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# 'We want to be there for everyone': imagined spaces of encounter and the politics of place in a super-diverse neighbourhood

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of increasingly diverse urban populations in European cities, neighbourhood organizations are often seen as offering spaces of encounter that can foster a sense of belonging. As a result, they have formed an important element in urban policies on community identity and social cohesion. Yet everyday encounters in such micro-publics may not necessarily be experienced as positive, and these spaces themselves might become sites of contestation and exclusion. Through an ethnographic study in a super-diverse neighbourhood in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, this paper investigates how residents' sense of belonging to the neighbourhood is informed by competing claims on a neighbourhood centre. Although envisioned as a collective space, contestations between different groups of residents over the centre as a functional and meaningful place illustrate how governing institutions shape informal politics of place through their own vision for the neighbourhood and their selective support of some initiatives over others.

## “Nous voulons être là pour tout le monde”: espaces de rencontre imaginés et les politiques du lieu dans un quartier extrêmement divers

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans le contexte de populations urbaines de plus en plus diverses dans les grandes villes européennes, les organisations de quartiers sont souvent vues comme des espaces de rencontre qui peuvent encourager un sentiment d'appartenance. Par conséquent, un élément important de politiques urbaines sur l'identité communautaire a vu le jour. Pourtant, Valentine (2008) nous met en garde: les rencontres quotidiennes au sein de publics si restreints peuvent ne pas être vécues comme positives et ces espaces eux-mêmes pourraient devenir des zones de contestation et d'exclusion. A partir d'une étude ethnographique dans un quartier extrêmement divers d'Amsterdam aux Pays-Bas, cet article examine comment le sentiment d'appartenance au quartier de ces résidents est influencé par des demandes concurrentielles sur le centre communautaire. Bien qu'envisagé comme espace collectif, les contestations entre

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différents groupes de résidents au sujet du centre en tant que lieu fonctionnel et important montrent bien comment les institutions gouvernantes influencent les politiques du lieu à travers leur propre vision du quartier et leur soutien sélectif à certaines initiatives plutôt qu'à d'autres.

### **'Queremos estar ahí para todos': espacios imaginarios de encuentro y la política de lugar en un barrio súper diverso**

#### **RESUMEN**

En el contexto de las poblaciones urbanas cada vez más diversas en ciudades europeas, las organizaciones vecinales se consideran a menudo como espacios de encuentro que pueden fomentar un sentido de pertenencia. Como resultado, han constituido un elemento importante en las políticas urbanas sobre identidad comunitaria y cohesión social. Sin embargo, como advierte Valentine (2008), los encuentros cotidianos en esos micro-públicos no necesariamente pueden ser experimentados como positivos, y estos mismos espacios pueden convertirse en sitios de contestación y exclusión. A través de un estudio etnográfico en un vecindario súper diverso en Ámsterdam, Holanda, este artículo investiga cómo el sentido de pertenencia al vecindario de los vecinos toma forma a través de demandas competitivas en un centro de barrio. Aunque se prevea como un espacio colectivo, las disputas entre diferentes grupos de residentes sobre el centro como un lugar funcional y significativo ilustran cómo las instituciones gobernantes configuran una política informal de lugar a través de su propia visión para el vecindario y su apoyo selectivo de algunas iniciativas sobre otras.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, much attention has been paid to Vertovec's (2007) concept of super-diversity as a conceptual lens through which to study the increasing social differentiation in Western European cities (Crul, Schneider, & Lelie, 2013). Super-diversity invites researchers to go beyond a focus on diversity that is the result of international migration and explore how differences in nationality, race, and ethnicity intersect with other dimensions of difference, such as gender, age, life course, class, religion, migrant trajectories and language. In a growing number of urban neighbourhoods, diversity along such multiple dimensions of difference is becoming 'commonplace' (Wessendorf, 2013), a constitutive part of everyday life.

From a policy perspective, diversity in urban neighbourhoods is generally considered problematic (Allen & Cars, 2001; Kährik, 2006; Morrison, 2003; Robinson, 2005), because the associated complexity and unpredictability of everyday life is thought to undermine easy conceptions of 'community' and 'belonging' (Grillo, 2007). Viewing neighbourhoods as the most appropriate locality for the mobilization and accommodation of diversity (Amin, 2005), urban policies on 'social cohesion' or 'community empowerment' have focused on fostering resident participation in neighbourhood-based organizations or initiatives to stimulate intercultural engagement (Phillips, Athwal, Robinson, & Harrison, 2014). Indeed, Amin (2002) has pointed to the importance of such micro-publics, as sites of purposeful and shared activities, to foster meaningful encounters in multicultural neighbourhoods. Fincher and Iveson (2008, p. 154) similarly suggest that planning for

encounters is essential as these ‘... can be fleeting and temporary, but they are vital resource for opening up opportunities for all to experience “strangerhood” without rejection and/or indifference’. Leitner (2012, p. 830) also observes that spaces of encounter hold ‘the possibility of destabilizing boundaries and creating new spaces for negotiating across difference’.

At the same time, ethnographic research in diverse neighbourhoods shows that encounters do not necessarily deepen intercultural understanding (Wessendorf, 2013) and may even foster negative stereotypes (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). Indeed, evaluations of area-based interventions aimed at improving social cohesion in diverse – and often also deprived – neighbourhoods suggest that they do not always meet their own objectives and sometimes even undermine social cohesion (Allen & Cars, 2001; Kährik, 2006). This occurs particularly when potential spaces of encounter are claimed or territorialized by specific groups of residents, and other residents are thereby excluded (Valentine, 2008). Contestations over the meaning and functional use of these neighbourhood spaces occur along multiple dimensions of difference (May, 1996; Wessendorf, 2013) and are influenced by unequal power dynamics between groups (Phillips et al., 2014). Moreover, such struggles reveal broader contestations over neighbourhood identity and the construction of place meanings. As Staeheli and Mitchell (2009, p. 187) note, ‘the politics of place-making, it seems, are characterized by the same power relations as society at large; they often reinforce those power relations, rather than challenge them’.

Building on these insights, this paper explores the degree to which neighbourhood organizations function as micro-publics, and how this subsequently influences the politics of belonging in a diverse neighbourhood in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The next section discusses recent literature on belonging in diverse places and the role of institutional actors in shaping encounters between neighbourhood residents. Then, we introduce the case study neighbourhood, an area which is considered both diverse and deprived. As such, it has been subject to sustained policy interventions since 2008, in order to improve the neighbourhood and generate a sense of belonging and ownership among residents, which local officials find to be lacking. In this process, the neighbourhood centre was envisioned as a space of encounter that could foster positive experiences of ‘others’. As this study will show, however, the function of the centre has been highly contested. Diverging visions about its use have reinforced complex forms of boundary drawing between resident groups and undermined residents’ sense of belonging to the wider neighbourhood. Moreover, these informal politics between residents have been highly influenced by the actions of governing institutions that over time accommodated different resident groups they considered ‘representative’ of the neighbourhood. Local geographies of encounters should, therefore, be seen as socially and spatially mediated, and contextualized by broader neighbourhood transformations (Leitner, 2012).

## **Belonging in diverse neighbourhoods**

Belonging is increasingly used as a key concept in geographical and sociological research. Yet the term itself is often ill-defined (Antonsich, 2010) and has been used as a synonym of place attachment, sense of place, social cohesion, identity, and citizenship. Following Antonsich (2010) and Mee and Wright (2009), this paper defines belonging as the affective relationship between individuals and their environment. As such, it depends on individuals’ social locations (Yuval-Davis, 2006), both in terms of their own social identity and

categorization by others, as well as their attachments to different places. Moreover, belonging can be levered as a discursive resource against those who are labelled as 'outsiders' and are seen as not-belonging (Duyvendak, 2011; Secor, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2006). In this way, the politics of belonging concerns the discursive and material boundaries through which meaning and identity are ascribed to specific places (Trudeau, 2006).

In the case of neighbourhoods characterized by high ethnic diversity, belonging is shown to be multiscalar (Antonsich, 2010; Wood & Waite, 2011), with much research focusing on migrants' transnational practices and affects (e.g. Ho, 2009; Leitner & Ehrkamp, 2006; Kobayashi, Preston, & Murnaghan, 2011; Yeoh & Willis, 2005) as well as the construction of migrant identities in local places and communities (e.g. Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008; Noble, 2009; Wessendorf, 2013). In contrast, less attention has been paid to dimensions of difference other than ethnicity or migrant status and to the ways in which the intersectionality of belonging generates inclusion and exclusion in particular spaces (Wood & Waite, 2011). Several authors (Clayton, 2009; Leitner, 2012; Secor, 2004) argue that the construction of identities should be understood as spatially contingent, arising from everyday socio-spatial practices as well as being shaped by wider discourses and power relations (cf. Leitner, Sheppard, & Sziarto, 2008). Clayton (2009, p. 483) notes that 'the spatial, itself a product of competing discourses, practices and power relations, has the capacity to constitute, constrain and mediate social distinctions'. Acknowledging that space is productive of difference rather than merely reflecting pre-existing insider-outsider configurations (Clayton, 2009), directs attention to the fact that feelings of belonging emerge out of the interaction between social and place identities. For example, in her study of Kurdish women's spatial narratives of identity and citizenship in Istanbul, Secor (2004) describes how her interviewees encounter dominant discourses and practices of Turkishness as they move around the city. She notes that different spaces (ranging from neighbourhoods to schools and workplaces) require specific identity performances and offer different possibilities for resistance and negotiation.

Notably, these studies also raise the issue of power geometries within neighbourhoods and inequalities between residents in their ability to determine place-specific codes of conduct and more broadly define place identity, including who ultimately belongs there. Such inequalities in processes of place-making have been demonstrated in numerous studies of gentrifying neighbourhoods, like the study by Benson and Jackson (2013, p. 806) who find that representations of place by middle-class residents of a mixed London neighbourhood serve to symbolically claim the area and recast it as an 'appropriate place for people like them', thereby excluding others. Gentrification studies like these tend to focus on differences in terms of class, albeit sometimes coinciding with race, and we can expect insider/outsider configurations and associated feelings of belonging in diverse neighbourhoods to be more complex and ambiguous, occurring at the intersection of multiple dimensions of difference. For example, May (1996) describes how the influx of ethnic British middle-class residents in an ethnically mixed working-class neighbourhood in North London threatens, but also affirms the sense of belonging of their working-class co-ethnics. While the newcomers' practices of territorialization (for example, the re-decoration and renaming of old working-class pubs) cause the long-term residents to experience feelings of loss and displacement, their presence also serves to bolster the 'white' image of the neighbourhood against the ethnic 'other'. This study further shows that place-specific residential histories influence who can make effective claims to belong. In neighbourhoods where local history or length of

residence is considered important, belonging may be more difficult for newcomers, especially when they are also ethnically 'other' (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008).

In short, whether residents living in diverse neighbourhoods develop a sense of belonging potentially depends on many factors, including individual and group identifications and place characteristics, and boundary drawing takes place along multiple and shifting axes of identification and differentiation. As Phillips et al. (2014, p. 55) observe, we may expect diverse neighbourhoods to be 'spaces of contradiction – places of conviviality and conflict, spaces for erasing and reinforcing differences, territories of inclusion and exclusion'. The ways in which encounters with 'others' play out are not just determined by the momentary materiality of the encounter itself, but also by pre-existing socio-spatial imaginaries about what place is or should be (cf. Yeoh & Willis, 2005) and as such should be analysed in the light of longstanding attachments and identifications, including personal narratives of place and belonging (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012).

### **Neighbourhood organizations as imagined spaces of encounter**

As noted above, fostering a shared sense of neighbourhood belonging in highly diverse neighbourhoods has long been an important concern in urban policy (Fortier, 2007). In the governance of these urban areas, neighbourhood organizations are expected to function as micro-publics (Amin, 2002), offering possibilities for interaction and positive encounters with difference. This is certainly the case in the Netherlands and Amsterdam, where this study was carried out. The Netherlands has a strong interventionist policy tradition, with policies employing social mixing strategies to engender feelings of belonging among the population. Especially (semi)public spaces in cities and neighbourhoods are seen as important locations for policy intervention (Duyvendak, Reinders, & Wekker, 2016). Dutch urban policies often focus on 'problem' neighbourhoods, which are described as lacking liveability and social cohesion due to their ethnically diverse and socio-economically weak population (van Gent, Musterd, & Ostendorf, 2009). These neighbourhoods are then subjected to a multitude of (often small-scale) social and physical interventions, in which resident participation is a key aspect (Dekker & Van Kempen, 2009; Uitermark, 2014).

However, managing diversity through neighbourhood organizations may be particularly challenging in view of diverging opinions among groups. From the side of neighbourhood organizations, there is an incentive to establish community and create an overarching vision for the neighbourhood (Leitner, 2012), since doing so is necessary to access political and economic resources. By focusing on situated and shared experiences, internal differences are obscured and the neighbourhood is constituted as the appropriate scale of action (Martin, 2003a). If local organizations are successful in bringing together residents of diverse backgrounds, they can potentially function as micro-publics (Amin, 2002), creating positive encounters and successful cooperation across group boundaries (Fincher & Iveson, 2008). For example, studies on local spaces of encounter in multi-ethnic communities in East Berlin (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011) and Newcastle Upon Tyne (Askins & Pain, 2011) reveal the value of sustained engagement, shared goals, and local ownership for fostering a sense of belonging. Similarly, Phillips et al. (2014) show how formalized events aimed at building bridges between established and new groups of residents reduce feelings of 'strangeness'. At the same time, processes of community-building and social group formation by neighbourhood organizations in diverse neighbourhoods can be exclusionary, when certain groups claim

these spaces by representing themselves as having a higher stake in the neighbourhood than others. Phillips et al. (2014) note that individuals and groups have unequal abilities to cooperate around neighbourhood issues and to engage with – and speak the language of – the institutional apparatus (Joseph, 2002). Community-building processes often rely on the participation of a few residents who are willing and able to take the lead and invest a lot of time and effort (Hoekstra & Dahlvik, 2017), and who may not necessarily represent ‘the’ neighbourhood interests even if they are recognized as such by institutional actors. Consequently, neighbourhood organizations can themselves become objects of contention and spaces of exclusion rather than encounter.

Within these organizations, institutional actors such as urban practitioners from local municipalities, welfare and housing institutions play an important role as ‘gate-keepers’, but studies of resident participation in the Netherlands show that these local governing actors often fail to adequately address ethnic and cultural differences among residents, resulting in ethnic minority groups being excluded from processes that are meant to be participatory (Dekker, Völker, Lelieveldt, & Torenvlied, 2010). de Wilde, Hurenkamp, and Tonkens (2014) similarly show that selective support of resident groups (often those which are seen as most flexible and competent) reproduces inequalities within the neighbourhood. Local officials have their own assumptions and ideological commitments, which influence how policies are implemented and consequently which groups are recognized and supported (Lavoie, 2012). This may result in support for those residents whose norms and values align with their own (Smets, 2006), putting middle-class and ‘native’ residents in a privileged position. These residents often also have more abilities to access political and social capital beyond the neighbourhood or even the city to further their local agenda for place-making (Fraser, 2004). The role of institutional actors in shaping unequal power dynamics between residents of different backgrounds is clearly demonstrated in a study in a mixed community in Toronto (August, 2014), where newly arrived middle-class, white and often male residents dominate meetings at the expense of long-term, low-income minority women and thereby determine the priorities for local law enforcement in terms of neighbourhood surveillance. Similarly, a recent study in a mixed housing project in Amsterdam found that institutional actors play an important role in exacerbating experiences of social distance between residents through their selective engagement with owner occupiers at the expense of social renters, which affected subsequent management decisions about the ways in which collective spaces could be used (Tersteeg & Pinkster, 2016).

These and other studies highlight that the politics of place-making can be strongly influenced by discourses and practices of institutional actors (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008). Unequal support and preferential treatment of resident claims to neighbourhood organizations by institutional actors can accentuate already existing differences between residents, leading residents to regard each other with suspicion (Robinson, Shaw, & Davidson, 2005). In addition, such processes of inclusion and exclusion in neighbourhood organizations can have repercussions on residents’ sense of belonging in the wider neighbourhood, precisely because these organizations claim to represent ‘the community’ (even though they rarely actually do so). These findings therefore clearly support Valentine’s (2008, p. 334) claim that ‘we need an urban politics that addresses inequalities (real and perceived) as well as diversity, and recognizes the need to fuse what are often seen as separate debates about prejudice and respect with questions of social-economic inequalities and power’.

## Case study context

To explore the ways in which neighbourhood organizations contribute to residents' sense of belonging in diverse neighbourhoods, a case study was conducted in a highly diverse neighbourhood in Amsterdam. It is a small neighbourhood of around 5000 residents, housed almost exclusively in low-rise buildings in the social rental sector. When the neighbourhood was built in the 1920s, it was intended for working-class families living under crowded and unhealthy conditions in the city centre. The neighbourhood's initial design as a 'garden village' was intended to stimulate wholesome community life in a green and cosy atmosphere, located nevertheless in the vicinity of industry and harbour activities. Compared to Amsterdam in general, the area has always been relatively poor: a third of all households have an income below the poverty line,<sup>1</sup> and thirteen per cent of all residents are dependent on social welfare. Nevertheless, there is also a substantial share of middle-class households (estimated to be around twenty to thirty per cent), as is typical for low-income neighbourhoods in the Netherlands and reflects the relatively moderate levels of income segregation in Dutch cities.

Over the years, the neighbourhood has become highly ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse. Currently around forty per cent of the population is of 'native',<sup>2</sup> ethnic Dutch background. The largest 'non-native' groups in the area are of Moroccan, Turkish and Surinamese descent. The Turkish group, in particular, has a longstanding presence in the area, as many of them moved to the city as temporary 'guest' workers in the 1970s and were employed in nearby industries. Similarly, residents of Moroccan and Surinamese descent by now have long histories in the neighbourhood, many having already moved in the 1980s. More recent waves of diversification include the influx of asylum seekers from various (former) conflict regions in the Middle East and Africa, who have priority status on the social rental market, and Central and Eastern European (temporary) migrants. In the last few years, the neighbourhood is again experiencing a process of gradual 'whitening' due to the influx of students and artists who are housed on temporary contracts in vacant housing stock earmarked for renovation. Both residents, professionals and local media have seen this as a sign that the neighbourhood stands on the brink of gentrification, although in terms of average income the neighbourhood is so far still positioned at the bottom end of the housing market (Hochstenbach & van Gent, 2015).

Due to its relatively deprived status in combination with the presence of minority residents, the neighbourhood has long been the focus of place-based urban policies. Several shifts can be identified in the agenda and aspirations of local governing actors for the neighbourhood. Rooted in the local history of the neighbourhood as a working class 'village', local government has subsidized community spaces and neighbourhood associations from the beginning. Within these spaces, residents were free to socialize and organize recreational activities. That these spaces were in practice mostly frequented by 'native', working class residents was not considered very problematic. This type of classic community development changed in 2008, when the neighbourhood was classified as problematic by the Amsterdam municipality and the VROM Ministry (Public Health, Spatial Planning, and the Environment). Since then, it has received funding for investments in the social and physical infrastructure, including a budget for residents' initiatives. Underpinning this policy was the assumption (made at the national level but also expressed by local civil servants) that these neighbourhoods lack social cohesion but also risk becoming excluded from the mainstream and forming 'parallel societies' (van Gent et al., 2009). Therefore, attempts were made to activate and

include 'non-native' residents who were a growing part of the neighbourhood population but had not received proportionate attention in previous policies. Included in this policy shift was a reform of existing neighbourhood centres. Activities that were deemed to be purely social are no longer funded, and centres should focus on connecting different resident groups rather than only catering to existing visitors.

More recently, the tenor has changed again. The neighbourhood's relatively attractive location close to Amsterdam's city centre, increasing demands for housing and the redevelopment of surrounding areas (Savini & Dembski, 2016) have paved the way for interventions that can be considered a form of state-led gentrification. For example, the municipality and the housing association offer financial incentives to creative entrepreneurs and shops and cafes with a middle-class aesthetic, in order to improve the neighbourhood's image and create social mixing. Neighbourhood initiatives continue to receive subsidies, but priorities have changed from integrating migrant communities to stimulating the place attachment of (new and long-term) middle-class residents (Van Gent, Boterman, & Hoekstra, 2016). These shifts in policy objectives demonstrate how neighbourhoods can function as spatial projects (Madden, 2014).

## Research design

Given our interest in the role that neighbourhood organizations play in the politics of belonging, we focused in particular on the role of the neighbourhood centre – which as the main community space has been at the forefront of the policy shifts detailed above – in informing residents' belonging to the neighbourhood. The fieldwork, which was carried out between November 2014 and February 2015, involved semi-structured interviews with 27 residents as well as ten urban practitioners and neighbourhood representatives, the analysis of local policy documentation and media coverage and participant observation in the neighbourhood centre itself over a period of four months. This included attendance of various functions, such as regularly organized activities (e.g. cooking classes, Qur'an classes, empowerment trainings), and one-off events (e.g. holiday celebrations), and informal conversations with those in attendance. The participant observation formed a way to come into contact with residents who were found to be hesitant to participate through other forms of recruitment, such as door-to-door sampling, and whose experiences of belonging would otherwise have remained invisible. Moreover, observations at the centre helped to interpret the diverging narratives and representations of the functioning of the centre in the interviews.

For the interviews, respondents were recruited both within and outside the centre, for example through other neighbourhood organizations, via snowball sampling and convenience sampling such as approaching people on the street. Eleven interviewees are currently active in neighbourhood organizations. Eight others were active in the past, while the remainder had never been active. The residents interviewed had different ethnic and class backgrounds: thirteen were 'native' ethnic Dutch and fourteen were first or second generation migrants from eight different countries but in particular of Moroccan and Turkish descent, reflecting neighbourhood demographics. Over half (16) of all interviewees had lived in the neighbourhood for at least 20 years, including seven non-ethnic Dutch residents. Ages ranged from 19 to 85 but most were middle-aged or older. Non-ethnic Dutch interviewees were mostly married with children, while ethnic Dutch were a mix of singles and couples with or without children. Just over half did not work: some were actively searching employment while others received disability benefits, were homemakers or were retired.

Those who worked mostly had jobs with low occupational status such as construction, health care or hospitality. A small number of respondents may be described as middle-class, with advanced tertiary education and employed as civil servants, managers or teachers. An interview guide was used to elicit information on residents' experience of the neighbourhood as a physical and social place, their sense of belonging, and whether they were aware of and participated in neighbourhood organizations, with a specific focus on the neighbourhood centre. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, most being around one hour.

In addition, ten 'key figures' affiliated to the city district, welfare organizations and civil society organizations were also interviewed about their work in the neighbourhood, community-building and neighbourhood organizations. These 'key figures' had different ethnic backgrounds although most (6) were 'native' Dutch, the remainder was of Surinamese, Moroccan and Turkish background. Half were middle-aged (40–60 years old), the rest were younger (mid-twenties to mid-thirties). Two 'key figures' currently lived in the neighbourhood, and one other had lived there in the past.

### **The neighbourhood centre as a place 'for everyone'**

At a central location in the neighbourhood, a large grey building stands next to a children's playground. Since 2012, it houses a multicultural women's centre. According to the website, it aims to 'organize weekly activities, empowerment training and workshops to actively contribute to social cohesion and liveability in the neighbourhood (...) stimulate initiatives for an active intercultural society and cultural exchange'. The centre has been featured as a 'best practice' many times, for example in a government brochure on working interculturally in the neighbourhood (VROM Ministry, 2010 – at the time it was located in a nearby neighbourhood). While the idea for the centre originated with the local government as a way to stimulate the labour market participation of migrant women in the district, current chairwoman Nour<sup>3</sup> (who herself migrated from Lebanon and now lives in a nearby neighbourhood) focuses on organizing activities for the neighbourhood, such as homework assistance for neighbourhood children and weekly dinners for elderly residents. She regards diversity as the 'core value' of the centre as it aims to 'be there for everyone'. She therefore often rents out the building to different neighbourhood groups and organizations in need of space. Frequent users include the neighbourhood's tenants' association (consisting mostly of ethnic Dutch men) who use the building to hold their weekly meetings, and a group of mostly Moroccan men (referred to by residents as the 'men's group') who socialize there in the evening. Yet in spite of the centre's mission statement, its position within the neighbourhood as an inclusive space proves to be contentious for residents. Because the neighbourhood is small, the building is one of the only places where larger groups of residents can gather indoors. Thus, there is a general agreement among residents and district officials that the building should be used 'for the good of the neighbourhood' and that this means that it should be an inclusive space where all residents are welcome.<sup>4</sup> However, there is disagreement about what this amounts to in practice.

### ***Imagined encounters and experiences of exclusion***

During the day, most of the centre's visitors are Muslim women from the neighbourhood and adjacent areas. During activities, many visitors mention that they do not have a lot of

contact with other neighbourhood residents, due to language barriers but also experiences of exclusion and discrimination. Therefore, for these women the centre is important as a place to socialize and feel 'at home'. One of them is Fatou, a 44-year-old Senegalese woman who has lived in the neighbourhood for six years. She leads a relatively isolated life which revolves around food shopping, cooking, and taking her child to and from school. Fatou discovered the women's centre by accident and has become a frequent visitor:

I was at the playground with my kid (...) and I saw Nour, she was always coming over to us, saying come [in] if you want, this is the women's centre of the neighbourhood, for everybody and you can come (...) so I went there once and I thought Nour was very sweet. And then well, I went more often (...) I think Nour is very good for the neighbourhood, because she says everybody is welcome. Yes. Sometimes when I stay home, she comes to call [on] me, she'll say 'Fatou what are you doing, come to the women's centre, you don't have to sit alone, come over here'.

While for Fatou, feeling welcome and included is a reason to visit the centre (she now drops by almost every day to chat with Nour and has also started taking Dutch language classes at the centre), some residents contest the women's centre's inclusivity by comparing it unfavourably with the centre that preceded it. That place, officially named after the playground but known colloquially as 'the old neighbourhood centre', was operated by a couple of long-term residents and frequented mostly by working-class ethnic Dutch. The old neighbourhood centre was shut down when the city district stopped providing subsidies as part of a more general shift in funding priorities, which meant that organizations deemed to have a purely social function were no longer eligible for funding. Hennie and Gerrit, the former leaders of the old neighbourhood centre, are somewhat embittered about this decision as the centre played an important role in their social life in the neighbourhood. As Hennie (60, 40 years in the neighbourhood) says:

We had lots of contact with people from the neighbourhood there. We always had a good time. Everybody could, everyone was welcome. It didn't matter which race, whether you were Turk, Moroccan or whatever, you were always welcome with us.

While the old centre felt like an extension of their own home, the change in ownership has contributed to a more general feeling of not being welcome in the neighbourhood: 'well, we feel like we are being pressured to leave the neighbourhood. We'll do no such thing. We won't let ourselves be run out of the neighbourhood'. Other working-class, 'native' Dutch residents are less outspoken but also link the old centre's closing to a loss of community and of the neighbourhood's white working-class identity. Jaap (59, 39 years in the neighbourhood) describes the neighbourhood as 'built for working people, very simply. That's who those houses were meant for'. He explains that changes in population composition (ethnic diversification but also the influx of students) and the closing of neighbourhood amenities (including the centre) have changed the neighbourhood's character:

The contacts between people are not really there, because it used to be. It used to be a working-class neighbourhood. You knew everybody, you could [borrow] a cup of sugar (...) it's no longer the neighbourhood it used to be. It's no longer a working-class neighbourhood. Actually, it's that distance between people [that now exists].

Thus, these residents see the closing of 'their' neighbourhood centre as symptomatic of wider neighbourhood change, resulting in feelings of loss, thereby demonstrating a form of place-based displacement which resonates with experiences in other working-class neighbourhoods in the city (Pinkster, 2016). These residents do not visit the new women's centre, which they think lacks the properties of a real neighbourhood centre. For Hennie, her

dismissal of the women's centre as 'not really a neighbourhood centre' is based on what she sees as the dominance of Islamic religious and cultural norms such as separate socializing for men, who visit the centre at night, and women, who come during the day. A true neighbourhood centre, according to her, should be open to everyone, and she believes that was the case with the old centre. Jolanda (44, 20 years in the neighbourhood), another ethnic Dutch resident who self-identifies as working class, agrees the new women's centre does not feel open and accessible:

The children also always used it [the old neighbourhood centre] a lot, because whenever there was something to do, and they wanted to try it, I said 'go ahead', because luckily it was always low budget. But anyway, here there are ...

that's gone, now it has become a women's centre, well my children don't feel called to, say, go there and do something (...) But well, the women's centre used to be really a neighbourhood centre. Personally, I preferred that, that it really was a neighbourhood centre. I used to go in there to play bingo and that kind of thing. Or pick up my daughter because she was doing crafts there and the like. But those are things, it's no longer as open. It's something a little shadowy I think.

Nour, the chairwoman of the women's centre, confirms some of the long-time ethnic Dutch residents feel that their place has been taken away from them 'by someone with a headscarf'. She herself thinks the old neighbourhood centre was not very inclusive as its activities were oriented towards Dutch people, featuring drinking, playing darts and bingo nights. In contrast, the women of migrant background in the neighbourhood did not yet have a place to go to. Nour wants to be a cultural 'broker' and offer a place where both groups are welcome. However, she explains that her attempts to appeal to the working-class, 'native' Dutch group by organizing bingo nights and mixed-gender activities mean that these become inaccessible for Muslim women who do not want to attend activities where men are present. Indeed, one Muslim interviewee of Moroccan background who used to frequent the centre says this is one of the reasons she stopped attending, as she did not want to be subjected to gossip from other (Moroccan) residents. Thus, it is quite a struggle for Nour to be truly inclusive.

In addition to these feelings of belonging/not-belonging related to ethnicity, religion and gender, class differences also play a role in the degree to which the neighbourhood centre is seen as a functional place. In particular, middle-class ethnic Dutch respondents indicate that the neighbourhood centre is 'not for them'. This was already the case for the 'old' neighbourhood centre, which was considered rather 'white trash'. Peter (55, 23 years in the neighbourhood) observes:

It [the building] used to be a neighbourhood centre and the woman who ran the place, Hennie is her name, she didn't do badly at all, she was what you could call typically Amsterdam, smoker and had a hoarse voice [laughs]. But you know, about what we were discussing, if she's in that kind of scene and I'm in a more intellectual scene or whatever you want to call it, well-read or just with wider interests, then it's not going to mix, just like that stuff about Turks and Moroccans, that doesn't mix either.

While middle-class respondents describe the current neighbourhood centre as a 'Moroccan' place, many of them have been there on occasion. Some are also friendly with Nour and say that 'if they wanted to' they would be welcome. For example, Arie (60, 38 years in the neighbourhood), who is active in the tenants' association and regularly visits the women's centre, argues that 'in fact the women's centre has become a neighbourhood centre' as it is the location where most large activities in the neighbourhood have to be organized. Like him, other middle-class residents think that the women's centre would offer the opportunity for

contacts if they so choose. Elaborating on this statement, Arie explains that the centre does not function as a real place of encounter because ethnic Dutch residents hesitate to participate in 'Moroccan' activities.

These findings show how the atmosphere and activities that engender a sense of belonging in some residents, and which also contribute to a feeling of having a 'place' in the wider neighbourhood, generate feelings of non-belonging and even exclusion and displacement for others. Residents' processes of identification and disidentification with the neighbourhood centre occur at the intersection of multiple dimensions of difference and depend on which aspects of their identity are made salient. One example of this can be found in the perspective of Lise (61, seven years in the neighbourhood), an ethnic Dutch woman with a Libyan husband, who has converted to Islam and wears a headscarf. Ethnic diversity is central to her sense of belonging in the neighbourhood, as she notes that people are friendlier than in previous, less diverse places of residence. Lise describes her first encounter with the old neighbourhood centre as one of not-belonging:

I came in there the first time, and they were immediately looking [at me] like what are you doing here with your ... you know, it was really such a Dutch clique. So in that sense, it has improved since more different people come.

Although she and Hennie share a similar ethnic background, she did not feel welcome at the old neighbourhood centre as she does not identify as part of the 'Dutch clique' and instead prefers a place with 'more different people'. Gender is a relevant dividing line for her, but rather than feeling uncomfortable with gender segregation, she relishes having a place where women can be among each other. According to Lise, the centre used to provide such a space for women but has now effectively been claimed by (Muslim) men, resulting in feelings of unsafety among female neighbours:

It's called the women's centre, they organized cooking activities and we had a ladies night, that means we go without *hijab* [headscarf], with make-up, wearing very sexy dresses, but that's not possible [anymore] as now there are men all the time so we could just as well call it men's centre (...) They hang around in front of the entrance you know, I have a neighbour it just makes her feel bad. Because they see that she goes [home] alone. So I always ask my husband [to] go in with her, so they see a man is going in.

On the other hand Meryem (30), a woman of Turkish descent who was born in the neighbourhood and lived there for 23 years, fondly recalls the old neighbourhood centre and the activities she attended there as a child:

But she [Hennie], it seemed like it was really their property, but that wasn't the case. They gave that impression but they did all right. They did organize it. They were like those Tokkie families,<sup>5</sup> they weren't very proper, let me put it like that. And this woman for example who taught us how to make things with beads, you could smell the tobacco ten meters away. But she really, I mean, we made little trees with beads, I learned that from her.

For Meryem, this contrasts with the women's centre, which she describes as 'not for everybody':

It's ... the women's centre, you know ... look of course I'm of Turkish descent myself, and it's not that foreign women go there or multicultural women go there, no problem that's not the point. But it has a different appearance than the familiar neighbourhood centre. And that is for everybody and the women's centre doesn't feel like it's for everybody, and that's a shame (...) that can't be a replacement for a neighbourhood centre that we used to have.

These findings show that, contrary to their stated aims, both the old neighbourhood centre and the women's centre did not function as micro-publics (Amin, 2002) where residents can

perform the 'labour of intercultural community' (Noble, 2009) and build a shared sense of belonging. In fact, feelings of exclusion rather than inclusion emerge most clearly from residents' narratives. These feelings of exclusion are informed by residents' social identities (expressed along the lines of ethnicity, class, gender and religion) which intersect with personal histories in the neighbourhood, also referred to as biographical dimensions of attachment (cf. Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012). In this way, the interviews demonstrate how space co-constructs experiences of difference, resulting in avoidance rather than encounter as different forms of belonging were made salient during the different life-stages of the centre and were connected to claims about neighbourhood identity.

### ***Institutional linkages and selective support***

These informal contestations over who can shape neighbourhood identity and claim its spaces for their preferred use do not emerge outside of government interventions, but are embedded within place-making policies and influenced by the actions of institutional representatives. Residents themselves frequently mentioned what they perceive as selective support (financial or otherwise) for some initiatives over others. For example, according to Hennie and Gerrit, local governing actors 'randomly' closed *their* place in favour of the women's centre. Due to budget cuts, they were faced with the choice to either close down or continue without subsidies, which they considered not feasible because the low income of the majority of neighbourhood residents makes it hard to ask participants for substantial financial contributions. They argue that the district neglects its duty to provide a meeting place for them in the neighbourhood, stating that they are discriminated against and that local institutions are not responsive to their needs and requests. Adding insult to injury, they believe that the woman's centre does receive financial support from the district (this is not the case). As Hennie argues:

And now it turns out the women's centre moved in, an Iraqi lady [*sic*], and she manages the thing, and she gets enough subsidies for everything (...) for the women's centre they do a lot. They get everything.

District officials, however, argue that the old centre's closing is due to a lack of attachment and effort from the side of residents. They argue that it did not function as a neighbourhood centre as the residents involved were only a small group whose activities did not appeal to a majority of residents:

You used to have the playground association, that wasn't a neighbourhood centre but something in between, it was only used by a small group. They were mostly elderly long-term residents who stopped when the subsidies were phased out.

Similarly, while the women's centre was intended to accommodate the hitherto not very visible group of migrant women and thereby create more inclusive neighbourhood facilities, district officials now say that they prefer to close this centre too. Given the simmering conflicts around the building, they prefer to turn it into a 'neutral' place which is exploited by the district itself and which facilitates multiple neighbourhood groups (thus coming closer to their definition of a 'real' neighbourhood centre). One of the groups that they envision as a user is a recently created 'neighbourhood trust', started by resident Peter (quoted earlier) and involving mostly middle-class residents. The trust aims to take over the maintenance of public space and greenery in the neighbourhood, which they argue would be more efficiently performed by residents themselves. In addition, they want to bring together other

organizations and institutional partners in the area. As such, on paper the trust comes close to the policy ideal of engaged and responsible residents who can connect different groups in the neighbourhood and foster a shared sense of belonging.

However, despite its inclusive intentions, a competition quickly developed between the trust on the one hand, and the communities associated with the women's centre on the other hand. Similar to previous developments – when the old neighbourhood centre was defunded in favour of the women's centre – disagreements between the groups ostentatiously concern the allocation and spending of neighbourhood budgets but they are also about who can claim to represent the neighbourhood and therefore indirectly determine its place identity. While Nour and the men's group initially supported the new neighbourhood organization – they organized activities together and a member of the men's group briefly joined the trust's board – their relationship soured when district officials offered the women's centre's building to the neighbourhood trust to use as a meeting place. Peter turned down this offer, stating:

The trust is intended to create togetherness in the neighbourhood (...) we don't want to be in a building which, to put it mildly, other groups have claimed and which they are emotionally connected to.

Clearly, this desire to be inclusive ('create togetherness') resonates with the women centre's claim to 'be there for everyone'. However, competition over neighbourhood funds created further discord between the groups. The women's centre resents that they have to rent their premises at market rate, while the neighbourhood trust has received a rent-free meeting place and a generous subsidy to cover their start-up costs. Nour and the men's group argue that the neighbourhood trust is all shine and little substance: they have been successfully organizing similar activities for a long time, and for less money. According to Karim (49, 24 years in the neighbourhood), a first generation Moroccan migrant and prominent member of the men's group, the neighbourhood trust chooses to spend money on 'accessories' while the men's group favours achieving concrete changes:

So we offered our full cooperation and worked with them for months. Then there were some people who had a, who wanted different things that we didn't agree with. Those things were more like accessories, we pay more attention to accessories than necessary (...) instead of improving the liveability, greenery and big things, they [wanted to spend money on] advertisements and butterfly gardens (...) we want to take advantage of the budget so that we can do something big for the neighbourhood residents. So that the neighbourhood residents can profit, that they see that there are changes. Not [spend money on] accessories while there's waste in the streets and littering, we should clean that up first.

As Karim continues his story, it becomes clear that this is not just a budgetary matter, but that he feels betrayed and excluded from the decision-making process. According to him, the neighbourhood trust is not inclusive because it only represents a small subset of neighbourhood residents, yet the local government allows them to unilaterally make decisions which will also impact other residents. He explicitly claims that the men's group – and by extension (part of) the Moroccan residents – is also part of the neighbourhood, and thereby should have a say in how resources which are earmarked for the neighbourhood are spent:

They [the neighbourhood trust] reneged on our deal, because we made a deal and then they completely changed the program (...) well OK, good luck but if you need us, for example during the cleaning actions all residents are involved, the men's group is part of that. It's our neighbourhood you know? (...) Everybody should feel and be involved in that project. That was the intention. But it turned out to be only a group of three, four people (...) I said, I see that it's not

fair, if there's involvement from the neighbourhood residents then I will join (...) it's a group that just appointed itself, without permission from the neighbourhood residents.

Peter, the initiator and leader of the neighbourhood trust, agrees that the current relationship with the men's group is problematic, which he attributes to the men's group feeling threatened by the district's intention to dismantle the women's centre:

The Moroccan men's group can be found in the women's centre on an almost daily basis. That's striking. And the Moroccan men's group receives subsidies from the district, and very slowly we see that the Moroccan men's group uses the women's centre as their clubhouse (...) and they feel that the neighbourhood trust is a threat to them (...) and wants to take over that building.

His word choice of 'clubhouse' (as well as the recurring qualifier 'Moroccan' for men's group) is interesting, because it seems to connote that the men's group is not a legitimate occupant of the women's centre but is rather colonizing or taking over the place, and that it represents only a particular interest (that of a subset of Moroccan men) rather than having the interests of the entire neighbourhood at heart. In an earlier conversation, Peter already mentioned that he does not approve of the men's group's activities. They used to organize 'cleaning actions' in which participants (children and youth supervised by adults) were given a small monetary reward. Peter implies that men's group participants used these activities to make money and did not really care about the improvement of the neighbourhood. His statements delegitimize the men's group's involvement in the neighbourhood as financially motivated, rather than being based in the desire to create a shared community. Moreover, he presents the trust – whose members are mostly 'native' Dutch and middle-class – as more qualified than other neighbourhood groups, whose activities he describes as inefficient and marginal: 'the ideas are nice, but if you look closer, it's too open-ended, they don't know how to make connections, how to reach their target group'. Institutional representatives mostly agree with this assessment. One local government official states that 'there are few people in the neighbourhood who are willing and able [to participate]'; but praises the trust as consisting of 'active residents who take responsibility'. Moreover, officials believe that the character of the neighbourhood will change in the near future to become more 'mixed', i.e. more middle class. They believe that the trust will be more representative of this future neighbourhood population than current organizations, which are dominated by working-class and/or 'non-native' residents.

Thus, while institutional representatives are eager to have the centre as a place of encounter, their decisions are informed by normative ideas on which groups are best positioned to be inclusive and representative (Madden, 2014), given the neighbourhood's changing character and broader processes of state-led gentrification in the city as a whole. From the side of residents, a lack of support from local officials as well as economic and political changes at higher levels of scale impact their neighbourhood belonging, resulting in feelings of marginalization and estrangement (cf. Pinkster, 2016).

## Conclusion

This study highlights the way in which the informal and formal politics around a neighbourhood centre in a diverse neighbourhood in Amsterdam interact to co-construct neighbourhood belonging. Although both urban practitioners and residents envisioned the centre as a collective space of encounter, the findings highlight experiences of belonging and exclusion which are informed by the past, present and future use of the centre and which occur

along multiple, complex and shifting dimensions of difference. Moreover, these experiences in relation to the centre itself are strongly informed by broader institutional processes and policy discourses.

Although the centre in its various incarnations professed to be inclusive and welcoming to all residents, this was rarely experienced as such. During the successive life-stages of the neighbourhood centre, different aspects of residents' identities were made salient, highlighting the complex 'faultlines' that emerge in diverse neighbourhoods in contestations over micro-publics. The study therefore shows the importance of seeing belonging as a dynamic emotional attachment (Wood & Waite, 2011) which is based not just on (self-identified or ascribed) group membership but also produced through attachments to specific places and the characteristics and meanings attributed to them. An understanding of space as productive of difference (Clayton, 2009) necessitates viewing encounters as 'spatiotemporal experiences' (Valentine & Sadgrove, 2012, p. 2025) that arise out of, among other factors, place-specific residential histories (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008) and imaginaries (Leitner, 2012; Yeoh & Willis, 2005).

Indeed, our findings illustrate how contestations over the centre itself affect belonging in a wider sense, as claiming this space also implies making claims about (desired) neighbourhood identity. As Sorensen (2009, pp. 212, 213) puts it, discussing residents' construction of shared meanings of place: 'because places shape memory, contests over public planning and place-making policies become a part of larger struggles over history and identity'. Residents' (dis)identifications with the neighbourhood centre should, therefore, be viewed as necessarily entangled with the neighbourhood's changing character – from past white working-class identity to the current classification of ethnically diverse and deprived, and the potentially transforming effects of future gentrification. Consequently, these findings shed light on the ambivalent role that governing institutions play in the politics of place and belonging in these neighbourhoods. Clearly, the lived experience of spaces of encounter is far different from what policy-makers imagine as a solution to the assumed lack of community and place attachment in diverse urban spaces (Allen & Cars, 2001; Phillips et al., 2014). In particular, the ability of resident groups to respond to institutional visions about the centre and the wider neighbourhood by presenting themselves and being seen as inclusive and representative influenced their degree of institutional support. The recurring use of 'neighbourhood centre' in the interviews as a normative label demonstrates the extent to which providing a shared space and gathering point for all residents is seen as necessary for achieving legitimacy. Consequently, officials' distribution of financial and other resources according to these ideas have generated more discord between groups and organizations, as illustrated by the stories about the centre being 'taken away' or 'taken over' during the different life-stages of the centre.

This case study therefore ultimately shows that while policy-makers present participation in spaces of encounter as a means of forming and expressing belonging, in diverse neighbourhoods their own actions result in new dynamics of exclusion and constrain residents' sense of belonging. Moreover, inequalities arise as a consequence of broader processes of neighbourhood transformation which themselves are the outcome of political contestations. As Madden (2014, p. 471) notes, neighbourhoods are not apolitical units but 'uneven, unequal products of complex, ongoing struggles between various groups and institutions'. Residents' everyday experiences often do not align with policy narratives and priorities (Robertson & Colic-Peisker, 2015), and neighbourhood organizations operate in this field of different and

sometimes competing place imaginaries. This research thus points to the value of rethinking the neighbourhood as a product of social and political relations, a place which is not only constructed but also contested by local people and events (Martin, 2003b). These spatialized social and political dynamics fundamentally affect the potential of neighbourhood organizations to function as spaces of encounter.

## Notes

1. Defined as the amount of money deemed necessary to make ends meet. The exact amount depends on the household form. In 2013, it amounted to a net monthly income of 1071.91 Euros for a single person, 1308.74 Euros for a single parent, and 1454.16 Euros for a couple with or without children (OIS, 2014).
2. Otherness in the Netherlands is primarily constructed along lines of ethnicity, rather than race. Official statistics distinguish between 'autochthonous' or native Dutch and first and second generation migrants, who are grouped together as 'allochthonous'. Although there is an implicit racial component to this distinction as 'autochthonous' Dutch are also understood as white, emic understandings focus more on ethnicity and (Islamic) religion than race as markers of Otherness.
3. Names are pseudonyms.
4. There is one other sizeable building in the neighbourhood that used to be a youth centre but is currently used by a commercial party as a (net)working space for freelancers. The majority of interviewed residents and professionals did not see this as problematic.
5. The Amsterdam family known as the 'Tokkies' was the subject of much media attention when they were evicted due to 'anti-social behaviour' and violent quarrels with their neighbours. The name has come to stand for anti-social persons more generally.

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