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

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**Abstract.** This paper examines how residents of neotraditional neighbourhoods in the Netherlands socially construct a ‘classed’ place-identity and what role the historicised architecture plays within that process. Given that place-identity is constructed through social and cultural practices, the paper argues that residents’ consumption of historicised environment is bound up with drawing symbolic boundaries which have been explored here by analysing residents’ narratives. Three prominent types of narratives were found: (1) residents’ locational choice, (2) their aesthetic judgement of the residential environment and (3) the way they use it. Through these layered narratives, all interviewees appear to use historicised aesthetics to classify themselves as part of a valued social category. However, the way of boundary drawing took several forms, based either on fostering moral judgements of social behaviour accompanied by sophisticated efforts to keep neighbourhoods’ historicised image unchanged, or by conducting cultural practices shared with fellow residents by which ‘the other’ living outside the neighbourhood is ‘bracket out’ symbolically and socially.

5.1 **Introduction**

In many Western countries, interest in historicised residential architecture is growing, as demonstrated via the popularity of neovernacular or neotraditional architecture as the basis of new urbanisms (Furuseth 1997; Dostrovsky and Harris 2008; Mauldin 2009). Countries including the UK, Canada or the US already have a long tradition of historicised housing, despite historical revivalism often being derided by ‘modern’ architects. In the Netherlands, neotraditional residential architecture was widely dismissed from the start of the 1950s to the mid 1990s: Dutch architects who were in favour of the
reproduction of ‘pre-modern’ building traditions, like protagonists of the so-called Delfse School, were given almost no opportunity to realize projects. The bulk of the Dutch housing production realized after World War Two hence followed generally approved modernist design guidelines. During the past fifteen years, however, neotraditional neighbourhoods have become more common (Ibelings 2004). One of the important reasons for the recent approval is the increased production of owner-occupied houses for the Dutch middle classes (Toussaint and Elsinga 2007).

While many studies have highlight motives for producing historicised neighbourhoods (McCann 1995; Furuseth 1997; Falconer Al-Hindi 2001), their design (Falconer Al-Hindi and Staddon 1997; Talen 2002) and the conflicting representations of place identity deployed by planners and residents (Bailey and Bryson 2006), the empirical question that has been largely ignored is how residents themselves construct their middle-class place-identity via the consumption of neotraditional architecture. This is despite the widespread recognition that the consumption of places and architectural styles – like the consumption of other goods - is an economic and cultural practice by which people classify themselves (and others) as being part of a particular social ‘class’ (Bourdieu 1984; Duncan and Duncan 2004; Skeggs 2005).

In this paper, we therefore aim to explore how people produce a ‘classed’ place-identity, first by developing attitudes towards, and social and cultural practices in, residential space and second, by the way they judge and classify these in order to draw symbolic boundaries between ‘people like us’ and the ‘Other’ (Savage 2010). Drawing on Leyshon and Bull (2011:164) - who suggest that ‘people should be seen as cultural agents embedded in social processes producing their own narratives of their everyday lives’ - we analyse the narratives through which symbolic boundary drawing becomes apparent.

The research reported on here is based on narratives revealed during in-depth interviews involving twenty-five households in the Dutch neotraditional neighbourhoods of Noorderhof and Brandevoort. Both are designed by Krier and Kohl architects who have implemented a number of guidelines of the New Urbanism movement. Noorderhof is a small-scale neighbourhood that is situated in the deprived post-war development of Amsterdam New West, while the second case, Brandevoort, is an example of an entirely new suburban neighbourhood, being part of Helmond (situated in the province of North-Brabant).

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39 From all tenures in 1975 37.2 per cent were owner-occupied; in 2005 54.2 per cent (Toussaint and Elsinga 2007).
40 How the term middle class has been used here is explained in the introduction (section 1.4.1).
41 Guidelines of housing design are part of the Charter of the New Urbanism that has been ratified at CNU’s fourth annual Congress in 1996, www.cnu.org/charter (accessed 4 December 2011).
5.2 **History as an architectural theme**

When the trappings of history are no longer confined to museums, the past is made visible at a variety of locations (Lowenthal 1985). We can spend our holidays in historicised theme parks, we go shopping in new shopping centres whose architecture is a throwback to shopping arcades of the nineteenth century, or we live in neighbourhoods with historicised architecture. In these ‘prepackaged landscapes’ (Dear 2000, p.145) of recreation, consumption and living, the built environment is not a heritage artefact\(^{42}\) itself: rather heritage has been reinvented (Sorkin 1992). Nevertheless, heritage has increasingly been used to convey a sense of continuity (Graham et al. 2000) and, what is more, become a cultural and economic resource underpinning the commodification of places (Hewison 1987; Jackson and Thrift 1995; Urry 2002). As such, ‘sense of place has very real economic, social and political significance’ (Ashworth 2005, p. 193). For example, building professionals who construct suburban housing and cottages have adopted the Tudor style in order to create a sense of ‘Englishness’ in the UK and elsewhere (Ballantyne and Law 2011).

5.2.1 **Theming history in residential architecture: building for the Dutch middle classes**

In the Netherlands, from the last decades of the nineteenth century onwards, urban planners and architects have searched for a style that was able to express artistically the wealth and prestige of the growing number of (affluent) middle classes\(^{43}\). These groups did not aspire to dwell in housing schemes that had been built for the urban working ‘mass’, the so called *revolutiebouw*. Based on the development of public transport, an increasing level of wealth, the planning of green suburban environments became a feature of Dutch urban planning practice. Although suburbanization in the form of satellite Garden Cities, as advocated by Ebenezer Howard (1965[1902]) was hampered\(^{44}\), more and more small-scale settlements with low density, large houses with abundant decorated claddings, doors and windows and

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\(^{42}\) The United Nations subdivide heritage into built heritage, natural heritage, and intangible heritage. The reinvention of heritage throughout time has been analysed by e.g. Lowenthal (1985), Hobsbawm (1983) and Harvey (2001). Among others, Hewison (1987) and Urry (2002) investigated built (urban) heritage due to its purpose for regeneration and tourist industry, while others focused on the question of how natural landscapes and historical references in built environment have been used to socially construct national identity like ‘Englishness’ (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Mauldin 2009; Ballantyne and Law 2011). Intangible heritage has been explored by e.g. Smith and Akagawa (2009).

\(^{43}\) Besides searching for a suitable artistic representation of the affluent middle classes, urban planners and architects searched for a suitable style to ‘raise’ employees and the ‘working class’ in social housing during the first decades of the twentieth century.

\(^{44}\) They were hampered by, for example, local zoning rules, the basic price of greenfields or cultural attitudes (Bolleray 1990, De Klerk 2008).
meandering streets were planned for the affluent middle classes\textsuperscript{45} in places like Wassenaar, 't Gooi or Bussum (Van der Cammen and De Klerk 2002). In these cases the architectural design referred to country summer residences traditionally occupied by the Dutch urban elite\textsuperscript{46} (Wagenaar 2006).

Scaled down smaller and simpler versions, but nevertheless with an obvious reference to high status residential culture, have also been implemented in a number of ‘garden villages’ (\textit{tuindorpen}) (Korthals Altes 2004). This production was accompanied by an increasing production of manor houses (\textit{herenhuizen}) at urban locations built by private construction companies. These companies were interested in building for ‘the market’ and to meet the taste of the new bourgeoisie rather than to adhere to classical rules of using style elements (Pey 2004). Many architects definitely dismissed this eclectic, cursory and exaggerated usage of style elements (Van der Woud 2008).

After World War Two, the reference to high status residential culture was nearly absent in the modernistic housing schemes built for the ‘middle’ and lower middle classes. The bulk of early post-war Dutch housing can be characterized by austerity and plainness and by a short-lived trend of up-scaling during the 1960s and 1970s. The criticism of the architecture of these housing schemes was basically that it was too monotonous and that, high scale housing in particular, would frustrate residents’ cultural identification with their home and neighbourhood. One answer to this criticism throughout the 1970s and 1980s was the building of neighbourhoods which had been differentiated and subdivided into various small-scale units. Architects basically experimented with spatial forms, proportions and arrangements like set-backs, roof-terraces, semi-public spaces and court yards in order to create, first and foremost, variety but also a (new) human-scale residential environment (De Vletter 2004, Reijndorp et. al. 2012). The houses of the so-called bloemkoolwijken were arranged along curved streets (which were to mean to be for children to play in rather than being used as a parking area), all the doors and windows were standardized, the ceilings had no ornaments and neither were there any fancy columns or cornices. The architecture of these new neighbourhoods was therefore \textit{self-referential} and did not symbolically refer to a high-status, historical residential culture.

The way in which residential architecture refers to history changed throughout the 1990s. The creation of locality via recognizable regional

\textsuperscript{45} Here the term affluent middle classes best suits the term ‘the new bourgeoisie’ that Wagenaar (2006:52) defines as: “These were the entrepreneurs; the industrialists who successfully develop their handicraft business into factories; shopkeepers who managed to deal in wholesale trade; captains who became the owner of a steamboat association or planters who accumulated wealth in Netherlands East Indies.”

\textsuperscript{46} Michiel Wagenaar (2006) describes the old elite as regent patriarchy which was mostly Dutch-reformed or Baptist and the offspring of the patriarchy who had accumulated wealth since 1600 (and were the first owners of Amsterdam canal-side houses).
architectural identities arguably becomes the main objective of planners of neotraditional neighbourhoods. First of all, the non-Dutch architects Krier and Kohl introduced the idea of an idealized European small town into the Dutch context (Krier 2003). After that, more and more Dutch offices began to refer to particular Dutch building traditions like the craftsmanship found in vernacular farmhouses (characterized by brick or green brushed wood) and the austere usage of (exotic) style elements (Ibelings 2004, Besems 2009).

According to Mauldin (2009), the reintroduction of the neotraditional house from the 1990s was initiated by planning policies promoting regional architectural identities in a top-down manner, rather than being driven by the desire of middle-class residents to architecturally exhibit their cultural values. This discrepancy has also been noted by Oliver et al. (1981) who investigated the emergence of the ‘suburban semi’ in the first half of the last century. They argue that homebuyers were not so much attracted by a clear-cut representation of cultural values like ‘Englishness’, but rather by the ambiguity of this environment which combined reinvented heritage and the newest technology, symbolising the owner’s individuality and their sense of belonging to a community.

Neotraditional neighbourhoods in general, but particularly in the Dutch context, are characterized not only by the strong rhetoric of locality and regional identities, but by a high degree of home ownership. They tend to be exclusive places where the vast majority of the residents are ‘white’, affluent and well-educated (Till 1993; McCann 1995; Falconer Al-Hindi and Staddon 1997; Falconer Al-Hindi 2001), despite planners having had the intention to build for a mix of age, ethnic and social groups (Talen 2002; Trudeau and Malloy 2011). Whether all Dutch neotraditional neighbourhoods are exclusive places is a matter for further research but there seem to be a number of lower middle-class homebuyers with a non-Dutch ethnic background who move to suburban areas (Burgers and Van der Lugt 2005), some of which have a historicised housing design. Moreover, in each newly-built suburban (neotraditional) neighbourhood, a certain percentage (10 up to 30 per cent) of social housing is demanded by the government (Boeijenga and Mensink 2008). Despite this agreement, national housing policy is basically aimed at increasing the proportion of owner-occupied housing by demolishing social housing stock in urban and post-war deprived neighbourhoods and providing new owner-occupied housing there and in suburban areas (Ministry of VROM 1993). Approximately 519,000 new housing units (Boeijenga and Mensink 2008) were projected over the period 1995-2005, mainly built by consortia consisting of local authorities, housing corporations and private developers. The number of neotraditional housing schemes among recently-built neighbourhoods remains unclear, but Boeijenga and Mensink (2008, p. 32) argue that ‘[H]istoricist building
styles are in fact extremely common... including the wooden Zaan houses... the miniature versions of traditional farmhouses...and the so-called Hague School, popularly known as “thirties houses”.

5.3 ‘Classed’ place-identity

Although place-identity is a contested theoretical concept (Buttimer 1980; Tuan 1980), in many accounts it is suggested that ‘people produce their identity in and through places, especially home places’ (Duncan and Duncan 2004, p. 3-4). When people decide to move they therefore consider place-identity (Reijndorp et. al. 1998, Reijndorp 2004). Some members of the (upper) middle class are basically able to choose from a number of different residential places because they have sufficient economic resources. Nevertheless, there are constraints. Their moving depends on the housing supply, household and life cycle changes (Clapham 2005). Moreover, available qualities of site and situation are important aspects for the decision-making process. The site’s qualities include the housing type, the number of rooms and the availability of a garden. Situation qualities are related to the closeness to friends and family members, to a decisive infrastructure, to the city centre, to the workplace or to the children’s school (Karsten 2007; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2006).

According to Savage et.al. (1992), the freedom to choose residential place and to acquire property there is dependent on peoples’ assets. Property is, alongside bureaucracy and culture, one of the three assets fundamental to class formation. Social groups attempt to preserve these assets for future generations and convert one type of asset into another. Typically, fractions of the middle-classes aspire to transform their cultural assets into property, with ‘the aesthetics of the middle-class residence’ playing ‘a major part in the exhibition of specific cultural taste and values’ (Savage et al. 1992, p. 94). Once middle-class incomers have moved to their new home, they ‘electively belong’ to places by seeking to distinguish themselves from the ‘locals’ who might have more established attachments to the place. The former group is likely to identify the beauty and architectural features of a place as belonging to them and to ‘people like us’, while the latter group can emphasize the ‘given-ness’ of place (Savage et al. 2005; Savage 2010). For example, Cloke et al. (1995) demonstrate that middle class fractions develop lifestyle strategies of elective belonging in rural areas, while others show that incomer households draw a symbolic boundary between their ‘respectable’ newly-built private estates and ‘others’ living nearby by classifying them as ‘tasteless’ and/or ‘rough’ (Dowling 1998; Watt 2009). This process of drawing symbolic boundaries reflects the spatial and social withdrawal tendencies of
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the upper and middle classes in exclusive enclaves (Atkinson 2006) or even in gated communities (Blakely and Snyder 1997; Atkinson and Blandy 2005).

Diverse studies accordingly underline that the construction of place-identity involves the (re)production of ‘contemporary inequality, especially its cultural and symbolic aspects’ (Savage 2010:115). This stresses that preferences for a particular locations or styles of development might act as a means of displaying distinction. Bourdieu (1984, p. 56) claimed that taste is ‘the basis of all that one has - people and things - and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others’. He related taste to inherited cultural capital (acquired by family background) and cultural capital acquired by education, arguing that the higher someone’s cultural capital, the more importance is attached to the representation of something rather than its instrumental characteristics. However, the relationship between cultural capital, taste and the formation of class is more complex than this suggests. In an unequal society, knowledge of cultural artefacts like classical music or art is used as means to represent and legitimate social boundaries. By using their habitus as a generative principle, individuals reproduce cultural practices and societal structures (i.e. the possibilities to acquire and employ social, cultural and economic capital) (Bourdieu 1984).

Although much contested (e.g. Savage 2000), the concept of habitus has laid the foundation for a number of studies that have reconsidered class formation as a structuring principle of inequality while giving more attention to the aesthetic, gendered, cultural and moral aspects of this process (Crompton et al. 2000; Bottero 2004; Skeggs 2005; Sayer 2005). The ‘culturalist’ class approach recognizes cultural identity as ‘classed’ identity. This does not mean that people explicitly have to identify themselves within ‘discrete class groupings for class processes to operate’ as all that is required is ‘for specific cultural practices to be bound up with the reproduction of hierarchy’ (Bottero 2004, p. 989). This hierarchy is a fine-grained differentiation (re)produced by economic and cultural practices including the judgement of whether people have the ‘right’ taste or whether they are morally worthwhile (Lawler 2005). Morally judging means classifying people (especially women) as respectable or not. For example, Skeggs (1997, 2005) demonstrates that ‘working-class’ women dis-identify with the label of working class while the middle-class self constitutes a ‘position of judgement’ which attributes negative values to others. Hence, classed subjectivity means drawing symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002) through active maintenance and negotiation with others through frameworks of inclusion and/or exclusion (Southerton 2002).

In relation to residential life, one example of ‘boundary work’ is the invention of community-based activities by which participation and a sense
of community can be generated. When carried out regularly, these activities become ‘invented traditions’ ‘establishing or symbolizing’ the social cohesion of ‘real or artificial communities’ (Hobsbawm 1983, p. 9). Moreover, aesthetic judgments of style can also be seen as an example of symbolic boundary drawing. In line with Duncan and Duncan (2004), we propose that aesthetic judgement (i.e. taste) is intertwined with the economic and visual consumption of property and residential environment including the ‘gaze’ (Urry 2002) exercised upon (and over) those who live in specific neighbourhoods.

5.4 Research locations: Noorderhof and Brandevoort De Veste

The Noorderhof is part of the Amsterdam New West area that was planned by Cornelis van Eesteren in the 1930s, but built after 1950. This post-war area was originally developed for the working and lower Dutch middle classes but the district’s sociocultural composition changed from the 1970s onwards as the elderly first generation was replaced by immigrants, generally from Morocco, Turkey and Surinam (Bolt et al. 2002). These days the neighbourhood has an unfavourable reputation in the Dutch media with 48 per cent of the inhabitants having a non-Dutch ethnic background, 8.7 per cent of them being unemployed47, and the modernistic apartment blocks being widely regarded as outdated.

In order to attract social groups with a secure middle-income to the area, a team of building professionals attempted to design a project which is ‘totally different’ from the ‘placeless’ modernistic, social housing building blocks. The team selected Krier and Kohl architects to build a ‘new old’ village around the church (which was a relict of the 1950s) situated close to a public park called Sloterpark. The ‘new old’ village consists of one-family houses arranged as small-scale housing blocks along narrow streets. All the houses have been constructed using what appear to be handmade bricks. Each façade is different in order to generate the illusion that the development had expanded in phases over time. The residents differ from the inhabitants of the surrounding area in that 63 per cent of the houses in Noorderhof are owner-occupied, compared to 21 elsewhere in the district.48

The suburban neighbourhood of Brandevoort is projected to have 6,000 single-family houses by 2015 of which approximately 3,000 have been built up to now (Gemeente Helmond 1997). Here, the developers also wanted to design an identifiable neighbourhood that was ‘totally different’ from the old urban neighbourhoods of Helmond. In the nineteenth century, the

48 www.os.amsterdam.nl/tabel/7405/ (accessed 3 October 2011)
city had developed as an industrial city specializing in textile and metal production. However, since the 1980s industrial production has been in decline. Nowadays, the city has a negative reputation due to its relatively high rate of unemployment and delinquency. Krier and Kohl architects were asked not to include references to an industrial past but rather to fortified old villages whose remains can still be found in the province of North-Brabant.

In our research we focus on the centre of Brandevoort known as De Veste. Here, just as in the Noorderhof, the urban design is based on one-family houses arranged as housing blocks. Of the approximately 900 houses built in De Veste to date, 84 per cent 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).

5.5 Consuming neotraditional architecture

Our research sample comprised ten households in Noorderhof and fifteen in the neighbourhood’s centre De Veste, with 33 respondents in total. Almost 50 per cent of the households in Noorderhof can be defined as family homes. All incomers in this new area paid nearly the same for their homes because the housing is roughly identical in size (in 1998 they paid around €150,000 and recently a number of these homes were sold for €300,000 or more). The vast majority of residents willing to give an interview (contacted through appeals made in letters send out to all homeowners) identified as families and we therefore selected seven families and three two-person households.

These interviewees had lived there right from the start, for a period of more than a decade.

In De Veste thirteen per cent of all the residents live alone, 36 per cent are two-person households, 35 per cent are nuclear families and 16 per cent are single parents with one (or more) child(ren) (Gemeente Helmond 2007). Single person households (27 per cent) interviewed were overrepresented in our sample and single parent households were underrepresented (7 per cent). However, we interviewed five families and five two-person households (with the 33 per cent that these represent almost coinciding with the averages for De Veste as a whole). The De Veste research participants had been in residence for between three and six years. They were homeowners and had paid between €200,000 and €500,000 for their dwelling. The majority of respondents had been born and raised in the Netherlands and were well-educated, with all bar one of the Noorderhof residents having degree level qualifications. In De Veste, however, less than half possessed degree qualifications.
This mirrors the unbalanced distribution of highly-educated people across the Netherlands. Highly educated people are more likely to live in the urban agglomeration (Randstad) including the major cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht: for example, 56 per cent of employed individuals in Amsterdam have a college or university degree, while the percentage for Helmond (southeast of the Netherlands) is only 25.49. Another noticeable difference related to the type of education: many of the Noorderhof respondents had been educated in the fields of arts or social science, whereas the Brandevoort interviewees were more likely to have a technical, economics or administration-related qualification (see Table X Appendix B).

The research participants were encouraged to reveal personal narratives face-to-face with the investigator about three basic topics: why they decided to move to their present neighbourhood, how they assessed the neohistoricised design and how they experienced everyday life in the neighbourhoods they share with others. According to Giddens (1991), self-identity is conceived as being socially constructed via personal narrative, i.e. ‘stories told by research participants (which are themselves interpretive)’ as well as ‘interpretive accounts developed by an investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observation (a story about stories)’ (Riessman 2008, p. 6). People construct narratives to give meaning to themselves, their relationship with others and - last but not least - their relationship with their place of residence (Bailey and Bryson 2006; Leyshon and Bull 2011).

5.5.1 Choosing residential place

All the Noorderhof respondents were already living in Amsterdam before they moved to this neighbourhood. Their places of work were in Amsterdam and all of them stated that they moved to have a bigger house without sacrificing their urban lifestyles: families in particular wanted houses with gardens, which are expensive and scarce goods in the municipality of Amsterdam. The respondents reported they were not wealthy enough to buy a one-family house in the affluent districts close to the city centre. Therefore, the decision to move to the poor post-war neighbourhood with an unfavourable reputation implied a compromise. However, this does not mean the respondents were discontented: all regarded Noorderhof as a ‘village within Amsterdam’ that enabled them to enjoy the benefits of a bigger house and a ‘green ambiance’, while feeling that they still belonged to the ‘cosmopolitan’ city of Amsterdam. Whilst for the families interviewed in the Noorderhof, location and house size appeared the most important attraction of the neighbourhood, the respondents without children stated that the ne-

otraditional architecture was the most important reason for moving. At De Veste, respondents generally were more outspoken about the role architecture played in their decision to move. They regularly used the infrastructure of several nearby cities such as Hertogenbosch or Eindhoven and those that worked spent at least half an hour getting to their places of work by car or public transport. Their main reasons for moving fell into two groups. For nine households, changes in their life cycle or work location were important reasons for moving. Six households (three families and three couples older than fifty-five) did not experience any life cycle changes and referred to historicised aesthetics as the main reason to move. They claimed that they were in search of ‘something new’ and distinctive but that they were hesitant about buying a house in De Veste because the location belongs to Helmond.

Sarah (living in De Veste, aged 58)
‘First, I do not want to live in Helmond. I was born in Geldrop [a village close to Helmond] but we never went to Helmond. This is what my parents said, ‘in Helmond you do not make friends! There is nothing there but criminals.’
Max (her husband, aged 59):
‘All the same, when we drove into De Veste, we stepped out of the car and she then said, ‘oh, I want to live here!’

AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, 13TH JUNE 2008

The quotation captures how insecure this woman (a non-college graduate who has worked as a secretary whose husband has worked as policy officer) is about whether their future place of residence will be a socially ‘valued’ place. Sarah attributed the dubious reputation of Helmond to the ‘unrespectable’ appearance and behaviour of the ‘lower social classes’:

“If you live in Helmond you have to go the annual fair and there you’ll see ‘real’ Helmond people. They are a real sight for sore eyes. The men dress up themselves, a sweat suit and with imitation gold jewellery everywhere … and the women wear high heels and have very blond hair. You know? When I was young the fair was the highlight of the year and the men used to come to blows and really picked a lot of serious fights…. They were the real mob. These days they can still be found living in some neighbourhoods.”  AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, 13TH JUNE 2008

It is the ‘wrong’ taste and the threat of violence that this couple wanted to distance themselves from (Skeggs 2005). By contrast this couple appreciated - like the great majority of the De Veste interviewees - the historicised
environment because to them it looks like ‘an Amsterdam canal-side house’
that symbolizes not only prestige, but also stands for the Golden Age of
Dutch trade, culture and science during the 17th century. These aesthetics
mark the symbolic boundary between the ‘respectable’ (middle-class) self
and the ‘unrespectable’ Other, with the historicised architecture finally
counterbalancing their doubt about moving to De Veste.

5.5.2 Aesthetic judgement

All the respondents in Noorderhof and De Veste appreciated the architectural
aesthetic of their newly-built neighbourhood and claimed that they
generated a number of different associations. The brick that appears to be
hand-made, the diversity of the facades, and the natural greenery were
features referred to most frequently. The interviewees from De Veste in
particular classified these aspects as non-standard and related these to
certain ‘types’ of people, indicating their elective belonging to their new
neighbourhood (Savage et al. 2005). For example, Frank, a 26 year-old
metalworker who attended further education and who had just bought a
home in De Veste together with his wife Betty, asserted with enthusiasm:

“I think certain architecture is appealing to a certain type of people. The
people living here would really like to live in an Amsterdam’ canal-side
house but can’t afford it. Choosing a house here is the next best thing.
They are new; there are no maintenance costs for the coming five years..
Brand spanking new houses with a touch of the nostalgia and an image of
yesteryear.” AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, 26TH MAY 2008

A middle-aged couple (Dave is an academic researcher and his wife Edith has
a university graduate degree but works as a secretary) claimed:

Dave (38):
‘[De Veste] is in principle is a suburban neighbourhood which has been
built with references to the past.’

Edith (37):
‘All the houses are different, in height and colour of the bricks. This
makes it more than a run-of-the-mill neighbourhood.’

Dave:
‘I would never claim to live in a bog-standard row of houses.’

Edith:
‘Me neither, because it doesn’t feel like that.’

AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, 28TH MAY 2008

These quotations are typical accounts of the appeal of historicised aesthetics.
The diverse brick facades are regarded as being the direct opposite of other ‘placeless’ newly-built suburbs, as well as the monotonous row of houses of post-war neighbourhoods which are typical of social housing. In addition, the variety of brick facades reminded almost all respondents of the old Amsterdam’ canal-side houses where the elite used to live. Many of them stated that differences in the facades help them identify with their own property, an argument in particular used by De Veste respondents to portray themselves as proud homeowners. The ability to choose variety and historicised aesthetics is a way of constructing a ‘respectable’ self that belongs to a valued social group: the ‘people like us’ (Savage 2010).

Besides historicised aesthetics, greenery also appears to symbolize respectability. The greenery of De Veste is basically situated in the zone surrounding the ‘old-new fortress’. A male resident, Felix, who is a non-college graduate but who worked as a manager in the computer industry where he apparently made a lot of money (illustrated by the large number of branded furnishings, the price of which he referred to during the interview) claimed that ‘a lot of space’ was crucial when deciding to move just to the edge of the De Veste ‘fortress’.

“We wanted to have a sense of freedom, with no neighbours nearby or on the opposite side. We feel we have a different, special house ... this open space will remain green and open for ever. Farmers and rich people live some way away but the space in front of our house will not be built on in the future.”

AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, 16TH MAY 2008

For some, the ‘gaze’ upon this green zone and moat (Fig. 2) evidentially prompted the idea of living in a quasi-rural environment. This affinity for nature is something often noted in studies of the middle class (Savage et al. 1992), with Cloke et al. (1995) argue that rurality is an object of desire across the range of (middle) class fractions.

As far as the Noorderhof interviewees were concerned it was the proximity to the Sloterpark that was emphasised, subsuming any talk that they were living in a poor post-war environment of Amsterdam. The Noorderhof interviewees perceived themselves as living in a village that has been around for a long time, despite knowing that they lived in an exclusive enclave. The original church and the trees supported this perception, with people appreciating the church as a symbol of a village-like community. For example, Shirley (aged 41 and with a university graduate in art history) recounted that:
“...the trees [of the Noorderhof] make it feel like an old village, like a village square [...] And the church gives you [hesitation]...a feeling of belonging [emphasis]. The church is not that old [...] but it still gives the place a retro feeling.” AUTHORS' INTERVIEW, 9TH JANUARY 2008

This feeling appeared related to being part of the community to which one 'electively belongs'. A male fellow resident, Martin, who studied political science at university and then worked for a bank explained that community feeling as follows:

Martin (living in Noorderhof, aged 43):
‘This neighbourhood has as a village-like charisma .. I think this is due to the small-scale architecture and the fact that you and your fellow residents moved in at the same time. Later your children all ended up going to the same schools. The fact that you know each other evokes a village feeling. And we share activities and things with each other. For instance, we bought a boat together with some neighbours and my wife looks after the collective bank account.
Interviewer:
‘Do you have experience conflicts about sharing things?’
Martin:
‘You know, the people who live here are rich .. all the residents are highly educated .. I guess that 80 per cent of them are college or university graduates. And we live in the city of Amsterdam. If you are able to stay in the city, then you are the better off .. If you stay in the village you were born in you will always be someone with a certain background. Here, everybody has moved into the neighbourhood from elsewhere, but we all have chosen to stay in Amsterdam’. AUTHORS' INTERVIEW, 7TH DECEMBER 2007

These interview extracts illustrate a sense of like-mindedness as well as confidence in fellow residents of the Noorderhof. Like Martin, many other interviewees stated that they shared activities with fellow residents such as childcare and other community-based activities. For instance, Melanie (a middle-aged teacher), organized a musical club for children. In response to a question by the interviewer as to whether this activity was also open to children living outside the neighbourhood she replied:

“I have children aged from 5 and 6 up to 9 and 13. First I thought I should also advertise for the music club at school. But, you know, it would take place in this neighbourhood, so it is most practical for residents living here. I thought I have to start here and send a letter to the households with children. In no time the club was overfull of children from this neighbourhood.” AUTHORS' INTERVIEW, 19TH NOVEMBER 2007
Like Martin and Melanie, many residents appeared to appreciate the community-based sociability and did not make much effort to include people who lived outside the neighbourhood. However, these activities appeared to family-oriented, meaning those without children complained that family interests prevailed.

5.5.3 Visually consuming the community
In the search for distinction, the streets appeared an important focus of social life. By installing benches in front of their houses, many residents of Noorderhof actively facilitated social interaction. In so doing, they reproduce the spontaneous street interactions developed by (upper) middle-class families who live in old inner-city districts in Amsterdam and Rotterdam (Karsten 2008). For example, John, a middle-aged journalist, enjoyed spontaneous interaction with his fellow residents:

“Whenever there’s football on TV, in the summer, we put tables and 30 chairs out so that everyone can watch. This attracted people from all over the neighbourhood. In the summer the place looks a bit like a campsite with crates of beer, tables and people with homemade food all out in the open air on the pavements.’ (resident of Noorderhof)”

AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, 22ND NOVEMBER 2007

FIGURE 16 Street in Noorderhof where residents meet each other spontaneously.
PHOTO: MIEKE GRESNICT
In contrast to the interviewees of Noorderhof, many residents of De Veste were not keen on people lingering on benches along the streets, associating that behaviour with uneducated ‘working-class’ residents of an area in Helmond called Het Haagje, and with delinquency and poverty. This suggests that while there was plenty of street furniture it served a predominantly decorative function, as discussed by Sarah and Max, the elderly couple referred to above:

Max (resident of De Veste):
‘Well, they are imitating the image of the ‘good old days’ by putting a bench out.’

His wife Sarah:
‘But they don’t use it. It’s like that neighbourhood in Eindhoven, the Edison neighbourhood isn’t it?’

Max:
‘But you have them in Amsterdam as well.’

Sarah:
‘There they often sit out if the weather’s good. But now people think it’s not the done thing any more […] No. We reckon it looks bad - it’s not done. It was all right in the old days […] You see it in neighbourhoods where sort of the lower classes live. They all sit outside together don’t they?’

Max:
‘No, only in working-class districts, real working-class districts.’

Sarah:
‘Yes, and the people love to sit outside together in nice weather and to call to people over the road, to the neighbours opposite. ‘Hey mate, fancy a beer?’ [laughs] That’s not our thing.’

Max:
‘Let’s say we’re just not like that.’  AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, 13TH JUNE 2008
The quotations capture how Sarah and Max linked aesthetic and moral concerns in the process of marking the boundary between the ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’. The two quotations illustrate that street furniture had different cultural meanings for different groups. While in Noorderhof it actually facilitated gathering, it appeared in De Veste as an instrument for inhibiting social interaction in front of the houses at the same time as consolidating a particular aesthetic. Moreover, the manner of decoration seems to be much less controlled in Noorderhof then in De Veste. In the latter case, it had to fit in with the perfectly historicised architectural image and to make the ‘decent’ street visually coherent. Betty, aged 24, who attended further education like her husband Frank, and is a secretary, stated:

“You know what the front gardens end up looking like? We get annoyed at the sand at the front [of the house] opposite, and the other stuff - it’s not that we’re looking out for things to moan about…[hesitation]…Well, perhaps we do a bit. But here in the neighbourhood you’re so used to everyone keeping it looking beautiful. Everyone planting nice plants and hanging up nice lamps. We once had neighbours opposite who always kept their curtains closed! [indignant] Then you sort of think, we pay quite a lot of money and then you have to sit and look at that all day long.’

(residents of De Veste)”

AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, 26TH MAY 2008
Her ambition to retain the look of the community represents her uncompromising acceptation of, and hence identification with, ‘middle class’ norms. The imposed social pressure to maintain a perfect image of the past is evident in more than just this form of self-regulation given the style of fences, awnings and lamps are also subject to local government regulations, with a brochure of approved materials and colours meaning the residents have little choice in terms of how the decorate their houses and gardens. Each resident of De Veste is also required to keep the fences white in colour and low in order to create a homogenous and therefore beautiful look. Here, individuals’ desire to personalise residential spaces, as emphasised by Brand (1997), is counteracted by the need to cultivate a collectively-controlled historicised image.

5.5.4 Inventing traditions

Every five years, the Noorderhof residents celebrate their neighbourhood’s anniversary. All the residents are asked to decorate the public streets and little squares to mark the day. A newsletter is sent out to advertise the planned activities in the form of a daily newspaper. John, the journalist, explained proudly how all the talent – i.e. the educational, cultural and organisation capital - required for the production of the newsletter was available in the neighbourhood itself. The event is organised to celebrate their sense of community and is not organised to celebrate any past traditions or national myths.

The residents of De Veste celebrate their perception of being a community in a similar way. However, they also organize a so-called Dickens Night festival which takes place in De Veste every year in December. Inspired by the literature of Charles Dickens, they have invented an imaginary nineteenth century tradition which seems to be famous in the Netherlands. The authors of the website of the small-sized Charles Dickens Museum50 affirm that there was always a lively interest in Dickens since his writings had been translated into the Dutch language (from 1839 onwards). However, particularly throughout the last two decades, Dickens’ humorous and not very harsh descriptions of social class differences have been used to invent city festivals that take place around Christmas. Here, ‘real’ historic city spaces serve as stage to revitalize characters from his writings. The journalist Van Ijzendoorn claims in his article ‘The new Victorians’ in the Dutch magazine *De groene Amsterdammer* (2012, no.136, p. 63) that Dickens is much-loved because his stories fit to the Dutch contemporary ‘unsecure and therefore nostalgic society’. In this vein, the organisation’s website of the Dickens Night in De Veste states:

50 see for more information: www.dickensmuseum.nl; accessed 8 August, 2011.
“The sphere of England around 1850 fits outstandingly into the decor of De Veste, the heart of Brandevoort. The authentic English market hall is the centre of the market. In the streets around this market hall 85 booths are arranged with Christmas-like, high-quality products. The Dickens Night foundation also decided to opt for quality rather than quantity.”  

For one day, the entire public space serves as a market place for social activities and the sale of goods. Moreover, visitors and residents are encouraged to dress up as characters from the writing of Dickens.

Most of the interviewees appreciate this event because it sets De Veste off from other suburban neighbourhoods. Goods are put on sale and the houses are decorated in a way that fits in with the nostalgic image of the past. One De Veste interviewee pointed out that the residents are not expected to ‘sell junk’. She was critical of door-to-door salesmen and she emphasised the fact that the Dickens Night event is intended to be a rather chic, art and crafts market. Similarly, some interviewees maintained that anyone who does not decorate the streets in a ‘decent’ way is not deemed to ‘belong’ to this neighbourhood. For instance, according to Sally (38), who works as an office employee and who is the mother of two children:

“...then you ought to go and live somewhere else if you... er ... don’t want to adapt to this style [of De Veste].”  

AUTHORS’ INTERVIEW, 27TH MAY 2008

Here, moral with aesthetic judgements again combine to draw a symbolic boundary between the ‘respectable’ self and the ‘Other’.

5.6 Conclusion

The recently-built Dutch neotraditional neighbourhoods seem to meet the desire of fractions of the middle classes to live in predictable residential spaces where they hope to share daily residential life with like-minded people. As the case studies illustrate, neotraditional design features, the visual consumption of community space, the inventing of community-based traditions and the tendency to ‘bracket out’ (Watt 2009; Savage 2010) inhabitants with non-Dutch ethnic backgrounds reinforced a classed place-identity. This suggests that symbolic boundary-making took several forms with aesthetic judgements of the neotraditional environment as a significant means used by the interviewees to classify themselves as part of a social group perceived as ‘respectable’ (Bourdieu 1984; Skeggs 1997). In addition, taste as an aesthetic and moral concern was a means to control residential space and to impede its change. Therefore the ‘innocent appreciation’ of historicised architecture served as an ‘effective mechanism[s] of exclusion and reaffirmation of class identity’ (Duncan and Duncan 2004, p. 4).

In the light of this, it is tempting to equate the reasons of appreciation of historical revivalism by the Dutch middle classes with motives elaborated in studies in which new urbanisms have been related to the erection of symbolic barriers in order to maintain class exclusivity (Dowling 1998; Falconer Al-Hindi 2001) and regional identities which only make sense in the relation to the ‘Other’ (Till 1993). However, in the Netherlands the tendency of the ‘white’, affluent and better educated to isolate themselves spatially in historicised ‘insulated spaces’ (Atkinson 2006, p. 820) seems to be balanced by policy intervention and the kind of housing production and supply. First of all, class exclusivity of residential space has been undermined by the state regulation that a certain percentage of new suburban housing stock has to be social rental housing (Boeijenga and Mensink 2008). Secondly, the recently built suburban housing has been part of a national building programme for which the state has provided subsidies for land acquisition and/or improvement of the infrastructure (Ministry of VROM 1993) in order to allocate high standard housing schemes, infrastructure and employment to a great number of Dutch urban regions. The housing production itself has been realized by building consortia that share risks and benefits with local authorities generally supervising the design of the urban form and architecture (Lörzing 2006). All these aspects have so far prevented the creation of neighbourhoods for the (upper) middle classes with clear spatial boundaries like gates or fences (except for a few exceptions (Meier 2011; Lohof and Reijndorp 2006)). Buildings professionals prefer instead to provide a hierarchy of residential places by means of historical references that,
following Till (1993, p. 710), legitimize particular ‘regional identities as being normal’. Here, we suggest that an actual legitimisation of territorial boundaries goes beyond what housing producers are able to achieve by themselves. Territorial boundaries only ‘work’ if residents routinely identify with the offered historicised neighbourhoods and, hence, draw symbolic and social boundaries in the midst of their day-to-day residential life.