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Storytelling for social cohesion at Story House Belvédère

Story House Belvédère in Rotterdam uses storytelling to bring the different communities in the city together, and contribute to a happier, more sustainable city. Located in Katendrecht, a part of town that is home to a combination of traditional migrant communities, recent newcomers, and hipsters attracted by the neighbourhood's industrial look, the place is at the heart of many of the city's developments and stories. In its short existence (it only opened in 2013), it has made a name for itself as a successful community-driven, innovative cultural initiative.

I finally got around to visiting Story House Belvedere a few weeks ago as part of the new **Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museum Projects** I am involved in, and I must say I was blown away by the place, its people,

and the stories.

Story House Belvédère is a special place. You can feel it the moment you step into their warm and welcoming place. It feels like a living room, where everybody can be a friend. Even the coffee cups and the cookies are in style. The magic, of course, goes beyond aesthetics and is deeply embedded in the organisation.

Before there was a house, the team behind Belvédère organised a community-focused temporary exhibition in the public space in the south of Rotterdam. As this is a deprived part of town, city officials and other professionals doubted this plan. “You will get shot at, and in two weeks everything will be destroyed.” They were wrong, and the exhibition was around for a year and a half.

One thing led to another, and the same city officials then encouraged the team to continue their work and focus on one of the key historical events in contemporary Rotterdam history: the bombing of the city at the beginning of the Second World War. Inspired by [Story Corps](#), they toured the neighbourhood with a recording studio and captured memories of the bombing. With these stories, they created events, which triggered other communities to start telling their story. As Linda, one of the founders, says, “Every story inspires a new story.”

The success of their storytelling events encouraged the team to look for a permanent location for storytelling. They found it in the old jazz club/boxing gym/neighbourhood museum Belvédère. Together with the communities they had worked with before, they are now renovating the building and using it for exhibitions, storytelling events, and much more. The approach the team takes to connect with communities, and then build new relationships is straightforward. In projects, they build a profound relationship with one specific community, such as the Chinese, Bulgarians, or football hooligans. This link is based on a genuine interest and includes a long-term commitment to stay involved with each other. When I visited, a community member made our delicious Bulgarian lunch. Such profound ties make it possible that when a new project focuses on another community, the team can personally invite people from other communities to join. In that way, they build bridges between communities.

This approach permeates all activities of Story House Belvédère. If you rent the place for a private event such as a wedding, some spots at the event are reserved for people from other communities. So, if you're interested in joining a Syrian wedding or Jewish Bar Mitzwa, you can. The reason this works is that of the personal ties between the team and

the communities.

As you can imagine, the team is special. It is a committed, dynamic groups of freelancers who care about the mission and the magic of the place. As warm and welcoming as the place they turned into their house, their energy and enthusiasm was probably the thing that stuck with me most after my visit.



