

## **THE LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF CO-CREATION IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN OF ROTTERDAM**

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**Abstract.** A group of undergraduate bachelor students engaged in a project that focused on finding new co-creation methods for the public domain in Rotterdam. This paper describes the context in which the students worked, the findings they made and the solutions they proposed. Their working process is compared with the work of the Freehouse foundation, a professional artist-run organization that focuses on empowering locals, socially and economically, by enlarging their involvement in the public domain. Subsequently the specifics of the discussed public domain, Rotterdam South, are pointed out. This is required because a very specific context is created by the combination of working class pride, lack of involved citizenship and severe social issues in the area. To conclude, the effect of the co-creative methods employed by the students and Freehouse on the redistribution of power is compared with more traditional forms of citizen participation.

### **1. Introduction**

The public domain is nowadays a widely contested territory and concept. Which spaces - both digital as non-digital - count as public and open, and which ones count as private and closed? What are the (common) values and practices that are manifested and negotiated in public space? And how does this relate to semi-public urban spaces, for instance shopping malls? We took these urgent questions as a starting point for an innovation focused learning lab, referred to as 'I-lab'. Rotterdam University has hosted a variety of I-labs, all of which have focused in on Rotterdam and most specifically, societal issues. The students partaking in the I-lab 'Co-Creation in the Public Domain' came from several courses from both the art school Willem de Kooning Academy and the school of Communication, Media and Information Technology. The I-lab took place during the first semester of 2011-2012. Its goal was to research opportunities, limitations and different models of the public domain in addition to its relation with urban space and digital media.

The students' projects had to include co-creation as a working method or strategy, and they had to discuss, critically engage and propose innovative solutions for a specific part of the public domain. The students had to include a specific method for approaching the public domain, namely 'co-creation'. First primarily used in the context of business and marketing strategy and customer relations, in the past ten years

co-creation has become a widely used term to denote a new way of consumer participation. In their article 'Co-opting Consumer competence' (2000) Prahalad and Ramaswamy introduced the notion of incorporating consumers' competence and experiences into organizations: the consumer takes the stage. During the 2000's onwards the concept was widened and got intertwined with notions and practices like participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) and crowd sourcing (Howe, 2006). But what happens when you apply co-creation to a non-commercial and non web-only environment, namely the public domain? This leads to our main question: what are the limits and possibilities of co-creation in Rotterdam? As a starting point for discussing this question, this paper will examine how students approached both concepts and how these relate to a traditional artist practice. Based on these cases, we will then focus on the peculiarities of the Rotterdam context and then critically reflect on both 'co-creation' and the 'public domain' in an urban environment.

## **2. Rotterdam: The public domain**

Before we sketch both the web-oriented approach and the artistic approach to co-creation in the public domain, we will provide some background information on the specific context, namely Rotterdam.

Rotterdam used to be described as a 'harbour with a city', rather than the other way around. And although the harbour has been moved bit by bit towards the North Sea coast during the last few decades, the spirit of the harbour labourers still largely coincides with the self-image of much of the inhabitants of Rotterdam. In the three decades after 1880, the population almost tripled to around 425.000 people (currently it is around 610.000). Rotterdam became the working class city of the Netherlands and its working class self image was further ingrained during the after war period of city and harbour reconstructing ['wederopbouw']. The reconstruction of the harbour went swiftly and in 1962 Rotterdam became the world's largest port (this status was lost to Shanghai in 2004). The rapidly increasing mechanization of the harbour, in particular the containerization that started in the 1960s, sharply decreased the demand for labour from the 1970s onwards. At the same time, the industrial sector, also a big employer in the Rotterdam area, was either moving away or becoming more labour extensive. The shift towards the service sector and, currently, the creative industries, proved especially harsh on Rotterdam, since the average level of education has traditionally been relatively low. The economic changes resulted in increased social tensions and rising unemployment. The growth of the nationalistic and populist side of the political spectrum since 2000, which has taken place in the Netherlands as a whole, has been especially significant in Rotterdam, culminating when the right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn, murdered in 2002, started his political champagne here.

Both the I-lab Zuidplein project and the Freehouse project took place in Rotterdam South. This is a very racially mixed area, with a lively atmosphere and many small businesses, with approximately 200,000 inhabitants. Rotterdam South is an area of Rotterdam whose population is comprised of relatively low educated people, low incomes and a low employment rate. Many immigrant workers settled in this area when they first came to Rotterdam, and in 1972 the locals rioted against the increasing

amount of boarding houses in the Afrikaanderwijk. Most housing today consists of small scale rented apartment buildings with 4 to 5 floors, with apartments that are often small, with sub-par building standards, poorly isolated. Crime rates are relatively high in the neighbourhoods on the south bank and many people don't feel comfortable being outside, in the public domain, after dark.

The problems in Rotterdam South are considered exceptional within the Netherlands. Therefore, the national government has, during the last years, set up a special programme for Rotterdam South, first called 'Pact op Zuid' ['Pact for South'] and now 'Nationaal Programma Kwaliteitsprong Zuid' ['National Program Quality leap South'], and has invested a lot of resources into the area: housing and infrastructure have improved and policing has intensified. The aim of the program is to lift Rotterdam South to the average level of the four biggest cities in terms of education, employment and income level.

However, the top-down, hard-on-crime approach has also resulted in the curbing of civil freedoms in Rotterdam. An example is that in many places it isn't allowed anymore to form groups of more than three people, thus curbing the right to associate. Also, Rotterdam was the first municipality in the Netherlands where the local police started to search people randomly. The ease with which the majority of the people of Rotterdam have accepted these invasive measures seems to collide with the local attitude of taking things on without further ado.

The self-image of the inhabitants of Rotterdam still reflects an emphasis on physical labour, masculinity, and a no-nonsense attitude. This attitude is best worded in the slogan of the biggest local football club, Feyenoord: 'Actions speak louder than words' ['Geen woorden maar daden']. Generally speaking, people came to Rotterdam to work and to better their material circumstances; they did not come to Rotterdam to think, reflect or debate. The downside to this 'attitude' is that if it does not change, then the city will continue to have a poor track record when it comes to active citizenship. The middle class, who is most likely to be politically involved, has always been relatively small, especially amongst a population where the medium level of education remains low, even though the city has several institutions for higher education, it still remains that most students move away after graduation and Rotterdam risks becoming a transitory city of people passing through. This is why the lack of a tradition of involved citizenship in Rotterdam formed an extra challenge for the co-creation projects described in this paper.

### 3. Co-creation and the Public Domain

The conceptual framework of the I-lab consisted of the combination of two concepts: 'co-creation' and 'the public domain'. To appropriate both the concept of co-creation and the public domain, the students discussed the meaning and significance of those concepts during a three-day session of so-called 'pressure cooker' discussions, presentations, brainstorming and screenings. The students themselves then defined the public domain as following. First, the public domain consists of different layers, from less to more to 'most' public. Second, the public domain governed by laws. Third, scale should always be taken into account. Fourth, you can access the public domain both

virtually and physically. Fifth and lastly, beside laws, the public domain consists of more implicit social rules or norms of behaviour. When it comes to co-creation, the students decided that first, there always has to be an initiator of this process, but sharing access to this process (co-authorship) should always be possible. Second, co-creation consists of simultaneous participation. Third, there might be unequal interests of participants. Fourth the partaking of participants is intentional. Fifth, the final result of the co-creation process is not determined in advance and sixth, the co-creation process as a whole should have added value for the participants. In their projects, students were free to choose whatever aspect of the public domain they wanted to enquire about, but co-creation was a required and added value part to the research. For the students, the definitions as described above functioned as a framework for their further investigation and design activities during the I-lab.

#### **4. The Zuidplein Shopping Mall: A web-oriented approach to co-creation**

About fifteen students participated in the I-lab. They formed small groups, researching an array of different topics such as: open source recipes for drugs, the search for common denominators in the public domain of Kralingen-Crooswijk (an neighbourhood in the north of Rotterdam with an affluent and a more deprived part), and the necessity to heighten awareness amongst children about the risks of sharing personal data online. For this article we will focus on one group of students in particular, the so-called 'Zuidplein' group, because this group's methods and projects give rise to comparison with the methods and projects Freehouse developed. Their project incorporated both new digital methods for co-creation as well as including a strong focus on the current problems and challenges of the (semi) public domain. The main goal of this student group was to come up with innovative and co-creative solutions to improve the social interaction between visitors of the 'Winkelcentrum Zuidplein', a large shopping mall, located in the southern part of Rotterdam. The shopping mall was built in the early 1960's, based on a rather utopian and functionalist architectural approach of an 'all in one shopping experience', consisting of an inward architecture, thereby lifting the main shopping area a few meters above the ground. Zuidplein and the surrounding area, which holds a theatre, a pool and other facilities, functions as a city centre for the south area of Rotterdam and surrounding towns.

The students were assigned to develop a product or concept that incorporated co-creation and was aimed at, or would question the public domain. While doing their research, the students were confronted with a lot of questions regarding Zuidplein. These questions concerned legal aspects (is it a public or a private space?), social (interaction between visitors, problems with youth), and cultural (different ethical backgrounds) issues. Their initial research strategy was to conduct interviews, based on a questionnaire, with visitors to the Zuidplein shopping mall and surrounding areas. The interviews gave the students useful insights into the visitors' experiences with the area, as well insight into the main problems and concerns as described by the shop owners and visitors. The practice of conducting interviews is an oft-used strategy of companies and organisations wanting more information about their customers. But, based on the criteria of the co-creation process, as defined by the students themselves, this method of

conducting interviews cannot be regarded as co-creation, because there is no clear indication of 'co-authorship'.

By using the method of the interview, Zuidplein visitors and shop owners became 'interviewees' rather than participants in the co-creation process, and responded accordingly, performing as an interviewee. But the students wanted to know more about the Zuidplein visitors' motivation to visit the mall, and their encounters while shopping. Therefore the students decided to recreate an interface for the ubiquitous social network site Facebook on a large poster (figure 1).



Figure 1. Facebook wall in Zuidplein shopping mall

They wrote down statements on the so-called 'wall' to get input from visitors. The students also provided stickers with the 'like-button' and felt-tip pens so visitors could express their opinions. The session took about two hours and it turned out that Facebook was well-known and recognized by visitors from different age groups and cultural backgrounds. By using the design of the Facebook wall, the students created a

cross-cultural and recognizable environment for research. The Facebook interface created a real physical space for a certain type of mostly online performed action, namely reacting, writing and using the 'like' button. By bringing the Facebook interface into an actual physical space, the students created a familiar space for (semi) public interaction and co-creation. Combined with the results from the interviews, the Facebook-wall approach produced a lot of insight into the motivations to visit Zuidplein, for instance to meet acquaintances, or to relax and to experience the shopping mall's design.

After they had completed this research phase, the students worked together to develop a concept that was aimed at improving the social interaction of the visitors. The students were interested in what ways they could use and influence emotions, to create a friendlier atmosphere in Zuidplein. The students wanted to know how Zuidplein's cultural diverse group of visitors would react to 'positive emotions'. So they decided to do another intervention, that they called 'love bombing'. During late night shopping, a group of five students entered the Zuidplein shopping mall, wearing heart-shaped sandwich boards, tossing heart shaped candy about through the mall and shouting "Liefde" ["Love"]. Every few minutes the students circled small groups of visitors and invited them to participate in a so called 'group hug'. If the visitors agreed, they were hugged by the student group. The 'love bombing' intervention was inspired by the free hugs campaign, which originated in 2004 when the Australian male, Juan Mann, was filmed giving people free hugs in the streets and in other public domains. In 2006 a film of the 'free hugs campaign' was uploaded on YouTube, where it gained widespread attention and went viral. The students combined this notion of giving free hugs to strangers in the public domain with a 'interactive flash mob', as described by Molnar (2009) where people suddenly gather in a public or semi-public space to perform a certain action, for instance, dancing, singing or freezing. Almost all visitors reacted positively to the 'love bombing' and a local newspaper even wrote an article on it (Daamen, 2011). The positive feedback strengthened the group and encouraged them to continue their research with new concepts for co-creation.

Both the 'love bombing' and the research with the Facebook wall resulted in the realization of a final concept, a technologically enhanced artificial tree that would enable people to exchange messages and stories by using the telephone horns that dangled from the tree. The tree, partly covered with LED's would be placed in the main square of the shopping mall, surrounded by benches. The content of the messages and stories people told would automatically be analysed by speech recognition software. Depending on the emotional content of the stories (determined by analysing certain words in the stories), the tree's colour will turn to either green (positive) or red (negative), thereby enabling the visitors of the Zuidplein shopping mall to become 'owner' and feel responsible for the overall atmosphere of the shopping mall. During the course of the project, the research phase turned out for the students to be the most challenging period. The method (co-creation) as the subject (public domain) was viewed as interesting and challenging, especially for the students in digital media, who had never before worked on a project in physical space.

The Facebook wall and the 'love bombing' flash mob are closely related to the criteria for co-creation, which the students defined earlier in the process during the pressure cooker session. The students put small pictures of themselves on the Facebook

wall, presenting themselves as initiators in the co-creation process, and therefore the Facebook wall enabled simultaneous participation. While visitors of the Zuidplein shopping mall were commenting and discussing the statements that were posted on the Facebook wall, they could look at each other's contributions. When comparing the process described above with the definition of co-creation mentioned in the fourth paragraph, it becomes clear that not all participants had the same interests during the initiated co-creation process. For instance, the students were focused on improving the overall 'atmosphere' of the shopping mall, while the intentions and goals of visitors partaking in this co-creation process might not be clear, and were no subject of enquiry.

The research or co-creation process of the students must also be understood from the perspective of the public domain, especially the urban public or semi-public space. The students are trained to become online communication specialists; the psychical space with its social interactions and legal restrictions required them to take a different approach to co-creation and the public domain. The methods as used by the students can be described as a web-oriented approach to co-creation in the public domain: it uses form, language and practices based on or made popular in the World Wide Web to co-create experiences and knowledge in collaboration with citizens in public space. The web-oriented approach is clearly visible in the so-called 'love bombing' strategy, which has its origins in two known practices within public space (free hugs and flash mobs) that gained widespread online popularity. Molnar stresses the importance of flash mobs because 'they provide insight into the intersection and interaction between new communications media and physical space' (Molnar, 2009). When we take a closer look at the web-oriented approach as conducted by the I-lab students, we can discern two methods to interfere or to change the daily routines and social norms of semi-public urban space and the public domain. The Facebook wall creates the opportunity for citizens to voice their individual opinions and concerns regarding the Zuidplein shopping mall. It stresses opinion, expression and individuality. The flash mob strategy was focused on the performance of togetherness and cross-cultural sameness; confronting visitors with what Molnar describes as the 'taken for granted, principally middle class norms of urban public space use' (Molnar, 2009).

One of the reasons of success of this web-oriented approach to co-creation in the public domain might be the average age of the inhabitants of Rotterdam. Rotterdam is the only large city in the Netherlands where the average age of its inhabitants doesn't increase, thus going against the national trend. In 2009 it was European Youth Capital of the year. Because in a co-creation process there has to be at least an initiator and participants, it clearly helped that the context of Rotterdam provides people in both categories that can initiate and participate in the web-oriented approach to co-creation in the public domain. To deepen our analysis we now will look at another approach to co-creation in the public domain.

#### **4. Freehouse: An artistic approach to co-creation in the public domain**

The Freehouse foundation is an organisation that helps people create their own environment. The core figure within Freehouse is professional artist Jeanne van Heeswijk. Central in her work is research into the meaning of art for the society at

large, and how it can be best articulated and implemented. Van Heeswijk has received much recognition for her work, including the Europrix and recently the Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change, and her work was included in the 2003 Venice Biennale. Freehouse focuses on the co-creation of the public domain, on engaging the local community with the shaping of their socio-economic surroundings, and attempts to design strategies to connect education, economy and culture with the aim of stimulation in transforming Rotterdam from a working class city into a post-industrial city. On their website they state their mission as such: 'Freehouse ... [engages itself in] developing and transforming the public space mostly on the basis of and with the help of this public space itself... It shifts the focus from the art object to the art objective. It sees art as a tool in a process of communication, making visible and enhancing cultural production. As far as Freehouse sees it, cultural production is the whole of activities with which people express their identity and with which they attempt to come to grips with their environment' (Van Heeswijk, 2012).

Since 2008 Freehouse has worked in the Afrikaanderwijk [Afrikaander neighbourhood] in the Feijenoord district in Rotterdam South. The central square in the neighbourhood is the Afrikaanderplein where many shops and eating places are located, and where twice a week a big market is held, where products from around the world are sold. On days the market is not held, the Afrikaanderplein was usually unused and uninviting. In Van Heeswijk's vision, squares and markets play a very important role, that of an agora, a social, cultural and economic meeting place for people. Van Heeswijk didn't see the residents of the Afrikaanderwijk as consumers of her work, but as co-producers and experts on the neighbourhood's needs and desires. Therefore, Freehouse took on the challenge of making the square livelier and more relevant for the surrounding neighbourhood by creating ways for artists, designers, local shops/ stall owners and other inhabitants to work together on creating new products and services. The strategy employed by Freehouse was to carry out a series of focused small interventions, to see what resonated with the locals and would be effective to turn the Afrikaanderplein into 'De markt van morgen' ['Tomorrow's Market']. One example of an enthusiastically welcomed intervention was the initiative to support local women to sell home cooked food at the market of which the ingredients were bought at the market as well. After that a successful catering service was set up with the women who ran their own kitchen, the Neighbourhood Kitchen, 'Wijkkeuken'. In order to stimulate the economical independence of the co-workers of the Wijkkeuken, who often didn't have much working experience or formal training, a co-op is currently being set up. One of the women that worked in the kitchen gained enough self-confidence to realise she had a marketable talent and started her own cake shop. Also, cloth bought on the market is being turned into garments that are sold at a shop in the neighbourhood that was started to sell local products. The garments were put on display for the neighbourhood to see during a runway show on the square, where locals were the models. The women also started a clothing repair service and have their own workshop, the 'Wijkatelier' (Van Heeswijk, 2011a & 2011b).

The strategies Freehouse employed made the potential skills and knowledge of people, who often didn't feel involved in decision making, more visible, thus empowering them. Although Jeanne van Heeswijk's was the initiator and her ideas were necessary to get Freehouse started, she, or Freehouse, did not by any means dictate, or



even anticipate, what the end results of the initial interventions made in the social-economical fabric of the neighbourhood would be. They worked with people who were unaccustomed to articulating their thoughts on how they would like their neighbourhood to be; or with those who were unaccustomed to be heard by local officials and who were often economically deprived. But because people felt their input was taken seriously and their talents and possibilities were emphasized, instead of their problems being emphasized, many welcomed the Freehouse project and their political awareness grew. Freehouse worked with the locals, instead of for them (Van Heeswijk, 2011b). The city administration and the national government seem to do just the latter. Although the intentions of the national program for Rotterdam South are good, it runs the risk of alienating the locals even further by focussing strongly on what is bad and what needs to be improved by importing resources from elsewhere, e.g., the new envisioned housing developments are often not aimed at the social climbers from the area, but at a wealthy middle class that currently doesn't live there.

The interventions initiated in the public domain of the Afrikaanderwijk by Freehouse, based on Van Heeswijk's strategies for co-creation, are considered very successful and fortunately the city administration and other stakeholders have generally been supportive of them, and continue to help so as to enlarge and prolong this success. Some of Freehouse's interventions were a violation of the strict regulations that the local administration imposes on the Rotterdam public domain, but these were often exceptionally tolerated in order not to frustrate the project.

Vital to the positive impact Freehouse could have in the Afrikaanderwijk is that they were visibly present in the neighbourhood and showed commitment to it by moving into several footholds close to the Afrikaanderplein and working on their projects for a few years. This way trust was gained, enthusiasm evoked, co-creation became possible and some of their interventions had unforeseen but welcomed spin-offs that added value. Therefore, the results Freehouse obtained match the criteria for co-creation formulated by the I-lab students.

## 5. Comparative Analyses

Given Rotterdam's context of relatively low income, low education, high unemployment rate and the top down approach of the local government, we now can scrutinize the conditions of successful co-creation processes in the public domain in Rotterdam by analysing both the artistic and the web-oriented approach to co-creation in the public domain. To do this we first need to question the very notion of 'co-creation in the public domain' itself: given the Rotterdam context has co-creation actual more impact than other forms of participation? To take a closer look at this question we will use Sherry R. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969). Arnstein remarks that 'there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process' (Arnstein, 1969). For Arnstein the redistribution of power is the main criterion that distinguishes the 'empty ritual' from real participatory practices. She states that 'participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the power holders to claim that all sides were considered, but

makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo' (Ibid.). Given Arnstein's perspective and based on the criteria for co-creation as described earlier, co-creation cannot have political aims because of the unequal interests of participants and because in the co-creation process the final result is not determined in advance. This creates an imbalance in power with regards to the people participating, and it lacks a clear orientation when it comes to achieving political goals. With Arnstein's critique in mind, the web-oriented approach to co-creation in the public domain as conducted by the I-lab students can be regarded as a depoliticized form of bringing people together to achieve a certain form of togetherness without a clear goal in mind. The Freehouse project stimulated people that are usually not involved in political processes to formulate their thoughts about the public domain, act upon those and lose their inhibitions about taking charge. Freehouse went beyond consulting the locals, but instead offered those that were interested a true partnership. Arnstein ranks 'partnership' as one of the forms of active citizens' power in the ladder of participation of citizens in social and/or governmental institutions (Arnstein, 1969). Therefore, it can be said that the strategies Freehouse employed to achieve co-creation in the public domain had excellent results.

We can reformulate which conditions determine successful co-creation processes in the public domain in Rotterdam, when we shift our focus from the goals (of participation) of the co-creation process to the methods used, and the time, skills and resources needed to initiate and participate in the co-creation process. We will call this 'co-creative capital'. The artistic approach to co-creation in the public domain can be successful, but it requires a considerable time investment from the initiator(s). The web-oriented approach to co-creation in the public domain might have potential because it makes use of forms, languages and practices that are performed on the World Wide Web. These are instantly recognised by the participants and can therefore be readily applied to the co-creation process. The web-oriented approach is less confined to a specific physical public domain and in that sense more 'mobile', depending on the role and the aim of the initiators. Although the scale of the students' project was much more limited, they managed to provoke positive responses in their target group. Both approaches have in common that the co-creative capital of initiators and participants is not only used to perform an array of co-creative practices in the public domain, for instance commenting or 'liking' on Facebook, organizing a runway show or working in a kitchen, but that it also enables the participants to envision for themselves how the public domain could or should look like. This means that co-creative capital for the public domain is aimed at *co-creating new possibilities*: different uses, practices and definitions of the public domain itself.

## 6. Conclusion

We argued that the effectiveness of a web-oriented approach to co-creation in the public domain is based on its recognizability and could be considered as a potentially highly accessible method to organize participation. The concept of co-creative capital can be used to argue that both the artistic and web-oriented approach to co-creation in the public domain can not only contribute to successful co-creation, but can also help

the participants redefining what the public domain means to them and what characteristics it should ideally have. From this perspective, new critical factors come in to play, for instance the amount of Facebook users and their connectivity might be an indicator of the potential success of co-creation processes. Therefore, it can be argued that in a city like Rotterdam with a lot of young people, a web-oriented approach to co-creation might be more effective than more traditional forms of participation in the public domain, such as town hall meetings or questionnaires. We therefore suggest further research on the relation between web-oriented co-creation processes and the physical urban public domain. We hope to continue our research in the next I-lab, starting in September 2012, which will be entirely focused on the Zuidplein mall.

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