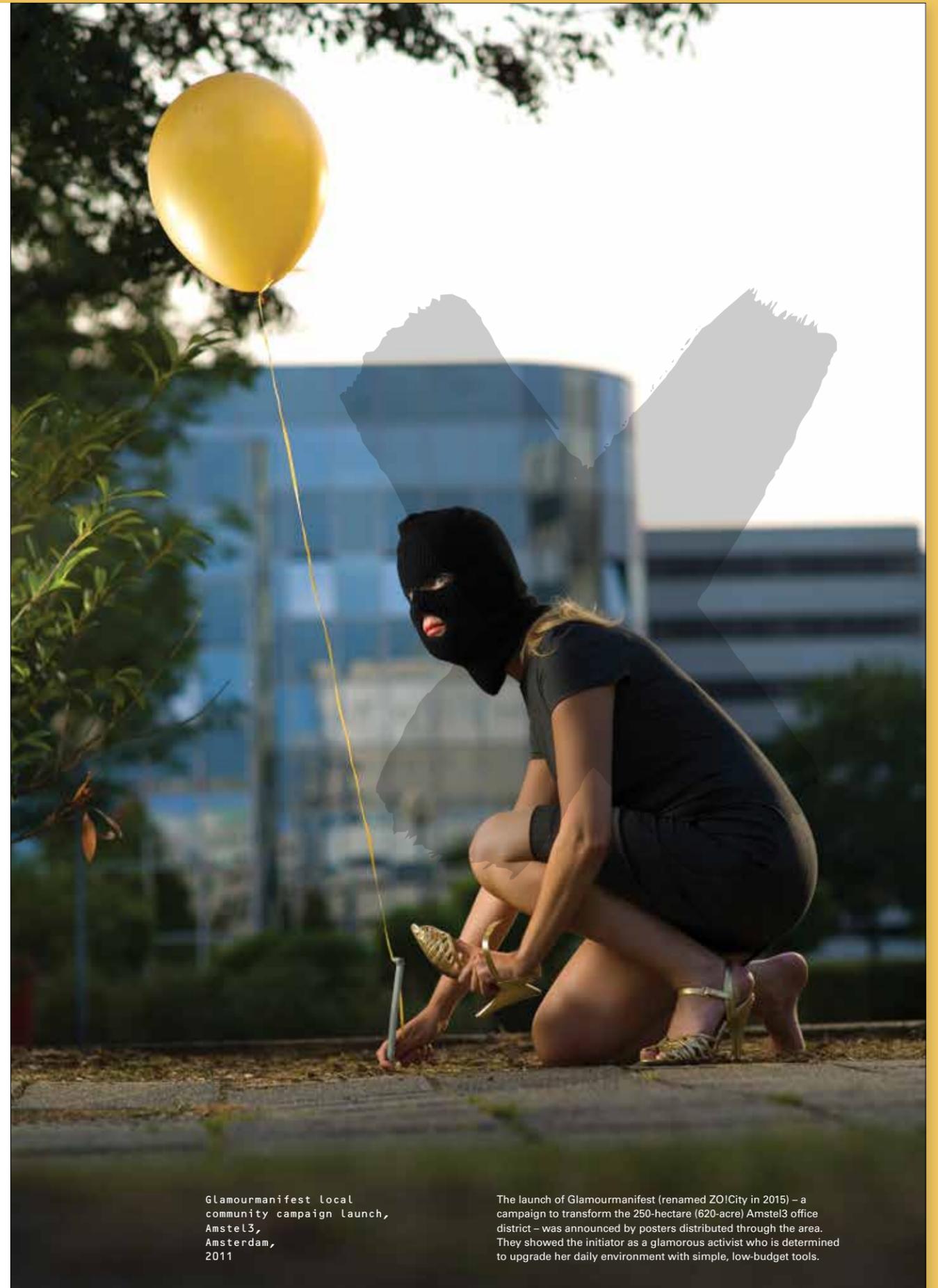


Driving the Regeneration of
Amsterdam's Amstel3 District

FROM CITIZEN PARTICIPATION TO REAL OWNERSHIP

Reinvigorating urban environments is a complex challenge involving multiple stakeholders. How can local governments and communities be enabled to work together to achieve it?

Saskia Beer reports on ZO!City (initially named Glamourmanifest), an initiative that she founded in 2011 to transform a waning Amsterdam office district into a lively mixed-use neighbourhood. An interactive online platform is key to revealing and interlinking different parties' priorities, and has been supported by playful real-world activities to generate enthusiasm and encourage engagement.



Glamourmanifest local
community campaign launch,
Amstel3,
Amsterdam,
2011

The launch of Glamourmanifest (renamed ZO!City in 2015) – a campaign to transform the 250-hectare (620-acre) Amstel3 office district – was announced by posters distributed through the area. They showed the initiator as a glamorous activist who is determined to upgrade her daily environment with simple, low-budget tools.

Amstel3 is a 250-hectare (620-acre) office district in Amsterdam, developed in the 1980s. Positioned along major public transport hubs and motorways, it became the city's third economic cluster, accommodating more than 300 companies. However, by 2011, the area had a 27 per cent vacancy rate, which was predicted to increase due to its outdated monofunctional layout. In the economic crisis the municipality could not continue its big regeneration plans to turn Amstel3 into a lively urban neighbourhood and had to withdraw from its long-established proactive planner's role. The local market and citizens were not organised or equipped to instantly take over this role: the stakeholder network was heterogeneous and the property ownership fragmented, with 120 buildings and 80 different owners. Stakeholders had no overview and no platform to exchange ideas and take collective decisions.

Connecting Stakeholders

There was a need for the different stakeholder groups, including the municipality, to be connected and activated around Amstel3's transformation. The idea of what would become the ZO!City initiative was that everybody, from property owner to employee in one of the buildings, has something at stake in the area. By mapping those stakes and interests and identifying the overlaps, collective starting points would emerge that everybody could contribute to and benefit from. By making the first positive changes together, the potential of the area would be unveiled incrementally and the conditions and support for further interventions would be set. From talking to different people in the area, however, it became clear that most were laymen in the field of urban development and did not automatically feel called or entitled to engage in it. Many daily users had never thought about influencing their environment and assumed the municipality would not allow them to. They were not convinced about their own interest in the area and were not activated.

Campaigning for Self-Organisation

In order to put Amstel3's transformation on the local agenda as an accessible and relevant subject, a local campaign was launched in 2011, based on light-hearted storytelling with glamorous metaphors representing new qualities for Amstel3, under the name Glamourmanifest. The team organised playful actions, like flower bulb planting and pop-up champagne parties. By using social media and newsletters, communication lines were built and people's trust and enthusiasm grew.

Behind the scenes an extensive database with local demands, ambitions and supporters was developing. However, Glamourmanifest still had a centralised network structure and the small team was becoming its weakest link. A decision was taken to start focusing on helping the local community to self-organise and assume collective ownership over the transformation of their neighbourhood. In June 2015, the name Glamourmanifest was dropped in favour of ZO!City, adopting the existing local branding prefix ZO!. This move from independent agent to local platform catalysed the sense of ownership among the local businesses and property owners who had become paying members and who related to Glamourmanifest's mission, but not to its name.



TransformCity® online dashboard, Amsterdam pilot, 2016

top: This highly integrated and actionable online urban transformation dashboard created by ZO!City allows citizens, businesses, organisations and the government to directly exchange data and ideas and collectively plan, change and own their neighbourhood.

right: The crowdfunding infrastructure on the dashboard allows for project-based alliances to be formed and resources to be shared and combined. The rewards for engagement vary from an improvement of daily environment to real shares in local projects.



The move from independent agent to local platform catalysed the sense of ownership among the local businesses and property owners



Glamourmanifest, Local community mobile cafe opening, Amstel3, Amsterdam, 2012

Initially it was difficult for the Glamourmanifest group campaigning for the transformation of the Amstel3 district to find entrepreneurs who dared to open a cafe there. By starting with food trucks, the market potential was revived, and soon more permanent cafes opened in the area as well.

ZO!City local community platform future vision, Amstel3, Amsterdam, 2015

ZO!City was commissioned by the municipality of Amsterdam to co-create a new urban vision for the southern part of the Amstel3 district together with all stakeholders. Simple collages were used to show alternative possibilities for existing areas.

Glamourmanifest
Local community
art intervention,
Amstel3,
Amsterdam,
2014

both images: Five artworks
on a large social trail near the
station offer passers-by a range
of different, coloured views
on their daily environment,
inviting them to dream about
possible alternatives for the
Amstel3 district. Intervention
in collaboration with Maxime
Vancoillie and The New
Verbalizers.



The initiative aims to deepen knowledge and experience exchange between cities, stakeholders and tools.

Urban Transformation Dashboard

The ZO!City team then set about designing and developing TransformCity, a highly integrated and actionable online urban transformation dashboard, with the help of graphic designers Bureau LUST and technical developers Systemantics. Its initial Amstel3 pilot was made financially and logistically possible by the ZO!City community of property owners and the Municipality of Amsterdam, with additional funding from the Beter Benutten Vervolg ('Optimising Use') MRA programme of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment. It integrates storytelling, data sharing, co-creation, participatory democracy, crowdsourcing and crowdfunding. Its distributed network structure allows the community and the municipality to directly exchange data and ideas and collectively plan, make and own their neighbourhood. The online map shows items such as buildings, parks and stations as clickable objects that hold basic information about, for example, floor space, building year and ownership. Via the menu, detailed thematic – open and user-generated – data can be found about mobility, real estate, policy and environment.

The timeline also features recent developments and future plans and scenarios. The full interactivity makes it easy to engage directly by clicking on the map and markers, and making comments. Everybody can share their ideas and initiatives for the area; feedback is obtained both from individuals and from official institutions. With the underlying crowdfunding infrastructure, project-based alliances can be formed and resources shared and combined. Active engagement is rewarded. The first crowdfunding campaign for formalising a large social trail near the station went live during the dashboard launch in May 2016. This campaign asked for donations, offering an upgrade in daily environment in return. At the start of 2017 a campaign will go live for funding a large restaurant. In that case funders receive actual shares in the restaurant company.

During the development the local stakeholders and officials at the Amsterdam municipality were consulted about the best ways to implement the dashboard pilot in Amstel3. The municipality, excited by its new possibilities for direct interaction with the neighbourhood, is sharing data and embracing the dashboard. Property owners have uploaded building pages and many have shared their projects and ideas.

The dashboard supports ZO!City's offline activities rather than replacing them. It still takes effort to engage people and stimulate them to use the dashboard. Large groups of stakeholders can be reached and invited around the table 24/7, but inclusivity will always need attention. The plan is to continue investing in an on-site presence to make sure the overall process is adopted sustainably. The team also encounters interesting questions regarding participatory democracy that will be further explored with the municipality. When is an idea legitimate? What happens when different ideas conflict? What are the rules for the transformation of Amstel3? How can these be transparently conveyed, without making the process overly complex?

A Resilient and Sustainable Organisational Model

Another issue arises as the economic crisis is now considered to be over in Amsterdam. Investments are flowing to the city and the need for housing is high. Whilst the city council's growing temptation to take back the lead and start making big plans again is understandable, the creation of resilient cities calls for many shoulders to carry such schemes. It takes enormous effort to activate stakeholders who are used to being taken care of by the government, and to break through their often docile attitude. Community-based and real-time urban transformation of the kind ZO!City is pursuing is not a crisis solution, but a resilient and sustainable organisational model that reflects the rapid changes to which our cities are subject.

Scaling the Hyperlocal

As the TransformCity® dashboard continues to be tested in real-world situations, the platform is now being requested by other cities too. Digital tools are easily scalable and it is tempting to believe they can solve similar challenges everywhere. However, the local – spatial, cultural, institutional – context varies, depending on the city or neighbourhood concerned, and can have a significant impact on the success of the methods and tools used. Who needs to adapt to whom? A digital tool carries the intrinsic values of the people and contexts that created it. Other cities can learn and benefit from this, but ideally also make their own impact on the tool to make it genuinely customised and hyperlocal again.

TransformCity is currently setting up an extended pilot with five international cities to research what the different contexts need and how our methods and tools need to adapt to them. The initiative aims to deepen knowledge and experience exchange between cities, stakeholders and tools. Technology can be a facilitating, rather than a demanding, force for our cities, but we need to keep each other sharp. ▫

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