Empathic Future Visions

First insights and impression
Summary of the kick-off workshop

TUDelft

These are examples from documentary, photography to collage styles that depict people in public spaces in various ways.

Upper left: Screenshot from Visage Village, *https://www.cineart.nl/films/visages-villages*.
Middle left: Architect collage "Playa" by Superstudio; an architect firm that creates visuals from friction to storyboard illustration, and photo montage.
*Upper right*: Everyday street images from Otto Snoek. *http://www.ottosnoek.com*.
Middle right: Differences between poor and rich expressed in everyday soap use. *https://www.gapminder.org*.
Bottom left: Rotterdam 2040 film. *https://vimeo.com/90262477*.

How do these images succeed in supporting the viewer to step into the shoes of those people and get a feel for what it is like to be in that space?

Design students at Industrial Design Engineering learn to deal with the future (creating concepts that are not there yet) and learn Human-Centered Design (taking the perspective of the end-user). In our research group we develop empathic design methods that trigger discovery, immersion, connection and detachment in design processes. We want to combine our knowledge with other experts such as architect firms to develop empathic future visions.

1930 ——— 1980 ——— 2040
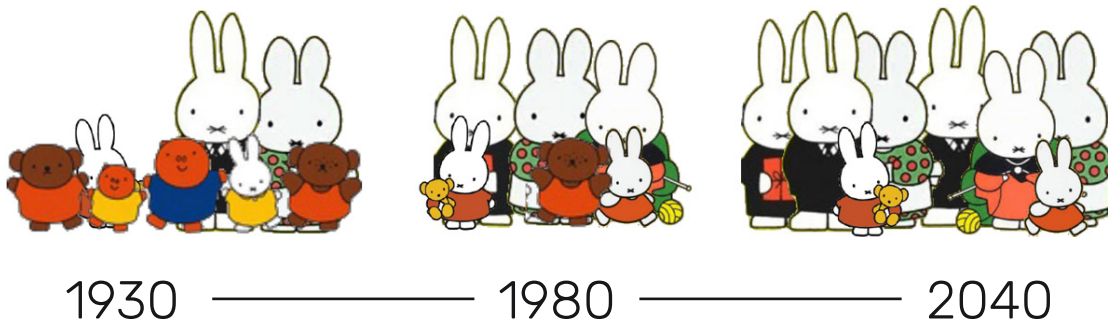
What if we live with four generations in 2040. Will birthday parties look like this?

Empathic Future Visions

In this project we aim to generate a set of empathic future visualizations that support imagination of a near (2040) new demographic society including many more elderly citizens. Currently available future visions sometimes empathic, i.e., evoke a sense of being a person living in that future, but miss out on some of the facts, e.g, portraying only young people in a street scene. Others convey the facts, but mainly as numbers, and miss out on evoking that sense of 'being there'. In this project we want to create the tools for empathy with the future self and others, with visuals that are both empathetically evocative and accurate.

Our everyday life in society will be different from the present. National and local governments know the demographic numbers but lack imagination of these near futures. What will everyday life look like when 1 out of four citizens are over 65, and four generations live side by side? We want to develop tools for speculative visions of the demographics of 2040, that help policymakers, urban planners, designers, and citizens imagine that future from a human-centered perspective.

In this collaborative design project we aim to develop tools for speculative visions of the demographics of 2040, that help policy makers, urban planners, designers and citizens imagine that future. The aim is to support these professionals and citizens 'to step into the shoes' of their future selves, to have a rich understanding of 'the future everyday'. For example we could create a library of imagery of our future society through an empathetic lens. We aim to combine four different perspectives to build these tools:

1. Authoritative demographic data
2. Visualizations used by architect firms
3. Empathic design tools
4. Needs from the field: experiences and needs of policy-makers, care organizations and citizens in 'imagining and discussing personal futures'

An online kick off workshop was held on May 12th 2020 with a first set of experts to review visualization approaches that are existing to represent contextual near future realities. All participants prepared a 5 min online pitch to share projects, images and inspirations to discuss the experiential demographic and contextual qualities of existing visualizations and what we can learn from them. We shared interesting visuals that present near futures. Some had powerful concepts, some triggered discussion and many demonstrated unique approaches to create representation for future visions.

Contributors: TU Delft (Design), Od205, MAS Architectuur, UNStudio, Rijksbouwmeester, Kennisland, 4Building.

Insights from the workshop:

1. All participants agree on the need to develop new and different imagery to stimulate human-centered imagination of our society in 2040. The aim of these images is to allow people to step in, immerse and connect, with the feel of demographic realities of the near future.

2. Policy makers and urban planners generally expect from architects and designers solutions for problems in a near future, not necessarily eye-opener tools and visuals to help them imagine the demographic context better. As a result, focus drifts easily to solutions with new technologies or system infrastructures in these visuals instead of collaboratively better imagining what surrounded by many more elderly will feel and look like. We could combine both perspectives stronger. And we could clearly communicate how to read these images. Titles or brief descriptions of the visuals will help what to read in the image since images are plural in nature. This overview can guide people with different backgrounds and realities towards a common interpretation of the images.

3. Various different projects and architects' collages and renderings were reviewed. These visualizations usually depict a few people to bring liveliness to the picture, often happy 30-yr old couples with two children. These visualizations are used in client meetings and serve a different goal than representing a realistic demographic context; to present the design of the building as if it is there already. Happy young people make the proposition more attractive for envisaged buyers. However, the craft of making these renderings, collages, visuals can also be used to develop images of (semi-)public spaces that are both appealing and probable. To understand the demographic context better, such visuals could:
- Depict interactions between people stronger (helps to imagine yourself in action in this context).
- Use alternatives (variations of a situation, not only black/white, different transparencies in the rendering etc.) We can use the images to imagine and communicate multiple futures instead of one unavoidable future.
- Collect and generate prototype images of the new elderly generation.
- The visuals need to be part of a larger vision or ongoing project to be meaningful and be actionable.
- Put the viewer inside the narrative, rather than a detached observer looking down from the sky.

To conclude we need to establish who the audience is and what they need to be able to embed the human-perspective in actionable contexts for the professionals who are designing. There is data, there are techniques, there is experience…

Anyone who knows about upcoming projects or events where such images could be valuable, let us know!

Glimpse into our conversations:

4Building, Bas van Eijndhoven

"This community has a very broad buildup for a lot of different people, so we try to make it understandable for these people through such visualizations. We use visual skills to bring people together and communicate about these images."

4Building uses collages, renders, sketches as a tool to engage people in the narrative of building space through participatory design. **By layering the visuals with necessary text, they clarify the intent and make it possible for people to interpret the context by leading them into what they need to interpret.**

UNStudio (a) Beata Giermasinska | (b) Marisa Cortright

"We have a smaller think tank within our office, here we don't focus on architecture per say but focus on shared human experience. We develop anything from product, VR to infrastructure, anything that may help create these experiences. Within this unit we have a lot of different disciplines like strategist, product designers, innovation designers etc. We are trying to do things in a collaborative way, since we realized people who don't really focus on the final image, are more empathetic towards architecture."

UNstudio demonstrated collages of maps and pictures to represent the context and lives of people within those contexts. **They used extensive text and imagery in support of the text.** Apart from this, they use renders of spaces to depict future visions. An interesting insight during their pitch, later validated by the other participants was, *"One of the reasons you tend to see 28 years old instead of 70 plus year old is because our commercial clients are wanting to have young people move there. That is one of the reasons why renderings are not representing certain futures."*

MAS Architectectuur, Dianta Wilmsen

" We are trying to use different techniques, this is a render and a photo collage, as you see in this image, a lot a people are in the image, people are transparent and so are the trees. You can look behind them, it gives a softer image."

MAS Architectuur demonstrated renders, collages, maps, isometric views in combination with images and text. They used futuristic objects within the images at times to represent certain futures. What was interesting about the image using transparency was that the context displayed in a very soft way, potentially offering an approach to have real people within the visuals without compromising on the clients' desire to have likable images. As affirmed by the participant, *"A lot of clients just want happy people."*

od205, Marjan Ketner

*"Urban plans showing routes and places are all very familiar for urban designers and architects. You need specific knowledge to understand what you see, you do get some feeling but the question is do you really get the feel of aging societies for the drawings. At the same time, **we did use communication tools like workshops and photography for ourselves to get this understanding of the elderly residents. But it's separate from the way we present our plans."***

*"**We are adding stories to the map** about people who are living in the neighborhood, and the way these people are using the spatial interventions we are designing."*

Visuals shared by the collaborator were of varying nature, from collages, montages, maps to movies. Every visual offered certain strengths, **especially when paired with a title, a brief description of the intent of the visuals, and user stories.**

Atelier Rijksbouwmeester, Milou Joosten
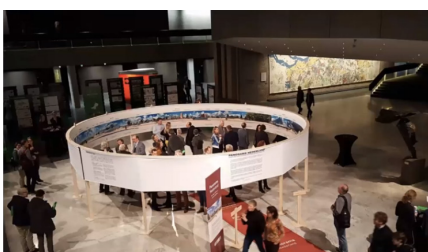
"Let's combine the demographic changes with what we want and also need to do, like combining them with answers related to climate change, because all of that is a design question and you have to integrate that within the solution."

One of the visuals that excited us was created using panoramic sections of different locations integrated with future visions. **The display of these visions represented the idea that people from different professions need to come together in the same space to make a collective choice among the many possible futures.**

FUTURE LIFE STORIES
the neighbourhood Nieuw Waldeck in 2040
from the perspective of the aging society

Master thesis
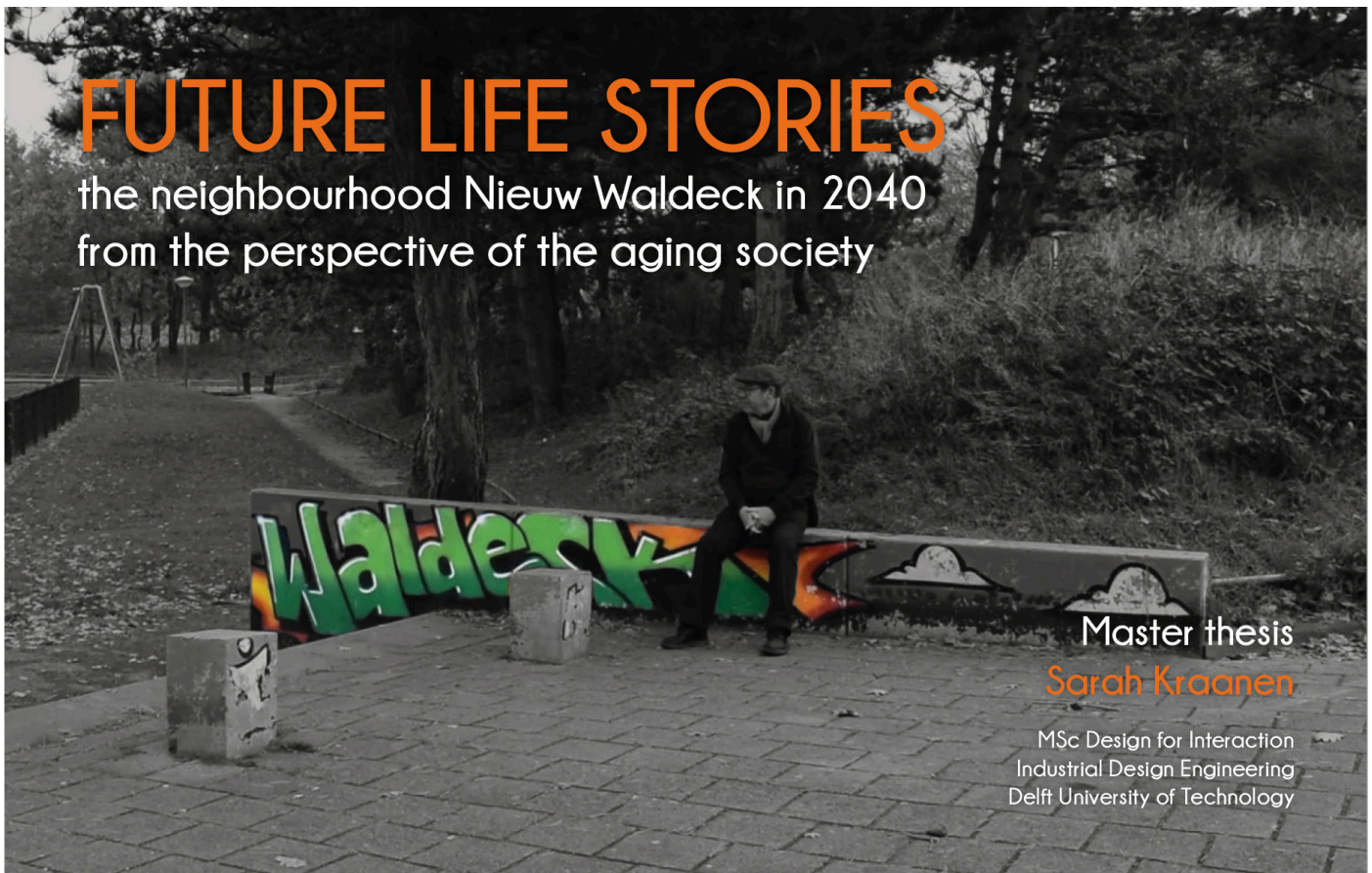Sarah Kraanen

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At TUDelft, we started with students to develop and explore empathic future visuals.

Sarah Kraanen (graduated January 2020) designed five short movies, each presenting an individual narrative of a resident in Waldeck (Den Haag) in 2040. Future elements, everyday life and the existing urban environment are used to invite urban planners to step into the possible experiences of the future residents. *(https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9_zajWCNvVnp8F0kw0ydXvZb3nby1BGS).*

Also, a team of five students has designed and prototyped tools to discuss the future wishes of residents in het Lage Land (Rotterdam).
(https://www.facebook.com/dromenvoorhll)