



Urban Climate Action and Planetary Possibilities



Imagining a hopeful future isn't naïve – it's radical.ⁱ

The opening to the 'Wild Hope – Conversations for a Planetary Commons' Exhibition as part of the inaugural Now or Never Festival featured Meerreeng Karweeyn – Earth Dance (2010,2023), by Vicki Couzens, a Keeray Woorroong Gunditjmarra Elder, Indigenous languages advocate and senior research scholar, artist and possum-skin-cloak maker – which emphasises First Peoples belonging to Land and Indigenous connections to Country. Through creative practices, she explores the inextricable connection of First Peoples ancestral obligations to the stewardship of Country – moornong meerreeng (Sky Country), meerteeyt meerreeng (Sea Country) ba meerreeng meerreeng (Earth Country).ⁱⁱ

This work is a powerful reminder that Indigenous leadership and knowledges are vital in a climate and biodiversity crisis.

It is an invitation to listen deeply, to learn from each other, and to take collective action to address climate change, recognising that responsibility, care and sovereignty matter.

This requires an enormous shift – not just towards electrification and renewable energy (although these are important) – but in **ways of working that centre living systems** in cities through reparative justice and urban equity.

Protecting vulnerable communities (human and non-human), repairing or making reparations for past harms, and ensuring actions address the needs of those who most marginalised are critical. Urban communities need new and old stories to reimagine the conditions for planetary survival with equity, dignity and respect for diversity.

Central to this are practices of deep listening and learning – from Indigenous leadership and knowledge-systems, and through diverse creative practices of shared storytelling and inquiry. There

is an important role here for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences – to captivate and engage the senses, to raise and respond to critical questions, to inspire empathy, and encourage planetary learning and action in cities and urban bioregions.

The Possibilities of the Planetary

To act on climate change, we need new civic frameworks — not just technical solutions but transformative, place-based and regenerative learning practices.

A planetary civics agenda envisages a world where innovative new civic alliances and ways of working in solidarity with those most impacted by climate change are the catalysts for the radical change that is needed to address degenerative cities and regions. Thinking through a planetary frame connects place-based action with the protection and repair of Earth's living systems by addressing four key challenges:

1 Understanding cascading climate risk and entanglement

By recognising the deep interdependence of ecological, social, technological, and economic systems operating at a planetary scale including the ongoing effects of colonisation.

2 Reinventing urban governance

By embracing novel forms of sovereignty and stewardship that move beyond singular ownership toward layered, mutual obligations for people and planet in allyship with First Nations and traditional custodians.

3 Activating place-based community leverage

By harnessing the potential of cities grounded in Indigenous leadership and culture, shaped by diverse knowledges, infrastructures and vital ecosystems and bioregions.

4 Redefining civic participation through stewardship

By reimagining climate actionism, not just as protest or engagement, but as radical civic interventions in the face of planetary-scale harm.ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite numerous policies and initiatives promoting sustainable development, society has largely failed to resolve the urban paradox at the heart of these challenges: that human consumption and economic growth continue to push cities beyond the Earth's planetary boundaries, undermining the very systems that sustain life. This requires a transformative shift from degenerative to regenerative urban policies and practices.

Placing *planetary and community stewardship*—caring for people, places, and living systems — at the centre of climate action is an opportunity for more regenerative futures.

Imagining a hopeful future isn't naïve, it's radical. The time for climate action is now.

Steele, W. (2025). "Urban Climate Action and Planetary Possibilities." *Thought Leadership Series Compendium*, Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University, 2025.

- i Hopkins, R (2025) *How to fall in love with the future: A time travellers guide to changing the world*, Chelsea Green Publishing
- ii Couzens, V (2010, 2023) *Meerreeng Karweeyn—Earth Dance* Wild Hope Exhibition, Now or Never Festival, City of Melbourne, RMIT Design Gallery
- iii See Planetary Civics Inquiry at <https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/schools-colleges/college-of-design-and-social-context/research/planetary-civics-inquiry> / <https://www.planetarycivics.net/> and Dark Matter Labs – <https://darkmatterlabs.org/feed/planetary-civics-inquiry>

