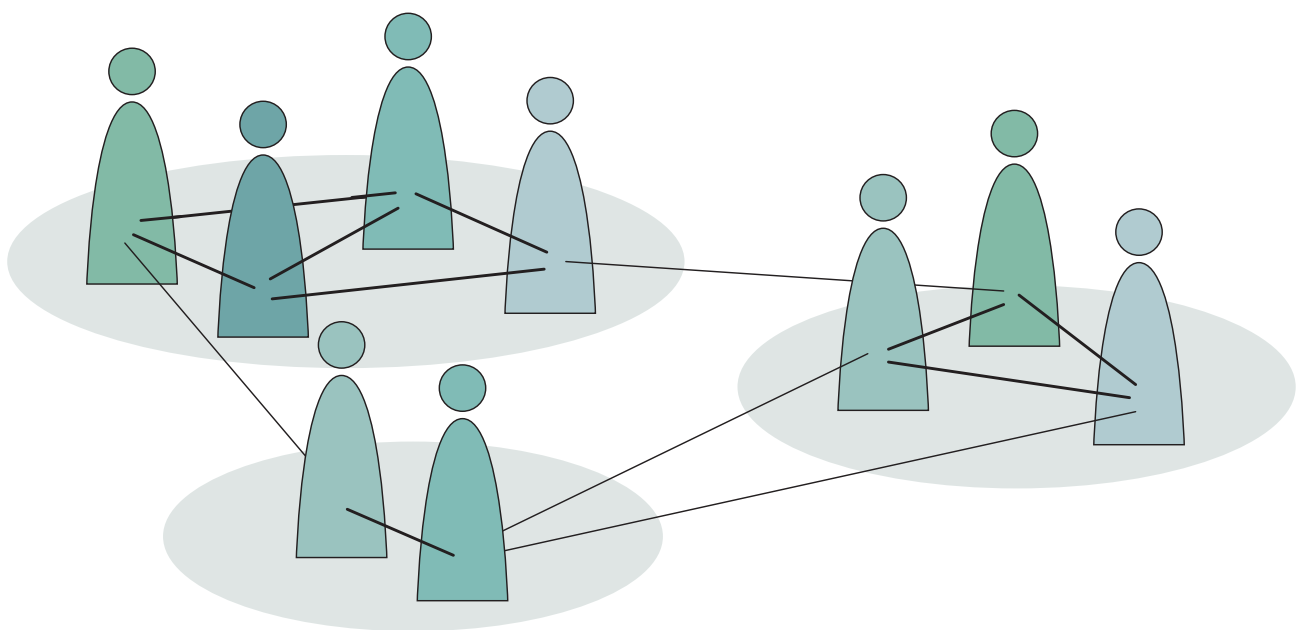


# DESIGN for COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

An inspirational guide for designers and other interested



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'Design for community well-being' is the graduation work of Hester van Zuthem, Master Design for Interaction, Technical University of Delft.

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# Introduction

In this booklet, the topic of 'community well-being' is introduced. In recent years, interest in the relationship between design and human well-being has grown. However, emphasis is on developing methods to design for individual well-being. As designers, we asked ourselves whether it would be possible to design for the needs of a community:

## ***“How to design for community well-being?”***

Our society is in transition and communities play an increasingly important role. Due to the economical crisis and new governmental policies, we are becoming more dependent on our direct living environment. Citizens have to contribute to basic social services for themselves as well as for those around them. However, it is difficult to look after each other in a society that has become rather individualistic: we hardly know our neighbours nowadays and we have more friends on Facebook than in 'real life'. Especially in urban areas, loneliness is rising and communal life is poor. Therefore we wanted to explore ways to create and support local communities and discover how designers can contribute to this development.

A community could be understood as a collection of individual people, and likewise, community well-being as the sum of well-being of all individual members. In this project however, we approached a community as an entity: a network of connected members. This required an exploration of the phenomenon 'community' and corresponding community needs that, when applied, can become the starting point of a design process.

This booklet introduces our framework of community needs and a definition of 'community well-being' based on this framework. Next, the framework is exemplified by means of a design case with the urban community 'Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt'.

We welcome designers and others interested to use our framework and share their experiences with us. It is our ambition to extend this publication with more design cases in the future.

Enjoy!

## What is a community?

A community is a group of people with one or more characteristic(s) in common, which can be a geographically defined, interest-based, or both at the same time. In order to explain how a community functions, a metaphor of the human body is used in this paragraph.

In the human body various organs perform different functions similar to the different members of a community. In order to function as a whole, the organs have to be connected to one another by means of nerves and blood vessels. Likewise, a community needs a certain structure to enable its members to interact with each other. Each separate organ, or member, could be replaced within this structure, as long as its function is continued. The structure of a community is often not regular but consists of several subgroups of people who are related to each other to a greater or lesser extent (as illustrated in the cover image).

Whereas the skin marks the difference between inside and outside the human body, a certain (physical or symbolical) boundary marks the distinction between the inside and outside of the community. In addition to this, the human body has a certain 'consciousness' that can be compared with the collective 'purpose' of a community. This purpose is often a specific activity or mission that requires collective action, in other words, a *raison d'être*. In most communities the purpose is created in response to its external environment; the context in which the community operates.

Based on this comparison, the following definition of 'community' has been formulated:

***“A community is a group of two or more mutually connected people having a common characteristic and collective purpose that requires collective action.”***

A community has four basic characteristics: members, a mutual structure, a collective purpose, and a boundary. The presence of these characteristics indicates whether a group of people can be considered a community. We call this the *basic needs* of a community.

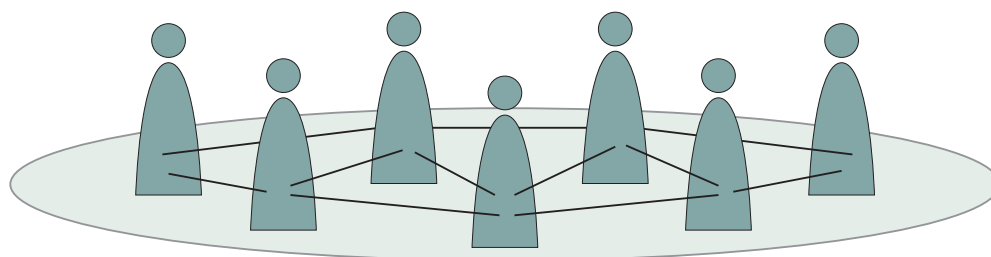


Figure 1. Representation of a community's members, structure, and boundary.

## What is community well-being?

‘Community needs’ have nothing to do with the individual members’ needs but are about the needs of a community as a *whole*. In addition to the four basic community needs, explained in the previous section, subsequent community needs have been identified: a need for identity, need for efficacy, need for resilience, and need for continuity. In the text box on the next page, each community need is explained in more detail.

Community well-being can be understood as a community’s ability to meet and continue to meet these subsequent needs: developing a communal identity, bringing about efficacy, providing resilience during periods of change, and ensuring continuity of its existence.

***“Community well-being is a community’s ability to meet and maintain its need for identity, efficacy, resilience, and continuity.”***

The figure below presents the community needs in hierarchical order. The framework is comparable with Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. Whereas Maslow’s hierarchy describes the needs of a healthy person from basic physiological needs towards the need for self-actualization, this framework describes the needs of a healthy community, from existence towards persistence.



Figure 2. Framework of community needs.

## Community needs

**Need for identity** - A community's identity is shaped and supported by a community's collective vision, customs, and external characteristics. Additionally, the achievements and legacy a community builds up over time strengthens its identity.

**Need for efficacy** - If a community is passive or static, it is not able to achieve its purpose. Therefore, a community requires a certain efficacy in order to establish progress. This does not mean that *all* community members have to be active at all times. Most communities show a cohesive core group of dedicated members that is supported by an outer shell of followers who are not so active but ensure a critical mass.

**Need for resilience** - Community resilience is a community's ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Over time, communities may encounter internal and/or external changes that need to be overcome. When a community is not able to respond to new situations, it may cease to exist.

**Need for continuity** - In fact, a community could outlive its members. While members may come and go, the community *itself* persists. Regularity, renewal, and a long-term mission help to ensure the continuity of a community. Additionally, communities can leave lasting traces behind that represent their legacy.

## Interpretation of the framework

Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, the framework of community needs describes different stages a community could go through. When the basic community needs are met, the need to develop a communal identity comes forward. Subsequently, the need to bring about efficacy emerges, and so on. However, a certain need does not have to be completely met in order to move towards a 'higher' community need.

Furthermore, the community needs are dynamic and influence each other. For example, a very resilient community is able to persist for a long time, and a long communal history helps to reinforce the community's identity again.

We think that the framework of community needs should not be seen as a checklist but rather as an inspirational tool to evaluate a community's state of well-being, which helps to set goals when designing for community well-being.



Figure 3. Community needs are dynamic.

## Design for community well-being

We now have defined 'community' and 'community well-being', the next question is how to design for community well-being? This requires a whole different approach than designing for (groups of) individual users and the fulfillment of personal needs, like most designers are used to.

Communities can be considered as autonomous entities with dynamic needs. Fulfilling these needs requires an internal process in which the designer plays a facilitating role. However, the needs of the individual community members should not be forgotten in the design process since they play an important role in developing and adopting of the outcome. Therefore, we would like to propose designing for communities as design *with* communities.

***“Design for community well-being is a bottom-up process that requires close involvement of community members. The designer has a facilitating role so that the community does not become dependent on the design, or designer. Besides focussing on the fulfilment of community needs, the designer should also take individual members’ needs into account.”***

**Custom solutions** - It is important to realize that every community is unique, so designing for communities asks for tailor-made solutions that are flexible to a community's dynamics. The framework of community needs helps to gain insight in the present state of a particular community, and which needs could be fulfilled with a design intervention to enhance the community's well-being. For example, reinforcing a community's identity; stimulating efficacy; increasing resilience; and promoting continuity.

**Co-creation** - Involving community members in the design process has multiple advantages. First, the process of co-design reinforces mutual connectedness amongst members and thereby enhances a community's structure. Second, a solution that emerges from within a community will fit well with the needs and wishes of its members. And third, the process of co-creation stimulates a sense of ownership over the outcome, which increases willingness to accept (and use) the designed product or service.

**Bottom-up** - A bottom-up approach enables the creation of tailor-made solutions that come from *within* a community. This requires engagement of the designer with the community, and of the community members in the design process. It is important to take a community's autonomy into account since the community should not become dependent on the design, or designer. A bottom-up approach makes use of the skills and strengths within a community, and gives the community (members) the possibility to continue the outcome independently.

## Design case 1: Stadsdorp story

The target group of this design case is the urban community 'Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt'. Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt was founded in December 2012 by residents of the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood in Amsterdam with the aim to form a local social safety net together. When this design project started, one year after its founding, the community counted almost 300 members. Most of the group consists of seniors, since they seem to have the most time and willingness to invest in a new social network.

### Step 1: Getting to know the community

The first step in the design process was to get to know the community and its members, the so-called 'Stadsdorpers'. This was done by interviewing different members about Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt, the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood, and possible other communities or groups they are involved in. Additionally, collective 'Stadsdorp gatherings' were visited and internal communication tools were closely examined, such as the community's website and the activity-exchange board. This all helped to form an understanding of how the community is organised, and wants to organise itself.

An interesting insight was that Stadsdorpers mentioned that they do not want to focus on 'care' directly. They rather want to undertake fun things together so that taking care of each other comes as a natural effect by the time it is needed.



Figure 4. Joining a collective Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt gathering, Februari 2014.

### Step 2: Evaluating the community

The next step was evaluating the community by means of the framework of community needs: *To what extent is Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt a 'true' community, and what needs have to be fulfilled to increase its well-being?* This step was done in close collaboration with the community members since they know the community best.

Together we agreed that there was a lack of solidarity in the community: being one together and having the feeling that you belong to one another. Solidarity was put forward as a requisite for creating a social safety net together. The question was however, how to create more solidarity?



This question was discussed collectively and answered as follows: “In order to create solidarity, you have to (get to) know each other, and in order to get to know each other you have to recognize each other.” The community’s vision, ‘*everyone has something to give*’, was considered an important condition for recognising a Stadsdorp as it marks the (symbolical) boundary of Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt. So, the next step in the design process was to find ways to emphasize this willingness to give and/or contribute.

### Step 3: Co-designing concept(s)

The third step was a series of collaborative design sessions in which we developed and discussed ideas to make Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt ‘membership’ more tangible and recognizable. Developing concepts that can enhance the well-being of Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt from the inside out is quite an abstract task, and therefore the designer’s role was facilitating the community members to go through this step by step.

Eventually, we designed ‘**Stadsdorp story**’ together: a product-service-system that supports and stimulates social interaction within the Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt community by means of sharing stories. Stadsdorpers can hang a ‘Stadsdorp label’ on an object or place around their homes, for example a place with strong memories attached or a self-made artwork behind the window. Each label has a unique number that can be used to share the corresponding story on an interactive map on the website of Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt.

Stadsdorp story becomes a lively portrait of Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt that every member can contribute to. The labels create unity, while at the same time there is room for individual diversity. Stadsdorpers are encouraged to share something of their personality, and at the same time they can get to know each other through the contributions of others. This way, the concept triggers communal activity in a bottom-up manner.



Figure 5. Co-design session, March 2014.



Figure 6. The concept of ‘Stadsdorp story’.

## Step 4: Implementing the concept

The final, and perhaps most important step was the implementation of the co-developed concept. This step was preceded by iterations of prototyping and detailing the design of the 'Stadsdorp labels'. Also the website was designed and programmed to make sure it was ready for usage. In several iterations, feedback moments with Stadsdorpers were organized.

The concept was implemented in two steps. First, participants of the co-design sessions received a label so they could put it into use and this way inspire others. Two weeks later, the labels were made available for the rest of the community.

## What was learned?

From the project with Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt we learned that close collaboration with the community is extremely important. The designer should get involved and listen to the wide variety of community members. Next, it is important to create an open and 'free' atmosphere during the sessions to make sure that members feel comfortable to contribute. This way, the co-design sessions proved to be a valuable means of community enhancement in itself; during the session a powerful connectedness among the session participants arose.

The concept of Stadsdorp story triggers communal activity in a bottom-up way, by encouraging individual actions that contribute to the community as a whole. None of us could have imagined this concept at the start of the project, or could have developed it on its own. This shows that it is important to have be persistent and keep faith in the outcome of the collaborative design sessions, no matter how much iteration it may take.



Figure 7. Design of the 'Stadsdorp label'.



Figure 8. Pre-launch of Stadsdorp story, May 2014.



## Stadsdorp stories

Het Stadsdorp zit vol verhalen. Op verschillende plekken in de Nieuwmarkt buurt zijn Stadsdorp labels te vinden, en achter elk label gaat een verhaal te schuil. Bent u benieuwd naar wat uw buurtgenoot heeft meegemaakt op de hoek van de straat, of welke kunst de overbuurvrouw maakt? Met de onderstaande kaart kunt u de Nieuwmarkt buurt (én haar verhalen) opnieuw verkennen!

Wilt u zelf ook een verhaal delen? In het Pintohuis en tijdens de Stadsdorp bijeenkomsten zijn de labels verkrijgbaar. Deze komen in een instructieboekje waarin stap voor stap wordt uitgelegd hoe u uw verhaal op de website kunt zetten. Zie ook het volgende [filmpje](#).

'Stadsdorp story' is het afstudeerproject van interactie ontwerpster Hester van Zuthem, in samenwerking met [Waag Society](#). Voor dit project deed zij onderzoek naar 'community welzijn' en ontwierp Stadsdorp story in een reeks co-creatie sessies samen met Stadsdorpers. Voor vragen of opmerkingen kunt u contact opnemen via [story@stadsdornieuwmarkt.nl](mailto:story@stadsdornieuwmarkt.nl).

[Story toevoegen](#)



Figure 9. Impression of the online platform 'Stadsdorp story' (in Dutch).

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