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Let's reimagine place together

Introduction

In November 2021, Mesopartner and a group of friends organised an online dialogue series. We invited a diverse group to jointly reimagine what we mean by "place" and how we approach this concept.

Mesopartner has a long history of supporting place-based development. As a firm, we have developed a widely used approach to Local and Regional Economic Development (LRED). "Place" has always played an important role for us as we believe territories are central to all development efforts (see AR Article: AR 2015/Article 1).

Places are always made up of the people and communities living in them. The reality in places is continuously changing; they are ecologies that are evolving, not machines that can be repaired. Vibrant communities come together in dialogue, not on the outside, but inside the challenges and muddles of people's lives, connecting from person to person, continuously learning together. Healthy and vital relationships between people and shared practices within a community provide the figurative soil from which enriching and nourishing initiatives

can grow. These initiatives help the community to thrive and make their places more friendly and liveable.

We therefore wanted to explore how we could not only contribute with frameworks and processes which people in places could use to foster their economic development, but also how we could engage people to strengthen the vitality and vibrancy of the places in which they live. For us, relational vitality is a basis for, and ideally goes together with, any development.

The question we asked in the dialogue series was: ***How can we contribute to the vitality and vibrancy of the places and communities in which we work?***

Warm Data

The format of the dialogue series was built on Warm Data, and the associated People Need People (PNP) process. Warm Data is a living practice that Nora Bateson of the International Bateson Institute (IBI) developed. Marcus Jenal and Frank Waeltring are trained Warm Data hosts. We also invited some friends who are trained hosts as well to co-host the dialogue series with us.

Warm Data invites us to embrace this "trans-contextuality" of life and see its inherent potential. The Reimagining Place dialogue series invited people to meet the complexity of these challenges with the richness and resourcefulness of their full human potential.

The Dialogue series

The series took place in five online sessions in November 2021. Each session, except the last one, started with a story related by one of the hosts, and then the participants were invited to have conversations inspired by a question that was shared with them for the session. At the end of each session and during the fifth session, the participants were invited to reflect on the conversations and share learning. How has this turned out?

How has this turned out

It is difficult to evaluate Warm Data practices – one could even say that it would constitute an act of violence against the very nature of the practice. So instead of trying to search for the effects or outcomes of the Reimagining Place series, we would like to share our personal reflections and those of some of our co-hosts.
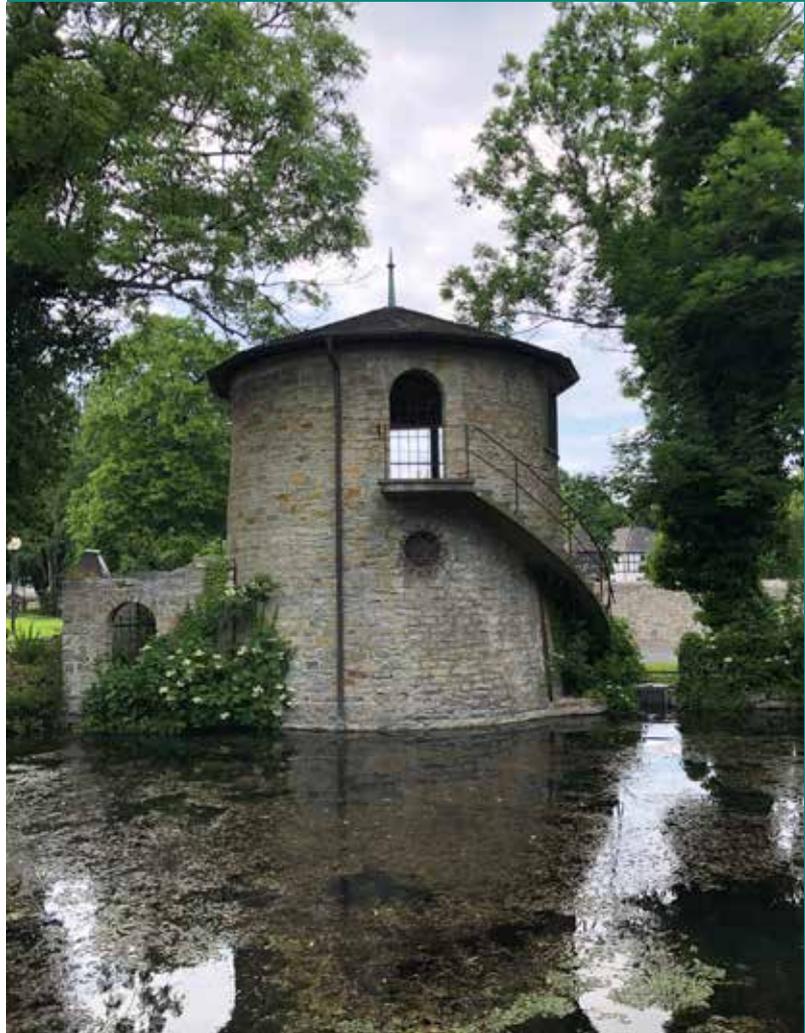
Marcus Jenal's view

What has stuck in my mind from the dialogue series is the shift in tone in the conversations. Given that most of the participants were partners, collaborators or clients of Mesopartner, the initial tone was professional. The aesthetics of the conversations were characterised by an objective assessment of the questions and presentation of arguments from one's point of view. As the conversations went on, the tone and aesthetics shifted. The tone became much more personal. People started to talk about their own lives and their personal experiences. The meaning of place shifted from something to intervene into something we live in.

This is the beauty of Warm Data practices. They soften us, the participants, into our humanity; they loosen the constraints of professionalism and role and the façade that we erect to show what we think others expect. But in the end, we are all human, and the richest conversations occur when we do not withhold our humanity but fully engage.

If we managed to create a space and an atmosphere where people were more human in their interactions with each other, even in our small series, what effect could this practice have on a place? What would happen if we brought together people from a place in a series of dialogues, not with a specific outcome in mind, but to connect with them in their humanity and thus widen what could be discussed.

Since even the small group we brought together in the series moved from just sharing professional arguments to sharing personal stories, what effect would it have when people in a place started to share more personal stories?

Frank Waeltring's view

I was excited to share this PNP dialogue approach with colleagues, friends and partners to see whether it affected them in the way it affected me and if it could open a new space for connecting, talking and sharing openly about our daily work and the personal aspects connected with it. "Reimagining place" tackles emotions such as belonging, individual histories, path dependencies of local societies, relationships experienced and conflicts. When I am "in my place", I feel entwined in it with all my being and life history. Nonetheless, sometimes in my work in my own or other places, I experience the tools, methodologies and skills I transfer as a protective shield or as a grip to maintain control over myself, my role before others and partially the process. "Being in the map and not in the territory", a phrase I picked up from Nora Bateson, makes total sense. Finally, our core work is about relationship building, addressing people's feelings towards their place and discovering why they are interested in putting creativity and development efforts into it. Reaching towards these sentiments should become part of our work. We can only do this if we are part of this process as individuals or humans, not just as experts. This also requires us to put aside the protective shields we often like to use. It rather requires discovering what is really going on between people and representative bodies. Encouraging openness through dialogue

I am thankful that it managed to open a new way of communication between the participants and us. I realised again that this way of talking to each other is needed more in our sphere of work, between each other as colleagues and with partners in the places where we work. We need to move out of our expert role more often. The pure expert view could undermine a real discovery process. In other words: embracing the territory versus embracing a plan enriches what we see and discover, creating new relationships relevant to reimagining the place.

Roger Duck's view

The freer people feel as they share stories in PNP sessions, the more alive the process becomes.

This series was framed by an invitation to "reimagine the role of community and place in development". Any intention such as this inevitably reduces variety by focusing on what is talked about. This can work well for attracting a certain audience but risks throttling the life out of emergent possibility.

As a warm data host, I take it that conscious awareness is just the tiniest glimmer of the unimaginably complex vitality of Mind and Nature. Warm Data hosting opens the widest possible space for people to find their way into new ways of knowing in their own ways. I have come to understand more deeply that learning together does not mean learning the same things, and much of the learning may not be expressible in language.

I can only comment on my own learning, much of which has submerged below awareness with the passing of time. I retain the sense, however, that the four PNP sessions had an aliveness and fluidity, which did not feel overly constrained by the defined topic. I sometimes sense a "softening" of my certainties in PNPs. This can be uncomfortable, but I sense a settling over time into a deeper appreciation of aliveness-in-togetherness. During this experience, I tried to capture something of this movement out of separation and into vitality with a poem, framed by the theme of reimagining place.

My place is the space that I live in
Distinct from those places apart.
To cut up a space creates places
That tidily cover the chart.

I've fallen in love with my models
The territory lost in the maps
Extraordinary places undreamt of
Unseen in the shimmering gaps.

Reality thought of as static
Where images hang in a room
Conceptions of up, down and sideways
Just fingers that hint at the moon.

Our thinking invisibly structures
A pattern that holds us in place
Life disrupts
In tangled touches.

Through purple as deep as the evening
A whisper of yellow gives birth
To losing this love of the models
And plunging in love with the earth.

Togethering softly I settle,
In sanity, into myself
A home where my being feels normal
A place of untameable health.

In rhythms of wildness
We step into awe
For nothing is ever
Just that and no more.

Emily Stewart's view

As a member of Generation Rent, I have a gnawing sense that the inquiry into reimaging place is existential. It returns back (and goes forward) to ancestry, to the tears in the fabric of our paths, the practice and experience of community, the village, mutual aid and gentrification. This series was an easy invitation to accept, not least because of the joy of co-hosting with the souls alongside me. Still, because the relationship to place – as a muse, concept, location, space, invitation, idea and verb – is one, I believe, that the 21st century is asking us to play with. Joining an organisation's invitation is particularly interesting, as we make an agreement as hosts to go in blind. As usual, I had no idea who was in the room, who of the (I'm sure) very impressive attendees did what, or where, or what their relationship was to Mesopartner. This is the style of labs – the lack of roles extends to how we observe ourselves as hosts. So, I was not able to censor, just as this inquiry occurred within me, between me and others, and among the group as a whole. Poetry emerged, as it often does (see above), by giving it space. That is our role as hosts – to somehow find a way to allow and request and set a tone of a place that can welcome in the contour lines and the old paths, the rivers and the source. From this, I think we can begin to find a way.

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