Stadsdorp Story: Designing for the general happiness of the community

Design by Hester van Zuthem
Text by Pieter Desmet

Happiness is personal. I flourish when I am able to develop my talents and when I am able to pursue my personal goals. In other words, well-being is the domain of the individual. Therefore, Positive Design starts with the individual: "Who am I designing for? What are her talents, virtues and goals?" That forms the basis for the design process, resulting in a product that contributes to the happiness of that specific person. But how do you design for the happiness of a community? There is no such thing as the average person: There are as many talents and goals as there are people. How can we handle that diversity? Designers often focus on the similarities between individuals. There is always a shared goal or skill. That approach is effective, but not entirely risk-free. Because consensus does not always lead to creativity. The spark of a design often lies in the extraordinary, the imaginative or the unconventional.

For this reason, designer Hester van Zuthem came up with an original approach: "Imagine that the community is a 'living being', with its own needs, like an autonomous entity. When that entity flourishes, that also stimulates the happiness of the individuals within." With this idea in

mind, Hester developed a design vision, and a design for Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt, a neighbourhood community in Amsterdam.

Flourishing of a community

Hester analysed a series of existing communities and discovered four basic traits: A community has (1) multiple members, with (2) common goals, (3) a connecting structure between the members, and (4) a clear boundary between members and non-members. Additionally, she discovered four core qualities of flourishing communities. A flourishing community:

· Has a characteristic and unique identity. This is supported by traditions, symbols, achievements and heritage.
· Is resilient. The community maintains itself through changing circumstances, by renewing itself and remaining relevant. Resilience is supported by a flexible organisation and openness to renewal.
· Is active. It actively contributes to identifying and achieving common goals.
· Has continuity. It is not dependent upon specific members for its continued existence.

This is stimulated by a clear long-term mission and shared ownership. Flourishing communities often exist longer than a single human life; they 'outlive' their members.

Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt

Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt (SDNM) is a citizens' initiative by the Nieuwmarktbuurt in Amsterdam that aims to connect the advantages of a small town with those of the city. Hester interviewed SDNM members to understand what the community's state of well-being was. She discovered an unfulfilled need in the third core quality: A lack of activity. Apart from an active core group, most members have a somewhat passive attitude. New members find it hard to become active. Taking that first step towards a more active membership was the basis of Hester's design.

The Stadsdorp Story

Hester designed 'Stadsdorp Story' for sharing personal stories about the neighbourhood. The design consists of three components: labels, a website with interactive map and an inspirational booklet.

The label - With the Stadsdorp Story label, the Stadsdorp residents can reveal something personal.
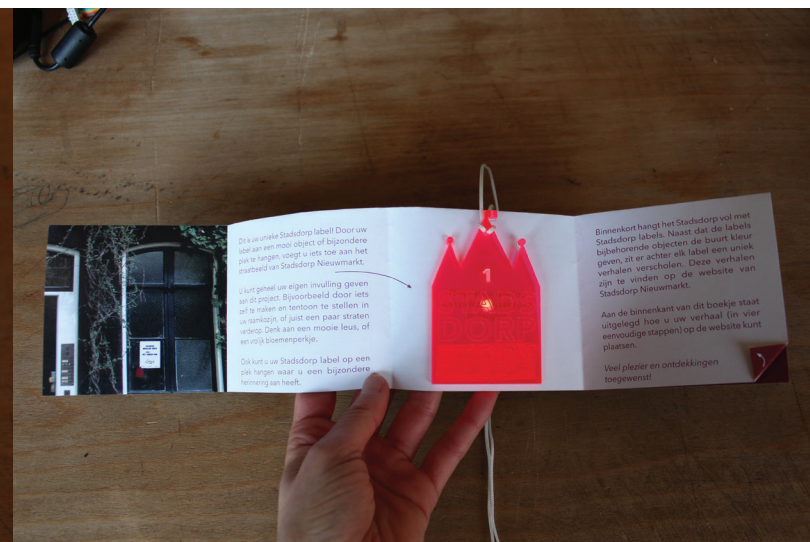
You attach it to an object somewhere in the neighbourhood. Think of homemade art in a windowsill or a birdhouse on a tree. It does not matter what it is, as long as it is part of a story. The labels of 6 by 9 centimetres are shaped like the Stadsdorp logo and are made of fluorescent pink plexiglass. The bright colour increases their visibility. They give a hint, but do not reveal the story, which stimulates curiosity.

The map - The second part of the design is an interactive map of the neighbourhood. Each label can be found on the map by means of a unique number. When you have discovered a label in the neighbourhood, you can find it on the map and read the personal story behind it. The number on the label is a subtle clue that more can be discovered; a treasure hunt in your own neighbourhood. Stadsdorp residents get to know each other through the stories, and this leads to a sense of connectedness.

The booklet - The Stadsdorp Story requires active participation of Stadsdorp residents. The inspiration booklet helps them with this. It contains an explanation and inspiring examples about the use of the label. Stadsdorp residents can also invite each other to contribute a story by giving each other a label.

With the Stadsdorp Story, Hester has removed the barrier that hindered active contribution to the community. Stadsdorp residents can get to know each other by sharing something of themselves, and the stories form a collective portrait of the SDNM community. The noticeable labels create recognition and coherence. At the same time, this unity functions as a stage for personal, unique and surprising insights into the world of the various Stadsdorp residents.

Shared ownership

Hester did not focus on the needs of the individual, but on those of the community as an entity. Does this community have a recognisable identity and continuity, is it resilient and active? This approach yielded a surprising additional benefit. She discovered that it is very inspiring for the members to work with the core qualities themselves. In doing so, Hester was able to let a diverse group of Stadsdorp residents share in the design process. This 'co-design' approach resulted in strong sense of ownership and gave the Stadsdorp residents the opportunity to work on the communal needs themselves. And that is how Stadsdorp Story started to lead its own life, independent of Hester – and for a designer that is a great compliment.

Hester van Zuthem developed the Stadsdorp Story as thesis project for the master's programme Design for Interaction at the TU Delft. The project was Hester's own initiative in collaboration with Stadsdorp Nieuwmarkt (Amsterdam), the Delft Institute of Positive Design, and Waag Society (Amsterdam) with the goal to explore how designers can contribute to the well-being of communities. Thesis supervisors were Pieter Desmet and Marieke Sonneveld (TU Delft), Marise Schot and Sacha van Tongeren (Waag Society). For more information: www.diopd.org/ http://studiolab.ide.tudelft.nl/diopd/projects/design-projects/design-for-community-well-being/

Colophon

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Reference

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