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SPRNG!: a case study on the relationship between local design collaborations and complex societal challenges

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ABSTRACT

This research reflects on the potential of innovation networks made up of 'creative hubs' as facilitators of design in a local context, by using the SPRNG! project from Leeuwarden as a case study, analyzing the initiative based on a systemic multilevel design perspective. In this approach, an iterative four-phase cyclic design process is being combined with a hierarchical systems perspective (Joore 2012).

Briefly described, creative hubs are physical spaces that host artists, designers, small companies, collaborations or events related to these. While providing networking opportunities, these hubs also help creative individuals to achieve their aims. Creative hubs receive many different names, varying from 'collectives' to 'incubators', yet it is possible to identify a common goal of improving creative businesses holistically.

The economic development of regions is strongly influenced by their national innovation system. Universities, research institutes, governmental agencies and policies that perform R and D activities, in combination with the links in between them compose this system together. (Nelson, 1993) However, socio-economical shifts are forcing the creative industry worldwide to find new forms and methods of collaborative design. The importance of creative networks is increasing for designers and innovators. (Arranz & Fdez de Arroyabe, 2012). Creative networks are the most crucial tools of implementing new ideas into local development strategies because their affectivity grows

proportionally with the ability to discover, facilitate and sustain solutions within the society (Rutten & Boekema, 2007).

In the recent years, in parallel to innovation being carried out of the context of technological companies to a societal level, there have been additions to national innovation system of the Netherlands. Various forms of networks emerged in form of spinoffs, star-ups, co-creation initiatives or social innovation. These bottom-up approaches have not only created a new dimension within national innovation system but also brought new necessities along. While academia and government could facilitate it's own innovation networks, these new additions required adequate assistance in order to function well. To fulfill this need, incubators, accelerators and creative hubs are added to this system as facilitators of innovation. Facilitating innovation can gain diverse meanings. A large percentage of facilitative entities that describe themselves as 'incubators' or 'accelerators' that provide startups with all kinds of resources varying from physical space to professional assistance. (Allen and McCluskey 1990) In the Netherlands most of the incubators are academic oriented which means they are directed towards student spin-offs.

Next to incubators and accelerators, during the last ten years the concept of 'creative hub' became an international trend in various formats. Worldwide, creative hubs are forming their own models based on their local needs. Aalto Design Factory from Finland and The Hub from United Kingdom are remarkable models that have been applied successfully. Both models were also carried beyond borders of the country they originated from and became successful in different contexts.

In the Netherlands unused, industrial, spacious buildings are being transformed into work and meet spaces for artists and designers. The hotspots are gaining an important function within the creative industry. Fresh graduates or start-ups are gathering around these locations to be able to build a network and position themselves in the sector. Remarkable examples of such spaces are *Caballerofabriek* in The Hague, an old cigarette factory renovated into a flexible workspace for small creative companies in 2006 and *Het Paleis* in Groningen, the old chemistry lab of the University, which is now being used as a meeting and inspiration spot for local creative minds. Similar to these, SPRNG! is located in De Blokhuispoort, an old prison building in Leeuwarden (Celik, 2013).

This research considers creative hubs as a new addition to creative industry, which is evolving rapidly since it has been conquered by 'generation Y' (and very soon by 'generation Z'). These hubs enable and facilitate collaborations that are becoming especially important during realization phases of design. At the same time, while reflecting on the shifts within the creative industry, the research is mainly interested in which way these creative networks position themselves between the dynamics of the industry and designers in general. Although this is a worldwide issue, this research takes a project from Fryslan, the northernmost province of the Netherlands as a case study. The SPRNG! project is a part of the Blokhuispoort network in Leeuwarden, which is the capital city of Fryslan.

Fryslan and the Northern part of the Netherlands have been under economical, environmental and social pressure during the recent years. This situation strongly reflects on daily life and threatens public unity by making every level of society vulnerable. Although Frisians are known to be a close-knit crowd that value social bonds, the area currently needs an action plan in order to sustain or regain the productive climate. Government reports and several researches from national authorities demonstrate the urgency of this situation. A vast majority of existing problems relate to the rising

number of 65+'s in the area, educational limits and incontrollable growth of urbanity. As a result of these problems, the overall livability of the area is deteriorating constantly. (Provinsje Fryslan, 2010)

Fryslan is suffering from population shrinkage. Government reports point out that next to various others like shortage of educational and professional opportunities, one of the main migration reasons for young generation is the limitation regarding the development and integration of new ideas. Especially in a country like the Netherlands where innovation and entrepreneurship are seen as core values, it is understandable for the young generation to lean more towards creative businesses. The Netherlands has a strong creative industry. As of 2013, 3% of the population has a directly creative job. (CBS, 2013) This large group of employees is mainly located in metropolitan areas. However, this creativity is not distributed homogenously throughout the Netherlands. The creative areas of the Netherlands are also a part of an unofficial and rather informal network. It is common to see exchange of knowhow and collaborations, even interdisciplinary ones. In the present state of the art, Fryslan is far from being a part of this network, which is not surprising since the main economical resources of this province have been agriculture and tourism for ages.

The province and local initiators are recognizing this situation and treating it carefully. In fact the capital, Leeuwarden, has recently been appointed as European Cultural Capital for the year 2018. Several groups have gathered together to create projects, proposals and future scenarios for this occasion. SPRNG! is one these groups.

SPRNG! identifies itself as a living lab for creative Industries. A 'living lab' is a research concept that is defined as a user-centered open innovation ecosystem integrating concurrent research and innovation processes within a business-citizens-government partnership. (Pallot, 2009) SPRNG! aims at forming a regional network of creative companies, universities, knowledge organizations and intermediary organizations that are in need of mobilizing. The region is dealing with complex societal problems that cannot be solved by business, government or any other single actor. A multi-disciplinary multi-actor approach is needed to start working on long-term solutions.

The SPRNG! Project will be analyzed based on multilevel perspective, relating developments that take place macro, mezzo and micro levels. On the macro societal level, the activities will focus on complex challenges that derive from Horizon 2020 ideals that are defined by the European Union:

- aging society

- food security and sustainable agriculture

- clean and renewable energy

- reliable water system

On mezzo level, SPRNG! will facilitate connections between different creative parties, in able to create solutions that will contribute to these complex societal challenges. For this purpose, the SPRNG! network functions as an organizational matchmaker between problem owners, for instance from government, and potential solution providers from the creative industry. On micro level SPRNG! Aims at coordinating concrete design projects, innovation challenges and crowd-sourcing activities. (SPRNG!, 2014)
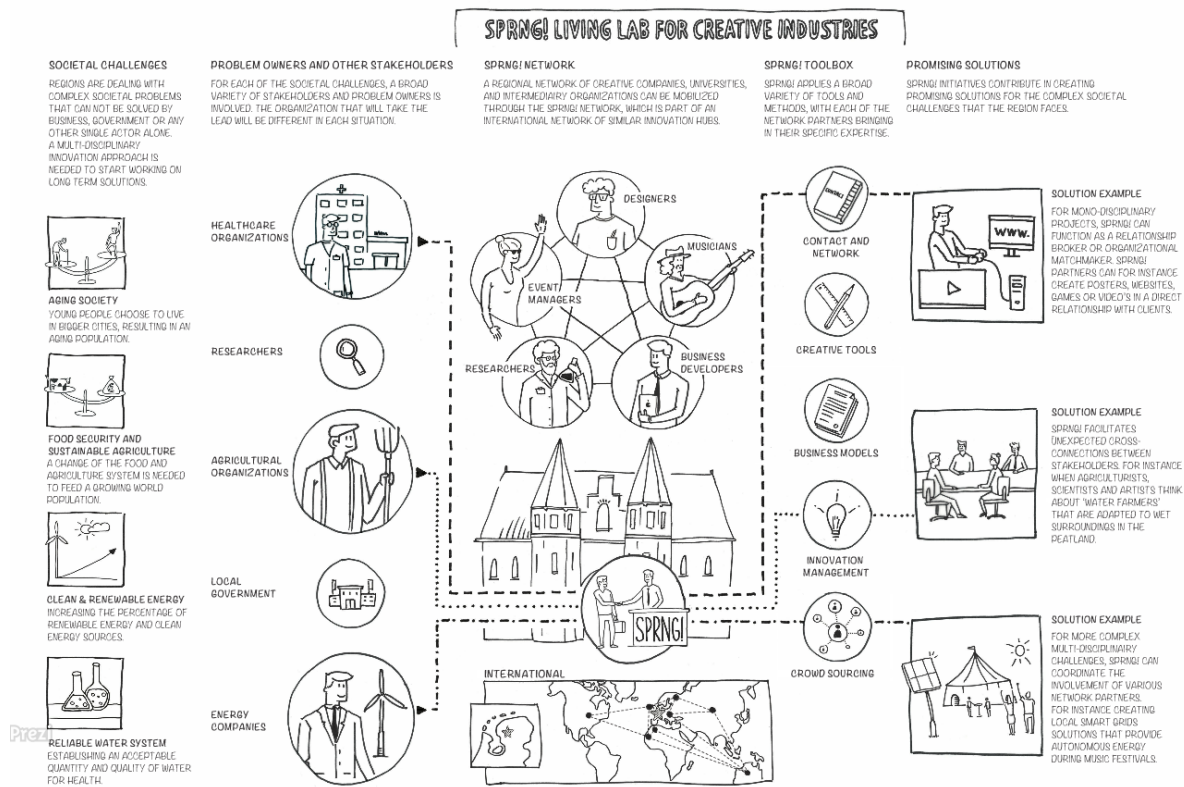
Figure 1. SPRNG! model, Schwandt infographics, 2014

This paper presents an overview of the activities conducted by this specific initiative since its start-up and evaluates their progress objectively. Also, the paper compares internationally successful models from other creative hubs with SPRNG! model. While evaluating the activities, the paper also takes a critical look towards the methodological framework behind this organization to be able to understand the internal dynamics within these types of creative hubs from a designer's perspective. Based on the research presented in this paper, an advisory guide can be formulated for future initiatives that aim at solving societal issues through design-based interventions implemented in local creative industry.

Figure 2. Blokhuispoort exterior and interior, www.blokhuispoort.frl, 2014

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