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THE COLLABORATIVE ATLAS, AN EXPERIMENT IN SUPPORTING SPATIAL CAPACITY BUILDING

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Introduction

An atlas is defined as a book or a coherent collection of pictures, maps and diagrams to understand a given reality or subject. In the discipline of urbanism, the atlas is explored as a research tool. Stefano Boeri and Gabriele Basilico made an *Eclectic Atlas* to read and document the Italian territory for the Venice Biennale in 1996. Luuk Boelens and Wies Sanders's *Mental Atlas of the Arnhem-Nijmegen urban network* outlines new challenges for spatial planning at the regional scale. These examples tell a subjective story, diagnose and become an invitation to look differently at a given territory. The atlas is employed as a rhetorical trick offering an insight view, depicting a kind of potential or openness that is maybe not yet present (Peleman, 2014).

Other examples aim to depict socio-spatial practices. Artist Jan Rothuizen sketched *The Soft Atlas of Amsterdam* based upon observations made during many and long walks in the city. *The Atlas of the Western Garden Cities in Amsterdam* (Nio, 2009) maps the 'lived' environment of different social and cultural groups against the background of its 'planned' environment, based upon observations, interviews, group sessions and mental maps. Here, not what people are supposed to do is central, but what they are doing and where. Apart from a research tool, the atlas offers a concrete medium to communicate broadly over the findings.

In this paper, I explore yet another potential of the atlas, namely facilitating collective reflection in a research by design process. Here, the atlas is not made by the researcher alone, but in collaboration with those living or working in the area that is being mapped. Open and collaborative mappings construct knowledge by collectively representing reality and therefore have the potential to build capacity among those involved in the mapping process. Capacity can be defined as the ability to carry out a set of stated objectives. Capacity building then refers to the process of improving the ability of a person, group, organization, or institute to meet these objectives (Brown et al., 2001). The point of departure is that such a process requires external assistance or incentives, not to direct the process towards an end result, but rather to initiate, feed, and/or accelerate it. Such a capacity building process could for instance lead to a slow shift in what gives an area status, openness for other urbanization models, or an increased engagement in local initiatives.

In this paper we describe and analyse a spatial capacity experiment in the context of the research by design project: *The Allotment Atlas Zolder*. The project focuses on a residential subdivision, searching for strategies to initiate a transition towards a more sustainable mode of living.

Post war Residential subdivisions

Since the sixties, Flanders suburbanized at a high pace, supported by a housing policy focusing on private homeownership and the construction of single-family houses through private initiatives (Van Herck & Avermaete, 2006). Subdivisions of free-standing single family houses popped up everywhere and became the symbol of the post war success of the middle class. Still today, this is one of the most preferred mode of living for the majority of Flemish, providing social status and (part of the) identity to its residents (Dedecker, 2014).

Nowadays, these post war residential subdivisions are subject of many changes. They become increasingly socially and culturally differentiated. Aging population and decreasing household sizes change living demands to which the houses and gardens are not adapted. Small scale renovations and extensions, splitting of plots and insertion of semi-detached houses and apartments bring about spontaneous reconversion and densification. However, the spatial quality and durability of these mutations are questionable. It does not change these neighbourhoods of being monotonous, space and energy consuming, car-dependent, lacking community and architectural and urban quality. To break with these trends, the report *Naar een visionaire woningbouw* (Vlaams Bouwmeester, 2012) set up five housing challenges, putting attention to new forms of collective housing, qualitative transformation of the suburban structure as well as regeneration of existing residential subdivisions. In this project we choose to address this last challenge, namely to investigate the impact of new forms of collective spaces as a mode for durable improvement of existing residential subdivisions. We tackle the strict distinction between what is private and public in order to go from the concept of exclusive ownership to concepts of shared use and management. As such, we argue a shift from property rights to user rights as condition for sustainable transition (Dehaene, 2014).



Picture 1: Dunantplein, Zolder

The Allotment Atlas Zolder

The project *The Allotment Atlas Zolder* is conducted in a neighbourhood of free standing single family houses with gardens, next to the historical centre of Zolder, in the province of Limburg. The typology of the neighbourhood we describe as a *composite allotment*, referring to the way the allotment developed. In one or two decades, the neighbourhood is composed by means of big parcels being subdivided step by step. In this particular case, agricultural land was subdivided and roads were built

on former field tracks and parcel boundaries, mainly during the seventies. In Central Limburg this is the most common typology of residential subdivision.

This step by step development led to complicated building regulations. The neighbourhood under study, for instance, counts dozens of allotment regulations overlapping with two land use plans (BPA's). In some cases it is not clear which regulation is prior, in others, neighbours do not have the same building rights. The city administration as well as the village council have put the reconsideration of these complicated regulations on the agenda and are preparing the development of a new spatial implementation plan (RUP). The atlas provides an open and co-creative method that will inspire and support this process.

Building capacity on the collective use of space

Urban transformations are never socially neutral. They change inevitable (a part of) the identity, status and use value of a place (Oosterlynck, 2014). To protect acquired status, inhabitants often oppose to urban projects and spatial planning processes. We argue that it is important to understand what gives a neighbourhood status in order to activate sustainable transition, tangled in slow shifts of what gives it status.

Therefore, introducing new forms of collective spaces implies the will of people to get engaged or give meaning to these concepts in their everyday context. It is not only a question for designers and administrators but is a challenge for everybody. All actors will play an active role in the development of a new direction, as space cannot only be considered from a 'technical perspective or expertise' (Certeau, 1984). Given this challenge, the objective is to build capacity, improving the ability of people to (1) understand the meaning and use of (shared) space in their neighbourhood and how it change(d); (2) have insight in different opinions, needs and aspirations and (3) act upon these dynamics, stimulating new proposals and coalitions.

The method we put to the fore is that of the *delayed debate*, being a debate between a group of people (not necessarily present at the same time) spanned over a long period of time. At one moment the conversation is intensive, while at another it moves to the background. The conversation is kept alive by an (irregular) rhythm of interventions; bringing in new people, perspectives and energy. The principle of 'delay' draws upon the conviction that capacity building takes time. And, that in order to be durable, the debate should finally blend into the day-to-day activities of those taking part. The main challenge of such a delayed debate is how to pass on arguments and insights from one conversation to another, considering the fact that the composition of the group changes continuously. We argue that the atlas can play a central role in addressing this challenge.

Set up of the Atlas

The atlas is set up as an interactive instrument that visualizes the use and meaning of neighbourhoods' collective spaces based upon observations, interviews, historical cartography and quantitative data.

Five types of representations with short explanatory text provide the framework of the debate:

- (1) A historical map relating today's spatial organisation with the landscape logics.
- (2) A timeline with the post war evolution of the neighbourhood, relating local development (housing construction, renovations, demolitions) to demographic and socio-economic trends and events.
- (3) A map describing local implications of current building regulations.
- (4) Housing history and relocation movements per street represented in a diagram and a street map.
- (5) Use maps depicting different forms of shared spaces in the neighbourhood (1,5x1.5km) as well as in the close region (15x15km).

Since the atlas is drawn collaboratively, the process of making this atlas is not completely predictable. The expectation is therefore that new maps will be added later.



Picture 2: The Atlas, Housing History page

The production of the atlas starts with the researcher analysing demographic data, historical cartography, governance documents and doing several walks in the neighbourhood to make observations. These analyses he/she translates into the five representations which are presented to participants. These add, modify, redefine and comment the maps and diagrams during the (individual) interview. After the interview, the designer re-draws and adds maps to the atlas to pass on stories and insights to the next conversation. In this way the researcher moderates a debate and documents the process.

In the *housing history map* inhabitants are asked about their personal home. How they use their home and garden. How it changed over time. Where they lived before. Why they moved in and where and how they want to live in the future. During the interview, the researcher draws what the participants explains. Hence, individual stories are visualised and documented in a sequence of sketches.

In the *shared spaces maps*, the researcher maps inhabitants' daily routes, routines and rituals. They are asked to explain where and how they go they work, study, bring children to school, where they shop. Where they party, go to events or have weddings or funerals. These daily life stories explain their relation with the living environment, with public and private places as well as their relation with neighbours, family and friends, with acquaintances and strangers (Reijndorp, 2010).

To assemble and overlap the individual choreographies in one map the researcher employs the method of *composite mapping*. In social science it is defined as the process of integrating a collection of cognitive maps, each representing views held by an individual regarding a common subject. It is a

tool to analyse data through which the scope and homogeneity or heterogeneity of its interwoven knowledge is visually elucidated (Horita et al., 2008).

Mapping collective spaces

Both maps aim to reveal how shared spaces are appropriated, used and managed in different ways. De Solà Molares (1992) describes contemporary shared spaces as the urbanization of the private domain and refers to them as 'collective spaces': public spaces used for private activities or private spaces that allow collective use, such as a weekly market, a supermarket, but also a shared kitchen garden.

Though these places have limited access, they do take part in public life and do form the background of social bonds and interaction.

We notice many examples of *micro collective spaces*, with informal agreements between a couple of neighbours. For example, a shared driveway of two neighbours to enlarge the garden space and three neighbours that collectively maintain food gardens in the back garden.

Furthermore, both maps aim to understand how these spaces evolve and change over time. People's social world shifts constantly. The meaning of their home, garden and neighbourhood, the places that they share, the way they search for privacy or interaction, do too. Reinders (2010) puts it as follows: "While the neighbourhood is changing new social relationships arise in which boundaries re-marked and individual and collective meanings are renewed." The everyday rhythmic structuring of the day is not merely individual but collective and plays an important role in the sense of identity and organisation of public life (Edensor, 2009). Therefore Reijndorp (2010) considers the public domain as the domain of social and cultural exchange, where routes, routines or rituals different groups, characterized by age, origin or lifestyle, cross or overlap. Understanding these mechanisms is essential to make the translatative step to durable future strategies.

Older inhabitants tell about former neighbourhood barbecues, diners and a former play field for the children. They explain how social activities are less interwoven with the neighbourhood and play more at the regional scale. Many go walking, running or cycling in the surrounding creek valleys and forests. Children and grandchildren go often to school outside the municipality and their leisure time is quite organised in activities.

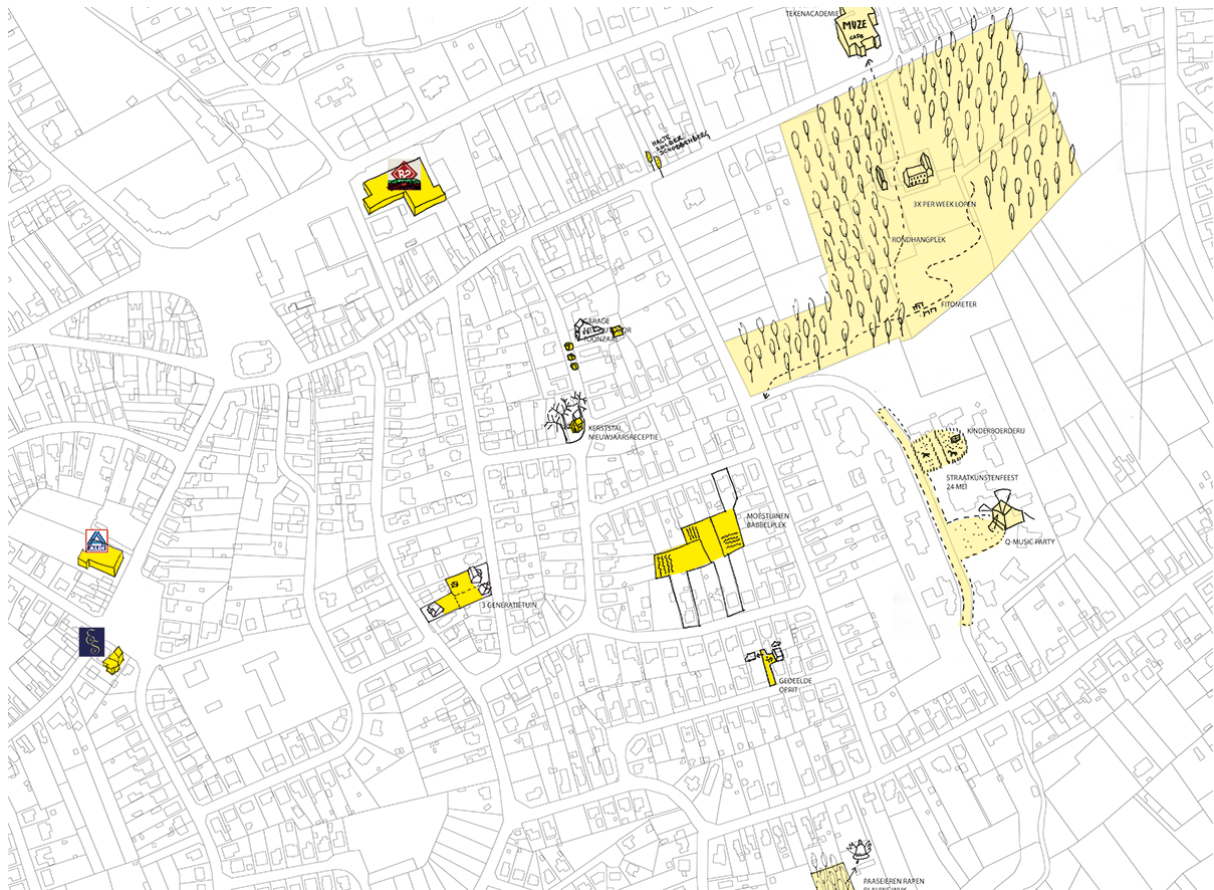
Facilitating collective reflection, engagement and debate

In this project we test features of collaborative mapping, as such exploring the impact of the atlas in supporting engagement and collective reflection. A first feature is the mapping method which is based upon *mental mapping* of Kevin Lynch (1960) and *narrative cartography* of Leeke Reinders (2010). These technics aim to unfold the imagination and perception of urban space. In this research project, these methods are adapted in such a way that they assure the readability of the atlas as one entity, as well as to stimulate dialogue between the different stories and data.

The second feature is the impact of the representation of the maps. The esthetical layer of maps makes reality more appealing. Everyday life is constituted out of a multitude of habits and routines that lend to it an ontological predictability and security. Once learned and followed, these habitual procedures become unreflexive (Edensor, 2009) but also risk becoming unreflective and unquestionable. The visual expression of the atlas offers people another look at their everyday space and therefore encourages criticism and engagement. For example, key spaces are depicted more prominent, introducing hierarchy in the map. We also notice that the hand drawn maps invite participants to sketch themselves. The sketch style represents a 'work in progress' making the maps easily accessible for a non-professional audience.

The last feature is the multi-layering of the maps and diagrams, allowing to correlate different facts and insights during the interviews. For example, the diagram of relocation movements shows that many people moved in and out since the last 10 years. However some inhabitants are aware, others

not, both reflect on how it changed the neighbourhood and their personal situation. In order to distribute and produce knowledge at the same time, the researcher plays an important role as moderator and guide of the atlas. She/he brings insights from one interview to the other and as such, aims to connect people, issues and initiatives. This role has room for further experimentation and we will test what happens if participants take over the job of the researcher and pass on the atlas.



Picture 3: A Use Map

How do we go from here?

This paper gives a description and analysis of how the Allotment Atlas Zolder supports an open and delayed debate. We believe this experience may provide additional background in stimulating collective reflection over spatial issues among inhabitants over their daily environment.

In a next phase, starting in June 2015, the diversity of ideas and insights of the atlas will be translated into future spatial scenarios. These scenarios will form the basis of further debate. Apart from interviews, we will integrate other instruments such as, walks, small group sessions (bringing in new peoples as well as connect people with jointed interests) to thicken the atlas with narratives and recommendations for the future.

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