University of Sussex

27 January 2015

To:
Municipal Council of Amersfoort
Mayor & Municipal Executive

Dear Sirs and Madams

Plans for development at De War

It is with considerable shock and disbelief that I receive news from De War that plans to buy and develop their site have been rejected. With this letter I wish to set out why De War is of international as well as local value, and to ask you to rethink your decision on the basis of the evidence I provide below.

I have been collaborating in research with De War since summer 2014. The collaboration has taken a number of forms. First, working with them for their FabFuse conference, which they hosted in August 2014. Second, working with them for a major European Commission Framework 7 research project on Transformative Social Innovation Theory (TRANSIT - http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu). And finally, developing an international workshop with them (to be hosted at De War this summer) that will look at issues and practices in energy demand and sustainability in relation to digital fabrication technology.

FabLab Amersfoort, which De War created and hosts, is an internationally significant facility. It is a pioneering example of a grassroots initiative to engage neighbours and local communities in the innovation possibilities of versatile, small-scale digital design and fabrication tools. It is a pioneer amongst a rapidly expanding global network of FabLabs and makerspaces. The original FabLab concept originated from an outreach programme of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003. There are over 440 FabLabs in 60 countries. As for makerspaces, these number in the high hundreds. Thanks to De War, Amersfoort is host to a FabLab that is innovative due to its grassroots approach, commitment to sustainability, and the networks it has been building locally.

It is for this reason that we worked with them in the European TRANSIT project. The project coordinators (at Erasmus University in Rotterdam) and I wanted to learn from the pioneering work done at De War. We have learnt an incredible amount from them about how to build communities that make engagement with the potential of digital fabrication technology meaningful to local communities. Digital fabrication technologies enable the sharing of designs, knowledge and experience through global social media networks. There are web-based platforms, tutorials, discussion lists, and videos where people can access knowledge about how to make practically anything they wish, from toys, to furniture, to renewable energy technologies, to upcycling and repairing products, and even pre-fabricated eco-houses. Workshops like the FabLabs are connected through these networks,

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and at the same time, they are local spaces where people can collaborate and learn how to implement this newfound knowledge by accessing and working together with high-tech fabrication tools. FabLab Amersfoort has contributed to both these global knowledge platforms and practical approaches for this new paradigm of commons-based peer-production of goods and services.

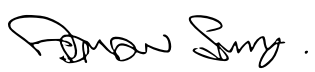
An increasing number of governments, businesses and development agencies are recognising the potential of FabLabs and makerspaces for the development of skills, entrepreneurship, and social and economic resilience in their societies. For example, Chevron has donated $10 million to expand the network of FabLabs in the USA. The city council of Barcelona has already spent over €900.000 opening FabLabs in three of its districts, and has plans to open a FabLab in every neighbourhood. They see FabLabs as part of the new public infrastructure for a smart and sustainable city. In Iceland, the national government has invested in nine FabLabs because they see them as the seedbeds for economic recovery and participation in a new productive paradigm. The costs of equipping a FabLab consistent with the MIT model are €100.000, with a similar amount estimated for running costs each year. I suggest you look at the Fab Foundation website to get a better impression: http://www.fabfoundation.org

In Amersfoort, and thanks to the commitment of De War, you have a group of people who have been pioneering and exploring these possibilities from their own initiative and with their own resources. All they need is space to expand and develop. The scope for linking the FabLab to other local projects is astounding and exciting, whether it is in citizen science, urban farming, renewable energy, or sustainable production and consumption of products at a local scale. The value that De War is generating through its approach to developing FabLabs is of international significance, but also, in my view, incredibly important locally. Here is a beacon that will attract interest, resources and knowledge.

Indeed, so impressed am I with this activity and commitment, that I have chosen De War as the best place to hold a workshop this summer where we can explore these possibilities and plan practical measures to realise them. A number of key figures from FabLabs networks have already expressed an interest in participating. And we would also invite local community groups and people involved or potentially interested in the local community building that De War has been doing. It would be great if you could come from the council too.

It is for the above reasons that I strongly urge you to reconsider your decision. I am very happy to discuss this with you either by phone or in person. So important do I think the initiative at De War that I am prepared to travel to make my case. Please, just imagine such energy, knowledge, and innovation contributing to Amersfoort! Rather than rejecting their proposal, I think you need to see it for the valuable resource it is, and think about how you can engage with that facility for the benefit of the city

Yours faithfully



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