Architectures of the Social: Anthropology, Music & Community Care[1]

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Abstract: *Policymakers often present community care as an answer to the demographic changes within an ageing Europe. This paper asks how we might understand the notion of community as different architectures of the social, meaning different constellations of social relationships. The aim is to learn how informal caring relationships may be imagined, supported, and developed. I will argue that theoretical and policy concepts that have impacted on the understanding of community in relation to aspiring 'citizens' who want to 'get in' to 'assert their rights' are problematic. I explore the notion of less governable everyday aesthetic values as an alternative to understand the formation of social ties. I will then put these insights to the test through an ethnographic study of the development of a music event. This event aimed to support the formation of social bonds in a Dutch apartment building for inhabitants over age 55. This experiment led to unexpected results that are instructive for thinking about 'architectures of the social'.*

Keywords: *older people; ethnography; community; music; inclusion*

[1] This paper is part of the research of Let's Care (2025), which takes place in seven European countries. Let's Care aims to advance EU Long-Term Care policy and practice through policy analysis and ethnographies of innovative care practices. Note that the notion of community is used in both retreating and absent welfare states as an innovation that responds to a very different situation: a lack of professional care and the support of family care respectively.

Crisis in elder care?

In European policy, 'the community' is often evoked as a key actor in solving problems in long-term care, including care for older people. In the paper, I will analyse different constellations of relationships that are hidden under the label 'community'. At the end of the paper, I introduce the notion 'architectures of the social', to provide an analytical tool that attends to the differences in relationship in a place where people live together, but where all participants engage in different relationships.

But first, some background on what seems to be the problem. When thinking about elder care, the discourse on the emerging 'care crisis' is hard to escape. In the Netherlands, the country I am writing from, and in Europe more widely, there are grave concerns about a lack of professional health care staff in relation to an increasing elderly population, with a particular concern for the increase of very old people. When looking beyond statistics, however, there are some problems with these crisis-discourses (see also Peine & Neven 2021; Aceros et al. 2015). They betray a certain idea of older people as sickly and in need of care rather than as, say, people who are also providing care.[2] Also, the assumed care crisis plays out very differently in different countries, ranging from in countries where the welfare state is retreating, versus countries where there never was a welfare state in the first place.[3]

Over the years, Dutch policy makers have alternately understood the problem of an ageing society as *either* a financial problem, *or* a problem of a lack of health care staff, tweaking their policies accordingly - and hence inconsistently (Pols 2012).[4] These Dutch policies differed from those in other European countries because they were concerned with *medical* rather than social care until recently (Mort et al. 2015; Pols 2017). Ideas about health are slowly changing in the Netherlands, towards a broader understanding of what generates a healthy life.[5] A longstanding neoliberal 'look after yourself' policy within a medically

2 Volunteer work in the Netherlands is done mostly by people aged 65 – 74 years. (52.9% of all volunteer work) see Rijksoverheid 2025.

3 Let's Care 2025.

4 In hindsight, it is amazing that people were fired when money was deemed to be the problem. For the lack of staff, the slogan was: technology will solve the problems through making care more efficient. But the tech solution also hides an economic agenda, as tech is only welcomed when industry stands to benefit. Useful low-tech solutions are simply not considered.

5 See the policy plans from the Ministry of Health under the header of 'health in all policies' and a focus on disease prevention through health promotion and care for jobs, debts, and other kinds of socio-economic inequalities. See also other policies that stimulate

focused, individualised understanding of vitality in ageing, however, often collapses health promotion into programmes engaged with inducing people to care for themselves, to 'self-manage' or even re-enablement (i.e. a (re-) learning of self-care and housekeeping skills) rather than social or structural changes.

What hinders 'community solutions', here: care that includes informal next to or instead of professional caregivers, is that health care in the Netherlands is organised in a tightly knit set of (sometimes contradictory) laws and regulations, paired with a strong professionalisation of health care workers, which provides another closely knit set of regulations. This regulatory zeal is amplified on the workfloor by the implementation of various accountability systems, and a juridical regulation of health care that substantially impacts long term care organisation (Muusse et al 2021).[6] Policy, professionalisation, and health care organisation are hence shaped along lines of regulation (law) and accountability (bureaucracy). This makes the system rigid and organised from the top down, while at the same time marginalising social care and hindering health care organisations and workers in organising care in less formalised ways.[7]

How, then, is 'community' understood in this context other than through the negative 'non-professional'? Pragmatically, community in Dutch policy is operationalised as 'family' and 'neighbourhood'. These are forms of the social that are built on family lines and physical closeness, on convention and habit rather than on management or governance. This makes such communities difficult to influence by regulation or government. The Dutch Ministry of Health seems to think that it is best to leave such socialities well alone and make individuals responsible for solving problems, by relying on them to self-manage themselves and maintain their own caring networks ('make sure to make younger friends').[8] On a more theoretical level, the question is what are these notions of community, or social ties between people, that are implicit in Dutch policy. And how may we imagine community life in a way that is conducive to local practices aspiring for a good life? I explore these questions in this paper.

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collaboration of health care organisations to join hands to work around policy restrictions (IZA and later AZWA).

6 Laws may be in place to solve problematic situations, but in the Netherlands, particularly in mental health care, they have become formative of ways to think about what care is and should be (see Pols 2003 for an example in long-term mental health care, where juridical impact is extensive (see Muusse et al. 2021).

7 See the ethnographic field reports that are forthcoming (Let's Care 2025).

8 Actiz 2025. This instrumentalisation of friendship, family, and other informal relationships is problematic, as it suggests that such relationships can be governed and regulated. But these relationships work differently, as this paper argues below.

Community of what?

I explore the notion of community and community care, first, by tracing the history of the concepts policy makers use to think about community in relation to people who need support due to handicaps or (chronic) health problems. Most prominently this was the notion of 'citizenship'. I will show how this notion sparked hope through a vision on both liberating and including people to exert their autonomy, but simultaneously understood community as 'already there', as static, unified and unproblematic. In the end, this turned out to be a rather exclusive society to which people may be invited to participate by adapting to existing norms. Second, I will explore attempts at re-imagining communities, not through ideas of rationalisation and governance, but through ideas of motivation and aesthetics. I present the concept of aesthetic values, as a set of values that refer to things that people do because they are *motivated* to do these things, because they find pleasure, meaning or good habits in them. What kind of communities could we then think of, and how may they hold together, if not by regulation? In the third part of the paper, I will put these conceptual findings ethnographically to the test.

The model of citizenship

Particularly in thinking about people in need of care, or people in disabling environments, the notion of *citizenship* has been mobilised to better their situation in the Netherlands and elsewhere.[9] This started with the idea that people who were marginalised in society needed to be included (moved to the centre), as a way of asserting and supporting their autonomy and participation. In 1984 and 1997, social philosopher Lolle Nauta showed how there were two notions of citizenship that emerged around the French Revolution in Paris: the citizen and the bourgeois.[10] They operated along different logics, yet are tied together in the history of ideas.[11]

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9 There is a vast literature in disability studies that takes this position as a starting point, see e.g. Shakespeare 2005; Imrie 2000.

10 There were differences between nations that were formed at the time, but the French Revolution is studied most widely and serves here as an exemplary situation to look at the framing of the two forms of citizenship. Hence, these ideas are developed theoretically more than empirically, even if the two hang together, as Nauta also claims with the notion of the 'exemplary situation', the empirical situation that is inscribed in even the most abstract of theories.

11 Pols 2023 (89–116) provides the analysis for the historical study quoted here.

The citizen is both a political individual and a private person. The *citoyen* became a character that aimed to exert influence through making decisions in gatherings in parliament, based on discussions where each voice was heard. The government then proclaimed laws to safeguard freedom for individuals by way of law or social contract: the *trias politica*.[12] The *citoyen* emerged together with a second type of citizen: the bourgeois. The bourgeois situated the citizens as male, rich traders (Landes 1988).[13] For the bourgeois, the free pursuit of calculated self-interest, unhindered by the state, was important. Society for the bourgeois, then, is the aggregation of individual activities that are propelled by self-interest.

Present day problems with notions of citizenship in the context of disability became clear in my ethnography of long-term mental health care in the early 2000s.[14] People with long-term mental health problems had been institutionalised in the Netherlands, often from their late teens onward. Their citizenship-to-be consisted of their moving out of institutions and 'into the community'. One of the problems with this type of discourse was the spatial metaphor of marginalisation. It pre-supposes a unified community as a central space where one can be excluded from, but can also enter. For the people *entering* the neighbourhood this could imply an isolated position, a lack of access to jobs, education and leisure activities, as well as a lack of friends. Entering a sociality defined by existing norms and autonomous individuals clearly did not do much for *integrating* newcomers on their own terms (Pols et al. 2017; Dronkert 2023).

For new relationships to emerge, a notion of relational citizenship proved helpful, moving the gaze away from the state and towards relationships between citizens and social material infrastructures.[15] Communities could then be thought of as the creation of relationships between people, places and institutions (or other materialities) (Ootes 2012). This implies a re-invention and a re-shaping of norms on how to live together, a creation of norms and socialities in which *all* partners take part. Difference, then, becomes part of interactions and can

12 The idea of the social contract is that individuals give up some of their freedom to delegate it to the state. The monopoly on the use of violence is the clear example. The idea was first used and developed by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The *trias politica* was developed by Montesquieu.

13 Notwithstanding the universalist style of thinking and speaking, Joan Landes shows how these citizens were a very particular type of rich male traders (rather than peasants). Ever since, the usefulness of universalist claims has been debated (is this discourse biased anyway, or should we merely extend the citizenry to include women, poor people, peasants, and so on? Jürgen Habermas is the clearest proponent of the latter strategy, with feminists and Foucauldians being on the critical side of the debate.

14 See, e.g., Pols 2006; 2016.

15 Thelen & Coe 2019 argue something similar by using the notion of 'belonging'.

be negotiated to make certain activities and newcomers 'normally different', i.e. different, but acceptable to the interaction parties, as Myriam Winance (2007) called it.[16] Rather than gaining access to a predefined and exclusive community, looking at citizenship in terms of becoming related to others and embedded in socio-material practices provides a more dynamic and creative ethnographic understanding of the formation of social ties.[17] The notion of community as the sum of the activities of the autonomous individuals, then, emerges as problematic, as too uniform, too static, and too exclusive.

The everyday aesthetics of social relationships

The notion of relational citizenship fragments a stabilised or 'whole' community, and instead studies the formation of relationships in action, on the ground. But how to think of the resulting unregulated socialities? How may we discern these smaller, less coherent social networks or arrangements? I suggest that the notion of aesthetic values is instructive here.[18] Even though individual passions became suspect in the 17th century, individuals do find (or create) value in and through the concrete practices they engage in (Hennion 2003; 2007). These may be moral considerations (what ought I do in this situation?), but also aesthetic motivations that are shared with others (Meijer 2009; Meijer & Verrips 2008). Aesthetic values refer to what people find of beauty, find nice, pleasant, or appropriate. People (and other species) pursue aesthetic values not for rational reasons or gain, but because they *appreciate* certain things and *want* to engage with them. Such values, Luc Boltanski (2012) argues, escape rational argumentation, reasoning, or utility calculations to maximise gain. They are about love, desire, friendship, or altruism.[19]

Aesthetic values within the modernist terminology of autonomous citizenship are framed as matters of taste. Taste in this context is a private matter. It cannot be disputed, as the Dutch saying goes. It cannot be argued or reasoned for one simply likes some things rather than others. However, this linking of aesthetic values to individual taste made the 'social life' of aesthetic values as formative

16 Winance's argument was that in more Goffman oriented understandings of norms and stigma, the norms are solid and pregiven. With an ethnographic understanding of how people together also create new norms, she breaks open this solidity. What is illustrative is her example of the man missing a right hand. After several meetings with him, it becomes 'normally different' to shake his left hand as a greeting.

17 Pols 206; 2016.

18 See Pols 2013; 2017 and other papers on dignity; and a full development of the term in Pols 2023.

19 Aesthetic activities like the Arts are, however, often forced into neoliberal logics.

social values invisible. In the widest sense, such aesthetic socialities can be understood as culture (small c) and Culture (capital c).

From my study into a clearly aesthetic concern, of women confronted with hair loss after chemotherapy for cancer, I learned that the aesthetic problem of feminine baldness was foremost a social problem. The perception of bald women is mediated by strong cultural and historical conceptions and events. These are embedded in culture understandings more widely, but are also fragile, in the sense that people have different cultural experiences. For instance, associations between baldness and World War II were less strong for younger generations, or were absent for people coming in from different parts of the world where they were educated to relate to their own particular historical moral and aesthetic atrocities or locally canonised forms of beauty.

Nevertheless, the formative potential of aesthetic appreciations for social life cannot be underestimated. Aesthetic appreciations can lead to the linking of niche cultural interests, such as collectors of stamps, or of larger social phenomena, such as soccer or jazz lovers, or to cultures and practices that are formative of national styles of doing things, such as hippy culture or religions. Such socialities are not based on regulations or economic gain, and may emerge at a distance, between people who do not know each other, but share concerns and things they find important. Aesthetic socialities, then, are outside the realm of governance, rationalisation, or gain, but are important drivers for social practices and social ties.[20] As such, they are useful for understanding informal socialities such as the ones envisioned with the notion of 'caring communities'.

Aesthetics and care for social life

From this brief history of citizenship and aesthetic relationships, I can extract the following insights in relation to thinking about care for older people in informal, aesthetic relationships, next to family or neighbourhood. First, such aesthetic relationships are held together by a certain symmetry and motivation, where actors find pleasure in something they both find important. People contribute to the practices they are motivated to support because it provides them with experiences they value. This does not need a dyadic or directly reciprocal understanding of relationships: such reciprocities can be dispersed over different relationships, or

[20] See Anthony Kwame Appiah 2011. 'Honour' is a form of aesthetic that, Appiah argues, had been crucial for the abolishing of slavery or feet binding, where the rational and moral arguments against these practices were well known at the time. Things being 'not done' have more impact than Reason.

over distances (such as in digital communication forms, or as a remote stamp collector).

Consequently, aesthetic activities can engage a variety of actors, as long as they contribute to what participants find a good life. This opens the possibility to look at different public sector actors when thinking about community care, such as social workers, teachers and artists as meaningful partners. They all provide matters that are of value to people.[21] These relationships that are based on shared aesthetic values or motivations hardly take the form of units or coherent 'wholes'. They may consist of a variety of relationships around a variety of values. Indeed, one taste does not fit all, or rather, one taste does not engage everyone.

Table 1. Characteristics of aesthetic socialities

• Relationships 'in the making' rather than given.
• Dispersed reciprocity (everybody needs care, but not necessarily from the person cared for)
• Activities pertaining to a locally defined understanding of a good life (motivating events)
• New (public sector) actors (like teachers, volunteers, researchers, artists) in care for a 'good life' (not only a healthy life)
• Diversity of roles and expressions of a good life

Putting aesthetic relationships to the test

With these theoretical and empirical insights, I will now turn to an analysis of a concrete initiative in the Netherlands where 'community building' was a goal set by a care organisation (I call it Robinson) for an apartment building with 120 apartments and around 150 inhabitants. Robinson had some rough times in its organisation, but hired a manager occupied with the task of creating a form of caring community called 'Omzien naar elkaar' ('Looking out for each other'). The idea was to turn The Appletree into a caring space where people would keep an eye on each other and help out with little tasks or needs. Robinson also aimed to include older people from the neighbourhood.

[21] For professional caregivers, rationalisation and professionalisation have also reached their limits, with many of them leaving health care for lack of recognition, burdensome work pressures and moral distress. Even if proper financial reward is important, the frustration in knowing what is good to do but being prevented from doing it (moral distress) by regulation and accountability systems is hard to live with.

This is where our research came in. We were eager to learn about community building and to explore if and how we might support this work with artistic means. Was it possible to actually support the new social relationships if these cannot be governed but have to develop through motivations? How? We conferred first with the active inhabitants, often members of the 'board of inhabitants'. They made it clear that the majority of inhabitants did not participate in the activities organised by them (about 50 of the 150 inhabitants show up). The board of inhabitants wanted to create a more tightly knit community, a goal they hence shared with the care organisation. With our action-research/music project we wanted to learn how a music event might contribute to building social ties in The Appletree. Our rough idea was to use music as a way to connect people or at least bring them together, allowing them the chance to meet.

Ethnographic methodology and positionality

We conducted fieldwork with an action research intent that centred around a musical intervention. There were 4 ethnographers involved; it proved impossible to co-organise events and observe at the same time, at least not in the limited time frame we had (the project was running for 3 months).[22] Professional musicians took part.[23] They were musicians who were interested in participating in musical contributions in care, and who could perform a broad range of musical styles. JP designed the idea together with two of the musicians and in conversation with the representatives of the active inhabitants (in the first round), through a door-to-door musical inquiry to also reach the inhabitants that were not active or were not represented by the board (second round), and through written requests for contributions (announcement in the newsletter, a letter to individual inhabitants through their letterbox that also informed them about the project).

The collaboration with the artists proved to be a challenge in itself. At different points in time, it was unclear who was in the lead with what activities. This collaboration between cultures of research and artistic activities is worth a study in itself, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. We eventually decided on a Poetry-Music Evening dubbed 'Salt on your skin'. In our case, we wanted to provide music different from what is usually available in The Appletree, as I will

[22] Next to the author Kristine Krause, Anne Loo, and Siënna Hernandez participated, whereas Sarah Oehlman observed creative projects and music on a different care location. Lot Heeremans conducted fieldwork for her MA thesis in anthropology here.

[23] Philipp Rüttgers (piano), Luca Warmer (voice), Oene van Geel (viola) and Remco Menting (drums and percussion).

explain in more detail below. In this way, we hoped to attract inhabitants who would not otherwise engage in shared activities. The musicians were responsible for the final performance and set list, which they decided on in relation to the requests received and their own intuitions. We observed all events and wrote fieldnotes that we collected and analysed together. There were no disagreements on the interpretation of the events.

I wrote the ethnographic part of the paper by describing the process of how our research-and-intervention emerged, showing how our positionality shifted from a rather naïve idea that we might be able to support the building of relationships through our action research. The reader will see how this idea shifted and what our events eventually brought out. The project was part of a larger research EU project (Let's Care) that was approved by our Ethics Advisory Board, and did not involve risks for participants. However, I believe the ethical concerns in ethnographic research are ongoing and emergent, and hence I take them to be explicitly part of the process, rather than present them as 'cleared' at the beginning of the research.

One of the main concerns during the research was the question 'who could speak for the inhabitants.' This question was clear from the start, but it was not solved, as clearly some inhabitants had a voice (the active inhabitants) and others did not (they did not come to the shared events and did not respond to our requests to collaborate). The idea of an artistic intervention formed a means to attract inhabitants with different backgrounds, and this succeeded at least partially. One of our main findings was that the variety among inhabitants was even wider than we had expected. This was confirmed by a student doing her anthropology master's thesis fieldwork at The Appletree some months later: there were people who explicitly did not want to engage in common activities (for various reasons) and who relied on their own networks. Even so, there are inhabitants who live an isolated life and who are not part of the study.

The Appletree: different kinds of fruit

The Appletree is part of a small village attached to a harbour town in the north of the Netherlands. People can rent an apartment in The Appletree if they are 55+ and have an indication for care, mostly home care. This can be any form of care, ranging from domestic work to wound care to assisted living issues. Care organisation Robinson manages the care and negotiates access to the apartments with the owner of the building (a housing organisation) which is also responsible for the maintenance of the building. There are three floors, the apartments on the ground floor have little gardens and each has its own private front door.

The upper two floors can be accessed through a main entrance and through the restaurant, by pressing the bell for an individual apartment or by entering the restaurant. There is no shared maintenance of the living spaces by the inhabitants, apart from active members of the 'board of inhabitants' who look after the inner communal gardens, which form the attractiveness of the building and are a place to 'hang out'.

> *Fieldnote-impression Anne: The atmosphere of the building I find closed. Long dark stone corridors lead to apartments that are separate from the shared spaces. Although there are central spaces to meet, they do not seem to be very inviting. The possibilities for chance meetings are few. The physical layout has few sightlines, informal corners or open transition zones, and hence affords few spontaneous interactions or casual meetings. The garden and balconies do make this possible, if the weather allows. It seems social meet-ups emerge when organised rather than spontaneously.*

Access for the ethnographers and musicians was an instructive thing, as it became clear that no unit or homogeneous community called The Appletree exists. There are the individual apartments, with their inhabitants with individual care needs,[24] and there is the active group of inhabitants. We did not know about the other inhabitants. There is no reception desk. The individualised living arrangements made access to the building more difficult. We were formally granted access through the manager, but this did not mean we could simply access the building physically. We eventually managed access through individual inhabitants who helped us. This is a telling situation: The Appletree in no way resembled the caring community that it was envisioned to become.

Fieldwork in The Appletree: Preparations

In our (fieldworker and 2 musicians) first meeting with the active group of inhabitants, it became clear that this group had a very particular idea of what kind of activities were helpful, and how they should be conducted. The core of the activities is the 'Friaftdri' (Friday afternoon drinks, 'Vrijmibo'), which became a concept in itself, representing the pleasures of these get-togethers. The Friaftdri's were described as a lot of fun, with festive music being played by the local dj, Mrs Moreno, proud owner of supposedly 17,000 records, and a musician herself. The Friafdri starts with local humpa music, which puts everyone present in

[24] Dutch health care is organised in a highly individualised way.

the mood. 'Humpa music' is a kind of carnivalesque song, with a simple structure, tickling the dancing muscles for movement in no choreography other than stepping through the space in a line where one person puts their hands on the shoulders of the one before them. Carnival is a celebration that is popular in the Catholic South of the Netherlands but finds its way into unreligious local folklore and Catholic enclaves up north. Another example is the 'anthem' of the village, which is a song about drinking.

In the meeting, it became clear that the active inhabitants felt that the absent majority also needed to be part of the activities. They felt that they miss out on the fun if they don't attend. But as a fieldworker I also sensed an implicit demand or obligation to participate, as well as a clear and particular set of norms on what is enjoyable.

> *Frannie [inhabitant] says that many people don't leave their apartment. It is always the same people who show up. This is not good. Our singer suggests: maybe we should go to them? There is a newsletter where activities are announced, Franny says. But still the people do not come. One lady of 96 visits all the newcomers. But still they don't come for the activities. [..] Hanny says it is typical for the region: first wait and see, to learn what's up ['de kat uit de boom kijken']. They did get a different crowd for liberation day. But there are so many other things to do: bingo, movies, playing cards, listening to music, even classical music, knitting, physical exercise... But people do not show up.*
>
> *This discussion goes on for a while, and at a certain point I say: It sounds a bit as if you are* angry *at the people who do not come. This stirs some commotion. One lady says eventually that they find it sad for the organisers if nobody shows up. Another says that they enjoy the activities so much themselves. It can be so gezellig [cosy], and the others all miss out on that.*
>
> *My note afterwards: It is all happiness and cheer and a joyful mess. It could be that newcomers do not particularly like that this type of get-together. It feels somewhat obligatory, all the fun it should be, and how it should be about fun and not about other emotions. Sensitive issues are avoided and are cut short with critical remarks. We learned later that this is part of the local social style.*

In the following meeting with the musicians, we discussed our findings. We talked about a type of event that is a bit outside of what is already there, with a different mood to it, to attract these no-show-people: a music poetry night. We chose the title 'Salt on your skin', to avoid the feeling of all-is-happiness. From my notes: [salt on your skin] *hurts a little and is also a bit nice, it is outside by the sea, linking to the harbour nearby.* The idea was to work from stories people

tell about their life, and relate to music that they like or that raises memories of important things they experienced in their lives.

We would put a call in the newsletter, send out a flyer, and we organised a door-to-door musical event (singing and violin play) in order to open the closed doors and ask people for their stories and preferences. A second idea came from the singer: she would create a 'pass-on box'. The singer wrote the text and recorded 'The Appletree-song' together with the pianist.[25] The song plays when you open the box. We sent it by mail to 'the inhabitants of the Appletree', with instruction on how to pass it on and recharge the battery if needed. The singer also designed an attractive flyer (with a picture of an open hand of each musician, with their instrument in the background, as an inviting gesture or reaching out) that we would hand out at the door-to-door event.

Door-to-door event

We planned to put the flyers in peoples' mailboxes, but our contact had already, thankfully, done this for us when we arrived for the door-to-door event. Here is a vignette from poetic ethnographer Anne, merged with my own notes, on the door-to-door event:

> *All is quiet at The Appletree. The corridors are dimly lighted, still, as if the building has withdrawn in the silence of the warm afternoon. Our footsteps echo lightly while we move to a common room with tables and a small kitchen, with glass walls overlooking the deserted inner garden. When we go out and the first sounds of song and violin strike, the sound hits the walls, touches the leaves, and follows the stone paths. One inhabitant comes out to the garden in his wheelchair. A small private session is his reward. I can see that he greatly appreciates the music, his banter falls silent and his body becomes tense and still when he listens intently.*
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> *More people gather, and there is some playing in the garden near the common space. There are some tables and chairs to sit, as well as some benches. One man observes from his own little garden. 'He will not come', one of the other inhabitants comments. 'He is too shy'.*
>
> *Most doors remain closed. Some people hurry away to appointments. Behind the windows, there are shadows, maybe presence, quiet. The playing and singing continue to fill the corridors of the inner building as we enter with a small*

[25] A beautiful song with music from the jazz standard 'Infant Eyes' from Wyne Shorter listen here: Warmer & Rüttgers, 2025.

Picture 1:
Pass-on-box
(Photo: Luca Warmer)

group of enthusiasts. Sometimes a head emerges through a door opened a crack. Curious, interpellated. But mostly the doors stay shut. The 'shy man' comes out for a chat after all, but he does not want to visit the music-poetry evening, even if he says he likes the music. There is football on the TV.

And then something special happens when we enter the second-floor gallery doors open: stories are being told, about singing in choirs, folksongs on birthdays, trumpet sounds in the marine, memories of Amsterdam neighbourhoods, magical concerts of André Rieu, festive nights in concert halls, the seductive rhythms of the tango. Not everyone responds to the invitation for the concert, but we share a story with everyone we speak to: the love for music, the power of memories and the emotion that comes with that.

I speak with a man in his fifties, who says he lives here because of the nice, large apartment. He does not share in the activities here; he does not want to. He has his own life in the cultural scene of the neighbouring town. He evades saying if he will come for the music-poetry evening, but I guess it's a no.

We end in the garden again, with a small group of the active inhabitants. They get a last couple of songs. Some sway with the music, others close their eyes. The benches face the other direction, so some sit with their back to the musicians. They enjoy the music together, but also everyone in their own way.

Picture 2:
Door-to-door music at The Appletree
Photo: Author of the text

A reflection from Anne afterwards:

> *What happened this afternoon was not a great shared event, but a mosaic of small moments: a melody that catches someone's attention, a memory retrieved, a door opened a crack. Not everyone came to watch, but maybe that is ok. Because of the hesitant looks, the soft humming (maybe also behind closed doors), and the spontaneous stories that came up showed; music presents an opening. Not for everyone in the same way, but the multitude of responses, from singing along loudly until quietly listening from a door opening, shows how the music creates space for things to emerge, for meetings, for memories, for being moved in a way that is hard to put into words.*

In the days between the door-to-door and the concert, it becomes clear that our sending of the pass-on-box to 'the inhabitants of The Appletree' was meant to appeal to some form of togetherness that did not demand physical co-presence. However, we immediately lost track of the box and we did not know where it was, even if it arrived well. Later, at the concert night, it turned out that the box *was* indeed travelling. But this was an intervention we could not study well; it happened between people and out of sight for the ethnographers…

Meanwhile, the call for stories was published and led to two responses over the telephone: one by (free) mail, one by email. During the preparation rehearsal, the musicians decided on a repertoire that included some improvisations, but mainly stayed close to songs everybody would know.

The music poetry evening

The music poetry evening itself took place on a warm evening in early July 2025. About 35 people visited, some in their good dresses, and the visitors started trickling in about an hour before the concert started. Volunteers served coffee and cookies, and later drinks and snacks. The food and drinks formed an integral part of the festive experience.

> *Fieldnotes from Kristine, Siënna, and me: From 18.30 on, people come into the garden, seating themselves in the provisionally organised semi-circle of chairs we put together. There are cards on the chairs for people to respond after the concert. More people come in when hearing the sound check. One gentleman comes with a mouth organ, later joined by another gentleman with the same instrument. They play in two voices, solemnly and quite softly. Later, they get an interlude in the music programme, as it seems fitting with the idea of bringing in personal backgrounds and stories. One of the men cracks a joke about classical composers, which may have performed a class difference with the other audience members.*[26] *This performance, however, is not responded to well by all. One lady responds angrily to that, and says: 'I take the dog inside! She says something like: 'It is terrible, unbearable!', which is quite a mismatch with our preconceived ideas. When I ask her later, she tells me the players hit their mouth organ every coffee break. She thinks it's too noisy, and very annoying. A man says*: *"I already hear them every day. In the coffee hours, they are always whining on these things." He says it is difficult to have a conversation when they do that.*

But I am running ahead of the story. These overt fights, we learned later, were very much part of the ordinary conversations here. What appeared to us outsiders as harsh comments did not lead to permanent fights, as conversations restarted the next day. 'This is how we do it. You have to live together.', one lady commented later.

[26] See Bourdieu 1984 for how class and aesthetic taste hang together.

Picture 3: *Concert at the Apletree* (Photo: Author of the text)

There are people from the neighbourhood, so that mission from Robinson seems to be accomplished. The volunteer says: "It is pretty busy! Gezellig!" The volunteers helped to estimate the number of chairs to put out, a local knowledge that came in handy. 'Ah, nice, in the garden!' people comment.

When the concert is in full swing, we see people listening at their door, through their open window, or on the balconies, but they do not join the gathering. I see hands waving and faces watching through different windows. The dj/musician is ill this evening, so she cannot join. Later in the evening I also see an active inhabitant slip back in, apparently she had not been part of the festivities we had prepared and discussed with her.

The lady to my left has a glamorously decorated walking aid. She comments on the situation all the time. The comments do not seem all nice, but I cannot hear or understand everything. They could also be 'Nordic humour'. To my right, there are some ladies with rollators in front of them. They use these for their tea glasses. Next to me is a very quiet lady, her face does not show many responses. Next to her a smartly dressed lady with pink shoes, blouse and lipstick. Behind me, two more rows of chairs, with a more active group of people. From my right I hear more sounds, people talk and sing along. Next to Siënna sits a guy who makes many comments, but also sings along. (Siënna notes: My neighbour says: I don't sing along! I need a drink for that. But sneakily I hear him sing along, and he drums with his hands to the music.) The lady next to me says she wants the band to come back more often. She clearly enjoys herself and dances in her chair and sings along the whole evening.

One of the highlights is a song sent in by a neighbourhood lady. It is a text written by her daughter who died at a young age from cancer, and arranged in a simple chord scheme (one of the musicians frowns upon the melody). The mother is very happy with the performance and there must be more people aware of the story, as the concentration[27] *makes you able to hear a pin drop.*

The performance is interrupted by the project manager after 4 or 5 songs. She says it is time for drinks. This was not planned, but seems to reflect the habits of the place, as well as the attention span of the audience members. People go in to get sweaters, as it is getting colder, and enjoy their break and chat. After the drinks and bites the concert continues, and people sing along with a popular waltz. I notice people comment a lot, whispers that sound critical, but one cannot hear the words clearly, only suspect the content from the tone. This is the common way of doing things here. But it does create some dissonance or forbiddingness in the atmosphere: doe maar gewoon [behave normally, that is mad enough in itself, as the Dutch saying goes].

The singer presents a poem she wrote about the Appletree, reflecting on her experiences. She thanks the inhabitants for the warm welcome but also mildly rebukes less friendly encounters. Then one humpa carnival song, and a 'not too wild' jazz improvisation. The concert ends with a thank you from a Robinson representative, who tells how Robinson made all this possible, and how they hope for 'saamhorigheid' [a feeling of togetherness] at the Appletree.

Then drinks are served inside, donated by Robinson. Some people fill out the cards for us with happy feedback. There is some chatter in the garden with the singer. One lady is elated by the singer's youth and spirit. A woman brings out the pass-on-box and passes it on. ['A weight off my shoulders', the singer says. 'It's not that heavy', the lady comments.]

Fieldnote from Kristine:

I enjoyed the music tremendously during the concert. I experienced a sense of happiness to be in this beautiful garden, surrounded by green and a blue sky. Two seagulls fly past. Protected by the apartments it feels very private, but also joyful and privileged. The combination of being surrounded, but with the large empty space of the garden and the wide blue sky feels special. The different types of chairs make it private, but the ladies walking around and offering nice foods (lots of sausage) and drinks make it festive and chic, the feeling that you are the guest of something privileged.

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[27] I learned that 'concentration' and participation are ways of observing an audience appreciation of music, see the note below on the difficulty of observing music events.

It is difficult after the events to describe the general mood: even the mood seems to be fragmented. The atmosphere created by the music adds to this, see this reflection in the fieldnotes from Kristine:

> *during the writing of these notes I realised that I find it difficult to write them, I hardly took notes about the songs, but the different songs were of course the main actors in this. They changed the mood, the way of engagement. Interesting question: how to note down something which happens with music as one of the main actors?*

It is difficult to observe while music is playing, it is difficult to bracket the music or one's own experience of it.

Afterparty

In the chats after the event with the three ethnographers, one lady commented that people from the neighbourhood take the place of inhabitants from the Appletree: *I live in The Appletree, but I cannot go to the movement activities, because someone from the neighbourhood was there before me. It is not fair! I need to exercise for my health, but then I cannot go!* The presence of people from the neighbourhood hence turns out to be not uncontested. On the other hand, during the concert the singer asked if there are people from outside in the audience, and they were greeted by applause. There is clearly no consensus on the policy for turning The Appletree into a caring community that includes the neighbourhood.

One person from the board of inhabitants says they do not want the Appletree to be "a social centre for the neighbourhood. The shared spaces are decorated and maintained by the board, it is ours, not for the whole neighbourhood."

But also some internal tensions emerged that we had not been aware of. An inhabitant told us that they were discussing if a person with mental health issues should be allowed to live here. She makes too much noise, does not clean, and closes the curtains to the world. The Board is critical about it: we cannot handle that behaviour here. Same as with people with dementia. They would not fit.

Hence, in the event, new differences came to light, showing even more fine-grained divisions than the mere opposition between active and inactive inhabitants. The board of inhabitants is an important driver from inside the Appletree, but their representation of the inhabitants is partial, and their standpoints apparently are not the same as Robinson's policy. So, what are social arrangements here?

The evaluation with the musicians also brought some interesting observations: to them it was very odd that people requested songs they could play. That is very uncommon for the artistic performances they normally engage in, where the artists carefully compose the set. Furthermore, they said that they held back from improvisations or 'wild music'. After some reflection they added that they felt uneasy about not playing the taste of the 'older people', whom they were used to 'showing respect' from their cultural backgrounds. Respect meant taking care that the older people were looked after and attended to. In the Netherlands, this showing of respect may also reflect a segregation of the generations that is common, where respect can also come to mean 'social distance'. This can also lead to an isolation of older people rather than to extra care. The tension about 'not too wild' music and music for people with a 'different taste' for music compared to the musical events on offer, formed one of the ironies of our experiment.

To conclude this story, the ethnographic harvest of the music event seemed to be, rather than a unifying happening, a bringing together of different groups of people that were characterised by even more differences than we eventually thought. There were more 'factions' and oppositions than we had thought based on our first visit and our discussions with the manager and the active inhabitants. Not only were there active and inactive inhabitants, there were differences between neighbourhood and inside people; there were independents with clearly differing tastes; there were shy people, participating at a distance; there were dominant and non-dominant people; approved of and despised musical talents; people sharing a household and people embedded in families, singles, people with unconventional behaviour, and differing standpoints between the board and the organisation. Our musical event, then, turned out to have been a *methodological device* for assembling these different moods and hues, allowing us to take stock of the very different entry-points and understandings of 'proper' sociality for everyone present.

Discussion

What have we learned from this event about community care? In the theoretical section of the paper, it was already clear that communities are hardly the unified and regulated wholes that exist out there, waiting for people to take part by adapting to their norms.[28] Social relations need to be created and main-

[28] For lovers of theory: John Law (2009) and Chung Lin Kwa (20080 call this a romantic idea of collectivities, and point to it as a basis for this romanticism in statistics, where individual numbers contribute to an aggregate score that represents a 'whole'. The alternative they propose is the baroque collectivity that is not adding up to a whole, but remains fragmented.

tained, and emerge on lines that are contingent on contacts between individuals. Material and social infrastructures can form a supportive foundation (Muusse et al. 2020), but do not predict how socialities will evolve. However, socio-material infrastructures were lacking in the Appletree. Most of the inhabitants were not living in The Appletree because they were looking for company or support from their neighbours. They came to find a space to live, and brought their individual care arrangements and relational networks - or lack thereof. This understanding of the Appletree as foremost a space to live is preluded on in the organisation's recruitment strategy, which is based on the rent of a place next to a care need. The policy background to this is a discussion in the Netherlands about separating care and living arrangements, with an ideal of 'ageing-proof housing' on the horizon, making it unnecessary to move once settled. But this is a very different ideal than the caring community ideal, and it is difficult to bridge the two, as they centre the individual and the social respectively.

In a multigenerational housing in Innsbruck, we visited with the Let's Care Consortium (see footnote 1), an infrastructure towards the creation of a community was in place. There was an interview for aspiring inhabitants which made it clear that living there would also mean involving with the collective. Ways to do this were open for negotiation, but this expectation was clearly managed from the start, providing a very different entry point. Moreover, in Innsbruck there was a full-time social worker present to manage relationships between inhabitants. Such a social worker at Appletree would have done a lot of good to negotiate the myriad small tensions between different 'groups' of inhabitants. There are many little things ('gedoe', as a Dutch social worker called it) that hinder productive ways of living together. People do not start with the same expectations, develop their likes and dislikes, and the organisation has yet different ideas. The Appletree habit of deadpan but indisputable critical comments certainly does not help to make it a social environment that is easy to navigate for the insecure, whereas the implicit norms for what constitutes 'fun' of the active inhabitants does not leave much room for differing aesthetic repertoires.

The advantage of multigenerational housing projects, we learned in Innsbruck, was that people have different roles to fulfil for one another: one could be a grandparent, provide homework help and babysit for the children. Others could do the odd job for an elderly neighbour or run to the shops for a forgotten packet of coffee beans. Elderly inhabitants reported a meaningful role and position in their shared housing accommodation. Alternatively, in a socially managed co-housing project for older people in Italy, more symmetrical relationships emerged, such as friendships or being a good neighbour for one another.

In terms of care this teaches us that one may receive care from one person who finds it important to provide it, but who receives care from another motivated person in turn: dispersed reciprocity. 'Care' here may consist of any activity of giving and receiving that the actors perceive as being part of a good life, which motivates them to pursue these values. A good life in the aesthetic sense of the term implies that both elements (caring and being cared for) are present, while the form is up for negotiation and is not static. Alternatively, the ethnography in a co-housing project in Italy showed the emergence of clusters of more symmetrical relationships due to comparable age, such as friendships or being a good neighbour (Pasian & DaRoit, forthcoming). A pro-active management and an infrastructure supporting this sociality was in place. Caring and being cared for, then, emerged in more directly reciprocal relationships. In all cases, where bonds emerged was hard to predict, as it was dependent on the individuals participating – or not.

Informal care needs motivations that can be supported to flourish by attempts at regulation or the management and maintenance of expectations and opportunities, while taking into account that such relationships need to be built and developed in unpredictable ways. Because such relationships are built on peoples' motivations, informal care for family members needs to be balanced with care for the caregiver in order for caregiving and receiving to remain motivating and meaningful. Volunteer work can be a fruitful model here, but also the more symmetrical relationships of friendship or less symmetrical family relationships.

Conclusion: architectures of the social

Communities do not exist 'out there', and do not emerge out of convenience for care organisations or policymakers. They need material and social infrastructures, maintenance, motivations and shared expectations, and above all: maintenance, repair, and innovation work. Roles for people living in a community building may differ, and hence provide different possibilities for social interaction. Some coordination and maintenance, traditionally the expertise of social work, provides important support for social life to flourish. This support is needed for the bridging of differences, to solve smaller or larger tensions, and to prevent differences leading to isolation (in neighbourhoods) rather than integration, as is well documented. The policy idea of 'looking out for one another' by providing care or services turns out to be a bit too eagerly instrumental, and glosses over the (aesthetic) motivations needed for the creation of social life. There are many things that factor into the possibility of working and caring together, some of which are difficult to 'manage', such as friendships, aesthetic similarities and understandings of what is pleasurable to do. Possibilities for inclusion can simultaneously

be ever so many possibilities for exclusion, and these processes deserve careful consideration and coordination of services (whom to grant access, and if not here, where might people go?).

One suggestion from our study is to spend more research on and invest more analysis into various 'architectures of the social'[29] to figure out how caring relationships emerge and how they may be developed while acknowledging their aesthetic motivational basis. The possibility for 'dividing caring tasks' over varied networks also deserves more attention, for instance, to learn how relationships over physical distance may be supported (e.g., by creating digital networks based on mutual interest and friendship, see Thygesen & Pols 2016; Pols 2014). If 'community care' is to be an answer to the shortage of staff, different forms of the social are well worth looking into. Richer understandings of 'architectures of the social' may inspire collaborations between new and different actors in care for what people think of as a good life.

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[29] The metaphor denotes the results of ongoing co-creative building processes, rather than a polished vision of a designer.

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Web links

Actiz 2025: https://www.actiz.nl/actueel/minister-helder-erkent-urgentie-om-zorg-voor-ouderen-anders-te-organiseren
Let's Care 2025: https://www.lets-care-hub.eu/
Rijksoverheid 19-06-2025: https://www.vzinfo.nl/participatie/vrijwilligerswerk#:~:text=De%20helft%20van%20de%20Nederlanders,vrijwilligerswerk%20deed%20was%20vrijwel%20gelijk.
Ministry of Health 2025: https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/f0a3eb6a-ca4c-4c79-b02c-4f050bb561c0/file
Luca Warmer & Philipp Rüttgers (2025): https://vimeo.com/1163574577/ad6ad1b846?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci

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