


# **Covid-19 and its impact on public urban space in the Netherlands: Ongoing trends and looking ahead**



 **From Prevention  
To Resilience**

 **ZonMw**

 **Amsterdam University  
of Applied Sciences**



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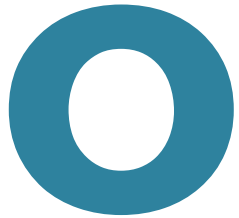
How did cities respond to the pandemic?  
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What opportunities and potentials are hidden in public space trends?  
How can we realise them?





# INTRODUCTION

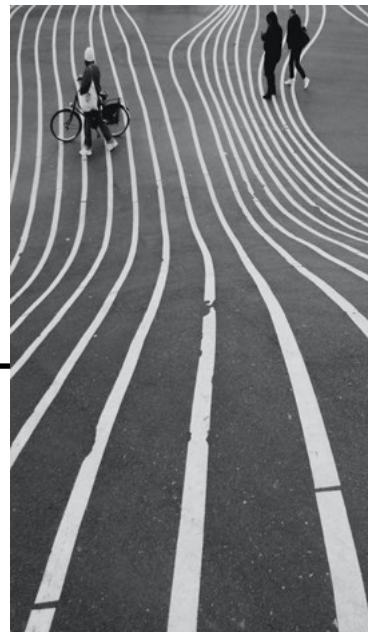
**'From Prevention to Resilience': research objectives and approach**  
**The Community of Practice**





## What is the project?

As a reaction to the challenges caused by the pandemic, the project 'From Prevention to Resilience' explores the possibilities of designing public space for more socially and ecologically resilient cities. Through desk research, expert sessions and a research-through-design approach, the project aims to generate



a framework that allows for the study and design of socially and ecologically resilient public spaces at the neighbourhood level; and an open-sources database of design examples, initiated as a response to the challenges provoked by Covid-19 and the pandemic restrictions.

 From Prevention  
To Resilience

 ZonMw

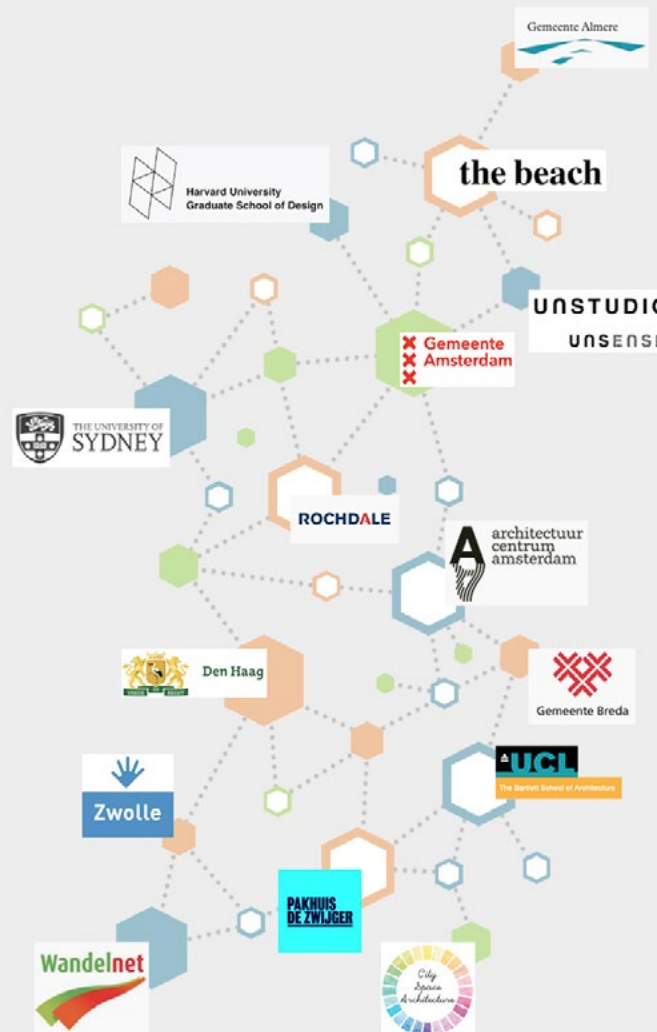
 Amsterdam University  
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## Objectives

Until recently, we have been experiencing a state of confinement while observing our cities and public spaces in a phase of change. Professionals are generating new design solutions in order to steer these changes in a positive direction, both in the social and environmental realms of our cities.

This document aims to capture some of the ongoing trends and everyday life challenges in public space observed in Dutch cities since the Covid-19 pandemic hit. We interviewed professionals from municipalities, research organizations, NGOs and design and architecture agencies in the Netherlands, each part of the community of practice connected to this project 'From Prevention to Resilience'. In these interviews, partners reflected on the various responses that have sprung up during one year of Covid-19 and how these may inform efforts to design better futures for our cities.

## Community of practice



## Interviewed partners

### Municipalities:

- Boen Groothoff, Amsterdam
- Judith Lekkerkerker & Annelies Bloemendaal, Almere
- Henk Snel, Zwolle
- Sarah Chekh Ibrahim, Breda

### Research and design firms:

- Filippo Lodi and Beata Giermasinska, UN Studio, UNx
- Diana Krabbendam and Emiel Wolf, The Beach
- Charley Fiedeldij Dop, Pakhuis de Zwijger
- Like Bijlsma, PBL Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving

The insights shared are generated by interviews with partners who are part of the Community of Practice and located in different Dutch cities:

- Amsterdam
- Zwolle
- Rotterdam
- Breda
- Almere

The trends observed in public space and the opportunities identified have a strong city-specific feature.



# Focus area



1

# Public Space Revalued and Repurposed

What are the trends observed in public space?





## PUBLIC SPACE TRENDS

With the strick of the pandemic, people and professionals came with various new initiatives that have shaped the form and use of urban public spaces. The public domain temporarily shifted and was transformed into new forms.

Based on the interviews, we have identified two main trends. The first trend concerns the **rapid shift towards soft mobility**, reflected in the increased pedestrian activity in residential urban areas; people started to walk and cycle more to commute and relax. The second trend refers to the **increasingly versatile use of green outdoor places**, attracting a more diverse group of users than before the pandemic. Some of the aspects of these two trends are following illustrated.



### 10 minutes neighbourhood concept

*Communities concentrated their daily routines in their own neighbourhoods, such as recreational walks, everyday shopping and other leisure activities.*

- Judith Lekkerkerker and Annelies Bloemendaal



### Cultural shift of public places

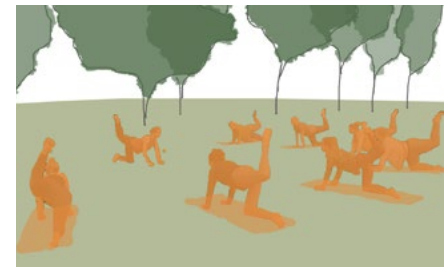
*The pandemic revealed important aspects that define public space, not just as a physical space but also as an environment with a strong cultural meaning. The pandemic allowed us to observe and understand the cultural shift happening in public places. People started to make it theirs by simply using public space, perceiving it differently, until feeling themselves as shared owners.*

- Diana Krabbendam and Emiel Wolf

### Shift of activities outdoor

*While work- and school-related activities entered people's homes, indoor leisure activities moved outdoors.*

- Like Bijlsma



## Diversified users

*There is a trend towards a more diversified group of users in terms of ethnicity, age and economic status. Lunching outdoors was before a leisure activity mainly enjoyed in warm weather by certain groups or youngsters. This pleasure has become popular in colder months and is more widely liked within the broader population. Dining in parks or green spaces offered a safer way to socialize during lunchtime or in the weekend.*

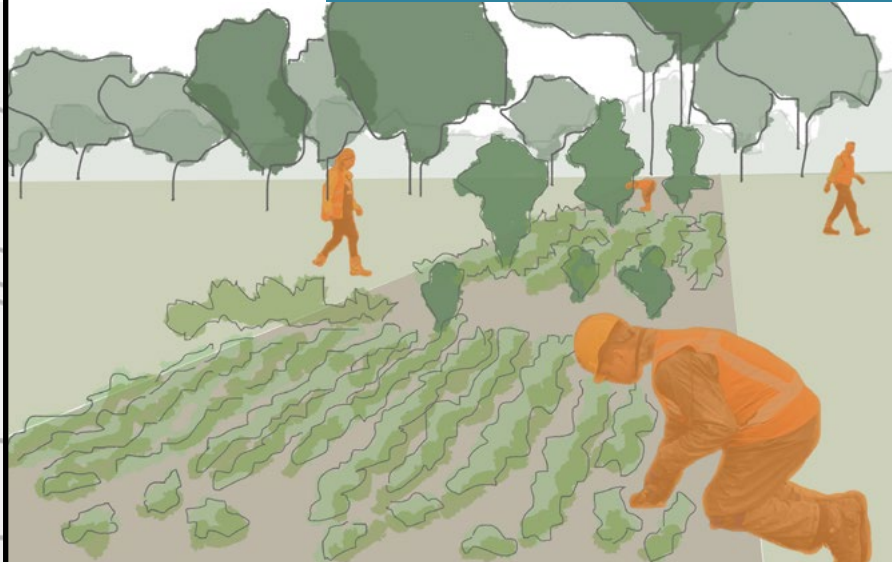
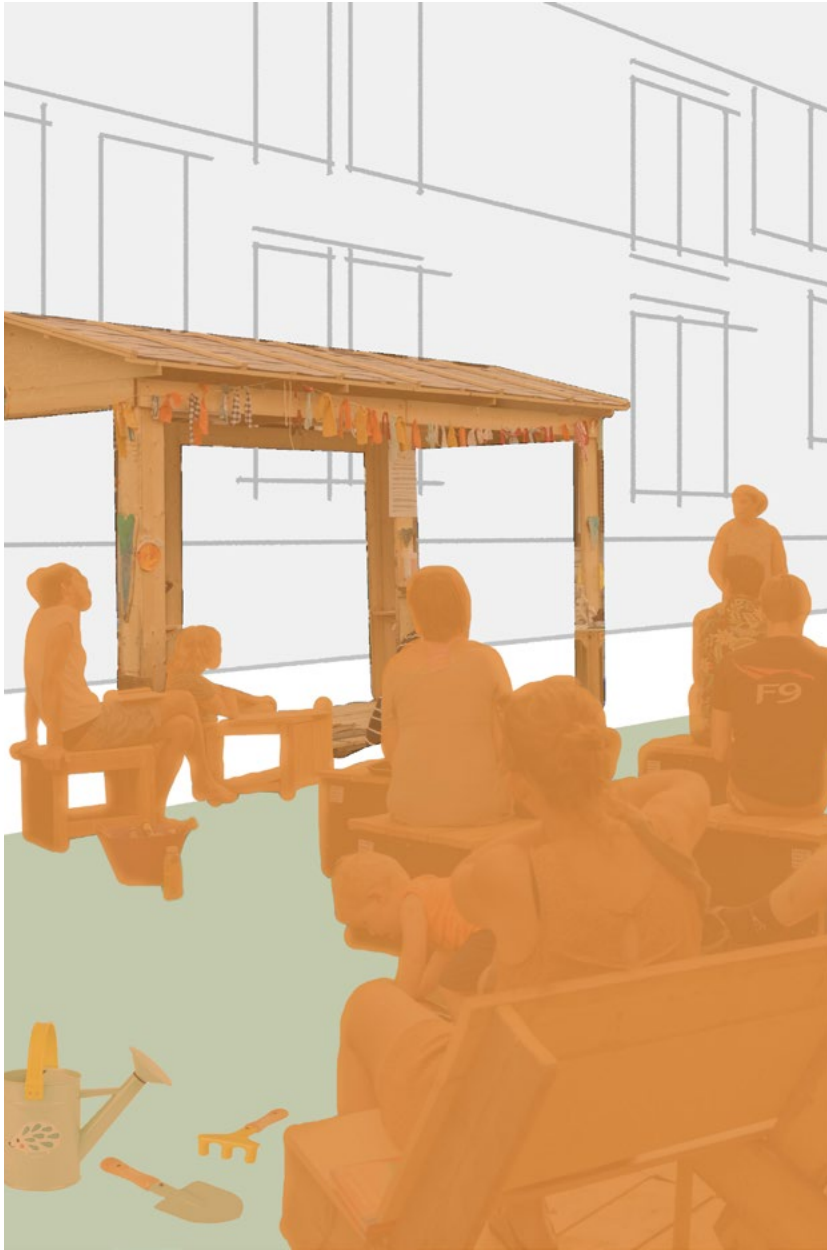
- Like Bijlsma



## New urban function

*Moving commercial and socio-cultural activities to outdoor public spaces affects local neighbourhoods in cities worldwide. Clear examples are the substitution of parking spots with parklets, the outdoor extensions of restaurants and bars over the summer months, and the increasing number of various kinds of kiosks.*

- Filippo Lodi and Beata Giermasinska



## Value of green spaces

*Almere is a relatively young city that acknowledges the potential of its solid green structure. In times of pandemic, the vast presence of public green played an important role for citizens, more than ever, as they started to utilize green infrastructures more actively than their private gardens: an unusual behaviour for the public space users of Almere.*

- Annelies Bloemendaal

## 'Vakantiestraat' ('Holidaystreet')

*Residents blocked their streets to create the so-called 'vakantiestraat' ('holidaystreet') to encourage a safe place for play and leisure for children and the whole community.*

- Sarah Chekh Ibrahim





# 2

## Partners' initiatives

**How did cities respond to the pandemic?  
What are the initiatives that took place?**





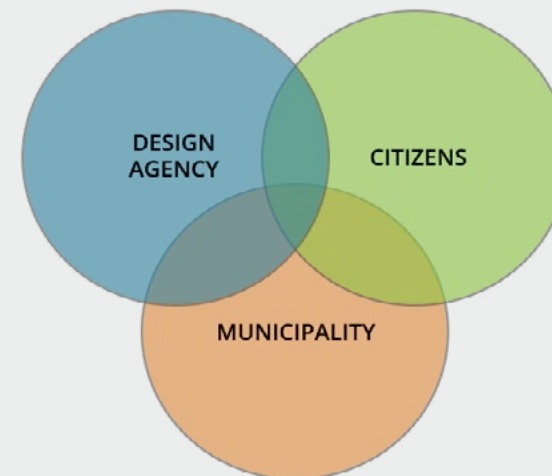
The responses to the shock caused by the virus are very diverse. Some cities responded promptly, while others took more time to understand the situation and the resources available before acting.

In general, many initiatives took place in the public domain and at the neighbourhood level; they have been witnessed and/or developed by the interviewed partners.

The schedule of the initiatives is variable. Part of the initiatives was realized before

the pandemic and have proven valuable to support people during the crisis. Other projects have been initiated in response to challenges caused by the pandemic and the related restrictions.

We highlight four initiatives discussed during the interviews, and we consider them well-representative of the diverse types of top-down and bottom-up responses. Additionally, a series of graphs will indicate the extent of an actor's contribution in designing and realizing the initiatives.



# Operational Mobility Center (OMC)

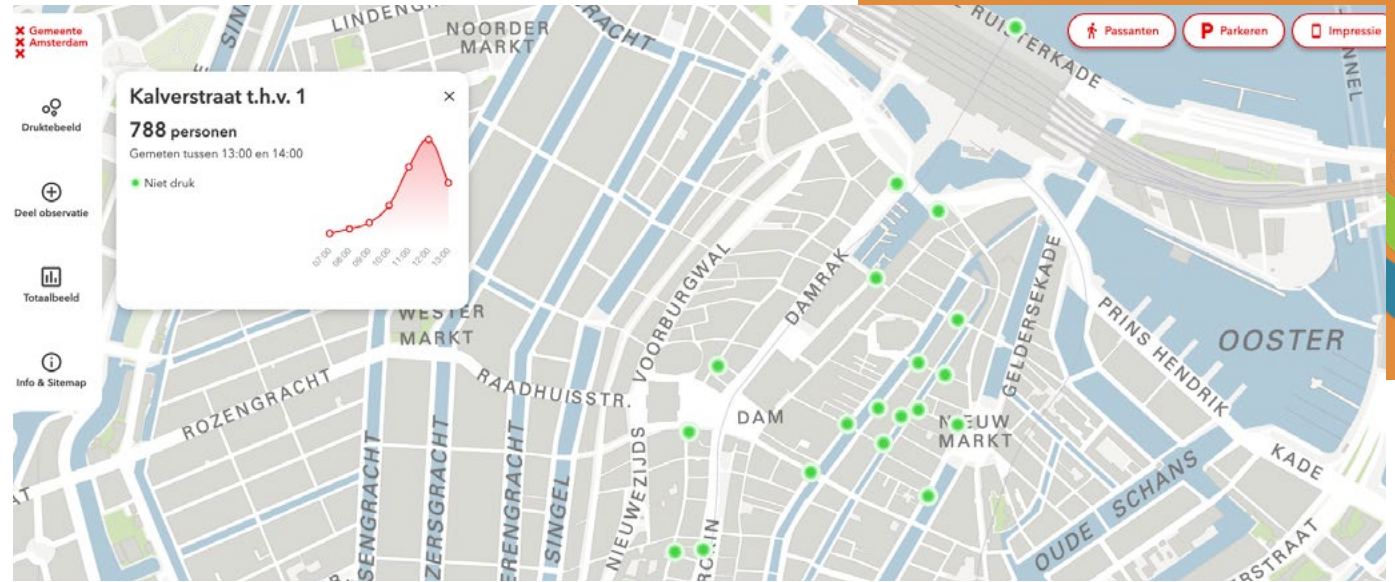
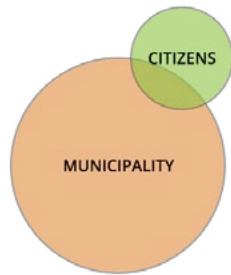
**Location:** Amsterdam

**Main actor(s):** Municipality - Boen Groothoff

**Project beginning:** 2018

**Initial scope:** managing mobility flows during events in Amsterdam South-East area.

**Covid-related scope:** identify crowdedness in the city to avoid unsafe situations.



With the shift in mobility during Covid times, issues related to crowdedness were raised within urban areas. Amsterdam municipality had to innovate its mobility analysis and management approaches to deal with the new challenges. Boen Groothoff, a municipal officer at the Amsterdam department of Smart Mobility, reports:

*The municipality was mainly focused on traditional vehicles road traffic and therefore had a limited grasp of other mobility*

*flows within the city. In 2018 the Operational Mobility Center (OMC) project was initiated by Amsterdam city, which resulted in testing new methods for data-driven mobility management, and managing mobility flows during event days in ArenApoort, Amsterdam's Zuidoost (Southeast) district.*

In light of the current societal needs of safe mobility in public space, the OMC project started to focus on gathering data on crowdedness, later on scaled to the whole city

within the project 'Intelligent gebruik openbare ruimte - IGOR ('Intelligent use of public space'), with the goal to avoid unsafe situations. This led to the 'druktebeeld.amsterdam.nl' platform, where these insights are publicly available for the citizens.

Furthermore, the obtained data provides a holistic picture of the situation. By comparing real-time data with historical data, the municipality can make assumptions about the future course of events and anticipate and prevent potential mobility problems.

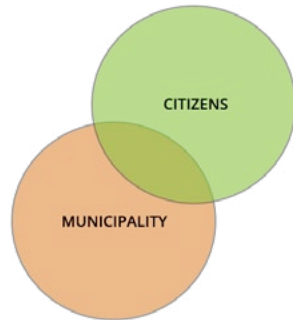
## Community platform 'Wij Amsterdam'

**Location:** Amsterdam

**Main actor(s):** Citizens, Municipality

**Project beginning:** 2020

**Initial scope:** gather and give visibility to all the bottom-up initiatives active in Amsterdam during the pandemic.



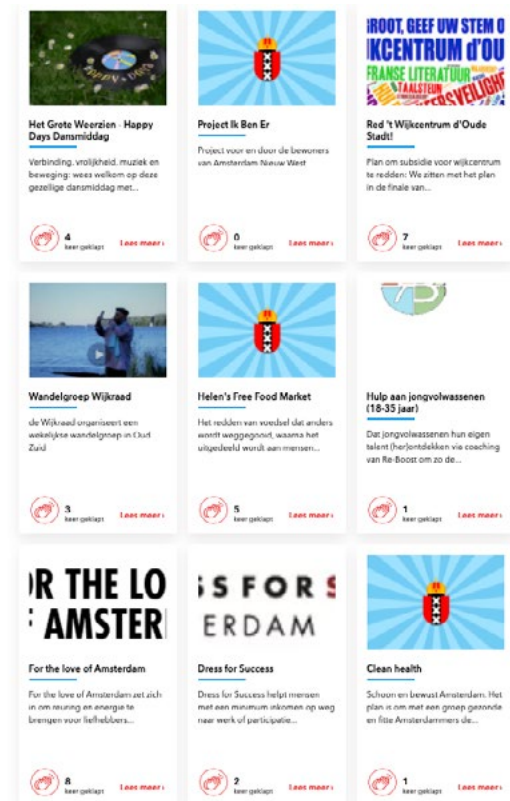
In Amsterdam, various grassroots initiatives were emerging to deal with the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic was bringing.

The municipality created the online platform 'Wij Amsterdam' to improve the visibility of the various initiatives for the citizens of Amsterdam. Charley Fiedeldij Dop from the NGO Pakhuis de Zwijger, who invited several of these citizens to share their stories on stage, describes these initiatives as having *a strong sense of adaptability and a spirit of change*.

For example, a broad group of initiatives assisted vulnerable

neighbours, such as elderly people, with food packaging and distribution. Others organised weekly activities programs to support people psychologically within the first strict lockdown period: residents realised and maintained community gardens and started other social activities collaboratively, engaging different age groups, from older people to children.

Many actions started in the Western part and South-East of the city. These communities demonstrated a high level of resilience, reflected in the solid local relationships between neighbours, which allowed fast and tailored reactions to very different challenges.





### CASE 3

## Social activities at the community level

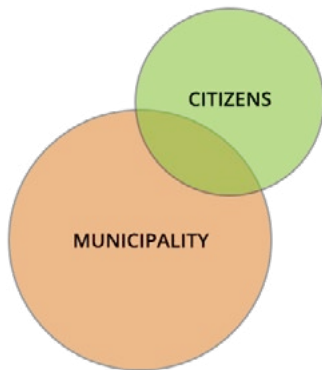
**Location:** Breda

**Main actor(s):** Municipality, community centers and citizens - Sarah Chekh Ibrahim

**Project beginning:** 2010

**Initial scope:** socially support the community.

**Covid-related scope:** support the local community especially the most vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic.



Sarah Chekh Ibrahim, from the municipality of Breda, has worked closely with several community centres during the pandemic. She reports that these places for encounters became even more valuable during the Covid-19 pandemic. They started to be recognized as essential locations for assistance and fellowship for a large part of the community. Thus, the city decided to support these places with supplementary workers and active volunteers. The responsibilities of the municipal officers became mainly directed

to build awareness and facilitate knowledge sharing concerning Covid-19 regulations and restrictions. With the municipality's help, community centres planned many initiatives to engage elderly people and youth. Examples are the 'neighbourhood deals', outdoor activities that involve the local community in creating and maintaining new green spots, which happened in over ten different neighbourhoods in Breda; or playful games with youngsters in public green areas or outdoor playgrounds.





## Social design initiatives in Osdorp Oost

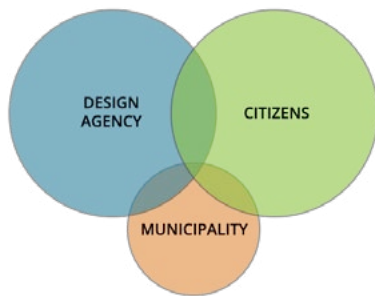
**Location:** Amsterdam-West

**Main actor(s):** citizens, The Beach - Diana Krabbendam and Emiel Wolf

**Project beginning:** 2016

**Initial scope:** create projects that make communities stronger. Designing new forms of relationships - creating new social structures.

**Covid-related scope:** support the community to cope with the pandemic crisis.



According to Diana Krabbendam, director of the social design firm The Beach (Amsterdam Nieuw-West), people from Amsterdam South-East and Nieuw-West are used to living in critical circumstances. The Beach has experience in working with people suffering from poverty and exclusion. The headquarters of The Beach is considered a place for gathering and sharing for the Osdorp Oost community. The working team's physical presence is fundamental in keeping relationships and engagement with residents. The lockdown restrictions significantly affected the organization's performance, and the bonds between the various actors started to loosen. Therefore, they had to rethink and restructure their work through a series of activities and tools to deal with the new situation and enhance the neighbourhood's resilience. As Diana states:

*What is vital within the activities we initiated is that not only our team connects with the community, but that the people involved also were able to build relationships.*

People had the chance to appreciate their spatial and social realms, understanding the value of their relationships with other community members and their connection with the nature surrounding their homes.



### 'Wilde Chefs' restaurant

The 'Wilde Chefs' restaurant at The Beach has adapted its way of working in response to the Covid-related regulations. Initially, the neighbourhood restaurant organized dinners each Thursday, involving primarily the oldest of the community. They replaced the dinner gatherings with the distribution of homemade food. Thanks to the additional sharing of cards, each person could write and send greetings to a friend or neighbour. These actions enabled people to stay in touch while being confined, which has been assumed crucial for the community's wellbeing.



## Makers Lab for children

When it comes to children and youth, parents and caregivers play a decisive role in their social activities. When the pandemic struck in Amsterdam, parents became afraid of leaving their children free to play and engage on the street. Thus, the organization developed another door-to-door project, distributing colouring materials and booklets designed for children to engage in playful activities indoors. This tailor-made approach is a method for tackling socio-spatial issues, particularly under challenging settings like the one in Amsterdam's West community, mainly composed of low-income migrant families: a small step to stimulate children's creativity to endure their skills development.



## Outdoor painting

When the pandemic restrictions loosened, a few activities started to take place outdoor again. For instance, children got involved in outdoor painting activities, in which they outlined the shape of their bodies next to each other on a white canvas. This initiative allows the youngest community to get alternatively close to each other again when social interaction and physical proximity are perceived as lacking aspects of peoples' life. At the same time, this exercise permits approaching a sensitive topic such as body appearance and physicality within a multicultural group.



## Circular herb gardens

Another group of the community that required attention was the one composed of local women. In Amsterdam West, women had often expressed the lack of recreational activities to fight boredom, loneliness and disengagement. To respond to this issue, a program developed around the circular economy's theme took place within 2020. With the support of The Beach team, local women started a community garden to plant, grow and produce tea. The program's progress brought further activities such as drying tea leaves and creating finished products distributed locally

and within retailers at the city scale. Guiding people through a concrete and hands-on project as a community garden enables them to understand concepts like collaboration, engagement, and circularity. It equips them with several tools and skills to foster human capacity, social empowerment, and environmental awareness.





# 3

## Looking ahead

**What opportunities and potentials are hidden in public space trends?  
How can we realise them?**



In light of the shared trends and developments observed in Dutch public spaces in the last year, we asked partners to reflect on the opportunities that these developments could bring.



## Mobility perspective

There are numerous opportunities hidden in the rapid shift towards soft mobility. Interviewees reflect on the potentials that increased pedestrian and unmotorized vehicle activities, as routine and leisure walking and cycling, can bring to urban areas and public life.

*Commuting to work and schooling habits drastically changed, leading to daily irregular and unpredictable mobility flows within one city and between various urban areas. We need to consider these trends and their consequences when defining mobility plans and spatial strategies for more inclusive and sustainable living environments.*

- Like Bijlsma

*In light of the growing presence of pop-up terraces and the related mobility obstacles they create, we need to organize mobility in the inner city more inclusively, thinking about people with special abilities, for instance, or the different types of unmotorized transports, and progress towards more soft mobility-centred policies.*

- Henk Snel

*We need to take advantage of the limited mobility in order to shift towards more sustainable solutions. For instance, we could consider drone technology or e-cargo bikes for environmentally friendly delivery.*

- Filippo Lodi and Beata Giermasinska





## Increased use and value of green spaces

There were also several remarks regarding the increased use and value of green spaces in urban areas and how this contributes to citizens' mental health:

*The pandemic has shown the strong potential of investing in green infrastructures. Almere municipality aims to improve existing green areas into more high-quality green places while looking at the small community gardens and local food production as exemplary initiatives to foster social cohesion.*

- Judith Lekkerkerker and Annelie Bloemendaal



*In Breda, the unity among residents was threatened by distancing measures. With a vision for a more international, diverse and green metropolitan area and focusing on collaborative ecological actions (e.g. community gardens), the city aims to strengthen social cohesion.*

- Sarah Chekh Ibrahim



*The current pandemic can be perceived as an opportunity to address climate change by introducing strategies that contribute to the ecology of the urban environment and people's health to strengthen green infrastructure and water management.*

- Henk Snel





## Plan for the long-term and short-term

While municipalities are dealing and coping with the ongoing pandemic, what is remarkably urgent is to simultaneously plan for the long-term and short-term resilience of their cities:

*Dealing with an unknown future brings many uncertainties to the table. Therefore, we need to tackle problems at their core by understanding and redefining notions such as public space, mobility, and green areas. Before we redesign public space, we need to rethink, for instance, people's current needs, functional aspects like infrastructure, and restorative interactions with spaces.*

- Like Bijlsma

*There is an urgency to reconsider appropriate planning programs and regulations. One of the spatial aspects that need more attention is intermediate urban zones, such as transition zones, courtyards or parking lots. A strong potential is hidden in these 'in-between' areas, where public and private uses are mediated and new type of connections can evolve from a shared common or a temporary appropriation.*

- Like Bijlsma



*Additionally, particular attention needs to be given to the increasing inequalities between (the coping capacities of) different community groups. We need to quickly intervene to support social groups or individuals who suffer from isolation, domestic violence, or poor school results and develop long-term solutions to decrease the level of inequality that the pandemic has brought more clearly to the surface.*

- Like Bijlsma

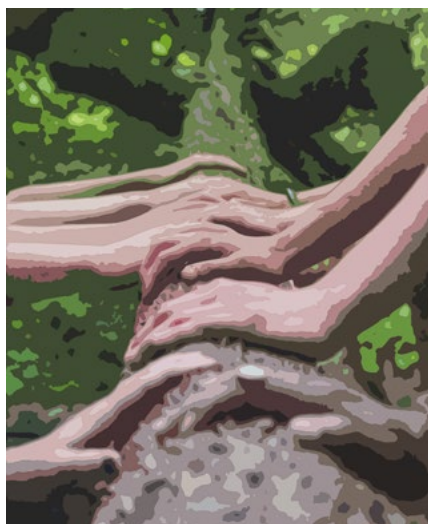


## Strengthening relationships and partnerships

Finally, partners believe that trust between organizations and initiatives needs to be a core principle to embrace in emergencies. Initiatives, as well as authorities, have to consider aligning each other plans, develop trustworthy dialogue and strengthen relationships and partnerships between each other.

*Municipalities could be more aligned with local initiatives. Better collaboration between top-down and bottom-up actions could benefit all involved parties and bring immediate and tangible benefits.*

- Charley Fiedeldij Dop



*Many initiatives within the city had the same or very similar goals. It is necessary to boost the interaction and connection between these active entrepreneurs through shared learning to achieve more impactful and cohesive results.*

- Sarah Chekh Ibrahim

*Enhancing partnerships between municipalities could produce more effective strategies. It is time to join efforts, share best practices and operate in an open-source manner. In the last year, Amsterdam and Rotterdam municipalities started to work together on an urban mobility app project; we will see the results of this collective work soon, and we hope it will be a good example to strengthen more intern municipal collaborations.*

- Boen Groothoff

*We need to consider residents as experts when addressing complex challenges that concern a cultural shift within our cities. Is our research really including local citizens knowledge and merging it with a professional perspective? We need to strive for co-development by creating a learning environment suitable for informing, exchanging, and getting more familiar with citizens' unique expertise and developing a project that proposes solutions for the challenges we experience today.*

- Diana Krabbendam and Emiel Wolf

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Giulia Gualtieri p.5, p.10, p.11, p.12

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# **Covid-19 and its impact on public urban space in the Netherlands:**

## **Ongoing trends and looking ahead**

