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

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Residential hyperspace: building ‘convincing ambiances’ for the middle classes

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Abstract. Throughout the last two decades, Dutch housing policy has shifted to become more market-oriented and neoliberal. This sea change is reflected in the architecture of owner-occupied houses, whose production has been increasingly accompanied by theming. Theming has often been criticized as an action to maximize profit through the commercialization of spaces and the resulting hyperreal, and hence fake-architecture. In the Netherlands, building professionals also develop theming in order to realize inward-looking, hyperreal residential spaces with an ambience that opposes the surrounding ‘real’ space. Besides that they invent new strategies to engage with home buyers’ unconscious thoughts on manageable community life and feelings of insecurity. The reference to the traditional small town, whether of Western or non-Western origin, seems to be particularly purposeful to meet these needs. However, despite these efforts, the actual practice of theming appears to be less clear-cut due to profit-making. First, the realization of different themed ambiences for a number of disparate target groups challenges the effectively organized and standardized housing production and requires investment in a number of new marketing strategies. Second, the building agents struggle with the need to perfect a ‘convincing ambience’ in order to ensure a safe and manageable community life for prospective residents on the one hand, and the creation of fake-architecture which they fear will cause them to lose respectability with respect to their colleagues on the other.

2.1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, the production of new owner-occupied houses in the Netherlands has been based more and more on theming (Lörzing et al. 2006). Here, the theme history - in terms of references to typical Dutch building traditions like ‘1930s houses’ (Kingma 2012) and to the traditional European small town (Krier, 2003) - is especially interesting because it
explicitly opposes the austere architectural appearance and functionalistic open urban forms of the bulk of the Dutch housing realized after World War Two (Ibelings, 2004). In a number of cases, this theme often has been put into practice with enclosed urban forms like the housing bloc and meandering streets and through the creation of semi-private residential spaces (Krier, 2003; Lörzing, 2006; Lohof and Reijndorp 2006, Meier and Reijndorp, 2010).

In theoretical terms, theming is defined as the application of a narrative to institutions or places to make them more appealing than they otherwise would be (Bryman, 2004). In a broader sense it is argued that theming is closely related to an intensified commodification of places through which, in turn, the power of hyperreality has been increased. Academic scholars have illustrated how theming has been applied to shopping malls (Chaney, 1990; Crawford, 1992; Goss, 1993), inner city districts (Warren 1994, Zukin 1991, Hannigan 1998) or small town city centres (Paradis 2002) while less attention has been paid to the theming of new residential areas. Where this has been the case it is referred to the New Urbanism movement as a planning tradition in which traditional community (Anderson, 2010, Talen, 1999, 2002), cultural history (Till, 1993; Falconer Al-Hindi and Staddon, 1997) and traditional urban forms (Mohney and Easterling, 1991; McCann, 1995) have been themed. In these interesting and diverse studies, scholars have largely ignored two aspects. The first omission is research into social agents: the building professionals who implement a certain practice of theming or, to put it in more concrete terms, research into the interplay between the agents’ choice and assumed needs of residential place consumers on the one hand and agents’ choice and the institutional context on the other. Where attention has been paid to building professionals they have often been portrayed as little more than profit-seeking agents who invent superficial themes and try to lure consumers to themed places to spend their money (Sorkin, 1992; Hanningan, 1998). Although these places are indeed locations of capital accumulation, their (re)development is not being imposed on social agents by an abstract force called neoliberal governance. Instead, neoliberal governance is actually “made through economic bases, social hierarchies, political cultures and institutional frameworks” which create different and actual rules and therefore enable and facilitate different kinds of social agency (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Wilson, 2004, p.772).

Consequently, and this is the second omission, the theming of residential areas in the Dutch context probably appears to be different to any theming examined to date. For example, in contrast to the United States, where the Walt Disney Company has laid a firm basis for the production of a variety

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Bryman (2004) argues that theming is alongside hybrid consumption, merchandising and performative labour, one main principle of Disneyization.
of hyperspaces, designing residential hyperspace in the Netherlands does not seem to fit in with the modernist planning legacy of housing. This paper aims to fill these voids by focusing on the way in which perception and actions of Dutch building professionals are related to the demand for profit and the commercialization of residential spaces. The key questions we aim to explore include: 1) How is space created for theming practices at political level?, 2) What are the main characteristics of theming practice and residential hyperspace? and 3) Why do Dutch building agents invent hyper-real housing schemes? Three recently-built developments were analyzed in which themes have been articulately implemented, namely a small, new neighbourhood in the post-war district of Amsterdam New West (Noorderhof), a new suburb called Brandevoort near Helmond and the urban housing scheme of Le Medi, which is situated in Bospolder, one of Rotterdam’s deprived inner city neighbourhoods. Empirical evidence was taken from in-depth interviews with 36 professionals who developed these housing schemes\(^{10}\) (in a number of different roles).

2.2 Theming and hyperreality

First of all, theming the built environment means treating it as a bearer of signs, or as a sign itself. The meaning of signs has traditionally been explored by scholars of semiology. In particular these scholars analyze how sociocultural meaning is constructed with language that is a system of signs (Barthes, 1967). A sign is something ‘that stands for something else, and more technically, as a spoken or written word, a drawn figure, or a material object [it is] unified in the mind with a particular cultural concept’ (Gottdiener, 1997, p.8). With the development of postmodern thought throughout the 1960s, the realm of semiology was broadened to include other societal fields, such as architectural design (Gottdiener and Lagopoulos, 1986). Architects like Jencks (1977) and Venturi (et al., 1977) argued that architecture has to be perceived as a sign system that is able to communicate with its users. From this perspective, they distanced themselves from functionalist architecture which is dominated by form and space rather than sign. However, the notion of architecture as a system of signs is not without problems: as a spatial object it offers functions rather than clear-cut messages (Colquhoun, 1989). Eco (1980) bridged the gap by suggesting that architecture has primary and secondary functions. For example, an archway primarily denotes corporal passage, while it could connote triumph as a secondary, symbolic meaning. Though, since then, the architectural debate about whether social functions have better to be

\(^{10}\) see Appendix A
represented by form or by sign goes on, themed environment has been established in many countries. It exhibits traits of a hyperspace if, by means of an inward-looking ambience (Sorkin, 1992), a reality is created where 'things that one wants to connote as real, these things must seem real. Absolute unreality is offered as real presence' (Eco, 1986, p. 7). This absolute unreality consists of signs which only represent themselves. They become simulacra and are therefore likely to replace a former reality by a perfect respectively 'hyper' reality (Baudrillard, 1983). In line with Baudrillard, Jameson (1984) argues that postmodern thought has generated a radical new culture of perceiving space which has replaced traditional ways of distinguishing between real and imagined space. By contrast scholars like Harvey (1990) and Soja (1995) tend to emphasize the piecemeal transformation of societies, built space and perceptions. Although causes and appearance of postmodern thinking are still controversial matters, there is no denying that through economic restructuring, privatopias (McKenzie, 1994), fortified public spaces (Davis, 1990), dreamscapes as parts of the city as a theme park (Sorkin, 1992) and so on have emerged which were identified as phenomena of postmodern urbanism (Dear and Flusty, 1998). By some means or other hyperreality has accompanied these phenomena while involving 'the intrusion and growing power of [...] simulations and simulacra (defined as exact copies of originals that do not exist), into the material reality and ideological imaginary of urban life' (Soja 1995, p.135).

Disneyland, which opened in 1955, has been regarded as the alpha point of hyperspace (Sorkin, 1992). The American white middle classes, who initially accounted for the majority of visitors, appreciated the park's beauty and cleanliness. Moreover, they were satisfied that they got what was promised (Fjellman, 1992; Bryman, 1995). This latter aspect should not be underestimated. Desires are evoked before people enter hyperspaces. '[A]dvertising has already identified particular emotional and social conditions with specific products' and a bond is therefore created between the individual and a certain product. Besides this, purchasing has been stimulated by offering products as 'adjacent attractions' (Crawford, 1992, p.12-13, 15) or, in other words, the unexpected array of dissimilar objects next to each other. Advertising and adjacent attractions are practices that appeal to consumers' emotions and unconscious thoughts. Professionals consider 'the design composition of things in more detail to see if it is possible to provide more in the way of momentary 'thing power', as well as the associated construction of circumstances rich enough in calculative prostheses to allow the neuro-aesthetic to function more forcefully.' (Thrift, 2006, p. 286).

The emphasis on unconscious thoughts and emotions indicates a way of commodity production which involves a continuous search for innovative strategies to engage consumers in the process of productions and tap their
knowledge, for instance by means of internet panels or interactive websites (Dujarier 2008; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). Moreover, the intensification of consumers’ emotional bonds with certain products is boosted by extending their primary function with recognizable secondary meaning (such as the application of narrative to the product (Bryman 2004)). These marketing strategies have been elaborated by advertising agencies for decades but, more recently, building professionals have incorporated them in the planning process of residential areas. Langdon (1994, p.63) claims that the idea of dividing the housing market and hence spatial areas into a number of subdivisions in order to make them “appeal, segment by segment” to whatever customer categories are desired has captured the planners’ perception of middle-class housing and of a perfect i.e. ‘hyperreal’ residential life. The market segmentation ‘has encouraged developers to view prospective residents as a series of disparate groups who are to be kept apart from the members of other groups’ and therefore to create spatially separated entities with a ‘coordinated aesthetic’ (Langdon (1994, p.64, 66). To paraphrase Wilson (2004:771) this perception and practice have been related to neoliberal governance as long as, it serves to free up (housing) markets from state regulation, to ‘re-entrepreneurialize’ city space, or to privatize former public assets like public streets and squares (Harvey 2006). Neoliberal (urban) governance is an elusive concept (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Peck and Tickell 2002) that will not be discussed in depth here. Instead it is more interesting to focus on the notion that neoliberal governance seems to reinforce feelings of insecurity and fear due to the effects of decreased state regulation and increased economic instability. According to Atkinson (2006, p.820) these feelings are one of the social forces that “appear to reveal deep inclinations towards segregation based on desires for social homogeneity and the predictability to engender”. The middle-class and affluent residents in particular were “now aided by policy and by private markets to create their own exclusionary and exclusive spaces which support their social needs and fear of otherness” (Atkinson, 2006, p.820). These spaces are actually made by building professionals who work in circumstances which demand skills in order to maximize profit. However, as Sennett (2006) claims, these skills are contrary to the human desire for continuity and craftsmanship because the shelf life of employees’ skills has been shortened by the culture of new capitalism and neoliberal governance. Craftsmanship, the great devotion for a specific intellectual, manual or artisan field, seems to be much less ‘effective’ for making profit than the talent to accomplish a variety of duties within a short period (Sennett, 2008). We are therefore curious to find out how building professionals deal with the practice of theming that require certain craftsmanship on the one hand and the demand for profit on the other.
2.2.1 **Feelings of insecurity and the traditional small town**

As regards the engagement with emotions, like the feelings of insecurity of residents, the New Urbanism movements in the United States and the Council for European Urbanism in particular have been successful. Here, the reference to the traditional small town has been widely used to attract target groups (i.e. the middle classes) because it seems to be an appropriate response to the desire for social (Dowling, 1998) or ethnic (Leitner, 2011) homogeneity, the desire for manageability and a sense of community (Talen, 1999, 2002). Although this reference certainly manifests itself differently in different settings, the practice of theming the traditional small town basically consists of two strategies: 1) the extension of meaning of architecture by secondary meanings and 2) the communication of key narratives about community feeling and the cultural history of places.

As regards the aspect of secondary meaning, suburbia has long been regarded as a cultural sign of a certain domestic life led by the affluent at the turn of the nineteenth century, and was then absorbed by the ‘mass’ of the middle classes throughout the twentieth century. Gottdiener (1997, p. 41) argues that the mansion, front porches, lawns and even mailboxes are copied but scaled down to ‘mini versions’. Copying signs of wealth and prestige simulates a high status residential place but does not mean that prestige and exclusiveness will be actually realized. Instead both come into existence through the combination of highly priced houses, the real presence of a selected social group, cultural boundaries and institutional regulations (Duncan and Duncan, 2004; Leitner, 2011). Following on from this the secondary meaning of architecture and place changes if particular groups move in or out of a certain area (Ley, 1995). Nevertheless, the mere simulation of wealth and prestige seems to ease the fear of the middle classes of a decline in their social status (Low, 2008).

Feelings of insecurity are capitalized on even more by the communication of key narratives. The first key narrative accompanying the theming of the traditional small town involves the description of manageable and social homogenous community (distributed by advertising, sales brochures or other mass media). This description is, for example, compatible with the ideology of the ‘American Dream’ (Marshall, 2003), “the ‘golden years’ of the Fordist period (of hope, harmony, and economic resurgence)” (Anderson, 2010, p. 1086) or with the nostalgic perception of an exclusively ‘white’ rural American small-town life (Leitner, 2011). The second key narrative completes the first one with its emphasis on history of the place concerned. As a result a certain cultural history is reinvented (Till, 1993) in order to generate
authenticity. An architectural image is therefore created that simulates a place which has grown naturally (Zukin, 2010). One instrument to achieve this is the creation of variety. For example, during the building of Seaside in Florida, Duany states that ‘[a] single firm cannot achieve authentic variety; only the work of many can achieve the character of the true town’ (cited in Mohney and Keller, 1991, p. 63). Hence, the image of the ‘true town’ has been realized through the actual building of diversity (of housing types), but this entails the following practical problem, namely how to control that the ‘realistic fabrication’ (Eco, 1986) of the traditional small town actually takes place. In Seaside, codes were introduced to guide the urban form with road width, lot size and housing type being prescribed in a codebook and architectural codes, like a selected variety of roof pitches, material and colour restrictions and so forth being mandatory (Mohney and Keller, 1991; Falconer Al-Hindi and Staddon, 1997).

In the Netherlands, the reappreciation of the traditional small town by building professionals throughout the 1990s is firstly related to the search for recognizable (suburban and inner city) architectural identities through which the owner-occupied housing market has become more and more subdivided (Lörzing, 2006). Secondly it is maintained that the demand for a traditional small town ambience in recently built pseudo-countryside locations has increased (Heins, 2004). As regards architectural design, any references to pre-modern building traditions were taboo for a long time until the non-Dutch architects Krier and Kohl introduced the concept of theming the idealized European small town during the 1990s (Krier, 2003). Thereafter, more and more Dutch offices again started to refer to particular Dutch building traditions like the craftsmanship found in traditional farmhouses (characterized by brick or green brushed wood) and the austere usage of (exotic) style elements (Ibelings, 2004). They were able to introduce this kind of theming into urban and suburban areas by at least two driving forces.

2.3 Political context

First, the changes in housing policy not only stimulate the production of owner-occupied housing but also reflect the shifting role of housing associations and second, building professionals have changed their own

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11 Authenticity is an elusive concept. Following the study of Zukin (2010) authenticity of places means 1) the feature of being historically old or being the ‘origin’ and 2) the characteristic of being historically new or innovative; but most interesting here is her statement that a ‘city is authentic if it can create the experience of origins’ (Zukin, 2010, p. 3).

12 In 2011, there are 7.2 million houses in the Netherlands from which 2.3 million were owned by all Dutch housing associations together; the great majority of these is social housing which is accessible low income and lower middle income people (http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/ woningvoorraadnaareigendom; accessed on 16th January 2012).
attitudes toward the usage of cultural signs in order to engage consumers in the planning process.

As regards the first, the social rented sector has been reduced in favour of owner-occupation (Boelhouwer, 2002). The building of a large quantity of owner-occupied housing is laid down in the Fourth Spatial Planning Memorandum Extra, known as the Vinex policy, which was formulated in 1993 (Ministry of VROM, 1993). Approximately 519,000 new housing units had been projected over the period 1995-2005 which were planned (and built) by consortiums consisting of commercial developers, housing associations and local governments that all share in the investments and benefits (Priemus, 1996, 2004; Boelhouwer, 2002). The majority of those developments are situated on city fringes. Furthermore, support was given to the building of owner-occupied homes in disadvantaged inner city and post-war neighbourhoods (Ministry of VROM 1997; Uitermark, 2003; Priemus 2004). In these urban areas housing associations, local authorities and the national government made extra investments to improve safety, quality of ‘livability’ and the socio-economic positions of residents (Aalbers and Beckhoven 2010). Housing associations are particularly powerful actors for renewal because they have a high share in the housing stock in several urban neighbourhoods and in many post-war areas. Whereas their key task before the 1990s was to provide housing for social groups who do not manage to provide it for themselves, they became hybrid organizations throughout the 1990s, i.e., they became financially independent of national government but were legally obliged to invest surpluses in new housing for their original target group. Additional consequences of this hybrid position are described elsewhere (Priemus, 2004, 2006). However, in any case, the new situation forced them into the competition with commercial developers and with each other. As a result, a number of small-scale associations were merged into fewer large-scale organizations that enabled them not only to accumulate power and financial capital but also to operate on regional housing markets. They were also able to participate in consortiums which realize suburban housing. For them and for other participants in the consortium, themed architecture (and the choice for a famous architect) became an effective way of ensuring that they and ‘their’ residential ambiences stood out from other business locations and rivals.

This more demand-driven housing production required a change in planning practitioners’ attitude towards their work, which is the second...
driving force of theming. The main target group for themed owner-occupied houses is the middle class\textsuperscript{15}. They still represent spatially mobile capital and in political terms are seen as an engine for improvement (Uitermark et al., 2007). Themed housing built in deprived neighbourhoods (and in the suburbs as well) is designed as a hyperreal “coordinated aesthetic whole” (Langdon (1994, p. 66): references to Dutch, European and non-Western building traditions being used to design houses and (semi-) public spaces as an aesthetic entity. These inward-looking hyperspaces are supposed to attract the middle classes to places which suffer from a dubious reputation by convincing them of the manageable character of the new residential area (Low, 2008; VROM-raad, 2009). Moreover, the concept of lifestyle has been implemented in housing production to predict preferences of the various target subgroups more precisely (Nio, 2010). While traditional housing market research based on income level, size of the household, life-cycle stage and age, lifestyle research focused on emotional attachment, personal attitudes and consumption patterns\textsuperscript{16}. Inquiries, workshops with potential home buyers and other kinds of market research have become an inherent part of the planning process.

2.4 Research locations: Noorderhof, Brandevoort De Veste, Le Medi

The housing schemes Noorderhof, Brandevoort De Veste and Le Medi are particularly advantageous sites to studying theming because building professionals implemented themes there in an articulately way and the selection allows a comparison of a post-war, an urban and a suburban area where theming was implemented.

\textsuperscript{15} In contrast to the academic Anglo-Saxon debate on middle classes where the questions i) how the middle classes are develop in time, ii) how the middle classes could adequately be defined via cultural capital, lifestyle preferences and locational choice and iii) how they reproduce themselves as a social class (see e.g. Butler, T. and Savage, M. eds, 1995; Savage, M., 2010), Dutch policymakers (still) define class position according to occupational and education levels. Most academic studies on locational choices of the Dutch middle classes deal with the residents’ decision on inner city districts, whereas studies of locational choice of suburbs are rare (exceptions are: Reijndorp et al., 1998). In this paper the term middle classes points to middle income groups who have non-college graduates (general secondary vocational education) or college or university graduates (higher vocational or further education), with a Dutch or non-Dutch ethnic background. All lifestyle, locational and architectural preferences mentioned here are assumed by the professionals themselves. Whether these assumptions have a real basis is not discussed in this paper (and should be investigated in further research).

\textsuperscript{16} The market research agency Smart Agent Company for example categorizes home consumers in four colours which represent ‘worlds of experience’: red (freedom, headstrong), yellow (social, careful), blue (rational, control), green (introvert, calm); www.smartagent.nl.
2.4.1 **Noorderhof: precursor of residential hyperspace**

Noorderhof is a new small-scaled housing scheme (63 social rented and 171 owner-occupied) in the post-war neighbourhood Amsterdam New West. The reference to the ‘traditional European small town’ was central to the design and, with this, it forms a clear antipode to the modernistic surrounding area designed by Cornelis van Eesteren in the 1930s (realized after 1950). Initially, Amsterdam New West was developed for middle and lower middle income groups. From the 1970s onwards, immigrants and their families have moved in and replaced the first generation inhabitants. These days, Amsterdam New West – where 48 per cent of residents have a non-Dutch ethnic background and where there are a large number of low-income groups - is denoted as a deprived neighbourhood. The city district government of New West developed a physical and socio-economic renewal plan in 2001, called *Park City 2015*. A quotation by the developer reflects the fact that the Noorderhof could be seen as a precursor of theming practice due to two aspects:

“Noorderhof had the first single-family houses built for sale within this city district. The estate agents thought we were crazy but they ended up nearly going crazy due to the project drawings [which showed every facade to be different]. In the space of a day, house prices rocketed. That was brilliant! At a certain moment it became necessary to introduce the idea that projects like this were possible in a deprived district”.

*AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, OCTOBER 1, 2008*

Here, the local authority and the housing association were at the forefront of the idea of attracting middle class residents to disadvantaged (post-war) neighbourhoods through a reference to the traditional European town. Since the building of Noorderhof, theming has been based more often on the building of residential hyperspaces which represent an idealized traditional European small town (as in the case at Brandevoort) or even a traditional non-Western small town (by referring to an Arabian Kasbah as in the case of Le Medi) (Lörzing 2006, Meier and Reijndorp, 2010).

2.4.2 **Brandevoort: dazzling pearl within the ‘mass’ of suburban housing**

Brandevoort is a suburban district of Helmond (in the province of North-Brabant). The invention of the umbrella theme ‘traditional Brabant small...”

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17 In 2010 approximately 135,000 inhabitants were registered as living in 60,000 housing units, of which 57% were social houses; [www.os.amsterdam.nl/feitenenCIjfers/20296](http://www.os.amsterdam.nl/feitenenCIjfers/20296).

18 The Masterplan of Brandevoort assigns density, infrastructure, accessibility, embedding in the natural context, target groups and urban and architectural themes. In total, 6,000 houses were projected of which 3,000 had been built up to that point.
Residential hyperspace: building ‘convincing ambiences’ for the middle classes

Town was based on the successful development and sale of Dierdonk, another suburb of Helmond where the theme ‘traditional Dutch town of the 1930s’ had been implemented a few years earlier. Helmond has approximately 88,000 inhabitants and is situated within a network of the mid-sized cities of Eindhoven, Tilburg, ‘s Hertogenbosch and Breda and a couple of small-scale towns. Although Brandevoort is part of Helmond, it is situated a few miles away from the city centre. It was designed as a new town which had to give the impression of having developed naturally throughout history.

The latter was essential for two reasons. First, the planners (and in particular the municipal government) intended to design a suburban area which the middle classes would not associate with the existing city of Helmond. As an industrial city in decay, Helmond has an unfavourable reputation, partly due to its relatively high rate of unemployment and subjectively assumed high rate of delinquency (Van Hooff and Van Lieshout, 2006). Second, the municipal government of Helmond and involved private developer aimed to create a residential area that was decidedly different from other suburbs initiated by the Vinex policy (Boeijenga and Mensink, 2010). While a large number of those has a density of between 20-30 dwelling units per hectare, Brandevoort is divided into two parts: one having 50 units per hectare, called De Veste, which is a perfected, hence hyperreal simulation of quasi-Medieval fortified village, and a second one with 20 units per hectare which building professionals described as ‘the outskirts’ (Gemeente Helmond, 1997).

19 Here, the professionals seem to refer to the ‘Duchy of Brabant’ (formally established at the end of the 12th century) that covered a region that is today divided in a Belgium and Dutch part. In this region a number of walled and even fortified cities (like Heusden and Grave) had been built. North-Brabant is the name of a contemporary Dutch province; Vlaams-Brabant and Waals-Brabant are two Belgium provinces.
2.4.3 Le Medi: attraction in a deprived urban neighbourhood

The Le Medi housing scheme was realized by a consortium consisting of the municipal government, two housing associations and a private developer on the basis of the umbrella theme of ‘Arabian Kasbah’. The 93 owner-occupied row houses, arranged around two narrow streets and a square, are situated in the inner city neighbourhood of Bospolder which is part of the Rotterdam city district of Delfshaven\(^{20}\). Here, the housing stock consists of enclosed, four storey high housing blocks of which the vast majority is social rented housing. These days approximately 60% of the inhabitants of the city district of Delfshaven have a non-Dutch ethnic background\(^{21}\).

Delfshaven is an area where an integral urban renewal operation has been planned with the settlement of middle and higher income groups as a key objective. Dutch scholars describe this objective as state-led gentrification. Uitermark et al. (2007, p. 138) argue that, although the shift towards a market-orientated policy took place, the gentrification is not totally subordinate to market forces because actors act against ‘sound business logic’ to invest in areas which have not the best potential to make profit. Le Medi is one of the housing schemes where the state-led gentrification became apparent. The driving force behind the realization of Le Medi was the launch of Rotterdam’s policy of cultural pluralism between 1998 and 2002, referred to as ‘the multicoloured city’, whereby migrants were stimulated to express cultural diversity in literature, art, music, built environment and so forth (a policy that has been changed from the 2003 onwards, see Van der Horst and Ouwehand 2011). This policy was a fertile breeding ground for the initiators of Le Medi (a Moroccan immigrant and a Dutch urban planner) to express, at first, Arabian culture in architecture, and secondly, to market it as a new residential commodity for the urban middle class. The Moroccan initiator suggested in an interview:

“.. We thought that it ought to be possible to combine architectural codes that refer to Mediterranean building traditions - these beautiful elements! - with the Dutch context to make something magnificent. With this you go beyond the problem of whether you should carry out one particular identity .. If we make a fusion then we avoid discussions like ‘we get Kasbah’s, we get enclaves, we set certain social groups against others, and so on’.. That’s why I said from the beginning that we will combine ‘concrete’ with ‘poetry’ .. I want to use themed architecture and housing as a political instrument, last but not least, to provoke Dutch society. […] We create something beautiful, something new. It is a new product.”

AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, OCTOBER 16, 2007

\(^{20}\) The planning process started in around 2000 and the first houses were delivered in 2008.

\(^{21}\) www.cos.rotterdam.nl [RotterdamDATA]
Moroccan culture is being stigmatized in the Netherlands, and the assumption is made that a reference to ‘pure’ Arabian or Moroccan building traditions would be unattractive to the non-Dutch and the Dutch middle classes (Meier, 2011). Therefore, a mix of themes is preferred. From the marketing point of view an adjacent attraction is created: Dutch culture (symbolized by concrete) and Arabian traditions (synonym with poetry) were set next to each other. In line with Zukin’s (2010) observation, the initiator had the idea of producing an authentic product in the sense of being innovative and creating a historically new experience by using collectively known cultural signs.

2.5 Practices of theming

The theming practice of Noorderhof, Brandevoort and Le Medi has developed in slightly different ways. However, in all cases the focus was on the invention of an umbrella theme (divided into sub themes) and key narratives (see table 1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>NOORDERHOF</th>
<th>BRANDEVOORT</th>
<th>LE MEDI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>building professionals' objectives</td>
<td>(1) Attract middle classes to deprived post-war neighbourhood (2) Housing association aims to be 'progressive' and a pioneer (breaking with Dutch functionalistic planning paradigm)</td>
<td>(1) Expansion of owner-occupied housing for the middle classes (Vinex policy) (2) Helmond competes with Eindhoven for middle classes (spatially mobile capital)</td>
<td>(1) Attract middle classes to a deprived urban neighbourhood (2) Consortium aims to be 'progressive' and a pioneer (breaking with negative image of Moroccan culture in Netherlands)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>umbrella theme subtheme</td>
<td>Traditional European small town Enclave around the church</td>
<td>Traditional Brabant's small town Imagined old city centre: fortified Brabant's village (De Veste) 'Outskirts' around the imagined fortress: Garden City (De Buitens)</td>
<td>Arabian Kasbah Mediterranean oasis Mediterranean ambience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>key narrativesa</td>
<td>(1) Embedding Noorderhof at its location means restoring a 'traditional place' for the church (in the middle of the small town and as a centre for the community) (2) Convincing ambiance is achieved by enclosure and diverse facades</td>
<td>(1) Embedding Brandevoort at its location means creating a 'naturally developed town' with an imaginary origin core and scattered settlements around it (2) Competition with villages nearby is needed</td>
<td>(1) Embedding Le Medi is an attempt to embed exotic architecture into the multiethnic, urban neighbourhood (2) The 'new Rotterdam citizen' is cosmopolitan: a fusion of Dutch and Arabian culture is an adjacent attraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>architectural codesb</td>
<td>Small-scaled housing block, diverse facades; old trees; different kinds of residential squares; vertical windows</td>
<td>Small-scaled housing block, gable roof, diverse facades, wooden roof ledge, molded window frame, bench and old fashioned street lamps</td>
<td>Small-scale housing block, water fountain, roof terrace, enclosed square</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Legitimizing the usage of themes in planning practice
b Codes which are concretized (written down, described) in beeldkwaliteitsplan or masterplan (aesthetical codebooks)

All the houses at Noorderhof were built on new ground and replaced old school buildings which were razed. A church, built in the 1950s by the Dutch traditionalistic architect Granpré Molière, was symbolically re-situated at the core of the new development. Together with the district chairman,
the housing association selected Krier and Kohl architects who they knew favoured neotraditional architecture. In order to simulate an “authentic location for the old church”, the umbrella theme was accompanied by two key narratives. The first one concerned the making of an inward-looking, hence convincing residential ambience. The developer of the housing association asserts that, for him,

“...an enclave could not be strong enough. I do not favour gated communities but I think it is a quality that if you enter Noorderhof today you feel as if you are a guest [...] These days, it is crucial to create convincing residential ambiences.” 

AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, OCTOBER 1, 2008

The quotation captures the developers’ conviction that spatial enclosure not only makes it possible to create a ‘convincing ambience’, but that this form is probably a suitable way to fulfil the middle classes’ desire for a sense of community and familiarity (Langdon, 1994; VROM-raad, 2009).
The second key narrative expressed the idea of reconstructing an original location for the church. This idea was highly contradictory: a physical remnant, the church, had been embedded in an irregularly shaped, traditional small town despite this urban form as an entity radically breaking with the modernistic post-war one. Internal consistency is achieved while, at a higher scale level, the enclosed ‘convincing ambience’ is considerably detached from its geographical context. The heightening of the internal consistency means the image has to be projected that Noorderhof has developed naturally throughout history. A development in time had been simulated by the creation of variety and the preservation of a number of old trees and different facades. The landscape architect involved recalls that he was, in the first instance, opposed to the creation of a hyperreal simulation of the past. However, during the planning process he changed his mind:

“I really did not appreciate nor understand why Krier wanted to preserve the trees and had therefore even curved the street lines. But admittedly, the idea to create an enclosed spatial form seemed to me a pleasant contrast to the diffuse and open urban forms that were so characteristic for this post-war neighbourhood. Krier said to me “every now and again you have to go crazy”. It was then that I changed my mind. From that moment onwards I was able to enjoy the idea of working on a simulation of the past.” Authors’ Interview, December 14, 2008

Krier and Kohl architects supervised the building of the entire design and invented a codebook comprising a range of materials, colours, proportions and so on which the contracted architects had to use. This strategy they also have adopted to design the Brandevoort master plan but the supervision was performed by an urban planner at Helmond local authority. In the case of Brandevoort the codebook was much more formalized. A consortium comprising the local government of Helmond, housing associations and a private developer was formed to realize Brandevoort by sharing the risk and investment. The consortium participants agreed with each other that a historicized ambience would achieve optimal sales. A developer at the time suggested the following when interviewed:

“I think that architecture is a very important way of creating identity. For example through references to the past, or by the building of a salient architectural icon. Though anything is possible, the reference to the past .. is so natural .. if you refer to history you appeal to a very broad target group. From the commercial point of view, it is reasonably safe. Nevertheless, I would hate the theming to stay confined to the reference to the past. That’s something I would get really tired of.” Authors’ Interview, August 27, 2008
The argument that history will appeal to ‘a very broad target group’ is partly based on market research. The commercial development firm regularly carried out surveys via emails that consumers complete and send back. These inquiries helped them to tap consumers’ knowledge about (and preference for) domestic cultures, functional features and architectural styles. They also regularly organized workshops with potential home buyers as one interviewee of this firm stated. Besides this strategy and its theming of the past, the development firm anticipated people’s attachment to the future place by the invention of key narratives. First, it was assumed that people who are interested in Brandevoort would be open to sharing the residential ambience with like-minded ‘middle-class’ people. Second, Brabant’s building tradition has been simulated by an imaginary narrative on how Brandevoort had developed during several decades. Advertising and sales brochures stated that the quasi-Medieval fortified centre (De Veste) had been expanded beyond its walls and, as a result, new green outskirts had been developed (De Buitens). This is another hyperreal simulation of natural growth.
However, the architects who actually transform the guidelines of the codebook into architectural design were often averse to creating a hyperreal residential ambience. One architect asserted:

“We have our doubts about building at Brandevoort De Veste. We asked ourselves whether it was going to turn into some kind of Disneyland? If so, it would have nothing to do with the profession of being an architect. Then our office decided to carry out the work as long as a high quality of the housing schemes was maintained. We said to each other, if it becomes Brummagem we’ll stop.” AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, AUGUST 26, 2008

This quotation illustrates his fear of creating fake-architecture because it does not fit in with the idea of craftsmanship.

In contrast to Noorderhof and Brandevoort De Veste, the umbrella theme of Le Medi was primarily not invented to lure middle classes to a specific place. Instead, an architectural codebook was worked out before a building location had been found. The codebook states that roof terraces, a fountain and a courtyard combined with architecture with quadrate windows, warm colours and hand-made looking bricks were essential for a simulation of an Arabian Kasbah. All the building professionals preferred a suburban region for its realization but none of the building consortium was able to acquire building land outside the city of Rotterdam. They therefore decided to locate Le Medi in Bospolder where the housing associations have a substantial stock of social housing which has been planned to be replaced by owner-occupied housing as provided in the agreement of the urban renewal operation in this urban area. At the moment the location was designated, the building professionals developed strategies to involve potential home buyers in the planning process and to interest them in investing in this deprived neighbourhood. Workshops were held with residents of Rotterdam to discuss essential features of Moroccan and Dutch culture, drawings were made which were intended to represent fusion of these two cultures and inquiries were regularly distributed via emails to consumers. Moreover, a small office was built for the Le Medi estate agents at the building location, complete with a Mediterranean-style interior. The office was used to inform potential home buyers about the house and the expected residential ambience. Finally, home buyers could arrange their furniture virtually on Le Medi floor plans on an interactive website.

22 means: kitsch in Dutch
The so-called *woonplanner* (home planner) is an interactive website where (potential) home buyers could furnish the floor plans of all storeys of the new home.

In order to enable recognition and place embeddedness, the fusion of Dutch and Arabian symbols were assumed to fit in the place because the neighbourhood itself is a multiethnic neighbourhood. A civil servant from the municipality of Rotterdam recalls:

“It [the scheme] does not cater for Moroccans. The initiator only wanted to interest Dutch people in the Moroccan culture [laugh]. Okay. Perhaps, this idea is too simple. The target group is much broader. The new urban, cosmopolitan .. that sounds good .. young people who feel attached to Rotterdam, to city life .. a social group that is willing to identify with the multicultural place here without wanting to live in a Moroccan enclave.”

*AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, SEPTEMBER 18, 2007*

This quotation reflects the idea that the middle classes are assumed to be impressed by the imaginary way in which culture is represented. Here, the Moroccan culture is manipulated by mixing it with collectively known and accepted Dutch culture. As such, it is assumed to represent the cosmopolitan lifestyle. However, for the architect the creation of this mixture was a challenge:
You get the opportunity to expand your own boundaries due to your architectural language. The theming was challenging .. er.. and at the same time it was a kind of protection against criticism because you could argue that the theme itself “asks” for the architecture I have designed. It was actually a reason to change the way of working .. [hesitation] ..as an architect you know all these references but to draw them by myself was another thing.” **AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, AUGUST 23, 2007**

This citation indicates his struggle with theming but also shows that he was finally able to see its advantages. He also argues that he tried to avoid the making of hyperreality, hence a housing scheme that resembles one in a Disneyland theme park. For example, therefore, he refused to implement an exact copy of a typical Arab gate in the Dutch context. In his view, just the displacement of such a symbol evokes the impression of fake. Instead, he designed a parabola-shaped main gate.

**2.6 Conclusion**

Due to the shift in Dutch housing policy towards a more market-oriented and neoliberal one throughout the last two decades, municipalities and housing associations now have an increased interest in the commercialization of neighbourhoods and housing schemes (Priemus, 1996, 2004). Municipalities can use a themed residential architecture to make ‘their’ city stand out from others. Likewise, housing associations are able to represent them as pioneers who break with the making of monotonous, large-scaled (social) housing schemes. Moreover, theming certainly helps to focus the various ideas and style preferences of all the consortium participants during the planning process and it is also an effective way of controlling the architectural result (Mohney and Easterling, 1993; McCann, 1995). Building professionals have embraced this development by elaborating theming in particular in order to ‘convince’ potential middle-class home buyers to move to areas with an unfavourable reputation (Meier and Reijndorp 2010). In the cases explored, the practice of theming consists of the built simulation of a ‘traditional small town’ and the invention of key narratives on its imaginary cultural history (Till, 1993). This theme – whether it is of a Dutch, European or Arabian origin - seems to be useful for the creation of hyperreal, inward-looking ambiences that visually and spatially oppose surrounding real space. Because of its well-defined spatial boundaries and distinguishable style elements, the entire residential area is very suitable for being marketed as a “coordinated aesthetic whole” (Langdon 1994). As such, the entity is also likely to be assumed familiar, safe and as
place where residential life with like-minded neighbours is possible (VROM-raad, 2009). Besides the production of a ‘convincing ambience’, building agents tap consumers’ unconscious thoughts and knowledge via interactive websites, questionnaires and face-to-face workshops. By doing so they were able to reveal requirements on floor plans and size or disclose daily routines and aesthetic judgments (Thrift, 2006).

However, both the creation of hyperspaces and the engagement with prospective residents seem to have less clear-cut effects due to profit-making (Sorkin, 1992; Gottdiener, 1997). As the research cases illustrate, the building professionals aim to produce housing schemes which are ready for sale, but they also create ‘hyperreal’ inward-looking ambiences which they (nevertheless) want to fit into the local context and this requires a lot of time and money. The architectural theming of the housing scheme Le Medi and its marketing campaign, for example, required considerable investment, first and foremost because the target group had to be convinced by the quality of the housing scheme and the ‘adjacent attraction’ (Crawford, 1992) of Arabian-Dutch architectural symbolism realized in a deprived urban neighbourhood. Moreover, the building agents interviewed claimed that creating variety in residential architecture in order to simulate wealth and prestige is more expensive than the production of houses which an austere architecture and which are all the same. Therefore, they attempted to standardize ground floors behind the diverse facades or to save money by decorating only the street facades which have to represent the theme and ignoring the rear facades.

Furthermore, the creation of hyperreal residential ambiences also appears to be contradictory to commercializing space in the long run. A number of building agents were afraid of producing fake-architecture and therefore of losing their respectability as a civil servant, a real estate developer or as a representative of the housing association compared to colleagues working in the same field. The architects in particular who - as contractors - have the most dependent position within the planning process were most concerned and reserved about theming. To them, the idea of creating hyperspace, and hence fake-architecture, conflicts with their perception of craftsmanship (Sennett, 2006, 2008). To meet this challenge, the architects developed a number of strategies. Some of them struggled to modify the theme in such a way that its fits in with forms which are local and common in the Dutch context and copy and craft these principles as perfectly as possible. Others mould the theme in such a way that an ‘authentic’ new product (Zukin) is produced by which they could represent, in turn, their creativity rather than craftsmanship. However, in any case, they had to adjust their perceptions and actions toward the demand for commercialization of residential space and due to the need to get fresh orders in the future.