A Multi-Lens Reflection Framework for Meaningful Participation

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can participation become more meaningful and valuable for residents?

Inviting residents to contribute does not establish Whetherparticipation is accessible, worthwhile or influential. This research explored what designing for meaningful participation requires in practice.

01

Exploring participation through design

A five-month Research through Design process took place in the Scheepsmasttuin on Noordereiland, Rotterdam. **Developing a street design proposal for greening this space served as a means of investigating participation.** Sketches and design alternatives made residents' concerns, interpretations and possible changes tangible.

The approach combined two forms of involvement. **Project-specific activities** invited residents to contribute through street conversations, written responses and co-creation. Alongside these activities, the designer-researcher joined existing neighbourhood activities through **embedded field research**, developing understanding of everyday experiences, relationships and local initiatives.

02

Broadening the inquiry

Two breakdowns challenged the designer-researcher's working understanding. A critical encounter involving strong opposition from a resident raised questions about existing tensions and the limits of further participation activities. A later clarification of municipal arrangements challenged the anticipated route towards further development and implementation.

Together with reflection on other encounters, these breakdowns prompted reconsideration of the approach. The scope broadened towards the context surrounding participation, introducing an additional research question:

What conditions surrounding a participation process shape whether meaningful participation can take place?

03

What became visible?

Reach, interest and contribution were distinct. Residents could care about the street while finding the communication, location or requested form of involvement unsuitable. Repeated contact supported familiarity without necessarily broadening participation.

Spatial concerns could also involve relationships and emotions. Discussions about greenery, noise and maintenance connected to earlier experiences, trust and expectations about influence.

Participation could hold value through the experience itself. Individual accounts described enjoyment, sharing knowledge, company and contributing to the neighbourhood.

Contributing to a proposal differed from influencing what happened afterwards. Residents' input informed the design, while continued involvement and municipal follow-up remained unresolved.

04

Two connected research outcomes

Twelve practice-based insights identify considerations for participation design, grouped around:

- Making participation accessible
- Building and sustaining contact
- Creating space to contribute
- Connecting contact to influence
- follow-up remained unresolved.

The Multi-Lens Reflection Framework, shown below, structures reflection through physical-spatial, social-relational and mental-emotional perspectives. Institutional conditions, such as mandates, resources and responsibilities, are examined through each lens.

The framework connects matters for reflection within and between perspectives, across activities and across contextual scopes. Time and history invite reconsideration as circumstances and understanding develop.

05

What does this mean for participation?

The research identifies three connected priorities: **creating opportunities that fit residents' circumstances, understanding and responding to what matters to them, and establishing how contributions can inform decisions and action.**

For participation professionals, the framework offers a structure for turning complex encounters into more specific questions:

- What has been observed or expressed?
- What remains an interpretation or assumption?
- Which connections require further investigation?
- What needs attention, and who should be involved?

Possible responses may concern spatial design, facilitation, dialogue or organisational coordination. The research also proposes exploring a shared starting point in which residents help define priorities before a spatial assignment is fixed.

06

A research outcome and starting point

The framework is a **situated research outcome,** developed through reflection on the Scheepsmasttuin process. Its usefulness for other professionals and its effects on participation practice require further development and assessment. Residents' experiences of the overall process and its eventual outcome also remain to be investigated.

Together, the insights and framework connect participation design with continued examination of its context, residents' scope of influence and the professional's own role.

THE RESEARCH OUTCOME

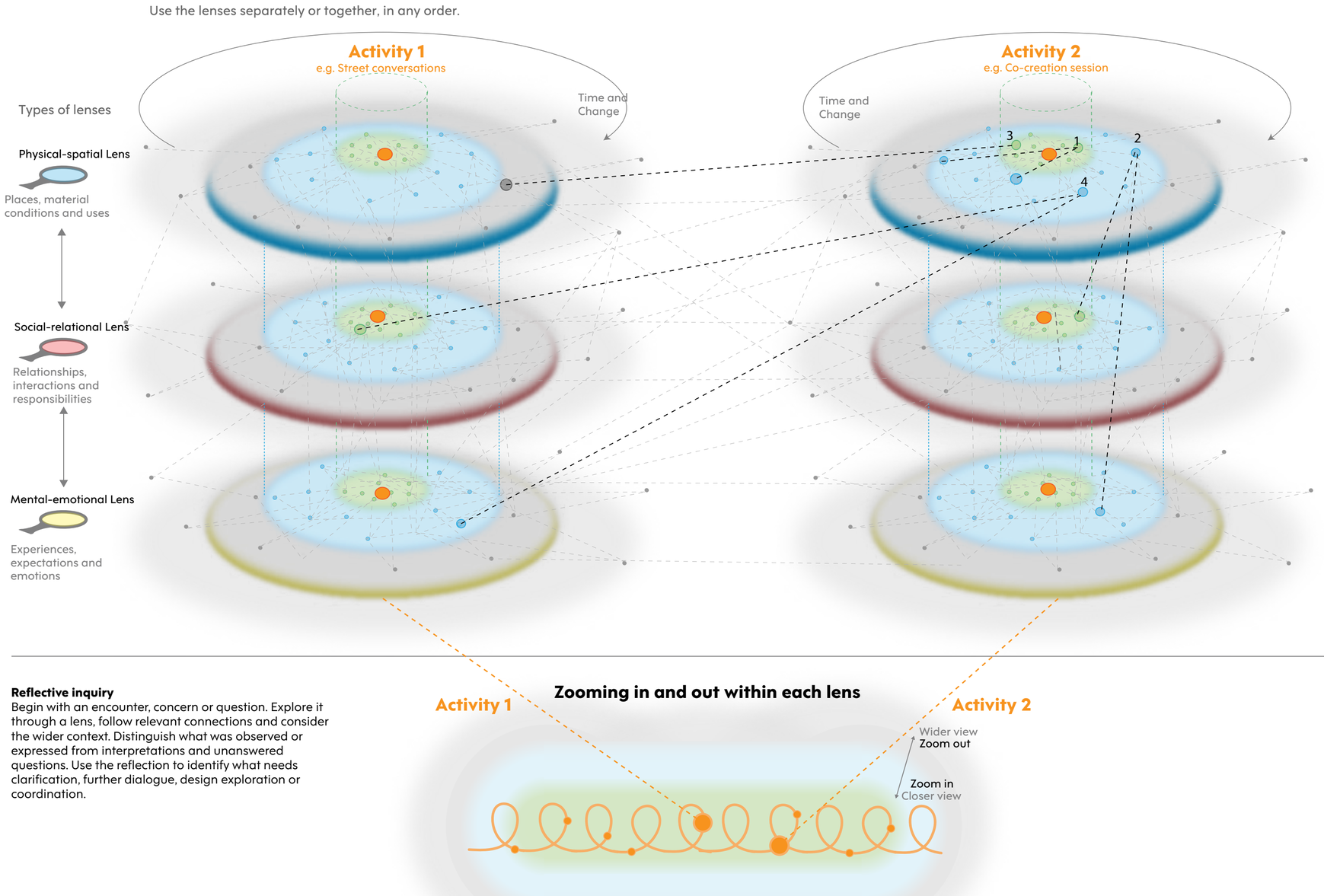
Multi-lens Reflection Framework

The framework connects matters for reflection within and between perspectives, across activities and across contextual scopes. Time and history invite reconsideration as circumstances and understanding develop.

For professionals designing, organising or facilitating participation.

Three perspectives on the same participation process

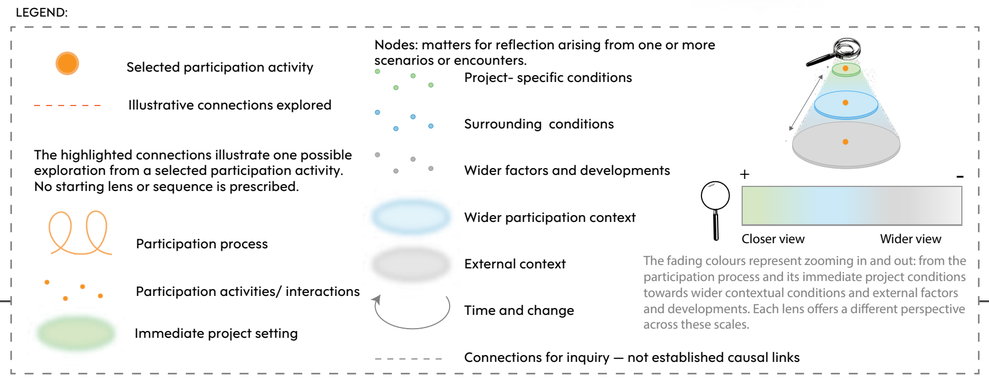
Use the lenses separately or together, in any order.



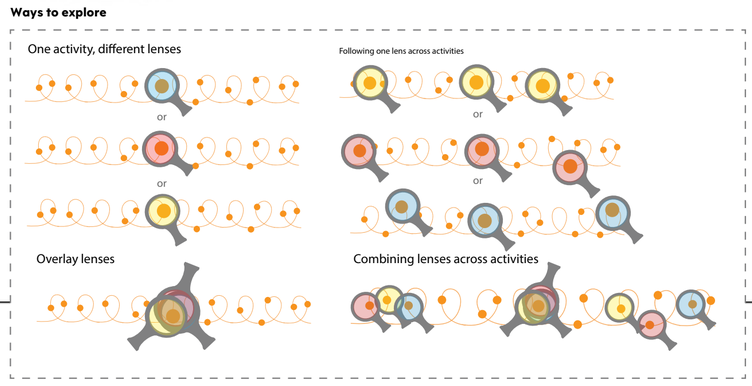
Reflective inquiry
Begin with an encounter, concern or question. Explore it through a lens, follow relevant connections and consider the wider context. Distinguish what was observed or expressed from interpretations and unanswered questions. Use the reflection to identify what needs clarification, further dialogue, design exploration or coordination.

Zooming in and out within each lens

LEGEND:



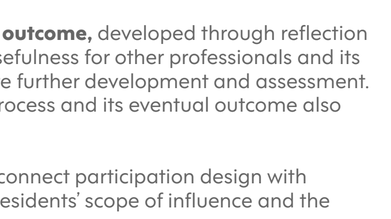
Ways to explore



DESIGNED ACTIVITIES & EMBEDDED FIELD RESEARCH (EXAMPLES)

Participation in practice

Cleanup days



Planting activity

Pop-up activity



Line-dancing sessions

Co-creation session



Discussing design iterations



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