

Cultural Village of Europe

Eleven European villages in support of vibrant village culture

By Bert Kisjes

The Dutch village of Wijk aan Zee has proclaimed itself Cultural Village of Europe 1999. Every year the European Union awards the title of Cultural Capital of Europe to some EU city. In Wijk aan Zee people felt they should make it known that urban culture is not all there is, that there's also a vibrant village culture with a whole lot going for it. To promote the idea, this small Dutch village sought the support of other rural European communities.

Enthusiastic responses were received from Kilingi Nomme in Estland, Aldeburgh in Engeland, Mellionec in Frankrijk, Porrúa in Spanje. Bystre in the Czech Republic, Paxos in Greece, Pergine Valdarno in Italy, Tommerup in Denmark, Strobeck in Germany and Palkonya in Hungary.

The actual location in which people live out their everyday lives, what's it in fact like? That small space unveiled each morning when you draw the curtains, the street that brings you to the baker's, the neighbourhood where you grew up. Is there broken glass all over the place, turning biking into an unending series of puncture repairs? Can you sleep soundly or is it often noisy at night? It is here that people probably spend most of the hours of their lives. This 'living environment' is of the utmost value.

Today, however, the quality of that living environment is under threat. Here in the Netherlands many people complain of being bothered by local nuisance and inconvenience in a variety of forms. With their noises and their smells people impose themselves on one another. I have acquaintances who don't even sit out in their garden on Saturday afternoon any more because of all the electric saws, hedge-trimmers and other noisy gadgets. Much of this nuisance goes unresolved and it may even spawn a neighbourhood feud that ultimately requires police intervention.

Everyone wants to feel at ease and secure in their home environment. The place you live must exude enough peace and quiet and trust for children to play unsullied by worry. Today, though, the police advise you above all not to trust anyone and to fit your doors with burglary-prevention strips and multiple locks.

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To call attention to the significance of one's everyday surroundings, one's immediate living environment, Wijk aan Zee has declared itself 'Cultural Village of Europe 1999'. Wijk aan Zee is a village that dates back to the Middle Ages and has retained its vibrancy. It's thirty kilometres from Amsterdam and only three from where the North Sea Canal from Amsterdam reaches the open sea. The heavy industry along the canal has encroached right up to the edge of the village. To the west beckons the North Sea.

When plans for a new wave of industrial expansion were announced in the seventies, Wijk aan Zee came up in arms. The village community had no desire to be wiped off the map and it stood up and said 'Enough is enough!'. The villagers held themselves to be more important than industrial development. Since the seventies the village has had to resist no fewer than thirteen separate

development plans that threatened the village. It had no choice but to take charge of its own fate, for it was the government to a large extent that held there was still ample space for an airport, a storage site for polluted sludge, a power plant.

Since we declared ourselves Cultural Village of Europe we've found that Wijk aan Zee by no means stands alone. With today's preoccupation with general, nationwide or even global issues, with 'education', 'the economy', 'the transport system', 'culture', centralised solutions are being dreamt up that are then just passed down for local implementation!. Today the whole process is being managed like a chain supermarket, with the village no more than an insignificant branch store. But that's no way to let a village flourish. Each village has its own features, its own peculiarities, its own story to tell.

Village blindness

In government and in industry I see a blindness for this basic living environment, the village. I hope that scientists eventually get around to the idea that diversity is of the essence not only for nature to thrive but also for human society to blossom. If more people come to see the importance of the individuality of small communities, in the future they can become village allies.

A large proportion of the 'big provisions' of contemporary urban life are not much use in the small world of everyday life. The social structure of small communities does not usually gain if the help of the police has to be called in. A really troublesome neighbour can be taken to court, but if the aim is to resolve conflicts once and for all, you're better off keeping away from solicitors and judges as long as you can. A conflict that has to be battled out before a judge is not likely find its ultimate settlement there. A village may also have informal institutions of its own. Certain people in a village community have the charisma to propose solutions that are acceptable to all parties. With time, every village develops its own informal structure, which sometimes becomes more important than anything formal that is in place.



All inhabitants of Wijk aan Zee join for a portrait

Culture

It's a funny thing that the 'cultural status' of towns and cities is measured by the number of theatres, musical events, cinemas and books published and not, say, by the level of hospitality, the time the average inhabitant spends singing every week or the way people behave towards one another in their communities. It would venture that the amount of violence, the number of court cases, thefts and acts of vandalism also says something about the cultural status of a place.

Need one say more about how one-sided the mainstream concept of culture in fact is? In today's conception of art, there is no room for the human individual. Saleable commodities rank as art. The art of living and the art of community living, to my mind the highest forms of art, no longer count and that's a stupendous mistake. These are non-material things. They're not commodities and therefore of no interest economically.

Village culture almost always revolves around cooperation -as embodied in a group of people that get together of their own volition to rehearse for something like a theatre performance, say. It's not just the result of the final performance, but the rehearsals themselves that give rise to a vibrant culture.

Hospitality

Over the past six months people have sometimes asked me "What exactly do you mean when you refer to a village's cultural status?" I like to respond with a story about hospitality. One of the main activities in Wijk aan Zee this year is to practise hospitality. Every month we welcome a coach load with fifty people from one of the ten European villages with which we're allied. They're taken in by families and for three days there's an extensive programme of receptions, visits, concerts, country walks, boat trips, festive meals and musical evenings enjoyed by our guests and the population of Wijk aan Zee.

There are many people who have no conception of what this means. To see hospitality as culture is too bizarre a leap of the imagination. Precisely here in Western Europe, people mourn the loss of yesteryear's hospitality. Meanwhile, travellers to faraway places report back with warm enthusiasm on the hospitality they encounter there. As Wijk aan Zee has experienced so often this year, hospitality is a form of culture that is not accorded its due place among the arts.

Continuity

Collaboration among the eleven European villages participating in the 'Cultural Village of Europe' initiative has bred so much enthusiasm that the mayors of our villages have decided to take it further. Next year it's the turn of the Breton village Mellionec to continue the organising work. And after that, well, we'll simply keep on going.