

Visiting De Pastorie

A reflective and speculative exploration of more-than-human storytelling in participatory design research

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Abstract

The Participatory Design (PD) research project De Pastorie focuses on the transition from a rectory to a living lab for participatory circular design, exploring how communities can reimagine their environment during the transition of the large-scale Noord-Zuid Limburg (NZL) infrastructural project in Flanders, Belgium. During this road transition, the planned demolition of buildings and gardens raised urgent questions among actors involved: How can communities and their environments coexist in the face of fragmentation? This exploratory paper explores how *De Pastorie* contributed to dialogue and reconciliation in an environment and community disrupted by the development of project NZL by narrating the practices of human and more-than-human co-creation through the perspective of De Pastorie as a more-than-human narrator. Inspired by Arendt & Beiner's [2] notion of 'visiting' and Haraway's [6] call for 'staying with the trouble', the paper explores how more-than-human storytelling as a methodological approach within PD can serve as a reflective and speculative tool to narrate processes of co-creation and co-existence in socio-environmental transitions.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design; Human computer interaction (HCI); HCI theory, concepts and models; • **Applied computing** → Arts and humanities.

Keywords

Participatory Design, more-than-human, visiting

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1 Introduction

Large-scale infrastructural projects reshape landscapes, often impacting communities' social and cultural fabric. An example is the ongoing Noord-Zuid Limburg (NZL) road transition, a complex project initiated by the Flemish Government [16] aimed at improving road safety, mobility, and biodiversity in the high-traffic road infrastructure connecting the Belgian city of Hasselt with the Dutch city of Eindhoven. For four decades, the trajectory has been a topic of active debate in spatial planning and design. The road cuts through municipalities, impacting the livability of neighbourhoods and road safety while fragmenting *De Wijers*, a nature area composed of rivers, valleys, and ponds [14, 15]. These disruptions cause ecological damage and social discontent, revealing multiple layers of conflict between mobility and livability, infrastructure and ecology, government vision and community memory, affecting humans and more-than-humans (e.g., trees, soils, ponds). There is a pressing need to explore Participatory Design (PD) approaches that actively contribute to dialogue and reconciliation across human and more-than-human communities, by investigating the entanglements [5] between "human and more-than-human worlds" [12:138] and how they approach "societal and climate issues" [12:138].

The Flemish government [16], through its independent body De Werkvennootschap, initiated the design process for a new road design to address the current negative environmental and social impacts of the road. Studio NZL - a consortium of engineering and design firms, legal support, and research groups, among which UHasselt's Civic & Policy Design - was set up by De Werkvennootschap for the research and design processes of the new road trajectory. The Flemish government expropriated plots and buildings as part of the road redesign process, leaving behind empty houses and gardens. This planned demolition raised urgent questions among the consortium's designers and researchers, but also local inhabitants and collectives: How can communities and their environments coexist in the face of fragmentation? What if the 'lost'



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Figure 1: De Pastorie, a former rectory in Houthalen-Helchteren, Belgium. Photograph by UHasselt.

materials, spaces, landscapes, and memories could be reassembled to nurture new forms of coexistence?

We investigate these questions through the case study of De Pastorie, a former rectory in the municipality of Houthalen-Helchteren (Figure 1). De Pastorie became the subject of a PD research project that explores how circular design can support communities in reimagining their environment during large-scale, often contested, infrastructural transitions. De Pastorie, embedded in NZL, has been transformed over the past five years into a living lab for participatory circular design in collaboration with the local community, Studio NZL, UHasselt researchers, De Werkvennootschap, the Flemish government’s environment department, the municipality of Houthalen-Helchteren, and several architectural practices. Through their co-creation in workshops, design experiments and festivities, materials (e.g., bricks) and natural elements (e.g., plants) scheduled for demolition were harvested and reused to shape new, community-driven public spaces and landscapes in and around De Pastorie. These materials and natural elements, retrieved from the expropriated buildings and gardens of project NZL, assumed new roles while retaining traces of their histories, absences, and possibilities; they became active participants in processes of making [8]. De Pastorie is an experiment in reconciliation through co-creation, demonstrating how PD can support communities in coping with the changes of large-scale socio-environmental transitions by re-assembling materials and fragmented social and ecological ties. To explore how human and more-than-human communities and their environments can coexist amid those transitions, we adopt more-than-human storytelling as a reflective and speculative method within PD.

2 Method: Visiting & staying with the trouble

In this paper, we explore storytelling as a method to enable researchers to attend to the affective, material, and relational dimensions often overlooked in conventional documentation [10]. We draw inspiration from Arendt & Beiner’s [2] notion of “visiting”, an imaginative ethical practice that explores how to “make others

present” [2:43] and Haraway’s [6] call for ‘staying with the trouble’, a commitment to remain within complexity in the face of environmental uncertainty. We explore both concepts to tell the story of De Pastorie from the perspective of the building itself.

We first explore how the De Pastorie nurtured coexistence and co-creation between humans and more-than-humans (e.g., materials, plants) during the socio-environmental transitions of project NZL using more-than-human storytelling. Second, we experiment and speculate through more-than-human storytelling to explore how narrating the story of De Pastorie - through a more-than-human narrator (De Pastorie) - can be a tool for enlarging engagement with multiple (human and more-than-human) perspectives in PD project documentation embedded in socio-environmental transitions.

To address both objectives, we gathered and analysed materials (e.g. visual, textual) from workshops, site visits, Live Projects, prototypes, etc., that were organised in and around De Pastorie over the past five years. We used these materials to curate a “silent” exhibition of De Pastorie for a Flemish design competition, starting from the story of the perspective of De Pastorie - a narrative we further developed through this paper - and curated materials (e.g., pictures, maps), inviting ‘visitors’ of the exhibition into the story of De Pastorie through the building’s perspective.

3 Exploring more-than-human ways of storytelling

Inspired by Latour et al. [9], and Dreessen et al. [3], De Pastorie can be understood as a “socio-material assembly - a collection of people and objects, dealing with a matter of concern” [3:33] and as the ‘thing’ [9] at the centre of this PD project that gathers people and materials around shared concerns. The idea of PD projects being defined by socio-material assemblies of humans, more-than-humans, their entangled relationships, the matters they gather around, the things these gatherings produce, etc., implies that projects like De Pastorie are more complex and layered than the sole perspective of a human initiator or “maker” [3:36]. The story is thus more complicated than our (authors’) sole perspective. Therefore, we considered the perspective of De Pastorie itself to tell the story, as it is at the centre of the project and the human and more-than-human entanglements it comprises, attuned to the agencies and care relations of these more-than-human actors [11, 13]. Meanwhile, where do we situate our perspectives as authors of this paper and as humans involved in the project, since “it matters which stories tell stories as a practice of caring and thinking” [6:37]?

3.1 Visiting perspectives

In “hot compost piles” of “unexpected collaborations and combinations” [6:4], like the project of De Pastorie, how do we include, or at least, take into consideration, the standpoints of diverse actors (humans and more-than-humans) involved? According to Arendt & Beiner [2:43], “critical thinking is possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection”. This critical thinking involves more than empathy; it is a practice that “makes the others present” [2:43] through imagination - an act described as training the mind to “go visiting” [2:43]. Visiting offers a way to engage ethically and reflectively with viewpoints that may differ from our own, especially those which are more-than-human.

The act of visiting is one that we further explored in this paper. What does it mean for us, human authors, to visit, with our imagination, the perspective of De Pastorie during its past and ongoing process of becoming a living lab for circular design? For humans involved in the project, visiting became a practice of dialogue. We asked actors, such as the architectural firms, neighbours and students, to share the ‘material’ (e.g., plans, pictures, drawings, manifestos, mock-ups) representing their engagement with De Pastorie. For more-than-humans (e.g., bricks, plants, tiles), visiting became an exploratory practice. Since we cannot ‘ask’ a harvested tile, a woodworm or De Pastorie itself to share insights, visiting more-than-human perspectives with our imagination became characterised by uncertainty. Indeed, how do we address our human perspectives and the uncertainty accompanying our thinking in more-than-human perspectives, even considering that “uncertainty” is an integral and necessary part of participatory projects [3:51]?

3.2 Writing with uncertainty: critical thinking, language and ecopoetics

For Arendt & Beiner [2:43]: “the trick of critical thinking does not consist in an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others. To think, according to Kant’s understanding of enlightenment, means *Selbstdenken*, to think for oneself” [2:43]. Thus, thinking through our perspective is part of critical thinking and, therefore, part of visiting.

Research projects like De Pastorie, which enable more-than-human and human co-creation, are emerging practices in contemporary PD. Smith et al. [12:193] argue that “contemporary PD research and practice must pay even more attention to relational practices, methods, tools, languages and focus their efforts to work across scales, cultural domains, human and more-than-human worlds”. This agenda of relationality in PD “implies rethinking which languages designers need to learn, utilise and be fluent in when they build relations and practice” [12:193]. How we tell our stories of PD research projects also implies rethinking the language we use in our storytelling and how this can address the relational features humans and more-than-humans share.

To articulate these relations and languages, we drew inspiration from ecopoetics, which embraces “both poetry and critical practice” [4:2]. Ecopoetics explores more-than-human perspectives by approaching “language not as a feature that distinguishes humans from other species, but as kin to a vast array of nonhuman communications” [4:2]. We can explore our storytelling as “a capacity of the literary arts to break through the boundaries of genre . . . forging an ecology of language, thought, perhaps eventually leading to action, even species-wide transformation” [4:4].

We will explore more-than-human storytelling as a reflective and speculative practice in PD by using our human perspectives, critical thinking, and language while visiting, with our imagination, the perspective of De Pastorie throughout the project’s process.

4 The story of de pastorie

Through seven concise chapters, we share De Pastorie’s process of becoming a living lab for participatory circular design by narrating the story from our imagination’s visit to the building’s perspective.

4.1 History

My story begins with project Noord-Zuid Limburg (NZL) - an ambitious infrastructural plan to reshape mobility, reconnect natural areas, and redesign public spaces in my region. For years, the road connecting the cities of Hasselt and Eindhoven has cut through my municipality, negatively impacting road safety, traffic flow, and quality of life. But before the boom of transregional traffic, rushing loud and fast, there was another connection here - a local one I was part of.

I stood among neighbouring houses and slow roads. In summer, my garden consisted of bees, aged trees, and dense shrubs. I received visits from the community for births, weddings, and funerals. But as time passed - and traffic became frequent and faster - my slow roads were severed, and the visits grew fewer.

Project NZL promised change for the better. Yet, homes would be demolished, soils would be expropriated, and trees would have to be uprooted. I, too, was uncertain of my future assembly. The pastors who once lived here, those who cycled by, the housemaid who dusted my interior, had long gone. To understand me, one would need to ‘visit’ [2] me and imagine what I have experienced.

4.2 Setting the agenda

My roof sagged, and my garden had grown wild and dense, no longer tended by human hands. My presence had grown softer. Yet one day, a group of people stopped before my gates.

They called themselves the *Friends of De Pastorie*. They visited me. Perhaps sparked by memories or inspired by opportunity, they would light lanterns, walk my paths at night and cast films against my walls. They curated my rooms with artworks for an exhibition, inviting humans in. These collective gestures proved to the municipality, which was intending to sell me to the private market, that I could be part of their future.

Efforts of the *Friends* soon caught UHasselt’s attention, where design researchers and students explored PD to redesign my surroundings with materials planned for demolition. Through their shared actions, co-creation had sparked and together with Studio NZL, UHasselt was invited to co-design a new identity with me. It was not a straightforward process; tensions rose as some saw me as an obstacle to be overcome, while others saw me as a memory worth preserving. Budgets for my transformation were uncertain. Yet, my transition from a rectory to a living lab began within this uncertainty.

4.3 Mapping & harvesting the environment

These new UHasselt and Studio NZL actors engaged with my physical presence and intangible heritage. They walked through my rooms with sketchbooks, reading my material palimpsest, and exploring my textures.

Their work soon expanded beyond my walls. During UHasselt Live Projects (Figure 2), students designed in, with, and around me for two intense weeks. Students and neighbours revived the paths of my garden, turning my empty corners into gathering places. For the first time in years, humans walked on my wooden floors, touching my handrails and doorknobs. These new synergies, which I was at the centre of, motivated the municipality to send out a design competition to restore and extend me as a community hub.



Figure 2: A drawing of the connections between De Pastorie and the surrounding buildings during a Live Project in 2022. Image by UHasselt.

Beyond my garden, project NZL was ongoing, calling for expropriation and demolition of homes, trees, and gardens. These homes contained bricks, tiles, and thresholds like mine, yet were quickly emptied of human life, despite being in good condition. These buildings were not ruins, but places filled with the materials, memories and emotions of those who occupied them, prompting the design researchers and post-graduate students who engaged with me to ask, ‘What can we do with the remaining materials?’

UHasselt gained access to a few expropriated buildings, from which they salvaged a variety of reusable materials. Sharing these materials with the municipality and community shifted my transformation from solely renovation to reuse. Making urban harvesting central to my future was a rigorous process, testing patience and endurance in administrative systems. Multiple emails were sent to the head office in Brussels to acquire permission and keys for these homes.

The people who engaged with my transition also had to work with the act of visiting [2], entering other people’s homes, imagining their presence and histories, accepting that this would not save these homes, yet choosing to stay with the trouble [6, 13]. The neighbours felt a mix of relief that a decision about the neighbourhood had been made, grief for what was lost, and uncertainty about what the future entailed. Because touching abandoned homes was considered overly sensitive, harvesting mainly occurred in a commercial building.

4.4 Co-designing the house

Inside my rooms and garden, UHasselt students and postdocs tested brick mock-ups, measured my wooden beams, and compared the tones of reused plaster against new mortar. There were many mishaps as mock-ups crumbled or ideas clashed. Sometimes, materials showed resistance. My tiles did not always come out easily for replacement, despite the students’ efforts to remove them. Projects involving such complexity and multiple voices require patience, compromise, and empathy [2, 7]. It was never about perfection; it was about learning through the process of co-creating with me. My



Figure 3: The co-created pizza oven in the garden of De Pastorie. Photograph by Olmo Peeters

transition was messy, uncertain, and risky. I became a workshop - a laboratory.

Within this chaos, the humans involved experienced a shift from designing *for* me to *with* me, responding to the uniqueness of my materials. Decisions were made through collective argument and thoughtful consideration.

Some days, frustration echoed louder than enthusiasm. Drawings were redone, emails unanswered, and permits delayed. Yet people stayed and worked through the mess together [6]. They became collectively emotionally intertwined with my rebuilding process. Initially, it did not make sense to the governmental parties involved. Urban harvesting was complex and time-consuming, yet people continued (re)building, working together through obstacles. Reuse became a hands-on way to connect with me and entangled others (such as bricks and plaster). This process birthed a sense of collective pride, an affective attachment formed through shared struggle and labour [1].

Eventually, people reopened my doors: as a living lab. My walls and gardens became testing grounds for experimenting with materials and circular designs. Through the work of students, design researchers, people from my neighbourhood, and my *Friends*, my co-created living rooms were inviting people.

4.5 Co-designing the garden

The following conversation was with my garden. The team of architectural practices discussed with the local community what they wished for in my garden: a pavilion for gatherings and a pizza oven (Figure 3) for sharing meals - places that could nourish collective moments with my garden. This seemingly simple wish took weeks to realise; funding was stretched, and deliveries were delayed. The design meetings were long and tense: Whose idea should take precedence?

Architectural plans for the pavilion and the pizza oven were carefully considered, with materials selected for their sustainability (Figure 4), locality, and heritage value, using what was present instead of sourcing new materials. The work was exhausting. Some

days, rain halted everything. Some volunteers stopped coming. But others stayed. Staying with me [6] was never easy.



Figure 4: Co-creating the pizza oven in the garden of De Pastorie. Photograph by Lilla Starkbauer.



Figure 5: Participants of project De Pastorie sharing a meal in de garden of De Pastorie. Photograph by John Silvertand

4.6 Celebrating every step

After long days of drilling, digging, and puzzling materials into new places, all those present would gather in the shade of the pavilion, or next to the still-warm pizza oven (Figure 5). Often, invitations were sent out through social media, and posters invited people to organised festivities. In those moments, divisions between collectives dissolved, and they shared the same unfinished story.

As the festivities faded, the architects faced a new challenge: continuing the work with the harvested materials. Some materials did not fit the new plans, and others required extra labour or testing to meet safety standards. How could they align circular ideals with the realities of design schedules, budgets, and regulations? My trouble did not end; it simply took a new shape.

4.7 Passing the building on

Houses hold memories, but I've learned I can also hold uncertainty, frustration, and hope. I am still under transformation - being studied, restructured, and given attention. My transition inspired a new building for exploring participatory circular design, where the work of urban harvesting continues. Yet, the transfer is difficult as contractors struggle to adapt to circular methods; it is not the most efficient or profitable way to build.

Perhaps this is what it means to visit [2] and to stay with the trouble [6]: to keep returning, to imagine from another's place, as there are still many to visit (such as the woodworms in my wooden beams), and to remain within the unfinished. My story is not a celebration of success but one of collectively working through challenges.

5 Visiting a new living lab

As described in our visit to De Pastorie, this PD research project continues in a new building along the NZL road trajectory. The transition to this new building is an ongoing process of negotiations, presentations, and meetings, as well as setting the agenda for the upcoming year together with De Werkvennootschap, Studio NZL, and the involved collectives. A small selection of projects and participatory activities (e.g., workshop harvesting plants) is currently taking shape. Yet, the uncertain building process is still ahead, intertwined with the complexity of the larger project (NZL).

6 Reflections & Conclusions

We explored the act of visiting, with our imagination, the perspective of De Pastorie to research (1) how De Pastorie nurtured coexistence and co-creation between humans and more-than-humans in the socio-environmental transitions of project NZL using more-than-human storytelling, and (2) how this storytelling can be a tool to enlarge engagement with multiple (human and more-than-human) perspectives in PD project documentation.

Regarding the first question, we learned that narrating the entangled human and more-than-human perspectives in De Pastorie is an entangled act in itself: we assembled fragments of data (e.g., field notes, prototypes, anecdotes) into a story, aiming to narrate the human and more-than-human co-creation of the project while navigating between our reflections and the others we gathered and imagined. This process demanded responsibility: considering how our words might represent or mishear other voices. In this sense,

critical thinking was about thinking for ourselves while keeping the standpoints of others imaginatively present [2]. This dual movement - thinking independently yet in relation - underpinned the writing process.

Regarding the second question, the method of more-than-human storytelling revealed opportunities and limitations. Its strengths lie in surfacing the relational dimensions between humans and more-than-humans (e.g., bricks, tiles, plants) that conventional documentation risks overlooking [10]. Yet it is also characterised by uncertainty [10], as it challenged academic writing conventions. Opening the story to diverse perspectives - without romanticising it and situating it within the expectations of scientific rigour - contained friction, questions, and disagreement among us authors. The narrative of De Pastorie does not claim to speak for the building nor pose as an authentic more-than-human voice. Through the speculative practice of visiting [2], we foreground limits, assumptions, and political implications of more-than-human storytelling. One might wonder if the building shares the same agenda as portrayed in the story. Perhaps the building does not need to be rebuilt if we look at it from the perspective of an inhabiting woodworm.

Circular participatory design was not an unquestioned practice, since it sometimes conflicted with efficiency, regulation, and the material constraints of the building itself. The building can act as a guide in giving voice to various human and more-than-human perspectives and agendas. Our exploration of more-than-human storytelling is, therefore, about opening the conversation on the more-than-human perspectives a PD project might encompass, exploring how we can use our human language to address those perspectives. We acknowledge that, also in this experiment, more-than-human storytelling risks becoming naive when it lacks the capabilities to account for conflict and complexity, assuming a direct alignment between human intention and the interests of more-than-humans. Yet, it is perhaps engaging with this struggle that signals a shift currently needed in documenting and reflecting on PD research. As Tsing [13] reminds us, it is in ruins, whether ecological, material, or methodological, that regeneration begins.

De Pastorie's story emerged from disturbance: NZL involved appropriating houses and gardens and displacing entangled memories and emotions, yet new forms of co-creation and coexistence took place. As the process of De Pastorie continued, the division between the teams involved became more fluid. The collaboration between the architectural offices, municipalities, neighbourhood collectives, researchers, and governmental parties intensified during the project. De Pastorie became a story of different perspectives entangled with one another through De Pastorie. This makes documenting a complex matter. By becoming solely spectators or reporters, attempting to avoid biasing results, one could limit the process of narrating the diversity of emotionally intertwined perspectives within projects like De Pastorie (in which we were also participating). Imagining ourselves in the world of 'others' involves adopting ethics, empathy, and humility regarding our human perspective, challenging storytelling in academic writing.

We argue that this method of storytelling offers a promising though challenging avenue for PD research. It enables writing *with* these layered perspectives (rather than only *about*) by re-narrating them. As the story continues in a new living lab, visiting

its perspective with our imagination can allow us to speculate about its future. The story about De Pastorie can inform this speculation.

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