

09 *Reflection*

Reflection

On the Project and the Studio

The topic of my graduation project aligns very much with concepts employed in the studio of Planning Complex Cities. On the one hand, the case study of Luxembourg represents a complex region in transformation. Challenges such as the competing housing market and the security of public social systems due to migration and ageing represent complex issues to deal with in the realm of spatial planning. Moreover, the project engages with the concept of planning as a critically engaged method, through its active questioning of current structures in care provision and governance. The thesis discloses binary conceptions in social reproductive labour imposed by family, welfare state, and market paradigms alike. Lastly, the thesis with its method of design experimenting through scenario-building and designing based on former utopian precedents aligns with the understanding of urban planning as a future projective discipline.

On the Scientific Relevance

There is a wide range of information on challenges and problems presented by demographic change and an ageing society. However, there is a lack of concrete strategies at various levels of politics, economy, and society to address these challenges (IZAH, 2023). While my project does not deliver concrete strategies, it presents the translation of strategies depending on a scenario into an alternate reality. The thesis explores the role of speculative scenarios in revealing structures of past and present spatial planning and how to seek inspiration and find a vision for a future aim of spatial planning. This study precedents a review of a variety of communal strategies in urban models and builds on the concept of Communal Care as introduced by Hester and Srincek (2023) or O’Brien (2023). Additionally, the thesis highlights challenges encountered when dealing with care provision through communal organisation in different spatial settings. Moreover, many contemporary concepts of ageing centre around a form of active ageing which hides certain aspects inherent to ageing. Rather than making old age fit into current economic systems of efficiency and optimisation, my thesis explores possibilities to learn from non-normative experiences of ageing and thus builds on the concept of Queering Ageing Futures as introduced by Sandberg & Marshall (2017). Additionally, this study reveals the interconnectedness between the home and care building on Leinfelder et al. (2023).

On the Project and the Master Program

The thesis further aligns with the approach of the Urbanism Master Track to integrate social, cultural, economic, and political perspectives into urban design and planning. The thesis references a large variety of concepts based on political and labour theory, as well as gender studies and critical cultural gerontology. It thus employs extensive research on aspects that concern local trends in housing, mobility, and care needs, combined with a larger perspective on the general ageing of the European population. A main component of the graduation project is the critical analysis of current spaces of care in general, as well as the application of the case study, which is a main component of the master track. It proposes a sustainable solution for aged care provision through the rethinking of current models and spaces. The methods used also reflect the skills used in design practice and social sciences and thus correlate with the MSc AUBS in its blended research.

On the Social Relevance

This study highlights the significance of care in an ageing society. By firstly analysing the often-opposing definitions of private and public space with Arendt (1998) and later understanding both the welfare state, the family, and the market, as institutions of care provision, as introduced in O’Brien (2023), I explore alternative concepts. Both areas of analysis are deep space- and culture-bound, in for example more individual or collective environments. From an understanding of these areas, I present scenarios that foster and/or renounce local concepts of care provision, moving from a substantive way of planning care services to a more procedural and contextualised approach. The thesis therefore deals with organising care differently from contemporary societal notions and binaries. It actively questions social norms in the realm of aged care provision. By this, the thesis reveals not only the existing paradigm present in care provision but also challenges the reader and raises more questions concerning individual rights and aspirations in a communal setting as well as agency and independence while ageing or in need of care.

On the Transferability

The thesis deals with questions that are apparent in a variety of contexts, cultures, and countries. However, the context of a strong welfare state in care and social services as present in Luxembourg is unique even when compared to other countries within the EU. In many other similar countries, such as Germany, France, or the Netherlands, larger parts of long-term healthcare services have been and continue to be privatised. The same process is occurring in Luxembourg although not as strongly. Compared to other countries it is easier to gain an overview of important actors in this field. The welfare state presents certain elements that accelerate urban sprawl and unhinged urban growth, such as the pension coupled with the index and small tax policies (Hesse, 2016). This makes the growth paradigm very present in this context but similarities can be found in other regions. Also, international connections and collaboration in certain matters are not unique but at least special: for example, cross-border workers and bus lines or just the amount of cross-border traffic. Therefore, the nomad experiment is one that is more context-specific. However, the main results of the thesis, which expose norms and current and alternative care scenarios, are more or less transferable to other north-western European or even North American countries, whereas the spatial implications are more specific in the context.



Figure 131: Reflection on Methods used, Author's Work

Research by Unlearning & Experimenting

Speaking of the outcome, the early theoretical research also made me realise that I am shaped by my biases and expectations growing up with a welfare state and its care systems. From the beginning of engaging with the theory, I knew that reflecting all concepts in a designerly outcome would be difficult. Looking back now, I am not sure I did the theory complete justice. I still found it challenging to spatially apply some of the radical concepts presented in O'Brien (2023), which discuss a post-revolutionary status. Imagining this scenario was particularly difficult for me, as I do not want to envision anyone in crisis and I do not think I have the ability to do any revolutionary act justice with a master thesis. Thus, quite early on, I wanted the design part, so to speak, the Experimenting, to be as open as possible and reflect my struggle of unlearning. I wanted to push myself from continuous small improvements in designer interventions to understand and denounce the bigger picture. Although I think I am still far from that, the three alternate scenarios are a first step and already raise important questions on agency, individuality, and collectiveness when giving or receiving care.

Research by Understanding & Experimenting

In this case, exploring the topic on-site was important. On the one hand, the spatial context of Luxembourg was very valuable in forming my aspiration to work with alternate and speculative scenarios. On the other hand, the spatial setting of the country shows such a variety, and even in the three neighbourhoods I investigated further, it also made me realise that working with common concepts such as the city as commons would not be sufficient because of the low density of some areas. This was also mentioned in one of the interviews I did. Cross-border mobility was also an aspect

On Research and Design

Research by Unlearning & Understanding

Unlearning built the theoretical research, while Understanding built the spatial analysis through a variety of different methods, including qualitative and quantitative analysis. By starting with the literature review, shaped the approach and outcome of the spatial analysis (Figure 141). By analysing the norms which are apparent in the current spatial setting of care work about the elderly along three to four main themes, including the body, the family, the state, and the market, this theoretical approach built the basis for the spatial analysis. Linking a variety of different spaces to the aspect of care allowed me to explore and include a variety of aspects on-site, such as housing typology and the critical reflection on the typology of care homes.

This moment of unlearning in the beginning was crucial in my thesis, and it shaped further analysis and the outcome. On the other hand, interacting with the site and with people during the field trip made the thesis topic more grounded and limited in a good way. The case study was relatively clear in terms of the main actors in care provision, as well as the economic and spatial settings, which made dealing with such a broad topic attainable.

that fascinated me, and I wanted to be reflected in a designerly outcome. Since the welfare economy in Luxembourg is rather broad, the site allowed me to move beyond visions of distributive justice and look at alternative scenarios that question the power of the welfare state and its relation to the economic growth paradigm. Linking both approaches through the means of storytelling was important because it is a critical reflection of someone’s personal experience.

Lessons for Education

I am grateful for the opportunity to develop this thesis. My mentors provided the time and patience needed to immerse myself in the theory, grapple with the context, and struggle with the design. When I started engaging with the topic, I received many comments, excluding my mentors, suggesting I pick a target group. However, I never wanted to design for a specific person but rather for an activity that involves everyone. The lessons I learned from engaging in these methods emphasise the importance of creating space and time for students to explore. Additionally, it is crucial to allow daily life’s complexity and intricacy to inform analysis, design, and research. If I had picked a single target group, I would not have been able to address the interconnectedness of family, state, and market when it comes to addressing care work. Education should allow for struggle, failure, and the unexpected because meaningful critiques of today and visions for the future can emerge mainly through these. Especially in the context of poly-crises, when business as usual has proven not to solve the causes of these, education should be give the space for trial and error, and additionally should allow for conflicting opinions.

On the Limitations of the Research

The research faced limitations stemming from the challenge of conceiving alternative scenarios that would radically transform current systems, a task advocated by some of the literature referenced. This difficulty is compounded by the study’s focus on an existing context rather than on the creation of entirely new structures, as seen in certain utopian socialist (and colonial) models such as Fourier’s Phalanstère.

Much of the literature delves into the concept of communal care within a post-revolutionary framework (especially in O’Brien, 2023), when property has been abolished through workers’ revolts. They often advocate not only for the abolition of the family but also for that of the state and borders. While these ideas are intriguing, they extend beyond both the scope of this thesis and my own imaginative capacity being deeply socialised in concepts of family, welfare, and nation-state.

In this regard, witnessing my student colleague’s thesis on the purpose of nation-building to gain independence in the context of ongoing geopolitical conflict, I found it very difficult to include border-abolitionist concepts

in this study. While I personally have an interest in anarchist movements, I did not find it necessary to explicitly include them in this project. Consequently, I saw a limit in implementing the theoretical research fully into the design outcome of an urbanism project. This study also does not dive deeper into specific care relations which are prevalent in dealing with dementia or mental disabilities but investigates care work on a general level of a generic receiver and giver.

On Ethical Considerations Encountered

During the research

Arendt (1998) claims bodily matters as the most private ones and the most difficult to communicate. This is one crucial element in my project, as for many people the need for care is considered private and people may often feel ashamed of it. I am aware that I developed this project as an able-bodied and young person. At the same time, I wish to contribute to a different understanding of care needs. However, I am aware that such a change in understanding takes time or may never occur because of biases.

I struggled sometimes with doing interviews because I was overwhelmed by the amount of information people were willing to share. This information was often on their vulnerable position, which I had not specifically asked for. I think a method such as interviewing could be integrated in the graduation trajectory for example as an Intensive Course since many students use it and its an important aspect of urban-social research.

During the design

Another aspect is by building scenarios based on local social behaviour and necessary changes; I actively suggest behaviour change. It is yet unclear how change of behaviour is influenced, enforced, or appreciated by local actors. Benhabib (1993) raises the concern that when dealing with private as political matters one may lead in feminist thinking to “authoritarian utopias” (Benhabib, 1993, p. 100). In the thesis, I actively use utopian precedents to showcase a possible future through scenarios. These scenarios are first and foremost tools for me to test my role as a designer and do not intend to cause any outside action. Moreover, as mentioned before, I use these alternatives to reveal the norms and expectations of both existing and alternative settings.

On The Purpose of the Thesis*

The purpose of this thesis is not necessarily to propose an improved care system that I wish to implement but to accelerate the discussion surrounding by who, why, and how care work is being done now and in the future.

The use of utopian precedents has two reasons. One is my personal fascination for projects such as Fourier’s phalanstère or the designs by Archigram and my willingness to learn from them. The other and more important one is their capability to expose, criticise, and transcend current paradigms. Because Utopia is not only a fantasy of another place and time but proposes emergence in a moment of crisis (Paris, 2024). While the rise in care needs is not an immediate crisis, this study has revealed its relation to economic growth and social coercion, which puts the environment and many members of society in constant crisis. Consequently, how we plan care in the future is an essential question and challenge. As revealed, the current system is often corrupted, so understanding its ideology and function is crucial.

Moreover, ageing bodies are often excluded from existing built utopian projects (Hester & Srnicek, 2023). This study thus uses an idea of embodied utopia (Zorach, 2001) and aims to expose bodily experience in different scenarios and what it tells us about the agency of someone who needs care over the decisions they can or cannot make. As argued, while the three alternate scenarios diminish existing norms, they raise other expectations. In my judgment and from my experience on-site, the intrusive strategies of some experiments in private family spaces such as the home are the most difficult to translate. This is especially visible in the effort and care some residents put on their private homes and gardens (Figure, 142). One such intrusive strategy is most exaggerated in the experiment of the Nomad in which the ageing body gives up their home to receive their needed care. The ageing body is thus asked to bow out from its known surroundings which may cause additional stress or feelings of non-belonging. Simultaneously, this is already happening to some people who must move to nursing homes at the current time.

Depending on the familiarity of someone with a certain system, they might not be able to see these norms or expectations. By exposing them to alternative scenarios, these norms become more prevalent. This concept of ambiguous utopia is often used by Ursula K. Le Guin in her literature (Theall, 1975). For example, in “The Dispossessed”, the main character Shevek is confronted with a different understanding of freedom than what he is used to. On his home planet society is classless and does not have or even refer to property in language. When he is sent to another planet with a class system and he encounters the freedoms of the riches he is very overwhelmed. He never saw the inflicted community service on his home planet as a restriction to his personal freedom but mainly as a duty to the community (Le Guin, 1974).

I encountered a similar instance on my site visit to the Familistère in Guise (Appendix 08) which I had idealised as a built form of Utopia. The familistère was built following the concepts of Fourier as a communal workers’ dwelling. In the exhibition, contemporary witnesses outline their

*this section is copied from the section “Embodied Utopia” in Chapter 08 Discussion, page 205. From the reading flow of the thesis this part made more sense to include in the Discussion section. It is copied here for reasons of completeness.

appreciation for the conviviality in the Familistère but also reveal its imposing structures or practices of exclusion. One woman describes that once the husband, who worked for the factory or cooperative, died, their non-working wife was expected to move out. Such a practice of inclusion through devotion to a community is also present in the scenarios of the Commune and the Cooperative, where members are expected to share space or time with the community.

In conclusion, this study exposes existing and alternative structures. In all structures, the notion of agency, as in the ability to craft our own lives and make decisions that shape our collective future, is central. Yet, as the thesis explores, the concept of current planning paradigms or utopian alternatives is not without its critiques. The study thus highlights the importance of self-emancipation and collective planning.

I further want to conclude this research by formulating three guiding principles crucial to progressing in the realm of urbanism, spatial planning, and reproductive labour:

Access to Land and Care: Land and property should be explicitly addressed as communal and local assets, serving as means for intergenerational care. Ownership and governance of land must be sustained through collective decision-making within the mega-family home.

The Capability of Space and Care Economics: Space must be understood in relation to the prevailing economic system. Spatial transformations have the potential to reshape the economic system, particularly when it is on the verge of collapse. Moreover, space can bring to light and amplify hidden economic practices, such as many reproductive activities, making them more visible and acknowledged.

Temporalities of Care: Time is a crucial element in planning. Care needs vary greatly over different time frames, daily, monthly, yearly, or over a lifetime, and must be considered. By addressing these evolving needs and shifting away from the notion of permanence, urban design and economic models can be reimagined to provide diverse options for everyone engaging in care work.



Figure 132: Carefully Maintained Lawn outside of a Home in Howald, Author’s Work