NEXTDOOR QUARTIER: TEACHING YOUNG DESIGNERS SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

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ABSTRACT
The NextDoor Quartier project gave the opportunity to students of communication design and product design to experience the societal relevance of their work. They had to dive into the implications of trying to deal with cultural differences knowing that their decisions will have an impact and can't be pulled back. Results from the two groups of 8 students (4 industrial design, 4 communication design), showed the importance of learning by doing as the main driving force for social understanding. By confronting young designers with their own beliefs as a person, they were able to improve their social conscience at the same time that they design for a specific social group. Involving the community in Brussels North proved to be key to develop this project. The active participation of the inhabitants worked as a catalyst to create synergies between content, context and locality that define a specific intercultural context. The results of the project were delivered by means of installations or experiential prototypes. They publicly were displayed in the city of Brussels (Brabantwijk).

Keywords: Social design, cultural differences, societal relevance

1   INTRODUCTION
Social design is not neutral or objective. Social design needs to be needed. Social design is a process that contributes to improve human well-being and the livelihood of a neighbourhood, touching with real problems and concerns that the city struggles with. Social design gets off the designers table and moves into the world. It forces to go beyond beautiful design or nicely found techniques. Social design is a way to interrupt daily experiences and confront the citizens with others. The challenge of creating installations [1] that help questioning people's fears or prejudices, raising new interests, and, by doing this, create new ways of interfering with the neighbourhood [2].
Social designers, like social workers, are actors in the neighbourhood [3]. They are part of its interactions, its functions and processes. Social designers actively participate, discover and reflect on the neighbourhood. They confront themselves and analyze their place in the neighbourhood. Social designers start from the know-how available to move away from the conceptual stage: looking for interesting opportunities in the environment surrounding them, in order to break out of the abstract thinking. Social designers in their learning process have to broaden their horizon, confront themselves with the reality they live in and get inspiration from that clash. Social designers have to get a clear view on the needs of the people who they design for. Investigating is of great value as much as the realization of the project and the integration of real life aspects. These activities are intertwined with each other [4].
Partnership between designers and the city is a win-win situation. It adds value for the city and the designers that work for it. The process always has a positive result both for the city and designers, even if there is no concrete realization. It gives new dynamics of change [5]. However, social design is especially vulnerable because you ask inhabitants to participate and therefore you create expectations. Don't underestimate the impact and the time required of implementation of your design. The end result should be practical, suitable for immediate use. Impoverished areas are not waiting for another design on paper that never gets materialized.
The definition of what social design means, how it should be tackled and its implications, are a way of emphasizing the societal relevance of the designers work. It goes without saying that this definition can be applied to the entire field of design.

In this article, the reader will find the approach taken by the department of Industrial Design at the Eindhoven University of Technology and by the Media and Design Group at the Hogeschool Sint Lukas Brussels to introduce social design to two groups of students for the first time and let them experience the societal relevance of their work.

The NextDoor Quartier project explored how design can (1) actively contribute to a peaceful cohabitation of people from different origins, with different cultures and traditions and at the same time (2) teach young designers' social conscience. It focused on three different stages:

- 1st stage: Confront young designers with an active appreciation and tolerance towards other cultures in a society that is outspokenly materialistic by letting them choose, apply and evaluate different ethnographic research methods. In other words, make them switch from a design process based on preconceptions to one based on an emphatic understanding of the context.

- 2nd stage: Make them sensible to this new socio-cultural context and content as a counterweight to intolerant flavoured thinking by running workshops asking for the active participation and advice of the inhabitants of the area. Make them realize they are working in a real life environment and that they should share and involve people in the neighbourhood instead of just requesting information.

- 3rd stage: Make them aware of the fact that design is not value neutral and has important ethical implications upon society by presenting their work in a public event to institutions, social workers and the inhabitants of the area. Make them proactively involve in the process, take sides and be able to justify their ideas after critics from different sides (social workers, politicians, teachers, neighbours).

2   CONTEXT AND RESULTS

The Brabantwijk, a popular but disfavoured neighbourhood in Brussels, is an ideal testing case for projects that aim at developing social cohesion in a city. The Brabantwijk is a busy multicultural neighbourhood that faces several problems. Eighty different cultures are living together in this 'quartier' of Brussels, and the interaction between these cultures and the neighbourhood is far from active. The attitude shared by most residents is: "The less people you know, few problems you have."

The area has a multitude of functions (e.g. shopping, schooling, living, leisure, prostitution, working) that captures flows from a multitude of scales and is therefore used by a huge variety of people. All these persons (groups or individuals) have their own, proper way of living, using, exploring or just passing through this neighbourhood. They have their own agendas and time schedules, their own interests and passions as well as fears and prejudices.

The results from the two groups focused on creating platforms that elicits social connectedness by making explicit and communicate on a visual and tactile level the richness of activities that a multicultural area can provide. Events and activities cannot be continually organized by an external agent. Rather than looking after support by way of a mediator, these technological platforms actively and directly support the emergence of multicultural communities. They empower residents and organizations in the neighbourhood to create and communicate their own activities. These systems make it able to explore the synergies between content, context and locality. They are systems that don't create dependence and fade to the background (if necessary) once the habits are created.

2.1 Mapping your Neighbourhood

The first group developed a platform to advertise and showcase the activity in the neighbourhood (see figure 1). They found important to communicate information in a way that can be understandable for all the residents and is scalable enough for displaying a large amount of initiatives. That is why a metro plan representing the neighbourhood was used. By using icons that resemble initiatives, happenings and events, services, and organizations an overview of the activity in the neighbourhood is given, without the usual barrier of language.

The metro plan is translated into the streets by painting the curbs of the sidewalks according to the colours in the plan. At central points in the area, an interactive object will be placed as a guide. By interacting with this object, exploration of the neighbourhood and information about the activities is provided. Furthermore, the residents can enter their own initiatives and services into the system.

Besides the icons on the metro plan, lights mounted on houses are used to communicate the activity of the neighbourhood from the streets. By wandering through the streets, information is perceived in a subtle way. This should trigger the curiosity of people to an activity or initiative and should created

appreciation for fellow residents and their own neighbourhood. Appreciation for their own environment should develop a positive and active attitude, creating a society in which people are willing to help each other out.

Figure 1. Different images illustrating the Mapping your neighbourhood concept

2.2 Nouvelles d'ici

The Nouvelles d'ici pillar was developed by the second group (see figure 2). This platform supports neighbourhood organizations in informing and inviting the residents, students and visitors to their activities. The Nouvelles d'ici pillar has a central role in crossings, where it creates an overview of activities and organizations for all the people who pass by. Crossings are a metaphor for the lack of communication in the neighbourhood since it is a place where residents, students and visitors cross but do not meet. By placing activity invitations at the crossings, everybody is invited while they walk their daily path. These days, information flyers are presented in cultural centres where only the residents who are already participating in activities are invited. With the Nouvelles d'ici more people will be reached by inviting everyone who cross by. Thus, residents that aren't actively participating yet will be welcome to get to know the organizations, their activities and meet their participators.

The Nouvelles d'ici pillar uses a vertical division of the space to visualize the location of the different organizations. Horizontally, the rings show different kinds of activities. Only one activity is showed for each ring (the ring has one opening). By turning a ring the location of the opening is changed and another activity is showed. By not showing all activities at the same time saturation is avoided. By turning the rings people can browse through the activities and after that, when continuing their walk, they indirectly leave their preference for the next who will pass. The passengers will notice the constant changes and this dynamics will keep the Nouvelles d'ici interesting.

Figure 2. Different images illustrating the Nouvelles d'ici concept

3   1ST STAGE: FROM PRECONCEPTIONS TO EMPHATIC UNDERSTANDING

In this first stage of the project we explored how we can confront young designers with an active appreciation and tolerance towards other cultures in a society that is outspokenly materialistic. We chose the unpopular Woensel district in Eindhoven as a test-case. The methodology selected was letting students choose, apply and evaluate four different methods during two weeks as to keep the people from Woensel in the centre of the design process. The practice methods were chosen from the IDEO method cards [7], which is a collection of 51 cards representing diverse ways for design teams to understand the people they are designing for. Each group picked up at least 4 techniques; one for

each activity of learning, looking, asking and trying. Each student used at least one technique individually. In groups they discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each technique. Finally, they presented the results and conclusions about its application within the design process

As an example, the IDEO methods long range forecast (figure 3), character profile, guided tour, behavioural mapping, card sort, five why's, empathy tools and quick and dirty prototyping were chosen by the second group considering what would be useful to gather information about a multicultural neighbourhood. In this context, the guided tour was seen as an interesting method because it provides an inside view of the neighbourhood by talking to a resident and walking through the streets.

In this phase it was considered best to try and experience as many methods as possible. The students realized that then there was time to make mistakes and learn from them. The outcome of this activity was a toolbox containing several techniques to get to know an unfamiliar neighbourhood better. These methods helped to get an overview, focus, deepen, specify user wishes, aspirations and fears, and at the same time define interviews or act as icebreakers to start a conversation.

Figure 3. Collage resulting from applying the long range forecast method

4   2ND STAGE: FROM REQUESTING TO SHARING AND INVOLVING

This second stage was to explore how we can make students sensible to a new socio-cultural context and content as a counterweight to intolerant flavoured thinking. It was done by running workshops and asking for the active participation and advice of the inhabitants of the area through a communication campaign. The students had to develop user participation strategies that fitted their project and the inhabitants. They had to describe their scope (what they'll do and what not), scale (size), time span (planning), parties involved (e.g. inhabitants, social workers and institutions) and communication strategies (in situ, web, workshops, TV adds, flyers). In order to do that they developed a deeper understanding on the appropriation phenomenon in the urban space by means of a workshop. The focus was on understanding the role of the inhabitants and their denunciation, proposition and intervention actions in designing in the public space [8]: denunciation actions relate to the public space and life quality, proposition actions relate to the city image and identity, and intervention action relate to the public space habilitation.

In this stage the key values of both concepts and communication strategies were defined. Enhancing the positive notion of the area was driving both projects. Two main categories were specified. First one was that the concept should contribute to the feeling of being proud of the Brabantwijk. The second one was that the identity of the neighbourhood was reflected in the concept itself. What was essential for both concepts was a trigger to get attention. The main goal of the concept is that it creates consciousness about what is going on in the neighbourhood, and this creates a positive notion of the Brabantwijk.

This was not an easy process. The first group thought about sending a letter to specific people in the neighbourhood as to make their intentions personal but they didn't take into consideration: when or

how much time they have to answer, what happens after the deadline, and where they were going to collect the answers (is it going to be a mailbox, is there going to be some meeting dates?). At the end this group decided to use a local coffee house as their own meeting space, a place known by the inhabitants where they will always find them.

The second group focused on getting the identity back of the neighbourhood and placed a compliment board in the neighbourhood. This board made it possible for the residents to write down their compliments about the Brabantwijk. When they took a second look at the board, after 24 hours, they saw some written compliments but unfortunately the board was broken into two (see figure 4). Concluding, the board was not totally accepted by the neighbourhood. To prevent such vandalistic reactions they decided to invite the residents in the building process of their designs in order to make outcome part of the neighbourhood. They understood that if the inhabitants were proud of their design, they would easily take care of it.

Figure 4. Broken compliment board used as communication medium

5 3RD STAGE: FROM INDIFFERENCE TO CARING

The third stage was to make students aware of the fact that design is not value neutral and has important ethical implications upon society. Even their actions, what they do and to whom they talk, have an impact. We wanted them to be proactively involved in the process, take sides and be able to justify their ideas after critics from different sides (social workers, politicians, teachers, neighbours). In order to achieve that, we worked with different partners from the Brussels neighbourhood, active in the socio-cultural field, as to introduce the real context (see figure 4) and deliver continuous feedback on design decisions. Moreover, we made the students present their work in a public event to institutions, social workers and the inhabitants of the area.

During feedback sessions with the experts the students had to grow from a factual understanding to a relational understanding. They had to position their project in relation to its feasibility and to relate the periodicity of the actions to the emotional value, in order to reduce vandalism.

The main topics during the discussions were: define what culture means for the students (e.g. can shops and business be involved or just NGOs?), clarify their aim (what are they empowering?), support different approaches (usefulness vs. fun in relation activities), study the feasibility project (naive vs. realistic), implement a plan (how can it get started and make it grow?), detail the supporting structures (how can it be kept up to date?), define the periodicity of the activities (does fix equals boring?), and find synergies (e.g. relate emotional value to fight vandalism).

The students realized that failure (because realization is not be possible or the concept doesn't fit the expectations) would add up to the disappointment-list citizens have. This is the reason why special attention was taken in involving inhabitants and constantly asking them for information and participation. They considered that they had to be as close to the reality as possible. The idea of presenting the results in the neighbourhood itself represented what they thought should be achieved: to give something back to the neighbourhood.

Figure 5. First impressions of the area through a guided tour by a social worker

6   CONCLUSIONS

After this project the students concluded that design is a good way to look at problems on a social field. Social design can be a language to address and influence situations that need changes by implementing installations in the current situation. Believing in design being a correct starting point for addressing a social problem or opportunity was a matched perception that every person who was involved, students, coaches and experts, agreed upon. With design and by making something physical, mental change can be achieved. In this project the mental change meant creating a positive notion about the Brabantwijk. The relatively subtle and simple to implement concepts developed (Nouvelles d'ici and Mapping your neighbourhood) are clearly a different approach than other disciplines have done so far. Moreover social design can involve residents easier and efficiently without changing the political structure, which is harder.

A designer who uses social design as a label for his/her work field has to analyze in which 'society' he/she comes from and will work for. The meaning of the word 'social' and its value is different everywhere because of the many influences such as cultural influences. This gives social design its strength: designing with a highly involved 'society' in which the final concept has most potential and brings out the best when placed in that 'society'.

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