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Where'd my Neighbour Go?

Collective Reflections on the Self and the Neighbourhood in Discussions on Climate Gentrification

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Where'd my Neighbour go?: Collective Reflections on the Self and the Neighbourhood in Discussions on Climate Gentrification

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Cities are spaces of struggle and contestation. Growing concerns over the climate crisis coupled with growing city populations have risen the urgency for public policies that prioritise climate risk management, adaptation, and mitigation efforts in cities. In this article, we will reflect on an experimental exercise on collective self-inquiry in discussions on climate gentrification, which we organised for the LDE-GMD Centre's "Rethinking urban governance for the future of diverse and mobile cities" conference held on 5 April 2023. Our experience suggests that exercises that evoke collective reflection can help connect often abstract discussions on climate gentrification with people's everyday experiences in their neighbourhoods.

Introduction

Growth-driven urban development has given space to technocrats and experts that mostly rely on quantitative systems of management and codification of urban problems and solutions (Savini and Raco, 2019). However, there is growing awareness among public management and governance experts on the need to include community members and democratic processes in decision-making (Fung, 2015; Nabatchi et al., 2017; Voorberg et al., 2015). Participatory urban planning is a complex endeavour, as facilitators and community members often struggle to capture and accommodate the triple challenge of urbanisation, climate change, and people's movement and mobilities (Sheller, 2018). A shared interest to capture and do research about these struggles led us to think about methodologies that would allow space for discussions on climate and mobility justice through people's daily experiences.

When the call for session proposals for the conference came out in February, we agreed this would be a great opportunity to experiment with our ideas. With one being an urban planner and the other an ethnographer, what kind of session do we want to design? In designing our session, we soon realised we are neighbours and session planning quickly became a potluck lunch. We talked about how we came to live in a

part of Rotterdam known for its migrant residents and the changes we observed around us. These exchanges inspired us to develop a workshop that could also allow others to share their stories.

"Where'd my neighbour go? Understanding the perils of living in a climate-vulnerable neighbourhood", was designed as a collective self-inquiry exercise that positioned ourselves and participants as members of communities and part of the neighbourhoods where we live. The session began with a brief presentation that introduced climate gentrification and used Rotterdam as an example to localize and make the context more tangible. Then we moved the session to something more exploratory and reflective by relating climate gentrification to our own vulnerabilities and our sense of self and community, while touching upon property values, rental price, finding a place to live, and living in a place that feels safe, healthy, and secure.



Opening Presentation: Climate Gentrification

We started the session with a presentation on climate gentrification. Keenan, Hill, and Gumber (2018) coined the term "climate gentrification" when analyzing the effects of sea level rise on property market values in Florida. They discovered that climate change affects the value of properties in terms of their ability to handle or accommodate certain climatic impacts or risks. This results in the volatility of prices "associated with rent-seeking, speculative investments, or superior purchasing power" (Keenan, Hill and Gumber, 2018: p. 2). We thought this topic is quite close to the current housing crisis we are facing in the Netherlands so we proceeded with explaining the three scenarios

found in their study: the superior investment, cost-burden, and resilience investment. Superior investment assumes the relocation of well-to-do households or households that can afford to leave high-risk areas to much safer, less or low-risk areas such as areas with higher elevation, raising property values in these low-risk areas. In this scenario, it also assumes that more investments or services will be made available in these low-risk areas compared to the high-risk areas.

The second scenario, cost-burden, refers to giving the “burden” of paying for the impacts of climate change on the property owners or renters. For example, to localize this context, the cost of fixing or replacing the weakened poles in the houses due to the lowering of the groundwater, land subsidence, or drought. Cost-burden then results in gentrification when it is only the wealthy residents who can afford to pay for these measures driving away those with lower income elsewhere. Finally, the resilience investment, which we mentioned in the presentation as similar to a cost burden and what can be called a ‘hidden’ cost burden. Public climate-resilient investments such as the creation of more climate-adaptive areas, and buildings either through new real estate developments or refurbishing old housing likewise increase property values (Keenan et al., 2018; Best et al., 2023). As such, it is a ‘hidden cost’ since people indirectly pay for these public climate-resilient investments through increased property taxes and values. The study on climate gentrification in the Netherlands and in particular Rotterdam have yet to be developed; so the claim that it is indeed happening in the city needs further exploration. However, the scenarios presented by Keenan, Hill, and Gumber (2018) are familiar enough to be discussed in relation to our own experiences living in our residential spaces.



Collective Self-inquiry Exercise

It was clear from the beginning that we wanted to do a workshop after a presentation on climate gentrification. How to design it was the first step in our collaborative process. We wanted to encourage people to think, feel, observe, and be aware of their surroundings.

Our aim is for people to think and reflect on their experiences and listen and understand the experiences of others. We were loosely inspired by a YouTube video "[What is privilege?](#)" (As/Is, 2015) which demonstrated the '[Privilege Walk](#)', a social experiment designed to help people understand societal privileges (Privilege Walk, n.d.). We recognised the importance of discussing 'privilege' in conversations around climate gentrification, however, were also aware that conversations around privilege may be problematic if intended to merely cause shame, reproduce reductive binaries between the haves and have-nots, or reduces systematic structures of power and oppression to individual responsibilities (Mascolo, 2019; Mehri, 2020). What we wanted to do is involve people in a conversation about their experiences in relation to climate change and climate gentrification, which may include different forms of privileges and vulnerabilities, but not limited to it.

In the end, we opted to develop an exercise as a "self-inquiry", asking ourselves what we have experienced in finding housing, whether we observe changes in our neighborhoods, and whether we struggle to adapt to changing seasonal temperatures due to the level of insulation we have at home. While the questions asked in the exercise were answerable by yes or no, we chose certain questions that needed more context to be discussed after the participants have answered the question. This allowed us to know deeper the situation the participants faced or are facing. We also wanted people to move through the room to position themselves in relation to each other. Inspired by the 'Privilege Walk', we planned to ask participants to stand in a line at the back of the room and take a step forward every time they agreed with a statement we read out loud. This symbolizes how climate gentrification allows those with more privilege the option to move or stay while affecting those who have limited or fewer opportunities. By making participants move during the exercise, we wanted to represent climate gentrification as embodied experiences of movement and (im)mobilities due to people's personal circumstances and the changes experienced in their surroundings.

As often is the case with workshop designs, flexibility was needed. We were assigned quite a large room full of large tables and chairs and were told that about thirty people had signed up for the workshop. We went to work pushing and moving tables and chairs aside to create enough empty space for people to move around, but the existing space was not large enough for thirty people to comfortably line up on one side of the room. As such, we adjusted the movements during the exercise. Instead of having people take a step forward every time they felt that a statement applied to them, we asked people to move to the left of the room if they would agree with a statement and

to the right side if they didn't. This adjustment allowed us to also have a middle space for people who felt that they neither agreed nor disagreed with a statement. It also meant that privilege became part of the conversation, but not its central feature.

We started with the first statement: "I've been living in the Netherlands for 5 years or more". This statement divided the participants almost equally, with slightly more people moving to the left of the room in affirmative to the statement. This allowed people to share a bit about their background and transitioned well to following statements about knowing their neighbours and noticing changes in their neighbourhood. Together these statements encouraged people to talk about different types of connections they have to their neighbours and neighbourhoods, the changes they notice in their built environments, and the people that come and go within these spaces. Having a diverse group of people, many of who recently moved to the Netherlands, also allowed for reflections on the fact that some participants were both witnesses to and part of the changes occurring in their neighbourhoods.

As we went down the list of statements, participants moved left and right across the room and became more candid in talking about and sharing their experiences. In response to the statement "I have *never* felt discriminated when looking for a space to live in the Netherlands", most participants moved to the left in affirmative 'yes', meaning they never felt discriminated. About three people chose to stand in the middle, expressing uncertainty about their own experiences. One woman, standing in the middle explained that she was born and raised in the Netherlands, making it possible for her to use her network of family and friends when looking for spaces to live. However, she also acknowledged as a Dutch woman of colour there were moments in which she felt discriminated against but was not sure whether she could qualify her experiences as discrimination. Another participant, on the right side of the room, who is in their late 60s and identifies as queer^[1], talked about how they wanted to move because they did not enjoy living in an apartment building designed for residents around that age or older, partly because they felt that other residents do not recognize them for who they are.

Resources also became central to the discussion, especially towards the last few statements. The majority of participants moved to the left side of the room as an affirmative response to "I *never* had a hard time finding an affordable space to live near my school or work". One woman on the right side shared how challenging it was for her to do so, especially after a divorce. The statement about affordable housing was followed by the statements: "I *never* had a hard time with the increase of gas prices and/or the increase of rental prices" and "My house is always warm even during the cold months". Interestingly, the same five participants stood on the right side of the room for both statements. One participant standing on the right side expressed surprise that those who faced difficulties in dealing with affordable housing, increased gas and rent prices, and cold temperatures in the winter were the minority in the group. There was a general acknowledgment that the exercise would likely yield different results

had it been done in a different environment, not in the academic conference that were in.

Due to the limited time allocated to our workshop, we were unable to go through all our statements nor ensure time for participants to debrief and reconnect with the topic of climate gentrification. This was because we had not anticipated how effective our exercise would be in encouraging and accommodating people's desires to share their stories.

Closing Reflections

While there were parts of the workshop that needed improvements, particularly in relation to time management and strengthening connections to the topic of climate gentrification, we found this first iteration of our workshop design to be successful. The success was mainly driven by participants' willingness to share their experiences openly, expose their vulnerabilities, and listen to others in doing so. We were very grateful that our first group of participants trusted us enough with this experiment.

We also received some insightfully written testimonies from participants^[2] about the potential of such space in the broader conversation about climate change and climate gentrification. One participant wrote: "The main takeaway for me is that (climate) gentrification has more perspectives than I realised beforehand, and thus climate adaptation strategies need to be more inclusive to deliver the effect/impact that we say we want to achieve."

Another stated: "I learned that even though many of us share experiences of displacement or discrimination, these experiences are still situated and diverse. Scientists and policy actors should try to give space to these multiplicities and acknowledge them, to make them more "real" in science and government circles."

After this workshop, we had another opportunity to try the original design of the exercise as we had planned with a group of visiting students from the USA^[3]. During this second opportunity, we were able to allocate 90 minutes for this exercise and strengthen connections between climate gentrification and people's embodied experiences. We are convinced that this methodology of collective self-inquiry can be further developed and may potentially offer a powerful tool to encourage conversations around climate change mitigation/adaptation strategies in our built environments and how it can amplify social-economic inequalities in our neighbourhoods.

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[1] On 13 June 2023, via phone call, we sought the permission of the participant on how to properly quote this discussion. They agreed on the exact terminology and context of the discussion.

[2] We sought permission from the participants of the session at the LDE-GMD 2023 Conference on 05 April to use their testimonies anonymously.

[3] We are grateful to the [Resilient Delta Initiative](#) specifically Dr. Zac Taylor and Ms. Milky Viola Gonzalez for inviting us and giving us this opportunity to test our method. Your trust and support are deeply appreciated.

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