Depolarization as Relational Design in Cities

A Six Year Practice-Based Inquiry through a Values-Based Urban Living Lab

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Key Finding

Relational capacity for depolarization may be cultivated through repeated civic encounters, embodied participatory practices, and sustained relational stewardship over time.

Introduction

In cities where trust between institutions, civic actors, and citizens has weakened, and where widening inequalities contribute to social fragmentation, understanding how conditions for civic participation are cultivated becomes increasingly important.

This six-year transdisciplinary practice-based inquiry was conducted within and through the evolving OurCluj ecosystem, a youth wellbeing initiative in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, conceived as a values-based urban living laboratory (VBULL).* It explored how trust, civic agency, and sustained engagement across civic, institutional, and generational differences may be cultivated through participatory, relational, spatial, and embodied practices.

Situated within the rapidly growing post-socialist city of Cluj-Napoca, OurCluj was developed to intervene in conditions of institutional mistrust, transactional urban development, and social fragmentation by bringing together youth groups, civic organizations, artists, educators, researchers, and public institutions through participatory research, systems mapping, artistic inquiry, participatory processes and collaborative governance dialogues.

Over 20 social innovation initiatives addressing youth wellbeing and collaborative social infrastructure were co-developed across civic, institutional, artistic, and cultural spaces.

*A values-based urban living laboratory is an urban living lab oriented by shared civic values — such as trust and care — rather than predetermined outcomes alone.

Research Questions

- How might participatory, relational, and embodied practices cultivate trust, care, and sustained engagement across differences within urban contexts?
- How might values-based urban living labs contribute to collaborative governance and shared civic agency in contexts shaped by mistrust and fragmentation?

Methodological Approach

This six-year longitudinal transdisciplinary practice-based inquiry within the OurCluj values-based urban living lab, combined participatory action research, systems inquiry, and arts-based approaches to examine how participatory, relational, spatial, and embodied practices influenced trust, civic agency, and sustained engagement across differences over time.

The living lab functioned as an iterative and adaptive ecosystem for stewarding civic relationships while simultaneously conducting longitudinal inquiry within and through them. Documentation included 2,000+ photographs and 500+ artworks.

- Participatory systems mapping
- Co-design workshops
- Collaborative governance dialogues
- Semi-structured interviews
- Surveys
- Reflective fieldnotes

Relational Concepts Explored

Trust | Care | Civic Agency | Sustained Engagement | Relational Capacity | Stewardship

Collaborative governance dialogue hosted in a classroom at Talentum Primary School, Cluj-Napoca. Embodied and participatory spatial practices supported dialogue across institutional, civic, and generational differences. (Photo: R. Vaczi, March 2024)

Embodied participatory practice, 2023

Arts-based reflective practice, 2022

Citywide co-hosted meetups, 2022–2025

Spatial design for shared imagination, 2024

Phygital storytelling and shared imagination, 2024

Values Based Urban Living Laboratory Ecosystem

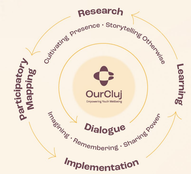
- 20+ participatory social innovation initiatives focused on youth wellbeing and social infrastructure
- 35+ facilitated workshops and roundtables
- 9 collaborative governance dialogues
- 8 co-hosted citywide Meetups across diverse civic spaces
- 3 participatory identity convenings

The ecosystem connected youth groups, civic organizations, artists, educators, researchers, and public institutions across civic, institutional, artistic, and cultural spaces through iterative cycles of research, dialogue, ideation, implementation, reflection, and relational stewardship.

Emergent Relational Practices

- **Remembering the Past**
- **Imagining Futures**
- **Sharing Power**
- **Cultivating Presence**
- **Storytelling Otherwise**

The first three practices emerged through the Activating Values in Urban Transitions research in 2022 and evolved into stewardship and participatory design practices within the VBULL. Cultivating Presence and Storytelling Otherwise became increasingly central from 2023 onward.



Wellbeing system map

Cultivating Relational Conditions (2019–2025)

Findings

Relational Conditions as Civic Infrastructure

- **Repeated encounters across civic spaces** — including dialogue, co-hosting, storytelling, shared meals, walks, and arts-based participation — helped cultivate trust, care, and relational capacity across previously disconnected civic, institutional, and generational actors.
- **Embodied participatory practices**, including circles, presence-based facilitation, movement across civic spaces, and participatory artistic experiences, supported dialogue across differences.
- **Moving meetings across diverse civic and institutional spaces** expanded participation and strengthened connections across fragmented parts of the urban ecosystem.
- **Arts-based and storytelling practices** created shared imaginative and reflective spaces that continued circulating across initiatives and civic spaces over time.

Stewardship as Relational Continuity

- **Relational continuity depended not only on participatory structures**, but also on sustained relational stewardship across civic actors, institutions, and spaces over time.
- **Over time, stewardship increasingly integrated embodied and reflective practices** — including circles, storytelling, reflective dialogue, co-hosting, and presence-based facilitation — into collaborative governance and participatory design processes.
- **Following stewardship transition**, relational continuity became more difficult to sustain.

Sustaining Relational Continuity

- **Funding and participatory structures alone were insufficient to cultivate durable relational capacity** across fragmented civic relationships. Financial and institutional support only created important enabling conditions for participation and sustained stewardship processes.
- **Sustaining collaboration** across differences may depend on the ongoing cultivation of relational capacities across stewardship teams, civic actors, institutions, funders, and communities over time.

Conclusions

Depolarization in cities may depend less on participatory structures or alignment alone, and more on how relational conditions for trust, care, participation, and shared civic experience are intentionally cultivated over time.

Sustaining collaboration across differences depended not only on funding or participatory structures, but also on ongoing relational stewardship and the cultivation of relational capacity across the wider civic ecosystem — including funders, stewardship teams, institutions, civic actors, and communities.

Acknowledgements

With gratitude, we acknowledge the participation, stewardship, and collaboration of all those who contributed to the evolving OurCluj ecosystem throughout this six-year inquiry.

Supported and funded through a long-term partnership with Fondation Botnar and the wider OurCity initiative in Romania, Colombia, Ecuador, Tanzania, and Ghana.

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Presented at the Mind & Life Summer Research Institute 2026: Depolarization — Cultivating Connection in a Divided World, Garrison Institute, New York.