Being in place: Citizenship in long-term mental healthcare
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It is staged as a people’s hearing: a place for mental health clients living in the region to air their grievances with mental healthcare and society in general. At the hearing, clients are invited to express how they suffer social exclusion in a public forum. The location is an auditorium of a psychiatric hospital in one of the larger cities in the south of the Netherlands. Although the hearing is supposed to start, people are shy. The chairman of the afternoon encourages those present to speak: “Who wants to begin? There really are no stupid things to say.” Finally, Kurt, president of the regional client union, takes the floor. He starts by listing the successes of the client union and gradually progresses to pointing out all the work still to be done. With his forceful plea for the recognition of clients’ rights, the hearing tentatively commences. Each in turn, clients tell their stories, recite their poems and voice their criticisms.

Meanwhile, Maurice, a client from the long-stay ward, tries to cut in several times, but he is systematically passed over. Sometimes the chair simply ignores him, at others he says, “I’ll be right with you,” and then doesn’t return to him. Financial cuts are discussed, new legislation is considered and people complain about the lack of support for volunteer aids, which is said to undermine ‘the potential of civil society’. Maurice, however, does not get a chance to speak. Then he simply stands up and starts talking. It’s an incoherent story about the alderman’s nephew. According to Maurice, the nephew is a delinquent and a drug dealer, and he once also ended up in this hospital. During his admission, the alderman’s nephew harassed a nurse, but Maurice managed to protect her: Maurice grabbed hold of him and saved the nurse from further harm. After his statement, Maurice sits down, the hearing continues and he continues to be ignored. After some time, Maurice leaves.