

Research plan

Eco-feminist values for nature connectedness

Explore lab - Research Plan
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1 Introduction

Around the globe we are seeing the increasing impact of humanity on our earth systems. Rising global temperatures, more frequent extreme weather events and an elevated extinction rates reveal the immense consequences of climate change (IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2023).

Induced by world-wide extractivism and exploitation, climate change is the direct effect of the western perception of nature as a resource (Klein, 2015). As western societies have become increasingly focussed on profit and progress, our environment has turned into a product rather than an extension of our own lives. As philosopher Timothy Morton (2009) argues, nature has become a distant concept, an “away” rather than a system we are a part of.

Architecture, as a cultural and spatial practice, plays a critical role in reinforcing this disconnection. In its modern Western form, architecture’s main function seems to be to shelter humans from the unpredictability of natural systems, actively disconnecting us from the world around us.

2 Problem statement

Current actions taken to reduce the impact of climate change – such as the implementation of nature-based solutions- often fail to challenge these underlying systems. As these solutions are generally based in wester- ways of thinking, they continue to use nature as a resource focussing on its value only in terms of human benefit. As a results, these approaches remain superficial and insufficient; treating symptoms without addressing our fundamentally broken relationship with nature. Instead, what is needed are radically new ways of designing our cities, ways that redefine our relationship with our environment and facilitate new, interconnected ways of living.

This research explores ways to reimagine our architectural practice. It does this by looking at the current architectural practice in the Netherlands through and ecofeminist lens and using radical spatial imagination to explore new values and tools for nature connectedness. Results of this research will then function as the foundation for a design project that aims to challenge architecture’s role in human-nature relationships in western societies.

Figure 1 shows how this is embodied in the research question:

What if we reimagine Architecture through a lens of eco-feminism in order to provoke nature connectedness in western societies?

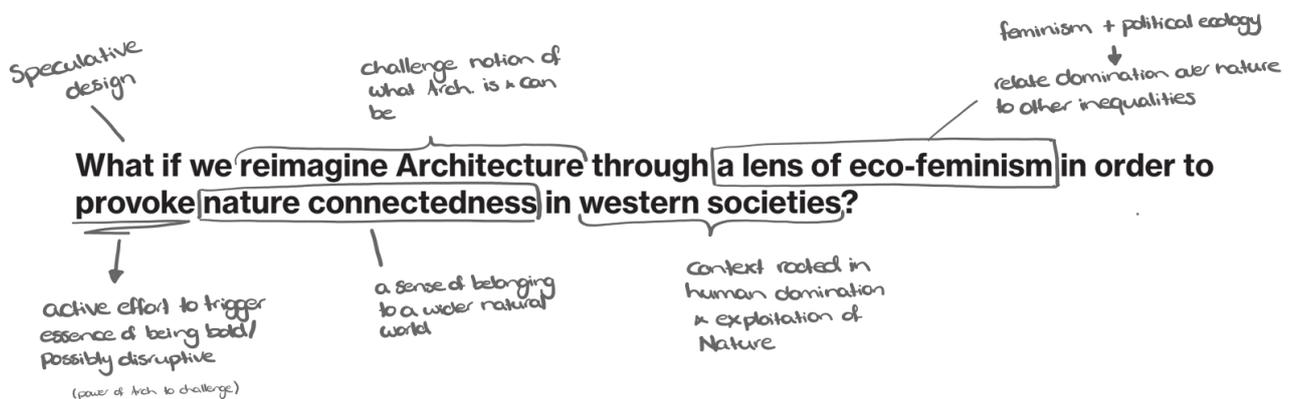


Figure 1: research question unpacked [own work]

3 Conceptual framework

Eco-feminism

This project is grounded in eco-feminist theory, which integrates feminism and political ecology by critically connecting the exploitation of nature to wider political systems of oppression and domination. At its core, ecofeminism is centred around the human connection to nature and critique's western binary thinking that establishes a divide between nature and culture.

Similar to how rigid gender distinctions have historically justified the oppression of women, the nature/culture divide turns nature into an 'other', making it available as a resource to extract and control. Ecofeminist and other critical ecological thinkers argue that these dualisms are not just philosophical but actively shape realities (Morton, 2009).

In response, eco-feminism focusses on notions of interconnectedness, interdependence and relationality, often de-emphasizing human centrism and exceptionalism in favour of multi-species collaboration (Haraway, 2016). This opens up space for different kinds of world-making, envisioning futures that are grounded in care and reciprocity.

Within this frame-work of eco-feminist values, I also intend to explore other ways of knowing. Many values central to eco-feminist thinking find resonance in indigenous practices, which have long centred reciprocal relationships with land, plants, animals, and ecosystems. Where ecofeminists are often still theorizing what it means to live interconnectedly, Indigenous cultures have practices these principles for generation. Braiding these wisdoms of indigenous cultures into our westernized context may offer transformative insights.

Nature (dis)connectedness

Nature connectedness is a term found in the Western psychology, where it is described as “a sense of belonging to the wider natural world ... an appreciation and value for all life that transcends any objective use of nature for humanities purposes” (Lumber et al., 2017, p.3). Research has linked nature connectedness to pro-environmental behaviour (Mackay & Schmitt, 2019), and direct contact with natural environments has been shown to enhance this connection (Perkins, 2010).

However, with psychology being rooted in western ways of thinking, its approaches are often constrained by the very dualisms ecofeminism seeks to dismantle. Psychology tends to treat humans and nature as separate entities, and its methodologies are inherently anthropocentric, maintaining a hierarchical power relationship between humans and the rest of the living world. While these insights provide empirical grounding for the benefits of reconnection, they will not provide the most suitable framework to support arguments for a radically new way of connecting to the natural world.

Similar notions, however, can be found in other fields of knowledge. Donna Haraway, for example, talks about multi-species entanglements rather than human-nature relationships (Haraway, 2016). This framework challenges the nature-culture divide and simultaneously decentralizes humanity from the narrative, providing a more sustainable and inclusive model for imagining interconnected worlds.

Building on indigenous perspectives, Robin Kimmerer, extends this argument even further. Rather than speaking of ‘connection’ she talks about relationality (Kimmerer, 2020). By emphasizing reciprocity and gratitude towards the land, she portrays natural elements - such as plants and animals - as active participants in a shared world and highlights the value of appreciating gifts of nature and the importance in giving back. With this narrative, Kimmerer shifts the focus from human benefit or responsibility to mutual care.

Positionality

A foundational principle in feminist research is positionality, which acknowledges the identity of researchers and practitioners as an active influence that inevitably shapes and affects the practice and the knowledge that emerges (Bourke, 2014).

Throughout this project, I aim to consistently situate myself by reflecting on and revealing my own positionality. Acknowledging that my identity, background, and perspective will inevitably influence every stage of the process—from the selection of information sources to their interpretations and the translations into design – I aim to facilitate critical reflection, both for myself and others.

Engaging actively with my positionality also underscores that this project represents a version of an interconnected future, not the version. I believe that multiple, diverse perspectives are necessary to adequately reimagine and reconstruct our relationships with the natural world.

4 Methodology

This section will describe how knowledge and insights were collected throughout this research. This was done through Radical Spatial Imagination, a method of research by design centred around spatial justice.

Through an iterative and cyclical process with constant feedback loops, Radical Spatial Imagination is used to embody ecofeminist thinking into concrete values and tools for spatial design (see figure 2). Throughout this process, a range of research methodologies are applied, each contributing to a distinct element of the total research process. This section outlines these elements - or bodies of knowledge - and their corresponding methodologies.

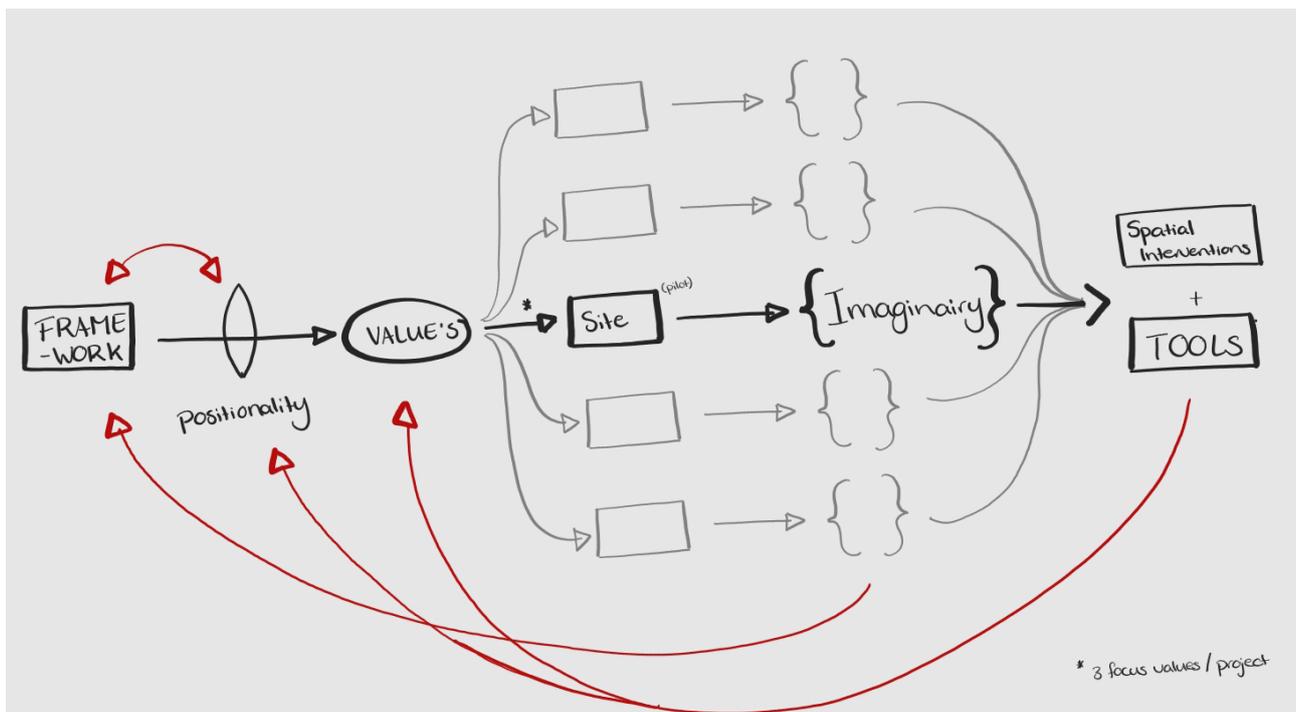


Figure 2: schematic overview of the research methodology [own work]

The ecofeminist framework

Functioning as a constantly evolving body of knowledge, the ecofeminist framework is established through extensive desk research. By combining insights from literature reviews, lectures and workshops, this framework will be grown from a wide range of knowledge fields. Gaps in the knowledge might be established through insights from the framework itself, but just as well through insights from the imaginaries or incidental encounters along the way. It is important to emphasize that while presented as a cohesive framework, it will never be complete or finished and even after this project is done it is open to constant extension, reflection and change.

Positionality

My positionality forms a lens through which the eco-feminist framework is translated into concrete values. Like the framework, my positionality will evolve throughout the process, shaped by both readings as well as experiences and work with the imaginaries. By keeping a positionality journal, in which I will consistently reflect on my experience of things I read and do, I will be exposing this positionality which will allow myself and others to critically reflect on and understand how this positionality has shaped the research.

Imaginaries

The imaginaries form a space of exploration. Here, values from the framework shape the reimagining of 5 different sites in the Netherlands. These sites will be carefully selected such that they represent a diverse range of functions (from housing to commercial and institutional spaces), a diverse range of nature engagements and a spread of urban contexts and landscape types.

For each imaginary, 3 core values are distilled from the framework that will form the basis of the reimagination and through speculative drawing, sketching and collaging an alternative vision for the site is created.

The various imaginaries will be able to build upon each other as the constant iterative process allows for the theoretical framework and my positionality to learn and adapt off of the imaginaries, re-shaping the values that will be distilled. Additionally the constant engagement with this active process of spatial imagination will hopefully allow me to extend the limits of my imagination throughout the course of this research, allowing new and different spatial imaginations to unfold.

Spatial interventions and Tools

From each imaginary, the spatial translations and manifestations of the values are collected and bundled. Together, these provide an array of possibilities that showcase how ecofeminist values might take shape in a western architectural context. Beyond the physical interventions, each imaginary is also examined for the emergence of broader design tools – understood not as discrete elements, but as guiding strategies or principles of action for an ecofeminist approach to fostering nature connectedness in Architecture.

Throughout the research, all of bodies of knowledge will be visually represented on so called “walls of crime”. On these walls, all bits and pieces of information will be collected and connected to other relating parts of the research. With this, these walls provide a place to showcase and identify patterns/ links across the bodies as well as a space to visualize and share the research as it develops.

5 The Imaginaries

This section will eventually include analysis of 5 spatial imagination studies. Possible results could look like this:

In the pilot imagination study I explored the site of eetcafe de Ruif in Delft through the values: reciprocity, gratitude and sensory experiences.

The outdoor area of the café is reimagined to take more space for the more-than-human. The harsh canal quay is turned into a gradually sloping shoreline, creating a biodiverse edge where shallow water welcomes both aquatic plants and animals. Inspired by the floating islands of the Ma'dan (see Watson, 2019) the café's boat is replaced by a floating platform constructed of willow branches. With this, the platform is a manifestation of the reciprocal relationship with the willow and its ecosystem: pruning the willow supports its vitality and biodiversity, while the platforms itself provides space for human and more-than human critters.

At the Ruif, we find moments of seasonal celebration, centred around the fruiting and flowering of the plants. These natural events initiate communal gatherings, where people come together to sit along the boardwalk and appreciate blooming flora, or to collaborate at the assembly station, crafting lemonade from blossoms and honey sourced from onsite beehives. The space facilitates acts of gratitude and ritual centred around the gifts of nature.

'Inside' the building, most interventions apply the idea of 'making holes' in the existing building envelop and 'taking space' for nature. This act is meant to challenge human entitlement to space and instead foster respect for natural presence. Often, these architectural openings simultaneously facilitates new sensory experiences for human users of the building.

On the ground floor, space for nature is created by removing the flooring. This frees the soil and literally puts people with their feet in the dirt.

On the second floor, perforations in the walls allow wind and sounds from 'outside' to travel through the space. These natural movements are sometimes made tangible through objects that create music as they are moved by the wind. The toilets function as a donation centre where human waste is collected to be turned into soil fertilizer.

On the top floor, roof panels are removed to establish a direct connection with the sky. The visual connection to the sky invites reflections on time, scale and interbeing. When the attic is not used by bats, the space becomes a place for sun or rain-kissed dance sessions, open to spontaneous human and non-human occupation.

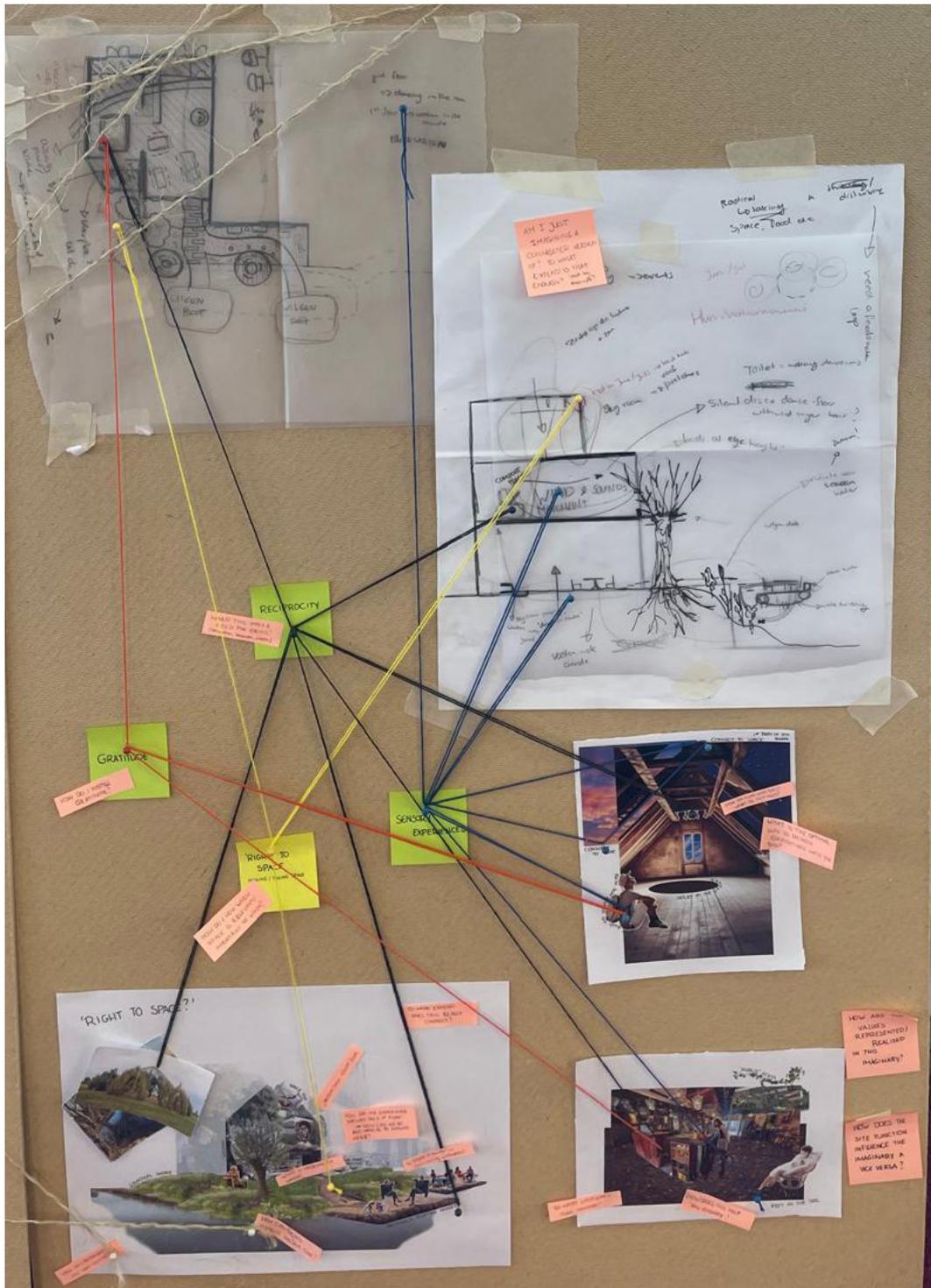


Figure 3: Imaginary as a wall of crime [own work]

6 *Expected Findings*

Aligning with the ‘what if’ of the research question, the final product of this research will not be a singular, definite conclusion but rather an array of possibilities. Beyond the five imaginaries, this array will consist of a list of core values as extracted from the framework, a collection of possible spatial interventions and some tools.

An example of a specific spatial intervention that could be part of the results of this study is the removal of flooring on the ground floors of buildings. This method was already applied in the first (pilot) imaginary and provides an intriguing new experience within the architecture while simultaneously challenging human’s sole right to this space. Soil forms a vital component of natural ecosystems, and the presence of pavement or flooring significantly disrupts soil water and carbon cycles, which impairs the functioning of these ecosystems (Fini et al., 2017). By removing the flooring, users are confronted with this perceived entitlement to space while also being offered a new sensory experience – one that physically connects them to their environment by placing their feet in the soil.

This specific spatial intervention could also be part of a tool: the tool of ‘making holes’, a design strategy that can be applied at multiple locations throughout the building envelop and which is grounded in exposing humans to sensory experience as well as challenging ‘right’ to exclude nature from certain spaces. Other tools might include other ways of challenging the boundaries created by architecture both in direct destructive ways as well as in ways transforming hard lines to temporary or partial boundaries.

7 Further Research and Design

Parallel to this research I will be working towards a design project. This project will aim to embody eco-feminist values in order to provoke nature connectedness within the western context of the Netherlands.

As the imaginaries from the research span across different contexts, timeframes, and functions, the outcomes of the study will also help guide the formulation of key preconditions – such as site, function, and scope – that will shape the direction of the final design project.

Currently, I expect that the design project will concern a transformation project. Transforming an existing building would allow me to explicitly challenge the existing architectural practice, for example by redefining boundaries and accessibility of space for the (more-than)-human. In addition I intend to reconsider/radicalize the intended function of the building by imposing new values and reconsidering the function from a post-human perspective.

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