

Expanding Participation in Urban Planning Through -Costume- Scenographics

Pukkelpop Festival and the North-South Road in Limburg Belgium

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Abstract

This doctoral research explores the intersection between the N74 Limburg North-South connection and the Pukkelpop festival, aiming to reimagine sustainable urban transitions. Each August, Pukkelpop occupies a section of the N74, transforming the road into a temporary stage of encounters. Through this lens, the research explores how scenographics -understood as practices of stage crafting and showing dressing- can alter the sense of place as well as bodies themselves. Drawing from expanded scenography, performance studies, and Critical Costume, it examines how acts of staging and costuming mediate relations between human and more-than-human actors, producing temporary forms of co-existence. Introducing the twin concepts of institutioning and commoning, the study analyses how Pukkelpop operates between grassroots initiatives and formal governance. The festival's recurring scenography is read as a cyclic space where temporary regulations and socialities emerge across multiple scales, public, private, and personal, and leave long-lasting traces in local communities. Focusing on costume scenographics, the paper reimagines the intermediary role of the participatory designer as a dresser, one who mediates transformation through acts of costuming. It explores how dressing, as an embodied and relational act of appearing otherwise, can become a method for coexistence. Translating this metaphor into a methodological framework, the study examines how clothing encodes hierarchies and how dressing can destabilise social positioning within participatory spaces. Reading PD workshops as theatrical environments foregrounds the performative and political dimensions of appearance while extending the inquiry toward posthumanist perspectives, where costume operates as an agential, sensing medium enabling more-than-human participation. Through a critical review of the PD literature, the research identifies three constellations of existing "dresser-like" practices: wearables for empathy, props for enactment, and fabric-based community work. Based on these, it develops a repertoire of dresser practices across three scales: costume hacking, costume-led mapping, and public costume interventions. By positioning the designer as a dresser, this research suggests that costuming practices can serve as a means to rebalance power through embodied attunement,

connect human and more-than-human relations, and reconfigure public appearance as a form of critique.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design.

Keywords

Scenographics, Costume, Festival, Participatory Design, Performativity

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1 Introduction

My research unfolds between a road and a festival: the N74, the Limburg North-South connection, and Pukkelpop, one of Belgium's longest-standing open-air music festivals. At first glance, these two sites seem worlds apart. The N74 is a linear piece of infrastructure, the product of engineering and political vision. Pukkelpop, by contrast, is a temporary city of stages, sound, and spectacle that hosts 60,000 people daily. Yet for more than three decades, these two have been deeply entangled. Every August, Pukkelpop occupies a section of the N74, transforming the suburban axis into a collective gathering space and festivity. While the Noord-Zuid Limburg plan aims to provide a permanent mobility solution between the cities of Hasselt (Belgium) and Eindhoven (Netherlands), the festival disrupts this intended flow each year. This tension becomes even more pressing, as since 2018, the regional government has posed the question: How do we make this road better?

I approach this question as an architect and scenographer finishing my first year of doctoral research in Participatory Urban Planning at Hasselt University. My focus lies on reimagining urban transitions in the post-industrial landscape in the areas of Kiewit and Zonhoven. In this area, the Pukkelpop festival is placed as an ephemeral but recurrent scenography [1] that "costumes" urban space and people's behaviours and practices. By weaving in Participatory Design, Urban Planning and Critical Costume literature and practices, I explore how we can stage world feelings [2], challenge entrenched binary oppositions, and imagine sustainable futures.



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Understood as worlding processes [3], scenographics could provide a path for participatory design to study and practice a REWORLDING [4, 5] process. From this perspective, my work investigates how (costume) scenographics inform participatory processes by revealing hidden divisions and marginal, human, and more-than-human voices, and experiments with community-based costume scenographics as design methods for imagining new forms of urban transition. Main questions include:

- How do scenographic and costume practices transform the sense and experience of place?
- How can costume scenographics act as participatory methods that reveal hidden relations between humans, non-humans, and institutions?
- How might these methods inform participatory urban planning and the reimagining of urban transitions?

2 (Costume) Scenographics of Institutioning and Commoning

(Costume) Scenographics [6] alter the sense of both place and body in spaces that extend beyond traditional theatre. Drawing on performance studies [7] and expanded sculpture [8], scholars introduce an expanded understanding of scenography [9]. Hann [1] insists on studying not what scenography is, but by what it does: how it “affects, directs, and shapes scenes” [10] inside and outside of the theatrical space, as in festivals, carnivals, and art installations [11]. Rather than creating an “empty space” [12], scenography operates through texts, costumes, and gestures [13], producing space and spatial relations [14]. Following the distinction between place and space [15], Aronson [16] argues that performative action can transform conceptions of place; crafting a stage becomes not a static setup but a spatiality in constant oscillation [17]. Costume scenographics extend this logic to the realm of the body. Through showing dressing [18], costume foregrounds appearance, particularly the relationship between the worn and wearer. Dressing becomes a performative act that enables participants to appear otherwise, unsettling stable identities and enacting what Hann terms “conscious othering” [18]. These practices stage comparisons [19] across categories: self/other, place/space, human/more-than-human.

To operationalise Pukkelpop scenographics in the participatory design context, I adopt the twin concepts of commoning and institutioning [20]. Festivals like Pukkelpop, since the 1990s, have navigated mainstreaming and professionalisation [21], operating at the intersection of carnivalization [22] and controlled experience [23]. They contribute to the local experience economy, while also retaining countercultural lineages from 1970s rock festivals [24], creating a paradoxical spatial logic that combines subversion and containment [25]. This contradiction reveals the connections a large-scale festival needs with institutions, local governing boards and grassroots initiatives. In the case of Pukkelpop, commoning [26, 27] refers to relational practices of creating shared worlds through volunteerism and collective inhabitation. Institutioning [28] denotes the mediation between grassroots actors and formal structures by integrating policies and regional economic plans. These intertwined practices, which are annually repeated, over the years shape Pukkelpop as a “cyclic place” [21], a scenography that opens up

an alternative way of perceiving space. Pukkelpop scenographics of Institutioning and Commoning, activated for the redesign of the N74 road axis, can provoke a tangible, concrete reimagining of urban space; one that challenges the restructuring of public sector governance [29] and neoliberal urbanism [30]. In reverse, (costume) scenographics reframe the role participatory designer as an intermediary [31], a scenographer, and a dresser: a practitioner who bridges the gap between “invited” and “invented” participation [32, 33], who mediates between institutions and emerging commons [34], who redistributes power [35], stages encounters that expose conflicts, dresses silenced voices, and invokes more-than-human agency.

3 Methodology

The methodology of this research is threefold, combining theory building, situated action, and performative exploration. Bibliographic research situates the work at the intersection of Scenographics and PD, examining how festivals reshape places and communities, and how appearance through costume reimagines participation. Second, a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach [36] frames the engagement with the Pukkelpop area along the Noord–Zuid axis. This includes studying its institutional arrangements, community dynamics, and affective entanglements [37, 38]. Planned fieldwork integrates digital ethnography, photography, video, movement mapping, and interviews to document how temporary scenographic infrastructures mediate relations between residents, volunteers, and institutions. Third, an Ethnography-by-Design approach [39] is employed to explore conflicts and envision alternative futures through embodied, performative interventions. Here, the costume-led workshop is the primary research tool [40], combining methods such as storylines [41], ecoscenography [42, 43], and fictional world-making [44]. This methodology integrates participatory and performative research, utilising scenography and costume as tools for situated inquiry and transformation.

4 Progress to date

My practice thus far has followed the same threefold approach. I am reviewing literature in Critical Costume and Participatory Design, proposing the concept of Participatory Designer as Dresser and outlining a three-scale repertoire of costuming practices. This framework serves as both my challenge and contribution at PDC 2026.

I have initiated ethnographic engagement with the Pukkelpop and its surrounding area to understand the interplay between the road axis and the festival’s temporary meta-sociality [21]. Fieldwork includes visual documentation and interviews with organisers, residents, and participants, as well as initial mapping of ephemeral infrastructures that orient bodies and mediate encounters. Preliminary findings reveal how scenographic transformations operate at three scales, relating community actions (commoning) with temporary regulations (institutioning). Public: Street closures alter everyday mobility and inhabitation; Private: Households open their yards and services to strangers; Personal: Volunteers enact civic labour through shared attire and accessories.

In parallel, I have experimented with scenographic and costume practices in urban and participatory formats. A first experiment

is the socially engaged workshops for UHasselt's architecture students, named "Live Projects". I have initiated temporary, scenographic interventions to transform a playground and a former parking lot in the Pukkelpop area into playful encounter spaces. Finally, the "Change the Script" workshop series, which I organised in collaboration with the Goethe-Institut Libraries in Zagreb, Athens, and Sofia, used costume practices to engage participants in bodily improvisation and collective performance. These workshops merge making and performing as inseparable practices, serving as a testing ground for costume-based participation, collective decision-making, and empowerment.

5 Future plans

I aim to deepen my inquiry further into the institutional frameworks that sustain festival practices in Flanders and Belgium through a secondment at the intercommunal agency Leiedal. This phase of my research will examine how festivals, installations, and artistic interventions intersect with regional policies, spatial planning processes, and grassroots initiatives. Insights from this institutional perspective will inform the next cycle of PAR in the Pukkelpop area, allowing me to re-engage with local actors and analyse how embodied practices and policies co-produce transitional spaces along the N74. Building on this, I plan to establish a partnership with Pukkelpop for the co-creation of mapping activities, in-situ interventions, and performative events during the festival weeks, a collaboration that will also inform future "Live Projects". Ultimately, my secondment at Malmö University's Department of Arts and Communication (K3) will contribute to the development of methodological guidelines and a toolkit for costume-based practices in Participatory Design.

6 Main Challenge: Rethinking Participatory Designer as a Dresser

Currently, I am exploring how the participatory designer can act as a dresser, shaping costume scenographics before, during, and after participatory design workshops. One of the main challenges I face is translating this metaphor into a coherent methodological framework that can operate both theoretically and in practice. Drawing on my experience as a scenographer, I have observed that changes in attire in theatre often mediate broader transformations, such as avenging, reconciling, marrying, and mourning. The "Change the Script" workshop was designed to understand how costume can reframe participation as an embodied, relational act of appearance. According to post-workshop feedback, several participants noted that without their costume element, they would not have been able to perform. From this perspective, I parallel the work of the participatory designer with that of the dresser, a practitioner who works in haptic proximity [45] and with care [46, 47]. This perspective aligns with relational ethics in participatory design [48], yet it reveals that the field often overlooks the affective and performative labour of appearance in participation.

Through the lens of costuming, I rethink participation as an act of showing dressing [18], foregrounding the performative character of social encounters and the politics of appearance. A current difficulty lies in articulating how this metaphor can make power relations visible and provide a method for practice. Following research on

attire in work environments [49], I argue that clothing encodes hidden hierarchies and shapes how participants are perceived and positioned in PD workshops. From municipal officers in suits to activists or design agency representatives, attire becomes an act of participation that prefigures social positioning [50]. Recognising these garments as costumes through which participants perform their social roles [7] opens the possibility of destabilising fixed identities and power hierarchies. From this perspective, participatory workshops can be understood as theatrical spaces [51, 52] in which attire mediates negotiation, identity, and power, opening up performative conditions for research and experimentation.

A further challenge concerns connecting the agency of costume with more-than-human participation in PD. Even though Critical Costume literature [53, 54] shows how materials act as agents in "costume thinking," integrating this posthuman perspective into PD practice remains a demanding task. Projects such as Costume Agency [55] reveal costume as an "independent mediator" [18], operating in a "tandem unity of movement, identity and design" [18] with the wearer. This haptic and agential relation destabilises human centrality and could potentially give voice to non-human worn entities [56, 57]. Yet the challenge remains: how can such more-than-human encounters be enacted, sensed, and sustained in PD settings? I see resonance with posthumanist debates in participatory design [58], where orientation and alignment [59] are proposed as methodological principles for attuning bodies and materials toward coexistence. Translating these principles into participatory costume scenographic practice, where costume operates as a technology of relational attunement, remains an open and evolving inquiry, one that continues to shape the core challenges of my doctoral research.

7 Intended contribution: "Showing Dressing" as a method for Coexistence

This research contributes to PDC 2026 by arguing that the Participatory Designer as a Dresser can foster coexistence. Here, coexistence extends beyond inclusion and representation to denote a relational ethics [48] grounded in the interdependence of human and more-than-human actors within design processes. The relationality of dressing is inscribed in its Greek etymology, $\epsilon' \nu \delta \nu \omega$ (*en - dyō*), meaning "to clothe," from $\epsilon' \nu$ ("in") + $\delta \nu \omega$ ("to dive, to immerse"), which evokes immersion into identity, an act of entering another's skin. To clothe another is thus to guide them through transformation: to accompany transitions between selves, roles, and forms of being, in haptic proximity [47]. Relating the designer to the dresser, a form of labour historically associated with women [46], draws attention to the often invisible affective care work participation demands. Through the lens of the dresser, the participatory designer becomes a mediator of coexistence, facilitating processes in which bodies, identities, and more-than-human others enter the scene, interweave, attune, and empower one another.

To ground this argument, I aim to demonstrate that participatory designers already employ dresser-like practices. A critical reflection on PD literature (mainly post-2000) identifies three constellations that deal with costume-like methods: (1) wearables for empathy, (2) props for enactment, and (3) work with fabrics for community building. I attempt to demonstrate that, through a "showing dressing"

[18] lens, these practices will provide a framework for expanding coexistence.

1. Expanding Empathic Horizons with Wearables. The early design research project, “Disguised” [60, 61], used prosthetics and restrictive clothing to simulate ageing. This tradition continues in wearable simulations [62, 63], including projects like MIT AgeLab’s “AGNES” suit [64]. These technologies aim to extend designers’ “empathic horizon” by simulating disabilities or age-related conditions with a technical focus on precision and fidelity. A costume perspective emphasises the performative potential of wearables as a means to engage with otherness.
2. Enacting with Props. Props in PD workshops enable participants to enact futures and relations through theatre-inspired “what if” scenarios [65]. Designers have employed various media, from real objects like masks and water nozzles [66], to full or small-scale presentations [67, 68], to facilitate embodied engagement. Since the 2010s, new materialism thinking has influenced working with and through things [69], from performing objects [70] to wearables in LARPs [71]. While the agency of LARP’s wearables relies much on technical augmentation [72–74], there are attempts in this literature to link the speculative power of objects with play and imagination [75, 76]. As seen in *The Treaty of Finsbury Park*, a performative understanding of costume’s agency could trigger affective prefigurations [77] with more-than-human others.
3. Building Communities through Fabrics. Textile practices in PD foster bonds, empower participants, and critique the fashion system. Examples include upcycling [78], participatory stitching [79], textile work [80], and patchworking [81, 82], to support inclusion and material engagement [83]. Fashion activism politicises this practice, through modular clothing [84], “half-way design” [85], and hacktivism [86, 87], fostering collective empowerment [88]. Seen through a costume lens, co-crafting also creates shared appearances and identities, which the PD designer-as-dresser can actively facilitate.

Since PD already employs costume-like practices to shape inclusion and belonging, I argue for expanding the designer’s role as a dresser. Through wearables, props, and fabric work, participants move beyond fixed identities and form temporary, affective communities of practice. These engagements enabled participants to experience human and more-than-human otherness, reimagine future transitions and everyday appearance. Building on that, the research articulates a repertoire of dresser practices that operationalise showing dressing as a method for coexistence, drawing on examples from the Critical Costume literature. This repertoire unfolds across three scales: small hacks that rebalance power dynamics, embodied mappings that render relations between human and more-than-human actors, and public interventions that reconfigure appearance as collective performance and critique.

1. Costume hacking uses dressing as a tool for embodied attunement and balance in participatory design. Through shared dress codes, clothing swaps –Çam van Chapull YOUNEY-OU MEYOU in [18]–, and co-designed wearables –“AweAre”

[89], “Skinscapes” [90]– designers invite transformation and non-verbal dialogue. Projects like MASK [40] reveal how shifting between the roles of wearer, maker, and observer [91] transforms attire into a site of relation and collective reorientation.

2. Costume-led mapping expands costuming into the landscape, connecting human and more-than-human actors through embodied cartographies. Works like “Divisor” by Pape [92] and “Community Walks” [93] use worn fabrics that stretch, cling, or tear to reveal environmental relations, while participatory costume archiving [94] and queer dressing events [95] utilise costume as a living memory and as a form of resistance. Here, the dresser creates mappings in which costuming forms a sensing medium and a connector of bodies, spaces, and personal and collective histories.
3. Public costume interventions transform appearance into a collective and political performance. Practices like the Carnival [96] and costumed protest [97, 98], show that people use costumes reclaim streets as stages of visibility and critique. Costume projects “TRIBES” [99] or the work of Complejo Conejo [100] demonstrate how shared fabrics and masks generate what Hann [101] refers to as “rupture,” transforming urban space into a scenographic site of coexistence and transformation.

This research draws on Critical Costume and Scenographics as both methodological and theoretical lenses for expanding PD. As an early-stage inquiry, it offers an initial exploration of the designer as dresser, foregrounding care, embodiment, and relational transformation as conditions for coexistence. In doing so, it contributes to broadening the theoretical dialogue between Critical Costume and PD while also proposing practical approaches for rethinking participation as a performative ethics of appearance.

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