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Re-centering the community in community engagement: from public to community engagement

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Re-Centering the Community in Community Engagement

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Overview

When our team embarked on this research journey, we were all coming from a place of interest in community engagement. We knew from personal and anecdotal experience how powerful community engagement could be to create better futures, but also felt the way community engagement was done currently was not achieving its potential.

We began with two primary research objectives. We wanted to understand how...

1. Community engagement could be decolonized; and
2. Power structures impact engaged communities

We also had several secondary research objectives. We wanted to...

- Understand how to make the decision-making process more collaborative
- Identify the people who are impacted versus those who are invested, informed and/or interested in community engagement; and
- Understand how innovative solutions and/or channels can be used to enhance community engagement and implement community feedback

We began this project with many questions, including:

- What are the barriers to implementing all the good information that comes from community engagement?
- How is decision making received by each stakeholder?
- How can innovation / technology be leveraged to enhance community engagement?
- What is decision making and how does it sit vis a vis leadership and the collective? Is decision making a process owned by only a few?
- How can we change the method of engaging with the community to create fundamentally different / new outcomes outside the colonized norm?
- How do we uncover political agendas?
- How do we uncover the voices least heard?
- How does language impact community engagement? How do power dynamics expressed in language undermine desired futures in community engagement? How does language such as “decision makers” hinder the implementation of community insights?

About the System

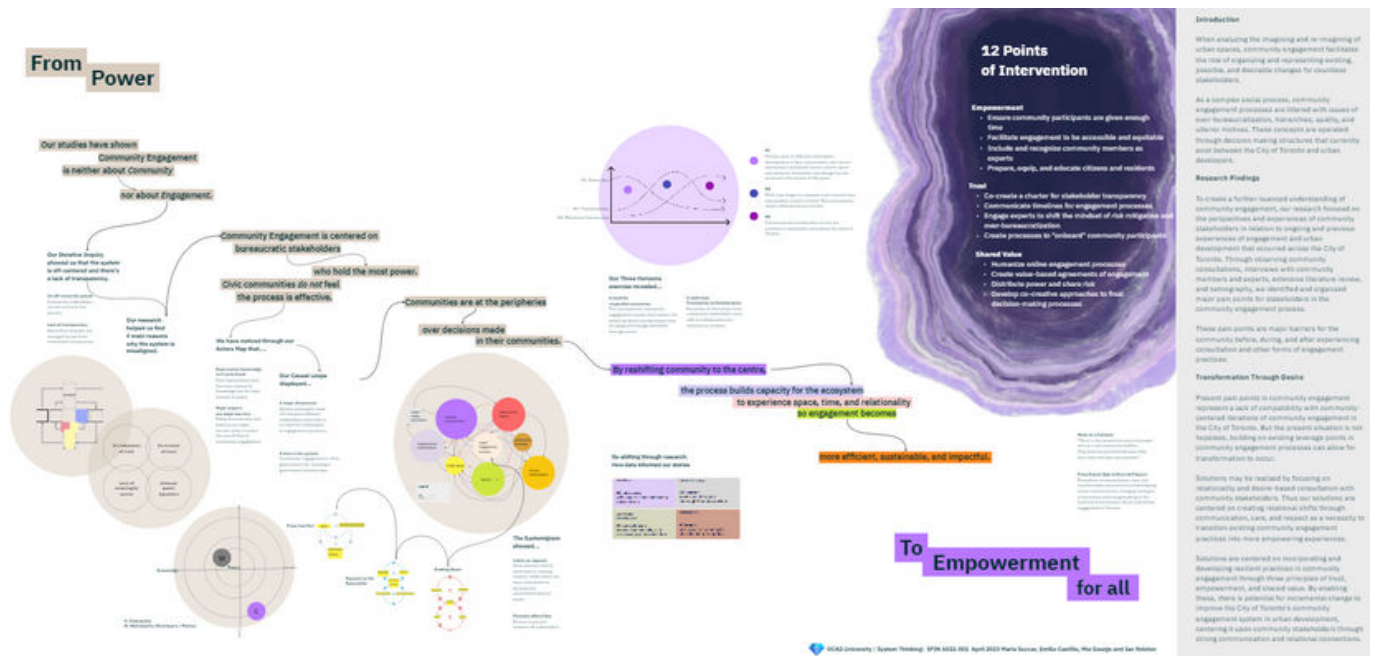


Figure 1: Synthesis Map illustrating the system of Community Engagement

The further in our research we got, the more we realized that community engagement in the way it is currently conducted is broken, and there is not one specific perpetrator to this brokenness. Rather, the act of community engagement is filled with a large majority of participants from all stakeholder groups wanting to do good, but there are several small and big ways that the process falls short. This is where our report comes in. The following report summarizes our findings and shares how system stakeholders conducting community engagement – the developers, builders, community agencies, and government organizations – can act in big and small ways to improve and re-center the community in the community engagement process, leading to positive change for all involved. Within these pages you will find the system mapping tools used, in conjunction with key research methods, to lead to our key insights and the areas of opportunity for further exploration moving forward. In short, it is a call to action for all of us to do better collectively with community engagement, while also providing practical suggestions for how this can be done.

Key Findings

An off-centered system
Community stakeholders are not central in the process of community engagement.

Lack of transparency
Hierarchies of power are managed by low-level community transparency.

Tools Used to Identify System Boundaries & Scope
Iterative Inquiry

Major Components & Relationships

Key Findings

Limits on impacts

Some avenues lead to dead ends in creating impacts, while others are more centralized on bureaucratic operationalization of power.

Tensions affect flow

Distrust is present between all stakeholders.

A major disconnect

System archetypes show rifts between different stakeholders with little or no room for relationality in engagement processes.

A bias in the system

Community engagement is often government led, resulting in government-initiative bias

Tools Used to Identify Major Components & Relationships

Systemigram
Causal Loops

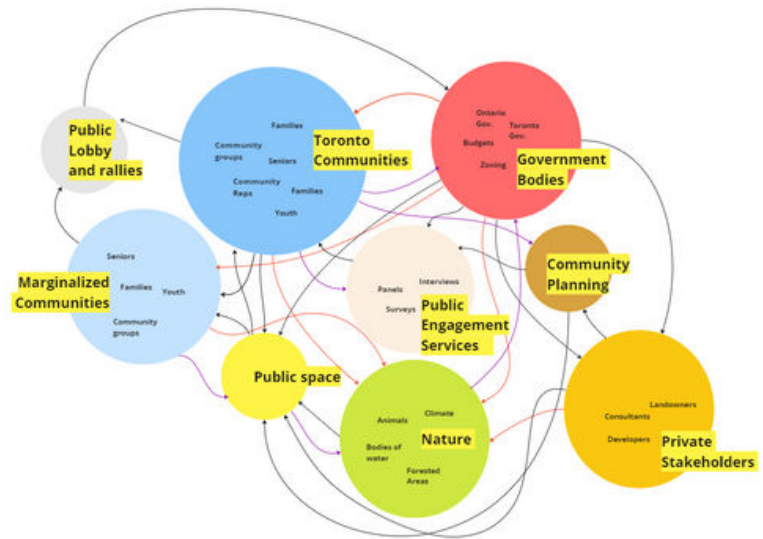


Figure 2: A systemigram was used to better understand major system components and their relationality (or lack thereof) to each other

Although community engagement is positioned as an opportunity for fair and equitable consideration of all feedback, inequity exists in practice. Power is centered on the city and developers, with a formal bureaucratic process and language seen as most valid by governance bodies. There is a perceived sense of unification and partnership between the city / government and developers that is reinforced in the format of public consultations, resulting in an us versus them mentality. For example, consultations are structured so that time is divided in half - the first and most prominent half dedicated to the city and developers speaking, and the second half dedicated to community members, regardless of how numerous the latter half is. Special permissions are also given to city and developer members, such as the ability to mute and unmute, type in the chat, appear on screen, and respond directly to questions, whereas these capabilities are not afforded to other participants.

Stakeholder Mapping

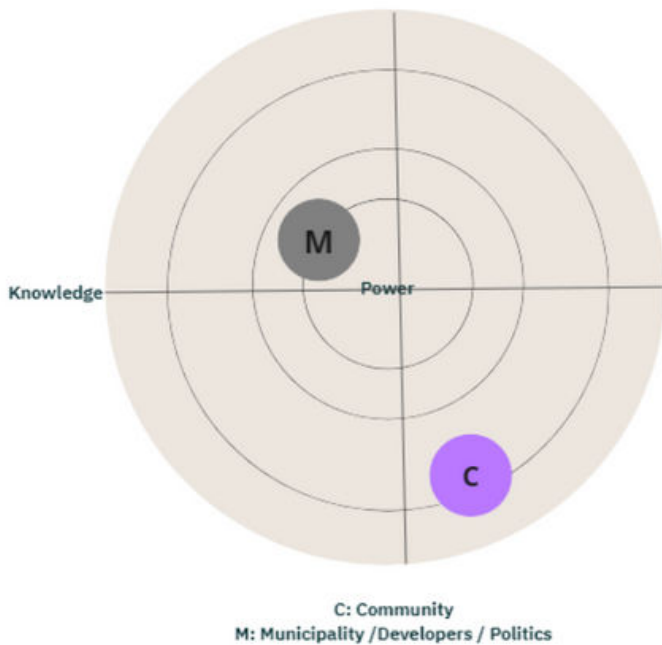


Figure 4: A simplified version of the detailed Actors Map (included in the Appendix) used to better understand stakeholders in the Community Engagement system

Key Findings

Experiential knowledge isn't prioritized

Civic communities have the most amount of knowledge but the least amount of power.

Major players are major barriers

Policy, bureaucracy, and industry are major barriers when it comes the overall flow of community engagement.

Tools Used to Support Stakeholder Mapping & Analysis

Actors Map
Expert Interviews
Observation

Current practitioners in the field of community engagement spoke to how community engagement in its current state is primarily a risk management tool meant to share responsibility and - should something go wrong - blame. In the meantime, community members frequently referred to their participation in community engagement activities as an act of civic engagement and community belonging. Community members expressed an underlying desire to contribute to the community. When community members perceive engagement as a form of action but institutions view it as a form of risk mitigation, lack of meaningful action from those in power results. Engagement as a box to check leads to disillusionment, distrust and disengagement from those whose feedback could be most valuable.

While expert interviews revealed public engagement is institution-centric and extractive, interviews with community members revealed an erosion of trust that would occur through repeated instances of feeling unheard, dismissed, and deceptively engaged with. In one instance, for example, a community member overheard his case being ridiculed by council members - those in positions of power to support or decline feedback - before even having an opportunity to speak to his case. Instances such as these speak to the dehumanizing nature of community engagement, which can occur incrementally through the perception of false hope offered over time, or suddenly through breaches of faith such as the one described. With an erosion of trust comes the degradation of community sense of belonging and the continuation of mistrust between all parties.

Proposal

3 Key Principles

Empowerment

Empowerment is necessary to shift power dynamics to better connect community members, government staff and officials, and adjacent entities through shared values, shared accountabilities, and shared risks in meeting stakeholder needs with transparency. Empowerment in this approach distributes the power of choice and influence more equitably amongst participants, resulting in strengthened stakeholder relationships informed by interconnected human needs.

Trust

Trust needs to be affirmed by consistent actions and processes to address the erosion of public trust in government. This was a sentiment our research uncovered that has ossified over years of dehumanizing community engagement practices. Distrust in the system will persist without trust being re-established through human-centered engagement, practices that affirm transparency, and collaborative final decision-making processes with evidence of how community input has informed the decisions made.

Shared Value

Without a shared understanding of what is valued in the community engagement process, relational reconciliation cannot be achieved in current approaches. Government and communities must align to a desired future, based on working relationships that see each others' needs are met equitably. Successful engagement will be achieved when community engagement processes become bound by productive, authentic caring relationships rooted in humanity, where value between parties is tacitly understood.

A Call to Action through 12 Points of Intervention

Our call for action supports relational shifts to create opportunities that empower and establish trust and shared values within the community engagement process. These interventions are catalysts for incremental change within the current system. We hope that collectively each contributes to transformational change to achieve our desired future, where power in decision-making is equitable distributed and informed by positive relationships.

Key Findings

A need for respectful connection

This unresponsive community engagement system necessitates the means by which transformation may be supported through identified leverage points.

A shift from Transaction to Collaboration

Extraction of information from community stakeholders must shift to collaborative and inclusive co-creation.

Tools Used to Identify Desired Futures & Areas of Opportunity

Three Horizons
Intervention Strategy

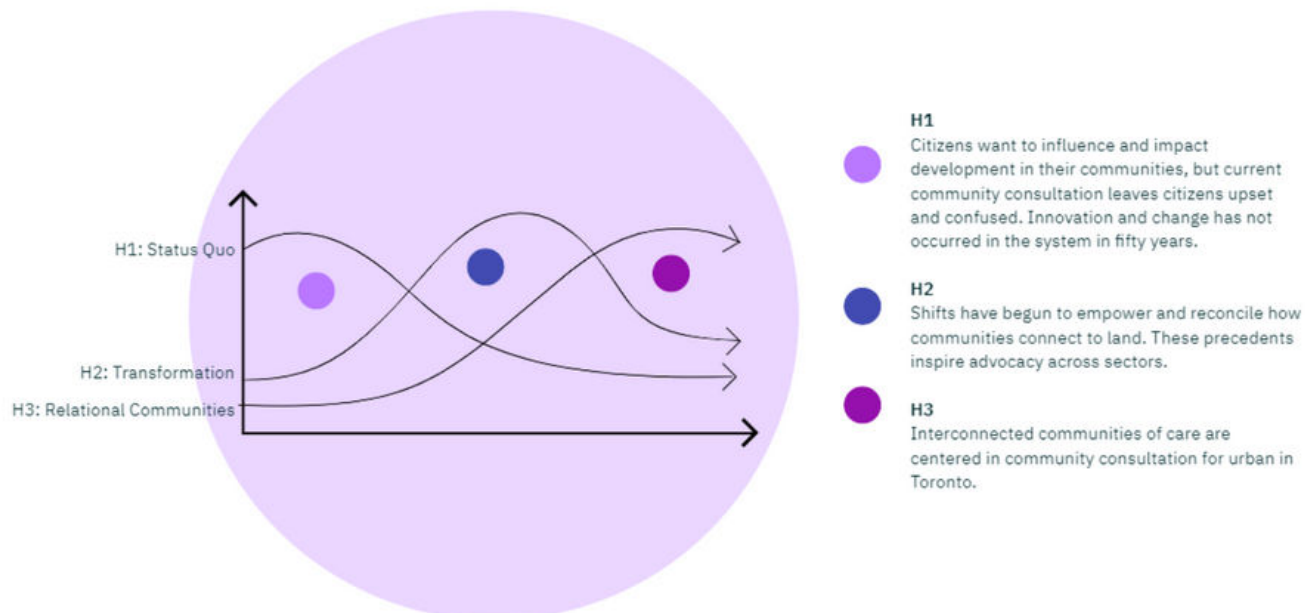


Figure 5: A depiction of the Three Horizons exercise (included in the Appendix) undertaken to better understand the desired future for the Community Engagement system

Empowerment

- 1 Ensure community participants are given enough time to impact** / frame items that require deliberation, prior to when a final decision is required (and delay decision making if time for collaborative problem framing is inadequate)
- 2 Facilitate accessible and equitable engagements** and support meaningful discourse, transparent processes, and relational connection before decision-making
- 3 Include and recognize community members as experts** in the development and decision-making processes
- 4 Prepare, equip, and educate citizens/residents** about development processes and critical issues needing mitigation

Trust

- 5 Co-create a charter for stakeholder transparency** that all are made aware of and given the chance to agree to
- 6 Communicate timelines for engagement** processes, identifying opportunities for community inputs, interventions, and influence in the development process
- 7 Engage experts to shift the mindset of risk mitigation and over-bureaucratization of processes**, thereby helping to address root causes of fear that paralyze innovation
- 8 Create processes to onboard community participants to create a shared knowledge base** from which to better discuss issues within the community engagement and development processes

Shared Value

- 9 Humanize the online engagement process.** Improve service delivery to address confusing registration and unresponsive systems
- 10 Create value-based agreements of engagement between** existing communities and developers to ensure representation and co-creation
- 11 Distribute power;** share risk and reward to support collaboration and partnership
- 12 Develop co-creative approaches** to final decision-making processes that align to stakeholder and community needs

Other Impacts

There exists the power to change

Even with all the barriers currently existing in community engagement, it is not a hopeless cause. Research and interviews have also shown people are inherently civically-engaged community builders. People possess potential and wisdom. And there is a wonderful cohort of people who are ready and willing to wrestle with tough problems and be vulnerable.

Improvements to community engagement, along with community engagement itself, needs to be an iterative process that changes based on context.

The good news is that people seem to know the ingredients of a strong, vibrant community. Everybody *wants* strong, vibrant communities. There is a strong, underlying desire amongst those in our communities to contribute.

Opportunity exists for community engagement to create a sense of community belonging. Community engagement has potential to influence and impact. There is unharnessed power within the community engagement process, ready to be unleashed.

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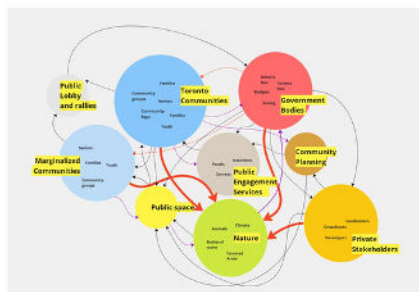
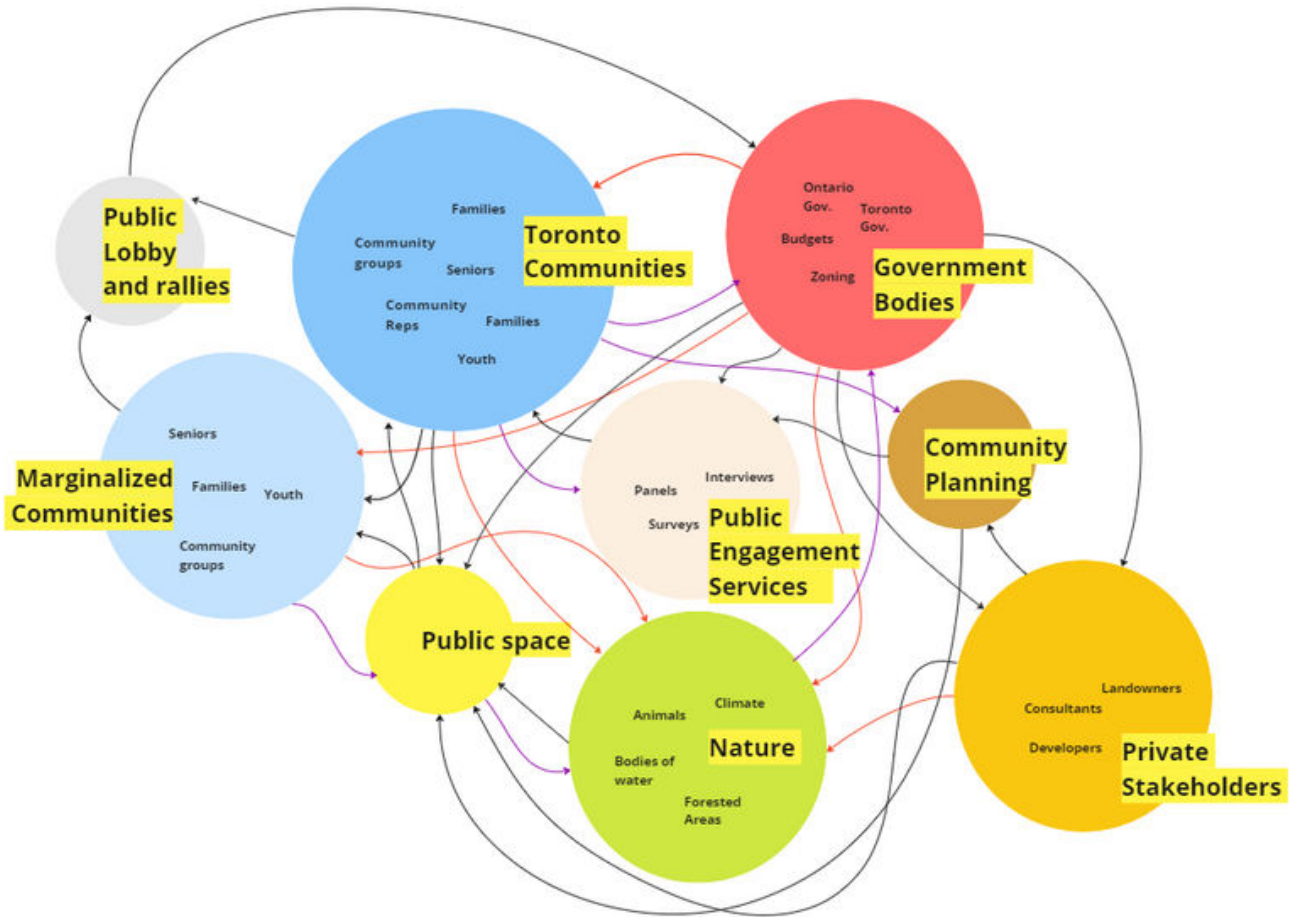
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Appendix: Detailed System Maps

Iterative Inquiry

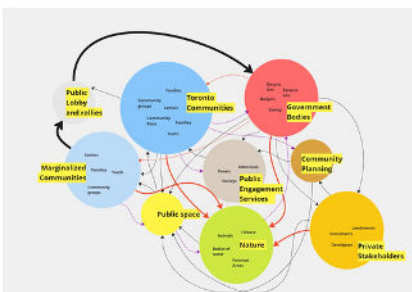


Systemigram



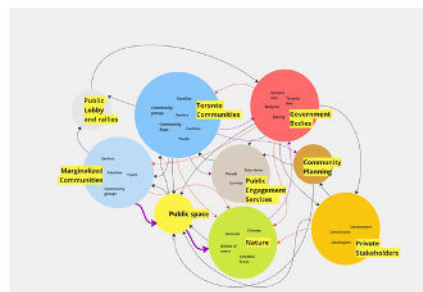
Insight 01 Tension with Nature

All modules of human actors place tensions onto natural spaces due to urban relationality to natural actants in public spaces. This prompted our team to accentuate potential futures where this tense relationality may be shifted in urban spaces.



Insight 02 Rallying as a bridge of connection

Due to social barriers, pressures and tensions on marginalized communities, public rallying appears to be the most significant channel through which these stakeholders can generate space for their voices to be heard by the governing bodies.

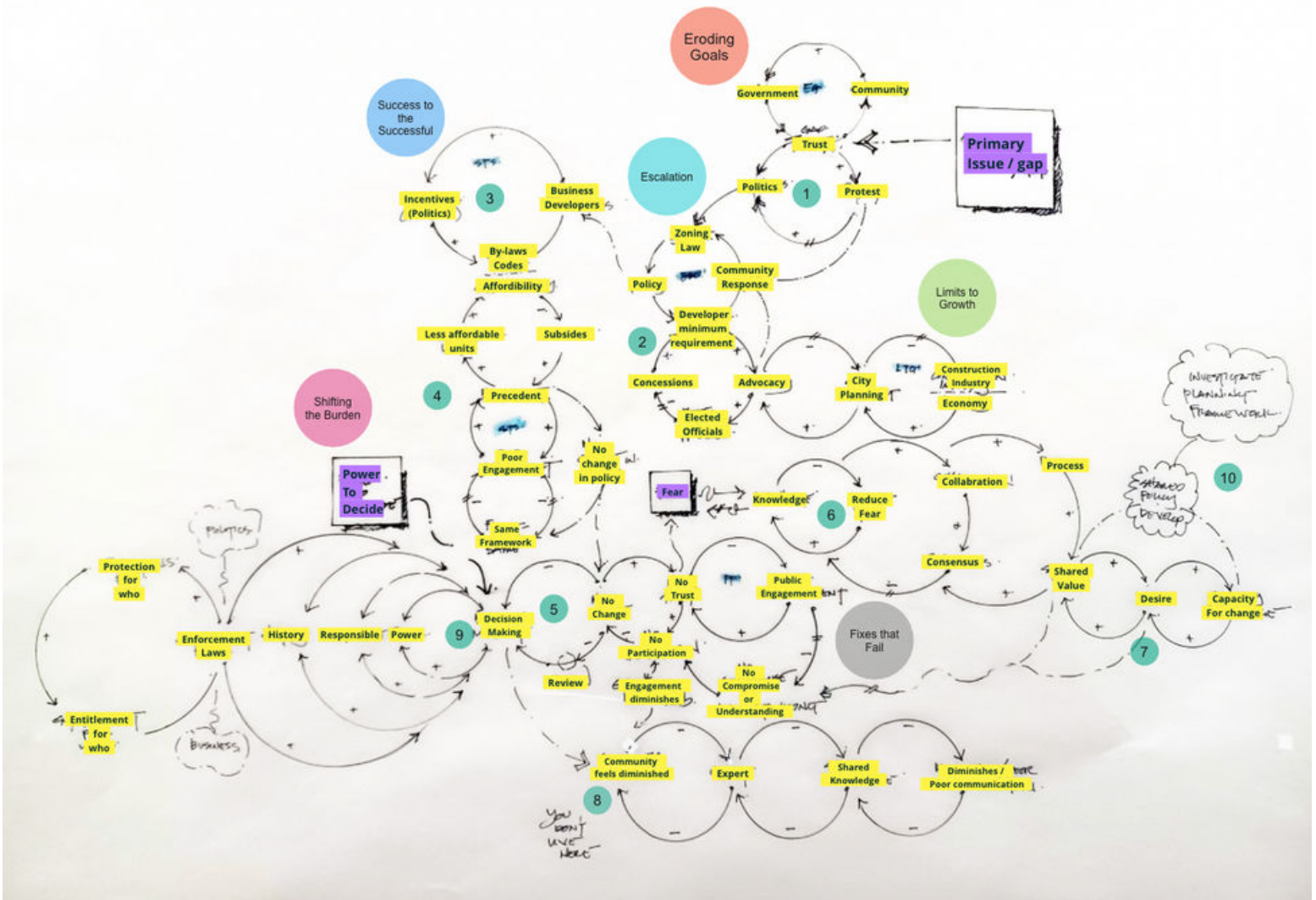


Insight 03 The rising of the notion of 'relationality'

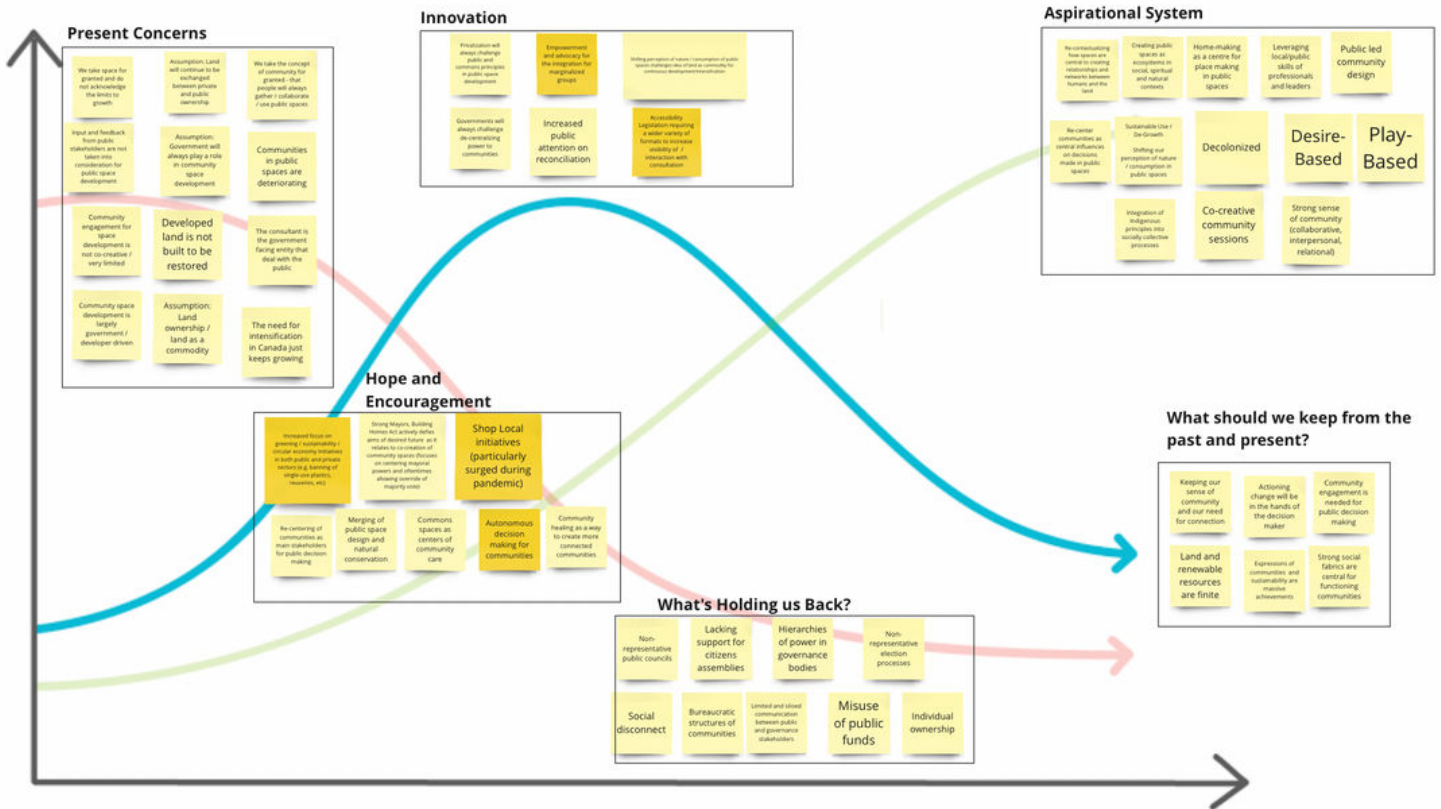
Marginalized communities find various barriers when interacting with private actors and organizations.

In this, we see that the relationality between marginalized communities and public spaces differs insofar as accessibility to these spaces allows stakeholders to value and connect to these spaces with intent and meaning, unlike other public and private stakeholders.

Causal Loops



Three Horizons



Intervention Strategy

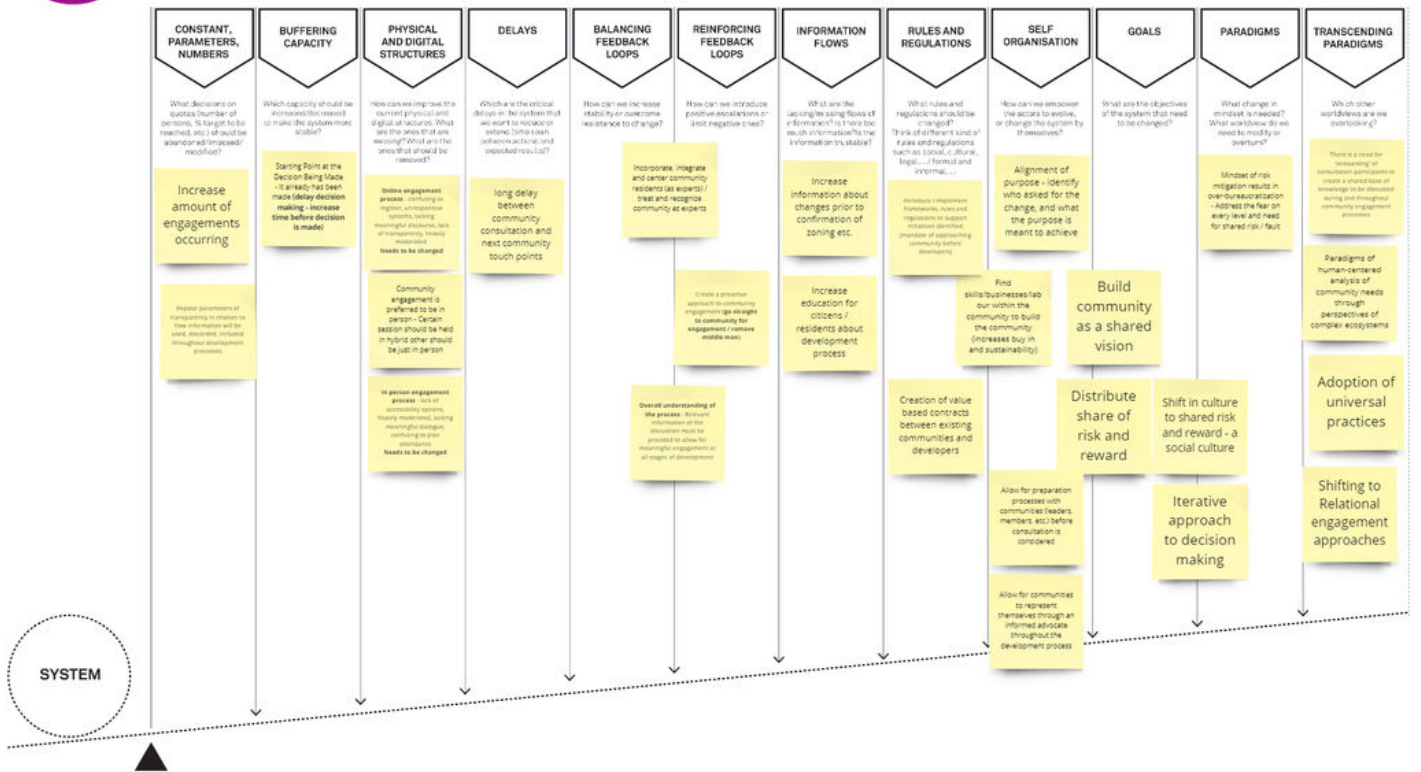


INTERVENTION STRATEGY

Exploring the Possibility Space



How is community seeing themselves in the processes - are they able to decide this image



www.systemicdesigntoolkit.org

Recommended size: A4



Figure A1: Several insights were identified using the Intervention Strategy template based on Donella Meadows twelve leverage points, but the final 12 Intervention Points presented in the team's Call to Action were selected based on their ability to be manageably implemented by all system stakeholders in a way to result in incremental yet significant system change

Insight Dotmocracy

Figure A2: Since research was divided amongst team members, with each member taking a different form of research (e.g. netnography, observation, literature review, interview), team members underwent a dotmocracy (dot voting) exercise to hone in on key insights. Individual insights were initially captured by each person based on the research they conducted, followed by time to review all insights on the board and vote for those that seemed to resonate most with findings

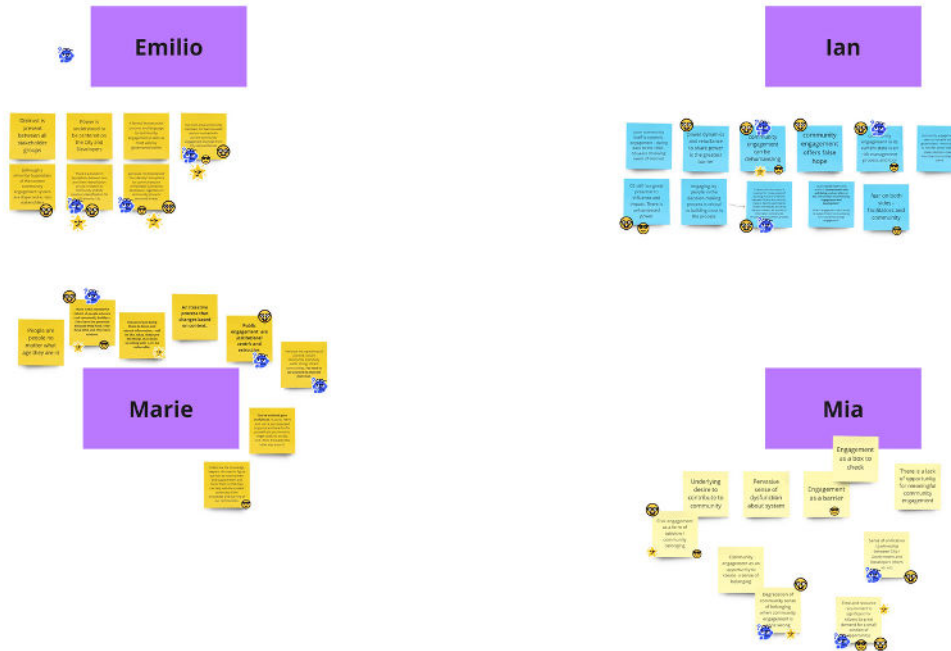


Figure A3: The findings that were voted upon by the entire group were then filtered and further analyzed for key insights, with the rest kept as supporting / secondary insights. Through analysis, team members found these insights seemed to only scratch the surface of a deeper story. Conversations with Professor Bowes helped guide the team towards clearer understanding, helping the team identify the underlying story to these insights: the shift from power to empowerment, and the need for incremental, integrative changes to influence the larger system

Research Conducted



Findings

