Care *and* Repair through Intimacy: A Live Lab Approach *in the* Garden City

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ABSTRACT
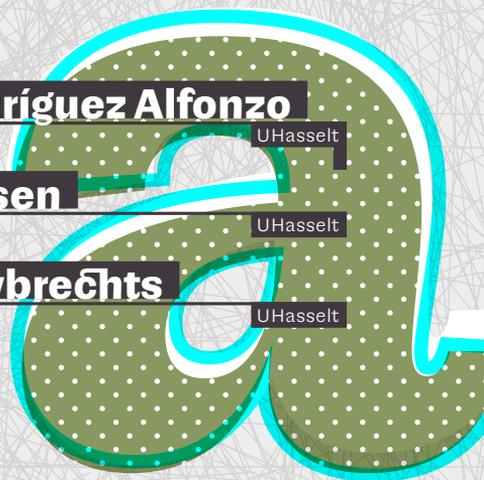
Participatory Design (PD) is increasingly interested in the repair process, motivated by the curiosity to articulate a more caring and relational attitude toward our socio-ecological environment. However, placing 'repair' centrally in PD is difficult, since the latter has been traditionally focused on 'making together' and less on repairing what was once made, or even 'unmake'. While repair is part of our continuous activities (repairing clothes, bikes, marriages, and relationships), it is often a painful and challenging endeavor. Repair entails hope but also grief. This article discusses how we used a *Live Lab* to explore more intimate design approaches, opening pathways to explore plural relations and access embodied and emotional knowledge. Finally, based on our research experience in a garden city, we reflect upon how acting within an intimacy framework contributes to PD's repair process, by bringing socio-ecological entanglements to the agenda of citizens.

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BEYOND FIXING PROBLEMS: SHIFTING FOCUS IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESSES

We need more parking spaces in our street! As Participatory Design (PD) practitioners and researchers working in sustainable neighborhood transition processes, we have repeatedly encountered the above demand. As PD researchers, we want to consider people's needs, but we must also find ways to acknowledge and collectively respond to current and future eco-social damages. This situation raises the question we will deal with in this paper: How can we go beyond a conversation about fixing problems by making, as in the case of the creation of additional parking space? How can we shift the conversation's focus in PD processes towards collectively repairing our eco-social environment?

As Participatory Design practitioners, this leaves us in the critical position of advisors, enabling relations where we can create a collective sense of responsibility and agency toward building an ecological and socially just culture. This position coincides with the significant ontological shift PD is going through, opening the field and expanding the repertoire of tools and processes to more relational research methods (Huybrechts et al., 2022) motivated by the curiosity to articulate a more caring and relational attitude toward repairing our socio-ecological environment (Jönsson, 2019). This has been theoretically grounded in Schultz's (2017) ethics of 'care for repair', Escobar's (2018) notion of 'radical interdependence', Garces and Finkel's (2019) research in 'affective knowledge', Haraway's (1988, 2016) feminist alternatives to 'objectivity', and Mol's (2008, 2021) attention to 'embodied knowledge', to name some of the most important ones.

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In this paper, we will discuss our explorations on relationality in an ongoing PD trajectory, working with and across worlds and worldviews in the context of a spatial design process in a socially and culturally diverse neighborhood. Particularly by engaging with an *intimacy orientation* to PD's relational approach "to shift from a weak to a more vital form of pluralism" (Akama & Yee, 2016, p. 3) and bring attention to cultural, emotional, and relational entanglements integral to Design—to work with and through difference. An intimacy orientation to design offers pluralism (Akama & Yee, 2016) in the methods of design practitioners and the outcomes of participation processes, opening pathways to access implicit, embodied, emotional, and sensible knowledge. Design through intimacy supports a repairing approach "to allow better visions about how contemporary material cultures are created, broken, and adjusted" (Huybrechts & Teli, 2020, p. 1). While interesting discussions have been published on an intimacy orientation in PD, as designers, we were curious about how to practice this orientation in the field.

Based on our research experience in a garden city neighborhood in Genk (Belgium) with a large area of social housing in transition, we will reflect upon how we made sense, felt, and acted within an intimacy framework through a 'care for repair' (Schultz, 2017) *Live Lab* approach. Via this reflection through action, we aim to answer the following questions: How do we build intimacy in a PD process via a Live Lab, to discover and foster embodied and relational collective knowledge around socio-ecological issues? What should we pay attention to, as spatial PD researchers, to consciously make intimacy part of participatory repair processes?

First, we will explore the notion and practice of intimacy and relationality in Participatory Design, and then specify how we explore intimacy in the architecture of communicative spaces. Second, since our research practice is 'situation-centered' (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014), we will exemplify these explorations through a Live Lab approach in the garden city context in Winterslag, Genk, where our research team has set up a PD trajectory in the past two years. We describe four moments within two Live Lab educational programs with Architecture students and discuss how intimacy was built in a relational approach to Participatory Design. Lastly, we will discuss and question our roles, methods, and difficulties in triggering a relational intimacy approach to 'care for repair', and we will foreground the personal, affective, and embodied dimensions constituting PD relationships through a Live Lab. Learning from these experiences, we aim to contribute to PD's expansion of repertoires in relational practices towards intimacy.

RELATIONALITY AND INTIMACY IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

The field of Participatory Design is constantly exploring ways to deeply engage with individuals from different societal groups (Smith et al., 2017, 2020) to ex-

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amine repairing relations between people and their environment. The field has seen the benefits of being in a permanent inquiry of its methods (Wicks & Reason, 2009), resulting in more inclusive design processes and engaging with groups perceived as challenging (Frauenberger et al., 2011; Moffatt et al., 2004). Advancements have been made in fields where creating relations through design is difficult, such as health care—for example, working with people with dementia and engaging in more intimate forms of communication (Hendriks et al., 2018). Because of this limitation of many people's inability to express themselves or make sense of the world with words, design researchers have tried to create relations in other ways, allowing themselves to be attentive and fostering affection towards their environment. PD in spatial design and planning, which has close ties with the engineering field, still has much to learn. As Dankl (2017) indicates, design researchers are mostly not trained in considering the relational dimension. PD researchers—and we argue that all designers—*need to develop a relational propensity* to learn how to cultivate other types of knowledge beyond the limits of verbal forms of communication, to allow working with differences. Understanding the heterogeneity of relations and anticipating potential tensions is fundamental in participatory spatial planning processes (Hillier, 2011). Participatory tools, such as mapping, walks, and prototyping, aim to support the relational skills of practitioners and participants 'making' and 'doing' together, to go beyond specific needs, such as more parking spots, allowing participants to address complex matters. Relationality is a fundamental yet often unacknowledged part of a collaboration (Akama et al., 2019), and it is the key to 'balancing several worlds' (Escobar, 2018) in participatory urban planning processes.

Intimacy as a Relational PD practice

As Akama and Yee state, "Intimacy starts from an interrelated view of designing that cannot be disentangled from the ecological, relational, intimate contexts in which it is performed" (2016, p. 1). Therefore, being attentive and fostering *intimacy* through the collaborative process brings us closer to more sensitive, respectful, reciprocal, and relational collaboration, where all the actors, including nature, are cared for. It brings to the surface interdependent and emotional ways of knowing that emphasize intimate ways of relating. If we refer to intimacy, we build on Mol's (2021) conception of bringing research closer to physical labor,[1] engaging in bodily sustenance activities such as eating and sleeping. Engaging in intimacy practices entails focusing on the body as a medium to gather knowledge, in close familiarity and friendship with others. Engaging with intimacy is thus directly connected with understanding the body as a communication tool.[2] Therefore, foregrounding *embodied knowledge* in urban design participation processes can bring us closer to social and ecological concerns about the fragility of such processes, making design

1 "Twentieth-century philosophical anthropology fostered the hope that the ability to think and engage in conversations might help humans rise above physical violence. But in thus celebrating rationality, philosophical anthropology downgraded physical labor and elevated humans above other creatures" (Mol, 2021, p. 20).
2 As shown in the healthcare field: the body has embodied intentionality, suggesting that even with severe cognitive decline, the body gives a sense of agency and can express awareness (Kontos & Naglie, 2007).

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practitioners more equipped to carry out processes where the engagement and the knowledge produced are not only rationally verbalized or represented.

Many researchers, such as Akama (Akama & Yee, 2016), Groys (2022), and Huybrechts (Huybrechts et al., 2022), integrate notions of intimacy into their methods. They engage with Annemarie Mol's seductive and sensitive approach to the search for knowledge through *metabolic engagement*. They all question the human's cognitive reflection about the world (Mol, 2021) and take inspiration from human metabolic engagements such as breathing, resting, and eating to find intimate ways to work with matters concerning metabolism, ecology, and environmental destruction. As designers, *repositioning intimacy* in participatory design entails paying closer attention to it, holding spaces where it becomes active, and exploring its relational capacity. In what follows, we present our Live Lab approach, via which we have explored this intimacy orientation, by *engaging in intimacy practices and stepping into intimate spaces through a relational approach to PD*.

Engaging in Intimacy Practices and Stepping into Intimate Spaces

Embodied knowledge becomes accessible when we take the time to pay attention and when we dare to be there, in the same space, bodies close and attentive, intimate. Intimacy, built that way, has found its way into the field of action research supported by Schutz's (1958, 1994) long-standing interpersonal theory that describes needs *for inclusion, control, and intimacy*, which has been integrated into the framework of group development when pursuing an inquiry venture. Wicks and Reason's (2009) work relates the success or failure of an inquiry to the venture's *communicative space*. "Opening communicative space involves creating an arena for the expression of interpersonal needs and the development of social contexts where these needs are met and frustrated" (Wicks & Reason, 2009, p. 248). Therefore, paying attention to the inquiry's physical space is important since "people cannot feel comfortable if their physical well-being is not looked after or in places that are physically uncomfortable" (Wicks & Reason, 2009, p. 250).

As Michel Pimbert points out, communicative spaces are "carefully thought-out environments of mutual support and empathy" (Wakeford & Pimbert, 2004, as cited in Wicks & Reason, 2009, p. 251). Consequently, following Pimbert, we must consider *where* and *how* to create them to devise spaces with the right conditions, where trust and safety can flourish for people to feel safe and free to express themselves (Wakeford & Pimbert, 2004, as cited in Wicks & Reason, 2009, p. 251). Trust and safety are closely related to intimacy and interdependence between actors (Groys, 2022).

Therefore, we explore Live Lab as an approach to creating communicative spaces as an intimate environment. The University of Hasselt has inte-

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grated the Live Lab into the curriculum since 2016, training students through building interventions to connect architectural practice and education with actors from society. What concerns the approach, being bodily present and building on location, is central to involving various—often invisible—minority voices (Bruyne & Gielen, 2011; Goyens & Huybrechts, 2021). Students exercise relational capabilities by actively tracing material and social ways of experiencing the world through anthropological design approaches, to reimagine alternatives for their environment with diverse groups of actors.

With the Live Lab project that we discuss in this paper, we particularly zoomed into the politics of the body, mainly resting and eating, inspired by Annemarie Mol's *Eating in Theory* (2021),[3] as politics not only engage with decisions on how to order society but demonstrate the alterity among ways of living. There are "many ways to *do* (...) eating" (Mol, 2021, p. 127) as there are also many ways to engage with nature in a neighborhood (e.g., depaving or reconnecting nature with the street). This goes beyond society—and design research's—virtues of clarity, distinctness, and fear of seduction and evocation. It enables a shift towards design worlds, such as eating, as being valued in practice and in 'labor' to negotiate practical socio-material concerns (e.g., nature, energy, and water). In the case study, we used Mol's interpretation of being, knowing, doing, and relating with others, including nature, as inspiration for design with and for the repair of our socio-ecological environment.

CASE STUDY CONTEXT: CREATING INTIMACY THROUGH A LIVE LAB IN THE GARDEN CITY

Our exploration occurs in the garden city of Winterslag II and IV, a neighborhood planned in line with the garden city model, as part of Hasselt University's Live Lab in collaboration with the city of Genk and the social housing company Nieuw Dak. The garden city of Winterslag was built between 1919 and 1950 for the employees of the coal mining company. Inspired by the international garden city model, these housing developments wanted to combine the best of town and country life in self-sustaining settlements, offering housing and amenities to all. Today, these settlements are considered historical ensembles of significant architectural and urban heritage values. Still, from a sociocultural and ecological perspective, they are fragile. They need repair to address contemporary challenges regarding housing standards, energy and climate needs, and public space requirements in building resilient communities. With this comes that the city of Genk and Nieuw Dak need to work on its transition towards a Garden City 2.0 involving the municipal administration, local NGOs, researchers, and citizens.

The garden city's transition is threefold. It entails: first, adapting the workers' houses to contemporary energy and living needs; second, revising

3 Mol discusses 'eating' as a practice that shows exemplary situations in which we, designers, can engage again with more-than-human actors, such as trees. Eating provides imaginaries with which to think, beyond the arrogance of the human, in relation to the more-than-human world. It reveals how situated people behave on our fragile Earth and depend on each other and actors such as an apple. We pick an apple from a tree, eat it, digest it, and excrete it.

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to improve the neighborhood's social cohesion by fostering and supporting its care practices; and lastly, questioning the present human-nature relationships by focusing on rewilding the over-orderly 'nature' of the garden city as a precondition for more social and ecological diversity. This transition is a complex process of repair where routines and comfort become susceptible, and fragility arises as social and environmental transformation tends to trigger polarized discussions. In the latter, we discuss participatory moments as part of a Live Lab, where we experiment with spaces and practices to express mutual intimacy.

Creating Intimacy through a Live Lab – Rewilding the Garden Village

Two educational programs were part of the Live Lab. First, a Live Project workshop was organized by the faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University in July 2022, called 'Rewilding the Garden City'. In this workshop, five international groups of master's students from four different European Architecture schools prototyped real-life interventions with and for the inhabitants of Winterslag II and IV, in a week of co-creation, focusing on rewilding as a precondition for more social and ecological diversity. They investigated how embracing human and non-human actors previously excluded from the design process of the garden city can stimulate collective identification and sustainable use of public spaces, in connection to the surrounding wood and heather landscape.

In the second educational program, three groups of six students continued the Live Lab during Autumn 2022 as part of the third Bachelor's Human Science class of the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University. The class engaged in a 'care for repair' (Schultz, 2017) approach to neighborhood spaces, exploring how design can contribute to integrating social and ecological agendas. Students were asked to map existing caring practices and then organize and design an *in situ* gathering to discuss and co-design future caring practices and spaces with residents. In what follows, we discuss two participatory moments carried out in two different sites in the garden city, analyzing both opportunities and tensions that emerged from these intense experiences, from a relational and intimate perspective.

Site 1: Repair through Intimacy in the Street

The students worked in the street (Bijenstraat) at the neighborhood's outer edge, next to the mosque and woodland. Families living in semi-detached houses have appropriated part of the public front gardens by transforming them into private parking (Figure 1). The students approached the space as problem solvers, looking for ways their expertise could help solve pain points for the neighbors. Being on location, they started conversations with residents who took them around the streets and their gardens. One topic was always discussed: *We need more parking*

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Figure 4: Parking spaces analysis. Live Project intervention to rethink the street section. Photographs: The authors.

spaces in our street! The group was in a clash between worlds, with invited experts (landscape architects) pushing for greener, sustainable, slow mobility ideas vs. the residents asking for more parking. Focusing on prototyping parking solutions, the students sparked debate about the street. Still, they did not yield results to the opposite agendas and jeopardized discussions about other possibilities for the site.

      In a second approach to the street, we asked the Human Science students to take a more intimate and relational approach inspired by Mol's search for knowledge through *metabolic engagements* (2008, 2021). The students learned about the neighbors' caring relations with chestnut trees and street cats. In addition, a group of female students engaged with the site through tasting, which consolidated an intimate relationship with a group of Muslim women baking *lahmacun* (Turkish bread) every Friday in the mosque (Figure 2). By tasting, students could access a concealed cooking practice, a form of cultural preservation. The student's intentionality in strengthening intimacy through taste allowed them access to a significant discovery: the lack of spaces for Muslim girls to gather in the neighborhood.

      The turn towards *intimacy* allowed for results beyond the parking needs and with a focus on caring spaces to repair human-nature relations, opening the public domain to pluriversal ways of living (Escobar, 2018). Ideas included outdoor eating areas inviting neighbors to try *lahmacun*, and meeting spaces for Muslim girls to cultivate intimacy and belonging, amplifying and making visible initiatives and people that otherwise would remain hidden. The students also

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Figure 2: Knowing the site through taste. *Lahmacun* making outside the mosque. Photographs: The authors.

designed nature play areas and walking paths filled with chestnut trees and native edible bushes to reinforce current care practices and, therefore, repair the connection between the forest and the neighborhood.

Site 2: Repair through Intimacy in the Backyard

During the 'Live Lab workshop', another group studied the Neighborhood Center, an introverted infrastructure with no relation to the surrounding heather landscape; therefore, the group's first approach was an observation that highlighted the many barriers (walls, fences, dense bushes) limiting the center's possibilities to engage with the neighbors and surrounding nature. During the Live Project, the center also hosted a summer camp for children (6-8 years) with whom they share the courtyard daily. The students decided to engage with the kids, playing ball, racing, being hairdressers, and drawing together ideas for the site. This activity yielded a fascinating finding: some kids draw themselves sleeping or lying on beds (Figure 3). The drawings coincide with a recurring sight: some kids took naps on the floor during recess.

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Figure 3: Drawing with the kids of Winterslag. Drawing of a boy resting in bed. Photographs: The authors.

Figure 4: Hammock in the woodlands. Live Project intervention in Winterslag's community center. Photograph: The authors.

The group worked with mapping borders and barriers, played with the kids, and intentionally united beyond the project, by holding time for personal connections. As a result, the group sought to repair the bond between neighbors and the surrounding heather woodland by creating relaxation spaces, allowing sleep, and dignifying rest in a public setting. Furthermore, the students decided to weave a hammock as a final project. This endeavor requires bodies to be present, working together and close to each other, allowing the group to reinforce their friendship and familiarity. The approach to repair through intimacy allowed students, neighbors, and living plants to weave bodily relations sustained by the act of resting and sleeping in public (Figure 4).

In a second approach to the site, Human Science students observed and traced human and non-human interactions and appropriations in the public domain, resulting in proposals to improve street sections, including parking solutions. Shifting towards an *intimacy* approach was possible when the students discovered care practices and the richness of social and ecological interactions in the houses' backyards and interior living spaces. The intentional turn towards intimacy set their path towards imagining future urban changes steaming from the cozy and intimate interiors where trust and safety were already present. As a final step, the students had dinner with neighbors (Figure 5) while discussing their 'care for repair' (Schultz, 2017) approach to linking courtyards and the woodlands by creating passages, views, and transitional gardens. The gathering was designed as a dialogue followed by a meal prepared by a group of female students. In this setting, the father and head of a traditional Muslim family became the dominant voice while his daughter, Merve, served tea. Even in an intimate space, existing power positions emerge in a participation moment shaped as a dialogue. Nevertheless, the father embraced a caring role and directed the

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Figure 5: Rethinking the neighborhood over a shared meal. Photographs: The authors.

conversation towards improvements in his daughter and his community's well-being, by supporting ideas such as a safe and intimate space for Muslim girls. With *lahmacun* came a quiet moment of eating together, changing the configuration of the meeting, allowing the students to hold an intimate and horizontal conversation with the neighborhood's social manager about gathering spaces, such as a communal kitchen or barbecue, as an opportunity to repair the neighbors' relationship with the woodlands.

CONCLUSIONS: FOREGROUNDING INTIMACY IN RELATIONAL PD PRACTICE AND ACADEMIA

Winterslag's Live Lab approach was arranged as a series of intimate moments to engage in relations with residents and their socio-ecological entanglements. As the name suggests, the Live Lab wants students to ingrain their lives on the site. Nevertheless, 'being there' and 'making' on site is not a default for foregrounding intimacy if we only engage through prototyping ideas (e.g., alternative street layout), which, in our study case, did not help going beyond polarized discussions about parking spaces. Engaging in *intimate ways* (Akama & Yee, 2016) of relating and refraining from solutionism appeared challenging for the group of international Architecture students. Engaging simultaneously in a social and design manner and integrating different voices and bodily forms of exchange in co-designs, were too many roles to take for the students who did not speak the language and were not familiar with this approach. Prototyping the street did create a communicative space; however, it established a client-architect relationship that jeopardized openness to a more interrelated view of the site.

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Repairing through intimacy was explored in three different moments. First, in the Neighborhood Center's backyard playing with the kids during recess hour; second, in an intimate living space where students organized a dinner and participatory consultation; and third, in a weekly cooking activity at the mosque. In these last three cases, different from the first one, the students joined an existing intimate dynamic, engaging in lifeworlds where attendees were already in interdependent relations. Here the intimacy approach established a shift in power relations, where the researcher is invited to be part of others' lifeworlds, not vice-versa, as the neighbors held a clear position of power as hosts in a trusted, safe, and familiar environment.

Through the Live Lab experience, we learned that relational PD needs space for intimacy to grow and time to develop deep connections with the site and all those involved: researchers, students, neighbors, institutions, chestnut trees, cats, and *lahmacun* bread. Repair through intimacy demands strategies to 'slow down', take time to rest, have dinner together, and be close to each other to bring social and ecological entanglements to the agenda of citizens. However, it is hard work to go beyond traditional participatory planning and design frameworks with tight PD and planning schedules. Still, if design endeavors want to succeed beyond problem-solving, constituting people's repairing relations with socio-environmental issues requires lifeworlds to be deeply intertwined. This position raises the question: *Why do we keep ourselves apart?* How can we cultivate intimacy as a strength and allow ourselves, PD researchers, to intimately engrain in new lifeworlds as we engage others in intimate co-creation processes to repair human-nature relationships?

Inspired by Annamarie Mol's urge to "take our cues from human metabolic engagements with the world" (2021, p. 3), we designed, built, and fostered intimacy in a Live Lab environment through bodily engagements. First, by encouraging and coming to be in practices such as cooking, eating, and resting, we allowed students and PD researchers to be more intimate and trust their bodies and senses (taste, touch, smell). Here, engagements became pleasure-centered, yielding less friction and more sensitive approaches towards others, including nature. Practices where our bodies became knowledge instruments, as we paid attention to our metabolic engagements with other beings, challenging bodies outside-inside boundaries (Mol, 2021). Second, stepping into intimate spaces and enabling design students to join lifeworlds with strong interdependent relations, access situated knowledge, and identify and reaffirm care practices (Schultz, 2017) focused on collectively repairing our eco-social environment. Both intimacy tactics prompted unexpectedly rich insights, such as the relevance of cooking and eating together and the food-human relation with design, as well as unexpectedly rich responses (Wilde, 2020) such as the enactment of futures where social and

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environmental agendas are deeply connected, where minorities become aware of their agency beyond the kitchen, and where sleeping, resting, and taking time has a place in the public domain and design discourses.

Repairing our eco-social environment entails giving space to reconnect with our surroundings through our bodies in intimate ways, amplifying other types of knowledge, as they propose more caring ways of engaging with the world and suggest inclusive, sensitive, and situated urban transformation projects and PD practices. Furthermore, finding approaches to consciously integrate intimacy helps us acknowledge interrelatedness while working across culture, geography, and conditions. As transitioning to human sustainment increasingly becomes a prescient concern (Schultz, 2017), we will continue experimenting with other intimate and bodily-centered ways of knowing, to increase the values of 'care for repair' in academia and society. **D**

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ARTICLE.4

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CARE AND REPAIR THROUGH INTIMACY: A LIVE LAB APPROACH IN THE GARDEN CITY

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