Living in imaginary places: on the creation and consumption of themed residential architecture

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1 Introduction

1.1 Theming: a theoretical concept

This study deals with the theming of residential space and architecture. Theming is an elusive theoretical concept that has been analysed from various angles. As an urban sociologist, Gottdiener (1995, 1997) defined theming as a material product of a social process by which the attention of the viewer is directed to the themed product, respectively to the themed environment. It also refers to a cultural production process by which spaces are likely to be designed as salient (architectural) signs. In the broader sense, theming has been related to contemporary consumer culture. Scholars like Sorkin (1992), Zukin (1995) and Hannigan (1998) argue that the consumption of places, architecture, goods and services has an ever-expanding impact on everyday private and public life. On the one hand, individuals are more and more likely to be treated as consumers, not only by marketing agents but also by municipalities, cultural institutions and organisations and urban planners. On the other hand, individuals increasingly seem to be in search of entertainment and the experience of being ‘enchanted’, as well as predictability and manageability. These needs have resulted in the construction of a large number of ‘cathedrals of consumption’ (Ritzer 1999) like theme parks, shopping malls or themed restaurants. In these locations a magical, hyperreal ambience is created by theming which is - as a certain motif - carried through to all aspects of the visitors’ space. Remarkably, these enchanted spaces are highly standardized and rationally organized behind the scenes in order to maintain the perfected and predictable ambience on stage. As Ritzer (1999:117) points out, predictability is one important reason why these places are attractive to so many visitors. He states that ‘[i]t is far easier .. to control simulated than real environments’. Consequently, theming fits in well with restriction, standardization and efficiency, while simultaneously providing enchanted spaces.

Based on Ritzers’ theory of McDonaldization, Bryman (2004:15) emphasizes another aspect of theming. He argues that theming means to apply narratives to geographical regions, places, architecture and institutions to make them more attractive than they otherwise would be. ‘Typically, the source of the theme is external to the institution or object to which it is applied. This externality is usually revealed as being external in terms of space, time, sphere or any combination of these sources’

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1 Ritzer (2000) names this phenomenon McDonaldization that is based on four main principles: efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (through non-human technology).
like a reference to foreign places, the past or the future, certain music genres, movies, the natural world, literature and so on. By applying a peculiar narrative to build environments whose constructions are actually standardized and homogenous, these become distinct from another. Moreover, the narrative conveys certain social and cultural meanings which engage consumers and hence attract and bond them to certain places, architects or products.

Theming has also started to have an effect in the Netherlands. While the foundations of the first theme park called the ‘Efteling’ were laid in the 1930s, an increasing number of cathedrals of consumption, themed inner city districts (Burgers 1992), themed natural places and the like were realized, in particular during the past two or three decades. These places attract huge numbers of visitors (Metz 2002). For instance, the architecture of small-scale shops in the Batavia Stad shopping centre (which was opened in 2001 near Lelystad) is reminiscent of a fort built in the seventeenth century. Then there are huge buildings like the Ayers Rock in Zoetermeer and De Uithof in The Hague where people can go skiing, ice-skating and enjoy some après-ski in a simulated Austrian ambience. Other people enjoy ‘fun shopping’ in the old inner city districts of Amsterdam, Gouda or Delft which have a tourist orientation (Urry 2002).

Some scholars argue that cathedrals of consumption are exclusive places prepared for the middle classes and that their continual expansion threatens, in turn, the existence and heterogeneity of small shops, facilities and amenities in old neighbourhoods and inner city districts (Sorkin 1992, Hannigan 1998). Therefore, shops in these districts attempt to change their supply into a more exclusive one and also invent themes to aestheticise the shops’ appearance in order to tie in with the higher and middle classes’ consumptive lifestyle (Featherstone 1991). Hence, the public domain inside and outside of cathedrals of consumption tends to become themed and exclusive.

Although this perspective has been widely shared by academic scholars, Hajer and Reijndorp (2001) suggest a less pessimistic view of exclusiveness and the decline of heterogeneity of public spaces. They emphasize the idea that the dichotomy between city centres and cathedrals of consumption situated in the periphery does not meet the sociospatial reality in the Dutch context (and elsewhere) which is basically characterised by an ‘urban field’ (Bertolini and Salet 2003, Friedmann and Miller 1965) and constitutes polycentric milieus (Musterd and Van Zelm 2001, Grünfeld 2010, Metaal 2011). The urban field consists of various scattered places and therefore place consumers (and academic scholars) are challenged to change their perception of public spaces in general. ‘The urban field is no longer the domain of a civic openness, as the traditional city was, but the territory of a middle-class
culture, characterized by increasing mobility, mass consumption and mass recreation. This middle-class culture forces us to look at space in a different way: we not only have to pay more attention to the new spaces that are created for this mass consumption and recreation, but also to the way in which individuals assemble their city for themselves from a whole variety of elements and locations in the urban field’ (Hajer and Reijndorp 2001:28).

One of the locations the middle classes do choose are residential places of which the design was also affected by the increasing emergence of theming and aesthetisation. Building professionals, such as urban planners and developers, know that housing locations are part of the urban field and therefore compete for potential home buyers. They invent narratives about the geographical region, places, local people or history. In some cases these external themes are artistically expressed in residential architecture. One of the first districts to which themes were introduced was Kattenbroek (Amersfoort), which was built in the early 1990s. The Dutch-Indian architect Ashok Bhalotra invented metaphors referred to as ‘journey and home’ or ‘the hidden zone’ to provide distinct identities for different parts of the district (Lörzing 2006; Reijndorp et. al. 1998). Between 1995 and 2005, the building of many new owner-occupied houses has actually prepared the ground for more themed residential places. Their number, location, density and urban plan were guided by the Fourth Spatial Planning Memorandum Extra, known as the Vinex policy. Like other themed places, themed residential areas have often been depicted as exclusive locations. Besides owner-occupied houses as a sign of economic wealth and prestige, themed architectural aesthetics probably activate processes of drawing boundaries. Some scholars assume that the production of themed and enclosed urban forms serves the spatial and social exclusionary tendencies of the (upper) middle classes (Duncan and Duncan 2004, Atkinson 2006, Blakely and Snyder 1997, Atkinson and Blandy 2005). It is argued that middle-class groups are more closely involved than others in the production of symbols and images to celebrate the own lifestyle (Featherstone 1991, Bourdieu 1984, Zukin 1982, 1998, 2010).

To sum up, the emergence of theming in Dutch housing production seems to be related to the increased production of owner-occupied houses and the occurrence of a new middle-class culture. Thus, as scholars like Gottdiener, Sorkin and Zukin have suggested, these aspects are indeed related to contemporary consumer culture. However, the existing theoretical concept of theming draws a picture of its causes and features that does not seem to fit accurately into the Dutch context.

First of all, theming has been explored as part of the U.S. American planning culture and spatial policy whose legacy is one of being more market orientated and less state controlled than it was and is in the Netherlands. Therefore, it is probably the case that these scholars tend to depict theming
mainly as a mere profit-seeking activity while overlooking its other antagonistic aspects.

Second, the literature of theming has focussed more attention on theming public and recreational places than on the theming of residential, hence semi-public and private areas. Visitors to mass consumption, recreational areas are likely to be described as mere consumers in terms of passive individuals who want first and foremost to be entertained. By contrast, this study attempts to analyse how a themed residential place is produced and consumed. The suggestion is that the commercialization of (residential) places does not ‘naturally’ appear but is made by people, that are social agents, who promote, fight or dismiss it. In this vein, residents are individuals who have ideas, desires and dreams which were not all automatically ‘produced’ by commercial culture. Residents probably do not expect to be entertained at their residential location. Instead, places are owned, claimed, appropriated and shared with fellow residents for long periods of time. Apart from a few studies (Reijndorp et. al. 1998, Reinders 2007), there has been little focus on the question of how the theming of residential space ‘works’ in the Netherlands.

Finally, up to now theming has basically been described and analysed by postmodern social scholars who have failed to do justice to the intrinsic capability of architecture to represent cultural and symbolic meanings. Since it beginnings, architecture has served as a means of artistic expression adjacent to its practical, usage functions. Consequently, themes have always been used to create a peculiar artistic expression. Having said that, the motivations and objectives relating to the implementation of themes continuously alter according to time and context. With a view to filling these voids, this dissertation aims to answer the following overall, two-sided research question.

**How has themed residential place been created and consumed in the Netherlands throughout the last two decades?**

The intention is to answer this question by empirically investigating three themed housing schemes: 1) the Noorderhof housing scheme in the district of Amsterdam New West, 2) the suburban neighbourhood of Brandevoort situated near Helmond and 3) the Le Medi housing scheme in the urban neighbourhood of Bospolder-Tussendijken in Rotterdam.

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2 Studies which do deal with theming of residential areas are often related to the New Urbanism movement (see Chapter 5) and not to the concept of theming mentioned above.
1.2 Investigating the creation and consumption of themed residential place

1.2.1 Themed residential place

Residential space constitutes different spatial scales. Therefore, theming could be implemented at different levels such as, first, the interior of a house (furniture, household devices); second, the architecture (the housing design, ground plot, facade); third, the neighbourhood (residential streets and squares, sidewalks); fourth, the city (city signs, city marketing) and finally, the region (signs as symbolic makers). While scholars like Hospers et al. (2011) and Dembski and Salet (2010) have grappled with the symbolization of spatial change at urban and regional levels (and the question of whether symbolization and marketing are able to amplify social meaning of places), this study deals with theming at the architectural and neighbourhood levels. Both scales form a socio-spatial entity which I will refer to as residential place.

One thing is sure and that is that residential place is a concept of which spatial and social limits are not at all objective. As Atkinson et. al. (2009:2816) states, ‘[s]caled spaces are shaped politically, through strategising amongst social actors and agents aiming to enrol scale to advance or protect interests by (re)territorialising and ‘fixing’ social processes and practices at particular scales.’ In this vein, residents of a themed neighbourhood are likely to draw the boundary of ‘their’ residential place differently and probably beyond the scope of the themed residential place. However, in mere physical terms, the boundary at which a themed residential place ends and the non-themed surrounding begins is often visually noticeable (as in the three cases investigated). In this study, therefore, residential place refers to the recently built themed residential place or the entire themed residential area.

First and foremost theming is investigated as an architectural, and hence merely physical phenomenon and secondly as a part of planning practice. Thirdly, social and cultural meanings are explored which residents attach to themed residential place. This thesis therefore deals with different perspectives developed within different academic disciplines.

**FIGURE 1** Theoretical concepts elaborated in this thesis
As regards the architecture, the concept of *artistic expression* is introduced. The concept of *hyperspace* is discussed in the context of the planning process. Empirical data was collected on the Dutch planning practice via face-to-face interviews with building professionals as well as political reports and academic literature on housing policy have been studied (Appendix A). The consumption of the themed places has been explored by the means of the theoretical concept of *social distinction*.

### 1.2.2 Artistic expression

In this study, artistic expression has been used as a translation of the German expression *künstlerischer Ausdruck*, or *artistieke expressie* in Dutch. This expression refers to the notion that architecture has an intrinsic capability to express meaning in an artistic way. Architecture therefore has the potential to express architectural (i.e. *self-referential*) and non-architectural, that is to say, *external* meaning in a concrete sensuous way (Böhme 2006).

Self-referential meaning engages with meanings relating to all levels of architectural structure: from spatial layout via physical structure up to figurative details. External meaning refers to meanings that go beyond the immediate realm of architectural structure.

The concept of artistic expression is a key concern in architectural and art theory (Friemert 1990). To put it simply, architecture and art, like statuary and painting, artistically express intentions and are both able to represent social and cultural meaning. However, in contrast to all other art forms, architecture is bound to purpose and social functions. Besides that, architecture is basically characterised by the fact that it could be *bodily* experienced i.e. we can smell, see, touch and walk through it (Böhme 2006).

Therefore, the architectural artistic expression lends itself particularly to the spatial shaping of an entire *ambience* and therefore to the creation of three-dimensional scenery. The experience presented by, for example, cathedrals of consumption has increasingly been used to merchandise products and places.

### 1.2.3 Hyperspace

In *Travels in Hyperreality*, Eco (1986) argues that producers of hyperspace aim to create places which are better, more beautiful, more inspiring, more interesting and so on than real, everyday places. Baudrillard (1983:141) maintains that the emergence of hyperspace indicates ‘the collapse of reality . . . into the minute duplication of the real, preferably on the basis of another reproductive medium - advertising, photo, etc. From medium to medium the real is volatilized.’ As a consequence, themes and symbols do not represent nor artistically express actual sociocultural meaning in architecture anymore but rather simulate them without referring to any reality. This process has successively been advanced from the Renaissance to the ‘current phase’.
Baudrillard (1983:11) refers to orders of simulacra where the image was originally ‘the reflection of a basic reality’, after which it was converted into an image that ‘masks the absence of a basic reality’ before finally ending up as a mere code that has ‘no relation to any reality.’

Viewed from the users’ perspective, the appearance of hyperspace changes traditional ways of distinguishing between real and imagined space. Jameson (1984:80) argues that there is ‘... a mutation in the object [of which] we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace’. He illustrates the argument by his experience of the Bonaventura Hotel where, for instance, the front entrance in the main facade seems to be a corporal passage into the hotel’s lobby while actually leading to a second-storey shopping balcony. Moreover, elevators rather ‘designate themselves as new reflexive signs of movement proper’ than as functional components to move bodies (Jameson 1984:82).

Many social scholars and other urban observers felt attracted to these new postmodern cultural representations while reflecting on whether or not the overproduction of themes in architecture, the loss of stable meanings and the aesthetisation of everyday life represent a break from the past ‘modern’ way of representing culture (Harvey 1990, Featherstone 1991, Sorkin 1992, Watson and Gibson 1995). Several geographers were engaged with hyperspace as part and parcel of postmodern urbanism that, in turn, defies a single definition (Warren 2009). Dear and Flusty (1998:60) suggest that postmodern urbanism is driven by a global and post-industrial restructuring that became spatially manifest in the urban field ‘whose populations are socially and culturally heterogeneous, but politically polarized; whose residents are educated and persuaded to the consumption of dreamscapes even as the poorest are consigned to carceral cities; whose built environment .. consists of edge cities, privatopias, and the like; ..'. Although a number of U.S. cities display aspects of this restructuring process (Nijman 2000), Los Angeles has been conceived as the alpha point of the postmodern city. The well-known essay Postmodern Urbanization (Soja (1995:134) describes a number of postmodern ‘geographies’ of which the increasing social fragmentation and the ‘radical change in the ‘urban imaginary’, in the ways we relate our images of what is real to empirical reality itself’ are the most interesting ones with respect to the topic of this dissertation. On the one hand Soja treats hyperspace as a spatial manifestation of social fragmentation which is characterized by an inward-looking, perfected and themed residential ambience. On the other hand hyperspace probably does change our perception of (residential) place through the provision of ready-made images, themes and narratives.

3 Processes like the shift from Fordist to postfordist urbanization, the concentration of globalized capital and culturally heterogeneous populations within Los Angeles County, the urbanization of suburbia, the increase of fortified (former public) places and finally the changing way of perceiving the ‘world around’ us (Soja 1995).
In Dutch planning practice, the production of residential hyperspace is a challenge. At the first sight building professionals seem to be most concerned with the question of how to meet the diverse needs and preferences of potential home buyers. This is an objective that leads – whether intentionally or not – to the creation of hyperreal ambiences (Chapter 2). In this way building for different target groups that have different lifestyles has become more and more common (Reijndorp 2004). Building professionals assume that residents are probably interested in themed architecture as one of the representations of their distinct lifestyle.

The concept of lifestyle became already a feature of Dutch housing planning throughout the 1970s. At that time household differentiation and new occupations in culture and service sectors entailed new consumption practices and ideas on residential life. While developing more knowledge on the residential preference of urban inhabitants, planners attempted to cluster lifestyle groups within small-scaled residential environments (Nio 2010). Up to now, a great deal of knowledge has been developed on personal and groups’ lifestyles on the one hand, and on how to realize residential places that meet these lifestyles on the other. A number of themed housing schemes have been realised to fill niches in the housing market, of which Le Medi is only one example. Other examples are residential places which are themed and marketed alongside shared hobbies (Lohof and Reijndorp 2006). Marketing strategies have also become a feature of planning practice, such as methods of monitoring residential preferences and consumption behaviour. With this, building professionals tap consumers’ knowledge (Thrift 2006) and utilize this knowledge for their theming practice.

1.2.4 Social distinction
Bourdieu (1984) argued that individuals and social groups develop classifiable practices (and judge these) which, in turn, are judged by others. Practices of social distinction are informed by forms of capital as well as by a societal system of differences and inequalities. The degree of economic capital and the kind of sociocultural capital mean a person has a certain social disposition. The habitus, so Bourdieu (1984:170) argued - i.e. ‘the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification’ - determines to a great extent people’s consumptive preferences. Sayer (2005) adds to this view his notion that social distinction also depends on moral

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4 There is no clear-cut definition of what lifestyle exactly comprises but some marked features may be observed in a great number of academic studies: someone’s lifestyle is closely related to consumption practices as well as to personal attitudes like preferred cultural and ethical values (Reijndorp et. al. 1997, Pinkster and Van Kempen 2002). Featherstone (1991:83) suggests that lifestyle has a “more restricted sociological meaning in reference to the distinctive style of life of specific status groups...; within contemporary consumer culture it connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness.”
judgements which are closely related to emotions such as rejection or shame. Emotions, even if they are incomplete and short-lived, are a response to ‘the inequalities and struggles of the social field and how people negotiate them are to be taken seriously both because they matter to people and because they generally reveal something about their situation and welfare. Indeed, if the latter were not true the former would not be either’ (Sayer 2005: 37). In this vein, feminist scholars like Skeggs (1997) and Bottero (2004) argue that morally judging means classifying a person as worthy or not while looking down upon them from a ‘respectable middle class’ perspective. With this, they relate social distinction to class inequality.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s argument that ‘class inequalities are reproduced through the hierarchically differentiated nature of tastes’ (Bottero 2004:990), it is suggested that class distinction became a highly individualized process whereby a finely graded hierarchy has been confirmed routinely by cultural and economic practices. This ‘classed’ identity constitutes people’s sense of self-worth, behaviour and judgements about others (Savage 2000).

However, by so doing, individuals very often refuse to perceive themselves as a ‘member’ of a social class despite recognising social inequality. While claiming to be ‘ordinary’ and talking about ‘people-like-us’ and ‘people-unlike-us’ someone keeps up social distinction but dis-identifies with class (Bottero 2004). Here it is not the explicit class consciousness that comes to fore but rather the implicit ‘classed’ nature of everyday social and cultural practices (Lawler 2005, Skeggs 2005). Therefore, ‘new’ culturalist class analysts like Savage, Skeggs and Bottero grapple with the question of how hierarchy and inequality have continuously been reproduced, both individually and socially, over time while former class theory has long been organized around Marxist and Weberian approaches which tended to focus on conflict and stratification analysis based on group solidarity, exploitation and distribution of power informed by employment relations.

1.3 Research cases: Noorderhof, Brandevoort, Le Medi

The empirical cases have been selected on the basis of the following characteristics. The themes have to be visible in architecture and must have played a crucial role within the planning process. Moreover, different geographical contexts were selected within the urban field, such as an urban and suburban location and a location in between. Le Medi represents the first, Brandevoort the second while Noorderhof is an example of the latter.

In Dutch planning practice theming has increasingly become a feature of housing design from the 1990s onwards, but especially during the Vinex
period (Boeijenga and Mensink 2008). Here, the theme history was the favourite architectural theme in addition to water and forest (Lörzing et. al. 2006). Moreover, theming of ethnic culture has developed as a strategy of city marketing. In this study the attention is therefore focussed on the reference to history in addition to a reference to non-Western themes which are sometimes referred to as 'ethnic' theming and which seem to be realized in urban rather than suburban or rural places.

Noorderhof is a small-scale enclave with a majority of homeowners in the post-war district of Amsterdam New West. It comprises 63 social rented and 171 owner-occupied houses. The entire district New West is characterized by a relatively high number of social housing which basically consisted of two or four storeys of high-rise building blocks. The architect and urban planner Cornelis van Eesteren created this area as a modernist garden city in the 1950s based on the functionalist guidelines formulated by the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) prior to World War Two. He was chairman of the CIAM between 1930 and 1947.

In contrast to the functional urban plan and modernist two or four storey high-rise building blocks, the Noorderhof housing scheme consists of single-family owner-occupied houses arranged as small-scale housing blocks which adjoin curved streets and little squares. Krier and Kohl architects designed the urban plan and supervised the planning process and together with the housing corporation Het Oosten and designed a number of houses alongside the main square. This square was named after the Roman Catholic architect M.J. Granpré Moliere who was a representative of the Delftse School (a traditional movement in the Netherlands which was active from the end of the 1920s until the early years after World War Two). For the Noorderhof, the reference to the ‘traditional European small town’ was central to the design and is in direct opposition with the modernistic surrounding area. Noorderhof was realised between 1995 and 1998.

The second case, Brandevoort, was planned as a completely new suburban neighbourhood of Helmond in the province of North-Brabant. It was intended to provide 6,000 single-family houses until 2015, of which approximately 3,000 have been built up to now (Gemeente Helmond 1997). The social housing in the entire neighbourhood was allocated on a 30 percent basis. The building professionals involved in the project introduced the theme of ‘traditional small town’ or, more specifically, the ‘traditional Brabant small town’. Krier and Kohl architects developed the general project plan together with a consortium that consists of commercial developers,

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5 For the entire district the allotment social housing stock (owned by housing corporations) is 56 per cent, 29 per cent home ownership, 15 privately rented; for the sub-district where the Noorderhof is situated in (called Slotermeer-Zuidwest) the allotment of social housing is higher: social housing stock 70 per cent, privately rented 8 per cent, home ownership 21 per cent; see: www.os.amsterdam.nl/pdf/2011_stadsdelen_in_cijfers.pdf.
housing associations and the local government. The idea of referring to the region and traditional (fortified) small towns was based on the successful development of Dierdonk, another suburb of Helmond, where the theme of ‘the 1930s’ had been implemented a few years earlier. However, in Brandevoort the consortium decided to split the suburb into two clearly dissimilar parts: one which was intended to be the centre and which is characterised by a relatively high density compared with other suburbs (around 75 houses per hectare) and another part which was intended to function as the ‘outskirts’ (around 30 houses per hectare)\(^6\). The centre was called De Veste and its design refers to a fortified small town, while the new houses outside the centre are a reflection of the idea of rural life and traditional green (Dutch) villages.

In my research I focus on De Veste. Of the approximately 900 houses built in De Veste to date, 84 percent are owner occupied. The average income level of the residents of Brandevoort and its centre, De Veste, is higher than the average for the city of Helmond (Gemeente Helmond 2007). Krier and Kohl architects were asked not to include references to an industrial past of the city of Helmond but rather to fortified old villages of which the remains can still be found in the region of North-Brabant. Like Noorderhof, the urban design is also based on single-family houses arranged as housing blocks. The planning process has started at the end of the 1990s. Parts of Brandevoort and also of De Veste are still under construction.

The final research case, Le Medi, is a housing scheme consisting of 93 owner-occupied houses which are situated in Bospolder-Tussendijken. The neighbourhood is seen as a multicultural and ‘deprived’ neighbourhood in the city district of Delfshaven. In 2007 the national government designated 40 deprived districts in order to make extra investments to improve safety, ‘liveability’ and socio-economic positions of the residents. Delfshaven was one of these districts. One of the improvement strategies is ‘social mixing’ i.e. the attraction of social groups with a higher or middle income level. Le Medi was initiated with a view to achieving that objective. Along the six rows of houses there are brick walls to give the impression of an enclosed housing block. The inward-looking streets and courtyard are owned by the residents. Access is possible via five gates that are closed at night. The umbrella theme was oriented around the realisation of an enclosed, small-scaled housing scheme which provided residents with a safe and manageable residential environment. The theme was of ‘Arabian Kasbah’, with a Mediterranean ambience being proposed by the building professionals. The idea was to express the richness of traditional Moroccan building styles in Dutch housing.

\(^6\) In average Brandevoort has a density of 24 houses per hectare (Boeijenga, Jelte and Jeroen Mensink. 2008. *Vinex atlas*. Rotterdam: 010., pp. 282, 284, 285).
1.4 **Research questions and interviewees**

To answer the overall research question, a number of sub questions have been introduced which basically refer to the perceptions of building professionals and residents. The first category of sub questions is concerned with the creation of a themed residential place:

1. **How is space created for theming at the political level?**

2. **What are the characteristics of themed residential place and architecture?**

3. **What are the characteristics of theming practice in the case of Noorderhof, Brandevoort and Le Medi?**

The second category of sub questions focuses on the way residents or home buyers consume themed residential place and architecture:

4. **How do home buyers judge the theming of Le Medi and how do they perceive themselves, fellow home buyers and ‘the other’?**

5. **How do residents appropriate and judge the themed housing schemes of Brandevoort and Noorderhof and how do they perceive themselves, fellow residents and ‘the other’?**

1.4.1 **Selection and characteristics of the interviewees**

This study is based on empirical data collected from 76 in-depth interviews. In addition, political reports and literature on housing and planning policy, websites, newspaper articles, promotion material and so on provided background information. I visited the neighbourhoods many times to analyse the architecture, proportion of the streets and squares and to observe the way in which residents use public or semi-public residential spaces.

At the very beginning of the research I held interviews with a number of building professionals in order to explore the research field of theming and, more specifically, of theming practice. I therefore conducted interviews with architects who had designed for particular target groups like Chinese or elderly Turkish people. I wanted to find out how they dealt with the artistic expression of culture in architecture. Moreover, property developers and housing association employees gave me an insight into the way they envisage and predict residential needs and desires of certain lifestyle groups. At the moment that the research cases Brandevoort, Le Medi and Noorderhof were chosen, a number of professionals were selected. Face-to-face in-depth
interviews were conducted with them which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. In total I interviewed 36 building professionals. All the interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. Appendix A provides a complete overview of the respondents.

As regards the residents, the research sample comprised 10 households in Noorderhof, 15 in the neighbourhood’s centre De Veste and 15 households (home buyers) in Le Medi, with 57 respondents in total. I conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews of approximately 90 minutes with all of them. All the interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed (Appendix C, D and G).

The residents of Noorderhof were contacted by letters which were sent out to all homeowners (this was possible because there are only 171 property owners in the neighbourhood). A selection was made of the reply letters to ensure that as many kinds of residents from the entire residential place as possible were represented. In Noorderhof almost 50 percent of the households are nuclear family households. The vast majority of residents willing to give an interview were families and I therefore selected seven families and (only) three two-person households. All of them were dual-income households of which the partners have part-time contracts.

In De Veste 13 percent of all the residents live alone, 36 percent are two-person households, 35 percent are nuclear families and 16 percent are single parents with one (or more) child(ren) (Gemeente Helmond 2007). The single person households (27 percent) interviewed were overrepresented in the sample and single parent households were underrepresented (7 percent). However, I interviewed five families and five two-person households (with the 33 percent that these represent almost coinciding with the averages for De Veste as a whole).

In order to select interviewees in Le Medi, contact was sought with buyers at buyers’ meetings. In the end 22 households were willing to participate and 15 of these were selected, allowing for a nearly equal distribution in terms of age and cultural background.

In this study I perceive these respondents as being part of fractions of the middle-classes although I am aware that this assumption is debatable. I come back to this point in section 6.2.3. For the time being, my categorisation of the respondents is based on the definition of the middle classes by Erikson et.al. (1979) and Goldthorpe et. al. (1995). They argue that the middle classes could be identified as a service class whose members are basically exempted from manual work and have a middle income level. Dutch scholars like Ganzeboom et al. (1991) suggest that (1) people who do manual work and had been educated at a lower level than secondary education are ‘working class’; (2) people who supervise manual labour or are 7

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7 www.osamsterdam.nl/feitenencijfers/buurtcombinaties based on 1st January 2011
self-employed and had attended (general) secondary vocational education were referred to as the intermediate class and (3) individuals who perform intellectual activities and who had received higher vocational education or further education are referred to as upper middle class. A large number of members of upper middle class and intermediate group has achieved to purchase property since 1990 (Beer 2008). Dutch scholars tend to indicate both the intermediates and the upper middle class as middle classes: industrialists and managers of large-scale capitalist enterprises are regarded as members of the middle classes, just like those with low economic but high cultural capital (intellectuals, teachers, artistic producers). In this study, all the respondents have a middle income level. According to the Dutch political definition, a middle income in 2011 was a pre-tax income of €32,500. All the respondents were able to buy home that cost between €180,000 and €500,000 (in 2008). The houses in Le Medi cost between €180,000 and €350,000, the ones in Noorderhof approximately €150,000 (that was in 1998 - recently some homes in the Noorderhof were sold for €300,000 or more), and the price of homes in Brandevoort De Veste differ considerably from each other. Respondents from De Veste could afford to buy a house that had cost between €200,000 and €500,000, though the vast majority of them had paid a price between €250,000 and €300,000. Although only half of the interviewees have degree level qualifications (college or university graduates), almost all of them did non-manual work. If we designate office or bank employees, police officers, journalists, teachers and so on as people who work at service sectors and do non-manual work, 50 of the total of 57 respondents work in the culture and service sectors, while 7 work in non-service sectors like the nurse, the cook, the shop assistant, the metalworker and the housewives (Appendix B).

1.5 Analysis of narratives

The research project is based on the analysis of narratives which are elicited during the interviews by the professionals, home buyers and residents. Narrative refers to ‘stories told by research participants (which are themselves interpretive), interpretive accounts developed by an investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observation (a story about stories)’ (Riessman 2008:6). The interviewees used narratives to make ‘connections between events and between events and contexts’ (Bryman 2004a:413). The choice for the narrative analysis was based on the objective of this study to clarify how home buyers and residents make sense of their residential choice.

8 middle income refers to ‘bruto modaal inkomen’; see fore more information: www.cbs.nl and www.gemiddeld-inkomen.nl
and residential life on the one hand, and how building professionals make sense of their function to realize themed residential place on the other. The suggestion is that people construct identity through narratives (Somers 1994). According to Giddens (1991: 52, 54) identity is not just the ‘result of the continuities of the individual’s action system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual’. Thus, the result of continuities is not only inherent in someone’s behaviour (and the reaction of others to it) but also by the means of ‘capacity to keep a particular narrative going’. This ongoing (biographical) narrative has to be confirmed with actual social actions which are externally apparent. To put it in other words, keeping self-integrity means integrating day-to-day routines into the narrative about the self or, as Somers (1994) puts it, social action is guided by narrativity and vice versa. The construction of self-identity through narrativity goes beyond the traditional understanding of the narrative as a form of representation (Riessman 2008). People hold onto an integrative sense of self by locating their narratives about their emotions, judgements and practices within a wider collectively-known repertoire of social and cultural narratives (Somers 1994).

1.5.1 Narratives of the respondents

The intention of the interviews with the building professionals was twofold. First, actual information has been gathered about the planning process. Second, an attempt was made to explore the sense of self that an architect, a property developer, a marketing agent etc. have. The research participants were encouraged to talk face-to-face with me about basically four issues, namely firstly, who had been initiated the planning of the housing scheme (and why); secondly, why themes were invented, thirdly, how themes and key narratives were judged and finally, which target groups had been identified (Appendices E and F).

As regards the narrative of residents and home buyers, the focus is on narratives as a means to construct (place) identity and social distinction. Since all social actions and day-to-day routines take place in space, place identity is perceived as a sub-structure of identity which is, in turn, constructed via narrativity. From an environmental psychological point of view, place-identity is seen as a cognitive process which is ‘characterized by a host of attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, meanings and behaviour tendencies that go well beyond just emotional attachments and belonging to particular places’ (Prohansky et.al. 1983:62). Drawing on this understanding, Cuba and Hummon (1993) show that place-identity (which they define as the feeling attached to ‘home’) is related to identification with three localities at the same time: the dwelling, the community and the region.
Although environmental psychological studies provide methods to explore cognitions and attitudes people held towards physical settings (Brandenburg et al. 1995; Stedman 2009), they ignore two dynamics which are, in my view, crucial to understanding the relevance of residential places for the social construction of ‘classed’ place-identity. First, the aspect of shared residential place has been ignored, while someone’s place-identity is at any time related to fellow residents. Collective as well as individual practices of territorial appropriation are parts of ‘classed’ practices done in shared residential place. Second, these studies tend to bracket out artistic expression of meaning in architecture and which role it plays for the formation of ‘classed’ place-identity. In contrast, conceptualizing place-identity as a sub-structure of narrativity opens up the possibility of exploring how people socially appropriate residential places and how they judge architectural aesthetics in order to distinguish themselves from others and/or to construct a sense of self-worth (Appendix C, D and G).

1.6 Readers’ guide

This dissertation consists of four parts. The first part is the introduction. The second part comprises chapter 2 and 3 which both deal with the creation of themed residential architecture. Chapter 4 and 5, the third part, explore the consumption of the themed environment. The last part comprises the conclusion. The chapters 2, 4 and 5 are academic papers which are published in (international) peer-review journals. Chapter 3 has also been submitted to an international peer-review journal. More concrete, the following chapter deals with the use of themes in planning practice. It is argued that realizing an enclosed urban form and the theme of ‘traditional small town’ is a means to advance the creation of residential hyperspaces. Moreover, it is a strategy to engage with consumers’ thoughts and desires. Chapter 3 explores how architects and architectural theorists have addressed styles and themes in architecture. It demonstrates that the usage of themes is not confined to contemporary times but has been developed over centuries. Chapter 4 explores how far theming has influenced the residential choice of home buyers in the Le Medi neighbourhood. Chapter 5 focuses on the ‘classed’ day-to-day practices of residents of Noorderhof and Brandevoort, while Chapter 6 synthesizes the findings of the previous chapters. It illustrates how theming practices and themed residential place is related to the trend to realize hyperreal, hence perfected and manageable ambiences, as well as to the need for social distinction of various social groups.