By & for: Welcoming and Inclusive Spaces at De Voorkamer in Utrecht, the Netherlands

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Chapter 23
By & for: Welcoming and Inclusive Spaces at De Voorkamer in Utrecht, the Netherlands

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Abstract Contrasting the politics and narratives of Fortress Europe, hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets across Europe to delcare "#WeHaveSpace" for refugees and other newcomers. Social activists (defined broadly) have co-created—often only after fighting uphill battles—diverse spaces where newcomers can feel welcomed and participate in building new futures together with the local communities. This chapter reflects on one of these welcoming spaces, namely, De Voorkamer ("The Front Room") in Utrecht, the Netherlands. We illustrate the strategies used by the community for maintaining and redefining their meeting space. We reflect on the importance of location, place, and space in De Voorkamer's work from social design and socio-cultural geography perspectives. Finally, we offer some critical thoughts on the ongoing challenges of welcoming initiatives such as De Voorkamer in creating sustainable (as in long-lasting and futureproofed) inclusive spaces.

1 Introduction

Contrasting the politics and narratives of Fortress Europe, hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets across Europe, especially after the fire in the Moria refugee camp on Lesbos in 2020, declaring "#WeHaveSpace" for refugees and other newcomers (Fig. 1). Social activists (defined broadly) have co-created—often only after fighting uphill battles—diverse spaces where newcomers can feel welcomed and participate in building new futures together with the local communities. This chapter reflects on one of these welcoming spaces, namely, De Voorkamer ("The Front Room") in Utrecht, the Netherlands. De Voorkamer was established in 2016

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Fig. 1 "#WeHaveSpace"—a slogan commonly used by demonstrators calling for newcomer-welcoming politics across Europe (*Photo Source* Noordhollands Dagblad, 2020)

as an open and inclusive space, designed by and for its community, where cultures meet to learn, exchange, and co-create.

In the following, we present a brief history of De Voorkamer, explain its key principles, and provide some examples of its activities[1]. This important backbone of the community was disrupted as COVID-19 swept across Europe in 2020. Here, we illustrate the strategies used by the community to maintain and redefine their meeting space and reflect on the importance of location, place, and space in De Voorkamer's work from social design and sociocultural geography perspectives. Finally, we offer some critical thoughts on the ongoing challenges of welcoming initiatives such as De Voorkamer in creating sustainable, inclusive spaces.

[1] This chapter summaries the history, design principles and work of De Voorkamer. More details can be found in Raviv, van der Mijl and Woods (2021). For updated information of the initiative https://devoorkamer.org/en/.

2 Designing Inclusive Spaces

De Voorkamer is an initiative developed by two of the authors of this chapter (Pim and Shay), who are social designers and researchers[2]. Out of our discontent with the way newcomers were perceived and treated, we worked to co-create, alongside members of our diverse community, a safe place in which to belong and make new experiences. De Voorkamer opened its doors in 2016 in Utrecht's Lombok neighborhood. The initial objective was to provide an inclusive space to facilitate and stimulate the talents of refugees, asylum seekers with residence permits, and people living in asylum-seeker centers. We also aimed to connect people to the local community through their talents.

As social designers, we use design processes as a starting point for creating a new inclusive space. Specifically, we practice "social design," which emphasizes working *with* people rather than *for* them (Sommer, 1983). In her paper on designing inclusive cities, Julienne Hanson (2004) compares the characteristics of inclusive design with expert-driven design processes (Fig. 2), drawing on the work of Sommer (1983) and Imrie and Hall (2001).

At De Voorkamer, we work with designers' eyes and an emphasis on the creative process. Our approach allows us to observe and make sense of a given condition or situation in new and innovative ways. In generating ideas and designs from the observations around us, we believe that designers have the power and the responsibility to challenge, influence, and reinvent conventions and status quos.

We developed our initiative using design as a methodology by actively and prominently using our designer tools in different respects. We have designed an approachable and personable space, questioning assumptions about the spatial characteristics and perceived limitations of community centers and spaces. We have designed new approaches to share our stories and experiences, and to communicate our work to larger audiences with which we wish to engage. We have designed a model (or approach) for events and programs that addresses the challenges newcomers and locals face in meaningfully participating in society. Through this methodology, we actively invite those who engage with our initiative to be more than passive participants: we consider each participant a potential co-creator. This facilitates the making of an inclusive space designed not just for, but equally by, its participants. Together with the rest of the team, we see ourselves as enablers, mediators, and coordinators.

The role of design and the creative process in the De Voorkamer project is to encourage exchange and stimulate participation—crucial ingredients for the building of an open, equal, and inclusive community. Through a variety of projects, such as weekly language cafes and game nights, storytelling events, photography and visual

[2] Our co-creative journey for this book chapter began when the third author, Maggi, learned about the work of De Voorkamer through her research project Welcoming Spaces https://www.welcomingspaces.eu/. The chapter builds on a conversation we began while preparing for and during a roundtable discussion 'Digital practices, materialities and migrant belongings' Maggi organised for the international conference 'Migrant Belongings – Digital Practices and the Everyday' in April 2021.

Inclusive design	Non-inclusive design
Concern with meaning and context	Concern with style and ornament
Participatory	Non-participatory
Orientated to people	Orientated to organizations or institutions
User-centered design	Owner as exclusive client
Low cost	High cost
Bottom-up design approach	Top-down design approach
Democratic	Authoritarian
Seeking to change design attitudes	Conforming to prevailing design attitudes
Use of appropriate technology	Use of high technology
Use of alternative models of the development process	Development process controlled by corporate interests
Heterogeneity	Homogeneity

Fig. 2 Inclusive and non-inclusive design (Hanson 2004, p. 22)

art and design projects, and music events, De Voorkamer facilitates creativity and talents, with the aim of establishing common ground to connect people from different backgrounds and co-create new commonalities, the community and all its activities. "By & For" is the underlining principle of this endeavor. We do so by working with small groups to establish valuable connections, through which participants share and exchange their inspiration and talents. In collaboration with local professionals, we design meetings and projects that bring our space to life and create events and objects that facilitate our activities. De Voorkamer changes its function, content, and objects according to the fascinations and interests of its participants.

3 Elements of Inclusive Spaces

Since its early days, De Voorkamer has evolved both through the lessons learned in our pilot project as well as those we continue to learn every day. Guided by these lessons and our project plans in the daily life of the initiative, we are rarely preoccupied with conventional principles and terminology—we just work! Reflecting on and distilling our past journey, we have identified a set of central elements that have shaped our work. At the core, as shown in Fig. 3, there are six key ***building blocks***: *People, Program, Location, Space, Communication,* and *Network*. Each building block bears

Fig. 3 Building blocks and design principles of De Voorkamer. (*Source* De Voorkamer)

a series of nine core ***design principles***: *Approachability, Cultural/Contextual Sensitivity, Diversity, Gradual Engagement, Flexibility, Narrativity, Inclusivity, Ownership,* and *Visibility.* These principles form the common thread that runs through our work and guides us in decision-making processes.

3.1 Six Key Building Blocks

The six building blocks are intimately interrelated and interdependent on one another.

People—By definition, people are at the core of any social initiative. How an initiative engages with the people who participate in its program has a distinct bearing on its character and, ultimately, its success. Human interaction is the crux of all of our work. We reach out to new members of the community by establishing personal relationships with them. We do not recruit members; rather, we build a community, which is an ongoing process of personal engagement. As a meeting space, the fundamental activities of De Voorkamer involve hosting people, connecting people with one another, mapping people's talents and interests, creating with people, and making them feel welcome and at home.

Program—The program, or series of programs, of any initiative is the vehicle with which it aims to fulfill its objectives. Applying certain design principles when creating programs can ensure that they contribute to the larger intentions of the initiative, while achieving their immediate intended outcomes. In the case of De Voorkamer, the program is a crucial ingredient that makes the place into a vibrant meeting space. Since the start of the initiative, we have organized and hosted different activities that might not seem to be our core practice, but that eventually contributed to the formation of a community and the involvement of that community in talent development processes as a way to meet other people. For example, while the language cafe and football are not our core "businesses," we invest in such activities as we feel they are a good way to introduce people to the space and the initiative. Later on, when people know the space and its people, they are more likely to feel comfortable and motivated to participate in other, more complex activities that entail a higher level of engagement. Therefore, program is a crucial element of place-making. The programs of De Voorkamer are generated in many ways, with co-creation as a fundamental approach throughout. Internally, program initiators may develop ideas alongside participants and volunteers, while these roles may equally be reversed, with participants and volunteers introducing the ideas to be developed. A further strand of programs is introduced from external sources, as we collaborate with groups wishing to run additional programs, for example, film festivals, dance classes, and training focused on work and education.

Location—Finding a suitable location can have a major impact on the potential success of an initiative, and considerations ranging from cost and accessibility need to be weighed and balanced against one another. Although a central location can ensure that many people will find their way to the place, either deliberately or while *en route* to somewhere else, a more residential location helps the initiative become embedded in the local community. As these considerations differ greatly from place to place, exploratory research is important prior to choosing a location. As we wanted to provide a meeting place for newcomers to Utrecht, proximity to the asylum seekers' center was one of the main considerations in our decision-making process. Finding the optimal location in the multicultural neighborhood of Lombok has proved to be a fundamental factor that has facilitated and amplified De Voorkamer's work within the city.

Space—Here we refer to the physical properties of the spaces of encounter. Each space that an initiative inhabits can be highly tailored to individual programs or decorated to personal tastes, but it should also be designed according to principles

that will facilitate the aims of the initiative. Experimenting with the various ways in which an initiative uses space is also a valuable exercise to help identify the specific characteristics and qualities that may be required. As the content of our work is meant to change according to the ideas and projects designed with the community, we furnished the space with light, modular furniture that can be readily moved around. Every week, De Voorkamer is used by many groups in different ways—which can also create chaos and hinder the collaboration among different community members. We "solved" this problem by creating a map to help each group put the furniture back where it originally was. Such a simple and practical solution can be seen as a tool for designing and maintaining an inclusive space.

As shown in Fig. 4, De Voorkamer has a large window that faces the street. People who have been involved in the initiative consider it an iconic marker that signals it as a welcoming space. Other elements that community members consider as welcoming are the colorful furniture, the façade, and the texts written on the walls in various languages. The windows allow passers-by and team members to communicate with each other through hand gestures and smiles. This transparency triggers people's curiosity to learn about the place and people often come in for a coffee and a chat. Our walk-in approach is one of the features of De Voorkamer as a welcoming space.

Communication—Social media and digital platforms are an ever-increasing asset that initiatives must take advantage of. From the outset, our communication has centered on being visual, playful, personal, open, colorful, and fun. By establishing a voice and an identity for De Voorkamer, we have attracted an audience beyond those who you might consider the "usual suspects" in social initiatives. We have also used this tone and approach in communicating our successes and work among our network and to the wider interest in our initiative.

Network—A fundamental requirement for initiatives when starting out is the ability to form, become part of, and then draw on a wide network. Such networks

Fig. 4 Front window of De Voorkamer. (*Photo Source*: authors' own photo)

can assist in getting initiatives off the ground, as well as provide support and amplify the impact their output can have—especially in the case of initiatives engaged in social outreach programs, which by their nature, cannot and should not work in isolation. In Utrecht, we identified early on the need to be part of a larger movement. The city has a wealth of initiatives and individuals working hard with similar objectives. By working with a network, we have expanded our reach and impact. We have collaborated with a wide range of partners, organizations, funds, companies, and individuals from different sectors and with different focuses, ranging from local government, to universities, NGOs, cultural organizations, and grassroots collectives. Working at the intersection of different fields and disciplines is a factor that contributes to developing De Voorkamer as an inclusive space.

3.2 Nine Design Principles

Each of the building blocks is characterized by several of the nine design principles we have identified as guidelines when organizing, coordinating, and designing an inclusive space. In the following, we use the building block "Space" to illustrate how the design principles are worked out[3].

Space—*Approachability, Diversity, Flexibility, Inclusivity,* and *Narrativity* are particularly relevant to the building block Space.

Approachability—A person's perception of a space can greatly influence how they approach and engage with a program and the people within it; a person's behavior in a formal private space will differ greatly from that in an informal public setting, such as a park. It is important to understand the character of a space to ensure it will be approachable, open, and safe for the audience you wish to attract.

Diversity—A space can be diverse in various ways—the number of programs it can accommodate, the different groups of people who use it, its different configurations, etc. However, the expressive qualities of space can also be diverse, bringing together arrays of forms and colors and styles. A diverse space can help ensure that all the people and functions of an initiative are brought together.

Flexibility—The range of variables encountered in many initiatives means it is crucial to have a flexible space so as to accommodate as many scenarios as possible. A highly programmed and designed space may become a negative rather than a positive factor if the initiative begins to draw more people to the space than it is designed for, or is unable to serve the changing needs of its participants.

Inclusivity—Encouraging participants to engage in the way a space is used and even designed can help instill their sense of ownership and belonging to an initiative, further promoting the inclusivity of the space. This can also help address the sense of hierarchy and ownership that participants may perceive vis-à-vis the initiative designer. Visitors to De Voorkamer encounter objects made in collaboration with

[3] For the other design principles, please refer to Raviv, van der Mijl and Woods (2021).

community members, such as cups, stools, tables, lamps, plates, curtains, and a bookshelf. Figure 5 shows the co-creation of a narrative wooden table.

Narrativity—Depending on the nature of an initiative or an individual program's aims, displaying the nature of, and activities within, a space may or may not be

Fig. 5 A narrative wooden table co-created by Shurooq Al-Qasemi and Pim van der Mijl, first as part of the theater play "Hoe ik talent voor het leven kreeg" ("How I got talent for life") and now a part of the interior of De Voorkamer (photo source: authors' own photo)

desirable. Do participants require anonymity and privacy, or is it important to exhibit and narrate the activities? What can a first-time visitor learn about the initiative by looking around the place? For example, the walls of De Voorkamer are decorated with many small portraits, all in the same format and style, which makes them engaging and not too "messy." People who enter the space like to see whether they recognize the people in the photos.

It should be emphasized that these block principle combinations are far from fixed. The community of De Voorkamer continually reviews the principles to ensure that the initiative achieves its full potential. Changes are also sometime imposed—by, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic.

4 De Voorkamer as a Meeting Space in the Time of COVID-19

COVID-19 meant that De Voorkamer had to reorient its core principle of meeting in physical space to learn, exchange, and co-create. The community adopted the following strategies to maintain, and even re-create, its meeting place and enhance the sense of belonging among community members during the pandemic.

Adopting a multi-local approach—Utrecht is fortunate to have quite a wide range of cultural and social spaces. As a community that runs such a space, we often struggle with finding common ground and opportunities to collaborate with other welcoming spaces in the city. In a way, every organization that manages a space wants to focus on its programming, attracting its own audience and ensuring a lively and active place of its own. The pandemic period opened up opportunities for collaboration, based on mutuality, among these "islands" at a new level. Initiatives with outdoor space hosted other partners, so that they could hold programs in a safe way for more people. Furthermore, sharing spaces also meant sharing programs across these communities at a time when many programs had to be cancelled. Collaboration was an effective way to create a lively program in a relatively short time.

A shift in thinking of "success" and "impact" as a sociocultural meeting space—During the enforcement of social distancing, we were not allowed to meet in large groups. Yet, we were forced to, and eventually appreciated this chance to, rethink the notion of "success" and "impact" in our work. Instead of seeing large-scale events as the only way to broaden our community, we now explore how to intensify our small-scale and recurring gatherings and workshops to boost the quality of the interactions and relationships built within De Voorkamer. We now put even more emphasis on quality, intimacy, and interaction and have started working in small groups or even one on one. While we consider this shift meaningful, and one that should be maintained in post-COVID times, we are also bound by some funders who measure our success in terms of numbers and growth in visitors.

Exploring the potential of online/offline engagements—The constantly changing regulations highlighted the importance of flexible working methods. We

designed new programs in a hybrid form of online/offline engagement. Programs function through group sessions and smaller groups, and sometimes in pairs, when there are exchanges and exercises between two people. The group sessions can be done online (if necessary) while participants are invited to meet up offline (if possible) for the one-on-one exercises. Online/offline space is seen and used more in intersection or conflation (cf. Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh, 2017, and the chapter by Leung et al. in this book). Participant evaluations show that they appreciate this compromising strategy, especially when there is a good balance between group events and one-on-one interactions. A good balance of these interactions, combined with content-driven programming, has proven to stimulate exchange and, in turn, a sense of belonging. Nonetheless, physical meetings are still far more valuable for sense of belonging and collectivity.

Designing creative solutions for offline events to stimulate playful encounters— During the pandemic, we were also pressed to find creative solutions during offline events to stimulate playful encounters. We did this by using the Corona restrictions as design principles. During the summer of 2020, we co-created with social designer Pauline Wiersema a special summer holiday program "Een Vleugje Vakantie" ("A Dash of Holiday"). As shown in Fig. 6, we tried to create a holiday experience for participants while they remained in Utrecht.

Pauline organized a tour through our neighborhood of Lombok, sharing personal stories and the home places of our community members. At the end of the tour, participants sent their postcards out and a dialog was created around a green screen showing the visited places. We asked participants which place they would like to travel to and why. Pauline then placed these places on the screen and let participants virtually travel to these destinations.

We thus turned the inability to travel into a playful element of the program.

5 Conclusions

In this chapter, we presented the six building blocks and nine design principles on which the cultural space and community of De Voorkamer is based. These key elements guide the building and maintenance of De Voorkamer as an open, inclusive, and creative space where people from all backgrounds—newcomers, not-so-newcomers and locals, and across other axes of differences such as gender, class, age, religion, and abilities/disabilities—can share their visions of, and efforts towards, achieving their new, shared futures. Charting the initiative's path up to now, one and a half years into the COVID-19 pandemic, we are reminded that community-building is an ongoing and never finished process. Global and local contexts change, people come and go, there are moments when the community is active and thriving, and moments where there seems to be less energy and involvement. This should be taken into consideration when thinking about the sustainability, growth, and impact of an initiative. Should numerical indicators, such as number of participants or activities, be used? How can we "measure" success and impact in other ways, perhaps in a more

Fig. 6 "Een Vleugje Vakantie" ("A Dash of Holiday"). (*Photo Source* authors' own photo)

organic and experience-centered manner? The identification of a set of core values, as operationalized in the building blocks and design principles of De Voorkamer, helps to chart the directions for future engagements.

The pandemic has also afforded us new insights into inclusion and place. As mobility was severely constrained for most people during the lockdown, the importance of micro-spaces—or "hyper local" places, such as neighborhoods—was made more obvious. Since the focus of De Voorkamer is quite local, the community members managed to maintain contact with, and even meet each other, during the pandemic. Initiatives working at different spatial levels might have had other experiences.

The dynamic nature of such a welcoming space became clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. De Voorkamer was pushed to reflect on the fundamental meaning and workings of such a social cultural space. How should "success" and "impact" be defined in a sociocultural space? And how can we achieve this? The reminder that quality reigns over quantity raises questions about what and how future programs should be conducted. Yet, initiatives do not always have complete freedom to depart from head-counting, as they are constrained by how funders measure success. The strategies implemented by De Voorkamer in dealing with the challenges brought by the pandemic not only help bridge this period, but they also serve as impulses for the initiative to be experimental and creative, also when the pandemic is finally behind us. As far as place and space are concerned, sharing (spaces with partner initiatives) and diversification (exploring online/offline as interesting spaces) are seen as new, productive ways. We can thus also see how the COVID-19 crisis has brought us new opportunities through the continuous re-creation of the welcoming space.

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