

Rethinking participatory architecture in Decidim

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and rationale

The Decidim Product Team is conducting a strategic analysis on the potential consolidation of **Processes** and **Assemblies** into a single, more versatile and abstract participatory space. While conceived for distinct use cases, these two spaces have functionally converged, sharing a significant portion of their features and capabilities. However, they remain as separate entities within the codebase, requiring administrators to make an early and sometimes arbitrary choice between them when initiating a participatory project.

This unification proposal aims to significantly reduce architectural complexity and decrease the cognitive load for platform administrators. A unified, abstract participation model would facilitate the creation of purpose-built templates for specific democratic use cases – such as a citizens' assembly, a strategic planning cycle, or an internal election, without the need for functional duplication. Furthermore, it would enhance interoperability between spaces, components, and external modules that rely on Decidim's core participatory structure.

This proposed evolution also presents challenges, including substantial code refactoring, legacy data management, and a comprehensive review of key user-facing features such as navigation, filtering, and search functionality. Notwithstanding these challenges, the long-term benefits, including improved maintainability, easier management and a more intuitive user experience, present a compelling strategic direction for the product's evolution.

1.2. Objectives of the analysis

The primary objective of this report is to evaluate the technical and functional feasibility of merging the Participatory Processes & Assemblies modules into a unified participatory space within the Decidim architecture. This entails a detailed examination of the impact such a consolidation would have on the platform's overall architecture, codebase, and internal logic.

Beyond the technical assessment, this report also aims to analyze the implications for day-to-day platform operations. This includes evaluating the experience from the perspective of both administrators managing the spaces and participants engaging in

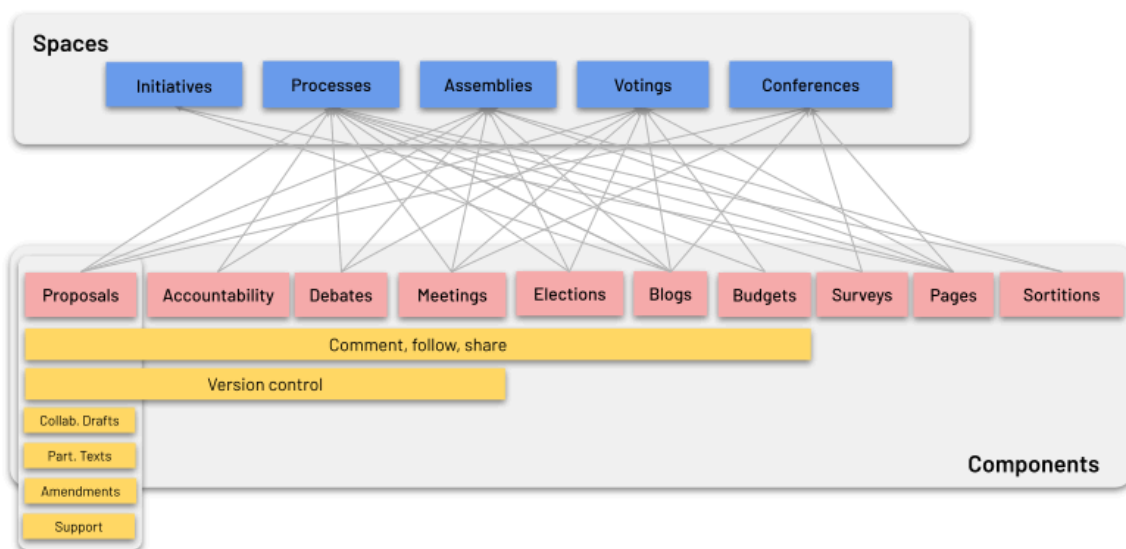
participatory activities. The analysis will assess how configuration workflows, navigation patterns, and administrative options could be simplified or transformed and determine whether the proposed unification enhances clarity, reduces cognitive overhead or introduces new usability considerations.

The ultimate goal is to provide an evidence base to inform strategic decision-making, taking into account long-term maintainability, user experience optimization and the potential need for migration strategies and third-party module compatibility.

2. Participatory spaces in Decidim

As defined in the Decidim Book¹:

Participatory spaces. These are the frameworks that define how participation will be carried out, the settings or media where citizens or members of an organisation can realise various activities. Each of them has a specific design. Initiatives, Processes, Assemblies, Votings and Conferences are all participatory spaces (see blue boxes in the figure below):



Specific examples of each of these spaces include: a citizen initiative for directly changing a regulation (Initiative); a general assembly or workers'

¹ Barandiaran, X. E., Calleja-López, A., Monterde, A., & Romero, C. (2024). *Decidim, a technopolitical network for participatory democracy: Philosophy, practice and autonomy of a collective platform in the age of Digital Intelligence*. Springer.

council (Assembly); a participatory budgeting, strategic planning, or electoral process (Processes); a referendum or call to vote “Yes” or “No” to change, for instance, the name of an organisation (Votings); a collection of meetings (with talks, working groups, announcements, etc.) for an event such as a Peace Conference or an Annual Congress or Convention (Conferences).

2.1. Conceptual overview of Processes and Assemblies

Decidim's foundational structure is based on various types of participatory spaces, with multiple instances of each type, where components are deployed to enable specific participatory actions.

Processes are spaces structured across distinct temporal *phases*. Administrators can activate, deactivate, and configure different participatory components within each phase, making this model suitable for time-bound, sequential processes like participatory budgeting or strategic planning.

Assemblies are spaces conceived to represent deliberative or decision-making bodies that meet periodically. They focus on detailing the assembly's composition, listing its meetings and facilitating participation, for instance, through attendance (where capacity allows), agenda item submissions or discussions on proposals and decisions.

They are characterized by their stability and continuous nature over time.

2.2. Functional similarities and differences

While conceived with distinct conceptual purposes, Processes and Assemblies have evolved to share nearly identical functional characteristics. They use a very similar configuration interface and support the activation of the same set of components (e.g., meetings, proposals, debates).

Two primary functional differences persist:

1. **Phases:** Processes are defined by a phased timeline, allowing component activation to be tied to specific stages. Assemblies lack this native phasing system, reflecting their ongoing nature.

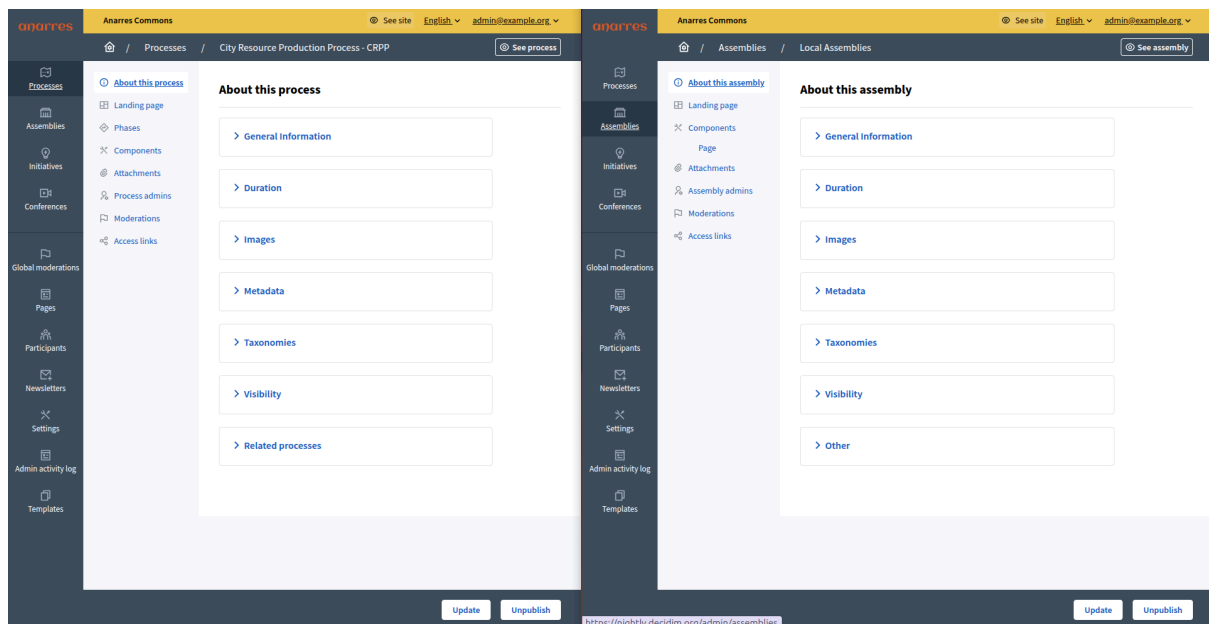
2. **Membership:** Assemblies can be structured around a defined group of people, incorporating native functionality for managing members. Processes are generally open to a broader public without a built-in membership roster.

These differentiating features, phases and memberships, do not inherently justify maintaining two separate and largely duplicated participatory spaces. Instead, they can be re-envisioned as **configurable options** within a single, more abstract participatory space. A citizens' assembly serves as a perfect example: it may require both a phased timeline for its deliberation process and a defined membership. A unified model would accommodate this seamlessly, without forcing an initial choice between two rigid space types.

Processes Groups vs. Parent/Child Assemblies

Both spaces also feature grouping mechanisms ("*Processes Groups*" for Processes and "*Parent Assemblies*" for Assemblies). Initially different, they have converged towards a similar use. A unified approach would allow for the integration of the best features of both: the hierarchical navigation from Assemblies and the better content layout from Process Groups.

2.2.1. Back office



Configuration comparison

The following table highlights the significant overlap and minor inconsistencies between the configuration forms for Processes and Assemblies, underscoring the opportunity for consolidation and standardization.

Process Configuration	Assembly Configuration
General Information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Title • Subtitle • Order position • URL slug • Short description • Description • Announcement 	General Information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Title • Subtitle • Order position • URL slug • Short description • Description • Purpose of action • Composition • Internal organization • Announcement
Duration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start date • End date 	Duration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date created • Included at • Duration • Closing date • Closing date reason
Images <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hero image 	Images <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hero image • Banner image

Metadata <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoter group • Organization area • Scope metadata • Who participates • What is decided • How is it decided 	Metadata <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is decided • How is it decided • Scope metadata • Promoter group • Organization area • Who participates
Taxonomies	Taxonomies
Visibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes group • Private process • Promoted? 	Visibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent space • Highlighted • Private space • Is transparent
Related Processes	Other <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created by • Related participatory processes

A direct comparison of the fields in both forms reveals a high degree of similarity. It is important to note that the original form design for Assemblies was conceived to address the specific requirements and organizational structure of the Barcelona City Council.

Consequently, while fields such as "*Purpose of action*" "*Composition*" and "*Internal organization*" were relevant for that particular use case, they may not be necessary for all organizations. This presents an opportunity to reassess their status as core fields versus optional or template-specific metadata in a unified model.

The remaining fields are practically identical in both function and purpose. The existing differences are primarily minor inconsistencies resulting from the independent evolution of these two spaces over time. It is worth mentioning that these discrepancies in field nomenclature and organization will be corrected to ensure

platform coherence, regardless of whether the merger of participatory spaces proceeds.

Admin list and management comparison

Title	Created at	Private	Published	Actions
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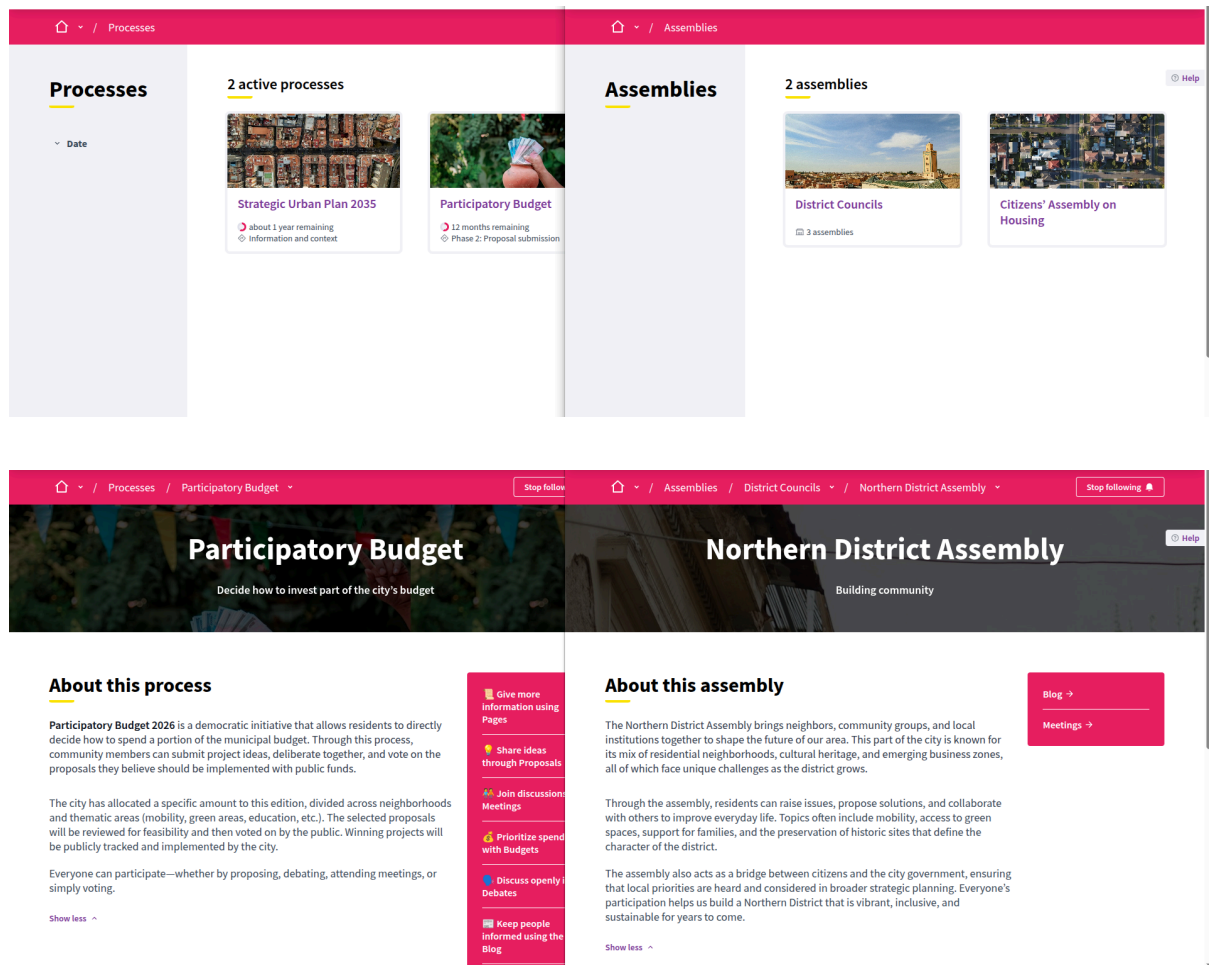
From an administration perspective, the management interfaces for Processes and Assemblies demonstrate near-identical functionality and user experience. The data tables presenting lists of both space types share the same structural patterns, including:

- Identical action menus (edit, duplicate, export, preview, share link, publish/unpublish, manage moderations, move to trash)
- Similar filtering and search capabilities
- Same sorting and pagination mechanics
- Identical layout systems
- Identical components management

The only notable distinction in administrative management lies in the grouping mechanisms, as previously mentioned: Processes are organized into "*Process Groups*" while Assemblies utilize a hierarchical "*Parent Assembly*" model. This divergence in grouping logic is perceived as dysfunctional, and has already generated demand from the community, with administrators explicitly requesting that both Processes and Assemblies behave identically in this regard.

This call for consistency further reinforces the argument for unification under a single participatory space model with consistent grouping options.

2.2.1. Front office



At the presentation layer, Processes and Assemblies result in an almost identical experience for end users. Both spaces rely on the same visual components, page structures and interaction patterns to display components like meetings, proposals and debates.

The main impact of unifying these spaces would be seen in **navigation** and overall information architecture. The new model would introduce far greater flexibility, allowing different types of participatory spaces to appear on the same listing page or be filtered dynamically. Importantly, this added flexibility is designed to be non-disruptive. Administrators would still be able to **preserve the current navigation structure if they choose**, replicating the existing separation between “Processes” and “Assemblies” in the main menu using a configurable menu manager and taxonomy-based filtering. This approach maintains backward compatibility while opening the door to a more integrated and intuitive way for users to explore all participatory activities.

2.3. Current architecture and dependencies

A key consideration in this proposed unification lies in the architecture and existing dependencies around the concept of **"ParticipatorySpace"**. This term — both as a concept and as an API — was first introduced with the **Assemblies** module in April 2018². As a result, several other modules, such as **Initiatives** and **Conferences**, currently depend on this API.

This creates a naming conflict that must be addressed before proceeding. There are two possible approaches:

1. **Retain the name "ParticipatorySpace"** for the new unified module, and rename the existing API to a different identifier.
2. **Adopt a new name** for the unified module, allowing the existing **ParticipatorySpace** API to remain unchanged.

The choice between these two strategies has significant implications for the project's complexity and timeline. The first approach would enable a relatively straightforward implementation, estimated at around six months of development. The second would require extensive refactoring across multiple modules, potentially extending the process over a much longer period.

Regardless of the approach, careful planning will be required to ensure backward compatibility and minimize disruption to existing modules and community extensions.

3. Impact assessment

3.1. Potential benefits

- **Improved maintainability:** Significant reduction of duplicated code, leading to more efficient development and long-term maintenance.
- **Unified feature development:** Enhancements to core space management (search, filtering, pagination, action menus) are implemented once for all spaces, rather than separately for each type.
- **Enhanced interoperability:** Simplified and more powerful relationships between spaces, and between components and spaces, without requiring duplicate implementations.

² See Pull Request at <https://github.com/decidim/decidim/pull/1659>

- **Template-driven configuration:** A more abstract space model could facilitate the creation of pre-defined templates for specific use cases (e.g., a general assembly, a strategic plan, a board election), accelerating project setup.
- **Streamlined third-party integration:** Easier integration for external modules that interact with participatory spaces, as they would interface with a single, consistent model.
- **Simplified user perception:** The perceived complexity of Decidim's functional architecture is reduced, creating a clearer distinction between organization-promoted environments (Spaces) and participant-promoted environments (Initiatives).
- **Unified permissions logic:** Easier to manage and streamlined permission logic for space admins within each space environment.

3.2. Risks and challenges

- **Substantial coding effort:** Requires a significant investment in code refactoring and potential data migration.
- **UX/UI impact:** Careful consideration is needed for the impact on administrative and front-end navigation, filtering and search interfaces.
- **Legacy data management:** A clear strategy is required for handling existing data from both Processes and Assemblies.

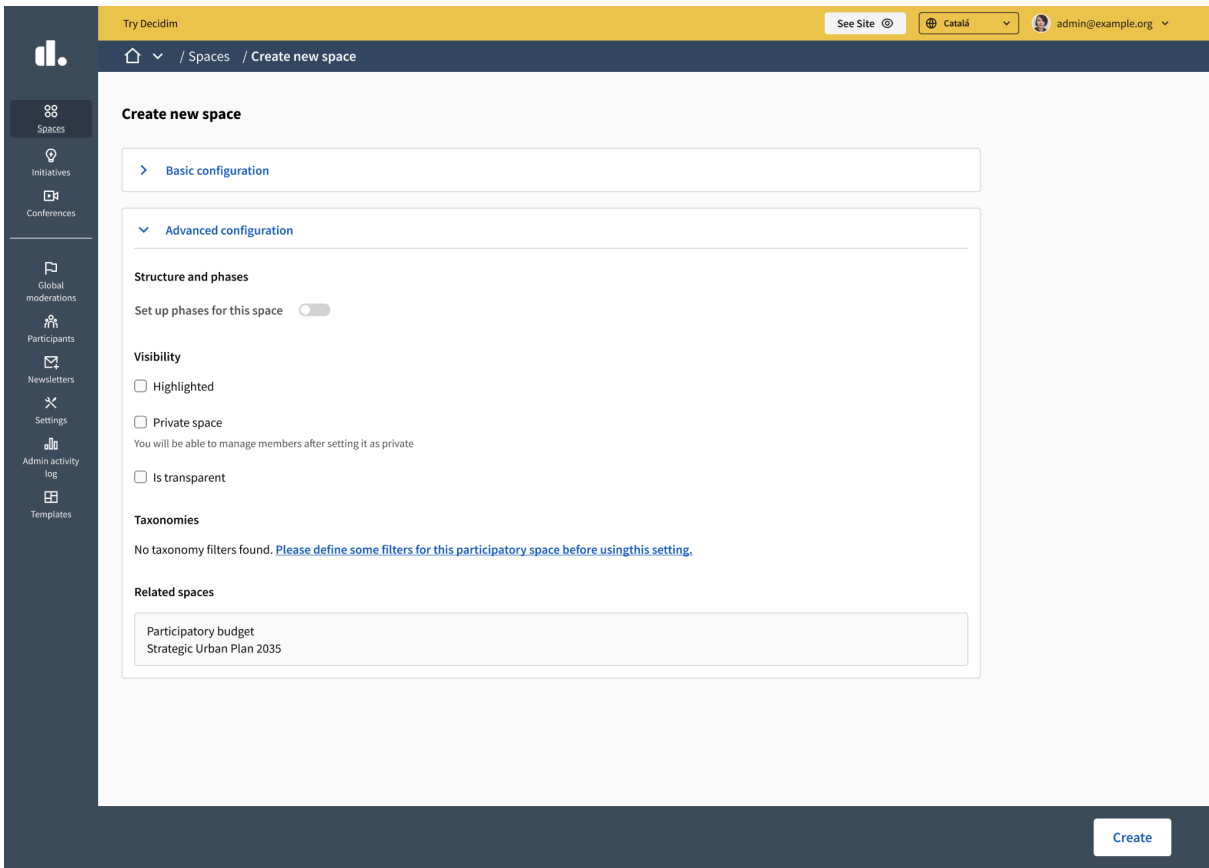
3.3. Impact on existing installations and legacy data

A necessary condition of this evolution is to preserve the existing user experience for end-users, should an administering organization desire it. Participants could continue to interact with the platform in a familiar manner, potentially seeing the same menu structure (e.g. a link to browse "*Processes*" and another for "*Assemblies*").

The platform's taxonomy system is a key enabler for this backward compatibility. It allows for the definition of space types (e.g. "*Participatory Process*," "*Assembly*,") which can then be used to filter and display spaces in familiar categories. This ensures a non-disruptive transition for established communities.

4. Design and implementation considerations

4.1. Space configuration



The resulting configuration form for the unified participatory space is envisioned as follows. Incorporating improvements for clarity and usability, such as a division between basic and advanced settings:

Space Configuration
Basic configuration
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Title+ SubtitleOrder positionURL slugShort description

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• + Description• Home image
Advanced configuration
Structure and phases <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set up phases for this space
Taxonomies
Visibility <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highlighted• Private space• Transparent space
Related spaces

Consolidation of the layout system

A key aspect of this unification involves standardizing the use of content blocks as the primary layout system across all spaces. Metadata fields, banner images, announcements, and any other form field currently managed in disparate sections will be integrated into their correspondent content block.

Phases as a configurable feature

The phased timeline would become an optional setting under "*Advanced configuration*". If enabled, would activate the existing logic for phase-dependent component configuration. If disabled, the space would behave as a continuous entity.

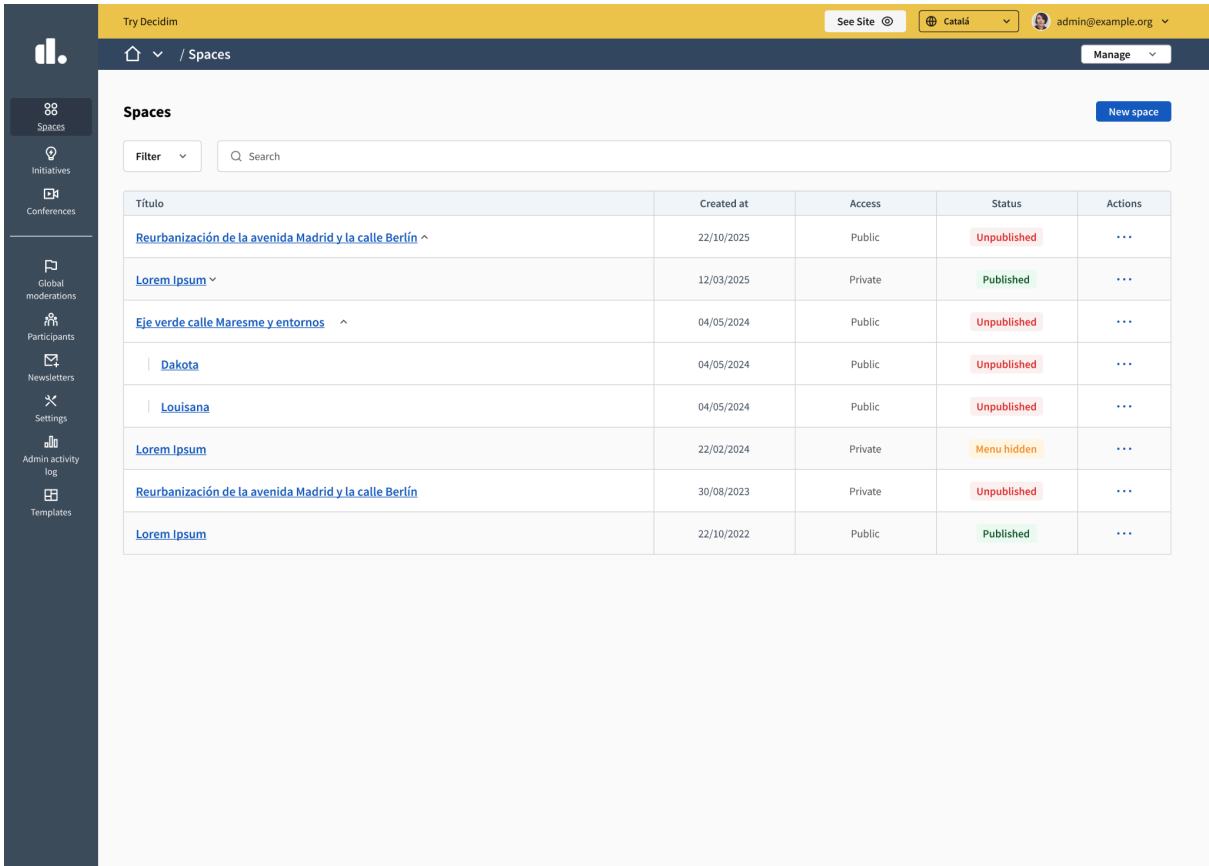
Space participants

In version 0.30 the concepts of "*Members*" and "*Private Participants*" were already harmonized in Assemblies. In the unified model, a "*Members*" section would be available when a space is configured as private or transparent. By definition, public spaces (accessible to all users) would not have a formal membership roster.

Space administrators

This functionality would primarily require a renaming exercise, as the underlying roles and management interfaces are already consistent between Processes and Assemblies.

4.2. Spaces management



Taxonomies for space classification and filtering

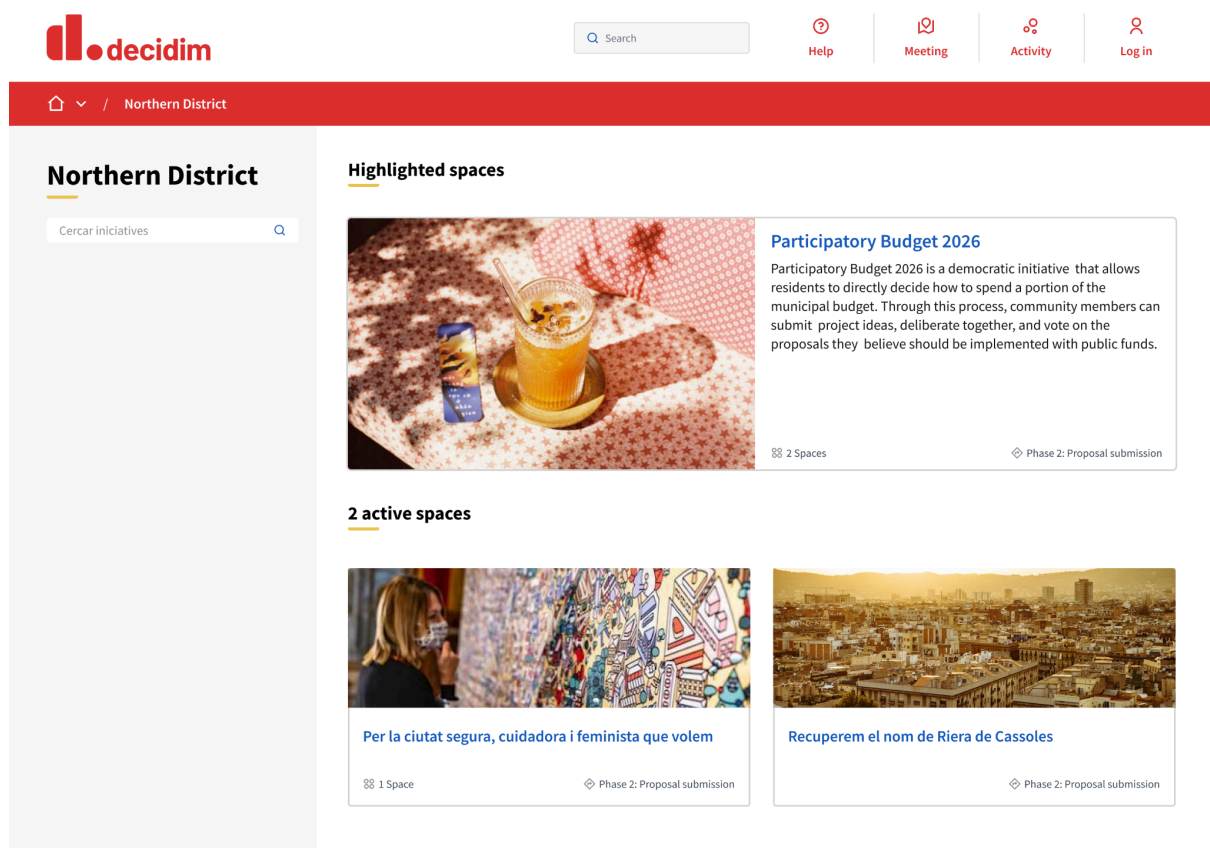
Spaces would be classified using the taxonomy system, which supports nested categories. This provides clarity for both filtering spaces on the public side and organizing them within the admin panel. This would be complemented by a menu manager, allowing administrators to define which spaces appear in the main navigation, thus providing the flexibility for each organization to structure its platform as desired.

Archive feature

While tangential to the merge itself, an archiving feature is critical for the long-term management of large Decidim instances. It would provide a clear distinction between

'Active' and 'Inactive' spaces. Archiving a space would remove it from default views and filters without deleting it, allowing it to be restored if needed, thereby reducing clutter in the administrative interface.

4.3. Frontend navigation and user interaction



Irrespective of the proposed merger, eight years of experience with Decidim indicate the necessity for a more powerful and customizable menu management system.

This system needs to allow navigation to be tailored to organizational specific needs, freeing it from being strictly dictated by the platform's underlying architectural concepts.

4.4. Integration with external modules and APIs

A unified space model significantly simplifies the API and integration points for external modules. Instead of developing separate connectors for Processes and Assemblies, module developers would interact with a single consistent participatory space entity, reducing development effort and potential for errors.

5. Comparative with other platforms

A comparative analysis with other digital participation platforms reveals a key strategic difference. While most competitors prioritize a simplified user experience, Decidim remains committed to its techno-political approach.

However, this complexity while conceptually robust, often penalizes the platform in comparative assessments conducted by field experts and evaluators³, who may perceive it as unnecessary intricacy.

The goal is preventing its theoretical complexity from manifesting as user-facing complexity. By designing more intuitive interfaces and workflows, we can maintain Decidim's powerful capabilities while ensuring a smoother, more accessible experience, thereby facilitating wider adoption and more favorable evaluations without compromising its foundational principles.

6. Preliminary conclusions and next steps

6.1. Summary of findings

- The functional merger of Processes and Assemblies is technically viable and can be achieved without disrupting the end-user experience. Moreover, it has the potential to significantly improve it by allowing the platform's architecture to adapt to specific use cases, rather than forcing use cases into predefined architectural boxes.
- For new organizations adopting the platform, the functional architecture becomes clearer: there are environments promoted by the organization and those promoted by participants. Within each, a common set of components can be combined.
- For existing organizations, careful attention must be paid to the administrative panel experience. The implementation of planned improvements: such as the menu manager, enhanced search and filtering, and the archive feature, is imperative for a smooth transition.
- From a maintenance and future development perspective, the unification represents a significant improvement by eliminating the need to update duplicated code across two separate modules.

³ <https://www.peoplepowered.org/platform-ratings>

- It is feasible to maintain the richness and quality required for political participation spaces without transferring underlying complexity to the user experience, particularly for those designing and administering these spaces.

6.2. Open questions for further exploration

What about Conferences and Initiatives?

Conferences are a candidate for future inclusion in the unified Spaces model. However, they currently possess specific features (e.g. program, speakers, registrations) that require a separate assessment to determine if they should be implemented as components, content blocks, or a hybrid. This is a separate discussion and is outside the scope of this document.

Initiatives, due to their distinct promoters (participants rather than the organization) and their unique workflow, are considered a fundamentally different entity and are therefore not included in this proposed merger.

How does a single table at the UI level for all spaces scale?

The scalability of a unified data model and the precise UI/UX implementation for managing a large number of diverse spaces require further technical and design detailing. This will be a critical focus in the next phase of evaluation.

How would "Space templates" be implemented?

The concept of pre-configured templates (e.g. "General Assembly," "Strategic Planning") needs deeper exploration. This involves defining what a template entails: default components, pre-defined phases, initial placeholder content, etc.

What will the unified space be named?

While "Spaces" is the current working term, the final name should be different for the technical reasons outlined in section 2.3. Proposals that enhance clarity without distorting the entity's purpose are welcome.

6.3. Roadmap proposal and decision-making process

This report is a deliverable within the broader NGI project “*Revamp Decidim*”⁴, which committed to an initial feasibility analysis of this change. Following this preliminary exploration, the intention is to deepen the investigation into the open questions outlined above. This unification represents a substantial evolution of the product and is envisioned as a strategic direction for a future major release, following the stabilization of the current architecture and user interface. **The consolidation of the current model into a stable release is the immediate priority.**

Future roadmapping will define the timeline and scope of this potential unification. In line with Decidim’s model of technological governance, the direction of this evolution will ultimately be shaped through collective debate and community consensus.

7. Appendices

7.1. Glossary

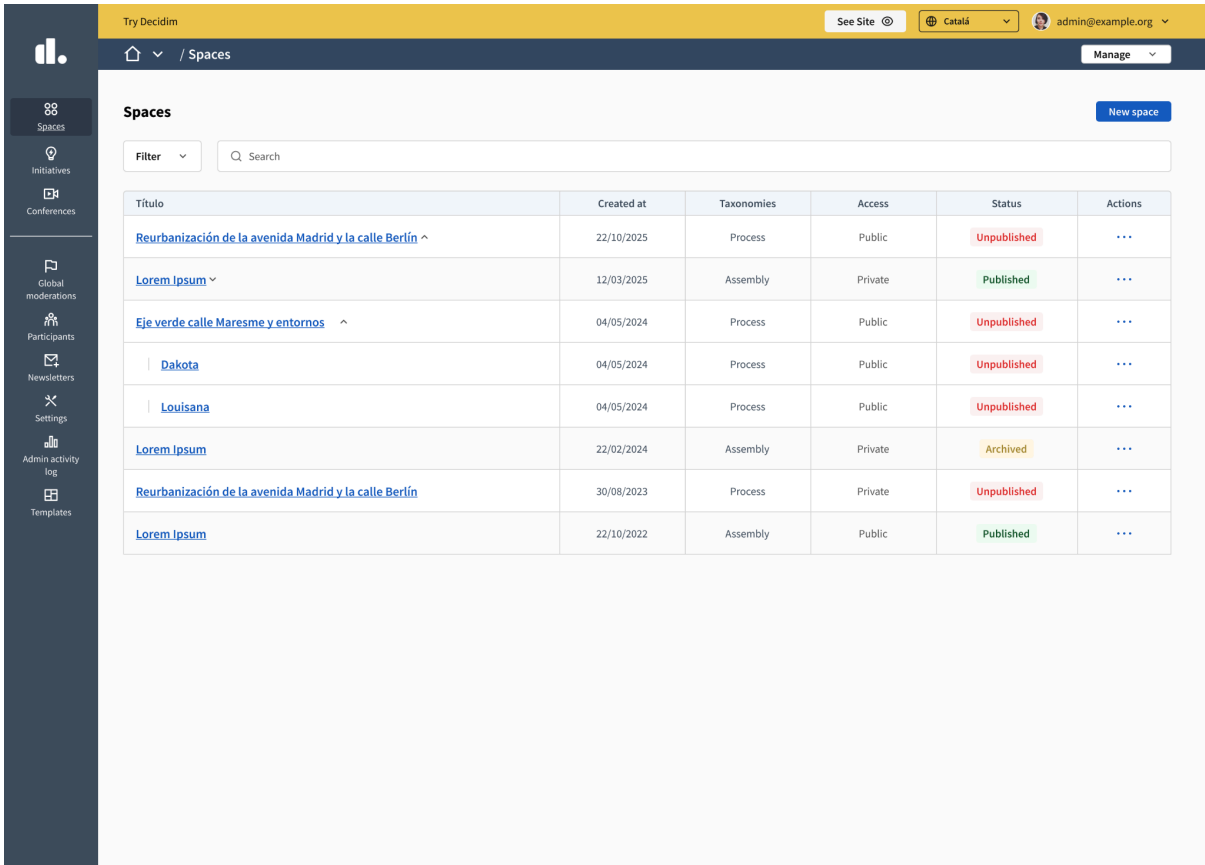
- **Participatory spaces:** The overarching frameworks in Decidim that define the context for participation (e.g., Processes, Assemblies, Conferences, Initiatives).
- **Processes:** A type of participatory space characterized by a time-bound, phased structure.
- **Assemblies:** A type of participatory space representing a deliberative body with a defined (often stable) membership.
- **Conferences:** A type of participatory space designed for events with programs, speakers, and registrations.
- **Initiatives:** A participant-promoted space, distinct from organization-promoted spaces, often used for citizen petitions through the collection of signatures.
- **Components:** Participation mechanisms (e.g., Meetings, Proposals, Blogs, Debates) that can be activated within a participatory space to enable specific actions.

7.2. Mockups and prototype

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<https://decidim.org/blog/2025-02-14-decidim-revamp-platform-consolidation-and-improvement-with-ngi-support/>

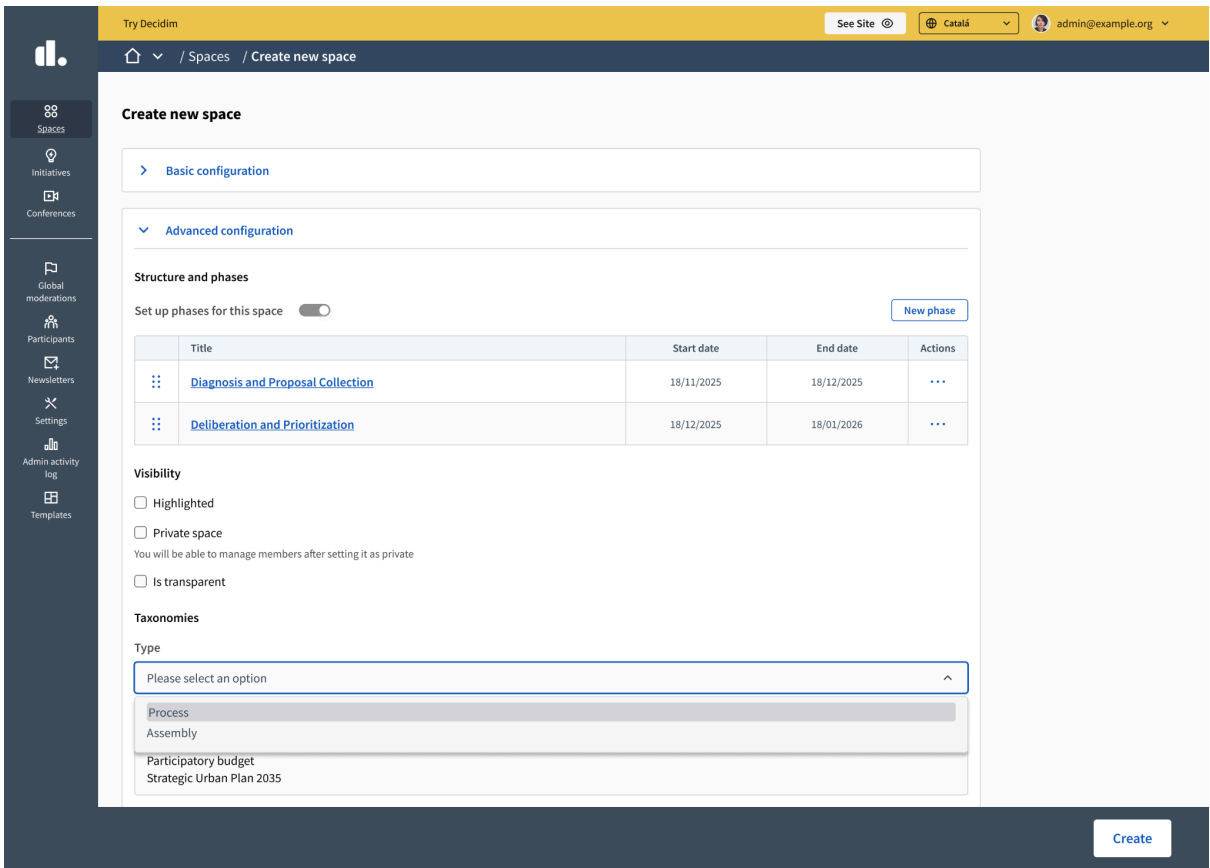
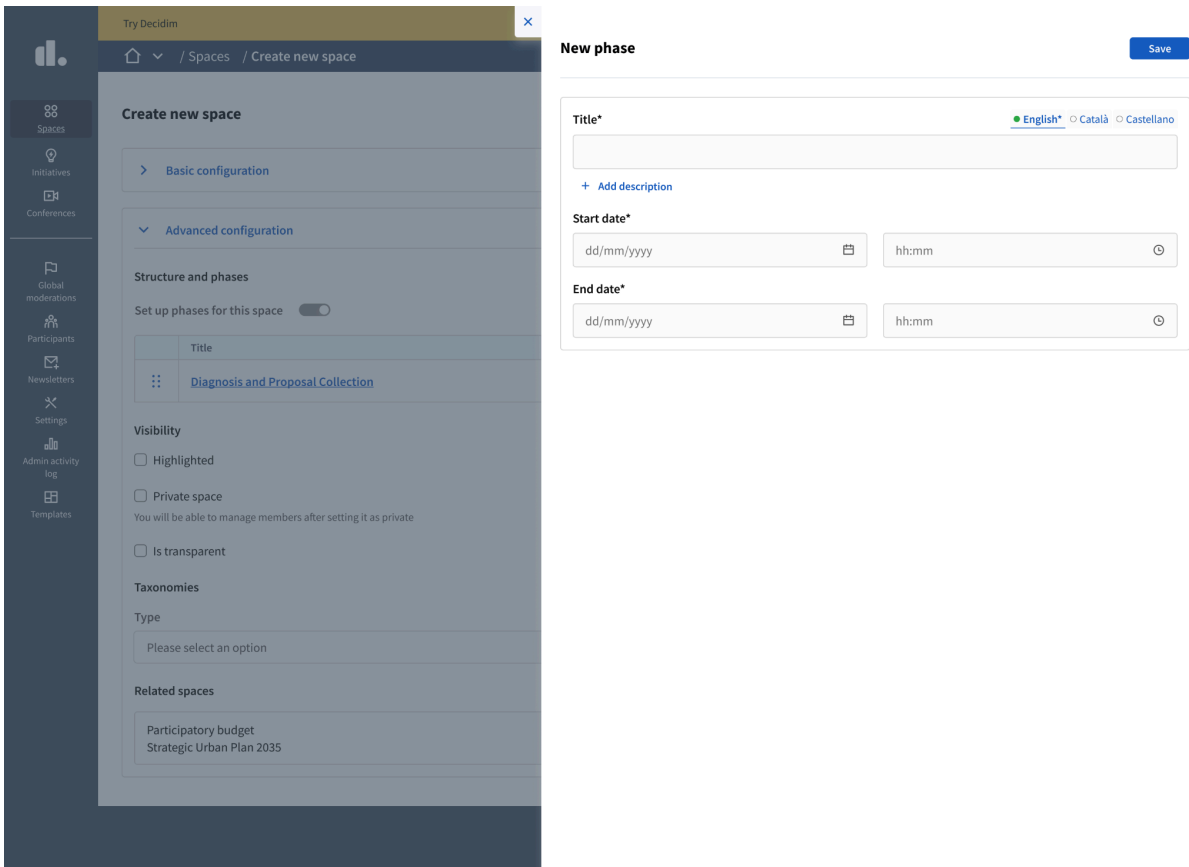
The conceptual design and user interface flows for the unified participatory space are being developed and iterated upon in a dedicated Figma file. For now it includes mockups of key screens, such as the updated configuration form, space management dashboard, and front-end navigation patterns⁵:

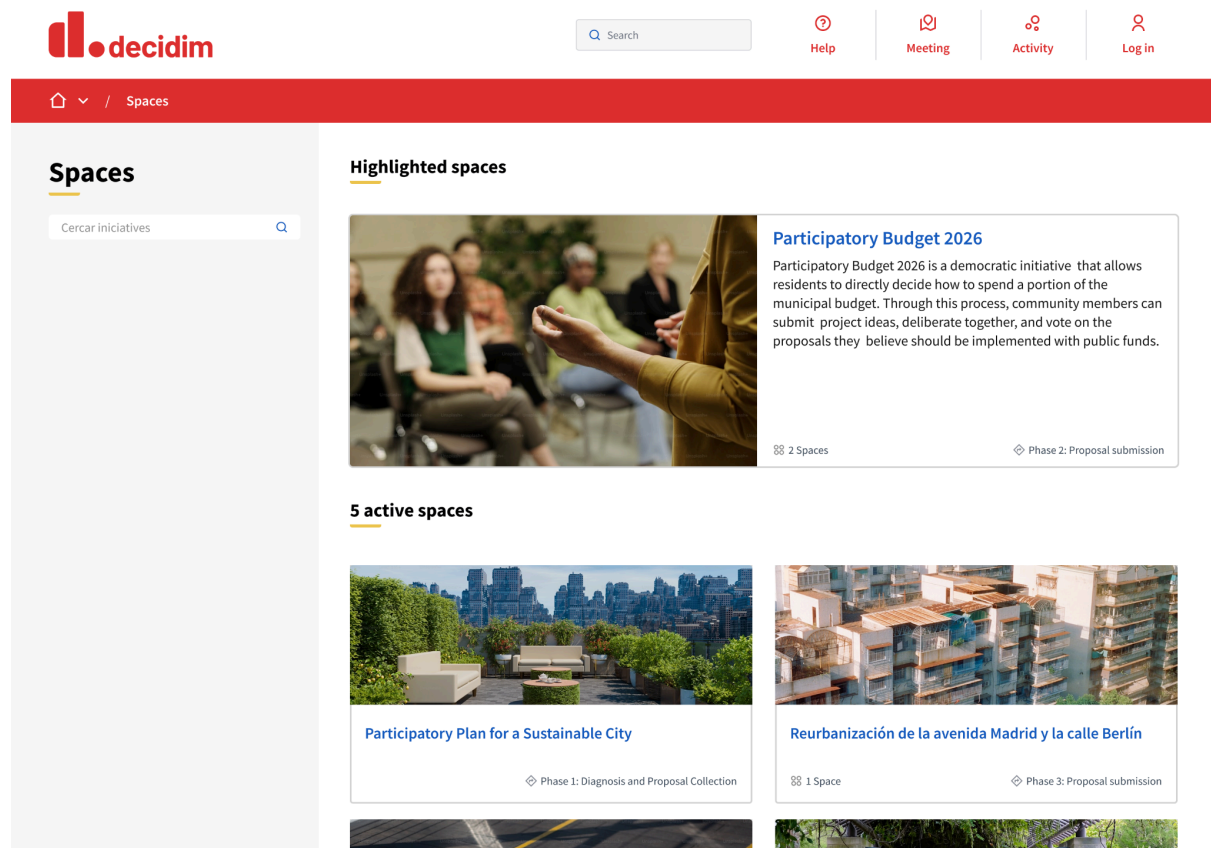


⁵ Screenshots from the Figma file:
<https://www.figma.com/design/GIPwk1eZEFBMUs3gcsTRXg/NGI?node-id=1389-24449&p=f&t=cAkPsef0l4rskupy-0>

Create

Create





Stakeholders and community members are encouraged to review the proposed designs directly in Figma. Please use the commenting feature to provide feedback on the visual and interactive aspects of the proposal.

7.4. Feedback from the community and stakeholders

Preliminary feedback has been positive. The Democratic Innovation team of the Barcelona City Council, which manages the oldest Decidim instance (Decidim.Barcelona), sees a clear advantage in having this new model that allows greater flexibility to relate spaces and components.

Coincidentally, a member of the Metadecidim community recently made a proposal to merge Processes and Assemblies. Other community participants have expressed interest in understanding the detailed implications of this change for both admin and participant interactions. This report serves as a direct response to that community interest⁶.

⁶ <https://meta.decidim.org/processes/roadmap/f/1987/proposals/18704>

