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Busy Body

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Living and working in urban renewal neighbourhoods

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Abstract

Urban renewal reinforces the isolation of working-class women. This was concluded in the 1983 publication “Zoiets maak je toch niet, ik zeg altijd, dat doen mannen...”. This booklet criticizes 1980s participatory urban renewal of the Staatsliedenbuurt in Amsterdam and addresses the exclusion of women. Several inventive tools were developed in this neighbourhood to empower women to make their diverse, tacit, embodied knowledge heard and make design suggestions that better fitted their needs. As a result, new knowledge was brought into participatory urban renewal processes of which women were so often excluded; diversifying and expanding what was commonly perceived as the concerns of the resident. This paper brings forward various tools developed in the Staatsliedenbuurt that were used as vehicles to bring women’s voices into urban renewal processes, such as the fictiocritical character Els, a workshop on dwelling stories, and a manual. The paper contributes to histories on the collective efforts by various women’s groups in the 1980s that fought exclusion and sought to develop feminist approaches for urban design by making what is the tacitly known, explicit; making the invisible, visible.

Participation and urban renewal in the Staatsliedenbuurt

After a political shift by the end of the 1970s, a new approach to urban renewal was adopted by the Amsterdam municipality that included participation, called *stadsvernieuwing*. Among the urban renewal neighbourhoods was the Staatsliedenbuurt, a nineteenth-century working-class neighbourhood in the west of Amsterdam. However, some groups remained systematically excluded from participating, such as women.¹ From the various interviews held after the renewal with women in the Staatsliedenbuurt, it may as well be concluded there was no participation at all.² As a result, the knowledge held by women living in the area, including their embodied knowledge, was not made explicit or used to make design decisions. According to the interviews, this exclusion or neglect had many consequences, such as the reinforcement of social isolation and economic inequalities, and the design of hostile and unsafe public spaces. In response to this exclusion and influenced by second-wave feminism, various women's groups that were active in architecture, urban planning and design were formed across The Netherlands in the 1980s. In the Staatsliedenbuurt, an active community developed several inventive tools aimed at bringing women's diverse, expert, tacit knowledge into urban renewal processes. Among these tools are a fictocriticism, dwelling stories, and a manual. This paper analyses how these tools were used to bring a specific body of tacit knowledge – namely women's experiences – into urban renewal processes.

Els, the story of a busy body

In the 1980s, the Staatsliedenbuurt was neglected and run-down. Municipal plans to renew the area were heavily debated through actions by the neighbourhood, amongst others by a very active squatting community. In 1983, *wijkopbouwwerkster*³ Yvonne van den Elsen set up a research project with the Nederlands Centrum Democratische Burgerschapsvorming (NCDB)⁴ to investigate the experiences of women in urban renewal neighbourhoods. The results were published “Zoiets maak je toch niet, ik zeg altijd, dat doen mannen...” (You wouldn't do something like that, I always say, that's what men do...)⁵.

1. In the 1980s there was an increase of separate resident groups, for instance for women or persons with disabilities.
2. Little Diederer and Yvonne van den Elsen, *Zoiets Maak Je Toch Niet, Ik Zeg Altijd, Dat Doen Mannen... Ervaringen van Vrouwen in de Stadsvernieuwing* (Amsterdam: Macula, n.d.).
3. The *wijkopbouwwerkster* was seconded to the *Wijkopbouworgaan* Staatslieden- en Hugo de Grootbuurt. This was a key actor in urban renewal processes in the Staatsliedenbuurt. A *Wijkopbouworgaan* was a legal body subsidized by the Amsterdam municipality of which various neighbourhood groups, committees, and institutes could become a member. Later, neighbourhoods gained more administrative autonomy when they became *stadsdelen* during the 1980s and 1990s.
4. The Nederlands Centrum Democratische Burgerschapsvorming, NCDB, was founded in 1966 by a group of social scientists and educators that aimed to intervene and critically reflect on politics W.P.T. de Jong, “Van Wie Is de Burger? Omstreden Democratie in Nederland, 1945-1985” (Nijmegen, Radboud University, 2014), <https://hdl.handle.net/2066/130052..>
5. Diederer and van den Elsen, *Zoiets Maak Je Toch Niet, Ik Zeg Altijd, Dat Doen Mannen...*

This booklet criticizes 1980s participatory urban renewal and compacte stad (compact city) approaches to urban design adopted by the Amsterdam municipality.⁶ It documents 14 interviews with women living and working in the North-East point, a small corner of the Staatsliedenbuurt in Amsterdam. The women were all thuisvrouwen (home women), meaning their first responsibility is taking care of the household.⁷

The publication was an indictment of the various actors involved in urban renewal and a call to action to women in urban renewal neighbourhoods to stand up for their needs. The authors resist offering generalized solutions, instead aiming to inspire women to critically assess their homes and neighbourhoods and discuss their opinions with other women. To make women's embodied experiences explicit without generalizing, the authors have invented a fictional character called Els. The first chapter is written from her perspective, and she also features on the cover. The second chapter reviews general guidelines for urban renewal from a women's perspective regarding living and working. Here too generalizing statements about female perspective are avoided.⁸ In chapter three a few suggestions are offered on how women could stand up for themselves in urban renewal processes.

Els is portrayed as a woman living and working in an urban renewal neighbourhood.⁹ She is comprised of various experiences collected through the 14 interviews. Written primarily for working-class women in urban renewal neighbourhoods, the figure of Els was designed to be recognisable and provoke discussion.¹⁰ Els is 28 years old, married, has two children, and works parttime. Els is very busy: from working, to housekeeping, to mending clothes, to bringing her children to school and home again, or to swimming lessons, or to expensive day-care, to doing groceries in various stores. For the women in this area, the neighbourhood and home were not only a place of living, but also of working, mostly unpaid.

6. The compacte stad (compact city) approach to urban design aimed to plan housing within the boundaries of existing cities or adjacent areas, instead of the suburban dispersal that characterized post-war housing development. In Amsterdam, this approach to housing was also connected to the preservation of the Green Heart, a peat-meadow landscape at the centre of the most highly populated cities of The Netherlands. Other features of the compact city approach were reconnecting housing, working, traffic and services, opposing the functionalist city principles of the post-war years. However, compactness and mixing functions was not comparable to historic inner cities. It was still rather segregated. For instance, a mix of functions was often achieved by building one shopping centre in the middle of a largely mono-functional housing area.
7. A lot of the issues raised in the publication arise from the division of labour between men and women at the time. In the 1980s, housework and care of children fell mostly under the responsibilities of women. In this period still 84% of married women in the Netherlands fitted this gender role-confirming profile (Diederer and van den Elsen, *Zoiets Maak Je Toch Niet, Ik Zeg Altijd, Dat Doen Mannen...*, 63.) Therefore, even though housework is nowadays carried out by various genders, the 1983 publication was primarily a call to women to stand up for these concerns that remain often invisible and undervalued.
8. The women's perspective is given through a series of anonymous quotes per guideline that also describe which consequences design choices have on their daily lives, often reinforcing the isolation of working-class women. By lifting these consequences embodied knowledge is made explicit in social, economic, and spatial terms. Even though the North-East point is a specific urban renewal area, the issues raised are relevant other areas as well, such as new urban expansions that followed similar compact city principles.
9. A well-known saying at the time describes this as follows: 'voor vrouwen zijn woning en buurt zowel woon- als werkplaats' (for women, house and neighbourhood are both living and work place) (Diederer and van den Elsen, *Zoiets Maak Je Toch Niet, Ik Zeg Altijd, Dat Doen Mannen...*, 23).
10. Secondary, the publication is also aimed at neighbourhood groups, architects, and planners, to better understand women's perspectives.

The workload of Els increased because of the urban renewal. First, there was a rent increase: from about 50 guilders to almost 400 for social housing.¹¹ To make ends meet, Els goes to various markets, stores and second-hand shops to find the best prices, taking her hours of extra work. Els recalls how small stores, such as the butcher and baker slowly disappear from the area or have become too expensive. This further increases her daily commute. These issues are a direct consequence of decisions made in the urban renewal process.

At home, it is also more difficult for her to get work done, or to have a moment to herself. She says her apartment lacks a small extra 'room of one's own'.¹² In her old home she had an attic, now they have a window-less storage box on the ground floor, and a built-in cabinet that is too small to use as a room. She cannot make an extra room because she is not allowed to adapt her home¹³ and the floorplan is inflexible: the dinner table, for example, only fits in one corner.

Els also describes how the social cohesion has changed since the renewal. In her block she does not know her neighbours anymore because, even though they come from the same neighbourhood, they came from a different street. This commentary shows how fragile social structures are and how easily they can be disrupted. In an urban renewal neighbourhood, social cohesion must be re-built. A busy person such as Els, however, does not have a lot of spare time to socialize; she does not even have time to go to the community centre. She is also often 'stuck' with her children in the evening, isolating her socially. And because she does not get to know anybody, she also cannot find someone to babysit her children. In this way it reinforces her social isolation.¹⁴

Without generalizing the women's perspective, the figure of Els succeeds to captivate and provoke the reader. In doing so, the authors of the booklet aim to inspire women to critically assess their own homes and neighbourhoods and discuss their opinions with other women. In the next chapters, recommendations for architecture and urban design are made based on Els and her stories, further emphasizing the importance of often-overlooked housework and daily experiences of women.

Dwelling stories

Continuing their work, in January 1984 Van den Elsen and Littie Diederer of the NCDB set up a project called Vrouwen en Bouwteams (Women and Building Teams), for the future female residents of block 11 in the Staatsliedenbuurt¹⁵ The project aimed to improve participation of women in urban renewal processes, engaging with the findings from their 1983 post-occupancy research.¹⁶

11. This rent increase happened despite efforts of activists. She recites that 150 squatters, backed by 1000 residents, refused to move away for two years, demanding agreements about the future rents.
12. Diederer and van den Elsen, *Zoiets Maak Je Toch Niet, Ik Zeg Altijd, Dat Doen Mannen...*, 25–27.
13. Social housing was rented by housing associations that often did not allow tenants to adapt their apartments.
14. Diederer and van den Elsen, *Zoiets Maak Je Toch Niet, Ik Zeg Altijd, Dat Doen Mannen...*
15. Littie Diederer and Yvonne van den Elsen, "Vrouwen En Bouwteams. Verslag Tweede Fase" (SWA, NCDB, August 1985), 1373, Amsterdam City Archives.
16. Diederer and van den Elsen, *Zoiets Maak Je Toch Niet, Ik Zeg Altijd, Dat Doen Mannen...*

One of the reasons they had identified a lack of participation was that women were ill-prepared to get involved because they were not aware of their specific expertise and embodied knowledge about the built environment.¹⁷ They used this insight to design alternative methodological steps.

In block 11, they proposed to organise seven preparatory meetings to help women understand and articulate their spatial agency and, importantly, develop a critical stance towards standardized social housing. The organisers hoped this would motivate them to get involved in urban renewal processes. In these meetings the women that would move into block 11 learned how to formulate their wishes and ideas about the design of their future apartments and neighbourhood. To guide this process, Van den Elsen and Diederer used a three-dimensional model, floor plans, a slideshow, and a housing game. At the end of the series of meetings, each resident had created their own floor plan and an individual and communal wish list.

The housing game, which was originally developed by Stichting Woonbewust (Den Bosch), was adapted to social housing by Van den Elsen and Diederer, paying special attention to activities and their hierarchy.¹⁸ Participants started the game by listing all the activities in the home. The organisers describe initial scepticism of the participants around the usefulness of the game. An elderly woman simply stated that all she does at home is 'eten, slapen en poetsen' (eating, sleeping and cleaning).¹⁹ But after some guidance this participant made an impressive list of activities, as did others. The list included activities like sleeping and eating, but also relaxing, making noise, mending furniture, and knitting.

The next step was to transfer the activities on coloured cards organised by personal activities, partner's activities, children's activities, and communal activities. The participants then arranged all cards on a large piece of paper; related activities were brought close together, and others were placed far apart. Activities that took place in the same room or adjacent rooms were connected by drawing a line. Every participant presented their unique collage of cards, their personal woonverhaal (dwelling story), in the group and discussed it.²⁰ In addition to their dwelling story, they listed the most important attributes for their future home. They then took the collages home, and some further changes were made. In the next step the participants started on the floor plans and cut-out furniture, translating their list of activities into a possible design. These floor plans invited engagement because they were unfinished and simple, unlike the plans usually presented by architects.²¹

17. Diederer and van den Elsen, "Vrouwen En Bouwteams," 2.

18. In Dutch architectural culture, the 1980s became notoriously known for its endless discussion about floorplan layouts and flexibility. Examples of flexible floorplans from this period are the experimental Flexible Housing project in Honingerdijk (Rotterdam, 1984), the Flexible Sliding-Wall-Apartment in the Dapperbuurt (Amsterdam, 1986-1988) by Duinker & Van der Torre, and The Other Three-Room-Apartment, or the Undefined Home, by Luzia Hartsuyker-Curjel (1984). Her design was a feminist critique on the social housing standards at the time that were based on the nuclear family (L.C. Tummers-Mueller and M. Novas, "Pioneers in Dutch Architecture. The Role of Women in Post-War Housing Innovations in the Netherlands.," Veredes, Arquitectura y Divulgacion (VAD), no. 6 (2021): 20-32).

19. Diederer and van den Elsen, "Vrouwen En Bouwteams," 21.

20. Diederer and van den Elsen, 22.

21. Diederer and van den Elsen, 24.

Through developing their personal dwelling stories, the participants were able to translate their tacitly held knowledge about the built environment to architectural drawings and programmatic proposals that could be used and understood by architects and planners.²²

A manual

Based on the work with the women in the Staatsliedenbuurt a manual was made to involve women in participatory processes in other neighbourhoods through a similar series of meetings. The manual, freely available via the NCDB, was used in at least two other neighbourhoods: in Nieuwe Westen in Rotterdam²³ and in Utrecht²⁴. The original manual was a yellow folder with eight booklets; one general booklet introducing the project and seven booklets that outlined the goals for each of the seven meetings, as well as steps that could be taken, and some advice for the organizers. Imagery from the Staatsliedenbuurt was also included.²⁵

By creating this manual, the tools, methodologies, and valuable insights on incorporating embodied, experiential knowledge into urban renewal plans, could be used somewhere else. By using a loose-leaf folder, the meetings can be easily re-imagined in a different order or added onto. By being adaptable the manual can function as a catalyst or as a key reference and remains open to be adapted to a specific context.

The topic of women and urban renewal enjoyed quite some interest at the time and Van den Elsen was even interviewed in *Het Parool*, Amsterdam's main newspaper. In 1983 a conference called *Vrouwen Bouwen Wonen* was organized in Utrecht, resulting a few years later in the establishment of a national network of women actively involved in the built environment, with various sections in Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Amsterdam, amongst others.²⁶

Effects of 1980s women's groups in urban renewal

The fictional character Els, the dwelling stories, and the manual all affected the urban renewal plans. They stimulated making explicit embodied experiences of working-class women that lived and worked in urban renewal neighbourhoods. The relationships between the authors and the participants appears to have been crucial in identifying the issues regarding overlooked embodied knowledge; coming up with the type of tools to incorporate tacit knowledge, and the ways of presenting them, such as the language used.

22. A report in 1986 states that the design team for block 11 had started and the results of the women participation project were taken into account (Wijkopbouworgaan Staatslieden- en Hugo de Grootbuurt, "Het Jaarverslag 1985/1986. Deel 1," n.d., 20, Amsterdam, Amsterdam City Archives, accessed March 22, 2023).
23. Vera Cerutti, Ireen van der Lem, and Yvonne van den Elsen, "Vrouwen En Renovatie. Verslag van Een Experiment in Het Nieuwe Westen Te Rotterdam," March 1987, NED 4 1987 - C, Atria.
24. Further research is needed to find out whether the material was used in other locations.
25. Yvonne van den Elsen and Littie Diederer, "Handleiding Vrouwen En Nieuwbouw" (NCDB, 1985), Personal archive Y. van den Elsen.
26. See the archive *Vrouwen Bouwen Wonen* in the National Collection for Dutch Architecture and Planning at the Nieuwe Instituut (Rotterdam), and the archive of Atria, Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History (Amsterdam).

Personal relationships would likewise have to determine the new shapes these tools would take on in different contexts, were they adopted today.

The alternative tools did not provide one spatial solution for one homogenous group of residents, but rather provoked critical thinking and awareness of one's spatial expertise and agency. The publications, meetings and workshops were vehicles that empowered people that were often excluded and not given agency in architecture and urban design, to bring tacit knowledge about the built environment forward and make design suggestions that better fit their needs: diversifying and expanding what was commonly perceived as the concerns of the resident. In this way new knowledge was brought into the fields of architecture and urban design, by making what is the tacitly known, explicit: making the invisible, visible.

Even though this work was done in a small corner of the Staatsliedenbuurt, its effect should be considered on a larger scale. Groups like these formed simultaneously in other parts of The Netherlands, as is evidenced amongst others by the extensive network Vrouwen Bouwen Wonen, and the older network of Vrouwen Advies Commissies (VACs). Together they form a feminist critique and a search for a feminist approach to architecture and urban design. However, because of their dispersal, their often-nuanced effects, and multi-authorship, previous research has frequently overlooked this work, even negating its existence. Further research is needed to bring forward the various ways in which feminist approaches to architecture and urban design were developed in the 1980s.

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