

been reversed: the new conventional wisdom is to encourage mentally handicapped persons to live their life as “normally” as possible. This includes rehousing them to live independently in towns and cities, with some support from a network of caregivers. This new ideology has had huge and largely disastrous consequences for the mentally handicapped themselves. When they entered the world of “normal people,” their physical isolation was ended, but not their mental isolation. Just moving mentally handicapped people from an institution into an apartment does not assure their inclusion in society; they tend not to integrate into their neighborhood and really don’t know how to deal with city life. Their new neighbors generally ignore the mentally handicapped: in the frantic rhythm of their busy lives, they do not have the time or patience to deal with them. As a result, the mentally handicapped are stranded in their apartments and are desperately lonely. The Integrated Living project was commissioned because the issues facing these people are complex and require creative solutions that potentially involve many stakeholders, spread throughout our modern urban society. A space for change needs to be created. In the course of early discussions, the initial question posed by the ministry was drastically redefined. The ministry had inadvertently cast the problem in terms of the need to care for the mentally disabled, while the artists and designers immediately approached the mentally handicapped in terms of their abilities. This was a first breakthrough, because thinking in terms of abilities opens up the whole problem arena to consider how these mentally handicapped people can actually contribute to urban society (the following quotations, from members of the partner organizations, are taken from Suyling, Krabbendam, and Dorst 2005). First, from a Ministry employee:

The designers were right not to accept the fact that mentally handicapped people live outside society. They understand that the mentally handicapped have their own ambitions.

The question to be answered then transforms from one about care into the challenge of looking into different ways in which the contributions of the mentally handicapped can be given shape and facilitated. That investigation took many, very different forms. Said an employee of a partner organization:

Some mentally handicapped people are at home a lot, so they can make a positive contribution to the social surveillance in the community. The safety and security in the community also increases through the presence of nurses and [caregivers].

Some of the young designers engaged deeply and personally in the life of the handicapped people to deepen their empathy and get a feel for where solutions might lie. One designer commented: