Healthier Democracies Case Study: Melbourne, Australia

FUTURE MELBOURNE'S STRATEGIC PLANNING

by Azucena Morán

Future Melbourne is a participatory process that aimed to draft 10-year strategic plans and visions to direct policymaking processes in the city. The first initiative, Future Melbourne 2008, consisted of a wide range of spaces for engagement and consultation in which citizens were able to set the agenda and comment on a 10-year plan. This plan was updated in 2016 to address "a new suite of economic, social, environmental and demographic changes," including rapid population growth and a significant change to the city's commuter-adjusted population.[1] The latter process combined deliberative and participatory methodologies—making lay citizens an active part of the decision-making and drafting processes.
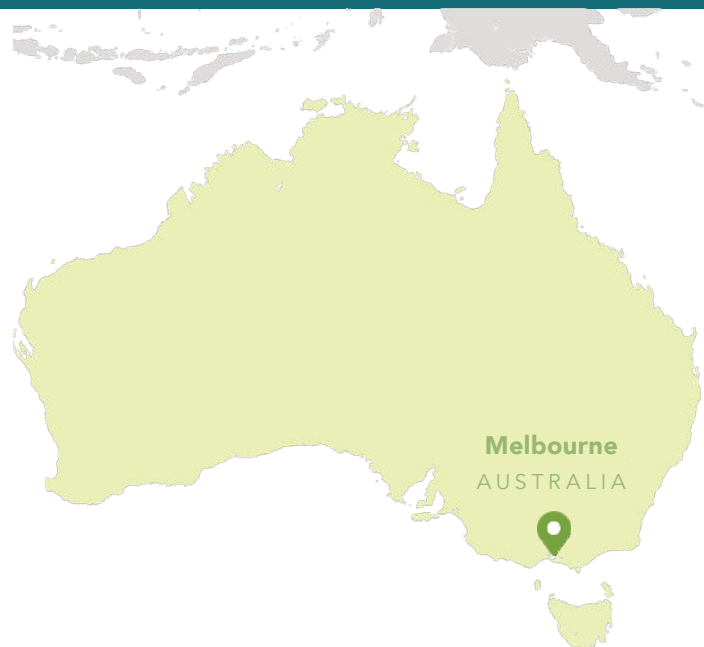
Melbourne
AUSTRALIA

PUBLIC AGENDA

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

The local government aimed to include the civil society, the private sector, as well as visitors (e.g., commuters, students) in collaboratively imagining, consulting and reviewing the Future Melbourne plans.[2] Most Future Melbourne activities used self-selection strategies to gather participants. These engagement and participatory spaces included public forums, World Cafés, online consultation platforms and conferences.

Both the 2008 and 2016 Future Melbourne initiatives were led and funded by the City of Melbourne. The design, implementation and assessment of the participatory processes were done in partnership with other institutions and groups.[3] Collaborators included teams in academia, foundations and regional institutions, as well as consultants focused on deliberative and participatory democracy.

Several strategies were set in place to engage lay citizens in these open processes and increase resonance within the city of Melbourne. They comprised face-to-face and targeted activities to connect communities and established networks to the process. For example, setting up a network of ambassadors, vox pops (i.e., video snapshots of public opinion) and conversation spaces during traffic jams.[4]

Future Melbourne also aimed to target specific audiences, so the city designed closed and invited spaces for participation, such as stakeholder workshops or Future Labs. In 2016, the process incorporated randomization as a selection strategy to implement a Citizens' Jury. The municipality sent 7,000 invitations citywide and randomly chose citizens using corrective measures, so the sample could reflect the city's demographics in terms of gender, age and type of employment.[5]

Fast Facts

AUSTRALIA
MELBOURNE

POPULATION
183,756

GRP
$97 billion

GEOGRAPHICAL AREA
23.4 mi²

In this case study you'll find great examples of:

STRUCTURES   **COMMITMENTS**

For more information, see the PGI User Guide, Glossary and Lessons Learned at publicagenda.org/healthier-democracies.

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[2] Lyndal Mackintosh (former Community Engagement Advisor, City of Melbourne), interviewed by the author, June 25, 2021.

[3] Georgie Meyer (Leader Community Engagement and Partnerships at City of Melbourne), interviewed by the author, August 4, 2021.

[4] Mackintosh, interview.

[5] City of Melbourne, "Future Melbourne 2026 Plan," last accessed February 2, 2022, https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/future-melbourne-2026-plan.pdf.

SYSTEMS & PROCESSES

Future Melbourne 2008

Future Melbourne 2008 was designed in collaboration with key organizations and institutions on the ground, as well as private consultants.[6] The goal was to collaboratively draft a 10-year plan and vision for the future of the city. The initiative created multiple online and in-person spaces for participation. Larger engagement spaces included public forums, seminars and conferences focused on specific policy issues, such as culture and arts or sustainability. They were paired with participatory spaces such as World Cafés, roundtable discussions, debates and stakeholder workshops where participants could share knowledge and discuss solutions in horizontal settings.

Online spaces for discussion and participation were centralized in an "eVillage Forum." This platform allowed participants to comment, discuss and send ideas (in text or image formats). Surveys and consultation spaces also allowed the new 10-year plan to be informed by the different demographics, challenges and visions for the future of the city.

The 10-year plan was developed in five different phases:[7]

The first phase engaged citizens in identifying values and issues to guide the governance of the city over the next 25 years. Over four months, the City of Melbourne set up invited and open spaces to deliberate a vision for the city's future.

The second phase consisted of online and in-person spaces to deliberate options and different futures for the City of Melbourne based on the ideas gathered in the first phase of the process. Deliberations around possible futures were divided into 11 policy areas, referred to as "talking points": business, culture, tourism, environmental sustainability, international cooperation, knowledge, people-centered urbanism, mobility, public space, community services and sport.

The third phase evaluated and voted upon a strategy and vision for the city's preferred futures. After assessing the 11 policy areas discussed during the previous phase, participants selected five goals to guide the future of the city: a City for People, a Prosperous City, an Eco-City, a Connected City, a Knowledge City, and a Bold and Inspirational City.

The fourth phase aimed to connect the results of the third phase to the strategies needed to achieve these visions for the future. The draft of the Future Melbourne plan was completed by the City of Melbourne and went through a one-month public consultation process in which citizens could edit, discuss and comment on the draft.

The fifth phase consisted of the final approval of the 10-year plan by the City Council.

This process effectively allowed citizens to set the goals that guided the municipality in drafting the Future Melbourne plan. In addition to engaging citizens in the agenda-setting phase, the local government also involved them in assessing the decisions made. The plan was published on a wiki page where citizens could "edit, co-write and discuss elements of the final draft."[8] Despite the large scope of the process, the multiple spaces convened and its commitment to participation, Future Melbourne 2008 remained largely consultative in nature (i.e., only asking communities for feedback) and largely failed to engage communities in the actual decision-making and drafting of the plan.[9]

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[6] City of Melbourne, "Future Melbourne Program 2008," last accessed February 2, 2022, https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/about-council/committees-meetings/meeting-archive/MeetingAgendaItemAttachments/196/3000/C3_61_20071218.pdf.

[7] City of Melbourne. "Future Melbourne – Considering the Options. Possible futures for Melbourne in 2020 and Beyond," 2008.

[8] Rhea Rebello, "Government to Governance: The Case of Future Melbourne," Foundation of Public Policy, 2020.

[9] Mackintosh, interview.

Future Melbourne 2016

STRUCTURES

The second Future Melbourne process was set up with the aim of updating the 2008 plan. Citizens gathered to deliberate new challenges and opportunities the city faced in the coming decade. The plan was developed in three phases over a five-month time span.[10]

The first phase consisted of a series of open spaces for engagement, both online and in person, and a survey. Future Melbourne gathered citizens and communities to brainstorm ideas for the future of the city.[11]

Based on the results of the survey and the ideas submitted during public events and through the online platform, the second phase included commenting and suggesting changes to the original 2008 plan. Participants could comment on the plan, assess other people's ideas (via thumbs up or thumbs down buttons), as well as debate proposals. The ideas were later coded using qualitative data analysis software in order to summarize the results of this phase.[12]

The third phase was a review by the Citizens' Jury. Fifty-two participants were gathered to evaluate the results of the first two phases and deliberate on the changes needed in the Future Melbourne 2016 plan.[13] The Citizens' Jury deliberated both online (six weeks) and in-person (3 ½ days). The results of the jury were then sent to Future Melbourne's network of ambassadors for comments and final editing of the document.

The Future Melbourne process held in 2016 used not only engagement and participatory methods, but also deliberative methodologies. Engagement and participatory spaces aimed to inform communities of the City of Melbourne about specific issues and policy-oriented questions for the future. These included forums, seminars and face-to-face workshops. Participants could also comment and propose ideas for the future of the city through an interactive platform (i.e., the Future Melbourne website) or respond to surveys delivered by the municipality. The final phase of the Future Melbourne 2016 process gathered all of the ideas shared during engagement and participatory spaces and set a Citizens' Jury of randomly selected citizens to deliberate, select and develop these ideas for an updated 10-year plan.

OUTCOMES

The 2016 process expanded the aims of Future Melbourne 2008. Future Melbourne 2008 focused on urban, cultural, educational and ecological policies, as well as mobility and prosperity in the city. The 2016 process also embedded processes for deliberation and transformation in the 2016–2026 City plan. Moreover, it highlighted the importance of addressing Melbourne's history of colonialism and the issues of indigenous rights in the city.

The 2016 process aimed to correct the largely consultative nature of the 2008 plan by setting up a deliberative space in parallel to multiple participatory and engagement efforts. The participatory spaces designed for phases one and two of the process gathered over 4,000 participants, both online and through 30 in-person activities. Fifty-two people were then randomly selected to deliberate as part of a Citizens' Jury.

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[10] Global Research, "Bringing Your Ideas Together," Christchurch: 2016, last accessed February 2, 2022, https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/sitecollectiondocuments/bringing-your-ideas-together-global-research.doc.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

TABLE 1. COMPARISON BETWEEN FUTURE MELBOURNE 2008 AND 2026 VISION AND GOALS.

	Future Melbourne 2008	Future Melbourne 2026
VISION	A bold, inspirational and sustainable city	In 2026, Melbourne will be sustainable, inventive, inclusive, vibrant and flourishing
GOALS	1. A city for people 2. A creative city 3. A prosperous city 4. A city of knowledge 5. An eco-city 6. A connected city	1. A city that cares for its environment 2. A city for people 3. A creative city 4. A prosperous city 5. A knowledge city 6. A connected city 7. A deliberative city 8. A city managing change 9. A city with an Aboriginal focus

Source: Table adapted from Maria Katsonis, "Designing Effective Public Engagement: The Case Study of Future Melbourne 2026," *Policy Design and Practice* 2, no. 2 (2019): 220.

The influence of these processes, deemed best practices of participation in the region,[14] is reflected in the way in which participatory democracy was embedded and referred to at the local level after the first Future Melbourne experience in 2008. This is evidenced in the new Local Government Act, which states that "every council needs to embed community engagement within decision-making processes,"[15] as well as the collaborative process to draft the Community Engagement Policy 2021.[16]

LESSONS

COMMITMENTS

Deeper transformations within the local administration moved politicians and public officials to think about the importance of delimiting expectations and setting political commitments, as well as dedicating staff and budget to participatory and deliberative processes.[17] Future Melbourne allowed the government and local partners to engage critically with new challenges of deliberative democracy, mainly, the dualism between scalability and affordability.[18] These new expectations and challenges set a new paradigm for the future of participatory democracy in the region.

This new paradigm combines elements from engagement practices with deliberative and participatory methodologies. It translates "many concepts from the deliberative and participatory democracy literature into

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[14] Katsonis, "Designing," 220–222.

[15] Meyer, interview.

[16] Global Research, "Community Engagement Policy," Christchurch: 2021, last accessed January 23, 2022, https://hdp-au-prod-app-com-participate-files.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/1616/2978/9989/Community_Engagement_Policy_-_Consultation_Report_Full.pdf.

[17] Cathy Oke (former Deputy Chair of Future Melbourne Environment Committee, City of Melbourne), interviewed by the author, June 21, 2021.

[18] Meyer, interview.

principles that are accessible to communities."[19] In doing so, it sets processes with a wide range of incentives, time-scales and levels of commitment that respond to the different needs of the population.

The ability of the local governments to replicate far-reaching participatory processes such as Future Melbourne on a regular basis is limited (e.g., due to budget constraints). However, holding sizable processes periodically allows leaps in deep transformation within the government and the local community. Generating smaller spaces of participation and institutionalized forms of deliberation can create opportunities for sustainable engagement.

> **Staying away from purist approaches to participation allows governments to create processes that reflect the needs of their communities and the financial constraints of their public budget, sharing with governmental staff the importance of engagement processes.**
>
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> ***Leader Community Engagement***
> ***and Partnerships, City of Melbourne***

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IMAGE CREDIT: Map adapted from Free Vector Maps.

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[19] Meyer, interview.