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# Urban belonging as place-based affect

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**ABSTRACT**

In this paper, we approach urban belonging as place-based affect to understand how it emerges and evolves in qualitatively different ways through everyday interactions with the city. Moving beyond a narrowly defined and fixed notion of urban belonging as feeling at home in place, we examine diverging feelings about Amsterdam during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Confronted with the abrupt reconfiguration of everyday life, some residents felt a strong sense of contentment in relation to place, while others developed more ambivalent feelings. These ranged from anxious detachment, to disenchantment and even alienation and rejection, raising existential questions about their place in the city that reach beyond the pandemic. We demonstrate how these affective inequalities are grounded in everyday practices and evolve through social and material encounters in domestic and public space. Our findings draw attention to the processual and relational nature of urban belonging, highlighting the affective capacities of the city in everyday life.

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## La pertenencia urbana como afecto basado en el lugar

**RESUMEN**

En este artículo, abordamos la pertenencia urbana como afecto basado en el lugar para comprender cómo surge de maneras cualitativamente diferentes a través de las interacciones cotidianas con la ciudad. Más allá de una noción estrictamente definida y fija de la pertenencia urbana como sentirse en casa en el lugar, examinamos cómo evolucionaron los sentimientos divergentes sobre Ámsterdam durante los primeros meses de la pandemia de Covid-19. Frente a la abrupta reconfiguración de la vida cotidiana, algunos residentes se sintieron satisfechos con su lugar en la ciudad, mientras que otros experimentaron un desapego ansioso, desencanto e incluso alienación y rechazo por parte de la ciudad, lo que plantea preguntas existenciales que van más allá de la pandemia. Demostramos cómo estas desigualdades afectivas se basan en prácticas cotidianas y encuentros sociales y materiales en el espacio

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doméstico y público. Nuestros hallazgos llaman la atención sobre la naturaleza procesal y relacional de la pertenencia y destacan las capacidades afectivas de la ciudad en la vida cotidiana.

## L'appartenance urbaine en tant qu'affect attaché au lieu

**RÉSUMÉ**

Dans cet article, nous nous intéressons à l'appartenance urbaine en tant qu'affect attaché au lieu dans le but de comprendre comment elle émerge de manières qualitativement différentes dans les interactions quotidiennes avec la ville. Nous allons au-delà d'une idée figée et strictement définie de l'appartenance urbaine en tant que sentiment de se sentir chez soi dans un lieu et nous étudions l'évolution des sentiments divergents vis-à-vis d'Amsterdam pendant les premiers mois de la pandémie de COVID-19. Face à la réorganisation abrupte de la vie de tous les jours, certains résidents ont ressenti de la satisfaction vis-à-vis de leur place dans la métropole, tandis que d'autres ont éprouvé une anxiété détachée, du désenchantement et même de l'aliénation et un rejet émanant de la cité. Tout cela a mené à des questions existentielles qui vont bien plus loin que la pandémie. Nous démontrons comment ces inégalités émotionnelles sont ancrées dans les pratiques quotidiennes et dans les rencontres sociales et matérielles au sein des espaces publics et privés. Nos observations mettent en lumière la nature procédurière et relationnelle de l'appartenance et soulignent les capacités affectives de la ville dans la vie de tous les jours.

## Introduction

Territorial belonging is generally equated with feeling at home in, or an emotional attachment to, place (Antonsich, 2010). In this paper, we argue that this rather one-dimensional, narrowly defined and fixed notion of belonging – focusing on whether one feels at home in place or not – obscures the different ways in which people relate to and belong in place (Bennett, 2014). We propose that approaching urban belonging as place-based affect can better capture how the city is lived and felt (Anderson, 2014; Wright, 2015) and provides a useful conceptual lens to study how everyday experiences in the city incrementally and cumulatively contribute to diverging and unequal feelings about place (Andrews et al., 2014; Duff, 2010).

Theoretically, we bring the literature on territorial belonging in conversation with phenomenological approaches in geography. We build on scholarship that has studied how human existence and experience is situated in and intrinsically connected to place through embodied engagement with our material and social surroundings (Bennett, 2014; Bille & Simonsen, 2021; Degen & Lewis, 2020; Edensor, 2012). As Conradson and Latham (2007, p. 238) note, 'a person's emotional experience of a city follows from the affective dynamics of the socio-natural – material compositions that they inhabit'. Such an affectual approach deepens our understanding of urban belonging in three ways. First, it moves beyond a binary notion of belonging to capture diverging feelings about city.

Second, it helps us to study the processual nature of belonging by exploring how these place-based affects evolve and emerge in daily life. Third, it highlights the relationality of belonging, foregrounding the active role of place in shaping belonging. As Edensor (2022) notes, 'normally' this ongoing experience of place is rarely reflected upon. It becomes explicit, however, when external forces disrupt place and also people's relationship to it. Research has shown that processes of urban change – ranging from gentrification and urban renewal to urban tourism, industrial decline and even urban warfare – may have substantial affective implications for residents, including feelings of nostalgia, frustration and loss (Baxter & Brickell, 2014). In this paper, we explore this relationship between lived experience of place and urban belonging through the lens of another disruptive force in urban life: that of the COVID-19 pandemic (Devine-Wright et al., 2020; Jensen, 2021; Statz et al., 2023).

We examine the processual and relational nature of urban belonging – as a situated, embodied and diverse experience – through a qualitative study in Amsterdam (the Netherlands) during the first months of the pandemic. We found that the reconfiguration of everyday life in Amsterdam during the pandemic and the disruption of routines and habitual use of place created a new awareness of the city amongst residents (Bissell, 2021; Doughty et al., 2023). Day-to-day experiences in the residential home and while venturing out into urban public space reconfigured people's feelings about the city in diverging and complex ways. To further understand this subjectivity of urban belonging, we examine why some residents were able to sustain and strengthen a sense of rootedness, while others developed more ambivalent and alienating feelings about the city, exposing existing social and spatial inequalities that were previously more obscured.

In the following, we first discuss why an affectual approach provides a useful theoretical lens to understand emerging and evolving geographies of belonging in everyday life. We then present four qualitatively different accounts of urban belonging during the pandemic. We show how everyday practices and encounters at home and in public space informed people's affective relationship to the city. We conclude with a reflection on how to make sense of these diverging experiences and the questions it raises about affective capacities of, and inequalities in, the city.

## Theorizing belonging as affect

Antonsich (2010) observes that place-belongingness or territorial belonging has often been left ill-defined. It tends to be equated with feeling at home in place, while surprisingly little attention is paid to the nature of these feelings (Boccagni & Duyvendak, 2021). As Wood and Waite (2011) state: 'seldom are questions asked that explore what belonging feels like; how it 'works' as an emotional attachment and the significance of the emotionality of belonging' (p. 2). Yet as feminist geographers and other critical scholars have long argued, home places – whether referring to the residential home, the neighbourhood, the city or the country – may be associated with a wide range of ambivalent and painful feelings (Joronen & Griffiths, 2019; Mallett, 2004; Pinkster, 2016; van Lanen, 2022). The danger of a one-dimensional and ideological notion of belonging – as feeling at home in place, which one either does or does not achieve – is that it renders such multifaceted feelings about place invisible. As Wright (2015) notes, the emotional resonances of belonging may be both complex and diverse, ranging from pride to nostalgia, desire or

shame. She therefore pleads for a 'weak theory' of belonging which traces how belonging is felt and lived.

Conceptualizing belonging as affect offers a useful framework to analyse belonging as a diverse embodied and situated experience. Affect refers to 'the emotional palette of lived experiences' (Duff, 2010, p. 884), to the experience of life as it is lived (Anderson, 2014). It refers to subjective moods, feeling states or ambiences that are experienced from moment-to-moment in everyday life. Affective experiences range from a sense of numbness or boredom, to anxiety, excitement or elation, which are 'felt' through the senses, expressed through the body and may be hard to put into words. For this reason, some scholars – particularly those building on non-representational theory – draw a hard distinction between affect as pre-cognitive and pre-discursive and emotions like anger, sadness or happiness, which are explicitly named, interpreted and reflected upon (Pile, 2010). Others, however, see affect as inherently entangled and interconnected with processes of meaning-making. Wetherell (2015) points to 'the highly complex intersections between body states, methods of registering and describing these' (p. 146). Similarly, Anderson (2014) observes that 'in practice affect, feeling and emotions are indistinguishable' (p. 84) because affects – as bodily dispositions – are expressed in feelings and qualified in emotions.

Geographers explore how affects are formed by and emerge in particular places and how specific spaces provide conditioning environments that prime or 'cook' affects (Anderson, 2014). Scholars have studied how places come to be experienced as homely and cosy, exciting or scary (Anderson, 2014; Conradson & Latham, 2007; Edensor, 2012), showing that affective qualities of places – like the calming experience of a cool spot in a city park on a hot summer day or the stressful experience of an overcrowded train during rush hour – are grounded in bodily sensations. In recent years, the concept of affective atmosphere – the 'feel of place' (Degen & Lewis, 2020) – has gained popularity to study people's multisensorial engagement with the sounds, smells, lights and touch of their social and material surroundings. Intriguingly, however, this growing literature has focused largely on how places are felt and how people feel *in* and are affected *by* place, but less on how people feel *about* place, which is the domain of belonging. In this paper, we explore how such *place-based* affects emerge and evolve in everyday life through place.

## *Belonging in everyday life*

To understand why people feel about place the way they do, cultural geographers have drawn attention to mundane embodied and placed experiences in everyday life. Building on phenomenological approaches, Bennett (2014) suggests that belonging is the process through which place becomes part of people's lifeworld and how place and people are entangled in the flow of life. One dimension of this are the spatial and social practices through which people habitually engage with place. For example, in his study of young people in Vancouver, Duff (2010) illustrates how shared practices of hanging out, walking, breakdancing and skateboarding accumulate in the production of 'thick' places, resonating beyond the moment and beyond these particular sites to create a broader sense of belonging. Such place-making practices functioned as more than expressions of young people's relationship with place. They contributed to it, demonstrating the performative dimension of affects (Wetherell, 2013, 2015). Affective experiences in and of place also

emerge through more individualized practices. As Bille and Simonsen (2021, p. 304) note 'practices of cooking, running, reading, and so on, are also atmospheric practices of affecting and being affected performed in solitude within a world of material objects'.

These scholars thus highlight the dialectical relationship between embodied practices and people's affective relationship with place. Such placed practices are not only soothing or stimulating, but can also generate negative affects. For example, Hitchen (2021) describes how paranoid practices amongst workers in a British library in the face of fiscal austerity – including nervous waiting, whispered rumours and exchanging bad-news stories from elsewhere – resulted in an uncanny atmosphere on the work floor of not knowing what is next, but anticipating the worst. Hitchen's study shows that people's feelings about place are also grounded in placed social encounters (Anderson, 2014). Geographers have studied how the coming together of people create place-specific affective atmospheres that live on in people's memories (Edensor, 2012), like the collective excitement of festival sites or the shared sense of purposefulness and togetherness in places of protest. Social encounters also shape the affective experiences of more mundane, ordinary places in the city. For example, in his research on spaces of public transport spaces, Bissell (2010) found that positive affective experiences were sustained by embodied codes of conduct that made other people's behaviour predictable. In contrast, disruptions of everyday rituals lead to negative dispositions towards others and towards place, demonstrating how momentary affects, emerging from placed encounters, can linger and stretch out over time.

Lastly, people's feelings about place also emerge *through* place, when they engage with the materiality of place and material objects in place in daily life (Bille & Simonsen, 2021). Edensor (2022) points out that our everyday experiences are deeply entangled with the material world: place-based qualities of urban landscapes form a rich spatial field of perception, generating diverse emotional, affective and sensory responses. Affective qualities of place have been studied in particular in relation to health and wellbeing (Duff, 2016). Research on therapeutic landscapes has predominantly studied natural landscapes, such as forests, lake areas, urban green spaces and community gardens, as sources of recovery and healing (Doughty et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2015). These studies suggest that wellbeing is anchored in the active and less-than-fully-conscious unfolding of life, accumulating through repeated, positive affective encounters with place (Andrews et al., 2014).

As Wright's (2015) points out, however, such a more-than-human, relational approach is scarce in research on belonging. One example can be found in a recent study on emerging belonging of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, where green and blue spaces in the city were found to act as places of restoration (van Liempt & Staring, 2021). Another example is a study amongst long-term residents in Amsterdam's canal belt. Pinkster and Boterman (2017) found that belonging was reinforced by the sensorial experience of the aesthetic, architectural and natural landscape. Beyond the public sphere, scholars have studied the affective implications of the materiality of the residential home. For example, van Lanen (2022) found that everyday encounters with substandard material housing conditions erode feelings of home through experiences of anxiety and stress over the quality and stability of one's living situation. His observations about home un-making clearly resonate with the broader literature on home that has questioned ideological notions of domestic space as a site of ontological security (Byrne, 2020; Mallett, 2004).

## Research design

In short, the literature on affect and place provides us with a relevant framework to study territorial belonging as an embodied, situated experience that evolves and emerges through place in everyday life. Below, we illustrate the processual and relational nature of urban belonging through the stories of Amsterdam residents about their changing relationship with the city during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. At the start of the pandemic, the Dutch government enacted what they called an 'intelligent lockdown'. While people were expected to stay home as much as possible, working from home and home-schooling, it was not a complete confinement. People were allowed to go outside. Moreover, shops for 'everyday essentials' remained open and restaurants and cafés were open for take-out and home deliveries. Socio-spatial measures included social distancing, a ban on gathering outdoor with more than two people and a limitation on receiving visitors indoor.

The interviews were part of a city-wide study in collaboration with the municipality of Amsterdam, which examined how residents re-evaluated their home, neighbourhood and the city in the spring and summer (De Graaff et al., 2020). After an online panel survey, we conducted 20 in-depth follow-up interviews to better understand diverging experiences. The sample was constructed to include a diverse group of respondents in terms of socio-demographic background, geographical location in the city and varied experiences of their homes and city during the lockdown. The interview sample ultimately consisted of nine men and eleven women, with ages ranging from 19 to 90. Five of the respondents lived alone, three were single parents, five lived with a partner and seven had a partner and children. Four respondents were retired, two were students, two unemployed and the rest worked in a wide variety of jobs with different educational requirements, including secretarial and administrative work, beauty consultant, ICT worker, financial advisor and small business owner. Eight respondents were renters and twelve owners.

Interviews were conducted observing social distancing rules and allowing respondents to determine where and how they would feel most comfortable. Some interviews were conducted by phone or video call, others outside in person while walking a dog or sitting at playgrounds and one interview was conducted on someone's roof garden. Because respondents themselves chose these settings, it generated relevant insights into their particular state of mind at the time. In the interview, respondents were invited to discuss their home life during lockdown, their everyday use of the neighbourhood and lived experiences of public space while venturing outside. Residents were also asked about their residential history and plans for the future, and, at the end of the interview, to reflect on the changes they had observed in the wider city. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 min. Before the interview, respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, data management and anonymization, and asked for consent for recording of the interviews, which were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

There has been much debate on the use of interviews to study affects which deserves some reflection. Some scholars argue that, unlike emotions, affect – as embodied and preconscious – cannot be captured in conscious thoughts and studied through interviews. Others, however, suggest that emotions and affects are inherently entangled and in practice indistinguishable (Anderson, 2014; Pile, 2010; Wetherell, 2015). Dewsbury (2010) concludes that interviews are an effective method when it takes the body seriously,

by attending to what people say about the quality of immediate experience and bodily affections and how their body conveys this through nonlinguistic expressions. In our own study, belonging sounded through the interviews in people's discursive and emotional qualifications of everyday life in the pandemic city, rather than an explicit topic of conversation or named feeling. Belonging made itself known through people's reflections on their place in the city, wondering whether to move or what the city still had to offer them. It was bodily enacted in their tone of voice, postures and facial expressions, for example conveying joy, frustration or grief. Such non-linguistic affective expressions were described in post-interview field notes on interview setting and atmosphere and subsequently included in the interview transcripts.

In line with our phenomenological approach to belonging – as lived and felt –, we used interpretative analysis to make sense of the interplay between everyday placed experiences, practices and encounters at home and in urban public space and people's feelings about the city. Through an interactive, iterative process with the research team, four different accounts of belonging were identified, in the form of contentment, anxious detachment, disenchantment and rejection. This analysis is not exhaustive in the sense that it does not cover all possible experiences of belonging in the pandemic city. However, it was not our aim to construct a typology of place-based affects, but to examine and understand how these different feelings about the city emerge incrementally in everyday life through place.

## Belonging in the pandemic city

Below, we introduce four qualitatively different experiences of urban belonging during the first months of the pandemic in Amsterdam through vignettes of four respondents. Building on their stories, we demonstrate how residents engage with their socio-spatial surroundings in different ways. We use pseudonyms throughout.

### *Contentment*

> We interview Evelien by phone, sitting on her roof terrace. The conversation is lively and cheerful. Recently retired from her work in publishing, Evelien lives with her husband along one of Amsterdam's canals. The lockdown months, she says, have a been a period of reflection and discovery. Making home cooked meals turns out to be just as nice as going out to restaurants and there are plenty of unread books lying around the house for entertainment. It has not been an effort to make it *gezellig* [cosy]. The house is more than big enough to do whatever they want and also have alone time. Although age makes her 'theoretically a risk category', she is in good health and her pension is secure. She does not have the worries that many younger people have. Also, she is willing to accept some risk at her age, because 'you have to consider how you want to spend your time remaining'. So they did not lock themselves up in the house. In fact, she emphasizes animatedly, it has been lovely to explore Amsterdam during the lockdown. Without the hordes of tourists, the city fell quiet and they finally got to experience the real beauty of the canals. There is a sense of companionship among the people they met along the way. It feels like the city is theirs again. Yes, she really loves this city, Evelien concludes. When we say goodbye, she says she regrets she did not choose the video interview: 'you could have seen me here under my parasol, with the view of the blooming butterfly bush and roses on my roof terrace, the massive, friendly waving elm

tree further along the canal and the water below, with the sporadic pleasure boat passing by. All so quiet and peaceful'.

In Evelien's account, urban belonging emerges as a feeling of contentment about her place in the city. Her sense of rootedness is strengthened by positive affective experiences at home and while exploring the city. Not particularly concerned about her health, she has experienced the lockdown as a pleasant slowing down of her hectic life and the city, a positive narrative that we also heard in other interviews. Like Evelien, other interviewees explicitly reflected on their privileged position – with stable incomes, relatively spacious homes and good health – making it easier for them to deal with the challenges of the pandemic. They are aware that was not the case for many people in Amsterdam. Yet these residents also emphasized their own common sense in 'making the lockdown work' to stay healthy and sane. This sense of agency and achievement is illustrated well by Marie, a single mother living with her teenage son. She explains that she realized early on in the lockdown that they needed to figure out how to cope with all the anxiety about covid: 'I said to him, we have to make the best of it [. . .] so we made it *gezellig*. My son is an optimist, like me, which makes life easier'. They decided to start working out at home and take neighbourhood walks.

These residents thus develop a range of soothing practices to feel good at home. Like Evelien, others mentioned appreciating having time for home-made dinners and trying out new recipes. They enjoyed taking up home-making activities like long overdue gardening projects, repainting walls and decorating. To alleviate boredom, they played board games and puzzles. Engaging in home-making together, the lockdown was described as a period of intimacy, as 'quality time'. For example, Renske (a woman in her early thirties, midway into her pregnancy) expressed her satisfaction at 'finally get all those odd jobs done around the house that we never had time for' and described how much she enjoyed seeing her husband in 'working mode', a side of him that she did not know before. But like Evelien, she also appreciated having enough space to find moments of quiet and being alone. In this respect, the materiality of their homes was a key factor in finding the right balance between intimacy and relaxation.

For Evelien, a sense of peace was also found in looking out over the canal, reflecting what Doughty et al. (2023) call 'moments of mindful presence' during the pandemic: an experience of being more grounded by engaging with elements in the everyday landscapes that continue to be normal. Other interviewees describe enjoying spending time looking out from their windows onto the world and developing a new awareness of, and appreciation for, their direct surroundings, showing how the domestic 'stretches out' into the public realm (Blunt & Sheringham, 2019; Boccagni & Duyvendak, 2021). They referred to trees in springtime bloom across the street and hearing birdsong nearby, resonating with the findings of Garrido-Cumbrera et al. (2022) that views of nature can form a source of wellbeing even from within the home.

Seeing one's surroundings with fresh eyes and finding surprise in the familiar also characterized ventures outside. Interviewees talk about exploring and discovering the charm of the neighbourhood where they previously spent little time. Their explorations reflect Phillips' et al. (2015) observation that practicing curiosity can form a source of wellbeing. Intriguingly, it is not just the natural landscape that is referred to in these conversations, but also the architectural ensembles of city streets and individual building

design. Several residents mentioned getting on their bikes to visit the canals in the city centre, as well as other historical neighbourhoods.

Yet social life did not disappear altogether. Like Evelien, other interviewees referred to a relaxed atmosphere in the street, appreciating fleeting friendly interactions with newly met neighbours. Jaap, a social worker in his fifties, muses: 'It's like the city has gone through a period of much needed reflection. No longer rushing from one thing to the other. You know, the whole burnout epidemic [. . .] And everyone just seems more courteous, more human. Like making eye contact in the supermarket aisle and sharing a smile, kind of disarming. Because we are all in the same boat'. Such positive experiences of social encounters can be partly understood in the light of recent debates in Amsterdam about the city becoming 'too crowded' and increasingly anonymous. Evelien's reference to the absence of tourist bodies and the neighbourhood as a village was mentioned by many interviewees and can be interpreted as a form of revanchism, a reclaiming of the city for locals rather than a sea of strangers (Pinkster & Boterman, 2017).

In short, what stands out in Evelien's story and other residents is their active and conscious engagement with both their material and social environment in the home and in public space. Combined, such soothing practices and positively experienced encounters accumulated in a feeling of contentment in relation to place and a sense of sureness that they are where they should be and the city is theirs to enjoy.

### *Anxious detachment*

> We interview Charlie via video-calling in her spacious home-office. The conversation proceeds stiffly. As a digital tech worker, Charlie explains, she worked remotely before the pandemic, so workwise the first months of lockdown were not much of an adjustment and isolating with her boyfriend in the large rowhouse was quite comfortable. Psychologically, however, it has been a terrible time. Charlie compares the lockdown to living in a spaceship, where every day is the same and you lose a sense of time and self. Having previously lived with depression, she found the sameness of lockdown life disorienting, struggled to keep a schedule and motivate herself to keep the house clean. She has felt bored: there are only so many video games to play or Netflix series to watch. Online social activities lost momentum over time and she notes that there are only so many memes you can send to your friends before conversation runs out. Only the wildlife in her garden provided some distraction, but it lost some of its charm after one of her anonymous neighbours apparently left for the countryside, taking the cats who always came to visit. It felt like losing two friends. Charlie's sense of isolation is exacerbated by her anxiety about going out. She and her partner had Covid very early on in the pandemic and it took her months to recover. Scared of being infected again – 'you never know who in the crowd might have it' – they only went out incidentally for a walk in a nearby park. They wore face masks, even though these were not mandatory in the early months, and people looked at them strangely. Rather than enjoying the break from boredom, she found keeping distance extremely stressful. So they cocooned at home, avoiding people, avoiding the neighbourhood and the city, which she calls the worst place to be in a pandemic.

Charlie's story conveys a feeling of anxious detachment from the city. At home, cocooning formed a self-protective practice, a spatial response to an existential fear of being infected. In Charlie's case, this was health-related, but other residents cocooned for different reasons. For example, Sietske's anxiety about getting sick was not just apparent in her citing detailed numbers of infections and repeated references to new medical

insights about covid, but also her lengthy discussion of the larger economic impacts of the pandemic on society and the possible ramifications for her own administrative job in the cultural sector. As a single mother in the early fifties, her utmost concern about getting sick was economic, noting 'It is just me . . . If I get sick, everything falls apart'. So she stayed home, not seeing family and friends, only taking incidental walks in the countryside to avoid interaction.

Yet Charlie's story illustrates that hunkering down does not always function as a soothing practice or turn the home into a comfort bubble (Brighenti & Pavoni, 2019). This is aptly shown by her metaphor of the spaceship in which she felt increasingly suspended in time and space, bored and anxious. Sietske also describes feeling very lonely with no other adults in the house to share her worries with. Other interviewees similarly struggled with the lack of routines and the absence of stimuli, mirroring findings in a study by Statz et al. (2023) about loss of normalcy and daily routines as a source of grief and sadness amongst ageing adults during lockdown. So while the home formed the hyper-object in their daily lives, a materially bounded and safe space that physically kept the virus out – describing what Bissell (2021) refers to as a capsular sense of place – it could not keep out anxiety. Interviewees describe a range of anxious practices (Hitchen, 2021) like vigilantly keeping track of the virus and the news to deal with their sense of uncertainty. This is well illustrated by Amir, a 19-year-old student born and raised in the city and still living with his parents. Mostly stuck in his room, his computer formed a digital lifeline. Scouring online news, he describes feeling overwhelmed by 'the dark cloud hanging over the world' and he did not leave the house for weeks on end. When he finally stepped out, he felt disoriented, musing 'Stepping over the threshold was such a strange sensation . . . there is literally just one door separating you from the world [. . .] The outside . . . at that point it sounded so big. And it was just the front door . . . just one door'.

Both Amir and Charlie's story highlight how digital technologies magnified their concerns about getting sick and fuelled their hesitancy to venture outside, thereby demonstrating that participation in digital spaces can change people's relationship to material spaces in complex ways. Consequently, when they did go out, they tried to avoid people as much as possible. In a way, they took their spaceship outside, developing tactics like speeding up, taking quiet routes and strategically planning shopping trips very early in the morning. But with the purposeful avoidance of encountering other bodies in public space also came a disorienting sensation of floating around in familiar surroundings that suddenly seems strange. Several interviewees note feeling discomfited by birdsong, identified as an unnatural soundscape for a city. Jeroen, a single 50+ man living in the centre of town, talks about the uncanny sensation of walking through an empty city, without the normal hustle and bustle: 'I realize that some people love this peace and quiet, but doesn't Amsterdam like this just feel wrong?'. His unease is enhanced by the material traces of covid along the streets, like queuing stickers and signposts. Forming what Jensen (2021) refers to as a 'semiotic landscape of fear', they remind him that public space is not safe. The eeriness of the city mirrors his sense of isolation at home, where the abrupt loss of clients at his work in the tourist industry left him with little to do, pulling him into a depressed state and to retreat further into his home. Similarly, other interviewees refer to encounters with the empty streetscape as scary and *unheimisch*, even comparing it to zombie movies.

In short, for this group of residents, self-chosen isolating practices – both at home and in public space – transformed their relationship with the city from one of the easy comfort to one of the anxious detachment and estrangement, whereby the outside was increasingly viewed as dangerous (Brighenti & Pavoni, 2019). Yet their generalized anxiety about the impact of covid on their health and income made it difficult to develop soothing practices at home to lighten their mood, despite having enough space to retreat from the world. As the city receded to the background of their daily lives, it grew into a threatening and looming presence.

## *Disenchantment*

> We talk to Valerie via video call. She is sitting at her dining room table in a light living room, now also her workplace, she says wryly. In her early thirties, she describes herself as very social, a *real* city person. She loves restaurants, going out for coffee with her friends, visit pop concerts or shows. So being stuck at home during lockdown was very lonely. Before covid, she notes, living in an expensive, small apartment with overdue maintenance issues did not matter, but now it does. Working her marketing job from home, she has felt stifled by her workaholic boyfriend, who makes comments like 'are you finished already?' when she is relaxing with a drink on the couch after a long work day. They were never one of those couple couples, so spending evening after evening together has been an adjustment. It does not help that all day she sees people are hanging out at the waterfront in front of their house, not keeping distance, while she and her boyfriend have kept their social circle very small. Valerie realizes that sticking to the rules is not in Amsterdam's DNA, but it now causes unpleasant confrontations on the street and in supermarkets between people with different interpretations of what is allowed. She was recently cursed at when trying to keep distance in the street, by an older lady – 'obviously in the risk category' – that Valerie is supposed to be protecting with her own good behaviour. So the city does not feel like itself anymore. Valerie always thought that she would stay here forever, that Amsterdam was THE place for her, but really . . . what is the point of staying in this apartment if you cannot enjoy the city and you no longer have to live close to work? She never thought she would say it, but maybe it is time to move somewhere spacious and green, like her boyfriend has been suggesting.

Valerie clearly feels disenchanted with the city. Pre-pandemic, her sense of belonging was grounded in an active enjoyment of the city, while her house formed a trivial space in her life, providing a place to sleep and access to the city. Now she feels involuntarily displaced from the city into her home, where she is confronted with a lack of space, privacy and freedom. Her experience resonates with Byrne's observation that while political responses to the pandemic were founded on the idea of the domestic home as a 'paradigmatic site of ontological security' providing safety, security and stability (Byrne, 2020, pp. 353, in referring to Giddens), the material home does not always provide the conditions under which staying home is comfortable or feasible. Other interviewees similarly talk about living like sardines in a can and a lack of personal freedom at home. Jannie, a 60-year-old woman living in a social housing apartment near the city centre, is highly aware of the prying eyes of her 'yuppy neighbors' across the courtyard, ' looking down at her' from newly constructed roof terraces. She no longer feels free to walk around the house naked, for her the ultimate experience of privacy and being comfortable in her own skin. To make things worse, they are enjoying their 'fancy roof terraces', while she is struggling to pay the rent and has fallen behind in her health insurance payments due to losing her evening

job in a hotel at the start of the pandemic. In this respect, Jannie's and Valerie's homes are clearly not isolated cocoons. Their house is a porous space (Blunt & Sheringham, 2019), where neighbours and the outside world are present through sounds, sights and smells, making it difficult for them to do what they need to relax.

Yet venturing outside does not alleviate Valerie's frustration. The city is no longer the place she values. Her disenchantment is not just related to the closure of restaurants and bars, cinemas or concert halls. She also misses the familiar and comfortable sociability of Amsterdam's streets. Her negative evaluation of encounters with fellow residents is not health-related, but social in nature, triggered by the loss of predictable, shared codes of conduct (Bissell, 2010). This experience is echoed by Jannie, who compares going outside to a surrealistic video game, where people act like robots following 'overly cautious' distancing rules, 'jumping out of the way' as if everyone represents danger. Frustrated about the hyper-regulation of social life communicated through endless signs and billboards (Jensen, 2021), Jannie fumingly describes how she accidentally swallowed her chewing gum during an elevator ride in a parking garage, started coughing and was kicked out 'suffocating and almost dying alone out there'. Also Andrea, an elderly resident, talks at length about missing the friendly banter typical to Amsterdam's streets. Informal chats with strangers used to structure her daily routines in the neighbourhood and prevented her from being lonely as a retired widow living alone. Now people speed up to avoid her. Although she does not experience public space as overtly hostile, like Jannie does, Andrea nevertheless draws a dystopian comparison to her childhood memories of the second world war, when she had to move to a village where she knew no-one and felt alien.

In short, Valerie represents a group of residents who are disenchanted with the city. Restricted in their urban lifestyle and stifled in their small homes, they are starting to question whether Amsterdam is where they want to be. For some, the closing down of urban amenities comes with an awareness that perhaps they had already 'outgrown' the city and had just not realized it, while others describe the option of moving as cutting their losses. They actively reconsider their living situation by surfing real estate websites, looking for more affordable and spacious homes elsewhere.

## *Alienation and rejection*

> We meet Johan on a nice summer day at a picnic table in one of Amsterdam's more peripheral parks. Belying his relaxed appearance in shorts and stylish sunglasses, he is nervous, talking fast in long stretches, switching topics often and leaving sentences unfinished. It is clear from the start that he has a lot on his mind and seems relieved to talk through some of his unhappy experiences in the past months. The lockdown has not been a good time for him. With family in Italy, he closely followed the news about early infections and deaths in the northern provinces. Covid has felt very close by, even if infection rates in Amsterdam were low. Anxious about getting sick, he has been very careful about going out and he also does not enjoy the purposeless walks in the eerily quiet and ugly concrete city. It feels like a dead space. As his temporary job contract was not renewed and his social life fell away, he was pretty much alone weeks after weeks, checking infections rates daily and watching old teenage movies. His one-room studio is the opposite of home, he says. More like a prison. With the sight of his unused laptop and dumbbells telling him to find a job or start working out, it was impossible to

> relax. What person in his early thirties lives like this, he wonders, without a job and no girlfriend? The lockdown has been a time for facing facts, he says: while he has always loved Amsterdam, the city where he was born, he has come to realize that he can never achieve here what he had hoped. He will never be able to afford a proper house. Perhaps there is no place for him here any longer.

Johan's story conveys a sense of alienation from and rejection by the city. His experiences during lockdown have raised existential questions about his life and his place in the city, as he struggled with a generalized sense of anxiety about getting sick, worrying about the ramifications of the pandemic for him personally – concerning his income – and for wider society. Although he diligently adhered to social distancing and isolation rules, he did not feel confident it was enough to keep the virus out. His concern about the porosity of his home is echoed by Sandra, whose husband has respiratory problems, making him a high risk for covid infection. She describes religiously wiping down the railings of the shared stairs in her apartment building every day and taking showers after coming home from her health-care job. She is constantly worried about bringing the virus home, explaining: 'I guess at home I am the danger . . . people are getting more sloppy, but I . . . I have to stay alert, and. [silence] . . . but it is also such a hassle and I think "this is no way to live"'.

Material objects play an important role in enhancing Johan's anxiety at home, like his laptop and the dumbbells which he associates with work life and social activities. His story highlights the challenges posed by the hybridization of everyday life to navigate the spatiality and materiality of small homes (Doucet et al., 2021; Preece et al., 2023). Other respondents similarly talk about their laptops staring at them, encroaching on their free time and diluting the meaning of home as a personal and private space. Johan's reference to living in a prison reflects this process of home un-making (van Lanen, 2022). The prison metaphor is also used by Sandra when she describes having to put her 2-year-old son in a playpen all day, after repeated neighbour complaints about him running around the room: 'It's just. . . [lengthy silence] you are really restricted in moving around, in your freedom really. In every way you can imagine'.

For Johan and Sandra, going outside is accompanied by a sense of gloom and danger. Concern about infection dominates their experience. As Sandra explains: 'I always felt so at home in the city. Especially when I still lived alone. That I was always part of the city and there would always be people around. But now I realize it was a false security. The city kind of turns against you. [. . .] Now people literally form a risk. Where I used to feel safe surrounded by people'. For somewhat different reasons, Manuel reaches a similar conclusion. After an accident in his twenties, he had to learn to adapt to living with a brain injury, but until the pandemic he had not realized how unsuited this made him to city life. Now having to process all the new cues and instructions in public space and adjusting to new routines in grocery stores to avoid infection, he realizes that city life – even during a pandemic – is just too fast-paced, with too many stimuli for someone like him.

For this group of residents, the pandemic has made them acutely aware of their precarious positions in terms of housing, work and/or health. It has exposed something that was, up to then, in the back of their minds: that perhaps there is no place for them in the city. Their sense of rejection conveys the pain of a broken relationship with the city where they grew up and that is so important to them. Yet rather than blaming the city, they interpret their inability to cope with the changing nature of urban life as a personal failure,

showing how notions of the self, embodied experience and perceptual environments blend to construct life-worlds (Pile, 2010). This becomes evident in Johan's and Sandra's reflexive question: if this is how I live, what does it say about me?

## Conclusion

In this paper, we approached urban belonging as affect to capture how it evolves and emerges in qualitatively different ways through everyday entanglements with place (Bennett, 2014; Degen & Lewis, 2020). To better understand the affective capacities of the city (Conradson & Latham, 2007), we studied diverging feelings of belonging in Amsterdam during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. As 'normal' urban life came to a halt, some residents experienced a strong sense of contentment in relation to place, whereby day-to-day experiences during the lockdown served as confirmation of their place in life and in the city. Other residents expressed much more ambivalent, antagonistic and alienating feelings about the city. Their stories show urban belonging to be a multifaceted affective experience that reaches far beyond a dichotomous notion of feeling at home in place, or not.

The stories of our respondents subsequently highlight both the processual and relational nature of territorial belonging, providing insight in 'the myriad of more-than-human processes of attunement and attachment through which belongings [note the plural] are constituted' (Wright, 2015, p. 392). Distinctive feelings about the city evolved in everyday life through the complex interplay between embodied practices (ranging from soothing, to anxious and restricted), social encounters (differently experienced as pleasant, dangerous or antagonistic) and the materiality of place and placed objects. These facets of everyday life were found to be strongly intertwined and not so easily disentangled (Bennett, 2014; Pile, 2010). For example, Evelien's contentment with the city was grounded, amongst others, in soothing home-making practices like roof-top gardening while enjoying her view across the canal. She consciously engaged with the materiality of her home and its surroundings to reduce the sense of aimlessness during the lockdown. Similarly, Charlie's fear of getting sick translated into elaborate spatial tactics of avoidance in public space. Meant to limit the health dangers of social encounters, the uncanny emptiness along her routes paradoxically strengthened her anxious detachment from the city.

These examples demonstrate the dialectical relationship between affect, practice and place (Duff, 2010; Wetherell, 2013, 2015): affects inform how people engage with the city, but people also manage affects through their surroundings. In fact, for some of our respondents *not* being able to do what they wanted or needed turned out to be fundamental in shaping belonging. This is illustrated by Valerie's frustration about the restriction of her usual activities in the city and by Johan feeling frozen at home as the house also became his (failing) work space and his (unused) gym, with his laptop and dumbbells staring at him from across the room. It is here that notable inequalities between residents come to the fore. The ability to engage in soothing practices or to experience encounters as pleasant is not simply grounded in an optimistic outlook on life – as suggested earlier in this paper by Marie – but conditioned by social position and spatial location. To put it simply, it is easier to be resilient when you have a spacious home, an attractive view, a secure job and are healthy. From this perspective, challenging or debilitating affects can be understood as the embodiment of structural precarity (Joronen & Griffiths, 2019).

Reflecting on the role of place in this process, we find that the domestic and urban realm do not just function as cumulative spaces of belonging, but as relational spaces that co-constitute each other (Blunt & Sheringham, 2019; Boccagni & Duyvendak, 2021). Lived experience of the home shape lived experiences of public space, and vice versa. Evelien, for example, experienced her home as the quintessential comfort bubble (Brighenti & Pavoni, 2019), a bounded protective space from where the city could be explored and enjoyed, even from within the home through the views outside the window. Charlie shared Evelien's capsular sense of home (Bissell, 2021), but it had an entirely different affective connotation, which is strongly influenced by her fear of infection in public space. In contrast, Valerie's negative experiences at home reflect her sense of displacement from the city, further emphasized by the view from her window of people disregarding social distancing rules and antagonistic social encounters when she goes outside. Lastly, Johan's extreme alienation in his home and in public space culminate in an existential out-of-placeness in relation to society and the city. These stories of home un-making illustrate the precarious nature of domestic space as a site of ontological security (Byrne, 2020; Mallett, 2004; van Lanen, 2022) and demonstrate that the boundaries between the outside world and the private realm are often quite permeable (Garrido-Cumbrera et al., 2022). The findings thereby highlight the complex interplay between lived experiences in the home, street, neighbourhood and the wider city, as well as digital space, in shaping people's relationship to the city (Blunt & Sheringham, 2019).

In addition, our study shows that the affective capacities of place go beyond the general, meaning that the observed place-based affects are particular to Amsterdam in a number of ways. For example, Evelien's current sense of contentment is grounded in Amsterdam's unique landscape of canals which in fact formed a source of pleasure for many of our interviewees, highlighting how the built urban environment can function as a therapeutic landscape fostering belonging (Duff, 2016; Edensor, 2022; Phillips et al., 2015). Yet these unique, imaginative surroundings are not available to everyone and stand in stark contrast to Charlie's new-built neighbourhood, which she refers to as 'mind-numbing', or to the modernist, concrete streetscape in Johan's peripheral neighbourhood which he describes as a 'dead space'. Moreover, Evelien's contentment can only be understood in light of pre-pandemic frustrations about the city's touristification and spoilt beauty (Pinkster & Boterman, 2017). Amsterdam is also present as a distinctive affective space in Valerie's frustration about people not keeping to the rules, which she acknowledges as 'simply not part of Amsterdam's DNA', something she used to love but that now fuels her disenchantment with the city. Finally, both her and Johan's negative experiences at home reflect a much broader, already existing housing affordability crisis in the city. Consequently, the painful experience of feeling trapped, stuck and lonely during the pandemic (Preece , 2021) also reach beyond it, raising fundamental questions about their place in the city.

Comparing these diverging feelings about Amsterdam, the differences are striking. Yet combined they resonate with Bennett's (2014) understanding of urban belonging as ontological: place becomes part of people's life stories and people make sense of their life through place. Everyday practices and material and social encounters shape people's relationship to the city in a process that Edensor (2012, p. 1114) fittingly refers to as the sedimentation of affectual belonging, noting that 'affective experience of space is usually conditioned by previous experience, by habit, by familiar emotions and sensations that

produce feelings of belongingness or otherwise'. Our findings illustrate how contingent lived experiences of the city incrementally and cumulatively linger and stretch out beyond specific moments and places in sometimes painful ways (Bissell, 2010; Hitchen, 2021; Pinkster, 2016). Ultimately, our study therefore draws attention to the substantial affective inequalities inherent to urban life. As Doucet et al. (2021) note, for geographers COVID-19 presented an opportunity to expose previously obscured or ignored spatial inequalities and draw attention to variegated, situated experiences. Indeed, the distinctive belongings highlighted in this paper intersect with well-known social inequalities, including physical and mental health, quality of housing and stability of employment and income, but add an affective dimension. Diverging, unequal lived experiences of everyday urban places resonate, leading residents to re-evaluate the city and exposing difficult questions about who can claim the city as theirs.

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