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Narratives of neighbourhood change and loss of belonging in an urban garden village

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ABSTRACT

In studies on the ties between residents and their residential surroundings, it is generally assumed that, over time, residents become more attached to their neighbourhood. However, as neighbourhoods change due to economic, political and social processes at higher spatial scales, so may residents' relationship to them. A qualitative case study in a working-class neighbourhood in Amsterdam explored the circumstances under which residents come to experience a loss of belonging. In-depth interviews provide insight into the way in which residents perceive, experience and make sense of processes of neighbourhood change. Although a particular group of Villagers express a strong sense of belonging to the neighbourhood, they perceive a process of neighbourhood decline, which they attribute to changing housing regimes, retrenchment of the local welfare state and shifting paradigms in neighbourhood governance. Consequently, the experienced disruption of neighbourhood life and local ways of 'doing' neighbourhood also result in feelings of discontent with governing institutions and the wider society. The study therefore draws attention to both the salience of the local in, and the relational nature of, neighbourhood belonging.

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PALABRAS CLAVE
el pertenecer; cambio barrial; políticas de diseño espacial

Récits de transformation de quartier et de la perte d'appartenance dans un jardin de village urbain

RÉSUMÉ

Dans les études sur les liens entre les résidents et leur environnement résidentiel, on présuppose généralement que, avec le temps, les résidents s'attachent de plus en plus à leur quartier. Pourtant, au fur et à mesure que les quartiers changent à cause de processus économiques, politiques et sociaux à des échelles spatiales supérieures, les relations des résidents avec leur quartier changent avec eux. Une étude de cas qualitative dans un quartier ouvrier d'Amsterdam a exploré les circonstances dans lesquelles les résidents en sont venus à faire l'expérience d'une perte d'appartenance. Des entretiens approfondis donnent une idée de la façon dont les résidents perçoivent les processus de changement de quartier, comment ils vivent l'expérience

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et comment ils la comprennent. Bien qu'un groupe particulier de résidents exprime un lien fort d'appartenance au quartier, ils perçoivent un processus de déclin du quartier, qu'ils attribuent au changement de politique du logement, à la réduction des dépenses à l'aide sociale des collectivités locales et aux paradigmes changeants de la gouvernance de quartier. Par conséquent, le bouleversement de la vie de quartier et des coutumes locales de « pratiques » du quartier dont ils font l'expérience a aussi pour conséquence des sentiments de mécontentement à l'encontre des institutions gouvernementales et de la société en général. L'étude attire donc l'attention à la fois sur la prépondérance du côté local et sur la nature relationnelle de l'appartenance à un quartier.

Narrativas del cambio en un barrio y la pérdida de pertenencia en una ciudad jardín

RESUMEN

En los estudios sobre los vínculos entre los residentes y sus entornos residenciales, en general se supone que, con el tiempo, los residentes se apegan más a su barrio. Sin embargo, como los barrios cambian a mayores escalas espaciales debido a procesos económicos, políticos y sociales, también lo hacen las relaciones de los residentes con ellos. Un estudio de caso cualitativo en un barrio obrero en Amsterdam exploró las circunstancias en las que los residentes experimentan una pérdida de pertenencia. Entrevistas en profundidad dan una idea de la forma en que los residentes perciben, experimentan y dan sentido a los procesos de cambio en el vecindario. Aunque un determinado grupo de pobladores expresa un fuerte sentido de pertenencia al barrio, también se percibe un proceso de declive barrial, que se atribuye a los cambios en los regímenes de vivienda, a los recortes en los subsidios estatales locales y al cambio de paradigmas en la gobernanza barrial. En consecuencia, la interrupción de la vida barrial y las formas locales de 'hacer' el barrio que se experimentan también dan lugar a sentimientos de descontento con las instituciones de gubernamentales y la sociedad en general. Por tanto, el estudio llama la atención tanto a la relevancia de lo local en, y la naturaleza relacional de, la pertenencia barrial.

Introduction

A central theme in geography is how people relate to the places in which they live. Affective ties between people and places have been studied at different spatial scales, ranging from one's home to regions, nation-states and beyond, using different conceptual lenses, such as place attachment, sense of place, sense of belonging and feeling at home (Antonsich, 2010; Fenster, 2005; Mee & Wright, 2009; Morley, 2001). Particular attention has been paid to the scale of the neighbourhood (Kearns & Parkinson, 2001), despite the fact that neighbourhood attachment is often weaker than attachment to one's home or the city (Lewicka, 2010). Studies on belonging in neighbourhoods often assume that attachment is a positive experience, which grows stronger over time. As Fenster (2005, p. 243) notes, 'in many cases belonging is […] associated with past and present experiences and memories and future ties connected to a place, which grow with time'. The assumption is that as one lives longer in a particular place, the neighbourhood becomes familiar and meaningful through everyday

practices (Benson, 2014; Laurier, Whyte, & Buckner, 2002) and one feels more comfortable and safe there. Antonsich (2010) refers to this process of feeling at home as territorial belonging or place-belonging.

It has been argued, however, that this optimistic perspective on belonging does not reflect the complex and sometimes ambivalent meanings that residential surroundings can have for residents (Duyvendak, 2011; Manzo, 2005; Massey, 2005). For example, studies on place-based displacement of lower class residents in gentrifying neighbourhoods have shown that long-term residents may come to experience a sense of estrangement from their surroundings as a result of a growing mismatch between neighbourhood identity and their own social (and in particular, class) identity (Davidson, 2009). These findings indicate that as neighbourhoods are impacted by, and change due to, economic, political and social processes at higher spatial scales, so may residents' relationship to them. This paper explores the circumstances under which neighbourhood belonging – understood here as the degree to which residents feel at home in and identify with a neighbourhood – decreases or transforms into a sense of estrangement, which may subsequently translate into tensions between different groups of residents and between residents and governing institutions (Duyvendak, 2011).

A qualitative study was undertaken in a low-income neighbourhood in Amsterdam to provide insight into the way in which residents perceive, experience and make sense of processes of neighbourhood change and how this influences their sense of belonging. Building on geographical conceptions of neighbourhoods as contingent, multiscalar and socially constructed (Cresswell, 2009; Madden, 2014; Martin, 2003; Massey, 2005), the study aims to provide insight into the dynamic and relational nature of neighbourhood belonging by questioning how changes in the meaning of neighbourhood are influenced by, and reflect, political and social configurations in wider society. The paper starts with a discussion of the research literature on belonging at the neighbourhood scale. Then the research methodology and case are introduced. The empirical section of the paper discusses experiences of belonging of long-term residents and their perceptions of neighbourhood change. This is followed by an exploration of the processes underlying these changes, which relate to changes in housing policy and governing practices of local institutions.

Belonging and neighbourhood change

How people relate to their residential surroundings has been studied by social scientists from different disciplines, including environmental psychologists, geographers, sociologists and anthropologists. Geographers have contributed to this literature by questioning how belonging is influenced by multiple dimensions of place (Lewicka, 2010; Martin, 2003). Neighbourhoods can be conceptualized as so-called complex commodities (Galster, 2001), forming bundles of physical, social, economic, political, symbolic and historical attributes. Some of these dimensions have been studied more extensively than others in relation to place attachment and belonging.

In particular, a substantial body of literature focuses on the degree to which neighbourhoods function as communities and form a source of social capital (Blokland-Potters, 2003; Fischer, 1982; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Völker, Flap, & Lindenberg, 2007). Classic urban sociological studies in working-class neighbourhoods, such as the work of Elias and Scotson (1965) and Suttles (1972), explored how social change in the neighbourhood impacted

communities and residents' sense of home. These studies found that the inflow of new residents goes hand in hand with boundary drawing between who does and does not belong based on perceived differences in norms and values, behaviour and lifestyle. These boundaries often overlap with multiple dimensions of difference, such as class, race and ethnicity, distinguishing not only between, but also within, these social categories (Woldoff, 2011). As 'others' move into the neighbourhood, long-term residents may start to feel increasingly out of place and express a sense of nostalgia for the 'old' neighbourhood and former ways of neighbouring (Blokland-Potters, 2003; Watt, 2006). This negative depiction of working-class attachment to place is often contrasted with the positive experiences of middle-class residents (Paton, 2014). Following the work of Bourdieu, sociologists have described neighbourhood choice of the urban middle class as part of a project of the self and the aesthetic and reputational value of a neighbourhood as more important than its social function (Benson, 2014; Savage, Barlow, & Longhurst, 2005). Neighbourhoods function as a source of symbolic capital whereby middle-class residents align their social identity with particular places, a process which Savage and colleagues have called 'elective belonging'.

Neighbourhood belonging, however, goes beyond the social meaning of place (Martin, 2003) and may also be related to environmental attributes (Lewicka, 2010; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). This includes natural conditions, such as the presence of green spaces, bodies of water or the view of mountains in the background; the nature of the built environment, such as architectural style, building size, street lay-out; and the degree to which the neighbourhood is clearly delineated from the urban fabric by roads, waterways, parks or even gates. According to Lewicka (2011), more physically distinct places generate stronger emotional connections for residents. In addition, neighbourhoods are made up of a collection of 'micro-publics' (Valentine, 2008) that may function as nodes in residents' everyday routines and foster neighbourhood belonging. These may include specific shops, services and local institutions as well as parks, playgrounds, squares and particular iconic buildings (Kusenbach, 2008).

This study builds on such a layered and multidimensional conception of neighbourhood – not only as social and symbolic spaces, but also as material settings that accommodate *and* shape the everyday lives of residents (Cresswell, 2009) – to study belonging. Nevertheless, research has shown that belonging in the neighbourhood cannot be taken for granted. Neighbourhood belonging can be selective (Watt, 2009), in the sense that certain groups of residents may choose to identify with particular segments of the neighbourhood while disaffiliating from other segments (see also Benson & Jackson, 2013; Uitermark, Duyvendak, & Kleinhans, 2007). In addition, residents can adopt a strategy of non-belonging, disaffiliating from the neighbourhood altogether (Pinkster, 2014). Whether belonging develops ultimately seems to depend on the interaction between social identity and place identity.[1] Neighbourhood belonging should therefore be understood as 'performed, displayed, and enacted through individual and collective practices' (Antonsich, 2010, p. 652).

Theorizing belonging as practice – which Benson and Jackson (2013) refer to as 'doing' neighbourhood – may help to understand the consequences of neighbourhood change. Paton (2014) notes that studies on 'doing' neighbourhood have been largely preoccupied with the urban middle class. Research has focused on the way in which middle-class residents engage with the neighbourhood discursively, by celebrating particular aspects of local history and identity that match their own social identities (Benson, 2014). Anglo-Saxon studies in particular emphasize this 'symbolic' use of space over 'actual' use of space (Blokland, 2009, p. 1608). Other studies show, however, that particular fragments of the urban middle class

also engage with the neighbourhood in other ways, using a range of commercial spaces and public services, as well as public space (Andreotti, Le Galès, & Moreno-Fuentes, 2015; Boterman, 2012; Karsten, 2014). In other words, 'doing' neighbourhood is not just about place-framing (Martin, 2003), but also includes the way in which everyday routines are embedded in the neighbourhood (Benson, 2014; Cresswell, 2009; de Certeau, 1984).

Nevertheless, these individual consumption practices are quite different from the collective ways of 'doing' neighbourhood observed in working-class neighbourhoods (Blokland-Potters, 2003; Elias & Scotson, 1965; Watt, 2006). Research shows that a sense of belonging is derived from informal socializing with and support relationships between neighbours. Paton (2014) describes a sense of rootedness that come from living in a particular place for a long time and social bonding with fellow residents. Valentine (2008) notes that this not only includes interactions with close friends and neighbours, but also everyday encounters in the neighbourhood and 'ordinary' interactions with familiar strangers who have shared ideas about neighbourliness and similar ways of using the neighbourhood (Laurier et al., 2002).

In short, neighbourhood belonging is expressed and maintained through both individual ànd collective practices in place (Benson & Jackson, 2013). Gotham and Brumley (2002, p. 269) refer to this as 'using' space, by which they mean 'the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain a personal identity tied to place'. At the same time, neighbourhoods are not closed or bounded containers, but are produced by and embedded in wider social, economic and political forces (Cresswell, 2009; Massey, 2005). Martin (2003, p. 362) argues that 'neighborhood […] should be studied as a contingent, flexible space that nonetheless has material, experiential salience for people's lives'. She notes that conflicts may arise in situations where there are different perspectives about what the neighbourhood should be. Her research illustrates the way in which residents seek to preserve their way of using the neighbourhood and protect the neighbourhood from change. However, in the 'negotiations over the terms that govern the use of place and space' (Pierce, Martin, & Murphy, 2010, p. 55) the degree of influence of residents varies. Madden (2014) suggests that neighbourhoods can be thought of as 'spatial projects', produced through strategic actions and interventions by various actors (possibly including residents) and institutions. When these actions do not reflect the interests and needs of residents, neighbourhoods can change in ways that make it difficult for (some) residents to use the neighbourhood as they would like and are used to. This, in turn, may undermine their sense of belonging. This paper builds on these conceptions of neighbourhood as practised and at the same time dynamic and multi-scalar to study how neighbourhood change affects belonging.

Research design

To explore how long-term residents perceive, experience and make sense of processes of neighbourhood change, a qualitative case study was undertaken in the neighbourhood of Betondorp – translated as Concrete Village – in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. This neighbourhood lies in the Eastern district of Amsterdam just inside the 'ring road', the main traffic artery that separates the pre-war city from post-war neighbourhoods. Concrete Village was developed in the 1930s as an 'urban garden village' by three housing associations in the spirit of Ebenezer Howard's vision of the garden city. The neighbourhood was meant to provide blue-collar workers – who, unlike middle-class residents, could not move to the suburbs, due to high transportation costs and long and irregular work hours – with a healthy, green and

village-like neighbourhood, which was designed to be self-sufficient and included amenities such as shops, churches, a library, community spaces for union meetings and other voluntary associations.

This particular social and planning history still influences the neighbourhood today. The neighbourhood has approximately 3000 residents and can be characterized as a working-class neighbourhood (see Table 1). The housing stock consists almost entirely of social housing. Housing units rarely exceed 80 m^2, which is very small by modern housing standards. Consequently, rents are quite low and the neighbourhood has a substantial share of low-income residents. Moreover, because the houses are small, single households are overrepresented and the proportion of families with children is quite low compared to the city. Residential mobility is very low and the proportion of residents over 65 is therefore much higher than the city average. Related to this, and quite exceptional for Amsterdam neighbourhoods with large shares of social housing, the majority of residents are native Dutch.

The research in Concrete Village consisted of in-depth interviews with residents and local professionals, attendance at neighbourhood meetings and events, an analysis of secondary written material and policy documents, and many informal encounters and observations during eighteen months of fieldwork. Such a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to allow for a layered, multidimensional perspective on place and to study residents' perceptions and experiences of neighbourhood change, which Small (2002) refers to as neighbourhood narrative frames. The interviews with 32 residents focused on their residential histories and their personal experiences of living in the neighbourhood, perceived changes, reasons for moving in and considerations relating to moving out, everyday use of the neighbourhood and interactions with neighbours, and involvement in local politics

Table 1. Neighbourhood statistics in 2013 (in %).

	Village	City
Share of social rent	90	47
'affordable' social rent (<412 euros)[a]	53	32
Age		
>20	15	20
21–40	22	36
40–65	37	32
65+	26	12
Household composition		
Singles	60	54
Couple without children	23	20
Single parent with children	8	9
Family with children	9	16
Share households with income below poverty line	26.1	16.7
Average household income (euros)	23.500	30.800
Share non-working in age group 15–65 years[b]	34	27
Level of education[a]		
Low	30	17
Middle	61	52
High	9	32
Ethnic background		
Native Dutch	66	49
Non-western immigrant	23	35
Western immigrant	11	16

[a]State of the neighbourhood, Eastern Borough.
[b]Statistics Netherlands, 2012.
Source: Municipal statistic.

or other local associations. To ensure a sample of both long-term and recent residents, respondents were recruited door-to-door in three specific streets in the neighbourhood where social housing units had recently been sold. In addition, snowball-sampling through three 'key' residents active in local associations provided access to a number of additional long-term residents. The interviews lasted an average of 1½ hours and were conducted in people's homes, in the community centre and in a local cafe. In addition, in order to gain further insight into the processes underlying neighbourhood change, 12 urban and housing professionals were interviewed, who work for the municipality in different capacities, for the different housing corporations in the area and for local law enforcement agencies. All interviews were subsequently transcribed and then coded and analysed, together with the secondary data material and field notes, using the software program Atlas.ti.

For the analysis, respondents are divided into two groups: a core group of 17 residents who refer to themselves as the real 'Villagers' and 15 residents who present themselves as 'newcomers'. This distinction between Villagers and newcomers in the neighbourhood is often discussed in the interviews and seems related to length of residence, as has been found in previous studies on working-class communities (Blokland-Potters, 2003; Elias & Scotson, 1965). Yet the interviews also show that at the individual level, the boundaries in this respect are not absolute or clear-cut. Some Villagers have lived in the neighbourhood for as long as 45 years, but others moved in 'only' 8 years ago. Some 'newcomers' have lived in the neighbourhood for 12 years and others for 3 years. Indeed, being a 'Villager' ultimately seems to depend on immersing oneself in, and conforming to, neighbourhood life, as will be discussed in more detail below. Similarly, while Villagers are often described in the interviews as working class, their occupational background is quite varied. Some Villagers work(ed) in low-skilled jobs, such as construction work, maintenance for municipal services and housing associations or working as janitors, others in lower middle-class jobs (i.e. lower administrative jobs in the public sector) and a few in middle middle-class jobs (i.e. overseeing municipal service crews, clerking at accountancy firms or working as a nurse). Currently, however, only about one-third of the Villagers are working. Others are pensioners and a few are long-term unemployed. Their ages range from 49 to 87. In terms of ethnic background, the large majority of Villagers is native Dutch, but two Villagers are of minority background. Although the focus of this article lies on the Villagers' experience of neighbourhood change, interviews with newcomers and professionals – particularly, their descriptions of interactions with Villagers and their observations about neighbourhood life – are used as a mirror for the stories of Villagers themselves. Compared to the Villagers, respondents who consider themselves 'newcomers' are much younger, with ages ranging from 26 to 55. Their socio-economic position ranges from low educated unemployed to upper middle-class professionals. Most interviewed newcomers are native Dutch, but two are of ethnic minority background.

At home in the village

The interviews with Villagers convey a strong sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. As Wim, 35 years in the neighbourhood, explains, 'This is really my place. It's home. I would not want to be anywhere else. There is no other place in Amsterdam like this'. Like Wim, many respondents perceive the neighbourhood as unique and as a village, despite the fact that it was incorporated into the urban fabric as the city expanded after Second World War. This has to do with both the physical and social attributes of the neighbourhood.

First, the village metaphor is used to describe the nature of the built environment. The tree-lined streets are relatively narrow, with small front gardens, and they are often curved so that the end of the street is not visible. The fact that most houses are no more than two stories high makes it easy to oversee one's surroundings and this makes the neighbourhood 'friendly' and 'intimate', as many respondents describe it (Figure 1). Clearly, the intention of the original planners to create a village in the city almost a hundred years ago still resonates with residents today. Another way in which the built environment contributes to this feeling of home is related to the fact that the neighbourhood is clearly demarcated from the surrounding urban area. As Mark (10 years in the neighbourhood) explains,

> When you visit our neighbourhood, you will notice that the row of houses on Middlestreet is actually a bit higher than the rest of the neighbourhood? It's almost like one of those old castle walls, with all that brick. And those houses on the corners with those red roofs, they form the towers.

Residents describe how they experience a sense of homecoming, as soon as they pass through this 'gate' along the main traffic artery passing by the neighbourhood (Figure 2).

Moreover, many respondents refer to the neighbourhood as a 'village' because in their opinion it has the social attributes of one. Being a Villager means keeping an eye out for each other and helping each other out when necessary. As Anne (11 years in the neighbourhood) answers when asked to explain what makes the neighbourhood a village,

> For example, when I just moved in, I didn't know anybody. But then my cat went missing. I put up posters and the rest of the week the phone was ringing off the hook. Everyone was out looking for him and after 10 days we actually found him. It was heartwarming. That's what makes this place different … people look out for you. You won't find that in Amsterdam neighbourhoods.

Similarly, Wil (8 years in the neighbourhood) recalls,

> When I had the flu last year, I didn't go to work for a few days and then my neighbor rang the doorbell to ask if I was OK and whether I needed anything. Because they had seen my car in front, when I am normally at work.

These findings resonate with the research literature on the way in which neighbourhood is performed through everyday practices (Laurier et al., 2002). Yet interpreting this as a sign of a close-knit, coherent community is not entirely correct. Certainly, many respondents have at least a few people in the neighbourhood who they consider friends, who they talk to regularly, with whom they share similar interests and with whom they spend time. However, their relationship with neighbours is generally more distant. Being a good neighbour means greeting each other in passing, watering plants when neighbours are on holiday and sending a Christmas card. Interactions between neighbours mostly take place outside, when people meet each other in the streets. Sporadically they drink a cup of coffee together. John, who has lived in the neighbourhood for 45 years, points out the window to identify a number of such neighbours along his streets and explains,

> Once in a while we have a coffee, or a late afternoon drink in the winter. Just for an hour or so, and then we chat about the neighbourhood. [when asked to explain] Well, you know, what's happening, what the neighbors are up to, like who's curtains are always closed and such …

John's story illustrates that many of the Villagers are quite familiar with the comings and goings of the people around them, including newcomers with whom they rarely interact. Inge (13 years in the neighbourhood) also described in great detail the arrival of a new resident four years ago. Although she has never actually talked to him, she knows exactly when he put up the new name sign on the door ('it took him more than 2 weeks!'), when his children



Figure 1. The 'human' scale, photo by author.



Figure 2. The 'gate' to the neighbourhood, photo by the author.

first came to stay for a few days ('he is divorced and they only stay with him a few days a month') and that he is often away for a few days ('He goes on work trips, I think, because he is always back on Friday'). Many newcomers also observe these forms of informal monitoring, but they experience it as oppressive and they appreciate this aspect of neighbourhood life far less than the Villagers. Newcomers try to keep the right balance between closeness and distance to avoid social conflict. The story of Rebekka (7 years in the neighbourhood), a single, working mother with a teenage daughter, illustrates that this is not always easy.

For a while, she had regular contact with an older long-term neighbour across the street, sometimes offering to get her extra groceries or to bring by a meal because she saw this as her social responsibility and 'something you do when you live in a neighbourhood like this, with so many old people'. However, she took a step back when she felt the neighbour had started depending on her more systematically, stating

> Friday is my day off and I like to relax, sleep in … So when she started ringing the doorbell at 9am like the house was on fire … It made me realize that we needed a little distance. […] I don't want taking care of her to become an obligation. If I wanted that, I would have moved closer to my parents.

Nevertheless, the Villagers consider these forms of informal social support and taking care of each other to be good neighbouring practices and it is one of the reasons why they value living in the neighbourhood so much.

Finally, for many Villagers, the neighbourhood is a source of pride due to its particular social and architectural history. Although none of the respondents were among the first residents in the neighbourhood, all of them refer to the fact that the neighbourhood was built as a blue-collar neighbourhood. As Jan (23 years in the neighbourhood) notes,

> Did you know that the neighbourhood was really built for blue collar workers? […] but more than just the average worker. When we moved here in the Fifties, the only way to get an apartment was to work at a municipal service or the housing association, or have connections. I myself worked for the department of public gardens.

Moreover, many can explain in detail the rules that were set for the first residents, such when to hang out laundry. Claudia (24 years in the neighbourhood) explains,

> Monday was always laundry day, and you could be reprimanded by the housing association if you hung out laundry on other days. That was a risk, because if you received three warnings, you were out.

Although these practices disappeared fifty years ago, they have become part of local oral history, thereby contributing to the image of the neighbourhood as a traditional, working-class community.

This symbolic representation of the neighbourhood is also reflected in the architectural style of the buildings. The Village is a famous icon of modernist architecture in social housing in The Netherlands and one of the earliest examples of the use of concrete in housing construction. Many Villagers refer to this unique architecture, which gave the neighbourhood its name. Nevertheless, fewer than half of all housing in the neighbourhood is made of concrete and most Villagers in fact prefer the more traditional brick architecture of the Amsterdam school in the rest of the neighbourhood. So even though they take pride in the fact that Concrete Village is famous for its social and architectural history, they personally do not seem to think it is particularly attractive and residents often personalize the austere and sober modernist facades with flowers, statues and other ornaments (see Figure 3). Finally, the representation of the neighbourhood as unique is further enhanced by the fact that it has produced a number of national 'heroes', most notably soccer player Johan Cruijff, a fact which is one of the first things mentioned by every Villager.

'Erosion' of the village

These descriptions of what makes the neighbourhood unique convey a strong sense of belonging that is expressed by Villagers through feelings of comfort, familiarity and pride



Figure 3. Personalizing the modernist façade, photo by the author.

and reproduced by sharing stories. These narratives suggest that Gans' (1962) classic depiction of urban neighbourhoods as villages, may still be relevant for Concrete Village today, at least in the way it is imagined and represented (Martin, 2003). At the same time, the Villagers exhibit ambivalence towards the way in which the neighbourhood is changing. Narratives about the erosion of the neighbourhood exist alongside narratives of home (Small, 2002) and reflect residents' anxieties that the village they value so much is disappearing (Blokland-Potters, 2003; Watt, 2006). In the interviews, there are a number of recurring themes about neighbourhood change, relating to physical and social degradation, loss of community and the erosion of local institutions and shared spaces of encounter, which signify to long-term residents that the neighbourhood is going through a process of decline. In trying to make sense of these changes, residents refer to a number of processes beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood, which they see as the main causes for neighbourhood change. In other words, although the perceived processes of decline take place at the local level, respondents relate these to political, social and economic forces at higher spatial scales.

Physical degradation and loss of status

The first dimension of neighbourhood decline is a perceived process of physical degradation signifying a loss of status. A recurring topic in the interviews is the neglect of houses and gardens. For the Villagers, the facades of their houses and their gardens are a source of pride and a way to display their social identity. They are adorned with hanging flower pots, porcelain figurines of geese and gnomes and classic garden fences and overall look extremely well cared for. In contrast to their own homes, an increasing number of gardens and homes are not maintained at all or have been replaced entirely by tiles. Some front 'gardens' are also used for parking bikes or storing miscellaneous objects that Villagers feel

belong in the trash. Marie (13 years in the neighbourhood) complains about a garden across the street (see Figure 4),

> I just don't get it … it's like they don't care what their house looks like. How can you let your own home become such a mess? It's like they don't take any pride in the neighbourhood. And maybe they don't care themselves, but the problem is I have to look at it as well.

Respondents also complain about the use of public gardens and of other public spaces such as the local playground and the village common (the central shopping square in the neighbourhood), giving examples of dog fouling and trash lying about.

The different forms of physical degradation are described by Villagers as markers for the influx of a group of 'other' social tenants. Their distinctions between residents on the basis of 'good' and 'bad' ways of using space clearly illustrate the role of moral boundaries in the construction and experience of class differences in the Netherlands (Van Eijk, 2012) and resonate with previous studies on boundary drawing within working-class neighbourhood (Blokland-Potters, 2003; Elias & Scotson, 1965; Watt, 2006; Woldoff, 2011). According to Herman (32 years in the neighbourhood) the first of these 'other' tenants arrived about fifteen years ago,

> By now that stretch of houses across the street there [points], all of them have been rented out to people that have something wrong with them. You know, health problems, addictions, mental problems. For example, a mother and an adult son, who are both drunks, live on the corner.

Some newcomers are also aware of the growth in this group of vulnerable social tenants in the last few years, as Claire (7 years in the neighbourhood) states,



Figure 4. 'Bad' gardening practices, photo by author.

> We call them the village idiots. Like this older man, who shuffles by everyday. He's probably harmless, but clearly needs a bath and some new clothes. I don't know if there are more of those types of people here than in our old neighbourhood downtown or whether they are just more visible here, but they seem out of place in a village like this.

The interviews with urban and housing professionals confirm these observations of residents. As one professional states,

> Yes, that's right. There is a quite a big group of residents with priority status who have been placed in Concrete Village. Renters 'with a blemish', as we say. You know, because they have mental health issues or are former addicts. These people are placed there under assisted living programs and I think housing assistance officials thought that this neighbourhood would be very suitable for them because it is like a village: easy to oversee, protected in a way. And there's a community that can serve as a support system.

Moving these social tenants into Concrete Village became possible partly because the social housing stock in the neighbourhood was incorporated in a new regional allocation system, making housing in the neighbourhood available for much larger groups of tenants. In addition, their priority status allows these tenants to jump the queue and compete with regular social housing tenants who have to stay on the waiting list for many years in order to obtain a home in Concrete Village. For Villagers, the arrival of this group of 'other' social tenants has been experienced as a threat to the 'respectability' (Watt, 2006) of the neighbourhood and also as a break with local tradition. While, in the past, residents of Concrete Village were carefully screened by housing associations so 'not just anybody could get in, now they [the housing association] just about allow anybody to live here' (Carrie, 21 years in the neighbourhood). To many Villagers, the changing population composition in the social rental sector therefore constitutes a loss of status for the neighbourhood and is interpreted as a process of marginalization within the urban housing market.

Moreover, what housing assistance officers did not realize at the time is that the high density of the built environment and the quality of housing – with very thin walls – actually makes Concrete Village very unsuitable to house people with somewhat different habits or lifestyles because it is almost impossible to avoid each other. As a consequence, the influx of these 'tainted' social tenants has been experienced extremely negatively by long-term renters and the local support system, which the urban professional refers to above, did not open up to the newer tenants. Instead, it has led to a stream of nuisance complaints. Nevertheless, although the Villagers blame the 'other' tenants for physical degradation in the neighbourhood, several urban professionals feel that this is not fair. In fact, they suggest that the increased incidence of poorly maintained gardens and disturbing behaviour is related in part to the ageing of long-term residents who cannot take care of their homes as they used to due to physical health problems or dementia-related issues.

Anxieties about loss of community

A second theme in the interviews about changes in the neighbourhood is the loss of community. Although there is still a substantial group of elderly residents who moved in 30 or 40 years ago, this group of Villagers is shrinking. Newcomer Karen (6 years in the neighbourhood) explains,

> Slowly but surely, the neighbourhood is changing. When we moved in, all of our neighbors were long-term residents, you know, 'real' Villagers. But quite a few of them have gone, often literally, because some of these people are really old and stay here until they die. When you have a look

> around, check out the disabled parking signs. When someone passes away, they pull a plastic bag over them. So you can literally see where someone has died. For our neighbors it's been difficult, I think, to accept these changes.

Indeed, several of the Villagers state that 'the only way I will leave here, is in a box'.

As residential mobility is slowly increasing and the neighbourhood becomes more heterogeneous, the concern of the Villagers is that newcomers will not adapt to neighbourhood life and are not willing to invest in the neighbourhood. This concern refers not so much to the new group of social tenants described above, but in particular to a new group of younger and more affluent residents. As Dinie (13 years in the neighbourhood) explained,

> As soon as a house becomes available they sell it, mostly to young single households because they are so small. Or the rent is raised to market rent with the new point system, so they [the housing association] can demand 725 euros for an apartment like mine. Who can pay those kind of prices? I couldn't. Most Villagers couldn't. So you get different group. [when asked to elaborate] You know, the type of people who are always working, who get in their cars in the morning and leave the neighbourhood. The ones who are never here.

Indeed, the sale of social housing is an issue that features in many of the interviews. Although the share of social housing sold in Concrete Village in the last seven years is still quite small, two of the three housing associations aim to sell 45% of their local housing stock and this is a fact that many Villagers have heard about through the village grapevine. The interviews with urban and housing professionals suggest that general financial considerations seem to be the main motivator for tenure conversion and rent liberalization in Concrete Village. As one housing professional explains,

> These houses are relatively close to the centre and they are architecturally attractive. So this seemed like a good location to sell and meet our quota for tenure conversion as we have agreed upon with municipality.

However, another urban professional remarked cynically,

> The only reason they are so pro-active in selling is that this association really needs the money. That's also why they don't invest in community programs anymore. Selling houses in Concrete Village is part of their main business strategy and has little to do with the neighbourhood.

Nevertheless, the housing associations frame the sale of social housing units from the perspective of the neighbourhood, hoping that new owner-occupiers will prove to be an asset to the neighbourhood, for example because they will form a source of social support for elderly residents and new clientele for local businesses.

Many Villagers, however, do not agree. They see the proposed sale of social housing as a negative development. Some residents have fundamental objections to the sale of social housing because they feel that the influx of more affluent households negates the historical legacy of the neighbourhood. For example, Joanne who sits on one of the renter associations states, 'This neighbourhood was built for the working class. That's how it should remain'. Such statements, whereby the neighbourhood is strategically portrayed from the perspective of its particular social history in order to defend it from change, have also made their way into local newsletters and flyers from community groups, reflecting the ways in which place frames can play an important role in place-making (Pierce et al., 2010).

Objections to the sale of social housing are also based on everyday social interactions in the neighbourhood. Although the share of new owner-occupiers is currently still quite small, respondents fear that more of these residents will lead to a loss of the traditional ways of neighbouring and using space. Jakob (19 years in the neighbourhood), for example, made

extremely negative statements about his new neighbours, who he describes as 'snobs […] who have just bought their first house, so now they feel they are on top of the world and don't have to take any account of anybody else'. These observations are based on interactions with his new neighbours, who made illegal home improvements without consulting the renters next door and the apartment above them and without making a formal request to the owner association, which includes the housing association. Moreover, in his opinion, some of the improvements were done poorly, like the creation of a new fume outlet in the back façade that causes odor nuisance for neighbours. When Jakob approached the owners about it, he said he was not taken seriously.

This perceived lack of engagement of newcomers also comes up in an interview with Jim (17 years in the neighbourhood), who describes his new neighbour as 'one of those individualistic types':

> The first thing he told me was that they were changing the fence between our gardens. He just told me, he didn't ask my opinion. Then they put up this high fence, so that now we don't see their garden anymore. Well, to me the message is loud and clear: they don't want anything to do with me, so I don't want to have anything to do with him.

To Jim, for whom the back gardens have always been a collective space for socializing with his former neighbours, the fence formed a clear sign that his new neighbours were fundamentally different people who are not interested in the neighbourhood and with whom he does not want to associate.

Other respondents share these concerns that new residents will not conform to neighbourhood life. However, as the experience of Herman (32 years in the neighbourhood) shows not all newcomers disrupt traditional neighbouring practices,

> We call this the golden end … because there is still many of us ['real' villagers] here and two of the houses are newcomers, but they have really adapted … you know, when you're new you have to be considerate to the way things are done here. […] For example, he [downstairs neighbor] first parked his bike against the streetlight on the sidewalk, but I said you can't do that with so many old people here. You have to be considerate. Now he has his bike in the back garden. And he helps some of us out sometimes with small jobs in the house, you know … hanging up a picture or putting in a light bulb. Of course, we don't expect him to renovate the whole house, or anything like that. But he's young … he can easily do small things. That's how we do things around here: you look out for each other. But the thing is … you never know if the next new neighbor will try to fit in … so far we've been lucky. So that's why we call it the golden end.

In light of this, experience Herman is more positive about newcomers, although he also recognizes that it could work out less favourably, as it did for Jim.

Rob has a similar positive experience with the new owner-occupiers in his street. He recently retired and has struggled with health problems. His neighbours, a family of four who bought their house five years ago, help out regularly by buying groceries when they go to an open air market further away and with odd jobs around the house. In return, they sometimes borrow his car and he takes care of the plants when they are on holiday. His new neighbours, who were also interviewed, are clearly more invested in the neighbourhood than 'those individualistic types' described above, which is related to the fact that they have small children and therefore spend more time in the neighbourhood. They are approached more positively by the Villagers, who raised their own children in the neighbourhood and see the arrival of these new families as a revival. Nevertheless, because the housing in Concrete Village is so small, Villagers are concerned that few families will remain in the neighbourhood. As Dinie (13 years in the neighbourhood) has experienced, 'You see some young families

around, but when their second child is born, or they become a bit older, they move out. These houses are just too small'.

Finally, the anxieties about the loss of community are also related to an increase in neighbourhood disorder and crime in the last 10 years. As Hennie (21 years in the neighbourhood) explains,

> In the past, I always kept my door open. The only people passing by were neighbors and we knew everyone. And everybody always kept an eye out, so we simply did not think about it. That's all so different now.

For her and other residents, the increase in thefts is attributed to the loss of informal social control and support amongst neighbours. According to local police, however, the increase in crime should be attributed to other factors. Up to a few years ago, the neighbourhood was off the mental map of criminals, but was then rediscovered as an easy target. The back gardens are easily accessible via shared back alleys and the maze of streets makes it easy for perpetrators to disappear. Nevertheless, in their view, the occurrence of break-ins is not exceptional and simply reflects the fact that the neighbourhood has become more incorporated into the city. By contrast, to long-term residents, the fact that they are no longer able to keep the back door unlocked at all times signifies a loss of community which they relate to the changing population composition.

Breakdown of local institutions and neighbourhood management

A third and final theme with respect to the changing nature of the neighbourhood is the hollowing-out of the local institutional infrastructure and the degradation of so-called micro-publics (Valentine, 2008) that used to serve as spaces of encounter for long-term residents. As already mentioned, Concrete Village was originally developed to be self-sufficient. For some of the Villagers, this is still their frame of reference and they are very negative about the disappearance of shops and various public services, like the public library, the post office and local elementary schools. Respondents describe how the village square used to be a vibrant place and a central node for their everyday routines. In the last 15 years, however, several local shops have lost the competition with larger chain stores outside the neighbourhood and the main square has become increasingly quiet. Some public meeting places have also been closed, such as the library, which hosted various community associations in the evenings, and a public cafeteria for elderly residents. In addition, Villagers complain about the fact that some of the local service providers, such as local law enforcement and two of the local housing associations, no longer have full-time staff in the area as they used to have in the past, but now have offices elsewhere in the city.

In a recent protest letter to the local borough council, which was also published in the city newspaper, a number of active residents labelled this process of de-institutionalization 'social concrete rot', a term usually used to refer to the physical degradation of concrete constructions. It illustrates the fact that the changes to the local institutional infrastructure are perceived by many respondents as signifying an abandonment of the neighbourhood by local governing actors. For example, Herman (32 years in the neighbourhood), states in unfriendly terms what he thinks about the money spent on neighbourhood improvement programmes in other neighbourhoods in the Eastern borough,

> All that money has gone to the Transvaal neighbourhood. And who profits? Those minority residents over there. It's not that I am racist, I just don't think that they deserve all of our tax money, while here everything is going down the drain. It's like they have forgotten us.

Like him, other Villagers think that the local government and local housing associations should be more active in trying to revive local institutions and attract local businesses. In addition, they also feel that local service providers should invest more in day-to-day maintenance of the neighbourhood and regulate the use of neighbourhood spaces. For example, during an open coffee hour in the community centre, Villagers agree that dog-fouling would not be such a problem if the police were to be present in the neighbourhood more often to hand out fines and if tenants who neglect their gardens were to be remonstrated by the housing associations.

Although urban professionals are aware of these negative sentiments and are regularly confronted by them through formal community participation as well as individual complaints, they also describe them as unreasonable. In various interviews with urban and housing professionals, it became clear that the expectations of long-term residents about maintenance and enforcement no longer match the current ideas about what the role of municipal service providers and housing associations should be. As one housing official explains,

> These long-term residents expect us to take care of even the smallest things. For example, I received a call yesterday if we wanted to come and remove the leaves from the roof gutters. And so I told them we don't do that anymore, so we advise you to ask your neighbor to borrow his ladder and clear it yourself. In my opinion, these resident have always been pampered.

Coincidentally, the woman in question was also interviewed and complained, 'What do they expect? I am 70 years old. I am not going to stand on a ladder. And they always used to do this for us'. Her response is typical of the experiences of Villagers who, in the past, depended on local service providers to maintain their homes and the neighbourhood. An urban professional from the local borough reflects,

> These long-term residents, they are used to a different type of government, a 'caring' government. Some of them were even part of that. Now everything is about active citizenship. People have to do things themselves. I don't know if it's just related to budget cuts, but it means a big change in what residents can expect from us. For higher educated people this is no problem. But for people like those 'real' villagers … I sometimes wonder whether we are not asking the impossible.

Other urban and housing professionals express frustration with the fact that long-term residents just complain and do not take a more active role in improving the neighbourhood. Urban professionals therefore responded very enthusiastically to a letter sent by a group of new owner-occupiers to the local municipality in which they presented a vision for Concrete Village as a more lively neighbourhood, including an idea for a new restaurant and maybe some galleries in the main square. As one of these residents explains,

> We made this statement to let them hear another sound from the neighborhood than just the complaints of the older residents. A more positive sound. But then we were invited by a group of professionals to discuss the matter and it seemed like they were also expecting us to come up with this plan. I guess they thought we would invest in the neighbourhood, for example by starting a new restaurant. But I'm not a restaurateur. I have a busy job. That's their job.

His experience illustrates how urban and housing professionals are increasingly looking to new rather than old residents to contribute to improving the neighbourhood.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to explore the circumstances under which residents come to experience a loss of belonging by way of an in-depth case study in Concrete Village, Amsterdam. Here, a group of residents who call themselves the 'real Villagers' express a strong attachment to the neighbourhood by sharing stories about the Village as an exceptional place with a particular working-class history (Blokland, 2009; Small, 2002). In these narratives, the 'old' neighbourhood is framed as existing quite separately from the rest of the city and functioning as a self-sufficient social system, reflecting the original planning ideals behind the (urban) garden village and illustrating that belonging is 'often based on collective memories and shared symbolism of community' (Fenster, 2005, p. 253). Indeed, if any neighbourhood was ever a bounded, permanent space, both residents and urban professionals agree that Concrete Village seems to have been that until the early 1990s.

However, as the findings show, in the eyes of the Villagers, this neighbourhood is disappearing. Everyday experiences of material, social and institutional changes in the neighbourhood are interpreted as evidence of decline and residents describe a process of estrangement from formerly familiar surroundings. Their anxieties about neighbourhood change seem to be somewhat different from those described in studies on place-based displacement of low-income residents in gentrifying areas, who end up feeling out of place in their own neighbourhood (Davidson, 2009). For these residents, the Village is without a doubt still *their* neighbourhood, reflecting Paton's (2014) observations about the importance of place in the construction of working-class identities. In this respect, the findings also clearly demonstrate the salience of 'the role of the "local" in a world increasingly characterized by extra-local interactions and exchanges' (Martin, 2003, p. 362).

At the same time, the study also shows how the experienced loss of belonging is related to political, economic and social processes that operate at higher spatial scales (Massey, 2005). The growing number of 'other' social tenants and the slow influx of more affluent residents in former social housing reflect changes in the allocation and regulation of the social rental sector which have been well documented in the research literature (see for example de Koning, 2015; van Gent, 2013). Similarly, the perceived changes in the local institutional infrastructure and neighbourhood management by municipal service providers, housing associations and law enforcement reflect widely documented processes of rescaling and retrenchment of the Dutch welfare state, as well as a paradigm shift away from the 'caring' government that most residents have known for many years to a discourse of active citizenship (Tonkens, Grootegoed, & Duyvendak, 2013).

What is intriguing in the case of Concrete Village, however, is that residents themselves recognize these linkages between intra-neighbourhood dynamics and wider political and social forces, illustrating that 'people experience the concrete, material dimensions of place affectively and cognitively' (Pierce et al., 2010, p. 60). In the perception of residents, actions and interventions by governing actors (or the lack thereof, according to some) have changed the neighbourhood in ways that undermine local ways of using or 'doing' the neighbourhood (Benson & Jackson, 2013; Gotham & Brumley, 2002; Laurier et al., 2002; Martin, 2003). At the same time, long-term residents in Concrete Village experience an increasing distance between themselves and governing institutions and the processes underlying the changes in the neighbourhood are therefore perceived as out of their control. From this perspective, the case study highlights the politicized nature of neighbourhood, demonstrating that the

meaning of neighbourhood change is often contested (Martin, 2003) and that there may be substantial power inequalities in terms of who is involved and whose voice is heard in processes of place-making (Madden, 2014; Paton, 2014).

Consequently, long-term residents in Concrete Village attribute the perceived process of decline of their neighbourhood to neglect by governing institutions and see it as symbolic of their own increasingly marginalized position within Dutch society. This may also explain why a relatively high share of residents in this neighbourhood votes for the right-wing populist party of Geert Wilders, which is seen as an anti-establishment, or for the Socialist Party which has fulfilled a similar role in the Amsterdam political arena. These populist sentiments are often linked by media, politicians and academics to anxiety of white working class about the inflow of ethnic minority residents (Duyvendak, 2011; van Gent, Jansen, & Smits, 2014; Watt, 2006), but this does not seem to be the main concern in Concrete Village. Although racist comments in the interviews about residents of ethnic minority background were not uncommon, they were expressed alongside similar derogatory remarks about 'egocentric yuppies' and 'addicts and drunks' (referring to the 'other' tenants). Yet some of these same respondents are on friendly terms with their Moroccan upstairs neighbours or the new owner-occupier family across the street. Above all, what seems to distinguish 'good' neighbours from 'other' residents is that they conform to, or at least do not disrupt, local codes of conduct and respect local ways of using space. In other words, in everyday interactions in Concrete Village, the most important boundary that is drawn is not based on length of residence, being native Dutch or working class, but on the right ways of 'doing' neighbourhood. An interesting avenue for further research would be to explore under which circumstances such everyday uses of space can transcend social distinctions between residents based on class, ethnicity and length of residence to create a sense of commonality, while also forming a basis for boundary drawing and exclusion within the neighbourhood in its own right.

Ultimately, however, these social, physical and institutional changes in the Concrete Village are blamed on what respondents collectively referred to as 'the government'. Their narratives of neighbourhood decline go beyond a sense of reactionary nostalgia for the neighbourhood of the past, reflecting a strong attachment to the neighbourhood (Paton, 2014) as well as a clear understanding of the contingent and relational nature of place-making in the context of a strong welfare state like the Netherlands (Madden, 2014; Massey, 2005; Pierce et al., 2010). Consequently, their experiences of decline and loss of belonging at the local level also influence belonging at higher spatial scales, confirming Morley's (2001) observation that the neighbourhood, the city and the nation-state form interconnected spaces of belonging that condition each other. In Concrete Village, sentiments of discontent originating at the local level are scaled upwards beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood itself. Future research on neighbourhood change should therefore not only focus on local experiences of cultural and political displacement (Davidson, 2009) and the way in which residents contest and try to defend their neighbourhood against unwanted, outside influences, but also on the wider societal and political implications of neighbourhood change.

Note

1. I use the term place identity here to refer to the nature or identity of a particular place. This differs from the way in which, for example, environmental psychologists have used the term as a psychological concept that describes place as contributing to one's sense of self.

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