

Drama Lab Toolkit

How theatre helps to have conversations about the future of the city



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A Drama Lab, what is it?

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- A new form of conversation about the future of cities, designed in collaboration with theatre makers and researchers.
- First step: extensive interviews with local residents, entrepreneurs and officials and attending meetings about the area in question.
- Second step: use the results of this research as inspiration for designing interactive, theatrical exercises in collaboration with researchers and theatre makers.
- Third step: invite local residents, entrepreneurs, and civil servants to the Drama Lab, where they jointly engage in conversations based on these exercises.
- The Drama Lab is not a theatre play, not standard research, and not a classic participation meeting: it operates at the intersection of these fields, creating something new.
- The Drama Lab is based on a number of principles:
 - o We do not avoid conflict, we approach it in a respectful manner. We want to find out where the tension lies!
 - o In addition to intellectually articulating and understanding your own role and that of others, the sensory and physical experience of face-to-face collaboration adds an important dimension to the understanding of a potentially conflictual situation.
 - o The positions you take are never fixed but context dependent. Changes in the context can also lead to changes in roles.

About the Drama Lab

Background

The concept of the Drama Lab was developed within the CONTRA research project, which stands for 'Conflict in Transformations'. Our research focuses on conflicts related to space and, in particular, climate policy in cities: a theme in which major transformations are underway. Many municipalities consider it important to involve citizens and other stakeholders, such as entrepreneurs and residents, in decisions about the future of their living environment. The criticism of such participation processes is that differences of opinion or competing interests are not given a proper place, and there is often a tendency to seek harmony and like-mindedness. This can allow conflicts to simmer in the background, with inhibiting or escalating consequences. As researchers within CONTRA, we have joined forces with theatre makers to look for a new form of participation. We ask how methods from theatre can help us have better conversations about conflicts in the city.

CONTRA has organized Drama Labs in four European cities: Drammen in Norway; Genk in Belgium, Gdynia in Poland, and Tilburg in the Netherlands. In each of these cities, researchers from universities worked together with theatre makers and the municipalities on the Drama Lab. In each city, a complicated case was presented in which climate policy had to be given a place in the city or played a role in how an area should be redesigned. After choosing a specific urban case, the first phase began: the research through interviews involving as many people as possible and attending meetings and activities in the surrounding areas. After this, the results of the research were incorporated into the design of

theatrical participation exercises. Finally, this came together in the enactment of the Drama Lab with local residents, civil servants, and entrepreneurs as participants.

Why Drama Labs?

Major issues such as climate change create a need for structural, transformative solutions/changes/policies, but, at the same time, such 'solutions' are met with polarization and resistance. Research shows that such resistance is often dealt with by seeking consensus and agreement. However, overly forced consensus often works like a plaster on an open wound, worsening conflicts. By immediately seeking agreement, dissenting voices are silenced and people's concerns are not heard. These concerns are subsequently overlooked in policy making.

Within CONTRA, we are looking for ways in which participation processes and conversations about the future of the city can be designed in a way that leaves room for conflict—but without escalation. Drama Labs try to do this by using theatre techniques to shape conversations. Our choice to use theatre has several reasons. Firstly, theatre gives you the opportunity to take on roles that are not available in everyday life, so that you can better empathize with others. Secondly, theatre can create a playful setting that invites free expression, allowing participants to feel freer than in regular participation meetings. Thirdly, theatre allows the more modes of communication rather than just the spoken word, for example through music, physical motion, images, or silence. This allows both arguments and feelings to be expressed in a different way.

By experimenting with theatre and having conversations in a different way, we believe that participation processes can become more inclusive, with more room for unheard voices, such as those of the city's minority groups, future generations, or even of plants and insects; what would they say if they could talk? By working with theatre we can allow 'conversations' to take place with these groups.

What can Drama Labs do?

- Make participants think.
- Invite participants to consider perspectives that they would normally not have on a particular issue.
- Surprise, stimulate; and challenge.
- Visualize potential future prospects.
- Enable embodied learning.

What do municipalities gain from Drama Labs?

Through Drama Labs, municipalities can organize participation processes that are based on imagination, stimulation, challenge, surprise, and the possibility to adopt different perspectives. In this way, more citizens and other stakeholders can be involved in decision-making. Ideally, Drama Labs ensure that there is less commotion following a decision because difficult conversations have already been held in advance, and participants have already gotten to know each other and delved into their working methods, concerns, and wishes. The Drama Lab is an encounter in which all parties are invited to reflect and, above all, to experience. That this occasionally leads to friction is not a problem because the

Drama Lab actually opens up space for friction to surface and becomes the subject of the conversation.

Art is essential

The Drama Lab is based on methods developed in artistic practice. Characteristically, such methods are socially committed, dialogical, relational, and participatory. The aim is to facilitate an open and exploratory process amongst different groups in society in which they learn to understand each other's positions without necessarily having to agree.

Art can provide a platform that is both a safe and playful way to bring each other together regardless of roles, age, and social class. This contrasts with the traditional forms of citizen participation that are usually offered when it comes to urban development. In traditional participation processes, there is often a lot at stake and people have the feeling that they have a lot to lose. Participants feel obliged to hold on to their positions for fear of appearing weak or superficial. In such a setting where the battle of interests is paramount, those who express themselves well verbally and are used to substantiating their positions with 'rational arguments' feel at ease. Artistic practices can allow disagreements, debates, and discussions to be conducted in a completely different way. Art offers room for self-expression and communication that goes beyond the exchange of objective arguments. It offers opportunities to share sensory and physical experiences, everyday observations, and emotions. In this way, connections can be made that otherwise could not be made and sides of the story are highlighted that would otherwise not receive attention. Theatre is also about being able to take on different roles, and it trains the imagination to perceive the world from perspectives that are different from one's own. This is important when facilitating dialogue on spatial issues.

In the Drama Lab, citizens and civil servants are not limited to their predefined roles. This allows for emotions, perspectives, and opinions that a transformation process such as that of the living environment entails. It does make the Drama Lab complex. It was in actual fact, created to seek out this complexity. Instead of insisting on consensus, a stage for differences of opinion is erected to be played out. This does mean that certain artistic expertise is needed to properly implement a Drama Lab.

Expertise

The Drama Lab offers a different platform than the usual participation meeting. Through art, a situation is staged, creating an alternative reality. This is necessary to enable the participants to adopt perspectives that are not necessarily their own, but also to dare to bring their own perspectives to the fore in the performance. This requires expertise that is available in the art world. It is crucial to work with people who have professional expertise in the performing arts, such as scenography, dramaturgy, and acting.

The guides required for the lab are trained actors with specific expertise in dialogue and participant-based theatre. A Drama Lab without the input of artists will not be a Drama Lab but a participation process inspired by the Drama Lab. It can be compared to organizing a concert with artists who can read sheet music but cannot play an instrument. The musical quality of a concert depends on the expertise required to play an instrument and the quality of the Drama Lab depends on the performance of the guides and their theatrical experience. The quality of the Drama Lab will be disappointing without this specific expertise.

Rules for guides

The guide is perhaps the most crucial element of the Drama Lab. The guide is responsible for guiding participants through the exercises and conversations. The responsibility of guides to ensure that participants feel safe and want to share is great because the Drama Lab requires a high degree of interaction amongst participants and offers them a lot of freedom. On the other hand, guides must also ensure that conversations remain relevant and 'on topic.'

As mentioned above, it is important to involve professional expertise in the Drama Lab, and that includes making sure guides are well-trained, preferably professional theatre makers and actors.

Below we have compiled seven key guidelines in this regard.

Guide-lines

1. Create a safe environment.

- a. All participants must be welcomed and taken care of when they enter the room.
- b. Help the participants get into the swing of things. Start by letting them speak in a smaller setting where they are not in the spotlight.
- c. Never put the spotlight on your participants. In addition, assure participants that they will never be put into a situation where they are in the spotlight and have to speak in front of everyone unless they want to.
- d. What happens to one participant happens to all participants. The participants function almost as a collective 'we,' and they will easily put themselves in the shoes of other participants. Therefore, all participants will easily feel that what you do with/to one participant is also happening to them.
- e. The power of the name: Knowing someone's name relaxes people; it makes them feel seen, and they get closer to each other. If you remember someone's name, all participants will feel like they have a closer connection. Remembering someone's name is a trick to bring the group closer together, creating a relaxed, familiar atmosphere.
- f. Set clear time frames and adhere to them. Do not let things go beyond their allotted time - it violates the contract with the participants regarding the time they have set aside for this.
- g. Have clear guidelines/rules of the game, so that participants are never in doubt about what is going on and what is going to happen next.
- h. Make sure participants always have the possibility to simply observe without having to actively participate.
- i. Address the participants as individuals rather than in terms of their societal roles: the participants are there only as themselves and not as representatives of a predefined group (e.g., as the architect, the developer, or the municipality).
- j. Make it very clear that this is a 'game,' where people are welcome to take on/explore perspectives and roles that are not their own. This must be

repeated throughout the lab so that participants can always rest assured that everyone understands that this is a game. At the same time, indicate the game's value. The game is necessary in order for the Drama Lab to achieve its full potential.

2. Trust in the guide's dramaturgical power

- a. The guides control the lab, ensure progression, and guide the participants safely through the planned programme.
- b. The guides make sure that the conversation feels relevant to everyone, while ensuring that all participants can say what is on their minds.
- c. The guides take care of the rhythm, dynamics, and tempo in the lab. For example, if the lab is slow and dragging on, the guide must offer something that picks up the pace and mood.
- d. The guides nudge the participants but do not push them.
- e. Never allow the progression of the lab to depend on the participants. By listening to the room, the guides decide when it is time to move on to the next part of the programme, not the actions of the participants.
- f. Try to avoid giving all the attention to those who demand it. As a guide, you can allow those who are not usually heard and seen participate without putting them in the spotlight.

3. Get an overview and try to hyperfocus at the same time

- a. The guide's primary task is to listen to what is happening in the room.
- b. If you have started something with a participant, it must be completed and returned to at a different time. Do not forget about your participants. Only start discussions with certain participants about threads and ideas that you can remember to return to and draw conclusions from.
- c. All participants should always be busy. It is your task as a guide to have an overview.
- d. Value disagreement and different perspectives: here is a disagreement and that is exactly what we want!
- e. Steer clear of solutions: Steer clear of concrete proposals about what should actually happen in this area because then the discussion will revolve around solutions rather than the general line of conflict, such as preservation vs. demolition. Then you can say: we don't know what's going to happen, we are now talking about preservation or demolition.

4. Drama Lab is serious but not pretentious

- a. Call a spade a spade.
- b. Value the Drama Lab as something more than a game and an experiment. The participants must understand that what we do in Drama Labs is important, and the outcome will have an impact on what happens next in this area.
- c. Be transparent: Acknowledge what is happening in the Drama Lab as an integral part of the action: What appears is what should be appearing. What happened was what was supposed to happen. There is nothing that needs to

take place in secret; if you want to give a message to the other guides then do it; if you want to ask for help with something, do so.

5. Be a buddy, and avoid taking on the expert role

- a. Everyone is equal, and the guides should not put themselves above the participants, but be on the same level as them.
- b. Be careful of over-educational infantilising rhetoric: 'I now think we have come up with a lot of good arguments, guys! Great job!' and 'And we don't know what the right answer is,' etc.
- c. Think IKEA instructions instead of having to explain things. Consider that we are all equally bad at putting together an IKEA cabinet. You must be involved in finding out whether this is the wrong or correct way to do it.
- d. Refer to professionals/experts in order to give context/importance to what is being done in the Drama Lab. This can act as a 'third authority' where the guide avoids being an expert by referring to a third person who promotes what is going to happen. For example: 'Donald Winnicott is a well-known psychoanalyst and paediatrician, and he writes about the importance of play for our development as human beings. As children, we use play to make sense of our surroundings, to try out different situations and roles and to get to know ourselves better in the process. Play, Winnicott says, is also a necessary process in developing the capacity to manage emotions and change. Today, we will use play in the same way: we will take on roles and positions that are not our own, and practice seeing the changes in the area from different aspects and perspectives.'

6. Be flexible in encounters with the participants and be curious about the participants' ideas

- a. Drama Lab facilitates a high degree of interactivity right from the start. Try not to create one idea of what the lab should be like. The magic often happens when you use the suggestions and directions the participants want to try out.
- b. Create conversation formats that provide a lot of room for manoeuvre. We do not force participants into a conversation format, we introduce and provide clear guidelines - and the participants themselves decide how they want to proceed and perform.
- c. Think about the different outcomes and twists and turns the conversation format can create in encounters with participants and create strategies to manage and utilise the suggestions the participants make.
- d. Balancing act: As a guide, you still have to lead the participants through the planned route. Knowing how much leeway to give the participants while guiding them safely through the lab within the allotted time is a delicate balancing act. You cannot give the participants so much leeway that control is lost, and time constraints are broken.
- e. Create a manuscript in the form of a deck of cards that can be shuffled: Don't stick rigorously to the manuscript but be good at reading the situation and determining what is needed (e.g., no need to ask the question if someone disagrees with the perspective they have chosen when the whole group is clearly comfortable taking on that perspective's role)

7. Set boundaries:

- a. As a guide, you do not have to accept all types of behaviour. Set clear boundaries for what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For example, the guide should not accept behaviour from participants who create a bad atmosphere and clearly show that they do not want to get involved. As a guide, it is easy to think that you should get everyone involved and work to make everyone happy. As a guide, if you feel that you are being pushed around, there are most likely some other participants who feel the same thing. Use your authority as a guide to set boundaries for all participants. If someone does not want to participate, address it and ask if they want to join the game. If not, they can leave.

The Tilburg Drama Lab

In this toolkit, we use the Contra Drama Lab that we organized in 'Tilburg Noord' in October 2023 as an example. To better imagine how a Drama Lab might proceed, we describe the components of that Drama Lab here. An important caveat is that Drama Labs are always tied to the specific context in which they are organized and can, therefore, take very different forms. In the description of this Tilburg Drama Lab, we will always emphasize how our observations from the specific case have determined the design.

The background

The Tilburg Drama Lab focused on the redesign of an area in Tilburg North, located between a residential area and the motorway around Tilburg: the northern city edge. This area harbours many different functions and activities, such as garden centres, hardware stores and car repair shops, agricultural land, a powerplant, and sporadic habitation. The adjacent neighbourhoods, Stokhasselt, Heijkamp and Quirijn-Stok, are to a greater or lesser extent affected by socio-economic problems and are a national focus area regarding crime prevention.

At the start of our research, it quickly became apparent that the municipality of Tilburg has many plans for this area known as the 'Stadsrand' (city edge): for example, a large water storage facility should be built that can collect water from the Stadsrand during heavy rainfall, the power plant should be doubled in capacity, the area should also be given a recreational function for local residents, and a residential facility should be established for people that need a 'low stimulus environment'. In addition, there are two different residents' initiatives that have plans for the Stadsrand, including sustainable agriculture and a neighbourhood meeting place or restaurant.

Phase 1 of the Drama Lab started in the spring of 2023 with a round of interviews both with involved officials and with local stakeholders. We also attended meetings that the municipality organized about the Stadsrand. A number of emotions quickly became apparent: many residents expressed the feeling of being 'at the bottom' of the municipality's priority list, and there was a sentiment 'that nothing ever came of all those plans'. At the same time, the plans for the Stadsrand seemed very important for, among other things, the climate adaptation policy of the city of Tilburg.

The location

The Drama Lab took place in the sports facilities that the community centre 'De Symfonie' shared with two primary schools in Tilburg Noord, in the Quirijn-Stok district. Originally, we preferred a location for the Drama Lab in the Stadsrand itself, in order to directly experience the place. After visiting various possible locations, it turned out that there was no suitable space for a group of about 20 people per evening and where set pieces and installations could remain for a week. The planned time of the year, the end of October, also played a role because it resulted in an unheated warehouse belonging to the municipality of Tilburg being excluded.

The choice of the sports facilities at the community centre turned out to have positive and negative sides: on the one hand, there was a lot of flexibility to arrange the space according to our own wishes and space for the participants and guides to move around. There was a storage area immediately adjacent where the set pieces could be stored during school hours. In addition, the community centre was a location that almost all invited guests already knew and was easily accessible to them. The community centre was located a short distance from the 'Stadsrand Noord' area, approximately 300 meters.

On the other hand, it was logistically impractical that the space was also used by schools during the day. It meant that all installations had to be built and taken down again every day. In addition, a disadvantage of the location turned out to be that many different activities always took place simultaneously in the community centre, including choir rehearsals and music lessons that caused annoying noise during our Drama Lab.

The choice to work with installations

In Tilburg it was decided to work with an accumulation of installations to be experienced, rather than a more traditional narrative approach. The primary sources for the design of the Drama Labs were the interviews with those involved. However, the three main questions from the interviews were never answered unanimously. Those questions were: #1 Who would you identify as the stakeholders?, #2 What interests do they serve?, #3 How do you describe the conflict in the area? Because the questions were always answered differently, a traditional approach, with one or two protagonists, a clear antagonist, and a clear dramaturgical framework (for example Aristotelian: prologue, exposition, motoric moment, conflict build-up, climax, settlement and epilogue) would exclude much of the interests and stories involved. It would require us to explain the choice of one story over the other stories. That is why we designed a Drama Lab aimed at bringing the undercurrents to the surface. By means of various installations, which served as metaphors for what was going on in the processes regarding the Stadsrand, the participants, each with their own partial interests, were able to experience the material together, reflecting the multitude of perspectives.

The ingredients of the Drama Lab

Various installation components are reviewed and described below. We also discuss the duration of each installation, the setting, the instructions for the participants and the purpose. The installations together form the Tilburg Drama Lab. This concerns the following parts:

- The reception
- Child of the future
- Sort files
- Starting position
- Complexity
- Hammer and nail
- Stadsrand puzzle
- Discussion
- Eating afterwards

The reception

Description

Upon entering the community centre, participants were received by a facilitator who asked them three things: first, to sign a consent form that made it clear what CONTRA is and gave the researchers permission to use data. Second, we asked the participants if they had any objections if pictures were taken of them. We handed out stickers to those who did not want to have their picture taken so the photographer would know. Third, participants were asked to leave contact information so that we could contact them for an interview afterwards if they were willing.

After these formalities, we gave each of them two items: a bag of marbles and a ball of long, coloured thread. After this, they were escorted to the waiting area where coffee, tea and biscuits were ready for them.

When the group was complete, the two guides from the Drama Lab, dressed in blue working clothes and white shirts, came to welcome the participants. The topic of the Stadsrand was introduced with the following text:

'The northern city edge, the end of the city or the beginning of the countryside? From the Vlashoflaan to the Burgemeester Bechtweg, is it where nature cannot go any further and where the city wants to settle? It depends on where you stand and where you look from. An area with potential for which there are many plans, but who owns the plans? And is everything possible? What choices can be made and who gets to say? Tonight, science meets art, and together we meet you. Let it be clear, we are not going to decide anything, but we are going to listen and try to look beneath the surface.'

The following rules were also introduced:

#1: Whoever you are and whatever you do, everyone's perspective is equally valuable.

#2: Speak from yourself (I), instead of we, them or you.

#3: Whatever we encounter, it all depends on your active contribution.

#4: As guides, we are responsible for making sure we stay on time. This may mean that we ask you to round off a conversation, but rest assured, food will be ready afterwards, and there will be plenty of room to speak to each other.

Duration

The entrance of participants took approximately half an hour, the instruction by the guides approximately 3 minutes.

Setting

We consciously chose not to have the reception take place in the sports facility - but instead in a separate corner of the restaurant of the community centre. This was a room where only the participants and our own team came at that time - so it was 'private'. With this choice of location, we ensured that the group of participants could all enter the performance room at the same time, discover the setting of the Drama Lab, and that we could introduce the rules of the game in one go before entering the room. Our goal was to clearly define the space. The transition to the space in which the lab takes place also marks a transition to another conversation and another form of interaction.

Instructions for performing this part

When carrying out this part, it is important that those sitting at the table near the consent forms are well informed about the Drama Lab so that participants' questions can be answered appropriately. During a dress rehearsal, we noticed that experience with research and knowledge of the Drama Lab also play a role in welcoming participants. It is wise to have one of the researchers or theatre makers present at the reception and not to leave it entirely to others (in our case, students who assisted us).

In addition, it is important that multiple consent forms can be signed simultaneously so that there is no queue and people do not have to wait a long time. It is important for the guides to be 'in their role' from the start. In our case, one of the two guides was also the researcher who had previously conducted interviews with a large number of participants. For her in particular, wearing a costume helped clearly delineate her role as guide. Both guides carried the script on a clipboard. All texts were written out and there was a clear time code for each part of the Drama Lab, which ensured that they could handle their time management well. There was room to use more text than written on the script. Since many instructions would be given, it was good to make them as concrete as possible, with as little chance for misunderstanding as possible.

Purpose of this part

The purpose of the reception was to clarify the framework for the Drama Lab: both formally through the consent forms and informally through the introduction of the guides. In this way, we also indicated that the participants would end up in a special setting and that participants would be treated with care and respect.

Part 1: Introduction Child of the Future

Description

Upon entering the playroom, the group formed a circle around the first interactive installation, on one side of the room. This consisted of a number of wooden slats on trestles, with years from 1900 up to and including 2100 written on them and a nail marking each year.



All participants were invited to tie their ball of wool (which they had received upon arrival) to the nail indicating their year of birth and string it to 2023. Then music played: Caligula from Windows 96, a futuristic tune, and a person inside, wearing a black hoody sweater, black pants and an LED mask. This figure also ties a string: from 2075 to 2087. The music stopped and the guide has the following text:

'Born in 2075, and now living in... 2087. A twelve-year-old child from the future... special. She comes to see how you are going to talk about the present because she is curious how that will affect her. I would like to ask you all to close your eyes for a moment and try to imagine what the outskirts of Tilburg North will look like in 2087.



Tonight, this child from the future will walk with us, and every time you make a decision, ask yourself what this child would think about it. During the evening the child of the future will not speak, after all, the child does not yet have a voice in the here and now."

Duration

About 10 minutes

Setting

In the room where the other installations are also visible. Construction trestles arranged along a wall with slats with nails and dates written on them.

Instruction for this part

It is important to take into account that, for some, it may be sensitive to directly expose their age in this way. There was feedback from participants on two out of three occasions that this had made them feel uncomfortable.

Purpose of this part

This part aimed to introduce the role of the child of the future without language. The reason for this choice is to allow the child to be present, but not to speak, and yet to introduce them in a clear way. The image of the timeline made this possible.

We considered the role of the child of the future to be an important part of the Drama Lab: by having this figure present and observant in all conversations, we aimed to expand the thinking frameworks and especially the time span in which people think. This is one of the possibilities that theatre offers: not just to say that we should 'think about future generations' but to bring that future generation into the room as a character.

It was also a way to give the climate theme a role in the Drama Lab. This was a motivation for many of the plans for the Stadsrand but was less prominent in the interviews conducted with local residents. Implicitly, the presence of the child of the future posed the question: 'What consequences do decisions made in the here and now have for the future?'

Part 2: Sorting Files



Description

On a table there are ten different file folders with names on them such as '*Structuurvisie Tilburg Noord*' (City plan Tilburg Noord) 'PACT Tilburg'. Nine of these plans are existing spatial plans that have been written in recent decades about the area, the Stadsrand Noord. One plan has been concocted. The participants in the Drama Lab are instructed to sort the file folders in chronological order and to remove the invented plan.

They are given two minutes to do this, accompanied by music.

When the two minutes are up, the guides on the adjacent table reveal the correct order of the file folders: here (under a cloth, which is removed during the unveiling) are the same files again, but in the correct order and without the concocted file amongst them.

The participants are then asked to put the marbles they received upon arrival into glasses in front of each file and to indicate how much of the plans they think have been realized. The more they think that a plan has been realized, the more marbles they put in the glass for the relevant file folder.

Duration

About 7 minutes.

Setting

Group stands in a circle or row around two tables against the wall, one with visible file folders and glasses, the other with file folders under a cloth draped over them.

Instruction for this part

It is important to give clear instructions on how the participants distribute their marbles. The starting point was that each marble represented about 10% of the plan. So, anyone who thought that a plan had been half realized would have to put 5 marbles in the glass in question.

Purpose of this part

This part made a clear link with the Stadsrand area and depicted a frequently heard sentiment from the interviews with those involved: a general feeling of an endless stream of plans without real change. During the various evenings, it quickly became clear that, in the eyes of the participants, not much came of the plans. This could be seen by the number of marbles they put in the different glasses. The reason for starting with this part was because we wanted to start with the history, what plans are actually already on the table. We wanted to do this with humour through an accessible game element to bond the group.

Part 3: Starting Position



Description

We stand around the 'Start Position' installation and the guides ask the participants for two volunteers. They step forward and are each given a die and asked to throw it. The one with the highest number gets a large shovel and the other a small shovel. Then they both get a small plastic house. Furthermore, the one with a large shovel gets a toy boat and the one with a small shovel gets a toy car. Now they can roll their dice again to see how many shovels of sand they can shovel into their plastic container. Naturally, the person with the large shovel has a much larger pile of sand compared to the one with the small shovel. They can place their houses on their sand piles and park their vehicles (boat or car) next to their house. Then one of the guides pulls off the rope construction and we see how one house remains standing perfectly and the other house floods.

During the shovelling, the placing of the house and the release of the water, 'Cello Suite in G Major No. 1' by Johann Sebastian Bach, performed by Yo-Yo Ma is played.

Immediately afterwards, the other guide introduces a position game from behind the backs of the group: this guide rolls out a line across the floor and asks everyone to take a seat and 'take a position'. If you agree with a statement, you remain where you are and if you disagree, you cross the line.

1. If you are rich, you have more opportunities to protect yourself from the negative effects of climate change.
2. Everyone in Tilburg Noord is responsible for their own success.
3. If you are poor, you don't have time to worry about the climate.

Duration

About 20 minutes

Setting

We stand around an installation that consists of a table with two containers, a bag of sand and various objects, and two dice. Above the table, there are two bottles of water that are secured with a rope construction.

Instruction for part

It is important not to emphasize that this is 'unfair'. The three times we repeated this experiment the observation came from the group itself, and we, as guides, were able to respond with: 'yes, indeed', which made the message more powerful.



Purpose of this part

The link with climate change was made very clearly in this part, and in particular the aspect of climate justice. This was directly in line with the theme of the major climate-related infrastructure planned for Stadsrand Noord. The aim of this part was to illustrate the difference in resilience based on different starting positions in life and to invite reflection on this situation.

Justice is an important pillar to legitimize government interventions. Stadsrand Noord is quickly becoming the preferred location for certain interventions where other parts of the city are apparently being spared. Why is that? And is that fair? The dilemma was reinforced by assigning the participants a starting position based on the toss of a coin. The chance for one person to obtain a better position than the other is equal, which appears as a fair chance. But once the positions were divided, it was perceived as unfair. It was immediately clear what advantages someone with more resources had over the other. It also served as a 'priming' for the final discussion by thinking about the underlying values that are the basis of interventions in the living environment (for example the Principles of Good Governance).

Part 4: Complexity



Description

In this part, the group of participants were asked to determine together what they thought were the three most important themes for the urban edge of Tilburg North. In sub-groups of 3-4 people, each group was allowed to choose a theme from our selection of themes; they

have 5 minutes to discuss this. The guides ask them to discuss together which theme has the highest priority for them and to make a joint choice.

The different themes were written on wooden slats, each of which was attached to a wire attached to the complexity installation. Each of these themes was actually a theme for which, at the time of the Drama Lab, there were plans that could be realized in the Stadsrand Noord. It concerned the following themes:

1. Climate adaptation
2. Housing
3. Tackling crime
4. Sustainable energy
5. Recreation
6. Employment
7. Sustainable agriculture
8. Playgrounds
9. Parking lots
10. Event location

Music was played during the group discussions in which they selected the theme that had the highest priority for them. After five minutes, the guides announce that the time is up, and each group can share which theme they have chosen. They can then pull the rope of their theme and see what happens in the 'complexity machine'. Before they did that, there was an intervention; 'Before you confirm your choices by pulling the corresponding blocks, you don't know what you are going to set in motion, something may go wrong or break. There may be unforeseen consequences. Now that you know this, I present you with the following choice: Do you still choose to pull the rope, or do you choose to do nothing?' So doing nothing was an option, but our hypothesis was that people are too curious to do nothing. People are always curious about the effect of their actions, even if the outcome is uncertain.



The effects that could occur included a large helium balloon flying to the ceiling, a tower of Jenga blocks falling over, an arrow being shot towards the ceiling, and a vase of flowers breaking.

After this, the guides ask the participants to each find their own place in the room and to think silently about whether they have ever made a decision that had unexpected consequences that they could not foresee. 'Now take a minute in silence, close your eyes if you like, and think about whether you have ever made a decision that had unexpected consequences.' After about a minute, the guides ask if anyone would like to share what they have been thinking about. This led to some interesting reflections.

The group is then split into two to talk about complexity and what they consider important in policy making in a complex urban context. This conversation is conducted based on three questions:

#1 How do we make choices if we don't know what the consequences are?

#2 What does that require of us?

#3 How do you deal with having the responsibility for something you could not have known?



Duration

About 20 minutes

Setting

The first half takes place around the 'complexity machine', a large installation in the corner of the room.

During the second half, participants take a seat on 2 x 2 school benches that are arranged in a triangle, facing the wall with a large sheet of paper with three questions.

Instruction for this part

The rules for choosing the policy topic sometimes caused some confusion, so it is important to provide clear instructions. In addition, this part takes quite a lot of time to introduce, due to the 'complexity' of the complexity machine.

Purpose of this part

This part has a twofold purpose: to visualize and make tangible the difficult decisions that policymakers make in contexts in which many different problems come together in the physical space and to conduct a substantive conversation about which themes really have priority for the urban edge of Tilburg North. At the same time, this part prepares for the next

one, by first exploring the possibility of unintended and unforeseen consequences and then experiencing the asymmetry in actual negative consequences of an action.

Part 5: Hammer and Nail



Description

Part A: During this part, the group gathers around a long board on which several wooden tree trunks are placed. A hammer and nail are available next to each tree trunk. The group is asked to pair up – and decide together who will hold the hammer and who will hold the nail. They are then instructed that the nail must go all the way into the tree trunk!

Afterwards, one of the guides asks a number of participants: 'What did you grab first? The hammer or the nail? And why?'

Part B: After this hammer-and-nail exercise, the participants gather again behind a ribbon in the middle of the room and are given a number of statements to which they can respond: if they cross the line, they disagree; if they are in favour the line will remain in place.

'You behave differently when you experience the consequences of your own action.'

'The people who make plans for the neighbourhood experience the consequences of this as much as the residents.'

'For this question you can all give your answer in one word: 'If you are responsible for the plans, but do not experience the consequences, then that requires...'

Duration

About 10 minutes

Setting

Part A: Benches stacked on top of each other with the logs and other objects on top. Part B: Later a ribbon in the middle of the room with pawns on two sides.

Instruction for this part

This part was relatively simple to explain and had a fairly large effect with relatively little 'effort'. It was mentioned afterwards by several participants as an element that had stayed with them.

Purpose of this part

To dramaturgically depict and translate what was a frequently heard sentiment in the interviews that took place prior to the Drama Lab. The point was to make the asymmetry of any negative consequences of someone's action palpable to others. In this case, it was often emphasized that advisors and professionals, who help decide what happens on the city fringe, were often involved for a limited time. Local residents described it as a 'coming and going' of external people who did not experience the consequences of decisions themselves. This part should ensure better understanding among professionals for residents who directly experience the consequences of the professionals' choices. Professionals are thus encouraged to be and/or remain more involved in the interventions they design.

In addition, we wanted to facilitate discussion about this frequently heard feeling in a group of participants where both professionals and local residents were present.

Part 6: The Stadsrand Puzzle



Description

During this part, participants sit on chairs positioned in a circle. In the middle is an artificial grass strip in the shape of Tilburg Noord's Stadsrand. The participants are then instructed to each choose an object from a table, which symbolizes a project that is intended to be realised in the outskirts of the city at the time of the Drama Lab. This varies from a wooden entrance gate that symbolizes the 'attractive access to Tilburg' to a P sign for a parking lot, wooden houses wrapped in bubble wrap that represent a 'stimulus-low housing project' and vegetable plants for urban agriculture. The participants are instructed to make a good partitioning of all these different plans: what should be placed where on the Stadsrand?

While puzzling, one of the guides arrives with a huge tree branch and announces: 'A new plan has just been announced, 5,000 trees also need to be planted on the outskirts of the city!' With this additional branch, it is actually no longer possible to accommodate all objects on the Stadsrand's cut-out.

When the group has been busy for a while, the guides invite them to sit down: 'Please, sit down and take a moment to look at what you have created – how does this image of the Stadsrand feel? And what would the child from the future think of this?'

This is followed by a round of responses from participants to the puzzle in front of them.

Duration

About 15 minutes

Setting

Circle with chairs, a strip of artificial grass in the shape of the Stadsrand Noord in the middle.

Instruction for this part

It is important that the objects are really too big for the grass strip so that the message that it will not fit is clearly conveyed.

Purpose of this part

The game element of solving a puzzle together that seems impossible to fit as a metaphor for the large number of different plans. It evoked an incoherent image, thrown together, and thus clearly reflected what is currently going on in the area.

The child of the future provided a physical presence as a reminder for the long term regarding what that puzzle will mean for those who are yet to come.

Visualizing the number of plans that are currently in place and starting the conversation, not only from the here and now but with a longer time horizon, encouraged people to actively think about what the child of the future would make of all these developments.

Part 7: Discussion



Description

The discussion takes place in a double circle of chairs around the 'puzzle' that was made during the previous exercise. During this conversation, the child of the future also takes a seat in the circle, with a plant on her lap. This plant is a fern, one of the oldest plant species on earth. All participants receive a sheet of paper, a marker and adhesive tape and are asked to write down the name of someone who is not in the room but who should be part of the conversation about the future of the Stadsrand of Tilburg North. The guides also explain that the child of the future represents the voice of the currently unheard future generations and the fern that of non-human life.

After everyone has shared whose voices they consider important to include in the conversation, the question is raised how to ensure that these people are truly involved in the next edition.

After this, the facilitators invite participants to divide into groups of three to four people and discuss the following two questions:

1: Which experience best symbolizes what you think is currently happening at the Stadsrand?

2: Which experience made you most uncomfortable and what does that say about you and this group?

After each group has had the opportunity to discuss this and has also provided brief feedback in the plenary setting, one of the guides asks: Based on this evening, do you think that the child of the future has become more or less concerned?

Duration

About 30 minutes

Setting

Double circle of chairs around the puzzle from the previous exercise.

Instruction for this part

The chairs and materials for naming the unheard voices must be well prepared, as this can also be messy and cause confusion. In addition, there was confusion on several evenings as to whether you could also write down a 'category' of people or whether you should really mention someone's name. Many 'categories' were now mentioned, which was less clear and could not be as readily invited for a subsequent session as a real person could.

Purpose of this part

To integrate the experiences of the evening and reflect on them together. By allowing participants to express what was most relevant to them in small groups, they retained ownership of the experience and could provide feedback in this way. In addition, to bring the voice of the child of the future, who is not heard, to the foreground and emphasize the concern for future generations among the participants.

Part 8: Eating Afterwards

Description

After the Drama Lab, all participants were invited for a meal, cooked by local residents who set up a catering service. Syrian meals were cooked here on all three nights that the Drama Lab took place. It provided space for discussion and to continue the discussion in an informal manner.

Duration

1-2 hours

Setting

At long tables in the cafe that belonged to the community centre.

Instruction for this part

It was important that the catering was done by local residents.

Purpose of this part

To provide space for any tensions that arose during the Drama Lab to be resolved, to hear more about impressions, and to create a safe setting.

Practical aspects: preparations

A Drama Lab requires intensive preparation. The Tilburg Drama Lab that serves as an example in this toolkit was preceded by interviews with approximately 20 people, as well as intensive contact with the municipality of Tilburg and attendance at a series of participation meetings regarding the planning for the Stadsrand of Tilburg North. In this section of the toolkit, we share a number of challenges in the preparation and how we dealt with them.

Planning of Theatre and municipality works differently.

When the case of the Tilburg North Stadsrand was chosen at the end of 2022, beginning of 2023 and the collaboration between the municipality of Tilburg, Tilburg University and theatre maker Taco van Dijk was agreed, based on the agendas that were known at that time, the last week of October 2023 was chosen as the period for the Drama Lab. In the world of theatre, performances, rehearsals and other obligations are fixed long in advance. The municipality of Tilburg appeared to have shifted planning: although October initially seemed like good timing for them, the research project was significantly delayed in the period February-April 2023: there were a number of questions at the administrative level that related to the Stadsrand. This meant both that researchers at Tilburg University were asked to postpone their research activities until these questions were clarified and that developments regarding the Stadsrand itself were postponed. Because the theatre partner's agenda was already so full, it was ultimately decided to stick to the October 2023 schedule, which resulted in a relatively short and, therefore, very intensive research time. The creative process to design the actual Drama Lab was also under pressure because it required actual physical design and that takes time. As the design choices are based on the substantive content, the determination of a so-called 'point of no return' is important. At what point do we consider there is enough information? And is that information solid enough to base a dramaturgical concept on?

Insight: In a similar situation, we would recommend even more margin in the time schedule next time, to take delays into account and to leave room for exercising due care and to prevent too much having to be done in too short a time.

The location of the Drama Lab determines its form, content and accessibility.

In the preparation of the Tilburg Drama Lab, various possible locations for the Drama Lab were considered. The expressed wish of the team of researchers and the theatre maker was to find a location in the area itself. After a warehouse owned by the municipality was rejected as a location due to the lack of facilities such as heating and toilets, it was moved to a community centre. Although this location was close to the edge of the city, it was not in the area itself. It also entailed other limitations: the space where the Drama Lab took place was used by a primary school as a gym during the day, which meant that the Drama Lab installations had to be built up and taken down for each edition. Several activities took place simultaneously in the community centre: for example, an edition of the Drama Lab was interrupted by drum lessons and the timing of the Drama Lab had to take into account the start of a choir rehearsal in the adjacent room. For each location that was considered, many of the options also changed, and with those options the dramaturgical context was also influenced. This required great flexibility from both the production and artistic teams. The sooner it becomes clear what the space will be like, with all possible limitations, the greater the chance of a better outcome. This is because of the greater amount of time to customize the space. The longer the location is uncertain, the longer critical choices will have to be postponed.

Facilities

The preparation of the Drama Lab showed how little a university is equipped for intensive art-research collaborations. It turned out that there was no studio space or workspace available on the Tilburg University campus where installations for the Drama Lab could be built. This resulted in limitations in the preparation because a lot of tidying had to be done in between and because many facilities were missing.

Reflection by Taco van Dijk, co-creator of the artistic content of the Drama Lab in the Netherlands.

Main critique of the application of the Drama Lab as a tool

People who pick up tools have a goal they want to achieve with the tool they pick up. When building something together, or for someone else, this goal is known to the parties involved. Furthermore, tools cost money, therefore, it's worth taking into consideration what you are going to construct before you start buying them. When you know this, you can start to assemble your toolkit. Tools are very much outcome orientated objects. And lastly, the implementation of the tools is placed somewhere in a process of other activities, for instance there is a phase of planning, constructing, and delivering.

To summarize, I look into the main three difficulties of implementing a real world Drama Lab from my perspective. First, I focus on the chronological position of the Drama Lab in a larger process of multiple participatory events. Followed by my take on outcome versus non-outcome events and I finish on the subject of neutrality.

On the chronological position of the Drama Lab

Where to place the Drama Lab in the chain of urban development or climate adaptation planning processes? I address this because the position itself creates meaning and pressure on the non-outcome design. Even if the intention of the position is to not have it to have meaning. Let me clarify this by giving it the three possible options in a process line.

The Drama Lab is the first participatory event, followed by more.

The Drama Lab will take place after a participatory event, and after the Drama Lab there will be more.

The Drama Lab is the last participatory event*, but there were others before.

If it is the first version, it creates expectations for the next event.

If it is the second option, it places the Drama Lab in the middle so there is history to take into consideration as well as future expectations.

*If it is the last option, well, how could someone state that it is the last participatory event? So besides there being a lot of history to take into account, there is always a future expectation.

Wherever you want to position it, it can never be outside of a process of participatory events, and since it cannot, either the history or future expectations or both, are in play. The questions of participants then becomes: Why would they choose to host this Drama Lab after the last participatory event? 'What happened before so that this exercise makes sense to them now? How will they use this for future reference? When confronted with these questions how will the guide or artist respond and why?

On outcome versus non-outcome event.

One of the key aspects of the Drama Lab is the ability to address conflict in a new way. For conflict to be present there is a history to consider. The participants are not a blank test group; there is no such thing as a clean slate. They are people living in a place where something, somehow already went wrong, and they have a personal interest in getting it fixed, changed or something else. More specific, most places where these types of conflict arise have a history of people delivering input into urban planning processes, but they are not seeing a lot of tangible results of this input. So, when the Drama Lab steps in and we ask them to participate and state upfront that there will be no official output of their attendance, then why should they bother in the first place? You could say that at least it is honest, but I reckon that that is not enough. Worst case scenario is that it will add to the already present feeling of not being taken completely seriously. In that case, it will do more harm than good. This time around, it was a scientific experiment, so there is this kind of novelty factor which can intrigue but that will not be the case when it is implemented. (It may still be novel, but it is no longer an experiment but an instrument.)

From the organizational point of view, how should local governments and municipalities put this in a non-outcome context? Taking into consideration the position in a chronological way, it builds upon the logical outcome of previous events. And if it is the first, there is a future outcome in mind. People reach for tools when they want to construct something. That is the real challenge. For a Drama Lab to function properly it needs to be free of consequence

because otherwise the stakes involved stifle the freedom of open dialogue, which is the opposite of the mindset of people involved in urban or/and climate transformation, or for most of us, generally speaking. Logically, we want our actions at our work to have consequences.

Two questions future participants could ask are:

#1: Why should I join?

#2: Why is the local government doing this (now*)?

By looking into the second question, I discovered another difficulty of implementing the Drama Lab. This difficulty is especially related to the required neutral position for both the artist and funder involved.

On neutrality

Let's take as an example the Drama Lab I designed in Tilburg Noord. Now I was a part of a scientific experiment. I was an 'neutral' outsider. This gave me the required artistic freedom to ask around and create a Drama Lab that would also question some of the previous actions of the local government involved. And bring them to the forefront, also if this meant it would be embarrassing for them. This 'neutral' position also made it possible for participants to overcome some of the resistance they feel against that same local government or talk more freely to a researcher from the university than to a city official. It was an important buy in. But let's change it to something more in line with how an actual Drama Lab toolkit may be used. Then I am no longer an 'neutral' party. Then I get hired by the same local government that is, in some way or other, involved in the history that made the potential conflict in the first place. This could potentially limit my artistic freedom, what if I discover something that makes the local government (my current employer) look really bad? So, I should have clearly stated at front that I will need my full artistic freedom and, if this is not possible, that I will not accept this job. But what if I, like most independent artist, need work? Would I be less inclined to expose the difficult truth needed for the proper functioning of the Drama Lab in order not to offend my employer? And would we get the same openness in the interviews while doing the research? I have some serious doubts there.

Or let's say that I was an official of the local government. And I saw that there was a lot going on in this particular area. A lot of things were not being said, voices were not being heard, and a conflict was brewing. The only way I could ascertain these facts, was for me to be on the inside loop. A space where I can be neutral no longer. I am a representation of an institution that the people in the specific area have a certain attitude against, and also, as an employee I have a certain task in this area. I have goals to achieve. This automatically frames the Drama Lab for the people living in this area as being, at the very least, 'favourable' to the local government. Because why would it act against its own goals? And quite honestly, would they really?

Which brings me on a side note of the costs involved in creating a Drama Lab. Local governments will be the most likely users and the main funders of such a participatory event as a Drama Lab. For something most government officials will interpret as a different take on an information gathering/sharing perspectives session, it is very expensive. A skeleton crew of at least five, for instance an artist director, head of production and assistant, researcher, and a technician all must be on a payroll, each for different periods but significant,

nonetheless. A rough estimate (which also includes, transport, meals, hotels, materials, etc. the basics for a small performance) comes to a total of €40.000. That is just a ballpark figure, but the point is obvious, it will cost significantly more than to rent a room and bring a beamer and some post-its. A lot of money, especially if you cannot clearly define the outcome generated by such an expenditure. How to justify the budget to the local government council?

Suggestions to counter the three main critiques.

#1. On the chronological position of the Drama Lab

The more (negative) history there is, the higher the expectations of participants will be for it to have a positive outcome (or they are already so disillusioned that they are too cynical to join). Therefore, the design question threshold could be: 'If we were to design a Drama Lab without a clearly defined outcome, taking into consideration the previous participatory events, will this do more harm than good for the general trust in the process?' If the answer is yes, don't do it.

#2. On the outcome versus non-outcome event

Involve the participants in designing the Drama Lab. What are their needs? What do they think is valuable to explore in a Drama Lab? Should there truly be no outcome at all? Is there anything at all that was worth documenting, and if so, in what way? If it became a story to be told what would that be and how could that story do justice to all those involved and where should it be told? And to whom?

#3. On neutrality

Split the initiative between all those involved. It should be possible for all stakeholders to take the primary initiative. But when all those involved are given the opportunity to join, it becomes a collective once they are on board. There should always be a minimum of two stakeholders, one of whom should always be somebody living in the specific area of development.

Make sure that the artist is free to use the funds at her/his disposal for the Drama lab itself. That is, create a basic funding application where there is room for the artist to describe his or her artistic approach, but that all the other practical needs are covered.

This assures artistic freedom. The toolkit could be a format that includes the right preconditions needed for the artist, a basic description of what a Drama Lab encompasses, it's practical needs, simple dos and don'ts.

In order to have a truly open conversation there are a couple of preconditions that are required:

- An adequate setting (Where)

- Enough Time (When)

- Safety (How)
- Honesty (How)
- Equality (How)
- Transparency (How)
- A clear goal (What)
- A personal interest of those involved (Why)