





## HARNESSING Social Imagination in The Era of the Climate crisis

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### **ABOUT THE** ORGANISATIONS





### **Centre for Public Impact**

The Centre for Public Impact (CPI) is a not-forprofit organisation that supports government, philanthropy, and civil society organisations across the globe to reimagine government so it works for everyone. The small team in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand leverages our global presence and draws from international networks and expertise to inform our work.

We work as learning partners to those in and around government to help them respond to the complex challenges they face by thinking systemically, centring relationships, engaging with complexity, prioritising learning and reflection, and reimagining measurement and evaluation.

### **Climate Change Initiative**

This project was funded by the Climate Change Initiative (CCI) within CPI. The CCI supports local governments in developing innovative approaches to climate action that can accelerate the achievement of net zero and adaptation goals. They work with partners across the public, private, and social sectors to identify and test new approaches.

### Hinterland Lab

Hinterland Lab works with organisations and communities to discover new possibilities, experiment with new approaches, and navigate times of change and uncertainty. We believe in contributing to a society built on wisdom, justice, and belonging. Hinterland is led by Ryan Hubbard, a trusted advisor for social and environmental change organisations across Australia.



## WHY IS THIS WORK IMPORTANT?

Climate change is the defining problem of our generation and those to come. We have never experienced a problem so complex and with such grave implications. The challenges of this complexity are interdependent, synergistic, and cannot be solved by simply working harder or smarter. We must face this challenge with an understanding of its complexity.

At CPI, we're finding more public servants who understand that current practices and processes cannot adequately support us in facing these challenges and creating change in communities. Collectively, we need to imagine new ways of doing, being, and seeing in order to build the futures we need.

This project was an experiment exploring how we might use social imagination to create practices and processes grounded in new ways of seeing the world, enabling us to meet the challenges of our times.



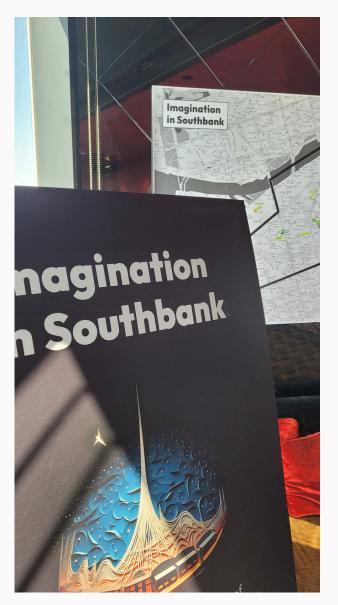
### WHAT IS SOCIAL MAGNATION?

Social imagination is an emerging discipline that invites us to see the scripts and rules that shape our world and imagine what might happen if they were different.

The practice helps us see how our individual and shared norms and values shape the scripts for our lives and for wider society. It encourages us to imagine different scripts together, and then use them to build a future we all need.

With deep roots in sociology, design, the arts, and the environmental movement, the discipline has grown significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. This global experience demonstrated the dramatic shifts our society can achieve under the right circumstances but also exposed many of the fault lines hidden in our culture.

Through this pilot project, we explored the 'materiality' of social imagination as an approach to social and environmental change. What are its properties? What can you do with it? What are its limitations? How can we help people understand that things made by society can be remade for different outcomes? What new ways of doing, being, and seeing might we create together to enable us to build a generative future we would be proud to pass on to future generations?



### IMAGINATION IN Southbank

We chose to focus on the City of Melbourne's Southbank community. As Melbourne's most densely populated area, it is home to a diverse, transient, growing community and a world-class arts precinct. Visitors and community members have described it as 'vibrant' and 'dynamic' but also 'isolating' and 'intimidating'.

For the project, we wanted to form a mixed group of people living or working in Southbank with different roles, experiences, aspirations, and social power. We drew on diverse fields, including:

- the social science of belonging and creativity,
- world-building from arts, literature, and design,
- theories of influence from adaptive leadership and community organising,
- and theories of community-building from values-based planning and place-based community.

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One of the most exhilarating, mindopening experiences I've had, and I've had lots. - Jennifer, participant

## THE PARTICIPANTS

Led by Ash Youkyoung Lee, the City of Melbourne's Southbank Neighbourhood Partner, we recruited a diverse and motivated cohort of participants. This included community leaders, civic workers, business representatives, and engaged residents – all people who live or work in Southbank and care about building a regenerative future for their community.

Mawaddah enjoys supporting people to get more involved in the community.

**Bonnie** is a service designer who brings a design and systems thinking approach to the ideas and actions brewing in the imagineer community.

Jennifer is the first to get behind a great cause, especially when it concerns green spaces in Southbank.

**Desi** is passionate about sustainable futures and enjoys collaborating with like-minded individuals who care for their community.

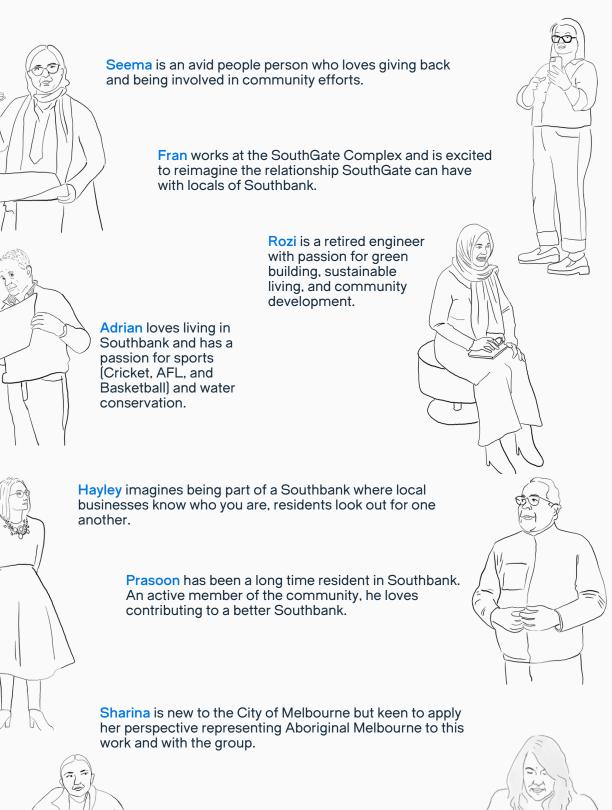
**Sophy** is keen to utilise the magical spaces in Southbank for more community engagement.

Martin is eager to build greater connectedness and community in buildings, finding opportunities for neighbours to get behind a shared goal.

**Roy** recognises the importance of belonging and connectedness for developing a strong and resilient community to face any challenge.

> Artemis is passionate about creating belonging and bringing positive change for the neighbourhood and environment in Southbank.





Mary Kay feels that the ultimate form of belonging is working to make the world better as part of a collective.

## THE PROJECT

CPI and Hinterland collaborated to design a workshop series that unfolded over five days and spread over six weeks. Each day, a different theme was embedded in a different Southbank location. In the following months, we continued to meet as a group to support engagement in plans for the future, build the network, and sustain motivation and efforts over time.

The process was designed to build trust and belonging within the group, deepen our understanding of the place and what's important to the community, and broaden our sense of what might be possible for its future through the lens of climate action.

### OUR GOALS

- Explore social imagination as a mechanism for social and environmental change what does this approach enable?
- Explore the conditions and practices that encourage people to engage in social imagination practice what does it take to do this well?
- Engage a cohort of people with a sense of individual and collective agency, particularly in the context of climate change.
- Generate ideas for actions to address the climate crisis, developed by people who live or work in Southbank and responding to local priorities.



## THE STRUCTURE

### Day 1 Preparation

### **Buxton Art Gallery**

### Arrival - 9:30

Morning tea, Southbank map, and welcome to country

### Introduction and journey - 10:30

Vincent Lingari on how values in society look vs how we think it looks, how teachers' imaginations shape students and how our imaginations shape society, and an overview of our journey.

### Meeting your fellow travelers pt I - 11:00

Where are we from? How far have we travelled? Maps and movement.

### Meeting your fellow travelers pt II - 1:00

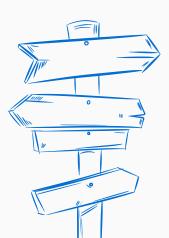
Interviewing each other: stories of Southbank, belonging, and the future.

### What is social imagination? - 2:30

Zap, whoosh, boing: exploring collective imagination, the idea that 'things can be otherwise' and how we choose to 'be' together in society.

### Guided imagination practice - 3:30

Future generations: sense of perspective, emotional connection to the lives of past and future ancestors.



### Day 2 Departure Beulah

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Arrival and belongings - 9:30 What are your 'belongings'? How do they enable you to be who you are in the world?

### Southbank context - 10:00

Aboriginal history, colonial history, demographics: younger, more transient, rapidly changing and growing, river.

Imagination practice - 11:00 Imagining and remembering belonging.

### Learning journey: belonging - 11:30

Learning about belonging through our own experiences (ups and downs). Connecting through, McGuffins, Bids and virtuous cycle of vulnerability, containers for forming and deepening relationships.

### Real or imagined - 1:30

Examples from around the world to widen our imaginations of what's possible.

### Things can be otherwise - 3:00

Rules, roles, and places guessing game, 'rules' of belonging in high-rise living.

### Trojan koala round I - 4:00

Practicing trying new things in our lives and communities. The first one is focused on building belonging.



### Eureka Tower: 89th Floor

### Scavenger hunt - 9:00

Practicing seeing how social, cultural, and physical infrastructure reflects our values.

### Introduction and check in - 10:00

First week: belonging, second week: becoming. What kind of society are we building? How can we influence that?

### Personal values - 10:30

What are your personal values? How do they inform your own actions?

### Collective values - 11:00

What are your collective values? What is expressed now? What would we prefer them to be in Southbank? What would that look like?

### Youth voice: Imo - 1:00

Young climate activist shares their journey, reflecting on emotions, values, and change.

### Windows of opportunity - 2:30

Based on conversations from last week: inclusive and welcoming society, nature connection and celonging, sustainability and climate, preparing the soil.



### **Boyd Community Hub**

### Arrival - 9:30

Your own becoming as someone who is involved in the future of Southbank.

### Creativity and imagining worlds - 10:00

Poet Joel Mckerrow introduces concepts of top-down and bottom-up world-building, imagination, and creativity, Practice writing and imagination. Circles of concern - 1:30 Agency and circles of concern.

This is not a stick - 1:45 Creativity needs other people.

### High-level ideas - 2:00

Going wide and generating new ideas for Southbank based on our values, windows of opportunity, and inspiration.

### Detailed ideas - 3:00

Taking a few ideas and exploring them in detail. Looking at what it takes doe new initiatives to succeed and make a difference.

### Trojan koala round II - 4:00

Practicing influencing our context, focused on environment and sustainability.



### **Buxton Art Gallery**

### Arrival - 9:30

Reviewing take-away menus to refresh ourselves on the journey.

### Collective visions and values revisited - 10:00

Reviewing our set of collective values. How do we want to be together as a society? What might that look like in practice?

### Pause and reflect - 11:00

Meditation on being a healer followed by lighthearted proverbs game.

### How change happens - 11:30

Three stories of change: cathedral thinking, gardeners vs carpenters, first followers.

### Planning - 12:00

Detailing our ideas and 'attempts'. Moving from ideas to practicalities.

### Storytelling - 3:00

Practicing the stories of self, us, and now.

### Citizen shift - 4:00

Zoom with Jon Alexander to connect to the bigger global movement.

### Closing circle - 4:30 Final reflections.

### WHAT HAPPENED IN THE WORKSHOPS



### Convened a diverse and committed group

The group engaged deeply from the beginning. They represented various social and cultural backgrounds, and many were involved in influential community groups, from resident associations to sustainability groups. This was all made possible through the City of Melbourne's brilliant local connector role.

### We hosted a beautiful and care-filled journey

We paid particular attention to the small details of the project that would express our care and commitment to participant experience and wellbeing. This included our choices around venues, food, audio and music, and individual coffee orders. We ensured the presentations, visuals, and materials were beautifully presented, and our overall tone was kind and inviting. The workshops were structured as a real and metaphorical journey to engender a sense of expansive and hopeful thinking.

### Guided and embodied practices

Each day, we included embodied and imaginative practices that invited participants to pause, be present, and imagine other places, times, and people (like future generations). We believe that connecting to the body and how things feel can create a sense of other unspoken futures that cannot be thought into reality.

### Another possible is possible

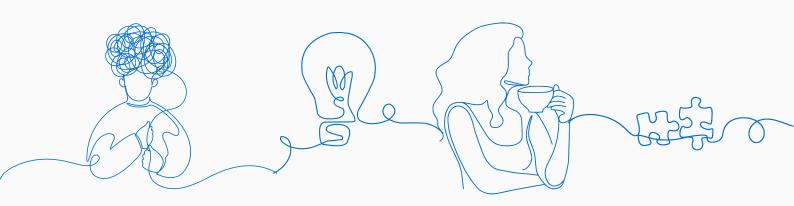
Some of the activities were centred around the idea that another possible is indeed possible, recognising how hard it is for most people to conceive this concept. We drew on examples from history and other places around the world, planned and executed small fail-safe experiments, and spent time reflecting and meditating on what we heard together that made alternatives feel possible.

### World-building

Much of our time together was spent in worldbuilding exercises, working in different ways to imagine alternatives to the future we might otherwise anticipate. Literature, especially speculative fiction, has a rich discipline of world-building. So, we brought in a poet and writer to share insights and help the group create imaginative alternative worlds.

### Values

By articulating the values we held individually and those we perceived in Southbank, we could trace the impact on decisions and actions, consider holding different values, and create alternative futures. The experience of realising that others held the same seemingly counter-cultural values was inspiring for our group and led to collaboration for action.





### Scan this QR code to watch a short video of the workshops!



In civic life, and particularly in public policy, we often pretend to promote inclusion and equity by taking a "values-neutral" position.

The first step in creating the world we want to see is imagining new sets of shared cultural values that are responsive to communities of place. Out Southbank Imagineers identified this set of values that would shape their preferred future:



### **Diversity & inclusion**

Even for a multicultural society, Southbank is exceptionally diverse. We want to see cultural holidays celebrated in shops and building lobbies, for groups, cultures, and ages to feel welcome.

Engaged with Aboriginal culture

We are proud of our Aboriginal cultural heritage and want more opportunities to connect with and celebrate that history and future.

Dynamic, vibrant, and creative

We are a dynamic, growing area. Not only do we have world-class arts, we are the engine room for the arts, from ABC to VCA, we are the fertile ground for creating what's next.



### Sustainability & climate

We have an opportunity to lead the way on sustainability in Australia. We envision better water management, vertical composting infrastructure, and 'returner' communities.



### **Connection to nature**

We value biodiversity even in the midst of the city: we want to be more of a home for birds and bees, with vertical forests, green buildings and more green space and parks.

### Safe and easy to move around

Southbank should be safe and easy to navigate, particularly for seniors, fam- ilies, and people with access needs. We should work to better balance the needs for those passing through with the needs of local people.



### Community & belonging

We need better physical, cultural, and social infrastructure to support a connected community in our dense environment, such as connector roles in buildings and the community and ways in for new arrivals.



### Approachable & welcoming

We are an entry point for people moving to Australia, and we have a highly transient population. We want to be a proactive community where new arrivals are warmly welcomed and supported to settle.



### **Future generations**

Whether it's working toward a safe climate future or providing for children, Southbank is a forwardlooking community that cares about our long-term legacy.

### SUPPORT AFTER Workshops

Recognising the importance of ensuring this was a transformative experience, we supported our participants in embedding learning and responding to their experiences.

### **Technical support**

For participants who wanted to apply the ideas they developed during the workshops in practice, we connected them to people who could offer technical support.

Some met with Masters of Design Futures students at RMIT, who were able to advise and support on developing, testing, and pitching ideas to decision-makers and changemakers. Others spoke to people doing similar work to their ideas to explore feasibility and lessons learned.

### Social support

We met with the group monthly for four months after the workshops to deepen the friendships, maintain the connections, develop motivation, and reinforce the value of working together. We designed 'Action Learning Sets' for the group to explore and build each other's ideas and encourage each other to express their agency by collectively building a sense of belonging and climate action. Some participants developed friendships, supporting each other and meeting regularly.

### A celebration

As a team, we are committed to the idea of celebration as an underused human ritual. We hosted an evening at the Malthouse Theatre in Southbank, where the participants described their ideas and were able to ask for support from guests in an interview with Councillor Jamal Hakim from the City of Melbourne Council.

It was well attended by residents and business owners, in addition to interested non-profits, academics, and the Deputy Lord Mayor of Melbourne.





## HOW WE EVALUATED

### Journaling

Our primary method for gathering data on progress was by regular journaling using reflective prompts. After each session, participants ran through a series of prompts created by our collaborator, Kate McKegg.

The process and the prompts helped the group regularly reflect on their experience in a thinking, feeling, and action-oriented way. In addition to data collection for evaluation, it was a way for our participants to take a metaphorical breath: time at the end of the day to reflect on what they heard and consolidate it through a ritual.

The prompts were printed on a beautiful bookmark and placed in a high-quality travel journal gifted to each participant, along with a nice pen and coloured pencil. They were asked to reflect on:

- What am I feeling?
- What have I learned?
- What am I curious about?
- What must I do?

With consent, we photographed some of the reflections to form the backbone of our dataset for evaluation.

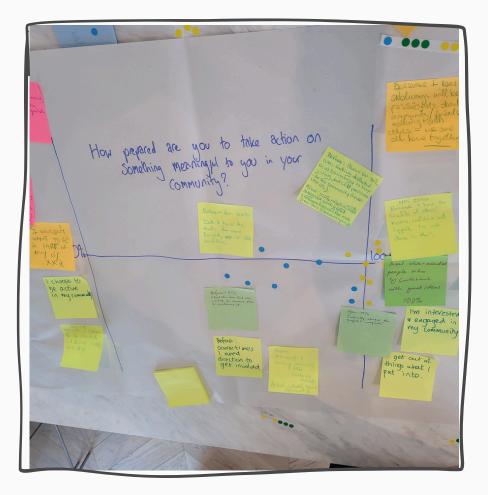
The images were analysed as data using a <u>pattern-spotting template</u> based on work by the Human Systems Dynamics Institute and adapted by the Kinnect Group and the Developmental Evaluation Institute.

This template – which explores generalisations, exceptions, contradictions, surprises, and puzzles within a qualitative dataset – facilitates a rigorous and systematic process.

By collecting images (and matching handwriting to track anonymous individuals), we could watch change occur over time and understand what was meaningful to participants in each workshop. The reflections included operational data to help us adapt our approach and respond day by day, as well as more strategic data to respond to our more strategic goals for the project.







### H forms

Moving into post-workshop support, we used <u>H forms</u> as a monitoring and evaluation exercise. The H form uses the horizontal line of a large H as a spectrum that runs from 0% agreement to 100% agreement for a statement written above the line.

Participants were invited to place themselves on a spectrum of agreement with the statement and consider the reasons for their choice.

On one sticky note, they wrote why they were not in 0% agreement with the statement and placed it to the left of the H. On a separate sticky note, they wrote why they were not in 100% agreement and placed it to the right of the H.



We used the following statements:

- How prepared are you to take action on something meaningful in your community?
- How confident do you feel that there are people that could support you if you did?

Because we were interested in change over time, participants were asked to put a yellow dot on where they felt they were now and a blue dot on where they felt they were before the workshop along the scale, then respond to the statements from their current position.

This brief exercise and the following conversations helped us understand some nuance of the participants' experiences, whether we created change through the workshops and our initial work afterwards, and what that change was contingent upon. It also built the network of social capital as it became clear how many were keen to be active and support each other, reinforcing the work we had begun in the workshops.

### WHAT WAS OUR MPACT?

The changes we saw fall into two categories. The first is where participants described the inner change they attributed to this work. The second referred to outer visible change.

### **INNER CHANGE**

### From commercial to community

One participant working in Southbank changed the way she approached her work due to her experience with the project and the people involved. She described it as "from commercial to community". "If we don't connect with those elements, and we don't feel like we belong, we're a part of it, then why fight? Why try?... That's where climate action starts. And it stays that way, too. Because, you know, it's difficult work. So, if you don't have that sense of belonging, why bother? Why continue?"

"Reflecting on my headspace at the start of it, I did have my commercial cap on...That's what I'm here for. But ... as I attended each of the days and stripped back the layers, ... doing place-making at Southbank became more than offering discounts to locals."

Belonging as a grounding for action After the project, another participant expressed that belonging and connectedness are essential to effective climate action.

Refection Tuesda NOUJOUS



### From isolated to connected

Several participants stated they did not see themselves as people who get involved in this kind of experiment. Serendipitous events led to their participation, and their experiences were stark reminders of how easy it is to remain disconnected from your neighbours and conversely how easy it can be to connect.

Participants were surprised at how interesting and interested their community members were and the potential for new friendships and actions.

### **Relieving burn out**

Before participating in the project, a few participants were involved in community organising. These individuals were often tired and described symptoms of burnout, including feelings of heaviness and burden. The project helped bring these participants a renewed sense of purpose and energy, often through the connections they made and a sense of collective action and solidarity.

"Those five days served really strongly on connecting and kind of aligning on my bigger picture, values or points of interest...Here are your people, your community, your support system that you've been longing for. Here it is on a plate. I'm like, oh, this is amazing."



### **OUTER CHANGE**

### Actions and ideas

Some participants are pursuing ideas that will increase a sense of belonging in their communities or increase the sustainability and livability of Southbank.

For example, a popular festival focused on connections and sustainability is now run by community members, most of whom participated in this project. It has been stabilised by the networks developed from this work and sustained through their commitment to community development.

### Engaging in civic decision-making

The workshop participants have been attending meetings to effect the changes they want to see. Two members attended the Future Melbourne Committee, where they discussed open spaces in Southbank and requested funding for a feasibility study for a new park. Others continue to lobby their elected members and meet with City of Melbourne employees to further their ideas.

### Increased social networks

Our project participants developed friendships that benefitted them as individuals and will benefit the community as they work together and encourage each other in their community-focused activities.



### WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The lessons from this project have taken some time to percolate through revisiting the evaluation data, wider reading, personal reflections, and conversations with participants and the project team.

### Create conditions that enable people to engage in social imagination

Care is essential to creating psychologically safe places for courage and risk-taking. People need to feel safe transgressing social boundaries and rewriting social scripts. Much has been written about life in fast-paced, urban environments and the stress and anxiety they often generate in the humans who live there. In these contexts, the role of care is even more critical and challenging to establish.

In addition, psychological safety was built by enabling supportive networks to grow across the groups through time and activities that encouraged them to get to know each other. This sense of cohesion helps to build courage for more meaningful and sustained action.

These conditions helped our participants learn new concepts and unlearn what 'good behaviour' in society looks like. It enabled them to engage with the ideas of agency and possibility and a revised idea of their role in society.

### Experimenting with embodied exercises can be very powerful

We experimented with world-building, design techniques and approaches, creativity exercises, reflection, and meditation to help people shift from the business-as-usual mindset and the accompanying scripts and norms that bound our thinking. We found that exercises that engaged the participants' emotions and bodies were the most effective. By using ways of knowing that are not cognitive and, therefore, less constrained by training, education, and our dominant ways of knowing, people can step out of what they have understood to be right and sensible and into what might be right on a deeper level of honesty and creativity.

The workshop design team, who usually inhabit the cognitive/thinking space, found developing these more embodied exercises difficult. Predictably, the exercises often worked well for only some of the group, with others who were perhaps naturally more pragmatic struggling with the wilder way of exploring what might be possible. They struggled to grasp that the fundamental assumptions that hold our society in place are social constructs that can be reconstructed by society (i.e. us).

### The challenge of civic agency in a consumer society

As facilitators, we designed a program to inspire the participants and help them feel a sense of agency, ownership of their ideas, and potential to shape their environment.

We witnessed how challenging it was to develop an active citizen mindset. We wondered whether this resulted from the strong messages of capitalism, extraction, commodification, and consumption that pervade dense urban environments like Southbank.

### Sociological imagination helped us to explore the underlying scripts

Some practitioners emphasise the highly creative side of social imagination. How might we be brave and creative to imagine how things could be different? The concept of sociological imagination provided the key to seeing things from a different perspective.

Sociological imagination highlights the interplay between individuals and the context we live in, highlighting how society shapes and is shaped by the individuals within it. It enables people to see their society as malleable, constructed by someone's imagination. We used this concept to ask our participants: "Why not my imagination? What kind of a society would I imagine, and can I build it?"

This academic work highlights the role of social scripts, imagined and created by a group of people, in dictating societal norms. How are our thinking and actions confined by our underlying values and their associated scripts? Given this, social imagination practice highlights those social scripts and considers what might be possible should we go off script. What new social scripts might we need to collectively imagine the future we need to tackle the challenges of our time?

### Values are a source of script

Values shape these scripts, which we may or may not share. This project grew from an understanding that the social scripts and the corresponding values that guide our society are grounded in imaginations of what we need. These imaginations no longer serve us, particularly in our increasing climate emergency.

We asked the group: What are our individual and collective values? The participants chose values they wanted to live by, including care, inclusion, and diversity. Highlighting the mismatch between the values held by the collective and those normalised in society provided a stronger impetus to rewrite the scripts.

What might a script based on the values of care, inclusion, or diversity be? What would a world shaped by those scripts look like? Would that world better support future generations?



## REFLECTIONS

This project faced limitations as a vehicle for transformative change in Southbank and our culture. However, as a social imagination experiment exploring what might be possible, we are very proud of the work.

### Our experience

Working with Southbankers on this project taught us more about social imagination as a mechanism for social and environmental change.

By exploring the conditions required and social imagination as a practice, we have a better idea of how deep and broad this work can be, what it looks like when done well, and the conditions it requires. We also have a clearer understanding of how difficult it is to bring people into a space where they want to break social scripts. It takes courage and creativity.

The 'imagineers', as we began to call them, became a group of friends committed to community action at different levels. They continue to work together and encourage each other as they exercise their agency in the community. It's difficult to say how much we can attribute this community work to their experience engaging with the project, but we are confident that some of this is the result of the relationships deepened, networks expanded, and ideas that inspired them.

The participants focused on building belonging and improving living conditions in Southbank, a necessary precursor to climate action.

### On future work

Our approach to social imagination leverages speculative design, futures work, and movement building, strongly emphasising building healthy democracies and strengthening civic voice and action.

In the future, we are interested in working with civil society and public servants to explore how we might collectively tackle the climate crisis. In our highly educated and capable society, what is the role of government? As we face complex, urgent, and adaptive challenges, what is the role of community?

Currently, towns and cities are missing out on opportunities to thrive in a net zero world, where communities and government work together to create resilient, sustainable, and connected places. We believe this can be done through experimentation, building relationships, and harnessing our collective imagination.

If this sounds like something you would like to imagine in your context, or if you'd like to have a conversation about how to bring it to life, please get in touch with <u>keira@centreforpublicimpact.org</u>.

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## **PROJECT TEAM**



### **Keira Lowther**

Centre for Public Impact, Project lead and facilitation





Hinterland Lab, Design and facilitation





City of Melbourne, Local connections



### Asitha Bandaranayaka

Centre for Public Impact, Logistics and welcoming experience





Centre for Public Impact, Leadership and direction





Centre for Public Impact, Design and feedback



# GET IN TOUCH WITH OUR TEAM info@centreforpublicimpact.org Follow us @CPI\_foundation

