Openness To Degrowth Housing in Veendam (Centre): Measuring Openness to Degrowth Housing in Veendam

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Masters Thesis
Society, Sustainability, and Planning
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09/07/2021

Abstract
Veendam is a medium-sized town and municipality in northeastern Netherlands with a municipal population of 27,417, and has been experiencing a slow but steady population decline since 1980. The Dutch housing crisis has been ongoing since 2014 and the market system of housing has not been able to deliver and match housing demand. Degrowth housing calls for a rethinking of the status symbol and investment narratives of growth that dominate our perspectives of housing, and instead concentrates on reducing the environmental impact of housing and views housing as a basic right. This thesis views degrowth as a solution for both the housing crisis and the vacant shops in Veendam Centre by converting vacant shops into housing. Using a qualitative approach interviews with users of Veendam Centre were asked whether they would be open to an aspect of degrowth housing (converting shops into houses, cohouses, squats, and decommodification of housing) occurring in Veendam Centre. The responses showed an openness to degrowth housing, which could have implications for planners and policy makers to conduct further openness research or begin experimenting with degrowth housing in the form of a living lab. Though the concepts were new to many of the people, more awareness of degrowth housing needs to be created through the means of local degrowth housing conventions or similar events.

Keywords:
Degrowth housing, openness, shrinkage, cohousing, squatting, decommodification, planning

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Alexandra for your love and support. Without you I would not have been able to attend university in the first place. I would also like to thank my wonderful thesis advisor, Dr. Christian Lamker, for all of your creative insights, helpful comments, and support during both my pre-masters thesis and this one. I would not have learned about post-growth without you. A special thanks also goes to Dr. Ethemcan Turhan for providing a second reading, and another special thanks to Dr. Emma Varley for the endless encouragement and support.

Abbreviations
BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation
CBS - Statistics Netherlands
EU - European Union
FvD - Forum for Democracy
GDP - Gross Domestic Product
IIS-WOZ - Income Information System (Inkomens Informatie Systeem)
LV-WOZ - National Property WOZ (Landelijke Voorziening Valuation Real Estate)
PvdA - The Labour Party
PVV - Party for Freedom
SP - Socialist Party
VVD - People's Party for Freedom and Democracy
WOZ - Valuation Real Estate (Waardering Onroerende Zaken)

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Word count: 18,869

Introduction

Climate change, the environmental crisis, housing shortages, and growing social disparities call for different approaches to urban planning that instead of stimulating economic growth, aims at social equity and environmental sustainability. Despite the rhetoric surrounding the promises of "green growth", there has been no evidence to suggest that urban economies can grow without negative environmental externalities (Krähmer, 2020). If negative environmental externalities cannot be decoupled from growth, spatial planners need to find ways to distribute urban resources (especially housing) for a growing population without economic growth and environmental degradation. Degrowth, a variety of post-growth, has been gaining ground in the debate of how to address the climate and environmental crisis and social inequality by rethinking the basic function of society and advocating for improvements to the environmental and human well being through the reduction of consumption (Kallis, 2018). Housing consumes vast quantities of land and materials and cannot be exempt from such reductions in consumption (Nelson and Schneider, 2018). Planners need to find ways of reusing vacant buildings and maximizing the efficiency of building use in order to reduce the environmental impact of housing construction, and degrowth provides a framework for achieving this aim, as well as adding additional houses to the overstretched housing market, especially in the Netherlands. The object of this study is to answer the question of how open the users of the Veendam Centre are to a degrowth housing occurring in the central neighbourhood. Specifically the results aim to answer the questions: how open are users of Veendam Centre to converting vacant shops into houses; how open are users of Veendam Centre to the creation of small scale houses and bringing shared amenities or cohousing to Veendam's vacant shop buildings; how open are users of Veendam Centre to squatting occurring in the vacant shop buildings of Veendam Centre; and how open are users of Veendam Centre to the decommodification of housing through rent controls of public housing in Veendam Centre. This research applied semi-structured and relatively short interviews with 24 users of space in Veendam Centre to find out how open users of Veendam Centre are to degrowth housing. The discussion that follows the results concerns policy proposals and possible ways toward improving the access and affordability of housing in light of the ongoing housing shortage in the Netherlands.

Veendam is a town and municipality in Eastern Groningen that has been experiencing population decline for the past forty years. The shrinkage in Veendam could be understood as part of a larger regional shrinkage affecting the eastern and northern parts of Groningen province. Veendam sits on the edge of this declining region, as neighbouring Drenthe municipality, Aa en Hunze, is experiencing a slight population growth. Population decline in Veendam is marginal, and could easily be reversed as demand for housing and affordable space continues to rise in the Netherlands and people seek to house themselves whatever houses are available, especially if people in Groningen city seek housing just outside the city. The municipality of Veendam is predicting a population increase of 2% until 2030 (Veendam Gemeente, 2014). Population decline and abandonment may occur in some neighbourhoods of Veendam, especially the centre, but growth may occur at the periphery and in in-fill projects in existing neighbourhoods (Sousa and Pinho, 2015). The close proximity to Groningen city by train and the future expansion of the rail line to Emmen increases the mobility of Veendamers and could entice more people to live in Veendam. Nevertheless, the

municipal and regional decline, as well as the transition towards e-commerce, supermarkets, and competing shopping areas have contributed to a high rate of vacancy in the old downtown area of Veendam. The decline of function in the centre has produced underutilized or wasted space. Considering the high demand for housing and the ongoing housing shortage in the Netherlands, these wasted spaces provide an opportunity to alleviate demand for housing by converting these spaces into houses. Making use of empty buildings not only provides a simple solution for providing affordable housing, it has a potential to lower greenhouse gas emissions and the environmental impact associated with building new homes. Population decline is not the problem, it is the underutilization of space in a time of an acute housing shortage.

The Dutch Government has announced that it will need to build 845,000 new houses between 2020 and 2030 in preparation for the projected population growth (Government of the Netherlands, 2020), and previous years of construction output show that the Netherlands has not been able to construct this many housing in the previous years (CBS, 2020a). Delays are expected, especially due to the limitations on nitrogen emissions associated with housing construction (Government of the Netherlands, 2020). The focus on accommodating population growth through the construction of new housing units will not necessarily solve the ongoing housing shortage either. The current housing crisis has its origins in 2013 as a delayed response to the 2008 global economic recession, which caused a drop in housing prices and decreasing financial incentive to build new. An example of how growth dependency (in this case profit growth) fails society. The Netherlands became unable to maintain construction of new houses at the rate of population growth. Ongoing demand and increased scarcity of housing have provided fertile ground for rising rent and the price of houses that continue to rise to this day, making housing unaffordable for many while the waiting lists for social housing in many Dutch municipalities sometimes exceed 15 years (DutchNews.nl, 2018). Parents need to place their children on such lists while they are still children to ensure that they will secure a home when they reach adulthood. Inadequate housing and housing inequality (as the housing shortage always affects the people with the lowest income) not only contributes to a lower standard of living, but is a driver of inequality (Boelhouwer, 2020) and contribute to the exacerbation of social problems as politicians scapegoat refugees and migrants (see DutchNews.nl, 2020 for a recent example of municipal representatives blaming immigrants for the housing shortage in Utrecht) and inadequate housing negatively affects mental and physical health (Bashir, 2002). Public housing programmes such as the Swedish Million Homes Programme show that it is possible to meet the demand of housing through state sponsored public housing projects (Hall and Vidén, 2005), however when the Dutch government announced that the Netherlands will need to build 845,000 new homes, it did not mean that the state will build them. Alternative approaches are needed to meet the need for housing in an environmentally sustainable manner. This thesis puts forward the idea that maximizing the use of existing buildings in the Netherlands could reduce the demand for housing by half and proposes a method for measuring how open people are to the idea of converting abandoned buildings into houses and although converting vacant buildings into houses can contribute to degrowth be increasing efficiency in terms of use of space, this paper looks at to what extent people would be open to degrowth housing in the place of vacant buildings in the centre of Veendam.

Statistics Netherlands (CBS 2020b) has two ways of measuring vacant buildings: the Income Information System Real Estate Valuation (IIS-WOZ) and the National Property Real Estate Valuation (LV-WOZ). The ISS-WOZ tends to be lower than the IIS-WOZ, but between the two measurements there is an image of how many buildings are empty in the Netherlands, regardless of type.

	LV WOZ		IIS WOZ	
Province	Area (m2)	Sum (n)	Area (m2)	Sum (n)
Drenthe	948,750	5,120	710,950	3,000
Flevoland	856,230	3,810	632,090	2,310
Friesland	1,409,880	8,380	1,097,920	5,890
Gelderland	4,161,500	20,160	3,020,610	12,670
Groningen	1,310,530	8,040	9,19,360	5,000
Limburg	4,353,700	18,410	3,452,880	12,990
North Brabant	6,030,170	28,610	4,400,050	17,090
North Holland	6,041,640	44,330	4,199,770	28,750
Overijssel	2,331,880	13,450	1,586,580	7,810
South Holland	7,860,570	50,750	5,542,460	32,860
Utrecht	2,664,070	14,680	2,170,890	10,420
Zeeland	926,000	6,300	634,490	3,960
Total	38,894,920	222,040	27,448,690	142,750

Data from CBS (2020b)

These statistics do not necessarily include every vacant building or the underutilization of buildings and some of these figures already include housing and some may have been only temporarily vacant during exchange of ownership. The data lacks longitudinal information, but it can still serve as an indication of how many vacant buildings are in the Netherlands. Knowing the area of vacant buildings is more useful than the sum of vacant buildings as the area can be used to estimate how many dwellings can be created from the conversion of these vacant buildings into houses. From the LV-WOZ area estimation 486,186.5 eighty square metre houses could be created and 343,108.6 eighty square metre houses from the IIS-WOZ figure. In Veendam alone, 776.25 and 544.125 houses could be created from the conversion of vacant buildings into houses. In 2020, 10,000 vacant non residential buildings were converted into houses already in the Netherlands (CBS 2020a), and other vacant buildings could be converted into permanent homes or at least provide comfortable living situations for people who lack adequate housing. Such a programme would reduce the environmental impact of housing by reducing the need to build new houses and the consumption of land by new expanses of urbanization. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted some of the benefits of working from home and as many people would like to

continue working from home (Parker et al, 2020), more buildings, especially offices will become available for conversion into houses if the trend of working from homes continues.

Theoretical Background

What is degrowth?

Degrowth is a type of post-growth. Post-growth can be understood as a position in which growth is no longer viewed as necessary or as the desired outcome of a project or plan (Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, in press). In place of the pursuit of growth, post-growth aims to create a sustainable society that is concerned with wellbeing and the good life (Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, in press; Soper, 2020). Post-growth is an umbrella term that contains various types of thinking that do not include growth. Steady state (as advanced by Herman Daly) and degrowth are perhaps the most prevalent post-growth concepts to this day (see Kerschner, 2010 for an evaluation of both concepts). Degrowth seeks to re-politicize debate on socio-ecological transformation of society against the false consensus of "sustainable development" and challenge the pro-growth hegemonic discourse in development and planning (Demaria et al, 2013). When people accumulate more products and materials, the environment shrinks as the materials needed to produce the products we enjoy every day are in one form or another extracted from the earth. The earth is a closed system. The nutrient density and microbial activity required to grow a healthy forest requires thousands of years to accumulate, but can be stripped away quickly when forests are clear cut to make way for urban expansion or provide materials to timber for new houses. The impacts of extraction go beyond the damage caused by extracting the minerals themselves. The mining of oil and other minerals contaminates the local soil and freshwater, decreasing the habitability of these sacrifice zones for both humans and wildlife (Preston, 2017; Maldonado, 2017). Degrowth scholars and activists are aware that our daily patterns of consumption contribute to the depletion and degradation of natural systems and seek to propose an alternative aims to:

> *(1) Reduce the environmental impact of human activities;*
> *(2) Redistribute income and wealth both within and between countries; and*
> *(3) Promote the transition from a materialistic to a convivial and participatory society* (Cosme, Santos, and O'Neil, 2017: 321).

The implementation of degrowth can occur either from the bottom up in citizens initiatives like ecovillages and other intentional communities aimed towards lowering the environmental of living and daily activities to individual refusals to consume, and from the top-down in the form of policies such as a maximum and minimum income (Kallis et al, 2012), which could serve as a method of redistributing financial wealth.

Kallis (2018) states that a degrowth position does not argue for a reduction in economic scale or GDP, but that such a shrinkage will occur as a result of a decline in throughput when consumption and production decreases as a result of improved wellbeing and environmental conditions. Throughput is the energy, materials, and waste that move through a system and the amount of throughput flowing through a system determines the size of the economy. It is therefore tantamount that if decreasing throughput is necessary for the global economy to stay within sustainable limits of greenhouse emissions and resources extraction that we plan a society that does not rely on growth for "prosperity" (Barry, 2019). Kallis (2018) distinguishes

green growth and economic downturns from degrowth. *Green Growth* occurs when throughput shrinks, but the economy continues to grow. Green growth can be understood as the rebranding of sustainable development, which fell out of fashion when it was criticized as being an oxymoron (Redclift, 2005). Krähmer (2020) shows that green growth is not sustainable, as the negative environmental impacts of urban activities in the green city are externalized or outsourced to other locations and the onslaught of environmental degradation is slowed but not eliminated. *Economic downturns* occur when throughput and welfare declines as a result of economic shrinkage. These are the recessions and depressions that occur periodically in capitalist societies. *Degrowth* occurs when social and environmental conditions improve and GDP declines as a result (Kallis, 2018: 9).

Degrowth calls for a new imaginary to question the function of our economic system, our ideas of well-being, and the purpose of society (Kallis, 2018), especially for this thesis, degrowth challenges the meaning of housing (Nelson and Schneider, 2018), aiming toward greater autonomy and conviviality in society (Latouche, 2012; Kallis, 2018), "A society that constantly reflects, questions, and makes it owns laws is autonomous… Conviviality involves technologies and institutions with a "human scale, a "de-complexified" society with reduced diversion of labour - without experts and "laypeople": (Kallis, 2018: 10). Latouche (2009: 33, from Kallis, 2018) depicts degrowth as involving the eight r's:

> "1. *reevaluating*, that is, valuing the "pleasure of leisure", for example, or the "ethos of play" instead of material possessions;"
> 2. *reconceptualizing* dualisms that shape the growth imaginary – poverty/wealth, scarcity/abundance, under-development/development, backward/modern;
> 3. *restructuring*, i.e. "adapting the productive apparatus and social relations to changing values" (Latouche 2009: 36);
> 4. *redistributing* wealth and income both between North and South and within each society;
> 5. *relocalizing* by slowing down long-distance trade, producing in proximity to consumption, and circulating and reinvesting surpluses locally;
> 6. *reducing*, that is, producing, consuming, working, travelling or wasting less; and
> 7. *reusing* and 8. *recycling*, stopping the built-in obsolescence of appliances, and recycling that which cannot be reused" (Kallis, 2018: 11).

Latouche's eight r's can serve as a guide to degrowth praxis towards the achievement of sustainable degrowth, which will be defined here as a continuation of degrowth that does not reenter a growth phase. Reductions in consumption cannot continue forever. It is possible then to think that a period of degrowth would be followed by a steady state period once human activities can be contained within planetary boundaries. The difficulty of this is that it is difficult to determine when enough reduction is enough.

What is Degrowth Housing?

If degrowth is about improving social and environmental conditions through the reduction of consumption and redistributive justice, what does degrowth housing look like? The main publiciation on degrowth housing used in this thesis is *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities* edited by Anitra Nelson and François Schneider. Housing is both a noun and a verb "a good that can be manufactured and demolished, produced and consumed, perceived and experienced, bought and sold [and] [a]t the same time "housing" can refer to people getting "housed", that is, getting access to housing" (Ruonavaara, 2018: 178) and contributes to 9% of GDP in EU countries" (Nelson, 2018). The aspiration narrative of home ownership is reproduced and reinforced through many different areas of social interactions and governmental policies and views home ownership as an investment and a status symbol, and treats tenants as second class citizens, as renting is viewed as a waste of money and poor living conditions and regulations favour home ownership (Nelson, 2018). Such housing narratives are dominant in capitalist societies where wealth is understood as a measure of success, especially in Canada, the Netherlands, USA, and UK. In Germany and Switzerland, for example, lifelong renting is more common and so the narrative plays out differently per country. Housing for growth drives urban expansion, colonizing rural landscapes and the innovation in the housing industry is geared towards bigger and most profitable designs possible in order to maximize profit and stay competitive on the market, wherein profit loses to sustainability and durability.This activity towards maximizing the profitability and growth of housing businesses and investors results in the ever increasing unaffordability of housing, favouring homeowners over people in need of housing (Nelson, 2018). The housing market has its booms and busts though, for example the Netherlands experienced a drop in housing prices in 2013 as a result of the global economic recession.

The housing narrative emerging from degrowth scholars and activities aims to displace the dominant growth narrative of housing as a financial investment, consumption, or status symbol (Schneider, 2018). A degrowth perspective views housing first and foremost as a basic human right, as the need for shelter is a basic need. One of the three main aims of degrowth housing is a reduction in the demand for housing, a reduction in urbanization, and a reduction in ecological impacts of housing (Schneider, 2018), all three of which are closely linked. The demand for housing can be reduced through maximizing the efficiency in how space is used, reusing and reducing construction materials, urban land, and finding uses for empty buildings (Schneider, 2018). Increasing the efficient use of space means sharing living space, such as living rooms, kitchens, and outdoor space (Schneider, 2018).

Housing for Degrowth Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities offers cohousing and squatting as potential models that contribute to degrowth. Cohousing is a neighbourhood scale approach organized around the sharing of everyday resources and space. Collective ownership of common resources ensures neighbourhood wide access, reducing the need for individual consumption of tools and objects that can be shared. If tools, cleaning equipment, bicycles, automobiles, books, computers can be held in common, then consumption can be lowered. The collectivity of neighbourhood scale cohousing projects contribute to increases in social capital (Ruiu, 2016), which can reduce social isolation but also foster situations of skill sharing, lowering the cost of maintenance and repair by helping

one another when needed. Cohousing contributes to a greater amount of leisure time through the sharing of necessary activities like cooking and purchasing food in bulk to reduce the cost (Lietaert, 2010). Cohousing can provide universal child care also as there is likely always someone available to look after the children while the parents are at work or out for an evening (Lietaert, 2010). The possibilities of the benefits of cohousing are as limitless as the imagination of the cohousers, however a problem with cohousing projects is that they are often exclusive to upper middle class individuals and families (Cucca and Friesenecker, 2021).

Squatting on the other hand is accessible to individuals with little or no income and contributes to material degrowth through the use of abandoned buildings, use of recycled materials to fix up appropriated spaces (Cattaneo, 2018). Though the precariousness and illegality of squats may lead squatters to use cheap unsustainable materials, providing more security to squats could foster long term and more sustainable approaches, perhaps encouraging the use of higher quality and more durable materials. Squatting also contributes to monetary and labour degrowth as not paying rent reduces the need for income and employment, creating more leisure time to focus on conviviality, friendships, hobbies, political activism. However, squatting can also contribute to growth through legal fees, otherwise squatting shares the same benefits of cohousing, bulk buying and sharing resources, skills, and space (Cattaneo, 2018).

As mentioned above, a degrowth perspective views housing as a basic human right and in order to provide housing to the most (Hagbert, 2018). How can housing be decommodified? “Decommodification of a good or benefit means that one does not need to generate income in order to acquire, access or maintain it” (Balmer and Bernet, 2015, paraphrasing Esping-Andersen, 1990). Balmer and Bernet (2015) charts the various types of housing tenure on a spectrum between strongly commodified to highly decommodified and least autonomous / self-organized and highly autonomous / self-organized. As the objective of degrowth is direct democracy which can be achieved through greater autonomy (Asara, 2013), highly decommodified and highly autonomy is the most preferable scenario in the Balmer and Bernet (2015) scheme from a degrowth perspective, in which the authors place cooperative housing, while non-profit or philanthropic housing is highly decommodified, it offers a lower level of autonomy. The least autonomous and most commodified type of housing is commercially rented housing whereas owner occupied housing is the second most commodified, but has a higher degree of autonomy. Privately owned subsidized houses (this is where the renter receives a subsidy from the government to pay rent) are considered temporarily decommodified, as they can still become available on the market and the same with public housing, though it is shown to have a high degree of decommodification, but likewise can still be sold on the market, especially when an anti-public housing government takes power. Commercially rented housing, privately owned subsidized housing, and public housing offer a low degree of autonomy for the inhabitants of the buildings, as the control of the building is by a government or business and not in the hands of the people that live in these spaces (Balmer and Bernet, 2015).

Degrowth housing aims to reduce the demand for housing through the sharing of space and efficiency designs that maximum the use of space. Degrowth houses are affordable (but preferably nonprofit and decommodified), and meets the minimal requirements for a

person to live convivially, with the aim of reducing the environmental impact of housing and has a political aim of challenging how we think about and understand housing.

What is Shrinkage?

Shrinkage is commonly understood as an ongoing decline in population, which negatively affects the economy and produces social problems. From the literature there have been six main conceptualizations of urban shrinkage (each are taken from Hasse et al, 2014). The first comes from life cycle theory, advanced by Berry (1977) and van den Berg et al (1982). The main idea is that growth is naturally followed by decline, and so shrinkage (conceptualized as "counterurbanization" or devaluation of urban space and overcrowding motives emigration to areas outside of cities) is the inevitable end result of urban development. The second conceptualization suggests that suburban environments overtake the function of the traditional urban core, causing it to lose its function and purpose, driving it into decline (Lang and LeFurgy, 2007; Soja, 1989; Garreau, 1991; Teaford, 1996; and Davis, 2006). The third conceptualization comes from a Neo-Marxist perspective, advanced by Harvey (1982; 2006) and Smith (1984) viewing shrinkage as the uneven spatial consequence of everyday capitalism. Shrinking areas are produced through failures of attracting investment, triggering a downward spiral of decreased attractiveness for investors and population decline. The fourth conceptualization of shrinkage is conceived by Lipietz (1977), Massey (1984), and Scott (1988) as territorial divisions of labour. Urban growth is largely dependent upon industrial development within cities and so when industries leave an urban area, causing an outmigration. The fifth conceptualization concerns demographic change toward low birth rates and extended life expectancy. Since death rates are outpacing birth rates, a rise in the average age and shortage of working-age individuals creates a situation of population loss in cities. More recently scholars studying shrinkage have been moving away from composing grand theories and focusing on particularities arising from each context (Haase et al, 2014). For example, Ročak (2019) compares Heerlen (Netherlands) with Blaenau Gwent (Wales) and found that the local context plays an important role in shaping the local response to changes like shrinkage, whereas Heerlen residents who have been historically made more docile by authorities like the mine owners and the local church, causing locals to take a passive approach to tackling shrinkage. The historical practice of fighting for better working conditions through labour unions in Blaenau Gwent to take on a more active role tackling shrinkage in their city. As a result the former mining area has become the location of a school, hospital, and other amenities that improve the quality of life in Blaenau Gwent (Ročak, 2019). As Haase et al (2014) note, each theory was developed at a particular time and attempts to explain a specific phenomena particular to that time, though they do have explanatory value and provide various scopes to explain the complex processes of urban shrinkage and that it is dynamic, context dependent, and changes over time.

A plethora of definitions of shrinkage have emerged throughout the years in the literature, the most common or influential of which have been identified by Bernt (2016): A temporary or permanent population of a minimum of 10% or exceeding 1% per year (Oswalt and Rieniets 2006), in other words a city with a population of loss of 9.9% or 0.9% annual loss is not a shrinking city. The population decline of Veendam from 1990 and 2020 was only 3.1% and would not be considered a shrinking city according to this definition. A definition

from Hollander and Nemeth (2011) requires a shrinking city to have a dense population and minimal population of 10,000 in which large segments of the population have been lost in a period exceeding two years, during economic transformations and the appearance of structural crises. Veendam would not fit into this definition either, as it has a relatively low density, though it is arguable that economic transformation and structural crises are present. Another definition by Schilling and Logan (2008) concerns the deindustrialization of a city that has sparked a loss in population of 25% or greater in the last 40 years and is made visible through vacancy and abandonment of properties. Though Veendam retains its industry. Martinez-Fernandez et al (2012) define a shrinking city as any type of urban area undergoing decline in population, economic activity, employment, and an increase in social problems and structure crisis. Haase et al (2013: 4) define shrinkage as an observable phenomenon that arises from "the interplay of changing drives of shrinkage at different spatial levels (from regional to global) that produces a decline in population at the local scale" relating to "economic decline, demographic change, and settlement system changes in the form of suburbanization and sprawl". The final definition identified by Bernt (2016) is from Pallasgt et al (2013: 3): "urban shrinkage is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing regions, cities, and parts of cities or metropolitan areas that are experiencing a dramatic decline in their economic and social bases and are facing population losses". From these six definitions, three common themes emerge: population loss, large scale trends in urban development, and problematic outcomes, such as outmigration, vacancy, social problems, financial difficulties (Bernt, 2016).

Bernt (2016) offers two critiques of the common definitions of shrinkage. The first is a methodological problem with measuring shrinkage in terms of population change is that boundaries of urban areas can change and cause an artificial increase or decrease in population without any real change (Bernt, 2016). Groningen municipality for example experienced a sharp increase in population when it annexed neighbouring municipalities Ten Boer and Haren, which exaggerated the population growth of the city (Gemeente Groningen, 2021). Bernt (2016) questions the causal link between population decline, vacancies, impoverishment, and fiscal stress, using Donetsk, Ukraine as an example of an economically powerful city due to its booming industry, but is undergoing population loss due to emigration and declining birth rates. In other cases in which overcrowding was dominant due to severe housing shortages, a decline in population provides an opportunity for people with inadequate housing to finally have an adequate place to live (Kazimierczak and Szafrańska, 2019). From a degrowth perspective, it is important to recognize the social problems, vacancy, and financial difficulties stem from a growth oriented imagination of how a city ought to develop. A degrowth or post-growth socio-spatial planning approach would seek to address these concerns directly, rather than a growth oriented trickle down approach. It is also possible to consider that social problems may become more pronounced as a result of out-migration, whereas in the more affluent and better off citizens leave a city, the statistical data represents only the poor who lack the financial capacity to leave the city. The same social problems exist in growing cities, but the demographic diversity and especially the presence of larger segments of affluence statistically buries social malaise.

A final conceptualization of shrinkage with explanatory power for Veendam is peripheralization (Kühn, 2015; Bernt, 2016). Peripheralization presents a dichotomic view of

shrinkage in which the growth in the centres is caused by peripheral shrinkage through "the interregional mobility of people, goods and capital" (Kühn, 2015: 370). As mentioned above, for example, when Groningen City shrunk slightly in the 1970s during the urban crisis period, Veendam experienced the final years of significant growth. Today when Veendamers visit Groningen to do their shopping, a shop in Veendam loses customers. Peripheralization illustrates how municipalities and urban centres compete for capital and how the marginalized spaces, like eastern and northern Groningen, lose to the larger centres. However, the location of centres changes with time as the support of a centre depends upon the decisions of large corporations that provide massive quantities of jobs and draw in large swaths of immigrants to a city or region (Bernt, 2016), and so growing areas can become stagnant and shrinking, while declining areas can undergo regrowth, which is why it is important to advance a degrowth agenda in growing and shrinking areas alike as a means of addressing climate change and the ecological crisis. Kühn (2015), lists a five point summary of peripheralization:

> **"Relational:** it is linked to the complementary notion of centralization within a socio-spatial system;
> **"Process-centred:** it is focused on the dynamics of the rise and fall of spaces instead of static locations of remoteness
> **"Multidimensional:** it is comprised of economic, social and political dimensions (as well as communicative dimensions, which was not discussed)
> **"Multi-scalar:** it is discerned at and between different spatial scales, from global to sublocal and
> **"Temporal:** the role of a periphery may change in long-term perspective and a "de-peripheralization" (or "re-centralization") is possible" (Kühn, 2015: 374).

Population growth in Veendam will not guarantee that shops will be filled in a vacant downtown, especially when another shopping centre has been built, for example a shopping mall called Autorama in Veendam competes for shoppers. As box malls turn shopping malls into dead malls in North America (Parlette and Cowen, 2011), small and medium sized European cities and towns have been experiencing increased shop vacancy in their traditional centres, losing to more peripheral shopping centres and city centres of major cities (Delage et al, 2020). In the case of Veendam, the close proximity of Groningen, Winschoten, and Assen offer a larger city centre shopping experience, while another shopping centre in Veendam offers more parking space, convenience, supermarkets, and chain stores (lower prices), making it difficult for the shops in the downtown to compete.

Planning responses to Shrinkage

Haase et al (2014) put forward a model to explain the mechanisms of shrinkage (economic decline, demographic change, suburbanization, political conflicts, or natural hazards) have an impact on local scale urban development which then leads to population decline. Aging, underuse and vacancy, segregation, unemployment, disinvestment, tax deficits as a result of the initial driver of shrinkage contributes to further decline, while governance plays a role in mitigating or worsening the impacts of decline depending on what

policies and decisions are implemented to address the problem, but also what various actors and institutions contribute (Haase et al, 2014). This model demonstrates that shrinkage is a continuous feedback cycle and interventions can cushion the negative impacts of shrinkage, possibly even using vacancy in advantageous ways, such as increased greenspace to improve ecosystem function (Haase, 2013).

Hospers (2013) conceptualizes four responses to shrinkage: *Trivializing shrinkage* acts as a form of denial that dismisses the accuracy of population projections. This is an unscientific approach that makes designing appropriate policy and planning difficult if not impossible. *Countering shrinkage* involves localized action designed to trigger economic growth. For example, Altena, Germany sought to restructure the former mining town toward fostering growth through restructuring the town towards a tourist economy with varying degrees of success (Schlappa, 2017). Actions to counter shrinkage are a gamble. They could lead to increased growth or could lead to failure and wasted financial capital that could have been redistributed into degrowth planning that would guarantee a better life for the citizens rather than only the investors in development schemes. *Accepting shrinkage* takes place when the city admits that shrinkage is occurring and policy is oriented toward mitigating the worst effects of shrinkage, such as service decline and social problems. Accepting shrinkage may be insufficient to actually write appropriate policy to mitigate such effects (Bernt, 2009), but gauging the citizen acceptability of shrinkage might indicate a degree of openness to exploring alternatives to growth, paving the way for future degrowth possibilities. The line between countering shrinkage and acceptance of shrinkage is quite thin, because counter action requires acceptance of the problem. Puolanka, a declining town in Finland for example utilized the pessimism that has been arising in the town from the decline to rebrand itself and became world famous as the “best worst” town in the world (Huusko, 2019). *Utilizing shrinkage* means policies have a positive outlook on shrinkage and maximize the benefit of it. Hospers (2013) uses the Cittaslow Network as an example of embracing shrinkage. Utilizing shrinkage could be understood as a form of post-growth. People who see something positive in shrinkage will likely be open to post-growth or degrowth.

Right sizing is seen as an approach of restructuring shrinking or shrunken cities, however the objective and course of action may depend on the city. Hummel (2015) identified five courses of right sizing action (all definitions below are paraphrased from Hummel, 2015, while the relevance to degrowth is added from the ideas in the degrowth section above). *Land banking* involves purchasing and management, redevelopment, sale of vacant, abandoned, or otherwise neglected properties. The purpose of land banking is to align housing with housing demand and the stabilization of the market. In terms of degrowth, the purchasing of neglected properties could lay the foundation of creating spaces of degrowth and degrowth housing cooperatives, though the situation could become grey if a municipal government coerced owners into selling. The deal should be fair for both parties, however the moral question is raised about how potentially wealthier individuals should use their property and wealth to benefit worse off individuals and groups, especially those in need of housing. *Rehabilitation* is the restoration of derelict buildings, however as Hummel (2015) notes, existing policies (at least in the USA) favour new construction. The restoration of existing buildings into quality and durable homes aligns with degrowth thinking, and the environmental and climatic aspect of preserving materials, enables an alternative argument

for preserving architectural heritage in rightsizing cities in place of the bottom line argument. *Demolition* is an option to either create space for new uses or to remove problematic structures. Economics plays a key role in demolition, as when restoration outweighs the cost of demolition, demolition is often always chosen. From a degrowth perspective, demolition is not preferable to restoration, however there may be instances when demolition is desirable, especially when a building is beyond repair or if there is an overabundance of buildings due to wide-scale downsizing. Demolition can be used to reclaim spaces for wildlife or horticulture. Degrowth demolition involves careful removal of building materials like bricks and wood, so they are not damaged in the demolition and restored. *Urban greening* is applied in abandoned or cleared properties and serves to increase property value and attract more affluent residents, the green neighbourhood is transformed into a cottage or villa neighbourhood. *Consolidation* is the last strategy that involves increasing the density of the city, basically creating a compact city and reducing the strain and maintenance on existing infrastructure. Hummel states that these efforts have been attempted in the USA, but the only successful pursuits have been in Detroit and Youngstown.

Right-sizing policies, however, have been criticized as being austere (Hackworth, 2015). Béal et al (2019) show how right-sizing approaches in shrinking French cities involve demolishing social housing and rebuilding commodified housing in an attempt to rid the city of its lower socio-economic residents with the aim of changing its image to attract more middle or upper middle class families. Not only does this approach displace or lower the possibilities for the people in most need of housing from accessing housing by removing social housing and increasing the cost of housing by building new, demolition and reconstruction is wasteful in terms of building materials and contributes to environmental decline and climate change. Instead of removing people in need of social housing from the picture, degrowth policies would aim to ensure that every person has access to the resources necessary to live a comfortable and decent life (Muraca, 2012), essentially raising the poor out of the conditions of poverty, while problematizing the overabundance of resources accumulated by the middle and upper middle classes.

What is openness?

The term “openness” emerged in psychology as the fifth factor in the big five personality model. McCrae and Costa (1997) present two groups of openness found in the literature: traditional conceptions: culture and cognitive ability; and the alternative conceptions: psychic structure and the need for experience. Below is a summary of the discussion from McCrae and Costa (1997): The first traditional conception is to understand openness as being cultured, primarily through education, specifically in the liberal arts, an exposure to a wide scope of ideas in arts and sciences, and a critical attitude toward dominant values and assumptions. However, as McCrae and Costa (1997) note Costa et al. (1986) found that uneducated individuals are just as open, if not more so than the educated. Education can close the mind (the education trap) when the educated causes overconfidence (or arrogance). On the other hand, open minded individuals may pursue a liberal arts education or have had a liberal upbringing, causing them to already have liberal and open values. Level of education may contribute to individual openness, but is not a reliable indicator of openness.

The second traditional conception claims that openness is intellect, defined in terms of intelligence, perceptiveness, knowledgeability, and analytic ability, thus emphasizing openness as a cognitive ability. McCrae and Costa (1997) counter that this is an inappropriate conceptualization of openness for five reasons: (1) the term "intellect" contains two independent domains: *openness* ("intellectually curious, imaginative, and inventive") and *conscientiousness* ("efficient, well-organized, competent, and careful in their work" each of which can create perceptions of intelligence (McCrae and Costa, 1997: 832); (2) Openness is not reducible to an ability. So called intellectuals may have a narrow specialization and close themselves off from other experiences beyond this special interest, whereas an open person continues to seek out new experiences; (3) The association between openness and intellect on psychometric testing is weak; (4) Intelligence is preferable to stupidity, producing a preference for openness rather than closedness, which may not be preferable in every case, especially in terms of selecting options with negative outcomes. For example it is better to be closed towards debating whether or not climate change is caused by humans as reopening this debate delays climate action; (5) Using the word "openness" rather than "intellect" allows for the study of how openness affects intelligence, as the alternative does not make sense (McCrae and Costa, 1997).

The first alternative conception of openness is viewing openness as a part of the psychic (or conscious) structure. Central to the understanding of openness from this perspective is the work of Frenkel-Brunswik on authoritarian personalities (Adorno et al., 1950/1969). Frenkel-Brunswik conceived of openness in terms of a lowered defensiveness, or "the ability to allow into consciousness unacceptable or undesirable impulses", whereas authoritarians deny or repress such impulses, closing themselves off from possibilities that challenge themselves and their worldview. The difference between an authoritarian and an open person then is the defense mechanism which is used to deal with conflicts. Open individuals rationalize conflicts and authoritarians deny their existence. McCrae and Costa (1997) write:

> "*Open individuals have access to more thoughts, feelings, and impulses in awareness, and can maintain many of these simultaneously. Tolerance of ambiguity, emotional ambivalence, and perceptual synesthesia are all hallmarks of the open person. The capacity for absorption, for deeply focused attention, may be a result of this structure. For the closed individual, ideas, feelings, and perceptions are relatively isolated and must compete for full attention. For the open individual, all these elements may be simultaneously in awareness, providing a deeper and more intense experience*" (McCrae and Costa, 1997: 838-839).

The second alternative conception of openness is openness to experience as a motivational factor. While structural factors may indeed paint a portrait of openness, motivational factors provide deeper insight into what causes a person to be open rather than closed. Though McCrae and Costa (1997) argue that it is likely that the structure shapes the motivational aspect, a need for and availability of new experiences is necessary for a person to be open to, otherwise there is no possibility for an open person. A closed individual would rather not pursue something new and this is why openness to experience is an important psychological concept when measuring openness.

Critical open mindedness

"Open mindedness" is another term that has been used to describe a psychological situation in which a person exhibits a high degree of openness. Hossenin and Saha (2018) present a narrow definition of open mindedness in an attempt to construct a sociological concept of open mindedness. These authors offer an eight point list definition of what it means to be critically open-minded: (1) Social inclusivity; (2) tolerant of diversity; (3) critical of absolute claims (especially when targeting minority groups); (4) views social and ecological issues holistically; (5) sensitivity toward "unfairness, economic injustice, and social inequalities"; (6) inclined to advocate and participate in the creation of an socially and ecologically just society; (7) committed to democracy and sees material or economic justice as necessary for a meaningful democracy; (8) and places the interests of people before the interests of powerful actors like corporations or states (Hosseini and Saha, 2017: 9-10). Nevertheless, just as Hosseini and Saha (2017) reflect on their own definition, it is possible for an individual to possess one or more of the above attributes, but not all of them.

Openness can be understood as existing along a spectrum between open and closed with respect to various indicators. Five dimensions of open-mindedness are identified for a sociological approach to open-mindedness:

> "(1) Social Open-mindedness, comprised of trusting specific out-groups, rejection of homophobia, rejection of sexism and ageism, and the acceptance of the secularist separation of the religion and the state;
> "(2) Cultural Open-mindedness, encompassing a positive attitude towards immigrants and ethnic diversity, inclusiveness towards cultural out-groups openness towards asylum seekers, and a broad conception of citizenship;
> "(3) Political Open-mindedness, comprised of valuing democracy, a stress on political rights and economic equity as the bases of genuine democracy;
> "(4) Economic Open-mindedness, comprised of the appreciation of more democratic regulations of the economy and more economic justice;
> "and finally (5) Environmental Open-mindedness which is mainly a general appreciation of environmentalist values, such as caring about nature, giving priority to ecology over economy, and a willingness to support environmentalist causes" (Hosseini and Saha, 2018).

A common theme in the five dimensions of critical open mindedness is progressive values, such as diversity, equality, justice, inclusivity, trust, democracy, and concern for the environment. Higgens (2009) conceived of seven polar binaries of open-mindedness, placing open-mindedness in the middle as the mean of each. He balances open mindedness between arrogance and self-abasement; dogmatism and servility; gullibility and suspiciousness; indecisiveness and hastiness; rigidity and spinelessness; messy mind and museum mind. Higgens (2009) defines *messy mind* as "the person who admits ideas by the truckload, without any concern for how they fit together" and *museum mind* as "One who keeps only a few carefully curated ideas" (Higgens, 2009: 54); and myopia and schematism. It is difficult to place the progressive values listed above on a similar schematic. Can there be an excess of diversity, equality, inclusivity, trust, democracy, and concern for the environment? Perhaps trust in an institution of lies is in excess, for example trust in a corrupt government. The antonyms of which represent a closed individual: uniformity (diversity), inequality (equality),

justice (injustice) exclusion (inclusivity), distrust (trust), dictatorship (democracy), and indifference to the environment (concern for the environment). These seven binaries resemble the values that a person may uphold.

Openness	**Closedness**
Diversity	Uniformity
Equality	Inequality
Justice	Injustice
Inclusivity	Exclusion
Trust	Distrust
Democracy	Dictatorship
Concern for the environment	Indifference to the environment

If openness contains progressive values, then closedness represents conservative values. In Veendam The 2021 federal election saw that conservative and far right parties Party for Freedom (PVV), People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), and Forum for Democracy (FvD) were ranked first, third, and sixth respectively by number of votes, while in previous years the social party (SP) or the Labour Party (PvdA) had been voted first and often by a landslide (AlleCifers.nl, 2021). If electoral votes are an indication of the values of Veendamers, it appears that recently there has been a turn toward closedness. However, the people seems to be swayed by right wing political leaders who are presenting arguments that make sense to the people who consume them, and so arguments for degrowth need to be constructed carefully and convincingly, though this may be difficult in the face of indifference to the environment, as degrowth is built upon concerns for the environment. In addition to the values listed above, open and closed binaries are proposed for degrowth: community, individuality; shared ownership, private ownership; decommodification, commodification; sustainable consumption of goods, indifference to the rate of consumption; minimal size and efficient use of space, limitless size; housing as a basic right, housing as a status symbol; reuse of existing buildings (especially in terms of abandoned and vacant ones), demolish and construct new buildings; and control and reduce urban expansion (increase density through infill and by making use of abandoned buildings), no limits to urban expansion.

Degrowth Housing Openness	**Degrowth Housing Closedness**
Community	Individuality (nuclear family)
Shared ownership	Private ownership
Decommodification (nonprofit housing, public housing, cooperative housing,	Commodification (housing for profit, commercial rent, owner-occupancy)

squatting)	
Sustainable consumption of goods	Unconstrained consumption of goods
Minimal in size and efficient use of space	Limitless size
Housing as a basic right	Housing as a status symbol
Reuse existing buildings, specifically abandoned and vacant	Demolish and construct new buildings
Reduce urban expansion (increase density through infill and by making use of abandoned buildings)	No limits on urban expansion
De-urbanize to create more space for wildlife	Expand urban areas to create more profit for development companies
Localized energy production	Centralized energy production
Conscious reduction in energy usage	No limits of energy usage

Methods

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to measure the openness to degrowth housing in Veendam Centre. Quantitative methods could have been used instead in the form of a survey, but surveys are not capable of capturing the same level of depth as a conversation via interview. A qualitative approach considers that new ideas might be presented to the participants, leaving room for the researcher to clarify terms and ask probing questions as well as respond to questions from the participants, while being open to unexpected results. 18 interviews with 24 participants. 6 of the interviews were conducted in pairs and during these interviews the participants helped translate the questions and responses (if one had more proficient English skills than the other), argued, challenged, and confronted each other's perspectives.

> P6: [...] that's what you like [handmade and secondhand shops in place of the vacant shops], but I don't feel like that's what people from this town or… are interested in.
> P5: But he asked what would make you come back to visit this place, well I would go back here because…
> P6: So you would like a second Rottendam in Veendam?

These inter-participant arguments help the researchers to quickly get beyond the formalities and possible shyness of speaking with strangers. Paired or grouped participants generally know one another far better than the researcher possibly can within the limited timeframe of the interview and may confront one another when one feels the other is being dishonest.

> P14: [...] shared apartments, I mean you have that in Groningen a lot, student homes that are like...
> P15: You don't want to share.
> P14: Well…

P15: No, you want all your own.

It is possible that a participant is revealing something new or undiscussed with their friend or family member or it could be that in this case P15 is telling P14 what she *should* want or she is recalling a previous conversation. The wider social and personal context is needed to uncover the closest thing to the truth, but data for that context would require a more longitudinal and indepth research approach. Measuring openness concerns discovering the subjective viewpoints of individual participants, which is why it is necessary to speak with people directly rather than engaging with politicians or other representatives who claim to speak for the people as the subjective experiences that form opinions, values, and beliefs are too complex and sometimes more flexible than would otherwise be represented by leadership; or by conducting surveys, which, although useful, may only scratch at the surface of this matter.

Interviews took place between May 6 and June 29, most of which occurred in the downtown area (see map) with the exception of P7, P8, P9, P17, and P18 (see Appendix 1 for specific details about each participant). These interviews took place either using the online video chat app Jitsi (P7, P17, P18) or at a private residence (P8, P9). These participants were either people already known by the researcher or were recommended by another participant (P7 recommended interviewing P8 and P9) because they were aware that these recommended participants had concerns and ideas about the downtown area of Veendam. Participants interviewed in the downtown area were often found sitting at benches either waiting for someone shopping or to finish working or eating/drinking in four main areas of the downtown (see figure 3.1). First participants were asked if they speak English, as the research is not capable of communicating in Dutch. Many of the interviews were short, ranging from five minutes to roughly fifteen minutes. The majority of interviews were recorded, using an audio recording device, after permission was granted by the participant. Only two interviews were not recorded (P1, P4). The data from these interviews was written from memory directly following the interview. Recorded notes and data were transcribed, then coded deductively using Atlas.ti (web version) and sorted according to categories indicative of openness toward degrowth. The coding tree can be found in Appendix 2.

The first four interviews conducted on May 6 had a slightly different set of questions on the research guide than the interviews that followed. The reason for this was that these early sets of questions were not optimal, did not flow naturally, were awkward to ask, and likely did not open the participant up to a more meaningful discussion, but this early stage was useful to develop a set of questions that did work. The early interviews did produce useful data and were included in this research project despite having a slightly different set of questions.

The new set of questions took a more conversational approach. It begins by asking general details about the relationship the participant has with the space. *Do you live in Veendam? How often do you visit downtown? What do you like to do here?* From these questions the researcher can get a sense of how the area is used, a general attitude toward it, and whether or not drastic changes to the urban fabric (like converting abandoned shops to houses) is an appropriate topic of discussion. The next set of questions asks: *Have you noticed the empty buildings? How do you feel about them?* The reason for these questions is

to steer the conversation toward the research purpose and the response is indicative of a need for action.

P12: It's really a pity. It's something over the last few years that's been increasing a lot. Even with the stickers on it, it's very sad to see.
P14: [Translating from Dutch into English for P15]. She doesn't like it and it's more/less because it looks quite poorly as she means it looks like it's getting… P15: Ghost town.

While the participant is thinking about the feelings they have attached to the empty buildings, they may be ready to consider the next question: *What would you do if you were put in charge of filling the empty buildings?* This is where the interview begins to challenge the participant to provide solutions and share ideas, but for some it may be a question that they have not considered before and they might be thinking that there is only a limited set of answers, such as filling the empty shops with more shops.

P2: [...] I would like to see more shops, but [...] I don't think it's possible because everything is online shopping. I would like to see change, but I don't think it's possible.

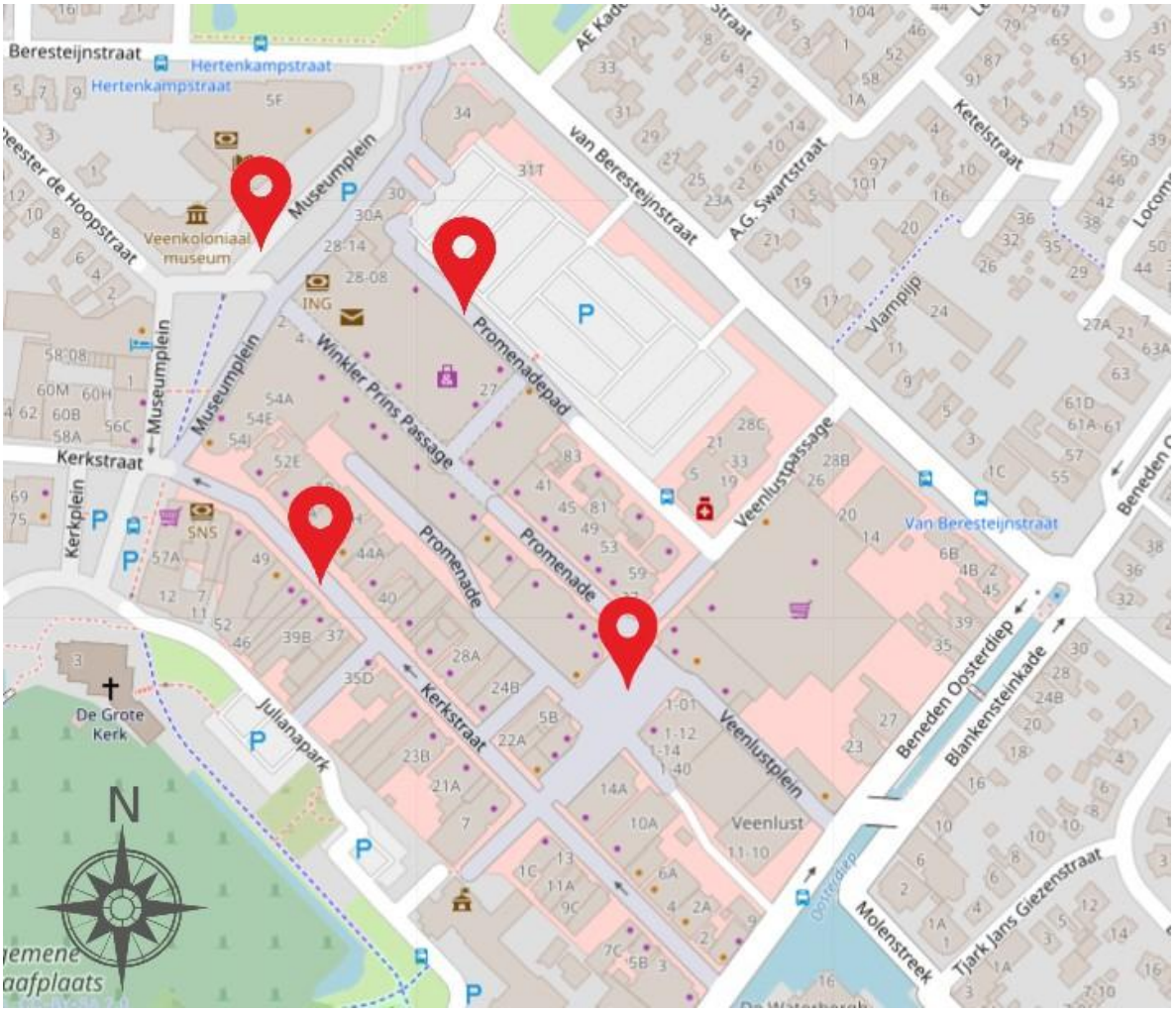
The impossibility of returning to the former downtown vibrancy mentioned above calls for an alternative use of the space, which is proposed in the next question: *What about putting houses in the empty buildings?* In cases in which the idea was contested it could have been clarified by specifying which area in the downtown is appropriate for houses and which is not. For interviews that followed the interview with P8 and P9 the idea proposed by P9 of condensing the shopping area in the downtown and converting the shops outside this core area into houses was explained as a potential path for retaining a more appropriate shopping area and creating more houses. At this point it was clear whether participants were open to a degree of degrowth via the decrease in demand for housing by increasing the use of the built environment (Schneider, 2018). Further confronting questions were asked of participants to test whether their openness to degrowth extends beyond this rather mild aspect of degrowth: *How would you respond if a cohousing community was put in downtown Veendam? How would you respond if you found out people were squatting in the vacant buildings? How would you feel if the government put a cap on rental prices? How would you feel if the municipal government started buying up empty buildings and turned them into public housing?* These questions required more explanation as cohousing is not a commonly known term and squatting was first thought to be a sport. Each interview took a unique directions due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews and uniqueness of each person, however this basic structure of first getting a sense of how the individual perceives and uses the space; their emotional response to a given spatial problems; their ideas and proposed solutions; and their responses to more confronting questions from a degrowth perspective provided a useful interview structure to measure how open people who use the downtown area of Veendam are to degrowth in Veendam Centre.

Interviews were conducted in English, which excludes potential participants from participating in the research because either they have a low proficiency or confidence in speaking English. The people who have better English skills are more likely to have achieved

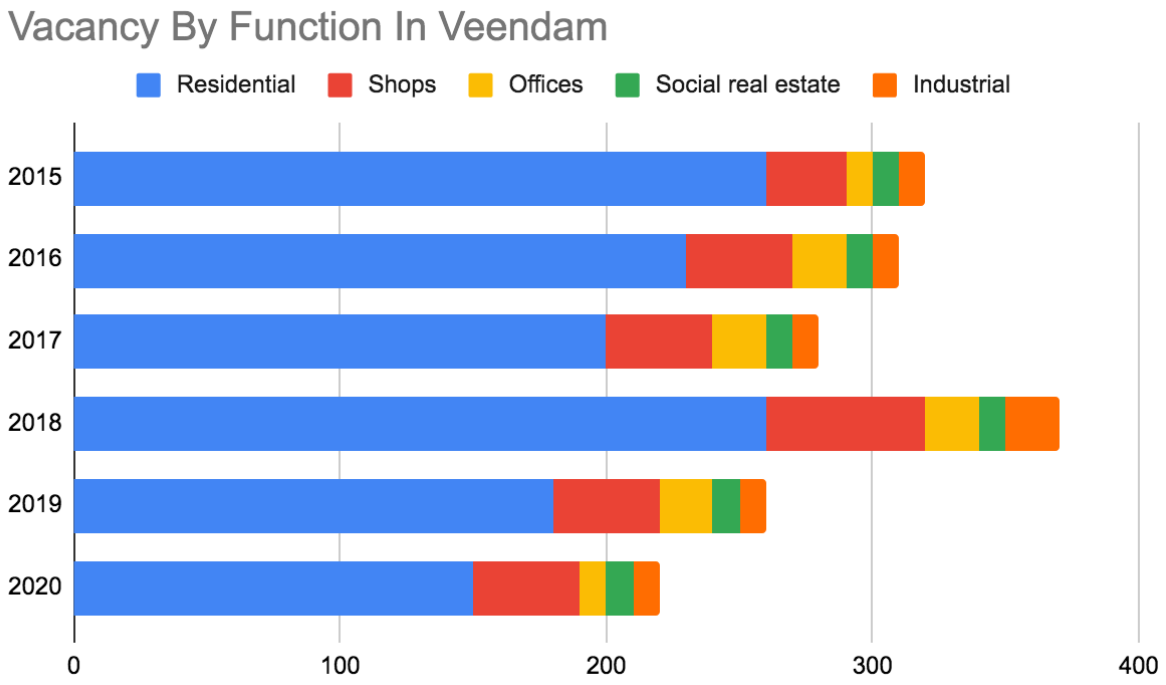
a higher level of education and perhaps more socio-economic status, thus excluding lower income and elderly individuals from the study. Some of the people who were approached to be interviewed could not understand the question: do *you speak English?* Interviewing these people was not possible. A number of people refused to participate in the study even when they were proficient and confident in their English. Perhaps they would have been more likely to participate if the researcher communicated in Dutch, but considering the characteristics of an open individual, it is possible that the more open individuals are most likely to participate because of their curiosity and motivation to experience new things and meet new people (McCrae and Costa, 1997), while the people who refused to participate are likely to be more closed to alternative approaches to urban development like degrowth. This then skews the results in favour of openness, but also supports the need for a sociological approach to measuring critical open mindedness (Hosseini and Saha, 2018), as it seems that if openness can be stimulated at a societal level, then society as a whole will become more open to unconventional approaches to planning like degrowth.

Data collection area

The data collection area is the place in which the interviews that took place within the downtown occurred. This area contains the highest number of vacant commercial units, which are largely concentrated in the centre of Veendam. The cemetery to the south and the canal to the east as well as the streets, Van Beresteijnstraat and Beneden Westerdiep provide clear boundaries, and areas that are unmixed residential were excluded from the area as well as the school, Winkler Prins. Interviews took place at four main places as indicated on figure 3.1. P01, P02, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15 were interviewed at Museumplein; P03, P16 were interviewed on Kerkstraat; P04, P22, P23, P24, P25 were interviewed at Veenlustplain Square; and P05, P06, P11, P19 P20, P21 were interviewed at Promenadepad. The reason for such a low representation of interviews on Kerkstraat is because there is more movement on the street, presenting few opportunities to interact with people in a less rushed way, whereas the other sites have more places to sit and relax for a few moments. The Promenadepad location is situated outside of the HEMA and there is a ledge along the whole pathway for people to sit on. A 3D image was painted in the middle of the public square Veenlustplein in June (along with two other locations, including Museumplein), which has been successful bringing people to these spaces to take photographs and watch their children interact with the artwork. The benches here serve as a waiting place as well for those not wanting to go into stores with their partners. Museumplein also features many places to sit, as well as the market and ATM machines that sometimes form lines of people. The streets with the highest vacancy are Kerkstraat and Promenade, which includes the hallway through the Winkelcentrum Veendam. Figure 3.2 shows that residential vacancy is decreasing, though shops have remained largely the same, at about 40 vacant shops for the past five years. This data is for the entire municipality, not only the center. However, 38 vacant buildings within the Centre of Veendam have been counted, not including the vacancy in the shopping mall, which are many, and the Albert Heijn that vacated at around the edge of March in coordination with the expansion of the Albert Heijn at the Autorama mall outside of the downtown.



(Figure 3.1 shows a map of the research area, map created using Open Street Maps.)



(Figure 3.2 shows the building vacancy by function in Veendam from CBS, 2020)

Ethical considerations

No sensitive or personal data is intended to be collected, especially during recorded sessions. Data is stored securely in a password protected folder and will be deleted after the period in which objections to the research will be no longer launched. The transcriptions will be also stored in a password protected folder and deleted at this time. All participants and potential participants will be approached with respect and treated with dignity, this involves leaving the interview if the participant shows signs of discomfort. Coronavirus rules were strictly followed during the interviews. The 1.5 metre rule was respected at all times and all interviews occurred outdoors, except for the ones mentioned above wherein coronavirus rules were respected at all times. Participants were informed about their right to refuse to answer any questions and withdrawal at any time and to have their interview removed from the research entirely.

Results

Openness To converting vacant, abandoned or underutilized shops and spaces into housing

Converting vacant and abandoned or underutilized shops into housing contributes to degrowth by reusing material buildings and space that is otherwise providing no function, as well as reducing housing demand by creating new houses. But also by converting vacant shops to houses, the neighbourhood function changes from spaces of consumption to spaces of living, though consumption takes place in spaces of living it is reduced. A small number of respondents explicitly stated that the conversion of shops to houses should be limited (P08, P09, P15, P21) or only if there is demand for housing in Veendam (P17, P18), but with a priority for keeping the shops (P04). For others converting shops to houses was a thought that they never considered before (P02). None of the interviewees who were open to the conversion of the shops into houses expressed an interest in living in Veendam Centre. They were either happy in their current living situations (P02, P05, P06, P07, P08, P09, P10, P11, P15, P16, P20, P21, P24); did not like the busyness of the centre (P03); already live close to the centre (P12, P13, P21, P22, P23); or already lived in or wanted to move to a larger centre (P14, P17, P18, P19). Perhaps the response would have been different if interviewees had more precarious living situations. One interviewee was recently unemployed due to layoffs related to coronavirus and out of financial necessity needed to return to living in the family home, while undertaking studies on a new career path because she could not find affordable housing (P14). She stated a preference for living in the Randstadt area, especially Amsterdam or Rotterdam of the high degree of tolerance toward difference that is common to large urban areas, whereas the local culture of Veendam and the surrounding area is to shun and make uncomfortable people who do things different, like dying ones hair pink. Such social behaviour may be indicative of a more general pattern of closed social attitudes, however these might be perpetuated by a small group of people. On the other hand, an alternative approach to housing in the downtown area of Veendam could change the culture by attracting more open individuals, making it more appealing to people who want to deviate from the dominant norm. Some research is needed to answer these questions.

Although many interviewees expressed a disinterest in living in newly converted shops in the downtown area, they offered ideas of who such living arrangements would be appropriate for elderly people in general (P02, P08, P09, P19, P20), as the creation of smaller

apartments makes life easier for people with limited physical capabilities and mobility. The nearness to the downtown is an added bonus that provides almost direct access to essential amenities groceries.

> P19: [...] there are lots of people like my parents, when they get older they want a house and not with a garden, just a studio or an apartment.
> P20: Smaller house, because they need to clean the house and they can't do it anymore.
> P19: I think it's a proper solution for the empty buildings here in Veendam, it's using for a living room and rent for the empty buildings has to go down.
> P20: So they don't have to build new houses […]

Reducing housing demand is one of the aims of degrowth housing and here P20 makes the connection between increasing the efficiency of existing buildings, by making use of abandoned ones, and appears to view the construction of new buildings in a negative light, putting forward the idea that the construction of new houses is not necessarily desired if it is not necessary, therefore degrowth housing should be pursued to reduce the construction of unnecessary houses.

Awareness of the housing shortage of students in Groningen, especially for international students, provoked some of the participants to suggest that students live in the vacant buildings in the downtown (P07, P08, P09, P10, P11, P14, P15, P17, P18).

> P07: [...] I would try to connect with the Gemente in Groningen, because they have a lot of problems with student housing [...] in the start of September. You know [...] two years ago there were people living in tents and so forth and it's like half an hour by train [from Veendam to Groningen]. I think if you could offer accommodation in exchange for some minor maintenance or like... just because buildings that are lived in have a whole different vibe, like when you're selling a house, it's better you don't move out of it because a building that's not lived in doesn't sell well…

Fostering collaboration between municipalities rather than competition, especially for providing people with housing, perhaps would be an effective means of reducing the demand for new houses, ensuring the use of vacant buildings, and moving closer to securing the right to housing for all as houses are distributed to those that need them most, all three of which would contribute to housing degrowth. P07 suggests a mechanism that would ensure the affordability of housing and financial degrowth by offering a non-monetary means of paying for accommodations via maintenance. Although offering free accommodations for students in the vacant buildings serves a humanitarian purpose, an underlying aim of such undertaking is to restart the growth engine in Veendam Centre. It may be the case that once the student housing arrangement becomes well established, it will become popular and continue without returning the buildings to shopping purposes. The future holds too many uncertainties to determine what will happen.

Others suggested that students may not consider moving to Veendam as an option, and that Veendam student housing would need to be advertised via a brochure or some other media from the university (P17, P18). The creation of a special public transit pass would be needed to enable students to commute to Groningen from Veendam for free or at a low cost (P07, P17, P18), since international students are not eligible for the Dutch student pass that offers free transit for five years to any student under the age of thirty. Parents who were interviewed stated that they are telling their ten year old daughter that she will live at home

when she is going to university and commute because they believe it will be impossible to find a place to live (P22, P23), even eight years from now, expressing how housing limits opportunities as the daughter will then only have the option to attend further education within the region. A social mix of young and old people was also suggested as potential occupants (P07, P09), in which the young people could assist the elderly in a special housing arrangement.

Objections to the conversion of shops to houses appeared less frequently (P16, P21). The reasons were that converting the shops to houses would make the downtown less attractive (P16) or it would reduce possibilities in the centre once shops are converted to houses because of the difficulty involved in converting the houses back to shops (P21).

> P21: [...] I think you shouldn't sell too much because you lose the shopping idea, so keep it open for changes I think, yeah.
> Graham: What do you mean "sell too much"?
> P21: Because I mean if you sell a building to someone that lives, then I think it's hard to get it back [...]

In this sense commercial buildings as shops are more versatile when they are not buildings. P21 suggested that bringing more shops and entrepreneurs would be better for the city and explained how he was aware that social entrepreneurs wanted to bring social services to Veendam centre, but could not get a permit from the municipality. The researcher failed to ask what was meant by social entrepreneurs. P16 on the other hand suggested improving the attractiveness through adding decorative lights and more plants would improve the aesthetics and bring more people downtown. For both it seems that the concern is populating the streets in a traditional sense of the downtown, although P21 was concerned that the space be left open to possibilities rather than being closed by the conversion to housing.

In terms of the limiting the amount of vacant shops converted to houses, an idea was proposed by P09 to create a smaller shopping zone and create housing outside of this newly created zone while moving all of the downtown shops outside of this zone to maximize the concentration, then put houses into the former shops outside of the new downtown shopping centre, which may provide a strategic way of visualizing the degrowth of the shopping area and opening up clear space for housing in the centre. P09 also suggested full renovations of the interiors of the buildings, which may reduce affordability, however that is not necessarily so, as it depends on how the renovations are done and what materials are selected and used. The materials should be produced as locally as possible and higher quality materials could ensure that there is less of a need for renovations in the future, contributing to perhaps the production of greenhouse gas emissions today, but a reduction in the future. Though P11 suggested a similar idea of shrinking the downtown, a spatial plan, so to speak, was put forward by P09 to shrink and concentrate the shopping area of the downtown and convert the buildings on the outside of it to housing.

> P09: Don't think too big for Veendam. Veendam is small, so keep it small. Don't think we want big shops like in Groningen or that. Just shops which are for the people who are living here.

The idea of P09 is to concentrate on an effort to counteract the growth machine by focusing on serving the needs of local people. Even though this idea is not necessarily coming from a

degrowth perspective, by increasing the use of urban space and reducing the demand for housing by increasing the access to housing. The idea of shrinking and increasing the concentration of the shopping was explained to some of the other interviewees, all of which were also open to it (P12, P13, P14, P15, P19, P20) with the expectation of P21 who stated that the downtown was already small enough.

> P21: I think it's already quite small, but big enough. I wouldn't shrink it more.

Again this is likely due to the perception that converting the shops to houses decreases possibilities and the idea that Veendam will not play a role in addressing the housing crisis. It seemed that P21 believed this was a concern for the major cities, but not Veendam because he was able to purchase his house in Veendam for a low price a few years ago, however the price of housing in Veendam has been on the rise and housing vacancy decreasing as shown in Figure 3.2. The idea of shrinking the downtown according to the plan of P09 was not proposed to other interviewees.

Openness to smaller houses and shared amenities/cohousing

Housing is viewed as a status symbol in capitalistic societies, in which larger houses are indications of success becoming more preferable to smaller houses (Nelson, 2018). Changing the narrative away from a symbol of status to concern for the environment or a desire to reduce our environmental footprint puts an emphasis on scaling down the size of houses. Smaller housing was discussed by P10, P13, P 14, P15, P20, P 20. However sustainability or anything relating to the environment was only mentioned by one interviewee (P14), whereas other reasons were to fulfil the demand for housing as smaller units can provide more housing with less space (P13, P14, P15); the increased ease at managing and cleaner a smaller space, especially for an elderly person (P20) as mentioned above; and increased affordability that one can expect from smaller houses (P10, P13, P14).

> P10: [...] in this moment there are a lot of people who are poor, maybe not the good word, but people can't buy a house because it's so expensive. So maybe you have to make the houses a little bit smaller.

Decreasing the size of housing could increase efficiency in terms of urban space and serve to house more people with a lower space consumption. Although no concerns for overcrowding were mentioned, it is important to keep in mind that adequate housing is important for physical and mental health (Bashir, 2002) and that the size stays within a healthy range or that a reduction in private space is compensated by high quality public space. If smaller houses are favourable because they are more affordable, then paying less rent for a smaller house can contribute to monetary degrowth (Cattaneo, 2018), however it is important to stay critical as landlords can increase their wealth by dividing a building into smaller and smaller spaces and decreasing the rent to a more affordable one. A hypothetical scenario which could occur in the Netherlands: 10 apartments are divided into 15 smaller apartments. The 10 apartments cost €800 per month and the 15 smaller ones cost €700 per month. In the end the landlord managed to increase their monthly profit by €2500. Smaller is more environmentally sustainable, but it can also be a money maker when it becomes more about charging higher rates for less space.

Cohousing arrangements were likened to student housing in a few of the interviews (P02, P07, P14), as the idea of sharing a kitchen and living space is common among student housing arrangements, for example in Groningen. It then became a small step to suggest that we were discussing housing for students or for the elderly (P02, P14) instead of an intentionally formed community around cohousing ideas. However the idea of sharing space with other people did not appeal to the interviewees, though they were open to it for other people to have the opportunity to do so, though suggested it is not what people in the Netherlands would be interested in doing, but that it should be explored where the demand is for housing.

P02: I love my privacy, so like, if you are a student then it doesn't matter, because [...]
Graham: It's temporary.
P02: Yeah I wouldn't want to live with someone else and share a kitchen if I'm married or something.
Graham: Yeah, for sure. But do you think for other people, do you think they should have an option maybe in the vacant buildings?
P02: I don't know which part is the biggest [...] group [who] want houses the most, so you focus on what they want.

Openness to cohousing could require a cultural shift in the Netherlands. In southern European countries, however, it is common practice to have a multigenerational home, as explained by P07. However, cohousing differs from student housing, senior housing, and multigenerational housing, though could contain all of these elements is a neighbourhood scale project that contains more diverse populations than just students, seniors, or family members. Providing more information about cohousing or well known living examples is needed to foster a greater understanding of cohousing.

Openness to Squatting

Squatting contributes to degrowth by making use of abandoned buildings, recycling materials for repairs, and financial degrowth through the absence of rent payments (Cattaneo, 2018). Interviewees were asked about how open they would be to people squatting in the empty buildings in the downtown area (P05, P06, P07, P12, P13, P16). The results produced three categories of responses: P05, P06, and P12 were open to squatting; P16 and P07 were conditionally open; and P13 was not open to the prospect of squatter squatting in Veendam Centre. A cultural centre type squat would have likely caused P05 and P06 to stay longer in Veendam, who had otherwise come to drink a cup of coffee and leave. For 05 if the squat organized a festival, they would likely return to Veendam to visit the festival. However it is unclear whether a festival contributes to degrowth or not because festivals are often organized around making money and involve the sale and consumption of various items, perhaps causing people to consume more than they might normally. On the other hand it is entirely possible that a degrowth festival could take place, in which people visit convivial festival grounds in order to consume even less than they would on a normal basis. P12 on the other hand responded that "if it's empty, why not?" and said that the downside is that the squatters will need to move at short notice if it comes to that, but that that would be the problem of the squatters. However, it should be a concern for human rights that people can lose their homes

without notice in this way, and as Cattaneo (2018) notes, that the precariousness and uncertainty of squatting leaves squatters resorting to using cheaper materials for building. On the other hand, P12 may have been talking about anti-squat laws in which property owners make an arrangement with the municipality to make use of a building that has been vacant for more than six months, sometimes by allowing housing to a person or people, who will need to leave when notified by the landlord. This moment shows the difficulty of researching an area in a language that the researcher does not know. P12 explained how one of the owners of a building that contained a bank tried to house people in what seemed like an anti-squat arrangement as the building contains several rooms and centralized heating, but the municipality declined and the building remains empty, due to inflexibility on behalf of the municipality, which is another theme that appeared several times (P12, P13, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23).

Conditional openness means that the interviewee would be open to an action (in this case squatting) if that action fit within their idea of how it should be. P16 at first rejected the idea of squatting for the reason that it would be unfair for the owner to not benefit from people using the building. When it was suggested that the squatters could pay for building expenses as well as maintain and repair it, P16 thought that it seemed like a good idea. This is an example of how planners can negotiate openness to less mainstream approaches to urban development by appealing to their interlocutor's sense of fairness. P07 on the other hand has had some experience visiting squats and had developed a kind of typology of squats: the ones that destroy buildings and the ones that provide a cultural centre for a wide variety of people, using Metelkova in Ljubljana as an example of the ideal squat.

> P07: You say squatters and you have two kinds of squatters, and [in] my experience, there are the people who move in and wreck everything and use it as a place to party and get drunk, then you have… like do you know the old hospital in Groningen it's basically an art commune [...]. It's in the old hospital and it's like an art collective and people live there and they have events and workshops and that I think is cool. We have something like that in Ljubljana and I kind of miss that, it was a good place to be on a friday.

The presence of a local squat in Groningen could be used to garner local interest in Veendam and provide an already existing example that squatting could be beneficial to a place. However, as the discussion with P07 progressed, it became clear that though the idea of a squat in Veendam Centre may be appealing and the space may be available for such a squat in Veendam, the "creative" people required to operate such a squat are likely not present, though they could come to Veendam from other places. In hindsight squatting, like cohousing, was perhaps not sufficiently explained to the participants by the researcher and as an informal practice is likely to invoke a negative reaction. Here too providing more information in the form of documentary videos and similar media might help to challenge prevailing negative ideas about squatting. It is important to keep in mind that the Netherlands has a rich history of squatting, which continues to this day despite the outlawing of squatting in 2009 (Vasudevan, 2017).

Openness to decommodification through rent controls or public housing

Rental prices of the shops is considered one of the reasons for the high rate of vacancy in Veendam Centre by P1, P8, P9, P12, P13, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23 and concerns for high rental housing prices was similarly raised by a number of participants. However, it was not until later in the interviewing process that I became aware of the need to ask the question of how the rents can be lowered, as it is quite clear that the landlords, despite the vacancy of their buildings, would rather that the buildings stay empty if they are not making money from them or at least breaking even (P04). P22, P23, and P24 discussed the possibilities of decommodifying housing in Veendam through either implementing a cap on rent or the municipality buying up some of the buildings and renting them out at an affordable rate.

P22 and P23 were easily open to either the idea of a cap on rent or publicly owned, low cost rentals in the downtown in place of the vacant shops. This could have been due to the awareness of how difficult it is to receive social rent and the poor conditions of rental apartments in Groningen.

> P22: Rent is difficult. You get a list from the geemente and they have a point system. You must have many points to the top and then you must see the house and would… [...] Imagine you don't want it, you go lower on the list. [...]
>
> P23: [translating for P22] he wants [...] the kids [to] stay as long as possible at home while [...] studying. [...]
> P22: You're living in a room there, three by three [metres] and the rent is so high. [...]
> P23: Cost a lot of money. And share.
> P22: Share the kitchen.
> P23: The toilet.
> P22: Ahh, no.

Shared amenities like kitchens and toilets sounds like cohousing, but the negative attitude toward sharing is accompanied by the high cost of these small, shared, and low quality spaces. Whereas public housing would be more heavily regulated to ensure that it meets minimum standards of living and require regular maintenance. A rental cap would see that landlords are not over charging for spaces. Either a rental cap or public housing contribute to degrowth through the decommodification of housing, removing financial growth from the equation and operating housing at the cost of operating and maintaining the building (Balmer and Bernet, 2015). However, as Balmer and Bernet (2015) show, public housing and rental caps do not fully decommodify houses. It is entirely possible that these buildings are sold onto the market again when change of government takes place.

In terms of placing a cap on rent or creating public housing in the vacant buildings in downtown Veendam, P24 needed time to reflect on these ideas as they were new.

> P24: Maybe, but, well, I think if we talk longer you create an opinion in my head, I don't really have my own. The notion is like surprising me for now.

The comment of P24 creates a challenge for the chosen research method of this study, as it is confronting individuals with ideas they have possibly not considered on a topic they may not have given much thought. It is entirely possible that every instance of openness can shift to closeness as the participant reflects and explores these subjects further. The topic of openness

to decommodification of housing in Veendam Centre was not as represented as the other topics as it was only discussed with three participants. Further research is needed to further explore the openness to decommodification of housing.

Discussion

"An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the raison d'être which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a purpose quite different from its initial use" (Lefebvre, 1991: 167, quoted from Leary-Owhin, 2015).

Ensuring that degrowth does not ignite the growth machine

The challenge for planning for degrowth is the implementation of sustainable degrowth, achieving degrowth that does not inevitably lead to the resurrection of the growth machine. Though eastern Groningen has largely accepted that shrinkage is a here to stay and is taking steps to mitigate the effects of shrinkage on the population (Beunen et al, 2020), Veendam appears to be anticipating growth projections of around 2% until 2030 (Gemeente Veendam, 2014), though plans may have changed as the latest structural vision created by the municipality is now several years old. Many of the housing ideas mentioned in this thesis are coming from a degrowth perspective, but can contain growth elements once put into play, especially over the long term. Squatting has been used to revitalize the cultural appeal of declining neighbourhoods, beginning the wheels of gentrification and displacement (Holm and Kuhn, 2016; Uitermark, 2004). This becomes a problem of the existence of wealth and social inequality, that there are people in society who have plenty who displace people who have not enough, and comes back to the uncertainty that the future offers once a plan has entered spatial reality. It is also indicative of a free market, profit driven approach to urban development. Housing as a basic right, which should not be denied even if rent is not paid or in the absence of a formal contract between the inhabitants and the owners, denying the people who have the least amount of financial or other resources access to housing, while the wealthy are able to own multiple homes (Paris, 2009). Though it may be impossible to stop growth without a dramatic shift in the way humans think about the social and physical world, prioritizing housing as a basic right over property rights could be a promising step toward decommodifying housing. Planners and activists should aim to encourage democratic organization around housing, whether that is for renters or squatters, with the aim of creating cooperative housing. For example, tenets in a building or city block should form a collective with the aim of fighting for housing justice and the decommodification of housing. Such social organizations could then work toward stopping the growth machine through decommodification and social justice.

Planning inroads for degrowth housing

The results show that there is a degree of openness to degrowth housing in Veendam Centre. In some cases such openness is conditional on certain outcomes. Two main conditional scenarios emerged from the data. (1) Vacant shops can be converted to houses only on the periphery of the shopping area and the remaining shops should be moved and concentrated in the middle to achieve a continuum of occupied buildings. (2) Squatting may

occur if the squatters pay for the operating costs of the building, maintain, and even improve the appearance of the building. These two conditional scenarios are examples of how space can be negotiated. The collection of these conditional scenarios through openness dialogues as conducted in this thesis, planners will be able to uncover the rules that would allow for the transformation of unconventional ideas into practice. For example, even though (2) concerns squatting, it would be just as easy to argue that non-squatted types of housing should be available in exchange for the operating costs of a building and necessary maintenance. However, this largely depends on the context. It could not easily be argued that housing costs should be minimal in booming cities where available housing is expensive and scarce, as it is in a town in a shrinking region with many vacant shops in the centre. This is where decommodification plays a central role in ensuring affordability of housing in areas of housing scarcity. Planners seeking to decommodify houses cannot act alone from the shadows of their offices, but need to get involved with housing movements; be supportive of tenants during rent strikes and educate the public on the reasons to support the decommodification of housing, as the market approach has not been able to provide housing for all (when landlords are mainly concerned with collecting as much rent as possible) and the market is vulnerable to economic instabilities like recessions or regional boom and bust cycles, which is one of the main drivers of the housing shortage in the Netherlands. Housing is not an apolitical topic, as was shown recently in the 2021 Dutch election. Planners need to get involved in the political movements concerned with housing justice. However, it is not enough to only demand housing for all, it needs to also be environmentally sustainable, which is why planners need to bring a degrowth housing perspective to the housing justice movements.

Degrowth housing ideas were new to many people, as the dominant growth housing narrative confines thoughts about housing in a narrow sense, as a status symbol and nest egg (Nelson, 2018). Although many participants showed openness to some aspects of degrowth housing developments in place of the vacant buildings in Veendam Centre, they did not express interest in living in these houses. The short length of the interviews did not allow participants to fully explore the potential of these new ideas resulting in an openness for such degrowth housing plans to go ahead. A platform should then be created in which these ideas can be explored in depth and planners seeking to increase environmental sustainability and access to housing via a degrowth approach need to get involved in creative ways of engaging and informing the public about alternative types of housing. Buhr et al (2018) suggest that something like “future week” (an annual event in Alingsås, a growing Swedish town with a population slightly smaller than Veendam), serves as an arena for degrowth, where people interested in sustainability meet and exchange ideas and try to influence policy (Buhr et al, 2018). Something like a local degrowth housing convention could be a powerful resource in providing information to the public about degrowth housing. This could be an event where people from various housing projects (for example cohousing or squats) and researchers can share their experiences and research in a convention centre, library, or community centre open to the public. These conventions should come to shrinking towns and cities to spread degrowth ideas. Following the event, it would be up to the public and the local politicians whether or not to pursue degrowth spatial visions, especially for housing. As local planners and politicians in shrinking cities may have been dealing with problems of vacancy and

shrinkage for an extended period of time and have their minds stuck on how to work toward a solution. Such conventions can reinvigorate local planners with fresh ideas and challenge them to think in different ways, hopefully leading to spatial improvements that are beneficial both socially and environmentally.

Reachable living examples or a type of living lab could provide additional interest into the development of degrowth housing in areas with high vacancy rates or experiencing demographic shrinkage, like Veendam. It is important for people to be able to see how such a project would work out in real life in order for them to decide whether or not they want to support it. In Veendam one of the more derelict blocks (one on the periphery) in the centre could be selected and purchased by the municipality or an arrangement could be made with the owners in which both parties reach a fair agreement. The municipality then can seek out individuals interested in living an urban low environmental impact lifestyle and establish a cooperative consisting of members who will develop a degrowth plan for the proposed space with the intention of creating a living lab. The board will need to consist of people who will intend to live in the buildings to ensure that their plan is inline with their personally desired outcome of the space. This living lab should be supported by the municipality for twenty years, without the possibility for the municipality to withdraw support unless it is absolutely necessary or if support is no longer needed. The cooperative should seek national and EU funding to support the project. Though the costs should be minimal, since this is an objective of degrowth. The most expensive period would likely be the purchasing of the buildings during the earliest phase. The reason for extending support for twenty years is to ensure that at least one generation grows up with the awareness and opportunity to visit this space and perhaps decide to move into the building once reaching adulthood. The twenty year period would normalize the presence of degrowth housing and give it the opportunity to develop a life of its own and test its feasibility in Veendam. At the end of the twenty year period planners and municipal representatives can decide whether to continue with the project. Such a living lab could provide citizens with the experience necessary to decide whether they are truly open to degrowth housing as well. In the meantime, new degrowth housing projects could begin if the living lab is a success. Other approaches toward the realization of the application of degrowth perspective to housing are possible, what is presented here is only one possible scenario. Degrowth housing conventions in shrinking towns and a degrowth housing living lab are ways in which the growth housing narrative can be countered and changed, through communication and real life examples. Nevertheless, as this research shows there is a degree of openness to degrowth housing in Veendam Centre, although additional research is needed, but this could be taken further perhaps in collaboration with the Sociaal Planbureau Groningen to conduct a more extensive and inclusive study on how open users of Veendam Centre are to degrowth housing.

Creating student housing in Veendam from the empty shops

Participants viewed students as a vulnerable demographic in the face of the housing shortage in Groningen. The vacant shops of Veendam were viewed as places of potential housing refuge for students in dire need of housing as the train connection is roughly thirty minutes from Veendam to Groningen and runs every thirty minutes during times that students would need to get to class. The design challenge then becomes how to convert these shops

into comfortable and viable living spaces for students. Most of the buildings are deep and narrow with large street facing windows, causing concern for ventilation, and safe exits in case of fire. Recently concern has been raised in the UK that converting shops into houses does not allow for privacy due to the large front facing windows (Jones, 2021). However, these problems can be solved with some creative design thinking, but the buildings may need to be modified in some sense to allow for greater airflow and privacy, for example if windows could be added in the back of the building, then these shops would be not much different from many row houses found in the Netherlands.

Discussions around students commuting to Groningen always turned to the need for travel passes, especially for EU and international students. These students are not eligible for the free transit pass that Dutch students receive and have higher travel expenses as a result. An agreement would need to be reached between the municipalities of Groningen and Veendam, as well as with the rail service providers OV or NS Rail. In any case, the collaboration between the municipalities of Groningen and Veendam would be necessary, and perhaps Groningen municipality or the province could provide some funding to modify the buildings so that they are suitable for living. In the meantime bedroom pods, complete with walls and ceilings, can be custom built and placed within the vacant shops, thus providing visual and auditory privacy, creating separate and private spaces within the floor space of the shop. This is one way that the vacant shops in Veendam could serve as a temporary but immediate solution to help alleviate some of the shortage of student housing in Groningen.

Squatting in Veendam and anti-squat laws or a right to housing

Anti-squat is a Dutch national law that requires property owners who have vacant buildings to register the vacancy if it is lasting longer than six months. At this point, the municipal government and the property owner(s) need to come to an agreement about how the vacancy will be filled. Further research is needed to uncover how these arrangements actually play out. The idea behind the law is that squatting is caused by vacancies, and so if the government can end vacancies, then squatting will end as a result. It is an attempt to tackle two problems with one law. People who live in an anti-squat arrangement have no legal rights and must leave without due notice when asked to vacate. The reason for wanting to outlaw squatting is that it is outside the formal system of land ownership agreements and challenges the dominant housing system (Vasudeven, 2017), however abandoned buildings squatted in Eastern Germany following the fall of the GDR eventually became sites of gentrification once the culture produced by these squats became attractive for the more affluent (Holm and Kuhn, 2016). Municipal governments, in Amsterdam for example, have been shown to co-opt the vibrancy arising from squats and have used it to stimulate economic growth and urban development (Uitermark, 2004). From a degrowth and squatting perspective, squatting should not spark the engine of economic growth, but maximize the use of abandoned buildings and make spaces available for low cost housing. The anti-squat law has not been able to solve the problem of vacancy in Veendam Centre. Vacancy is more a problem of capitalism, that the space has outlived its purpose, as the quote from Lefebvre suggests. These spaces are no longer able to produce a profit for the owners and so they will remain empty until the time comes when they are able to produce a profit again. Although it

seems in a market setting that vacancy should lower the rents, making the space more available, this does not happen in reality (Gentili and Hoekstra, 2019).

Planners can counter the need to function only for profit by insisting that the property should serve a social function (Foster and Bonilla, 2011). The anti-squat law should not be applied where it clearly does not work and where there has never been an instance of squatting, such as in Veendam. Instead planners and municipal actors should find ways in which chronically vacant buildings can better serve society and that might mean looking beyond the municipality toward helping out neighbouring municipalities struggling with overstretched scarce resources, like the housing shortage in Groningen and other Dutch cities or even provide temporary housing for refugees.

Not only is there a shortage of housing in the Netherlands, but there is a shortage of affordable housing. The vacant shops in Veendam centre could help in this way, however the local government needs to be open to it and a plan needs to be created. If the local government is not able to ensure that the buildings are used, then the citizens should have the right to make use of them. Anti-squat laws give landlords six months to fill their vacant building before they need to begin to make an agreement with the municipality for some further use. If the anti-squat law is to continue to be enforced, an amendment needs to be added that if the municipality is unable to fill the vacant buildings six months following the moment that property owner(s) and the municipality have begun negotiations for a use, then the anti-squat law is no longer applied and citizens then have the opportunity to make use of the buildings in a way that serves a social function, such as housing for those in need.

Application of Shrinkage Theories to Veendam

Each conceptualization of shrinkage put forward by Haase et al (2014) can be identified in the development of Veendam. To recap, the five conceptions have been placed below:

Counterurbanization or the devaluing of the urban (first conception)
Suburbanization favoured over urbanization (second conception)
Shrinkage as a result of uneven spatial consequence of everyday capitalism (third conception)
Shrinkage as a result of territorial divisions of labour (fourth conception)
Demographic change (fifth conception)

The post-war population growth in Veendam that ended in 1980 was a result of Dutch national planning. The wide distribution of automobiles increased mobility and the policy of concentrated deconcentration (Zonneveld, 1989) enabled the suburban expansion of towns like Veendam. The population expansion of Veendam coincided with a population decline in Groningen city, which occurred between 1972 and 1978 (Groningen Gemeente, 2021). During this period of population gain Veendam and decline in Groningen, it could be argued that Veendam became a self-sufficient place in its own right (the second conceptualization), without much need to seek services and amenities outside, enabling full occupancy in the downtown shopping area. However, it is not to say that people in Groningen moved to Veendam, but that people in larger cities were choosing to move to smaller ones like Veendam. The population of Veendam began to decline when Dutch national planning policy began shifting policy away from car oriented planning (Zonneveld, 1989), thus leaving the

towns with less adaptive capacity or income behind as they are less able to change the spatial structure of the town away from an automobile oriented structure (the third conceptualization). Population growth during the boom coincided with the construction of factories in Veendam, bringing people into the town in search of employment, most of which remain today, however technological innovation and automation may have reduced the need for workers (the fourth conceptualization). Finally, in 2019 the birth rate (7.7 per 1000) in Veendam municipality was lower than the 2020 mortality rate (10.8 for men and 12.4 for women per 1000), which means that the population of Veendam cannot grow without immigration (CBS, 2020b). The low fertility rate is not unique to Veendam, but common across the Netherlands (Mills, 2015). It appears then that the earlier counterurbanization was a decision of national planning policy and the reversal of such policy may have contributed to the stagnating or declining circumstances in Veendam. In regards to the life cycle theory of urbanization, it is perhaps possible that urban areas decline, but never fully die, at least in most cases and as long as the human population does not drastically decline.

Peripheralization: The Competing Centres of Veendam

Market competition is frequently seen as a means to foster innovation and reward the best practices and ideas. However competition has been shown to produce innovation when it exists between firms who stand on equal footing, while the smaller firms are unable to compete (Aghion, 2005). In spatial terms competition produces duplicates, redundancy, and waste as losing competitors or those unable to compete vacate buildings. Peripheralization is a useful concept to explain how not only on a regional scale does growth occur at the centre at the expense of resources at the peripheries, but within towns competing centres lead to the decline in one centre and growth in another. This is shown within Veendam that the traditional town centre is losing to the new centre, the shopping centre Autorama. Discussions with participants touched upon the competition between the two centres.

P07: Albert Heijn in Veenlustpassage. It closed and moved, or just closed because they expanded the one in Autorama. It's much bigger now.
P12: Autorama. I don't know if you know it here, [...] they have it all clustered together. I think that's better.
P13: I know the hairdressing on the opposite of the fire [which recently destroyed a building] said he wants to move because it's not really a nice place to look at, so [...] there is another centre, well a sort of centre, and it's more popular and you can see that it's more invested over there and the prices are better I guess for the people who have a building. Graham: At Autorama? P13: Yeah, and you can see that it's decent and more people over there. Nice parking space.

Recognizable supermarkets, clustering of shops, more investment, available parking spaces give autorama a competitive edge and the actions of the municipality, the new fountain in the centre and new public art could be seen as actions to increase the competitive advantage of the traditional centre, though it is entirely possible from the perspective from a peripheralization theory of shrinkage that the existence of Autorama has contributed to the

decline in Veendam Centre, it has produced wasted space that no longer serve their purpose. The drive toward endless growth sees the construction and expansion of a new centre as a positive development, but does not consider that people do not endlessly consume, so there is a limit on the amount of shops that a town is able to support, especially towns that do not experience a continuous influx of tourists. To avoid the waste of space produced by competing centres, planners need an approach to estimate the consumption capacity of the town or city, approve commercial expansion only when deemed necessary, and find creative approaches to increase the use of space. For example, as some functions are only operational during certain hours, perhaps commercial space can be made more flexible to transform from a shop that operates during the nine to four work hours, while a more evening function can take over that space once the early shop ends operation for the day.

Instead of stimulating competition planners need to find ways of fostering cooperation to avoid the overabundance of shops and vacant shop buildings, though it is still important that people have the opportunity and freedom to pursue entrepreneurial ambitions, the prevailing perception of growth as a measure of success needs to be offset by the quality of the ideas and products offered by entrepreneurs. Cooperation rather than competition, in a sense a building and constant improvement of one another's ideas may produce better innovation than competition, as is exemplified in the way academics and researchers collaborate toward finding solutions to everyday problems. Understanding shrinkage and growth as a peripheralization process, that growth in the centre occurs due to shrinkage in the peripheries, should challenge researchers to consider ways in which municipalities should cooperate, as it then is not necessarily growth that is occurring, but a shifting of resources from one space to another, which contributes then to the advantage of one space over another and increasing spatial inequality.

Projects that did not get approval or were evicted

A few participants had mentioned ambitions or ideas that they were involved in or aware of which were denied the necessary permits or approval. These are listed below.

Social entrepreneurs → The researcher failed to ask what was meant by social entrepreneurs, but P21 said that he knows of some organizations who have tried to establish their social enterprise in Veendam Centre and were not granted permission from the municipality.

Indoor playgrounds → P22 stated that he pitched a business plan for an indoor playground for children to the franchise with the intention of operating in Veendam Centre. This proposal was rejected on the grounds that market research showed no demand for such an enterprise in Veendam.

Housing in a former bank office → P13 mentioned that the owner of a vacant office building wanted to offer the building as a place for housing as is on the grounds that its multiple rooms and centralized heating make it a comfortable place to live. However, the municipality refused this request and the building remains empty.

Galerie Rendez-Vous → One of the now vacant buildings in Veendam Centre used to house an art gallery, which made a special arrangement with the owner to pay for the cost of gas, electricity, and water in exchange for the use of the space. The owner however suddenly was no longer willing to continue with this arrangement and forced the art gallery to close (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2019).

The image shows the former residence of Galerie Rendez Vous, a now non-existent art gallery.

The latter two projects or proposals have elements of degrowth: increasing the use of space and in a sense decommodifying space (in the case of Galerie Rendez Vous). However, the motivations for the building owner to want to allow people to live in his vacant building are not clear. Nonetheless, in a time of housing shortage, these types of projects could be of great help to reduce the demand for houses.

Conclusion

An openness approach can be employed by planners to confront citizens and politicians with new ideas and measure their responses in order to challenge dominant discourses such as the ubiquitous growth narrative. It provides planners with an opportunity to get a deeper understanding of how people interpret the spaces they use every day, which can lead to some unexpected findings. The formal planning sessions in which planners seek to receive input and feedback on planning proposals only attract certain people, who firstly are knowledgeable about such events, and are either curious, in favour, or against the plan and most importantly have the leisure time to attend. Many people are missing from these discussions and it is not because they do not have ideas about how the city should look and function, but because they are not included in a way that works for them. Taking the planning process to the streets and talking with the people that use these spaces becomes a more inclusive strategy of engagement that is only limited by the planner's willingness to engage. As planners interested in degrowth or post-growth search for ways to degrow planning itself, they should consider ways of slowing down planning to allow citizens more time to reflect and consider planning proposals more seriously and increasing citizen participation and control over the planning process.

Planners can look to social movements like the French movement Nuit Debout, who in 2016 occupied public spaces to discuss future plans in a massive group of people. Though the outcome of Nuit Debout is not well understood, it provides a model for using public space for democratic decision making and creating an informal platform for citizens to speak their

thoughts in a space where they will be heard by other citizens. Concerns for the environment and the shortage of housing can be heard in these moments and solutions can be found as a community, or at least citizens can have a clearer picture of what policies and ideas matter in future elections. However, it is important to note that Nuit Debout emerged in response to austerity measures and France has a more prevalent culture of revolt and protest than the Netherlands. If planners are able to organize such a forum, then it could be used to spread ideas about degrowth and test the response from the public. On the other hand, this approach might not be inclusive to everyone, so it is better to approach citizen engagement from as many angles as possible.

A degrowth housing approach, be it squatting, cohousing or some other community based housing project, could provide a space for this kind of participation in public decision making or at least foster a more participatory civic sphere. The redistribution of wealth, the increase in leisure time and conviviality, and the creation of a more equal society in line with degrowth values could see democratic participation increase as people have more freedom and leisure to choose to become involved. This might necessitate such spaces as a public forum for discussion and public deliberation, however it is important to keep in mind that although this sounds utopian, increased participation could become extremely messy and complex as many different viewpoints are brought to the table, including negative ones of bigotry, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia. Greater participation can provide the place to confront these traits, but it cannot guarantee that they will disappear. Preparations need to be made on how to deal with these in a way that ensures that no one feels excluded.

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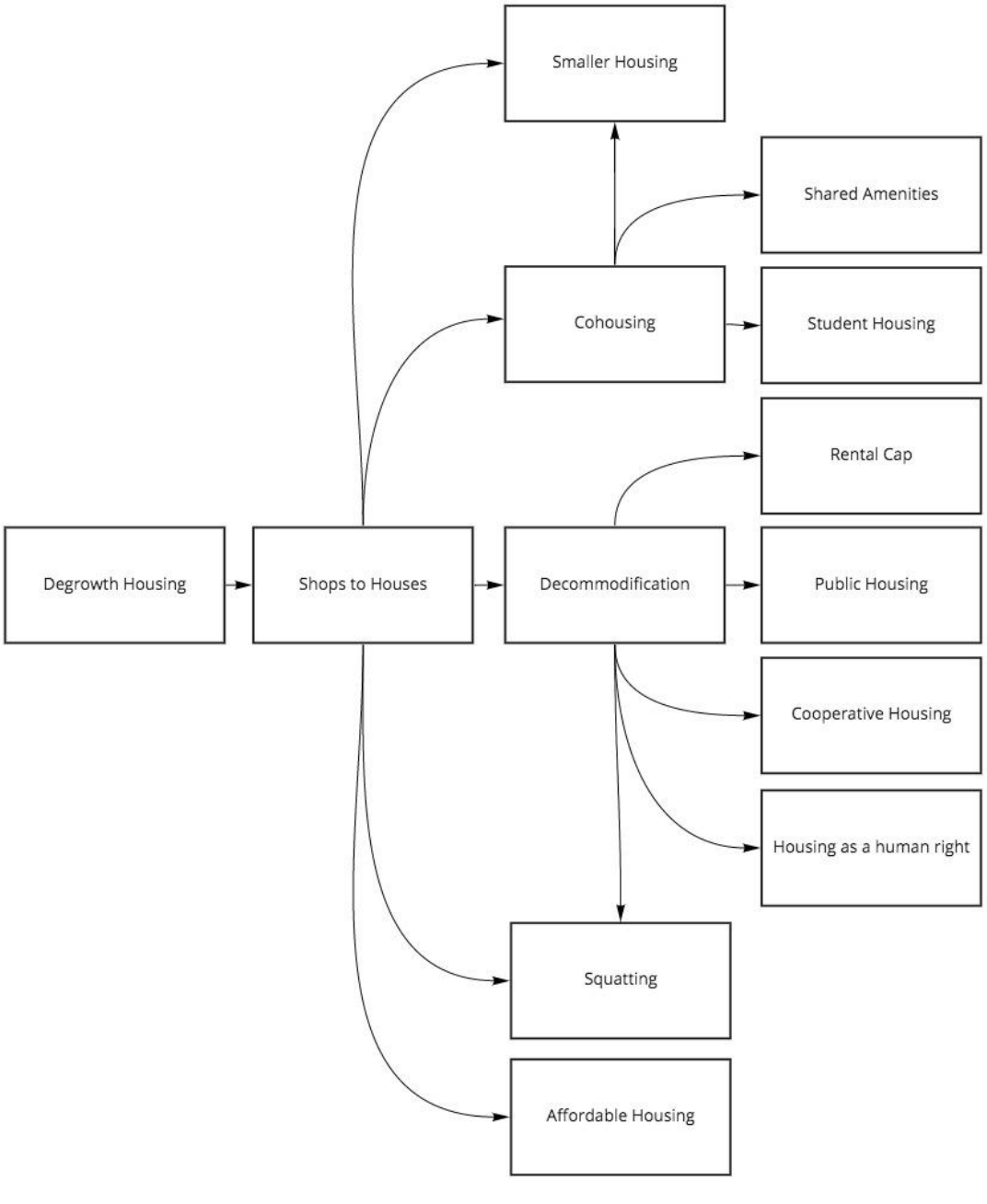
Appendix 1: Interview Participants

Participant Number	*Description*	*Date & Location of interview*
P01	52 year old male, works in the downtown	May 6, Museumplein
P02	20 year old female, used to live in Veendam, now lives in another town. Works in Veendam.	May 6, Museumplein
P03	17 year old male from Veendam	May 6, Kerkstraat
P04	Middle aged male, owns a shop in Veendam	May 6, Veenlustplein
P05	27 year old female from Rotterdam, visiting on a bicycle trip through the area with P06.	May 8, Promenadepad
P06	30 year old female from Amsterdam, visiting on a bicycle through the area with P05.	May 8, Promenadepad
P07	30 something year old female, international living in Veendam. Interviewed over Jitsi.	May 8, online
P08	60 something female, lives in Veendam, works in the downtown. Married to P09 and mother in law to P07. I was invited to their house to interview, as suggested by P07.	May 10, private residence
P09	60 something male, lives in Veendam. Married to P09 and father in law to P07. See P08 for further description.	May 10, private residence
P10	60 something male from Friesland, visiting for the weekend on bicycle with wife. She was present, but did not say very much.	May 15, Museumplein
P11	25 year old female from Muntendam, visiting downtown for the day to do some shopping.	May 15, Promenadepad

P12	37 year old female from Veendam, lives close to the downtown. Married to P13.	May 15, Museumplein
P13	56 year old male from Veendam, works downtown and lives nearby. Married to P12.	May 15, Museumplein
P14	23 year old female from Wildervank, eating ice cream with her mom (P15).	May 15, Museumplein
P15	53 year old female from Wildervank, eating ice cream with her daughter (P14)	May 15, Museumplein
P16	19 year old shop owner (family owned local chain), living in Winschoten.	May 15, Kerkstraat
P17	31 year old, international, recently moved to Groningen from Veendam. Interviewed over Jitsi. Married to P18.	May 19, online
P18	40 year old, international, recently moved to Groningen from Veendam. Interviewed over Jitsi. Married to P17.	May 19, online
P19	40 something female, from Veendam window shopping with her daughter (P20).	May 22, Promenadepad
P20	20 something female, from Veendam currently living in Groningen, window shopping with her mom (P19).	May 22, Promenadepad
P21	30 year old male, living in Veendam, recently moved to Groningen.	May 22, Promenadepad
P22	38 year old male, living in Veendam, downtown with his wife (P23) and children.	June 12, Veenlustplein
P23	35 year old female, living in Veendam, downtown with her husband (P22) and children.	June 12, Veenlustplein
P24	43 year old female, international, living in a village outside Veendam.	June 12, Veenlustplein

Appendix 2: Coding Tree