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# INQUIRING THE EVERYDAY – learning from Action Research to intervene in autonomous, spatial transformation processes

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## Abstract

Haspengouw (Belgium) is a region characterized by small-scale projects that are often initiated by individual actors. We take the silent, small and incremental character of these projects as the starting point to question where and how they start to form an issue of concern for broader society. Precisely by publicly debating these small-scale changes in the everyday, we design strategies to intervene in this process of 'autonomous' transformations [1]. Within the frame of an Action Research approach we set up different forms of interaction (i.e. walking, scenario thinking, envisioning, enacting, prototyping, etc.) to stage such a public debate. The objective of this paper, is to discuss in what way this approach of Action Research can offer a framework to address this double perspective, namely to inquire the small-scale by (collective) small-scaled interventions in the everyday environment -and at the same time- to debate issues taking place at a larger scale, inciting (collective) reflection.

Keywords: Action Research, spatial design, everyday habitat.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The rhythm of the village: slow and silent: What is the issue?

Haspengouw is a region of fruit cultivation in the east of Flanders characterized by small-scale changes e.g. a farmer that adds a barn, a low trunk orchard that replaces a high trunk orchard, small farms that make room for detached houses, etc. Just like natural (environmental) changes these changes cause an 'autonomous' process of transformation [1]. The open landscape harbours an increasing number of claims (housing, agriculture, recreation, watermanagement, etc.) and gets privatized and cut into bits (by horsification, garden sprawl [2]. Grasslands and the remaining open inner areas and orchards are slowly built over with generic houses that hide behind hedges and automatic garage ports, the village shop and the local bakery close, and the dispersed mode of building makes it impossible to organize an efficient public transport [3]. Slowly, the once autonomous villages are turning into purely residential areas, with the public domain transforming into a transit zone [4].

These transformations are initiated by individual decisions, and the speed of these transformations is slow enough to digest and does not trigger a collective protest, resistance or debate, unless they are of a larger scale or commissioned by a public authority touching on private property (e.g. a bicycle path at the border of private gardens). The involvement of actors is mostly limited within the clear borders of legal procedures linked to structural plans or building codes. But then the projects are so small that these procedures mainly address neighbours. The majority of inhabitants live in comfort, the village is the place where they found their residential dream in the form of a detached house with a private garden. For them there is no issue of concern in how the village is transforming.

## 1.2 Public debate as a practice to intervene

Although these incremental transformations are not a prominent issue for public debate nor a clear object of planning strategies, they do effect the social and spatial reality of rural villages. Via the often invisible interactions between each isolated change, they start to form an issue of concern for broader society. The more generic character of housing as well as the increasing diversity of inhabitants have an impact on the use of the public places. There are sites where the public character is threatened by privatization (e.g. green structures that become an extension of a garden, a farmer that closes the road to a public orchard, streets with front gardens as parking lots) or get claimed by new groups or a dominant use (e.g. a parade for Sikhs on the church square that is mainly used as parking) but moreover there are sites that are underused, where any ownership is lacking, where there are no claims at all.

Apart from strategies to intervene in these complex processes of spatial transformations, in Flanders we lack a culture to publicly debate what is (spatially) changing in our daily environment. What is going on, who uses, claims ownership and maintains public or common places? We do formally involve citizens in spatial planning processes. The type of involvement in these non-urban regions is however, limited to participatory activities within procedures. Hence, despite of the increasing focus of policy makers on participation this citizen involvement does not lead to an open and public debate, i.e. it does not lead to an active citizenship as this requires a collective reflection and trust. [5][6]

We hypothesise the challenge is to involve different actors in an open and continuous public debate, beyond a specific project or dominant agenda, as everybody is continuously involved in how space transforms in their everyday habitat. [7][8]

## 2 APPROACH

### 2.1 Inquiring the everyday versus issues on the larger scale and longer term

By publicly debating these small-scale changes in the everyday, we want to design strategies to address the issues that occur on the larger scale and on the long term. As we do look for ways to intervene in these autonomous transformations and more specifically how to steer them towards more spatial and social quality (e.g. by densification of housing tissue, improving the relation with landscape, increasing biotopes, biodiversity, and diversity of housing types and (informal) meeting places) and in a more democratic direction (e.g. the cost of certain ways of living are made by some, but have to be paid by all, e.g. public transport, services, etc.).

Within the frame of an Action Research we set up different experiments to stage a public debate. The objective of this paper, is to discuss in what way this approach of Action Research can offer a framework to address this double perspective of inquiring the everyday (by means of interventions and collective action) versus issues on the larger scale and longer term (inciting collective reflection). And the democratic challenge this entails, not only to 'empower' a specific or vulnerable group, [9] towards a more dominant actor or prominent agenda, but to open the debate towards a diversity of actors.

### 2.2 'Illuminating what is' versus 'creating what has to become': learning from Action Research

Writing on research methods in social sciences, [10] made the difference between research as observing, describing, reporting on *what is* (which we can relate to the small scale actions in the everyday), and research as to create *what has to become*, or a future-forming orientation to research (which we can relate to the debate on the larger scale). Any research that describes human behaviour, Gergen states, also establishes the grounds for possible action (or resistance), however researchers failed to explore these productive possibilities. The vast share of research remains dedicated to

'revealing', 'illuminating', 'understanding', or 'reflecting' a given state of affairs. In conducting research of what exists, we lend inertia to conventional forms of life. We do not ask about what does not yet exist, or about ways of life that could be created. In effect, the mirroring tradition of research favors the maintenance of the status quo.

Roose and De Bie [12] suggest that action research operates as a democratic practice: that is a practice that involves the participation of all involved. Such participation needs to emerge from real questions and issues emerging from the situation rather than questions formulated by researchers from the outside. This means, that action research is not primarily focused on the implementation of solutions but rather on challenging and questioning existing interpretations and understanding. This questioning is needed to connect the diversity of the interpretation of the same situation, and the contradictions in these interpretations, to the practical demand for change. The transformative character of future-forming orientation Gergen wants to assign to research emerges from understanding and questioning of what is already there. Action Research is therefore no method to reach a predefined problem, it is a way of inquiry that moves towards a problem definition in order to change the situation in collaboration with people involved while striving for the development of theory [12].

Action Research faces the same double perspective of inquiring the everyday in coming to a better understanding or moving towards a problem definition (what is) in order to transform the situation (what has to become). As a method it is not providing any tools, moreover, these scholars have more attention or interests in the social implications of this shift towards inquiry as future-making. Research in a future forming mode unsettles the structure of political power and researchers themselves become agents of social change; in contrast to the 'mirroring tradition' where conclusions have little impact on societal wellbeing - as the laboratory situations created for 'testing' general hypotheses are typically remote from everyday life. Hence, Gergen warns to not embrace a new *methodism viewing the practice of a specialized set of methods as an end in itself; rather that we view action research as an approach to inquiry, rather than a methodology.*" [11] Instead he offers no tools but 'three registers of inquiry', being (1) liberatory, (2) practice producing, and (3) action centred, to illustrate this potential of what this future orientation in research. We will apply these three registers to our inquiry of the everyday. [10]

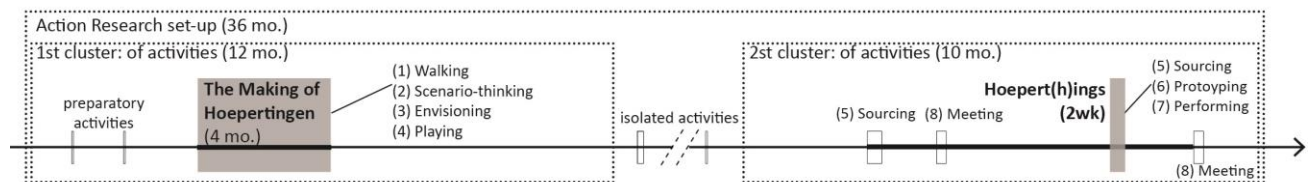
### **3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research integrates aspects of Action-Research with aspects of a Participatory Design framework. The following scheme presents the steps taken, where the research activities can be seen as design activities, interacting in the everyday environment, and where individual research activities alternate with participatory or collective ones. The research frames within a Phd project in search for strategies to intervene in a process 'autonomous' transformations in more rural regions, beyond a project or the juridical logic of a planning procedure. As scholars refer to the importance of a public debate but give little concrete examples of how to do so, the objective of this research is to 'practice' to stage such a debate. There was no actor who asked for this practice, or commissioned this research, however the choice for the village of Hoepertingen was motivated as it was a test-case in another project funded by the European fund of Rural Development.

In this paper, the three registers for inquiry (liberatory, practice producing and action centered) we selected from the literature on Action Research, will be used to learn from fieldwork that was set up within a participatory design framework. The 'practice' we want to improve is that of the 'spatial practitioner', however not in collaboration with spatial professionals or designers only but with a diversity of actors (villagers with different backgrounds and abilities, professionals (from local governments, non-profit associations (e.g. civil or nature organisations), entrepreneurs, academia, planners, activists, etc.).

## 4 FIELDWORK

During approximately 3 years we engaged in Hoepertingen, a growing residential village (with up to 2000 inhabitants) that is hosting different groups of newcomers in Haspengouw (Belgium). The activities that took place can be clustered in two sets of different forms of interaction. In 2013 there was *'The making of Hoepertingen'* based on the principles of the game *'The Making of'* of Venhuizen[13]. After a break of almost two years, in September 2015 we set up a live project *'Hoepert(h)ings'*. In between there were isolated design studio's and we participated in local activities and the village council.



### 4.1 The first cluster of interactions: 'The Making of Hoepertingen' (timeframe of 12 months)

A first insight in the spatial transformation processes of the village was built up by reviewing policy documents, a general field observation, by reconstructing the historic evolution via cartography and interviews, and a mapping of the village with children. In a focusgroup we formulated a statement on the identity of the village. All these activities were a preparation for a game we called *'The Making of Hoepertingen'*. In the course of this game (4 months) we addressed a diversity of stakeholders (villagers, administrators, policy makers, regional organisations) in different settings and roles, by means of the four different forms of interaction (i.e. **(1) walking**, **(2) scenario-thinking**, **(3) envisioning** and **(4) playing**).

In the first three months there were 3 sessions where we walked these routes, each time with different teams of villagers, in a 4<sup>th</sup> session the team consisted of participants of regional organizations and urban administrators. In between each session we visualized the different proposals that the teams made in collages. In the 4<sup>th</sup> and last month there was a concluding and final game; a debate where all opinions, ideas and proposals were collected; at that point the policymakers came in.



[Figure 2] A debate with villagers in an orchard [Figure 4] Constructing as a trigger for conversations

### 4.2 Second cluster of interactions: Hoepert(h)ings (over a timeframe of 10 months)

In spring of 2015 we spread a 'call for projects' in the region in search **((5), sourcing)** for local actors to mentor and host a *live project* (i.e. a teaching program that takes master students of Architecture out of the studio into the 'real world' to build). Two local actors of Hoepertingen combined their agenda's, continuing on the outcome of the earlier activities. They proposed to visualize and physically shape a green route throughout the village in order to connect people and places. With these local actors we coproduced a design brief for the *Hoepert(h)ings* referring to constructions to be built as informal

meeting places on this route, and chose the exact locations or connections. As a next step we further (5) sourced the material and ambassadors. In an intensive summerschool the students stayed on location for two weeks (6) **prototyping** the constructions and (7) **performing** on site; by literally building and interact with local villagers. Only after the final event we set formal arrangements in (8) **meetings** with the village council and other actors to connect the actions on a longer term.



[Figure 3] Built construction by the end of the summerschool

## 5 FINDINGS

### 5.1 Liberatory

In order to responsibly address the question ‘to what kind of future can I contribute?’ is to face complex questions of the good. When the traditional claim that science is concerned with what is, rather than what ought to be, is reversed, one is fundamentally addressing issues of value. The question of what ‘ought’ to be is a personal one is: ‘what future do I value?’. However, there is an important way in which the logic shifts the site of moral choice from the individual to the relational sphere. [10]. Next to the attention for this relational aspect of future forming research, Gergen refers to the ‘critical movement’ with its attempt ‘to draw critical attention to existing way of life, and to engender a critical consciousness from which social change might spring’. The hope is that ‘seeing with new eyes’ can incite resistance to the status quo. The goal of such research is to free the reader from traditional or common-sense ways of constructing the world.

If we look to our fieldwork from this ‘liberatory’ register, we aimed to keep the debate open. The variation in form of interaction and type of activity addressed a variety of actors. Furthermore also the composition of participants changed; from a diverse and large group of actors, to only a few villagers, from one-to-one interviews and small meetings, to a debate with local actors and policy makers. In this way we supported to make explicit a diversity of agenda’s, with a diversity of settings in time and space, in interaction with other participants. While walking the different personal agendas were expressed, before discussing ‘what future do I value’ collectively in the scenario-thinking. Often participants had a very clear idea on what needs to be changed, and which places should be renewed for example. Towards the end of an activity these ideas changed in interaction with the site, new understanding or other participants, and they start to defend the proposal they made with the group. The composition of the different interactions thus enhanced to make explicit diverging opinions before searching for a consensus. In smaller 1-to-1 settings we first built up trust before confronting conflicting viewpoints in meetings.

However, a farmer closed the road to the site (a public orchard) that ‘won’ the debate. He never participated in any of the activities, although he helped us preparing the walk. Instead of opening up this public site for different users, the opposite happened and it physically got blocked off. One neighbor of the fruit track asked a politician directly to cancel the engagement of a nature organisation

taking care of a public green zone (on a former railway track) as he partly appropriated this green zone as an extension to his garden.

## 5.2 Practice producing

In many domains the traditional attempt to solve problems through scientific research has been frustrating or ineffective. Gergen refers to different research projects in which knowledge is acquired through the complex and creative process of constructing a successful practice (see also [14]). When such knowledge is shared it becomes a resource for others. As multiple practices are generated they provide alternatives from which one can select as best fits local needs, or from which new hybrids can be formed. In what way did we 'produced a practice' and can our fieldwork some insights on the role of the 'spatial practitioner', inspirational insights for other actors, as well as clues for implementation? What were the elements that induced 'concrete results'? (e.g. designation of a new track for non-motorized traffic, restoring a high trunk orchard and revaluing it as a semi-public place, the agreement on maintenance and engagement of 'park-rangers', etc.)

Some initiatives were connected to ambitions on a larger scale or an existing rural development project for instance. These connections were made because there was a more intense interaction between different actors or roles (e.g. a villager who is also a representative in a nature organisation). Without this connection of actors and roles, the follow-up initiatives have little chance to be sustainable. As it are people (neighbours, volunteers, owners) that need to come to an agreement of how to use and maintain these common spaces. They need to get to know each other, build up trust to value and respect each other's role as well as the initiative. At several points these initiatives ran into resistance, or lack a follow-up by administrators, and proved to be very fragile.

Local administrators (culture and spatial policy) declared the changing attitude of policy makers towards participation after taking part in the final debate of the '*Making of Hoepertingen*'. Although there was no follow-up by the municipality, one administrator approached us with a question for support as a villager himself. A regional organisation (Flemisch Land Agency) started 'walking' with stakeholders in preparation for a design proposal for the plan for land consolidation and invited us to share insights on the fieldwork in workshops. A regional nature organization worked further on the consolidation of the ideas for a common orchard that students initiated in '*Hoepert(h)ings*'.

## 5.3 Action centered

Any research that describes human behaviour, Gergen states, also establishes the grounds for possible action (or resistance). In effect, in their descriptions of human activity, communities of social science have the capacity to transform the society more generally. However, limitations are in the fact that the capacity for creation remains primarily in the hands of the research community. Therefore Gergen refers to the promising alternative to work collaboratively with those outside the academy in achieving social change. Which is at the core of action research.

By walking, prototyping as well as performing on location, the debate was more visible and accessible to 'unintended' participants; villagers that might not join in the debate otherwise (e.g. children, passers-by). By physically act together within the everyday environment we "*focus on what people do, rather than what they say*" [15][16], and met new actors.

Already by walking participants explored issues by doing; they tested for instance how to make a route throughout the village avoiding as much motorized traffic as possible. With this task they felt confident enough to ignore signs of privatization, but just as well reflected on the role of their own garden within a network of open space and explored this by passing there with other participants. Inspired by the proposals made in the scenario-thinking game, participants were triggered to bring in their own resources, use or behaviour, e.g. a local centre for care started to allow children to play on their private plot, that connects the neighbourhood with a hidden green zone, and adapted this towards the live project. The second cluster of interactions was even more focused on concrete interventions and

testing and made villagers more explicitly ask to clarify our objective: what did we want to do and why? Students sourced materials and tools via the informal networks, but mostly they asked direct neighbours for help, which resulted in neighbours cooperating by helping to dig for example. The built constructions were not the mere results (some of them already made space for another project), but they facilitated a discussion on maintenance, on agreements and how to connect these ideas to existing funding.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By 'making' (e.g. prototyping) and acting (e.g. walking) in the daily environment with participants we inquired insights on what works, reflected on what could be, and as such produced a practice for spatial professionals. The three registers of inquiry offered a framework to illustrate the potentials inherent in a future making orientation to research, and hence to debate issues of concern in the everyday environment. However as we learned from the opposing reaction of some actors, we may have challenged the status quo (as a liberatory potential), but in constructing a 'new world' the opposite happened. In envisioning future scenario's a consensus was built amongst participants but it was not made public or openly communicated. The challenge is how to articulate different agenda's as well as communicate or document a common or shared vision for the future without becoming exclusive. In Hoepertingen we did not invest enough in 'creating' a community to support the debate, as strong and dominant voices easily took over.

Articulating an agenda and defining shared values takes time and confidence to do so. There is not a clear cut method to 'build' this confidence, but as stated before it is important to view Action Research as an approach to inquiry rather than a methodology. [11] The experiments presented are some out of many ways of conducting public debates, and do not lead to the practice of a specialized set of methods. The challenge is how to share skills or transfer knowledge on these type of very local, collaborative and situated practices.

Acting in a concrete and everyday habitat proofed to be a valid way to inquire knowledge on how the village works as well as to test certain choices and to visualize its consequences (i.e. the societal value of semi-private ownership of public domain). It triggered resistance as well as the engagement of new actors (e.g. nature organisation) and hence it triggered a new debate with new and different actors. The first cluster of interactions focused more on understanding what is going on, sounding different viewpoints, but just as well lead choices, to concrete actions. In this way the physical interventions can be considered as a 'result' of previous interactions and discussion, but are just as well a way to debate. Despite the temporal character or the resistance these outcomes may trigger; acting, experimenting and testing lead to new insights, deeper understanding. This 'learning by doing' is a valid approach for spatial practitioners to go beyond a specific project or dominant agenda, and to test, facilitate, moderate and take part in the debate; to collectively reflect and act with villagers, local and regional organisations on the ongoing political process of spatial transformations.

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