

Reflection on the research 'ways of dwelling' and design of a housing project with multi-generational living and palliative care

Anniek Kloosterziel
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At the beginning of this year, the Friche Josaphat in Brussels was introduced; a former marshalling yard that is now a field of wild nature and great biodiversity. The unbuilt site is a large void in between a dense urban area. For P1 we analysed the Friche, learning about the surrounding neighbourhoods and activities. My group looked into the Garden City of Terdel, west of the Friche. We studied the houses, the activities and the people that live there. In our big drawing as P1 product, we showed how people inhabit their gardens and make use of the spaces they have. We worked on a human scale, and came as close to the people of Terdel as we could, eventually entering some houses and back gardens. We found out that Terdel is a well-maintained neighbourhood where the upper and middle-class lives, very different from most of the rest of Brussels.

I am highlighting this because Brussels currently struggles with a big housing crisis. In addition to that, Brussels' population forecasts predict that there will be a boom of over-85s people from 2030 onwards. Brussels will face an ageing population, while in addition, the cultural diversity among elderly in Brussels is also increasing. Therefore, there is a big need for more diverse and more flexible ways of living together as a solution to this housing crisis and ageing society.

At the beginning of the year, I started by researching co-living as a response to the housing crisis in Brussels. I was interested in the different ways that people can live together, and that Brussels' people are already living together. However, co-living is quite broad and has already been researched a lot by others, so Eireen encouraged me to narrow it down. I decided to look only at multi-generational living, because as stated before, Brussels' population is ageing. People are living longer, resulting in a bigger demand for health care and

good social systems, which is a major challenge to achieve. Therefore, it is important to focus not only on quantity, but also on social quality.

Multi-generational living is a great solution to the challenges we now have as a society because of the aging population. It provides the chance to share facilities and care for one another. However, as part of my research on multi-generational living, I found out that this is still rare in both Dutch and Brussels practice. Projects are still positioned on target groups like 'seniors', 'students', 'families' and so on, not in combination and collaboration with one another. It can bring great benefits to society, and once parties like municipalities, investors and health insurers realise and acknowledge this, they might create more room to invest. What those parties often forget is that it used to be normal to live with more generations in one house. Until roughly the end of the 19th century, family members continued to live together practically all their lives. The most normal family pattern included second- and third-level family ties, all in one house. In these housing structures, work, caring and doing household chores, were running right through each other. Over time, these structures changed, as society became more individualistic and people lived in separate single-family houses.

Because of the previously mentioned social challenges, this way of living is shifting again. As people start seeing again the advantages of living together and sharing chores, multiple households sharing one house or property is slowly making a return.

For my design, I looked into the most known dwelling type in which more generations live together. This is the so called 'kangaroo home', where a separate home for the elderly is placed near the main family home. It can be found mostly in rural areas, where people with big houses and big gardens take in their elderly parents. Rural municipalities can see the growing demand for this way of living in their building- and permit applications. The kangaroo home, however, is only applicable in rural areas where there is more space, and is therefore not directly suitable for an urban

context. There are some cooperatives and project developers that are trying to incorporate the aspect of living with multiple generations. However, this is mostly focussed on creating a neighbourhood where multiple generations live, rather than creating buildings where multiple generations share the same house. The latter does exist, but these projects are developed by independent parties and families themselves.

The human scale of this slow return of multi-generational living as a way of living together sparked my interest. It was also a great follow-up to the work we did for P1, so I decided to keep on working on this scale. This resulted in the start of the *Ways of Dwelling* research of my grandparents. I started mapping out the different patterns, rules, habits and uses of my grandparents in the different houses that they have lived in during their lives. They have experienced different family structures, that each resulted in a different way of using certain spaces in a home. For the research product, I decided to make a book of drawings where I drew these patterns in the floor plans of their homes using different colors to categorize everything.

Along with the research, my ideas for the design also developed from a co-living project to an all-generation project. Towards P2, my group designed a masterplan on the industrial part of the Friche, where housing would be based on the principle of perimeter blocks with inner courtyards. The spot for our individual designs would be on the south-west entrance of the Friche where we wanted to create a calm area by designing courtyards. The building I designed would be dedicated to multi-generational houses, in combination with a meditation room, hospice, birth centre, normal living units, youth hub, and a nursing station. So for P2 I presented a still quite undefined building volume that could house all those functions, in combination with a first drawing on the *Ways of Dwelling* research.

After P2 Eireen pointed out that it was not quite clear yet what the research would exactly mean for the design. Rosie mentioned that the building volume should be defined more, the

program could be more specific, and I could take a step back from our group proposal. Therefore, I moved the building plot more towards the southwest entrance of the Friche. From there on, I could better define the building volume and its program according to the context. I also decided to let go of the birth centre, youth hub, and nursing station in terms of further specifying my program.

Also, the choice of what types of housing the project would include and how it was designed, was now not only based on social relevance, but also highly influenced by my research on the dwelling careers of my grandparents. With the findings from *Ways of living* I set building rules for the design of the housing project with multi-generational living and palliative care. This resulted in the design of a housing ensemble that contains apartments, family houses, multi-generation houses, communal spaces and a hospice. The building rules determined a number of choices in the design, such as the entrance of the houses, the liveliness of spaces, the adaptability, and the design of the hospice. The research became not only a practical design tool, but also a very personal and meaningful documentation on the way that my grandparents used to live in different family structures, and how and why their living situations changed over time.

In the process of designing, I struggled the most with the configuration of the different building blocks. The hospice felt like the odd one out, whereas it should be part of the whole design. The feedback from the visiting critics and Rosie after P3 helped me a lot in the process of getting this right. I let go of the principle of the closed perimeter block and designed the buildings in a new configuration. The hospice now became a prominent but intimate part of the design, and the principle of the shared courtyards was still intact.

From then on, I could dive into the details of my design, which I enjoyed. Discussing everything with Rosie and Lex every week, and an extra tutoring by Paul helped me in making certain choices and giving the project more value. The social problems and housing issues

that this design addresses are not only an issue in Brussels, but also in many other countries. The design is therefore very suitable for implementation in other countries. The adaptability of the project and the way it deals with new forms of living, make it suitable for many other urban and societal contexts.

I will use the weeks towards P5 to work further on the P4 products to turn them into beautiful products that represent the quality of the project well. I want the research product to be an exhibition object that is easy to read and complements the verbal presentation at P5.