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Revitalization public spaces as a tool for urban development in shrinking regions

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**Abstract**

In a moment of socio-economical and urban transition processes taking place in Europe, an increasing number of cities and territories are today facing population decline and its consequences. Population decline is indeed associated to widespread issues: unemployment, declining of property values, fragmentation of the urban environment, lack of participation in the city and neighbourhood life. Moreover with population change social bonds among neighbours are under stress and a sense of community is getting lost. According to the literature, this lack of interaction is clearly manifested in the use or under use of public spaces and infrastructures. In context of post industrial shrinking territories public authorities, stakeholders and designers therefore wonder on how to intervene in public spaces, and which kind of strategies are need to enable them to mobilize local communities. Research shows that public spaces that are designed even with small-scale, low-cost infrastructures, but following the real need of the inhabitants (users), play an important role in social inclusion in neighbourhoods and cities. Therefore, by listening the city how to develop smart low-cost urban design interventions guidelines to reactivate public spaces and to facilitate social inclusion, vitality and wellbeing?

This article aims to reflect on the results of one-year education-applied research activity developed in the city of Kerkrade located in the southern part of the Dutch Limburg (NL). Since fifty years this region is living a process of economic and social transition from mining region towards post-industrial economic developments. That resulted in: declining economic activity, selective migration, aging population, loss of identity, decay of housing and infrastructures and vacancy problems.

By focusing on Kerkrade West, the paper describes the co-developing of place-made design strategies for low-cost interventions in underused public spaces. The paper shows how the transformation with low-cost intervention through a co-development process can be positive solution for local communities experiencing socio-spatial shrinkage. Moreover this serves to develop alternative tools and methods for local stakeholders to traditional strategies to facilitate social cohesion and a dialogue with the inhabitants of the city. Therefore this paper is divided in two main parts according with the two main phase of the process.

Firstly, after a short review of the main causes and consequences of shrinkage in three neighbourhoods of Kerkrade West, the study presents the original site-based analysis of socio-spatial dynamics in public spaces and need of local community. This analysis consisted of explorative research with inhabitants, local stakeholders and multidisciplinary team of students, going beyond governmental national and regional statistical data and representation.

Then the resulted observation and need of inhabitants lead to development of low cost, temporary and place based urban intervention to reclaim public spaces. Therefore in the second part, the article presents and evaluates the design interventions on public space lands based on place-making approach. The design experiments developed during one-week design workshop developed by multidisciplinary team of students and young designers, in constant discussion with local stakeholders and inhabitants.

**Keywords**

Public space, placemaking, temporary urbanism, co-development, shrinking region

**1 Introduction**

Through time, and globally urban development was always characterised by diverse combination of urban growth and shrinkage (Adhya 2017). However, since the last forty years many theories and urban policy documents easily led to the impression that cities and region across Europe would be lost without: a growing population, a growing economy and a growing national and international importance (Bontje 2005). Urban shrinkage phenomenon is often portrayed as deeply damaging occurrence (Németh & Hollander 2016)*,* nevertheless contraction of urban territories is a component that characterised the natural life cycle of any city and region (Foo et al. 2013)

According to Grobman et al. (2013) and OECD (2012)report urban shrinkage reflects the consequences on the territories of urban population loss and de-industrialisation processes. These results in wide range of socio economic and spatial issue: as increased unemployment rate, vacancy of buildings and lands as well as degradation of properties. However, considering urban territories as dynamic entities that are permanently emerging and constantly modifying these consequences are in ways that are geographically and historically specific (Meulder 2008; Furlan 2013). The diversity of spatial consequences of urban shrinkage has been reflected in distinctive national or regional debates, policies and urban design interventions across the world.

In the specific case of the Netherlands, urban shrinkage is occurring in different parts of the Low Countries. According to OECD report of 2012 the strongest shrinkage is taking place in the southern part of the Dutch Limburg region. Over the past decade, a negative net migration of 11 thousand was recorded (CBS 2006).

Moreover, according to the demographic statistics, the southern part of Limburg is expected to have 74.000 fewer inhabitants (-12%) in 2025 than in 2005 (RPB 2006). The largest absolute shrinkage is taking place in the municipalities of Heerlen, Kerkrade and Sittard-Geleen (RPB 2006; PBL & CBS 2010).

This shrinkage process has deep roots. Since the closure and disappearance of mining activities in 1970's, that shaped the development of this region for seventy years, cities like Kerkrade, are still facing social and economic problems. That resulted in: selective migration[[1]](#footnote-1) and consequently in population loss of 12% by 2040, aging population and unemployment rate of 11.4% in 2009 occurred (Municipality of Kerkrade 2011). In the urban tissue this negative demographic trends reflected in 2010 in housing surplus, which manifested itself as a vacancy rate of 6 % (Municipality of Kerkrade 2011), empty street an public spaces, out-dated house stocks and infrastructures, closure of public facilities and amenities due to the high maintenance costs (Elzerman and Bontje 2015).

In Limburg, the demographic transformation and spatial processes are reflected also in the social dynamics of the region. Social cohesion is under stress, identity, sense of community are decreased. That consequently is manifested in empty streets, empty squares, underused parks and playgrounds, vacant buildings. The simultaneous presence of this type of spaces, here defined as unused and underused public spaces, undermines social inclusion due to privatisation, reducing accessibility and generating fear and insecurity (Jacobs 1992). In Limburg the demographic transformation is both the cause and the effect of a fluctuating number of inhabitants. Demographic changes (aging and migration) and the development of people working outside their community has resulted in a decrease of interaction between people within the city and especially in public spaces, like squares streets and playgrounds (Vermeij & Steenbekkers 2015). For instance, the study in 43 deprived Dutch neighbourhoods by Van Nes, & López (2016) highlights that in Limburg there is strong interconnection between insecurity, population structure change (in terms of age, immigration, wealth and health) and the accessibility, connectedness, vitality, social inclusion and identity of neighbourhoods and public spaces. A common challenges in the Dutch context [[2]](#footnote-2).

Social inclusion dynamic strongly influenced how the cities and public spaces are planned and designed; simultaneously the character of the city is defined by the social dynamic in its public spaces (Jacobs 1992). Many practitioners and professionals (see PPS.org) in the field of urban development have confirmed this condition, and it is also highly stressed in the new UN-HABITAT III urban agenda (UN-Habitat 2016)*.*

Creating a sense of belonging and attractive public spaces in a shrinking area like Limburg seems to be a harder and different process than in a growing area. A complicating factor in the redevelopment plans for shrinkage areas is the lack of a coherent vision for the region. Although at the province and local level several initiatives experimented initiatives to support vitality, social inclusion and to develop a vibrant social climate in urban areas are developed, dispersed efforts and results are experienced. This lack is mainly consequent to the fragmentation of the local government and due to the extreme specialisation of roles and competences of the different professionals involved in the agenda of the province and local municipalities. Therefore it is difficult to develop a long-term vision that considers the social, health and urban planning sectors at the province and regional level.

This awareness on the transition of Limburg region and the importance of vital public space was the starting point for the Kerkrade West (KW)[[3]](#footnote-3) initiatives on public spaces developed between 2016-2017 in partnership between Zuyd Hogeschool, KW municipality and citizen platforms. The co-developed process and the first results of KW observations are presented in this paper.

**2 Underused public urban space and neighbourhood identity in shrinking context**

The UNESCO[[4]](#footnote-4) agency refers to public space as an area or place that is open and accessible to all peoples, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level. These are public gathering spaces such as plazas, squares and parks. Connecting spaces, such as sidewalks and streets, are also public spaces. UNESCO agency also affirms that a well-designed public space allows social mixing, civic participation, recreation, and a sense of belonging. These characteristics are fundamental features in the development and designing for a social inclusive society.

Therefore we can deduce that public spaces are the spaces where people and different social groups participate, physically meet, exchange, providing opportunities for sharing thoughts and information. Governmental, regional and local planning offices that have a strong notion of the ‘public’ demonstrate a commitment to an improved quality of life for their citizens by providing adequate street space, green areas, parks, recreation facilities and other public spaces (Anderson 2015). Public spaces are a vital ingredient of successful cities. They help build a sense of community, civic identity and culture. Public spaces facilitate social capital, economic development and community revitalisation. The liveliness and continuous use of public space as a public good leads to urban environments that are well maintained, healthy and safe, making the city an attractive place to live and work (Anderson 2015).

There is a broad consent in the literature of urban studies on considering public urban spaces as fundamental to provide social inclusion in the city and even define the character of a city in itself (Jacobs 1992; Douglas & Calder 2014; Anderson 2015).

However in shrinking context like Limburg region and Kerkrade West the historical transformations of the neighbourhoods during the recent history produce underuse of collecting public urban spaces marking larger socio economic changes and particular the lost of identity within the community (Foo et al. 2013).

Empty or underused public spaces in urban neighbourhoods draw attention to the way *“changing meanings of nature have intersected with wider debates about urban change”* (Gandy 2002:13).

Lynch (1960) also confirms this in the book the image of the city (1960). According to him the transformation of neighbourhood and the use or not use of public spaces render legible the ‘image of the city’ to its inhabitants. For instance in the case of KW, increasing polarization, shrinking population has presented a challenge in which the ‘image of the city’ and the sense of belonging of the residents appears fragmented to urban planners, developers and public agencies.

Empty parks, playground, squares, streets vacant lots and residential and commercial buildings are posing new governance problematic, new policies, protocols, and organizational forms are needed.

The historical presence of state driven interventions and the absence of inhabitants’ participation in decision making for the transformations and improvements of Kerkrade generate the presence of emptiness in public spaces. Consequently the combination of these processes creates cascade of effects towards a an endless cycle of urban decay, which (Hollander & Neeth 2011) call the “contagion effect”. The presence of emptiness and abandoned land is immediately associated with increased criminal or illicit activity, physical signs of decay; and dumping of waste and conceptually linked to suburban sprawl (Goldstein et al. 2001). Further, this increase the phenomena of high levels of crime, lower access by local residents to such spaces may be minimal, hindering positive human-environment benefits (Foo et al. 2013; Brownlow 2006)-

Therefore in Limburg and in Kerkrade West (KW) the actual main challenge is not about the role of public space as a catalyser for social inclusion and vitality but rather about how to overcome and reverse the traditional state-driven top-down revitalization strategies towards a re-appropriation of public spaces. Thus, literature and case study analysis highlight that the upcoming challenges for cities today require efforts in developing new innovative approach based on the demands, needs and traditional/historical of the inhabitants as well as to address the specific context challenges and potentials of neighbourhoods and public spaces (Anderson 2015). Consequently question what was the role of the public space in the recent history of Kerkrade West and of the Dutch Limburg?

**3 Method**

The process used in this study is drawn on two initiatives related to the function and meaning of unused and underused public spaces in KW neighbourhoods. Firstly, the study analysed together with Kerkrade inhabitants and local stakeholders the different socio-spatial dynamics and necessities of the neighbourhood at neighbourhood and city scale. Secondly, a research by design experiments zoomed in specific areas, proposing and co-developing placed base temporary interventions to reclaim public spaces.

Taken together these two initiatives provide:

An insight into the specific socio-physical consequences of urban shrinkage in KW, going beyond governmental national and regional statistical data and representation

Design of experimental low cost interventions on abandoned and underused lands based on place-making approach.

In particular, the first initiative consisted of explorative research with inhabitants local stakeholders and multidisciplinary team of students belonging to the faculty of architecture, engineering, social science of Zuyd University of Applied science in three different neighbourhoods of KW.

In fall of 2016 the research team together with an interdisciplinary team of 100 students, inhabitants and group of stakeholders conducted three urban analyses in the KW neighbourhoods of Gracht, Kaalheide and Akerstraat. We involved in the urban explorations a wide a range of place-based inhabitants associations like neighbourhood associations, housing corporation, shop keeper association, artist association and local stakeholder and public servants

Photographs and maps of the built environment, landscape, underused public spaces and vacancies supported a more classical morphological urban analysis. Graphic tools concentrated around the theme of well-being, health, water, mobility infrastructure, green infrastructure, urban and industrial tissue were complemented by community base activities and the socio special perception and everyday uses of KW residents. However, by listening and visualising perception of inhabitants and stakeholders the topic of unused and underused of public inductively space appears. The discussion focuses on the inductive category of underused public space, and how it influences the perception everyday life of the neighbourhood according to the involved participants.

The second initiative consisted of place-making design explorations on specific underused and unused public spaces selected in light of the first initiatives. Practically, this initiative consisted in one intensive design moment called “international design workshop: recycle Limburg” hold between 12th and 16th of December 2016. The intensive design moment was organized with the participation of 50 students of several universities and nationalities belonging to Zuyd University of Applied Science, NHTV Breda University of Applied Science, KU Leuven University, with the collaboration of young urban designers, inhabitants (including schoolchildren, elderly people and shopkeepers/entrepreneurs) and the municipality of KW.

Divided in 7 interdisciplinary and mixed groups, the participants designed specific low cost urban intervention for a temporary appropriation and programming of selected public spaces in KW in the three analysed neighbourhood.

The combination of these two initiatives provide an inside understating of the shrinkage phenomenon, and a meaning of underused public spaces and vacant lots. Moreover this generate useful process to develop new collaboration between local research institutes and local stakeholders and inhabitants whose opinion where not often listened.

3.1 Case studies: Kerkrade West

The municipality of Kerkrade is located in the southeast part of Limburg province on the border with Aachen city (Germany) and has about 47,303 inhabitants (2011). As the entire region, Kerkrade is formerly known as the Eastern Mining region. After the closure of mines, Kerkrade underwent a complete metamorphosis in which the black landscape gave way to green (urban) parks that penetrate far into the urban cores. The green areas and reliefs, due to the original stream valley structure and the mining past, divide the city into three districts: Kerkrade north, Kerkrade east and west.

The focus of the study is on the district KW as site featured by small singular family-houses and row-houses, by large industrial estates and large infrastructural developments. KW includes the neighbourhoods Kaalheide-Heilust, Spekholzerheide, Gracht and Beitel.

Today, KW is characterized by a high variety of functions in a very small footprint with high urban fragmentation: heavy industries - paper, plastic factories and a brickyard, different shops mainly located along the main spine, large retail area with offices, a striking stadium, a newly refurbished city centre, a didactic centre and large recreational area surround the residential fabric. The landscape results in a puzzle of detached spaces, infra-bodies, hidden and forgotten sites (vacuums) located in close proximity around intense infra bundles (Monolab, 2013) that need to be rearranged through new roles and functions in order to revitalize and redesign a whole coherent functional system.

Besides spatial fragmentation, KW faces social and economic problems, after the closure of mines: due to the lack of alternative employment solutions the population lead to shrinkage and high unemployment rate. Reporters Hillebrand and Beije are regularly holding a radio post about shrinkage in KW. They stated that in order to ‘experience what shrinkage does to people, you have to hit the streets’ (2011).

As an attempt to re-boost the economy after the closure of mines, modern industrial estates have been relocated but an overall economic crisis seems to have frozen once again this area.

However the decline and the disappearance of the mining industry seem to have become the drive for an ecological regeneration, a catalytic infrastructure where landscape was rendered visible at the precise moment at which the industrialization failed (Bélanger 2009). The exiting green structure has been formed around streams valley of Anselderbeek and Wurm River in the west and the Geul River on the east

Due to a fertile geological condition Kerkrade’s landscape is interested by main ecological network (MEN). MEN is strengthened by the ambition of the national and provincial government to preserve and facilitate diversity of species and ecosystems. An important point is the ecological North- South corridor composed by the Anselderbeek and Wurm valleys.

For their high ecological and landscape value the Anselderbeek river of the Gravenrode Park has been developed into one of the major international tourism and leisure attractions, and a similar development characterizes also Crombacherbeek valley with Pferdelander river, as the figure shows.

Fig. 1

In particular this study focuses on Graacht, Heilust-Kaalheide and Akerstrrat are three neighbourhoods located in the western part of the city of Kerkrade. They are characterised by different types of public spaces, building structures, urban and population density and composition.

Fig. 2

*Heilust-Kaalheide* is a neighbourhood area developed during 1970s, characterized by 4 residential blocks each of the with an individual green public space. Since 2009 as part of the Limburg District Approach, the neighbourhood and the raw houses were renovated according with the more modern concept. The municipality and the Land van Rode housing corporation were in-charged for the area-specific development of Vroenhof-Bleijerheide.

As part of the Limburg District Approach, an initiative of the Province of Limburg, the whole of Heilust-Kaalheide has been included as one of the five pilot districts in Parkstad. The aim of the Limburg District Approach is to speed up the restructuring process and at the same time improve the quality of life in the area. Kerkrade is giving this process a very high priority and has developed this pilot scheme into a District Agenda with its own implementation programme.

The municipality of Kerkrade, the City Region of Parkstad Limburg And the Province of Limburg Residents, businesses activities were closely involved in preparing the agenda, which also consists of an implementation programme, a communication plan and a management plan for the area to be restructured (Municipality of Kerkrade 2011).

The way in which the Heilust-Kaalheide as pilot scheme has been addressed is considered an example of the way renovate housing stock and in which dealing the consequences of population shrinkage. Although the neighbourhood was modern renovate the public spaces are not properly used. They are often empty green pocket non properly design, without a distinctive character often relegated as backyard elements in between the house. These undefined and neglected public spaces are the focus of the following initiatives

The second case study in the western part of Kerkrade is the neighbourhood of *Gracht*. It is characterized by a combination of small residential raw houses, of maximum two floors built between 1940 and 1970 and modern social housing apartment blocks. This residential quarter has being built alongside the railways, in relation to the activity of will Willem Sophia mine activity and in a marginal location respect Kerkrade west centre. Soon after the closure of Willem Sophia mine (1970) the railway line stopped its duty of coal transportation. Consequently, Gracht lost its role of mining residential area. Today, out-date building stock, vacant buildings, unplanned recreational functions and marginal green spaces in between the building blocks characterize Gracht.

The third case study focuses on **Akestraat,** the main commercial spine of KW. Crossing from north to south the city and this axis attracts many services like the library, commercial activities, apartments and also two squares: Carbonplein and Patronaatplien.

Although is central position Akestraat is the symbol of its decay, dramatically ignored from the car traffic passing aside the centre. Its progressive marginal role made several shops close, enforcing the image of a quite sad and unsafe street. These elements actually excluded Kerkrade West from the events planned during the year in Kerkrade, unless the weekly markets occurring in Carboonplein, and hardly tolerated by the inhabitants, whose main worry is an easy place to leave their car.

These three locations have in common that on the one side they’re well maintained and safe (often recently (re) designed) but rather mono-functional in design and use; traffic/parking or visual greenery. The full potential of these spaces is not used; these spaces lack socio-cultural function and meaning. The three types of public spaces also can be found elsewhere in Parkstad region and beyond, often with similar problems. This makes the generated knowledge and experiences in KW study, to which the two following initiatives contribute, also valuable for other locations.

**First initiative: Listening the city**

Since the first fieldwork[[5]](#footnote-5) observations and interviews the issue unused-underused public spaces begin to emerge. By listening the inhabitants’ everyday life experiences emerge that these neighbourhoods are characterized by out-dated physical infrastructures, including streets, schools, parks empty shops and residential buildings that deflates their value compared with other suburban land in the Netherlands. While community underused spaces have become incorporated into narratives of the consequences of the closure of the mining activities urban shrinkage and economical crises. The story of underused and empty public spaces tends to be denied or associated with the passiveness of the majority of the inhabitants. Also, public spaces in KW tend to be understood as ordinary features of every city, rather than an essential element for the city's present or future (Glover 2003).

Distribution and character of underused public spaces emerged inductively by listening the inhabitants as a critical liability and potential resource in shaping perceptions and experiences of their neighbourhoods. Usually, empty public spaces reflect the absence of infrastructures, place to sit, lack of gathering points, inaccessibility, dysfunctional features (like a path that does not go anywhere) or presence of vehicles. However in KW the emptiness is also attributable to the lack of involvement in the public life of the inhabitants and the lack of long term vision of the municipality. The behaviour in underused public space has varied across the three case study neighbourhoods as visible reminders of their different characters.

1. Kaalheide, composed the recently renovate urban neighbourhoods in KW. During the neighbourhood renovation, lastly from 2015 to 2016, public spaces have been redeveloped as green pockets in between the backyards of the raw building blocks, scarcely illuminated and not well connected. Moreover the design of green urban surfaces, with presence of trees and different types of butches and flowers demands a constant work from Kerkrade municipality during the entire year.

2) Similar to Kaalheide is the case of Gracht, in which the inhabitants have highlighted the distribution of many small public spaces in between the urban tissue, design without specific programs and with no street furniture. This is particularly true if we looked at the elderly population that mainly lives in this neighbourhood.

By listening the inhabitants of Gracht clearly emerged the necessity of developing ad-hoc urban solutions for a better accessibility, in terms of both removal of physical barriers, connection to the services and commercial activities and meeting place. The community expressed their dissatisfaction from municipality projects during mainly due to the municipality’s top-down approach in which neither the community opinions nor needs were addressed in the implemented projects. Consequently, the projects didn’t attract the community as it didn’t fulfil their specific needs[[6]](#footnote-6) as Gracht inhabitants stated:

*“We want to have active, vibrant neighbourhood, where neighbours communicate and take care of each other as it used to be in the past. We want to bring colour back to our neighbourhood and invest in spaces for elderly youngsters”*

Fig. 3

3) In contrast, in the case of Akerstraat groups of inhabitants clearly addressed the problem of the scarce use of the shopping street to the vast presence of vacant building and shops a along the main boulevard and the domination of car vehicles. For instance in 2007-2010, the municipality developed along Akerstraat a city square. Carboonplein, that literally mean square of Coal, was built with the intention to attract the most important city and neighbourhood activities and public events but today it is mainly arranged and used for parking.

Fig. 4

From the first initiative of listening the city emerged that many cases parks, playgrounds, squares side street were often planned according with old design strategies in which the design of public space tend to focus only on one aspect (Barnett 2013). Frequently public spaces are design just to host facilities for one category of people (elderly, children…), they are not well programmed with activities, there are limited to landscaping and beatification exercise. For instance parks are well illuminated but not easily accessible. Often urban development policy-making and practitioner forgot that urban design *“aims at the creation of useful, attractive, safe, environmentally sustainable, economically successful and socially equitable places” (Carmona 2014:2), it may in practice function as “a movement without social content, ...value free, ...even the hand-maiden of global capitalism*”(Carmona 2017:37) .Thus, we can conclude that the implemented projects on public space couldn’t address the needs quality and impacts expected due to the top-down approach of local public authorities, without listening the need of the inhabitants.

In the case of KW, the act of listening the inhabitants on their neighbourhoods and specifically on public space simultaneously invokes the necessities of infrastructural and social transformation. In contrast to the lack of identity associated with underused public space in shrinking region community activities, debates meeting can contribute to neighbourhood building and relationships. In this way, public spaces vacant lot build collective efficacy going beyond top down public interventions.

**Second initiative: a placemaking design approach and temporary design strategies**

The necessity for re-setting public spaces to contribute towards a more social inclusion in the cities, multifunctional public spaces, and in particular the local community of KW has raised questions about the broadening[[7]](#footnote-7) and deepening[[8]](#footnote-8) of alternative participatory design approach is in line with the description given by (Lupi, Musterd, & Kempen, 2007) on the concept of placemaking.

In fact, accordingly Lupi et al. (Lupi, Musterd, & Kempen, 2007) the concept placemaking is actually a combination of multiple aspects of area interventions. Placemaking approach combined the needs and idea of inhabitants with the skills of planners, designers, and engineers social workers, health care management moving beyond the narrow focus of their own professions, disciplines, agendas (Project for Public Space 2009). With this, element placemaking is also part of this social vision of spatial development. Moreover According to Amit Bahatia[[9]](#footnote-9) placemaking is how people collectively shape their public real to maximize shared value.

There is a broad literature on placemaking, the method proposed by Silberberg et al. (2013) and Projects for Public Space initiatives (PPS) was chosen to developing design second initiative. Placemaking is defined PPS (2016) as a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value. It aims at strengthening the connection between people and the places that they share. Silberberg et al. (2013)argues that placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its on-going evolution. The placemaking approach helps citizens transform their public spaces into vital places that highlight local assets, and serve common needs. The approach improves public space, sparks public discourse, creates beauty and delight, engenders civic pride, connects neighbourhoods, supports community health and safety, grows social justice, catalyses economic development, promotes environmental sustainability and of course nurtures an authentic ‘sense of place’ Silberberg et al. (2013).

Practically, the concept placemaking refers to discuss, design and implement in a participatory way different type o interventions. Generally, these are small-scale intervention *low-risk, cheap, quick, and easy to implement.* For citizens, *“it allows the immediate reclamation, redesign, or reprogramming of public space. For developers or entrepreneurs, it provides a means of collecting design intelligence from the market they intend to serve. For advocacy organizations, it’s a way to show what is possible to garner public and political support. And for government, it’s a way to put best practices into, well, practice — and quickly!”* (Lydon & Garcia 2015).

However, placemaking is not just the act of building, but it is a process that fosters the design strategies and interventions for the creation of a place of belonging. This process capitalise the existing structure of public spaces within the community’s assets inspiration and potentials. This combination creates good public spaces that promote people’s health, happiness, and social inclusion (Project for Public Spaces, 2010).

Often, simplified and homologated placemaking design strategies interventions are frequently focused on cities in which the population is rapidly growing and they address specific categories of people (children, elderly people…). There is therefore the necessity to develop alternatives placemaking strategies for territories in transformation like Kerkrade West*.*

Therefore the second initiative focused on developing specific low cost and temporary design investigations based on the placemaking approach above described.

The design investigations developed in KW, during one week of intensive design moment ( see method section) show an instance in which neighbourhood-based initiative reconfigured the value of underuse- unused public space for the benefit of the community. In this section, we discuss three different and site specific investigations that clearly exemplified a possible transformation.

Fig. 5.

The first example aims to unify and mix the inhabitants living in the neigh­bourhood Graacht.

Through the analysis of the site the project iden­tify a series of under-used public spaces hide in between the building blocks. These under-used public spaces have generally small dimensions, and different materials characterize them: asphalt, grass, gravel pavement. Although their undefined character theses spaces embody many potentialities and they can host several activities and programs.

The prosed design exploration focuses on the hidden and under-used character of the spaces to highlighting their presence. The goal of highlighting is achieved by insert­ing light high landmarks as the image shows.

The proposed landmarks can occasionally illuminate the neighborhood according with the presence of specific activities in the corresponding public spaces. The public spaces can be designed and programmed together with the inhabitants and the municipalities, stressing the distinctive spatial characters and the needs of the surrounding inhabitants. These spaces can host temporary playgrounds, temporary sport fields or light street furniture.

Moreover the project aims to physically connect each distinctive public space by colouring the existing small paths that are informally used by the inhabitants to safely walk around in the neighbourhood. The process of painting and highlighting the path is imagined as an inclusive activity done with the inhabitants, local artist and municipalities. This activity can be a first step of a longer inclusive process to integrate the new young population that is moving into Gracht with the former inhabitants; the older part of the population with the younger ones, the Dutch with the foreigners.

Fig. 6

The second design investigation observes the shopping and central street of Akerstraat. The aim is to transform the grey empty car street into a lively pedestrian path through two phases.

The first phase deals with the high-speed circulation along Akerstraat. It objects is to progressively slowing down the traffic intensity and use by temporary closing the street to the car traffic. This will transform Akerstraat in a pedestrian street for few hours or few days during specific events. After working on the circulation system the following phase focuses on the abandoned shops marking the street, enhancing a deep restyling starting from the pavement to the façade design.

The operation consists in writing on pavement surface big scale lettering text, that at the first time can relate to the mines and replicates the ‘’zwarte goud’’, black gold, that is the coal, former source of richness of the town and strongly recalling Kerkrade Wests’ identity, translated into the native languages of the foreign communities who worked in the mines. This writing, like a golden ribbon, leads to the center, and from the soil it runs upon the empty shop façades as the image shows.

Fig. 7

Notably the space between the facades and the car street is the central point of the projects, a public space which is inviting to people and wants them to stay together, show their own interests and memories. This action concretively involves the inhabitants to the huge painting on the soil, and preparing the space in front of the empty shops in order to change them into little open-air rooms where lo­cal music performances can be shown. Hopefully, the first and very cheap painting operation can be improved, adding furniture and lights popping out from the shops and completing all the street and trigger off a real co-development of public space.

The last design investigation explores the residential neighbourhood of Kaalheide. In particular focuses on the requalification of the “in-between” underused public spaces, by redefying a new identity and program.

As mention before, Kerkrade is one of Europe’s oldest coal-mining towns, it served as an important coal-mining centre from 1113 until the early 1970s, when the mines were closed and destroyed, it released a sense of lost identity in the community. However the history of Kerkrade is much longer than the modern mining period and it has Roman roots. In fact housing excavations in Kerkrade undertaken in 2001 and 2002, revealed a typical Roman villa Rustica. The archaeological traces of the villa were discovered on the slope of a small hill, just outside the centre of the present town, at the site of the Holzkuil (Van Dijk & Tichleman 2006). This discovery urged to inform the inhabitants about the ancient history of their territory.

This dis­covery arise the urgency of inform the inhabitants about the ancient history of their territory.

Therefore the project aims to use and reconvert the archipelago of green public spaces in a sort of open air historical centre. Each of the green pockets will host some light structure that can inform and reproduce historical environments such as a roman garden, or a mining shaft in the medieval era. The project propose for each environment public and interactive facilities that allows children and inhabitants to simultaneously learn about their culture, to play and to manage their surrounding public spaces.

Fig. 8

In conclusion the project proposes environment public and interactive urban facilities and street furniture that allow children and inhabitants to simultaneously learn about their ancient culture, to play and actively and directly manage their surrounding public spaces.

**Final reflection and conclusion**

The observation done during this one year activity within the two initiatives of listening and design suggests that unused and underused public spaces occur due to large scale socio-economic processes, but perceptions, attitudes, and values about such lots derive and constantly evolve from a mix of local, regional, and national dynamics (Foo et al 2015). Moreover, the study on KW, consisted of 22 meetings, interviews, fieldworks, urban analysis, one intensive design moment, with the involvement of students, of local inhabitants and different stakeholders gave the base for several long term co-development processes.

Firstly this study provides a wealth of information about KW that can be seen as a first contribution to the development of a participatory design approach for urban interventions in public space.

The combination of these initiatives builds up the foundations of open dialogue and discussions around the future of KW. In particular these initiatives selected potential design proposals that are of interest for the community and the municipality. The projects proposals are now in the process of developing technical projects details together with the community for implementation in spring 2018.

Secondly it provides individual or community-based senses of place, which may lead to despair at disuse, but also potentially, to interventions that challenge neighbourhood character. This reflects in the active role that the community is taking now by expressing their desire to engage in the development process. For example, the neighbourhood platform and inhabitants formulated several ideas and requests to SURD/Zuyd students to tackle in the academic year 2017-2018.

Thirdly the study provides the base for an original interdisciplinary educational activity and collaboration between several and internationals higher education as Zuyd University of Applied Science, NHTV University of Applied Science and KU Leuven University.

Finally underused public spaces represent the literal grounding for both local government policy and grassroots interventions. Neighbourhood-level interventions on and offer a tangible, direct means for residents to connect with the ecology of the neighbourhood, history of their past, to have green space and community activities through their activities (Glover 2003; Schmelzkopf 1995)

That consequently generates on the long term a more deeper social and physical interaction between inhabitants.

Today (September 2017) the KW initiatives are acknowledged by the province of Limburg as one of the best practices in social mobilization and bottom up, participatory project in the region. Kerkrade West project is listed in the Limburg Province Kracht van Limburg program[[10]](#footnote-10).

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Fig. 7 Street painting urban design intervention to revitalise Akestraat. Authors: Recycle Limburg workshop participants 2016

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1. Selective migration means that young and highly educated people tend to move out of the region [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See PBL, Netherlands environment assessment agency report on Cities in Europe , <http://agendastad.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/rapport-cities-in-europe-cities-in-the-netherlands.pdf> see also <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/National-Report-Europe-Netherlands-Final-in-English.pdf>. Other relevant reports *The Future of the City Quality without Growth* (2014) also *Perspectief voor de steden: adviezen voor de agenda van de stad* (2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kerkrade is located in the southeast of the Limburg province on the border with Aachen (DE) and has about 47,694 inhabitants (Municipality of Kerkrade, 2011). Together with six other municipalities (Heerlen, Landgraaf, Brunssum, Voerendaal, Simpelveld and onderbanken) is part of Parkstad Limburg. This region is known as former mining region. Due to the closure of mines, this city underwent into a landscape transformation in which the historical industrial territory gave way to green (urban) parks that penetrate far into the urban cores. The landscape structure divides the city into three districts: North Kerkrade, Kerkrade East and West (Roxana & Lucia 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/urban-development/migrants-inclusion-in-cities/good-practices/inclusion-through-access-to-public-space/> [Accessed May 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the research team fieldwork observations mean: walking through the city, portray the temporary location on the map of some of these spaces. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eg. Creating accessible public space for elderly people with reduced mobility or attractive families with young kids that are more ICT oriented**.** [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Concerning the number and diversity of participants [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Concerning the process organization and design quality [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (<https://issuu.com/ar.amitb/docs/publication>) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://vereniginglimburg.yelloobox.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Vooraankondiging-grande-finale-De-kracht-van-Limburg-NETwerk-in-uitvoering\_2.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-10)