

New times for the villages

Essay

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1. Introduction

Inspired by the institute Cultural Capital of Europe, Wijk aan Zee proclaimed itself to be Cultural Village of Europe in 1999. The most important motive was to gain status and once and for all end the avalanche of plans from planners who thought the surroundings of the village perfect to build a storage for toxic sludge, an addition to Schiphol Airport, extra harbours in the sea, a windmill park, a power plant and an addition to the Hoogovens Steel Mill. The village had had a meeting place for years—hotel café restaurant Sonnevank—where active inhabitants meet. As such they were able to respond promptly. They soon agreed and responded with a tour de force. But what started with protests evolved into a movement of emancipation for the village. Wijk aan Zee had sought the support of villages of other countries for the idea Cultural Village of Europe, because it was convinced that they would be have similar problems. This resulted in 1999 in a network of eleven villages in various European countries. The movement was named Cultural Villages of Europe. One of the first actions of the movement was to compose a Charter. The Charter was signed by the mayors of all eleven participating villages: Aldeburgh (GB), Bystré (CZ), Kilingi Nõmme (Estonia), Mellionec (F), Palkonya (H), Paxos (GR), Pergine Valdarno (I), Porrúa (ES), Schachdorf Ströbeck (D), Tommerup (DK) and Wijk aan Zee (NL). The Charter is a statement of the villages about where they stand, how they see the world and how they want to be seen by the world. Eleven European villages in eleven European countries that sailed their own course and took action. Together they developed powers of which they themselves hardly recognise the magnitude. This made vitality emerge in those villages.

In the past two centuries there have been a number of developments that have led to major changes in society. Economic thinking, organising and planning, specialising, mobility, individualising, science and its applications have changed society profoundly. These developments have touched on the village, but they were not developments of the village. The changes came from outside. Thus the village got the reputation to be backward. People in this period could do nothing with the qualities of the village we will formulate in this village. But now that the great developments are not only bringing civilisation but problems as well, the villages again provide possibilities. Because in politics large infrastructure projects are no longer paramount. Life in the street is the main theme, and the way in which citizens interact. The village can participate once more because its themes are again on the agenda.

While pondering this essay we had great difficulty with the word village. The word is laden with prejudice. Attributing qualities to villages is easily considered romanticising and the lack of specialist knowledge is easily considered a real deficiency. Moreover: what is the difference with a city district? Can a district not also be a good place to live? Much of what is said about villages will also apply to city districts. However, it is necessary to realise that a district is part of a city and that the facilities of the city are the facilities of the district as well, while an important characteristic of a village is that it can deal with many fewer nearby facilities.

For the description of a village we follow the formulation of the movement Cultural Villages of Europe in their Charter:

“Every human being has a world of his own. He is an individual. Every human being has a father and a mother, his family. Even when he does not know these people.

Every human being has an environment in which he grows up and which he gets to know well. This is his territory. And all these worlds are set into a large world we call a community, or province, a region or a state or Europe or 'the' world. The village is an old and tried form of a human's territory. It is the known world. Not only the things, but the people as well are familiar there."

What the definition implies is that a village is not the same as green space, but that people live there, and that you need to get involved with them. The importance of this will be made clear in this essay.

Cultural anthropologist Eric Wolf, in his book 'Peasant wars of the twentieth century', wrote the following about the character of the people of village and country side:

"Villagers are not good revolutionaries but rather anarchists. The universal peasant idea is a village free from officials, army recruiters, policemen, tax collectors and all other representatives of the city-based government".

When asked many villagers recognise themselves in this description.

In this essay we are looking for vitality in villages. We will use the experiences of the movement Cultural Villages of Europe as a base. We speak of vitality when a village is using its own powers. These are the powers of the natural environment, the capacities of the (individual) inhabitants and the specific qualities of a small community as they will be described in this essay.

2. How the village was trivialised.

In past times many people lived in villages. The city was the place of facilities such as the market, government, bishop, university and court of law. When in the 19th century industrialisation started people started moving to where factories were built, wages were paid and new products were for sale. People started living together in larger communities. The development of mobility also made it possible to transport food over larger distances. Numerous families migrated from the countryside to the city because no wages were paid in the countryside. Creative people also moved to the cities. In the cities you could find new experiences and that was where the heart of a new and exciting time was beating. In the cities, the concentrations of population centres, where developments occurred on all sorts of subjects, which together led to society as we know it today. Below we give a global sketch of the processes we believe are relevant to our argument of the position of villages.

Economics

The emergence of economics as a science and its application in the 19th century was a great success. It led to what is called prosperity, the pride of Western society.

However, while in the Netherlands people thought to have eradicated the problem of poverty after the Second World War, the growth of the economy has not prevented the return of homeless people and beggars in the streets. The abundance that was the consequence of prosperity and that has made such an impression on the world also resulted in overuse of many products. This overuse led to hard-to-combat diseases of prosperity. The development of economics also contributed considerably to the disappearance of beautiful landscapes, forest and biodiversity.

Economics has come to play an increasingly influential role in our thoughts and actions. More and more economic terms appear in our daily vocabulary. In shops citizens are continuously comparing prices. He needs to keep calculating what he can and cannot afford. The most important difference between two jobs is no longer the nature of the work but the pay.

Culture of organising

Social sciences, originating as an analogy of the natural sciences, subjected society to a study and started manipulating it. They invented large scale forms of organisation for production processes. Large factories, banks with many branches and other so-called service industries emerged, where division of labour became characteristic. People became used to execute instructions of which they could not see the implications. Personal initiative and personal responsibility fit less and less well. Bureaucracy became more and more important.

Procedures became important and formalism triumphed. The best compliment one could give after a party was "It was well organised". Then the host would be satisfied.

Specialisation

Specialisation emerged with the development of organising culture. It became very important what you specialized in. The lawyer became an international affairs lawyer or penal law specialist. Public places became clubhouses of intended audiences. The public place that catering company were were filed under 'business', and described by 'economics': economic laws were enforced, for instance that more (beer) needed to be sold for a healthy enterprise. Catering companies should be selling. And social activities were housed in other, often government subsidized buildings: 'village houses', 'sociocultural centres', or sports cafés. But

people also drank a beer there. The catering saw this as unfair competition and a war broke out around what were to be called commercial and Para-commercial businesses. And the café that wanted to keep its old social function and not be just a place to sell beer would inevitably get into trouble with the inspecting organizations, which would conclude that the café was unusual and not healthy or viable.

Mobility

As long as people have existed they have travelled. There have even been times that people did not settle at all. Travelling is not a new thing. But the inventions of the train, car, bus and airplane have greatly increased mobility. Citizens can now travel all over the world, and travelling is encouraged and facilitated in many ways. Who travels gets much knowledge of other cities. But this knowledge can be very superficial and unreliable. You don't get the impression that travelling across Africa brings you closer to understanding Africa. People, on most organized tours, bring their own culture, sleep in European beds in European hotels.

Mobility has also made possible the division of house and workplace. It is no longer necessary to live where you work. That has far reaching consequences, among other things for the relation between parents and children. Many children nowadays have little understanding of their parent's occupation. In general we can say that through mobility people are less connected to their direct environments. Not only physically, but also socially: people live increasingly farther away from their contacts.

The possibilities that the Internet offers to 'travel' and to contact others through chat boxes have increased mobility in another way. The world is what is called a 'global village'. We can contact people from around the globe without being able to touch, smell or see them. That also has reduced our connection our own, immediate environment. Someone in a room who is connected to someone from Oslo may hardly notice what happens ten feet next to him.

Individualising

Because of diverse influences society has become more and more individualized. Every person has a right to an own life, an own income, and an own existence without depending on someone else. When he by necessity comes to depend on someone else, because he lacks physical or mental abilities, then in most instances he comes to depend not on an individual but on an organization. In practice such organizations turn out to be insufficiently up to the task. An example is care for the elderly. The wish to grow old without depending on their own children, by relying on health care for help has not led to the ideal situation people had hoped on.

The process of individualizing has resulted in people caring more and more about their own interests, without adjusting to other people. And that again leads to an explosive growth of interest groups. Even the elderly feel the need to get organized. Individualising separates people from each other. This separation is formulated in rights. Rights about a place in the yard where a tree can or cannot grow and how much shade it can project. Rights about how loud and until what time you may play your radio. Rights not to have to perform certain tasks in a business.

Despite the process of individualizing, the call that people should mainly follow their own path is weakening. Perhaps also because people are finding out that the personal freedom that

individualising promises is not true freedom. You are only an individual when you are recognized by others or when you are able to recognize others as individuals.

Science

The developments described above flow—directly or indirectly—from the development and application of science. The growth and prosperity of science has given the European culture many impulses. It kept its promise to expose superstitions (such as belief in witches). The middle ages were called ‘dark’ and the time that conquered this darkness called itself ‘enlightenment’.

But has science kept its promise? Do citizens have more security and more to hold on to in life? Of course, in many areas. But in general? Science often led not to one truth but to many different truths or theories. And sometimes the battle between theories was not fought in studies but like an old-fashioned religious war. An infamous example is the battle between different economic theories that originated in the 19th century and was later called the ‘cold war’. The cold war was a war between two conflicting economic opinions.

Until the emergence and development of science, people got knowledge from experience. That knowledge was passed on from generation to generation and therefore we now call it traditional. In the countryside and in the villages the replacement of traditional knowledge by theoretical knowledge occurred very slowly. And the change was not welcomed. The first Dutch minister of agriculture, Mr. Jacobs, told farmers in the early 19th century to listen to agricultural scientists and public relations people. But agriculturalists especially found it difficult to comply with scientific advice, because what should you do when that advice opposed the traditional insights? In the end theoretical knowledge triumphed over traditional knowledge. But its application has led to a number of new problems, such as in the areas of animal well being and quality of nature and environment. In the village, with much general and little specialized knowledge, people had to deal daily with outsiders who had much theoretical knowledge and knew better. And also when a villager suspected that they were wrong it was not possible to refute it. This has caused many a countryside inhabitant to feel that he was considered stupid or even to feel stupid.

The development of science, too, turns out to have its problems.

The place of the village in these developments

The developments considered above have changed all of society. Including the village. The initiative of the developments lay in the city. The small scale world and the small community, characteristic to a village, became trivialised. Village inhabitants followed the process slowly and passively, critical to so many things contradicting traditional knowledge, somewhat annoyed because of the tempo and often asking themselves: is this all necessary? Is it not going too far? Should it all be this way? But they could not stop the developments. The village slowly lost its identity and was unable to grasp the new world being born. The book of Geert Mak about Jorwerd that appeared a few years ago was an instant success, and it confirms that life in a village is not what it once was.

Not only did the cities initiate the developments, but we can even see that the norms of the city have come to dominate the countryside and that there seems no longer to be a place for the village. We would like to give some examples of this.

The first example concerns town and country planning.

In the 5th Note of Town and Country Planning of 2001 the government strives to improve the physical environment of people, in cities as well as in the countryside. In the countryside the aim is to counter ‘thrashing’ and eroding the open landscape. It talks about high-rise and low-

rise buildings, green and red contours. Green contours should give nature a chance and red contours should clarify where you can and cannot build. The problems that come with the application of the red contour idea are clear for example in Wijk aan Zee, where villagers are arguing with a construction company. Like in many villages in central areas, the village needs cheap houses so that young people can stay there. The construction companies however want to build for the market. The consequence is that young people would need to pay so much for the new houses, because they are close to the sea, that they will not be able to afford them. The result is that they will have to move. The consequences this may have are clear in Aldeburgh, a small town on the eastern English coast, across the North Sea from Wijk aan Zee. Londoners qualifying for pensions buy houses there and the average age is 65. Young people wish to stay but cannot afford to. Another problem in Wijk aan Zee is that construction firms have developed all sorts of ideas for 'inbreiding' (concentration of constructions) of cities, that are now being applied to Wijk aan Zee. The result is that they always come with plans for high-rise (four story) buildings in an environment of low-rise buildings. It is interesting that applying the city norms in the countryside was also the policy in the former Soviet Union and Rumania. People there decided to build flats for the farmers and workers in the countryside. The government thought that the countryside had a right to this, just like the city. Rumania took the most extreme actions: it levelled villages and built a few flats instead. These developments we, in the West, have always despised. Yet we are doing the same thing now in our country!

To what extent the city norms concerning town and country planning have influenced thought in the countryside, we can see from what some town and country planning experts wrote not long ago in 'de Volkskrant'. For Auke van der Woud, student of the history of architecture and city planning, talking about villages is mere nostalgia. He sees the Dutch agriculture merge into a so-called Park City. Architects know what to do: integrate the village into the city and they become something useful. That is the idea behind Holland Park City. Holland becomes a large city without agriculture, without a countryside but with parks and recreational areas. Gert de Roo, planologist from Groningen says it another way: "In our heads, also in the countryside, we are all city folk. The people from the countryside as well show city-like behaviour in all their doings. So what is stopping us from citifying the countryside? Nothing." Architects speak openly about city designing even when talking about a village: "When we allow forms of urbanization in the countryside, we will create greater dynamics there."

The **second example** is at the level of government.

In our country, just like in other EU countries, there is continuous talk of municipal reforms, joining small communities into larger ones. In this way they want to improve the quality of government. The European policy aims to have all new member states adjust their quality of government and implement large-scale projects to join small communities. For candidate members of the European Union, which have just recently started to look for democratic forms, this means new adjustments in the small village communities. After the changes of 1989 again a major municipal reform. Municipal reforms are not only improvements. Wijk aan Zee, for example, was joined with the town Beverwijk in the thirties of the last century. That left Beverwijk in charge of the governmental decisions about Wijk aan Zee. Wijk aan Zee however never became a part of the town. In the inhabitant's experience it has always remained a separate village, which made them feel that their decisions were being made for them. People learned to whine and sulk, which always happens when dependence occurs without personal responsibility.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have shown how villages became trivialised because of developments in economics, the culture of organization, specialization, mobility, individualizing and science, and how the city perspective came to be central in the way people look at villages.

3. Qualities of vital villages

In this chapter we will write about the specific characteristics and qualities that empower villages. We will show its value to present day society.

Knowledge of the surroundings and the people

Whoever lives in a village for any period of time will have to exert little effort to get much knowledge of his surroundings. Not only the physical surroundings, such as buildings and infrastructure, but also of the changes. Knowledge of how it looked twenty years ago. In every village there are people who have lived there for generations. Their knowledge goes much farther back. There is not only knowledge of the physical surroundings, but also of other village inhabitants. Not only do people know what their names are and how they look, but also what their profession is and how that profession works. People know part of the past of the villagers, their educations, and their loves. People know also the misery others carry about with them and the failures of years before. The knowledge of people in a village is very detailed and comprehensive.

Having detailed knowledge of a small piece of the world gives people something to hold on to. They know their way in that small world, they can find their way well and they do not have to feel like strangers. Others have called this a connection to their roots. That knowledge is more difficult to lose than money and more difficult than an ideology, two other things you could hold on to.

Knowledge of people, amassed over the years, is an important part of this knowledge. In modern society such knowledge is disappearing. The fact that detailed knowledge of their own, tangible world that surrounds people in villages, gives them something to hold on to, could help psychologists to find solutions to difficult modern problems such as stress, uprooting, and having nothing to go by. Detailed knowledge of their own world provides a clear framework for villagers to distinguish between real and fake, between reality and fiction. In modern society, where the 'virtual' world is so dominant, this is no unnecessary luxury.

The detailed knowledge of village inhabitants also has a considerable breadth. It rises above the usual sectors of society. In a village different people live together, so the idea of separate population groups with their own needs does not exist there. That produces people who are used to weighing things in their minds. In modern society all problems are approached per sector and formulated by interest groups. Of all governors and politicians we expect a weighing on higher level. That often makes decision making a complicated and theoretical process. Certain sectors are forgotten and the amount of sectorised approaches makes it difficult to oversee. The village on the other hand, because of its size and clear layout, is capable of an integral approach to those problems.

Social control

The village has always known social control as an important instrument for control. Therefore a villager would be wise to solve a difference of opinion with his neighbours himself instead of calling the police. When the police needs to come there is a serious problem that may never be solved.

Resistance to social control rose in the 19th and 20th centuries. The norms for social control only slowly adjusted to the developments discussed in chapter 2. Because these developments were not developments of the village. They came from the outside. Especially the villagers who liked the new developments were confronted with social control. They used different values and ways of life.

In the village social control exists for two reasons. The first reason is that people are interested in each other. People always want to know what is happening in their environment. The second reason is security. When there would be no social control then the countryside could be very dangerous. The low population density would too easily offer a place for all sorts of unwanted activities, breaking and entering, storage of weapons and drugs, and murder. When social control functions well it means that there are eyes everywhere anyway. The combination of these two reasons—interest and security—provides for a well functioning social control. Thanks to social control people who cannot live by themselves can still live in society. Someone is keeping an eye on them, once in a while someone helps them a little, and they do no longer need to go to a place of care. Social control can make life more bearable. In the French village of Mellionec two elderly people from Paris bought a house. The houses there are inexpensive and the couple was looking for peace and quiet. They did not talk to the people in their new neighbourhood. Everyone left them alone as well. Mellionec is a village without a bus stop. There is a baker and a grocery store but there are no other shops. The two people began to have difficulty walking. Their children discovered this and decided to take their parents back to Paris. There they both died within months. The comment of the villagers was: “Why did they not talk to us? It is so simple to help them do groceries. But you do have to say something.”

The number of controlling institutes in our society has grown very large in the last fifty years. Some inspectors have been replaced with machines. Machines were made to inspect tickets and to register people to counter theft and vandalism. Every time something goes wrong people call for more police officers in the streets. But people seem to start to realize that expanding police, camera's, specialized inspection teams and vigilantes will not solve the problems. Expanding this type of control will lead to a police state. Police states have led to very bad experiences in Eastern Europe in the 20th century. Lately there has been renewed attention to social control. People advocate it especially when talking about senseless violence and small time criminals. People are increasingly calling for more civil responsibility, beyond calling the police.

Practicing human interaction

City culture is characterized by ‘each man for himself’. It is ridiculous to greet everyone you meet in a crowded shopping mall. Those who want to move freely in a street avoid contact. The city folk know how to avoid others. They know how to be anonymous in the streets. That does not mean that a city person is doomed to live in isolation. They will generally interact through work, church, hobbies, cafés or clubs. They can easily avoid people they do not like to meet. That way circles of similar minded people easily emerge. Small ghettos of people who share a political colour, age, love or defect or who have similar incomes. That leads to people getting used to dealing only with those like themselves. At school, these are those of the same age. At work they are colleagues and at the club they are those who share your opinion, sport or hobby. You can avoid someone you do not like. When you leave your house you do not need to meet anyone even when the streets are crowded. Cafés, too, are generally aiming for specific sorts of customers. The consequence is that the public places where everybody comes are now experienced as uncomfortable. We are thinking of trains and stations. Another thing is that there are few public places left. Most are claimed by traffic and shopping centres with merchandise. In a few places space has been created for specific population groups. On terraces people tend to concern themselves with their own table only. Shops are public places but they have intensive camera control. True public places could be

squares or parks. For the Vondelpark in Amsterdam this is its claim to fame. That is how special public life is when it functions correctly.

Only in villages there is any kind of necessity to talk to with everyone. It is strange when you do not greet someone you regularly meet in the streets. Whether you like it or not, you learn to talk to people, not just the ones you like, but also the ones that you don't. Where people in a village community systematically avoid each other there is a serious problem. Feuds can emerge and poison the whole village.

A village inhabitant can also isolate himself. He can build a wall around his property. People who lived in a castle tended to do this long ago. They preferred isolated existences within the castle walls. Among the people moving into villages from cities now, there are some who do not seek contact of any kind. But the children of someone who isolates himself will feel that wall in the village school. Such children are likely to become isolated.

In a village interaction with fellow inhabitants is so important that those who consider buying a house there would be wise not only to review the quality of the house and the décor before the sale but also to realize that they have to be able to get along with their new neighbours. Those living there already will play important roles in how much you would enjoy living there.

The facts that human interaction is important in a village and that it is practiced, do not mean that there are harmonic relations. Social cohesion, social control, interaction and helping neighbours do not together automatically lead to harmony and solidarity. That is a romantic idea. In a village things can get rough. People can fight. These point to the fact that people don't feel indifferent toward another, that there are human relations. The art of human interaction is practiced in a village, and only when it is practiced can it prosper.

What we are talking about here was referred to in the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance as the 'art of living'. The first sentence of the first Ethics written in Dutch by Coornhert in 1586 is: 'My intention is to describe the art of living'. Our society, being focused on prerequisites to life, has somewhat lost that idea, although the words 'life artist' are still sometimes used in biographies and funeral speeches. When you think of a work of art you tend to think of a sellable object and not of life. We think this is an incorrect attitude.

Hospitality

Hospitality is one of the forms of the art of living. Rediscovering hospitality is an important affair in a time when people talk negatively about foreigners. The foreigner who is not a tourist is soon seen to be a problem. That will stay that way as long as hospitality stays professionalized, as a branch of industry instead of part of the art of living.

A village like Aalten in the Achterhoek, near the German border, took in a lot of people in hiding during the war. At a certain moment 20% of the local population were refugees. Those people in hiding were not tax deductible, they were illegal and put their hosts at great risk. Aalten had its own ideas about what should happen in the world.

When in 1989 the Iron Curtain was torn people of the Danish village Tommerup came together. They wanted to respond to this world scale event. One of the inhabitants, Poul Peterson, proposed to invite 1000 inhabitants of different Eastern European countries. For practical reasons the number was reduced to 400. With this kind of hospitality Tommerup lay an important base for the current movement Cultural Villages of Europe. The most important activity of this movement is practicing hospitality. Each year hundreds of villagers travel to the Cultural Village of the year where they are provided for by families. At first this idea

caused many to react sceptically: how could Estonian people, who speak only Estonian and Russian, stay with a French family? By now, practice has caught up with fear. It turned out not to be a problem and it did not detract anything from the experience either. The movement Cultural Villages of Europe shows that hospitality can be practiced in these times as well.

Ability to do something as a community

There are villages that, when they pull together, are capable of something extraordinary. We would like to give an example.

In the past year governments and small communities have often collided about space for highways, toxic sludge depots, harbours, railroad tracks, house building projects, airports, industry and nature reserves and recreation areas. The problem of the small communities is always that the planners have thought up a plan at the drawing board without knowing the local situation sufficiently. In 1994 an 'Eleven Foolish Plans Tour' designated eleven such plans as 'foolish'. One was the construction of a large toxic sludge depot on the beach near Wijk aan Zee. What was going on? In the IJmond the company Hoogovens has been expanding northward since after WWII and it has closed Wijk aan Zee off from its eastern neighbours. The inhabitants considered this growth a necessity. Holland wanted its own steel mill and economic development was considered important. When in the 1970s the company claimed even more space, people began to ask whether that was necessary. And when in 1989 other companies started to claim space as well the inhabitants decided that they were going too far: the plan for a depot of toxic sludge on the beach was misplaced. Unanimously they showed this by taking a group photo of all inhabitants. The argument they used was: "That is not what the beach is for." Meanwhile the village was looking for alternative methods. After thirteen years they proved that you do not need to store sludge but you can make bricks out of it. In our society, where many people have come to become self-involved, communal actions that increase community cohesion, as in the above example, are of great importance.

Art and culture

We have described an activity as a unified expression of a community. Usually however the things that people do together are related to art and culture. Art and culture have slightly different meanings in a village than has become the trend in society as a whole. The professional art, where individuals or small groups can make a work of art and put it up for sale to hang on a wall or to enjoy it for an evening, is scarce in villages. That is mainly because a village cannot provide enough audience, and therefore not enough money. For those things you go to a city.

Participating in a choir, an orchestra, or a play is something very different from buying a ticket for an event. Singing together, playing, rehearsing and organizing is a very intensive way of interacting with each other.

Another important characteristic of practicing village culture is freedom. Freedom to an extent that the professional artists unfortunately cannot have. The professionals have enormous obligations. They have to be able to live and generally they have to play whatever the audience or the reviewer likes. They need to repeat something that works over and over again. In the visual arts the artist can hardly avoid considering the taste of museum boards and gallery owners. Depending on the type of art, especially among people playing theatre and playing in orchestras, single performances are very costly. In a village single performances are the rule. That is necessary to get players to participate because they will not play something they do not like. When you realize this and can work with it, may also be able to

make a living in a village as a professional artist, because a booster or supervisor is usually welcome. This could be a good investment for money from subsidies.

The communal practice of different forms of culture turns out to be crucial for a village. A village with a firm identity usually derives it from practicing culture. Some examples. The village Halsbach (800 inhabitants) in Baiern performs a number of plays each year. This has brought fame to the village. The ingredients for success? (1) a farmer who is a talented writer and director; (2) an old farm functioning as an in-door theatre; (3) a forest that is used as an open-air theatre; (4) enough inhabitants who are prepared to study for a part and (5) a number of people who are prepared to build the decors and other necessary things. Organizing Cultural Village in 1996 in Tommerup, in 1999 in Wijk aan Zee, in 2000 in French Mellionec, in 2001 in Czech Bystré and in 2002 in Tuscan Pergine Valdarno has had enormous consequences for all participating villages. In all instances it was a joint action involving many inhabitants. At first people thought they were in over their heads and they had doubts. Doubts as to whether they could manage the year well. Doubts as to whether they could have so many people over and feed and lodge them without an adequate budget. But they all found a way and made something beautiful of which everybody was proud afterward. The German chess village Ströbeck at the foot of the Harz Mountains knows a long chess tradition. Long ago a captured nobleman is said to have taught chess to his guard. This had great consequences in the village. Since schools exist in Ströbeck there has also been chess education. The village has not yet reared world famous chess players but it does have an identity. Even now, although chess education has almost succumbed to the uniformity the higher levels of government strive for. That a village can teach an own subject in school clashes with increasing scale and streamlining aimed at by central management to such an extent that the village needed to devote much energy to keep its education—an education that had survived both Hitler and communism.

The famous historian Johan Huizinga discovered in his book *Homo Ludens* that our ancestors in the 19th century have become overly serious and that they had ‘put on their work suits’. He thought that playfulness largely disappeared from public life during the industrialization. Perhaps he meant the joint practicing of village culture we are talking about here. In any case we can say that practicing village culture—also because of its communal character—increases cohesion between citizens. As such it is an important force in the village.

Nature

In a very essential sector of the countryside, in agri- and horticulture, people are dealing with living instead of with dead things. Those who refuse to acknowledge this risk getting in trouble. The rapid change in Eastern European countries after WWII from farms to industrial factories, modelled on the factories working with dead materials, therefore was a great fiasco. It is still an open question whether you can treat nature in this way. There is still an active discussion about how you can treat animals.

In the countryside there generally is much respect for nature. Nature is big there because it includes not only plants and birds and fish, but also people and the weather. People and nature are not opposites in a village. Recognising that people are also part of nature is an important base for acknowledging each individual. The long-lasting interaction between people so characteristic to a village is an excellent ground for such recognition. For the realization that you have to accept people for who they are. Realizing this makes the unique aspect of people stand out. It is an attitude that allows people to have defects without having to hide them.

Informal democracy

Wijk aan Zee has not been an independent community since the 30s of the last century. There is a village council, but that has only advisory powers. When something needs to happen that involves a risk, a private initiative is necessary. That is what happened when Wijk aan Zee became Cultural Village in 1999. That happened without any kind of formal decision. Support was sought through informal circles and in the end the project was supported throughout the community. An ad hoc board was formed consisting of the different population groups. It was so widely supported that the Mayor and Aldermen had no trouble getting money from the city council.

A village lends itself perfectly to come up with democratic solutions to problems. People can oversee the things being discussed. There is no need for complicated analyses or theories. People know the problems from their own experience, from seeing and hearing them. And although they can perhaps not see the national and international size of the problem, but locally they can know which problems need a solution right away and which can wait a while.

The quality of the village democracy determines to what extent the various population groups in a village are able to sit together and talk. That does not happen automatically. That requires people who are able to reason from common interests and who can consider those their own interests. In a world where competition is protected by law as a good and functional principle, people looking for cooperation can be discredited. A company cooperating with another can be corrected by the competition laws.

One of the concerns the government has about village democracy is that they doubt that enough specialized knowledge exists in villages. This deficiency has caused them to join small communities together. However, expertise does not imply a better view of a problem. It, more often than not, takes the problem out of context. Moreover, when discussing a problem usually many experts are claiming to be right. Because of their thorough knowledge of their surroundings villagers are often the best people to choose the solutions to problems. Other kinds of specialized knowledge, such as that required for building a bridge, building a house, reinforcing a dike or constructing a road can always be asked from outside.

Conclusion

Knowledge of the environment and of the people, social control, practicing human interaction, hospitality, the ability to do something as a community, the joint practicing of art and culture, being closest to nature, seeing people as part of nature, informal democracy. All these are characteristics that can give a village identity and power. These are also the traits that society as a whole can use to solve the current problems in prospering(!) societies.

4. Vitality in practice

Villages can grow into vital villages and contribute to society as a whole. The times are ready. In a number of villages people have realized this. In this chapter we give examples of how vitality is realized or how such realization is impeded. We will do this using the experiences of Wijk aan Zee and other European villages.

First: no

To become vital a village needs to start moving. That requires something. In the case of Wijk aan Zee the requirement was fulfilled by anger about sloppy town and country planners who wanted to use the village as a dumping ground. Anger about the policy not to spread burdens but to concentrate them. The villagers were however thinking in terms of spreading burdens and they thought that the village had sacrificed enough for the economic development they considered necessary.

Wijk aan Zee understood in time that protesting only erodes your own strength and causes you to lose your good mood that you need to get something done. The village became unified which, as we shall see, made a lot of things possible.

Unity and a place of meeting

That unity could exist because Wijk aan Zee had a place of meeting. Lacking a town hall the village used hotel café restaurant Sonnevanck as a public place that was prepared to house and service the people of the village. The café attained an important function in social life in Wijk aan Zee, and because it was also a hotel, could connect that to the world outside the village. Not only the villagers could find each other there, people from elsewhere were also involved. An example of the latter is this. When, because of the problems of toxic sludge, the village needed to concern itself with water, at a certain point they needed a hydrologist—even though nobody knew what that was. In Sonnevanck they wrote on a blackboard: ‘Wanted: hydrologist’. Within a month two hydrologists appeared who gave very sound advice. Sonnevanck as a café could be more than a community or village social centre because it did not depend on any form of government. Administrators of community or village social centres tend to draw initiatives into a drab average. Characteristic for Sonnevanck was that it dared to take risks like a private enterprise, which makes entrepreneurship so interesting. The most important thing was to reformulate the goals of the café. The emphasis ended up on the function of a public place in society and therefore on the quality of the meeting place.

Importance of the small independent entrepreneur

Also in a wider sense than we described above the small independent entrepreneur is economically and socially very important to a community like a village. Its interests usually coincide with the interests of the village, because for a café owner, a carpenter, a baker and a greengrocer the inhabitants of a village are both neighbours and customers. The same goes for modern service providers. For instance, to some a bookkeeper who can estimate a budget is indispensable.

The small independent entrepreneur is often a person who has trouble working for bosses or who is not satisfied in paid employment. It is someone who needs independence above all and who wants to do things his own way. Within the current economic climate there is little space for such people. Economic organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, trade organizations and other commercial organisations provide the small entrepreneur with little support. A small entrepreneur, to them, is a starting entrepreneur who wants to rapidly increase his turnover and expand his enterprise. Also, the requirements put to such an

entrepreneur regarding reports and quality often makes it very difficult or even impossible for him to work competitively while adhering to a 40-hour workweek. Forms and all sorts of demands and regulations cost a lot of time and paralyse the enterprise. Moreover, these things drive a small entrepreneur to work in a way suitable for large corporations but not for small ones.

In Wijk aan Zee, and probably in any other village, there are many people whose capacities are used minimally because of these impediments. Among those with disability benefits there could also be many who could prosper as independent entrepreneurs.

Practicing culture

There are villages where there is a higher level of creativity, villages that use much art and culture to form their identity. Examples in the Netherlands are Wieringen, where singing culture is highly developed, and Diever in Drente, which has an evolved theatre culture. Outside of the Netherlands an example is Halsbach in Baiern, which performs a new play written by its inhabitants as often as five times a year.

In Wijk aan Zee music culture has developed to an above average level. In Sonnevanck in 1985 mechanical music was turned off forever. That created space for people to play music again. They took their instruments when they came to Sonnevanck. Eating culture was also rediscovered and cherished as a new form of art. Since 1999 every first Saturday of the year a large communal dinner is organized for hundreds of people. Like serious communities have organizations called 'municipal works', the village has a 'cooking team'. In the summer, on a day when the weather is good, a 'dinner at the seaside' is prepared for villagers and guests. Thousands of guests participate. For 2003 a 'dinner with the neighbours' is in preparation: a number of employees and the directors of the Corus steel mill is invited to dinner. The village hopes in this way to create a better climate to talk about all the problems that exist between the factory and its small neighbour.

There are many villages that express themselves in their own way. In the Spanish Porrúa everyone loves bagpipes and drums. Everyone wants to play in the band. The local music school has 80 students, while the village has only 500 inhabitants. Cultural expressions in the form of a band, a theatre company, a choir or through the visual arts are important to a community's well being.

Using the means available

You can make a long list of villages where beautiful things happened by using the qualities of the people in the village and the natural environment. These are remarkable achievements of which the village is proud and in which outsiders love to participate. We would like to give some examples.

The opening meeting of Cultural Village in 1999 in Wijk aan Zee was held in the local gym. The gym is not beautiful nor pleasant. A few villagers however were able to turn it into something gorgeous with very little money. The village had never seen the gym look like that and loved it. The whole year of Cultural Village was only possible because of that attitude: you have to use the means available. The means were individuals with certain abilities, a steel mill, dunes, a beach, the sea, two churches, a number of cafés and restaurants, many musicians, a recording studio and a few sculptors and painters.

The village Zdenkov in the southern Czech republic has 75 inhabitants. Too low a number to realize many community facilities. There is no village meeting house or café where people can meet. Therefore the farmer who was chosen to be mayor has created a public fireplace, in

a corner of his fields where there are a few trees. Villagers meet there on nice evenings to barbecue together.

The village Diever in Drente, the Netherlands, performs a Shakespeare play every year. The village uses the abilities of its inhabitants, the environment, and the fact that many tourists visit the village in the summer.

The village Bystré in the Czech Republic calls woodworkers to come to the village for a week in 2003. They live in the middle of the forest and the letter of invitation reads: 'One part of the wood is used for industrial products, another for heating. But wood is a material that needs more time to grow than a human being has to live, and you can create beautiful things of it that give new forms and new life to the wood.'

Processing the past

Reflecting on its own past is healthy and indispensable to the vitality of a village.

In many places people pay attention to their own history. The community Heemskerk in the Netherlands has a historic club with over a thousand members. In Wijk aan Zee stories of old inhabitants are published monthly in the village paper. But in many villages large parts of their past remains unprocessed. People who have lived their whole lives in the village have often had trouble accepting the developments in modern society. But they had nowhere to go with their criticisms. In many places that turned into a fruitless conflict between the autochthons and so-called the 'imported ones'. The Belgian publicist Jan Hertoghs wrote in the magazine Humo a few years ago how complicated the process of integration of city people in villages was.

Improving cooperation between local government and village

More and more villages are losing their independence and are becoming part of larger communities. For those communities a village belongs under the heading 'district affairs'. Wijk aan Zee for example has been part of Beverwijk since the 1930's and relations between the two have always been difficult. The formal democracy of the town does not connect well to the informal structures in the village. In Wijk aan Zee people have taken the initiative to analyse the relationship between the town and the village and try to find and formulate a good method of cooperation. During a lunch to which the town government was invited, they proposed their idea. The town government liked the idea, and they seem prepared to cooperate. The project will not only concern the relations between village and town government, but the relations with higher levels of government will be included as well. The project should start in 2003.

Throughout Europe there is a process of joining small communities, led by the national governments and the European Union. Organising a year of Cultural Village of Europe meant for small communities such as Mellionec, France, and Bystré in the Czech Republic that they had to call in help from neighbouring villages. Ties of cooperation emerged out of the inner need to cooperate. This cooperation has continued after the year ended. That is something very different from cooperation imposed from above.

In Pergine, Italy, that has consisted of a number of villages for a while now, the initiative Cultural Village has finally consolidated the relations between the former villages; they used to have few ties with one another.

Drastically limiting formalisms

Activities in villages are usually small and clearly structured. A formal approach therefore paralyzes and is soon considered annoying. We give as examples dealing with volunteers, system of permits, and the difference between commercial and para-commercial enterprises. Firstly, the professionals of local government can usually deal much more carefully with volunteers. They often do not realize the quality of the volunteer. The volunteer works in the evenings and in the weekends, the professional at working hours. The work a volunteer does is something he fully supports. That is not always the case in what he does for a living. Moreover, a volunteer works for free. In most instances what he does will actually cost him money. Those who pick up, place and return crash-barriers themselves should not have to pay for them.

Secondly, the system of permits is not always very subtle. The system makes it impossible to think of something on a Friday evening and to execute it the next Saturday or Sunday. The system of permits discourages organisers to act spontaneously. Sometimes this problem can be solved to the satisfaction of all concerned. For example in the Drommedaris in Enkhuizen, the Netherlands. Musicians often played there, but that was in principle impossible for the proprietor to allow because he needed a permit for every performance. Finally he agreed with the mayor to have a permanent permit for live music, while the mayor retained the right to revoke it when problems arose. Another example. Whoever wants to organize something on the beach, or elsewhere in the open air, needs to act according to the weather. Because of the necessity to have a permit it is now very difficult to react to changing weather conditions. However, experiences in Wijk aan Zee teach that when you show the responsible civil servant that in our time we can fly to the moon but cannot get a permit for an event in a weekend when the weather is good, this will often make him think. That made it possible for Wijk aan Zee to have dinner together at the beach.

Thirdly and finally, the difference between commercial and para-commercial enterprises. For the café that separation of functions has effectively eradicated, in most places, the old formula of hotel-café-restaurant-with-a-few-rooms where everything happened. We have written of this in chapter 2. In any case it is clear that this separation of functions has worked badly in the villages for the simple reason that there are not enough people for such specialization. The café Sonnevank in Wijk aan Zee has never concerned itself with this separation of functions and that was undoubtedly one of the reasons for its success.

Ownership and maintenance of land in the same hands

Large organizations such as the Provincial waterworks and Natuurmonumenten tend to act like landlords who do not care where their lands lie. They compose a national policy and find it annoying to follow specific demands of local people.

Most of the dunes around Wijk aan Zee are owned by the Provincial waterworks. As we said before, in 1999 Wijk aan Zee wanted to use a plot of land between the village and the Corus steel mill as a sculpture park. Eleven renowned sculptors from eleven European countries were invited to make sculptures. It became a beautiful park and the Dutch queen came by at the opening. For those who love art it was clear that you could not remove such a collection after four months. It was easy to convince the various governments of that. It took however two years to convince the waterworks that in such a case you should not hold strictly onto your policy, which of course does not mention anything like a sculpture park. Those two years took a lot of energy and have enormously delayed making the park a permanent thing.

Another example is local agriculture. When that disappears, the acres of land it leaves will need to be maintained. We should prevent that that will happen from a distance, by

organizations that have no connection to the place or the local residents. Ownership and maintenance by the local people will also increase the number of jobs.

Space for doing and thinking at the same time

A place where you think of things and make them, where thinking and doing is united, is hard to imagine in these times when functions are separated. For a village it can contribute significantly to vitality.

In Wijk aan Zee a space was recently designated 'public workspace'. The space is a small old church that was used as storage space for beach cabins in winter. The idea behind this project was that, besides a meeting hall, sports area, church and café, you also need a place where you can make things. How did the idea originate? We will have to go back to 1999, when Wijk aan Zee became Cultural Village of Europe. Because of the large number of activities in that year a construction team was brought together. A team of people who made all the constructions necessary in that year. They invented constructions, made painted signs along the access road to Wijk aan Zee, and turned the gym into a feasting hall. After 1999 the building team remained intact. People had come to enjoy doing things instead of talking in meetings. Following the methods of this team the idea for the workplace emerged. The old church was found to be the best place. The intention is that painters, welders, woodworkers, instrument builders and perhaps designers as well will meet each other there, that there will be exhibits, and that the top floor will house a well-equipped music studio. The important thing is that you can support many activities in the village from such a workplace.

Conclusion

However limited the practical experiences may be, the examples show how vitality can be attained. It is important that a creative process is started that is supported by the village community. The most important building blocks for this creative process are the different abilities of the various residents, the fact that those citizens are prepared to deal with one another, the private initiative, using the local artistic qualities and means, using the situation as it is, keeping history in mind and having a meeting place. It is also important to be critical about methods that may work elsewhere in society but tend to impede good and wanted developments in villages.

5. In conclusion

In the 19th and 20th century many developments occurred in which villages did not play a part. In a rapid development of economics, organization, individualizing, mobility, specialization and science there was no place for the typical qualities of a village community. But when it turned out that those developments also caused problems the situation changed. People started to ask again for the things that can be developed in villages, what they call social cohesion. On the basis of the ideas and experiences of Cultural Villages of Europe we have shown in this essay what the qualities of the villages are. We have made clear that those qualities only become visible when they are called upon. That is not only important to villages, but also to society as a whole. Because the quality of society depends on all of its building blocks.

In the nineties of the last century the world was acquainted with the term 'social capital'. Well known social scientist such as Bourdieu and Putnam, as well as the philosopher Fukuyama, used the term. Capital, labour and technique were no longer considered sufficient for economic and social developments. When corporate life and networks fail, when citizens are insufficiently involved we will not advance. The characteristics that we called qualities of the village in chapter 3 may fit the heading 'social capital'. The village no longer needs to feel backward. The criteria have changed.

At the closing conference this year in Cultural Village Pergine Valdarno, one of the speakers was Enrico Cheli, a sociologist from Sienna. He said that he had just returned from a conference in Frankfurt where he spoke with colleagues about the future of European culture. That culture does not yet exist, he argued, it still needs to be born. That culture cannot be imposed from above. It can only grow from the base, from the people themselves. He emphasized the timeliness of the movement Cultural Villages of Europe, comparing it to a four-year old that made a step in the direction of European culture. The important thing is to create a society that unites the best of cities and villages.

Looking at a village is seen by many people as looking at the past. As nostalgia. In the past, studying the past has led to great innovations. In a changing time, where some developments grind to a halt, looking back at history may be the most important thing you can do. Looking at ancient Greece in the late medieval times has brought us the Renaissance and the New Time. History can indeed inspire people for the future. Also in the case of villages.

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