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# Housing as a Way of Life: Towards an Understanding of Middle-Class Families' Preference for an Urban Residential Location

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**ABSTRACT** *Housing studies show an overwhelming preference by middle-class families for suburban living locations. In this paper an atypical category, middle-class families living in the city, is addressed. The aim is to understand why these households disconnect the seemingly natural relationship between families and the suburbs. Empirical evidence comes from interviews with families living in two Rotterdam neighbourhoods. Three interrelated sets of explanations were found. First, families express clearly the time-geographical reasons for urban living. In particular, the location of work provides a strong incentive to seek housing in the same city. Second, social embeddedness is a strong reason for staying. Understanding housing preferences requires the conceptualization of families as social networks. Third, these families define themselves as true urbanites and sturdy families who reject the suburbs as a suitable place in which to live. The results are discussed in the context of urban policies to retain the middle classes in the city.*

**KEY WORDS:** Family housing, urban residential preferences, dual-earner families, social networks, residential identity

## Introduction

Although families have always constituted a large proportion of the urban population, today larger cities can best be regarded as places for singles and other small, childless households. As a result of suburbanization processes, households with children are in a minority on the urban landscape (Gans, 1968; Mazanti, 2005; Vijgen & Van Engelsdorp Gastelaars, 1992). In the Netherlands, a steady trend of out-migration has occurred since the 1960s, particularly amongst families and higher-income groups (Bootsma, 1998). In addition, statistics show that this out-migration, or suburbanization, will not stop in the near future: more than 40 per cent of the families with children who are presently living in the major cities have plans to move. This percentage is much higher than it is amongst the

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Dutch population as a whole (24 per cent) (SCP, 2001, p. 34). In the four largest cities in the Netherlands, families with children report the lowest level of satisfaction with their living situation (VROM, 2003, pp. 43–44). They tend to be in search of larger accommodation and, if possible, owner-occupied single-family houses (SCP, 2001, p. 31). Out-migration is not only a ‘white’ phenomenon; Surinamese and Turkish families are also particularly likely to follow this trend (Burger & van der Lugt, 2005; Sterckx *et al.*, 2003).

The suburbs have been the main habitat of middle-class families. Those who can afford to do so tend to leave the city for suburbia. In doing so, most of them exchange lengthy commutes for child-friendly suburban residential environments. However, fragmented research (Brun & Fagnani, 1994; Butler, 2003, 2001; Karsten, 2003) shows that a minority of family households are deciding differently. They seem to follow the trend of gentrification, which, so far, has affected mainly childless households. The research reported in this paper builds further on this issue and explores the question of why middle-class families who can afford to buy houses in the suburbs decide to remain in the city. How can we understand this atypical pattern of family housing that goes against powerful cultural norms about the suburb as the most suitable place for family life? (Hamers, 2003; Richards, 1990). Households with children have not featured widely in the literature on gentrification and urban revitalization (Rose & Chicoine, 1991). Many questions remain unanswered. What motives do they have to maintain an urban residential location after the birth of children?

The research reported here is based on interviews with middle-class dual-income families (including migrant families) in Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands (Karsten *et al.*, 2006). This is the context in which the results of the study must be interpreted. Rotterdam, like other large cities, wishes to retain its middle-class. The city would like to become an attractive place for the moderate to higher-income groups and at the same time seeks to reduce social polarization. The income segregation between Rotterdam and the surrounding region and the ethnic concentration that follows in its wake have to be decreased. Policy measures put forward include the revitalization of old neighbourhoods and the building of completely new housing estates (infill-site) in former industrial/port districts. The empirical evidence reported in this paper comes from residents living in these two types of neighbourhood.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, the literature consulted to help specify the main research question is reviewed. It becomes clear that classical studies on housing preferences are not capable of explaining why some middle-class families opt for an urban residential location. Daily activity patterns, social networks and urban identities lie at the basis of an urban orientation. From there the empirical context of the research is specified: an old mixed-use high-density district and a newly-built small neighbourhood in a former harbour district. The Results section of this paper is structured along the lines of the literature and the outcomes are discussed in the light of the differences between the two study locations. The Conclusion section summarizes the main findings and returns to the policy implications of this study.

### **Housing Preferences**

In traditional housing studies, economic and demographic factors are regarded as the most important determinants of residential choice. A residential decision is considered

to be a function of the price a household can afford and the size of the family or the number and age of their children. During the life course, families adjust their housing situation to correspond with their financial resources and the spatial requirements of their household. This scientific tradition isolates housing from the wider context of life (Clapham, 2005; Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999; Shlay, 1986). Gaining a deeper understanding of housing issues requires a search for the interrelationship of housing with the broader context of family needs. The site (accommodation of daily life) and the situation (location) of the neighbourhood are important conditions for family life. Families are dependent on the facilities that are available within and beyond the neighbourhood. The location of the neighbourhood within the urban field is therefore vital. The time-geographical literature shows the importance of distance and time in daily life, particularly in the lives of dual-income families (Brun & Fagnani, 1994; Green, 1997; Jarvis, 1999; Droogleever Fortuijn & Karsten 1989; McDowell *et al.*, 2006). Working families must integrate public and private activities on a daily basis, and some neighbourhoods accommodate this daily struggle better than others. Some neighbourhoods may also be more strategically located with regard to a broad range of facilities, including work. Households are engaged in complex trade-offs involving a variety of costs and benefits related to the type of neighbourhood and the living location (Butler, 2003; Hardill, 2002). Residential neighbourhoods in large cities generally have the advantage of shorter commuting time and the proximity of many amenities, while the disadvantages can roughly be summarized as a lack of child-friendliness. Families have to achieve a balance between the pros and cons, but ambivalent feelings often prevail (Droogleever Fortuijn, 1993; Jarvis *et al.*, 2001).

Time-geographical explanations emphasize the importance of physical factors in relation to the routines of daily life. They focus on the optimization of residential location with regard to distance and the time needed to reach various activity spaces. Another literature grouping addresses the social embeddedness of families (Bailey *et al.*, 2004; Miller & Darlington, 2002). Households with children are more inclined to build on social networks with neighbours than are childless households (Fischer, 1977; Volker & Verhoeff, 1999). This tendency applies even more strongly to working families, who engage in a variety of external relationships and commitments. Working families try to construct supportive communities based on the mutual exchange of help and sociality. This social engagement is one reason why households with children tend not to move as often as singles and childless couples. When they do relocate, they tend to move only short distances; they prefer to avoid disconnecting from their social networks (Fischer & Malmberg, 2001). So, remaining in the city may be regarded as a coping strategy, but not only as such. Urban families, like all residents, orient themselves to particular neighbours and specific citizens: the group of people to which they wish to belong. These social networks comprise individuals and families who share a certain degree of 'sameness'. People prefer to engage in social networks that are homogeneous in terms of class and ethnicity (Butler & Robson, 2001), household situation (Gans, 1968), and discourse on 'good' family life (Mazanti, 2005). The result of these social forces seems to be urban segregation between different like-with-like associations (Atkinson, 2006)

The desire to belong to certain social circles (and places) advances identity as a third category of explanations for residential location. Our understanding of residential choice can be further extended by considering the social construction of residential identities. Notions of distinction, which lie at the heart of identity building, are constructed through

participation in daily social practices and made manifest in consumption goods (Bourdieu, 1984). The goods that people own can be considered to be an expression of the self. Housing is one form of consumption through which the self can be expressed (Cooper Marcus, 1995). Savage *et al.* (2005) put this idea even more strongly when they refer to the residence as a crucial identifier of who you are. To date, the interior of the home is more frequently related to the identity of the resident, but the location and the quality of the neighbourhood are important in terms of identity, too (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Wijs Mulkens, 1999). Where do you live? Our answer to this question provides information not only about the location of our home, but also about who we are. It is the choice to live in certain places (and leave others) that makes social distinction manifest. The location of living is part of the narrative of the self (Giddens, 1991). When many middle-class families have already achieved the 'ideal' of owning a house in the suburbs, some families may experience an urge to distinguish themselves through completely different housing arrangements. Family gentrification, which is not yet very widespread, can be understood in this way. The whole issue of identity construction is very much related to middle-class residents who have the resources that allow them to make choices and, if necessary, to defend those choices.

The three collections of literature help us to specify further the research question of how to understand some urban middle-class families' preference for the city as a place in which to live. First, what is the role of time-space budgets in the decision to remain in the city? Second, to what extent does the social embeddedness of a family contribute to the continuation of their city-based life? Third, in a situation of strong cultural norms about suburbia as the most suitable place for families, how do these families defend their urban living against outsiders? But before turning to the responses to these questions, reference will be made to the daily-life context of the families studied: their city, the specific neighbourhoods in which they live, and their household characteristics.

### **Empirical Context**

With nearly 600 000 inhabitants, Rotterdam is the second largest city in the Netherlands. It is currently struggling with its transformation from an industrial city to a global-service city. Unemployment is high, educational levels and income levels are low, and the housing supply is dominated by social and rental housing. Rotterdam is certainly not the 'honeypot' that London is, pulling in people from both ends of the social structure (Butler, 2003). So far, it is predominantly an immigration city for poor people and its reputation is not such that higher-income groups would be eager to settle there. Overall, there has been a small decline in the number of inhabitants in the last few years. Families with children comprise approximately one-third of all households. Native Dutch residents form 54 per cent of the population (for these and other figures used see [www.cos.rotterdam.nl](http://www.cos.rotterdam.nl)).

Local governmental policies are aimed at enlarging the middle-class population. State-led gentrification is one of the main instruments. Rotterdam has large areas of land where industrial and port activities used to be located on both sides of the river Maas. This land is being redeveloped with amenities and housing. The results of this new policy have recently begun to materialize; owner-occupied housing has been extended and now constitutes approximately 25 per cent of the stock. Although home buyers are still predominantly white, the growth of homeownership among migrants, particular those of Surinamese and Turkish origin, is striking. Between 1990 and 2003, the percentage

of homeowners in the Surinamese population increased from 7 to 18 per cent. In the Turkish population, the percentage of homeowners increased from 5 to 13 per cent, while the percentage of homeowners among the native Dutch population increased from 20 to 30 per cent (COS, 2003). The highest income groups are concentrated in two neighbourhoods not included in this study: Hilligersberg and Kralingen. The large majority of Rotterdam neighbourhoods are dominated by lower-income groups, predominantly ethnic minorities. That means that the Rotterdam middle-class families live in a minority situation.

Against the backdrop of socially, demographically and culturally diverse Rotterdam, interviews were conducted with moderately- to highly-educated working families in different neighbourhoods. In identifying the study areas, two contrasting sets of housing arrangements were selected: an older, heterogeneous district with middle-class households dispersed throughout the district (North Rotterdam) and a small recently-built infill-site in the old Feijenoord district with middle-class households concentrated around a green square (Stadstuinen). Both research locations are situated near the city centre, the first to the north and the latter to the south.

North Rotterdam is a mosaic of different, mainly 19th century, neighbourhoods. It is a mix of narrow streets full of parked cars and attractive, green lane avenues; relatively prosperous native Dutch singles and large, poor migrant families from all over the world; shabby shops with cheap products and speciality stores with stylish goods. Although play spaces of various sizes are scattered throughout the neighbourhoods, they are generally in short supply. Around 20 per cent of the houses are owner occupied; the prices vary, depending on the quality, from less than €200 000 to almost €300 000. The high level of mix in different aspects gives this neighbourhood its special flavour. It is part of the old Rotterdam, which was not bombed during the Second World War, and as such it has symbolic meaning. However, the old Rotterdam is difficult to recognize: the population has changed considerably, new 'exotic' shops have replaced the traditional ones, and the urban renovation in the 1970s completely changed the townscape of great parts of North.

Stadstuinen contrasts with North Rotterdam in many ways. This restructured neighbourhood is surrounded on the north side by modern blocks, including offices and theatres, with large multicultural lower-class neighbourhoods to the south, west, and east. It is a small, reconstructed area of about 10 streets around a green square, on which a primary school and some play equipment is located. The area resembles projects of new urbanism (Franklin & Tate, 2002), but precisely because it is so small the confrontation with the overwhelmingly poor district of Feijenoord is marked. The confrontation is most visible at the Vuurplaat, the shopping street of Stadstuinen and of the southern and eastern neighbourhoods. Here, the cheap Lidl supermarket is found next to the more expensive supermarket of Albert Heijn. Stadstuinen is connected to the Rotterdam centre by the famous Erasmus Bridge, which is a symbol for new and modern Rotterdam. Most of the houses are owner occupied (more expensive than in North: between €300 000 and €400 000) and were built between 1998–99. The houses are predominantly single-family homes with gardens or shared terraces and some studio apartments. The majority of the residents have a Dutch background (around 60 per cent), but Stadstuinen has residents from different regions of the world. The streets are quiet and are not used by through traffic. Stadstuinen can be considered a middle-class enclave within the lower-class area of South Rotterdam, Feijenoord.

The 30 households interviewed included single parents (5) and migrant families (11). Survey information was gathered from 55 adults. To complement the interviews, several



systematic observations were carried out in the neighbourhoods in which the interviewees live as were conversations with a number of professionals (including school directors, estate agents, policy makers and street corner workers). The families interviewed were all working families with children between the ages of 0 and 16 years. The addresses of the interview subjects were obtained from various networks. Within the limits of the respondent profile, the study sought to compile a population that was as diverse as possible with regard to age, number of children, professional status, ethnicity and address. The respondents were well educated, but not all of them are dual-career households. Women predominately work part-time, as does a substantial minority of the men. These more or less symmetrical households do not earn high salaries, although the families in Stadstuinen have higher incomes than those in North. Some families in North do not have a car (7 out of 18; Stadstuinen: 0) and some live in rented housing (8 out of 18; Stadstuinen: 0). All the families interviewed had a long housing history in Rotterdam, which for both groups often started in North Rotterdam. The majority are 'newcomers' who came to live in Rotterdam at the beginning of their academic education. Professions are diverse with an emphasis on the cultural (arts, media) and the public sector (education, public affairs) with a minority working in the commercial sectors (more often in Stadstuinen). The interviews, which lasted from one to two-and-a-half hours, were held with one or both partners and fully transcribed. Interview topics were life stories (educational, working and housing histories), the organization of daily life (work, caring tasks and leisure) and residential preference (including the significance of the present home and neighbourhood).

### **Distance and Time**

All the families who were interviewed were working families, but they varied with regard to the number of hours they worked each week and the incomes they earned. While it would be a mistake to assume that all dual-income families are affluent, all the families interviewed were engaged in the same process: on a daily basis, they combined paid work with childcare and a variety of other activities. This process requires families to organize themselves spatially and temporally; residential location is crucial in this respect. These time-poor families were very aware of the advantages of urban living in terms of time and space. During the interviews, respondents frequently mentioned the need to minimize distance and travel time, and these issues were clearly associated with a sense of urgency, by respondents from North and Stadstuinen in equal measure.

Most crucially, respondents reported the importance of the location of work for the territory within which they want to reside. Work-related factors seemed to be strong determinants of their actual residential location. Therefore, it is no coincidence that most of the respondents worked in Rotterdam itself. In many cases, both partners had jobs in Rotterdam, and the few exceptions to this pattern perceived their situation as a constraint. The interviewees, particularly the women, left the interviewer in no doubt that living in Rotterdam was part of their strategy for combining paid employment with the demands of caring for children. A woman (48) in Stadstuinen, who was brought up in a suburb, said:

Both of us work here, and it is naturally ideal that we are within cycling distance of everything. My father used to take at least an hour to come home from work—and that has not got any better these days. It all costs time—sitting in traffic jams—and I think that's a waste. I'd rather spend that time with my children. It doesn't take me

very long at all to come home from work, and I try to be there when they get home. That's become more flexible lately, because they're getting older, but it's still important for someone to be there when they get home. I can do that easily by working a four-day week; I don't have to bother about commuting time. It's all a lot more efficient this way.

Although proximity to work was the primary reason that families mentioned for not moving out of the city, work-related issues were not the only reasons mentioned. Many respondents made it clear that they enjoyed living close to a broad range of urban cultural facilities. They perceived the possibility to visit these facilities—by cycle—as a luxury (compare Karsten, 2003). The facilities that they valued the most differed. Some families made frequent use of the cinema, while others preferred to attend festivals or speciality shops. They all shared a positive evaluation of the varied urban climate in Rotterdam.

Families also stressed the advantages of living close to children's facilities such as schools, children's leisure clubs, the swimming pool, the library and so forth. A father (47) of three sons in North Rotterdam:

... and it's really convenient that it's so central. We are within five minutes' cycling distance of tennis, Scouts, swimming lessons, the school and so forth. I also really like being so close to the centre of town...Of course, one disadvantage is that the area is very busy—traffic and the general hectic pace of the city. I also miss the open countryside...

'Nearby' does not always mean 'easy to reach' and this is the disadvantage of the urban milieu, particularly with regard to children's mobility. Parents felt it imperative that they should always accompany their children in the city. Statements about small distances were tempered with the observation that the 'hectic' character of the city tended to reduce the attractiveness of children's domains. Children have to be accompanied even for a five-minute cycle ride, and adult supervision is required when children have to cross busy streets or pass through 'bad' neighbourhoods. The parents in North and in Stadstuinen struggle with the same restrictions on their children's freedom of movement, which costs them a considerable amount of time and is irksome for the children. Respondents from North Rotterdam added the lack of safe and attractive play spaces to their lists of time-consuming activities:

The little playground across the street is close by, of course, but it's across the street, and this is a very busy street. And the children who go there aren't very nice. T. didn't fit in there at all. They are mostly Moroccan or other foreign children, and they go to other schools. It's really an entirely different neighbourhood across the street.

Outdoor adult supervision is considered necessary at all times in North Rotterdam. Although parents are obviously anxious about the dangers posed by traffic, the quotation above also shows clearly that social safety plays a major part in their decision to supervise their children. Concerns about 'other' children and 'different' styles of play were expressed by both native Dutch and migrant families living in the culturally-diverse streets of North Rotterdam. This diversity was less of a problem in Stadstuinen, where playing



outdoors was not regarded as a cause for concern, as the play area is located within the residential enclave of like-minded neighbours.

### **Families as Social Networks**

Cities can be characterized as diverse milieus with regard to population groups, neighbourhood types and range of facilities. In general, the proximity to ‘everything you could want’ is greatly appreciated, and that positive attitude carries over to the diverse social environment. This is particularly valued by people who have grown up outside the city, such as this woman in North brought up in a village in the south of the Netherlands:

Some Turks live upstairs in the house next door and some Moroccans live downstairs. Two men from Cape Verde live together across the street. We’re actually the only white family on this corner, but the diversity gives me a sense of freedom. I can just be who I am, and I wouldn’t want it any other way. That is also true for the facilities. There is so much within walking or cycling distance . . .

A common Dutch saying runs: ‘City air makes you free’. That is precisely what our interviewees indicated. However, praise for the fruits of diversity was accompanied by emphasis on the importance of having local contact with ‘people like us’ (Butler & Robson, 2001). Because they live in such a diverse environment, the families feel a strong need for social and emotional recognition and support. Sometimes it even seemed that the social network functioned as a shield against the chaotic city (cf. Sennett, 1984). By building a wide social network, families try to guard against negative experiences. It is clear that such a strategy is easier to operate in *Stadstuinen* than it is in North.

Who belongs to the social networks of these urban families? These households have many contacts with other households with children of about the same age who provide mutual playmates. The demographic homogeneity of the social networks is apparent, and it is one of the reasons for the popularity of *Stadstuinen*:

The alleyway that we share with the neighbours is really nice. We also like the house. It’s ideal—plenty of room—but that alleyway; it’s closed off and the children can just do as they please. There are lots of playmates for them here. We counted them not long ago: there were 28, but there are probably even more now. The children are welcome everywhere. In the summer, they just go from one wading pool to another (laughing). (Somewhat later:) It’s actually a little village within the city.

Children connect families who live in close proximity, and these connections can develop into supportive communities with the mutual exchange of assistance and advice. Parents take care of each other’s children, offer practical advice and discuss the nature of urban childhood. Most of the respondents had already lived in Rotterdam for years, but in their position of ‘newcomer’ they have no personal experience of growing up in a city. They felt that they could not compare their children’s childhood with their own and they were consequently involved in a process of reinventing a modern version of urban childhood (Bouw & Karsten, 2004). Children’s domains (schools and day-care centres, for example) are important meeting places where information and support is exchanged. These children’s places function as nodes in the social networks, particularly in North, where demographic diversity is large.

Family networks tend to be homogeneous in terms not only of children's ages, but also of class, but it is interesting to see that the social networks of these Rotterdam families were not entirely mono-ethnic circles. In contrast with the networks that have been described in studies about middle-class groups in London (Butler & Robson, 2001) and Amsterdam (Karsten, 2003). Rotterdam seems to correspond more closely with the ideal of the multicultural city. A Dutch North Rotterdam woman:

We actually have quite a lot of friends who live in the area. Of course, we don't have a lot of contact with everyone in the neighbourhood. We don't see much of our next-door neighbours. They are old Rotterdammers who think that it's terrible that so many migrants have come here to live. They also think that we're too close to the migrants in our neighbourhood ... We have good contact with our Moroccan neighbours upstairs. My neighbour and I sometimes sit on the porch and keep a watch out for the children together.

The old Rotterdammers this woman (38) refers to belong to the small remaining white urban working class. Obviously, they do not fit in very well in the social circle of the 'new' urban families. The Moroccan neighbours fit better. Networks of informal friendly contacts include families that belong to the same status group, regardless of ethnic origin. A woman in Stadstuinen tells us that she is not very pleased by the ethnic minorities living in the big rented housing estate near Stadstuinen, but she adds:

But, well, the migrants who live here in Stadstuinen don't cause any problems. How can I explain that? It's the people, I think, yes—they're middle-class I would say. A Moroccan family lives in our street and they bring up their children just as we do. They also think that it's important to make the most of your chances. That's what they tell their children, too.

Engaging with the same middle-class status groups is the dominant pattern. This does not mean that the respondents are in denial about the problematic sides of city life. The Rotterdam households interviewed can be characterized by a high degree of professional and residential commitment (see also Reijndorp, 2004). Some respondents work in public institutions and contribute enthusiastically to the solution of urban problems. Others are engaged in neighbourhood associations or sit as governors on school boards. The improvement of the public space in the neighbourhood (traffic reduction, cleaning, green planting) was high on the agenda. Overlapping local networks of people who have sufficient organizational skills, clear goals and a willingness to invest their energy in the local environment could be recognized (Willmott, 1986). These forms of engagement reflect a high degree of enlightened self-interest, but at the same time they illustrate that the respondents were not indifferent to the problems of Rotterdam. Many are keenly aware of the imbalance between poverty and wealth within the city, and they feel somehow responsible, as does this woman (47) in Stadstuinen who finds herself living in a prosperous enclave in a very poor district (Feijenoord):

It's like this; of course, we are living on a sort of island. I think it's terrible how those people over there, in Feijenoord, have to live. I make home visits there as part of my work, and I see how little room they have. They're awfully small homes for a whole

lot of people. It's a tremendous contrast with how we live, and I hope my children see that—that they can't take everything in this world for granted.

Although many networks function around the interests of the children, the mutual contacts do not end there. Parents tend to search for 'interesting' social relationships 'over the heads of their children'. These Rotterdam residents are 'not just parents'; they are working parents from a broad range of professions. The Amsterdam study referred to such parents as 'Yupps' (young urban professional parents) (Karsten, 2003). It is the physical and social proximity of many 'interesting' people that is considered an attractive part of urban life and it is mobilized when necessary:

We belong to the neighbourhood association, and we go to the cocktail parties and barbecues, but that is really for functional reasons. The association is one of the networks that we use. It's sometimes interesting for my wife, who is a cultural entrepreneur. My daughter finds her babysitting jobs that way. We get to know all sorts of people, and that can sometimes be convenient.

It is striking that the social networks of these families are very much locally rooted. This applies not only to *Stadstuinen*, with its homogeneous neighbours, but also to North Rotterdam, where many families talked with enthusiasm about their pleasant neighbours: "If it weren't for my neighbours, I might have moved away a long time ago". In both study areas families emphasize the good social relations with neighbours. Could it be that it is the families who failed to establish a local social network who have moved out of Rotterdam? For some households, the friendly contacts in the neighbourhood apparently function as a form of self-selected kinship, since most families (newcomers) have few relatives living in Rotterdam. Other families, particularly migrant households, have intensive relationships with their relatives, who live nearby. They engage in a variety of mutual-support activities. Grandparents care for the children and the middle-class migrant families themselves function as mentors for younger relatives. In doing so, members of the (still) small migrant middle-class are able to form important bridges between the various home cultures in Rotterdam.

### **Contested Identities**

Living as a family in a highly urbanized area is not seen simply as one of the many housing options available to households with children. On the contrary—the households have to defend their urban living to relatives, colleagues and friends who live elsewhere. "They ask me, 'What are you doing there still?'" This situation is clearly related to Rotterdam's poor reputation as a city, ranking among the worst in terms of safety, quality of the housing stock, political climate and repressive police behaviour. Who would want to live in such a place? Some families in North feel guilty with regard to their children: "... to be honest, it's mainly because of us that we live here; they didn't ask to live here". Others emphasize the positive side: "Our children will become streetwise and be prepared for the multi-cultural future". Or they become tired of arguing: "I've stopped defending our choice".

Narratives about residential locations say something about the identities that people wish to construct for themselves. Residents talk about the places they want to live as the places to which they would like to belong. Rotterdam respondents often started and finished their

justification of residential choice by simply saying: “We are real city people”. Most of these families had a strong preference for living in an urban environment, and they often made explicit, negative comparisons of city living and life in the suburbs. A family in North said: “It would really be a nightmare for us if we were to have to move to one of those suburbs. We wouldn’t want to do that to our children. We’re real city people, and we like all the opportunities that are there”. Migrants are particularly likely to display an aversion for the countryside and small villages, not so much from taste, but rather from fear. A migrant living in Stadstuinen stated: “I’m a true urbanite. I wouldn’t ever be able to live in a village. I’m afraid that there’d be a lot of discrimination there. I feel safer in the city”.

Identities are social constructions with many layers and distinguishing properties (Katz, 2003). The preference for urban living was frequently further qualified with statements about being ‘a real Rotterdammer’. Some respondents illustrate this point with a reference to Feyenoord (the Rotterdam soccer club):

I support Feyenoord. That’s really Rotterdam. If, as just recently, things aren’t going too well for them, you still support them. You stay loyal. I’ve lived on the Noordereiland for a long time, and I’ve seen the city change. It’s dynamic. They’ve achieved so much; just look at South. The city is changing all the time, and I think that’s positive. You see, Amsterdam’s lovely, but it always seems to stay the same.

The woman quoted has a long association with Rotterdam. She has lived in several neighbourhoods (among them Noordereiland) and expresses pride in Rotterdam, its hard-working inhabitants and its dynamic character. Rotterdam families felt a sense of loyalty towards Rotterdam and defended their city against all criticism. Nevertheless, they were certainly not blind to the negative aspects:

You have to learn to appreciate Rotterdam. Yes, I know we have to stick up for ourselves for living here. It’s funny; even though I go around griping about Rotterdam, if anyone else criticizes it, I immediately go onto the defensive.

The problematic sides of Rotterdam, among others the negative reputation of the city, however, also affect their status as ‘good’ families. Living in Rotterdam has to be defended. The families interviewed emphasized that living in Rotterdam does not mean that they are not good families. They often retort to outsiders’ questions about why they did not move. They define themselves as ‘sturdy’ families who can roll with the punches, as a mother (37) living in North Rotterdam expresses it:

Sometimes when we are on holiday, people who live in the province wonder about that: “. . . with children in Rotterdam?” Then they start to talk with compassion, and I start to think, “Come on, you silly moo, wake up!”

The ‘silly moo’ apparently lives in the province. The urban families are proud of their ability to live a family life in the city, as this young mother (34) affirms:

At parties, I often hear that people are jealous of us. Then they ask us, “Are you still living in the city?” Then they say that they would like to do that, once their children have grown up. That makes me feel pretty good about myself.

Sturdy families in the city of Rotterdam, this is how the respondents would like to present themselves. Their stories can be considered as components in the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991). The different layers of residential identity are intertwined and are related to different domains of life. These families live and work in a big city, they bring up their children there, and many of them actively engage in a broad variety of working and social networks. Living in Rotterdam, with its overlapping networks and the local centre of gravity has become a self-chosen way of life. Some of the families, who used to live in North, decided that they would prefer a little more comfort, homogeneity and quietness. They moved to Stadstuinen. The majority of the families in North do not value the newly-built 'enclave' in South highly, but some of them admit that they dream sometimes of a neighbourhood that would be easier to cope with. With their rejection of the classical suburb, the newly-built 'urban village' offers an alternative. The choice of residential location is subject to continual reflection and renegotiation.

### **Doubts**

Negative experiences can disrupt residential satisfaction. One woman in North spoke about her husband, who had recently passed through one of the roughest streets in Rotterdam. According to her, he was deeply shocked by the drug addicts he saw gathered there, the poor maintenance of the buildings and the gloomy atmosphere. She said, "In those moments, you really start to ask yourself: why would we want to live in such a city?" Fresh doubts are raised at each new stage in the life-course, especially when this concerns the perceived safety of their children, their development and opportunities for education and future well-being. Each time new, important steps in life have to be taken, new horizons are explored, particularly when children's lives are involved. The choice of a primary school is one such important step, but the process of reflection starts again as the secondary school comes into view. Families in Stadstuinen are very positive about the ethnically-mixed primary school, but are already thinking of the time to come (secondary school):

At first, we thought that we'd stay until our oldest was old enough for primary school. We had a really nice day-care centre, and we didn't know anything about the school that we have now. But now we're so satisfied with that school. It's actually a lot like a village school with a principal who greets each child every morning; it's really sweet. Everything just seems to be going well, and we have no reason to move now. There are also children of different ethnic backgrounds there, and we think that it's good that they can benefit from the school as well. I think that it's good. But sometimes we talk about what we ought to do when they become adolescents. Which school should they go to then?

'Which school?' is an important question (Butler & Robson, 2003). The families who participated in this study, including migrant families, did not find the many 'black schools' (schools in which most of the students are of non-Dutch background) in Rotterdam very attractive. The children of only two families attended a black neighbourhood school. The completely 'white' schools were not thought to be very attractive either, but some parents decided that these schools are to be preferred because of the extra cultural classes. Most of the respondent families sought and found ethnically-mixed schools that, at the same time,

had appreciable numbers of 'children like ours'. In Stadstuinen, the popular neighbourhood school does reflect this wish. The ratio of native Dutch to migrant children is 60:40.

When parents succeed in finding their ideal school, the housing situation becomes more firmly rooted. Not finding the right school sets off a seemingly endless process of evaluation and re-evaluation. Such processes also occur when one of the partners finds a job outside the city. Residential location is not always as fixed as it might seem. Settled people tend not to move (Fischer & Malmberg, 2001), but with growing children and two careers, settlement is to some extent in a continual state of flux.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

In this paper the question of how to explain middle-class families' preference for urban living has been addressed. The Rotterdam families interviewed have abandoned the seemingly natural relationship between middle-class households and suburbia, trying instead to survive in highly urbanized areas. Demographic and economic factors cannot explain such housing preferences. Therefore, a broader perspective has been introduced: a framework that considers housing in relation to daily activity patterns, social networks and identity constructions.

Daily activity patterns and time-geographical considerations (commuting time in particular) turned out to be determining factors in the choice of residential location for dual-income families. Living in the city is a component of a long-term coping strategy for families in which both partners work in the city where they also live. In addition, the close proximity to a broad range of facilities, including children's domains, is celebrated as an advantage of urban living. However, this does not imply the absence of criticism. Such observations tend to concern restrictions on children's freedom of movement and an overall lack of safety. The scarcity of time in the lives of these working families makes them vulnerable to problems of distance and accessibility. In the contemporary urban debate, mobility is presented as a matter of course, but despite the general trend of increasing mobility in Western societies, this study has shown that the emergence of working parenthood has placed space and time restrictions high on the agenda. These households, in both Stadstuinen and in North Rotterdam, stress the necessity of and the preference for proximity. Their essentially local daily activity patterns may be typical of Dutch cities in which cycle-distance is still a frequently-used measure contrasting with huge intra-commuting times in big metropolitan areas (Jarvis, 2005). The local character of day-to-day activities must not be confused with a local habitat: their outlook on the world is certainly not confined to their own community (Butler, 2003, p. 165). It is a combination of a geographically local space-time pattern with a cosmopolitan outlook peculiar to highly-educated people working in a broad variety of jobs. As such, these middle-class families are clearly distinguishable from the locally-based close-knit working-class (Young & Willmott, 1962) and migrant (Gans, 1962) communities.

The social networks of these Rotterdam families form a strong basis for the continuation of an urban lifestyle. Families were actively creating a home base within their diverse urban environment. Insight into the social contexts of households enhances our understanding of family housing issues and the motivation to stay or to move (Bailey *et al.*, 2003). Families are not isolated cells, but are engaged in social networks with neighbours, friends and—at least for the migrant households—relatives as well. These networks can be typified as relatively homogeneous with regard to demographic characteristics, class



position and ideas about a 'good' family life. The highly valued diversity of the urban environment is greatly enhanced by the presence of neighbours and friends who are within easy reach. In contrast with earlier studies in London (Butler, 2003) and Amsterdam (Karsten, 2003) there is some evidence of cross-ethnic intra-class social bonds. This bonding may be brought about by the cultural mix of the streets where they live: the residents are not exclusively white, not even in the middle-class enclave of Stadstuinen. Social networks combine personal and professional relationships that reflect a high degree of enlightened self-interest parallel to a willingness to contribute to solutions for urban (neighbourhood) problems. The social networks in both neighbourhoods are certainly less exclusive than Atkinson's (2006) typology of the residential disaffiliation of the British middle classes would suggest. In the Dutch context of moderate incomes, the absence of private schools, the emphasis on children's need to play outdoors (Karsten & van Vliet, 2006), and extensive cycle use, families cannot easily disassociate themselves from the environment in which they live. This cohesiveness applies more to North Rotterdam than to Stadstuinen. But even in the middle-class enclave of Stadstuinen, which is actually on too small a scale to accommodate rigid separation, residents cannot avoid engagement in the 'other' city. The primary school is a mixed school with a diverse pupil population and the Vuurplaat (shopping street) is also used by the working-class migrants living nearby.

The middle-class families studied were well aware that their residential choices run against the grain, and they frequently referred to their identity as 'true urbanites' and 'sturdy families'. They expressed a desire to belong to the big city, and they had a generally negative perception of suburbia as the optimal residential environment for families. Their stories of belonging highlighted the necessity of defending their preference for living in such a big city as Rotterdam. This study lays bare the tensions between being an urbanite and being a 'good' family. Living in Rotterdam forms a part of their contested family identities. They are of the opinion that they have not lost their right to the city after becoming a family. Within a broader context, we can understand the rise of the urban family as a step forward in the process of household diversification and emancipation. Not all families are alike. In addition to the majority of families who consider suburban housing as the ideal, there are also families who feel more at home in an urban context.

For these city-oriented families, housing is related to a variety of domains in life that are intertwined and can only be separated in analytical terms. Housing is linked with changing gender roles, new practices to combine care giving and a career, a growing dependence on external facilities and networks, a stronger need to position and distinguish themselves in relation to a growing middle-class. Housing can be considered to be not just one aspect of life but, at least for the families studied here, as a way of life with overlapping contexts. Differences between families in the old North Rotterdam district and the recently developed neighbourhood of Stadstuinen are only gradual. We are not discussing completely different groups. The Stadstuinen residents have been living in North Rotterdam for many years, long enough to earn the money needed to improve their housing situation. They have created social mobility without distancing themselves geographically from the city. They share with the families in North Rotterdam a rejection of suburbia as the preferred place for family life. Their residential location can be considered to be a compromise: an urban suburban enclave. It would be too easy to conclude that the families in the newly-built restructured neighbourhoods are only demonstrating a fierce social withdrawal. Both groups feel loyal to the city where they live and are trying to improve city life, clearly not without self-interest.

Cities have not yet felt the urge to accommodate urban family life appropriately. The cities' pressing need to retain middle-class people in the city has been translated into the building of expensive compact apartments. In this study, it is argued that families who have been living in the city for a considerable time and who are willing to continue their urban stay, are an interesting new target group for urban planning. They have overcome their anxiety of living in a diverse urban environment and try—some with hesitation and some with resolute purposefulness—to build a basis for a liveable future multicultural urban fabric. We are talking about first steps and these families are asking for more support. Some of them prefer the old mixed-use neighbourhoods where they have already lived for a long time. They would be grateful for the better maintenance of the public space, traffic-calming measures and more play spaces. Other families prefer modern housing conditions and can afford to make that wish come about. They opt for one of the infill sites such as Stadstuinen, which are better equipped for children playing outdoors. No single uniform building strategy should be followed in the struggle against social polarization in the city. Instead, we should think about different urban planning strategies to integrate family life in cities in a way that would accommodate social integration.

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