

A Social Service Design Approach

# towards depolarisation

Master Thesis | Cato van Lieshout

Design for Interaction



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# towards depolarisation

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**Author**

Cato van Lieshout

**Supervisors**

**Chair**

Dr. Mulder, I.J. (Ingrid)  
Human Centred Design (HCD)  
Co-designing Social Change

**Mentor**

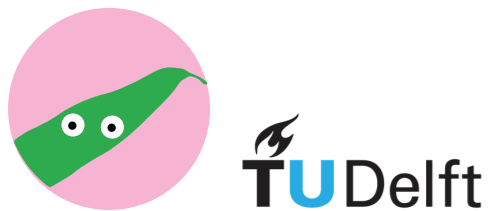
Ir. Mulder, S.S. (Sander)  
Design, Organisation and Strategy (DOS)  
Creative Processes

**In collaboration with**

Snijboon, Social Service Design Agency

Company Mentor  
Frouke Richter  
Founder of Snijboon

Maliestraat 7  
3581SH, Utrecht  
The Netherlands



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”

**One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, greed, arrogance, and ego. The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, kindness, generosity, and faith. The same fight going on inside you is inside every other person too.” The child thought about it for a moment and then asked, “Which one will win?” The old man replied, “The one you feed.**

(Coleman, 2021)

“

# Introduction

**Chapter 1: Project Context, Scope & Objective**

**Chapter 2: Project Approach**

This introductory section is divided into two chapters: 'Context, Scope and Objective' and 'Project Approach'. The reader becomes familiar with the project's context, the formulated scope, and the objective and design challenge that follows from it. This chapter concludes with the embedding of this in research questions to move forward.

The next chapter presents the project's approach, including how the research questions will be answered and how the design challenge will be tackled.



# Chapter 1

## Project Context, Scope & Objective

This chapter defines the project's context, scope, and objectives, shaping the design challenge and research questions. Defining the problem clearly at the start is important because it guides what I want to accomplish with this project.

### 1.1 Project Context

Polarisation increasingly shapes daily life, often arising from subtle interactions. Public debate amplifies extremes and limits nuance. Polarisation in this project is defined as a conceptual and ideological distance between groups culminating in an us-versus-them dynamic where opposing groups reject nuance and accelerate toward extreme positions.

Grouping with like-minded individuals is natural (Hogg et al., 2008), but when combined with polarising debates, it can restrict nuanced or uncertain expression. People often feel compelled to take sides. This environment makes it harder to express uncertainty, appreciate nuance, and hinders constructive dialogue (Siev et al., 2024). Communication suffers as individuals struggle to listen across differences (Hendriks et al., 2018), especially where nuanced expression is vital.

Diverse societies experience tension when norms conflict, especially when boundaries are unclear (Yampolsky & Amiot, 2016; Mohyeddin, Z., 2024). This project examines how social design fosters nuance, reflection, and connection (Hendriks et al., 2018). Rather than resolving differences, it focuses on how designers can foster listening and dialogue. Using intersectional resonance, which welcomes multiple truths (Kulundu, 2018) and acknowledging pluralism, the project investigates how to support coexistence and dialogue while maintaining personal boundaries.

This project investigates whether and how design can foster interactions that promote nuance, reflection, and connection despite differences. While attention to polarisation is growing, most depolarisation methods are political, communicative, or psychological, with few studies considering how designers might address polarisation in daily life. While design-led methods show promise in addressing wicked problems (Sanders & Stappers, 2013; Van Der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020), their application to polarisation remains under explored (Gessler & Sharp, 2026; Wigger et al., 2026). This gap shapes the project's focus: to define the potential of design to mitigate everyday polarisation, which will be scoped in the next paragraph. A deeper understanding of the dynamics, mechanisms and how design can intervene is sought in the section: Understanding Polarisation.



## 1.1 Project Scope

This project seeks to provide clear, actionable frameworks that bridge the gap between theoretical insights into polarisation and the practical needs of design practitioners operating in polarised environments. Specifically, it will translate academic knowledge into design-led research at the interaction level. It aims to show that a social service design approach can help practitioners like Snijboon foster depolarisation in their work.

### Snijboon

This assignment is done for and with the client Snijboon. It is a social service design agency that guides ambitious system-changers through co-creation processes with curiosity. Instead of taking issues off their clients' hands and returning them once a solution has been found, they aim to let their clients experience design thinking first-hand. This helps clients look at social issues differently, with energy and curiosity.

My collaboration with Snijboon shaped part of the focus and methodology of my project. While Snijboon already works intuitively with dialogue, empathy, and interaction, these approaches are largely experience-based and context-dependent. This project contributes by translating these intuitive practices into a structured, theoretically grounded framework that can be explained, replicated, and evaluated. In doing so, it supports Snijboon in scaling its impact without losing its pragmatic focus. This will be established through a design-led methodology (approach in which problem solving uses creativity, user experience, and iterative design to guide strategy and decisions), theoretical analysis and frameworks, and Snijboon's guidance. The methodology will be explained more in the next chapter.

### Scope

This project will intervene at the interaction level. It will address direct interaction between Snijboon and the user, using design to address the psychological and social consequences of a polarised system. The aim is to design an intervention, process, or platform that transforms a polarised environment. Designers can then minimise dehumanising factors and foster mutual respect. This can contribute to meaningful, lasting change in how individuals engage with one another in a polarised context. In small steps, this helps our society depolarise.

This project is part of a Master's Design for Interaction graduation project at the TU Delft. For that, the scope is estimated at 100 days to execute the project individually. Given the thesis's 100-day scope, it focuses on measuring immediate capacity shifts rather than long-term behaviour change, prioritising qualitative insights over broad quantitative data. In collaboration with Snijboon, it targets interaction-level influence rather than policy interventions. This ensures the methodology remains practical, actionable, and implementable for social design agencies rather than aspirational.

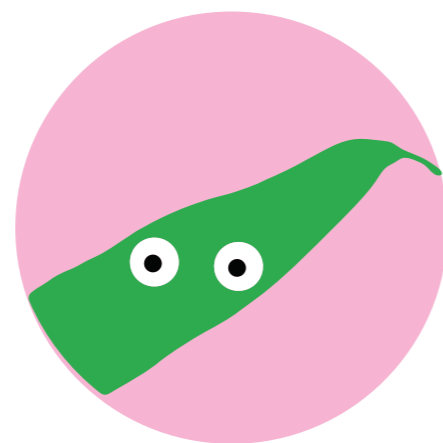


Figure 1: Logo Snijboon.

## 1.2 Project Objective

### Objective

With this project, I want to move beyond the obvious solution of simply increasing social cohesion when designing for depolarisation, using design-led research and participatory methods. And doing so by designing solutions that actively foster mutual respect and looking for common ground among competing groups without forcing consensus.

In this context, respect involves valuing the legitimacy of different perspectives and recognising the shared human vulnerability while under pressure of polarisation. The intention is to address the underlying frustrations and issues that fuel polarisation, aiming for a small but meaningful step towards depolarisation.

### Design Challenge

The project addresses the design challenge of how social designers can co-create a space or experience for Utrecht's polarised citizens that fosters constructive interaction and mutual understanding among individuals with diverse perspectives.

### Literature Research Questions

Following the objective and challenge, the central question in this thesis is:

**How can design-led methods be used to create social spaces or experiences that foster nuance, mutual respect, and constructive interaction between people with different perspectives in everyday polarised contexts?**

To clarify the underlying assumptions of this question, the following sub-questions structure the literature review needed to form the theoretical foundation for the design choices.

- How is polarisation defined, and what mechanisms and drivers shape how people navigate everyday polarised situations?
- How does polarisation suppress nuance, reduce openness, and intensify pressures to take sides?
- What factors influence emotional safety, boundary-setting, and people's willingness to express uncertainty?
- How can design mediate tensions and enable interaction qualities that reduce othering and support coexistence?

### Moving Forward

The context has been established, and the design challenge has been defined along with its research questions. While these questions help provide structure, they cannot guide or organise the design project on their own.

The next chapter describes how these questions will be addressed and how the design challenge will be approached. It introduces a sectioned approach that starts with a theoretical look at polarisation and leads to practical solutions.



### Design Challenge

How can social designers co-create a space or experience for Utrecht's polarised citizens that fosters constructive interaction and mutual understanding among individuals with diverse perspectives?





# Chapter 2

## Project Approach & Methodology

### Reading Guide

This thesis follows a seven-section structure (excluding the introduction) shown in Figure 2. The project moves from a broad theoretical view of polarisation to a specific, reframed design challenge informed by fieldwork with relevant stakeholders.

Each section answers a specific sub-question, stated on the first page and answered on the last. Chapter 2 explains the different sections in more detail. Each chapter begins with a short introduction about what has been and will be discussed, and ends with a brief summary ('Move Forward' parts of what comes next; these summaries use the colour of the relevant section.

Depolarisation is a complex challenge. To tackle it, I follow a structured, step-by-step process that helps me understand the issue before acting. This chapter explains that approach. The work is divided into seven sections, beginning with theory, then moving through context analysis, lived-experience research, and system mapping, and finishing with intervention development.

Each section builds on the previous one. This ensures that design choices rely on evidence, not assumptions. With this base, I can use both an analytical approach and Snijboon's intuitive design methods during the project.

### 2.1 Project Sections

As mentioned in the Scope, this project follows a design-led approach. Figure 2 visually represents the project approach. The following pages detail each section, clarifying both what will be done and why these methods were

chosen to address the design challenge. The main limitations are the 100-day timeframe and that only one person will execute the project. Section colours correspond with the report's theme for that section.

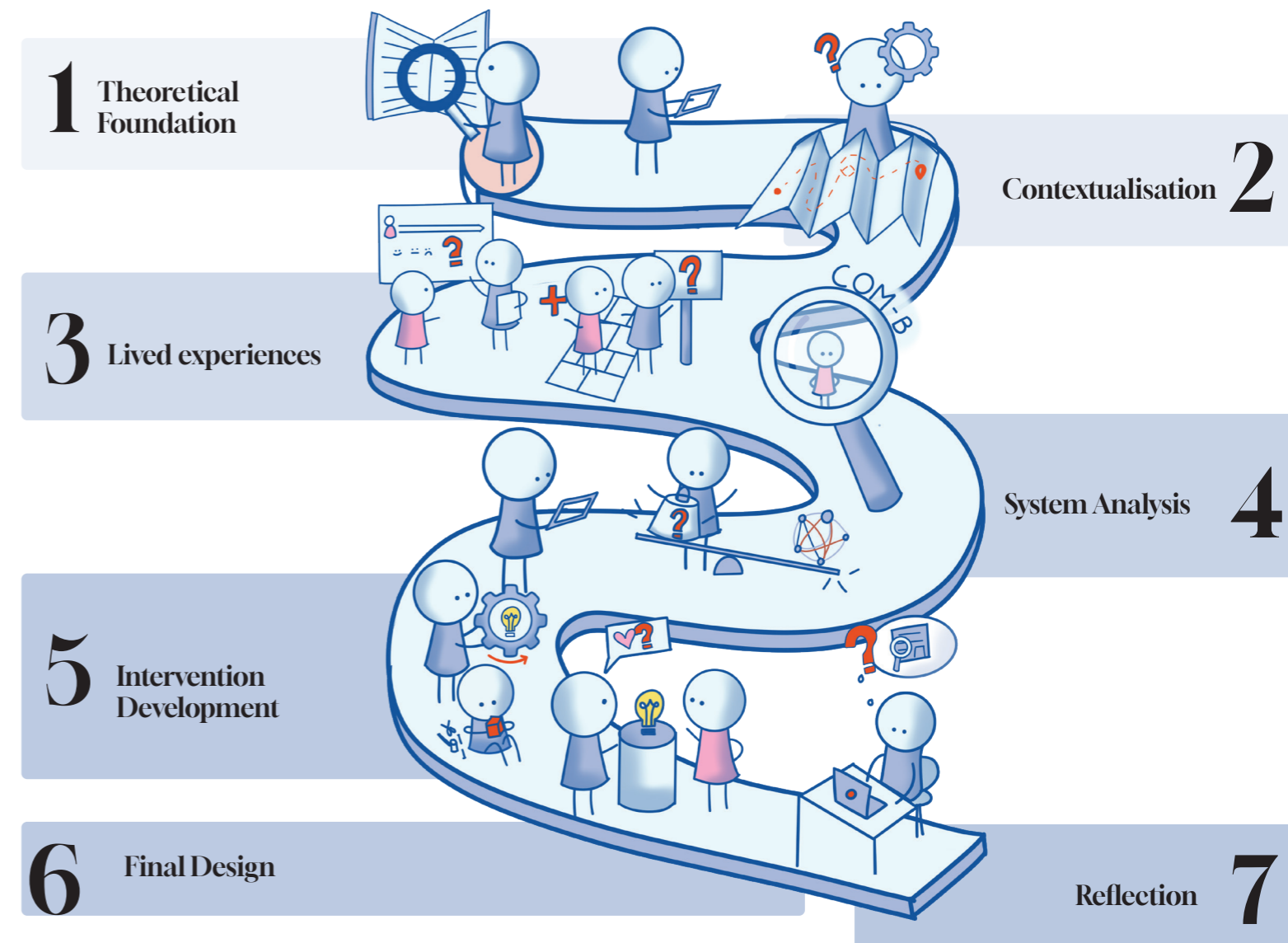


Figure 2: Process visual of this project.



## Section 1: Theoretical Foundation (p. 22-45)

First, the theory of polarisation will need to be understood, and the key terms clearly defined. A systematic literature review across multiple disciplines will be conducted, including social psychology, political science, design research and conflict resolution. Polarisation appears differently in each context. The learned depolarisation principles would be translated, adapted, and tested different in each of these contexts. Therefore, the project requires a concrete polarisation context where theory and practice meet, and abstract principles are translated into actionable design. In line with the theory, this section situates the project in a specific context, explaining why it is important to both society and academic research. A comparative case study will examine multiple depolarisation initiatives across contexts to identify shared interaction qualities, laying the foundation for the design.

In this first section, the core question is: **What is polarisation, and how can social design address it?**

### Why this approach?

Polarisation isn't contained within one discipline—it operates simultaneously at psychological, social, and political levels. A mono-disciplinary approach risks missing crucial intersections, like how institutional opacity triggers fear (Carleton, 2016), which design can address. Examining existing initiatives reveals what's already working and what gaps remain, preventing wasted effort on reinventing solutions while building a foundation grounded in proven principles.

## Section 2: Contextualisation (p. 46-67)

To understand the dynamics of the chosen context, desk research will be conducted on quantitative data and policy documents to understand how the current situation creates a breeding ground for polarisation. The specific ecosystem will be mapped through stakeholder mapping and stakeholder interviews to reveal power structures and dependencies, sources of tension, cascading pressures, and why polarisation emerges structurally.

The core question in this section is: **How does polarisation manifest in the selected context?**

### Why this approach?

Polarisation emerges from relationships and system structures, not isolated actors. Standalone policy analysis or surveys might capture frustrations but miss why and where the system generates polarisation in the first place. Mapping power relations and cascading pressures through interviews and desk research reveals structural patterns that individual-focused methods cannot uncover (Koch et al., 2023). This contextualisation establishes the what (numbers on scarcity, waiting times and allocation rules) before testing the why and how through lived experiences.

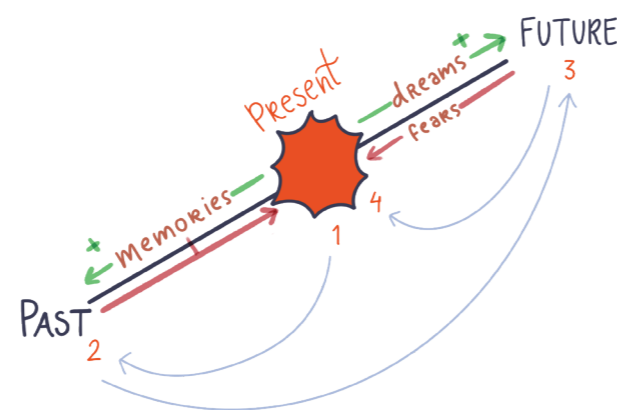


Figure 3: Path of Expression (Sanders & Stappers, 2013)

## Section 3: Lived Experiences (p. 68-121)

This section shifts from theory and context to the lived reality of polarisation. Exploratory street interviews will serve as a qualitative diagnostic tool to capture the current state of polarisation, identify which groups are most affected, collect emotional responses, and contextualise data through real human experiences. After identifying groups in high polarisation tension, selected polarised groups will be analysed to uncover emotional realities, understand the polarised dynamic, and identify the latent needs of those navigating the crisis.

For in-depth generative interviews, Sanders & Stappers' (2013) Context Mapping methodology will be used, treating participants as experts in their experience and enabling deep reflection through the Path of Expression framework (Figure 3). Context mapping requires a generative tool; here, journey mapping will be used, which helps participants discuss their experiences by linking actions, feelings, thoughts, and system touch points. The interviews will focus on participants' perceptions of the housing context, deliberately keeping polarisation out of focus to allow authentic frustrations and instances of blame to emerge organically. For the more vulnerable scapegoating group, semi-structured interviews will be held in a safe, home-like setting to encourage authentic sharing about sensitive experiences. Interview findings will be mapped to a simplified model to navigate and address identified frustrations, needs, and obstacles in the polarised context.

The section concludes by returning to the lived polarisation on the street. A street intervention using dot voting will gauge polarisation, surface nuance, identify the presence of a 'silent middle,' and test openness to dialogue. The understanding of explicit and implicit polarisation of this section informs reflection on the design challenge from Chapter 1.

The core question in this section is: **What are the underlying frustrations, needs, and perceptions driving the polarised tension?**

### Why this approach?

Street interviews quickly test whether the theory aligns with reality, determine whether the housing allocation context is suitable for design, and assess the stage of polarisation before investing in deeper research. Direct questioning about polarisation would miss the emotional and tacit knowledge that drives it. Context mapping (Sanders & Stappers, 2013) accesses this by focusing on everyday experiences, allowing latent frustrations and moments of othering to emerge naturally rather than through prompted responses. Journey mapping proves particularly valuable here because it prepares data for systemic analysis. Elizarova & Kahn (2018) show that journey mapping and COM-B work well together, creating a seamless link between lived experience research and the behavioural modelling in Section 4. Semi-structured interviews with vulnerable groups prioritise safety, honour their unique stories, and adjust to their comfort levels. The street intervention reveals whether a silent middle exists, those caught between polarised extremes, which fundamentally changes intervention strategy. Triangulating individual stories and public sentiment grounds both design and theory in reality.



## Section 4: Systemic Analysis (p. 122-137)

This section structures the findings from all previous sections into a systemic model that reveals feedback loops, causal relationships, and strategic intervention points, using a hybrid methodology: the COM-B behavioural framework combined with leverage-point analysis. Unlike pure system dynamics, COM-B links individual actions to systemic patterns (Michie et al., 2011), providing structure for behavioural complexity and flexibility for mapping social systems. Alongside the COM-B modelling, leverage point theory will be used to address the complexity of polarisation. Based on the analysis, the design challenge will be refined to link lived experience to system dynamics, provide clear direction for intervention development, and establish boundaries.

The core question in this section is: *Where and how should we intervene in this complex, polarised system?*

### Why this approach?

Polarisation requires more than linear solutions (De Marchi, 2022; Burgess, 2021). Wicked problems resist linear solutions because they involve complex feedback loops that reinforce their causes (R. J. A. Murphy & Jones, 2021). Combining COM-B behavioural modelling with leverage-point analysis bridges the qualitative depth from Section 3 to strategic design requirements.

As established in Section 3, Elizarova & Kahn (2018) show that journey mapping and COM-B are a fruitful combination, translating behavioural complexity into systemic variables for analysis. Meadows' (1997) leverage point framework then reveals high-impact intervention points, moving from shallow interventions to deep leverage points accessible for social service designers like Snijboon.

Using this method reveals why the problem persists, how to break negative cycles, where positive cycles can be activated, what ripple effects to expect and how to monitor this all. Most depolarisation approaches are political, communicative, or psychological (Gessler & Sharp, 2026). Few consider how designers can deliberately influence polarisation through interaction design. This section combines research from Sections 1 to 3 with behavioural systems mapping and leverage analysis to bridge the scope gap. Mapping feedback loops and leverage points from experiential data ensures that interventions target meaningful interaction-level dynamics, translating theory into actionable strategies for practitioners.

## Section 5: Intervention Development (p. 138-193)

This section translates the refined design challenge, research findings, and strategic analysis into concrete, actionable design through five steps. First, semi-structured interviews will be held with practitioners who successfully engage polarised or nuanced individuals. Second, research findings will be synthesised into design requirements organised as steps for the intervention. Third, a morphological chart analysis will generate creative ideas, which will be further developed through design drawings and evaluated through client feedback and pilot testing. Fourth, the final concept will be evaluated with stakeholders, practitioners, experts, and user tests using the Desirability-Viability-Feasibility (DVF) framework:

- **Desirability:** Does it address the user's needs?
- **Viability:** Can Snijboon realistically implement and scale this?
- **Feasibility:** Does it work in practice within real-world constraints?

The core question in this section is: *What should the intervention look like, how should it work, and what measures will indicate success?*

### Why this approach?

Practitioners navigating polarisation daily hold tacit knowledge about what actually works and what fails, knowledge that academic theory alone cannot provide. Defining design requirements ensures that every choice has evidence-based and theory-based justification. Morphological chart analysis systematically generates creative solutions, while design drawings and rapid prototyping identify strengths and weaknesses early through quick testing.

Pilot sessions and expert feedback serve as both validation and sources of insight, informing iterative refinement of the design intervention. Iterative DVF testing validates that the intervention meets real needs, fits Snijboon's actual capacity, and functions within real-world constraints. This iterative DVF testing keeps the intervention implementable rather than aspirational.

## Section 6: Final Design (p. 194-217)

This section will propose the final design for the intervention, provide an overview of how it works, and present the physical elements. The design will be critically discussed afterwards, and recommendations for future implementation will be proposed.

The core question in this section is: *What is the final design, how does it work, and how does it show success?*

## Section 7: Reflection (p. 220-229)

In this final section, a project reflection and a personal reflection will be presented.

The core question of this section is: *Did the project succeed, and how do I personally feel about the project process?*

## Moving Forward

The approach is set: seven sections that progress from broad understanding to intervention development and end with reflection. Within the given time frame, this method acknowledges polarisations complexity and offers a clear path through it.

The roadmap is established. The journey now begins with theory: *What is polarisation? How does it operate? What tools do designers have to address it?*

# 1 Theoretical Foundation

**Chapter 3: Definition, Drivers and Mechanisms of Polarisation**

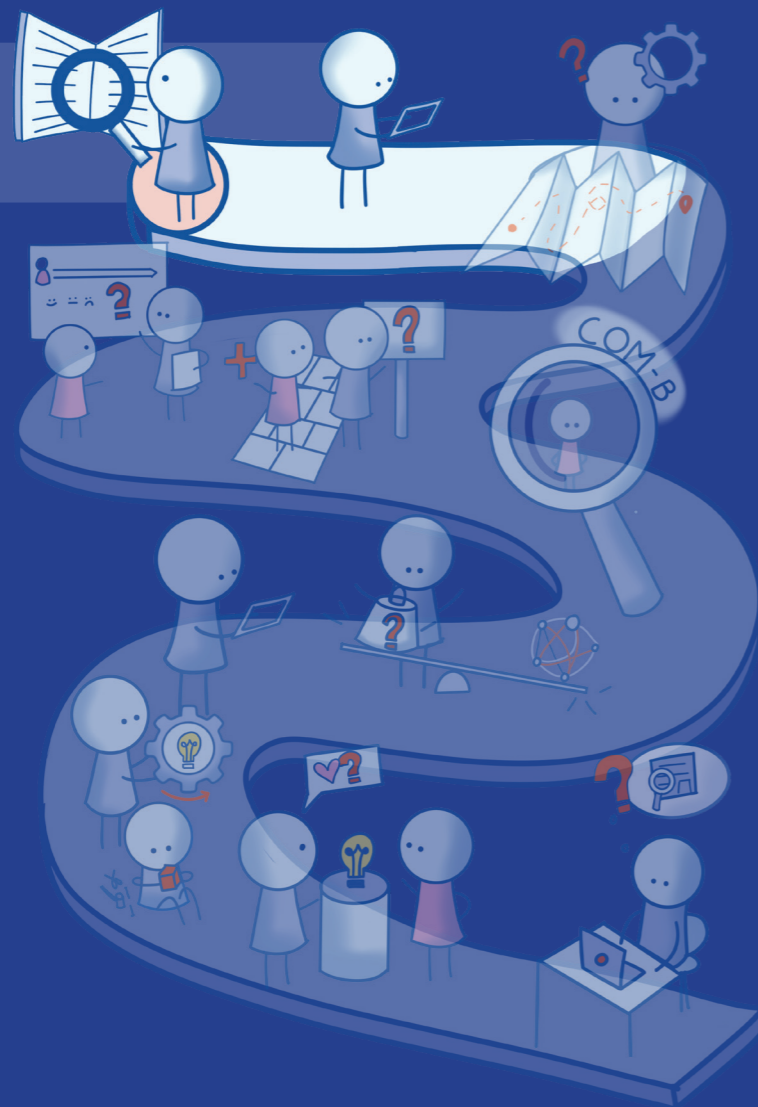
**Chapter 4: Positioning and Project Relevance**

**Chapter 5: Inspiration from Depolarisation Movements**

This section establishes the theoretical basis for understanding polarisation and designing interventions by addressing the sub-research questions. It includes a systematic literature review and analysis of successful depolarisation initiatives. With this understanding, the design challenge is positioned in context, and the project's social relevance is presented.

This section lays the foundation for theoretical design choices, ensuring the future design addresses root causes and extends beyond social cohesion to mutual respect and intersectional resonance.

1 Theoretical Foundation



”

What is polarisation, and how can social design address it?



# Chapter 3

## Definition, Drivers and Mechanisms of Polarisation

The research question assumes certain ideas that require exploration. Understanding what polarisation is, how it appears, and how design can support depolarisation is essential. This chapter summarises key findings from the literature review that guided the design process, providing an overview for the reader. For a deeper understanding, see Appendix B for the full literature review. The theory presented here forms the foundation for grounded design choices throughout the process.

### 3.1 Definition of Polarisation

Polarisation has many definitions. In this project, polarisation extends beyond a political disagreement (e.g. left or right-wing). It is viewed as a complex social phenomenon rooted in psychological and systemic failures. The central definition used for polarisation is presented in the blue box.

**Polarisation**

A persistent, identity-driven societal shift resulting in the increasing conceptual and ideological distance between groups, often culminating in the highly destructive ‘us-versus-them dynamic’ where opposing groups reject nuance and accelerate toward extreme positions. (Brandsma, 2016; Cassam, 2020).

At its core, polarisation is a process of ‘othering’ (Canales, 2000; De Haan, 2023). In this process, a group defines another group as different and often inferior to itself. It is important to note that not all polarisation is harmful; polarisation is necessary in a healthy democratic society (Overgaard et al., 2021). Disagreement is needed in a functional democracy; it is needed to make progress. Polarisation becomes harmful when ideological distance shapes its affective form. In affective polarisation, the different poles start to dehumanise each other. The differences become more than division on specific topics and increase animosity and distrust toward opposing groups ‘the other’, fuelling othering. This project will therefore focus on affective polarisation. This form poses the greatest threat to a healthy democratic world and brings polarisation to a toxic state. (Axelrod et al., 2021; Van Bavel et al., 2021).

Dehumanising language and behaviour deny someone’s human qualities, personality, or dignity. It portrays someone in a way that obscures that person’s humanity. In this context, it is often paired with feelings of hatred. Dehumanising language in extreme forms looks like this: ‘Those people are rats infesting our country’, but it is also present in mild forms, such as saying someone is insane or illegal.

Dehumanisation is also seen in historical events, for example, in the Nazi propaganda that famously equated Jews to subhuman or vermin, denying their human uniqueness. In a dehumanised society, self-identity starts to mostly arise in relation to the ‘other’. The construction of the ‘Orient’ vs. ‘Occident’ is a historical example of defining the self by constructing an inferior ‘other’ (Said, 2003).

### 3.2 Polarisation as a Process

Polarisation is a construct in our minds and an identity creator. It appeals to our gut feeling (Brandsma, 2016). Once society reaches a certain level of polarisation, carefully chosen words and arguments fail to reach the rational mind (Nelmarkkaet al., 2018). They affect emotions instead. It is fuelled by both positive and negative attention created during discussions, conversations, and information flows.



### 3.3 Drivers of Polarisation

The primary driver of polarisation is our need to belong to a group. The motivations for this can differ. For example, the group offers self-esteem functions, alleviates existential anxiety, or provides a clear sense of identity through norms and roles. These can be mapped to three foundational theories (Hogg et al., 2008): the Socio-Meter Model (self-esteem as a meter of successful social inclusion), Terror Management theory (reducing existential anxiety), and Uncertainty-identity theory (reducing subjective uncertainty).

Additionally, we often fear the unknown. Fear arises from the perceived absence of information at any level of consciousness or processing (Carleton, 2016). Joining a group accelerates polarisation, as people tend to defend more extreme positions than they would have argued for individually. This is known as the group effect (Barbeito Thonon, 2025; Vinokur & Burnstein, 1978).

Increased polarisation pressures people outside the polarisation grouping (the middle group) to choose, shrinking the public nuance opinion that this middle holds. So, the middle group is shrinking rapidly, partly because holding ambivalent positions on political issues tends to be costly in terms of likeability, among other things (Siev et al., 2024). This results in a disjunction between our articulated behaviour and our actual behaviour. One particular answer or opinion might feel more socially acceptable (Bravo & Farjam, 2022).

### 3.4 Social Media as Facilitator

Social media amplifies divisive content, shaping the online public debate in a polarised nest. It reinforces existing beliefs through echo chambers and selective exposure to like-minded information (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021; Van Bavel et al., 2021). In echo chambers, both online and offline, one's existing beliefs, views, and assumptions are reinforced by encountering information that aligns with their own perspectives (Curiel, 2021). In highly polarised societies, individuals become almost immune to information that does not align with their views. Information that supports and confirms their beliefs drives them further toward extremism (Zhang et al., 2025). This can intensify intergroup conflict and reduce awareness of differing perspectives.

The shape of this online debate ripples through to daily life (De Haan, 2023), fuelling polarisation. Many exchanges remain non-dialogical and reinforce othering rather than bridge divides. 3.5 Intersectional Resonance

The challenge of depolarisation lies in accepting multiple identities without forcing compartmentalisation (Yampolsky & Amiot, 2016; Kulundu, 2018; Lindell et al., 2016). There exists a tension between our emancipatory efforts and the acceptance of multiple truths. The focus should shift from forcing consensus and winning one over in a debate to peaceful coexistence of opinions and beliefs in a climate of sometimes differing truths (intersectional resonance). One should avoid single-axis movement and acknowledge struggles and personal situations.

### 3.5 Dynamics of a Polarised Society

Polarised countries tend to be more conservative and security-driven, with societies that prioritise abstract values. Typically, these societies value things stemming from loss aversion (e.g., success, power, money, tradition, comfort, and security) (Patkós, 2024). They experience heightened anxiety and uncertainty, coupled with an intensified craving for rules and order. Their uncertainty drives more people to join extreme groups in polarised environments (Uncertainty-identity theory).

### Roles in a Polarised Context

Zooming into a polarised context within a country. Figure 4 shows the different roles in a polarised context (Brandsma, 2016):

- **The Pusher:** Fuels division by spreading their own version of truth and facts.
- **The Joiner:** Sides with a camp, supports pushers, but poses as more moderate.
- **The Silent Middle:** Feels pressure from both sides yet resists taking sides.
- **The Bridge Builder:** Seeks to understand both groups and foster understanding between them.
- **The Scapegoat:** Is the group that becomes the target of the polarisation conflict. These are often people from the middle or bridge-building group.

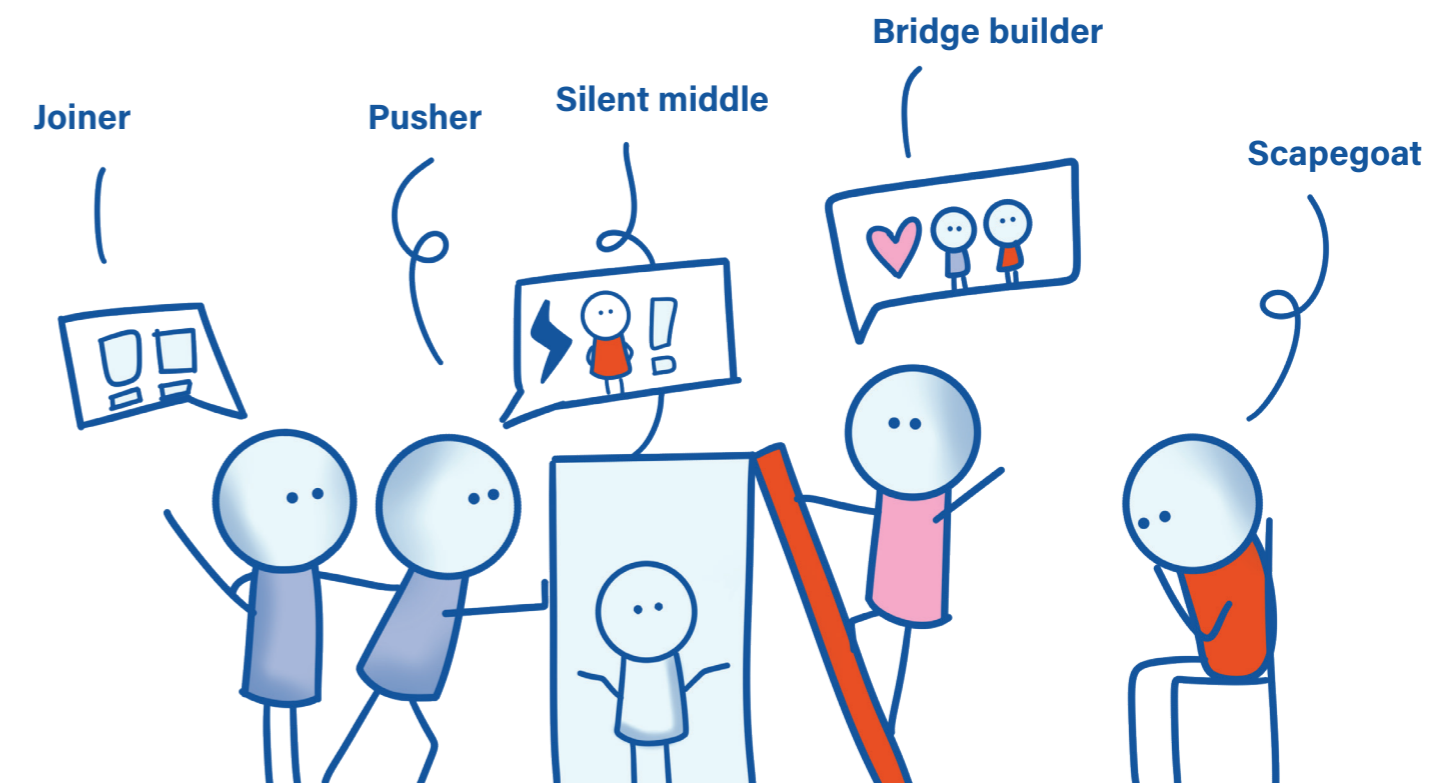


Figure 4: The role dynamic in a polarised context.



## Stages in a Polarisation Context

Although polarisation lacks clear opponents or boundaries as a conflict would befit, viewing it through a conflict lens helps facilitate time-effective interventions. Brandsma (2016) recognises four different stages of a polarisation conflict. Please look at Figure 5; the y-axis represents the pressure and the height of the tension in the polarisation conflict. The higher the curve, the more tension exists, and the higher the 'us-versus-them' dynamic persists.

### Stage 1: Prevention stage

In the prevention stage, dialogue can give the opportunity to exchange knowledge about each other's identities. This can be useful for reducing hatred and the tendency toward conflict or toxic polarisation.

### Stage 2: Intervention stage

The most critical stage in the polarisation conflict is the intervention stage. In the intervention stage, the polarisation intensifies, and neutrality becomes increasingly intolerable, turning the middle into a primary target for aggression or using scapegoats as outlets for collective guilt and anger.

### Stage 3: Mediation stage

In the mediation stage, each pole has time to self-reflect; dialogue should only be initiated if they had time to understand their version of the world and have skills in handling conflicts. Going beyond the conflict and talking about why they think something without having the aim of convincing the other.

### Stage 4: The reconciliation stage

The reconciliation stage offers the golden conditions for dialogue. After reflecting on and understanding the different constructs around the polarised issue, everyone is ready to listen and move away from the 'us vs. them' dynamic.

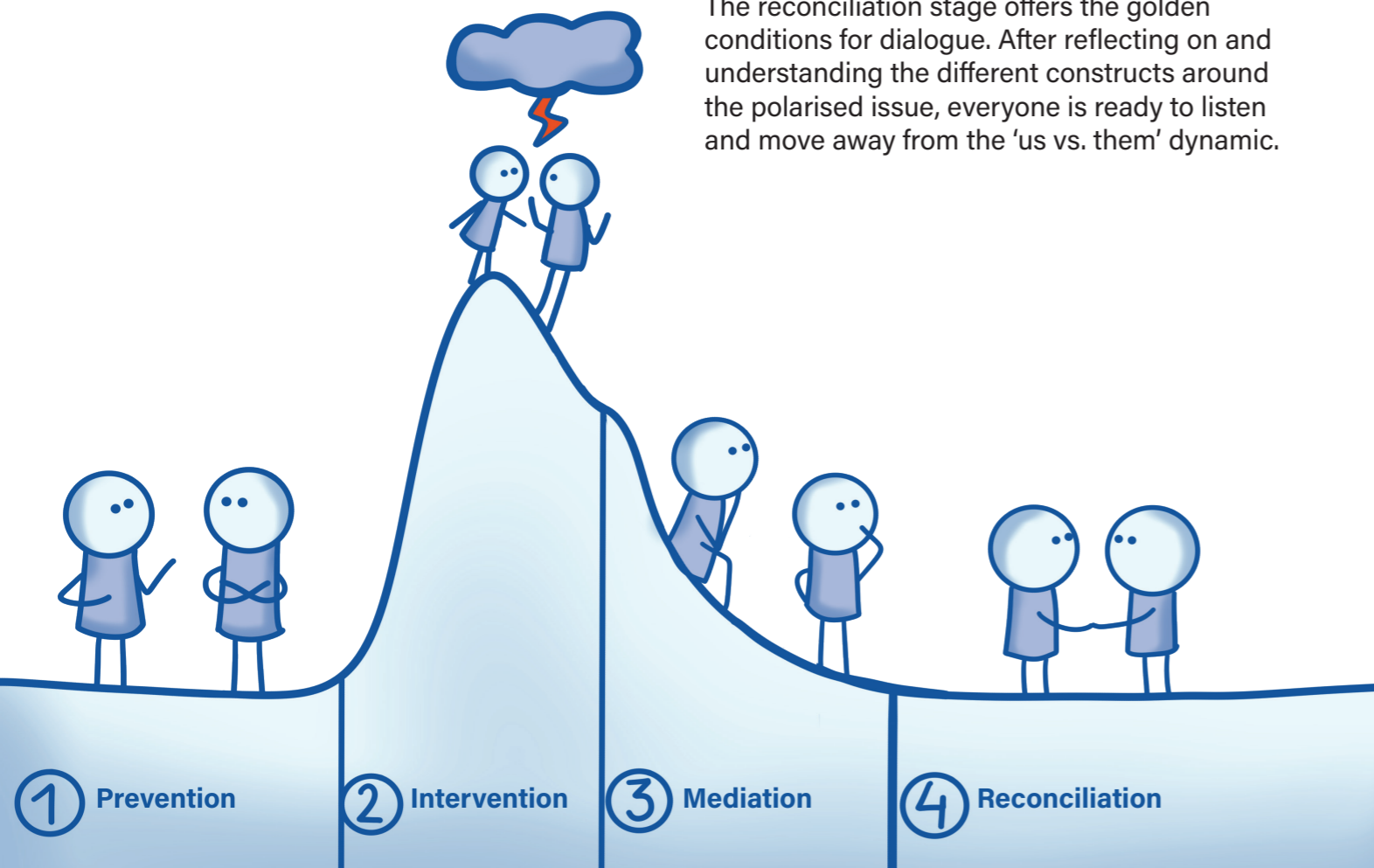


Figure 5: The stages of a polarised conflict, the y-axis represents the 'heat of the conflict'. In other words the tension between the two groups.

## 3.6 Dialogue

Dialogue is a central theme in polarisation literature. It can serve as a mechanism where othering is either reproduced or disrupted. The definition of dialogue in this thesis is the following:

### Dialogue

A type of conversation with often a structured exchange between two or more parties aimed at exchanging views and fostering mutual understanding.

There is a fine line between the polarising effects and the depolarising effects of a dialogue. Primarily, the environment must be right: the timing, goal, and state of mind. Dialogue should never be initiated in the intervention stage; this is a polarised environment with tension that diminishes social engagement. The sense of threat hampers understanding, meaning exposure to differing views can instead reinforce existing beliefs and identities (Nelmarkka et al., 2018). We call this the backfire effect, in which depolarisation tactics actually deepen polarisation (Brandsma, 2016).

Please see Figure 6 on the next page for principles that can help create a dialogue as a tool for depolarisation. The tactics in this figure prevent a dialogue from reinforcing polarisation (the backfire effect).

To prevent the backfire effect, the design of dialogue should be guided by several key principles (also summarised in Figure 6, next page). Firstly, participants should be encouraged to use 'I' positioning, speaking from personal

experience rather than using collective terms such as 'we' or 'they.' This helps to maintain a personal tone and reduces group polarisation (Englisch & Mahendran, 2021). Secondly, an effective approach is to match participants through non-political commonalities, such as shared hobbies or feelings about stable home environments, rather than immediately addressing divisive topics (Baliotti et al., 2021; Barbello Thoron, 2025). This humanises the opponent and opens participants up to new perspectives before contentious issues arise.

Equally critical is establishing psychological safety and trust; intentionally creating a non-judgemental climate reduces the stress and perception of threat that typically hinder genuine listening in polarised contexts (Barbello Thoron, 2025; De Haan, 2025). Rather than focusing solely on changing attitudes, interventions should prioritise capacity building by increasing individuals' tolerance of opposing viewpoints through high-tolerance exercises (Åkerlind et al., 2021). Furthermore, the principle of action over words emphasises that direct, personal contact through cooperative activities and shared problem-solving is more effective at shifting behaviour than abstract discussions alone (Bravo & Farjam, 2022).

The timing of interactions is crucial: dialogue should take place during the prevention or reconciliation stages, when the parties involved have had time to reflect and have developed the necessary skills to manage conflicts (Brandsma, 2016). Finally, facilitators should employ both cognitive and emotional empathy to genuinely understand the other side's feelings and values, approaching opponents with curiosity rather than attempting to convince them (Cassam, 2020). Although empathy facilitates constructive dialogue and mutual understanding, depolarisation cannot be achieved solely through empathy; complementary interventions are also needed.



### Interaction Principles

To prevent dialogue from reinforcing polarisation, the intervention must be carefully designed.



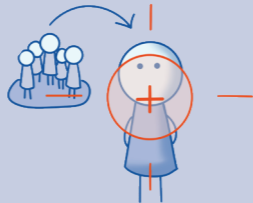
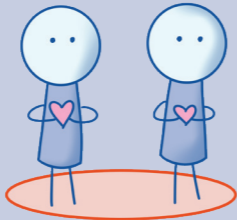


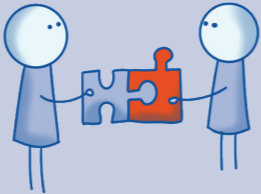
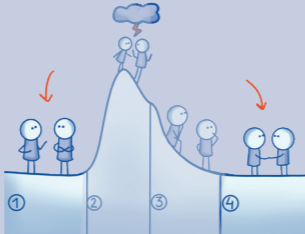
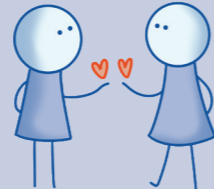
Principle	Description and Recommended Action	Rationale / Goal
 <p><b>I-Positioning &amp; Make It Personal</b> (English, 2022; English &amp; Mahendran, 2021)</p>	Encourage individuals to speak from a 'I' position about their personal experiences and concerns. The approaches differ based on which 'role' you focus within the polarised context.	Reduces group polarisation, where people defend more extreme views when using collective terms like 'we' or 'them'. Maintains a personal tone and keeps dialogue open, even on controversial topics.
 <p><b>Value-Based Approach</b> (Baliotti et al., 2021; Barbeito Thonon, 2025)</p>	Match participants by non-political values (such as hobbies) or shared feelings (like wanting a safe and stable home or feeling frustrated) to focus on what they have in common.	Humanising the opponent ('the other') opens participants to new views before divisive topics. Avoid questions that pressure sides.
 <p><b>Psychological Safety &amp; Trust</b> (Barbeito Thonon, 2025; De Haan, 2023)</p>	Establish a climate of trust that is non-judgemental and intentionally designed to foster a sense of safety. Change the environment to reduce the stress of the participants.	Reduces stress and perception of threat in conflict, which usually hampers genuine listening in polarised contexts.
 <p><b>Capacity Building</b> (Axelrod et al., 2021)</p>	Increase individuals' capacity to tolerate opposing viewpoints rather than aiming to change their attitudes.	Shifts the intervention from a content-based to a capacity-based approach. High tolerance can slow or prevent polarisation.
 <p><b>Action over Words</b> (Bravo &amp; Farjam, 2022)</p>	Implement interventions that involve cooperation, allowing for nuanced opinions and shared problem-solving.	The literature reveals a gap: attitudes do not consistently predict behaviour. Direct, personal contact is more effective than abstract principles.
 <p><b>Timing of Interaction</b> (Brandsma, 2016)</p>	Time the design intervention or dialogue correctly, ideally during the prevention or reconciliation stages of conflict. Only in the mediation stage, when sufficient time to reflect.	Initiating dialogue during the intervention stage (the heat of the conflict) risks reinforcing positions and increasing antagonism. During the mediation stage, the parties require sufficient time to understand their perspective on the world and possess the necessary skills to manage conflicts.
 <p><b>Both Ways of Empathy</b> (Cassam, 2020)</p>	Utilise cognitive and emotional empathy to genuinely understand the other side's feelings and values. Approach the opponent with curiosity rather than trying to convince them.	Helps facilitate constructive dialogue and mutual understanding. However, it is an ingredient that requires another intervention to help depolarisation; alone, it will only combat symptoms.

Figure 6: Interaction principles for a depolarisation dialogue.



## 3.7 Depolarisation Efforts

Please read Figure 7, which shows the necessary shift in goals and the intervention mechanism needed for successful depolarisation efforts, as outlined in my literature review (you are kindly referred to Appendix B for the full expression).

In the first part of Figure 7, I present the necessary shift in goals that one must adopt to achieve depolarisation. One should not aim for consensus but for pluralisation, promote constructive dispute and focus on the affective gap rather than the ideological distance.

In the second part of Figure 7, the mechanism of a successful intervention is discussed. It outlines strategic directions for a designer's focus in a depolarisation context. One that targets the silent middle, designed for multiple democratic listening forms and addresses complexity and transparency rather than forcing empathy or using a poorly designed dialogue.

In a whole, Figure 7 helps to understand behaviour and identify the key issues to consider when researching polarisation and designing for depolarisation.

### Moving Forward

Polarisation emerges from constructed dynamics, group behaviour, fear of uncertainty, and echo chambers that intensify extremes. It appears in roles: pushers who fuel division, joiners who support them, a shrinking silent middle, bridge builders who foster dialogue, and scapegoats who bear the blame. These patterns follow a mechanism shaped by human needs for belonging, certainty, and identity.

With the theory established, the next step is to ground it in reality. Chapter 4 takes this theoretical foundation and applies it to a specific context, explaining why this case matters and what it reveals about polarisation in practice.

### 01. Shifting goals

Depolarisation should not necessarily require consensus. Instead, the goal is to manage multiple truths and acknowledge the legitimacy of differing viewpoints, ensuring coexistence and respect for different views.



#### Pluralisation over Consensus

The design must utilise pluralisation mechanisms—approaches that allow for the recognition and coexistence of multiple perspectives, experiences, and ideologies. Pluralisation refers to enabling multiple truths to coexist in harmony rather than forcing a single perspective or labelling views as right or wrong. This can be enabled by framing plurality, shared repertoires, and/or network plurality. The goal is to intentionally create environments where diverse voices are distinguished from background noise, contributing to a broader harmony.

#### Constructive Dispute

The objective is to promote constructive dispute, enabling individuals to engage in reasoned disagreement that fosters respect, rather than merely striving for consensus or moderation.

#### Focus on the affective gap

The design must address the fact that polarisation means not only ideological divergence but also growing emotional hostility, or dislike, between groups. This eventually leads to dehumanisation and toxic polarisation in our world.

### 02. Mechanism of intervention

The literature (Appendix B) on design in polarised contexts provides a justification for a design-centric approach. It further outlines how it should be used and gives a strategic direction to its role in this context.



#### Targeting the Silent Middle

A critical strategy is to mobilise the silent middle. This group holds ambivalent or nuanced views and, if empowered, can act as bridge carriers between the extreme poles (Brandsma, 2016; Koch et al., 2023). The design should create platforms or narratives that give visibility and legitimacy to nuanced positions.

#### Strategic Listening and Communication Types

There are four forms of democratic listening: enclave (within like-minded groups), alliance (across shared interests), adversarial (towards opposing views), and transformative (to engage broader public) (Hendriks et al., 2018). Each form serves key democratic functions, ranging from fostering solidarity and reflection to developing strategies and mobilising action. This type of listening goes beyond empathy, emphasising purpose, strategy, and coalition building in public debate.

#### Addressing Complexity and Transparency

Polarisation is complex; simple solutions are resisted due to its complex adaptive nature. Design must recognise the interconnectedness of the issues. The intervention must help make the complexity approachable rather than overwhelming.

Figure 7: Interaction principles for a depolarisation dialogue.



# Chapter 4

## Positioning and Project Relevance

Chapter 3 has provided the theory and vocabulary to understand polarisation, but this cannot predict where or how it will occur. For example, debates about climate compared to migration each present their own tensions, power structures, and emotional stakes. For the learned depolarisation principles of the previous chapter to be effective, they need to be tailored, adapted, and tested in a specific context.

The context needs to be accessible within the project's timeframe, align with Snijboon's social mission, and be complex enough to demonstrate how polarisation works. Most importantly, it should enable design interventions that lead to real, practical solutions. Based on these criteria, this chapter introduces the chosen context: housing allocation in Utrecht, and explains what its social relevance.

### 4.1 Choice of Context

To choose the context to design for in which the local 'us-versus-them' dynamics can be explored. An inventory of polarised contexts was made (e.g., housing and allocation, nitrogen rules, citizens and policy, LGBTQ+, freedom of speech vs. social safety), taking my scope into account and the timeframe of this project (100 days), as well as the accessibility of the different groups of the polarisation tension. I decided the context for this project would be Housing and Allocation in Utrecht. This is a context that affects us all, making it accessible, and small parts of the journey can be tackled, making it feasible.

The choice of Housing and Allocation highlights a societal issue that requires more social understanding and nuance in the heated public debate. This societal nature and its focus on Utrecht make it relevant to my client, Snijboon. The housing and allocation context shows clear opponents and several tensions, making it a suitable focus for this project.

These tensions need to be explored not only to import the principles from the theoretical framework for depolarisation in Chapter 3, but also to translate them effectively into this specific context.



## 4.2 Project Relevance

The project aims to address a concerning phenomenon worldwide: toxic polarisation. The focus on the housing crisis in the Utrecht region will highlight the psychological and societal pressures that seem to intensify divisions between groups. As discussed in Chapter 3, a sense of security, belonging, and fairness is essential for a healthy society. Having a safe home lies close to the heart of feeling secure, and this polarisation challenges that sense of security. This has a high chance of leading to increased affective polarisation, with more pointing of fingers at scapegoats.

In the Housing and Allocation context, pushers (pushing the polarisation conflict) seem to get a big stage, and the tension in the public debate is growing. By exploring these tensions, the project seeks to deepen the understanding of how such perceptions and emotions contribute to societal division. This makes the work especially relevant today, as widening inequalities and false narratives continue to fuel polarisation.

Based on the findings of this project, I will develop a practical approach to addressing polarisation. It seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical models of depolarisation and the lived reality of social friction. Looking for ways to minimise the dehumanisation present in the housing allocation debate.

### Moving Forward

The housing allocation crisis in Utrecht is marked by scarcity, opacity, and growing frustration. When people compete for fundamental needs in systems they cannot influence or understand, polarisation takes root. Blame shifts to scapegoats, division hardens, and the middle grows silent. This context matters because it is real, accessible, urgent, relevant to Snijboon's work, and feasible within this project's timeframe. The exploration of this context can reveal how polarisation lives in everyday conversations.

While theory has provided the necessary tools and the Utrecht context has set the stage, the next step is to understand how design can practically bridge these divides. How have other initiatives successfully shifted human relationships in polarised settings? The following chapter, Chapter 5: Inspiration from Depolarisation Movements, explores various case studies to identify transferable interaction qualities that can be adapted to foster mutual respect in the Utrecht housing market.



# Chapter 5

## Inspiration from Depolarisation Movements

Theory and context have established the “what” and “where” of polarisation. As the concluding chapter of this section, the ‘how’ now needs to be answered: how a tangible solution works within polarised contexts. This chapter examines seven global initiatives that have transformed adversarial relationships into human encounters. These movements use carefully designed conditions where polarisation diminishes. By analysing these case studies, transferable interaction qualities are identified that can serve as building blocks for a social design intervention in Utrecht’s housing market.



Figure 8: The MobileBooth of StoryCorps.

a) StoryCorps. (2022, July 28). Life on the Road: Adventures with StoryCorps’ Mobile Tour Staff (July 13, 2022). [Image] <https://storycorps.org/life-on-the-road-adventures-with-storycorps-mobile-tour-staff-july-13-2022/>

b) Burk, K. (2013, October 23). 10 years and 50,631 interviews later: a snapshot of StoryCorps’ achievements. [Image] NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-extra/2013/10/23/239704819/10-years-and-50-631-interviews-later-a-snapshot-of-storycorps-achievements>

### 5.1 Case Studies

Numerous inspiring initiatives on depolarisation tactics arose from desk research of the web, including examples of ways in which different groups are brought together in harmony, creative ways to design for dialogue, and depolarisation movements. The initiatives that inspired were case-studied and listed below.

I will analyse these initiatives based on their interaction qualities (explained in section 5.2) to better understand their dynamics, allowing me to utilise their strengths and adapt them to my own context. Rather than reinventing the wheel, I built on existing successes. These are not blueprints to copy, but principles to learn from and build upon.

#### StoryCorps

An initiative to record and preserve stories. A mobile booth (see Figure 8) travelled through the United States of America, providing an open space for people to record life stories in pairs (often family or cross-cultural partners). These stories are archived to preserve them, becoming the largest collection of human stories from people of all backgrounds, ages, and beliefs (StoryCorps, 2023).

#### Letter to the Future

An initiative from UNESCO in which young people co-write a letter imagining a shared future (Unicef, 2025), surfacing values rather than conflicts. The letters serve as a time capsule, capturing the hopes, dreams, and visions of the future generation.



## Narrative4

Narrative 4 is a form of group dialogue in which students and/or adults swap stories and retell each other's lives in the first person, fostering deep empathy (Narrative 4, 2025).

### Minna de Hikikomori

Radio program aimed at recluses (often youth). The program invites those who remain isolated, often refusing to leave their homes or engage with others. It gives voice to those who had previously gone largely unheard (NHK, e.d.).

### Parliament of Things

Artistic initiative where citizens debate as if they were rivers, animals, or future generations, breaking rigid human divides (Middeldorp, 2019).



Figure 9: The 'A Mile in my shoes' exhibition.

a) Powell, R. (2019, July 15). A new interactive art exhibit lets you literally walk a mile in someone else's shoes. [Image] - 303 magazine. 303 Magazine. <https://303magazine.com/2019/07/empathy-museum-denver-biennial/>  
 b) Empathy Museum. (2019, August 24). In The Box: Empathy Museum presents A Mile In My Shoes. [Image] The Art Quarterly: Art News People. <https://www.artquarterly.com/in-the-box-empathy-museum-presents-a-mile-in-my-shoes/>

## Deep canvassing

A campaigning method that is working to create mutual understanding rooted in lived experience, instead of in debate or talking points. The canvassers go in pairs along houses to discuss societal themes (Deep Canvassing Nederland, n.d.).

### The Empathy Museum - A Mile in My Shoes

A Mile in My Shoes is a life-size shoe shop (see Figure 9) where visitors are invited to literally walk a mile in someone else's shoes while listening to their life story through headphones. The stories cover aspects of life, from loss and grief to hope and love and take the visitor on an empathetic as well as a physical journey. (A Mile in My Shoes | Empathy Museum, n.d.).

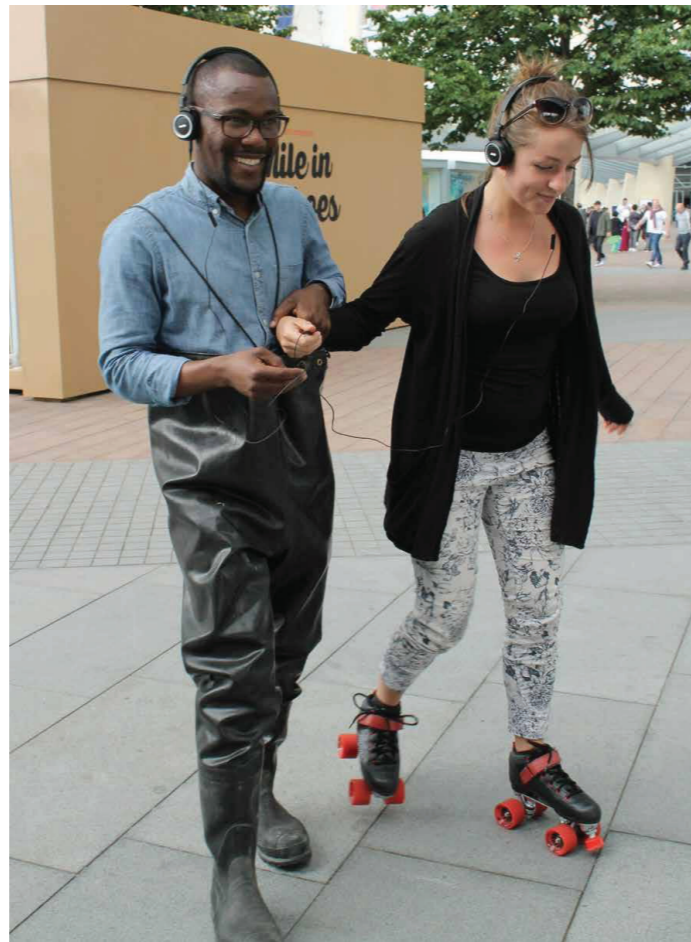


Figure 10: A silent parade in Schiedam.

ANP. (2025, March 2). Stille tocht voor jongen van 13 in Schiedam. [Image] jeugdjournaal.nl. <https://jeugdjournaal.nl/artikel/2557887-stille-tocht-voor-jongen-van-13-in-schiedam>

### Silent Walks

Silent walks (see Figure 10 and 11) are a way to grieve for someone or to memorialise an occasion. While people do not know each other, they share the common view of the importance of the thing at hand. They share an embodied presence by working together in silence.



Figure 11: A silent parade in Groningen.

NU.nl. (2014, July 23). Honderden deelnemers stille tocht Groningen. [Image] NU.nl. <https://www.nu.nl/groningen/3835957/honderden-deelnemers-stille-tocht-groningen.html?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>

### Japanese Tea House

A traditional tea ceremony space (see Figure 13 and 12) is designed as a threshold, where hierarchical roles are suspended and shared presence matters more than debate. The guiding principles are harmony, respect, purity and tranquillity. You enter the tea room with a sense of shared humility. You leave behind your title, your status, and simply become a guest. It's a space where hierarchical roles are suspended and shared presence matters more than debate (Tea Ceremony, 2025).



Figure 12: Traditional Japanese tea ceremony.

Marka. (2019). Japan. tea ceremony. 1930-40 [Photo]. Touring Club Italiano/Marka/Universal Images Group via Getty Images. Getty Images. [https://www.gettyimages.nl/detail/nieuwsfoto%27s/japan-tea-ceremony-1930-40-nieuwsfotos/1177018801?utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_source=google&utm\\_campaign=iptcurl](https://www.gettyimages.nl/detail/nieuwsfoto%27s/japan-tea-ceremony-1930-40-nieuwsfotos/1177018801?utm_medium=organic&utm_source=google&utm_campaign=iptcurl)



Figure 13: Guest seated to receive tea.

Chikanobu, T. (1896). Tea Ceremony [Japenses Print]. Ronin Gallery. <https://ukiyo-e.org/image/japancoll/p425-chikanobu-tea-ceremony-6057>



## 5.2 Interaction Qualities

For each case, I defined their interaction qualities and common characteristics that I recognised.

In this chapter, an interaction quality is the character of interactions; e.g., going through a box of old photos can have the character of careful, deliberate, surprising, or nostalgic. The characteristics are the things that evoke, support, or enable the particular character and link these to descriptive adjectives. They are an object's or actor's properties that indicate the possible actions users can take, thereby suggesting how they may interact with the object or actor. So, for example, the interaction quality of careful entails the fragility of the paper; the uniqueness of the photo format (TU Delft, 2023).

The interaction qualities recognised in the different depolarisation inspiration movements are clustered into five clusters (If you want to see all defined interaction qualities, please refer to Appendix C). Please read Figure 14.

**Cluster one** is about a humble, equal, and role-suspended interaction where participants meet as humans as hierarchies dissolve.

**Cluster two** focuses on fostering an empathetic, vulnerable, and intimate interaction, enabling participants to feel emotionally open and willing to share personal experiences, thereby creating a shared human connection that transcends the surface level of the debate.

**Cluster three** is about being present, embodied interaction, and silence. The participants experience shared physical space without language barriers, focusing on being rather than talking.

**Cluster four** is about curiosity, open-mindedness, and being non-judgemental. Participants approach with genuine interest rather than predetermined positions.

**Cluster five** is about a transformative, revelatory, and hopeful interaction in which participants experience genuine shifts in understanding, leaving changed with a forward orientation.

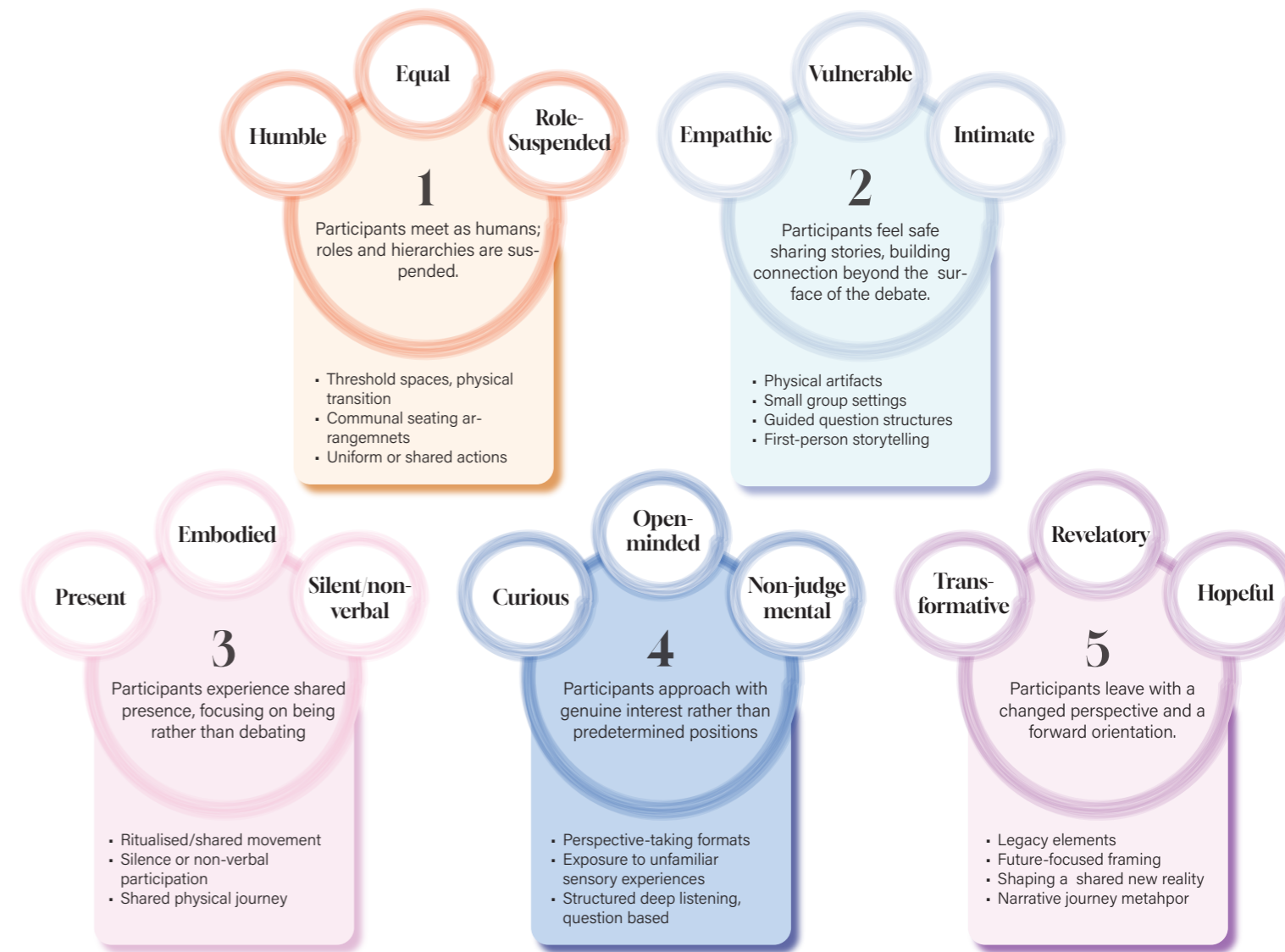


Figure 14: Five clusters of interaction qualities and enabling characteristics identified across depolarisation case studies, highlighting transferable design qualities that support constructive interaction and mutual respect.

## Moving Forward

The analysis of these global initiatives has revealed that successful depolarisation initiatives are not the result of forced agreement, but of creating specific interaction qualities that allow people to encounter one another as humans. From these case studies, five transferable design clusters have emerged: role-suspended equality, vulnerable intimacy, silent presence, open-minded curiosity, and hopeful transformation. These qualities are enabled by concrete design choices, such as the use of threshold spaces, physical artifacts, and ritualised movement.

Next, the Section will conclude by defining polarisation and explaining how design can address it theoretically. The journey then moves into Section 2, where the project investigates how the housing crisis in Utrecht acts as a toxic polarisation engine and maps the specific stakeholder tensions a design intervention must navigate.

# Conclusion

“ What is polarisation, and how can social design address it in a social context?

## Section 1: Theoretical Foundation

This section established the theoretical foundation for understanding societal division and the role social service design can play in mitigating its toxic effects.

### What is Learned

The research identifies polarisation as a persistent, identity-driven societal shift that creates an “us-versus-them” dynamic, where opposing groups reject nuance and move toward extreme positions. Key takeaways include:

**Toxic Polarisation:** Disagreement is necessary for a healthy democracy, but it becomes toxic when it turns into affective polarisation, where groups dehumanise and distrust “the other”.

**The Power of the Silent Middle:** In a polarised society, the silent middle, those who hold nuanced or ambivalent positions, often feel pressured to choose a side or disengage to avoid social costs.

**Systemic Drivers:** Polarisation is fuelled by the human need for group belonging, fear of the unknown, and social media echo chambers that amplify extreme voices over moderate ones.

**Pluralisation over Consensus:** Effective design interventions should not force agreement; they should foster pluralisation, allowing multiple truths and perspectives to coexist respectfully.

**Interaction Principles:** Successful dialogue requires a safe container built on I-positioning, psychological safety, shared non-political values, and capacity building rather than forced attitude changes.

**Effective Design:** Design can reduce polarisation through strategic interventions that foster people’s encounters humans. This can be done by role-suspended equality, vulnerable intimacy, silent presence, open-minded curiosity, and hopeful transformation.

To translate these principles, the context of housing allocation in Utrecht has been chosen. It provides a case for testing and designing these principles. Scarcity leads to zero-sum thinking, bureaucracy leaves information gaps, and system failure makes scapegoating likely. This is a societal issue that needs serious attention.

### How This Advances the Project

By establishing this theoretical grounding, the project has taken the first step toward designing for depolarisation. Theory confirms that dialogue cannot be forced during peak conflict, the intervention stage, without risking a backfire effect. Therefore, the stage of the polarisation debate needs to be defined before starting to design. An analysis of global initiatives provided design building blocks of transferable interaction qualities, such as role-suspended equality and silent presence, that can be adapted for the final solution. These theories shift the focus from simply bringing people together to a strategic approach. The goal is not consensus but pluralisation, allowing multiple truths to exist together with mutual respect. Dialogue needs careful design to avoid reinforcing divisions. This clarity helps avoid common traps, like rushing dialogue or relying on empathy, and guides us in shaping effective design interventions.

### The Path Forward

While this section provided a foundation, an understanding of principles, and design building blocks, it cannot predict how polarisation manifests in this context. To move toward a tangible solution, these abstract principles need to be grounded in reality.

The project now moves into Section 2: Contextualisation, focusing on the Utrecht housing market. By analysing this context, the research will map stakeholder tensions and structural scarcity to understand why polarisation occurs and identify where and between whom a social service designer can intervene to restore mutual respect.

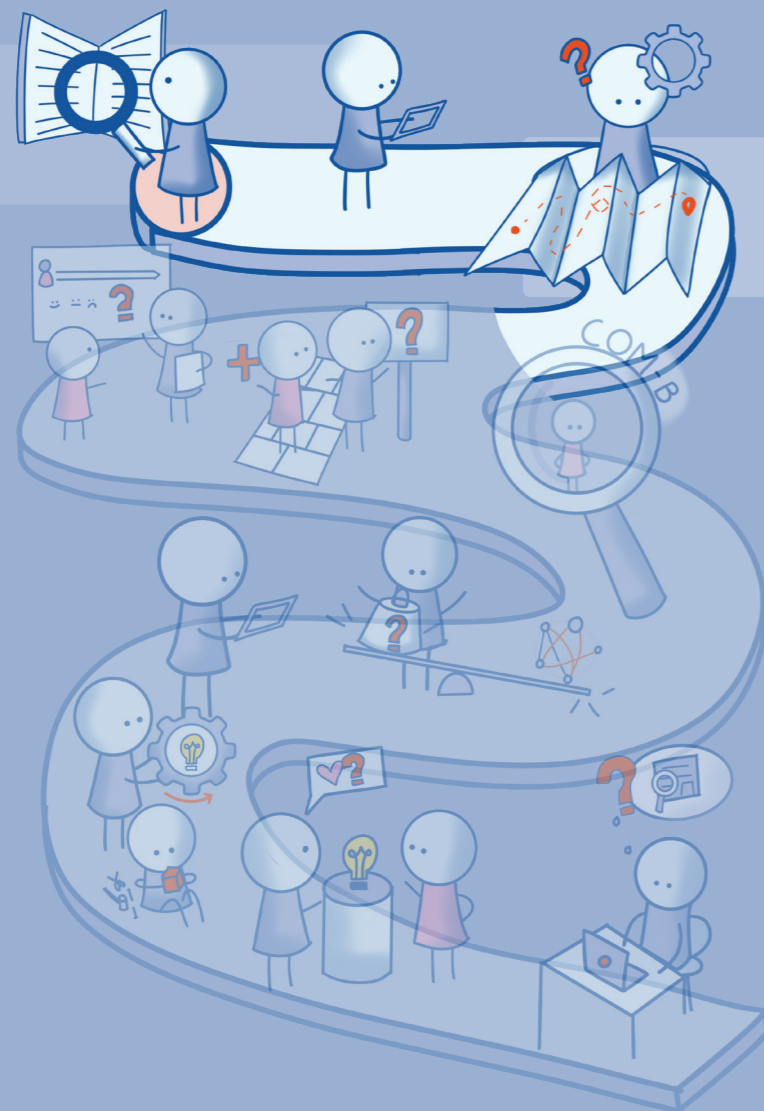
# 2 Contextualisation

**Chapter 6: Overview of the Housing Market and Social tensions**  
**Chapter 7: Stakeholder Map and Analysis**

This section grounds the theoretical findings of Section 1 in the Utrecht housing market. It examines how polarisation appears in Utrecht's housing allocation system through desk research, stakeholder interviews, and ecosystem mapping. By understanding the market's scarcity pressures and identifying competing stakeholder interests and power dynamics, specific polarisation dynamics are revealed. This shows not just that polarisation exists but where, between whom, and why it emerges, which is essential knowledge for targeted intervention design.

1

Theoretical Foundation



Contextualisation

2

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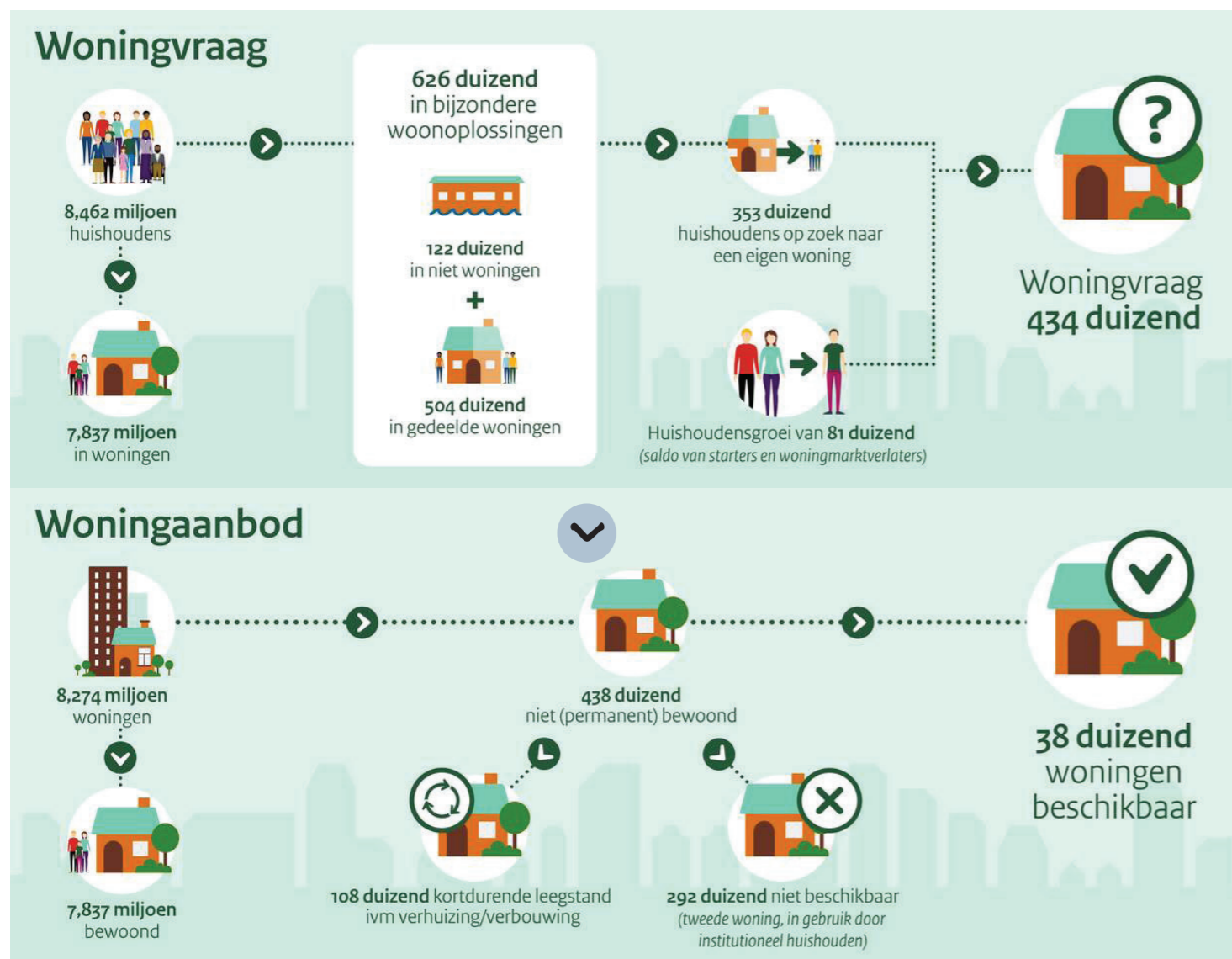
How does polarisation manifest in the Utrecht housing context?



# Chapter 6

## Overview of the Housing Market and Social Tensions

Contextualisation



Polarisation does not emerge suddenly. It often grows in specific conditions involving scarcity, opacity, competing interests, and systemic pressure. To understand these conditions in the context of Utrecht's housing allocation, I need to first understand the ecosystem that cultivates them. This understanding will help me design effective strategies for depolarisation, as I will know what drives people towards us-versus-them thinking.

This chapter maps the Dutch housing market and its crisis, as well as the specific challenges that Utrecht faces in allocating housing. The goal is to create a clear picture of how this scarcity fuels polarisation. It moves beyond merely stating that there is a shortage to examining how that shortage systematically pits groups against one another. It reveals the breeding ground for toxic polarisation, which this project seeks to address.

### 6.1 The Dutch House market

The Dutch housing market is divided into the regulated (social) rental sector and the private rental and purchase markets. Social housing is mostly managed by housing corporations that operate on a non-profit basis. This sector is reserved for lower-income households and regulated by governmental targets and rules. The housing allocation for social housing follows urgency rules, such as prioritizing those facing displacement, those in need of maternal care, or asylum seekers. These are rules established by every municipality. The national government sets targets for placing people from vulnerable groups, but municipalities determine the urgency of these placements.

The private rental sector is unregulated and operates on a market-based pricing model. The government attempts to encourage home ownership through mortgage tax deductions and the return of investment when moving between homes. House prices have risen significantly due to supply shortages and high demand, resulting in a tight market with long waiting lists for social housing and growing inequality between renters and homeowners. See Figure 15 of an overview of the demand and supply of houses. As can be seen, there is a significant gap between availability and demand.

### Housing Crisis

The Netherlands is currently in a housing crisis. With a significant housing shortage estimated at around 400,000 houses. This shortage accounts for approximately 4.5-4.8% of the housing stock. The shortage leaves both buyers and renters under pressure. Housing prices are sky-rocketing, with a year-on-year growth of nearly 9-10%, and rental prices are experiencing a similar growth of 6.8%. Increasingly, people are seeking social housing (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, 2025). Together with more one-person households, the pool of social house seekers poses an impossible challenge in housing allocation. Given the size of this shortage and the number of seekers, no solution seems fair or can be fair to all parties.

Figure 15: An overview of the housing crisis: the demand and the supply. Het statistisch woningtekort uitgelegd | Home | Volkshuisvesting Nederland. (2026, January 13). Home | Volkshuisvesting Nederland. <https://www.volkshuisvestingnederland.nl/onderwerpen/aanpak-woningnood/berekening-woningbouwopgave>



## 6.2 Housing Crisis in Utrecht

While the housing crisis (and the polarisation around housing) are national issues, this thesis focuses on Utrecht's housing market. Narrowing the research scope enables a deeper understanding of the local context. Utrecht, most relevant for Snijboon, is also one of the Netherlands' largest and fastest-growing cities. The city faces challenges such as homelessness, accommodating status holders, and assisting individuals transitioning out of special care. Additionally, public resistance and activism surrounding new construction are on the rise. These factors make Utrecht a particularly relevant and interesting case to study. See Figure 16 for an overview of numbers in the municipality of Utrecht.

National tensions will be examined and translated into design strategies, informed by insights from Utrecht's stakeholder field. To identify points of intervention, we must first examine the roles of stakeholders and how social tensions are experienced in this high-stakes urban environment.

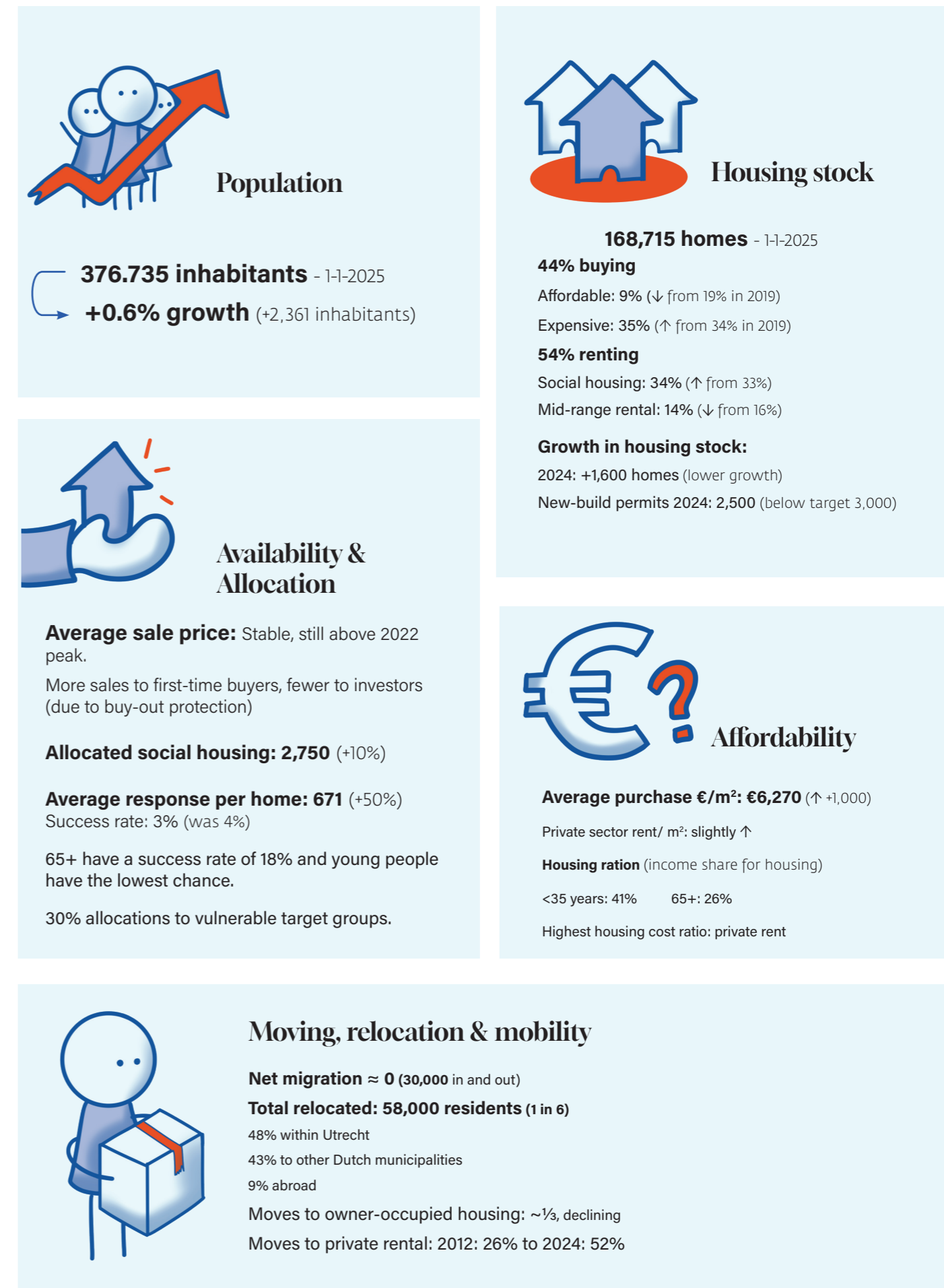


Figure 16: An overview of the housing crisis: the demand and the supply (De Vries, 2024; Gemeente Utrecht, 2025).

## 6.3 Social Housing Allocation

In Utrecht, social housing is mainly allocated through WoningNet (DAK), where people register and respond to available homes. Most homes are offered based on waiting time (the person registered the longest gets priority), while some are allocated by lottery or priority rules (either privilege or urgency). Eligibility depends on the nationally set income limits. Housing corporations manage the final allocation but must comply with the municipality's regulations and demand goals.

### Privilege

In Utrecht, privilege rules (also called priority or preference rules) give certain applicants an advantage, even without an urgency declaration. Typically, these rules favour people with a local or social connection: residents already living in the neighbourhood, those born or raised in the municipality, tenants moving within the same housing association, or people downsizing from a larger to a smaller home. The goal is to support neighbourhood continuity, stimulate appropriate housing (suitable to the people living in the house), and prevent social displacement by giving locals a higher priority for some social housing units.

### Urgency

Every municipality has its own specific urgency rules. An urgent declaration, issued by the mayor and aldermen, places a house seeker in an urgent category and grants priority for social housing in cases where registration is mandatory. In Utrecht, this is only possible in the following cases:

- In the event of imminent homelessness;
- In the event of a relationship ending;
- Due to financial circumstances;
- On medical grounds;
- In the case of informal care;
- On public housing grounds;
- On social grounds;
- For status holders (the definition used in this thesis is: a refugee granted temporary asylum and residency in the Netherlands);
- Victim status from the supply system.

Not in all cases will you be granted an urgency declaration when one of the above applies to you. It is an extensive examination if you are actually in a situation where urgency is high.

### Lottery

Apart from regular housing allocation through the waiting list, a part of the housing stock can be distributed through the lottery model. Every municipality is free to decide how much of the available housing stock will ultimately be distributed through a lottery. This part of the market is therefore independent of urgency, privilege rules and the waiting time.

## Moving Forward

The housing crisis creates a toxic engine of polarisation. When 400,000 houses are needed but unavailable, when prices rise by 9% annually, and allocation follows rules of urgency and privilege that seem unfair to those excluded, scarcity becomes conflict. The system forces people to compete for fundamental needs, and competition without transparency breeds suspicion, resentment, and blame.

The numbers reveal a market under severe stress, but they alone cannot explain how this stress translates into social tension, toxic polarisation, and dehumanisation. While the structural shortage creates the conditions, it is the stakeholder ecosystem that determines how these conditions manifest as polarisation. Chapter 7 maps this ecosystem, revealing not just what the housing crisis is, but also how it operates as a system that predictably generates a 'us-versus-them' conflict.



# Chapter 7

## Stakeholder Map and Analysis

The previous chapter set the context. This chapter maps the key stakeholders in the housing ecosystem and highlights the tensions among them. Using interviews and desk research, it outlines their objectives, concerns, roles, and influence. Polarisation is systemic and involves many groups. It results from a complex system where stakeholders face constraints, have competing objectives, and respond to scarcity and pressure from others.

Each stakeholder operates under different rules, faces unique frustrations, and defines fairness in their own way. Understanding these relationships is crucial. By mapping influence, tension points, and pressure points, I can identify why polarisation occurs and where to intervene.

### 7.1 Stakeholder Analysis

To identify the stakeholders and their roles in the housing allocation context, interviews are held with the concerned stakeholders. Please refer to Table 1 for the executed interviews with a subset of the stakeholders. The remaining insights are derived from desk research, common knowledge, and sense-making.

Figure 17 on the next page shows the stakeholder map of the Utrecht housing market. The following pages outline the various stakeholders, grouped by their influence on the system, roles, interests, objectives, and concerns.

Table 1: Overview of the executed interviews.

Stakeholder	Amount	Role
Starters	12	House seeking or recently found housing
Status holders	3	Placed in housing after AZC
Housing corporations	2	Cazas Wonen (Quality and Proces Coordinator rentals, involved with the allocation proces) & Woonin (Consultant housingallocation - strategic team)
Private landlords	2	Owning two houses
Online Platform	1	Huizenpedia - owner
Vastgoed Belang	1	Head chief
Municipality	1	Senior regulation living
Real estate agent	1	Both taxator and real estate agent (private)
Student housing	1	SSH - Vastgoedstrateg
COA	1	Employee helping last steps of finding a house and translating
Volunteer homeless shelter	1	Working 2 nights in the homeless shelter

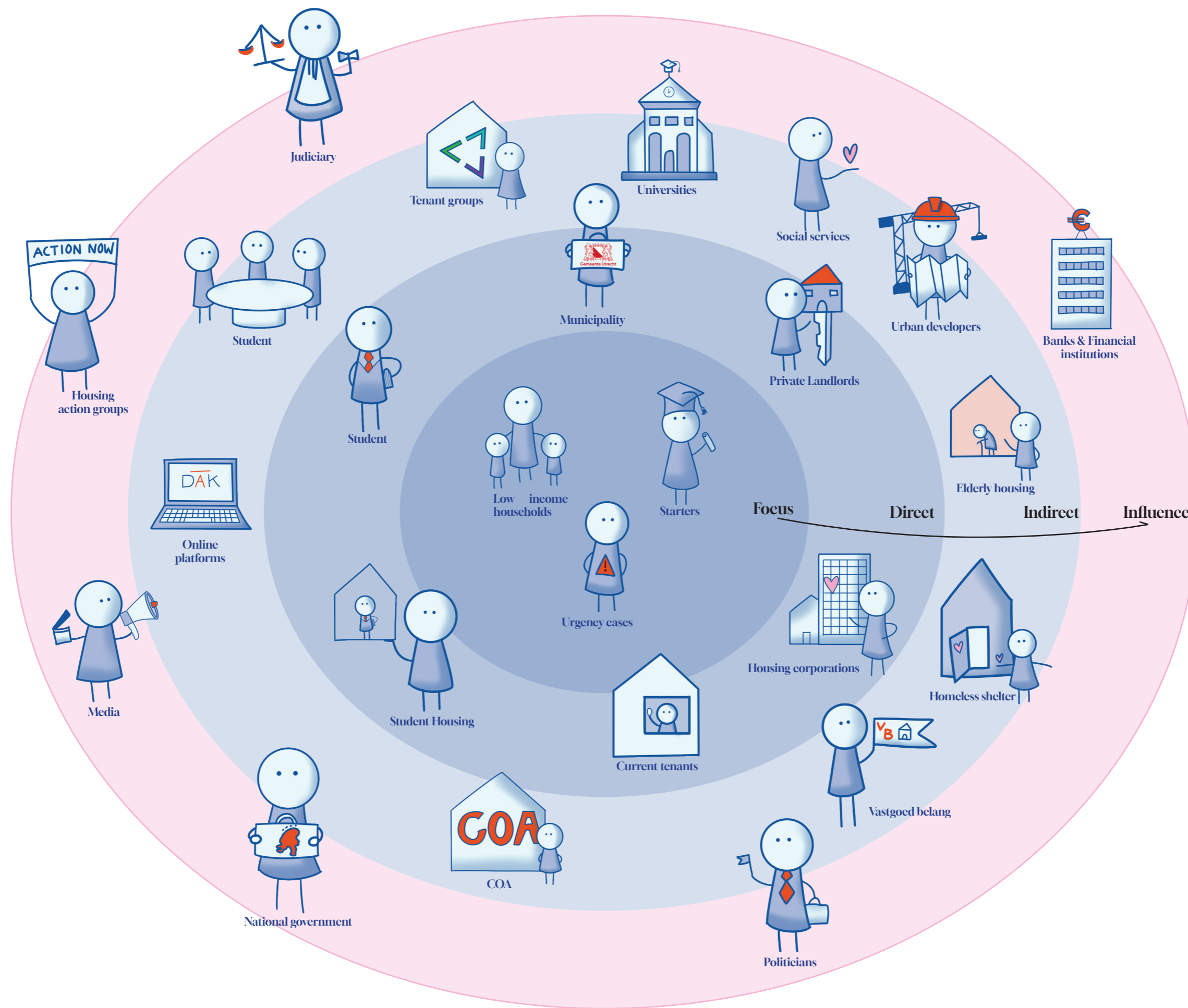


Figure 17: Stakeholder map.



## 7.2 The Focus Group

This thesis focuses on individuals seeking a rental home in social housing. Within this group, three types of house seekers are recognised: low-income households, starters, and urgency cases. Throughout this project, multiple interviews were conducted with these groups or on the street to understand their lived experiences, roles, objectives, concerns, and influence. For a detailed understanding of their stakes, please refer to Appendix D.



### Starters

Young adults (18-30) and recent graduates seeking independent rental housing. They face 10+ year waiting lists, mismatches in income, and competition with urgent cases. They have little influence or agency and depend on allocation. They experience intense frustration: "Dutch youth should get priority, what do you mean I can't live in my own country?" - Young person (16 years old).



### Low-income households

Families earning less than €40,765/year are seeking social housing with stable long-term contracts. They face similar waiting lists, lack of agency and express frustration about the peaking competition: "Social housing is no longer for the low-income, due to the great competition." - Adult seeking social housing.



### Urgency cases

Priority housing cases, including those facing homelessness, relationship breakups, status holders, or medical grounds. Though legally prioritised, they have minimal agency in the process while seeking safety and stability. "An honest answer? That you are not discriminated against, that is what makes a home, that I feel safe." - Status holder.

## 7.3 The Direct Stakeholders

Direct stakeholders are parties directly engaged in the daily operations of the context. They work closely with, or directly impact, the focus group and actively shape the context. This group includes those who will soon seek housing (such as students or current tenants planning to move) as well as parties who regulate, own, or manage housing. For an elaborate description of the direct stakeholders' roles, interests, objectives, concerns, and relationships, refer to Appendix D. Most stakeholders were interviewed, and supporting quotes are provided to substantiate their perspectives. Interviews were conducted with students, private landlords, the municipality of Utrecht, Cazas women, Woonin, SSH, and tenants aged 16-80.



### Utrecht municipality

Sets housing targets (60% affordable by 2040), manages allocation, and negotiates with corporations/developers. Faces the challenge of balancing competing needs: "We choose to invest unevenly in equal opportunities", while feeling the pressure of refugee obligations and from the 10+ waiting list, both from the public debate and from political pressure. They have a strong influence as they mandate housing composition, set urgency rules, and zoning.



### Housing Corporations

Dominate the social sector, controlling allocations and leading building projects. They balance social mission with financial health: "If we are allowed, we can build a lot, but a lot of regulations slow down the process. In scarcity, you always have polarisation, since a fair system does not exist." They feel significant pressure from the municipality due to status-holder quotas and sustainability goals.



### Students

Face 24-30 month SSH waiting lists and pressure to vacate after graduation: "You start to think, shit, will I find something before I have to leave my house?" They have a big concern about finding affordable rent options in the future.



### Private Landlords

Own/manage private rental properties, favouring market rents and minimal regulation: "I particularly like it as a provision for my pension." They are concerned about the new restrictions on fixed-term contracts and purchase limits, as well as the tax changes. They are represented and lobbied for through Vastgoed Belang.



### Current Tenants

Existing renters, sometimes in unsuitable housing situations (including the elderly in oversized homes): "My house might be too big, but when moving, I have to pay six times as much as I currently pay, and also have to move to a smaller place." - Older Tenant (70+)



### Student Housing

Provide student rental housing and allocate it while maintaining and expanding properties. The student housing corporation in Utrecht is SSH. They aim to house students and encourage social cohesion as a non-profit organisation. "I think there is a great social value in arguing about cleaning the toilet." They are trying to build appropriate housing and have concerns about meeting the demand of over 52.000 students while balancing affordability with operational costs.



## 7.4 The Indirect Stakeholders

Indirect stakeholders are parties that are not directly involved but are affected by the context and have an interest or influence in it. They are further removed from the daily dynamics of the focus group, but they do perform supporting operational roles. Supporting quotes for stakeholders are presented to give them a voice and are drawn from interviews (please refer to Table 1 for an overview of the interviews). If a stakeholder has not been interviewed directly, a user perception quote is presented to gauge how they are perceived in the field. For the complete stakeholder profiles with full analysis, see Appendix D.

Contextualisation

### Digital Platforms (e.g. DAK)



Facilitate housing search and allocation. Woningnet runs social allocation but is constrained by municipality rules: "All social rent is collected in DAK; this was convenient, it became a routine to look in the app every day." (Social house seeker). There is a difference between Woningnet (DAK), which is as transparent as possible and only presents social housing and commercial listings that also have a commercial interest in return on investment.



### COA (Central Agency Reception Seekers)

Manages refugee housing and coordinates the distribution of ~2,800 status holders by 2025. Creates pressure on municipalities: "You can only participate with society with an address." Currently, they have a big concern about overflowing centres and violence toward facilities and inhabitants due to a negative stigma.

### Urban Developers



Major builders constructing 2,600+ annual rental homes, primarily mid/upper segments: "Urban developers, they only go after the money." – Real estate agent perception. Their interest is mostly in profitable deals, to build fast with low cost and high return on investment.



### Tenant Groups (BoKS, Woonbond, VIDUIS)

Represent tenant interests, provide legal advice, and participate in 'Woontafel'. Growing voice in policy dialogue. "Bad landlord ship, such as unreasonable prices, discrimination, and intimidation to get a place to live" (-Social house seeker).

### Social Services (GGD, Wijkteams)



Support vulnerable residents, identify urgency cases: "Without a place to live, there is no good basis to work on recovery. (Volunteer homeless shelter)" Their objective is to build individual and neighbourhood resilience and increase liveability in this context of pressure.

### Elderly Housing Organisations



Manage age-specific rental housing, face ageing population pressures: "There should be more focus on fitting housing for the elderly, for example, bigger balconies so they do not have to give up all their space outside." (Senior 65 years old).

### Vastgoed Belang



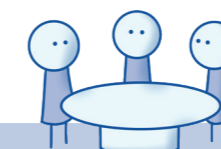
Represents private property owners, significant lobbying power: "We want to offer rooms without losing money, and people want to find a room, let us do our thing." They are concerned about the strict regulations on landlords and the high taxes, and how the public debate is shaping this policy: 'If it is just a perception, if someone says at a birthday party that all landlords are slim-lords, that is fine, but it becomes a problem if you start shaping policy around that perception.'

### Universities



Educational institutions with 52,000+ students need housing. They are interested in providing adequate housing to attract and retain students, as well as sufficient temporary housing for interns. Their concern is the housing shortage affecting enrolment and attendance, and the balancing of fair treatment between international and Dutch students. "I find it somewhat strange that international students sometimes immediately get a house from the TU while Dutch students must undergo all the grim approvals."

### Neighbourhood Committees



Advocate for neighbourhood interests, can delay projects through protests: "You recognise friction with the neighbourhood: 'we do not want this group in our neighbourhood' (-Housing corporation)

### Homeless Shelters



Provide emergency shelter and transition services: "Anyone who spends time in a shelter worsens. There is a toxic stigma that it is people's own choice/fault to live on the street." They have to deal with limited emergency capacity while in a world of scarcity and low investment in prevention (helping a homeless person build a life after receiving shelter), and regulations from the government.



## 7.3 The Influence Stakeholders

Influential stakeholders are high-level actors. While not directly involved in housing provision, they significantly shape discourse, policy, and public perception of housing. They do so through advocacy, regulation, or information—examples include political parties, the media, and activist groups. For a deeper understanding of their stakes, influence, and relationships, please refer to Appendix D.



### National Government

(Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations)

Sets housing policy framework, rent caps, tax policy, building goals, allocation requirements: "Legislation and regulation cause housing market misery. It is the populism that leads to the housing crisis." – Vastgoed Belang critique. They are concerned about local implementation issues, investors seeking 'the big money', and the influx of asylum seekers.



### Banks and Financial Institutions

Provide financing for housing corporations, developers, and rental property investments. Control access to capital: "I could not choose a sustainable bank since it didn't offer a family mortgage." - Critique from house buyer (starter).



### Political Parties

Set municipal agenda, legislate housing ordinances/zoning/budgets. Face voter pressure and long waiting lists: "Political parties are not there for the people; they try to save their own skin." The interests and concerns vary for the right-wing and left-wing parties.



### Media (RTV Utrecht, AD Utrecht, DUB)

Shape public opinion, perceived as truth, create pressure on government: "And also the noise that asylum seekers get a house sooner, on TV and talk shows, I really don't know what is true anymore."



### Housing Activists

Organise protests, lobby for policy changes, advocate squatting rights: "You have to do something to let your voice be heard." Examples of these are the Woonprotest Utrecht and the Woonopstand



### Judiciary

Handle housing discrimination cases, eviction disputes, and appeals. Final word on housing law: "People worsen their situation to a level to get an urgent appeal, and argue this in court." (Housing corporation), which could lead to a concern of an increase in appeals.

## 7.4 The Ecosystem

The stakeholder analysis concludes that the housing market is not a balanced system. Instead, it acts as an ecosystem with high tensions, defined by severe supply scarcity. This system features competing, often zero-sum stakes. As a result, a conflict arises between the basic human need for secure housing and the bureaucratic and market mechanisms intended to manage shortages. The situation has become a loop of cascading pressures. These pressures both increase scarcity and intensify the need to house more one-person households. Factors include smaller families, increased numbers of asylum seekers, and an aging population.

This sub-chapter identifies the existing tensions and relations among the different stakeholders to determine which cascading roles and dynamics fuel the polarisation.



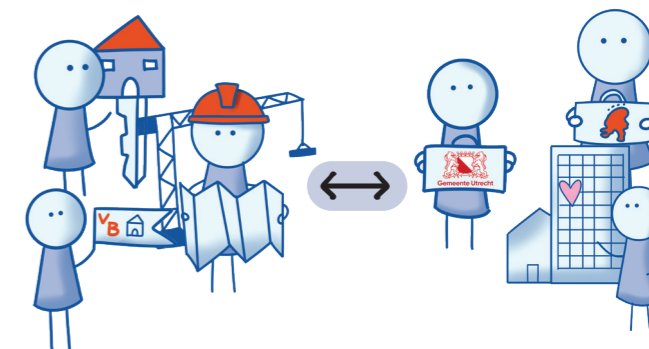
### National government, Municipality, and Housing corporations

The national government sets refugee and vulnerable group allocation requirements that the municipality of Utrecht must enforce. As a result, Utrecht requires local housing corporations to meet quotas, placing pressure on them. To avoid sanctions from the municipality, corporations must allocate a portion of the already scarce social housing stock.



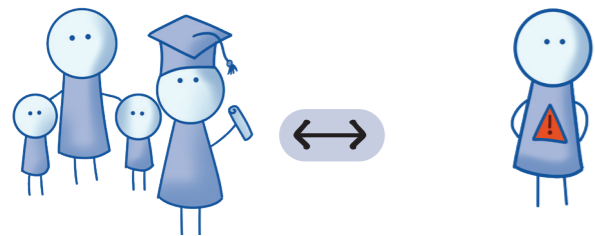
### Neighbourhood committees and Urgency cases

Neighbourhood committees serve as representative bodies that advocate for local residents' interests, often focusing on issues such as high-density development, safety, and social cohesion. These advocacy efforts can sometimes create friction, especially when newcomers arrive.



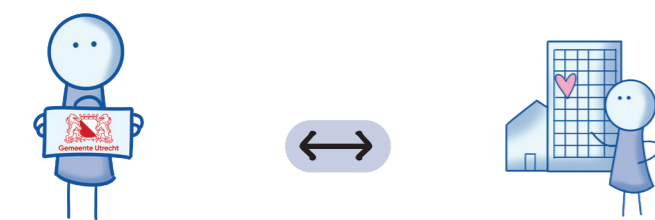
### Vastgoed belang, Landlords, Developers vs. Municipality, Government, and Housing corporations

There is direct opposition between these stakeholder groups. On one side, market actors such as private developers and landlords focus on return on investment. They lobby against regulations they claim are ruining the market. For example, Vastgoed Belang engages in significant lobbying to influence private rental supply decisions and to oppose policies such as opkoopbescherming. They argue that politicians shape policy based on public perception rather than on objective market forces. On the other hand, housing corporations and the government maintain a core stake in the public mission to serve the vulnerable during times of scarcity, often requiring unequal investments for equal opportunities.



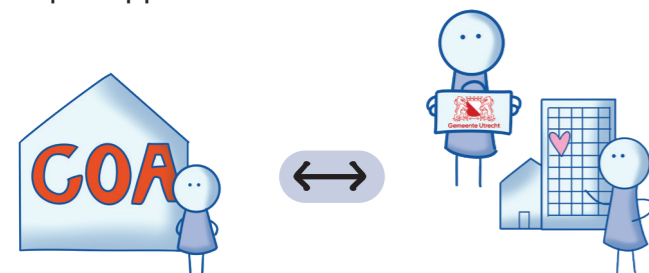
**Low-income households, Starters vs. Urgency cases**

This is the relation with the most active polarisation and scapegoating. The systemic frustration is understandably, but incorrectly, directed at the visible status holder who was just housed, transforming a systemic failure into a perceived interpersonal conflict.



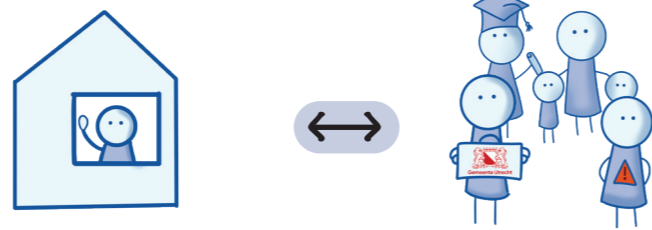
**Municipality - Housing corporations**

They are key collaboration partners. Corporations work with the Municipality on annual goals and accords. However, the relationship is tense as the Municipality mandates housing composition (e.g., 60% affordable) and sets urgency rules, forcing Corporations to invest "unevenly" to achieve "equal opportunities."



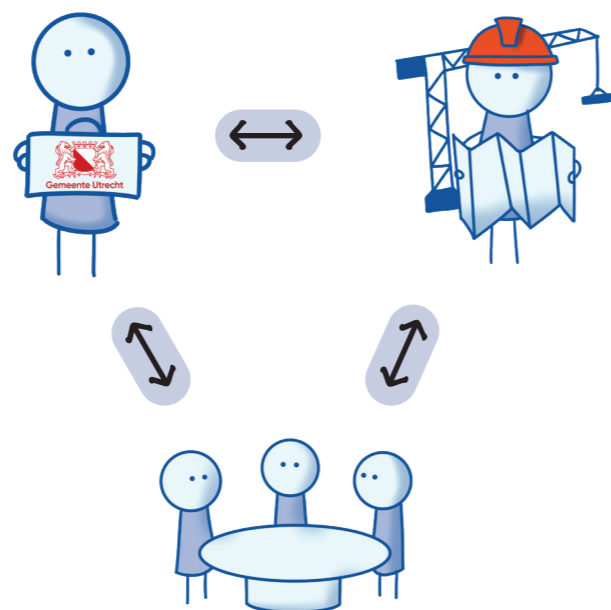
**COA - Municipality and Housing corporations**

The COA manages refugee reception and distribution and creates pressure on the Municipality by requiring them to house status holders. This pressure marks the start of a cascading loop that affects housing stock availability.



**Current tenants - Municipality, all focus groups**

Current tenants seek to protect their affordable rent and stability. Elderly tenants often remain in homes that are "too big" because moving would require them to pay "six times as much as I currently pay" for a smaller place. This concern prevents the necessary flow (doorstroom) of housing stock back into the system for newcomers.



**Municipality - Developers - neighbourhood committees**

The Municipality uses its zoning authority to leverage developers. Developers cooperate but complain about the slow, complex processes and the burden of affordable housing quotas. Neighbourhood committees can delay building projects by appealing if they feel it endangers the character of the neighbourhood, for example.

**7.5 Conclusion on System**

Looking at the ecosystem as a map, it has proven to be dysfunctional. The system of external social and environmental structures that influence individuals leads to polarisation and scapegoating. These create divisions and blame individuals or groups for broader problems. The human need for security and comfort, central to the dynamics of a polarised society like the Netherlands, is under pressure. Policy explanations are often unclear and hard to understand. This gives pushers material to point to scapegoats. Joiners join this movement, pressure the middle, and each group ends up in an information vacuum.

**Main dynamics**

The system faces opposing forces. The national government mandates refugee allocation. Municipalities pressure housing corporations to meet quotas. Corporations allocate from already-scarce stock. Starters blame status holders for "taking their spot." Neighbourhood committees resist density. Elderly tenants block housing flow. Each stakeholder acts rationally within their constraints, but the system produces irrational results: scapegoating, othering, and toxic polarisation. Information asymmetry persists. Citizens do not understand allocation logic. Stakeholders do not communicate constraints. Privacy rules prevent transparency. The combined housing shortage and migration problems intensify blame, creating a toxic mix.

**Moving Forward**

The stakeholder analysis shows a system under pressure. The clearest polarisation is within the focus group, low-income households, starters, and the urgency group. Status holders are most visible in debates and the news, serving as scapegoats for systemic failure. Tensions in the ecosystem likely ripple into daily life, shaping how people talk about housing and whom they blame. People may keep nuanced positions or swing to extremes.

The stakeholder map gives structure, but structure alone cannot capture the emotional reality of this system. To validate this and design responsibly, the next section will move from institutional perspectives to lived experience. First, this section concludes by answering the question: How does polarisation manifest in the Utrecht housing context?

# Conclusion



How does polarisation manifest in the Utrecht housing context?

This section grounded the theoretical concepts on polarisation into the context of the Utrecht housing market. By analysing the structural scarcity and stakeholder ecosystem, the research identified how this environment functions as a predictable engine for societal conflict.

## What is Learned

The analysis confirms that the Utrecht housing market acts as a “toxic polarisation engine,” in which systemic failures are translated into interpersonal hostility. Key findings include:

**Scarcity:** With a national shortage of 400,000 homes and waiting lists over 11 years in Utrecht, individuals are forced to compete for a fundamental human need.

**Zero-Sum Framing:** The system reinforces a mindset in which one group’s gain is seen as another’s loss, pitting groups like starters and status holders against each other.

**Cascading Pressures:** Tension flows from national mandates to municipal quotas, creating a chain of stress that burdens both individual citizens and housing corporations.

**Information Asymmetry and Scapegoating:** A lack of transparency in the allocation logic produces suspicion. When the system is opaque, frustration seeks visible targets, leading to the dehumanisation of status holders who are blamed for failures they do not control.

## How This Advances the Project

The journey from the theoretical principles of Section One to the contextualisation provided a way toward a targeted intervention. The research has pinpointed exactly where and between whom polarisation is most acute, identifying the starter vs. status holder dynamic as the primary tension for design intervention. Housing polarisation in Utrecht is mainly caused by structural factors, not cultural ones. It is a predictable result of a dysfunctional ecosystem. This finding supports the use of a design strategy focused on relational architecture.

## The Path Forward

While the system’s structural map is now clear, the project still lacks an understanding of the emotional realities of those affected by the housing crisis. Knowing tension exists is not the same as understanding the lived reality of powerlessness.

The project now moves into Section 3: Lived Experiences, shifting from desk research and institutional mapping to direct engagement with starters and status holders. By capturing unfiltered voices on the street and conducting in-depth interviews, the research will identify latent needs and specific emotional moments, such as when hope fails or frustration turns to blame, that will serve as the foundation for the final design.

# 3 Lived Experiences

**Chapter 8: Street Interviews**

**Chapter 9: Lived Experience of the Starter**

**Chapter 10: Street Intervention - Public Polarisation Debate**

**Chapter 11: Lived Experience of the Status Holder**

**Chapter 12: Insights and Tensions**

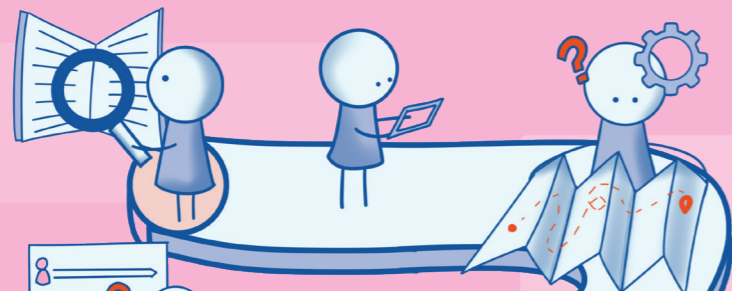
**Chapter 13: Behavioural Mapping**

**Chapter 14: Reframing Design Challenge**

Section 2 established the structural drivers of Utrecht's housing crisis, but knowing that systemic tension exists is not the same as understanding the emotional toll of navigating it. This section moves from institutional analysis to lived reality, focusing on direct engagement with the people caught in this "toxic polarisation engine".

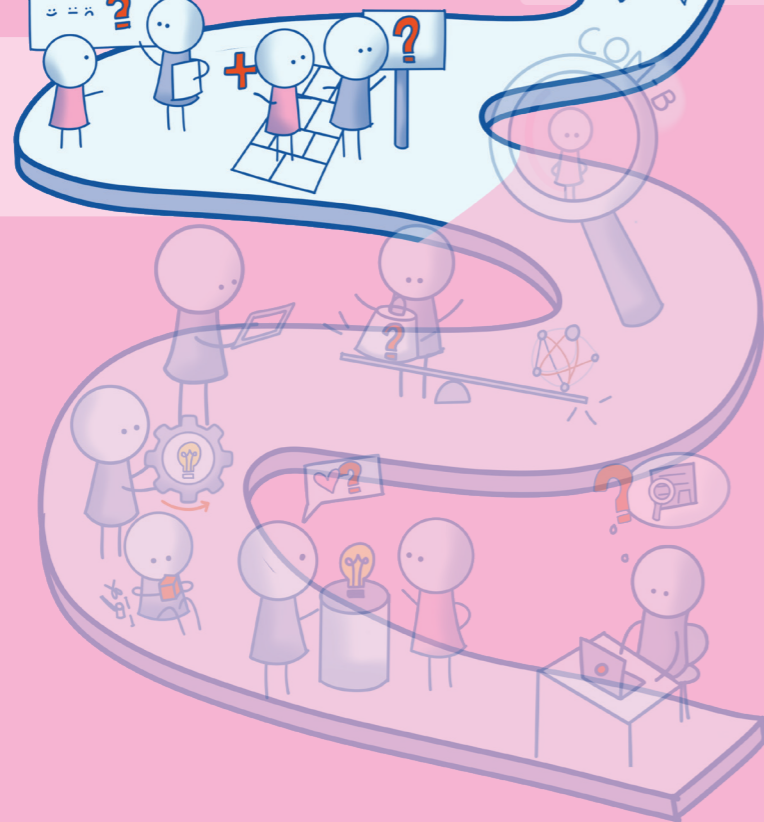
This section will answer the question: What are the underlying frustrations, needs, and perceptions driving the polarised tension? By capturing unfiltered voices and emotional journeys, this research identifies the latent needs that must be addressed to shift interactions from blame to mutual respect. These human insights provide the evidence needed to reframe the design challenge and ensure the final intervention targets authentic needs at critical moments of systemic friction.

**1** Theoretical Foundation



Contextualisation **2**

**3** Lived Experiences



“What are the underlying frustrations, needs, perceptions, and misunderstandings driving the tension?”



# Chapter 8

## Street Interviews

“  
‘Do you think that houses are distributed fairly in the Netherlands?’  
‘What makes a house a home?’  
”



Figure 18: Street interviews on the streets of Utrecht.

Having established the structural drivers of the ecosystem within the housing allocation context, the project now moves from institutional mapping to capturing the immediate state of polarisation on the street.

This chapter documents informal street interviews with 17 citizens in Utrecht to validate theoretical assumptions against the lived reality of housing scarcity. By capturing unfiltered voices of frustration, the fieldwork seeks to identify the core social tensions where dehumanising language and othering are most apparent. These insights provide a first look at the latent needs, such as the desire for transparency and agency, that fuel the us-versus-them dynamic and sharpen the project's focus on the tension between starters and status holders.

### 8.1 Evidence from Fieldwork: Voices of Frustration

As I walked through Utrecht, I approached citizens with the questions: ‘Do you perceive the housing market as fair?’ and ‘What makes a house a home to you?’ to capture the daily voices of frustration and polarisation, and to recognise latent needs in this dysfunctional system (see Figure 18).

#### Latent needs

The street interviews with 17 people aged 16 to 80 reveal frustration, unmet latent needs, and powerlessness among citizens. It also shows what people need to feel at home. The insights from the street interviews were clustered (Appendix E), and the following latent needs were discovered:

#### Need for Grip and Transparency

There is a desire to understand and have some control over the process. This is driven by a distrust of opaque institutions and a desire for agency. People want a grip on the currently invisible process. The feeling of being in a lottery system underscores this lack of agency.

#### Need for a Just System

Citizens seek a system that feels fair and provides equal opportunities. There is a feeling of injustice due to the influence of origin, budget, history and lack of urgency. You are, for example, dependent on your parents, who signed you up at an early age. The prevalence of insider networks (ons-kent-ons) reinforces the belief that the rules do not apply equally to everyone.

#### Need to Be Seen and Heard

Beyond the mechanisms of allocation, there is a fundamental need for empathy and recognition. Participants feel the system is populist and operates on a logic of money rather than what is needed for citizens. There is a lack of human interaction and consideration, for example:

## 8.2 Social Tensions

Besides revealing unmet latent needs of Utrecht citizens regarding the housing market, the interviews confirmed the core social tension between starters and status holders. This conflict arises between starters, soon to be looking for a place after graduation (18-27), who feel powerless in the system, and newcomers who are seen as prioritised and circumventing the rules. Newcomers are blamed for the housing crisis, and the community directs its frustration at them, using dehumanising language and othering. For example: 'That bunch just crapes by and immediately gets a house.' This language, along with the high-tension environment, creates a breeding ground for polarisation and validates focusing on the social tension between starters and status holders, in this thesis that seeks to get out of the toxic state of polarisation.

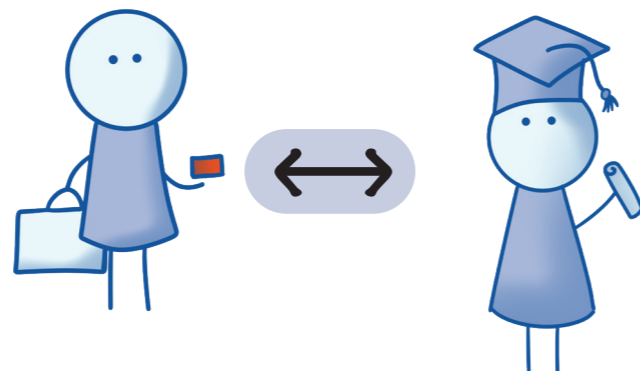


Figure 19: The social tension to design for, the starter and of the urgency cases in the housing allocation market the focus is on status holders.

“

**“That bunch just arrives by and immediately gets a house.”**

”

“

**“You sign up for DAK, pay something yearly but you see or hear nothing back.”**

”

## Moving Forward

Street interviews confirm what structural analysis predicted: an ecosystem with social tensions. Citizens express three unmet needs: grip and transparency, justice, and being seen and heard. When these needs go unmet, frustration seeks targets. The main tension forms around two groups: starters and status holders. Starters feel invisible, pushed aside by confusing urgency rules. Status holders become scapegoats blamed for things they can't control.

Chapter 9 till 12 shifts to understanding the lived reality of both groups. Structured interviews will map not just what starters and status holders say, but what they experience, revealing when hope collapses, or frustration turns to blame, enabling design to meet people where they are.



# Chapter 9

## Lived Experience of the Starter

Chapter 8 began to capture the personal emotional toll of searching for a home in Utrecht's scarce market, but missed the system analysis and stakeholder mapping. This chapter goes further by focusing on the lived experience of starters (recent graduates and young professionals) to show how systemic dysfunction creates friction that can feed polarisation. Using the Context Mapping methodology, participants are treated as experts of their own experience as they collaboratively map their search journeys. The goal is to identify specific moments of peak frustration, such as the "active search" phase, where repeated rejection and institutional opacity risk turning exhaustion into interpersonal blame and "othering."

### 9.1 Research Approach - Context Mapping

To inform and develop solutions that meet people's needs, an understanding of their everyday experiences is needed (Van Boeijen et al., 2020). For this, I employ the Context Mapping method, which involves people sharing their personal daily experiences. Since this method generates outcomes that help empathise with my intended user. Context mapping consists of a series of activities in which different research methods can be used and goes through the steps of preparation and sensitising, generative assignments, and analysis (Sanders & Stappers, 2013).

#### Preparation

During this step, the designer and participants are primed before starting the generative assignment to open up. For this, I used an assumption judgment on the context that revealed assumptions to be further investigated:

1. What are the latent needs that lead to frustration and polarisation?
2. What is the state of the existing polarisation (preparation, intervention, mediation, or reconciliation)?
3. How and where can design intervene to help depolarise?

For the full assumption dump, you are referred to Appendix F. To prime the participants, they were tasked to already think about their search journey and what makes a house a home.





## Generative Assignments

Interviews were conducted to uncover where frustrations arise in the house-seeking process. With interviews, you find out what they think; with observations, what they do and how they use things; but with generative techniques, you can gain a better understanding of what they know and feel, and maybe dream about. For the approach, I will first explain how the interview is structured, then explain the generative tool I used: journey mapping.

### The interviews

The interviews were structured using the Path of Expression framework (Sanders & Stappers, 2013, see Figure 20). This framework shows that the experience of the moment (now) is connected to the past and future through memories and dreams. The participant's awareness can be guided in steps: first, focus on the present, then on the past, and then look for underlying layers to move toward the future. The framework is used to understand the deep layers of frustration, beyond the actions they have taken, and how they felt during the journey. And with that, look ahead. The different steps took shape in the interview as follows:

**Now:** what makes a house a home? How do they like their current living situation?

**Past:** How did they perceive the steps during their experience journey?

**Future:** What would they change if they were the ones in power? How would things be different if they were the minister of housing?

## Journey Mapping

To understand the housing seekers' experience, the theory of journey mapping is applied (van Boeijen et al. 2020). Creating journey maps helps designers get insight into different phases of people's experience. The form of journey mapping used in the interviews is the 'customer journey'. Hereafter, referred to as 'experience journey' as it focused on what the participant felt and experienced. The participants' experience journey was mapped collaboratively (see worksheet in Figure 21), from the initial motivation to seek a new place to finding one or giving up on the search process.

The following phases were identified:

1. **Initiation and Orientation**
2. **Deepening and start searching**
3. **Adjustments and active searching**
4. **Breakthrough and finding**

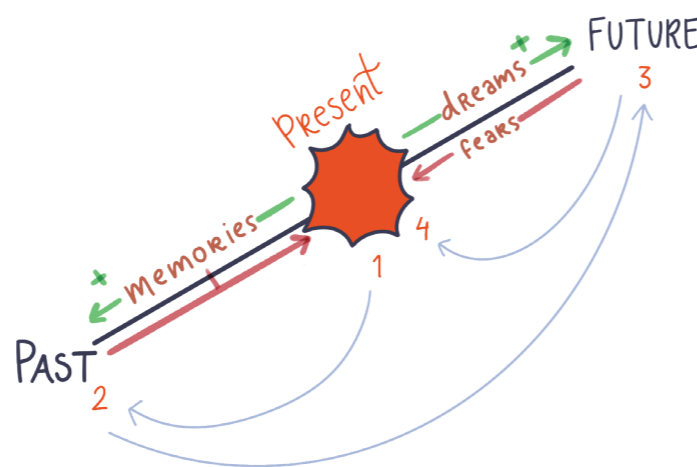


Figure 20: Path of Expression (Sanders & Stappers, 2013).

## Analysis

The last step is analysing to identify patterns and generate ideas. Unlike ethnography, you do not document the entire situation; instead, you focus on key points to create an overview that inspires you to develop design solutions. Therefore, during the analysis, I focus back on the steps of seeking a rental house, and within these steps, their emotions, obstacles, motivation, and opportunities are defined.

## Participants

The interviews, each lasting about an hour, are conducted with 12 participants. Although the focus of this project is on social housing allocation, to capture a broad range of system perspectives, interviews were held with both renters and buyers.

### Critical Note

All interviewees were HBO or WO graduates, and only two did not hold left-wing ideologies. No clear polarisation, like that seen between newcomers and starters on the street, appeared. Additional interviews or street interventions with participants outside this left-wing sample are needed to better understand more specific frustrations and dehumanising actions around this polarisation. This will be done in the next chapter.

## Experience Journey

- Naam
- Leeftijd
- Woonsituatie nu
- Werk je momenteel, en zo ja hoeveel uur per week?
- Wat is de arbeidssituatie (loondienst met vast of tijdelijk contract, zelfstandig, student, geen werk, een uitkering)
- Bij je meest recentelijke huizenzoektocht was dit koop of huur?

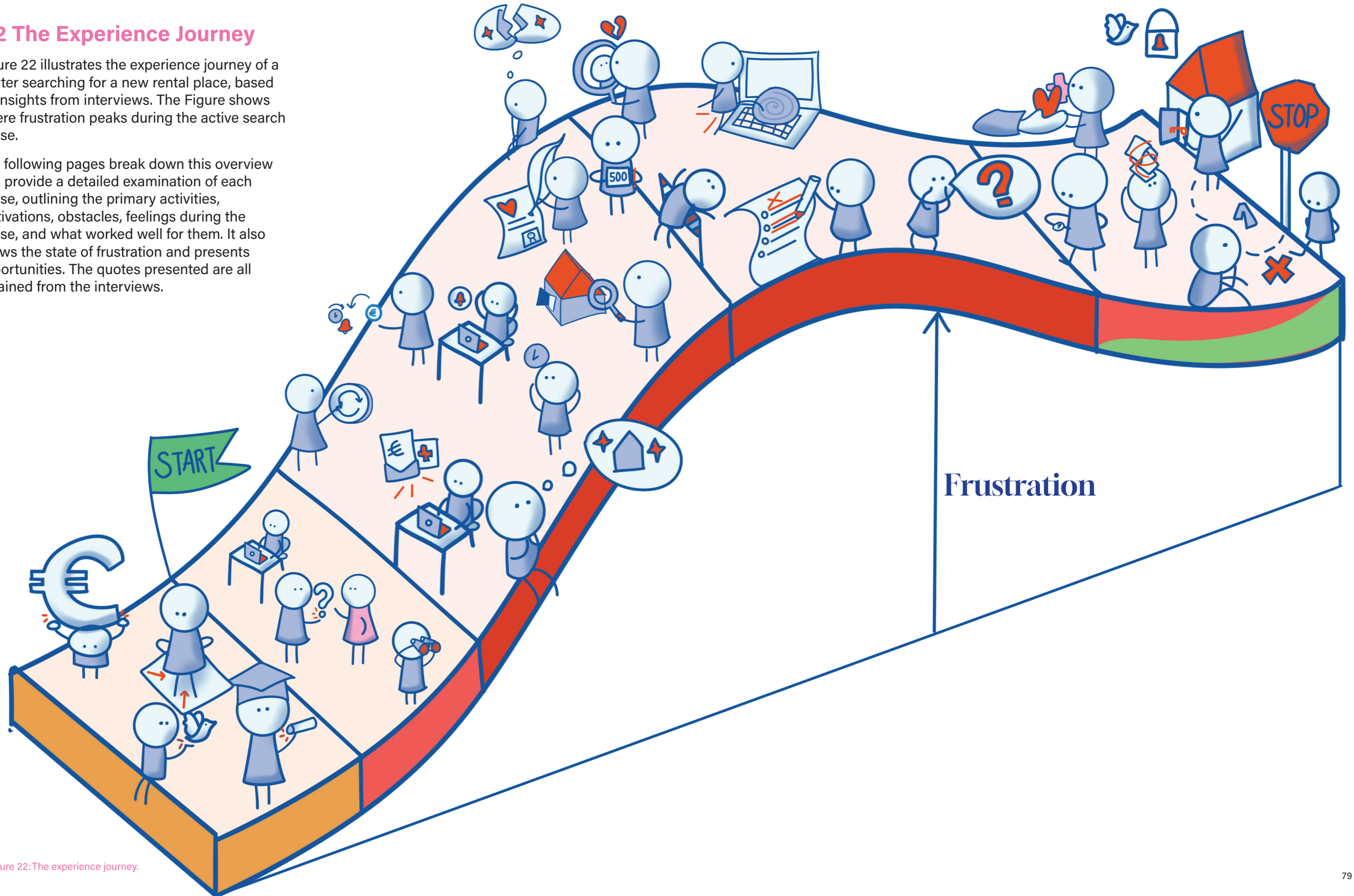
Aanleiding & Oriënteren	Zoeken en wachten	Aanpassingen	Doorbraak/Vinden
Acties (doet)	Acties (doet)	Acties (doet)	Acties (doet)
Gedachten (denkt)	Gedachten (denkt)	Gedachten (denkt)	Gedachten (denkt)
Emoties (voelt)	Emoties (voelt)	Emoties (voelt)	Emoties (voelt)
Touchpoints	Touchpoints	Touchpoints	Touchpoints

Figure 21: The experience journey worksheet.

## 9.2 The Experience Journey

Figure 22 illustrates the experience journey of a starter searching for a new rental place, based on insights from interviews. The Figure shows where frustration peaks during the active search phase.

The following pages break down this overview and provide a detailed examination of each phase, outlining the primary activities, motivations, obstacles, feelings during the phase, and what worked well for them. It also shows the state of frustration and presents opportunities. The quotes presented are all obtained from the interviews.



Lived Experiences

78 Figure 22: The experience journey.

## Phase 1: Initiation and Orientation

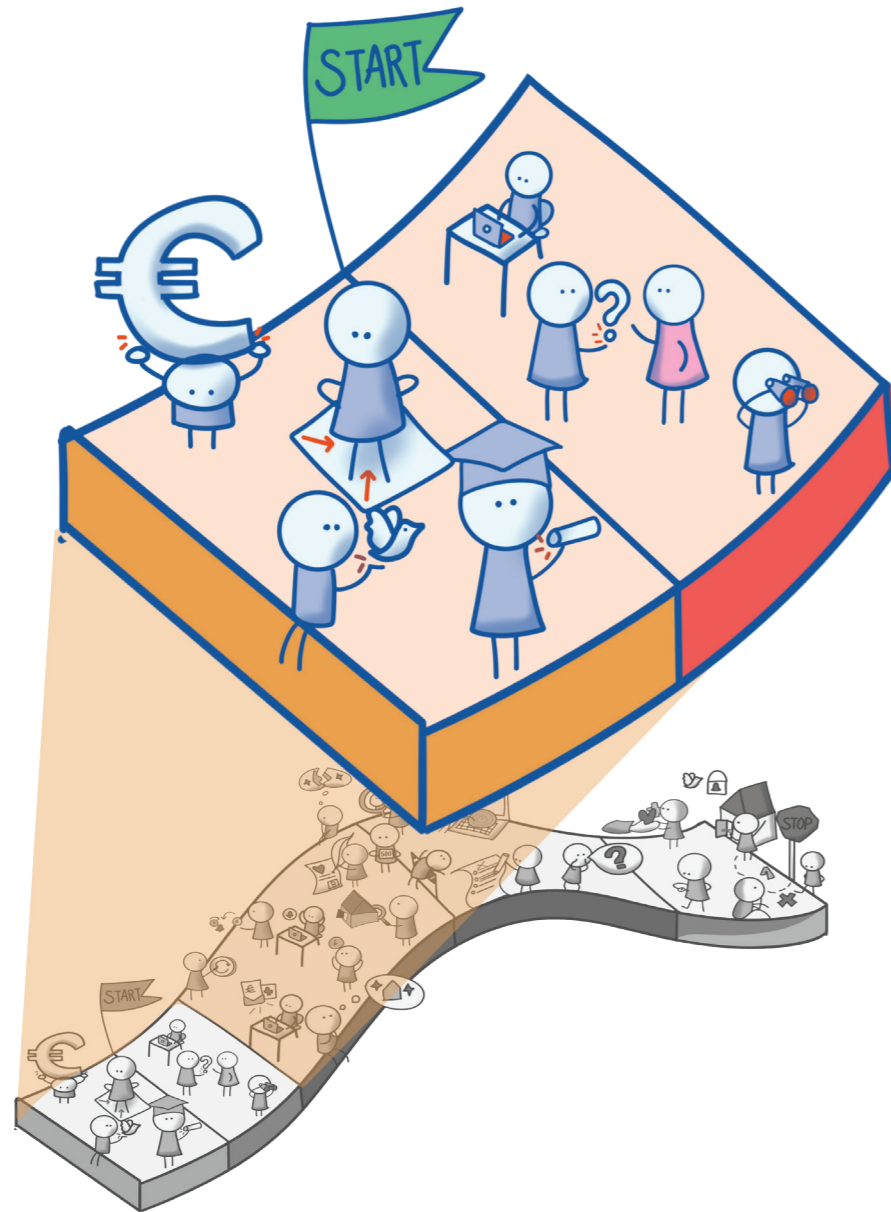


Figure 23: The experience journey: initiation and orientation phase.

### 9.3 Initiation and Orientation

The first phase discussed is the initiation and orientation. There is always a motivation behind someone's decision to look for a new place. This marks the beginning of the initiation phase, where the desire or need to move is recognised. The transition to the orientation phase occurs as participants act on this motivation and start actively seeking a new place.

#### Steps/Activities performed.

- Recognising the need to move.
- Seekers initially explore possibilities by asking their network and browsing websites (e.g., Huurwoningen.nl, Funda, Paradius, DAK, SSH).
- For social housing, they mostly rely on prior registration (sometimes registered at age 16) or must actively register for a lottery system.

#### Motivations for Actions

There were numerous reasons mentioned by the participants: they sought freedom and a place for themselves, the rent was becoming too expensive, they had just graduated, or they needed more space. The search is fuelled by necessity and the anticipation of entering a significant new phase of life.

#### Obstacles

Often, seekers find themselves overwhelmed from the outset, lost in a maze of confusing paperwork or bewildered by unfamiliar social housing procedures. There is a palpable sense of frustration, anxiety, and vulnerability—like stepping into the dark, without a map.

#### Feelings

The initial feeling is often a mix of excitement for the new phase to come. Often, they mentioned being hopeful. But also reluctance and a sense of duty, stemming from the difficulty of the task.

#### What works well?

Early consultation with personal networks is helpful for finding access points and mental support.

#### State of Frustration & Design Opportunities

During initiation and orientation, the state of frustration is medium as there is still motivation and hope. But often, frustration is already high due to known market pressure.

**Opportunity:** Design for transparency and access to knowledge. Design for respect and understanding for other seekers in the same vast system.

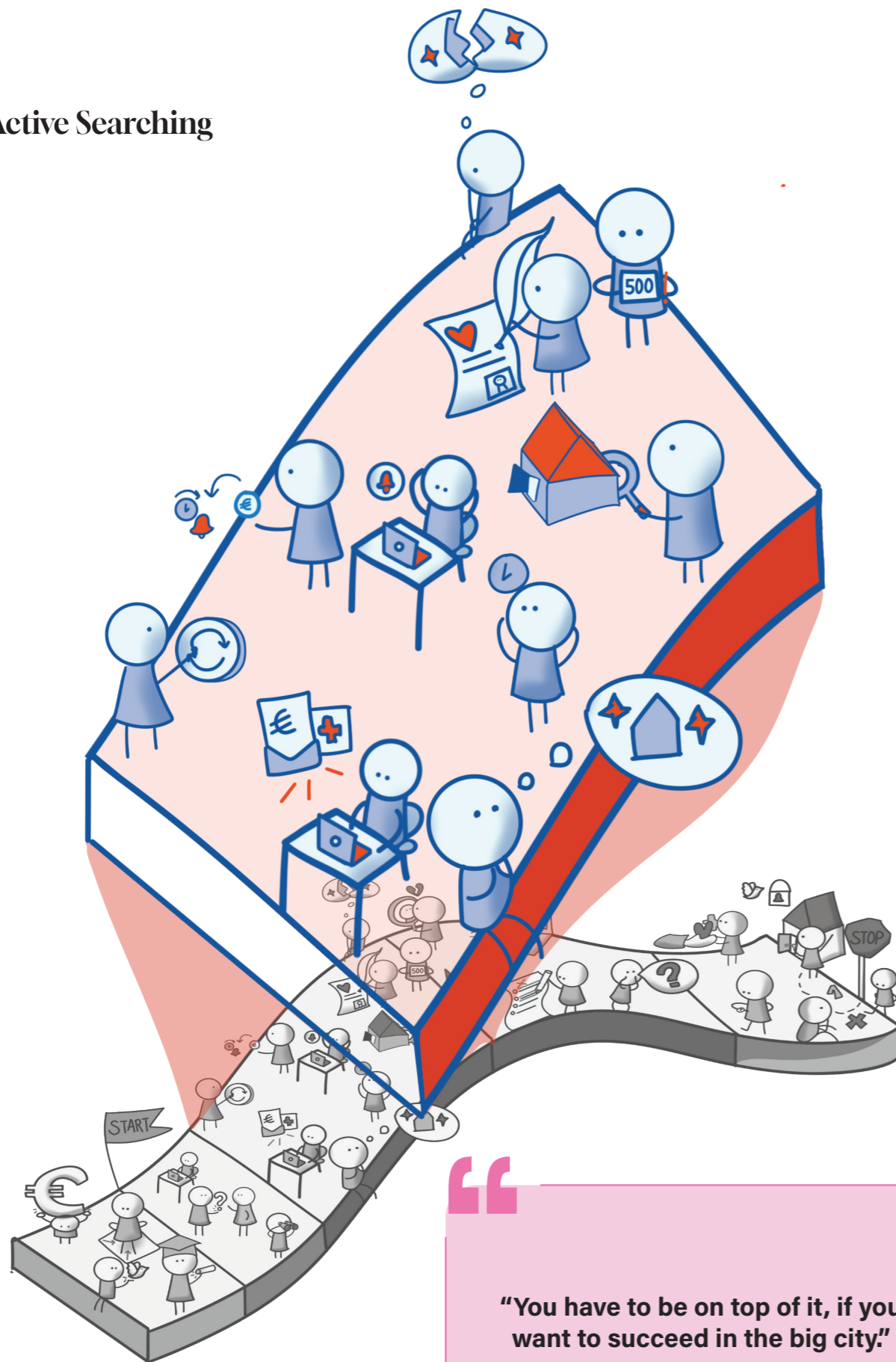
“I had no clue where to start.”

“This phase felt tense, but in a positive way, because it really feels like a new phase in your life.”

“A bit of “I have to”, a bit with reluctantly because it's difficult to find something.”



## Phase 2: Active Searching



**“You have to be on top of it, if you want to succeed in the big city.”**

## 9.4 Active Searching

The second phase is the active searching here the search becomes routine. Activities include digital monitoring and first contact with house providers. The commitment grows from weekly to daily.

### Steps/Actions performed

- Collect all the necessary documents required by most websites.
- Slowly spend more time searching. Set up notifications. Actively monitor listings multiple times, from weekly to daily, using online platforms (e.g., Funda, Huurwoningen.nl, Woningnet).
- Over time, the routine involves frequent refreshes of listings.
- Start paying platforms to gain quicker access to new listings.
- Visualise themselves in the houses they respond to
- After receiving the notification, respond within 3 minutes.
- When lucky, accept invitations to crowded viewings.
- Writing a ‘zoetsappige’ motivation letter
- Provide extensive and very personal documentation (e.g., full salary slips, mental health records, and bank statements).
- Receive rejection for the house and start the process again.

### Motivations for Actions

Acknowledge extreme competition; recognise that securing a viewing or submission requires urgency and speed.

### Obstacles

- Immediately encounter discouraging systemic barriers. These include excessive income demands, such as requiring three times the rent for non-social housing.
- Crowded viewings where they feel like a number

- Hard deadlines or pressing need to choose quickly with minimal information, whether this is a fitting house.
- Competition is described as gigantic.
- It is a time-consuming and draining process that can lead to growing frustrations.
- Many landlords/private corporations have strict, unrealistic requirements. For example, income must be three times the rent.
- Applicants are often rejected or feel compelled to compromise integrity. Rejection based on personal factors is frequent, leading to self-doubt about eligibility.

### Feelings

They feel depersonalised and treated as interchangeable data points in a vast system.

### What works well?

Successful candidates use proactive, personalised strategies. They submit motivation letters that appeal to the emotions. They have a social network that helps with gathering necessary documentation.

### State of Frustration & Design Opportunities

During the active search phase, the frustration reaches its peak. The breeding ground of polarisation. One loses grip on the process and sees that others get different treatments. They feel unheard and neglected, and they start blaming others out of both fear of the unknown and the hopelessness of the process.

**Opportunities:** Implement mechanisms to pluralise rental applications, providing feedback on rejections and contextualising competition. This approach reduces othering and helps applicants understand that rejection is not a personal attack. Also made them more visible due to the system's failure.

Empowering the nuanced voice by tools that facilitate dialogue where seekers can safely express nuanced views, like frustration over the waiting list and belief that everyone deserves shelter, without being labelled as groups.

Figure 24: The experience journey: the active searching phase.

## Phase 3: Adjustments and Vigorous Searching

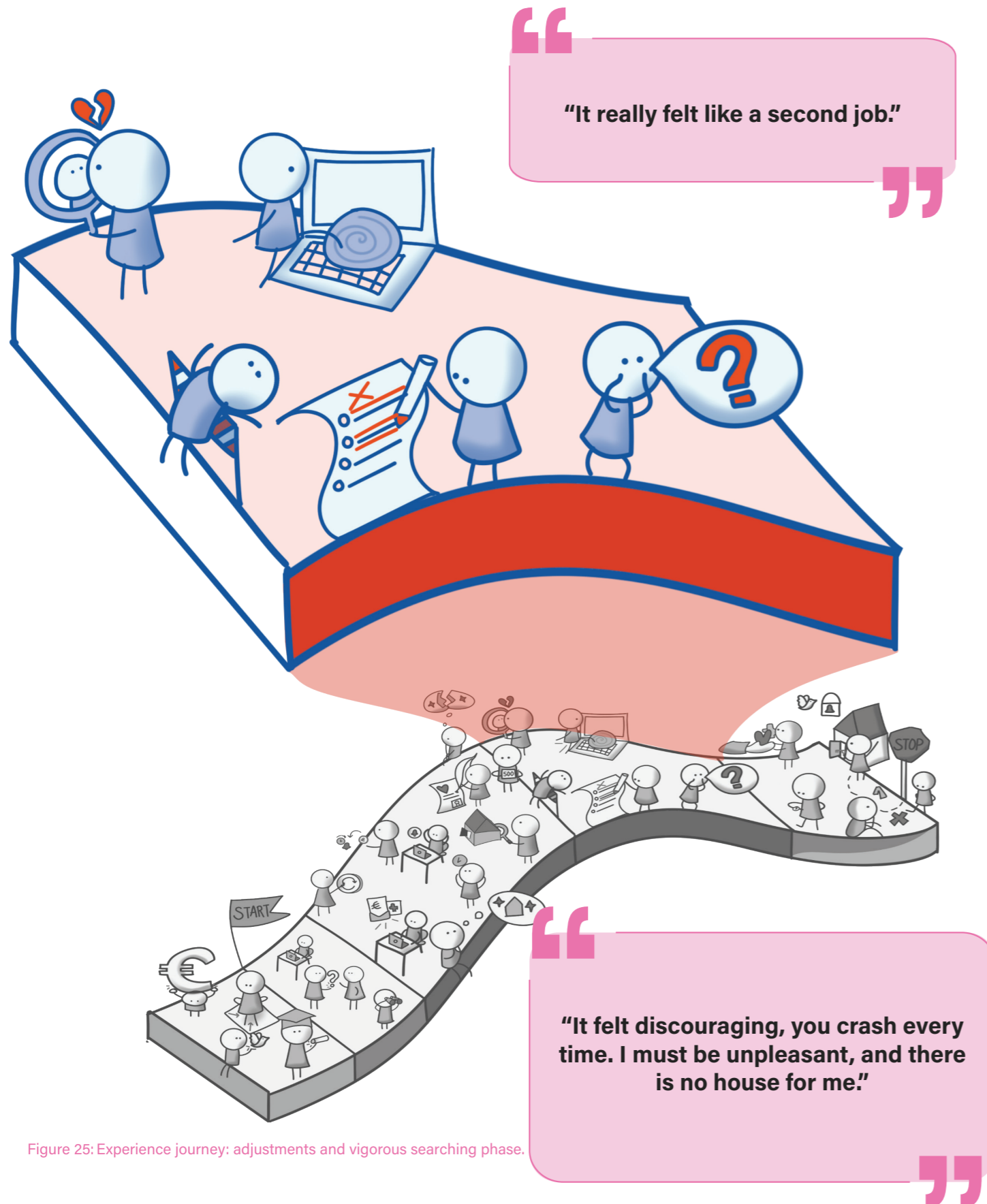


Figure 25: Experience journey: adjustments and vigorous searching phase.

## 9.5 Adjustments and Vigorous Searching

In the third phase, adjustments are made to their search strategy as initial attempts fail, and seekers increase their effort. They spend more time searching, adjust expectations, and start to struggle emotionally due to ongoing rejection and market pressure.

### Steps/Actions performed

- Over think why they are not getting the houses.
- Explore new options for searching.
- Lowering expectations and compromising on their wishes for their new place (e.g., regarding location, size, or features). This results in a less critical approach to listings.
- Looking for loopholes in the system.
- Return to their network with their frustrations and ask for help.

### Motivations for Actions

Seekers recognise that the housing crisis restricts their daily and future freedom and choices. The pressure from their initial reason to search keeps them going.

### Obstacles

- The viewing process is impersonal, rushed, and shared with many other applicants. This leads to frustration and a feeling of disconnection from the search.
- The initial motivation has evolved into a negative relationship with the search project.
- No prospects of finding something, no other options for searching.
- There appears to be limited control or grip on the process.
- Seekers often hear nothing back after submitting their applications.
- A sense of achievement is tempered by realising the housing market limits their long-term freedom.

### Feelings

After rejections, they experience an intense emotional crash. They often blame themselves and feel mentally exhausted.

### What works well?

Using fast responses and notification alerts. They explore new options and search for loopholes (e.g., actively search for new building plans and apply through urban developers) in the system, hoping to find something.

Acknowledging and processing disappointment rationally to sustain the search effort. Clarity about personal non-negotiable requirements. Support network provides technical and emotional support.

### State of Frustrations & Design Opportunities

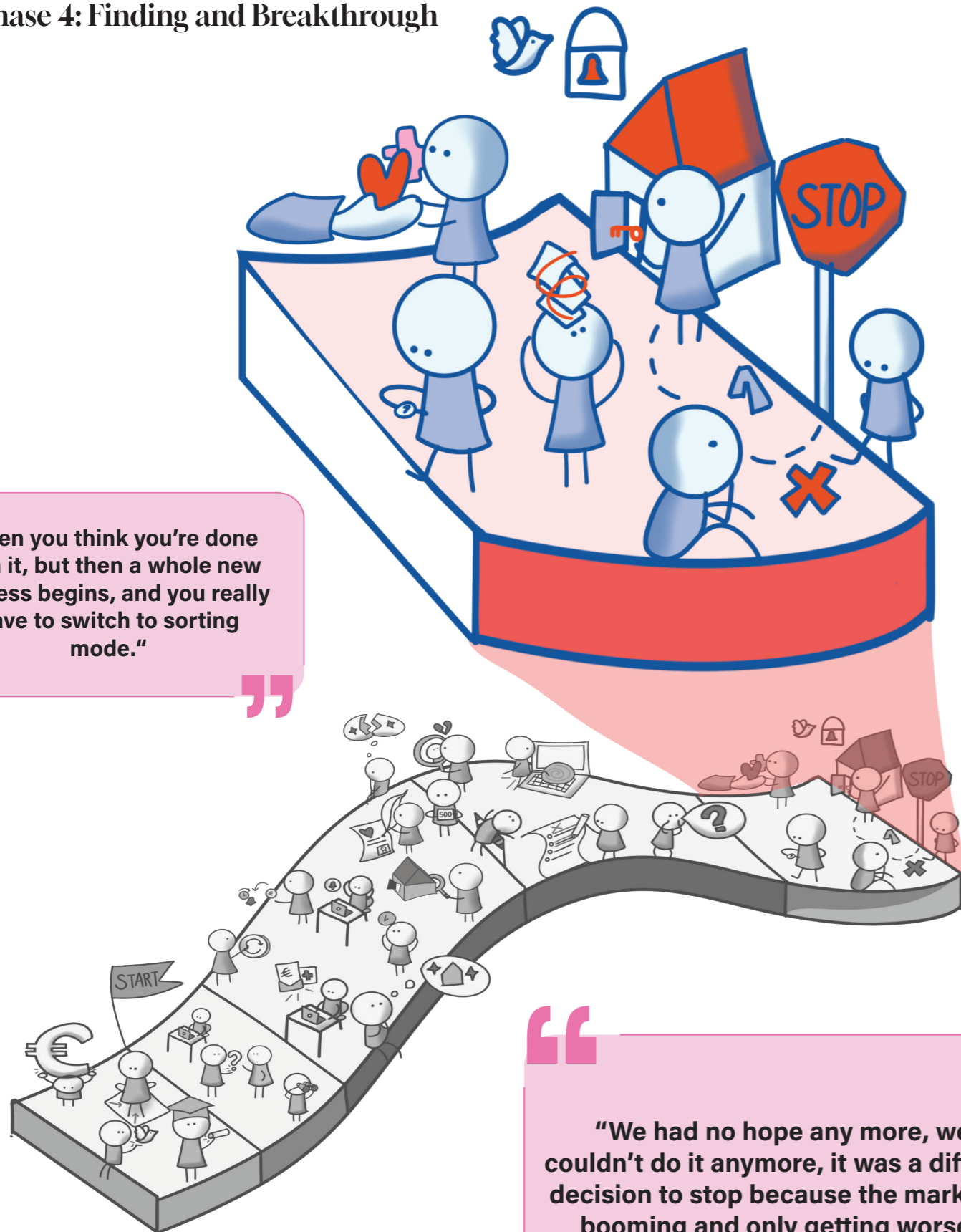
During this phase, we are at the heart of the frustrations. Seekers feel out of control and are becoming emotionally drained. No reasonable explanation or carefully chosen arguments land.

**Opportunity:** Engage the silent middle by creating peer-to-peer networks or moderated spaces that offer emotional support. Provide seekers a place to express exhaustion, process guilt about disengaging from priority systems, and see that others share these struggles. Enable them to feel heard by the government or municipality, which helps reduce their sense of isolation and reinforces that more equitable support and effort are being made.

**“The tension lies in powerlessness and ignorance.”**



## Phase 4: Finding and Breakthrough



“Then you think you’re done with it, but then a whole new process begins, and you really have to switch to sorting mode.”

“We had no hope any more, we couldn’t do it anymore, it was a difficult decision to stop because the market is booming and only getting worse.”

## 9.6 Finding and Breakthrough

In the last phase, the seekers either reach a breakthrough or come to the end of the road. This marks the end of their search journey, at least for the time being. At this transition point, they may decide to stop searching because they feel it is impossible or too mentally draining, or they may have found a house (or room) and can finally put their search to rest.

### Steps/Actions performed:

- Receiving assistance from the environment, experiencing substantial luck, or reaching the required waiting time for social housing.
- Accepting the lease or renting agreement.
- Transition rapidly from searching to administrative tasks, submitting extensive documentation.
- Alternatively, choose to quit searching due to overwhelming mental stress.

### Motivations for Action

The successful conclusion brings immediate, palpable relief, along with a sudden increase in free time and mental energy.

Alternatively, the mental toll and loss of daily freedom prompt them to stop searching and accept their current living situation for now.

### Obstacles

- Even after success, the process lacks a human touch, with bureaucratic entities pressuring for quick turnover and limited support.
- Communication often lacks clarity when it comes to when they can move, how the contract works, and paperwork is therefore requested promptly with limited support.
- Recognise that stopping now makes restarting even harder, as housing market pressures will persist.

### Feelings

While happy and relieved about having secured a place, successful renters often express a lack of complete satisfaction due to the knowledge that the arrangement is temporary. They are emotionally exhausted if the outcome was not positive.

### What works well?

Experiencing a “human element” in the final stages (e.g., kind contact with specific landlords/cooperatives); After the decision: finally finding time and mental space for hobbies and personal life.

### State of Polarisation & Design Opportunities

This phase allows limited reflection and relief, but frustrations remain. They rarely look back positively. The sense of accomplishment is muted by realising housing restrictions limit their future options, and the likelihood of buying or securing the next place seems even more remote.

**Opportunity:** Facilitate structured interaction between successful seekers and developers who genuinely prioritise social good and community. Call on all stakeholders to participate in open forums or workshops, and highlight that housing stability enables freedom and productive citizenship for everyone.

Focus on shared humanity and experiences. For example, organise a shared experience that builds on the common feeling of turning a house into a home.

Show the people who stopped searching that they did have this choice; they did have a form of living that they can now take some comfort in.

Figure 26: The experience journey: The Finding and Breakthrough phase.



## 9.7 Conclusion on Questions

### Frustrations and Latent Needs

The last part of the Context mapping is the analysis of the outcomes into useful design points. The first step was to find an answer to the question: What are the latent needs that lead to frustration feeding polarisation?

Figure 27 shows the five main frustrations in the system arose from clustering the outcomes. To the right of the frustrations, some example quotes that affirm them are presented. The underlying latent needs are for transparency, agency, and a fundamental desire to be seen and heard by institutions.

### State of Polarisation

The second question was what state the existing polarisation is in (preparation, intervention, mediation, or reconciliation). While the interviewed starters are frustrated, this group (primarily highly educated and left-wing) did not initially display the dehumanising or 'us-versus-them' language seen in the prior street interviews. However, as frustrations peak during the active search phase and are high throughout the whole experience journey, the breeding ground for polarisation is established, as seekers begin to look for scapegoats to explain a hopeless process.

## Moving Forward

The mapped journey of the starter reveals a system that feels like a "second job" and frequently crashes one's self-worth. While these interviews captured the depth of personal struggle, they represent a specific demographic that is often more moderate in its views. To see how these personal frustrations translate into the broader societal "us-versus-them" dynamic, the next step is to engage directly with the public debate.

Chapter 10 moves from the quiet, generative setting of interviews to a street intervention, testing whether a silent middle exists (as recognised as a design opportunity) and how dehumanising language manifests in the heat of the public housing conflict. Further concluding on the state of polarisation.

### Design Opportunities

To answer the third question: How and where can design intervene to help depolarise? The different opportunities of all phases are reviewed. Design can intervene by fostering transparency through feedback loops on applications and by creating peer-to-peer networks for emotional relief. Most critically, there is an opportunity to empower nuanced voices, allowing them to express the duality of their frustration without resorting to blaming groups.

#### 01. Powerlessness and lack of control



**"The tension lies in the powerlessness and ignorance!"**

**"You are completely sidelined!"**

**"You simply have no control over it!"**

#### 02. Uncertainty in the system and rules of the game



**"You have to participate in the game, otherwise you are kicked out!"**

**"He was a smart intelligent man that did not want to lower his standard to our level!"**

**"I sometimes wonder whether there even is a system behind all this."**

#### 03. Ethical transgressions



**"It doesn't feel right, but you do end up participating, that feels dirty, feels very gross!"**

**"It feels like I have made a pact with the devil!"**

**"Eventually we pretended to be a gay couple."**

#### 04. Emotional exhaustion



**"Sometimes you had to fill in details, how much you earn and so on, an that made me wonder, is it me? That they don't like my profile?"**

**"At some point, you've done everything you can, and then it seems so hopeless. How can this ever work out?"**

#### 05. Perception of inequality and not being seen



**"Suddenly, a lot of homes were being built for those Ukrainians!"**

**"The way of finding and searching does not feel the same for everyone!"**

**"The distribution is not fair residents who are struggling seem less urgent!"**

Figure 27: The five clustered main frustrations from the starter.



# Chapter 10

## Street Intervention - Public Polarisation Debate



Figure 28: The statement board for the street intervention.



Figure 29: The set up for the street intervention.

Chapter 9 interviewed starters to reveal personal struggles within the system, but focused mainly on a highly educated, left-leaning demographic. The focus on polarisation was previously set aside; in this chapter, it takes centre stage again while capturing a broader spectrum of the public debate.

This chapter documents a street intervention designed to surface ambivalence and test for the existence of the silent middle in a real-world setting. Through an interactive dot-voting exercise with contradictory statements, the intervention examines how citizens navigate the tension between universal rights and perceived practical entitlements. These insights help determine the current state of polarisation and assess the public's willingness to engage in constructive dialogue despite systemic scarcity.

### 10.1 Public Debate of Polarisation

Before going to the streets, an approach and street intervention had to be designed.

#### The Set-up of Street Intervention

The intervention seeks to surface ambivalence; to do so, I decided not to ask open-ended questions, as holding ambivalent opinions is considered less socially acceptable. Therefore, an interactive street intervention is designed with two seemingly contradictory statements:

Everyone deserves a house, no matter where you are from. ('Iedereen verdient een huis, ongeacht waar je vandaan komt')

I have the feeling that there is no place for me anymore ('Ik heb het gevoel dat er voor mij geen plek meer is').

Passers-by are invited to vote by placing stickers on a spectrum from complete agreement to complete disagreement. If people vote on both ends (agreeing with one, disagreeing with the other), it confirms polarised thinking. If people cluster in the middle on both statements, it reveals the ambivalence that characterises nuanced positions: the capacity to hold that everyone deserves housing and there is no place for me simultaneously, without seeing these as contradictions requiring resolution.

During the voting process, I observed whether participants used polarised language, assigned blame, or dehumanised others, and explored where they felt frustration, anxiety, or insecurity within the housing context. These observations aimed to assess the state of polarisation in public debate, the existence of a middle group, the willingness to engage in dialogue, and how existing polarisation shapes discourse.



## Outcomes Voting

A total of 23 people participated; see Figure 30 for the dot voting results. For the first statement ('Everyone deserves a house no matter where you come from' – Iedereen verdient een huis ongeacht waar je vandaan komt), most participants favoured everyone deserving a house. However, the majority of votes clustered in the middle, with several expressing 'Ik ben echt op het randje' ('I am just on the border'), indicating nuanced positions. With the other statement ('I have the feeling there is no room for me' - 'Ik heb het gevoel dat er voor mij geen plek meer is'), there was a bigger divide.

It was an eventful day; I tasted and saw the polarisation happen before my eyes. While in conversation with another, other groups would join and start the discussion. Some would argue with me, what was my opinion?

The next sub-chapter will dive deeper into the interpretation of what I observed during the voting process.



Figure 30: The outcome of the dote voting.

## Critical Note

The main context for this project is the housing market in Utrecht; however, this intervention was executed in the Hague. This was to step outside my bubble in the Netherlands' political hierarchy to experience the public debate on housing allocation.

## 10.2 Interpretations

The collected data and observations reveal a public debate in a state of high tension. The following interpretation synthesises the findings to assess the state of polarisation, the existence of a silent middle, and underlying drivers of the felt tension. These claims are made carefully, as they are an interpretation of what I heard in conversation, and I aligned with the theory gathered throughout this process.

### State of Polarisation

The conversations during the intervention confirm that the public housing debate is currently in the intervention state, the most critical stage of a polarisation conflict (Brandsma, 2016). At this stage, neutrality becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, and pushes the polarisation into a toxic state with active scapegoating and othering. This showed through participants assigning dehumanising labels to opposing groups, such as referring to status holders as "dat tuig" (that scum), and blaming "them" for the housing shortage.

### Values vs. Practical Entitlement

While a majority of the 23 participants voted in favour of the statement "Everyone deserves a house," many added a critical nuance: they distinguished between the universal human right to a "roof over one's head" (shelter) and the practical entitlement to a permanent house. This suggests that while abstract values of human rights remain, they are being eroded by the material reality of scarcity, leading to the sentiment that "Dutch citizens should get priority".

**"A dialogue sounds nice, but it does nothing to change the housing shortage."**

### Rejection of Dialogue in Scarcity

Participants who showed signs of being pushers or joiners (those actively directing blame) were sceptical or dismissive of dialogue. The reasons mentioned were the belief that dialogue cannot solve a supply problem; it would be a distraction from the fact that there simply are not enough houses. And a perceived inequality. Scarcity creates a situation where the conversation would feel "unfair from the start". Some participants felt that "talking doesn't help if you don't live in the same reality," suggesting an affective gap in which the other's experiences are no longer viewed as legitimate.

**"Talking doesn't help if you don't live in the same reality."**

**"I do believe that everyone should have a place to live, but I don't believe that everyone should automatically be entitled to a house."**

## Fear of Regression

Participants expressed a fear of regression, such as being forced to move back in with parents or becoming homeless because they lack the capital to compete in a market where housing requires more than two stable salaries. This fear turns the housing search into a zero-sum game, where the arrival of new status holders is seen as a threat to the starter's future.

## The Presence of the Silent Middle

Despite the dehumanising language used by some, the intervention also successfully surfaced nuanced opinions and, with that, the silent middle. These individuals voted on the edge or clustered in the middle of the contradictory statements. This group experiences high ambivalence; they want to remain nuanced but feel pressured by conflicting public messages and the lack of clear information about the system and regulations. Unlike the pushers and joiners, this group expressed an openness to dialogue, viewing it as a priority because "currently we have no dialogue".

## Systemic vs. Interpersonal Blame

Overall, the intervention revealed that while people attribute the crisis to a housing shortage and government failure, the lack of institutional transparency leads this systemic frustration to be misdirected at the most visible group: status holders. Scarcity has successfully transformed a systemic failure into a perceived interpersonal conflict. Linking to the latent needs as described below.

## Latent needs

- **Security and certainty:** A guaranteed future where they can find housing without having to take steps backward in life.
- **Fairness and recognition:** Acknowledgment of their struggles and equal treatment and priority as citizens.
- **Agency and control:** Concrete solutions rather than just dialogue, being able to get a grip on how, where, and having the option they are looking for.

## Moving Forward

The street intervention confirms that the housing crisis has created a breeding ground for toxic polarisation where status holders serve as primary scapegoats for systemic failures. While the starters navigate a journey of active exhaustion and frustration, they view status holders as their direct competitors. Having captured how the public debate functions, it is now necessary to explore the other side of this tension. Chapter 11 will examine the lived experience of the status holder, humanising the group currently dehumanised on the street and revealing the parallel vulnerabilities and frustrations they face within the same broken system.



# Chapter 11

## Lived Experiences of the Status holder



Chapter 9 focused on the starter's lived experiences, and Chapter 10 surfaced the public debate and the silent middle. One last group needs to be accounted for to grasp the vulnerabilities of all sides of the social tension.

This chapter explores the journey of status holders (refugees granted temporary asylum). Through semi-structured interviews in safe, home-like settings, this research uncovers how they navigate the housing allocation context.

### 11.1 Research Approach - Semi-structured Interviews

The approach to understanding the lived experiences of status holders differs from that of starters. There is a chance this journey was traumatic for them and can trigger deep emotional responses. Therefore, rather than completing an experience journey, the emphasis was placed on understanding how they perceived the system; knowing how that felt for them is more valuable than their concrete actions. Once the narrative is told, a general journey with emotions experienced can then be outlined.

The setup was a semi-structured interview in a home setting. One of the interviewers was with a translator, present to ensure safety and that everything said was understood.

#### The Sections

The questions for these interviews focused on the following sections:

- Arrival and first experiences
- The waiting process
- Experiences with others
- Integration and a sense of home
- The system and honesty
- Ideals and wishes for the future.

#### The Goal

The goal was to understand how a status holder experiences the housing allocation process, what barriers they encounter (both practical and social), and how they feel polarisation or resistance from other groups. Discovering where misunderstandings arise between status holders and local house hunters, and how the system pits both groups against each other.

#### The Participants

Four interviews, including a follow-up with one participant who wished to share more were conducted with three status holders each, lasting around two hours.



## 11.2 The Journey from Arrival to Housing

Although the journey was not created together with the participants, it is valuable to review what status holders go through. A critical note is that this journey is shaped by conversations and information from earlier research on the context, with the three individuals, and may not represent every journey of status holders, but their lived experiences provide insight into the frustrations and emotions within the system.

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### Leaving Home

Status holders begin their journey in their homeland, burdened by anxiety and loss. Fleeing war, violence, or persecution is not a matter of choice but a desperate act of survival; the trauma seeps into every part of them. One participant described himself as a 'warrior' who has sacrificed everything, but even warriors can break: 'I thought, yes, I am a warrior, but am I not still a human being after all?' After all this sacrifice, am I now at a new bottleneck? I cannot take it anymore."

### Arrival and Waiting for Status

Arrival in the Netherlands brings safety, but also anxiety while waiting for status. The most difficult moment is the period of waiting until you have status; you can't do anything. Nothing can help." The unclear process leaves status holders feeling forgotten: "It feels like you are forgotten. Once you get the permit, you feel seen and cared for. Without it, you feel they don't care; you're just a number. Receiving status brings relief, but this is often short-lived; they are moved to an AZC in their allocated local authority, which brings new challenges.

### The AZC

After receiving status, applicants are assigned to an Asylum Seekers Centre (AZC), where daily life is often characterised by passivity, shared rooms with five or six strangers, and frequent tensions or violence. The combination of diverse, traumatic backgrounds and close quarters can result in conflict.

One participant described serious aggression from a roommate: "He attacked me, he hates me badly... He tried to stab me with a knife; luckily, my friends held him back." The incident was reported to COA staff, but no action followed. They are left in the dark, with no communication about when and where they will receive housing, and without an address, they cannot participate in society, for example, to apply for employment.

### Receiving Housing and Making It Home

Receiving housing brings immediate relief and the chance to participate in society, yet this moment is rarely straightforward. For some, joy is tempered by loneliness while waiting for family reunification or feeling isolated in unfamiliar cities. Even more challenging, the house cannot shield them from daily discrimination fuelled by political rhetoric: "I used to wear my scarf, but not any more, because people see me as a criminal." Despite this, hope persists for connection and understanding. What emerges is that home means more than shelter—it

**"I hope that people will open their hearts and overcome their fear, which may stem from a bad experience with people who are not like him. I cannot force love, but I want him to understand: I am not a threat to you."**

means dignity and freedom from fear. Only with time, effort, and safety from discrimination does a house become a home: 'Not being discriminated against is what makes a home, makes you productive, and able to participate in society.'" Even after housing is secured, systemic barriers and unmet needs persist, as explored in the next section.

## 11.3 Frustrations

The interview outcomes were analysed and summarised, highlighting the frustrations that characterise their journey. The journey is different but equally significant in terms of a lack of agency. However, in their journey, anxiety is higher, sometimes with threats to the fulfilment of their fundamental needs.

The following three things characterized their experience of the housing allocation system.

### Not Heard by the System

When violence occurs in the AZC or conflicts arise, institutional response is often inadequate or absent. This indifference extends beyond physical safety to a broader feeling of being unseen by the system. Status holders describe feeling like numbers in a bureaucratic process, where individual circumstances and struggles go unrecognised.

### A Process without Agency

For status holders, the housing allocation process is almost entirely passive. They are placed in a system where they have no control over the outcome or time scale. Only in very special cases, such as having a strong connection to a place, can they indicate a preference for a local authority. However, it is unclear whether these preferences are taken into account. Typically, the location is assigned rather than chosen.

Status holders cannot refuse the assigned home unless the accommodation is highly unsuitable,

such as a large family being placed in a small house. In those rare cases, they can appeal the decision. The allocation process lacks transparency. Status holders receive no clarity on time lines, no feedback on their position, and no explanation for why some receive housing within months while others wait years. This opacity creates the same fear of the unknown.

### The Challenge of Starting Over

A house is more than shelter; it is essential for integration and rebuilding. Integration into Dutch society requires an address for work, study, and language courses. Yet the very thing needed to participate remains entirely outside their control. This creates a fundamental barrier, where rebuilding life depends on a passive waiting process that offers no agency.

## Moving Forward

The interviews with status holders reveal a journey marked by a near lack of agency. The transition from "warrior" to "resident" is often stalled by a bureaucratic system that treats individuals as numbers. They are worn down by the anxiety of passivity, waiting in the dark for a home they cannot choose and an address they need to begin participating in society.

Despite different paths, a commonality emerges between starters and status holders: both feel unseen and unheard by the institutions that govern their lives. The project has now captured both sides of the tension. The next step is to bridge these two realities. Chapter 12 will synthesise these findings by laying the journeys of the starter and status holder side by side to identify the parallel frustrations and cross-cutting tensions that will form the foundation for the final design intervention.



# Chapter 12

## Insights and Tensions

This section has shifted from the broad theoretical drivers and stakeholder analysis of polarisation and the housing allocation context in Sections 1 and 2 to the lived experiences of those in the Utrecht housing market. After documenting the “active exhaustion” of the starter and the “anxious passivity” of the status holder, this chapter synthesises these findings to reveal the realities behind their polarising tension.

By laying these two journeys side by side, we can identify parallel frustrations, such as institutional opacity and the feeling of being treated like a number, that constitute shared human struggles. Recognising both groups as victims of a broken system, not natural opponents, allows the project to bridge the affective gap and humanise the “scapegoat” group. This synthesis identifies the cross-cutting tensions that fuel the “us-versus-them” dynamic and provides the foundation for a targeted design intervention.

### 12.1 The Polarisation Context

The polarisation of housing allocation is currently at its peak (intervention stage). Scarcity has transformed a systemic failure into a zero-sum game where one group’s gain is perceived as another’s loss. Based on the street intervention and interviews, the following roles (see Figure 31 for the role dynamic visualised, refer to Chapter 3, Section 1 for explanation of the roles) have been identified within the polarisation dynamic of starters versus status holders:

**The pusher:** This group directs systemic blame toward the influx of newcomers, viewing them as the primary cause of the shortage and articulating this openly to fuel division.

**The joiner:** Often a frustrated starter or young person, the joiner is driven by a sense of personal powerlessness. Joiners begin to adopt the pushers’ views and align with them, channelling their anger at the ineffective housing system towards the more visible ‘other’ group, whom they perceive as direct opponents.

**The scapegoat:** In this context, the status holder is blamed for things they cannot control. They are dehumanised through language that denies their dignity, often being viewed as “taking a spot” that they were passively assigned by the system.

**The silent middle:** This group also seeks housing in the highly competitive market. While they experience the effects of polarisation and scarcity, they refrain from blaming other groups. Members struggle internally between their belief that everyone deserves a home and the frustration with real market conditions. They feel confused by contrasting public messages and actively seek factual information, often processing the issue rationally rather than emotionally. They still hold nuanced, ambivalent positions.

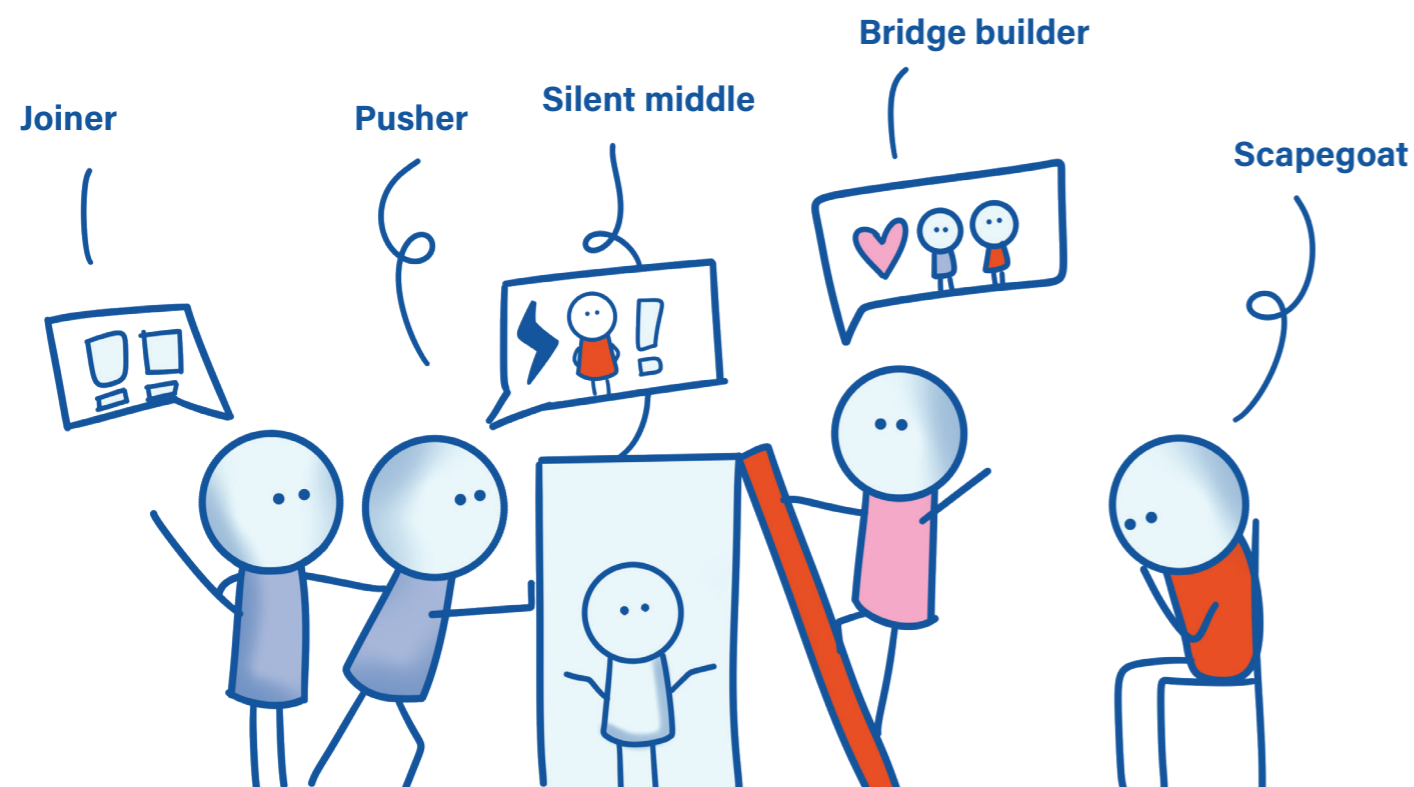


Figure 31: The role dynamic in a polarised context.

## 12.2 Parallel Frustrations

Despite a completely different journey and the apparent polarisation conflict of “us-versus-them”, the interviews reveal that starters and status holders share significant parallel frustrations:

### Lack of Agency

Both groups feel powerless. While the starter experiences ‘active lack of agency’, an effort without result. The status holder experiences a passive lack of agency, with no choice, for example, over location, timing, or housing type.

### Institutional Opacity

Both groups feel left in the dark by the institutions that control their fate. They receive no time line clarity or little to no feedback on applications, and feel the rules are hidden or opaque.

### Treated Like a Number

Both feel treated as numbers with their individual circumstances lost in bureaucracy.

### Emotional Exhaustion

Prolonged uncertainty creates a state of survival mode. Both experience emotional exhaustion from the crash of self-worth and seeking to feel safe. Housing is seen as existential. For starters, it is about living independently. For status holders, it is crucial to finally participate in society.

## 12.2 Cross Cutting Tensions

While the frustrations are parallel, the way they manifest in the system creates cross-cutting tensions; the following three are recognised.

### Scarcity and Competition

They compete for the same limited housing, leading starters to feel there is no space for them, and often blame status holders.

### Fairness vs. Equality

The municipality’s decision to “invest unevenly for equal opportunities” (prioritising status holders to ensure integration) is viewed by many stakeholders as a violation of systemic fairness. This creates the sentiment that “own citizens should come first”.

### Agency vs. Passivity

Starters often wish they had the certainty that status holders seem to enjoy when they are assigned a home. At the same time, status holders sometimes wish they had the freedom and choice that starters have during their search.

## Moving Forward

These two realities demonstrate that polarisation stems from a dysfunctional system. While starters and status holders take different paths, both groups experience frustration due to a lack of agency, unclear institutions, and being treated as interchangeable.

Recognising shared struggles explains the conflict, but does not show how design can deliver solutions. Scarcity drives the pusher and joiner, while the silent middle remains trapped in an information vacuum. These insights form a behavioural framework for building solutions. In Chapter 13, this framework will be build.



# Chapter 13

## Behavioural Mapping

The previous chapter established the shared frustrations and cross-cutting tensions. However, these struggles do not automatically provide a roadmap for a design solution. This chapter bridges that gap by turning human insights into a behavioural framework that defines the conditions for shifting toxic polarisation toward mutual respect.

Lived Experiences

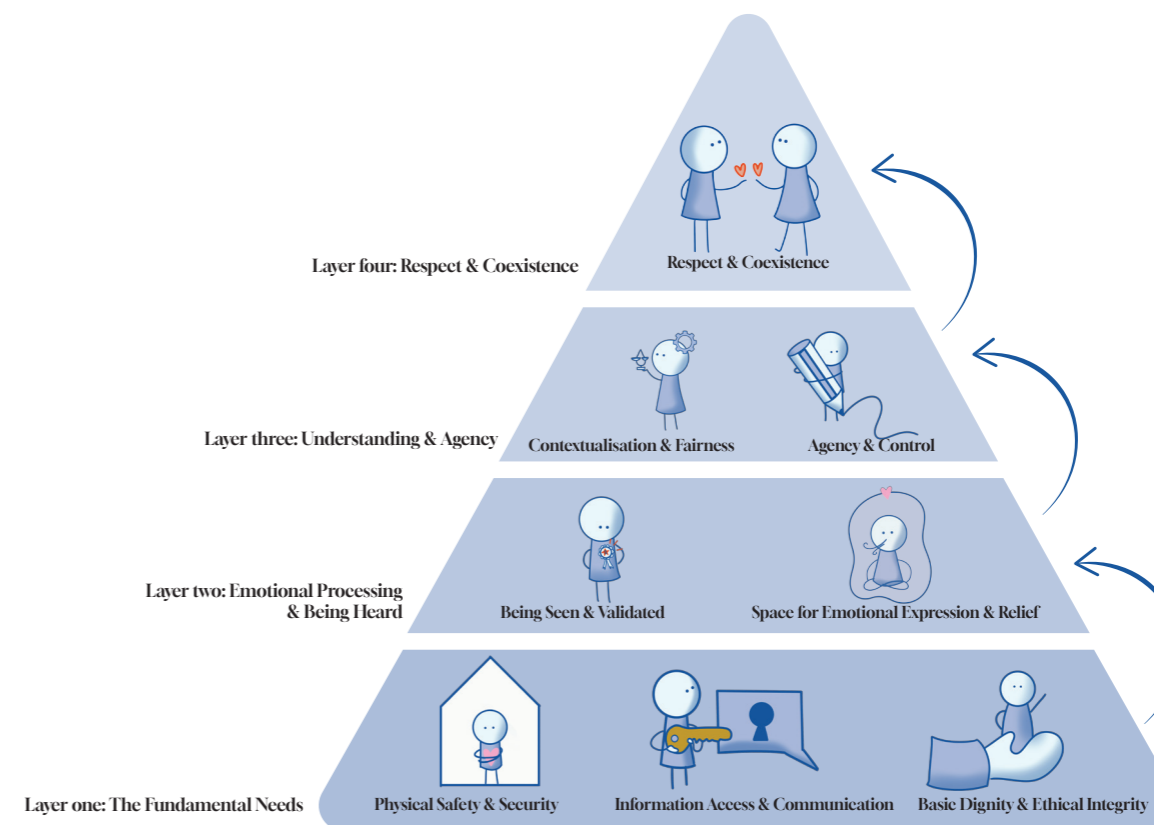


Figure 34: Pyramid of needs to reach respect.

### 13.1 The Pyramid of Need

The start of bridging that gap starts with understanding what encourages openness, not agreement, but respect for diverse, sometimes contradicting beliefs. This was done by analysing the findings of this section so far and in co-creation with both a starter as a status holder (see Figure 32 and 33).

#### The Hierarchy of Needs

The sessions identified recurrent frustrations and unmet needs, structured as a pyramid modelled on Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1957). I used this framework, drawing on previous successful experience with vulnerable groups in large systems. Additionally, research across fields shows that instability in basic needs blocks higher outcomes, such as social connection and dignity (Nimela & Kim, 2014; Lai & Hou, 2013; Pimonsathean & Chaiwiwatworakol, 2020). This model is not only an effective communication tool, but also clarifies why respectful coexistence is difficult when foundational needs go unmet.

#### The Initial Linear Model

This linear model, presented in Figure 34, consists of four sequential layers: Physical Safety and Security, Emotional Processing, Understanding and Agency, and Respectful Coexistence. The underlying logic is that individuals trapped in "survival mode" (characterised by existential fear of homelessness or a total lack of information) are cognitively unable to engage in nuanced dialogue. Consequently, stabilising the foundational layers is necessary before an individual can move toward mutual understanding. This model is based on all interviews and a co-design session with a new social housing resident.

Within this model, respect means passive coexistence without hostility, representing an initial phase of depolarisation. Building on this foundation, further steps may focus on active respect, such as understanding and empathy.

Despite its strengths, using the model revealed limitations and indicated the need to adjust toward a more dynamic representation.

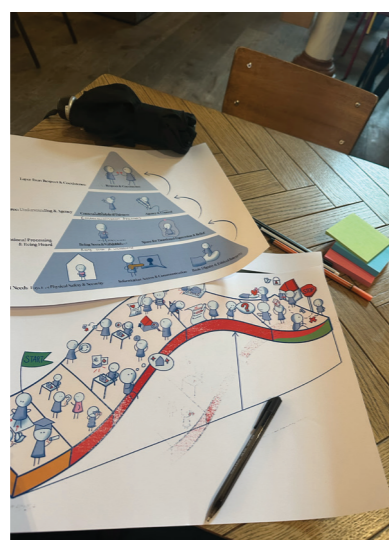


Figure 32: Co-creation session.

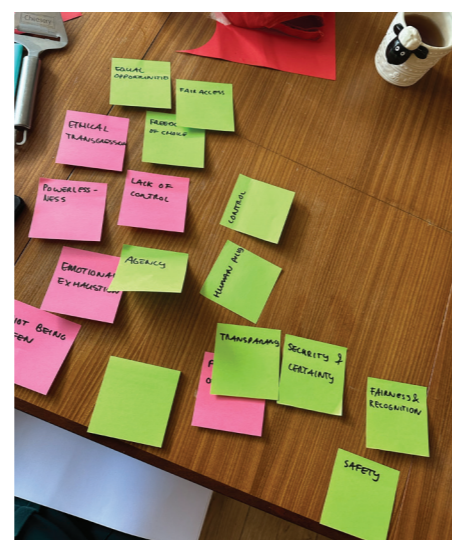


Figure 33: Co-creation session.



## Limitations of Pyramid Model

The pyramid suggested a linear progression, but as De Marchi (2022) and Burgess (2021) note, simple models cannot capture this complexity. Three one-on-one sessions with a housed starter, behavioural expert<sup>1</sup>, and status holder affirmed this by showing that real-life polarisation is much more complex and dynamic. Progress in one area can make up for gaps in others. Feedback loops reinforce elements, and respect is not a final goal but something continually regenerated.

There are multiple entry points for intervention, with top layers sometimes supporting foundational ones. One participant highlighted that a foundation of respect is essential, but progress is not strictly linear. Meaningful change can start at different points in the process ("When I had information about my status position, it helped me feel less anxious, even though nothing changed materially. When I felt validated by fellow refugees at the AZC or at my work in the Voorkamer, I could better process my frustration. It wasn't a single factor – everything worked together." - A status holder. A behavioural expert noted that people have different needs; a rigid, linear approach is not effective. Some seek agency and respect through action, while others need to feel seen and have their dignity affirmed. The model should support multiple pathways to respect and coexistence. This highlighted the need to adapt the rigid, linear pyramid model into a more dynamic system.

## 13.2 From Linear to Dynamic The Respectful Coexistence system

To create a more dynamic system, I moved away from a rigid hierarchy and explored connections between elements of the pyramid through a co-design session with a social designer. This iterative process revealed that relationships among elements are not strictly sequential; instead, they reinforce each other in multiple ways. Adding lateral connections turned the pyramid into a circular system with feedback loops, showing that respect, validation, and physical safety are deeply interconnected.

These feedback loops were grouped into two clusters: Personal Centredness and Clarity on the System. Respect and coexistence emerged as central outcomes, supported by a foundation of physical safety and security. When this foundation is stable, both feedback loops are less fragile, creating more space for respect and coexistence. Coming to the newly improved Respectful Coexistence system (S-R&C) presented in Figure 35.

Unlike the former linear model, the new system is a resilient ecosystem. Multiple elements support one another. Respect is cultivated, not achieved by climbing a ladder, and it continually feeds back into the system. This framework clarifies what must be met to shift from toxic polarisation to constructive coexistence. The following pages detail the system architecture.

### Design Choices

The diagram shows some system connections that act as one-way bridges. While all factors are related, changing just one may not be enough to promote respect. For instance, information alone is not useful without the skills to contextualise or manage it, and respect itself does not automatically foster these abilities. Similarly, perceiving the system as fair can build respect, but being respected does not directly improve your skills or sense of fairness. This model blends linear and dynamic elements, with some layers closely tied to respect and others less. So if those break, respect is affected, but stabilising distant layers alone does not necessarily increase respect.

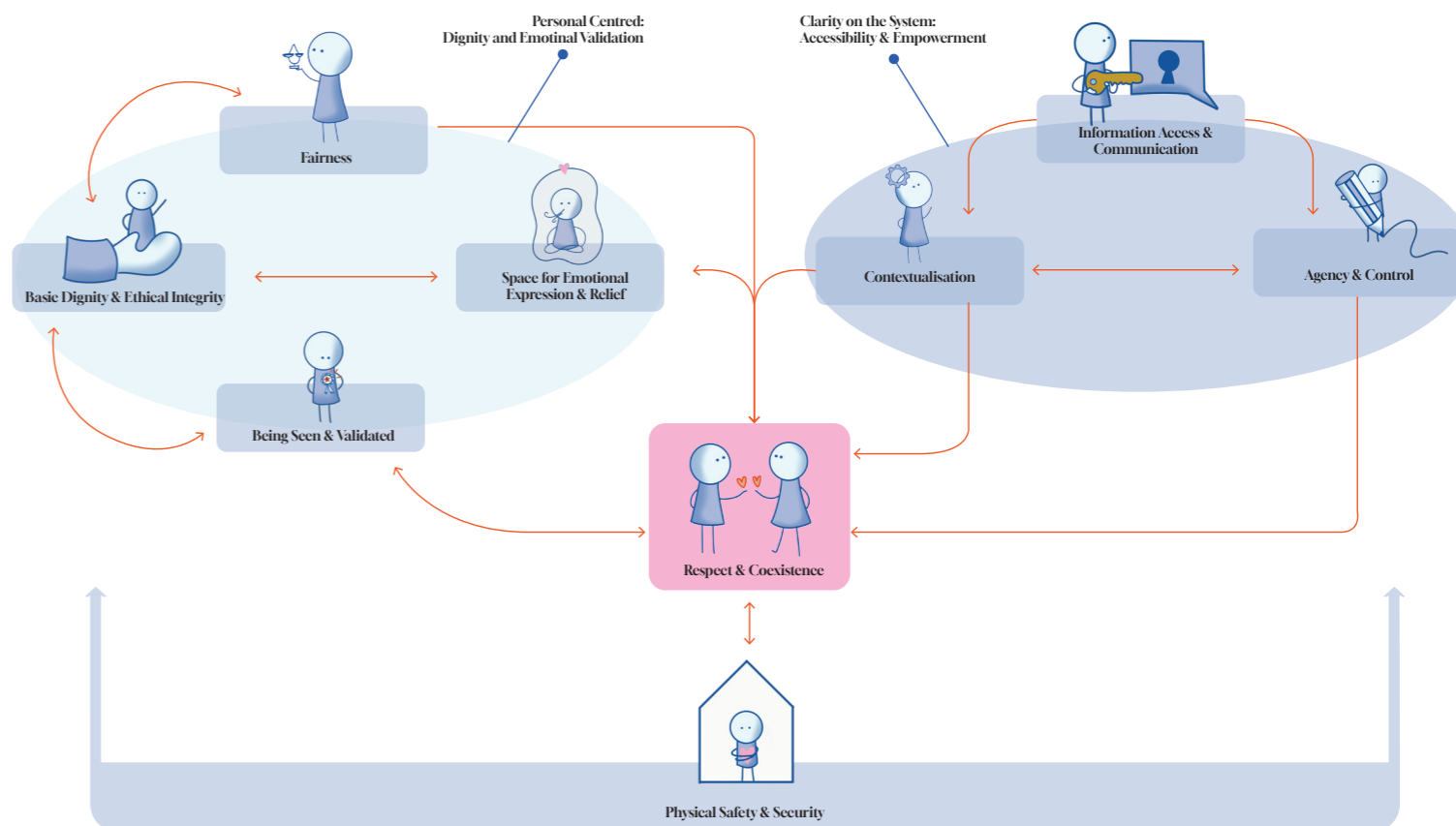


Figure 35: The Respectful Co-existence system.

### Critical note

In creating the model, I focused on the strongest interrelationships between elements, highlighting how mutual respect and coexistence form the core. Feedback in the system serves as a tool for designing for depolarisation. While many secondary connections exist, the model visualises only primary mechanisms to maintain clarity. Secondary links enrich the system but do not change the main strategy: strengthen clusters and enable respect to emerge.

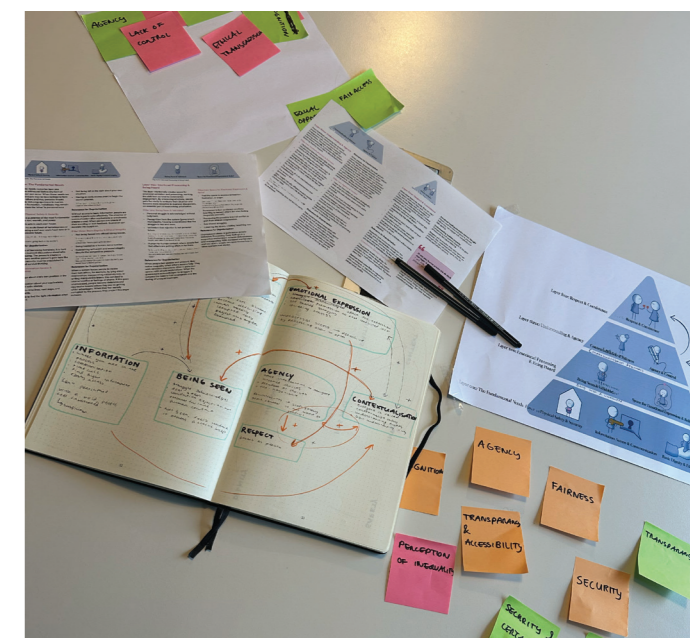


Figure 36: Co-creation session to bring the system from linear to dynamic with a peer.

[1] Spoken at the Dag van het gedrag, organised by Behavioural Insights Network Netherlands, a day to show how behavioural insights can drive transformation and inform smarter policy for complex societal issues.

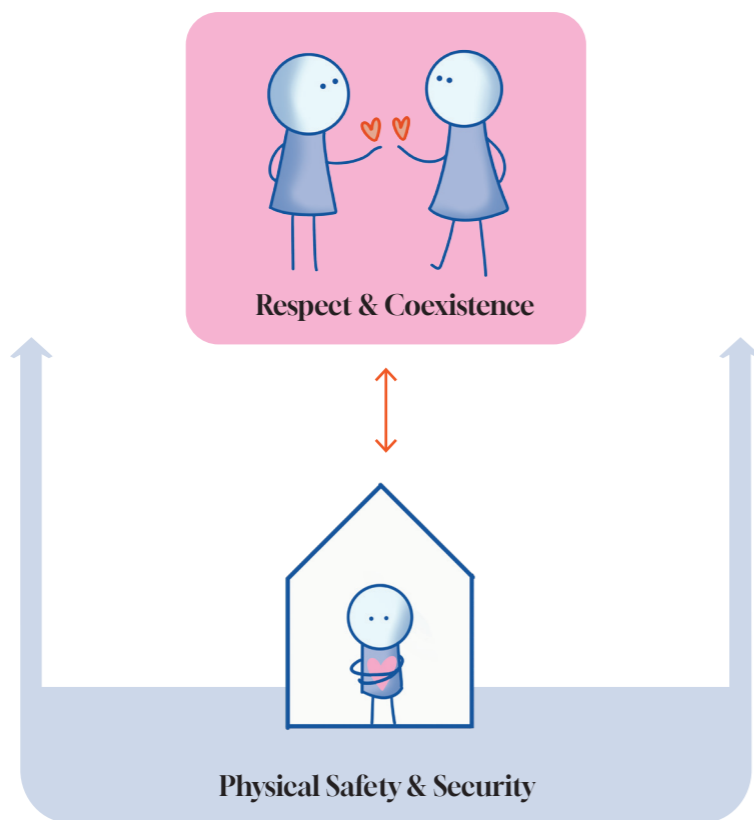


Figure 37: Feedback loop 1: Physical Safety & Security

### 13.3 Physical Safety & Security **Relevance for depolarisation**

Physical safety and security form the foundation of the system; secure housing and protection from homelessness enable individuals to move beyond perceiving others as threats and competition. When essentials (such as shelter, warmth, and tranquillity) are fulfilled, people feel safe and grounded. Without this stability, individuals often remain in a defensive state, unable to listen or engage with nuance. The absence of immediate threats, such as homelessness, is critical for stability and receptiveness to others. However, as will be detailed in the feedback loop, respect can deepen this sense of safety and vice versa.

With the fear of becoming homeless, it is hard to engage in nuanced discussions about who deserves housing. The pressure creates a mentality where another person's gain feels like a loss (zero-sum). Intervening with individuals with no secure foundation is hard as they are stuck in survival thinking.

#### Feedback Loop

Apart from forming an important foundation for the elements in the system. It also forms a feedback loop to the respect and coexistence variable, shown in Figure 37. When one receives respect and validation of their opinions, this helps one feel safe and secure. And when someone feels safer, they will open up more to different nuances. The Humanising a human in an inhuman system to allow for more respect and safety. However, disrespect can lead to perceived threat, safety feels compromised, and further disrespect ensues breaking the loop.

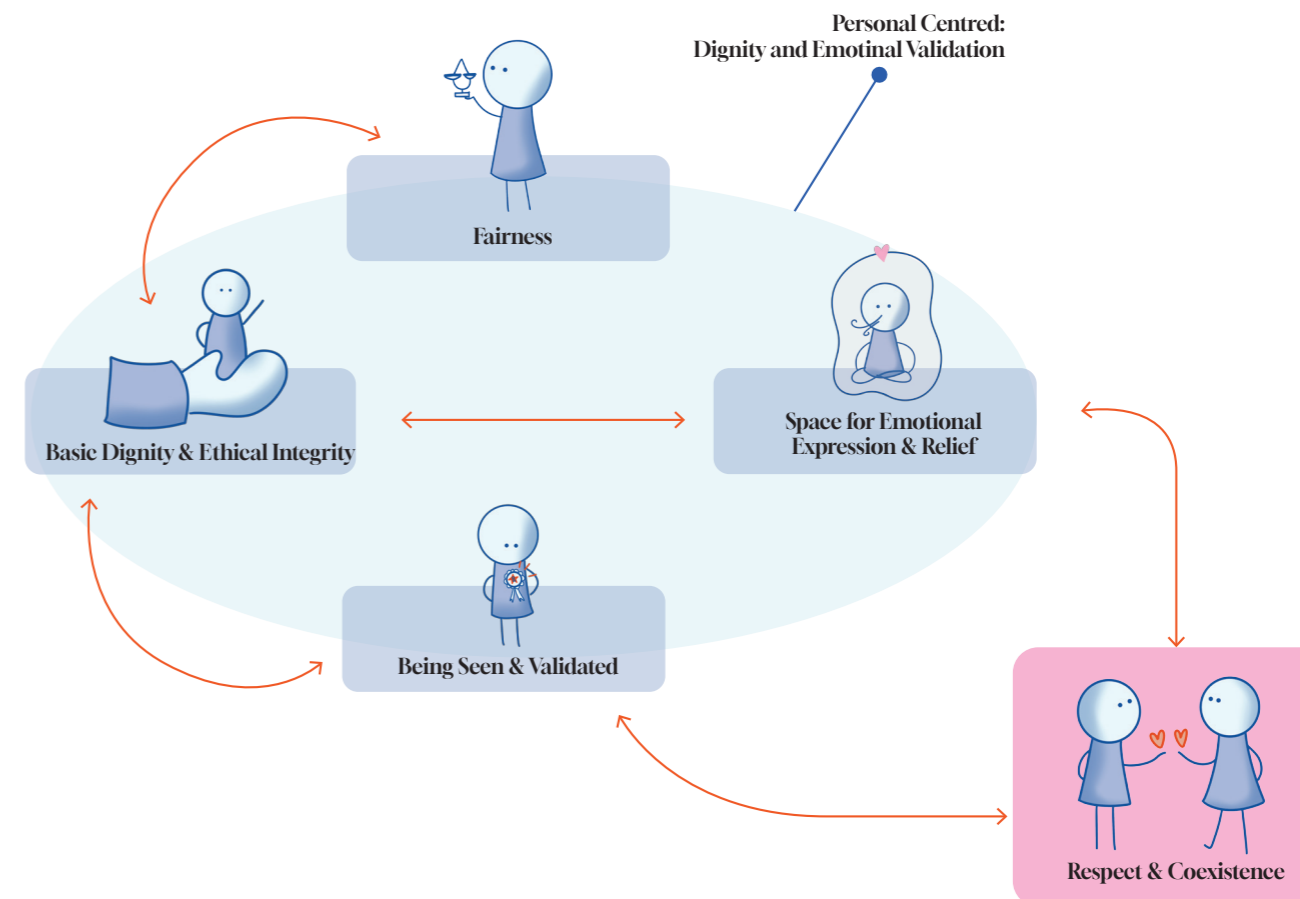


Figure 38: The personal centred: dignity and emotional validation feedback loop.

### 13.4 Personal Centred

This cluster: Personal Centred: Dignity and Emotional Validation (Figure 38) contains four interconnected elements. This cluster examines the emotional and ethical dimensions of an individual's experience in a polarised system. It highlights the importance of recognising people's struggles to help prevent scapegoating.

#### Basic Dignity & Ethical Integrity

Basic dignity and ethical integrity mean not being forced into ethical transgressions, maintaining self-worth despite pressure, and being treated as a human rather than a number. As one participant put it, "It feels like I have a pact with the devil." The struggle for housing sometimes leads to difficult choices, but respecting dignity is essential for well-being: "You can live better for a year in Leger des Heils; you would have a house quicker."

#### Relevance for Depolarisation

When a system forces people to violate their ethics, like lying or exaggerating, it causes shame and inner conflict. If these feelings are not dealt with, people become defensive and angry. They may target others they see as gaining unfair advantages. When they feel corrupted by the process, they may project this anger onto others.

#### Being Seen & Validated

Being seen and validated means having personal struggles acknowledged without judgment and receiving recognition from institutions that these challenges are real. Validation assures individuals that rejection is not a personal failure. As one participant shared, "It felt discouraging; you crash every time. I must be stupid, and there is no house for me." Genuine human-to-human contact, where people feel others are making an effort, provides crucial support.

#### Relevance for Depolarisation

When people feel unseen, they notice when others get help. They may seek validation elsewhere, often in polarized groups with simple answers. If the government recognises their struggles as well, it lowers the need for scapegoats and reduces feelings of unfairness.



Figure 39: The Dignity and validation loop.

## Fairness

Understanding the housing system means recognising its failures for many, not just yourself, and acknowledging that all parties are affected by shortages. It also requires assessing the fairness of distribution, even when you disagree with outcomes, and understanding why people are treated differently, including both formal and informal rules.

### Relevance for Depolarisation

When both groups feel powerless but recognise this within each other, it can reduce competition and encourage solidarity. Fairness relies on understanding the system. More context and transparency help people judge more fairly. When people disagree about fairness, the debate can shift from blaming others to discussing policies.

## Space for Emotional Expression & Relief

Having space to express difficult emotions like exhaustion, frustration, or anger, and to acknowledge conflicted feelings such as wanting to respect others while feeling desperate, is important. This openness reduces stress, relieves pressure, and allows people to process internal conflict or guilt from ethical compromises. Sharing these experiences also helps people understand common challenges. As illustrated by this quote: It was nice to have a chat about this, to get my frustrations off my chest.

### Relevance for Depolarisation

Unprocessed stress or guilt makes people defensive. Processing feelings in a supportive space reduces this and stops scapegoating. With less mental strain, people can listen to other views.

## Feedback Loops

Within this system, there are different feedback loops.

### Loop Dignity-validation

The Dignity-validation loop, illustrated in Figure 39, demonstrates how maintaining ethical integrity fosters a sense of worthiness and openness to validation. When institutions recognize and validate individuals, it strengthens their dignity and reduces the temptation to compromise ethics. This mutual reinforcement encourages people to see and respect others, promoting respect without internal conflict or anger toward other groups. However, the loop breaks down when the system demands ethical compromises—such as pressuring individuals to go against their values to fit in or succeed. In these moments, individuals may feel shame and self-loathing and withdraw from seeking validation. Without external validation, desperation can set in, which may, in turn, lead to unethical actions.

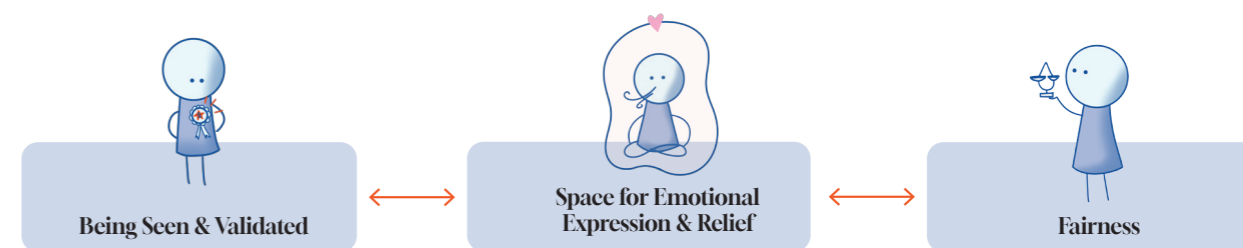


Figure 40: The Loop for Emotional Processing.

## Loop Emotional Processing

The dynamics of the loop of emotional processing (as seen in Figure 40) reveal that validation creates the psychological safety necessary to express difficult emotions. Expressing emotions provides relief and makes fairness assessments more rational (less emotionally reactive). When there is a perception of fairness, there is a willingness to be seen, and grievances are not taken defensively.

The loop breaks when there is no validation, emotions are suppressed, resentment builds, and fairness seems impossible. Alternatively, when there is no space for expression, emotions fester and distort fairness judgments.

### Loop the Fairness-Respect Bridge

The relationship from fairness to respect (presented in Figure 41) acts as a bridge, not a loop. If people see fairness, they see others' claims as real, even when they disagree. Legitimate claims deserve respect, and people are more willing to negotiate fairly. The bridge breaks if people see unfairness. This leads to seeing others as illegitimate, then to toxic polarisation.

## Loop Emotional-to-Relational

The Loop Emotional to Relational (presented in Figure 42) shows that processed emotions reduce defensiveness. This enables openness to others' perspectives. Respect from others provides validation, reinforcing emotional health. This breaks when unprocessed emotions push people into defensiveness, creating hostility toward others. If people do not receive validation, they can feel the urge to seek validation in polarised echo chambers.

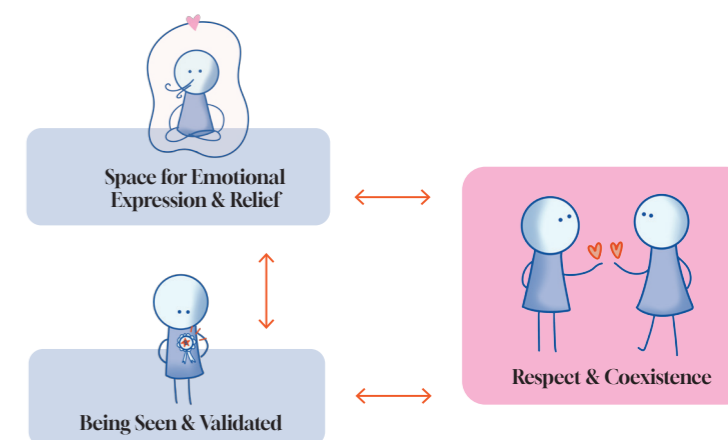


Figure 42: The Emotional to Relational Loop.

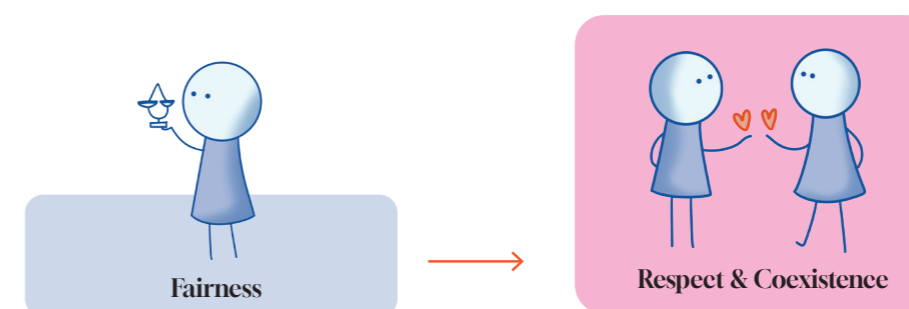


Figure 41: The Fairness-Respect Bridge.

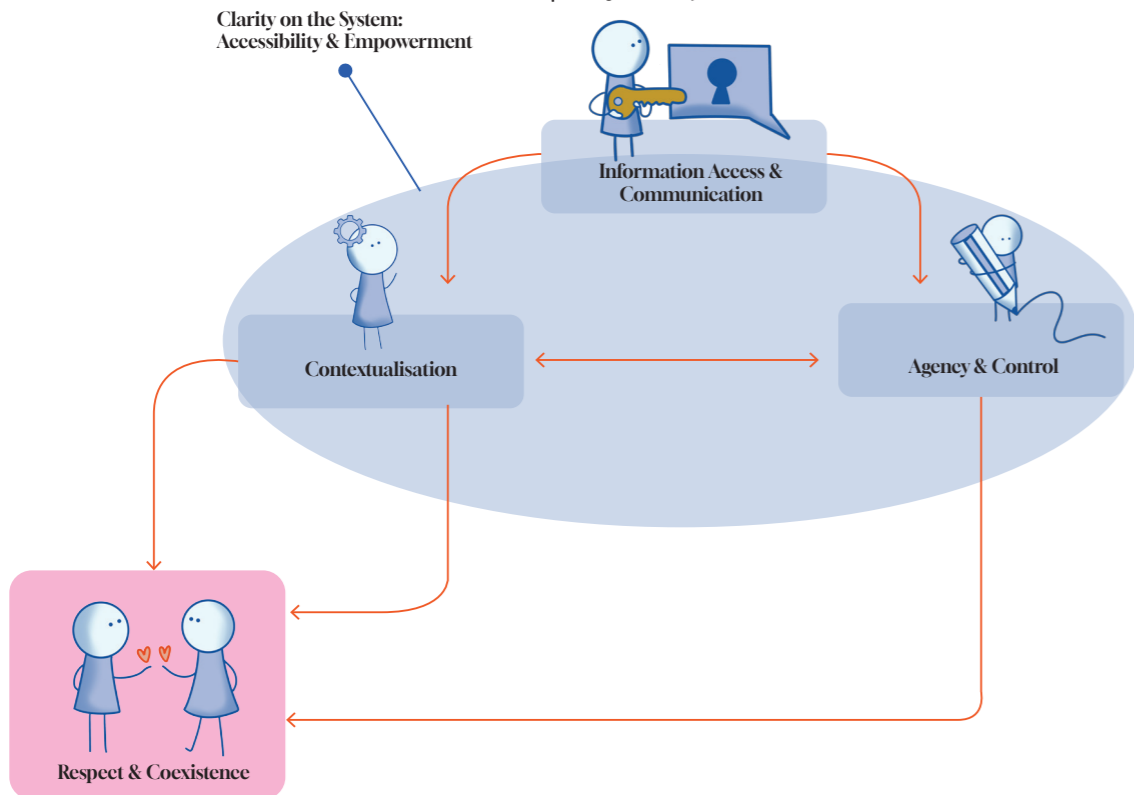


Figure 43: Clarity on the System: Accessibility & Empowerment Feedback loop

### 13.5 Clarity on the System

The other cluster, Clarity on the System: Accessibility and Empowerment, consists of three building blocks (see Figure 43). This cluster focuses on the cognitive and actionable aspects needed to move through a complex system. It emphasises the value of transparency to help reduce fear of the unknown.

#### Contextualisation

Contextualisation helps explain why you did not get a house: it is not that others have taken your place, but rather that there are simply not enough spots for everyone. By understanding the process's rules, you can replace feelings of chaos and uncertainty with clarity, helping reduce the fear of the unknown. Much of the tension stems from a sense of powerlessness and not knowing what to expect. Recognising these dynamics puts individual experiences into perspective and allows for a more realistic outlook.

#### Relevance for Depolarisation

When people recognise that both groups report feelings of powerlessness, it can reduce othering and encourage solidarity rather than competition. Providing a clearer context helps prevent filling information gaps with assumptions. Transparency clarifies decision-making processes and can reduce mistrust.

#### Information Access & Communication

Having clear knowledge of your position in the process, receiving regular communication about your applications rather than radio silence, and gaining insight into timelines, next steps, and requirements all contribute to a smoother experience. Being able to find the right information when you need it and not being left in the dark about your situation are equally important, as is having an early access point to begin the search process. Without these elements, it's easy to feel lost and overwhelmed, echoed by the sentiment: "I had no clue where to start."

#### Relevance for Depolarisation

Without access to basic information, people are unable to participate effectively. The absence of communication after applications or enrolments creates a void. When seekers are unsure of their standing or lack feedback, frustration can escalate into suspicion.

### Feedback Loops

#### Loop for Information Agency

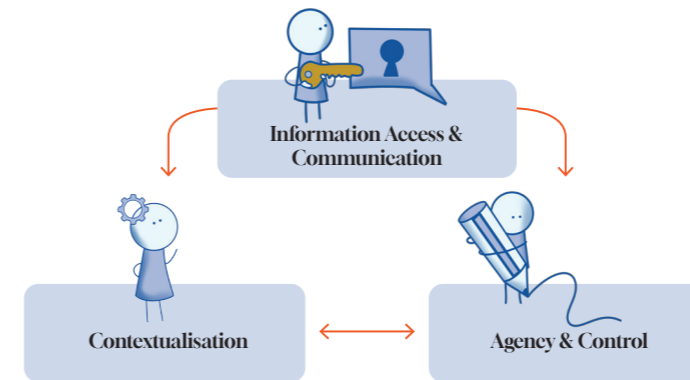


Figure 44: The Loop for Information Agency

The loop for information agency (Figure 44) shows that information enables strategic action; in a minimal action room, it provides understanding of where small actions are possible. The feeling of opportunity to take action increases. The agency allows seeking relevant information and feels it has more control in the system. Contextualisation makes information meaningful and creates an understanding of why rules exist. This all bridges to respect, as explained in the next paragraph.

The loop breaks if there is no accessible information; without knowledge, you cannot act. With no agency information, it feels useless (knowing does not help if I can not act). And if one does not have context, information can seem arbitrary (where do these rules come from and why do they exist)?

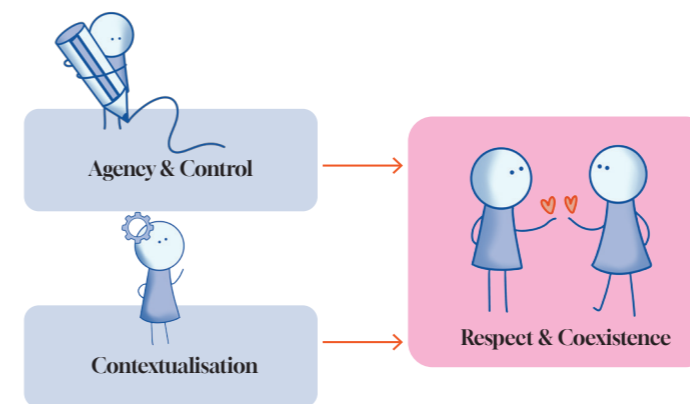


Figure 45: The Bridge from Understanding to Respect.

#### Bridge from Understanding to Respect

The bridge from understanding to respect (see Figure 45) shows that understanding context reduces blaming individuals, and agency reduces victim and scapegoat mentality. Both enable constructive engagement with the other without feelings of threat or blame. The bridge breaks when context lacks the fuel for conspiracy theories, leading to scapegoating. No agency leads to a feeling of powerlessness, which feeds back into extremism.

#### Agency & Control

Having the information to navigate strategically, even when outcomes cannot be controlled, enables you to make informed choices about which paths to pursue and how much (mental) energy to invest, including knowing when to strategically pause. Practising this kind of navigation helps you maintain autonomy within fixed constraints and find some form of free choice, even in a restricted system. Gaining clarity about your personal non-negotiable requirements is essential, as it reduces the feeling of endlessly compromising on your fundamentals and empowers you to move forward with greater confidence.

#### Relevance for Depolarisation

Total powerlessness is associated with extremism and scapegoating. While agency is limited, there is a distinction between having no choices and navigating an unfair system. Opportunities for control may reduce the desperation that contributes to polarised behaviours. Such behaviours often provide simplistic solutions by attributing blame to others.

## 13.6 Implications for Design: From System to Intervention

This section highlights the takeaways from the model iteration that helped me understand the role of design in the path towards depolarisation.

### Multiple Entry Points

The pyramid model is implied to start at the bottom and work up sequentially. The new coexistence system model shows that interventions can target multiple elements, creating rippling effects through feedback loops. If, for example, policy change is impossible or physical safety can not be guaranteed quickly, designers can still intervene in the information architecture or emotional validation systems. Progress in these areas will still foster mutual respect and coexistence, though it will lack fundamental layers.

### Multi-Layered Approach

The pyramid approach to intervention at a single layer shows that systemic resilience requires simultaneous interventions across multiple elements. Single interventions can be done as well and can foster a sense of respect, but it is important to note that if other bridges in the loop start to break down, this can, in turn, negatively affect the feeling of respect. When a multi-layered portfolio of interventions is employed, a designer can build, rather than merely increase, respect, coexistence, and resilience.

### Respect as Emergent, Not Designed

The pyramid implied that if you build up all layers, respect will evolve. Also, it implied that one can only design for one layer if the one underneath is stable. The new system model shows that respect continuously emerges from healthy feedback loops. And it self, designing for respect and coexistence can also be an intervention as it also feeds back into the other core elements of the system. So we should aim to design for design system conditions that allow respect to emerge organically and feedback to the system. Success can then be measured, for example, by loop health rather than by one-time successful interactions.

### Diagnosing System Breakdowns

The pyramid could only show failing pillars, implying that this whole layer was unstable, and it lacked the deeper explanation of how this works within the system. The respect-and-coexistence system can be used as a diagnostic tool to identify which loops are broken. This can help them subsequently know where to design the intervention.

### Designing for Resilience through Redundancy

Instead of designing for single successful interventions to work linearly to respect, the system approach shows how a designer can work towards a more resilient equilibrium of creating respect and coexistence. For example, if validation fails (the municipality does not acknowledge struggles), but information is provided pro-actively (people understand the system), some respect can still emerge through the cognitive pathway as they contextualise the municipality's way of working. And to draw another example, if agency is limited (as scarcity does not allow much agency), but emotional processing succeeds (people do feel heard), despair will not convert into direct polarisation. So, in the context of this model, the designer can build redundancy into interventions targeting multiple loops, ensuring the system is resilient and will not collapse immediately if one element fails.

## Moving Forward

Having established that respect is an emergent property of a healthy system, the next step is to translate these building blocks and feedback loops into a concrete action plan. To transform these systemic insights into a tangible intervention, an evaluation of the original starting point is needed.

Chapter 14 will revisit the initial design challenge, assessing whether the project's original assumptions still hold up against the complex, systemic reality uncovered during this section.



# Chapter 14

## Reframing Design Challenge



In the previous chapter, these human insights were synthesised into the Respectful Coexistence system. To bridge the gap between systemic modelling and tangible intervention, this chapter sheds light on the original challenge and examines whether reframing is needed.

The initial challenge was set without a deep understanding of the context. To move toward depolarisation, the design challenge assessment should determine whether it is framed correctly, taking into account all insights from the polarised landscape in Sections 1, 2, and 3.

### 14.1 Revisiting the Design Challenge

To start synthesising the findings of Section 1 (Understanding Polarisation), Section 2 (Contextualisation) and this Section 3 (Lived Experiences) into a reframed design challenge and potential directions, the initial assignment is first revisited.

#### Initial Assignment

As stated in the introduction (Chapter 1), the initial assignment was to determine how social designers can co-create a space or experience for Utrecht's polarised citizens that fosters constructive interaction and mutual understanding among individuals with diverse perspectives, later defined as the housing allocation context in Utrecht.

However, this implies that bringing people together in a well-designed environment does naturally lead to depolarisation. Above this, it is flawed on several implicit assumptions:

**1. Assumption of equality:** Enter on equal entry levels with similar capacity for dialogue.

**2. Assumption of universality:** The intervention could address all parties in the polarised field, as no clear group is identified.

**3. Assumption of directness:** The solution involves directly facilitating interaction between polarised groups or individuals with diverse perspectives.

**4. Assumption of space as solution:** The physical or experiential design is the primary variable in making or breaking the depolarisation design.

#### What Research Revealed

The journey from literature review through contextual analysis to lived experience research revealed a more complex reality that challenges each of these assumptions.

#### Not Everyone Can Dialogue Right Now

As Section 1 concluded, polarisation occurs in distinct stages. Dialogue during the intervention stage often reinforces positions. Field research found scapegoating and dehumanising language, indicating this stage. Many dismissed dialogue: 'Praten helpt niet als je niet in dezelfde realiteit leeft' (Talking doesn't help if you don't live in the same reality). Bringing groups together now would likely backfire, as they are not ready to listen. The timing is wrong for a direct confrontation.

However, research identified a critical group: the silent middle, those holding ambivalent positions. They remain open to dialogue but feel pressure to pick sides.

### The Problem is Systemic, Not Just Interpersonal

Stakeholder mapping showed that polarisation in Utrecht's housing market is a predictable outcome of a dysfunctional system. The system creates a zero-sum game where one group's gain is perceived as another's loss. Scapegoating is understandable but misdirected; the real issue is systemic failure, not individuals.

Facilitating mutual understanding won't solve polarisation if the system keeps producing hostility. Interventions must address why people feel threatened and powerless, not just encourage dialogue or shared interactions.

### Understanding is Not Enough

The literature emphasises building capacity to tolerate opposing viewpoints, rather than changing attitudes. High tolerance for ambiguity can slow or prevent polarisation. Attitudes do not always predict behaviour; direct contact and nuanced positions matter more than agreement.

Aiming directly for respect and co-existence rarely works; goodwill or information alone is not enough. Foundations and feedback loops can reinforce these outcomes. Critically, participants must not be in survival mode, or they will react defensively and struggle to engage in genuine dialogue.

Thus, the intervention must focus on building capacity and resilience rather than directly pursuing mutual understanding.

“

The challenge is to design a facilitated intervention for the silent middle in Utrecht's housing context that strengthens their capacity to resist polarisation.

”

## 14.2 Reframing the Challenge

Based on these three critical findings and the findings of the report, the design challenge is reframed:

The challenge is to design a facilitated intervention for the silent middle in Utrecht's housing context that strengthens their capacity to resist polarisation. The intervention must validate their frustrations, explain systemic drivers of conflict, help them process emotional exhaustion, activate shared values, and support them in holding nuanced positions under social pressure—ultimately equipping them to act as bridge builders within their own networks.

This reframing shifts the focus from co-creating a generic space for dialogue among all perspectives to developing a structured, facilitated process specifically for the silent middle, prioritising emotional capacity, systemic context, and facilitation quality over direct confrontation between groups.

### Reframe Opportunities

This Reframing enables a realistic scope by working with reachable groups, avoiding premature dialogue between highly polarised individuals. The outcome of the challenge becomes observable in capacity shifts. The success, therefore, becomes apparent in, for example, nuanced positions, reduced dehumanising language, redirected blame and emotional resilience. And it focuses on the potential silent middle at the peak of the polarisation conflict (the intervention phase), before polarisation deepens further.

## Moving Forward

By reframing the challenge, the project shifts from a broad look at polarisation to a targeted plan. The intervention should validate personal struggles and build the capacity and systemic understanding needed to resist pressure to polarise. This approach ensures the final design focuses on building resilience rather than forcing consensus.

Next, the Section will conclude by answering the question: What are the underlying frustrations, needs, perceptions, and misunderstandings driving the tension?

# Conclusion

“What are the underlying frustrations, needs, perceptions, and misunderstandings driving the tension?”

## Section 3: Lived Experiences

This section moved the project from a structural analysis of the housing market to the lived emotional reality of those navigating it. By engaging directly with citizens through interviews and street interventions, the research uncovered the lived tensions and frustrations of a dysfunctional system.

### What is learned?

The key insights of this section are synthesised in the parallel frustrations of the starter and status holder. Although they seem to be in conflict, they share a lack of agency and feel unseen by institutions. The reality for this differs. Starters face a journey of active exhaustion, where searching for a home becomes a demanding second job. And status holders experience anxious passivity, trapped in a waiting room, lacking agency.

The blaming within polarisation is fueled by five core frustrations: uncertainty (fear of the unknown), ethical transgressions (feeling forced to lie by the system), emotional exhaustion, invisibility (no human interaction; feeling like a number), and total powerlessness.

The street intervention revealed that the polarisation stage of the housing allocation debate is underway. Making the focus on designing for the silent middle. This group was successfully identified, as individuals held both ambivalent views (such as believing everyone deserves housing while feeling there was no place for them).

The findings were mapped in a framework: the system for respect and coexistence. This framework showed a dynamic relation. Respectful coexistence of truths is not a linear goal but an emergent property of a healthy system. It requires a balance of personal centeredness (dignity and validation) and clarity on the system (transparency and empowerment).

### How This Advances the Project

The lived experiences of real people and the insights from the street interventions have reframed the design challenge:

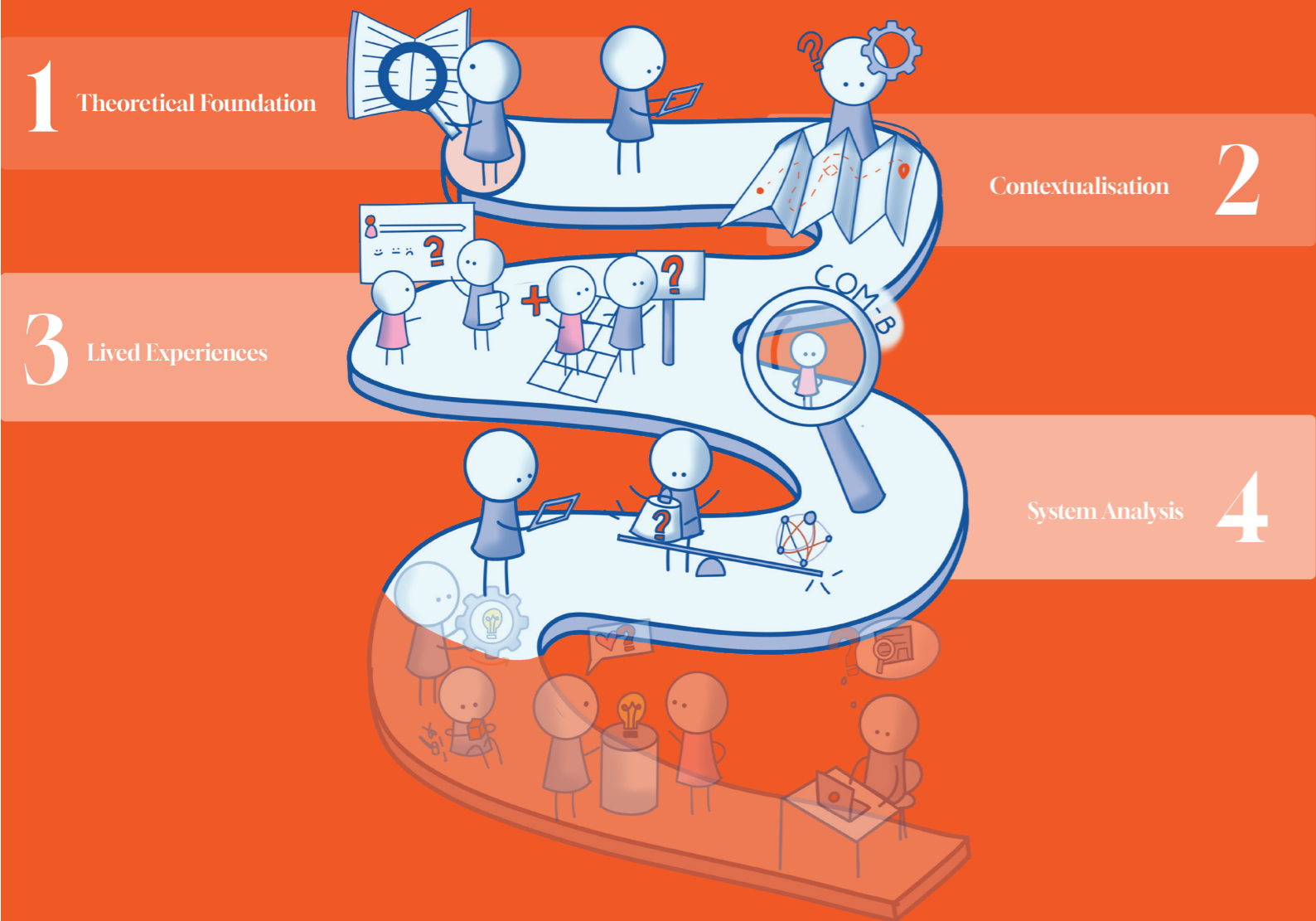
The project will now design a guided intervention for the silent middle group. This shift aims to help individuals build emotional capacity to express nuance, even under societal pressure. Importantly, the project has learnt that emotional restoration must come before sharing system information. Participants cannot engage in nuanced dialogue if they are still in a defensive survival mode.

### The Path Forward

With this reframed design challenge, the project moves into Section 4: Systemic Analysis. The start of this has been made with the system for respectful coexistence. This model will guide a leverage-point analysis. This analysis helps to identify where social service designers can intervene to achieve impact.

# 4 System Analysis

## Chapter 15: The Leverage Point Analysis



This section transitions from the system for respect and coexistence in Chapter 13 to a focused Leverage Point Analysis. It identifies where in this complex system a social service design agency (Snijboon) can most effectively intervene by calculating which nodes have the greatest impact and accessibility. Together, these frameworks move from understanding people's needs to determining specific intervention points for maximum systemic impact, with success measured through observable signals.

”

Where and how should we intervene in this complex, polarised system?



# Chapter 15

## The Leverage Point Analysis

Section 3 concluded with a reframed design challenge with a specific target: the silent middle, with the objective of enlarging their capacity to withstand the pressures of toxic polarisation. To move from a reframed challenge to an actionable design, this chapter utilizes leverage-point theory to identify specific spots in the system where a small shift can trigger significant, lasting change. By applying this theory to a behavioural system map informed by previous fieldwork, the analysis calculates which nodes offer the greatest impact and accessibility for a social service design agency.

### 15.1 What Are Leverage Points?

Our society faces 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973), issues that resist linear solutions. We often see that progress on these problems remains disproportionate to the resources invested because complex systems behave in counter-intuitive ways, causing even our best intentions to fail.

A leverage point is a spot in a complex system where a small shift can create major changes (Meadows, 1997; Murphy & Jones, 2020). Where you act often matters more than how forcefully you act. Instead of altering the whole system or addressing surface symptoms, this method highlights small changes that can drive lasting systemic impact (Meadows, 1997; Murphy & Jones, 2020).

#### Why this theory?

As mentioned by Burgess (2021 and Van Der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm (2020), designing for depolarisation demands a systematic approach. It is a complex system full of wicked problems. To identify a point in the system where a social service design agency (Snijboon) can intervene to effect lasting change, I applied this method.

Moreover, this theory is unique in showing how to monitor this lasting change. Since polarisation is a problem with many symptoms, and depolarisation is a gradual process, it is helpful to know which signals in the system can be analysed to assess whether your intervention has the intended outcome and is making its way to depolarisation. To put it differently: which effects to follow.

#### Different types of Leverage Points

Not all leverage points create change equally. Meadows (1997) ranked interventions from "shallow" points, such as parameters, to "deep" points, such as rules, goals, and underlying paradigms shaping the system. Where deep leverage points proved to be most effective.

For transformational systemic change, interventions should prioritise deep leverage points, supported by shallower ones (Gaziulusoy et al., 2021). In my context, Snijboon cannot change the system's rules, so only certain deep leverage points are actionable. Therefore, for this project, the most relevant leverage points are:

- The mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises (a society's shared beliefs and assumptions)
- The ability to exceed patterns and rituals (seeing no pattern as absolute)
- The gain in activating positive feedback loops (strengthening self-reinforcement)
- Structure of information flows (adding new information pathways)

Knowing which points to focus on, the Leverage Point Analysis will be explained and applied.

## 15.2 The Process

The Leverage Point Analysis process consists of six steps, illustrated in Figure 48, and described below.

### 1. Map my system

The first step is to map your system in which you want to find your leverage points. For this, I used the COM-B behavioural model (Elizarova & Kahn, 2018) to find all nodes through the eyes of the Silent Middle.

The COM-B model categorises phenomena into Capacities (psychological and physical abilities), Opportunities (environmental factors), Motivations (reflective and automatic), and Behaviours (specific actions performed). To see how the system would be disrupted, I combined this map with system mapping, placing different interventions within the system to see their influence (Van Der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020).

The elements of COM-B and intervention possibilities are defined based on my fieldwork (stakeholder interviews, housing seeker interviews, street interventions) and literature review. So every 'node' in the system is mapped through my process; see Figure 46 for an example of argumentation. For the full expression of all recognised nodes, you are referred to Appendix G.

### 2. Find causal relationships.

After identifying critical nodes in your system, you can begin identifying causal relationships. For this, I used the Respectful Coexistence system and its loops as mapped in Chapter 13. Apart from that, I identified reinforcing and negative impacts among actors, drawing on literature findings (e.g., De Haan's (2023) finding that creating a physical space leads to more engagement, as shown in Figure 47), fieldwork evidence, and logical interpretation. The full system map can be found in Appendix H.

This revealed 13 key feedback loops: 6 negative spirals and 7 balancing/positive loops (the full loop analysis is in Appendix I).

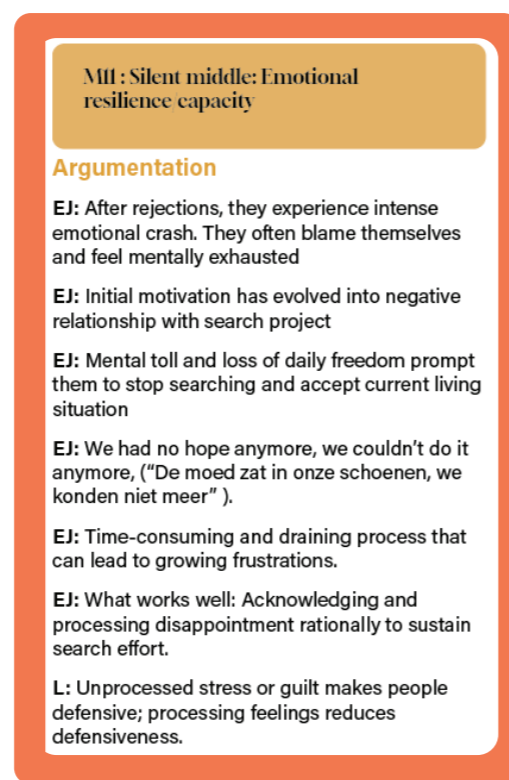


Figure 46: Example of the node M11's argumentation. The codes indicate the source of the argumentation. EJ means Experience journey and interviews, and L Literature.

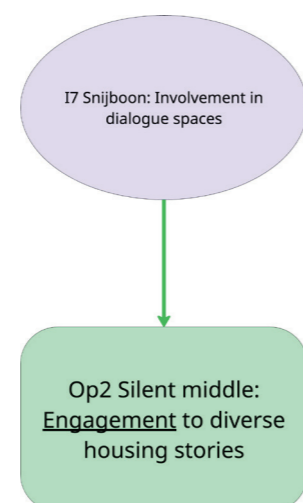


Figure 47: Example of a positive causal relationship based on literature, I is short for intervention and Op for opportunity. The word behind the code is the group performing the action.

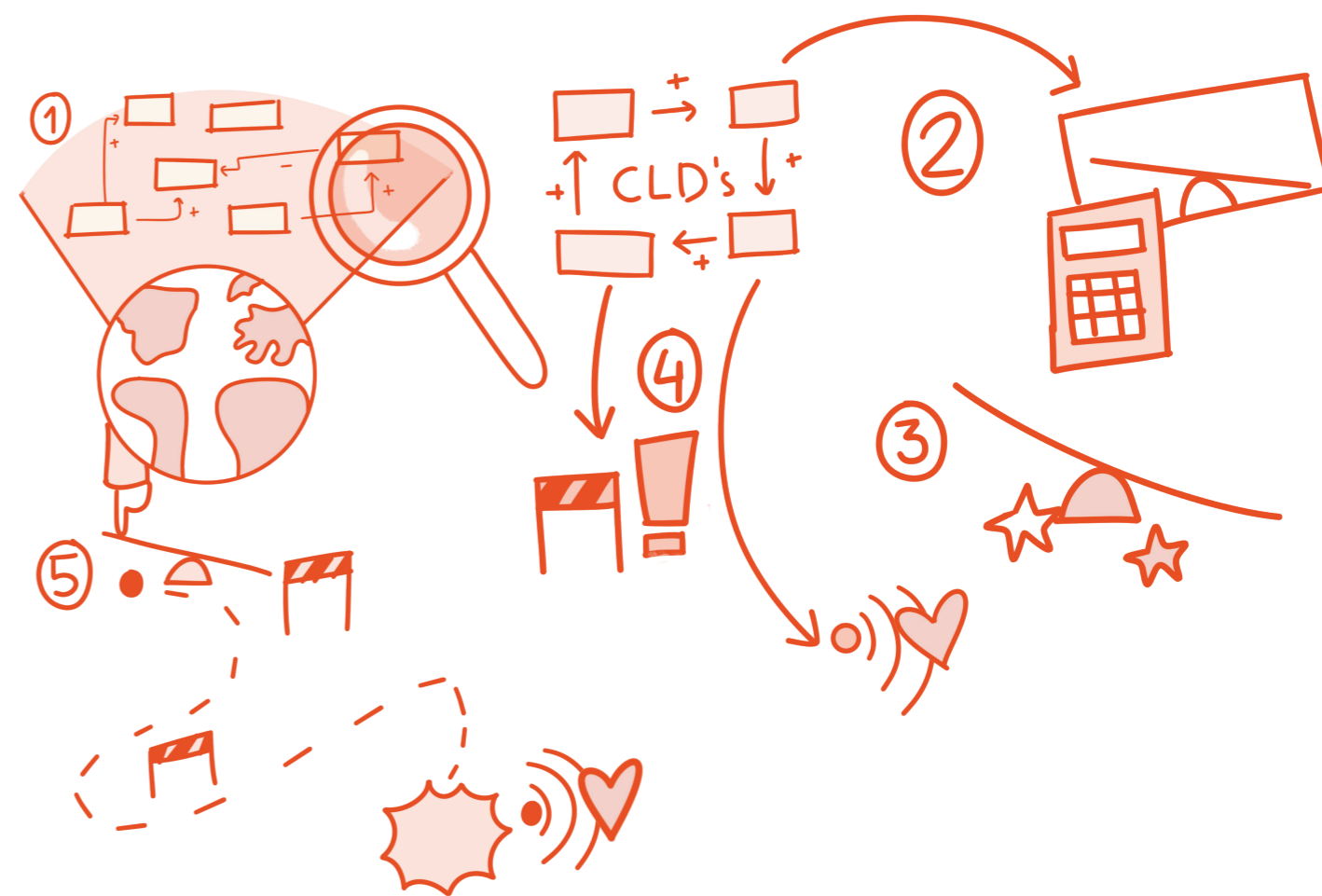


Figure 48: Visual of the steps if using the leverage analysis.



### 3. Calculate leverage measures

The Leverage Point Analysis moves from the found causal loops to a full computational analysis. In this analysis, the following key measures are calculated:

- **Eigenvector:** This measures the amount of connection to other highly connected nodes (points in the system). High-eigenvector points are highly influential, as their impact cascades through other influential parts of the system.
- **Reach:** The proportion of the network (the entire system of interconnected nodes or actors) that can be reached from a given node within a number of steps. High-reach phenomena connect deeply to the system, meaning changes will be felt by even relatively disconnected elements.
- **Betweenness:** The frequency with which a node lies on the shortest path between two other nodes. High-betweenness phenomena are gateways or bottlenecks.
- **Closeness:** The average length of the shortest paths between a given node and all other nodes (connections in the system). High closeness indicates resilience or independence, suggesting resistance to change, while low closeness indicates accessibility for intervention.
- **Indegree & Outdegree:** The number of connection lines going either into or out of the node in the system.

This calculation is based on the locations of the nodes defined in step one in the system. The most useful calculations are for the feedback loops as defined in step two, in which Snijboon could intervene. Therefore, the influence of Snijboon is integrated as a separate note to identify which leverage points were accessible or influenced. Knowing which points were, I started the calculation.

However, I did not do this computation as the behavioural map is based on assumptions rather than purely quantifiable relationships. So the calculation was turned into a qualitative leverage measure: High, Medium, or Low. Maintaining the approaches directional nature while acknowledging the assumption-based nature of the evidence for connections. The calculation for the identified nodes for the potential influence of Snijboon is presented in Table 2.

### 4. Identify the lever

The next step is to find the lever you can use as an ideal leverage point. I looked for nodes that were both highly influential (high impact on the system) and reasonably accessible (within Snijboon's reach to affect, please refer to Appendix J for the overview of loops that were identified as such). The criteria for such a node were: High Eigenvector, High Reach, High Outdegree, and Low Closeness. From Table 2, it can be seen that I9: Human touchpoint design and Op10: Perceived quality of human interaction showed the best results for this criterion; hence, they were chosen as the best leverage points.

Table 2: The calculation of the Leverage measures.

Actor	Indegree	Outdegree	Eigenvector	Reach	Closeness	Betweenness
<b>I9 - Human touchpoint design</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low-Med</b>	<b>High</b>
Op5 - Perceived scarcity pressure	0	3	Low-Med	Low-Med	Low-Med	Low
M10 - Future housing confidence	3	4	Med-High	High	High	Med-High
Op9 - Peer support	0	3	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low-Medium
C2 - Communication skill	0	3	Low-Med	Medium	Medium	Low
Op1 - Safe dialogue spaces	0	3	Medium	Med-High	Low	Low-Medium
Op4 - Media moderation	0	2	Medium	Low-Med	Low-Med	Medium
C7 - Resist polarisation pressure	3	4	High	High	High	High
M11 - Emotional resilience	4	5	High	High	High	High
<b>Op10 - Perceived quality of human interaction</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Very High</b>	<b>Low-Med</b>	<b>Very High</b>
Op2 - Peer information flow	0	3	Low-Med	Medium	Low	Low
Op7 - Institutional recognition	1	3	Medium	Med-High	Low-Med	Medium
C1 - System understanding	1	2	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low-Med

### 5. Identify barriers and signals

Knowing which leverage points to use, the leverage point analysis proceeds by recognising the barriers and signals that belong to this node. Barriers are phenomena that act as bottlenecks or are resistant to change (high closeness/betweenness). They can reduce the effectiveness of interventions by disrupting momentum or working against the intended outcome. Identifying barriers helps designers understand which actors need to be stable before activating the lever.

Signals refer to nodes that do not serve as targets for direct intervention but play a crucial role as lead indicators of systemic change (these points often have a high indegree/closeness).

Designers can use these signals to see whether an intervention successfully shapes the system's architecture. Monitoring these signals provides a much richer picture of an intervention's impact than solely measuring direct outputs. The barriers and signals of my leverage points are described in 15.3.

### 6. Identify the pathway of change

The last step is crucial as the value of this analysis lies in the synthesis of its components. The leverage analysis identifies structurally important nodes and locates phenomena at different leverage depths.

High Eigenvector scores reveal feedback structures maintaining dominant patterns, while high betweenness scores identify bottlenecks in flows. Having both these characters defined in your leverage points helps create pathways to change that move from actionable interventions to ultimate goals, guiding strategic interventions with the great potential for systemic impact. The pathway to the change found is described in the next paragraph.



## 15.3 Outcomes Analysis

As mentioned, the analysis identified two interconnected variables that best meet the leverage criteria:

- I9 (Design of human touchpoints): With High Eigenvector, High Reach, High Outdegree, and Low-to-Medium Closeness, this leverage point is both powerful and accessible.
- Op10 (Perceived quality of human interaction): With a High Eigenvector, Very High Reach, and High Outdegree, this variable can create wide-reaching effects. As an outcome of I9, it powerfully shapes the silent middles emotional and cognitive states.

### The Pathway to Change

By designing human touchpoints (I9) to improve the perceived quality of interaction (Op10), we activate a powerful cascade shown in Figure 49. This pathway shows how a targeted intervention focused on human connection ripples through the system, transforming deep emotional and social structures.

The leverage point operates as a deep one, shifting the mindset by changing core beliefs about whether rejection reflects personal or systemic failure. The following impacts result from activating the leverage point.

#### Immediate Impact

As Figure 49 shows, improved human touchpoints and interactions can recognise and clarify individual struggles, reducing feelings of shame and personal failure (M8) associated with housing rejection.

#### Cascading Impact

This validation produces a measurable increase in emotional resilience (M11) and the capacity to resist pressure to polarise the group (C7). With replenished emotional capacity, individuals are better equipped to move away from simplistic, antagonistic narratives.

### Long-Term Change

If the pathway chain is longer in place, resilience can start to grow, and individuals engage more in bridge-building activities (O6), fostering dialogue and understanding between groups. This process achieves the ultimate goals: reduced polarisation (O1) and increased mutual trust and respect (O3).

### Long-Term Behavioural and Systemic Change

When the resilience is higher and resistance to polarisation grows, they yield profound, long-term behavioural changes. Individuals are more likely to engage in bridge-building activities (O6) and have more skills as bridge builders (C5) that foster dialogue and understanding between groups.

This, in turn, leads to the ultimate goals of the pathway: a reduction in the overall level of polarisation in the housing debate (O1) and a significant increase in mutual trust and respect between groups (O3).

### The Loop Effect

As Figure 49 suggests, the pathway ends by breaking and reinforcing four loops. This is part of the systemic change the pathway of change entails; in addition to having its own cascading impact, it ripples through the system. The full expression of the loops can be found in Appendix I. This is a short description of the loops:

#### Loop 1: Institutional Distrust

Poor human interaction quality reinforces the silence of the silent middle because people feel dehumanised, so they withdraw. Lack of human touchpoint design perpetuates poor interactions, further eroding trust.

This loop is broken by improving the quality of human interaction in the system.

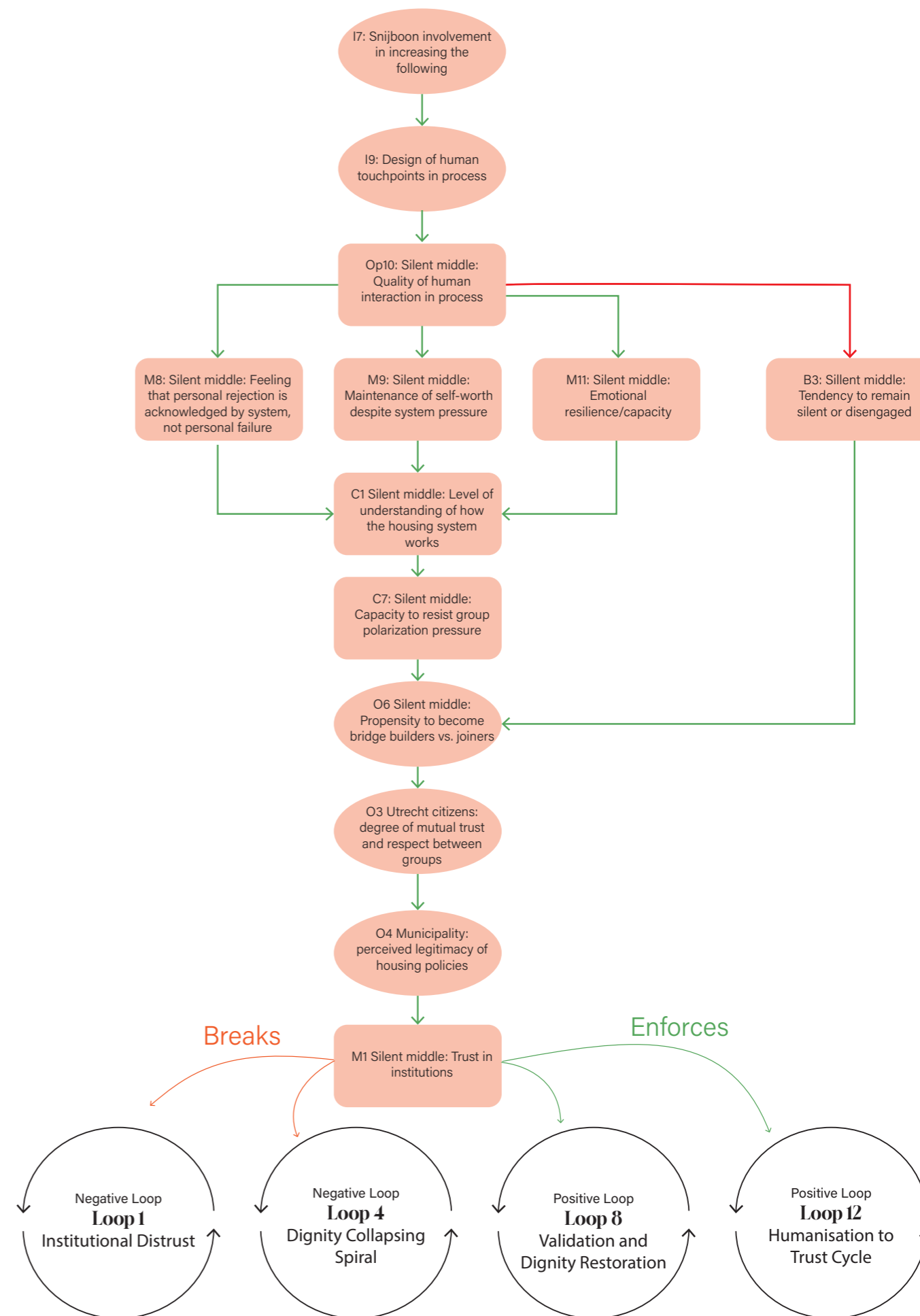


Figure 49: Chosen pathway of change.



### Loop 4: Dignity Collapsing Spiral

When the silent middle lacks the capacity to resist group polarisation pressure, they either remain silent or become joiners in the polarisation debate. As more become joiners, fear of conflict increases for remaining in the middle, reinforcing them to be silent.

### Loop 8: Validation and Dignity Restoration

Design of human touchpoints (I9) directly improves interaction quality (Op10), which acts like recognition. Quality interaction not only protects self-worth but also replenishes emotional resilience. This prevents ethical compromise and improves perceived fairness.

### Loop 12: Humanisation to Trust Cycle

Human touchpoint design improves interaction quality, which helps people see rejection as systemic, not personal. This makes them receptive to understanding system complexity, which builds resistance to simplistic narratives. This enables bridge building, creating mutual respect, which increases policy legitimacy and trust, creating political space for more humane design.

Breaking and reinforcing the right loops makes long-term change possible as described in 15.3.

### Barriers

Looking at the barriers for implementation of this pathway (nodes acting as bottlenecks or resistant to change), analysis revealed several barriers that could reduce the intervention's effectiveness by disrupting its momentum or working against its intended effect. The key barriers identified are:

- **Structural Pressures:** The perceived scarcity of housing creates a zero-sum mindset, especially when it is not perceived as a stable and fair system.
- **Emotional fatigue and low resilience:** The constant stress and energy spent searching for housing reduces emotional resilience, making people less receptive to nuanced dialogue and less eager for constructive engagement.
- **Narrative framing:** Intense media coverage framing the housing context and neighbourhood talks reinforces polarisation.
- **Fear of social conflict and group pressure:** Both discourage the expression of nuanced views or engagement in public debate.

### Signals to Monitor

Systemic signals are nodes that do not serve as targets for direct intervention but are crucial lead indicators of systemic change. They reveal whether an intervention is successfully shaping the system's architecture. Key signals identified include:

- Emotional resilience (M11)
- Resistance to polarisation (C7)
- Trust in institutions (M1)
- Perceived fairness (M2)
- Acknowledgement of systemic failure (M8)
- Propensity for bridge-building (O6)
- Mutual trust and respect (O3)
- Reduced pressure to compromise ethics (B7)

Monitoring these signals provides a much richer picture of an intervention's impact than simply measuring direct outputs. A rise in these indicators would suggest that the human touchpoint intervention is successfully activating the desired positive feedback loops.

## 15.4 Conclusion

This analysis has shown that a high-leverage intervention in the Utrecht housing debate for a social design agency is changing the quality of human interactions within the system.

By focusing on the emotional and relational architecture of the problem, it is possible to activate positive feedback loops that can counteract the system's current negative spirals. This positions the intervention as fundamentally different from typical dialogue formats, as it creates conditions in which the silent middle can maintain nuanced positions without pressure to choose extremes, with a focus on the quality of the interaction rather than the substance of the dialogue.

The analysis offered a theoretically grounded and practically bounded pathway for intervening in a complex, polarised social system, where traditional problem-solving approaches have proven insufficient (Brandsma, 2016; Burgess, 2021; Van Der Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020).

### The Type of Human Touchpoints

Snijboon's has no power to intervene in the housing policy or the actual search for a house (for example, by providing more feedback on applications). So the design of human touchpoints should be outside the current way of finding a house. This seems to set a clear limit on what the intervention can do, but, ironically, because of this, the strategy focuses on deep leverage points instead of making small changes to parameters or information flows.

### A Critical Note on Methodology

This analysis uses a hybrid method, applying a quantitative leverage analysis framework (Murphy & Jones, 2020) to qualitatively estimated data. The behavioural map is based on fieldwork, literature, and interpretation instead of computational metrics. This adds some subjectivity to the analysis.

However, emotional and social causes cannot always be measured with numbers. The structured framework helps guide Snijboon's intuitive approach, though it does not offer mathematical certainty.

## 15.5 What does this mean for the design direction?

The leverage analysis provides a clear direction: transform the emotional and relational experience of the housing search, not the search process itself. The intervention should function as a parallel space where individuals process experiences, encounter perspectives, and rebuild nuanced thinking.

This translates to four key design principles, in which elements of the Respect and Coexistence system can also be recognised:

### 1. Emotional Restoration Before Information

Address emotional exhaustion and shame before introducing contextual information. Design elements should validate struggles and provide space for expression. Only once participants feel seen can they engage with complexity.

### 2. Shared Space Over Debate

The intervention should help participants connect as people, set aside status, and build trust as they navigate a flawed system together. The design should help participants keep what they learn and share it with others. This can spread the message, make useful tools, or build peer groups. And grow a network of positive interactions, not limit it to one event. In this way, more human connections help reduce toxic polarisation.

### 3. Breaking the Fuel for Polarisation of the Fear of the Unknown

Using human touchpoints helps people better understand the system. This makes it easier to reduce fear of the unknown by providing more context. Since fear of the unknown was a key reason for frustration with the housing allocation process, addressing it can help move toward depolarisation.

### 4. Success Measured by Tracking Systemic Signals

The success of the developed design should be measured against the defined systematic signals. Meaning, increased emotional resilience, strengthened resistance to polarisation pressure, and reduced dehumanisation. This can be done by making these shifts tangible through measurement tools within the design.

This approach makes the intervention stand out from standard dialogue formats. It allows people in the silent middle to keep their nuanced views without feeling forced to pick a side. By making human connection the main focus, the intervention works at a deep level, changing not only individual beliefs but also the relationships that would normally support polarisation.

#### Refined Design Challenge

This asked for an iteration on the reframed design challenge of Chapter 14 to:

**Design a facilitated shared human experience for Utrecht's silent middle to strengthen their capacity to resist polarisation by validating frustrations, building understanding, unpacking systemic drivers, and sustaining nuance beyond the intervention.**

## Moving Forward

The leverage analysis has provided a strategic direction: the intervention should focus on transforming the emotional and relational aspects of human interactions rather than fixing the housing search process itself. By identifying human touchpoints as the primary lever, the project has established a pathway of change that leads from the restoration of individual dignity to the activation of bridge-building behaviours. This showed where design can have the greatest impact in counteracting the system's current negative spirals.

Next, the conclusion of this section will be presented. Section 5 will make the strategic leverage tangible as an actionable intervention for Snijboon.

# Conclusion



Issue

Where and how should we intervene in this complex, polarised system?

This section synthesized the theoretical, contextual, and human insights gathered thus far into a strategic model for change. By applying leverage point analysis, the research identified where a social service design intervention can disrupt negative cycles and reinforce positive ones.

## What is learned?

The systemic analysis showed that the best way for a design agency to influence the Utrecht housing crisis is to transform human touchpoints and improve interaction quality. The intervention's main power is changing the mindset of the silent middle from "rejection is my personal failure" to "rejection is a systemic issue." Targeted improvements in human connection ripple through the system. They boost emotional resilience, strengthen resistance to polarisation, and encourage bridge-building behaviours. True impact can be tracked through eight system signals, such as a person's ability to maintain nuance under social pressure and increased emotional resilience. While a designer cannot alter housing policy or construction speed, they can intervene in the emotional and relational architecture of the search process.

## How This Advances the Project

This section has moved towards strategic design requirements. It established that the intervention should address the emotional exhaustion of the silent middle and restore dignity before introducing complex systemic information. The intervention creates a parallel space for processing experiences and rebuilding nuanced thinking. It shifts the focus from changing people's political attitudes to building their skills and resilience to withstand divisive pressures.

## The Path Forward

The project now enters Section 5: Intervention Development, where these strategic requirements will be translated into a concrete design.

The next step is to bridge theory and practice by learning from practitioners who successfully navigate polarized environments. Expert wisdom is then combined with the design principles from this section. An intervention is iteratively developed, prototyped, and tested. This gives Snijboon a concrete way to foster mutual respect in Utrecht.

# 5 Intervention Development

**Chapter 16: Interviews with Practitioners**

**Chapter 17: Depolarisation Design Requirements**

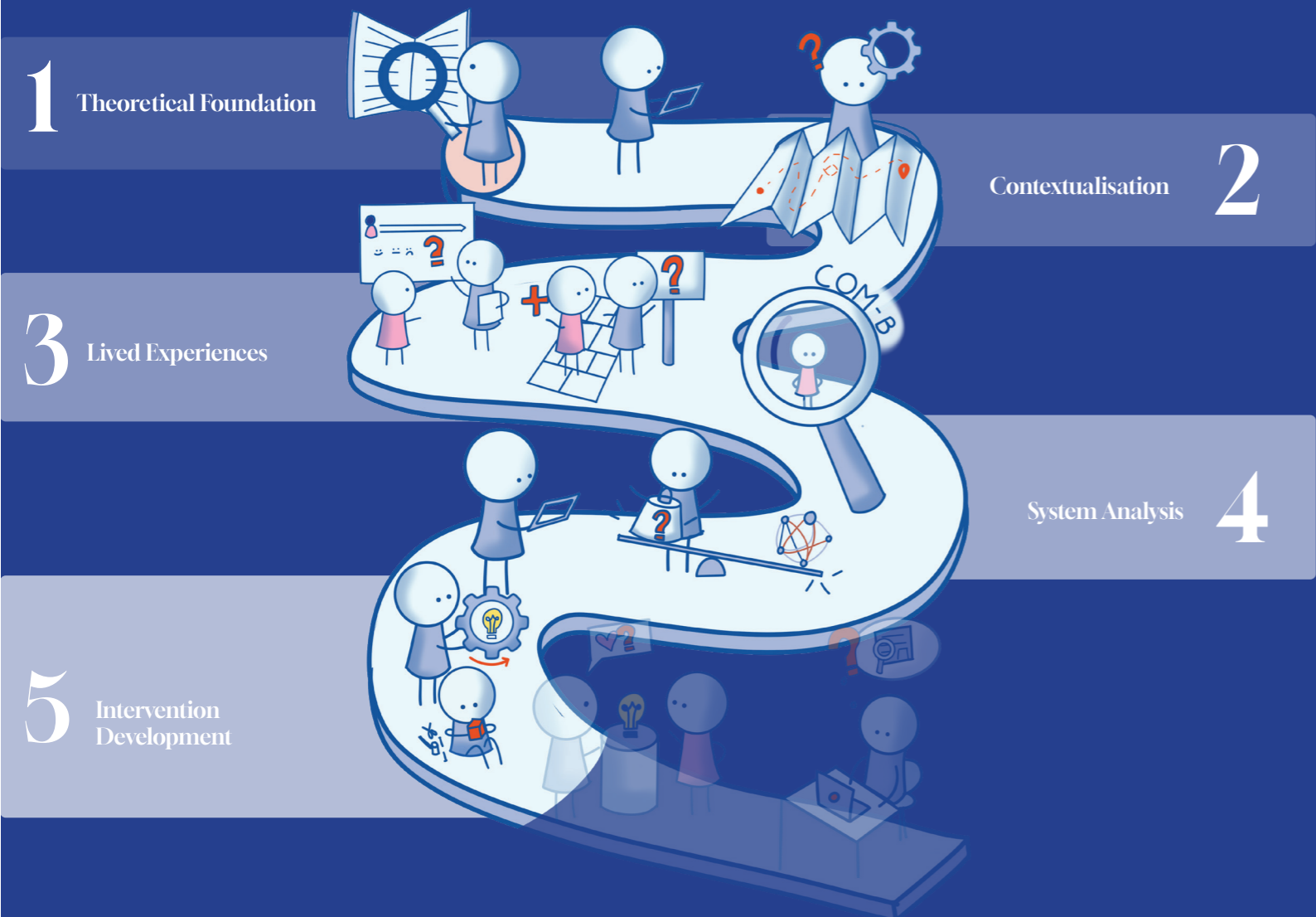
**Chapter 18: Generating Ideas and Testing**

**Chapter 19: The Concept Presentation**

**Chapter 20: Testing, Validating and Iterations**

This section marks the transition from academic research and strategic analysis to the actual synthesis and creation of a concrete social service design. Having established the theoretical foundations, the structural pressures of the Utrecht housing market, and the lived experiences of those within it, the project now focuses on developing a tangible intervention.

This section is to turn the strategic leverage points identified in Section 4 (the design of qualitative human touchpoints) into a replicable intervention that fosters mutual respect and room for nuance.



“ What should the intervention look like, how should it work, and what measures will indicate success? ”



# Chapter 16

## Interviews with Practitioners

The systemic analysis in the previous section provided a strategic pathway of change. However, this alone cannot offer the practical nuances needed for effective facilitation in polarised contexts. Designing human touchpoints that successfully counter toxic polarisation depends on a deep understanding of how to communicate with the silent middle.

To bridge the gap between theoretical leverage points and real-world applications, this chapter draws on the tactical wisdom of experts who already operate successfully within these social frictions. This way, I gain the tools to help the silent middle become bridge-builders.

### 16.1 The Silent Middle

To better understand the targeted user for my intervention, I reviewed research by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) on the characteristics and values of the moveable middle (silent middle). They commissioned the research company Ipsos and conducted an online survey among 1045 Dutch respondents.

They conclude that the priorities of the respondent recognised as the silent middle (answering with at least 50 percent of answers as 'I don't know' or 'I don't have an opinion' on questions about migration) are the ones shown in Figure 50. (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

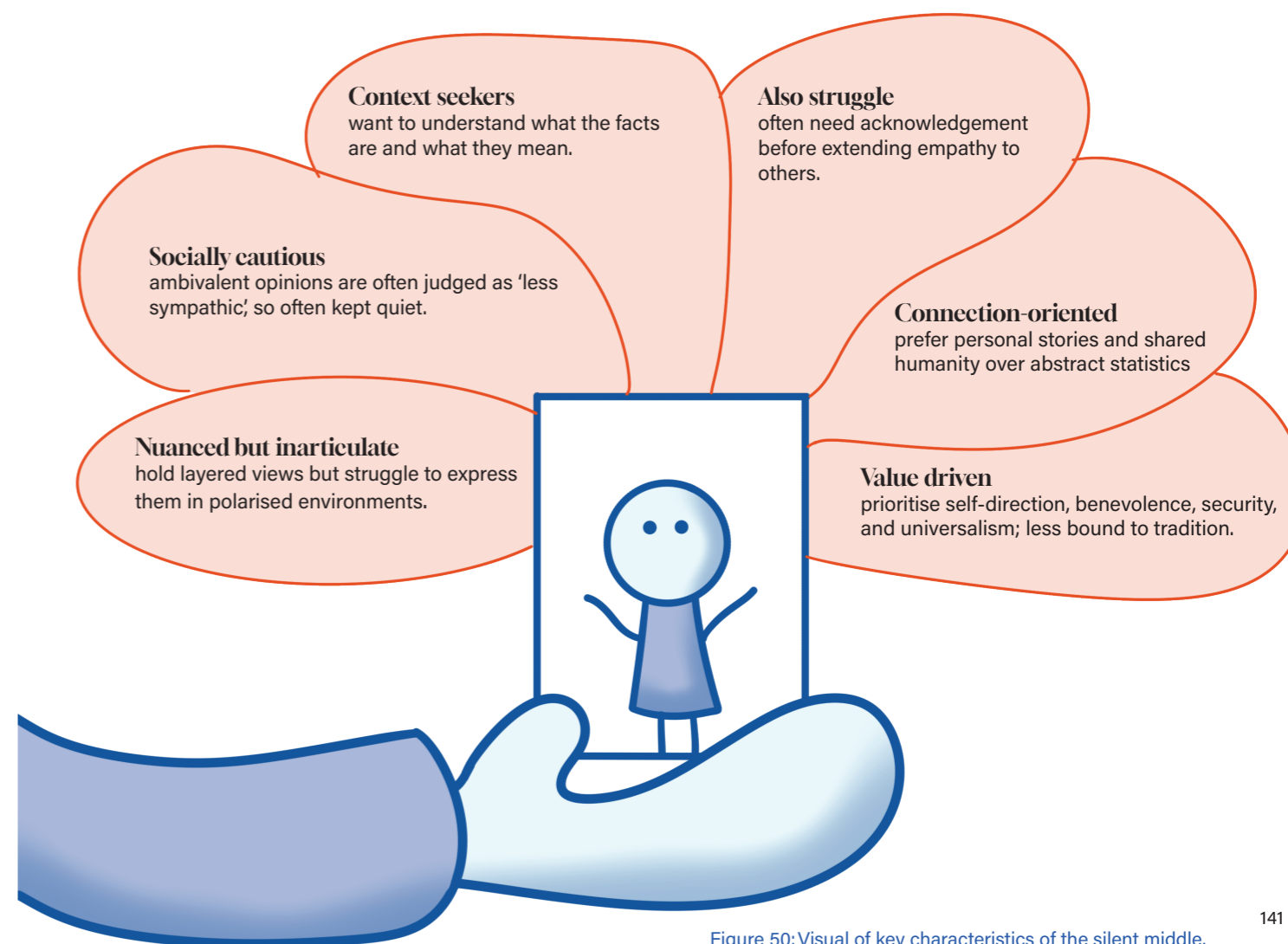


Figure 50: Visual of key characteristics of the silent middle.



## What Does The Silent Middle Need?

To illustrate what can help them, I created a visual metaphor shown in Figure 51. Think of them as people standing at a crossroads, with fog obscuring both paths. They need:

**Light** (context and personal stories) to see clearly

**Companions** (human connection) to feel safe moving forward.

**Recognition** (validation of their struggles) before they can recognize others' needs.

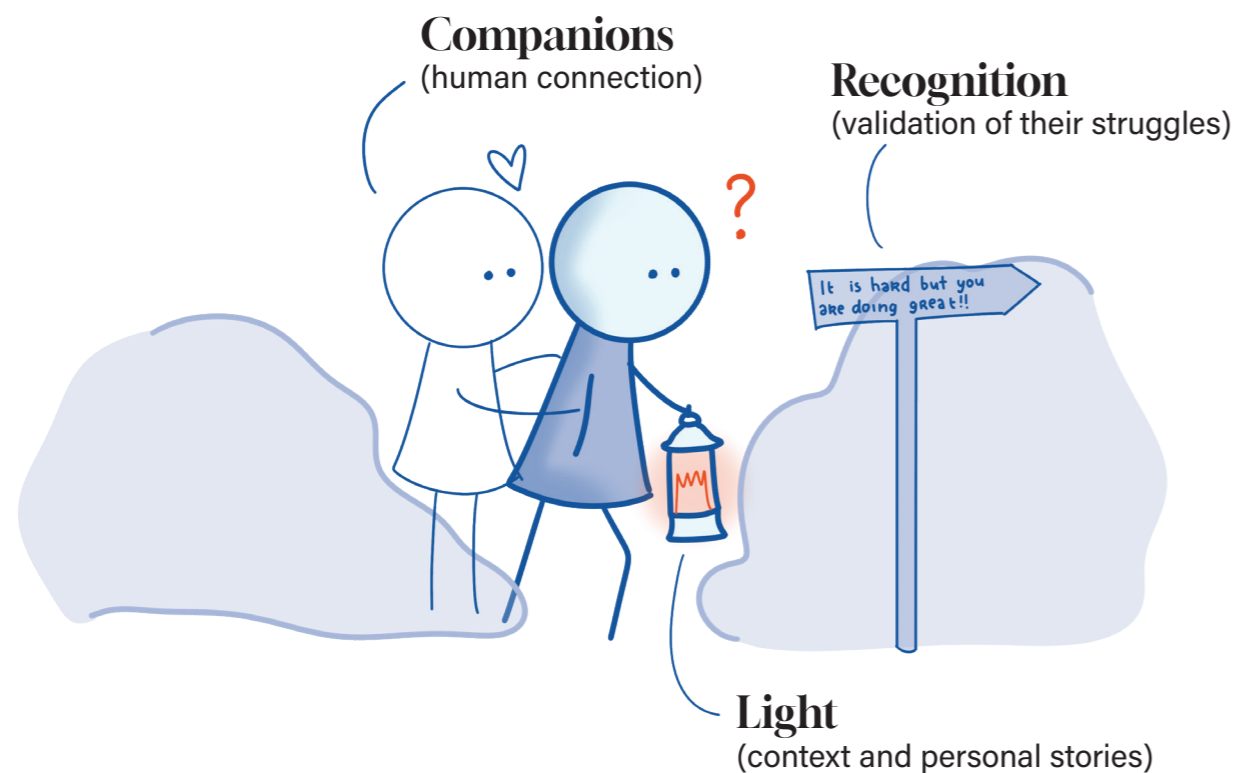


Figure 51: Visual metaphor for the needs of the silent middle.

## 16.2 Communicating with the Silent Middle

In addition to identifying the silent middle's characteristics, IOM's research offers insights on communicating with them. Their knowledge dossier presents several successful communication frames. After reading the research and discussing my context with an IOM representative, the most relevant frames for my project were:

### 1. *Panta Rhei* (Everything Flows)

Throughout history, people have always moved and changed. Change is a constant part of life, and we should embrace this. This frame will be called 'Everything Changes' forward to make it more accessible than calling it *Panta Rhei*.

### 2. We are all human

We are all human, and we share values that go beyond borders.

Beyond strategic framing, the interview with an IOM representative and their research revealed pitfalls in communicating with the silent middle. The biggest mistake is presenting facts without acknowledging their struggles. The silent middle understands only when you first validate their struggles. Then they start seeing what the facts mean and, even in scarcity, can see others as deserving. Another pitfall is presenting facts without context.

Facts need context and should feel personal. Personal stories with real people create faster connections and have a greater impact. What does this fact mean to them? For example, instead of saying "status holders need housing," say "Fatima, with two children, is looking for a new home", something relatable. And with that, don't ignore what is happening, don't deny the facts, and, as said before, their struggles.

Connection is key. When people have more information and opportunities to unite, their willingness to communicate grows. In the migration context, stories from volunteers who work with migrants are especially effective because this work feels close to the lives of the silent middle themselves.

The goal of the communication should be to separate the real problem from misplaced blame. It is not about the housing market, but about why we assign guilt to others. When you see through your own experiences that someone different is essentially the same, you are less likely to blame them. This can be discovered only by talking to each other and understanding. The essence: ask questions rather than presenting facts.

The next page shows the key takeaways from the IOM research and interview for the development of my design intervention.

“Stand alone facts are hard to digest.”



## 16.3 IOM Main Takeaways

The following strategic communication takeaways are my main takeaways for my design development. This is on top of understanding what the silent middle characterised and needs (as shown in Figures 51 and 52).

- Use effective frames when communicating, like Everything Changes, and We are all Human.
- Acknowledge differences and validate emotions: Take their struggles seriously before redirecting dialogue.
- Lead with shared struggle: Frame issues as collective problems. We are all in overcrowded waiting rooms. The issue is not who is in line, but too few chairs.
- Make numbers tangible and contextual: Explain what statistics mean, for whom, and why it matters. Connect data to real impact on lives.
- Reframe as a system problem, not a people problem: The issue is that we stopped building, not who gets priority.
- Ask questions, don't just present information: Create openness for dialogue rather than just correcting.
- Activities that stimulate exchange: Focus on the connection between groups to increase willingness to communicate.

## 16.4 Deep Canvassing

To better understand communication in polarised settings and enable peaceful dialogue, I interviewed a founder of Deep Canvassing NL.

Deep canvassing connects with people through respectful, empathetic one-on-one conversations at their door. These talks focus on values and personal experiences around sensitive topics. The goal is to create lasting attitude change by listening rather than debating. Deep Canvassing NL was inspired by the movement that began in the USA and has been campaigning for three years. The interviewee said that through deep canvassing, they aim to stop the scapegoat politics in the Netherlands. A powerful metaphor used is the man with cookies, as seen in Figure 52.

In addition to the interview, I examined the training methods and underlying philosophy of Deep Canvassing NL, exploring the theory of progressive campaigning.

This sub-chapter first explores their conversation structure, then examines the progressive campaigning theory. Both of which are enriched by insights from the interview.

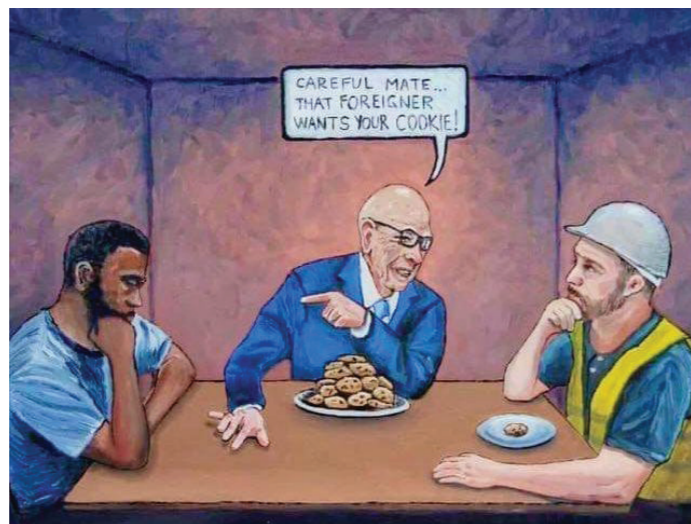


Figure 52: Metaphor about how division is created in society. Lushch, D. (2024). 'Careful mate, that foreigner wants your cookie' [Oils on gessoed paper]. Victoria, Australia.

## The Deep Canvassing Structure

The conversational structure of Deep Canvassing follows four steps when they arrive at someone's door:

1. Start a conversation without judgment. Create a setting for open dialogue by beginning with a statement and letting the other person respond. For example, on a scale from 1-10, do you agree that everyone in the Netherlands has the right to a home, work, and education? This clarifies from the start where you both stand and sets the tone.
2. Make the political personal. Connect abstract issues to lived experiences.
3. Reframe your point in terms of solidarity, shared values, and hope.
4. Reflect back on the beginning statement, and together reflect on the conversation: Did something have change?

Their goal is to genuinely explore a different opinion with respect.

## Changing Attitudes

The conversations sometimes change someone's mind or attitude. Nuance is crucial here: you are not convincing someone, but creating space for reflection. By reflecting on their own contradictions or encountering a new perspective, people can change. The Deep Canvasser noted that to change opinions about a group, the conversational partner does not have to come from that group, but must be able to share openly or help the other person realise they also do not know anyone from the group they might be judging.

And that can lead someone to change their mind. This principle of listening rather than convincing is particularly important for my design approach towards depolarisation.

“We hope to help people reflect on their own views by exchanging personal stories and perspectives.”  
- Deep Canvasser

“Our strength is in connecting on universal emotions and empathy. [...] People are not afraid to speak their minds either!”  
- Deep Canvasser



## 16.5 Progressive Campaigning

Deep Canvassing relies in part on progressive campaigning theory. This theory (Derber et al., 2024) offers key insights for designing progressive communication. The following five elements are the core building blocks.

### Facts Don't Change Minds

A fact can be shown and proven, but facts often do not change minds. For example, look at Figure 53. The two checkers A and B appear to be different colours, but they are not. Even when strips are added to prove the squares are the same colour, our brain often refuses to believe this (Vermeulen, 2024). Everyone interprets information based on existing prejudices (Derber et al., 2024). Facts follow what we already believe, so they are not necessary to change people's minds.

### The Value-Villain-Vision Framework

According to Derber et al. (2024), a progressive message should follow this three-part structure:

1 Value - Open with a shared value. For example, think about family, a good life for your children, a bright future, health, and being able to be yourself.

2 Villain - Name the villain and how their actions harm our shared values to benefit themselves (like the cookie metaphor). Think about: certain companies, political movements, or government policy.

3 Vision - Show how collective action solves the problem and name the desired future outcome.

Following this framework, a progressive message would look like this (Vermeulen, 2024):

(1) However you look, wherever you were born, everyone wants a safe, affordable home.

(2) But some politicians want to divide us and make us believe it's the refugees' fault that there aren't enough affordable homes.

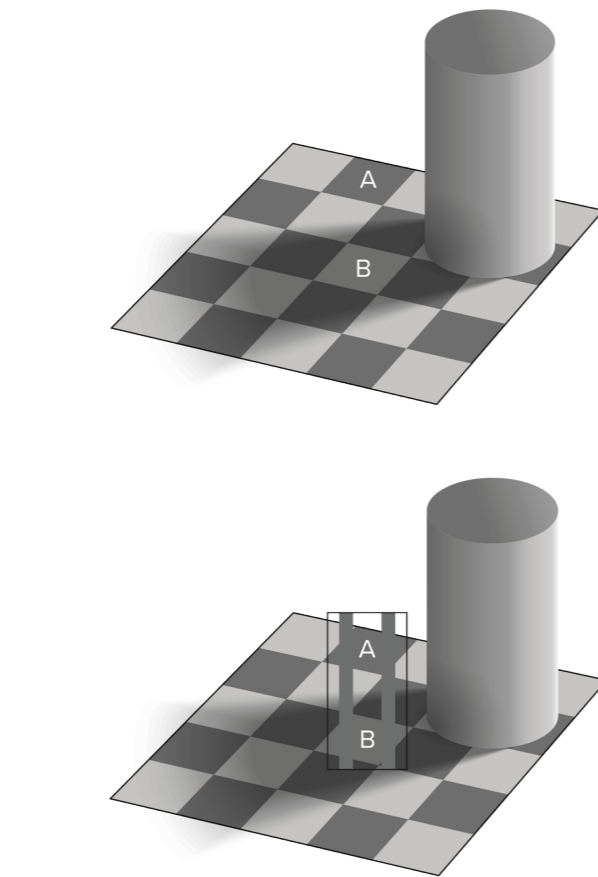


Figure 53: Optical illusion illustrating that facts slide off. Wästberg, B. S. (2006). [Image]How to Convert Reality into Virtual Reality: Exploring Colour Appearance in Digital Models. <https://research.chalmers.se/en/publication/20590>

(3) We must not fall for that, and we must vote for parties that ensure more social housing is built. Then we can live in the Netherlands, where everyone has an affordable roof over their head.

### Focus on What You're For, Not Against

Progressives often focus on opposition, which elevates opponents. Instead of saying "refugees are not terrorists," say, "We can create a fair migration system." Frame the conversation around your vision, not their accusations.

### Empathy, Not Sympathy

Creating empathy means showing shared humanity. In a campaign on island detention (Shenker-Osorio et al., 2015), organisers told personal, relatable stories—like dancing to Beyoncé before work or recalling all cricket scores since 1987. Such stories evoke empathy. Focus on aspirations, too: "I want to become a human rights lawyer." Aspiration forges connections and breaks prejudice.

### Preach Your Own Parish

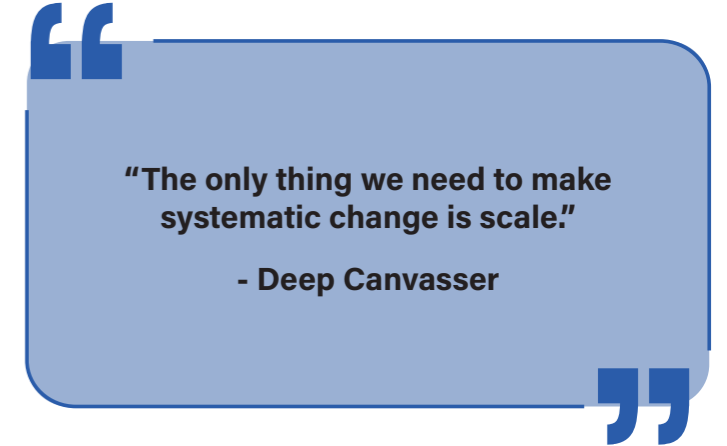
Words only matter if they spread. People should want to repeat your message—"wear the t-shirt." The strategy is to connect issues, showing how their priorities are affected as well.

For example, someone invested in climate change may see that a strict migration policy impacts climate issues badly. Linking issues mobilises people who care about different causes under a shared sense of who the real villain is.

## 16.6 Design Takeaways

Deep Canvassing NL merges Progressive Campaigning into a personal approach, shown to change 10% of minds permanently. According to themselves, scaling up conversations is all that's needed to expand. Key takeaways from Deep Canvassing for my design:

- Listen rather than convince. Create space for reflection to allow perspective shifts.
- Use personal stories and perspectives to help people reflect on their own standpoints.
- Connect through universal emotions and use empathy as the foundation.
- The conversational partner does not need to be from the affected group but must share openly.
- Never use facts alone. They lose context and follow existing beliefs.
- Focus on what you're for, not against (e.g., "fair migration system" not "refugees aren't terrorists").
- Measure the impact of the conversation with scales at the beginning and end.
- A scale of democratic safe conversations and the exploration of each other's tensions is needed for systematic change.
- Building capacity for nuanced positions under pressure.



## Moving Forward

Learning from practitioners has helped turn abstract ideas into practical tactics. These lessons show that validation and connection need to come before sharing information or starting a debate. Consistent with this, research on the silent middle points to a key design recommendation: focus on storytelling, shared humanity, and creating a safe space for uncertainty. It is important to offer context, connection, and validation before presenting statistics or making judgments. The design intervention should encourage reflection, vulnerability, sincere listening, personal stories, and genuine dialogue rather than debate.

The next step is to organise all the findings of all sections, from polarisation theory to practitioner insights, into a clear design plan.

Chapter 17 will bring together the key elements collected throughout the project into design requirements and a structured intervention blueprint. By creating this evidence-based plan, the project can make sure the final design is both grounded in theory and practical for Snijboon.



# Chapter 17

## Depolarisation Design Requirements

Moving from research to creation calls for a pause to bring everything together. So far, the project has collected ideas from different areas, including psychological theory on othering, understanding the dynamics of polarisation, models of respect, lessons from case studies, and advice from practitioners. This chapter brings it all together, describing the kinds of conversations, listening methods, and interaction principles needed for the intervention that improves human interactions to work.

It lays out a five-step process, aligning these steps with the system for respectful and coexistence and the outcomes of the system analysis in Chapter 15, the project ensures that each design choice supports the right feedback loops and gives answer to the design challenge.

### 17.1 The Design Challenge

This chapter turns systemic analysis and theory into a practical guide. It outlines a blueprint for depolarisation, bringing together key findings as clear, actionable steps to tackle the design challenge from Chapter 14.

“Design a facilitated shared human experience for Utrecht’s silent middle to strengthen their capacity to resist polarisation by validating frustrations, building understanding, unpacking systemic drivers, and sustaining nuance beyond the intervention.”

With this in focus, the first practical elements for effective intervention can be outlined, beginning with what has been learned from theory.

#### Success Criteria

The design is successful if it activates the change pathway described in Chapter 15. We measure this by tracking eight system signals that show when the system is shifting and when people start seeing problems as systemic, not personal failures. ‘System signals’ are observable signs of change, each linked to a specific point in the analysis (see Appendix G for details).

Emotional resilience (M11): The motivation and ability to handle frustration without getting defensive or blaming others.

Resistance to polarisation (C7): Capacity to maintain nuanced positions even when there is pressure to take sides

Trust in institutions (M1): The belief that the housing system works with some logic, even if it is not perfect, and that those involved are doing their best.

Perceived fairness (M2): Seeing allocation rules as unfair but understandable, instead of viewing them as random or harmful.

Acknowledgement of systemic failure (M8): Recognising that rejection is due to structural problems, rather than personal shortcomings.

Propensity for bridge-building (O6): The likelihood of becoming someone who encourages nuanced discussion in their network instead of joining polarised groups.

Mutual trust and respect (O3): The level of respect between competing groups, such as starters and status holders, even when they disagree.

Reduced pressure to compromise ethics (B7): A lower need to lie, manipulate, or go against personal values to get housing.



## 17.2 Key Theory Ingredients

This section sums up the findings of Section 1 from 'Understanding Polarisation'. It highlights key theories that should guide productive dialogue in polarised settings, explained here for practitioners. Some points, like focusing on the silent middle, are already covered in the design challenge and are not repeated.

### Basis for Depolarisation Tactics

The depolarisation strategies here focus on pluralisation, creating space for different perspectives to coexist rather than forcing agreement. This approach bridges emotional and ideological divides, sees hostility as a key part of polarisation, and aims to help people become more resilient when facing opposing views.

### Types of Talk

Kolikant & Wegerif (2025) identify four discussion types. Disputation, which breeds resistance, should be excluded. The other three forms are practical tools:

- Exploratory talk (participants open to learning and reconsidering positions),
- Constructive dispute (competition and disagreement relying on reasoned arguments, fostering dialogue agency without requiring consensus)
- Cumulative talk (building common knowledge when searching for shared values, carefully designed to prevent echo chambers, which are situations where one viewpoint dominates and others are excluded).

The intervention should focus on constructive dispute, as it is essential for depolarising dialogue.

## Interaction principles

The theory also offers principles for interaction that help prevent dialogue from worsening polarisation. These are shown in Figure 54 (see Chapter 3 for detailed explanation). Timing is crucial. While housing allocation often occurs during conflict, focusing on the silent middle can make dialogue possible if carefully designed.



Figure 54: Interaction principles for a depolarising dialogue.

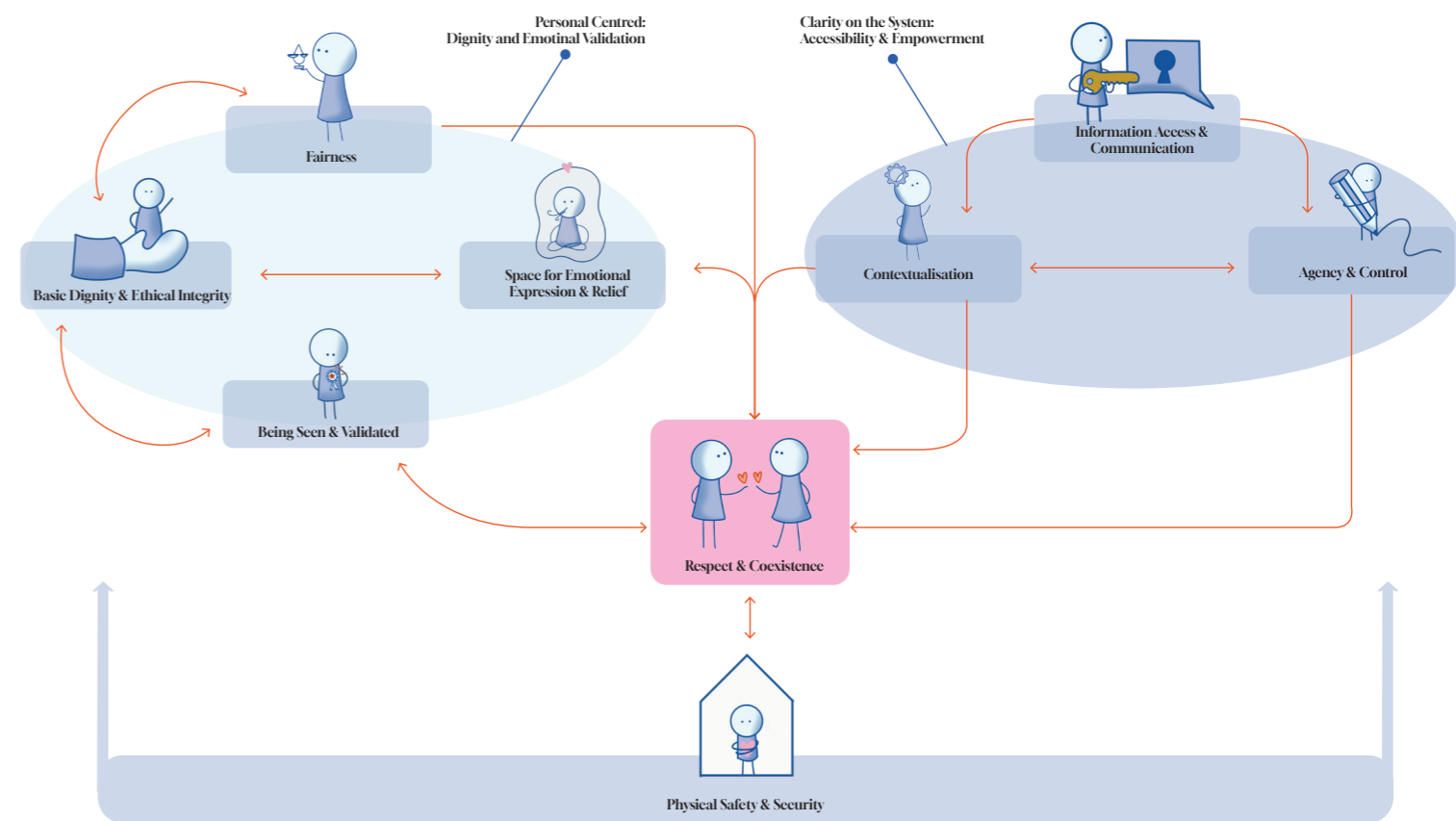


Figure 55: System for respect and co-existence.

## Types of Listening

Hendriks et al. (2018) highlight that four listening styles are essential for constructive democratic dialogue. To be effective, integrate all four into the intervention design:

- Enclave listening (fostering solidarity among like-minded individuals)
- Alliance listening (forming alliances with those sharing overlapping interests)
- Adversarial listening (monitoring opposing views to build counterarguments)
- Transformative listening (shifting public consciousness to inform and mobilise collective action).

## 17.3 The system for respect and co-existence

The system for respect and coexistence (see Figure 55, see Chapter 13 for full explanation) offers key design elements. It gives a structural blueprint, and the intervention should aim to activate all building blocks across two main feedback loops: Personal-Centred (Dignity and Emotional Validation) and Clarity on System (Accessibility and Empowerment).

Practitioners should not force these feedback loops. Instead, they should create conditions for them to develop naturally. There are many entry points, but it is vital to ensure a stable foundation of physical safety, since participants in 'survival mode' are less open. Respect grows when healthy, voluntary feedback loops are maintained.

## 17.4 Existing Practices

Existing practices were studied through case studies, interviews, and research into their methods. Below is a short summary of the active design ingredients included in the blueprint for the planned intervention.

### Case studies

Case study research identifies interaction qualities and characteristics, grouped into clusters that guide design across the intervention steps. These clusters can serve as blueprints for each step of the intervention. See Figure 57 for all clusters; the numbers are not in order.

### Practitioner Wisdom

Interviews with experts from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and Deep Canvassing NL helped turn theory into a practical script.

The following design ingredients from Chapter 16 will be integrated throughout the intervention step:

### The Validation Mandate and Soft Facts

Chapter 16 shows that the main mistake when talking to the silent middle is sharing information before recognising their personal struggles. Both experts stress that for the silent middle, facts alone are often hard to digest and need to be connected to personal validation and shared humanity to work well, as shown in the metaphor in Figure 57.

Practitioners suggest that 'Light'—meaning context or understanding—is needed to see through the fog of polarisation. Instead of using abstract statistics, they recommend sharing 'Soft Facts,' or data presented through real, relatable stories and experiences, to make information easier to understand.

### The Value-Villain-Vision Framework

This three-part communication structure, used in progressive campaigning, includes: (1) an opening statement to find common ground, (2) a clear statement of core values, and (3) an actionable request. This approach helps avoid defensiveness and encourages solidarity.

### Creating a Safe Space

Based on Deep Canvassing principles, the intervention aims to create a safe space for vulnerability and self-reflection, not debate. Ask questions that let participants share their views and contradictions without fear of judgment. Using tools like statement scale measurements before dialogue can help set this tone.

### Strategic Framing

The research on communicating with the silent middle resulted in the discovery of the use of strategic framing. After consulting with the experts and with a better understanding throughout this project. I developed four frames: Everything Changes, The Villain, Shared Humanity and Struggles.

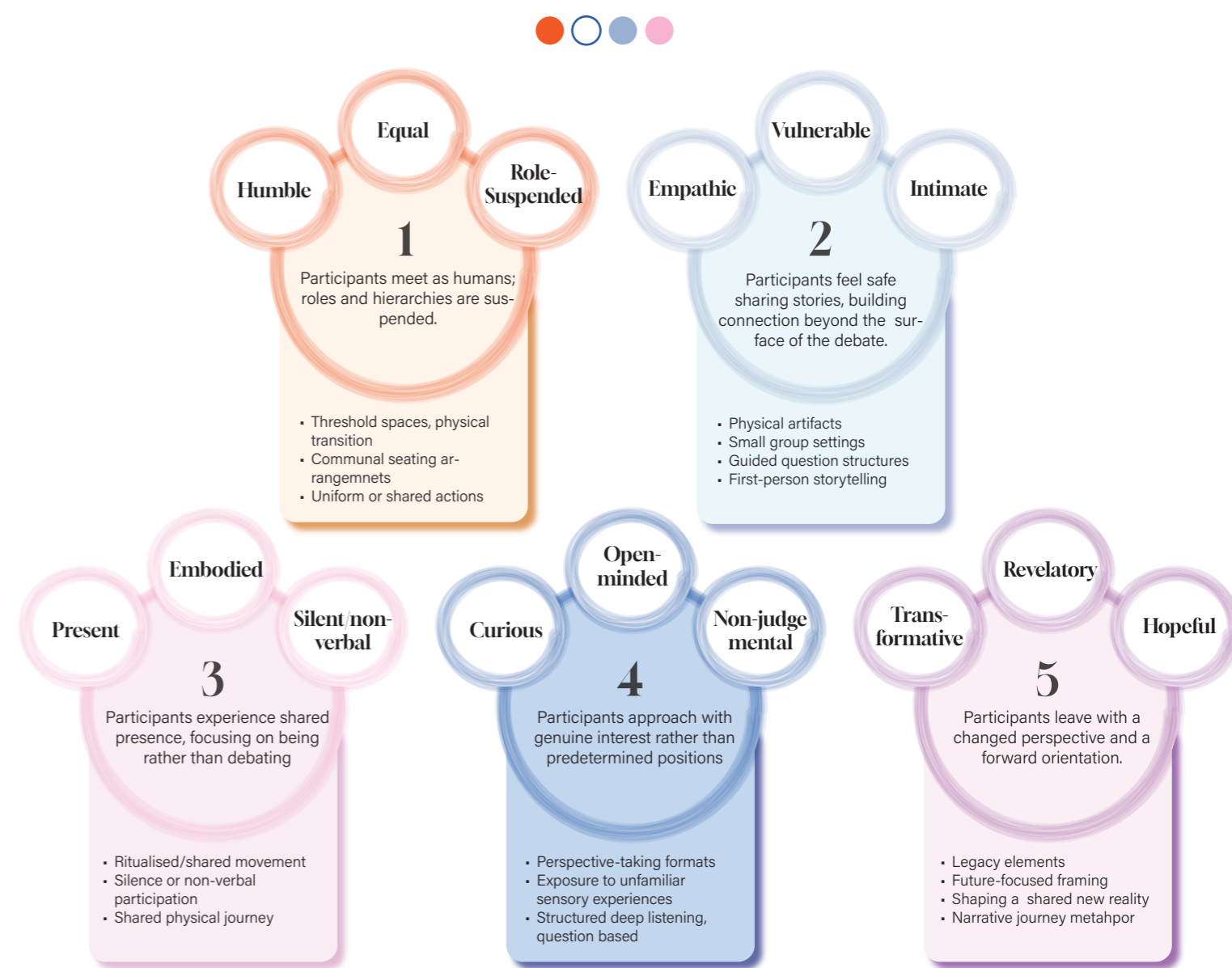


Figure 57: Five clusters of interaction qualities and enabling characteristics identified across depolarisation case studies, highlighting transferable design qualities that support constructive interaction and mutual respect.

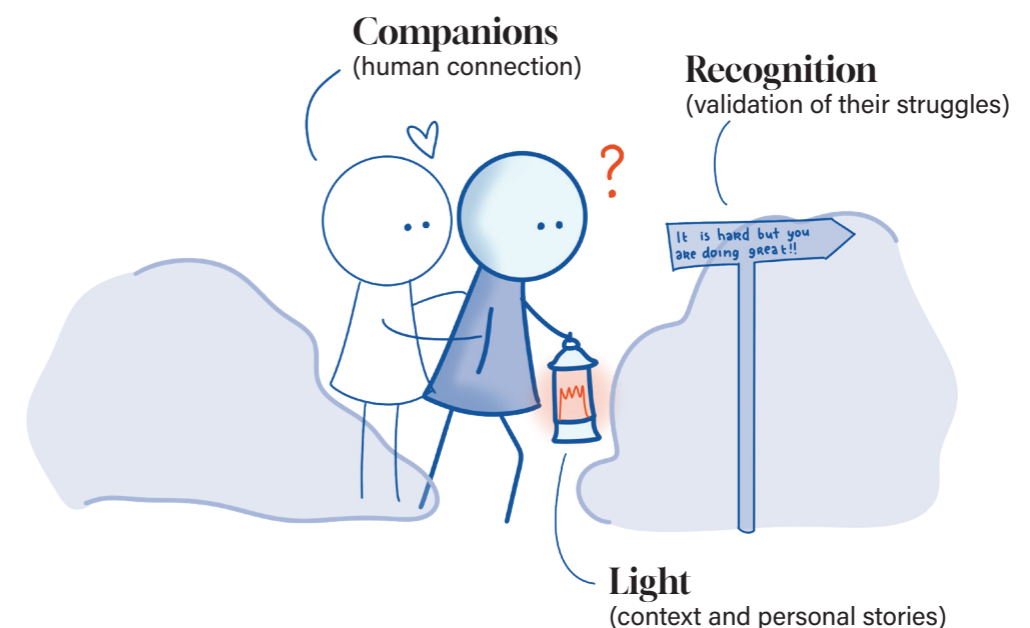


Figure 56: Visual metaphor for the needs of the silent middle.



## 17.5 Fundamentals of Flow

Together, these ingredients make up the intervention blueprint, which follows a five-step flow. First, it addresses emotional exhaustion and fear from the housing system (Steps 0-1). Next, it builds context and shared values (Step 2), encourages nuanced dialogue (Step 3), and finally supports lasting change through personal agency and the spread of ideas within networks (Steps 4-5).

Each step activates specific parts of the Respect and Co-existence System and integrates the interaction qualities found in successful depolarisation efforts. Figure 58 shows the overall flow. The following sections explain each step, showing which building blocks (of the system for respect and coexistence) or system nodes (if a node is mentioned, the node number e.g. M11 is written in the text, to see full expression of the node with its argumentation, you are referred to Appendix G) and their feedback loops are activated, how, and which interaction qualities inspired and makes up the step.

### Step 0: Baseline Measurement (The Foundation)

Participants fill out an individual questionnaire to evaluate and reflect on their starting points. This measures the baseline of the eight system signals described in Paragraph 17.1.

#### Theoretical Grounding

Self-report measures help capture how participants experience system dynamics, revealing hidden knowledge that observation alone cannot provide (Sanders & Stappers, 2013). Using a pre/post comparison design controls for individual differences and tracks changes in behaviour, not just satisfaction. This approach puts Meadows' (1997) idea into practice: leverage points need us to monitor changes in system structure, not just outputs.

#### Elements Activated

Emotional expression and relief.

#### Interaction qualities

Present, Embodied, Silent/non-verbal.

### Step 1: Shared Humanity (Safety)

Participants share a physical space in silence, focusing on being present. The activity in this non-verbal step should help them notice personal struggles and values. So that it builds psychological safety and trust, establishing shared humanity before discussing sensitive, polarised topics. The silence and shared experience remove language barriers and role differences to lower defensiveness.

#### Theoretical Grounding

Three mechanisms work together in this step. First, moving through threshold spaces creates psychological distance from daily roles. For example, in Japanese tea ceremonies, entering through low doorways and bowing symbolizes leaving status behind (Tea ceremony, Ch. 5). Second, moving together in silence helps people coordinate without talking, which eases worries about saying the wrong thing (Silent walks, Ch. 5). Third, making sure people feel safe before starting deeper conversations prevents defensive reactions. Brandsma (2016) shows that when people feel threatened, they cannot handle complex ideas and instead see others as either friends or enemies.

#### Elements Activated

This step creates a sense of physical safety and security through a silent ritual. It also supports basic dignity and ethical integrity by removing role hierarchies. It helps participants feel seen and validated by allowing them to be themselves in the moment.

#### Loop Impact

This begins to activate the Dignity-Validation Loop (Loop 8, Ch. 15), ensuring participants meet as humans first rather than as representatives of competing groups.

#### Interaction quality

Humble, Role-Suspended, Equal, Present, Embodied, Silent.

### Step 2: Soft Facts & System Understanding (The Context)

After setting aside their roles, participants break the silence to explore shared, nonpolitical values through personal stories and open discussion. Facilitators share qualitative stories and soft facts to fill information gaps and activate the Dignity-Validation Loop. This builds emotional resilience and helps prevent scapegoating. The sharing of values and empathy prepares participants for constructive disagreement.

This step uses cumulative and exploratory talk to build common knowledge and alliances, while listening for shared frustrations with the system.

#### Theoretical Grounding

When people lack information, they often fear the unknown and fill the gaps with stories, sometimes even conspiracy theories or blaming others, especially under stress (Carleton, 2016). "Soft facts" help by connecting statistics to real people's stories, making numbers easier to understand (IOM, 2023). Cumulative talk (Kolikant & Wegerif, 2025) lets the group build a shared sense of what is happening before jumping to solutions, which helps avoid early polarisation.

#### Elements Activated

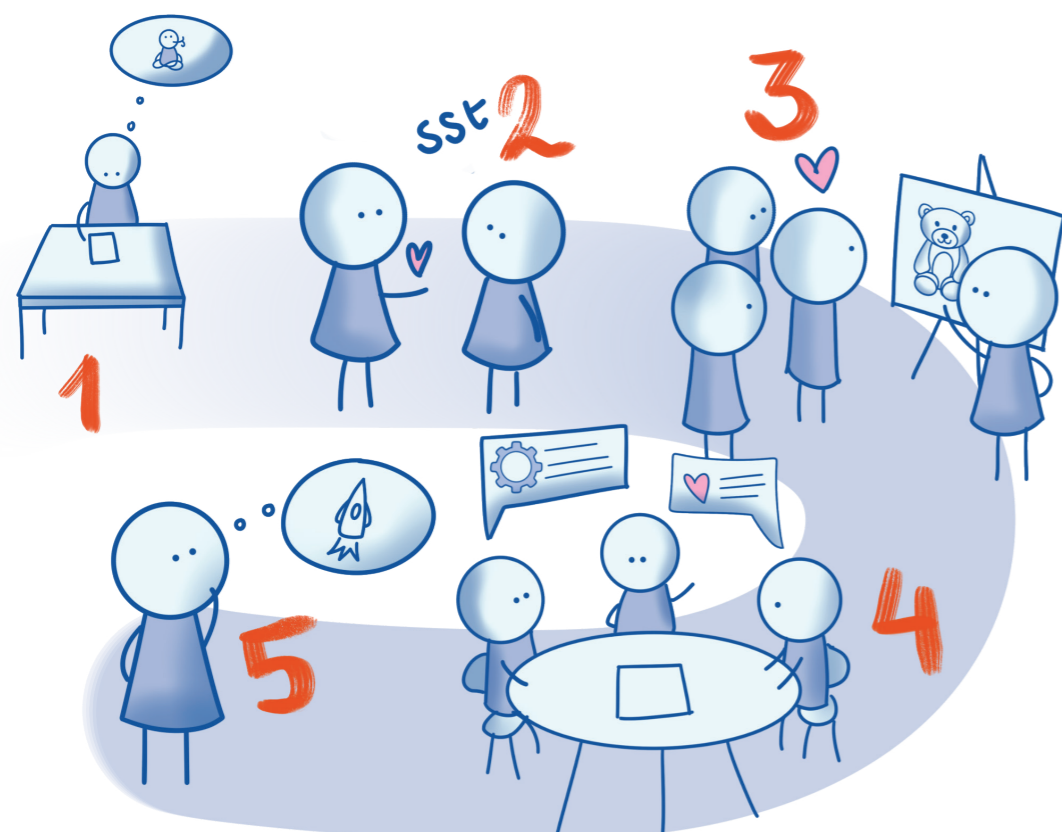
It triggers contextualisation, information access and communication, and fairness. It also starts to build on empathy (M4).

#### Loop Impact

Apart from the Dignity-Validation loop (Ch. 15) being activated, this step activates the Loop for Information Agency (Ch. 15) by making the system's complexities relatable. It helps people see rejection as a systemic issue, not a personal failure. This is key for the Humanisation to Trust Cycle (Ch. 15), as it helps participants become more open to complexity.

#### Interaction quality

Empathic, Intimate, Vulnerable, Curious.





### Step 3: Constructive Dispute (The Shift)

Participants address their differences through constructive dispute, approaching disagreements with curiosity instead of fixed positions. The trust and resilience built earlier helps them stay open and vulnerable without becoming defensive, and to respect different views without needing consensus. Using first-person storytelling, they practice constructive dispute and use strategic frames to shift from personal pain to shared systemic barriers. In this step, participants reconsider their positions, practice respectful disagreement while maintaining their nuanced views and use adversarial listening to understand the logic behind opposing perspectives.

#### Theoretical Grounding

Constructive dispute allows people to disagree through reasoned arguments while still respecting one another (Kolikant & Wegerif, 2025). Strategic frames use the Value-Villain-Vision structure from progressive campaigns (Derber et al., 2024) to shift blame from individuals to systems. But these frames only work if people feel validated first. IOM (2023) found that people in the middle reject new frames if their struggles are ignored. Using “I” statements (e.g., “I feel...” rather than “People think...”) helps reduce group polarisation, in which people defend more extreme views than they actually hold (English & Mahendran, 2021). Adversarial listening (Hendriks et al., 2018) helps in understanding the other person’s logic without having to agree with them.

#### Elements Activated

It provides space for emotional expression and relief through given vulnerability by the facilitator and the group, story sharing, and by validation from the group. People feel more seen and validated. It also builds communication skills (C2) by introducing strategic frames and giving them agency in the dialogue.

#### Loop Impact

This step activates the Loop Emotional to Relational (Ch. 13), where validation creates the psychological safety needed to relieve resentment.

#### Interaction quality

Non-judgemental, Curious, Open-minded, Transformative.

### Step 4: Personal Values & Action (The Agency)

Participants share their visions for change and develop concrete actions, focusing on pluralisation rather than consensus. They develop or receive a ‘legacy element’ and work on forward-looking actions and shared problem-solving. This future focus replaces hopelessness with a sense of agency, helping participants leave with a new understanding and hope. Transformative listening helps them reflect on how they will communicate differently in the future. Cumulative talk builds personal understanding, and if differences arise, constructive dispute helps maintain respect while expressing different visions.

#### Theoretical Grounding

Pluralisation mechanisms, which allow multiple truths to coexist, make possible what Kulundu (2018) calls “intersectional resonance.” This means participants do not have to resolve contradictions to respect each other. The interaction helps them to express complex views, which aligns with Siev et al.’s (2024) finding that people with mixed opinions are often seen as less likeable unless they can explain their views clearly.

#### Elements Activated

It maximises agency and control by helping participants formulate concrete personal actions. It helps with strategic navigation (C6) and builds towards respect & coexistence.

#### Loop Impact

It reinforces the Bridge from Understanding to Respect (Ch 13), empowering participants to maintain their autonomy and resist polarisation pressure (C7) without requiring group consensus.

#### Interaction quality

Hopeful, Transformative, Revelatory.

### Step 5: Legacy & Ripple Effect (The Impact)

The final step anchors the transformation in reflection. Participants complete the baseline measurement again to compare before and after, and reflect on the session and the intervention as a whole. Transformative listening helps them reflect on their changed understanding and how they can use it afterwards.

#### Theoretical Grounding

Material artefacts have symbolic power that words alone do not. For example, passing a physical baton turns intention into real responsibility, much like how StoryCorps’ archived recordings make conversations last (Ch. 5). The “pass it forward” approach uses social networks: if each person involves one more, the effect grows quickly (Deep Canvassing NL’s model). Repeating the baseline helps participants see their own progress, which builds self-awareness and commitment.

#### Elements Activated

It provides a final reinforcement of respect and coexistence and replenishes Emotional Resilience (M11).

#### Loop Impact

It triggers the Resilience Expression Reinforcement (Loop 11, Ch.) and increases Bridge-building Propensity (O6). The Physical Safety Loop (Ch. 13) can be activated here, as well as respect in the session, which can lead to safer expression in daily life.

#### Interaction quality

Transformative, Hopeful, Legacy-oriented.

## 17.6 Design Requirements

The intervention blueprint includes several design non-negotiables that must be accounted for. This sub-chapter translates those into design requirements to develop promising designs and serves as a foundational frame to shape the process and guide me in designing the intervention.

### Design Requirements

These requirements help keep the intervention focused, relevant, practical, and effective when choosing and testing ideas during development.

**DR1 - Audience and Strategic Boundary:** Focus exclusively on the silent/movable middle; exclude hardliners or opposing poles to avoid the backfire effect

**DR2 - Procedural Logic (The "Soil Preparation" Flow):** In what sequence should the intervention unfold?

**DR2a:** Sequence safety first. Establish physical safety and a role suspension before any cognitive work begins.

**DR2b:** Restore emotions before information. Address emotional exhaustion and validate personal struggles as strict prerequisites for providing system context.

**DR2c:** Lead with shared humanity. Use non-political, shared values, such as the universal need for a home, before introducing divisive topics or statistics.

**DR3 - Interaction Quality and Content:** How should participants engage with each other and the material?

**DR3a:** Use embodied rituals. Rely on cooperative action and physical objects instead of lectures or abstract discussion.

**DR3b:** Mandate pluralisation. Intentionally legitimise multiple narratives; the design must work without needing everyone to agree.

**R3c:** Externalise the problem. Make systemic drivers visible (M8) to shift blame away from individuals and toward the broken system.

**DR4 - Impact and Legacy:** What should participants take away, and how should success be measured?

**DR4a:** Build capacity for nuance. Focus on helping individuals maintain and express nuance under social pressure (C7) rather than changing their political stance.

**DR4b:** Measure via system signals. Evaluate success using the eight specific system signals, such as emotional resilience and perceived fairness, instead of simple satisfaction scores.

### Implementation and Role Snijboon

Snijboon works on societal issues daily, and unfortunately, there is a rise in polarisation. They already, and more and more, have to face polarised situations in their work, such as the risk that stakeholder meetings with tensions block collaboration, that focus groups turn into debates, and that participation processes become dominated by some voices while others withdraw.

This intervention helps them guide tough conversations that reduce conflict and encourage constructive dialogue. It also positions them as specialists in a growing area of social design and helps them facilitate a session in a depolarising way.

### Snijboon's Role and Capabilities

The intervention is made for social service design agencies like Snijboon to lead. This approach is strategic for several reasons:

**Realistic Scope of Influence:** Snijboon cannot change housing policy, build more houses, or alter allocation systems. However, they can create experiences outside the formal housing system that allow for reflection, emotional processing, and dialogue. The intervention fits this role by designing human touchpoints (I9) to improve how people experience interactions (Op10).

### Market Positioning

This intervention fills a gap in Snijboon's services. They are good at leading stakeholder dialogues and system innovation, but they do not yet have tools for handling toxic polarisation. This intervention makes them more aware of depolarisation tactics, a skill needed across many sectors.

### Application Contexts

The intervention serves multiple use cases within Snijboon's practice:

- **Primary Application:** Use this tool during focus groups or stakeholder meetings where polarisation is present or emerging. It helps keep discussions peaceful and involves the silent middle, stopping debates from becoming adversarial. Participants may hold conflicting views on difficult topics.
- **Participatory design projects:** At the beginning of long-term collaborations to establish dialogue foundations
- **Training and capacity building:** Teaching clients depolarisation skills they can use independently.
- **Research and validation:** Gathering nuanced perspectives on polarised topics for policy development.

## Moving Forward

All theory and insights from interaction principles, talk types, and strategic listening are converged into a step-by-step process, creating a clear method for depolarisation. This blueprint provides the intervention development with the evidence-based structure needed to intervene effectively for a design that can help shift from seeing issues as personal failures to understanding them as systemic problems.

But a blueprint is just a plan. To make it useful, it is necessary to turn these ideas into something people can use and experience. Chapter 18 explains how the stepped process is developed into the final design, showing how the blueprint is turned into a real tool through brainstorming, quick prototypes, and pilot tests.



# Chapter 18

## Generating Ideas and Testing

Now that the design elements and intervention flow are set, the project shifts from planning to practical intervention design. This stage moves from broad ideas to repeated refinements, ensuring the final concept is both practical and appealing.

This chapter explains how the intervention developed, by sketching, prototyping, and testing, ideas were improved and led to the final concept. The process highlights design choices that balance theory with practical use.

### 18.1 Brainstorming

Having gathered a lot of inspiration and different creative ways to construct a dialogue, and defining a basis for the interaction. I want to create solutions that account for the flow, including all steps as defined in Chapter 17, while still being creative. Therefore, I applied the morphological Chart.

#### Morphological Chart

This method helps generate solutions in an analytical and systematic way (Van Boeijen et al., 2020). It is a matrix of sub-functions and solutions; these do not yet have a shape or outline. But the matrix allows principal solutions to be found by combining solutions for each sub-function.

The sub functions in the matrix for me were based on how this dialogue flow and ritual could take form:

- Ways to facilitate dialogue
- Ways of integrating a ritual
- Ways of measuring the baseline
- Ways of reflection and building a vision
- Ways of presenting
- Ways to open the conversation to allow for exploratory talk and shared humanity, and to acknowledge struggles before presenting facts.

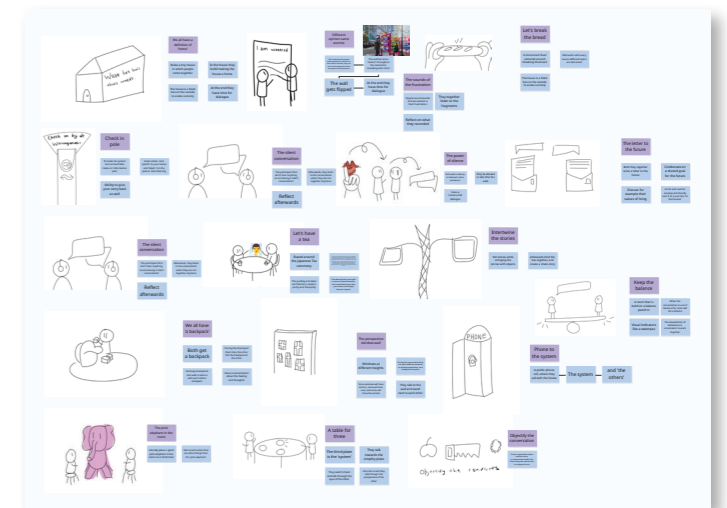


Figure 59: Impression on sketches with the Morphological Chart.

By drawing lines and combining the different segments of the Morphological Chart, I came up with many ideas.

Figure 59 presents a snippet of the sketches that arose. Please refer to Appendix K for the morphological chart and additional sketches.

To make a choice on which ideas to pursue or combine. I checked how and if the ideas would materialise the intended flow as set in Chapter 17, the best. Four ideas arose as combination of different sketches of the wider brainstorm.

One of which, 'we are all in the clouds,' required an extensive installation and was therefore discontinued. The other three were worked out, and will be outlined next.



## 18.2 Ideas and Final Sketching

For the development and presentation of the ideas, I used Design Drawing (Van Boeijen et al., 2020). This method uses sketches and other visual representations for communicative rather than exploratory purposes. The sketches and presentation of the concept flow help present the specific qualities of a design.

For each concept, a flow diagram has been drawn, forming a conceptual presentation that helps communicate the concept to Snijboon before testing and evaluating it with them. For the sketches, please refer to Appendix K.

### Fragile Feather

A feather floats in a transparent cylinder during dialogue, rising with gentle conversation and falling when voices escalate or people interrupt. The feather provides real-time, non-verbal feedback on the quality of listening, making the invisible dynamics of respectful dialogue visible. When the feather drops, it's a gentle reminder to return to curiosity rather than debate, softness rather than defence. This ritual teaches participants that transformative conversation requires the lightness of genuine interest, not the weight of winning arguments.

### 'Geef het stokje door' - Pass the baton

Participants place a written note about their role or position into a hollow bamboo tube, which is then inserted into a bridge structure alongside others' tubes—symbolising that roles support the dialogue but don't define the people. Through this ritual, a physical transition occurs from "I am my label" to "I am a human meeting other humans," allowing people to leave defensive positions behind and meet on common ground. Afterwards, participants write a message about what they learned and pass their baton to someone in their community, carrying the bridge-building forward beyond the room. In this way, dialogue is transformed from a contained moment into a ripple effect, where each conversation becomes a link in a growing chain of connections.

### Silent Middle Starter Kit

Many people have nuanced opinions on polarising topics but stay silent out of fear of conflict, feeling they don't fit into either extreme camp. This facilitated session provides individuals from the silent middle with a safe space to explore their complex feelings, practice articulating their perspectives without being pushed into a box, and prepare to voice their nuance in the wider world. The session validates that holding contradictions ("I believe X and Y") is not a weakness but a form of wisdom, equipping participants with the language and confidence to break their silence without compromising their complexity.

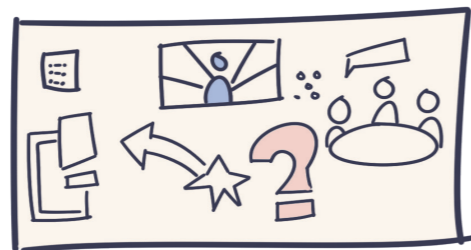


Figure 60: Quick sketch up of the design drawing of the Silent Middle Starter Kit.

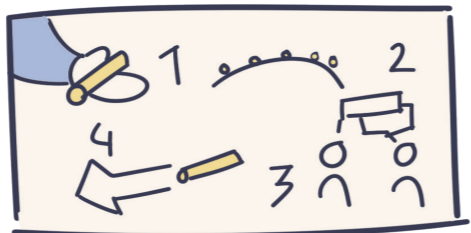


Figure 61: Quick sketch up of the design drawing of the Pass the Baton.

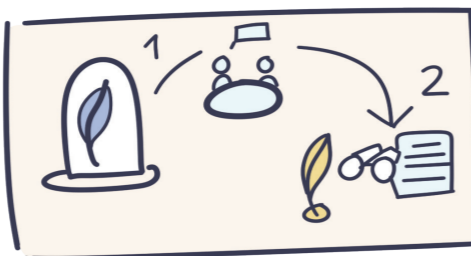


Figure 62: Quick sketch up of the design drawing of Fragile Feather.

## 18.3 Development Final Concept

Figure 63 on the next page, visually presents the development process leading to the final concept. Throughout the evolution from the blueprint in Chapter 17 to a working prototype that could be tested with a pilot group, the Product Concept Evaluation (Van Boeijen et al., 2020) evaluation method is used. This method helps designers understand how intended users and stakeholders (for me, the client Snijboon) value their concept design. This enables us to determine which aspects should be optimised and allows us to make a go or no-go decision on the presented ideas: Fragile Feather, Pass the Baton, and the Silent Middle Starter Kit, and on the final concept that rolled out of these three. This final go/no-go decision is then made against the design requirements as concluded in Chapter 17.

The presentation of the concepts changed during the development process. From the final sketches, as described in 18.2, to different types of tangible prototypes, to a complete final mock-up of the concept during the pilot test. The evaluation test helped determine whether the concept met the requirements set in Chapter 17 and whether it was perceived as valuable by the client.

### From Ideas to Concept

As described, the process began with the foundational flow outlined in Chapter 17 and developed into presentable concepts through design drawings and rapid prototyping of the physical elements using cardboard and paper by one of the founders of Snijboon.

This evaluation led me to combine the physical elements of Pass the Baton with the conceptual basis from the silent middle starter kit. Snijboon pointed out that they liked working with tangible, physical things and the innovative approach of fostering a depolarising dialogue that gives people space to explore their complex feelings, present them respectfully, and address those tensions in daily life.

## From Concept to Testable Prototype

Since this combination of concepts delivers a concept that both needs testing with the facilitator (do they understand it), the client (do they see a way they can implement it, and do they recognise the value) and the silent middle (do they see value in such dialogues, and getting tools to handle the tensions). The product concept evaluation required these three tests to make the go/no-go decision.

### Client Test

As the combination of ideas was made together with, and the coming to the description of the concept co-created with, the concept seemed like something they valued and were able to implement

### Facilitator Test

The test with a social design facilitator (another owner of Snijboon) was to see whether the idea was facilitatable. For this test, I produced the full card decks, one for the facilitator and one for the participant and worked out some physical elements.

This test showed me that the dialogue had too many steps, was too complex, and that the two separate decks were very confusing. Changes to the concept include not separating the facilitator cards from the participant cards, as this was too much work for the facilitator. I did not include the theoretical groundings on the cards due to cognitive load.



### Pilot Test

The pilot test with three participants helped confirm the approach and identified areas for improvement (please refer to Appendix L for more elaborate discussion of the pilot and the prototype used). The session successfully changed participants' perspectives, as they said that hearing different stories in a structured way allowed for more considered conversations. One participant said, "I thought it was a really lovely conversation, something we do not often have, and I did not know [X] felt so much polarisation pressure in the family. It is nice to have a chat about it." The physical "bridge" was particularly helpful. Participants liked that it illustrated the conversation rules and made them feel safer: "I like that it stands centrally on the table, so I can point to it when I feel like my partner is moving in another direction, and I like that it puts the safety of my opinion at the centre." Baseline results (for the outcomes of the baseline measures see Appendix L) showed positive changes, especially in how much participants felt their opinions mattered and that they could make a difference. The soft fact approach was also praised: "The soft facts helped me to see it differently and showed me how I can use this with others."

The test also revealed areas requiring improvement. Participants said there were too many frame cards and that the session progressed too quickly to take everything in. Beginning with a shared vision did not align with the real goal, which is to help each person share their own views. This means the script needs to be revised. The main improvements are to use only three carefully chosen sub cards in each frame deck (rather than ten), remove any ranking or order numbers on the frame cards, focus on individual actions rather than group goals, and make the session shorter and more focused so each part can be explored in greater depth.

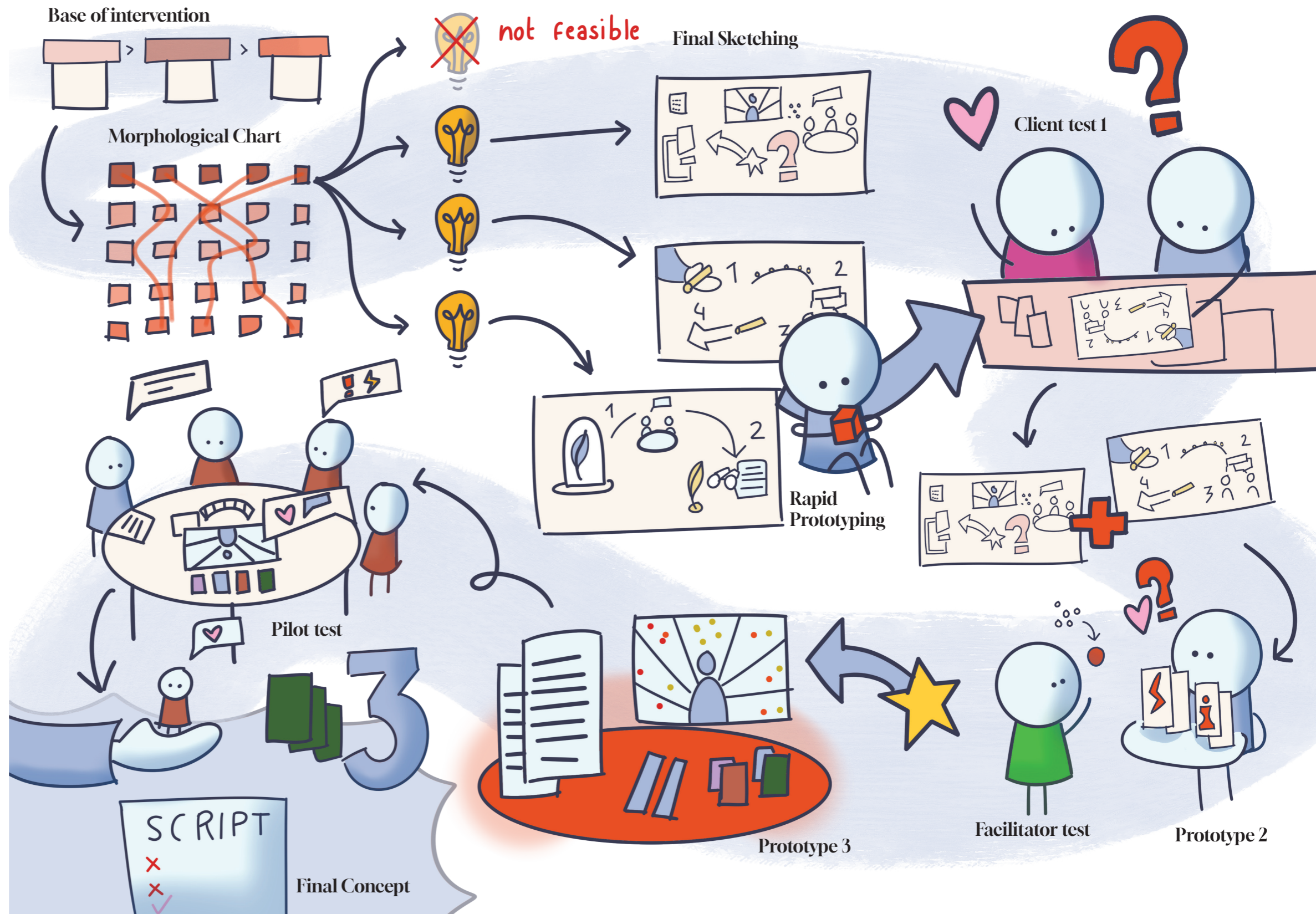


Figure 63: The development flow of the concept.

## Go/No-Go Decision

The concept meets the main requirements: it focuses on the silent middle (DR1), follows a safety-first sequence with the bridge ritual and role suspension (DR2a), and uses physical activities instead of just talking (DR3a). The pilot test showed positive changes, especially in how participants felt their opinions mattered and that they could influence the issue (DR4b). Combining Pass the Baton's hands-on elements with the Silent Middle Starter Kit's ideas was helpful for both Snijboon and the participants, who liked having a structured way to share their views. Some improvements are still needed, such as using fewer cards, removing hierarchical numbering, and making the session shorter, but these are minor adjustments. Participant feedback and improved baseline results show that the concept can help shift perspectives while allowing everyone to keep their own voice, making it a strong concept for further development. All together, the decision is a go after the full product concept evaluation, and it is time for the next step: final concept development.

## Moving Forward

The development process has turned abstract ideas into a tested intervention concept. By testing early prototypes with clients and pilot groups, key challenges were identified and addressed, such as avoiding cognitive overload and ensuring everyone's voice is heard rather than pushing for group voice and action. The final design now puts pluralism into practice through the bridge-and-baton ritual.

With the concept set, the project moves to presenting and documenting it in full. Chapter 19 will present the complete "Bridge Building Dialogue."



# Chapter 19

## The Concept Presentation

**Dialogue**  
A type of conversation with often a structured exchange between two or more parties aimed at exchanging views and fostering mutual understanding. Dialogue is different from a discussion, as with a discussion often someone is trying to convince the other party.

This chapter presents the Bridge Building Dialogue, a structured dialogue intervention designed specifically for the silent middle: those who hold nuanced opinions but often feel pressure to polarise or disengage (the definition of dialogue used here is presented in the blue box). Rather than bringing opposing poles together, which would risk the backfire effect during the current intervention stage, this design mobilises bridge builders within the silent middle to speak up, handle polarisation tension, and, in this way, step by step shift public discourse from toxic to constructive polarisation.

### 19.1 Core Principles

To start to explain the concept, first the purpose and design principles are outlined.

#### The Purpose of the Concept

The purpose of the concept is to create a replicable dialogue intervention for Snijboon, enabling them to facilitate depolarising conversations that help the silent middle better express and share nuanced positions in polarised contexts. This strengthens their ability to address polarisation, transforming uncertainty into shared resilience without forcing agreement (as stated in the reframed challenge in Chapter 15).

#### Core Design Principles

These are the three foundational principles derived from the theoretical framework in the final design.

##### 1. Pluralisation over Consensus

The intervention moves away from the goal of group agreement or consensus. Instead, it operationalises respected pluralism: creating conditions where multiple truths can coexist with mutual recognition of legitimacy. Participants leave with their own strengthened narrative, not a shared one. Moreover, it provides them with the tools to maintain this nuanced position in their daily lives. This is all with the motivation of helping more people maintain their nuanced positions and challenge 'the pushers' in the debate.

##### 2. Capacity Building over Attitude Change

Following the leverage point analysis, the design targets capacity elements (C1, C2, C5, C7) that enable individuals to resist polarisation pressure, build bridge-building skills and navigate complexity. Rather than attempting to change what people think, it builds their ability to hold and express nuance despite social costs.

##### 3. Ritual as Basis

Drawing on ritual formats such as the Japanese tea ceremony and silent walks (referenced in Chapter 5), the method temporarily suspends social roles, creating a secure, contained environment in which participants can engage as individuals first.

##### 4. Strategic Framing and Progressive Campaigning

The concept draws on strategic framing derived from frames gathered throughout this research. The four frames used are: Everything Changes, The Villain, and Shared Humanity and Struggles. Mostly gathered from IOM research on the movable middle, tactics from Deep Canvassing, and the way progressive campaigning proposes holding a progressive conversation using the V-V-V model (value, villain, vision).



Figure 64: The visualisation of the working of the concept

## 19.2 The Six-Step Journey

The intervention follows the step-by-step process from Chapter 17. Here, you'll see how these steps work within the Bridge Building Dialogue approach (see Figure 64). For more details on why each step was designed this way, refer to Chapter 17 for the physical representation of the concept. Please refer to Chapter 21.

### Step 0: Baseline Measurement

When participants arrive, they fill out a quiet questionnaire. This helps measure things like ambivalence, self-worth, agency, resistance to peer pressure, and how safe they feel sharing nuanced opinions.

### Step 1: Safety & Shared Humanity

Participants write down their roles, labels, and concerns, then put these papers in their conversation baton to symbolically leave them behind. After a quiet moment, they walk to the dialogue area, build a bridge, and read the conversation rules together.

Rules on batons:

- Speak from 'I,' not 'we' or 'people say'
- We listen to understand, not to react.
- We don't have to pick a side.
- Here we stimulate doubt.
- Here, 'I don't know' is a good answer.
- Curiosity over conviction
- We deal with multiple truths and recognise legitimacy.

After this, the group can add any extra rules they feel are needed for a safe conversation. This helps them take ownership of the bridge and the conversation, and encourages everyone to engage more with the rules.

Participants use stickers to map outside pressures that cause polarisation on a poster. This icebreaker makes the topic feel lighter. It also helps everyone see social roles and pressures, creates a sense of fairness, and uncovers shared values that might be hidden.

By the end of this step, participants are in a space where roles are set aside. They have made safety rules together, talked about polarisation, found shared values, and received recognition for the pressures and struggles they feel.

### Step 2: Contextualisation & Soft Facts

Give enough background to fill in any gaps, but avoid overwhelming or lecturing the group.

Participants hear up to two soft facts—statistics shared through real, named personal stories—to make complex systems easier to relate to (see Figure 65 for an example). They then talk about their own experiences and connect them to the bigger picture. Storytelling helps build empathy and understanding, and this step encourages curiosity and openness.

### Step 3: Guided Dialogue & Reframing

Make room for participants to share personal stories and introduce helpful ways to frame future conversations.

Participants take turns sharing their stories, with the facilitator showing openness and vulnerability. Together, the group points out the frustrations they share with the system.

The facilitator introduces one strategic frame, such as Shared Struggle, Villain, Everything Changes, or Shared Humanity, depending on the group's mood and main values. This gives participants tools to reframe future polarised conversations. Here 'we are all human' contains one card that is quite specific for migration issues. Through my exploration of the context, I discovered that the migrants (partly due to the fear of the unknown) were easy targets for scapegoating. Making this frame card (Changes in yourself, see Appendix M for the expression of this card) applicable to a lot of polarisation contexts. Critically, this card needs to be removed from the deck if it is not suitable; this is the facilitator's action.

To close, the facilitator asks participants to share their personal struggles, such as, "I want solidarity, but sometimes it feels unfair." This step encourages open discussion to build solidarity around shared barriers, not just shared opinions. It helps participants move from listening only to like-minded people to finding common ground and even to understanding opposing views. This step also shows that it's okay to feel uncertain and helps everyone express complex ideas without needing to solve everything.

#### Example Soft Fact

Hard facts (polarising): 'There are 400,000 status holders in the Netherlands.' This number may feel abstract or impersonal, making a personal connection harder. To move from this broad perspective to a more relatable one, consider the personal stories behind the statistics.

Soft facts (accessible): 'Fien fled in 2015 after his neighborhood in Aleppo was bombed. He arrived with his wife, daughter, and son. He learned Dutch at the library and now works as a plumber. His children play hockey and football locally.' Feels concrete and human and evokes understanding.

Figure 65: Example of a soft fact

## Step 4: Personal Values & Individual Action

Help each participant strengthen their own story and get ready to share nuance on their own, without needing everyone to agree.

Participants name their values, identify barriers, share ideas for change, and develop personal actions using bridge sentences from the toolkit.

This step shows that it's okay to have different visions without needing everyone to agree. It respects each person's independence and focuses on broader system issues rather than individuals. It also helps people disagree respectfully.

## Step 5: Reflection & Legacy

Participants think about how their views have changed, pick up their conversation batons, and write down what they've learned and the goals they share before passing the legacy baton to someone else.

This step gives final recognition, for example, "Your doubt isn't weakness but gives depth, finding the middle is also an opinion." It encourages participants to think about how they might speak differently now and helps them see themselves as bridge builders. The legacy baton becomes a real symbol they can use in daily life, helping the approach spread as each person shares nuance in their own way.

The baseline test is repeated to assess how the eight system signals have changed and to measure the session's overall impact.

### Two-week follow-up

Two weeks later, participants are asked if they passed the baton, how they feel about the session now, and how the baton passing went. This helps measure any ongoing effects. To truly see long-term impact, though, monitoring for at least six months is needed.

## 19.3 Implementation Format

The intervention is designed as a facilitated session with the following parameters:

### Group size

3–6 participants (small enough for psychological safety, large enough for diverse perspectives)

### Duration

2.5–3 hours (allows proper sequencing through emotional foundation to cognitive reframing)

### Setting

Two neutral spaces outside official housing allocation processes. This setup enables ritual transition and role suspension.

### Frequency

One-time session per group (designed for immediate capacity building, with optional follow-up after two weeks)

## 19.4 Design Requirements

Before diving into the tests, I tested for myself whether the design fulfilled all requirements as set in Chapter 17, and it did:

**Strategic Focus (DR1):** Targets only the silent middle, excluding hardliners to prevent backfire effects while activating those most receptive to bridge-building.

**Procedural Integrity (DR2):** The six-step flow establishes physical and psychological safety (DR2a) before any cognitive work, validates emotions (DR2b) before providing system context, and grounds the intervention in shared non-political values (DR2c) before addressing divisive allocation topics.

**Interaction Design (DR3):** Embodied rituals (bridge-building, baton-carrying, silent walking) replace lectures (DR3a), pluralisation mechanisms intentionally legitimise multiple narratives without requiring consensus (DR3b), and soft facts with strategic frames externalise blame from individuals to systemic failures (DR3c).

**Measurable Impact (DR4):** The intervention builds capacity for maintaining nuance under pressure (DR4a) through concrete skills (strategic frames, bridge sentences, soft fact templates), and measures success via eight system signals (DR4b) that track emotional resilience, resistance to polarisation, trust, fairness perception, systemic understanding, bridge-building propensity, mutual respect, and reduced ethical compromise.

## Moving Forward

The Bridge Building Dialogue has been developed, bringing together pluralisation mechanisms and ritualised movement to help the silent middle keep their nuanced views. It needs thorough validation before it can be used in real-world settings.

The next chapter outlines a detailed test plan to assess the design's desirability, viability, and feasibility with the silent middle, stakeholders, and experts.



# Chapter 20

## Testing, Validating and Iterations

With the design prototyped and developed, it is necessary to validate whether the concept fulfils its intended purpose and whether the designed feedback loops change as expected. Validation also helps assess the feasibility and potential success of an idea. My validation is conducted in three stages: experts, social service designers (facilitators), and intended users (the silent middle). This chapter explains what is tested, why it is tested, and how it is tested. Then, it presents the test results, iterations, and recommendations.

### 20.1 Goal of Intervention

#### Primary Goal

Strengthen the silent middle's capacity to resist pressure to polarise and maintain nuanced positions in the Utrecht housing debate, thereby shifting public discourse from toxic to constructive polarisation.

#### Operationalised When

##### Individual Capacity Building (Micro-level)

- Participants demonstrate increased emotional resilience.
- Participants resist pressure to choose extremes, and have the tools to handle felt polarisation tension.
- Participants express nuanced opinions publicly without social cost.

##### Relational Quality Transformation (Meso-level)

- Improved perceived quality of human interaction in the housing context.
- Reduced dehumanising language toward status holders.
- Shift from individual blame to systemic understanding.

#### Systemic Ripple Effects (Macro-level)

- Increased visibility of the silent middle in public debate.
- Activation of bridge-building propensity over the joiner pathway.
- Spreading action as each participant is equipped to spread nuanced discourse through passing the baton and having depolarising conversations.

#### Theoretical Alignment

This goal operationalises the leverage point analysis (Chapter 15): by designing human touchpoints to improve perceived interaction quality, we activate the cascade: the rejection and pressure seen as systemic, leading to emotional resilience that helps resist polarisation. This resilience helps activate bridge builders who build towards mutual respect.



## 20.2 Test Strategy

Validation is a critical checkpoint to ensure the concept aligns with intended outcomes, user needs, and client requirements. I applied the DVF (desirability, viability, feasibility) framework from design thinking, which evaluates if the concept is appealing to users (desirability), practical to realise (feasibility), and sustainable (viability). This approach allowed for strategic, structured assessment and feedback on key elements of the solution.

By aligning with Snijboon's design thinking methodology, I ensured my validation approach matched their practices, which helped communicate results and evaluations throughout the process and for the outcomes. Using the DVF framework clarified which aspects of the solution were most valuable, and highlighted if any pillar was lacking, the solution might not be suitable. For every test, an evaluation form is used to structure it according to the DVF framework. One example is included in Appendix N.

To ensure comprehensive validation, I use a multifaceted approach combining expert reviews, user testing (the silent middle), and stakeholder engagement. This addresses evaluation gaps missed by single methods: user testing reveals real-world usability, expert reviews add theoretical rigour, and stakeholder input ensures practical viability. Please refer to Figure 66 for a visual of the different tests.

The concept should be tested on two main things:

1. Validate and activate the systems described in this project: the respectful coexistence system of Chapter 13 and the system signals in Chapter 15.
2. Assess whether the concept meets the DVF criteria through the selected validation activities.

This dual approach assesses both impact and implementation. Impact asks if the intervention reduces polarisation; implementation asks if the concept works in practice. Both objectives were validated with social design practitioners, stakeholders, and experts.

The next section details the different tests, with their objectives, success criteria, and outcomes. The outcomes are structured as follows: first, alongside the DVF framework, and second, an overall assessment. The next sub-chapter will explain the arisen actionable recommendations and an assessment of implementation readiness.

### Time Constrain

To fully validate the activation of system elements, rigorous testing is required. However, within the time span of this project, the long-term effects and scaling of tests are not possible. The tests with the silent middle remain pilots, as they are recruited through my network and are small-scale. Also, the two-week follow-up session was out of scope with testing.

Therefore, the tests can only suggest that the intervention works as intended and will primarily offer insights into its practicality. Chapter 22 will provide further recommendations for monitoring lasting change and testing system signals.

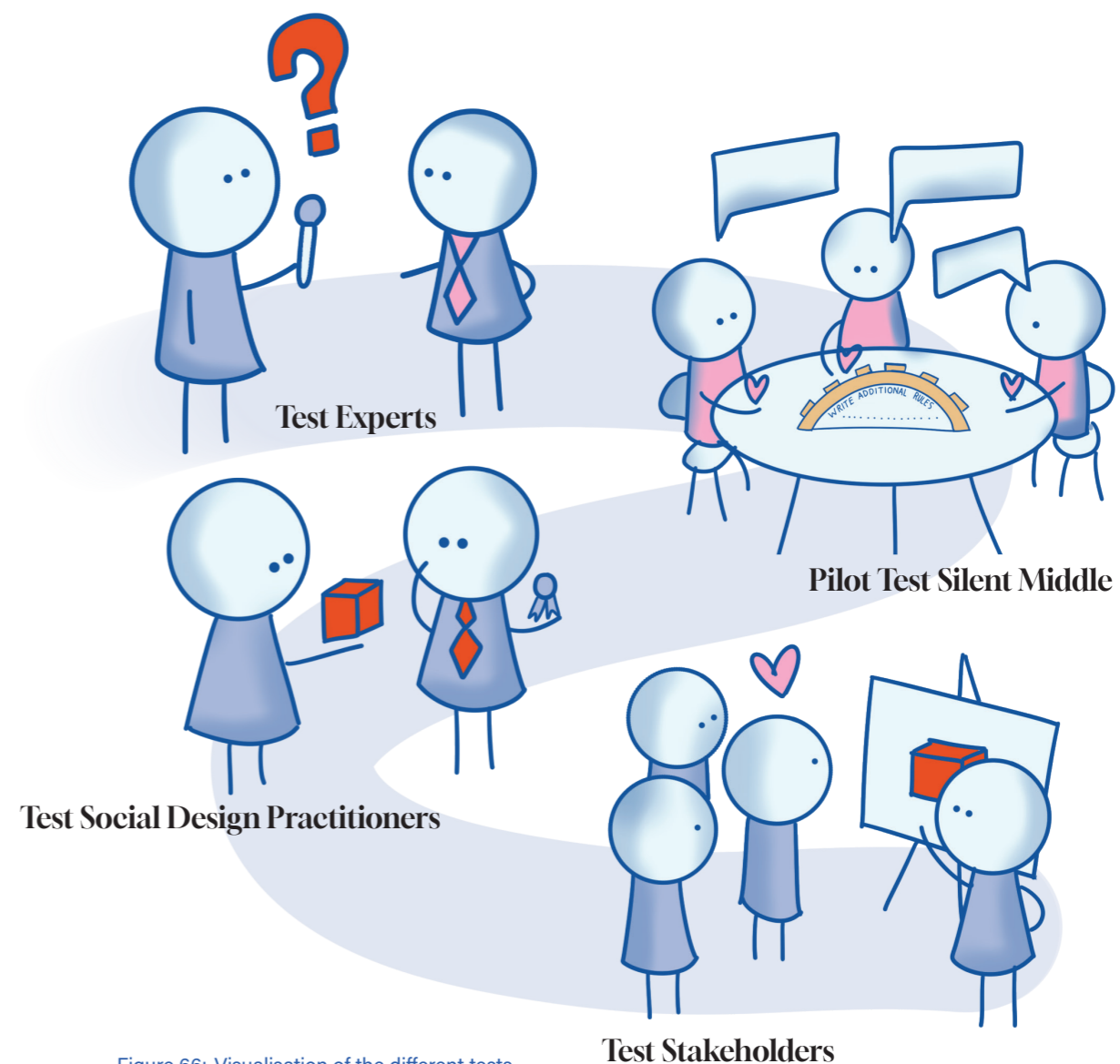


Figure 66: Visualisation of the different tests.



## 20.3 Test with Experts

This test grounds the intervention in established practice by consulting three relevant experts: a sociologist (to assess sociological effects), a Deep Canvassing expert (for depolarisation strategies), and an IOM representative (for silent middle expertise research). Each provides perspective on a core component of the intervention's aims, overall theoretical rigour, and impact.

### Evaluation Format and Success Criteria

The evaluation format consisted of individual demonstration sessions with each expert, lasting around 1 hour.

The intervention's success through expert evaluation was measured against the following criteria:

- **Concept Soundness:** Does the intervention align with established theories and best practices in sociology, depolarisation conversations, conflict resolution, communication, and theory about the silent middle?
- **Psychological Safety:** Does the design effectively create a safe space for vulnerability and authentic sharing?
- **Practical Applicability:** Is the intervention and its tools perceived as usable, concrete, and relevant for real-world depolarisation efforts?
- **Potential for Impact:** Do experts believe the intervention can foster mutual understanding and reduce polarisation?

### Findings

The feedback from the expert tests provided strong validation for the intervention's core design and conceptual strength while also highlighting critical areas for strategic refinement.

#### Desirability

The experts expressed high enthusiasm for the tool's value and innovative approach. The IOM representative rated it 5 out of 5, calling it "fantastic", feeling like a complete, deployable intervention.

The Deep Canvassing expert praised the process for creating a 'safe container' for dialogue.

*"You build a container, creating a safe space first [...] It makes you vulnerable, but also protected."*

She saw the tool used in a complementary way with their practices. Highlighting that it can help them ensure ongoing group dialogue rather than just individual conversations keeps participants engaged and better prepares communities to handle everyday polarisation.

The sociologist valued the silent, reflective start for encouraging neutral conversation. She noted that the role-levelling exercise helps participants focus on the human element, rather than their professional interests.

#### Viability

The experts judged the intervention to have long-term potential. IOM provided a strong endorsement, stating the tool is concrete, impactful, and could be deployed tomorrow to make a real difference. She emphasised its value not only for external dialogue but also for internal organisational use, seeing high potential. Noting sometimes staff understand theory but have yet to execute it, she said,

*"I think having such a conversation within our organisation is very meaningful." There was a consensus among the other experts that the intervention is also highly suitable as a training module, "providing the participants with tangible, effective tools." - IOM representative.*

Experts discussed 'passing the baton' as both symbolic and a way to encourage organic growth. The Deep Canvassing expert saw it as a reminder mechanism, with a two-week follow-up helping ensure action. The sociologist observed that it works best with enthusiastic participants, spreading engagement and skills through social networks. They agreed that the intervention brings people together for real-time dialogue and helps them practise democratic skills, with take-home cards reinforcing learning.

Deep Canvasser expert also emphasised the strength of the dialogue as a whole:

*"It feels like the sum of its parts [...] The combination of experiencing tension and then entering dialogue with a frame" - Deep Canvasser.*

#### Feasibility

Experts agreed that the main design choices help people feel safe. Skipping introductions and starting in silence supports neutrality:

*"If it's not clear in the group who is who, you can share your opinion just a bit safer." - Sociologist*

And appreciating the conscious silence in the beginning, where there is a bit of waiting time before dialogue.

However, there are feasibility barriers. The Deep Canvassing expert noted communication frames may seem left-winged due to their progressive origins. She explained that the frame "Alles verandert" (Everything changes) might threaten those with conservative values. Although, the Villian frame was promising:

*"I find the Villain frame interesting because you're essentially conducting a politicised discussion." - Deep Canvasser.*

She also flagged confusion between "soft" and "hard" facts, as deep canvassing relies on stories and values, not facts.

Additionally, IOM noted another limitation: the tool was tested solely with Dutch participants. This raises questions about its applicability, as the direct Dutch communication style may not easily fit multicultural settings where different norms of "vocal safety" exist.

On facilitator requirements, the Deep Canvassing expert said facilitators need to be knowledgeable to manage group tensions. She pointed out it's key to know which tensions to leave alone. But with expert facilitators, it can be scaled up easily:

*"I could do this myself after one session, and I know 20 others who could do this, too." - Deep Canvasser.*

### Overall Assessment

Expert validation confirmed the intervention's thoughtful design, strong theory-practice link, and potential impact.

*"I find it incredible that you manage to take all those different studies and target groups and the big amount of information that you've worked through very systematically and make something completely concrete that is really deployable."*

With a note that it would be nice to better convey the dialogues theory on the cards, for example, this acknowledgement of struggle.

The IOM expert validated the tool's suitability for the movable middle. She noted: "I think this works very well as training and as an eye opener." She confirmed the target group fit goes beyond only the silent middle, as long as you don't have the very hardest hardliners at the table. Feedback highlighted the importance of psychological safety, structured dialogue, and refining communication for wider use across different political and cultural contexts.



## 20.4 Pilot Tests Silent Middle

While expert feedback validates theory, the pilot test with end-users is the true measure of the intervention's value: Does it foster constructive interaction and mutual understanding, and help navigate daily polarised tensions?

It also provided an assessment of the flow of the intervention and of whether the participant felt safe during it.

### Participants

The first pilot test involved four participants aged 21 to 65. The second pilot test involved three participants aged 21 to 28.

### Evaluation Format and Success Criteria

The evaluation consisted of two full pilot test sessions. In each session, the participants experienced the entire intervention from start to finish. A debrief was held afterward, gathering their feedback, reflections, and personal experiences.



Figure 67: Photo of the first pilot test during the dialogue session.

Success for this pilot was measured with the following criteria:

- **Use Engagement:** Did participants find the experience engaging, valuable, and meaningful?
- **Foster Understanding:** Did participants feel the tool helped create mutual understanding and make a complex topic more tangible? Did they feel like they could hold their own truth whilst engaging with others?
- **Provides Practical Tools:** Did participants find the intervention and its tools, such as the strategic frames, useful handles for navigating difficult conversations?
- **Inspiration to Act:** Did the experience motivate participants to apply these skills or continue the conversation in other areas of their lives (e.g., with family, colleagues, or friends)?

[About card deck, works at Municipality Tilburg]

**“I think I will really take this mentally with me to my work... These are very nice handholds”**



Figure 68: Photo of the second pilot test during the dialogue session.



Figure 69: Photo of the second pilot test session during the silent ritual.

### Findings

The participants' feedback was positive, validating the intervention's experience.

### Desirability

Participants expressed a sense of value and engagement. For example, one participant stated,

**“I'm already excited to pass the baton”**

while another shared their desire to use the tool with their family. The physical tools were also highly appreciated as a practical tool when conversations get stuck. One participant, after reading a bridge card, remarked that it

**“perfectly summarised what I often think but can't necessarily put into words.”**

Another participant mentioned wanting to give the tool to colleagues, believing it could benefit everyone in the workplace. The concept of the soft facts also resonated with participants.

### Viability

The potential for lasting impact and spread was mentioned several times.

**“I see the value in expanding and passing it on.”**

Numerous participants saw immediate applications for the tools in their professional lives, such as improving public debate or helping colleagues have better conversations. They saw broad applicability: in schools, in their field of work, and with friends.

### Feasibility

Participants found the structure and cards helpful for expressing thoughts. Suggestions included clearer topic framing, since there was confusion about whether the conversation was about depolarisation or the housing crisis. They also recommended introducing the 'bridge builders' theory to connect the intervention's elements, enhance the story, and help them understand why it is a bridge and why they need to pass the baton (to build together towards depolarisation).



## Overall Assessment

Pilot tests showed strong desirability and positive impact, with baseline measures (see Figure 70 for the comparison of the baseline of Pilot test 2, refer to Appendix L for the results of other pilot tests) indicating improvement after the session. Suggesting quantitative validation of the intervention's effectiveness and shifts in system signals.

The creation of respect and peaceful coexistence was also reinforced by a participant after the pilot. They reflected:

*"I think it is very beautiful that in this interaction, you can still think it is unfair, or someone is not right, but still, empathy and understanding are created for the other perspective."*

## Additional Evaluation

During both pilot tests, I evaluated the guide to improve session flow. This highlighted feedback points for refinement. For instance, during pilot test 1 in the silent ritual, participants asked questions aloud, breaking the silence. To resolve this, the cards for pilot 2 included instructions to raise a hand when they had a question (see Figure 70). This instruction should also be in the introduction.

Further adjustments addressed flow and wording errors. For instance, participants found 'polarisation pressure' confusing, as they experienced tension rather than pressure. And 'polarisation' should be more clearly defined.

During my second pilot, I made these adjustments, resulting in a more fluent flow with less confusion about the terms and assignments. Everything seemed clear, and I thought the guide provided good handles to facilitate the intervention. But real validation of this will be achieved in the next text with the social design practitioners.



Figure 70: Combined results of the baseline measures of pilot test 2. Top is before the Bridge Building Dialogue, and bottom is after.

## 20.5 Social Design Practitioners

To validate the intervention's practical applicability, concept testing was conducted with six social service design practitioners across two sessions: an initial evaluation with Snijboon (n=2) and an assessment with Zeewaardig (n=4). This test allowed me to see if the product could be executed by my intended facilitators, and if they saw value in this product.

## Evaluation Format and Success Criteria

The test included a walkthrough of the concept and a structured evaluation. Groups gave both collective and individual feedback; in the duo test (with Snijboon), feedback was combined. The evaluation form used is available in Appendix M.

The success criteria for this test were:

- **DVF general test:** Does the tool address practitioner needs (Desirability)? Can it be implemented by Snijboon (Viability)? Does it work within practical constraints (Feasibility)?
- **Respect and Coexistence Model:** Does the intervention demonstrate its ability to foster nuance, enable the coexistence of different perspectives, and create psychological safety?
- **Facilitator Usability:** Is the guide clear, comprehensive, and practical for a facilitator to prepare and run a session?
- **Procedural Logic:** Do the physical elements and session flow feel logical, well-integrated, and effective from a practitioner's standpoint?
- **Work field Fit:** Does the intervention align with their established methods and meet their clients' perceived needs?
- **Toolkit Potential:** Do the practitioners see a clear application for this tool in their professional work?



Figure 71: Photo of the first pilot test during the dialogue session.



Figure 72: Left: Photo of test with Zeewaardig, Right: Test set-up with Snijboon.



Figure 73: Photo of the test with Snijboon.



## Findings

This section synthesises qualitative feedback from the Zeewaardig and Snijboon test, assessing readiness for professional deployment.

### Desirability

Social design practitioners strongly valued the tool's thoughtful design, visual style, and clear need. Card sets were seen as valuable, credible, and market-ready. Physical elements like the bridge and batons created a safe, playful environment, though some suggested simplifying materials and setup. For example, the fragility of the bridge could give problems in transportation, and reserving two rooms would double session costs. The tool's versatility was praised for use in personal and professional contexts. Take-home materials and follow-up reinforced learning. Baseline measurements helped surface honest experiences. Practitioners appreciated how the intervention combines proven approaches and structures them cohesively.

*"Super well-developed, thought through to the smallest detail with good substantiation!" - Zeewaardig*

The focus on enabling valuable conversations, rather than forced consensus, was seen as a major strength.

### Feasibility

Despite high desirability, practitioners saw major feasibility challenges. The session was too long (2.5–3 hours) according to Zeewaardig, prompting requests for a shorter, 1–1.5-hour version. However, Snijboon thought it was a good fit for the format, although seeing value in a modular kit. Concerns included the intervention's framing as a 'depolarisation dialogue' (which may label participants), facilitator neutrality, especially during the soft facts step, and the need for extensive preparation. Practitioners wanted better support materials: a playbook, script, slides, a B1 Dutch manual, an introductory video, and a visual agenda. They also stressed the importance of onboarding or training before facilitating sessions.

## Viability

Feedback on viability was mixed. The tool meets a real need and fits existing services, especially for polarised conversations,

*"There is a lot of demand for guidance and handles."- Zeewaardig*

But its long, complex format makes it hard to sell.

Practitioners found it useful in many settings, such as stakeholder meetings, participation meetings, internal team sessions, training sessions, citizen councils, and interviews, but suggested a shorter, modular, or card-only version would work better for most contexts. Some contexts, such as long-term groups, were ideal, while short projects posed challenges.

### Overall Assessment

The tests with Zeewaardig and Snijboon validated the core concept, theoretical soundness, and the quality of the design. Practitioners see value in the tool for navigating complex conversations, but critical barriers to the full version's practical adoption remain.

Overall, the intervention is highly desirable, but currently infeasible for practitioners and unviable for Snijboon to sell at scale. Addressing time commitment, facilitation complexity, and support materials is essential to success. The value proposition is strong, but the delivery model requires refinement.

This assessment leads directly to a set of clear, actionable recommendations for improving the intervention that will be presented in 20.8: Recommendations.

## 20.6 Stakeholder Validation

Validation tests with key housing organisations (Czas Wonen, the Municipality of Utrecht, and the Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning) assessed whether the tool can reduce polarisation. By involving all levels (ministry, municipality, and housing corporation), the evaluation addressed real-world needs and constraints. Stakeholder feedback gave direct insight into relevance, feasibility, and potential for broader adoption.

### Evaluation Format and Success Criteria

The evaluation consisted of a demonstration of the intervention with its tools, with a focus on the flow of intervention and the intended outcomes.

Success for this stakeholder evaluation was measured against the following criteria:

- **Organisational Relevance:** Do stakeholders see an application for the tool within their context (e.g., policy development, community engagement, staff training)?
- **Perceived Effectiveness:** Do they believe the tool can contribute to depolarisation within the polarisation debate in the housing context and can it contribute to their organisational goals, such as increasing mutual understanding or easing community tensions?
- **Implementation Barriers:** What organisational challenges (e.g., time, priorities, politics, resources) do they foresee?
- **Value Proposition:** Is the potential benefit of the intervention seen as worth the investment of organisational resources?

## Findings

This section synthesises feedback from the three stakeholder organisations to assess the intervention's value and readiness in the housing sector.

### Desirability

Feedback confirmed all three organisations saw the tool as valuable and relevant for addressing polarisation in housing. Stakeholders praised its alignment with their missions, use of relatable examples, and ability to correct misconceptions. The tool's design encourages dialogue, helps restore neutrality, and bridges gaps between institutions and residents, making it suitable for both formal and informal use.

*"I see potential in using it to train civil servants to maintain neutrality and recognise biases, which can become internalised."*

*"I like the bridge sentences as I feel like it highlights shared values and reconnects participants who are drifting apart"*

### Viability

Viability feedback was mixed. The tool meets clear needs and fits organisational missions, but adoption depends on priorities, resources, and proof of impact. Stakeholders saw value in many contexts, especially for participation and training. The Ministry suggested official integration in civil servant training, while noting the tool can't fix housing shortages but can ease social tensions. Demonstrated impact and third-party validation are needed for political buy-in. Demand for depolarisation tools is likely to rise as polarisation grows. The municipality noted that it needs clearer guidance on how to report this activity and its outcomes to the council.

*"It is very difficult to counteract polarisation... I don't know many other things in all honesty, so that increases the value of this" - Ministry*



## Feasibility

Stakeholders found the tool both desirable and practical, but noted some challenges. They stressed the importance of having neutral, independent facilitators to keep the process fair. The “silence rule” should be introduced carefully so residents who already feel unheard are not put off. It is also hard to recruit people beyond the ‘usual suspects’, but social managers could help by reaching out to specific groups. Stakeholders appreciated that the sessions are well-organized and that materials are easy to understand, including in B1-level Dutch. Although Cazas Wonen supports the tool, it has limited capacity, so social managers could also help implement it.

“We would very much like to use this, but we are also very busy right now”. - Cazas wonen

## Overall Assessment

Tests with the Ministry, the Gemeente, and Cazas Wonen confirmed the concept’s value and alignment. Stakeholders see its usefulness for polarised housing discussions, but adoption barriers remain.

The intervention is desirable and meets a growing need, but its success depends on organisational priorities and professional facilitation. Strong documented proof is needed to move from concept to practice.

Stakeholders see uses in civil servant training, neighbourhood participation, and inter-organisational coordination. Main obstacles include recruiting the “usual suspects,” carefully framing the silence rule, limited organisational capacity, and the need for impact data to justify resources.

Despite these barriers, all stakeholders agreed that the tool’s core mechanism (e.g., revealing shared fundamental desires such as affordable cities and housing for essential workers) addresses a real democratic deficit. As the gemeente representative said, these connections:

“Always exist; the challenge is making them visible.”

This assessment offers clear steps for organisational implementation, which will be explored next, together with the recommendations that arose during the other tests.

## 20.7 Iterations While Testing

All tests gave me a lot of insights, and I learned while testing. So after each test, critical flaws or clear opportunities for improvement were identified before testing with a new expert, a new pilot group or another stakeholder. Within this project span, I still addressed and attempted to obtain initial validation for some of the iterations.

Unfortunately, other intervention recommendations are outside the time line of this project and are recommended to pursue to make the Bridge Building Dialogue a market-ready roll-out, helping move together with social designers and society towards depolarisation in 20.8: recommendations.

Here, the iterations are outlined based on the concept compared to the one presented in Chapter 19.

### Refinement Baseline and Ritual Cards

Snijboon recommended a cohesive visual language for all materials. The pilot test showed the need for clearer folding instructions and revised wording for ‘your role’.

The ambivalence test was removed from the baseline after feedback that it was confusing and unnecessary. The tool is broadly applicable, but disruptive participants are excluded in advance. Ambivalent opinions are now addressed in other statements. Final materials will be in Chapter 21, with old and new materials compared in Appendix O.

### Change of Flow

Changes in the flow shortened the dialogue and made it more cohesive by removing steps. This unified the intervention and avoided a rushed feel. A break was added based on pilot-test feedback on session length. These are the changes made to each step of the flow; if a step is not mentioned, it remains the same:

## Introduction

The facilitator clearly states that the session’s focus is on a specific topic (e.g., housing) and explains that this is used to practice broader depolarisation dialogue skills. This can be omitted when the goal is to train people to use depolarisation tools. Also, a brief theoretical introduction to the context of the concept of bridge builders in society is provided at the beginning.

It is explained that the first part will be in silence, and participants are told to raise their hands if they have questions. The reason for silence is given: to ensure safety and equal participation in the dialogue that follows. The facilitator also explains what it means to be a bridge builder in society, laying a brief theoretical foundation for the upcoming dialogue. The program poster (see the design in Figure 74) is displayed in both the silent room and the dialogue room, and the facilitator addresses this in the opening.

To enhance a sense of safety, at the beginning of the interaction, when participants are writing the role cards, the facilitator underlines that no one will read these cards and that participants will remain anonymous.

### Polarisation tension

Instead of introducing the dot-vote poster as polarisation pressure mapping, it was called polarisation tension; where they felt an active force of division!



## 20.8 Recommendations

Beyond the iterations during testing, other actionable recommendations emerged. These are outlined in three categories: product development, validation and expansion, and marketing and positioning.

### Product Development

**Develop a modular toolkit in two formats:** a 2.5-hour session for in-depth use and a 1-hour version focused on frame cards and everyday polarisation. Include a challenge card in every kit to prompt immediate practice of techniques.

**Create a comprehensive facilitator enablement package** to address concerns about complexity, preparation, and neutrality by developing the following:

- A step-by-step Facilitator Playbook (“draaiboek”) with silence rule scripts and constructive redirection techniques
- An introductory video explaining the core theory and processes
- A slide deck to accompany the intervention, serving as a reference for participants. It can be used as an optional addition to show definitions and other key points.
- A dedicated FAQ guide on maintaining neutrality and managing challenging group dynamics

**Demonstrate the frame-card theory during the session:** State the need to recognise struggles early on when using strategic frames. Clearly explain the structure of the frame cards as shown on the back (see Figure 75). Specify this in the facilitator’s guide. If tension arises (such as during the dot-voting poster action), instruct the facilitator to assess whether an extra validation step is needed before moving to dialogue. Direct the guide to clarify how to recognise tension and highlight when this validation step is necessary.

**Iterate on the bridge:** Explore portable alternatives and reconsider the two-room requirement.



Figure 75: The back side of the frame card of Everything Changes, showing the structure on how to build up the frame.

### Validation and Expansion

**Refine and Validate Communication Frames:** Test with politically diverse groups to address classic left-wing concerns. Investigate a fifth frame for centre-right perspectives using different value systems.

**Address cross-cultural applicability:** Organise pilot tests with diverse groups. Evaluate and adapt the tool for different communication styles, focusing on vocal safety. Test if direct Dutch communication is a barrier.

**Develop Facilitator Guidance:** Create extra guidance that emphasises tension recognition and adaptive navigation strategies.

**Establish Institutional Validation Path:** Partner with third-party research to analyse long-term effects. Document pilots and publish accessible findings for stakeholders.

### Marketing and Positioning

**Reframe and position the intervention:** Use inviting terms such as “bridge-building dialogue” instead of “depolarisation dialogue.” This will reduce resistance when marketing the tool.

**Develop a training module package.** Tailor the interaction to an active training module.

**Develop the Participation Output Module:** Standardise session insights as formal outputs. If wanting to expand to municipal grounds, use, for example, a participation compliance document for information duty and an anonymous quote bank for representative statements.

## Moving Forward

Testing and validation have successfully verified that the concept fulfils its intended purpose and that the designed feedback loops operate as expected. By engaging with experts, social service designers, and the silent middle, the intervention has transitioned from a prototype to a refined, actionable design.

These iterations ensure the final intervention is both practical and appealing for real-world use. Next, this section will conclude to move forward to section 6, the final design showcase.

# Conclusion



What should the intervention look like, how should it work, and what measures will indicate success?

In Section 5, the project transitioned to the synthesis and creation of ideas towards a working prototype and final concept. This section turned the identified leverage point (designing human touchpoints) into a tangible, replicable intervention.

## What is Learned

Developing and testing the “Bridge Building Dialogue” led to important lessons for social design. Experts from IOM and Deep Canvassing showed that it is essential to connect on a human level and validate emotions before sharing facts or system logic. The team also found that abstract statistics are difficult for many people to understand. Instead, sharing data through personal stories, or “Soft Facts,” makes complex issues feel more relatable and human.

Physical rituals, like entering a room in silence or symbolically leaving roles behind, help lower defensiveness and create a safe space for open conversation. Early pilot tests showed clear improvements, especially in emotional resilience and participants’ sense that their opinions matter. However, the full 2.5 to 3-hour intervention is difficult for agencies to implement, so there is a need for shorter or more flexible versions, such as card-only tool-kits.

## How This Advances the Project

This section took the project from a theoretical plan to a working prototype. By combining psychological theory, case studies, and practitioners’ advice, social service designers can use the Bridge Building Dialogue to address toxic polarisation if recommendations are followed.

The project has put the idea of pluralization into practice, showing that design can help different viewpoints coexist without requiring everyone to agree. Testing also showed that the intervention meets the needs of housing organizations and civil servants by connecting institutional goals with residents’ experiences.

## Path Forward

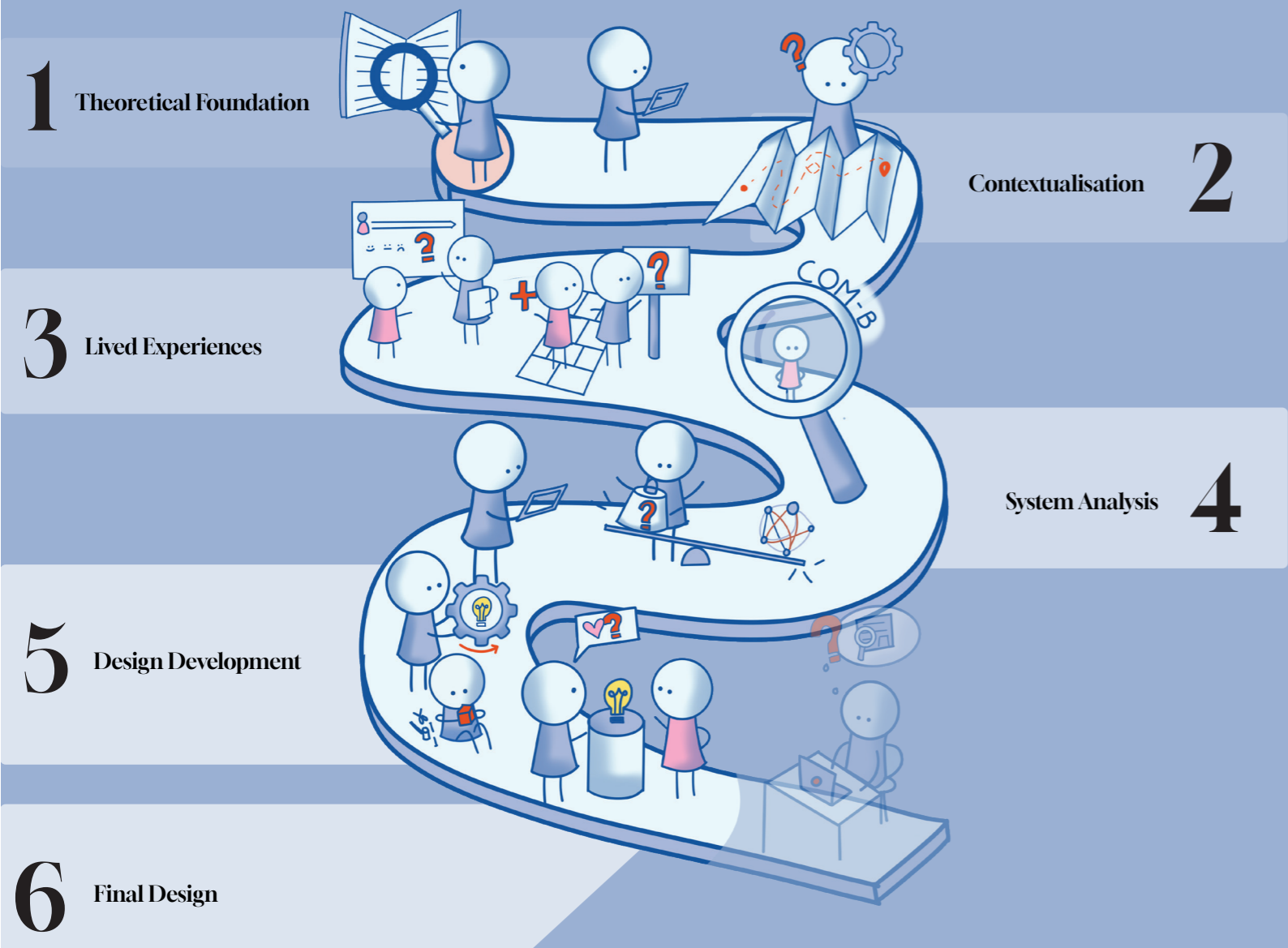
Now that the intervention has been prototyped and its main approach tested, the project is ready for final documentation and review. The next section will present the Final Design Showcase, which explains the finished Bridge Building Dialogue toolkit and its flow. After that, Chapter 22 will cover discussion and recommendations, including cultural challenges and the need for long-term studies to measure the impact of the “Pass the Baton” ritual.

# 6 Final Design

## Chapter 21: The Final Design Showcase: The Bridge Building Dialogue

This section proposes the final intervention, provides an overview of its full flow, and presents the refined physical elements of the toolkit.

The section concludes with a critical evaluation of the Bridge Builder Dialogue. This chapter addresses cultural and political constraints, sampling biases, and outlines the necessary trajectory for long-term implementation and future research.



”

What should the intervention look like, how should it work, and what measures will indicate success?



# Chapter 21

## Final Design Showcase: The Bridge Building Dialogue

The journey from understanding polarisation in theory to creating a tangible intervention has been long. The process began with abstract questions about how design could address toxic polarisation in Utrecht's housing market. The next steps involved mapping the ecosystem, listening to people's stories, identifying leverage points, and testing prototypes. Now, all of that comes together in one concept: the Bridge Building Dialogue.

This chapter explains the final design. It shows what the intervention looks like, how it works, and what is included in the physical toolkit.

### 21.1 What Is the Bridge Building Dialogue?

The Bridge Building Dialogue is a facilitated dialogue designed specifically for the silent middle. These are people who hold nuanced opinions in a polarised setting but feel pressure to pick a side or stay quiet. The tool was originally developed in the context of the housing market, but it has been modified to be applicable to dialogues in many contexts. The housing context is used throughout the intervention as an example (e.g. on the frame cards that will be presented in the physical toolkit presentation, the backside shows how this frame is used in the context of the housing market)

It is a structured process that helps people work through frustration, understand the system, practice sharing complex ideas, and leave with tools they can use in daily life.

The intervention has three core elements:

1. A physical ritual that suspends roles and creates psychological safety
2. Strategic communication tools (soft facts, frames, bridge sentences) that participants practice during the session
3. A legacy mechanism ("pass the baton") that spreads the approach beyond the room

This intervention uniquely helps the silent middle resist pressure to take sides. Usually, conversations end when people leave the room, but here, participants receive cards and a legacy baton to keep talking. Instead of measuring success by whether people change their minds, this approach assesses whether they can maintain their nuanced views even under pressure.

This design works by focusing on a key leverage point from Chapter 15: improving how people interact by creating better human interactions and touch points. When people feel heard, understood, and have the right words, they become more emotionally resilient, can resist polarisation, and start building bridges between polarised groups. These do not remain abstract ideas and ideologies, they are measured before and after the session and, ideally, tracked over time.



Figure 76: The step-by-step flow of the Bridge Building Dialogue.

## 21.2 The Eight-Step Flow

The intervention uses an eight-step process (including the baseline) presented in Figure 76, with each step building on the last. It starts with safety and silence, moves into context and dialogue, and ends with personal action and legacy. This flow is based on the blueprint in Chapter 17, which explains the theory behind each step. The following outlines how the flow works in practice. For the physical elements of the toolkit, refer to 21.3 onwards.

### Step 0: Baseline Measurement

Participants arrive and fill out a quiet individual questionnaire. This helps measure eight system signals identified in the leverage point analysis: emotional resilience, resistance to polarisation pressure, trust in institutions, perceived fairness, acknowledgement of systemic failure, bridge-building propensity, mutual respect, and pressure to compromise ethics.

Besides collecting data, this step gives people a chance to reflect. Most people rarely think about whether they feel safe sharing their views or if they trust the system. This makes those feelings more visible.

### Step 1: Shared Humanity

This step helps people set aside their usual roles, reflect on their place in the situation, and feel safe. Participants write down the roles, labels, and worries they bring with them. For example, in the housing debate, these might be 'starter,' 'urban developer,' or 'worried parent.' Worrying about 'affordable rent,' 'new project ground for the future' and 'a safe place for their children.' They fold up these papers and put them inside hollow conversation batons. This act symbolises leaving behind those daily identities and worries.

### Step 2: Foundation of the Dialogue, creating safety

After a moment of silence, they walk into the dialogue space without speaking. They assemble a physical bridge structure using their conversation batons, each one displaying a conversation rule for a dialogue with constructive dispute.

One side of the bridge has a whiteboard where the group can write their own safety rules. By setting rules together, they take ownership of the dialogue. Examples that were written down during the test sessions are: 'We do not interrupt each other' and 'we respect each other.'

After building the bridge, participants use dot-vote stickers in either green, yellow or red to show where, and how strongly, the polarisation tension is felt in their daily lives on the tension poster. This playful activity helps break the ice and, helps to externalise the pressure. It creates a shared moment of vulnerability recognising the daily struggle of polarisation, and along with the ritual, builds a sense of shared humanity.

### Step 3: Shared Values

The dialogue then shifts to personal experiences and values to shared values. The facilitator starts with a personal and vulnerable example where they experience polarisation tension and what is difficult about that.

Then, together, they explore:

What value underlies the tension visible on the poster? What do people need to let their voices be heard?

The facilitator concludes by asking, "What similarities do we see?" What frustrations or values are shared? Even with different opinions, people often share underlying values and feelings, highlighting our shared humanity.

### Step 4: Tools for Depolarisation

Now participants know where they feel polarisation tension as a group and which values it stems from. This fourth step can vary greatly for the participating group. If the tool is used as a depolarisation dialogue for a specific context, this step will be used as a guided dialogue to explore this tension in that context. In the case of training purpose, these steps will be more general, showing how they can use the tools as handles to navigate polarisation.

The next step is learning how to handle that tension. How can you make conversations less polarised, keep your own views, and still have safe discussions?

#### Part A: Co-Creating Soft Facts (10 minutes)

First, the idea of soft facts is introduced. Facts can feel different depending on how they are shared. Hard, abstract numbers are tough to connect to daily life. When you make them 'soft,' through human stories, they become more real.

The facilitator shows the soft facts template card and asks the group: "What's a statistic you've heard that was hard to understand or made you upset? Was there a number that bothered or confused you?' Together, they use the template to turn it into a soft fact. Then they discuss if this new way of sharing makes a difference and how they might use it in their own conversations.



## Part B: Choosing and Practising Frames (25 minutes)

The facilitator introduces frame cards as tools to open up conversations and help redirect them when needed. In each session, only one frame card is used, chosen by the facilitator based on the group's mood. The facilitator explains the frame and reminds everyone to first acknowledge their partner's frustrations or struggles. Someone then picks a scenario card, reads it out loud, and applies it to a real or imagined situation. The group can use it to reflect on earlier conversations, a made-up scenario, or just talk about what the frame brings up.

Do they recognise the scenario? Could they use this frame in their conversations?

Everyone gets the full set of cards to use at home. Even though they practice with just one, the rest are theirs to try out later.

### Break

A 15-minute pause. People use the bathroom, think, breathe. This is crucial processing time. After emotional and cognitive intensity, the brain needs rest before moving to action.

## Step 5: Personal Values & Individual Action (The Agency)

This step helps each person find their voice. Participants think of their values and current barriers, and develop personal actions.

To facilitate this, bridge sentences from the toolkit get presented. Bridge sentences are simple phrases like:

- "Both things can be true: [X] and [Y]"
- "Maybe we are not on the same page about the solution, but can we agree on the problem?"
- "Can I ask you why you think that?"

Each person picks a bridge sentence that matches how they like to communicate. They talk about why they chose it and how they might use it.

## Step 6: Personal action

Then, everyone chooses one specific action to take in the following week. The goal here is to make the action small, so that participants feel more agency rather than powerlessness when thinking of big actions like: 'Improve the social cohesion in a neighbourhood.'

This is not about group consensus but individual agency putting pluralism in action. Each person leaves with their own strengthened narrative and tools to express it. After some time to think about actions, the facilitator explains that one action has been outlined to make this easier: passing the baton. And invites the group to pick up their own conversation baton with their roles inside, dispose of their roles, and walk to the other room. Their legacy is underscored here: the dialogue does not stop in this room; they are now bridge builders of society.

## Step 7: Reflection & Legacy

This step aims to anchor the transformation. Participants receive the legacy baton, a pass-the-baton card, and a reflection card. They write what they learned and their key takeaway on a reflection card. They choose whether to keep it private or roll it with their pass-the-baton card as a shared package. On the pass-the-baton card, they write who they would like to give it to and the reason. The card triggers a question and conversation during the passing on, as it asks where the other is feeling polarisation tension.

The participants repeat the baseline measurement so the facilitator can compare the before and after. The facilitator emphasises their checking in after two weeks to see if they passed the baton and how it went to motivate action.

This final step activates the Resilience-Expression Loop (Chapter 13) and increases the propensity to build bridges. The baton becomes a symbolic transformation piece, helping the intervention's impact ripple outward.

## Two-Week Follow-Up

In the two-week follow-up, the facilitator contacts participants to ask, "Did you pass the baton? How did it go? How do you feel about the session now?"

This follow-up checks if the changes last after the session. To really see long-term impact, monitoring would need to continue for at least six months, but shaping this is beyond the scope of this project. The two-week check gives early signs whether the intervention is working.

The flow is structured but flexible, so facilitators can change the timing to fit the group. The physical elements, like the bridge, batons, and cards, form tools that make abstract ideas real. The order of steps matters, as each one builds the foundation for the next, moving from safety to context to agency.

For the complete facilitator guide with time stamps and troubleshooting tips, see Appendix P. For the theoretical reasoning behind each step, revisit Chapter 17, though with different numbering.

The next sub-chapter presents the base on which it all lies: the toolkit itself.



## 21.3 Overview Toolkit

This toolkit provides everything needed to facilitate the Bridge Building Dialogue, along with a takeaway package for participants to continue the conversation.

### Facilitator Guides

The package includes step-by-step guidance for facilitators (see Figure 77), including theoretical background, the session goal, and time stamps for every step in a step-by-step breakdown.

This entails Snijboon letting others lead the session, thus scaling up to different contexts and uses. For the full guide, please refer to Appendix P.



Figure 77: Pages of the facilitator guide

## Polarisation Tension Map

In Step 2 of the interaction, a polarisation tension map is used to identify where participants experience polarisation tension in their daily lives, as shown in Figure 78.

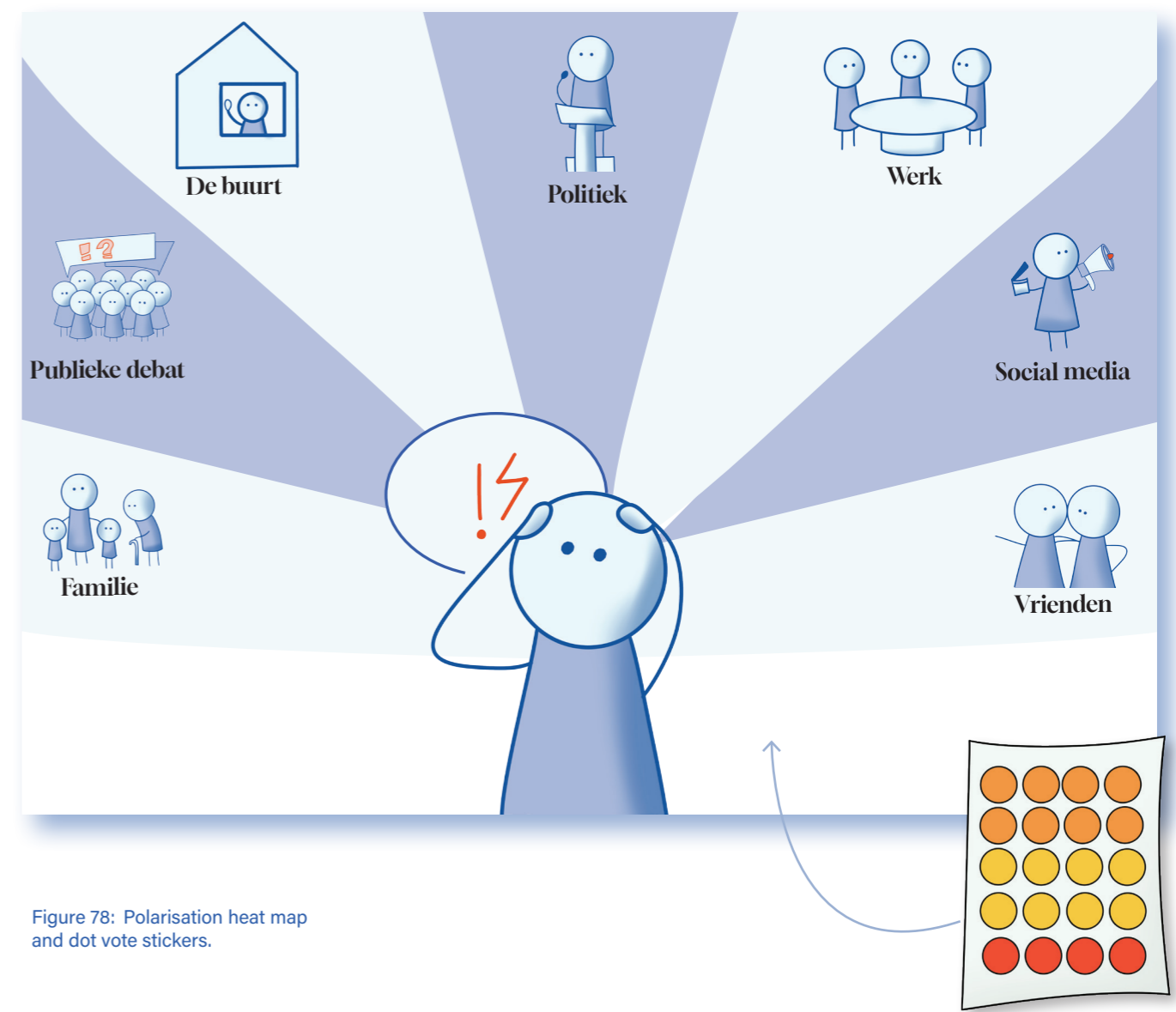


Figure 78: Polarisation heat map and dot vote stickers.



### Baseline measure cards

At the beginning of the interaction, the participants are asked to reflect on different statements. The same questions are asked at the end, which allows the facilitator to measure immediate impact and leaves the participants pondering about the effect this conversation might have had on them. The cards to reflect and measure.

### The Program Poster

A program poster (see Figure 80) shows what the general activities are throughout the intervention. This is for the participants to refer back to what they can expect and where they are in the process.

*Jouw initiaal*

Vul in stilte in.  
Als je een vraag hebt, steek dan je hand op.

**Op een schaal 1 op 10, hoe voel jij je over:**

Mijn mening is belangrijk in dit debat.  
1 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

Ik kan invloed hebben op dit probleem.  
1 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

Het systeem luistert naar mensen zoals ik.  
1 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

Ik kan nee zeggen tegen groepsdruk.  
1 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

Ik voel me veilig om mijn mening te delen, ook als deze niet populair is  
1 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

Ik weet hoe ik mijn mening kan uitleggen aan anderen.  
1 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_ 10

Figure 79: The baseline measure

### Physical Ritual Elements

The central metaphor is a baton—a hollow wooden stick. The interaction starts with the conversation baton and ends with the legacy baton.

See the picture of the wooden bridge with the white board and conversational baton in Figure 81. As mentioned, the bridge represents the dialogue with the conversational rules.

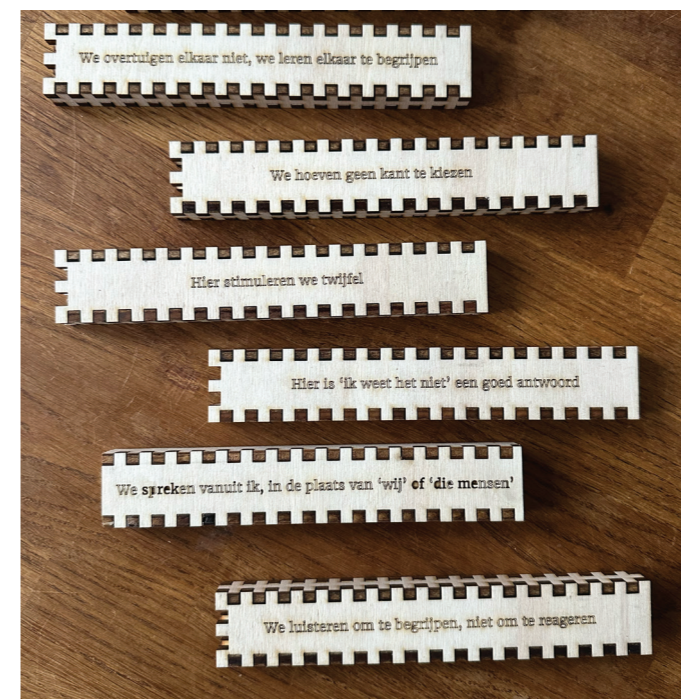
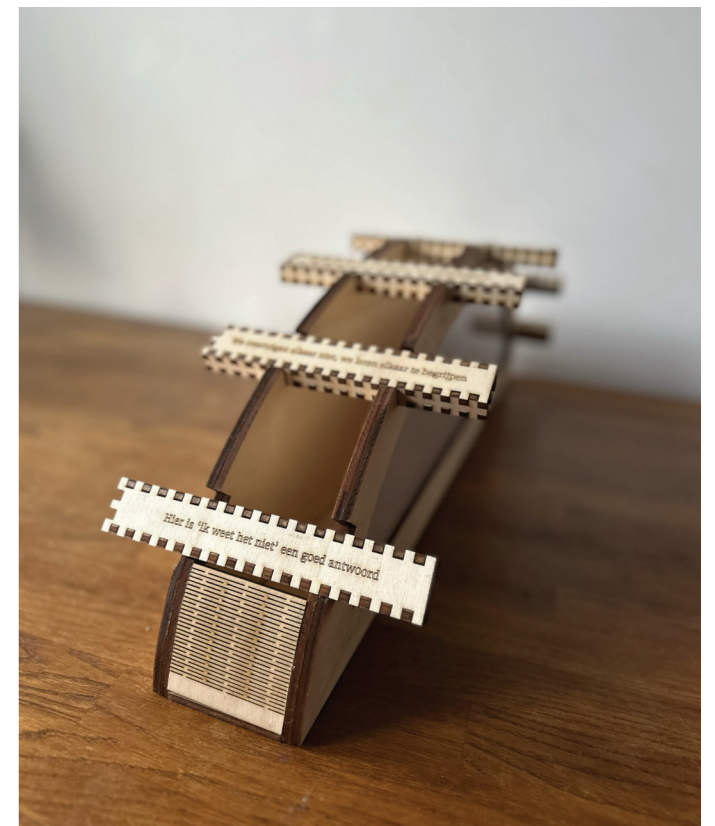
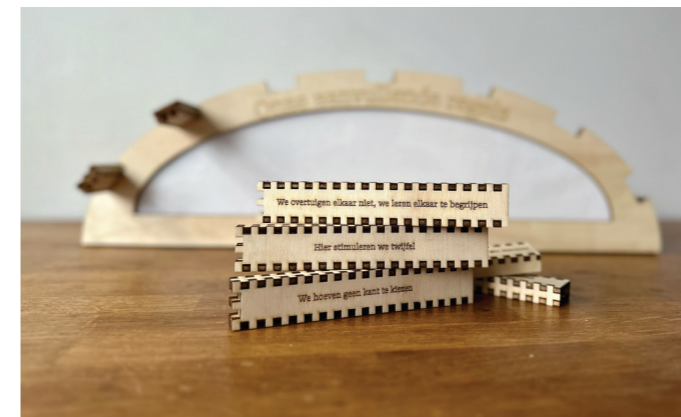
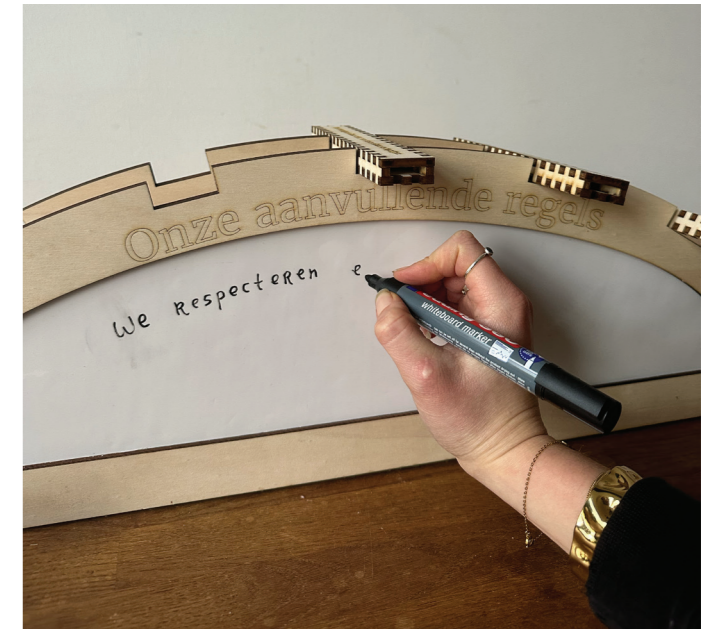


Figure 81: The physical bridge with conversation batons and white board.



Figure 80: The program poster



### The Begin Ritual Card

At the beginning, the “Leaving Your Role Behind” card (presented in Figure 86) helps participants set aside their roles and focus on what they have in common.

### The Pass-the-Baton Card

The pass-the-baton Card (presented in Figure 84) is a tangible legacy that turns dialogue sessions into opportunities for wider change.

The letter invites participants to write to someone in their community, starting with ‘I am passing this baton to you because...’ and encouraging new conversations with the question, ‘Where do you experience the tension between staying true to your own opinion and the pressure to take sides?’ The letter is wrapped around the legacy baton (see Figure 82) and sealed with a ‘Bridge Builder’ sticker (see Figure 83).

### Reflection Card

At the end of the session, participants use a reflection card (presented in Figure 85) to capture what they learned during the dialogue. The card asks them to finish sentences like “I now understand that...” and “My tool for dealing with tension is...”. By writing down what they learned from others and noting one thing they want to change, the card turns a short meeting into a lasting memory. Participants can keep the card for themselves or roll it up with their pass-the-baton card to share as a package.

For facilitation, the Depolarisation Conversation Card deck is also needed. This is presented in the next section, as this is a package the participants take with them at the end of the interaction.



Figure 82: Visual representation of the pass-the-baton baton.



Figure 83: Bridge building sticker



Figure 84: The pass-the-baton card.



Figure 85: The personal reflection card



Figure 86: Leaving your role behind card.



## 21.4 Depolarisation Card deck

### Strategic Frame Cards

Four frame families with sub-cards for tactical deployment. Each frame serves a specific function in navigating polarised discourse. During the intervention, the facilitator chooses which frame to deploy based on group dynamics, dominant values and emotions, and the stage of the conversation. Afterwards, he discusses the other frames, and at the end of the intervention, they receive a little frame package. Apart from the frame example cards presented in subsets, the teach deck includes introduction cards with the general structure, tips, warnings, and a short explanation of why and how it works (see Appendix M for full card decks). On each frame card, the back side includes examples of the housing context for how this frame can be used. The frames are:



Figure 87: Examples cards of the frame 'Shared Struggle.'

### Frame: Gedeelde strijd (Shared Struggle)

This frame (see Figure 87) is used when competition is visible (they get more than we do) and the focus of the conversation is the division of scarce resources. The frame tries to validate both sides, shifts the focus to the system, creates a shared enemy, and breaks the zero-sum thinking. This frame should only be used if the individual pain is validated; you can zoom out.

### Frame: Menselijkheid (Shared Humanity)

This frame (see Figure 88) is used when there is a lot of dehumanising language used in the group. Stereotypes are in place, and groups are defined as abstract categories with which they have a large distance. It tries to break othering, reduce defensiveness, and create empathy and engage emotion in the conversation. Be careful not to say 'we are all the same' if not in place, acknowledge specific experience matters, but unite on unifying themes (being human, for instance)



Figure 88: Examples cards of the frame 'We are all human.'

### Frame: De schurk (The Villain)

This frame (see Figure 90) is used when the group is blaming each other out of powerlessness, and there is a system dysfunction. It works as it creates a shared enemy, shifts from individual to structural blame and returns agency.



Figure 89: Examples cards of the frame 'The Villain.'

### Frame: Alles verandert (Everything Flows)

This frame (see Figure 91) is best used when there are strong nostalgic feelings in the group, a fear of change, and a sense that everything is going too fast. It works because it aims to normalise change, depersonalise the conflict, and provide direction toward adaptation.



Figure 90: Examples cards of the frame 'Everything Changes.'

## Bridge Building Cards

Bridge sentences (see Figure 91) are conversational tools designed for individual deployment in polarised everyday conversations: family dinners, work meetings, or online discussions. Unlike strategic frames, these cards provide simple, everyday sentences. Each participant receives seven bridge cards (see Appendix M for all cards). The cards, again, on the backside include example scenarios gained from my research in the housing context.

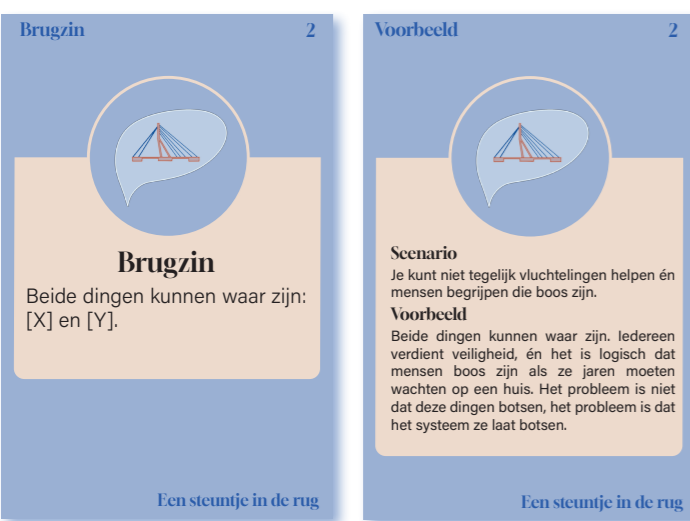


Figure 91: Example of a bridge building card.

## Soft Fact Templates

Soft facts help in a polarised conversation. The silent middle likes the contextualisation, and helps them to keep their nuanced opinion. Therefore, the last element of the support pack is a small template for creating soft facts (Figure 92).



Figure 92: Soft Facts help cards.

## 21.5 Application contexts

The Bridge-Building Dialogue is designed for the following contexts for Snijboon to use. Critically, the actionable recommendations need to be applied first before the product can be rolled out in this context. But this suggests how it can be used.

**Focus Groups:** This method is used in focus group sessions within a polarised context.

**Public Participation:** It can be used in neighbourhood meetings (gebiedstafels), citizen councils, and projects involving sensitive issues such as AZC placements.

**Organisational Training:** The method is useful for civil servant training on bias awareness and for team sessions that address tensions within organisations.

**Policy and Strategy:** It helps with long-term projects where it's important to raise early tensions, and in sessions that shape housing policy, such as Nota Wonen.

**Inter-Organisational Dialogue or Stakeholder Meetings:** The approach supports coordination meetings among groups such as municipalities, housing corporations, and care organisations.

**Everyday Conversations:** Participants get a set of cards to help them use these dialogue techniques at family dinners, work meetings, or in online discussions.

**Tools for practitioners** when they feel stuck in conversation, or know that they are likely to encounter a polarisation context.

## Moving Forward

The Bridge Building Dialogue is now fully documented, covering everything from its core ideas to its practical toolkit, as well as facilitator guidance and real-world uses. It offers a complete approach that social service designers can use to help the silent middles capacity to resist polarisation.

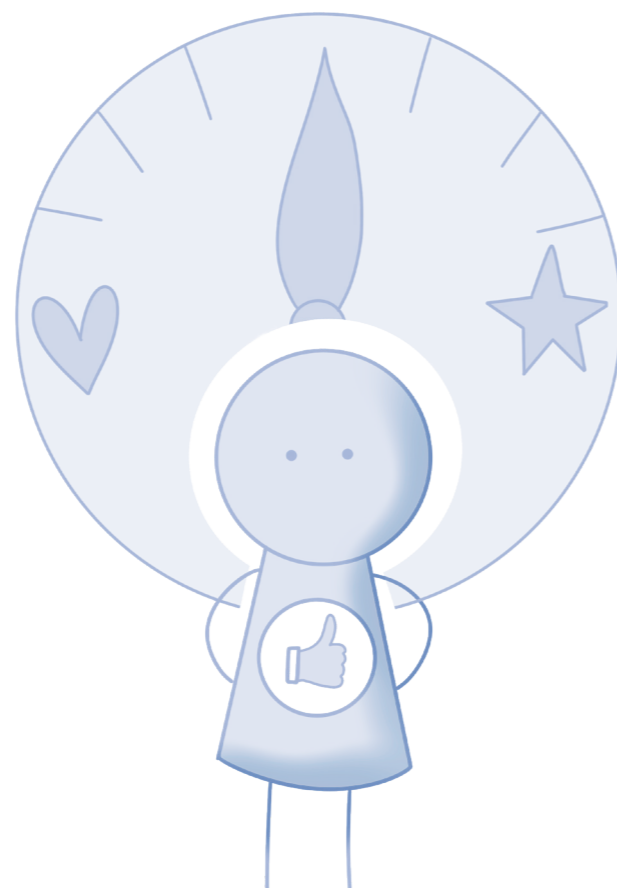
However, every design has its limits, assumptions, and ideal conditions. To move this intervention and the wider field of design-led depolarisation work forward, the design needs to be examined critically in terms of what this project achieved, what it could not cover, and what questions remain for future research.

The next chapter offers this critical reflection. Serves two audiences: practitioners who might adapt this intervention to their contexts, and researchers who build on this work to expand design's role in addressing societal polarisation.



# Chapter 22

## Discussion and Recommendations



Having presented the final design in detail, there are some limitations that need to be addressed. This chapter reflects critically on the Bridge Building Dialogue intervention, it evaluates its contributions, limitations, and provides recommendations for future implementation and research. Rather than weakening the project, this transparency strengthens its value as a foundation for future design-led depolarisation work.

The recommendations in this chapter zoom in on the research areas that can further this project. The ones tailored to the concept specifically are outlined in Chapter 20.

### 22.1 Successes

This project demonstrates that design can meaningfully engage with polarisation not by simplifying conflict, but by creating space for nuance, and shared humanity. The project succeeded in translating depolarisation theory into a real-life promising intervention.

User pilots and expert feedback consistently confirmed the tool's strengths: its ability to foster psychological safety, and its potential to activate the silent middle as a bridging force in polarised debates. At the same time, several methodological, cultural, and practical constraints limit the certainty of long-term impacts. These constraints offer valuable learning opportunities rather than fundamental flaws and are outlined next.

### 22.2 Method Limitations

#### Assumption-based modelling

The COM-B behavioural model and leverage point analysis relied on qualitative data and interpretative synthesis. Therefore, the proposed causal relationships between intervention activities, behavioural changes and systemic outcomes remain hypothetical, not empirically shown. While this limits statistical certainty, it is also consistent with early-stage design research, where models function as strategic tools and not as predictive instruments. The strength of the utilised approach lies in its ability to guide intentional design decisions and shine light on exploitable leverage points, even when quantitative validation is not yet available.

The effectiveness of the Bridge Building Dialogue is grounded in theoretical research. It would therefore be amiss to describe the project as ungrounded. Nevertheless, it would be extremely valuable if the effectiveness of this project would be proven quantitatively as well. Future iterations could strengthen this project by combining qualitative insights with quantitative behavioural measures or longitudinal studies.

#### Measurement Validity

The eight system signals were only measured immediately after the intervention, relying on self-reported data. Self-reported baseline measures are susceptible to social desirability bias which makes it more difficult to predict the project effect's durability over time. Immediate post-session measurement does, however, offer insight into perceived impact and participant experience, which is also crucial in early-stage intervention design.

Future research should introduce longitudinal check-ups. Combining self-report surveys with objective measurements such as times participated in public discussions or amount of bridge sentences used, perhaps tracked by the participant in a depolarisation journal.



## Context Specificity

The stakeholder map, leverage points, and system dynamics reflect Utrecht's ecosystem, while participants came from and testing was also done outside of Utrecht. For example, one street intervention took place outside Utrecht in The Hague. This creates a partial mismatch between the theoretical model and testing. While this weakens context alignment, it also suggests that the intervention may already have possessed a degree of contextual flexibility, which is only further enhanced and now one of the key strengths of this project: its multi-purpose design.

Nevertheless, could future research focus on identifying possible unintended effects of this slight contextual mismatch by either fully aligning system mapping and participant context before testing or by explicitly testing the intervention across multiple local ecosystems, comparing how it shifts between contexts.

## 22.3 Cultural and Political Constraints

### Sampling Bias

Most Context Mapping participants were highly educated and left leaning, limiting generalisability of the findings. While street interventions introduced broader perspectives, pilot testing still relied mostly on this initial participant profile. Experts found that some strategic frames may unintentionally be "classic left-wing", and the "Everything Changes" frame could potentially be alienating for participants who prioritise stability or continuity. Which risks only engaging those who already agree.

This critique does not negate the intervention's value. It highlights the sensitivity of framing in polarised context. The intervention's structure proved adept at empowering nuance, but its frames require further calibration. Moreover, this highlights the value of the extensive testing done in this project, which brought concerns like these to light. Future work should continue this route by iterating and testing again and again

with as many stakeholders as possible, taking care to include participants from across the political spectrum. Only then will we be able to cut our own biases and context out of a design.

### Language and Culture Barriers

The intervention was designed and tested mainly with Dutch, highly educated, left-leaning participants who share specific communication styles. These styles may not translate easily across cultures, so cultural adaptation may be necessary. Although the card decks were written at B1-level Dutch, during testing surfaced that the conversation during the intervention required strong language skills. Participants with limited language ability may struggle to keep up. Facilitators should be aware of this and be alert and offer additional information to keep everyone engaged.

Besides, norms around 'vocal safety', silence, and directness can differ widely across cultures, and Dutch communicative norms may not always translate perfectly to other contexts. Creating multiple versions of the Bridge Building Dialogue, maybe including non-verbal components or alternative facilitation styles, would increase accessibility. Testing the role of indirect expression in high-context cultures represents a promising research direction to widen the applicability of this project even further.

### 22.3 Long-Term Change

The intervention hypothesizes that strengthening the silent middles' capacity to resist polarisation (C7) and maintain nuanced positions (B2) will reduce overall polarisation (O1) and increase mutual trust (O3) in Utrecht's housing debate. However, this causal chain requires long-term validation. Key uncertainties remain: Does one 2.5-hour session create lasting change, or is repetition required? Afterward, do participants use bridge sentences, or do they revert under social pressure? Does baton-passing effectively spread depolarisation skills, or does enthusiasm fade after two weeks?

These questions require longitudinal studies tracking participants over 6-12 months, measuring not just self-reported attitudes but observed behaviours: participation in public forums (B1), expression of nuanced opinions (B2), and bridge-building actions (O6). Which are not done in this thesis, leaving the conclusion on the intervention's effectiveness still tentative.

## 22.4 Implement Readiness

User pilots and expert feedback confirm the intervention's value and empowering impact. The tool is robust and has sparked interest in further testing. Experts are eager for pilots, and participants highlighted that they want it expanded to schools, their workplace, and families. Unfortunately, the intervention is not yet ready for widespread roll-out. The top priority is to develop a modular toolkit and a refined facilitator package to ensure reliability and scalability, while addressing the complexity, preparation, and recruitment challenges. The intervention is intended for real-world pilots, prioritizing feedback, testing with more politically diverse and cross-cultural groups, and tailoring the tool for different settings. Once refined, the intervention will be a valuable asset for Snijboon, helping housing organisations address polarisation, enable collaboration, and strengthen Snijboon's role in facilitating depolarisation dialogue. Further focused development is needed for deployment, but the foundation and demand are strong.

## 22.5 Questions for Further Research

- As this discussion demonstrates, this project lays the groundwork for various further research opportunities:
- How do ritual, silence, and role suspension differ in collectivist and individualist cultures?
- How can the intervention be adapted for high-context cultures where direct confrontation is avoided?

- Do strategic frames need cultural adaptation?
- How does the Bridge Building Dialogue compare to other depolarisation approaches, such as Deep Canvassing, and how do they reinforce each other?
- How does the tool work in different contexts?
- Investigate how design professionals contribute to depolarisation work, but what are facilitator skills matter most for intervention success?
- How can design education prepare students for depolarisation facilitation?
- Does the Bridge Building Dialogue improve public participation in housing policy development?
- Can design interventions shift policy discourse from a zero-sum to a collaborative problem-solving approach?
- What conditions enable or constrain designed depolarisation work?

## Moving Forward

With the intervention's limitations, future trajectory, and contribution to social design clearly articulated, the thesis next concludes on whether the design challenge as defined has been meaningfully addressed.

The final section, Section 6: Reflection, offers a step back to assess the project's broader contribution to social design and provides a personal account of my individual growth and the lessons learned throughout this graduation process.

# Conclusion

” What is the final design, how does it work, and how does it show success?

First, this section concludes. Then, the thesis will conclude by addressing the set design challenge.

## **What is learned?**

The final design showcase and critical discussion revealed several key insights. Success in a polarised context is not about changing minds, but about increasing the ability to maintain and express nuance under social pressure. Symbolic actions, such as placing written roles into a hollow baton or building a wooden bridge, help create a safe space that suspends social hierarchies and fosters vocal safety. The critical reflection revealed a sampling bias toward highly educated, left-leaning participants, so the design's effectiveness with conservative or culturally diverse groups needs further testing.

## **What does It Solve?**

Currently, Utrecht's housing market is in a toxic state of polarisation, with active scapegoating and dehumanising language. Lack of clear information and control, along with zero-sum scarcity, leads to frustration and an us-versus-them attitude. Public debates focus on the loudest voices, leaving the silent middle group feeling pressure to remain nuanced.

The Bridge Building Dialogue helps people interact better to rebuild trust and understanding in the housing discussion. It focuses on three main problems. First, it recognises people's personal struggles and ensures they feel seen by the system before asking them to understand others. Second, it shifts blame for frustrations from individuals to broader issues, such as construction delays or unclear policies. Third, it encourages the silent middle to speak up by giving them the language and confidence to share their complex views without fear of social consequences.

## **Path Forward**

The next page will conclude the thesis. It will address the design challenge and determine whether the design requirements are met. Afterwards, the final section offers a reflection on the project's contribution, the role of design in the depolarisation movement, and my personal reflections as a designer along this journey.

# Conclusion of Thesis

## Did the project tackle the Design Challenge?

### Design Challenge

Design a facilitated shared human experience for Utrecht's silent middle to strengthen their capacity to resist polarisation by validating frustrations, building understanding, unpacking systemic drivers, and sustaining nuance beyond the intervention.

This thesis began with a challenge: How can social designers co-create a space or experience for Utrecht's polarised citizens that fosters constructive interaction and mutual understanding among individuals with diverse perspectives?

By investigating theory, mapping the context, and researching real experiences, the challenge was refined. The new focus became designing a shared experience for Utrecht's silent middle, helping them resist polarisation by validating frustrations, building understanding, exploring deeper causes, and keeping nuance alive after the intervention.

The Bridge Building Dialogue successfully co-creates a facilitated, shared human experience for Utrecht's polarised citizens, fostering constructive interaction and mutual understanding. It does so not by forcing consensus or bringing opposing poles into direct dialogue, but by strengthening the silent middle's capacity to resist polarisation, maintain nuanced positions, and spread bridge-building skills through their networks. The intervention demonstrates measurable impact through system signals and provides social service designers with a replicable, evidence-based framework for addressing polarisation at the human touchpoint—the highest-leverage intervention accessible to design practice. The Bridge Building Dialogue prioritises the emotional "Affective Gap" over ideological agreement.

While the Bridge Building Dialogue cannot solve Utrecht's housing crisis, build homes, or change policies, it helps reduce the social impact of the crisis.

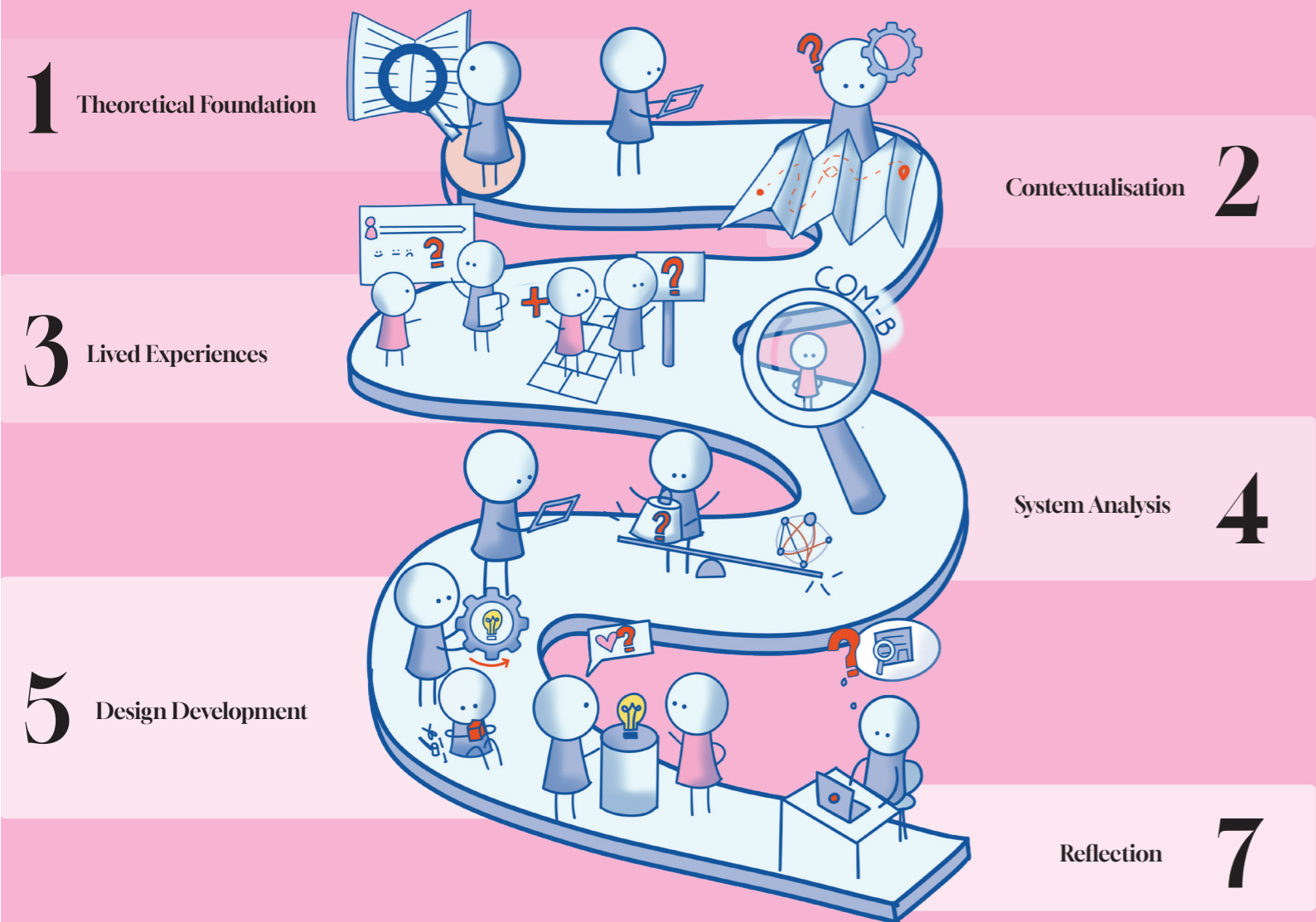
This thesis shows that design can help address polarisation when designers focus on interactions, such as human touch points and dialogue, rather than on changing policy or addressing scarcity.

It shows that intervention based in research from psychology, sociology, and politics to understand polarisation before creating solutions is a successful approach. This is validated by real users and experts during pilot testing. This project does not replace larger structural changes, rather it supports it by having found a place where a small change can make a big difference and having focussed on that.

# 7 Reflection

Chapter 23: Project Reflection  
Chapter 24: Personal Reflection

This final section offers a reflection on both the project's systemic outcomes and the designer's personal journey. It explores the broader impact of a social service design approach on depolarisation, as well as the combination of Snijboon's pragmatic way of working with a more analytical and academic approach.



“ Did the project succeed, and how do I personally feel about the project process?”



# Chapter 23

## Project Reflection



This chapter looks back at the project as a whole, covering what was accomplished, where challenges came up, and how this work adds to academic knowledge and practical use in social service design.

This project reflection explores what design can and cannot achieve in divided settings, and what this particular intervention offers. It reviews the scope, limits, and lessons that future practitioners can apply when working at the intersection of design and polarisation.

### 23.1 Design's Role in Depolarisation

Throughout this project, I was working with the challenge of how design works in a more sociological context: can design actually address polarisation, or are we overstepping our boundaries?

Apart from that, Design cannot build houses, change housing policy, or solve scarcity. These are economic, political, and structural issues that go beyond what design can do.

Design cannot build houses. It cannot change housing policy or eliminate scarcity. However, design can influence how people experience scarcity. It can help people process frustration in a healthy way rather than blaming others, and provide tools for dealing with the daily realities of polarisation.

The Bridge Building Dialogue does not solve the housing crisis. What it does is make the social toll of that crisis more bearable. It gives people who feel caught between extremes a place to stand, and language for nuance in a public debate that often permits only certainty.

Design's role in depolarisation is to create conditions for coexistence despite conflict—working at the interaction level through rituals, artefacts, and experience sequences that make abstract principles tangible and navigable.

## 23.2 Core Contributions

### Making Polarisation Designable Through Systems Thinking

Polarisation often feels too large or political for design agencies to address. This project demonstrates intervention is possible by operationalising Meadows' (1997) leverage point theory: translating qualitative fieldwork into COM-B mapping, then using network centrality analysis to identify high-leverage intervention points.

The methodology (Chapter 15) is documented for replication, making systems thinking actionable. This clarifies where designers can meaningfully intervene (human touchpoints) and where they cannot (housing scarcity itself), preventing overpromising while empowering concrete contributions.

### A Replicable Framework for Depolarisation Design

Most depolarisation work is political, communicative, or psychological. Few approaches employ design directly as a depolarisation tool. This project addresses a gap identified by Gessler & Sharp (2026) and Wigger et al. (2027) by showing how design intervenes through complementary layers: ritual design for psychological safety, artefact design for independent use, and experience design to sequence emotional, cognitive, and relational work.

The intervention blueprint (Chapter 17) is transferable across different polarisation contexts—e.g. climate, education, and healthcare—by adapting the content while maintaining the core structure: validation, contextualisation through dialogue, and action.

### Designing for Pluralisation, Not Consensus

Intuition often brings us naturally to think that consensus is the desired outcome. This project challenges that assumption. In polarised contexts, forcing consensus can erase legitimate differences and silence marginal voices.

The intervention pursues pluralisation: creating conditions where multiple truths coexist with mutual respect. Participants leave with their opinions intact, not a shared conclusion. This validates Kulundu's (2018) concept of intersectional resonance in practice—participants repeatedly expressed relief at holding both “everyone deserves housing” and “I’m frustrated by the waiting list” without being forced to reconcile them.

This contribution gives social designers permission to design for coexistence rather than agreement, expanding the toolkit for addressing wicked problems.

### Understanding and Activating the Silent Middle

The silent middle is recognised in political science (IOM, 2023; Siev et al., 2024), but remains under explored in the design literature. This project contributes empirical evidence of their presence in Utrecht's housing debate and characterises their needs: validation before information, tools for nuance, and permission to hold ambivalence.

Finding that ambivalent positions are socially costly—nuance feels unsafe—has clear design implications. The Bridge Building Dialogue demonstrates how to create protected spaces where ambivalence is normalised, offering strategies for activating the silent middle as bridge builders.

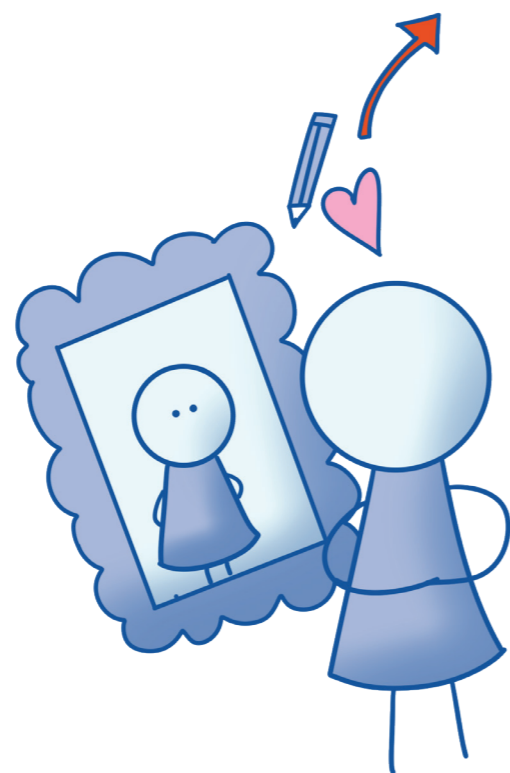
## Moving Forward

Having evaluated the project itself, the next chapter I will evaluate myself in the project and which key takeaways I can pass on.



# Chapter 24

## Personal Reflection



This project has been a learning journey for me as a designer. It has challenged me in ways I didn't anticipate when started.

In this chapter I share some personal learnings, and few takeaways that might come handy for students who graduate from my master or within the same context. It reflects on the journey: what I learned about design, about polarisation, and about myself.

### 24.1 Take-aways

In the next sections, I'll talk about what I learned personally as I designer doing this project, and share a few takeaways that might help students working on similar topics or doing a graduation project in general.

#### When writing, be the reader

I think the biggest challenge during this project was writing up what I had done academically. Having both dyslexia and dysorthography, I already knew this at the beginning. As I was trying my best to state everything I was doing academically and to the point, I forgot to write for the reader. The story's flow was missing, which I could tell during presentations. I learned that when writing, it is very useful to have small proofreads with peers to see if they can see the flow.

Pay attention to what helps readers follow your text and where they get stuck. Don't just show what you did, but explain why you did it and how it moved the project forward. Did I do this perfectly? No. But I did get better at it as the project went on.

### Challenge your instinct

This project was all about balancing my design instincts with questioning them. I had to combine the intuitive way of working at Snijboon with the more structured, analytical approach I learned at TU Delft.

When I felt strongly about something, I learned to ask myself, "Why do I believe this? What evidence supports it? What would prove me wrong?"

This is where using a mix of methods helped. My intuition gave me ideas, and research either backed them up or challenged them. I found that the best designs happened when my gut feeling and the evidence matched. For example, the bridge ritual felt right to me and was also supported by theory on role suspension and threshold spaces.

Takeaway for future students: Your design instincts matter—you've spent years building them. But for complex projects, always check your instincts with a test. Ask yourself, "How would I know if this is right or wrong?" and then try it out.

## Draw the path before you start running **Go out and ask**

I am someone who likes to work hard. When I see a goal on the horizon, my instinct is to chase it immediately. However, this often happens without a clear plan; I start before fully preparing.

This project taught me to stop and plan before jumping in. Building a theoretical foundation before choosing a context helped me avoid mistakes, such as thinking that simply bringing people together would create social cohesion. When I got to the design phase, ideas came easily because I had a strong base. I was designing based on evidence, not just assumptions.

Takeaway for future students: Resist the urge to jump to solutions. Spend time really understanding the problem first. This will help you avoid designs that don't work or even make things worse. Draw your path. Then run.

### Know when to stop running

I also learned when it's time to stop, which connects to my previous point.

There were many times in this project when I wanted to keep going. After the first pilot test, I wanted to do five more with different groups. After finishing the full version of the intervention, I wanted to make a light version, a digital version, a youth version, and more.

But at some point, you have to stop designing and start writing things down. If you don't, you run out of time to document your work, and your insights can get lost. This was tough for me because I wanted everything to be perfect. But I learned that finishing and sharing your work is often better than holding out for perfection.

Key takeaway for future students: Set clear points in your project when you stop designing and start documenting.

One of the biggest things I learned was the value of just asking. Almost everyone I reached out to responded positively. Stakeholders gave their time, experts were excited about the intervention, and participants volunteered hours for pilot testing.

This taught me that design research benefits from reaching out. People working on complex problems often welcome deep questions and want to share their expertise.

Takeaway for future students: Email the people you think could help your project. Be clear about what you need, how much time it will take, and why you value their expertise. You'll be surprised by how many people say yes.

## A Final Thought

Altogether, I fully enjoyed this project and never would have thought that, at the end of this long project, I would be sincerely sad that it has finished. I was intrigued by the intricate landscape of the research's sociological, political, and social aspects, and by how the things I created could be used in my daily life as well.

For example, one side of my family is very set in their views. Our conversations usually last less than 10 minutes, but when I used the bridge sentences, we had a much deeper conversation than usual.

When I started this project, I wanted to solve polarisation. I imagined designing something transformative that would bring divided people together and create lasting harmony.

I didn't solve polarisation. The housing crisis continues. The public debate is still heated. Status holders are still scapegoated.

But I did create something: a small intervention that helps some people handle these issues a bit better. It's a toolkit that lets the silent middle stay nuanced, and a ritual that reminds people they can disagree without losing respect for each other.

It's not the big solution I imagined. But maybe it's a more honest one.

Polarisation isn't solved in 100 days by one designer. It gets better slowly, through many small steps in different places. This project is just one small step of that bigger effort.

I'm ready to pass the baton, and I hope you will be too.

*Caro* 

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# Appendices

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# Appendix A

## Acknowledgement of A.I.

I acknowledge the use of several AI-assisted tools in the preparation of this thesis, used in a limited and transparent manner.

I acknowledge the use of Grammarly (<https://grammarly.com>) throughout the writing process to help with clarity, spelling, grammar, and fluency. As writing and spelling are not my strongest suit, having both dyslexia and dysorthography, I used Grammarly as a proofreading and refinement tool. I critically reviewed all its suggestions and took responsibility for the final wording, structure, and content.

I also acknowledge the use of Claude (<https://claude.ai>) to help create an initial outline and framework for sections of the text, aiming to improve overall structure and flow. The generated outlines were used only in the early planning stages. I selectively adapted, modified, or discarded suggestions based on my own research, analysis, and academic judgement.

Finally, I acknowledge the use of NotebookLM (<https://notebooklm.google.com>) to help find and retrieve key quotes from large amounts of interview and test transcription data. This tool helped me organise and navigate the source material, but I made all selections, interpretations, and analytical decisions myself.



# Appendix B

## Literature Review

This Appendix presents the systematic literature.

## Understanding Polarisation and the Role of Design to Depolarise: A Critical Exploration of Mechanisms, Consequences, and the Paradoxical Challenge of Interventions

### Abstract

We live in an increasingly polarised world marked by a persistent 'us versus them' dynamic. This literature review examines the complexity of polarisation, its definitions, underlying mechanisms, societal and individual impacts, and proposes potential strategies for depolarisation.

The analysis indicates that polarisation is sustained by the interplay between psychological needs for group belonging and identity, social dynamics such as homophily and attitude-behaviour gaps, and the role of social media in disseminating divisive content. The consequences include the undermining of democratic processes, a contraction of the middle groups, and an increase in cultural homogenisation.

Despite numerous initiatives aimed at countering polarisation, this review highlights the paradoxical outcomes of many interventions. Dialogue, for instance, is frequently regarded as a solution; yet, it may at times reinforce positions through the social costs of ambivalence and group polarisation effects, particularly in polarised contexts. Effective depolarisation appears to require carefully designed and comprehensive strategies. Some proposed strategies include fostering climates of trust, focusing on shared values, altering network structures, and engaging the 'silent middle.' Literature suggests that depolarisation does not necessarily require consensus, but rather involves managing 'multiple truths' and recognising the legitimacy of differing viewpoints. The complexity of polarisation thus appears to require a holistic, patient, and adaptive approach that extends beyond simplistic solutions.

### 1. Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Polarisation is an umbrella term, used in many ways. This review begins by providing a definition of the term, examining the roots of the process, models that attempt to predict polarisation, and establishing a connection to how design can contribute to this. The central analytic lens for this review is the rootedness of othering in our polarised world. In contemporary contexts, this is increasingly mediated by technical objects that structure how people interact with and categorise one another.

#### 1.1 Definitions of Polarisation and Othering

Throughout literature, multiple definitions of polarisation are given. At its core, polarisation is a process of 'othering', where the 'us-versus-them' dynamic is central to social and political life (Brandsma, 2016; Cassam, 2020; De Haan, 2023; Kolikant & Wegerif, 2025). Othering is the process where a group defines another group as different and often inferior. (Canales, 2000). An individual is primed to experience fear caused by the perceived absence of information. Since there is less information available about 'the others', we naturally reject them. (Carleton, 2016). It is a foundational social and political movement that constructs identities and social realities by emphasising differences and assigning inferiority.

In concrete terms, polarisation can be defined as the increasing conceptual or ideological distance between the positions of individuals and those of perceived 'others' (Cassam, 2020; Enders & Armaly, 2018). This conceptual distance is closely linked to power dynamics and perceived diversity within society (De Haan, 2023). As this distance grows, society tends to shift toward extremes, often resulting in a shrinking middle class (Koch et al., 2023). When polarisation intensifies to the point where opposing groups begin to dehumanise each other, this stage is referred to as 'toxic' polarisation.

Research distinguishes between key forms of polarisation. Attitudinal (or ideological) polarisation refers specifically to the divergence and intensification of beliefs and opinions, resulting in increasingly extreme viewpoints (Axelrod et al., 2021; Barbeito Thonon, 2025; Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021; Overgaard et al., 2021; Van Bavel et al., 2021). In contrast, affective polarisation describes the growing mistrust or hostility directed toward members of an opposing group, regardless of differing policy preferences. In affective polarisation, people dislike or distrust 'the other side' primarily due to group identity. Political polarisation is defined as the situation where society is split between officials and citizens, with a lack of productive communication between them (Cassam, 2020).



Some scholars define polarisation by its causes. Koch et al. (2023) distinguish between elite-based polarisation, where wealthy groups dominate at the expense of the middle class, and poverty-based polarisation, where working-class groups claim the city. These definitions explain mechanisms of division but add little to a general definition. Mohyeddin (2024) notes that the homogenisation of cultures and religions under globalisation is another form of polarisation, where local identities are pressured, and group divisions increase.

### 1.2 Rooting of Polarisation

Polarisation is a process of 'Othering' that leads to an 'us-versus-them dynamic'. This is central to both social and political life. Ancient philosophers and historians frequently discussed how groups form identities by distinguishing between the 'self' and the 'other' (Cartledge, 1993; Marangudakis, 2019; Panopoulos, 2003). For example, in ancient Greek city-states, referring to someone as a 'citizen' (an 'us') automatically defined non-citizens as 'them', with different rights and obligations (Cartledge, 1993). It became dangerous for an individual not to join the 'us', since those who did not belong were abandoned by the city and sent away to 'the others' (Marangudakis, 2019).

From an evolutionary standpoint, belonging to a group offered advantages. Staying accepted within one's group was crucial because outsiders were often seen as threats. People tend to feel that they lack information about those they do not know directly (Carleton, 2016). This makes us resist or fear those outside our group and view the unfamiliar with suspicion.

The concept of Othering comes from philosophical and theoretical traditions (Velho & Thomas-Olalde, 2016). These traditions stress that identity is socially constructed through power distinctions between "us" and "them." Lacan's (1977) psychoanalytic ideas say a person's sense of self depends on how 'others' see and reflect them. Althusser (1971) introduces the concept of interpellation, illustrating how people are called by ideology to assume specific subject positions, thereby shaping their identities. Identity is mainly formed in the gaze of those with power. So, people's selfhood depends on how they are seen by 'others', which makes their sense of self both dependent and perhaps illusory. Jensen (2011) notes that philosopher Hegel's master-slave dialectic shows that self-consciousness arises only in relation to the other. According to Jensen (2011), the philosopher Beauvoir, in 1977, expanded on this, arguing that the otherness of women was a result of men being seen as the norm. This means women's identity is shaped by how men see and define them. The roots of polarisation and Othering also appear in the rise of the 'rich west'. The 'Orient' was created as the opposite of the Occident (the West), helping the West define its own identity and self-image (Said, 2003). In other words, the West constructed an 'other' as irrational and inferior, which helped justify imperial power. Together, these traditions show that Othering is a process constructed by society and embedded in power structures.

### 1.3 Polarisation as a process

Polarisation is a dynamic process. Groups increasingly align along a single dimension, erasing cross-cutting differences (Cassam, 2020; Patkós, 2024). It differs from conflict, which has clear opponents and issues, as polarisation compels side-taking even without direct involvement. The core problem becomes the constructed "us-them" division—the process of Othering—, not the original issue. Accordingly, Brandsma (2016) identified three main characteristics.

Firstly, polarisation is constructed in our minds. According to Brandsma (2016), these mental constructs are temporary and do not reflect reality. As a result, our perceived polarisation is often greater than the actual polarisation. These constructs produce two identities, each firmly convinced of its own reality. Our natural belief formation, grounded in normative conceptions, then leads us to choose a group as a rational decision (Lindell et al., 2016). In this way, polarisation becomes an identity creator (Brandsma, 2016)—something we humans actively seek.

Secondly, polarisation appeals to our gut feeling. Once society has reached a certain level of polarisation, even carefully chosen words and arguments fail to reach the rational mind and instead affect emotions. This leads to the third characteristic: polarisation needs fuel and feeds itself. It is fuelled by the positive and negative attention generated in discussions, conversations, and information flow.

### 1.4 Theoretical Models of Polarisation

#### The ARM Model and Tolerance Dynamics

Axelrod et al. (2021) propose the Assimilation-Repulsion Model (ARM), a mathematical model based on tolerance and exposure. The ARM model states that interacting with similar people attracts, while interacting with dissimilar people increases differences. High tolerance in interactions reduces polarisation. Low tolerance even leads similar people to grow apart. A somewhat simplistic view that aligns with conventional knowledge (De Marchi, 2022), but a good starting

point for understanding that maintaining this dynamic leaves us in a downward spiral toward deeper polarisation. Growing the us-them dynamic, as we grow more and more intolerant of 'the others'.

#### The Friedkin-Johnsen Framework

The Friedkin-Johnsen model (FJ Model) explains how individual opinions change in response to the influence of others. The mathematical model states that two factors shape opinions: one's original view (shaped by prejudice and obstinacy) and the views of one's social network. Final opinions are a weighted middle of these two (Biondi et al., 2023). Disarò & Valcher (2024) found opinions are dynamic—not limited to a fixed social network. Social media makes these influences constantly change. The updated model includes homophily, the tendency for people to seek out those who are similar to themselves, and prejudice, with self-influence as the strongest factor. This dual nature means that interactions can foster greater understanding and inclusivity, but can also reinforce divisions and negative biases. The standardised model demonstrates a high degree of accuracy in its prediction of local depolarisation, where there is a direct connection between individuals. In such cases, depolarisation is observed to decrease almost invariably (Biondi et al., 2023). At a global level, the phenomenon functions in a distinct manner. Individuals who share similar perspectives tend to congregate and become isolated from those who hold divergent views.

The enhanced FJ model incorporates this by demonstrating that our social networks are not static, and the influence exerted by individuals on one another is subject to change over time (Disarò & Valcher, 2024). To depolarise the network structure, bridging is necessary. Bridging entails the intentional action of creating connections. It is evident that, in accordance with the model's eventual attainment of a stable state, which is indicated by the matrix's stability, the balance in question plays a pivotal role in determining the nature of the relationship within the group and between the groups, namely, whether it will be characterised by cooperation or antagonism. Disarò and Valcher (2024) demonstrated that if the network appears cooperative at the outset, the relationship and opinions persist in a positive direction. In the absence of connection, the separation will be maintained, and the subgroup will engage in internal cooperation. The FJ model can demonstrate ways to depolarise, but also shows that we should not reach a consensus, as individual obstinacy and beliefs persist.

#### Persuasive Argumentation Theory

The Persuasive-Arguments Theory, proposed by Vinokur and Burnstein (1978), describes how group discussions narrow the gap between subgroups on an issue. People rely on arguments stored in memory. Group discussions introduce new arguments and help members evaluate different alternatives. People then build arguments by describing ideas and possible solutions from memory. Depending on the arguments exchanged, groups can move toward more nuanced views. However, people mostly retrieve arguments from their own cultural pool. These pools differ in the arguments available, their direction, and persuasiveness. As groups discuss, polarisation between argument pools grows since members move toward more convincing arguments within their own pool. The theory's effect is greater when people access arguments they previously lacked.

### 1.5 Complex Systems Perspectives

Polarisation is a complex system with uncertainty and self-reinforcing dynamics (Burgess, 2021). De Marchi (2022) argues that the ARM model fails to fully identify and assess causes. He claims that behavioural rules may be flawed, as research shows that interaction between ideologies can yield positive outcomes when the conditions are right. The ARM model claims such encounters are always negative, so it may be too simple. Burgess (2021) also challenges the mathematical and conventional solutions. As polarised conflicts are complex and resist these methods, a holistic, systemic approach beyond fixing single parts is needed. The interventions must attend not only to behavioural rules but to the mediating role of the surroundings that co-produce system dynamics.

### 1.6 Designer in a Polarised World

This review seeks to go beyond traditional sociological approaches to polarisation by providing design-based insights for creating systems where functions can be either isolated or unified, integrating both intended and unintended effects driven by internal necessity rather than just external demands. The main argument centres on how technical objects—defined as human creations that evolve over time into their own distinct forms, standing between people and the world to help us connect with and interact with our surroundings—serve as instruments of knowledge that are inseparable from the world around us (Simondon, 2011; Akrich, 1992). While people often associate technology solely with 'techy stuff' things like mobile phones or machines, Simondon (2011) argues that technical objects actually exist, evolve, and relate to humanity and culture in ways that extend beyond viewing them as mere instruments and economic realities.



Instead, these objects simultaneously embody and measure relations between heterogeneous elements, participating in the construction of networks that bring together diverse human and nonhuman actors (Simondon, 2011; Akrich, 1992). Design reconstructs societal relationships by shaping how we understand and interact with them, requiring designers to consider how technical objects reflect their vision and influence user perception and behaviour. This involves moving constantly between technical and social dimensions, seeing the boundary between inside and outside as a result of interaction rather than something that predetermines it (Akrich, 1992). Through embedding their vision of the world into technical objects, designers create scripts that decide what tasks to assign to machines versus humans, establishing frameworks for action that guide future development and help interpret later events, ultimately shaping the settings users imagine and enabling designers to play a key role in addressing polarisation through depolarisation initiatives.

## 2. Drivers and Mechanisms of Polarisation

The psychological and social drivers of polarisation operate together within our world. The technical objects, our search for identity and media systems amplify homophily, structure groups, and make processes of Othering more durable.

### 2.1 Psychological and identity factors

#### Group Membership Motivations

Psychological theories help explain why individuals gravitate toward groups and extremes. According to Hogg et al. (2008), there are three fundamental motivations driving grouping that contribute to polarisation and the 'us vs. them' dynamic:

The **Sociometer Model** suggests that self-esteem functions as a meter of successful social inclusion: you feel accepted and appreciated. This makes group belonging essential for your psychological well-being.

**Terror Management theory** argues that people form groups to create a shared worldview, offering a sense of meaning that helps reduce existential anxiety, such as the fear of mortality. This fear of the unknown is rooted in human instinct and is reflected in evolutionary psychology models, where fear arises from the perceived absence of information at any level of consciousness or processing (Carleton, 2016). Experiences or entities that fall into this category trigger a sense of 'danger' in our instincts, making us naturally fearful of them.

**The Uncertainty-identity theory** posits that a group reduces subjective uncertainty about one's identity and behavioural norms. The group provides a clear identity and a socially shared identity, characterised by norms and roles.

These motivations highlight the friction and difficulty of changing (political) identities, attitudes, and opinions. Because group membership satisfies deep psychological needs, group dynamics leave little room for nuance. When identity, purpose, self-esteem, and social norms are tied to group beliefs, challenging these beliefs threatens psychological security. Thus, polarisation is deeply rooted in cultural, ideological, and value factors, both deepening divisions and serving as risk factors for further polarisation (Patkós, 2024). Something deeply rooted in evolutionary psychology and anthropology, such as tribalism. An innate human tendency to form tightly-knit groups for survival, protection, and resource acquisition, and to view outsiders with suspicion, providing a strong instinctive basis for 'othering'.

#### Multicultural Identity and Discrimination

To better understand polarisation in multicultural contexts, Yampolsky and Amiot (2016) examine how individuals cope with multiple cultural identities under varying conditions and explore how people decide whether to retain or reject new identities. They identify three key configurations:

- **Categorisation:** the process of adopting a single cultural identity, while other identities are effectively excluded.
- **Compartmentalisation:** maintaining multiple identities for different contexts, dividing a person's thoughts, feelings, memories, or behaviours.
- **Integration:** an individual seeks common ground between their cultural identities, thereby identifying shared underlying principles and establishing a foundation for mutual understanding that links diverse identities.

Discrimination and group labelling by one's environment (e.g., being labelled as daring or dull, right or wrong) play a significant role in shaping one's identity, and initiate the concept of Othering. Higher levels of discrimination and

microaggressions are linked to increased stress for affected individuals (Yampolsky & Amiot, 2016). In such circumstances, a common response is to distinguish between one's personal identity and the roles one adopts in challenging contexts. This dissociation enables individuals to present a curated self that aligns with situational demands, resulting in increased compartmentalisation. Conversely, lower discrimination reduces stress and enables integration, providing opportunities to explore and reconcile identities across various contexts.

#### The Social Costs of Ambivalence

A polarised society exerts significant pressure on the middle group with nuanced or ambivalent views. Siev et al. (2024) highlight a troubling dynamic: when individuals express ambivalent positions on political issues, they tend to lose likability among their own political allies more than they gain sympathy from opponents. This phenomenon creates a strong social barrier to adopting nuanced stances, a pattern that persists even in less polarised contexts. When people disagree with someone's overall position, they are less likely to distinguish their judgments based on ambivalence; however, when they share the same stance, they do make such distinctions. As a result, individuals are often disliked for recognising and acknowledging complexities or contradictions within their own group, making it difficult for them to engage in ambivalent thinking. The very thinking that is essential for democratic deliberation. In short, pressure from polarised groups discourages nuanced thinking, as ambivalence reduces acceptance within one's group, hindering open discussion needed for healthy democratic deliberation.

### 2.2 Social and Relational Mechanisms

#### The Sympathy-Opinion Feedback Loop

He and Zhang (2023) found a strong correlation between sympathy and opinion similarity. Higher sympathy levels increase openness to opinion change, while greater differences in opinions decrease sympathy. The co-evaluation between the two terms acts in a feedback loop where initial similarities or differences become intensified over time. And assimilation, coming to common ground, occurs more rapidly in situations with higher affinity levels. Making the differences in opinions start to slow down, sympathy grows as well, and the convergence of opinions accelerates. This suggests that the quality of a relationship in a conversation can significantly influence persuasion processes. Thus, the feedback loop between sympathy and agreement means relationship quality can either speed up or intensify polarisation, underlining the importance of interpersonal dynamics in opinion formation.

#### Actions speak louder than words

There is a tendency to articulate more than is enacted, and such exaggeration contributes to polarisation. In everyday dialogue, a gap often exists between attitudes and actual behaviours (Bravo & Farjam, 2022), strengthening polarised dynamics. This tendency is particularly evident on sensitive topics where one response is perceived as more socially acceptable. For example, regarding issues such as discrimination or climate change, individuals are more likely to provide answers that align positively with perceived group expectations. This process, occurring gradually in normal conversation, facilitates the spread of more extreme views, intensifying polarisation. The division observed in schools reflects this broader societal divide, which is reproduced daily through language and interaction (De Haan, 2023).

#### Homophily and Network Effects

Curiel (2021) demonstrates how network structure critically shapes polarisation outcomes. In fully connected networks, opinions are broadly shared, fostering growth toward extremes. Where proximity and inequality exist between nodes, homophilic clusters reinforce the opinions that are detected. Homophilic clusters, also known as echo chambers, are environments where one's existing beliefs, views, and assumptions are reinforced by encountering information that aligns with their own perspectives. Individuals in echo chambers become less aware of other views, increasing extremism and limiting space for differing opinions.

Zhang et al. (2025) investigated this topic based on the impact of propaganda. In highly polarised societies, individuals become almost immune to propaganda that does not align with their views, while propaganda that supports and confirms their beliefs drives them further toward extremism. Even with little homophily, people tend to become biased in favour of more extreme positions, as their opinions are continually reinforced through repeated interactions with like-minded individuals. This reinforcement makes it difficult for counterarguments or opposing views through propaganda to alter their stances.

In less polarised societies, propaganda exerts little influence, and opinions only seem to converge toward one of two extremes if a dominant view emerges early. The most common scenario is when a few individuals hold extreme views, and propaganda circulates widely; as a result, people update their opinions. This change is insufficient to resist subsequent waves of propaganda, thereby preventing extreme polarisation. Networks with small-world and scale-free



structures thus show intermediate effects. While rounds of propaganda can increase polarisation, Zhang et al. (2025) argue that in these networks, the existence of shortcuts and hubs significantly reduces homophilic clustering. In essence, network attributes determine whether propaganda can fuel polarisation or facilitate opinion convergence, depending on how connected and diverse the interactions are.

These network and group dynamics are materially mediated by the platform and other technical objects that shape the feedback loops between sympathy and opinion, thereby affecting whether Othering intensifies or is mitigated.

#### Group dynamic

People in a group tend to defend more extreme positions than they would have argued for individually, a phenomenon known as the 'group effect' (Barbeito Thonon, 2025). The group effect influences the increased extreme polarisation. Partly because holding a relatively extreme attitude is socially desirable (Vinokur & Burnstein, 1978). This attractiveness stems from the values of Western culture. These values include a desire to be perceived as risky or daring and to express your honest opinion without fear. In group settings, perceiving an individual as more extreme than you makes you feel less accepted and more moderate in comparison. The group member experiences a sense of failure and apprehension regarding potential disapproval. Consequently, they modify their attitude, resulting in the adoption of a more radical course of action. This feedback loop fuels and exacerbates the polarisation. In short, group dynamics drive individuals toward more extreme positions through social comparison and feedback, intensifying polarisation in collective environments.

#### 2.3 Social Media as a Facilitator

Social media has become a significant mechanism in shaping polarisation. With 5.6 billion users, it now influences our society as a whole and affects individual cognition (Van Bavel et al., 2021; Statista, 2025). Social media amplifies divisive content by reinforcing existing beliefs through exposure to like-minded information and echo chambers. This can intensify intergroup conflict and reduce awareness of differing perspectives. Persuasive theory suggests this dynamic pushes individuals toward more extreme poles, as reflected in the rising anger and engagement with posts about outgroups (Van Bavel et al., 2021). Not only social but also traditional media are affected, as divisive rhetoric is used to capture attention (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021).

It is important to note, however, that social media is not itself the origin of polarisation—a point that is frequently misunderstood. While the echo chamber effect and exposure to polarising content can intensify division, this influence is often overshadowed by the broader role of centralist media and individual viewing preferences. Thus, social media acts as a key facilitator, rather than the main driver, of polarisation (Van Bavel et al., 2021). It, together with traditional media, functions as a technical object that, with its embedded distraction logics, acts as a facilitator of Othering and amplifies the polarising dynamics.

The literature consistently finds that exposure to like-minded media increases polarisation. However, there is an ongoing debate regarding the effects of exposure to opposing viewpoints. Some posit that such exposure mitigates polarisation by introducing alternative ideas and encouraging reconsideration of beliefs, but others suggest it exacerbates polarisation through a backfire effect, causing individuals to become further entrenched (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). Additionally, topics with increased engagement and discussion may sometimes lead to reduced polarisation as deeper cognitive processing is encouraged (Zhang et al., 2025). Exposure to diverse perspectives alone is ineffective, as individuals tend to interpret new information in a manner that reinforces their beliefs. To address this, attention must be paid to breaking up echo chambers by examining dialogue dynamics and facilitating meaningful interaction.

### 3. The complex polarised society- Effects and Outcomes

The social, political, and cultural consequences of polarisation are intensified where technical objects channel attention and consolidate group boundaries, making Othering a dangerous factor in a healthy democratic and multicultural life.

#### 3.1 Democratic and Political Consequences

Polarisation is necessary for a healthy democracy. Healthy debate requires discussion of different opinions and viewpoints. Therefore, we need to establish a new connective democracy (Overgaard et al., 2021), a form of democracy that fosters connections between people across political divides. As Cassam (2020) shows us, the political polarisation has now reached a point where officials and citizens are so deeply divided that productive communication and compromise are impossible. This makes a healthy democracy impossible, as it depends on the ability to negotiate and build consensus across divides.

Overgaard et al. (2021) identify two distinct yet connected threats from entrenched political polarisation: issue polarisation (intensifying division on specific topics) and affective polarisation (increasing animosity and distrust toward opposing groups). Affective polarisation is especially dangerous for democracy, as it fosters toxic splits. Opponents become dehumanised, hatred emerges, and friendships between differing opinions seem unattainable. This undermines the legitimacy of political rivals and makes peaceful power transitions and genuine dialogue progressively less feasible. Polarised societies become more susceptible to misinformation, as people with extreme views engage in motivated reasoning that filters information to confirm existing beliefs while rejecting contradictory evidence (Overgaard et al., 2021). By mediating what citizens see and how they relate to 'the other', technical objects can undermine productive communication and feed affective polarisation that undermines democratic practice. This can influence the way individuals perceive existing polarisation, assuming that out-party members are farther from them on the issue than is actually the case, according to measures of their personal preferences. The perceived polarisation relates strongly to negative affective evaluations and out-party candidates, as well as voting, participation, trust, and efficacy (Enders & Armaly, 2018). In contrast, actual polarisation—measured as the conceptual distance between positions of in-party and out-party members—shows much weaker relationships with these outcomes. Notably, the impact of moving from low to high levels of perceived polarisation on affective attitudes is greater than that of shifts in actual polarisation. This suggests that while perceptions of intense polarisation do not necessarily discourage political engagement, they play a significant role in shaping the emotional reactions that underpin affective political divides.

#### 3.2 Social and Cultural Impacts on a Polarised Society

Polarisation penetrates society's core; it extends well beyond political divides and impacts our social and cultural values. Polarised countries tend to be more conservative and security-driven. Rising polarisation creates societies that prioritise abstract values. Typically, they prize values stemming from loss aversion (e.g., success, power, money, tradition, comfort, and security) and display a preference for right-wing and conservative ideologies (Patkòs, 2024). Highly polarised societies experience heightened anxiety and uncertainty, coupled with an intensified craving for rules and order. This uncertainty, as detailed by Hogg et al. (2008) in Section 2.1, drives people to join groups that intensify polarisation.

#### Role dynamic

Increased polarisation has grown the us-them dynamic in our society, with a deepening process of Othering. Brandsma (2016) recognises five roles within this dynamic:

- **The pusher:** Individuals who are known to exacerbate divisions by adding fuel to the fire. Often, they do this with their own version of the truth and facts.
- **The joiner:** Individuals who opt to align themselves with one of the two camps. They like, retweet, and support the pushers, yet they simultaneously seek to differentiate themselves from the pushers by presenting themselves as more moderate.
- **The silent middle:** These individuals experience the pressure of polarisation from the pushers of both sides, yet they persist in their resistance for various reasons
- **The bridge builder:** This person positions themselves above the poles and seeks to foster understanding with a view to eliminating polarisation. Sometimes, this approach provides more fuel, feeding polarisation.
- **The scapegoat:** When polarisation is at its peak, the search for a scapegoat inevitably commences. This person is often found in the silent middle or the bridge builder.

As polarisation intensifies, neutrality becomes increasingly intolerable, turning the middle into a primary target for aggression. Koch et al. (2023) note that polarised societies often have a weakened middle class lacking cross-cutting connections. In such environments, scapegoats are used as outlets for collective guilt and anger. The middle group is pressured to take sides, further undermining their position and contributing to societal fragmentation. Civil services—including police, fire brigades, and ambulances—frequently become scapegoats in polarised societies. Although expected to remain neutral, these groups quickly lose the trust of both sides and are only tolerated as long as they serve opposing interests.



## Local and Community Impacts

Building on Koch et al. (2023) 's research, they examined how polarisation manifests in local contexts. Their research reveals that local configurations of social relations significantly influence the strength of popular mobilisation around inequality issues. The weak and missing middle, lack of cross-cutting connections, and the important role of locally rooted institutions are key themes in polarised societies. In line with the previously mentioned network theory of Curiel (2021), we need to be aware of the spread of opinions in closely connected and proximity networks. Understanding the intricate balance within local communities, with a focus on the importance of locally rooted institutions, can help bridge the gaps between them. These findings suggest that the effects of polarisation vary significantly based on community structure and the availability of social capital.

Kolundu (2018) extends this perspective by emphasising that identity categories are not fixed but rather constructs of political, social, and experiential histories that have a lived impact and are shaped by social and political enforcement. Facilitated by technical objects that privilege certain frames and render diverse voices invisible. The persistence of single-axis frameworks reinforces foundations of inequality by falsely universalising the experiences and knowledge of some and obscuring within-group differences. The experience of a lack of resources of one group can be argued to be reinforced by the sense of affluence and disconnection of 'the others'.

### 3.3 Cultural Reproduction

Our cultures and religions are under pressure, and local identities are beginning to fade away. The homogenisation of cultures polarises our society by making divisions between groups more pronounced, as the middle, which holds multiple identities, is pressured to conform to a more homogenised culture (Mohyeddin, 2024). Globalisation poses a threat to cultural distinctiveness and the freedom to express that culture in a nuanced way. It erases rather than enriches cultural exchange due to a lack of harmonious co-existence between tradition and modernity.

Apart from this barrier, globalisation also formed a bridge: opening doors to unparalleled cultural exchange. The challenge lies in ensuring that this exchange actually enriches and allows the existence of multiple truths. In line with this thought, Kulundu (2018), as mentioned above, believes in the reinforcement of a matrix approach. The matrix approach moves beyond single understandings and acknowledges the multiple ways in which individuals may experience exclusion and inequality. Advocating to develop an adequate language and practice around how to strategically forge and dissipate our emancipatory impulses. One's social location impacts one's experience of the social world and shapes what is known and understood about inequality. Both elements should be integrated into the script around the solution; if done correctly, it can serve as sites of pluralisation, depending on how technical objects and structures are encountered, rather than reproducing Othering.

## 4. Dialogue and communication

Dialogue is a central theme in the polarisation literature. It can serve as a mechanism where Othering is either reproduced or disrupted. The structure of the dialogue should follow a script and affordances in the right timing, safety, and social structure, allowing for nuance and ambivalence, which can be integrated into the technical objects we encounter in daily life.

### 4.1 Dialogue as Reinforcement of Polarisation

Polarisation is increasingly present in daily life, with many exchanges remaining non-dialogical, reinforcing Othering rather than bridging divides and echoing ongoing societal conflicts (De Haan, 2023). Dialogue is defined in this review as: a structured conversation between two or more parties aimed at exchanging views and fostering mutual understanding. Although dialogue between divides is often seen as a solution to polarisation, a polarised environment triggers a perception of threat, which diminishes social engagement (Barbeito Thonon, 2025). This sense of threat hampers listening, meaning exposure to differing views can reinforce existing beliefs and identities, even in dialogue (Nelmarkka et al., 2018).

Empathy is often suggested as essential for depolarising dialogue, but its absence is not the root of polarisation; therefore, focusing solely on empathy addresses symptoms rather than causes. Cassam (2020) argues that empathy can be categorised into two distinct types. Cognitive empathy, which involves understanding another's feelings without sharing them. And emotional empathy, which engages emotions and allows you to experience the world as you think someone else does. Empathic conversations are often mentioned as a depolarisation tactic. This simple view of empathy

overlooks the fact that effective depolarising dialogue requires both, enabling participants to genuinely understand opposing perspectives. Both sides need to start understanding 'the others' emotions and values. So, yes, empathy helps facilitate constructive dialogue, but a deeper understanding of the concept is necessary.

Initiating an empathetic conversation with gaps in either type of empathy can increase polarisation due to misunderstandings. The discussion can escalate into seeing opponents as enemies, weakening legitimacy, and leading to toxic polarisation. The goal of dialogue may shift from constructive interaction to dominating or delegitimising the other side, aligning with the group polarisation effect—defending extreme positions when part of a group. Moreover, the nuanced position comes at a social cost, as Siev et al. (2024) mentioned. Dialogue that encourages more nuanced thinking can actually result in social punishment, causing resistance to further nuancing and actually moving to a more extreme pole than before.

Initiating an empathetic conversation with gaps in either type of empathy can increase polarisation due to misunderstandings. The discussion can escalate into seeing opponents as enemies, weakening legitimacy, and amplifying toxicity. The goal of dialogue may shift from constructive interaction to dominating or delegitimising the other side, aligning with the group polarisation effect—defending extreme positions when part of a group (Siev et al., 2024). Dialogue encouraging nuance can also incur social costs, causing resistance and driving more extreme positions. Brandsma (2016) cautions against viewing dialogue as a guaranteed solution, warning that it can backfire at certain stages of polarisation and conflict. Attempting dialogue at the wrong time risks entrenching positions. Interaction with outgroup members, especially strong advocates, often intensifies polarisation and fixes viewpoints.

### 4.2 Dialogue for Depolarisation

#### Types of talks

Kolikant and Wegerif (2025) extend the traditional categorisation of educational talk by proposing "constructive dispute" as a fourth type, alongside the three existing types: exploratory, disputation, and cumulative talk. Exploratory talk is characterised by participants being open to learning from each other and reconsidering their positions. Partners engage in each other's stories and ideas. Statements in this talk are offered in joint consideration. Disputation talk occurs when partners disagree and resist learning from their opponents' perspectives. There are a few attempts to seek resources or offer constructive criticism, resulting in brief assertions and challenges. Cumulative talk is characterised by speakers building on what others have said to construct common knowledge. This happens uncritically and positively through repetition, confirmation, and elaboration.

To depolarise, a fourth type of talk is needed: constructive dispute. If only the traditional three forms of talk are used, polarisation may deepen. For example, in-group talk often involves exploratory and cumulative talk, but when interacting with outgroups, conversations tend to become disputational, which struggles with contentious issues when participants hold strong identity commitments—a key feature of polarisation. Constructive dispute involves competition, disagreement, and refutation, but relies on reasoned arguments and substantial support for positions. Rather than avoiding criticism or failing to develop arguments, participants are encouraged to take responsibility for their views and address the challenges presented by the dispute. The objective is not consensus, but to foster dialogic agency. By learning about others' positions and listening to their arguments, participants gain respect for their legitimacy without necessarily agreeing, thus reducing the echo chamber effect and supporting depolarisation.

#### Climate of trust and Emotional Safety

De Haan (2023) suggests creating contact zones or experimental spaces where rules of engagement are open to negotiation. Creating a physical space with defined freedom of engagement allows people to try out new forms of dialogue without being bound by existing rules. Equally, Barbeito Thonon (2025) stresses the importance of a climate of trust. An environment where one does not feel judged. Changing the environment reduces the stress of the conflict, allowing for deep listening and diminishing the natural reaction of 'fight' when exposed to 'the other'. According to Brandsma (2016), establishing deep listening fosters genuine respect and connection, which in turn changes the tone of the conversation. From judging and defending to showing real interest and respect. In the next paragraph, it is explained how one shapes such an environment.

#### Content and Focus Strategies

A climate of trust must be intentionally established. In every relationship, there is potential common ground; identifying and using it beforehand helps prevent polarisation in dialogue. Baliatti et al. (2021) recommend matching over non-



political values (such as hobbies or birthplace) before addressing differences, humanising the opponent, and opening participants to other views. This shifts focus from arguments to sharing experiences and values, fostering empathy (Nelmarkka et al., 2018). Acknowledging doubts and contradictions further reveals nuance and humanity, challenging polarised narratives (Burgess, 2021). Hence, establishing trust and common ground before dialogue can reduce polarisation and promote understanding.

Barbeito Thonon (2025) refers to this as the value-based approach, emphasising the importance of avoiding angled or divided questions. In a highly polarised context, sharing one's stance on the axis has a high chance of pressuring participants into taking sides. Turning the dialogue into polarisation instead of depolarisation. The focus should therefore be on topics that highlight common needs and concerns. The subject does not need to be completely changed, as polarisation issues are very important to discuss in order to eventually depolarise, but the main subjects always need a binding element to sustain dialogue (Brandsma, 2016). Move away from divisive topics toward unifying themes within the polarisation issue at hand. McCoy et al. (2022) underline this with historical depolarisation movements that shared common goals. The global waves of democratisation accompanying the defeats of fascism and communism, for example, provided context for a significant depolarisation episode.

### Strategic Listening and Communication Types

Hendriks et al. (2018) challenge traditional assumptions about democratic listening by identifying four distinct types that serve different functions:

- **Enclave listening:** individuals listen to those with like-minded views. This fosters solidarity and serves the democratic function of sharing knowledge and experiences, mobilising citizens with common interests who seek to understand, affirm, and represent affected publics.
- **Alliance listening:** individuals listen to those with overlapping interests to form new alliances. In a democracy, this connects and builds networks across groups with common causes. Consolidating positions and arguments facilitates more effective communication to the public, media, and decision-makers.
- **Adversarial listening:** listening to those with opposing views, to monitor claims and activities. This has a reflective function in democracy, helping to build counterarguments and strategies.
- **Transformative listening:** listening to the broader public to change views, serving a democratic function that is both communicative and reflective. This inserts issues into public consciousness and informs and mobilises the broader public, highlighting the need for grassroots movements.

This framework recognises that all types of listening serve important democratic functions, not just open-minded listening. Emphasising informal horizontal listening between citizens in public debates involves diverse practices, with mixed and nuanced motivations. It is not only about empathy and agreement, but also about strategy, purpose, and forming coalitions. Listening in a democracy is multifaceted, serving both strategic and understanding-focused goals.

### Dialogue Sustainment and Positioning Theory

English and Mahendran (2021) propose the Dialogue Sustainment Theoretical Model (DSTM), which aims to break the trend of populism and social media that are eroding dialogue through manipulative algorithms and echo chambers. Stressing the importance of not relying on a shared identity theory, as it holds rigid binary group classifications that do not reflect the complexity of real interactions, but instead focuses on maintaining dialogue. Dialogue can reduce the perception of your opponents as offensive and shows that you can have normal conversations and discussions without damaging your relationship or decreasing the perceived sympathy for the other.

The model focuses on three components: internalising political worldviews shaped by cultural representations, interactive dialogical positioning through shifting 'I-positions' rather than fixed identities, and dimensional chronotropic boundaries that frame political narratives in specific temporal and spatial contexts. It helps to see that shared identities do not automatically enable communication, and it helps explain why dialogue sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails by examining how participants position themselves and others while in dialogue.

Essentially, the model suggests we should:

- Talk from a distant or 'I' position instead of the collective 'we' and 'them'. This makes the conversation more personal, and the group polarisation effect is minimised. English (2020) shows that even when the substance of the conversation was very controversial, this tactic helped keep the dialogue going.

- Use shared emotional reactions, even in disagreement, we tend to have the same emotional output to subjects, which creates mutual respect and understanding.
- Explore some core positions that exist for or beyond the polarised position and maintain this in the conversation; this can form the anchor in the conversation to fall back to when landed in a conflicting polarising dialogue.
- Sharing core and distancing dialogical positions at relevant points in the discussion offers a means of sustaining dialogue; it provides new insights into the polarising discourse, rather than focusing on consensus.

### Timing and Context consideration

The timing of when to initiate a dialogue is crucial to its effectiveness in either polarising or depolarising. As mentioned, initiating dialogue in the heat of the conflict (intervention phase) is impossible. Brandsma (2016) recognises four different phases: prevention, intervention, mediation, and reconciliation. In the prevention stage, dialogue can give the opportunity to exchange knowledge about each other's identities. This can be useful in lowering hatred and the leaning towards conflict or toxic polarisation. In the mediation phase, each 'camp' has time to self-reflect, and dialogue should only be initiated if they have had sufficient time to understand their version of the world and possess the skills to handle conflicts. Going beyond the conflict and talking about why they think something without having the aim of convincing the other. The reconciliation phase offers the golden stage for dialogue. After the reflection and understanding of the different constructs around the polarised issue, everyone is ready to listen and move away from the 'us-vs-them' dynamic'.

Burgess (2021), reviewing Coleman's approach, outlines six steps for navigating complex, polarised systems, creating a context that allows for dialogue. Think differently, shifting from simple to complex system thinking. Reset, utilising instability and crisis moments as opportunities. Bolster and break, strengthening positive connections while disrupting negative patterns. Complicate, embrace contradictory complexity by including information that does not fit in the simple good guy versus bad guy story. Move, activating novel pathways and rhythms. And lastly, adapt, seeking evolution rather than revolution.

The polarised context is complex, and it changes unpredictably. This approach recognises this dynamic and shows we need to embrace patience, flexibility, and multiple, simultaneous interventions rather than a single, short-handed solution. Seek opportunities for dialogue that arise outside direct intervention moments. In summary, patience, adaptability, and multiple coordinated actions are essential for effective dialogue in polarised settings.

### Structural Democratising Dialogue Process

Pruitt and Thomas (2007) outline a comprehensive four-phase framework for facilitating democratising dialogue. Phase 1 involves exploring dialogue possibilities through situation assessment, engaging and understanding actors, and determining the readiness of the context for dialogue. Phase 2 focuses on the collaborative design of the process for dialogue, including the selection of participants, setting objectives, and resource mobilisation. Phase 3 encompasses implementation, including the creation of a safe space, trust-building, and a structured dialogue journey that spans from perspective elicitation through deliberation to action. Phase 4 emphasises monitoring and evaluation with stakeholder involvement, and both quantitative and qualitative indicators, with a focus on tangible results and intangible changes (e.g., relationships, mutual understanding).

This approach suggests that successful dialogue requires extensive preparation and ongoing support, rather than simply bringing parties in conflict together. Effective dialogue demands careful planning, implementation, and follow-up to achieve lasting outcomes.

Design interventions can help facilitate these conditions (emotional safety, shared ground, constructive dispute) by reshaping the technical objects and interaction scripts through which dialogue occurs.

### 5. Depolarisation beyond dialogue

Transitioning from dialogue-based approaches, structural and network interventions take a broader perspective. The interventions must be carefully considered to create communication infrastructures and shared repertoires that enable bridging and mitigate the effects of echo chambers and othering, which can be found in daily technical objects.



## 5.1 Structural and Network Interventions

### Local institutions and Mobilise the Silent Middle

This literature review highlights the need to reshape our social networks. Globally, polarisation is sustained by networks that foster echo chambers, isolating individuals and restricting diverse viewpoints. To reverse this structure, intentional bridging is essential. Not simply exposing people, but constructing deliberate connections rooted in local identity and cohesion, possibly through local organisations. For instance, the Allies' approach in the Netherlands demonstrates how police can maintain societal trust by forging alliances with various social groups ("*Communicative Policing as an Instrument Against Polarization*, 2024).

Polarisation intensifies when the moderate group is pressured to take sides, erasing nuance and reducing the landscape to adversaries. Brandsma (2016) and Koch et al. (2023) argue that combating polarisation requires prioritising the silent majority over polarising actors. By empowering the middle group through role models, local organisations, or key community figures, this group can become vocal and unite around shared objectives. The middle needs a platform to reinforce its stance. By highlighting their identities, a space for multiple identities emerges. This enables the middle to integrate shared identities, rather than compartmentalising them. Intentionally designed technical objects and local platforms can create bridges and make the silent middle visible, counteracting the structural effects of Othering.

### Pluralisation Mechanisms

Stjepandić et al. (2022) share three depolarisation mechanisms that enable diverse groups to form coalitions and mobilise:

- **Framing plurality:** Let opponents unite on a common denominator outside the specific policy position. Reframe the conflict to an overarching frame.
- **Shared repertoires:** Instead of using talk as the sole mechanism, utilise shared repertoires, such as creative and emotional protest formats, to foster a sense of unity.
- **Network plurality:** Examining the common ground between the diverse networks of individuals, seeking an ability to bridge them. For this, bridging institutional and movement actors while maintaining organisational autonomy proved to be a key success.

### Cultural and Value System Interventions

Patkós (2024) argues that polarisation is deeply rooted in social, ideological, and cultural values. As polarisation is volatile and values change gradually, these factors become risks. This suggests that long-term depolarisation solutions require cultural interventions targeting the underlying value systems. In polarised societies focused on security and loss aversion, these values dominate.

### Holding Multiple Truths in Intersectional Approaches

In a heated discussion or a dialogue where people hold opposing views, consensus is simply impossible. Throughout this literature review, we have seen that consensus is not the solution in bridging divides. Kulundu (2018) advocates for matrix-based responses to social justice issues and tactics. He suggests room for new forms of subjectivity through collective experiments. This involves moving beyond single-axis approaches that tend to reinforce foundations of inequality toward more complex, intersectional frameworks that step away from the dialogue between polarised groups. The emphasis here is on developing effective language and practice to deliberately channel and dissolve our emancipatory impulses. This approach should promote the coexistence of diverse perspectives, experiences, and ideologies, ensuring multiple truths persist in harmony, rather than being subsumed under a single axis or labelled right or wrong. It requires confronting personal values, humanising those with divergent values, and placing oneself within the global narrative. Kolundu stresses the value of 'creating a space, with others, where voices stand apart from background noise to contribute to a broader harmony'.

## 5.2 Communication and Online Platforms

Bialetti (2021) suggests that online platforms could reduce polarisation. Social media and online platforms can be used strategically to foster the creation of cross-partisan bridges with strangers based on non-political affiliations. Many people prefer to keep politics out of their personal social networks and consume news that aligns with their attitudes. Breaking the echo chambers and forming soft connections online based on common features could help prevent the creation of a us-versus-them dualism.

The online world can also support the middle group, as suggested in 5.1. Highlighting key figures who represent the middle encourages more to freely express nuanced positions. New platforms can host stories, emotions, and knowledge from all groups to create a shared reality. Online pathways should facilitate easy access to and sharing of information across divides. They should be designed as technical objects that facilitate cross-partisan bridges, host shared repertoires, and reduce the isolated visibility dynamics that fuel othering.

## 5.3 Individual and Group-Level Strategies

### Tolerance and Exposure Management

Axelrod et al. (2021) identify tolerance as the key component of increasing polarisation, arguing that sufficiently high tolerance can prevent or slow down polarisation. Rather than focusing on changing minds through conversation, the focus should be on increasing individuals' capacity to tolerate opposing viewpoints. So, shifting from content-based interventions to capacity-building ones.

### Persuasive Argumentation and Group Composition

Vinokur and Burnstein's (1978) experiment tested a key prediction from persuasive argumentation theory (see Section 2.3). The experiment involved subgroups of similar size holding opposing views (e.g., pro-risk and pro-caution on a "risky" dilemma). Researchers measured whether discussion increased or narrowed attitude gaps. Discussions in the big group, dominated by one viewpoint, drove polarisation, shifting group attitudes to extremes. When split into subgroups, each favouring a different stance, however, depolarisation occurred, and the attitude gap within and between the groups shrank significantly. Thus, persuasive argumentation is effective but mainly when subgroups integrate multiple perspectives without seeking to convince.

## 5.4 Behavioural and Practical Approaches

Bravo and Farjam (2022) reveal a significant gap between reported attitudes and actual behaviour, particularly in politically charged contexts. Self-reported actions poorly predict real conduct. Their research advises prioritising behavioural change over attitude shifts and emphasising practical problem-solving as a route to bridging partisan divides.

The study demonstrates that personal contact and direct involvement are more effective in bridging divides than abstract discussions of principles. Feelings toward the opponent and the level of polarised talk diminished when people were involved in a face-to-face conversation. Pointing toward experiential rather than rhetorical approaches to tackle polarisation.

Another way to intervene and depolarise is by correcting exaggerated perceptions of polarisation. Making people aware of overestimations—in both their understanding and perceptions of others—moderates attitudes (Overgaard et al., 2021). To foster a connected democracy, new forms of democratic engagement must emerge. This model encourages positive intergroup contact to reduce bias and hostility, provided that participants share common ground. The review demonstrates that sympathy and shared humanity are crucial for successful contact, preventing it from escalating into deeper polarisation. On a broader scale, national identity can reduce polarisation by priming a common humanity—emphasising our collective emotions, values, and beliefs, with a shared identity at its core.

## 6. Critical Perspectives and Limitations

The following section considers critical perspectives and limitations of these approaches, including theoretical and methodological critiques.

### 6.1 Theoretical and Methodological Critiques

#### Model Limitations and Complexity

De Marchi's (2022) critique focuses on the models of polarisation in the literature. He argues that many models are too simplistic and fail to reveal the causal mechanisms for de- and polarisation that help inform policy. Behavioural (mathematical) models often repeat conventional wisdom and employ flawed assumptions, such as the universal repulsion between groups. Burgess (2021) adds that this oversimplifies human dynamics, trapping us in self-reinforcing



polarisation. These conflicts resist simple solutions and are complex, uncertain systems where fear and anger take hold, sharply limiting our ability to influence them intentionally. Tolerance and empathy may be associated with a lower risk of rising polarisation, compared to situations where these are absent. However, increased tolerance alone is unlikely to lead to depolarisation. While valuable, tolerance is not depicted as a comprehensive solution in the models reviewed.

#### Labelling Polarisation as the black sheep

Lindell et al. (2016) argue that polarisation is not inherently problematic at the individual level as long as it involves epistemic advancement and ethical clarification without being heavily influenced by problematic group dynamics. Both polarisation and moderation can represent legitimate outcomes of deliberative processes when they involve genuine learning and value clarification.

This perspective challenges the assumption that consensus or moderation are always preferable, suggesting some forms of principled disagreement can benefit democracy. People may follow unique paths, adhering to collective belief formation while preserving individuality.

#### Measurement and Validity Issues

Much research and models are unfortunately based on survey data to assess polarisation levels or intervention effectiveness. Bravo and Farjam (2022) highlight the unreliability of this data set. Our self-reported behaviours in a politically loaded context are subject to social desirability bias, and we often overestimate our behaviour to conform to this socially desirable stance. The so-called attitude-behaviour gap is especially problematic for polarisation research because political identities strongly predict self-reported attitudes but weakly predict actual behaviours, making it difficult to assess real-world impacts of various interventions.

### 6.2 Contextual and Practical Limitations

Any design intervention that alters technical objects in our environment must be sensitive to contextual and normative limits. Poorly designed and conceived changes can entrench the process of Othering, creating ethical trade-offs or creating negative unintended consequences.

#### Dialogue and Empathy as Clear Solutions

As referenced in Section 4.1, there is debate over whether dialogue and empathy offer clear solutions to polarisation, with some suggesting these approaches may not address its dynamics. If used at an inappropriate phase of conflict, these approaches may contribute to unwanted outcomes such as increasing the potential for mutual antagonism. Barbeito (2025) presents findings indicating that when participants perceive themselves as threatened, their nervous systems may hinder their engagement with others. This perspective challenges the idea that simply bringing opposing groups together for dialogue will lead to mutual understanding and compromise. The perception of the other party's intentions appears to be a factor, as a lack of perceived goodwill can lead to rejection of compromise. These findings suggest that deficits in empathy and dialogue may arise from polarisation dynamics, rather than solely cause them.

#### Historical and Cultural Specificity

Patkós (2024) demonstrates that polarisation is deeply embedded in our cultural, ideological, and value factors, which change over time. This makes finding a solution to polarisation very hard. Polarisation itself is a factor that keeps changing rapidly. Different issues create different divides. Patkós (2024) states that interventions focusing on immediate political divisions will therefore be limited in effectiveness, as they overlook tackling polarisation as a whole. A more negative outlook on polarisation is offered by McCoy et al. (2022), who present a historical analysis revealing that depolarisation is rare and only seems to occur during major historical disruptions, rather than through targeted interventions.

#### Contradictory Findings on Intergroup Contact

Several studies have revealed the paradoxical effect of well-intentioned interventions. Van Bavel et al. (2021) show that exposing people to opposing (political) views on social media can increase, rather than decrease, polarisation. Their experiment showed that exposure to the other party increased political polarisation, although this backfire effect was significant only among Republicans. Balietti et al. (2021) have found that while cross-stance interactions reduce

polarisation overall, they may also create asymmetric effects that increase negative feelings in some participants. Taking a nuanced position can leave you perceived as less sympathetic while you are trying to bridge divides (Sieve et al., 2024). Axelrod et al. (2021) present the most counterintuitive finding, stating that limiting exposure to dissimilar views is an effective mechanism for avoiding polarisation. The contradictions in common assumptions about only the benefits of exposure to diverse viewpoints suggest that contact strategies may only be effective under very specific conditions. Depolarisation interventions thus must be carefully designed and tested over time, as intuitive approaches often backfire by providing additional fuel for intergroup conflict or by inadvertently reinforcing the dynamics we should seek to disrupt.

### 6.3 Normative and Ethical Considerations

#### Consensus vs. Plurality Debates

Kulundu (2018) challenges the assumption that consensus provides the solution to polarisation and, therefore, should be the goal of depolarisation efforts. He argues that consensus will form an obstacle since it overshadows the nuanced experiences of marginalised groups. De Haan (2023) advocates for approaches that avoid the myth of reaching consensus because this can be oppressive if it demands that minorities adapt to the norms of the majority. Instead, we should frame dialogue as a negotiation of differences rather than an argument or agreement. Suggesting that productive disagreement may be more valuable than forced unity.

#### Power Dynamics and Justice Concerns

To depolarise, we need to understand the power dynamics in this newly polarised society. De Haan (2023) notes that minority voices often feel excluded or delegitimised. Kulundu (2018) warns that depolarisation efforts can actually maintain inequalities when experiences and knowledge of some are falsely generalised to represent the experiences, needs, and claims of all. Well-intended bridge-building efforts may silence the group that we need most in depolarisation efforts —the silent middle—and silence marginalised perspectives in the name of unity. To challenge hierarchical power structures through coalition mobilisation, Kulundu (2018) advocates for a matrix approach rather than simply seeking harmony. These two studies raise questions about whether depolarisation inherently favours existing power structures by prioritising stability over justice.

#### Scalability and sustainability of interventions

This review reveals tensions between effective small-scale interventions and democratic participation. Predicting the influence of individuals or small-scale communities seems challenging, and interventions that work in one context can have a backfire effect in another. Brandsma (2016) advocates for mobilising the silent middle, but this raises questions about which voices are being prioritised in depolarisation efforts. Similarly, focusing on bridge builders, local institutions, and key figures and moderate voices could unintentionally marginalise individuals with strong convictions on justice issues, for example.

These normative tensions imply that depolarisation initiatives must address fundamental questions concerning the relationship between social harmony, democratic participation, and social justice.

## 7. Designing for Depolarisation

This review has demonstrated how polarisation is continuously shaped by processes of Othering, network dynamics, and our values and beliefs. Deeply embedded in our human instinct, we join groups, and through interactions with our environment, this group voice gets strengthened. For designers, this provides both a challenge and an opportunity. Unlike political science or sociological frameworks, where the solution lies in diagnosing structural causes and often aims for social cohesion. Design for interaction can intervene at the level of how people, groups, and technical objects meet in practice, nurturing and creating a healthier environment that helps mitigate Othering.

Several design directions are recommended after this review:

- Shaping technical objects as mediators: Technical objects stand between humans and the world, structuring relations (Simondon, 2011). Designers can embed depolarising 'scripts' into platforms, spaces, and tools by shaping how people encounter 'the other' and by creating open, neutral systems rather than closed ones that are characterised by extremes in interaction.



- Time your design intervention: Polarisation is a dynamic process that changes over time, and therefore goes through different phases. It is the job of the designer to recognise these phases and use them to favour them in the process of depolarisation. Every phase in depolarisation or conflict demands a different approach. The same is true when designing technical objects for depolarisation. They should be handled as a multifaceted project, where changes are developed slowly through iterative phases, involving all stakeholders. Thereby preventing the creation of poles and thus polarising the world, as well as yourself as a designer.
- Supporting constructive dialogue: If not carefully designed or facilitated, dialogue can reinforce division. Design needs to create conditions for constructive dispute. This requires emotional safety, a climate of trust, careful timing, and rules of engagement that are unintentionally designed. In interactions, the focus should be on personal contact, both cognitively, emotionally, and physically. This way, designers can help structure encounters that enable disagreement without dehumanisation, allowing for multiple truths and identities. In this dialogue, a designer is invited to integrate different types of listening and a focus on constructive talking methods.
- Mobilising the silent middle: This review has shown that empowering the silent middle group is crucial in our way to depolarisation. They can prevent the existence of only extreme poles, and can be the carriers of the bridge between the different extremes. Designers can create platforms, narratives, and shared repertoires that give visibility and legitimacy to nuanced positions, counteracting the social costs of ambivalence.
- Designing for intersectional resonance: The conclusion can be made that polarisation cannot always be solved by consensus. Design can instead foster environments where multiple truths coexist. This can be created through framing plurality, enabling shared grounds, and highlighting overlapping values. The goal in this interaction is not to convince each other, but to humanise 'the other' and get a sense of why one might believe this.
- Designing for behaviour, not attitudes: Since attitudes often diverge from behaviour, designers need to make interventions that enable cooperation, shared problem-solving, or direct contact, which may be more effective than persuasive strategies alone. The focus needs to be on experiences and practices that do not focus on theories and constructs, but rather allow for embodied collaboration.
- Structural recommendations: If a designer aims for broader system changes, it is essential to implement culture-based interventions. Acknowledging that high-polarised societies attach a higher value to loss-averse themes (such as success, power, and security). With the aim of creating a more secure society that fosters increased tolerance and an open stance towards opinions that differ from one's own beliefs or identity.

## Conclusion

This literature review shows that polarisation is a deeply rooted and multifaceted societal phenomenon. At its core, it is driven by 'othering' and the entrenched 'us-them' divisions. The review traced its philosophical roots, showing how identity and division have historically been constructed through this process of Othering. The research makes clear that polarisation consists not only of ideological divergence but also of growing affective hostility between groups. The widening affective gap makes people perceive polarisation as worse than it is, intensifying feelings of othering. The forces behind these dynamics are layered and complex. Psychologically, group membership theories show how polarisation meets needs for identity, certainty, and self-esteem. Socially, homophily, network effects, and argument spread form echo chambers that reinforce group views. The gap between attitudes and behaviour, especially on sensitive topics, fuels polarised narratives. Nuanced positions often bring social costs within a group, limiting willingness to engage. Social media amplifies polarisation by encouraging the sharing of divisive content, but it is not the main cause. Design should target the mediators of daily life—technical objects and interaction scripts that shape how people meet, communicate, see others, and work across differences. Design can go further than describing polarisation, intervening by testing practical depolarisation tactics.

The consequences of polarisation are profound for democracy, society, and culture. It harms productive communication and compromise, both of which are key to democracy. It also makes people vulnerable to misinformation and motivated reasoning. For society, polarisation weakens the middle class, increases uncertainty, and pushes toward conservative, loss-averse values. Cultural homogenisation and 'single-axis' frameworks suppress nuance and hide deeper inequalities. This review finds that depolarisation strategies must be nuanced and context-dependent, countering the temptation for universal or oversimplified fixes. Dialogue, often seen as a cure-all, can reinforce polarisation in intense conflicts by deepening group divides. Empathy is also not a stand-alone solution; it usually results from, rather than causes, polarisation, and therefore cannot alone provide a solution. Effective dialogue requires careful design to ensure

emotional safety and emphasise shared values over ideology. Strategic listening and using 'I-positions' can also ease antagonism and support productive exchanges.

Several pathways emerge from this review, suggesting a need to look beyond dialogue. Designers can shape technical objects as open systems and structural interventions. Modifying network structures, building bridges across divides, mobilising and strengthening the 'silent middle', and utilising 'pluralisation mechanisms', all of which are proven crucial. Cultural and intersectional approaches recognise multiple truths and challenge power hierarchies, paving the way for justice and new identities. Focusing on behaviour change and using personal contact and involvement are also more effective than just changing attitudes.

This review concludes that polarisation should be seen as a complex adaptive system. It requires flexible, multi-level, and context-sensitive interventions. One-size-fits-all solutions will not work. Interventions must balance consensus and pluralism. The goal is not uniformity, but coexistence and respect for different views. Individual polarisation can be helpful if it leads to learning and clarity. Addressing polarisation needs deep understanding and creative, thoughtful strategies. The main challenge is to keep society cohesive and respectful, even with big differences. Smartly utilising technical objects that drive us away from the process of Othering.

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# Appendix C

## Interaction Qualities from Case Studies

This Appendix presents the interaction qualities identified across all the case studies. In this overview, the separation between the chosen case studies is not made. All the case studies examined during the research are shown. This means not all case studies mentioned in this appendix are included in the report or used during the clustering. However, it does provide a comprehensive overview of the research for inspiration done during the theoretical foundation section.





# Appendix D

## Full Stakeholder Analysis

This Appendix presents the detailed overview of the stakeholder analysis.

### The Focus Group

This project focuses on individuals seeking a rental home in social housing. Within this group, three types of house seekers are recognised: low-income households, starters, and urgency cases. Throughout this project, multiple interviews were conducted with different tenant groups or held on the street to understand their role, objectives concerns and influence.

**Focus**

**Role:** Young professionals, graduated starting careers, seeking independent rental

**Interests/Objectives:** Affordable social or mid-rent housing, career proximity, to find a home (more than a house).

**Concerns:** 10+ year waiting lists and income mismatch, middle-income trap, high deposits, competition with urgency cases.

**Influence/Relations:** Low influence, dependent on allocation systems, represented by tenants groups.



“ Dutch youth should get priority, what do you mean I can't live in my own country? ”

- Young person (16 years old)

**Focus**

**Role:** Families earning less than €40,765/year seeking social housing.

**Interests/Objectives:** Access to fitting social rental housing, stable long-term contracts.

**Concerns:** 10+ year waiting lists, competition with urgency cases, housing benefit dependency.

**Influence/Relations:** Low influence, dependent on allocation systems, represented by tenants groups.



Low income households

“ Social housing is no longer for the low-income, due to the great competition. ”

- Low income household


**Focus**

**Role:** Priority housing cases (e.g. homelessness threat, relation break ups, status holders or medical grounds)

**Interests/Objectives:** Immediate housing access, safety, stability.

**Concerns:** Limited housing stock, competition with regular applicants, no stable housing situation, stigma.

**Influence/Relations:** Low influence, dependent on system, but legal priority.



Urgency cases

“ An honest answer? That you are not discriminated against, that is what makes a home, that I feel safe. ”

- Status holder



## The direct stakeholders

Direct stakeholders are parties directly engaged in the daily operations of the context. They work closely with, or have a direct impact on, the focus group and actively shape the context. This group includes those who will soon seek housing (such as students or current tenants planning to move) as well as parties who regulate, own, or manage housing. The following pages describe the roles, interests, objectives, concerns, and relationships of the

direct stakeholders presented in Figure 17. Most stakeholders were interviewed, and supporting quotes are provided to substantiate their perspectives. Interviews were conducted with students, private landlords, the municipality of Utrecht, Cazas wonen, Woonin, SSH, and tenants aged 16–80.

### Direct

**Role:** Students seeking temporary rental (52.000+ in Utrecht).

**Interests/Objectives:** Affordable student housing, proximity to university, social environment.

**Concerns:** 24-30 month SSH waiting time, pressure to vacate after graduation, rising renting prices, struggle to get a room through personal voting evenings.

**Influence/Relations:** Low influence.



Students

“ You start to think, shit, will I find something before I have to leave my house. ”

- Student

### Direct

**Role:** City planning, zoning, permits, manages allocation, negotiates with corporations/ developers. Sets housing targets.

**Interests/Objectives:** Ensure affordable mixed housing, meet national goals, 60% affordable by 2040 (35% social, 25% mid-rent), 3,000 homes/ year, house asylum seekers and vulnerable groups.

**Concerns:** Balancing urgency cases with housing need, managing refugee obligations, 10+ waiting list, social cohesion, political pressure, equal chances in a non equal division.

**Influence/Relations:** Very high, mandates housing composition, sets urgency rules, zoning authority, key collaboration partner for all stakeholders.



Utrecht municipality

“ We choose to invest unevenly in equal opportunities ”

- Municipality of Utrecht

### Direct

**Role:** Own and/or manage private rental properties, primarily mid/high-rent segment.

**Interests/Objectives:** Maximise rental income, favour market rents, minimal regulation, quick tenant turnover.

**Concerns:** Rent control, fixed-term contract restrictions, purchase limits (purchase limits), tax changes, profitability vs. regulations.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium, affect mid/free segment, lobby through Vastgoed belang, increase rent gaps.



Private Landlords

“ I particularly like it as a provision for my pension. ”

- Private Landlords

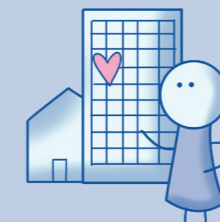
### Direct

**Role:** Own/manage the social rental homes. STUW& RWU members include Bo-ex, Cazas wonen, Woonin, Portaal, SSH).

**Interests/Objectives:** Fulfil social mission, maintain financial health, meet building targets, house urgency cases and low-income house holds.

**Concerns:** Managing 10+ waiting lists, allocation requirement, status holder quotas, sustainability goals, regulations and restrictions.

**Influence/Relations:** Very high, dominate social sector, set policy, control allocations, lead building projects, work with municipality on annual goals/ accords



Housing corporations

“ If we are allowed, we can build a lot, but a lot of regulations slow down the process. In scarcity you always have polarisation, since a fair system does not exist. ”

- Housing corporation



Direct

**Role:** Existing social and private renters occupying housing stock (sometimes in not-fitting housing situations including elderly).

**Interests/Objectives:** Protect affordable rent, stability, housing security, comfortable living.

**Concerns:** High rents, inability to move to suitable housing, forced moves, displacement risk, temporary contracts.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium, depends on contract type, occupancy (too large homes), can lobby through tenant groups.



Current tenants

“My house might be too big, but when moving I have to pay six times as much as I currently pay, and also having to move to a smaller place.”

- Current tenants

The indirect stakeholders

Indirect stakeholders are parties that are not directly involved but are affected by the context and have an interest or influence. They are further removed from the daily dynamics of the focus group, but they do perform supporting operational roles. Supporting quotes for stakeholders are presented to give them a voice and are retrieved from interviews. If a stakeholder has not been interviewed directly, a user perception quote is presented to gauge how they are perceived in the field. Interviews are conducted with a volunteer at the homeless shelter, status holders, an employee at a COA, and house seekers.

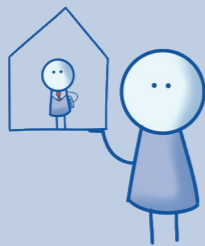
Direct

**Role:** Provide student rental housing, handle allocations, maintain properties (mainly SSH).

**Interests/Objectives:** House students, encourage social cohesion, non-profit, build appropriate housing, manage contracts and facilitate housing-flow.

**Concerns:** Meet demand of 52.000+ students, balance affordability with operational costs, long waiting lists, limited land, fair allocation.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium influence, strong ties with municipalities, universities, STUW, influence rental durations.



Student housing

“I think there is a great social value in arguing about cleaning the toilet.”

- Student Housing

Indirect

**Role:** Facilitate housing search, manage allocations. DAK: social rental allocation, Paradius/Funda: private rental listing.

**Interests/Objectives:** Woningnet: transparent (as much as possible) and fair allocation. Commercial: maximise listing, user fees, return of investment.

**Concerns:** Woningnet: low housing availability, tenants contracts. Commercial: Competitions, regulations, decrease of renters.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium influence, DAK runs social allocation but is constrained by municipality rules, private platforms influence mid/free sector, dependent on renters.



Digital Platforms

“All social rent is collected in DAK, this was convenient, it became a routine to look in the app everyday and respond to houses.”

- Social house seeker (user perception)



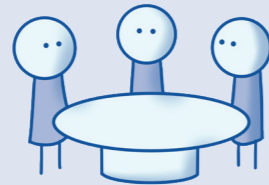
Indirect

**Role:** Resident associations advocating for neighbourhood interests ('Wijkcommissies')

**Interests/Objectives:** Liveability of the neighbourhood, preserve character, social cohesion, balance housing need and local interests.

**Concerns:** High-density development, parking, safety, social cohesion with a lot of newcomers, noise disturbance.

**Influence/Relations:** Low influence, limited but can delay projects through protests and appeals.



Neighbourhood committees

“ You recognise friction with the neighbourhood: ‘we do not want this group in our neighbourhood!’  
- Housing corporation ”

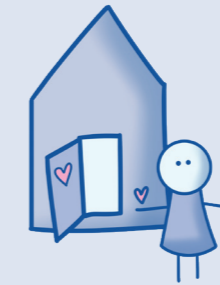
Indirect

**Role:** Emergency shelter and transition services for homeless individuals (e.g. Leger des Heils)

**Interests/Objectives:** Provide emergency shelter, transition to permanent housing, prevent homelessness, help from surviving to living.

**Concerns:** Limited emergency capacity, limited prevention regulations, housing shortages, compel clients demanding essential care.

**Influence/Relations:** Low, dependent on housing supply, advisory role in urgency cases.



Homeless shelter

“ Anyone that would spend time in shelter, worsens. There is a toxic stigma that it is people their own choice/fault to live on the street.  
- Volunteer homeless shelter ”

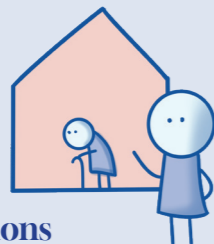
Indirect

**Role:** Senior housing associations and care providers managing age-specific rental housing.

**Interests/Objectives:** Suitable housing for elderly, accessibility, care integration, encourage building.

**Concerns:** Aging population, care needs, limited suitable housing stock.

**Influence/Relations:** Low, partner with housing corporations.



Elderly housing organisations

“ There should be more focus on fitting housing for elderly, for example bigger balconies so they do not have to give up all there space outside.  
- Older person (65-) ”

Indirect

**Role:** Major builders constructing 2.600+ annual rental homes, primarily mid/upper segments.

**Interests/Objectives:** Profitable deals, build fast, low cost and high return on investment, stable permits, joint ventures for affordable quotas.

**Concerns:** Regulations, affordable housing quotas, material costs, labour shortage, building appeals, complex zoning.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium, can meet or miss targets, municipality leverage building quotas, cooperate with corporations.



Urban developers

“ Urban developers, they only go after the money.  
- Real estate agent ”



Indirect

**Role:** Central Agency Reception Seekers manages refugee/asylum seeker housing, coordinates distribution.

**Interests/Objectives:** House around 2.800 status holders by 2025, move 15.00 from temporary to permanent housing, meet legal obligations, assure safety.

**Concerns:** Overflowing centres, protests and violence toward facilities and inhabitants, negative stigma, creating safe environment and provide appropriate save housing.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium influence, creates pressure on municipality and allocates urgency cases.



COA

“ You can only participate with society with an address.  
- **Employee COA** ”

Indirect

**Role:** GGD, Wijkteams; support vulnerable residents and provide housing guidance.

**Interests/Objectives:** Create individual and neighbourhood resilience, increase liveability, identify and prioritise urgency housing.

**Concerns:** Limited housing which puts pressure on individuals, complex case management, cohesion in the neighbourhood.

**Influence/Relations:** Low influence, advisory role in urgency cases and guidance for vulnerable individuals.



Social services

“ Without a place to live, there is no good basis to work on recovery.  
- **Volunteer homeless shelter** ”

Indirect

**Role:** Represent tenant interests, provide legal advice, come together at 'de Woontafel' (e.g. BoKS, Woonbond, VIDUIS).

**Interests/Objectives:** Strengthen tenant rights, let the voice of tenants to be heard, rent control, expand social housing, fair allocation.

**Concerns:** Rent increases, displacement, discrimination, tenant protection enforcement.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium, a growing voice in policy dialogue through Woontafel, mobilise public opinion and voice public debate.



Tenant groups

“ Bad landlord ship, such as unreasonable prices, discrimination, and intimidation to get a place to live.  
- **Social house seeker (user need)** ”

Indirect

**Role:** Representing private property owners in the rental market.

**Interests/Objectives:** Advocate for members' interests in policy discussions, rent liberalisation, minimal regulations, protect property rights and investment returns, favourable tax treatment.

**Concerns:** Increasing rent control, purchase regulations (opkoopbescherming), rent restrictions, negative public perception, government favouring corporations.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium, significant lobbying power, mobilise members, work with tenant groups, can influence private rental supply decisions.



Vastgoed belang

“ We want to offer rooms without losing money, and people want to find a room, let us do our thing.  
- **Vastgoed belang** ”

“ If it is just a perception, if someone says at a birthday party that all landlords are slim-lords, that is fine, but it becomes a problem if you start shaping policy around that perception.  
- **Vastgoed belang** ”



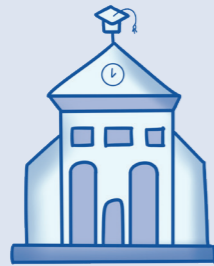
Indirect

**Role:** Educational institutions with 52.000+ students needing housing (UU, HU, HKU)

**Interests/Objectives:** Adequate student housing to attract and retain students, enough temporal housing for international housing, student welfare.

**Concerns:** Housing shortage affecting enrolment, student homelessness, attendance on lectures, fair treatment of all students.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium, partner with SSH/ municipality on student housing, an economic actor.



Universities

“ I find it somewhat strange that international students sometimes immediately get a house from the TU while Dutch students must undergo all grim approvals.  
- Former student ”

The influence stakeholders

Influence stakeholders are high-level actors. While not directly involved in housing provision, they significantly shape the discourse, policy, or public perception around housing. They do so through advocacy, regulation, or information—examples include political parties, the media, and activist groups. This and the next page explain the different parties. We also illustrate some of their concerns and needs through quotes from interviews.

“ Legislation and regulation causes housing market misery. It is the populism that leads to the housing crisis.  
- Vastgoed belang ”

- Vastgoed belang

Influence

**Role:** Sets national housing policy, framework laws, subsidies and regulations (Ministry of interior and kingdom relations)

**Interests/Objectives:** Address national shortage, balance the market, rent control, fair refugee and urgency cases distribution.

**Concerns:** Local implementation issues, investors in it for the big money, asylum seeker inflow, housing crisis pressure.

**Influence/Relations:** High, sets housing act, rent caps, tax policy building goals, allocation requirements, etc.



National government

Influence

**Role:** Provide financing for housing corporations, developers, and rental property investments.

**Interests/Objectives:** Secure returns on housing investments, minimise risk, comply with regulations, maintain good relationships.

**Concerns:** Market volatility, default risk, regulatory dynamic changes affecting rental market increasing insecurity.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium, control access to capital for building, development and renovations, influence feasibility of projects.



Banks and Financial institutes

“ I could not chose a sustainable bank since it didn't offer a family mortgage.  
- House buyer (starter) ”

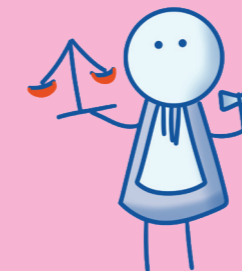
Influence

**Role:** Handle housing and discrimination cases, eviction disputes, appeals.

**Interests/Objectives:** Fair application of housing, rent and allocation rules, protect rights, balance the scarcity with access rights.

**Concerns:** Interpreting complex dynamic housing law, pressure due to the housing crisis, increase of appeals.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium, final word on appeals, enforce regulation compliance but works in assignment,



Judiciary

“ People worsen their situation to a level to get an urgency appeal, and argue this in court.  
- Housing corporation ”



**Influence**

**Role:** Set housing regulations, translate their parties vision in their housing philosophies, agenda setting for housing.

**Interests/Objectives:** Progressive: social housing emphasis, tenant protection. Right: mid-segment, market solutions. Both win votes on housing

**Concerns:** Voter pressure, long waiting lists, affordability gap, speculation on policies, ecological limits, high level of appeals.

**Influence/Relations:** High, set municipal agenda, legislate housing ordinances/zoning/budgets, translate vision to policy.



Political parties

“  
Political parties are not there for the people, they try to save their own skin.  
- House seeker  
”

**Indirect**

**Role:** Organise protests, lobby for policy changes (e.g. Woonprotest Utrecht, Woonopstand)

**Interests/Objectives:** Affordable housing for all, rent control, expand social housing stock, resist gentrification, advocate squatting rights.

**Concerns:** High rents, discrimination, lack of power of the tenant, displacement, housing shortage.

**Influence/Relations:** Low influence, limited power but growing public debate/dialogue, mobilise public.



Housing activists

“  
You have to do something to led your voice to be heard.  
- House seeker  
”

**Indirect**

**Role:** Cover housing crisis, policy debates, human interest stories (e.g. RTV Utrecht, AD Utrecht, DUB)

**Interests/Objectives:** Report crisis impact, shape public opinion, hold providers/politicians accountable, generate engagement.

**Concerns:** Staying objective, verification, covering all facts.

**Influence/Relations:** Medium, shape public opinion, perceived as truth, create pressure on government and public debate.



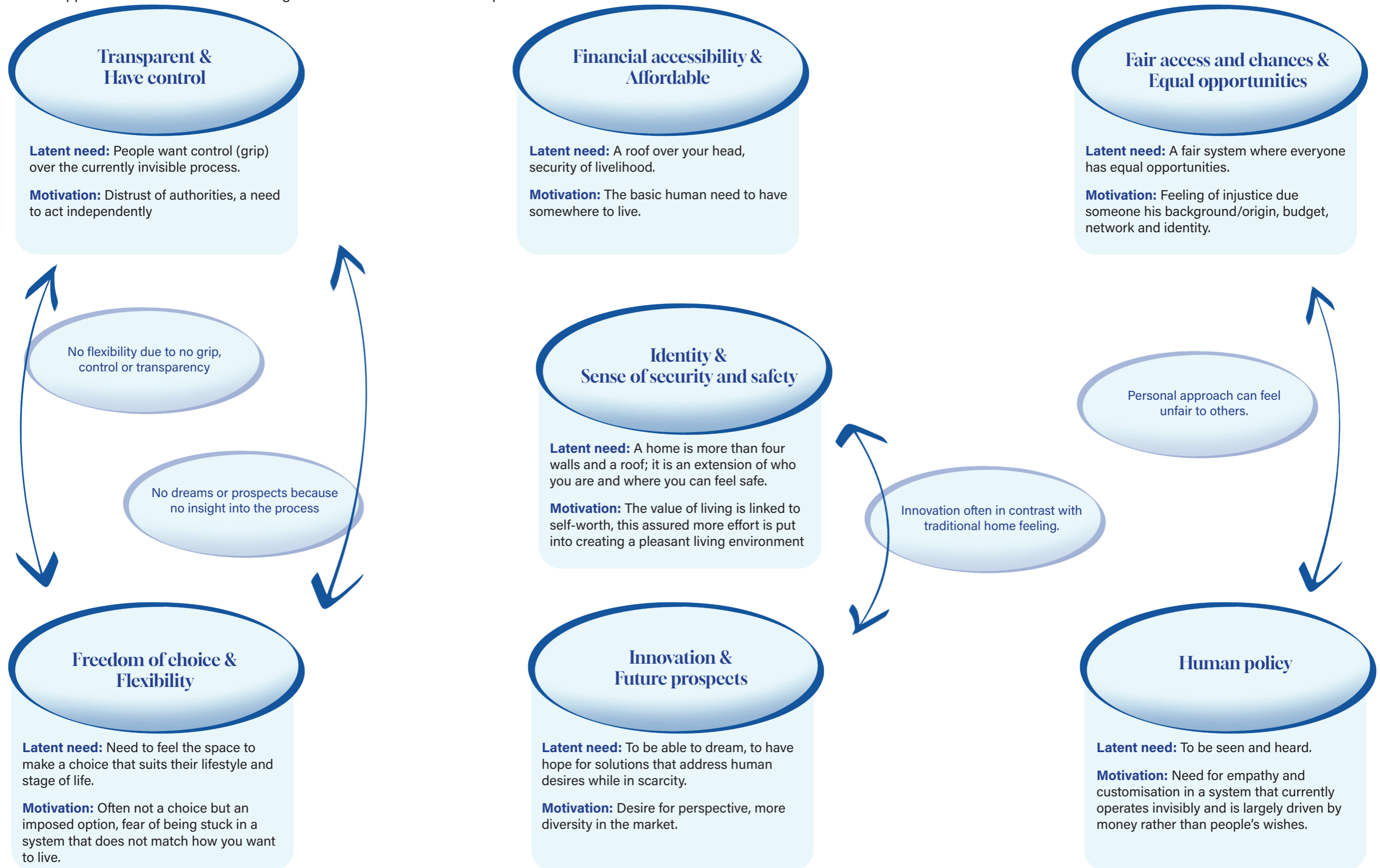
Media

“  
And also the noise that asylum seekers et a house sooner, on TV and talk shows, I really don't know what is true anymore  
- House seeker  
”



## Appendix E: Latent Need Clusters of Street Interviews

In this Appendix the clusters from the insights of the street interviews are presented.

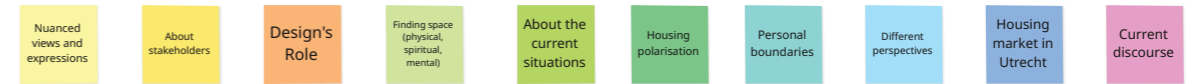


# Appendix F

## Assumption Dumption

This Appendix details the assumption dumption conducted prior to context mapping. This process identifies my preconceptions regarding the research question and topic, enabling a more open and receptive approach in subsequent interviews.

## 1. Define Assumption Theme's



## 2. Assumptions





### 3. Prioritise in relevance

#### Relevant - High priority

#### Relevant - Medium priority

#### Less relevant

#### To investigate further

### Key questions to resolve with context mapping

- What is the existing polarisation?
- Who interacts with whom in the system? Does there exist polarisation in the current discourse?
- Can people assert personal boundaries?
- Where is 'dehumanising' recognised in the system?
- What is the common ground/nuanced view in the context?
- Where does the design intervention need to happen?
- What are the stakes with tension where the intervention can lead to depolarisation?
- Which design methods can help depolarise the recognised tension?



# Appendix G

## Evidence for the Assigned Nodes

This Appendix presents the arguments for choosing the different nodes in the COM-B model, and a quick glance at all nodes (refer to the end of the Appendix). Each node is structured around insights from interviews with starters, status holders, and stakeholders, from the literature review, and from the street interview. The research conducted in this report also serves as the basis for creating the different nodes. This Appendix structures the argumentation into four sections: the experience journey and interviews with status holders (EJ), street intervention (SI), stakeholder interviews (StI), S-R&C (the System for respect and co-existence), and literature and foundations in this report (L).

For every node, there are more arguments than presented; this appendix shows the ones that prompted me to build a separate node for this in the behavioural map. The structure of the node is [who] - [their related abilities, factors, motivations, or actions], e.g., the silent middle 'has an understanding of how the housing system works' is described as their Capacity (C1), a level of their understanding of how the housing system works.

### M1: Silent middle: Trust in institutions

#### Argumentation

**SI:** You pay every year, you are enrolled to woningnet, but what does that mean? ("Je betaalt elk jaar, en je bent dan wel ingeschreven op woningnet maar wat betekent dat?").

**EJ:** Sometimes I wonder whether there even is a system behind all this, ("Soms vraag ik mij af of er wel een systeem achter zit").

**EJ:** Uncertainty in the system and rules of the game.

**L:** Affective polarisation describes growing mistrust or hostility directed toward members of opposing group.

**S-R&C:** Loop for Informational access.

**Feeling:** Frustration with opaque institutions.

### M3: Silent middle: Fear of social conflict

#### Argumentation

**SI:** I would only be able to talk if the pressure decreased ("Ik zou pas kunnen praten als de druk wat lager is").

**SI:** If the other has a place and I don't, the conversation feels unfair from the start, ("Als de ander een plek heeft en ik niet, voelt het gesprek oneerlijk van het begin").

**L:** Willingness to engage in dialogue rejected due to perceived threat. Siev et al. (2024) shows "ambivalent individuals face unexpected social costs in political conflicts"

**SI:** Dialogue was not only rejected due to prejudice, but also because participants felt it wouldn't solve the material problem

### M2: Silent middle: Perceived fairness of housing allocation

#### Argumentation

**SI:** The distribution is not fair; residents who are struggling seem less urgent, ("De verdeling is niet eerlijk verdeeld, eigen inwoners die het zwaar hebben lijkt minder urgent").

**SI:** The way of finding and searching does not feel the same for everyone, ("De manier van vinden en zoeken voelt niet gelijk voor iedereen").

**EJ:** Obstacles include perception of inequality and not being seen.

**S-R&C:** Fairness is key building block in respect system - Understand how system fails everyone, not just you.

**SI:** Suddenly, a lot of homes were being built for those Ukrainians, but nothing for us, ("Er werden voor die Oekraïners opeens wel heel veel woningen gebouwd.")

### M4: Silent middle: Empathy toward status holder and newcomers

#### Argumentation

**SI:** The majority voted for that everyone deserves a house, no matter where you are from. But a tension between believing everyone deserves housing and feeling there's no place for them anymore. The votes in the middle showed that they deserve a house despite personal struggle.

**SI (conflicted):** I believe everyone should have shelter, but not everyone automatically deserves a house, ("Ik vind wel dat iedereen een onderdak mag hebben, maar ik vind niet dat iedereen gelijk een huis mag hebben.")

**SI:** Recognition that everyone deserves shelter while feeling personal urgency is overlooked.

**L:** Cognitive and emotional empathy needed to genuinely understand other side's feelings and values



### M5: Silent middle: Sense of personal efficacy in influencing housing policy

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** At some point, you've done everything you can, and then it seems so hopeless. How can this ever work out? ("Op een gegeven moment heb je alles gedaan, en dan is het zo uitzichtloos, hoe kan dit dan ooit gaan lukken?")

**EJ:** You are completely sidelined. ("Je wordt volledig buiten spel gezet.")

**EJ:** Feeling of total powerlessness and lack of control

**EJ:** Tension lies in powerlessness and ignorance ("De spanning zit in de machteloosheid en in onwetendheid").

**L:** Total powerlessness is associated with extremism and scapegoating.

### M6: Local media: Motivation to maximise engagement through outrage and "juicy" content

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** And also the noise that asylum seekers get a house sooner, on TV and talk shows, I really don't know what is true anymore. ("En ook de ruis dat asielzoekers sneller een huis krijgen, op TV en talkshows, ik weet echt niet meer wat waar is").

**StI:** Media puts the status holders under fire. ("Media legt statushouders onder vuur"). Intense media coverage framing housing context reinforces polarisation.

**L:** Media amplifies extreme viewpoints, limiting expression of nuanced positions. Divisive rhetoric is used to capture attention and social media amplifies divisive content (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021).

**L:** Public debate amplifies extreme viewpoints from those who scream the loudest.

### M7: Municipality: Motivation to avoid political backlash and follow regulations

#### Argumentation

**StI:** We are stuck - we can't build fast enough, so we try to be fair with urgency rules. But fairness to one group feels unfair to another, ("We zitten vast - we kunnen niet snel genoeg bouwen, dus proberen we eerlijk te zijn met urgentievoorschriften. Maar wat voor de ene groep eerlijk is, voelt voor een andere groep oneerlijk").

**StI:** We choose to invest unevenly in equal opportunities, ("Wij kiezen om ongelijk te investeren in gelijke kansen").

**StI:** Municipality concerns include balancing urgency cases and political pressure. Municipality must meet national goals, 60% affordable by 2040 while managing social cohesion.

### M8: Silent middle: Feeling that personal rejection is acknowledged as systemic, not personal failure

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** Is it just me? Sometimes you could fill in details, how much you earn and so on, and that made me wonder, is it just me that they don't like my profile?

("Het was een beetje het gevoel van ligt het aan mij? Soms kon je gegevens invullen, hoeveel je verdient enzo, en dan ging ik het afvragen, hey ligt het nou gewoon aan mij, dat ze van mijn profiel niet willen.")

**EJ:** It felt discouraging; you crash every time. I must be stupid, and there is no house for me. ("Het voelde moedeloos, dan wordt je na elke keer gecrasht. Ik ben stom en er is geen huis voor mij"). Latent need of struggle acknowledged.

**S-R&C:** Validation that rejection is not personal failure. Currently perception of inequality and not being seen.

**L:** Making people "realize rejection is due to systemic, not personal, failure" shifts paradigm.

### M9 Silent middle: Maintenance of self-worth despite system pressure

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** System forces ethical transgressions: It feels like I have made a pact with the devil, ("Het voelt alsof ik een pact met de duivel heb gemaakt").

**EJ:** "Voelt niet goed, maar je doet er toch aan mee, dat voelt vies, voelt gewoon heel vies." (It doesn't feel right, but you do end up participating, that feels dirty, feels very gross)

**EJ:** Emotional exhaustion and ethical transgression were seen as big obstacles.

**S-R&C:** Basic Dignity & Ethical Integrity" identified as core element: "Not being forced into ethical transgression" and "Maintaining self-worth and moral integrity despite competitive pressure.

**L:** The Sociometer Model (Hogg et al., 2008) suggests that self-esteem tracks social inclusion; repeated rejection lowers self-esteem. This erosion, combined with unprocessed stress, drives defensiveness and scapegoating.

### M10: Silent middle: Confidence in future housing stability

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** While happy and relieved about having secured a place, successful renters often express a lack of complete satisfaction due to the knowledge that the arrangement is temporary.

**EJ:** Muted feeling of accomplishment - realising housing restrictions limit future options, likelihood of securing next place seems even more remote"

**EJ:** Seekers recognise that their housing search journey during the housing crisis restricts their daily and future freedom and choices.

### M11: Silent middle: Emotional resilience/capacity

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** After rejections, they experience intense emotional crash. They often blame themselves and feel mentally exhausted

**EJ:** Initial motivation has evolved into negative relationship with search project

**EJ:** Mental toll and loss of daily freedom prompt them to stop searching and accept current living situation

**EJ:** We had no hope anymore, we couldn't do it anymore, ("De moed zat in onze schoenen, we konden niet meer" ).

**EJ:** Time-consuming and draining process that can lead to growing frustrations.

**EJ:** What works well: Acknowledging and processing disappointment rationally to sustain search effort.

**L:** Unprocessed stress or guilt makes people defensive; processing feelings reduces defensiveness.

**SI:** If we keep letting so many people in, there won't be any place left in a few years. (Permanent scarcity concern). Their need seems to be guaranteed future where they can find housing without taking steps backward in life.

**EJ:** At some point you've done everything, then it seems hopeless, ("Op een gegeven moment heb je alles gedaan, en dan is het zo uitzichtloos").

**SI:** Young person expressed fear "afraid of regression: afraid to have to take step back in life, moving back to parents"



### Op1: Silent middle: Opportunity to access neutral dialogue spaces

#### Argumentation

**SI:** A dialogue sounds nice, but it doesn't change anything about the housing shortage, ("Een dialoog klinkt mooi, maar het verandert niks aan de woning nood"). Dialogue was rejected because participants felt it wouldn't solve material problem or felt threatening

**SI:** Talking doesn't help if you don't live in the same reality, ("Praten helpt niet als je niet in dezelfde realiteit leeft").

**L:** IOM research shows "connection is very important" and activities that "stimulate exchange" work well.

**L:** De Haan (2023) and Barbeito Thonon (2025) emphasize climate of trust and creating contact zones where rules of engagement are open to negotiation; an environment where one does not feel judged.

### Op3 – Neighbourhood networks: Level of inclusiveness toward newcomers

#### Argumentation

**StI:** Housing corporations note "You recognise friction with the neighbourhood: 'we do not want this group in our neighbourhood.'"

**StI:** Neighbourhood committees can delay projects through protests and appeals

**L:** Koch et al. (2023) shows local configurations of social relations significantly influence strength of popular mobilisation

**EJ:** Status holder noted that he felt much more welcome in his new neighbourhood, when on the first day he was welcome by the neighbourhood 'chair'

### Op2 – Silent middle: Exposure to diverse housing stories

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** It is hard to know what is true anymore, ("En ook de ruis dat asielzoekers sneller een huis krijgen, op TV en talkshows, ik weet echt niet meer wat waar is").

**L:** Exposure to like-minded media, an information vacuum filled with selective polarised narratives, increases polarisation" but diverse perspectives can help if done carefully (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021).

**EJ:** What worked well were facilitate structured interaction between successful seekers and developers who genuinely prioritise social good.

**L:** IOM research shows personal stories with real people showed more impactful and created faster connection.

### Op4 – Digital platforms: Presence of safe, moderated spaces for nuance

#### Argumentation

**EJ -Activity:** Seekers browse online (Huurwoningen.nl, Funda, Paradius, DAK, SSH)

**EJ:** No safe spaces for expressing conflicted feelings or concerns online.

**EJ:** Digital platforms currently amplify conflict (B4, M6), not nuance.

**StI:** Digital platforms currently have low housing availability and lack mechanisms for nuanced discussion

**L:** Bialetti (2021) suggests online platforms could reduce polarisation if designed for cross-partisan bridges.

### Op5 – Silent middle: Degree of perceived scarcity of affordable homes

#### Argumentation

**L:** Utrecht has waiting list for social housing of over 11 years, shortage of 400,000 homes nationally.

**EJ:** Seekers Acknowledge extreme competition; recognise that securing viewing requires urgency and speed. The competition is described as gigantic.

**SI:** It feels a bit impossible nowadays to get a house. ("Het voelt een beetje onmogelijk tegenwoordig om een huis te krijgen.")

**SI** Concerns about becoming homeless, fear of not finding something in future

**EJ- Obstacle:** No prospects of finding something, no other options for searching.

**L:** Scarcity creates "zero-sum mindset" and "anxiety and uncertainty" (Patkós, 2024)

### Op6 – Municipality: Extent of accessible public participation channels

#### Argumentation

**StI:** Municipality has "Woontafel" (housing table) where tenant groups participate.

**StI:** No accessible channels for non-organized citizens to influence policy

**StI** Managing "equal chances in a non-equal division"

**L:** Pruitt and Thomas (2007) showed facilitating democratising dialogue includes collaborative design of the process.

### Op7 – Municipalities/corporations: Recognition of seeker struggles

#### Argumentation

**SI:** You pay every year but see or hear nothing back, ("Je betaald elk jaar, en je bent dan wel ingeschreven maar wat betekent dat?").

**EJ:** A need for human-to-human contact where people feel others are putting effort in for them

**S-R&C:** Need for being seen and validated. Personal struggle acknowledged without judgment.

**EJ:** A need for recognition from system (government, municipality, housing corporations) that struggle is real and seen.

**EJ:** Seekers feel completely sidelined ("volledig buiten spel gezet").

### Op8: Silent middle: Opportunity to use tools for informed choice-making within constraints

#### Argumentation

**EJ-Activity:** Seekers mention having no control. ("Je hebt er gewoon geen grip op").

**EJ - Activity:** Explore new options for searching by looking for loopholes in the system.

**EJ:** It worked well to use fast responses and notification alerts.

**EJ:** It worked well if there was clarity about personal non-negotiable requirements.

**EJ:** A need for making informed choices about which paths to pursue, deciding how much energy to invest and when to strategically pause"

**S-R&C:** Need for agency&control, having the information to navigate strategically.



### Op9 – Municipality/corporations/ neighbourhoods: Peer support networks for emotional processing

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** Worked well to have a support network providing technical and emotional support. Successful candidates have social network that helps with gathering necessary documentation.

**EJ- Activity:** “Return to their network with their frustrations and ask for help”

**S-R&C:** Space for Emotional expression & relief: Processing possible internal conflict or guilt from ethical compromises.

**L:** Permission to feel conflicted emotions (wanting to respect others but also feeling desperate yourself). See shared struggles, lowering stress, creating breathing room.

### II – Municipality of Utrecht: Level of transparency about housing allocation rules and waiting times

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** Way of searching doesn't feel same for everyone. (“De manier van vinden en zoeken voelt niet gelijk voor iedereen”)

**EJ:** Overwhelmed from outset, lost in maze of confusing paperwork, bewildered by unfamiliar social housing procedures

**EJ:** Immediately encounter discouraging systemic barriers (income demands, etc.)

**EJ:** It worked well to have knowledge about one's own position in the process. Insight into time lines, next steps, and requirements. And understanding rules of the game, instead of feeling lost in chaos.

**S-R&C:** Need for information access and communication and contextualisation.

### Op10 – Silent middle: Quality of human interaction in the process.

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** What worked well: Experiencing a ‘human element’ in the final stages (e.g., kind contact with specific landlords/cooperatives)/

**EJ-Obstacle:** “Crowded viewings where they feel like a number”

**EJ-Obstacle:** Even after success, process lacks human touch, with bureaucratic entities pressuring for quick turnover and limited support.

**S-R&C:** Basic Dignity: The need to be treated as a human, not a number.

**EJ:** The interview with me was perceived nice, It was nice to have chat about this, to get my frustrations off chest. (“Het was fijn om hier over te jeppen, mijn frustratie eruit.”)

### I2 – Housing corporations: Clarity of communication on allocation and eligibility

#### Argumentation

**StI:** Housing corporation: “In scarcity you always have polarisation, since a fair system does not exist”: “If we are allowed, we can build a lot, but a lot of regulations slow down the process”. They have concerns about managing 10+ year waiting lists and allocation requirements.

**EJ-Obstacle:** “Communication often lacks clarity when it comes to when they can move, how contract works”

**SI:** You pay yearly...but what does that mean? (“Je betaald elk jaar...maar wat betekend dat? ”)

**S-R&C:** Communication about your applications, instead of radio silence.

### I3 – COA: Visibility of status-holder placement process

#### Argumentation

**StI:** COA: You can only participate with society with an address

**StI: Housing corporation:** “You recognize friction with the neighbourhood: ‘we do not want this group in our neighbourhood”

**EJ:** The process is opaque. “I don't know how it works. They just tell you when you have a house. Sometimes it's fast, sometimes it takes years. I don't know why.”

**SI:** Misundersatnding fuels blame: Suddenly, a lot of houses were being built for those Ukrainians. (“Er werden voor die Oekraïners opeens wel heel veel woningen gebouwd”).

**EJ:** You just have to wait until you get a house, (“Je moet gewoon wachten tot je een huis krijgt”).

**StI:** Concern of COA: Overflowing centres, protests and violence toward facilities, negative stigma

**L:** Information vacuum process feeds conspiracy theories.

### I4: Media: Intensity of coverage framing housing as zero-sum

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** You know who the real villain is: the media, they spread a lot of hate. (“Weet je wie de echte bosdoener is? De media. Ze zaaien alleen maar haat”).

**StI:** Media shape public opinion and can amplify conflict.

**L:** Divisive rhetoric used to capture attention creates zero-sum framing.

### I5 – Neighbourhood committees: Frequency of discussions about housing tensions

#### Argumentation

**StI:** Neighbourhoods concern high-density development, parking, safety, social cohesion with a lot of newcomers, noise disturbance.

**StI:** They can have discussions about housing tensions and can influence through protests and appeals.

**StI:** Growing activism surrounding new construction.

### I6 – Developers and landlords: Influence on scarcity narrative

#### Argumentation

**StI:** Private landlord: “I particularly like it as a provision for my pension”

**StI: Vastgoed belang:** Legislation and regulation causes housing market misery. It is the populism that leads to the housing crisis. “We want to offer rooms without losing money, and people want to find a room, let us do our thing”

**EJ:** Perception of the seekers and real estate agent is that urban developers, only go after the money.

**StI:** Concern developers: affordable housing quotas, material costs, complex zoning

**L:** Perception of scarcity drives zero-sum mindset even beyond actual shortage.



### I7 – Social Design Agency: Amount of involvement.

#### Argumentation

An node added to test where they can have direct intervention, and show their influence in the system.

**L:** Design can shape objects as mediators.

### I8 – Housing corporations: Feedback on application rejections

#### Argumentation

**EJ-Obstacle:** Seekers often hear nothing back after submitting their applications.

**EJ- Obstacle:** Receive rejection for the house, with no explanation and have to start the process again.

**EJ:** No prospects of finding something

**S-R&C:** Information access & Communication: about your applications, instead of radio silence.

**S-R&C:** Basic dignity and being validated: that rejection is not personal failure"

**EJ-Opportunity:** Implement pluralisation mechanisms—approaches that provide feedback on rental applications, explaining rejections and contextualizing competition.

**EJ:** Lack of feedback contributes to personalisation of systemic failure.

### I9: Housing corporations/municipality: Design of human touchpoints in allocation process

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** It worked well having experienced a 'human element' in final stages (kind contact with specific landlords/cooperatives).

**EJ - Obstacle:** Crowded viewings where they feel like a number.

**EJ - Obstacle:** Viewing process is impersonal, rushed, shared with many other applicants, leads to feeling of disconnection.

**EJ - Obstacle:** Process lacks human touch, bureaucratic entities pressuring for quick turnover, limited support.

**EJ-Opportunity:** Facilitate structured interaction between successful seekers and developers who genuinely prioritize social good and community.

### I10 – Municipality: Visibility of system complexity (not individual blame)

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** A need to contextualise why you did not get a house. Recognise that others are not taking your spot; there are simply not enough spots.

**EJ:** Understanding that system fails everyone, not just you

**EJ:** Opportunity to implement pluralization mechanisms that help applicants understand rejection is not personal attack.

**SI:** Current framing leads to the feeling that Dutch should get priority. ("Nederlands moeten voorrang krijgen").

**L:** Information vacuum causes people to fill gaps with assumptions that leverage scapegoating.

### B1 – The silent middle: Frequency of participation in public debate

#### Argumentation

**SI:** Silent middle struggle internally between belief that everyone deserves home and frustration with real market conditions.

**EJ:** Often feeling confused by contrasting public messages.

**EJ:** Don't know how to answer as they lack context. ("Daar durf ik niks over te zeggen").

**L:** Silent middle refrain from blaming other groups but don't actively participate.

**L:** Current state of polarisation shows a disengagement trap as people feel participation is futile.

### B2 – Silent middle: Likelihood of expressing nuanced opinions publicly

#### Argumentation

**SI:** Voting showed middle group exists but holding ambivalent positions comes at social cost. ('Iedereen verdient een huis, ongeacht waar je vandaan komt' and 'Ik heb het gevoel dat er voor mij geen plek meer is' (voted on both statements - holding complexity)).

**L:** Silent middle process issue rationally rather than emotionally.

**L:** Holding ambivalent positions on political issues tends to be costly in terms of likeability creating a barrier (Siev et al., 2024).

**L:** Shrinking space to form nuanced opinion, leads to shrinking middle group as people face pressure to choose sides.

### B3: Silent middle: Tendency to remain silent or disengaged

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** Mental toll and loss of daily freedom prompt them to stop searching and accept current living situation.

**EJ:** We had no hope anymore, difficult decision to stop because market keeps moving, ("De moed zat in onze schoenen, we konden niet meer, een lastige keuze om te stoppen want de markt dendert door").

**L:** Fear of conflict and group pressure causes withdrawal.

**L:** Silent middle feel pressure from both sides yet resist taking sides. Some refuse to engage, they don't need to talk to 'that scum'. ("Ik hoef niet te praten met dat tuig").

**SI:** Dialogue sounds nice but changes nothing ("Een dialoog klinkt mooi, maar het verandert niks aan de woning nood"). Several indicated they would only talk if pressure decreased.

### B4 – Local media: Speed of amplifying conflict

#### Argumentation

**L:** Media covers extreme viewpoints for engagement.

**L:** Public debate amplifies divisions rather than nuance (e.g. Not the 'normal' Jack invited to TV shows, but often the one with extreme opinions.)

**StI:** Media shape public opinion, perceived as truth, create pressure on government

**L:** Social media amplifies divisive content with algorithms and echo chambers (English & Mahendran, 2021)



### B5 – Neighbourhood committees: Propensity to personalise blame

#### Argumentation

**StI:** Housing corporations note: “You recognize friction with the neighbourhood: ‘we do not want this group in our neighbourhood’”

**StI:** Neighbourhood committees advocate for residents, sometimes creating friction with newcomer arrival.

**StI:** Neighbourhoods hold social cohesion concern with a lot of newcomers.

### B6 – Silent middle: Time and energy spent searching for housing

#### Argumentation

**EJ-Activity:** Slowly spend more time searching. Set up notifications. Actively monitor listings multiple times, from weekly to daily. After some time, routine involves frequently refreshing listings.

**EJ - Activity:** Start paying platforms to gain quicker access to new listings

**EJ:** It really felt like a second job. (“Het voelde echt als een tweede baan”).

**EJ - Obstacle:** Time-consuming and draining process that can lead to growing frustrations

**EJ - Feeling:** Finally finding time and mental space for hobbies and personal life (relief after finding).

### B7 – Silent middle: Pressure to compromise ethics (lie about relationships, exaggerate circumstances)

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** It feels like I made a pact with the devil. (“Het voelt alsof ik een pact met de duivel heb gemaakt”).

**EJ:** Doesn’t feel right, but you participate, feels dirty. (“Voelt niet goed, maar je doet er toch aan mee, dat voelt vies”).

**EJ:** Eventually we pretended to be a gay couple. (“Toen hebben we maar gedaan alsof we een gay koppel waren.”).

**EJ:** You have to play the game, otherwise you’ll be kicked out. (“Je moet meedoen met het spelletje, anders word je er gewoon uitgeknikkerd.”).

**EJ-Activity:** Writing a ‘zoetsappige’ motivation letter (overly sweet/manipulative).

**S-R&C:** Need for ethical integrity.

### C1 – Silent middle: Level of understanding of how the housing system works

#### Argumentation

**EJ:** I had no clue where to start (“Ik had geen idee waar ik moest beginnen”). Demonstrating initial lack of system knowledge

**EJ:** Overwhelmed from outset, lost in maze of confusing paperwork

**SI:** Sometimes I wonder whether there even is a system. (“Soms vraag ik mij af of er wel een systeem achter zit”).

**S-R&C:** Agency and control and Information access and communication: understanding rules of game instead of feeling lost in chaos. Contextualize why you did not get house. Recognize others not taking your spot; simply not enough spots.

**L:** Information gaps lead to fear of unknown (Carleton, 2016) and people fill these gaps with assumptions.

### C2 – Silent middle: Skill in and room for communicating emotions constructively

#### Argumentation

**S-R&C:** Feel space to express exhaustion, frustration, or anger. To have space for emotional expression and relief. Processing possible internal conflict or guilt from ethical compromises.

**EJ:** What worked well was the acknowledging and processing of disappointment rationally to sustain search effort.

**EJ- Activity:** Return to their network with frustrations and ask for help.

**EJ:** It was nice to chat about this, to get frustrations off chest, (“Het was fijn om hier over te jeppen, mijn frustraties eruit”).

**L:** Unprocessed stress makes people defensive and increases scapegoating; emotional safety is needed for dialogue.

### C3 – Municipality: Competence in facilitating emotionally charged dialogue

#### Argumentation

**StI:** Municipality must balance competing needs in high-stakes environment

**StI:** Their challenge is to provide equal chances in non-equal division.

**Finding:** No current mechanisms for facilitating dialogue between competing groups

**StI:** Their concern is managing refugee obligations, political pressure, social cohesion. And be restricted in communication due to privacy.

### C4 – Local media: Capacity to frame complex stories constructively

#### Argumentation

Media currently amplifies conflict (see I4, M6, B4) **StI:** Media has Motivation to maximise engagement through outrage and ‘juicy’ content. Opportunities exist to frame complexity without simplification. Their role is powerful shaping public opinion as perceived truth.

### C5 – Bridge builders/facilitators: Availability and training

#### Argumentation

**L:** Silent middle members process issue rationally, actively seek factual information

**L:** bridge builders are key to addressing polarisation, which stems from a weak middle and lack of cross-cutting connections (Brandsma, 2016; Koch et al., 2023).

**SI:** Potential bridge builders exist but lack infrastructure to activate

Need for trained facilitators to create neutral spaces (Op1, Op4).



### C6 – Silent middle: Skills in strategic navigation of the system

#### Argumentation

**EJ - Activity:** Explore new options and search for loopholes (e.g., actively searching for new building plans and apply through urban developers).

**EJ-What works well:** Using fast responses and notification alerts. And clarity about personal non-negotiable requirements.

**S-R&C:** Need for Agency and control: Practice strategic navigation and maintain autonomy within fixed constraints.

**EJ:** Successful candidates use proactive, personalised strategies.

### C7 – Silent middle: Capacity to resist group polarisation pressure

#### Argumentation

**L:** Silent middle can resist taking sides despite pressure from both extremes.

**L:** Siev et al. (2024) shows ambivalent positions on political issues tend to lose likability, which creates pressure to conform.

**L:** Silent middle members actively seek factual information to resist simplistic narratives

**L:** The group effect means people in a group tend to defend more extreme positions than individually (Barbeito Thonon, 2025).

### O1 – Utrecht society: Level of polarisation in the housing debate

#### Argumentation

**SI:** I'm not going to talk to that scum, ("Ik hoef niet met dat tuig in gesprek").

**SI:** Dutch youth should get priority, ("Nederlandse jongeren moeten voorgang krijgen")

**SI:** Active scapegoating and othering, dehumanizing characters assigned to opposing party. Public debate is in full swing (intervention stage, heat of conflict)

**L:** Toxic polarisation state where different groups start to dehumanize each other.

### O2 – Silent middle: Visibility in the public debate

#### Argumentation

**L:** Silent middle refrain from blaming other groups but don't participate actively. Koch et al. (2023) - weak and missing middle, lack of cross-cutting connections.

**SI:** Nuanced voices present but increasingly intolerable as neutrality becomes target. Shrinking the space to form nuanced opinion.

**EJ:** Silent middle members feel confused by contrasting public messages.

### O3 – Utrecht citizens: Degree of mutual trust and respect between groups

#### Argumentation

**SI:** I don't have to talk to that scum ("Ik hoef niet met dat tuig in gesprek.") (Active dehumanization)

**EJ:** Status holder: I hope that people will open their hearts, ("Ik hoop dat mensen hun hart gaan openen").

**Willingness for dialogue:** Would only talk if pressure decreased. ("Ik zou pas kunnen praten als de druk wat lager is").

**EJ:** Systemic frustration understandably but incorrectly directed at visible status holder.

**L:** Zero-sum competition creates adversarial environment

### O5 – Media: Proportion of nuanced vs polarised stories

#### Argumentation

**L:** Public debate amplifies extreme viewpoints, limiting expression of nuanced positions

**L:** Media coverage contributes to "shrinking space to form nuanced opinion"

**EJ:** Confusion about what's true due to conflicting media narratives

**SI:** Media faces tension between generate engagement and staying objective

**L:** Currently many exchanges remain non-dialogical reinforcing othering (De Haan, 2023)

**L:** for example could shift this.

### O4 – Municipality: Perceived legitimacy of housing policies

#### Argumentation

**SI:** Distribution is not fair, ("De verdeling is niet eerlijk verdeeld").

**SI:** Searching doesn't feel same for everyone, ("De manier van zoeken en vinden voelt niet gelijk voor iedereen").

**SI:** "Political parties are not there for the people, they try to save their own skin"

**S-R&C:** Perception of inequality and not being seen

**EJ:** Policy explanations often unclear and difficult to understand, giving pushers material to point to scapegoats.

### O6 – Silent middle: Propensity to become bridge builders vs. joiners

#### Argumentation

**L:** Feel confused by contrasting public messages, actively seek factual information, process issue rationally rather than emotionally.

**L:** Typically a starter or young person, driven by personal frustration and powerlessness. Begin to adopt pushers' views, channeling anger at ineffective system toward more visible 'other' group

**L:** Within silent middle, essential to identify and activate potential bridge builders, as their engagement is key to initiating depolarisation

**EJ:** Successful seekers can facilitate structured interaction, organize open forums highlighting housing stability enables freedom and productive citizenship for everyone

**L:** Silent middle shrinks as pressure mounts to 'choose sides.

**SI:** Some showed bridge-building potential ("I think dialogue is nice") while others became joiners (It seems like there is no place for me).



## Quick Glance Nodes

### Capacities

- C1: Silent Middle - Level of understanding of how the housing system works.
- C2: Silent Middle - Skill in and room for communicating emotions constructively.
- C3: Municipality - Competence in facilitating emotionally charged dialogue.
- C4: Local media: Capacity to frame complex stories constructively.
- C5: Silent Middle- Availability of bridge builders and training.
- C6: Silent Middle - Skills in strategic navigation of the system.
- C7: Silent middle - Capacity to resist group polarisation pressure.

### Opportunities

- Op1: Silent middle - Opportunity to access neutral dialogue spaces.
- Op2: Silent middle- Exposure to diverse housing stories.
- Op3: Neighbourhood networks - Level of inclusiveness toward newcomers.
- Op4: Digital platforms - Presence of safe, moderated spaces for nuance.
- Op5: Silent middle - Degree of perceived scarcity of affordable homes.
- Op6: Municipality- Extent of accessible public participation channels.
- Op7: Municipalities & housing corporations - Recognition of seeker struggles.
- Op8: Silent middle - Opportunity to use tools for informed choice-making within constraints.
- Op9: Silent middle-Presence of peer support networks.
- Op10: Silent middle- perceived quality of

human interaction in the process.

### Motivations

- M1: Silent middle: trust in institutions.
- M2: Silent middle: perceived fairness of housing allocation.
- M3: Silent middle - Fear of Social Conflict.
- M4: Silent middle - Empathy toward status holders and newcomers.
- M5: Silent middle - Sense of personal efficacy in influencing housing policy.
- M6: Local Media - Motivation to maximise engagement through outrage and 'juicy' content.
- M7: Municipality - Motivation to avoid political backlash and follow regulations.
- M8: Silent middle - Feeling that personal rejection is acknowledged by systemic, not personal failure.
- M9: Silent middle - Maintenance of self-worth despite system pressure.
- M10: Silent middle - Confidence in future housing stability.
- M11: Silent middle - Amount of emotional resilience/capacity.

### Behaviours

- B1: Silent middle -Frequency of participation in public debate.
- B2: Silent middle - Likelihood of expressing nuanced opinions publicly.
- B3: Silent middle - Tendency to remain silent or disengaged.
- B4: Local media - Speed of amplifying conflict.
- B5: Neighbourhood committees - Propensity to personalise blame.
- B6: Silent middle -Time & energy spent searching for housing.

- B7: Silent middle - Pressure to compromise ethics (lie about relationships, exaggerate circumstances). individual blame).

### Outcomes

- O1: Utrecht society- Level of polarisation in the housing debate.
- O2 Silent middle: Visibility in the public debate.
- O3 Utrecht citizens: degree of mutual trust and respect between groups.
- O4 Municipality: perceived legitimacy of housing policies.
- O5 Media: Proportion of nuanced vs polarised stories.
- O6 Silent middle: Propensity to become bridge builders vs. joiners.

### Interventions

- I1 Municipality of Utrecht: Level of transparency about housing allocation rules and waiting times.
- I2 Housing corporations: Clarity of communication on allocation and eligibility.
- I3 COA: Visibility of status-holder placement process.
- I4 Media: Intensity of coverage framing housing as zero-sum.
- I5 Neighbourhood committees: Frequency of discussions about housing tensions.
- I6 Developers and landlords: Influence on scarcity narrative.
- I7 Snijboon: Involvement in dialogue spaces.
- I8 Housing corporations: Feedback on application rejections.
- I9: Housing corporations/municipality/ NGO's: Design of human touchpoints in process.
- I10: Visibility of system complexity (not



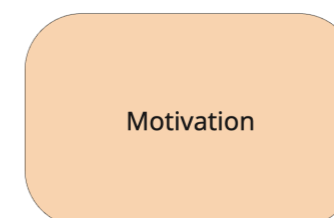
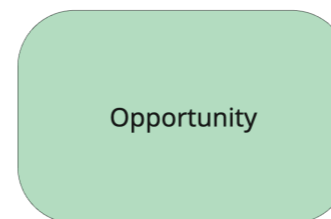
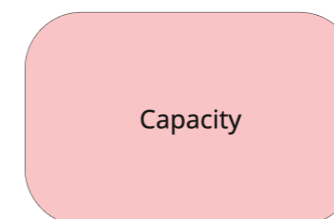
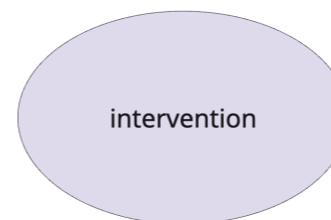
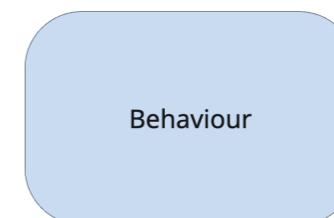
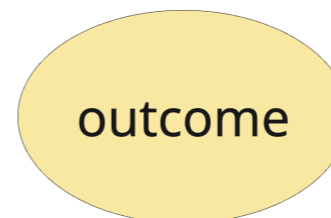
# Appendix H

## Full System Map

This Appendix presents the full system map. The map is built from the nodes shown in Appendix G. The connections are based on research in Sections 1, 2, and 3 of this report, as well as the literature review and logical reasoning. First, the legend is shown.

The system in this Appendix is the cleaned-up, simpler version, designed to maximise readability for such a big file. The original map is more extensive, shown on the last page to give an impression, linked to the elements of the system for respect and coexistence.

### Legend

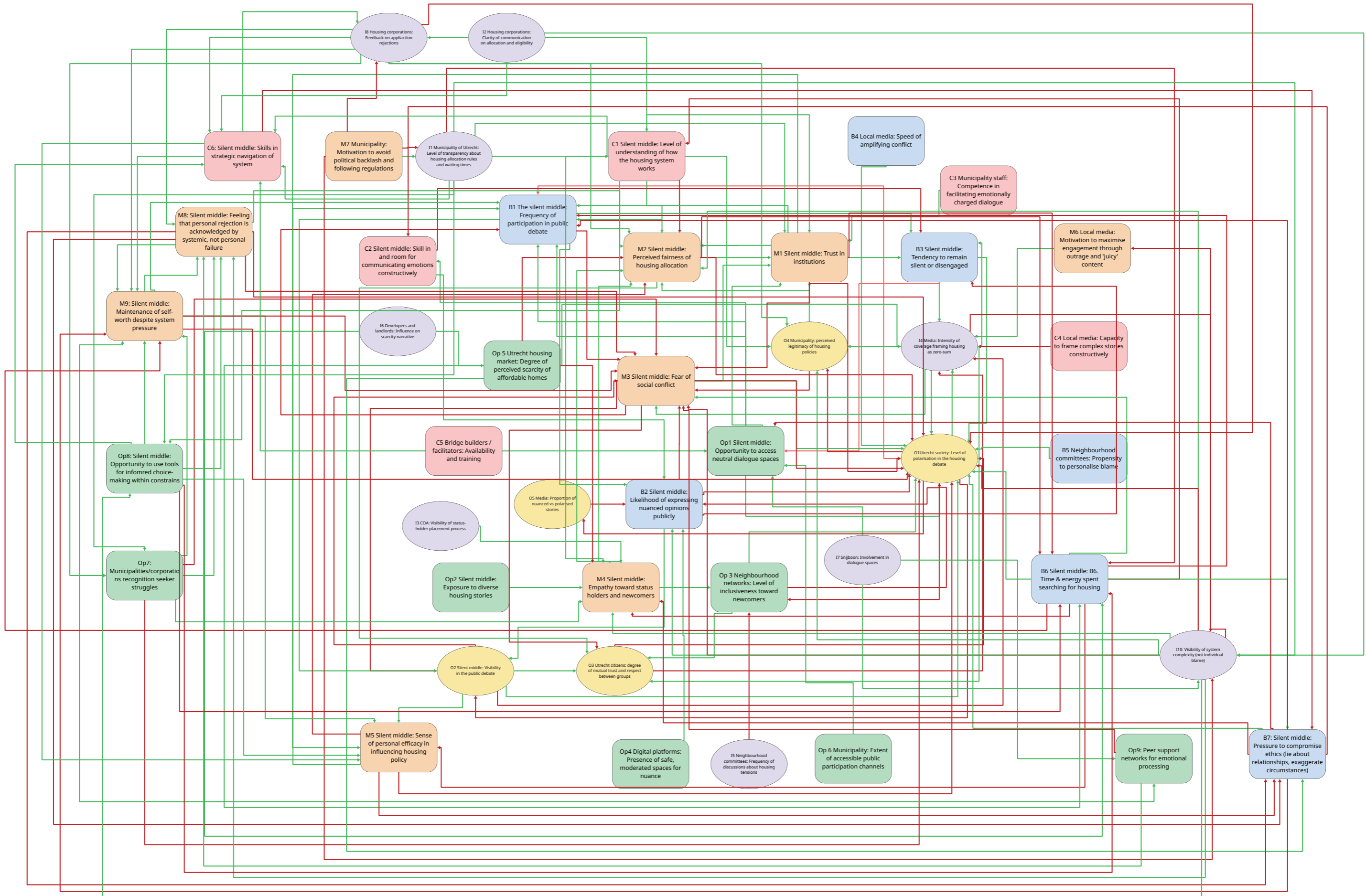


→ Negative influence

→ Positive influence



# Simplified Version







# Appendix I

## CLD Loops

This Appendix presents the recognised CLD loops resulting from the Leverage theory analysis. In the loops presented in the following pages, the green arrow represents a reinforcing relation and the red arrow a negative relation. Within the loops, one node is tagged as 'bigger' or 'smaller', indicating the critical factor that initiates the loops and is either reinforced or balanced by the feedback loop.

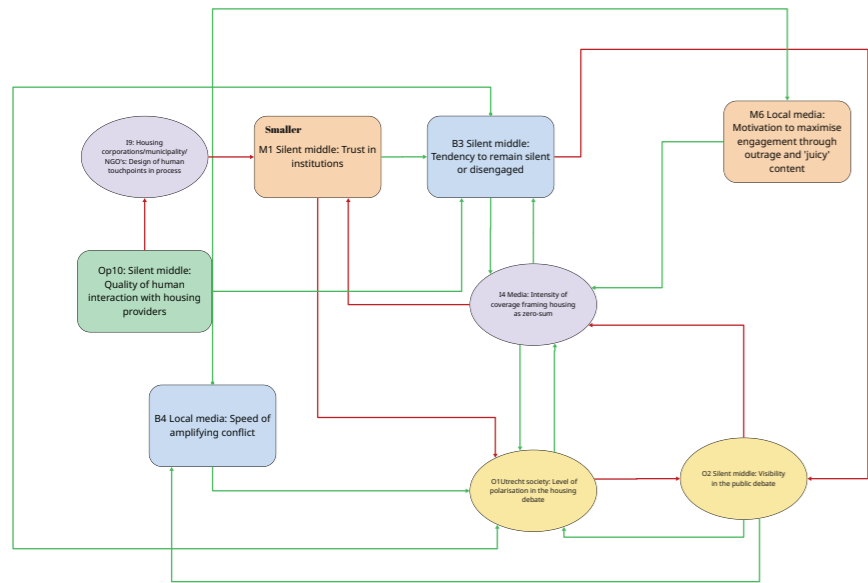
## Quick Glance Loops

The following 'negative spiral CLD are recognised:

- Loop 1: Loop of Institutional Distrust
- Loop 2: The Disengagement Trap of the Silent Middle
- Loop 3: Scarcity Fear Amplifying Competition
- Loop 4: Dignity Collapsing Spiral
- Loop 5: The Exhaustion Radicalisation Pipeline
- Loop 6: Information Vacuum Leading to Individual Blame

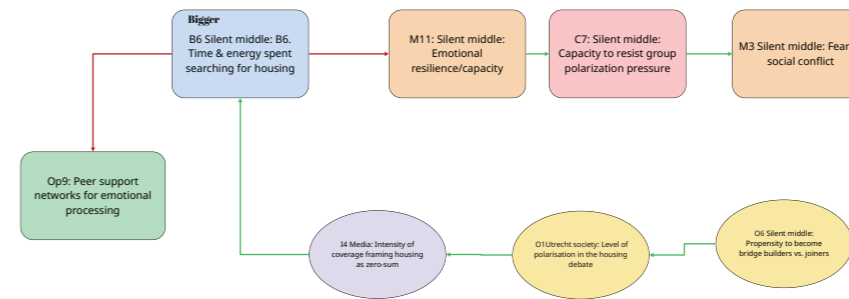
And the following balancing loops were found:

- Loop 7: The Understanding Agency Trust Builder
- Loop 8: The Validation and Dignity Restoration
- Loop 9: The Silent Middle Activation
- Loop 10: The Empathy-Respect Reinforcement
- Loop 11: The Resilience Expression Reinforcement
- Loop 12: The Humanisation to Trust Cycle
- Loop 13: Middle Ground Defence System



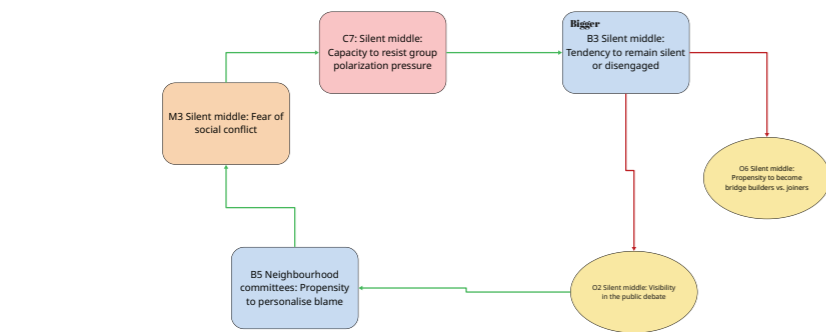
**LOOP 1: INSTITUTIONAL DISTRUST**

Poor interaction quality (Op10) reinforces silence (B3) because people feel dehumanized and withdraw. Lack of human touchpoint design (I9) perpetuates poor interactions, further eroding trust (M1).



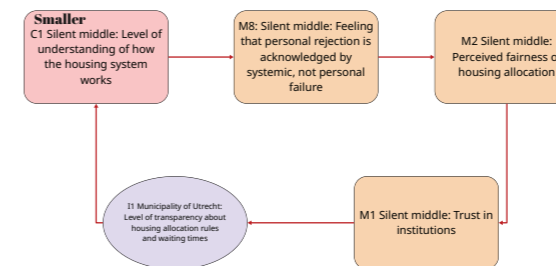
**LOOP 5: THE EXHAUSTION RADICALISATION PIPELINE**

Time/energy exhaustion (B6) depletes emotional resilience (M11), which undermines capacity to resist group polarization (C7). Depleted people become joiners (O6), increasing overall polarization (O1), which media amplifies (I4), creating more stress and exhaustion (B6). Absence of peer support (Op9) accelerates depletion.



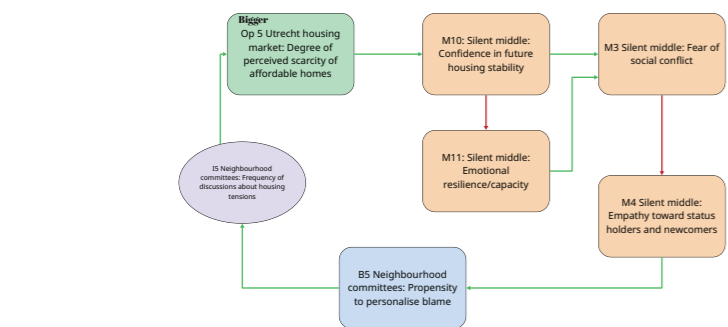
**LOOP 2: THE DISENGAGEMENT TRAP OF THE SILENT MIDDLE**

When silent middle lacks capacity to resist group polarization pressure (C7), they either remain silent (B3) or become joiners (O6). As more become joiners, fear of conflict (M3) increases for remaining middle, reinforcing silence.



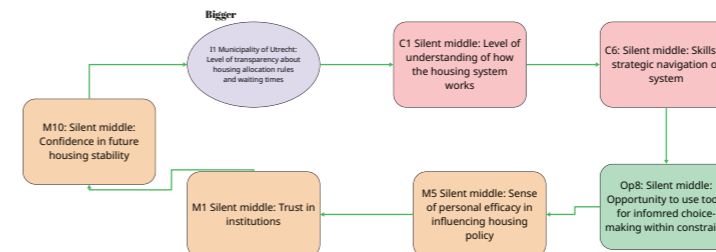
**LOOP 6: THE INFORMATION VACCUUM LEADING TO BLAME**

With no understanding of how the system feels (C1), changes are higher of taking it personal (M8), decreasing the perceived fairness (M2) with less trust in institutions (M1), making them less keen on being transparent (I1)



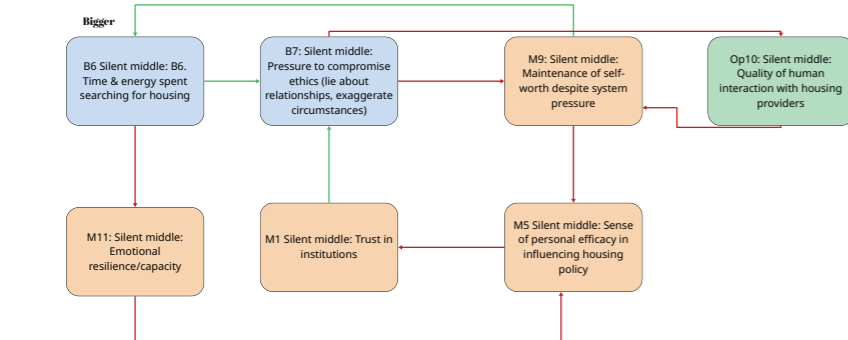
**LOOP 3: SCARCITY FEAR AMPLIFYING COMPETITION**

Perceived scarcity (Op5) directly undermines future housing confidence (M10), which depletes emotional resilience (M11) and amplifies fear (M3). This creates zero-sum thinking, reducing empathy (M4) and increasing blame (B5).



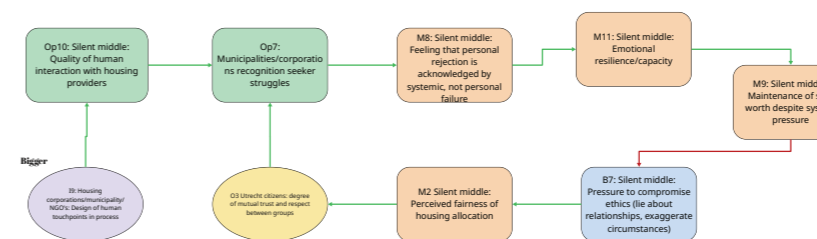
**LOOP 7: THE UNDERSTANDING AGENCY TRUST BUILDER**

System understanding (C1) not only enables navigation (C6) but also builds capacity to resist simplistic narratives (C7). Transparency about timelines (I1) sets realistic expectations, which paradoxically INCREASES future confidence (M10) by reducing false hope. This strengthens trust (M1).



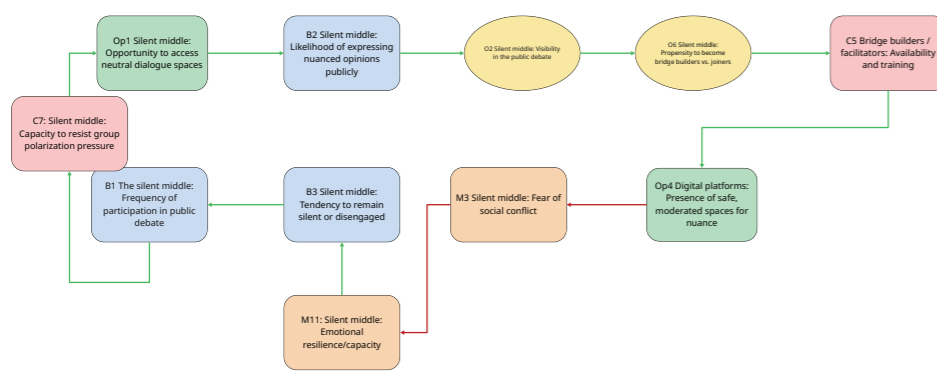
**LOOP 4: DIGNITY COLLAPSING SPIRAL**

When silent middle lacks capacity to resist group polarization pressure (C7), they either remain silent (B3) or become joiners (O6). As more become joiners, fear of conflict (M3) increases for remaining middle, reinforcing silence.



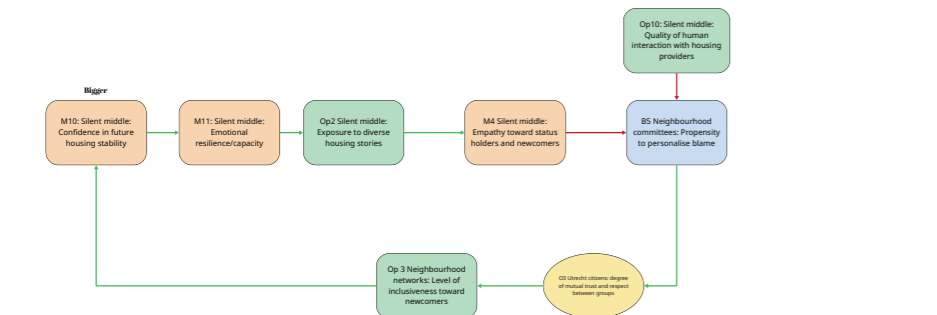
**LOOP 8: THE VALIDATION AND DIGNITY RESTORATION**

Design of human touchpoints (I9) directly improves interaction quality (Op10), which is recognition (Op7). Quality interaction not only protects self-worth (M9) but also replenishes emotional resilience (M11). This prevents ethical compromise (B7) and improves perceived fairness (M2).



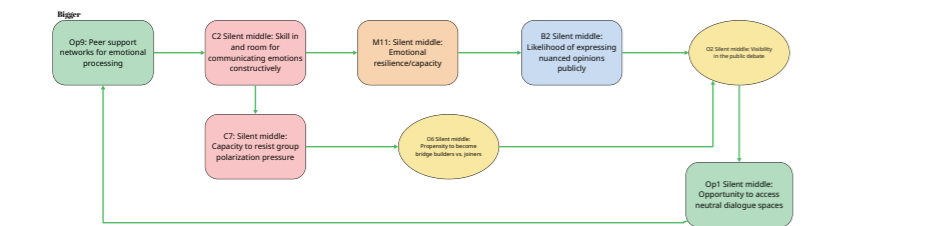
**LOOP 9: THE SILENT MIDDLE ACTIVATION**

Neutral spaces (Op1) enable nuanced expression (B2) when people have resistance capacity (C7) or emotional resilience (M11). Visibility (O2) allows some to adopt bridge builder role (O6), who become facilitators (C5) and create more neutral spaces (Op1), generating more bridge builders. As bridge builders increase, mutual respect (O3) emerges, which replenishes resilience (M11) system-wide.



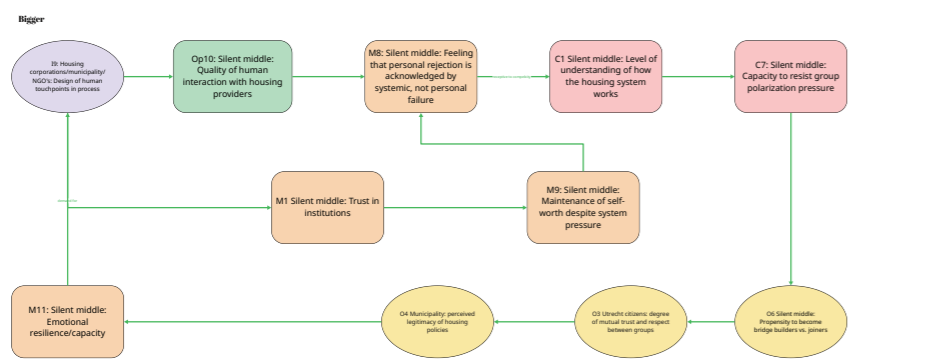
**LOOP 10: THE EMPATHY-RESPECT REINFORCEMENT**

Future confidence (M10) provides emotional buffer that enables resilience (M11), which creates capacity for empathy (M4). Empathy motivates exposure to diverse stories (Op2) which deepens empathy further and reduces blame (B5). Mutual respect (O3) creates inclusive neighborhoods (Op3), where interaction quality improves (Op10), reinforcing sense of stability (M10).



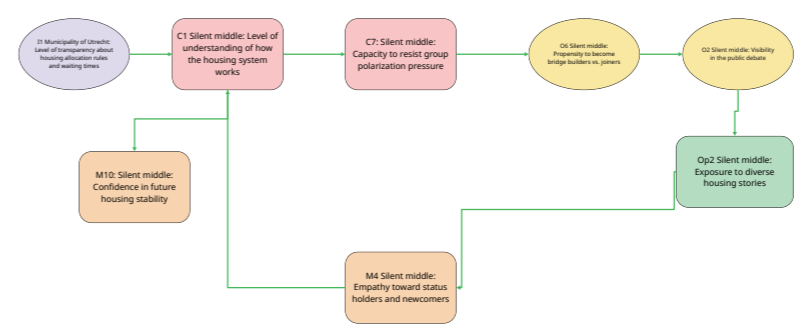
**LOOP 11: THE RESILIENCE EXPRESSION REINFORCEMENT**

Peer support networks (Op9) build emotional communication skills (C2), which replenish resilience (M11). Resilience enables nuanced expression (B2), increasing visibility (O2), which creates demand for more dialogue spaces (Op1) and more peer support (Op9). Resilience also builds resistance capacity (C7) and enables bridge building (O6).



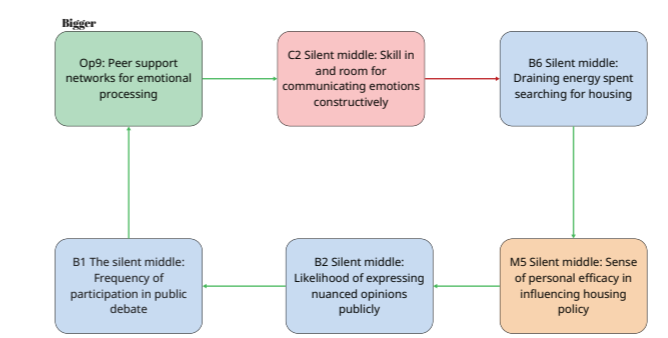
**LOOP 12: THE HUMANISATION TO TRUST CYCLE**

Human touchpoint design (O9) improves interaction quality (Op10), which helps people see rejection as systemic not personal (M8). This makes them RECEPTIVE to understanding system complexity (C1), which builds resistance to simplistic narratives (C7). This enables bridge building (O6), creating mutual respect (O3), which increases policy legitimacy (O4) and trust (M1), creating political space for more humane design (O9).



**LOOP 13: MIDDLE-GROUND DEFENSE SYSTEM**

Transparency (O1) builds system understanding (C1), which enables resistance to polarization pressure (C7). Resistance prevents junior pathway, maintaining bridge builder potential (O6). Bridge builders increase visibility (O2) and exposure to diverse stories (Op2), which deepens understanding (C1) and empathy (M4).



**LOOP 14: EMOTIONAL PROCESSING LEADS TO PARTICIPATION**

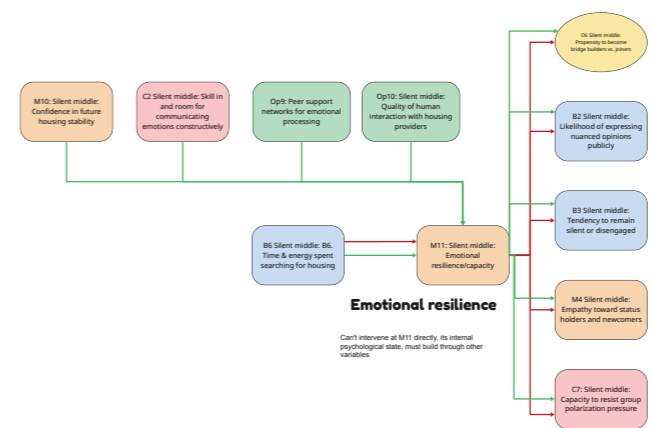
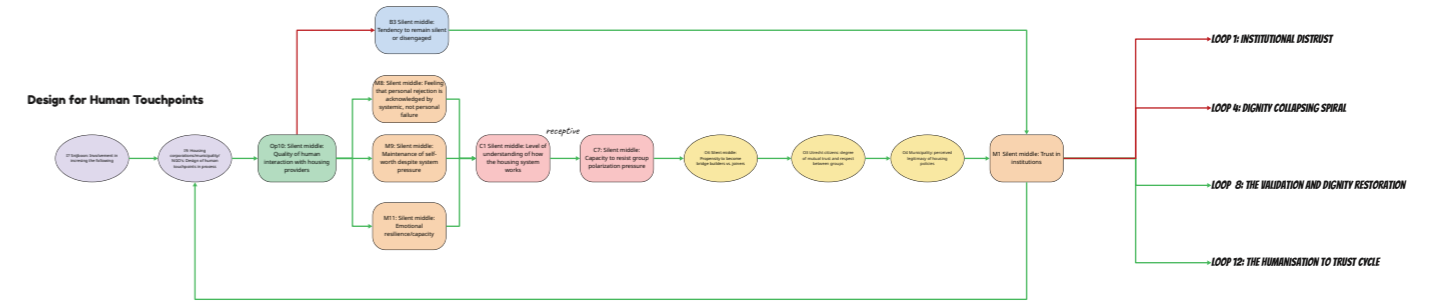
More room for emotional processing (Op9), leads to more skill and room for communication emotions (C2), so it is less draining (B6), so that they feel more efficacy (M5), increasing the change of expressing their opinion (B2) which leads to more participation in the public debate (B1).



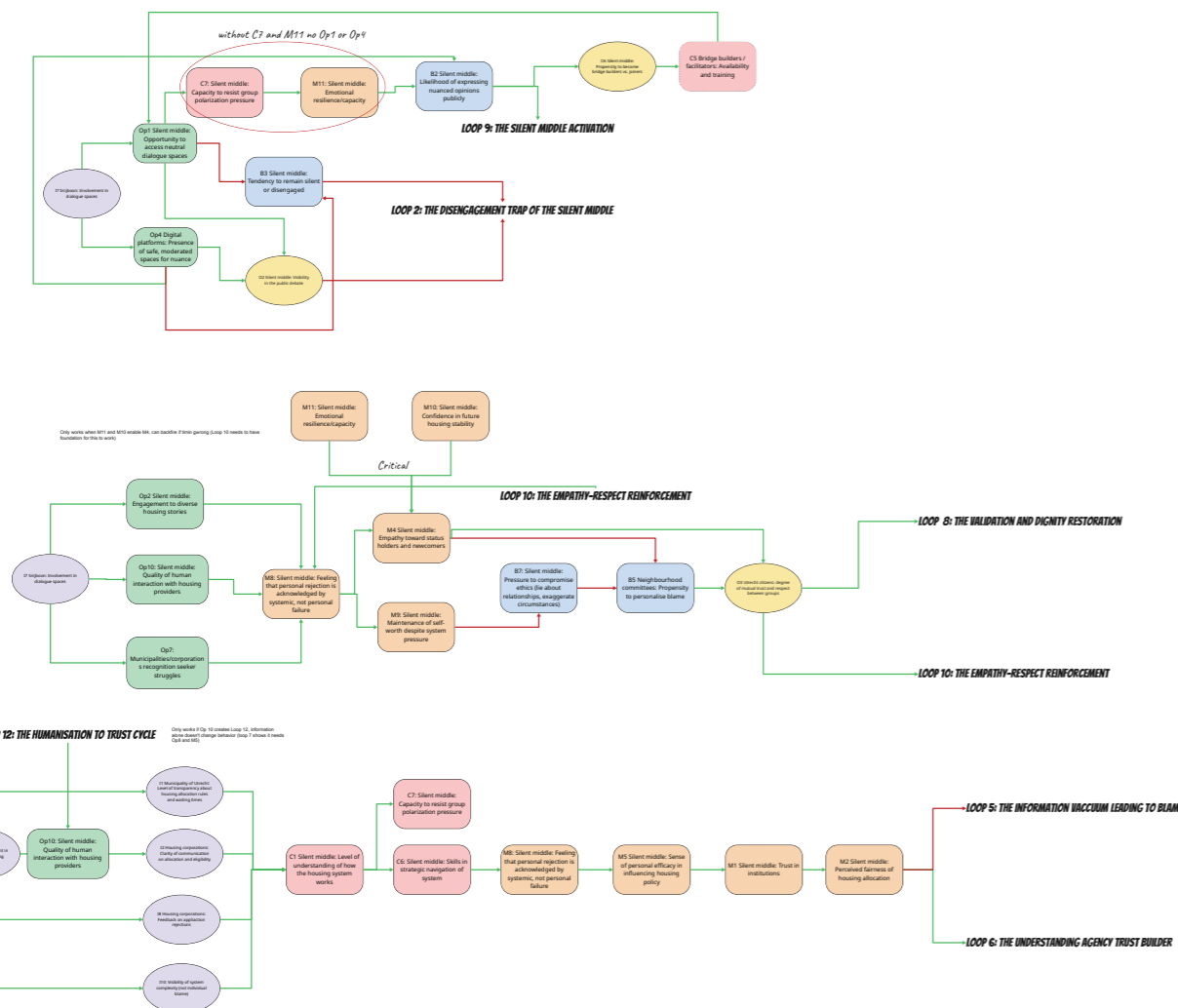
# Appendix J

## Intervention Points for Snijboon

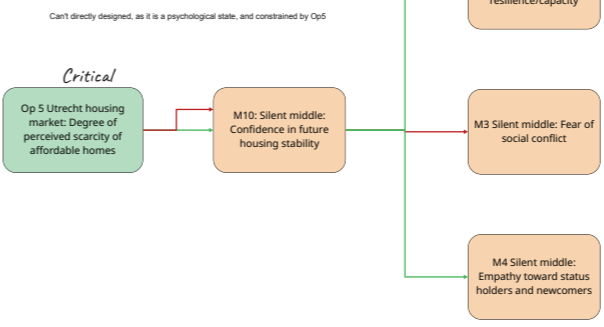
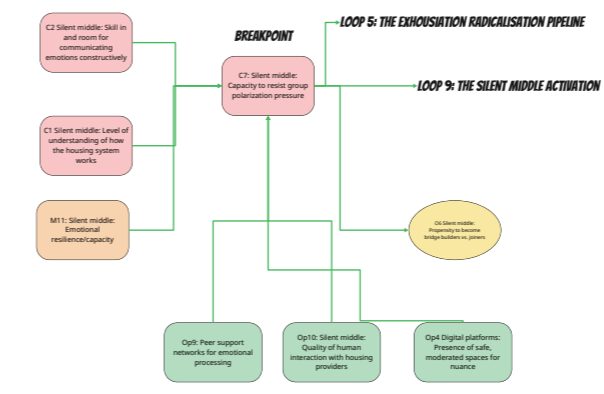
This Appendix presents the actionable pathways for Snijboon to intervene in the behavioral system map for housing allocation in Utrecht. Green arrows represent positive relations and red arrows negative relations between the nodes.



Where can snijboon intervene



Requires time to build and depends on c1, c2 and m11

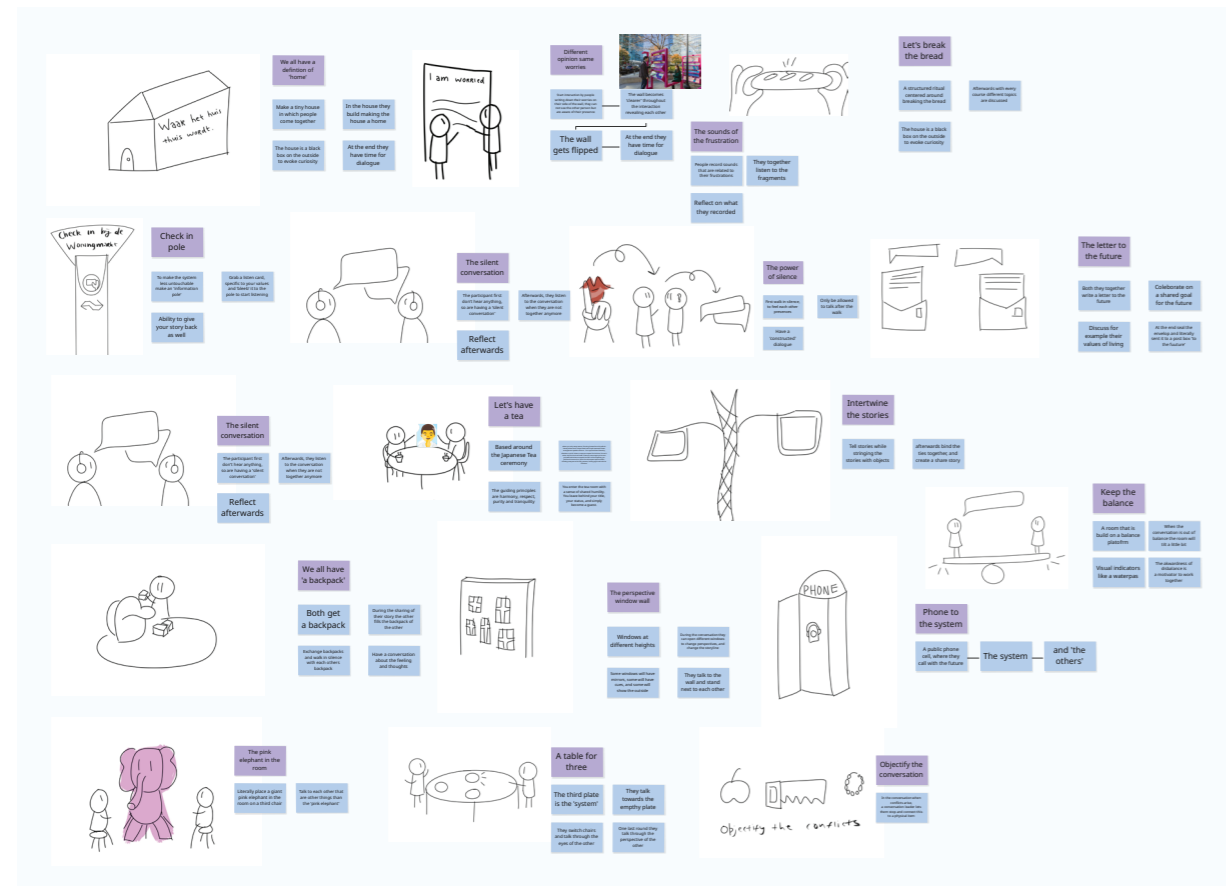




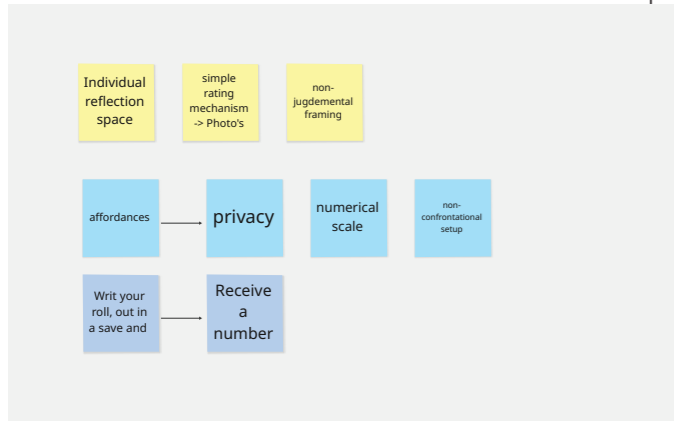
# Appendix K

## Morphological Chart and Design Drawings

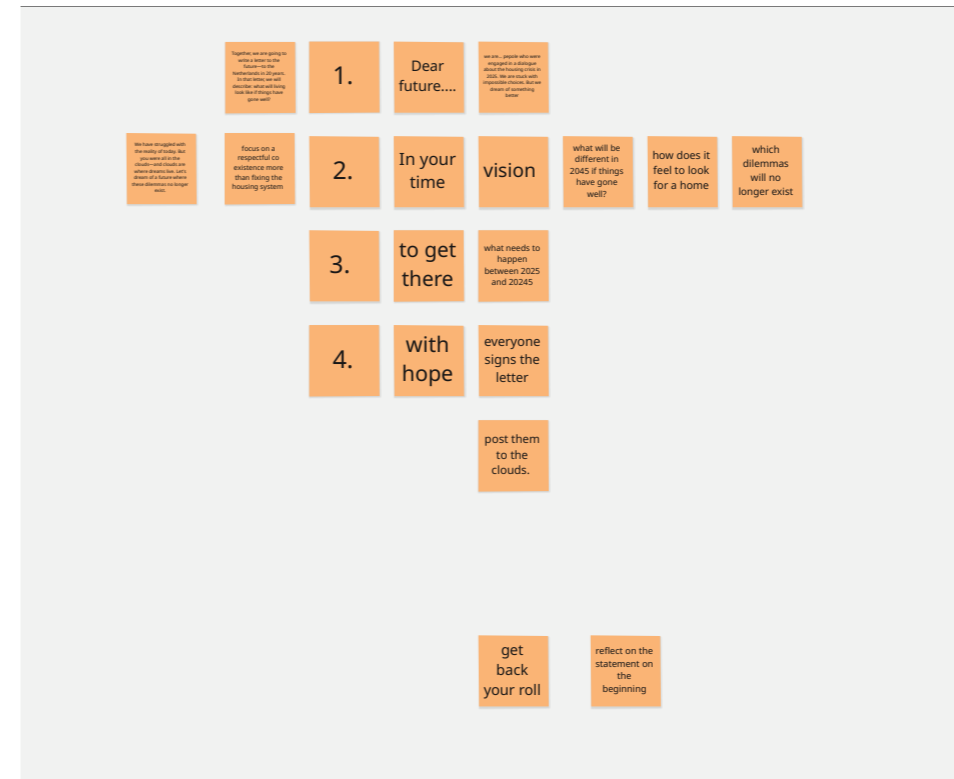
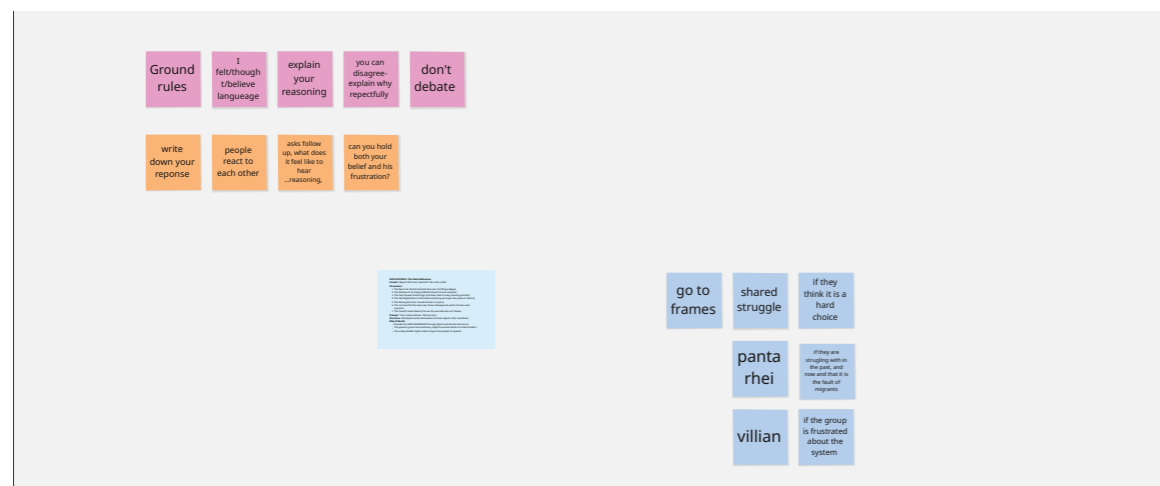
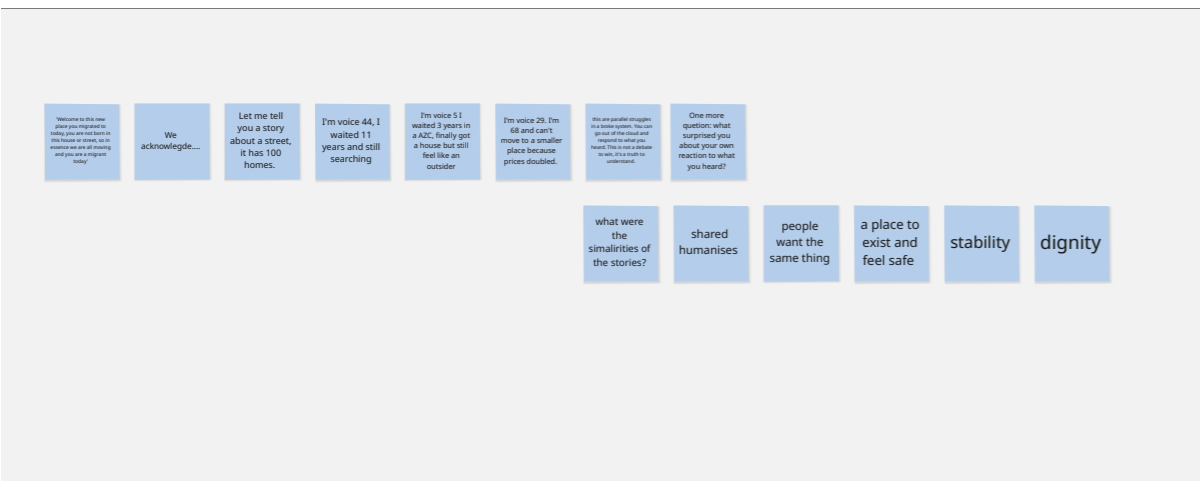
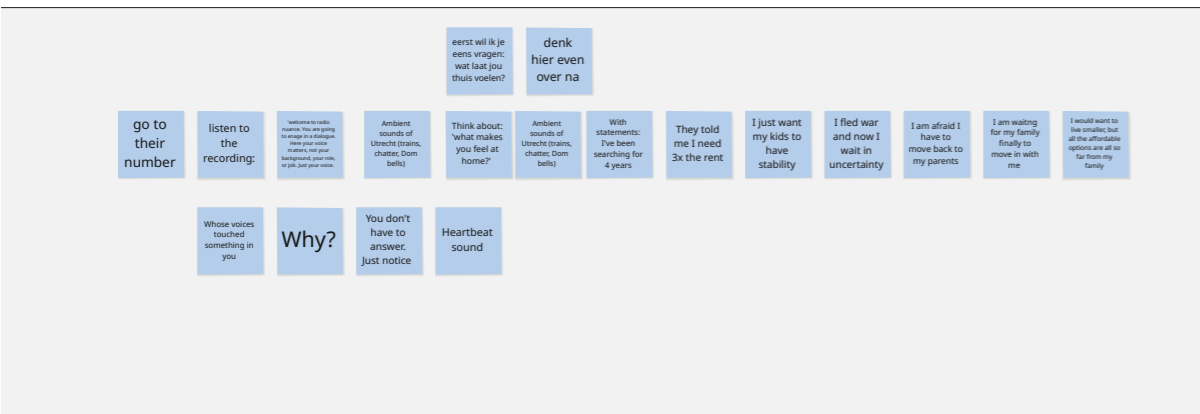
This Appendix shows the morphological chart used to brainstorm different intervention flows. The elements in the morphological chart are mostly inspired by the case studies described in Chapter 5. By connecting elements across categories, I first generated loose ideas and combined these in create four unique intervention flows, one of which is not further developed (we are all in the clouds) which is persented as Miro flow on the next page. The others were developed through Design Drawing to Develop, and presented afterwards.

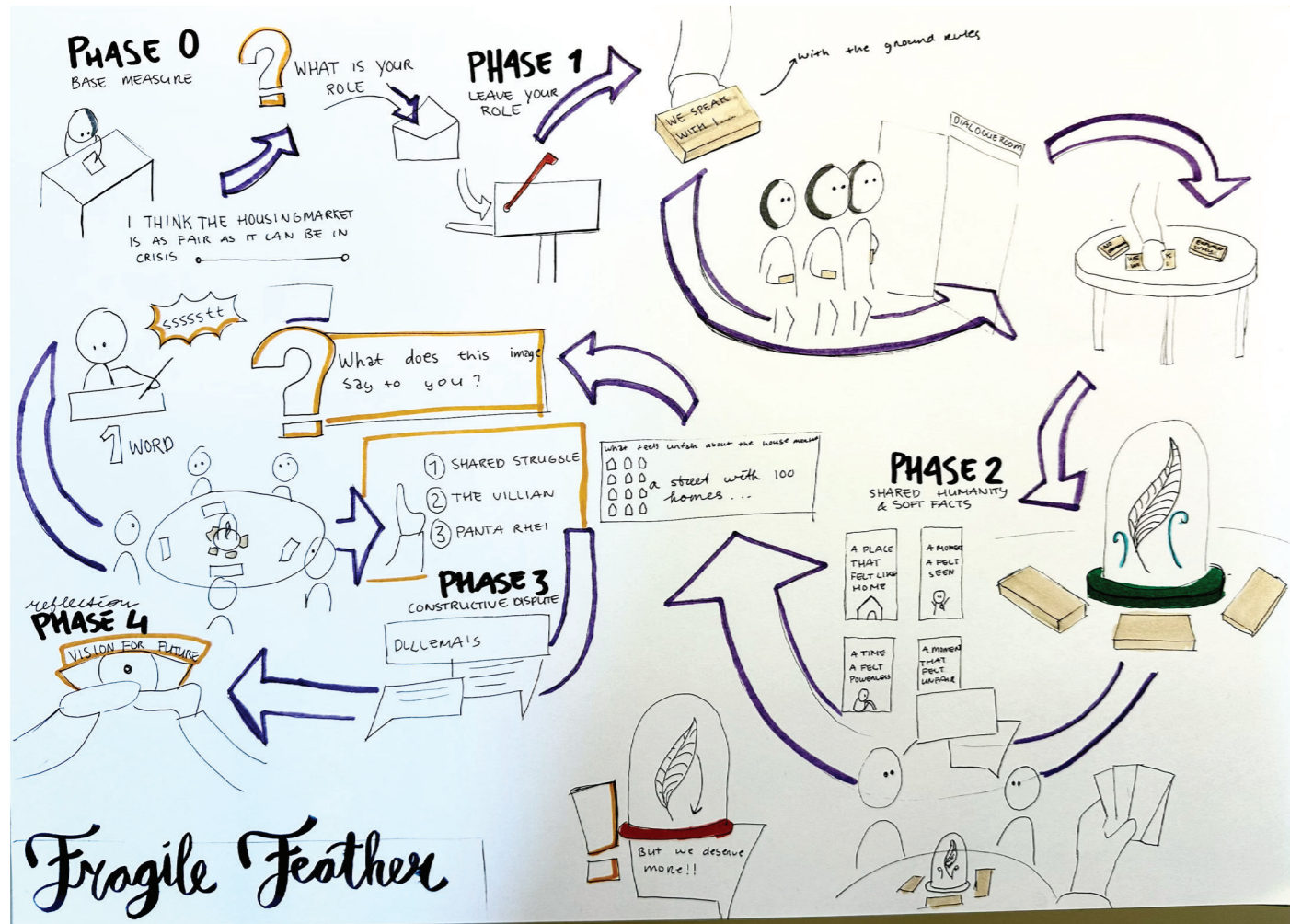


314 Figure 93: The first ideas from the morphological chart.

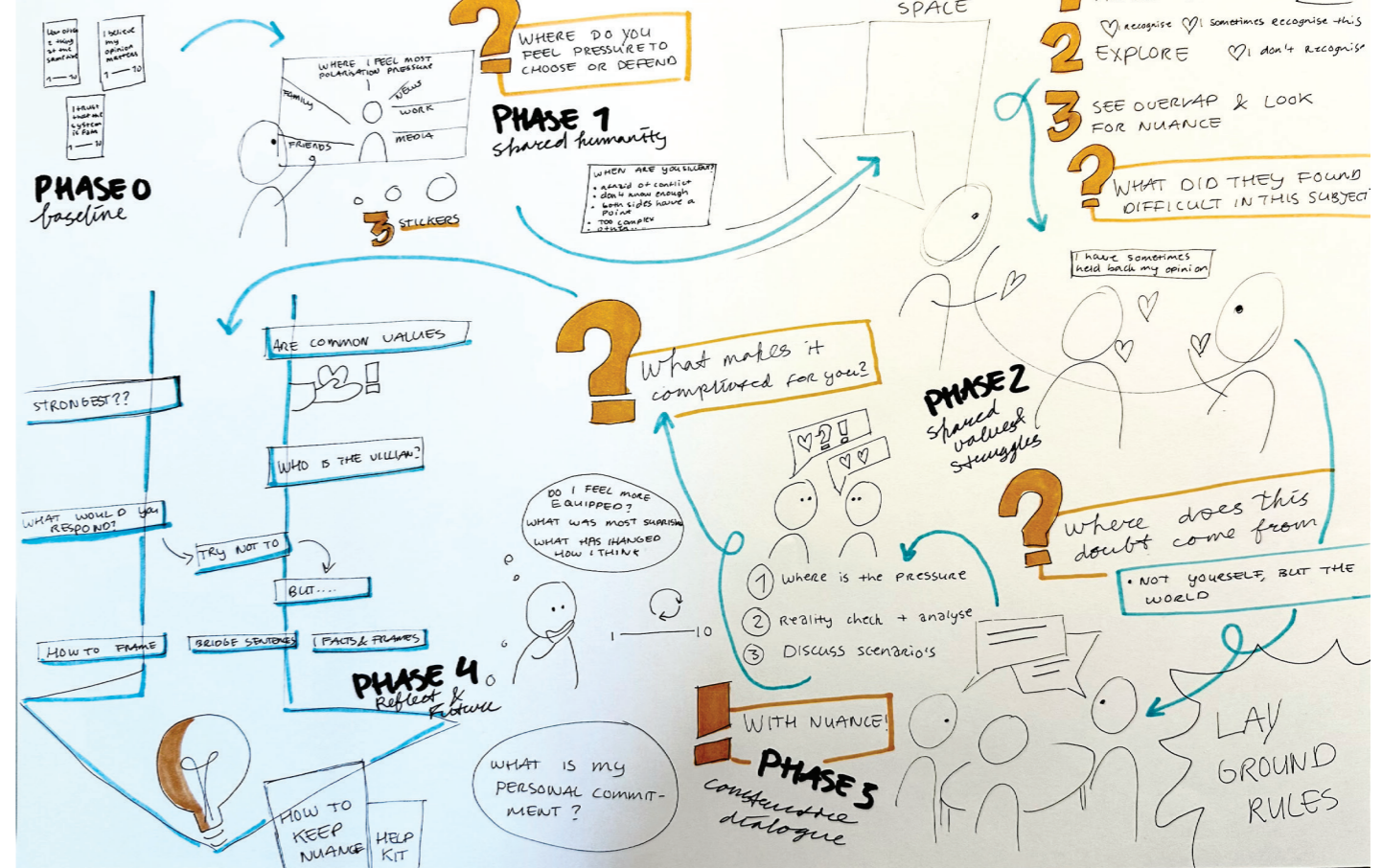


# We are all in the clouds concept flow

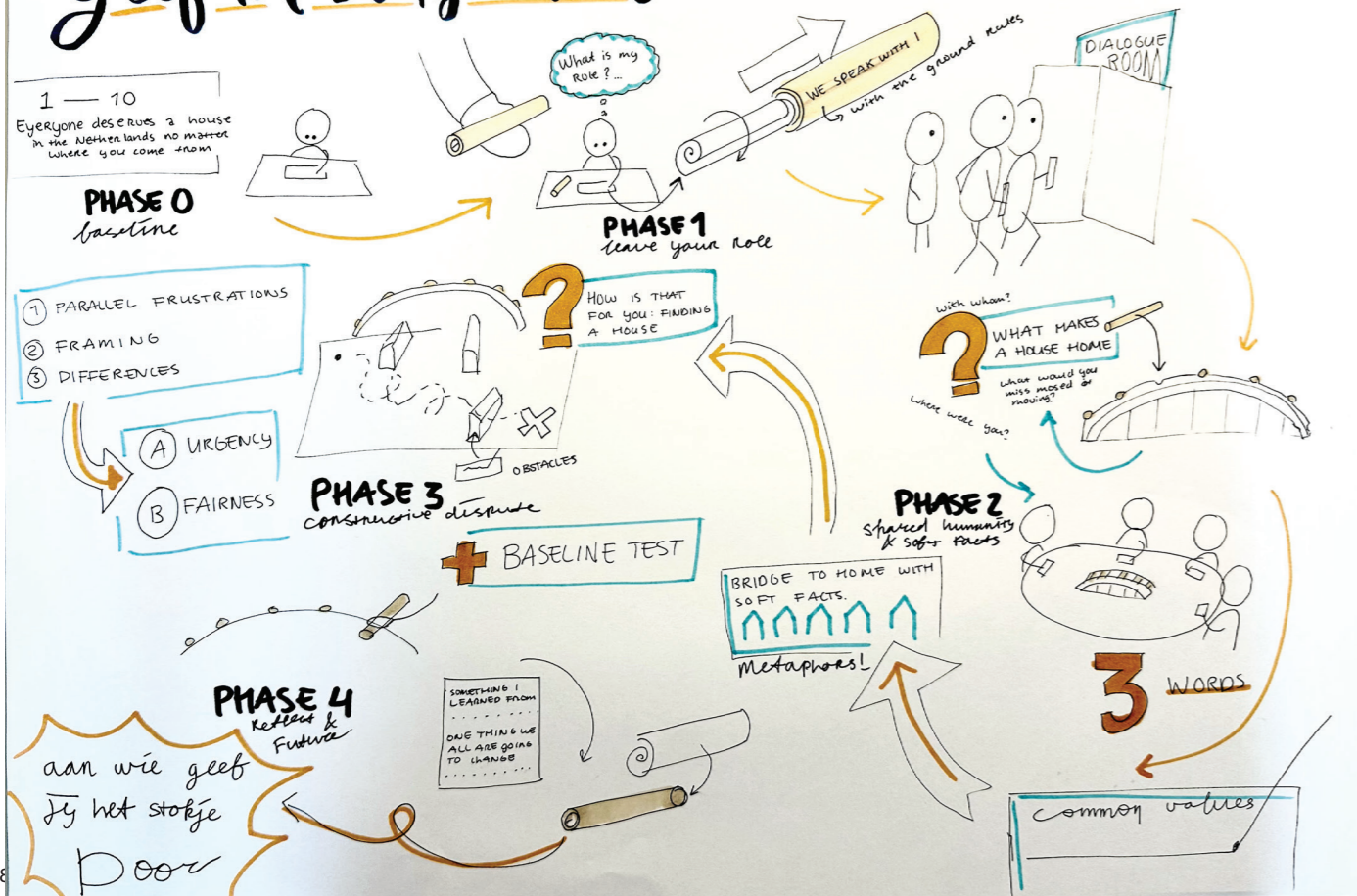




### Silent Middle Starter Kit



### Geef het stokje door





# Appendix L

## Pilot Test

This Appendix presents the set up and outcomes of the Pilot test.

### 1. The Set up & Participants

During the pilot test, the wooden bridge had not yet been built. To mimic this, the conversation rules were printed out on paper. The full card decks were presented (for every frame 10 subcards), together with a printed-out 'soft fact' and the polarisation pressure map.

Furthermore, I brought the baseline measure cards, the role suspension cards, and the pass-the-baton-along cards.

#### Participants

The pilot test is conducted with three participants, each of whom reports having a nuanced opinion about the housing market (all three believe everyone deserves a space, but it seems hard to get one).

The ages ranged from 27 to 65, and they were related family members.

### 2. Findings during the test

During the test, I immediately noticed areas that needed improvement. For example, one participant noted that 'polarisation pressure' is a vague term that needs more clarification. During the test, several other technical issues were noted for improvement.

I noticed that my script during the session focused heavily on creating a shared vision and voice. However, the purpose of the concept is to lead everyone to have their own opinion, so this needed adjustments. Lastly, the use of cards felt

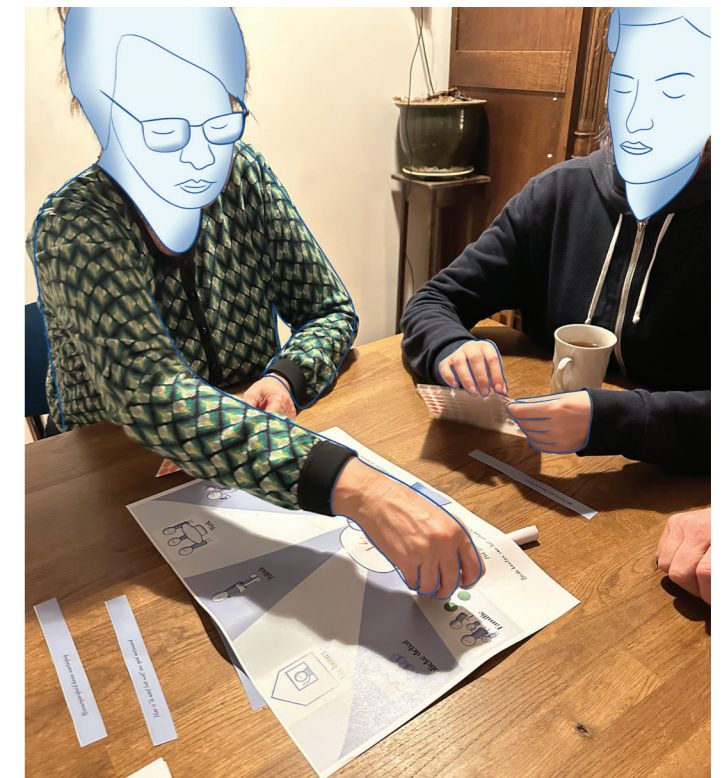
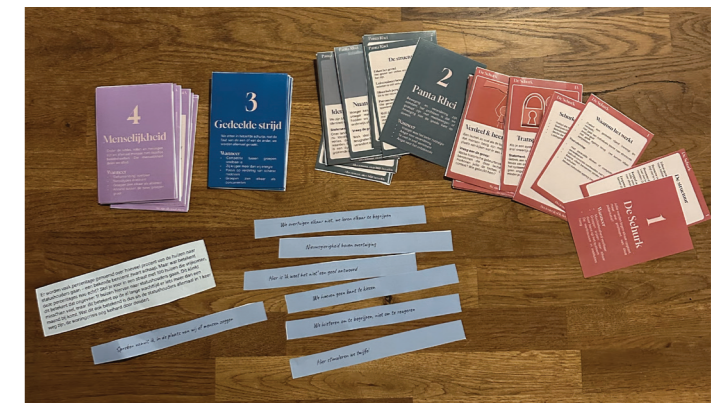
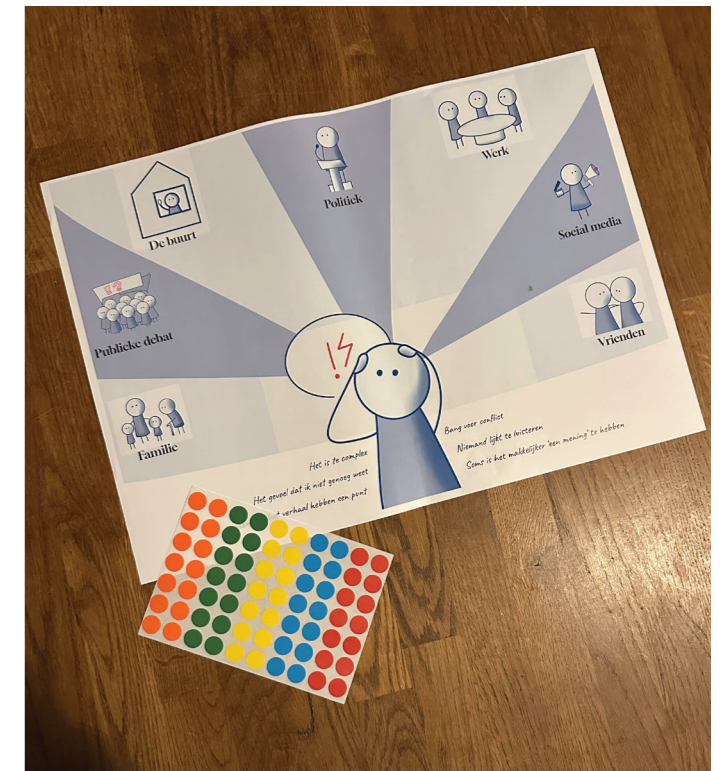


Figure 94: The Pilot test set up.



overwhelming and rushed, given the number available. So this needed to be cut down as well.

### 3. Outcomes

See Figure 96 for the outcomes of the baseline test and Figure 95 for the combined outcomes, the reflection questions and the things written down on the pass the baton cards.

As shown in the baseline measures, every scale either remained the same or improved. This indicates positive effects. The biggest improvements are noted in my opinion matters, and 'I can influence this issue.'

From the reflection questions, the key points were:

The most surprising was the differences in stories and how, within the given boundaries, a beautiful conversation can be held with great depth. They all noted that their perspective had changed. The problem is not perceived differently, but it does give more room for more solutions.

Their overall goal was to promote greater equality, acknowledge that less can be more, and introduce nuance to the discussion.

### 4. Afterwards Reflection

The bridge was perceived as a nice physical element that represented the conversation rules and the roles and concerns they had left behind.

'I like that it stands central on the table, so I can point to it when I feel like my partner is moving in another direction, and I like that it puts the safety of my opinion central.'

This were the other key quotes in evaluation:

The soft fact helped me to see it differently and showed me how I can use this with others. ("De zachte feiten hielpen mij om het anders in te zien en hoe ik dit kon gebruiken bij anderen.")

It is a good way to show that the world is not so black and white, ("Het goed om op deze manier

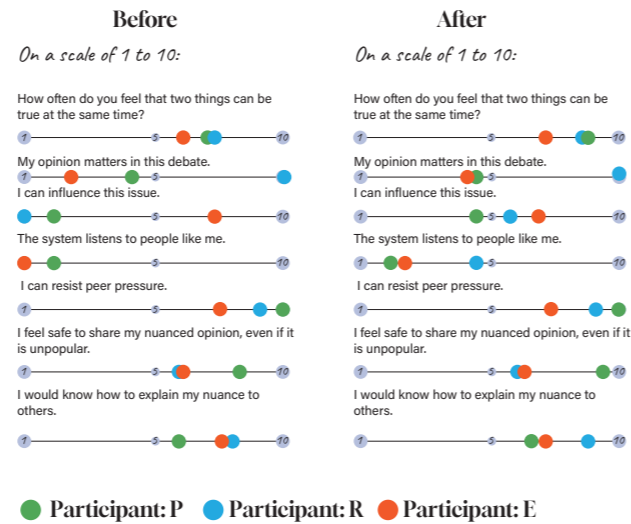


Figure 95: Summarised outcomes of the baseline test.

te benoemen dat het niet zwart wit is.")

I especially liked the fact presentation, it made it clear what numbers actually mean for me and others. ("Ik vond vooral het zachte feit erg fijn, het liet mij zien wat de numers nou eigenlijk echt voor mij en andere betekent")

I especially liked the set up and the atmosphere created, we spoke with respect due to this structure. ("Ik vond de opzet en sfeer we met elkaar spraken heel respectvol waren, door de structuur.")

Those cards seem very nice to take with me and use, but I couldn't say exactly what I could do with them because they flew by so quickly. ("Die kaarten lijken mij heel mooi om mee tenemen en teggebruiken, maar wat ik er precies mee kan zou ik niet zo 1, 2, 3 kunnen vertellen want die vlogen voorbij.")

It felt weird that we had to create a shared goal and vision, as I thought the goal was to let everyone have their own opinion..

### 5. Improvements

- Less frame cards with more deepening in the session
- Not numbered frames, as they were received as hierarchical.
- More emphasise on personal actions
- A shorter intervention and more cohesion in the steps.

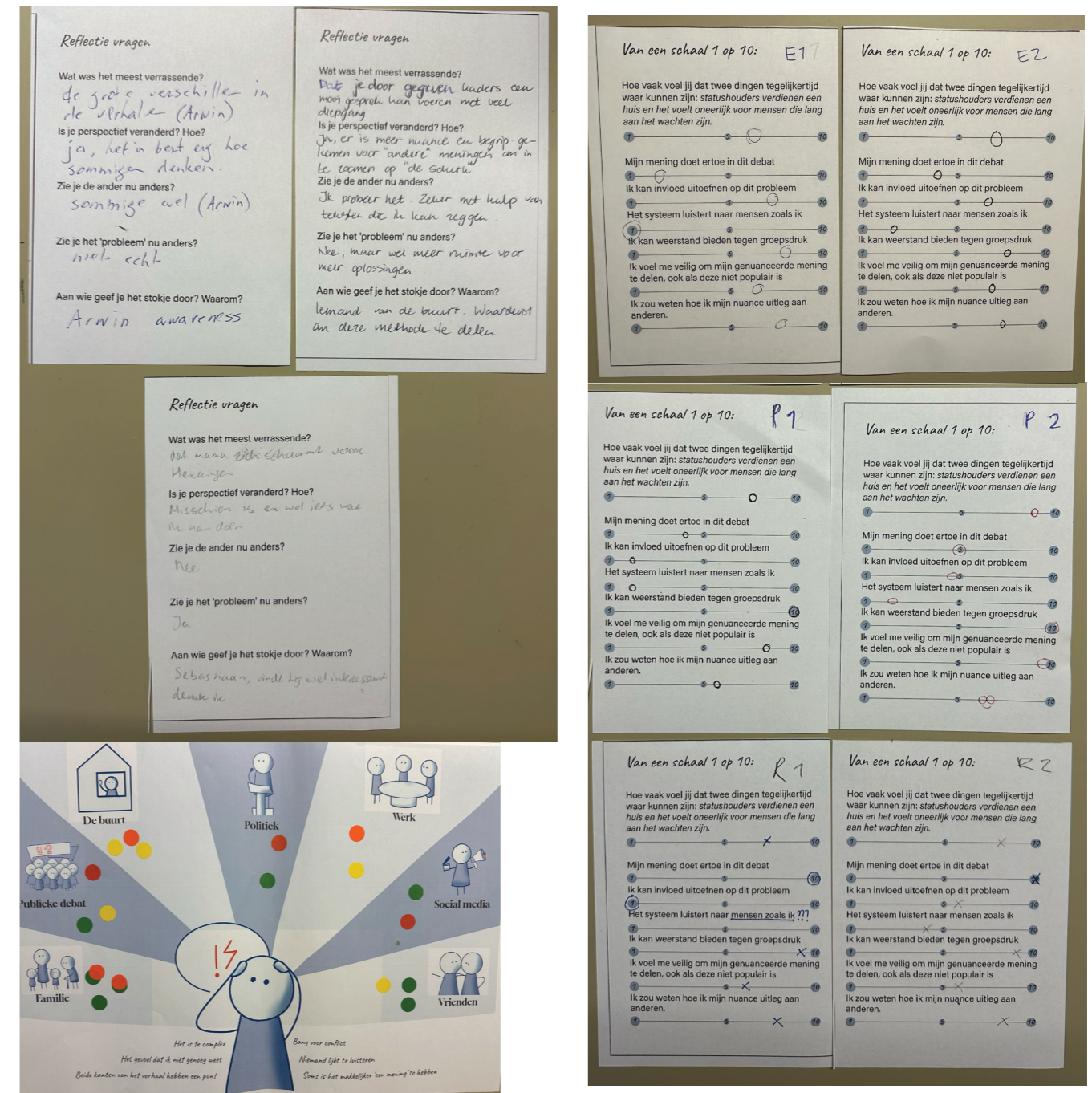


Figure 96: Analogue outcomes of the pilot test



## Results of Baseline Measurements of Pilot Tests in Chpater 20

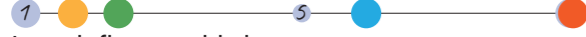
### Before, Pilot test 1

On a scale of 1 to 10:

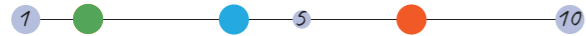
How often do you feel that two things can be true at the same time?



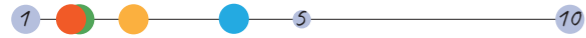
My opinion matters in this debate.



I can influence this issue.



The system listens to people like me.



I can resist peer pressure.



I feel safe to share my nuanced opinion, even if it is unpopular.



I would know how to explain my nuance to others.



### After, Pilot test 1

On a scale of 1 to 10:

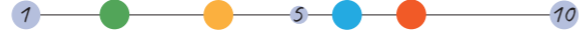
How often do you feel that two things can be true at the same time?



My opinion matters in this debate.



I can influence this issue.



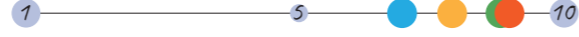
The system listens to people like me.



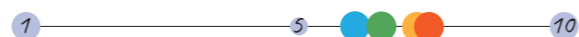
I can resist peer pressure.



I feel safe to share my nuanced opinion, even if it is unpopular.



I would know how to explain my nuance to others.



### Before, Pilot test 2

*Jouw initiaal*  
.....

Vul in stilte in.  
Als je een vraag hebt, steek dan je hand op.

**Op een schaal 1 op 10, hoe voel jij over:**

Ik zie vaak beide kanten van het verhaal in dit polarisatie debat. [Voorbeeld]

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Mijn mening is belangrijk in dit debat.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Ik kan invloed hebben op dit probleem.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Het systeem luistert naar mensen zoals ik.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Ik kan nee zeggen tegen groepsdruk.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Ik voel me veilig om mijn mening te delen, ook als deze niet populair is

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Ik weet hoe ik mijn mening kan uitleggen aan anderen.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

### After, Pilot test 2

*Jouw initiaal*  
.....

Vul in stilte in.  
Als je een vraag hebt, steek dan je hand op.

**Op een schaal 1 op 10, hoe voel jij over:**

Ik zie vaak beide kanten van het verhaal in dit polarisatie debat. [Voorbeeld]

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Mijn mening is belangrijk in dit debat.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Ik kan invloed hebben op dit probleem.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Het systeem luistert naar mensen zoals ik.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Ik kan nee zeggen tegen groepsdruk.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Ik voel me veilig om mijn mening te delen, ook als deze niet populair is

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

Ik weet hoe ik mijn mening kan uitleggen aan anderen.

1 ———— 5 ———— 10

# Appendix M

## Full Card Deck

This Appendix shows the full card deck used in the Bridge Building Dialogue. The cards next to each other are the front and back sides.

## Gesprekskaarten voor depolarisatie



## Depolarisatie kaarten

Van tegenover elkaar naar naast elkaar

### Wat is dit?

Hulpmiddelen voor als gesprekken over groepen of schaarse middelen vastlopen of veranderen in beschuldigingen die mensen verdelen.

### Spelregels

- 1. Luister eerst, praat daarna**  
Wat speelt er echt? Wat voelt de ander?
- 2. Kies een tool die past**  
Een frame, brugzin, zacht feit; of een combinatie.
- 3. Stel vragen, geef geen antwoorden**  
De kaarten helpen om te praten en denken, niet om te overtuigen.
- 4. Erken altijd de emotie**  
Ook als je het niet eens bent met de conclusie.
- 5. Doel is begrip, niet gelijk**  
Maak ruimte voor elkaar in het gesprek.



## Inhoud van het deck

### 4 Frame sets met:

- 1 uitleg kaart
- 3 inzetkaarten (A, B & C) met vragen en voorbeelden uit de praktijk van de huizenmarkt

### 7 Brugzinkaarten

Zinnen voor als het gesprek vastloopt.

### 1 Zachte feiten hulp kaart

Hoe maak je feiten begrijpelijk? Deel je feiten zonder 'het beter te weten'.

## De 4 frames

Gebruik in verschillende situaties



### De schurk

Wanneer mensen tegenover elkaar staan.  
*Wie profiteert echt van de verdeeldheid?*  
Signaal: 'Het is hun schuld'



### Alles verandert

Wanneer verandering eng voelt.  
*Dit is normaal, hoe gaan we ermee om?*  
Signaal: 'Vroeger was alles beter'



### Gedeelde strijd

Wanneer groepen concurreren in schaarste.  
*We zitten in hetzelfde schuitje.*  
Signaal: 'Zij krijgen meer'



### Menselijkheid

Wanneer labels belangrijker worden dan mensen.  
*Wat hebben we allemaal nodig?*  
Signaal: Labels en stereotypes



# De schurk

Jullie worden tegen elkaar opgezet.  
Maar wie profiteert daarvan?



## Gebruik bij

- Mensen die tegenover elkaar staan
- Groepen die zich machteloos voelen
- Groot wantrouwen in het systeem

Het is niet jij of ik, het is het systeem

## De schurk

### Wat je doet

- 1. Erken de gezamenlijke frustratie**  
Jullie hebben allebei last van het systeem.
- 2. Benoem de concrete schurk**  
Wie of wat profiteert hier echt van?
- 3. Laat de schurkentactiek zien**  
Hoe worden jullie tegen elkaar opgezet?
- 4. Koppel aan gezamenlijk belang**  
Samen staan we sterker dan verdeeld.

### Voorbeelden van 'de schurk' zijn

- Politici die verdelen
- Investeerders die verdienen
- Beleidsmakers die niets doen of deden
- Media die conflict groter maken

*Let op: Zorg dat het niet klinkt alsof alles een complot is. Gebruik concrete voorbeelden met namen.*

Het is niet jij of ik, het is het systeem

## De schurk



### Individu vs. systeem

Je lijkt boos op één persoon of groep. Dat is begrijpelijk.

#### Vraag:

- Hebben zij het systeem gemaakt?
- Of maakt iemand anders de regels?
- Waar zit de echte macht?

Misschien is het geen persoonlijke schuld, maar een probleem van het systeem.

Het is niet jij of ik, het is het systeem

## De schurk

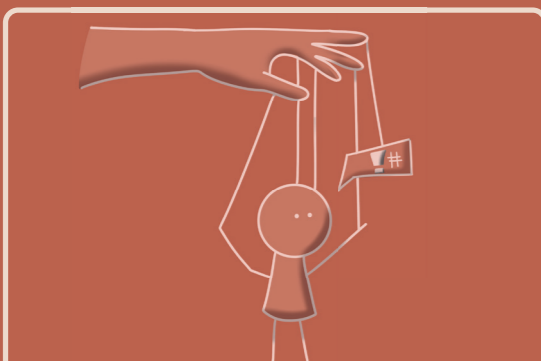


### Individu vs. systeem

*Voorbeeld: De starter, de migrant, de senior is geen vijand. Ze zitten vast in een systeem dat niet werkt. De regels en vastgelopen beleid zijn voorbeelden van het echte probleem.*

Het is niet jij of ik, het is het systeem

## De schurk



### Verdeel & heers tactiek

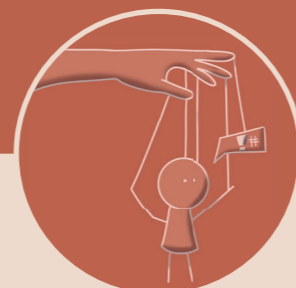
Een tactiek zo oud als de boeken: mensen worden met elkaar bezig gehouden, zodat ze niet kijken naar wat er echt misgaat.

#### Vraag:

- Kun je een historische gebeurtenis noemen waarin verdeel en heers werd gebruikt?
- Zie je deze tactiek ook hier terug?
- Wie gebruikt hem?

Het is niet jij of ik, het is het systeem

## De schurk

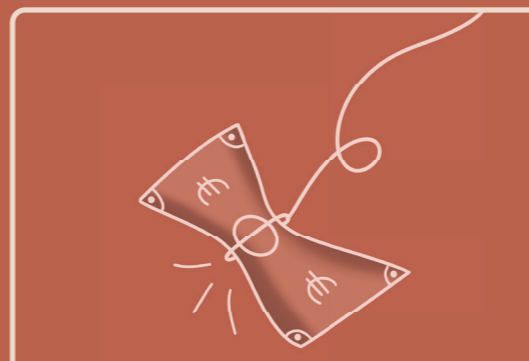


### Verdeel & heers tactiek

*Voorbeeld: Door het debat steeds te laten gaan over huisverdeling en wie voorrang krijgt, blijven grote problemen verborgen, zoals mislukt bouwbeleid of het aanpakken van leegstaande panden.*

Het is niet jij of ik, het is het systeem

## De schurk



### Volg het geld

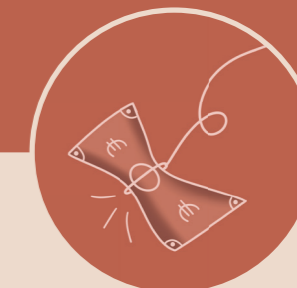
Ach, wat houden we toch van geld. Iemand verdient aan dit probleem: een stille winnaar. Waarschijnlijk jij en ik niet. En ook niet de mensen op wie je boos bent.

#### Vraag:

1. Wie verdient eraan als het probleem blijft bestaan?
2. Wie verliest als het wordt opgelost?
3. Waarom zijn we niet boos op hen?

Het is niet jij of ik, het is het systeem

## De schurk



### Volg het geld

*Voorbeeld: Zolang de woningmarkt krap blijft, verdienen investeerders en beleggers aan hoge huren en prijzen.*

Het is niet jij of ik, het is het systeem



# Alles verandert

Niet de verandering is het probleem, maar hoe we ermee omgaan.



## Gebruik bij

- "Vroeger was alles beter"
- Angst voor verandering
- Angst voor het onbekende

Alles stroomt, niets blijft hetzelfde

## Alles verandert

### Wat je doet

- 1. Erken dat verandering moeilijk is**  
Het mag spannend zijn.
- 2. Laat zien dat dit normaal is**  
Dit gebeurt elke generatie.
- 3. Geef historisch perspectief**  
Hiermee hebben we al lange tijd ervaring.
- 4. Verleg de focus**  
Het probleem is niet de verandering, maar of en hoe we meebewegen.

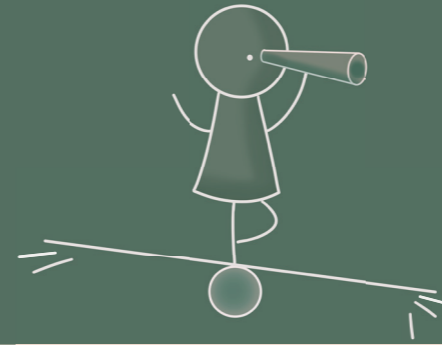
### Oorzaken angst verandering

- Verlies van controle
- Angst voor verlies van identiteit
- Verandering voelt soms te snel of te veel
- Geen inspraak: "Niemand vroeg mij of dit mocht"

*Let op: Zeg nooit 'wen er maar aan'. Erken eerst de pijn, biedt daarna pas perspectief.*

Alles stroomt, niets blijft hetzelfde

## Alles verandert



### Constance zoektocht

We denken soms dat stabiliteit betekent dat alles hetzelfde blijft. Maar juist door te bewegen, blijf je stabiel.

#### Vraag:

Wat is er constant gebleven in jouw leven? Is stabiliteit hetzelfde als constant blijven? Of kun je stabiel zijn terwijl dingen veranderen?

Alles stroomt, niets blijft hetzelfde

## Alles verandert



### Constance zoektocht

*Voorbeeld: Je huis geeft je stabiliteit, maar jij en je buurt veranderen mee met de wereld. Daarom moet je huis ook meeveranderen. Zo ben jij en je huis klaar voor de toekomst en blijf je stabiel, ook als dingen veranderen.*

Alles stroomt, niets blijft hetzelfde

## Alles verandert



### Brief uit het verleden

Soms lijkt alles uit het verleden beter, en is vernieuwing eng.

#### Ga 50 jaar terug:

- Wat was toen nieuw en spannend?
- Is die bedreiging er nog? Of is dit normaal geworden?
- Heeft wat toen eng was ook kansen gebracht? Zoals internet: vroeger heel spannend, nu onmisbaar.

Alles stroomt, niets blijft hetzelfde

## Alles verandert

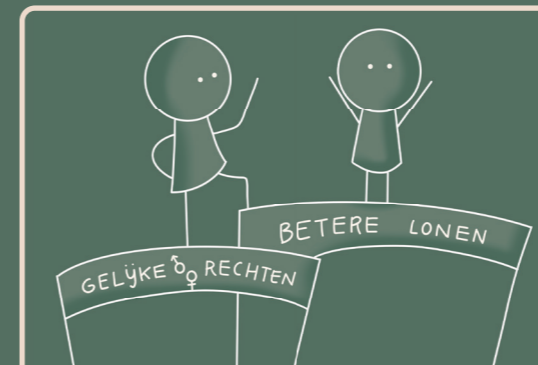


### Brief uit het verleden

*Voorbeeld: Het lijkt soms alsof migratie nu de oorzaak is van de druk op de woningmarkt, maar migratie is altijd al geweest en is de laatste jaren niet veel meer geworden.*

Alles stroomt, niets blijft hetzelfde

## Alles verandert



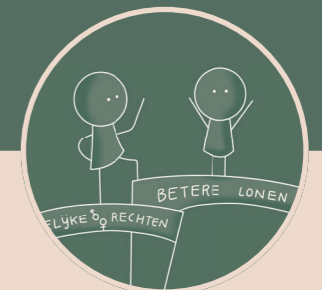
### Vroege veranderaars

Door de geschiedenis heen hebben anderen voor ons verandering mogelijk gemaakt, zoals betere lonen en rechten.

**Vraag:** Jij en ik zijn strijdlustig. Welke verandering kunnen wij nu omarmen om samen verder te komen?

Alles stroomt, niets blijft hetzelfde

## Alles verandert



### Vroege veranderaars

*Voorbeeld: In Den Bosch werkten mensen samen en bouwden in één dag hun eigen huis. Zo hielpen ze mee een oplossing te maken.*

Alles stroomt, niets blijft hetzelfde

# Gedeelde strijd

Het is niet de fout van de één of van de ander. Iedereen wordt geraakt.



## Gebruik bij

- Groepen die concurrentie voelen
- Het gevoel dat 'zij meer krijgen'
- Verdeling van schaarse middelen

We zitten allemaal in hetzelfde schuitje

## Gedeelde strijd

### Wat je doet

- 1. Erken beide frustraties**  
Kies niet, ze zijn allebei echt.
- 2. Zoom uit**  
Laat zien dat beide groepen tekortkomen.
- 3. Benoem de échte schaarste**  
Het probleem is niet de verdeling, maar het totaal.
- 4. Maak van vijanden bondgenoten**  
Jullie lopen tegen hetzelfde systeem aan.

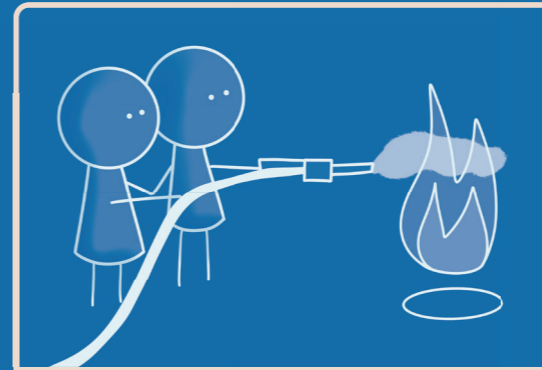
### Metafoor

Eén man houdt 988 koekjes, wij vechten om twaalf. In plaats van ruzie te maken over kruimels, hebben we samen een strijd voor meer koekjes nodig.

*Let op: Pas op voor machteloosheid, en maak niemands pijn kleiner. Erken eerst individuele emoties, zoom daarna pas uit.*

We zitten allemaal in hetzelfde schuitje

## Gedeelde strijd



### Gedeelde uitdaging

Volgens mij delen wij dezelfde waarde: [benoem gedeelde waarde], Die staat nu onder druk, het is een strijd die ons allemaal raakt.

### Vraag:

Kunnen we onze energie richten op de gedeelde uitdaging die deze waarde bedreigt? In plaats van elkaar aan te vallen.

We zitten allemaal in hetzelfde schuitje

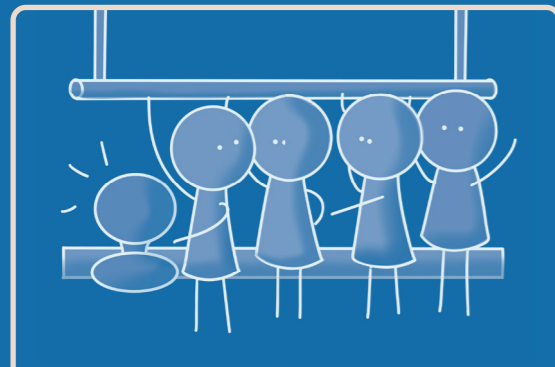
## Gedeelde strijd



### Gedeelde uitdaging

Voorbeeld: *We willen allemaal veiligheid en zekerheid. Het tekort aan huizen maakt dat voor iedereen moeilijk.*

## Gedeelde strijd



### De overvolle bus

Je zit in een overvolle bus. Er komt één zitplek vrij. De ruzie gaat over wie er mag zitten. De échte vraag is: waarom rijdt er geen tweede bus?

### Vraag:

- Wat zijn op dit moment de zitplekken?
- Welke 'bus' moet erbij komen?

We zitten allemaal in hetzelfde schuitje

## Gedeelde strijd



### De overvolle bus

Voorbeeld: *Als starter voelt het soms oneerlijk dat statushouders voorrang krijgen. Maar het echte probleem is niet de ander, het is dat er te weinig woningen zijn.*

We zitten allemaal in hetzelfde schuitje

## Gedeelde strijd



### Waardenkompas

We praten nu veel over waar we tegen zijn. Laten we praten over waar we vóór zijn.

### Opdracht:

1. Benoem drie dingen waar je vóór bent.
2. Bedenk ook de dingen waar alle 'groepen voor kunnen zijn'.

*Herken de gezamenlijke ambitie.*

We zitten allemaal in hetzelfde schuitje

## Gedeelde strijd



### Waardenkompas

Voorbeeld: *In plaats van tegenover elkaar te staan kijken we naar wat we samen willen: een eerlijke huizenmarkt met genoeg betaalbare woningen voor iedereen. Van daaruit zoeken we samen naar oplossingen.*

We zitten allemaal in hetzelfde schuitje



# Menselijkheid

Onder alle labels en meningen schuilt onze gedeelde menselijkheid.



## Gebruik bij

- Groepen die elkaar niet meer zien als mens
- Stereotypes die overheersen
- Grote afstand tussen de twee groepen

We zijn allemaal mens

## Menselijkheid

### Wat je doet

#### 1. Haal labels weg

Van 'groep' naar mensen met namen.

#### 2. Laat gedeelde behoefte zien

Wat willen we allemaal?

#### 3. Maak het persoonlijk

Praat over dagelijks leven, niet over politiek.

#### 4. Verbind door kwetsbaarheid

Maak het herkenbaar, deel echte verhalen en emoties.

### Gezamenlijke behoeften

Veiligheid, ergens bij horen, gezien worden, dromen hebben en waarmaken.

*Let op: Zeg niet "we zijn allemaal hetzelfde". Erken iedereen is mens én ieders ervaring is uniek.*

We zijn allemaal mens

## Menselijkheid



## Keuken van conflict

Uit een keuken van conflict kan soms een vijf sterren maaltijd komen.

### Opdracht:

1. Wat is een 'negatief' ingrediënt van [groep]?
2. Welke positieve kant kan dit hebben?  
*Voorbeeld: te kritisch, zorgt voor scherpe controle.*
3. Pas dit toe. Denk aan een recente ontmoeting:  
Wat hielp om je in de ander te verplaatsen?  
Hoe leefde je mee en zag je iets positiefs?

We zijn allemaal mens

## Menselijkheid



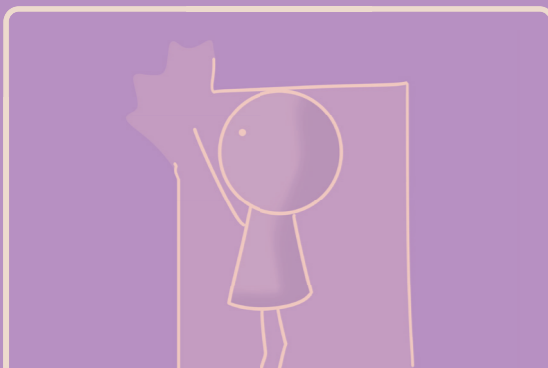
## Keuken van conflict

*Voorbeeld: De buurtcommissies kunnen egocentrisch lijken, maar zorgen zo wel voor veiligheid in de wijk.*

*Het conflict met de buur, die ik niet goed kende, was snel opgelost door er samen over te praten. Ik leefde mij in zijn schoenen, zoals ik dat bij een vriend zou doen. Het spuiten van gif was nodig omdat hij erg veel last heeft van hooikoorts.*

We zijn allemaal mens

## Menselijkheid



## Vrijheid van hokjes

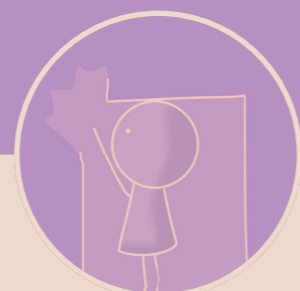
We leven in een hokjessamenleving. Dit is iets wat soms automatisch gaat, maar dit kan vervelend zijn.

### Vraag:

- In welk hokje ben jij weleens geduwd waar je niet paste?
- Hoe voelde dat?

We zijn allemaal mens

## Menselijkheid

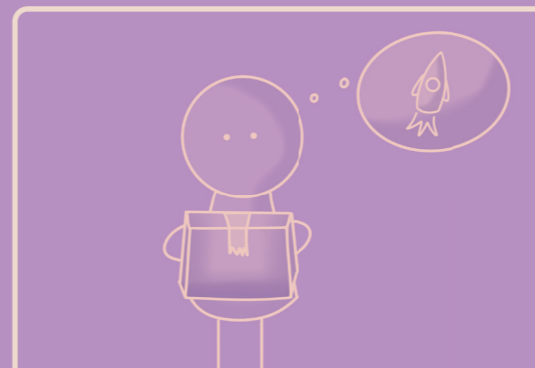


## Vrijheid van hokjes

*Voorbeeld: Als je gezien wordt als één van de homogene groep, bijvoorbeeld 'statushouder', dat ontnemt iemands persoonlijke identiteit. Hoe voelt het om neergezet te worden als 'die zoutpilaar van een meid die niet kan voetballen'.*

We zijn allemaal mens

## Menselijkheid



## Verandering in jezelf

In ons leven komen constant nieuwe dingen op ons af, nieuwe omgevingen, mensen of ervaringen.

### Vraag:

- Vertel over een keer dat jij veranderde (van baan, verhuisd, van mening, etc.).
- Hoe wilde je toen behandeld worden?
  - Gunnen we dat ook anderen?

We zijn allemaal mens

## Menselijkheid



## Verandering in jezelf

*Voorbeeld: Bij mijn nieuwe baan werd ik met open armen ontvangen. Dat deed ik ook bij iemand die nieuw was in de wijk. In plaats van weerstand te tonen, ging ik langs met koekjes, zoals ik zelf ook graag zou willen.*

We zijn allemaal mens



**Zacht feit**

**5**  
stappen naar een zacht feit

- 1. Kies één duidelijk en controleerbaar feit**  
Neem een feit dat mensen vaak verkeerd gebruiken of waar vaak ruzie over ontstaat.
- 2. Maak het begrijpelijk**  
Vertel het zodat mensen het kunnen voorstellen. Niet: "23% van de woningen" Wel: "1 op de 4 woningen, misschien jouw straat".
- 3. Geef het een gezicht**  
Van abstract naar herkenbaar
  - **Bij aantallen:** drie volle stadions; één schoolklas.
  - **Bij geld:** zo duur als een nieuwe tv.
  - **Bij percentages:** een halve taart, 1 op de 3.
- 4. Leg uit wat het persoonlijk betekent**  
Bijvoorbeeld: "Voor jou kan dit betekenen dat..."
- 5. Erken de spanning**  
"En tegelijkertijd voelt dit voor veel mensen niet eerlijk."

**Een steuntje in de rug**

**Zacht feit**



**Zacht feit checklist**

Een controleerbaar feit, verteld op een manier die ruimte laat voor het gevoel van de ander.

**Het is zacht als:**

- Het feit klopt en is te controleren
- Je maakt het herkenbaar (geen abstracte getallen)
- Je legt uit zonder te overtuigen
- Je erkent spanning of het gevoel
- Het opent begrip in plaats van discussie

**Niet zacht als:**

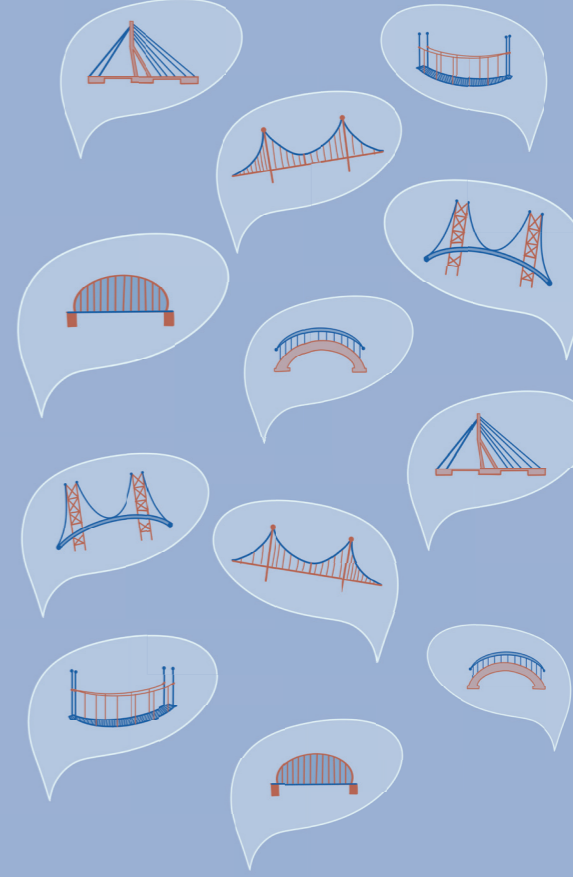
- Je gebruikt moeilijke taal of abstracte termen
- Het voelt als 'je snapt het niet'
- Je uitlegt waarom iets goed of slecht is
- Je de emotie wegdrukt
- Het voelt als het winnen van een discussie

**Een steuntje in de rug**



**Brugzinnen**

Soms loopt het gesprek even vast, en wil je er een draai aangeven. Dit zijn zinnen die dat steuntje in de rug kunnen zijn.



**Brugzin**



**Brugzin**

De vraag die ik mezelf stel is niet wie schuld heeft, maar...

**Een steuntje in de rug**

**Voorbeeld**



**Scenario**

Iemand zegt: "Het is de schuld van die groep dat de woningmarkt kapot is."

**Voorbeeld**

De vraag die ik mezelf stel is niet wie schuld heeft, maar wat we nodig hebben om genoeg huizen te bouwen. Als we vechten om kruimels, eten anderen de hele taart op.

**Een steuntje in de rug**

**Brugzin**



**Brugzin**

Beide dingen kunnen waar zijn: [X] en [Y].

**Een steuntje in de rug**

**Voorbeeld**



**Scenario**

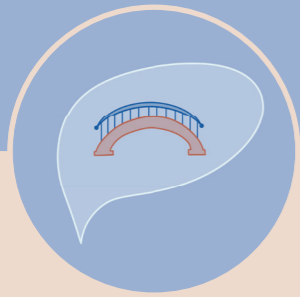
Je kunt niet tegelijk vluchtelingen helpen én mensen begrijpen die boos zijn.

**Voorbeeld**

Beide dingen kunnen waar zijn. Iedereen verdient veiligheid, én het is logisch dat mensen boos zijn als ze jaren moeten wachten op een huis. Het probleem is niet dat deze dingen botsen, het probleem is dat het systeem ze laat botsen.

**Een steuntje in de rug**

Brugzin

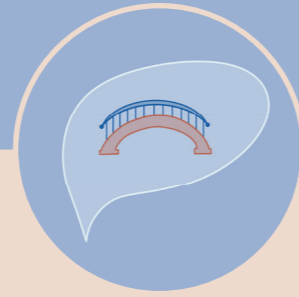


**Brugzin**

Misschien denken we anders over de oplossing, maar zijn we het eens over het probleem?

Een steuntje in de rug

Voorbeeld



**Scenario**

Discussie: "We moeten grenzen dicht!" vs "We moeten meer ouderenwoningen!"

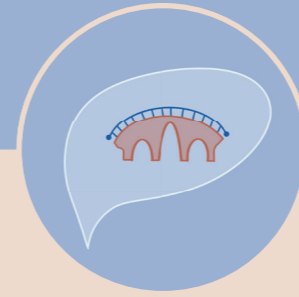
**Voorbeeld**

Misschien verschillen we over de oplossing, maar kunnen we het eens zijn over het probleem?

Er zijn te weinig huizen. De wachttijd is te lang. Als we daar beginnen, kunnen we echt praten over oplossingen.

Een steuntje in de rug

Brugzin

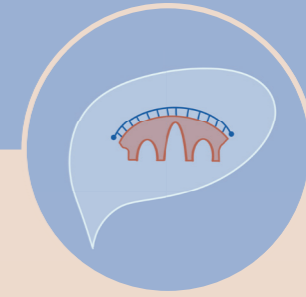


**Brugzin**

Hoe voelde jij je toen?

Een steuntje in de rug

Voorbeeld



**Scenario**

Het is zo oneerlijk dat mijn huisbaas het huis opeens wil verkopen!

**Voorbeeld**

Dat klinkt frustrerend. Hoe voelde jij je toen?

**Follow-up:** Ik kan me voorstellen dat dat zwaar voelt. Ik merk dat dit voor veel mensen lastig is, voor zowel verhuurders, huurders en beleggers.

Een steuntje in de rug

Brugzin

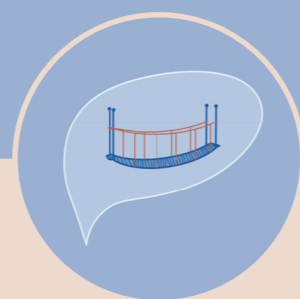


**Brugzin**

Ik snap niet alle keuzes, maar ik zie dat het niet de schuld is van één groep.

Een steuntje in de rug

Voorbeeld



**Scenario**

Het is de schuld van die statushouders dat jongeren geen huis kunnen vinden!

**Voorbeeld**

Ik snap dat het oneerlijk voelt. Maar het zit meestal in het systeem, niet in één groep.

Een steuntje in de rug

Brugzin



**Brugzin**

Mag ik vragen waarom je zo denkt?

Een steuntje in de rug

Voorbeeld



**Scenario**

Migranten verdienen geen urgentie.

**Voorbeeld:**

Mag ik vragen waarom je dat denkt? Ik wil het begrijpen.

**Follow-up:** Als ik jaren moest wachten en iemand anders kreeg snel een huis, zou ik ook boos zijn. Maar soms is die persoon net gevlucht voor oorlog.

Een steuntje in de rug



## Brugzin



### Brugzin

Jouw ervaring is echt, en het grote plaatje kan ook waar zijn.

Een steuntje in de rug

## Voorbeeld



### Scenario

In mijn straat krijgen alleen statushouders huizen, dus zeg me niet dat het geen voorrang is!

### Voorbeeld

Jouw ervaring is echt. En tegelijk klopt het dat landelijk maar een klein deel van de woningen naar statushouders gaat. Maar sommige wijken krijgen meer druk. Dat moet beter verdeeld worden.

Een steuntje in de rug



# Appendix N

## Evaluation Form Social Design Practitioners

This Appendix presents the evaluation form used to assess the concept with social practitioners. The evaluations with stakeholders and experts used similar formats but were tailored to their respective fields.

## Evaluation Social Practitioners

### Evaluatie formulier - Test Prototype

**Deel A - Jouw praktijk**

**A1. Hoeveel jaar ervaring heb jij in facilitatie en/of sociaal ontwerp?**

0-2 jaar  
 3-5 jaar  
 6-10 jaar  
 10+ jaar

**A2. Werk jij binnen gepolariseerde contexten?**

Ja, regelmatig  
 Ja, af en toe  
 Nee, maar geïnteresseerd  
 Nee

**A3. Welke dialoog- of conflictmethoden gebruik je nu in je werk?**

**Deel B - Desirability: Creert dit waarde?**

De interventie is ontworpen om meerdere waarheden naast elkaar te laten bestaan in plaats van te streven naar consensus. Het doel is niet dat iedereen het eens wordt, maar dat ieders legitimiteit wordt erkend.

**B1. In hoeverre is deze focus nieuw voor jullie praktijk?**

Heel nieuw – dit doen we niet  
 Enigszins nieuw – we doen dit soms impliciet  
 Niet nieuw- dit is al onderdeel van ons werk  
 Weet ik niet

**B2. Hoe waardevol is deze verlegging van focus van consensus naar legitimiteit van ieders waarheid voor het veld van sociaal service ontwerp?**

Niet waardevol      Zeer waardevol

**B3. Hoe waardevol zou deze interventie zijn voor jouw klanten/projecten?**

Niet waardevol      Zeer waardevol

**B4. In hoeverre vult deze interventie een gat in jullie huidige toolkit en methoden?**

Vult geen gat      Vult groot gat

**B5. Zie jij mogelijkheden om deze toolkit toe te passen op andere gepolariseerde gebieden buiten wonen (bijv. klimaat, gezondheidszorg)?**

Ja, zeer geschikt voor andere contexten  
 Ja, met aanpassingen  
 Misschien – moet eerst getest worden  
 Nee, te specifiek voor wonen  
 Weet niet

**Zo ja: Voor welke soort projecten zie jij kansen dit te gebruiken?**

De interventie opereert op interactie-niveau (tussen mensen) in plaats van op beleidsniveau. Dit is een bewuste keuze omdat social design agencies vaak niet direct beleid kunnen veranderen.

**B6. Gelooft u dat een interactie-level interventie kan bijdragen aan het aanpakken van een wicked problem zoals polarisatie en woningtekort?**

Nee, te klein      Ja, zeker

**Deel C - Usability - Kun je het gebruiken**

Deze vragen gaan over de praktische bruikbaarheid van de handleiding en toolkit.

**C1. Hoe duidelijk en bruikbaar is de handleiding?**

Verwarrend / Onbruikbaar      Helder, klaar om te gebruiken

**C2. Welke onderdelen van de handleiding hebben meer duidelijkheid of detail nodig? (meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)**

<input type="radio"/> Fase 0: Baseline meting	<input type="radio"/> Fase 7: Evaluatiemeting
<input type="radio"/> Fase 1: Rituele transitie (stokjes, stilte, brug bouwen)	<input type="radio"/> Hoe je het juiste strategische frame kiest (Schurk/Gedeelde Strijd/Panta Rhei/Menselijkheid)
<input type="radio"/> Fase 2: Veiligheid en gedeelde menselijkheid (polarisatiedruk kaart)	<input type="radio"/> Hoe je spanning/conflict in de ruimte houdt zonder te escaleren
<input type="radio"/> Fase 3: Zachte feiten presenteren	<input type="radio"/> Timing management tijdens de sessie
<input type="radio"/> Fase 4: Begeleide dialoog en frames	<input type="radio"/> Geen – alles is duidelijk
<input type="radio"/> Fase 5: Persoonlijke waarden en individuele actie	
<input type="radio"/> Fase 6: Reflectie en stokje doorgeven ritueel	

**C3. Hoe zelfverzekerd voel je je om het juiste strategische frame te kiezen op basis van groepsdynamiek en om het zelf te faciliteren?**

Frame kiezen:  
 Niet zelfverzekerd      Zeer zelfverzekerd

Zelf faciliteren:  
 Niet zelfverzekerd      Zeer zelfverzekerd

**C4. Wat ontbreekt er in de handleiding om je meer vertrouwen te geven in deze aanpak?**

**C5. Welke training of ondersteuning heb je nodig om dit goed te kunnen faciliteren?**

Geen, de handleiding is voldoende  
 Eenmalige training (halve dag)  
 Uitgebreide training (2 dagen) + Coaching  
 Eerst een sessie observeren  
 Co-faciliteren bij eerste keer  
 Anders:

**C6. Kijkend naar de fysieke onderdelen in de toolkit: de brug met gespreksstokjes, polarisatiedruk kaart, depolarisatie kaarten set, doorgeefstokjes + papieren, baseline test. Wat zou je veranderen aan de fysieke toolkit?**

**C7. Het ritueel in Fase 1: Deelnemers schrijven hun rol/zorgen op papier, stoppen dit in een houten stokje, lopen in stilte naar de dialoogruimte, en leggen gezamenlijk de stokjes in een brug.**

**Denk je dat dit ritueel effectief is om:**

Mensen te helpen hun dagelijkse rol los te laten?  
 Niet effectief      Zeer effectief

Psychologische veiligheid te creëren voordat polariserende onderwerpen aan bod komen?  
 Niet effectief      Zeer effectief

**C8. Het doorgeefstokje-ritueel: Na de sessie geven deelnemers hun stokje door aan iemand in hun netwerk die dit gesprek ook zou moeten hebben.**

**Denk je dat dit een bruikbaar/haalbaar mechanisme biedt om de interventie op te schalen verder dan de focusgroep?**

Niet haalbaar      Zeer haalbaar

**C9. Kan dit stokje een herkenbaar symbool worden voor bruggen bouwers in Utrecht en daarbuiten?**

Ja, sterk symbool  
 Ja, met de juiste branding/communicatie  
 Misschien  
 Nee, te abstract  
 Weet niet

**Deel D - Feasibility: Is het realistisch**

Deze vragen gaan over de praktische haalbaarheid in jullie context.

**D1. Hoe haalbaar is deze interventie binnen een typisch projectbudget en -timeline?**

Niet haalbaar      Zeer haalbaar

**D2. De interventie duurt 2.5-3 uur. Is dit realistisch voor jouw context?**

Ja, perfecte lengte  
 Te lang - moet korter (idealiter: uur)  
 Kan langer als dat nodig is  
 Hangt af van de context

**F2. Zie je waarde in deze andere benadering van evalueren (gedragssignalen) vergeleken met traditionele methode?**

Ja, dit is veel zinvoller dan tevredenheidsscores  
 Ja, maar we hebben ook traditionele meetmethoden nodig  
 Weet ik niet zeker – ik wil eerst bewijs dat dit werkt  
 Nee, te complex om te meten

**F3. De interventie gebruikt baseline measurement cards die deelnemers voor en na de sessie invullen. Voorbeeldvragen: "Mijn mening doet er toe in dit debat" "Ik kan weerstand bieden aan groepsdruk om een kant te kiezen" Hoe praktisch is het om deze kaarten tijdens een sessie te gebruiken?**

Niet praktisch      Zeer praktisch

**F4. De interventie gebruikt drie meetmomenten:**

- Direct (voor/na sessie): verschuiving ten opzichte van de uitgangssituatie
- 2 weken later: blijvende effecten + toepassing in de praktijk
- 6 maanden later (optioneel): integratie op lange termijn

**Welke meetmethode is realistisch voor jullie?**

Alleen direct (voor/na sessie)  
 Direct + follow-up na 2 weken  
 Alle drie de meetmomenten  
 We kunnen/willen niet meten  
 Anders: \_\_\_\_\_

**F5. De 2-weken follow-up vraagt:**

- Heb je het stokje doorgegeven? Aan wie? Wat is er gebeurd?
- Heb je een gesprek gevoerd in een polariserende context? Hoe is dat gegaan?
- Welke frame- of brugzin heb je gebruikt?
- Voel je je nog steeds in staat om nuance te behouden?

**Hoe nuttig is deze follow-up in jullie praktijk?**

Niet nuttig      Zeer nuttig

**Hoe haalbaar is deze follow-up in jullie praktijk?**

Niet haalbaar      Zeer haalbaar

**F9. Hoe belangrijk is het om deze netwerkverspreiding bij te houden (Is het stokje doorgegeven? Zijn hun gesprekken veranderd)?**

Niet belangrijk      Essentieel

**D3. Wat zou deze interventie makkelijker maken om uit te voeren?**

**D4. Hoe haalbaar is dit om met een focusgroep uit te voeren?**

Niet haalbaar      Zeer haalbaar

**D5. Of zou je liever een nieuwe groep recruten om deze interventie uit te voeren? Zo ja, wie zou je recruten?**

**Deel E Viability - Overleeft het op lange termijn?**

Deze vragen gaan over duurzaamheid en schaalbaarheid

**E1. Zou dit onderdeel kunnen worden van de standaard toolkit die jullie inzetten?**

**E2. De interventie beoogt ethische normen te ontwikkelen door ervoor te zorgen dat deelnemers niet worden gedwongen tot ethische overtredingen (liegen, overdrijven) alleen om gehoord te worden. Hoe belangrijk vind je het aanpakken van "gedwongen ethische compromissen" als onderdeel van depolarisatie-werk?**

**Deel F Measurement - kunnen we impact meten?**

Deze vragen gaan over het meten van resultaten.

Traditionele evaluatie meet vaak:

- Tevredenheid van deelnemers ("Vond je het leuk?")
- Opgedane kennis ("Begrijp je het nu beter?")
- Intentie om actie te ondernemen ("Ga je nu iets doen?")

Deze interventie meet gedragsverandering via 8 "systeemsignalen":

- Emotionele veerkracht – Kunnen ze stress aan zonder in te storten?
- Weerstand tegen polarisatie – Kunnen ze nuance behouden onder sociale druk?
- Vertrouwen in instanties – Zien ze het systeem als legitiem (ook al zijn ze het er niet mee eens)?
- Ervaren eerlijkheid – Begrijpen ze de allocatie logica?
- Systemische vs. persoonlijke schuld – Zien ze afwijzing als systeemfalen, niet persoonlijk falen?
- Brugbouw-skills en veerkracht – Verbinden ze mensen of kiezen ze kanten?
- Respect tussen groepen – Zien ze "de andere kant" als legitiem bezorgde mensen?
- Afgenomen druk van ethische overschrijdingen – Voelen ze minder druk om te liegen/manipuleren?

**F1. Hoe nuttig is dit meetkader (8 systeemsignalen) om impact aan klanten aan te tonen?**

Niet nuttig      Zeer nuttig

**Deel G: Overall Assessment**

**G1 Overall, hoeveel potentie zie je in deze interventie?**

**G2. Wat is het meest innovatieve of waardevolle aspect van deze aanpak?**

**G3. Wat is je grootste zorg over het implementeren van deze interventie?**

**G4. Wat verraste je het meest aan deze interventie?**

**G5. Waar zie je het grootste risico voor mislukking?**

**G6. In welke contexten zou dit interventie goed werken?**

**G7. In welke contexten zou dit interventie NIET goed werken?**

**G8. Als je 1 ding zou kunnen veranderen aan deze interventie, wat zou dat zijn?**

**G9. Zou je deze interventie aanbevelen aan andere social design agencies?**

Ja, zonder voorbehoud  
 Ja, met aanpassingen  
 Misschien - meer bewijs nodig  
 Nee

**G10. Overige feedback, suggesties of opmerkingen:**



# Appendix O

## Comparison Old and New Toolkit Materials

This Appendix presents the comparison of materials of the Bridge Building Dialogue.



Jouw naam:

Jouw rol/ labels:

Jouw expertise:

Drukkende zorgen of frustratie:

Rol mij op en stop en jouw houten stokje

*Van een schaal 1 op 10:*

Hoe vaak voel jij dat twee dingen tegelijkertijd waar kunnen zijn: *statushouders verdienen een huis en het voelt oneerlijk voor mensen die lang aan het wachten zijn.*

1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Mijn mening doet ertoe in dit debat

1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Ik kan invloed uitoefenen op dit probleem

1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Het systeem luistert naar mensen zoals ik

1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Ik kan weerstand bieden tegen groepsdruk

1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Ik voel me veilig om mijn genuanceerde mening te delen, ook als deze niet populair is

1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Ik zou weten hoe ik mijn nuance uitleg aan anderen.

1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Iterated version

*Jouw initiaal*  
.....

Vul in stilte in.  
Als je een vraag hebt, steek dan je hand op.

**Op een schaal 1 op 10, hoe voel jij je over:**

Mijn mening is belangrijk in dit debat.  
1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Ik kan invloed hebben op dit probleem.  
1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Het systeem luistert naar mensen zoals ik.  
1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Ik kan nee zeggen tegen groepsdruk.  
1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Ik voel me veilig om mijn mening te delen, ook als deze niet populair is  
1 ————— 5 ————— 10

Ik weet hoe ik mijn mening kan uitleggen aan anderen.  
1 ————— 5 ————— 10

**Inzichten om door te geven, of om bij stil te staan**

Als ik terugkijk, merkte ik dat ik spanning voelde bij...

Ik begrijp nu dat...

Mijn tool om met spanning om te gaan is...

Voor: \_\_\_\_\_

Ik geef dit stokje door aan jou omdat:

**Een vraag voor jou:**  
Waar ervaar jij de spanning om trouw te blijven aan je eigen mening, en tegelijk de spanning om een kant te kiezen?

**Laten we praten.**

Van: \_\_\_\_\_

*Wat ik leerde vandaag is:*

*1 ding dat wij samen willen veranderen:*



First version

**Wie ben jij?** Binnen deze context ben ik.....

**Welke zorgen draag jij mee?** Ik maak mij hierbij zorgen om.....

*vouwlijn*

*Vouw mij langs de lijn dicht en stop in jouw houten stokje.*

# Appendix P

## The Facilitator Guide - Bridge Building Dialogue

This Appendix presents the facilitator guide made for the Bridge Builder Dialogue. The iterations done after testing (Chapter 20) are not included in this version.

## Handleiding

### gesprek voor depolarisation



## Depolarisatie gesprek

Van tegenover elkaar naar naast elkaar

 Duur: 2-4 uur afhankelijk van groepsgrootte

 Voor: 3-6 personen

### Wat is dit?

De handleiding voor een gespreksmethode voor het stille midden: mensen die genuanceerd willen blijven maar druk voelen om een kant te kiezen.

### Doel

Op een depolariserende manier een dialoog voeren met ruimte voor twijfel en nuance. Geen debat, geen overtuigen. Wel: luisteren, begrijpen, verbinden. En deelnemers de tools geven dit zelf voort te zetten.

### Definitie Polarisatie

De samenleving voelt als twee kampen die steeds verder uit elkaar bewegen. Je moet kiezen: voor of tegen. Links of rechts. Wij of zij. De ruimte in het midden, waar twijfel, vragen en nuance leven, wordt steeds kleiner.

### Theoretische Basis

Dit gesprek is gebaseerd op onderzoek naar depolarisatie.

Het werkt door:

- Het stille midden te mobiliseren (mensen met nuance)
- Gedeelde menselijkheid te tonen vóór politieke verschillen
- Systeemcomplexiteit inzichtelijk te maken
- Emotionele veerkracht op te bouwen
- Tools te geven om nuance te behouden onder druk

### Acties

De acties van de hele groep zijn aangegeven in koper kleur.



### Actie facilitator

Specifieke acties voor de facilitator zijn aangegeven in blauw.

### Focus op jouw context

Wat is jouw hoofdthema die je gaat bespreken? Dit vul je in in de [het thema] plekken in de handleiding.

### Timing

Er staat een duur voor een kleine groep () en grote groep () aangegeven bij elke stap. Tijden zijn richtlijnen; wees flexibel als het gesprek daarom vraagt.

### Trouble shooting

**Als het gesprek te heet wordt:** Wijs terug naar de brug en de gespreksregels. Wat was onze afspraak? Herhaal: we hoeven het niet eens te zijn

**Als iemand overstuur raakt:** Bied een pauze aan

**Als iemand domineert:** "Dankje [naam], laten we ook [ander] horen."

**Als de groep focus verliest:** Mini-pauze, vat daarna kort samen wat je tot nu toe hoort.

# Depolarisatie gesprek

Materialen en Set-up

## De set-up

### Materialen voor het gesprek

- 7 Houten gespreksbrugstokjes
- Brug met whiteboardmarker
- Polarisatie druk poster + dot-votes (geel/rood/groen)
- Depolarisatie gesprekskaarten (1 set per persoon)
- Zacht feit (uitgeprint, 1 per persoon)
- Baseline vragenlijsten (2x per persoon)
- Begin ritueel papieren (rollen/oordelen)
- Eind ritueel materialen (toekomststokjes + toekomstpapiertjes)
- Pennen

### Check vooraf

- Is er een aparte ruimte voor het ritueel?
- Zijn beide ruimtes rustig en zonder afleiding?
- Hoeveel mensen doen mee?
- Ken je groep. Deze methode is ontwikkeld voor het stille midden. In contexten met hoge polarisatie druk: selecteer deelnemers zorgvuldig.

### Pre-dialoog ruimte

#### Voor iedereen klaar:

- Gespreksbrugstokje
- Baseline test
- Begin ritueel-papiertje

#### Na pauze hier klaar leggen:

- Baseline test
- Toekomststokje en toekomstpapiertje

### Dialoogruimte

- Brug in het midden van de tafel + whiteboard markers
- Gesprekskaarten (voor iedereen)
- Voor facilitator: Zachte feit en polarisatie druk poster
- Voor iedereen dot-vote stickers en pennen

# Depolarisatie gesprek

Tips & Kernconcepten

## Welk frame gebruik ik?

### Kernconcepten

- Zachte feiten: Feiten met context en persoonlijk verhaal
- Bruginnen: Zinnen die gesprek openen en bijsturen.
- Frame: Manier om gesprek te herkaderen naar constructief
- Nuance: Een manier om harde stellingen met meer context en details te voorzien. Nuance geeft vermogen om meerdere, soms tegenstrijdige waarheden tegelijk te erkennen als legitiem, zonder dat je gedwongen wordt om te kiezen voor één kant.

### Jouw houding

- Je stuurt niet naar consensus; laat verschillen bestaan.
- Blijf nieuwsgierig, nooit oordelend. Vraag door bij wat je belangrijk vindt, maar wees niet te sturend
- Vat regelmatig samen wat je hoort
- Laat mensen hun eigen woorden vinden, vul niet te snel in. Gun ruimte voor stilte en laat mensen bij emotionele verhalen uitpraten, dwing niets af

### Onthoud

- Niet alle waarden hoeven gedeeld te zijn
- Mensen hoeven geen oplossing te vinden voor het grote probleem
- Het gaat om het proces en de verbinding, niet het resultaat

### De schurk - Focus op schuld

Je hoort:

- "Het is hun schuld"
- "Die groep krijgt alles"
- "Als zij er niet waren..."

### Alles verandert- Focus op verandering

Je hoort:

- "Vroeger was beter"
- "Dit was er nooit"
- "Alles gaat te snel"

### Gedeelde strijd- Focus op verdeling

Je hoort:

- "Zij krijgen meer"
- "Wij krijgen niks"
- "Het is niet eerlijk"

### Menselijkheid- Focus op categorieën

Je hoort:

- "Die [groep]..."
- Veel labels, stereotypes en generalisaties
- In een zwarte schaap dynamiek



# 1

Baseline test & Start ritueel

 15 minuten  
 15 Minuten

# 2

Veiligheid

 10 minuten  
 15 Minuten

### Binnenkomst

De groep zit in stilte en vult individueel de baseline test in. Benoem dat dit gesprek gaat over [\[het thema\]](#) en dat het geen toets is. Het is een moment om te voelen waar iedereen persoonlijk staat.

**Actie:** Baseline test invullen.

### Rollen en oordelen achterlaten

Dit ritueel markeert de overgang van de dagelijkse wereld naar de gespreksruimte.

Introduceer dit door te vragen: wie jij bent in deze context, hoe zie jij jouw rol? Welke labels draag jij mee? Waar maak jij je zorgen om rond [\[het thema\]](#)?



**Actie:** Deelnemers schrijven dit op, vouwen het briefje en stoppen het in hun houten gespreksstokje.

Iedereen loopt vervolgens in stilte naar de dialoogruimte, met het stokje in de hand. Benoem dat de labels, zorgen en oordelen achterblijven in de eerste ruimte en in het stokje. Bij de dialoogtafel verzamelen jullie, iedereen met hun stokje in de hand.

**Actie:** Een stille verplaatsing naar dialoogruimte met gevulde stokjes in de hand.

# 3

Menselijkheid

 40 minuten  
 55 Minuten

### Polarisatie spanning zichtbaar maken

Leg de polarisatieposter op tafel. Polarisatie kan druk of spanning geven om een mening te delen of een kant te kiezen.

Voorbeelden:

Familie: "Ik durf mijn mening niet te zeggen aan tafel!"

Werk: "Collega's hebben harde meningen, ik hou het voor me!"

Media: "Elk bericht is zwart-wit, geen ruimte voor grijs!"

Polarisatie raakt ons allemaal, maar niet overal even hard. Waar ervaren de deelnemers de spanning?

Mensen plakken gekleurde stickers bij de domeinen:

- Rood = ik voel grote polarisatie spanning
- Geel = ik voel een beetje spanning
- Groen = ik voel geen polarisatie spanning

**Actie:** Stickers plakken en samen bespreken wat opvalt. Waar zit de meeste druk? Is er een patroon? Wat betekent dit?

### Gedeelde waarde

Verschuift het gesprek naar persoonlijke ervaringen. Dit is geen debat, maar een verkenning. Om te luisteren wat elkaar beweegt.

Jij begint met een persoonlijk en kwetsbaar voorbeeld. Waar ervaar jij spanning? Wat maakt dit lastig?

Daarna onderzoek je samen:

Welke waarde ligt onder de spanning die zichtbaar is op de poster?

Wat staat er op het spel?

Wat hebben mensen nodig om hun stem te laten horen?

**Actie:** Iedereen deelt belangrijke waarde die in gevaar komt door individueel gevoelde spanning en wat zij nodig hebben.



Vat samen: Welke overeenkomsten zijn er? Welke frustraties komen steeds terug? Welke verlangens? Welke waarden?

Dit zijn gedeelde waarden, zonder dat daar consensus voor nodig is. Mensen kunnen verschillende meningen hebben en toch dezelfde waarden en gevoelens delen, gedeelde menselijkheid.

**Actie facilitator:** Noteer de waarden - dit helpt straks bij de frame keuze!

# 4

Zachte feiten

 10 minuten  
 20 Minuten

## Stap maken naar depolarisatie

Jullie gaan nu samen kijken naar tools om die spanning aan te jagen, hoe kan je gesprekken depolariseren of je eigen mening behouden, een veilig gesprek voeren?

### Zachte feiten presenteren

Je introduceert een zacht feit: een feit met context en menselijke betekenis. Feiten komen soms anders binnen, of zijn lastig te begrijpen omdat ze vaak abstract zijn en moeilijk te relateren aan iemands dagelijks leven. Door ze zacht te presenteren worden ze voelbaar.

**Actie facilitator:** Deel het zachte feit uit dat je voorbereid hebt, en leg uit waarom dit anders is dan harde, abstracte cijfers.

Bespreek samen: Kennen zij dit feit? Wat herkennen ze? Wat wringt er? Maakt deze manier van presenteren verschil?



**Actie:** Bespreek wat het zachte feit los maakt.

**Actie facilitator:** Wijs hun op het zachte feiten template in de kaartenset.

Zouden zij deze tool kunnen gebruiken in gesprekken?

# 5

De frames

 25 minuten  
 30 Minuten

## Frame kiezen

Introduceer de framekaarten als tools om gesprekken te openen in plaats van te sluiten en bij te sturen.

**Actie facilitator:** Kies één frame dat past bij de energie in de groep, gebruik de tips vooraan in de handleiding. Behandel maar 1 kaart in volledigheid in de sessie.

**Actie:** Laat iemand een opdrachtkaart trekken, voorlezen en toepassen op een herkenbaar scenario.

Bespreek daarna wat dit oproept. Herkennen ze het scenario en kunnen ze deze frames daarbij gebruiken. Benadruk dat iedereen de volledige set meekrijgt om thuis zelf in te zetten.

# 7

Stokje doorgeven

 15 minuten  
 15 Minuten

## Legitimiteit

Benadruk dat twijfel geen zwakte is, dat je geen kant hoeft te kiezen en dat het midden een volwaardige positie is. Het midden vinden in een discussie is ook een mening, een volwaardige positie.

### Het stokje ritueel

Benoem dat iedereen hun stokje terug kan pakken en zich kan verplaatsen naar de andere ruimte. Waar ze hun oude stokjes inleveren. Leg uit dat deze dialoog niet stopt bij de deur. Hun bijdrage is juist ná dit gesprek belangrijk. Ze laten zorgen en oordelen achter en nemen een nieuwe rol aan: brugbouwer in hun eigen omgeving.

**Actie:** Pak stokje en loop terug naar de andere ruimte.

Daar vullen ze een nieuw stokje met wat ze meenemen uit dit gesprek.



**Actie:** Schrijf het toekomst ritueel blaadje en stop het in het toekomststokje

Dit stokje geven ze door aan iemand in hun eigen omgeving die baat kan hebben bij een soort gelijk gesprek of tools, niet om te overtuigen maar om te verbinden.

Zo verspreid de depolariserende beweging zich organisch verder.

# 8

Evaluatie

 10 minuten  
 15 Minuten

## Evaluatie invullen

Deelnemers vullen opnieuw de baseline vragenlijst in.

**Actie:** Herhaal de baseline vragenlijst

### Bedank en wijs op de kaarten set

Bedank de groep voor het mooie gesprek en de openheid. Geef ze de kaartenset mee met templates voor zachte feiten en hapklare brugzinnen.

Benadruk: hun mening telt, hun genuanceerde stem is waardevol.

### Eventueel: Reflecteren op het gesprek

**Vraag:**


- Wat was het meest verrassend?
- Zou je dagelijkse gesprekken nu anders voeren?

### Optioneel: Follow-up na 2 weken

Neem contact op met deelnemers. Hebben ze het stokje doorgegeven? Hoe ging dat gesprek? Hoe kijken ze nu, met wat afstand, terug op de sessie? Dit helpt om te zien of de geleerde inzichten beklijken.

# 6

Persoonlijke stem

 20 minuten  
 30 Minuten

## Wat wil jij anders?

Nu gaan jullie werken aan ieders eigen verhaal. Dit is het moment waarop iedereen zijn of haar eigen genuanceerde positie formuleert. Jullie hebben al verkend welke waarden belangrijk zijn.

**Actie facilitator:** Vat de gedeelde waarden samen

Maar wat wil jij persoonlijk anders in dit systeem, en wat maakt dit lastig (wat is hun 'persoonlijke schurk')?

**Actie:** Iedereen bedenkt hun visie en wat dit nu lastig maakt

## Wat kan je doen?

Nu maken jullie het concreet en klein. Wat is een haalbare stap in de komende week ondanks die obstakels? Niet "de samenleving veranderen", maar iets dat echt te doen is. Bijvoorbeeld: één gesprek voeren, een nieuw frame proberen, of een brugzin gebruiken. Dit geeft mensen grip: ze verlaten dit gesprek niet met een gevoel van machteloosheid, maar met concrete tools en een eerste stap.

**Actie facilitator:** Presenteer de brugzinnen

Welke spreekt aan? Iedereen mag een ander kiezen - het gaat erom dat het bij hun manier van praten past.

**Actie:** Iedereen bekijkt en kiest een brugzin, bespreek dit met elkaar.



## Pauze

 15 minuten

Dit moment helpt om los te komen van de intensiteit en het gesprek te laten landen. Gun ze deze ruimte.

Laat ze even nadenken over het frame en het gesprek even landen.

### Na pauze

Jullie hebben nu gezien waar de druk vandaan komt (polarisatiekaart), wat de feiten zijn (zachte feiten), en hoe je anders over dit onderwerp kunt praten (frames). Nu gaan we aan jou werken. Wat neem jij mee uit dit gesprek? Wat is jouw persoonlijke verhaal?

Een gespreksmethode ontwikkeld door :

Cato van Lieshout

In samenwerking met Snijboon.



## Personal Project Brief – IDE Master Graduation Project

# Appendix Q

## Original Project Brief

This Appendix presents the original project brief as it was approved at the start of the project. Personal details have been covered.

Name student Cato van Lieshout

Student number 4874560

### PROJECT TITLE, INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM DEFINITION and ASSIGNMENT

Complete all fields, keep information clear, specific and concise

Designing Coexistence: Creating Social Spaces for Diverse Perspectives in a Polarised world.

#### Project title

*Please state the title of your graduation project (above). Keep the title compact and simple. Do not use abbreviations. The remainder of this document allows you to define and clarify your graduation project.*

#### Introduction

*Describe the context of your project here; What is the domain in which your project takes place? Who are the main stakeholders and what interests are at stake? Describe the opportunities (and limitations) in this domain to better serve the stakeholder interests. (max 250 words)*

Polarisation is having an increasingly significant influence on our daily lives, often emerging not from overt confrontation, but from subtle patterns of interaction (Axelrod et al., 2021). Individuals tend towards grouping, a natural human behaviour that leads us to associate with like-minded people (Hogg et al., 2008). This tendency, coupled with public debates that amplify extreme viewpoints, limits the expression of uncertainty or nuanced positions. People frequently feel compelled to choose sides, for example, to be for or against, or to be left or right, creating an environment that makes it harder to express uncertainty, appreciate nuance and stifles diverse voices and hinders constructive dialogue (Siev et al., 2024). Communication deteriorates as individuals struggle to listen across differing perspectives (Hendriks et al., 2018), particularly in social contexts where space (physical, social, or symbolic) for nuanced expression is vital.

In diverse societies, encountering differing social and cultural norms may trigger tensions, especially when personal boundaries are ambiguous or unclear (Yampolsky & Amiot, 2016; Mohyeddin, Z, 2024). The aim of this graduation project is therefore to investigate how design can facilitate experiences and spaces that encourage nuance, reflection, and connection despite differences (Hendriks et al., 2018). Rather than resolving differences, it explores how designers can facilitate various forms of listening, dialogue and meaningful interaction. Grounded in the concept of intersectional resonance, which embraces multiple, even conflicting truths (Kulundu, 2018), the project will focus on creating and investigating inclusive social spaces and experiences. By facilitating coexistence and constructive dialogue, it will promote freedom of thought and establish personal boundaries within these spaces, contributing to Ingrid Mulder et al.'s research and/or the Delft Design Lab Participatory City Making as well as aligning with Snijboon's stakeholder field.

→ space available for images / figures on next page

# Personal Project Brief – IDE Master Graduation Project

## Problem Definition

What problem do you want to solve in the context described in the introduction, and within the available time frame of 100 working days? (= Master Graduation Project of 30 EC). What opportunities do you see to create added value for the described stakeholders? Substantiate your choice. (max 200 words)

Polarisation narrows the space for dialogue, often forcing people into simplistic categories and silencing those who seek nuance, change their minds or set boundaries. This affects not only how individuals engage with societal issues, but also how they interact with one another. Constructive interaction requires more than exposure to different views; it requires carefully designed conditions that reduce the perception of threat and foster a sense of shared humanity (Balietti et al., 2021). Although various initiatives aim to counter polarisation, few explore how design can encourage nuance, curiosity, and constructive interaction across divides. Rather than resolving polarisation by forcing consensus or taking sides, the focus will be on creating spaces and interactions in which diverse perspectives can coexist. Central to this is the concept of 'intersectional resonance' (Kulundu, 2018): the ability to accommodate multiple, even conflicting, perspectives and experiences.

This project will therefore explore how people navigate everyday polarised tensions in social contexts. The target audience will be individuals relevant to Snijboon’s work, and conducted within the Participatory City Lab research field. The project will propose ways to facilitate inclusive social spaces within such contexts by investigating how designers can shape spaces (physical, social or symbolic) and interactions that enable nuance and coexistence. The aim is to create awareness of boundaries and social opinions, and to increase social understanding.

## Assignment

This is the most important part of the project brief because it will give a clear direction of what you are heading for. Formulate an assignment to yourself regarding what you expect to deliver as result at the end of your project. (1 sentence) As you graduate as an industrial design engineer, your assignment will start with a verb (Design/Investigate/Validate/Create), and you may use the green text format:

Investigate how polarisation affects people's ability to express nuanced views and assert personal boundaries in social or public contexts. Then, co-create a space or experience that facilitates constructive interaction and mutual understanding between people with different perspectives.

Then explain your project approach to carrying out your graduation project and what research and design methods you plan to use to generate your design solution (max 150 words)

This project will utilise a design research process combining qualitative enquiry with iterative prototyping. The study will begin with exploratory methods, such as semi-structured interviews and observational studies, to uncover lived experiences in polarised contexts and specify a social domain. This social domain is of interest to the Snijboon and their field of work, as well as to the research field of the Participatory City Making Lab of Ingrid et al. Understanding the subtle dynamics of polarisation will enable the project to prototype alternatives that promote tolerance and curiosity. Building on insights from Balietti et al. (2021), the study will examine the effectiveness of incorporating similarity cues, such as shared values, into interventions to encourage cross-perspective engagement. Insights will be synthesised using journey mapping and scenario building, with co-creation playing a crucial role through collaborative design sessions with diverse participants. Potential outcomes include artefacts, toolkits, conversation tools, games or a value compass to help navigate nuanced positions. All outcomes will be iteratively tested and refined based on user feedback.

## Project planning and key moments

To make visible how you plan to spend your time, you must make a planning for the full project. You are advised to use a Gantt chart format to show the different phases of your project, deliverables you have in mind, meetings and in-between deadlines. Keep in mind that all activities should fit within the given run time of 100 working days. Your planning should include a **kick-off meeting, mid-term evaluation meeting, green light meeting and graduation ceremony**. Please indicate periods of part-time activities and/or periods of not spending time on your graduation project, if any (for instance because of holidays or parallel course activities).

Make sure to attach the full plan to this project brief. The four key moment dates must be filled in below

Kick off meeting 25 Augustus 2025

Mid-term evaluation 31 October 2025

Green light meeting 11 December 2025

Graduation ceremony 27 January 2026

In exceptional cases (part of) the Graduation Project may need to be scheduled part-time. Indicate here if such applies to your project

Part of project scheduled part-time	<input type="checkbox"/>
For how many project weeks	<input type="text"/>
Number of project days per week	<input type="text"/>

Comments:

## Motivation and personal ambitions

Explain why you wish to start this project, what competencies you want to prove or develop (e.g. competencies acquired in your MSc programme, electives, extra-curricular activities or other).

Optionally, describe whether you have some personal learning ambitions which you explicitly want to address in this project, on top of the learning objectives of the Graduation Project itself. You might think of e.g. acquiring in depth knowledge on a specific subject, broadening your competencies or experimenting with a specific tool or methodology. Personal learning ambitions are limited to a maximum number of five. (200 words max)

Having worked at Zeewaardig, a social service design agency in Rotterdam, I discovered a passion for designing within the social sector. I find it fascinating to explore diverse perspectives and analyse them to draw broader conclusions that can guide municipalities, for example. I believe it’s essential to first understand the different ways in which people view the world, and then find common ground where these differing opinions and beliefs can coexist.

The competencies I wish to develop include becoming an independent designer who can manage their own projects. I want to take the initiative and trust my intuition in the design process to make a meaningful impact through active design research, facilitating unique insights into the challenges of our complex world. This project will enable me to develop my design research, interaction design and co-creation skills while nurturing my ability to address complexity and societal challenges. For instance, user-centred research and contextual analysis will help to frame the issues at hand, integrating academic theories in the process. I hope to challenge my conceptual and creative skills by exploring prototyping, iteration and reflection, and by embracing and balancing ambiguity. Lastly, I intend to work with interaction qualities and situate them within the newly discovered context.

## References

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