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Haspengouw (Belgium)

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# **‘The making of Hoepertingen’: Debating change in a village in Haspengouw (Belgium)**

## **Abstract**

Villages are changing as a consequence of global processes of transformation, as well as a summation of small-scale and individual decisions. Village communities are challenged by the way identities change, and search for ways to reflect and exchange ideas on what has disappeared, what aspects of life remain and will be possible. Our aim was to support individual villagers in order to better understand what is changing and to collectively define a future image. The methodology of action research brings in a future-forming orientation: to discuss what might become and to reflect on what is already there. Combined with aspects of participatory design, we set up different actions in Hoepertingen, a village in Haspengouw. Through walking with villagers, generating scenarios, envisioning, enacting, prototyping and more, we assembled and compared different meaning constructs, experimented with possible solutions and developed dialogues about these scenarios. In this paper, we will discuss the ways in which these participatory actions supported us to envision how public places in villages change and generate reflection, and debate about how inhabitants can contribute to this change.

Keywords: participatory design, action research, public space

## **1. Introduction**

Hoepertingen is a village in Haspengouw that is historically known for its fruit cultivation. Like most rural regions in Europe (Van der Ploeg, *et al.* 2008), Hoepertingen is changing as a consequence of global processes of transformation (e.g. changing mobility, improved technology, globalising markets, changes in governance), as well as a summation of small-scale and individual decisions. These decisions are spatially reflected in, for instance, the replacement of high trunk orchards by low trunk orchards (see fig. 1 and 2), meadows that make room for new detached houses built with more distance from the street, or houses that are refurbished in a different style. Other changes concern the use of open space: Dewaelheyns *et al.* (2011) describe how the open landscape is affected by a general trend of converting farmland to other uses of open space, e.g. tourism. One example of changing land use is the privatisation of open space all over western Europe, is described by Bomans *et al.* (2010) as the ‘horsification’ of the landscape and by Verbeek *et al.* (2011) and Dewaelheyns *et al.* (2012) as a ‘garden sprawl’. In addition, Verhoeve *et al.* (2012) addresses the appearance of non-agricultural functions (e.g. building firms, wellness centres) in agricultural buildings that escape the attention of spatial planning strategies. Kerselaers (2012) points out how many of these alterations introduce ‘new’ actors and ‘new’ uses that are not captured by standard categorisations.

Antrop (1998) already described these shifts as ‘autonomous’ processes of transformation. Just like natural (environmental) changes, he argues, these are processes that are hard to steer and predict. They also correspond to the ‘*tyranny of small decisions*’ launched by Kahn (1966, in: Dewaelheyns, 2014), referring to the culmination of uncoordinated (e.g. autonomous and individual) decisions that lead to major effects on the environment. Such culminated effects are often neither optimal, desired, intended, nor preferred by society (Odum, 1982). Woods (2007) furthermore refers to their small scale and how they are, in consequence, often invisible when using standard land-cover analysis techniques. With the concept of ‘interface’, Dewaelheyns *et al.* (2018) search for a way out of excess standardisation or conformity in research, design and planning policy. They aim to break through this silence on phenomena that remain ‘under the radar’ (Bomans *et al.*, 2010) in everyday landscape analysis, design

and planning policy. Verhoeve et al. (2012) argue for the need to build up knowledge, gather more data, and do more fieldwork to gain insight into the impact of and mechanisms behind these hidden and unplanned (and therefore potentially underrated) changes.



**Figures 1 and 2** - Pictures (c) Peter Bongaerts, showing how the view on the surrounding landscape is different when low-trunk plantings replace high trunk orchards.

Policies and studies continue to use the ‘autonomous village’ as a frame of reference, often neglecting the current dynamic and potential of villages (Thissen & Loopmans, 2013). At the same time, there is a lack of opportunity for individual actors (albeit villagers, organisations or civil servants) to understand and debate what is changing on a larger scale or a longer-term. The purpose is less to redefine the village identity than to initiate a willingness to accept that identities change, and to discuss and address the unwanted consequences (of privatisation, of fragmentation of open space) of these ‘autonomous changes’. An openness towards different viewpoints is fundamental to allow debate and to translate individual conceptions of local identity and community into collective imaginations (Loopmans et al., 2012). Biesta (2014) addresses how it is precisely in transforming, evaluating and reformulating private interests in the light of collective needs that our ongoing struggle for democracy takes shape. The challenges that changing villages face can thus be considered as a democratic challenge.

Our research assumes that villagers cannot be seen as passive recipients of changes in their environment, but that they negotiate these changes as active agents. We started from different ideas from the individual villagers, making use of participatory design methods to collectively define an image to which they want to contribute. Framed within an action research set-up, we staged a debate in one village as a participatory intervention. This participatory experiment was part of a PhD exploring approaches to organise participation as an ongoing and democratic challenge, more than a momentary intervention, and investigating how to go beyond a logic of spatial projects and instrumental perspectives of juridical and predefined processes of spatial planning. This paper discusses a temporary, participatory experiment, established as a game, in order to address the question: *What we can learn from staging a public debate about what is changing in the village, and how are these changes are perceived?* Thus, although this research is nested in the discipline and theory of architecture, urbanism and spatial planning, we want to focus here on what the experiment can teach us about the actual dynamics and intentionality of changes in villages.

Participation is generally considered as an instrument to involve multiple stakeholders in the pursuit of a certain goal. We can also consider participation as a starting point, an assumption upon which to act, going from the idea that citizens, or villagers, are already and are always participating in their daily

environment. The challenge is not to engage villagers in a ‘participatory project’, but how individual actors can equally take part in a debate on issues concerning the ‘common good’ (De Bie et al. 2012).

## **2. Framework: Third and public places, the sites of informal networks in villages**

The choice for a specific village as a place to live is increasingly becoming an issue of local consciousness and emotional connection, rather than a natural process of having ties to the village where one was born (Vermeij, 2015; Thissen, 2017). Initiatives that contribute to the social and spatial infrastructure of a village can support identification with the village. Thissen, et al. (2012) refer, in this regard, to a need for ‘third places’. Oldenberg & Brisset (1982) introduced this concept, considering home as a ‘first place’, while functional spaces like a workplace and many facilities are ‘second places’. ‘Third places’ are spaces where people can meet without many obligations and where there is room for local initiatives, like a market square or a café, as places for ‘light encounters’ (Soenen, 2006). Research has pointed out that, in order for villagers to obtain place attachment and to develop social networks, the presence of places to meet and the possibility to support community initiatives (third places) are more relevant than the presence of services or local facilities (second places) (Gieling et al., 2017; Völker, et al., 2007) ‘Third places’ create opportunities to meet other people and play a role as a shared encounter with the village. Spontaneous interactions are believed to contribute to local ties and thus foster social cohesion (Oldenburg 1991, Haartsen & Van Wissen, 2012).

We further explored the role of public space and its potential to function as ‘third place’ by addressing public space in a broad sense and how it is related to the public sphere. The public sphere brings a spatial dimension to democratic practices, phrased by Arendt (1958) as a space of appearance: *‘the space where I appear to others, as others appear to me’*. In theory, ‘the public’ is often defined in clear relation to ‘the private’, moving towards a more dynamic conception of different spheres with a shifting interpretation of ‘the public’ to ‘publics’ (Arendt, 1958; Habermas, 1991; Sennet, 1992; Lofland, 1998). Nancy Fraser (1993) further calls to encompass ‘counterpublics’ and to produce a very different picture of the public sphere, one founded on contestation rather than unity and created through competing interests as much as reasoned debate.

Comparable to how Fraser looks beyond the officially designated ‘public’ towards multiple ‘publics’, Margaret Crawford (2016a) identifies multiple types of spaces by looking beyond the culturally defined physical realms of ‘home’, ‘workplace’ and ‘institution’. Crawford argues that the materialization of these public spaces and activities are shaped by lived experience rather than built space. The fundamental question for Crawford is not how places should appear, but how they can be connected with democracy. This connection is embodied in the right to access, to express differences and livelihood. In this way, trivial places such as vacant lots, sidewalks, front yards are claimed for new use and meaning. Leinfelder (2007) argues that larger pieces of open space can also be considered as public space. Apart from economic use, a productive landscape can function as a cultural and inspiring public space. In addition, Vigano (2008: 39) emphasizes the potential of open, unbuilt space, like agricultural land, forests, and flood areas in and outside of the built core, as places that can readdress the traditional concept of public space. In their manifesto for *‘living landscapes’*, Hans Teerds and Johan Van Der Zwart (2012) also explore the perspective of the open space and the landscape as being part of the public realm. Teerds & Van Der Zwart refer to Arendt as well, emphasizing that this concept is not just about expressing one’s opinion (to speak), but it is about the possibility to contribute, to take part, and most importantly to act. Only what is publicly heard and seen can be discussed, rejected or confirmed, as action and reaction.

We consider the village as a patchwork of potential public places, such as the streets, but also small footpaths, a church square or a playground, an open field or a shared garden, each with a particular relation to surrounding open space. We want to explore further how different places can be considered as public space and how they can play a role in this open process of understanding and redefining how the village identity is changing. We chose to focus on public spaces – in their interpretation as *places that can be connected with democracy* – as the subject matter of our participatory actions.

### 3. Methodology

The idea that participation is more than an instrument aligns with ideas in action research that avoid focusing on the intervention, nor the method, but on the situation itself in order to learn what this can mean (Roose et al., 2014). Starting from how to understand a number of specific changes in villages, we staged many distributed actions that engaged different actors. We will now first (3.1) situate our approach and the choice for action research. Secondly, (3.2) we explain the different fieldwork actions that are combined in a game. We discuss the design of the game (3.2.1) and then the concrete set up and performance of the game (3.2.2).

#### 3.1. Our approach of Action Research with aspects of Participatory Design

We chose for a participatory approach of action research built on ideas of Paulo Freire (1972). Roose et al. (2014) define action research *‘as a way of social interaction in response to a problematic situation in order to change a situation in collaboration with people involved, striving for the development of theory’*. (Roose et al. 2014: 108)

The ‘change’ in this definition refers to an awareness of other interpretations or possibilities, in interaction with what is already known. In this way, the validity of action research does not depend on how much or how far the project contributes to changing a situation factually, or on the implementation of solutions, but rather on challenging and questioning existing interpretations and understandings. *‘The degree of change is not the measure of validity’* (Waterman, 1998). It is this awareness and questioning of different understandings that can support ‘all people involved’ to relate what is happening to a broader framework, and that can lead to an improved understanding of how to relate oneself to what is happening.

*“The researcher has to make the action possible and can, more particularly, facilitate the dialogue between the actors, introduce knowledge that prompts the actors to reflect on their actions and develop new theoretical concepts that result from the newly initiated dialogue, which may contribute to a better understanding of the realities at stake.”* (Roose et al. 2014: 113)

In his essay *From Mirroring to World-Making: Research as Future Forming*, Gergen (2015) writes on action research, distinguishing between research as observing, describing, reporting and *mirroring what is* and research to *create what has to become*. Any research that describes human behaviour, he continues, also establishes the grounds for possible action (or resistance). Gergen argues that researchers have not yet sufficiently explored these productive possibilities. He considers the vast share of research to remain dedicated to ‘revealing’, ‘illuminating’, ‘understanding’, or ‘reflecting’ a given state of affairs. For Gergen, action research has a transformative potential to change an ‘understanding’ towards a future-oriented ‘making’. In this future-forming mode, research unsettles the structure of political power, and Gergen concludes that researchers themselves become agents of social change.



Thus, action research supports the definition of a broader frame of reference, taking into account other possible definitions, which we define as a challenge that villages are facing as they change. Secondly, the future-forming orientation of action research opens possibilities to include a more forward-looking perspective of ‘making’. We included designerly methods like walking, scenarios, envisioning, enacting, prototyping, etc., to stage a debate as an ongoing and open experiment more than as a momentary intervention. Participatory design attempts to actively involve people who are being served through the design itself. As true experts, they are valued as co-creators in the process. A key characteristic of participatory design is the use of physical artefacts as thinking tools throughout the process. The making of things, the telling of stories and the enactment of possible futures provide the basis for forming a temporary community in which the new can be envisioned (Brandt et al., 2012).

### 3.2. Fieldwork actions

We clustered different participatory actions in a game called ‘The making of Hoepertingen’ based on an existing game format, ‘The Making of’ (Venhuizen, 2010). We continue to refer to this format as a game, to label this choreography of actions that we designed and performed together with different actors and villagers. Planners have, over the past 40 years, experimented with games and playful approaches to support (participatory) planning processes (Duke and Kriz, 2014; Devisch et al., 2016). Serious games can be powerful tools for collective learning because they provide a safe space for experimentation and experiences. Participants explore this space of possibilities, observe the consequences of decisions taken, without running any real risk or damage (Huizinga, 1999). By interacting with one another, commenting, engaging in role-play, imitating and etc., the players develop shared values, practices, ways of knowing, acting, being, and caring (Kapp, 2012).

The game was established as an experiment of eight months, within the frame of LEADER<sup>1</sup>-project of two years. This LEADER-project was supervised and conducted by our research group to participatory-design a format called ‘*Mooiste dorpen van Haspengouw*’ so as to collaboratively learn with local actors and inhabitants about (spatial) transformations in the region Haspengouw. Framed within this project, our first experiment was to choose one village to stage a debate, while questioning how to set up participatory actions outside the predefined logic of a spatial project or a planning procedure. There was no specific agenda, question, nor project that motivated the choice for the village of Hoepertingen. Like many villages in Haspengouw, Hoepertingen belonged to the working territory of actors involved in the LEADER area. For example, STEBO<sup>2</sup> was commissioned to develop a policy document on living quality by the municipality of Borgloon. The VLM (the Flemish Land Agency) was busy with an exploratory study to see if the area needed a development plan for land consolidation. Both organisations were also active in other villages. In addition, the local cultural organisation Kasteel Mariagaarde<sup>3</sup> was a member of the Local Action Group (LAG) of LEADER (more on these organizations below). Thus, there certainly were occasions for cooperation, but not significantly more, less or different than in other villages.

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<sup>1</sup> LEADER, “Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Economie Rurale”, is a European funding for rural development.

<sup>2</sup> STEBO is a non-profit organization developing projects concerning community building, dwelling, employment, energy, etc. Their mission is to start from everyone’s capacities and strengths, and the social capital present in groups and neighbourhoods. In the LAG they represent the sector of welfare organizations.

<sup>3</sup> Kasteel Mariagaarde is a non-profit organization that is in charge of the use of the domain of the castle convent of Hoepertingen and its park. The site is a recognized site of silence and the organization mainly welcomes contemplative activities. They aim to strengthen their connection with the local neighborhood with numerous initiatives. In LAG they represent the sector of socio-cultural organizations.

### *3.2.1. Participatory design of the game*

According to the framework of Venhuizen (2010), we first gathered information, getting to know the village by reviewing policy documents (e.g. the municipal plan for town and country planning) combined with general field observations, by walking through the village and interviewing different villagers, by reconstructing the historic evolution via cartography, and through a mapping exercise with children. Based on this first collection of data we participatory defined ‘game-tasks’ with three organisations: Kasteel Mariagaarde, Ter Heide (a local centre for care) and STEBO. We combined the information we gathered with the vision and agenda that these organisations have for the village in order to engage different (professional) actors, besides residents. The game-tasks can be considered as design briefs; including other actors in defining this brief is key to participatory design (Brandt et al., 2012). This game format furthermore resembles an often-used design method, ‘scenario-thinking’ (Van de Weijer and Devisch, 2013), where the first exploratory stage comes down to gathering insights, identifying ambitions and mapping present and future dynamics. In the second stage, this information is divided into ‘certainties and uncertainties’ and placed on two axes. Each quadrant leads to a specific future scenario.

We collaboratively defined ‘tasks’, (e.g. ‘create an event on this site for all villagers’) in combination with challenges or ‘restrictions’ (e.g. the possible tension and opportunities coming with tourism, or the decision of the local authorities that housing expansion will take place in Hoepertingen prior to other villages) and ‘trends’ (e.g. a shift of mentality towards more attention for recycling). These tasks, restrictions and trends were again combined with specific game-locations. These were all ‘unbuilt’ places, sometimes ‘formally public’ (i.e. publicly owned and maintained), like a playground or the church square, but also a private park, orchards and other less obvious ‘leftover spaces’, all included to confront issues of privatisation and fragmentation of open space. In this way, the village itself became a ‘game-board’ with game-tasks that question how particular locations can function as a ‘third place’. Because we chose real on-site game locations, participants had to find and walk their own routes between different spots.

### *3.2.2. Performing the game*

After the initial participatory-design of the game, it was performed in four sessions. These were spread over three months, each time with two different teams of 4 to 5 participants, thus eight teams and 37 participants in total (Fig. 7, session 1 to 4). Participants were not selected but responded to our invitation to join in, in the form of leaflets distributed in all letterboxes; the composition of teams was thus done randomly. Children were engaged in a separate activity prior to the game, and only a few younger people participated in the game itself (cf. figure 7, indicating that 5 children joined a mapping exercise). Most participants were over 50 years of age and had lived in the village for a long time, although in each session participants who had moved to the village more recently joined the game. Only a few young parents took part and only two farmers. Members of the Sikh community did not take part. Each team was accompanied by one researcher, who gave the group practical guidance through the game and facilitated the discussion. In a fourth and final session, we invited participants of regional organisations and urban administrators. During and after each session, we (1) walked a route between the selected locations, avoiding roads for motorised traffic as much as possible. On location, we stopped for 20 minutes to work on the (2) game-tasks. Following each session, the researchers (3) visualised the different scenarios in a collage as a visual summary of the discussion. By translating the ideas in spatial and visual terms, this discussion could be passed on to the next team. This

supported the teams' efforts to think and draw in spatial terms. The first team was shown a collage of existing projects in order to support them in understanding aspects of scale. After the four sessions, all participants were invited to join in (4) a final debate where all opinions, ideas and proposals were collected, and further arguments were formulated and discussed. Only in this final step, the policymakers (local aldermen) participated.



Figure 3: Walking between game locations, Figure 4: Discussing game-tasks in an orchard, Figure 5: A collage visualising a proposed scenario, Figure 6: the final debate (author's pictures)

Participants did not always debate in a direct way. There were intense events but also longer pauses. The composition of participants changed, from a one-to-one interview in the preparatory phase to a diverse and more extensive group of actors with policymakers and regional organisations in the final debate. We provided different access points for people to join in, as there were different moments in time, different ways of communication and debate. The collages were used to create prompts and representations of what was discussed and to explore tools to support an ongoing discussion. The use of artefacts (drawings, pictures) is key to participatory design, as thinking tools throughout the process (Brandt et al., 2012). There were more organised as well as more informal ways in which we met villagers (e.g. walking between different locations). We searched for diverse ways to reflect on the ideas or scenarios, by letting participants respond to collages, pictures, and above all to the space itself. As we chose real on-site game locations, participants had to find and walk their route between different locations. By crossing these locations, they became appropriated for just a moment. In this way, the location played along, as its actual presence was part of the game. Assumptions on what is public, what is accessible, what is underused, are not readable on a map, but become explicit on-site, as you can see the hedges, gates, or garden waste, but also children skating on a private parking lot, for



instance. We triggered participants to think of how they would act differently, what they would do to change a situation, going from their habits and environment (e.g. changing daily routines or routes).

Participants were not selected according to specific criteria; instead, we created situations and invited villagers who volunteered to take part. In figure 7, we indicate how many villagers, professionals and administrators, policymakers and researchers (for reviewing policy documents, map making, facilitating and visualising) participated. The different person-icons refer to different roles. Villagers can be professionals as well as administrators or policymakers. We categorised participants in the roles they addressed themselves. The professional actors we invited to take part were not residents of Hoepertingen. In the game sessions, residents responded on our invitation via the leaflets. These leaflets were distributed in all letterboxes after ‘the participatory design of the game’ and before ‘performing the game’, hence before the first game session. In between sessions there were no extra leaflets distributed, although, in retrospect that would have supported other actors to join (e.g. young parents, members of the Sikh community, fruit cultivators). Extra participants did join in by word of mouth, via participants in earlier sessions. Finally, this figure visualises the different steps taken in a timeline, indicating longer pauses and more concentrated moments.

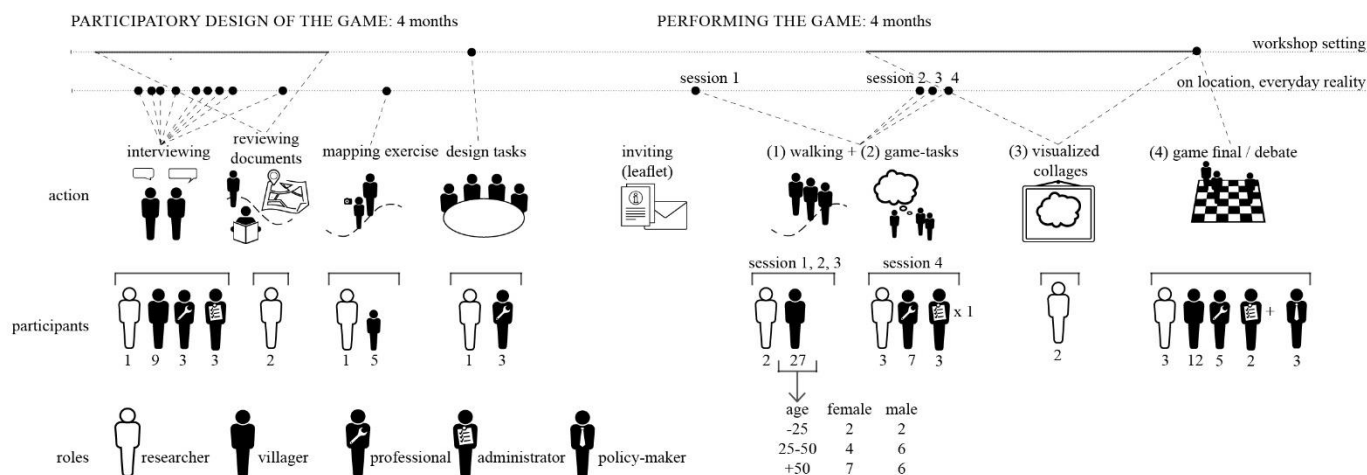


Figure 7 scheme visualizing different actions of the game on a timeline

#### 4. Findings

The next paragraphs describe findings on how villagers use and perceive their daily living environments. The game ‘*The making of Hoepertingen*’ triggered a reflection on how particular spaces are used and perceived today. These reflections were sometimes in conflict with future ideas as well as with different perceptions villagers hold.

The first set of findings discussed (in 4.1.) are different perspectives for public places. These perspectives are a combination of an observation and an understanding of what is: how this place is used and perceived today - with new ideas on what might become: how could this place work in the future, referring to the future-forming orientation of action research (see section 2, Gergen, 2015). Hence, these perspectives include the transformative orientation of action research from an ‘understanding’ towards ‘making’. These findings are based on interviews, walks, observations and maps we made in the preparatory stage, as well as on what participants said in the course of the game and on data coming from the documentation of this fieldwork (i.e. field notes, meeting reports,

pictures, the scenarios, the collages that envisioned the outcome and the discussions of the final game).

The second set of findings are labelled as different visions on the village or 'village-views' that different villagers hold (4.2.). These findings are only based on the villagers we met and on what they told us. Based on the data mentioned above (i.e. field notes, meeting reports, and interviews), the village-views were defined in retrospect. They gave support to the act of defining what we did (what to consider as a research-action) and who was involved in the game (who to consider as a participant). As we are not sociologists nor anthropologists, describing these different views incited a reflection on 'social aspects' (i.e. relations, activities) in a spatial way. We thus present these village-views in order to categorise our findings, and to reflect on the openness of the game as a debate. Furthermore, these views helped us to make sense of differences in what people told us (e.g. appreciating the surrounding landscape or addressing issues of privatisation), what they did (e.g. blocking the view with fences or using a public footpath to store wood), and what they revealed about each other (e.g. about the new houses that were built or the old terraced houses that are used in a different way). In this way, spatial observations and different statements were connected to data gathered in course of the game.

Both sets of findings were only defined after the game and were not discussed with villagers, nor did they influence, for instance, the composition of the teams. Hence, we present these findings as concepts that were not validated by our actions, but which clarified and substantiated these actions, referring to the sensitising concepts defined by Blumer (1954). Sensitising concepts lack specification but give a general sense of guidance, they suggest where to look instead of provide prescription of what to see.

#### 4.1. Different perspectives for public places

##### *From places for staying to places for connecting*

We learnt how traditional public spaces, such as the square in front of the church, are losing their roles as common meeting places; and at the same time, these places are used for new types of collective activities (e.g. the Sikh community uses the church square for their parade). More ephemeral places, such as the small roads in the fields, the graveyard and the park of the castle, were put forward as interesting places to meet. Places that function as 'points for connection' are precisely those that villagers came up with when asked to think of places to meet. The proposals they made can be understood as ideas to 'thicken' existing routes and crossing points (e.g. to add a bench or natural playing infrastructure). These places for connection were also seen as a starting point or opportunity to make different combinations of use (e.g. a community orchard with a playing area). In their proposals, villagers furthermore expressed their concern for control. They want the daily living environment to remain a safe environment, with familiar social contacts and room for meetings without many obligations (as characterising for 'third spaces'). Lofland (1985) described 'trusted strangers' as faces we know or people who feel familiar, but who we do not know. One roughly knows who lives where, or whom to cross at what time on the street. For Reijndorp (2010) it is more a matter of trust and routines than a matter of knowing each other through social activities and neighbourhood barbecues. It is a matter of knowing how one's village 'works' and feeling comfortable about it. By means of rules, as well as physical infrastructure (e.g. choice for materials) the villagers want to control how these places are used (e.g. in their proposal for the park of the castle they suggested a new connection with the neighbourhood, but at the same time were thinking on how to prevent bikes and strangers from entering).

### *From property-rights to management*

Public places like the church square, a public park or a playground are places where property, as well as management, are controlled by the local authority. Although these places were well maintained, villagers considered them as underused. In discussing how a public playground could regain a social meaning, villagers reflected on forms of community or individual management. They suggested the community should be involved in maintaining the public space by offering them the opportunity to use it for private purposes (e.g. using shared facilities for parties). Villagers came up with scenarios for use and maintenance, starting from the abilities and needs of the immediate neighbours. They proposed coalitions between these neighbours and other local actors (e.g. with different roles for the youth movement, a local nature organisation, a centre for care), rather than spatial design solutions. The proposals were open and flexible, reflecting the different coalitions of actors, and often privileged certain groups or favoured certain activities, pragmatically going from those who have an interest and are willing to engage in using and taking care of a place. Their reflections were not oriented towards how to facilitate the use of these places for ‘everybody’ but chose to start from those who have a sense of ownership for the place.

### *From consuming open space to connecting fragments of open space*

Villagers started reflecting on the size and shape of the village when we asked them where new housing should be located. The image of ‘the rural village surrounded by open landscape’ appeared to be a strong image. They wanted new houses to be built within the borders of the village. This image was strengthened by an expectation of a compact village with services and meaningful public spaces in the centre. Villagers realised that this has the unavoidable consequence that new houses should be built in the remaining open areas (the former meadows or orchards). When we asked them to rethink these open inner areas, villagers articulated how they value these open spaces because of their characteristic views and their sense of topography, and this, therefore, came in conflict with the aforementioned image of ‘compact village’. It made villagers propose denser and more compact typologies of housing. In order to maintain a bit of open space, they suggested to minimise private outdoor space and to make gardens collective. Furthermore, they proposed to make it possible to cross these inner areas. This would increase the permeability of the village and also regain the importance of views and elements that characterise the village (e.g. the topography, some older fruit trees). While walking, participants observed and started to value a network of, often small pieces of remaining open landscape, and made proposals to connect them with small paths and views.

An interesting and final point of discussion that came to the fore in almost each game session is where children can or are allowed to play. The possibility to play in the fields or orchards is considered as an advantage of living in a village. However, villagers assert that this rarely happens today. The current agricultural landscape, with its low trunk plantations that focus on high production, is closing the landscape visually but also is making it less accessible. One group proposed an open high trunk ‘village orchard’ immediately outside the village, inviting the youth movement, local school and ‘only children’. Also remarkable is that in this proposal, in contrast to the expectations towards a compact centre with the meaningful public places and services we saw before, villagers showed interest to meet, play and recreate *outside* the village (or the built borders). It shows how these open spaces are considered as a meaningful public space where a diversity of users can cross (along with strangers, walkers-by and cycle tourists). In the ‘final debate’ this was the winning proposal.

### 4.2. Different village-views

These views are based on what villagers told us, on observations we made ourselves about what they did, and on what they reported about each other. Hence, these village-views are not solely based on statements made by villagers holding this view; furthermore, villagers can hold contradicting views.

#### *A native view*

Villagers that are born and bred in Hoepertingen mostly have a strong connection with the village, and a 'productive' relation with the surrounding open landscape. The same view is shared by many of the current agriculturists. Often, the older and retired villagers still maintain a small orchard or a vegetable garden. *"Hoepertingen used to be a village of entrepreneurs, of hard workers; everybody maintained an orchard, either full-time as a farmer, or in the evening, combining two jobs"* (quote from interview). This productive relationship with the landscape is no longer evident for all villagers. In almost every interview with older villagers, the transforming landscape was mentioned, and how this used to be more diverse, with different fields and crops. Today, this landscape is dominated by low trunk orchards. The coming of the many new houses are rarely mentioned as a change as such, but the arrival of new inhabitants is, and the assertion that 'they do not know everybody anymore'. These 'native' villagers still consider the pavement and the street as important places for interaction but miss the moments where one would put a chair in front of the house to chat, or on a palette in the field during summer evenings, like they used to do. Next to small roads, they also refer to the cemetery as a place for 'light encounters' (Soenen, 2006). Just like many other villagers, they have a social network outside the village and are oriented towards the wider region for shopping.

#### *A native 2.0. view, the next generation*

There is a younger generation that is born in Hoepertingen but often working outside the village. For shopping, sports and cultural activities, they are focused on a wider region, as are the newcomers (cf. *infra*). The village is the place where they grew up, and they still have a strong connection with it, but also refer to a wider social network outside the village. Unlike their parents, they do not maintain an orchard, nor a vegetable garden. The changes they refer to are the new houses that have been built and the transformations in public space; for instance, playgrounds that are underused or streets that became more anonymous and dominated by cars. They often have built their own detached houses with a garden in newly developed meadows or on buildable land previously owned by their parents. They rarely buy the older terraced houses in the village centre. Their house and plot of the people interviewed seem more 'enclosed', meaning the garden is often surrounded by hedges or fences, where children can play in their private playground. Although the backside of their garden is often facing orchards and fields, they rarely make a physical connection with this landscape. The transition from their private plot towards the public street is not diffuse either, but often abrupt, designed for entering by car and minimising interactions with passers-by.

#### *A (seasonal) worker's view, and the Sikh community as a new group of fruit cultivators*

Due to general progress in agricultural systems, local fruit companies have expanded and attracted an increasing number of Polish and Romanian migrants who work as fruit pickers. These seasonal workers go back to their families regularly. We do not know much about them as we have not spoken to them and villagers rarely referred to their presence. In addition to these seasonal workers, there is a Sikh community living in Hoepertingen whose presence is related to this surrounding landscape of fruit production. The first wave of Sikh migrants arrived in the 1970s as political refugees. The 'second generation' of the Sikh community members started their enterprises and became a new group of fruit cultivators (Cosemans, 2012). The Sikh community also did not take part in any of our activities but, unlike the seasonal workers, they were referred to often. In all interviews and



conversations, villagers expressed their respect for the Sikh community, although they rarely interact with them. When local associations (e.g. the youth movement, the fanfare, school or sports club) organise activities, the Sikh community rarely participates. Children join the local school the community has a temple. Once a week, the church square and streets around the temple are occupied by cars from Sikh visitors to the temple, coming from all over the region. Once a year they make use of the streets as a stage for a parade. The community has bought the older terraced houses in the village centre. Their use of the front and entrance zone of the house is different from most villagers. Although these differences are small (the absence of curtains, for instance), some villagers told us that they do not know what to think of this different 'culture of dwelling'. From their perspectives, these differences change the image or façade of the village.

#### *A newcomer's view*

Newcomers, attracted by the green and rural environment of Hoepertingen, have no family bonds in the village. However, some of the participants who joined in the game have a social network within the village via their children. Many of them have built a new detached house with a garden and a direct view of the open landscape. However, just like the native villagers of their generation, their detached houses often paradoxically block this view by hedges and fences. These villagers do not have a 'productive' relation with the landscape, but they do like to go walking and running in the fields, and 'consume' the landscape in a recreational way, along with tourists and visitors. As they came to live in the village just recently, they do not refer so much to transformations. They expect the more formal public places like the church square to be attractive for people to meet, with activities like a café or small shop. On the other hand, they do not use the street nor the space in front of their house as a place for interaction, like some of the older villagers.

#### *A super-local view*

Amongst more native, recent arrivals and migrant villagers, there is a section of villagers whose social network is super-local. They depend on others in order to take part in any activity outside the village; for instance, elderly, children, or less mobile people. We met these villagers while walking or performing on location, or during preliminary observations. They did not agree nor volunteer to participate in the game, as they doubted their ability to contribute. On site, they sometimes spontaneously started speaking about their needs and dreams for the village. Their expectations for public space are closely connected to the need for a place where one can (informally) meet people without needing an alibi, agenda or membership to be there. They long for a place to watch people, listen, and maybe start a little conversation, like a walking route or a bench with a view. Where the high trunk orchards were a favourite place to play in the memory of older villagers, today the low trunk orchards not only visually but often literally close the landscape. The surrounding landscape became a forbidden zone to play for many children. Older villagers furthermore told us that the increase of cycle tourists during the spring makes them uncertain about cycling themselves.

#### *A strong initiator's view*

Finally, there is a perspective of 'villagers' who do not always live in the village, but sometimes only work in Hoepertingen. Nevertheless, they share a strong sense of initiative, professionally or personally. Responding on the game, these actors took concrete action; for instance, the local construction company started to allow people to pass through and use a green zone of their private terrain. The local centre for care invited children to use their open garden to play. We also met villagers with different perspectives and visions taking the initiative. As a first example, two newcomers actively participated in the game; in their professional role, they were both working for a nature organisation. They only recently moved to the village but were very motivated to work further

with scenarios in the game. In another example, we refer to a villager born in the village, like his parents, who worked for a youth organisation. In response to the scenarios in the game, he made new connections in his professional role between regional and local initiatives in the village and translated ideas into project proposals. A final example is a professional who joined in the last session of the game. In his professional role, he was working for the municipality of Borgloon. In his role as a villager, he translated ideas of the game to his own village.

In line with the different perspectives for public space (4.1), these village-views were only defined after the game and were not discussed with villagers, nor did these findings influence the composition of the teams. We thus did not act upon these insights to include certain views in making new proposals. The views of a member of the Sikh community or a seasonal worker, as well as young parents or fruit cultivators, were represented in the game-actions by only a few or an absence of voices. But these views were mentioned and referred to by other participants and are furthermore based on (spatial) observations while walking or interviewing. It is a way to categorise our data on how spaces are used and perceived. Next to different perspectives for public space (4.1.), we thus learnt how villagers hold different views (4.2.); both illustrating how one can relate to and use spaces in different ways. Secondly, these different views show the limits of our actions to design a platform for debate that is open for a plurality of voices.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Lessons learnt on the 'actions' performed and the openness or value of the debate

A process of change in villages, driven by many small and autonomous actions, can be considered as a democratic challenge. By staging a debate as a participatory experiment, we provided different access points for people to join in particular moments in different ways (e.g. children or passers-by). Working on the game-tasks on location, visualising ideas and walking through the village provided a basis for forming *a temporary community in which the new can be envisioned* (Brandt et al., 2012).

However, with these different actions, power or a voice was given to those who are already capable and willing to participate. All findings are furthermore based on their opinions and ideas. These experiments were set up to better understand the use and ideas for public spaces. Defining different perspectives in retrospect supported our understanding of how villagers relate differently to what is (spatially) changing. It made clear how some perspectives were referred to, but remained absent; for instance, no villagers of the Sikh community took part in the game. Participants were not selected but responded to our invitation to join in. We did not endeavour to invite a 'representative' diversity. Roose (2006) argues that an organised participation that formally involves representatives from different groups neither can lessen or reproduce existing differences (Roose, 2006: 72). They argue that within the framework of a 'participatory action research' it thus is not an issue of representation (as it is not a matter of generalising findings on the village as valid for all villages), but a matter of how open the process can be. We aimed to facilitate a process that is open for different voices, but we did not succeed to engage participants from different groups, and many voices were not present.

Some actions were conducted by participants in response to when the game actually induced a change. The local construction company, for instance, made agreements with a regional nature organisation to restore a private orchard and invited neighbours to use this area to play. These 'actual changes' should not be considered as solutions that can or should be applied elsewhere. These changes were made in response to the game, and thus our research actions. In respect to our definition of action research, the value of these changes indicates a direction for possible solutions (e.g. common or shared spaces for

children to play, the value of slow and green routes, connecting fragments of open space) and contribute to a shared understanding (e.g. of issues of privatisation, fragmentation of open space, disappearing landscape elements like orchards and their ecosystems, but also more global changes like the societal and environmental cost of spread housing).

## 5.2. Lessons learnt on public spaces in Hoepertingen

### 5.2.1. What is public?

To better understand the specific context of villages, we searched for more nuanced and hybrid images, holding different perceptions and future ideas. More particularly, we focused on the role of public places, to understand and define these collective and aspirational imaginations. Issues with public space are not to be answered only on a spatial level, but should start from the everyday, enabling individuals to relate to their environment. The literature on public space often refers to an urban context when giving concrete examples. In general, ideas on public space that we discussed come down to the possibility of meeting the other in *a space created by action and speech* (Arendt, 1958); as where *city dwellers* are confronted with each other, and where matters concerning the common good can be discussed. From here on, all ideas and concepts are situated between a public realm and a private sphere, in different balances, and between more ‘rational and universal’ or more ‘hybrid and dynamic’ conceptions of ‘the public’ or ‘publics’.

The public domain in villages is also perceived to be privatising. In different discussions, we learnt that villagers do not consider it to be evident that people become ‘trusted strangers’, nor that it is necessary that ‘everybody knows everybody’. The decline or lack of third places or possibilities for light encounters that villagers perceive is not just a lack of physical places, but also a matter of opportunities to collaborate, to organise things together in an open way, allowing others to join in. What is needed are occasions or initiatives for different groups to meet and cooperate. Villagers made proposals to create opportunities in these everyday spaces, that Crawford (2016b) defines as the connective tissue that binds daily lives together - for instance, on the private grass field and parking area next to the local care centre.

De Solà-Morales (1992:6) emphasised the relevance of spaces that are not public nor private, but both; for example, public spaces that are used for private activities or private spaces that are collectively used. In Hoepertingen, we learned how neighbours used the gym of the local care centre together with friends from outside the village. We also saw different examples of privatisation, like a public footpath that was used to store wood, or a part of the former railway track that became an extension of the garden, etc. On the other hand, the private park of the castle is used by different groups, each conducting their activity with like-minded people in their own area. By making small ‘invitations’ in each other’s area, different groups of people enter the diverse areas of the park; for instance, a beehive built by school children in cooperation with a nature organisation, or an sculpture made in collaboration with an artist. Hence, many ideas formulated in an urban context (by De Solà-Morales, 1992; Reijndorp and Hayer, 2001; Soenen, 2006 and Lofland, 1998) are also interesting and valuable in the village. Soenen (2016), for instance, addresses how a better understanding of diverse needs and residents can support us to contribute and intervene in the ‘everyday community’. Soenen addresses how in ‘designing’ for light encounters, it is just as important to create the possibility to meet as well as to avoid each other.

### 5.2.2. Open space as public space, the role of landscape

We discussed ideas of Leinfelder (2007) and Vigano (2008) in considering open space as public space and emphasising the potentials of pieces of agricultural land, forests, flood areas in and outside of the built core as places that can readdress the traditional concept of public space. Illustrative for these ideas was the proposal for a meeting place in a village orchard just outside the built border of the village, situated in the transition to the open landscape. Here the farmer, for instance, can meet the passers-by. By combining different semi-public and private activities (e.g. composting, school garden, a meadow with sheep, etc.), these places invite people to pause, observe and meet, and support an encounter between different groups. A good network of small roads can make these places valuable as public spaces; i.e. as relevant for the everyday life, by combining passage and a parochial sphere. It was only in our fieldwork, walking in the village and interviewing villagers, that the importance of these unbuilt spaces, of landscape elements and the changes in agricultural use (from acres with different crops and high trunk orchards to large low trunk orchards) became evident and were repeatedly addressed by villagers.

Sites that triggered most discussions and ideas in the game were thus the more ‘open’ spaces. Villagers often started with clear ideas on what needed to be changed in the centre of the village, but these ideas shifted when we started to walk. We asked participants to walk on roads for non-motorized traffic as much as possible, and this made them choose for different routes (e.g. ignoring signs of private use on a public footpath or passing through their gardens with villagers they did not know). They made proposals to connect different pieces of open space with small paths and vistas, and reflected on the role of their gardens within this network of open spaces. In the final debate it was these open spaces (meadows, orchards, open inner areas) that participants identified as typical for the village; they no longer referred to the empty church square. More importantly, proposals explored how these open spaces could be considered as public, making it possible to meet the other and to play.

## **Conclusion**

With different participatory and designerly actions, we set up a process that did not lead towards a detailed masterplan, nor a spatial project. Instead, we aimed to observe and increase understanding of ongoing (spatial) changes. ‘Change’, as defined for action research with Roose *et al.* (2014), means questioning existing interpretations and making it possible to relate what is happening to a broader frame of reference, rather than altering a situation. In response to our fieldwork actions, participants took initiatives that cannot be generalised nor should be applied elsewhere, but rather that indicate directions in how a community wishes to improve. Larger bits of open space in the transition to the surrounding landscape, as well as a connecting network of small roads, came to the fore as inviting public spaces. We did not further explore the concept and role of landscape as such. However, we believe bits of open space, landscape elements and footpaths have rich potentials to further nuance an understanding of what is public in a village.

This approach contributed to more nuanced images of the village, leaving behind idyllic ideas of peace and tranquillity and strong social connections (where everybody knows everybody). The game offered insights into how villagers perceive increasing private use of space, in the functioning of more hybrid constellations of private as well as public property, and the ways that these places can be collectively used and managed by villagers who interact and take different roles. Nevertheless, these participatory and designerly actions did not engage a representative subsection of who inhabits Hoepertingen. There were groups of villagers that we did not or barely reach, like the Sikh community, the seasonal workers, young parents, fruit cultivators. In this paper, we aimed to include different views by not



limiting our research data to the proposals made within the game and arguments given in the final debate. We added (spatial) observations and statements made in small conversations. With our participatory actions, power or a voice was given to those who were already capable and willing to participate. Focused on learning how public space is changing, we did not endeavour to invite a 'representative' diversity. While taking this lesson into account for future actions, we believe there is value in not creating groups in advance, nor to set goals on who to reach but instead to redesign points to enter the debate consciously and continuously: for instance, by more strategically/deliberately taking into account the talks on the pavement, walks, and being present in the village as a possible way to invite villagers to take part in the debate.

In this respect, lessons for future research are furthermore not only related to the entry points for debate, but also to the way we proceed. We set up a process not directed towards a plan nor a project, nor did we start from an idea or vision on what needs to be changed, unlike many procedures of spatial planning, but as a game, with the freedom involved. We addressed how there is a lack of opportunities or ways for individual actors (albeit villagers, organisations or civil servants) to understand and debate what is changing on a larger scale or a longer-term. Not so much to redefine the village identity, but to initiate, with openness and play, a willingness to accept that identities change and also to discuss and address the unwanted consequences (of private use, of fragmentation of open space). The proposals capture perspectives on how villagers perceive their daily environment to be changing. With Biesta (2014), we believe that it is not a matter of villagers lacking knowledge, skills, nor dispositions, but more a matter of lacking the opportunity to take part in a debate. The different participatory actions we initiated created the first opportunity to discuss individual conceptions in relation to one another, and in relation to the agendas coming from local organisations and authorities. Villagers discussed their ideas and gained insight into spatial plans on a longer-term or a more regional scale. These findings supported an understanding of different perspectives, of different views on the village as well as a diversity of places, albeit private, collectively or publicly owned and managed: as a multiplicity of third places in and surrounding the village.

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