

# A Social Service Design Approach Towards Depolarisation

“ Polarisation isn't solved in 100 days. It gets better through many small steps—one conversation at a time. *To who will you pass the baton?*”

## The Challenge

Toxic polarisation is becoming a bigger part of daily conversations. In Utrecht's housing crisis, not enough homes, long waiting lists, and unclear allocation systems lead to frustration and scapegoating. People feel forced to take sides, while nuanced voices disappear into the background.

How can we design a facilitated shared human experience for Utrecht's silent middle that strengthens their capacity to resist polarisation by validating frustrations, building understanding, unpacking systemic drivers, and sustaining nuance beyond the intervention?

## The Approach

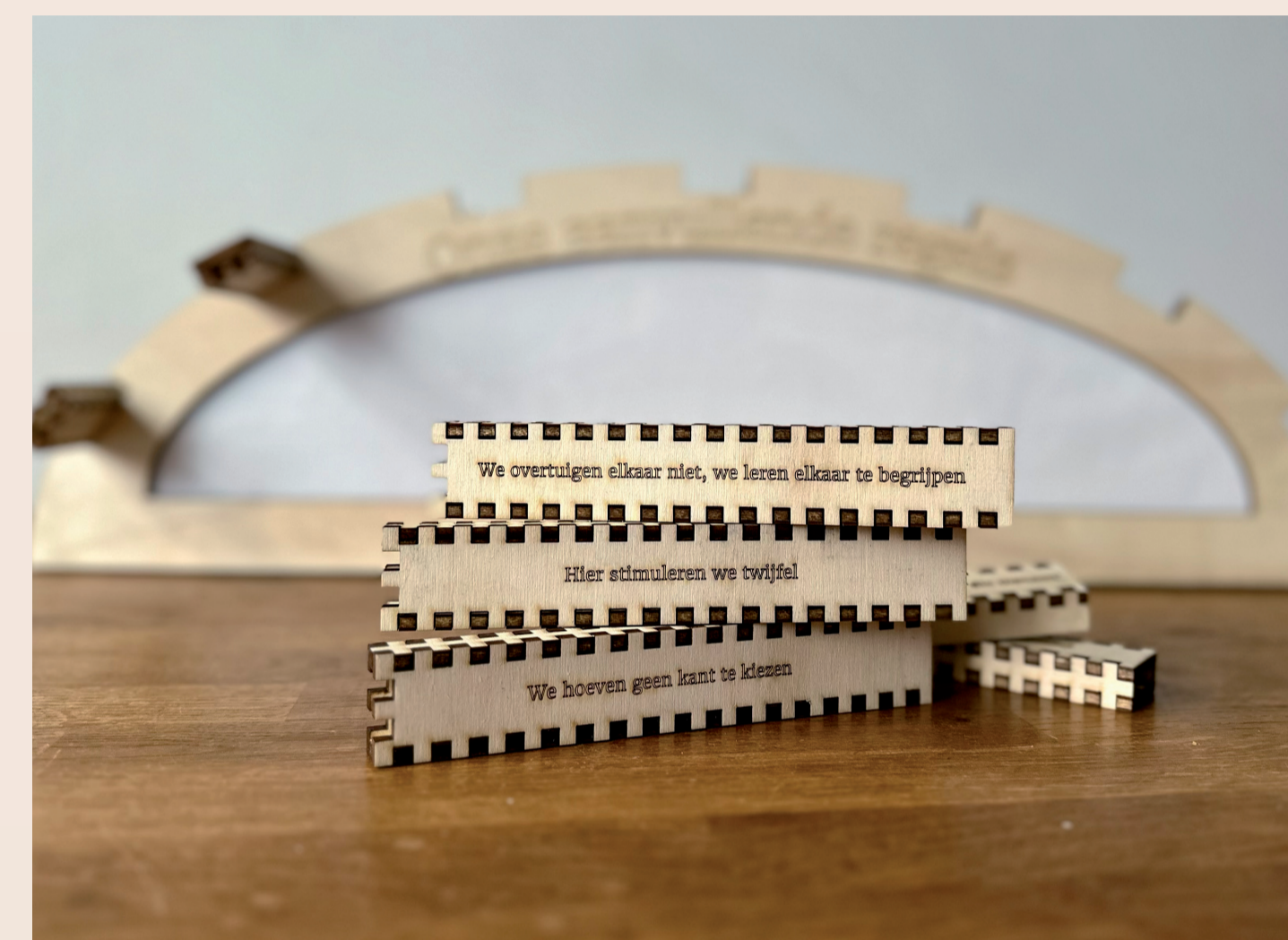
A seven-step approach blends practical, intuitive design with analytical theory including among other theories context mapping, modeling behaviour using COM-B, and analysing leverage points. This process helps social service designers find the most effective places to intervene.

The silent middle, made up of people with mixed or nuanced views, often steps back. To restore productive debate, we need to encourage these voices to participate and make space for dialogue beyond the extremes.

**Result:** Human touchpoints emerged as the highest-leverage intervention. The focus is not on changing what people think, but on how they process frustration and navigate daily polarisation.

## The Bridge Building Dialogue

Depolarisation dialogue that builds capacity through a carefully designed flow.



## Flow of Intervention

- Safety Ritual:** Suspend roles through silence.
- Shared Humanity:** Map tensions, discover values
- Contextualisation:** Transform abstract statistics into relatable human stories
- Dialogue:** Practice frame cards: Shared Humanity and Struggle, Villain, and Everything Changes.
- Personal Action:** Develop individual voice with bridge sentences
- Pass the baton:** spread skills through networks.

## The Impact

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.

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