(UN)CURATING THE CITY: PARTICIPATORY DESIGN AND URBAN HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relations between participatory design (PD) and critical heritage studies (CHS) in the context of urban planning and development. In searching for a PD approach which can critically address the role of heritage in urban development, it problematizes the focus on economic viability in urban renewal practices and the lack of care for socio-political values and challenges. The article searches for a PD framework that could support alternative regimes of care, via the notion of design space as the terrain for selection, articulation and curation of values. This framework will be outlined by reflecting on a case study related to a historic industrial area in Leuven, Belgium.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores how participatory design (PD) as a field can support the articulation of alternative regimes of care at the intersection of heritage and urban planning. PD has a tradition in rethinking care, starting with the workplace democracy movement in the 1970s Scandinavia. Designers collaborated with unions and workers in the struggle against deskilling and managerial goals by articulating processes of care for their rights to participate in the design of the workplace and working process. Since then, PD is active in many different contexts, including urban planning (Dalsgaard, 2012) and heritage institutions (Smith & Iversen, 2014; Engberg et al. 2017). While there is already experience in how PD can provide a framework for participation in heritage-making, we want to explore this practice further to address heritage debates in urban space contexts, primarily by learning from the field of critical heritage studies (CHS).

Critical heritage studies is an academic field "which grew out of early critiques of the use of the past in nation-building", and developed towards dealing with "the politics of representation and the idea of heritage as a series of discursive practices" (Harrison, 2013). To CHS, politics of heritage is the crucial aspect of understanding the governmental capacities of heritage and its role as a regime of care in normalizing and historicizing different inequalities (Harrison, 2015). While deeply critical of this, the field aims to consider a range of alternative forms of caring for the future (Harrison, 2015) and argues for "a dialogical model of heritage and a more democratic approach to heritage decision-making processes" (Harrison, 2015), an endeavour which is in line with the PD mindset.

In the context of urban planning, heritage is often rendered through the lens of preservation and built authenticity, favouring the material value (Orbasli, 2000; Nasser, 2014), while decision-making on what should be preserved in a city generally leans towards finding new economic viability for the site (Ashworth et al, 2007; Nasser, 2014). The discussion on the social values of heritage often comes up too late and in reaction to a threat (such as urban renewal), rather than addressing them in a systematic way (Hayden, 1995; Jones, 2017). The goal of this article is to investigate how this established regime of care could be challenged within PD by countering the market-focused curation of heritage values in urban planning. It searches for a PD framework which could support the articulation of alternative regimes of care, by looking into curation of design space as an act of ethical and political positioning, while expanding on the understanding of heritage as a future-making process (Harrison, 2015).

DESIGN SPACE AND HERITAGE FUTURES

Our exploration of this PD framework starts from the concept of 'design space', which is here understood as the imaginary space where different actors come into a discussion on urban planning. In PD theory, design space is described as a complex conceptual space containing "all the possible design solutions that would work; that prospective users and other stakeholders would find meaningful" (Westerlund, 2009). Additionally, it is discussed as an imagined field of work explored through the design process and created through interactions with multiple and diverse constituents - "things, artifacts, or 'representations'" (A. Telier, 2011) which represent different actors in the process. In this article, we contribute to the discussion on design space by understanding it as a conceptual terrain which has a history. It is not only the proposals for the future that are represented here but also the constituents of the past which condition the selection of values preserved by the future design. Since the socio-political values of heritage are our main interest, we find it crucial to understand how values are curated in the design space and how different regimes of care shape it.

To do this, we explore if design space in heritage contexts can be understood as produced by design and heritage as processes of future-making. Here heritage presents a "creative engagement with the past" which "is fundamentally concerned with assembling and designing the future" that could, through dialogue and encounter of multiple actors, "be oriented toward composing (…) 'common futures'" (Harrison, 2015). Heritage, traditionally past-oriented, can be assisted by design in this process, while design, as a future-oriented activity, can broaden its focus by engaging with the past. However, the future-making orientation in both heritage and design should also be considered in a critical way, by addressing its "defuturing" (Fry, 2009) aspects. As Fry argues, design needs to redirect itself from taking away the future as an active contributor to unsustainability processes. Can we also think about the defuturing aspects of how values in design space are curated? For example, urban revitalization entails a curation of urban life where decisions are made on what is valuable and what can be eradicated. Sustaining certain values and roles of heritage, such as economic ones, can lead to exclusionary narratives which marginalize and defuture socio-political values. Thus, there is a need for a critical reflection on the affirmative notion of future-making that closely examines how values are cared for, or defutured, in participatory engagements with the design space.

Following the political tradition of PD in caring for the marginalized groups, the design space could become an interface where to challenge existing and possibly defuturing regimes of care. The staging of design space can support different participants to "interrupt a particular order and redistribute the sensible" (Keshavarz & Mazé, 2013). Thus, by setting up the design space which can help articulate marginalized narratives in a confrontation with dominant voices in urban renewal practices, we can attempt to stage an alternative regime of care as an interruption in how future is imagined. This builds on Keshavarz and Mazé's understanding of dissensus as a "break within one world, seen and realized as 'factual present' in which another that might be invisible, excluded or not present could somehow be represented" (Keshavarz & Mazé, 2013).

THE VAARTKOM TRANSITION

To explore this approach of design space curation as an act of presencing alternative regimes of care, in 2017, we collaborated on a project interested in the urban transition of the Vaartkom historic industrial area in the city of Leuven. It was a research residency of our living lab, De Andere Markt, at the LUCA School of Arts exhibition titled '(Let yourself) fall' within which we decided to focus on the Vaartkom neighbourhood, where Keizersberg abbey - the exhibition venue - was located. Vaartkom is a space of contrast and diversity, but in particular, of an extensive urban revitalization. The former industrial artery, the Vaart canal, is being redefined as a marina, while new residential buildings and creative industry offices start replacing previously squatted industrial buildings. This once important industrial area (the first Stella Artois brewery was started here centuries ago), with an exciting recent history of subcultures reclaiming the abandoned industrial buildings, is being reinvented as 'Vaartopia' - a hub of affordable space for the creative sector in the region. Heritage-making is an important aspect of spatial development and place branding, as the new space for creativity is described as a continuation of the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit of old industries.

We envisioned the residency as an intensive dive into the context by relocating our living lab office (normally based in the city of Genk) to the Keizersberg abbey. We started with a workshop, where we invited spatial planners and researchers interested in the site and its issues, along with Leuven city officials who worked on Vaartkom spatial development. The aim of the workshop was to learn about the ongoing development strategies and frame the planning problems and future scenarios together with the stakeholders. We used a mapping methodology with an atlas (figure 1) of three categories of elements: (1) spaces, (2) actors and (3) their relations. The map was created in three views (past, present and the future - figure 2) to visualize how the relations in space evolved from the past to the present and how their future was designed in the official and expert narratives. The next step was to challenge this problem framing and the map of the design space by engaging with different individuals and groups living or working in this area. In doing so, we used different methodologies. We interviewed the local community actors and did site visits to continue mapping the spaces and actors in the area. All participants were invited to

discuss the problems in Vaartkom and interact with the workshop map, as well as to give statements on the values that they would like to take forward. Finally, we set up the abbey office as an interactive design space installation where the broad exhibition audience could take part.
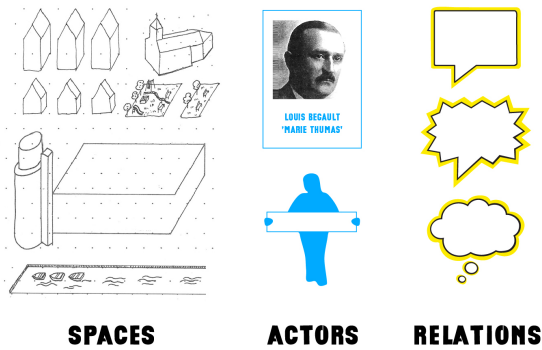

Figure 1: Three categories of the atlas elements

Figure 2: Workshop mapping showing the past, the present and the future view

The office was designed as an interface where to continue collecting, presenting and discussing findings, by creating an imaginary representation of the Vaartkom with an abstract map of the site drawn on the floor (figure 3). The map visualized not only spaces but also the different actors and their statements on values they attribute to the site. Furthermore, actors and spaces from the past were added by collecting historical information through desk research and conversations with participants. The mapping installation became a staged design space where we invited visitors to talk about the neighbourhood transition and to position themselves in relation to the values represented in the map. The visitors gave statements by using different tools: after making their own billboard with a value written on it, their story and a photo of them holding the billboard was printed on a postcard, and they were invited to position it somewhere in the mapping space (figure 4). Thus, the postcards were placed on different

poles across the floor map, clustering the participants in relation to spaces and values they speak of.

Figure 3: The abbey office with the abstract map of the Vaartkom

Figure 4: One of the visitors with 'Iedereen' (Everybody) written on his billboard – the value he talks about is the accessibility of space to everyone.

To reflect on the findings of the research residency, we organized a follow-up workshop with the stakeholders' group and compiled the reflections into a foldable magazine that could be assembled into a large map of Vaartkom (figure 5). The map differentiated the layers of past, present and the future - as well as actors, spaces and their relations. Actors' statements were placed on one side, while the interpretation of their positions and relations in space was presented on the other side to visualize the possible scenarios challenging the current transition trajectory. In a follow-up exhibition and online, the map was shared with all of the participants and offered as a tool for the community to build upon in their future negotiations with the city officials.
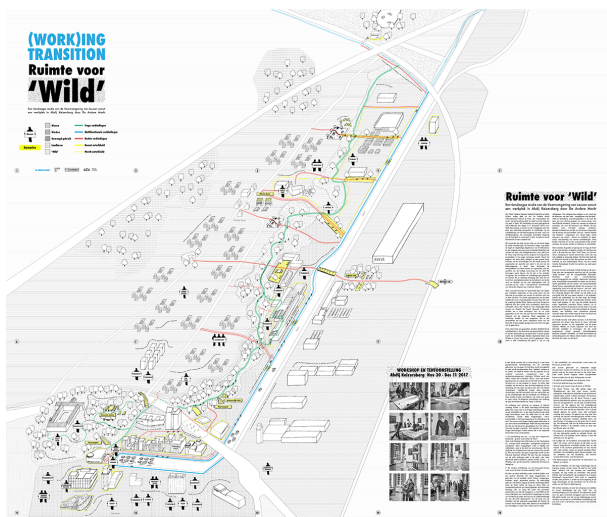
Figure 5: The final map with spaces, actors, relations and possible scenarios

(UN)CURATING THE CITY IN DESIGN SPACE

By using different methods and tools described above, the staging of design space entailed a process of continuous collecting, visualizing and communicating the discussion on urban values. How we organised the design space tried to reflect a variety of emerging issues that were symptomatic of the tension between caring for economic vs. socio-political values of urban heritage. Three main aspects appeared to us as relevant in outlining a PD approach that could tackle these issues: (1) the importance of expanding the timeline of the design space to include actors, spaces and relations from the past, (2) the aspect of positioning and navigating ourselves in relation to values in design space and (3) the importance of acknowledging the flip side of future-making - the curation of values which can defuture less powerful positions.

One of the first goals in setting up the design space was to engage with the longer timeline by introducing a discussion on the past of the neighbourhood, in order to understand how it conditions the proposals for future. Adding past actors, spaces and their related values to the map triggered the visitors' motivation and provoked value associations which guided them in positioning themselves within the map installation. The older generations picked up postcards representing old industries, such as the bottle factory, to talk about past values less prominent in the brewing history focused official narratives. On the other hand, the younger generations recognized images of artists and spaces from the recent history (such as an electronic music club shut down for noise complaints) - expressing their regret that the subcultures which maintained the spaces in Vaartkom have been removed as it's developed into a 'clean' and upmarket neighbourhood. While the distant industrial past was used in the ongoing urban renewal process to establish continuity with values promoted in the place-branding narratives, the recent history of a

messy space for youngsters to enjoy music and create - along with actors and spaces building upon its values - was being removed in the process.

Secondly, the focus on the act of navigating and positioning oneself in relation to the floor map encouraged the participants to articulate more carefully where they stand in the discussion on values. The map installation grew into a complex representation challenging official development visions, as well as our initial presumptions - for example, a number of participants pointed out to a lack of interest in the issues of a neighbouring village and its own set of values which were under threat due to the transition. Furthermore, while the official planning agendas (such as Vaartopia) offered a vision of 'hip' neighbourhood with affordable space for creatives, several participants in the mapping revealed the limited conception of what was valued as 'creative' in this process, having in mind that most of the informal spaces started by artists in the area were vacated or becoming too expensive to rent. As PD researchers, while aligning politically and ethically with the interest of groups in marginalized positions (artists, informal collectives and residents of the neighbouring village)– we did not try to find a consensus between the different sides. Rather the output was presented as a dissensual (Keshavarz & Mazé, 2013) design space mapping, making visible the different confrontations in the curation of values in urban space, while the magazine articulated possible alternative scenarios of care which can appreciate the values of accessible, informal and underdeveloped space that can be appropriated by different groups.

Finally, in struggling with the tension between future-making and defuturing, we attempted to bring to the surface different narratives of the past that were left out of the official development vision. While the brewing history was selected as a valuable asset in the effort to upscale the neighbourhood development, spaces and values related to other historical narratives were being defutured, as well as the efforts to build upon them. For example, when positioning themselves on the map, younger participants made strong statements problematizing the branding of Vaartkom as the synergy of old beer industry spirit and new, clean, creative economy. As the mapping visualized how alternative creative spaces were removed through development, the youngsters were encouraged to articulate clearly in their statements why they don't feel welcome in the future of Vaartkom, or the writing of its history. By mapping the design space for the site, we engaged ourselves as design researchers in taking care of these less articulated and *uncurated* positions to discover the ways in which they were historically conditioned. We learned that a more careful crafting of the design space as a way to create alternative - and more just - regimes of care in participatory ways, can make our and other actors' positions stronger and more visible in resisting the use of the past as a marketing resource and supporting the struggle for more common futures.

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