

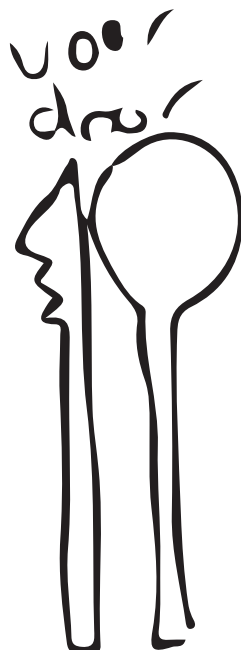
PUTTING PARTICIPATION TO PRACTICE



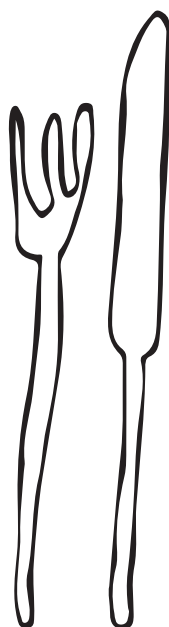
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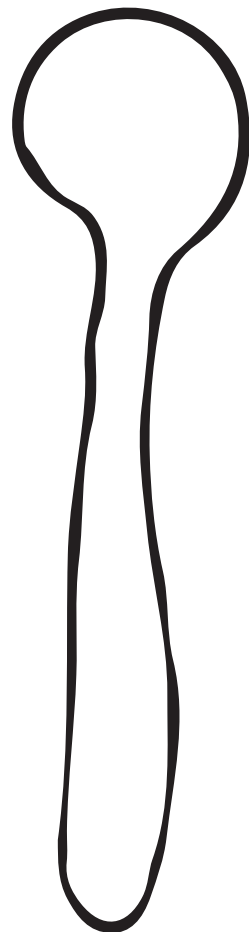
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DEVELOPING A PARTICIPATORY
APPROACH TO THE DESIGN AND
PROGRAMMING OF YOUTH HUBS

PREFACE

At the time of writing this preface I am sitting behind a desk overlooking the Maas and the skyline of Rotterdam. The window frame almost makes it look like I am watching a screensaver of the chromecast back home. From this view I can pinpoint the locations of the youth hubs I visited throughout this project. I am thankful for all the people that invited me into parts of their world and their place in this city. I couldn't have done this project without them.

I also want to express my thanks to Irene. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work on this project. Even before we met I was refreshed by your curiosity and knowledge; your emails were rich with resources, tips and ideas. Thank you for guiding me, yet giving me the freedom to make the project my own. A big thank you to the team at Healthy Start for the warm welcome and providing a great space for workshops. A special shoutout to Susanna!

I want to thank my supervisory team. Sam, thank you. You have a way of listening and responding with genuine interest and kindness, which helped me see my project from new perspectives and gave me reassurance when I needed it most. Pieter Jan, your riddles and anecdotes will stay with me—especially the one about the soldiers and the map, which I've already passed on as advice to a friend! Thanks for always encouraging me to think about *"how things will play out in the real world."*

Femke and Hannah, thank you!! Femke, you were always there to warm up the couch—the couch isn't the same without you (nor am I). Hannah, thanks for expressing your confidence in me as a person and as a designer, - sometimes you were the only one I believed. Gaby, thank you for the flowers, notes on toilet paper, cloud lamps, phone calls, croissant breaks—thanks for all of that and more. Thank you for helping me see who I am and who I want to be.

Finally, a heartfelt thank you to all the youth workers, civil servants, and young people who have shaped this project into what it is. Your contributions form the foundation of this thesis. It's your openness that truly drive the impact of participatory efforts.

Enjoy reading,
Maartje

Master thesis

*A participatory approach to the design
and programming of youth hubs*
November 2024

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SUMMARY

Goal

The objective of this project was to explore how participation is and can be shaped within the context of youth hubs. The design outcome aimed to develop a participatory approach that encourages youth workers to collaborate with young people in shaping the design and programming of these hubs, ultimately empowering the youth.

Background

The municipality of Rotterdam is currently working on opening 33 youth hubs across the city. These hubs are designed as spaces where young people can meet, develop and grow. Youth workers, the main facilitators and guides in these hubs, aim to build trustful relationships with local youth and support them in their journey to adulthood. Besides offering fun activities and opportunities for skill development, hubs are aimed to be shaped both by and for young people to create a sense of ownership. While the importance of youth participation is widely acknowledged, the practical implementation of such participation is often unclear. This project provides insights into the challenges of embedding participation in youth hubs and offers a method for youth workers to collaborate with young people in the design and programming of these spaces.

Methods

To gain a deep understanding of the context, I visited the youth hubs that were already open (N = 12). I attended some participatory activities myself (N = 5) and conducted interviews with civil servants (N = 4), youth workers (N = 8), and "key figures" of youth hubs (i.e., young active visitors of youth hubs) (N = 4). Additionally, I spoke with youth on the streets of Rotterdam (N = 40) and later iteratively explored low-fidelity prototypes in the library (N = 20). I also hosted a workshop with stakeholders (N = 12) of the project to test the design proposal, after which I conducted a more thorough reflection on the method with a few participants of that same workshop (N = 3).

Results

Gaining or giving away responsibility is an adjustment for both youth and youth workers. The focus should not be on simply swapping roles but rather on collaboration and creating an environment where both parties feel comfortable to explore their roles within the hub. Youth hubs are dynamic spaces, with young people growing older, youth workers moving on and the city itself evolving. This makes

them vibrant yet complex environments. Participation in such spaces is challenging because it must be tailored to a diverse range of individuals, requiring creativity and adaptability from youth workers who facilitate the process. Thinking along still appears to be seen as something serious, separate from fun activities where children and youth are expected to adapt to adult ways of working. Despite many creative efforts, there is still a lack of a methodological approach that allows youth to freely contribute their ideas in a collaborative setting and express themselves in their own way.

Conclusions

The Ideediner (Idea Dinner) is a method that transforms a formal meeting into a dining experience, using the dinner table as a space for discussing the design and programming of youth hubs. A blank tablecloth serves as the canvas, where participants "bring something to the table"—using the metaphor of dinner and food to represent their ideas or thoughts about the hub. Each step and course of the dinner is drawn on the tablecloth, accompanied by questions and tasks that help participants bring their ideas to life. Seats are swapped throughout the process to encourage collaboration and multiple forms of expression are welcome, allowing individuals to contribute without needing to be the most vocal in the room. This approach fosters a more inclusive environment, where ideas can be explored visually and interactively. The method results in a tangible, visual representation of collaboration, which can be revisited and reflected upon. A facilitator's guide, including a script and tips, supports the method and enables its execution.

Tests and evaluative interviews revealed that the method is highly regarded for its potential applications both within youth hubs and beyond. Stakeholders expressed interest in using it in various contexts, such as facilitating team meetings and guiding sessions for a youth council within the municipality. Given that the method relies on strong facilitator skills, further research is needed to identify the essential skills required and to explore effective training methods. Additionally, it is important to conduct tests to evaluate the readability and applicability of the current guide. Piloting the method in real youth hub settings over an extended period will also provide valuable insights for refinement. While the method aims to create a collaborative environment for youth and workers to generate ideas, further research is necessary to ensure these ideas are put to action.

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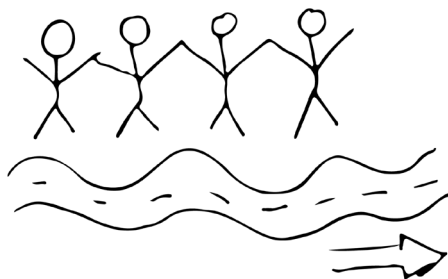
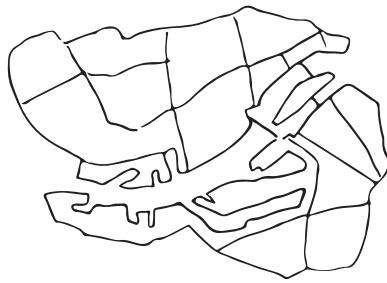


Figure 1. Drawing of participant during workshop. Describing what participation means and looks like to her.

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 INTRODUCTION
- 1.2 PROJECT COLLABORATION
- 1.3 PROJECT FOCUS
- 1.4 PROJECT APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

All over Rotterdam youth hubs are popping up or reopening their doors. Their main goal: to bring youth together, develop their talents and have fun in and around a place that is designed 'for, with, and by young people,' (Gemeente Rotterdam, z.d.). While these hubs are established by the municipality and staffed by youth professionals, they strongly encourage active participation and youth ownership. The aim is for these hubs to be 'places where young people from the neighborhood feel at home by making it their home.'

Rotterdam is a relatively young city, with over 200,000 residents under the age of 27 (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2023). It has the highest levels of child poverty and the highest rates of high school dropouts in the country (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2021). Furthermore, over half of Rotterdam's youth (68%) report feeling very lonely (Boer, 2023). Where the city's skyline is expanding, trust in the local government continues to decline (Boschove et al., 2021). Confronted with these statistics, the municipality of Rotterdam is seeking ways to reconnect with its younger citizens, foster mutual trust, better understand their needs, and ultimately contribute to laying the groundwork for Rotterdam's future policemen, doctors, teachers, artists, and bakers. Youth hubs serve as gateways in this effort.

Despite the widespread recognition that involving young people in the design and programming of spaces intended for them fosters ownership and responsible behavior, it remains challenging in practice to clearly define and give form to meaningful participation and as McMellon & Tisdall (2020, p.157) state: "far more is written about its challenges than possible solutions". 'Jongerenwerkers' (i.e. youth workers), the professionals at the youth hubs, serve as mediators and initiators of participation in these places. They must balance the (participation) goals of the municipality and welfare organizations with the actual needs and desires of the young participants—a task that requires significant creativity and adaptability.

The outcomes of this project aim to enhance collaboration between these youth workers and young people in the design and programming of youth hubs.

INTRODUCTION

1.2 PROJECT COLLABORATION

This project is part of a two-year research and design initiative, led by Irene Fierloos, with the goal of enhancing youth engagement in municipal policy-making. This two year project was initiated by 'Healthy Start', a convergence of the TU Delft, Erasmus University Rotterdam and the Erasmus Medical Center. One of their six ambitions is to increase participation of underrepresented youth (Healthy Start - Convergence, 2023).

This project complements the work of two other graduate students working with Irene, Betsie Loeffen (Design for Interaction) and Susanna Ossinga (Strategic Product Design), who focused on different aspects of youth participation. From a more overarching perspective, Susanna proposed alternative strategic approaches to youth participation by reframing the problem space (Ossinga, 2024). Betsie focused on examining youth participation from the perspective of policymakers, suggesting a new approach that enables these policymakers to engage more effectively with the young people for whom they create policies (Loeffen, 2024).

In contrast, my research focuses on the perspective of youth and youth workers, specifically their involvement in youth hubs. While there is often a significant gap between policymakers, civil servants, and youth, the (physical/literal) distance between youth workers and young people is much smaller. Youth workers engage with young people on a daily basis, working directly with and for them. As a result, the challenges and opportunities identified in this project will differ from those in previous projects by Susanna and Betsie. The results of their projects provide a solid foundation to build upon, but I will approach their findings with an open mind and further explore the perspective of youth within the specific context of youth hubs.

1.3 PROJECT FOCUS

Youth workers

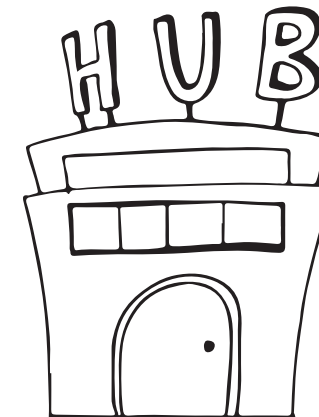
Youth workers are professionals who interact with young people daily. While the title is not strictly defined, the Nederlands Jeugdinstituut (n.d.) describes them as individuals who 'speak the language of youth,' with their primary goal being to support youth in their development toward adulthood. They collaborate with various organizations, including schools, psychologists, parents, and the police, to form a support network for vulnerable youth. Their work is accessible and informal, focusing on identifying issues and, when necessary, referring youth to other partners. Youth workers are often found in youth hubs or community centers.

Youth

Defining 'youth' is challenging, as it varies based on cultural context, politics, and family roles (Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015). There is no clean cut between the social groups 'children,' 'youth' and 'young-adults'. According to the Dutch dictionary Van Dale (2024) youth are defined as individuals between 16 and 30 years old. The CBS considers youth to be between 0 and 24 years old (CBS, 2024), while the UN standard for youth is between 15 and 24 years old (United Nations, z.d.). Since younger children also attend youth hubs, I will adopt a middle ground. In this project, when referring to youth, I mean individuals aged between 10 and 24 years.

Rotterdam

Rotterdam is actively working on the structural involvement of youth in policy, with special attention given to enhancing participation (Fierloos et al., 2024). They are working towards opening 33 youth hubs across the city. As mentioned in the introduction, Rotterdam is a relatively young city, with over 200,000 residents under the age of 27 (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2023). It has the highest levels of child poverty and the highest rates of high school dropouts in the country (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2021). Additionally, Rotterdam is home to the largest number of lonely young individuals (CBS, 2022). These factors make Rotterdam an appropriate and interesting arena for this project.

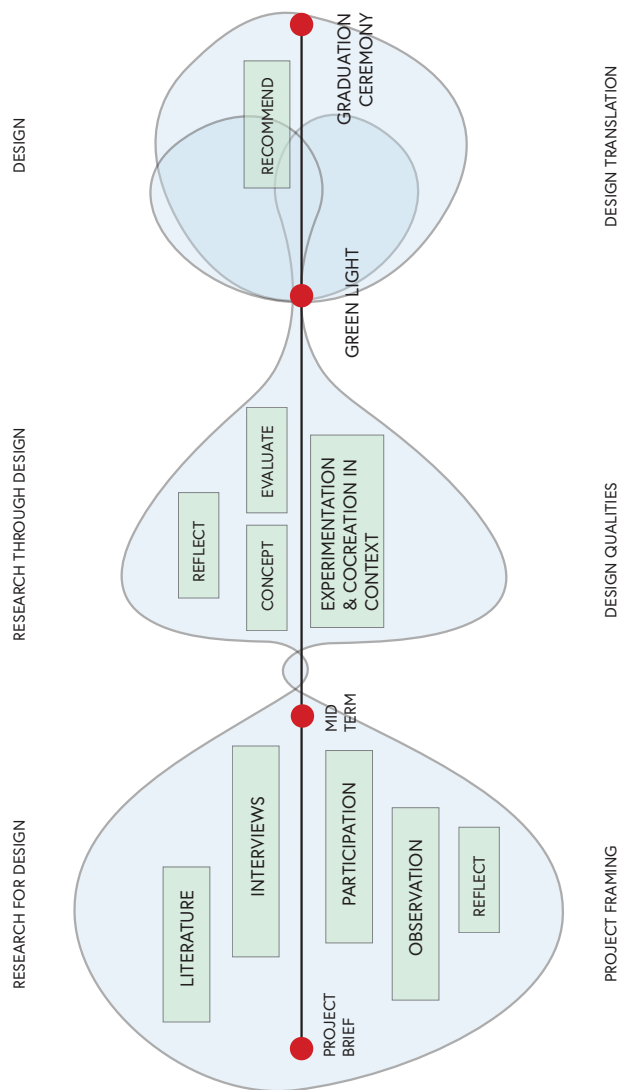


INTRODUCTION

1.4 PROJECT APPROACH

This section outlines the design and research methods used throughout the project. Design projects are marked by a process of divergence and convergence, as illustrated in Figure 2, which provides an overview of the entire design and research process.

Figure 2. Project approach and structure



The three phases of the process are defined as: 1) research for design, 2) research through design, and 3) design. The elements within each phase represent the methods I used to develop 1) the project framework, 2) design qualities, and 3) the design translation.

Research for design

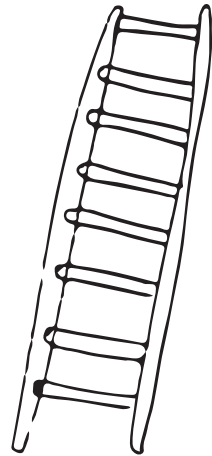
In addition to standard desk research to gain familiarity with the topic, this design phase involved in-depth interviews (Appendix A) with the target group, along with participation and observation. A deeper understanding of the problem was shaped by comparing insights from these conversations with my own experiences during participatory activities organized by both the municipality and local youth hubs (Appendix B). Ethnography in design contributes to both understanding the context and identifying emerging themes (Jones, 2006). By being present, I could observe participants' behaviors, attitudes, and interactions, which allowed me to either reinforce the patterns identified in the interviews and literature or clarify their nature more precisely.

Research through design

The second phase, 'research through design,' involved activities like creating low-fidelity prototypes, testing them in public spaces (Appendix E), iterating on them and organizing creative sessions with stakeholders (Appendix F). In this approach, design and research are not strictly separated; design activities generate knowledge for both fields (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2017). These methods provided insights into desired interactions that further informed the design process. By focusing on interaction, the project questioned established relationships before shaping a product or service with a new intended interaction (Hekkert & van Dijk, 2011). Key relationships explored included those between youth workers and youth, youth workers and the organizational system, and among youth themselves. Through examining these dynamics and experimenting with new interactions, the final design embodies these insights and suggests future interactions.

Design

The final phase of the project involves translating all research into material properties, culminating in a design proposal that is reviewed and evaluated by relevant stakeholders. This proposal does not necessarily mark the end of the project but can serve as a starting point for further exploration of the possibilities and challenges it reveals.



2.

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH PARTICI- PATION

2.1 A DEFENITION

2.2 A REASON

QUESTIONS & METHODS

The chapter explores the following questions:

- What is youth participation?
- Why is youth participation valuable?

The following methods were used to answer the abovementioned questions:

- Literature research
- Desk research

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

2.1 A DEFINITION

Since the International Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasized the importance of youth participation, its value and necessity have received increasing recognition (CRC, 1990). This growing focus has also extended to Rotterdam and its youth hubs, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Before examining the role of participation in youth hubs, the following sections will explore what youth participation is and what motivations are behind it.

Youth participation is a right

Youth participation is a fundamental right outlined primarily in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This article asserts that children and young people have the right to be involved in projects and decision-making processes that impact their lives, giving them the opportunity to influence outcomes (CRC, 1990). Similarly, the Kennisknooppunt Participatie (z.d.), following a definition established by Erasmus University Rotterdam (2019, p.4), defines participation as ' [...] a process in which individuals, groups, and organizations exert influence and share control over collective issues, decisions, or services that concern them.' Building on these definitions, in the context of this project, youth participation is understood as follows:

"Youth participation in youth hubs is a process in which young people and youth workers exert influence and share control over the design and programming of a shared space."

Categorizing participation

Involvement can take many forms, each reflecting different levels of influence over a situation. Imagine you're planning a holiday with friends, and your friend Jessy has taken the lead. Jessy could choose to organize everything by himself (which might make you think, "Great, I wasn't in the mood to plan anyway," or "Wow, what a control freak"). Alternatively, he could share his ideas with the group to keep everyone informed. He might seek feedback, send out polls, develop a voting system, or host a dinner to discuss options. What works best largely depends on the group, the holiday that is to be planned and on personal preferences (how much time do you have, do you like thinking along, do you like Jessy..?) The various levels of participation are often described using the 'ladder of participation,' initially developed by Arnstein (1969) and later adapted by Hart (1992) (see figure 3).

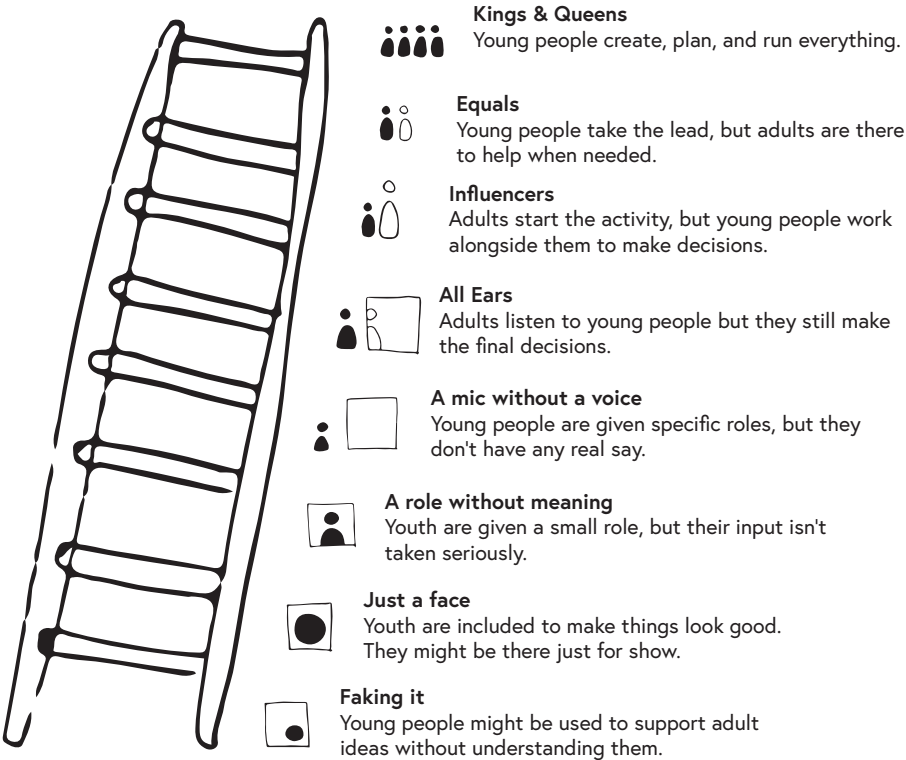
UNDERSTANDING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

2.1 A DEFENITION

Participatory projects or activities can be categorized into eight different steps on the ladder, with the lowest step representing the least amount of influence or power and the highest step representing the most.

The ladder offers a helpful framework for classifying the level of youth agency involved in various activities. While it has been critiqued for its hierarchical nature—implying that higher levels of participation are inherently better, thus overlooking more complex contextual factors that influence what 'better' truly means (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018)—I will sometimes refer to this model throughout the report. Despite its limitations, the ladder provides a clear typology and language for discussing different forms of participation (Hart, 2007).

Figure 3. Ladder of participation (Hart, 1992), slightly adapted.



UNDERSTANDING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

2.2 A REASON

Adolescents often feel uncertain about their future role in society, grappling with the transition between childhood and adult responsibilities. Many for example experience anxiety about excelling in school to secure a successful future (Harris et al., 2010). Participatory activities offer a way for them to explore their journey toward adulthood. Some youth hubs even award certificates or diplomas for participation, which young people can add to their resumes (Netwerk Nieuw Rotterdam, 2024). The following sections delve deeper into the motivations for participation across four key areas: democratic trust, decision-making quality, skill development, and the need to contribute.

Democratic trust

Many organizations recognize that young people not only offer valuable ideas but that their early involvement can help shape the future of democracy in the Netherlands (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2024). Participatory activities contribute to the development of political literacy and social skills, encouraging youth to become engaged members of society later in life (Macauley et al., 2022). Additionally, participation provides an opportunity for government systems to challenge misconceptions, demonstrating that they are made up of people, not just bureaucracies (Osinga, 2024). Young people are aware that youth hubs are part of the municipality and the broader "political system." Therefore, participatory activities in these hubs can foster civic engagement among Rotterdam's youth, helping to build trustful relationships that extend into adulthood.

Quality of decisions

Empathy has its limits. As a policymaker or youth professional (like a youth worker at a youth hub), having children, considering yourself a 'young soul,' or recalling your own teenage years is not enough to be able to make decisions for a group of people of which you aren't part. It helps, but stepping into smaller or more modern shoes will not answer questions about situations where you aren't the subject. Times change, and (young) people have different interests and issues. Therefore, it makes sense to consult directly with those affected by your decisions. Giving young people a voice in decision-making about their needs leads to services that are more accurately aligned with those needs (Migchelbrink & Van De Walle, 2021).

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

2.2 A REASON

Skill development

We all have the desire to learn, help, and be part of something—whether it's a group, a family, a shared goal, or a youth hub. An overview of studies about youth participation conducted by Macauley et al. (2022) revealed that most young participants reported an increase in skills after a participation process. These skills included confidence, political literacy, communication, and group collaboration. According to the municipality of Rotterdam (2023) The main goal of youth hubs is skill development. Massih Hutak, a rapper and writer from Amsterdam, highlighted the need for spaces where youth can grow and thrive beyond the confines of school:

"We don't need another school where kids learn to read and write; we need a place where they learn how to live and thrive."

Massih Hutak (Movisie Utrecht, 2023, 1:16:20).

Involving youth in the design and programming is a way to work on skills, to learn how to share responsibility.

The need to contribute

Research using functional MRI (fMRI) reveals that when individuals feel excluded from social activities, such as being skipped in a game, it activates brain regions associated with physical pain (Woo et al., 2014). Humans are inherently social and naturally seek to be part of a group. We establish our roles within these groups by making contributions, demonstrating our value, and proving we are essential members. However, as visible in our brain, it can be harmful if our contributions go unrecognized (Tyler & Blader, 2003). During adolescence, it becomes particularly important to learn how to contribute, as this is a time when one's social world is expanding. As young people mature, they naturally seek to carve out their own space and establish their roles within it (Fuligni, 2018). Creating opportunities for youth to participate and contribute to society allows young people to feel needed and gives the government a chance to acknowledge their contributions.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter explored the following questions:

1. What is youth participation?
2. Why is youth participation valuable?

1. What is youth participation?

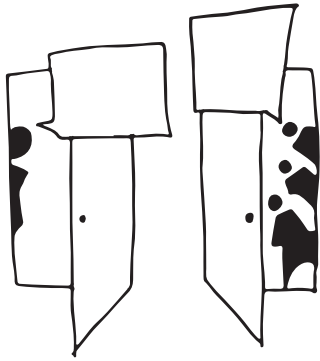
- Youth participation is a right outlined in article 12 of the Conventions of the rights of the child (1989).
- Building on definitions of (youth) participation in literature, participation in this project is defined as follows:

"Youth participation in youth hubs is a process in which young people and youth workers exert influence and share control over the design and programming of a shared space."

- Hart's ladder of participation categorizes (youth) participation into eight 'levels', with the lowest representing the least amount of influence or power and the highest step representing the most.
- The ladder offers a clear language and typology of participation and will therefore be used to classify levels of participation throughout this thesis.
- However it is important to note that its hierarchy does not mean that the highest level of participation where youth take on full leadership is most valuable. Different contextual factors might call for a lower step of the ladder.

2. Why is youth participation valuable?

- Early involvement fosters political literacy and civic engagement. Consulting youth improves services to meet their real needs. Participation builds confidence, communication, and teamwork. Inclusion in society fulfills a natural need to belong and be valued.



3.

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH HUBS

3.1 BACKGROUND

3.2 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

3.3 YOUTH HUBS AND PARTICIPATION

QUESTIONS & METHODS

The chapter explores the following questions:

- What led to the creation of youth hubs?
- How are youth hubs structured?
- What kinds of activities do youth hubs provide?
- How do youth hubs engage young people in participation?

The following methods were used to answer the abovementioned questions:

- Literature research
- Desk research
- 16 interviews with civil servants (N = 4), youth workers (N = 8) and key figures (young active visitors of youth hubs) (N = 4). The format of the semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix A.
- Observation and attendance at participatory events organized by the municipality of Rotterdam and youth hubs (N = 5). A description of these events can be found in Appendix B.

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH HUBS

3.1 BACKGROUND

Some time ago, I overheard a conversation in the train between two girls discussing activities organized by their church. They appeared to be about 19 or 20 years old, wore heavy makeup, had tattoos and piercings, and managed to look both intimidating and endearing at the same time. They were talking about the 'summer youth program'. They mentioned that their pastor was encouraging them to volunteer for the elderly and one of them expressed gratitude for something to do during the holidays, as her parents couldn't afford a trip anyways.



Figure 4. From church to youth hub

From church to center

It's not surprising that I noticed many similarities between what they were discussing and what youth hubs offer and stand for. Churches have a long tradition of organizing community events and encouraging volunteer work. When community centers began to emerge in the late 19th century, churches in the Netherlands primarily utilized these centers to maintain connections with youth from their own denominations, focusing especially on disadvantaged youth. Following secularization, both citizens and municipalities recognized the continued need for community connections. This led to the preservation of neighborhood centers, which shifted their focus from spiritual activities to educational and social initiatives (Antenne Rotterdam, 2012). (Figure 4).

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH HUBS

3.1 BACKGROUND

From center to youth hub

The first subsidy program for youth work was introduced in 1949, with a particular focus on the 'mass youth.' In the period shortly after World War II, there was widespread concern about the mental state of the mass youth, and fears of social decline among the younger generation were prevalent (Witte, 2011). Initially, young people were welcomed into community centers that catered to all age groups, and later, dedicated youth centers were established to cater to their specific needs. In the youth centers, activities were organized by volunteers or youth workers, and the buildings were filled with various forms of entertainment. Young people could participate voluntarily or simply hang out, but this often resulted in 'claiming behavior', where a dominant group would take over the space and exclude newcomers (Karisli, 2009). Recognizing this problematic pattern, professionals occasionally had to shut the centers down. Despite this, young people continued to express the need for spaces of their own (Young010, z.d.), and municipalities wanted to provide places for connection and growth. This led to the creation of youth hubs, where the focus shifted from merely accommodating young people to actively involving them in the setup and organization of the space. This approach aims to encourage responsible behavior and prevent the claiming of space by any single group.

Budget cuts

Since 2012, the number of community centers in the Netherlands has significantly declined, as many municipalities have closed these facilities due to budget cuts. Many centers now depend heavily on volunteers to remain operational, though this is often unsustainable (NOS, 2013). In conversations with youth workers, they highlighted that the effects of these budget cuts are still felt in their daily work. Although youth work and youth hubs continue to receive municipal funding, they face financial limitations. Youth workers frequently manage large groups alone, contend with limited space, and have restricted budgets for activities (more on this in chapter 4).

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH HUBS

3.2 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

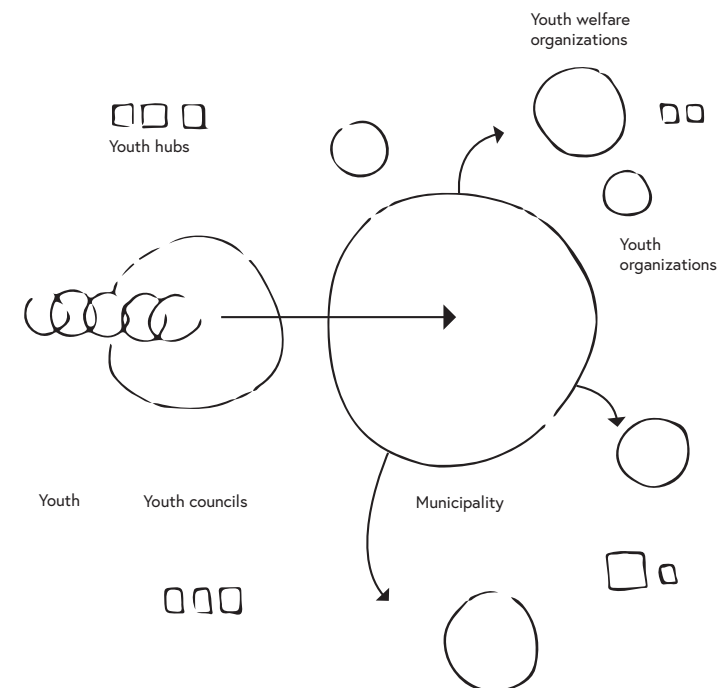


Figure 5. Organizational network around youth hubs

The municipality of Rotterdam is currently reopening 33 hubs throughout the city. Through youth councils, the municipality is informed about their desire for spaces of their own. The municipality provides funding to youth welfare organizations, each responsible for a specific region. These organizations either manage the hubs independently or collaborate with other youth organizations that already have an established network of young people. Each hub has a team of two to five youth workers who engage with young people on a daily basis. Following municipal guidelines and the plans set by the youth welfare organizations, these youth workers build relationships with local youth or integrate newcomers into their existing networks. Figure 5 illustrates the organizational network around youth hubs.

3.2 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Key figures

While claiming behavior is not a prevalent issue, most hubs have a core group of young people who regularly visit and sometimes assist the youth workers. These regular participants, known as 'sleutelfiguren' (key figures) or the 'kernteam' (core team), typically consist of about five to fifteen individuals. They help attract other young people to the hub and are the first to be invited to think along about things such as programming or interior design. Additionally, there are those who frequently participate in activities but do not spend as much time at the hub, as well as occasional passersby who are curious but not consistently engaged. Figure 6 illustrates this 'system'.

The drive for hubs

The desire for a dedicated space for young people is highlighted by the fact that, in addition to the municipally organized youth hubs, independent hubs are also being established. The rise in mental health issues among young people, increasing polarization, and the recognition that individualistic approaches are insufficient in addressing these challenges all contribute to the need for community-building and spaces where young people can connect and grow (Netwerk Nieuw Rotterdam, 2023). These independent hubs also focus on supporting vulnerable youth, including those facing loneliness, financial difficulties, or problems at home. Some youth hubs emerge independently from the municipality or any external organization, driven by ambitious young people determined to make a difference in their neighborhoods. Recognizing the urgency of their needs, they choose not to wait for municipal action, instead using their own networks to create these spaces from the ground up (Stichting L.E.S., n.d.).

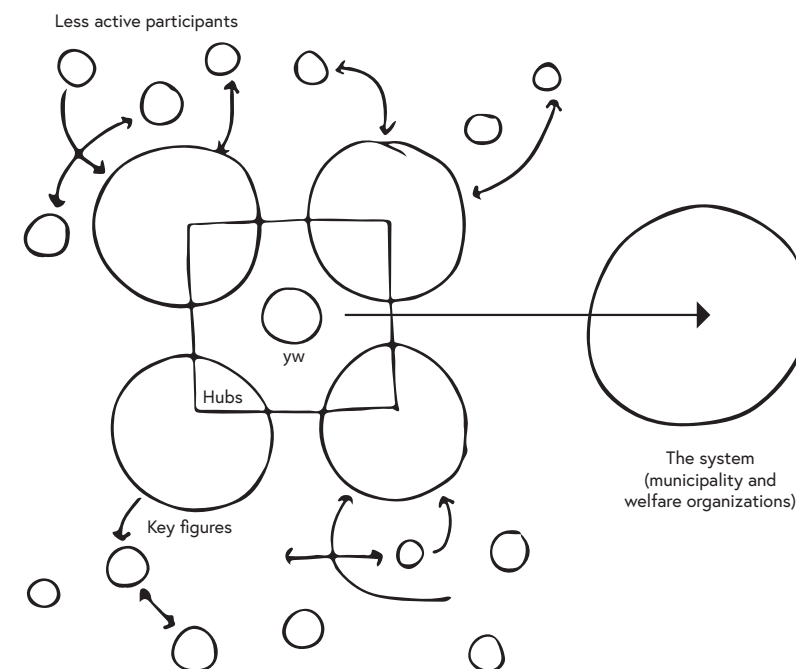


Figure 6. Youth hubs and key figures

What they offer

The hubs generally provide similar activities, focusing on collaborative efforts such as cooking, playing games, arts and crafts, or engaging in community service like volunteering. They also offer walk-in services where individuals can seek advice or use the space to do their homework. Youth workers typically have irregular hours, "No two days are the same. Tiring sometimes, but never boring." This irregular schedule accommodates the fact that many young people need to attend school, participate in other activities or manage other responsibilities. Figure 7 displays the hubs listed by the municipality along with the activities they offer, as presented online (SOL, 2024.; WMO radar, 2022.; Gro-Up, n.d.; Gemeente Rotterdam, n.d.).

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH HUBS

3.2 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



Figure 7. Activities and location of youth hubs

** This Figure was created in May 2024; the number of youth hubs and the activities presented online have likely increased since then.

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH HUBS

3.3 YOUTH HUBS AND PARTICIPATION



Figure 8. Who 'owns' youth hubs?

In the early 21st century, work in community and youth centers was largely volunteer-driven, but today, youth hubs are run by professionals. This shift has led to some youth responding with surprise when asked to take initiative, saying, "But isn't that your job since you're getting paid?" Slogans like "for and by youth" may sometimes seem somewhat out of place. Since professionals play a significant role in guiding youth involvement, it can feel contradictory to push youth into leadership roles or somewhat confusing to say a place is theirs, when in fact that is not completely true (Figure 8). Youth workers still hold the key, retaining control over opening hours and, in most cases, having the final say on budget allocation. The focus might not be about stepping back entirely but rather about everyone—youth and professionals alike—getting their hands dirty.

3.3 YOUTH HUBS AND PARTICIPATION

Talenthouse

In 2007, the 'Talenthouse method' was introduced in the outer south east part of Rotterdam, IJsselmonde. Although the method is quite old and currently being updated, it still serves as the primary foundation for the (upcoming) hubs in Rotterdam. It is based upon the observation of the passive 'consumer' behavior of youth and the active 'producer' role of youth workers. The method aims to break this cycle: instead of waiting for professionals to organize activities, young people are encouraged to take the lead themselves. This approach helps them confront the reality that not everything will be provided for them and allows them to learn from their mistakes. Youth workers are encouraged to step back from solving problems directly, allowing youth to develop their own solutions.

Up to the youth worker

Youth workers have considerable freedom when it comes to programming and designing youth hubs. While they must work towards specific goals, such as talent development and participation, the methods they use to achieve these objectives are largely at their discretion and that of their team. As a result, the practice and interpretation of participation can vary significantly depending on who is involved. Despite these differences, some common approaches have emerged in how they engage young people.

Ideas on the wall

When it comes to designing or decorating the space, youth professionals often start by sending out surveys to active participants and inviting the core team for a walk-through, placing post-its on walls with suggestions. Moodboards are created with piles of magazines (Figure 9). If the ideas turn out to be unrealistic, the professionals discuss them with the group to reach a consensus. Occasionally, a graffiti artist or mural painter is brought in to speak with the youth, and the artist then creates a visual based on these conversations, which is displayed on the wall.

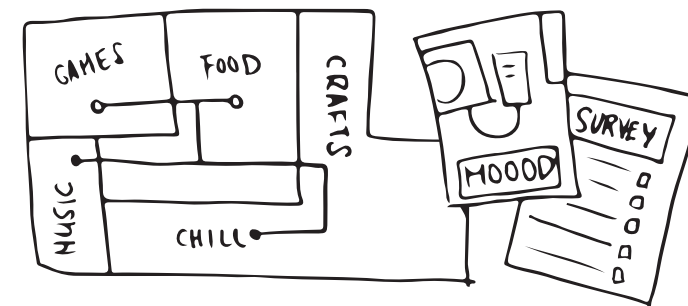


Figure 9. Methods for designing the interior of youth hubs

Participatory programming

But when it comes to programming, it seems more difficult to think of creative fun ways to collaboratively come up with ideas. Typically, the team of youth workers arranges a set program, but occasionally invites young people to contribute ideas for organizing specific activities. For example, boxing lessons are scheduled for Tuesday and Thursday evenings, Wednesdays are designated as girls' nights, and Fridays are reserved for pizza nights. On Monday evenings, youth and professionals collaborate to plan activities for the summer.

Professionals typically engage with young participants by directly asking what they want to do, trying to understand their perspectives, or using a trial-and-error approach. The success of an event is often gauged by attendance. If it draws a good crowd, it's likely to be organized again; if not, it may not be repeated.

As mentioned earlier, there is no single correct approach. The highest level of participation, where youth take full lead, is not always desirable or necessary for generating great ideas and fostering effective collaboration. Factors like shyness or time constraints can hinder this level of involvement. The ideal of "for and by youth" is often neither feasible nor desirable. The uncertainty about the best approach and timing is part of the challenge, which can either spark creativity or lead to tokenistic behavior by youth workers. The next chapter delves deeper into the challenges youth workers and young people face in their shared ownership of youth hubs.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter explored the following questions:

1. What led to the creation of youth hubs?
2. How are youth hubs structured?
3. What kinds of activities do youth hubs provide?
4. How do youth hubs engage young people in participation?

1. What led to the creation of youth hubs?

- Youth hubs evolved from community centers, initially organized by churches to support and engage 'disadvantaged' youth through community activities and volunteer work. Over time, these centers shifted from spiritual to social and educational functions.
- Growing recognition of young people's need for dedicated spaces led to the establishment of youth hubs, which now emphasize active youth involvement in organization and programming to foster responsibility and inclusivity.

2. How are youth hubs organized?

- Youth hubs are funded by the municipality and managed by youth welfare organizations, often in collaboration with other youth organizations. Each hub has a team of youth workers who engage local youth, supported by core participants or 'key figures' who assist with activities and attract peers.

3. What kind of activities do youth hubs provide?

- The hubs provide similar activities such as cooking, playing games, arts and crafts or volunteer work. They also offer walk-in services where individuals can seek advice or use the space to do their homework.

4. How do youth hubs engage young people in participation?

- Youth hubs vary in how often they involve young people in designing and programming the spaces. Youth workers have considerable freedom to shape participation as they see fit. Engaging youth in the design of the space is often easier and more enjoyable, while involving them in programming tends to be more challenging.

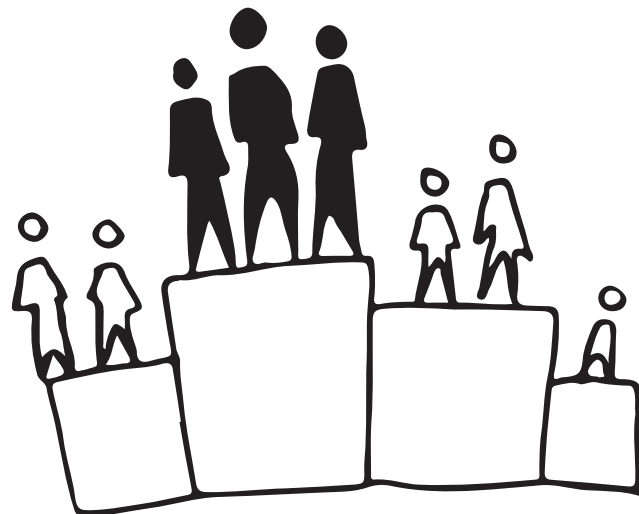
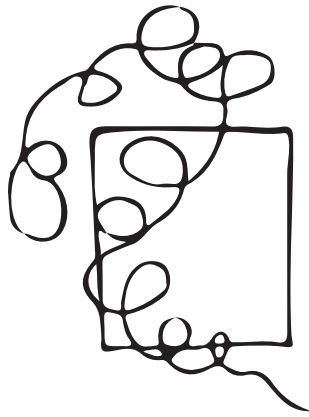


Figure 10. "Claiming behavior"



4.

EXPLORING THE PROBLEM SPACE

4.1 THEMES

4.2 CONNECTING THE DOTS

QUESTIONS & METHODS

The chapter explores the following questions:

- What makes youth participation challenging in youth hubs?
- How can these challenges be translated into design opportunities?

The following methods were used to answer the abovementioned questions:

- Literature research
- Desk research
- 16 interviews with civil servants (N = 4), youth workers (N = 8) and key figures (young active visitors of youth hubs) (N = 4). The format of the semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix A.
- Observation and attendance at participatory events organized by the municipality of Rotterdam and youth hubs (N = 5). A description of these events can be found in Appendix B.
- Data analysis. Moving from data toward design opportunities (Sanders & Stappers, 2020).

EXPLORING THE PROBLEM SPACE 4.1 THEMES

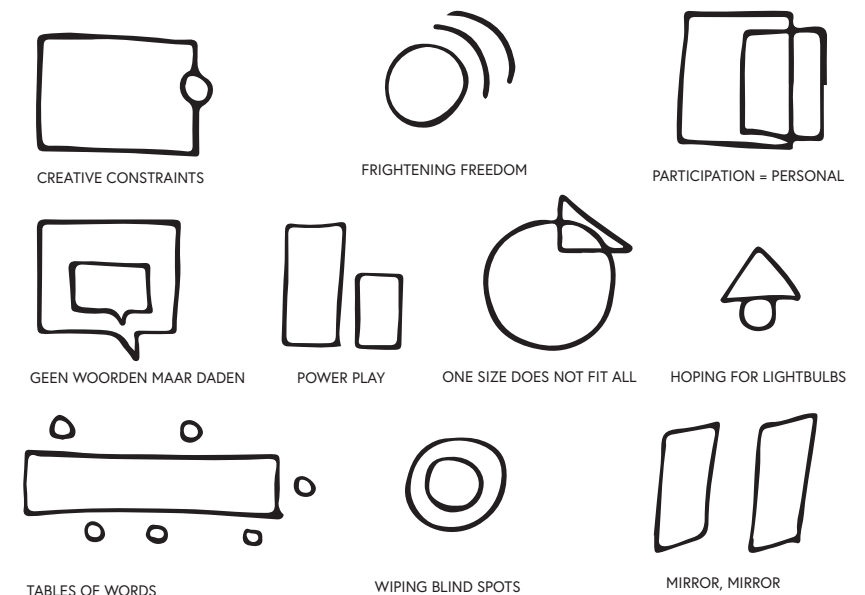


Figure 11. Ten themes

Ten themes

The following section outlines ten themes (Figure 11) that emerged from interviews with stakeholders, youth workers, and key figures at youth hubs, as well as from my own observations and experiences during participatory activities organized by the municipality and youth hubs. The raw data—interview transcripts and observation notes—were analyzed and grouped based on recurring patterns. This resulted in ten themes, or "driving forces," which provide a clearer understanding of the context and its challenges (Hekkert & van Dijk, 2011). These themes address the question:

What makes participation at youth hubs difficult?

Collectively, these themes highlight design opportunities, which are further explored in section 4.2.

EXPLORING THE PROBLEM SPACE

4.1 THEMES



youth



youth worker

Categorizing challenges

The challenges highlighted in each theme are organized according to the acronym CLEAR, which stands for Can do, Like to, Enabled to, Asked to, and Responded to. The CLEAR framework, developed by Lowndes et al. (2006), serves as an assessment tool to evaluate the conditions required for effective participation, asking the question:

"What needs to be in place for citizens to participate?"

Lowndes et al (p. 6).

Each theme concludes with a brief explanation of how the identified challenges impact participation within this CLEAR framework. Figure 12 summarizes the conclusions. The Figure also identifies the source(s) of each barrier, whether it stems from the youth worker, the youth or a combination.

The acronym

- Can do: do citizens have the knowledge and resources to participate?
- Like to: do citizens have a sense of attachment that reinforces their participation?
- Enabled to: are citizens provided with the opportunity to participate?
- Asked to: are citizens invited to participate by organizations or other 'official bodies' or voluntary groups?
- Responded to: are citizens provided with a form of evidence that their view had been considered?

		C	L	E	A	R
		CAN DO	LIKE TO	ENABLED TO	ASKED TO	RESPONDED TO
CREATIVE CONSTRAINTS						
HOPING FOR LIGHT BULBS						
GEEN WOORDEN MAAR DADEN						
TABLES OF WORDS						
FRIGHTENING FREEDOM						
PARTICIPATION IS PERSONAL						
POWER PLAY						
ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL						
WIPING BLIND SPOTS						
MIRROR, MIRROR						

Figure 12. Catogorization of themes using the CLEAR framework

4.1 THEMES



THEME 1. CREATIVE CONSTRAINTS

Constraints, by nature, define and limit, but they also inspire. Youth workers have to work with numerous constraints which both confines and boosts their ability and willingness to explore creative ways to involve young people in the programming and design of youth hubs. They have to deal with certain rules and regulations, limited funding and a certain space in a certain neighborhood.

"Impact is not measurable. The work we do can't be captured in numbers. [...] But we still have to spend hours on paperwork."

youth worker

Rules and regulations

The Rekenkamer Rotterdam (n.d.), an independent research institute that evaluates local policy, notes that "there is very little insight into the impact youth work has on young people's lives," (p.3). Youth workers I spoke to agree that while they see and feel the changes they are making, they are constrained by bureaucratic requirements. "Impact is not measurable. The work we do can't be captured in numbers," one said. "But we still have to spend hours on paperwork." Many shared stories of young people who, with their support, have become successful artists, athletes, or have passed exams they once struggled with. Others have discovered new hobbies or talents, feeling more supported and less lonely. Yet, they are often required to reduce this impact to a simple metric: "the number of attendees."

Limited funding

"Neighborhood centers don't exist anymore, right?" was one of the reactions from someone I spoke to in the streets of central Rotterdam. She was surprised I asked about youth centers—not only because she was unaware of the separation between youth and adult centers, but also because she thought all the centers had already disappeared, viewing them as something from her grandparents' generation. Most neighborhood centers are becoming increasingly reliant on volunteers. Youth centers, while an exception in this case, still face budget cuts.

Youth hubs must operate within the constraints of limited funding from the municipality. While some found it challenging to work with such tight budgets, others noted that it often pushed them to be more creative in finding solutions.

Spaceboundness

Physical spaces, such as youth hubs, also limit the area available for activities. Regardless of its form, the space is finite—it has boundaries. Within these boundaries, youth workers must create an environment that feels open, welcoming, and inclusive. As one youth worker put it, "I turned that room into a music studio, but now the music boys have left and no one makes use of it anymore." Another remarked, "Today this room is a cooking class workshop, but tomorrow, who knows what it will be." Youth workers often express a sense of relief in having a space dedicated solely to youth. It gives them the freedom to make mistakes, be loud, and experiment without worrying about disturbing adults. However, they still feel that the space is too limited to accommodate everyone. They constantly need to rearrange the setup, adapting the room to suit different activities as needed.

"If there's no possibility to bring ideas to life, there's little point in gathering them."

Youth worker

Can do

The bureaucratic demands highlighted in this theme often limit youth workers' ability to experiment with participatory activities, as they are pressured to focus on organizing activities themselves to ensure adequate attendance. Additionally, limited funding and spatial constraints can hinder efforts to accommodate everyone's interests, obstructing the realization of participatory initiatives. As one youth worker put it, "If there's no possibility to bring ideas to life, there's little point in gathering them."



EXPLORING THE PROBLEM SPACE

4.1 THEMES



THEME 2. HOPING FOR LIGHT BULBS

Youth workers celebrate initiatives and encourage young people to come up with their own personal ideas. But they often wait for them to happen instead of creating an environment that stimulates idea development. While youth workers play an important role in supporting and refining ideas once they emerge, the reactive nature of this approach means youth who are more hesitant or lack confidence may be left out. This creates a reliance on a few individuals and risks stagnation when no ideas arise.

"Now they have the freedom and they don't do anything with it. I really hope they are going to take action."

Youth worker

"We kind of look and listen to the neighborhood to get a sense of what the needs are. But it's best when they come up with their own ideas; talent development is important."

Youth worker

Individual based initiation

Raising your hand, dropping a suggestion in the idea box, or approaching a youth worker are all ways for young people to voice their ideas (figure 13). While it's great that there's an opportunity for individuals to share, it often remains just that—an individual action rather than a collaborative group effort.

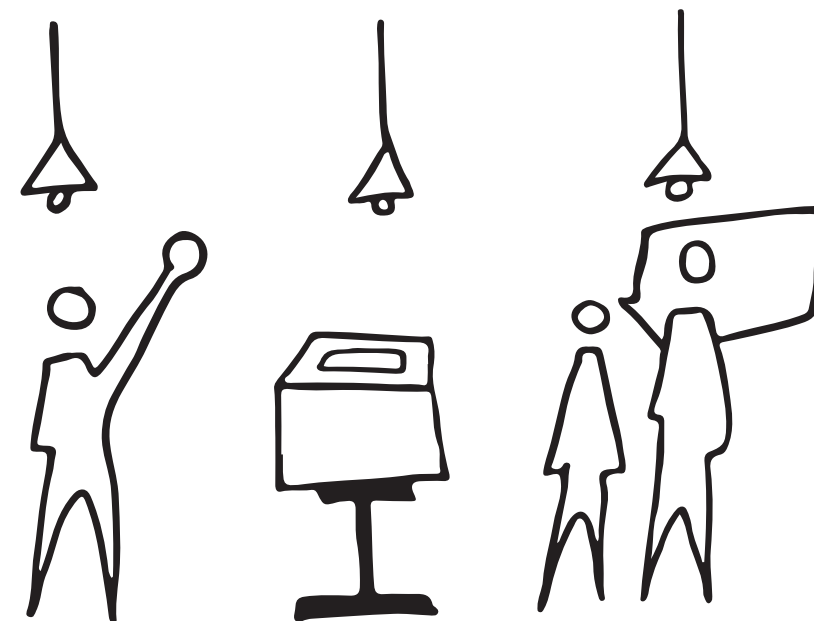


Figure 13. Methods for idea suggestions: raising hands, idea boxes, one on one talks

Can do

The challenges outlined above align with the "Can do" aspect of the CLEAR framework. While ideas are celebrated, there is limited accessibility for collaboration. Although there are occasional gatherings—such as those aimed at designing the interior of a new hub—a consistent routine for fostering a creative environment is often lacking. Without a consistent opportunity, youth are unable to participate to their fullest potential and there is less possibility to improve their participatory skills.

EXPLORING THE PROBLEM SPACE

4.1 THEMES



THEME 3. ONSIZE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

"If I just do it myself it's much more efficient."

youth worker

Youth workers have to balance the needs, interests, and well-being of individual participants with those of the larger group. Handing responsibility to a young individual might be straightforward, but it becomes more challenging when a whole group is waiting for direction. Everyone needs to be entertained and guided, and as one youth worker put it, "If I just do it myself, it's much more efficient."

Youth hubs are designed to be inclusive spaces, but the diversity of participants—ranging from different interests to varying needs—means that creating a universally accommodating environment is a complex task. On one hand, youth workers strive to tailor their engagement to the specific desires of each young person, recognizing that personalization fosters a sense of belonging and individual empowerment. On the other hand, they must also consider the needs of the group as a whole, ensuring that group activities and spaces are safe, healthy, and accessible for everyone.

Age differences

Youth hubs are designed to be inclusive for all ages, typically catering to those between 10 and 27 years old. They offer a variety of activities tailored to different interests, and on the municipality's website, you can filter by age group to find events specifically organized for you. However, when it comes to participatory events, everyone, regardless of age, is encouraged to take part. Naturally, placing a 10-year-old next to a 27-year-old means that their interests and preferred ways of getting involved will differ significantly.

Can do

The challenges outlined above relate to the "Can do" aspect of the framework. The diversity within the group makes it difficult to design activities that meet everyone's needs and capabilities. For example, a participatory activity organized for a 16-year-old might be too complex for a younger participant. While youth workers may successfully address some individual preferences, they often struggle to accommodate other ideas and interests.



THEME 4. WIPING BLIND SPOTS

"I remember smoking was cool when I was their age, but now apparently it's vaping. It's important I learn more about this new hype."

youth worker

When organizing activities for youth without actively involving them, youth workers ensure the activities suit the participants by engaging with them in other ways. They try to bring themselves closer to their world by directly asking them what they want or using their hand on experience with youth to empathize whilst arranging activities.

"I'm in contact with them on a daily basis, so I think I have a good understanding of what they like or don't."

youth worker

Building on empathy

However, youth experiences are shaped by diverse, often unseen factors such as culture, socio-economic status, personal history, and rapidly shifting social trends. Even with immersion or close interaction, some aspects of their reality remain elusive to adults or facilitators who come from different backgrounds or generations.

Just ask

Further, directly asking youth "what they want" can sometimes result in vague or incomplete answers. Young people may not always have the language or clarity to articulate their desires, or they might respond based on what they think is expected rather than what they genuinely feel. This can create blind spots, where the solutions provided by youth workers do not fully resonate with the young people they're trying to serve.

Asked to

If youth workers fully trust their own abilities to understand what young people want, it limits the opportunities for youth to be invited to participate. Although young people may be asked for their opinions occasionally, the final decision on whether to implement those opinions still rests with the youth worker.





THEME 5. FRIGHTENING FREEDOM

Where youth workers have to get used to losing power, youth have to get used with receiving more. Although initially it often excites them, it often comes along with some sense of confusion and insecurity.

Blank slate

"It's hard, because now we have lift off we have to take action and we are very perfectionistic. We have to step out of our comfort zone."

When youth workers provide young people with opportunities for freedom—such as the ability to lead activities, shape programs, or make decisions about how a space is used—they are essentially giving them a blank slate. This blank slate represents infinite possibilities, but it also lacks structure. Without clear direction or expectations, some young people may struggle to know where to begin or feel unsure about what is expected of them. This uncertainty can be particularly intimidating for those who are not used to taking the lead or who fear failure. They may worry about making the wrong decision, not being taken seriously, or disappointing others.

"But it's your job right, to organize events. Why should I have to do that. I don't get paid."

Youth worker quoting a young hub visitor

Not mine to take

While some young people feel empowered and trusted when given more responsibility, others may feel belittled or patronized. This shift of power from youth workers can leave participants confused about their role, often prioritizing their own enjoyment over taking on responsibility. They may become frustrated when asked to engage in activities they don't feel are right for them.

Stage fright

With the freedom to make choices and take the lead comes the responsibility to own the outcomes of those choices. For young people, this might mean planning an event, managing a group project, or organizing a space within the youth hub. They are responsible not only for their own participation but for how their actions affect others in the group. This can be a daunting task. Some young people may feel unprepared for the consequences of their decisions or unsure of how to navigate the complexities of leadership or group dynamics. They are eager to gain responsibility, but are sometimes less enthusiastic about actually having it.

"They want to take action and are full of energy, but when it actually comes to it, they seem to back away."

Youth worker

Like to

The challenges mentioned above all hinder youth's ability to develop a sense of attachment to participation. They are less likely to engage if the tasks seem overwhelming, if they don't feel a sense of responsibility, or if they are taken aback by the effort required.



4.1 THEMES



THEME 6. PARTICIPATION IS PERSONAL

Participation is personal. The willingness of both the youth worker and the young participant often hinges on their personal relationship or even the first impression they have of each other. The connection between them sets the tone. If there isn't a connection from the start, the likelihood of the young person returning diminishes. Even if the young person has a strong bond with the group, they may still stay, but the foundation remains fragile.

"If there isn't any trust, you can simply forget it. I will not take the extra step or do something I am unsure of if I don't trust it will be seen or valued."

Key figure (frequent visitor of youth hubs)

Trust has many meanings

If I were to create a word cloud of my conversations, "trust" would undoubtedly stand out. It came up in almost every interview, yet its exact meaning was often hard to define. For most, however, it was the key ingredient for collaboration and participation—a kind of prerequisite. The nature of trust in this context is complex and fluid, with both youth workers and the young people they work with having their own interpretations and expectations of what it truly means. Trust means something different for both parties (Figure 14). For youth workers, trust is built on a foundation of reliability, mutual respect, and engagement. They expect that young people will be committed, involved, and respectful toward others. The youth worker needs to believe that the young person will show up—not just physically but emotionally and mentally—to actively participate and contribute to the shared goals of the group. Young people however, tended to describe trust less so as an attitude but more so as an act (see theme 'geen woorden maar daden' p. 60).



Figure 14. Different interpretations of trust

The face of the place

Having established a trustworthy relationship, youth workers sometimes expressed their worries about not being present or maybe eventually switching jobs. "I know that some kids might not come anymore if I leave. And then you have to start from the beginning - with building a family." In this sense, participation is very personal. Young people show up if they know and like the person running the activity, and the reverse is also true. If youth workers feel a connection with a young person, they are more likely to invest time and effort to ensure that person stays involved.

"Some are really like my kids, I know they will come."

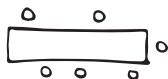
Youth worker

Like to, responded to

The challenges described above relate to the "Like to" and "Responded to" aspects of the CLEAR framework. Participatory efforts are more appealing when there is a positive relationship between youth workers and young people; youth are more likely to attend if they like the worker. The act itself becomes more fun because they like the host of the activity. Conversely, when youth workers genuinely appreciate and connect with the young people, they tend to invest more time to encourage their attendance. Regarding the "Responded to" component, trust plays a crucial role. Following through on commitments from both youth and youth workers strengthens their relationship, which in turn enhances the appeal of participation ("Like to"),.

EXPLORING THE PROBLEM SPACE

4.1 THEMES



THEME 7. TABLES OF WORDS

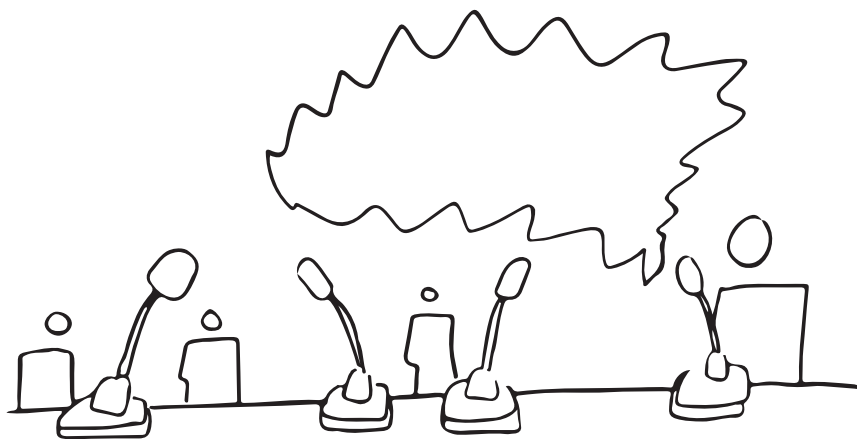


Figure 15. Sketch of participatory meeting setting

Meeting setting: we are seated at a large table with about ten young people ranging between 16 and 30 years old. There are about 10 youth workers, civil servants and researchers present. We all have a microphone that works when you push the button. We are asked how we would like to communicate or be involved. Some people don't say anything. Some generously take their time to express their dissatisfaction to the municipality. (Figure 15).

observation note

Participation largely takes the form of conversations, dialogues, and formal meetings. Whether it's with teenagers or even young children, this method often involves sitting down together at a table to discuss agendas, share ideas, and deliberate over decisions. While well-intentioned, this approach can both empower and limit youth participation, depending on how it is carried out.

"Participation is aimed at integration, not at actual transformation. Young people have to conform to the formats set by adults."

Femke Kaulingfreks (2023).

Integration not transformation

Participation through formal dialogue often mirrors adult-centric modes of engagement, where meetings and discussions are the primary tools for decision-making. The formal nature of a "table of words" can replicate adult-child power dynamics, where adults control the flow of conversation. Youth may feel they need to conform to expected behaviors or may hesitate to speak up honestly, especially if they sense the conversation is skewed toward adult priorities.

"Maybe we should talk without words for once."

young person during participatory activity

Limited forms of expression

Youth, especially children, may express themselves more freely through alternative forms of communication such as play, art, or other creative activities. Forcing participation into a rigid, verbal format can unintentionally stifle creative expression or alienate those who struggle with articulating their thoughts in a formal setting.



Like to, enabled to

The challenges mentioned above can be categorized as "Like to" and "Enabled to." Although it may appear that there are opportunities for contributing ideas, this is not entirely accurate if those opportunities do not align with the contributor's needs. While it can be enjoyable to engage in activities that differ from what one is used to, it is essential to feel comfortable in a new situation.



THEME 8. POWER PLAY

Participatory approaches call for a shift in responsibility. This transition requires youth workers to let go of some control, embrace uncertainties, and navigate the power dynamics that stem from age and experience differences.

"Youth workers are natural caretakers; it's hard for them not to care and provide. They want to make things easier for young people, not harder."

youth worker

"They [youth] need a big brother figure to guide them, not the added pressure of having to take the lead."

youth worker

Shifting responsibility

"Youth don't always know what they need or want." One youth worker shared, "Young people have so much to deal with, especially those who come here because they don't feel safe at home or school, or are struggling with loneliness or depression. They need a big brother figure to guide them, not the added pressure of having to take the lead."

Traditionally, youth workers have held positions of authority, acting as facilitators, rule-makers, and mediators—roles that allowed them to maintain control, ensure order, and steer activities according to a pre-established framework. However, participatory processes challenge these dynamics by encouraging a more equal distribution of power between youth workers and the young people they serve. This shift comes with significant challenges for youth workers. Letting go of control in favor of more democratic, youth-driven engagement requires not only a change in mindset but also a willingness to embrace the uncertainty, inefficiency, and even messiness that comes with sharing power. Additionally, as one youth worker put it, "Youth workers are natural caretakers; it's hard for them not to care

and provide. They want to make things easier for young people, not harder." This dedication, however, can sometimes make it difficult to shift responsibility to the youth themselves.

"Some [youthworkers] find it so difficult to take a step back. They think that if they take the lead, things go more smoothly; or they just prefer a certain colour on the wall. I've been around [youth work] for a long time, this attitude makes young people lazy."

youth worker

The age gap

In addition to the age differences among young participants, there is also a generational gap between youth workers and the youth they support. This often introduces a natural power dynamic: older individuals tend to be seen as more knowledgeable, while younger ones are perceived as still in a phase of learning and development (White, Wyn, & Robards, 2017). Youth are viewed as still growing, not yet fully capable of making significant contributions, and still becoming more equipped for responsibility (Kelly, 2011). This perception is shared by both youth and adults: in conversations with youth workers, they often note that "young people still have a lot to learn," while young people themselves express self-doubt, such as "I don't understand everything about organizing something; maybe when I'm older, I will." Such attitudes make it difficult to fully engage youth as active contributors, as they may not be seen as capable of serious participation but rather as individuals there to learn.

Asked to

The challenges described relate to the "Like to" and "Asked to" components of the CLEAR framework. The traditional caretaker role often prevents youth workers from inviting young people to think and decide collaboratively with them. Simultaneously, the self-doubt that youth experience regarding their age appropriateness can lead them to perceive participation as something meant for adults, causing them to feel disinclined to join.



EXPLORING THE PROBLEM SPACE

4.1 THEMES



THEME 9. MIRROR, MIRROR

Both youth workers and youth hubs reflect the environments and communities they serve. Youth workers, in their roles as mentors and guides, act as mirrors for the young people they work with. Their attitudes, behaviors, and ways of interacting with the world are often observed and mimicked by the youth. Similarly, youth hubs serve as mirrors of the broader neighborhood or community, reflecting its values, challenges, and cultural dynamics.

"I'm not so sure if the hub accurately reflects this neighborhood. I think a lot of young people like to come here because it is in the center of the city, not necessarily because they live close by."

youth worker

Following friends

Young people tend to stay within their own social circles, sticking to familiar friend groups. Most follow the same daily routine—moving from school, work, home, and their usual hobbies (like a chess club, hockey practice, or a pub). Breaking this pattern and encouraging new engagement is difficult. "I'm fine with my own friends and don't see the need to connect with others in my neighborhood. Maybe when I'm older and have more time," is a common sentiment. It is hard to represent a community if many don't come or stick to their own groups. "I would only go if my friends go as well." This can lead to youth hubs that may only mirror specific groups rather than the entire neighborhood. This tendency shows that while youth hubs aim to be inclusive spaces, they can become mirrors of individual preferences and existing social divisions.



"Doing the shopping themselves teaches them that our work requires effort. They start to understand our perspective, realizing it's harder than they thought. This experience also brings us closer together."

youth worker

Changing environment

Capturing something is harder when things are constantly moving. The word "hub" originates from the hub of a wheel—the central part around which everything revolves. While the core idea is about connection, the activities are constantly shifting. Different events take place, different people get involved, youth grow up and move on, and youth workers may be reassigned to new roles or locations. This adaptability is essential for working in this environment, but it can be challenging for both youth workers and the young people to maintain a stable foundation. Youth workers often become accustomed to a certain group dynamic, knowing how to engage and involve the participants. However, when young people outgrow the hub and stop attending, and new (younger) children join, the youth workers must constantly adapt. The same goes for the young people—friends leave, and sometimes even the youth workers move on.

Asked to, like to

The contextual factors outlined above demonstrate how hubs are rooted in social ties. Interestingly, this principle—where young people are more likely to engage in activities when they are familiar or friendly with other attendees (like to)—can inadvertently lead to the exclusion of others, limiting their opportunities to be invited to participate (asked to).

EXPLORING THE PROBLEM SPACE

4.1 THEMES



THEME 10. GEEN WOORDEN MAAR DADEN

Many young people, particularly those who have had negative experiences with bureaucratic systems or feel disconnected from mainstream institutions, are often skeptical of adults, especially civil workers or youth workers, who they associate with empty promises, formal language, and political agendas. To them, it can feel like these workers talk a lot about solutions, policies, and support, but rarely follow through with meaningful action.

"All they do is talk. There's never any real action. If we want change, we have to make it happen ourselves, because civil workers are just there for their nine-to-five paycheck."

key figure (young person active at youth hub)

"As soon as I see those green-coloured shirts I head in the opposite direction."

key figure

Perception of the system

The quote above reflects a widespread distrust in the government. Young people often see it as slow, uninspiring, indifferent and sometimes even as manipulative. "As soon as I see those green-coloured shirts I head in the opposite direction." It's challenging to get youth involved in participatory activities or youth hubs when they already hold such a negative view of the municipality. On the flip side, youth workers sometimes feel that working with certain young people is a lost cause. "If they are just here to hang and smoke weed, they can forget it." These attitudes reinforce each other, creating a repelling dynamic that only widens the gap.

"If they are just here to hang and smoke weed, they can forget it. I mean it's okay, but they shouldn't bother the other kids or interrupt me."

youth worker

Fancy words vs. real action

The idea of "fancy words" refers to the formal language of politicians, policymakers, and civil workers—language that can feel abstract and irrelevant to young people's day-to-day realities. Terms like "inclusion," "engagement," or "empowerment" are often used, but if young people don't see these words translated into action, they lose faith in the system. To them, these words may sound like empty rhetoric, used to sound progressive or caring, but with little actual impact on their lives. In contrast, what young people are looking for is real, visible action. They want to see concrete results: programs that deliver on their promises, resources that actually reach them, and initiatives that are relevant to their needs and interests. They don't want words; they want deeds. Youth workers, positioned within youth hubs, are in a unique place where they can either bridge this gap or reinforce it. They are often seen as intermediaries between young people and the larger political or social systems they represent.

Responded to

Both young people and youth workers need evidence that their efforts are acknowledged and valued. The challenges outlined in this theme illustrate how difficult it can be to bridge the gap between the two, especially when individuals operate based on preconceived notions. This situation demonstrates that the current approach to involving young people in the process can feel futile if discussions do not lead to tangible actions.



EXPLORING THE PROBLEM SPACE

4.2 CONNECTING THE DOTS

How do the themes from the previous section connect with one another? What insights do these connections reveal? By drawing connections and stepping back, the bigger picture is uncovered, presented as a framework (see Figure 16). This framework then serves as a foundation for identifying key perspectives to guide the design process. First, the framework and its connections are explained, followed by a discussion of specific elements within the framework that present design opportunities.

The connection between the themes

The framework is built around this balance of power. For young people to take on more responsibility, youth workers need to be willing to relinquish some of their own. For this shift to occur, there are certain requirements that, while similar, differ for both sides.

For collaboration or participation to happen (for the shift in power to occur), the young person must be willing to engage in the activity. They're more likely to join if they 1) know it will be fun, 2) if there are immediate results and short-term desires are met (like having good food or seeing their idea implemented), or 3) if they have a trusting, friendly relationship with the organizer (typically the youth worker). Being friendly with the rest of the group is also an important condition.

For youth workers, it's crucial that participants are actively involved (speaking up and listening), show respect toward others (avoiding bullying or exclusion), and often, they are more inclined to include people if there is already an established relationship.

Going to the other side of the power negotiation. Currently, this collaboration is often shaped by trial and error: youth workers organize activities and, based on the turnout, adapt their methods. They often use discussions and structured conversations to plan the programming. Alternatively, they might simply be present, build relationships with the young people, and then organize activities based on their understanding and empathy.

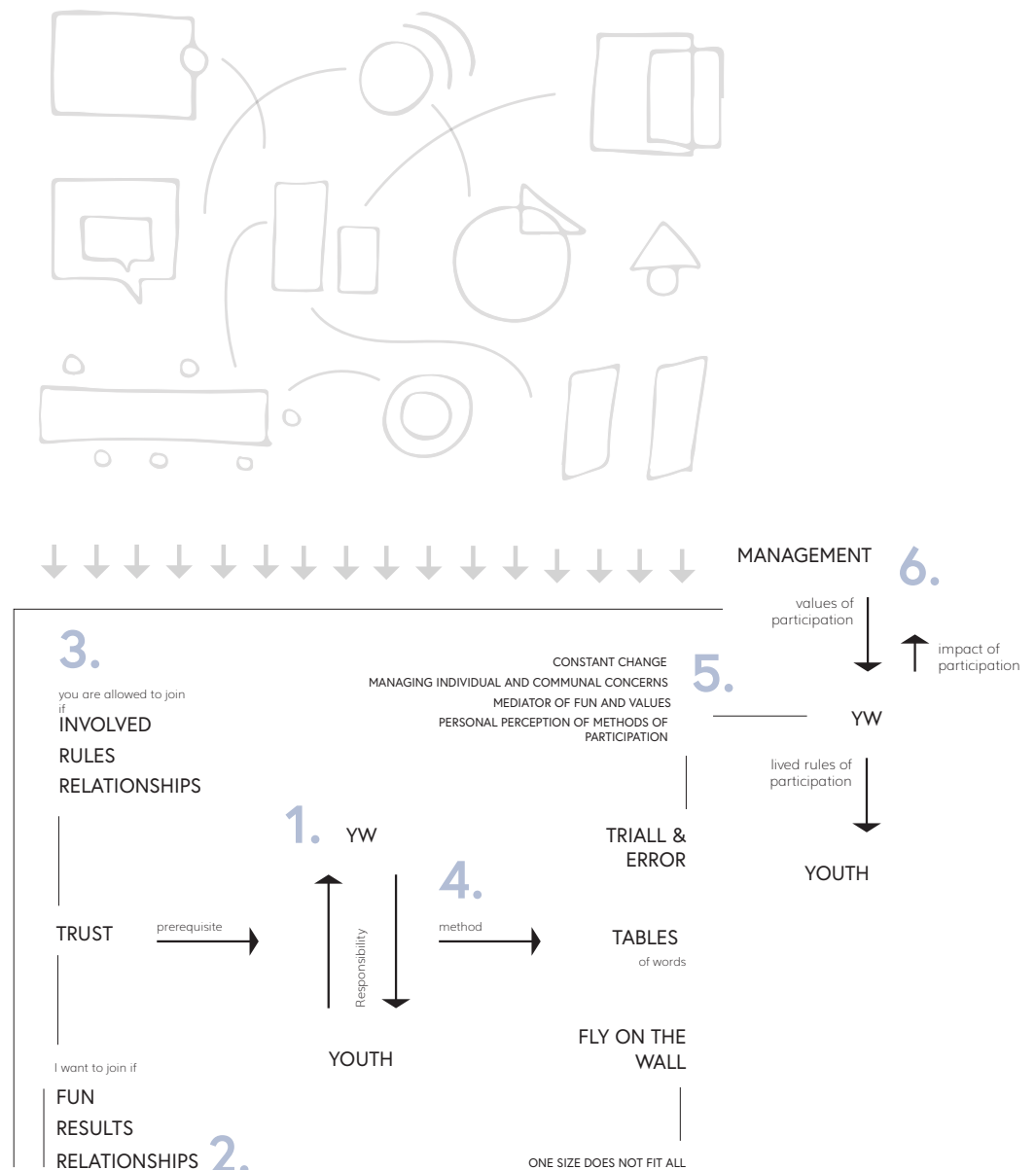


Figure 16. Resulting framework of connecting all ten themes

4.2 CONNECTING THE DOTS

5. The reason these methods are so varied is that the young people involved are diverse and constantly changing. As a result, youth workers must continually adapt their methods and stay attuned to shifting dynamics. They also use these flexible approaches to address a range of individual and community concerns. It can be challenging to manage, so they often resort to experimentation or their own preferred methods. Additionally, they are relatively new to participatory methods and are still exploring the possibilities.
6. Youth workers find themselves in the middle ground. They need to be engaging and interesting for the young people while also making an impact and adhering to the participation goals and values outlined in their responsibilities. They have the freedom to interpret these values and sometimes involve young people, asking them what participation or collaboration means to them. It's a challenging position that requires creativity and can be overwhelming. Young people rarely have a say in defining what participation actually involves. It tends to happen to them rather than with them.

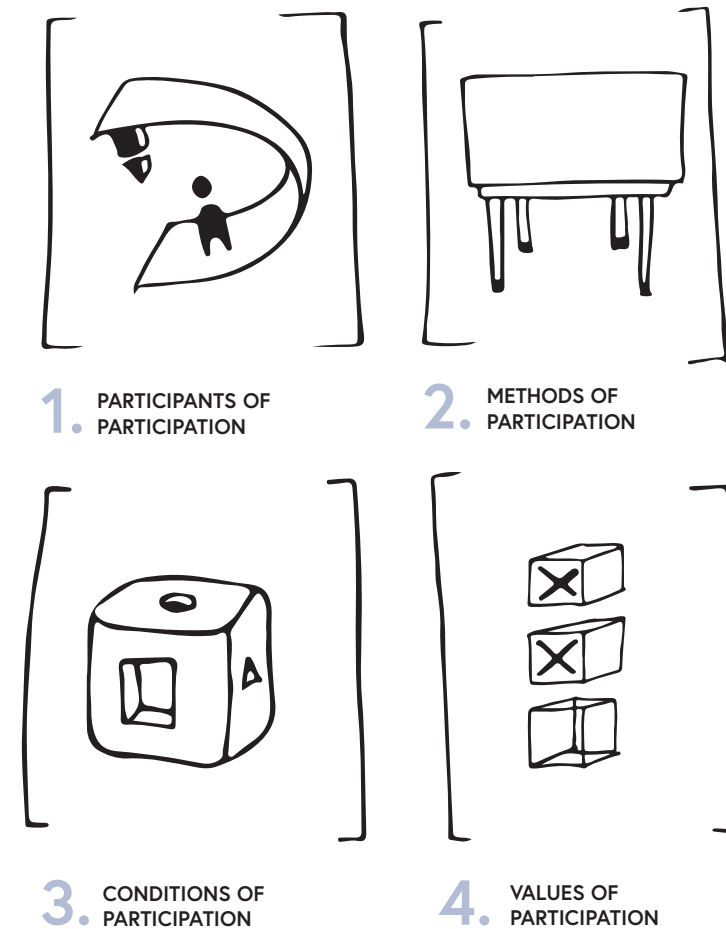


Figure 17. Frames (i.e. design opportunities resulting from framework)

Creating frames

The framework identifies four key frames that revolve around the central power dynamics between youth workers and youth (figure 17). These frames offer different perspectives to examine the issue and can be used to identify specific areas for targeted solutions. While addressing all focus points would be ideal, it is not always necessary or practical. Influencing just one area can potentially affect other connections within the framework, leading to changes across multiple areas. The frames are explained in the following pages.

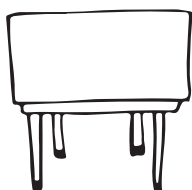
4.2 CONNECTING THE DOTS



1. The participants of participation, design for all

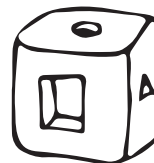
This frame revolves around the concept of reflecting the broader community and engaging a wider audience beyond the core group of youth hubs. This frame is about extending an invitation to those who may not be directly involved in the central team, encouraging broader participation that reflects the diversity of the neighborhood. The guiding question here is: how can meaningful participation occur outside the hub's physical boundaries?

There are a lot of opportunities beyond the hub's immediate environment, making it an ideal starting point for exploring and engaging with the neighborhood. Not every young person may want to be part of the central organizing team, but that doesn't mean they lack opinions or ideas about the activities being planned. To tap into this broader perspective, it's essential to lower barriers to participation and actively reach out to these individuals, rather than waiting for them to engage on their own terms.



2. The methods of participation, design for transformation

The second frame focuses on current methods of participation, proposing a reimagining of existing practices. Many participatory activities take place at the table, where questions are raised, meetings are held, and brainstorming occurs. How can this familiar setting be transformed to play a more dynamic role in the process? By rethinking the arrangement of the table and the objects placed on it, a more inclusive and interactive environment can be created. This shift in approach can turn the table into a tool for expression and collaboration, making the participatory process more engaging and aligned with the ways young people prefer to communicate.



3. The conditions of participation, design for trust

The third frame centers on the prerequisites for effective collaboration, with a particular emphasis on trust. Trust is a complex and often abstract concept that can mean different things to different parties. This ambiguity can make it challenging to establish a solid foundation for collaboration. To address this, it can be helpful to break down and clarify what trust specifically entails for each participant involved. By designing a process that makes these expectations explicit, all parties can develop a shared understanding of what trust might look like in practice.

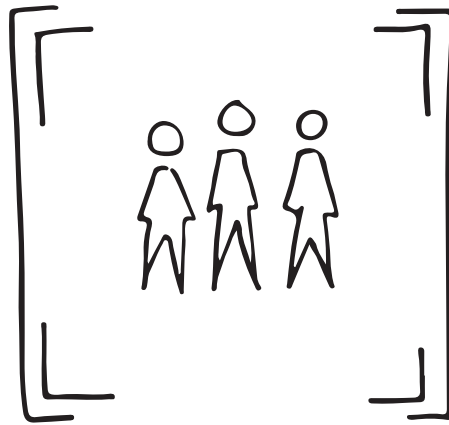
4. The rules of participation, design for values

The last frame addresses the established 'rules' and values of participation, often imposed from higher authorities or organizational structures. This frame questions how these rules can be shaped or influenced by the youth themselves, rather than being top-down directives. It explores ways to involve young people in the creation and interpretation of these values and goals, ensuring that they are not just passive recipients but active contributors to the process of figuring out what participation entails.

Next steps

Connecting the themes led to a summarizing framework, from which the abovementioned four design opportunities were identified. These frames highlight specific aspects of the problem and offer design opportunities. The next chapter explains how a specific frame was selected, emphasizing that this choice does not necessarily mean the challenges associated with the other frames are entirely overlooked.

CHAPTER SUMMARY



This chapter explored the following questions:

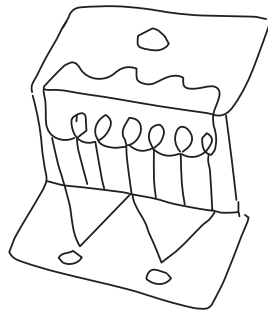
1. What makes youth participation challenging in youth hubs?
2. How can these challenges be translated into design opportunities?

1. What makes youth participation challenging in youth hubs?

- The ten themes in this chapter summarize the challenges faced by youth and youth workers in their collaboration on the design and programming of youth hubs.
- 1) Youth workers are restricted by rules, limited funding, and insufficient space; 2) New activity ideas often come from individuals rather than groups; 3) Activities must cater to diverse age groups; 4) Youth workers may assume they understand the needs and desires of the youth, 5) Attendance and motivation are influenced by the personal relationships between youth and workers; 6) With significant freedom in shaping participation, youth workers may default to familiar, adult-centric methods; 7) Effective participation requires a shift in power dynamics, which can be uncomfortable for both youth and youth workers.

2. How can these challenges be translated into design opportunities?

- Connections among the themes create a framework that highlights four key focus areas offering design opportunities: 1) Design for conditions of participation: How can design clarify the differing expectations of both parties and establish a trusting relationship? 2) Design for broader inclusion: How can design facilitate participation beyond the boundaries of the hub? 3) Design for youth-driven values: How can young people become active contributors to defining the meaning of participation? 4) Design for participation methods: How can design transform the current formal setting into a more engaging experience?



5. DEFINING THE GOAL

5.1 START OF THE RIPPLE EFFECT

5.2 INTERACTION VISION

5.3 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

QUESTIONS & METHODS

The chapter explores the following questions:

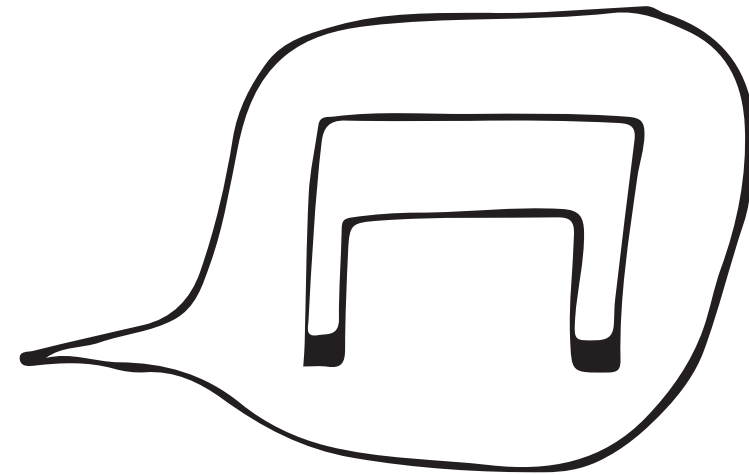
- What is the design focus of this project and why?
- What principles should be taken into account within this design focus?

The following methods were used to answer the abovementioned questions:

- Literature research
- Desk research
- 16 interviews with civil servants (N = 4), youth workers (N = 8) and key figures (young active visitors of youth hubs) (N = 4). The format of the semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix A.
- Observation and attendance at participatory events organized by the municipality of Rotterdam and youth hubs (N = 5). A description of these events can be found in Appendix B.
- An interaction vision (a metaphor) informs intended interaction qualities of the future design.
- Guerilla interviews (N = 40) with youth, to test assumptions and inform design principles. Appendix C describes the set-up of these guerilla interviews.

DEFINING THE GOAL

5.1 START OF THE RIPPLE EFFECT



Which area of the context should be targeted? Where can design add the most value? Based on conversations with various stakeholders, the initial project goal, and existing literature, the most logical and intriguing opportunities lie in reimagining methods of participation, in transforming the usual setting of participatory meetings: the table.

By modifying these methods and introducing a new approach, changes can also occur in other areas (mentioned in the previous chapter): the relational aspects of the prerequisites are altered, the amount and type of participants may shift as the activity might speak to a broader audience and participation becomes less passive and more of an active, experimental process—instead of a mere top down imposed value. This section explains three key reasons why this particular frame has been chosen.

1. Putting participation to practice
2. Quality above quantity
3. Leveraging an existing setting

5.1 START OF THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Civil servant: *"Young people have so many great ideas, but they don't always have the tools to bring them to life. It's our responsibility to provide those tools."*
Me: *"What do you think these tools, that you need to provide, are?"* **Same civil servant:** *"Ooooooh. I'm not sure."*

1. Participation in practice, making the abstract more concrete

Putting participation into practice is easier said than done. While its value is widely acknowledged and its promises are often celebrated, both literature and real-life experiences reveal that its implementation is limited. Civil servants and youth workers understand their responsibility to foster involvement, but as the quote above illustrates, the knowledge and especially the practical know-how of a diverse set of tools is still lacking.

"Why try to involve those who don't want to, if you can improve things for the ones who do?"

youth worker

"I have been around for a long time. You could call me the dinosaur of youth participation. And it keeps coming back: those who are not present. But is it really a problem? Hockey clubs are for hockey players, chess is for chess players, can't hubs just be for hub-enthusiasts?"

youth worker

2. Quality above quantity

Active involvement means being able to share on a more personal level. Participation requires time and the development of trusting relationships, making it essential to focus on the quality of engagement rather than the number of participants. While a voting system or anonymity can provide an idea of what people want, the underlying mechanisms of personal storytelling and opinion-sharing offer a more powerful contribution.

"Who is seated at the table?"

"You can't simply say 'just do it.' There needs to be some form of guidance—a balance between encouraging independent thinking and providing guidelines. You want to stimulate them to think within the framework while also pushing beyond it, and that requires guidance."

youth worker

3. Leveraging an existing setting

In discussions about participation, a common question—both metaphorically and literally—is: who has a seat at the table? The table represents the place where decisions are made, and those who are not present are excluded from the decision-making process. It also symbolizes seriousness, formality, meetings, and agendas. Even in youth hubs with children as young as ten years old, programming and design choices are deliberated around the table. By utilizing this familiar setting, where both youth workers and youth are already engaged, implementing change becomes less intimidating.

5.2 INTERACTION VISION

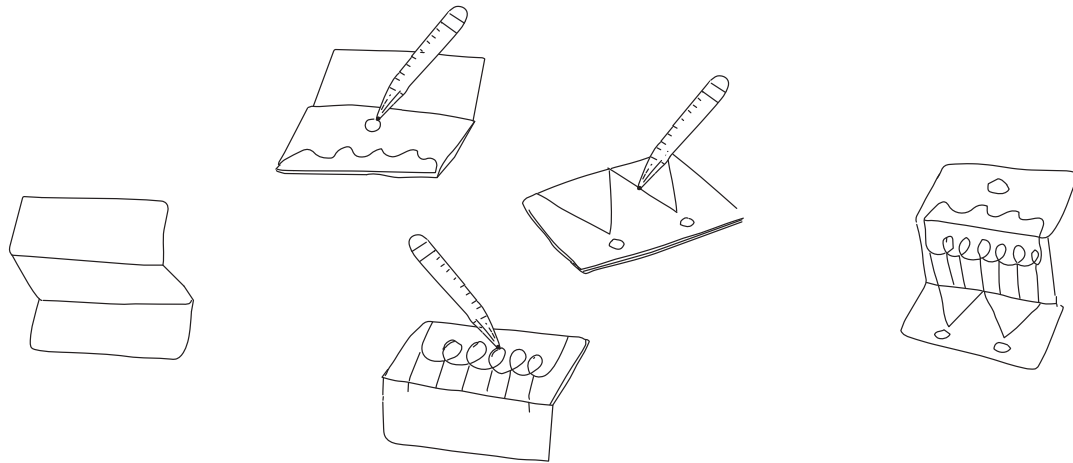


Figure 18. Interaction vision: the exquisite corpse

Using a metaphor serves as a guide for how interactions with the new approach should feel. Transitioning from problem analysis to potential solutions, an interaction vision provides a map to navigate the unknown. While it's straightforward to illustrate and define what you want to avoid, developing a new proposal requires an understanding of the desired experience and outcomes.

The 'exquisite corpse'

While searching for metaphors related to collaboration, participation, and creativity, I reflected on my personal experiences and reasons for engaging in certain activities. I realized that a key element of the metaphor should be both collaboration and individual contribution. I feel excited to contribute when I can add value to a team by adapting and becoming part of it. But I'm even more motivated when my personal skills are recognized and enhance the process. The interaction with the design should both allow teamwork, as space for doing things your own way. As I was studying, I noticed a folded piece of paper and recalled how, as a child, I loved creating drawings with friends. We would each contribute to different sections of the paper, and when unfolded, the result was often a comically bizarre figure that always made us laugh. The blend of absurdity, collaborative effort, and the pride in our joint creation made this activity particularly engaging. This memory seemed like a fitting

metaphor: the 'exquisite corpse', which, apparently is not something just for kids, but was used by the surrealists at first (Figure 18).

The interaction of drawing the exquisite corpse is used to describe desirable interaction qualities I want the design to consist of. These qualities are described below.

Individual and communal creativity

The design should welcome different forms of expression. Everyone should be able to contribute in their own way. The fact that everyone thinks and creates differently is the main reason the outcome is intriguing. Instead of opposing forces leading to conflict it should be the reason for creativity.

An assigned space to work from

The design should provide a solid foundation to work from. Although it begins with a blank page, the structure—defined here by folds and specific assignments (e.g., "you do the head," "you do the body," "you do the feet")—makes the blank slate less intimidating. Each participant has the freedom to fill in their part as they wish, allowing for creativity. Mistakes are welcomed and can enhance the final outcome, adding to its uniqueness.

An overview of who is contributing

Everyone gets a turn; otherwise, the figure remains incomplete. The design should ensure that all participants have the opportunity to contribute. By offering designated spaces and the freedom for personal expression, the design should ultimately present a clear overview of the collective contributions, rather than letting any input fade away unnoticed.

A surprising result

Throughout the process, participants should feel excitement about what lies ahead. In the metaphor, the exact outcome remains uncertain until the very end, adding a sense of thrill. The final result should be surprising and serve as a catalyst for conversation: What kind of figure is this? What character does it possess? What should we call it? This outcome provides a reference point that can be revisited throughout the discussion.

5.3 DESIGN PRINCIPLES



THE AGENDA



ICEBREAKERS



GETTING STARTED



MAIN TOPICS



CONCLUDING

Figure 19. Parallels between food, dining and a meeting

Testing assumptions with youth

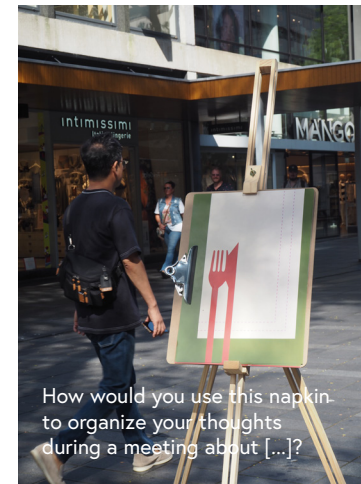
To develop a set of design principles, justify my design choices and further enrich the desired interaction qualities, I questioned my assumptions by engaging young people in public spaces, gathering their opinions and ideas on formal meetings and brainstorming sessions. I used a combination of illustrations and small interactive tasks that could encourage further discussion (Figure 20). Youth could respond to a question by placing stickers on these illustrations. The illustrations were all created with a "dinner/food" metaphor as a foundation, which is further explained in the following section.

The food metaphor

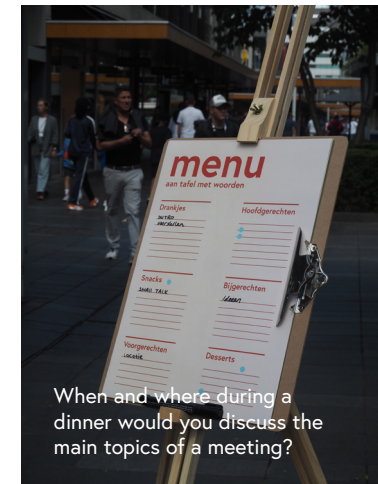
I began by exploring how the arrangement of a table setting and the use of table objects could contribute to conversations. My brainstorming focused on how typical table objects—such as vases, salt and pepper shakers, and napkins—might be redesigned to serve as tools for discussing and planning youth hub programs. I soon realized that these many table objects are of course connected to the experience of eating and dining. Together with Irene Fierloos, I then identified parallels between the structure of formal meetings and that of a shared dinner setting (Figure 19). These insights formed the foundation of the illustrations and prompts used during the guerilla interviews conducted on the streets of Rotterdam. More associations and ideas can be found in Appendix D.

The questions

Figure 20 provides an overview of the questions that accompanied the illustrations. In essence, my goal was to explore how various table and dinner-related items—such as placemats, menus, recipes, napkins, and kitchen timers—might serve as tools to help young people spark ideas and organize their thoughts effectively. I wanted to see if these familiar objects could facilitate creativity and structure during brainstorming and planning activities. In addition to this main question, I was also interested in their general opinions on youth hubs and their thoughts on what elements a meeting or session should include for them to feel comfortable and creative. Appendix C goes into more detail.



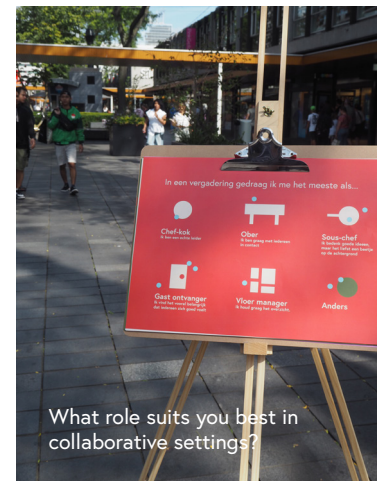
How would you use this napkin to organize your thoughts during a meeting about [...]?



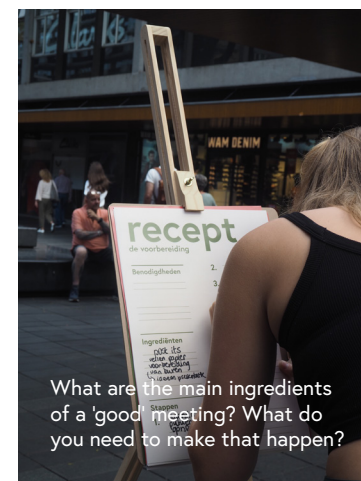
When and where during a dinner would you discuss the main topics of a meeting?



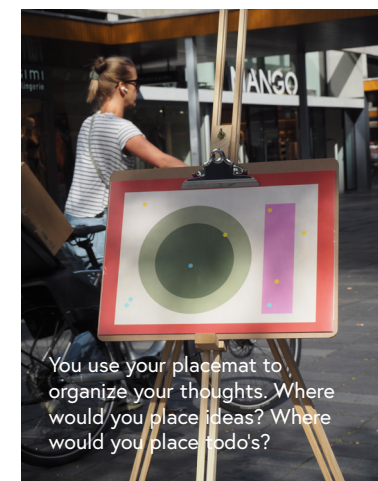
How much time do you need for yourself when coming up with a good idea? How much time do you work together?



What role suits you best in collaborative settings?



What are the main ingredients of a 'good' meeting? What do you need to make that happen?



You use your placemat to organize your thoughts. Where would you place ideas? Where would you place todo's?

Figure 20. Illustrations and questions used for querilla interviews with youth

5.3 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

"I need a lot of time before I speak up."

"I've got a lot of ideas, but I tend to keep them for myself."

"After a meeting I forget everything."

youth during street conversations

Results

The conversations indicate that young people prioritize structure, clarity, and personalization in collaborative settings. Traditional meetings are often perceived as boring, time-consuming, 'something for adults' and the discussion can seem fleeting. Using the recipe analogy, participants described trust, openness, and listening as essential to a "good" meeting, though these elements are framed abstractly and hold varied meanings for each participant. The menu analogy helped them conceptualize meeting stages (e.g., "fun" during drinks, more serious discussion at the main course), while the kitchen timer underscored their need for plenty of time to process and contribute ideas. All 40 young people I spoke with shared that they needed individual time to figure things out before feeling comfortable collaborating as a team. The placemat exercises revealed diverse approaches to organizing thoughts: some arranged ideas randomly, while others used a very structured approach. These differences highlighted the importance of accommodating various ways of organizing ideas during discussions. Lastly, participants easily identified their preferred roles in meetings and expressed discomfort with drastically exploring different roles.

"I know my strengths, so in a setting where I don't know many people, I want to show that side of myself."

5.3 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Design principles

Building on the desired interaction qualities, prior research, the initial project goals and the conversations with youth, the following design principles are incorporated into the design phase of the process.

1. **The design should encourage collaboration and build on each other's ideas.**

The best ideas often come from group interactions, where diverse perspectives contribute to unexpected and interesting outcomes. Mixing ideas and building on one another's input tends to produce richer results. This design principle also reflects findings that many initiatives in youth hubs are currently based on individual ideas. The principle should guide the design to encourage collaboration and diversity, moving beyond a focus on individual contributions.

2. **The design should allow time for individuals to organize their thoughts and ideas before sharing.**

Many participatory efforts rely on people speaking up, often without dedicated time to fully develop or refine their ideas before sharing. In street conversations, many participants expressed a need for personal time to organize their thoughts before feeling confident to contribute to a group. This principle guides the design to intentionally provide that time for reflection.

3. **The design should create space for non-verbal contributions to the discussion.**

This principle is included for several reasons. First, participatory activities are often dominated by outspoken participants who are comfortable in the spotlight. This design principle aims to prevent that imbalance. Additionally, incorporating non-verbal forms of contribution encourages participants to think differently, fostering a more creative environment for brainstorming.

5.3 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

4. **The design should accommodate each person's preferred form of expression.**

Expanding on the previous design principle, this one emphasizes celebrating individual forms of expression. Whether verbal or non-verbal, it's essential for participants to contribute in ways that feel natural to them. This principle guides the design to create a space where young people can further develop their skills and appreciate the differences among them.

5. **The design should feel enjoyable and surprising.**

Street conversations revealed that young people often view meetings as boring and time-consuming. In my own experience with participatory activities, these events are usually quite serious. This principle aims to shift that perception by creating an experience that is both enjoyable and engaging, blending serious and fun elements rather than keeping them separate.

6. **The design should accommodate a clear structure and flow.**

A common perspective from young people on the streets was that a meeting should have a clear structure and flow. They want to understand what they're contributing to and how it will be accomplished. This structure provides the stability needed to feel comfortable and creative within the process. The design, therefore, incorporates a fixed sequence of actions, while allowing room for experimentation within each step.

7. **The design should allow young people to explore new roles in collaboration while also enhancing the skills they already possess.**

A key goal of youth hubs is to recognize and nurture young people's talents. Street conversations showed that while youth are often confident in identifying their strengths, they tend to be cautious about stepping outside their comfort zones—yet growth often happens in doing so. The design should, therefore, allow participants to deepen their existing skills while also encouraging them to explore new roles and ways to contribute to a team when developing ideas.

5.3 DESIGN PRINCIPLES

IN SUMMARY

Project goal

Develop a participatory approach that incites youth workers to methodologically collaborate with youth in the design and programming of youth hubs, thereby empowering youth.

Design goal

Transform the center of participatory meetings into a conversational tool that allows room for multiple forms of expression.

Interaction vision

Using the exquisite corpse metaphor, the interaction with the design should foster both individual and communal creativity, provide a dedicated space for each contributor, offer a clear view of who is participating, and ultimately lead to an unexpected, surprising outcome.

Design principles

1. The design should encourage collaboration and build on each other's ideas.
2. The design should allow time for individuals to organize their thoughts and ideas before sharing.
3. The design should create space for non-verbal contributions to the discussion.
4. The design should accommodate each person's preferred form of expression.
5. The design should feel enjoyable and surprising.
6. The design should accommodate a clear structure and flow.
7. The design should allow young people to explore new roles in collaboration while also enhancing the skills they already possess.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter explored the following questions:

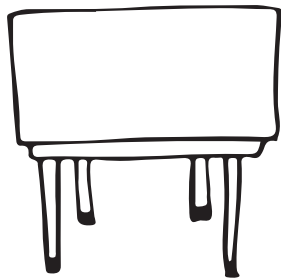
1. What is the design focus of this project and why?
2. What principles should be taken into account within this design focus?

1. What is the design focus of this project and why?

- The design focus of this project is to transform the center of participatory meetings (the table) into a conversational tool where multiple forms of expression are embraced.
- By focusing on modifying an existing setting, smoother implementation across youth hubs can be ensured. This focus provides an opportunity to experiment with practical applications of participation and interviews with stakeholders revealed their interest in prioritizing quality ('good' participation) over quantity (number of attendees).

2. What principles should be taken into account within this design focus?

- The interaction vision 'the exquisite corpse' reveals the desired interaction qualities of the future design. The design should: 1) present an overview of who is contributing, 2) result in something surprising, 3) allow for both individual as communal creativity and 4) give an assigned space to work from.
- During brainstorming sessions, parallels were drawn between formal meetings and dining experiences. The food metaphor was employed in interviews with youth on the streets of Rotterdam, uncovering their thoughts and aspirations regarding meetings and brainstorming sessions. Along with the interaction vision, these discussions led to the development of eight design principles emphasizing collaboration, diverse forms of expression, clear structure and flow, experimentation, non-verbal contributions, and time for participants to organize their thoughts.



6.

A NEW APPROACH

- 6.1 THE DESIGN PROPOSAL**
- 6.2 DETAILS OF THE GUIDE**
- 6.3 ROLE OF THE CONCEPT IN YOUTH HUBS**
- 6.4 ROLE OF THE CONCEPT IN YOUTH
PARTICIPATION**

QUESTIONS & METHODS

The chapter explores the following questions:

- How can the center of participatory meetings in youth hubs be transformed into a conversational piece that embraces multiple forms of expression?
- What values does the design proposal bring to youth and youth workers?
- What is the role of the design proposal in youth hubs and in youth participation?

The following methods were used to answer the abovementioned questions:

- Designing through metaphors
- Brainstorming. Appendix D presents some results of these sessions.
- Iterative tests and explorations with students (N = 4), youth at the central library of Rotterdam (N = 20), stakeholders of the project (i.e. civil servants, youth workers and key figures of youth hubs) (N = 12). The format and observations during the library session can be found in Appendix E. The set-up for the workshop with stakeholders is presented in Appendix F.
- Analyzing how the proposal addresses the challenges identified in the ten themes outlined earlier in this thesis.
- Evaluating how the design proposal aligns with Hart's Ladder of Participation and the CLEAR framework.

A NEW APPROACH

6.1 THE DESIGN PROPOSAL

The IdeeDiner (i.e. IdeaDinner) is an engagement method designed to encourage youth to actively contribute their ideas and suggestions in a collaborative setting. By offering a structured (guide) yet open (blank tablecloth) space, it enables participants to engage in dialogue on topics related to youth hubs or any other relevant issues. Figure 21 visualizes its use and flow.

Participants arrive at a table set with a blank paper tablecloth and markers. Before the dinner begins, the facilitator guides them in preparing a dish to bring to the table: these dishes are drawings, each accompanied by an idea or topic participants wish to discuss. Next, the table is set with drawn plates, cutlery, and glasses, along with introductory tasks to warm up and help participants get to know each other. As each dish is served, it is discussed by answering pre-prepared questions, initiating a conversation where participants can respond by placing objects in the table's center. Once all dishes have been discussed, conclusions and actions are drawn, and any leftovers are noted to start off the next dinner. The method encourages different perspectives and communication styles—such as drawing, writing, and speaking—while promoting active movement on and around the table. This dynamic interaction helps participants shift viewpoints and build on each other's ideas. It transforms the typical meeting environment into a more interactive and informal experience, where participants are not just passive listeners but active contributors with or without raising their voice.

The structure of the IdeeDiner is outlined in a guide (section 6.2) that allows for multiple facilitators to steer the conversation. Ultimately, the method aims to empower youth by making them active participants in decision-making processes and building a sense of ownership over the outcomes, which might not be set in stone, but are 'set in tablecloth'. It fosters an environment where diverse ideas are not only heard but celebrated, and where the act of participation itself becomes a fun and memorable experience.

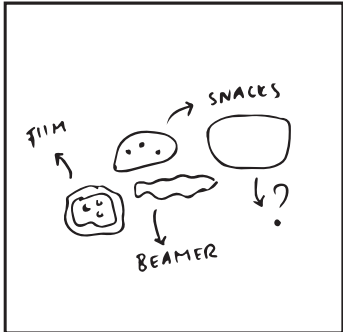
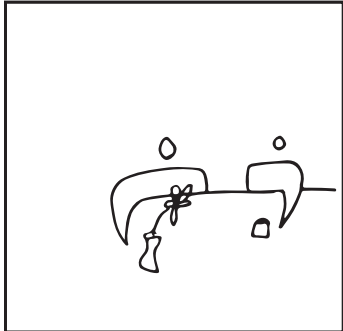
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Figure 21. Flow of the concept

1 Taking a seat

The tablecloth is rolled out, the markers are placed on the table, and a table object is chosen. Everyone takes a seat at the table.

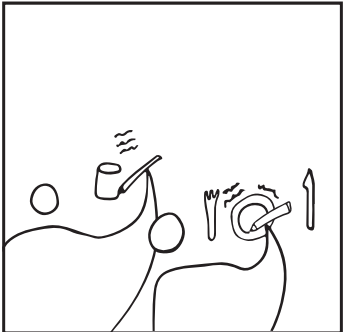
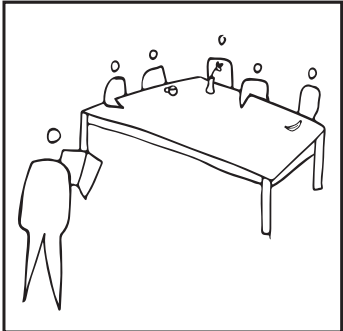


Time is given to look at others' dishes and add to them if desired. Is there an ingredient missing?

4 The missing ingredient

2 Introduction

The facilitator welcomes everyone. A brief introduction is given or read aloud, and the rules of 'the game' are explained.

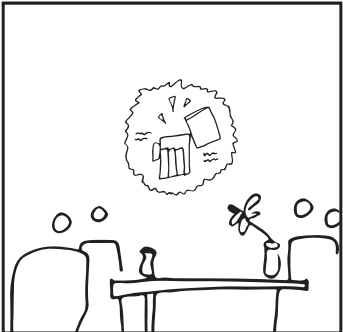
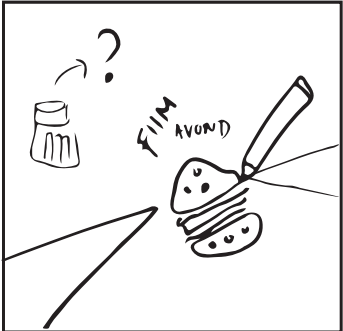


The table is set. The facilitator assists the participants in drawing their plate, glass, and cutlery, and asks questions to help everyone get to know each other better.

5 Setting the table

3 A topic, dish and question

The facilitator guides the participants in drawing a dish and coming up with a topic and a question that can be posed to the group.

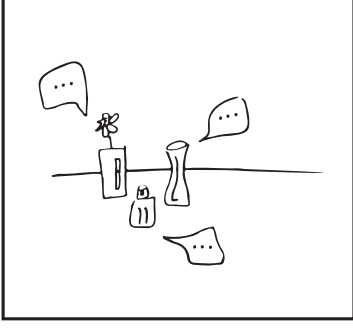
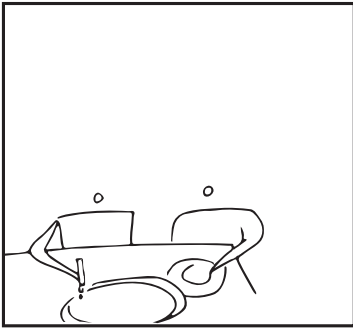


Participants make a toast with the person across from them, discussing the drawn and written topics.

6 Cheers

7 To share

A few people draw large sharing plates in the center of the table. The participants then decide whether they want to share their dish with the group.

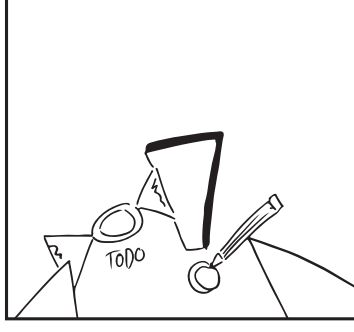



If someone wants to respond, their table object is moved to the center of the table. This makes it clear who has not yet spoken.

10 Respond with table objects

8 A question on your plate

The cook of each dish asks the question they came up with in step 3 to the group and serves the dish in the form of post-its on a tray.

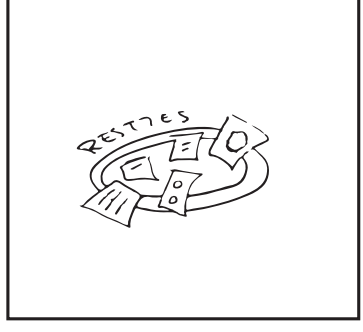
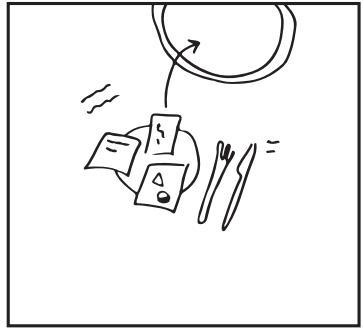


Once all the dishes have been discussed, it's time to wrap up and reflect. The participants walk around the table and add any final ideas or thoughts.

11 'Natafelen'

9 Sharing answers and ideas

Participants answer the questions and choose whether to share them. The facilitator takes the post-its from the sharing plates and invites to elaborate.



An 'action menu' is drawn up and the remaining post-its are kept as "leftovers" for the next time, with those topics being addressed first.

12 Leftovers

6.1 THE DESIGN PROPOSAL

The guide describes the following steps. See figure 21.

Preparing a dish

Similarly to a neighborhood dinner, where everyone brings a different dish, the first step of the method describes how to choose and prepare a discussion topic. The guide provides a step-by-step plan and script along with a "recipe" template, featuring guiding questions to help participants prepare their topic for the conversation. Participants are encouraged to identify three key "ingredients" (subtopics) and craft a question to share with the group when their "dish" is presented for discussion. After preparing a topic for discussion and identifying its key ingredients, participants swap places with their neighbors, allowing others to add ingredients (subtopics) and transforming individual ideas into shared ones. This collaborative process enriches the discussion by incorporating multiple perspectives on each topic. Facilitators can either assign the recipe template as homework, sensitizing participants in advance, or follow the script to collaboratively prepare dishes during the IdeeDiner.

Setting the table

Before the dinner begins, the table is set, creating space for some introductory questions. As part of the ritual, each object (glasses, plates, cutlery) drawn on the tablecloth is paired with a task—something to be written down next to the drawing. Then, participants shift perspectives by moving one seat to the right, allowing them to observe what others have contributed. This is followed by a round where everyone describes what's in front of them, encouraging participants to focus on others' contributions rather than their own. This process not only eases self-expression but also helps them get to know the person next to them better. Large sharing bowls are drawn in the center of the table, and each prepared dish is placed in the bowls if the chef chooses to share it with the group.



Discussing the menu

Once everyone is back in their original seats, the facilitator reviews the "menu" by reading aloud the items in the shared bowls. This clarifies the order of topics and invites any final contributions before the discussion starts.

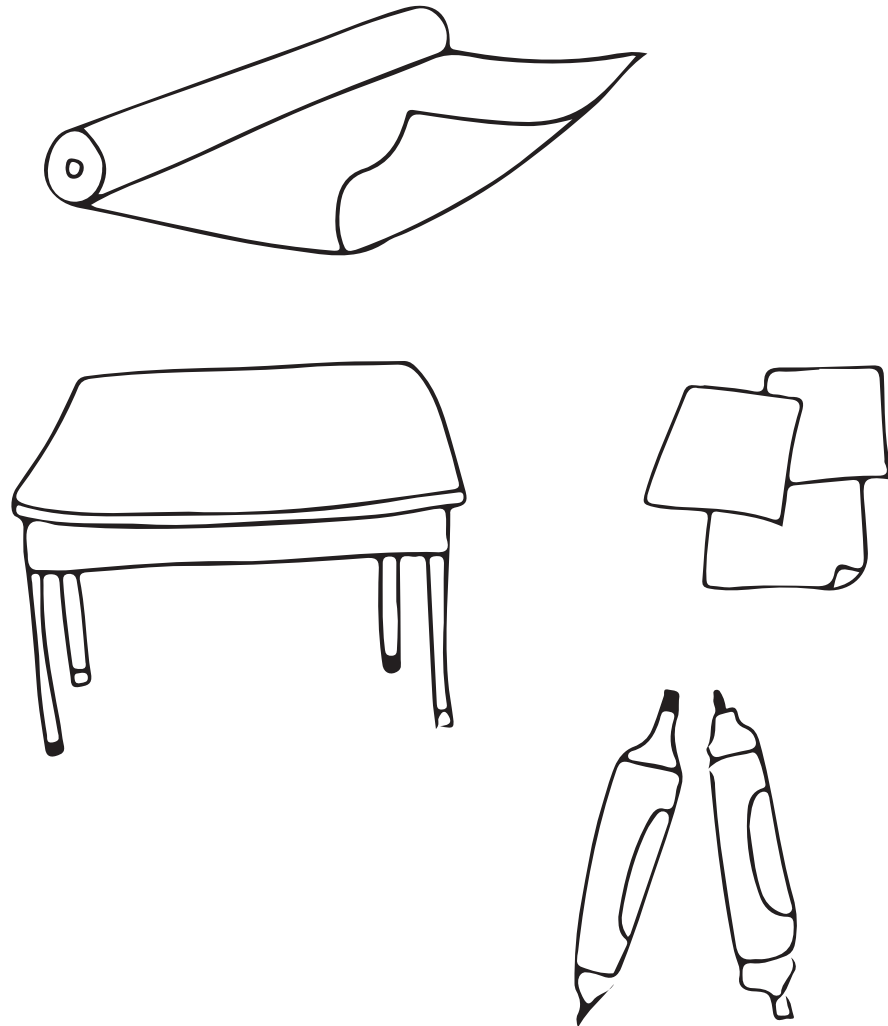
Having dinner

Finally, it's time to eat. Each dish begins with the question prepared by the participant. The participant hands out post-its and asks everyone to answer the question related to the ingredients of the topic. Responses are either drawn or written down and can be shared by placing the post-its on the shared plates, or kept private by keeping them on their own plate. The facilitator then reads the shared post-its aloud one by one, inviting the participant to elaborate on their idea. Others can respond by placing their table objects in the center, further contributing to the discussion. They can also contribute non verbally, by writing or drawing thoughts on the table cloth.

'Natafelen' 'after-dinner-chilling'

After wrapping up the discussion and filling their bellies with ideas, participants are invited to step back and walk around the table. This allows them to review everyone's contributions and add any final remarks or drawings where they feel inspired. A final important note or idea is recorded, accompanied by a drawing of a cup of coffee, tea, or a peppermint sweet. The facilitator then compiles a 'menu of actions' by going around the table, asking participants how their ideas can and will be implemented, and by whom. Any points that couldn't be addressed are placed in the "leftovers" pile to be reviewed at the start of the next session.

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Value for youth

1. Short-term outcomes and tangible results

One advantage for youth is the immediate visibility of their contributions. Unlike traditional meetings, where ideas may feel abstract or disconnected from the final outcomes, the IdeeDiner provides a more concrete sense of progress. Ideas are physically expressed—whether through drawing, writing, or verbal discussion—and given form on the table for all to see. This helps participants witness the evolution of the conversation in real-time, creating a greater sense of accomplishment and validation for their contributions.

2. A fun and memorable experience

By turning the meeting into a more interactive and informal experience, the method adds an element of playfulness and creativity that traditional settings often lack. The use of drawing and writing on a blank tablecloth, for instance, makes the process feel more relaxed and engaging. This also makes it easier for participants to remember key ideas and outcomes, as the tactile and visual elements stimulate different areas of the brain, enhancing memory retention (Wammes et al., 2018).

3. Inclusivity for all communication styles

The IdeeDiner is designed to be accessible for everyone, including those who may be shy or less comfortable speaking in front of groups. Youth who prefer not to talk can still contribute meaningfully by writing or drawing their ideas, ensuring that their perspectives are included in the discussion. This inclusivity creates a more welcoming environment where all voices are valued, regardless of how they are expressed.

4. Encouraging perspective-shifting and collaboration

The method promotes movement and interaction around the table, encouraging participants to engage with ideas from different viewpoints. This helps youth practice shifting perspectives, which can lead to deeper insights and more

6.1 THE DESIGN PROPOSAL

creative solutions. The collaborative nature of the process also fosters a sense of teamwork, as participants can build on each other's contributions, creating a more dynamic and collective decision-making experience.

5. Ownership and empowerment

Everyone organizes their thoughts differently; some are more verbal, while others are more visual. This method allows participants to experiment with expressing their ideas in both writing and drawing. The visibility allows for sharing and comparing with others. By bringing thoughts to life, participants can see how different drawing styles and interpretations shape ideas, highlighting individual differences in understanding and creativity. Ultimately, this process makes personal contributions clear, enhancing a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants.

Value for youth workers

1. Putting participation to practice

For youth workers, the IdeeDiner is an opportunity to practice with alternative forms of participation. It moves from the traditional talk or questions and stimulates others forms of idea generation.

2. Flexible role of facilitator or participant

Youth workers benefit from the flexibility of either taking on a facilitative role or becoming an active participant in the conversation. They can do both. The script allows them to step back and let young people take the lead. At the same time, youth workers can step in when necessary, helping to guide the conversation or clarify points.

3. Reference tool

The tablecloth and materials used during the discussion serve as both a visible overview of participation and a reference point. Youth workers can easily track contributions, monitor engagement, and spot emerging patterns through

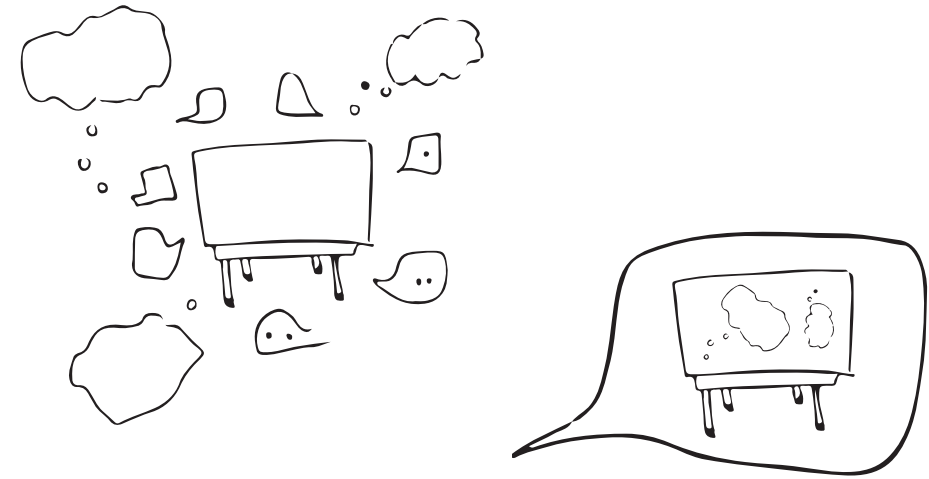


Figure 22. The table as part of the conversation

the drawings and notes, ensuring diverse perspectives are included. The tablecloth also acts as a reference tool, allowing facilitators to revisit earlier ideas, ask follow-up questions, and guide the conversation in new directions. The table now becomes an active participant in the conversation. Rather than simply talking around it, participants engage with the table itself (Figure 22).

4. Structure and flexibility

While the guide offers a clear structure for how to conduct the IdeeDiner, the method itself remains highly adaptable. Youth workers can tailor the process to fit specific situations, topics, or participant needs. The blank space provided by the tablecloth leaves room for flexibility, while the guiding structure ensures that conversations remain organized and goal-oriented. This adaptability makes the method versatile for various contexts, whether discussing youth hubs, planning community projects, or addressing other youth-related topics.

5. Informality

The informal, interactive nature of the method breaks down barriers between facilitators and participants, leading to more authentic conversations and stronger relationships between youth workers and young people.

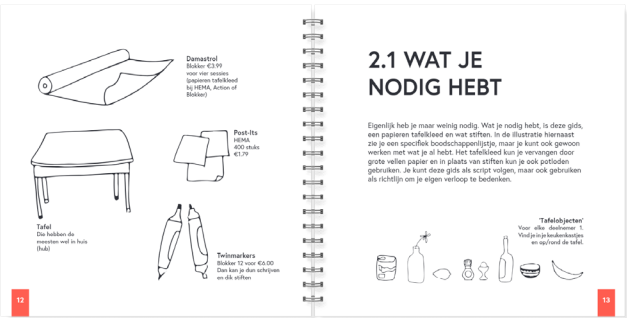
A NEW APPROACH

6.2 DETAILS OF THE GUIDE

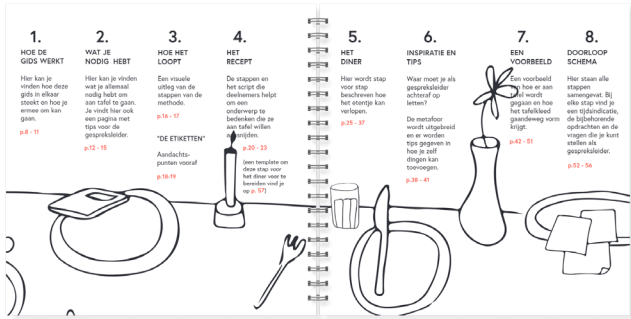
The following pages outline the key points and structure of the guide. The full guide can be found in Appendix H. It includes a script for hosting a dinner, explains the method, provides additional information and tips and also offers a summary of the dinner with a detailed walkthrough and time schedule.



Readability and markers
The guide is printed as an O-wire booklet, allowing for easy flipping of the pages and ensuring the script remains readable. Throughout the guide, illustrations are hand-drawn with markers, matching the ones used during the dinner.



Materials
The guide includes a list of required materials, including a detailed grocery list. It also notes that if time or budget is limited, you can use items already available at home. The maximum recommended expense is 20 euros.



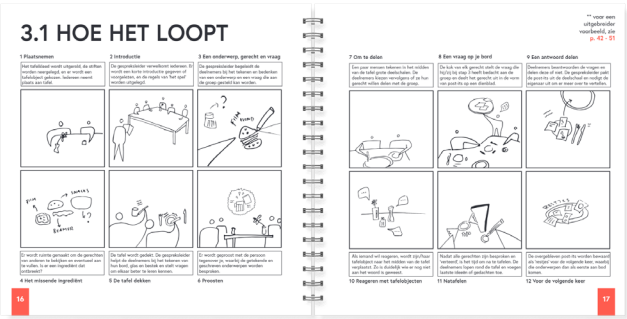
Contents
The guide includes instructions for use, a materials list, a visual dinner walkthrough, scripts for dish preparation and dinner discussions, facilitator tips, a loop-through schedule, and a template for pre-dinner dish preparation if needed.



Role of the facilitator
In addition to materials, the guide outlines the facilitator's role, offering tips for both youth workers and young people. It encourages embracing unpredictability, not fearing silence, using the guide while experimenting, and using the tablecloth as a reference point for discussion.



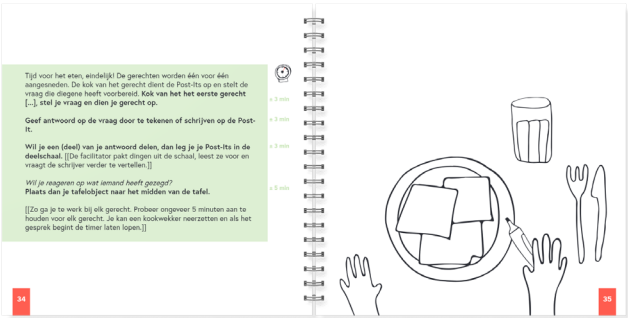
Instructions for use
To enhance readability, visual cues are provided and explained in advance: a kitchen timer marks the time for each task or question, arrows indicate when to switch facilitator roles, green boxes highlight the script, and red pages contain additional information.



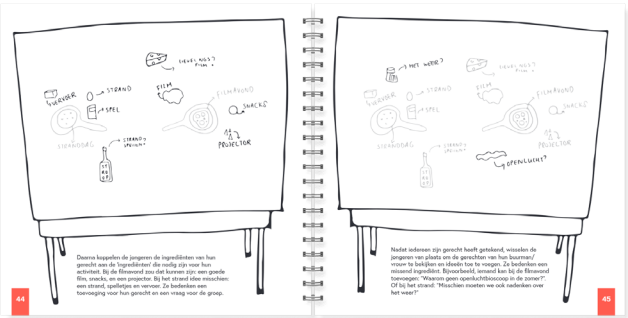
Storyboard
A visual walkthrough of the dinner highlights the key steps and structure. It clarifies the dinner's flow, and with experience, can serve as a quick reference for hosting without extensive preparation.

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6.2 DETAILS OF THE GUIDE



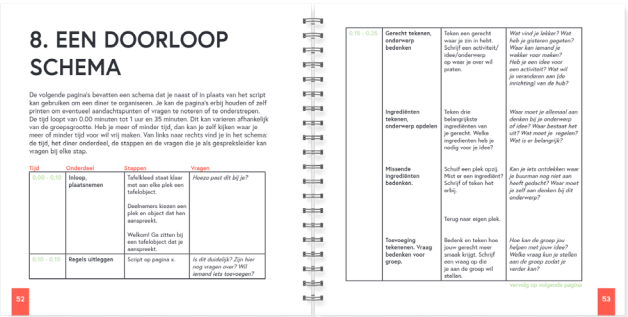
The script
The script is accompanied by sketch drawings that illustrate the steps described. Time is indicated in minutes, and different font styles like **bold**, *italics*, and cues in `[[brackets]]` highlight the facilitator's tasks.



An example
Building on the earlier visual walkthrough, this section offers a concrete example that shows how the method is applied in detail on the tablecloth. It illustrates how the table evolves over time, filled with drawings and ideas that capture the conversation and brainstorming process.



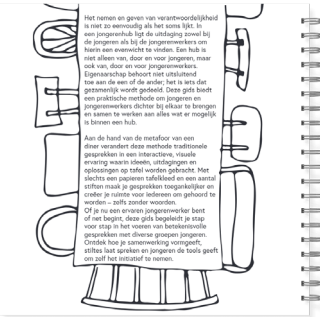
Focuspoints
After the script, the guide offers extra tips for the facilitator, encouraging reflection, role-switching with participants, active involvement. It also highlights how the results of the dinner should be put into action.



An overview
While the guide includes a script for each part of the dinner, the final pages provide an overview in a schematic format. From left to right it displays a timeline, shows the dinner section, facilitator tasks, and optional stimulating questions to ask during each task.



Extending the metaphor
The guide then explains the rationale behind using food and the structure of a dinner as metaphors for linking thoughts and ideas. It provides examples of how to extend this metaphor, encouraging both facilitators and participants to experiment further.

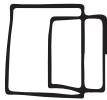


Summary
The back cover briefly outlines the context, method, and purpose of the guide. It emphasizes that in youth hubs, the focus is not on completely relinquishing control, but rather on sharing power through collaboration, which this method actively promotes.

6.3 ROLE OF THE CONCEPT IN YOUTH HUBS

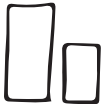
In this section, the challenges identified in the themes are revisited (see chapter 4). The question at hand is:

How does the proposal address the problems uncovered during the analysis?



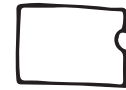
Participation is personal

Trust may not be something that can be directly designed for, as no material or interaction sequence can guarantee a strong bond between people. However, design can create opportunities for trust to develop through repetition. In this proposal, the aim is to establish a ritual that is not a one-time event, but something repeated regularly, potentially becoming part of the hub's routine. This ongoing practice can help build trust in the process itself, which may in turn foster trust among the people participating in it. The concept of a "safe space" is embedded in the method by utilizing a familiar setting, while "open and effective communication" is promoted through a structured sequence that encourages contribution and sharing.



Power play

A key challenge highlighted in the "Power Play" theme is the shift in responsibility from an accommodating role to that of a team player. Instead of merely organizing and leading activities, youth workers must learn to step back while still providing support. The guide is designed to be flexible, accommodating both youth workers and young participants as facilitators of the participation dinner, with the option to switch roles during the event. What is brought to the table belongs to the entire group, not just the team of youth workers. While this is the intention and design of the method, in practice, the youth worker may still end up playing a larger facilitative role. However, the method encourages alternative approaches to this dynamic. The age gap challenge is partially addressed, as everyone is free to contribute in their own way without being forced into a particular communication style.



Creative constraints

The theme of creative constraints revolved around three key limitations that both stimulated creativity and restricted youth workers' ability to freely experiment with participation forms. Due to rules and regulations, youth workers are often required to report impact through quantitative measures, leaving little room to showcase lived experiences or share meaningful stories. The participation method, however, provides a tangible way to demonstrate youth involvement. Regarding the constraint of limited funding, the method is well-suited as it requires minimal to no cost. Although it suggests specific materials, it can easily be adapted using resources already available at the hub. Lastly, while the space limitation isn't fully addressed, the method works without requiring a dedicated space—leveraging a common feature found in every hub: the table.



Hoping for light bulbs

The "Hoping for Light Bulbs" theme describes the attitude of youth workers who are open to youth ideas, eagerly encouraging them but often waiting for them to emerge. This approach tends to be reactive and creates little room for collaboration. The design proposal offers a more proactive setting that fosters the emergence of ideas at both the individual and group levels, making it easier for creative contributions to surface.



Frightening freedom

The IdeeDiner addresses the "Frightening Freedom" challenges by providing structure while empowering youth to take the lead. It helps ease the uncertainty of a "blank slate" by offering a step-by-step guide, making it easier for young people to navigate their newfound responsibilities. By fostering collaboration and shared ownership, the method clarifies roles and reduces confusion about who should take action. It also lessens performance anxiety by allowing participants to engage in multiple forms of communication, whether through drawing, writing, or speaking, creating a more relaxed and supportive environment.

6.3 ROLE OF THE CONCEPT IN YOUTH HUBS



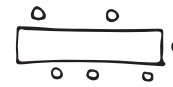
Geen woorden maar daden

The IdeeDiner design proposal addresses some of the challenges highlighted in the "geen woorden maar daden" theme by focusing on tangible actions. Instead of relying on formal (invisible) talk, the method invites young people to contribute actively and visibly, allowing them to see their ideas take shape in real-time through drawing or writing. This hands-on approach offers an alternative to the bureaucratic, abstract discussions that often alienate them. However, while the method promotes active participation, it may not fully overcome the deeper skepticism young people have toward certain institutions. Youth who are already disengaged or distrustful might still view this as another superficial exercise unless real, impactful changes result from their input. The proposal offers a valuable tool for bridging the gap, but without concrete follow-through and evidence of results, it risks being perceived as yet another initiative filled with promises but lacking in action.



One size does not fit all

The method encourages multiple communication styles—such as drawing, writing, and speaking—which accommodates different personalities and comfort levels, making it easier for everyone to contribute. This flexibility helps engage both quieter individuals and those more eager to take the lead. However, while the proposal offers tools to address diverse forms of expression, it may not fully resolve deeper challenges like age differences or balancing individual desires with group cohesion. A 10-year-old might struggle to contribute meaningfully alongside a 27-year-old, even with the variety of expression methods offered. Similarly, despite its inclusivity, the method doesn't completely address the practical tension youth workers face between personalization and efficiency. In some cases, a group-wide approach might still lead to certain individuals feeling overlooked or less engaged.



Tables of words

The IdeeDiner offers a creative alternative to the challenges mentioned in "tables of words" by allowing youth to contribute through drawing, writing, and movement, breaking away from rigid, adult-led discussions. However, youth workers probably still play a big role in guiding the process, which may reinforce existing imbalances. Additionally, it may not fully engage youth who prefer complete private, individual or even anonymous participation.



Wiping blind spots

The "Wiping Blind Spots" theme explores how youth workers currently try to understand and empathize with young people to organize appropriate activities. They build personal relationships, ask directly what youth want, and try to stay informed about current trends. However, empathy, conversation, and self-learning aren't always enough to grasp the full picture. The design proposal uses visual cues to deepen the dialogue, potentially revealing hidden perspectives. Still, young people may continue to adjust their responses based on what they think adults expect, which can limit the authenticity of their input.

A NEW APPROACH

6.4 ROLE OF THE CONCEPT IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

How does this method align with established models of participation found in the literature? What level of participation does it enable? In this section, I will briefly outline how the design proposal accommodates various levels of participation, referencing Hart's ladder of participation. Following that, I will look into the CLEAR model, which was also used as a categorization method during the analysis (see chapter 4). This model offers a more detailed examination of the conditions necessary for effective participation.

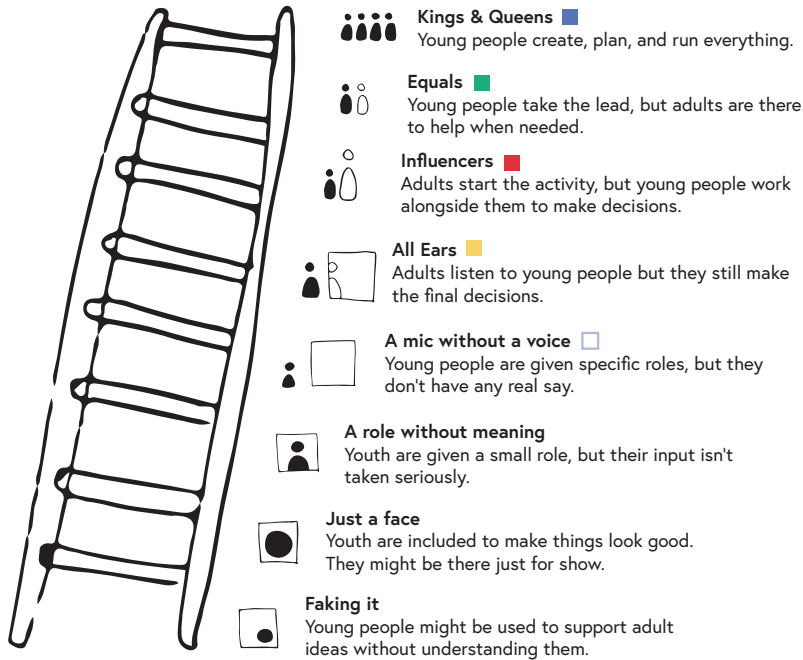


The difference

As mentioned previously, Hart's ladder of participation focuses on the levels of youth involvement, representing a hierarchy where participation increases as youth gain more control. It ranges from minimal influence to full leadership. In contrast, the CLEAR framework emphasizes the conditions needed for effective participation. So, while the ladder is about how much power participants have, the CLEAR model looks at creating the right environment to support and sustain participation.

Dinner on the ladder

Figure 23 illustrates the levels of involvement achievable with the proposed method. However, it is important to recognize that the actual level of participation depends on how the method is implemented and the extent to which young people actively contribute their "prepared dishes" to the process. Another significant, yet unpredictable, factor is whether the decisions and ideas generated through this method are carried out without youth involvement, for youth, or by youth themselves.



- If the method becomes part of the hubs routine.
- If the youth worker supports youth in facilitating the dinner.
- Likely the level at which the method works most effectively.
- If the outcomes are implemented, but based on the youthworker's decision.
- If the results from the method are not listened to or incorporated in the hubs programming

Figure 23. On what level of participation the method can operate

6.4 ROLE OF THE CONCEPT IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

The method encourages every young participant to bring a dish to the table (either in preparation or during the dinner), giving them full autonomy over what they want to discuss and ask the group. This ensures the method operates at least at the level of "All Ears." However, there may be instances where a participant either doesn't complete the preparation or, for example, feels too shy to share their ideas. In such cases, one participant might be engaging at the "Influencers" level of participation, while another operates at the "All Ears" level.

The guide is designed for the youth worker, but the script is deliberately written with the intention that even youth as young as 10 years old can use it to facilitate the dinner, either on their own or by rotating the role of facilitator. While the goal is to encourage participation at the "Influencers" and "Equals" levels, the extent to which this happens depends on the youth worker's willingness to allow for that initiative. The script in the guide helps youth workers feel more comfortable stepping back, making it easier for young participants who want to take on the facilitator role to do so confidently. By regularly implementing the method as part of a hub's program, youth are likely to occasionally become "Kings" and "Queens" through this design proposal. While the method isn't overly simple and may require some practice to master—and might not suit everyone—it represents a proactive effort to foster 'royal' engagement.

The clear framework

The CLEAR framework, introduced in Chapter X, focuses on the question: "What needs to be in place for citizens to participate?" (Lowndes et al., 2006, p. 6). CLEAR stands for Can do, Like to, Enabled to, Asked to, and Responded to. Although originally designed for adult participation, Fierloos et al. (2023) used the framework to outline the strategies of organizations that promote youth participation. In Chapter 4, I also employ it to categorize the strategies and challenges encountered in the context of youth hubs and participation. Below, I use the framework as an assessment tool to evaluate how effectively the design proposal creates the right conditions for youth participation in these hubs.



Can do

Do participants have the resources and knowledge to participate with the method?

Offering various forms of contribution ensures that more youth can participate effectively. While using the metaphor may take some getting used to, the provision of a script simplifies the role of the facilitator. It's important to recognize that not all children or youth may be able to read, which may limit their ability to occasionally take on a facilitating role. However, this does not prevent them from contributing as participants.



Like to

Do participants have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation?

The method transforms a formal setting into a more engaging experience—one that many participants can relate to. Making this connection can be enjoyable, and the structured approach helps participants know what to expect, easing them into the experience. Allowing them to scribble, draw, and move around the table instead of remaining seated adds an element of fun, making it something participants hopefully enjoy.



Enabled to

Does the method provide participants with the opportunity for participation?

The guide provides instructions and tips for youth workers, offering a practical approach to fostering participation. It serves as a resource that encourages youth workers to engage young people in youth hubs. Many hubs already host participatory gatherings around the table, creating an excellent opportunity to slightly adjust this format. For those hubs still seeking ways to invite young people to participate, the guide equips youth workers with suggestions for such activities.

6.4 ROLE OF THE CONCEPT IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION



Asked to

Does the method help in mobilizing young people to participate?

Depending on the youth worker, young people may be encouraged to participate using the method. However, the method itself has limited control over this. It can serve as a friendly invitation and a motivational tool to encourage participation.



Responded to

Does the method provide evidence that youth's views have been considered?

One form of 'evidence' provided by the method is the tangible nature of contributions. After participating, individuals can clearly see how and what they have contributed, as the facilitator must include each participant's "dish" in the menu, and the group is encouraged to address the prepared questions. This ensures that their views are definitely taken into account. The final step of the dinner involves creating a menu of actions that encourages participants and the facilitator to translate their discussions into future actions and accountability—specifying who will do what. The guide also provides tips for youth workers to reflect on the discussions using the method, enhancing their awareness of what has been prioritized or overlooked. However, the method in itself does not guarantee that actions will follow. Nonetheless, it aids memory through mnemonic techniques—like the use of metaphor—and drawing and writing, allowing the youth worker to regularly revisit what has or hasn't been implemented.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. How can the center of participatory meetings in youth hubs be transformed into a conversational piece that embraces multiple forms of expression?

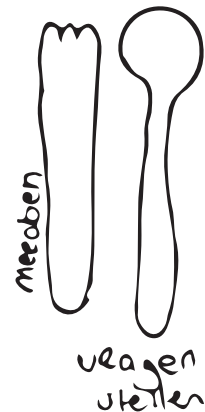
- The IdeeDiner (IdeaDinner) is an engagement method that utilizes the metaphor of food and dining, transforming the table into a collaborative canvas for preparing, discussing, and reflecting on ideas and topics.
- A guide has been created for the facilitator, along with a script that both youth and youth workers can read aloud to host the dinner. The script guides participants through the process of preparing a dish (the topic for discussion), setting the table (preparing for the discussion), and dining (engaging in dialogue and brainstorming).

2. What values does the design proposal bring to youth and youth workers?

- The proposal generates a visual representation of participation that aligns with the youth's desire for immediate results. By incorporating drawing, writing, and conversation, it allows for diverse forms of contribution, making participation more engaging. It also provides reference material to facilitate deeper discussions.

3. What is the role of the design proposal in youth hubs and in youth participation?

- The design proposal addresses all ten themes outlined in Chapter X, effectively tackling several challenges faced by youth hubs in their participatory efforts. Depending on its implementation, the proposal operates mainly at the "Influencers" level on Hart's ladder of participation. When evaluated alongside the CLEAR framework, it clearly engages with the C, L, and E components, while the A and R elements are largely influenced by the facilitator (i.e., youth worker).



7. EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT

7.1 EVALUATION METHODS

7.2 THE YOUTH WORKERS' PERSPECTIVE

7.3 THE YOUTHS' PERSPECTIVE

QUESTIONS & METHODS

The chapter explores the following questions:

- How does the design proposal create opportunities for collaboration between youth and youth workers in the design and programming of youth hubs?
- To what extent is the design proposal feasible and desirable and what are its implications in the long term?

The following methods were used to answer the abovementioned questions:

- Iterative tests and explorations with students (N = 4), youth at the central library of Rotterdam (N = 20), stakeholders of the project (i.e. civil servants, youth workers and key figures of youth hubs) (N = 12). The format and observations during the library session can be found in Appendix E. The set-up for the workshop with stakeholders is presented in Appendix F.
- Three evaluative interviews with participants of the workshop.

EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT 7.1 EVALUATION METHODS

Design iterations

This chapter presents insights from three evaluation activities: (1) a creative session at the central library in Rotterdam, (2) a workshop with stakeholders, and (3) evaluation interviews with workshop participants. These methods were not limited to the post-concept phase; instead, they were implemented at various stages, both before and after the final design concept was developed. Each experiment played a role in shaping the final design. Conclusions drawn from each experiment informed the evolving concept, with some issues being partially resolved in the final design. The library session and the stakeholder workshop were conducted prior to finalizing the concept, while the evaluative interviews took place during the finalization of the guide.

Creative session at the library

In an earlier phase of the concept, I visited the youth floor of the Rotterdam Central Library. This session took place in a youth-oriented area, where young passers-by were invited to join a large table covered in paper tablecloth. They were introduced to a scenario in which they were guests at the library's IdeeDiner, brainstorming improvements for the space and atmosphere. Participants were asked to draw table settings (plates, glasses, cutlery) and answer introductory questions about their personal experiences with the library (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Participants focussed during creative session at the library



EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT

7.1 EVALUATION METHODS

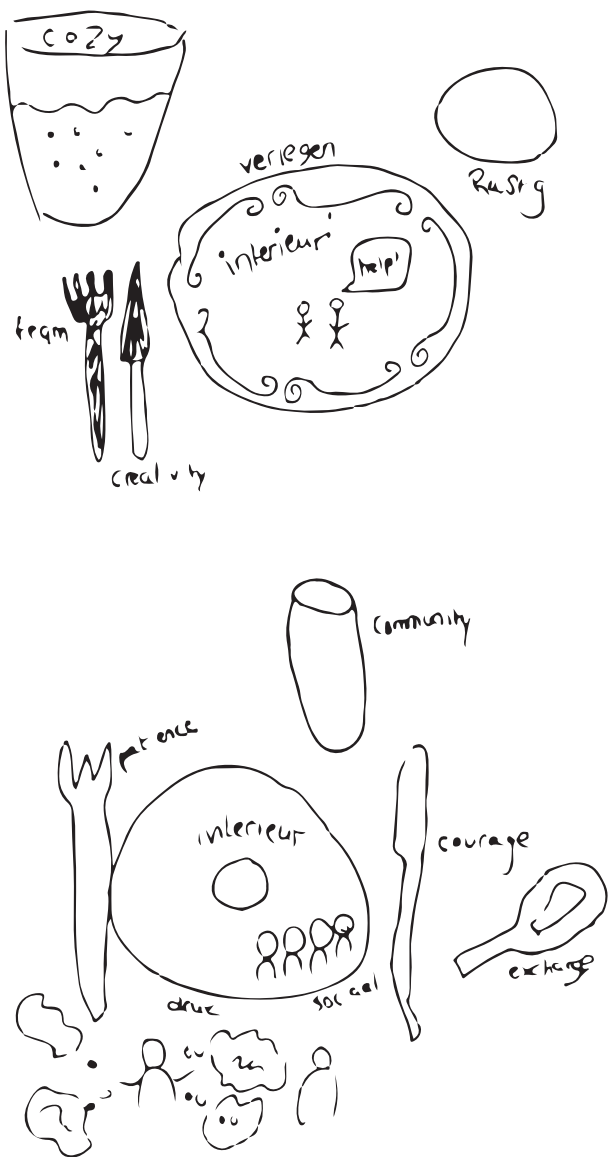


Figure 25. Two table settings drawn by participants during the library session

menu

het ideediner

iconisch bordje interieur

ingrediënten
de verdiepingen van het bibliotheek gebouw
de meubels van het bibliotheek gebouw
de kleuren in het bibliotheek gebouw
de inrichting van het bibliotheek gebouw

iets toe te voegen aan dit gerecht?

stoofpotje sfeer

ingrediënten
de bezoekers van de bibliotheek
de omgang tussen bezoekers van de bibliotheek
de omgang tussen werknemers en bezoekers van de bibliotheek
de uitstraling van de bibliotheek
de emoties van mensen in de bibliotheek

iets toe te voegen aan dit gerecht?

allegaartje activiteiten

ingrediënten
de informatie over activiteiten
de standaard activiteiten
partijen en evenementen

iets toe te voegen aan dit gerecht?

Figure 26. The menu of topics participants could choose from

A predefined menu (Figure 26) presented a variety of "dishes" representing topics or areas for improvement, which participants could select or add ingredients to. They then wrote their ideas about the chosen dish on Post-its, placing them on their drawn plates. Participants could either add their ideas to a central sharing bowl for group discussion or keep them on their plates.

In another scenario, participants were asked to imagine that they were hosting the IdeeDiner themselves and needed to set the table for all future guests. They drew plates for multiple participants and were prompted to consider what roles and attitudes would be essential for a successful dinner. Participants wrote their ideas on each plate and then answered which role they would personally fulfill. Results are visualized in Figures 25, 27 and 28.

EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT

7.1 EVALUATION METHODS



Figure 27. Table setting drawn by participant of library session

Main outcomes

- The metaphor is clear: the use of the dinner metaphor effectively communicates the purpose of the activity. Participants easily grasp the concept, making it easier for them to engage with the tasks at hand. The sequence of actions—such as setting the table, drawing, then writing—flows naturally. Participants find these steps intuitive, which helps maintain their engagement throughout the activity.
- Sparks curiosity: the format piques participants' interest. Participants are smiling and at times really focused. Participants appear to take their time with each task, indicating a level of comfort and immersion in the process. There is no sense of rushing through the activity; instead, participants seem to enjoy and entertain themselves throughout.
- Uncertainty about drawing skills: some participants express hesitancy about their drawing abilities. While this doesn't seem to hinder their participation significantly, it does require a ready response from the facilitator.
- Individual expression: each participant writes and draws in a unique way. They also interpret tasks differently. This diversity of expression both excites participants, but sometimes makes them insecure when comparing to their neighbors drawings and writings.

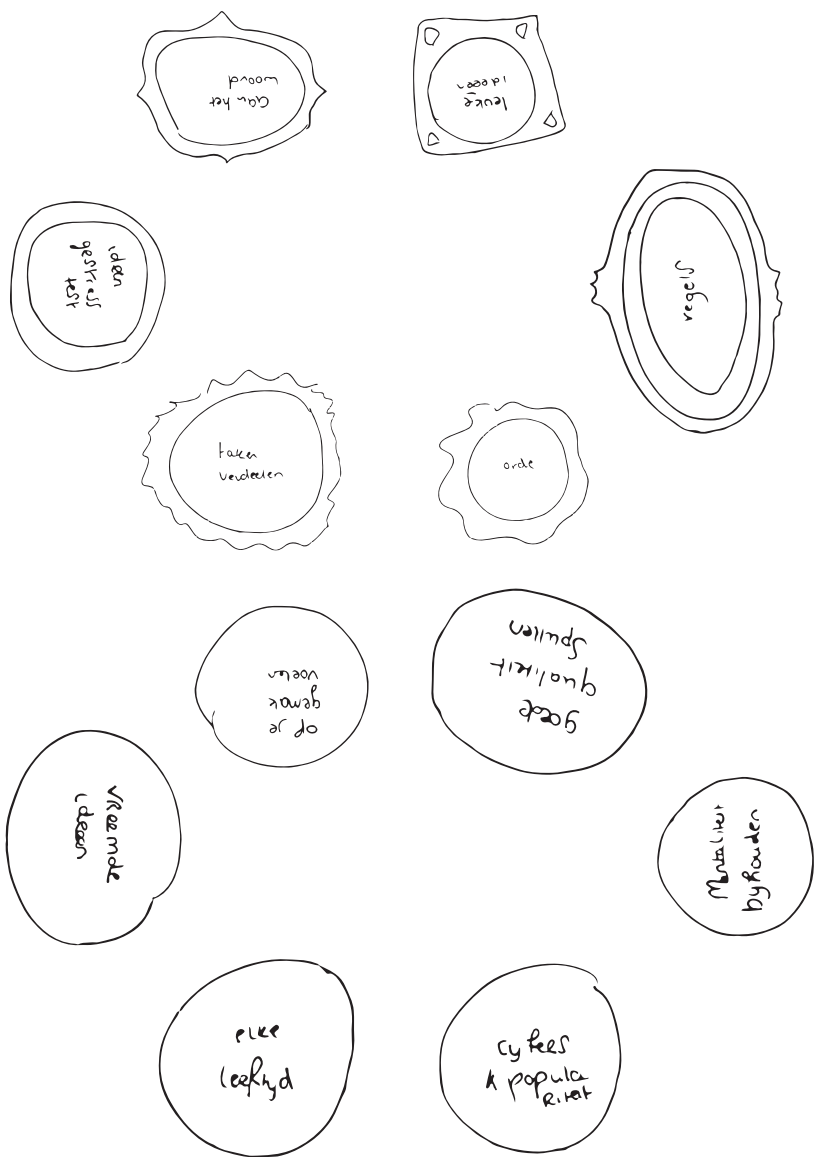


Figure 28. Results of library session part 2: identifying roles

"Do I draw here? Or here?.. Oh wait you are doing something totally different, haha!"

young participant of creative session at library

7.1 EVALUATION METHODS



Stakeholders I interviewed in the project's initial phase were invited to a collaborative session at the Healthy Start Hub. I set up the table with a large paper tablecloth and placed a distinctive table object at each seat (Figure 30). Under each object, I wrote a role, such as "the enthusiast" or "the creative one," symbolizing positive attitudes participants could adopt for the session. Participants chose a seat by selecting the object that resonated with them. Similar to the library session, they began by drawing a table setting and answering introductory questions about themselves and their perspectives on youth participation.

Once they had drawn their cutlery, participants removed their object and shared two ways (knife and fork) in which they would embody the role written beneath it. Instead of selecting a topic from a menu, I presented my research insights (the frames identified in chapter 4.2) alongside a specific question, which participants answered on Post-its. These responses could be shared in a central sharing bowl or kept on their plates, after which I, as the facilitator, read them aloud to prompt further discussion. Participants used their table objects to signal when they wanted to contribute. After discussing all insights and questions by making use of the method, we reflected on the method itself. Results are visualized in Figures 29 and 31.

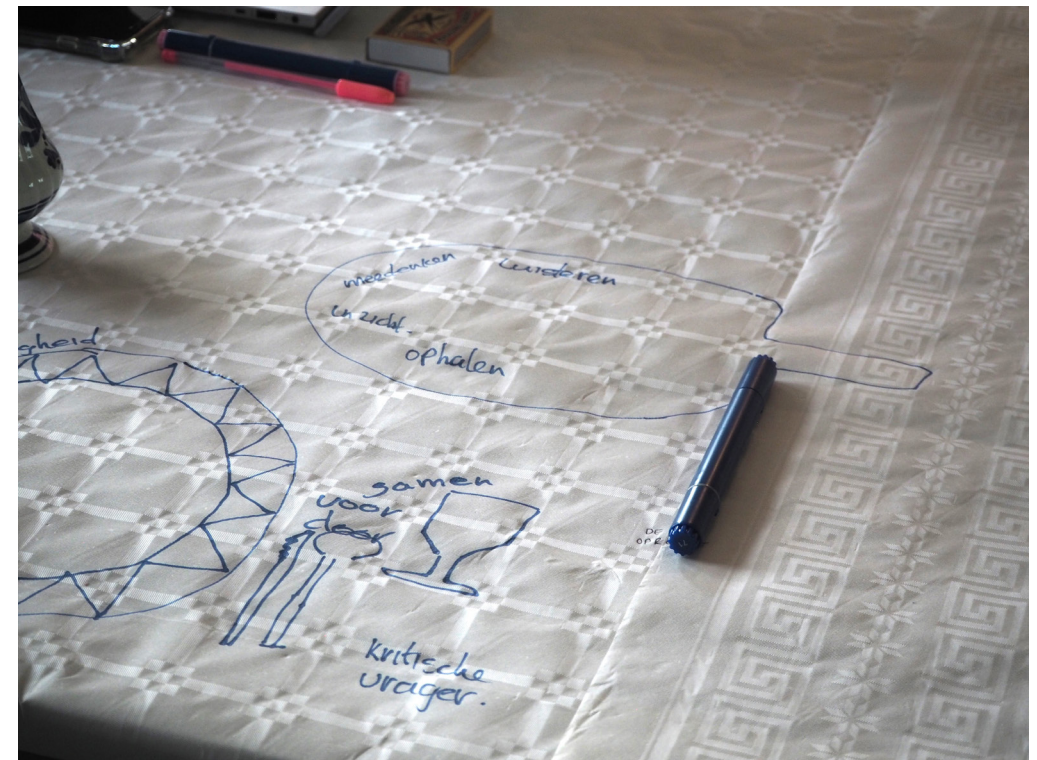


Figure 30. Pictures of workshop. 1) tableobject, 2) tablesetting drawn by participant

EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT

7.1 EVALUATION METHODS

Main outcomes

- Limited interaction among participants: there was less interaction between participants than anticipated. While some group discussions did occur, much of the engagement consisted of one-on-one conversations with the facilitator (me). Therefore, the facilitator's role is crucial. My role as the facilitator proved to be central to guiding the workshop. I often found myself steering conversations and prompting participants to engage more deeply. This highlights the importance of a facilitator in not only managing the flow of the session but also in fostering an environment where participants feel comfortable interacting with each other.
- Occasional ambiguity: at times, the workshop seemed to lack clarity regarding its goals and direction. Some participants expressed uncertainty about the purpose of certain activities, which occasionally made the process feel abstract. This points to the need for explicit communication of objectives to ensure that participants understand the intended outcomes.
- Conscious participation: participants were very mindful of their level of engagement, carefully choosing when to share or withhold their input.
- Increasing comfort over time: as more ideas and contributions accumulated on the tablecloth, participants seemed to feel progressively more comfortable adding their own input. This indicates that a visible record of shared thoughts can help create a sense of collective ownership and encourage further participation.
- Lack of a wrap-up: the workshop lacked a proper conclusion or wrap-up, leaving some participants uncertain about the final outcomes. A structured wrap-up is essential to consolidate key takeaways, provide closure, and reinforce the purpose of the workshop, ensuring participants leave with a clear understanding of what was achieved.

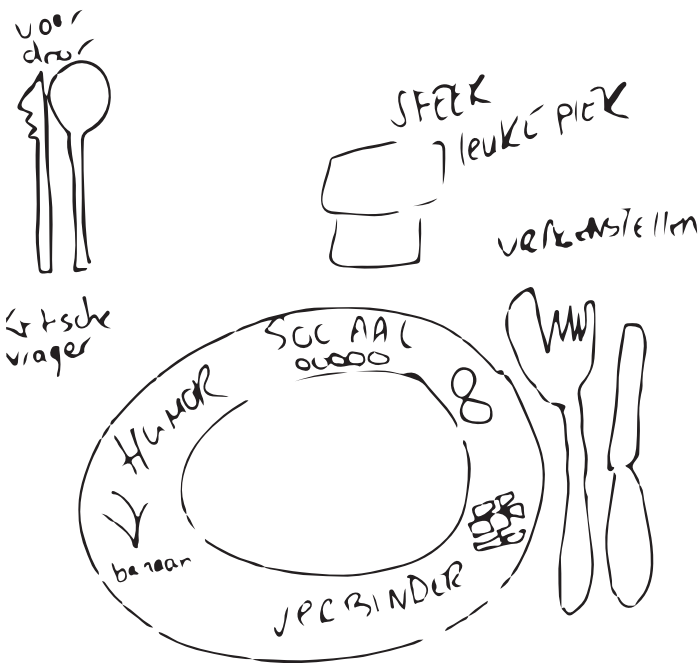


Figure 31. Table setting by participant of workshop

"I sometimes missed doing things together."

Civil servant

"At times I forgot the point of some things you were asking us to do. I found it a bit abstract at times. Maybe some people do understand, but..."

Civil servant

"It was inviting and very surprising."

Project lead youth hubs

"I liked that I could just draw and write down whatever I felt like. Made me think outside of the box."

Key figure

EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT

7.2 THE YOUTH WORKERS PERSPECTIVE

"While there are many plans for participatory activities in the hubs, only a few are actually up and running."

Civil servant

Value of method for youth workers in the design and programming of youth hubs

The method offers a flexible framework for encouraging participation in youth hubs, allowing youth workers to engage young people without pushing them into unfamiliar roles. It creates a space for experimentation, helping youth workers make participation tangible by bringing ideas and thoughts to the table. By demonstrating that everyone thinks and creates differently, the method fosters an environment where ideas can emerge and be collectively discussed. However, its success still relies heavily on the proactive engagement of youth workers to ensure that these ideas are implemented.

"A step-by-step plan is helpful; it doesn't need to be too detailed so you can respond to the situation. You don't want it to be too rigid—just enough to follow the main points. Since it's easy to remember the steps of a dinner, everything flows logically, so you don't really need a strict script."

Youth worker

Ability to work with the method from the youth workers perspective

The experiments show that the method relies heavily on the skills of the facilitator, typically the youth worker. The openness and creativity of the facilitator significantly influence how the method is executed. For example, if there is limited interaction between participants, it is up to the facilitator to get the conversation going again. The tablecloth here functions nicely as reference material, but if the facilitator lacks experience with the method it would remain

a challenge to keep the conversation going. Although the method provides a clear structure, its effectiveness and reception depend largely on the willingness and engagement of the participants. Youth workers and other participants in the workshop were optimistic that young people would enjoy the method, though some expressed concerns about engaging youth who struggle to sit still. The method also requires practice, which may be challenging for some youth workers who prefer immediate results. However, both the experiments and reflective interviews indicated that youth workers appreciate the flexibility to adapt the method to suit their needs.

"You could also do a train-the-trainer session—that's what I would do. There are plenty of things I'd like to discuss with my team using this method. Killing two birds with one stone! Because we'd be practicing the method together while also holding a meeting."

"I would love to see how over time different hubs would use the method in their own unique ways. Maybe you can do an after study?"

Youth worker

Implications for youth workers of the method in the long term

Participants were eager to try the method not only within youth hubs but also with their own teams. They recognized its potential to become part of the regular routine at youth hubs and were curious about how the method could evolve uniquely at different locations over time. While they acknowledged that it might take some time for everyone to get used to it, they believed that eventually, youth might take the lead using the guide. This suggests the possibility for youth workers to step back, transitioning from being the primary facilitator and motivator to becoming more of an equal participant in the process.

7.3 THE YOUTHS PERSPECTIVE

"When I sat down, I thought, 'Ooh, what's going to happen?' especially since it was so different from any meetings or activities I'd experienced before."

participant of workshop

"I can imagine that the more you try this the more creative you can get."

participant of workshop

Value of method for youth in the design and programming of youth hubs

The experiments in the library and workshop revealed youths' curiosity and engagement with the method. The new approach encourages them to think differently and experiment with their ideas. While drawing initially felt intimidating for some, it ultimately helped them better shape and articulate their thoughts on various topics. Youth participants noted that the method fostered creative thinking, though they occasionally felt it lacked a clearly defined goal.

"I had to draw and talk at the same time, which sometimes made me lose focus. But it felt creative, and I had to just let go at times."

participant of workshop

Ability to work with the method from the youth's perspective

The method proved to be well-suited to the knowledge and skills of younger participants. A range of ages took part in both the library session and the workshop, and no one found the activities too challenging or too childish. While some participants were initially concerned about their drawing abilities and shyness, the option to contribute through writing and drawing on the tablecloth, rather than speaking, helped ease these concerns. However, they still emphasized the importance of the facilitator in encouraging more active participation and engagement.

Implications for youth of the method in the long term

As time progressed and more ideas were added to the table, participants found it easier and more enjoyable, suggesting that the method could become more fruitful with time and experience. If youth regularly engage with the method, their level of participation is likely to grow, though their initial curiosity may diminish. On the other hand, new participants may require more encouragement but are likely to remain engaged due to the novelty of the approach. This balance indicates the method's potential for sustained use, with both experienced and new participants benefiting in different ways.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. How does the design proposal create opportunities for the collaboration between youth and youth workers in the design and programming of youth hubs?

- The evaluative interviews revealed that stakeholders can see the design proposal being used and adapted in the context of youth hubs but also beyond.
- During the explorations in the library and the workshop the metaphor demonstrates to be helpful in guiding participants in developing ideas or topics of discussion. Participants show focus and enjoyment.

2. To what extent is the design proposal desirable, feasible and what are its possible implications in the long term?

- The method provides youth workers with a flexible framework to encourage participation in youth hubs, fostering an experimental space for collaboration. However, its success heavily depends on the proactive engagement and facilitation skills of the youth workers.
- The approach promotes curiosity and creative thinking among youth, allowing them to express ideas in a less structured environment. While some youth felt uncertain about their drawing skills, the method ultimately empowered them to articulate their thoughts and engage in meaningful discussions.
- Both youth and youth workers see the method as having the potential to become a regular practice within youth hubs. With consistent use, youth workers can transition from being primary facilitators to equal participants, while youth can gain confidence in leading discussions and contributing creatively.



8. CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

8.1 FINAL CONCLUSION

8.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

8.3 PERSONAL REFLECTION

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

FINAL CONCLUSION

The goal

This project explored new ways to foster participation within youth hubs in Rotterdam. Youth hubs are often presented as spaces designed for and by youth, but in practice, this transfer of responsibility can be overwhelming for young people and challenging for youth workers, who may struggle to relinquish control. The method developed in this project emphasizes collaboration between youth and youth workers, rather than placing full ownership on either group. Through iterative testing involving youth, youth workers, and other key stakeholders it developed a participatory approach that creates an encouraging environment for youth to contribute their ideas and perspectives.

The Ideediner (or idea dinner) is a method outlined in a guide that enables both youth and youth workers to host a dinner where ideas and thoughts on the youth hub are brought to the table in the form of dishes. It uses the metaphor of dining, where dishes are prepared, missing ingredients are added, the table is set, and the meal is shared and enjoyed together by drawing on a paper tablecloth. The new approach incites youth workers to collaborate and brainstorm with young people at the hubs, enabling them to co-create and design the programming and shared space, promoting a sense of shared ownership.

Value of the concept

Testing and conversations with youth throughout the project revealed their desire to express themselves in various ways. Contributing shouldn't always require raising one's voice. Experiments with prototypes showed that the method supports multiple forms of expression, enabling youth to contribute without necessarily relying on words. The Ideediner leverages an existing setting in youth hubs—the table—but instead of framing participation as a formal meeting, it integrates it into the more informal, enjoyable activities of the hub, making it more accessible. The method encourages visible contributions during conversations or brainstorming sessions about future activities and provides visible evidence that everyone is participating (in contrast to the otherwise fleeting words used during traditional meeting settings). Throughout the Ideediner, participants are prompted not only to share their own ideas but also to build on

others' and engage in collaborative thinking. The visibility of ideas and thoughts on the tablecloth allows the facilitator (youth worker) to connect more deeply with the young people, gaining valuable insights into their needs and desires. The tablecloth serves as both a reference point for deeper discussions and a reflective tool, helping youth workers better understand the aspirations of the youth for the hub.

Limitations of the concept

The concept of the Ideediner still faces several challenges. Its success largely depends on the facilitator's skill, meaning that strong facilitation abilities or repeated practice with the method are necessary. Another limitation is the uncertainty of how the results from the Ideediner will actually be incorporated in the hub's programming and design. There is a risk of tokenism—creating space for idea development but not following through with those ideas. Although the guide encourages facilitators to consider how to implement ideas, it doesn't guarantee that this will happen. Additionally, further research should be conducted on the readability of the facilitator's guide, and more testing should take place within the actual context of youth hubs.

Value of the project

Throughout this project, I encountered many of the same challenges that youth workers and civil servants face when trying to involve youth. It requires patience, experimentation, and, most importantly, a bold and open mindset. A single design or method won't instantly solve the complexities of youth participation. However, I hope this project brings us one step closer to genuinely inviting youth to the table and experimenting with how that process unfolds. Rotterdam, "de stad van doeners en durfalls (the city of doers and risk-takers)", feels like the perfect environment to foster this mindset. Through the Ideediner, I aim to inspire experimentation and move beyond simply asking youth what they want. By regularly using and adapting the method, it can evolve into a routine that helps youth workers better connect with young people, allowing them to express their desires and ideas for shaping a small part of the city they call home.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines key recommendations for refining and expanding the method. It emphasizes the need to strengthen the role of the facilitator, conduct tests in youth hubs and improve the guide's accessibility. Additionally, it suggests conducting further design research to explore how the method can lead to actionable steps in the design and programming of youth hubs, as well as ways to enhance youth ownership of the process. Recommendations also include adapting the method for different group sizes and examining its potential for application beyond youth hubs.

Train the trainer

Since the success of the method relies heavily on the facilitator's skills, particularly those of the youth worker, further research is needed to explore how these skills can be effectively developed. A dedicated training program could be designed to guide facilitators through practicing the method, offering feedback on their approach. Additional tests should also be conducted to assess whether the current guide provides adequate support for facilitators. This could help identify areas where the script, tips, or visuals lack clarity or need more detailed instructions to ensure the method is carried out effectively.

Test in the actual context and over time

The current method and its guide are based on interviews, literature reviews, iterative testing, and a creative workshop. However, the guide and method have not yet been tested in actual youth hubs. A key recommendation is to pilot the method in real-world settings, ideally over several months, engaging youth with the method at least every two weeks. This would offer valuable feedback for refining the method and provide stronger evidence of its desirability, feasibility, and viability. The youth consulted during this project were often already engaged in youth participation, such as students, municipal interns, or active members of youth hubs. While the library experiment and street conversations included youth unconnected to the project, they were likely not regular visitors of youth hubs. To ensure the method is relevant to its actual target group, it's important to involve less active or less engaged members of youth hubs in future testing.

Readability and accessibility of the guide

The guide, along with its steps and instructions, was developed throughout the project, but its actual verbal and visual contents were only reviewed through three interviews with participants from the co-creation workshop. While feedback from those conversations has been incorporated, the finalized version has not been tested for readability and accessibility. Organizing a read-through session or conducting tests in real contexts, followed by a reflective discussion, would be valuable in refining and improving the guide.

The next steps, from the table to the world

The method aims to foster a creative environment where both youth and youth workers can generate ideas and share their thoughts about youth hubs. It's about collaboration, self-expression in ways that feel natural to each individual, and experimenting with what works in youth hub participation. While the method provides an overview of what youth want and need in the design and programming of these spaces, it doesn't guarantee that their ideas will be implemented. Further research is needed to explore how both youth and youth workers can turn these ideas into action and how a sense of accountability can be developed.

Ownership of method by youth

The guide is primarily intended for youth workers, though the script used in the Ideediner is designed so that youth can also take on the role of facilitator. However, this aspect could be further refined. As one participant noted, "Ideally, there would be two guides: one for youth and one for youth workers." I deliberately created a single guide to avoid reinforcing a power dynamic between younger and older users, but this approach may still fall short in fostering youth ownership. A separate guide or workbook tailored to youth could be developed, or the method could be tested multiple times with young people to adapt the instructions to better suit their needs.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

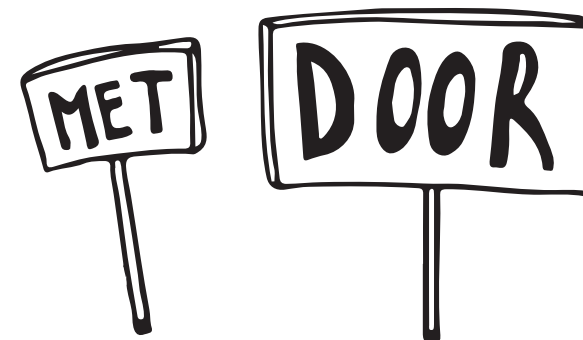
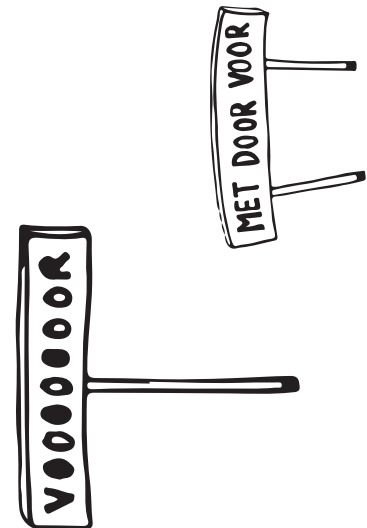
RECOMMENDATIONS

Group size options

A final practical improvement would be to further explore how the method functions across different group sizes. It would be beneficial to experiment with how the method can be adapted for both smaller and larger groups. The library test involved just one to two participants, while the workshop included over ten people, but the library used a low-fidelity prototype, and the workshop participants were not the actual target group. Testing the method's adaptability with various group sizes should be incorporated into the instruction guide, offering modifications based on the number of participants.

Beyond the scope of this project

Reflecting on the method with stakeholders both during and after the workshop, several expressed interest in trying it out in their own "adult" meetings. At the library, the floor manager even mentioned the possibility of using the method within the library setting. During the workshop, with over eight attendees aged 30 and above, I was surprised by their enthusiasm and engagement, as I had assumed they might find the method too childish for themselves. However, the opposite was true—they appreciated the process, enjoying the visual expression and the use of metaphors to guide their thinking. This suggests that the method could be valuable in other settings beyond youth hubs. It would be worth exploring how it could be adapted for different contexts or developing a more neutral guide that can be applied to various settings.



CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Participation for participation

I strongly believe that many designers, myself included, don't know enough about the worlds we design for. As students, we're encouraged to engage with the target group, at the very least by interviewing them to identify their needs and wants. However, I've always been somewhat critical about the level of this engagement—is the audience truly involved, or is it just a box to check off? The same kind of skepticism exists in the field of youth participation, are youth involved to make other people look good or are they actually listened too? The parallels between (social/participatory) design and youth participation were interesting to compare. I saw myself reflected in the words of many youth workers and civil servants, where efficiency and deeper engagement with the target group often seem to be at odds with each other. I used participatory design methods to design for participation. Although here I could clearly see the added value of the experimental and hands-on attitude and methods of design, I too sometimes faced challenges in reaching out and involving youth.

Reaching out to stakeholders is generally easier. They share an interest in the design topic, often use the same vocabulary, and have a clearer understanding of a designer's role. Additionally, they are compensated for engaging with researchers and designers in their field. In contrast, the target group for this project—young people—are simply living their lives. They don't have LinkedIn profiles or company affiliations that you can research. They aren't being paid to engage in conversation with you. Engaging with youth can be unpredictable, and that uncertainty is often viewed alongside inefficiency. I think we should shift our perspective on uncertainty and inefficiency to see them as opportunities for discovery. Embracing inefficiency might actually be the most efficient thing to do.

How we communicate and connect

In the end, I think what fascinates me most in the world is words, language, and the way people communicate. These phenomena interest me both as a person but also as a designer. To me it's remarkable how, without altering the physical world, we can simplify or complicate things just through conversation. This unraveling—or at times, complicating—of ideas or concepts allows us to see things differently and feel relief, disappointment, or wonder.

'Giving form' to conversation might seem mundane, and adding design or objects to facilitate communication can sometimes feel unnecessary. What's the value of language if it can't stand on its own? But as humans, we just like (and need) to talk about *things*. We use symbols and metaphors to express what words alone can't convey. We bring in visuals and physical objects to organize our thoughts, helping others either understand or question them.

I just want to understand people and I want people to understand people and I think design can help in this pursuit. It grounds abstract ideas in the real world, allowing complexity to be discussed rather than dismissed. Design provides a opportunities for grasping otherwise fleeting concepts. While the complexity may remain and might not be 'solved', design enables meaningful conversations about that complexity. Ultimately, we seek connection with each other, and it thrills me to have participated in this effort throughout this project.

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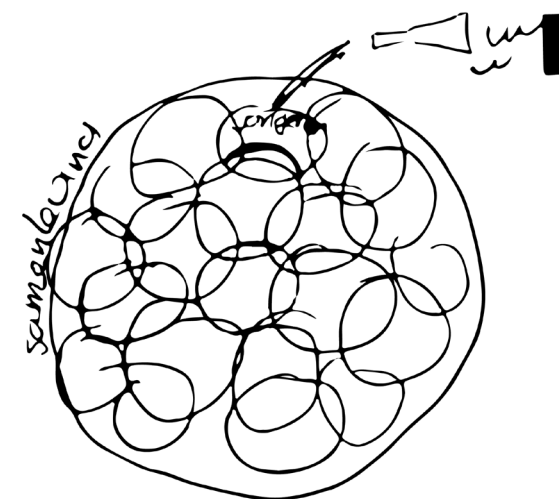
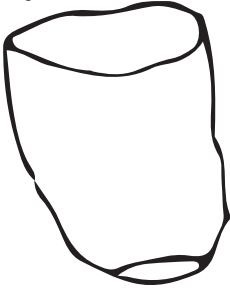


Figure 32. Drawing of participant during workshop. Describing what participation means and looks like to her.

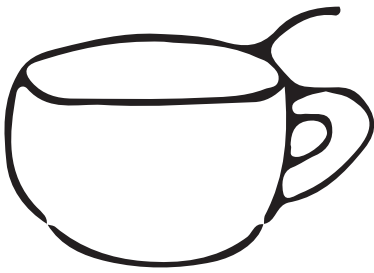
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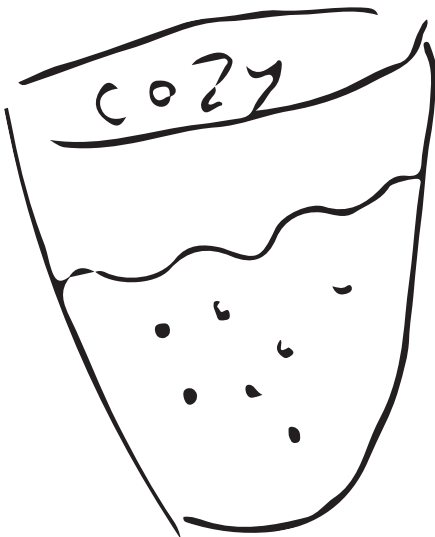
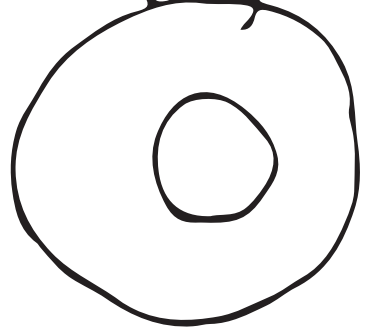
CREAT'EF 24ⁿ



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Velly



community