Not just a Walk in the Park – The Park at Gaasbeek Castle

Project topic

I would like to develop a conceptual interpretive plan for a specific site linked to Gaasbeek Castle, the heritage site where I work. Using the different tools and concepts of the Delphi Course I want to initiate a plan to open up the surrounding castle park to the public in a more engaging way than already happens now, where the park is mainly a nice place for walking. The main theme of the plan will be "Metamorphoses".

Why?

I'd like a walk through Gaasbeek park to be a bit more than that. The main drivers behind my intentions or the 'goals' of the interpretive plan are:
- to present the park more in unison with the castle itself (today they are too much perceived as two different entities)
- to offer people a starting point or a kind of window to experience the park in different ways and in that way also lower the threshold for a castle visit
- to create a space of stories, a park where stories are told and other stories can be fostered and shared, as to try and develop a "two way street" with visitors
- to give a first 'nudge' toward a space of stories, my main theme can function as a lens to broaden the scope, but also to put things more clearly into focus.

On top of that there is also the practical consideration that the castle will be closed for more than two years, starting from September, and so opening up the park in more different ways is a means to keep presenting the heritage site to visitors. Also, people who come walking in the park consist of a greater diversity than people who end up visiting the castle itself. That also intrigues me and pushes me towards developing a plan for the park.

Objectives

The idea is to create a very low threshold to lure people into the history of the park, and by extension, the castle. And not only that specific history, but also history and the passage of time in general. Through the main theme of Metamorphoses, that will be developed in specific ways as I will explain further on.

I would like for the museum to develop into something more than a museum stricto sensu. That it can become rooted in the eagerness to offer the local communities a place where they can read, walk, learn, express,… That it breaths 'hospitality'.
And in the same time use the low threshold this creates to lure them in further (so not only a social function, but also a social function as a starting point for more), like the cinema in the C-Mine complex in Genk! There you have this huge ancient mine site that houses a lot of functions now, and the cinema serves as an interesting gateway to the site. It draws people in, who otherwise might not come there and some of them will be triggered to explore the site further.

Context

Situation

Currently the remaining buildings in the park are either closed (pavilion, small meeting room) or under renovation (chapel, triumphal arc). Disappeared constructions (like a baroque fountain) are in no way marked or remembered. So the park is for the moment just that, a nice park to walk in, with a castle always in view.

Goal

Developing the park surrounding the castle, while the castle will initially be closed for two years and after it re-opening will co-exist in a natural way with the surrounding park. Make all the different buildings/phenomena accessible and bring them under the 'umbrella' of a main theme: Metamorphoses.

Those different buildings are: triumphal arc, pavilion, chapel. On top of that there will be new buildings or redeveloped buildings to enhance visitors' experiences: visitor centre, library/archive, meeting rooms, workshop rooms, bar/restaurant.

Specific objectives

I will look at the park as one site, with different phenomena. Some of them are linked because they were all built/created under the direction of one specific owner of the castle: René de Renesse, Count of Warfusée in the beginning of the 17th century. He had a grand idea to create a kind of baroque park. He had a chapel, a pavilion and a fountain built. Today the fountain is no longer there, but the pavilion and the chapel have survived the ages. So the specific objective would be first to create an overarching theme as a starting point from where to lure people in.

Ideally we attract a lot of people drawn by the park and the beautiful surroundings and complementary with a nice walk we offer them some context regarding the beauty and calm they experience and walk through. We try to trigger their curiosity and invite them to experience the park in multiple ways with a possible visit to the castle as piece de resistance but not mandatory for the experience. We want to trigger people into curiosity, into feeling moved, awed, or even disturbed (for example by the display of wealth and luxury). And hopefully we raise some questions about how we live and regard ourselves in our (imagined) communities. One way to raise those questions is illustrate how this was done through the centuries the park was developed: possible focus points: 19th century political fugitives coming to Gaasbeek from Italy as a refuge, the castle and park as a holiday 'escape' for urban elites, the 17th century grand dream of one baroque park, the anchoring of religious beliefs (with the chapel). Our main way to achieve this will be through all kinds of stories: some displayed (with video), some only to be listened to (audio) or read; but also some locations where people themselves can tell/write down a story. Some stories will be steeped in the historical realities of this sites, others will have a link that will trigger the imagination, others might be told simply because they are important to people.

Main theme

The aforementioned possible focal points, changes through the ages, different possible stories will all be brought under the main theme of Metamorphoses, as it offers a binding element and a way to add meaning and oxygen to known histories and stories. Metamorphoses are a kind of change, disruptive but not necessarily destructive, where some things evolve, mutate,.. and other things stay the same, like a sense of personality or identity that is still there, but in a different way.

We will need to provide some initial context around the framework of Metamorphoses and one of the ways we will do that is by giving it a certain 'starting' point in Ancient Greece and Rome. The idea of everything being constantly on the move and evolving was very familiar to Greek society

(Herakleitos and the idea of Panta Rhei) and was also picked up by the later Roman culture. Ovid finished his grand epos The Metamorphoses around the year 1 of our Christian calendar. It serves as a way to give meaning and life to the existing cultural and natural world and to express ideas and beliefs through stories about people, animals, plants in metamorphosis. Ovid's epos proved very influential through the ages in Europe and were for example a heavy influence on Shakespeare.

Apart from this more concrete historical 'starting point' we will offer some other ways and links to deal with the theme of Metamorphoses. There are many possible links to be made throughout the different phenomena in the park: how the natural and cultural (human) world shape and mutate each other, how history in itself brings about changes, but also metamorphoses, …

Related to heritage interpretation + local engagement
The 49 hectares park with the castle and walled museum garden is a diverse natural and cultural heritage site that is still underdeveloped and has an awkward divide between nature & culture. On top of that local engagement is largely absent today. There is no defined idea yet about how to involve locals. But every further development of the site should enable locals to come more, participate more. So the site could become a driver in itself of local engagement and community. For now it's not a goal to reach out directly to the local communities (heritage and non-heritage) but to remodel the park and create extra facilities in a way that will draw people in. And once they show up, we can think of ways to forge more sustainable relations.
Hopefully the local community, or communities as there are actually several, will be the first to add some stories, take up some of the space that will be there for visitors. Some stories that are still told locally about the last owner for example, should be collected and put to use!!

I also strongly feel that the intriguing concept of Metamorphoses can help to draw all kinds of local people in. Almost everybody feels that his or her life is evolving, changing, mutating. Migrant communities for example are in certain ways made of people who are uprooted and re-settled elsewhere and so while a lot changes for them, at the same time they keep a certain idea of self, and identity that is being remodeled through the metamorphoses they underwent. But also local communities see their more rural way of life upset by the ever growing city of Brussels and see people settling in their villages who are and feel foreign to them.

And then on a more conceptual or philosophical level, there may be an interesting link between these epic stories of Metamorphoses and the way certain grand theories and stories of conspiracy give meaning to people today. For example the quite radical but also very interesting story that the world is ruled by shape-shifting lizards who can take human form (David Icke and his followers).

We live in times that are seemingly moving and changing and evolving ever faster and so the theme of Metamorphoses has a certain contemporary urgency to it. We shouldn't try and drown people in all its different historical manifestations and philosophical implications but look for as many ways as possible for people to relate to this theme and give them time and space to listen to stories and tell their own.

Action Field

Local engagement

Still need to think of ways to involve them in a co-creation to a certain extent. But for now they can be engaged already in two ways:

- The 'first': to shape the "park of stories" under the umbrella of Metamorphoses: there will be the possibility at some places (workshop building for example, but also at some locations in the park) to tell one's own story, or leave a story behind, or a comment on a story,…
- A source of locally told stories, for example about the last owner at the beginning of the 20th century: looking for ways to collect memories and stories of locals online or through actual meetings. But also about village life or reversely about the growing city life. Or about people from all over the world settling in Belgium and Brussels and its surroundings.

Interpretation

Main inner motivation: Active hospitality in diversity, socially, cultural & nature wise

Main theme: Metamorphose. And from there give way to: Imagination! Wonder! So many stories! The whole park as a kind of "storyland", where stories linger, are told, can be told and retold,..

Different phenomena: baroque pavilion, baroque chapel, triumphal arc

+ facilities: building for workshops, restaurant/bar, visitor center

Phenomenon: baroque pavilion: obvious storylines:

- the story of Phaëton and by expansion that of the Metamorphoses as historical starting point from Oivd onwards
- the story of the intriguing owner who commissioned the building

Baroque chapel:

- story of saint Gertrude
- the role a procession to the chapel played in people's lives
- bigger religious picture (other religions): how did and does religion influence and shape people's lives and what stories do religions contain?
- the chapel will be used as an actual place for marriage ceremonies!

Throughout the park:

- link trees, animals, plants, to mythical figures (Metamorphoses) through signs, pictures,.. or to other kinds of stories. This is a way to create a unity between the natural and cultural worlds

Triumphal arc:

- tales about the life of the excentric Paul Arconati who commissioned the arc to glorify Napoleon at the beginning of the 19th century and the height of Napoleon's power
- talk about Napoleon himself and his legacy
- links with other triumphal arcs that people might now
- relate to stories that have (worldly) triumph as a theme

+ the different facilities!

- Old munition storage building: A space for workshops and where you can leave your own stories
- A new to build visitor center + public library/archive
- Old barn: possibly a place for meetings and or rehearsals of local associations (music, theatre,..)

European values

The whole project is very value-driven. It is based on the importance of community and opening up spaces where people can interact, engage,… An extreme example (in a good way) would be the MAAM in Rome where art, museum & social living form a unique combination. The overarching value here would be social equality & dignity.

The French Revolution (and a lot of the European values) was based on "Liberté, égalité and Fraternité". We are acutely aware of the first, more and more focused on addressing the second, but where is the emphasis on fraternité? I believe that's where this project can come in. Not as a place to teach and preach values but as a space where people can experience them and experiment with them. The park will become a meeting point in itself and also because of the different activities deployed there over time. The site sits on the crossroads of a multi-diverse city, the Belgian capital Brussels, and several rural villages and could be a facilitator for some connections from the one to the other and vice versa. Shared experiences of metamorphoses and its expressions could be strengthening local fraternité (brotherhood).

Competences

In that regard this interpretative plan seems mostly steeped in the cluster of social sustainability competences of the DELPHI Framework, being competences 6 and 7.

The idea is:
- To develop a multi-perspective participatory heritage identification project: offer some stories from our vast collection at the castle and its archives, mix them with broader stories that have links with the site, and leave space for people to bring their own stories. Ideally that's how we will arrive at a participatory and multi-perspective heritage site. Identification will flow through all the different kinds of stories (we are the stories we tell ourselves) and will be put into a broad perspective and focus by the main idea of metamorphoses.

- To advocate for an inclusive and participative approach to heritage: we have different local communities all a few miles away that ideally claim and develop their own stories and in a next step hopefully make those stories interact with each other. We have smalltown Flanders sitting next to cosmopolitan Brussels + visible minorities who are born here but have roots elsewhere.

+ extra incentives:
- To use heritage to create better communication and synergy between different socio-cultural sectors
- To provide low threshold and equal access opportunities to culture & heritage.

Media

the park will become a sort of magical story park, enhanced by different media: video projection, VR (virtual reality) and/or AR (augmented reality: enhancing existing structures or images), audio (speakers hidden in trees or bushes), signs and information panels,..

It ultimately and ideally all serves to enhance the experience from walking in a park to walking in a sort of "magical" world full of stories, a realm of possibilities where stories, ideas, experiences and people meet.

With the use of media, especially nowadays, it is important to always maintain the role of media as a means to an end and not an end in itself, which can be tempting.

Final results

Unfortunately there is no final result, nor even the beginning of a realization of this plan/dream. My contract ends at the end of August and is not prolonged. My job will be cut altogether for at least 18 months so there is also no one to pass this potential project on to. It's saddening that this stays a purely theoretical exercise, but I still cherish a glimmer of hope it can be picked up somewhere in the (near) future and serve as an inspiration for an actual development of the castle park.

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