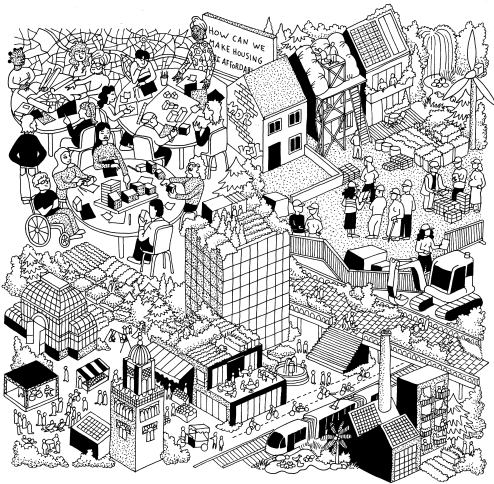


# Six ways to *democratise city planning*: Enabling thriving and healthy cities



DemocracyNext

Illustration by [Adèle Vivet](#)

## Project rationale

The future of the cities we inhabit and where we spend our daily lives matters to all of us in very tangible ways. This future is also collective. We share the spaces we call home with numerous beings. Balancing a diversity of people's needs and preferences, concerns for environmental and social justice, a flourishing living planet, sustainability and resilience, communities' health and well-being, as well as a desire for beauty, joy, and belonging is no easy feat. So many of these things are interconnected and are directly and deeply impacted by urban planning and the multiple other decisions we take about our built environment.

Who makes these decisions, and how they are made matter greatly. We argue that the 'who' and the 'how' of urban planning decision making need to change.

## Six ways to democratise city planning

To live in thriving and healthy cities, we propose six possible ways to instigate systemic changes that can democratise the governance of urban planning decisions through Citizens' Assemblies. Depending on a city's current starting point, at least one, if not multiple, of these options can be seen as an initial 'way in' to begin making systemic changes to urban planning decision making. The six ways are outlined as different entry points on the following page.

---

# Six ways to democratise city planning

01



If you are a city or a region...

about to initiate a major infrastructure project, initiate an ad-hoc Citizens' Assembly to shape project objectives and key design goals that are more aligned with the community's wants and needs.

02



If you are a developer...

in the early stages of a large urban development project initiate an ad-hoc Citizens' Assembly to generate higher quality, community-supported design strategies and site programming that, in turn, enables the creation of places where people can connect, live, and thrive.

03



If you are a city...

about to develop your next long-term plan, a significant urban policy, or a financial plan consider initiating this process with an ad-hoc Citizens' Assembly to develop a citizen-driven vision for the city, a multi-year budget, or a planning policy that is aligned with and reflects the needs, values, and desires of the city's residents.

04



If you are a city or a region...

frustrated with the status quo of legally-required public consultation, commit to improving the quality of mandatory public engagement by implementing an ad-hoc Citizens' Assembly for a significant urban development project instead.

05



If you are a member of an existing community board or neighbourhood association...

Consider changing how people are chosen to be part of the board or association by using sortition to select new Members. OR

If you are a municipality or a CSO...

and you are in a city where community boards do not exist, consider creating new sortition-based Community Assemblies to represent each district, borough, ward, or neighbourhood.

06



If you are a city...

that is already familiar with Citizens' Assemblies, how they work and their benefits, but want to implement them to find solutions to city-wide challenges in an ongoing way, consider implementing a City-wide Citizens' Assembly that convenes on a regular basis to tackle ongoing, systemic, city-wide challenges by forming recommendations that shape key urban policies, the city's long-term vision, amendments to this vision, and significant development projects.



Members of the Dresden Kunstgewerbemuseum Assembly deliberating, 11 November 2023, Photo credit: Vera Sacchetti

## What is a Citizens' Assembly?

A Citizens' Assembly is a group of people who are selected through sortition to be broadly representative of a community. They are convened with the aim of making shared, consensus-driven recommendations for decision makers through deliberation. Citizens' Assemblies are sometimes called Citizens' Juries, Panels, or Councils depending on their size and the country where they are taking place.

There are two main ingredients of a Citizens' Assembly that differentiate it from other forms of participation and enable its effectiveness and legitimacy - these are sortition and deliberation.

For more details on the technical and practical considerations for running a Citizens' Assembly (including how many people to invite and select, an expected budget for running an Assembly, and other key elements) refer to our [Assembling an Assembly Guide here](#).

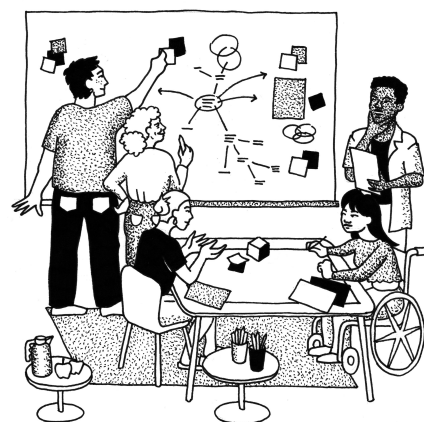


Illustration by [Adèle Vivet](#)

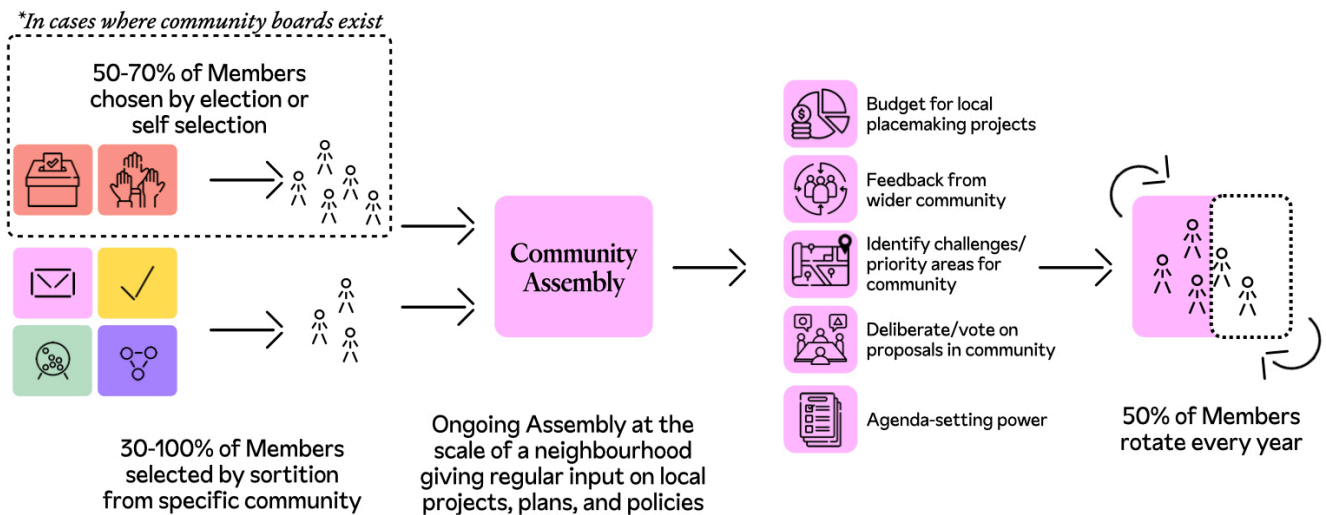
---

## Three types of Citizens' Assemblies

The central part of the different entry points listed on the previous page are three types of Citizens' Assemblies: Community Assemblies, City-wide Assembly, and Ad-hoc Assemblies. How they can be implemented, either independently or concurrently, depends on a city's size, its existing institutions, decision-making, and engagement processes, and the resources available for implementation.

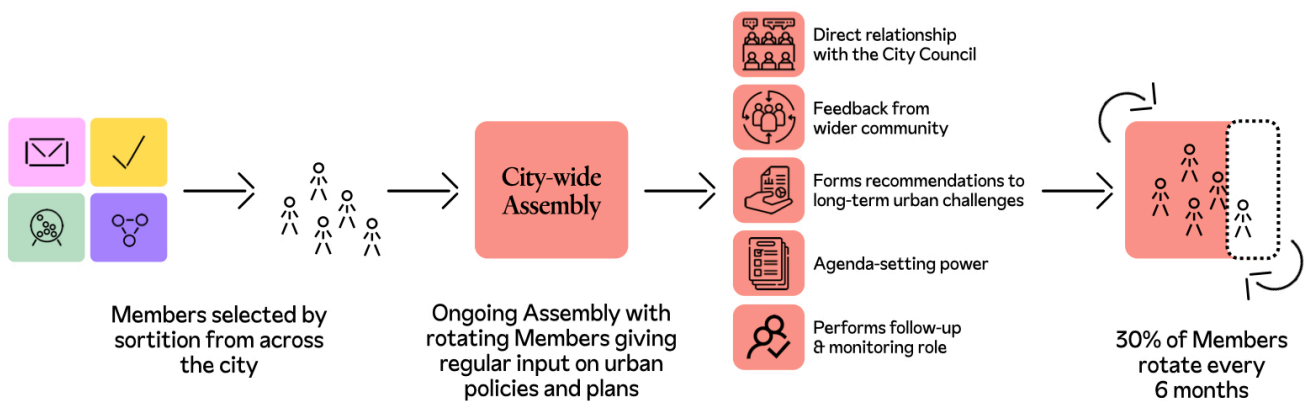
### Community Assembly

This Assembly type functions at the scale of a borough, district, ward, or neighbourhood (naming convention will be dependent on city). The Assembly Members give regular input on projects, plans, and decision-making processes that impact their particular jurisdiction. This input is directly linked to key stages in the decision-making process with a commitment from the public authority to consider, respond to, and act on the recommendations.



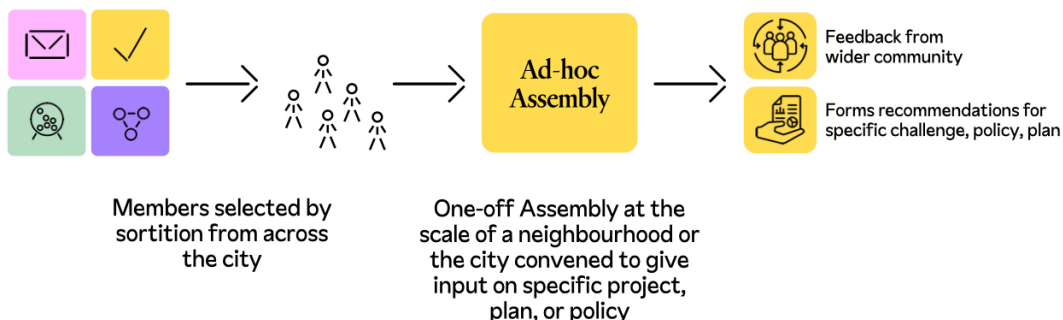
## City-wide Citizens' Assembly (on Planning)

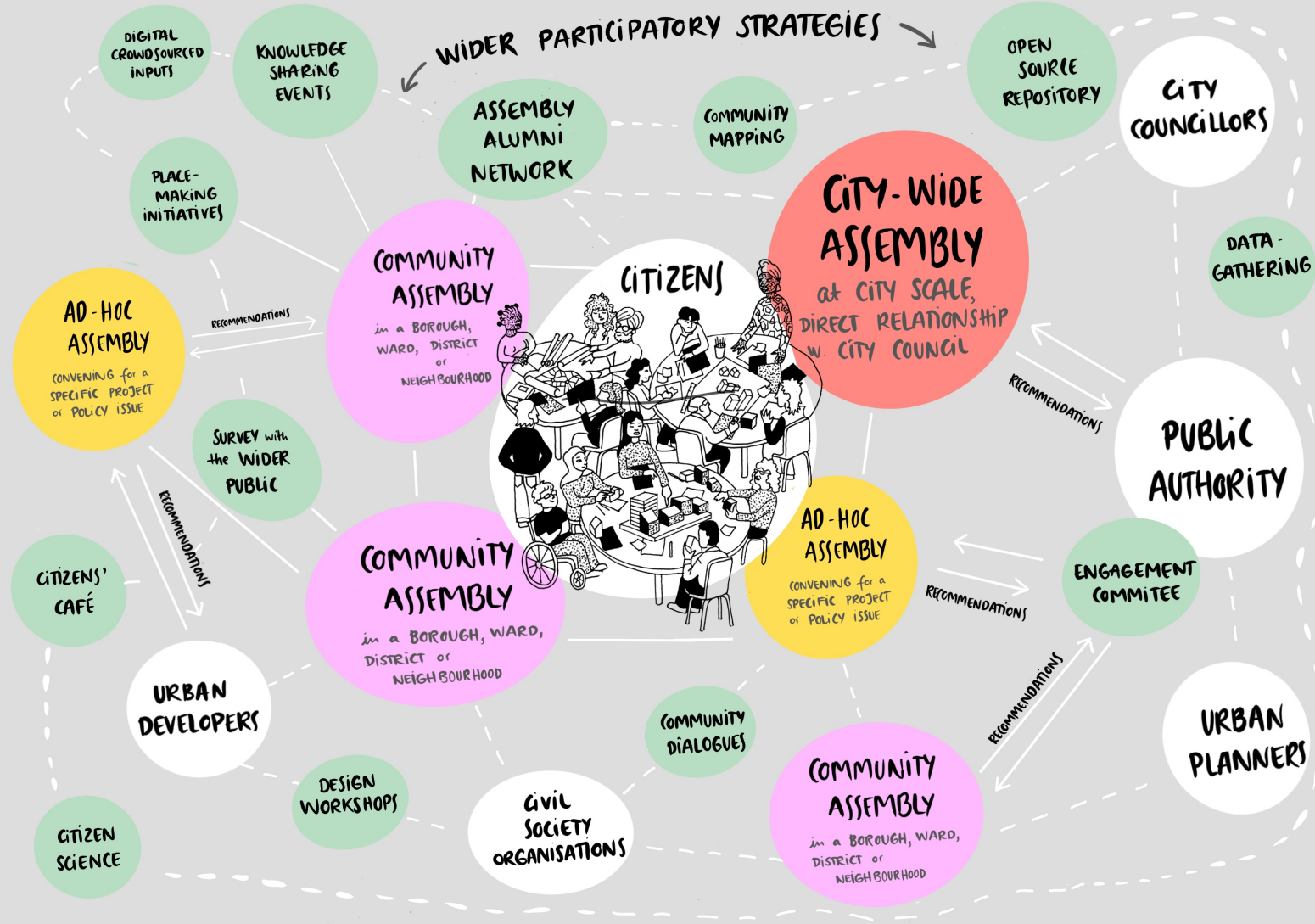
At the scale of the city, we propose a standing City-wide Citizens' Assembly with rotating Members which gives regular input on longer-term and city-wide decisions. For example, this can include the city's strategic (5-10 year) plan and amendments to / development of a significant piece of policy.



## Ad-hoc Citizens' Assembly

An ad-hoc Citizens' Assembly is convened for a specific project or policy issue and can be initiated by either the City-wide Citizens' Assembly on Planning, a Community Assembly, the City Council/Public Authority, a developer or through a citizen-led petition with a minimum number of signatures.





A conceptual illustration of how Citizens' Assemblies, key actors and stakeholders, wider citizen participation strategies work together in an ecosystem. Illustrator: [Mona Ebdrup](#)

These representative and deliberative Assemblies are envisioned to be a core part of a much wider participatory ecosystem that involves digital surveying, participatory data collection and map-making, citizen science, and community-driven initiatives like placemaking, public dialogues, and design workshops.

We have thought about Citizens' Assemblies holistically, as an intrinsic part of a city's decision-making processes. This means there should be a direct connection to the relevant public authority and other key actors, including managers, urban planners, developers and investors, civil society groups, architects, and researchers.

---

## Next steps: Turning ideas into action

As a next step, DemocracyNext is seeking to partner with a cohort of three cities, which we will select through an open application process beginning in February 2024.

For interested cities that are not part of the first cohort in 2024, but who would like to stay updated on their progress to learn from their experiences, it will be possible to do so. There will also be opportunities to partner with us in the future to expand this work.

Progress will be shared regularly via our [website](#), [social media platforms](#), and regular [newsletter](#). If you are interested in exploring how these ideas can apply in your own city, don't hesitate to reach out! Please contact James MacDonald-Nelson ([james@demnext.org](mailto:james@demnext.org)).

## About DemocracyNext

DemocracyNext is a non-profit, non-partisan research and action institute. We work to shift who has power and how decisions are taken in government and other institutions of daily life.

We are an international knowledge hub on deliberative democracy that creates tools and resources to build the field and experiments with innovative approaches. We advise on the design and establishment of new democratic institutions, processes, and spaces, including Citizens' Assemblies.

We want more people to see the democratic potential of [sortition](#) (selecting decision makers by lottery), [deliberation](#), and [participation](#) for strengthening trust, reducing polarisation, and improving decision making. We believe that these principles enable us to be with complexity, channel our collective wisdom, and find common ground.



Illustration by [Adèle Vivet](#)