

Pepita Hesselberth

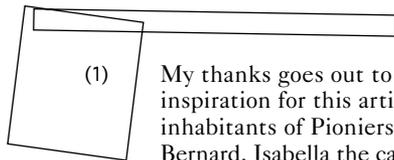
The Grid as
Structuring Paradox:
A Case
of Tiny Living

abstract This short position paper addresses the gap between idealistic, entrepreneurial, and culturally critical concerns over the emergence of new environmental communities that strive for more sustainable and self-sufficient modes of living, taking the tiny house community in the Netherlands as a case in point. Reflecting on the micro

and macro processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization at play in the concrete case of tiny living, the grid is seen to wield a stricter interpretation of a more general problematic with regards to contemporary urban/human life, where the notion of the grid, I argue, functions as a structuring paradox that at once allows and disallows for the negotiation of possibilities and limits in our thinking about community, sustainability, and alternative modes of living today.

The Tiny House Movement ⁽¹⁾

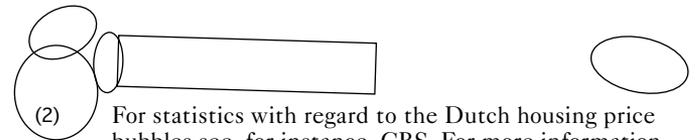
The tiny house movement originated in the United States and gained momentum as a social movement in



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My thanks goes out to Jente de Vries, for her input and inspiration for this article, and to her and the other inhabitants of Pionierskwartier (Jasmijn, Jurre, Ole, Maria, Bernard, Isabella the cat, Happy the rabbit, Sanne and Barry) for allowing me in on what it means to live tiny today.

the Netherlands in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, when the expanding housing bubble — which in the Netherlands peaked in 2008 — burst, only to peak again in the years that followed, hitting new all-time highs in the period between 2015-2018.⁽²⁾ Where the first bubble peak and burst forced people into debt and even foreclosure, the rapidly rising housing prices and regulatory responses to the subprime mortgage crisis since have forced many residents to leave the expensive centers of especially metropolitan areas and have made it increasingly difficult — if not downright impossible — for (young) starters to enter the housing market. Yet, it has also made them think (again) about possible alternatives to such high-cost living, as well as, more generally, about the widespread values and institutions that underlie our present-day economic system, the logics of which are arguably best captured in the adage “the bigger, the better.” Tiny living, then, is about minimizing and downsizing: to save money (to be financially independent), to reduce one’s possessions (to declutter), to voluntarily simplify



(2)

For statistics with regard to the Dutch housing price bubbles see, for instance, CBS. For more information on the origins of the Tiny House Movement, see Nonko and “Tiny House Movement” for the United States, and “Tiny House Nederland – Minder huis, meer leven” for the Netherlands.

one's lifestyle (Thoreau style), to reduce one's spatial footprint (to help the environment), to be self-sufficient.

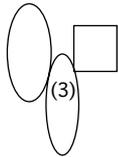
In the tiny house movement, concerns over affordable living, debt, and the impact of consumer culture thus spill over to ideals of environmental and social sustainability, and the development of housing solutions and new modes of living that are both green and space-saving, and, often, cooperative and community-based. Tiny living is also about off-gridding. Habitually designed to achieve relative autonomy from remote infrastructures — including electricity, municipal water supplies, gas, and sewer systems — tiny homes are in the main equipped with onsite renewable energy sources (such as solar panels), rainwater harvesting and sanitation pumps and filtration, other energy-saving solutions like high-efficiency insulation and wood burning stoves, a so-called dry (or composting) toilet, and other more elaborate recycling systems. But the grids from which tiny houses seek to subtract themselves are often myriad and pertain to more than just those of water, sewer, and electrical power alone. To live mortgage-free (if not debt-free) is to disconnect oneself not only from a lifetime of debt, but also from the sway of labor precarity, so as to become less vulnerable to the pressure to (over)perform. Adopting the credo “less is more,” many tiny house owners, moreover, openly distance themselves from the grids of growth-based economics, and actively look for ways to make the economy more circular (e.g. through reuse and

regeneration). Finally, adhering to a zero-waste ethic in the utilization of (urban) space, tiny houses often make use of (urban) wastelands, temporarily abandoned or unoccupied areas of land, until future destinations are found.

But the off-grid is a messy, contested, and often, volatile space. By imagining the off-grid and making it real, new grids may emerge. Grids challenge one another, and what is perceived to be off one grid may easily partake in, or be undermined by, another. To the extent that it takes a grid to imagine an off-grid, the off-grid works affirmatively: no off-grid without a grid, no grid without an off-grid. Yet, the off-grid can also disturb the grid, if only by making us aware of the latter's taken-for-granted-ness. This short position paper reflects on the tension between infrastructural idealism, pragmatic realism, and corporate and governmental control in the ideals and practices of “off the grid living” under the conditions of late-capitalism and neoliberal reform. In particular, it seeks to address the gap between idealistic, entrepreneurial/governmental, and culturally critical concerns over the emergence of new environmental communities that strive for more sustainable and self-sufficient modes of living, taking the tiny house community in the Netherlands as a case in point.

The Pioneers

In the summer of 2017, a group of young innovative housing pioneers embark on a collaboration with one of the biggest real estate project developers in the Netherlands, BPD, formally known as Bouwfonds.⁽³⁾ A group of tiny house builders (five houses, eight inhabitants in total) is granted permission to use a former allotment garden in the suburban area of The Hague for a period of two years in exchange for modest rent and their willingness to help develop the area into a place suitable for dwelling. The project is called Proeftuin Erasmusveld.⁽⁴⁾ A basic infrastructure is set in place: a minimal grid of a few communal water and electricity taps, wifi (!), two outdoor composting toilets,



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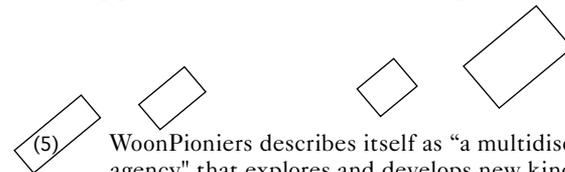
Bouwfonds is a former Dutch (semi-)governmental building company (literally: building fund) responsible for making public housing in the post-war decades. The fund became gradually more commercialized until it was fully privatized in 2005. In 2007, Bouwfonds was subject to a huge national scandal involving massive real estate fraud, which contributed to the downfall and dismantling of SNS Reaal, its main financial stakeholder. It was in this year, i.e. the year of the financial crisis, that Bouwfonds changed its name to BPD: Bouwfonds Project Developers.

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On the scandal, see Posthumus; on BPD and their view on the project, see: “Proeven aan duurzaam wonen.” Proeftuin plays on the double meaning of the Dutch word *proef* (the verb “to taste” and the noun “experiment”), combined with *tuin*, meaning “garden.” On the project (in Dutch) see: “Proeftuin Erasmusveld.”

a constructed wetland, a few paths, a public area, and a designated parking lot. The area’s former pavilion is redecorated and turned into a communal space to be used by both tiny villagers and project developers. Equipped with a kitchen, a living/dining/office space, a bathroom, a few empty spaces, and a washing machine, the place is used to organize meetings and workshops, to do laundry, and to facilitate the occasional joint dinner and/or overnight guest. Two neighboring warehouses are freed up for storage, tools, and tiny DIY construction work. A plot of land is kept for urban agriculture (mainly fruit trees); another is developed into a perma-culture garden and run by city farmer Suzanne of De Zoete Wildernis (Dutch for The Sweet Wilderness). Workshops are organized, a festival of waste, and, about every month, an open day, for those curious to know what it is like to live tiny.

It is an unconventional but prolific partnership: the unwieldy market player BPD, a group of principled area developers called Woonpioniers, a city farmer, and a small community of tiny house builders.⁽⁵⁾ With their hands-on approach to DIY (tiny) living, the task assigned



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WoonPioniers describes itself as “a multidisciplinary agency” that explores and develops new kinds of residential environments and concepts for living (for more information, see “Woonpioniers Ontwerpt Bezielde Woningen, van Binnen En Buiten”).

to the latter is, first and foremost, one of placemaking: to reimagine and reinvent the space and transform it into a place of living so as to attract prospective buyers for the soon-to-be-built residential area. But it is placemaking spun off its axis. Where the process of placemaking typically is said to capitalize on “a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential, and [...] results in the creation of public spaces that contribute to [the community’s] happiness, health and well-being” (“What Is Placemaking?”), here, a new-found community of decoy-hipsters with a picture-perfect life (an image and irony of which the tiny house owners are all too aware) are barreled in as part of a branding strategy that serves to facilitate the sale, and therewith privatization, of a formerly public space. That the selling-points of the new real estate district — i.e. sub-urban, nature-inclusive, energy-saving, car-free, circular, and community-based (“Duurzame Woonwijk”) — largely coincide with some of the ideals and ways of living of the area’s temporary inhabitants is of course no coincidence: it is contrived (indeed, plotted) this way. But there is irony to the fact — an irony, I hope, that in the remainder of this short position paper will become clearer.

Off-the-Grid, but not Out-of-Control

For, what of the tiny villagers themselves? Meandering between their own venturesome zeal — i.e. for sustainable, green, off-grid, community-based living (to which I will

return below) — and their delegated task as placemakers, they are a paragon of proactive citizenship: unpaid for their labor and precarious in their abode, they are to change the world, and pick the fruits of their own effort (but not too many!). Prepared to take risks, many tiny house builders have embarked on the project of tiny living without fully knowing how it will pan out, or where they will end up in the long run. In the interim, they are allocated this plot of land for their own world building. Yet, they are allowed to do so only within the parameters of what feels governable from a corporate (and governmental) point of view: not an unhinged hippie community, but one that is neatly ordered; off the grid, but not out of control. Oftentimes highly-educated, creative, idealist, and entrepreneurial (with the odd exception, the tiny villagers are all builders, social entrepreneurs and/or work in the creative industries) their survival and well-being depends on their skills, creativity, network, and their ability to position themselves socially, as well as on their willingness to cooperate and negotiate the conditions of their own living with the landowners (municipalities, large real-estate corporations) that impose their own grids upon them in the form of restrictions, guidelines, regulations, and legislation.

On the one hand, then, the tiny house community is expected to be self-organizing. On the other hand, however, when it comes to the

aforementioned landowner-imposed regulations, the tiny house builders generally have very little, if anything, to say. To give a few examples: land needs to be formally designated as a living zone within the area's land-use or development plan before it can be occupied, which means that no (waste) land can be occupied without reserve, or without time passing. Altering the zoning plan for a district generally requires a long-term investment and strategy, especially by area developers and landowners, on whose goodwill tiny house owners then depend. Other conditions may have to be met as well. Depending on the size of the plot of land and the aims of the land's owners, a maximum number of houses may be permitted, or minimum required. Some regulations may be site-specific, such as the need to build a (temporary) sound wall when a site is near a highway or train track.

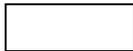
The tiny houses, too, are subject to directives. There is a maximum size for a house to be considered tiny; certain aesthetic standards have to be met: it has to be properly built (a tiny house cannot be a caravan or makeshift hut); it has to be self-made (or at least self-designed). Further, the Dutch Building Order ("Bouwbesluit 2012") demands that, for a construction to be considered a house at all, it needs to be connected to a sewer and running water (rainwater filtering is illegal in the Netherlands), and accommodated with a minimum of insulation that literally would outweigh principles of mobility and tininess. Exceptions can be made, but as

a rule, before any new location can be occupied, a basic grid must be installed, and every home has to apply for its own environmental license (omgevingsvergunning) and/or residence permit based on the principle of equality — which means the investment of a lot of time, money and energy upon every move. Buying land is not really an alternative because, first of all, the same Building Order and regulations apply; secondly, due to these same regulations, a plot of land cannot be occupied by more than one house unless it is formally split (in which case every plot/home needs to be connected to the sewer, and apply for exemption, etc.); and thirdly, the Dutch metropolitan area is simply far too expensive to be populated in this way (where there are now five tiny houses, 350 sustainable homes will be built — neither one of which, needless to say, the tiny house builders can afford).

As is often the case in the Netherlands (and elsewhere), the tiny house inhabitants of Proeftuin Erasmusveld occupy the land under circumstances that are tolerated but not legal, for their conditions of living are formally below standards. These standards, the inhabitants know all too well, are there for a reason: apart from being set in place to prevent haphazard building, they are to keep residents healthy and safe, ascertain a minimum level of well-being, and protect them against the malpractices of, for example, slumlords. The irony of the movement befitting, it is precisely these elementary

conditions of living that are romanticized to the point of being glorified in the tiny house's public appeal:⁽⁶⁾ burning wood to keep warm, going outside for a pee, and other kinds of reduced comfort — limited quantities of electricity and water, no washing machine, waste separation, a limited amount of space, a kind of camping life. Genuine in their quest to bring about social change, and with little to no on-grid alternative to build the kind of life that they wish to lead, for most tiny house pioneers, the willingness to compromise is considerable. Yet their alacrity is not boundless. Dissuasion always lies in wait. Frustrated in their initiative, creativity, and resourcefulness by corporate and governmental agencies that (cannot but) pursue their own goals and exercise their own control over these projects (often by milking them for all they are worth), initiative may get killed, and therewith the project: instead of a breeding space for tiny initiatives, a plot of land turns into a temporary parking lot for tiny houses until a next destination is found.

The reality of tiny off-grid living, then, is as idyllic and picturesque as it is precarious and entangled in uncertainty. As paragons of proactive citizenship, it may



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See for example the project branding strategy “Proeven via Tiny Houses” and “Proeftuin Erasmusveld | Woonpioniers”; or the tiny house mania on Pinterest (Bearfoot Theory).

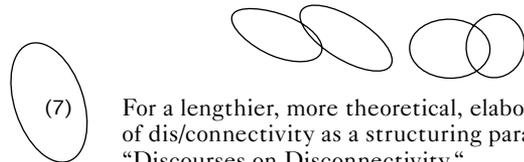
be tempting to view the tiny house builders in terms of the win-win-situation of their (envisioned yet arguable) immanent success; if all turns out well, they get to inhabit the world as (they envision) it should be: affordable, green, sustainable, and community-based, a world that they have helped built; at its worst, they have taken part in an interesting experiment that might help their careers before being ground to a halt, upon which time they are as likely to find themselves in a position to buy a house after all (or to find alternative housing solutions), though such a position is not guaranteed at all. While there may be a kernel of truth to the observation that there is a gain for the tiny house pioneers, moreover, it does not alter the fact that their off-grid living, as said, is characterized by tenure insecurity, frequently substandard conditions of living, endless negotiations with governmental and corporate landowners, and non-stop unwaged inventiveness, networking, and creativity.

What is more, as Isabell Lorey has rightly pointed out in a slightly different context, the idea of “self-chosen precarization” with which the off-grid is often associated is premised on ideas (i.e. of freedom, autonomy, creativity, participation, and empowerment) that are themselves constitutively linked to the hegemonic on-grid modes of living and subjectivation we call late-capitalism. In other words, they are part and parcel of the “hegemonic function of neo-liberal

governmentality” in the global West. While self-precarization may “[contribute] to producing the conditions for being able to become an active part of neo-liberal political and economic relations,” Lorey also points out in line with Foucault that, in this scenario, agency emerges in the paradoxical movement between subjugation and empowerment, coercion and freedom. It is in this paradoxical movement, which manifests itself here in the critical imaginaries and practices of tiny living, that the possibilities for alternative modes of living and housing that are environmentally and socially more sustainable may come into view and are arguably most forcefully negotiated.

The Grid as Structuring Paradox

Reflecting on the micro and macro processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization at play in the concrete case of tiny living, the claim of this short position paper is that the notion of the “grid” functions as a structuring paradox that at once allows and disallows for the negotiation of limits to (and possibilities within) our present-day societies of control.⁽⁷⁾ On the one hand perceived as a potentially adequate response to



(7) For a lengthier, more theoretical, elaboration on the notion of dis/connectivity as a structuring paradox, see my “Discourses on Disconnectivity.”

the negative side effects of consumer capitalism, climate change, and the rise of what Maurizio Lazzarato has called “the indebted man,” on the other hand, the tiny house movement can be seen to meet the demands of neoliberalism head-on: participation, gentrification, and flexibilization. The on/off-grid, I argue, in this sense, can be seen to wield a stricter interpretation of a more general problematic with regards to contemporary urban/human life, where living off the grid is not so much, or at least not solely, about the refusal or dislike of the grid as such, but can be seen to function as an affirmative force that nonetheless holds the capacity for transformation. As Woonpioniers’ Arthur van der Lee and BPD’s Hans-Hugo Smit put it: “The real challenge for us is in finding a way to unite the temporary character of our project with the permanent impact we hope it will have” (“Erasmusveld Area Development”). For the area developers, this impact is defined in terms that are both pragmatic and idealistic, local and global. On the one hand, they wish to “positively determine the future demographics in the area”; on the other hand, they aspire to “redefine the core business” of project development by “setting an example for the real estate industry at large” (“Pioneering”). It is remarkable, therefore, how little is uttered on the lived-reality of the plot’s temporary inhabitants, whose situation remains as idyllic as it is precarious from beginning to end. Indeed, it is one thing to contribute to optimizing the conditions

for gentrification, but another to come up with creative sustainable solutions and develop new modes of living in situ that make some of the existing guidelines and regulations redundant, as the tiny house pioneers do. It is yet quite another (but it would take another paper to develop this argument more fully) to glorify a substandard quality of living, and contribute, however reluctant or unwilling, to a reverie of the gentrification of poverty as guarantee for the future sustainability of our world. To be continued...

fig. 1



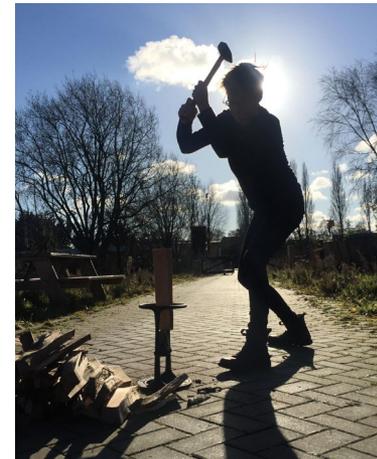
Covering the Roof at Proeftuin Erasmusveld. Photo courtesy of Jente de Vries.

fig. 2



Inside Jente's Tiny House. Photo courtesy of John Hesselberth.

fig. 3



Chopping wood at Proeftuin Erasmusveld. Photo courtesy of Jente de Vries.

biography Pepita Hesselberth is Assistant Professor Film and Digital Media at the Centre for Arts and Society, Leiden University. She is the author of *Cinematic Chronotopes* (2014), and co-editor of, amongst others, *Legibility in the Age of Signs and Machines* (2018) and *Compact Cinematics* (2016). She has published widely on Disconnectivity in the Digital, a project for which she received a fellowship from the Danish Council for Independent Research and was appointed as a research fellow at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen (2015-2018).

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