

Design for Liveability: Connecting Local Stakeholders as Co-creative Partnerships

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Abstract

The Dutch welfare state model has become too expensive. As a result local governments are looking for new approaches that stimulate a participation society. Research showed that for enhancing community participation in order to improve the liveability of a neighbourhood, bonding-, bridging-, and linking social capital are important. The current paper presents the service design process of enhancing citizen participation by strengthening social ties among local stakeholders. An iterative research through design approach has been applied in the actual context of local stakeholders that aim to improve the liveability of their neighbourhood. The paper elaborates upon the design process used as well as the corresponding final design. It can be concluded that the co-creative sessions add new dimensions to citizen participation. The online platform encouraged citizens' initiative and improved all three kinds of social capital. Moreover, the quality of the citizens' proposals was beyond expectation and struck the heart of the restructuring program in Rotterdam.

KEYWORDS: citizen participation, connecting stakeholders, creative facilitation, liveability, social capital, research through design

Introduction

The ageing population in combination with the recent economic crisis has put pressure on the Dutch welfare state model. As a response, the national government proposed a so-called participation society in which citizens have to take social initiative as well as more responsibility regarding their direct surroundings in accordance to their knowledge, experience, and capacity (Elsevier, 2013). Such a society of participation calls for “reshaping society in the direction of a more participative arena where people are empowered and learning is central, which make policies more effective” (Bureau of European Policy Advisors, 2010). As a result, it will also impact the role of the civil service and the relationship between citizens and the municipality. Citizens can no longer passively consume services that the municipality previously took care of. Equally so, civil servants are expected

to leave their offices and learn about the true ambitions and needs of their citizens. Differently said, “not only are new strategies, ideas, and ways of organisation needed to cope with societal challenges, but also co-creative partnerships demonstrating a sustainable relationship to make a transforming society happen” (Mulder, 2014: p. 573).

Within the Netherlands, the city of Rotterdam has been experimenting with this new type of participatory governance for the past years. Rotterdam has the largest European harbour and is the second biggest city of the Netherlands. The city is known for its continuous drive for renewal and innovation, as well as its no-nonsense mentality. From the Second World War onwards, impressive collaborations have taken place to give the city new identities. Unfortunately, the individualisation and the 24/7 online connectivity reduced the post-war solidarity and at the same time, the communal spirit of the seventies became less dominant. However, recent initiatives demonstrate that Rotterdam is still a fertile ground for the development of new collaborative networks that aim to improve the city through social initiatives (Uitermark, 2014). Rotterdam’s borough Delfshaven is an active area in creating social initiatives. Therefore, the current work selected Delfshaven, and the Burgemeester Meineszplein in particular, as a real life testbed for designing services that support a society of participation. The Burgemeester Meineszplein is both a square and a thoroughfare connecting four smaller neighborhoods, as Figure 1 shows.



Figure 1: Overview of the Burgemeester Meineszplein and the four neighbourhoods that convene on the square.

At the start of the new millennium the square was in decay; not only were youngsters causing nuisance, also drug dealing and public littering made it an unpleasant place to stay, work, or live. In 2008, citizens raised this urgency at the then still existent local municipality of Delfshaven. A continuous lobby resulted in the installation of cameras and mosquitos, as well as the departure of criminally active entrepreneurs. After immediate issues were taken up the new formed citizen initiative collaborated with the (local) municipality, housing corporations, and entrepreneurs to further improve the liveability on the square; more greenery, less empty housing, quality real estate, and an attractive entrepreneurial climate.

Unfortunately, these plans were only partly realised; the municipal attention shifted elsewhere and the housing corporations returned to their core activity of providing and maintaining living and working space (Van der Zwaal, 2014). Also the activities within the initiative lost momentum, culminating in one good willing inhabitant, who had to look after all the green on the roundabout. Consequently, the square fell into decay and new initiatives were crucial. As a welcome response the initiative called “Laatiepleinzijn” emerged as a joint effort of three active citizens: a civil servant, a social innovator, and a social entrepreneur (Jongmans, Prinsen, & Ramos, 2014). As the current initiative stimulates other initiatives that support a close collaboration between local stakeholders such as inhabitants, entrepreneurs, civil servants, and other professionals, Laatiepleinzijn can be seen as a striking example of a participation society. Based on a shared interest in the square and community building ambitions, the initiators of Laatiepleinzijn prepared several proposals to make the square more lovable and liveable. To realize these plans they followed a bottom up approach of involving citizens, local stakeholders, and professionals (from the local government). Despite the good intentions of being a co-creative partnership (Mulder, 2014), Laatiepleinzijn is currently struggling with its continuity in a self-sustaining way and its contribution to a sustainable participation society.

A more detailed look at ongoing initiatives in the neighbourhood shows that participating locals tend to focus on events in their own street. Small groups of participants that know each other typically take the lead and execute these initiatives. Unfortunately, the attendees of input evenings were not representative for their neighbourhoods. These participative citizens were assertive, yet did not act on behalf a larger community. In other words, the citizen participation did not contribute to a larger participation of the community. Although active citizens are crucial for establishing a co-creative partnership, such a partnership needs to be representative for the respective neighbourhood in order to become successful. Too often, these groups are rarely aware of other initiatives nearby (Hepworth, 2015). Different initiatives, however, seem to struggle with similar challenges. Learning among initiatives will likely improve their success rate. Current initiatives launched oftentimes focus on immediate issues such as littering or vandalism. Whereas these initiatives do solve temporary issues, they hardly contribute to an improved situation in the long run (Hepworth, 2015).

In keeping with Sander and Lowney (2005), who showed that communities with a high degree of social capital are more successful in solving collective problems, our conceptual framework elaborates upon social capital (see next section). With social capital we refer to “the features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam, 1996).

Conceptual framework

Putnam (2000) specifies three types of social capital: *bonding*-, *bridging*-, and *linking* social capital. *Bonding social capital* exists between close friends and family members. The case of Laatiepleinzijn showed that bonding social capital is strong, since most initiatives occur within groups that know each other well. *Bridging social capital* refers to less strong social ties, for instance between neighbours or colleagues. These social ties can cut across social differences such as race, class, and ethnicity (Sander & Lowney, 2005). The case of Laatiepleinzijn showed that the bridging social capital was not very strong, as the initiatives do not always take into account solutions that other people in the neighbourhood prefer. Therefore these groups are not representative for the neighbourhood.

Lastly, *linking social capital* addresses the weak ties that go beyond one's present network. In order to become a successful society of participation, it is important to become conscious of which type of social capital is most necessary (Sander & Lowney, 2005). When initiatives attempt to improve local liveability, new social ties need to be bridged; those between neighbours, local entrepreneurs, and professionals are most valuable. Once ideas involve multiple neighbourhoods and organisational layers within the local government, linking capital is needed. This is in accordance with Granovetter (1973), who emphasizes that weak ties are "indispensable to individuals' opportunities and to their integration into communities". In such situations, citizens will have to find ways to reach outside their direct network and get in touch with municipal departments, local investors, or national charities. Current observations showed that still too often the initiators are not aware of other initiatives. This implicates that the necessary linking social capital is not very strong.

It can be concluded that initiative building could improve local liveability; however, current initiative building only served the bonding and some bridging social capital. This process can be improved by increasing the 'bridging of social capital' and to introduce linking social capital as well. The current work, therefore, explores how to facilitate the initiative building process while strengthening the social ties among local stakeholders. Using a research through design approach we aim to create social ties on the levels of bridging and linking, without losing bonding social capital. In the remainder, we explain the research through design approach. Next, the resulting service will be explained layer by layer. Then experiences of various stakeholders with the design are discussed, concluded by lessons learned and recommendations for future participative projects.

Research through design

To connect local stakeholders in order to improve the liveability of the Burgemeester Meineszplein through the three types of social capital, a research through design approach has been used (Koskinen, Zimmerman, Binder, Redstrom, & Wensveen, 2011). We took this constructive design research approach, since improving liveability is an ill-defined problem. A research through design approach allows for the discovery of the main problems regarding the construction of the three types of social capital while designing (Koskinen et al., 2011, p. 2). The necessity of concrete problem framing and the presence of a "specific, preferred state in a context of use" require such a grounded approach (Zimmerman & Forlizzi, 2008).

In the present service design process the following research question was guiding: How can social ties between stakeholders be strengthened through service design? The accompanying interaction vision, which formed the backbone for the service development, was phrased as follows: "Feeling supported yet free and being tempted to participate." More specifically, our chosen research through design approach consists out of three iterative phases: ideate, iterate, and demonstrate (Boess & Mulder, 2012). Within these phases a variety of design and research explorations (D&REs) were performed; a continuous series of activities where research and design go hand in hand. Each D&RE started with a (detailed) research question or assumption and resulted in the creation of research tools and/or prototypes to assess the design. The insights from the one D&RE were used as the starting point for the next.

Figure 2 shows how these D&REs connect two parallel processes; the design of a broadly applicable service (service design process, on top) and the exploration of this service by the facilitation of a series of co-creative sessions on the square (initiative building process,

bottom row). In a synergy, elements of the service were evaluated during the sessions and in return, insights of the sessions were included in the design.

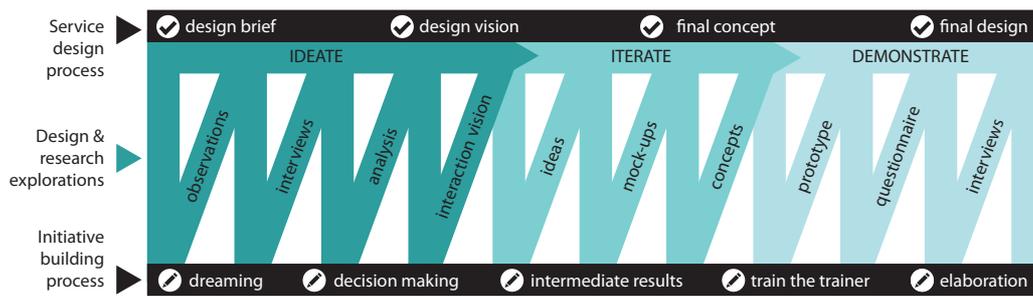


Figure 2: Visualisation of the approach.

Key to the concept of co-creative partnerships is the equal relationship among partners (Mulder, 2014). We, therefore, emphasise equal partnerships, and aim to enable them to turn the public domain into a participatory domain. A variety of co-creative techniques has been used to stimulate the equal participation and allowed for actually designing with local stakeholders, which eventually led to a strengthening of the social ties between citizens and other stakeholders of the Burgemeester Meineszplein. Consequently, the co-creative sessions were central in this approach. By reframing creative techniques in the context of local participation we introduced a new way of initiative building. In total five sessions took place, being “Dreaming”, “Decision making”, “Intermediate results”, “Train-the-trainer” and “Elaboration” (see bottom row in Figure 2).

The proposed workshops lasted for roughly three hours and were based on the methodologies of integrated Creative Problem Solving (Tassoul, 2009). The general set up of a creative session was as following: (1) start with an icebreaker to familiarize the participants with each other and the problem and to get them at ease, (2) generate ideas for a particular problem (= diverging), (3) cluster similar ideas, and (4) pick the best ideas to continue with (= converging). The first author has created specific templates to support the participants during the exercises. In between, he applied energizers to keep the energy flowing. The first author made use of the existing Burgemeester Meineszplein network and announced the workshops via various mediums, such as Facebook, email and occasional flyers. With attractive visuals and frequent reminders inhabitants were stimulated to participate.

Final design

The design created to facilitate the strengthening of the three forms of social capital between citizens and other stakeholders, consists of three parts:

- » An initiative building toolkit consisting out of steps, exercises, roles and templates
- » An online platform allowing the stakeholders to share their ideas
- » *A system of* stakeholder profiles, moments of interaction between the stakeholders and touchpoints with the proposed toolkit and platform

In the following sections, these parts are introduced one by one.

Initiative building toolkit

The research findings of the creative sessions informed the design of a toolkit that facilitates social participation. More specifically, the toolkit guides citizens through a process of initiative building. By going through this process together, citizens strengthen their social capital by bridging and linking social ties that consequently contribute towards more sustainable developments and more participation. Each step of the developed process consists out of a series of designerly exercises that serve as input for *creative neighbourhood meetings* (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Impression of a creative neighbourhood meeting.

Depending on the purpose of the meeting diverging, clustering, or converging exercises can be performed. Each exercise is explained in detail and suggests how, why, when, and with whom it is done best. The use of the developed templates makes the exercises easier to perform. Citizens can use this toolkit for the development of several types of initiatives, as we discovered throughout the project. Although every initiative is unique and objectives can range from a local barbeque to the redevelopment of public space, the process towards realisation appeared to be quite similar. By communicating the process up front, the chances of dropping out are reduced. The steps of the process are:

- » *Sharing*; starting the initiative. Communicating the initiative and its objectives. Promoting the upcoming workshop(s).
- » *Dreaming*; learning about possibilities in citizen participation. Coming up with a vision for the neighbourhood.
- » *Thinking*; elaborating the vision into ideas.
- » *Choosing*; selecting the most promising idea.
- » *Elaborating*; materialising the selected idea and translating it into a funding proposal.
- » *Doing*; realising the idea, optionally with the support of commercial professionals or municipal departments.
- » *What's next*; communicating the results and expenses, thinking of continuation, or discuss the closing of an initiative.

Whilst facilitating the creative neighbourhood meetings, it became clear that in order to make initiatives successful, it is important to create a (clear) role division among participants. Based upon the roles that people took during the sessions, we developed nine roles that are necessary during initiative building, which are initiator, facilitator, buddy, expert, insider, note-taker, promoter, host, and treasurer (see Figure 4).

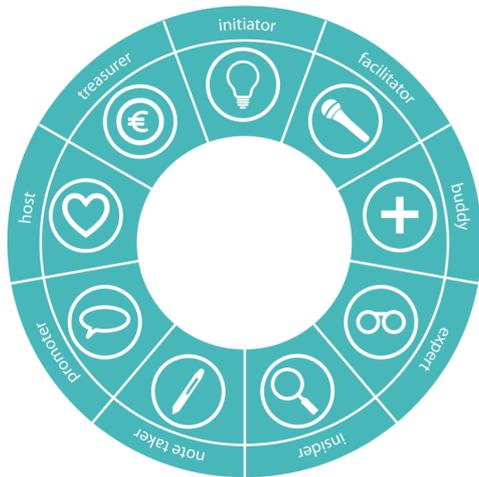


Figure 4: Roles division wheel for initiative building.

The role division wheel shows the different tasks inhabitants could take. By asking participants to assign oneself to a role, existing social capital within an initiative becomes tangible and explicit. Therefore it is transferrable to other initiatives, which increases bridging- and linking social capital. Not all roles are required within every initiative and/or step, yet the fulfilment of the roles contributes to the continuity and resilience of the initiative. It is possible to share a role (e.g., the one of treasurer) and participants also can take up more than one (e.g., being both a host and a promoter) at the same time. However, to prevent conflicts between process and content, the roles of initiator and facilitator should not be combined. The role division wheel is also part of the initiative building toolkit, and aims to facilitate all roles in order to sustain the effect of the initial facilitating role of the service designer.

Online platform

The initiative building toolkit is accessible by means of an online platform, where the steps together with accompanying exercises and roles are available, including downloadable templates. Initiatives are able to share and announce a project and show their progress by creating a profile page (Figure 5). This page contains the steps and the exercises performed, as well as overview of the members of the initiative, providing insight in the available bridging social capital. In order to secure personal information, citizens can only view data once they are logged in. Sharing information among initiatives serves multiple purposes; (1) initiatives can learn from each other's approach (= improving linking social capital), (2) the network of the initiative becomes visible and accessible to citizens (= improving bridging and linking social capital) (3) supporting stakeholders can use the profile pages to keep track of local participation (= improving bridging and linking social capital) and (4) stakeholders can use the information to assess and validate financial requests (= improving linking social capital), (5) civil servants of the Rotterdam municipality can provide online support and upload municipal templates and forms, which results in more feasible proposals (= improving linking social capital).



Figure 6: Stakeholders grid.

Both the municipality as the commercial professionals operate on a citywide scale. Empathic experts support the leading locals with information regarding municipal rules and regulations, as well as other specialised knowledge that might be necessary to realise an initiative. They can also support an initiative with tools and skills to execute their idea, for example a gardener can assist in the realisation of a shared garden. The fourth group that we distinguished are *involved investors*. This group consists of charities, foundations and institutions that are willing to support the initiative financially. These are assigned with the assessment, grant, and evaluation of the initiative and often operate city- or nationwide. Involved investors support the leading locals with the financial means to realise their ambitions and/or make them sustainable.

At certain moments in the initiative building process the different stakeholder groups gather; these are the touchpoints. Even though the activities on the platform happen online, physical interactions are central in the realisation of initiative building. One stakeholder group is not able to realize all objectives on its own. Most touchpoints happen between the leading locals and the keen connectors, who support the citizens with the right means, e.g., materials, a location, or their network. In this way they function as a bridge between the leading locals, the empathic experts and involved investors. The contribution of their network makes necessary linking capital accessible. Intermediate touchpoints on which decisions have to be made might involve the attendance of empathic experts, who advise and assess the feasibility of the initiative. If necessary, they might also support the initiative in the realisation of their goals. Sporadically the involved investors will join to assess, award, and validate proposals. Their involvement is mainly at the end of the initiative building process.

Discussion and Conclusions

We have presented the service design process of a service that aims to enhance citizen participation into community participation by strengthening social ties among local stakeholders in the area of Delfshaven in Rotterdam by allowing them to design for liveability. Perceived unawareness of on-going initiatives as well as the communicative gap between citizens and the municipality gave insights in how the process of initiative building can be improved. The resulting design includes an initiative building toolkit, an online platform, roles, and touchpoints for the identified stakeholder groups. It can be concluded that reframing creative exercises in the context of civil participation adds a new dimension to conventional initiative building and liveability. The facilitated creative neighbourhood meetings proved to be an innovative way of connecting stakeholders.

An evaluative online questionnaire with participants of the sessions revealed that the participants were positively surprised by the creativity, energy, and enthusiasm that they generated. Different activities such as diverging, converging, and clustering kept the energy flowing, in addition to the alternating group(s) (sizes). Once participating in creative neighbourhood meetings, differences in social status seemed to fade away, which again paved the way for new social ties. Bridging social capital emerges as participants discover similarities and shared interests. Local community centres and entrepreneurs also benefit from the creative neighbourhood meetings, as they become known amongst participants. Linking social capital is brought in as different stakeholder groups join and participants start to share their personal and/or professional network. The keen connector plays a key role in the establishment of these linking social ties.

Although each participant already had an intrinsic motivation to join (e.g., the realisation of a playground, social inclusion, more greenery) the creative design exercises made it possible to integrate the different interests into one coherent plan fitting the local interests. Inhabitants, professionals, civil servants, and investors all have an equal say and are guided towards this shared plan. This finding shows that the approach is in line with participatory design principles that democratize decision-making processes through design. Design allows focusing more on the content instead of political agendas (Lindtner, Greenspan, & Li, 2007). Collaboratively creating an initiative also resulted in a sense of ownership, as all participants had a share in the outcome. As participants repeatedly collaborated towards a set goal, both bonding and bridging social ties were strengthened.

The designed service also allows the creation of new social capital across projects. Evaluative interviews with chairmen of other initiatives learnt that the exchange of initiative building experiences can aid novice initiators and prevents reinventing the wheel. Next to this, examples of successful initiatives can stimulate inhabitants to start their own. By sharing an initiative page on the platform (as shown in Figure 5) bridging social ties become visible and therefore stronger.

Furthermore, a demonstration of the online platform amongst area networkers and managers sparked the enthusiasm of the tech savvy co-workers. They strongly believe that the platform could be a useful online extension to observe participation and to assess and validate funding proposals. However, they found the expected attendance of them during creative neighbourhood meetings early in the process too time consuming and not feasible. On top of this, they said that early engagement could be in conflict with the assessment of the proposal in the end. Even though, their accompaniment on the Burgemeester Meineszplein resulted in new linking capital between citizens, professionals and investors.

Looking back at the creative neighbourhood meetings, participants explained that social capital within the area indeed had increased. Participating locals got to know their neighbours better (resulting in stronger bonding social capital) and met new neighbours (creating more bridging social capital). The involvement of professionals and investors, brought in by the network of civil servants, provided new linking social capital on the Burgemeester Meineszplein. These weak ties allow individuals to become part of a larger community (Granovetter, 1973).

Importantly, the Burgemeester Meineszplein has been put on the political agenda. After presenting the proposals to the municipal departments and corresponding public services, it became clear that the proposals addressed the heart of restructuring plans of Rotterdam. As a result, some ambitions collided with municipal plans and could therefore not be realised by inhabitants in short notice. These are to be implemented by the municipality in the coming years. Other ideas were possible; yet needed more deepening and budget to be allocated.

Due to the structural improvements proposed by the inhabitants, the realisation of their ideas takes time. The absence of visible short term results and the lacking sense of urgency might have demotivated participants, resulting in less activity within the initiative. It is therefore important for initiative building processes to keep the momentum going. The facilitator could be this important catalyst in the process. S/he treated all stakeholders as experts of their own experiences. The participatory design approach of the facilitator also made personal differences to disappear. It shows that stimulating, independent, and continuous facilitation is essential in the creation of social capital. Equipped with skills in creative problem solving, visualisation and with an empathic capacity, the facilitator is fit to guide an initiative over a longer period of time. S/he will be capable of creating the overview and foreseeing the impact of a particular idea or project. This facilitator can focus on content apart from any political agendas, which will democratize ideation and also the realisation of ideas.. The independence of the facilitator allows him or her to function as a bridge between citizen and government, as well as facilitating the interplay between top-down and bottom-up. S/he needs to take care that the proposed service is continued to use. Bonding-, bridging- and linking social capital through the service only works when new content is provided to the platform. Otherwise social capital is likely to decrease again, especially the bonding and bridging ties.

The social experiment on the Burgemeester Meineszplein shows how various urban stakeholders can be connected in order to improve local liveability. Yet this first attempt needs to be further evaluated and detailed. The designed service has the potential to be implemented in other cities, yet it is essential that stakeholders are involved from the start and are able to determine their own objectives, roles, and steps.

Within the initiative building process, the steps towards the realisation of a liveability-related goal are as valuable as, if not more valuable than the eventual result. Recurrent creative neighbourhood meetings strengthen social capital, irrespective their outcome. The proposed service can serve as a guide for a new dialogue in the participatory domain, in which citizens and government will meet in the middle. Initiatives will have to structure their activities enabling civil servants and commercial professionals to join. Vice versa, the municipality will need to meet the citizen in the streets. Civil servants will need to empathise with these “leading locals”, which requires a significant shift in mentality and activities. By becoming involved earlier in the process, even before concrete results are visible, the municipality shows its trust in the ambitions of its citizens.

Current initiators are already exploring the new relationship between citizens and the retracting government. Within such societal experiments, the designed service supports these new roles and provides an integral approach to enhance initiative building and therefore strengthen social capital as well as improve liveability.

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