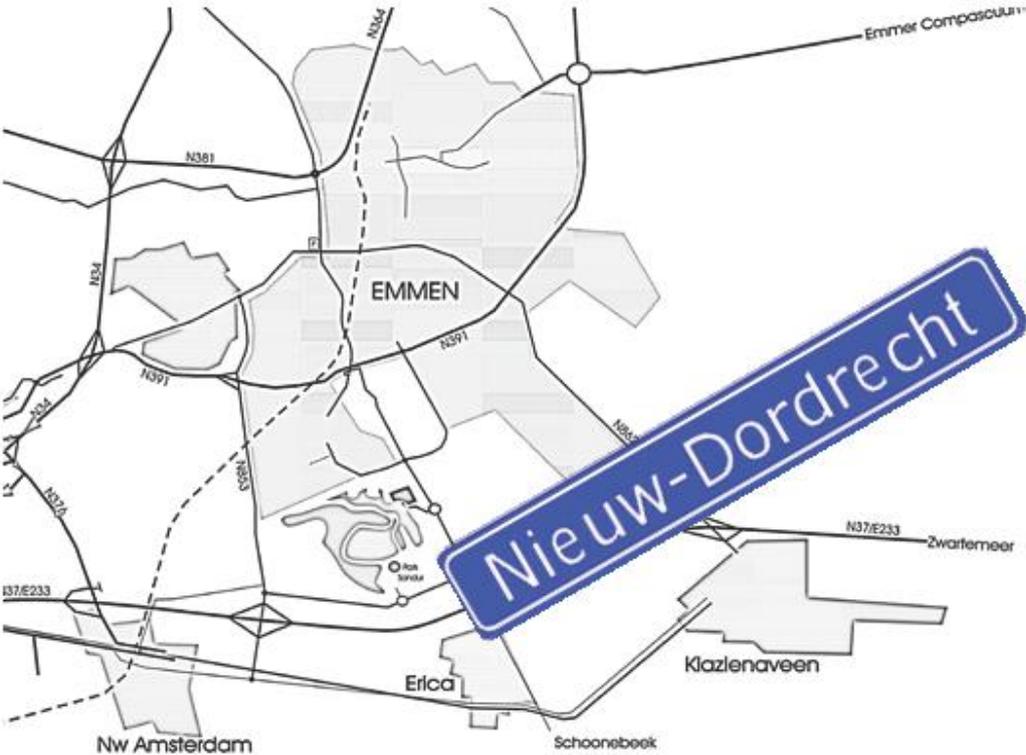


# Project proposal concerning the implementation of the Emmen Revisited structure in the village of Nieuw-Dordrecht



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## Introduction of the project and its context

In the village of Nieuw-Dordrecht, in the municipality of Emmen, the project Emmen Revisited is currently being implemented. The underlying idea of the project is that further involvement of inhabitants can make the so-called 'Place Keeping'-process easier and more cost-efficient. The place keeping-concept focuses on better integration of initiatives in spatial planning and social activities coming from inhabitants, so it will gradually become obvious to inhabitants that they are not only the users of their own surroundings, but they're also in a way responsible for the quality of their surroundings. The pre-defined meaning of place keeping is to develop and manage the living environment within a village or residential area, with a maximum focus on spatial qualities of the location, environmental effects, and social and economic strengths of the inhabitants, which are being found, used and developed. Place keeping should offer a sustainable way of working together in and financing processes in the village, and therefore offer a permanent contribution towards the quality and vitality in the village or residential area. <sup>1)</sup>

We have been asked to look into the implementation of this 'Place Keeping'-concept, and offer insights and advice on possibilities for improvement. We've also looked for potential threats to the project. In this proposal we aim on presenting a clear overview of our findings in the village, the potential developments we see therein, and some theoretical viewpoints on approaches towards these developments. We shall conclude this proposal with an advice towards the municipality, in which we will try to offer easy to implement solutions for possible problems.

### Initial approach towards the project

As we see it, the municipality of Emmen wants to improve Nieuw-Dordrecht for its' inhabitants. They have elected to approach this matter in a way which allows residents of the village to participate in the planning process. Therefore, we have chosen to focus on the inhabitant of the village, and their willingness to participate. The main question we want to answer with this research, is; "How is inhabitant involvement in decision making processes in the village of Nieuw-Dordrecht organized, which possibilities are there for further expansion of this involvement, and what possible benefits could such an expansion have for involved parties?"

To be able to get a first overview for the project, we wanted to have at least the following questions answered:

- Which steps are currently being taken by the municipality and any other relevant stakeholders to heighten the level of involvement from the inhabitants?
- Do the inhabitants even have a wish to become more involved in the decision-making processes within their village?
- Are there lots of (aggressive) territorial claims in the village, which would make it harder for inhabitants to freely communicate their wishes?
- Is public space a big part of the everyday life in the village? How is public space used and experienced by the villagers?
- Do the inhabitants see points of improvement? If so, why do they not, or are they not able to, communicate them in a sufficient manner?
- Since the start of the "Emmen Revisited" project, have certain changes in participation already become visible?

We expect that most of the issues in the village are coming from a conflict in spatial claims, making it harder than strictly necessary for the inhabitants to communicate their expectations and desires towards the municipality. We think there will be a lot of spatial claims in Nieuw-Dordrecht because of people's engagement with the village.

We're given the opportunity to discuss these issues with the available representatives, both from the municipality and from the inhabitants of Nieuw-Dordrecht. Among them, a residents association has been put together by the coordination parties within the "Emmen Revisited" project. It consists of people from all target audiences, e.g. local youth and elderly persons. A selection from these villagers will answer our questions, hopefully in a way that'll make clear to us what the issues within the village are, so that we can give the municipality guidelines on how to approach the next steps related to the project. With the ability to interview more villagers not present, we've considered the people put forward by the municipality to be representative for the village. The advice is based on interviews with those representatives, and will describe our vision.

From the results of our research, we will form a conceptual advice, which can serve as a guideline for the municipality to streamline the implementation of the desired changes, as they are described in the documents provided by the client. The plan we aim to make will discuss the current issues with the involvement of inhabitants within the planning process. We hope that, with such a plan, we can help stimulate initiative and create awareness among the residents. Our underlying expectation is that, when the plan is implemented, inhabitants will actively contribute to new projects that can be beneficial to the village, without the municipality having to urge them into it.

## Field analysis of posed issues; are the issues we see also the issues that are actually present?

### Initial findings

On Thursday September 13th we visited the village of Nieuw-Dordrecht, to be informed by the municipality and the inhabitants themselves. To check if the main research question we asked was the right question, we have tried to answer the sub-questions posed earlier.

We've found that our initial definition of the possible problem wasn't completely right; Since Nieuw-Dordrecht is not in a developing area anymore, there aren't a lot of spatial claims within the region. This contradicts one of the assumptions we made about the aggressiveness with which territorial claims are usually posed. This, together with the lack of complaints about specific locations within the village, also seems to make the spatial component less relevant for the research area, as far as the problems are concerned.

A question that did get us a lot of useful information was about the desires and expectations of inhabitants about their own involvement in the village. As it seems, there is a wish for involvement from both the inhabitants and the municipality, only on different levels. In the current situation, inhabitants seem to want to give input on a higher level than the municipality can offer. This is currently leading towards a situation where both parties are cautious around one another, and seem to be uncertain about which among them should initiate the first step.

### Processing of the findings

After our visit to Nieuw-Dordrecht, we've concluded that a few issues are mentioned by almost all involved parties. We chose to explore those issues more in-depth, so we would be able to set a clear goal within the theoretical framework. We've also tried to point out causes for the problems, which we've based on input and opinions received while visiting the village. The issues that came up most, we've explored more in-depth.

The first issue we will address is that the municipality and the inhabitants both see participation as something different; it is, to them, not yet clearly defined:

- From talks with people that have been put forward as being representative among the inhabitants, we've gotten some signals that the inhabitants seem to be under the impression that the municipality is only trying to involve them to avoid having to hire external parties to, for example, provide homecare to the elderly, do maintenance around the village, and solve other issues that aren't related to what the villagers consider to be relevant for real decision-making and development of new policy. To them, it seems as if the municipality is giving them a false sense of power, like the proverbial 'throwing a dog a bone', just so that they feel more involved.
- This conflicts with the view the municipality has communicated towards us, in which they claim to want to create room for initiative among inhabitants, but are concerned by a development where people seem to be losing willingness to actually help their neighbors, or even to just offer a contribution to the village life. They admit that they would like to see more community involvement in aforementioned issues, but also claim that they would be supportive towards new initiatives.

As we see it, this unclear definition of a very broad mechanism leads to parties coming to agreements about who will do the so-called participating, but not about who has to take which kind of responsibility. This usually results in projects not getting done in a way that is beneficial to both parties, since most of the time the municipality has to complete the project with minimal costs involved.

Secondly, there is the issue that according to the inhabitants, they aren't being involved in decision-making concerning issues they find relevant. They claim they would be more involved if they were to have a say in the development of new infrastructure, like business or industrial areas, or new roads. The problem we see, from our project group perspective, is that these are processes which can be regulated very well when applying a more technocratic approach, which has no direct need for involvement from inhabitants. Such involvement might even lead to more frustration and resistance, when inhabitants become aware of a situation where their wishes conflict directly with the plan, or even amongst one another.

The main problem the municipality has put forward is that there are little initiatives coming from the villagers, and they would like to see more. According to parties within the municipality when a few more initiatives take off, they expect that more will eventually come. As far as we can see, as a project group, there is a situation where opportunities aren't clear enough to relevant actors among the inhabitants. Currently, we don't see the municipality pointing out, or even hinting towards, what the opportunities for the village might be, and therefore the villagers seem not to know where there's room for initiatives. This leads the potentially active people, who want to take initiative, into a forest of trial-and-error, where frustration over denied projects is a certain risk. This has already partially damaged, but will eventually fully deplete the amount of commitment from currently still available volunteers.

### **Analysis of the findings**

Based on our observations of the opinions within the village, most problems that are being put forward lie within the (lack of) definition of boundaries. Inhabitants don't seem to know what they're expected to do, what they are allowed to do, and how they should communicate wishes to start projects. Meanwhile, the municipality states it gets blamed for projects in which inhabitants feel they're not involved. These projects are mostly done by the province however, on a level on which the municipality doesn't have a significant amount of influence, which leads to the municipality acting as a 'punching bag' for frustrated citizens. According to them, this weakens the bond of trust between both parties.

Another reason we see for the current issues, that would in any other planning assignment be considered very positive, but currently seems to be holding the inhabitants of Nieuw-Dordrecht back, is an apparent lack of dissatisfaction. When small things are wrong or missing, it may jumpstart people into action. If everything is 'good enough', people don't seek to make any changes that require them to take real effort. The municipality is still acting as the main service-provider to the village, and although the municipality itself is trying to shift this responsibility towards the village, the villagers seem to show no desire to take these tasks upon themselves.

The third reason we see for the problems within the town is embedded in the main reason for the town's existence; it's a small town, historically placed near a currently diminishing amount of work. In the time of the peat-production, the town was relatively wealthy, and there was no lack of work. Over the past years, the availability of work in the direct surroundings of the village has diminished, and the town has turned into a commuter village. The people who live in Nieuw-Dordrecht often have work in the city of Emmen. Thus these people are only at home at night, so there is no time to get to know their neighbors and fellow villagers. Neither will they create a bond with the town itself. They won't feel any connection with the place where they live. Because of this, we expect a decline in people who care about the village enough to become involved. We've chosen not to focus on the issues with disappearing work, since we consider that a national problem, that isn't specific to Nieuw-Dordrecht.

The last cause of the problems, according to us, is the over-involvement of not necessarily relevant governmental bodies. The project is supposed to be focusing on involvement between the inhabitants and the municipality. With organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and Sedna present, it's unclear to the inhabitants which side who's on. The Chamber of Commerce has clearly stated to have no intention whatsoever to become involved in the processes in the village, except for an advisory function. According to them, the people in the village on the other hand expect a more proactive approach from them, and they claim they are seen as a possible partner within the realization of projects. Sedna's role in the village is welfare of the people. They help people with their problems, such as alcohol addiction, domestic violence, abuse, etc. Sedna says that the inhabitants don't know where to go, who's available for such matters. The Sedna representative also had the idea that the villagers don't act when something's wrong. For example, when they know there's something wrong next door, they won't tell anyone, simply because they don't know who to turn to. Sedna does, however, organize meetings where people can come in and have lunch with each other. In that way these parties can meet, talk and maybe find a way to work better together.

## Exploration of theories relevant to the issues in Nieuw-Dordrecht

With the problems and their underlying causes more clearly defined, we've done a study into existing theories on spatial planning, to give us an angle at which we should approach the problem. We've tried to pick a different theory to match individual problems, so that the approach is as broad as possible.

### Miscommunication between the municipality and the inhabitants

#### Miscommunication from the municipality towards the inhabitants

There seems to be a lot of miscommunication between the municipality and the inhabitants. In a modern society, a lot of communication is taking place over the internet, but that's not the only way to approach your public. From a societal point of view, the mayor is the most visible representative of the municipality, but mayors are usually harder to approach than other, less visible government officials. For the visibility and approachability of the government, it is important to maintain and strengthen contact between the citizens and the municipality, and although the contact can be established by both parties, the municipality is usually held responsible for maintaining this contact. In his theory, Hanssen suggest a very straightforward approach for political parties to present themselves to the public. According the Hanssen, digital possibilities should be explored and used to make the local government more visible. <sup>2)</sup>

#### Miscommunication from the inhabitants towards the municipality

When it comes to political participation in combination with political involvement, you can divide the inhabitants into four groups; the active, the dependent, the expectant and the neutral. The active inhabitant has maximum potential and sometimes even underlying needs for political involvement and participation. The expectant inhabitant has a lot of potential for picking up on problems long before they present themselves, but doesn't show any real willingness to participate in the political process. The dependent inhabitant has a maximum political participation but a minimum involvement, only willing to participate in developments that are beneficial to them, but feeling a strong need to 'meddle' with all decisions being made. The neutral inhabitant has a minimum political involvement and participation, he's just a spectator.

We have to consider this information when we make our plans for Nieuw-Dordrecht. According to Brouwer, not every solution is useful for every type of inhabitant. <sup>3)</sup>

### Lack of clear definition of participating parties.

The municipality spokesperson stated that there are too few initiatives from the inhabitants. For too many inhabitants it seems to be unclear who the participating parties and organizations with any influence within Emmen Revisited are. Certain conceptions of planning, called 'paradigms', are mentioned, which are useful to analyze the participating parties. The first paradigm includes the dominating power of the government. The government will take all the decisions in spatial planning and everything will be regulated following the plan of the municipality. This is the kind of top-down approach the regional and national government are said to have towards development in the region. In the second paradigm the municipality will develop plans together with the entrepreneurs from the private sector. The normal citizens have no influence or hardly any influence. The third and last paradigm also includes the inhabitants of the village who can express their opinions to the municipality. They will make decisions in spatial planning together. There is the most participation in this paradigm. This is a situation that would allow most freedom for the inhabitants of the village. According to the theory, it is important to have a certain balance between the three paradigms in order to satisfy all involved parties, the municipality, private sector and the civil society. When there are hardly any activities taking place within one of the three paradigms, one of the involved parties

will become dissatisfied. It should be made clear within these paradigms which party is involved in which project. <sup>4)</sup>

### **Inhabitants don't see any real points for improvement they wish to be involved in.**

“The question whether architecture has a social function is totally irrelevant, because socially indifferent solutions simply do not exist; in other words, every intervention in people's surroundings (...) has a social implication.” <sup>5)</sup>

Any change in people's living environment, changes the way people feel about their living environment. The more people are allowed to change in their surroundings, the more they will associate themselves with those surroundings. This conflicts strongly with the Dutch idea of city-planning, where the government seems to think that each square centimeter of space has to be accounted for. This detracts from the environment's ability to offer people any room for interaction with their environment, at least not the interactions that would bring them closer to their environment. This lack of interaction can leave people feeling like they're in a place that has been designed by and for other persons, but not for them. This leads to a certain degree of alienation, which expresses itself in a lack of involvement in, and love for, one's surroundings. Hertzberger posed a theory within the field of architecture that can also be applied to the field of spatial planning. His idea is to leave certain places within a design empty, not to fill all the gaps, but leave certain gaps deliberately open, for people to give their own meaning to. The empty space is full of possibilities, as long as the place is attractive and interesting enough. It'll lead to more involvement which will hopefully lead to a renewed appreciation of the area. <sup>6)</sup>

### **Case study: Monumentaal Usquert**

A relevant case study to go with all three theories is a project taking place in the far north of the Netherlands, in a small village called Usquert. Just like Nieuw-Dordrecht, Usquert also suffers from decreasing numbers of inhabitants. The village was also interested in how to keep the inhabitants interested in their own village. Usquert is a village with a lot of history and even a lot of activities going on today. To bring the history and recent activities together, every other year an event called “Monumentaal Usquert” is organized. During this event, the inhabitants are invited to open their doors and gardens. Some of their houses are listed as monuments. On that day, inhabitants are offered a closer look inside these buildings. Artists, musicians and craftsmen from the village and surrounding region are invited to show their work. Some play or exhibit their art in a garden, some choose a square or church to perform. The event has now been held three times and attracted a lot of visitors each time. The organizers call it a real success, claiming it's a great way to show people the beauty of their own village.

In this case, the event is organized by Dorpsbelangen Usquert, an association for the interest of the inhabitants of Usquert. In order to execute this project, sponsors were searched. The municipality, the province and even the EU were able to help, with some financial support from regional parties. For a project like this, you need active inhabitants, who are willing to set it up. In Usquert, these are the people of Dorpsbelangen. These active inhabitants are able to find a lot of dependents. These are the people who live or manage a monumental building and are willing to open the doors. The artists that perform or exhibit are also either active or dependent inhabitants. The other groups of inhabitants are the visitors of the project. All they need is a flyer with a map and a list of activities they can visit. With one party organizing the event, it's very clear who is responsible. The other parties are just sponsors with money. The association Dorpsbelangen Usquert is a local party from the village. It's well-known among the inhabitants so they know who to turn to for questions.

And last but not least, it's an event that puts one village in the spotlights. The inhabitants of Usquert feel involved because the event is about them and their monuments, arts and crafts. All they have to do is open their doors and be friendly! 7)

## Results and suggestions

In the current situation, we've seen a few developments we consider to pose a (growing) threat to the continuation of the Emmen Revisited project. The prospect we see for the village of Nieuw-Dordrecht if the current developments progress, and the issues the developments lead to aren't addressed correctly, is an advance towards a "wait-and-see" standstill, where both parties are left uncertain of what they are allowed to do, what they need to do, and what they're expected to do. In such a situation, they will both be waiting for the other party to make a first move. This will in turn lead to frustration amongst all involved parties, which can lead to an even greater decline in involvement and participation.

In the current situation, the citizens feel they're just being involved by the municipality to cut back on expenses. The municipality shouldn't try to make the inhabitants to do this work for them, but get them to work with the municipality. Take sides with the citizens, not with the money. The municipality should get the regional, provincial and national governments to strive towards policy that offers more capacity for involvement from citizens. The roles of those far-away government bodies in the process should be less dominant, and more facilitating. The regional parties, that are to be considered more involved, should get a bigger say in these processes, and a bigger responsibility within the execution. This should lead to a faster, more intuitive approach towards the processes in the region. The municipality should act as a safety net, with an advisory role within these projects, and not as the initiator. With such a development, the municipality has a stronger starting position from which to present itself to the citizens, but municipality officials should nevertheless present themselves even more clearly towards the inhabitants. New ways of making and keeping contact must therefore be established. This shouldn't be done in a way that focuses on the utilitarian relationships, but in a more humanist way, where the human experience is the key factor. Bring the fun back into doing something with, in, and to the benefit of your surroundings. This makes it clear that we consider the government the designated party to take the initiative to get the whole process started. The inhabitants should eventually work together with them and also take some initiatives, but this probably won't take place without some stimulation from the government.

The presentation of relevant parties within the municipality is also lacking. A solution for this would be to better utilize the digital possibilities that present themselves. Because of the more straightforward and direct way of establishing contact, it would be possible to actively involve people with less hassle. It should be made clear towards the inhabitants who their representative within the municipality is. When we visited the village, a lot of political parties were promoting themselves in regard to the elections; if even a small amount of that kind of attention would be given to promoting the relevant parties within the municipality, it could have a very positive effect on the visibility of those parties. When it is clearer who the parties are, and what they are about they will involve the inhabitants more in the whole process. If they also keep the inhabitants up to date weekly with what's going on by mail for example the inhabitants will feel more involved. This way they inhabitants know what still needs to be done and what has been done. It will make it a lot easier for them to approach someone about the "work" that needs to be done.

On the other hand there also is the miscommunication from the inhabitants towards the municipality. To offer the right solution, an analysis of the spread of these typologies amongst the inhabitants would be useful. To achieve such a goal, further involvement from the municipality is first required, however. But it is still important to keep this information on the background, since it is of course impossible to take all these kinds of people in to account. A possible way to handle this is to organize certain different kinds of activities/meetings, because not everyone would like to come to, say, a barbeque, but if you also organize some kind of lecture different kinds of people will come. Or, for example, a neighborhood green workday, where not only inhabitants are present, but also municipality officials or, if possible, the mayor. This way more people will feel invited to get involved in the project. This can strengthen the bond between the municipality, who can see the willing citizens in action, and the inhabitants, who can see what the municipality is willing to do for them. For these activities, there should be spaces in the village that are left open to public initiative, without having to serve a communal purpose, except for the purpose of allowing people to experiment in shaping and managing their own surroundings. This space can be managed or stewarded by a group of more active citizens.

A third problem is the lack of clear definition of participating parties. According to people we've spoken, this is what's currently causing problems within the village. Some among them claim only economically relevant parties are invited to participate. For people it can be made clearer if the organizations and citizens will be classified in the three groups: municipality, private sector and the civil society. This will make it clearer which paradigm is valid for which situation, and help to define the amount of influence inhabitants are allowed to have. It is difficult to actually change the valid paradigms in a certain situation, since they mostly co-exist within Nieuw-Dordrecht. We aren't able to just choose a paradigm we wish to enforce, but we are able to more clearly define which projects fall within which paradigm(s). This should help the inhabitants focus on the issues in which they can actually get involved, and the parties with which they can get involved. We would also like to try to shift more activities towards the third paradigm, but that would require a less profit-oriented approach from the municipality. In the current situation, where there's a strong impression that the municipality is trying to expand participation just to save money, we don't deem this likely.

As mentioned before, Nieuw-Dordrecht is not the only village with these aforementioned problems. For the municipality and the Village Team of Emmen Revisited it would be advisable to take a good look at the project of Monumentaal Usquert. Nieuw-Dordrecht doesn't have as much monumental buildings as Usquert has, but perhaps the concept can be changed to Historical Nieuw-Dordrecht or Creative Nieuw-Dordrecht. The village has lots of qualities and creative inhabitants. These dependent artists can be activated by some active citizens. It must be possible to find some active citizens to start the project, among the Village Team or other parties. Financial support can be given by many parties, just like in Usquert. Put Nieuw-Dordrecht in the spotlight, show its beauty and make everyone feel involved by turning the village into a lively place, even if it's just for one day. An event like that is one that will not be forgotten by the inhabitants of Nieuw-Dordrecht soon.

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