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## Epilogue

*“We need the ‘networked individual’ to change; from an identity spontaneously produced by technology and social freedom to an identity consciously crafted by collective action”<sup>1</sup>.*

Paul Mason

*“At its most elementary, architecture does little other than design and construct frames; these are its basic forms of expression”<sup>2</sup>.*

Elizabeth Grosz

## Spring, 2030

From a distance, the five- to seven-storey wooden buildings seem to fade between their surrounding environment and the clear skies above the river, given the fact that it is structured in and around the lush, green newly planted areas in the western part of Rotterdam. These former ports, terminals, warehouses, and industrial areas, after being neglected for decades have been redeveloped into attractive sections of the city that – to a large extent – are self-organized and self-supporting. In part raised from ground

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<sup>1</sup>Mason, P. (2019). Clear Bright Future, a radical defence of the human being. Allen Lane. (p.193)

<sup>2</sup>Grosz, E. (2008). Chaos, Territory, Art. Columbia University Press. (p.13)

level where urban farming is located, all other levels are structured around common areas that serve as entries to the various houses and small working areas as well as service areas for domestic and logistic purposes. The spacious common terraces in between serve as places to meet and relax; structured around nature-based areas covered with trees, shrubs, and rotating greenhouses. The entire project, initiated 10 years before by a collaboration of the City of Rotterdam, two architects, and two housing corporations, also serves as, in part, research- and, in part, test-bed project. The City provided and prepared the grounds and designed and managed the infrastructure, the corporations acted as organizing and managing entity between the architects, and builders and the organization to assist assisted inhabitants. More important, the project functions as a pilot to investigate its climate, control, and privacy settings; inhabitants are in control of their personal data connected to time and place. Their agency guarantees a participating role within the local government, in discussions, and common decisions that concern their immediate sphere, e.g., waste management, and local urban issues such as energy, services, traffic, and transport.

An automatic electric shuttle brings me as far as the pedestrian area and the central entrance of the building; an elevator takes me up to the first level with its housing areas, all situated at the edges of the supporting structure. Each level incorporates two-storey houses, all modifiable at its façades between completely open to completely closed off. A digital floor plan mentions the individual inhabitants; on the screen, I select the persons I need to visit and await the reaction in the shadow, provided by the overhanging vegetation.



It is – even with the inescapable imagination – no longer a classic radio play. When I approach the green oak paneled door, it unlocks, guided by software that has recognized me from an earlier visit. Before me stands an old man and close behind him an old woman, both with a confident and joyful look on their face. A few minutes later, we sit together at a small wooden table with coffee and chocolate biscuits; I remember the last time I was here. I recall the domestic items and the smells of times long gone. But what has changed is the atmosphere or, rephrased, the imagination and presence of that sphere. One entire inner wall is “covered” by an image of their former neighborhood and house, an image very slowly shifting from the left to the right, showing the narrow street and the canal with its old trees. No nostalgia here, just an adequate yet illustrative reminder of previous other times elsewhere, times with their specific quality and personal memories.

The couple has been informed a few months earlier that their request for an extension of their place is considered and approved by the community. They desired and needed more space to be able to accommodate their grandchildren when necessary, but this implies a change within the overall plan of common and private areas. When they started inhabiting this building, they also agreed to share part of their spaces with their fellow inhabitants in this section, so there is now the possibility to rearrange their premises within the common main structure. There is no need for them to move elsewhere; the common spatial structure in this section houses around 120 people, i.e., families, singles like students, and elderly. Structured along the standardized principles of industrial elements and their infrastructure, it is only a matter of hours to adapt the infill, connect the services needed, and rearrange the privacy settings. All building- and infill-elements are tagged and registered; each one is reused. Their contract will also be adapted since the total surface of their occupied space has increased; the standard contribution for each m<sup>2</sup> is defined, as are the fees for various advice and the hours needed for adaptation. Their privacy settings require a minor adaption since their outer spatial separation is increased; the grid that covers the entire floor and building calculates their use and the software adjusts the settings for various infrastructures, to be monitored by them.



## To end

I am fully aware of the possibility, most likely the probable fact, that these texts will cause the much aimed discussion, raise questions, and produce critique: “this all has been argued before,” with minor success. However, anyone consulting the various media – be it from a general, technological, and/or architectural background – will recognize the increasing number of (research) articles and opinions that question or even criticize the current situation of designing, providing, and building our housing. But to get somewhere together, we first have to decide *not* to remain where we are now. Rephrased: the process of envisioning, realizing, and occupying our housing can/will only change when, collectively, we make the choice to change. I am also aware of the fact that for about 50 years now, many people within the housing building industry will acknowledge that things have to change, as I have illustrated in the previous chapters and pages. This however can only become a reality when the entire chain of participants is aware of the

current and future situation, when the inhabitant is included in the complete process and will have a lasting influence in what determines and shapes his/her environment. First, it may seem a step back for many currently involved; but it also provides a step forward, i.e., ample chances and opportunities for those same parties, assuming we stop treating the envisioning and realization of our housing as some distant logistic process that excludes the inhabitant. As citizens, we have acquired more and more ways and means to become – in part – independent of these traditional and sometimes obsolete processes; we also possess the technical/digital options to exercise our power and have a real influence in what concerns our life, all assuming we have/gain authority and control over the data/information we produce and utilize.

Recalling the illustrative words of Constant when he talked about his “New Babylon, sketch for a culture”: *“The climatic conditions (..) are all under technical control. Inside, variable range of climates can be created and modified at will. Climate becomes an important element in the play of ambience, all the more so since the technical apparatus is accessible to everybody and the decentralisation (of distribution) encourages a certain autonomy of the sector or groups of sectors. (..) The fluctuating world of sectors calls on facilities (a transmitting and receiving network) that are both decentralised and public. Given the participation of a large number of people in the transmission and reception of images and sounds, perfected telecommunications become an important factor in ludic social behaviour”*<sup>3</sup>.

At Council, the unavoidable shift from an Internet of Things to an Internet of People is emphasized for years now; the *“infosphere”* is inclusive of objects *and* humans. It is within this context that architecture – and therefore our housing – is situated and thus cannot be excluded; it is not autonomous. If we value our dwelling – which we can hardly negotiate – we need to value our position, place, and agency in a hybrid world. In the adequate words of Mireille Hildebrandt in the Onlife Initiative (OI): *“(..) we need an environment to construct an infrastructure that allows for a plurality of publics, a choice of exposure and places to hide”*<sup>4</sup>.

Preferably, “everything at once.”




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<sup>3</sup>Constant; ‘New Babylon, schets voor een kultuur.’ 1974. (orig.German)

<sup>4</sup>Floridi, L. et al. (2013). *the Onlife Initiative*. (p.176)

An additional, but in my view necessary and inescapable actual, note:

When I started writing these texts in early 2019, no one could have anticipated the actual situation caused by the development and rapid worldwide spreading of a contagious virus – four proteins and a piece of genetic code – that has changed our world in a most fundamental way and thus emphasized once again the urgent need to rethink much of what we have taken for granted far too long. Now, we have no educated guess how long this disruptive situation will continue, nor do we have a clear image of the world in one year’s time from now. But as Jeff Malpas argues: *“dwelling (..) does not name one mode of being as opposed to another; it is the essential way human being is in the world”*<sup>a</sup>. Now that dwelling, our “being in the world,” has, to a large extent, become dependent of often alienating circumstances beyond our control, it raises the question as to the extent in which we should be in full control. Where previous social/architectural projects often originated from – in Situationist’s terms – a sense of play or “*derive*” we may well be forced to change the physical translation of our dwelling into something more personal, temporary, and technological: a state-of-the-art environment or shelter as ultimate answer to changing circumstances.

As illustrated in Chapter 4 – “Early and recent history” – a wide variety of artists, architects, and parallel disciplines have tried to envision/design a world according to the developments (or the lack thereof) occurring in their times; some unrealizable due to social circumstances or technological requirements unavailable at that time. Much of what is written in previous chapters should have illustrated that much of what has been argued in particularly the last 50 years is far from new; we have failed though to act accordingly and envision/create systemic change instead of cosmetic appearance. Many around the world acknowledge that the unsustainable, linear ways in which we inhabit and exploit our planet, together with our consumerism, travels and other ways of transport cannot be maintained. Political, economic, as well as social circumstances have caused environments in which “to dwell” has often become an anachronism where it should be a vital element to experience life, in lived space.

We believe – too often – that we are in control of the world around us; many believe we can capture society and life by clean numbers and detailed statistics, and many believe that providing a manual equals adequate use. We fail to allow the uncertainty and the unexpected, while many expect

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<sup>a</sup>Malpas, J. (2012). Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the question of place (p. 12).

and believe – even urge – that we need to return to the times before the virus, to the questionable economics on which many of us thought we could build a sustainable and inclusive society for everyone. At the same time, we discuss digital control systems that via technology “promise” a world in which this will not happen again and, if so, we can control this as well. Today, a world-spread virus has confronted us with too often disruptive circumstances we did not anticipate, although it is us that created or facilitated the preconditions. It has locked us into a place we know as protected space, without – for a long time – the assurance that we could venture safely into public space where we are subject to threats unfamiliar and unknown to us. This seems therefore all the more remarkable when we remember earlier innovative projects, e.g., Michael Webb’s “Cushicle,” Francois Dallegret’s “Un-house,” Haus-Rucker-Co’s “Oase nr.7,” or Toyo Ito’s “PAO” (see Chapter 4), that tried to think/design individual systems of shelter; systems that separate and/or isolate man from his/her environment by offering (mobile) protection and a mode of personalized privacy. Looking at many of today’s protective outfits, the step further is the one that creates a dichotomy between basic shelter and built environment, ensuring freedom of movement, protection from elements, and control over shelter. If man is to become more like a nomad, due to environmental changes, the limited availability of work and/or other causes, why should his refuge, his *pied-à-terre*, be a permanent one?