RESEARCH REPORT

Document No. PL-MTU-003_v1.0

Edge City Patagonia Focus Group Study: Local Community Perceptions of an Experimental Pop-Up Community

Sterlin Lujan, Cecillia Lujan, Suzanne Steele, Rafal Przemyslaw, Dilshad Haider

Polis Labs · Tallinn, Estonia

May 2026

Corresponding author: Suzanne Steele, Polis Labs suzanne@polis-labs.com

Suggested citation: Lujan, S., Lujan, C., Steele, S., Przemyslaw, R., & Haider, D. (2026). Edge City Patagonia focus group study: Local community perceptions of an experimental pop-up community (Report No. PL-MTU-003_v1.0). Tallinn, Estonia: Polis Labs.

Disclosure: This study was conducted by Polis Labs researchers. Four of the five authors (S. Lujan, C. Lujan, Steele, and Przemyslaw) attended Edge City Patagonia but resided independently in San Martín de los Andes rather than being embedded participants within any specific Edge City residency. See Methods for full disclosure.

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Abstract

Pop-up cities and network state experiments have proliferated as attempts to prototype alternative models of community, governance, and civic life outside conventional institutional frameworks. Yet relatively little qualitative research examines how host community residents (rather than primarily international participants) experience these initiatives. This study addresses this information gap through a focus group study of Edge City Patagonia, an experimental pop-up community held in San Martin de los Andes (SMA), Argentina in October-November 2025, and designed to convene local and international participants around themes of technology, well-being, governance, and social innovation.

The research team is affiliated with Polis Labs, an independent Estonia-registered nonprofit. Four of the five authors attended Edge City Patagonia while residing independently in SMA, rather than being embedded within a specific Edge City residency. This proximity enabled access while introducing selection, interpretive, and advocacy risks addressed in the Methods section. Ten participants took part in a single facilitated focus group discussion, conducted primarily in English with approximately 15% of contributions delivered in Spanish and translated by a bilingual participant by group consent. The discussion was transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, with independent coding conducted by the non-attending author (Haider).

Four interrelated themes were identified, structured to follow the temporal arc of participants' actual experience: Pre-Engagement Barriers and Awareness; First Contact and Experiential Understanding; Post-Engagement Experience and Social Dynamics; and Vision, Co-Creation, and Future Engagement. Participants reported minimal prior awareness of Edge City before attending and described available pre-event information as confusing or inaccessible. Despite this, post-engagement sentiment was strongly positive: participants valued the egalitarian social environment, exposure to international networks, and conversations on topics rarely available in the local context. Support for the return of Edge City or a similar initiative was nearly unanimous, but conditional on better local integration, co-created programming, and proactive attention to displacement risks observed in comparable host communities.

Findings suggest that the primary design challenge for initiatives of this kind is not communications but participation architecture; if the event itself is what makes it comprehensible, the most important intervention is lowering the threshold of first contact. Long-term viability and legitimacy appear to depend on genuine co-creation with host communities rather than treating local residents as a secondary audience. Given the small sample, single-session design, and researcher proximity to the field, findings should be treated as exploratory and situated rather than generalizable.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore local residents' subjective experiences of Edge City Patagonia, with particular attention to awareness and access barriers prior to engagement, the character of participation once engaged, perceptions of local integration, and willingness to support future iterations or a permanent hub. A single in-person focus group discussion was selected as the primary method, on the grounds that group conversation allows participants to build on one another's contributions and surface meanings that individual interviews may not.

The focus group questions were designed specifically for a host-community audience whose primary relationship to Edge City was as local residents of the city in which it was held, and who had some level of interaction with the Edge City community, whether as a direct participant or through informal interactions with local and international Edge City participants. Accordingly, the questioning focused on awareness, access, social experience, and community impact rather than on governance design, organizational structure, or ideological alignment, which were topics outside the scope and experiences of this participant cohort.

Researcher Positionality and Conflicts of Interest

This study was conducted by researchers affiliated with Polis Labs, an independent, Estonia-registered nonprofit research institute focused on governance in voluntary and parallel-society communities. Four of the five authors (S. Lujan, C. Lujan, Steele, and Przemyslaw) attended Edge City Patagonia for the initiative's final week of programming, but resided independently in San Martin de los Andes rather than living within a specific Edge City residency. They were, therefore, present observers and attendees rather than embedded residents. The fifth author (Haider) had no on-site presence and conducted thematic coding independently; this separation was intended to introduce analytic distance between the focus group environment and the interpretation of its transcript. S. Lujan moderated the focus group.

We acknowledge three categories of risk this arrangement introduces. First, selection bias: recruitment proceeded through Polis Labs networks and snowball sampling, which likely overrepresents individuals already favorably disposed to Edge City and underrepresents residents with neutral or critical views who had no contact with the initiative. Second, interpretive bias: the attending researchers had contextual familiarity with the community setting and some of the individuals and events referenced during the discussion, which may have shaped moderating prompts and the weighting of excerpts. Third, advocacy bias: findings could be read, intentionally or otherwise, as evidence supporting the governance-design services Polis Labs offers.

To partially mitigate these risks, thematic coding was conducted by the non-attending author (Haider) using Braun and Clarke's (2006) structured procedure. No formal member-checking was conducted, and the analysis was not reviewed by researchers external to Polis Labs. Readers should treat findings as exploratory and situated within this specific community at this specific moment.

Participants and Recruitment

Ten participants were recruited through Polis Labs networks and snowball sampling from the local SMA community. Community organizers were not included in the participant pool. Recruitment aimed for diversity across age, gender, and degree of prior involvement with Edge City. Participants were not compensated.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N = 10)

Demographics	**f (%)**
Age (years)	
20–Early 40s (young professionals)	5 (50%)
40–50 (professionals & entrepreneurs)	2 (20%)
60+ (retired professionals)	3 (30%)
Gender	
Male	5 (50%)
Female	5 (50%)
Resident Location	
SMA residents	9 (90%)
Nearby city resident	1 (10%)

Participants varied in age from their early 20s to their 60s, with the majority aged between 20 and 40 years (50%), followed by participants aged above 60 years (30%) and 40 to 50 years (20%). The sample comprised equal numbers of male and female participants (50% each). The majority were SMA residents (90%), with one participant from a nearby city (10%). Nine of the ten participants were at least bilingual in Spanish and English.

Unlike the primary Edge City cohort of international visitors, participants were local community members whose shared characteristic was some form of prior contact with Edge City Patagonia.

As a self-selected sample of ten participants, this study cannot make claims about the views of SMA residents as a whole. Frequency language used in the findings (e.g., "the majority," "nearly all") reflects patterns within the focus group and should be interpreted accordingly. The study's value lies in the depth and consistency of qualitative themes rather than in statistical generalizability. Larger-scale follow-up research, including survey methods, would be required to test these themes at the population level.

Setting and Procedure

The focus group was conducted in person in SMA during Edge City Patagonia. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the session using a form developed in compliance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The form described the study's purpose, the discussion topics, recording and transcription procedures, and participant rights to access, rectify, withdraw, or request deletion of their data at any time. Participants were informed in advance that the session was being audio-recorded.

The discussion was facilitated by S. Lujan and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The moderator opened with an icebreaker prompt, asking participants what they knew about Edge City before the event started in San Martin de los Andes, before moving through four topic areas: (1) prior awareness of Edge City and barriers to access; (2) the nature and quality of participation once engaged; (3) perceptions of local integration, social dynamics, and inclusivity; and (4) views on future iterations or long-term establishment of Edge City or similar initiatives in SMA.

The discussion was conducted primarily in English. Approximately 15% of contributions were delivered in Spanish by participants who struggled to express themselves in English; a bilingual participant translated these contributions with the explicit and unanimous consent of the group. This arrangement was agreed on by the participants and moderator; consent was reconfirmed at the start of the session.

Ethical Considerations

This study did not undergo formal review by an institutional ethics board, as Polis Labs is not affiliated with an academic institution maintaining such a body. Ethical conduct was governed by the GDPR-compliant consent procedure described above, which provided participants with the legal protections of Article 6(1)(a) (consent as legal basis for data processing) and Article 9(2)(a) (explicit consent for sensitive data). Polis Labs is registered in Estonia and is subject to the GDPR by default; the standard was retained and applied in full both for jurisdictional compliance and because it represents one of the most rigorous and widely recognized data-protection frameworks in current use. Compliance with its provisions on consent, retention, anonymization, and participant rights generally meets or exceeds the requirements of national privacy regimes in jurisdictions where participants reside.

Recordings are stored securely and will be deleted within 12 months of the focus group date, in accordance with the consent form. Individual participant identities are anonymized throughout this report and are referenced as Participant 1 through 10. The location is referred to as San Martin de los Andes or SMA throughout; identifying details of specific participants, local businesses, and individual incidents have been redacted or generalized.

On consent form scope: the consent form under which participants agreed to take part described four purposes: evaluating the subjective experiences of local community members participating in temporary communities; identifying patterns contributing to positive or negative experiences; assessing the optimal level of local community participation; and generating quantitative metrics and qualitative themes to guide the future design of similar initiatives. The analysis presented in this report addresses all four purposes directly and does not extend beyond the framing under which consent was obtained.

Data Analysis

The recorded discussion was transcribed verbatim to preserve nuance and detail. The transcript was then imported into MAXQDA for coding and analysis. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: repeated line-by-line familiarization with the transcript, assignment of initial codes to participant excerpts, collation of codes into candidate themes, review against the data, and refinement into a final set of themes and subthemes.

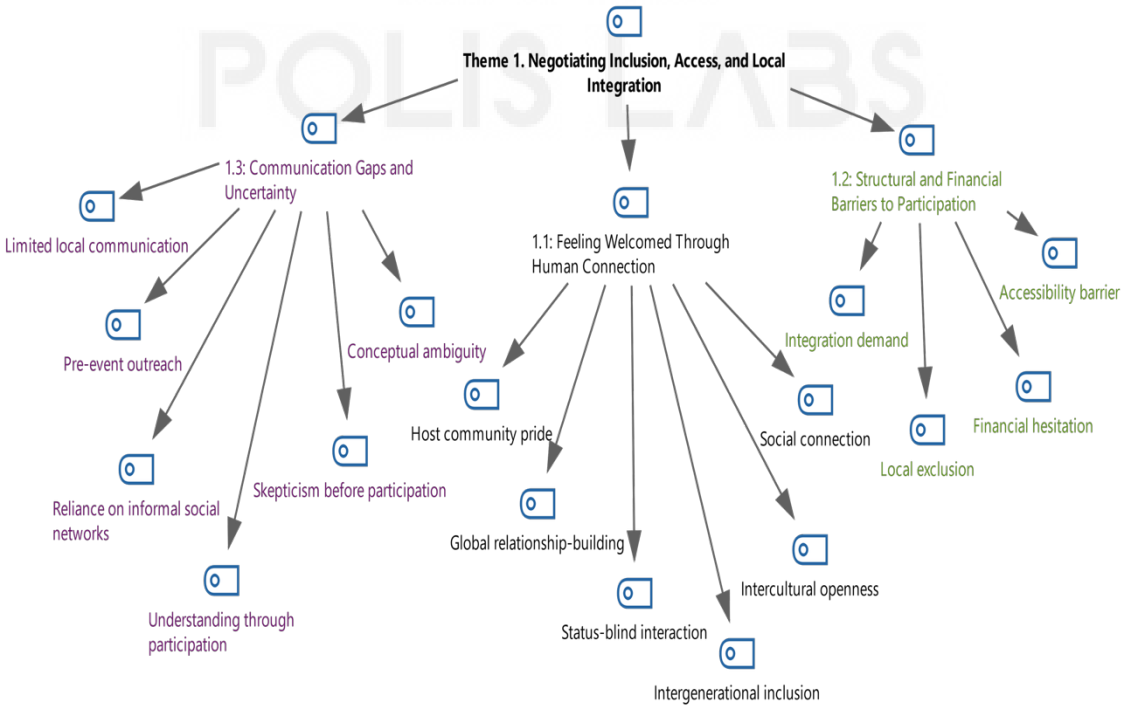
Coding was conducted by a single researcher (Haider), who was not present at the focus group; no second-coder verification or intercoder reliability check was performed, and this is noted as a limitation. Translated portions of the transcript (approximately 15% of total content) were analyzed in their translated form. The analysis identified four interrelated themes, presented with their subthemes and visual theme maps in the Findings section.

Findings

The analysis identified four interrelated themes. These themes are structured to follow the temporal arc of participants' actual experience rather than topical categories: Pre-Engagement Barriers and Awareness; First Contact and Experiential Understanding; Post-Engagement Experience and Social Dynamics; and Vision, Co-Creation, and Future Engagement. This structure was adopted because the most consistent and analytically significant pattern in the data was sequential, moving from confusion and skepticism through a threshold moment of direct participation, and then to sustained positive engagement. Adoption of a topical structure would have obscured rather than illuminated that pattern. Each theme is presented with its subthemes below.

1. Pre-Engagement Barriers and Awareness

Nearly all participants reported minimal or no prior awareness of Edge City before their first engagement. Where awareness existed, it arrived through informal personal networks rather than any direct communication from organizers. Participants encountered significant structural, communicative, and financial barriers to first contact that, in several cases, generated active mistrust before any participation had occurred.



Theme Map 1: Negotiating Inclusion, Access, and Local Integration

1.1 Low Prior Awareness and Communicative Gaps

Nearly all participants reported minimal or no meaningful knowledge of Edge City prior to the event. The icebreaker question consistently produced responses characterizing prior knowledge as "nothing," "never heard of it" (Participant 2), or exceedingly limited (Participant 5). Where awareness existed, it was acquired informally through hackathon-adjacent networks, groups associated with DevConnect (held in Buenos Aires, November 2025), acquaintances, or personal connections. No participant reported learning about Edge City through direct communication from organizers.

Even participants who had made active efforts to understand Edge City in advance found the available information insufficient:

> *"I still did not comprehend [what Edge City was] until I attended community dinners and engaged directly with other participants." (Participant 3)*

This pattern, an effort to understand followed by continued confusion, indicates a structural gap in how the event was communicated. The findings suggest that comprehension of Edge City mostly arose from direct social contact and experiential knowledge rather than through formal communication (Bartels, 2023; Polanyi, 1966).

1.2 Skepticism, Mistrust, and the Cost of Ambiguity

For some participants, unclear or inaccessible pre-event information actively generated mistrust. One participant recounted:

> *"Lots of people told me not [to go] – 'It's a Ponzi.' Information wasn't available on the web. You could only see the residencies and stuff once you paid... It was like, they want me to pay $2,000 just to see what's happening. It's kind of sketchy." (Participant 8)*

This skepticism reflects a reasonable response to opacity. The same phenomenon has been observed in research on new participatory and intercultural projects, in which initial ambiguity about purpose and identity can create barriers to participation before giving way to genuine engagement (Collie et al., 2010).

1.3 Financial and Structural Barriers

Financial uncertainty compounded the communication gap. Several participants were reluctant to purchase tickets without a clear understanding of what their participation would involve:

> *"I didn't feel confident enough to pay the ticket until the last day." (Participant 7)*

> *"I was like, what am I going to pay if I'm not really sure what I'm going to do -- am I going to work with other people?" (Participant 5)*

Participants also noted structural exclusions: inflexible scheduling, communication practices that assumed prior knowledge, and a general sense that the event had not been designed with local residents as an intended audience. One participant described it plainly:

> *"You understand what I said -- an untouchable schedule that [means] locals cannot see what happened... The message to me is: embrace locals." (Participant 7)*

For some participants Edge City seemed to be either socially remote or externally imposed, especially when there were few opportunities for the local community to participate in meaningful ways in programming and decision-making. Research on culturally rooted participatory approaches indicates that meaningful inclusion is achieved through collaborative structures that value local knowledge and social context and that are community owned (Leino & Puumala, 2021).

2. First Contact and Experiential Understanding

The most consistent and analytically significant pattern in the data is the contrast between pre-engagement confusion and post-engagement clarity. For nearly every participant, the turning point was not better information but direct experience.

2.1 Participation as the Primary Mode of Comprehension

Participants who had conducted online research, asked acquaintances, or sought out organizers still reported confusion about Edge City's nature and purpose. That confusion resolved, in almost every case, upon attending a community dinner, joining an informal gathering, or participating in some other type of shared activity. Edge City became understandable through direct involvement, not through reading about it. Participant 3 described making sustained efforts to understand the initiative before attending and concluding that comprehension only arrived after attending community dinners and engaging directly with other participants, not through any prior communication.

This is consistent with research on tacit and experiential knowledge, which holds that some forms of understanding can only be transmitted through participation rather than formal description (Polanyi, 1966; Bartels, 2023). The implication for design is significant: if comprehension requires participation, the primary intervention point is not communication strategy but the threshold of first contact. Lowering that threshold, whether through free or low-cost introductory events, open community meals, or visible public-facing activities, may be more effective than any communications campaign.

2.2 Low-Barrier Entry Points as Transformative Thresholds

Participants who were invited to join activities without prior registration were especially positive about those experiences:

> *"I felt very welcome to participate in some activities where I was not signed up previously." (Participant 3)*

This suggests that informal, low-commitment entry points were more effective at generating engagement and subsequent understanding than structured ticketed participation. The current model, which begins with a payment requirement and registration process, functions as a filter that excludes precisely the participants who most need direct experiential access before they can assess whether to commit.

3. Post-Engagement Experience and Social Dynamics

Once participants crossed the threshold of first engagement, their experiences were strongly and consistently positive. This section captures the quality and character of that experience across three dimensions: the social environment, exposure to new ideas, and personal transformation.

3.1 A Welcoming, Egalitarian Social Environment

Participants consistently described Edge City's interpersonal atmosphere as open, egalitarian, and socially stimulating. A striking feature of many accounts was the perception of irrelevance of social status within the event's informal settings:

> *"It was crazy to know that I have no idea who I'm talking to. Just a cool person on the other side. I didn't know if he or she was a millionaire or not. First time it doesn't matter." (Participant 6)*

These descriptions are consistent with research indicating that egalitarian, cross-status interaction, facilitated by what Putnam (2000) terms “bridging social capital,” is characteristic of high social capital environments.

International visitors' openness and curiosity about local culture also contributed to a sense of genuine mutual exchange, with one participant expressing the perception that of the international visitors they interacted with:

> *"They were very kind, very open and they would like to know more about us." (Participant 3)*

The pace of relationship formation was noted as distinctive; friendships developed quickly, facilitated by shared activities and informal participation:

> *"I met a lot of friends. I'm invited to travel around the world and stay in their homes." (Participant 6)*

These results are compatible with studies indicating that intercultural dialogue and interactions that involve social exchange can foster an open, equal and integrated community sense in pluralistic social contexts (Paunova, 2021).

The results also indicate that interpersonal integration took place more smoothly than structural integration. Emotional warmth, accelerated friendship, and sharing of language were often cited as positive aspects of the experience.

3.2 Exposure to New Ideas and Expanded Perspectives

Edge City was consistently described as an intellectually expansive experience, particularly given SMA's relative isolation and the limited availability of equivalent events locally. Participants valued exposure to both the technological ideas they encountered, and were pleasantly surprised by the number of discussions on human-centered topics that they claimed rarely arise in the local context:

> *"One thing I want to highlight that was a surprise for me is that they [Edge City] don't care only about tech or innovation, but they care about mental health and environment... I participated in many talks about neurodivergency, or menopause, or nutrition -- things that are not taken care of here in Argentina, taboo things that are not spoken in general." (Participant 3)*

Edge City was often described as a place for learning and discovery. New technologies, philosophies, and world views were seen as significant in the context of what was viewed as a more isolated or conservative local context. One participant stated:

> *"So for me, this event is expansion. I like that part, and it's really important." (Participant 6)*

This positive reaction to Edge City's opportunities for accessing new ideas and expanding perspectives is consistent with research on transformative learning, which indicates that intercultural experiences can stimulate critical reflection, open perspectives, and foster openness to new ways of thinking (Onosu, 2020).

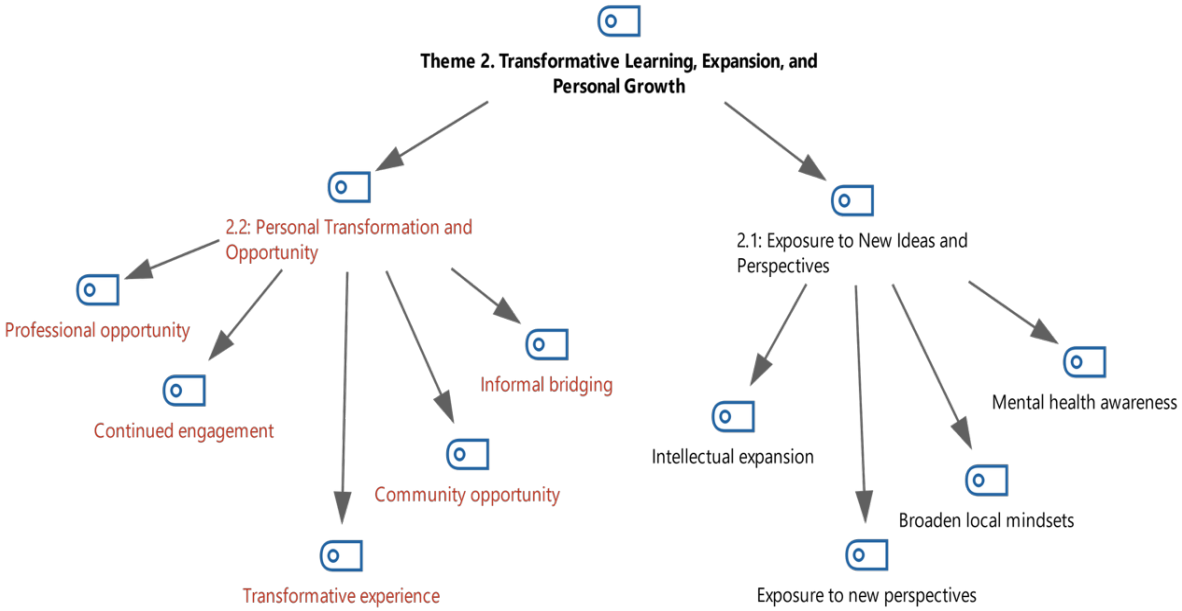
3.3 Personal Transformation and Concrete Opportunity

For several participants, the experience extended beyond the event itself into lasting personal and professional outcomes. Accounts of personal transformation were common, and some participants cited concrete results:

> *"My experience -- I can only say amazing -- because it changed my life and became very important for me. For example, I got an internship. I met very important people. Networking is very important for me." (Participant 8)*

> *"After we became friends, I invited them to do different stuff, and I ended up learning about crypto and so many things that I wasn't expecting." (Participant 5)*

Studies of transformative experiences at large-scale communal events suggest that experiential learning can foster lasting feelings of connectedness, growth, and deepened social values (Carr & Vaughn, 2020; Leung & Chiu, 2010).



Theme Map 2: Transformative Learning, Expansion, and Personal Growth

3.4 Social Integration and Structural Gaps

While interpersonal integration was described positively, participants identified a structural gap: they perceived the event had not been designed with local residents as an intended audience. Communication practices, scheduling, and programming assumed prior familiarity with digital nomad and pop-up community frameworks that most SMA residents do not have. This produced a situation in which local residents who crossed the threshold of first contact experienced strong inclusion, while many who might have done so never reached that point.

Participants also noted missed opportunities for local co-creation. They reported that local instructors, guides, and facilitators were not incorporated into the programme despite the availability of relevant local expertise. Gaps between co-creation intent and on-ground implementation can rapidly erode trust in participatory projects (Cornwall, 2008).

4. Vision, Co-Creation, and Future Engagement

Participants were asked to reflect on what they hoped for in the event of a future Edge City or similar presence in SMA. Three distinct themes emerged: strong aspiration for continuation, a desire for genuine local co-creation, and substantive concerns about the risk of displacement.

4.1 Aspirational Support for Continuation

Support for the return of Edge City (or a similar initiative) was nearly unanimous and expressed with considerable emotional investment:

> *"For me it's a dream -- to have this permanent here would be something like a dream, to integrate with family, my family, into the city and everything." (Participant 8)*
>
> *"I think it would be fantastic. We would be more prepared as a community because this opens the mind and encourages us." (Participant 3)*
>
> *"I would like [Edge City] to come back and I would like to participate because this time I couldn't. More than anything, to practice English." (Participant 4)*

Participants consistently framed the event as especially significant for younger residents, for whom local opportunities for connection, learning, and exposure to global networks are scarce:

"For me, I am young. I know that here there aren't a lot of events. So for my type of age it's very important to connect with that event." (Participant 7)

These results are consistent with research indicating that collective acts and intercultural projects can engender optimism, sense of community, and a future orientation through the provision of space for collective aspirations (Wood & Alonzo, 2026; Yudkin et al., 2022).

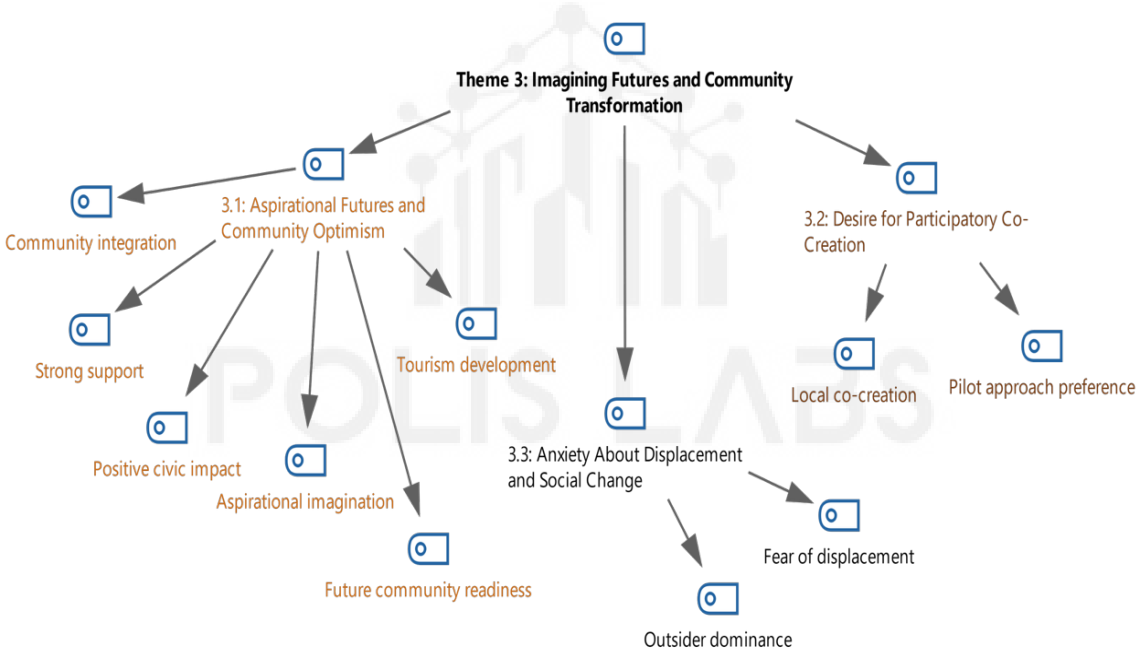
4.2 Desire for Participatory Co-Creation

Strong support for future events was consistently coupled with requests for local residents to play a more active and visible role in shaping them. Rather than act merely as a passive audience, participants called for local community members to actively co-create structures and act as contributors and facilitators. One suggested:

"To invite locals -- they organize a lot of activities, like yoga, heat baths, hiking. I think it's good to invite local people to do that, to be a yoga teacher from here, a mountain guide from here, and that kind of stuff." (Participant 6)

"I thought about ambassadors, like Edge City ambassadors, teachers of Edge City, [where] I go and explain to everyone. Because you want everyone to get advantage of this kind of event." (Participant 6)

Evidence suggests a significant role for community participation in decision-making, implementation, and knowledge production processes in ensuring sustainable engagement (Wexler, 2011).



Theme Map 3: Imagining Futures and Community Transformation

4.3 Interest in Longer-Term Engagement

Several participants expressed interest not just in a future iteration but in a more permanent or recurring presence of Edge City or similar initiative in SMA. This interest was grounded in the perceived scarcity of comparable opportunities locally, including networking, intellectual engagement, and connection to global communities, and in the relationships formed during the event.

Participants who had developed friendships and professional connections expressed a clear desire to maintain and deepen those connections through continued proximity. This is consistent with literature on experimental workspaces, where strong initial engagement is often associated with sustained involvement when participants feel their input can influence future directions (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017).

4.4 Concerns About Displacement and Social Change

A meaningful minority of participants raised concerns that deserve serious consideration rather than being treated as peripheral caveats or vague anxieties. Many of their observations were grounded in precedent, e.g. participants had witnessed or heard of nomadic communities transforming the social and economic character of other towns:

> *"The only thing that would worry me is -- in some places I've seen that these nomad movements came to some cities, and [they] ended up making locals move to other areas." (Participant 5)*

The same participant also noted that some international visitors had expressed interest in relocating to SMA as a result of their experience during the Edge City event. This observation appeared to elicit mixed feelings. Displacement concerns of this kind are well-documented in research on lifestyle migration and the effects of globally mobile communities on smaller host towns (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011). Future planning should engage with this concern directly, rather than assuming that enthusiasm for Edge City among local participants implies immunity to the displacement dynamics observed elsewhere.

Limitations

Several methodological constraints, including single-session design, recruitment through Polis Labs networks, the absence of member-checking and intercoder verification, and the lack of formal institutional ethics review, are described in the Methods section and should be considered when interpreting the findings. Three additional limitations warrant attention here.

First, a single focus group of approximately 60 minutes cannot reach thematic saturation in the conventional sense. The themes presented should be understood as patterns observable within this specific conversation rather than as exhaustive accounts of local community experience. Individual follow-up interviews, a survey-based follow-up with a larger sample, or a second focus group with a different participant cohort would each have strengthened the evidentiary base. Larger-scale follow-up research, including quantitative survey methods, would be required to test these themes at the population level.

Second, the translated portions of the transcript (approximately 15% of contributions) introduce a layer of interpretive mediation not present in comparable studies using a single language. Peer translation, however consensual and carefully managed, differs from professionally verified interpretation. Nuances of meaning, particularly in emotional or culturally specific expressions, may not have been fully captured in the English record. The analysis treats translated contributions with equivalent weight, but readers should be aware of this constraint.

Third, the participant cohort, while more demographically varied than would be typical of a network state-focused study, shares a significant selection characteristic: all participants had some prior contact with Edge City. The views of SMA residents with no contact, or with predominantly negative responses to the initiative, are not represented. The study's value lies in the depth and consistency of qualitative themes among those who did engage, rather than in any claim to represent SMA community opinion as a whole.

Recommendations and Implications

The following recommendations derive directly from the findings of this study. Each is based on specific participant experiences or concerns rather than general best practice, and each maps to one of the phases of the participant arc described in the findings.

Reducing Pre-Engagement Barriers

Redesign first-contact materials around the uninformed reader. The current approach assumes a level of prior familiarity with digital nomad and network society concepts that most SMA residents do not have. Communications should be written for someone who has never heard of Edge City, explaining concretely what happens day-to-day, what it costs, who it is for, and what a local resident would actually do there if they showed up. Abstract language about technology, innovation, and community-building alone is not adequate.

Work through the channels appropriate to the local, informal context. Participant accounts consistently showed that awareness came through personal networks, acquaintances, and informal community groups, so future outreach should invest in activating those same informal channels deliberately. Identifying well-connected local individuals who attended the first iteration of Edge City Patagonia and asking them to share their experiences directly with their networks would be a good start.

Address the cost barrier explicitly and early. Financial uncertainty was a significant deterrent for participants who were otherwise interested. Clear, early information about what participation costs, what is included, and whether any subsidized or free access is available for local residents would remove a barrier that several participants cited as a reason for delayed or non-participation.

Redesigning the Point of First Contact

Create structured low-barrier entry points. The data is unambiguous: participation was what made Edge City understandable, not prior information. The most effective intervention is almost certainly a deliberate first-contact experience that is free, visible, and requires no prior knowledge or commitment. An open community meal, a public talk, or a free afternoon activity held in a central public location would serve this function. The goal is to create the conditions for the kind of spontaneous participation that participants described as transformative.

Make informal participation an explicit design feature. Several participants cited being welcomed to join activities they had not registered for as a highlight of their experience. This should not be accidental, but could instead be a named and promoted feature of the event. Signposting that says, in effect, "you are welcome to join" reduces the perceived social cost of showing up without knowing what to expect.

Pilot a local preview event. Consider holding a small community-facing event in the weeks before Edge City opens, specifically for SMA residents, with no ticket price and no expectation of further commitment. The purpose is experiential: give residents the first-contact moment that will maximize their understanding and enthusiasm.

Local Integration and Co-Creation

Involve local residents in programming before the event, not during it. Participants called clearly for co-created structures rather than the current model, in which locals are invited to attend something designed primarily by and for an outside cohort. This means identifying local facilitators, instructors, guides, and subject-matter contributors in advance and building them into the programme as named, visible participants.

Establish a local ambassador programme. Multiple participants independently raised the idea of local ambassadors who could explain Edge City to their communities in their own terms and through their own networks. This is worth formalizing: a small group of local participants from each edition, given a light brief and genuine visibility, would be more effective at building community awareness and trust than any external communications effort.

Create a formal feedback mechanism for local participants. There does not appear to be a specific channel through which local residents can share observations, concerns, or suggestions with organizers during or after the event. A simple, accessible mechanism targeted directly at the local community, even if informal, would signal that local input is genuinely valued and would provide organizers with actionable information for future iterations.

Displacement and Long-Term Community Impact

Take displacement concerns seriously as a planning input. The participants who raised concerns about nomadic communities displacing local residents were among the most engaged and enthusiastic supporters of Edge City. Their concern was not opposition, but a condition on their support. Future planning should acknowledge this concern directly, engage with evidence from comparable host communities, and be transparent about what is and is not known about Edge City's long-term social and economic effects in SMA.

Establish a baseline. Before the next iteration of Edge City (or similar) it would be worth documenting current housing costs, rental availability, and relevant social and economic indicators in SMA, especially if there is any

intent to establish an enduring presence. This creates the basis for monitoring change over time and for identifying early whether patterns associated with displacement in other locations are beginning to emerge locally.

Build ongoing community dialogue into the model. Sustained dialogue with local residents, before, during, and after each edition, would both surface concerns early and demonstrate a genuine long-term commitment to the community rather than a transactional relationship with it.

Implications for Governance-Design Research and Practice

The most theoretically significant finding in this study is the primacy of experiential understanding over informational comprehension. Participants could not understand Edge City from descriptions of it; they needed to participate. This suggests a design principle with broad applicability to experimental community initiatives operating in host-city contexts: the entry point is not a communications challenge but a participation architecture challenge. How participation is first made possible, and for whom, is the central design question.

A related implication concerns the relationship between local legitimacy and local co-creation. Participants' calls for a local ambassador programme, for local instructors and guides to be built into programming, and for structured channels through which local residents can shape future iterations are not simply preferences. They are the conditions under which an initiative like Edge City can maintain genuine community support over time. Enthusiasm generated by a single well-received iteration is real but conditional; its conversion into durable local legitimacy requires demonstrated responsiveness to the concerns and aspirations that participants in this study articulated.

Finally, the displacement concerns raised by this study deserve attention as a research question in their own right. The participants most attuned to these risks were also the most enthusiastic about Edge City's potential. That combination, strong support coupled with genuine concern about long-term social effects, is precisely the profile of the engaged local stakeholder whose continued involvement would most benefit future iterations. Research that tracks social and economic indicators in SMA over successive Edge City editions, and that documents whether the displacement patterns observed in comparable locations are emerging or not, would provide the evidentiary base needed to address those concerns honestly and specifically.

Conclusion

The participants in this focus group were, in the end, strongly positive about Edge City. Their accounts described an experience that was socially inclusive, intellectually stimulating, and personally meaningful, often in ways that persisted well beyond the event itself. Networking, intercultural exchange, exposure to new ideas, and unexpected personal opportunities were recurring themes. Support for Edge City or a similar initiative's return was nearly universal and expressed with genuine enthusiasm.

But that positive experience existed in direct tension with how the event was introduced to the local community. Almost no participant arrived at Edge City having understood what it was. Understanding came through participation, often via an informal invitation to join an activity, rather than through any prior information.

Although local participants felt their Edge City experiences were transformative, they also perceived that access to it was not designed with local residents in mind.

This gap is the study's central and most actionable finding. The goal for future iterations should not simply be better communication, but a deliberate redesign of the entry point: more visible, lower-barrier, and structured to create the kind of first contact that the data shows is necessary for Edge City and similar initiatives to become comprehensible and meaningful to the people who live where it takes place.

Participants were clear about what that would look like: local residents involved in programming and facilitation from the outset; community ambassadors who can explain and champion the event in their own networks; and structured pathways for residents to participate without requiring prior knowledge or financial commitment upfront.

Finally, the displacement concerns raised by several participants should not be reduced to a footnote, especially since the participants who raised them were among Edge City's strongest supporters. Their concern was that something valuable should not be allowed to become something harmful through inattention to local social and economic dynamics. That concern is worth building into the planning framework explicitly, rather than addressing reactively, if and when problems arise.

This study suggests that Edge City and globally networked initiatives of this kind can add real value to the communities that host them, but making access to that value genuinely local requires more work and attention for any future iterations in SMA.

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