

Andere Tonen #3
Nienke van der Straten - Garage2020

Andere Tonen the podcast in which graphic designer Asja Keeman - together with guests - takes a closer look at the Dutch design climate. The aim is to reflect, learn and deepen the conversation about the position of designers and design agencies in society. In the third episode, Nienke van der straten (social designer at Garage2020) and Asja talk about working with experts or the field of youth aid and the people who really matter, the youth of the Netherlands.

AK: Today I'm speaking with Nienke van de straten of Garage2020. Garage2020 is an innovation platform in youth aid. They design solutions that children, young people and their environment experience. They do this from different areas of expertise. And with the people who really matter. They do this in the form of innovation developments, research and conducting interviews. For me, this is Nienke welcome. Nice to have you here.

NVDS: Thank you very much.

AK: Can you tell me why you became a designer? And how you ended up at Garage2020?

NVDS: Yes, I certainly can. And at least designer. All the way back. He was mainly because I had to study something and felt completely at home there. I actually had no idea what I was getting into. But I came to love it so much.

AK: It was a gut-feeling.

NVDS: Yeah, maybe it was. I don't know, but it was really great. It's, it's creativity. So I was basically always in the water. And can just be really fun to come up with solutions. That fit to the context and the problem. I then started working in a research firm. And because I found out that there are a lot of beautiful designs. Or a lot of designs that are very nicely worked out, let me put it this way, that I wondered if they should exist. So then I went into research first: to see can I first discover what the need is before looking for solutions. I did that for three years. And then I thought, I don't want this anymore, I miss designing. So then I started working at garage2020. And that is great fun. I can design on the one hand and investigate on the other.

AK: Yes, a nice combination of the two.

NVDS: Yes, exactly.

AK: And what training did you do?

NVDS: Yes, I studied industrial design at TU Delft.

AK: That's really something different?

NVDS: Yes. It did really become product design, back then. It's shifting more towards service design now but I was really trained there as a product designer.

AK: And now at Garage2020 as a social designer?

NVDS: Yes, definitely.

AK: And how do you like that?

NVDS: It's fantastic. That really is so much fun. A lot of freedom to see how I can look for the right solution. So the process also depends on the issue. And I really enjoy doing that.

AK: And that what of issues do you all work on?

NVDS: Well you said it before its innovation workshop in youth care our mission was always to make youth care redundant. So in that sense that always has the theme, we're always working with children and youth. Increasing the opportunity equality. And actually prevent them from ending up in youth assistance. Or at least have a good time. Yes, so in that, that has the theme. But that's actually much broader than I thought beforehand. On the one hand, you're working with children who are still in the womb. So then you're actually working with parents. Sometimes it's about preventing homelessness among you among young people. Sometimes it's about preventing younger people from carrying. So yeah, very variable. Actually, yes,

AK: Yes, with very diverse themes. Very diverse solutions probably too. And working together, I think, is a very big part of what you do. Can you tell us something more about that? Are there different ways you have collaborated within Garage2020 for the topics?

NVDS: Yes, collaboration is always important. Especially in the case of such complex issues. It's really the problems that don't usually have a solution that are really obvious.

So in that you really need different disciplines. At least that's how we look at it. You said it we actually employ a lot of different disciplines. Of which designer is a piece. But really just a piece, so we have anthropologists on staff, data scientist and anthropologists but also social workers so as not to reinvent the wheel. And in a project always try to have a diverse team in there as well. To look at that to the research. But also on the final solution.

AK: Yes, and that works very well.

AK: Yes, exactly. Dis it's really actually a collaboration between designers and emh let's call them experts for a moment. Who really have a bit more insight into youth care. I can imagine.

NVDS: On the one hand, the experts from the help of youth care. So that's the moment when you're designing for children and you ask yourself hard on: gosh, what is actually the development of a child? Then you get an answer to that right away. So that's very nice. Or what are the preventive tools? Those work or methods so then you can take away. But sometimes we also work with philosophers. So then we do philosophical session where we look go that problem. How does it actually stand in society? Isn't that something that we need to think around the system. And denounce the system in that. Rather than at the obvious solution?

AK: Yes. And how is that for you as a designer to work with that?

NVDS: Yes, I think that's fantastic. I really like that a lot. Yes as a designer you always have to have a fresh look. And that is reinforced in this way.

AK: And maybe it's also and quite logical approach actually. Because can imagine that if those are. There you have less knowledge in that area. But that there is someone sitting next to you who does have a lot of knowledge about that. He'll probably come up with other solutions.

NVDS: Yes, absolutely. Yes. You really need those forces for this. To come up with good solutions, I think. **AK:** Yeah.

AK: And then what is it like to work with that? Do you feel like you still have your design freedom, so to speak. Or are they constrained a little bit more?

NVDS: I think just more freedom actually.

AK: Yes? Can you give an example of that?

NVDS: Yes. With a design agency you often have certain ways and certain methods that are used. And at the moment I am often the only designer in a team. Everyone looks to me on how we're going to fill in that design piece. So I have and I also take a lot of freedom how to do that. So if that's going to be on the street. And ask everyone what they think about it. That's what I'll do. I recently did a pop-up creative session in a park. Then you can do that too. At one point we had the idea of putting an EM van up there. And then have young people rap in it. Well, then we do that so that's a lot of freedom.

AK: Yes. I can imagine what fun.

NVDS: Yes.

AK: And you just mentioned the ME van with the young people that you recorded rap sessions with. How did this project come about? Can you talk a little bit more about the content of this project?

NVDS: It's fun to ask how it came about. As a matter of fact, it was a pretty crazy idea. It was during the time of corona that these young people started to riot. And well, we're working with youth services and there were a lot of condemnations from societies about what the young people were doing. We felt sort of called to do something with that. And to say: can't we give these young people a platform themselves? We noticed that young people are often not very good at expressing feelings and emotions. And telling what is going on with them and what lies beneath those symptoms. So that's why we asked ourselves is there another way we can start having that constructive conversation?

And now I've come across in other projects that young people, as I said, are not very good at sharing emotions. Unless they rap. Because the moment they rap then a tidal wave of vulnerability comes over you that you think I thought you were a tough guy with a hoodie on who doesn't say a word. So one day the idea came. Can't we then give that a stage in the language of young people. But because at that moment there was a riot with all those ME busses. We thought, can't we do this in a police bus? That we actually have these two worlds that are diametrically opposed to each other at the moment. Couldn't we bring them together and have them engage in, well, constructive discussions?

And that was an idea. It came up. Then we thought, "Would that be something? So what we did is we called all the experts, the youth workers, people who can better assess

whether it is really a good idea or not. And they said yes jo, fat when are you going to do that? And then we thought yes when are we going to do that, no idea. And then we did it. And within two weeks it was there. So there we were in the snow with an ME bus and police and young people rapping. And that was it and it was such a success that we looked into doing it in other places as well. But it was actually kind of a brainfart.

AK: Well a great example.

NVDS: Yeah.

AK: So it can also turn out very well. Those very spontaneous ideas. Just reacting immediately to what's happening.

NVDS: Yes, carry it out immediately. It's fantastic how much energy is released. Yes, really that so many people were suddenly standing there in the cold. Because it was really very cold and could find each other there. Yes, that within two weeks was really fantastic.

AK: Yes, nice design sprint. Now do you have a favorite project or a favorite working method or medium?

NVDS: No. I think it's in the diversity. And that you can look at what is in front of us at the moment? And then what is a good method to use. And also just have the freedom to turn around halfway and think we're always going to do it differently anyway.

AK: Yes, exactly. Can you give an example of that?

NVDS: For example, we were working on a project in Amsterdam Zuidoost. And the plan was that we first wanted to look at what the context was there. And are there certain cultures or certain rituals that we want to take into account or draw inspiration from. And also in that way to look at what is then the core of the problem? And then we found out that it is very difficult to find these people. And that you also often have the usual suspect. So we turned around and said okay, let's go and recruit people on the street. So then we started to do that, I think I grabbed a cargo bike and we started to build with building blocks and we asked what is the value in parenting for you and in that way people on the one hand come to you and on the other hand what is the value of the child. pull, get into a conversation. And then see if you can interview those people anyway. Get information out of them in a different way.

AK: Yes. So actually it's a very direct collaboration with the community and with the people you actually work with.

NVDS: Oh yes We actually do everything with a team. So we also really give young people a voice, it's not just that we involve them, but we also really work with them. sometimes they are also part of the team and if that is not possible then we involve them in every possible way. And if we have any doubts at all, we first go back to the target group to see. Is it right what we have thought up or does it make sense to change it.

AK: Yes, so you always link back, at multiple times, to the people you are actually making it for.

NVDS: Yes, to give an example I'm working on a project right now about youth homelessness. We've talked to twenty-six different young people in the process, in really every way. Sometimes in a creative session. Sometimes in a see if there's a way to get their needs out. By building. And sometimes really coming up with solutions or really having in-depth interviews. It depends on what moment you're in in the process.

AK: And would you say yourself that just by involving the community. Or the people that you guys are making the projects for. That you can also tell more inclusive stories because of that.

NVDS: It really does depend on how you define inclusivity? I think what does help in this way. Is by the problem in the complexity of these people. What it's about is bringing those to the surface. And looking at that in it, do we involve everyone and do we reach everyone. But still remains a target group that you're talking about. So for example that project that just gave as an example of those homeless people. It's about young people with experiences with youth care. And in that, we do set the boundary there. The young people who have no experience with youth assistance yet. Yes, that. Those are excluded at the moment. But within this target group. We do ensure that it becomes more inclusive. Yes, but I think for instance for social workers. Or for municipalities that are currently dealing with the help. In the municipalities and within the care there, it helps to give those stories and those people a face. That it actually also provides the policy and the ultimate direction. That it is at least done with this boy in mind. And the complexity of this boy.

AK: Indeed. And do you think that the problems that you are concerned with have a solution? You just mentioned it very briefly that it's very complex. And how do you look at it?

NVDS: Well, they are complex. But I don't want to give up. I do want to continue to believe that the system can be changed. What else let's face it then the system wins. So I would say yes.

AK: And so how do you guys try to contribute to that? Is that really the projects that you guys do?

NVDS: Yes, it's the the outcome of the projects of course. But also, think process in that is also important. So by including those people in the process. You can also make quite an impact. Or at least bring about change.

AK: Yes. You just said make an impact. How do you measure the impact of these projects? Do you have benchmarks that you put up for that or is it mainly the feedback from the communities that you work with?

NVDS: I am actually a little tired of the discussion about making an impact. And especially trying to make it measurable. And trying to make it concrete. Let's make that time that we all spend on it just do things.

AK: Yes, use that energy back for that.

NVDS: That would help a lot but I also understand that it's important to make impact concrete. And to bring about change. So what often persists at the Garage. Is actually a combination of how many people can reach and the intensity that we can reach. I think in that, the quality is the most important thing. And it could be that by having a young person rap in a ME bus that, we give them an escape. And make a very big difference in his life. Then we're satisfied with that too. And if that's a thousand people a little bit, yes, then also. But the quality in that is the most important thing.

AK: Yes exactly, so that can be very lowkey. Really focused on one person. But it can also be focused on a larger group of people.

NVDS: Yes, exactly. I think in that it's also important to look at the different types of impact. It's not just measuring the impact or looking at the kpi's at the end. But you can also make a difference during the process. Sometimes already by just listening in an interview to someone and hearing someone out. But we started talking about The Youth Garage, for example. It's actually Garage2020, but with young people so they can come

up with their own solutions. There are only ten of them but that's a mega impact actually for them makes.

AK: Can you tell us a bit more about that about the Youth Garage?

NVDS: It's a way for youth participation. To see if we can involve them completely, let it be so to speak. We have experienced in recent years that young people are very good at coming up with their own solutions. And they are right in the middle of the context so they can actually do it much better than we can. So what we did is we gathered a group of young people. Some of them came from youth care and some did not. And they actually learned the Design Thinking method. Then gave them tools. Did a kind of safaris. That they can do inspiration in different places. And then you set them free, they get to choose their own topic. They then go through the whole process. And we're just facilitating. So if we say I need an expert. Then we'll see if we can support in that. And that is.

AK: What a great initiative!

NVDS: Yes, that's very nice.

AK: Yeah that sounds too crazy. And now you're sitting here in front of me and then I see that you're all laid out when we talk about this. What's that like for you? Because to experience it now. That younger people can actually do it very well themselves.

NVDS: Yes, I think it's just nice to show that we have to give young people a bigger voice. And that it can also be done differently than ticking a box saying we have spoken with young people and they agree. But to really let them be part of the process that you come to very different solutions that you might not have expected. That you hadn't thought about yourself as a policymaker.

AK: Is actually kind of a breath of fresh air.

NVDS: Yes.

AK: And when is a project successful for you? We were just talking about making an impact. That it can also be very accessible. Just by listening to someone. But do you have a project where you felt like this was a real success for me because ...

NVDS: Yes, I think it varies a bit from project to project. Because sometimes the projects that are really for the far future. That are not being used at the moment. But do bring about some kind of system change. Or at least thought change in that case, if you bring that about. People start thinking a little differently. Then I am satisfied. In other projects that are just a little bit closer to the present. Then I'm satisfied at the moment that it is actually implemented. And that you see that there is change in the current systems now. Changes. But sometimes it's also the case, for example, with the ME bus with the rapping young people. There I was very surprised about the result of the moment. The result and the one I had thought up was giving young people a voice in their own language. And at that moment to open a constructive conversation between the police and the young people. Then with the police and the young people. But when that happened then it came out a lot different than expected. So we found out that there was a lot of connection in a lot of things. Not only between the police and the young people. But also between all the other organizations that came to see. And between the municipality and the police. And that suddenly everyone could talk to each other as people. Instead of from a role. Then you go on from there.

AK: Very surprising. Something we couldn't have thought of beforehand.

NVDS: No.

AK: Are those projects especially successful in your eyes? If there is a different effect than you actually thought of beforehand?

NVDS: Depends whether this effect is positive or not. But in this case it is.

AK: A negative effect can sometimes be surprising, right?

NVDS: Yes, definitely. But I think that shows that you always have to test in between. For example, we are now the project on the homeless youth dar is now an idea. And I said there are a lot of young people involved in the process. But I still haven't reached the point where I think let's build that app. And from now on, no more speaking to young people until it's there. I do think there is a real difference between what people say and what people do. So also in that process you have to keep testing constantly. What is the effect and the indirect effect and the direct effect?

AK: And can you give an example there?

NVDS: Well, so in this case of a homeless person then. So then it could be that it's that it's not used. Despite them saying yes, I would use this and this is very useful. To me, there could be other context factors. That are not being considered at this time. So it could be that they think it's a really good idea. If there are sitting at the table with me that moment that he's busy with their studies or have concerns about finances. AK: Yeah, can't have that sitting there.

AK: Then there is no room for it.

NVDS: Then there is no room for that. So in that case you really have to test in practice whether it is going to work or not.

AK: Yes, always giving feedback, always self-reflection.

NVDS: Yes, checking whether the assumptions you have made are correct.

AK: Yes, that is an essential part, I think. When we talk about social design but also actually in all other fields that work with social, societal, political issues. But I would imagine that maybe during the Corona epidemic that was a little more difficult?

NVDS: Yes. I think it was. We did try to look within the rules that are there anyway to see if people could speak. Especially if you're talking about a homeless shelter then you just have to go there. I've also done interviews with drug dealers. They're really not going to tell me anything about teams what they've been up to and what we need to change. you just need a relationship of trust?

AK: No exactly, you just need direct contact.

NVDS: Yes. So we really tried our best to see what was possible anyway. Whether or not at a meter and a half or well anyway, outside something. But if you really want to start a movement. In a city where you don't live.... Surely that's the limit of Zoom.

AK: And did it lead to any new insights of oh the next time I'm going to approach it like that again. But it worked better, didn't it?

NVDS: Well, I did in certain cases think that I always had to do on interviews, always physical. because you always need that confidence. But I don't think that's always the case, that's when you're doing more dry subjects or expert interviews. Then you can do

that just fine through Zoom or over teams. In that, I think, you can be quite a bit more efficient by speaking to them digitally though. So I think we've become a conscious there. In what should be physical and what should be digital.

AK: And you just mentioned for a moment that you spoke to a Zoom drug dealers, for example or no, actually not through Zoom, but you did speak to them so. Can you talk a little bit more about that project?

NVDS: It's a project in which we're working to see if we can prevent drug crime among young people. And can do that together with residents, without the subversion program. To prevent young people from being recruited and getting stuck in the criminal circuit. For this you need, on the one hand, municipalities and authorities and police. But you also need everyone to counteract that. You just can't do it alone. And to find out what the real problem was and the context was we talked to everyone lost and fixed around this topic. So I also wanted to speak to drug dealer. Because I think yes, if I don't speak to drug dealers. Then it's always talk about instead of talk with So yes, then I was in a vacation home with the largest GHB dealer in North Holland. According to his own words, I didn't check, having an interview.

AK: Of all places.

NVDS: Yes, that makes you wonder how I ended up here.

AK: Makes you wonder how I got here.

NVDS: Yes, haha.

AK: And what came out of it in the end?

NVDS: That's a good question. In the end we developed a platform to discuss these issues with young people behind closed doors. Because a lot of young people turn to drugs. Because they don't talk about their emotions and vulnerabilities. Very briefly, mind you. But yes, I thought it was time to get rid of the shame. By being able to talk to each other anonymously about it, in order to counteract some of this.

AK: And what did they think of this themselves?

NVDS: I think at the moment it has been a pilot version. I think it still needs some scraping. Especially when you're dealing with drug crime. I think it works very well for use. And that there is also a need for it. Especially if you encourage in that. That parents also speak with young people and experts by experience. And that we broaden the perspective a bit. The feeling that you are not alone. For drug dealers, I think it's slightly different. And for them it is even more exciting to share something. Because the consequences are big. So I think a different way has to be found in that.

AK: Yes, exactly. So you are still working on that?

NVDS: Yes, certainly. Yes.

AK: We've dropped the word vulnerability a couple of times. So do you believe in the power of vulnerability?

NVDS: Well, absolutely. Yes. I think the most important thing is that you just sit there as people. So that you're sitting next to someone and genuinely listening. So not trying to finish your questionnaire. But let them tell their story in their own words in their own order. Of course you can steer them a bit to ensure that you get the right relevant information for your project. But in that you have to be able to, the sincerity that's the most important thing I think, just for a little while, dive completely into someone else's world of experience and want to dive in. Also, I think, wanting to understand. Then that comes naturally.

AK: But that wants to be one of your strengths, I think.

NVDS: I'm just really curious about it. I just want to know lol.

AK: Yes and you want to understand it I think then too.

NVDS: I want to understand. Yes, I think that also characterizes me as a designer. The more complex the subject and the less I understand it, the more I want to know about it. So I want to know why someone became a drug dealer. Because when I look at a class of children of ten. Then I think there's no one among them who thinks later when I grow up, I'll become a drug dealer. Or I'll become a criminal...

AK: That must be very crazy.

NVDS: Yes exactly. So that only fascinates me because I then want to know what happened during that time. That you did find this as a logical step. And I have to say that it's also quite understandable. Occasionally but that that drives my, yes.

AK: But can also imagine that sometimes you hear a very violent stories. How do you deal with that?

NVDS: Yes, you do hear intense stories, especially in youth care. On the one hand, that is very distressing. On the other hand, it also makes it interesting. And I think it's necessary to really come up with good solutions.

AK: How did you come to work with these kinds of subjects? Because after all, these are pretty intense topics. And I can imagine that this doesn't just come your way. You have to have some kind of affinity with it. Or a kind of interest. And how did that work out for you?

NVDS: Yes, of course I have an interest in these subjects. Although I must say that this interest has also grown. So the more you hear and are confronted with these stories. And the more you get frustrated with the system. And that these people are not being heard. The more my interest grows as well. And my affinities hpe you want to call then too.

AK: Yes, enjoying working with these people.

NVDS: Yes, absolutely. **AK:** Yes. But that's also enriching. That's the tjongen. Then when you're with these young people with mild intellectual disabilities. I come back with so much energy. They make such striking remarks. Well, you won't get that anywhere else. And they change your outlook and your world view shifts a bit.

AK: So it's not only enriching for the young people themselves to participate than works.

NVDS: Yes definitely, the more diverse people I meet, the more fun it is. The better I can understand how the world works. I don't think I would ever fully understand that. And I don't want to at all. Yeah. But that's kind of what I think.

AK: Yes, beautiful. We were just talking very briefly about making the young people part of your design process as well. Can you give an example of how you do this?

NVDS: Yes, certainly. And actually in many different ways. But we also have our own podcast, for example. The key sessions. In which we engage in conversation with young people. So we always have at least one young person at the table. Who tells us how he experiences his life. Or who experiences the problems or the context. And in addition, an expert to tell a round story. Yes, very dynamic. Yes, certainly. Very rich, rich episodes, I think.

AK: Yes, so everyone should go and listen.

NVDS: Yes, always.

AK: And then when you look back like this he over the past few years. Did you expect to work for this organization on these themes or did it turn out completely different than you had thought beforehand?

NVDS: Well maybe I could have dreamed it, I guess. Of course I started out as a product designer, but I always found the social side of it more interesting. During my master's, I also went more and more in the direction of the psychological side of design. Perhaps I hadn't expected that I would end up on the social side. But I am very happy with it.

And despite the fact that it's all about young people and children, it's quite diverse, you have to deal with very complex issues. And I notice that it is actually nice to have a little overlap between those themes so that you, as a designer, can also take along more and more substantive knowledge or at least know where to look for it.

AK: Yes, exactly. How do you see the future role of Garage2020, what lies ahead for you?

NVDS: Yes, not. Ideally, we would make ourselves redundant. If I will look completely to the future then I hope we won't exist anymore.

AK: Okay, but that also means that you will be without a job.

NVDS: Yes, but if that is the case and we have made ourselves superfluous, then I think that is fine. Then we'll go on looking. I don't see that as a problem, but I think we still have a long way to go before that happens. So it's not as if I'll be without a job in six months' time, but that's what we're aiming for.

AK: And do you have any tips for people who would like to do this kind of work. Who hear this podcast and think, this work of Nienke, I want to do that too, where can I go?

NVDS: I think the key is to figure out how to get the right information and to try and experiment. So I've been working for Garage2020 for almost two years now and there are few things that I've done the same. With that, you enrich your toolbox when you're faced with an issue. So I would say mainly think about what do I want to know and who do I have in front of me and what can I do. And then just go do it and see how it went afterwards.

AK: Thanks for this conversation Nienke, was very inspiring and let's hope Garage2020 doesn't exist in a few years. Which is very crazy to say but with all good intentions.

NVDS: Thank you for allowing me to be here.