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Of House and Immigrants

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"Everybody wants a little bit of land, not much. Jus' som'thin' that was his. Som'thin' he could live on and there couldn't nobody throw him off of it."
— John Steinbeck, Of Mice and Men

It was the middle of March when our research team was requested to host a session in two weeks for a conference to be attended by people in the government and private sector. This request came at a busy time, when we were also co-organizing a workshop with the Municipality of Rotterdam. We thought maybe we could propose the "pre-packaged" workshop from the small project I am running. Excited for the prospect of conducting a workshop that uses reflective methods for this type of audience I began writing the session proposal. A week before the conference I received an email saying that it was not the kind of workshop they wanted. A phone call ensued in which I was told that the attendees were paying participants and were of a "high level". I responded by saying I had done this workshop for the Dutch Enterprise Agency, which was attended by the Dutch Water Envoy, who appreciated this method. To cut the story short, I gave up. I was frustrated and it was exactly that frustration that led me to write a 500-word abstract in one sitting and send it to ISRF to apply to be part of the "Migration and Climate Change" conference long before the call-for-papers deadline.

Fast forward to the ISRF conference, I presented my "transdisciplinary" research project on Rotterdam, which I started back when I was doing my PhD but has since evolved to encompass the neighbourhoods south of the city. I am not a migration scholar, to begin with; I am an urban planner. However, issues surrounding area developments in this part of the city are more than just designing a climate-adaptive infrastructure. The story of the immigrants who compose 75% of the population of five neighbourhoods in the south is a story that needs telling.

The immigrants, the port, and the growth of the south

During World War II, Rotterdam was heavily bombed, destroying over 80% of its infrastructure. The city administration rapidly devised reconstruction plans, and in 1946, after the war had ended, the so-called Basic Plan was developed and implemented. This plan aimed to reconstruct and restructure the city's central and port areas. During the period of economic growth between 1960 to 1970, the *Nieuwe Bouwen*, or Modern Movement in architecture, a sober style that emphasised functionality and angular shapes, dominated the city. Its modern architecture became a statement both of the city's ability to recover and of its power, true to Rotterdam's adage *'sterker door strijd'*. Struggle renders both the city and its people stronger—or does it?

The period of economic growth enabled the city and the national government to expand the port to Botlek and Europoort. However, there was a labour shortage, so the Dutch government had to recruit what it called 'guest workers' to work at the port. Guest workers from Spain, Italy, Cabo Verde, Portugal, Hungary, Poland, Morocco, and Turkey topped the bill. As the port further expanded towards the sea, the longer port workers stayed in the country.

The story of immigration did not start during this period. The port has always been an attractive place for trading and settlement since the fourteenth century. Rich merchants from France, England, and Ireland established their trading posts in Rotterdam, while domestic workers from Germany came in to work at the docks. But it was the influx of guest workers in the 50s, 60s, and 70s that made the immigrants "visible," not least because, in racial terms, they stood out more from the majority population.

Visible tensions, housing as a catalyst

To meet the housing demands the original port area Feijenoord transformed into a low-cost housing area which expanded to the neighbourhoods of Afrikaanderwijk, Hillesluis, and Bloemhof. Mass housing was constructed in these areas to meet this housing demand in the 1960s. But the growth of the population over the years due to several factors such as family reunifications and the collapse of the Soviet Union, when labour migrants from Eastern Europe entered the country, most of whom were housed in Rotterdam, put pressure on the housing sector.

Because of the housing demand and also the poor housing conditions for some harbour workers, a riot erupted in Afrikaanderwijk in 1972 when Turkish landlords established pension houses for Turkish labourers. This riot lasted several days and prompted the Rotterdam City Council to implement a cap of only 5% of migrants in each neighbourhood. While this policy failed to be implemented because of its unconstitutionality it was a clear first attempt to distribute and divide the population of migrant workers. In 1978 Rotterdam enacted an integration policy, the first in the Netherlands, to improve immigrants' social and economic conditions. Several national integration policies ensued in 1980, 1990, and 2002.

While these tensions arose in Rotterdam's south, the city centre and north were being renewed, developed, and regenerated, fostering the city's ambitions for development and prosperity, as well as the creation of a knowledge society. This signalled a move away from the blue-collar image of 'roll up your sleeves; major works lie before us'.

Two events in 1990s coalesced to make a perfect storm, both literally and figuratively: the rising popularity of the right-wing populist party Leefbaar Rotterdam; and major flood events in 1993 and 1995 (near-flood events), and 1998 (pluvial flooding). The former set the direction of the development in Rotterdam South, while the latter set the direction of the environmental policies both at the national and local levels. The latter also helped in strengthening and improving research on climate change.

Leefbaar Rotterdam's flag bearer, Pim Fortuyn, openly criticized what he called a blight in local neighbourhoods, directly implying immigrants are the cause, and claiming there was a need to stop more immigrants from coming to the country. The party won the 2002 municipal elections, shortly after which Fortuyn was assassinated. Party members who took over from Fortuyn continued with his anti-immigrant rhetoric, although this did not sit well with the other parties of Rotterdam. What did was the perceived need to limit the number of disadvantaged households in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. And thus the Rotterdam Act was born.

Extraordinary, exclusionary, liveability

The Rotterdam Act—formally, The Act on Extraordinary Measures for Urban Problems—was a national policy approved in 2003 and implemented in 2006 with the goal of preventing the concentration of 'disadvantaged' people in already-disadvantaged districts. Oud Charlois, Carnisse, Tarwewijk, Bloemhof, and Hillesluis are examples of 'opportunity zones' in Rotterdam that were initially targeted. The Act had three particular exclusionary measures: Article 8, nature of income, focussed on whether

individuals are employed or not, and whether they are on welfare; Article 9, socioeconomic characteristics, measured whether individuals work in the city's priority professions, such as medical services, police, or teachers; and Article 10, disruptive and criminal behaviour, focussed on whether individuals have or are suspected of having shown disruptive or criminal behaviour. As a result, any individual or household that does not match these conditions had their 'opportunity' to live in these 'opportunity zones' withdrawn.

Currently, immigrants or people with immigrant backgrounds account for 75% of the population in these five neighbourhoods. The average annual household income in the five neighbourhoods is €20,000. Homeownership is similarly low. The average percentage of rental properties in the neighbourhoods is 75%. These are mostly owned by housing corporations who provide social housing to the residents.

On top of this, the neighbourhoods have a problem with the urban heat island effect where the neighbourhoods experience up to 45 Celsius temperatures (or over) in summer months. The areas also suffer from land subsidence, with houses built on wooden poles and those without a foundation in desperate need of repair. The combination of heat and drought affects the land and the wooden poles supporting most of the old houses, while land subsidence threatens the stability of the poles and the overall integrity of the houses. There is an urgent need to make these areas climate-adaptive.

However, the cost of renovation is way higher than it would be to demolish and rebuild. Some housing blocks in these areas have now been demolished to make room for new ones. These developments are part of the Nationaal Programma Rotterdam Zuid to transform the area into a more liveable neighbourhood. This programme is also informed by the Rotterdam Act. Most of the new developments are priced on average at €400,000 per apartment. This makes me question how the current population in these neighbourhoods can afford these apartments. Because with a €20,000 euro annual income, who can afford a €400,000 apartment? Should they, being long-time residents of the area, not be the ones benefitting from these developments and liveability measures? It seems that exclusion continues only now it is framed as climate change adaptation policies and urban development.

Technocracy and transdisciplinarity

Even today, many research projects that claim to be transdisciplinary still rely heavily on technocratic approaches that have long been at the foundation of urban planning and climate change strategies, rendering inequality invisible and generating false consciousness. Presenting and walking around in front a roomful of technocrats and capitalists, the so-called 'high-level' participants I mentioned earlier, asking whether property value will increase or decrease if a road is elevated to adapt or mitigate flooding, presents an appearance of a superficial comprehension of the situation. In fact, with that query, one can simply look to the Global South, where this has been done, as well as how many individual well-off households in the Global South have elevated their own homes as a local adaptation measure. Have the property values in these frequently flooded neighbourhoods in the Global South increased? Yes, incrementally, and this is due to rising demand for houses, unless the government imposes a cap, which may be difficult to achieve with privately owned residences that can take advantage of the market value.

I am not saying that we should abandon transdisciplinarity but rather that there is a need to be more reflective about one's approach. This cannot be achieved by merely coming up with a solution to a perceived problem. Transdisciplinary projects (research or otherwise) can only truly contribute to meaningful scientific outcomes and discourses on climate and social justice if research projects are led with a deeper understanding of the intersectionalities present in urban development and climate change.