

DRIVING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN PLACE AND COMMUNITY

2025 City North Activation Program

WE CARE X STORYBOX

We Care x STORYBOX

Project Lead: Dr Sarah Barns

Project Summary

The *We Care x STORYBOX Project* was designed as a digital placemaking program that promoted participatory storytelling and exhibition opportunities within City North. The Project adapts and critiques the modes of outdoor media and smart cities that are dominant across urban precincts today.

Operating in a university precinct, the Project activities directly responded to the City North Activation Challenge focusing on how shared civic data infrastructure can empower communities, inform better city-making, and how the idea of a precinct shaped through the lens of common growth can be brought to life.

The Project utilised the digital tool 'STORYBOX' as shared exhibition infrastructure supporting research, teaching and engagement. As a place-based platform, the STORYBOX Cube and Plinths showcased diverse City North activation projects, helping to build social cohesion while supporting stronger engagement outcomes through a range of hard and soft data points.

The Project involved collaboration from community workshop facilitator and participatory researcher Victoria Johnstone, members of the STORYBOX / Studio ESEM team, and other exhibiting partners — including other City North Activation Projects. Community and industry participants were also involved in the Project, as well as First Nations storytellers.

Key Project Activities, Milestones & Deliverables

Project activities are being delivered on three levels running from September 2025 to March 2026. The first level, 'digital assets', focused on delivering a flexible digital exhibition infrastructure available for City North teams and projects to exhibit and engage with audiences on campus. The second; 'programs and partnerships', required collaboration with City North teams and partners to curate and respond to place responsive programming. The third; 'place insights', was connected to adapting smart city modalities for place-based insights via Internet of Things (IoT), sensors, and sentiment surveys, all grounded in data civics.

The core milestone of the Project was the installation of key STORYBOX digital infrastructure. These installations were fit for temporary programming and located first in Cardigan Street in City North during the 2025 City North Shared Futures Festival

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and later moved across the road on to the RMIT City Campus. Two STORYBOX Digital Plinths were also erected in Bowen St for the entirety of the Project's duration, these included the installation of IoT Sensors for people counts in the Precinct.

Programming of STORYBOX partner and curatorial content was also an essential project activity along with the participatory workshop program entitled 'We are Creatures'. The creative outcomes produced from the workshop were then displayed on the STORYBOX units.

Project Impact

The Project's establishment of digital infrastructure for temporary exhibitions and storytelling was underpinned by digital insights that support reporting for project/audience reach and engagement. These infrastructures were designed to enable exhibitors and partners to better report on how their projects were experienced and shared in civic spaces. They were also positioned where the audience would be extremely transient but overall exposure would ultimately be very high.

The STORYBOX methodology recognised that outdoor exposure is part of a continuum of engagement, from participation to exposure. This methodology supports RMIT academics, leaders and students to report exhibition and programming outcomes through the lens of impact, where overall reach volumes matter, and deepening connections to local audiences remain vital.

Future Planning

The future focus of the Project centres on deepening connections to the multi-vocal, layered perspectives of place that shape the City North Precinct. Discussions are underway with RMIT Vietnam to host a digital listening portal that connects campuses and enables shared exchange.

A First Nations activation, Future Memorials, is taking place in March 2026, facilitating site-specific Indigenous storytelling that brings attention to contested histories. In parallel, a Be. Curious Totem has been developed through the STORYBOX program, designed to support alternative sensory ways of connecting to place.

Longer-term, the Project will be extended through the 'Civic Interplay' program. This will expand the data civic values required to operate in digital public spaces through partnerships with major CBD precincts. In addition, an ongoing conversational series has commenced with the 'City North Stars' interviews. This will continue in 2026, featuring various key place custodians.

The Project aims to evolve across modalities and perspectives from outdoor 'screen media' to sound, listening, civic AI data ethnographies and, potentially, future place portals.



“We need to slow down our life to embrace what’s going on in nature.”

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The We Care X STORYBOX Project asked 'Could digital engagement in public spaces engage with audiences as citizens not consumers, and promote shared storytelling around the layers of place that shape identities through time'?

The *We Care* x *STORYBOX* team acknowledge and thank the following contributors:

We Care x STORYBOX

Studio ESEM/STORYBOX, Victoria Johnstone and Lee O'Donoghue.

For more information on the City North Social Innovation Precinct,
including partnership, collaboration and co-location opportunities, visit:

