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2. At home in the city?

The difference between friendship and amicability

Jan Willem Duyvendak and Fenneke Wekker

The home is all the rage. We see it in the media, where Ikea commercials and romantic movies remind us that there is no place quite like home; we come across it in the pamphlets of political parties that argue that ‘everyone should feel at home in the Netherlands’; and we see it all around us: everyone is trying to make themselves at home – in their house, in the neighbourhood, in the city, and in the nation. State policy is supporting citizens in this. Policy interventions and welfare projects ensure that citizens integrate, meet each other, begin to feel connected with one another, and identify themselves with the neighbourhood, the city and the country. In so doing, politics seeks to promote active citizenship and to encourage people to become involved in their neighbourhood, city and country – as if it were their own home.

These policies and social projects show that there is nothing noncommittal about feeling at home. Feeling at home is necessary and compulsory. There is, of course, the political hope that the quality of life in so-called ‘disadvantaged neighbourhoods’ will improve by increasing a sense of home among their inhabitants. Feeling at home and experiencing a sense of interconnectedness are seen as preconditions for a ‘good’ and livable neighbourhood and city. And successful neighbourhoods – characterised by sustainable, local networks of residents – are considered to be the building blocks of a sense of belonging at the national level.

More and more policymakers believe that the nation, the city and certainly the neighbourhood should feel like home to its residents. On the basis of this idea, politicians – in collaboration with welfare workers and local organisations – are calling

upon residents to become actively involved in their 'collective house' by jointly countering deviant behaviour, by serving in neighbourhood committees, by participating in neighbourhood activities and by taking care of neighbours in need of help. The increased social control and social cohesion are meant to lead to a greater sense of security, more trust among residents and a livable environment that everyone can justifiably call their 'home'.

A livable Netherlands is a country in which everyone feels at home – this is what is written in countless policy documents produced by rural and local politics and also in the ambitious plans of welfare institutions and neighbourhood organisations. But is that even possible? Paradoxically, the will and the drive to make a neighbourhood a safe and peaceful 'home' all too often lead to open conflicts between residents over what that 'public home' should look like and especially who should be able to determine what it looks like: conflicts between renters and buyers, between established residents and newcomers, between young and old, between 'antisocial' people and the 'well-adjusted' are the order of the day in urban areas and city streets. As soon as one group of residents appropriates too much of the common or public space, the feeling of security and familiarity of the other residents melts away like snow. Accordingly, the balance between the point at which a sense of belonging begins for one person and ceases for the other is extremely precarious.

The preoccupation with home – shared by citizens, policy-makers and welfare workers alike – is understandable. Wanting to feel at home is a basic human need that every citizen, community social worker and politician recognises. But is the (ultimate) aim to make everyone in the public space feel at home and feel connected with everybody not an overambitious ideal? Is it appropriate to stimulate a sense of feeling at home – and with it a strong degree of appropriation of the public space – if that brings about more conflicts and if it drives some people to withdraw from that space? Would it not be more desirable for

people to maintain a certain social distance from each other and to refrain from bonding strongly with their (social and physical) environment outside the home? In other words, is it possible to create an 'open house' out of public space? Doesn't the attempt to define the city or city district as 'home' simply create a breeding ground for social conflicts in a society as diverse as the Netherlands?

Limits to feeling at home

A sense of home is a very widely shared and deeply felt emotion that is almost impossible to describe. There is, however, one thing that researchers emphasise without exception: a profound sense of home can only be experienced in a small circle of people. It turns out that we feel at home only with certain people and under certain circumstances. The depth of the emotion thus appears to lie in its selectivity: we are capable of feeling at ease with quite a few people and in many situations, but can we really feel at home with them? When 'certain people in certain places' are present, this can spoil our sense of home, our trust and our sense of security. It is precisely such encounters with these 'other people' that can undermine those feelings of belonging and social interconnectedness so sought after by community social workers. Perhaps a reasonably 'good sense of home' in an urban setting requires relationships that are 'lighter' and more aloof than the long-term, chummy relationships that policymakers would like city dwellers to cultivate.

Within a heterogeneous setting of renters and buyers, of different cultures and lifestyles, the only real option appears to be to relativise the ultimate aim – i.e. a sense of home in the city. Physical proximity can then be combined with keeping one's social distance, which in effect means that the ideal of the home is primarily 'localised' in one's own house. One lives in a neighbourhood with 'others', but precisely because the 'others' may be very different, social proximity is not always appreciated.

In order to coexist in spite of this, what should be sought is not a common 'home' but rather 'public familiarity'.

Talja Blokland and Julia Nast posit that public familiarity is sufficient for urbanites. They argue that at most what is needed is the ability to navigate public space in order to feel that you are safe and that you have a certain amount of control. This navigating occurs en route – on your way from home to the rest of your life. You move through your neighbourhood, you stop in a shop, you stand at a bus stop, and all the while you run into people you know by sight or because you sometimes chat with them at the school playground or the park where you walk your dog, or because you know them from your work or school and they live in the same neighbourhood as you. Blokland and Nast claim that it would be overambitious to strive to get to know one another on a more than superficial basis purely on the basis of the coincidence that you live in the same neighbourhood. People generally do not expand their networks by adding friends from the neighbourhood; they find friends elsewhere. Government interventions that insinuate that you really should be friends with your neighbours in fact generate the wrong expectations. After all, true friendship requires like-mindedness and a certain degree of homogeneity, which is by definition rare in an urban setting.

Towards a 'light' form of a sense of home – the importance of amicability

In our view, Blokland and Nast are right in arguing that public familiarity – which they identify in terms of safety and being familiar with 'strangers' – is key to living in a city. But many people in a neighbourhood, district or street seek something more than merely living together: they want, in fact, to feel at home. And for that, public familiarity is a necessary precondition but is insufficient – at least in the way that Blokland and Nast define it. We believe their definition of the term familiarity is

too parsimonious, for familiarity not only refers to something that one is accustomed to, it also signifies amicability. This latter aspect of familiarity denotes a friendly interaction – the way friends treat each other – without the depth and emotional weight of True Friendship. When people treat each other kindly, they treat each other *as if* they are friends and assume that they can trust each other. They presume that they have things in common, and they treat each other in a way that exudes trust and ease. There is trust in such a relationship unless proven otherwise, instead of the opposite, distrustful variant in which people view each other with suspicion until ‘common ground’ is found.

Research has shown that amicability does not mean that you have to be ‘the same’ in terms of a shared lifestyle, cultural background or socio-economic position: the common denominator can be that you both have a child or a dog, that you both love to swim, that you visit the same church or always put the trash out on a Wednesday or take the same bus to the city centre. Amicability is more about what you do (together) than who you are: it is much more about activity than identity. This makes it also an ‘attainable’ ideal for people living in heterogeneous neighbourhoods. Such people probably do not have much in common in terms of ‘identities’ – ethnic, religious, cultural – but this does not mean that they have no activities in common with each other. Many successful social interventions are therefore focused on activities that residents undertake together: they create a form of commonality that form a basis for amicability.

To deal with someone amicably is somewhere between ‘amiable’ and ‘chummy’: it is more than simply being friendly, but it is not based on – nor is its aim – true friendship. It is this ‘mild form of friendship’, this amicability, that can fulfil the various needs of people to feel at home in a public space.

Our conception of familiarity goes beyond the narrow conception of public familiarity in which everything appears to revolve around being able to survive in the urban ‘jungle’. While Joke van

der Zwaard advocates a limited definition of public familiarity, focused on feelings of security among 'familiar strangers', we would adopt a broader definition that includes amicability. Amicability adds something that allows people to feel at home while simultaneously giving others space to also feel at home. A person who treats you amicably is giving you space and the recognition that you belong there. And often it is a very familiar pattern: a friendly relationship develops over the course of time. It is like a dance on the sidewalk that becomes so familiar that you immediately notice if something or someone is missing. Certain people simply belong, not because you are so emotionally connected to them, not because you recognise them as someone who is 'just like you', but because they actively make the neighbourhood what it is – a neighbourhood that everyone can call their own to some extent.

There is a 'mild' form of a sense of home in many boroughs and neighbourhoods, even in those that are mixed. Instead of striving for the deepest variant of this sense of home in which *friendships* are formed between residents, it would be more effective to encourage *friendly* relations. Such relations are not created from one day to the next; they require time. If a neighbourhood experiences a rapid change in character, such amicable relations will temporarily be put under pressure, but over time they will develop again. Striving for amicable relations appears to be a realistic option for residents, policymakers and social workers: we can learn to treat each other amicably, especially if we know that as a result we will feel more at home in our neighbourhood. Being friendly with strangers on our street and in our neighbourhood is an effective way to appropriate (to a certain extent) an area that we always share with others. By doing so, we actively create a place in which we can feel quite at home. In our opinion, this is the best that politics and social policy can and should stimulate. To hope for more and to arouse lofty expectations could lead to unmanageable conflicts between residents and to the exclusion of certain population groups. A public home is a place to which one should never be too emotionally wedded, as it is a place that by definition also belongs to 'others'.

The authors

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Further reading

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