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

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Summary

Introduction

This thesis is about theming. Although theming first appeared in the Netherlands when the Efteling theme park was built in the Nineteen Thirties, the phenomenon only became widespread sixty years later. These days themed holiday parks and natural landscapes, shopping centres, old city centres and other themed locations throughout the Netherlands attract large numbers of visitors and day trippers (Burgers 1992, Metz 2002). These are places where a certain theme is used to create an inward-looking ambience. The aim of this ambience is, in turn, to distinguish places (and buildings) from everyday spaces and enable visitors to forget their everyday routines. In short these are places, buildings and spaces which offer an ‘experience’ to large numbers of people simultaneously.

After the themed places and buildings of fun and enjoyment, theming also became a feature of housing production in the Netherlands. How is theming expressed in this new context? After all, the residential environment is not a place where people expect an exceptional experience which they then want to share with a large number of strangers. Instead it is a place of retreat and social interaction with a select number of friends and acquaintances. Nevertheless, certain mechanisms of theming have permeated through to the private or parochial domain on the one hand, and to Dutch housing planning practice on the other.

Theming of the residential environment is, at the very least, viewed with suspicion in Dutch newspapers and by architecture critics. These places are criticised due to the ‘fake architecture’ and due to the (reputed) strong social control and the exclusion of certain social groups. The aim of this study is to assess whether these places really do have an exclusive character and are appealing to certain social groups. How do residents value a themed environment? On the production side, an examination is carried out as to why the themed residential environment has existed in the Netherlands since the 1990s and what effect theming has had on housing planning practice. The umbrella research question is:

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

In order to answer the question the empirical analysis of three consistently themed research cases (Noorderhof in Amsterdam Nieuw West, Brandevoort De Veste in Helmond and Le Medi in Rotterdam) were linked to theoretical
concepts on the theming of the built environment. The focus of these cases is the concepts of artistic expression, hyperspace and social distinction.

**Methodological approach**

The empirical basis comprises in-depth interviews with the 93 respondents. The most important theoretical perspective of this thesis is that identity is constructed socially (Bourdieu 1984, Giddens 1991) and that the appreciation of the place of residence is part of this identity construction (Savage e.a. 2005, Duncan and Duncan 2004). The way in which residents and house purchasers describe their relationship with the place and the architecture, the image they (want to) project of themselves and how they assess others with whom they share the residential environment, is expressed in narratives. By so doing, the researcher gained a nuanced and detailed picture of a person (Somers 1994, Riessman 2008). That would not so much be the case if the written questionnaire method was used.

In these narratives people reflect on their residential choice and the quality of their place of residence. They account for what others do and do not do and for what they do themselves. In the same way planners reflect on the motives for choosing a certain theme, they account for what their professional colleagues do and do not do and for what they, as professionals, (ought to) do or not do.

These narratives have a number of characteristics. First and foremost they can be seen as ‘pieces’ of experience which people express to others in conversations. A second characteristic is that people strive, in their life story, as well as in the consumption choices they make, to achieve continuity and integrity (Giddens 1991). Trying to maintain integrity is an expression of the desire to limit the uncertainty inherent in life. Atkinson (2006) and Sennett (2006) maintain that the uncertainty of today’s existence is fed by neoliberal politics. Uncertainty leads to a search for the external perfection of situations with the aim being to find inner peace (Low 2008). Theming is a response to this desire for certainty and perfection. A third characteristic of the narratives is that they reflect a socio-cultural pattern of standards and values.

**Structure**

The thesis consists of four parts. The first part of this thesis contains the introduction in which the subject, the research questions, the theoretical framework and the methodological approach are clarified. The second part,
Chapters 2 and 3, focuses on the production side of theming, while the third part, Chapters 4 and 5, covers the consumption side. Chapters 2 to 5 consist of peer-review articles published in, or submitted to, journals. The fourth part, Chapter 6, synthesises a number of the findings from the previous chapters. Empirical findings are related to the theoretical framework. The theoretical and methodological approaches are also reflected on.

**Production of themed housing**

In Chapters 2 and 3 the following sub questions are answered: 1) *How was space for the theming of the residential environment created at political (and social) level?* 2) *What are the characteristics of themed (housing) architecture?* 3) *What are the characteristics of the themed housing at Noorderhof, Brandevoort de Veste and Le Medi?* 

Since the 1990s, space for the theming of housing has been created primarily by a larger market-oriented production and the changed position of housing corporations. Following on from that, people - including planners of new housing - increasingly started to think in terms of place and area marketing.

Residential areas, and with that the commissioning parties such as the corporations, which had increased in size due to numerous mergers, and commercial developers, started competing more fiercely with each other than before the 1990s for target groups with purchase power. In effect, the need to compete with others lays the foundation for devising and assigning themes to places and architecture. In this way a new identity is created and the emphasis is placed on differences rather than on similarities between places.

There are, however, other reasons why the ‘density’ of new symbolic meanings of residential areas has increased since the 1990s. For example, the focus on cultural-historical aspects of the landscape and places was stimulated by pursuing spatial policy in relation to these aspects at both national and regional levels. The Belvedere Memorandum or projects such as Mooi Nederland are just a couple of examples (paragraph 6.1). In addition, increased prosperity means the differentiation of social groups according to social-cultural factors, such as lifestyles and ‘a good taste’ is no longer restricted to the higher income groups. Broad layers of the population are becoming more open to the symbolic meaning of, for example, owner occupied housing and its surroundings (VROM-raad 2009).

That is why - in view of the second sub question - the theming of housing is characterised by the search for suitable themes which can represent the social status of the ‘new middle class’. Chapter 3 and paragraph 5.2.1 explain that this search is not a modern-day phenomenon. For example,
nineteenth century architects were also interested in what architecture should or should not represent. Architectural styles were linked to certain spatial constellations and physical constructions which also referred to specific periods and regions. However, according to a number of architecture critics of the 19th century, the primary function of architectural styles is to reflect the physical logic of a building. The growth in the number of affluent citizens and the increasing desire to ‘live in a good area’ within (and outside) the cities caused commercial property developers to start looking for (a mix of) architectural styles which could represent this group’s social status. As a result, the relationship between a building’s physical logic and what was represented by the façade became more detached (Pey 2004).

Only after the Second World War were references (again) made to regional and local cultures in housing architecture in the Netherlands. This development was due to, among other things, the influence which semiotics had on architects like Jencks and Venturi. In the Netherlands, for example, Tzonis and Lefaivre (1990) argued from the 1980s onwards that architecture should primarily reflect the diversity of the users and symbolically express everyday and regional cultures.

With reference to the third sub question, Chapter 2 sets forth a number of striking characteristics of the three cases analysed. In contrast to the realisation of a mix of architectural styles in mansions in the cities and elsewhere at the beginning of the 20th century, Noorderhof, Brandevoort de Veste and Le Medi are characterised by a large spatial scale to which the theme is applied. What is more, the three projects have an inward-looking, enclosed urban form. Both aspects facilitate the creation of one particular and ‘enchanted’ ambience.

Some scholars have argued that (social) control of the urban image and architecture, of the ambience and of social behaviour in themed places means creating *hyperspaces* (Eco 1986, Sorkin 1992). They are more beautiful and more perfect than places where no recognisable theme has been created. This is where the artificial character can be found (Baudrillard 1983).

The analysis of the production of the three research cases reveals that two umbrella themes have been realised which merge together to form a contrived story. The first theme is the reference to the *traditional small town* in Noorderhof and Brandevoort de Veste and the second theme is the *Arabian Kasbah* in Le Medi. Due to the very consistent way in which the theming in primarily Brandevoort de Veste and Le Medi has been implemented, the research cases can be regarded, to a certain extent, as *hyperspaces*. A lot of effort has gone into creating an optimal image and, with that, a certain ambience. In De Veste, for example, the theme is translated into an enclosed building block where the architectural design is subject to rigid frameworks (defined in an image quality plan). Using the combination of building block,
historicized architecture and street layout, the ambience of a ‘real’ old town is simulated.

The idea of simulating the ambience of a made-up place has inspired the planners of all three research cases. They try, for example, to symbolise natural urban growth via architecture and urban development or create a certain ambience using carefully selected materials, proportions, colours etc. in as perfect a way as possible.

The planners’ method of creating a specific hyperreal ambience using an architectural theme and a story about the (location of the) architecture, confirms the findings of Bryman (2004). He maintains that current theming is accompanied by a story, but that the source of the story is always outside the object itself. De Veste and Le Medi, in particular, match the statement by Eco (1986:7) that: “Absolute unreality is offered as real presence”.

Consumption of themed housing

In Chapters 4 and 5 the following sub questions are answered: 1) How do Le Medi purchasers assess the theming and what do they think about themselves, the (expected) future neighbours and the ‘other’? 2) How do the residents of Noorderhof and Brandevoort de Veste assess the theming, how do they appropriate the residential environment and what do they think about themselves, the neighbours and the ‘other’?

In a broad sense, theming is related to the current culture of consumption. Sorkin (1992), Zukin (1995) and Hannigan (1998) assert that the consumption of places, architecture, goods and services is having an ever greater impact on everyday life. In more concrete terms, Bourdieu (1984) maintains that the appropriation of places, the home and goods is accompanied by the social construction of distinction. In La Distinction he explains that the construction of social class, from within and as social structure, is related to social practices and the allocation of symbolic values to these practices. The basis for practices and appreciation is a person’s habitus which is determined by characteristics such as sex, age, social-cultural background, but also by education, profession and the course of their life. In short by the degree of economic and cultural capital. Different backgrounds produce different forms of the habitus, as a result of which groups of people stand out from others or, indeed, feel connected to certain groups (distinction). Via social practices and their symbolic appreciation thereof people express their habitus and repeatedly reconstruct lifestyle and social positions.

The analysis of the interviews with the Le Medi purchasers in Chapter 4 illustrates how social distinction is constructed in the narratives of the interviewees.
First and foremost the interviewees purchased a home in Le Medi because the focus of their daily lives was on Rotterdam. They maintained relationships there with family and friends and did not intend to change this. Almost all purchasers indicated that exchanging the city for a suburban neighbourhood was not an option, although the native Dutch respondents spoke more negatively about the Vinex neighbourhoods than the non-native respondents.

Secondly - in addition to the above-mentioned characteristics - the purchase decision is affected by the theming of the housing project. As far as the younger respondents aged about thirty and with a Dutch background are concerned, a house in that location offers an excellent way for them to feel like pioneers. They take a financial risk and they feel like they are going against the tide. In the midst of the uncertainty surrounding this step they enjoy the contrary reactions of friends, which are part incomprehension and part admiration. The uniqueness of the Mediterranean ambience in Rotterdam fits in with the self-image of being creative and cosmopolitan. Families with older children (parents older than thirty-five) feel less like pioneers. For this group the building block, with its clear boundaries between public and parochial space, solves a dilemma. The sense of being closed off makes it possible to live under the lee of urban life (Karsten et al. 2006). You can continue to live in the city without having to give up the convenience of a family home, security and protection (for the children). What is more, those who have bought a house inside do not have the view of the ‘ugly’ existing social housing around Le Medi.

At the same time, behind this aesthetic assessment lies a moral judgement because the respondents reject the ‘ugly’ elements outside as belonging to the ‘others’ (Sayer 2005). In addition, the building block is aestheticised by theming. The sense of being spatially closed off consequently becomes acceptable and is toned down. After all, this group of respondents also does not want purely to turn its back on the neighbourhood.

Interestingly enough, the theming of a Mediterranean ambience appears to be less important to the third group of interviewees (the so-called ‘non-native social risers’ aged between 30 and 40 with one or more children) than to the native Dutch purchasers. Although the theming of a Mediterranean ambience sometimes brings back happy memories of the country of origin (or the parents), the use of a Mediterranean, Arabian symbolism in the Western context has a positive value for them if native Dutch groups also identify with it. After all, living in Le Medi together with them means improved social status and distinction in comparison to lower income groups.
The analysis of the interviews with the residents of Noorderhof and Brandevoort de Veste in Chapter 5 is also an illustration of how social distinction is constructed.

Generally speaking the self-image and social distinction is expressed by three themes which they refer to in their narratives namely, the considerations regarding the choice of location, their aesthetic judgement of the themed architecture and place and finally their judgement of social behaviour in the public spaces of the residential environment (for example on the pavements and in the streets during the Dickens Night).

In view of the narratives on the choice of location the conclusion is that the themed architecture appeared to be less important to the residents of the Noorderhof than to the residents of De Veste. A third of them opted for De Veste, despite not experiencing any changes in their phase of life, or in the size of their household. To them the theme traditional small town means ‘living in a good area’. The themed architecture represents a middle-class mentality and ‘good taste’. In the opinion of the majority of the respondents the themed architecture compensates for Helmond’s dubious reputation.

Given the aesthetic judgement, four aspects of the themed residential environment were particularly appreciated, namely the handmade-looking bricks, the diversity of the façades, the greenery and the small scale. The majority of the respondents associated the handmade-looking bricks with traditional workmanship. In addition, it is a material that is often regarded as Dutch. The diversity of the façades reminded the respondents of De Veste in particular of Amsterdam rings of canals. This association evoked feelings of pride and belonging. Although the vast majority cannot afford to live in the expensive canal-side residences, the simulation also serves as a sign vehicle (Gotttdiener 1997) for ‘living in a good area’. The amount of greenery is limited in De Veste to the green outer ring, while Noorderhof is located on the banks of Sloterplas lake in a green environment. The vast majority of the Noorderhof respondents stated that they tend to say that they live ‘on the banks of Sloterplas’ rather than in ‘Geuzenveld-Slotermeer’. They avoid the name of the (former) district because the neighbourhood had already had a bad reputation for some time. For the respondents who live on the green outer ring of De Veste, the view is a luxury mainly because they know that the green zone may not be built on, now or in the future.

Besides these architectural aspects, the small scale is also hugely appreciated. This is not just based on an aesthetic judgement. The impression of living in a traditional small town evokes feelings of sociability and social bonding among both the residents of Noorderhof who were interviewed and the respondents of De Veste. At the same time, the small scale expresses the need for social control, a lack of change and living with a select number of acquaintances.
The judgement of social behaviour in public space (the third theme of the narratives) by the respondents of De Veste is the clearest expression of the need for social distinction. Some judge the long time people spend out on the pavements as social behaviour typical of residents of working class areas, the ‘working class’ (referring to the ‘t Haagje working class area in Helmond). This view is shared collectively in De Veste and is expressed by the fact that, although there are benches out on the pavements, almost no-one actually sits on them for any length of time. The emphasis on decent social behaviour is also expressed by the way in which some respondents describe the Dickens Night party. It is supposed to be a market where high quality goods are sold and, in particular, items are displayed which reflect the nostalgic and therefore aestheticised view of the past.

Conclusion

In general terms (Chapter 6) this thesis shows that - just as the producers of places of fun and enjoyment - Dutch planners of new housing are using themes to try and make places stand out and become more aesthetic. Their aim is not only to attract attention, but implement themes which fit in with (the feeling for) social status of ‘the middle class’. In contrast to amusement parks, where artificiality and fake architecture are apparently not experienced as a problem, themed housing represents authenticity, identity and placeness. In practice, architects and urban planners (as well as commissioning parties and project developers) are constantly searching for the ‘right’ balance between the reference to regional and local traditions or to another (imaginary) past and innovation. Recreating placeness by theming confronts planners with a dilemma. On the one hand they want to create unique housing whereby a predetermined ambience is actually realised in as perfect a way as possible (an aim which, in any event, demands professional skill). On the other hand, strongly themed housing stands out too much from the surroundings. In addition, planners fear the opinions of their professional colleagues who brand the housing project as fake architecture or insufficiently innovative.

As regards the ‘consumption’ of amusement parks on the one hand and themed neighbourhoods on the other, similarities can also be found. Similarly to day trippers, who form an idea beforehand of the future ‘experience’ because that experience has been frequently portrayed and detailed in brochures, house purchasers form an idea of the future in their new neighbourhood. A theme that is recurrent in the marketing influences this idea. In addition, planners are becoming more and more adept at acquiring, in particular, knowledge of the instinctive needs of potential
purchasers and devising suitable themes. However, purchasers do not visualise a temporary, limited experience but weigh up the advantages and disadvantages during the purchase phase or harbour certain expectations as regards future neighbours. The analysis of the interviews shows that some respondents of Le Medi and De Veste are convinced that the themed architecture attracts ‘people like me/us’ (that is like-minded people).

Drawing on the theory of social distinction expounded by Bourdieu (1984) and Savage et al. (2005), social scientists like Skeggs (1997) and Bottero (2004) maintain that, in the context of an unequal society, the way we act and think is, by definition, classified, and is therefore of classed nature. For that reason a judgement of architectural aesthetics and social behaviour reflects not only a personal view but also the social and cultural hierarchy of the context a person is in. They claim that ‘class difference’ is repeatedly confirmed from the inside.

Whether the themed neighbourhoods researched are appropriated exclusively for middle income earners cannot unequivocally be answered in the affirmative. Not all residents were interviewed and in Brandevoort de Veste, for example, the residents are not only home owners but also tenants of social rented accommodation. However, the analysis of the narratives provides a strong indication that, in the themed residential environment, a certain middle class culture exists and is appreciated. That is expressed in Noorderhof, for example, by the (proud) assumption that all fellow residents in the neighbourhood have a high level of cultural capital and by the creation of differences between the own group and the people ’outside’ their project. In the case of Le Medi the native Dutch respondents regard themselves as creative and tolerant city dwellers, while the non-native purchasers mainly want to progress by acquiring property. However, it is not yet clear which social practices and cultures they are developing. The middle-class culture part of De Veste is expressed in the need to distance oneself from the working class areas of Helmond and to hold parties in a ‘decent’ manner. Here, the unchangeability of historicised architecture is not only a monumental decor for the nostalgic imitation of the past but also appears to be an effective means to aestheticise the inside and outside of day-to-day life.