

INTRODUCTION, The Dream – Play – Challenge Project: Facing up to the Crisis in Residential Living, eds. Sarah Riviere & Wiltrud Simbuerger.

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Introduction by Sarah Riviere and Wiltrud Simbuerger, 2023

Title: THE DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE PROJECT: Facing up to the Crisis in Residential Living by Sarah Riviere and Wiltrud Simbuerger, 2023

Residential living is in crisis. Socially engaged architects find themselves trapped in an industry held hostage by structures predicated on short-term financial gain. An industry thus unable – or unwilling – to respond adequately to shifting demands. As a result, our built environment too often fails both the communities and the individuals that it purports to serve.

A home, a community and space to dream are human rights. To have a roof over one's head and to share common ground with others are necessities for a life from which dreams can be launched. But demands for homes that can support the diverse constellations in which people wish to dwell, as well as the individual lives we wish to lead, echo in the hollow space of late capitalism. Voices within the architectural profession are calling out for design that meets our changing needs, but – beyond the exclusive luxury sector – this call remains generally unrealised. And socio-political players, while surely aware of the signs of community breakdown highlighted by data on escalating levels of loneliness and a mental-health crisis of heart-breaking social cost, seem unable to instigate real change.

So, is architecture truly stymied in the face of these challenges? The history of early modernism tells of architects who tried to take their responsibilities seriously towards users of their spaces, but with limited tools at hand they struggled to meet social and ethical demands. Since then, we have learned to be sceptical of the idea of a sole architectural 'genius' offering answers in the short-term, only to be faced with a new set of problems in the longer-term. But what other options are available?

DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE suggests a different game, setting up opportunities for equitable creative exchanges that go beyond traditional academic discourse. It aims to create spaces where concerned stakeholders can dream together, playfully developing alternative processes of cocreating a fairer and more vibrant built environment, and challenging industry players to get on board.

As the first expression of DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE, the Future of Residential Living symposium took place in Berlin in June 2021. It was conceived as a platform to enable feminist architects and industry professionals to face up to how we are housing – or failing to house – today's contemporary lives. Our aim was to build a space of creative exchange between individual protagonists with common concerns. DREAM – PLAY –

CHALLENGE is part of a 'movement of socially engaged and often participatory feminist practice' that includes 'approaches which aim to transform or alter, by practicing "otherwise" or "otherhow"' (Rendell 2022, citing Doina Petrescu). Such practices do not, by definition, rest on certainties, and that is why, as the symposium opened on the morning of 24th June, we found ourselves optimistic and yet unsure as to what would arise here: just how generative might DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE become?

OUTDATED DOMESTIC TROPES

In 1978 Kerstin Dörhöfer criticised ongoing residential planning as predicated on the male working day, with life in the home oriented on supplying the main breadwinner with nutrition, relaxation, sleep, and the care of both body and clothing, as well as with affection and sex – all, she set out, 'necessities' to ensure the maintenance of an effective labour force. Meeting such demands, women primarily continued in their traditional domestic roles of housewife and mother, including those women who had careers outside the home. Their input thus ensured both the daily reproduction of male labour as well as the generational reproduction of the workforce of the future. Yet in both roles, as Dörhöfer reminds us, women remained financially unacknowledged as well as socially undervalued (Dörhöfer, 1978).

In early 1980s Berlin, women architects responded to the ongoing domination of male voices in planning the 1984/87 International Building Exhibition (IBA) by setting up the feminist organisation FOPA e.V. (Organisation for Feminist Architects and Planners). The IBA Berlin thematised housing, and FOPA's campaign for gender equality across the building profession naturally extended into residential planning and construction. Under pressure from women architects – both in FOPA and in the international UIFA (*Union Internationale des Femmes Architectes*) – the Berlin Senate and IBA management finally allocated the IBA Block 2 to be designed by women architects. And there, in the centre of Berlin, projects including Christine Jachmann's residential complex (completed in 1992) designed for emancipatory living came to fruition.

In parallel, a group of women architects set up the Feminist Design Collective in London in 1978. Later renamed Matrix, the Collective reclaimed female agency by engaging with the physical fabric of their homes in an activist way, 'shaping and adapting [their built environment] both at the level of the household and the community' (Wall, 2017). This critique of the urban and domestic 'man-made' environment found expression both in such feminist dwelling practice and through writings and publications. While architectural discourse acknowledges such precedents for residing 'otherwise' the question remains: how much – in terms of dwellings being constructed today – has changed on the ground? Not much, it seems. To a major extent, both in terms of process and product, outdated hierarchical social and spatial models still extensively inform the architecture of residential living today.

On top of this, and accelerated by pandemic realities, public and private space increasingly overlap within our homes, not only in living rooms and kitchens but even in bedrooms and bathrooms. In fact, any space within the home may, at any moment, be drawn into a digital hub of engagement. In addition, in the face of a climate emergency the architectural profession is only slowly – too slowly – beginning to address how the

design and construction of residential architecture can respond to the present crisis, including concerns about resourcing and carbon footprints.

Let us face the fact that we have hardly begun to address how to design homes that can properly accommodate these concatenated demands: redefined models of domesticity, struggling communities and precarious ecological conditions, together creating huge frictions for current modes of living. But, at the same time, the fundamental notion of the residential lures us with its echoes of stability and permanence, conjuring the desire for a home within a society that finds it more and more difficult to provide one. How can we design in response to such an array of challenges?

How ambitious do we dare to be?

ARCHITECTURE AS THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

To paraphrase our DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE participant, Andrea Prins, our homes pinch our lives like badly-fitting shoes. They pinch us not only in terms of causing pain, but also in terms of pinching away from us other, potentially more vibrant, lives. Because residential life is just that: life, and as such it is, by definition, ever-changing. Any architecture designed through and for static modalities is an architecture designed to halt the changes that ongoing life involves. Faced with extensive stagnation in the building industry and the architectural profession it becomes difficult to imagine – let alone realise – different methodologies of design, procurement and construction.

We know this: just as the constellations within which we wish to dwell shift, and as the programmes we demand of our dwelling spaces transform, our design methodologies for these homes must also change. But how can we instigate such change?

BECOMING ‘AT HOME’ IN THE WORLD

How we reside at home, how we reside in our work and how we reside in the world can no longer be separated. The climate crisis and the interlinked pandemic force us to take a hard look at how we inhabit space, and to acknowledge that our current modes of dwelling have wider and even frightening consequences. Architecture based on the exploitation of assumed unlimited resources is unethical, and the short-termism that is hard-coded into that approach has become brutally clear. We need to start to inhabit this planet that both houses us and sustains our lives in a very different way.

When we discuss how we can feel at home in terms of residential living we have to address how we can equally feel at home in our working lives. DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE suggests that different methodologies for future residential living, other ways of practicing design and new understandings of how we come together within our world should, all three, be developed in parallel.

DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE: AN OPPORTUNITY TO DO IT THINK IT AND DREAM IT ANEW

In her article ‘Women Architects and Architectural Activism,’ Ori Brown, architect, academic, and co-founder of ArchiXX, the feminist organisation for change, describes

how, ‘increasingly we envision a discipline that supports and celebrates who we are, how we work, and the world we seek to construct – creating a different future altogether’ (Brown, 2017, p.271).

Within this framework, questions of who takes part and how we work together become integral. We cannot construct change in the architectural profession without first enabling a representative set of voices to come together to work in a way that suits them, that is, in a way that can support the unique *modus operandi* of each participant.

Just as we are constricted if we are forced to live as we lived in the past, we are equally constricted when we discuss and interact through inherited processes and practices without questioning them. Alternative forms of exchange, modes of connection that are differently informed, and more generous constellations of voices, enable us to imagine more nuanced expressions of who we are and how we work within our industry. Architectural and urban space is informed, stamped and integrally moulded by the processes and the voices that take part in producing it; the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ crystallise into physical form, becoming the environment within which our communities either thrive or fail.

With the DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE project we work out one possible way to maintain equitable voices and generative processes, and then we play it out in practice. The symposium and the present publication have enabled forty architectural practitioners and researchers from across the world to come together in such a way. The results of this event are gathered in the present publication. We hope it shows how DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE is a place of cheerful exchange that can give form to alternative, joyfully unexpected, and previously impossible dreams.

By playing them out in active exchange through a shared project it becomes possible to invent and imagine different cooperative futures. It makes real our parallel dreams of what could become possible in future residences: not as places designed primarily for respite, and not as places that support only some members of the group while stifling others, but as places of safer, more respectful and challenging exchange based on real equity of voice for all involved.

THE DREAM – PLAY – CHALLENGE METHODOLOGY

TO DREAM

When we dream...

... the limitations of the ‘real’ world can be put aside and another way of doing things can be envisioned. As the given constraints of one reality are allowed to dissolve, possible trajectories for the future can be made possible. This is generative: it gives licence to idealism. Some of us share ideals for a different way of living, for others our dream is to join a constructive exchange in a welcoming, equitable and intersectional context. Still more of us dream of having our voices heard, or our work engaged with on a fair basis. Living a dream, if only for a brief time, can strengthen and empower those who are beginning to lose hope. Getting a glimpse of another reality, another way of

coming together, can be essential to the ability to, as Sara Ahmed says, 'keep on going on' (Ahmed, 2017).

And a dream is both personal and communal. Springing from past experiences of hardly-daring-to-hope as well as but-that's-just-not-fair, a dream rarely conceives the world in a self-serving way. Instead, dreams are so often social and generous, touching on how things could be kinder and more just, and on how caring and equitable the world could be. There is much courage in daring to dream.

TO PLAY:

Let's play...

... there are rules, but they are different to those of everyday life. Play is fun, but as every child knows, it is never a trivial thing. When we play we set up given terms of engagement and play them through to see what evolves. We become matched protagonists, all committing to the same codex, taking up individual positions to jostle with each other in creative ways. A game locates itself apart from everyday life for a limited time: it sets out a framework and an etiquette for an exchange, initiates a certain equity between players, and then it sets the ball rolling.

What can come out of this? Anything is possible. Once we start to dream, playful processes can keep our dreams alive, filling them out into less abstract forms. In the enabling space of play dissenting protagonists compete without danger, often bringing welcome results to light.

TO CHALLENGE:

A challenge can be positive...

A challenge can mean quietly challenging oneself to act in a new way, or it may push us to unite with others to set out a shared dissent. In organising the symposium and the publication we put the onus not only onto ourselves but also onto every participant to step up, to communicate their message and to raise their voice. This is voice beyond the acoustic: a voice can be raised through drawing, singing, writing a letter, playing a board game – in response to a challenge any medium can be used to raise a voice.

Both the symposium and this publication are, in themselves, a challenge. They set out a challenge to our architectural profession to bring together more representative voices from our communities in more creative ways, in the hope that a more fitting residential future has a chance to come to life.

INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST EXCHANGE THROUGH GENEROSITY AND DEMANDS

The Dream – Play – Challenge project is grounded in our ambition to perform architectural practice and exchange through inclusion, equity and mutual respect. As part of this project we set up the symposium as a shared space where each and every one of us feels able to exist in full. As only through lived processes where we all feel that

we belong, can we enable a built environment where everyone, as individuals and as part of our own communities, can feel strengthened and 'at home'.

Referencing Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, we recognise that every person on this planet brings a unique set of talents and experiences to the global conversation, but also lives with an equally unique set of delineations to their power, opportunity, and voice. So, as we meet to forge commonalities, we also prioritise difference. The driving concepts of commonality and difference highlight how we are playing out intersectional awareness in two ways: through generosity and demand.

Intersectional feminist exchange involves the generous mutual care that comes with acknowledging shared ground and ambitions; but we must also go further to combine the space of kindred empathy with the space of challenge, where we make demands of ourselves and of others.

As if what each of us has to say is unique, then each of us must take responsibility to voice our particular message.

SO, S EP UP!

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By Sarah Riviere & Wiltrud Simbuerger, Berlin, 2023

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