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Dudani, Palak

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From Wealth to Well-being A Systems Oriented Design Exploration of Imagining Alternatives in Urban Housing

Palak Dudani

Oslo School of Architecture and Design

Introduction

This paper argues that a Systems Oriented Design (SOD) view has the potential to articulate and materialise community centred notions of care and wellbeing when exploring alternative futures within complex systems. This is exemplified concerning urban housing in the Norwegian context and by developing and applying a Design-Analysis Framework to articulate the conceptualisation and potential of alternative near-futures of urban dwelling.

Presenting this SOD view, a conceptual housing model is visualised and materialised in form of design artefacts and user-situated scenarios. These are drawn from a completed study centred on stakeholder views and, literature reviews on policies and practices on housing while exploring speculative and futures design scenario building for manifestation of potential alternatives.

This paper contributes to SOD by offering a Design-Analysis Framework; it offers an analytical and descriptive account of how this framework helps raise questions about the nature of urban housing, well-being, policy and practices of dwelling, community, and care.

Housing and well-being

Access to safe, quality, affordable housing – and supports necessary to maintain that housing – constitute one of the most basic and powerful social determinants of health and wellbeing. (Centre for Supportive Housing, 2014). In the social democratic society of Norway, home-ownership as a mode of dwelling is promoted as it accounts for one of the primary ways of building welfare. While the asset-based treatment of housing supports this goal, housing trends suggest less and less citizens being able to become homeowners. (Oslo Kommune, 2019) Current systems dynamics mirror ‘Success to Successful’ archetype which disproportionately affects poorer, immigrant and young members of society, creating disadvantage in the short term and perpetuating vulnerabilities within these communities in the long term. (Sandlie and Gulbrandsen, 2017)

Housing and interrelated sectors are highly susceptible to global interdependencies and future risks such as climate change (Finanstilsynet, 2019) and financialisation of housing. Within Norway, risks such as declining tax revenues from previously strong oil and gas businesses and higher healthcare costs for a rising older population will affect the state's ability to mitigate consequences for housing. (Regjeringen, 2017)

In the face of such anticipated future risks, my notion of care and wellbeing translates to a systems oriented design (SOD) view with an intention to ‘take care ahead of time’ (Morrison, 2019). This is done by challenging the housing system’s current predilection (of creating vulnerabilities within our communities) and imagining alternative system-structures which create conditions for capacity building and emergence of resilience. Countries that focus on enhancing wellbeing not only raise the standard of living of their citizens, but also set their country up for stronger and more resilient economic growth. My approach to strengthening communities as a key active participant in shaping a well-being centred approach to housing is relevant because Norway is currently debating what is the appropriate place and role of civil society organizations within a state-dominated system of social benefits and services (van Kersbergen, 2018).

Methods and methodologies

Systems Oriented Design (SOD) is a skill-based approach which enables designers to capitalize on the inherent systemic nature of design by visualizing the whole Gestalt of the system (Koffka, 2013). It considers different hierarchies, creating a holistic overview in order to deal with dynamic complexity of real world problems in a pragmatic way. (Sevaldson, 2013). Rich design space and gigamapping (Sevaldson, 2011) were among the SOD tools used along with research through design (RTD) methodology (Zimmerman, Stolterman, & Forlizzi, 2010). Mixed, qualitative research methods of service design (Edvardsson, Tronvoll and Gruber, 2011) and use of narrative and metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) allowed surveying and probing of existing systems complexities, contexts and conditions, and interview key actors and stakeholders in the housing sector (owners and renters, municipality players, housing associations, urban designers and researchers, policy and legal experts). Literature on housing and care in design in particular (e.g. Vaughan, 2018) informed the use of anticipatory design approaches (Morrison, 2019).

The Design-Analysis Framework

Complex systems problems such as housing can be understood as wicked problems (Head and Alford, 2008). The present system creates long-term vulnerabilities and decision makers struggle with systems perspective as it's challenging to remove one-self from the existing system in order to imagine alternatives. The design research presents a Design-Analysis Framework (Figure 1), offering a multi-level nuanced approach for attempting a problem of such scale and complexity.

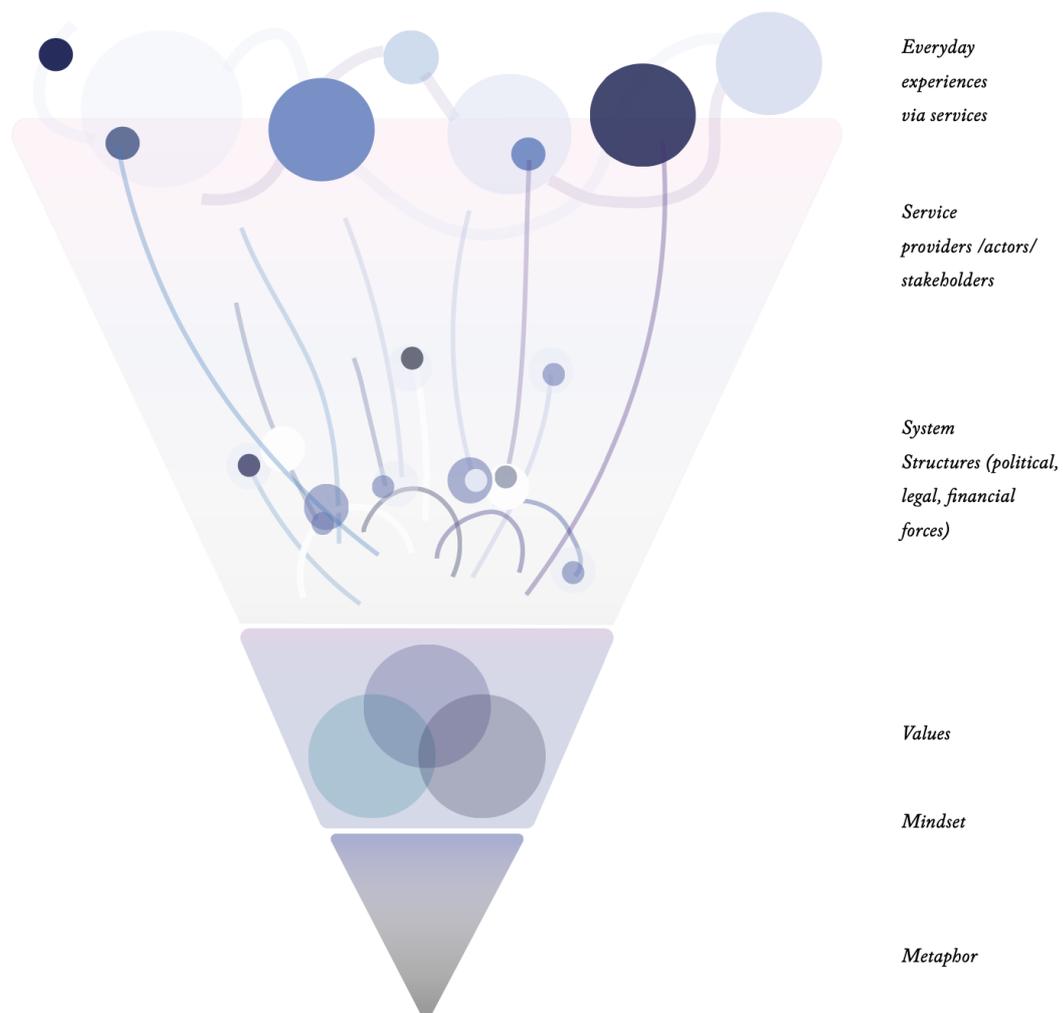


Figure 1: The Design-Analysis Framework, an adaptation of Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah, 1998)

The author argues that one can not think about new systems without placing it in reference with time. Having a futures position is hence crucial to conceptualisation of alternatives within complex systems. Instead of focusing on the horizontal spatiality of futures - as it usually is in techniques such as scenarios and back casting - the study refers to Causal Layered Analysis or CLA (Inayatullah, 1998) which is concerned with moving beyond the concerns of predicting a particular future and working towards opening up the present and past to create alternative futures. As an adaptation of the CLA, The Design-Analysis Framework puts emphasis on the vertical, on the layers of analysis as it was conceived with the intention of seeing future in pluralities (Celi & Morrison, 2017).

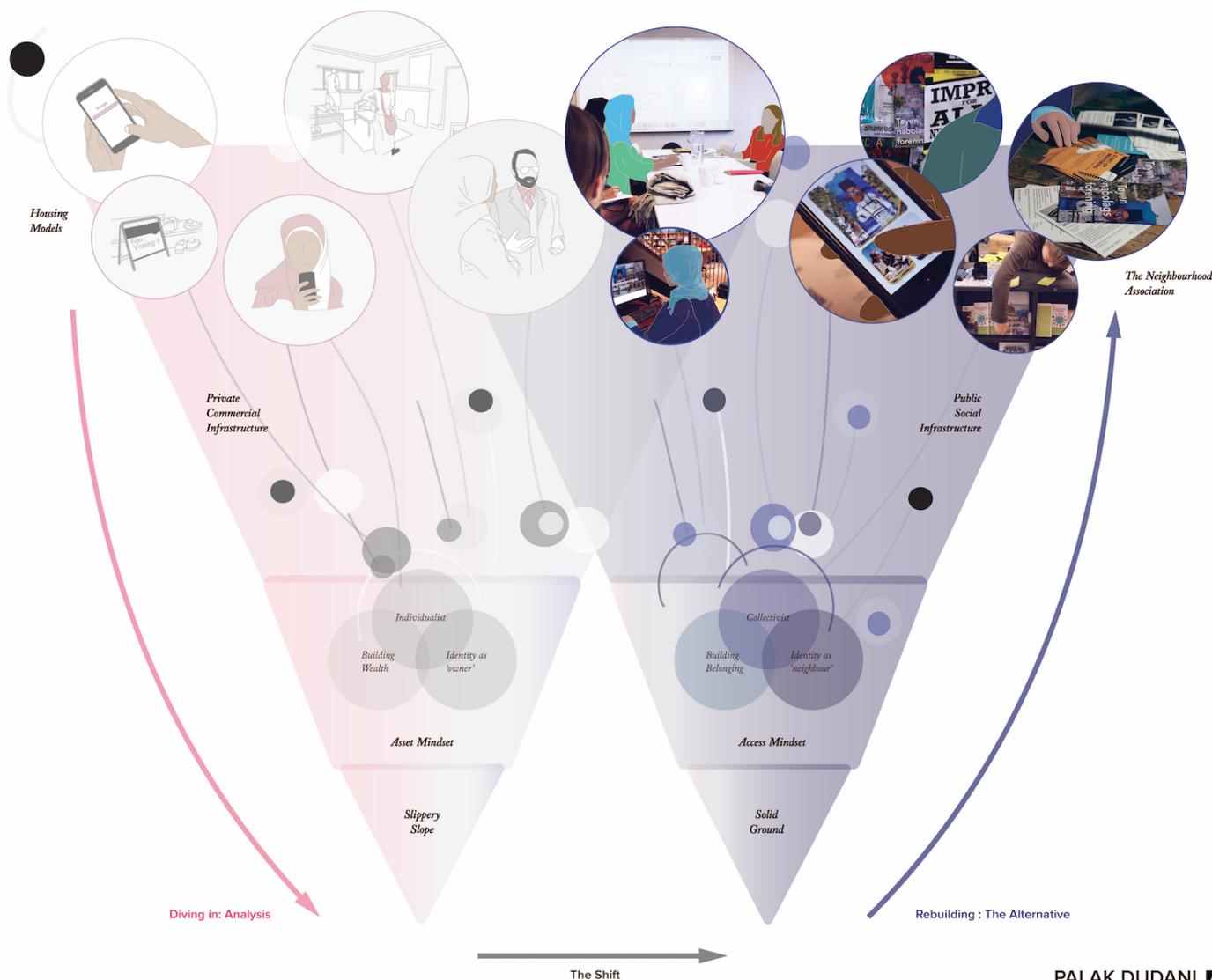


Figure 2: An illustration of how the Design-Analysis Framework was applied in three stages, part of the completed master thesis.

The design-analysis framework can be applied in three stages (Figure 2).

1. Diving In: Building a comprehensive understanding of the status quo by analysing existing services, touchpoints, stakeholders and system-structures they're part of. These point to worldviews or existing narratives on housing, where perceptions can be codified as metaphors.

2. Shifting: How would changing the metaphor change the housing system and by extension, our experiences of dwelling? By identifying core-assumptions and biases, we 'flip the metaphor' for housing and reframe the problem which results in a slight horizontal shift, or adjacent possibility.
3. Rebuilding: The new metaphor has its meaning translated into new values, creating mindset shift. The 'Alternative system-structure' is then an exploration in how these new values could present themselves in political and socio-economical elements, ultimately alternating the everyday experience of dwelling.

The 'alternative' is presented in form of a conceptual housing model, positioned within a public social infrastructure supporting the new values in the form of self-governance, participatory budgeting and informal service exchange. The framework is part of a completed Master's thesis (<https://palakdudani.com/Wealth-to-Wellbeing>) and its materialisations and visualisations will be elaborated in the full paper.

Conclusion

Present models of dwelling are a product of existing political and socio-economic system structures that are broadly centred around ownership-lease relations and wealth, despite the elaboration of public housing systems and strategies. In this paper the author investigates these system-structures in relation to alternate approaches to how system-service relations of housing centred on dwelling and well-being may assist in revealing the mindset and values. It presents a framework for questioning their core assumptions, in order to make space for community-centred notions of care and well-being.

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