Village Matters

Michiel De Cleene

Mark Luyten /
Thomas Verstraeten

Nahid Shaikh

VILLAGE MATTERS

Michiel De Cleene
Mark Luyten / Thomas Verstraeten
Nahid Shaikh

with a contribution by Johan Braeckman

Atelier Bouwmeester
Ravenstein Gallery 54 — 59, 1000 Brussels
Exhibition from 15 January to 11 March 2022

Three artistic-documentary explorations of ‘the village’

The Flemish Government Architect advises the Flemish Government on the development of an architectural and spatial vision. Together with a team of experts, the Government Architect helps public commissioners to formulate concrete spatial assignments and to select designers for the realization of projects. The Team Flemish Government Architect also initiates research and stimulates reflection in order to put urgent themes on the policy agenda: the construction of schools, collective housing, inclusive care infrastructure, and so on. Over the past twenty years, the emphasis has often been on urban matters and the urban context. Under the impetus of the successive Flemish Government Architects and many other actors in government and civil society, Belgian cities have developed a new dynamic in recent decades, paying greater attention to high-quality public spaces and public buildings, to green spaces and soft mobility. Big cities such as Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and Charleroi now have strong urban development agencies and/or city architects who promote and monitor the quality of the built environment.

However, the Team Flemish Government Architect does not only focus on cities. Local authorities also make use of our services, and many of the projects which we supervise and initiate are situated in rural and suburban areas or in the centres of smaller municipalities. Whether we can speak in this suburban and rural context of an overall improvement in the handling of architectural and spatial challenges is doubtful. In part as a result of a growing awareness of ecology and sustainability, it is mostly ‘concern’ that has been growing in recent years. The negative consequences of a fragmented use of space, scattered construction and a preference for individual car use are being felt increasingly sharply in Flanders: in the continual appropriation of scarce open space, in the paving of surfaces, in traffic jams, in inefficient public transport, and the list goes on. Policymakers emphasize the need to concentrate buildings more in the centres and to reinforce and densify these buildings. However, when local authorities and developers pursue this line, it is not always done selectively enough, and the results are often subject to a great deal of criticism.

Rural communities are indeed urbanizing at a rapid pace. Apartment buildings are popping up like mushrooms in the villages we used to know. What’s more, we do not yet seem to have found the idiom required to fit this densification and this stacking of homes harmoniously into the villages. Urban typologies are dropped into villages with little or no regard for the local context, and this regularly provokes outraged reactions from citizens and experts alike. Many villages have lost much of their character over time. The village streets in the centres all look alike and it is often difficult to tell from photographs which village we find ourselves in. Pedestrians have become motorists, village streets have become paved roads, and parked cars monopolize village

squares. Footpaths have disappeared and, along with them, small landscape elements. By approaching all these evolutions – not unjustly – mainly from considerations of ecology and sustainability, we run the risk of neglecting the question of the overall image it creates and what the quality of the experience of the village environment is.

In section six of his vision document 2020–2025, Flemish Government Architect Erik Wieërs addresses the issue of 'the village' and expresses his intention to help ensure that 'densifying village centres goes hand in hand with strengthening their character and identity'. In 2022 the Team Flemish Government Architect wants to set out one or more projects in relation to the question of what the new architecture and the new spatial character of the village could be. Before giving these a tangible form, it seemed prudent, as a prelude, to have people look at the village from a different perspective – different than that of architects, urban designers and spatial planners. We believe that opening up such an imaginative space could be a way, not only to stimulate and inspire us, but also to enrich the public debate, beyond reactionary indignation and well-intentioned pragmatism.

The Team Flemish Government Architect invited photographer Michiel De Cleene, artists Mark Luyten and Thomas Verstraeten, and documentary maker Nahid Shaikh to consider, in complete freedom and from the perspective of their own artistic or documentary practices, the village and the concerns we presented to them. They in turn invited philosopher Johan Braeckman to contribute a text.

Michiel De Cleene
[he waves again at the woman who is still walking her dog]
Eight routes, one village

There are foxes and martens. A motorway, a canal and a railway run through it. There is a dairy farmer and a vertical stake, a watchtower and a hacienda, a tower crane and an automated warehouse. Next to the reservoir, a litter of German shepherds is born. The architect parks with two wheels in the grass. The café The Bolero is always full at this hour. The bus is moving fast; the windows are open. Under the chestnut trees near the glass containers, a woman walks to the supermarket. A brand-new robot lawn mower touches the spire of the basilica. A hot-air balloon flies low over the fields. A woman points. An invasive exotic species proliferates on the shoulder. An empty crate of Coke rests on a fence post.

Due to his work as an architectural and landscape photographer for various clients, Michiel De Cleene is well acquainted with Flemish (urban) landscapes. He is also active as a researcher, with an interest in the boundaries and conditions of the documentary genre and in what happens when uncertainty

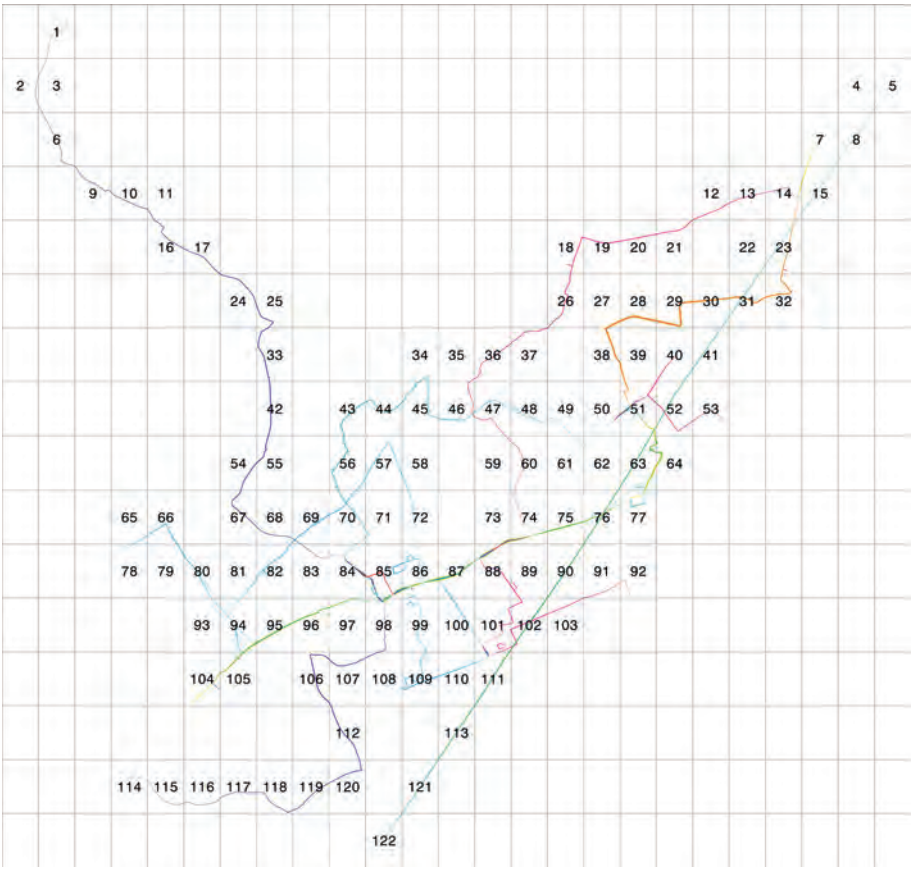
and speculation occupy a central place in it. For this project he explored the possibilities and limitations of the village as narrative fabric. A village consists of landscape, urban planning, social, natural and historical elements. The specificity of these elements and their combination ensure that a village is recognizable as a village – as this village, and not as another village; as a village, and not as a town or hamlet. But a village is more than something that can be identified geographically or that can be distinguished by area, size or the number of inhabitants. According to De Cleene, what is at least as important is the way it functions as a place that collects stories.

Michiel De Cleene accompanied various individuals who move at different speeds and in different ways in different villages, recorded their stories and mapped out the routes they follow. That collection formed the multiple basis (historical/anecdotal and geographical) of a photographic documentation in a recording, documentary style. The accounts, the routes and the images were then traced cartographically and superimposed as layers. The project as a whole found its expression in a book titled *[hij zwaait opnieuw naar de vrouw die nog steeds haar hond uitlaat] (he waves again at the woman who is still walking her dog)*: a cross-section and a snapshot of a single fictional Flemish village. The routes of the veterinarian, of the retired woman on her way to the supermarket, of the architect, of the installer of robot lawn mowers, of a hot-air balloon, of the dairy farmer, of the regular on his way to the café and of a scheduled service bus cross each other, intersect and circle around the centre, follow the ribbon development, and in doing so give shape to the village in motion.

The combination and accumulation of real routes, stories and images not only result in a fictional village, they also show the village as fiction. The village today, according to De Cleene, exists as a collection of nostalgic and romanticizing ideas and images, pessimistic outlooks, prejudices and pragmatic interpretations. It is as such a layered narrative, written by the people who live and pass through it, that the village and the way it functions scenically, discursively and sociologically can be understood.

[hij zwaait opnieuw naar de vrouw die nog steeds haar hond uitlaat] contains fictionalized transcriptions of conversations that took place in Beersel, Beervelde, Beert, Brielen, Desteldonk, Doorslaar, Dworp, Eindhout, Elingen, Ertvelde, Gorsem, Hijfte, Holleken, Hondzocht, Houthulst, Jonkershove, Klerken, Linkebeek, Mendonk, Merkem, Moerbeke, Oosterlo, Reningelst, Terrest, Vlamertinge, Wachtebeke, Westouter, Woumen, Zaffelare, Zammel and Zeveneken. It also includes a contribution by writer and literary scholar Sofie Verraest. Arnout De Cleene contributed to the research and editing. Ine Meganck designed the book. Besides the book, De Cleene presents in this exhibition the map of the village and a selection of images.

Michiel De Cleene (b. 1988 in Ghent) is a photographer. He works as a researcher at KASK, School of Arts, Ghent and is part of De Cleene De Cleene and the collective 019. He is one of the founders of The School of Speculative Documentary. In many of his projects he employs a polycentric perspective within a documentary context. In 2014 he made the fourth (and as yet last) series of photographs within the re-photographing project 'Recollecting Landscapes'. In addition to publishing the books *-scope*, *F#1-13* and *Reference Guide*, he has contributed to the *Flanders Architectural Review N°14* (VAi), *Trigger* (FOMU), *A+*, *rekto:verso* and *Image & Narrative*.



Mark Luyten / Thomas Verstraeten
Summer Academy in Balen

Like Michiel De Cleene, Mark Luyten and Thomas Verstraeten start from the hypothesis that what we define as 'the village' is not only the result of a series of human connections and spatial arrangements, but also of a stream of stories produced by the village and its inhabitants, which then find their way into literature, film, art, and so forth. A dual image of the village emerges from Flemish literature and films. On the one hand, it is described in terms of closeness and solidity, silence and stagnation: a place where everyone knows everyone and where people live in harmony with nature. At the same time, the village stands for isolation and suffocation, social control and secretiveness, fear of anything different, anything new. Verstraeten and Luyten ask themselves whether those stories still really tell us something about the changed, contemporary village? Isn't the contemporary village a matter of stories that are always different, always new?

For the *Summer Academy in Balen* project, Thomas Verstraeten and Mark Luyten explore whether and how new fictions could emerge in a village. The *Summer Academy* revolves around the creation, right in the centre of Balen, of an ambitious art workshop which for a short period of time will occupy and reorganize the municipality. The *Summer Academy* is not so much a school as an artistic multimedia work and meeting place: a sort of beehive that does not primarily aim to produce works of art, but rather to generate a particular artistic energy. This implies specific forms of social intercourse and specific spatial constellations. The *Summer Academy* is a disruptive, nomadic village that settles in the municipality, on the one hand foreign to the daily life of the village but on the other hand also part of it.

For the construction of that nomadic village, Mark Luyten and Thomas Verstraeten make use of materials, infrastructure, services and talents that they found in the village itself: a classroom as a rehearsal space, an empty garage as the setting for a group meeting, a carpenter's atelier as a workshop, a supermarket as a stage, and so on. But also bedrooms in private houses that are offered as places to stay, private toilets opened to the public, a garden to camp in, a living room in which to have a long breakfast and chat … And then, of course: brass bands setting to work with a choreographer and taking the village streets as their backdrop, visual artists reimagining a bridge, café De Post that for the occasion has been renamed Café Des Arts … With this project, the makers want to question how this temporary, fictional reorganization can make other connections visible and how they can be grafted onto the existing village. The *Summer Academy* radically places the dormant energies of a village and its inhabitants in the foreground and connects them with others from outside the village.

For the time being, the *Summer Academy* will only exist as a hypothesis, a proposal. With a camera at the ready, Mark Luyten and Thomas Verstraeten immersed themselves in the social and cultural life of the municipality of Balen. They talked to many residents and photographed everything that could possibly be part of the *Summer Academy*. They turned these photos into a model in an attempt to identify and connect places and dynamics. The model shows a hypothetical nomadic village and its location in the municipality of Balen. It is a start and a test of the village as another narrative.

Mark Luyten (b. 1955 in Antwerp) lives and works in Antwerp and is a visual artist. He works alone but sometimes also with others, on-site, on commission or in a studio. He uses various media: photography, video, installations, paintings, books. He looks for 'blind and blinding images or, perhaps better, what lies just beside them: the almost blind and not quite blinding or a stumbling image that has gazed at the sun for too long'. He has also worked as a researcher and as a research supervisor in the arts. His work has been shown since 1980 on various exhibition platforms, in solo or group shows, in Europe, the US, Canada and Japan.

Thomas Verstraeten (b. 1986 in Antwerp) lives and works in Antwerp and is a theatre-maker, actor and visual artist. He is part of the theatre company FC Bergman, with which he creates performances and operas that have been acclaimed both nationally and internationally. Central to the work of FC Bergman is the floundering, ever-striving human being. The performances are characterized by large-scale images assembled together and research into theatre in immense spaces, with groups of extras and integration of video. FC Bergman is associated with the Antwerp city theatre Toneelhuis. Independently from FC Bergman, Verstraeten pursues an art practice that explores the boundaries between performing and visual arts. His projects have been presented in urban public spaces and cultural institutions.


KOOR
TE HUUR


Hairstudio Elite

Nahid Shaikh
Allures

Nahid Shaikh's film is the result of observations and conversations she conducted in the East Flanders village of Sint-Maria-Oudenhove. During her research and her search for interesting locations, the name of the village had often come up: it still had an identity and a vibrant life, and it was idyllically situated in a rolling landscape. The village she found lies indeed on one side among the rolling hills of the Flemish Ardennes. On the other side, however, a ribbon development has almost turned it into a suburb of the neighbouring Zottegem, of which it is also a submunicipality (the municipality was split during the merger in 1977, part of it integrating Zottegem while another part integrated Brakel). Sint-Maria-Oudenhove: a village with urban allure, or a district with village allure? It seemed to be a question of perception.

Shaikh positioned herself in the village centre. The village square with the church, a café and a few shops is cut through by a busy main road, resulting in regular traffic jams. Among others, Shaikh met a local, the last nun of the almost defunct monastery, and an elderly lady who was originally from elsewhere. Like everyone else who moves into the village, she also got to know Dane, the former café owner whom everyone knows. The aim for Shaikh was to direct as little as possible and to 'capture' the reality of this village and of these people 'as they are'. On the other hand, the film makes palpable the ambiguous relationship that the maker herself has with villages in general and with this village in particular. The village and village life do not correspond at all to the idyllic image that Shaikh had as a city child and consumer of nostalgic TV fiction in the 1980s. However, this does not prevent her from approaching the residents with a sense of empathy.

The accounts and the village itself are full of contradictions: the noise of traffic on the main road reminiscent of a city and the silence behind the church, the many cars and the little-travelled village roads. New inhabitants move there for the peace and quiet, while villagers complain about the lack of liveliness. People still know each other, but on the other hand many no longer do. Traditions are disappearing, says Dane, the café owner, but the majorettes and brass band are trying to keep them alive. 'I don't know many people here', says the nun, who can no longer walk around the old monastery site because of a 'wire', while such a fence is just the thing for Dane and the village postperson to chat about people they used to know. Although all the expectations, all the lives are so different, and although the interviewees speak much in terms of loss, their love for the village filters through in the stories. Nahid Shaikh wonders whether that might just be an essential element of the village.

Nahid Shaikh (b. 1978 in Brussels) is a Belgian documentary maker with mixed roots. After a stint at the BBC, she has been working as a final editor and reporter for Canvas, VRT since 2006. She likes to go where journalists don't go as well as to places which they have long since left. For *Amazones*, she travelled with Phara de Aguirre to Colombia and Iraqi Kurdistan to understand why women take up arms and what the consequences of that choice are. With Rudi Vranckx she went to the Congo, fifty years after independence. For *Blanco* she travelled with Phara de Aguirre through Belgium to give people who no longer vote or who vote invalidly a voice after all. She has also made authorial documentaries such as *Bedankt & Merci* (about popular cafés in the Westhoek) and *La Facture* (an intimate portrait of her Pakistani father, who left his country at the age of 17 and paid a high price for it).

On the Village
Johan Braeckman

Let us begin at the beginning. The anatomically modern human being – a primate like you and me – has existed for about three hundred thousand years. We have experienced many unlikely adventures, have at times been near extinction and have migrated to almost every corner of the world. Somewhere along the way we began to talk, invented art, mythology and technology, and we refined the moral, social, cognitive and other abilities we inherited from our predecessors. Until several tens of thousands of years ago, we were not the only members of *Homo*, our genus. In Western and Southern Europe we met the Neanderthals, in Siberia the Denisovans. We mixed genetically with both species. Countless human beings living today carry genes coming from Neanderthals or Denisovans. We were different from each other but also very similar. Yet there is a fundamental difference: we are still alive, they are extinct. We still don't know exactly how this came about. Were we more aggressive? Smarter? Better able to adapt to a changing environment? Or were we simply luckier? Perhaps science will one day be able to tell us. In any case, that our ancestors were creative and adaptive is beyond dispute. Otherwise they could never have made the transition from an existence as hunter-gatherers to sedentary farm life. We only started farming and raising livestock about ten thousand years ago. Before that, we were nomads for no less than 290,000 years, keeping ourselves and our offspring alive by hunting, gathering and fishing. If we include our distant ancestors, *Homo erectus* and *Homo habilis* (from which we evolved), we are talking about several million years. In short, what is called the Neolithic Revolution is a recent occurrence in human history. It remains amazing how immense its impact was, and still is. Those who no longer gather their food but grow it have to sleep beside their food. Animals and plants need to be cared for and watched over. A direct effect of this, which probably was soon noticed, is the greater food yield per given area. A hectare of land that you cultivate and sow yourself yields far more than the same hectare left to nature. Women no longer had to wait four or five years to give birth to the next child.

Hunter-gatherers roamed around in groups of between a few dozen and 150 people. More was not possible for several reasons. But the groups that made the transition to a sedentary existence experienced rapid demographic growth. Domestication of animals and plants emerged in several places between 12,000 and 7,000 years ago. The transition from a nomadic to a sedentary existence happened gradually, over several generations. But after a while, there was no turning back: our Neolithic ancestors had walked themselves into a trap. Demographic growth forced humankind to keep working the land, 'by the sweat of its brow', as the Bible puts it. No more idle loafing about in the Garden of Eden, where food was always plentiful. Apparently the writers of the book of Genesis already believed that things were better in the past: they describe the transition to farming as a punishment.

They are not entirely wrong. Archaeological research has shown that life became much harder during and after the Neolithic Revolution. Life expectancy decreased, the diet became less diverse, insecurity increased, and all sorts of new diseases arose as we began to live in close contact with animals (zoonoses). Some contemporary authors therefore describe the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture and cattle breeding as the most foolish step in our cultural evolution. We are all bearing the consequences of it to this day. Only a small percentage of the nearly eight billion people today still live nomadically or have a hybrid form of livelihood. The overwhelming majority live the way the first farmers mapped out unintentionally thousands of years ago: sedentarily, with an ever-increasing number of people together and in ever-closer proximity, in self-made dwellings that must serve a long time. This is called culture or civilization. In the latter we recognize the word *civis*, which means citizen, but also refers to an urbanite or city dweller. Critics notwithstanding, we also cannot ignore the fact that the Neolithic Revolution had many positive effects: think of the development of writing, literature, trade, more complex technology and architecture, new art forms, labour specialization, philosophy, mathematics, and gradually medicine and science. The pre-Neolithic human being already influenced nature to a fairly large degree, but the Neolithic Revolution brought with it the purposeful

transformation of animals and plants, from the wolf to the poodle, from wild, low-nutrient crops to the grains and seeds we know today.

We associate the first settlements with civilization and urbanity. Many authors write about the first cities, such as Jericho in the West Bank, where people have lived uninterruptedly for 11,000 years, or Çatalhöyük in Central Anatolia, where five to eight thousand people lived together during its heyday. Here we may rightly already talk about a city, even if we use different criteria than the current ones. But what is usually overlooked is that the first cities did not appear out of thin air. They developed from hamlets and villages, or what we might call *village* settlements: a few dozen or a hundred huts or houses, in which a few hundred people built an existence together. 'Dorp', the Dutch term for village, is one of the oldest known words in the language; it originally referred to a single wooden house or a structure in which people reside. (The word is derived from Protogermanic *turpa*, which became *dorf* in Old High German, *thorp* in Old English, *therp* in Old Frisian, *thorpe* in Old Low Franconian, and so on.) This new way of living together was very different from the earlier nomadic existence. At the same time, there were many similarities: everyone knew everyone else, there was still a large degree of social equality and people shared the same conception of humankind and the same world view. Society was not yet socially or economically diversified, there was no intensive labour specialization, there was no political or religious elite, and the accumulation of property and wealth was rudimentary. Inevitably, this changed as the population increased. Psychologists have shown that we maintain stable long-term social relationships with a maximum of 150 people: we know their names, their personalities, their biography and their family, and usually know where they live. Beyond 150 it becomes difficult: these people become acquaintances, or people you recognize but know nothing else about, strangers, foreigners.

An important aspect of the toll of civilization, in the sense of urbanization, is the sense of alienation people may experience with regard to other city dwellers. The physical and mental gap with nature also increases. Unlike with the first villages in history, people built walls around the first cities, or dug a moat. The difference between nature and culture, the wild and the domesticated, was

visually obvious. The transition was rather abrupt, through a gate or a bridge. The epic of Gilgamesh, immortalized in clay tablets more than four thousand years ago, reflects on the contradiction: Gilgamesh, king of the city, battles Enkidu, a wild man who represents nature and the untamed. Enkidu becomes civilized, which the epic portrays as a positive event.

Identifying exactly where a village society transitions into an urban one is tricky, perhaps even impossible. When did Jericho become a real city? When it reached one thousand inhabitants? Two thousand? Five thousand? When no one no longer knew every inhabitant? Or when a king was appointed? Or when a political or religious caste came into being? When clear laws and rules were needed to maintain cohesion? In any case, just because the transition is gradual and the criteria are debatable and partly subjective does not mean that there are no clear differences between a village and a city. Although we may be somewhat surprised to realize that there are no 'village' equivalents for 'urbanity' and 'urbanization', this in fact reveals our implicit assumption that the arrow of history points inevitably in the direction of ever-more and ever-larger cities. For a city to become a village or hamlet again is counter-intuitive, even though several historic cities have fallen into ruins. The facts are that throughout history, more and more cities came into being, growing larger and larger. Today, hundreds of cities have more than a million inhabitants, and several dozen cities, called megacities, are home to more than ten million people combined. Yet there are still countless villages scattered all over the world. They have not yet been swallowed up by urbanization, although the suburbs continue to grow. Many villagers pride themselves on living in a village and resist urban influences. The question of whether new villages are forming *inside* cities may sound strange, but it makes sense, nonetheless. Cities have neighbourhoods, community committees, places where people buy their groceries, go to the café or visit a church within a village radius. (the Flemish poet Roland Jooris wrote this line of verse: 'A village is a circle / drawn by hand around a church'). There is often a small park that serves as a centre, a meeting place. Here and there, attempts are made to create the sense of living in an *urban village*, with fêtes, flea markets or fairs.

With some good will, it can be said that virtual villages are also developing on social media: communities of people who feel connected to each other, spend time together online, exchange information, and help and support each other where necessary and possible. It is an important aspect of village life: the sense of connection is more concrete than in a city. The bond between people arises because they know each other personally and are woven together in social networks as well as in networks of friends and relatives. The bond between city dwellers, once beyond the inner circle of one hundred to 150 people, is more abstract: we may be Brussels natives, for example, but our mutual differences can be quite pronounced, just as they are in nations. I can have more in common and experience a deeper bond with an African PhD student than with a fellow city dweller or any compatriot. It is in essence a statistical question: a city simply features more diversity than a village, whether in cultural, linguistic, ethnic, political or other terms.

For one thing, it turns out to be a good reason why people flee the village they were born and raised in: homogeneity kills creativity and has a stifling effect. A city is so much more exciting and interesting on many levels. On the other hand, it is precisely because of this that many people never leave their village or return to it when they are raising children themselves, or when they are older. The village feels familiar, recognizable, safer; it offers peace and quiet, stability and social cosiness. *People know their way around, they know the language*. Above all: a village consists of stories that everyone knows, that connect people and form the biography of a community. People tell these stories in cafés, at the baker's and barber's, and grandparents pass them on to their grandchildren. There is joy and drama in these stories – stories about love, hope and loss, about despair and doubt, about everything that makes us human. Each village has its own stories and has a unique life story of its own. Life's emotional intensity is not on a different scale depending on whether one lives in a village, a municipality, a provincial town or a metropolis. Village stories have a different rhythm, are interlaced with a slowness that has been lost in urban life. In cities, things always move faster and faster, including literally. Walkers spend less time in shopping streets, on park benches and terraces than they used to. The village

still manages to preserve some of the older rhythms. Outsiders or new residents do not immediately pick up on this and talk, act and live in an offbeat, syncopated manner. This can cause friction that a city has no trouble dealing with. There, fusion and free jazz are more the rule. The harmony that a village can offer us feels good to those who resonate with it. Those who fail to catch the right tone will find a more natural biotope in the city.

In recent decades, urban style has increasingly infiltrated the village sphere of life. In the past already, paved roads tore villages in half, nobody having yet been called to account for these mutilations. Now village houses are making way for blocks of flats, strange architectural constructions in the eyes of many villagers, imposed on a landscape in which they find it difficult to thrive. The village unfolded itself, from the inside out, in an organic and self-regulating manner. Each resident, over many generations, contributed to the growth of its soul, heart and character. The housing areas that rub against it and take over the fields and meadows lack a centre. Their growth rate is out of phase, they have no history, no biography. The stories behind them are about gains and profits, those who conceived them are anonymous. 'That village of yore is a thing of the past/ This is all that remained for me/ A postcard and memories', Wim Sonneveld sang as early as the late 1960s. The original version by Jean Ferrat is several years older. At the time already, people lamented the loss of the village spirit due to the intrusiveness of modernity and the flight to the city of part of the youth. Whoever still calls himself a villager in our time points to loss, to lack, to something intangible that is in danger of being lost. The same shops and banks pop up in all villages, there are cars everywhere and sameness is served everywhere, or so the complaint goes. Are these nostalgic musings, stemming from an inability to adapt to a changing world? Maybe. Sometimes. But the village reflects the human scale; village life can better suit our evolved social psychology than the hurriedness and anonymity of the big city. Although we will never rid ourselves of the ambiguity that has crept in: village life attracts but repels in equal measure. One is drawn to it, one wants to get away from it. Both observations are simultaneously true. There is a longing for simplicity, whether perceived or otherwise – the simple and orderly life, the daily chat with

neighbours. But there is also *Smalltown*, that wry song by Lou Reed: 'When you're growing up in a small town/ You know you'll grow down in a small town/There is only one good use for a small town/ You hate it and you know you'll have to leave.'

Is the village doomed to languish in the shadow of increasing urbanization? Perhaps not; the longing for everything it stands for remains. A better question is: how do we see the village of the future? For many, the image they have of the village is fictionalized and idealized, and this often leads to disillusionment among those who want to live in that fiction. Nevertheless, the village is real, even if it is difficult to put your finger on its true meaning. The village carries unmistakable positive values that are in danger of being lost if the building boom continues blindly and thoughtlessly. At the same time, we must recognize that the housing model that promises everyone a detached house with a garden is untenable. If we want to avoid the further fragmentation of natural and public spaces, *densification* is necessary, including in villages. The modernization of the village is inevitable and necessary, but how it happens should not be left purely to building promoters. That single-family houses disappear and make way for buildings that can accommodate more people in less space is not something we need to regret. On the contrary: this is in fact a return to the very beginning of the village, when collectivity and togetherness were essential. We can and must oppose the lament regarding the possible loss of the village with creativity. Let architects, designers, artists, politicians, ecologists, psychologists, investors, villagers, city dwellers and other citizens exchange ideas about the opportunities that villages offer for co-housing, greening, alternative mobility, heat-proofing and water collection, animal welfare, gardening, small-scale art and culture, direct democracy, and so on. The village has neither an opera nor a sports hall, but neither does it need that to excel: its strength lies rather in intimacy and in the small scale. There is no need for a place for an orchestra to perform Beethoven's Ninth. To play Satie, only one piano is needed. And there is always room in a village for a brass band and a theatre club. Just as the village seems to find its way into the city, the city can find expression in the village. In part thanks to the internet, information and knowledge are available everywhere,

from Herstappe to Alveringem. A village will thrive better if it is open to the world, open to the present and the future. Creativity can emerge anywhere, but it has architectural, spatial and other contextual needs. Let us think about this thoroughly and debate it in depth before irreparable damage is done once more.

Many thanks to Gwenny Cooman, Nahid Shaikh, Michiel De Cleene, Jouri De Pelecijn, Thomas Verstraeten, Mark Luyten and Erik Wieërs for the inspiring conversations that preceded the writing of this text.

Johan Braeckman (b. 1965) is a Flemish philosopher. He is ordinary professor of philosophy at Ghent University, where he teaches, among other things, the history of philosophy. Braeckman was also endowed professor at the University of Amsterdam from 2003 to 2008. His research focuses on the philosophical problems associated with the life sciences, in particular the theory of evolution. In 2013 Johan Braeckman received the Career Prize of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts. In 2019 he was awarded the Free-thinking Humanism Prize.

The exhibition *Village Matters* is an initiative of Team Flemish Government Architect. It consists of new productions commissioned by the Team in the course of 2020 - 2021.

Concept and production: Jouri De Pelecijn (project coordinator), Christa Dewachter, Tania Hertveld, Anne Malliet, Celine Oosterlynck, Cateau Robberechts, Hedwig Truyts, Oda Walpot, Erik Wieërs

Open Tuesday, Friday and Saturday from 13:00 to 17:00 or by appointment via bouwmeester@vlaanderen.be

The exhibition is closed on Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday and on 25/01 and 28/01/2022.

Visitor's Guide
Editor and production supervisor: Cateau Robberechts
Graphic design: Lise Leën
English translation: Patrick Lennon

Responsible publisher: Erik Wieërs, Flemish Government Architect, Havenlaan 88 bus 10, 1000 Brussels

BWMSTR
Team
Vlaams
Bouwmeester