

Innovation Networks has a mission: dream, dare, do

During her inauguration speech on May 24th, our new Professor of Applied Sciences Innovation Networks Christine De Lille shared a crystal clear vision: “When I first started talking to people about networking, generally they thought networking is ego driven and all about personal gain: how can I get better by talking to you? But for me networking is about empathy. It’s not about me getting better, it’s about us getting better.” Excitement and enthusiasm filled the room as De Lille told the attendants exactly how we can foster improvement by consciously design our networks. Following her positive whirlwind of inspiration, there was little else to do except: dream, dare, do!

The square in the central hall of the main building of The Hague University of Applied Sciences was turned into a market place for the occasion. Innovative projects, mainly designed by students, were displayed. Visitors could enjoy a smoothie made out of discarded fruits and vegetables and there was even an old-fashioned kissing booth. The latter, perfectly demonstrated how design can trigger people to talk about important topics and ideas, something De Lille illustrated further during her speech. In the Delft blue setting in which you would normally find the traditional Dutch farmer boy and girl, visitors of all backgrounds, genders and religions were invited to share a kiss. This design, that was already showcased at the Dutch Design Week, literally portrays the diverse society we live in today.

What if ...

By prototyping and conceptualising, designers can create a new type of dialogue that triggers new behaviour and actions. During her speech, De Lille showed some more examples, such as a transparent seaweed ‘bubble’ containing a measure of drinking water. A fun demo video showed that when you put it in your mouth and squeeze, the bubble breaks and you have a sip. Of course, De Lille had anticipated a surprised audience: “What if all our packaging was edible? How would that impact and change our system? That makes you think, right? Maybe it could help us get rid of the plastic soup!” She continued: “If we dream big and if we want to solve big issues, we need to collaborate. These kind of issues are not something you can address alone. Therefore, we need to teach our students the value of networking.”

Complex versus complicated

During her first five months as Professor of Applied Sciences Innovation Networks, De Lille and her team of researchers have already set a great example in building networks. A design exercise in itself, as she explained: how do you bring people together, how do you make sure they find connecting interests and how do you make it work? Designing a network is usually complex, and that’s exactly how it should be. “In nature for instance, there is no food chain but a food web. There is not one animal that only eats one other animal: multiple animals eat multiple others. So, when we design networks in the food sector, we consider: could leftovers from different companies be of value to several other companies? Of course, that makes it complex. But we help our participants embrace that *complexity*, so that it doesn’t become *complicated*.”

Where to go?

Whilst investigating the aforementioned food web question, a company named Instock discovered that beer can be brewed from leftover bread or potatoes. It tastes surprisingly good and it helps people contribute to a more sustainable way of consuming. Of course, this last part is the essence: the end user should always be the compass. De Lille: "With all these people collaborating in networks, we need to make sense of where we are going. For us that's the people we're working for. We all want to achieve something for someone, that's our value. With that in mind we are able to navigate." The networks are being built around three domains: retail, urban mobility and food. Each domain has been assigned a different team of researchers, but every team investigates the same research themes. "A few people operate in between domains, so that the teams can learn from each other."

Winning combinations

Learning from each other, that's what it's all about. Inspiring, connecting, sharing and making dreams come true. De Lille concluded: "We all have a part to play and we can use our expertise to reinforce each other. That is already apparent in experiments in Future Proof Retail, in which several partners are collaborating. Another example: The New Farm in the Hague is a hub for innovation, inspiration and new concepts in agriculture, while Greenport Westland is aimed more at scaling up, export and commercialisation. My interest is: how can we design networks like this so that they can form a combination? And what can researchers add to the mix? And students? I'm proud to say that students from multiple faculties are already very much involved in everything we do. This way we can approach challenges from multiple disciplines, which is a necessity for truly addressing complex issues. Students raise our creativity by asking questions we don't yet have answers to. They trigger us to see what kind of knowledge we should be looking for. And we still have five more years to do so."