

Contested Relations

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City space is contested terrain. Definitely in Amsterdam, where the average house price in 2019 was nearly half a million euros. In the center of Amsterdam that was just enough to buy a two-bedroom apartment of 60m². But with its extraordinarily high prices, Amsterdam does not even make the top ten of the world's most expensive cities to buy property. That only demonstrates the extent to which house prices have risen over the last decade. Yet Amsterdam is one of the cities where real estate prices have increased the fastest since the 2008 housing crisis, making it one of the most desirable places to invest and one of the most difficult to afford to live in.[1] Despite its commercial success the city struggles to create enough space for its inhabitants. The demand for affordable housing is so high that the waiting time for a social apartment is currently over fifteen years with forty-four percent of applications marked with an urgency status.[2] As managers of such highly desirable assets, it is not surprising that cities today choose what kind of clientele they want to serve. Rotterdam, for instance, introduced a policy known as the Rotterdamwet that does not allow newcomers with a low income to register in specific sub-municipalities. The problem is, those parts of the city are the ones where affordable housing is available. It is clear that cities, in the Netherlands and beyond, are no longer places for everyone. They are places of wealth accumulation for those who already are well-off enough to invest there.

As bricks have turned out to be a better investment than gold or stock exchange, cities have become financial machines and property ownership became an important way to generate revenue. This dynamic of capital extraction has become a defining element of today's urban areas and goes hand in hand with the increase of private and corporate ownership and the decrease of public ownership across the globe. In 2019 one in five homes in Amsterdam was sold to foreign investors who in turn would rent them to expats or transform them into Airbnbs. In her book *Expulsions*, sociologist Saskia Sassen argues that the rise of foreign investment in cities continues to have a strong influence on the disintegration of relationships within urban areas. When more and more places are owned by people who don't live there, there is no need to develop bonds and to care about the spaces that form neighbourhoods. Many cities are grappling with finding a balance between providing a space for living and for earning. Left with many properties that operate more like hotels than homes or simply remain empty, they face a dilemma to stand up either for their inhabitants or for capital.[3]

Until 2012 we rarely heard of the word gentrification. The term, coined by a British sociologist Ruth Glass in the 1960s to describe changes she then observed in inner London, had not been widely used until a bit longer than a decade ago. Gentrification is a process that changes the character of a neighbourhood by a controlled influx of more affluent residents and businesses. The nature of this change is of course rooted in the economic value of the spaces. It increases so much that whole areas become inaccessible to the original, usually working-class demographic, and results in the displacement of those communities. Just over the past few years, the real estate prices in Amsterdam soared by forty-five percent making it increasingly difficult for people with mid and low incomes to afford to live in the city and pushing them into the group of less-desirable residents. That is despite the fact that many in that group belong to the so-called 'crucial sectors' including healthcare and social workers.

As market value takes over, other social and spatial values are deemed to be obsolete. Unprofitability is unacceptable and spaces that are dormant or that simply cherish values other than the monetary one are considered useless. The market does not seem to be the best of urban planners, yet it is not

clear who or what else should be able to 'conduct space' and determine how these relationships and values are formed. Can disciplines such as art and architecture play a role in stirring the debate on the tension between use and exchange value of space? Both art and architecture are deeply entangled with finance, yet they have both historically been advocating for the recognition of social rather than the economical ones. The question is, can they form alternatives strong enough to counter the contemporary distorted definition of value where a house is no longer a shelter but a business model, and where an empty city is an excellent money-making machine?

Augustas Serapinas' *20 Apartments* opens up new relationships between the work's embeddedness into the site and its neighbours. In this case, the neighbour is a construction site next door from P////AKT. This newly built development has been discussed as one of the possible triggers for changing relationships in the Zeeburgerpad, a street in Amsterdam Oost, which thus far resisted gentrification. Serapinas' mirroring or extending the building site into the gallery space lets us ponder the current relations between the space of the gallery and the space of construction. At the same time, the work lets us imagine ways in which the relationships in the area could develop. Will the current inhabitants of the street be able to maintain the social values of their neighbourhood or will they need to make space for a more profitable vision of the area? What if the expansion could be understood in reverse? Perhaps it is the extension of the gallery into the city or a merging of the two spaces? We don't really know which of those scenarios could potentially be true.

Serapinas, in his work, creates a relationship that might only last for a moment. Yet, it creates a temporality that exposes us to seemingly simple things we have not noticed before. It makes us discover that these things actually matter to us and helps us to turn our attention towards the places and people around us. It pushes us to imagine what occurs or could occur between them.

The fact that *20 Apartments* was built during the outbreak of the biggest pandemic we have seen in a century tells us something else about the changing nature of the currently contested relationships. In the period when this installation was made many of us were confined in our domestic spaces. At the same time, others were working. Cleaning, caretaking, healing, teaching, transporting, informing were recognized as so-called 'crucial sectors'.^[4] Even though construction workers were not on that list, it has been recognized that the construction industry plays a supporting role to those sectors and was also granted access to childcare during the lockdown.^[5] This re-definition of what matters and what doesn't in a situation of the crisis has revealed how strongly the relationship between the social relevance of work and its monetary value has been distorted.

So, if social relations can help us rethink what's valuable, could it also be true for spatial relations? If the monetary value is already so detached from what it serves, why can we not remold it into a different form? After all, value is an imaginary construct that we can shape in whatever way we want.

In his *Poetics of Relation* Eduard Glissant advocated for developing a sensitivity to relations in a way that would render us unable to participate in non-relational imaginaries.^[6] He wrote about a vision of the world that questions Western relations of domination and instead sketches a possibility of a world in which one agrees to be, with and among others.^[7] For Glissant the primary exchange value was the ability to transfer knowledge from one space to another. Perhaps to find new forms of being together and other forms of valuation we need to become more attentive to what and who is around us. Develop a form of relational mindfulness and higher sensitivity to our surroundings simply by strolling around bricks and mortar.

[1] <https://www.ubs.com/global/en/wealth-management/chief-investment-office/life-goals/real-estate/2019/global-real-estate-bubble-index-2019.html>

[2] <https://nos.nl/artikel/2244999-woningzoekenden-zonder-urgentieverklaring-vissen-steeds-vaker-achter-het-net.html>

[3] In Amsterdam as of July 2020 buy-to-let has been curbed for newly built homes in order to regulate the uneven competition on the housing market. <https://www.rodinl.nl/regio/amsterdam-noord/180121/verplicht-zelf-wonen-in-nieuwbouw>

[4] <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/03/20/childcare-for-children-of-people-working-in-crucial-sectors>

[5] <https://www.bouwendnederland.nl/actueel/nieuws/11390/is-de-bouw-infra-eeen-vitale-sector>

[6] Edouard Glissant in *Friends and Enemies: The Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature (Postcolonialism Across the Disciplines LUP)*, 2008: 336-337.

[7] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.