

Designing the neighbourhood of the XXI century, through strategic innovation



21st Century Neighbourhood Economics – Neighbourhood Lab



21st Century Neighbourhood Economics in times of great transition.

“It could be that the neighbourhood, not the individual, is the essential unit of social change. If you’re trying to improve lives, maybe you have to think about changing many elements of a single neighborhood, in a systematic way, at a steady pace.”

– David Brooks

CIVIC SQUARE is an organisation that transitioned from the Birmingham Impact Hub, building on its rich history of activism, creative thinking and leadership. Civic Square’s motto is that within a time where the scale and pace of change in the country and globally, we need to also move away from a business as usual model. This will require to design out the next business model strategically and with intention in order to make a bold transition into a new economy. All the while ensuring that we design as many local benefits into this model right from the initial conditions.

REMIX supports the journey of Civic Square and participates in the creation of the local Doughnut Economics Lab but the work of Civic Square reaches further and this product gives a wider perspective on the Civic Square’s mission and next steps.

In our rapidly changing world, beta-testing is the required norm.

The vision for CIVIC SQUARE is all about taking a bold approach to visioning, building and investing in civic infrastructure for neighbourhoods in the future to support this transition we are in. As we approach this challenge, one of the crucial questions we need to focus on is. How will we measure our impact? How do explore what is needed in this new economy and how do we define value? What should we be measuring, and what unintended consequences could those measurements lead to? What our impact could be in the future? What this means for our work, individually and collectively and what it will take to approach building this in our neighbourhoods and cities.

Working alongside Dark Matter Labs, Open Systems Lab and world class thinkers and doers such as Kate Raworth, Pam Warhurst and more, Civic Square immersed themselves in some of the bold ideas, practice and thinking that are shifting the paradigms of civic work in the 21st century as well as experiment with ways these could be applied to their work.

Inspired by work across the city, country and abroad – from being involved in, designing and growing 100s of projects across the team, to supporting and championing work of all scales around the world – we want to dream big, think deeply, work with integrity, bravery and courage; but always making sure this starts right in our own backyard.

Regenerative, Networked & Open

In the ever-changing, uncertain and turbulent times where it is pretty hard to be certain about anything, one thing we know for sure is business as usual is not going to be enough. Whilst we balance the urgent needs of so many in crisis across the world, we also recognise that it would be irresponsible for us to build a platform that is extractive and not regenerative by default in every element. This will be a deep paradigm shift in every part of our mission and business case. Over the last 6 months we have been working with Kate Raworth to imagine what this might look like in practice, and how it can be co-created with many citizens together, from exploring deeply the idea of inclusive economics, land, sharing the value that created by civic infrastructure, often directly captured by the private sector, to the practical frameworks for designing a neighbourhood donuts, designing intentionally deeply regenerative loops that create many benefits and using biomimicry techniques to design buildings. We want to take the next step intentionally, to be regenerative by default, and to share and design openly. Ultimately though we feel committed to going beyond theory and into practice and experimentation.

We have been so blessed to work with 1000s of glorious projects, ideas, and people over the last 8 years in the city and we hope to only build on that in networked and open ways, reminding ourselves constantly no matter how hard it gets, or when ego creeps in that the shared missions and outcomes matter more than who gets the credit always, whilst ensuring labour isn't erased. We hope to continue this in deep and interconnected ways.

The local neighbourhood, and neighbourhoods that many of us grew up in, live in, and are proximate to our everyday experience make the change and work we are all fighting for deeper and connected to our collective purpose. In some ways the neighbourhood is the right size for communities to mobilise effectively, and connected enough for the broader implementation of policies that can be significant enough and spread. We know there are all sorts of complications and complexities in how we define and draw lines around our neighbourhoods such as borders, postcodes, wards, voting boundaries, and what defines how we see and understand our

neighbourhood. However, we know and swathes of evidence point to the fact that empowered active and participatory neighbourhoods, devolved power and resources can boost levels of civic engagement and resilience, help rebuild legitimacy, trust, make bureaucracies more responsive and develop deep sources of social and civic value. When functioning poorly, they can also lead to mistrust, growing inequality, failing public services and conflict.

Whilst this has to be matched with national and regional resource, policy and vision, the neighbourhood is often the start of how we experience society. Neighbourhoods shape routine and quality of daily life in multiple ways. They are the place where you can bump into someone, connect, organise, celebrate and more. However it isn't just about the day-to-day. In his recent book *Palaces for People*, Eric Klinenberg reiterates that outcomes and life expectancy can vary greatly depending on the services and social infrastructure you find in your community. Klinenberg gives the example of a lethal heatwave that struck Chicago in 1995. He asked how two adjacent poor neighbourhoods on the South Side, demographically similar and presumably equally vulnerable, could fare so differently in the disaster. Elderly victims in the Englewood neighbourhood lost their lives at 10 times the rate of those in Auburn Gresham. The exploration goes deep into the differences in social capital, and the social infrastructure that enables social capital to flourish. In the neighbourhood with fewer fatalities, people checked in on one another, knew where to go for help. In the other social isolation was the norm, with residents more often left to fend for themselves. This relates to density of spaces, social infrastructure, shops and vacant units along streets, which either helped or hindered people in getting to know their neighbourhoods, and their neighbours. This has been further reiterated in Local Trust's recent research, comparing outcomes in economically similar areas with large disparities in outcomes where this social fabric and civic life thrived, compared to where it didn't.

“When hard infrastructure fails, it can be the softer, social infrastructure that determines our fate”.
—Eric Klinenberg

This isn't just about buildings, but it is clear that convivial space as well as a range of other interconnected factors are not only a nice-to-have, but can be a case of life and death in times of crisis. Are our neighbourhoods resilient to the futures, opportunities and deep structural threats that are emerging? We believe the neighbourhood to be an exciting, legitimate, creative and tangible unit of change, if designed with intention, care, generosity and our future structural risks at the forefront of our minds and built upon the long history of neighbourhood level work in the UK. Most importantly, our work in the last few years in the area has shown an incredibly rich, deep, and hardworking network of organisations that we are excited to sit alongside and learn from. Here is some more information about the approach our work is set to take, from 2020 to 2030.

CIVIC SQUARE: Three Key Areas for the Next Decade



Please note: This is a computer-generated design. This is for illustration purposes, and is not final and remain very much subject to legals and planning.

1 / Public Square

“Building places where all kinds of people can gather is the best way to repair the fractured societies we live in today.”

—Palaces for the People

With a wide range of partners we are working towards a bold vision to build a new public square, reviving and repurposing old industrial buildings to reimagine and collectively build a vibrant, well-resourced, 21st century place where communities gather.

CIVIC SQUARE will co-design and co-build spaces at the heart of the neighbourhood for meeting, connecting, creating, working, and dreaming together; to find support, give support, learn, grow, build and experiment. It will trade money, skills and time. It will be designed to be regenerative, flexible, adaptable, open and sustainable, acting as a local economic multiplier. It will a tiny pop-up floating on the canal in 2020, this is a long term vision with many parts and partners to bring together over co-create social infrastructure, and be home to practical resources and physical spaces for making, cooking, working, growing, and playing, with a purpose-built home developed by and for children and families, known as BABHaus.

Starting from the years ahead.

2 / Neighbourhood Economics Lab

“We have 10 years to build regenerative economies that are sustained by resilient communities.”

—Janine Benyus

We know the instruments exist to decentralise the human and create regenerative, open, connected and thriving places, but it is paramount to acknowledge that these new mechanisms, no matter how sophisticated and powerful, only truly come alive and, perhaps more importantly, become legitimate, when woven into community priorities and their aspirations for the future.

CIVIC SQUARE launched a new partnership with Dark Matter Laboratories and Doughnut Economics Action Lab, working together as a wider ecosystem to test and experiment with bold ideas in practice, co-build these ideas with local residents, create practical tools in a neighbourhood setting that can be spread and changed to context, building on local and indigenous expertise and connecting ambitious global thinking, wisdom and practice.

The Lab work takes the form of fieldwork, tools, research, events, workshops, civic experiments and activism; not dictating strict courses of action in hugely troubled and transitory times, but instead creating a set of interconnected frameworks and applying them in unique, creative and contextually-relevant ways that are openly available to be adapted, improved, pulled apart, reapplied, and spread quickly, working in a constant state of beta.

CIVIC SQUARE’s Neighbourhood Lab works in a range of ways, from generating, uncovering and investing in hopes and dreams of residents and citizens for their neighbourhoods, to practically co design of the future spaces of CIVIC SQUARE. Through this we are collectively mapping and planning regenerative neighbourhood economies alongside deeper dives into fundamental questions about the future of how our society works.

From creative and artistic approaches to technical and more nerdy work, the lab works with all types of interests, skills and knowledge to think, design, and create future civic infrastructure for neighbourhoods. The Lab launched in November 2020 and through this created a chance to challenge and think about some key questions and fundamental principles underpinning civic work. This is a beta, and just the start.



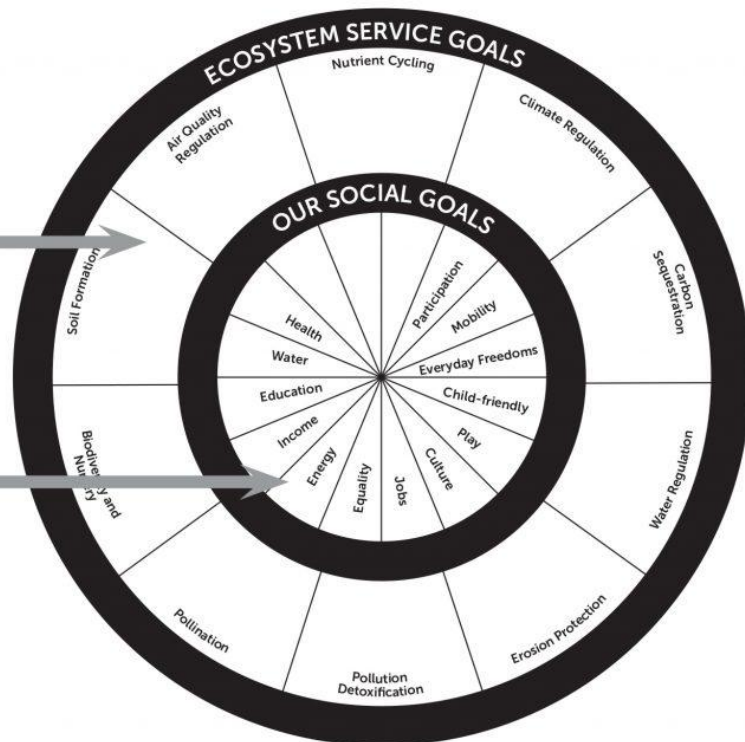
The Lab's key areas of enquiry will be:

- 1. Buildings and Business Models** — climate resilient design, indigenous design, regenerative architecture and business models
- 2. Designed to Spread and Tools to Act** — openly sharing frameworks, processes, learnings and experimentations
- 3. Construct of Land** — interrogating and unpacking the construct of land, unlocking under-utilised land for community housing, play and growing
- 4. Circulating Capital** — Neighbourhood Trusts, shared ownership and distributing value
- 5. Department of Dreams** — boldly and creatively imagining regenerative futures

DEVELOPING A NEIGHBOURHOOD DOUGHNUT

To be developed
through ecological
study of the place

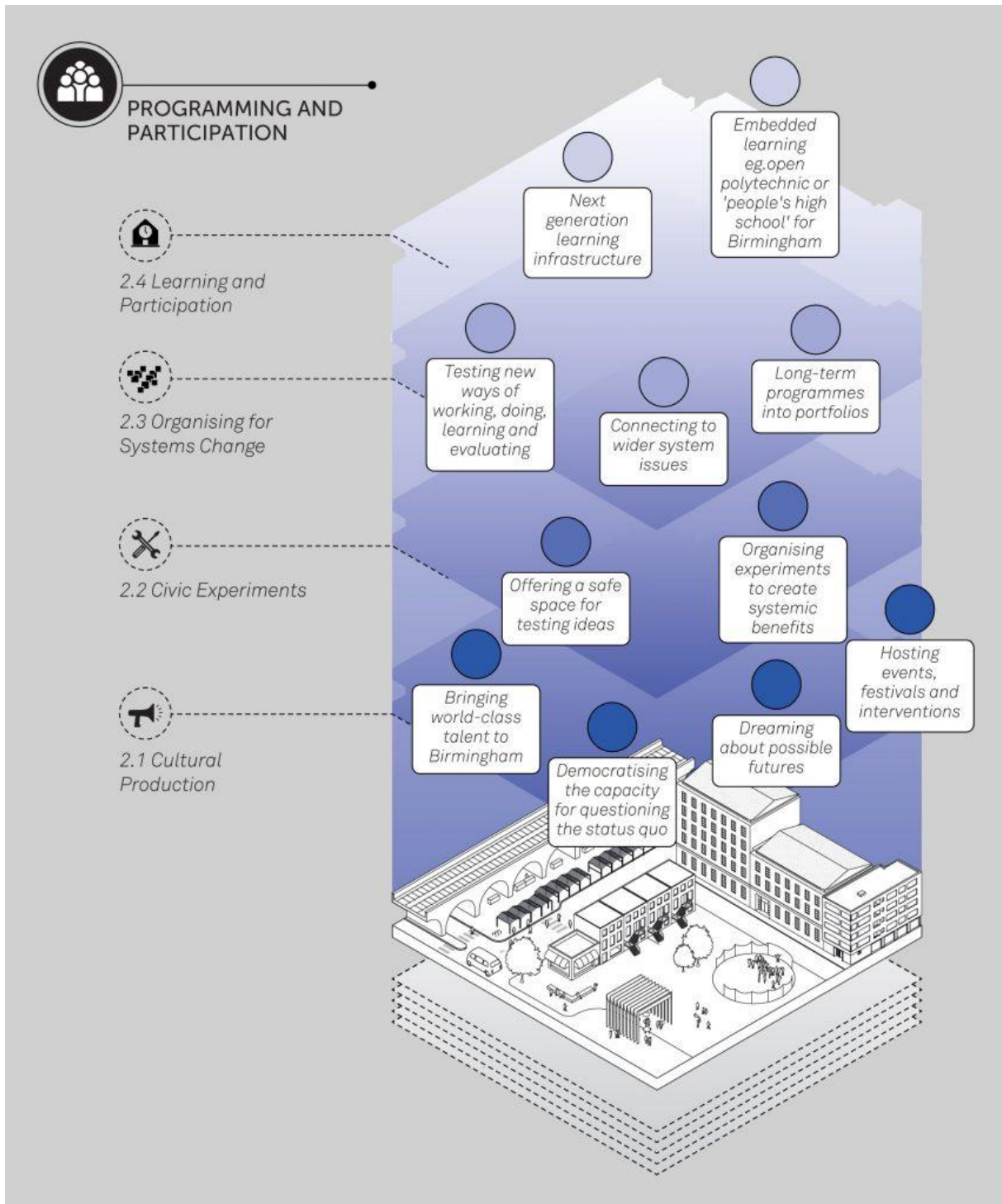
To be co-created
with local citizens



We will be starting to share articles around the beginnings of this ongoing exploration via medium.com/civic-square.

As we look out across at least a decade's worth of bold work, the first phase of CIVIC SQUARE will be a point of hosted welcome to design and grow this ambitious project together, known as The Front Room. You can now find us right at the beginning of the journey at The Floating Front Room at Port Loop, bringing together and developing the first tangible versions of these areas of work. This is undoubtedly just the start of a long, exciting, but complex journey ahead, that we hope to grow, build and steward in a considered way with the care, but also with ambition and the urgency that is required.







A CONVIVIAL ANCHOR FOR THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

