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This is the first edition of a new magazine, counting down to the appearance of the first real issue, in July 2005. It is published during the Dutch presidency of the European Union, on the occasion of a conference that is connected to the Europe of the regions. The conference is about peri-urban areas, those areas that are close to the large cities. It was exactly such an environment that spawned the Cultural Village initiative, which grew to become a European network of villages. Out of this network came the desire to create an international magazine that voices the opinions and concerns of the European countryside.

Command and control culture: pressure from the cities

The initiative PURPLE distinguishes between countryside under urban pressure ("peri-urban areas") and areas further away from the cities. For the cities, the peri-urban areas are useful for solving housing shortages, for refuse disposal, for satisfying recreation needs, for industry collocation. But not only are the areas that are directly adjacent to cities under pressure. The modernizing process of the 20th century started in the cities and influences both the peri-urban areas and those further away from the city. That is the pressure that the urban organisation pattern and the urban lifestyle exert.

First let me clear up a misconception. Conventional wisdom has it that since the introduction of modern communication technology all differences in lifestyle between city-dwellers and villagers have disappeared. They all watch the same TV-shows, have identical idols and are confronted with the same political problems. Moreover, cars, busses, trains and planes are mixing city and

village dwellers. But for some reason, however, this still did not bring about one single lifestyle, even though the urban lifestyle is dominant. That much is clear when you look at fashion, consumerism, nightlife, art and culture and especially organisation. But this dominance doesn't mean that the lifestyle has really taken root everywhere. Many people see it as imposed and inescapable--not chosen.

This shows prominently among farmers, who have been protesting this imposition for half a century now. Non-farmers however were not able to understand their cries. Farmers had to subject to modern economy and become entrepreneurs producing commodities. It also shows in the increasing closedness of the countryside. Villagers have become cautious in dealing with outsiders. People moving into villages often fail to take the trouble to mix into village life. They decided to move to the countryside for the grass, the flowers, and the horses you can see from the window, without realizing that life works differently in the

countryside. This has led to considerable tensions between life-long villagers and newcomers.

I have also personally witnessed the clash between modern organisation methods (developed for large corporations) and the realities of village life. Running a bar in a small village has become incredibly difficult because the ways in which the central government wants it to be done do not fit the workings of a small village business:

The central government wants both large and small enterprises to be run according to a one-size-fits-all scheme, which is taken from the way large businesses operate. This means that any task must first be planned beforehand, executed according to plan, and evaluated afterwards. Planning involves defining goals, describing exactly what is to be done and how, mapping out the entire project, and calculating a budget. Planning requires skills very different from actually running a business. Larger

corporations hire different people for these different tasks, but in small enterprises the person who performs the tasks must also do the planning. Because small enterprises are expected to conform to the planning-execution-evaluation scheme, they have to hire planning specialists like accountants. This development has led to a division: some people plan and command, others do what they are told and are have to account for their actions.

This newly arisen command and control culture is anathema to anyone wishing to run an enterprise artfully. There is no room for improvising--once the strength of small businesses. Many people wish things were different but do not know how to escape from it. The countryside is a place where small scale matters. However large land holdings may be, there are always just a few people working on them. Command and control culture is a burden to all of them.

From July 15 to October 20, a caravan will tour the countryside of Europe. This caravan will visit more than fifty-five villages in twenty-five countries. It will not only become a beautiful trip, but also a conference on wheels about and with the European countryside. The caravan, which will accommodate twenty-five to fifty persons, will breathe in and explore rural Europe.

Kitchen Wagon

At every location where the caravan stops, people from the kitchen wagon will head to the farmer and try to buy any needed foods from him. Any necessities will be bought from local manufacturers if possible. A group of students from the University of Wageningen will write down the things they are confronted with in the fifty-five villages. They will map the

Europa Tour



The Europa Tour that starts on the 15th of July 2005

differences, similarities, problems and opportunities.

New Jobs

The caravan also carries a number of people who will think about new possible jobs on the countryside. Such jobs are necessary in many rural areas, to keep young people from moving away and to prevent vacancy from occurring. New employment opportunities are an important part of the proposed EU rural policy. Currently a lot of emphasis is put on recreation and tourism, but there must be many more possibilities. The caravan will help the European Union to find new jobs that are compatible with the countryside scale.

Other interests

Besides the interests in land cultivation and

local economy, the caravan will also explore art, culture and political organisation on the countryside. Democracy is originally the business of small communities. How are decisions taken in the different villages? What things are the villagers doing together? Film and photography will accompany the caravan, to register the tour. Also, a lot of media attention is expected.

Sponsors wanted

Funds, sponsors or material contributions are wanted for this tour. Currently, we need a minibus that can carry eight persons, a truck that can serve as a kitchen wagon and another truck that can be used as a communication wagon. Also, fuel is needed for the trip, that will be 12 000 kilometres long. For further suggestions or information, please contact us.

It's not that crazy to compare Wijk aan Zee to the village of Asterix the Gaul. Just as the Gallic village resisted the Romans, this coastal village has defied the hungry eyes of urban planners for years. The city plans have only made the village stronger.

Where else could something like Cultural Village emerge? It put the Dutch village on the map and on the political agenda - exactly as the villagers intended. It was Bert Kisjes -Asterix, Obelix and Panoramix all in one- who, on New Year's Eve 1995, declared Wijk aan Zee to be Cultural Village of Europe in 1999.

No organisation existed to prepare Wijk aan Zee for this task. Neither did a plan. Still, Bert Kisjes, then still innkeeper of Hotel Sonnevank, knew that there was no other way. To Wijk aan Zee, after all, being talked about and having a place on the political agenda is a survival strategy.

The coastal village came very close to non-existence. Surrounded by steel giant

Vital Village Wijk aan Zee

Hoogovens (now Corus) it has thwarted a number of plans. The village almost had to give way to an expansion of the factory. This started in the 1970s. In the 1980s, additional plans were made to build a toxic sludge depot on the beach and an airport just off the coast.

In the meantime Sonnevank had conquered a place as community center, a meeting place for people with ideas and love for the village. It should come as no surprise that this was the place where resistance against the plans took shape, under the inspiring guidance of Bert Kisjes.

The villagers sought attention for their village in a peaceful manner. Resistance was voiced through music, theatre and other playful means. The CDs with protest songs against the planned airport and the sludge depot are famous, as is the theatrical 'Eleven Foolish Plans Tour'.

Wijk aan Zee got national press coverage. Its message is always the same. Every village has a right to exist, even in the late twentieth, twenty-first century. Not only that, but a village is vital, and city and village complement each other as long as they acknowledge each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Bert Kisjes, like no other, understood that this message should not be told just once. After a sludge depot, after an airport, more plans would come. Wijk aan Zee had to think of a way to permanently spread its message and to root itself on the map. To this end Wijk aan Zee pronounced itself Cultural Village of Europe 1999.

In the magical year of 1999 Wijk aan Zee was at the center of attention. A miracle happened that year. Twelve villages formed a

European covenant. This way the message of Wijk aan Zee is resonating through the whole of Europe. Every year the villagers meet each other at a different place in Europe. Friendly cultural exchanges occur, and afterwards vitality in villages is discussed, as are the ways in which villagers can learn from one another.

Wijk aan Zee sets the example of how a village can fight to return stronger from the battle. Gradually, the inhabitants of Wijk aan Zee have become conscious of the beauty of their own village. This has made them happy and creative. All beauty that comes from that, works like a Gallic magic potion itself.

Thirteen plans were made for Wijk aan Zee. Thirteen times the village had to fight for its existence and against urban interests. The count remains at thirteen. Since the covenant of villages no policy maker has dared touch Wijk aan Zee.

“Farming can be so much more than just food production”

“A farming business can not be considered to be a small enterprise anymore,” says Mark Groeneveld. He is the former secretary of the Boerengroep (Farmer’s Group) in Wageningen and currently works for the Agrarian Youth Contact in Gelderland.

“Because the bottom line of farms has to be lowered continuously, machines and larger scales are increasingly employed. Farmers start collaborations, both with each other and with other companies. However, there are still only one or two persons working on farms with livestock. Farmers don’t split their tasks: they don’t hire specialists and are still small entrepreneurs in that sense, even though the activities of a farmer are very diverse.”

However, this too is beginning to change, according to Groeneveld. High labour costs are rendering conservation of the many-sidedness of farm life impossible. He gives the example of a business in Groesbeek, which produces milk but also incorporates a successful cheese factory. That factory is currently being run by the parents of the farmer that runs the milk farm, but one day they will stop to do so. “Without the labour of those parents the company can’t be run anymore. That’s really bad, because then a lot of people can’t come to that beautiful company anymore. This is an example of a countryside enterprise that is being narrowed down to milk production and some nature conservation. There is way too little thought on problems like these and possible solutions.”

The social role that can be fulfilled by a farm is very important, says Groeneveld. “A farm can be invigorating to some people. There’s always

a job to be done. Fortunately there still are farmers who get people involved with their work, for example by asking for volunteers to help with nature conservation. Boys and girls from the neighbourhood can help to milk the cows. I like this vital agriculture that involves a lot of people. In these cases, the farmer has opened up, but still sets the course. In this way farming can be much more than just food production.”

Currently, young farmers are often also employed as wage workers. Groeneveld: “A lot of young farmers have side jobs with accountancy firms or another farmer. This expands the tight budget that exists during takeover a bit and is a generally accepted way among farmers. Some take other directions with their businesses. Farmers who are very creative, have guts and possess some marketing skills, can be very successful offering all kinds of recreation, education, good cheeses, special

vegetables, tomatoes, et cetera. Farmers have looked at such enterprises with much scepticism in the past, but are increasingly showing appreciation for these colleagues.”

Groeneveld has some reservations about rural development in a country like the Netherlands. “Many villages are occupied by people who can afford a large house and have one or two cars,” he says. “Should these people be supported when satisfying their latent needs? I think there are bigger problems in the world... People should be stimulated to talk to each other about these matters, and to make their village better to live in by themselves. Part of this is about becoming conscious about your own situation. Villagers shouldn’t always look at the ways cities are organised and built. That way the countryside keeps its own identity and variety. In some villages however, the question remains who has to initiate such developments.”

The representatives of the eleven villages who met at Wijk aan Zee in January 1999 and who signed the Charter of the Villages. From left to right: Donald Wilson (Aldeburgh), Pedro Haces Tames, Porrúa. Leonora Becker (Palkonya), Magda Berndsen (Beverwijk), Finn Brunse (Tommerup), Thanasis Kangas (Paxos), Massimo Palazzeschi (Pergine Valdarno), Rudi Krosch (Ströbeck), Hana Sejkorová (Bystré), Michel Balbot (Mellionec) and Agu Leivits (Kilingi Nömme).

Foto: Riet Molenaar.



Time for the EU to discover its villages

During this year’s spring, when the European Union incorporated ten new countries, it became clear that European cooperation is not popular. Almost everyone was sceptical, as the European elections of mid-June illustrated. Voter turnout was low and the number of election posters was small, even though the governments did call on their citizens to show their commitment to Europe.

As Cultural Village of Europe, Wijk aan Zee looked beyond its own borders. It developed an interest in Europe. It organized a large welcoming party for the ten new members of the European Union. A delegation of at most fifty people was invited from each of the ten countries. In the end, three hundred and fifty guests came to Wijk aan Zee with their best musicians on the 12th and 13th of June. They were housed by locals and joined during a unique ‘Night of Europe’, in which music was played and a great banquet held. Wijk aan Zee managed to get various local municipalities and

the surrounding steel giant Corus to help out with the festivities.

The national government, however, did not participate in the event. Neither did any officials from the European Union. Delegations from eleven countries were celebrating EU policy, but not a single politician seemed to care! In the end, the first secretary of the Polish embassy did come to open the Night and she delivered a beautiful speech. But the lack of interest shown by Brussels and The Hague was incomprehensible.

The diversity of Europe turned out to be a great source of inspiration for the Cultural Village network. That collaboration led to a Charter in 1999 in which eleven European villages speak about what can be expected of villages in twenty-first century Europe. The European Union should in turn be inspired by villages and countryside when developing her programmes, methods and policy. Villages discovered Europe. Now it is time for Europe to discover her villages.

Trust and space

Now a research psychologist, Carin Giesen wrote her dissertation ‘Crisis on the Farm’ on analysed farm life. Later she got involved with the Cultural Village project. Together with Bert Kisjes, she wrote an essay on vitality of village life for the Dutch government. This magazine asked her about her experiences and views on the future of the countryside.

Sceptical

“When I first encountered Cultural Village, I was a bit sceptical,” Giesen admits. I’ve seen village life change a lot since I moved to Amsterdam. Villages have piggybacked on the developments that blew over from the cities and became more and more alike. Village stores were replaced by large supermarket chains, farmers were suddenly called ‘agricultural entrepreneurs’ and their work became bureaucratized. I saw how the character of villages succumbed to these new forces, but I couldn’t do much more than accept that and offer farmers a way to ventilate their frustrations and powerlessness. When a movement emerged that countered these trends, that claimed a place for the village as it used to be, I seriously doubted whether that could be done.”

Qualities

Still the project got her interest. Giesen: “What makes Cultural Village so fascinating is the fact that the project views the village as a community of people. It showed how village characteristics – knowing each other and the surroundings, the necessity of working and living with one another – are qualities that are not even considered in modern solutions. You don’t have to control villagers top-down, it’s much better to let them be free and do the things their way. That alone revitalises villages and restores the pride and self-esteem of villagers. The outside world – and nowadays even the villagers themselves – has to become conscious of those qualities of the village. They have to realise that village life is different from urban life, but in a way that should be cherished. By naming those qualities, Cultural Village put up some good arguments for the survival of the village.”

Rural development

“I think any development on the countryside must be preceded by a good discussion. If villagers – both old and young – are asked to formulate themselves what the qualities of their village is, it can become clear where ‘urban thinking’ is dominating the minds and discussion. If you subsequently ask them what their views on rural development are, you

might see that the villagers who want certain facilities are the same ones who have an urban perspective. You can continue the discussion from there and let the villagers – or their representatives – come up with the problems. I think that is necessary to get a satisfying outcome of rural development. I would also let these same people expand on plans for development. Those who govern should listen well and set conditions that allow the villagers to be as free as possible, that give them both trust and space.”

Acknowledge the villages

“Cultural Village’s philosophy is of tremendous importance. You see, it wasn’t thought up behind a desk, but by villagers themselves, in a language that is clear and understandable to other people from the countryside. As soon as the government – the national as well as the European – recognises that city and countryside are different social structures, with their own qualities, it will become clear to them that you need to give villagers a large degree of freedom, so that they can make use of their own sources, talents, knowledge and experience. In that way, dynamic villages will arise, that are attractive to live in.”

Colophon

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