

Chapter 7

Towards a Political Definition of the Sharing Economy: Reflections on the Development of a Sharing Economy Initiative Outside of Big Cities

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7.1 The Street as a Shared Space

The public space – the street – belongs to all of us. However, during the last century, in many European cities, the mobility system, and more specifically the dominance of the car, has gradually reduced and divided the space for people literally, but also figuratively. There exists a growing uncertainty and disagreement about how to deal with the complex challenge of increasingly busy car roads: their economic and functional necessity is weighed against their disadvantages for social cohesion and ecological balance (Illich, 1974; Gehl, 2010; te Brömmelstroet and Verkade, 2020). The increase of cars has contributed to a perception that today the street divides us instead of connecting us: neighbourhoods are cut by busy car roads, cyclists and

pedestrians have to fight for their space on the streets. In multiple projects, the research work of the group Spatial Capacity Building challenges the current mobility system by learning about mobility and how it interacts with other domains of everyday life. The starting point of this learning process is to look for what connects us, “**what we share**” rather than what divides us (Huybrechts *et al.*, 2018): we learn how to reclaim mobility as something we share.

Within the context of the complex North-South Limburg project (Studio NZL, 2019), which focuses on the redesign process of a very busy and important regional connection in a rather rural part of Flanders, called Limburg, we question the current mobility system as something that for years has “divided” the community and its politics, by rediscovering it as a shared space. The busy road divides residential areas, cuts through green spaces and divides between cars, bikes and pedestrians, but also divides people on the question of what position this road should take in the space and how it should be designed.

In this article we will (1) discuss how sharing was a conscious approach to deal with a subject that divides people, and particularly how this is practiced **outside of the big cities**, in a more **rural region**. Indeed, sharing concepts thrive in urban contexts, but have been under-discussed in semi-urban and rural contexts. (2) We elaborate on how we have developed a **platform-methodology to support sharing** in this particular context, in a way that enables to root sharing in a particular space and time. (3) We discuss the **Platform Mobility in the North-South context** and the particular ways in which it operated, to end with a discussion on what sharing means and to embrace sharing as a term that is political, that embraces and respects the diversity of the everyday life in which it is situated and thus does not exclude what and who is often perceived as at the margin.

7.2 Sharing Outside of the Urban Context

In “The Age of Sharing” Nicholas John (2016) dissects the increasingly popular word “sharing” and sharing economy: sharing bikes, food, houses etc. He finds that when we talk about sharing, we point to prosocial behaviours that claim to promote greater openness, trust and understanding between people. He also sees, however, that ‘sharing’ has not always been associated with these values. In his book he focuses on three spheres of sharing: sharing as the constitutive activity of social media and our technologically mediated lives; sharing as a model for economic behaviour and thus our economic lives as producers and consumers; and sharing as a category of speech that impacts our emotional, interpersonal lives. His book allows us to differentiate between how the concept of sharing is ideally articulated, what we desire from it in creating a sense of community and the actual daily life

transactions that people label as sharing, but that are often the victim of the market dynamics and commodification. What he talks less about is that this idea of sharing has an elitist character and the platforms that facilitate sharing involve people who are well-educated and with sufficient incomes (Bársony, 2017).

Indeed, what requires additional investigation is how sharing is rooted in the world we live in. In line with Latour (2018) claim to come down to earth, we are interested in how sharing is performed in daily life, between people, people and animals, people and water, water and plants, etc. This way of looking at sharing reveals a great diversity of sharing practices in the world and provides angles to see how actors that are often marginalised in the sharing economy can become part of it. Coming down to earth also reveals the particularities of sharing in more rural contexts, where people do not live in close proximity, and maybe do not always have access to the technologies needed to participate in sharing economies. Indeed, often sharing economy initiatives emerge in urban contexts. In this case we explored sharing as a basis for sustainable mobility transition in a less urban context, where sharing might emerge in less spontaneous ways (Davidson and Infranca, 2016). Because in these contexts that can be situated in-between the urban and the rural there is a great need for sustainable transitions in mobility, building, working etc., we explored deliberate sharing strategies to shape these transitions. This approach to sharing forms the basis of our platform-methodology, that is focussed on starting from particular situated contexts to build platforms for diverse actors, spread out in space, who can share and act together.

7.3 Approach: A Platform-Methodology to Support Sharing

We discuss a particular design research trajectory that resulted in a sharing economy initiative that we initiated in the complex North-South Limburg project (Studio NZL, 2019). In this context, the team decided not to start from what divides people, but examined “sharing” as a stepping stone for a sustainable mobility transition. We questioned the current mobility system as something that “divides” by learning together about mobility and its interactions with everyday life: how do we think about mobility and its interaction and how do we want to shape it. By researching together “what we share” (Huybrechts *et al.*, 2018), we build on a tradition of participatory design research that looks at “commons” (Berlant, 2016; Gil and Baldwin, 2014; Marttila *et al.*, 2014; Seravalli, 2014; Teli, 2019) and “partial economies” (Avram *et al.*, 2017).

To enable this situated understanding of how sharing economies develop in this context and develop platforms that can support these situated sharing activities, we

used history and a design anthropological approach. On the one hand, we traced actualities and histories of sharing through intense observations, interviews and archival work. We built on our experience with historical approaches in participatory design research as earlier developed in [Huybrechts *et al.* \(2016\)](#) and in [Zuljevic and Huybrechts \(2019\)](#) and further develop them for the particular context of the sharing economy. On the other hand, we start designing Platforms – physically and digitally – that support the growth of these initiatives. Because in this case, many institutions played a role in the development process of the sharing economy initiative, we particularly dived into the question of **how can we design platforms that can enable sharing initiatives to develop in contexts, and with actors that are systematically marginalised in the sharing economy initiatives, in close interaction with existing institutions** that drive sustainable mobility transitions?

First of all, we decided to start with detecting **the historical and existing sharing collectives in the field** (often citizen-driven) who already were reclaiming modes of sharing mobility and the street. We define collectives as assemblages of both non human as well as human agents ([Latour, 1999](#)) that radically interdepend ([Escobar, 2018](#)). We discovered these sharing collectives and their radical interdependencies based on a design anthropological trajectory made of 250 field interviews and even more field observations via photography, drawing and video-portraits as methods. As one of the conclusions of our extensive participation process, it was noticed that the discussion on sharing mobility revolved mainly around two central themes. First, there were groups who organised themselves around mobility in the sense that they wanted to regain their position in “sharing the street”, as a space for people who live and work around it. Second, we noticed that in the less organised group of inhabitants, there was only very limited cycling in the area of North-South Limburg, including by children and young people. Often because people didn't dare to bike, didn't know how or didn't own a bike. Therefore, there was a need for collective sharing of bikes, but also of collective sharing of knowledge and practices on biking.

Second, we decided to build on these insights to collaboratively give form to **platforms (see scheme “platform-approach”, Figure 7.3) that can support self-organised initiatives with impact on a sustainable mobility transition and that can document how these evolve**. Four platforms were created: on open space, on living, on working and – and this is the one we will discuss in the remainder of this paper – on mobility. In line with the understanding that there is a shared demand for more quality use of bicycles and public transport by children and young people, within the context of their schools and neighborhoods, children and young people became one of the central target groups in the platforms' activities, a group involving also their parents, grandparents, etc.

7.4 Insights: Case Study “North-South Limburg Bicycle Library” as Part of the Platform Mobility in the North-South Context

7.4.1 Historical Research

7.4.1.1 East-West and North-South

As we mentioned, there are two central themes in the history of the North-South connection in Houthalen-Helchteren (HH) – a municipality in the centre of Limburg – the attention for moves from east to west and the (often supralocal) attention from north to south (see Figure 7.1).

In the landscape where the water structure of the Demervallei and the sandy structure of the Kempisch Plateau met, a unique east-west oriented settlement pattern grew on the edges and peaks. These east-west “corridors”, or “village routes”

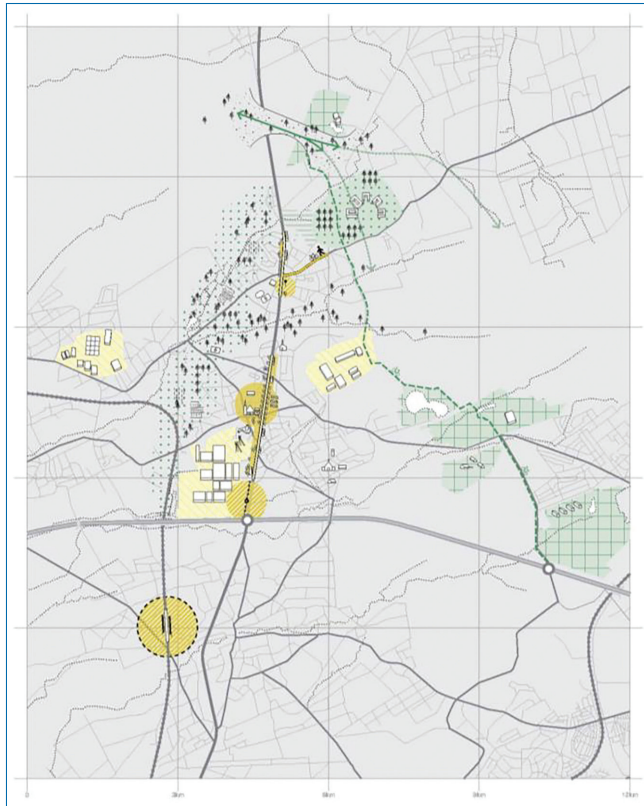


Figure 7.1. Map of the Noord-Zuid Limburg context. Image by the Design team Studio NZL (2019).

(OSA, 2018) formed the historical basis of the local road infrastructure as a connector between living, working and facilities, in dialogue with the landscape of the little valleys. Coal was discovered on the same axis at the beginning of the 20th century, as part of a supra-local movement stretching from the German Ruhr area over Limburg to the French region of Hauts-de-France. The Houthalen mine had a slower start-up and finally went into production in 1939 as the youngest of the seven mines in Limburg. The facilities that supported the exploitation of coal were also part of these “village routes”. In the same way, the cité “Meulenberg” was connected with a historical axis parallel to the valley of the Laambeek and leading to the church of Houthalen (*Atlas der Buurtwegen*, 1841). The miners named this axis “Koolmijnlaan”, because it connected the cité with the mining site. Because of its favourable location at the junction between cité and historical network, the Koolmijnlaan created the perfect climate for small independent entrepreneurs. The foreign miners wanted shops, cafes and restaurants like in their own country, so the Koolmijnlaan grew into a colourful and lively trading street.

In the meantime, also a supra-local North-South route steadily grew, crossing both the valley area and the edge of the plateau from north to south. Before the 18th century this connection was just a dirt road. In the second half of this century it became a paved stone road that passed from Liège over Hasselt to 's-Hertogenbosch. For two centuries this road was the most important trade connection in the east of Belgium, but it looked like a green avenue with trees on both sides. Until the 1920s, few people lived along this main road. After the coal mine was built, the houses and companies along this green avenue gradually increased and from the 1950s the first cars appeared (*Geschied-en Heemkundige Kring De Kloukviol*, 2018). This supra-local connection was developed more intensively thanks to the growing popularity of the car. The hitherto still green North-South connection was paved and divided into two lanes. This infrastructure was quickly saturated in the 1960s and the existing two-lane infrastructure was extended to four lanes, losing its green character.

In the 1970s the project around the North-South connection started, mainly to improve the accessibility of the North Limburg municipalities and companies. In 1971 an initial proposal was made to strengthen the North-South connection via constructing the A-24 motorway as a connector between Eindhoven and Huy on the East side. Later, the idea of this new road was moved to the west of the municipality (1978), later on the existing road that would be tunneled (2000) and finally the choice was again made for a western diversion (2007) that was also put aside in 2017. Characteristic of this debate is that the North-South connection was mainly approached from the perspective of the car, with little attention for the local east-west network that traditionally connected the people, animals and nature elements who inhabit the space. At the end of 2018, with the start of the

complex project North-South Limburg, the interdisciplinary research and design team Studio North-South Limburg (Studio NZL) – of which the authors of this text are part – actively reopened up this focus on a car connection to themes such as living and working, open space, entrepreneurship and also mobility in all its aspects (cycling, walking, driving, public transport, etc.). Within the design goal of the project that needs to provide an answer to some of the issues the supra-local North-South connection is confronted with, the research team of the University of Hasselt supports in opening up this perspective by involving people, animals and natural actors that inhabit the surrounding rural context.

7.4.1.2 The district of Meulenberg

In order to deepen our understanding and commitment to this local network, we started working with specific neighbourhoods. We became, among others, more actively involved with the network in Meulenberg, because we were aware of the fact that this neighbourhood had received too little attention and care in recent history. From the seventies onwards we see how Meulenberg is increasingly evolving into an island within the local east-west network in Houthalen-Helchteren, because of the closure of the mines in Limburg and an increasingly busy North-South connection. In 1970, the government threatened to cut back on mining activity, causing miners to go on strike en masse. This context gave birth to the first community work “vzw Buurtopbouwwerk Meulenberg” in 1972 and its own youth work in 1978 (Lingier, 2011). In 1964 the Houthalen mine, the youngest mine in Limburg, had to close its shafts after twenty-five years, because of a lack of coal deposits and unfavourable geological conditions. Fortunately, the mine merged with that of Zolder and a large group of miners and managers were able to keep their jobs: the shafts in Houthalen remained operational for descents and after two years the head offices were put back into operation by management and administration. The Zolder mine was definitively closed in September 1992 as the last mine, both in Limburg and in Belgium (van Doorslaer *et al.*, 2012).

During the mining industry, the mine took good care of its employees: it provided housing embedded in a high quality and green public space, schools, shops, opportunities for relaxation, etc. In return, the mine did not tolerate any disorder, which was meticulously supervised: not pruning the hedge or not taking care of the garden, was punished with a fine. After the closure, this care ceased overnight. For a long time, the municipalities, which had never had to invest in the mining districts, denied the problems raised by the inhabitants. The community workers encouraged the residents to take the initiative themselves, and to confront the municipality. Slowly the confrontation policy of the municipality was transformed into a cooperation policy. At the beginning of the 2000s, community work was encapsulated within the non-profit organisation Rimo Limburg, a sub-contractor

of the municipal authorities, and youth work was also encapsulated in the municipality's cross-neighbourhood youth welfare work. This growth of neighbourhood work was obvious during our preparatory fieldwork in the context of the complex North-South Limburg project.

At the same time, Meulenberg was isolated by the increasingly busy North-South axis. Some neighbourhoods and groups were able to defend their position around the North-South. This was the case for many supra-local established platforms and local action groups, who are today also strongly involved in the current complex North-South Limburg project from the start: *Beweging.net*, *Boerenbond*, *Bond Beter Leefmilieu*, *Ondernemingsclub*, *Limburgse Milieukoepel*, *Unizo Limburg*, *VKW-Limburg*, *Voka*, etc. We see that these platforms, together with the local community, and supported by local political parties, united over time in a few local action groups: *Aktiekomitee "A-24"*, *Aktiekomitee "Grote Baan"*, action group *"Noord-Zuid-Nooit"*, action group *"Om-Nu"*, action group *"Om-U"*, action group *"Om-nee"* etc. However, because the various routes that were discussed in the historical debate have had little direct impact on the local network on the east side of Houthalen-Helchteren and Meulenberg, the local community on the east side was not involved from the outset in the North-South Limburg complex project, although the Meulenberg district became strongly isolated from the centre of Houthalen. Gerard, creative coach at *vzw L.A.C.H.* in Meulenberg (interview, 8 June 2019) explains that his father never let him cross the *Grote Baan*. According to him and other people we interviewed, the historically grown opposition between the East and West of Houthalen-Helchteren grew over the years. There was a perception of a difference between the rich West, which flourished thanks to the railway station, and the poor East, which became increasingly isolated from the centre by the busy *Grote Baan*, resulting in even more social deprivation (G. Aerts, interview, 8 June 2019; F. Didden, interview, 31 June 2019; D. Pauli, interview, 22 September 2019).

7.4.2 Platform-Approach: "North-South Limburg Bicycle Library" as Part of a Platform Mobility

In order to understand and design with the collectives that were active and spread out in this rural area who cared for and worked on a more caring approach to mobility which could include the excluded actors and areas, we slowly developed a platform for mobility for the North-South Limburg connection. From our historical overview it became clear that there exist platforms that have been striving for better and more inclusive mobility around North-South for years now, such as union groups, political parties, neighbourhood actions groups and more recently groups like the *"fietsersbond (bikers union)"*, but that they often represent only a part

of the community and often fail to reach groups that are lower educated, women, children and youth and migrant communities. Therefore, we developed a platform-approach, namely an approach that aimed for carefully developing historical-aware and situated platforms that support sharing between a larger diversity of groups (see also [Botto and Teli, 2017](#)). In order to understand the diversity of actors we continuously mapped and brought together the local network that cared for mobility; we supported groups and people we discovered in the network to design for existing and new opportunities for mobility, we invested in scaling small initiatives – often very distributed in space, because of the less densified character of the municipality – in order for them to be part of stronger and more robust networks. We also communicated these activities to a broader audience in order to inform and strengthen the network.

After an extensive field research Platforms were set up at the end of 2019 as a way to interweave the design trajectory of the “Studio NZL” design team that worked with the more established groups on the North-South, and the participatory trajectory of the UHasselt team that was aiming for including more diverse voices in the process. Today, the design team Studio NZL is one of the many actors – on an equal footing with other actors such as pupils, schools, the municipality, neighbourhood organisations, other professionals, etc. – in driving these platforms. Sometimes in a pulling role, other times in a supporting role, or just as a stakeholder. So we see that the platform has evolved from “a platform that served the environment of the complex project North-South Limburg” to “a platform as a building block for a sustainable society”.

In order to answer our research question on how can we design platforms that can enable sharing initiatives to develop in contexts, and with actors that are systematically marginalised in sharing economy initiatives, **in close interaction with existing institutions that drive sustainable mobility transitions?**”, we did a bottom-up analysis of how we researched and designed the platform, all the interviews, images produced, conversations during workshops. Based on this, we distinguished five capabilities that supported us and the people involved in building a trusted platform around a shared space as a building block for a sustainable society: networking, coaching, scaling, communicating and imagining. On the basis of the project “North-South Limburg bicycle library” – started from the Platform Mobility – we clarify these five capabilities below.

a. Networking

During the project we were continuously actively present in the field – physically and digitally – in order to collect information on historical and present individuals and groups who cared for their street and their mobility, each in their own way. In the beginning of the project we were mainly physically present in the field, but

on a daily basis, because the route to and from school is perceived as too dangerous by their parents. Teachers also note that students are less able to cycle over the years and more accidents happen during class trips.

When we brought together some of those people we discovered in the network – people who care for learning to cycle and safe cycling – the idea of a bicycle library (de Fietsbieb) grew: a lending point for children's bikes up to 12 years old. The existing Fietsbiebs focus more on the individual, not yet on groups or schools: if you need a bike as a child, you and your parents will choose a bike in the library. The field research showed that there is currently no service where schools or associations can temporarily lend out bicycles. To explore further this idea we met *Beweging.net*, a social movement network that grew from the Workers Movement connecting 11 organisations (such as women and elderly organisations) that manages most bicycle libraries in the region.

Furthermore, we engaged more actively with the network in the cité Meulenberg, because of the historically detected lack of attention and care throughout the years. In the preparatory fieldwork, we detected many committed citizens and organisations who are sincerely concerned with the future of the neighborhood: *vzw RIMO*, *vzw Stebo*, youth well-being Meulenberg, cultural center Casino, *vzw L.A.C.H.*, the elementary school Sprankel, etc We entered this network through a “Live project”, a project in which each year we as architecture researchers, together with our master students (interieur)architecture of the UHasselt and with the local community, turn an ongoing research project into a live built intervention, to explore and materialise some deeper insights on location. This intervention made clear how themes such as cycling and qualitative public space already were present in the neighbourhood and could be further explored (Birgit, Brent, Busra, Fadime, Louise, Mahya, Sebnem, Selin, Tom, interview, 16 September 2019).

One of the core actors in the community was situated at the top of Meulenberg: the elementary school Sprankel. Eighty years ago, Isia Isgour, a modernist architect, formed the basis for this inspiring learning environment. He designed an educational kindergarten in the form of separate, comfortable cottages framed as communities for small groups of toddlers. Based on the same pedagogical vision, he also designed an elementary girls' and boys' school, with gymnasium and stage, around a large playground. This former mine school has an interesting excess of green space between the primary school and the nursery school, which at one point was closed off from the public space. The entire school site was fenced off. This once lively green oasis became with time a forgotten piece of green. During the Live project, this forgotten piece of green started to live again: we as researchers and students removed part of the school's fence and literally built a gate welcoming everyone in this green oasis. Equally important, this gate was also conceived as the starting point of a walking route connecting all existing and potential meeting green

places in the neighborhood. This intervention ended up boosting the plans of the local community to found a children's campus that today already hosted functions such as the Chiro, the sports hall, pre- and after-school care, the drawing academy and also youth well-being. After the Live project, in September 2020 this site was again expanded with a nursery for babies and toddlers and also a secondary Freinet school and a bicycle library. They also plan a traffic park and a music academy for 2021.

“The children's campus thus becomes an ideal place for working parents who want to offer their child as many opportunities as possible, without having to ride back and forth. On the traffic-free site, children from the same family can go to daycare, to the Jenaplan kindergarten and elementary school and to the Freinet secondary school. After school these children can circulate independently between daycare, sports hall, drawing or music academy. On Wednesdays and Saturdays sports activities and playground activities are offered. On Sundays there is Chiro. All in one place. This unique concept focuses on the development opportunities and talents of all children and young people,” Christos Pistolas tells us. (interview, 26 September 2019).

This network became the basis for building a caring “Platform Mobility” in Meulenberg and by extension around the North-South Limburg road connection, which led to projects such as the bicycle library and a bicycle park to learn to cycle. The school offered a space within the building for the bicycle library that is spatially related to the neighbourhood. *Beweging.net* started searching connections between the library in development and the recycle centre in the neighbourhood, that brings used and repaired bicycles to the school. When the coordinator of youth well-being became in charge for the library project, the project also became networked with the municipality.

b. Coaching

We visualised the group of people and organisations that were engaged with the mobility theme in the map that gave an overview of people, artefacts and green (see small sample of the map, Figure 7.2). In a first stage, they were research subjects for us as researchers, but later they became trainers for our students and colleagues less familiar with the neighbourhood. At the start of the Live project they showed a group of our master students around in the cité Meulenberg. During the Live project we as researchers, together with our students, kicked off the bicycle library by temporarily building a bicycle training environment in the middle of this play and learning landscape. The children were asked to take their bikes with them so that they could test the temporary bicycle training environment during the physical education lessons and after school hours. After a while, a network of

people emerged that started coaching each other in cycling: the school trainers and the (grand)parents gave cycling lessons for small groups of children through the schools, for (grand)parent and (grand)child, for young adults who are new in the country, and so on. Parents came to school earlier and stayed a bit longer while their child played and cycled together with their friends. Christos Pistolas (interview, 26 September 2019), director of the Jenaplan elementary school Sprankel, was already very excited:

“This project fits in seamlessly with the vision for the future that we as a school have in mind from September ’20: an open school community linked to a play and learning landscape that pupils, young people, adults and the elderly can make use of before, during and after school hours. The entire teaching staff now sees the potential of this vision of the future temporarily translated into space”.

Together with the local community who already experienced their role as trainers in the network and Beweging.net we then managed to develop a Fietsbieb as the ninth location in Limburg. Slowly the collaboration between the school, Beweging.net and UHasselt/Studio NZL developed further. The idea grew that the temporarily built bicycle training environment could be made sustainable with a more permanent bicycle training park. The more the children’s campus and Beweging.net became the core drivers and core trainers in the project, the more the role of Uhaselt/Studio NZL changed into a support in the back-office and finally being the liaison between the bicycle library and the Platform Mobility in which the different smaller initiatives around mobility in the North-South Limburg project are discussed. This platform became a learning environment enhancing collective learning between pupils, (grand)parents, schools, neighborhood organisations, the municipality, spatial professionals, the social movement platform (Beweging.net) and the Flemish government on how a shift in mobility culture can occur.

Within the Platform Mobility, the Fietsbieb project, located at the school, now served as a sharing economy platform in itself within which children, their mothers and fathers, schools, neighbourhood organisations, the municipality and spatial professionals can learn from each other. The coaching role became more and more distributed between multiple actors: groups that set up initiatives (the schools), groups that needed to learn how to cycle (the pupils and their (grand)mothers and (grand)fathers), a regional organisation with experience in the field of Fietsbiebs (Beweging.net).

c. Scaling

By mapping the network of people who care for cycling, we discovered actors and groups on a micro and on a macro level and detected possibilities for new

collaborations between them. The most relevant decision in this particular case was that a collaboration was set up with a regional social movement network to set up a bicycle library to make it part of a bigger discourse on mobility in the region (an approach which we have called institutioning in Huybrechts *et al.*, 2018). The choice for the network *Beweging.net* versus the other network, “Op Wielekes” was its strong relation with the region (*Beweging.net* runs 10 libraries in the region versus *Op Wielekes* 1) and its affinity with the more rural and multicultural character of the region, the (women’s and elderly and other) groups, rather than its political colour. It was felt that in our region there is a great need for collaboration between small initiatives on regional level, because of the lack of an urban context that can surround the small initiative with a lot of dynamic. While the project was solely on a voluntary basis until January 2019, at the end of 2019 we applied for funding from *cera* foundation to enable the start-up of this *Fietsbieb*. Early February 2020 the funding was approved.

The intention was also to consider this *Fietsbieb* as a pilot project for and by the schools in the larger municipality and the neighbouring municipalities. The district of *Meulenberg* as a location for the *Fietsbieb* was interesting on a regional level because no bicycle libraries had yet been started in this region of *Limburg*. The intention is that in time this *Fietsbieb* will also have faces (e.g. information stands) at various schools (municipal level) in the vicinity because together with *Meulenberg*, the entire region also needs a new perspective on cycling. The design process of the *Fietsbieb* creates a collaboration with primary and secondary schools in which children and young people – often from underprivileged groups – can learn skills to take control and design qualitative shared space, in collaboration with researchers, teachers and students. In this way we want to develop the skills of everyone – especially groups that are often neglected in spatial design processes, such as disadvantaged groups – in order to give them a voice and to develop further in the spatial debate.

Finally, this *Fietsbieb* with bicycle track as part of a green spot in the neighbourhood, located at the top of the *Meulenberg*, will also be used strategically as part of an incubator that contributes to the revival of the isolated district of *Meulenberg* among the general public in order to break through the historically grown contrast between East and West, reinforced by the ever busier *Grote Baan*.

From the *Fietsbieb* we thus entered into links with different scale levels via collaboration with the regional social movement running different bicycle libraries, with elementary and secondary schools, with urban planners/designers in the university and the participating agencies, and within the neighbourhood.

d. Communicating

In order to support the diverse voices in the sharing economy platform initiative in development, the communication strategy became more and more decentralised over time. While at the start the mobility Platform mainly used the communication of the complex North-South Limburg project to gather people and communicate the initiatives, over time the different partners took over and the North-South Platform communication diminished. The bicycle library keeps a fixed project page on the website of the North-South project as one of the “short-term wins” of the project. Here, regular updates are published.

Beweging.net offered a fixed method to guide the communication of Fietsbiebs during the start-up. Together with UHasselt, the organisation supported the funding application in the search for a start-up budget. Because the organisation had a large network with many local anchor points, they could efficiently facilitate the search for a possible location, volunteers and children’s bikes. Finally, each new Fietsbieb also gets its own page on Facebook and its own email address so that the volunteers can stay in touch with their (new) members and start building their own local network. Also the school’s role became more active over time. During the school party of the primary school on Saturday, March 14 2019, and also during the opening of the children’s campus in the beginning of the school year 2020–2021, the school wanted to introduce the arrival of the Fietsbieb to the general public. As a result of the measures concerning the Coronavirus, a large party was postponed for an indefinite period of time. Instead, guided tours were organised in small groups in the autumn where children could discover the campus and the library together with their parents. Additionally, the municipality had played an active role in communicating the project, via their monthly magazine and via their online communication.

The launch of the sharing platform for bikes was in the end organised online and not via an event on location. A digital platform was set up by launching a webpage “Fietsbieb Houthalen-Helchteren” on Facebook. All partners could use this Facebook Page to spread both the arrival of the library and the call to volunteers and children’s bikes within their own network in order to reach the widest possible target group. The regional newspaper “Het Belang van Limburg” published the arrival of the Fietsbieb as part of the children’s campus, as well as a call for volunteers and (children’s) bikes. Volunteers who wanted to host the library or repair bikes, could register by email and children’s bikes could be brought in on a daily basis to either the elementary school “Sprankel”, the future location of the Fietsbieb, or the recycle centre in the neighbourhood. In exchange for offering a children’s bike to the library, the children receive a voucher with which they can borrow a bike for

a year. In the meantime three technicians have reported themselves as volunteers. The library opened in full capacity in April 2021.

e. Imagining

The whole trajectory was not only focussed on networking, coaching, scaling and communicating what was and what is, but also on what “could be”. The bicycle library was potentially present in the past and present network and was strengthened by the above mentioned capabilities, but what made it emerge as a project was the capability of the collective to imagine a future. In this imagination process they looked at the already existing relations in the community and discovered that they had all the resources, when working together, to collaboratively realise a project that could impact the transformation from a car-centred to a more bike-oriented community. What the project put forward was the capacity as a collective to work together concretely on an abstract theme such as ‘sustainable mobility culture’ for the future, right from the start, based on relations that already exist, but could be strengthened in the community. Imagining a potential project thus served as a driver for the other capabilities: imagining how to strengthen the networking potential, stimulating people to take a coaching role, enabling to scale in more concrete ways (namely, by imagining the role of the bicycle library within the larger sustainable mobility project) and supporting the shift in communication strategy from central to decentralised, from professional to personal.

7.5 Discussion: Towards a Political Definition of the Sharing Economy

In the above process it became clear that tracing the history, studying the present and imagining the future of situated caring relations enabled the emergence of a more political definition and conception of a sharing economy initiative. It became clear that the capability of imagination – as mastered and introduced by the designers involved in the process – became a driver for the different actors to engage in a careful exchange of their capabilities, which allowed existing groups present in the community to self-organise themselves as a sharing collective (as defined with [Latour, 1999](#) and [Escobar, 2018](#) earlier) that in its diversity and radical interdependence could take a step forward in the direction of a more sustainable mobility transition. The process showed that the step from the potential of capabilities in the network and the realisation of an imagined sharing economy initiative, required a collective learning process. This was especially important in a context where the awareness on the potential of sharing economy initiatives was particularly low. The set-up of a platform ([van Dijck et al., 2018](#)) that explicitly enables this collective

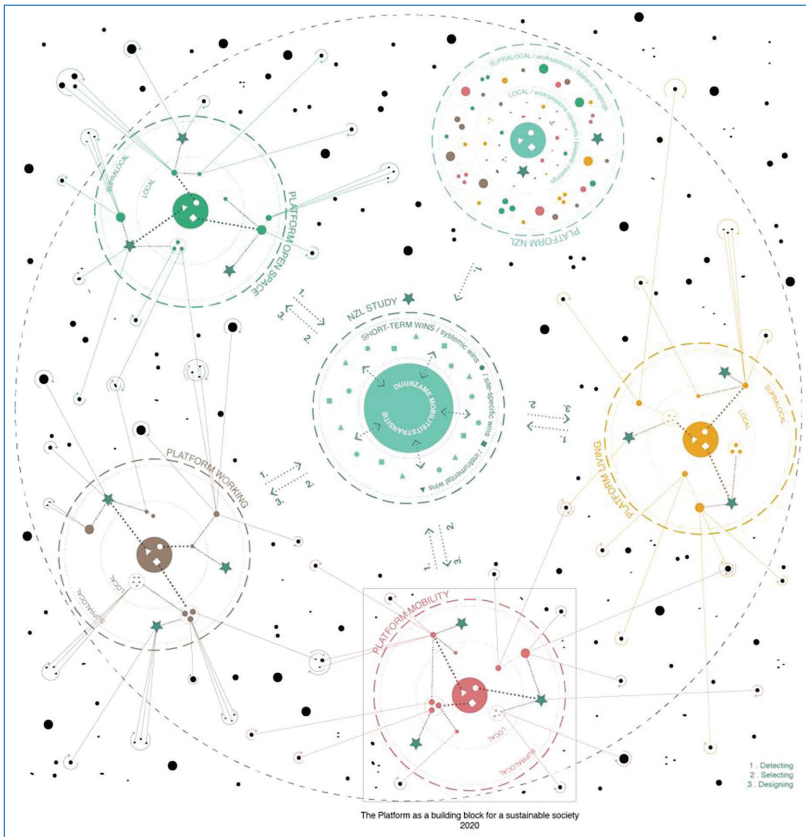


Figure 7.3. Scheme “platform-approach”. Image by Goyens (2020).

learning on how we share and can share in the future, was an effective way to debate the ownership and power relations in the sharing initiative under development and to sustain the sharing which we had built on and prototyped for two weeks during the Live Projects.

When tracing back the recent history of the project, we noticed that there were a few aspects that were important to support this collective learning process as a stepping stone from prototype to sustainable sharing economy initiative. More particularly, we distinguish five capabilities that supported us and the people involved in building a trusted platform around a shared space: networking, coaching, scaling, communicating and imagining. The schema above (see Figure 7.3) illustrates this platform-approach.

a. Networking: Platform as part of the world

In the process from a divided to a shared space for a sharing economy initiative to emerge with sensitivity to politics, we entered continuously into situated networks

and expanded and sharpened them. This growing network is anything but stable today, but it does have sufficient resilience to collaboratively reflect upon (in this case for young people, often from vulnerable backgrounds) and to take up complex challenges. **By embedding a prototype of the sharing economy initiative in a strategic location in the neighbourhood, a careful connection between people and space in the community is created.** By temporarily imagining this potential project, a stable network is gradually emerging in the neighbourhood that is embedded both locally and supra-locally and forms a basis for building a platform for caring mobility.

b. Coaching: Platform as a space activated by actors

All working methods to create a caring platform were continuously supervised, yet not necessarily by spatial planners and designers, or even participation experts. The strength of the platform is that the coaches of the several projects were present in the social network itself and gradually formed a new network, sustained by a potential project in the field. We detected different types of coaches: the participation professional, the designer, the communication expert, the social professionals (the schools, the unions), the family and friends. All of them have different motivations to engage: the schools were looking for projects that taught their students to think and communicate socially, the trade unions were looking for partners to reconnect their social movements to particular neighbourhoods and the designers were looking for a greater involvement of children and young people, to enhance a diversity of groups in their design process.

c. Scaling: Platform as a political space

Throughout the whole process imagination supported the step from the personal, situated world to the complex and uncertain world of “sustainable mobility transition” and infrastructure plans in the far future and vice versa. A prototype of the sharing economy initiative of the Fietsbieb helped to make this process of scaling up and/or down of the impact of the initiative a step-by-step process, or at least provided handles for it.

d. Communicating: Platform as a sustainable (memory) space

In order to support the diverse voices in the platform, over time the communication strategy became more and more decentralised. While at the start the Platform Mobility mainly uses the communication of the North-South project to gather people and communicate the sharing economy initiative, over time the different partners (Beweging.net, elementary school, municipality, etc.) took over and the North-South Platform took a supportive communication role. Situating the project



Figure 7.4. Picture of the bicycle library in development via small scale interventions, in the context of the Noord-Zuid Limburg project. Image by Goyens (2019).

in the past, present and future of the field supported the shift in communication strategy from central to decentralised.

e. Imagining: Platform as a space for collective imagination

The whole trajectory was continuously focussed not only on networking, coaching, scaling and communicating what was and what is, but also what “could be”. The imagination of the bicycle project (see Figure 7.4) in the network brought out the capability of the collective to give form to a situated future. This imagination process served as a driver for the other capabilities: imagining revealed, stabilised and strengthened collectives – in their radical interdependency (Escobar, 2018) – locally and supra-locally. It stimulated people to take a coaching role, it enabled to scale in more concrete ways and supported the shift in communication strategy from central to decentralised, from professional to personal. **The interactions**

between these capabilities, triggered by imagination, contributed to creating the networks between inhabitants and institutions (Huybrechts *et al.*, 2018) that set a sustainable mobility transition in motion.

7.6 Conclusion: Situating the Sharing Economy in Rural Contexts

Based on the idea that sharing is a situated practice (John, 2016) and on our desire to create platforms that facilitate sharing between diverse groups of people, beyond those groups who live in big cities, who are well-educated and with sufficient incomes (Bársony, 2017), we developed a platform methodology (building on e.g. Botto and Teli, 2017). This methodology aimed for rooting the sharing economy initiatives in a history of sharing in the environment and then further developing and tracing how the sharing economy initiative develops in the present and further into the future. This was done via the slow discovery and introduction of new actors, tools and networks via a process of imagination. This process proved to be beneficial for a more political understanding of the development – and the power and ownership relations – of the sharing economy initiative. It allowed the existing “sharing collectives” that were distributed in the rather rural context of the region, with their particular histories and interests (e.g. their own street), to become “collectives that share in time and space”: they entered in a learning exchange between each other and other individuals in the discussed study. They exchanged about different traditions in sharing, in what to share and how to share and how this can contribute to a sustainable mobility transition on a larger scale.

From this process we learned that as long as we continue to approach mobility as a theme that divides us (between the urban and the rural, between cultures, between young and old etc), it is difficult to find a ground for sharing economy initiatives that have the potential to include certain marginalised groups and spatial contexts. If we approach mobility and the street as a theme that we share, this opens a new dimension of living together: What do we share in the discussion, how can we gain knowledge about it through time and build a future around it? And how can we do that in an environment that we have built together? The platform methodology slowly took shape via the collaborative articulating, tapping into and developing five capabilities and formed the ground for the development of the discussed sharing economy initiative. While it still requires a lot of research and experimentation, in the case of North-South Limburg it offered both methodological and thematic support in shaping a space of care together in times where many issues, such as mobility, are discussed in polarising ways.

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