but many, and the process of developing them together is equally important.

Now's the time to seed, nurture and grow these emerging narratives throughout Greater Melbourne. The opportunity in front of us is to prepare the soil so that these bold new stories of community, participation and active citizenship can begin to sprout in this place.

So, we ask again: what are the stories of your community's future? And what role are you playing in telling them and, more importantly, bringing them to life?

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LESSONS AND NEXT STEPS

LESSONS

Our learning from this process provides a springboard for linking narrative and action in 2025. Key reflections from this process are:

- The process of developing new narratives as a community can be as valuable as the resulting narrative itself.
- Narratives offer an accessible tool to bring people together around a shared vision for the future, and to identify common ground where difference often dominates.
- Narrative development is a relational process, and the types of narratives we hold are a choice - including positive and negative.
- Grounding narratives in place presents a clear approach to breaking through identity-based barriers or differences: we all depend on and have a relationship with the places where we live.
- Storytelling helps us work through tension and disagreement as much as it helps us build capability, imagine different worlds and see what is possible or desirable.

WHAT NEXT

This work to date has set us up to collaboratively to develop new narratives about our city and the way we engage with the decisions that will shape it. In 2025, we will apply what we have learned to progress new community-based narratives in the context of Regen Melbourne's Earthshots, wildly ambitious projects that serve as urban transformation pathways. Our Earthshots focus on making the Birrarung Yarra River swimmable, regenerating our streets at a neighbourhood scale and creating a resilient, nourishing, accessible food system. Developing new narratives in relation to these aspects of our city will first involve understanding the current dominant narrative for each. This will be followed by shaping and delivering community-based approaches to creating new narratives and presenting public campaigns that can begin to shift our relationship with our streets, waterways and food across Greater Melbourne.

As we explore new, placed-based narratives for Melbourne, using the Earthshots as a vehicle for a different kind of storytelling, Regen Melbourne will also look to encourage new narratives around democratic participation. We will find ways to bring new voices into this important discussion and expand the democratic project to all Melburnians, positioning people as active democratic participants, rather than passive subjects or consumers.

WHAT NEXT (CONTINUED)

Regen Melbourne is incorporating the insights from this new narratives work into many of the projects that will underpin the formation of the Earthshots, as we try to bring more people into the conversations about the future of our city and expand the nature of the stories we are telling ourselves and each other. Examples of these projects include:

Swimmable Birrarung
Project: Rowboat Stories

The Rowboat – Swimmable Birrarung is an adaptation of the creative Rowboat project conceived and produced by ESEM Projects and Hello Atoll.

This project will create recorded conversations with multiple actors and stakeholders along the Birrarung | Yarra River, discussing their stories of the river.

This is a powerful storytelling opportunity to centre the Birrarung, raise awareness about the river and facilitate a reconnection with the broader community.

Conversation recordings will help to create new narratives about the Birrarung, drawing on First Nations practices of connection and listening, and new scholarship around more-than-human practices of place-connection and custodianship.

300,000 Streets
Project: Activating Communities

Residents who want to activate and transform their neighborhoods face a fragmented system of regulations, limited resources, and disconnected knowledge about effective approaches.

This project will help communities to reimagine the role of streets as the foundational public spaces where community resilience and democratic participation flourish.

Activating Communities will also allow local leaders to reimagine their roles as empowered catalysts for positive change at a street and neighbourhood (and ultimately system) level, challenging the prevailing narrative of citizens as mere subjects or consumers.

Nourished Neighbourhoods
Project: Great Food Conversation

We're launching Australia's largest community-led dialogue on food, bringing diverse voices into the spotlight to uncover what Melburnians truly value about food, where the system is failing, and how we can collectively build a healthier, fairer, and more resilient future.

These conversations will inform a citizen-driven food manifesto and shift the centre of gravity in food policy toward lived experience and community priorities.

The project will also help to shift the dominant narrative, away from top-down, fragmented food policies that have focussed on the commodification of food, at the expense of human and planetary health.

APPENDIX A:

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF URBAN GOVERNANCE IN AUSTRALIA

Colonial and Early 20th Century Governance

Governance in Australia during the colonial period was highly centralised, with power concentrated in the hands of colonial administrators and later state governments (A1). Early urban governance lacked community involvement, as decision-making was dominated by elite, often British-born, landowners and officials (A2). This governance model was shaped by the imperial state structure, where cities were managed as extensions of colonial control (A3). It bore little resemblance to the localised and participatory models of governance maintained by Indigenous communities for millennia prior to colonial settlement (A4).

As Australia transitioned into the 20th century, local councils were established, designed to be subordinate to state governments. Governance at the time was characterised by limited citizen engagement, mirroring the sense of paternalism and top-down governance that is echoed in modern frustrations with limitations to political voice (A5). The long-standing distrust of government institutions evident today can be traced back to these origins, where the public had little influence on decision-making.

Post-War Era and Centralisation

Following World War II, urbanisation and industrialisation accelerated in Australia, leading to more centralised urban governance models focused on planning for growth and infrastructure development (A6). The 1950s to 1970s saw a shift towards technocratic governance, where expert planners and bureaucrats made decisions for urban development with little consultation from communities (A7). This era of modernist planning emphasised efficiency and growth, often at the expense of community involvement and local needs.

The civic discontent documented in the Civic Health of Australia report developed as part of Participatory Melbourne (A8), particularly the perception that governments serve vested interests over public welfare, can be linked to this historical legacy of urban governance focused on economic imperatives rather than community engagement. This top-down approach alienated many citizens from the processes shaping their cities.

A record low of 33% of people took great pride in Australia's culture and way of life, according to the Scanlon Institute's 2023 Social Cohesion Index

A1. Egger, S., & Schreckenberg, R. (2019) Urban Development in Colonial Australia. Australian Journal of Urban History, 45(2).

A2. Davison, G. (2001), *The Rise and Fall of the Colonial City*, Urban History Review, 30(1).

A3. Shaw, K. (2007), Colonial Power Structures and Australian Urban Governance. Australian Geographical Studies, 39(3).

A4. Graham, M. (2023). The law of obligation, aboriginal ethics: Australia becoming, Australia dreaming. Parrhesia.

A5. Wilson, S. G., Kowalski, E. V., & Demsar. V (2024). The civic health of Australia: A national portrait in 30 charts. Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

A6. Freestone, R. (2012), *Post-War Modernist Urban Planning in Australia*, Planning Perspectives, 27(1).

A7. Randolph, B., & Troy, L, (2013), Technocracy and Australian Urban Growth, Urban Policy and Research, 31(2).

Decentralisation and Participatory Governance in the Late 20th Century

In the 1980s and 1990s, urban governance in Australia began to embrace decentralisation and community participation (A9). The New Public Management (NPM) reforms introduced market-based mechanisms into governance, with local councils gaining more responsibility for service delivery (A10). However, while these reforms aimed to increase efficiency, they often reinforced a consumer-oriented model, where citizens were treated more like clients or customers rather than active participants in governance.

This transition reflects the concerns highlighted by New Citizenship Project co-founder Jon Alexander in his critique of consumerist governance, and his call for a shift towards active citizenship (A11). The Civic Health of Australia report's finding that citizens feel disempowered and lack political voice (A12) is partly a product of this consumer-based model, where participation is limited to narrow forms of engagement like service delivery feedback, rather than genuine decision-making.

Indigenous Governance and Marginalised Communities

Urban governance in Australia has historically marginalised Indigenous communities and other minority groups, often excluding them from urban planning and decision-making processes (A13). Indigenous communities have had their own governance structures based on relational, place-based, and communal decision-making—aligned with the approaches advocated by Tyson Yunkaporta (A14). Current-day declining social cohesion and a lack of inclusive dialogue (A15) highlights the value of reintegrating Indigenous knowledge and principles into urban governance, as these systems emphasise collective responsibility, long-term thinking, and community resilience.

Contemporary Governance Challenges

In recent decades, Australia's urban governance has struggled to balance community needs with economic pressures and population growth. The rise of urban sprawl, housing affordability crises, and increased social fragmentation have revealed gaps in governance models that prioritise economic development over community well-being (A16). Persisting civic disillusionment with government institutions suggests that contemporary governance still grapples with the legacy of centralised, growth-driven decision-making, leaving communities feeling disconnected.

A8. Wilson, S. G., Kowalski, E. V., & Demsar. V (2024). The civic health of Australia: A national portrait in 30 charts. Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

A9. Gleeson, B., & Low, N. (1996), Decentralization and Citizen Engagement in Australian Cities. Australian Planner, 33(2).

A10. Dollery, B., & Grant, B. (2010), New Public Management in Australian Local Governance. Public Administration Quarterly, 34(3).

A11. Bradley, S. Mahmoud, I.H. Arlati, A (2022). Integrated Collaborative Governance Approaches towards Urban Transformation: Experiences from the CLEVER Cities Project. Sustainability 14.

A12. Wilson, S. G., Kowalski, E. V., & Demsar. V (2024). The civic health of Australia: A national portrait in 30 charts. Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

A13. Howitt, R. (2014), Indigenous Urban Spaces and Governance in Australia, Australian Journal of Indigenous Studies, 56(4).

A14. Yunkaporta, T. (2019), Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World. Text Publishing.

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A16. Dodson, J., & Sipe, N. "Urban Sprawl and Australian Housing Affordability." Urban Policy and Research, 27(4), 2009.

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Any errors or omissions included in this report are RM's alone.

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