

CIVIC INTERPLAY

*Place-based civic agency with
digital and AI methods*

Led by Dr Sarah Barns
RMIT University, Centre for Urban Research



There is more information about our places than ever before

More of our places, and the infrastructures and services that shape them, are being built through the *intelligence* borne of digital and AI ecosystems.

*But who gets to make sense of this?
And who gets to act on it?*



An era of escalating anxieties

In an era of AI, advanced digital infrastructure risks losing its social licence to operate. But without strong and resilient digital infrastructure, everyone loses.

This makes the problem of AI governance less of a specialist field and more of *a local issue*.

Frameworks for AI governance need expand, to move beyond specialist technology policy and industry policy.

Communities are demanding greater transparency around the design and governance of the digital infrastructures shaping their everyday lives.

So how can this work?

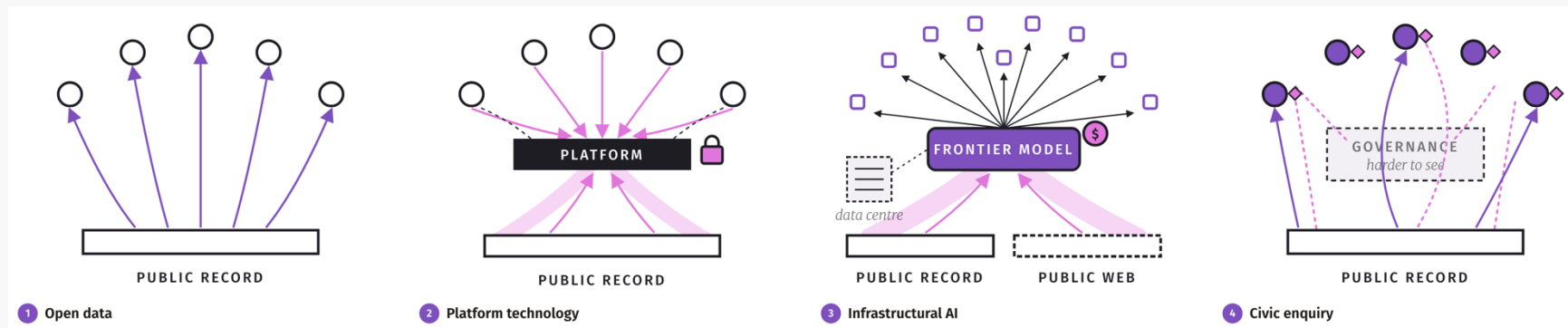
“Public input in governmental decision-making is particularly crucial to promoting a well-functioning democracy and mitigating harms from AI. However, *AI’s opacity, mutability, and resource requirements impede meaningful civic engagement particularly in urban environments.*”

Sieber, R., Brandusescu, A., Sangiambut, S., & Adu-Daako, A. (2025). What is civic participation in artificial intelligence? *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science*, 52(6), 1388–1406.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/23998083241296200>

From open data to civic enquiry

Open data → platform technology → infrastructural AI → civic enquiry

Timelines are approximate



2008–2013

Open data was promoted to enhance transparency and legibility to support greater participation and accountability.

2013–2018

Platforms built on open data to create more closed or proprietary digital ecosystems, governing access and use through algorithms and paywalls.

2018– onwards

Frontier AI models absorbed public and open (as well as proprietary) data at scale.
Infrastructural AI begins to compete directly with communities

2020s

Citizens enlist AI agents in practices of civic enquiry, seeking shared benefits and accountabilities from digital infrastructure.

Why transparency and legibility

Poor levels of transparency and legibility in the governance of digital services and systems is bad for democratic resilience.

CONFLICT

Communities resist AI companies

Low social licence for data centres and the companies behind them.

AI SERVICES

Governments and companies promote AI services to citizens

AI is offered as better, faster public and private services.

CAPABILITIES

AI companies promote their capabilities

Each new model is presented as a leap forward.

NOT VISIBLE

The benefits a community gains, and on what terms, are obscured in the conflict.

NOT VISIBLE

How the digital infrastructure behind those services is governed, where value flows over time

NOT VISIBLE

How resource impacts will be managed, and whether benefits will be shared over time.

Why transparency and legibility

Benefit claims

What a community could secure, and on what terms, when a data centre or AI Factory lands

Infrastructure governance

how the systems behind AI services are run, what accountabilities are expected

Public trust

Understanding trade offs in investment pathways to promote place based community resilience and prosperity

THE WHY

Transparency in the governance of digital & AI infrastructure is becoming essential to realising its benefits

This is needed so that communities, governments and companies can understand where the benefits lie, and what is actually at stake, before conflict and distrust sets in.

Towards civic agencies?

Civic Interplay explores what practices and forums might promote more meaningful engagement in the conditions shaping digital infrastructure, and how these produce benefits in communities and urban settings. It asks:

What forms of civic enquiry are possible in an era of AI infrastructure?

When digital infrastructure shapes the material and ecological logics of places more explicitly, what forms of democratic accountability do communities expect, and what are they able to access?

What counts as civic participation in urban AI?

"We think about each other as data, which has dehumanising effects."

ROSIE PHAR
VMD STUDENT



What counts as civic participation in urban AI?

AI as the reason to participate

e.g. a police force adopting facial recognition

AI as the medium of participation

e.g. chatbots recommending public services

What gets in the way: AI's opacity, its mutability, and the resources it takes.

STRONGEST FORM

Able to investigate, contest, influence or dismantle AI systems

Partners in design and decisions

Informed and consulted

Citizens as customers or users

Sieber, Brandusescu, Sangiambut and Adu-Daako (2025), Environment and Planning B 52(6).
Ladder after Arnstein (1969).

Civic AI in Liverpool: data as a civic asset

Evidence gathered close to the people affected

Shared infrastructure, governed by accountable institutions

Turned into public good

THE INSTITUTIONS

Civic Data Cooperative

The UK's first, from 2019. Funded by the Combined Authority, hosted at the University of Liverpool.

Civic Health Innovation Labs

The University, the NHS, local government and industry, working on shared challenges.

Community Charter on Data and AI

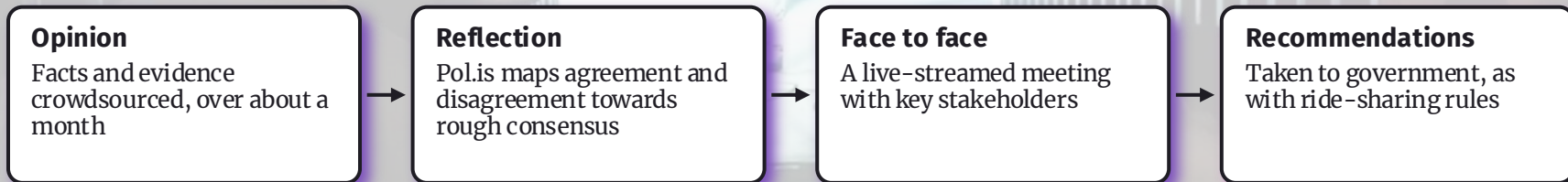
Shaped in 2025 with residents of all six boroughs. First principle: data and AI must benefit the community.

The test: do inequalities narrow?

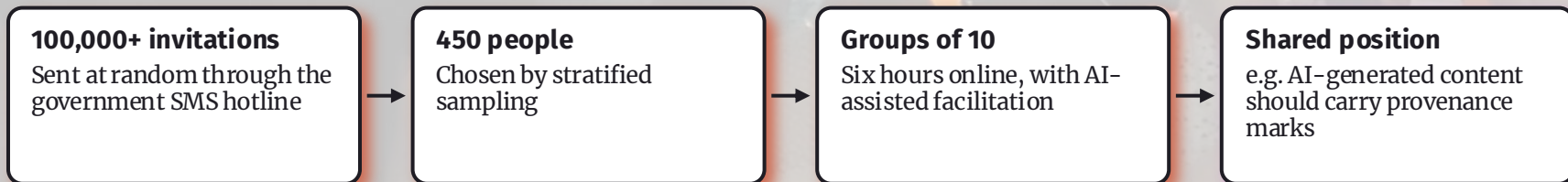
A lineage from Dr William Henry Duncan, Liverpool's first Medical Officer of Health, who used data on disease and housing in the 1840s.

Taiwan: deliberation at scale, with AI in the loop

vTAIWAN



ALIGNMENT ASSEMBLY ON INFORMATION INTEGRITY



Community benefit deals around data centres

WORKED EXAMPLE · LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA, 2025

Funds

\$10M economic development fund (community foundation) and \$10M clean energy fund (city)

Limits

Water capped at 20,000 gallons a day per campus; noise tied to existing levels

Energy

100% clean energy, with penalties up to \$10M a building, though critics call the wording soft

Transparency

Full public records access

OTHER MODELS

Memphis

25% of data centre property tax funds projects within five miles

Cedar Rapids

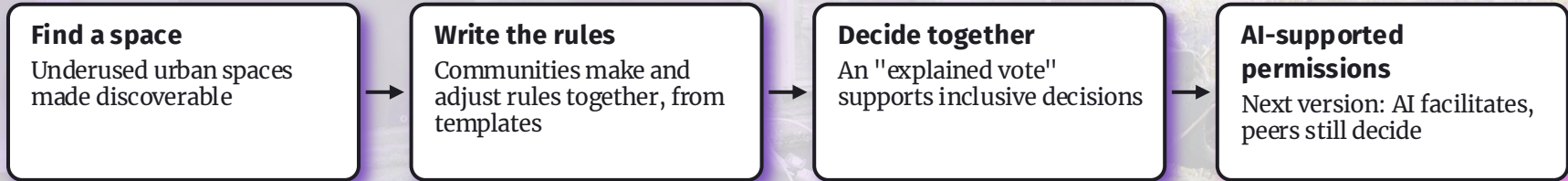
A Community Betterment Fund, tied to jobs and investment targets

HIDDEN

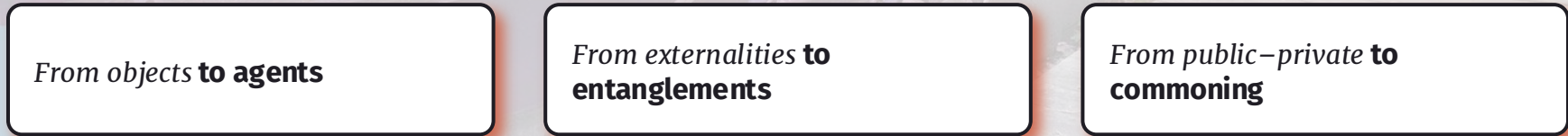
Few deals are public. One review found only eight in the US; non-disclosure agreements keep others from view.

Participating in the protocols of space

PERMISSIONING THE CITY · WITH DAEGU, SOUTH KOREA



RADICLE CIVICS · THREE SHIFTS



Rivers, land and homes treated as agents in a web of care, tested through "proofs of possibility" such as #FreeHouse and #FreeRiver.

Where Civic Interplay sits

THE PRACTICE

FOCUS AREA

WHAT CIVIC INTERPLAY BUILDS ON

Sieber et al.

A framework for what counts as meaningful participation

A practice anyone can run, with AI as both the subject and the tool of enquiry

Buchan, Liverpool

A place-based institutional sponsor for data as a civic asset

Keeps place, not data, at the centre of AI governance and data licenses

Tang, Taiwan

A process: deliberation at scale

Methods of enquiry outside formal governance contexts: more attention to place flows than policy deliberation

Benefit deals

A contract: negotiated terms

Conditions of legibility and traceability over time – beyond one-off negotiations

Dark Matter Labs

A protocol: the rules for how space is used

The history of permissions, so new protocols can learn from what past ones did to a place

Mapping the terrain

HARD INFRASTRUCTURE
PHYSICAL ASSETS & PLANNING



Benefit deals

Councils and developers negotiating benefit sharing around data centres

Aundrey Tang, Taiwan

Government-convened deliberation

Permissioning the City

communities write the rules for space

CONVENED BY INSTITUTIONS

SELF-ORGANISED

Buchan, Liverpool

Civic data cooperative convened with universities and public health agencies

Civic Interplay

What value flows in place can be made legible, beyond formal institutional settings, as practices of care and connection to place?

SOFT INFRASTRUCTURES
(BELONGING, CONNECTION TO PLACE)

Civic AI practices can operate both within formal governance contexts and outside them.
Does meaningful engagement depend on institutional acknowledgement?

Practising Civic Interplay

Taking a deliberately experimental stance, civic interplay is inspired by everyday practices of *care-full* placemaking & participation.

As a practice, it seeks locations where digital architectures, sense-making and civic participation can be examined in more collaborative ways.

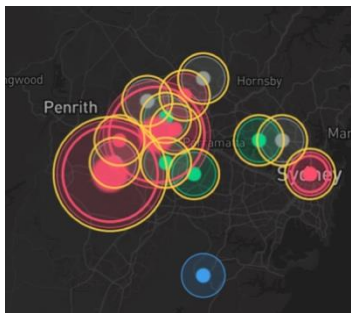
Questions:

- How are places assembled as digital objects and governance ecosystems
- What forms of accountability and legibility do these systems foster.
- What kinds of exclusions are evidenced?

THE INTENTION

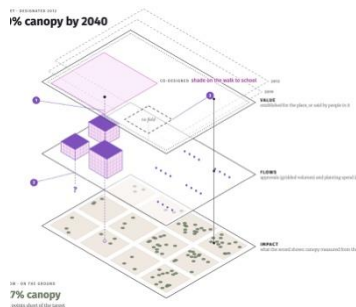
Cultivating greater awareness of the institutional contexts shaping how places are known and become legible, and doing so from multiple vantage points: sensory, digital and agentic ways of seeing.

Current practices



SHARED RECORDS · LIVE

**Data Centres
Transparency
Project
(Australian view)**



EXPERIMENTAL

**Tracing public
value in place:
Mapping
investment flows**

*

**Workflows and
prompts, forkable**

everything here is a draft

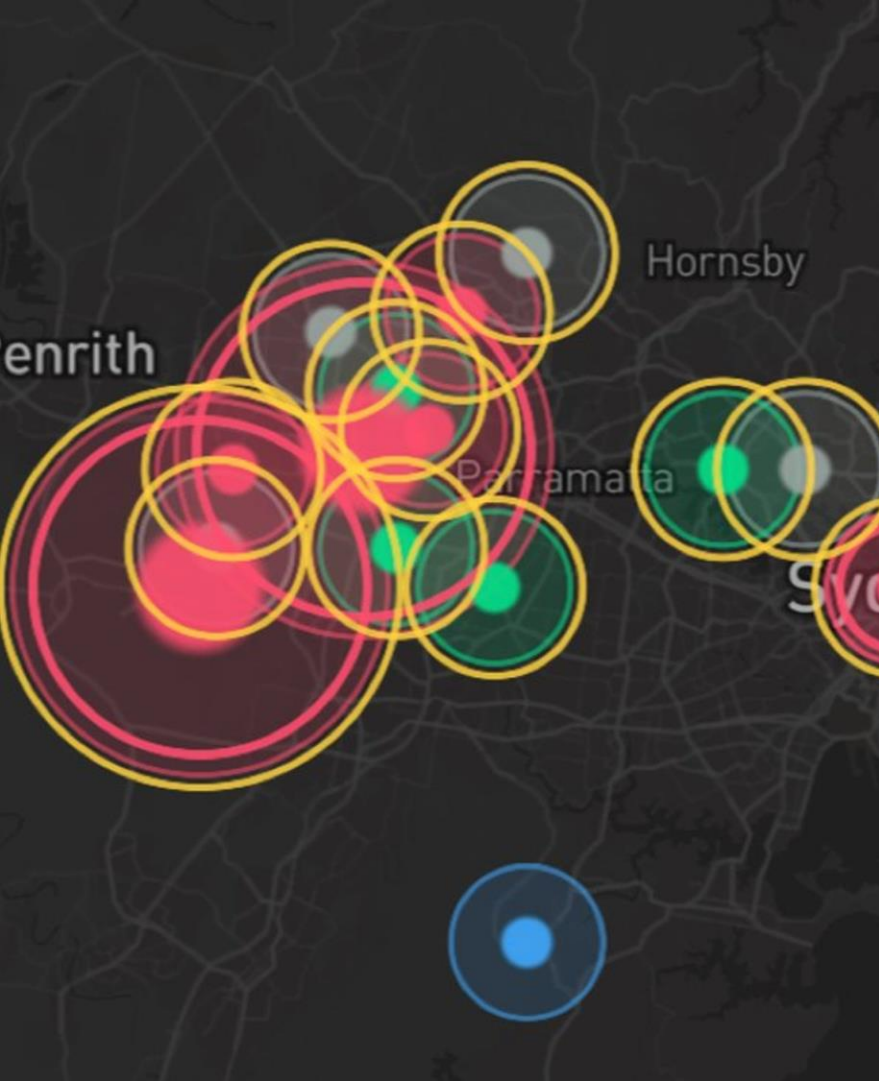
EXPERIMENTAL METHOD

**Gathering
Intelligences: Field
Studies**



PLACE

**We Care & Ambient
Commons for City
North Innovation
Precinct**



SHARED RECORDS · LIVE

Data Centres Transparency Project

A live map of the data centre build-out in Australia. Site by site: who owns the compute, what it draws in power and water, how it was approved, and what has been disclosed since.

Records and method published openly, with a DOI. The evidence base for the Senate submission on AI and data centres.

Tracing public value: A side angle on a place

An exploded axonometric view of a place, built from its public registers of investment and set against named priorities and targets.

VALUE

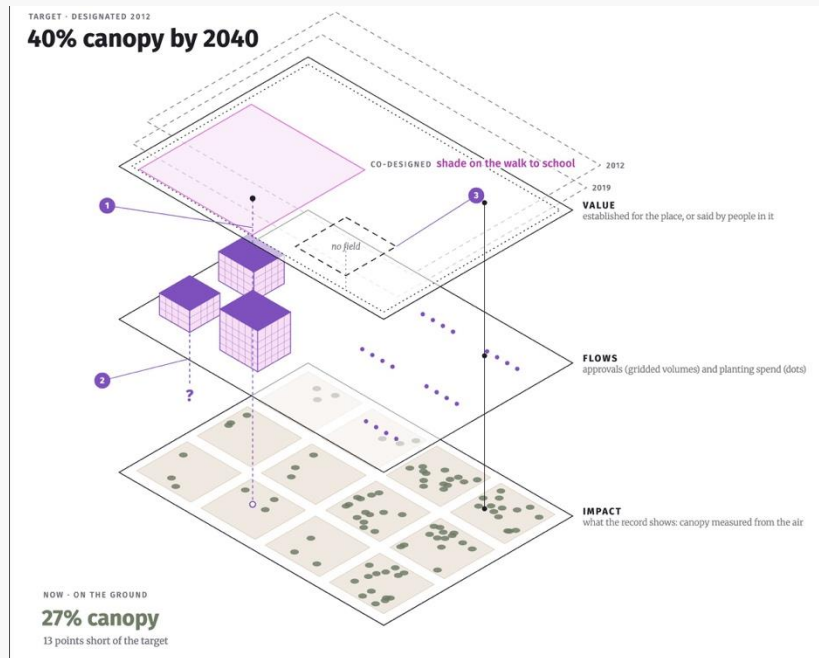
What was promised, or said by people in the place

FLows

Where money and approvals went

IMPACT

What the public record shows happened



Speculative; figures illustrative.

Gathering Intelligences

An experimental walking practice, assembling the digital and sensory conditions that shape attention to practices of care and connection in everyday spaces.

1

Assemble the records

Gather the public record of a project or precinct, through time.

2

Begin your dig

What was the core priority for your place twenty years ago? Or ten?

3

Making sense

A map, a diagram, or a chart? Which values are most evident?

4

Sense checking

Walk your place, add your sightings, and bring it back.

Agent skills for Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini or your own model, with prompts for each step.



PLACE · RMIT CITY NORTH

WeCare

Participatory storytelling for RMIT's City North Social Innovation Precinct, opening its idea of a 'platform for common growth' to many voices.

Stories of the future written together, through the lens of care and common growth

A silent walk through the precinct, noticing together

A co-intelligent partner an AI version of the shared conversation, to test how it felt,

Portraits from the day were shown on STORYBOX during the City North Activation program, October to November 2025.

Collaboration

Become a site for civic enquiry

Collaborate on the following activities:

- *A place read: A side angle on a place: how investment flows have impacted place experience and value*
- *A field study or walk: Walk and assemble with others to build a novel digital architecture of place.*
- *A benefits register: Mapping flows of value at contested sites (e.g.) data centres towards a shared benefits register*
- *Other ideas?*

PARTNER TYPOLOGIES

- **Innovation precincts (multipartner governance)**
- **Placemaking Professionals**
- **Policy Researchers**
- **Sustainability Managers & Data Strategists**
- **Community Engagement Strategists**
- **Curious citizens**

Learn more

Civic Interplay is a practice-led program led by Dr Sarah Barns and collaborators, through a Vice-Chancellor's Senior Research Fellowship at RMIT University's Centre for Urban Research.

[Friends and collaborators](#) include the Futures + Literacies + Methods Lab at Utrecht University, Irina Panovich (aiio studio), Amber Theurer (HUMAN AF) and Miguel McCormick (Facta Living Lab, Mexico).



civicinterplay.io