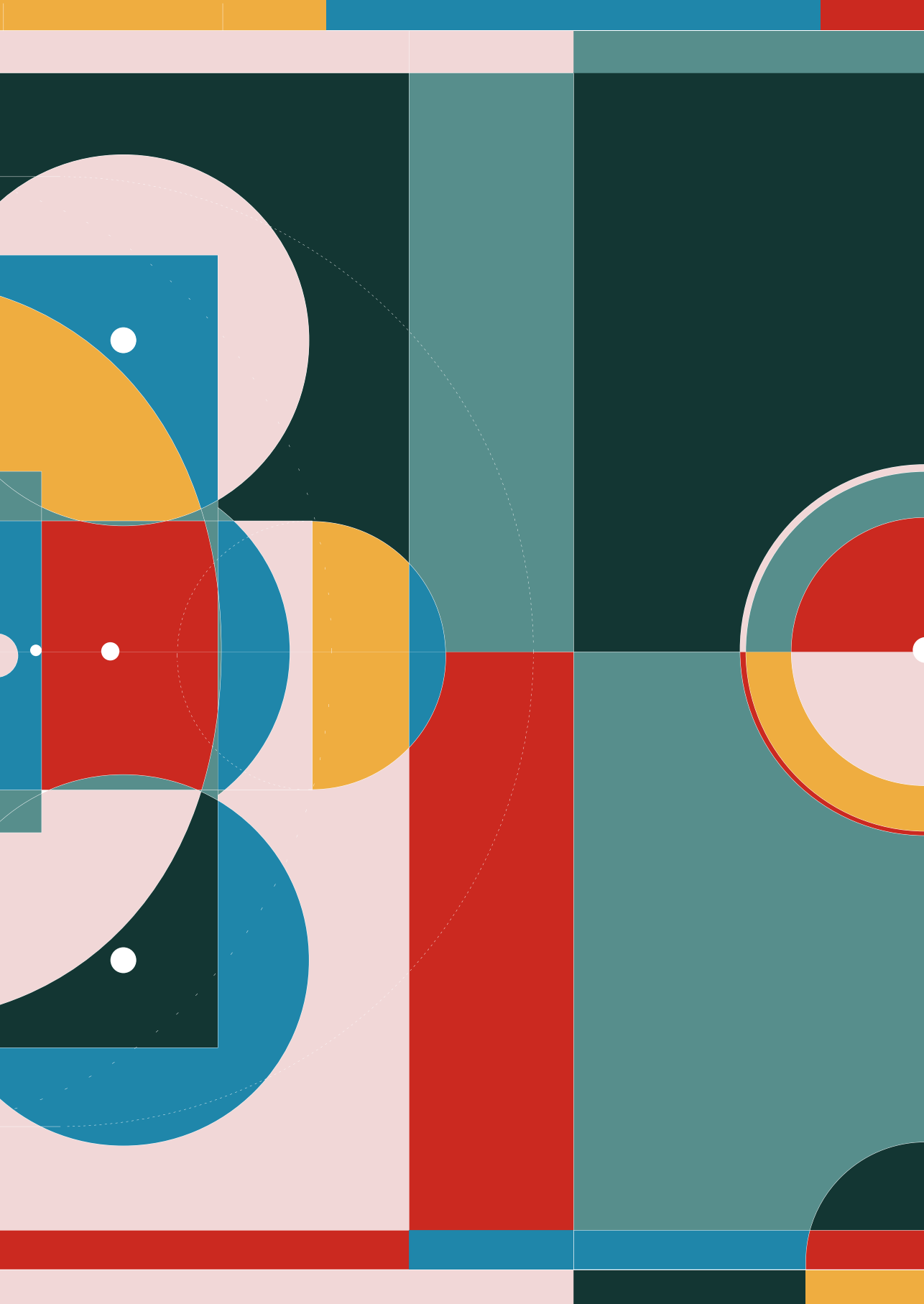


Dramalab toolkit: How theatre fosters better conversations about the future of a city

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How
Theatre
Fosters
Better
Conversations
about
the
Future
of
a
City

Drama lab Tool kit



Dramalab Toolkit

How Theatre Fosters
Better Conversations
about the Future of a City





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**What
Exactly
is a
Dramalab?**

In a *Dramalab*, together with residents, civil servants, social entrepreneurs, artists, and researchers, we explore the future of cities. We do this by having conversations in an interactive environment that is designed to appeal to different senses and to offer visitors a new perspective on their relationship to each other and to their living environment. In this toolkit, we share not only our experiences in organising a Dramalab in Tilburg but also the lessons we learned from our international research with Dramalabs in Drammen (Norway), Gdynia (Poland), and Genk (Belgium).

A Dramalab therefore is neither a play, nor traditional research, nor a typical community meeting; instead, it is an event poised at the intersection of all three, forming something entirely new.

A Dramalab consists of three phases:

- 1. Research**
This includes conducting in-depth interviews with residents, social entrepreneurs, and civil servants as well as attending meetings to discuss the area in question.
- 2. Co-creation**
Findings from the research are used as inspiration for the design of interactive and theatrical experiences, with the designing carried out in a collaboration between researchers and theatremakers.
- 3. Experiencing together**
Residents, social entrepreneurs, and civil servants are invited to the Dramalab, where together they engage in discussions based on the developed activities.

A Dramalab involves three elements.

- 1. Estrangement**
The theatrical experiences in the Dramalab create a sense of 'distance', making the familiar appear extraordinary, and helping to break through what is normally taken for granted. This opens up opportunities to develop new and unexpected perspectives.
- 2. Embodiment**
By embodying experiences in the Dramalab, abstract concepts are brought to life and made tangible: i.e. able to be perceived by the senses. Values, interests, and points of view can be represented in physical installations and objects, turning them into the focus of experiences and conversations that might not otherwise occur.
- 3. Entanglement**
Dramalabs explore how values, interests, and perspectives are interconnected, interwoven in complex, shifting, and often messy relationships. They give participants an opportunity to bring their insights to the surface and to articulate them.





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1. About the Dramalab

1.1 Background

Many municipalities find it important to involve citizens and other interested parties – also called stakeholders – in decision-making about their living environment. At the same time, existing community meetings and public consultations are often criticized, for example for excluding certain groups and for struggling to facilitate meaningful conversations. For better results, we need new forms of engagement. The introduction of the participation obligation within the new Dutch environmental law makes this task even more urgent. With Dramalabs, we investigate how art, and especially theatre, can contribute to shaping participation.

The Dramalabs originated from the research project CONTRA, an acronym that stands for ‘Conflict in Transformations’. CONTRA has organised Dramalabs in four European cities: Tilburg in the Netherlands, Drammen in Norway, Genk in Belgium, and Gdynia in Poland. In the Netherlands, the Dramalabs were coordinated by Tilburg University. In each of these cities, climate policy is required to be integrated into planning, often playing a key role in the redevelopment of certain areas. In each city, researchers, theatremakers, and municipal officials worked on the Dramalabs together, keeping this climate-related challenge in mind.

The Dramalabs were informed by prior research. This research focused on how cities shape climate policy, a topic marked by major transformations

on the agenda. Energy transition and climate adaptation, for example, require new infrastructure, which in turn demands that physical space be made available in urban areas. Since space is scarce, these changes are often accompanied by conflict.

In our research phase, we investigated how cities deal with conflicting interests, values, and perspectives when making climate policy. We did this by interviewing as many stakeholders as possible and by attending meetings and activities around the areas in question. The results of this research were used to shape the design of the theatrical participation activities. Ultimately, all of these elements came together in the implementation of the Dramalabs, in which residents, officials, and local entrepreneurs participated.

1.2 Why Dramalabs?

Major societal challenges require structural transformations, but these often encounter strong resistance. Research shows that such resistance is frequently addressed by striving for consensus. However, when immediate agreement is prioritised, dissenting voices are often silenced, and people's concerns may go unheard. As a result, these concerns are not reflected in policy. This is why overly hasty consensus acts like a band-aid on an open wound: it often worsens the conflict rather than resolving it.

Within CONTRA, we explore ways to design participatory processes and shape conversations about the future of cities in a way that creates space for conflict, while at the same time preventing it from escalating. Dramalabs contribute to this by making use of theatrical techniques.

The three leading principles in the design of Dramalabs are as follows:

1. Estrangement:

A Dramalab creates an unexpected and slightly alienating setting through the use of elements such as costumes, props, lighting, and interactive activities. This helps to challenge what is usually taken for granted and allows existing feelings to be expressed in new ways. During the Dramalab in Tilburg, for instance, participants were invited to place objects on a large (4 x 1.5 metres) map to visualise and compare different plans. Among the objects were a broken battery representing the high-voltage electrical supply station, a large container of water symbolising water storage, and a toy pram to indicate walking routes.

2. Embodiment:

However, Dramalabs involve more than just the spoken word; they engage multiple senses during conversations. This is achieved through elements like music, body movement, imagery, or even deliberate silence, allowing both feelings and arguments to be expressed in a new manner. Traditional participation processes are often structured in ways that reflect existing power dynamics, but without making those dynamics part of the conversation. For example, residents

and civil servants might discuss important topics together at participation tables that are deliberately kept small, enabling the discussion leader to maintain control. In contrast, embodied conversations – where verbal and non-verbal cues like gestures, facial expressions, body language play a central role – in a Dramalab go beyond the spoken word; attention is also given to physical aspects, such as how participants position themselves in the space.

3. Entanglement:

In a Dramalab, the ways in which decisions, relationships, and structures are interconnected are brought to the surface and examined critically. This can be done, for example, by reversing power dynamics in role play, allowing participants to experience other points of view. By experimenting with theatrical techniques, participatory processes can also become more inclusive, providing a platform for voices that are often unheard, such as those in a city's minority groups, or even those of future generations or of the environment. Through the imaginative power of theatre, 'conversations' involving even non-existing groups can take place.



1.3 What can Dramalabs do?

- Get participants to think.
- Encourage participants to imagine themselves and the world from a different point of view.
- Stimulate, challenge, and surprise.
- Motivate participants to explore alternative futures through visualisation.
- Facilitate learning through physical experience.

1.4 In short, what do public organisations gain from Dramalabs?

Dramalabs offer a way to design participation processes that spark the imagination, stimulate reflection, pose challenges, and create moments of surprise. They encourage participants to question their own perspective and to step into the mindsets of others. This opens the door for people who are not usually involved in decision-making to participate in a meaningful manner. Ideally, Dramalabs help ensure that difficult conversations happen before major policy decisions are made: namely, at a moment when those involved have already gotten to know each other better and have explored each other's values, interests, perspectives, working methods, concerns, and hopes. A Dramalab is not just a place for shared thinking but for shared experience as well. If feelings of tensions appear, they do not pose a problem, because when they arise, they reveal what needs to be open for discussion.





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**2. About
the Setting:
*The Arts
as a Starting
Point***

2.1 Traditional participation and the arts

The arts, and theatre in particular, provide room for self-expression and communication that goes beyond the simple exchange of arguments. Debates and discussions can be conducted in an alternative way, not only through words but also physically and sensorily, and with the opportunity to share everyday observations and emotions. The aim of a Dramalab is to initiate an open and exploratory dialogue between diverse groups involved in transformations, helping them to understand each other's points of view without the need for agreement

2.2 The power of theatre

The power of theatre in particular revolves around actors being able to assume diverse roles, thereby enriching the imagination and training it to see the world from different angles. Residents, civil servants, and others in the Dramalab are therefore not limited to the role they normally have. They are not expected to contribute only as residents, business leaders, or policy-makers. A Dramalab is also not intended to lead to a formal decision. As a result, less is at stake, creating space for the conflicting values, interests, perspectives, and emotions that inevitably accompany transformations of the living environment.

This makes the Dramalab complex, but that is precisely the intention. The Dramalab is designed not to reduce complexity but to seek it out and explore it. The complexity that Dramalabs entail, however, means that artistic expertise is essential to carry them out effectively.

2.3 Theatrical expertise

The Dramalab provides a different setting than the typical participatory meeting. By means of theatrical methods, it creates an alternative reality that allows participants to explore different perspectives, including those beyond their own. Instead of aiming for consensus, a stage is set for diverse opinions to be expressed openly and played out. For a Dramalab to be successful, the involvement of professionals in the performing arts – theatre-makers, directors, scriptwriters, stage designers, and actors – is necessary.

Without the involvement of artists, creating a Dramalab is like organising a concert with musicians who can read sheet music but play no instruments. The quality of a concert depends on the skill of the musicians, just as the quality of a Dramalab depends on the theatrical experience of the accompanists.

It is not only necessary to challenge the existing, but also to create new connections and new institutions, for this we cannot do without artists.

– Chantal Mouffe (2013)

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3. About the Design of the Dramalab

In this toolkit, we use as an example the **CONTRA Dramalab** that we organised in Tilburg in October 2023. Before discussing its components in the next chapter, we will describe briefly how we arrived at the Tilburg Dramalab. Since Dramalabs are always bound to the specific context in which they are organised, they can also take very different forms in practice. Examples of other types of Dramalabs are, for example, those in Genk, Drammen, and Gdynia, which we will discuss briefly at the end of this section. In the description of the Tilburg Dramalab, we highlight how insights gained from the specific case study influenced the design process.

Background of the Dramalab

The Tilburg Dramalab focuses on the redevelopment of Tilburg Noord, located between a residential area and the highway around the outskirts of the city. This area serves multiple purposes, including businesses such as garden centres, DIY stores, and garages, but it also features agricultural land, an electricity sub-station, and residential housing. The adjacent neighbourhoods, Stokhas-selt, Heijkamp, and Quirijn-Stok, are post-war districts characterised by high-rise buildings. These neighbourhoods also face socio-economic challenges and varying levels of criminal activity.

It quickly became apparent at the start of our research that the municipality of Tilburg had numerous plans for the city's outskirts. For example, a large water storage facility was needed to collect runoff from the city centre during heavy rainfall, the electricity supply capacity had to

be doubled, and there were calls for walking paths, picnic areas, and a 'low-stimulus' residential facility. In addition, two different residents' initiatives proposed plans for the city's outskirts, including sustainable agriculture and a neighbourhood meeting place or restaurant.

Phase 1 of the Dramalab began in the spring of 2023 with a series of interviews involving civil servants and local stakeholders. We also attended meetings organised by the municipality to discuss the city's outskirts. Mixed emotions quickly surfaced, however, with many residents expressing the feeling that they were 'at the bottom' of the municipality's priority list and doubting whether anything would ever come of all the plans. At the same time, redeveloping the outskirts was seen as crucial for, among other things, the city's climate adaptation policy – for example, to help prevent flooding in the city centre.

The installations

In Tilburg, we chose to work with a series of experiential installations. Interviews with the parties involved revealed that many different stories about the area were in circulation. Rather than presenting a single protagonist or a clear-cut narrative, the Dramalab highlights many voices and perspectives. Through these installations, we bring hidden undercurrents to the surface and explore the images and associations that the participants have with regard to the city's outskirts. This also makes the participants' experiences accessible to others, giving a tangible, sensory form to the diversity of values, interests, and perspectives.









4. About the Three Other Dramalabs

For the CONTRA project, we collaborated with partners in three other European countries, which gave us the opportunity to learn from each other and to develop different forms of Dramalabs. Below is a brief description of the Dramalab projects in Poland, Norway, and Belgium. A more detailed description can be found in our international toolbox at www.conflictintransformations.eu.





Gdynia, Poland

In the Polish Dramalab, researchers worked closely with municipal officials and chose as a case study the Redłowska Glade, a popular green space. The question was whether this green space would be preserved as a popular picnic spot or be designated for redevelopment.

The core of the conflict seemed to be found not so much in the spatial plans but in the communication between

the local government and activists. An interactive role-play environment was designed for ContraTAK!, using elements of LARP and Forum Theater. The Dramalab took place in a local theater where the participants, divided into groups, explored different interests and negotiated the development of their neighbourhood. Afterwards, the participants reflected on their experiences during a shared meal, which concluded the Dramalab.

Drammen, Norway

The Norwegian version of the Dramalab was called Bragernes ByLab, named after the development site in Drammen, which was facing a major urban transformation due to the relocation of the city hospital. A crucial question concerned what would happen to the hospital building: demolish or preserve? This question formed the central theme of the Dramalab. However, the aim was not to provide an answer but to explore the two conflicting positions. This was done by way of a 'performative conversation' at a nearby school. Participants shared personal stories and used porcelain cups to mark their favourite spot. During an audio tour, they listened to

the voices of objects, such as lampposts and trees, that depicted their vision of the hospital's future.

Participants then chose a side: preserve or demolish. The demolishers had to smash the cups that participants had previously provided along with personal stories. Those who chose to preserve glued the cups back together in the manner of the Japanese art of 'kintsugi'. In a final confrontation, based on the 'agonistic conversation' of Building Conversations, the two parties discussed their positions, ending with a high-five. Afterwards, they reflected and concluded with a shared meal.





Genk, Belgium

The Belgian version of the Dramalab took place in Genk, and focused on the redevelopment of a valley that was suffering from flooding and pollution. During the analysis, it became clear that many residents were not aware of the plans for redevelopment. Many experienced a gap between individual needs and collective responsibilities: for example, there was often resistance to measures being taken on private property even though those measures would benefit the community.

The Dramalab consisted of three phases. In the first phase, an actor in the role of a climate refugee travelled through the valley with a tiny house to stimulate conversations about

climate change. In the second phase, the tiny house was transformed into a confessional booth that was placed in the valley. In this confessional booth, fully anonymised 'blind dates' took place between stakeholders who talked to each other about their valley-related concerns and hopes. In the third phase, a public ritual took place in honour of the valley. During this ritual, participants carried to it a heavy stone from a parking lot that would disappear due to the planned developments. This stone symbolised the sacrifices associated with large-scale urban transformations. The ritual was concluded with a shared meal on a bridge, where participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences.



These examples demonstrate that a Dramalab can take different forms and, in diverse ways, stimulate people to think. The constant here is the creativity in the design, the involvement of the participants, and the anchoring in the local context. The focus is not on winning a debate but on sharing the experience from different points of view.





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5. About the Components of the Tilburg Dramalab

In this section, we present the various components of the Tilburg Dramalab. We begin by describing each one, followed by details about its duration, setting, participant instructions, and objectives. Our detailed descriptions aim to provide as concrete an insight as possible into what a Dramalab can entail.

The Tilburg Dramalab consists of the following activities, which participants complete in chronological order. We will therefore describe them in the same sequence.

1. **The Reception**
2. **The Child from the future**
3. **Sorting File Folders**
4. **Starting Position**
5. **Complexity**
6. **Hammer and Nail**
7. **City Outskirts Puzzle**
8. **Discussion**
9. **Closing Dinner**



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The Reception

Description As participants enter the community centre, we welcome them and ask three questions. First, we request that they sign a consent form explaining the purpose of CONTRA and granting permission to use the data collected during the Dramalab for research purposes. Second, we ask whether they object to being photographed. Those not wishing to have their picture taken are given a sticker to indicate this to the photographer. Third, we ask the participants to provide their contact details if they are willing to take part in a follow-up interview. After these formalities, we give each person two items: a bag of marbles and a ball of coloured yarn. We then show them to the waiting room where refreshments such as coffee, tea, and cookies are available.

Once the group is complete, the two Dramalab guides, wearing a white shirt and a dark blue jacket with matching pants, welcome the participants. They then introduce the topic of the City's Outskirts with the following words:

'Is the northern edge of Tilburg where the city ends or where the countryside begins? From the Vlashoflaan to the Burgemeester Bechtweg: Is this where nature stops and the city starts to take hold? It depends on where you stand and how you look at it. This is an area full of potential, with many plans underway. But whose plans are they? And is everything possible? What choices can be made, and who gets to decide? Tonight, science meets art, and together we meet you. But let it be clear – we are not going to decide anything – we will simply listen and try to look beneath the surface.'

The rules of the game are also introduced:

- #1 No matter who you are and what you do, everyone's perspective is of equal value.**
- #2 Speak from your own perspective. Use 'I' rather than 'we', 'they', or 'you'.**
- #3 Whatever we encounter here depends on your active contribution.**
- #4 As guides, we are responsible for keeping track of the time. This means we might ask you to wrap up a conversation, but rest assured, food will be provided afterwards and there will be plenty of time for you to talk with each other.**

Duration

The participants' arrival process requires approximately half an hour, while the guides' instructions take about three minutes.

Setting

The reception takes place in a separate corner of the community centre rather than in the Dramalab space itself. This allows everyone to enter the Dramalab together so that they discover the setting at the same time. It also gives guides the chance to introduce the rules of the game to the whole group at once. Moving into the Dramalab room also marks a shift to a different kind of conversation and interaction.

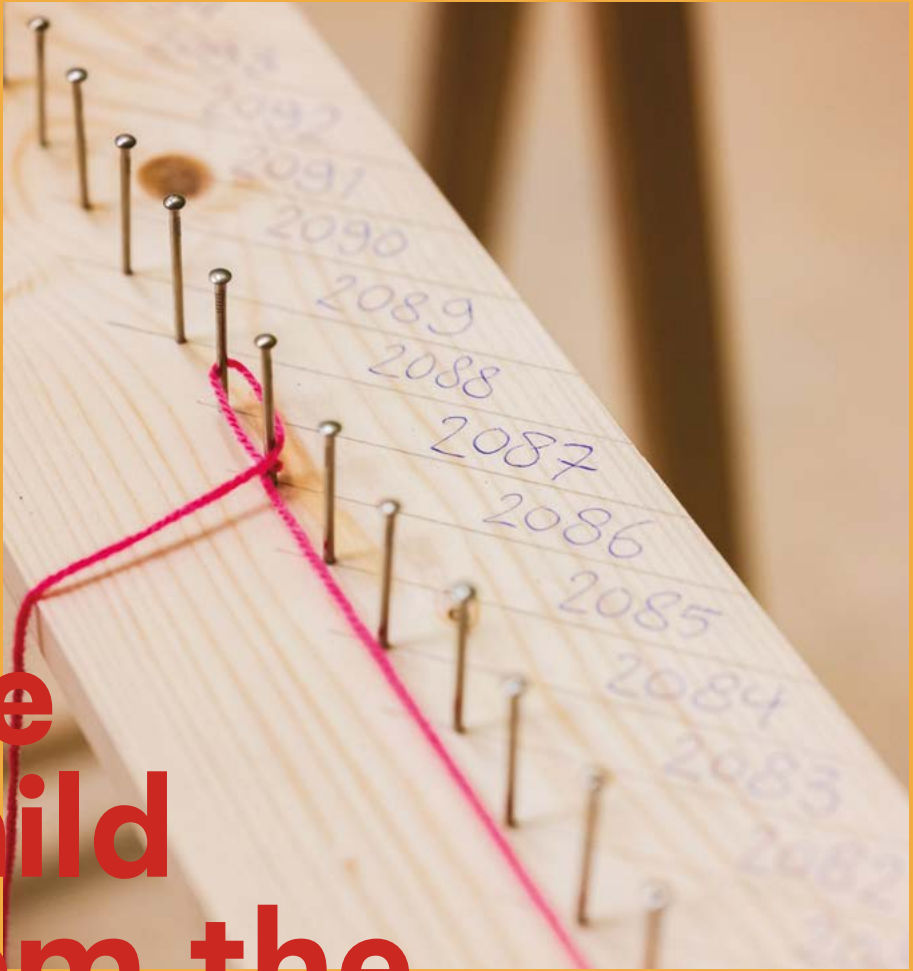
Instructions for conducting this activity

It is important that the people handling the consent forms are well informed about the Dramalab so that they can satisfactorily answer any questions participations may have. During our dress rehearsal, we realised that familiarity with the research and the Dramalab itself also affect how participants feel welcomed. Therefore, it is advisable to have one of the researchers or theatremakers present at the reception, rather than leaving it entirely to others (in our case, student assistants). In addition, to avoid queues and long waiting times, it is important to have multiple consent forms ready to be signed at the same time.

It is important as well for the guides to be 'in role' right from the start. In our case, one of the two guides was also the researcher who had previously conducted interviews with many of the participants. For her especially, wearing the designated outfit helped mark a clear shift into her role as guide. To help manage the schedule, both guides carried a script on a clipboard, with all text written out and with clear time codes for each part of the Dramalab. Note that while it is fine in practice to deviate from the script, it serves as a useful anchor when concrete instructions need to be given.

Purpose of this activity

The purpose of the reception is to establish the Dramalab framework, both formally through the signing of consent forms and informally by introducing the guides. In this way, we also signal to the participants that they are stepping into a special environment in which their contributions are treated with care and respect.



The Child from the Future

Description On entering the designated Dramalab space, the group gathers in a circle around the first interactive installation, positioned along one side of the room. The installation consists of several narrow wooden beams set on trestles. Each beam is marked with dates spanning from 1900 to 2100, with a thin nail indicating each year.

Participants are invited to fasten their ball of coloured yarn to the nail representing their year of birth. They then stretch a string of yarn forward to the nail marking 2023, symbolising their life up to the present moment (i.e. at the time of the Dramalab). This action is followed by music – a futuristic track, ‘Caligula’ by Windows 96 – and a person enters the room, dressed in a black hooded sweater and black pants, and with an LED mask obscuring their face. The figure also has a ball of yarn, which they use to denote years, but from 2075 to 2087. The music fades and one of the guides addresses the group with the following words:

'Born in 2075, and now living in... 2087. A twelve-year-old child from the future. A special visitor, here to witness how you will talk about the present, curious about how your actions today might shape the world to come. I would like to ask you all to close your eyes for a moment. Take a deep breath, and try to imagine what Tilburg North, the city's outskirts, will look like in 2087.'

Throughout the evening, the child from the future remains silent. After all, they do not have a voice in the here and now.

Duration

Approximately 10 minutes

Setting

This part of the Dramalab takes place in the designated space where the other installations are already visible. Along one wall, a row of wooden trestles supports wooden beams, each marked with dates and fitted with nails corresponding to years.

Instructions for the activity

Keep in mind that some participants may be uncomfortable indicating their age publicly. During the Tilburg Dramalab, for instance, we received feedback on two out of three occasions that participants felt uneasy in this respect. Give them the option to engage in a way they find comfortable.

Purpose of the activity

This part is intended to introduce the role of the child of the future without using language. The reason for this choice is to allow the child to be present, without speaking, and yet still be clearly introduced. The visual of the timeline made this possible.

The child from the future is a central element of the Dramalab. By having this silent figure present and observing during every conversation, the aim is to expand the frameworks – and especially the timespans – within which people think. This is one of the unique possibilities that theatre offers. We do not just talk about the importance of considering future generations – we embody that future by introducing it as a physical presence in the space.

The child from the future also serves to introduce the theme of climate. Although climate adaptation was a key motivation behind many of the municipality's plans for the city's urban fringes, it featured less prominently in the interviews with local residents. The silent presence of the child subtly raises the question: 'What consequences do decisions in the here and now have for the future?'



Sorting File Folders

Standing upright on a table are ten white plastic file folders, each labeled with the title of a spatial plan, such as ‘Structuurvisie Tilburg Noord’, ‘Stadsplan Tilburg Noord’, and ‘PACT Tilburg’. Nine of these plans are real, and were written in recent decades about the area; one plan, however, is fictional. The participants’ collective task is to sort the file folders into chronological order and identify and remove the made-up plan. They have two minutes to complete this, with music playing in the background to create a sense of urgency. When the time is up, the guides reveal the correct order of the file folders on the table next to them. Draped under a cloth are a set of the same folders, but arranged in the correct order and with the fictional plan removed.

The participants are then asked to place their marbles inside a glass positioned in front of each file folder. The marbles represent how much of each plan the participants believe has been realised. The more marbles placed in a glass, the greater the perception that the plan was implemented.

Duration

Approximately 7 minutes.

Setting

During this activity, the group stands in a circle or row around two tables placed against the wall. On one table are the visible file folders and the glasses, while on the other table, and draped under a cloth, is an identical set of folders in their correct order.

Instructions for the activity

It is important to give clear instructions on how participants are to distribute their marbles. Each one represents approximately ten percent of a plan's implementation. For example, anyone who thinks a plan has been half-implemented should place five marbles in the relevant glass.

Purpose of the activity

The file folders create a tangible connection to Tilburg Noord, and reflect a sentiment often expressed during interviews with participants: the feeling that despite an endless stream of plans, no real change is taking place. The number of marbles in the glasses clearly illustrates that, in the eyes of many participants, little is actually being done. We chose to begin with this activity, however, because it links in a playful manner to the area's history. The humour and the game-like element help to break the ice and create a sense of connection within the group.



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Starting position

We gather around the installation 'Starting position', where the guides invite two volunteers to step forward. Each is given a dice and is asked to roll it. The participant who rolls the highest number is given a large shovel, while the other receives a small one. Both are also handed a small plastic house. In addition, the participant with the large shovel also receives a toy boat, and the one with the small shovel is given a toy car. The volunteers then roll their dice again to determine how many shovels of sand they can scoop into a large plastic container. Of course, the person with the large shovel ends up with a much bigger pile of sand than the one with the small shovel. Next, they place their plastic houses on top of their respective sand piles and park their toy vehicle (boat or car) beside their house. Finally, one of the guides activates a rope mechanism, releasing water from bottles suspended above the containers. The outcome is clear: one house remains standing on dry ground while the other house is flooded.

While the participants are scooping sand, placing their houses, and observing the water being released, Johann Sebastian Bach's 'Cello Suite in G Major No. 1', performed by Yo-Yo Ma, is playing in the background. Immediately afterwards, from behind the group, the second guide introduces the next activity: a position game. Using barrier tape, the guide rolls out a demarcation line across the floor and asks everyone to gather round and 'take a position'. The rules are simple: If you agree with a statement, you remain where you are; if you disagree, step across the demarcation line.

The statements are as follows:

1. **'If you are rich, you have a better chance of protecting yourself against the negative consequences 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.'**

Each statement serves as a springboard to discuss with the group the meaning of starting positions in life and climate-related justice.

Duration

Approximately 20 minutes.

Setting

We gather around an installation consisting of a table with two containers, a bag of sand, various objects, and two dice. Suspended above the table are two bottles of water, held in place by a rope and pulley system.

Instruction for the activity

It is important that the guide does not point out that the situation is 'unfair'. In each of the three times we conducted this experiment, the observation about unfairness always came from the participants themselves. By the guide responding simply with 'yes, indeed', the message becomes more powerful, because it emerges from the group rather than being imposed by the guide.

Purpose of the activity

The purpose of the 'Starting positions' activity is to illustrate differences in resilience based on unequal starting positions, and to encourage participants to reflect on this. By assigning participants their starting position based on the toss of a coin, the sense of dilemma is reinforced. Everyone has an equal chance of ending up in a better position, which initially feels fair. However, once the positions are assigned, the situation quickly begins to feel unfair. It immediately becomes apparent how much advantage someone with more resources has over others. This activity also serves as a form of 'priming' for the final discussion, encouraging participants to reflect on the underlying values behind interventions in the living environment. It also clearly establishes the connection to climate change, particularly the issue of climate justice. In this way, it ties into the broader theme of the major climate-related infrastructure projects planned for Tilburg Noord.





The complexity machine

In this activity, participants work together to identify together what they see as the three most important themes relating to Tilburg Noord. In small groups of three to four people, each group is asked to select one theme after a five-minute discussion. The guides encourage the participants to talk through which theme feels most urgent or important to them and to arrive at a joint decision.

Each theme is written on a small wooden block, which is attached to a rope connected to the complexity machine installation. These themes represent real issues for which plans were being developed at the time of the Dramalab, with the potential to be implemented in the Tilburg Noord outskirts.

The themes are as follows:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Climate adaptation | 6. Employment |
| 2. Housing | 7. Sustainable agriculture |
| 3. Tackling crime | 8. Playgrounds |
| 4. Renewable energy | 9. Parking spaces |
| 5. Recreation | 10. Event venue |

Music plays softly in the background while the groups discuss their choices. After five minutes, the guides announce that the time is up and invite each group to share the theme they selected. The participants are then given the chance to pull on the rope attached to their chosen theme and see what will happen in the 'complexity machine'. Before they do this, however, a guide intervenes to state:

'Before you confirm your choices by pulling on the rope attached to the corresponding blocks, be aware that you have no idea what you might set in motion. Things could go wrong, something might break. There could be unforeseen consequences linked to your decision. Now that you know this, do you still prefer to pull on the rope or to do nothing?'

Doing nothing was of course an option, but our hypothesis was that people are too curious to do nothing. People are naturally curious about the outcomes of their actions, even when these outcomes are uncertain. Possible consequences of people pulling on their chosen block include a large helium balloon flying to the ceiling, a tower of Jenga blocks tumbling down, an arrow shooting upwards to the ceiling, and a vase of flowers falling and breaking.

Finally, the guides invite the participants to find a quiet spot in the room and take a moment to silently reflect.

'Close your eyes if you like. And think about whether you have ever made a decision that led to unexpected consequences.'

After about a minute, participants are invited to share their thoughts if they

wish. During the Tilburg Dramalab, this led to some interesting reflections. For example, one participant recalled meeting their current partner while cycling through the outskirts of the city.

The group is then split into two smaller groups to discuss complexity and what they consider to be important when making policy decisions in a complex urban context. This discussion was held on the basis of three questions:

- #1. 'How do we make choices when we do not know what the consequences will be?'**
- #2. 'What does that require from us?'**
- #3. 'How do we deal with responsibility for something we could not have known?'**

Duration

Approximately 20 minutes

Setting

The first half of the activity takes place around the 'complexity machine', a large installation positioned in a corner of the room. For the second half, participants sit on two sets of paired school benches arranged in a triangle, facing a wall where a large sheet of paper with the three guiding questions is displayed.

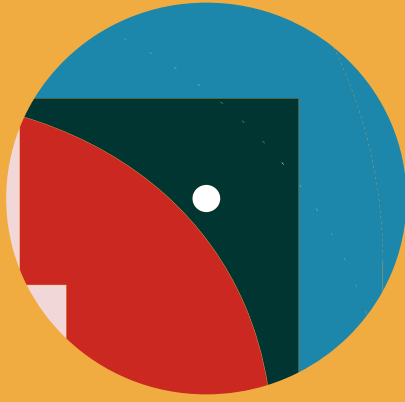
Instructions for the activity

This activity requires considerable time to set up due to the complexity of the complexity machine.

Purpose of the activity

This activity has a twofold purpose. First, it makes tangible the difficult decisions policy-makers face in contexts where multiple challenges overlap in a physical space. Second, it serves as a starting point for a meaningful discussion about which issues are of the highest priority concerning Tilburg Noord.

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Hammer and Nail

The 'Hammer and Nail' activity consists of two parts.

Part A: The group gathers around a long wooden beam with several tree trunks placed on it. Next to each tree trunk lie a hammer and a nail. Participants are asked to form pairs and decide who will use the hammer and who will hold the nail. The instruction is simple: The nail must be driven all the way into the tree trunk. Afterwards, one of the guides asks the participants: 'What did you choose first – the hammer or the nail? And why?'

Part B: Following this activity, the group gathers again behind a strip of checkered barrier tape stretched across the middle of the room. They are then presented with a series of statements to which they can respond by either stepping over the tape (indicating disagreement) or by remaining behind it (indicating agreement).

The statements are as follows:

1. **'You behave differently if you experience the consequences of your own actions.'**
2. **'The people who make plans for the neighbourhood experience the consequences of these plans just as much as the residents.'**

The following is not really a statement but a sentence the participants may complete by themselves.

3. **'For this question, you can each respond in one word: "If you are responsible for the plans but do not experience the consequences, then that requires (fill in the blank)".'**

Each statement – or position – serves as a springboard for a conversation with participants about what it means when there is a very obvious imbalance between taking an action and experiencing its consequences.

Duration

Approximately 10 minutes

Setting

Part A: Small gym benches stacked on top of each other, with tree trunks and other objects placed on top.

Part B: Later, a barrier tape is stretched across the middle of the room with cones on both sides.

Instructions for the activity

The 'Hammer and Nail' activity proved relatively easy to explain in practice, yet even with minimal 'effort' it had a significant impact. Several participants later mentioned it was one of the most memorable parts of the programme.

Purpose of the activity

The goal was to translate and dramatise a sentiment that emerged repeatedly from the interviews conducted in preparation for the Dramalab. The activity was designed to make tangible the lack of balance when someone's actions result in negative consequences for others but that person does not experience the same consequences. In the interviews, residents often pointed out that the external advisors and professionals involved in making decisions about the city's outskirts were usually present for only a limited period. They described it as a 'coming and going' of outsiders who were not personally affected by the long-term impact of their decisions. This activity is intended to help professionals better understand a recurring sentiment among local residents, while also creating space for discussion within a group that includes both professionals and residents.

What did you pick up first – the hammer or the nail? And why?



City's Outskirts Puzzle

During this exercise, participants sit in chairs arranged in a circle. On the floor in the centre lies an artificial grass mat cut in the shape of Tilburg Noord, representing the city's outskirts. Participants are then asked to choose an object from a table, with each object symbolising a plan that should – in principle – be underway or implemented in that area at the time of the Dramalab. These items range from a wooden entrance gate symbolising the idea of 'attractive entrance to Tilburg' to a P-sign representing a new parking area, to small wooden houses wrapped in bubble wrap, symbolising a 'low-stimulus housing project', and to vegetable plants representing urban agriculture. The participants' task is to work together to make a coherent arrangement of all of these plans: namely, determine where each item should be placed within the city's outskirts. The child from the future is also present, but sits observing silently from one of the chairs in the circle.

While participants are thinking hard about the arrangement, one of the guides enters carrying a large tree branch and announces: 'A new plan has just been made public; 5000 trees still need to be planted in the outskirts!' With the addition of this branch, it becomes impossible to fit all of the objects onto the mat. After the group has spent some time at this task, the guides invite them to:

'Sit down for a moment and take a look at what you have made. How does this image of the outskirts feel to you? And what might the child from the future think of it?'

This question is followed by a round of responses, with the participants sharing their thoughts and feelings about the arrangement they have created together.

Duration

Approximately 15 minutes

Setting

Chairs are arranged in a circle. On the floor in the centre is an artificial grass mat cut in the shape of Tilburg Noord.

Instructions for the activity

For the Tilburg Noord puzzle, it is important that the objects be intentionally too large, making it clear that not all of them can fit on the mat. This is to reinforce the activity's message.

Purpose of the activity

This seemingly impossible puzzle serves as a metaphor for the overwhelming number of diverse plans proposed for the area. In practice, the result is a fragmented, non-cohesive picture, reflecting the commonly expressed feeling that there are too many plans that do not seem to fit together well. Moreover, the silent presence of the child from the future introduces a discernible view of the long-term impact. What will this puzzle mean for those who are yet to come?

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Post- discussion



This takes place with participants seated in a double circle of chairs arranged around the ‘puzzle’ that was created during the previous activity. The child from the future is already seated and holds a fern, one of the oldest plant species on earth. Each participant is given a sheet of paper, a marker, and a piece of tape on which to write the name of someone who is not present, but who they feel should be part of the conversation about the future of Tilburg Noord, the city’s outskirts. The guides also explain that the child from the future represents the unheard voices of future generations, while the fern symbolises non-human life.

After everyone has shared whose voice they think should be included in the conversation, the question is raised as to how to make sure these people are actually involved in a subsequent Dramalab discussion on the future of Tilburg Noord.

Next, the guides invite participants to break into groups of three or four to discuss the following two questions:

- 1. Which of tonight’s experiences best symbolise what you feel is happening at the moment in the city’s outskirts?**
- 2. During which experience did you feel most uncomfortable, and what does that say about you and about this group?**

After each group has had the chance to discuss these questions and provide concise feedback in a follow-up session, one of the guides asks:

‘Based on this evening, do you think the child from the future has become less concerned or even more so?’

Duration

Approximately 30 minutes

Setting

A double circle of chairs arranged around the puzzle from the previous activity.

Instructions for the activity

It is important to prepare the chairs and materials carefully with regard to assigning names to the unheard voices, as this activity can easily become chaotic. In addition, participants may be unsure about whether they should write down a category of people or the name of a specific person. Many categories have already been mentioned, but these are less clear and more difficult to follow up than real names. Guides need to clarify in advance that specific names of individuals are preferred.

Purpose of the activity

The purpose of the ‘post–discussion’ is to bring together the evening’s adventure’s and experiences and to reflect on them in a meaningful way. By having participants express in small groups what was most relevant to them, they remain owners of their experiences and are able to give something back to the collective discussion. Moreover, the activity brings the voice of the child from the future, which otherwise remains unheard, to the forefront once again, leaving the participants with thoughts regarding future generations.



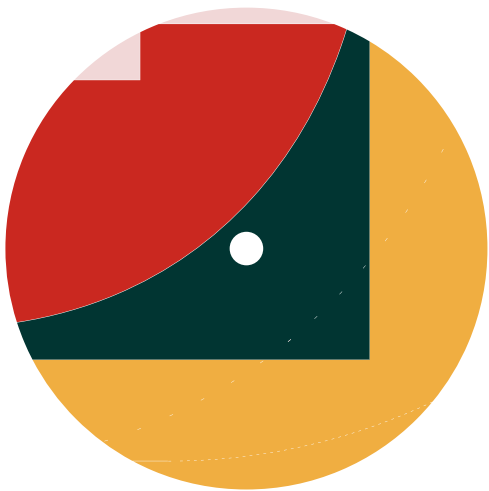


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Closing Dinner

After the Dramalab, all participants are invited to share a meal. This provides an opportunity to talk to each other. On all three evenings of the Tilburg Dramalab, Syrian cuisine was prepared and served by local residents who had set up a catering service.



Duration

1-2 hours

Setting

Long tables in the café that was part of the community centre.

Instructions for the activity

It adds value to the evening when the catering is done by local residents.

Purpose of the activity

The dinner provides a safe setting and an opportunity to resolve any tensions that might arise during the Dramalab, and to hear more about the participants' impressions, thoughts, and feelings.



6. About the Preparation

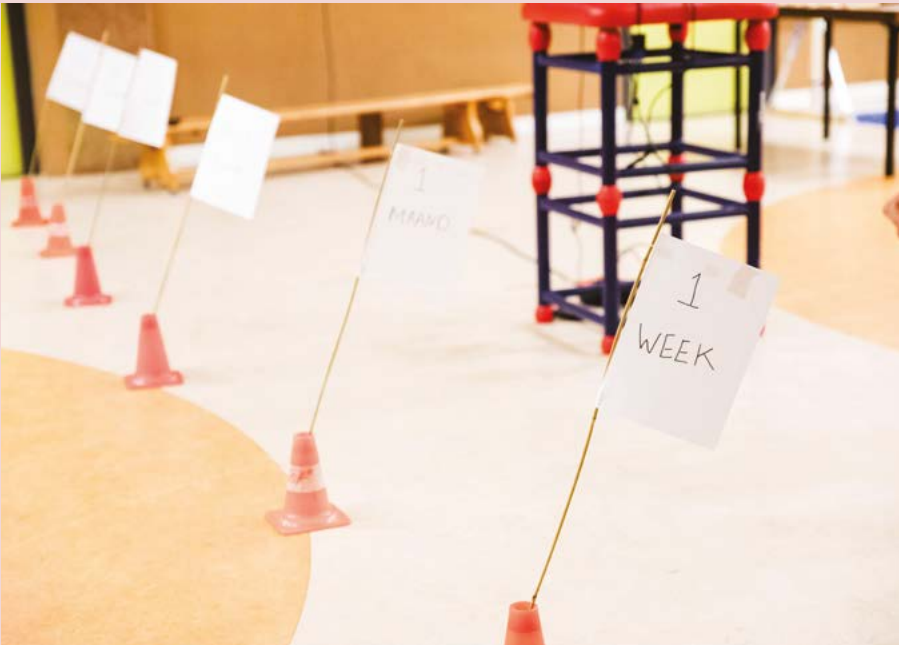
A Dramalab requires careful and well-considered preparation. The Tilburg event was preceded by interviews with around twenty people. There was also intensive contact with the municipality of Tilburg, and a series of participation meetings were organised in connection with the planning for the city's outskirts, Tilburg Noord. This section of the toolkit outlines several key aspects with regard to setting up a Dramalab successfully.

6.1 The importance of space in time and planning

At the end of 2022, the case study regarding Tilburg Noord was selected, and a collaboration was established between the municipality of Tilburg, Tilburg University, and theatremaker Taco van Dijk. Based on the schedules available at that time, the last week of October 2023 was chosen for the period of the Dramalab. In the theatre world, performances, rehearsals, and other commitments are typically planned well in advance. Planning on the part of Tilburg's municipality, however, appeared to be in a state of flux. Although October initially seemed to be a suitable time for municipal officials as well, the research project experienced significant delays between February and April 2023. Several questions concerning the outskirts had arisen at the administrative level, which meant that the university researchers needed to postpone their activities until these issues had been resolved. As a result, developments concerning Tilburg Noord were also delayed. However, because the theatre partner's

schedule was already full, it was not possible to postpone the Dramalab to a later date. As a result, it was decided to continue with the originally planned date in October 2023.

This led to a relatively short and therefore very intensive research period. The creative process of developing the design also came under pressure, as choices involving form and presentation depend heavily on the content. Therefore, in a future similar situation, we would recommend allowing for more flexibility in the schedule. This would take delays into account and provide the leeway to work thoroughly, thereby avoiding the need to do too much in too short a time. The theatremaker's schedule in particular is a decisive factor in this regard. We also concluded that it is crucial to define a saturation point: namely, at what stage do we consider that the information we already have is enough to serve as a foundation for the dramatic concept. Establishing this in advance helps to maintain focus and avoid unnecessary overreach in the preparation phase.









6.2 The importance of location for form, content, and accessibility

In preparing the Tilburg Dramalab, several possible locations were considered. The team of researchers and theatremakers strongly preferred a venue located within the area itself. However, after a warehouse owned by the municipality was ruled out due to the absence of basic facilities such as heating and toilets, the team settled on a nearby community centre. Although close to the city's outskirts, this location was not actually within the area, and brought other limitations into play. During the day, the chosen location also served as a gymnasium for a local primary school, which meant the Dramalab installations had to be set up and dismantled for each event. Furthermore, the community

centre hosted multiple activities simultaneously: for example, one Dramalab event was disrupted by drum lessons taking place nearby, and Dramalab scheduling had to take into account the start of a choir rehearsal in the adjacent room.

The uncertainty surrounding the location also had consequences for the theatrical design. Each potential venue came with its own opportunities and limitations, which required considerable flexibility from both the production and the artistic teams. The sooner that clarity can be established about the location and its potential limitations, the greater the likelihood of achieving a better outcome. Prolonged uncertainty leads to delays in making key decisions on both the creative processes and the overall production.

6.3 The importance of suitable facilities

During preparations for the Dramalab, it became apparent how poorly equipped a university is for intensive collaborations involving art and research. Although there is a growing movement towards greater cooperation between the arts and academia, university facilities are often not designed to support this in practice. The same applies to municipal spaces. On the Tilburg University campus, for example, there was no suitable studio or work space where installations for the Dramalab could be constructed. This led to practical

limitations and time pressure during the preparation phase, as areas had to be cleared and reorganised repeatedly, and many necessary facilities were lacking. It is essential to take this very practical, physical dimension into account when entering into future collaborations that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries. Especially for theatremakers, it is crucial that they have access to dedicated space and sufficient time to develop their work independently and thoroughly. To make this possible, it is necessary that the Dramalab – before it is developed further – be given sufficient organisational and financial support.



6.4 The importance of the team

Whether Dramalabs succeed depends largely on the team involved. Interdisciplinary collaboration does not happen automatically, as municipalities, artists, and researchers each have their own working methods, which also entail different expectations. Academic research operates in a different manner than the preliminary research a theatremaker typically undertakes. For example, it may take some adjustment for a theatremaker to realise that a scientist, too, conducts interviews in order to inform the design of the Dramalab – especially if that is something the theatremaker would normally do themselves. Conversely, a researcher might need to find ways to actively involve theatremakers and have them engage in the research phase.

During our Dramalab research phase, we addressed the matter by, among other things, organising a joint bicycle tour through Tilburg Noord, where the researcher shared her first impressions and results on site. Later, we also organised a walk together with local residents, the theatremaker, and the researcher, which helped foster a shared understanding of the area and its issues. In the collaboration with the municipality, it was essential to find a partner who could not only provide a

suitable case study but also be open to experimentation and working with unconventional partners. This called for openness and flexibility, but also courage on the part of the municipality. After all, it was a bold step to hand over the reins for organising a meeting about a sensitive area, where many different emotions and interests were at play. A number of municipal officials and politicians took part in the Dramalab without knowing in advance what they would experience.

Finally, the order in which the team was assembled turned out to be important. In the Tilburg case, a collaboration had already been established between researchers and theatremakers before the location for the research and Dramalab intervention had been chosen. This led to major logistical challenges, especially due to the long travel distance between Groningen and Tilburg. Furthermore, the principal researcher was appointed only after the theatre partner had been selected, which meant she missed out on the important joint introductory phase with the rest of the team. In a similar situation in the future, we would try to organise forming the team more carefully to make sure all members are involved in the joint introduction process.



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7. About the Future of Dramalabs

How can this instrument best be used?

Thoughts on the Results of the Dramalab

An important but complex question concerns what exactly is the actual outcome or impact of the Dramalab method. Following the Tilburg Dramalab, participants shared that they had experienced a different, more surprising form of participation than they were used to. For example, one participant shared that the child from the future character had made him feel uncomfortable during the conversations, which in turn led him to reflect more deeply on his own role and responsibilities. Another participant highlighted the value of tools like the Dramalab for people with limited language skills. She was convinced that this method was more accessible than a 'traditional participation evening'. A third local resident was so enthusiastic after attending the first session that she encouraged several neighbours, including those with limited language skills, to come along to the second session. Finally, a Tilburg municipal employee noted that there was less 'broadcasting' during the Dramalab in comparison to regular participation evenings, and that the various activities helped participants to gain insights into the policy issues at hand and to visualise them.

At the same time, however, not all responses to the Dramalab were positive. During several of the activ-

ities, some participants expressed uncertainty about the relevance of these activities to the policy issues being discussed. While the connection between the installations and the local context was clear to us, this link was not always immediately evident to the participants. In addition, certain participants – especially from the municipality – experienced a certain amount of tension. This is understandable, as it is not common practice for municipalities to deliberately seek out the points of friction in a participation process, as was done in the Dramalab. Moreover, the Dramalab intentionally creates room for emotions and dynamics that would otherwise not be likely to surface publicly. While this discomfort can also be viewed as a positive outcome of a method that embraces conflict, it also highlights the need for greater attention to guidance and aftercare in future events. Finally, the Dramalab's design deliberately kept it separate from the regular planning process. On the one hand, this allowed for valuable freedom and openness for exploration. On the other hand, it led some participants to seek more clarity about how the insights and outcomes of the Dramalab would actually be integrated into the city's planning process.



Reflections on the Use of the Dramalab as a Tool in Public Projects

The desire for greater clarity regarding integration in the planning process highlights the importance of consciously reflecting on the role the Dramalab plays within a participation trajectory. If the Dramalab serves as a first step, it sets the tone for what participation might look like; if positioned as the end of a process, it functions as a concluding step or reflection. Participants bring their own expectations – shaped by previous participation experiences – into the Dramalab. Its position in relation to existing planning processes affects not only how participants engage but what they expect from the outcomes. In the case of Tilburg, we deliberately chose to maintain a loose connection to formal planning, which resulted in both advantages and disadvantages. To facilitate free and creative engagement, the Dramalab must be an open space where participants can engage honestly without

fearing negative consequences. But this creates a dilemma: If participation carries no risk or obligation, can it realistically have a meaningful impact? And if not, what is the point of participating?

This is why it is essential for municipalities considering a Dramalab to think carefully about how it fits into the broader participation process around a project or policy. In Tilburg, although the timing of the Dramalab was coordinated prior to a planned experimental phase, it was not integrated officially into a formal participation procedure related to a project or policy. These kinds of considerations are also important for the design of a Dramalab so that the experience can be positioned more consciously with regard to both the future of decision-making and to how decisions were made in the past. It is wise to explore and exchange questions and ideas about this at an early stage in the conversation with both the municipality and potential Dramalab participants.

Thoughts on Possible Variations in the Dramalab in the Future

The above reflections on the outcomes and application of the Dramalab raise the question of whether variations in the method could be developed in the future. On the one hand, it is possible to imagine a stronger connection between the Dramalab and formal planning processes. Such a stronger link or integration could help address some of the disadvantages described earlier, particularly with regard to the desire for a clearer impact and a follow-up. However, this approach would also require significant time and effort, and could come at the

expense of the openness that was one of the Dramalab's strengths in its current form. On the other hand, certain elements of the Dramalab could inspire other, more widely applicable formats. These adaptations would require less preparation and fewer resources, but might not be connected as strongly to existing planning processes. In addition, some of the more unique features of the Dramalab, which complement regular participation processes, could be lost. In any case, we envisage three possible variations with regard to the Dramalab we designed.









Future Dramalabs could be imbedded more directly in formal municipal or governmental planning processes. On the one hand, this would increase the reach of the Dramalab and its potential to shape decision-making. In the Netherlands, for instance, the new Environment and Planning Act provides opportunities for this. While citizen participation is mandatory under the act, the form in which it occurs is flexible. A Dramalab could be used during the policy development phase to assess the mood, feelings, and expectations of the different groups involved. Alternatively, a Dramalab could be positioned at the end of the process, as a reflective, theatre-driven conclusion that motivates participants and decision-makers to reflect on the trajectory and its results. On the other hand, such 'institutionalisation' carries the risk that the Dramalab may lose its vitality, as it may become more outcome-oriented and, as a result, lose some of its open and free-form character. It also requires an open mindset and close collaboration between public organisations, artists, and researchers who, in a more integrated form, are also directly involved in implementing the Dramalabs.

Another way to apply elements of the Dramalab method is in a less context-bound form. The method developed within CONTRA is grounded in in-depth research into local community dynamics and their connection to area development. However, certain working methods and activities from the Dramalab could also be applied in more general settings. For example, the 'Hammer and Nail' activity or the 'Starting Position' activity – both from this toolkit – were instrumental in helping residents of Tilburg Noord to express their feelings, but the activities could also be effective at larger public events where residents reflect together on wider public themes or the future of the city, or even in training programmes. However, activities

that are tied explicitly to the context of Tilburg Noord would be less suitable in such cases. The drawback of this more generic approach is the weaker connection to real-world practice – a costly trade-off, since that real-world grounding is one of the Dramalab's core strengths.

Finally, during participation meetings, the principles of estrangement, embodiment, and entanglement could also be introduced through a single intervention rather than a fully immersive experience. This would make the method more accessible: for instance, by incorporating just one of the toolkit's activities into an otherwise conventional participation event. A character like the child from the future could, for example, join such a meeting to spark discussion. This use of isolated elements of the Dramalab could be especially appropriate in contexts where interests are less in conflict. However, individual activities in isolation do come at the expense of the Dramalab's holistic approach, and reduce the extent to which participants can immerse themselves fully in a new perspective and manner of engaging in dialogue.





Colophon

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