

Feminist foresight in housing studies: housing scenarios through care for Brussels 2050

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Abstract

This paper presents four housing scenarios through care drawn from a long qualitative survey in the Brussels Region. The Brussels region is facing a housing crisis that is affecting the most vulnerable people. By combining care studies, housing studies and future studies, the CTRL+H research proposes several exploratory scenarios for the housing conditions in Brussels in 2050. These scenarios are based on a mixed qualitative survey carried out with residents and field workers in 5 collective housing complexes. The scenarios explore four different relations of care and housing in four different societies. They put light on the role of the state, the tech industry, the grass root movements and the inhabitants in carework and housing production. This method is original in several ways. It uses an empirical survey to develop exploratory scenarios that take account of the issues of power and inequality in the field of foresight where feminist perspectives are in the minority.

INTRODUCTION

The project Caretaker/support resilience laboratory of housing is hosted by the Louvain research institute for Landscape, Architecture and Build environment (LAB) of Université catholique de Louvain in Brussels since 2021 and will last four years. The project team is composed by two architects, a sociologist, an anthropologist and a geographer. It's funded by the Brussels region through innoviris institution. The project deals with collective housing in Brussels. It crosses the question of residential vulnerabilities with the question of care work.

The aim of this article is to question the relevance of integrating a feminist approach into foresight studies. To discuss this issue, we will first present the CTRL+H (2021-2025) research project, which has attempted to work out the contradictions between a theoretical framework derived from care theories and feminism, and the foresight approach that is in the large majority used with quantitative data, with a positivist and technocratic stance. Next, we present a summary of the four scenarios of care work in the inhabited environment, projecting the reader into distinct worlds in 2050: care in the liberal tech society, care in the community society, care in the familial-nationalist society, care in the associativist society. And finally, we'll address questions to the audience about the heuristic scope and potential risks of integrating the feminist approach into the field of foresight studies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS & AIM – MAIN QUESTIONS AND STUDY OBJECTIVES (Chloé)

The CTRL+H research addresses two systemic crises in the Brussels-Capital Region: the housing crisis and the care crisis, examined through their multiple dimension and projections toward 2050. Since the early 2000s in the Brussels Region, the housing crisis has been defined by several mutually influencing factors: land scarcity, increase in household economic burden, an increasing demand for social housing, inadequate housing stock, etc.

The identification of a care crisis in capitalist Western countries dates roughly to the same period; it is determined by several factors: population aging, the weakening of the welfare state, the erosion of local forms of solidarity, demographic changes and the increasing of women in paid employment. The care crisis raises questions about our mutual vulnerability, dependencies, and how these are managed.

In the CTRL+H research, care is, on the one hand, a methodological and epistemological perspective mobilized within its controversies to renew the view on housing and the social relations occurring within it. On the other hand, care is an object of study understood as work invisibilized by institutions; addressing our mutual dependencies and vulnerabilities; mitigating inequalities related to gender, race, class, physical or mental ability, age, religion, sexuality and administrative status; and situated within inhabited environments.

The laboratory aims to identify, through qualitative, participatory, and prospective methodologies, and an epistemology grounded in care and gender, the social and spatial resilience factors within and through housing mobilized to face the two crises targeted by the project: housing and care.

The project aims to explore the spatial scope of care, a notion primarily mobilized within feminist theories of justice and philosophy; to examine housing and its surroundings as levers of resilience and responses to crises; to identify, qualify and categorize variables that may impact the evolution of inhabited environments by 2050; and finally, to propose four prospective scenarios for housing development by 2050 based on the foresight methodology and nourished by situated data from the seven study sites. This final objective led to formulate the following prospective question: what care scenarios are needed to challenge residential vulnerability in Brussels by 2050?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The CTRL+H research lies on a theoretical framework crossing care studies, housing studies and future studies. The definition of care we mobilize inherits from Joan Tronto for whom care is a process and from the materialistic conception of Helene Hirata for whom care is not only an attitude but a relationship, a service, an activity to answer to somebody needs. Inside the housing studies, we defend a feminist approach that analyses gender inequalities and residential vulnerabilities. A situation of residential vulnerability is identified when the occupation status, the localisation or the material housing conditions are not satisfied, are threatened or weakened (Bouillon et al. 2019). Concerning the future studies, we develop a specific approach of foresight based on feminist epistemology. As Gunnarsson-Östling, Svenfelt and Höjer write “futures studies methods need to be changed in order to incorporate a critical gender perspective (2012, 921)”. This is true that feminist foresight remains scarce letting foresight a domain reserved to universalistic perspective. Foresight comes from the oil industry and is used by public authorities and companies for decision making in different domains. The method is quite rigid. It is based on statistics, literature review, interviews with experts and workshops. The main output is the production of scenarios in order to support action and decision. Since feminist epistemology is based on situated knowledge and stands for gender justice, combining foresight and feminist perspective shall look paradoxical. Feminist epistemology defends a science at the service of a just and feminist society grounded on subjectivity and experiences from the margins. Nevertheless, two common themes persist: social change and imagination.

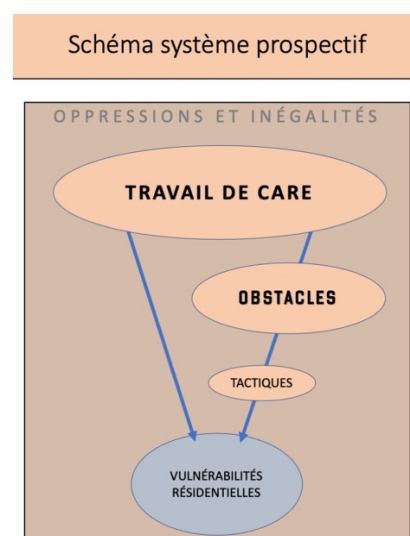
Our approach to feminist foresight is inspired by feminist science fiction and architecture. On one hand feminist science fiction gets more and more audience. On the other hand, feminist architects and activists give concrete examples of what a feminist world could be. Books of authors like Wendy Delorme and Becky Chambers are interesting because they imagine a world where women and gender minorities are not subalterns. They give words to experiences and relationships of those we don't hear. Many feminist architects are inspiring. For example, Marie Stevens Howland invented housing complexes in early 20th-century in Mexico with common kitchens, living rooms and laundries (Denèfle 2008).

In the CTRL+H project, we propose an approach that tend to go beyond text and utopia. Our idea is to engage in future studies to produce other narratives and to call on public authorities. In order to achieve this goal, we developed a method combining feminist perspective to some foresight features.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The four scenarios are based on a mixed qualitative survey in 5 collective housing complexes (interviews, inhabited plans, lived neighborhood map, observation, focus groups). This long fieldwork aims to identify and collect the existing dynamics of care within the collective housing of the RBC region. This survey has been carried out with 40 inhabitants and 25 field workers (social workers, housing employees, building caretakers...). The interviews with inhabitants have been conducted regarding their daily lives and their relationships to care in and around housing. The list of themes was enriched from one interview to another and dealt on different scales: housing, collective spaces in the building and in the neighborhood. We had particular attention conducting paid interviews (35 euros volunteer contracts) with people who are said to be minoritized, isolated or invisibilized. At the end of the interviews, interiors have been drawn then reworked in software. The aim was to draw the living space in order to identify residential vulnerabilities and inhabitant strategies through care work.

Then, we set up a field data analysis system to identify a series of 11 key variables. Key variables are factors whose dynamics can influence how the foresight system evolves.



Care work

- Human care
- Space care
- Financial aids

Obstacles

- Social tensions
- Spatial configurations
- Governance problems

Tactics

- Informal organisation
- Civil disobedience and citizen mobilisation

Residential vulnerabilities

- Poor housing conditions
- Urban accessibility
- Social isolation

These key variables enabled us to construct future scenarios. We could, in a first step, identify and list carework and strategies combating vulnerabilities and, in a second step, analyse carework from different angles: spaces, quality, limits, emotions, etc.

RESULTS – KEY FINDINGS OR ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

The scenarios explore four different relations of care and housing in four different societies. They put light on the role of the state, the tech industry, the grass root movements and the inhabitants in carework and housing production.

Each fictional society is defined by its economic and politic system; its housing conditions; its relation to technology and energy; the role of family; the treatment of the minorities. We found inspiration in a variety of sources: disciplines of humanities as sociology of care (Tronto, Hirata, Fraser, Feder Kittay, Bhattacharya), feminist philosophy (Hamrouni, Young) and political science (Olin Wright, Ledoux, Esping-Andersen); essays (Byung-Chul Han, Meg O’ Brien, Lola Olufemi), feminist science fiction (Becky Chambers, Collectif Antemonde, Wendy Delorme, Phoebe Hadjimarkos-Clarke, Corven, Collectif Æ). In addition, the actual world was very inspiring. We refer to the tech industry news, geopolitics news in the USA and in the EU, climate change news, etc. Moreover, some local initiatives and our own participation in local initiatives enriched our thoughts: ecological communities, cohousing projects, queer squats, LGBT events, associations, etc.

The four scenarios constitute a dossier of about fifty pages, including a diegesis presenting the identified variables, a fictional narrative, and a script for a short scene. Each of these four scenarios will be the subject of an animated film produced by four different directors.

These are the sum up of the 4 scenarios.

Care in the liberal-tech society

The liberal-digital society is a society governed by companies of the Star Tech, the giants of information and communication technologies. These companies are competing to control as many Western cities and colonised territories as possible, exploiting the essential resources needed to run them. In Brussels, several of them are competing for a monopoly of the city and its users. The Star Tech companies are developing AI based on exploiting the digital, biometric, physiological and intellectual data of its workers. City districts have been redesigned on the basis of economic performance. Efficiency algorithms convert low-performance areas to change their function. The digital liberal city is a city in constant mutation. Infrastructures are dismantled and replaced. Most electrical energy and water resources are used to power data centres. Brussels is divided into poor, polluted neighbourhoods with poor 10G connectivity and healthy, new neighbourhoods with excellent connectivity. Air pollution makes public spaces dangerous, so people have retreated into their homes. The digital society is one in which individualism is at its peak. The basic unit of production is the individual rather than the family. People live alone. The birth rate is 0.24. Society is hierarchical, based on people's access to applications and artificial intelligence. The digital divide creates a social hierarchy. Face-to-face work is undervalued and underpaid, whereas digital work offers advantages. People are seen as independent. Care is a despised value. Care-related activities are devalued and carried out by minorities. Virtual relationships with AIs are favoured over those with humans, the latter of which are despised. The richest people use machines and AIs to perform care work. Care workers are selected not on the basis of their CVs or moral qualities, but on the basis of their access to AIs and quality applications. Individuals' value on the market depends on the quality of their data. Work is paid for in cryptocurrency. Work is paid for in cryptocurrency. Each user has a ScoreFlux account enabling them to access services in exchange for cryptocurrency. Access to education, healthcare and housing is provided by Star Tech. Housing is an algorithmic service, conditional on a behavioural score associated with the ScoreFlux account. It is calculated on the basis of economic activity, psychological stability and social docility. Having computer equipment and access to the latest versions of the applications guarantees high-quality daily services. The users' objective is to free themselves from face-to-face work. The day workers are the only ones working in the face-to-face environment. They carry out the work that has to be done in the real world (data centre maintenance, driving certain site machinery, installing cabling, delivery, care work, etc.).

Care in the community society

The community society is a horizontal society based on solidarity and self-management. It operates locally through sectoral committees, such as those responsible for housing, education, transport, food, communication and security. In this society, care has become the defining social value. It lies at the heart of the community-based political project. Care work is valued and respected. It is the main activity of citizens. People are viewed as vulnerable and dependent on their peers and the environment. Care work is carried out by everyone and applies equally to people, materials, living things and animals. Care generates relationships of reciprocity and respect between those involved (human and non-human). Everyone is both a caretaker and a carereceiver. It responds to each person's needs and adapts to everyone's specific requirements. Making care the central value of the social project results in policies that respect human beings and the environment. Energy is used frugally in only certain sectors, such as transport and health. All activities have been refocused at a local level, resulting in energy savings and

improved governance. Community society is characterised by a certain slowness in the implementation of new ideas and development projects. Activities based on shared knowledge are generally small-scale and require relatively simple technologies.

Care in the familial-nationalist society

The United Nations of Europe is made up of European republics governed by a single party. It is a federation of states governed by extreme right-wing European parties. The United Nations performs certain sovereign functions and is responsible for energy policy. Its economic system is based on protectionism and industrial capitalism. Resources are exploited on its own territory and on the territory of European colonies. Its values are the nation and the family. Each nation is sovereign over its domestic policies (education, housing, culture, labour). However, they agree on crucial points inherent in the fervour of Europe. A large part of the national budget is devoted to industrial production and family reproduction. As the preservation and reproduction of the nation is paramount, the Ministry for the Family has a substantial portfolio. It enacts laws regulating reproductive rights (abortion ban, contraception, sterilisation) and care work (raising children, caring for the elderly, cleaning, feeding, body care, etc.). Thanks to a policy of encouraging childbearing and controlling reproductive rights, the birth rate is high. Most care work is carried out by mothers or female civil servants. The family-nationalist society protects women's integrity through measures that protect and defend their security. Each individual is given a social pass in the form of a smart card. This card contains personal details such as surname, first name, nationality, gender and category, as well as a social score. This score varies according to whether an individual's behaviour is virtuous or vicious. The civil service is divided into categories based on qualifications and responsibilities. The most privileged category (category A) is made up of federal and national senior civil servants, such as the Guide, heads of state, ministers, secretaries of state, ambassadors, etc. Civil servants in categories B and C (including teaching, healthcare, security, defence, engineering and secretarial roles, as well as personal care, cleaning, construction, security, transport and logistics delivery roles) are less advantaged. A significant proportion of the population is employed on a contractual basis. These are individuals who have failed a civil service competitive examination or have been downgraded. Downgrading is a sanction for serious misconduct. Those at fault may be reinstated by completing a recovery course and retaking the competitive examination. If a contract employee reoffends, they are sent to a correctional centre, where they must regain the trust of the authorities and perjure their mistakes. Those who deviate from the natural order of the nation are particularly closely monitored (homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals, prostitutes). The authorities ensure that the rules laid down in the Constitution are scrupulously respected. Regular visits to their workplaces and homes are organised to check that the nation's principles are being properly applied. Infertile couples are required to fulfil their parental role by taking in one or more wards of the nation. People who deviate from the natural order of the nation and refuse to undergo conformation monitoring are forced to leave European territory. Europe cannot tolerate in its bosom subjects who sully its honour or, worse still, threaten its glory. Brussels is the capital of the United Nations of Europe. A showcase for the grandeur of the family-nationalist society, it is set up as an urban and social model. The remigration of non-Europeans has left large areas vacant for redevelopment. Vast programmes have been launched to clean up former pockets of poverty. The city is organised into national districts (Spain, France, Italy, Hungary, Austria, and so on) located around the European institutions at the heart of the city. The city is strongly polarised between the various categories of civil servants and contract workers.

Care in the associativist society

The associativist society is structured around a Belgian state, whose two main functions are the ethical regulation of the society and the financing of the national network of associations. In this model, all functions have been decentralised and entrusted to non-profit associations. The region is criss-crossed by thousands of associations providing care services, essential material production and care for the living. Associations are ranked from 1 to 5 according to their responsibilities. The higher the association's ranking, the greater its income and means of action. Rank 5 associations are considered the most essential to the preservation of life. They provide vital services such as community medicine, nutrition, care for young children and the elderly, health care, essential transport and care for the acutely vulnerable. The housing is taken entirely off the market. It is entrusted to residents' cooperatives or managed by specialised associations (ranks 3 to 5). Each person is allocated a dwelling on an individual basis, and the right to use it, rather than ownership, is guaranteed for life and can be bequeathed to children. In fact, co-housing is the dominant norm: intergenerational, affinity-based or organised around care practices. By extension, the family forms that are developing are not based on biological filiation, but on the mutualization of care. Family units are flexible, plural and sometimes temporary. Each individual receives a basic universal income guaranteed by the state. This income can be increased according to involvement in a recognized association of rank 1 to 5. In this system, it is mainly people the most minoritized who rise to the highest levels of responsibility. Their lived experience is considered a skill. It becomes a lever for economic and political empowerment. The result is a redistribution of power from the margins. The most influential associations are structured by those concerned.

Decision-making positions are reserved for people who have headed rank 5 associations for at least 3 years. These people are then appointed to form the collective governance bodies, for a non-renewable 3-year term, regardless of their past legal status. The condition is that they have completed a transformative reintegration programme based on the militant practices of restorative justice and conflict ethics. When an association reaches rank 5 and remains there for a long time, it can take part in the rewriting of the national specifications in dialogue with the associative ministries. This process of integrating and recognising the experience of voluntary organisations enables a bottom-up transformation of society.

In the associativist society, care is an implicit form of social capital, that is valued in people's daily lives and experiences. Some people refuse to accept these norms or cannot find a place for themselves within them. They voluntarily withdraw from the system and are given the status of "voluntary non-joiner". The system attempts to identify these individuals through observatories of residential invisibility. Others, who are less visible (psychiatric and neurodivergent patients, migrants, precarious users), remain marginalised despite the inclusion mechanisms.

QUESTIONS TO AUDIENCE & CHAIR – SPECIFIC ASPECTS WHERE FEEDBACK IS SOUGHT

To conclude, we would like to share some statements that could be discussed in the panel.

This method looks original in several ways. This approaches housing through the prism of care and well-being. It draws on the combined expertise of residents and institutional players

(caretakers, mediators, social workers, neighbourhood workers). It uses an empirical survey to develop exploratory scenarios that take account of the issues of power and inequality in the field of foresight where feminist perspectives are in the minority.

The questions we would like to discuss at ENHR are as follows:

- 1) From your position as researchers, activists and public officials, is there any point in defending a feminist foresight? From our point of view, there are three assets that can be highlighted: on the epistemological level: (a) the feminist foresight opens a breach in a field where feminists are absent; (b) on the societal level: the feminist foresight provides public authorities and society with creative tools. This addresses social justice in a feminist way and provides public policy with input in order to support informed decision-making; (c) in terms of knowledge production: the approach brings into discussion themes rarely addressed by housing studies and well-being (racism, residential vulnerabilities, agency etc.).
- 2) Are there any blind spots in our research, any references on feminist foresight that we might not have mobilized? We're thinking, for example, of references outside the global North.
- 3) Isn't there an underestimated risk of stirring up dystopian imaginings that could be used by extreme far-right political agendas, but also a risk of revealing strategies of resistance to the systems we denounce in fiction?
- 4) What about the porosity of the researcher's field of knowledge? When writing narratives and fictional texts, we draw on the tools used by artists and novelists. What risks might there be in moving outside our own field of action (for our own credibility and for the expertise of the ones whom we borrow the tools)?