

A Community Out of the Box: Understanding Flexibility and Justice through Self-organised Housing in the Netherlands

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Abstract

The article examines the Roma community at De Witte Plas, Netherlands, as a case study of informal, self-organised housing practices that resist dominant corporate systems. Through a combination of fieldwork, design-driven research, and collaborative workshops, the study explores how community members creatively reconfigure containerised housing using recycled materials and digital platforms. Framed through the dual meaning of flexibility, the article argues for informality as a strategic, emancipatory paradigm. It proposes a reconceptualisation of migrant workers' housing that highlights user autonomy, adaptability, and social embeddedness, challenging the limitations of institutionally regulated models like flexwoningen.

Keywords: flexibility, self-design, workers' housing

Introduction

In their book *Informal City: Caracas Case*, Brillembourg and Klumpner investigate the informal processes supporting spontaneous urbanisation, seeking to identify the implicit logics and structures that organise what might initially seem as disorder (Brillembourg, Klumpner, 2005, pp. 16-23). Crucial to their analysis is the concept of flexibility, framed as a model of self-organised development that challenges conventional planning approaches and is manifested in the adaptive construction practices characteristic of informal settlements (Brillembourg, Klumpner, 2005, pp. 248-259).

In recent times, however, the concept of flexibility has shifted to a more restrictive meaning, primarily addressing housing emergencies. Temporary, mobile, modular, containerised, and prefab became synonyms of flexible. In the Netherlands, *flexwoningen* (flexible housing) are designed to accommodate migrant workers and defined by containerised and temporary nature. These units can be "moved, stacked, connected, or split," provided that at least "one of the following aspects is temporary: the house itself, the occupation through temporary lease, or the location" (Housing Expert Team, 2021). This narrow definition, focused on mobility and temporariness, implicitly excludes user adaptation and self-design.

The efficiency criteria of *flexwoningen* and the design of dormitories as simulacra of vacation accommodations enable employment agencies to consolidate their pervasive presence and maintain constant surveillance. By reducing inhabitants to a condition of "bare life" (Agamben, 1998, pp. 21, 169-170), workers' housing seems instrumental in developing a disciplinary code to educate the workforce. Agencies control workers' lives through inspections, warnings, and organising shifts and transport via algorithms. These coercive practices reveal the oppressive and panoptical nature of workers' housing, where hyper-rationalised layouts amplify workers' stress (Sgolacchia, 2023). A relevant example is the orthogonal grid layout of mobile home parks, which enables a complete view (fig. 01). Security officers and agencies' personnel can monitor the entire outdoor area simply by walking along the site's perimeter, while the layout offers no blind spots in the field of view of surveillance camera. This spatial arrangement transforms the campsite into a fully observable environment, revealing the disciplinary logic embedded in its design.

Stichting Normering Flexwonen (SNF) regulates the architectural standards of migrant workers' housing, defining the "minimum requirements for liveability," such as square meters per person, cupboard volume, and bed dimensions (SNF, 2022, pp. 5-8). A prefabricated mobile home, which workers usually call a "bungalow" or "chalet," typically includes three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a living room with an open kitchen, housing three to four people. In this type, the SNF estimates the minimum space for a single room at 3.5 m², specifying that such fig-

ures are largely based on guesswork and intuition.¹ This approach reveals SNF's insensibility to the lived realities and needs of inhabitants, regulating only the minimum thresholds for liveability.

By contrast, the Roma community at De Witte Plas, a campsite in North Brabant, close to the Belgian border, represents an emblematic case of informal spatial reconfiguration and self-designed housing, subverting dominant corporate architectures in the Netherlands. Mario and Lavi, two Roma individuals from Bistrita-Năsăud county in Romania, arrived in the Netherlands in 2020.² After initial work experiences under the control of recruitment agencies, they emancipated themselves finding alternative accommodation outside the agencies' system and living with their children, who are excluded from workers' dormitories and often left in the country of origin. Having reached an agreement with De Witte Plas campsite owner, they settled there with their families and invited relatives and fellow villagers from across Europe. Currently, the Romani community comprises almost three hundred residents at the campsite of which nearly a hundred primarily work as pickers at Bol.com, a major Dutch webshop, in its distribution centre in Waalwijk. Functioning as a de facto trade union, the community collectively negotiates directly with factory management on specific requests and employment conditions.³ The community's informal approach is exemplified by their resistance to the dormitory labour regime and their self-construction of homes, adapting and extending standard containerised units to house newcomers (fig. 02).

Objectives

The article explores the Roma community's practices within broader theoretical debates on flexibility and informal architecture, emphasising their relevance in reimagining contemporary urban forms. These practices, including self-planning, recycling and sourcing building materials, and the negotiations of labour conditions, challenge the rigid models of workers' housing conceived and imposed by agencies and regulated by SNF.

By actively subverting the formal systems that govern their lives, the Roma community embodies Adrian Forty's concept of "flexibility as a political strategy" (Forty, 2000, p. 147). According to him, this notion of flexibility emerged as a countermeasure to the capitalist control of space, which limits individual freedom by compartmentalising domestic life, leisure, and work into distinct functional zones, transforming them into commodified spaces with exchange value (Ibidem). Forty analyses the Situationist International's "appropriation of existing buildings with predetermined uses" in the late 1950s and Henri Lefebvre's "resistance to dominated space" theorised in his 1974 book, *The Production of Space* (Ibidem). These examples demonstrate a collective pursuit of "freedom of use," promoting the reinterpretation of buildings and cities beyond their prescribed functions (Ibidem). In this sense, flexibility is not merely an architectural feature of buildings, but a political act to adapt spaces for diverse everyday uses.

The main hypothesis of the article is that, by rejecting the compartmentalisation of life into rigid functions, typical of *flexwoningen* designed to optimise profit and control labour, the community's informal strategies demonstrates how workers' housing can be reconfigured into adaptable, circular, and participatory frameworks that better respond to the inhabitants' needs. In other words, how containerised housing types can be repurposed into truly flexible dwellings.

The community's approach emphasises the appropriation and transformation of existing buildings and resources by users, who apply flexibility and multifunctionality as tools of collective care and resistance. The article seeks to position these self-organised practices as an emancipatory response to the pervasive systems of control embedded in the Dutch corporate housing regime, while also integrating the community's practical, tacit knowledge into architectural research.

1 Interview with Jolet Woorders, the secretary of SNF, 8 December 2022.
2 Interview with Mario, 2 July 2022.
3 Ibidem.

Furthermore, the article argues for a reconceptualisation of the boundary between formal and informal architecture, proposing a hybrid paradigm in which user autonomy, adaptability, and social embeddedness are central to the design of inclusive environments.

Methods

The adopted method combines field study and design-driven research. Data were collected through spatial analysis and fieldwork conducted in the spring of 2024, including a series of qualitative interviews at De Witte Plas campsite with the inhabitants. In addition, a 12-minute documentary filmed on site offers a visual impression of community life.

Engaging in a research-by-design process involves using design not just as a problem-solving activity or a means of architectural production, but as a method for inquiry and exploration.⁴ Collaboration with the Romani community took the form of workshops focused on their spatial practices, emphasising the role of negotiations and the potential of their architectural tacit knowledge. As part of this process, I briefly reconstructed the community's informal approach, particularly their strategy for extending containerised units and optimising resource flows. Drawing, as a visually-oriented experience, served as a medium for mutual learning and knowledge exchange during these workshops.

To develop the design-driven investigation, I selected a specific case study: the home of Mario's family, which exemplify a typical construction process initiated by Roma people at the campsite. Mario methodically organised the project into five phases: purchasing a mobile home on the site, storing building materials, preparing the extension, constructing internal partitions, and installing a roof. This progression illustrates the transformation of a rigid, containerised unit into a self-designed, adaptable dwelling, highlighting the community's capacity to manage complex logistical operations and produce sustainable, inhabitable space (fig. 03).

A defining feature of the Roma community's informal approach is their strategic activation of existing logistical functions embedded within digital platforms. As Clare Lyster argues, apps that mediate between users and urban systems offer an interesting model for sharing infrastructure and goods (Lyster, 2016). The community's use of classified advertising platforms such as Marktplaats and Facebook Marketplace, augments access to recycled building materials and second-hand furniture. They benefit from these platforms to employ the material surplus of other users, selecting listings within a 50 to 100 kilometre radius of De Witte Plas, and linking otherwise disconnected basements, storages, and depots into a distributed supply network. The community subverts the platforms' profit-driven models, which rely on listing fees, advertising, and subscriptions, by sourcing materials free of charge, typically from private homeowners, and bypassing paid services entirely.

The construction of Mario's home exemplifies the community's resourcefulness and its strong collective commitment. The project involves eight months of planning, namely researching, negotiating, purchasing, transporting, and storing materials, followed by one-month of on-site construction. Mario, his son Edy, and other community members rolled up their sleeves to participate, transforming the project into a shared endeavour and a powerful symbol of self-sufficiency.

Discussion

This building process illustrates two key outcomes. First, it disrupts the agency-imposed logic of containerised housing by demonstrating how rigid, prefab units can be reconfigured into adaptable dwellings. Second, it emphasises the broader social cohesion that emerges from these construction efforts. The focus extends beyond individual homes to include forms of social aggregation and collective infrastructure within the campsite. At De Witte Plas, the Roma community has established mutual aid systems, collective bargaining practices, and knowledge-sharing networks, functioning as a civic organisation. These mechanisms challenge the isolation typical of migrant workers' housing and their impact contribute to include forms of social aggregation and the creation of

4 The research-by-design method is extensively investigated by the CA2RE+ seminars. See for instance one of the publications: *CA2RE+ Delft Recommendation, Book of Proceedings*, (TU Delft: Open Publishing, 2023).

shared facilities within the campsite. Considering the lack of formal public spaces, shared outdoor areas of the campsite have been informally repurposed for rituals, celebrations, religious ceremonies, and communal child-care, creating vital nodes of everyday life and cultural expressions.

To better understand this self-organised process, the notion of the architect as a bricoleur, as developed by Irénée Scalbert, provides a clear analogy for understanding the Roma community's informal. Scalbert describes the bricoleur as "at once designer, builder, and user," characterised by "improvisation, resourcefulness, and adaptability," someone who creates something new using whatever materials or tools are at hand, often operating outside formal, conventional practices (Scalbert, 2011). He introduces this figure from Claude Lévi-Strauss's distinction between the bricoleur and the engineer, developed in his 1962 book *La Pensée Sauvage* (The Savage Mind): while the engineer subordinates materials to a predefined project, imposing a conceptual framework on reality, the bricoleur, by contrast, adapts their design to a specific and limited inventory and recycles the remains of older projects in response to present needs (Ibidem).

Like Scalbert's *bricoleur*, the Roma community operates in an environment of constraint, where access to conventional building materials and institutional support is limited. They creatively respond to these limitations reconfiguring available resources through online platforms and adapting second-hand materials and tools to fit their immediate needs. This process mirrors the bricoleur's method of assembling disparate elements into a coherent whole, constructing meaningful spaces from what others might consider unusable or insignificant. This ability to work fluidly with what is at hand demonstrates a deep flexibility, a peculiar quality of Scalbert's *bricoleur*.

De Witte Plas emerges as a key site of alternative and informal architecture, shaped by what Edwin Buitelaar calls the "spontaneous order" of a "free society." This concept stands in contrast to a "designed order," which typically involves nationally-operating developers, active land-use policies, and formal zoning regulations (Buitelaar, 2020, pp. 38-39). Spontaneous order, by contrast, relies on minimal and generic building regulations (Ibid.). In such contexts, social and spatial order emerges organically, without a central organising authority, and inhabitants establish rules to prevent unjust actions between individuals (Ibid.). At De Witte Plas, familial and neighbourly connections among residents help regulate relations and prevent injustices, reinforcing the principles of spontaneous order and showing its practical implications in creating a just and supportive community.

Scholars argue that institutional frameworks must meet certain justice requirements, such as establishing fundamental freedoms and equal rights (Buitelaar, 2020; Moroni, 2019). In this particular conceptualisation of the just city, the Roma community achieved a significant progress when they successfully registered their residency with the municipality of Schijf in 2020.⁵ This registration marked a key moment, as the spontaneous order at De Witte Plas emerged primarily from the community's own initiative rather than from institutional planning. Nevertheless, the municipality played a crucial role by formally recognising and certifying the community's desire to reside at the campsite, thereby guaranteeing their freedom of choice.

Conclusions

The findings reveal the Roma community's capacity to negotiate autonomy within the constraints of global logistics and labour systems. Their housing practices, rooted in circular economy principles and participatory design, demonstrate how informal architecture can create adaptive, fair, and resilient environments. This case study contributes to understanding informality as a strategic paradigm, offering insights into the transformative potential of grassroots action. It suggests urban planning frameworks that foster community agency, flexibility, and sustainability, redefining justice and equity in spatial arrangements.

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- 5 The old leadership of the Schijf municipality was kind and supportive, unlike the new one that has been intolerant for two years.

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Images



Fig. 01 Typical mobile home park to accommodate migrant workers, North Brabant region, Netherlands. Photo by the author.



Fig. 02 Roma community at De Witte Plas camsite, North Brabant region, Netherlands. Photo by the author.

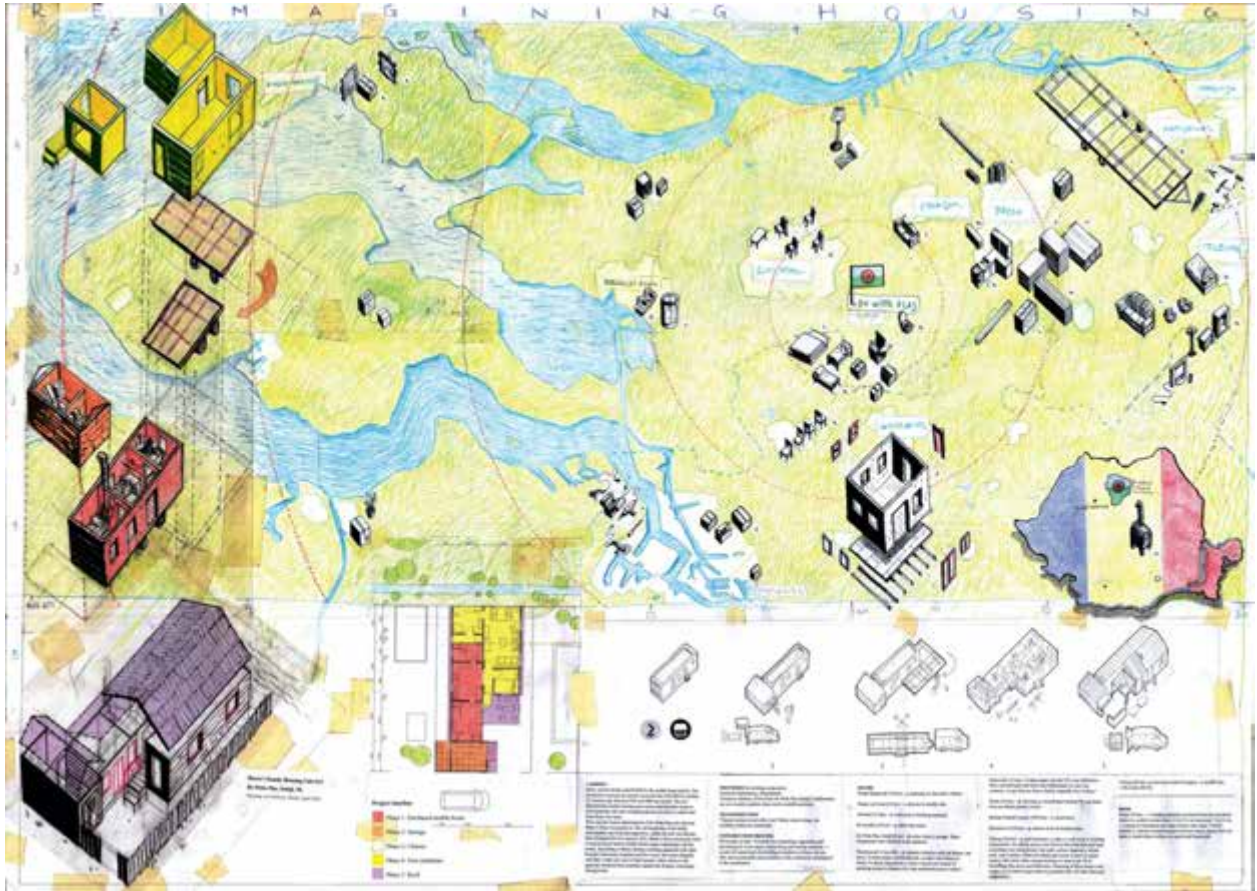


Fig. 03 Outcome of the design-driven research and collaborative workshops at De Witte Plas. Drawing by the author.