Bridging the Social Distance. Using Customised Digital Platforms to Enable Community Engagement in Student Research & Design in Times of COVID-19

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Universities across the world are becoming increasingly interested and active in contributing to fighting social inequality and strengthening social cohesion at a local level. This phenomenon is known in the literature as ‘university-community engagement’, ‘local engagement’ or ‘community outreach’ (Goddard et al. 2016; Grau et al. 2017). Many activities are clustered under this heading, such as life-long learning; volunteerism of staff and students; service-based learning, and participatory research (Humphrey, 2013; Goddard et al. 2016). Community engagement requires face-to-face, reciprocal interactions between stakeholders and community members. The ability for such (offline) interactions has been fundamentally hampered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The immediate reaction of many universities to the pandemic was to move all teaching and communication to online platforms and video-calling systems, but this raises several issues regarding community engagement in the context of research and design.

This paper evaluates a hybrid strategy to engage local residents in design research conducted by Architecture bachelor students. The context of the design research are three deprived Dutch neighbourhoods which are part of the National Program Rotterdam South (NPRZ), a long-term integrated regeneration approach. Students and instructors used simple, custom-made web platforms to reach out to residents’ social
media networks, to elicit responses to a survey and semi-structured interviews by phone, and to give back results of the research and design to the local community. Teaching was geared towards support in setting up and managing the platforms, as well as using the aforementioned research methods. The paper aims to understand to what extent this research strategy enabled community engagement that successfully bridged the COVID-19 distancing limitations as well as the lack of face-to-face communication. The perceived levels and nature of achieved engagement are analysed from the perspective of students, community members and other local stakeholders.

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