

DESIGN FOR HAPPINESS

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What determines happiness? And more importantly, how can we influence a person's happiness? Dealing with this subject asks for psychological knowledge and an empathic attitude of the designer. Marise Schot strongly believes that designers can influence how happy a person is. Find out if sociologist and world authority on the subject of happiness Ruut Veenhoven agrees. Can we make people happy by design?

Sociologist Ruut Veenhoven is a pioneer and world authority on the scientific study of happiness. The 'happiness guru' has shown that happiness can be used as a reliable measure to assess progress in societies, which inspired the United Nations to adopt happiness measures as a holistic approach to development. The research done by Ruut Veenhoven increases our knowledge on conditions for human happiness, which we can use as direct inspiration in Design for Happiness.

"I do believe that inventions have made people happier. A good example of a product that made people happier is definitely the birth control pill. The effect of this invention hugely impacts people's happiness: it enhances their sex life, something that is in direct correlation with happiness. Not only because of the pleasure sex can give, but also because it strengthens the relationship. More importantly, this new product prevented a lot of unhappy parents and unwanted children."

"When we talk about happiness in psychology, we mean satisfaction with life as a whole. When people assess their satisfaction with life, they draw on two sources of information, how well they feel most of the time (mood level) and how well their life-as-it-is fits their standards of how-life-should-be (contentment). These sub-appraisals are referred to as 'components' of happiness, respectively the affective component called 'mood level' and the cognitive component called 'contentment'. The former affective appraisal has typically a greater weight than the latter cognitive evaluation.

Design of products and buildings typically affects the affective component of happiness more than the cognitive component. A well designed building makes you feel good when you are there and adds as such to your average mood. Effects on mood can be measured. With modern technology such as smartphones with GPS we are able to determine how happy people feel in different places. People are beeped repeatedly, and report how happy they feel at the moment. This method, called 'experience sampling', is very useful for assessing the impact of design on happiness, in particular the effects of architecture. To my knowledge this technique is hardly applied as yet. One of the reasons seems to be that designers are not too

interested in the real effects of their creations. For the time being I believe Design for Happiness is mere rhetoric.

A suitable e-tool for assessing how happy people feel during different activities is the GeluksWijzer (Happiness Indicator), which I developed together with health insurance company VGZ. The GeluksWijzer is available on internet (at www.gelukswijzer.nl) and involves a 'Happiness Diary'. A special feature is that it allows comparison with other participants, and in particular with others in a similar situation are. Discovering that your peers are much happier than you might be an eye-opener and encourage you to change. The Gelukswijzer also shows what those people rate as happy moments. An example is that if you see that people with the same background are much happier while working than you are, you might consider finding a job that suits you better. With Gelukswijzer we do not provide therapy, we will not force people to change. We simply provide the means to gain insight into your happiness. This appears to work. A recent follow-up study showed that people who kept the happiness diary for some time became significantly happier.

Happiness is not only desirable in itself, but has also beneficial side effects. One of these is that happiness makes us less susceptible to diseases. If someone is unhappy, a stress mechanism is activated: fight or flight. This has various somatic effects, such as on your digestive system causing your lunch to be less well digested, which in turn causes a low immune system. As a result happy people live longer”.

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