

Centre for Social Justice &  
Inclusion

UTS

MAKING  
CHANGE  
TOGETHER

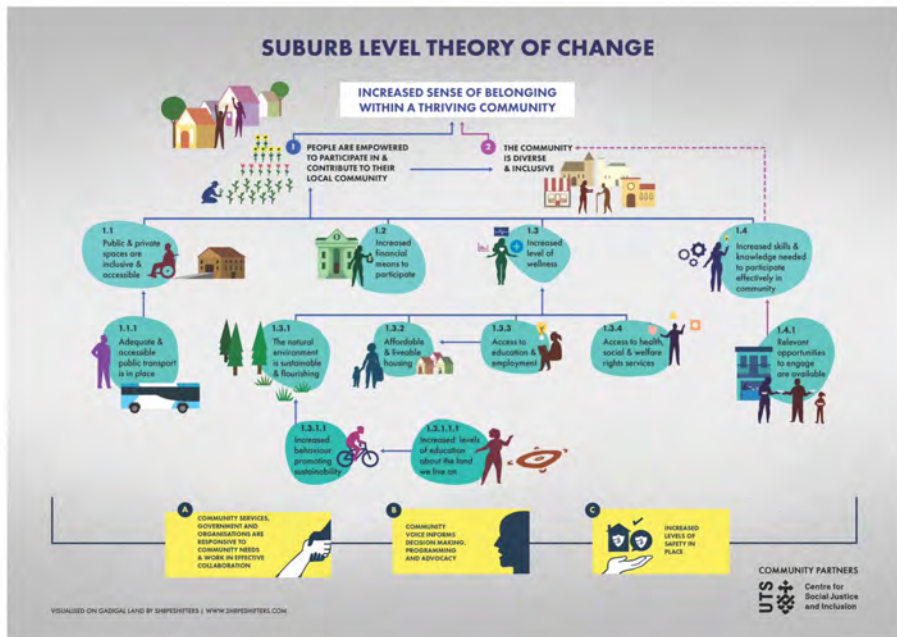
# Community Led Sustainable Cities

Place-Based Partnerships for Change



Source: National Centre for cultural competence

# The CSJI Social Impact Lab



- Years of place-based work in our precinct
- Amplifying the voices of our community – ensuring equity among major precinct change
- Suburb-level Theory of Change
- Building reputation and public trust for UTS
- Real world engagement and learning for students
- Research opportunities for faculty partners
- Social Justice and impact engagement for staff



## Local lens – Global Challenges

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- Global grand challenges have local impacts
- Local contexts create complexity – no one size fits all!
- Top-down approaches can leave communities behind and miss local opportunities
- Engaging communities in solutions builds participation and leverages local knowledge and resources
- Building broad leadership in the transition can lead to diverse and emergent impact







## A Diversity of Perspectives

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### **Community Partners Group**

7 Local Residents  
3 UTS Faculty  
3 City of Sydney  
Mission Australia  
Wesley Mission  
Uniting Harris Community Centre  
Glebe Youth Service

### **UTS**

Centre of Excellence in Sustainable Fashion and Textiles  
School of Design & Society  
Institute for Sustainable Futures  
ClimateKIC  
Activate  
SOUL

### **Community Organisations**

The Bower  
Bush 2 Bowl  
Scartree Ministry  
Bridge Housing  
Ultimo TAFE  
Jiwah  
Solar Citizens  
Pingala  
Parliament on King  
Kobi Shetty MP  
Sydney Royal Botanic Gardens  
Ultimo Community Centre  
St Helens Community Centre

*Plus, numerous community members who participated in workshops!*



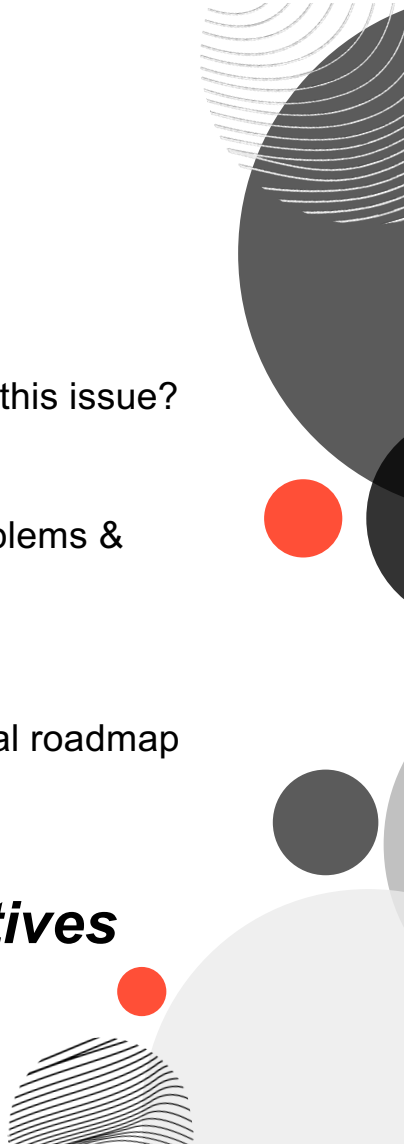


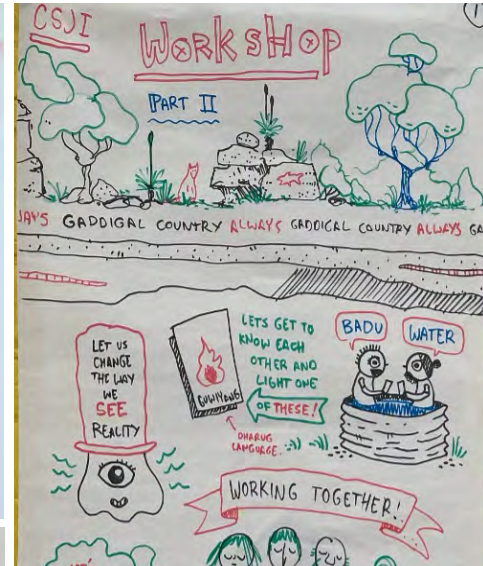
## Phase 1: Community Knowledge

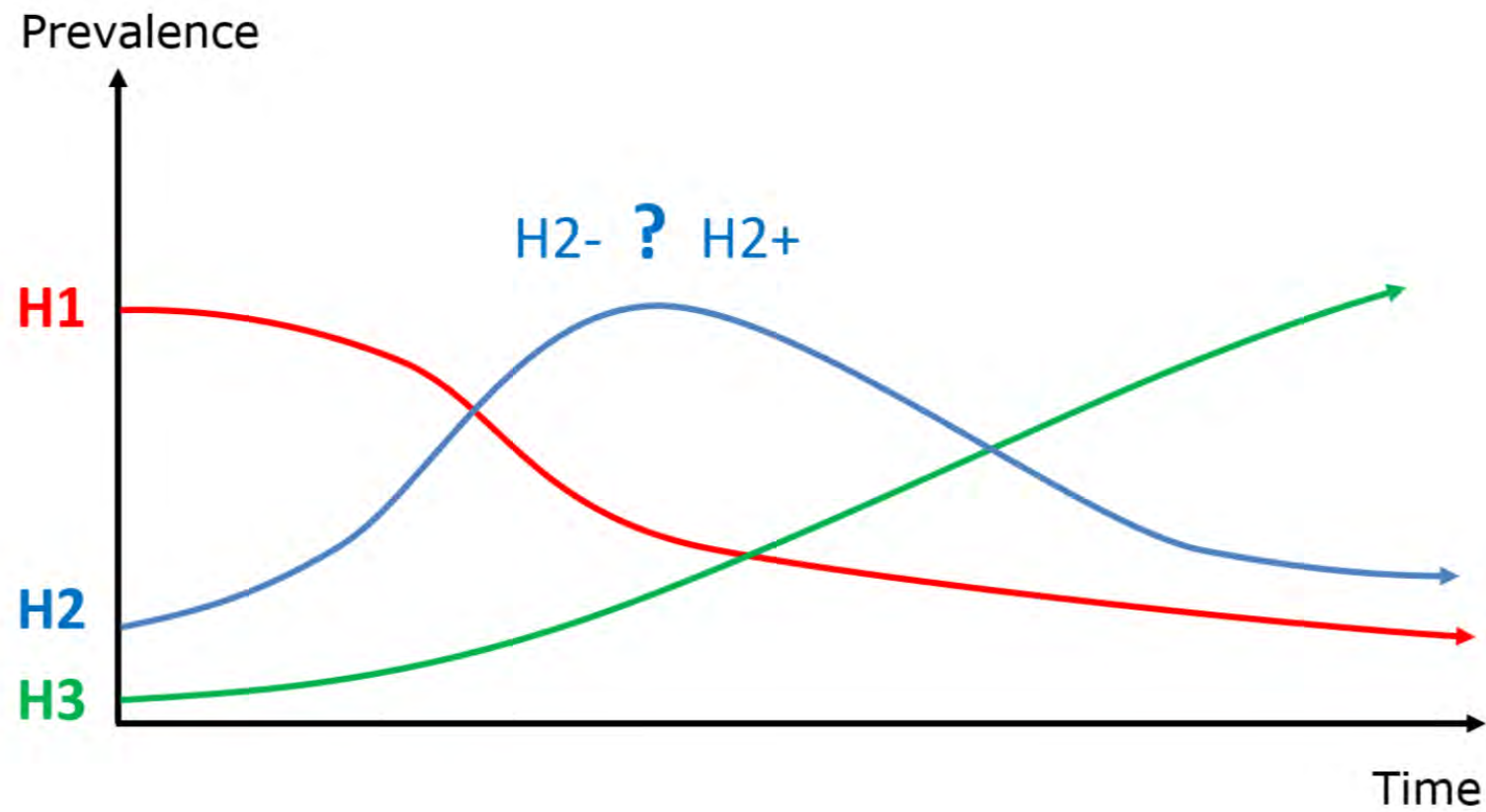
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- Sustainability is complex! How can we engage diverse communities in this issue?
- How to flip the standard approaches – focus on assets rather than problems & participants as researchers
- How can we leverage our community's lived experiences to build a local roadmap for a sustainable future?

***~ To unpack complexity, we used art, narratives  
and participant-led activities ~***

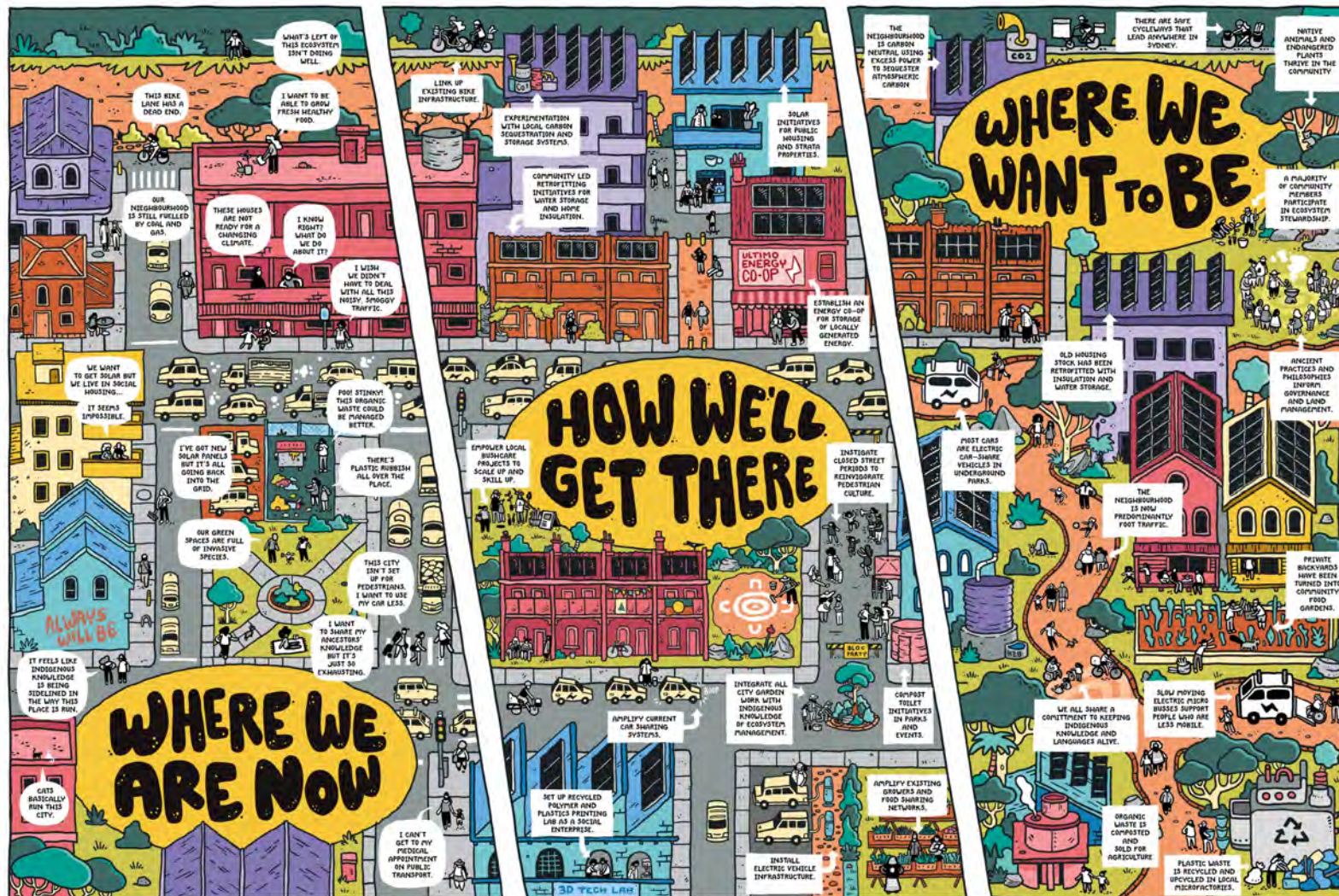






Source:

Sharpe, B., A. Hodgson, G. Leicester, A. Lyon, and I. Fazey. 2016. Three horizons: a pathways practice for transformation. *Ecology and Society* 21(2):47



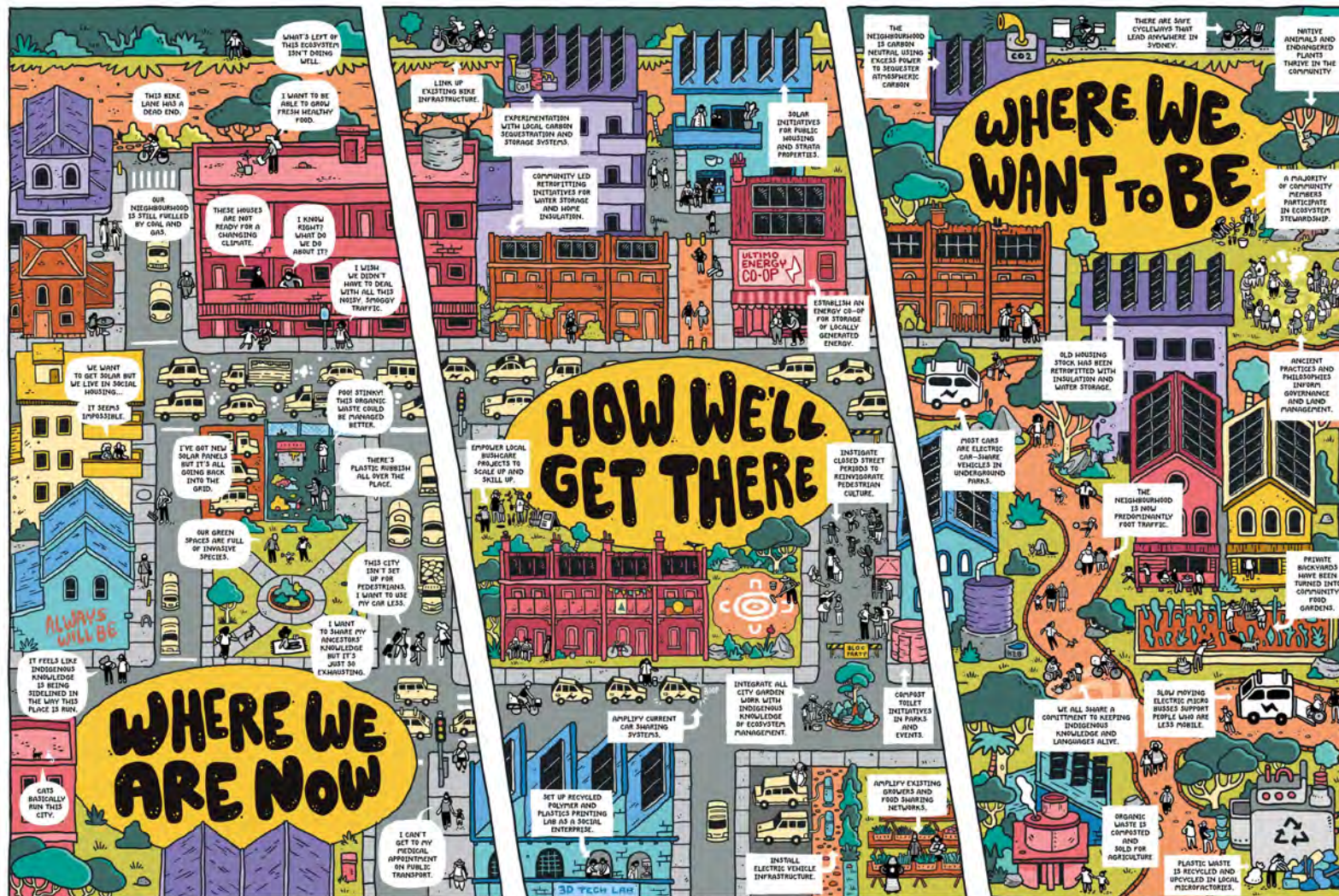
A SUSTAINABLE STORY OF CHANGE FOR OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

UTS+ Centre for Social Justice & Inclusion

SUPPORTED BY CITY OF SYDNEY







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## Phase 2: Our Commitment to Action

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- 3 community-led projects: Sustainable Food; Waste & Recycling; Climate Action
- \$5,000 funding each
- **Ongoing tailored support provided by the SIL team including:** evaluation support, budgeting, scheduling, and strategic advice, brokering local partnerships and networks
- **UTS student volunteers** assisted with event logistics, documentation, and facilitation - gaining hands-on experience in community-led sustainability work.



## Sustainable Food Revitalise Social Housing Community Garden

- Stronger, more engaged community connections
- Improved gardening skills and knowledge
- Reduction in anti-social behaviour and increased perceptions of safety



# Clothing Swap and Repair Workshop

- Zero waste: approx. 360 pieces of clothing were swapped and avoided landfill
- Skill building & repair
- Leadership & connection for the Chinese speaking community
- Connections between students & community





# Community Climate Action Forum

- 4 speakers: Solar Citizens, Jiwah, Pingala & UTS Institute for Sustainable Futures
- Suburb-based action toward climate resilience
- Ongoing climate action groups have been established across Pyrmont, Glebe and Ultimo

# More lessons!



**TAKE AWAY**

# START WITH STRENGTHS

When we talk about community change, it's easy to start with what's broken. What's not working. What needs fixing. But that approach can quickly feel overwhelming - like the problems are too big, and the solutions have to come from somewhere else.

**What if we started in a different place?**

**Asset-Based Community Development** is built on a simple but powerful idea: every community already has what it needs to create change. Skills. Knowledge. Networks. Local leaders. Stories of success. Spaces that bring people together. These are the assets - the building blocks - for community-led action.

When we focus on **what's strong, not just what's wrong**, people feel more motivated and capable. They shift from seeing themselves as service recipients to active participants. They start to say:

**This MATTERS to us and we know what to do... So let's get STARTED.**

That's the spirit behind our approach. By asking what's working, what's possible and what people are proud of, we help shift the story from one of scarcity to one of strength - and from talk to action.

**HOT TIPS:**

- TAP INTO LOCAL NETWORKS.** PARTNER WITH TRUSTED COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO CAN SPREAD THE WORD AND BRING OTHERS IN - PERSONAL CONNECTIONS ARE POWERFUL ASSETS.
- ASK WHAT'S WORKING.** USE QUESTIONS THAT INVITE PEOPLE TO REFLECT ON THEIR BEST EXPERIENCES. THESE POSITIVE STORIES ARE GREAT STARTING POINTS FOR BUILDING REAL CHANGE.
- START WITH WHAT YOU'VE GOT.** BEGIN BY MAPPING THE SKILLS, SPACES, AND ENERGY ALREADY IN THE COMMUNITY - THEN CO-DESIGN PROJECTS THAT BUILD ON THOSE STRENGTHS.
- BRING IN COMMUNITY EXPERTS.** INVITE LOCAL PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS WITH HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE TO HELP SHAPE AND GUIDE THE WORK.

**WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT STRENGTH-BASED APPROACHES:**

- START WITH WHAT'S ALREADY WORKING AND AMPLIFY THESE EXPERIENCES. ASK PEOPLE TO SHARE THE BEST EXPERIENCES THEY'VE HAD - WITH SUSTAINABILITY, CONNECTION, OR COMMUNITY CARE. THESE STORIES ARE SEEDS FOR ACTION.**
- LET THE COMMUNITY LEAD. COMMUNITY ASSETS BELONG TO THE COMMUNITY. ORGANISATIONS SHOULD SUPPORT AND AMPLIFY THEM - NOT TAKE OVER.**
- KEEP THE ENERGY MOVING. DON'T GET STUCK IN ENDLESS PLANNING. ONCE STRENGTHS ARE IDENTIFIED, MOVE QUICKLY TO BUILD ON THEM - EVEN SMALL STEPS COUNT.**
- SHIFT THE MINDSET. IT'S EASY TO SLIP BACK INTO A PROBLEM FIRST WAY OF THINKING. STAY FOCUSED ON STRENGTHS - NOT TO IGNORE CHALLENGES, BUT TO APPROACH THEM FROM A PLACE OF CONFIDENCE AND CAPABILITY.**

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To motivate people to take action, we need to:

- Start with the community's strengths, what the community already has, - skills, relationships, networks, and ideas - and use these as the foundation for action.
- Centre community priorities in decision-making and use academic & professional expertise to support - not steer - the work.
- Act quickly on community energy and ideas to maintain momentum and avoid burnout.
- Respect that community assets belong to the community - they should guide how those assets are used and shared.

**TAKE AWAY:**

# USE STORIES AND ART TO TACKLE COMPLEXITY

Sustainability. Climate change. Systems change. These are big, complex topics — and they can feel overwhelming.

So how do we explore them in a way that feels real and relevant for local communities?

One of the most powerful ways is through stories and art.

Storytelling and creative activities help people reflect on their own experiences, values and visions — without needing to be experts.

These tools create space for people to connect with each other, express what matters to them, and **imagine new possibilities for the future.**

**HOT TIP: YOU DON'T NEED TO BE AN ARTIST**  
SIMPLE SKETCHES OR PROMPTS CAN SPARK IMAGINATION, BUILD CONNECTION, AND HELP EXPLORE COMPLEX ISSUES IN CREATIVE, INCLUSIVE AND MEANINGFUL WAYS.

**FACILITATOR TIP: TEST CREATIVE ACTIVITIES ON YOURSELVES FIRST.**  
YOU'LL SPOT UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES AND BUILD EMPATHY. BONUS: SHARING YOUR OWN ROUGH EXAMPLE HELPS REASSURE PARTICIPANTS THAT ARTISTIC SKILLS AREN'T NEEDED TO TAKE PART.



A SUSTAINABLE STORY OF CHANGE FOR OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD


CITY OF SYDNEY

To help communities engage with complex issues, we can:

- Use storytelling to surface lived experience and make space for people to reflect on their role in shaping the future.
- Use simple visual tools – like drawings, diagrams, or storyboards – to unpack systemic issues without needing technical language.
- Focus on the conversations that emerge through art-making, rather than the end product - these dialogues build understanding and connection.
- Reflect community input back in real time - through visual note-taking or live sketching - to build trust, recognition, and shared ownership.

**TAKE AWAY**

# MAKE EVALUATION MEANINGFUL



**LEARN WHAT MATTERS TO COMMUNITY**

Evaluation doesn't have to be boring.

When it's done well, it becomes a powerful tool to understand what's working, what's not, and why it matters — especially in community projects led by local people.

To be truly meaningful, evaluation needs to reflect the voices, values, and lived experiences of the people involved. It's not just about ticking boxes or counting numbers — it's about telling the real story of change.

**10+ TIPS:**

**DESIGN IT TOGETHER:** Ask the community: "What would show us this is working?" Let them shape what gets measured.

**TELL THE STORY:** Numbers are fine, but quotes, photos, drawings and real-life moments bring the impact to life.

**STAY FLEXIBLE:** Community work is ever changing. Be ready to adapt how you measure progress as things evolve.

**REFLECT AS YOU GO:** Take time to pause and talk. Regular check-ins, group chats, or casual debriefs often reveal the most useful insights.

**HERE'S WHAT WE'VE LEARNED:**

**LET THE COMMUNITY DEFINE SUCCESS.** TRADITIONAL EVALUATION OFTEN OVERLOOKS WHAT REALLY MATTERS. FOR OUR PROJECT, SUCCESS MEANT PEOPLE FELT MORE CONNECTED, PROUD OF THEIR NEIGHBOURHOOD, CONFIDENT TO SPEAK UP, AND READY TO TAKE ACTION — EVEN IN SMALL WAYS.


**KEEP IT SIMPLE AND CREATIVE.** FORGET LONG FORMS AND TECHNICAL JARGON. WE USED MAPS, STORYTELLING, STICKY NOTES AND GROUP REFLECTIONS — TOOLS THAT MADE IT EASY AND ENJOYABLE FOR PEOPLE TO SHARE WHAT THEY THOUGHT AND FELT.

**BUILD EVALUATION INTO THE JOURNEY.** DON'T WAIT UNTIL THE END TO ASK, "HOW DID WE DO?" WE WOVE REFLECTIVE MOMENTS INTO THE PROJECT FROM THE START, USING THEM TO GUIDE NEXT STEPS AND RESPOND TO WHAT WAS EMERGING.

**LOOK AT PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE IMPACT.** WE DIDN'T JUST ASK WHAT CHANGED IN THE COMMUNITY. WE ASKED HOW BEING INVOLVED CHANGED PEOPLE — THEIR CONFIDENCE, SKILLS, NETWORKS AND SENSE OF BELONGING.

**ALLOW SPACE FOR THE UNEXPECTED.** DON'T JUST FOCUS ON WHAT YOU THOUGHT YOU WOULD ACHIEVE — ASK OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS THAT ALLOW PEOPLE TO EXPRESS UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES. "WHAT HAS SURPRISED YOU?" IS A GREAT PLACE TO START.

**ASK FOR FEEDBACK — AND USE IT.** PARTICIPANTS HAVE VALUABLE INSIGHTS INTO WHAT WORKED AND WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED. LISTENING AND LEARNING TOGETHER MAKES FUTURE WORK STRONGER.

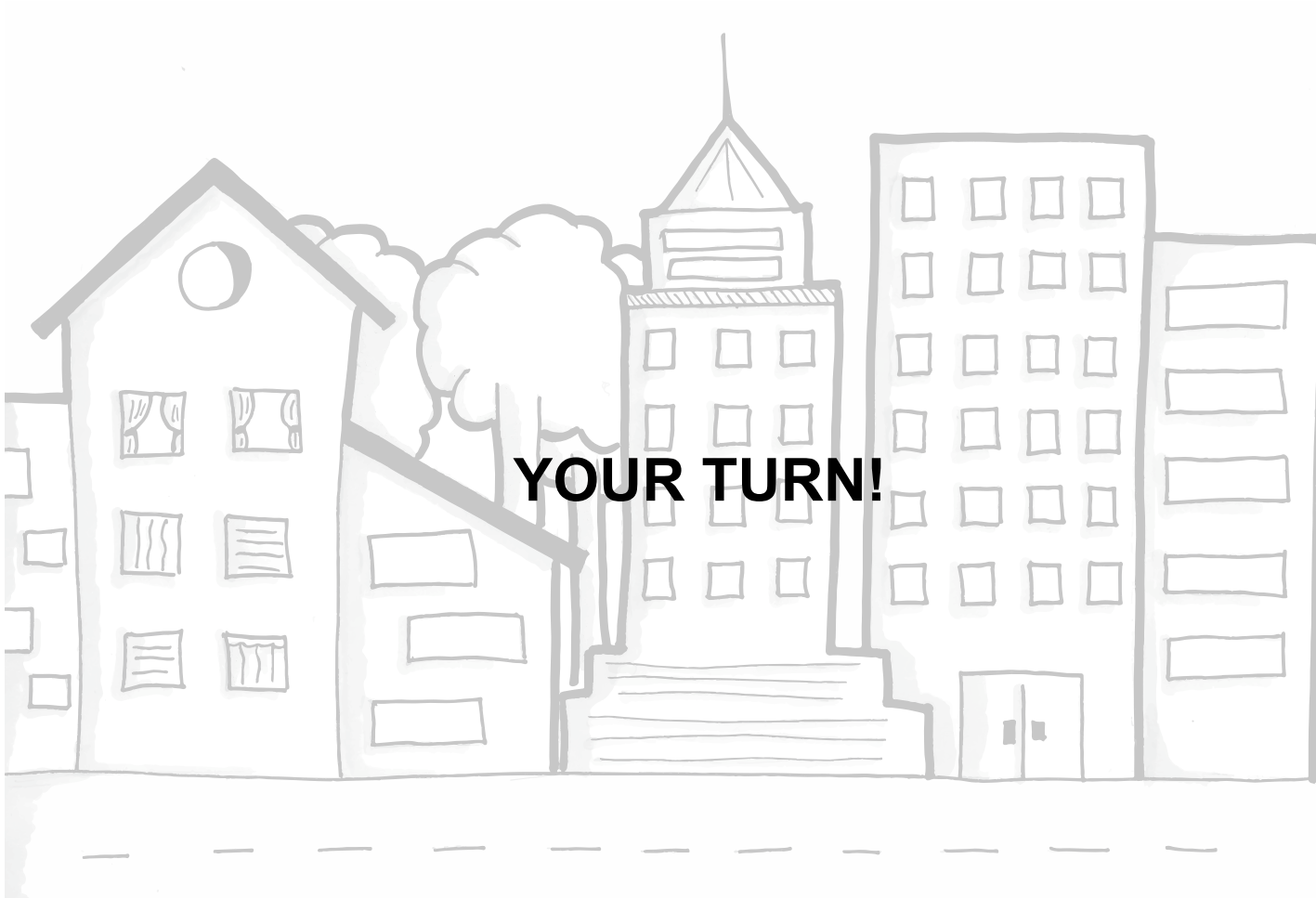


To evaluate community projects in meaningful ways, we can:

- Work with communities to define what success looks like, based on their priorities and values.
- Use simple, creative tools that allow people to reflect in their own words and styles.
- Embed evaluation throughout the project—don't leave it to the end.
- Assess both the wider community impact and how participation affects individual confidence, skills, and connection.
- Ask participants what worked and what didn't — and use their feedback to improve future practice.

Receive a copy!







## **Appreciative Inquiry**

Start with the 'best of what is' to create the first part of our story!

Turn to your neighbour & have a conversation with each other.

5 minutes each.



## Appreciative Inquiry

*Think about a time when you connected to a **movement for positive social or environmental change**. It could be as big or as small as you like and your role could be as a leader, contributor or supporting witness. A time when you felt energised and optimistic about the ability of everyday people to create change.*

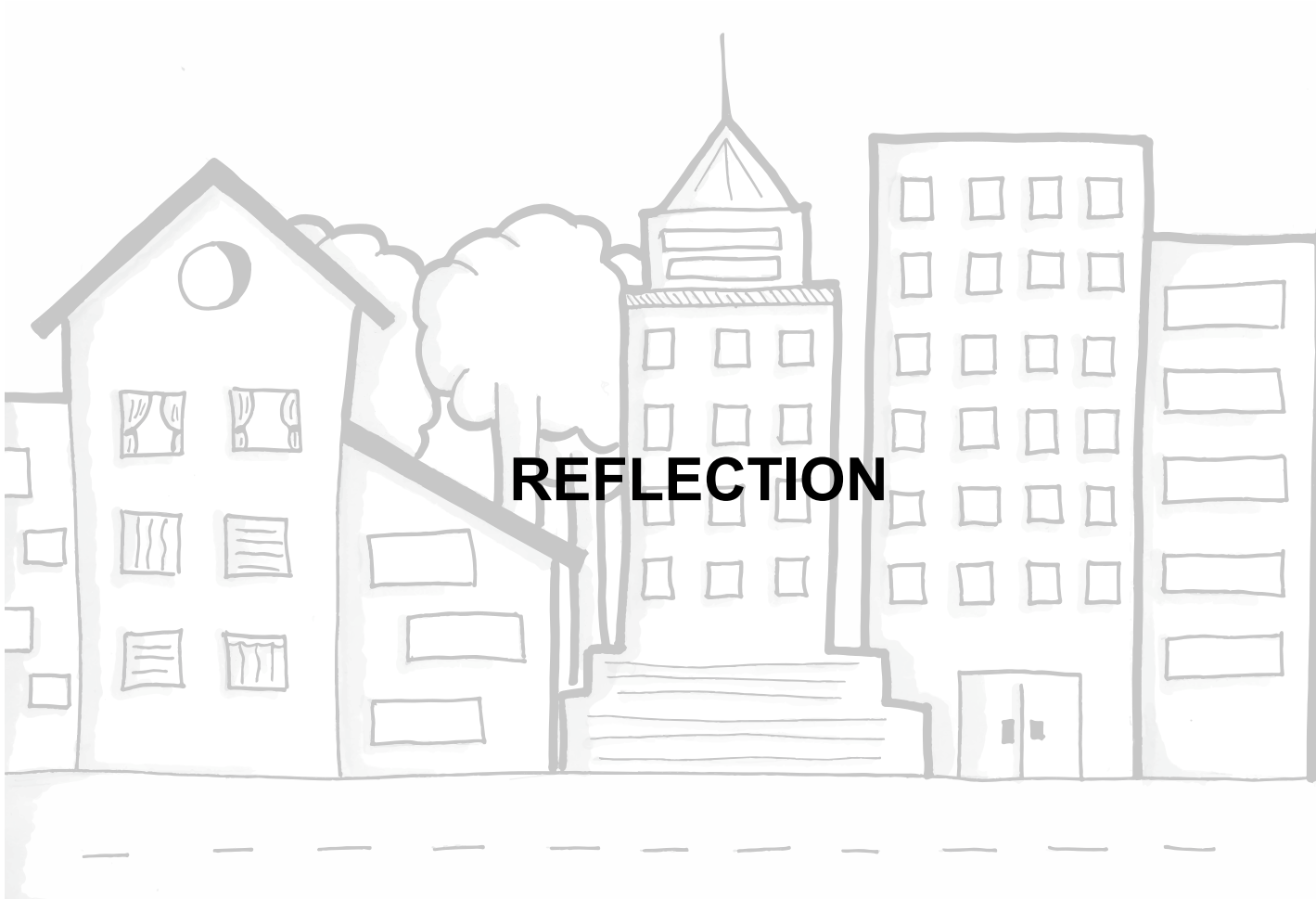
Describe this moment in 60 seconds or less

What made this moment meaningful to you?

Can you describe 3 things that made it feel like change was possible?

What networks, resources, physical spaces, technologies or other assets were activated in support of this change?

Whose knowledges or perspectives were vital in building momentum for change?



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Thank you!

