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# Walking Praxis as Community-Based Research: A Deep Map of Affective Flows in a Neighborhood Development Process

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## Abstract

The rapid transformation of suburban neighborhoods, driven by development and changing demographics, is causing feelings of loss, disconnect, and a perceived diminution of political representation. This study examines socio-spatial relationalities that affect the sense of belonging in such neighborhoods-in-flux. We propose a re-imagined participatory research process with residents from the perspective of "walkability." Go-along walking methodology enabled us to gather place-based narratives that revealed how emotions and memories influence different aspects of the sense of belonging. Jointly moving through the environment gave us sensory exposure to sights, sounds, smells, and tactical sensations of the neighborhood. It also deepened our understanding of how residents mentally and physically navigate the proposed social and spatial transformations outlined in a municipal development plan. Our analysis, informed by a new materialist framework and visualized in a deep map, demonstrates how the walking methodology can generate new knowledge about socio-spatial dynamics to plan and design place. The methodology facilitated spontaneous and affective encounters with both human and other-than-human agents. The diverse range of place-based emotions, memories, and stories shared, provided insights into how the changing built environment and place identity produce multiple belongings. The findings suggest that go-along walking praxis offers a unique socio-spatial window into the affective flows of belonging in neighborhoods-in-flux.

## Keywords

deep mapping; go-along interviews; new materialism; spatial planning; suburban village; walking

# 1. Introduction

While many of us engage in walking on a daily basis, it is commonly considered a mundane activity of almost unconscious movement. Yet, scholarly interest grows in walking as an emplaced method to tap into lived experience, memories, and community (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020; O'Rourke, 2013; Springgay & Truman, 2018). In this study, walking becomes a powerful tool for understanding how residents negotiate their sense of belonging in the context of rapid development and transformation in the Flemish region. The region, characterized by its dispersed suburban spatial fabric that is neither urban nor rural with expanding villages, allotments, and ribbon development, has suffered from decades of poor spatial decision-making and planning (Renard et al., 2022). In recent years, the transformation pressure has increased due to several spatial, social, economic, and environmental challenges, such as a housing crisis, mobility issues, and changes in the infrastructure of energy supply. Suburban villages have experienced both housing dispersion as well as (core) densification, while political mergers and economic shifts made such smaller villages more dependent on larger centers to meet basic needs such as employment, education, public services, or even social contacts.

At the same time, there is a gap between ambitious policy and implementation due to the complex web of planning policies, policy exceptions, and competing interests. The strong focus on denser neighborhoods, apartments, and collective living also aims to attract new residents, with a financial incentive to increase the municipal tax base to fund sports and cultural facilities (Canfyn & Janssens, 2014). This spatial change disrupts the sometimes nostalgic visual image of these villages and communities. Such change is not an easy process, precisely because it affects daily lives. The speed of change is perceived as a threat to the community's sense of belonging, through the disruption of spatial and social connections and changing demographics (Segers et al., 2021).

However, institutionalized (participatory) planning processes have insufficiently paid attention to aspects of a sense of belonging, unwillingly feeding a growing wave of resistance connected to a call for more participatory democracy (e.g., Abbeloos, 2023; Blommaert, 2023; Van Maele, 2023). The essential role of participation in urban planning as well as its challenging nature, has been well documented (Kuhk et al., 2019). While it can be applauded that participation is now institutionalized in planning processes, in its implementation it remains challenging to establish open dialogue and trust with citizens (De Bie et al., 2012). Resulting plans are still often static and disconnected from the local community and place reality. This contrasts with a growing understanding of place as fluid and entangled, as stated by new materialism (Fox & Alldred, 2017). Similarly, Massey (2005) defined place as relational and continuously changing, the site of coexisting differences, and thus a dimension of politics and power. From this dynamic understanding of place, such participatory processes insufficiently address the complex reality of neighborhoods-in-flux. We argue that a new materialist or socio-spatial lens could help participatory planning to acknowledge and incorporate this dynamic and relational place understanding.

Therefore, this study takes a socio-spatial approach to investigate how ongoing and accelerating spatial change affects residents, with a particular focus on the social dimension of a sense of belonging. Our study work is situated in a context of accelerating socio-spatial change. We therefore opted to investigate the sense of belonging through the theoretical concept of "assemblage," and, more specifically, the concept of "affect" as described as a becoming by Deleuze and Guattari (1988). Going beyond the emotional dimension,

this conceptualization understands affect as a force that shifts the state or capabilities in relations. Affective flows drive the unfolding of our lives, communities, and history as these connections expand capacities (Thrift, 2004). The combination of this focus on affects and moving through the changing environment to map socio-spatial practices and experiences allowed us to take stock of the ongoing changes during our fieldwork which resulted in a deep mapping process. Such deep mapping integrates rich multilayered streams of evidence (visual and textual) that enact multi-vocal understandings to democratize the spatial narrative and knowledge of a particular place (Springett, 2015).

Go-along walks were used to gather emplaced narratives, allowing us to engage residents in a sensory exposure to memories and emotions in relation to social and material aspects of place, in which we acknowledged the entanglement between body, mind, and environment (Springgay & Truman, 2018). Drawing on the new materialist or socio-material analytical framework of Fox and Alldred (2022), we mapped out different socio-spatial accounts, both real and imagined, in relation to the affects and capacities these relationships generated. Simultaneously, and by means of reflecting on our research strategy, we investigated what sort of knowledge could be generated from these go-along interviews by adopting this new materialist analytical framework.

We focus our study on the suburban, Flemish neighborhood Veltem-Beisem, hamlet of the municipality Herent. Located in the suburban agglomeration between Brussels and Leuven, it is subjected to increasing socio-demographic pressure through a number of factors. For decades, the expanding employment hubs of both cities increasingly attracted employees. Municipal boundaries permeate, as people settle in the urban agglomeration to fulfill housing needs. The village's tranquil, safe, and spacious housing arrangements, (more) affordable property rates, access to nature (Figure 2), and easy commute options appeal to both old and new residents. Rapid development aims to address housing demands. Expansion of the city has spilled to the core of the municipality, where in the last decade at least 1,000 new apartments were built. This fundamentally changed its character, previously available central green space, and demographics. Veltem-Beisem itself has recently seen an increase in similar, denser housing developments (Figure 1).

The spark that accelerated the neighborhood dynamics in Veltem-Beisem and our interest in the case was a general concern with the public investigation of a proposed spatial plan for the village center. The process started with a series of consultation events, including two walks and multiple info moments with a steering group in 2017. The plan was produced and presented for public investigation in 2022 to allow citizen feedback on the proposed plan. However, the process and its outcome were not perceived as participatory, representative, or place-sensitive by many residents, which has affected the relations between the



**Figure 1.** Development of 32 residences in the core of the village.



**Figure 2.** Chapel and field track.

municipality, the citizens, and the neighborhood. Citizens came together in protest, seeking judicial support to jointly submit almost 500 objections. Afterward, the plan was adapted and approved before being annulled after an appeal.

We were already personally connected to the village through previous research in the socio-spatial transformation of the community church St. Laurentius (Vrebos et al., 2023). Sensing the friction the plan triggered on the community, we decided to plug our socio-spatial toolkit into this placemaking process to investigate the underlying dynamics of an unfolding sense of belonging. This research investigated the broader dynamics of socio-spatial change and started during the public investigation.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is "the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experience" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 1). This means that belonging consists of a "place belongingness" or the feeling of being "at home" through everyday practices and a politics of belonging through a more official membership (Antonsich, 2010). It can be spatially defined by a geographical area such as a neighborhood, or non-spatially, defined by proximity in social networks and shared values and ideals, e.g., through a cultural group, sports team, or social networking site (Raman, 2014). According to Segers et al. (2021), sense of place is an essential aspect of a sense of belonging. It is considered a fundamental human need essential for human wellbeing and even survival, similar to food, shelter, and physical safety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The concept is linked to numerous positive outcomes, while the lack of belonging has several negative outcomes on psychological and physical health (Allen et al., 2021), to the point that it has been used as a predictor for depression (Hagerty & Williams, 1999).

Despite the broad academic consensus on the significance of belonging, there has been a critique of the lack of conceptual clarity and consistency. Moreover, it is argued that the concept is studied too often through a unidimensional, subjective, and static approach which prioritizes social belonging, omitting the connection to place and culture and overlooking the dynamic interaction with social space (Allen et al., 2021). Other scholars have proposed more nuance. Yuval-Davis (2011) stresses the multidimensional axes of power that shape belonging and therefore proposes intersectional approaches. Youkhana (2015) proposes an alternative, space-sensitive conceptualization of belonging that takes the aspects of space and place further and integrates a material-semiotic perspective, distancing herself from what she calls an essentialized conceptualization of belonging in terms of social, political, and territorial boundaries and demarcations. She replaces this conventional, static spatial thinking based on inherent spatialities, territoriality, and boundary-making, with concepts based on movement and flow, developing a rhizomatic and entangled understanding of belonging through multiple and heterogenous actors. This builds on the idea that belonging is relational and "comes into being between people and things, and between people and people, through material conditions" (Youkhana, 2015, p. 16). She operationalizes this intersectional entwined conceptualization of belonging by proposing space as an analytical category. The socio-spatial changes in a neighborhood-in-flux affect the sense of belonging as both the physical place changes and the group identity shifts with a changing demographic. What was once perceived as a gradually evolving landscape in contrast to the urban environment has now entered a phase of rapid transformation.

## 2.2. New Materialism

New materialism denotes a range of philosophical perspectives with a focus on a turn to matter. The many new materialisms are characterized by three propositions: first, the world and its content are understood as relational, uneven, and in constant flux (Barad, 2007). Second, dichotomies like nature and culture are rejected and replaced with a continuum, as both the physical and social have material affects in this dynamic world (Haraway, 1997). Third, non-human and inanimate actors hold agency to produce the social world (De Landa, 2017). Instead of focusing on individual bodies and their supposedly inherent characteristics, new materialist theory focuses on assemblages, affects, and emergent capacities and "attends to complex flows of affects in everyday events that progressively and endlessly produce and reproduce the social world and human lives" (Fox & Alldred, 2022, p. 630). Some of the critiques on new materialism are the neglect of human responsibility and power dynamics as well as the difficulty to operationalize the theory. We aimed to address this latter critique by expanding previous approaches to operationalize the theory (Feely, 2020; Fox & Alldred, 2022).

The place emphasis of the model proposed by Fox and Alldred (2022) stems from the conviction that materiality possesses agency and can consequently affect relationships and social practices. This lens offers an analytical opportunity to apply the new materialistic philosophy to investigate the complex interplay between people, places, and things. By focusing on assemblages, the framework investigates events through the human and non-human relationships formed, the affects that shape these relations, the capacities these affects produce in matter, and, finally, the micropolitical consequences (Fox & Alldred, 2022). Affects represent a change of state of an entity and its capacities, which can be physical, psychological, emotional, or social. Capacities are what components are able to do through relations in the assemblage.

## 2.3. Walking and Mapping Methodologies

The increasing academic interest in walking methodologies within social sciences is situated in various turns, such as the spatial, sensory, and participatory turn. It builds on the understanding of place and spatial practices as actors in constructing lived experiences, perception, and meaning-making (Springgay & Truman, 2018). Despite the mundane act of walking often operating on a low level of awareness, it can invite an embodied attunement to place: the sensory experience of walking exposes the interconnectedness between our bodily movement, our consciousness, and our environment (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020). Walking as a method activates this awareness and as such can uncover tacit perceptions of places that hold personal significance in the present or past by passing through social and material circumstances. Walking as both method and methodology is practiced in a broad range of disciplines and widely theoretically studied (Springgay & Truman, 2018). Go-along interviews are a walking methodology where researchers tap into the potential of walking in participants' natural habitat while asking questions, listening, and observing. Actively moving through and interacting with the physical and social environment of participants as a companion allows researchers to engage deeply with the participant's emplaced experiences and spatial practices (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020). The slow navigation through the socio-spatial environment evokes a stream of place associations, including memories, anticipations (Kusenbach, 2003), and place attachments. The immersion in participants' environments cultivates a particular spatial sensitivity, offering privileged access to the socio-material milieu that shapes participants' everyday experiences (Martini, 2020).

In this study, we combine walking methodology with mapping practices to better understand the spatial entanglement between the material and discursive and the unfolding affects on sense of belonging. Walking

allowed for the rich and materially grounded investigation this lens requires. Extensive research has been done on the explicit and implicit power dynamics in maps (Corner, 2011) with artists and scholars experimenting with the combination of walking and mapping to counter unfair power dynamics through critical cartography (O'Rourke, 2013). Similarly, deep mapping aims to shift the spatial narrative towards a more democratic one by breaking through temporal, spatial, and disciplinary boundaries. It is an in-depth cartographic place investigation, which is an embodied and reflexive immersive exercise in contrast to a shallow or one-sided one, applied by literature, art, theatre, geographic information systems, or other forms (Roberts, 2016). Not necessarily a traditional cartographic approach, deep mapping involves an embodiment of mapping information on a representational plane, expressing metaphorical and sometimes material relations between various map components (Springett, 2015).

## 3. Methodology

A semi-participatory design approach was adopted to ensure that the research was inclusive, collaborative, and emplaced. This involved an initial engagement with the neighborhood committee to explain the objectives and consult on the format of the methods of walking and mapping. The objective of the study was presented to the larger community during an event organized by the committee, in the presence of about 100 participants. The presentation used maps and photos to visualize the changing neighborhood through the past, present, and future. The overlay of the plan with aerial imagery was perceived as eye-opening for understanding the concrete physical impact of the abstract spatial plan. While we extensively consulted with the neighborhood committee, the research was not done in a true partnership due to the ongoing tensions between different parties. This tension necessitated an inclusive yet critical position and an active engagement of all stakeholders, including the municipal council, developer, local entrepreneurs, and citizens not involved in the neighborhood committee. After the study and the changed plan were approved, results were communicated back to the community during a presentation in the neighborhood church, towards about 70 people. Participants included the mayor, aldermen, and representatives of various organizations, triggering member reflections (Tracy, 2010).

### 3.1. Positionality

While the first author has historic family ties to the village, the last author lives and has a business there. Two years prior to starting data collection for this study, the team has been involved in the neighborhood assemblage in a number of ways. In a previous research project, we initially connected to the municipality by joining a participatory process for a church reconversion. This research resulted in the development of a hybrid tool to engage citizens in a visual and emplaced way (Vrebos et al., 2023). We used the momentum of renewed interest in the (changing) spatial environment instigated by the proposed Spatial Development Plan (Ruimtelijk UitvoeringsPlan or RUP in Dutch) to initiate this research, sensing a need to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the neighborhood. After the launch of the RUP and the mobilization of the population, we decided to expand our socio-spatial research on the ongoing neighborhood dynamics.

### 3.2. Go-Along Walks to Co-Produce Data

Initially, we engaged with the neighborhood committee leading the mobilization and attended community events where we could informally connect with residents. Here we established further connections and

shared research intentions. The first author conducted go-along interviews with citizens and other stakeholders to investigate the unfolding sense of belonging using an assemblage lens. This lens helped us to better understand perceptions and fears of past, ongoing, and future socio-spatial change and its affects on the sense of belonging. Approaching the semi-structured interviews as go-along interviews had three advantages. First, it allowed us to take a more reciprocal approach, going beyond the traditional binary of a dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. This gave agency to place in the walking conversation, setting up a polylogue (Anderson et al., 2010). Second, it facilitated the mapping of implicit social community relationships beyond the strongest social ties. Third, it offered insights into the multilayered environmental awareness or engagement of spatial practices (Kusenbach, 2003).

The 12 interviews were semi-structured through a number of topics such as their relationship towards the neighborhood, memories, sensory experiences, and stories, such as perceptions of change or views on the future, further directed by the socio-spatial reality itself. Each interview ended with a reflection on the go-along walking methodology. Two stakeholders preferred a more traditional interview in their offices. Participants all had a direct link with the village, being citizens, having a business, and/or having a political position. While most interviews were one-on-one, one go-along was done in a group of four citizens. Participants decided on the route to walk (or in one case, to bike), the pace of movement, and locations to stop and dwell. Routes are shown in Figure 3, while some of the stops are shown in Figures 4 to 7.
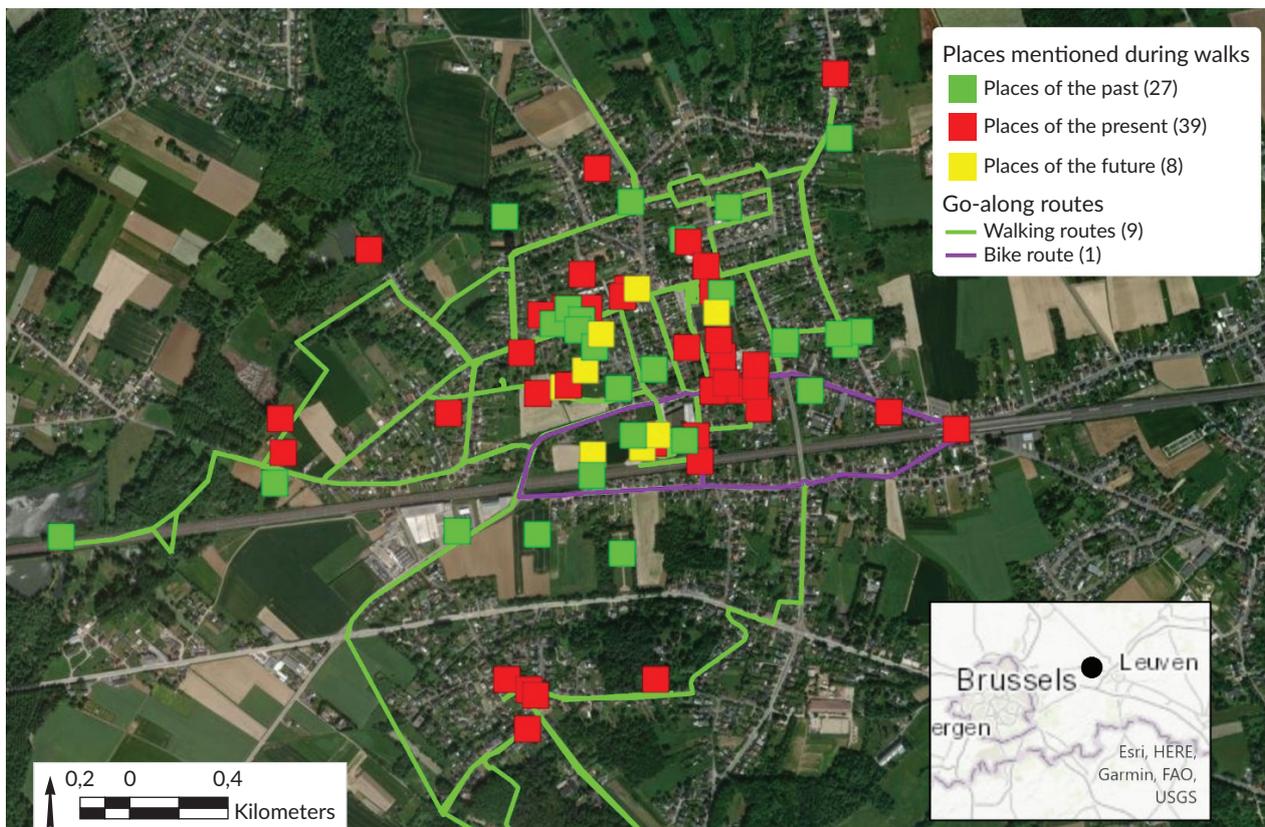


**Figure 3.** Map of the neighborhood-in-flux showing the trajectory of the walking (in green) and bike (purple) conversations and the main locations mentioned related to the past (green), present (red), and future (yellow). Notes: Map by authors, made September 2023; inlay map showing the relative position between Brussels and Leuven.

**Figure 4.** The park on the village square lacks a clear identity.


**Figure 5.** New development of serviced residences enacting the scale of the village architecture.


**Figure 6.** The facade of the previous milk factory, now temporarily used for a range of socio-cultural events and commercial activities.


**Figure 7.** The railroad dividing the village in two and a mural on the previous milk factory.

The interviewer could interfere with specific questions based on serendipitous encounters. Duration varied between one hour and three hours. The interviews ran multidirectional, as the first author was often asked to share her own socio-spatial experience with the neighborhood or her thoughts on socio-spatial change as a planner. Conversations were audio recorded, and photos were taken on the way.

### 3.3. A New Materialist Lens to Data Analysis

After transcription, we analyzed the interview data through a new materialist lens to tackle the intricacy of the neighborhood assemblage. We used a framework developed by Fox and Alldred (2022).

Taking a relational view on the sense of belonging (Youkhana, 2015) aligned with the new materialism perspective of material-discursive entanglement. Consequently, our analysis focused on (a) how human and non-human relations contribute to a sense of belonging in the neighborhood under study, (b) how affective flows draw these relations into the neighborhood assemblage, and (c) how spatial capacities are produced in the neighborhood. These themes structured the preliminary codebook uploaded in the software NVIVO and supported a semi-deductive coding strategy to work through our data. The preliminary framework consisted of the three themes of relations, affects, and capacities and started from the categories for relations (human and non-human) and affects (physical, psychological, social, and economic) as defined by Fox and Alldred (2022). Through an iterative thematic analysis process of the transcripts, we clustered the codes into code clusters and adapted the categories as seen in the coding tree in Table 1. Insights were presented to the community in a member reflection. The researchers then linked these coded affects to the spatial relations to understand the affective flows in relation to the socio-spatial accounts. Photoshop was used to visualize the different spatial narratives in a deep map (Figure 8) imposed on an aerial picture which was later hidden.

By using compacted quotes and visualizations to enact different perspectives from the go-along walks, the deep map emplaced the multi-vocal affective flows. The accompanying description narrates the four major capacities identified and the micropolitical consequences on the sense of belonging.

## 4. Findings

Our socio-spatial analysis of the interview data is presented in this section, with the coding tree in Table 1 and an overview of the interviews in Table 2. These tables are followed by the deep map in Figure 8 that geovisualizes how the specific affective flows draw the relations into the neighborhood assemblage. The affective flows are evoked through a selection of emplaced statements and illustrations based on interview quotes. This is followed by a short description of the capacities that produce these affects and the micropolitical consequences on the sense of belonging.

**Table 1.** The coding tree was generated based on themes by Fox and Alldred (2017).

| Theme | Category | Code clusters |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Relations | Human | Community |
| | | Conflict and tension |
| | | Local economy |
| | | Participation, dialogue, and communication |
| | Sense of place | Characteristics and qualities assigned to the village |
| | | Human place connection |
| | | Mobility and infrastructure |
| | | Move or settle |
| | | Nature |
| | | Neighborhood locations |
| | | Place and time |
| | | Relations between places |
| 2. Affects | Economic affects | Citizen economics |
| | | Infrastructure and economics |
| | | Lack of facilities or deficient facilities |
| | | Market economics |
| | Psychological and emotional affects | Ambiguity |
| | | Appreciation for place or spatial change |
| | | Concerns about spatial change |
| | Physical and spatial affects | Change as a loss or tabula rasa |
| | | Change of public infrastructure as an improvement |
| | | Change that builds on what is there |
| | | Expansion and new constructions (open space disappears) |
| | | Lack of change |
| | | Social and spatial affect each other |
| | | Speed or extent of change (unrecognizable) |

**Table 1.** (Cont.) The coding tree was generated based on themes by Fox and Alldred (2017).

| Theme | Category | Code clusters |
|---|---|---|
| 2. Affects | Socio-cultural affects | Changing community relations |
| | | Changing relations to the past |
| | | Different interests, functions, and thoughts lead to tension |
| | | Resisting change for the future |
| | | Social engagement, care, and civic life |
| | | Territorial affects, uncertainty, and resistance |
| 3. Capacities | Governance | Governance can trigger positive change |
| | | Governance issues polarize |
| | | Lack of emplacement in the development or participatory process |
| | Money | Money or power steers change |
| | People | Hope about the future of place |
| | | Speculations about place and placemaking |
| | | The protest triggered a sense of belonging |
| | | Protest and participation affected plans |
| | | Capacity to make place |
| | | Capacity to organize events |
| | Place | (Unused) potential and challenges of the existing patrimony |
| | | Changing geographical areas affect social relations |
| | | The agency of location and locale |

**Table 2.** Description of interviews.

| ID | Date | Participant position | Type of interview | Spatial narrative focus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1–4 | 13-11-2022 | Neighborhood committee (four citizens) | Go-along walk-in group | RUP is not in the interest of the community |
| 5 | 22-11-2022 | Citizen | Go-along walk one-on-one | The rich history of Veltem-Beisem is worth remembering |
| 6 | 7-12-2022 | Representative bicycle committee (non-citizen, though living within walking distance) | Go-along bike one-on-one | The situation of the current bike infrastructure is unsafe |
| | | | | Advocates practical solutions to increase the safety and comfort of cyclists |
| 7 | 8-12-2022 | Citizen | Go-along walk one-on-one | The unknown Bovenberg neighborhood also deserves attention |
| | | | | Decision-making in the RUP is disconnected from the situated reality |
| | | | | Previously active in the neighborhood association |
| 8 | 5-1-2023 | Citizen | Go-along walk one-on-one | Change has been a constant over the last 80 years |
| | | | | A previously active member of football |

**Table 2.** (Cont.) Description of interviews.

| ID | Date | Participant position | Type of interview | Spatial narrative focus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9 | 17-2-2023 | Citizen | Go-along walk one-on-one | Affordable housing is a big concern<br><br>Did everything to return to live in the village after having lived elsewhere due to the housing prices<br><br>An active member of football |
| 10 | 24-2-2023 | Alderman and (previous) entrepreneur (soon to be citizen) | Go-along walk one-on-one | Change is needed to address current socio-spatial challenges and improve living standards<br><br>Previously active in scouts and youth work |
| 11 | 26-2-2023 | Citizen and Opposition | Go-along walk one-on-one | The spatial changes and plan are harmful to the village<br><br>Active in scouts and several other organizations |
| 12 | 27-2-2023 | Citizen and Alderwoman | Go-along walk one-on-one | The municipality must protect the natural richness of the village |
| 13 | 9-3-2023 | Entrepreneur (non-citizen) | Conversation in office | Set up a business in an old milk factory due to its industrial heritage value |
| 14 | 23-5-2023 | Citizen | Go-along walk one-on-one | Social embedment in the village changed due to a widening social and spatial life circle<br><br>Active in music association |
| 15 | 9-6-2023 and 29-6-2023 | Developer (non-citizen) | Conversation in office | The new development brings life back to this sleeping village and accelerates the sustainable transition with respect for the sense of place |

### 4.1. Four Capacities

Through these affect economies, as shown in the deep map in Figure 2, we could identify four major capacities that drive the unfolding of socio-spatial changes in the neighborhood assemblage, namely place, people, municipality, and money.

#### 4.1.1. Place

Place holds the capacity to affect and be affected through interactions in the neighborhood assemblage. One aspect of this relates to its symbolic and functional meaning. Participants produced knowledge about the significance of slow places in the street such as small chapels (Figure 2), trees throwing shade on the central village square (Figure 4), or pedestrian trails in their agency to facilitate connection between community members. The walking also illustrated the capacity of slow movement to connect to place. Still, much-planned change started from a rational commuter's logic, with a strong focus on car infrastructure. The go-along interview with Participant 6 showed that the recent increase in bike infrastructure remains subordinate to car and rail passage.

**Figure 8.** Deep map of affective flows based on shortened quote statements of the interviews illustrating various affective flows of belonging (see Supplementary File).

The place capacity also becomes visible through the existing patrimony. As Participant 13 explained, it was exactly the charm and edginess of the industrial site that attracted him to open his shop in that location. Participants emphasized how construction projects fostered neighborhood identity by repurposing existing spaces and materials, including the conversion of religious facilities into a community hub, school or food charity, the adaptation of industrial sites for housing or socio-cultural purposes, and the integration of authentic elements into new residential buildings. At the same time, there is a realization that some of these buildings are not easy to repurpose and bring up-to-date to today's standards.

### 4.1.2. People Make Place

The citizens themselves hold capacities that result in a rich and evolving civic life: caring for others and place, placemaking activities, or organizing themselves for a shared goal. Residents are active in embedded associations such as the gym, football club, youth movement, or schools. They organize many festive or socio-cultural initiatives that bring neighbors regularly together. Participants talked about the changing role the Catholic institutions played within this social fabric and their adapting materialities. The various placemaking events (such as the temporary use of the industrial site, the spatial plan proposed, the different

events organized, or renewed activities in the church) reinforced place attachment by triggering a renewed spatial sensitivity. Collaboration on a shared goal, such as the protest against the plan, created momentum and built on procedural and governance skills among citizens. This is seen in actions such as the poster campaign, the organization of events, or the joint legal objections filed with the support of a crowdsourced lawyer. However, suspicions and assumptions developed into stories that unfolded speculation over the spatial changes planned, which negatively affected trust between actors. The legal action resulted in significant changes to the approved plan (later canceled under appeal), which illustrates the capacity of the people and their protest to (partly) counter powerful interests. It also showed they were emotionally affected and that citizens have a role to play in ensuring spatial change improves the neighborhood and safeguards the wellbeing of its residents.

### 4.1.3. Governance

The municipality holds the capacity to maintain this assembling through the support of civic life, the physical environment, or the role they played in the sensitive repurposing process of the church, thus enhancing a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, governance can also be constraining, as illustrated by the growing sense of distrust towards authorities with regard to the uncertain sustainability of the sports infrastructure. The analysis has shown the potential challenges certain forms of governance can put to sense of belonging, as shown by the fragmented and ambiguous participatory process of the spatial plan. It was perceived that the results from the initial participatory moments were insufficiently translated into the proposed spatial plan (such as the sense of place and density). Moreover, it was felt that there was a disbalance between who was involved in the participatory process. The number of citizens was limited, while many of the participants represented specific interest groups without being residents of the village. As such there was a critique that it was not representative of the community's interest and thus the participatory process set up by the municipality did not foster a sense of belonging towards the larger municipality. In stark contrast, it showed how governance and planning enhanced a very local sense of belonging by bringing people together in protest over spatial change and closer to their neighborhood. Citizens mentioned this joint resistance developed spatial knowledge, civic skills, and local connections.

### 4.1.4. Money

As citizens felt that economic interests drive development and socio-spatial change over social and environmental interests, money, specifically the money related to development projects, also holds capacity in the affective flows of the neighborhood. Change was described as increasing in speed and scale, bringing both benefits and challenges. On the one hand, the developer, himself an inhabitant of the broader municipality, held affective relations with many local associations, e.g., by supporting their activities. Moreover, the pop-up use of the milk factory site (Figure 6) over which he holds the development rights, brought in new enterprises and other activities, bringing together inhabitants. This produced new place symbols and attachments through different socio-spatial practices. Many of these activities were welcomed by citizens as meaningful for the community, while others were still critiqued by some interviewees as out of place. On the other hand, the larger developments hold a capacity to change not only the physical outlook but also reshape social dynamics and planning incentives, thereby affecting village qualities. The lack of transparency in combination with a perceived neglect of local knowledge and identity, led to a sense of nostalgia and fear of losing the charm and identity of the industrial site among citizens.

### 4.2. Micropolitical Consequences on the Sense of Belonging

The socio-spatial analysis of our (walking) interviews also looked at how these affective flows in these place assemblages contributed to the sense of belonging and loss on a micropolitical level. A first sense of loss relates to the affordability of housing, leading to a fear that in the future "locals" would no longer be able to afford living in the area and the previous economic diversity of inhabitants would no longer hold up. The new and planned constructions feed into a sense of loss associated with individual and community wellbeing, with a potential loss of personal gardens, access to light and open space, and quietness. Moreover, the changing physical state provokes a sense of losing rural identity, qualities, and social connectedness. Acceleration of change on different levels makes community members feel they lost control. They look for assurance that their concerns are taken into account and that the change happening is well thought through. The snippets of acceleration they see—such as the allotment development (Figure 1)—are not reassuring. One participant stated it as follows: "Don't misunderstand our protest. We are not against change, but change has to be an improvement" (Participant 3). This suggests that change has to be more than solely for economic improvement but should also benefit the community. This raises questions about who the community is and what the boundaries of the community are.

While the spatial transformations trigger emotions of nostalgia and loss, they also bring excitement and joy, sometimes even in the same locations, as illustrated by the milk factory. These contrasting emotions create tension, as can be seen in the reservation towards newcomers and the resistance against rapid change. Another micropolitical affect is the wavering trust in the authorities. The lack of transparency and clarity in decision-making and planning makes citizens suspect a hidden spatial agenda of the municipality. At the same time, there is also an increased sense of belonging through the increased uptake of civic duty and the coming together of citizens, old and new, to define and protect the sense of place. New spatial and social connections are being established in the neighborhood-in-flux. Our deep map in Figure 8 shows a glimpse of how different senses of belonging emerge and evolve.

### 4.3. How Walking Methodologies Shaped the Affective Flows

The walking methodology triggered serendipitous social and spatial encounters, which organically moved the conversation in new directions and towards new insights. When sharing the purpose of our go-alongs, a spontaneous encounter with an inhabitant working on the construction of the development inspired discussion about what makes an inhabitant a local or not. Other encounters snowballed new interviewees and exposed the implicit social networks and relations rooted in the past. The encounters with specific places triggered memories, emotions, or folk tales about previous events or past spatial practices, such as the previous industrial use of the factory or the meeting room of a music group.

During the walks, participants also encountered small new changes in their familiar environments, such as the planting of a forest, the advancement of a construction site, or the disappearance of a building. At certain moments this provoked emotions of surprise, disappointment, regret, or pride, prompting spatial narratives about the lived experiences of these places. Something similar happened on a more conscious level when navigating the places affected by the proposed municipal development plan. Some of the participants used their bodies, gestures, and deictic references to paint a picture of the environment about the affects of the plan on their lived places.

Walking provided a broad sensory exposure to all aspects of place, disclosing a richer understanding of the connection between places and inhabitants. This sensory experience moved the conversations beyond the abstract level towards specific symbols, memories, social associations, and emotions attached to a place, offering nuanced glimpses of aspects of belonging. For example, Participant 14 mentioned how mischief while playing in a field as a child instantly traveled to his parents through social control. Seeing the physical fabric, spatial changes, or significant places with a symbolic meaning gained over a prolonged socio-spatial practice, like the gym or church, provoked stories about their emotional attachment. Changes or proposed changes to this physical fabric triggered an increased spatial awareness, as was made clear by Participant 3 describing the architecture of the milk factory (Figure 6):

> Usually, you only realize what you have when it is too late. What you see here now is a layering, different depths and relative heights, and the complexity of these arcs. Until today I did not notice how beautiful this is. But what will replace this won't have this layering and complexity.

Other senses were also activated during the walks. Slowing down to walking speed led to a richer emplaced narrative and new observations. The sounds of traffic, cars, cargo, or trains, materialized the increasing sense of speed and density. Sounds of children picked up after school underlined aspects of a changing demography and mobility with an affect on spatial practice. Participants grasped the sounds of animals to accentuate a rural image of the village. Tactical sensations not only made embodied feelings of distance, shade, or wind explicit, but they also strengthened spatial narratives by embodying their concerns about the future of the place. Participant 1 linked the tactical sensation of a broken footpath to a sense of neglected maintenance in this part of the village. The walks were diffractive, as unfolding through situational coincidences of weather, time of day and year, week or weekend day. This influenced who and what we encountered and in which state, making every walk unique.

## 5. Discussion

By combining walking, a new material analysis, and deep mapping, we aimed to explore what new forms of knowledge walking methodologies could generate. We noticed that walking advanced the multiplicity of meanings, lived experiences and perspectives materialized through the unfolding physical place as a common denominator. The go-along interviews used the movement and flow of both the body and environment to develop an entangled understanding through multiple and heterogenous actors, which aligns with Youkhana's (2015) relational conceptualization of sense of belonging being materialized through place. The passing through the material and social environment of the go-along interviews unraveled the different affective flows and capacities and generated embodied, sensory, and shared knowledge with a concrete emplacement.

### 5.1. Spatial Change as a Manifestation of a Growing Social Unease

Our analysis showed that spatial change and sense of belonging are reciprocal cross-pollinating concepts in which social unease plays a key role. The sense of loss described seems to be an expression of a growing sense of social unease. Social unease is a concern or anxiety about the precarious societal state, built on a sense of collective uncontrollability of the decline of society. Social unease is strongly characterized by a

sense of loss (in trust, human capacity, ideology, political power, and sense of community), an increase in socio-economic vulnerability, and a general societal pessimism (Geurkink & Miltenburg, 2023).

The deep map showed a growing focus on individualization, with loosening social ties on a local level, a strong focus on private space, the disappearance of certain social structures, and a growing sense of institutional distrust. The vivid objection against high rise is rooted in a belief that collective living in bigger blocks disrupts social cohesion compared to ground-based allotment living. This is in line with popular concerns about dense collective housing without sufficient care for socio-spatial wellbeing (De Decker et al., 2005). The multiple nostalgic references to a rural village identity contrast with the suburban lifestyle of most residents. The sense of community, however, persists with a certain aspect of exclusion towards who and what is not perceived as part of this authentic image, triggering a perception of the decline of community. Moreover, the focus on individual property rights produced a perceived threat to individual wellbeing and welfare (such as the affordability of housing for the next generation), resulting in societal pessimism and a perception of socio-economic vulnerability.

Our analysis has also illustrated that, while there is a strong social fabric in the neighborhood, socio-spatial changes produce underlying tensions. Societal pessimism is fueled by the sense of elusiveness over the change of place. Some participants mentioned they did not join the protest, not believing it could make a difference. The new constructions and their new inhabitants resulted in a diminishing recognizability of people and place, leading to a sense of losing social control. In combination with the growing outward mobility over the last decades, these changing demographics led to an increasing heterogeneity in society with seemingly insurmountable contradictory visions. Finally, our analysis showed that citizens perceive a decline in political power with the private sector taking over responsibilities considered of general interest, such as public space and housing or steering change.

### 5.2. Walking Uncovers Multiple Belongings

The various go-along conversations exposed a multitude of belongings in the village, such as belonging to a specific age group with children, to a middle-class economic group, to a professional circle, a group of friends, a festive, cultural, or sports organization, or a street committee. It is connected to an emotional and spatial attachment shared and built over time. This touches upon dimensions of belonging as social locations and individual identification or emotional attachment as established by Yuval-Davis (2011). We also noticed aspects of the third dimension of belonging, namely the politics of belonging when it came to inhabitants who did not grow up in the village. While inhabitants that moved to the village later in life often managed to integrate through civic engagement, they kept on being referred to—by others or themselves—as not *fully* belonging to the community. Our findings demonstrated that this facet of identity and community building during childhood possesses an irreplaceable quality when compared to joining the community later in life.

Our analysis revealed a mainly binary and static thinking about place, as if place has reached or will reach an ideal state in the past or future to hang on to. Citizens often compare spatial change against a benchmarked time in the past, mainly their childhood or the moment they settled in the neighborhood. While they all talked extensively about the spatial change happening or planned, they used this moment as a benchmark to fixate on the identity of the village. A sense of belonging is cultivated through the imaginative connection to different spatial temporalities, with nostalgia serving as a key component in understanding these

temporal-spatial experiences (Colin, 2021). Some forms of spatial change felt "in place" and were welcomed, such as the establishment of the—crowdsourced—new daycare, while other forms perceived "out of place" were resisted—like the latest dense residential site developed (Figure 1). This spatial temporality also defined individual living standards for traffic or allotment types. The individual allotment type is therefore set as a standard, even with a growing realization of the limited extent of this model. In contrast, the developer and municipality envisioned a renewed neighborhood, locking the physical state of the neighborhood through vision plans. This suggests an insufficient awareness of the entanglement of spatial change and the social fabric.

The go-along interviews were well-suited to capture feelings of belonging and loss as they connected these emotions to specific place aspects and spatial practices. Walking proved especially appropriate for examining belonging through flow and movement, as suggested by Youkhana (2015). By engaging lived experiences within the dynamic physical reality of a village-in-flux, walking facilitated deeper insights. The repeated movement through the evolving physical and social environment, combined with the authors' own place connection in the reciprocal interviews, enabled a more intricate, collaborative meaning-making process.

## 5.3. Strengths and Limitations of the Go-Along Methodology

Walking through the neighborhood materialized the turn to matter in a new materialist understanding and facilitated the demonstration of affective flows. The extensive use of spatial and temporal deictic references illustrates the value of walking to articulate and share tacit emplaced knowledge and spatial experiences. Not only did these references facilitate the communication and co-production of knowledge about the village, but they also illustrate the agency of place itself in the conversation. Emplaced encounters (in the form of hearing traffic, seeing the impact of new constructions, or the feeling of mud on the boots or the crooked sidewalk) or ad-hoc meetings unfolded new avenues of data that would perhaps not have been mentioned during classic interviews behind a desk.

The walks have been particularly suited to investigate sense of belonging given how they facilitate rich and multidimensional emplaced narratives about the socio-spatial changing village. Navigating the social and physical elements together with participants, advanced a multiplicity of meanings and lived experiences, allowing for a nuanced understanding, as represented in the deep map. Participant 12 mentioned that "walking was a slowing down" (walking in contrast to taking the car on a daily basis) which made her reflect on her daily environment, physical changes, and what remains.

Walking methodologies allow knowledge to be co-produced between place, interviewee, and interviewer. Sensing the environment while speaking about it helped to visualize the spatial dimensions of proposed plans and developments. Moreover, the emplaced conversation also prompted aspects the interviewee would otherwise not think about, leading to conversations that focused on more concrete aspects of place and community.

This led to the interviews being rather long with a lot of unexpected information and the noise of traffic. One participant expressed content for not needing to filter his stories, while others pointed out that the walking made it less abstract and more concrete. One interview was done with the citizens committee. This group walk brought together similar views. While we did not experience power dynamics that could have

affected the conversation, the interaction evolved organically as new ideas or stories were unfolded by other participants' words.

A certain bias could be identified on the sample level which could have provided an even broader perspective. Using opportunistic sampling, we followed diffractive leads to enact different perspectives. However, we did not reach saturation. Therefore, this narrative, even intended to be multivocal, must be read with a certain nuance as it cannot claim to cover a complete variation of perspectives.

Another limitation of this research is the specific period of data collection, especially unique due to the ongoing planning processes. The static project logic contrasts with the topics of concern as very dynamic processes of change. The annulment of the planning process was only one of the many ways the socio-spatial context has already changed compared to the situation during data collection. This spatial narrative must thus be read to understand this specific period in time. By staying connected to the dynamic community and stakeholders, we aim to counter the limitation of this static project logic.

This ongoing long-term connection to the village and community facilitated the co-production of a shared understanding as it enabled us to better understand the socio-spatial relations and the material markers people used to describe the changes. While this facilitated cognitive empathy, it did raise the risk for bias, and thus asked for additional attention to ensure the quality of our research and avoid over or under-interpretation of data. Using quality markers appropriate for qualitative research, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hannes, 2011), we integrated extensive and multiple active reflection moments, both among the authors as well as with the public. Specifically, this was done through ongoing peer debriefing, member checks, and member reflection.

### 5.4. Implications

The study highlights the significance of emplaced participation, both in research and practice. By studying the flows of affects, we demonstrated the interconnectedness of spatial change and social unease. This highlights the importance of considering the social implications of spatial change in urban planning and development. Cornwall (2008) points to two important questions participation has to ask, namely who participates and how participation influences decision-making.

While the municipality's pre-designed participatory frameworks might have limited citizen engagement to feedback or formal procedures, "in ways that domesticate [citizens] initiative and co-opt them into supporting the status quo" (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 22), the citizen committee demonstrated the potential to break free from these constraints. They successfully claimed an emplaced dialogue, revealing the power to influence the spatial future and demand the integration of tacit knowledge and local narratives that inform an emplaced vision. Walking methodologies offer a promising alternative, as they can facilitate community engagement, relationship-building, and a deeper sense of belonging (Kanstrup et al., 2014). By exploring the environment together with the community, planners, and designers can gain insider knowledge and challenge dominant narratives (Horgan et al., 2023).

However, the study also underscores the importance of inclusive and representative participation. The plan did not align with the input of the walks with the soundboard group, composed primarily of external

representatives and few neighbors, and failed to integrate the local sense of place. To ensure meaningful and well-defined participation, it is crucial to balance a diverse range of stakeholders. While the community is central, such participation goes beyond the static boundaries of the community and municipality and includes minority groups as well as representatives of other interests. Creating spaces for open and ongoing dialogue and critical reflection could take the form of a living lab set up by the municipality, which makes affective flows in the planning processes more transparent. Future participatory processes should prioritize emplaced approaches, walking methodologies, genuine engagement with local communities, and transparent communication. Such an approach would require a shift in mindset, time, resources, and ongoing negotiation of interests. However, it could significantly improve spatial planning and design processes by better reflecting the needs, aspirations, and unique character of specific places in a broader context. City policy could prescribe such participatory processes as ongoing networked dialogues in and beyond communities that invite continuous critical discussions of what entails the materiality of belonging, nostalgia, and power.

## 6. Conclusion

This article applied go-along interviews to investigate the sense of belonging in a neighborhood-in-flux. Data was analyzed using a new materialistic analytical approach (Fox & Alldred, 2022) and represented through a deep map. Our results showed how spatial and the resulting social change could be seen as a manifestation of growing social unease, triggering a nostalgia that served as a central element in producing a sense of belonging. At the same time, our results showed an unfolding of multiple entangled belongings in the changing socio-spatial fabric which are crucial to understand to plan and design for an inclusive future of a suburban village.

The go-along interviews generated embodied, sensory, and shared knowledge about the community, the neighborhood, and the affects of the transitions they are undergoing as the village's rural fabric morphs into a suburban one. The contributions of this article are manifold. First, we explored and confirmed the value of walking methodologies to explore the multidimensional and dynamic nature of sense of belonging. Second, we provided a useful example of applying a new materialist analytical model for neighborhood development purposes. Third, we shed light on the flows of affects that play a role in producing multiple senses of belonging in a changing neighborhood. By studying these affective flows, we demonstrated the interconnectedness of spatial change and social unease. This highlights the importance of considering the social implications of spatial change in urban planning and development.

## Conflict of Interests

As part of this study, we connected to the community advocacy group Leefbaar Veltem to sample participants and communicate with the community. The church board, with the support of the municipality, generously helped to organize the presentation of the findings and provided refreshments. While the first author had family ties in the village, the third author is a resident of Veltem-Beisem and runs a social innovation business there.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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