Out of place? Emotional ties to the neighbourhood in urban renewal in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom
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When studying the place attachments of residents, you cannot help to reflect upon your own attachments to places. On reflection, I have realised that my research has been closely related to my own life. I joined the Amsterdam School at the start of my PhD research in May 2005, just as my son was born. As a first-time father you could say I had a lot on my mind (and my research was not always the first among them). Surprisingly, my room at the school provided a quiet place to take my mind off the worries of fatherhood at home and enabled me to focus my mind on the emotional stress of others; residents who were forced out of their homes because they were demolished or renovated.

At the same time I experienced at first hand what the effect is of having children on my attachment to the neighbourhood where I lived. Before Thomas was born, I was the typical ‘dinky’ (double income no kids), whose social life mainly took place outside the neighbourhood and my house was no more than a place to eat, sleep and lounge. The neighbourhood took on a whole new meaning after Thomas was born, both physically and socially. One of the best ways to stop him from crying was to push the buggy around in the neighbourhood; the rocking motion was the only thing that would send him off to sleep, allowing me to explore the area where I lived on foot in blissful peace. During those quiet moments I grew quite fond of all those places in ‘my’ neighbourhood. It also brought me into contact with many neighbours, whose existence I had largely ignored so far. It was quite fascinating to discover the number of parents living in the area and to discover how easily it was to bond with them by showing off my (sleeping) baby in the buggy.

What it meant to move house became a reality for me when in February 2007 I moved out of the Netherlands with my family and England became our new home. All of a sudden, I found myself in a new environment where all the familiar faces and places were gone. This time I was surrounded by dinkies, while being
confined to my new home as a house dad and PhD student. However, I became quickly attached to my new environment, thanks to England’s best park (Saltwell Park) on my doorstep. Many happy mornings were spent at the pond and play ground of this great place, meeting other parents and even fellow countrymen. This gave personal meaning to the title of a book I wrote on the meaning of social urban renewal with Kees Fortuin, “Feeding the Ducks”. I do not want to suggest that every relocated resident should be supplied with a loaf of bread and a pond full of ducks, but I think there is a lot to be said for the importance of attractive public spaces for new residents to get attached to their neighbourhood.

Three years on at the end of my research, in May 2005, my PhD project and personal life became once again intertwined. While I was finalising my thesis, I moved up the societal ladder by finding a job as Research Associate at the University of Teesside, around the corner from our house in Eaglescliffe, personally demonstrating the intertwinedness of social mobility and neighbourhood attachment. The story became full circle with the birth of my daughter: I started studying the emotional ties of others when Thomas was born and finished when Jessica arrived. By then I was settled in a new country; not only by finding a new home and job, but also by feeling emotionally connected again to the place where I live. This time, my children did not provide the biggest incentive, but in true English style, my garden. After spending many a weekends digging and weeding to transform my pebbled backyard into a proper English garden, complete with apple tree and vegetable plot, I was firmly rooted in my neighbourhood. How this relates to the residents I was studying you can read in the following chapters.

As you will read in chapter two, emotions are a thoroughly social affair, even when studied as a subject for a doctorate. I would like to mention a number of people to whom I am deeply thankful and attached.

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