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# The middle classes and the remaking of the suburban family community: evidence from the Netherlands

Lia Karsten · Tineke Lupi · Marlies de Stigter-Speksnijder

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**Abstract** This paper presents data on everyday life in three recently built Dutch suburban areas constructed under the Vinex national urban planning policy. Its focus is on family households and today's division of work and care, social life and neighbourhood activism. The results show that suburbs are no longer breeding grounds for the traditional nuclear family. But, while the rate of working mothers is high, the limited use of professional child care still reflects the tradition that maintains that children are best cared for in the private domain. Having children is crucial for putting down roots and developing social networks. In contrast to the past, both working mothers and fathers are actively constructing family communities. The newly established family communities are firmly of the middle class and tend to exclude childless and lowerclass households. Neighbourhood activism involves both the reproduction of an unspoiled and orderly environment and the realisation of a suburban paradise for children. This paper further reveals differences in the suburban areas studied and discusses the false dichotomy between the urban and the suburban within the metropolitan area.

**Keywords** Daily life · Middle class families · Neighbourhood · Social networks · Gender divisions of work and care

## 1 Introduction

Many urbanites leave the city as soon as they have children. Although a counter movement can be discerned (Boterman et al. 2010), family households still favour suburban residence (Hummon 1990; Richards 1990; Clapson 1998, 2003). The role of the suburb as a family place, however, has been highly criticised. Feminist geographers have pointed to the suburbs as locations of unequal gender relations. They argue that the traditional nuclear family with its stay-at-home motherhood is being reproduced through suburban space

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(McDowell 1983; England 1993; Aitken 1998). Moreover, scholars describe life in the suburbs as anonymous and individualistic, pointing to the endless commuting between home, work, and child care facilities as well as travel to family and friends elsewhere. Social networks within the suburban neighbourhood are found to be thin and produce little cohesion or social capital (Putnam 2000). It has been argued that civic engagement is limited and that suburban middle-class families organise themselves in a way that creates a defensive and risk-averse culture that fosters social segregation (Baumgartner 1988; Dowling 1998a; Duncan and Duncan 2004; Watt 2009). In short, the academic literature describes the suburb as a conglomerate of private, home-centred, isolated families that are characterised by unequal gender relations, narrow social networks and only limited participation in the local communities.

In his overview of American suburbanisation twenty years ago, Marc Baldassare wrote: 'suburban communities are understudied in sociology, relative to their size and importance. They are also not well understood, subject to urban biases and cultural myths about suburban living' (1992, p. 476). His claim found some support amongst scholars who, at the end of the 1990s, started to notice gradations in the bleak representation by pointing out differences in and among suburbs (Fincher and Jacobs 1998; Harris and Larkham 1999; Strong-Boag et al. 1999) and the position of the suburban landscape within the urban field (Maher 2003; Savage et al. 2005; Hanlon et al. 2009). However, Baldassare's statement of a 'lack of in-depth, qualitative community studies' on suburbs still holds, particularly when we have a look at the non-Anglo-Saxon world (Lupi and Musterd 2006; Modarres and Kirby 2010).

The observation that the knowledge of suburbia is limited forms the starting point of our study of everyday life in three suburban neighbourhoods in the western part of the Netherlands: De Aker and IJburg on the outskirts of Amsterdam and Getsewoud, to the south of Schiphol airport. They are part of large, master-planned suburban areas called Vinex locations and stand in a long tradition of urban planning under the direction of the Dutch government (Bontje 2001). The Vinex policy provided a total of 650,000 new dwellings, mainly semidetached, owner-occupied, single family homes built since the early 1990s (VROM 1990). The research presented here is intended to shed light on the everyday life of family households in recently built suburbs and focuses on the division of work and care, social life and neighbourhood activism. Through an enquiry into the differences in and among the Vinex locations, we attempt to add fresh data to the international literature, suggesting certain important shifts but also pointing to continuities in suburban family life at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Following this introduction, we first review the literature on daily life in the suburbs and then describe the outline of the research; this is followed by our results and conclusions.

## 2 Everyday life in the suburb

Suburbanisation is often described as a process in which family ties are strengthened (Gans 1967; Willmott and Young 1967; Hummon 1990). In many western countries, urban planning policies have stimulated suburban family life, and moving to the suburbs is often seen as a 'natural' choice for families just starting out. A family adjusts the site and situation of its residential location to meet its specific demands as it grows. In one of the first overviews of the suburban community, Bell (1958) described suburban lifestyles as familism in contrast to a lifestyle of careerism that would flourish in central urban areas.

The image of the suburb as the ideal community for the family has been challenged by many scholars from different backgrounds. Feminist authors argue that traditional gender relations are reproduced by suburban space and view the suburb as a spatial entrapment for women (McDowell 1983; Hanson and Pratt 1995). The suburbs accommodate traditional family life with its unequal, gender division of labour that leaves little room for women's personal development and requires them to be housewives and caretakers of children. This was especially the case in the first suburbs where the possibility of employment was rare and both mobility structures and child care facilities were limited (Droogleever Fortuijn and Karsten 1989). Over the last decades, the suburban landscape has changed, and many companies have moved out of the centre of the city, bringing employment closer to the suburban family (Harris and Larkham 1999; Phelps et al. 2006; Hanlon et al. 2009). Under these conditions the number of working mothers in the suburbs has increased, transportation and other facilities have improved, and socio-economic diversity has grown (Dowling 1998b; England 1993). Nevertheless, as research has shown, suburban women still have more difficulty in managing their work-life balance than urban women do (Jarvis et al. 2001; De Meester et al. 2007, 2011).

The debate over suburban social life resembles the 'community question' of the urban areas (Wellman 1978; Lupi and Musterd 2006). Many scholars suggest that the community *lost* describes suburban life most appropriately. Suburban facilities are scarce and do not function as social meeting places. In the first years of a new development, contacts are usually more intensive, but when everything is settled, most people retreat to their home territory, focussing less on neighbours (Baxandall and Ewen 2000; Putnam 2000). In contrast, other studies indicate that it is precisely suburban residents who participate most in social networks. This supports the community *saved* argument, although it does not automatically lead to a more close-knit community as contacts between families are found to be only moderately intensive (Guest et al. 2006; Rosenblatt et al. 2009). Suburbanites have many local social contacts, but they lack deep forms of identification with their place (Lupi and Musterd 2006). In her Australian study on suburban social life, Richards (1990) speaks of *family communities*. She found a minority of suburban families that are highly involved socially with their neighbours. This involvement applied particularly to traditional families with stay-at-home mothers supporting each other in raising their children. Gray et al. (2009) found the same patterns in Irish suburbs. Savage et al. (2005) also indicate traits of community *transformed* in British suburban middle-class neighbourhoods. Residents have a busy social life and use childrearing to connect and interact with like-minded neighbours. Given their options, according to the research, middle-class families look for a place that fits their personal biography and their idea of place. This process is called the politics of elective belonging, stressing both individual choice and community building (Savage 2010). The element of choice allows Watt (2009) to define social life in the suburbs as a form of selective belonging: neighbouring occurs along the lines of sameness, with class as the predominant variable.

Since the 1990s, suburbs have increasingly been studied as a part of the metropolitan area with its growing diversity in terms of age, class and ethnicity (Fincher and Jacobs 1998; Harris and Larkham 1999; Hanlon et al. 2009; Dowling et al. 2010). Suburbs are no longer homogenous enclaves and community is not a given but something that is actively constructed by the increasingly self-regulating middle classes. They develop different forms of neighbourhood activism to defend their suburban paradise (Baumgartner 1988; Cheshire et al. 2010). Suburban residents go to great lengths to make sure that the outdoors reflects order and that the private sphere has little room for irregularities (Baldassare 1986, 1992; Maher 2003; Duncan and Duncan 2004). Middle class suburbanites tend to buy



themselves into low-risk environments, free of poor people, migrants and other urban 'discomforts' (Dowling 1998a; Watt 2007, 2009). This process is said to increase social-spatial segregation within the urban field (Atkinson and Flint 2004; McGuirk and Dowling 2009, 2011).

In the United States, Canada, Australia and some Eastern European countries, the growth of camera surveillance, gated communities and private neighbourhood governance reflects this trend (McKenzie 1994; Low 2003; Polanska 2010). In the Netherlands, however important an orderly environment is valued, these forms of suburban exclusion are still exceptional. One of the questions of this paper is whether and how the Dutch suburban middle classes have developed new forms of neighbourhood activism to secure their middle class status.

Ambiguous results about suburban everyday life parallel a growing variety among suburbs. Next, we discuss the particularities of the Dutch suburbs studied and their impact on the division of work and care, social life and neighbourhood activism.

### 3 Suburbs studied and methods used

Suburbs in the Netherlands are not entirely comparable to suburban places elsewhere. Compared to the stereotype of large, isolated, low-density, completely mono-functional single-family housing districts, it can even be argued that there are no real Dutch suburbs. Most suburban areas in the Netherlands are relatively small, consist of row houses instead of detached houses and are close to the urban core. Yet Dutch suburbs are very different from inner-city neighbourhoods both in physical terms (low density, low level of facilities, including work) and social terms (dominance of family, middle class and native households). They are generally considered not to be very problematic environments, making for limited academic attention.

The research reported here is the first large comparative study of suburban life in the Netherlands that considers the differences among and within suburban environments (Lupi et al. 2007). We focus on three Vinex neighbourhoods in the Amsterdam metropolitan region: Getsewoud, De Aker, and IJburg (Fig. 1). Although they are part of the same policy, they differ both socially and physically. The Getsewoud area was developed from 1998 onwards as an extension of Nieuw Vennep, a village to the south of Schiphol airport. With its size (5,500 houses), a low density of 28 houses per square hectare and relative isolation, it has the most suburban characteristics of all three Vinex locations. At the time of the research, 55 % of the population of Getsewoud consisted of families with children. The area houses a traditional middle-class population, moderately educated, with occupations in ICT, construction, trade and health care. Houses in Getsewoud are large by Dutch standards, built in traditional style resembling the architecture of the 1930s and predominantly owner occupied. The municipality required that 'only' 20 % of the houses be social housing and left control of the project in the hands of private parties. One can quite easily reach the urban area from Getsewoud by car but far less so by public transport. The area does, however, have a fully developed shopping mall.

De Aker and IJburg were both built under the close supervision of the city of Amsterdam and are thus more intimately connected to the main Dutch metropolitan area. De Aker is an extension of the garden cities on the western outskirts of Amsterdam. Building started in 1995, and today, there are approximately 3,600 houses, predominantly single-family dwellings with a density of 56 houses per square hectare and 30 % social housing. Dwellings are smaller than those in Getsewoud, and not all have front gardens,



**Fig. 1** Map of the three research areas in the Amsterdam metropolitan region

making the area less green and spacious. De Aker is connected to Amsterdam centre by a tram that takes approximately 25 min. The area has a small shopping centre that can satisfy basic, daily needs.

The third district, IJburg, is still under construction. It is being built on the lake (IJmeer) on the eastern outskirts of Amsterdam. IJburg was to be completed in 2018 with approximately 18,000 houses, making it the second largest Vinex area in the Netherlands. Due to the economic crises, however, the construction of IJburg has been put on hold; to date, only half of the total area has been completed. The density has been set at an average of 60 dwellings per hectare and social rental housing at 30 %; the percentages vary on the different islands. In 2003, the first residents moved in, and at the start of this research, around 600 houses were occupied. They consisted mainly of single-family homes; however, several low-rise apartment buildings were under construction. Initially, IJburg was connected to the city centre only by bus, which was later replaced by a tramline. It takes 15 min to reach Amsterdam city centre. Until the population was sufficient enough to support a shopping centre, the main facilities in the area consisted of a supermarket in a big tent and a video store that sold groceries.

We used mixed methods to study everyday life in the Vinex locations. First, a survey was developed and distributed among 1,835 households. In IJburg, all the households living in the area at that time were approached. In De Aker and Getsewoud, we selected streets that were representative of the whole area. Questionnaires were distributed by mail and had a high response rate of 48 % (875 households). In order to limit the diversity of the research population the very small group of pensioners were excluded from the sample, leaving 852 households.



**Table 1** The number of respondents and their family status

	Getsewoud		De Aker		IJburg		Total respondents		Total Netherlands
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	%
Singles	32	11	12	5	29	9	73	9	35
Single parents	11	4	16	6	18	5	45	5	6
Couples	59	20	58	24	120	38	237	28	30
Two-parent families	186	65	160	65	151	48	497	58	29
Total	288	100	246	100	318	100	852	100	100

Cramer's  $V = 0.147$ ;  $p < 0.001$

Source the Netherlands: [www.statline.nl](http://www.statline.nl)

Next, we conducted 43 semi-structured interviews with selected households from the survey, based on household type, age of the family members, social-economical background, tenancy and location within the neighbourhood. The interviews were conducted by two female researchers and took place at the homes of the respondents. They generally lasted an hour, varying between 30 and 100 min, and were guided by a broad topic list. The focus was on the respective motive for the move to this specific area, the division of work and care, parenting practices, neighbouring and community actions. Interviews were fully transcribed and computerised with Atlas TI to derive quotes.

The percentage of family households (single and two-parent households) within the population studied is highest in De Aker and Getsewoud (Table 1). The former can be characterised as housing established families with children in primary education, whereas the latter represents growing families. In IJburg, we often met pregnant women and young couples preparing to start a family. Respondents reflected the white, middle-class status of the Dutch Vinex but with internal differentiation. Non-western immigrants accounted for 18 % of the respondents in IJburg, 16 % in De Aker and 5 % in Getsewoud. Many of them are low educated and belong to the lower classes housed in the social renting blocks. Middle-class respondents are generally living in owner occupied housing. They are moderate to high educated. The highest educational levels (academic level and highest level of professional education) were found in IJburg (73 %), followed by De Aker (52 %) and Getsewoud (33 %).

#### 4 Divisions of work and care

An important dimension of suburban daily life is the division between paid work and child care within families. The literature suggests the existence of unequal gender relations in suburbia, while recent studies indicate that some change has taken place. Table 2 reveals that traditional families, with one working partner, are a minority in all three studied locations. Mothers are working mothers, and women living in the suburbs are no exception to this new (Dutch) norm. Mothers in these three suburbs are even more likely to be employed than mothers in the Netherlands as a whole. At the time of our research, 60 % of all Dutch mothers (with under-aged children) were in the workforce. At 80 %, the percentage in our Vinex locations is much higher. In general, unemployment in the three areas is very low compared to the rest of the Netherlands.

**Table 2** Division of paid work within two-parent families, by percentage

	Getsewoud	De Aker	IJburg	Total respondents	Total Netherlands
Traditional	17	22	15	18	39
A-symmetrical	63	39	36	47	43
Symmetrical	19	34	48	33	12
Unemployed	1	5	1	2	6

Cramers V = 0.222;  $p < 0.001$

Source the Netherlands: [www.statline.nl](http://www.statline.nl)

**Table 3** Percentage of families with children aged 0-12 that use professional child care

	Getsewoud	De Aker	IJburg	Total respondents	Total Netherlands
Kindergarten	45	59	71	59	28
After-school care	10	20	32	19	19

Kindergarten: Cramer's V = 0.233;  $p < 0.001$ ; After-school care: Cramer's V = 0.216;  $p < 0.01$

Source the Netherlands: SCP 2005

There are interesting differences among the three suburbs. Getsewoud clearly represents the Dutch model of new traditionalism with men working full-time and women working part-time: the a-symmetrical model. The symmetrical model in which both men and women work for about the same number of hours per week had the lowest score in this area. IJburg shows the reverse, and De Aker falls more or less between these two. The majority of the men in all three neighbourhoods still work full-time as their fathers did before them. However, particularly in IJburg, we encountered quite a few fathers and mothers who each worked four days a week. The percentage of symmetrical households among the family households in IJburg (48 %) was very high both in comparison with the two other suburbs studied and with the Netherlands (12 %) as a whole.

Working parenthood creates a need for child care, either formal (professional) or informal. According to the literature, the lack of facilities in the suburbs is a barrier for women who want a career. Yet things have come a long way since the days of the early mono-functional suburb. Kindergartens take care of toddlers, and after-school child care facilities cater to children aged four years old and older, the age at which children in the Netherlands start primary education.

The high rate of parental employment made us expect a high use of professional child care. In all three suburbs, the use of child care is indeed higher than the figure for the Netherlands as a whole (SCP 2005). Yet the picture became more nuanced when we looked at the usage in the different areas. For all age groups, residents in IJburg use professional child care most intensively, while Getsewoud had the lowest rate of use (Table 3). In addition, there is a large difference between the use of day care for the youngest children and after-school care for the older ones. Whereas kindergartens are used by a majority of parents, many tend to arrange informal child care when their children turn four. And the families who do use professional child care try to limit it to a few days a week.

While the employment rate of mothers in the suburbs is increasing, the use of kindergarten and after-school care is evidently still influenced by the Dutch norms about family care, favouring a pattern of families taking care of their children themselves. Many respondents reduce the number of hours in paid employment and/or organise informal

childcare within their social network. In Getsewoud, where most mothers work two to three days a week, kindergarten use is the lowest. They opt for informal arrangements that most closely resemble home care:

When my daughter was born in 2003, there was no kindergarten place available before 2004. So my mother, who had always wanted to look after my baby, took care of her; after all, she is her grandmother. And then my sister wanted to take care of her too. And then we decided: to let them do so together. And now I must say that I very much appreciate that solution. My mother takes the children to her own home in the morning and I pick them up after work.

Parents tend to take care of their school-aged children themselves. Working during school hours only is an often-used strategy:

I don't use child care; I'm at home at three o'clock. I just work the hours that they (the children) are at school. It is so expensive, child care. And when my daughter went to the primary school there wasn't even a place for her in after-school care. The only problem is the school holidays. We try to arrange those together, my husband and I, we exchange care with friends and sometimes my mother is willing to come. That's the way we try to manage.

This mother in IJburg has a moderately paid, part-time job, as does her husband. An equal division of paid work and shared child care between the mother and the father is more frequent in IJburg and De Aker than in Getsewoud.

To summarise: traditional suburban life with the housewife staying home to take care of the children is disappearing, yet full-time employment for both parents is rare. Professional child care is still not fully accepted, and suburban families construct their daily lives accordingly, blending familism with different degrees of careerism (Dyck 1990; De Meester et al. 2011). The result of this combination varies amongst families and is related to the location of the neighbourhood in the metropolitan region and the education levels of the parents. Residents in IJburg, which is nearest to the city centre of Amsterdam and has the highest education levels, pursue urban lifestyles characterised by striving for a symmetrical division of tasks and a high use of professional child care. In Getsewoud, the traditional patterns of gender divisions of work and care are still dominant.

## 5 Social life in the neighbourhood

The presence of many informal child care arrangements in the suburbs under study here reveals a vibrant social life. In all three Vinex locations, social life developed quite rapidly after the first residents moved in. At the time of this research, the active pioneering stage was almost over in IJburg, whereas the two other neighbourhoods had already moved beyond that phase by then. Yet, in all three suburbs, residents continue to greet their neighbours, most chat from time to time, and many invite each other to their parties. The families with children clearly stand out. As shown in Table 4, they know more neighbours and are busier with social events than are childless households.

Having children is a trigger for social interaction that goes beyond the casual greeting. Families with children share the experiences associated with childrearing and establish forms of child care exchange. The schoolyard is an important meeting place in all three neighbourhoods, as a mother in De Aker explains:

**Table 4** Percentage of residents who socialise with neighbours by household type (no significant differences between the neighbourhoods)

	Household with children (%)	Childless household (%)
Know nearby neighbours	88	76
Know neighbours elsewhere in area	61	29
Say hello	99	98
Small talk	89	78
Having a drink together	58	48
Inviting to parties	59	27
Playing sports together	26	12

It is only recently that my social contacts in this neighbourhood have been intensified. Now that my children go to the primary school, you really get in contact with other neighbouring families. All of us have some sort of the same common problem, how to look after our children.

Additionally, a mother in IJburg states explicitly that she selects neighbourhood friends on the basis of their family status:

The neighbours who live some houses further away, we have frequent contact with. They also have children, of about the same age, and that creates a basis for drinking coffee together and from there other activities follow.

The differences between households with and without children do not reflect the trend of the Netherlands as a whole, where the differences between family households and childless households are less evident (Völker and Flap 2007). This may be an indication that the Vinex areas are the ultimate family communities. Socialising and supportive forms of child-centred activities often blend together and, with very minor differences, are very common in all three neighbourhoods. Neighbouring families support each other with children's activities in different ways. Looking after the children of a neighbour is widespread. Organising children's outings and asking neighbours and friends to transport one's children are often done.

Local socialising and mutual support among families construct the family community that Richards (1990) described, but in new, transformed ways. In all three neighbourhoods, it is working mothers and fathers rather than only housewives who are the active participants. The family community of today's suburb is a loose-knit network of households with similar social backgrounds and lifestyles. It reflects the social reproduction of middle-class lifestyles found in contemporary suburbs elsewhere, as in the master-planned estates in Australia (Rosenblatt et al. 2009; McGuirk and Dowling 2011).

Little children seem to take the lead in establishing social contacts. They are most able to ignore private barriers and in doing so, bring about parental meetings: "The children run into each other's houses and when they are cycling you go outside yourself and look. Then you encounter the neighbours quite easily", a young mother explains. Interaction within the family communities, however, has limits. To some extent, childless households and families living in social rental housing are excluded. Childless households are simply not in the picture when it comes to reciprocal forms of daily contact and child support. Some childless households regret their status as outsider, but many feel perfectly happy with their separate worlds. They do not want to be too engaged in neighbourhood life; they work

longer hours and have social gatherings elsewhere. A single man living in an apartment block in IJburg explains: "I know my neighbours by name and we exchange friendly greetings, but it's not that personal. I think because we live in apartments, we work all day and we don't have children. It's OK for me." The exclusion of the second category, the residents in social housing, is less explicitly noted, but it is clear in all three suburbs. Middle-class residents socialise with neighbouring middle-class families that share the same type of lifestyle. The predominance of middle-class families in the neighbourhood makes it rather easy to find 'people like us' without openly excluding others. In the next section, however, it will be seen that differences in lifestyle between the residents in owner-occupied housing and those living in the social housing blocks also create tension.

## 6 Neighbourhood activism

Both old and new studies of suburban life deal with the rise of residential associations and community groups (Gans 1967; Baxandall and Ewen 2000; Dowling et al. 2010). Living in completely new and often unfinished surroundings, residents feel the need to take action. In all three suburbs, the Internet has clearly stimulated neighbourhood activism from the very beginning (Hampton and Wellman 2003). Even before they moved in, residents set up websites and online-forums to inform each other about the building process, organise occasional protests, negotiate with construction firms and plan a first neighbourhood party. After the first active years, this engagement gradually slowed down, and residents focused on their own street and housing block. In this process, neighbourhood actions attained a more exclusive character and became organised within the same social strata: residents of the owner-occupied housing. Initially, the middle-class residents who took the initiative from the start cooperated with the residents living in the rental apartments. After several years, however, the residents in social housing were increasingly seen as troublemakers, responsible for traffic problems such as speeding and parking violations, animal droppings, litter, loitering and vandalism. These small nuisances were experienced in all three neighbourhoods at a rate higher than the norm in the Netherlands (Table 5). The figures challenge the image of the new neighbourhood as an unspoiled paradise, as a resident in De Aker made clear.

Look, here on the corner it's all social renting. That creates all sorts of trouble, throwing garbage on the streets, kids hanging around making noise and working on cars or scooters in front of the door. That's not the sort of thing we expected in this area.

It was particularly the middle-class families living in the owner occupied housing who were concerned about keeping a clean, homogenous and child-friendly community. While claiming they would never choose to live in a 'white elitist ghetto', they struggled with the increasing diversity of their suburban environment and expected neighbours to behave orderly and predictably, a process Watt (2007) noticed in the suburban areas surrounding London. In all three Dutch suburbs, the middle-class families worried about the appearance of the streets, and violations of their norms became an incentive for them to intervene. An IJburg mother told us:

We are very active in cleaning together. On New Year's Eve we had gathered together to make a firework party with all the children. Red paper everywhere.

**Table 5** Experience of nuisances in the neighbourhood by residents, in percentages

	Getsewoud	De Aker	IJburg	Total respondents	The Netherlands
Speeding	50	54	39	47	31
Litter	39	65	37	46	20
Animal droppings	57	28	29	38	33
Parking problems	30	23	42	32	24
Vandalism	15	29	9	17	14
Loitering youth	20	40	9	21	11
Burglary	11	20	2	10	7
Bike theft	6	11	3	6	10

Source the Netherlands: [www.statline.nl](http://www.statline.nl)

And then one of the neighbours suggested spontaneously a clean-up and another one started to organise a bag and so on. It ended up with seven of us cleaning the street.

Cleaning up is also seen as a pedagogical activity: children have to know that throwing litter on the street is not considered acceptable. “We want to teach our children good behaviour”, one Getsewoud mother explained.

Not only is neighbourhood activism fed by a clear consciousness of the vulnerability of the middle-class status of the neighbourhood, but the reproduction of this status was accompanied by a deep interest in the creation of a child-centred and family-friendly community. At the time of this research, building in De Aker and Getsewoud had already been completed for some years, and the residents had achieved some success with respect to the creation of playgrounds and the improvement of traffic safety. Complaints about the lack of facilities for the children were still frequently heard among the residents in IJburg, where construction was still in process:

I really miss playgrounds. When you look out from your balcony, it's all residents with children. We only have one item of play equipment, that little train, nothing else. And this is a neighbourhood with so many little children!

The temporary playground on a vacant lot was generally thought to be suitable only for older children.

Residents not only complained about playgrounds, but they also pointed to the shortage of child care facilities, children's clubs, children's sporting facilities, and so on. When it turned out that such facilities were not planned or would only be added much later, parents took the initiative. Some even started their own day-care facility through the neighbourhood website, an action that, according to one of the mothers, reflects the enterprise of the residents:

They are all demanding parents around here. Many of them want to interfere, particularly because it's about their own children. It's all the newly arrived families who wanted to do something, to create a form of engagement.

Middle-class suburbanites made use of their professional skills in taking action for neighbourhood improvement and in so doing they were constructing the ideal family community in which they wanted to live.

## 7 Conclusions

In this paper, we have focused on the everyday life of families in Dutch suburbs that had recently been built under the national Vinex policy. Aiming to update the academic literature, we studied suburban everyday life at the beginning of the twenty-first century with a focus on the division of work and care, social life and neighbourhood activism. It became clear that suburbia continues to be a family-oriented place: all three suburbs studied are dominated by households in the stage of family building. Consequently, newly built suburbs are still the childrearing sections in the urban field, and non-family households form a minority. In addition, the newly built suburbs in the Netherlands are still predominantly white, middle-class worlds. There are few residents from ethnic minorities, and education and income levels are relatively high. Our empirical data indicate processes of continuity and change along with differentiation between suburbs.

Our first conclusion is that, with respect to the traditional gender division of work and care, the structure of the suburban family has shifted. Working motherhood is the dominant model, and the percentage of working mothers in the suburbs is even higher than in the Netherlands as a whole. Although the suburban housewife still exists and full-time female employment is rare, the stay-at-home-mother is fading away (Strong-Boag et al. 1999). Careerism has found a strong foothold in suburban lifestyles. Yet familism is still the common ground in Dutch suburbs. Within the framework of the enduring traditional ideas about families caring for themselves, working motherhood complicates the rearing of children. Families are struggling to find a work-life balance that suits both of these norms (Jarvis et al. 2001; De Meester et al. 2011). For this reason, all types of informal child care arrangements have emerged within the social circles of neighbours, friends, and relatives, a practice that is widespread in the Netherlands (SCP 2005).

Second, suburban social life is characterised by the continued existence of family communities but in the context of the twenty-first century. Social interactions are still cultivated by having children. Having children is crucial to the development of bonds and roots in an environment in which no family member was born and raised (Gray et al. 2009; Guest et al. 2006). In suburban Vinex, daily routines around bringing up children feed a sense of belonging (Savage et al. 2005). We recognise the paradox of the disappearance of traditional families along with the persistence of family-oriented lifestyles. Sharing the same life stage and trying to support each other, neighbours create social networks among 'people like us', meaning other middle-class families with children of the same age. The emerging twenty-first-century suburban community differs from the traditional family community as described by Richards (1990). It is no longer housewives but employed parents who form the backbone of today's suburban community. Both mothers and fathers socialise actively and build communities with a focus on children's issues. This new family community is, however, strongly focussed on supporting middle-class lifestyles to the exclusion of childless households and tenants.

Third, levels of neighbourhood activism have changed; the initial high level of activism waned and also became more local. At first, initiatives were directed at community building on the neighbourhood level and included all residents. After some time, however, the enthusiasm declined, and residents began to focus only on their immediate surroundings. In this process of scaling down, the maintenance of middle-class status became important (Baumgartner 1988; Watt 2009); it defined neighbours in social housing as 'others' and their different lifestyle as unwelcome. Preserving an unspoiled middle-class appearance was central, but neighbourhood politics encompassed both the reproduction of middle-class status and the construction of a family-centred community. In all three



suburban areas, families put a lot of effort into creating playgrounds and child care facilities, and improving traffic safety. In the long run, levels of activism decreased, but families kept on monitoring neighbourhood developments and, using their professional skills, take action when needed.

We want to end this paper with three context-bound reflections on the results presented. First, the results must be interpreted in the context of the Dutch society with its moderate income inequalities, low levels of privatisation, modest obsession with safety issues and the absence of full-gated communities. While we recognise some forms of British middle-class disaffiliation and selective belonging (Atkinson 2006; Watt 2009), our research also reveals levels of social interaction and of connection similar to those found in the new suburban estates in Australia (Dowling et al. 2010).

Second, our study shows families struggling to construct new forms of suburban community that depart from traditional notions. The degree to which the families have succeeded in replacing traditional suburbia differs by location. Both IJburg and to a lesser extent De Aker reflect the changes in suburban family life more fully than Getsewoud does. Getsewoud resembles the stereotypical suburb most, particularly with respect to the traditional gender division of paid work and child care. This is most likely influenced by the lower educational levels of the Getsewoud middle classes, but the fact that this is also the most peripheral location cannot be totally discounted either. In contrast, family life in IJburg seems rather similar to the new lifestyle of the highly educated, inner-city family gentrifiers with its intermingling of familism and careerism. Here, we recognise the existence of the young urban professional parents (yupps) described elsewhere (Karsten 2003, 2007), with both mothers and fathers combining care and career while simultaneously constructing the local, child-friendly, (sub)urban community they prefer to live in.

This brings us to our final reflection: To what extent are the terms *urban* and *suburban* still useful in differentiating residential environments (Harris and Larkham 1999; Butler 2007)? As several scholars have noted, we also find that there is a range of suburban communities, each with its own specificities (Dreier et al. 2001; Phelps et al. 2006; Hanlon et al. 2009). We argue that an open eye for the emerging differences among (sub)urban areas can provide us with a clearer view of the twenty-first-century metropolitan area than can an urban-suburban dichotomy.

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