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# When the spell is broken: gentrification, urban tourism and privileged discontent in the Amsterdam canal district

*cultural geographies*

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## Abstract

Expansion of urban tourism in historic districts in European cities is putting increasing pressure on these areas as places to live. In Amsterdam, an ever-growing number of tourists visit the famous canal district, which also forms the home of a group of long-term, upper-middle-class residents. While such residents are generally depicted as instigators of urban transformation, in this case, they are on the receiving end. Bringing together the literature on the socio-spatial impact of tourism, belonging and the lived experience of place, this article explores the changing relationship between these established residents and their neighbourhood and provides insight into their growing sense of discontent and even powerlessness in the face of neighbourhood change.

## Keywords

belonging, neighbourhood change, urban tourism, sense of place, gentrification, urban middle class

## Introduction

In the research literature, middle-class residents are generally presented as key instigators of urban transformation and neighbourhood change. Studies on elective belonging have explored how gentrifiers (re)shape neighbourhoods through place-making practices and carefully manage their exposure to elements in the city they find less desirable. In contrast, less is known about what

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happens when these residents are themselves confronted with processes of neighbourhood change, imposed by bigger, more powerful forces than themselves.<sup>1</sup> In Amsterdam, this process takes shape in the form of urban tourism. Fuelled by economic, financial and cultural globalization, the international tourism industry is redefining historic city centres into objects of cultural consumption,<sup>2</sup> a process that is not always evaluated positively by locals. In the case of Amsterdam, tourism is fast becoming one of the most debated and contentious issues in the city. Particularly vocal is a group of long-term, upper-middle-class residents of the historic canal district, who express their frustration about tourism-related nuisances and developments in a continuous stream of newspaper letters, at public events and in municipal settings. This article aims to provide insight into their expressions of discontent by examining how urban tourism is changing the relationship between these established residents and their neighbourhood.

Research shows that the socio-spatial impact of urban tourism can be substantial as cities become geared to the experience of visitors.<sup>3</sup> While early research on urban tourism focused on the visual, aesthetic consumption of architectural heritage,<sup>4</sup> recent studies indicate that tourists consume place identity in a much broader sense, immersing themselves in the distinctive ambience of cities.<sup>5</sup> As Degen<sup>6</sup> notes, the tourist experience 'is expanded into a more holistic consumption of sensory rhythms: textures, sounds, smells and even tastes'. In this respect, tourism has been likened to a performance in which visitors strive to play the part of a local by consuming local customs.<sup>7</sup> The continuous search for authentic experiences can trigger processes of commodification as some aspects of local identity and culture are exploited for profit.<sup>8</sup> This process of commodification is associated with economic and cultural globalization, including the emergence of a global capitalist economy, increased availability of mass transportation and new communication and information technologies, but it has also been produced locally by city governments.<sup>9</sup>

In Amsterdam, city marketing policies first appeared in the 1990s to boost the local economy by attracting tourists and foreign investment in luxury hotel chains and other tourism-related services.<sup>10</sup> Over the years, city marketing has focused on the city's cultural heritage to appeal to more affluent visitors meant to replace the low budget tourists visiting the city for its liberal reputation with respect to drugs and prostitution. In 2010, this culminated in the successful lobby by a broad coalition of stakeholders – including residents – for UNESCO heritage status for the canal district. Yet this unique architectural landscape is only one aspect of the Amsterdam tourist experience. Most visitors also want to explore the city's image as a tolerant place, 'packaged' as permissiveness and liberal attitudes with respect to sex and drugs.<sup>11</sup> This representation of tolerance is only loosely related to the original, historical meaning of tolerance and has little to do with ordinary, everyday life in the city. Nevertheless, the growing numbers of tourists attracted by this image have made it a reality, illustrating how place identity may become geared towards the entertainment of visitors rather than reflecting local meanings and practices.<sup>12</sup> As Nijman<sup>13</sup> observes, 'The theme of the "park" is [. . .] drugs and sex under a pretence of normalcy'.

Thus, somewhat paradoxically, visitors searching for authentic urban life<sup>14</sup> trigger processes of commodification that transform places into spaces of leisure and consumption.<sup>15</sup> In extreme forms, this results in themed enclaves, designed to meet the aesthetic expectations of the tourist gaze. In most cities, however, tourist uses and other uses of the city intersect, and increasingly so due to the rise of short-term rental arrangements such as AirBnB.<sup>16</sup> The resulting interaction between visitors and the everyday city can lead to tensions and negative stereotyping of tourists as well as collective organizing and protest.<sup>17</sup> Yet overall the research literature on urban tourism tends to be pre-occupied with the experiences of tourists themselves, the political economy of urban tourism and the perceived economic benefits for the city.<sup>18</sup> By comparison, resident perspectives have received far less attention and it remains unclear why tourism is often experienced so negatively.<sup>19</sup>

This article focuses on the transformation of the historic canal district in Amsterdam from a residential neighbourhood into an object of leisure and tourist consumption as experienced by a group of long-term, upper-middle-class residents. In 2015, the city was visited by approximately 17 million tourists, leaving their footprint in the urban landscape, particularly in the historic centre, which also houses 86.000 residents. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore how a group of long-term, upper-middle-class residents experience urban tourism and how it changes their relationship with their residential surroundings.

## Middle-class belonging

In the wake of the reorientation of middle classes to the city, gentrification scholars have explored the relationship of the new urban middle class with their residential surroundings through the concept of elective belonging. Middle-class residents are thought to strategically engage with their neighbourhood as a site 'for performing identities where people attach their own biographies to their chosen residential location'.<sup>20</sup> Savage<sup>21</sup> has argued that 'it is relatively unimportant for them [middle-class residents] to belong to a socially cohesive neighbourhood. What matters more is the sense that they live somewhere appropriate "for someone like me"'. So while they symbolically tie their identity to place, in everyday life middle-class residents often play games of proximity and distance: some elements of the neighbourhood are embraced and kept close, while other elements are maintained at a distance. Neighbourhoods are selectively performed through everyday practices and routines<sup>22</sup> – in consumption spaces, public space and local institutions such as schooling<sup>23</sup> – but rarely fully embraced. Atkinson has referred to this phenomenon as disaffiliation, whereby middle-class residents consciously and strategically shield themselves from their surroundings.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, to create an optimal fit between their social identity and their residential surroundings, they also engage in strategic acts of place-making and place-framing<sup>25</sup> that normalize middle-class values, tastes and aesthetics.<sup>26</sup>

This depiction of middle-class belonging as a highly strategic and reflexive project of the self is largely disconnected from the work of cultural geographers, environmental psychologist and anthropologists on the emotional and highly personal meaning of place. The humanistic notion of 'dwelling' describes the way in which people become embedded in place over time, providing them with feelings of comfort and familiarity.<sup>27</sup> Bennett refers to this form of belonging as 'ontological' belonging or 'being in this world'.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this perspective does not feature prominently in the research literature on the urban middle class because these studies tend to focus on residents moving *into* the city and *into* neighbourhoods in the early stages of their working career and life course,<sup>29</sup> thereby highlighting strategic and conscious decision-making processes rather than the everyday and often unconscious process of making the neighbourhood one's home.

The concept of dwelling, however, recognizes the importance of personal memories and experiences in developing a sense of home over time. May and Muir<sup>30</sup> note that 'achieving a sense of belonging entails creating a sense of identification with one's relational, material and cultural surroundings [. . .], or "of recognising – or misrecognising – the self in the other"'. Our feelings of connection to place are thus strengthened when we feel comfortable with the people we encounter and feel familiar with the way our surroundings look, feel, sound, smell and taste. Vice versa, feelings of home may transform into estrangement, when the neighbourhood changes. For example, research in gentrifying neighbourhoods shows that belonging of working-class residents is undermined when local community dissolves and residents become involuntary *fixed* in space.<sup>31</sup> Their combined feelings of loss of identity, community and place have been captured in the concept of nostalgia. Moreover, their experiences of cultural displacement are also informed by material

changes in the built environment and changes in the local facility structure, which impact local ways of 'doing' neighbourhood.<sup>32</sup>

Belonging is thus a multidimensional and complex experience.<sup>33</sup> As Bennett<sup>34</sup> notes, 'places are more than social constructions or imaginaries and more than a context for social relations; places are also material and engage with all the senses and with physical bodies'. Places can be conceived of as sensescapes, referring to the physicality of place, such as the visual aesthetics of the built environment and natural environment, as well as the activity rhythm of public life.<sup>35</sup> This spatiotemporal character of place may inform our sense of home as we encounter predictable flows of people and recognize regular comings and goings, with associated sounds and smells, during the mundane and purposeful routines of our everyday lives. Conceptualizing belonging this way, it shows distinct parallels to Bourdieusian perspectives on the embodiment of experiences. Conversely, changes in the everyday rhythm of the neighbourhood may trigger experiences of estrangement and disconnection. For example, Kern<sup>36</sup> shows how gentrification reconfigures the temporalities of the neighbourhood through the organization of new consumption-oriented and place-making events for new middle-class residents in public and semi-public spaces, marginalizing everyday practices of long-term, working-class residents. Similarly, Degen<sup>37</sup> observes that sensescapes of residents may be marginalized as processes of urban regeneration and place-branding transform and commodify the distinctive sensory-experiential geography of place for bohemian visitors.

Finally, the literature on ageing provides additional insights in the relationship between belonging and neighbourhood change.<sup>38</sup> Lagen and colleagues<sup>39</sup> show that older residents may come to feel out of place in their neighbourhood when their own daily rhythms slow down and become out of sync with the everyday temporalities of younger residents. Cities in particular are associated with lower quality of life for elderly due to the dynamic nature of commercial, social, cultural and political structures. Phillipson finds, however, that there are different ways in which older residents experience and respond to these changes,<sup>40</sup> differentiating between the 'excluded' and the 'elected'. While some experience alienation, powerlessness and nostalgia over the lost community – as has also been observed in research on working-class experiences of gentrification – others with 'expanding life style options' actively control and shape their environment, either by choosing to move to places that reflect their ageing identities or by developing mobile lifestyles through second homes and international travels. The study thus shows that spatial mobility – which is in turn related to economic and cultural capital – may serve as a form of capital, a process which Kaufman and colleagues<sup>41</sup> refer to as *motility*. These findings clearly resonates with the literature on elective belonging in terms of the strategic and relatively flexible connection of middle-class residents to place.

## Research design

To understand how urban tourism changes the relationship between long-term, middle-class residents and their residential surroundings, a qualitative study was conducted in the Amsterdam canal district. The canals were constructed in the 17th century as a residential and business district for the bourgeoisie, a function it kept for centuries. In the early 20th century, upper-middle-class residents started to move out to new bourgeois districts south of the centre and to emerging exclusive suburbs along the newly developed train system. After World War II, out-migration increased as also less affluent households opted for newly constructed suburbs. Canal houses functioning as office spaces and places of craftsmanship were also increasingly unable to compete with more 'modern' work spaces elsewhere, leaving a substantial part of the housing stock along the canals vacant and run down. In the early 1970s, young, high educated professionals – often working in academia and

the cultural sector – moved in and instigated physical and social upgrading through financial investment and sweat equity and by actively protesting plans of the local government to demolish the ‘obsolete’ historic buildings and advocating for public investment in historical preservation. By the 1990s, the area was solidly gentrified. Current real estate prices are amongst the highest in the country. Nevertheless, as a residential area, it so far remains fairly mixed due to the presence of social housing constructed in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>42</sup> and the continued residence of long-term private tenants protected by rent control.

In 2014 and 2015, we performed 26 interviews with 31 long-term residents in the western section of the canal belt. A combination of snowball-sampling and door-to-door flyers was used to realize a theoretical sample of residents who lived in the neighbourhood for at least 20 years. On average, respondents have lived in the neighbourhood for 36 years, ranging from 18 to 64 years. Interviews focused on neighbourhood choice and residential practices, neighbourhood attachment and everyday routines, perceptions of neighbourhood change and urban tourism and responses to these. In addition, seven interviews were held with key informants from different stakeholder groups in the area, including political representatives, local shopping street managers and two resident representatives affiliated to a renters’ association and to a local foundation for historic preservation. These interviews provided background information on the changing nature of the neighbourhood and served as a mirror for the individual stories of our respondents. All interviews were conducted in Dutch, transcribed and analysed in the software programme Atlas.ti with inductive and selective coding.

In terms of class position, almost all respondents can be characterized as upper middle class. Many moved into the area at the start of their housing and working careers and embody the incumbent upgrading of the area. Their age ranges from 49 to 81 years and about half of the respondents are now retired. They hold academic and professional degrees in humanities, social science, law, architecture or the arts although a few characterize themselves as ‘self-made’. The majority works or worked either in public sector jobs in for example education, health care and the justice system or in the cultural sector, ranging from architects to musicians and painters. Reflecting these occupational positions, respondents’ disposable incomes are not particularly high, especially for those with a career in the cultural sector, and certainly incomparable to corporate sector wages. However, two-thirds of the respondents are home owners and have therefore built up significant housing wealth due to the substantial upgrading of the area. Quite a few of these respondents have also paid off their mortgages and therefore have very low housing costs. The other respondents live in social housing and private rental apartments.

## **Cosmopolitans dwelling in beauty**

In respondents’ stories about their relationship with their neighbourhood, two aspects of belonging can be identified. First, respondents express a strong emotional attachment to place, describing themselves as ‘having long ago struck roots here’ and comparing the neighbourhood to a ‘comfortable, warm winter coat’. Above all, their sense of place is informed by the aesthetic and sensory experience of the unique landscape. Respondents extensively discuss the beauty of the cityscape, pointing out details in the view from their apartment across the canals. Often, respondents mention the unique sensation of walking along the canals and of coming home after a trip abroad, each time rediscovering how special the area really is. Jeanette (63 years old) explains, ‘sometimes I take the most illogical route . . . just to enjoy the canals and the colours. [. . .] The blue sky, and the trees, and the reflection of the gable . . .’.

This aesthetic appreciation of the area goes beyond the architectural ensemble of the canal belt and is rooted in a broad sensory experience of place. For example, many respondents discuss the

subtle changes in their surroundings in the different seasons or indifferent types of weather, some also referring to winter images of the canal belt in paintings of Dutch masters of the Golden age. As Diana (65) observes,

It is just a beautiful neighbourhood, a beautiful city. I have travelled a lot, especially when I was young. I have been to a lot of places. In the US and Australia, Singapore, Barcelona, etcetera. [. . .] I thought New York was great. I could see myself living there. But, no, I guess this is my place. Yes. Also because of the history. I have read a lot about the old city and how it was created. It is historically really interesting. And so beautiful. I still enjoy it so much when I walk around the neighbourhood. I never fail to notice. I don't take it for granted. When I think about the walk home on a summer evening, past the Western Church Tower, I smile to myself and think, 'wow, what a beautiful picture this is'.

Respondents also clearly value the heritage of the area and many are familiar with the particular history of their own house, recounting who originally built it, how the building was used over time and what elements in the house still point back to that time. Several respondents also often refer to a sense of privilege of being able to consume this landscape on a daily basis, as Jeroen (52) illustrates:

Look around . . . [. . .] a house like this, my heart is in it [. . .] everyday when I step out and stand on my doorstep and look out onto the canals. I think: how privileged am I to live here. And everyone who visits says 'wow how amazing that you live here'.

In this respect, the respondents demonstrate a sense of home closely related to the notion of 'dwelling', showing an embodied knowledge of and familiarity with place, which comes from having lived in the area and experienced place over a long period of time. Particularly, home owners also display a strong sense of pride, seeing the preservation of this unique architectural ensemble as their own achievement. They were the ones who moved in being others saw the value of the neighbourhood and through sweat equity renovated the area. Several respondents at length describe the restorations done to their house and many also note the costs associated with the maintenance of 350-year-old buildings.

At the same time, as many respondents emphasize, the neighbourhood is more than a beautiful scenery. It is the combination of stillness at some parts of the day and liveliness at other times that gives the area its character. In this respect, respondents' sensory experience of place includes watching the urban spectacle unfold, the dynamic flows of people generated by the mix of residences, businesses and consumption spaces. Frank (76) explains,

It's not just that it's beautiful. It's the whole atmosphere. The shabby chic. The majestic houses on the one hand, [. . .] but also the liveliness. The bustle. I still have that . . . after all those years, I still love to sit out here [on the bench in front of the house] whenever possible, and look at the people go by. On bikes, on the water, people going about their business. It's so nice.

Frank demonstrates a conscious awareness of the distinctive activity rhythm of the area. Respondents' appreciation of the dynamic urban atmosphere also clearly reflects their urban habitus, the second theme running through the interviews. Living in the city centre forms an important aspect of respondents' social identity, resonating with the literature on elective belonging. For example, Robert (76) observes,

The Canal Belt is alive [. . .], it is not just a painting that you stop in front of to look at. Not a museum. [when asked to explain] Ordinary people use this place, doing their everyday things. And it is very lively,

with visitors and such. It is a lively mix. [. . .] Not boring. Some people, who get older, move to the country side. I can't imagine myself there. That must be so horribly boring.

Several other respondents recount that they deliberately chose the centre over buying a house in conventional middle-class neighbourhoods or in the suburbs. Yet while living in the city centre provides them with a source of distinction, respondents seem to attach little value to the neighbourhood itself as a distinct socio-spatial unit. Most respondents prefer to refer to themselves as *Amsterdammers* rather than residents of the Canal Belt, and several respondents explicitly describe the area as 'not really a neighbourhood' and represent themselves as 'not neighbourhood-minded people'. Their rejection of the term 'neighbourhood' is related to the social connotation of the word in Dutch, serving almost as synonym with 'community'. Such a performance of neighbourhood, as one respondent explains, is something that his parents used to engage in and something that belongs to the suburbs. He and other respondents describe 'good' neighbour relations as incidental, functional interactions about shared home issues, making no further claims on each other's time. Several respondents discuss how they appreciate living among like-minded people with similar attitudes about preserving each other's privacy. Nevertheless, respondents do value familiar faces in local shops or along the streets. For example, when asked whether she feels at home, Elsa (67) responds,

Well . . . I guess very much. It is nice to see familiar faces when walking along the canal. I mean . . . I don't know these people, but they are people you see around for years. Some you greet, others you think 'oh, isn't that Mrs so-and-so?' But well . . . I am not so good at that kind of thing. Not like my mother, who does have that sense of community. But it does give me a sense of familiarity, which is important to me. [. . .] So I guess I am attached not to the people, but to the whole atmosphere. My social life is something else. That has little to do with the neighbourhood.

Beyond such fleeting interactions with familiar strangers, respondents do not seem to expect much from fellow residents in terms of socializing because their lives are 'busy enough as it is'. Overall, the Canal Belt forms a marginal space in their everyday routines. While respondents appreciate the availability of local specialty food shops and cafes, their time-space routines are much wider in scope. The neighbourhood serves as a hub for accessing the rest of the city, and thanks to its proximity to central station and the airport, also the rest of the country and places abroad. In line with previous work on the Dutch urban middle-class, respondents display their classed identities through a set of cultural and culinary consumption practices, which are all understood to be indicative of their cosmopolitan lifestyle.<sup>43</sup> For example, many respondents elaborately discuss Amsterdam's cultural amenities in terms of museums, classical music concerts and high-quality restaurants. They also describe their own frequent international travels to other cities, which in turn serves to reconfirm their appreciation of the Canal Belt and the city.

## Experiences of urban tourism

The respondents clearly experience a strong sense of belonging, primarily informed by their aesthetic, sensory experience of place and secondarily by the symbolic and practical rewards of a central location. This carefully constructed imaginary of the Canal Belt is, however, increasingly threatened by urban tourism. On the one hand, large numbers of visitors contribute to the dynamic sense of place that is thought to be part and parcel of living in the city. Moreover, tourists obviously enjoy the aesthetics of the Canal Belt, confirming respondents' own aesthetic sense of place, and they therefore express a certain degree of tolerance to tourism. They do not want to 'keep the area



to themselves'. In a way, their ambivalence is in line with Brown-Saracino's<sup>44</sup> findings that some middle-class residents in gentrifying neighbourhoods are aware, and reflective, of their own privileged position in relation to the context in which they are embedded. The popularity and fame of the Canal Belt provides residents with symbolic capital, especially when the Canal Belt is experienced and discussed by tourists, guide books and international newspaper in ways that fit with residents' views. Respondents themselves look at the landscape of the neighbourhood with a tourist gaze and understand its appeal. On the other hand, the reality of sharing the neighbourhood with visitors is experienced quite negatively. The respondents use two metaphors to describe these experiences: the theme park and the museum.

### *The theme park*

The theme park metaphor is used to refer to everyday encounters with visitors and the inappropriate ways in which visitors use the neighbourhood. This behaviour reflects Amsterdam's reputation of sex, drugs and – more in general – a city where 'anything goes'. Visitors do not come for the canal district alone, but also for the 'shabby' in the 'shabby chic', as some respondents call it. While in the past associated activities – drinking, getting stoned and partying – were more concentrated in the red light district and other nightlife areas, with the increasing numbers of visitors and new geographies of tourism – that is, facilitated by AirBnB – the theme park is spilling over into the canal district. As Richard, who represents a group of social housing tenants, observes,

Well, it gets really crowded here. [. . .] It becomes a bit of a theme park. Overcrowded with tourists and activities that to me don't belong in the city. [. . .] Beer bikes, canal boats, not just normal ones but drinking boats, floating hot tubs. [. . .] It's a lot of banal entertainment with a lot of noise. And those people don't really care where they are. They could just as well be out at some lake, where they wouldn't bother anybody.

Some of these amusements – such as the beer bike<sup>45</sup> – are rooted in Dutch traditions, but they are extrapolations of it. Respondents describe them as forms of staged authenticity,<sup>46</sup> derived from local customs but never really a local custom. In addition, respondents also refer to new amusements that have even less to do with the city itself. Jeroen (52) observes,

We saw it coming: these double deck buses. I think they don't belong here. A red bus should be in London. It's a tourist thing, it does not belong in Amsterdam. The beer bike, rickshaw taxi's, Segways, it just doesn't fit in, it doesn't belong. It cannot be prohibited, but 20 years ago it didn't exist.

Respondents therefore use labels such as theme park, amusement park and Disneyland to summarize what they see as a loss of authenticity. In their eyes, the centre is used in ways that do not belong in a residential neighbourhood nor in Amsterdam. The tourist engaging in these entertainments is depicted as an abstract other who does not know how to behave. This tourist is compared to the 'good' tourist who comes to experience the beauty of the Canal Belt, reflecting respondents' own appreciation of place. Bart (68) and Jeanette (63) explain,

Bart: So there's tourists and then there's tourists. So you have the mass tourist and you have the tourist that walks along the canals and is really interested in the architecture. [when asked to explain what the mass tourist is like] Yes, the kind that wants to be on a beer bike. The kind that just comes to drink.

Jeanette: Yes, like all those English tourists. They come to drink and smoke up.

Bart: Smoking and drinking.

Jeanette: And peeing in the canals.

These categorizations of 'bad' tourists are permeated with notions about proper behaviour, good taste and appreciating the aesthetic value of Amsterdam, which are clearly classed. Respondents, however, tend to ascribe 'vulgar' amusement park behaviour to generational differences. Younger tourists are perceived to disrupt the unique sense of place of the Canal Belt in various ways: through the trash they leave behind, their engagement in 'tasteless' activities and their 'inappropriate' outfits.

Besides the 'visual pollution' by tourists, respondents are annoyed by the loud interactions of groups of tourists on beer bikes or stag parties on their way to the next bar that invade respondents' home. They refer to the loud dance music from leisure boats, reverberating between the facades during the day time, which cannot be ignored by closing the curtains, and even the sound of the wheels of tourist suitcases on the cobbled streets, disturbing the silence in the early mornings and late evenings. Although noise disturbances seem to be a particularly pressing issue to respondents who are retired or work from home, also others comment on these sensory disruptions of place. Nevertheless, as noted above, respondents are ambivalent about the negative undertone in their narratives. Concerned about coming across as intolerant, several respondents reflect on how their sensitivity to visitor behaviour is to some degree related to their own age. Oscar, who is retired and spends a lot of time at home, reflects, 'the music they play. It's deafening. I just cannot tolerate it. Maybe when I was twenty I would have been ok with it. Now I just cannot stand it'.

Finally, respondents observe that the growing crowds of visitors are disrupting the 'natural' or 'ordinary' rhythm of the neighbourhood. Roughly speaking, the tourist season starts around Easter and runs until late September and then peaks again during the December month, but some respondents cynically observe that the crowds seem to have become a permanent feature and the district is described as bursting out of its seams on regular summer days. As Frank comments (76),

Me, I like crowds. It can't be lively enough, like on King's Day<sup>47</sup> or the Gay Pride. Then I sit here and watch the people stroll by. I love it. But on regular days . . . It's all become such cheap entertainment . . . You can't see your surroundings anymore through the crowds. [pointing to the square across the canal]. All those terrace cafes, with parasols and even tents. I used to be able to stroll across the square and enjoy the scenery. Now that's impossible.

While some respondents enjoy festivals, like King's Day, because they serve an important function for the city and contribute to a lively atmosphere, their increasing frequency in combination with the growing number of visitors is experienced as a nuisance. Crowds create bottlenecks of foot traffic in the narrow side streets of the canals which frustrate many respondents. Tourists 'wandering about' conflicts with their own, more purposeful trajectories and pace. Typical to Amsterdam, this also includes visitors on rental bikes, depicted by respondents as dangerously zigzagging the road, oblivious to other traffic and distracted by the views and the spectacle around them. These concerns are expressed in particular by older respondents, who are becoming aware of to their own growing physical vulnerability, demonstrating how the perceived divergence between the activity rhythm of locals and visitors is also influenced by respondents' own positionality.

Combined, the tourist spectacle is described by respondents as 'out of control', beyond healthy and appreciated liveliness, and as undermining the Canal Belt's unique sensory experience of place. As Jakob (73) concludes, 'the nicest time of the year is when it is raining, because there are few people around and you can see how beautiful the city is. Mornings like this . . . then it is really a blessed place.'

### *The museum*

In addition to everyday disruptions, respondents perceive a more permanent loss of place through an erosion of the everyday, ordinary function of the area for residents and for the city as a whole.

Respondents refer to the disappearance of ordinary shops such as butchers, bakeries and green grocers by consumption spaces that cater to tourists, such as lunch rooms, hotels and boutiques. The bakery where residents used to buy bread is now a ciabatta sandwich shop, while the regular pharmacy has become an upscale make-up boutique. Although this transformation of the commercial landscape is caused by increasing rents, it is experienced by long-term residents as a process of downgrading and of mainstreaming, whereby the area includes ice cream stores that can be found in any other tourist city. As several respondents observe, the streets that used to smell of weed now smell of Belgian waffles.

In addition, respondents discuss the growing number of hotels and the increasing use of private homes for short stay. From their windows, they point out apartments that have been sold for 'exorbitant' amounts, only to be rented out to tourists. Quite a few refer to a recent press release by commercial bank ING which attributed quickly rising real estate prices in Amsterdam's already overheated housing market to airBnB.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, respondents worry that the area will become unaffordable to locals, who are increasingly priced out by foreign investors. In their opinion, 'normal people' are important for keeping the area 'alive' and to preserve its public function as centre of the city. Jan (65) reflects,

I mean, the municipality should think about what they want. They don't have a vision for the city. It's 'let the market do its work'. But that basically means the survival of the fittest. And in the end that will be an impoverishment of the city. Amsterdam will become Venice. A museum, without residents, real people. [. . .] It will be a city of hotels. You shouldn't let that just happen. You have to make a conscious choice. And I blame the city council for not doing this.

For many respondents, Venice serves as the negative example of how tourism can hollow out a city. Nevertheless, their negative depictions of short stay arrangements are also fuelled by disruptions of their lived experience of place. For example, Karin (61) complains,

The whole AirBnB thing . . . short-stay's. That is becoming a real issue. So this house has two parts, kind of like the Anne Frank house. A front section and a back section. [. . .] And at some point we realized that there were all these strangers passing through the hallway. Sometimes five of them at the same time. Who are these people? It's just . . . It just really makes you feel uncomfortable . . . You know . . . anxious . . . Just scary. You don't even know who lives in your own house anymore.

Short-term rentals are perceived to change the nature of everyday interactions, contributing to the disappearance of familiar strangers. Respondents describe tourists as disinterested in preserving the right balance between privacy and proximity, as their neighbours used to do. Moreover, these anonymous others cannot easily be approached. Theo (73) recounts,

. . . and then there is for example the group of Italian guys who rent an apartment to throw parties. Picking up girls from the streets. Having loud conversations at three o'clock at night below my window about how much money they scored on selling pills from this ordinary apartment that is supposed to be for families.

## Discontent and disaffiliation

Although not all respondents experience the same levels of nuisance, due to different degrees of exposure, many talk about the neighbourhood being 'invaded' and 'taken over'. Respondents have developed various coping strategies to deal with the disruption of their sense of place. At home, everyday nuisances are dealt with by closing windows, closing the shades and relocating to rooms at the back of the house. This kind of 'padding the bunker' seems to be quite routinized.<sup>49</sup> They can

take on extreme forms during festival days, when some respondents avoid going out, retreating from the public sphere altogether.

The ‘invasion’ of the neighbourhood during large events also triggers other responses. The most common strategy is to temporarily leave the city. Depending on their financial means, some respondents arrange to be on holiday during festival days. They describe this temporary escape as a ‘flight’ away from the city. For example, Willem (84) and Sarah (68) explain, ‘Kingsday, it is a ruin out here, terrible, terrible! [. . .] We really leave. We just go to, let’s say Belgium. For a couple of days we flee from the city. So does the Mayor by the way’. Others visit family or go for a day of cycling in the countryside. While most respondents have found a way to deal with these occasional events, some residents note that the crowdedness and disneyfication of the city is becoming a more permanent feature of the Canal Belt and respond accordingly.

The most radical solution considered – and occasionally also put into practice – is to move. Several respondents express the desire to get away, primarily as the result of the described nuisance and rarely because they envisage a more attractive alternative, except from being more quiet and less crowded. Herman (49) expects to move in the foreseeable future, blaming the tourist spectacle for his loss of home:

- Herman: It damages my health to constantly experience nuisance. Some people are not bothered, but I am a sound-sensitive person.  
 Interviewer: Yes, and for you this is the limit?  
 Herman: Yeah, I am past that limit. It is clear that I want something else.

Other respondents ponder the option of moving, but are very hesitant. Most would consider any move a deterioration of their housing situation, not only in terms of costs - which is frequently mentioned, but particularly because they still consider the Canal Belt to be the best, that is most beautiful, place to live, despite negative experiences of tourism. A strategy of the more affluent respondents, therefore, is to acquire a second home, abroad or in the more rural parts of the Netherlands, using the accumulated housing wealth in their Amsterdam home as collateral. This allows them to escape during the busiest months of the year while maintaining their home in the Canal Belt, as Rudi (68) and Claire (59) explain:

- Rudi: We also wanted a place outside the city and we recently found it.  
 Interviewer: So, you bought another house?  
 Claire: So yes, we will. The keys are handed over the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Far away in the Achterhoek, in a Nature Reserve, so only sand roads and no highway!  
 Interviewer: and for what reason?  
 Rudi: The crowdedness  
 Claire: Yes, the crowdedness.

Residents thus respond to the temporary, partial loss of place via a range of equally temporal coping mechanisms. The choice to stay is deliberate and made more bearable through specific forms of mobility. Such coping mechanisms are made possible by not only respondents’ command of economic capital, but also their social capital and – for those who have retired and can choose to be mobile – the availability of time. However, not all respondents are equally affluent and for some the only option that remains is to retreat into the privacy of their homes.

Overall, irrespective of these different ways of coping, the interviews convey a sense of powerlessness to influence the processes that are taking place, as Gerald (67) reflects, ‘I mean what can I do alone? I mean I will just be someone fighting windmills, that’s pointless. No, one should tackle this at a higher level’. In general, respondents look to the municipality to ‘do something about it’,

mentioning a plethora of smaller and larger problems that should be addressed. While they recognize that the changes triggered by international flows of tourists are difficult to regulate, they call for a more comprehensive policy approach to tourism that should establish a 'balance' between local interests, explicitly those of residents, and economic interests of other stakeholders. This stance is eloquently formulated by the chairman of a local resident organization:

The feeling among residents is that the neighbourhood is off balance and leans towards tourism. One should not forget that people live here. [ . . . ] they feel like . . . it's getting out of control. People say things like: the canal belt belongs to everyone. But that does not feel right. There are people here who moved in all those years ago when nobody wanted to live here. Do they get pushed aside? No! those people made this place what it is. So beautiful, and so liveable. That deserves respect and support. [ . . . ] We live here, listen to us!

Consequently, residents are starting to make use of their cultural, social and institutional capital to influence politicians, policy-makers and media. Although this study did not systematically explore collective contestations of tourism, many respondents indicate that they signed a recent petition to prohibit the much hated beer bike from public space. They also refer to letters of fellow residents in local and national newspapers which bring the issue of crowdedness, disruptive behaviour and AirBnB-related problems to the public's attention. Many respondents are aware of the position of aldermen with respect to the regulation of tourism and some indicate that they themselves have communicated their concerns to local politicians, who in their view are wrongly prioritizing and accommodating economic interests rather than interests of local residents. Yet ultimately they also express doubts about what the municipality can actually do to influence global flows of people and money. This in particular may explain their sense of powerlessness, a sentiment which is eloquently summarized by the chairman of the foundation for historic preservation, when he compares the UNESCO heritage status – which the committee lobbied for – to a Trojan horse: while safeguarding the physical preservation of the district, it has accelerated processes of commodification beyond their control.

## Discussion

This study explored the discontent expressed by a group of established and privileged residents in the Amsterdam canal district in the face of neighbourhood change. Their stories about their changing relationship to place do not sit comfortably in the broader literature on middle-class belonging in the city, which has emphasized the strategic and relatively loose connection between urban middle classes and their residential neighbourhoods. Although these respondents clearly derive a sense of self – as cosmopolitans – from living in the city centre, they also experience a strong attachment to place: they are fixed in place and feel privileged that they are. Their long *durée* has contributed to a sense of rootedness and an embodied knowledge of place, which is reinforced through everyday practices of visual consumption and the lived experience of place.<sup>50</sup> This complex construction of belonging reflects respondents' identities as not only middle class, but also as long-term residents who are ageing. Such intersectional perspectives have so far received little attention in the literature on middle-class belonging in the city.<sup>51</sup>

It is their sensory experience of place, which lies at the heart of their feelings of home, that is disrupted by urban tourism and explains their negative response. As long as visitors view the aesthetic ensemble of the Canal Belt through a tourist gaze, like residents themselves do, their presence does not interfere much with respondents' sense of place. In fact, visitors contribute to the liveliness that originally attracted respondents to the area. Nonetheless, the tourist spectacle is

perceived to increasingly disrupt the daily rhythm of the area, not only due to their sheer numbers, but also to the 'other' ways of using space, reflecting generational differences as much as different classed identities.<sup>52</sup> When tourists perform the area differently than considered appropriate by long-term gentrifiers, the spell is broken. Their experiences can perhaps best be understood as a post-gentrification story: moving into the neighbourhood in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, our respondents remade the neighbourhood and the city to match their lifestyles and for a while achieved a form of dwelling. This is now increasingly undermined.

Consequently, the transformation of the Canal Belt into a place of leisure and consumption is seen as a form of downgrading and a loss of place. Respondents express a sense of discontent and even powerlessness in the face of urban tourism, despite their relatively privileged social and spatial position. In this respect, their narratives of neighbourhood change resonate with research on nostalgia and experiences of cultural displacement of working-class residents in gentrifying urban areas,<sup>53</sup> raising intriguing questions about the role of residential history and age in shaping experiences of neighbourhood change rather than class alone. Studies on estrangement and displacement have so far been almost exclusively focused on working-class communities, while middle-class residents tend to be represented as the ones 'in control' in exclusionary processes of place-making. Yet, in the context of the Amsterdam Canal Belt, these residents themselves express frustration about their inability to deal with the changes in their surroundings. They are clearly aware that the growing flows of international visitors and foreign capital are moving beyond their sphere of influence.

Of course, what distinguishes these upper-middle-class residents from their working-class counterparts is the fact that they individually cope with the challenges of living in a space of tourism by using their resources to disaffiliate from the neighbourhood in both time and space. They play their own particular game of proximity and distance,<sup>54</sup> combining a strategy of mobility – facilitated by their financial, material, temporal and social resources – with retreating into their own homes to deal with the changes triggered by urban tourism. In this respect, their complex narratives of attachment, alienation and mobility seem to conflate Philipson's descriptions of the 'elected' and the 'excluded'.<sup>55</sup> Here, a paradox also emerges because as long-term gentrifiers start to avoid the neighbourhood, it becomes more and more the domain of visitors, raising fundamental questions about the future of the city centre as a place *for* the city. At the same time, some respondents are considering renting out their homes to provide them with capital to strategically cope with living in a tourist space, demonstrating how the theme park and museum collide and reinforce each other. Everyday coping strategies to deal with the tourist spectacle contribute to the more permanent transformation of the neighbourhood and residents themselves become co-producers of the process which they evaluate so negatively.

Finally, their stories indicate that recent transformations in Amsterdam's city centre are more a reflection of global forces, boosted by local government, than local power dynamics between upper-middle-class residents and less affluent groups. Neoliberalization of the housing market and commercial real estate in combination with the sale of public buildings to corporate investors, luxury hotel chains and international department stores have accelerated processes of commodification that are dislodging the area from the everyday lives of residents. Although it may be tempting to dismiss the negative narratives of these respondents in view of their relatively privileged class position – after all, how bad can it be to remove oneself to the south of France for a few months a year? – they also represent a group of long-term residents with personal histories in the city and a strong commitment to it. Yet these established residents now feel overwhelmed and use their resources to disaffiliate from the city. For many others, this is not an option. Consequently, new tensions are rising between residents and governing institutions about the need to regulate urban tourism versus the need to generate revenues for the city. Further research is needed to

explore how residents collectively contest recent developments and the potential political backlash of the observed feelings of discontent.

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### Notes

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42. Social housing includes both historic buildings, which were bought by the municipality and renovated, and new housing which replaced derelict buildings that could not be preserved. The construction of social housing was strongly advocated by a coalition of young higher educated newcomers in the 1970s



- and some of the last working-class residents in the area. The diverse group of residents in fact includes many of those first 'gentrifiers' with jobs in the public or cultural sector and reflects the Amsterdam social housing sector (see S. Musterd, 'Public Housing for Whom? Experiences in an Era of Mature Neo-Liberalism: The Netherlands and Amsterdam', *Housing Studies*, 29, 2014, pp. 467–84).
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  54. Atkinson, 'Padding the Bunker'; Kaufman et al., 'Motility'.
  55. Phillipson, 'The Elected and the Excluded'.

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