



The Story Table

*Meet your fellow citizens
at the City Shop*

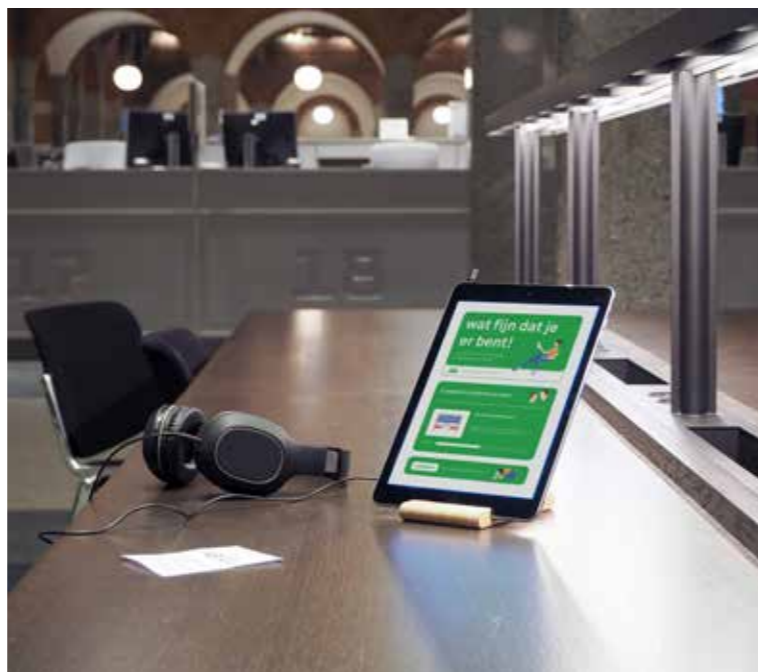
Design by Koen van der Loop

Text by Pieter Desmet

Antwerp has a City Shop: “Are you looking for a nice Antwerp souvenir or delicious local products? Then, at the Stadswinkel, you’re in the right place”, according to the website. This matches my view of a City Shop quite well. Rotterdam also has a City Shop. But you won’t find a couple of bottles of ‘Harrie’, a box of ‘Rotterdamertjes’ or a nice postcard there. You go there to apply for your passport or to renew your driver’s license. It is the place where you, as a citizen, can go for all municipal matters: benefits, taxes, parking, permits; from reporting a move to registering a birth.

Municipal Services

Each municipality recognises the challenge of maintaining and strengthening its relationship with its inhabitants – the citizens. This relationship determines its legitimacy and, thus, also the results that can be achieved for the community (see Smith & Kuenkel, 2018). The City Shop plays a vital role here. This is the place for direct and personal contact. The place where you, as a citizen, do not turn to ‘the government’ but to an actual person. Approachability and inclusiveness are key. In total, Rotterdam has seven City Shops. The largest is located at City Hall, Coolsingel 40. The imposing National Monument was completed in 1920 and withstood the devastating war. It is a symmetrical building designed by Henri Evers, with an impressive tower above the central hall as a real eye-catcher.



Well-being at the City Shop

Designer Koen van der Loop asked himself the following question: What can I do to strengthen the well-being of the people who come to the City Shop? He spoke to eleven different visitors and created an overview of their positive and negative experiences. Frequently felt emotions are dissatisfaction and frustration, but there is also trust and hope (see Van der Loop, 2019). Following the ideas of positive psychology, he decided to focus on strengthening those positive feelings. And as a basis for his design, he chose the need for community.

Community: Being part of and accepted by a social group or entity that is important to you. Rather than feeling you do not belong anywhere and have no social structure to rely on.

This desire to belong is a fundamental human need (see Desmet & Fokkinga, 2020) and an appropriate starting point for well-being at the City Shop. After all, this is the ‘home of the community’. For his design, he was inspired by the power of story-telling. A community is shaped and defined by shared stories. Everyone has their own unique story. By listening to each other’s stories, you can connect with each other and, in this way, with a community. With this, the idea for the Story Table was born.

The Story Table

“Is it my turn yet?” You are probably familiar with the stifling atmosphere of a waiting room. Checking the call numbers on the screen every few seconds. The Story Table offers comfort and convenience. Its design consists of a tablet, headphones, and a simple stand. Placed on the communal table in the waiting area. You enter your call number and then you can relax: the tablet will notify you when it’s your turn. Now that you have some time to spare, you can use it to listen to a story shared by a fellow citizen. You can choose from various stories. These are not just any stories – they are stories in which fellow citizens tell you about their world of experiences and feelings. Tales you can identify with. It is as if you are being read to and, for a short while, you find yourself in the world of the other. You will receive a subtle notification when it is almost your turn for your appointment. Straight away, you can indicate whether you want to receive a link to continue to listen to the story at home. You will then see at which counter you can report for the service you came for.

No images for a while

Koen is familiar with images; as a designer he gives for to the visual. Using video images to accompany his Story Table would have been the obvious choice. After all, we are all familiar with the temptation of motion picture. Surprisingly, he deliberately chose to work solely with audio. In his own words: “I have experienced how intimate and moving it can be to purely listen to someone’s story. Your own imagination comes to life while listening. This is much more personal than watching video images. And for me, that is the key to connection.” In line with this choice, it was also obvious for Koen to make the interface as simple as possible. Excessive features were unnecessary. While standing in front of City Hall, I feel small at the sight of Evers’ tower. Over 70 metres high. But once inside, listening to the stories of my fellow citizens, for a moment, I feel taller than the tower: as large as all Rotterdammers put together.



References

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Koen van der Loop designed the Story Table in 2019 as graduation project as part of his master's degree *Design for Interaction* in collaboration with the Municipality of Rotterdam. Supervisors were Jeroen van Erp and Pieter Desmet (TU Delft). Koen is currently working as a freelance UX designer in Rotterdam.

Colophon

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Reference

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