

BUILDING SPATIAL CAPACITIES TO RETROFIT THE DISPERSED CITY

Exploring The Role Of Design

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ABSTRACT

Flanders is spatially dispersed. This mode of urbanisation comes with a high social cost. The current planning paradigm, strategic spatial planning, argues that the retrofitting of dispersed urbanisation requires a continuous public debate, and that such a debate depends on both a process of civic participation and a process of spatial capacity building. This paper researches how spatial designers can support this process of capacity building. It does this by discussing two explorative case studies.

1. FLANDERS AS A DISPERSED 'CITY'

The dominant housing preference in Flanders is for a detached single-family house. 38 per cent of the population lives in this preferred option (Winters et al., 2015). In the Netherlands, only around 16.4 per cent of the population does. Moreover, people prefer to live in a green, peaceful environment. In Flanders this implies residential subdivision. Since the introduction of the first legislation on spatial planning in Flanders, enacted in 1962, 577,714 areas have been approved as residential subdivisions, scattered over the entire territory (Ruimte Vlaanderen, 2016). As a result, there are hardly any green and quiet places left, because there are detached single family houses everywhere. In Flanders, around 26 per cent of the total land surface is built on. In Belgium as a whole this figure is between 10 and 13 per cent. The Netherlands has the highest percentage of built-on land in Europe, namely 13 to 15 per cent. In Europe as a whole the figure is only 4 per cent (Eurostat). This dispersed mode of urbanisation has given Flanders the nickname of 'nebulous city' (De Meulder et al., 1999). Scholars, practitioners and policy-makers have time and again pointed out the increasing social costs of spatial dispersion. For an overview, see Verbeek et al. (2014). However, to date no attempts have been made to significantly address this situation (Voets et al., 2010).

The main ambition of the active spatial planning policy document, the 'Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders' (1997), is to retrofit the nebulous city to sustainable proportions 'that leaves qualitative space for the coming generations, without compromising the claims of the current generation'. The plan stresses the importance of civic support, on the one hand for pragmatic reasons: the challenges are so vast that authorities depend on private initiatives to implement their ambitions; on the other hand, for the sake of ideology: the plan is built on the conviction that spatial quality is not so much about the intrinsic features of a place, but more about the value that people attach to it. Given that people differ and may change their opinions over time, sustainable retrofitting requires a continuous public debate over what is valuable at that moment. One of the aims of

the policy document is therefore to initiate and sustain such a debate. Since the introduction of the Spatial Structure Plan, civic participation has indeed become a compulsory part of most planning procedures. Despite of the repeated involvement of citizens in planning procedures, this has not led to an increase in civic support (De Bie et al., 2012).

This paper therefore reflects on how to build civic support for the retrofitting of the Flemish 'nebula'. We refer to this process as 'spatial capacity building', and are specifically interested in the role that design can play in this process. We will explore this role by analysing two case studies, both situated in villages dominated by residential subdivisions, with residents mainly valuing the green space and the tranquillity.

In what follows, we first introduce the current planning approach, namely strategic spatial planning, in order to position capacity building. Secondly, we present a theoretical framework on spatial capacity building. Thirdly, we introduce the two case studies. Fourthly, we explore the role of design by deconstructing the two cases into the theoretical framework.

2. PLANNERS IN SEARCH OF CIVIC SUPPORT

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, spatial planners in Belgium have been aware of the challenges of spatial dispersion. Nonetheless, it took until 1962 to actually introduce a spatial planning policy (Janssens, 2012). This policy followed the dominant international planning paradigm of the time, namely land-use planning. Plans define the land use of every parcel of land in Belgium. This approach to planning quickly proved too static, unable to deal with the dynamic and unpredictable nature of socio-spatial processes. Spatial planners have thus adopted a new paradigm, that of strategic spatial planning. This paradigm forms the basis for the Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders, which was approved in 1997 and which frames the current spatial planning

policy in the country. Albrechts (2004:747) defines strategic planning as 'a public-sector-led socio-spatial process through which a vision, actions, and means for implementation are produced that shape and frame what a place is and may become.' It departs from the idea that not everything can be planned, so that one has to focus on strategic locations, with strategic issues, supported by strategic players. It also proposes that planners should be prepared to reconsider decisions, as conditions may change and new challenges may emerge. This prompts Albrechts to conclude that 'much of the (planning) process lies in making the tough decisions about what is most important for the purpose of producing fair, structural responses to problems, challenges, aspirations, and diversity' (2004:751). This implies that strategic planning is not neutral and cannot be left to planners alone. The making of tough decisions requires civic support and the involvement of as many socio-cultural groups as possible.

For this reason, since 2005 civic participation has been made a compulsory part of nearly all procedures, in nearly all policy domains. This has led to the professionalisation of participatory practices, with an increasing focus on methods (De Bie et al., 2012). On the one hand this has generated a discourse and practice around participation, but on the other it has reduced participation to standard procedures with delineated techniques, instruments, good practices, participation professionals and manuals. These define the steps, shape and output of the process in advance, so that civic participation loses much of its potential to re-calibrate the common good, and turns into a formality that is depoliticised and thus irrelevant.

Albrechts (2004:753) points out the importance not only of civic participation, but also of inclusive and more permanent empowerment processes in which citizens 'learn about one another and about different points of view, and they come to reflect on their own points of view'. Albrechts sees these processes as 'places for continuous learning' that engage (disempowered) citizens

in a long-term dialogue, instead of isolated, project-driven discussions. This dialogue should help these citizens to learn to argue or reason, to talk and think spatially and to present and defend outcomes in the face of formal policy settings. In this way, a resource of mutual understanding can be built up, a 'social and intellectual capital'. In this paper, we will refer to these learning processes as spatial capacity building.

3. SPATIAL CAPACITY BUILDING

In the literature on developing countries, spatial planning is nearly synonymous with capacity building. The point of departure is that a (development) project can only be durable if it is accompanied by a process of community capacity building (Verity, 2007). In this literature capacity is defined as the ability of a community to carry out a set of stated objectives. Capacity building then refers to the process of improving the ability of a person, group, organisation or institute to meet these objectives (Brown et al., 2001).

Like the field of participation in developed countries, the field of capacity building in developing countries has witnessed an increasing professionalisation, with each NGO developing its own method and manual. And just as with participation, this professionalisation is one of the reasons that capacity building initiatives often fail (Otoo et al., 2009). The remainder of this section takes one capacity building framework, not as a manual but as a perspective to reflect on the role of design in processes that are initiated to support, in the words of Albrechts (2004), 'inclusive and more permanent empowerment processes', in the Flemish context of dispersed urbanisation. We select a framework by Baser & Morgan (2008). To underline this we explore this framework to research the role of design, redefining its components as 'conditions for durable spatial capacity building'.

The first condition is that capacity building is not an isolated activity, but part of a bigger system, and thus depends on a socio-political

context, external stakeholders, resources and external interventions. Baser and Morgan (2008:86) stress that 'capacity is a potential state. It is elusive and transient. It is about latent as opposed to kinetic energy'. For capacity building to have a durable impact, this potential state needs to result in observable changes in behaviour, that in turn need to result in changes in the system.

The second condition is that capacity building requires both the building of individual competences and of collective capabilities. Baser and Morgan (2008:34) define capacities as 'that emergent combination of individual competencies and collective capabilities that enables a human system to create (public) value'.

The third condition is that capacity building requires working on five so-called 'core collective capabilities' (Baser & Morgan 2008:33): the core capability (1) to commit and engage; (2) to carry out technical, service delivery and logistical tasks; (3) to relate and to attract resources and support; (4) to adapt and self-renew, and (5) to balance diversity and coherence.

The next section will introduce the two case studies. Section 5 will then deconstruct the underlying capacity building processes by screening them against these three conditions.

4. TWO EXPLORATORY CASE STUDIES

The case studies are both located in villages composed of residential subdivisions. The objective is to explore how spatial designers can give form to a spatial capacity building process together with residents, local authorities and NGOs. Or, to quote Albrechts (2004), to make all the involved actors 'learn about one another and about their different points of view, and to reflect on their own points of view'. The field of participatory design (PD) has a long tradition of supporting such processes of collective-reflection-in-action (Robertson & Simonsen, 2013). PD has developed a wide range of methods to

facilitate these processes. In the two case studies, we relied on the work of Brandt et al. (2013) who distinguish three clusters of methods, namely methods that support telling, making or enacting. All three depart from a (partly) fictive universe within which existing rules and power relations do not count. The participants are asked to collectively explore this universe while they tell stories, make objects or enact scenarios. Going through this process may make them realise that the step from fiction to reality is not necessarily that big. The two case studies each depart from one of these clusters of methods. The first, located in Beerse, adopts the enacting approach; the second, located in Hoepertingen, adopts the making approach.

The first case study, in the municipality of Beerse, focuses on two dispersion challenges. The first is the oversupply of land suitable for development. Beerse has more than 1,500 empty plots on which to build detached single-family houses. The expectation is that the population will grow by 500 families by 2024. This is three times lower than the (theoretically) available building plots. The second challenge is the mismatch between offer and demand. The offer consists mainly of detached single-family houses in a residential subdivision. The expected population growth is primarily a consequence of ageing and single parenting. These groups are not looking for single family houses.

Both challenges suggest that Beerse is heading towards a residential property crisis. Residents of Beerse are aware of this. In 2013 an owner of a large plot of developable land asked a local architectural organisation to organise a series of excursions, workshops and lectures in search of alternative modes of subdividing land. The process ended with the formulation of 'four principles for a new housing concept': affordability, diversity, collectivity and minimal consumption of space (AR-TUR, 2014). From now on, these principles should guide the design of new subdivisions. But the principles have turned out to be too abstract to inspire, and nothing has changed. The collective contacted us and together we

decided to explore the method of enacting. First, we selected an empty plot in Beerse, and develop five subdividing scenarios: business as usual, a tower block, a garden city, an urban villa and a beguinage¹. These form the basis of an 'urban game' (Venhuizen et al., 2010) that is played by local representatives. The idea of the game is that each group of players has to 'sell' one of the scenarios. The rules force the players to translate the 'four principles' into tangible economic and social gains. A week later, the winning scenario is built, to the actual size, on location, with bamboo and elastic bands (see Figure 1). The same representatives are invited to each design to furnish a housing unit and to discuss together the use of the collective greenhouse. After two hours of building, residents of the surrounding neighborhood are invited to visit the new neighborhood for an open day. The process of enacting is intended to help the participants to experience the advantages and the problems of a more collective mode of living and to reflect on the two challenges that triggered the exploration, namely too much buildable land and the mismatch between offer and demand.

The second case study, in the municipality of Hoepertingen, also focuses on two challenges. The first is that of social segregation. In recent years, the social diversity in the village has increased, resulting in a mix of locals and newcomers: Sikhs working in the fruit industry, tourists visiting for a retreat in the village castle and mentally disabled people living in the local healthcare centre. These groups rarely meet one another. The second challenge is the area's increasing privatisation. Nearly all new buildings are detached houses surrounded by a hedge or fence. The church square is used as parking. And parts of the former railway line have been appropriated by a construction company, a farmer and individual residents. In search of new meeting places, we organised a series of public walks. In

2014, we invited residents, NGOs and local authorities to join us and imagine alternative scenarios for underused spaces, such as an old playground, an orchard and the former railway line. In this case, too, the scenarios formed the basis of an urban game (Venhuizen et al., 2010). The game was developed to help the participants to define criteria for good meeting places. It turned out that trails, alleys and passages play a crucial role in all the scenarios. An analysis of these trails makes clear that some have disappeared, or are privatised. This led to the ambition to re-connect trails and turn the resulting network into a meeting place.

As a first step towards this ambition, we proposed to explore the method of making. Together with two local players, the village castle and the healthcare centre, we translated the winning scenarios of the urban game into three project briefs: a shelter to be built on the graveyard, a platform to be built on the the construction company's land and a path connecting both constructions. These briefs were given to a group of seventeen architecture students, who lived for two weeks in Hoepertingen. The students divided themselves into groups and started building. The available construction materials were bricks, cobblestones and granite. The students had to find or borrow all the other materials, and the tools to process them. Computers and drawing boards were not allowed. Most of the students had no experience of building. Also, in this situation, they had to ask for help. Every other day there was a meeting with residents to discuss the constructions. All these 'rules' turned the making process into a trigger for conversations, with passers-by, with neighbours to borrow tools, with residents coming to the discussions, etc. (see Figure 2), about the value of the trail-network. In this way, people who normally never take part in participatory initiatives can be involved. At the end of the two weeks, we organised another public walk, along the new path, with residents, local policy makers and two donkeys, to hand over the constructions. Today, the local council takes care of the shelter on the graveyard, and the construction

1 A beguinage is a historic settlement type, referring to a compact housing complex, usually around a garden, to house beguines: lay religious women living as a community.



Figure 1. Designing and furnishing the new neighbourhood for an open day



Figure 2. Constructing as a trigger for conversations

company opened a new public trail on its property, maintained by a nature organisation.

5. THE ROLE OF SPATIAL DESIGN

In order to explore the ways in which spatial designers can help build spatial capacities, we now apply the three conditions, introduced earlier, to the two case studies. The first condition states that the durable character of capacity building depends on external factors such as supra-local stakeholders and the socio-political context. In both cases these stakeholders are regional NGOs, active in areas such as nature preservation, agriculture, tourism and healthcare. The socio-political context is the increasing awareness of the social costs of dispersed urbanisation. The first condition also stresses that capacity building needs to result in observable changes in behaviour, in turn leading to changes in the system. In the second case study, actors did start to change behaviour in that new coalitions emerged, between researchers and residents, between students and residents, between residents and local public and private organisations, among others, to maintain the constructed artefacts and to manage the new trail. In these coalitions, actors take up new roles with new responsibilities. In the first case study, the process of enacting was too short to have an observable impact on the behaviour of the participants.

The second condition states that capacity building requires the building of both individual competences and collective capabilities. The point of departure is that retrofitting the nebulous city requires a change in culture. 'Change the dream and you change the city' (Reinhold et al., 2011). So the challenge is not so much to work on individual competences, but rather to create shared ambitions and dreams, among residents, NGOs and local authorities, about their own residential subdivisions, and this requires a focus on collective capabilities.

The two case studies point to three difficulties. Firstly, residents of the dispersed city are

living their housing dream: a detached house in a green, tranquil environment. No wonder that every retrofitting proposal is seen as a threat, and thus swiftly rejected. Both cases try to circumvent this by letting participants collectively experience and discuss the values of alternative modes of living, either by enacting or by making. Secondly, a residential subdivision consists primarily of small property owners, with limited expertise in collaborating, negotiating, and investing. An interesting concept in this regard is that of 'clumsy citizenship' (author's translation), referring to the inherent social ineptness of people. Hurenkamp et al. (2012) therefore suggest approaching citizenship as craft that takes time and persistence to develop. Thirdly, there is no clear (building) project, but only the (external) ambition to start a process of collective-reflection-in-action. This is not exactly engaging. The methods of enacting and making help to overcome this difficulty by focusing the discussion on tangible issues.

The third condition stresses the need to develop five core (collective) capabilities. In what follows, these capabilities are translated as 'core challenges' that collectives have to overcome in order to be durable. To commit and engage then becomes: 'How do we withstand resistance and critique?' To carry out technical, service delivery and logistical tasks becomes: 'How do we understand new legislation, technology, etc.?' To relate and to attract resources and support becomes: 'How do we sustain the project over time?' To adapt and self-renew becomes: 'How do we deal with external change?' And to balance diversity and coherence becomes: 'How do we cope with internal change?' The underlying hypothesis is that each time a collective overcomes a core challenge, it improves a core capability. Capacity building then comes down to managing this process, either by deliberately confronting the collective with challenges or by providing them with the tools to fight a particular challenge.

In what follows, the two case studies are deconstructed and re-interpreted as a succession of core challenges that the groups

of actors involved have to overcome. We will focus particularly on the role of design: sometimes the challenges are design issues, and sometimes the actors use design to overcome a challenge.

Let us begin with the enacting case study. A first challenge was to make the 'four principles for a new housing concept' more concrete. Their high level of abstraction led to different interpretations, resulting in misunderstandings and participation fatigue. This challenge matches the fifth core capability: namely, how to cope with internal change. The introduction of the urban game, being a design intervention, forced the participants to discuss the values of each housing concept in detail and helped them to come to a shared interpretation of the abstract principles.

Another challenge was the lack of technical knowledge on issues such as privacy, collectivity and walkability. This matches the second core capability: namely, how to understand new legislation, technology, etc. The furnishing of the bamboo structure prompted participants to use their own body as a reference, in order to decide upon the size of a living room, the placing of a window, or the acceptable walking distance to the entrance to the underground parking (see Figure 1).

A third challenge was how to involve passers-by. This matches the first core capability: namely, how do we withstand resistance and critique? The principle of enacting made the participants pretend that they were actually a family living in the bamboo neighbourhood. They took visiting residents on a walk through their house, using artefacts to support their arguments. 'The terrace starts behind this line. As you can see, this wall separates the terrace from the greenhouse. So no one can see you when you are sunbathing'.

And now the making case study. One of the first challenges was how to deal with the lack of technical knowledge among the students about materials and construction. This matches the second core capability: namely,

how to understand new legislation, technology, etc. The students countered this challenge by making mock-ups with any object they could find: during dinner, for instance, with spoons and forks. With the bricklaying, they just got started on it (see Figure 3): until a passer-by offered to help them.

A second challenge was how to engage outsiders in the collective-reflection-in-action. This matches the fourth core capability: namely, how to deal with external change. A first design intervention was the making-process itself. The constructing made people stop (see Figure 3). Why are these youngsters digging a hole in the graveyard? Why are they cutting trees on the old railway line? Discussions typically started with the constructions and ended with a reflection on the importance of the trail network for the village. A second design intervention was the publishing of a 'newspaper from the future'. Each day an article reported on an event that had taken place in one of the three interventions, ten years into the future. This allowed to visualisation of the potential of the interventions.

A third challenge was how to deal with new players who joined the process along the way, such as a nature organisation, a contractor or a counsellor. All came with their own agenda. This matches the fifth core capability: namely, how do we cope with internal change? For this challenge, the pre-trajectory is important. The walks and the urban game generated a clear and simple ambition, namely to strengthen the existing trail-network. Every new player is taken on a walk to one of the constructions. Along the way, the value of the ambition becomes tangible, and agendas become synchronised.

A fourth challenge was how to hand over the constructions to the group of residents, local NGOs and authorities. Who will maintain them? Who will take up the responsibility if something goes wrong? This matches the third core capability: namely, how do we sustain the project over time? One strategy was to turn the trail-network into a brand, with its own

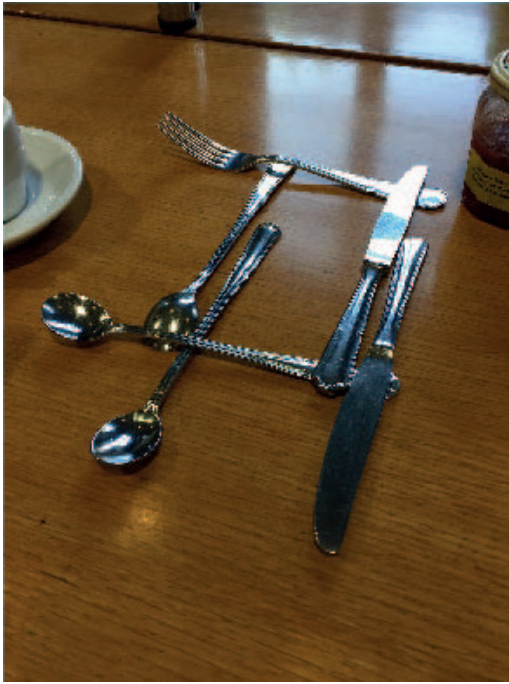


Figure 3. Making mock-ups as a prompt for conversations

logo and a hiking map. At the end of the two weeks, the students painted the logo on the trails and made the map physical. A second strategy was to organise a public event to open the interventions and to let a number of city officials give a speech to appropriate the project. A final strategy was to work with contracts that formalise this appropriation. At this moment, contracts are being signed with the municipality and with the construction company.

6. REFLECTION

This paper departs from the claim of strategic planning that durable spatial transitions require a public debate. And that such a debate both depends on a process of civic participation, and on a process of spatial capacity building. The aim of this paper is to explore the role of spatial designers in supporting this process of capacity building. What follows are speculative reflections and themes for further study, based on the two case studies that focus on the retrofitting of dispersed urbanisation.

A first reflection is that the capacity building framework of Baser and Morgan (2008) does provide arguments to claim that spatial design can support the development of collective capabilities. There is an observable change in behaviour in the two cases: namely, a change in the way that participants look at the residential subdivision in the Beerse case, and the formation of new coalitions and roles in the Hoepertingen case. These changes are either generated by introducing design challenges or by providing design tools that the collective had to use to tackle a challenge. In both cases they created a place for (collective) learning. A first question is how durable this behavioral change is, given the general hypothesis that capacity building is a long-term and iterative process (Baser & Morgan 2008). This would imply that there is a continued need for design interventions. A second question is how to value the impact of the design interventions. Did behaviour really change? And what is the contribution of the interventions to this change?

A second reflection is that the framework not only provides arguments to employ design in spatial capacity building processes, but can also be used to fine-tune the process of capacity building: for instance, in order to speed up the learning process or to move it in a particular direction (such as the retrofitting of dispersed urbanisation). In this paper, the three conditions and the five challenges are only used to conduct a retrospective analysis of two case studies. But, what if we were to use the framework to manage the capacity building process so that it deliberately aims for the five core capabilities, or for one capability in particular. This would imply that we employ spatial planning as a process of collective learning. This point has been made in the literature (Kuhk et al., 2015), but there are hardly any frameworks that help to specifically 'design' spatial planning processes to support collective learning. The three conditions and the five challenges could function as a first attempt to fill this gap. Further research could then specify whether there is a logical sequence in building the five collective capabilities, or in which conditions is it best use telling, making or enacting?

The final reflection is how to prevent spatial capacity building from also becoming a closed procedure, in the same way that the increased demand for civic support has turned participatory projects into formalities. This requires that each capacity building process begins with the definition of clear ambitions and process criteria, which can then be used as benchmarks to regularly self-audit the process.

BIOGRAPHY

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