

People about Longyearbyen as a physical framework

Focus group 04
UNIS students

JUNE 2020



Background

In spring 2020 LPO Architects in collaboration with Svalbard Social Science Initiative (SSSI) initiated a project to find out how people in Longyearbyen perceive and use the town, and what needs and dreams they associate with the place.

The aim was to make different voices heard and thus contribute to knowledge about the town that can serve as a fundament for the future development of the town.

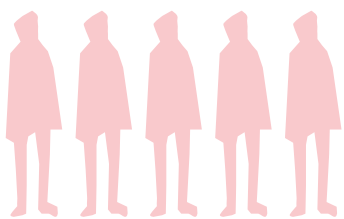
The project is part of a needs assessment of the self-initiated LPO project Right Place Right Form, funded through the Design-driven innovation program (DIP) by DOGA (Design and Architecture Norway).

We conducted **nine focus groups, which are structured group interviews**, with different groups in town, and talked with in total 39 persons. We also worked interactively with maps as part of the conversations.

The original focus in the conversations was on the urban physical environment but our conversations took us beyond that to include also social realities in town, **making apparent the interconnection between the physical and the social.**

In these folders we present the outcomes of these focus groups and hope by this to stir engagement for our town!

Participants

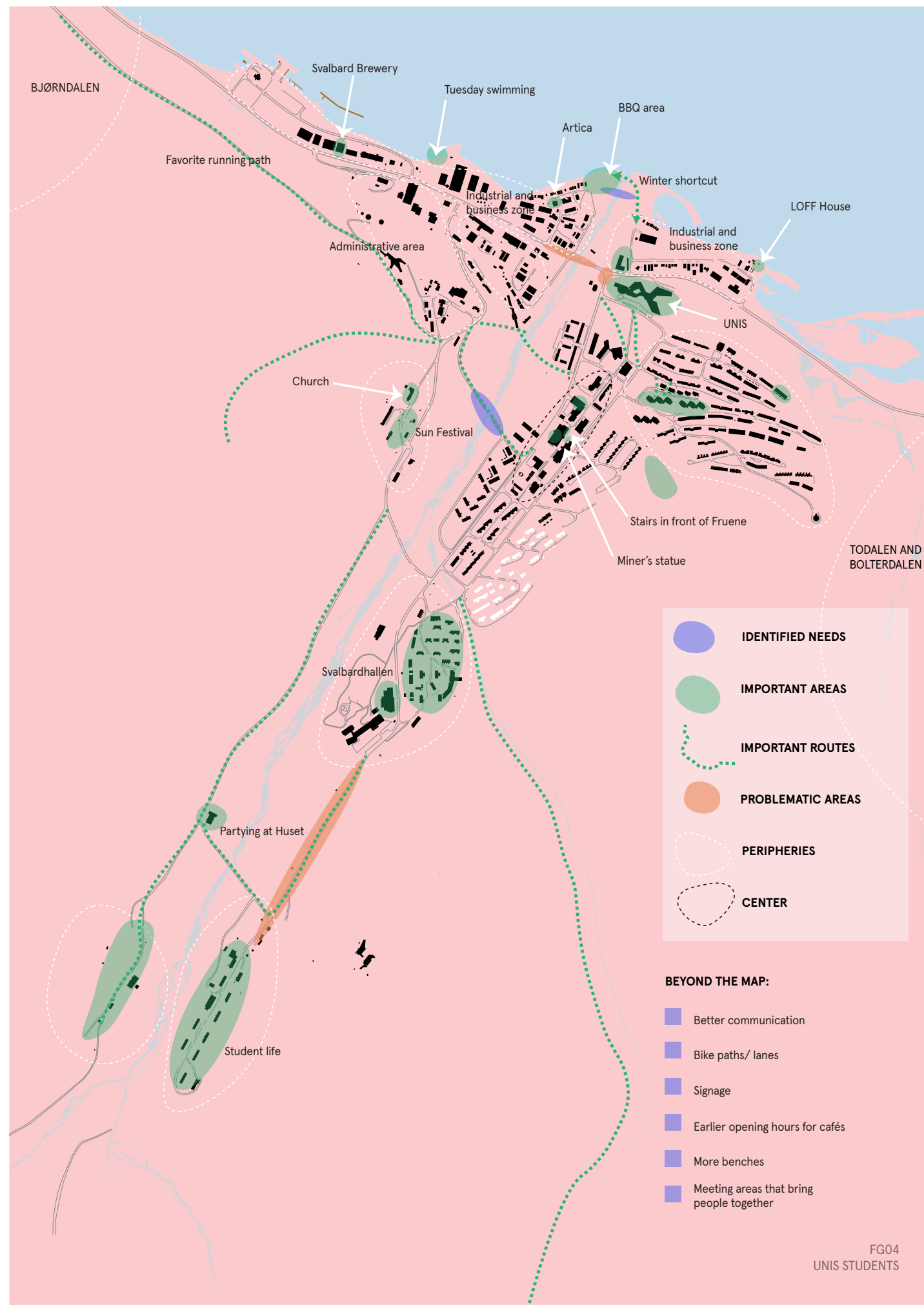


5 people: 1 Norwegian, 4 with background from other countries

Years spent in Svalbard: 6 years, 1 year, 4 1/2 years, 3 'spring seasons' (6 months/yr), 1 year

Place of stay: Nybyen (dorm), Sjøskrenten (dorm), apartment via UNIS

*People have different needs in different phases of their lives.
Our fourth group shows what needs UNIS students identify.*



Map

During the focus groups, maps of Longyearbyen were distributed and participants were asked to mark important areas, problematic areas and identified needs. The map on the left is the collective map for this group.

The UNIS students have their own hubs in the town with most of their time spent between UNIS and the student housing areas in Nybyen and Sjøskrenten. They also use the town centre and are active in the nature nearby. They would like to have public spaces/ workshops where people from different parts of the community could meet and share. Roads and infrastructure are seen as problematic.

Description of the town



Town's identity

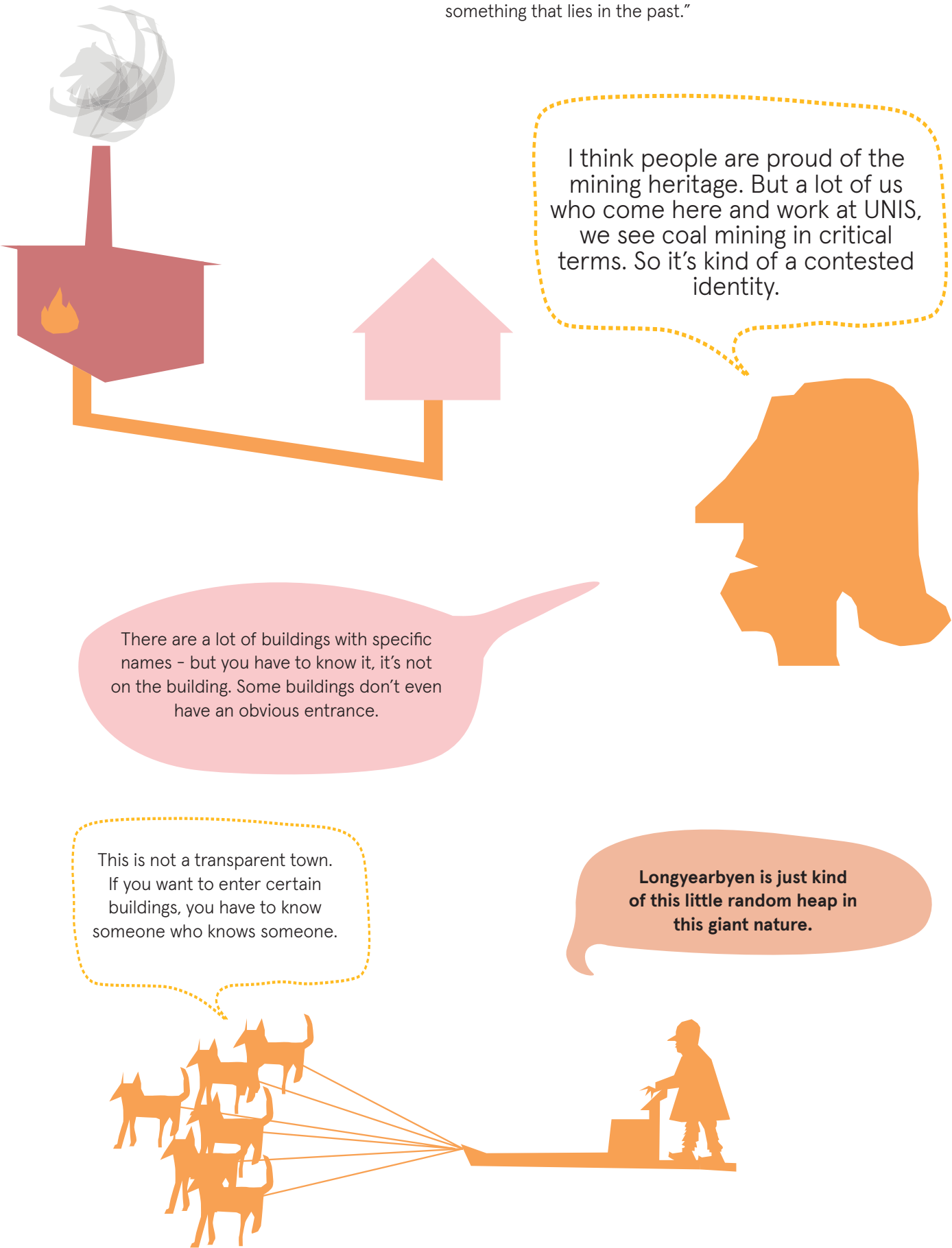
"Mining is still a living part of the identity. But it is dying out. In 10 years it will be something that lies in the past."

I think people are proud of the mining heritage. But a lot of us who come here and work at UNIS, we see coal mining in critical terms. So it's kind of a contested identity.

There are a lot of buildings with specific names - but you have to know it, it's not on the building. Some buildings don't even have an obvious entrance.

This is not a transparent town. If you want to enter certain buildings, you have to know someone who knows someone.

Longyearbyen is just kind of this little random heap in this giant nature.

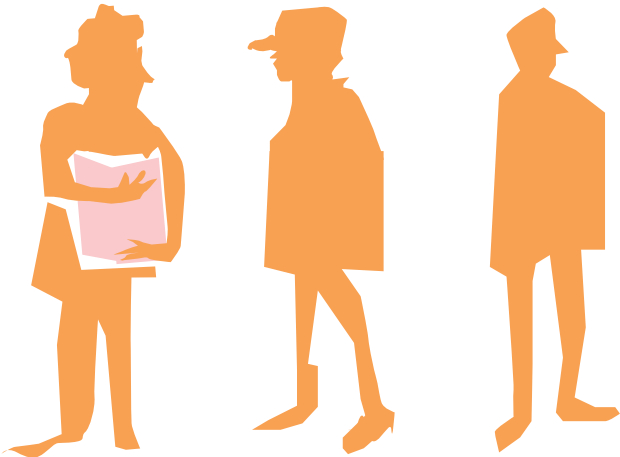


"The identity is changing decade to decade, year to year. But it's also changing within the year because there's such high seasonality."

"There are groups in town which aren't mixing that much - like I feel the university community is somewhat separate from the local community - whatever that is - which is separate from the Thai community etc. etc."

So we have these common values (appreciation of nature) but the communities are kind of separated, as well."

"At any given time of the year, there can be a completely different demographic of people who are living here and using the town."



Even though you have people from different sectors and different nationalities, I think everyone enjoys some aspect of nature activities!



Use of town, centre vs. periphery

What people use/do

One of the biggest restrictions is when and where I can get out of town.

Butikken is a very important place. If you feel lonely you can always go to the shop and meet someone you know.

When I first moved up here, I thought I was only staying for a year, so then you're like 'I need to go on all hikes' and all the students do this. Once you decide or realize that you are not temporary, then it becomes the seasonality thing. Like, 'it's scooter season!' and then there's this intensity to get all the scooter trips. And then, 'it's boat season!' and we need to get on the boats!

The beach. That's a place where it doesn't matter what demographic you are in Longyearbyen, you are making use of that.

I use the city centre quite a lot. Like the library, the bars, the cafe, the shop, everything. And then, maybe it's the sporthallen, then very occasionally, Huset. But that's it. Sometimes the church.

It's sad that the bridge (to Skjeringa) is gone.

Use of town, centre vs. periphery

Centre and peripheries

"For me the city centre is starting at Radisson and the pedestrian street up to Kroa."

"I don't really see it as periphery but as zones. This middle part is sort of for visitors and tourists. Everyone really. And then you've got this industrial part, or business zone. And then research and education. Administration and other zones."

"I feel that SysseImann is very far away from the town centre. They are sitting up there on Skjeringa and it's literally, physically, like apart from the city centre, looking down on it."

"UNIS really is pretty disconnected (physically)."

"Lokalstyre, in Naeringsbygg, is in the city centre. You walk past it every day. You see people coming in and out. But SysseIman, you have to go up there. If they were where the post office is, it would have a completely different feel - like you'd see them coming in and out. They would be there. They would be accessible."

Use of town, centre vs. periphery

Public places

- The stairs at Fruene (more summer)
- Library (maybe more important in winter)
- Around the miner statue in the town square
- Kulturhuset
- Artica
- Sjøområdet (more spring/summer)
- LOFF House
- Lompensentret (more winter)



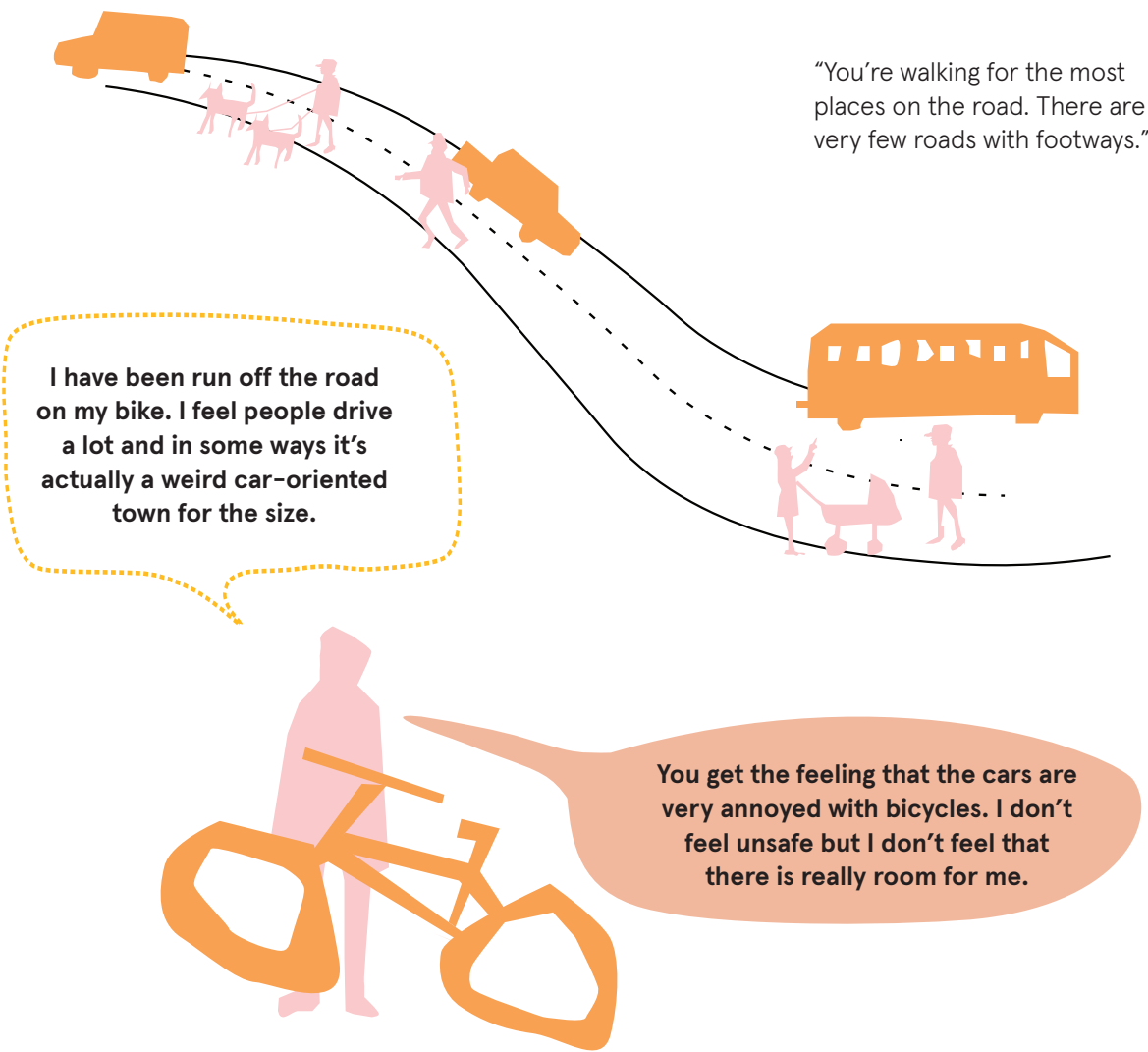
Transportation means

- Bike
- Walk
- Occasionally snowmobile
- Sometimes car (but most not)
- Run and ski for sport/free time use



Problematic places and roads

- The intersection near UNIS/road to airport
- Way between Sjøskrenten and UNIS
- Road to Nybyen
- Lack of bridge across river bed
- Better communication



"Sometimes I don't take my bike if I'm with people who don't have bikes. Or if it's really icy. Because maybe about halfway up there is enough traffic to keep it clear but once you get to Nybyen it's really slippery."

Futuring Longyearbyen

- More tourism
- Academic aspect will remain
- Housing crisis not so bad now (because of Corona) but problem will return
- Alternate energy sources

If I could have one wish, I hope that - given that everything is so temporary - I hope that this town will move into more kind of sharing. (...) I know students share snowmobiles but I think we could share lot more, make it a bit more about communal. Have more communal spaces - for example workshops where you fix things, where you store things.

The nature around us is changing rapidly and it's getting warmer (...) we already see avalanche protections and we are already demolishing a lot of houses. I think we see more river water flowing in, more melt, so the river is going to change. So how we build and where we build is going to change in the future.



This year I saw a lot more posts about organising where people are supposed to put their scooters and stuff. There is also interest in trying to be more organised with the random objects sitting around on the tundra. So I both think it is heading in the right direction and I want it to keep heading in the right direction.

After Covid, how will the businesses recover? And if they don't recover there will be a lot of changes. Like all the services with all the bars, all of this is indirectly kept alive by the tourism. So would it just go back to like KB and Fruene?



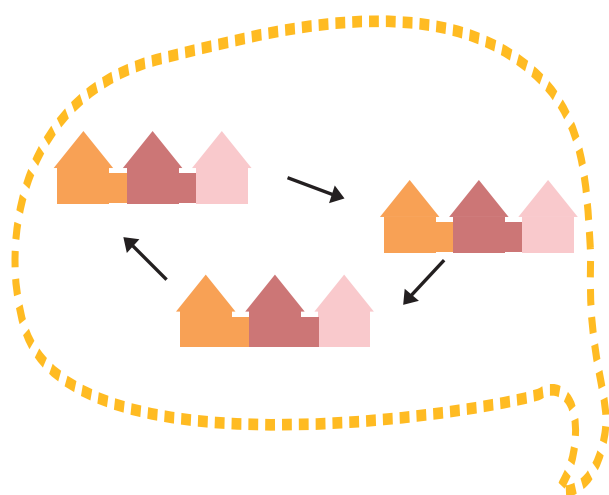
I think tourism is going to continue and with that, the big inequality in living conditions.

The State rules overall so if the local citizens say we want this or that and the State says we don't, then it won't happen. And I think this won't change in the future.

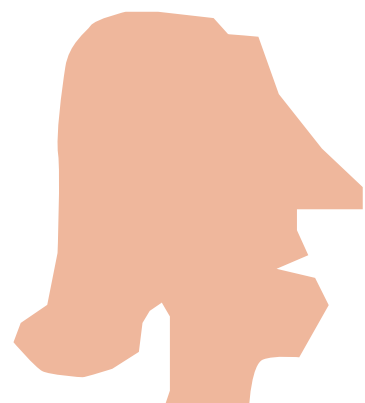


I think it's naturally going in these two directions that are not in agreement. Going towards more tourism will mean a higher proportion of internationals. And the government, they want the money from the tourism but they don't want more internationals - so how is that going to work?

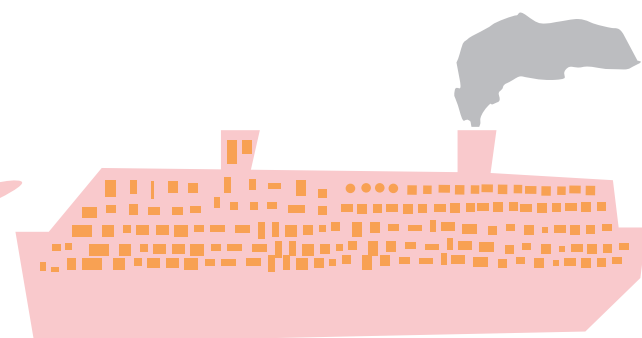




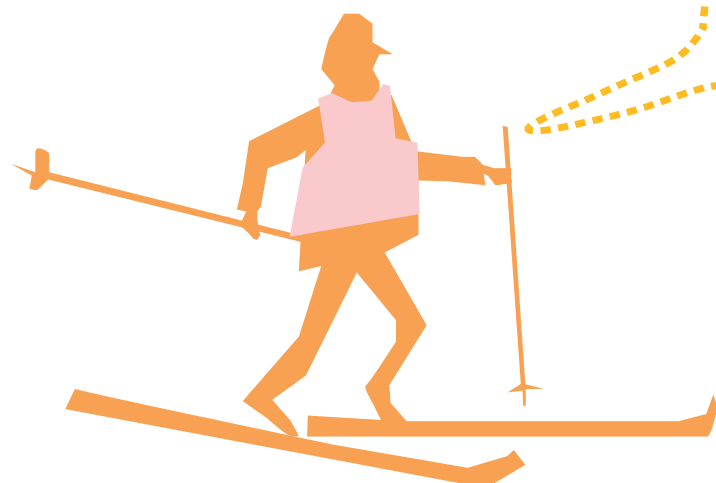
I don't think the town will grow. Rather, it will be re-structured and reorganised.



I don't think there is enough thought in how the port is being developed. It's being expanded for tourism but whose decision is that? Why is it being expanded when the level of the tourism compared to the size of the town is crazy?



Adventdalen is a place people use a lot. It's the closest nature space and I'm a bit worried Sysseman will be like 'you can only drive in the scooter track' you can't go anywhere else. I think that might happen. I wouldn't like that.



Things that should be developed

- Sidewalks
- Clear paths for bikes
- Outdoor seating
- Public art studio/craft centre
- The bridge should be rebuilt
- A pier
- Street signs (signage in general)
- Earlier opening hours for cafés
- Public BBQ area

Think how nice it would be to have a big green house and you could apply for a small space there!

They put aside so much space for an un-organised parking lot but they can't put up even a small space for outdoor seating.



I think the lack of this space (bedehuset/craft centre type place) contributes to keeping different groups in town separate. We can all access UNIS, and there are a lot of activities there, like the dancing club, but it's basically only accessible to people with access to UNIS. We meet there and do things. Maybe other groups meet somewhere else.

In general, a lot of people live in small apartments (...) so a public craft space would be great. It could be pretty simple. Just some big tables and some lighting. And a pottery wheel.

Why is there no brygge? It's the natural meeting place in every Norwegian small town by the sea. It wouldn't even have to have a cafe. Just this structure with some benches...

It would be really cool to have an outdoor pizza oven and since they usually have tiles, each of the kids from school could make their own tile.



Consistent themes in the discussion

Public places that unifies, leisure activities and infrastructure

The students expressed an overall feeling of wanting more integration in the community. They were aware of the multiple layers within the town and were concerned about the unequal conditions between certain groups. They saw Longyearbyen as a village with city amenities, shaped by the nature that surrounds it. They felt the high number of bars and restaurants on offer was due in part to the high level of tourists. The town was seen as ad hoc and car-oriented: the students were surprised and disappointed that the town wasn't more sustainably oriented. Longyearbyen was perceived as hard to navigate at first, and they felt some places were only available to 'insiders' (lack of signage, places hard to find, little or no public information - especially in English).

Their place as UNIS students was seen as being different than being 'local' even though they were aware of UNIS's position as one of the 3 pillars of town (along with mining and tourism). The students perceived the temporariness of most of the inhabitants as a factor in the intensity of offerings/events and were themselves active in many of the things the town has to offer (sports, cultural events, bars and restaurants etc.). They experienced living in Longyearbyen as rhythmmed by the seasons, not just because of the nature but also because of how the seasonality of tourism and those who work in it impact the town's demography. Trips and activities out in nature were an important part of their lives, as were social interactions in town. Their concerns were pragmatic: they want better sidewalks and bike paths, a place where people can meet, share in activities and hobbies. Overall, they want a town that is more inclusive and sustainable.



Thanks to all participants

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