

# Could Participatory Design Offer A Revolution To Architecture? Field Notes from a Situated Action in Hasselt, Belgium.

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Architecture always involves people, but current architectural design methods continue to actively avoid involving people. Participation has been both applauded as the hero, and stigmatised as the enemy, of design methodology perhaps due to inevitable political entanglements. I subscribe to the notion that Participation and Architecture will always be political, in the sense that they both affect people's lives. Participatory Design (PD) methodologies, and their transformational power, can offer Architecture a more responsive approach of how to involve people.

For the purpose of this paper, I will reflect upon the findings of a Situated Action, called The Library of Engagements, included in the Participatory Design Conference held in Hasselt, Belgium in August 2018. The Library is a collection of PD methods that I have been gathering since 2010. It is shared through a performative dialogue, initially with the aim of inspiring more designers to employ participative methods in their processes, and has developed into a motivational toolkit for citizens to take action themselves. The paper focuses on two examples and uses descriptive field notes to summarise unintended but beneficial outcomes.

**Keywords:** *participatory design; engagement; architecture; art; participation; transformation.*

## 1 Introduction

The explicit aim of Participatory Design is to improve the quality of a designed product, service or even building, however the impact of PD methods have greater reach than on outcome alone. I believe engagement activities have an inherent transformative effect on both the participant, and facilitator (Till, 2005). Promoting architectural design activities that are carried out *with* people, as opposed to *for* them, challenges the current paradigm and contributes to the movement that Participation needs to become central to the practice of architecture. This also endorses a potential future for Architecture to become a form of affective labour, one that always directly constructs a relationship (Hardt & Negri, 2005).

The Library of Engagements evolved from a critique of methods of participation employed inside and outside the built environment as part of my Master's in Architecture. What started as a theoretical study has continued to develop over the last 10 years through my

professional practice, community facilitation, research and teaching. I am interested in discovering ways of sharing and disseminating methods of engagement to both built environment professionals and citizens.

“The Library of Engagements is a Participatory Design tool for engaging citizens in the production of space, urban and architectural design in their cities. It is a collection of methods, techniques and tools used in Participatory Design. The physical archive consists of a catalogue index box, archive boxes and a selection of books. The archive has documents, photos and objects relating to examples of different methods catalogued in the index.” (Crompton, 2018) (fig. 1).



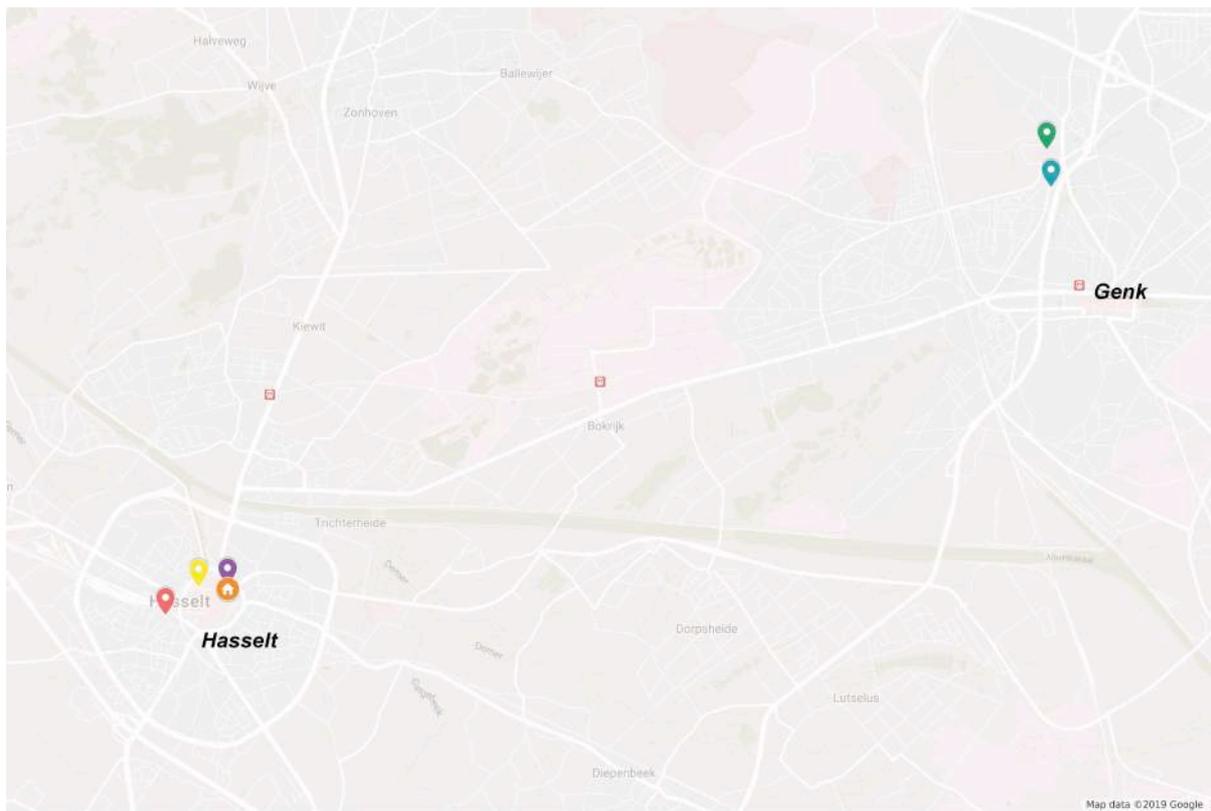
Figure 1. Image showing the Library of Engagement's Archive (left) and the Library's Catalogue or Index (right).  
Source: Author's Own.

The Library offers a tonic to a consultation-fatigued public, providing examples of democratic design methods from role-play workshops to artist's interventions. There are around 100 examples currently 'held' in the library, the majority of which are UK based. It is an ever-growing collection, activated by participants and curated by its owner, the librarian (Emily Crompton), who uses small illustrative examples to inform and possibly inspire an alternative way to practice architecture or approach Participatory Design. Participants can only access the library's collection through conversation with the librarian, who through asking questions about the person's life gleans an interest and selects an appropriate method of engagement to share. The personalised nature of the installation emphasises the importance of creating bespoke methods for each scenario, but also highlights a restriction of dissemination.

The Library's index is ordered in multiple ways, meaning projects and artefacts can be found through various entry points. Through dialogue, the participant affects which examples will be revealed by the librarian from the collection, to ensure examples are relevant. The conversation between participant and librarian becomes a tool itself, demonstrating a desire to create space for a "negotiation of hope" (Till, 2005), which regards the interaction as important as the outcome. Here outcomes are unknown, no perfect solution (method) will be found, only attempts to make space for others to make sense of the actions of others, and

an acceptance that space is not created by a lone individual but by the very act of negotiation, of participation.

The Library of Engagements, as a Situated Action was part of the Participatory Design Conference (PDC) 2018. The Situated Action programme is a series of site-specific interventions instigated to address the debate on public space and on the politics of design. An exhibition of the fifteen Situated Actions, entitled *The Politics of Design: Act 1*, was curated as part of the conference, and held at Z33 House for Contemporary Art. It aimed to contextualise current participatory design practices that were part of PDC 2018 by placing Situated Actions in a dialogue with several local and international projects (fig. 2).



*Figure 2. Map showing the location of the 5 'Situated Actions' at PDC18 which are local to Hasselt, the other 10 actions were internationally located, or hosted at Z33 in Hasselt (orange home symbol). Credit: Google Maps*

## 2 Methodology

The Library of Engagements as a Situated Action took place over one day (21<sup>st</sup> August 2018) within the conference, and was located in a central bicycle café called Fietsbar to encourage an open dialogue with residents of Hasselt. It aimed to simultaneously gather information, stories and artefacts of methods of engagement from local citizens whilst also sharing information, stories and artefacts from the existing library's collection and archive. The ambition was to create a mutual learning exchange where both participant and facilitator were affected by the interaction, and as such produce a microcosm of 'transformational participation' (Till, 2005).

Rather than act as another “how to” guide, the library as a catalogue of methods responds to Doina Petrescu’s criticism that such guides are too prescriptive and rather than liberating, tend to control the participative process (Petrescu, 2005). When reviewing each method I distinguished different characteristics and aspects, which help categorise and form links between methods. While these descriptors help comprehend the practicalities of the method, they cannot alone describe all the aspects or outcomes of the activity. Field notes supplemented the descriptions to capture additional impacts the method had on the participant, facilitator or outcome.

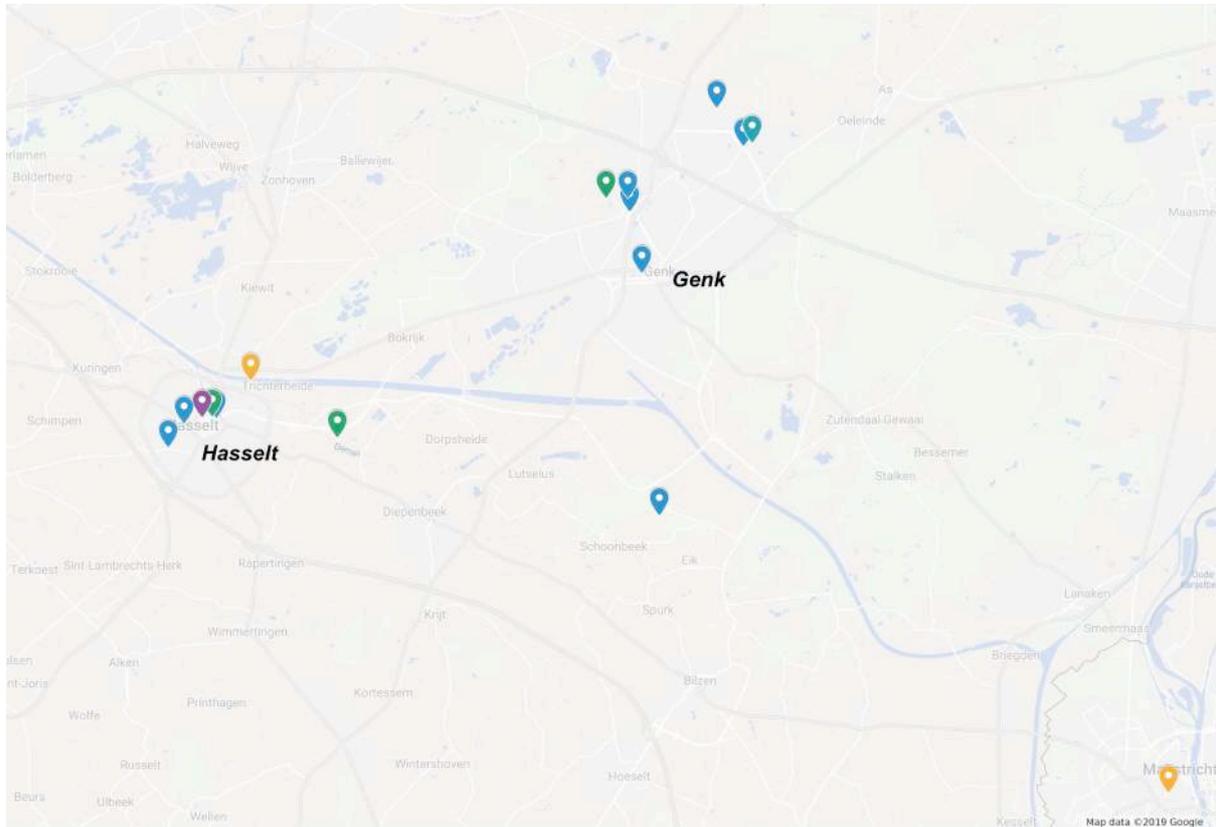
*Table 1 Showing the different categories of descriptors reviewed for each method*

<b>Engagement Descriptor</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Instigator	The person designing and leading the engagement activity. (e.g. workshop facilitator, protest leader, writer of survey)
Instigator Motivation/s	The motives of the instigator/ why they are involved.
Participants	The people taking part in the engagement (whether knowingly or not). Important to understand if they have self-selected or not.
Participant Motivation/s	The motives of the participants/ why they are taking part.
Organisational Motivation/s	Instigators are often (but not always) connected to or employed by an organisation. It is important to understand the organisation’s motives for carrying out an engagement activity, as this will impact upon the instigator’s actions.
Economics	How the activity is being funded, (e.g. whether it is created voluntarily, developer-led, or Local Authority-led etc). This impacts upon the involvement of instigator, participant, and affects potential outputs.
Location	Site of Engagement. As this library is created from the perspective of the architectural discipline, all methods are situated. The chosen location impact for engagements will impact on participants, economics, and output.
Theme	The overarching theme that the desired outcome is connected to (e.g. Heritage)
Topic	The specific topic of the method of engagement, or what is being talked about. (e.g. regeneration of a building)
Engagement Method	How the engagement was provided, or the type of engagement method (e.g. workshop, survey, meanwhile event, festival, talk, protest)
Engagement Medium	The style the method is carried out in (e.g. sets of diagrams, 3D model, drawings)
Timing	The length of activity, and when it took place. The timescale of methods is important to understand to glean what affect the engagement will have on the outcome (and sometimes if at all).
Output	What was the result. This may or may not have been affected by the engagement. (this may not be defined at the time of activity, and could be different to original aim)

The library accepts that no ideal participation model exists, and that there is no perfect method with which to engage all groups (Till, 2005). However, by looking at a wide variety of consultation practises and alternative methods of participation, the library provides a platform for discussion to define future participative processes.

In Hasselt, the Library was used as a tool to engage citizens in a discussion about their city, and I hoped it would also encourage them to instigate Participatory (Design) practices themselves. Ahead of the Action I carried out desktop research into various PD projects in and around Hasselt, and supplemented the Library’s existing catalogue of methods, projects,

groups etc. with 35 local projects. Examples selected for the Library were mostly 'situated'; Participatory Design for Architecture is always located, positioned, in place (fig. 3). Where possible I contacted groups and individuals responsible for projects, including architects, practitioners, activists, artists, residents and academics and invited them to take part in the Situated Action, and contribute to the Library Archive.



*Figure 3. Map showing the locations of the newly entered projects local to Hasselt and Genk. Credit: Google Maps.*

### **3 Results and Discussion**

In its simplest form, the Action was a series of conversations or storytelling. Till (2005) discusses recognising the power and validity of an ordinary conversation as a new form of communication for participatory processes in the creation of 'transformative participation'. He goes on to suggest how conversations are an appropriate new starting point to challenge normative architectural production and communication styles. Individual narratives often communicate how people navigate societal or organisational constructs, but they can move beyond description alone especially considering that "Telling a story about oneself can sometimes transform that self" (Wortham, 2001).

In this section, I will focus on two specific conversations with invited guests, which took place at the Situated Action (fig. 4). They told me some interesting stories, which allude to a 'transformative participation'. The conversations in the Action were audio recorded with permission and interpreted into detailed field notes which are summarised below.

Using the earlier defined Engagement Descriptors, these explanations touch on the important aspects of each engagement event such as: who instigated the activity, who were the intended participants, where did it take place, what was the theme or topic of the participation activity, what were the motivations for involvement of both instigator and participant, the timing of the event etc. Field notes provide reflection on moments of transformation due to engagement activities.



Figure 4. Author in Conversation with [S], an invited guest to the Library of Engagements as a 'Situating Action'.  
Photo credit: Seppe Moons-Z33

### 3.1 Chocoladefabriek, Nerem-Tongeren, Belgium, 2013 – 2016.

The desired outcome of the first example was a building design. Methods employed included meanwhile uses and artists residencies to challenge people's preconceptions of the building, as well as informal conversations with the architects using blank templates of the existing structure, and online tools to encourage discussion about the potential design of housing units. The engagement activities are summarised in Table 2 and a descriptive summary of the field notes from the conversation follows.

Table 2 Chocoladefabriek Engagement Description

Engagement Descriptor	Chocoladefabriek
Instigator	[B] as an Architect, part of an architectural practice, working with a communications agency (paid for by a developer).
Instigator Motivation/s	To bring a derelict building back into use.
Participants	Thousands of people from surrounding area, 900 Local Residents, Artists, event's organisers and others.
Participant Motivation/s	Public with a need for large event space/ to attend temporary events.
Organisational Motivation/s	Developer needed to make the development viable.
Economics	Developer paid architects to work on design; much of the engagement

	was self-initiated by Architects / Citizens.
Location	Chocoladefabriek, Nerem-Tongerren, Belgium.
Theme	Regeneration.
Topic	What can we use this building for?
Engagement Method	Temporary Interventions in a derelict building/ Meanwhile uses for an out of use building.
Engagement Medium	Architects used plans, drawings, websites and conversations.
Timing	Various events taking place over 4 years, construction started in 2017 (2013 – 2018).
Output	Renovated Building, including housing units, workspaces, event space and a restaurant.

From the developer’s perspective, the only perceived re-use for a derelict Chocolate factory outside Nerem was housing, but the site had a poor reputation with the public due to its industrial past. It was a unique space for the area: 160m long, 2 storeys, with a 10 storey-high tower. “No one knew what do with it – we [didn’t] know what to do with it either! Imagine if we just open the doors and ask people what they think to do with it. Neighbours, old factory workers.” [B: Architect, and instigator].

A series of meanwhile events challenged the local community’s perceptions of the building’s potential, these included: an Easter egg hunt, a cycling games, artist’s residencies, dance classes, parties, temporary installations, chocolate making competitions etc. Activities enabled people to visit the building, many for the first time, and almost as an aside to these activities, the architects would informally ask people what they thought about the future of the building through various tools such as websites, drawings and conversations. “We hosted a festival as part of a historic open building event in Belgium. It became so popular, over 7000 people attended! And with only 900 people in the town, they were amazed. It wasn’t loved before, but the activities created a fondness” [B].

Naturally, instigating such events in a derelict building brought challenges, for example navigating strict regulatory frameworks for putting on a party for 1000 people (e.g. fire regulations, licences). [B] reflected that their developer client was wary of the risks of holding open events and activities, and even of asking people what they wanted to do with the space. However, without hosting the events, and having the conversations, [B] felt the factory would not have been brought back into use. The meanwhile and engagement activities created a demand for additional space for socialising, working and eating which may never have become a viable part of the development. The activities had an impact on the brief and built outcome, as well as on the participants (their perception of the building), on the developer (what was viable) and on the designers (what was important to people who may live there). “They [the community] asked us how did we do it, and we always say we did it together, we were all small ambassadors to make a new future for the building – that was our aim, it was the most important thing for us” [B].

For inclusion in the library of engagements, [B] donated a framed series of images depicting the project including the output of an artist’s residency, the residents drawings, a computer model of the scheme and a photo of the factory under construction (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Image of framed set of image depicting the design process of Chocoladefabriek Artefact, donated by [B].

### 3.2 SteenKool / Forever Coal, Mine-Depot Waterschei, Genk, Belgium, 2012

Manifesta is a biennial arts festival, and for its 9<sup>th</sup> edition the organisers had a desire to include local residents. The outcome was not defined ahead of the engagement activity, and instead emerged through the participative process. The method employed was workshops that led to the creation of artwork by ex-miners and culminated in an exhibition. A brief summary of the method of engagement is below in Table 3 followed by the descriptive summary of the field notes.

Table 3 SteenKool / Forever Coal Engagement Description

Engagement Descriptor	SteenKool / Forever Coal
Instigator	[S] as an Art Mediator (paid by Manifesta 9 – an art biennial).
Instigator Motivation/s	To work with people (non-artists) to create art.
Participants	8 Local Ex-miners, all volunteers at mine heritage museum.
Participant Motivation/s	To take part, to make art, to reflect on the place of the mine.
Organisational Motivation/s	Manifesta's motivation appears to be partly to increase the museum volunteer's involvement, and partly to bring the museum's volunteers "on side" – to tolerate the Biennial's art activities.
Economics	Activity included as part of Art Biennial.
Location	Waterschei colmine, Genk, Belgium. Engagement took place specifically in the mine museum.
Theme	Art.
Topic	Waterschei mine closed in the late 80s "how do we look back, how do we see their future, or how are they doing today." [S]
Engagement Method	Facilitated Workshop.
Engagement Medium	Art workshop
Timing	1 month to create artworks, participants and instigator met once a week
Output	Exhibition. Artworks by all participants exhibited as part of Manifesta 9.

The 9th edition of the Biennial was held in the old Waterschei coalmine in Genk, an industrial town East of Hasselt. A small heritage museum already existed at the mine, and while there was some communication between the Biennial's organisers and the museum's volunteers, the Biennial commissioned [S], an Art Mediator to carry out a project to involve them further. [S] already knew some of the ex-miners, having carried out public tours for Manifesta, and started the engagement "by inviting them for a Sunday morning brainstorm. I like to let it grow from the people themselves... by talking, asking, feeling, a lot of intuitive feeling." They became their own Art Group. The themes of the work displayed at the Biennial placed the local context centre-stage, and works regarded coal mining, energy production, and the associated labour. Work from The Ashington Group – a group of miners who took art classes in 1934, receiving international success – was exhibited, which tied in well with the creation of ART SCHOOL MINE HISTORY, as they called themselves.

The ex-miners began to make work, using collage, drawing, and materials they found or photocopied from the museum archive. Locating the group within the heritage museum helped them draw on the environment and influenced the work they created. [S] remembers that the ex-miners had their own way of communicating together. It was hard for her to pick-up on the hidden meaning of their conversations. It was intuitive, but also allowed them to have conversations together without her, which seemed important to the process.

For Manifesta, it was the first time they had invited local residents to become the artists, to display their own work. It concluded with an exhibition in the mine heritage museum. [S] recalled the exhibition as being "the most important thing of the project – it made them [the ex-miners] feel that they were full members of Manifesta." After the project, one participant created a painting every week; "it opened something in him and he developed as an artist". [S] continued to visit him for some years after and he would often gift to her his paintings. She donated his 191st painting, completed in 2015, to the library as an artefact for the Library Archive (fig. 6).

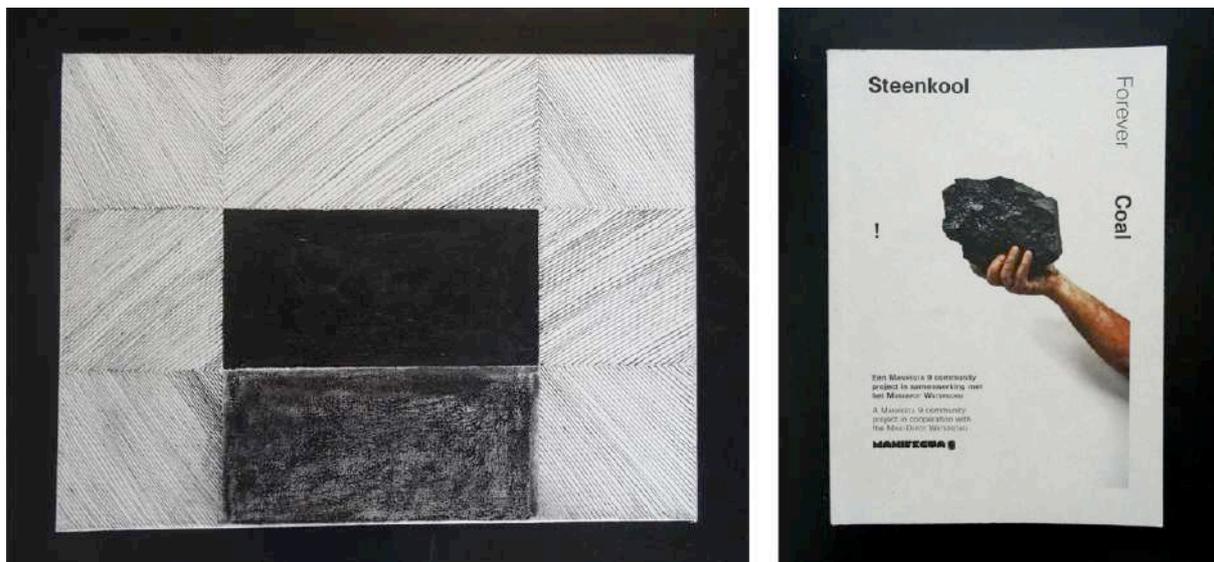


Figure 6. Image of a canvas made by a participant in Steenkool (left) and exhibition publication (right), donated by [S].

## 4 Summary

In both examples, the transformative moments were an unscripted or unintended consequence of the engagement activity. While the PD methods were carefully curated and planned, the transformational power of PD practice is how space can be provided to uncover unexpected outcomes. For example, the participant becoming an artist through their engagement in Manifesta's 1-month art project, or at Chocoladefabriek the newly created viability of event space in a housing-led development scheme. The two examples demonstrate that the effects of PD can be wider reaching than on design outcome alone. By continuing to investigate the methods of PD, I hope to encourage more Architects to use Participation in their own design processes, so the discipline can support the transformation of citizens, as well as designing suitable buildings.

To explore the Library of Engagements as a method of transformational participation in itself, I have reflected on the Situated Action using the engagement descriptors (table 4). Both conversations provided an opportunity for exchange between [S]/[B] (the participants) and myself (as instigator). The original aim of the library was to help architects and designers value unintended outcomes of engagement activities in their design process. I believe in both examples above this was achieved to some extent, though admittedly both were self-selecting and were practitioners who had already carried out PD activities. Both [B] and [S] acknowledged that PD was not their usual mode of operations in their respective fields, and identified benefits (and complications) of working in that way through the conversations. The dialogue gave the practitioners and myself time to reflect on using PD methods, and in the case of [S] provided encouragement to carry out more PD inspired projects – she vocalised having loved looking back over the project, and a desire to work again in this way. We discussed other Art festival's attempts at resident inclusion, including my own involvement in Liverpool Biennial's 2up2down participatory design process (van Heeswijk, 2017), further highlighting the unintended benefits of creating space for unscripted conversations, in this case a sharing of good practice.

*Table 4 The Library of Engagement Situated Action Engagement Description*

<b>Engagement Descriptor</b>	<b>Library of Engagement Situated Action</b>
Instigator	Researcher / practitioner/ educator (myself – Emily Crompton)
Instigator Motivation/s	To research methods of participation. To encourage more people to carry out PD in their practices. To take part in a international conference about participation.
Participants	Citizens of Hasselt, Practitioners and Academics.
Participant Motivation/s	To donate a method to the library and find out about the Library of Engagement. To take part in the PDC conference.
Organisational Motivation/s	The PDC 2018 conference organising panel's motivation to include Situated Actions was in order to address the debate on public space (in Hasselt) and on the politics of design.
Economics	MMU (the instigator's employer) paid for the instigator to attend. Their motivation is (partially) to support the production of research output from the instigator's activities.
Location	Situated Action: Fietsbar, Hasselt, Belgium. Exhibition: Z33 House of Contemporary Art.
Theme	Participation
Topic	Methods of Engagement
Engagement Method	Performance style event and Exhibition
Engagement Medium	Situated Action: Conversations. Exhibition: Artefacts, postcards, audio.
Timing	1 month desktop research. 1 day Situated Action. 3 month exhibition.

Output	Entries into the library, exhibition, this paper.
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The resulting exhibition piece from this situation action, included in *The Politics of Design: Act 1*, was the first ‘act’ for the town of Hasselt, and is part of a longer trajectory that aims to stimulate conversation about new collaborations and will lead to the final ‘act’ in 2020 (PDC, 2018). Audio of conversations recorded during the Action became part of the exhibition along with artefacts, some given by participants and others from various PD or engagement methods researched in UK and Belgium, and an ‘index’ of methods were displayed as postcards. To mirror the exchange taking place in the Action, visitors were invited to ‘eavesdrop’ on the conversations, view selected artefacts from the collection, take away a postcard of a method which was relevant to their lives (fig. 7), as well being prompted to provide their own examples of engagement activities, for future research.

The notion of a ‘transformational participation’ taking place in the Action was fully realised when [S] attended the opening of the PDC 2018 exhibition a few days after the Action and began conversations on PD with other local practitioners and researchers. Both participant [S] and instigator (myself) had been transformed through the Situated Action of the Library.

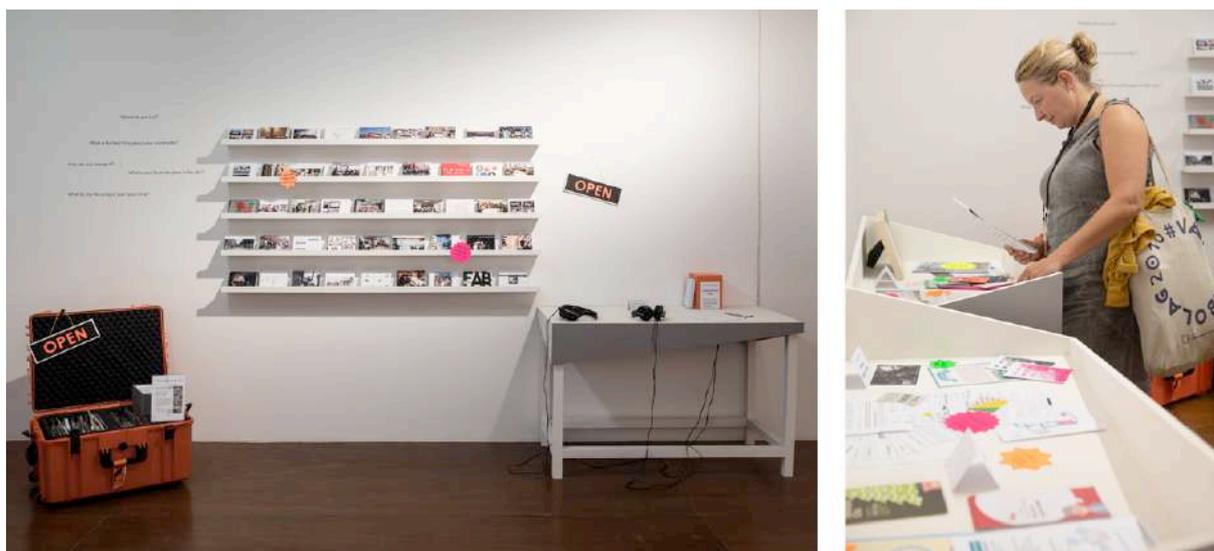


Figure 7. *The Library of Engagements* at Z33, as part of *The Politics of Design: Act 1* exhibition which ran August – December 2018 (left) a visitor looking at artefacts from the Library’s Archive (right). Photo credit: Kristof Vrancken-Z33

## 5 Conclusion

This Situated Action achieved the desired aim of increasing the methods included in the Library of Engagements by 35, and widened the geographical reach to include European examples. It also helped me to develop a better understanding of how to define each engagement activity through the elements of the methodology (the idea of each method in the Library having an instigator, participant, motivation, medium, topic, timing, etc.). Using conversation or anecdote as a tool to gather information or stories about engagement methods enabled me to glean richer material with which to analyse PD processes and interrogate moments of transformation.

Using the collection method of field notes has implications for future development of the library, and for understanding the impact of PD on architectural projects. The library's catalogue affords many inspirational examples to citizen and practitioner alike, however it was only through conversation with the librarian that potential applications were identified. Recording field notes helps to overcome this restriction on dissemination, as they can offer insight into the unintended outcomes of methods and assist design practitioners to value unplanned outcomes of participative processes.

Participatory Design in Architecture must be 'situated' for it to be of value to the knowledge or design outcome, as the traditional products (or outputs) of Architectural Design exist in real time for real people. I recommend that when Architects intend to use PD methods, those methods must be designed in context and with as much care as the buildings they create.

I believe the Library of Engagements adds value to the field of Participatory Design. The use of field notes also affords an opportunity to disseminate the less visible, unnoticed moments in engagement activities, which are often responsible for real transformations in people. If a revolution is what Architecture needs, maybe Participatory Design could be the answer.

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