



Suburbs are highly differentiated throughout various parts of the country, also depending on the era they were built. Despite being dynamic and diverse places, the most ubiquitous suburban image is associated with sprawl, white-flight, relative homogeneity, and auto-dependance. Suburbs have a deeply entrenched racist history that is reinforced over decades of exclusionary zoning, red-lining, and urban renewal. This history persists in the form of [Nimbyism](#) (not in my backyard) policies that restrict affordable housing, social services, and therefore who can live in suburbs and send their children to certain schools. Because the nature of suburbs was designed around homogeneity, communities have and continue to attempt to shield themselves from conflicts that arise from diverse perspectives. **But like all places, suburbs too are in a constant state of change.**

Institutional racism remains a deeply entrenched reality in U.S. suburbs. Though not uncommon across the U.S., many US suburbs lack robust and inclusive civic infrastructure that can facilitate interactions to work across differences and cultivate an informed democracy. And national narratives perpetuate an outdated, misunderstood, and incomplete picture of the plurality afoot in suburbs. Existing cultural patterns and structures of democracy often prioritize immigrant assimilation over cultural responsiveness.

Suburban cities must become more adaptive to differentiated communities by upgrading their civic infrastructure with interculturally responsive practices. Too often suburban municipalities take a highly outdated approach that aims to tokenize and assimilate diversity without learning from newcomers societal values and practices to expand notions of civic participation. Suburbs as global contexts have the opportunity to respond with participatory approaches that integrate established and differentiated cultural communities. Upgrading our democracies also requires that we operate from a knowledge of humans' deep interdependence with each other and all of life.

Suburbs need more investment in culturally diverse civic programs, social services, and anti-racist policies, at the same level that is invested in cities. In recent decades, dense cities have been prioritized as preferred and optimal places to live for a myriad of reasons. However, despite this push for urbanization, a larger growth is continuing in suburban contexts often because of their access to open space as well as affordability.

We advocate for the adoption of civic practices of diverse communities for revitalizing democracy today. Learning about tangible ways US suburbs can develop more dynamic and participatory civic infrastructure is imperative if democracy is to thrive. Former mayor of New York City, Ed Koch used to say that 'New York City is where the future goes to audition'. Today, many futures are auditioning in U.S. suburbs. No longer sub, many, aging and diversifying suburbs are in fact 'pluri-burbs'. Pluri-burbs are places where many worlds co-exist.

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## **I. Civic Upgrades for Suburbs**

In this section we present a set of civic practices that are well developed and re-emerging in many places across the U.S. and that can be readily brought to bear in the U.S. suburban context. This is here as shared understanding and best practices.

### **1. Participatory processes**

To increase voter turnout and develop a more direct form of democracy, municipalities must better engage residents in [participatory processes](#). Participatory processes tactically engage residents who otherwise may be apt to stay disengaged and/or never felt invited to the table in the first place. The following are examples of participatory processes that can be brought to bear in suburbs. Inclusionary zoning, smart growth, transit-oriented and mixed use development are all contentious suburban issues that can benefit from participatory and deliberative processes that motivate unity and sustain change over the longer-term.

#### **a. Deliberative democracy**

Though not synonymous with the term participatory, [deliberative democracy practices](#) are also aimed at increasing resident engagement in the political process. However, deliberation requires that residents engage in a debate that involves established agreements and plural logics. Deliberation goes beyond participation to involve residents to engage in policy-making prior to legislation.

Whereas participation invites in, deliberation requires facilitated engagement. One example of a form of deliberative democracy is often referred to as Citizen Assemblies.

#### **b. Resident (Citizen/Non-citizen) assemblies 🙌**

Resident assemblies, often also called '[citizen assemblies](#)' bring together a randomly selected, representative group of local residents to deliberate on pressing issues. Since we are encouraging involvement with non-citizens in suburban civic life we prefer the term Resident Assemblies. Depending on the size of the suburb, an adequate assembly pool might range between 50-150 participants or more. During a residents assembly, selected participants deliberate around issues and collectively decide on recommendations to be given to those with legislative power. Unlike a town hall which generally involves debate without deliberation or decision-making, assemblies are highly coordinated and facilitated sessions that require participants to agree to a set of logical terms that are conducive to effective deliberation and decision making. Resident assemblies are already popular in democracies outside of the U.S., but are arriving at a time when much more listening and facilitated deliberation are required for true democracy to flourish. Resident assemblies can become a key tool in suburbs that are grappling with political divisions that were perhaps not formally present in once culturally homogeneous environments. Resident assemblies not only have the power to help suburban legislators make better decisions, but they do so while building relationships and a listening culture amongst differentiated residents. Learn more about how to develop and facilitate resident assemblies from [Democracy Together](#) and [here](#).

#### **c. Participatory budgeting 🗳️**

Residents and communities themselves know best what they need. Let's put decision making about how city money is spent in their hands. Originated in Brazil in 1989, Participatory budgeting is becoming more commonplace in many cities. [Participatory budgeting](#) processes typically originate from an interested public who partner with city councils to decide on an aspect or amount of a city budget that can be put more broadly to the public. A process is

devised and agreed upon, next residents are able to put forward proposals for where money could be spent such as repairing a park or creating a new office for immigrants, and finally a vote takes place. Other versions of this include [Plural budgeting](#) which then also encourages residents themselves to vote by investing individual funds into projects - no matter the amount Plural budgeting encourages residents to invest in their city beyond tax dollars.

## 2. Built environment and public spaces

The suburb necessitates everyday long travel and less contact hours with the locality. The desire to go out and even walk around for recreation is highly dependent on the perceived aesthetics of the neighborhood and suburban residents have identified this as a barrier in their outgoing-ness.

It is proven that residing in walkable, mixed-use areas results in greater interactions with neighbors and community and leads to political participation. It is a cyclical process because the built environment affects community building and placemaking also requires higher level community engagement and involvement to create meaningful public spaces. Public spaces and a sense of familiarity of the built environment also affect the tendency to participate. To encourage inter-cultural responsiveness, the built environment should also reflect different cultures.

New urbanist approaches are [retrofitting suburbia](#) that include concepts associated with a 15-minute city that are increasingly desirable and applicable to suburbs. Project for Public Spaces, Placemaking X, and [Co-design Studio](#) are great resources for 'new suburbanists' to try human-centered design approaches in order to activate underutilized spaces in suburbs, including oversized parking lots, aging malls, bus stops, etc.

## 3. Cultural Responsiveness

Translation services alone are simply not enough to make services accessible to linguistically diverse communities. Funding community and cultural liaisons are an essential component to engage diverse communities in civic life. It's important to recognize that civic participation in a political

sense is sometimes not possible in immigrants' home countries, sometimes due to less democratic political regimes, but there was often more communal involvement. Helping a neighbor and having a bond of trust can be an important form of civic participation. For some immigrants, suburban life can feel like a deeply estranged and lonely experience. Often immigrants can come from close knit communities where everyone knows each other. Immigrants may be more accustomed to an active street life and more frequent community interaction. Problem solving through more informal community structures, built on trust and non-transactional relationships is common in many immigrant countries. Apart from language and normative barriers, there is also a fear associated with participation in civic life because of lack of democratic representation.

#### **a. Non-Citizen voting**

Many practices that are considered controversial/revolutionary today have had a history of unanimous approval/normalcy in the past. One of them is non-citizen voting. Non-citizen voting in North America was fairly common until the 1880s. In that era, where all white, land owning males could vote, voting had no responsibility to converge with citizenship. The very concept of voting as a right of citizens was dangerous then, since it could beget protests. However, 'alien voting' started getting denied when the immigrants included refugees from poorer countries, included people with darker skin, and people who spoke a different language other than English. States started repealing the right of 'aliens' to vote in the early 1900s. This history shows that non-citizen voting was once functional (though for bizarre reasons), in line with sovereign principles, and became unpopular only because of racist sentiments, the very sentiments that are stopping it from coming into action today. However, several municipalities and some suburbs, including [Hyattsville, MD](#) have reinstated non-citizen voting. In Hyattsville, the latest data is 67% turnout for City-only voters compared to 28% for State registered voters who reside within our incorporated City limits - here is their [non-citizen voting ordinance](#).

#### **b. Civics trainings**

Government shouldn't only be taught in primary school. Understanding the design and function of democracy at the

local level is crucial for an engaged public that can exercise its interests. Basic courses on civics and city government can offer a primer that includes knowledge about various departments within local governments, how residents can participate on commissions and boards, and more. The suburb of Aurora, Colorado has numerous government and non-governmental efforts to maintain and encourage more diversity. There are many programs like the Natural Helpers to help immigrants settle but more can be done to invite and inculcate diverse cultural practices and to potentialize the suburb as a true site of globalism's hopes.

Aurora city government has a plan "Aurora is open to the world" under which there are language classes for immigrants, civics classes, free home and monetary aid for newcomers, skill classes for immigrants so that they can earn a living, etc. However, City of Aurora, 2018 Community Survey Report showcases low percentages of community participation among residents. Forty-two percent of respondents never used a community recreation center, 70% never attended a city sponsored event, 72% never volunteered time to a group activity, 81% never attended a local public meeting, etc. Community engagement is an essential manifestation of internalizing the democratic responsibility and the feeling of a nation. Civic participation is also a sign of a robust community generating a social capital for investing in the development of the place.

Though these are standard, the suburb of Beaverton, OR developed a leadership program called [BOLD](#) for emerging immigrant and refugee leaders. Programs like BOLD go beyond a basic primer on city government to bring about reciprocal and intercultural awareness, surfacing priority issues, and learning about community organizing and how to shift public policy. Ultimately change won't be gained from dated top down, business-as-usual methods.

These previous examples are shared to inspire more immediate civic upgrades in the suburban context. The following section relates more to changing civic relationships within suburbs, and though it is immediately actionable, may be seen as more aspiration to begin.

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## II. Nurturing a web of care and shared maintenance

Webs of care is an idea(1) that prioritizes longer-term and cooperative, latitudinal negotiation of privilege and power over hierarchically-delegated, vertical administration of power. Sustainability is a core principle of this aspiration, defined by viewing Government and governance as synthetic social structures that do not intrinsically prioritize planetary (including human) "well-being". Commitment to viewing actions and their consequences through the lens of connected ecologies can reveal the need for alternative, more agile and responsive methods of governance. Participation, conflict, and cooperation are qualities that we argue should be nurtured in (self-)governance paradigms to prioritize care over administration. Suburban contexts are already primed for webs of care, based on the core notion and social relation of "neighbor", which we can recognize constitutes a nation of neighbors, where proximity affects our behavior. It is important to consider, what are ways that suburbs are primed for webs of care already? What are the access points within suburbs? We've included case studies to complement the aspirational practices that follow. But it's important to remember that webs of maintenance and care can be practiced only in specific contexts, where relation and relating are possible. This non-generalizability renders the social network enmeshed - between seeds and soil, built structures, and even concepts (or conceptions).

### 1. Participation through solidarity

Seeing the relation of "neighbor" on a national scale brings into light a recognition of one's group identity. Though this might seem a trivial basis for relation, the recognition helps to usher in awareness of "shared interests, objectives, standards, and sympathies", which is a precondition for participation and solidarity. Solidarity involves participation, in the sense of plurality in interaction, for reaching the compromise and agreement necessary for effective group agency. This fundamental ability to give and to receive forms the first web of care.

Solidarity, viewed as a process, is one of unification, bridging ideas and sentiments across various boundaries - distance, work expertise, forms of labor, age, silos of communication, aesthetic standards, etc. - so that all participants create and benefit from a "together effect".<sup>1</sup> Solidarity affords a "psychological sense of unity of groups or classes" that lends an accelerated changemaking ability in a system of representative government (administration, as in hierarchical delegation, of power), whereby citizens acting in solidarity and only together can hone the political dynamics of voter "critical mass".<sup>2</sup>

An organized practice of group participation through solidarity is thus preferable to insulation, for advancing any shared will. To ameliorate conflicting political will requires practicing empathy and win-win negotiation.<sup>3</sup> As communities of various scales, including suburbs, practice and develop their abilities to do so, networks of solidarity can be further built and broadened, in a process comparable to a syndicate, not unlike the partnerships seen built between governing bodies, also at various scales.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Caring with digital technology**

As viewpoints can be increasingly shared through practicing solidarity, digital technology can play a dramatic role in framing those viewpoints which are inaccessible but critical, by rendering the effects of scale and (inter)connection as tangible (eg. delayed feedback, benefits distributed over time). Our viewpoints, in them our positions, and as a result our attitudes are currently framed by singular, siloed, and often biased ways of relating to any set of events as "issues". Such viewpoints reinforce a position that advantages zero-sum game mindsets that rely on our sense of constant competition, distrust, and quick rewards, over win-win negotiation mental frames. But that which is difficult to "perceive", can nonetheless be "understood".

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<sup>1</sup>"Increase changemaking agency in social organization", from post shared by ben arfur ig @ben.arfur

<sup>2</sup>"Critical mass" is a term borrowed from nuclear physics, used to refer to the smallest number of people acting in solidarity needed for a sustained chain reaction for a movement to gain political traction.

<sup>3</sup>Conflicting political will can be either change-seeking or change-resistant, like the joint pursuit of some goal or the thwarting of some threat.

<sup>4</sup>The term "syndicate" is inspired by the response to the Arts Council England new Emergency Funding system <https://makeitclear.eu/posts/sol-syn/> See examples of intergovernmental partnership here <https://www.nj.com/hudson/2022/04/jersey-city-and-hoboken-plan-to-unite-bike-lanes-by-connecting-18th-street-and-observer-highway.html> and here <https://www.coneg.org/>

While some of the aspirations of technology ushering in a “more connected civics” are not yet existent in practice, there are already thriving examples of tech fostering the aforementioned together effect. Civic engagement platform Beamdata has made the saying “power in numbers” actionable using the logic of [voting blocs](#).<sup>5</sup> The app reformed the relationship between voters and public officials by demonstrably aggregating individual voter attitudes. Dialogue is amplified between citizens who stand in solidarity. Such a channel of political connection shifts the burden on community members from finding ways to organize to prioritizing the shared issues they face.<sup>6</sup> The technology taps into the critical mass factor to definitively communicate political priority to elected officials.

In these blocs, citizens can use openly accessible spreadsheets for collective, multi-criteria decision making.<sup>7</sup> This way, [plural pathways](#) to addressing shared issues can be developed and sustained in the longer-term. More specifically, alignment with a politician's stance on a hot topic at a given moment in the media cycle should not overshadow a citizen's/voter's complete set of values and positions - like healthcare over immigration. This kind of choice is a false binary. All issues matter, and while an individual might prioritize issues that one feels strongest about, having to choose to vote based on one over another is a form of coercion that technology, in [helping to build solidarity](#), can eradicate.

Even these tech-enabled benefits to civic participation and co-governance [take the ability to reach consensus as an assumption](#), while this is a significant challenge in itself.<sup>8</sup> In order to soundly codeliberate, members of any community need to have a shared understanding of the values, causes, relationships, resources, the systems that matter to them, and fundamentally, shared understandings of what is [“the good life/ves”](#). These notions must become specific (beyond, for eg. “safety” or “opportunity”) and take shape as shared causal

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<sup>5</sup> Voting blocs are different groups of voters with varying levels of common ground who share a baseline of consensus when coalescing behind to-be-elected leadership. Interacting with and as voting blocks can enhance the role of accountability in elected office

<sup>6</sup>Issues like poor air quality, lack of public transportation, or isolated food deserts ; beam data company link <https://www.linkedin.com/company/beamdataco/>

<sup>7</sup>This in turn can disrupt the particular political dynamic of campaign promises and speech heavy in pathos during election cycles that is particularly appealing to the concurring events and issues someone might be experiencing, or thinking about. Depending on the decision making shared protocol and the sophistication of the process, there can even be aggregate shared preference schemes that show their respective distributions and provides numeric weight value to different preference groups within a community

<sup>8</sup>The debate around 5G wireless connectivity rollout is an example of a nation-wide issue inspiring local response and vast array of responses.

structures, so that we can individuate responsibility within our communities, withhold pinpointing blame prematurely, and become more comfortable with not knowing over choosing easy but misguided/misguiding answers, especially when assessing effects that we can only recognize cumulatively.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Enmeshed Networks of Care

The one to one and one to many relationships formed by establishing platforms and channels for input constitute the same "social infrastructure" that underlies the webs of care that this brief aspires for. In order to nurture webs of maintenance and care, the "neighbor" fundamental unit of relation needs to be seen in its various specific contexts - as "enmeshed networks". We present [three case studies for contexts of land, neighborhood, and kinship](#). At the same time, these relations also have a scalar dimension, such that the connections between people and place can "scale up" and form broader networks, or "separate-out" from a broader network into smaller groups. This dimension of webs of care is relevant because the ability to effectively scale between more global goals and more local plans of action poses an additional challenge given the typically larger scale at which policy itself is often framed and funded.<sup>10</sup>

Behavioral science findings have shown that most people "fall short when they try to conceptualize numbers that scale beyond their tangible experience," and that in fact, "understanding numerical information can play a critical role in citizenship".<sup>11</sup> Based on this insight, organizations that operate as networks should outline how collective efforts can build up to accomplish high-level planning goals. One strategy is providing per-person average involvement and cost

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<sup>9</sup>Broad issues such as inflation, staffing shortages, housing crises, rising crime, etc. are too complex to understand in simple causal structure form, and easy (convenient) attribution of causation at this level creates opportunities for biases to deter finding common ground and establishing collective action. This is the gap where dialogic, predictive modeling, and simulation technology can help to make the benefits of win-win negotiation more tangible, and desirable, especially when benefits are delayed by longer time horizons, in order to facilitate consensus as tier-based agreement and reinforce a culture where participation is both sought out and readily provided.

<sup>10</sup> For example, headline-grabbing policy and spending proposals are defined by large, total spending amounts eg. \$5.6B "to build the wall" , \$1.9T "American Rescue Plan".  
<https://www.heritage.org/budget-and-spending/heritage-explains/19-trillion-covid-relief-package> &  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4mzD1EWA6c&ab\\_channel=NBCNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4mzD1EWA6c&ab_channel=NBCNews)

<sup>11</sup> According to findings by Christina Boyce-Jacino et al. Christina is first author on a study investigating magnitude neglect due to large numbers and provides citizen engagement with tax expenditures as an example.  
<https://www.cmu.edu/dietrich/news/news-stories/2022/july/chapman-big.html>

requirements.<sup>12</sup> Another example is set by the group Local Progress, who assessed how US public policy has and continues to perpetuate racial inequality across a comprehensive set of policy "impact areas" and in response established 73 two-page policy briefs consisting of shared problem definitions and community engagement recommendations to support all members of their activist network.<sup>13</sup> We present a [final case study on bridging scale](#) in changemaking efforts in a way that is context-specific.

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We envision the proposals in this primer to help develop and sustain forms of trans-local meshworked power, based on the belief that suburban communities can be constituted around commonalities and differences, across regions, and with openness to others.

You can find creative inspiration [from other examples here](#) and through [case studies here](#) and feel free to add more examples.

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## Glossary

- **Suburb:** human habitat known in the U.S. for its predominantly single-family and auto-oriented design, typically occupying rings extending out from denser urban cores.
- **Sprawl:** a low density style of housing development, typically oriented around auto dependency and single family homes that maximizes spatial distancing.
- **Pluriverse:** a notion that [many worlds can co-exist within one](#), instead of attempts at universalization and homogenization.
- **Pluriburb:** suburbs, predominantly in the U.S. that are home to increasing levels of racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, often [containing more differentiated](#) and intermingled cultures than their counterpart cities.
- **Polycentric:** a city that contains many hubs of commerce and diverse cultural human interaction, such examples are sometimes

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<sup>12</sup> "Large numbers cause magnitude neglect: The case of government expenditures"  
<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2203037119>

<sup>13</sup> Local Progress conducted the analysis at various levels of policy implementation (ie. municipal, county, state, federal)

aspirationally embodied in the so-called [15-minute city](#) where residents can transit to multiple business districts within walking or biking distance.

→ **Cultural responsiveness:** aims at reciprocity of learning with diverse, immigrant communities within an existing hegemonic culture. Requires a recognition of one's own privileges and working from a strengths based approach. Instead of aiming at assimilation, cultural responsiveness aims to learn and integrate with diverse communities in ways that are non-hierarchical and co-liberatory.