

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Spaces for deliberation: Eight spatial qualities for designing deliberative assemblies

As citizens' assemblies and other forms of citizen deliberation are increasingly implemented in many parts of the world, it is becoming more relevant to explore and question the role of the physical spaces in which these processes take place.

This paper builds on existing literature that considers the relationships between space and democracy. These relationships have been studied with a focus on the architecture of parliament buildings, and on the role of urban public spaces and architecture for political culture, both largely within the context of representative democracy and with little or no attention given to spaces for facilitated citizen deliberation. With very limited considerations of the spaces for deliberative assemblies in the literature, in this paper, we argue that the spatial qualities for citizen deliberation demand more critical attention.

Through a series of interviews with leading practitioners of citizens' assemblies from six different countries, we explore what spatial qualities are typically considered in the planning and implementation of these assemblies, the recurring challenges related to the physical spaces where they take place, and the opportunities and limitations for a more intentional spatial design. In this paper, we synthesise our findings and formulate a series of considerations for the spatial qualities of citizens' assemblies aimed at informing future practice and further research.

Key findings

This preliminary study of the spatial qualities of citizens' assemblies reveals three main findings derived from interviews and collected image documentation of discussed assemblies:

1. The spatial qualities of citizens' assemblies are carefully considered by conveners and facilitators when planning and designing the assembly.
2. Practical requirements are often prioritised over considerations for qualities such as atmosphere and symbolic value when both cannot be achieved.
3. Common challenges to choosing spaces with suitable spatial qualities for deliberative assemblies are high rental costs or the cost of temporary adaptations, inaccessible locations, and general availability.

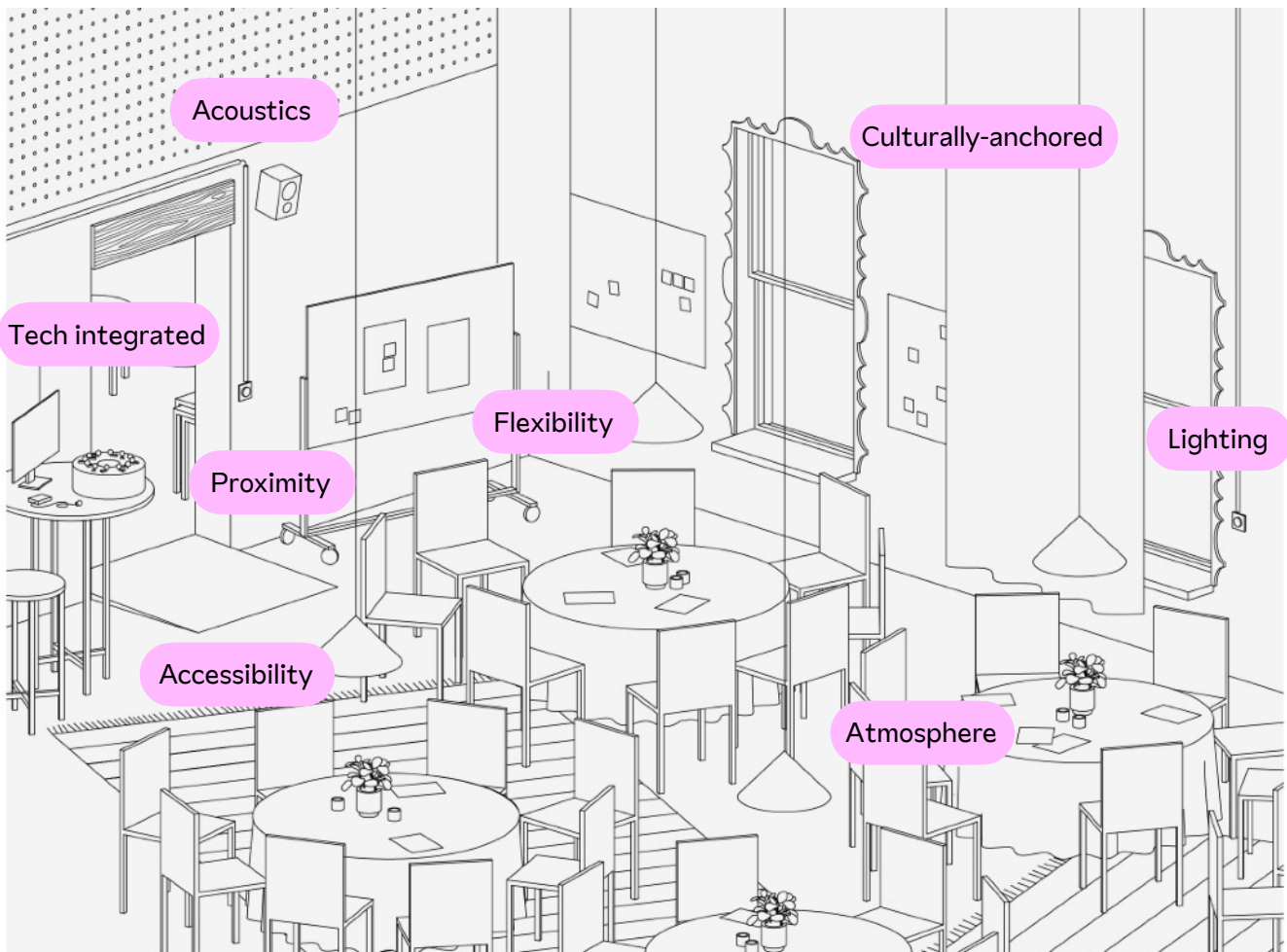
With over [700 citizens' assemblies](#) having taken place around the world (and more happening each year), there are numerous examples of physical spaces that have been adapted and used to host and facilitate deliberative processes. In the literature, however, limited attention has been given to the role that space plays in a deliberative process and how we might design this more intentionally. We take preliminary steps towards understanding the importance of spaces for deliberation in this paper through a closer look at a handful of cases. From conversations with researchers, conveners, and facilitators in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, and the USA we've had the opportunity to gain insights on the kinds of physical conditions that citizens' assemblies take place in today.



Deliberative sessions from Citizens' Assemblies organised by the practitioners we've spoken to. From top-left to bottom-right: Grandview-Woodland Citizens' Assembly, Canada, MASS LBP (Sarah Yaffe); Itinerant Citizens' Assembly, Bogota, DemoLab (Felipe Rey); Lynetteholm Citizens' Assembly, Copenhagen, We Do Democracy (Johan Galster); Ostbelgien Citizens' Assembly, Ostbelgien, "Bürgerdialogue" (Myriam Pelzer); Brussels Citizens' Assembly, Brussels, Agora (Ana Adzersen); City of Melbourne Affordable Housing Panel, MosaicLab (Kimbra White).

Drawing upon the learnings from interviews with assembly practitioners, we have identified a non-exhaustive list of eight spatial considerations for citizens' assemblies.

These are synthesised and presented on the next page. Besides contributing to the existing literature on democratic spaces this synthesis also aims to contribute to the further development of the [Spatial Considerations Checklist](#) in the DemocracyNext [Assembling an Assembly Guide](#).



Synthesis drawing of spatial qualities for deliberative spaces. Drawing by the authors

Eight spatial qualities for deliberation

Based on our research and analysis, we have identified eight spatial qualities that are important to take into account with intention when designing deliberative assemblies: lighting; acoustics; connectivity; symbolic value; flexibility; atmosphere; access, and technology. These form an initial list of considerations in current practice:

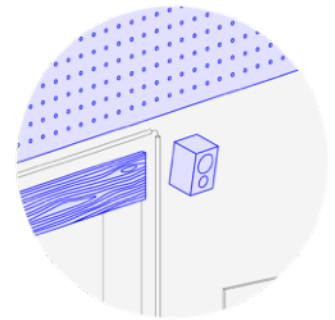
1. Natural and adjustable lighting

Include a combination of artificial and natural light sources with both cold and warm tones as well as elements to easily adjust natural light throughout the assembly process, such as manoeuvrable or fixed screens or curtains.



2. Good acoustics

Incorporate specific materials or acoustic products, such as porous surfaces, carpets, or curtains in large deliberation spaces, in combination with adjacent smaller breakout rooms for group discussion to ensure a variety of suitable acoustic conditions for different scales of conversation. Consider the acoustic conditions needed to ensure high-quality recordings for tech-enhanced deliberative assemblies (i.e. separate spaces for each breakout discussion).



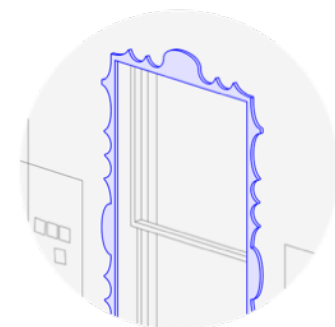
3. Close proximity between spaces

Ensure that spaces used throughout the assembly process are in close proximity to each other to accommodate the various phases and activities of deliberations and the logistical organisation of the process.



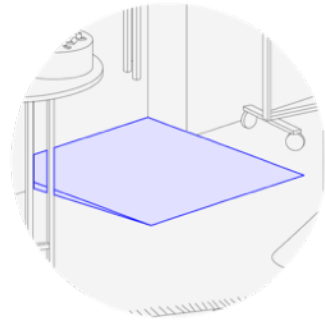
4. Culturally and socially-anchored place

Consider the socio-cultural context of the space, who might identify with the place, and who may not. Weigh the trade-offs of using a space that possesses a strong symbolic value and poor acoustics, lighting and flexibility, versus a space with less symbolic value but optimal acoustics, lighting, and flexibility.



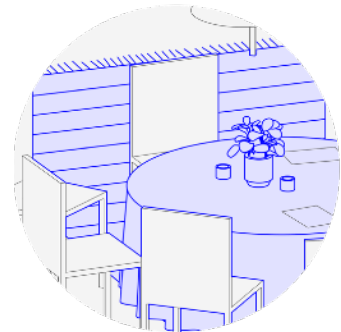
5. Accessible location and navigation

Spaces for deliberation must be accessible to reach by assembly members and accessible to enter and navigate within. This includes places that are accessible by public transportation and spaces that are equipped with ramps, handrails, elevators, and barrier free rooms.



6. Formal and welcoming atmosphere

Consider how material choices and decorative items play a role in creating an atmosphere that is formal, yet welcoming, for various activities throughout the assembly process. Designing a space for diverse sensorial and emotional experiences allows for both casual and relaxed conversations/activities during some parts of the process, and the serious work of drafting and voting on recommendations.



7. Flexible furniture and equipment arrangement

Consider how furniture and technical equipment can be placed and re-arranged in a space to ensure that the space remains flexible and adaptable depending on the specific activities of the assembly process.



8. Thoughtful integration of technology

Consider how the integration of technology in a deliberative process can be made visible and accessible to the assembly members. This can help foster trust as it becomes part of the process—visible, approachable, and easier to engage with.



Conclusions, considerations, and further research

Understanding the spatial qualities that enable both facilitators and assembly members to engage in successful citizen deliberation can help us begin sketching principles for how we might more intentionally approach how we design and create spaces for deliberation. This is especially important as we begin to see more examples of ongoing, institutionalised citizens' assemblies taking shape. While the considerations above are practically-oriented and derived from empirical observations and interviews, they encourage further speculation on how materialities, embodied experiences, and specific spatial configurations play a role for citizen deliberation, participation, and representation in a citizens' assembly.

As we continue to experiment and explore how different forms of democracy can take shape, the spatial conditions must also adapt. We have a unique opportunity to create spaces that are intentionally designed for citizen deliberation while also enabling and connecting to other broader civic and community activities.

The next piece in this series of papers will explore how these desired spatial qualities of deliberative spaces support or work against the design of socially and environmentally just spaces. We will approach this by first sketching out the existing and possible networks of spaces involved in deliberative assemblies, including digital spaces, and explore how these spaces might address exclusion, inclusivity, and regenerative practices. We will ask questions such as:

- How can spatial design address “internal exclusions” (Young, 2000) and disagreements in deliberative assemblies?
- How does the integration of advanced technologies in deliberative assemblies change spatial considerations?
- How can the design of deliberative spaces be anchored in place-based social and cultural practices through co-design and co-creation?
- How can deliberative spaces be designed with a positive impact on climate and biodiversity?
- How are virtual deliberative spaces designed? And what relationships do these spaces have with physical spaces for deliberation?

About the Authors

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