Connecting people and ideas for transformative urban futures

Centre for Urban Research

RMIT UNIVERSITY

Centre for
Urban Research

Edited by Anahita Gangwani

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nation on whose unceded lands we conduct our research, teaching, and service. We pay respects to Ancestors and Elders past and present who have always been caring for Country. We honour the work of emerging leaders standing strong for Country. We pay our respects to Country, the lifeworld that sustains us all.

Our research, education, and service are already in a relationship with Country and the people of Country, here and in all the places we undertake our business. As mostly non-Indigenous people at CUR, we acknowledge our obligation in this relationship: to uphold the ngarn-ga (understanding) of Bundjil and practice respect for community and culture in all that we do. Though there is much we still need to learn, especially about ourselves, we affirm our dhumbali (commitment) to helping create shared futures grounded in recognition of First Peoples sovereignty.

Centre for Urban Research

The Centre for Urban Research is a dynamic hub of interdisciplinary research focused on the social, ecological and political challenges of urbanisation in the 21st century. Through our research, we aim to contribute new insights that address real-world problems while being critical in orientation and collaborative in how we create and share knowledge.

In an era of climate crisis, housing precarity and deepening spatial inequality, the Centre for Urban Research is driven by a commitment to justice. We believe that research inquiry should strive to understand the underlying systems that create crises, precarity and inequality and contribute positively and creatively toward their resolution. Our research and education practices strive to foreground the sovereignty of First Peoples and our underlying responsibility to this in our research practice.

We understand cities not simply as engines of economic activity or an aggregation of population and buildings, but as complex socio-ecological systems shaped by power, history and struggle.

In our research, we seek to challenge and refuse simplistic narratives of progress and growth, instead approaching urbanisation as a contested process where histories of colonisation, racial capitalism, gendered labour and environmental harm are inscribed and reproduced. The underpinning questions that drive our inquiry are: what is the urban, and who gets to define it? Whose knowledge is legitimised and who is silenced? How can we imagine urban futures that are regenerative, reparative and emancipatory?

We believe strongly in public scholarship – that research created in universities should be shared with everyone to inspire different ways of thinking about and acting in the world. This matters so much to us, that we began this Thought Leadership series, both to demonstrate our commitment to sharing our work with a wider audience and as one example of what public scholarship might be. This compendium brings together diverse voices from right across the Centre to share our insights about the questions we think really matter right now and that will shape urban life in years to come.

Each piece in the compendium reflects a different approach. Some offer conceptual provocations, others present more concrete insights on specific challenges. All are grounded in our decades of research expertise derived from fieldwork,

community engagement and stakeholder collaboration. Together, they demonstrate the value of interdisciplinary place-based scholarship and the importance of thinking about cities not just as physical spaces but as constellations of meaning, memory and struggle.

Bringing the pieces together has also been a collective practice. We identified and discussed topics, together deciding on the most compelling ideas. Each author wrote in their own style and we met several times as an authorship group to provide feedback. The choice to keep the diversity of approaches reflected in each piece is intentional.

Just and reparative urban futures will require diverse ways of knowing, being and doing.

The pieces intentionally use quotes from First Peoples who have shaped our thinking and we have sought conversation with each knowledge holder to demonstrate our respect for their voice and leadership on these critical issues. This process has both practiced and affirmed our Centre commitment to the innate value of collective and reciprocal knowledge creation.

The topics covered in this Thought Leadership compendium are drawn from the three key themes that organise the Centre for Urban Research's work.

Our hope is that these contributions are a provocation, a conversation starter.

We certainly don't have all the answers, but one thing we know for sure is the urgent need to think differently about what cities are, and what urbanisation means in the context of intersecting crises and an increasingly contested future. As a committed collective of researchers, curious about why things are the way they are and what we might do to transform the conditions of urban life toward justice and liberation, the pieces in this collection seek to share our thinking about that goal.

We invite readers to engage with this compendium as provocations to think critically and creatively about urban life. Whether you are a student, scholar, practitioner, policymaker, activist or resident, we hope this collection sparks dialogue, inspires action and deepens your appreciation of the urban as a site of both challenge and possibility.

Centre for Urban Research Themes

Regenerative Environments and Climate Action

Planning and Transport for Healthy Cities

Geographies of Land, Home and Place

Regenerative Environments and Climate Action

What does it take to build cities that work with — not against — our planet? This theme investigates how urban life intersects with climate action, ecological processes and environmental justice. Researchers explore urgent issues including climate justice, biodiversity, urban greening, water and oceans, disaster resilience, food systems, waste and urban heat. At its heart is a commitment to rethinking cities as more-than-human environments — places where regeneration, justice and resilience go hand in hand.

Geographies of Land, Home and Place

Where we live, how we are housed, and the places we belong all shape our lives. This theme brings together expertise in geography to understand land systems, housing, and the social and cultural geographies of inclusion and belonging. Researchers examine space, place, temporality and human–environment relations across local, national and global scales — from urban policy and governance to displacement, dispossession and socio-ecological change. With focus areas including housing, land, urban ecologies, homelessness, cultural identity and inclusion, this work takes a broad view of the 'urban,' uncovering the processes and relationships across time and place that shape our everyday lives.
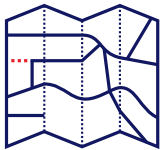
Planning and Transport for Healthy Cities

How can the way we plan and move through cities create healthier, fairer and more sustainable futures? This theme explores the intersection of urban planning, transport and design to understand how governance, infrastructure and technology shape everyday life. From mobility and critical infrastructure to health, wellbeing and urban design, researchers work across disciplines to reimagine cities that are inclusive, liveable and resilient.

By Benjamin Cooke and Libby Porter

What is Land?

Talk of land is everywhere, so commonplace that the term is often used without much thought. The availability of land, its use, and conflict about who has rights to it are present in everything from housing to agriculture, from infrastructure to geopolitical conflict.

But what is land, really, and how does the way we think about it shape our lives? We all live on land – our towns and cities, basic services and the food we eat are all dependent on it.

Major urban challenges like housing stress, declining biodiversity, pollution, income inequality, racism and rising global conflict all revolve around land. How we use, distribute, exchange, extract from or protect land says a lot about our collective values. What we prioritise about land ripples through all aspects of our lives.

First Peoples in Australia teach us that the relationship to land is an interconnected lifeworld from soil to sky, encompassing water, creatures, materials, energy, and spirit. This is why the term 'Country', used and shared by First Peoples, is so important because it shows that everything is connected and always dynamic.

> *'Land is life, land gives life, and land sustains life. Land is us and we are land. Land is central to what we call Country... Country is a living entity with memory and consciousness. Our connection to Country flows from the past and influences the future. Our connection to Country gives us our identity, the Country is us, and we are Country.'*
>
> *Paul Paton (Gunnai, Monaro, Gunditjmara) CEO of the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations (FTVOC), Yoorrook Justice Commission.*

Colonisation has tried to break and obscure this relationship to Country. Instead, land has come to be seen as simply a resource, something we extract from or use. When land is not regarded as useful it is often classified as vacant or empty – either for some other use, or a 'wasteland' that is already used up. Property and resource extraction have flattened and reframed our understanding of land, and this powerful reconceptualising of land as a resource now shapes our laws and social norms, and our interactions and relationships with land.

What are the implications of treating land as a resource?

Turning land into a resource is a deliberate process – as a society, we choose to adopt this narrow view of land and uphold it through law, policy and social norms. The most powerful tool for turning land into a resource commodity is private property. Fences and property titles create enforceable (visible and invisible) boundaries. Private property titles mean that an owner can sell, rent or exchange land to extract profit. Whether we are owners or tenants, this relationship to land impacts us directly.

Land treated as a resource has generated prosperity for some, but always at the expense of and burden to others.

Most importantly, this view of land limits our relationship to place and to each other.

Land understood only as a resource limits the way we think about land. Instead of a dynamic and interconnected basis of life, land becomes bound parcels, individual pieces of the landscape divided by those boundaries and fragmenting our social relationships. But that happens on one parcel of land impacts other people and creatures on other parcels of land. None of us are islands, but the compartmentalisation of land often makes us behave as if that is the case. This can prevent us from seeing our responsibilities to place beyond the boundaries we have produced, limiting our ability to act holistically and as social collectives whose flourishing is interconnected.

Land is more than a resource

Somewhere deep inside we all know that land is not only a resource.

We grow to love and cherish places that are part of our everyday lives, and there are times when we see places as more than land.

During times of crisis like bushfire or flood, the dominant relationship to land is disrupted by forces bigger than ourselves. Property rights and boundaries become secondary, at least for a moment, to helping each other.

Noticing that the dominant way of relating to land is causing us harm by narrowing our social and ecological relationships should give us pause. First Peoples teach that to be cared for by Country means caring for Country and each other – we have a responsibility to place, beyond taking from land, generating wealth or other benefits from use. To be invited to engage with the notion of Country is to reconsider our relationship to land, and work toward a transformative relationship that is grounded in respect and reciprocity.

By Priya Kunjan and David Kelly

Unpacking 'housing crisis'

Housing insecurity has become such a routine topic of political discourse and everyday life in Australia that we often take for granted what it means to declare a 'housing crisis.'

Indeed, in the lead up to the 2025 federal election, both major parties framed the 'housing crisis' as a key policy priority. Over the past decade in Victoria, we have seen a jumble of initiatives introduced with the intent of 'fixing' the housing crisis. However, they have so far been categorically incapable of achieving this goal.

But what exactly are we talking about when we talk about a 'housing crisis'?

In general terms, we can think of the term 'housing crisis' as referring to a prolonged state of housing instability marked by unaffordability, insecurity, and inadequate living conditions. These conditions are driven by the remaking of housing as an asset under capitalism, worsened by policies that prioritise markets over welfare. Experiences of housing crisis are unevenly distributed, and, depending on who you are, your experience of housing crisis may be considered more or less significant by political decision-makers.

This is primarily because the existence of crisis is not a bug in our housing system, it is a feature.

In Australia, any discussion of a housing crisis should recognise the role of colonisation in transforming First Nations land into alienable property. This original dispossession is not an incidental part of Australia's housing history; it is foundational to our system of property law. The Australian property – and therefore, housing – system was formed through colonial processes of valuing, transacting and (re)developing stolen land. It is the physical and conceptual ground from which housing must be understood. This points to the intrinsic injustice of property in Australia, an injustice that is often hidden amidst the immediate effects of widespread and acute housing stress. We need to consider these injustices as related rather than separate – a both/and situation.

The accumulation of landed property forms the basis of Australian housing policy. Cemented in Menzies' ideal of the quarter-acre block, this rationale shaped policy choices and created a housing system geared towards homeownership. Despite a brief post war flurry of public housing construction, Australian economic policy over the last 40 years has trended towards promoting asset-based welfare. The promotion of housing as a stable and safe asset has intensified its treatment as an intergenerational investment. Australia's limited and shrinking social safety net has deepened inequalities in the housing system, where homeownership is increasingly dependent on access to intergenerational wealth. This has led to fragmented and often contradictory narratives about what the housing crisis is and how it should be addressed.

In recent years, we have seen a patchwork of initiatives in Victoria that are supposedly aimed at fixing the housing crisis. However, these efforts often lead to the dismantling of current social protections, meagre as they are. This has occurred most notably in the case of Victoria's divestment from and managed decline of public housing. While community housing has expanded both in the state and nationally, this has occurred at the direct cost of public housing, signaling a turn toward corporate landlordism. With rents continuing to rise in the private market, a net loss of rent-regulated public housing stock, and the entry of financial capital into the social housing space, marginalised communities and individuals are increasingly excluded and displaced within our housing system.

Australia's response to housing crisis remains wedded to technocratic and market-led approaches. Policy attempts to reconcile urban sprawl, sustainability, and housing stress are bound to fail when the crisis is framed as simply one of supply or inefficiency in planning regulations. Further, the breadth of experiences of housing stress is vast, ranging from homelessness to the anxiety of uncertain future ownership.

Despite the drivers of the housing crisis being rooted in our system of property and successive economic and social welfare policy decisions, political discourse routinely targets planning laws, housing activism, and First Nations land justice claims as standing in the way of progress.

If the housing crisis is a systemic issue, then so are the incentives upholding what produces it. Policy responses are inadequate not because of poor design, but because of the interests they serve. A reliance on market logic and silver bullet fixes distracts from the political and economic architecture that propel the crisis. And yet, alternative visions persist. From First Nations movements to tenant unions and public housing advocacy campaigns, there are grounded, collective responses that challenge the terms of dispossession and affirm housing as a right.

By Sarah Robertson

Hot cities: Attending with care to life with increased heat

We are living with increased heat. Australia has already experienced 1.5 degrees of warming since 1910. Globally, 2024 was the hottest year on record.

In cities, urban heat islands compound and extend the effects of extreme and severe summer heat, causing much more than sleepless nights. Warped train lines, electricity systems pushed to the limit, and heat-related physical and mental ill-health; air thick with pollutants from wildfires and warnings for those at risk to stay indoors. These are here and now, not dystopian futures.

Living with increased heat requires multiple and collaborative approaches.

Beyond substantially reducing – better yet, stopping – greenhouse gas emissions, heat adaptation demands careful responses that attend to and support the care work of people, plants and animals, and infrastructures that sustain, and can help regenerate life in cities and regions.

The scalar challenges of cool housing and neighbourhoods

For many, our homes and neighbourhoods are not designed for climate, let alone the changing one we are experiencing.

Housing in Australia lags similar nations overseas when it comes to its thermal quality. Households are increasingly turning to air-conditioning to keep cool but installing these systems in leaky and uninsulated homes is a band-aid solution. We need more substantial energy and thermal upgrades of homes to respond to equity, health and carbon abatement challenges.

Heat, however, flows through urban fabrics. This means we must look holistically beyond housing to the streets and neighbourhoods where we dwell, and the systems that shape this dwelling. Such governance and decision-making must be multi-scalar, collaborative and proactive. It means targeted heat-health messaging alongside urban greening. It means cooler precincts and cool spaces alongside the adapted design of primary health and service delivery like food provision, maternal and child health, and education.

Heat will increasingly shape urban mobilities

Cities and their inhabitants are constantly in motion. There is the movement of people walking, driving, or taking trams or trains to work, school pickup in the hot afternoon sun, or visiting friends and loved ones. There is the slithering and pattering of animals and plants; the creep of built infrastructures encroaching on green space.

Extreme heat shapes these mobilities with significant and wide-ranging social and economic implications, particularly when infrastructures break down or pathways are too hot or dangerous to travel.

Social connection is a key factor in how people and communities more vulnerable to heat cope, or not.

It is not only that at-risk people can become isolated in hot homes, but that the movement of loved ones and those providing key services during heat events may also be impacted.

Heat and urban rhythms

Time is also important when it comes to governing life with increased heat. Leaving aside the importance of stopping current and future carbon emissions, time matters at the everyday level. Urban heat islands, where heat is absorbed by concrete and other hard surfaces, exacerbate heat's ill-effects, extending hot days into hot nights.

Meanwhile, daily routines and schedules shape peaks in electricity demand. School hours, calendars and work commitments shape the routines of families despite the heat.

In the heat, bodies need to slow down. But essential workers and services must continue. 'Essential' is a broad term here, capturing those in health care, education, food systems, critical infrastructure, and those caring for family and friends. Increased heat requires we attend to the challenges of maintaining and delivering this essential care work, despite the weather.

Increased heat demands careful work in urban and regional places to shape adaptation responses to an overheated and changing climate. This is not only about collaboratively and proactively designing and making cooler environments, but designing systems to ensure those most at risk are not left worse off.

By Thami Croeser

Urban greening is popular – but that doesn't mean it's on track

You've likely heard about urban greening as something cities should do more of. Whether it's for heat, flooding, human health, or just making things beautiful, there are lots of reasons we should have more trees, parks and nature in our cities.

Firstly, it's an issue of equity. People on lower incomes often have to live in hotter, greyer neighbourhoods. The parks are lower quality and there's much less shade; a wealthy landowner of an inner-eastern suburb might have around three to five times more shade around their home than a tenant in Melbourne's west.

More nature, and less paving, also makes a lot of sense as our climate gets tougher.

If you cover a large portion of the land in materials that soak up heat – things like asphalt and concrete – then you'll eventually have a city that gets hot, and stays hot, whenever the weather is warm. During heatwaves, this is deadly. The same goes for rain: asphalt all the land that normally soaks up rainwater, and you create a landscape that generates massive amounts of runoff when it rains, with none of the normal natural filtering of water through soil and vegetation before it gets to the river. Flooding, and a dirty brown unswimmable river, are inevitable results.

There's an abundance of research showing that we're physically and mentally healthier when there's enough nature around us. We also have a chance to bring native species back into our communities – our kids deserve to live in cities that have more living things than just rats, seagulls and pigeons. Critically, for those of us in colonised places, the urban fabric was often built to obscure or replace the characteristics and culture of the land. Showing residents the real trees, shrubs, insects, birds and animals that belong to the land they're living on is part of rebuilding our understanding of where our cities truly are in the world.

And then, there's also just ... beauty. Enjoying a walk with a view like this shouldn't be a rarity.

Why we aren't there yet?

In urbanised areas around the world, reversing the level of risk from flooding and heat will require massive amounts of de-paving and tree planting.

In central Melbourne, we'll need almost 90 cricket ovals (180ha) worth of new shade, and even more asphalt removed, within the next 10–15 years to avoid severe climate risks.

With heatwaves and downpours both set to become more intense as our climate changes, we don't have a lot of time to get this work done, and progress to date has been slow. This is despite an abundance of quality evidence in favour of urban greening, which has now translated into bold local and state strategies that call for more canopy cover and green space in cities.

Unfortunately, targets and evidence don't plant trees. Delivering adequate levels of nature to urban residents will require a major program of greening investments. This 'implementation gap' is where we aren't walking the talk just yet. The budgets our cash-strapped municipalities can allocate to greening remain very small – a tiny fraction of what we spend on highways.

Money isn't the only currency that matters in this arena: cities also need to be willing to allocate space. To do this, cities must either buy up expensive privately-owned land, or green-up public land that's being used for other things.

Buying a property to make a new park can occasionally be effective, but the big change will come when we're able to take public land that's already in use and convert it to green space, in a systematic way, at scale.

Changing land use is politically difficult, particularly because most of the public land in our cities is in streets, and it's currently allocated to cars. Politicians and bureaucrats are scared to be seen to make parking more difficult, or traffic slower, regardless of how generous a street might be to vehicles. This partly explains why councils embrace politically safe tactics, like making upgrades to existing green spaces, or announcing a single showy 'flagship' project, or running feel-good community events. While worthwhile, these actions are also a way to offer an impression of progress while avoiding the difficult, contested work of large-scale land use change.

Delivering urban greening at a scale that actually protects us from heatwaves and flooding is going to need a new approach.

This isn't just about urgent climate risks; rapid, large-scale delivery is key to preventing gentrification. Delivering a lot of new trees and parks, quickly, simply and without fanfare, means that access to nature becomes normal, rather than a reason to raise the rent.

It's crucial that we push forward with reforms, (State) funding and a decided step away from petty local politics if we hope to realise the many benefits of nature in our cities.

By Annette Kroen, Lucy Gunn and Andrew Butt

New suburbs on the urban fringe – more than just housing!
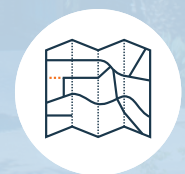
Most of us agree that Australia needs to build a lot more homes – and soon. This need is acknowledged in Australia's National Housing Accord – an agreement between all levels of government, investors and the construction sector – with a target of building 1.2 million new homes over 5 years from mid-2024.

Equally, sustainable urban growth and housing affordability are primary goals of the National Urban Policy. However, new suburbs also need jobs, schools, social services, meeting places, public open space and shops to be truly liveable.

We need to plan for and build complete communities, not only new homes.

Lagging infrastructure and services in new suburbs

Developments with a primary focus on new housing generally lack community infrastructure, services, and public transport. Private sector retail and hospitality services also often arrive later. This means that the 1 in 5 Australians living in rapidly expanding outer suburban areas need to travel long distances for work, healthcare, education, shopping and other daily needs. Yet supporting infrastructure for public transport, walking and cycling is often absent making people dependent on cars. This adds financial burden, and worsens road congestion, further impacting access to activities and leisure time. Finally, so-called 'bumping spaces' – where people can bump into each other and connect – are missing. Without these spaces, it is harder to build a strong local community.

Why should we provide community infrastructure and transport options?

While transport options increase opportunities to get to work and other services, especially for those unable to drive or without access to a car, community or social infrastructure, such as community centres, libraries, sports, educational and health facilities, are essential for immediate and long-term community wellbeing.

When this infrastructure is delayed, access to vital services is limited, hindering community development and resilience, and reducing liveability.

These gaps can worsen issues like loneliness, family violence, substance abuse, and social exclusion. Research shows that early delivery of high-quality public and active transport to growth areas has high benefits (i.e. a very favourable benefit-cost ratio), particularly when considering social and economic participation. Similarly, early social infrastructure provision can avoid longer-term costs in health and social support services.

What are barriers to earlier infrastructure provision?

Infrastructure and services cost money, and early provision is often assumed to be too expensive and not viable for the low numbers of residents in growth areas. For retailers or developers, viability and cash-flow are key considerations. Fringe councils on the other hand, are balancing low levels of existing services, low and capped revenue, and the need to provide services across multiple growth suburbs. Funding is a mix of council resources and external grants, but funding programs are fragmented between tiers of government, and often poorly aligned with construction timelines and the arrival of new residents. State and federal infrastructure delivery is also frequently politicised and contested.

What could be done differently?

More funding and better coordination of transport and social infrastructure is essential.

A base level of social infrastructure should be linked to development approval and then established before residents arrive rather than relying on population thresholds to trigger services. New and collaborative approaches between local government, service providers, retailers and developers can support solutions for viability concerns for early provision.

Planning processes can also be used to sequence development, allowing the establishment of larger populations sooner in an area, thus supporting the viability of services. This helps councils consolidate infrastructure investment due to fewer growth fronts and enables earlier delivery of retail and other services due to larger populations. State infrastructure plans and improved funding mechanisms at state and federal levels can support a more coordinated approach to growth.

Finally, while the value of social infrastructure is widely recognised, its benefits are often excluded from project assessments due to their intangible nature. Factoring in the costs of not providing social and transport infrastructure and services could further highlight their significance. We need to better understand these intangible benefits and consider them more strongly when undertaking cost-benefit analyses of delivery options in growth areas.

These measures can support the development of our new suburbs as complete communities, thereby achieving a more equitable, sustainable and healthier city.

By Sarah Barns

What is Urban AI, and what could it mean for the future of cities?

Picture the scene. You're standing on a street corner, a busy hive of activity. Buses, scooters, trams, cars, cyclists move swiftly through your field of vision, signaling to hold your forward motion. Dappled light streams through the leafy canopy of the camphor laurel, as the ambient temperature drop is logged by your personal ambient agent.

Soon enough you're back in motion again, logging data points: **ground temp, PM 2.5 levels, activity scores, spend per kilometer, heart rate, likelihood to see (LTS) rate per CPM ad spend**. But your mind is elsewhere. You've been caught in an anxiety loop over missed deadlines, red alerts flooding your time tracker and workflow automations. The walk outside, you hope, will clear your mind and help you focus. You can take some time to check the health of the new saplings in the urban forest, planted recently to keep the street cool and the pollinators close by.

This is an everyday city scene, based sometime in the proximate future. At a surface level, perhaps not so much is different to the pre-internet era, or even the digital era that preceded the influx of artificial intelligence (AI) agents into city streets.

That era saw increasingly powerful, if not always visible, networks of computational activity-loops trained through billions of human, ecological and infrastructural interactions.

This era created the training grounds for a new form of urban sense-making and intelligence, today known as 'artificial intelligence' (AI).

Now urban AI agents are a part of the urban scene, helping to log, nudge, or generate new data and workflows. Your ambient agent is trained to understand and respond to the complex environment you move through – and help nudge you to help wherever extra hands are needed. You're part of a new global citizen-science movement that has adopted AI tools to help regenerate urban habitats, and has become a thriving part of your local precinct's digital economy. By logging care practices – tending to local urban agriculture, nurturing pollen corridors, lending a hand to local urban forest initiatives, helping those in need, the ambient device helps measure local benefits, and nudges you to do more when you can, through rewards and incentives.

It's just one of the ways in which 'urban AI' is transforming how major urban challenges are being tackled.

The scene described here is a near-future vision for urban AI, one enabled when AI tools are adopted *care-fully*, trained to support rather than destroy urban habitats and communities. It is not necessarily the future being progressed by many AI companies today. Instead, AI is mostly being sold as a way to accelerate our existing, highly unsustainable urban lives – with unknown consequences for local economies, livelihoods, communities and habitats.

The disruptions predicted from the widespread adoption of AI across our society are expected to be far-reaching. But we will miss big opportunities for urban reform and innovation if we adopt a narrow focus on using AI to automate the current workflows of urban life. Urban AI platforms can be used to speed up housing approvals, and even automate construction projects, and cut costs - but what unintended effects might occur if platform companies and algorithms become primary infrastructures for automated, AI-driven urban planning and decision-making?

The disruptive impacts of AI – from non-human agents participating in urban life, to automated construction projects, to advanced digital twins, to smart contracts, and more – point to critical choices for the future of cities around governing the 'information commons'. Some cities may choose to invest in local AI economies & capabilities that nurture healthy places and habitats, and leverage new opportunities for community participation in shared futures. Others may take a more passive approach, and simply allow global AI companies to accelerate 'business as usual' approaches, with little consideration towards local impacts.

If we are to shape a positive future with urban AI, we are going to need urban leaders equipped with strong AI literacies, who understand how to navigate choices around digital procurement, governance, security, and value-sharing. Investing in ideas around new forms of citizen engagement and AI literacies towards low carbon, regenerative futures is also critical. As the earlier scene hints at, perhaps urban AI can unleash a renewal of cities as places where people are better equipped to nurture healthy habitats, and can help us confront the damaging impacts of a climate emergency. At least, we need to hope so, and not simply get sold on the latest bot that floods our zone.

By Wendy Steele
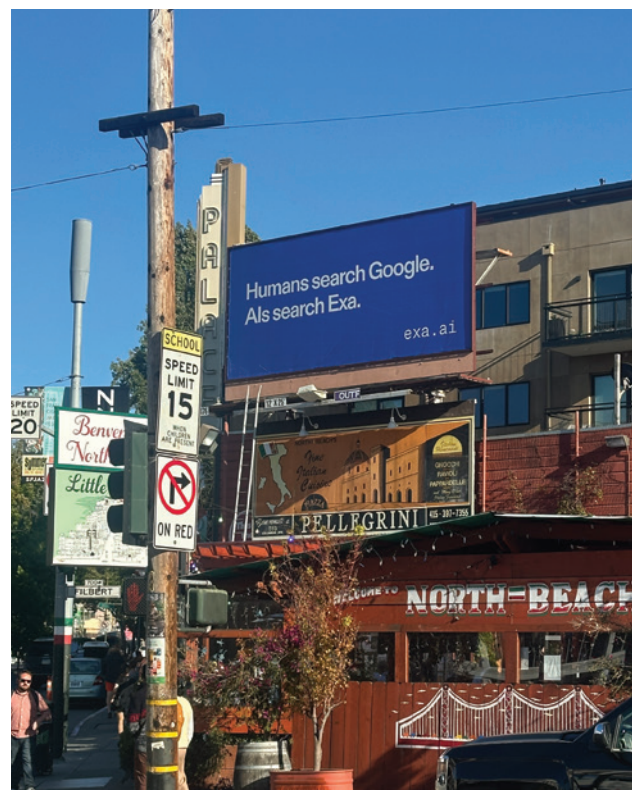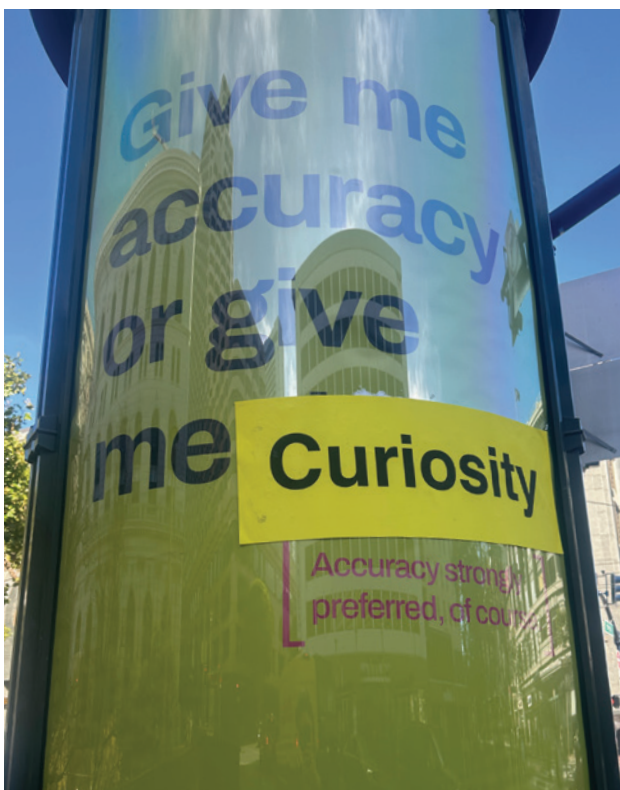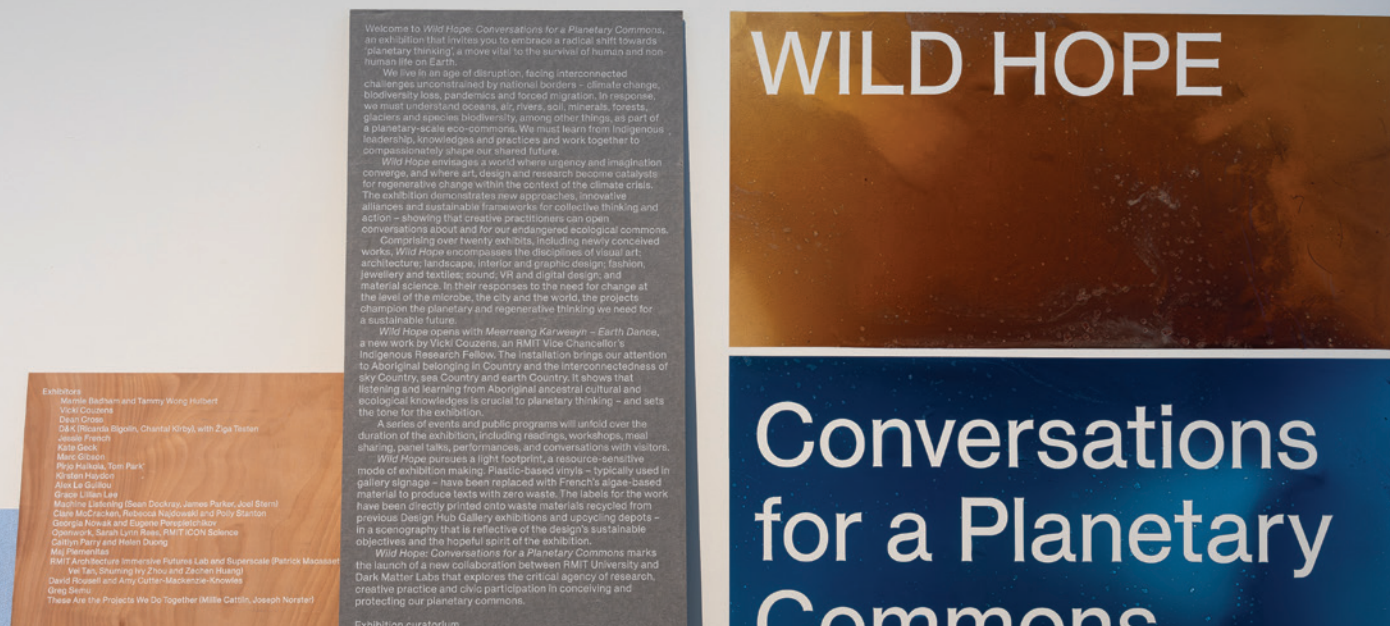
Urban Climate Action and Planetary Possibilities

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 Gunditjmara 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.

Photo by Tobias Titz

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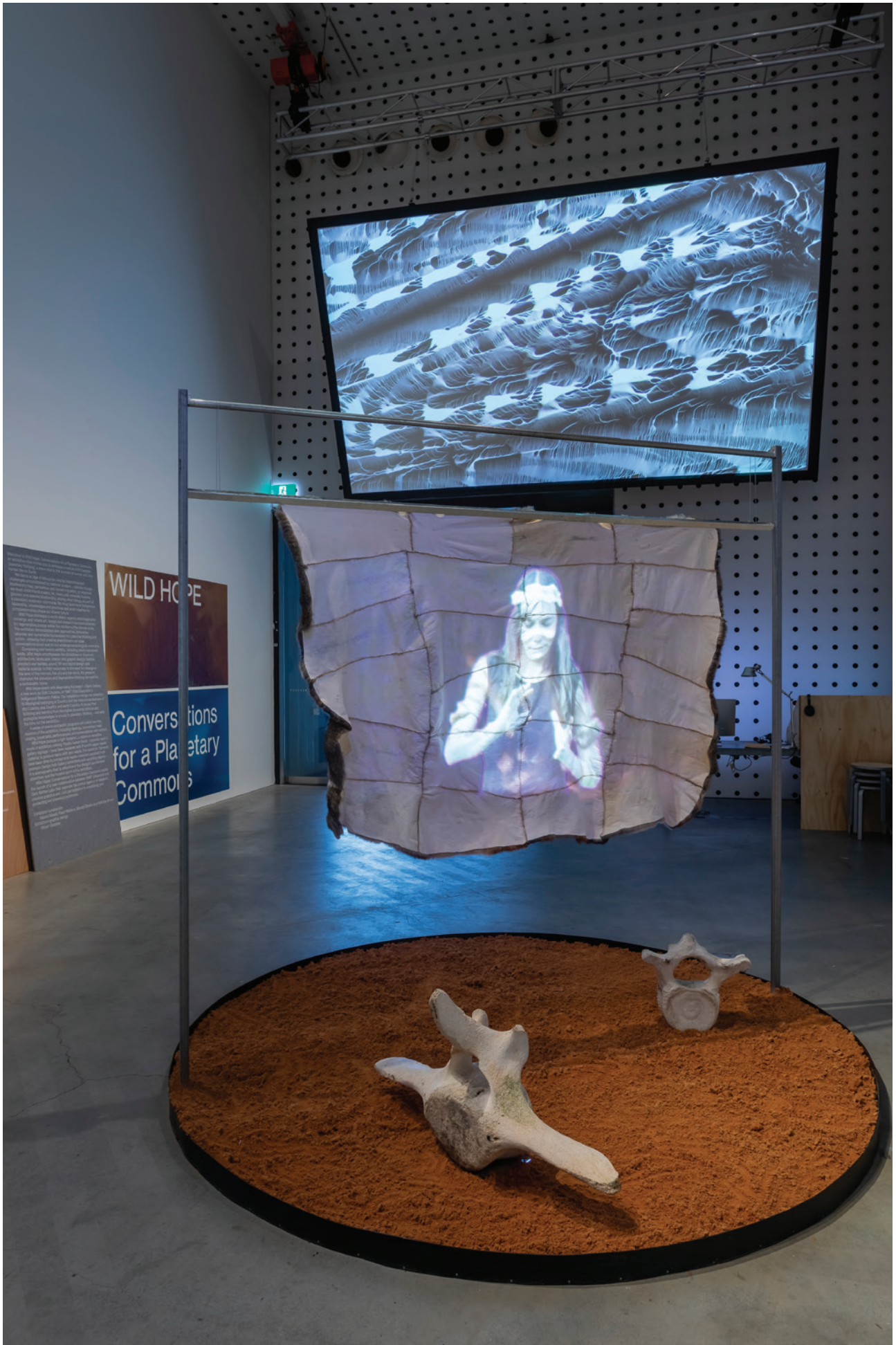
Placing *planetary and community stewardship*— caring for people, places, and living systems — at the centre of climate action is an opportunity for more regenerative futures.

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

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

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