



# Creatively Engaging the Community in Urban Planning

## Critical Policy Brief

This briefing draws upon the expertise of RMIT creative arts and urban planning researchers to inform policy makers and the wider community on opportunities to enhance community involvement in urban planning through creative engagement.

**Extensive development in Melbourne's middle and outer suburbs is changing the living experience of communities. Conventional forms of consultation in urban planning do not adequately engage communities about what aspects of their suburbs and liveability are important to them, and have limited reach into under-represented groups. This policy brief signals ways in which creative practice can be used to increase community participation and "amplify voices" in the future development of our suburbs.**

### Key Messages

- ▶ While the importance of community consultation and engagement in urban planning is widely recognised, satisfaction with consultation and engagement processes remains low.
- ▶ Creative approaches to community engagement have proven effective in engaging under-represented groups, as well as contributing to community-building, active citizenship and improved individual health and well-being.
- ▶ Creative forms of community engagement such as creative workshops and interactive installations can directly inform planning processes and outcomes, as demonstrated through the United Kingdom's Connected Communities initiative, and locally, by the Knox City Council Section 32 project.
- ▶ Local Councils and other organisations seeking to actively engage the public in planning would benefit from guidance on creative methods and facilitation approaches appropriate to the outcomes they are seeking. This can be supported by development of a resource toolkit for the design and commissioning of creative approaches to community engagement.

### Overview

Community consultation and engagement are key quality indicators for Victorian local councils. While there are many positive examples of effective community engagement, community satisfaction with existing consultation and engagement practices remains low, particularly with regard to engagement on important local issues.<sup>1</sup> The Victorian Auditor-General's Office has noted that inadequate community engagement can undermine trust and alienate sections of the community, leading to a call for improved public participation practices in local government.<sup>2</sup> The Planning Institute of Australia has similarly advocated for improvements in community engagement, especially for the inclusion of hard to reach groups and more diverse approaches to participation.<sup>3</sup>

**"Victorian Neighbourhood and Community Renewal programs that have adopted arts-based engagement approaches have shown that it is possible to both re-engage communities that have been excluded from the political and social mainstream, and create inspirational public space outcomes."<sup>4</sup>**

Art and creative activities have proven to be effective in reaching traditionally under-represented groups such as young people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and low socio-economic groups.<sup>5</sup> While arts-based activities are a strength of Victorian local government community engagement approaches, these are less frequently used to inform planning directly.<sup>6</sup> Creative approaches to participation in planning can deliver benefits in terms of community-building,<sup>7</sup> active citizenship<sup>8</sup>, and improved individual health and well-being.<sup>9</sup> This briefing outlines how creative approaches can be used to stimulate community engagement in urban planning, to strengthen communities and deliver better planning outcomes.

### Creative approaches to community engagement in planning

Creative forms of engagement are more accessible than formal approaches to planning consultation such as community meetings and submissions. Participation in creative activities such as filmmaking, performance installations, photography, drawing and gaming can help overcome language, culture, gender and age barriers, opening up more diverse and inclusive perspectives on planning. For example, the experiential public art installation Section 32 designed by Clare McCracken and commissioned by Knox City Council has been used to engage the community on future suburban living.<sup>10</sup> In the United Kingdom, the *Connecting Communities* initiative supports university collaborations with local communities to better understand the changing nature of

## Section 32 Art Installation, Knox City Council

RMIT researcher Clare McCracken's urban public art project Section 32 transformed an ordinary suburban house into an immersive installation. Community members experienced impressions of daily life in an Australian suburb with new technologies, increased population and the effects of climate change. Community feedback from the experience has directly informed planning decisions, particularly related to sustainability.

community life and the role communities can play in addressing local urban issues.<sup>11</sup>

Creative methods of participation engage with personal experiences, sensory perceptions and cultural values, accessing other ways of knowing, thinking and doing. It is important that people have an active role in shaping the places in which they live, work and socialise, creating a sense of ownership and belonging. Creative approaches can be especially effective in place-making as they extend beyond the physical aspects of the urban environment to engage with people's 'felt' experiences of urban spaces.<sup>12</sup> In masterplanned estates, migrant lived experiences have been found to be quite different from the way developers promote and design for new communities.<sup>13</sup> There is value in gaining a more culturally diverse understanding of future residents to create more socially inclusive residential communities.

## Building skills, civic literacy and social connection

Beyond the benefits of bringing more diverse voices into community



planning, creative activities can stimulate the learning of new skills, increase civic literacy and build stronger community connections. Art activities increase creative and critical thinking, open mindedness, problem solving, project planning, analytical and communication skills.<sup>14</sup> Creative approaches to place-making in the United Kingdom have been found to increase confidence of underrepresented groups and build stronger links with the local community.<sup>15</sup> These benefits have also been demonstrated in a recent initiative in New Zealand, where residents of a newly developed housing estate were invited to share their journey to the estate through a story-telling event run by a local indigenous community, an approach that developed mutual understanding and strengthened social cohesion.<sup>16</sup>

## Delivering programs that support creative engagement

Victoria has a strong skills base from which to deliver creative community engagement programs, with many highly-trained creative facilitators. To support development and commissioning of creative approaches to community engagement, local councils, private sector developers and community engagement consultants would benefit from a resource similar to the United Kingdom's *Community Planning Toolkit*.<sup>17</sup> This toolkit outlines different creative methods and techniques, providing guidance to local councils on which are most appropriate to achieve intended outcomes and increase diversity in community engagement.

Bringing together the cultural services and planning areas of local councils in the delivery of creative community workshops would provide opportunities to more closely integrate community engagement, promoting inclusive practices in urban design and planning. This could be supported through collaboration across planning, cultural services and community services areas.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2015-16 Victorian Councils reported an average community satisfaction score of 55 out of 100 for community consultation and engagement (Victorian Auditor General's Office, Public Participation and Community Engagement: Local Government Sector, Victorian Government Printer, May 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Victorian Auditor General's Office, Public Participation and Community Engagement: Local Government Sector, Victorian Government Printer, May 2017, p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> Planning Institute of Australia (2011) Policy: Public Participation (06/11).

<sup>4</sup> Castanet (2017), The Arts Ripple Effect: Valuing the Arts in Communities, Arts Victoria and Australian Council for the Arts, p. 6.2.

<sup>5</sup> Matthews, H. (2001), 'Participatory Structures and the Youth of Today', Ethics, Place & Environment, Vol 29, No 3, pages 153-159; Bell, J., Vromen, A., & Collin, P. (2008), Rewriting the rules for youth participation: Inclusion and diversity in government and community decision making. National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.

<sup>6</sup> Common approaches to creative community engagement include artists working with communities to develop a permanent or temporary artwork, though creative methods are less commonly used to inform initial stages of planning decisions. For examples of creative arts led community engagement see: Multicultural Arts Victoria 2018 Annual Report; Arts Victoria, Vic Health and Castanet (2013), Making Art with Communities – A Work Guide; City of Melbourne Creative Strategy 2018-2028.

<sup>7</sup> Layard, A. et al (2012), Connected Communities: Creative Participation in Place-

making, AHRC Connected Communities.

<sup>8</sup> Chawla, L. (2002), 'Insight, creativity and thoughts on the environment: integrating children and youth into human settlement development', Environment and Urbanization, Vol 14, No. 2, 11-22.

<sup>9</sup> Deloitte (2007), The Small Arts Sector Research and Evaluation Report. Arts Victoria, Melbourne; Castanet (2017), The Arts Ripple Effect: Valuing the Arts in Communities, Arts Victoria and Australian Council for the Arts.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mccracken.com.au/#/section32/>

<sup>11</sup> Symons, J. (2017), 'We're not hard-to-reach, they are!' Integrating local priorities in urban research in Northern England: An experimental method', The Sociological Review, 66(1), pp. 207-223; Facer, K. and Enright, B. (2016), Creating Living Knowledge, Bristol: University of Bristol/AHRC Connected Communities.

<sup>12</sup> Layard, A. et al (2012), Connected Communities: Creative Participation in Place-making, AHRC Connected Communities.

<sup>13</sup> Roggenbuck, C. (2019), 'Diverse Lived Experiences of Community in Masterplanned Estates: A Case Study of Filipino and Indian Migrants in Wyndham', Urban Policy and Research, 1-14.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nagc.org/blog/developing-creative-thinking-skills-through-art-0>

<sup>15</sup> Layard, A. et al (2012), Connected Communities: Creative Participation in Place-making, AHRC Connected Communities.

<sup>16</sup> Menzies, D. and Paul, J. (2019), Urban Regeneration and Social Cohesion. State of Australian Cities Conference, Perth, 2-5 December 2019.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/>