

# Involving stakeholders in cross-border regional design

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**Abstract:** Regional design is a means to develop integrated spatial plans with a long term perspective in close collaboration with stakeholders. In doing so, regional design shows similarities to participatory design. In this paper, a regional design process is compared to the basic principles and values of participatory design. The regional design process showed strong signs of *mutual learning, embeddedness in actual situations, using participatory tools and techniques, and opening up to alternative visions*. The democracy oriented principles *equalizing power relations* and *committing to democratic practices* were also present in the regional design case, but not in a emancipatory or empowering way. The regional design case showed the signs of a fraternalistic approach to participatory design, in which multiple voices and perspectives grapple with each other. Regional design can learn from participatory design theory and practice, as it resonates with the principles and values of participatory design.

**Keywords:** Regional design, participatory design, workshops, landscape architecture

## 1. Introduction

Designing (urban) landscapes on a regional scale has gained momentum in landscape architecture and urban planning and design over the last decades (Kempenaar et al. 2016; Meijsmans and Beelen 2010; von Seggern, Werner and Grosse-Bächle 2008). This practice is referred to as regional designing and is a means to develop integrated strategic spatial plans for a region with a long term perspective (Oosterlynck et al. 2011). The responsibility for regional developments is typically distributed over various stakeholders with interdependent relationships (Albrechts and Balducci, 2013), making regional designing a collaborative and deliberative effort that exhibits strong similarities to participatory design approaches.



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In participatory design, democracy and genuine participation are central values (Bratteteig, Bødker et al. 2013; Robertson and Wagner 2013). It aims to give participants a real say in the design process and wants to empower them (Kensing and Greenbaum 2013). In regional designing, the engagement with stakeholders seems to be based on more pragmatic motivations, like the disclosure of useful stakeholder knowledge and the need for collaboration to deal with networked regional problems. In this paper we compare a regional design process to the basic principles and values of participatory design. We examine a regional design process and its final product to see how stakeholders influenced the design process and outcome, and how the workshops shaped the perspective for future use and application of these design outcomes. Our case concerns the design of a landscape perspective for the Three Countries Park, a cross-border region located in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany.

## **2. Regional designing: a participatory design process?**

Regional design is rooted in both landscape architecture and urban planning and design and envisions the future arrangement of settlements, infrastructures, water features, nature reserves and other land-uses in a region, including their relationships and their aesthetic appearances (de Jonge 2009; Neuman 2000). However, regional designing is not aimed at changing the physical environment directly, it is a form of *second order design* that is “engaged in designing the decision environment within which others (sometimes these are other design professionals) make decisions to alter or add to the built environment” (George 1997, p. 145). The resulting designs seek to accommodate change over a long period of time, have a strategic character and provide a context for smaller scale decisions. Regional designs are no blueprints, but take other forms like frameworks, visions or guidelines that provide direction for future development and change, which can be used as navigation devices in the uncertain and unpredictable regional process that lies ahead (Langner 2014).

In regional design, the term regional is used to indicate the supra-local scale on which the design is focussed, which can vary from the scale of a couple of municipalities up to the scale of a nation state. The size of the region concerned in regional design is predominantly determined by the issues that are addressed in regional design. For example, when the regional design is concerned with flood-prevention, a logical sub-system of the watershed will be taken into account. These large scale representations are accompanied by suggestions for small scale and short term interventions to make the long term vision and the pathway towards the desirable future tangible (Neuman 2000).

In a region multiple stakeholders are involved in the planning, making, shaping and maintaining of the region, but it often lacks a designated regional planning authority (Albrechts and Balducci 2013). The stakeholders have a shared responsibility and various interdependent relationships. For example, the value of real estate is related to its connectivity to schools, shops, and its location to forests, nature reserves and valuable cultural

landscapes. A regional design project is often commissioned by a group of regional stakeholders that invite other stakeholders to join in in the project. Designers engage with these stakeholders in the design process to make use of their knowledge, but also to exchange ideas, to build collective perceptions of possible regional futures, and to create ownership of the ideas to improve the perspective for future action. To organise such interaction between designers and stakeholders, workshops, ateliers or other interactive events are organised as part of the regional design process.

Participatory design is a design methodology that involves future users as co-designers in the design process, and includes a collection of design practices (van der Velden and Mörtberg 2014). Democracy and genuine participation are strong values in participatory design (Bratteteig et al. 2013; Robertson and Wagner 2013). Based on these values a series of principles have evolved that characterise participatory design practices: equalizing power relations, committing to democratic practices, embeddedness in actual situations, mutual learning, using participatory tools and techniques, and opening up to alternative visions (Kensing and Greenbaum 2013; van der Velden and Mörtberg 2014). Participatory design considers the design process and product equally important. The inclusion of future users or stakeholders in the design process, and the structure and design of this process influence the final design product as well as the future use and value of these design products (Simonsen and Robertson 2013). This implies that designers take other design-decisions than without participation, and that stakeholders look at the end result differently after participating in a design process. Participatory design results are a true co-production of designers and stakeholders. In this paper we investigate to what extent these values and principles also account for regional designing.

### **3. Methods and materials**

The regional design case described in this paper concerned the design of a landscape perspective for the Three Countries Park, a cross-border region located in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany (Figure 1). The regional design was part of a larger project on developing a landscape policy for the Three Countries Park that started in March 2012 and finished in May 2014. The development of the landscape perspective was phase two in the project and included a series of three one-day stakeholder workshops which were held in October 2012, November 2012 and in March 2013. The role of these stakeholder workshops in shaping the design outcome and the perspective of future use of the design results was central in our investigation.

The case was researched by reading and analysing:

- maps, sketches and collective notes produced during the workshops,
- workshop minutes,
- other project documents, such as intermediate reports, committee meeting minutes and project team minutes,

- the regional design products which were presented in the final project reports (Houwen, Blokland and Wirth, 2014; Lohrberg et al. 2014a, 2014b, 2014c).

Moreover, the author was part of the design team that drew up the landscape perspective and could also build on personal observations and experiences in the analysis of the case. Below we give a short introduction of the regional design case.



Figure 1 The Three Countries Park area.

### 3.1 Designing a landscape perspective for the Three Countries Park

The Three Countries Park covers an area of cultural landscape between the cities of Hasselt, Liège, Maastricht, Heerlen, and Aachen with a diameter of around 50 km. The landscape is crisscrossed by several streams and has been inhabited since 4500 BC. Over the last centuries, agricultural use and innovations, economic developments, and demographic changes influenced and shaped the use of the land and the landscape, and made it what it is today: a varied landscape where attractive rural areas alternate with valuable nature reserves, cultural heritage and a polycentric urban network (Figure 2).

The Three Countries Park covers an area, in which three different languages are spoken: French, German and Dutch. Furthermore, the region encompasses four different administrative and institutional settings: Germany, the Netherlands, Flanders and Wallonia. The Three Countries Park was first named in 1993 in the MHAL Spatial Development Perspective (Internationale Coordinatiecommissie 1993), a spatial vision for the development of the cross-border region including the cities of Maastricht, Hasselt, Aachen

and Liège (hence the MHAL abbreviation). In 2001, as one of the follow-ups on the MHAL perspective, the Three Countries Park initiative started, a collaboration of nine public partners stemming from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. Their aim is to protect, develop and manage the Three Countries Park in a functional, sustainable and attractive manner. In 2012 they commissioned with the financial support of ESPON ([www.espon.eu](http://www.espon.eu)) a project to develop a cross-border landscape policy, which included the design of the Three Countries Park landscape perspective.



*Figure 2 Views on the Three Countries Park landscape*

#### **4. Designer – stakeholder interaction in the design process**

The design process for the Three Countries Park landscape perspective centred around a cycle of three one-day workshops with regional stakeholders (Figure 3). The first workshop focussed on the collective exploration of the structure, problems and issues of the Three Countries Park. The second workshop explored principle solutions, and the third workshop focussed on the testing of the draft results. The workshops were prepared, organised and facilitated by the regional design team.

Besides representatives of the nine organisations involved in the Three Countries Park initiative, several other regional stakeholders participated. For each workshop a balance was

sought in stakeholders from different countries and institutional settings. Next to the design team and stakeholders, the other members of the project group that worked on the landscape policy project also participated in the workshop. This resulted in 18 participants in the first workshop, 24 in the second and 15 in the third workshop. English, a foreign language to all participants including the design team and the project group, was the agreed language for the workshops, minutes and reports. Below we describe the aim, preparation and organisation of each of these workshops more in detail, and reflect on their outcome and effect on the development of the design ideas.



Figure 3 Impression of the workshops

#### 4.1 Workshop one: Working on storylines

The first workshop for the landscape perspective was held in October 2012 and aimed to elaborate and discuss trends and developments that would affect the landscape of the Three Countries Park. In preparation for the workshop, the landscape of the Three Countries Park and its history were analysed by the design team to gain a deeper understanding of the landscape and how it has come about. Furthermore, the design team developed three storylines for possible future developments in the region that built on the research of the first phase of the project on trends and developments:

1. new rural dynamics of the Three Countries Park landscape,
2. resilient and climate proof Three Countries Park landscape,
3. the attractive Three Countries Park metropolitan landscape.

The workshop started with a short presentation of the landscape analysis and an introduction of the three storylines. In the afternoon, three sub-groups consisting of representatives from Germany, Flanders, Wallonia and the Netherlands, each discussed and elaborated one of the storylines.

This workshop resulted in a deeper understanding with the design team of the landscape issues and developments across the Three Countries Park. It also enhanced the teams' understanding of the cultural and institutional differences between different parts of the region, and the value that the stakeholders attached to these differences. Not only the design team benefitted from the workshop, the stakeholders also broadened their perception with the long term and large scale trends and developments incorporated in the

storylines. Moreover, issues, values and perspectives were also shared amongst the stakeholders, which improved both their knowledge and understanding of situations on the other side of the border.

The composition of sub-groups in the afternoon with representatives of Germany, Flanders, Wallonia and the Netherlands enabled this exchange of knowledge and a detailed exploration of the three storylines, which led to a specification of issues. For example, several stakeholders argued that although the overall accessibility of the Three Countries Park for walking and cycling is good, the access to attractive landscape elements like water features and historic sites is very poor in the region. Other important issues that arose in the discussions concerned the mutual relationship between the urban and rural parts, and the rich cultural variation within the region. The stakeholders expressed that the design team should include these urban-rural relationships and celebrate the cultural differences throughout the Three Countries Park in the landscape perspective.

#### *4.2 Workshop two: principle solutions*

The second workshop was held one month later in November 2012 and focussed on the collaborative exploration of desirable future landscape developments. In preparation of this workshop the design team identified five core qualities of the Three Countries Landscape and elaborated how these characteristics added to the landscape quality in the various parts of the Three Countries Park. The core qualities built on the outcomes of the discussion during the first workshop as well as a series of interviews with the nine commissioning stakeholders on the qualities of the landscape. Next to the core qualities, the design team had prepared a longlist of possible aims and ambitions for the landscape perspective.

In the morning, the design team presented an analysis of the core qualities of the Three Countries Park landscape, which were then discussed. After this discussion, the focus turned to the aims and ambitions for the Three Countries Park landscape, and the main challenges that should be addressed. At the end of the morning session all stakeholders (design team and project group excluded) were invited to mark two challenges, which he/she thought the landscape perspective should focus on. This indicated the *management of an attractive, diverse and historic rich landscape* as the primary challenge with the development of a continuing *cross border ecological network* as a secondary challenge. *Tourism* and *water management* were also indicated as important topics to take into consideration.

The aim of the afternoon session of the second workshop was to discuss and explore options for the enhancement of the core qualities of the Three Countries Park landscape. The design team had selected four different locations within the Three Countries Park landscape to initiate this discussion. The participating stakeholders were divided into four groups, each consisting of stakeholders from one institutional setting (Flanders, Wallonia, Germany, the Netherlands). In four consecutive rounds, the groups discussed possible landscape measures

and realisation options for the four locations. The design team and project group members hosted the four tables, reporting the ongoing discussion. These discussions showed that each area or site has its own specifics and highlighted the need to combine the development of ongoing landscape structures with tailor made, place based solutions that fit the local context.

The main result of the second workshop comprised a communal idea on the points of departure and focus of the landscape perspective. The morning discussion confirmed the shared value of connected and continuing landscape structures across borders, while the afternoon session illustrated the differences between specific sites in the region, and the value of developing place-based solutions.

#### *4.3 Workshop three: testing draft results*

The third workshop was held four months later and focussed on the evaluation and testing of the draft design result: a landscape framework based on a series of guiding principles for landscape development. In the period between the second and third workshop the design team developed a draft landscape perspective aimed at balancing the values of landscape unity and diversity. This perspective combined the value of ongoing and connected landscape structures, such as river valleys, slopes and plateaus with the rich cultural diversity of the Three Countries Park region. The design team developed a series of guiding principles for landscape development that would result in a landscape framework, which secures the value of ongoing landscape structures, but also leaves room for local variations.

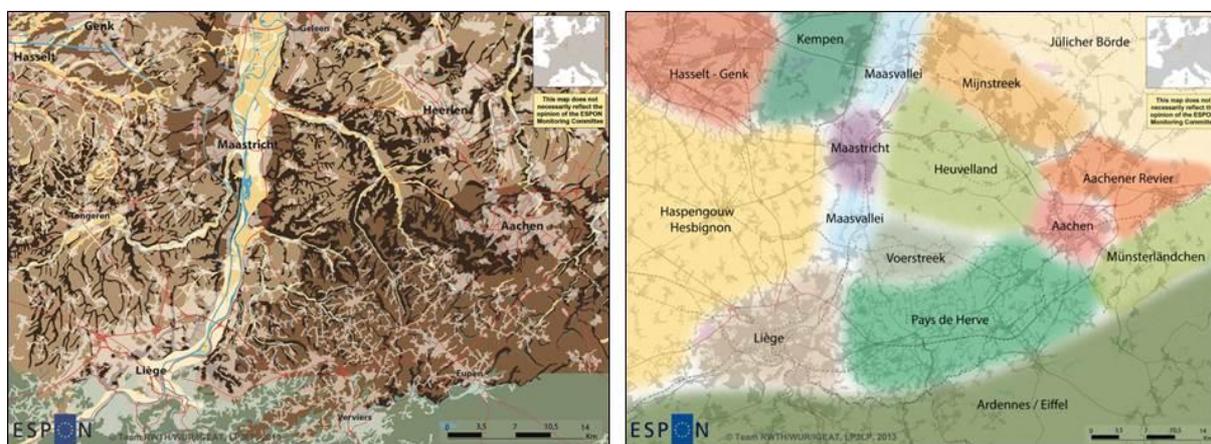
In the morning, the design team presented these draft results, which were then discussed with the stakeholders. An important comment that arose from the morning discussion concerned the need to make local culture and identity equally important to the development and management of the ongoing landscape structures. The stakeholders stressed that this value should be more explicitly addressed and stressed in the final result. Moreover, the stakeholders made some detailed comments and had valuable suggestions to improve the guiding principles, including their representation.

In the afternoon, three groups were formed with representatives of different institutional settings. These groups discussed the potential use and value of the guiding principles in local projects with members of the design team. Each stakeholder was asked beforehand to bring documentation on one or more recent local landscape related projects. The groups compared these projects with the draft landscape framework and guiding principles and discussed whether the framework and guiding principles would have helped and fitted with these projects. Most projects turned out to have already included several of the guiding principles, but the majority also could have been enhanced with additional ones.

The stakeholders found the guiding principles very helpful in connecting the regional landscape quality ambition with local situations. The general perception was that the guiding principles for landscape development were more valuable than the landscape framework map as part of a shared landscape policy. This insight proved to be a very important outcome of the third workshop. The design team chose to put the guiding principles at the heart of their proposal, instead of the landscape framework map as was their original intention. Moreover, the design team realised the need to explain how the regional guiding principles for landscape development related to local situations, and could be used in the elaboration of place-based solutions.

## **5. How the workshops helped to shape the regional design outcome**

Balancing unity and diversity in future landscape development of the Three Countries Park became the heart of the landscape perspective. This reflects the discussion that arose multiple times during the workshops on the values of both connected and ongoing landscape structures and the rich cultural diversity within the Three Countries Park. ‘Unity and diversity’ were represented in two maps of the Three Countries Park, one that represents the underlying geomorphological basis or landscape structure, and a map that identifies the various identities throughout the region (Figure 4). These maps were presented as a diptych in the final publication of the project (Houwen et al. 2014, p. 42-43), representing the equal importance of unity and diversity for future landscape development in the Three Countries Park.



*Figure 4 Landscape structure and the Regional identities in the Three Countries Park*

The landscape perspective furthermore provides 13 guiding principles for the preservation and development of the Three Countries Park landscape (Figure 5), which are related to the relief elements in the Three Countries Park (Figure 6). The guiding principles are based on the one hand on existing reports and policy documents on the landscape in different parts of the region, and on the other hand on the discussions on specific landscape issues and the core-qualities of the landscape in the first and second workshop. This is for example

illustrated by guiding principle 13 'Improved access to heritage and nature sites', an issue that was addressed and discussed in the first workshop.

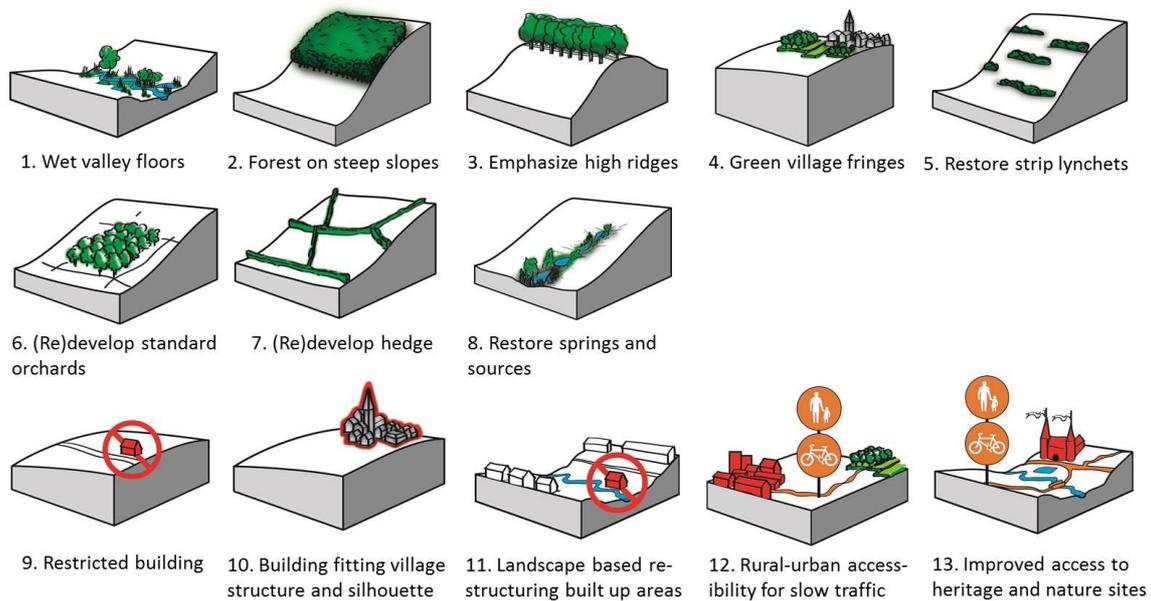


Figure 5 Thirteen guiding principles for future landscape protection and development in the Three Countries Park.

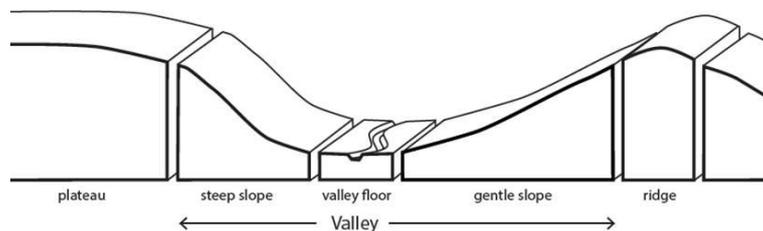


Figure 6 Cross section with the main relief elements in the Three Countries Park

A consistent application and use of these principles in future projects, decisions and physical adjustments to the landscape is expected to lead to, and reinforce a regional green-blue framework (Figure 7). However, the guiding principles have a general character and need to be elaborated into place-based solutions that take local spatial and economic developments into account, and include local knowledge and customs. These place based solutions will ensure the continuance of landscape diversity and local character in the three Countries Park, a value that was expressed multiple times during the workshops. This envisioned process was represented with a flow chart in the final report (Figure 8).

As the described before, the third workshop was important in determining the final order of presenting the design outcomes. The design team made the guiding principles central stage in the landscape perspective based on the discussions in this workshop, and added a flow chart to illustrate that these general principles needed to be worked out in local place based

solutions. Furthermore, several of the guiding principles were adjusted and altered based on the workshop discussion, just like that discussions on the maps led to improved representations of these maps.

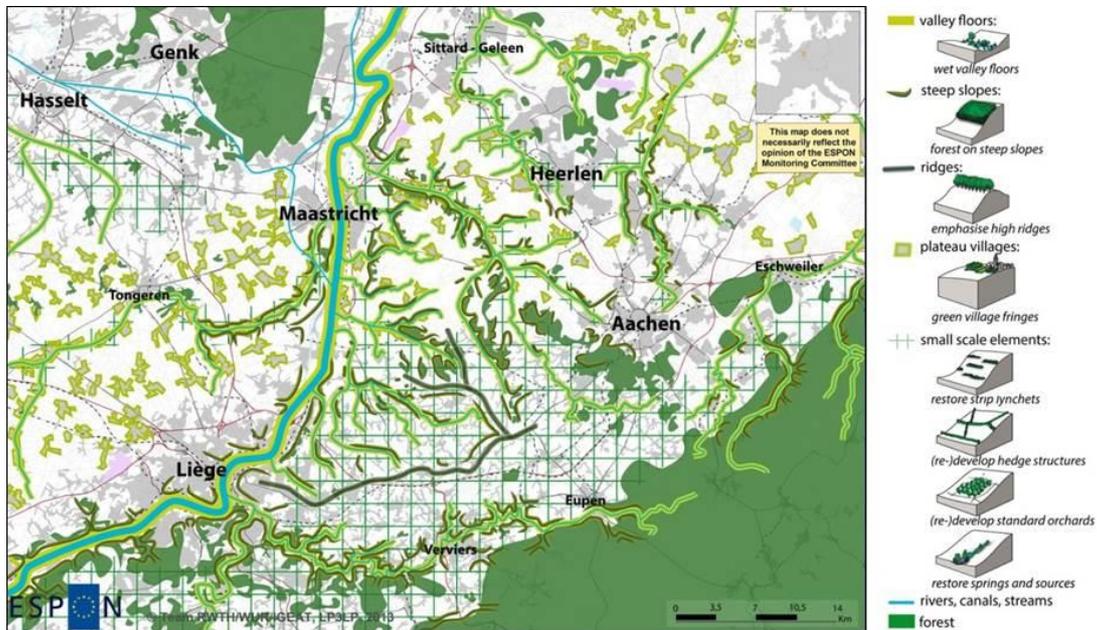


Figure 7 Green-blue framework

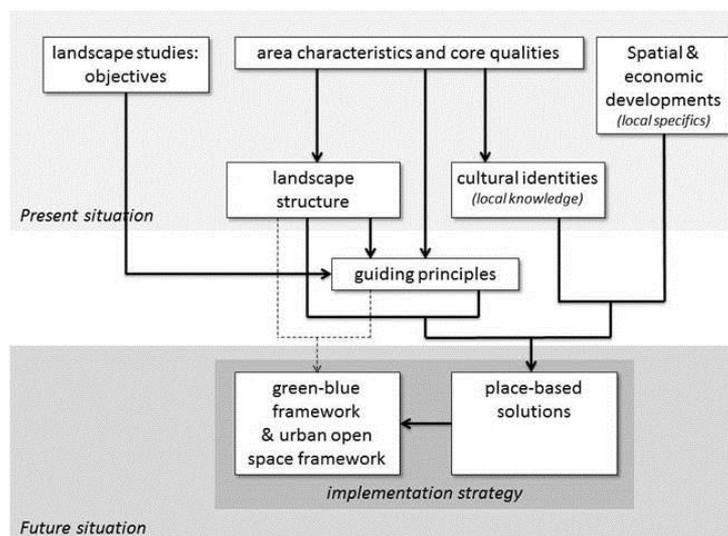


Figure 8 Flow chart for the local application of the guiding principles

### 5.1 Expected future use of the design outcomes

The ‘testing’ of the guiding principles for landscape development in the third workshop – by comparing them to multiple existing projects – illustrated that these principles fitted various local situations throughout the Three Countries Park. This ‘testing’ resembles use-before-use in participatory design (Brandt, Binder and Sanders 2013), and strengthened the idea that

the principles could be useful and applicable in the different the institutional settings in Germany, the Netherlands, Flanders and Wallonia.

However, the actual landscape of the region is a continuous co-production of local stakeholders, such as farmers, municipalities, water boards, citizens etc. These numbers supersede the involved stakeholders in the workshops by thousands. It will take time, effort and long term perseverance to get all these stakeholders involved in landscape management, protection and enhancement based on the guiding principles for landscape development. This critical issue for the success of the proposed ideas was only briefly touched upon in the project and not properly addressed.

The third phase of the landscape policy project elaborated four strategies for active landscape preservation and enhancement in the Three Countries Park. One of these strategies, the development of a green-infrastructure programme for the region is currently taken up by the nine public partners joint in the Three Countries Park initiative. Moreover, the city of Aachen announced it is going to use the guiding principles as a starting point for their new landscape plan. These follow ups confirm that the design of the landscape perspective touched upon a concept – guiding principles – that is useful and applicable for landscape management, protection and enhancement in different settings. It also shows that the involved stakeholders take ownership of the regional design results and use them. However, cross-border collaboration remains difficult as borders keep hindering cooperation (Fricke 2015) and much will depend on the available resources for cross-border – landscape – developments (Kempenaar, Brinkhuijsen and van den Brink, in review).

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

The analysis of our case shows that the principles of participatory design resonate in regional designing. Mutual learning for example, clearly took place during the regional design process. The design team could not have dealt with the complexity of the multiple institutional setting in three countries without the input of the stakeholders. In that sense, the interaction with stakeholders was a necessity. The stakeholders also learned from the workshops, exchanged ideas, values and perspectives, and developed insights in how to apply the regional design results. Also concerning *embeddedness in actual situations, using participatory tools and techniques, and opening up to alternative visions* our case fits with the principles of participatory design (Kensing and Greenbaum 2013; van der Velden and Mörtberg 2014). The regional design concerned the question of the group of stakeholders concerned with the Three Countries Park landscape, it was embedded in a real-life context. Furthermore, the workshops as well as the techniques used in the workshops aimed at genuine participation of the stakeholders in the design process. And finally the cross-border setting of the Three Countries Park in different institutional and cultural settings enforced both the design team and the stakeholders to be open to the different perceptions and visions concerning landscapes, and landscape management, protection and enhancement.

Concerning the principles *equalizing power relations* and *committing to democratic practices* our regional case shows less direct fitness with 'classic' participatory design conceptions. Emancipation and empowerment of groups of people, and giving them a real say in the design process, have been important values in the early days of participatory design (Robertson and Simonsen 2013; van der Velden and Mörtberg 2014), and still can be important. This however does not fit with our case. We argue our case shows characteristics of a 'fraternalistic' approach of participatory design, in which 'an equitable, mutual and caring concern for and between actors in a project, and towards the project itself' (Thorpe and Gamman 2011, p. 222) is central. The regional design process then becomes a platform for true dialogue (de Jonge 2009) in which diversity is fundamental, and multiple voices and perspectives can grapple with each other (van der Velden and Mörtberg 2014), resembling the ideas of 'radical democracy' (Laclau and Mouffe 2014). The role of the design team in our case was to facilitate this dialogue, and to add to this conversation their 'expert' design knowledge. The design teams' focus during the project was on helping the stakeholders in developing and designing the landscape perspective they had requested themselves.

Regional designing is rooted in landscape architecture and urban planning and design. These disciplines have a strong tradition in designing for public values, in designing the living environment of people, and in engaging with people during the design process. However, in landscape architecture and urban design academia there seems to be little attention to the values, methods and techniques concerned with involving future users in the design process (de Jonge 2009; Kempenaar et al. 2016; Roggema 2014). We argue these disciplines can learn a lot from participatory design research, for example on reflecting on the values concerned with participatory designing, and on the methods and technique used in participatory design in different phases of the design process and with different goals (e.g. Brandt et al. 2013; Bratteteig et al. 2013). Regional design has some specific design characteristics, but at the same time shares many basic principles and values with participatory design, making it worthwhile to share and compare experiences and ideas.

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