



**Exemplary Urban Practitioners <sup>1</sup>**  
Survival of the fittest ... and the fitting

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<sup>1</sup> See the documentaries: [www.bestpersons.eu](http://www.bestpersons.eu)

## Introduction

*"I like coloring outside given lines; think and work outside the box. I don't like it if everything goes normal. Thinking outside the box means that you look outside your own organization of the municipality. So coloring outside the box, outside of regulations and codes. That you make connections between this department and other policy domains. You can't always stay in the box and you have to go outside."*

In our research we selected (semi) professionals, observed them in their daily activities and spoke with them.<sup>2</sup> They worked in Dutch urban renewal districts (Amsterdam, The Hague, Leeuwarden, Zwolle and Utrecht) and were selected from different domains: health, welfare, housing, education, safety, resident participation. These professionals were marked by their colleges in the policy networks that they make 'the difference'.

But what means 'making the difference?' Generally speaking they were given a certain kind of policy freedom by their institution they represent in the policy network, but their quality was it that they filled in their practice with a certain kind of obstinate.

What they have in common is their attention to everyday life (in deprived urban districts), their holistic problem orientation and finding solutions based on it. They are not operating alone but take part in relevant governance processes of policy making, but are not detained by the systematic and logic of their organization or by bureaucratic rationality. In the actual policy of urban renewal this 'exemplary urban practitioner' gets and takes an integrated task to solve complex problems bottom up. We call them Best persons operating as Exemplary Urban Practitioners.

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<sup>2</sup> Brink, G. v.d., M. van Hulst, L. de Graaf & T. v.d. Pennen (2012). Best persons en hun betekenis voor de Nederlandse achterstandswijk. Den Haag: Boom/Lemma.

## The research question:

‘Through what ways of working and relating do Exemplary Urban Practitioner (try to) get things done?’

The research question is connected to an assumption that is more and more heard in policy administration and in policy scientific debates: Effective neighborhoods interventions would need a certain kind of professional, who impersonates certain qualities. Several researchers have demonstrated the importance of such professionals as a result of increasing social and administrative complexity (Schön, 1983<sup>3</sup>; Healey, 1992<sup>4</sup>, Forester, 1999<sup>5</sup>). ‘The relevance of the operation of Best Persons have become increasingly important in a world where financial resources for neighbourhood renewal have dwindled due to the economic crisis, the austerity measures and housing market blight. Large-scale neighbourhood renewal funding has all but disappeared’. There must be find alternative strategies and probably the experiences of Best Persons are relevant.

In the perspective of this debate, we were interested in the meaning of exemplary urban practitioners. In their way of looking at the world around them, their problem definitions and aims, their qualities, the methods and strategies these professionals use in their practices.

The (semi-) professionals we call *exemplary* are not always taking the common routes to realize their goals. They will not automatic follow the routines of problem solving and because of that they can make a difference. They are critical about ‘main stream’ practices and try to find solutions starting from the

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<sup>3</sup> Schön, D.A., 1983. *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>4</sup> Healey, P. (1992). A planner’s day: knowledge and action in communicative practice. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 58, pp. 9–20.

<sup>5</sup> Forester, J. (1999). *The deliberative practitioner: encouraging participatory planning processes*. Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press.

perspectives of citizens. When we talk about *'ways of working and relating'* we refer to the qualities these professionals put to use in the planning and decision making processes of urban renewal. It has to do with personal qualities like attitude and experience, but also with strategic skills such as networking with policy partners. *'Getting things done'* will mean solving problems or better stated exploiting opportunities. More broadly is their aim is to transform 'urban problem districts' into 'livable neighbourhoods'.

### **Dealing with dilemma's**

A central element to the work practice of professionals in urban renewal is the fact that they are confronted with a unruly social reality. Urban renewal is a complex process. The process takes place in networks of interdependent partners.

The process have ever changing characteristics and that makes it at the same time dynamic:

- Changing coalitions. During the planning process there are constantly other coalition partners and therefore changing composition of actors in the policy network.
- Changes in problem definitions.
- Changes in policy strategies.
- Changing regulations and rules (instruments).
- Changing political relations and administrative parties.
- Changing institutional relations between different policy networks.

Professionals are confronted with this complexity and therefore with dilemma's, situations of tension in which a difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives. The question is what chooses are made by our exemplary urban practitioners?

Because of the uncertainty, differences and interdependence it is hard to predict the future, let alone to steer it through public policies. Recognition of the dynamic and complex nature of policy processes is by no means new. What seems to have changed empirically, however, is the extent to which

policymakers are confronted with it (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).<sup>6</sup> In the field of public administration, the use of complex systems theory to explain the dynamics surrounding public policies has become increasingly popular (e.g. Wagenaar 2007<sup>7</sup>, Teisman *et al.* 2009<sup>8</sup>). Complexity theorists tell us that governance processes nowadays are 'erratic' and non-linear; stability and predictability are an exception in these processes' (Boons *et al.* 2009, p. 232).<sup>9</sup> What are the uncertainties professionals are confronted with? It is worked out in the next sections.

### **Substantive uncertainty.**

A problem-definition in a policy network is by definition fragmented. Uncertainty has to do with the fragmentation of the problem definition. If you make an analysis you find a fragmented way of thinking about the social reality, where the actors are not aware. Most of the problem-definitions are formulated in abstract terms; hardly translated to local and specific situations; shows a lack of priority statement. Mostly we could type the policy vision as an

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<sup>6</sup> Hajer, M.A. and Wagenaar, H. (eds), (2003). *Deliberative policy analysis: understanding governance in the network society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Wagenaar, H. (2007). Governance, complexity and democratic participation: how citizens and public officials harness the complexities of neighbourhood decline. *American review of public administration*, 37, pp. 17–50.

<sup>8</sup> Teisman, G., Van Buuren, A., and Gerrits, L. (eds), (2009). *Managing complex governance systems: dynamics, self-organization and coevolution in public investments*. London: Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Boons, F. *et al.*, (2009). Towards and approach of evolutionary public administration. In: G. Teisman, A. van Buuren and L. Gerrits, (eds). *Managing complex governance systems: dynamics, self-organization and coevolution in public investments*. London: Routledge, pp. 231–250.

appearance of consensus (Van der Pennen, et al, 1998).<sup>10</sup> Actors confronted with social problems do not know what the impact of the problems and what the effects are of their policy acting. Mostly it is hard to identify the problems because there is less information about causes and effects. Even if the knowledge is there than it is spread out over different sources actors can and will use. This generates knowledge uncertainty. This fragmentation and always have less information is a planning reality and be aware of it. More information does not mean less uncertainty. What gives certainty is to give insight in the fragmentation. A policy problem definition express how the social reality is defined by the different actors; what the differences are in the policy network and what is common. It also expresses what the contribution is of the different actors in reaching the policy aims and the way (instruments) they choose.

### **Institutional uncertainty.**

If there is an agreement what a common problem definition is, it is hard to find an institutional context to work it out, every time it must be worked out. Every actor involved in the planning process has its own (different) institutional context. The interaction between actors is complicated because every player has its own specific behaviour that is influenced by the tasks the organisation has given, the way of problem definition, rules and regulation and language of the own organisation. Once again we are talking about fragmentation but now in the institutional sphere. This institutional uncertainty cannot solve easily and for once and ever. It seems to be easy to find by every problem the right players and create a vital policy coalition. But a situation like that is extraordinary, most of the time the involved actors represents organisations with a history. Occasional there is what I will call 'bottom-up organisation': 'we see a problem; have an idea and we make a team'.

### **Strategic uncertainty**

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<sup>10</sup> Pennen, T. van der, et al. (1998). *Sociale vernieuwing: van plan naar praktijk*. Den Haag: Vuga/Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

This has to do with the strategic choices actors make in their reactions to complex social problems. Because there are more and different players involved in the planning process, everyone with its perception and demarcating the problem, strategic discussions about ways of implementation are complex and results most of the time in not expected outcomes. "Success is not a certainty. And even when the result is successful, it is often a surprise, not what was actually being sought", as Jane Jacobs indicates before. In analysing the discussion-making process you can see that actors anticipate and react on the action of each other. Because of this it is hard to predict how the interaction will be about the strategies that will result in the most promising solution of the stated problem. To handle the strategic uncertainty is not easy to reduce and cannot be eliminated. Is a part of the planning reality and is typical for the network society (Castells, 2000).<sup>11</sup>

In the planning's reality we have to do with these uncertainties; planning is not predictable. How to get grip on this uncertainty? My statement is that uncertainty is the only certainty in planning. 'Getting grip' is not to 'demolish' the uncertainties, that is an illusion and can see as a planners blind, but to handle the uncertainties and find a workable policy strategy for a given situation in a given time perspective. This policy strategy can be defined as: 'an ever changing interactive process of discussion, negotiation, feedback and adoption, in which a range of actors finds and do agree upon a common vision and common goals to give their handling a direction'. A reality that will not be captured by existing frames of thinking and planning regulation. This is a context that offers conditions to do outstanding work and make a difference.

The exemplary urban practitioners seem to have a 'good' impact on complex policy problems, by working more bottom-up, bringing in social and citizen-focused orientations and experiences. The exemplary urban practitioners are not driven by the logic of the institutional world, logic of rational planning in the time, to get a grip on the unexpected and uncertainties. They are driven by the

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<sup>11</sup> Castells, M. (2000). *The Rise of The Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

logic of 'the everyday world', that is the notion that urbanity is a dynamic process that does not stop with planning urban space, with designing and realizing a building, a street, or a square. Once realized there are the citizens who give their signature to the urban space, their expressions of their ways of life (Reijndorp & Reinders, 2010).<sup>12</sup>

### **The system world versus the Everyday World**

The second tension has to do with the world of planning and bureaucracy and the everyday world. Our research states the notion that is more and more heard in policy administration and in policy scientific debates that neighbourhood regeneration is hampered by the incongruence between the concepts of state and private sector systems and the life world of residents (Habermas, 1981, p:467<sup>13</sup>). Several recent publications regards see this concept as an essential factor in neighbourhood regeneration, resident participation and community development outcomes (Sieckelinck et al., 2013<sup>14</sup>; Van den Brink et al., 2012; WRR, 2012<sup>15</sup>).

According to Habermas, in his standard work *Theory of Communicative Action*, two forms of rationality at work in modern society. Firstly, the end-mean rationality dominant in what Habermas calls the 'system', and secondly, the communicative rationality that is the cohesive mechanism in the life world (Lebenswelt). The system world is an extraordinary collection of disparate systems and subsystems that people have developed in the form of

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<sup>12</sup> Reijndorp, A., L.Reinders (eds.) (2010). *De alledaagse en de geplande stad*. Over identiteit, plek en thuis. Amsterdam: SUN Transcity.

<sup>13</sup> Habermas, J. (1981) *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*; Band 2, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.

<sup>14</sup> Sieckelinck, S., S. van Buuren, H. El Madkouri (eds.) (2013) *Onbevoegd Gezag*, Den Haag: Boom Lemma.

<sup>15</sup> Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR) (2012) *Vertrouwen in de Burger*. Den Haag: SDU.



organizations, rules, procedures hierarchies and laws in societal domains such as economics, politics, education, housing, science, government, healthcare, welfare and justice.

Bureaucracies are the most undiluted form of systems (Weber, 1922/1992) quoted by Van den Brink, et al. p: 55) Bureaucracies are technologically and administratively superior to all previous forms of organisation. Bureaucracies have contributed largely to growth of productivity and to the creation of our modern welfare state. Due do their success and efficiency they have spread throughout all state and local government institutions, but also to large profit and non-profit companies. But that came at a price. Bureaucracies function best when the human element is eliminated and decisions are based on strict formal, rational and hierarchical rules. Human emotions such as love, hate and empathy are like sand in a well-oiled machine.

In contrast, the life world is the domain of personal relations between family members, friends and local communities, a world of values and emotions, but also one of social inequalities. Relations in the life world are based informal communications and story-telling (Van den Brink et al., 2012: 58). In the past, society consisted almost entirely of life world, but gradually systems began to increase in number and size and started to infiltrate, and dominate the life world. Habermas talks of the "colonization of the life world".

**Table 1.** Theoretical incongruities between system world (according to Weber) and lifeworld (according to Habermas)

|    | System world (Weber's Bureaucracies)  | Lifeworld (Habermas)     |
|----|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. | Salaried staff                        | Voluntary service        |
| 2. | Division of labour and specialisation | Communicative action     |
| 3. | Formal rules and procedures           | Informal / story telling |
| 4. | Functional Hierarchies                | Social inequalities      |
| 5. | Formal / Functional relations         | Personal relations       |
| 6. | Rational power resources              | Values and emotions      |

Source: Van den Brink, et al. (2012: 58)

As Habermas contents, we have reached a critical point where the system breaks away from his roots in the life world and even began to dominate the life world. Increasingly, citizens complain about negative experiences with the impersonality and cold rationality of systems. System world agencies are increasingly unable, or unwilling, to solve life world problems. According to Habermans, the solution lies in mobilizing the untapped potential within the life world.

According to our research findings there must be more professionals like our exemplary urban practitioners who can bridge the system world, the world of planning and bureaucracy as ideal typed by Weber and bureaucrats on one side and the everyday world on the other, expressed by citizens and ideal typed by Habermas. In the problematic defined neighbourhoods the tension between these worlds is one of a sharp manifestation, because these citizens have more intensive contacts with different bureaucratic organisations. You can see, remarkable, that most of the professional works according the reality of the system world, characterised by functionality, rationality, formal regulation and procedures, a specialist treatment according to a hierarchic system. In the everyday world there are other characteristics like informal personal contacts and communication, feelings and emotions, unpaid civil engagement. Daily life in neighbourhoods can be distinguished from the professional and policy handling. It can be recognised that these worlds does not fit and where the exemplary urban practitioners can do a good job.

### **Problem orientation**

In their problem orientations and problem definitions the exemplary urban practitioners abstain from using the commonly employed routines of data gathering. Instead, they go out in 'the field' and leave the offices. This yields a problem analysis, based on local knowledge (Yanow, 2004: 12)<sup>16</sup> and on looking for proper solutions. The practitioners make a 'discovery journey' and try to understand social reality from the perspective of the citizens. By gathering

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<sup>16</sup> Yanow, D., 2004. Translating local knowledge at organizational peripheries. *British journal of management*, 15, pp. S9–S25.

knowledge in this way one not only learns about the various and interrelated problems that citizens are confronted with, in the descriptions of the citizens themselves, but also about the strategies citizens use to tackle their problems and about their capacities to do so.

**Explorer Hamed: 'be straight'**



**Explorer Constance: 'Don't come with your own solutions'**



## Explorer Hans: 'Listen to them'



### To point out qualities

The working methods of exemplary urban practitioners in our five Dutch cities show a mix of entrepreneurialism, strategic networking and empathic engagement that differ from standard bureaucracy but fit very well with what is needed in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.<sup>17</sup> To point out:

1. Exemplary urban practitioners positioned themselves in the front line directly connected with the people and the problems. They gain local knowledge, which is essential to their work.

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<sup>17</sup> We worked out the qualities of our best persons in 4 types: Frontline worker; Everyday fixer; Social Entrepreneur; Boundary Spanner. See:

1. Van Hulst, M., De Graaf, L., and Van den Brink, G. (2011). Exemplary practitioners: a review of actors who make a difference in governing. *Administrative theory & praxis*, 33 (1), pp. 120–142.
2. Van der Pennen, Ton (2013). 'Profis die in sozialen Brennpunkten den Uterschied machen können' In: *Verbandsorgan des vhw - Forum Wohnen und Stadtentwicklung*. April 2013.

2. They have a strong engagement with the life world of residents (empathic). They are everyday fixers, because they want to reach problem solutions.<sup>18</sup>
3. They have entrepreneurial ways of working.<sup>19</sup> They started a project or give a project that was not successful 'live' again, so they are social entrepreneurs.
4. Their reality (problem definition and aims) does not always fit the rules and regulations. They are not against the rules, but do relative the rigidly of rules, because rules does not always fit problem solutions.
5. They bridge, make connections with other (domain) actors and institutions and creates in that way relevant working networks, so they are domain spanners.
6. Their creativity can involve matching rules with situations, but sometimes practitioner even need to cross institutional or professional rules and borders. In this sense, exemplary professionals act as boundary spanners.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusions

The work of exemplary practitioners is political work. It is directed towards goals that seem to be beyond the reach of 'normal' politics. It entails efforts to redistribute resources and efforts to empower, often without the explicit

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<sup>18</sup> Bang, H.P. and Sørensen, E., 1999. The everyday maker: a new challenge to democratic governance. *Administrative theory & praxis*, 21, pp. 325–341.

<sup>19</sup> Leadbeater, C. (1997). *The rise of the social entrepreneur*. London: DEMOS.

<sup>20</sup> Steadman, H.J. (1992). Boundary spanners: a key component for the effective interactions of the justice and mental health systems. *Law and human behavior*, 16, pp. 75–87.



'positions of public authority' (Lipsky 2010, p. 84)<sup>21</sup> to back it up. These practitioners are motivated by a view of a better local society, even if they are often pragmatic in their view of how we could get there. An important reason for their success might be that they are rather independent and because of this are able to follow their personal and professional knowledge and judgment. It is for this reason that their exemplarity is not something that can be easily copied (Norval2007)<sup>22</sup>.

But they cannot do their work alone. The work itself is about social interactions. On the one hand, they come into contact with many people when they try to mediate between people, policies and (sub)-system. And even if they are often a – if not he– central actor in a project or organization, they need these people to collaborate. In addition, they need to work with others who complement them in the more technical, administrative and organizational aspects of their work. The buddy system we encountered is the way they deal with this. In their study of everyday fixers, Hendriks and Tops (2005)<sup>23</sup> also stated that in order to be successful, these actors needed to be backed by local administrators. Understanding exemplary urban practitioners also means understanding what they are not. Exemplary urban practitioners are successful in their work in the rough-and-tumble of the world outside the bureaucratic institutions; others are clearly successful inside the bureaucratic institutions themselves. Exemplary urban practitioners can be exemplary because they make a fit with the environment in which they 'do their thing'. Not giving up too quickly as they fight to get things done remains an important condition for them to succeed. It is not just a matter of survival of the fittest, but also one of survival of the fitting.

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<sup>21</sup> Lipsky, M. (1980) *Street-level bureaucracy*. Dilemmas of the individual in public services. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>23</sup> Hendriks, F. and Tops, P.W., 2005. Everyday fixers as local heroes: a case study of vital interaction in urban governance. *Local government studies*, 31, 475–490.