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

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6 Conclusion

The two-sided research question of this study was how has themed residential place been created and consumed in the Netherlands throughout the last two decades. Due to the creation of themed residential places, I analysed theming as an architectural phenomenon and showed how themed architecture is related to residential hyperspace. Dutch planning practice was also investigated by analysing political reports as well as by gathering empirical data via face-to-face interviews with building professionals (see Appendices E and F). With regard to the process of consumption, the concept of social distinction guided the investigation of residents’ appropriation and judgements of their themed residential environment.

The aim of this study was to achieve a better understanding of the sociospatial and cultural ‘realities’ of theming: the reality of the increasing emergence of themes, images and narratives on residential architecture, the reality of a changed planning practice and the way in which residents use themed architecture to draw symbolic and social boundaries. An additional aim was to contribute to the academic and public debate on the commercialisation of residential places and architecture.

The following paragraph 6.1 deals with theming on the side of the production while paragraph 6.2 is concerned with the consumption of themed place. In section 6.3 I reflect on the theoretical and methodological approach of this dissertation and in the last paragraph some suggestions are made for further research.

6.1 Creation of themed residential architecture

As regards the first sub question of how space is created for theming at a political level, the findings of this study are in line with the argument of Lörzing et al. (2006) that the increased production of owner-occupied houses has stimulated the production of themed residential places. The building of a large number of owner-occupied housing is laid down in the Fourth Spatial Planning Memorandum Extra, known as the Vinex policy (Boelhouwer 2002, Ministry of VROM, 1993). There has also been an increased emphasis on the building of owner-occupied homes in disadvantaged inner city and post-war neighbourhoods, and the resulting ‘social mixing’ (Ministry of VROM 1997; Uitermark, 2003). For both kinds of locations, the main target group is the middle class. As the empirical chapters suggested, building professionals assume that themed architecture appeals to fractions of the middle classes who are in search for distinct and small-scale residential places.
The more market-orientated housing policy has changed the role of housing associations. Whereas their key task before the 1990s was to provide housing for social groups that were unable to fulfil their own housing needs, during the 1990s they turned into hybrid organizations (Priemus, 2004, 2006). In this new role, they competed with commercial developers and with each other. During this period themed architecture (and selecting a famous architect) became an effective way of ensuring that they and ‘their’ residential places stood out from other business locations and rivals. In addition, a themed environment fitted in well with the place marketing strategies which more and more municipalities adopted (Hospers et al. 2011). The emphasis on the history of neighbourhoods and cities, in conjunction with themed public and residential places, became a way of making one particular city stand out from others. This enabled planning practitioners to respond to the competition for different places in the urban field (Hajer and Reijndorp 2001).

Due to the kind of themes, references to history and culture seem to be in particular popular (Lörzing et al. 2006, Boeijenga and Mensink 2008). The empirical chapters demonstrate that commercial developers, housing associations and local governments believe that potential home buyers prefer historicised residential architecture to an artistic expression of plainness. As illustrated in detail below (6.1.2), this assumption requires a change in building professionals’ attitudes toward the usage of historical and cultural signs in residential architecture.

The theming of history and culture has also been enhanced by the idea of planners to protect and/or reinvent placeness, and hence identifiable (residential) places and landscapes. This notion has found its way into Dutch national planning policy52 in which emphasis was placed on regional differences. The Belvedere Planning Memorandum (known as Nota Belvedere formulated in 1999 by four Dutch Ministries) states that ‘[t]he cultural-historical identity will have a greater guiding influence on the rearrangement of space with national policy providing the right conditions’. Another argument is that, if there is no national policy inspired by cultural-historical awareness, regional differences will eventually disappear. ‘[P]laces all over the Netherlands will resemble each other.’53

52 See, for instance, the initiative Mooi Nederland (Beautiful Netherlands) (www.kennispleinmooi, nederland.vrom.nl).
53 These four Ministries were 1) the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2) the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature management and Fisheries (now the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality), 3) the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (since 2012 the issues that were dealt with by this Ministry have been split up between several other Ministries) and 4) Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management (now the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment); Nota Belvedere. Beleidsnota over de relatie cultuurhistorie en ruimtelijke inrichting [Memorandum on the relationship between cultural history and spatial planning], 1999, The Hague: VNG uitgeverij, p. 6
Therefore, archaeological and cultural heritage, like the landscape of marsh areas, dikes, traditional windmills, relics of fortified villages and old residential buildings alongside canals and ditches should be valued again. As a consequence, certain Dutch built environments and landscapes were identified as particularly worth preserving (known as Belvedere regions of which a couple are on the list of World Heritage Site). The reappreciation of Dutch culture not only caters to its preservation. Culture heritage has also been kept in mind when spatial change is necessary such as the redevelopment of rural areas and the realization of new housing schemes.

In line with these objectives, the symbolic expression of culture in new residential areas has been boosted by housing policy. The housing report (Ministry of VROM 2000) called Mensen, Wensen, Wonen (People, Preferences, Living) suggested that building professionals were supposed to provide pleasant residential ‘experiences’ by referring to high-status residential culture (e.g. to the manor house). In addition, as a follow-up to ideas of multicultural planning and housing (Van der Horst and Ouwehand 2012), the participation of ethnic groups in the planning process should not only be stimulated, the symbolic expression of ethnic culture in public space and residential architecture should also be realized (VROM-raad 2002).

These developments concerning spatial change and housing production were accompanied by the theming of culture as part of the strategies to market multiethnic neighbourhoods. Initially, urban ethnic entrepreneurs broadened the supply of their products to others than their own ethnic group. This bottom-up and haphazard promotion of ethnic products has now been absorbed by local governments that stimulated the theming of multiethnic shops and streets, restaurants, products and so on, basically as a tourist attraction. Local governments attempted to improve the reputation of disadvantaged multiethnic neighbourhoods by promising a convenient but surprising experience of urban consumption (Anderson 1990, Rath 2005, Hall and Rath 2007). As suggested in Chapter 4, these ethnic shops, products or restaurants are not only appealing to tourists but also to urban minded residents. References to Arabian and other non-Western culture were realized in a few housing schemes which became a beautiful backdrop to a pleasant residential experience (Meier and Ouwehand 2009).

6.1.1. **Characteristics of themed residential place and architecture**

In order to identify characteristics of themed residential place and architecture (which are related to the second sub research question), differences between the use of themes today and in the past have been explored.

Several interviewed professionals told me that theming is not new. They claimed that contemporary theming is comparable to the usage of styles during the period of historism. At that time architects searched
for the ‘right’ style in order to express ‘truth’ (Hübsch 1828) while private
construction companies have arbitrarily mixed and moulded style elements
in order to meet the taste of the new bourgeoisie54 (Pey 2004, Van der Woud
2008).

This study has shown that the idea of style in the nineteenth century was
different from the contemporary perception, although some traits of the
usage of themes seem to be stable. During the nineteenth century, styles
were distinguished by the way of spatial configuration, the mode of physical
construction and their figurative shape. First of all, a style represented
certain regions and periods of time. In 1828, the German architectural
theorist Hübsch argued in his essay *In welchem Stile sollen wir bauen* that ‘[T]he
difference between the monuments of one nation and one period lies in the
number and manifold combinations of walls, ceilings, piers or columns,
doors, windows, roofs, and cornices55, according to their various purposes.’
(Britt 1992:66). Thus, history had been ‘themed’ in terms of classifying
regions and periods of time. Moreover, the purpose of using styles was first
and foremost to artistically express the structural principle of the building.
Hence, an ornament artistically expresses the structural principle, like the
pediment (geveldriehoek) of the Greek temple represents the principle of
horizontal load and vertical support. Styles were self-referential in the sense
that cladding and structural principle was perceived as an entity.

In contrast, contemporary theming of history does not aim to emphasize
the structural principle. Instead, the cladding or ‘capsule’ is the bearer of
meaning while meaning is sometimes artistically expressed in the capsule
and urban form, as the theming of the ‘traditional small town’ or ‘Arabian
Kasbah’ demonstrates. In such instances both are fused to an entire themed
ambience that refers to an imaginary place which, as I assert in this study,
lays the ground for the creation of hyperspace. It is precisely this ‘spatial’,
three-dimensional theming that was previously evident found in theme
parks, shopping malls or restaurants in the V.S. (Sorkin 1992, Hanningan

What is more, and again in contrast to the nineteenth century, the
range of themes has been broadened considerably by comprising external
themes like (imaginary) history, cultural heritage and popular culture. This
finding is in line with the rationale that contemporary theming essentially
constitutes the implementation of external themes (Gottdiener 1997, Bryman
2004).

However, similarly to the nineteenth century, private developers are
attempting to meet the taste and preferences of the middle classes by using

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54 See for a definition of the new bourgeoise used in this study section 5.2.1
55 In Dutch: *kroonlijst: verzierde lijst (boven aan) een gebouw of muur, soms ook onderdeel van een raam of portiekontsluiting*
historical styles elements. They implement various combinations of style elements like decorated facades, ceilings, doors, windows and so on. As was the case a hundred years ago (Pey 2004), architects and other critics are concerned about the arbitrariness of this usage which is prone to the creation of truthless and fake architecture (Hulsman 2006). However, the gap between architects and other building parties seems to be less profound than in earlier times. The findings of this dissertation illustrate that the creation of themed residential place is the result of a collaborative action: housing associations, architects and urban planners, private developers and local governments are all interested in fulfilling the residential preferences of the (affluent) middle classes. As I suggest, this consensus is based on the introduction of populist thought in Dutch planning practice. Inspired by ideas of e.g. Gans, Venturi and Haskell, scholars like Lefaivre and Tzonis (1976) claimed that, first of all, the position of ‘consumers’ during the planning process had to be reconsidered. However, the idea of granting more power to consumers and symbolically expressing cultural identity and placeness was not actually put into practice before the 1990s.

To conclude, past and present theming differ by the usage of self-referential and external themes and the range of themes. This finding leads to the follow-up argument that contemporary themed residential place constitutes the pretention to artistically express cultural identity of fractions of the middle classes while rejecting high-scale housing schemes. Instead, the ‘traditional small town’, the garden villages of ‘the 1930s’ or fortified villages serve as favoured and collectively known originals which emanate a high-status residential culture and, in the case of Brandevoort, a monumentality of the human scale.

6.1.2 Characteristics of theming practice in Noorderhof, Brandevoort and Le Medi

As regards the third sub research question of what the characteristics of theming practice are, this study provides empirical evidence that building professionals in all research cases appreciate references to history and (ethnic) culture. Reference to culture in architecture and urban forms has basically been used to enhance the attractiveness of places for fractions of the middle classes. In this context culture tends to commute into commercial culture and, for this reason, themed residential place has become a new economy of culture in the Netherlands (Zukin 1995, 2010).

However, the investigation of the research cases also demonstrates that the question of what references to history, culture or cultural heritage actually comprise appears to be blurred and hence, also the references. For example, those who built Brandevoort selected certain ‘real’ fragments of the Dutch past, replenished them with invented aspects and narratives in order
to realize placeness and also design distinct architecture. This conflicting aim often resulted in a more or less imaginary relationship between housing and its geographical surroundings. The architecture is likely to stand out from the surrounding landscape rather than emanate placeness. Consequently, ‘making the difference’ tends to counterbalance the idea of representing ‘real’ cultural heritage or ‘real’ (regional) culture.

This finding supports Baudrillard’s perception of hyperspace. He suggested that references to ‘reality’ – for example to ‘real’ or observable cultural heritage - has been converted into a simulation of reality that has never existed (Baudrillard 1983, Eco 1986). In this sense, the themed architecture of Noorderhof, Brandevoort De Veste and Le Medi is more than a mere artistic expression of imaginary small towns or an Arabian Kasbah. A simulation of a traditional small-town has been built. In Noorderhof an ‘authentic’ location for the old church had to be realized. Because churches are the core of traditional villages and small towns, the old church had been given a new small town around it. To simulate natural growth, all the facades are different. The preservation of a number of old trees suggests that the village has existed for a long time. In Brandevoort, Brabant’s building tradition was simulated by an imaginary narrative on how Brandevoort had developed during the centuries. The narrative suggested that the medieval fortified centre (De Veste) had been expanded beyond its walls and, as a result, new green suburbia had been developed (De Buitens). The urban form of a fortified centre was actually realized, along with the green ‘suburbs’. The architecture in Le Medi refers to an Arabian Kasbah that lacks a comparable original in the Dutch and Mediterranean context.

To sum up, this study has demonstrated that a more market-orientated housing production required a change in the attitude of planning practitioners to their work. Two characteristics of their theming practice have been found. First, the building professionals involved in Noorderhof, Brandevoort and Le Medi were aware of the requirement to meet target groups’ residential preferences. However, defining and predicting these preferences is a difficult and complex process. Second, the design process of all the three housing schemes comprises the invention of key narratives which are closely related to architectural design. This feature of theming practice found in the Dutch context confirms the notion of Bryman (2004) that theming always consists of the combination of an object and a narrative applied to it.

However, the building professionals involved in Le Medi were more concerned about the prospective residential lifestyle groups than the professionals who built Noorderhof and Brandevoort. I argue that the most important reason for this is that the invented theme does not refer to commonly known Dutch cultural heritage or ‘originals’. Instead, the
initiators attempted to express Arabian building traditions artistically in a Dutch context. Being aware of this displacement, they developed the following strategies. They aimed to realize a fusion of Dutch and Arabian building in order to create something not ‘too foreign’. In addition, strategies were developed to establish potential home buyers’ preferences. In contrast, the representative of the housing association who initiated the production of Noorderhof relied on his personal experience and argued that the creation of an enclosed ‘convincing’ ambience would be enough to attract middle income home buyers to this location. The imitators of Brandevoort De Veste also relied on their experience that reference to history is an appealing theme for middle and higher income groups. However, they also carried out surveys and held workshops to engage with potential target groups.

Thus, this study only partly confirms the assertion that commodity producers draw on consumer knowledge during the production process (Thrift 2006, Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). In particular, building professionals involved in Le Medi wanted to find innovative strategies to engage consumers in the planning process and tap into their unconscious thoughts while the planners of the other two cases made less of an effort to do so.

6.2 Consumption of themed residential place

With regard to the consumption of themed residential architecture, two types of interviewees were identified, namely home buyers (Le Medi) and residents (Noorderhof and Brandevoort). When I interviewed the people who had bought homes in Le Medi, the purchases had just been made and the people were waiting to move in. All the residents of Noorderhof and Brandevoort De Veste had lived there for at least three years. This dissertation has shown that a number of aspects are responsible for residential choice and the way in which they socially construct a ‘classed’ place identity. The argument is that sociocultural and individual practices of territorial appropriation are aspects of ‘classed’ practices.

In the following section I respond to the sub research questions of how do home buyers judge the themed architecture and how do they perceive themselves, fellow residents and ‘the others’. Section 6.2.2 deals with the question of how residents appropriate and judge the themed housing projects of Noorderhof and Brandevoort and how they perceive themselves, fellow residents and ‘the others’.

6.2.1 Narratives of home buyers

This study identified different narratives of home buyers in Le Medi (Chapter 4). Through these layered narratives they classify themselves as part of a
valued social category. Evidence has been provided that home buyers with an ethnic background classify themselves by referring to different aspects to those used by Dutch interviewees, although there are some similarities.

First, home buyers with an ethnic background distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups and from individuals with the same ethnic background. The latter are dismissed if they behave anti-socially and therefore damage the reputation of the whole (own) ethnic group. Second, some interviewees argue that homeowners are more ‘decent’ than tenants, in an attempt to underline their own progress based on the idea that homeowners are ‘people-like-us’ and are therefore the desired peer group to which they are actually going to belong in the near future. Third, all interviewees with an ethnic background appreciate the fact that a large number of Dutch people have also purchased homes in Le Medi thereby embodying a valued social category. This fraction of the urban middle classes is able to embrace the themed Arabian Kasbah precisely because Dutch buyers are willing to appropriate it. They therefore acknowledge this particular theme as being an artistic expression of ‘their’ cosmopolitan culture. This finding highlights the close relationship between architectural aesthetics, social disposition and a sense of self-worth (Duncan and Duncan 2004; Ley 1996, 2003).

Interviewees with a Dutch background do not explicitly distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups. Instead, they seek to distinguish themselves from ‘the other locals’ who live in Bospolder-Tussendijken. For example, one interviewee expressed his detachment from ‘the other locals’ by dismissing their consumption pattern (‘just people, who only buy rubbish, eat rubbish and stuff their children full of sweets’; see quotation on page 80). Despite that, some interviewees are less negative and prefer to emphasize their solidarity with ‘the other locals’. They believe in their power to improve the liveability of the neighbourhood and are willing to invest time, ideas and money.

In addition to this, all Dutch respondents distinguish themselves from people who live in the suburbs. To them, living in the suburbs means dullness, while living in the city represents a cosmopolitan lifestyle and creativity. Their preferred peer group is, therefore, the urbanites who ‘dare’ to invest in an urban neighbourhood which cannot immediately be described as decent. To some interviewees, the themed architecture compensates the negative reputation of the deprived urban district. The theming of the Arabian Kasbah is then perceived as unique and distinct from the surrounding buildings.

However, this study also provides support for the idea that all interviewees - whether they have an ethnic background or not - share an urban minded lifestyle, although the reasoning behind this varies considerably.
Respondents with an ethnic background do not want to live in the suburbs because they are afraid of stigmatisation (the majority of residents there are perceived as ‘white’) while the Dutch interviewees are afraid of dullness. This finding is in line with the argument of earlier studies (Reijndorp et al. 1998, Karsten et al. 2006). Besides that, both groups share an interest in living in a manageable and safe residential ambience. In particular, the parents of young children are comfortable with the collectively owned square and streets.

As regards the role of theming for residential choice, all the interviewees who had bought a home in Le Medi had done so because they see themselves as ‘real’ urbanites and have no intention of changing this. Almost all of them have social relations with people living in Rotterdam and enjoy the supply of multicultural food, products and services. Moreover, the single-family houses fulfilled a number of functional desires. The combination of property and themed architecture is a ‘pre-packaged’ commodity (Dear 2002) through which fractions of the urban middle classes attempt to reproduce their social disposition (Bourdieu 1984, Zukin 1998, Ley 2003).

Moreover, this study provides evidence that the Arabian Kasbah theme appeals to Dutch respondents in their thirties, particularly in an urban context. This group perceive themselves as being different from ‘the mainstream’. In the case of the families interviewed, themed ambience, with its clear spatial boundaries, immediately solves two problems: it makes it possible to live in the ‘lee of the city’ while still having vibrant city life close by (Karsten et al. 2006). This is confirmed by the convenience of owner-occupied, single-family homes surrounded by a safe and guarded space for children to play in and less of a focus on the architectural theme. While the interviewees with a non-Dutch background claimed that although the themed and enclosed architecture was remarkable, it was not the main reason for buying a house in Le Medi, they also stated that they would have been interested in buying a home in Bospolder anyway, even if there no gated or themed housing had been available.

6.2.2 Narratives of the residents
The residents of Noorderhof and Brandevoort De Veste also socially construct distinction and social disposition by means of themed residential architecture. The analysis of their narratives has shown that they relate a sense of self-worth to locational choice, aesthetic judgements, social behaviour and collectively organized events (Chapter 5).

As regards locational choice, the study provides evidence that the interviewees from Noorderhof are clearly more concerned with the location of their property than the respondents of Brandevoort De Veste. Similarly to the home buyers of Le Medi, they perceive themselves as urban-minded
people who still greatly appreciate the small scale of their residential environment. Living in a ‘village within Amsterdam’ is a perception that unifies their own sense of belonging to Amsterdam, despite them not being able to afford a house (with a garden) in the affluent districts near the city centre. By contrast, the residents of Brandevoort De Veste do not focus on a specific city. They use a number of medium-sized towns for daily shopping, work or other amenities and seem to have no trouble with being ‘suburbanites’.

Interviewees from both research cases assert that they appreciate the historicized residential architecture. In particular, residents of De Veste associate it with a high status of residential culture. The diversity of the facades, with brickwork that looks hand-made, reminds some of them of an old Amsterdam canal-side house. By contrast the residents of Noorderhof see the greenery as a reflection of respectability rather than the themed architecture.

This study suggests that the interviewees from Noorderhof are very involved in residential social life and are proud of their collectively organized events. Some of them argued that almost all their fellow residents are ‘people like us’ and have chosen to ‘stay in Amsterdam’ (citation p. 102). This perception expresses the elective belonging (Savage et al. 2006) to the place. The vast majority of the interviewees perceive the fellow residents as like-minded, highly educated and affluent.

Remarkably, social residential behaviour has been judged differently in the two themed residential places. For the Noorderhof residents the encounters and time spent on the pavements is appreciated and perceived as ‘normal’ behaviour. In particular the families appreciate the spontaneous encounters that take place in front of their houses. By contrast, the interviewees of Brandevoort De Veste avoid this social practice. They morally judge lingering on the sidewalks in front of the houses as being ‘working class’ and unrespectable behaviour. Instead, they decorate the zone in front of the houses with flowers and decorative furniture. The decorations therefore become a way of deterring people from stopping while, in turn, the decorations become a defensible design. In this vein, the Dickens Night is a celebration of the community on the one hand, but represents social respectability on the other. Residents who take part on the festival are not supposed to ‘sell junk’. Instead, a rather chic arts and crafts market is supposed to be organized which simulates the past in a euphemistic way.

6.2.3 Concluding remarks on social distinction
In conclusion this study has demonstrated that the interviewees socially construct distinction by appropriating the residential location and themed architecture as features that belong to ‘people-like-us’. By doing so they
routinely draw social and symbolic boundaries. The empirical chapters support the argument that everyday residential practices have a ‘classed’ nature (Bourdieu 1984, Bottero 2004, Skeggs 2005). These ‘classed’ practices are closely related to moral judgements of social behaviour as well as to themed architectural aesthetics. The interviewees classify ‘the other’ and the self with different intensities.

With regard to the ‘classed’ nature of cultural and social practices, themed architecture seems to add something. It provides a ready-made and stable sign which the respondents relate to respectability. In this vein, themed residential architecture seems to assure them that they are, or will be, living with like-minded people. It is remarkable that all the residents interviewed ‘need’ this sign of middle-class respectability. They use themed architecture as a means to socially distinguish themselves from ‘the others’ out there rather than from fellow residents next door (Savage 2010). People use themed architecture to collectively portray themselves as member of a valued social category despite they are being aware of the fact that different social groups live in the same neighbourhood. The architecture serves as a reliable tool which is used to express pride in the residential location and the residents enjoy telling people where they live.

Some academic scholars argue that one reason for this kind of social segregation and the need for stable signs of respectability lay in neoliberal governance (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Peck and Tickell 2002, Atkinson 2006). The argument is that an increasing economic instability accompanied with decreased state regulation enhances feelings of insecurity for many people, hence also for fractions of the middle classes who fear a decline in social status. Atkinson (2006) and Low (2008) asserted that feelings of insecurity encourage a desire to share day-to-day residential life with like-minded people. The empirical chapters provided evidence that the interviewees indeed tend to segregate themselves from people they perceived as being ‘the others’. Some of them expressed feelings of insecurity while appreciating the inward-looking residential ambience, the ‘stability’ of the themed architectural aesthetics (Brandevoort) and residential life with like-minded people. However, I would tentatively suggest that feelings of insecurity are based on a variety of reasons. In any case, the empirical data gathered does not support or reject the correlation between neoliberal governance and feelings of insecurity.

Finally, and as regards the relation between social distinction and middle class, one aspect is worth to discuss here. The perception of who belongs whether or not to the middle classes has been shaped by the categorization from ‘outside’. Class theory has long been organized around a Marxist and Weberian approaches where class struggle based on exploitation took the centre stage. Scholars have defined class position according to means of
production and/or occupational and education levels of individuals and households (Erikson, Goldthorne and Portocareo 1979), the ‘extent’ of their cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1984) or according to property, cultural and organisational assets. Social groups attempt to preserve these assets for future generations and convert one type of asset into another (Savage et.al. 1992). Although these approaches are interesting and convincing, the question that remains is if people do think that they belong to a social class. Is there a (middle) class identity evolving from ‘inside’?

Concerning this question, Kelley and Evans (1995) draw a remarkable picture. Based on a study accomplished in six Western countries, they suggest that the relationship between objective materialist forces and subjective perceptions inform the perception of class. They argue that reference group processes basically deform perceptions of class because people tend to perceive the world as an enlarged version of their reference group. Because the reference group is ‘mainly homogeneous in social status . . . people see themselves in the middle of the class hierarchy - this is true of rich and poor, educated and illiterate, worker and boss in all six nations’ (Kelley and Evans 1995:173). This argument is in line with the notion that people prefer to be ordinary rather than exceptionally (Savage 2010).

Concerning the sense of middle class identity, the findings of this study are ambiguous. A great number of the respondents of Brandevoort De Veste explicitly distinct themselves from people they perceive as members of the working or lower class. Beside, some home buyers of Le Medi explicitly distinct themselves from the poor and unhealthy lifestyle of urban locals while the interviewees with a non-Dutch ethnic background perceive themselves as ‘the decent’ immigrants. In constrast, the interviewees of Noorderhof tend to create a sense of self of being ‘just ordinary people’. Therefore, it is inviting to conclude that the more culturally close people are to the ‘working classes’ (like the Brandevoort residents with a lower level of education and Le Medi respondents with an ethnic background who are on the cusp of homeownership) the more they attempt to create a sense of decent middle class identity. A rationale Skeggs (1997, 2005) has worked out. However, as regards the high educated respondents of Le Medi who distinct themselves from ‘the local poor’ do not fit in this picture. Thus, more research on the sense of middle class identity is needed to substantiate this tentative finding.
6.3 **Reflection on the theoretical and methodological approach**

6.3.1 **Reflection on the concepts hyperspace and theming**

Hyperreality is an elusive and contested concept which I now want to reflect on. A number of scholars have argued that the impression of hyperreality exists if an inward-looking urban form has been produced with a theme which appears all over the place (Bryman 2004, Eco 1975, Gotttdiener 1997, Ritzer 1999). I have used the term hyperspace in the sense of a perfectly themed ambience. Perfected in terms of being a frozen three-dimensional ‘image’. Furthermore, residential hyperspace refers to a simulation of reality in an abstract sense. As illustrated in this study, building professionals did this by simulating natural growth for example. However, above all, the creation of hyperspace needs spatial enclosure (Sokin 1992): separated entities with a ‘coordinated aesthetic’ can be created (Langdon 1994) just by an inward-looking space whose claddings are ‘decorated’. As a consequence, theming does not always lead to the creation of hyperspace. Lörzing et al. (2006) have illustrated that many housing schemes have been realized in the Netherlands which make use of themes but in an eclectic way. Themes were sometimes used as mere names rather than as guidelines for the architectural design. At times themes were invented afterwards and were only used as a strategy for sale. Therefore, residential hyperspace and theming were not self-evidently related to each other. I argue that hyperspace can only be created if the objective is to create a particular and spatially inward-looking ambience accompanied with consistent theming.

**FIGURE 19  Range of theming**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>MOST ELABORATED THEMING PRACTICE</th>
<th>LEAST ELABORATED THEMING PRACTICE</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>External</em> themes considerable guide architectural and urban design and marketing strategy with the aim being to create <em>one specific</em> ambience. Result: big chance of creating a hyperreal residential ambience.</td>
<td><em>External</em> themes only guide marketing strategy during period of sale. <em>Only self-referential</em> themes have relevance for architectural and urban design. No aim to create <em>one specific</em> ambience. Result: hardly any chance of creating hyperreal ambience (mere physical construction has artistically been expressed).</td>
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Postmodern scholars like Soja (1995), Dear and Flusty (2000) have asserted that the invention of theming and hyperspaces first and foremost serves commercialization. In this vein, theming practice is a mere profit-seeking action. This rationale has repeatedly been illustrated by studies of ‘cathedrals of consumption’ (Ritzer 1999, Sorkin 1992, Gotttdiener 1997). This study provides evidence that theming in the Netherlands has also been deployed as a means of commercialization of residential place. In that sense commercialization actually means competing with other building firms.
and organisations for middle-class homebuyers (and tenants) by creating distinctive themed residential places.

Nevertheless, theming of residential place seems to be a less clear-cut profit seeking action as is suggested for public and/or recreational places. This study has demonstrated that several building professionals were afraid of inventing themes and thereby producing fake architecture. They were afraid of losing their respectability compared to their ‘peer group’ working in the same field (Sennett, 2006, 2008).

Finally, the desire for authenticity counterbalances and simultaneously enhances the creation of hyperspace. Most of the interviewees were in some way or other concerned with questions about authenticity. To architects, authenticity often means creating ‘truth’. As illustrated in Chapter 3, nineteenth century architects advocated the artistic expression of the material-structural basis of architecture while modernist architects argued in favour of the representation of plain purpose and physical construction. The emergence of theming challenges the notion of ‘truth’. Designing a mere facade undermines architects’ craftsmanship which, in turn, means designing three dimensional spaces and typologies and hence, artistically expressing purpose. The private developers and civil servants interviewed also claimed to value authentic places and architecture. To them placeness and side-specific design represent authenticity. However, this study provides evidence that they seem to be satisfied with simulating placeness.

Remarkably, and in actuality, the residents I interviewed do accept simulation of authenticity as being sufficiently authentic to identify with it. Home buyers in Le Medi, for example, know rationally that Le Medi simulates a Mediterranean ambience but this does not prevent them from perceiving the Mediterranean lifestyle as belonging to them and they therefore identify with Le Medi. Based on their narratives, it can be tentatively suggested that the higher the education, the higher the concern with, and reflection on, authenticity (a finding which confirms Bourdieu’s idea of social disposition). Admittedly, the empirical data does not substantiate a clear-cut correlation between the level of education and appreciation of authenticity.

These findings highlight another aspect by which the theoretical concept of hyperspace could be criticized, namely the question of whether it is possible to experience hyperspace or, to put it in even better terms, do residents indeed experience themed residential place as hyperreal? In contrast to the experience of a one-day-off in a theme park where people can be entertained and enchanted, residential life is day-to-day routine. The findings of this study are ambiguous due to this point. Although it is clear that residential life has been experienced as real social life by the interviewees, with all their conflicts and pleasures, the themed architecture does evoke the association
of living in an imaginary place. For example, one interviewee argued that the trees and old church of the Noorderhof evoke the feeling of living in an old (Italian) village while another respondent asserted that living in Brandevoort De Veste made him feel like he had a role in a movie. Another couple that was interviewed asserted that, when they came home from a holiday, they were once more enchanted by the real beauty of Brandevoort (‘which is more beautiful than being on holiday’).

In sum, the real exists alongside the hyperreal: day-to-day routines and social conflicts are real but, for the residents, their themed residential place is also real and luckily always present. I tentatively suggest that a themed residential ambience functions as a kind of tranquilizer, not least because themed architecture represents affluence and consequently balances feelings of insecurity to some extent (Low 2008).

6.3.2 Reflection on this case study research

In this dissertation, three research cases were selected. The empirical cases were selected on the basis of the ‘distinctiveness’ of theming practice: themes have to be visual in architecture and should have played a crucial role in the designing process. Besides that, themed residential places in different geographical contexts were selected. Critics might claim that research involving three research cases is not representative of the way in which a social group develops social distinction through living in themed neighbourhoods in general. In a statistical sense, and from the viewpoint of the theory of probability, it would indeed be unfeasible. However, I argue that, despite the limited number of case studies a lot can still be said about general causes and features of theming practice in the Netherlands (Flyvberg 2006).

First, this study has identified planning practices which are globally implemented. Building professionals who work on behalf of the New Urbanism movement, for instance, standardize design principles and advocate the invention of stories on the place due to placeness, traditional urban patterns and neotraditional architectural signs. Brandevoort and other historicized Dutch neighbourhoods were built using similar principles and design code books. This is no surprise due to the fact that architects like Rob Krier and Christoph Kohl design buildings in a number of European countries. Consequently, the approach to designing themed environments underlies general features, although they have been adjusted in line with local contexts (Ibelings 2004).

Second, more market-orientated housing production leads to more competition between regions and building firms, municipalities, housing associations and so on. This required a change in work attitude as regards the production of places. Following Sennett (2006), this development is
specific for the culture of new capitalism. Therefore, the patterns of change in work attitude discovered here can tentatively be regarded as general patterns.

Another point I want to mention here is that this study is limited by the absence of a control case: a non-themed neighbourhood. This was a deliberate choice made because a number of studies on social distinction and appropriation of non-themed residential place have already verified that residents do socially construct narratives to distinguish themselves from ‘the others’ while identifying with fellow residents they perceive as being like-minded (Reijndorp et.al. 1998, Karsten 2006, Nio 2007, Watt 2009, Savage 2010). This study adds the emphasis on the changing attitudes of building professionals and the empirical investigation of the relationship between themed architectural aesthetics, social distinction and commercialization of residential places within the urban field to these studies. This is done using a multidisciplinary approach.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

This study has led to new insights concerning the connection between production and consumption of themed residential architecture. However, more aspects deserve further attention in future research concerning the connection of these two sides. I now wish to emphasize some aspects relating to building practice, theory and methodology.

As regard building practice, some studies have already dealt with the connection between residents’ lifestyles and architectural aesthetics (Nio 2002, 2010, Bosch and Ouwehand 2011) but more research is needed to understand this complex relationship. This study has shown that identification with residential place is vibrant and goes beyond the identification with the location alone. Architectural aesthetics do play a role as regards social distinction as well as emotions and moral judgements. More and more housing schemes have meanwhile been completed specifically for certain lifestyle groups. A critical evaluation could lead to practice-relevant findings for the building of new housing schemes.

As regards theory, the production of themed residential place is a comprehensive practice which impacts the side of consumption and vice versa. However, the relation to each other at a theoretical level is difficult to explore because both sides are embedded in separate theoretical concepts which themselves vary widely. The production of residential place has often been related to housing policy (e.g. Boelhouwer 2002, Tousaint and Elsinga 2007, Priemus 2006) or to neoliberal governance (see Peck and Tickell 2002, Brenner and Theodore 2002). Both neglect the architectural aesthetics of
housing and the way in which it has been consumed. Studies that deal with architectural aesthetics (e.g. Mohney and Easterling 1991, McCann 1995, Marshall 2003) also tend to ignore the way in which has been consumed, while studies that explore the consumption of architectural aesthetics are basically concerned with social distinction and exclusion, rather than with housing production (e.g. Atkinson 2006, Ley 1996, De Wijs-Mulkens 1999) (though there are exceptions (Duncan and Duncan 2004, Low 2008).

I have argued that producers are more and more concerned about engaging with consumers’ thoughts, moral judgements and emotions. Drawing on Toffler’s idea of the prosumer, scholars like Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) and Dujarier (2008) have developed the notion of the ‘prosumer society’. They assert that there is a trend towards putting consumers to work mainly through the use of the internet. On the one hand this could help organizations and businesses to save money and, on the other hand, give consumers more opportunities to create their own products and connections. Further research should investigate to what extent consumers are able to inform or even take over the housing production.

As regards methodology, discourse analysis probably offers an opportunity to get a grip on the relationship between consumption and production of themed residential space and architecture. As long as the meaning of residential place is socially constructed via several kinds of media, including the websites of the residents themselves, it would be interesting to compare, first, symbolic meanings which are constructed around the same place by residents and place producers and second, to compare symbolic meaning with actual practice of place appropriation.