



Social interaction in mixed-tenure
neighbourhoods: a comparative
analysis of housing regeneration in the
UK (England) and in the Netherlands

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This report reflects on doctoral research on urban regeneration and social mix policies conducted at University College London between 2011 and 2016 and funded by the Bonnard Trust. The thesis, titled *Social interaction in mixed-tenure neighbourhoods: a comparative analysis of housing regeneration in the UK (England) and in the Netherlands*, focuses on everyday encounters with difference in neighbourhoods in London and Amsterdam. The project was driven by an interest in the effectiveness of current housing and planning policies in creating more diverse and tolerant environments.

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Executive summary

In the last three decades, policy interventions to improve conditions in deprived urban neighbourhoods have been characterised by the extensive physical restructuring of the housing stock, especially in areas that have large concentrations of social housing. These interventions are intended to increase the local mix of housing sizes, types and tenures, and foster more socio-economically and ethnically diverse communities. My PhD thesis explored social interaction in neighbourhoods in London and Amsterdam that had undergone large-scale demolition and reconstruction as part of urban regeneration. I investigated the nature and significance of everyday social interactions in these neighbourhoods, particularly among individuals of different housing tenure status – owner-occupiers, social and private sector tenants. My focus was on whether the increased mix of tenures resulted in the formation of more diverse local social networks and whether these helped break socio-economic, cultural and ethnic barriers, and brought benefits to households on lower incomes. My findings challenged the policy assumption behind urban regeneration strategies that a greater mix of residents with different housing tenure status will result in increased interaction across difference and called for more attention on policies falling outside the remit of housing and planning.

Background

Urban regeneration in many European and North American countries has been largely characterised by physical interventions in deprived neighbourhoods. Such projects are based on the partial or total demolition of social housing estates to open space for a greater mix of housing types and tenures to create more socially balanced communities by attracting more affluent households.

Alongside improvements to the local economy – due to the presence of households with higher purchasing power – reductions in area stigma, and the financing of urban regeneration through partnerships with the private sector, such strategies emphasise the importance of encouraging social interaction across

difference and improving social cohesion. It is argued that the presence of a wider mix of residents can benefit households on lower incomes by allowing them access to new information and opportunities they would not have if they only interacted with people similar to them.

My PhD thesis explored social interaction in two neighbourhoods that had undergone large-scale physical restructuring aimed at promoting social mix: North Peckham, in London, and the Zuidwest Kwadrant, in Amsterdam (the Netherlands). It focused on the nature and significance of residents' interactions with next-door or near neighbours, as well as those that result from encounters in local public spaces and during residents' routine activities in the neighbourhood. By shedding further light on national and local contexts that affect the outcomes of regeneration strategies, I questioned whether the objective of promoting positive social interaction can be materialised to a degree that justifies the high financial and social costs of physical restructuring and the reduction of affordable housing in regenerated neighbourhoods.

Both the UK and the Netherlands invested heavily in a non-profit rental sector (social housing) after World War II, but since the 1980s the social housing sector has been gradually declining, increasingly housing greater numbers of deprived and vulnerable households. In the Netherlands, despite the recent introduction of an income ceiling for social rental housing, the sector still houses a greater mix of households across income levels. Despite these differences, both countries have heavily relied on large-scale housing restructuring programmes to tackle spatial concentrations of deprived households.

Although my focus was on housing tenure, it is important to highlight that cities like London and Amsterdam have an over-representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (BAME), deprived neighbourhoods and housing estates, and it is argued that policy in many countries aims to counter both the spatial segregation of low-income and of BAME households 'in one go' (see Arbaci, 2007; Bolt et al., 2008; Cheshire, 2009; Colomb, 2011).

Neighbourhoods studied and methods used

Peckham is located in the London Borough of Southwark, within close proximity to central London. The area studied is known as North Peckham and was previously occupied by five modernist housing estates – the Sumner, the North Peckham, Gloucester Grove, the Willowbrook and the Camden estates. By the end of the 1970s, the area had become unpopular and, by the late 1980s, it repeatedly attracted political and media attention as being ridden with crime and dereliction. Figures from the 1991 Census (ONS, 1991), three years before regeneration started, show that the area had a higher than average proportion of young people under the age of 16, a high percentage of lone-parent households, high levels of unemployment, and high concentrations of BAME groups, particularly from Africa (57% of the area's total population, a figure well above the average of 24% in Southwark and 14% in London overall).

The Zuidwest Kwadrant is located in the district of Osdorp, in Amsterdam Nieuw-West, an area developed after World War II on the principles of the garden city movement and modernism¹. As Amsterdam expanded and new towns were created in its vicinity from the 1970s onwards, many households moved to other locations to gain more space – the area was dominated by small two-bedroom flats. The dwellings that were left unoccupied were gradually taken up by migrant households, particularly of Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds, whose position in the labour market had been badly affected by industrial restructuring, resulting in more than 80% of males aged 50 or over being unemployed (Crul and Doornik, 2003). With time, the area housed a concentration of elderly Dutch residents and large migrant households, resulting in tensions between the two groups. As a result, the general view held by politicians, policy-makers and the media was that improvements to the area could only be made possible if the inflow of BAME groups of non-Western origin² were controlled.

1 For more information about the development of the garden city neighbourhoods, visit <http://vaneesterenmuseum.nl/en>

2 I use the term 'non-Western' to follow the categorisation from the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2015), which uses the category 'non-Western' for people originating from Turkey, Africa, Latin America and Asia, with the exception of Indonesia and Japan.

The two case study areas were chosen because they shared similar characteristics, such as:

- The predominance of social housing before urban regeneration.
- Regeneration lasted approximately 10 years and ended a few years before fieldwork was conducted.
- A history of extensive demolition and reconstruction in order to create a mix of housing tenures and typologies.
- Similarity in terms of number of dwellings or area size.

From the start, it was evident that the research topic and questions demanded the employment of diverse methods and I chose a mixed-method approach. I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in both areas and attended tenants' and residents' association meetings, events and meetings at local schools, and events in community centres and religious organisations, as well as conducting observation in parks and other public spaces. I also distributed self-completion questionnaires in both areas and conducted interviews with residents, community organisers, local politicians and representatives of religious organisations.

I created an analytical framework that combined the literature on neighbour relations (Mann, 1954; Abrams and Bulmer, 1986) with that on social networks and communities (Wellman, 1979). Neighbour relations are setting-specific (van Eijk, 2011), rather than chosen and, therefore, relationships are unpredictable. Thus, I explored neighbour interactions based on Phillip Mann's (1954) suggestion that they should be explored as if sitting on a 'continuum' with 'both positive and negative poles' (p164), and I partially borrowed Chaskin and Joseph's (2011) framework for analysing social interaction in mixed-income developments because it evaluates interactions according to their intensity and purpose.

Main findings

In both case study areas, residents manifested a general predisposition and expectation of knowing who their neighbours were and providing small favours – such as taking in a parcel on a neighbour’s behalf – and help in cases of emergency. However, people only tended to interact beyond the cordial greeting with people like themselves. Contacts with neighbours were generally a consequence of impromptu encounters due to residential proximity rather than a deliberate choice.

Research participants were generally satisfied with casual and fleeting interactions with neighbours and did not have great expectations of building closer relationships with them. Many reported preferring to keep a degree of distance in order to ensure their privacy. Thus, although conversations in passing with neighbours were frequent, people reported doing “the usual chit-chat”. Their conversations generally centred around the weather, children or neighbourhood-related issues and were aimed at keeping a degree of distance to ensure their privacy while maintaining “a good atmosphere” in the neighbourhood.

People frequently exchanged favours with neighbours and these happened independently of age, lifestyles and ethnic differences, but did not necessarily culminate in stronger bonds forming between neighbours. This was illustrated by a private renter who had been living in Peckham for five years. Describing himself as “the typical 28-year-old ex-student, who doesn’t really get involved”, he gave an overview of his interactions with his next-door neighbour, whom he described as having two daughters, being an owner-occupier, and sounding “a bit Scottish”:

I remember the day when we were moving in [...]. There was Matt {changed name}, our next-door neighbour, and I just said ‘Hi, we’re moving in’. And then after that, when we passed, ‘Hi’. Nothing else. But then, I think, they were going on holiday one time and he wanted to know if I minded just taking the bins and putting them at the edge of the property. I said ‘that is fine’. Then we had a little chat. Then they’ve made an extension at the back of their garden, he can only clean the windows

from our garden. So he came round once and cleaned the windows. We were chatting and he said: 'do you wanna see the inside of the house?' [...]. I went in there. So it is sort of... I've spoken to him... I know you better than my neighbour, but, I now know him... sort of!... [chuckles]. And they invited us to their, 'come and see the house and have a drink'. [...] that would have been the first time we were socialising with them, but, I knocked on the door and said 'we're going out tonight, really sorry, but thanks for the invite'."

When housing tenure status was analysed in more detail, important differences were found. First, concurring with similar studies that investigate the experience of living in mixed-tenure neighbourhoods, owner-occupiers and private tenants in both case study areas spent most of their time outside the neighbourhood, whereas social housing tenants were found to be more neighbourhood-bound.

Secondly, while receiving or visiting a neighbour at home was common among both owner-occupiers and social tenants, the former often visited neighbours to discuss the maintenance of shared areas and as a consequence of their involvement in local campaigns. Social tenants tended to visit neighbours to socialise (e.g. for cups of tea or coffee, "check how the neighbour is doing") and to talk about personal issues.

Thirdly, vulnerable households – generally living in social housing in both case study areas – often maintained close bonds with at least one neighbour and relied on them for assistance with daily activities. These households spent most or all of their time in the neighbourhood as financial and health constraints caused them to be significantly less mobile. Their neighbours were also in similar situations and their interactions were characterised by the frequent exchange of various forms of support, including the lending and borrowing of money, household and food items, and help with mobility and personal care.

In the Zuidwest Kwadrant, tensions caused by behavioural differences between migrant and native Dutch households often resulted in an 'us' and 'them' dynamic. Comments such as "they leave their clothes to dry outside their

house” or “their children stay out until late in the evening” were common during interviews with Dutch households in both social housing and owner-occupation. However, while before regeneration these tensions were contained within the social rented sector because of the absence of private housing in the area, the increase in tenure mix resulted in socio-economic difference becoming more racialised as some owner-occupiers manifested opposition to new social housing developments near to them for fear of an increase in BAME groups in the area.

Private sector tenants in both case study areas reported the lowest levels of interactions with neighbours. The interviews revealed that social tenants and owner-occupiers often perceived private sector tenants to be uninterested in local issues. The increase in ‘buy-to-lets’ in North Peckham contributed to growing resident turnover in the area, with many residents complaining about the “loss of community”, particularly due to their inability to recognise neighbours in rented properties. In the Zuidwest Kwadrant, the private rented sector was perceived as a temporary tenure, attracting newcomers to Amsterdam who would soon move to other more attractive locations.

Regarding encounters in public spaces and during activities such as shopping and eating, the results from the two case studies differed substantially. As an example, at the time of the interview, parents in Peckham noted that their school choices were limited because school places were offered based on catchment areas. As a result, they often joined parent-teacher associations to improve the quality of local schools. Conversely, the Dutch school system is known to be heavily segregated along ethnic lines because parents can choose schools according to their lifestyles and values. Despite investments in a state-of-the-art building to house the local school, the interviews revealed that the decisions of native Dutch parents reinforced ethnic segregation as they actively sought schools outside the case study areas. Segregation was so stark that the local school ran parent and children events with the help of a local Christian organisation and elderly native Dutch volunteers to teach children traditional Dutch play and games and to, according to one of the organisers, help mothers and children learn about Dutch culture.

With regard to eating, drinking and socialising locally, a sharp divide along class and ethnic lines was found. While in both case studies owner-occupiers and private tenants frequented bars and cafes in areas that were gentrifying or that offered more exclusive services, social housing tenants often went to budget and restaurant chains. Both Peckham and Amsterdam Nieuw-West are known for their ethnic shops and these were found to be important meeting places for BAME groups and key spaces for information and support. In North Peckham, one Nigerian interviewee had met his partner – also from Nigeria – while visiting one of the shops; another found his first rental property in the area through an advert in a shop window. In the Zuidwest Kwadrant, it was common for ethnic minority households to shop at Halal butchers and other specialty shops, while elderly Dutch residents generally went to cafes with historic links to traditional associations and churches.

Discussion of findings and implications

Although urban regeneration had a positive impact on the physical environment and on overall perceptions of safety in both case study areas, the increased mix of housing tenures did not result in a level of cross-tenure interaction that would be meaningful enough to allow for the exchange of the type of information – such as employment opportunities – that would benefit, in economic terms, social housing tenants on lower incomes. People's propensity to interact and form relationships with neighbours were found to be a product of a complex mixture of circumstances, such as individual volition, the sharing of socio-demographic characteristics or lifestyles, or of a common language, and of individual and general perceptions of the neighbourhood's history and its inhabitants.

The findings highlighted that communities are far from being static. Improvements to deprived areas might trigger a process of gentrification, which would, in turn, lead to concentrations of particular socio-demographic groups – indeed, private renters reported being concerned about gentrification in North Peckham. Most importantly, reductions in social housing and demolitions contribute to a backlog in local authorities' housing waiting lists and put pressure

on low-income households who have to find refuge in the private rented sector. These issues raise questions regarding the suitability of urban regeneration projects based on tenure-mixing strategies in answering problems related to housing supply, access and affordability.

The research also raises questions regarding the effectiveness of social mix policies in meeting the needs of vulnerable households as these were found to be more dependent on place-based social networks. Agreeing with similar studies (Gwyther, 2009, 2011), the findings highlight that, by intervening in housing tenure, strategies to increase an area's social mix run the risk of dismantling the support networks of vulnerable social housing tenants by dispersing them amidst residents who spend more time outside the neighbourhood and who are better able to avoid those with whom they have little in common.

The findings related to the use of public spaces and facilities also revealed that residents of different housing tenure status do not necessarily integrate. They coexist. They live parallel lives since their lifestyles, social worlds, leisure and consumption patterns differ considerably – an existence that Robson and Butler (2001, p77) define as “tectonic”. Interviews with owner-occupiers revealed that they were engaged in what Andreotti et al. (2014) describe as a “complex game of distance and proximity” (p63) in relation to social housing tenants. Owner-occupiers have more resources – financial, educational and cultural – and these enable them to “select, control and choose the nature, intensity and dynamics of their interactions” in the neighbourhood (2014, p63).

Lastly, by comparing two European countries, my PhD thesis has brought attention to the fact that a multitude of factors influenced by local and national contexts resulted in both areas falling into deprivation. It also showed that despite the fact that similar approaches towards social mix have been adopted in both case study areas, possibilities of encounters and cross-tenure interaction in public spaces and facilities in the neighbourhood are contingent on the implementation at the local level of a combination of national and local policies

and strategies, many of which sit outside the remit of housing and planning policy. This has important policy implications as it shows that planning and housing policy alone – much of it in the form of physical improvements and the construction of state-of-the-art buildings – cannot guarantee that people will use the same spaces or will mix.

Final thoughts

When I started my research, the global financial crisis of 2008 had already markedly affected housing regeneration programmes in both the UK and the Netherlands. By the time I was doing fieldwork – between 2012 and 2013 – both governments had already intervened in the financial market to prevent the collapse of financial institutions and restore confidence in the banking sector. The climate of economic instability originating from the crisis and the fall in housing prices and transactions – particularly in the Netherlands – contributed to projects similar to the one studied in Amsterdam to be “delayed indefinitely” (Savini et al., 2016: p109).

In response to the crisis, both countries opted for austerity measures to different degrees. In England, these took the shape of deep spending cuts implemented in 2010 by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government. In 2011, the Coalition Government cut the country’s social housing budget by half while the 2012 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) increased the weight of viability assessments in discussions over developers’ affordable housing obligations. These have significantly affected the building of affordable housing, particularly in London, where property development has since picked up substantially. Many redevelopment projects have been subject to controversy due to significant reductions in social housing provision. An example is the regeneration of the Heygate Estate, where the original promise of 500 new social housing units was reduced to just 82³. In the Netherlands, changes to the eligibility criteria for social housing, and the relaxation of rent controls and the sale of social housing

³ Visit <http://35percent.org> for more details.

in the most sought-after areas of Amsterdam are contributing to increased spatial segregation between low-income – often BAME – and more affluent households (Musterd, 2014; Savini et al., 2016).

With home ownership becoming out-of-reach for many and social housing only available to those in most need, more and more people have no other option but to rent from a private landlord. Although the private rented sector is very differently structured in the two countries, problems related to affordability are growing and these changes are having significant effects on the social make-up of the two cities.

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The Braunthal Reports are named after the Founder of The Bonnart Trust. Freddy Bonnart-Braunthal set up the trust in 2002 to *“establish and maintain scholarships at universities in the United Kingdom for research at the postgraduate level into the nature of racial, religious and cultural intolerance with a view to finding a means to combat it”*.

Freddy had personal experience of prejudice. At the outbreak of WWII he was studying economics at LSE and was evacuated to Cambridge, but in 1940 he was labelled an ‘enemy alien’ and interned to a camp in Canada for 10 months. He was eventually allowed to return to Britain to fight against Nazism. On joining the army in 1943, he changed his name to Frederick Bonnart. However, he was determined that his original name be preserved and associated with the actions of the Trust – hence we are calling these papers The Braunthal Reports.

The Braunthal Reports are based on analysis and recommendations drawn from the dissertations submitted for a doctorate by the Scholars funded by The Bonnart Trust. They are freely available and can be downloaded from the trust website. www.fbbtrust.org.uk

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