

Embassy of Youth: Loitering teens of Rotterdam-Zuid discover their unique talents

Design by Lisa van de Merwe

Text by Pieter Desmet

You probably know the headlines “Loitering teens ruin late night shopping around metro station Beurs”, “Loitering teens plague the IJsselmonde district”, “Complaints about municipality of Rotterdam after trouble with loitering teens”, and “Amsterdam district Banne Buiksloot terrorised by loitering teens”. A loitering teen is an infamous phenomenon. When he – usually a boy – makes the news, it is usually due to nuisance, littering or vandalism. In order to reduce that nuisance, far-reaching measures are sometimes taken. In extreme cases, municipalities may impose a restraining order or a ban on gathering in groups, if necessary with police enforcement. Less drastic is installing a so-called Mosquito, a device that produces a high-pitched sound. Inaudible to adults, but particularly irritating to adolescents. That is only one of the means by which teens are ‘chased away’ from their spots, just like experimentation with increased camera supervision, playing classical music, police surveillance and even applying pink lighting.

EMBASSY
OF
YOUTH



embassy-of-youth.org
#embassyofyouth

**MOONDAY
THE WEEKEND
MOVES ON...**

EVERY MONDAY DEEP-TECH-HOUSE

04-05-15 SUN JAMO | YOSH HOUZER

11-05-15 TORUS PROJECT | N.O.B.

18-05-15 EDUARDO DE LA TORRE | TORUS PROJECT

25-05-15 MARINGO | N.O.B. | YOSH HOUZER

01.11.2015

The stereotypical troublemaker

Measures against loitering teens are often understandable, and maybe even necessary. But, at the same time, they leave a bitter aftertaste – solutions such as the Mosquito almost remind me of some kind of pest control. What do these negative associations do to the teens' self-image? Because, of course, not all loitering teens are troublemakers. Most are just normal teenagers; young people with their own values, insecurities, dreams, ideals and talents. Designer Lisa van de Merwe aimed to design something for rather than against these teenagers. The idea is that a positive approach can support the well-being of both the teens and of other residents.

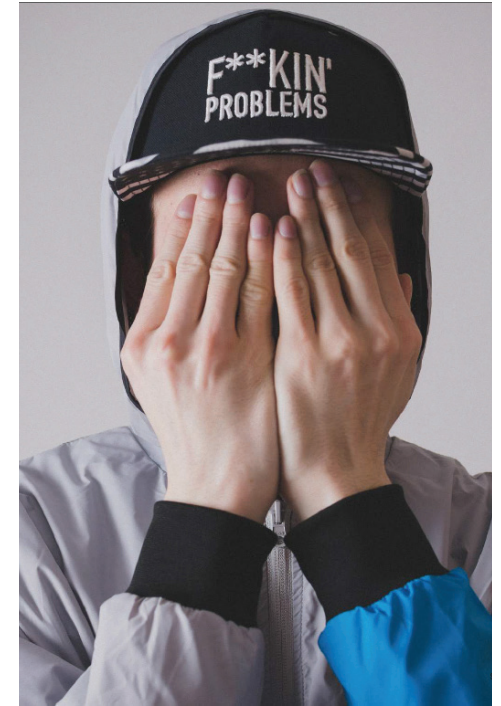
Loitering teens in Rotterdam-Zuid

Lisa focused on teens in the Feijenoord district in Rotterdam-Zuid. This district has a bad reputation and is known to the rest of the world as a 'bad neighbourhood'. She studied the street life of the local teenage boys. They talked about their moti-

ventions and experiences, the meaning of street life and how their self-image is influenced by the residents' responses. Additionally, Lisa also spoke to a diverse group of residents, youth workers and other experts. As it turned out, the boys experience their street life to be particularly positive. In the streets, they are free to express themselves, uninhibited by limitations of family, work or school. Here, they feel connected to their friends and experience the room to develop their personality. In short, they feel at home in the streets, and the streets have become part of their identity. At the same time, neighbourhood residents have a very negative attitude towards them on the streets. They are confronted with rejection and stereotyping. Then, they feel misunderstood, because it looks like their opinion does not count, both in the neighbourhood and in their world.

The Talent Toolkit

Lisa's design focuses on personal talents as that is a field that's often neglected due to the negative approach. Lisa decided to design something that approaches those talents with attention and encouragement. She named her design the 'Embassy of Youth' as a reference to the street as the context of their shared identity. The idea was developed together with the adolescents and youth workers. The key is a toolkit they can use to explore and develop their talents together. The kit consists of a set of cards and an online platform (website and Instagram) with positive anecdotes and tips from local role models. The cards are used in three workshops that are given by the youth workers over a period of three to four weeks. During the workshop, adolescents discover their own talents (workshop 1: Discover), what they can do with these (workshop 2: Do), and how those can be valuable now and in the future (workshop 3: Reflect).





Fifteen talents in the Talent Toolkit

The talent cards

The toolkit contains six sets of fifteen talent cards and eight cards with an activity or a design for discussion (eight different cards per workshop). In the workshops, the teens use the cards to explore which talents make them unique. Each talent card depicts a talent with a description, a photo and a quote from a local hero. The cards give the adolescents a language by which to express their talents (for instance in an interview). In the workshop, they name each other's talents, which is often easier than recognising your own talents. For them, it often proves to be valuable just to realise that those 'roles' on the cards are actually talents, and that they can use these talents. The photos and quotes are connected to personal stories about talents on the website of the Embassy of Youth. Between the workshops, the teenagers work on assignments; something to undertake or think about. Residents can also play a role, for instance by participating in the workshops or by supporting the teenagers.

The online platform

The Embassy of Youth is a website where stories are gathered about the talents of young people in Rotterdam-Zuid. Because negative stories already receive ample attention, this platform only focuses on the positive side. The goal is to make adolescents see how much potential they actually have. The stories are very varied, from unknown teenagers to the local neighbourhood heroes, such as the owner of a boxing school or a local rap artist. They each tell about their own talents and they give tips on how you can use your talents. After the workshops, the participants can also place their own stories on the website.

Beyond prejudice

Lisa was surprised by the people she encountered in her project. Upon the start, she had not foreseen that she would be designing for teenagers in the street, a target group she knew absolutely nothing about. But it turned out to be possible to make a connection –and she discovered that one of her own talents was that of 'the connector'. In her own words: "After spending many nights out on the street with the youth workers, and visiting local football matches and a Christmas dinner in the community centre, I can honestly say I now know Feijenoord better than my own neighbourhood." Lisa was not led by prejudice, and this made her open to unplanned, inspiring encounters. From the connector to the inventor, everyone has talents; sometimes, you just need a little help to become aware of them.



Lisa van de Merwe developed the Embassy of Youth as thesis project for the master's programme Design for Interaction at the TU Delft. The project was initiated by Lisa and Anna Pohlmeier, and conducted in collaboration with Oxfam GB and the Delft Institute of Positive Design, with the goal to explore how designers can contribute to the well-being of teenagers in the Rotterdam Feijenoord district. The thesis supervisors were Anna Pohlmeier, Stella Boess, Jay Yoon (TU Delft), and Katherine Trebeck (Oxfam). www.diopd.org and www.embassyofyouth.org

Colophon

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