Conference Report

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Design & The City

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The *Design & The City* conference was organised by the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and was held over four days from 19 to 22 April 2016. The location of the conference was the Knowledge Mile in central Amsterdam. The Knowledge Mile is a network of academic institutions, government organisations, and citizens who have joined forces to create 'an applied research ecosystem to develop, test and display smart solutions for metropolitan challenges in the area.' Following the notion of an eco-system and the concept of the city as a living lab, the conference extended its reach beyond the conference presentations to include related activities such as labs and workshops that were held across the city. The common denominator across the various events was the need to address the topic of 'citizen-centered design approaches for the smart city'. The smart city project is defined broadly by Willem van Winden, Professor of Urban Knowledge Economy and Strategy at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and one of the conference speakers, as a collaborative innovation where urban stakeholders work together to innovate using new technology with societal and/or environmental objectives. As such, the location of the conference supported the theme owing to the number of initiatives adopted by the city to make it more inclusive.

The conference came at a time when the discourse about urban futures and smart cities is gaining momentum around the globe amidst contemporary political and environmental tensions. It is also worth noting that the conference was held during the Dutch European Union presidency; for the first half of 2016, the Netherlands holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. One of the guiding principles of this Dutch designation is a Union that connects with civil society, and one of the related aims is to put forward a new declaration for the European Urban Agenda.

Similarly, the aim of the conference was to bring citizens into the discussion of cities by presenting ideas and sharing solutions that focus on designing smart cities for citizens. More specifically, the central theme of the conference was 'the role of design(ers) to create opportunities and practices for citizens, (social) entrepreneurs and policy makers towards more liveable, sustainable and sociable urban futures.' To this end, the conference coordinator, Martijn de Waal, delineated the framework of civic projects for urban futures as being premised on three key players – individuals, communities and institutions – and their relationships with one another. This framework provided the platform for dialogue about designers' roles across the following three overarching presentation categories: design and city making, design and socio-economic change, and design and smart citizens.

A recurring thread that was evident throughout the keynote presentations was the idea that designers serve as or create the bridge between the three key players by promoting and applying collaborative ways of working and nurturing critical yet constructive attitudes towards collective urban innovation. For example, the first keynote speech by Tony Garcia, co-author of *Tactical urbanism* (2015), set the tone for a hacker culture within urban contexts. Miami-based Garcia, who is trained as an architect, raised the question of creating a change in public attitude towards the city through tactical urbanism projects. Tactical urbanism draws on methodology from product design in that it follows an iterative process from identifying a problem, developing and implementing disruptions, testing and iterating and lastly, measuring.

To illustrate the call for the inclusion of citizens as part of this design process, Garcia discussed the Ludlum Project; this project focuses on developing a safe trail in the Miami-Dade County for pedestrians and cyclists along a previously used railway line. Garcia indicated that public trust in government is low. He noted that the lack of infrastructure, together with a lack of transparency and collaboration in local planning processes, are the reasons behind the need and desire for citizens to take action. Hence, the project served as a practical example of citizens now taking charge of what cities should rightfully be doing. Despite his American vantage point, Garcia's sentiment extends closer to home in a country such as South Africa, for example, where the country has been shifting demographically yet the infrastructure has not developed sufficiently to support this change.

Another insightful viewpoint that emerged during the discussion of the Ludlum Trail project was the fact that designers do not only perform professional design tasks but they also act first and foremost as citizens in the community in which they operate. This immediate engagement fosters a greater sense of ownership and

responsibility to other citizens as well as the environment. Garcia further argued that designers 'need to be non-elected officials' in communities, thereby highlighting the catalytic role that these creative professionals can play in cities to disrupt the norm and to change perceptions on the ground towards more proactive citizen participation.

Christian Nold, a PhD candidate at University College London, echoed this thought in his presentation by asserting that designers need to be located in the controversy, indicating that designers should be directly situated where the need is. A large part of designing smart cities is dependent on the use of technology to design solutions in and for the city; Nold's keynote reiterated that advances in technology, and specifically open source technology, are advancing new opportunities for public participation. Nold highlighted the case study of the expansion of Heathrow Airport as a public controversy that allowed designers to make explicit the 'socio-technical networks' amongst a large group of people who would be affected by the expansion. On a pragmatic level, Nold made reference to using participatory prototyping as a tool for broader public participation. In this context, examples were given of how the community gathered and mobilised to measure the noise pollution around Heathrow as a means to support their protests against the airport's expansion. Nold's powerful presentation illustrated that if contemporary citizenship is about making one's voice heard, then technology might serve as a new tool for this purpose and in essence move one closer to becoming a smart citizen.

Liesbeth Huybrechts, another keynote speaker, picked up on designers' facilitating role. According to Huybrechts, designers can help to build capacity through democratic dialogues using a bottom-up approach. Her vantage point is De Andere Markt (DAM), a collaborative research project in Genk, Belgium, where she brings her expertise on participatory design and spatial transformation processes to the living lab. She used DAM as the backdrop for her discussion on design roles and democratic dialogues, with a view towards the creation of alternate futures. Huybrechts thereby extended the definition of smart cities provided by van Winden beyond the focus of using new technologies in the present to include a perspective on creating alternative futures for urban development. This focus on alternate futures in the smart city discourse recalls Herbert Simon's (1969) definition of design from his seminal book, *The sciences of the artificial*, that 'Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.'

Huybrechts proposed a typology of four types of dialogue, namely open, strategic, tactical, and dialogues of trust where each type is related to a specific design role. The value of her typology is that it may allow us to transcend stereotypes of participation and to counter anthropologist Dorien Zandbergen's critique at the

conference that smart city discourse is largely normative in nature; Zandbergen believes that current discourse is based on and reinforces particular beliefs about relationship between people, power, and digital technologies.

Other presentations by a range of speakers followed a similar trajectory of thought as the abovementioned keynote presentations: Matthijs Bouw spoke about a do-it-yourself ethos and knowledge sharing approach with regard to the Hackable Cities research project; Ben Schouten noted the role of play that facilitates empowerment rather than a mere civic invitation to participate; Dietmar Offenhuber offered a compelling argument for ambient accountability and aesthetics of transactionalisation; incremental city-making and civic economies were touched on by Saskia Beer; Joost Beunderman and Frank Suurenbroek also offered economic perspectives by looking at a civic entrepreneurship and the potential of a circular economy, respectively.

What became evident throughout the conference presentations was that contradictions and dichotomies are rife with regard to smart city initiatives. Furthermore, developments in cities are complex. Even though the conference presentations could be criticised for their seemingly show and tell nature, there is value in initiating such dialogue as the presentations helped to contextualise and foreground current smart city discussions, albeit from a predominantly European perspective. The closing speaker, Dan Hill, arrived at a similar conclusion, noting that although no answers could be arrived at after the conference, these types of narratives were important because they posed significant questions that need to be probed further in an attempt to shape the European urban agenda through a careful understanding of the interplay between the social and the political. Some of the themes that Hill highlighted included new forms of infrastructure for city planning, moving from tactical practices to more strategic and long-term practices, as well as the need for more visible input from institutions, particularly policy makers.

Overall, despite the conference emphasising the value in working collectively towards the creation of smart cities, there was also an underlying warning about cities becoming too smart for their own good by trying to merely emulate existing approaches. From a design perspective, this means that for cities to develop and grow, design needs to shift from its predominantly problem-solving focus to make way for experimentation and for nurturing more widespread communication competencies across individuals, communities, and institutions. In this way, cities can stay true to the immediate needs and nuances of the urban environment in question and the aims of developing smart cities can be extended significantly across the globe.