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## **Keep It Looking Beautiful!**

# **Historicised Residential Architecture as a means of Reproducing The Middle Class Self**

Sabine Meier

School of Architecture, Built Environment & Civil Engineering,  
Hanze University of Applied Sciences

**Abstract.** This paper explores how residents of Helmond Brandevoort, a neotraditional neighbourhood in the Netherlands, socially construct a 'classed' place identity and what role the historicised architecture plays within that process. Given that place identity is constructed through social and cultural practices, the paper argues that residents' consumption of historicised environment is bound up with drawing symbolic boundaries which were explored here by analysing residents' narratives. Two prominent types of narratives were found: their aesthetic judgement of the residential environment and the way they use it. Through these layered narratives, all interviewees appear to use historicized aesthetics to classify themselves as part of a valued social category. In the neighbourhood explored, the way of boundary drawing based on fostering moral judgements of social behaviour accompanied by efforts to keep neighbourhoods' historicised image unchanged.

**Keywords:** middle class, neotraditional housing, place identity, symbolic boundaries, Helmond Brandevoort, the Netherlands

## Historicised Residential Architecture

When the trappings of history are no longer confined to museums, the past is made visible at a variety of locations (Lowenthal 1985). We can spend our holidays in historicised theme parks, we go shopping in new shopping centres whose architecture is a throwback to shopping arcades of the nineteenth century, or we live in neighbourhoods with historicised architecture (Sorkin 1992). For example, building professionals who construct suburban housing and cottages have adopted the Tudor style in order to create a sense of 'Englishness' in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Ballantyne and Law 2011). References to the American small town (Anderson 2010) and European medieval streetscapes (Krier 2003) have also been widely used in attempts to create 'authentic' communities and localities (Duany et al. 2002).

In the Netherlands, neotraditional residential architecture was widely dismissed from the start of the 1950s to the mid 1990s. However, during the past fifteen years neotraditional neighbourhoods have become increasingly common (Ibelings 2004). One of the most important reasons to explain this change in attitude is the increased production of owner-occupied houses<sup>1</sup> for the Dutch middle class<sup>2</sup> (Toussaint and Elsinga 2007). Moreover, the creation of recognizable regional architectural identities has become arguably the main objective of planners. Initially, non-Dutch architects like Krier and Kohl introduced the idea of an idealized European small town into the Dutch context throughout the 1990s (Krier 2003). Afterwards, more and more Dutch offices began to refer to particular Dutch building traditions -- like the craftsmanship found in vernacular farmhouses (characterized by brick or green brushed wood) and the austere usage of (exotic) style elements -- in order to recreate unique and recognizable residential places (Meier and Reijndorp 2010).

Neotraditional neighbourhoods in general, but particularly in the Dutch context, are characterized not only by the strong rhetoric of locality and regional identities, but by a high degree of home ownership. They tend to be exclusive places where the vast majority of the residents are 'white', affluent and well-educated (Till 1993; McCann 1995; Falconer Al-Hindi and Staddon 1997; Falconer Al-Hindi 2001). Whether *all* Dutch neotraditional neighbourhoods are exclusive places is a matter for further research but it is a fact that in each newly-built suburban (neotraditional) neighbourhood, a certain percentage (10 up to 30 per cent) of social housing is demanded by the government (Boeijenga and Mensink 2008). Approximately 519,000 new housing units were projected over the period 1995-2005, mainly built by consortia consisting of local authorities, housing corporations and private developers (Ministry of VROM 1993). The number of neotraditional housing schemes among recently-built neighbourhoods remains unclear, but Boeijenga and Mensink (2008:32) argue that '[H]istoricist building styles are in fact extremely common... including the wooden Zaan houses...the miniature versions of traditional farmhouses...and the so-called Hague School, popularly known as "thirties houses".'

While many studies have highlighted the motives behind the production of historicised neighbourhoods (McCann 1995; Furuseth 1997; Falconer Al-Hindi 2001) or the ability of design features designed to encourage community formation (Talen 2002), the empirical question that has been largely ignored is how residents themselves construct their middle class place identity via the consumption of neotraditional architecture. In this paper, I therefore aim to explore how people produce a 'classed' place-identity, first by developing attitudes towards, and social and cultural practices in, residential space and second, by the way they judge and

classify these in order to draw symbolic boundaries between ‘people like us’ and the ‘Other’ (Savage 2010).

The research illustrated here is based on narratives emerged during in-depth interviews involving fifteen households in the Dutch neotraditional neighbourhood of Brandevoort. The neighbourhood is a recently-built suburban neighbourhood, which is part of the municipality of Helmond (situated in the province of North-Brabant)

### **Middle Class' Place Identity**

When people decide to move they (re)consider their place identity. Yet the freedom to choose a residential place and to acquire a property is dependent on peoples’ assets. According to Savage et.al. (1992), property is, alongside bureaucracy and culture, one of the three assets fundamental to class formation. Social groups attempt to preserve these assets for future generations and convert one type of asset into another.

Typically, fractions of the middle class aspire to transform their cultural assets into property, with ‘the aesthetics of the middle-class residence’ playing ‘a major part in the exhibition of specific cultural taste and values’ (Savage et al. 1992:94). Once middle class incomers have moved to their new home, they ‘electively belong’ to places by seeking to distinguish themselves from the ‘locals’ who might have more established attachments to the place. The former group is likely to identify the beauty and architectural features of a place as belonging to them and to ‘people like us’, while the latter group emphasize the ‘given-ness’ of place (Savage et al. 2005; Savage 2010). Cloke et al. (1995) demonstrate that middle class fractions develop lifestyle strategies of elective belonging in rural areas, while others show that incomer households draw a symbolic boundary between their ‘respectable’ newly-built private estates and ‘others’ living nearby by classifying them as ‘tasteless’ and/or ‘rough’ (Dowling 1998; Watt 2009). This process of drawing symbolic boundaries reflects the spatial and social withdrawal tendencies of the upper and middle class in exclusive enclaves (Atkinson 2006) or even in gated communities (Blakely and Snyder 1999; Atkinson and Blandy 2005).

Diverse studies accordingly underline that the construction of place-identity involves the (re)production of ‘contemporary inequality, especially its cultural and symbolic aspects’ (Savage 2010:115). This stresses that preferences for a particular locations or styles of development might act as a means of displaying *distinction*. Bourdieu (1984:56) claimed that taste is ‘the basis of all that one has - people and things - and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others’. He related taste to inherited cultural capital (acquired by family background) and cultural capital acquired by education, arguing that the higher is someone’s cultural capital, the more importance is attached to the representation of something rather than its instrumental characteristics. However, the relationship between cultural capital, taste and the formation of class is more complex than this suggests. In an unequal society, knowledge of cultural artefacts like classical music or art is used as means to represent and legitimate social boundaries. By using their *habitus* as a generative principle, individuals reproduce cultural practices and societal structures (i.e. the possibilities to acquire and employ social, cultural and economic capital) (Bourdieu 1984).

Although much contested (e.g. Savage 2000), the concept of *habitus* has laid the foundation for a number of studies that have reconsidered class formation as a structuring principle of inequality while giving more attention to the aesthetic, gendered, cultural and moral aspects of this process (Crompton et al. 2000; Bottero 2004; Skeggs 2005; Sayer 2005). The ‘culturalist’ class approach recognizes cultural

identity as ‘classed’ identity. This does not mean that people explicitly have to identify themselves within ‘discrete class groupings for class processes to operate’ as all that is required is ‘for specific cultural practices to be bound up with the reproduction of hierarchy’ (Bottero 2004:989). This hierarchy is a fine-grained differentiation (re)produced by economic and cultural practices including the judgement of whether people have the ‘right’ taste or whether they are morally worthwhile (Lawler 2005). Morally judging means classifying people (especially women) as respectable or not.

In relation to residential life, one example of ‘boundary work’ is the invention of community-based activities by which participation and a sense of community can be generated. When carried out regularly, these activities become ‘invented traditions’ ‘establishing or symbolizing’ the social cohesion of ‘real or artificial communities’ (Hobsbawm 1983:9). Moreover, aesthetic judgments of style can also be seen as an example of symbolic boundary drawing. In line with Duncan and Duncan (2004), I propose that aesthetic judgement (i.e. taste) is intertwined with the economic *and* visual consumption of property and residential environment including the ‘gaze’ (Urry 2002) exercised upon (and over) those who live in specific neighbourhoods.

### **Research Location: Brandevoort**

The suburban neighbourhood of Brandevoort is expected to be composed by 6,000 single-family houses by 2015 of which approximately 3,000 have been built up to now (Gemeente Helmond 1997). Here, the developers also wanted to design an identifiable neighbourhood that was ‘totally different’ from the old urban neighbourhoods of Helmond. In the nineteenth century, the city had developed as an industrial city specializing in textile and metal production. However, since the 1980s industrial production has been in decline. Nowadays, the city has a negative reputation due to its relatively high rate of unemployment and delinquency. The architectural firm Krier and Kohl was asked not to include references to the industrial past but rather to fortified old villages whose remains can still be found in the province of North-Brabant. In my research I focus on the centre of Brandevoort known as De Veste. Here the urban design is based on one-family houses arranged as housing blocks. Of the approximately 900 houses built in De Veste to date, 84 per cent are owner occupied. The average income level of the residents of Brandevoort and its centre, De Veste, is higher than the average for the city of Helmond (Gemeente Helmond 2007).

*Table 1: Occupations of the interviewees*

	<b>De Veste (Helmond)</b>
Doctor or academic researcher	2
Manager	3
Architect	1
Teacher	-
Journalist	-
Police officer	1
Office or bank employees (secretary, administrative work, accountant, IT-administration, etc.)	10
Nurse	-
Shop assistant	2
(supervision of) metalworker	2
Housewife	1
<b>Total no. Interviewees</b>	<b>22</b>

My research sample comprised fifteen households with 22 interviewees in the De Veste neighbourhood centre. These homeowners who paid between €200,000 and €500,000 for their dwelling were for the most part/all well-educated and born and raised in the Netherlands.

The research participants were encouraged to reveal personal narratives face-to-face with the investigator about three basic topics: why they decided to move to their present neighbourhood, how they assessed the neohistoricized design and how they experienced everyday life in the neighbourhoods they share with others.<sup>3</sup>

### **Narrative One: The Aesthetic Judgement**

All the respondents in De Veste appreciated the architectural aesthetic of their newly-built neighbourhood and claimed that they generated a number of different associations. The brick that appears to be hand-made, the diversity of the facades, and the natural greenery were the most frequently referred features. The interviewees classified these aspects as non-standard and related them to certain 'types' of people, indicating their elective belonging to their new neighbourhood (Savage et al. 2005). For example, Frank, a 26 year-old metalworker asserted with enthusiasm:

'I think certain architecture is appealing to a certain type of people. The people living here would really like to live in an Amsterdam' canal-side house but can't afford it. Choosing a house here is the next best thing. They are new; there are no maintenance costs for the coming five years ... Brand spanking new houses with a touch of the nostalgia and an image of yesteryear.'

A middle-aged couple (Dave is an academic researcher and his wife Edith has a university graduate degree but works as a secretary) claimed:

Dave (38):

'[De Veste] is in principle a suburban neighbourhood which has been built with references to the past.'

Edith (37):

'All the houses are different, in height and colour of the bricks. This makes it more than a run-of-the-mill neighbourhood.'

Dave:

'I would never claim to live in a bog-standard row of houses.'

Edith:

'Me neither, because it doesn't feel like that.'

These quotations are typical accounts of the appeal of historicised aesthetics. The diverse brick facades are regarded as being the direct opposite of other 'placeless' newly-built suburbs, as well as the monotonous row of houses of postwar neighbourhoods which are typical of social housing. In addition, the variety of brick facades reminded almost all respondents of the old Amsterdam' canal-side houses where the elite used to live. The ability to choose variety and historicised aesthetics is a way of constructing a 'respectable' self that belongs to a valued social group: the 'people like us' (Savage 2010).

Besides historicised aesthetics, greenery also appears to symbolize respectability. The greenery of De Veste is basically situated in the zone surrounding the 'old-new fortress'. A male resident named Felix, a non-college graduate who worked as a

manager in the computer industry where he apparently earned a large amount of money (illustrated by the large number of branded furnishings, the price of which he referred to during the interview), claimed that ‘a lot of space’ was a decisive factor when deciding to move just to the edge of the De Veste ‘fortress’.

‘We wanted to have a sense of freedom, with no neighbours nearby or on the opposite side. We feel we have a different, special house ... this open space will remain green and open for ever. Farmers and rich people live some way away but the space in front of our house will not be built in the future.’

For some, the ‘gaze’ upon this green zone and moat (Fig. 1) evidentially prompted the idea of living in a quasi-rural environment. This affinity for nature is something often noted in studies of the middle class (Savage et al. 1992), with Cloke et al. (1995) arguing that rurality is an object of desire across the range of (middle) class fractions.

*Figure 1: The green zone and moat that divide De Veste from the ‘new’ suburbs (i.e. the other new parts of Brandevoort). Author’s photograph*



#### *Judging the historicised image of the street*

The great majority of residents of De Veste were not keen on people lingering on benches along the streets, associating that behaviour with uneducated ‘working-class’ residents of an area in Helmond called Het Haagje, and with delinquency and poverty. This suggests that street furniture served a predominantly decorative function rather than actual usage, as discussed by Sarah and Max, the elderly couple mentioned above:

Max:

‘Well, they are imitating the image of the ‘good old days’ by putting a bench out.’

His wife Sarah:

‘But they don’t use it. It’s like that neighbourhood in Eindhoven, the Edison neighbourhood isn’t it?’

Max:

‘But you have them in Amsterdam as well.’

Sarah:

‘There they often sit out if the weather’s good. But now people think it’s not the done thing any more [...] No. We reckon it looks bad - it’s not done. It was all right in the old days [...] You see it in neighbourhoods where sort of the lower classes live. They all sit outside together don’t they?’

Max:

‘No, only in working-class districts, real working-class districts.’

Sarah:

‘Yes, and the people love to sit outside together in nice weather and to call to people over the road, to the neighbours opposite. ‘Hey mate, fancy a beer?’ [laughs] That’s not our thing.’

Max:

‘Let’s say we’re just not like that.’

The quotations capture how Sarah and Max linked aesthetic and moral concerns in the process of marking the boundary between the ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’. The two quotations illustrate that street furniture here appeared as an instrument for inhibiting social interaction in front of the houses at the same time as consolidating a particular aesthetic. It had to fit in with the perfectly historicised architectural image and to make the ‘decent’ street visually coherent. Betty, aged 24, a secretary, stated:

‘You know what the front gardens end up looking like? We get annoyed at the sand at the front [*of the house*] opposite, and the other stuff - it’s not that we’re looking out for things to moan about...[*hesitation*]...Well, perhaps we do a bit. But here in the neighbourhood you’re so used to everyone keeping it looking beautiful. Everyone planting nice plants and hanging up nice lamps. We once had neighbours opposite who always kept their curtains closed! [*indignant*] Then you sort of think, we pay quite a lot of money and then you have to sit and look at that all day long.’

Her ambition to retain the look of the community represents her uncompromising acceptance of, and hence identification with, ‘middle class’ norms. The imposed social pressure to maintain a perfect image of the past is evident in more than just this form of self-regulation given the style of fences, awnings and lamps are also subject to local government regulations, with a brochure of approved materials and colours meaning the residents have little choice in terms of how to decorate their houses and gardens. Each resident of De Veste is also required to keep the fences white in colour and low in order to create a homogenous and therefore beautiful look. Here, individuals’ desire to personalise residential spaces is counteracted by the need to cultivate a collectively-controlled historicised image.

### **Narrative Two: Inventing Traditions**

The residents of De Veste celebrate their perception of being a community in a similar way. However, they also organize a so-called Dickens Night festival which takes place in De Veste every year in December. Inspired by the literature of Charles Dickens, they have invented an imaginary nineteenth century tradition<sup>4</sup>. For one day, the entire public space serves as a market place for social activities and the sale of

goods. Moreover, visitors and residents are encouraged to dress up as characters from the writing of Dickens.

*Figure 2: Celebration of the Dickens Night festival in De Veste. Author's photograph*



Most of the interviewees appreciate this event because it sets De Veste off from other suburban neighbourhoods. Goods are put on sale and the houses are decorated in a way that fits in with the nostalgic image of the past. One De Veste interviewee pointed out that the residents are not expected to 'sell junk'. She was critical of door-to-door salesmen and she emphasised the fact that the Dickens Night event is intended to be a rather chic, art and crafts market. Similarly, some interviewees maintained that anyone who does not decorate the streets in a 'decent' way is not deemed to 'belong' to this neighbourhood. For instance, according to Sally (38), who works as an office employee and who is the mother of two children:

'...then you ought to go and live somewhere else if you... er ... don't want to adapt to this style.'

Here, moral with aesthetic judgements again combine to draw a symbolic boundary between the 'respectable' self and the 'Other'.

### **Conclusion**

The recently-built Dutch neotraditional neighbourhoods seem to meet the desire of fractions of the middle class to live in predictable residential spaces where they hope to share daily residential life with like-minded people. As the case study illustrates, neotraditional design features, the visual consumption of community space and the

inventing of community-based traditions (Watt 2009; Savage 2010) reinforced a classed place-identity. This suggests that symbolic boundary-making took several forms but the aesthetic judgement of the neotraditional environment is a significant means used by the interviewees to classify themselves as part of a social group perceived as 'respectable' (Bourdieu 1984; Skeggs 1997). In addition, taste as an aesthetic and moral concern was a means to control residential space and to impede its change. Therefore the 'innocent appreciation' of historicised architecture served as an 'effective mechanism[s] of exclusion and reaffirmation of class identity' (Duncan and Duncan 2004:4).

In the light of this, it is tempting to equate the reasons of appreciation of historical revivalism by the Dutch middle class with motives elaborated in studies in which new urbanisms have been related to the erection of symbolic barriers in order to maintain class exclusivity (Dowling 1998; Falconer Al-Hindi 2001) and regional identities which only make sense in the relation to the 'Other' (Till 1993). However, in the Netherlands the tendency of the 'white', affluent and better educated to isolate themselves in historicised 'insulated spaces' (Atkinson 2006:820) seems to be balanced by policy intervention and the kind of housing production and supply. First of all, class exclusivity of residential space has been undermined by the state regulation that a certain percentage of new suburban housing stock has to be social housing (Boeijenga and Mensink 2008). Secondly, the recently built suburban housing has been part of a national building programme for which the state has provided subsidies for land acquisition and/or improvement of the infrastructure (Ministry of VROM 1993) in order to allocate high standard housing schemes, infrastructure and employment to a great number of Dutch urban regions. The housing production itself has been realized by building consortia that share risks and benefits with local authorities generally supervising the design of the urban form and architecture (Lörzing 2006). All these aspects have so far prevented the creation of neighbourhoods for the (upper) middle class with clear spatial boundaries like gates or fences (except for a few exceptions (Meier 2011; Lohof and Reijndorp 2006)). Buildings professionals prefer instead to provide a hierarchy of residential places by means of historical references that, following Till (1993:710), legitimize particular 'regional identities as being normal'. Here, I suggest that an actual legitimisation of territorial boundaries goes beyond what housing producers are able to achieve by themselves. Territorial boundaries only 'work' if residents routinely identify with the offered historicised neighbourhoods and, hence, draw symbolic and social boundaries in the midst of their day-to-day residential life.

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## Notes

- 1 From all tenures in 1975 37.2 per cent were owner-occupied; in 2005 54.2 per cent (Toussaint and Elsinga 2007).
- 2 Dutch scholars like Ganzeboom et al. (1991) suggest that (1) people who do manual work and had been educated at a lower level than secondary education are ‘working class’; (2) people who supervise manual labour or are self-employed and had attended (general) secondary vocational education were referred to as the intermediate class and (3) individuals who perform intellectual activities and who had received higher vocational education or further education are referred to as upper middle class. A large number of members of upper middle class and intermediate group have achieved to purchase property since 1990.
- 3 According to Giddens (1991), self-identity is conceived as being socially constructed via personal narrative, i.e. ‘stories told by research participants (which are themselves interpretive)’ as well as ‘interpretive accounts developed by an investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observation (a story about stories)’ (Riessman 2008:6). People construct narratives to give meaning to themselves, their relationship with others and - last but not least - their relationship with their place of residence (Leyshon and Bull 2011).
- 4 Non-Dutch readers probably are amazed about the popularity of Charles Dickens in the Netherlands. The authors of the website of the small-sized Charles Dickens Museum ([www.dickensmuseum.nl](http://www.dickensmuseum.nl)) argue that there was always a lively interest in Dickens since his writings had been translated into the Dutch language (from 1839 onwards). However, particularly throughout the last two decades, Dickens’ humorous and not very harsh descriptions of social class differences have been used to invent city festivals that take place around Christmas. Here, ‘real’ historic or historicised city spaces serve as stage to revitalize characters from his writings. The journalist Van Ijzendoorn claims in his article ‘The new Victorians’ in the Dutch magazine *De groene Amsterdammer* (2012, no.136, p. 63) that Dickens is much-loved because his stories fit to the Dutch contemporary ‘insecure and therefore nostalgic society’.