

EXPERIENCES IN FORWARD MONITORING OF URBAN INNOVATION

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On Friday afternoon I had a talk with Nadira* in the ForwArt store on Verdiplein. I met her the week before. We had dinner together with about a hundred other residents, volunteers and professionals involved in the development of Tilburg Noord, after a neighborhood walk along several neighborhood initiatives. She is very involved in all kinds of [youth] activities in the neighborhood, studies social work, has a side job, knows many people here, and is devoted to her neighborhood. Someone who knows how to take her chances. We have a cup of tea, I want to explore whether she could be of any help in the investigation. We chat a lot. I tell her who I am and what I'm doing. We ask each other questions back and forth. She tells me about her activities and what it is like in Tilburg Noord. For me a lot of interesting and relevant information that offers insight into the world of young people. A comment she made at the end of our conversation got me thinking: *"I really enjoyed talking to you, and if I can help you connect with other young people in Tilburg Noord I would love to help you. But if you had asked if you could interview me, I don't know if I would have said yes."*

*not her real name

The conversation with Nadira illustrates what we experience day in day out in ForwArt, a UIA-funded project that explores and experiments how the use of art and culture can give the Tilburg Noord district a positive impulse, especially for young people.

The UIA project application states that ForwArt focuses on the development of Tilburg North in four dimensions: well-being, cultural participation, public services and criminal undermining. These are all important and major themes on which an attempt is made to exert a positive influence via ForwArt, among others. That is quite something. That is why it is also described in detail in advance what all eleven project partners will do to realize this. After all, there is a lot of money involved, which must be spent responsibly.

However, an important discrepancy is revealed in the project monitoring and the initial findings of the accompanying evaluation. It is like two realities: that of the Excel sheets and that of everyday reality. This first reality does not take into account spaces that are not [yet] available to work from, key figures who drop out in the meantime, a pandemic that regularly has a limiting effect, chance encounters that lead to new, unforeseen but meaningful initiatives, different tempos in which [work] processes of different partners take

place and the [sometimes limited] scope for action they experience, differing views on the way in which project partners give substance to their contribution to ForwArt, and so much more.

In other words, a gap is experienced between the question of how ForwArt develops to be recorded in a structure from the perspective of project accountability [the deliverables] and the daily reality in which ForwArt develops and takes shape. Which meaningful developments take place that influence how ForwArt is implemented in practice completes not always the way it was initially conceived. This observed gap between Excel sheets and daily practice also affects the research component of ForwArt. The research provides input for the Excel sheets, but also moves along with daily practice.

The function of the ForwArt research is to show what working on innovation [transition] requires and produces for those who are involved. These are the [young] residents of the neighbourhood, but also those who are professionally committed to Tilburg Noord. We work in a kaleidoscopic way. Every conversation, every observation, every encounter offers a view of what is going on from that specific perspective. For this it is necessary - crucial even - to collect stories. Because stories show what actually happens. Then developments in the neighborhood are no longer abstractions expressed in numbers, but the people concerned become visible. Stories do touch. Not rarely stories are the starting point for change.

Gaining access to knowledge about daily reality, in particular the living environment of young people and the developments which takes place there, requires a qualitative research approach instead of performing measurements on predefined indicators via surveys. It requires the researcher to become part of it to a certain extent. Methods such as participant observation, in which simple listening and making contact are preconditions for meaningful data collection, are appropriate here. Even a generally accepted method such as [semi-structured] interviewing is not always sufficient to collect the required knowledge.

Because we are convinced: by strictly adhering to the reality of the excel sheets, you don't do justice to what can be learned from a process such as that unfolds in and around ForwArt. Because everything that happens during this process influences the all-encompassing task of which ForwArt is a manifestation and at the same time contributes to: namely area development and vitalization of the neighborhood, in such a way that Tilburg Noord is a place where there is - literally and figuratively - space for all residents, and in particular young people, to be there, to develop, to be heard and seen, to exert influence, to live a dignified life.

The reflexive significance of research is of great importance, because it is precisely this that provides lessons for policy making. In both the implementation and the accompanying research, we therefore keep an eye not only on the deliverables, but also, perhaps even more precisely, on the discoverables. In order not to miss what Nadira wants to tell without wanting to be interviewed.

