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**Aalto University
School of Arts, Design
and Architecture**

Final Report

How to reach and involve young and international residents in city development?

Team 5 – Participation 1

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Acknowledgments

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Executive summary

This project report answers the challenge: *How to reach and involve young and international residents in city development?* Young residents and residents with an international background in the city of Espoo are not connected to the process strongly enough due to demanding traditional methods. The conducted research showed that a sense of belonging is a prerequisite for involvement. The project focused specifically on international Aalto students onboarding to provide concrete and tangible suggestions. However, it has been structured to scale up to other environments and target groups.

The proposal contains two parts: 1.) a set of opportunities to build better a sense of belonging and participation through an onboarding process, and 2.) design principles of service concept for the development team to further implement the identified opportunities. The proposal provides a tangible concept that helps the city of Espoo to build more meaningful relationships with its residents, by highlighting the root causes behind the emerging challenges and suggesting concrete solutions to the challenges.

Introduction

Client & Project Brief

In this project our team partnered up with the city of Espoo's resident participation team, who provided us with the brief: **How to reach and involve young and international residents in city development?**

Our initial contact person, the development manager of resident participation in Espoo Marion Ticklén, elaborated that Espoo faces challenges in reaching and involving younger residents. Good decision-making requires diversity in the process, and currently, young residents and residents with an international background are not connected to the process strongly enough due to demanding traditional methods like panels and workshops.

Current Situation: People Make The City – A New Resident Activity Model

Espoo has created a resident activity model (City of Espoo, 2022) that outlines ways how the city wishes to empower its residents to take part in their own way.

As mentioned earlier Espoo has noticed that they face challenges to include younger generations. They have sectioned their residents into four groups by their activity level: **active** city residents, **semi-active** city residents, **interested** city residents, and **independent** city residents. Activity level is mainly determined by how often the residents participate. Espoo has also noted that they need more light participation methods for those residents who do not have enough time or resources to participate in higher-level participatory activities like workshops and panels. These light participation methods could be for example polls, pop-ups, and surveys. In conclusion, Espoo has great plans to provide different ways to participate that best suit their residents' different life situations.

Scope Of The Project

City participation has many societal layers and can be described as a "wicked problem" (Rittel & Webber, 1973), therefore our project is complex and can not be solved without digging deeper. Our target group defined by the brief mainly falls under interested and independent city residents. To gain an understanding of how to reach and involve these young and international residents in city development we need to first ask why Espoo is not reaching them now. To gain further understanding we formulated the following four research questions:

1. **What is participation? What does it mean to Espoo, what does it mean to the residents?**

   Almost all the mentioned participation methods in the Espoo Resident Activity Model (City of Espoo, 2022) are data-collecting surveys and panels. Is participation with the city voicing your opinion or could it be something else?

2. **What is the current reality in reach and engagement among internationals and young people?**

3. **Where is the gap between the connection of the city and young international residents? How to improve the experience?**

4. **On a more motivational level, how to make the resident feel that their contribution matters?**

The scope of young, and international residents in Espoo is quite extensive, so in our project, we first narrowed it down to the part where these two groups are overlapping: young residents with an international background. The relevance of this group is further visualized in figure 1.

Figure 1: Chosen focus segment

Provotype To Spark Discussion

Provotype is meant to provoke feelings and spark a discussion (Haverinen, 2018). It can be intentionally frustrating, annoying, or even hilarious as long as it gets the conversation flowing. Our team decided to create a "Match made in Espoo" – A dating app-inspired participation app where users could browse through various city projects and swipe right on the ones they fall in love with. When a match is made, get updates on the project and offer feedback on its development.
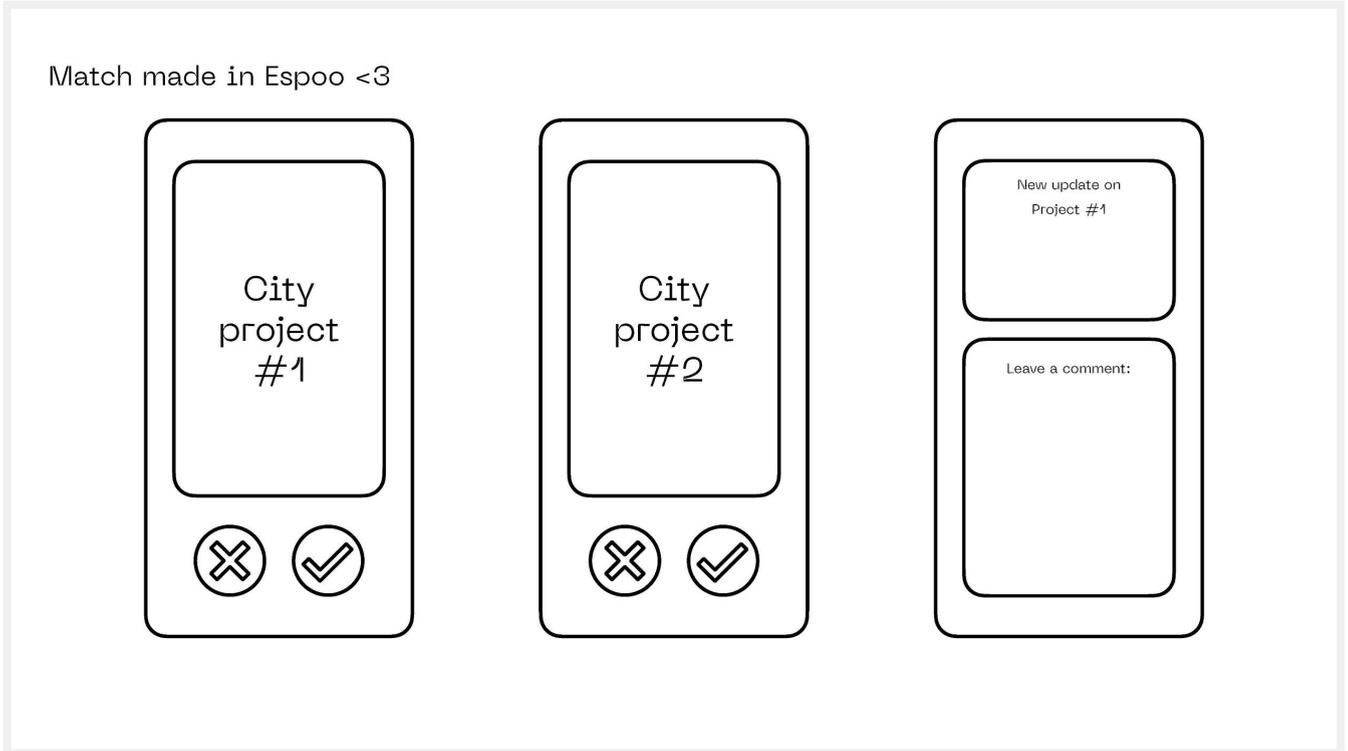
Even at this point of the project, we had an understanding that participation for younger generations should be something easy, light, and fun. Younger generations are familiar with different kinds of dating platforms so the format of participation should be close to the format that younger people are already familiar with.

Research

Interview With Espoo

In order to understand participation from an organizational internal point of view, we conducted an interview with our client representative. The aim was to gain an understanding of residents' side activities, internal activities, the support system in the city, what are bottlenecks in the processes, and what kind of internal boundaries are there. We also conducted a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of participatory practices from the perspective of the city. Based on the interview we identified that city of Espoo:

1. is struggling to tolerate incompleteness,
2. lacks the courage to be bold and attract attention,
3. feels pressure to be perfect which leads to fear to take action, and
4. 5 city centers makes it feel like 5 different cities which causes fragmented espoolaisuus identity.

In conclusion, there is still a strong aim to create a sense of belonging for the residents but the pain points are currently blocking them to reach that.

To keep the city of Espoo involved in the co-creation process, we met with the client representative weekly to make sure the project keeps moving in the right direction and keeps elaborating meaningfully.

Desktop Research

We conducted desktop research to gain a better understanding of Espoo's existing communication strategies and the mediums used to reach and involve young and international residents. Since the target group is international residents, who may not speak Finnish or have a low level of proficiency, we focus on English search and display results in order to get more valuable results. After desktop research we found:

1. Espoo has a good search engine visibility with the words "Espoo participation" and alike. There are many proactive ways for residents to express their opinions like portals, forms, and email links.

2. There is a language barrier. We have found out that people who do not speak Finnish have relatively more difficulty getting information or get less information than Finnish speakers. For example, we were unable to find the English version of the Espoos newsletter.

In conclusion, if residents know the right keywords for what they are looking for, they usually could find it. The difficulties emerged when the keywords were not exactly correct and when the information was not in English.

Field Research: Espoo Town Hall Meeting – Sustainable Transport

We also conducted field research to gain important insights about the current reality of participation in the city of Espoo. We took part in the field by participating as residents in the "Espoo town hall meeting" organized by Espoo. We used this opportunity to observe and experience participation firsthand in the existing activity.

After the experience, we identified 4 key pain points:

1. **Uninformed organization**
   The structure of the activity could be improved. The workshop did not have an icebreaker activity, which would have been helpful for the participants.

2. **Demanding questions**
   Many of the questions asked were too abstract and made it difficult for participants to answer.

3. **Unclearly oriented presentation**
   A lot of information (data and charts) were not directly useful from the resident's point of view.

4. **A small number of participants**
   The workshop did not succeed to attract enough participants to create a meaningful co-creation.

Resident Interviews

To gain a deeper understanding of the target group we conducted qualitative research where we interviewed 7 residents. Based on the Espoo Resident Activity Model we reached three categories of the interviewees: **active, semi-active,** and **independent.** The 7 interviews contained interviews from 3 active residents, 2 semi-active residents, and 2 independent residents. The active residents were recruited during the Espoo workshop, the semi-active ones are people engaged in community work without the city, while the independent residents were chosen for not having direct engagement with the city.

For the interviews, we prepared an interview guide to structure the interviews. We asked the interviewees about their background, sense of belonging in the city, their understanding and experience of participation, and their motivation for participation. The interview guide and the questions can be found in the appendix.

Summary Of The Pain Points

After analyzing and organizing our research data, we summarized the most crucial pain points:

1. **Time and location**
   People do not participate or do not consider participating because they do not have the time, the timing is not right, or the location is too far from their home.

2. **Not feeling involved and limited knowledge about Espoo**
   A lot of residents do not feel involved in the decision-making of the city due to different understanding of opportunities to participate. Involvement is missing also because of people's limited knowledge of Espoo. Some of the interviewees did not know that Espoo is its own city, not a suburb of Helsinki, and this leads to not feeling a connection to the city of Espoo.

3. **Lack of consistent feedback and follow-up**
   Some residents do not feel the city would be listening to them because the residents do not usually receive feedback and follow-up after they make a suggestion.

4. **Language barrier and no interest in the topic**
   Language is a critical issue. Many international residents do not speak Finnish or have limited proficiency. A lot of information and activities are in Finnish, which makes it difficult for international residents to participate or even feel they could.

Defining The Solution Space

Understanding Resident Participation

Participation is always present

Through our research we have discovered that participation does not have one shape or definition. There are many different perspectives to it, each entailing its own reasons and expectations. Due to its fluidity, it is also ever-present. Everyone participates, although sometimes perhaps in non-obvious ways. Even non-participation is a paradoxical, yet relevant form of participation. Thus, the effort in making people participate is senseless, as they all already do. However, making people participate in the desired way is a totally different story.

A lesson on involvement

To study involvement, as the city's desired way of participation, we outlined various participatory resident activities in an actionable and relevant case of city operations – waste management, using a participation ladder (figure 2). What is important to discern, is that there are multiple ways of involvement, each with its own scale of effort. Making participatory flows less rigid and demanding would likely motivate residents to participate in higher-effort activities, but it would not help with increasing their involvement. This suggests that being more involved does not necessarily demand higher effort, but a different kind of sentiment.
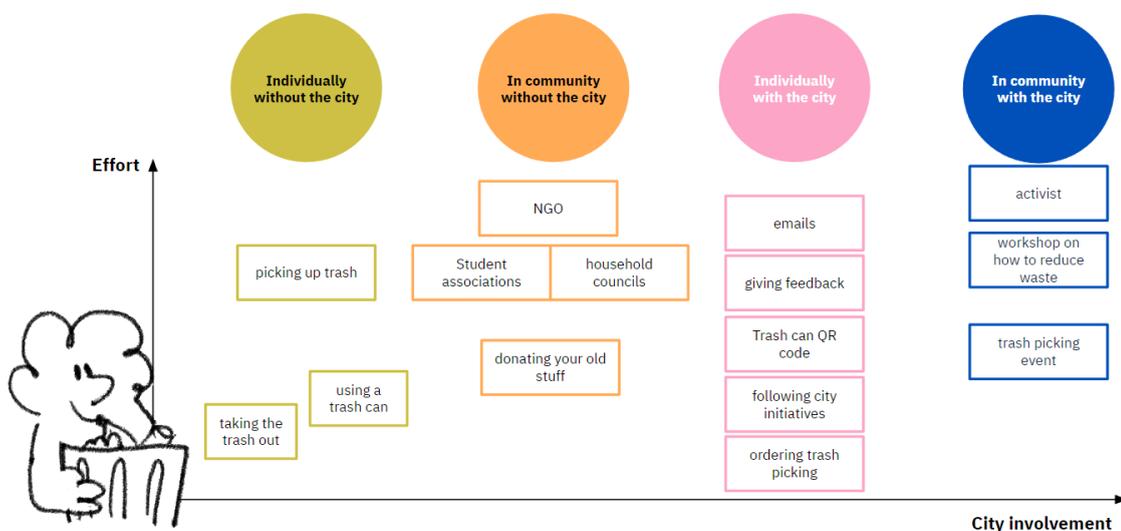

Figure 2: The participation ladder

Involvement Through A Sense Of Belonging

Sense of belonging as a prerequisite for involvement

Conducting further data analysis, we uncovered that a relevant motivator behind involvement was a sense of belonging. International residents did not see themselves getting involved unless they felt like they were a part of the discussion. This meant being informed and interested in the topic, deeming they can contribute, and believing they can leave an impact. Since all the discussion topics were about the city, residents needed to feel a part of it in order to get involved.

How to inspire a sense of belonging

For an individual to feel like they belong, they need to feel accepted and supported. They also need to know what they are even supposed to belong to. Most interviewees had trouble describing what kind of a city Espoo is, and some did not even know it was a city.

Furthermore, time was of the essence - we learned that in order to establish belonging, newcomers would need to be reached out to the first couple of months after arriving. A move to a different country presents to an individual a monumental change; a life transition. In this transitionary period they feel vulnerable, uncertain, and thus desperate to escape it. The things that used to structure their everyday life are suddenly left behind and in dire need of replacement. This restructuring can not be postponed. If they are not offered replacements they are forced to find them on their own. If the city does present itself as a source for these, they will search elsewhere. Thus, the longer the disconnect remains, the more their lives start to get structured without the city in mind.

Onboarding As A Transitory Intervention

The potential of onboarding

To reach out to newcomers not only at the right time but also in a relevant and meaningful way, we identified the potential in developing a deeper understanding of the onboarding process. The same way an app evokes comfort and trust through its onboarding, so would the city need to address its own process.

As onboarding heavily differs based on the reason behind the move, we knew that the research would need to be case specific. As we were operating with limited time and resources, we ascertained that if we wished to obtain meaningful insights, we could only address one case and that its actors would need to be readily available. The onboarding experience of the Aalto universities international students fits within this scope. Additionally, the particular case already had a somewhat developed process from Aalto's side and could serve as a relevant benchmark. The relevance of this group is further explained in figure 3.
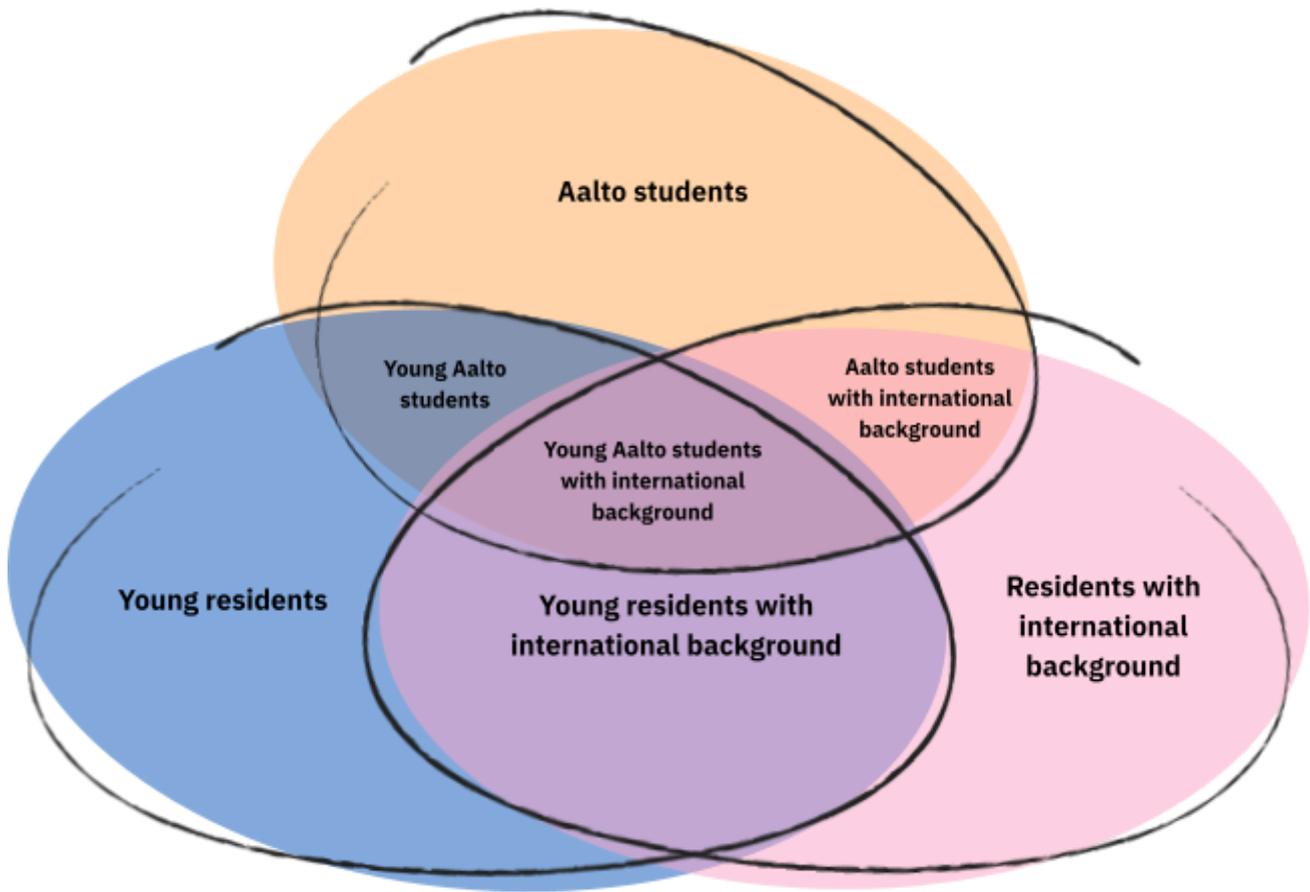
Figure 3: Relevance of the chosen focus segment

The onboarding journey of an Aalto international student

Figure 4 presents a journey map of Aalto international students. It helps us better reflect, empathize and ideate around the successive experiences that our actors go through. As we can see the journey begins with the letter of admission and ends with the Espoo's Welcome Postcard. Between these two points are numerous phases the student needs to go through to complete their life transition. Some are somewhat catered to, while others present considerable struggles. Noted jobs to be done help us better understand the context of each phase, while corresponding pains inform us what has already been addressed and what needs further action. Touchpoints show us potential channels where interventions could take place, where the stakeholder section highlights the actors we need to coordinate around when developing these interventions. To help us better empathize with the actors we're following, the final section of emotions offers a glimpse into the feelings they experienced within the given phase.

Figure 4: A journey map of Aalto international students (higher resolution in appendix)

The journey map was conducted with two 1st year Aalto students who arrived in Finland only a month before, which meant that the recollection of their experience was still fresh and highly relevant. We helped facilitate their efforts using journey and emotion cards that served as design probes (Sanders & Stappers, 2014). Furthermore, we finalized the journey with the autoethnographic (Ellis et al., 2011) retrospectives of our three international team members.

Onboarding and the City of Espoo

Through a meeting with Espoo's onboarding team we have gained a better understanding of the possibilities and limitations of implementing and evolving the identified onboarding process.

Our learnings were as follows:

- Espoo's has a dedicated phone line for questions about moving to the city and Finland. It is becoming increasingly popular, yet they believe even more customers could be served. Considering the movers' journey from the very start could help identify touch points where the helpline can be presented. The scalability of the service should also be considered as the number of callers starts to increase.

- There has already been an initiative to join efforts with Aalto university when onboarding international students, however, it seems that a fruitful relationship is hard to establish. We advise further research into the organizational context to identify a relevant contact. A structured and actionable proposition could also help spark initial efforts.

- There is the belief that the key to successful onboarding is connecting with an already situated Espoo resident. As such, improving language proficiency and participation in community activities is advocated. This stance does identify relevant prerequisites for holistic integration within a community. However, based on our gathered insights, such an approach is likely too demanding for internationals and a lower bar of entry should be considered.

Proposals

Our design intervention aims to develop solutions for building a sense of belonging and meaningful participation opportunities already during the onboarding process. Considering the bigger picture and the human experience (Solsona, 2022) moving to another country is much more than a journey, it represents a life transition. In our particular case, the onboarding process represents a transition to student life and to being an Espoo resident. In a such process, Espoo can take the role of a guide and helping hand for a better transition.

Opportunities To Build Sense of Belonging And Participation

The Method

Starting from the current journey map of Aalto international students we added a new level, *the new opportunities level*. Mapping and understanding all the existing phases, touchpoints, and actors, allowed us to tackle down where contact with Espoo is missing and allowed us to define new collaborations and touchpoints.

Figure 5: the new opportunities level in a journey map of Aalto international students (higher resolution in appendix)

The definition of the new solutions followed a structure composed of 3 steps:

1. Introduction to the city of Espoo

The very first thing to do while building a connection and sense of belonging is introducing ourselves. As a first step, it is important to let people know what Espoo city represents and what it can offer.

2. Introduction to Participation

Always consider residents' cultural backgrounds and their different understandings of participation. Research conducted by CIVICUS Monitor showed that from a global perspective, participation is a privilege. The countries with an open participatory model represent a narrowed minority (figure 6), not everyone is familiar with the concept of participation. For such reason, it's important to provide an explanation of the participatory model and achieve a common understanding.
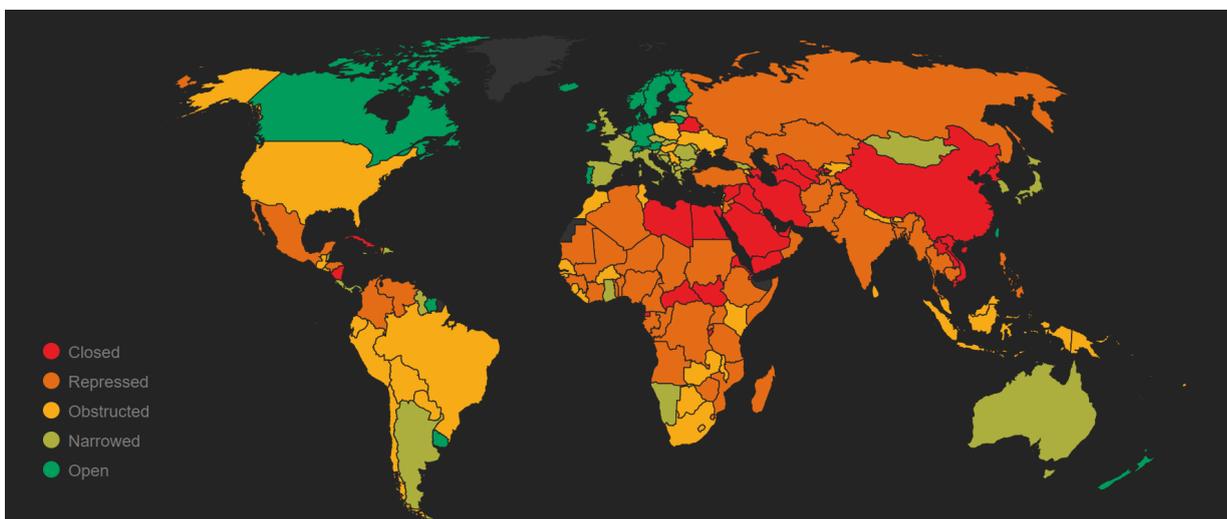

Figure 6. CIVICUS Monitor (2022) National Civic Space Ratings: 39 rated as Open, 41 rating as Narrowed, 42 rated as Obstructed, 50 rated as Repressed & 25 rated as Closed. Available at: www.monitor.civicus.org (Accessed: 2022-10-06)

3. Participation opportunities

Only after defining the previous two steps, new opportunities for a sense of belonging and participation can be established.

Proposals

Following the method mentioned above we defined some proposals of interventions that we want to provide as an inspiration

Journey phase	New opportunity	Explanation
Letter of Admission	Attach a Video about Espoo to the admission email Ask consent from the new student (future resident) to forward contact info to the city of Espoo to provide smoother onboarding experience	First contact. Aims to provide an introduction to Espoo with a light way of receiving information (video). Remember: your audience is under a heavy information overload. Make the video light and easy to watch! *Aims to provide an introduction to Espoo*
Gathering general information	Build a relationship with Aalto tutors for future collaborations	Aalto tutors are second-year students in contact with the new students. They take care of providing them with all the information needed before their arrival. It's a really good opportunity for Espoo to be in contact with future international residents. + At the same time, you are in contact with fairly new Espoo residents, the tutors! (Usually, tutors are second-year students) * Aims to provide an introduction to Espoo and build Participation*
Find housing	Collaborate with housing providers like Sato and others to start international housing meetings to further develop the area.	We found out that not all housing is friendly for residents with international backgrounds. However, big housing providers like Sato are offering information in English which makes it more easily approachable. The size of the company also means that they have a wide audience that it can communicate with. We recommend that Espoo would collaborate with housing providers like Sato and others to start international housing meetings to further develop the area. *Aims to provide an introduction to Espoo and build Participation*

Grocery shopping	Food guide	What is Finnish food? Where to shop in Espoo? What is the difference between R-kiosk and Prisma? *Aims to provide an introduction to Finnish culture and different places in Espoo*
Get HSL tickets	Welcome discount for the first week/month	*Aims to provide an introduction to Espoos public transportation*
Orientation Week	Espoo pop up during OtaOrienting Espoo merch and patches	Ota Orienteering is a checkpoint crawl in which the students have a chance to get to know the multitude of student associations in Otaniemi. Every association has a stand with activities and badges. Taking part in such an event, even having Espoo patches is a great opportunity to provide visibility and connect directly with students. *Aims to provide an introduction to Espoo and build Participation*
Start of the studies	Espoo pop up	The first weeks of the studies are a time of exploration for the students. Being physically present and creating engagement and participation can establish Espoo as a very present guide. *Aims to provide an introduction to Espoo and build a Participation*
Welcome Postcard	Can this be automated? Welcoming emails	We saw the postcard as a good touch, however, the postcards might arrive at the wrong point. We recommend exploring the opportunities to automate sending postcards so everyone can receive those at the very beginning of their residency. *Aims to provide an introduction* to *Espoo and build Participation*
in Various Phases For example Airport, DVV, Migri, and Aalto	Physical Booklet	Creating a physical booklet about what it is like to live in Espoo and in Finland. Tell about participation, public services, and jokamiehenoikeudet! *Aims to provide an introduction to Espoo, Finnish culture, and Introduction to Participation*

Service Concept For Development Team: Design Principles

The onboarding experience of Aalto students is placed in a bigger ecosystem, that should be considered to have a long-term and meaningful social impact (Vink et al., 2021). The such ecosystem involves multiple actors outside the participation team and outside Espoo, making the frame of action very variable and more complex.

We envisioned for Espoo the role of guide for the residents' life transition, providing a deep sense of belonging and meaningful participation opportunities. In order to help Espoo realize such a vision we defined some design principles. They serve as a tool and guide for the participation and onboarding team, to establish valuable communication both with the residents and with the organizations to collaborate with.

Design Principles

1. Bite-sized information

People are constantly under the influence of a huge information flow, from different mediums. Avoid creating a sense of overwhelmedness. Consider how to catch the residents' attention, and how to provide the information briefly one step at a time, having in mind the whole journey.

This principle is a meaningful starter, especially regarding the onboarding process. The list of "things to do" before, during, and after the onboarding is long and stressful. There is an opportunity to prioritize the information and spread them during the whole onboarding process, to provide a reassuring feeling.

2. Language is an important factor

Language is a big barrier for international residents in Espoo. The first step for inclusivity is having always an English translation.

To create a sense of belonging, such a principle should be considered by every working team in Espoo, in every communication medium. The internal alignment to such principle will provide a reliable and accessible perception of Espoo. One example of how the principle can be applied is to make sure that all the texts on social media can be easily copied and pasted for translation.

3. Consider Global perspective – Consider different understandings of participation

As mentioned before, participation is a privilege. Before promoting any participatory activity it is good to make sure that all the residents are aware of *what participation means*, *how* can they participate, and *why* participation is important.

4. Invest time to understand your collaborator

Collaboration is important, but even more important is to understand how to make it possible.

This principle aims to inspire Espoo teams to reserve time and capacity for proper investigation. The practical suggestions are conducting both quantitative and qualitative research. Interviews are a powerful tool. They help have a better and more concrete understanding of the organizational structure, and provide relevant contacts for collaboration.

5. Connect with communities and build collaboration

After gaining a good comprehension of your collaborator, establish valuable communication, have a clear plan to propose and connect directly with communities.
In this particular case, the application of the principle is to connect directly with students and Aalto student associations.

6. Be there for them already in the very beginning.

Broad the focus and take into consideration what happens before the specific activity that you are planning. The principle aims to inspire the reflection that "the journey starts even before". Building upon this thought we realized that the sense of belonging and participation starts already during the onboarding. This allows to intervene and provide support immediately.

7. Internal Collaboration

Broadening the focus can make you realize that you have shared goals with other internal departments. On our project, the principle brings together a collaboration between the participation and onboarding teams.

8. Change your point of view

Going through the journey, but from the resident's perspective helps gain a different mindset and a fresh perspective.
The principle aims to inspire the decision-makers to reflect first on residents' feelings and needs. Applying the principle can mean, for example, changing the perspective to the experience of becoming a resident. In the current situation, Espoo perceives as residents, people who went through the process of address registration. For internationals, the feeling of being a resident of Espoo starts when deciding to move to Espoo. This gap becomes evident through the Welcoming postcard, that the residents receive after entire months of their stay in Finland.

Final Words & Next Steps

The project focused specifically on international Aalto students onboarding to provide concrete and tangible suggestions. However, it has been structured to scale up to other environments and target groups. The final goal of design principles, tools, and methods is to apply them also in other contexts. For example, in the case of international workers they can be used to build new collaborations with companies; and in the case of immigrant communities, the suggestions can be reproduced with specific helping associations.

Having that in mind the next steps for the realization of an onboarding experience able to provide a sense of belonging and participation opportunities will be:

1. Establish a clear workflow between the "Onboarding team" and "Participation team"

2. Plan interviews with the target groups

3. Expand the onboarding system to include other actor groups, using the outlined approach

4. Plan a feedback system to validate new touchpoints

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview guide

1. **Backgrounds**
    - How long have you been here?
    - Why are you here?

2. **Sense of belonging in the city**
    - Are you planning to stay here? Why? How long?
    - Do you feel welcome?
    - Where do you feel that the city of Espoo intersects with your life?
    - Do you use public facilities?
    - Do you feel part of the Espoo community?
    - Are there any barriers that make you hesitate to stay in Espoo?

3. **Understanding and experience of participation**
    - Did you ever have experience with the city of Espoo?
    - What does "participation" mean to you?
    - What type of participation makes you feel more comfortable/uncomfortable?
    - How do you participate in the city of Espoo? How did you participate in your previous country?
    - Would you like to participate? How frequently would you like to/could participate? How much time in max would you like to use for participation?

4. **The motivation for participation**
    - Why do you participate or not in public life? How does it make you feel?
    - Do you feel seen by the city?

5. **Wrap-up**
    - Do you have anything to add?
    - Do you have questions for us?

Appendix 2: A journey map of Aalto international students

Figure 4: A journey map of Aalto international students