Open Design: A History of the Construction of a Dutch Idea

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ABSTRACT In a short period of time, open design went from an unknown notion to a buzzword in the Dutch design world. This development is usually attributed to the proliferation of bottom-up activities fostered by a typically open Dutch society. However, although open design is commonly associated with grassroots, bottom-up activities, in the Netherlands, the most visible effort at widespread dissemination of these ideals has been the result of a highly centralized effort largely supported by government funding. Why were the government and cultural organizations interested in fostering open design practices? And what type of open practices has this top-down model
engendered? Advancing from a constructivist approach, we examine how this discourse has been formed by the convergence of actors with distinct agendas, and position it in relation to its cultural and economic contexts.

KEYWORDS: open design, Dutch design, creative industries, historiography, constructivism

Introduction: Of Visibility and Productivity

As a design academic and a design practitioner, we are interested in open design. Like many involved, we recognize it as a movement with enormous social and economic potential. However, from our vantage points, we have noticed some disparity between the open talk and the open action. To better understand the prevailing realities of open design, this paper examines the confluence of distinct interests in the construction of open design discourse.

The phrase ‘open design’ has become ubiquitous in the Dutch design world. Its ascension to the top of the official agenda has been relatively rapid, advancing from a series of lesser-known activities to a lynchpin in the national design rhetoric in just three years. Its propagation has not remained confined to subcultural interest groups, but has spilled over to mainstream design discourse; this year it has been present, if not prominent, at nearly all major Dutch design events. Open design was an important theme of the Dutch contingent at the International Furniture Fair in Milan, Waag Society’s open design programme was nominated for the Rotterdam Design Prize (‘the “king” of Dutch Design prizes’) and this very publication – the first special edition on Dutch design in an international academic journal – focuses on ‘openness’, testifying to the centrality and implicit association of this term with design from the Netherlands. Justifiably, some commentators have raised the question as to why open design has become so prominent in this country in particular (see Menichinelli, 2011).

Transformations of this scope and speed do not occur by accident, so it is pertinent to enquire what factors contributed to its rapid emergence and widespread propagation in the Netherlands. Open design is commonly described as the development of physical products through the free sharing of information. As in the free and open source software movements before it, the internet facilitates the sharing of data, allowing other individuals to copy or evolve the original object. Although ‘free’ mostly refers to the freedom to copy, according to Wikipedia – arguably an authoritative reference in this context – open design ‘is often performed without monetary compensation’ (2012). This pool of shared data forms the commons, a body of information freely available for public use. Thus, where once
methods of production were highly centralized in large, hierarchical corporations, this data-sharing coupled with new technologies proposes a new decentralized, grassroots, bottom-up production model.

In the Netherlands ‘open design is still very much in the idealistic phase’ (Mulder, 2012); still ‘under construction’ (Neicu, 2010: 30). This means that currently, the term open design points to an ideal rather than an extensive or coherent body of practices. But if the prominence of this ideal is not a reflection of widespread practices, why and how has it gained such currency?

Between 2009 and 2012 a series of highly visible events concerning open design were staged in the mainstream Dutch design arena. The first, the (Un)limited Design Contest, occurred in April 2009. Its result, as assessed by one of its initiators, was nothing less than to place ‘the idea of open design on the map in the Netherlands’ by the second half of that year (Waag Society, 2010: 9, authors’ translation). Its success led to a second edition of the competition with the slightly changed title (Un)limited Dutch Design in 2010, and to a third the following year. Other open design-related events included the digital platform-cum-collection Design for Download/MakeMe in 2010 and the publication of Open Design Now in 2011. These events were initiated by a small group of Dutch cultural organizations who, despite distinct and at times conflicting agendas, nevertheless had a common goal in fostering open design practices in the Netherlands. Crucially, they were all largely run with funding from the Ministry of Culture, Education and Science (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, OCW).

Thus, although open design is commonly associated with grassroots, bottom-up activities, in the Netherlands the most visible effort at widespread dissemination of these ideals has been the result of a highly centralized effort largely supported by government funding. Why were the government and cultural organizations interested in fostering open design practices? And what type of open practices has this top-down model engendered? These are the questions this paper will address.

Taking our cue from Phillips and Hardy (2002), insofar as the above-mentioned interrelated contests, lectures, workshops, websites and publications bring a common notion into being, they may be thought of as together constituting a discourse on open design. Advancing from a constructivist epistemology, in this article we examine how the production and dissemination of this discourse has produced and given meaning to open design practices. These processes need to be viewed in relation to Dutch cultural policy on the one hand, and to the economic and political circumstances that served as catalysts in the formulation of this policy on the other. We will focus on three government-funded events that were key in the construction of open discourse in the Netherlands: (Un)limited Design Contest, (Un)limited Dutch Design and Design for Download.
By examining how each participates in the construction of open design discourse, the aim is to tell the story of where the ideal of open design came from, why it gained such a foothold on the mainstream Dutch design stage and the implications its widespread dissemination has had in engendering open design practices.

The Making of a Practice

Open design discourse in the Netherlands emerged in earnest in 2009 with the launch of the (Un)limited Design Contest, initiated by Waag Society and Premsele.

Since its establishment in 1994, Waag has been devoted to ‘developing creative technological applications for societal innovation’ (2012). As part of its mission, Waag acts as an interface between activist culture and the establishment, lobbying government and institutions to embrace radical and disruptive innovation (Stikker, 2012). In addition to being an actor at the government level, Waag has initiated a variety of projects aimed at disseminating and familiarizing the general public with social innovation models and otherwise exclusive innovative technology.

Waag’s co-founder Marleen Stikker was, for example, among the initiators of The Digital City (De Digitale Stad, DDS) in 1993, a pioneering project in making internet accessible to the general public. In 2005, Waag became involved in the establishment of the Dutch branch of Creative Commons (CC), a system of licences wherein only some, rather than all, rights are protected, allowing for the free distribution of content under flexible conditions. The implementation of Fablabs, or fabrication laboratories, inaugurated as a pilot in 2007 and then as a permanent fixture in 2008 (Waag Society, 2008: 5, 2009: 7), engendered those same ideals in physical objects. Originally developed at MIT, the small-scale workshops offer individuals free access to an array of computer-controlled tools that enable self-manufacturing. Waag’s motivation for these three programs – open access, open content and open hardware, respectively – was to disseminate cutting-edge technology for the empowerment of individuals and grassroots movements.

However, unlike the general public’s swift appropriation of internet access in the 1990s, the potential of the tools provided by Fablabs was less easy to grasp. Part of the difficulty in conveying the possibilities of Fablabs is the fact that their innovative nature pertains to a largely invisible field of decentralized production, distribution and consumption (van Abel, 2012). At this point, the possibilities offered were still mostly referred to as ‘open hardware’, to echo the more established notion of open source (significantly, up until 2009 Waag used the term ‘open hardware’ rather than ‘open design’ in its year reports). As physical products would offer a better means of communicating the abstract principles of the Fablab, Waag contacted Premsele/The Netherlands Institute for Design and Fashion because, according to van Abel, ‘[d]esign products are very
Premsela was founded in 2002, as the latest in a succession of national institutes supporting Dutch design. What distinguishes Premsela from its predecessors is the emphasis on the promotion of existing design activities with high potential. In 2009, Premsela organized its projects according to four main programmes: Designworld, Fashion Culture, Heritage and History and People’s Republic of Design. Open design was consonant with programme strands within the latter (Democratisation and Popular Culture), and with the general theme of ‘Amateurism’, which proposed that ‘[i]nnovation is increasingly a mass affair, with large numbers of professionals, amateurs, designers and consumers sharing ideas’ (Premsela, 2010a: 14). As such, Premsela, the People’s Republic of Design and its manager Roel Klaassen, formed the perfect mould for the work of reshaping ‘open hardware’ into ‘open design’.1

Waag and Premsela thus had different though converging interests that resulted in a mutual goal: to increase the visibility and thereby to disseminate the practices and principles of open hardware to mainstream design in the Netherlands. From these motivations the (Un)limited Design Contest was born. According to the (Un)limited Design website, the programme ‘functions as an experiment in Open Design – the sharing of creative work in the same manner as open source software’ (2012a). The rules were relatively straightforward: ‘[e]ntrants could submit product designs on the condition that they shared their digital blueprints so others could modify and improve their designs or manufacture them using Fablabs. Creative Commons licences allowed entrants to share their designs without relinquishing copyright’ (Premsela, 2012). To target the widest possible population, van Abel and Klaassen chose to launch the contest at the Hacking at Random conference, the largest hacker gathering in the Netherlands. Followed by a series of smaller spin-off events, the contest concluded at the largest mainstream design manifestation in the Netherlands: Dutch Design Week, a yearly event in Eindhoven. These two locations not only ensured exposure to a very large number of people, but it bridged both ends of the spectrum by targeting mainstream commercial design as well as the hacker community and everything in between. The contest is still running today, with various modifications, as described below.

By defining a basic protocol that involved a number of ‘obligatory passage points’ (Latour, 1987) and by enrolling designers to participate in and hopefully appropriate the process, the (Un)limited Design Contest played an active role in fostering open design practice in the Netherlands.2 Indeed, van Abel personally invited designers working in the Fablabs – some of whom had little knowledge of open design – to join the competition. For example, Goof van Beek and Alexander Rulkens of Studio Ludens, who had worked at the Utrecht and Amsterdam Fablabs and were winners of the (Un)limited Design
Contest in 2009, and 2010 and 2011, were both individually asked by van Abel to join the contest (Rulkens, 2012; van Beek, 2012).

Yet, as it turns out, designers have been cautious in adopting open design ideals in their practice. In the case of Marina Toeters, a winner in 2010, enrolment was not the result of an interest in developing or sharing blueprints per se, but for the long-term gain of publicity for her practice (Toeters, 2012). Indeed, the sole blueprint available for her project – a shawl with integrated solar cells – on the (Un)limited Design Contest website, shows no more than a black-and-white pattern, and the only instructions which are provided, ‘The cutting proces [sic]’ (Un)limited Design Contest, 2012b), hardly make it possible to recreate or modify her project for future use. Studio Ludens, one of 2010’s winners with the project Magic Box, eventually wished to close the initially open source code in an effort to transform the software into a viable business venture, believing that ‘Investors don’t want to invest in things that are totally open’ (Rulkens, 2012). This ultimately led them to develop a business model that redefined ‘open’ as customizable. Designers’ cautiousness in adopting open design principles is also illustrated by the addition of the theme Fusion in the 2010 version of the contest, which aimed to encourage the sharing and adaptation of other participants’ previous entries, given the relative lack of reuse of existing blueprints.

In sum, although open hardware practices already existed in the Netherlands, in their effort to disseminate these principles among a wider design community, Waag and Premsela constructed a highly visible discourse on open design. However, there is room to wonder whether those practices correspond to their initial principles and motivations. Moreover, given designers’ reluctance to adopt open design principles, why is it that these institutions were so convinced of its value and willing to invest so much in its dissemination among that community?

Regulating Openness
As it happens, the events relating to the discourse on open design in the Netherlands from 2009 to 2012 were largely subsidized by the OCW, either via direct support (for Waag or Premsela) or special-purpose subsidies. In this funding, the OCW was guided by the cultural policy Art for Life’s Sake, which was presented by Minister Ronald Plasterk in 2007 and came into effect during the 2009–12 funding period. A comprehensive review of this policy is beyond the scope of the present paper; in what follows we concentrate exclusively on the aspects that are immediately relevant to the present discussion.

The administrative restructuring introduced by Art for Life’s Sake entailed a differentiation between institutes that are subsidized directly by the OCW and as such are part of the ‘basic infrastructure’, and other organizations that must submit applications for temporary grants to one of the national cultural funds (van Hamersveld, 2009: 43). This distinction was intended to bring efficiency and
transparency to the cultural system while maintaining control over the implementation of its cultural policy objectives. In this restructuring, both Premsela and Waag became part of the basic infrastructure.

The policy document also defined culture to be, as its name suggests, in the service of society rather than the other way around. This exemplifies the extent to which *Art for Life’s Sake* perpetuates the main lines of cultural policy established in the 1980s (Pots, 2010). Until the 1980s, culture in the Netherlands was heavily subsidized by the government, coinciding with a cultural policy that reflected an understanding of culture as synonymous with “innovatory” and “experimental” – the antithesis of “marketable” (van Hamersveld, 2009: 34). However, the wide-ranging neoliberal reforms instigated by the economic downturn of the 1970s and the ensuing slimming down of welfare meant that this policy’s approach to culture became untenable. Accordingly, the key aim of cultural policy since the 1980s has been to make the cultural sector function according to a neoliberal economic logic, where demand dictates production, the private sector takes over the role of supporting culture with sponsorship contracts becoming increasingly influential (van Hamersveld, 2009: 91) and state intervention is reduced to the creation of new cultural markets. Practically, this means a focus on audience appeal (more demand equals more financial input for cultural production), on artistic quality (as conditional for enhancing public demand), on national cultural identity (to promote Dutch products abroad) and a streamlined policy planning system (to help the government pursue its cultural policy objectives). Subsequent cultural policy can be characterized as a gradual adaptation of these pillars to contemporaneous circumstances, such as the intensification of international trade and migration, advances in information technology and European political integration. These main lines came to form the foundational pillars of cultural policy, valid to this day.

This neoliberal legacy and concomitant cultural policy has inevitably influenced the development of the open design discourse in the Netherlands. Some of the institutions involved in this development are (partially) funded by OCW, so it is no surprise that their programming bears more than a circumstantial similarity to cultural policy. As Klaassen says, for example, ‘of course’ OCW’s themes of diversity and cultural participation have been taken into account in Premsela’s programming (2012a). Specifically, the *Art for Life’s Sake* policy document contains a ten-point plan to increase public participation in culture. Point five explicitly states the goal of ‘[m]aking more money available for the amateur arts and popular culture’ as a way to increase participation (OCW, 2008: 24). Or, as phrased earlier in the document, ‘What we must do is to give the amateur arts more support […] and ensure that everyone has easier access to culture’ (OCW, 2008: 21). This latter formulation succinctly captures the ambivalence at stake, as it could serve almost as well to describe Waag and Premsela’s motivation to produce the *(Un)limited Design Contest*. 
Yet, however clearly cultural policy’s stake in increasing cultural participation played a key role in enabling the (Un)limited Design Contest in particular and open design discourse in general, we caution against a deterministic view of cause and effect. As discussed above, Premsela’s involvement with open design also originated from its own interest in amateurism as well as ‘from its intellectual and professional network’ (Klaassen, 2012a). Waag, moreover, is an independent institution that emphatically defines its own agenda, so that its motivation for initiating the (Un)limited Design Contest and for disseminating open design cannot simply be attributed to the prevailing cultural policy. Indeed, Waag perceives part of its mission as actively intervening in the very formulation of cultural policy. In the sections that follow we therefore understand the construction of open design discourse as a convergence of interests by actors with otherwise distinct perspectives and agendas.

In these sections we shall explore the extent to which other themes set by cultural policy – namely, the branding and internationalization of Dutch cultural identity, and the creation of new business models – have influenced the specific formulation of open discourse in the Netherlands.

**Branding the Netherlands**

One of the key themes in *Art for Life’s Sake* was the branding and internationalization of Dutch cultural identity. Attention to national identity within the context of cultural policy was not new: in the 1980s, Elco Brinkman, Minister of Ministry of Welfare, Health and Culture (Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Cultuur, CRM), had emphasized the importance of ‘the national cultural identity’ amidst the rapid process of internationalization that the Netherlands was undergoing (Pots, 2010: 326, authors’ translation). The intention was to use a coherent image of Dutch national culture as a means to raise international interest and reap any possible economic benefits. Since then, ‘[i]nternational trade, digitization, migration, mobility and European political integration have all gone to tie the Netherlands more closely to the rest of the world’ (van Hamersveld, 2009: 47). Hence, cultural policy’s increasing emphasis on national history and culture should be positioned alongside a progressively open attitude toward the economic opportunities that globalization offers (van Hamersveld, 2009: 20). It is against this backdrop that we should position the emphasis in *Art for Life’s Sake* on ensuring that the Netherlands presents itself abroad in a consistent manner.

According to Minister Plasterk, ‘[t]he government wants the Netherlands to be able to attain, maintain, or improve its leading position in the international arts scene. […] [A]lthough the Netherlands is respected internationally for its talented artists and cultural facilities – we make insufficient use of these advantages’ (OCW, 2008: 8). Doing so, according to Plasterk, entails ‘providing more scope for the ongoing development of artistic disciplines in which the
Netherlands has a strong or highly promising international position’ (OCW 2008: 8). In its international cultural policy, the government thus chose to focus on the cultural sectors that – according to the Council for Culture (Raad voor Cultuur) – already had an internationally strong position, namely: fashion, design and architecture (Plasterk et al, 2008: 9). Besides being strong calling cards for the Netherlands abroad, the government recognized that ‘these sectors are also promising from an economic perspective’ (Plasterk et al, 2008: 9, authors’ translation).

This focus on the international promotion of Dutch design abroad with a view to its economic benefits ultimately led to the establishment of Dutch Design Fashion and Architecture (DutchDFA), a collaborative project between the OCW, the Ministry of Economic Affairs (Ministerie van Economische Zaken, Landbouw en Innovatie, EL&I), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, BZ), Premsela and a number of other public and private organizations (DutchDFA, 2012c, 2012d). Armed with a total of twelve million euros spread across 2009 to 2012, it ‘aims to strengthen the international position of the Dutch creative industry sector in four focus countries’ (DutchDFA, 2012b) which, from 2008 to 2011, included Germany. According to the 2009 DutchDFA Year Report, ‘[t]he selection of Germany is to a large extent driven by economic motives’ (2010: 6). Indeed, (Un)limited Dutch Design was just one of a number of programmes aimed at creating opportunities for Dutch designers to enter the German market. Part of the strategy for entering this market involved ‘the creation of a more nuanced image – abroad – of Dutch designers […]. Beyond the object and beyond the icons of “Dutch Design,” the attention should be focused on the processes of thinking and making and the visions that underpin them’ (2010: 14). This aim neatly accords with the aims and principles of open design.

In 2010, the organizers of DMY International Design Festival Berlin proposed to give the (Un)limited Design Contest a prominent role in that year’s festival (Premsela, 2010b). Given that one of that year’s themes was open design, and aware of Germany’s position as a focus country, Waag and Premsela submitted a funding proposal to the DutchDFA with the goal to ‘promote, position and profile the Netherlands as an open design country’ (Premsela, 2010b: 4, authors’ translation). The proposal was for a series of (Un)limited Dutch Design events, including a contest, an exhibition, workshops, lectures and discussions on the publication of a book on open design. DutchDFA eventually accepted to provide 45 per cent of the funding for the initiative (2011: 22); yet to be eligible for this funding, Premsela and Waag had to package open design along with Dutch culture. In the project proposal (Premsela, 2010b), the Netherlands’ design tradition is explained as the result of the long-standing need to design the landscape (presumably due to the constant threat of inundation). Originally born out of necessity, modernist design and
its socially progressive ideologies had a chance to flourish due to the ‘relatively open culture in the Netherlands’ (Premsela, 2010b: 2, authors’ translation). Recent technological developments have subsequently consolidated the expansion of this forerunner of open design practices, creating innumerable possibilities for social, cultural and economic innovation and development, including the participation of non-professional designers in the process.

Thus the notion that Dutch design is intrinsically open resulted from the merging of the disparate agendas of the actors behind (Un)limited Dutch Design. Premsela’s and Waag’s motivations were the same as in (Un)limited Design Contest: to introduce open principles to the traditional design community and to increase public participation. Their interest was to extend these principles beyond Dutch borders, thereby extending and strengthening open design and Fablabs’ networks internationally. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the partner that enabled them to do so introduced the caveat of branding open design as typically Dutch in order to fulfil its own agenda, itself set by cultural policy’s theme of the branding and internationalization of Dutch cultural identity.

**Commodifying Openness?**

The last policy theme we will examine as it relates to open design is the notion of the creative industries. Under the influence of Richard Florida’s (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class* (which cultural policy documents explicitly reference, see EZ and OCW 2005: 8; OCW 2004: 7), the government increasingly started to see creativity as an ‘essential element in the modern knowledge economy’ (EZ and OCW, 2005: 3, authors’ translation). Given its view since the 1980s, of the creative sector as a financial burden, this represents a significant reconceptualization of the relationship between culture and economy. In 2005, the government launched the *Programme for the Creative Industries* (*Programma voor de Creatieve Industrie*), as a joint venture of the OCW and EZ, with the aim of encouraging the cross-pollination between culture and commerce (2005: 3–4). Of particular relevance to the present section are the measures aimed at fostering entrepreneurial skills in order to wean the cultural sector off government subsidies. The *Programme for the Creative Industries* concluded in 2008, but *Art for Life’s Sake* continued providing financial support to the principles it had introduced, one outcome of which was the subsidy *Manifestations of Innovative Culture* (*Innovatie cultuuruitingen*). Running for two consecutive rounds (2009 and 2010), this subsidy was intended for cultural projects that would establish innovative connections, broaden culture’s social support base and help reduce its dependency on public funds (Timmermans and van Rosmalen, 2011: 3).

One of the projects that was awarded funding from the above-mentioned subsidy programme was *Design for Download* by Droog Design.³ Droog made its name in the early 1990s with what came
to be known as typically Dutch conceptual design. It had a special interest in design projects that actively engaged the user as a means to ‘finish’ the project and as such applied do-it-yourself (DIY) principles. Exemplary of this is Droog’s ‘Do Hit’ chair by Marijn van der Poll (2000), which starts off as a metal cube that the user has to form into a chair by hammering a seat into place with a club. Since the 1990s Droog has sought to evolve into a full-fledged global enterprise. It now defines itself as ‘a brand offering unique products for the home’ as well as an initiator of ‘products, projects and events around the world in collaboration with designers, clients and partners’ (Droog, 2012). It has since started looking for ways of lowering costs, while maintaining the exclusive nature and high quality of the designs that it markets (Klaassen and Troxler, 2011). One means of doing so would be to bypass middlemen through the decentralization of design production, distribution and consumption – that is, by embracing the open design model.

*Design for Download* aimed to create ‘the first platform for downloadable design’, offering access to new ‘easy-to-use parametric design tools’ – to enable non-professionals to design – and to a network of ‘local low- and high-tech manufacturers’ (Droog, 2011) by whom the digital blueprints could be produced. This platform – entitled *MakeMe* – is intended to have two spheres, one ‘curated’ and the other ‘open’. The former is meant to keep the quality of designs up to Droog’s standards and thereby to safeguard the platform’s commercial viability. As director Renny Ramakers explains, ‘[t]he curated aspect is very important as we anticipate that the open sphere will give rise to a lot of low quality content’ (2011). Indeed, she holds the view that ‘[w]ith the opening up of the design industry to consumers now empowered with easy-to-access and low-cost design and production tools, the role of curation becomes ever more important’ (Ramakers cited in Droog, 2011). In the non-curated sphere everyone is free to set up shop; designers and companies alike can develop new business models based on the possibilities offered by a decentralized system of production and distribution.

It is difficult to assess the type of open design practices engendered by this project since *MakeMe* is still under development and not yet functional. With this proviso in mind, we may examine the direction the project is taking, rather than its results. Up until the presentation in April 2011, development proceeded according to traditional project development as it is known in the Netherlands, more closely resembling a privatized business model. Instead of issuing an open call for designers, Droog selected a small and relatively well-known group with whom they had already developed relationships (Jaworska, 2011; Minale, 2012), and who were financially compensated for their proposals as well as for the final production (Minale, 2012). The resulting pieces were exhibited not in an open forum, but at the International Furniture Fair in Milan, the long-established stomping ground for the commercial design industry. The objects
were moreover not produced locally according to the ideals of this new technology, but in the Netherlands and transported to Italy.

In sum, at the time of writing, *Design for Download* continues to operate according to the traditional design system of centralized production, distribution and consumption.

It may be tempting to conclude, following philosopher Paolo Virno, that *Design for Download* adheres to the ‘logic of the ghetto’ (referring to deprived, generally black US neighbourhoods as breeding grounds of new hip-hop talent): ‘it is important to […] capitalism that creativity develops autonomously, so it can subsequently catch it and appropriate it. Capitalism cannot organize reflection and creativity, for then it would no longer be creativity. […] “You go on and make new music, and then we will go and commercialize that new music”’ (Virno quoted in Lavaert and Gielen, 2009: 29). While such practices seem to run contrary to the open design principles of free information, *Design for Download* actually seems to achieve precisely what the subsidy *Manifestations of Innovative Culture* intended to foster: cultural projects that establish innovative connections, broaden culture’s social support base and help reduce its dependency on public funds. Even though *MakeMe* currently still functions according to a traditional design model, this is hardly in Droog’s interest: Droog itself has a stake in implementing the practice, if not the principles, of open design – even if this stake is purely commercial. *Design for Download* may indeed introduce a tension between the principles of open design and its commodification; yet this only reflects the tension inherent to how the policy theme of creative industries seeks to make creativity the motor of the economy through top-down regulation.

Another interesting example of the tensions and complexities in the relation between profitability and open principles is offered by *Open Design Now*: the evolution of the *(Un)limited Design Book*, which began its development at *(Un)limited Dutch Design* in Berlin. A collection of articles and projects on open design, *Open Design Now* is a joint publication by the familiar parties: CC, Waag and Premsela, and supported by DutchDFA. However, despite this financial and organizational support, the partners were initially unable to find a publisher willing to agree to the original intention of having completely open content due to the financial risks involved (Klaassen, 2012b). Following talks with various publishers in the cultural sector, the partners finally managed to strike a deal with BIS Publishers. BIS, a ‘more commercial’ publisher (van Wezel, 2011), believed that they could make money from the project and began searching for a business model that could be open and profitable at the same time. In the words of Mr van Wezel ‘I’m for more openness, but if you have created a book, there should be some ownership and payment’ (2011). Eventually they arrived at a system whereby the content becomes opened slowly, article by article over nineteen months. So while a cultural publisher would not take the risk of having an open
book, a commercial publisher did. It required the drive to make a profit from the project to make an open content book possible.

Conclusion
This research was motivated by the puzzling observation that although open design is redolent with associations of bottom-up activities, in the Netherlands, the most visible effort at widespread dissemination of these ideals has been highly centralized and largely supported with government funding. This has led us to formulate two questions: why were government and cultural organizations interested in fostering open design practices? And what type of open practices has this top-down model engendered?

To answer these questions we focused on three key cases of open design discourse that were largely funded by the government: the (Un)limited Design Contest, (Un)limited Dutch Design and Design for Download. In each case, we tried to reconstruct the stake of the different actors in supporting, producing and participating in these events. To avoid generalizations or stereotypes of openness as a means to measure what type of practices these events generated, we instead focused on how the actors involved actively (re)defined the meaning of open design as guideline or justification for their actions. It is from this approach that we formulate our conclusions.

When considering the type of open design practices that government-funded open design events have engendered, a striking aspect is the reluctance shown by designers to adopt open design principles in their practice. In the case of the (Un)limited Design Contest, for example, designers seemed hesitant to share their blueprints, apparently with a view to financial considerations. As Rulkens aptly remarks, ‘the idea of openness is something that is a lot less easy when there is money involved’ (2012). Yet the example of Open Design Now illustrates how, conversely, the practice of openness is a lot less easy if there is no money involved.

Perhaps for that reason, even when Droog explicitly challenged designers to develop new business models that would make open design’s decentralized production system financially viable, the results of the brief were nevertheless mostly object-based. The question of how designers can earn a living while practising open design thus seems crucial and warrants future consideration if open design principles are to make inroads in the professional design sphere.

On the other hand, as transpired in all case studies, cultural organizations were very keen to promote open design principles. Their motivations were as diverse as their organizational nature and mission, ranging from commercial enterprises to independent and public institutions. While Waag’s aspiration is to introduce principles of collaboration to a design community that it sees as having become too closed in a world of increasingly open systems, Droog’s interest is to implement decentralized systems of production as a means to tap into its possible financial benefits. While both PremseLa’s and
DutchDFA’s intentions clearly cannot be reduced to implementing cultural policy, their role within the Dutch cultural infrastructure cannot be denied.

This brings us to the question regarding the government’s motivation to support and even promote open design. In fact, open design as such does not figure in cultural policy; as we saw, the government’s support for open design was mediated via special-purpose subsidies and via its financial support of cultural institutions. So the question should be reformulated as: how does open design fit within current cultural policy’s agenda? Ever since cultural policy started heeding a neoliberal logic, one of its main goals has been to shift the financial burden of culture from the public to the private sector. Among its key strategies to achieve this have been to increase audience appeal of culture and public participation; the branding and internationalizing of Dutch cultural identity; and the fostering of entrepreneurial skills in the cultural sector. As we have seen, open design has served as a means to pursue all of these goals, and as such it may resonate with current cultural logic, while nevertheless preserving its own tone.

In the Netherlands, open design is still nascent. If its principles and practices have so far not fulfilled all the aspirations of those that champion it – whatever these parties may be – then it means there is still room and cause to intervene in the direction it is taking. To imagine open design’s possible futures, we have thought it useful to reconstruct its pasts.

Notes
1. Creative Commons Netherlands was also a partner in the project. Unfortunately we have not found enough sources on their participation and as such do not comment on it here. Further research is warranted.
2. There were already many grassroots ‘open hardware’ activities in the Netherlands (among which Fablabs and the Low Cost Prosthesis Project); (Un)limited Design Contest served to disseminate these further and bring them into the design community rather than to create them from scratch.
3. Originally Waag Society was a partner in the project. However, since we do not have enough sources on their initial collaboration, here we concentrate solely on Droog. Further research is warranted.

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Biographies

Joana Ozorio de Almeida Meroz completed her BFA in 2006 at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, earned a MDes (cum laude) in Conceptual Design in Context from Design Academy Eindhoven in 2009, and a Research MA degree (cum laude) in Visual Arts, Media and Architecture from VU University Amsterdam in 2011. She is currently a PhD candidate and Teaching Assistant Design Cultures at the VU University Amsterdam. She is presently writing a dissertation on the History of the Construction of the Idea of Dutch Design from 1945 to 2012. Her research interests include historiography, social design and the relationship between design and national identity.

Rachel Griffin completed her BFA in 2003 at Washington University in St Louis, and earned a Bachelor of Design in Man & Living from the Design Academy Eindhoven in 2010. Today she is the proprietor of Earnest Studio: a multi-disciplinary design practice based in Rotterdam. Earnest’s work is characterized by in-depth research into traditional and industrial production methods while looking for innovative ways to address sustainability. In particular, Earnest is concerned with the tension between durability (to prevent premature disposal) and degradation (to embrace inevitable disposal), yielding products that are built for change. The studio works on a combination of self-initiated projects and industry collaborations.

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