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Prefiguring the Caring City: Everyday Practices and Postcapitalist Possibility in Neighborhood Living Rooms

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Abstract

This article brings an ethic of care into conversation with prefigurative politics to position practices of care as examples of everyday life beyond capitalism. Examining everyday practices in community spaces as prefigurative practices of care illustrates two distinct but interrelated ways these spaces function: firstly by facilitating cultures of care in the present, sustaining individuals and communities within an uncaring urban context, and secondly by making possible and visible other ways of caring, relating, and living. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in Dutch neighborhood living rooms, we show how participants in these spaces practice an ethic of care, how this transforms their everyday experience and their sense of future possibility, and how a desire for change motivates their continued care practices. Reading this through the lens of prefigurative practice reveals concrete examples of what everyday postcapitalist urban life might look like if cities were instead organized around an ethic of care. Finally, we call attention to the socio-spatial infrastructures that make these practices possible in the present and would support an expanded capacity to care in the future.

Keywords

care; care in cities; neoliberalism; postcapitalism; prefiguration; social infrastructure; social practice

1. Introduction

The contemporary city under neoliberal and austerity governance produces deficits of care (Fraser, 2022; Tronto, 2013, 2019). Scholarship has shown empirically how this deficit is compensated by (mostly unpaid, and often gendered) care work in the form of drop-in centers (Williams, 2017), community food hubs (Traill et al., 2024), libraries (Rivano Eckerdal et al., 2024), or mutual aid networks during the Covid-19 pandemic (De Gasperi & Martinez, 2024). Such studies call attention to the uneven distribution of the burden of care,

which is marginalized and made invisible by the same system that relies on it to produce workers and consumers (Bhattacharya, 2017; Lawson, 2007), and thus call for more care in, and more caring, cities. This has included attention for the creation and maintenance of "infrastructures of care" (Power & Mee, 2020; Power & Williams, 2019) and the need for "cultures of care" beyond the individual or the family (Greenhough et al., 2023). Meanwhile, planning scholars have consistently identified the urgent need to reimagine both urban systems and everyday life in cities beyond dominant capitalist logics, calling for the "good city" (Amin, 2006), the "city we need" (Cardoso et al., 2022), the "just" city (Fainstein, 2013), or the "city of care" (Power & Williams, 2019).

Insufficiently addressed in this work is the connection between the everyday, reparative, and survival-oriented practices of care documented in the empirical work mentioned above, and future urban imaginaries as discussed in planning literature (Williams, 2020, is one exception). This raises the question of how care might be seen as a creative and imaginative practice, generating tangible and hopeful urban futures, including viable and desirable visions of "the good life" in a postcapitalist world (Soper, 2020). This entails, firstly, an understanding of how care practices not only compensate for injustices and care deficits in order to sustain urban and community life under capitalism but also actively disrupt and oppose the status quo, cultivating alternative visions of daily life. Secondly, it asks how these practices can contribute to planning theory and its normative arguments for more just and desired urban futures.

In this article, we propose studying care practices both as a way of appreciating and making visible their life-sustaining work and implicit critique of the contemporary city *under* capitalism, and as prefigurative glimpses into alternative urban futures *beyond* capitalism. Bringing a feminist ethic of care into conversation with social practice theory and prefigurative politics, we argue that practices of care can be understood simultaneously as serving a vital social and community purpose in the present and prefiguring what everyday urban life might look and feel like in postcapitalist futures organized around an ethic of care. Through a study of four community spaces in the Netherlands, we provide empirical evidence for how an ethic of care is operationalized through situated community practices; show how care motivates participants' actions and informs their desire for change; and read these practices as prefiguring what the caring city might look like. Attention to personal and shared experiences show how continued engagement with care practices transforms participants at the level of everyday life as well as their visions and expectations of the future, suggesting a way for an ethic of care to scale from particular locations and practices to wider urban "cultures of care" (Greenhough et al., 2023). Finally, we call attention to the urban spaces that enable and sustain these practices, as an essential "infrastructure of care" (Power & Mee, 2020) acting in the present and facilitating these future developments.

2. Theoretical Framing

2.1. Prefigurative Practices

Social practice theory proposes that human societies are best studied and understood in terms of "neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time" (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). Looking at practices as the basis for "how the fabric of society is sustained and how it changes" (Shove et al., 2012, p. 8) is therefore useful in both analyzing existing practices of groups and individuals—what do they do, why, under what conditions?—and linking present action

to future change. In Giddens's theory of structuration, people's actions are shaped by their structural and cultural environment, but their actions in turn also reproduce these structures: a recursive process whereby "in and through these activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible" (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). Practices are the moments in which agency and structure are brought into interaction and therefore where social structures are reproduced, and potentially altered. When thinking about social change, transition, or transformation, this perspective offers a way out of the perceived binary of attributing (lack of) change to individual free will or consumer choice on the one hand, or systemic or structural determinism on the other. It locates the potential for change in actually-existing phenomena without putting the responsibility for transformation on individual actors, accounts for the structural forces shaping human behavior without presenting them as all-powerful or unalterable, and tangibly links current realities to transformed futures.

One approach to operationalize the transformative potential in everyday practices is through prefiguration, a political idea closely associated with anarchist direct action and feminism, which prioritizes the performance and embodiment of values and preferences in the here-and-now over designing a desired end-state (Kinna, 2017; Maeckelbergh, 2011). To prefigure is to act "as if" one lives in the preferred future, and directly to "embody the forms of social relation that actors wish to see develop" (Franks, 2006, p. 114). It collapses the distinction between means and ends in an iterative recursion of "a means not to an end, but only to future means" (Springer, 2016, p. 287) and with a recognition that how we go about creating a new world is as important as the world we create (Graeber, 2011; Maeckelbergh, 2011). Prefigurative theory echoes Giddens's assertion that structures are reproduced through human activity, and can therefore be reproduced otherwise, and likewise looks for the possibility of change as already implicit within existing practices.

Davina Cooper (2014) describes prefigurative practices as "everyday utopias" which both demonstrate the possibilities of living differently and generate new concepts and new perspectives on the status quo: they are "places *from* which to think and *about* which to think" (Cooper, 2014, p. 18). Such practices are "utopian" in the tradition of Ernst Bloch: "concrete" rather than "abstract utopias," animated by an "unfinished forward dream" but rooted in everyday life (Levitas, 2008, p. 44). In her study of six sites where participants "perform regular daily life…in a radically different fashion" (Cooper, 2014, p. 2), regardless of whether they consciously consider themselves as prefigurative, Cooper shows how such practices "challenge basic presumptions about how things should work" and, through immersion and active participation, cultivate "new forms of normalization, desire, and subjectivity" (2014, pp. 4–5).

While prefiguration typically describes strategic actions that consciously seek to enact, demonstrate, and experiment with alternative social or political arrangements, what Cooper demonstrates is that it is also possible and productive to use prefiguration as a lens or interpretive framework to examine the concepts and possibilities that are generated by practices. Prefigurative practices do not linearly pursue desired (and known) futures, but generate "new forms of future imagining" in an open-ended process of "moving beyond concepts as they currently are by imagining what they might become" (Cooper, 2014, p. 220). Reading everyday practices as prefigurative thus opens up new imaginaries and concepts of what everyday life might be in the future (some limitations of this approach are discussed in Wilson, 2024).

2.2. Care: Ethic, Infrastructures, and Cultures

Feminist scholarship has called attention to care as a gendered and undervalued aspect of sustaining and reproducing human society, including "everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). Fisher and Tronto (1990) identify four phases of care: caring about (noticing unmet needs); caring for (taking responsibility for meeting those needs); care-giving (doing the work of caring for another); and care-receiving (responding to care and evaluating whether the needs have been met); to which Tronto (2013, 2019) later added a fifth, caring-with (the solidarity and trust that develops through reciprocal care, and a commitment to justice, equality, and freedom). This additional element begins to broaden the scope of care discourse beyond the necessary work of sustenance and survival, to include its role in advancing justice and transformation: that is, not merely sustaining and reproducing, but bringing about more just and equal realities (Lawson, 2007; Williams, 2016, 2017).

Recent literature has further recognized that the "capacity to care" is unevenly distributed and relies on "infrastructures of care" such as housing (Power & Mee, 2020) or other "social infrastructures" including people, social networks, and places of social encounter (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019, 2022). Especially in the context of neoliberalism and austerity, it is necessary to address the social and material contexts which promote or inhibit a "culture of care" since an exclusive emphasis on affective and interpersonal care risks shifting responsibility onto individuals and "volunteerism" rather than structurally addressing people's needs, vulnerability, and precarity (Greenhough et al., 2023). Such a "culture of care" consists of the "norms of caring behavior, practices of care and modes of relating which promote and enable effective care" and reproduce caring social norms (Greenhough et al., 2023, p. 2). Cultures of care help us to envision how an ethic of care could be operationalized and practiced beyond the scale of the individual or the nuclear family, and without becoming institutionalized or bureaucratized—arguably, bureaucracy is by its nature antithetical to care (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Greenhough et al., 2023). Moving from particular instances of care to wider cultures of care necessitates paying attention to the socio-material "infrastructures of care"—spaces, systems, processes, and relations—which enable these practices to develop and persist at the scale of a social community (Greenhough et al., 2023). Care is "embedded in the practices that maintain webs of relationality and is always happening in between" (de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 166) and practices of care need to be understood in the relations between (groups of) people, as well as between people and the material, social, political, and economic contexts within which they seek to care.

2.3. Prefigurative Practices of Care

Practices of care are typically understood as sustaining life and community in the everyday, taking on the reproductive burden neglected (but simultaneously exploited) by extractive capitalism and neoliberal urban governance. Meanwhile, prefigurative practices are understood as self-conscious attempts to transform the world, demonstrate alternative possibilities, and manifest these alternatives in the present day. Bringing care into conversation with prefiguration means seeing these practices simultaneously as necessary, life-affirming parts of daily social life in the present, and as opening up new imaginaries of the future. In the words of Williams (2017, p. 824), they are both "practices enacted in response to particular injustices" and practices of "creatively growing new ways of being/thinking/doing urban life." Prefigurative practices of care are therefore both reproductive of everyday life and generative of radical new possibilities, motivated and informed by an ethic of care.

Practices of care in the contemporary neoliberal city are first and foremost concerned with (individual and collective) survival (hence "maintain, continue, and repair"; Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). They therefore contain an implicit critique of the neoliberal city which makes them necessary since, by definition, they operate according to different values and priorities; introducing the prefigurative lens makes this critique explicit. Furthermore, it uses these values and priorities as the starting point for imagining, discussing, and proposing alternatives to the status quo, cultivating postcapitalist subjectivities, affect, and imaginaries (Gibson-Graham, 2006). The imaginative and generative value of such practices can be vital in attempting to envision and bring about more just, sustainable, and desirable urban futures. Faced with the urgency of multiple crises, our challenge is not only to survive in an uncertain world, but to imagine a "good life" beyond capitalism, consumerism, and the crises they produce (Soper, 2020). Paying attention to everyday spaces and practices of care can deliver tangible and credible visions of what urban life might look like if we put an ethic of care at the center of our lives (Tronto, 2013).

In the rest of this article, we employ the theoretical framework of prefigurative care practice to empirically explore four self-organized "neighborhood living rooms" as prefiguring postcapitalist community life. This firstly demonstrates how an ethic of care is operationalized in the present-day neoliberal city; secondly reveals the alternative and desired futures made visible through participants' actions and motivations; and thirdly uses the framing of care to make an explicit link between the necessary life-sustaining work in the present (Fisher & Tronto, 1990) and the radical effort to challenge and disrupt the uncaring status quo, as an act of "radical" or "oppositional" care (Miraftab & Huq, 2024; Russo, 2021). While our informants might not self-identify as "doing prefiguration," reading their practices *as prefigurative* opens up possibilities for envisioning alternatives: if they are understood as "acting as if" they lived in more desired futures, what does everyday life look like in those futures, what does it mean to participants to experience these alternatives first-hand, and how do their practices contribute to wider urban transformations?

3. Methodology

The empirical basis for this article is a year-long multi-sited ethnographic study in four public neighborhood living rooms, or *buurthuiskamers*, in Rotterdam and Eindhoven, the Netherlands. From an initial desktop mapping exercise and exploratory site visits, four examples were selected as broadly illustrative of this phenomenon while reflecting key differences such as being initiated by residents or by institutions, and being new or more established. Participants were observed in the course of their daily actions and interactions during general opening times as well as programmed activities, with a focus on observable practice (what people can be seen to be doing, rather than their abstract or stated goals), their interaction with the space, and their interaction and communication with others (Hennink et al., 2020, pp. 173–178). Casual conversations and questions were used to clarify what people were doing, how often or for how long they had been doing this, and to open up conversation around participants' motivations and aims.

The researcher, a white, non-Dutch native in his early thirties, also became an active participant in a range of activities: from regular events such as collective baking, to taking notes at collective governance meetings, to once-off actions such as planting trees and shrubs for a community garden, to mundane everyday moments such as washing up after shared meals. Taking the time to become personally embedded in the spaces, practices, and relational webs brought the researcher a level of situated and embodied knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Pink, 2012). It also meant that interviews could be conducted on more of an equal footing with

participants, attempting to bring the mutual openness and vulnerability inherent to an ethic of care into the interview process—a mutuality sometimes reinforced by Dutch being neither person's first language. Finally, the time spent embedded in these spaces allowed a suspension of initial research questions and assumptions, with interests evolving over time in relation to observations, the questions or concerns of practitioners themselves, and the "serendipitous" encounters, moments and opportunities that arise during ethnographic fieldwork (Ocejo, 2013, p. 3; Pink, 2001, p. 15).

Fieldnotes were produced after every visit or activity to record observations, conversations, and reflections on personal experiences and emotions. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with initiators and facilitators of the spaces, regular and sporadic participants, and two representatives of institutional partners (a housing association and a social welfare organization). These interviews were based on an interview guide with a list of topics to be covered (the history of the space, the nature of the informant's participation, personal motivation, and desires or expectations for the future), but informants were encouraged to speak about what they found important or interesting. In-depth discussion of individual participants' actions, understandings, and motivations served both to develop a fuller understanding of these spaces and practices of care, and to reveal the transformative potential for "both stability and change" as participants "modify and re-create practices as they inform them" (Pink, 2012, p. 21). This links the ways practices reproduce and sustain everyday life in the present, to the ways they prefigure alternative futures by showing how everyday life might be performed otherwise.

Interviews were conducted in Dutch, the first language of most participants and the common language of all four sites, recorded, and translated into English by the researcher as a summary account including key quotes. These texts were coded in Atlas.ti software using a combination of open-ended inductive coding to identify emerging themes and deductive coding using codes derived from the theoretical framework (types and levels of care, everyday practices and experiences, desire for change, and demonstration of alternatives). Gray literature from municipalities, public communications, neighborhood newspapers, and social media posts were used to provide contextual understanding of the projects and neighborhoods, but not coded in this process. The names of the sites are given in full, as public places, while respondents have been anonymized for privacy (as per ethical board approval and informed consent forms) and because we aim to interpret practices across these spaces, rather than to compare between them. Although it is not part of our analysis here, gender and ethnicity (Dutch native or non-native) have been included so as not to "invisibilize" these dimensions.

4. Context

4.1. "Buurthuiskamers" in the Netherlands

The Dutch word *buurthuiskamer* roughly translates as "neighborhood living room" and is often used interchangeably with *buurthuis* (community center, lit. "neighborhood house") and *buurtkamer* ("neighborhood room"). Buurthuiskamers have a long history in Dutch cities and public imagination, dating back to the *verzuiling* ("pillarization") of 19th-century Dutch society, when separate religious and political groupings organized themselves to provide workers' housing, social and trade associations, and social infrastructure for members of their "pillar" (Lijphart, 1968; Spierts, 2014). The post-WWII welfare state built on this tradition but generalized it to the whole population in a process of secularization and "depillarization" (van Dam, 2015), institutionalizing what was previously self-organized. Urban development was typically

executed by not-for-profit housing associations whose social responsibility and mandate included the provision and maintenance of community spaces, including buurthuiskamers. Increasing privatization, neoliberal policymaking and austerity measures starting in the 1980s saw the funding and creation of such spaces dwindle, and responsibility for social welfare was delegated first to local authorities, subsequently to external welfare organizations contracted by the municipality, and, increasingly, to citizens themselves.

Recent years have seen the historical form of the buurthuiskamer revived by urban communities in response to the experienced shortcomings of austerity urbanism and the dismantling of the welfare state. Today, buurthuiskamers tend to be spaces initiated and managed by local residents, often in the form of a non-profit association (*stichting*) or by welfare organizations. Alongside the historical parallels, a key difference is the contemporary absence of the social capital that "pillars" provided. This means that organizers themselves are responsible for building their community and social networks amidst a fragmented social landscape, in contrast to the clearly defined demographics of earlier forms. The spaces they occupy are frequently (and ironically) vacant real estate belonging to the municipality or housing associations, including former community centers or social infrastructure, as well as vacant commercial property (especially in the wake of the 2008–2013 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic) and buildings awaiting demolition or redevelopment. The four spaces studied as part of this research demonstrate this range of conditions.

4.2. De Nieuwe Maan, Drents Dorp, Eindhoven

Buurthuis De Nieuwe Maan is a project initiated in 2022 through a cooperation between Eindhoven municipality, welfare organization WijEindhoven, and local housing association Woonbedrijf. It was precipitated by the planned demolition of a local activity center and the end of the lease of the local neighborhood association's meeting space. Following tensions and perceived divisions between the user groups of these spaces, but recognizing the need for a social community space, it was decided to open a single *buurthuiskamer* for the whole neighborhood, as a "fresh start" free of associations with the previous locations. The housing association provided a ground-floor corner dwelling, the municipality took legal responsibility by signing the lease, and a WijEindhoven employee is responsible for the programming and day-to-day management as a "neutral" party. The space is open from 09h–17h every weekday with occasional events after hours, and predominantly used by residents of the surrounding neighborhood, which consists of 80% social housing. There is always a volunteer host present, who is responsible for serving the (free) coffee and tea and maintaining the house rules and social atmosphere. Weekly programming includes: walk-in consultation times for WijEindhoven, the neighborhood association, mental health services, and financial assistance, respectively; an arts-and-crafts club; shared lunches; and a Dutch language café for new arrivals. Outside of these, the space is open for social encounters, a warm drink, and somewhere warm and dry to sit. The municipality wants the buurthuiskamer to become fully self-sustaining and community-managed, but WijEindhoven remains responsible due to limited capacity.

4.3. Buurthuis 't Struikske, Het Ven, Eindhoven

Buurthuis 't Struikske was founded by neighborhood advocacy group Wijkoverleg Het Ven when a community center for young people with disabilities closed, and the building was offered to them for a nominal price of €1 with a 10-year leasehold from the municipality. The group had been founded to help the

neighborhood (a mix of social and owner-occupied housing) address issues with the adjacent industrial park. Their intention was for a shared social space "by the neighborhood, for the neighborhood," independent of the municipality and of institutions (although they do collaborate and receive subsidies). Since opening in late 2023, they have attempted to stimulate regular use of the space through social activities such as billiards and card games, including coffee and tea, community meals with residents of a nearby care home, and events around holidays or landmark dates. The management takes a facilitating role, offering residents space and support to initiate activities and making the space available for use by local projects, including a support group for families of troubled teens, an orchestra, and a scouting group. Community groups are charged a reduced fee to use the space, if at all, while commercial and institutional users pay a higher rate to cross-subsidize this. In the spring of 2024, volunteers worked with a local gardener to initiate a strawbale community garden on permaculture principles.

4.4. Het Bollenpandje, Bospolder-Tussendijken, Rotterdam

Het Bollenpandje (literally "The Little House of Bulbs") is a self-organized community space located in a former corner store in the west of Rotterdam. The location was deemed commercially unusable due to leaks and water damage and made available in 2019 to a local community organizer on a "temporary vacancy management" lease to incubate flowers and edible plants, as part of a project to green the neighborhood, when the previously used community space was sold off to a developer. These activities were increasingly accompanied by social events and programming, and since late 2020, the space has been jointly run by the initiator and a local social and community art foundation. Het Bollenpandje is generally open every weekday for ad-hoc conversation, warm drinks, arts and craft activities, meetings, and shared cooking and eating; and alongside the general open hours, there is also semi-regular programming such as a knitting club, bread-baking "rituals," or boardgame days. Organizers strive for inclusivity, empowerment, and non-hierarchical management (according to one facilitator, around 50 people currently have a key to the front door), and recently started a weekly "open assembly" where participants, neighbors, and external stakeholders can raise issues, debate shared questions, and participate in the programming. The space will typically see anywhere between two and 20 visitors throughout the day, drawn from a large population of "regulars," predominantly women of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds reflecting Bospolder-Tussendijken's demographics.

4.5. Huis van de Toekomst, Bospolder-Tussendijken, Rotterdam

Huis van de Toekomst ("House of the Future") is an experimental community initiative, including a shared buurthuiskamer in a vacant corner store, situated in a 1920s social housing block awaiting large-scale renovation. The project was initiated by two artist-researchers in 2019 to explore the effect of the energy transition on everyday life in one of the city's poorest and most marginalized neighborhoods—Bospolder-Tussendijken is currently undergoing large-scale infrastructural redevelopment as the municipality works to transition away from natural gas towards district heating and induction cooking. The project draws on traditional cultures (the neighborhood has a high proportion of residents with a migration background, particularly from Turkey and Morocco) as well as low-tech innovations and sharing practices to reimagine daily life to be both materially more sustainable and socially more collective and connected. Central to this is the buurthuiskamer as a space to meet, socialize, develop shared values and priorities for their current practices and their visions of future community life, and make connections with

the neighborhood. Their aim is to develop social and technical "prototypes" for a low-consumption future "energy community" while acting as social and community infrastructure in the present. This is made challenging by the precarity of a temporary space (currently secured for 18 months) and the fact that the initiators are white artists from outside Rotterdam, working in a neighborhood with a majority non-white population, a history of marginalization, and fears of gentrification.

5. The Caring City in Practice

Fisher and Tronto's (1990) framework describes care as consisting of five "phases"—caring about, caring for, giving care, receiving care, and caring with. In showing examples of how care is practiced in buurthuiskamers we employ the same categories here; however, the phase of "caring about," which chronologically comes first (one must care about something in order to perform care), is here discussed last, as a transition from describing observed practices towards personal motivations and the implied politics of caring about these spaces. While we use these discrete phases as a heuristic to organize and interpret our findings, in reality, they are more nuanced and intertwined than this might suggest. In what follows, we describe how actors care for the space in order for practices of giving and receiving care to take place; how the mutuality of these practices constitute a reciprocity of care and cultivate the solidarity of caring with; and finally explore how these practices are motivated by, and reflect, the things practitioners care about—including the desire for change and critique of existing systems against which they practice care. While all these forms of care demonstrate the role of infrastructures of care in fostering cultures of care now and towards the future, it is the reflective mode of caring about which most explicitly relates to the prefiguration of future imaginaries of a more caring city beyond capitalism.

5.1. Caring for: Structural and Material Preconditions

"Caring for" means accepting and allocating responsibility (Tronto, 2019, p. 30). In the case of the buurthuiskamers described here, this includes the administrative work of ensuring that the space remains open, as well as the physical and affective labor that makes the space comfortable and welcoming. A central ambition of these buurthuiskamers is to offer space to the neighborhood for an open-ended range of possible activities. Particularly in a context of disappearing social and community spaces and intense financialization of urban real estate (Aalbers et al., 2017), the hard work of holding open the space is an act of care towards existing and potential users of the space, who rely on this work whether they realize it or not. Here we include the work of pursuing and reporting on subsidies, financial and legal administration, and all the work behind the scenes to keep the doors open and the lights on. Facilitators concur that this is hard and time-consuming work: "We spend six months chasing funding then six months reporting on it" (female, Dutch); that it is "not what you do this for" but necessary in order to make everything else possible; and that they persist with this because they care about the wider project—"It's like my baby," one initiator (female, Dutch) says, while for another (female, Dutch) "it's almost like being married, and you know maybe you should actually get divorced, but…well, you also love the children."

The importance of having and maintaining a physical space is not only practical, but extends to the space as a source of identity for their communities: Their collective identities are based on the fact they are the people who use and maintain that particular space as opposed to others, and so someone referring to "Het Bollenpandje," for example, might be referring to the group of people who frequent and care for that

space as much as they are referring to the physical building. As such, caring for the space is an important element in sustaining the community and showing care and respect for other participants. This care includes the daily gestures of watering plants, putting away furniture after an event, making sure the heating is turned on before a meeting and turned off afterwards, and washing the dishes after a shared meal or coffee. These actions not only keep the space clean, usable, and attractive, but also take the burden off of other community members who would otherwise have to do this later—an act of care across time.

Care for the space also includes the more intensive investments necessary to renovate or redecorate spaces, especially when first taken on after a period of vacancy or a different function. It took weeks of collective labor and the donation of time, skills, and furniture from local residents and businesses to turn 't Struikske from a somewhat run-down institutional location to a warmer and more welcoming public living room, with technical improvements (insulation, lighting) as well as softening touches in the form of domestic furniture, bunting, and artworks. The collective pride was evident at the project's public opening where local residents were able to enjoy and show off the fruits of their efforts to family and friends, creating a sense of connection with a new space. Similarly, at De Nieuwe Maan, the original fit-out was minimal due to cost limitations, but this was seen as leaving room for participants to add to it, encouraging a sense of ownership and identity over time.

5.2. Giving Care: Recognizing the Other

Core participants and hosts of these spaces recognize that a large part of their responsibility and contribution is to listen to others, to make them feel welcomed, included, and heard. Being present with another person without a hierarchical or transactional relationship makes them feel validated and gives them a sense of belonging, empowering newcomers to participate in activities and decisions. For one organizer (female, non-native), "sometimes it's just about being there, that's enough. You don't even need to wash a plate, sometimes just putting your body in the space helps." Another (male, Dutch) spoke of presence and affect making a previously hostile public space feel safe and welcoming to neighbors: "You transmit a kind of softness and then the hardness sort of stays away." To give care in this way is directly to embody and enact an alternate, more caring reality.

The most literal examples of "giving care" as traditionally understood are in the quasi-institutional setting of De Nieuwe Maan, where an explicit goal is to reach vulnerable or marginalized individuals and connect them to the help they need. This could be in the form of institutional referral, putting people in contact with the relevant organization or municipal department, but is also seen in examples of an isolated person coming to the space for social contact and unexpectedly finding someone offering to help them with practical chores at home, or visitors spontaneously offering practical expertise or experience to others. A local grocer periodically donates a crate of surplus food, which is spread on a central table to take home if needed, and there is similarly a "giveaway" fridge on the sidewalk. These are material acts of care extended openly to whoever might need them and act across time and distance (Williams, 2017).

Giving care can also mean the practical and moral support of encouraging someone to realize their own ideas—for an arts club or a boardgame day—and facilitating this rather than organizing it for them. Helping people to get in touch with their creativity, talents, and ambitions is an empowering act of care in a social and economic context where many residents have "for years just basically been surviving" and have lost self-confidence and belief in their own futures, or their ability to influence these. Part of giving care then

becomes "asking them, what did you like to do as a child…what were your dreams?" This kind of caring would not necessarily be provided at a medical or social institution where a struggling resident might end up referred, but is an everyday occurrence in the looser interpersonal space of the buurthuiskamer. Professionalized and institutionalized models of care in these cities are typified by experts "providing" care to disempowered, passive, and grateful recipients—one respondent (female, non-native) describes this in mocking tones as a one-way process where "I am nice to you because I'm a care worker and a good person, so I'll help you, and you'll listen to me, and you'll become a good person too." The care she experiences and performs in the buurthuiskamer is an explicit alternative to this model, centered on recognizing and supporting the agency of the other, and thus prefiguring what caregiving might look and feel like beyond both the contemporary capitalist city and the historic welfare state.

5.3. Receiving Care: Practices of Support and Healing

Paying attention to the experience of participants reveals satisfying and gratifying experiences of feeling cared for in these spaces. In some examples, this is reflected in straightforward accounts of receiving help with a particular task, event, or challenge, but more often it concerns more subtle, everyday experiences of being seen, heard, and made to feel like they matter. At 't Struikske, a group of retired regulars expressed an appreciation for the social contact that they would otherwise miss, living alone. They feel noticed, in a context where they do not see their direct neighbors often, and where isolation and vulnerability can be frightening. Because of their routine at the buurthuiskamer, they know people will notice their absence and check on their well-being. Regular, everyday social interaction was also experienced as care by a young man dealing with intersecting challenges around housing, unemployment, and mental health, who spoke of appreciating being treated as "just another person" at his buurthuiskamer, whereas in institutional settings he was made to feel like a "problem."

At Het Bollenpandje, an early activity involved personal storytelling and family tree mapping. Some participants were incredibly moved by the experience of having their story heard, perhaps for the first time, and seeing it resonate with others. They spoke of feeling "carried" by others in the space, and empowered by "daring to speak up and show who you are." One participant (female, Dutch) explains how the space helped her cope with a period of unemployment and isolation: "I wasn't working, and, well, sitting inside on your own isn't very healthy, mentally, so…coming here is like medicine….Being in community with others is a form of healing." Similar terms are used by a respondent (female, non-native) who became active in one of these spaces after spending 30 years raising children and "being a housewife" which led to social isolation and a lack of agency in the outside world beyond her familial responsibilities: "It feels like I've been to therapy, to the hospital…if I went there, I would never recover as I have here, because here you are appreciated."

Another regular of Het Bollenpandje (female, non-native) recalls being at home in pain from a fractured rib, needing to go to the hospital in the middle of the night but unable to do so alone; she posted in the group text chat and "within three minutes" two neighbors had offered to come to her home and take her to get help. She says she "had never known such a feeling of being cared for," going so far as to hand over her phone and passcode, trusting others to make the necessary calls and arrangements while she was being treated; "and you can just let go and…there are no words for that." Receiving care and support in this way is notable for participants precisely because it is absent from their everyday lives; the prefigurative experience is of a world where it is present when they need it.

5.4. Reciprocity, Solidarity, and Caring With: Challenging Individualism by Embracing Vulnerability

Ongoing care fosters solidarity and trust among people over time (Tronto, 2019, p. 31), and participants' accounts make clear the reciprocal and relational nature of giving and receiving care. Part of being able to give care is making yourself vulnerable and open to interpersonal connection; within these relations, the distinction between giving and receiving care falls away as both parties are contributing and benefiting from the interaction. Telling one's story is then not only a "receiving" act of being listened to, but an act of generosity towards others: "I didn't realize, you know, that I would help so many others, just by sharing my own story." For this participant (female, non-native), the experience of mutual vulnerability and openness cultivates a deeper connection and solidarity whereby "everybody wants to join in, and does join in, and helps." This is a commitment to each other and a sense of collective identity and purpose "that will never go away…we're spiritual sisters. There is nothing we don't share with each other, we empower each other, you know, and we care for each other."

This mutual interdependence is described by one of the organizers of Het Bollenpandje (female, non-native) as a "vessel" made up of all participants: "You can jump inside and be supported, but you are also supporting. So you're inside *and* outside…everybody is both inside and outside." This includes newcomers—she describes the experience of someone visiting the space for the first time, feeling lost and looking for support, and quickly entering a conversation where another person was offering her advice while describing their own challenges. The newcomer was instantly trusted to give input, and the act of helping others made her feel more empowered to address her own problems. This reciprocal, solidarity-building culture is most visible at Het Bollenpandje, which deliberately aims to be non-hierarchical in their social relations and everyday activities; at the other end of the spectrum, De Nieuwe Maan has a more formal division between volunteers and "users"—a sign makes it clear that only the volunteer-hosts are permitted behind the kitchen counter. This is a result of the quasi-institutional nature of the project, the context of the neighborhood's earlier conflicts and divisions, and the initiators' intention of maintaining a neutral, mediating role.

At Huis van de Toekomst, the white, Dutch initiators have experienced a persistent difficulty in reaching the diverse, largely Islamic, working-class residents of the neighborhood. Their "breakthroughs" have come through experiences of sharing space and taking the time to listen to each other, one core participant (male, Dutch) says, describing a Muslim woman who was skeptical of the project and hesitant to work alongside a man. Taking the time to be present and open to each other while baking bread in an outdoor oven allowed a mutual trust and understanding to develop organically, "and she felt it too, and you see it in each other's eyes…and then the doors open up between you." Through that experience of mutuality, she was able to step inside and make use of the space, becoming a returning participant. A regular of Het Bollenpandje (female, non-native) gives a strikingly similar account of openness and interpersonal connection: "Know yourself, and know the people around you…then so many doors open for you. Or rather, the doors were always open, but then you can go through them." It is through practicing reciprocal vulnerability that participants are able to see and seek out this connection to others, challenging the individualist status quo of the capitalist city. This reciprocity represents both a desired reality and the real-time performance of that reality—an example of the means–ends consistency that typifies prefigurative politics.

5.5. Caring About (and Caring Against)

Caring about means recognizing a care deficit, or an unmet need for care (Tronto, 2013, 2019), and being moved to do something about it; it is the motivating factor that sets care practices in motion. Among our interview participants, a significant majority described being motivated by a desire for change, and saw their practices as both creating the changes they wanted in their daily lives and potentially effecting change more broadly. This desire took different forms: system change towards sustainability involving less extractive, consumerist, and individualistic lifestyles and systems; changing the medicalized, bureaucratic, and paternalistic ways that municipalities currently approach (mental) healthcare and social welfare, towards a more humane, empathetic, and relational approach; and creating alternatives to both the isolation and individualism of everyday contemporary life under capitalism, and the competitive, energy-intensive, and ultimately unfulfilling experience of paid work in the current system. Their caring, relational, and solidarity-oriented practices can be understood as both a reaction against, and a positive alternative to, the alienating and uncaring systems around them. What this reveals is that caring about is not limited to recognizing a deficit and wanting to reduce it, but extends to caring enough to want to develop and bring about alternatives to the system that produces such a deficit. While Fisher and Tronto's (1990) definition of care concerns activities which "maintain, continue and repair" the world, buurthuiskamers showcase an element of radical care (Miraftab & Huq, 2024), or caring against, seeking to disrupt aspects of the existing world and create preferred alternatives. Practices of care thus transcend the concepts of deficit and repair to positively create and sustain particular forms of life, spaces, processes, and relationships, and actively repudiate and dismantle others; caring about is both a creative and an oppositional practice (Russo, 2021).

A core participant at Het Bollenpandje (female, non-native) spoke of the mental health impacts of repression and isolation, seeing her newfound vulnerability and openness as a radical act of opposition and refusal, and an example to help others "cut the cord":

> You grow up seeing this society…I always thought, that's not right, but I never spoke about it. Never shared that. So everything stays inside, which made me even sicker. So I know, that that makes you sick. Or, you're sick, and it just makes it worse, and it can kill you. And that…I don't want that kind of society, and so I don't participate in it.

One of the founders of 't Struikske (female, Dutch) spoke of quitting her previous job in search of more fulfilling work in response to the refugee crisis and the state of the world; the initiator of a community garden (male, Dutch) became involved in permaculture and guerilla gardening after a long illness made him question both the industrialized food system and modern work culture; and Huis van de Toekomst's emphasis on collective decision-making, community-building, and cultural exchange is a direct response to the municipality's top-down, technocratic implementation of an energy transition in the neighborhood. This neighborhood has also seen municipal social infrastructure reduced to a single library-cum-community center, which does not address the needs of a diverse population of nearly 15,000 people, nor the personal identification residents find with smaller buurthuiskamers. Finally, the leadership of Het Bollenpandje refuses on ethical grounds to work with the local welfare organization trying to place benefits recipients as what one organizer calls "forced volunteers" (as part of Dutch austerity reforms, unemployed benefits recipients are obliged to show through volunteering that they are "participating in society"; see Delsen, 2016).

The centrality in these examples of dissatisfaction with life under neoliberal capitalism, and the desire for difference, illustrates how care practices can be considered prefigurative of alternatives. Because of what they care about, participants are motivated to create the desired alternatives that are otherwise not available to them, performing more caring realities in their everyday lives. The first-hand experience of these alternatives in the present then motivates them to keep doing the work of making this possible, "to do what we can to create spaces and things which reflect our own values, rather than those of the capitalist culture within which we make them," to quote one definition of prefigurative action (Wilson, 2024, p. 2). By continuing to prefigure caring alternatives, they demonstrate the existence and desirability of those alternatives to other people, attempting to bring about cultural and systemic changes that would help everyday life better align with what they care about.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The examples discussed above operationalize an ethic of care by illustrating the kinds of concrete actions, words, and motivations that go into caring about, caring for, giving and receiving care, and caring with. The reciprocal and relational experience of care practices "weave new networks of care and trust amid the alienating pressures of the capitalist cityscape" (Huron, 2015, p. 977) in the here and now, helping urban residents to better survive the care deficits of the contemporary neoliberal city and to prefigure alternatives to the system which produces these deficits. Read as prefigurative political acts, they constitute provisional but tangible enactments of "the ideal of what the urban could be" (Williams, 2017, p. 830) beyond these "alienating pressures," as participants formulate and demonstrate a critique of the capitalist status quo by embodying the possibility of difference. As they continue to perform these alternatives and take their transformed subjectivities into their everyday lives, they contribute to developing wider "cultures of care" (Greenhough et al., 2023). Finally, the buurthuiskamers which facilitate this process function as "infrastructures of care" (Power & Mee, 2020) by supporting the individual and collective "capacity to care" in the present and into the future.

What becomes clear when operationalizing an ethic of care as practiced and observed is that the types of care described by Fisher and Tronto (1990) are fluid and entangled, rather than being fully discrete categories (or chronological "phases"). The preceding descriptions show how caring about, caring for, giving and receiving care, and caring with are layers of care that can be partially distinguished, but are interrelated. Respondents frequently blur the lines between giving and receiving care; a sense of caring *about* something might precede caring *for*, but receiving care and the solidarity of caring with can also make people care about something they previously had not. In some cases, participants did not immediately realize they were giving care to others through their presence and attention. Practicing an ethic of care is thus not only about concrete, classifiable actions, but also a more nebulous "being there" and engaging in the relational web of sharing a space with others. This embodied experience is part of the transformed emotional and affective stance that Gibson-Graham (2006) put at the center of postcapitalist possibility.

The reflections of participants on their experiences and motivations—the caring about which informs what they do and why—illustrate how these are not only expressions of already-held values and preferences, but that participants are themselves changed through reciprocal and relational practices of giving and receiving care, caring with, and caring against. Prefigurative practices "bring about…new forms of normalization, desire and subjectivity" (Cooper, 2014, p. 5) as participants are exposed to new ideas and ways of being, and

experience a shift in what they consider possible and desirable in their own lives through the embodied experience of the prefigurative "as if"—what David Graeber (2011, p. 64) calls a "realignment of imagination." Part of this realignment is also directed towards existing structures, norms, and practices in their everyday lives, as the direct experience of alternatives in the present generates and informs a critique of and dissatisfaction with everyday urban life under capitalism. This is a critique that Cooper, drawing on feminist standpoint theory, suggests is not possible from within that status quo (2014, p. 32)—hence why prefigurative practices are "places *from* which to think" (2014, p. 18). This critique is visible in the way in which solidarity and mutuality, cultivated by experiences of care and caring, inform new and oppositional forms of caring about, as participants are motivated to sustain the space because of what it has given them, and to share that experience and opportunity with others. The prefigured experience of alternatives changes what they want and demand from their everyday life, from the city, and from the future.

Because participants are transformed through *shared* experiences, their changing desires are not individual but co-created through collective practice and interpersonal subjectivities. It is by practicing care—listening to others, understanding their needs, understanding one's own needs and how to ask for them to be met—that participants develop a shared conception of what a wider "culture of care" might entail: what forms of care people and communities need in their daily lives, how this might this be organized, and how members of a community want to relate to each other. As discussed above, this includes both the creative ideas generated by caring with others—shared values, desires, commitments, and solidarity—and the critical perspective of caring against—identifying systems, structures, and processes which work against cultures of care, reproduce uncaring cities, and therefore need to be challenged or dismantled. Everyday expressions of these values simultaneously sustain everyday urban life in the capitalist city, and challenge and disrupt the capitalist city by prefiguring alternative arrangements which are "oriented toward a better world" (Cooper, 2014, p. 5), showing participants and the wider world that other ways of doing are possible, and experimenting with how those alternatives might be organized. Practices of care thus prefigure the caring city through the simultaneity of means and ends, as the performance of care produces more caring everyday realities, which in turn facilitate continued care. As social norms and expectations transform in more care-oriented ways, an ethic of care moves beyond the confines of bounded practices in particular spaces, contributing to wider "cultures of care."

Everyday practices of care, and their potential to (re)produce cultures of care at the scale of the neighborhood or city, are facilitated by the spaces where people are able to come together and prefigure more caring alternatives—in this case, by the continuing existence of buurthuiskamers. These spaces provide a tangibly different setting for social life, beyond the private home, the state institution, or commercial space. It is accessible from, and yet spatially bounded from, the surrounding neighborhood, and this is what opens up the possibility to exercise new forms of caring social relations. The importance of sustaining the space is reflected in facilitators' accounts of the time, effort, and energy they put into the administration, maintenance, and protection of the space. This work is difficult, tiring, "not what we do this for," and often beyond the prior skills or interests of those responsible for doing it. This shows how strongly these actors must care about the value of the space in order to keep caring for its continued existence. This ongoing struggle also reveals the precarity and contingency of the capacity to care: the difficulty of holding open even a modest space for neighbors to be together in a caring way exposes the uncaring nature of the contemporary city under capitalism. As an informal infrastructure of care, buurthuiskamers support participants' care practices, but also rely on and arguably exploit their care in the form of volunteering and un(der)paid labor to make up for the neoliberal dismantling of other social infrastructures (Rosol, 2012).

Taking these spaces seriously as social infrastructure would mean investment and structural support in order to widen and guarantee this capacity, more sustainably providing conditions for everyday cultures of care in the future.

By bringing an ethic of care into conversation with prefigurative practice, we have shown how practices of care not only work to maintain, continue, and repair everyday life in the face of care deficits, but also directly and radically prefigure more caring urban futures beyond capitalism. This perspective connects the restorative and recuperative functions of care in the city to the often abstract or even speculative image of a more caring city in the future. Applying a prefigurative lens to everyday community practices—reading them *as prefigurative*—collapses the distance between everyday life and preferable urban futures, positioning buurthuiskamers simultaneously as vital infrastructures of care for collective survival in the uncaring city under capitalism, and as incubators and demonstrations of the caring city beyond it. Their participants are motivated *by* care, *to* care, both as a direct response to the care deficits they encounter and as a (temporary, provisional) prefiguring of a more caring reality. Their relations and practices of care produce transformed subjects and communities, who enact and "embody the forms of social relation (they) wish to see develop" in the world (Franks, 2006, p. 114), and critique the uncaring status quo of the contemporary capitalist city. As prefigurative practices, they can be read as already performing the caring city of the future, in the here and now.

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