

Hack the Connected City of the Future

Can you build the digital backbone that brings people together in tomorrow's city centres?

CHALLENGE BRIEF

City centres are much more than places where people just shop. They are places where people meet, discover, spend time, experience culture, support local entrepreneurs and feel connected to their surroundings. A strong city centre contributes to quality of life, social cohesion, employment, the local economy and cultural development.

Currently, city centres across the Netherlands are under pressure. Consumers increasingly discover products, services and experiences through global digital platforms. Information about local shops, cafés, restaurants, cultural venues, events and community initiatives is spread across countless websites, apps and social media channels. Local entrepreneurs and organisations often struggle to remain visible in a digital landscape dominated by large technology companies.

As a result, citizens discover less of what their own city has to offer. Local businesses lose visibility. Cultural activities are harder to find. Opportunities for spontaneous encounters and social interaction are missed. The city centre risks becoming less connected, less lively and less relevant in people's daily lives.

The question behind this hackathon is how digital technology can strengthen local communities instead of replacing them. How can data, digital infrastructure and emerging technologies help people go out, discover local places and meet others in the physical city centre? How can a digital layer make the city centre more visible, accessible, trustworthy and attractive?

This hackathon is connected to the national programme: '*A Digital Approach for Resilient Urban Centres in the Netherlands*'. Within this programme, partners such as inretail, the Retail Agenda, municipalities, knowledge institutions and technology providers are exploring how Dutch city centres can become more resilient and future-proof.

The ambition is not to create yet another isolated app or platform. The ambition is to think about a broader digital ecosystem around cities and retail: an infrastructure that allows local businesses, hospitality, cultural institutions, event organisers, municipalities and citizens to connect more effectively. Such an infrastructure could make local offerings easier to discover, enable trusted data sharing, support new digital services and create a more level playing field for local organisations.

Artificial intelligence could play an important role in this future. For example, AI could help people discover events, shops or activities that match their interests. It could also support local entrepreneurs in becoming more visible and help cities understand how people use the city centre. But AI is not a goal in itself. It is one possible part of a larger digital infrastructure that should help people discover, meet and connect.

FUTURE SCENARIO: ENSCHEDE 2035

Imagine Enschede in the year 2035: Sophie is 35 years old and lives in the city. On a Saturday morning, she has no fixed plans. Instead of scrolling through separate websites, social media pages and event calendars, she asks her personal digital assistant what she could do that day.

The assistant does not simply recommend products or online content. It helps Sophie experience the city. It knows that there is a small makers market in the city centre and it can see that a local bookstore has organised a reading that matches her interests. It notices that several friends are planning to visit a cultural event later that afternoon. It therefore suggests a route through the city that combines local shops, a café, an exhibition and an evening activity.

Sophie decides to go into the city. During the day, she discovers places she had never visited before, meets people she would otherwise not have seen and spends time with local entrepreneurs, cultural organisations and other residents. The city feels personal, lively and connected.

For Sophie, this illustrative experience is simple. But behind it lies a much more complex system: Different organisations need to work together and data must be exchanged in a trustworthy and responsible way. For example, local businesses need to make their information available and cultural institutions and event organisers need to share their programmes. Digital services therefore need to understand local context and AI tools or recommendation systems may need access to reliable information. The challenge here is not to build Sophie's assistant alone. The challenge is to design a digital ecosystem that makes this kind of connected city experience possible.

YOUR CHALLENGE

Your team is challenged to design the digitally connected city centre of the future. You will explore how digital infrastructure, data and emerging technologies can help citizens discover more, participate more and connect more with their city. Your solution should contribute to a future in which local businesses are easier to find, cultural and social activities are more visible, organisations can collaborate more effectively and people have more reasons to physically visit the city centre.

You are free to choose the direction of your solution. It may involve AI-assisted discovery, trusted data spaces, digital platforms, recommendation systems, city dashboards, Internet of Things, open data, smart search, event discovery, local commerce, community engagement or a completely different approach. What matters is that your idea contributes to a more connected, resilient and vibrant city centre.

Fundamental Track – THINK & DESIGN

For students who have chosen this challenge, the focus is on reshaping the underlying system. This asks for both academic and creative approaches.

You are asked to think at the level of architecture, infrastructure and ecosystem design. What digital backbone is needed to support the connected city centre of 2035? How can different organisations exchange information? How can the system be designed so that it is trustworthy, scalable and reusable across multiple Dutch cities? What role could AI or other emerging technologies play within this larger ecosystem?

Your outcome does not need to be a working application. Instead, your team should develop a clear conceptual solution that explains how the connected city could function behind the scenes. You should show which actors are involved, what information flows between them, what digital services could be built on top of the infrastructure and how your concept creates value for citizens, entrepreneurs, cultural organisations and municipalities. The emphasis in this challenge lies on storytelling. How can you best communicate your ideas to a broad set of stakeholders?

Your team will present a future vision, a conceptual architecture, the main actors in your ecosystem, the value your solution creates and the reasoning behind your choices.

Applied Track – BUILD & APPLY

For students who have chosen this challenge, the focus is on translating a vision into something tangible. You are asked to develop a concept, prototype or demonstrator that shows how digital technologies can help people discover, meet and connect in the city. Your solution might focus on residents, visitors, local entrepreneurs, cultural organisations, events or municipalities. It might be a digital service, a platform, a smart discovery tool, an AI-enabled application, a dashboard, a user journey or another practical solution.

The emphasis is on practical value, usability and real-world impact. Your solution does not need to be fully finished, but it should make clear how it would work, who it is for and why it would help strengthen city life. The result should be realistic and scalable.

Your team will present its concept, prototype or demonstrator, explain the intended user and use case, show how the solution works in practice, and outline the value it creates, its expected impact and how it could be realistically developed in the future.

PRESENTATION

At the end of the day, your team will present your concept or prototype, the user journey or use case, the impact you expect it to have and why your idea could realistically be developed further. Groups should present during a timed pitch and can expect a question from the jury.

Pitch format

Each team will have a maximum of **4 minutes** to present. We will enforce this time limit strictly and presentations will be stopped after four minutes if they run longer.

Your team may decide who will deliver the pitch. A maximum of **two team members** may present on behalf of the group. The pitch can be held in Dutch or English. After the pitch, the jury will have an opportunity to ask questions. This round of questions is limited to two minutes, so keep your answers brief and to the point.

Submitting your presentation

All teams must submit their PowerPoint slides in advance. Presentations will be run from one central computer, so it will not be possible to connect or switch to personal laptops during the pitch session.

If you want to demonstrate a prototype or other digital product, we recommend recording a short demonstration video and embedding it directly in your PowerPoint presentation.

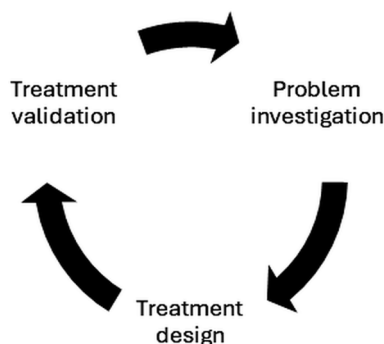
Please email your slides to plieshout@inretail.nl **no later than 18:00 on the day of the hackathon**. Clearly state the following in your email: the name of your group and your group number.

Include at least the following recommended items in your presentation:

1. **CONCEPT:** Key solution direction
2. **DEMO:** Demonstrator
3. **IMPACT:** Real-world impact and effects
4. **EVIDENCE:** Feasibility
5. **KEY MESSAGE:** Takeaways

SUGGESTED APPROACH

We strongly recommend that you plan your time carefully and allocate sufficient time to understanding the problem before developing and testing a solution. To structure your work effectively, we suggest following the Design Cycle approach.



Design Cycle (Wieringa, 2014)

1. Problem investigation

Carefully investigate the current situation and problem by engaging with relevant stakeholders and analysing the available data. You have access to a large dataset from provided to you from 'Koopstromenonderzoek'. You are also free to use other publicly available data as you see fit. However, be mindful that while there is a considerable amount of data available, the time available for analysis is limited. Therefore, it is important to first clarify which information you need to understand the problem better and identify which patterns, variables, or relationships are most relevant to investigate. **Do not attempt to analyse everything.** Instead, focus your efforts on the data that is most likely to provide insights into the problem you aim to address.

2. Treatment design

Once you have a better understanding of the problems and opportunities which city centres face, start brainstorming and designing initial prototypes.

3. Treatment validation

Make sure to test your prototype early in the process, e.g. by asking feedback from your coaches and going back to the analyzed data to test whether the solution will actually help your problem. You can then proceed with another iteration of the design cycle by further refining the problem.

HOW YOUR WORK WILL BE EVALUATED

The professionals in the jury are



Martin Spitholt

Entrepreneur, investor and director of the Sustainable Scale-up Foundation



Tess Rutgers-van Rozenburg Rottier

Entrepreneur, strategic advisor and founder of ValueTrack Network



Harm Jan Arendshorst

Tech entrepreneur, expert in digital twins and digital identity



Hein Roelfsema

Professor of Regional Development



Michiel Vos

Expert in digital transformation and internet strategy

The expert jury will assess your contribution along three main evaluation criteria.

Originality and impact value

First, the jury will look at how well your solution addresses the challenge of future city centres. A strong proposal shows a clear understanding of the problem and explains how digital infrastructure or digital tools can help people discover, meet and connect.

Demonstrator

The jury will also consider the design and concept of your solution. Does it produce a visible contribution to help citizens experience more of their city? Does it strengthen local entrepreneurs, cultural organisations or communities? The jury will also assess the creativity and originality of your idea.

Technical feasibility

Innovation is important, but your idea should also be feasible. The jury will look at whether your concept could realistically be developed or tested further. Scalability also matters: the strongest ideas are not only relevant for one street or one event, but could potentially be applied in other city centres as well.

Your pitch is smashing

Finally, your pitch matters. You should be able to explain your idea clearly, show why it matters and convince the jury that your solution contributes to the connected city of the future.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

This hackathon contributes to the development of new digital approaches for resilient Dutch city centres. The ideas created during the day may inspire future pilots, living labs and innovation projects.

The future of city centres will not be shaped by technology alone. It will be shaped by the choices we make about how technology connects people, places and organisations. Your challenge is to imagine that future and design a solution that helps bring it closer.