



# *Relay-Conversations*

→ **Designerly Facilitated Light Structures across Communities**

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DESIGNERLY FACILITATION RELAY-CONVERSATION

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## Abstract

Collaboration is seen as the key to acting on, in and with the green transition. Being in the transition of change, networks are formed and brought together in cities around common issues. In this chapter, we present a method we have developed to enable all actors in a newly formed network to contribute to new visions from their perspective.

A relay-example of the perspective of a local actor: 'From tide flats, to city, to ocean – we need to stand together and share common interests in the project supported by the tourist information and ambassadors, who can communicate what Esbjerg is capable of. The beauty of nature needs to be enhanced and linked to experiences in the city – where the quality needs to be improved.'

The method has been developed to acknowledge voices of everyday life as well as help to visualize and elaborate these. This chapter takes its starting point in three case examples of new networks with

issues of material flows and flexible places – all cases conducted in various settings and with various issues but with a sustainability-orientation in common. By bringing forward these cases, we aim at discussing the role of the designer as facilitator in kick-starting a transition within a network of several actors. In doing so, we introduce the method based on a process of relay-conversations, which link individual conversations in a light structure based on common interests. By light structures, we mean different networks of actors that arise momentarily depending on a common issue. Huybrechts, Dreesen and Hagenaaers describe this as an activity of infrastructure in communities with the designer as a trigger (Huybrechts, Dreesen, & Hagenaaers, 2018). And Latour underlines that groups are not just perpetual but need to be made and re-made (Latour, 2005).

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## Introduction

The relay-conversation method has been developed as a part of collaborations between Design School Kolding and community projects in the location of Middelfart; an Urban Life Project in Esbjerg; and a change process at Esbjerg Town Hall. Our contributions in the community projects in Middelfart and Esbjerg were mainly in the very beginning of these projects as a way to investigate the potentials and possible future scenarios – also categorized as ‘the fuzzy front end’ (Sanders & Stappers, 2016).

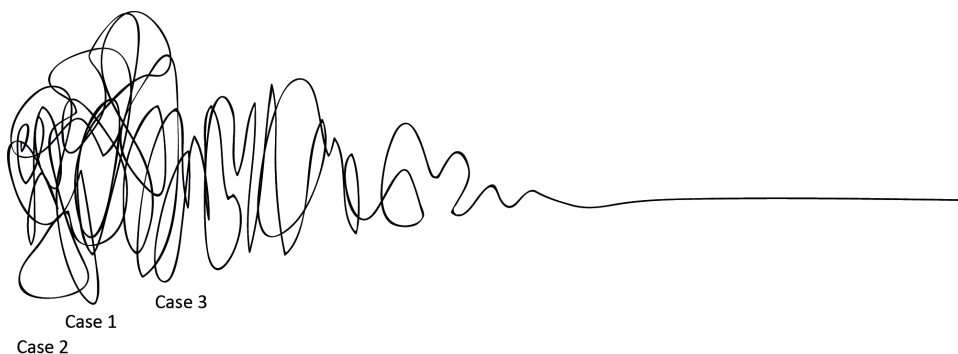


Figure 1: Use of model by Sanders & Stappers (2016, s. 26-31) to illustrate all three cases in the ‘fuzzy front end’ of the design squiggle (Newman, 2002).

The insights we gained from involving in these community projects proceeded beyond our contributions as they helped us substantiate the relay-conversation method. The cases showed a place and role for the designer in facilitating transition processes across local communities and hierarchies through the relay-conversation method. Exploring the method in the setting of these cases has allowed us to refine and further develop the principles.

Throughout this chapter, we investigate the notion of relay-conversation and the related tools and artefacts applied in the three cases that we have here named ‘time’, ‘place’ and ‘time & place’ due to how our investigation has evolved. First, we will (1) Introduce the three cases in which we have applied the relay-conversation method. Further, we will (2) Analyse and develop an application of this method to (3) Utilize our experiences from developing and employing the relay-conversation method to discuss what designers as facilitators might (and might not) bring to sustainable transitions.

## 1

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## Introducing the three cases

### Relay case 1: Time

An investigation of local micro initiatives and how to make them visible and thus the potential to evolve into organised light structures across local networks towards urban resilience.

In the first case, situated in the town Middelfart, we were invited in to help strengthen the viability of the town centre through utilizing design facilitation practices among actors from an established cross-sector network, ‘Brobygning Middelfart’. Brobygning Middelfart is an entrepreneurial organisation founded by the Municipality, which was established to bridge three networks of Middelfart Council for Trade and Industry, Middelfart Trade and Visit Middelfart and utilize the full potential amongst organisations, companies and citizens. We merged the network with local citizens, entrepreneurs and cultural institutions outside the network. When we chose these actors, it was among other reasons, because we knew that they represented nascent tendencies towards the green transition in the town.

The study focused on design facilitation applied during one string of relay-conversations organized by us, research assistants and designers from Design School Kolding (DSKD). In total, the study involved 15 citizens, each engaging in two events - an individual relay-conversation and a following common workshop over a period of three months.

Figure 2: total case time span



The actors were invited to tell stories about the town from their perspective, discuss possible and speculative future scenarios and engage in the relay-conversation by answering a question from the actor before and contributing with a question to the next actor.

Every conversation followed a grid – 1) Introduction to build trust and match expectations 2) Discussing their everyday experiences 3) Building future scenarios, and 4) Condensing the conversation into a relay-question or -theme for the next actor.

The conversations followed a detailed procedure to keep time and divide responsibility amongst us, and further to ensure room for the actor to influence the direction of the conversation, as we considered them as experts of their town. We used an A3 picture of a place well-known to the actor for note taking (workplace, home etc.), sticky notes, pens, camera, ideation cards and markers during the conversations. By noting the insights on the picture in front of the actor during the conversation, we wanted to make an open and transparent process that made it possible for the actor to correct possible mistakes and trust the process.

The order of conversations was settled continuously according to calendars and as actors agreed to participate. Some actors were familiar with each other beforehand others were not. It happened that we would arrive at a meeting, and one actor was meeting with another. The intervening time between the conversations made it possible for us to mediate between the actors and address the different viewpoints, and link correlations.

One example was our conversation with the **café owners**. They expressed a strong wish to get more vegetation in the town. At this point in the conversation, we brought in the voice from the previous relay-conversation with the **store manager**. We told them about his initiative to plant a wood with the citizens in Middelfart. This had until then been unknown to the **café owners** they knew neither of the concrete project nor the **store manager's** visions about this on behalf of the town. The other way around, the **store manager** asked the café owners in his baton if it was an idea to change the taxis to rental bikes or -scooters without knowing that the café already rented out bikes having that exact reason in mind. For our next conversation, we brought the baton from the café owners to the room rental **agency**. It was a clear message: 'to create life – reduce the rent'. Already early in the conversation with the **room rental agency**, it became clear that her focus was on life in the cohesive city and that she and her business partner, to a great extent, tried to reduce prices to a reasonable level, even with the landlords that did not rent their rooms out through their **agency**.

In this case, we connected the actors by addressing their many similar thoughts and visions about urban development. In that way, the actors met each other's voices prior to the workshop and were more open to each other's visions and viewpoints, which became incentives for a common conversation.

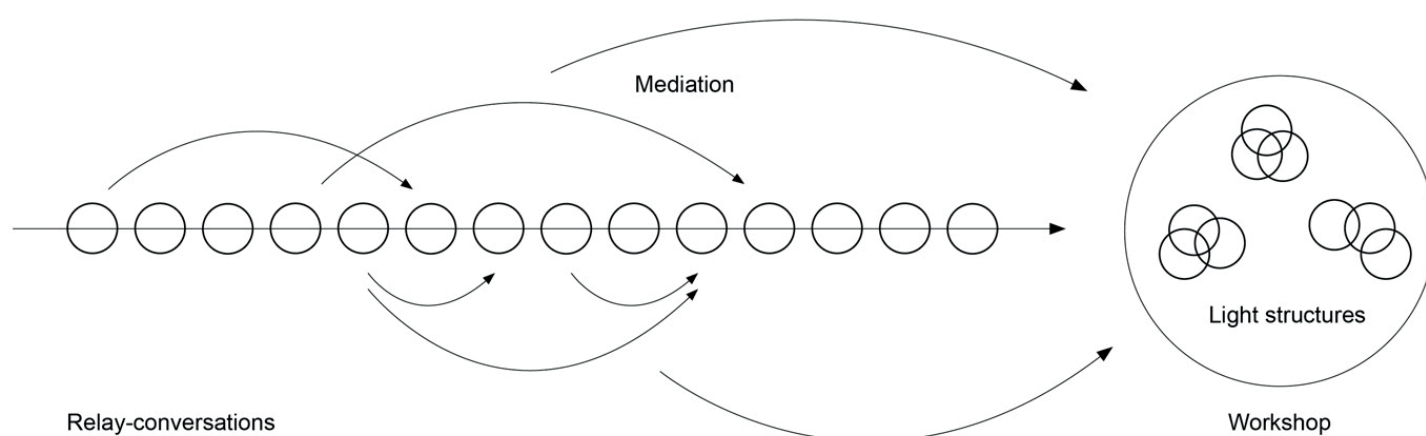


Figure 3: Relay-string

As shown in the illustration, the *relay-conversations* and mediation between actors led to the common workshop where they were invited to share viewpoints on the relay-conversations, and together evaluate how the future scenarios could look like for Middelfart and what it would take to get there. This started an ideation process among the actors and broke down barriers before the common workshop. We facilitated the interaction by trying to link the different perspectives in our introduction to the workshop, suggesting possible and speculative scenarios, and representing the voices of the actors that could not participate in the workshop.

The insights we gained during the relay-conversations gave us a better understanding of the dawning potentials which could be brought up as topics in the workshop.

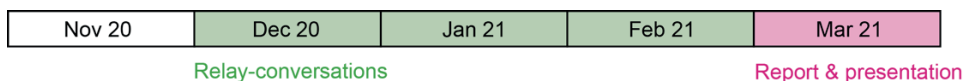
## 1.2

### Relay case 2: Place

How to make people visit, and how to make them come back or stay?

In the second case, the overall purpose was to elevate the population density in the city centre of Esbjerg, among other things expressed by a desire to raise the level of shopping, retain the group of students after graduating and, in general, strengthen urban life. The case ran from November 2020 to March 2021.

Figure 4: total case time span



Our role was to do a qualitative study and analysis at the beginning of a larger urban life project initiated by the Municipality of Esbjerg. The case allowed us to explore design facilitation practices employed within three networks in Esbjerg, individually focusing on urban life within 'culture', 'youngsters' and 'retail'. The Municipality of Esbjerg provided a list of possible actors for us to contact. To ensure a broad variety of actors, we could also add to the list. The order of conversations was planned according to the timing of actors responding to the invitation.

Beginning the study, we were introduced to the city on a tour through the city centre arranged by the municipality accompanied by ‘Technical and Environmental Services’, city architects and municipal planners. From exploring the urban terrain and city life of Esbjerg ourselves, we invited the actors from each network to detect opportunity areas in the city centre, identified from being a citizen experiencing the daily life in Esbjerg. We also asked them individually to think of one or *two places* they found valuable, problematic, or interesting to bring to the relay-conversation.

Our conversation with the individual actor took starting point from a physical *place* in the city centre, depending on the network the actor belonged within. From this place, we would walk together with the actor first to the former actor’s chosen *place* before ending at the chosen *place* for this conversation. Most actors had prepared an entire route. During the study, it became clear that the common starting point was not important. Instead, each actor would decide on a starting point that made sense for the *place* or route they wanted to show.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased restrictions at the time, the conversations were modified into an online version using ‘Microsoft Teams’, ‘Adobe InDesign’ and screen sharing as facilitation tools. One meeting was split into three parts: 1) A pre-meeting for the actor to introduce the route and points for attention, 2) we would walk the route alone and 3) the actual relay-conversation meeting.

Preparing for the actors’ exploration (in all types of weather) of the city site, we developed plastic cards for notetaking in different colours for structuring the output, each colour representing a perspective - *Possibilities, Challenges, Place, Time, Qualities and Community*, waterproof pens, a city-map, and a camera to record the route. The cards were used to open up the conversations between the individual actors and us and to record the conversation for later analysis. In one of the cards, an actor writes about her perception of a visit at the harbour:

KVALITETER (Ung/Studerende)

I definitely visit the harbour because of the water. If you climb over a small fence, you can see the water and Fanø-calmness. When the sun is shining during winter, and it is low, this is where you will experience it, because it is more open. We live on the pedestrian street, many weird sounds. At the harbour we find out where they come from ‘ooh, it’s that crane’.

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Figure 5: Notetaking card, perspective: Qualities. ‘Harbour’

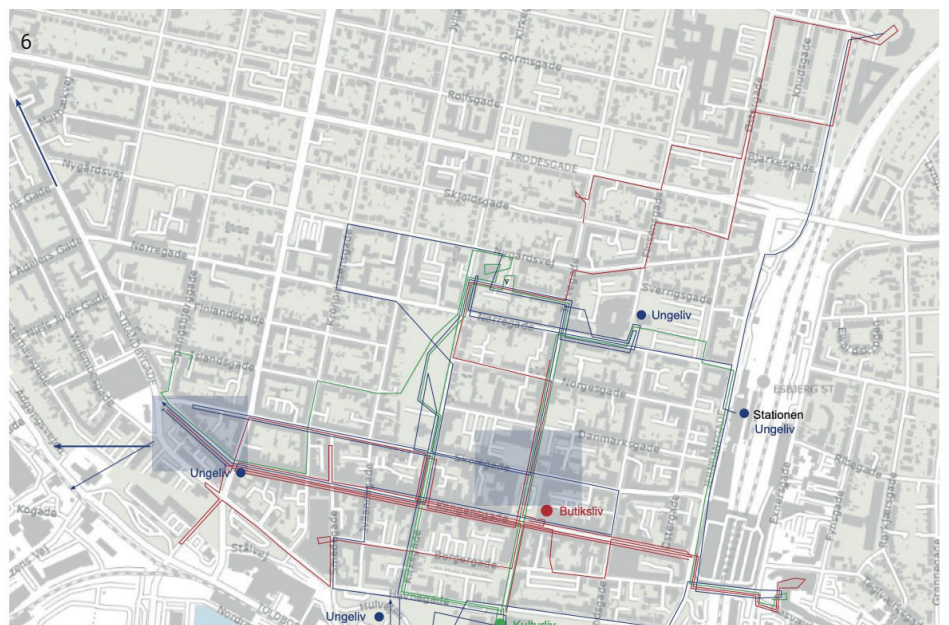
In a conversation with the actor, who was a young new arrival of Esbjerg, she asked us to pay attention to the sounds from the harbour because to her, once she had connected them to *places* in the city, she found them a quality. When we walked the route alone, what we normally would describe as noise, gave us another understanding of the harbour as an inherent quality of the city.

By walking different routes, suggested by the actors, we got a better understanding of the size of the city and the distances between the individual *places*. As we walked the route with an actor, we sometimes became part of their meeting with an acquaintance. In some cases, they were brought into our conversation, and in other cases, we were brought into their ongoing conversation about issues in the city. Before either of us had ever visited Esbjerg, we had both heard about the wind being a part of the everyday life of the city. That wind was also present in most of our relay-conversations through senses as well as articulated. Hence, the impressions from being guided by the actors broadened our perception of the city life and urban terrain.

Figure 6: Screenshot of the different actors chosen routes in the city - from online conversations.

Figure 7: Greenhouses outside a café on the pedestrian street in Esbjerg.

Our analysis and a range of thematic related to the dawning potentials in the city across the 3 networks laid ground for the next part of the process – illuminating what was most important to the citizens at the time – for both new arrivals, natives and visitors.





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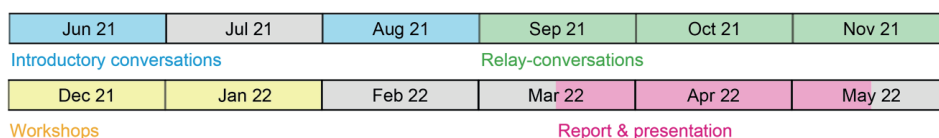
## Relay case 3: Time &amp; Place

Setting the direction of new administrative working procedures through encouraging a common culture.

The third case concerned the town hall in Esbjerg. This project was initiated by the Municipality of Esbjerg, and the actors were employees already working at the town hall, employees relocated to the town hall within this process and citizens and other guests using the facilities. Post-pandemic increased digitalisation, more hours at the home office, and a new layout of the town hall were to set the direction of new administrative working procedures and make space for a hundred more employees.

Our involvement in the community project runs for about a year (June 2021 – May 2022). Though in this case, we describe the early stage of our contribution.

Figure 8: total case time span



The process of relay-conversations took part in 4 steps – 1) Initial meetings with each department, walking around the town hall to experience the context in which this process and change were needed, 2) Relay-conversations – 9 strings of 4-5 employees, one for each department, 3) Workshops concerning the common areas, and 4) Workshops for individual departments. During this process, an investigation among the citizens and other guests was conducted by employees of the municipality.

The actual relay-conversations were, from the beginning, planned to be carried out in an online format due to the unknown situation regarding COVID-19 and to save time and travel expenses. We started the conversations by inviting the actors to tell stories from their everyday work life at the town hall – a good day and a challenging day. From

these, we extracted the most important elements. We asked the actor to *place* the elements within 6 categories (*Possibilities, Challenges, Place, Time, Qualities and Community*) before we introduced the baton from the previous conversation and ended by having them formulate a baton on their own.

We used Microsoft Teams and an online whiteboard with visual artefacts as facilitation tools, screen-sharing, photos from initial conversations and floor plans. By noting down together on the online whiteboard, we could all see, rethink, and adjust the outcome. Despite the online format, each conversation had their office space – *place* – as focal point, and we made sure that they knew we had already visited and were aware of the context we were tapping into.

Due to the number of actors, we made an invitation via doodle so that they could choose a fitting timeslot. Thus, the order of all 43 actors was random, and the 9 relay-strings overlapped. Because of the random order, we, as a minimum, had a small time slot in between each conversation to note insights that could be important to bring forward in the following conversations.

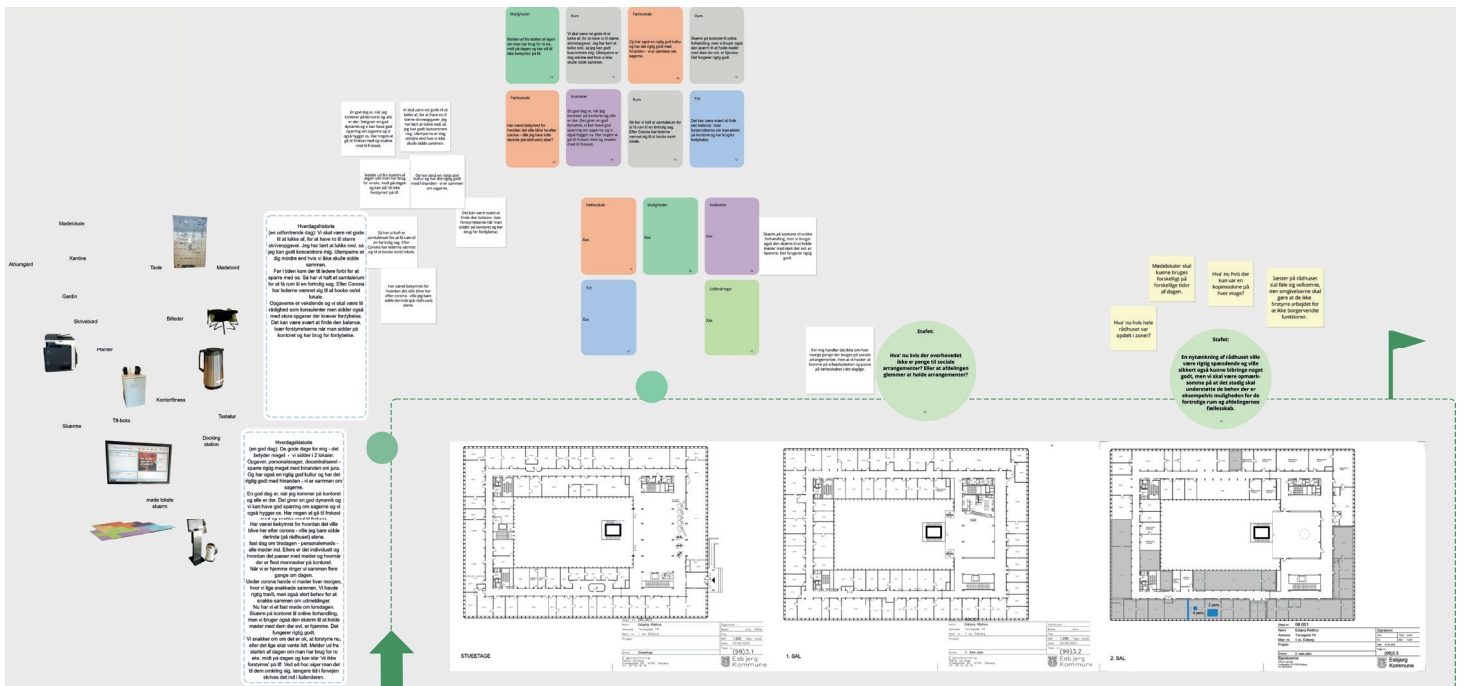


Figure 9: Screenshot of the online whiteboard. Example of online format for the relay-conversations. Start point 'green arrow', steps 'round green shapes', ending point 'green flag'.

When we made the acquaintance of Esbjerg Town Hall through the initial meetings, we tried to perceive as much of the surroundings as possible – activating all our senses to see, hear, feel, smell etc. We experienced how you could hear every sound through the walls in meeting rooms and corridors. We felt how the desks in some offices were squeezed together. We tested two different ways of entry as a guest – the anonymous and more relaxed entrance and the confusing public authority entrance. We opened the doors of endless one-man offices with meeting facilities, and felt we took a deep breath and squinted our eyes against the daylight upon exit.

The output of the project at the Town Hall, in this case, was the change process accompanied by our analysis and recommendations resulting in a report and a presentation about how new working methods, proposals for office layouts, and interior promotes the needs of the individual as well as the common hosting and solidarity across departments – a common culture.

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## Analysis and development of an application of the method of relay-conversations

When working towards resilient solutions in different contexts across Denmark, we see a need for innovative ways to make connections and create social relatedness among non-connections. Thus, we claim there is a need to make changes in the way we face challenges to identify new ways of structuring for collaboration. Part of reaching a higher level of sustainability is to acknowledge and actively encourage social connectedness at a large scale because collective responsibility can lead to green transition and generate democratic value and competent communities. As Albert Einstein said (though in another context): “a new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move towards higher levels” (Einstein, 1946).

If we don't succeed in meeting these challenges towards the green transition, it will affect our liveability. On the other hand, though, the challenges provide the opportunity to rethink and reconstruct solution frames from the perspective of broader connectedness.

The overall intention of structuring collaboration is to initiate synergies across communities towards sustainable progress and hereby attain resilience. Thus, we are working on the topic of designerly facilitation of collaborating communities based on resources and needs. Therefore we will illuminate the characteristics of designerly facilitation and the competencies needed when building light structures across communities, where non-connections are connected through a relay-conversation method.

It is nothing new to us that in order to fulfil the future role of the designer in relation to the sustainable agenda and community resilience, we need to extend our thinking to both product lifespans and systems. Connecting light structures inevitably involves actors across different communities. In the process of connecting non-connections and, at the same time identifying individual needs, we need facilitation skills, and (it is our claim) that we, as designers, can draw on design skills that we already master to overcome barriers and change the mindsets of the actors.

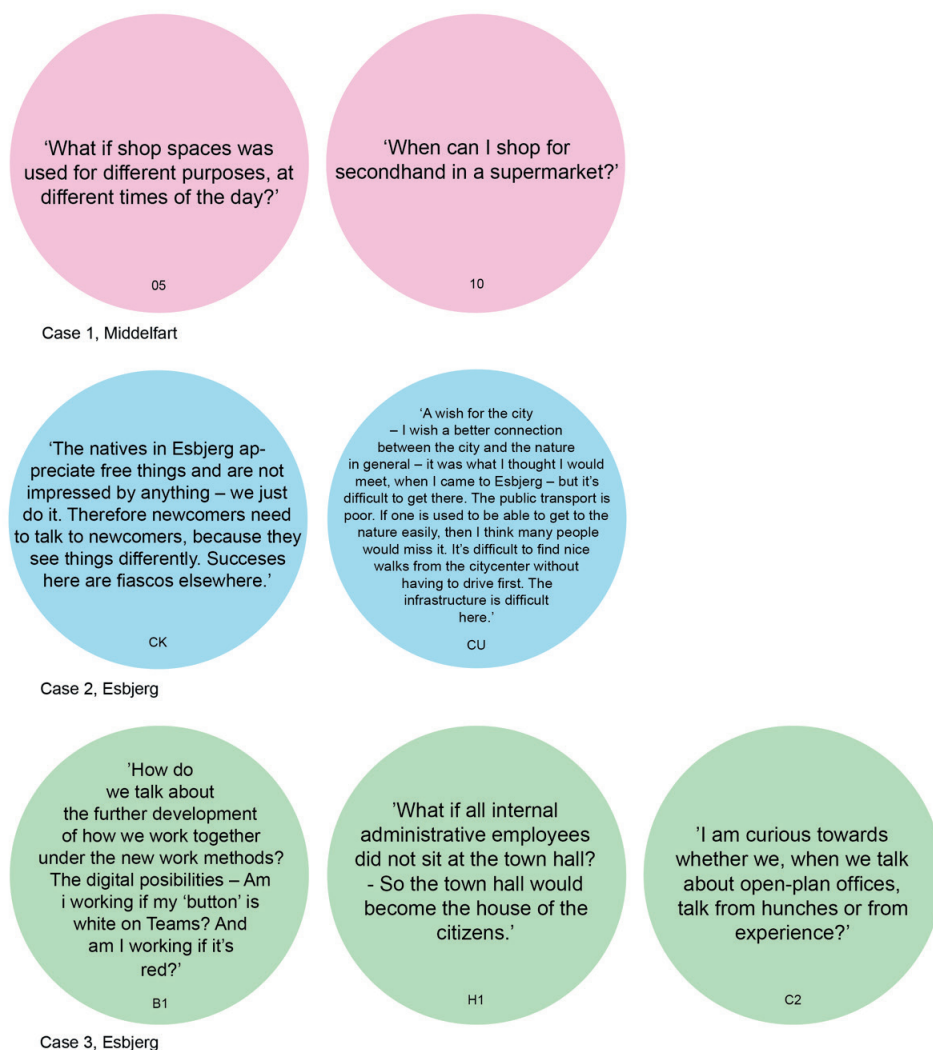
A relay-string consists of at least 3 following conversations with actors, which is partly initiated to get insights about potential common interests among actors and partly to break down barriers. This we have seen when knowledge about other actors is handed over at a distance before a possible common follow-up like the final workshop in Middel-fart and Esbjerg Townhall. The framework is loosely planned by the designer, which makes room for the actors to influence the direction of the conversation. It is about hearing what is most important to the actor, which concerns future visions and how the conversation is connected to other conversations in the same local proximity. *Relay-conversations are interesting because they can pave the way for concerns that we did not see or address at all in the prepared questions.*

The relay-conversations took place before the common workshop. Time between conversations enabled us to mediate and navigate between possible confrontations in the dialogue, not to avoid them, but to start a constructive conversation. Time also left space for each actor to consider new potential for light structures. Hence, the relay-method slows down the conversation.

In the case in Middelfart, we lacked knowledge on the places that the actors referred to during the conversations. Hence, it was difficult to talk about these places in depth and further bring them up in the next conversation with conviction. Therefore, in the next cases, we arranged a pre-walk in Esbjerg city and initial meetings, including tours around the town hall, respectively. From the early knowledge and insights, we developed context-specific tools for each case. In case 2 in Esbjerg, we further discovered the significance of place in relation to the conversations - how it contributed in-depth knowledge, not only about the specific places we got introduced to during the conversation, but also our understanding of the places through our senses (Sand, Skovbjerg, & Tanggaard, 2021), connections between places, people we randomly met and conversations in the gaps from one place to another. Thus, it made us capable of asking more relevant questions.

We, as designers and facilitators, needed to follow the entire process to keep the overview and be able to link the conversations. Thus, we were a part of the conversation, not on equal ground, but also not invisible (Aguirre, Agudelo, & Romm, 2017). It was essential to focus on future possibilities instead of present challenges or the present conversation when navigating and passing on the 'right' baton. We tried to open for possibilities and for daring to dream – dream together. Alongside the relay-conversations, we provided the opportunity to follow the relays with pictures of attendees on an online platform. In that way, the actors got a glimpse of what they were entering beforehand, and, in some sense, they were connected.

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 Figure 10: baton from the 3 cases.



Having individual conversations created an equal dialogue where all actors had the chance to tell their stories and viewpoints despite otherwise existing hierarchy and decision layers. From earlier experience with managing stakeholders, we have seen the importance of equal weighting of the individual voices.

It was our agenda for the processes in these 3 cases to draw on our design competencies, experience within the green transition and the empathic mindset of the designer. Further, we wanted to open the actors' mindsets by emphasizing future needs of the individual and the whole. In this way, we looked for correlations, and throughout, it was important for us to keep the process transparent – putting all intermediate results and arguments forward when discussing possible futures. We developed context-specific physical artefacts to ensure a common ground in our discussions. Showing the intermediate re-

sults was important so the experts (actors) could evaluate, argue and change the proposal. In all 3 cases, the actors had the last word.

Our aim with developing the relay-conversation method is to leave tangible traces with the actors that enable them to approach new challenges with an empathic perspective and reach out to all relevant stakeholders in relation to a specific issue and make momentary light structures to accommodate new possibilities. By leaving tangible traces, we mean showing them ways to engage with and imagine possible futures. As in the workshop in Middelfart, when we brought their voices together, the actors became aware of the lack of space and sense of belonging for children and youngsters in their town. This approach draws on Participatory Design, where stakeholders are brought together in the design process to ensure a broader perspective on an issue to attain the best possible solution (Sanders & Stappers, 2016). Our approach is to break down barriers before the actors meet in order to initiate light structures over time.

In case 3, several of the actors referred to conversations they had had with previous actors in the relay-conversation before entering themselves. And especially in this case, we also had the opportunity to mediate and inspire across relay-strings as we conducted them concurrently. It was our intention that the delay would leave an opportunity for talks in the corridors, as we, e.g., said: 'if you talk to your colleagues and come up with new ideas, come to think about new perspectives etc. Please reach out to us'. *These transient voices (of other actors) in the conversation, brought forward by us, left tangible traces which opened up for them to reach out and self-organise.*

Utilize our experiences from developing and employing the relay-conversation method to discuss what designers as facilitators might (and might not) bring to sustainable transitions.

As mentioned above, the 3 cases we conducted were all in the pre-project phase, meaning we entered the processes before the projects were defined. We used the relay-method to uncover issues and develop solutions simultaneously by continuously proposing possible solutions as visual prototypes and discussing how they could fulfil the needs. As Lawson describes the design process: “problem and solution emerge together” (Lawson, 2005, s. 31-50). In this pre-project phase, working towards suggestions on how to approach the issues - possible directions to search, emerging dreams, or a framework for the next phases, we as designers tried to engage a wide range of stakeholders to ensure multiple perspectives in a wide and flat structure not only within prevalent frontrunners and organizations.

One cannot introduce changes towards a green transition at the end of a project, as one needs to make systemic changes in order to obtain an effect on societal value. Therefore, our relay-method is aimed at the fuzzy-front end or pre-project phase (Sanders & Stappers, 2016).

We guided the actors through the process visually, constantly referring to their surroundings when trying to capture both common and individual needs. Further, our underlying purpose was to build trust, and emphatic participation as a means to achieve a safe space for daring to dream and rehearse proposals together (Huybrechts, Dreessen, & Hagedaars, 2018; Aguirre, Agudelo, & Romm, 2017; Halse, Brandt, Clark, & Binder, 2010)

When trust is established, the designer can start to inspire, initiate change, and even act as activist towards the green transition (Huybrechts, Dreessen, & Hagedaars, 2018, s. 84) Through our proposals and questions, we make clear that our agenda is strongly influenced by the sustainable agenda. For instance, we acted upon this when we realised how many one-man offices with meeting facilities they had at the town hall, occupying square metres and being inaccessible when used as offices. Even though everyone had expressed the quality of having easy access to an extra meeting room. Or when we heard from many actors in Esbjerg that they lacked fresh air, daylight,



and movement during their working day at the town hall, we suggested that instead of only changing the office space, we needed to make changes that could support a common culture around a healthy working day, e.g., walk-and-talk routes and eating facilities outside.

Aquirre, Agudelo and Romm refer to the facilitating designer and the participants as flocking birds in synchronized compositions, where the role of the designer shifts between participant and facilitator when new patterns emerge (Aquirre, Agudelo, & Romm, 2017). The picture describes how making light structures depends on mutual understanding and effort - social connectedness - and how the designer, in some ways, becomes part of the flock. Even though we become part of the flock, we also draw on the fact that we are outsiders to the issues at stake. Hence, we can raise more difficult questions and keep a focus on the overall purpose. In this, we pay attention to the gaps between our touch points with the actors by leaving tangible traces consisting of visual prototypes and trigger questions in an attempt to keep the light structures as long as necessary after we leave the flock.

Though the process of obtaining light structures in the work towards green transition is time-consuming, we see the bottom-up approach as the only one possible when not working with politicians making regulations (top-down). Despite the slow pace, it is our conviction that we can make another kind of change when building on insights from everyday life in local proximities. The common visualisation of future possibilities is crucial to make changes.

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## Conclusion & Further

### New perspectives

In this chapter, we have shown how we, as designers, can push the agenda of a common green transition through interventions that clarify the new qualities as well as contextualise and concretise.

As in the relay-conversation method, which is the starting point of changing a mindset to explore common visions. A dialogue which we participate in as designers because we are preoccupied with how potentials of everyday life can strengthen communities – how the

mutual dependency is reflected in the way we live together. This puts us in a position where we, as designers, are involved but unaffected compared to the actors. Thus, we have a free space for leaving tangible traces of dawning potential connections.

We have to practice the future in a way that embraces both the predictable and unpredictable in the green transition. The challenges are complex, and thus we have to explore and learn what sustainable ways of living can look like. This method paves the way for identifying and understanding new perspectives, as well as enabling changes of inappropriate aspects in former prototypes, by opening broader conversation. Hence, we create proposals based on tangled communities.

## New networks

By speaking across established conforming groups and at the same time, even out hierarchies, we put the different layers of decision-making mandates on the same footing and make networks based on the suggestions related to the individual challenges and visions.

## Local proposals

Local change can seem a little ineffectual compared to global challenges, but these kinds of changes are easier to implement, and the effects are easier to spot. Furthermore, small initiatives often inspire people and enable them to adjust the proposals to their local communities. In that way, concrete solutions, even the small ones, can start a chain of proposals (Colville-Andersen, 2020). Halse, Brandt, Clark and Binder describe this as staying in the ongoing process of rehearsal (Halse, Brandt, Clark, & Binder, 2010). In this common process, we strive for a mindset of staying 'adjustable' to attain resilience.

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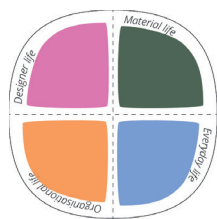
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## *Tangible String Conversations*

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