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'Making Buurland': Place-making, Friendship and Unboundedness in gradually developed Residential Community Buurland Utrecht
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‘Making Buurland’

Place-making, Friendship and Unboundedness in gradually developed
Residential Community *Buurland Utrecht*



**Universiteit
Leiden**
The Netherlands

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MA Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology:

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

This research presents an historical-ethnographic case-study of ‘Buurland’: a collaborative housing community in Utrecht. By using various audio-visual and ethnographic methods I¹ explore how Buurland became the community it is now and how this communal living is lived and experienced by different Buurlanders². The focus of this research is on processes of re-design and place-making and the factors that allowed this re-design to occur. The temporality of the place, and the attitude and close ties of the initiating group prove to be important in this process. Furthermore, drawing upon discourses on architecture and communal living, I argue that the specific design of the housing blocks fosters social interactions between neighbors. In addition, Buurland’s case-study shows how lack of policy in a residential area leads to creative communal practices organized by neighbors. The yearly ‘Zwemfest’ is a key communal practice, which forms a binding ritual among the members of the community. In 2023 the housing blocks of Buurland will be demolished and make place for social housing appartements and mid-market rental housing. The aim of housing corporation Mitros is to ‘create’ a new community with a similar communal character. The question remains if Mitros will succeed in doing so. The outcomes of this research are presented in an article, ‘Making Buurland’³, and in an ethnographic film, ‘Buurland, a Land Ruled by Neighbors’.

¹ I am a member of the community

² Residents of Buurland

³ Cover page: **Figure 1** Buurland, the inner gardens of block A. ©Luca Petersen 2019

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Introduction

The Netherlands finds itself in a period in which the housing market is fired up and the pressure on urban living space has increased. As an answer to the housing crisis, politicians focus on the expansion of construction in urban areas. We need infrastructures to respond to the rising demand, however, current policy merely focusses on designing infrastructures for individual forms of living in areas where space is already scarce. This policy approach seems in line with ongoing processes of individualization within Dutch society: despite the density of urban areas, residents feel increasingly lonely and less connected. Housing corporation manager Bernard Smits argues that 5% of the Dutch population is willing to live in a cooperative form of living, yet current policies don't offer this infrastructure (Mesters 2021).

Yet, communal living initiatives gain increased attention. Buurland, my research site, forms one of these places where in the past twelve years (2010 – 2022) a special sense of community among neighbors has been able to develop. What makes Buurland's story so interesting, is that it didn't start as an 'intentional community' nor as a project of developer-led co-living. A sense of community among neighbors has emerged organically. The relative unboundedness and low level of external intervention were important in this process and made it possible for neighbors to interact with their environment in different ways. This research explores how Buurland became the community it is now and how this communal living is lived and experienced by different Buurlanders.

The research site: 'Buurland'

'Buurland' refers to a group of people and a place. Let's first discuss the place. 'Buurland' consists of two housing blocks owned by housing corporation Mitros. Mitros is active in the municipality of Utrecht and Nieuwegein and their main focus is to provide more affordable social housing in these municipalities. The blocks of Buurland are located in the 'Staatsliedenbuurt'; an area close to the city-center of Utrecht. They were built in 1953, a period right after World War II. In 2007 Mitros decided that the apartments did not meet the environmental standards anymore. They were considered to be too small, insufficiently isolated, and noisy (Sprengers 2012). Therefore, the apartments came on the list for demolition. When families moved out, students moved in: the apartments came under the management of the SSH – student housing association – that rents the rooms to students up until today. Back

in 2007, the prospect for demolition was half a year. Yet, demolition got postponed, again and again, and the housing blocks remained until today.

Emma: “Some people just want a normal civil house. With a heater that works.”

Tanja: “Yeah, it’s cold in the rooms because of lack of isolation.”

Justin: “That’s the trade-off. You have a house that leaks at all sides, and the wind blows in every corner, but in return you receive a community.”⁴

Windows are still single glazed, and many apartments don’t have central heating; only the living room has a gas heater. In winter, most residents use portable electric heaters to warm up their bedrooms. And up until today, the SSH is responsible for the selection of residents that live in the blocks. In the 150 apartments two students are housed for a price of €328 per month per student. The contracts resonate the temporality of the stay: for the relatively low price, the renters are not guaranteed accommodation after demolition. Yet, they will be notified six months before they have to leave the place. Moreover, the ‘campus-prerequisite’ does not apply: residents that moved in as students can live in the houses up until today. Several residents that came to live here as students, nowadays live with their children in the small houses. In terms of age, the demography is between student-age and people in their thirties.

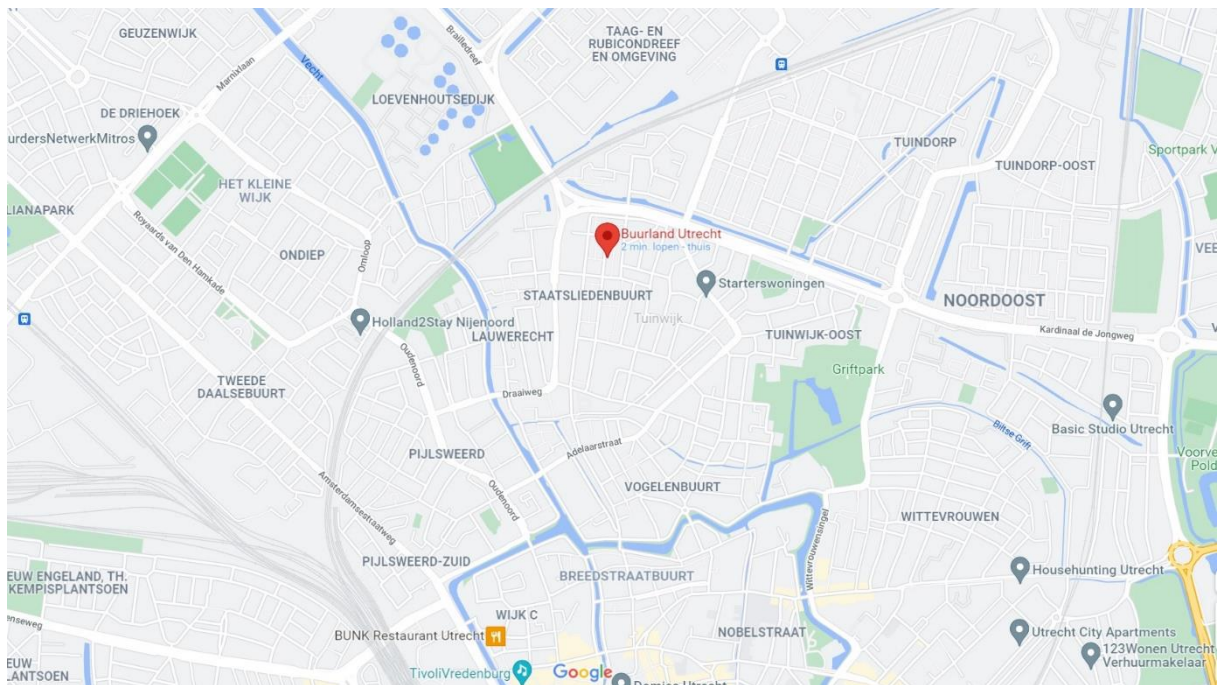


Figure 2 ‘Buurland Utrecht’, located in Utrecht North-East, *Staatsliedenbuurt*. ©Google Maps 2022

⁴ Excerpt from participants’ discussion during the workshop ‘Draw Your Garden’



Figure 3 Birdy-eye perspective of ‘Buurland Utrecht’. The housing blocks marked with a yellow line, between the ‘Troelstralaan’ and ‘Samuel Mullerstraat’, are owned by Mitros and named ‘Buurland’ by a group of residents. On the left, block B (the smaller block) and on the right block A. ©2022 Aerodata International Surveys, Maxar Technologies, Google Maps.

The community of ‘Buurlanders’

In 2009, a group of friends came to live in the temporal housing blocks. The group – Piet, Thomas, Carlo, Harm and Richard – were childhood friends from the ‘Achterhoek’⁵. The friends decided to hire an excavator and dig a swimming pool. This didn’t go unnoticed: neighbors Stijn and Corien, who lived in the opposite house, asked “what are you doing over there?”⁶.



Figure 4 Piet, Thomas and Richard digging the swimming pool. Author unknown, 2010.

⁵ Area in East-Netherlands

⁶ Piet, during an informal conversation, 2022

This event has been important for Buurland’s development for two reasons. Firstly, it was a first encounter between neighbors that lived in the blocks and this group⁷ started to call themselves ‘Buurland’. Secondly, the digging of the swimming pool resulted in a first celebration: Zwemfest no. 1 in 2010. This event grew out into the most important ritual for the community: a yearly neighborhood festival. The ethnographic film gives a more extensive reconstruction of that period.

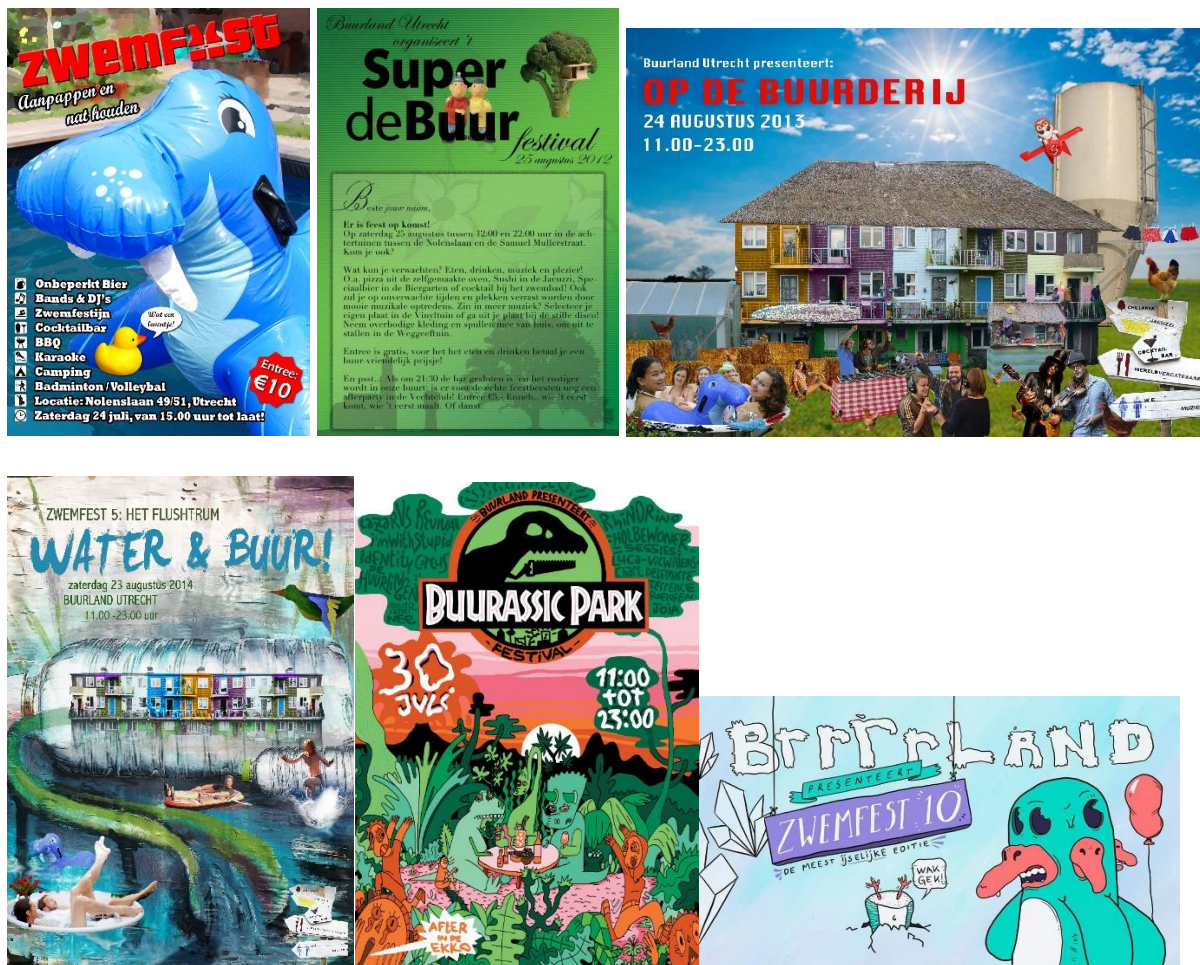


Figure 5 Zwemfest posters: 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2019.

The festival⁸ was an incentive for other neighbors to participate. Consequently, the group of Buurlanders started to grow over the years. Yet, ‘Buurland’ is a selective group. Not all residents of the blocks know about ‘Buurland’ or consider themselves part of the group. Out of three hundred residents, roughly seventy residents make Buurland. While the total nucleus of Buurlanders is bigger; several of them already left the place. Yet, it remains difficult to

⁷ The ‘Doetinchem’ friends together with neighbors Stijn and Corien

⁸ The festival is called ‘Zwemfest’ and later ‘Buurland Festival’

estimate the exact size of the group and the level of engagement people have with Buurland. The communal WhatsApp group consist of 161 people, whereof several left the place, and several recently came to live in one of the houses. ‘Zwemfest’ or ‘Buurland Festival’ remains the key event that brings the community together. Yet, ‘Buurland’ is not merely the festival: the community has more aspects. In this article, I will take you along Buurland’s journey by zooming in on different aspects that define the community, then and today.

Community Studies

Anthropologists have studied communities for the past 200 years (Barnard and Spencer 2002, 173). The fascination with communities (villages, tribes, islands) arises from anthropologists’ interest in kinship and its elementary structures. Communities “were regarded as the key structural units of social life” (ibid.). Barnard and Spencer define community as “a bounded group of people, culturally homogeneous and resident in one locality” (2002, 174). Common interests, sharing a geographical territory and joint action and activities are key (ibid.). Robert Redfield defines ‘community’ as “the state of minds of particular people”, rather than “a body of houses, tools, institutions” (1960, 59). It forms “a social group and environment to which people would expect, advocate or wish to belong” (Barnard and Spencer 2002, 177).

Communal Urban Living

Most collective housing initiatives are defined by their extend of communal facilities, shared meals, and active participation of residents in the initial designing of the place (Vestbro 2010). In Buurland, none of these factors is present. Residents reside in their individual apartment; tools and food is shared, but there are no real shared facilities such as washing machines or sport studios. And the place was designed before the community had developed itself. Yet, a key aspect in Buurland’s community is collaboration. This happens voluntarily and organically: neighbors are welcome to participate in organizing an event, but this is not compulsory. There is a communal access to tools, materials, and knowledge and a WhatsApp group that facilitates this exchange⁹. Moreover, leftover food is offered and neighbors ask other neighbors to look after their cat and home while being on holiday.

⁹ Luc mentions the ‘sharing of soup spoons’ in the film [03:18:09].

Summarizing, Buurland’s community is characterized by neighborly solidarity, the sharing of tools, and a practical attitude. Therefore, Buurland can be defined as a ‘collaborative housing community’. Key aspects of such initiatives are ‘neighborly cooperation’ and ‘a sense of community’ (Vestbro 2010, 21). When we follow Tummers’ perspective on co-housing initiatives, Buurland resonates with ‘weconomy’ (figure 6). Contrary to many cohousing initiatives, Buurland’s driving force is not climate change nor equal citizenship. The community’s focus is on the collective sharing of goods and the organization of communal activities, with ‘Zwemfest’ as major event that brings the community together.

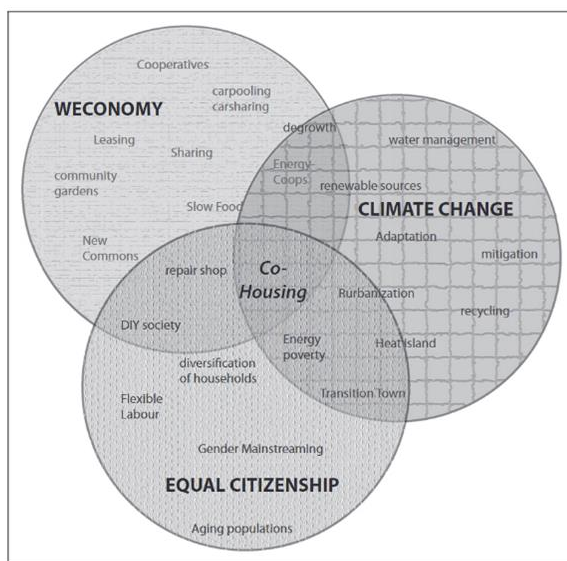


Figure 6 Co-housing as an integrative practice (Tummers, 2016)

Friendship Ties & Sub-groups

An important foundation of Buurland’s community is friendship. The initial group has ties that go back to childhood. Later, a second large group of friends came to live in the houses. Due to the low level of inspection by the SSH, neighbors invited friends to come and live in Buurland when a room was available. Nowadays we can differentiate a lot of sub-groups in Buurland. Many of them are based on earlier friendship ties. Others developed after people had met in Buurland. This is how I met most of my ‘Buurland’ friends. Let me tell you something about my role in Buurland.

Me becoming a ‘Buurlander’

In August 2017 I came to live in one of the houses. The day I picked up my key, in late August, the yearly ‘Zwemfest’ was in full swing. For me it wasn’t more than a neighborhood festivity back then. I recognized some familiar faces, mainly those of the visitors outside of the community. Later, during my first spring in Buurland, neighbors started to appear in the gardens and on the aisles after a tranquil hibernation which is so characteristic to Buurland, and I started to get to know more of them. It was only in the first year that I found out about the collective nature of the festival. That summer, in 2018, I participated in the organization of my first Buurland festival: ‘Het Buurniversum’. It

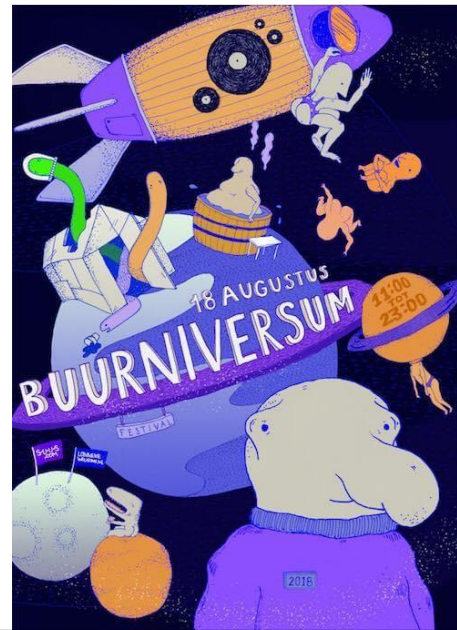


Figure 7 Poster Zwemfest 9. Designed by Lonneke Weuring and Suus Kwee.

was the ninth edition of ‘Zwemfest’ since its start in 2010. The intensive week of building and the meetings enabled me to get to know more of my neighbors.

In March 2021 I started working on a film project about ‘Buurland’ together with my neighbor Silke van Diemen¹⁰. In September that same year, ‘Buurland’ became the topic for this research and besides continuing to film with Silke, I moved towards a deeper engagement with the community. I designed co-creative workshops to analyze specific aspects of the community and explored other aspects through film and interviews. The filming became more informative to my research and since fieldwork I took the lead in filming and working on the montage. Yet, the collaborative process with Silke and the time we spent thinking through what the documentary would focus on, has strongly informed my research. The selection of participants forms a good example of that¹¹. Silke and me presented our documentary outline to Mitros and to the municipality of Utrecht to get funding. From the latter party we received a funding for start-up projects. The ethnographic film that is part of this research is edited by me and engages with the aspects I touch upon in this written article¹².

¹⁰ Silke lives in Buurland since 2015. Just like me, she has a background in Visual Ethnography.

¹¹ In the first section I will explain how our positionality interfered with the selection of participants.

¹² Except for the last two minutes of the film; those are edited by Silke. In the future, we will make a longer version that will be more informed by Silke’s montage and narrative choices.

The research

This research aims to learn and better understand how Buurland as a community has been able to develop throughout the years. In this article, I will specifically zoom in on two aspects that characterize the community and that have been key in its development. The first aspect relates to spatial organization: initial design, re-design and place-making. The second aspect is rituality:

‘How do design and processes of place-making contribute to Buurland as a collaborative housing community, what is the role of policy and the characteristics of its residents, and how and why has the annual festival Zwemfest’ been of importance in its emergence and development?’

Throughout the analysis I will argue how these aspects have been key in creating a sense of community among neighbors. Each section of this article will cover several sub-questions:

Section 2: Design, Re-design & Place-making

- *How does the initial design of the housing blocks enable social interactions between neighbors?*
- *What processes of re-design and place-making can be identified in Buurland and what factors were important to enable this?*
- *How do these processes give meaning to residents’ lived reality of Buurland as a place?*

Section 3: ‘Zwemfest’: a Binding Ritual

- *What was needed for ‘Zwemfest’ to develop?*
- *What makes ‘Zwemfest’ a ritual?*
- *How does the rituality of the organization of ‘Zwemfest’ give meaning to Buurland?*

In the first section, I will elaborate on my position in the community and reflect on epistemological issues that come with this positionality. Then, I will discuss the methods I’ve used during fieldwork and what kinds of knowledge these methods have generated. The second section addresses discourses of intentional design for community lived spaces. This will be followed by a discussion on ‘re-design’ as a form of ‘place-making’, by especially focusing on the notion of the ‘physical re-designing of space’. Lastly, I will explore how ‘space’ becomes ‘place’ in Buurland. The last and third section zooms in on the importance of having a shared

ritual for communities. Through ethnographic examples I will illustrate how a shared, recurring ritual contributes to creating and sustaining a sense of community in Buurland, and what factors were needed to make this ritual happening. The main activity that will be analyzed is the yearly Buurland Festival or ‘Zwemfest’.

Besides the article, research findings are presented in an ethnographic film. The film is an historical-ethnographic account of Buurland’s place and people. It makes the viewer experience how the collaborative housing is lived and experienced through the eyes of Buurlanders. I included my own perspective in the film through the use of a voice-over. Besides leading the narrative, the voice-over is a tool to reveal my position in the community and provide my perspective on the story of Buurland. I believe that doing this is important, as my position is inherently connected to the findings that I produce in this research. Moreover, it is a form of auto-ethnography, a methodological choice that I will discuss in the next section.

Section 1 Methodological Reflections

In this section I will discuss several key methods I have used in this research, such as participant observation, autoethnography, fieldwork with a camera, and collective mapping. First, I will reflect on my position as Buurlander and researcher.

Being a ‘Buurlander-Ethnographer’

This research draws on three months of ethnographic fieldwork in Buurland, my homeplace. Doing fieldwork didn’t mean taking a train or a bus to arrive at the field site. Yet, I was living there, part of the everyday life. Fieldwork had already started before the actual ‘fieldwork’ that was part of the Visual Ethnography program, during the four years of my experience of living in Buurland. I started analyzing my own experiences, in past and in present times, of being a resident in Buurland. “In order to understand cultural experience” I had to understand my “personal experience”, which forms the basis of autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). In this article and in the film I include my perspective by treating my own experiences as that of a research participant. I recalled past experiences to understand the bigger picture of what Buurland means to us, Buurlanders¹³. One of these experiences was becoming part of the group. After my first year of living in Buurland, I could distinguish several sub-groups. These groups were mainly based on previous friendship ties. At a certain period I started to question my position in the group. Later, I accepted the fact that I didn’t share the deeper connections that some others in the group did have and I started to create my own social ‘bubble’. That consisted of Buurlanders whom, like me, had joined the group in a later stage. The reflection on these inter-group dynamics informed several questions of my research, such as: how did the initial group of friends create openness for ‘new-comers’ to participate; what factors made the newcomers feel welcome and willing to participate; and how did other Buurlanders experience becoming part of the group?

Positionality: the choice of participants

In contrast to an ethnographer that arrives ‘new’ at a place, I knew about Buurland’s history. I could distinguish important factors that had enabled Buurland’s gradual development into a residential community and I knew whom had played an important role in this process. This

¹³ Residents of ‘Buurland’

allowed me to dive deeper into certain aspects that characterize the community. In that sense, my position as a member of the community brought its advantages. I knew how to navigate through the community and whom I could ask to find an answer to specific topics. Furthermore, I had access to knowledge that ‘outsiders’ might have more difficulties with to find out, such as the informal ‘shuffling’ of contracts.

Yet, my position in the community also entailed its own constraints. When Silke and me sat down in March 2021 to discuss the initial focus of the film, we made a rough sketch of some of the subgroups we identified in Buurland. It helped us visualize whom played what role in the community. This is the sketch we made:

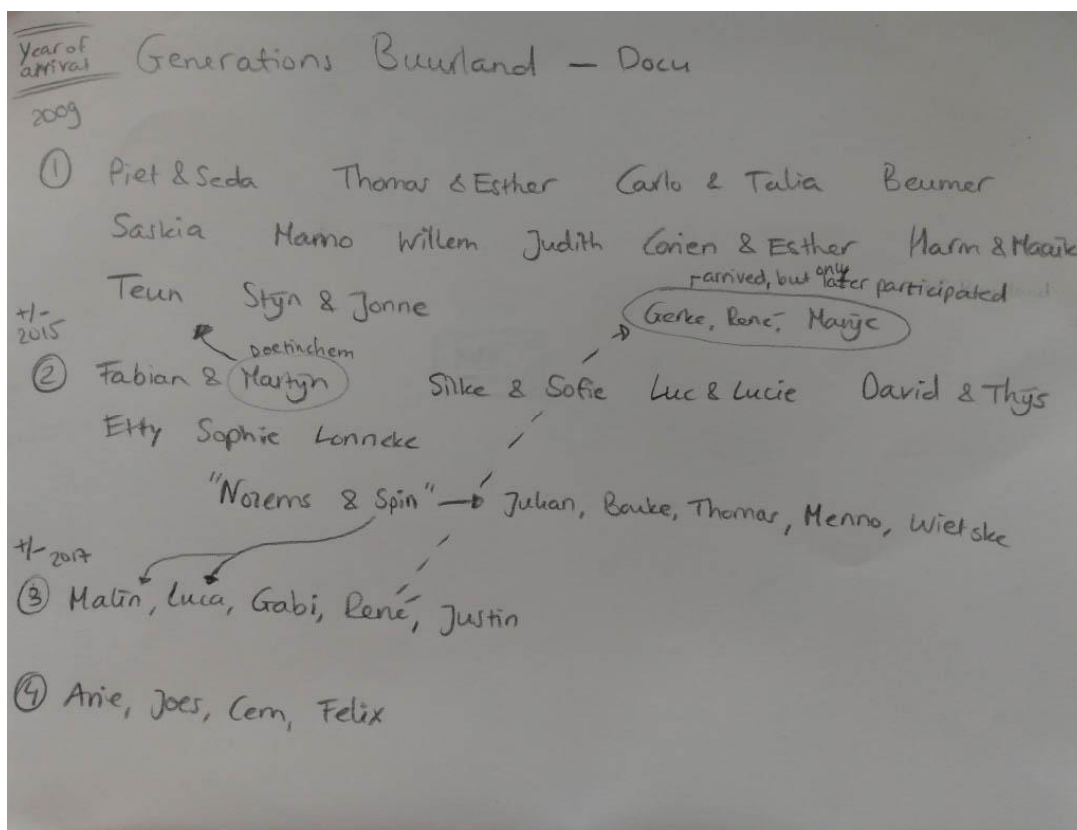


Figure 8 Sketch of Buurland’s generations, by Silke and Malin.

The ‘generations’ that we defined, were mainly based on the year of arrival and on previous social connections. The chart includes the initiating group and the mayor friend groups that followed. The sketch defined whom we wanted to follow for the film.

Later, when the project turned into my research project, I asked participants René, Justin, Gerke and Tanja to make a relational chart of Buurland. Soon I found out that their relational chart was completely different from Silke's and mine.

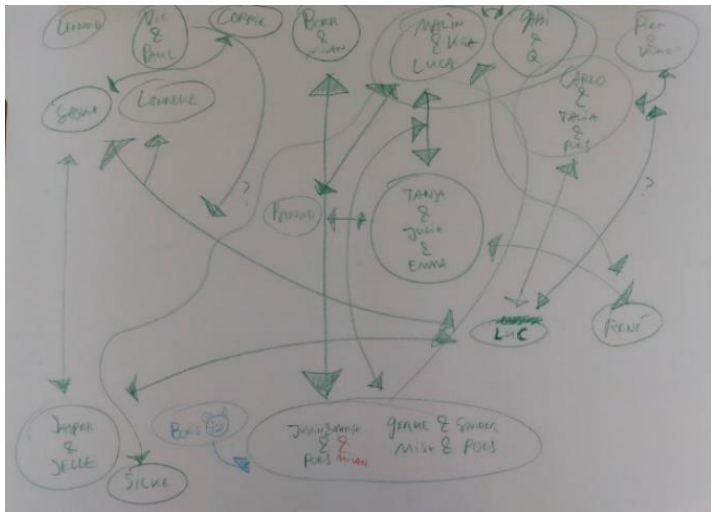


Figure 9 Relational chart by Justin Thijssen

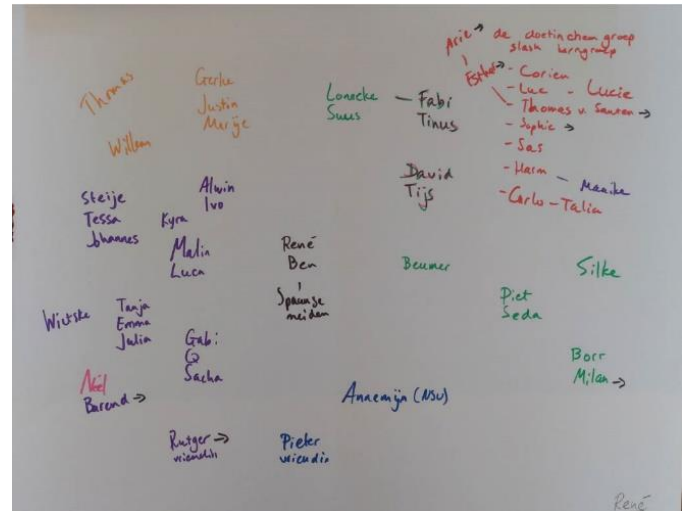


Figure 10 Relational chart by René Witteveen

Both drawings mention Buurlanders that me and Silke didn't cover in the first place. Justin indicated several households, represented by circles. These households are connected with arrows that represent interaction. The households are drawn in the order of how the households appear in the blocks. René's chart comes closest to Silke's and mine. He used different colors and during the process of drawing he was still finding out what these colors represent. In red it says "Doetinchem group or nucleus": several sub-groups in Buurland started to mix over the years and I can see that confusion coming back in the drawing of René.

This process of drawing with other Buurlanders showed me how subjective the choice is of whom is important in the community. Participants covered neighbors that are most present in their daily experience. It made me realize that I had to broaden my perspective and include the perspective of Buurlanders that we didn't define in our first sketch.

Yet, as I was interested in aspects of friendship and the re-designing of place, the story of the swimming pool and the attitude of the first group was key. Therefore, I decided to focus on the first generation of Buurlanders for the ethnographic film. The collaborative workshops I

organized, brought the perspectives of later generations of Buurlanders into the research, since most of the neighbors who signed up are my closest friends in Buurland¹⁴.



Figure 11 Piet, Cem, and me after the interview I conducted with Piet and Seda. January 2022. ©Seda Çakir.

Making the Familiar Strange

“The familiar, with all its necessary relativism, is becoming increasingly a relevant subject for investigation — for anthropology which concerns itself with perceiving social change — not only on the level of great historical transformations, but also as the accumulated and progressive result of interactions in everyday life”¹⁵

Doing research in a less familiar cultural setting would have resulted in more fieldnotes in my journal. Yet, in the setting of Buurland the challenge was different. As Spradley argues, “the more you know about a situation as an ordinary participant, the more difficult it is to study it as an ethnographer” (1980, 61). Living in Buurland gained a *dual purpose* (ibid.): interactions and activities I was used to undertake, I now had to approach with the eye of an ethnographer. I had to add an *explicit awareness* to those activities (ibid.). With which neighbors do I interact most, and why? Who is walking over the aisles? Which routes does that person take? What different spots for social interaction can I distinguish in Buurland? And how does this all relate

¹⁴ I will reflect on this in the paragraph ‘The Buurland Workshops’

¹⁵ Velho (2001, 56)

to how we experience Buurland as a living place? I became an observer of my neighbors' daily actions. This sometimes led to funny conversations: "Watch out what you say! Malin is doing a research on Buurland".

Participant Observation

Doing participant observation, a commonly used method in ethnography, became in my case being a *participant observer*. Participation was already there, for almost four years; the activity of observing was added to this participative aspect. Yet, this resulted in a constant negotiation between the role of a researcher and that of a neighbor. During the build-up of the Buurland Festival in October 2021, I felt a constant 'fight' in myself of wanting to participate by painting, sawing and hanging around, while at the same time having to film the event. I shifted quite a lot between those two roles: one moment I was part of the build-up team, another moment I was observing my neighbors actions. When I shifted to filming, I felt more distant from them. On the one hand I was an *insider*, having similar bodily experiences as ordinary participants, whilst at the same time I experienced being an *outsider* (Spradley 1980, 57). Often I felt the urge to participate, rather than to film. Then I found out I could position the camera on a tripod. Whilst the camera would stand there for half an hour, I was carrying stuff around and I became part of the build-up team again. In that sense I found a solution to combine the two roles.



Figure 12 Me during the build-up of Buurland Festival: 'Büürler Mürler', October 2021. © Eva de Jong.

Fieldwork with a Camera

At the same time, filming provided me with the special position that required me to change from a participant in a researcher. I became the filmmaker for a moment, visible to all outward appearances. Moreover, photography and film allowed me to explore and convey the use of space in Buurland. Walking through Buurland with the camera made me closely observe details of Buurlanders' gardens, houses and objects that are made by Buurlanders over time.



Figure 13 Stepping out of the house. January 2022. ©Tanja Nieuwenhuijse.

Observational cinema allows the viewer access to “the filmmaker’s sensuous engagement with the social life portrayed” (Suhr & Willerslev 2012, 284). I used this method when exploring the life of my participants. By doing this, I was inspired by Meyknecht’s film ‘Boarded Up’ (2000) in which he portrays the life of the residents of a social housing flat in Amsterdam before its demolition. Meyknecht managed to create a characteristic and intimate portrait of the residents and his observational film style suits the feeling of time passing until demolition. I wanted to convey to the audience the sense of familiarity me and my subjects had. Therefore, I used the camera as “a physical extension of the cameraperson’s body” (ibid). Sometimes I used a more “explorative, enquiring camera” (Postma 2021, 130) mainly when filming the build-up of the festival. It allowed me to distinguish roles among participants, and to capture their emotions and bodily communication. Watching the footage when working on the montage of the film enabled me to reflect on these interactions and to dive deeper into the self-organizational and collaborative process we as a group go through.

Ways of Knowing

Observational cinema allowed me to convey different ways of knowing, such as more “experiential” ways of knowing (MacDougall 1998, 78). I could describe Buurland’s

surroundings and the design of the blocks, yet, “with a single wide shot” I can “reveal all that at once”¹⁶. By recording Buurland’s sounds and visuals I could give the viewer an embodied experience of what walking through Buurland feels like.

The audiovisual also enables to convey more “affective knowledge” (MacDougall 1998, 61–92). Seeing Arie running with a little wagon and screaming: “Watch out! I am mowing the lawn!” in combination with the buzz of conversations¹⁷ allows viewers to dive into Arie’s imaginative world: it “enables viewers to project themselves into the corporeal reality of the other” (ibid.). I could convey Buurlanders’ world emotionally and not only through the embodied perspective of the writer (Postma 2021, 118). In this process, the viewer’s sensuous and emotional engagements contribute to the information that is being conveyed (ibid.).

In one scene we see Esther passing through the neighborhood, carrying Joes on her arm. In another scene we see Esther’s neighbor Sofie passing through the block with Arie and Joes in a little wagon. In a third scene Esther explains that for her, one of the most beautiful aspects of Buurland is when a neighbor spontaneously looks after her kids Arie and Joes, and she has both hands free. When telling this, Esther sinks deeper into the couch and relieves a deep sigh. A sequence of these images allows the viewer to experience what it must feel like to be occupied with the children and then, for a moment, having a moment of rest¹⁸. This is a perfect example of how the audiovisual communicates “human experiences and emotions in contexts we can empathize with and interpret differently than when reading about them” (Postma 2021, 118).

Meaning-making

When assigning meaning to ethnographic audiovisual material, the perspective of researcher, subject and viewer interfere. Firstly, me and Silke are selective ‘in regard to time, focus, angle and framing of each shot’ (Carta 2015, 2). Secondly, the decisions I made in the process of montage define the knowledge that is conveyed. Moreover, “the knowledge developed while filming observationally is the product of real contact between the filmmaker and the objects being filmed” (ibid., 3). The outcome is, therefore, “the result of events in which both filmmaker and subjects are involved” (ibid.). That makes the knowledge that we produce as ethnographic filmmakers always *relational* (MacDougall 1998, 79). Lastly, the audience has

¹⁶ Gary Kildea in MacDougall 1998, 78.

¹⁷ This scene didn’t make it into the final film, yet it was part of the ‘fine cut’.

¹⁸ These images didn’t make it into the final film, yet it was part of the ‘fine cut’.

its role: “viewing ethnographic video invites us” as an audience “to make new knowledge as we engage with it” (Pink 2021, 126).

Montage

While using observational cinema when portraying the life of my participants, the montage doesn't quite conform to a mere 'observational mode' (Nichols 2017). Time and space are not continuous throughout the film, only in certain events that unfold themselves, such as the moment when Gabi unpacks her bag and prepares a package on the bench outside for her neighbors. Suddenly, neighbor Jasper arrives¹⁹. In these scenes I slowly followed the action, used minimal cuts, and stayed closely with the events and how they unfolded in the field to convey the sense of life in Buurland. With these scenes I try to convey aspects of the life of my protagonists. Another such a scene is when Arie enters with 'pink' flowers²⁰. Suddenly Esther arrives and we see Thomas playing guitar on the deck. A perfect daily scene in Buurland.

Co-creation: the Buurland Workshops

Besides filming and photographing, I designed several workshops. Since the collective aspect is central to Buurland as a community, I wanted to centerstage this element in my choice of methods. Literature inspired me with different kinds of collaborative research and I was determined that this type of method would correspond to the kind of spirit that is present in Buurland: collaborative, creative and hands-on. I wanted to build upon my participant's knowledge and perspectives on Buurland, concretely, and visually. So I designed five workshops. With the workshops “the visual production [was] passed into the hands of the subjects” (Literat 2013, 12). Each workshop had its own theme and included mapping exercises, conversations about design and place-making, and bringing objects or photographs linked to important memories in my participants' lives. The aim was to learn about how certain aspects of Buurland interact in the everyday-life of my participants. I designed a flyer²¹ and shared it with thirty neighbors to see if they were willing to participate. I had imagined the group to consist of Buurlanders from each generation, and from different sub-groups. How hard I tried to make the workshops attractive, in the end only eleven Buurlanders signed up.

¹⁹ [07:43:03]

²⁰ [13:22:05]

²¹ See Appendix 1, text in Dutch

Most of them were my closest friends in the neighborhood. I was surprised. Even though the collaborative aspect was key to the communities' spirit, collaborative research turned out to be difficult. There were several reasons I could think of. Firstly, it was the end of a lockdown winter, energy was low. Secondly, I had a conversation with Pim²² and asked him why even the older generation still feels like organizing the festival each year. He said: "The drive to organize it results from a freedom to fully create your own festival". Maybe this wasn't the case with the workshops. Lastly, René said, it is friendship. The attendance exactly reflects your position in Buurland. People sign up because they are interested, yet, maybe more because they know you well. Summarizing, the attendance gave food for thought. And positively, the perspectives of the participants in this group proved to be important to this research. Especially during the workshop 'Becoming a Buurlander': I learned how Buurlanders like me, that weren't part of the mayor friend groups, experienced being and becoming part of the community. That enabled us as a group to reflect on the homogeneity in Buurland and the 'culture' that is present.

Collective Mapping

A method I used during one of the workshops ('Draw Your Garden') is collective mapping. I asked seven participants, including myself, to make a drawing from bird-eye perspective of both blocks. First, I asked them to indicate their daily or most important trajectories through space. Then, I asked them to bring up a memory and indicate it on their map. With this method I wanted to explore how the initial design impacts the routes Buurlanders take. I also hoped to learn if important memories for them are connected to the re-design of the space that is done by Buurlanders. Like Grasseni (2012), I see the collective mapping as a visual research-method to provide place-based knowledge: by drawing we collectively represented our living place. In this way, ethnography and participatory mapping can work together to "produce a meaningful exercise of collective self-representation" (ibid., 97). Moreover, collective mapping "authenticates non-textual ways of knowing" (Literat 2013, 12). A conversation on the same topic would generate a different kind of knowledge and not give the same insights that participants experienced by going through the process of drawing. Firstly, drawing asks participants to spend time imagining. This is what anthropologist Carol Hendrickson underlines: "with a camera, I take a picture and quickly move along. Drawing, on the other

²² A childhood friend of the 'Doetinchem' group, but never lived in Buurland

hand, forces me to slow down and spend time looking and thinking” (Hendrickson 2010, 36). Secondly, the kind of knowledge that is produced, is more concrete and associative, because of the use of the visual (Versluis and Kakebeeke, n.d.). Participants’ emotions and memories are indicated on the map with forms, colours and words. This concrete, visual form opens up space for interpretation and discussion, what we did during the workshops. Lastly, the drawings reflect a mental representation of my participants’ visual imagination of Buurland. The knowledge that they convey to me is therefore mental and affective. The mapping exercise and the discussions, for instance, gave me insights in participants’ emotional attachment to the material culture that is present in Buurland.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting this research, I aimed following the guidelines of the American Association of Anthropology (2013) stating that “the informed consent process is necessarily dynamic, continuous and reflexive”. During fieldwork I made sure neighbors agreed on being filmed by asking them to sign the release form²³. After fieldwork I showed the fine cut of the film to several of my main characters. I also checked if the story of the start of Buurland was correctly presented, since I had received a request from Carlo and Corien to include this in the film. In August the film will be showed to all Buurlanders. Until two weeks after the screening, participants can still object to certain information being part of the documentary.

²³ See appendix

Section 2 Design, Re-Design and Place-making

Justin: “That’s the trade-off. You have a house that leaks at all sides, and the wind blows in every corner, but in return you receive a community”.

This section elaborates on notions of spatial design, re-design and place-making. I will depart from these concepts and identify processes of place-making in Buurland. First, I will zoom in on the architecture of Buurland’s housing blocks and argue how this initial design fosters social interaction among its residents.

Constructing in Times of Recovery

The two housing blocks between the Troelstralaan, Nolenslaan and Samuel Mullerstraat²⁴ were built in 1953 by the municipality of Utrecht²⁵. This was right after World War II, in a period characterized by recovery and reconstruction. After the ending of World War II the demand for living space was high. There was a chronic shortage of housing – due to the destructive nature of the war – and a rise in childbirth. This required an efficient approach to housing construction: in a short time an enormous amount of living space had to be provided (Heuvel 2005, 5). Thus, there was “an intensive phase of (re)building”, mainly of family apartments (Schmid et al. 2019, 145).

The apartments at the Nolensstraat were designed to accommodate families and their children: a total of about 150 households. The apartments resemble the working class houses that are characteristic to the neighborhood ‘Staatsliedenbuurt’: they are small, but efficient. The architecture of the blocks is characteristic to post-war building styles (Heuvel 2005, 20). Some features of the blocks are the two houses on top of one-style, the balustrades, and the large space in between each of the blocks, as figure 14 shows.

²⁴ that we, Buurlanders, now call ‘Buurland’

²⁵ The Utrecht Archives (1953)



Figure 14 View of some apartment buildings on the Nolensstraat (since 1979 Nolenslaan) in Utrecht. Nowadays ‘Buurland’. © Lauwers, G.J. 1955, The Utrecht Archives.

Co-living and Design

Even though several developers in Europe from 1850’s till now strived for creating a sense of collective life and neighborly contact through the design of their apartments to “counter anonymity and isolation”, “the issue of collective living was barely discussed” during the post-war period in Europe (Schmid et al. 2019, 147; 145). The same applies to Buurlands’ housing blocks. They were not intentionally built to enable communal living. The archival photographs I found in the Archive of the Municipality of Utrecht don’t inform me about any choices made for the social design of the blocks. In fact, even the architect remains unknown²⁶. However, Heuvel (2005), who published an analysis of the architecture in the neighborhood, informs me about an interesting concept that was characteristic to the post-war building style. It is the ‘neighborhood concept’ of American sociologist Clarence Perry (1929). In Perry’s concept,

²⁶ The architect was someone in the service of the *Bouw en Woningdienst* of the municipality of Utrecht (The Utrecht Archives, 1953; Heuvel 2005, 20).

each neighborhood was in itself a city. He perceived “the neighborhood unit as a component of a larger urban whole” (Patricios 2002, 72). Community development was central to Perry’s concept. Interestingly, the striving for a sense of community among residents was more on the level of the neighborhood, and not so much on the individual design of the apartment blocks in the neighborhood.

Design and Social Interaction

Even though the blocks are not designed with the intention to foster neighborly contact, I argue that several spatial features of the blocks do contribute to the social interaction between neighbors. Let me take you along several of these aspects.

Early sociologists from the Chicago School studied the importance of the relation between neighborhood physical design and social interaction. One of them was Ernest Burgess. According to him, “the physical form of the city was a “frame” upon which the community grew”. “Face-to-face relations, were, then, the basis of social interaction between neighborhood residents” (Patricios 2002, 72). We see this aspect coming back in Buurland. As figure 3 shows, Buurland consists of two blocks. Each block has two rows of apartments with in-between a green area. When you stand in one of these areas, you see that the inner facades face each other (see figure 15 & 16). This construction makes that everything is centered around the inner gardens. When walking on the balustrade or looking out of the window, face-to-face interaction is inevitable.



Figure 15 & 16 Two inner walls of block A that face each other. Below, on both photographs, the backdoor of the houses downstairs. On the balustrades, the main doors of the upper houses. Stills by author.

Neighbor Luca: “What I really like about Buurland is that the upper houses have a view over the gardens. And everybody that lives downstairs uses their back door as main door. Hence you know all the faces [of the people that live in Buurland] because you see each other all the time.”

Here, Luca touches upon an exciting aspect. All downstairs residents use their back door as main door. At the same time, the front door of the upper houses faces the inside area of the block. So, while upstairs residents have no choice but to leave their house on the garden side, downstairs residents became used to only using their back door and thus leaving their house at the same side.

Neighbor Tanja: “Many neighbours don’t use their front door. This was not intentionally the idea when constructing the houses, but it does enable contact between neighbours. We always say to visitors: enter through the garden.”

Neighbor Thomas: “We never use our front door. Everybody enters through the garden. Only the postman and people that have never been here ring the bell.”

By using their back door, residents decide on the use of the given design. This links to the *Spatial Triad*, a model created by sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991). According to Lefebvre, there are three forms of social space. The ‘Representation of Space’ (*espace conçu*) is conceived space, rather than lived (Woerkum 2012). It is how those conceptualizing space talk about space (planners, urbanists, scientists) (Briercliffe, n.d.). It is the production of abstract space. Secondly, ‘Representational Space’ (*espace vécu*) is the symbolic value that is given to a place by its inhabitants. Through daily life, space becomes lived and gains meaning. Lastly, ‘Spatial Practices’ (*espace perçu*) are the everyday routines and practices we perform in that space; the choices we make in space (ibid.). Those experiences, then, influence how we perceive that space.

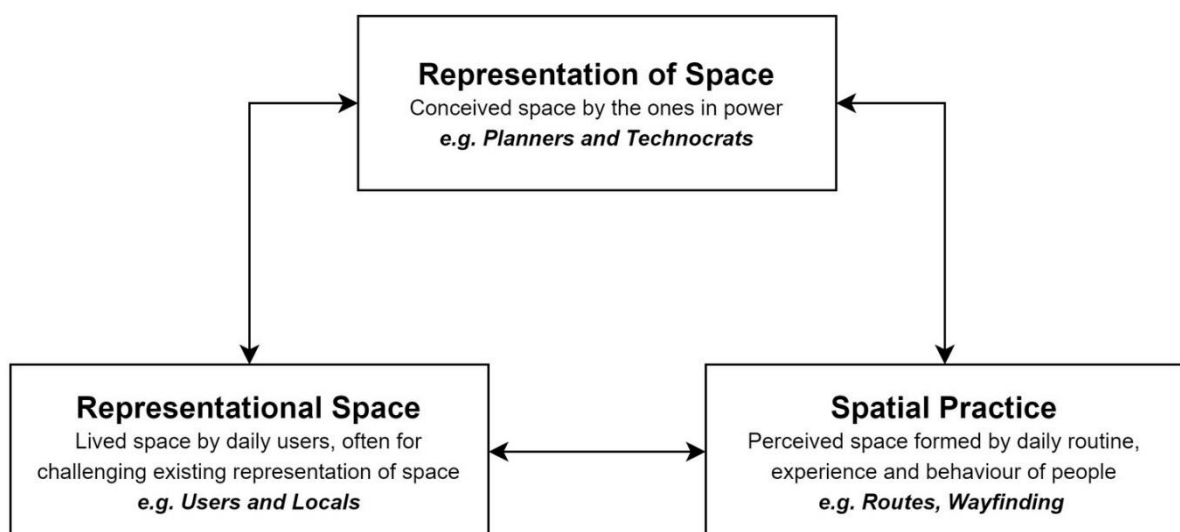


Figure 17 Lefebvre’s spatial triad (Lefebvre, 1991)

The three dimensions of space interact all the time. In Buurland we see an interplay between the *espace conçu* and the *espace vécu*. While design forces upstairs residents to leave their house on the garden side (Representation of Space; *espace conçu*), downstairs residents decide to only use their back door (Spatial Practice; *espace vécu*). The convergence of these two aspects causes a higher rate of spontaneous encounters between neighbors, as every resident leaves their home on the inner side of the block.



Figure 18 The gardens of Buurland block A, bird-eye perspective. The right corner contains a legenda. Drawing by author.

Yet, there are more architectural features that foster social encounter between neighbors. One of them are the aisles and balustrades. As we've seen before, they were characteristic to the post-war building style (Heuvel 2005, 20).

Neighbor Justin: "the blocks are long and there are just a few paths to walk. There are certain crossroads where everybody walks, which makes it more likely for people to bump into each other".

The few paths to walk, mentioned by Justin, are the aisles and the balustrades. When living upstairs and leaving your house, you will have to cross the balustrade. Chances are high that you will cross someone from the same row that walks home (see figure 19 & 20).



Figure 19 & 20 Balustrades in Buurland. Stills by author.

The same counts for the residents that live downstairs and who use their back door as main door. They walk down the aisles, along the gardens of their neighbors.

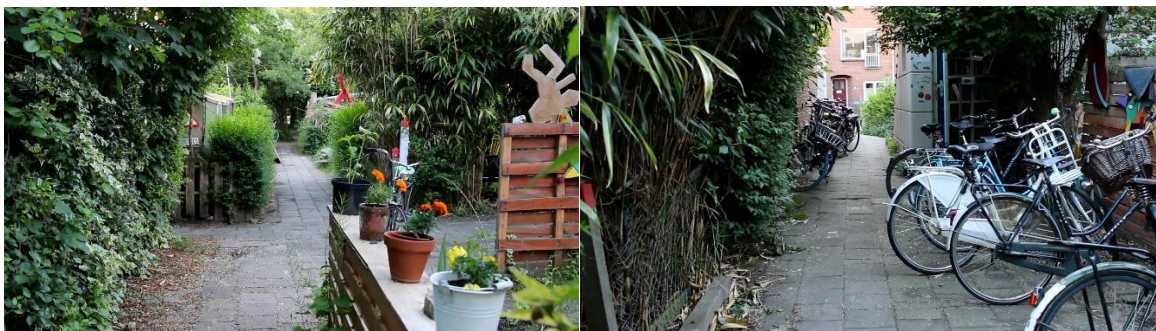


Figure 21 & 22 Aisles in Buurland. Stills by author.

Neighbor Tanja: “You walk the same routes as other neighbors and you’ll look into each other’s gardens before entering your house”.

When I asked Buurlanders to indicate their daily trajectories through Buurland, I found evidence on how the aisles and balustrades create points of encounter between neighbors.

This is also the spot where I often meet Menno when he is on his way to Sanne's. As Tanja explained to me, the spot contains memories of encounters with neighbors. She has a little chat, discusses her day, and continues her itinerary. Here, place gains meaning through everyday interactions. And these interactions are controlled by the design of the place. The meanings and memories we Buurlanders connect to the place – Representational Space – are in constant interplay with the given design – the Represented Space – and with our Spatial Practice (the choices we make in space).

Justin: “[...] the routes through Buurland are more fun. Often, I don't go through the Slotemaker de Bruïnestraat, but through Buurland, because the surroundings are beautiful, you'll meet people, and it's cosy.”

Tanja: “Yes, there is always something to see.”

Justin: “Exactly, you can stroke a cat, socialize...”

Justin prefers to pass through block A (the red block in his drawing) when going home (Troelstralaan, left), instead of taking the adjoining street. Justin's choices for his daily itinerary are informed by earlier memories (stroking a cat, socializing).

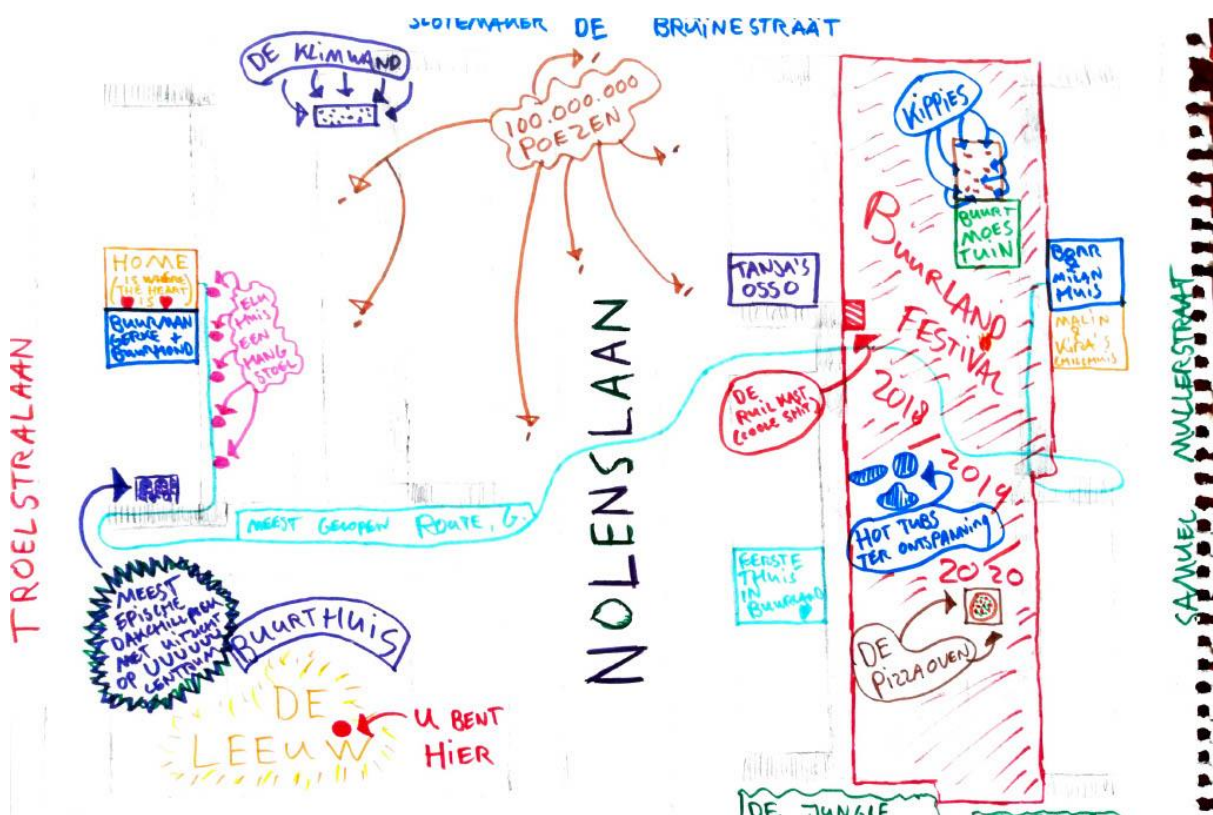


Figure 25 ‘Draw Your Garden’ by Justin Thijssen

Hence, coming back to Lefebvre's Spatial Triad (1991), we see how the initial design, yet also the use of design by its residents, creates ways for social interaction in Buurland.

'Tight and loose spaces': 'Zwemfest'

A last key design factor that encourages social interaction is a central site for parks and recreation spaces (Patricios 2002, 76). Between the two blocks of Buurland a huge area is reserved for recreational space. Between 1953 and 2007, this space was a communal area full of sand and served as recreational space for the families that lived in the apartments²⁷. Around 2007, the open space gave way to gardens, separated by hedges. To prevent burglaries, the municipality decided in the spring of 2010 to prune high hedges and remove the fences in the neighborhood. Less afforestation provides more overview and more social control, was the idea (Biemans, 2015). Having an outside space allowed the initial group of Buurlanders to dig a swimming pool and organize their first 'Zwemfest' that would grow out into a yearly neighborhood festival. This outside area in-between the blocks has been key in Buurland's development. It allowed for organizing a neighborhood event where other neighbors could join in. In section 3 I will zoom in on the importance of this festival for the community.

During that week in August, the individual gardens become part of the festival terrain. The area becomes 'communal' for a few days; the separation is lifted and the space is unified. Not all gardens are used: the organization consults the owners if they can use their garden.

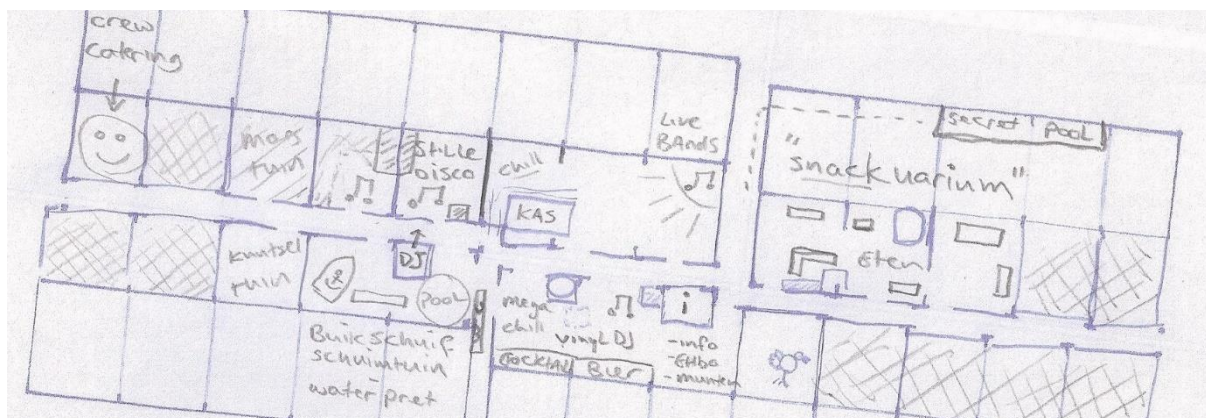


Figure 26 Overview gardens block A during 'Water en Buur' ('Zwemfest' 2014). The vinyl garden, head stage, food garden, cocktail bar and silent disco.

²⁷ See figure 14

Here, we observe a shift in the way that conventional space is designed and how it is used: the gardens have been given an additional purpose and meaning. “Spaces often serve in activities for which they are not always intended. These activities can take place alongside the original uses of the space [...]. When these activities are tolerated, space becomes looser” (Tani 2015, 127). The author explores how young people in a shopping mall in Helsinki interact with space. She analyses her findings from the perspective of ‘tight and loose spaces’. Instead of using the place for shopping, the young people use the space to hang out. By doing so, the function of the space is re-defined and the space becomes ‘looser’; less bounded by the functional use for which this space was originally intended (Tani 2015). The same phenomena applies to Buurland. During the organization of ‘Zwemfest’ space becomes ‘loose’: residential outside space gains a new use and serves community purposes. And by doing that, the Buurlanders create new meanings to that space, a point I will discuss in section 3.

A Low Level of Intervention: Buurland as little “Free State”

“It is people’s actions which make a space loose, with or without official sanction and with or without physical features that support those actions”²⁸

Yet, what was needed for this space to become ‘loose’ is the relative absence of policy in Buurland. Since 2007, when the blocks came on the list for demolition, there has been a relative absence of rules. Due to the temporality of the housing situation, the landlord (Mitros) and representatives of the SSH (Student Housing Association) have been relatively absent. “Throughout the years”, Piet²⁹ told me, “we were in good contact with the spokesperson of the SSH, that would come every now and then to check what was going on in the blocks. When Buurland appeared in a ‘Man Bij Hond’³⁰ broadcast, it was called a ‘free state’ and neighbor Rosa showed the huge wall paintings outside. After that, we couldn’t do crazy things for some months. Yet, after some time, the surveillance diminished again”. Over the years, the presence of the SSH decreased even more. Neighbor Justin, who lives in Buurland since 2019: “the absence of the landlord plays a big role in Buurland. Many residents have never seen a spokesperson from the SSH”.

²⁸ Franck & Stevens (2007, 2).

²⁹ Piet belongs to the group that initiated Buurland.

³⁰ Dutch television program about every-day Dutch life and characteristic Netherlanders

The relative absence of the landlord and the temporality of the houses gave the initial group free range to make spatial adaptations. It all started with digging the swimming pool. In the years that followed, several Buurlanders decided to break out a wall to create a more spacious kitchen or living room. The skills of how to do it, and the tools like a wall saw were often shared. In August 2019, me and my roommate Luca decided to take down our kitchen wall. In that weekend neighbors David and Thijs did the same. They rented a wall saw and we shared the costs. We knew how to go about, because other neighbors had done it before.



Figure 27 Me and Luca making preparations.



Figure 28 & 29 The wall saw. The kitchen wall in pieces.

In any ‘normal’ housing situation, taking down a wall is uncommon. Yet, this event brought us closer to the neighborhood in various ways. Before the event we visited many Buurlanders who had removed a wall to decide whether we wanted to remove the wall in the kitchen or in the living room. Secondly, we were informed by other neighbors on how to do it. Thirdly, the simultaneous practice with neighbors David and Thijs created a shared celebration of the more spacious kitchens we had. Fourthly, neighbor Carlo came to learn us to fix the electricity, because we didn’t know how to do it. And it created a lot of memories of physically taking down the wall, the excitement that I shared with Luca and Sjoerd³¹, and the everyday moments that I can enjoy the benefits of creating your own kitchen. During the years I have visited many Buurlanders’ houses and seen how others have adapted their place. This creates an atmosphere of sharing the freedom that we have. The adaptations characterize Buurlanders’ houses and identifies us as a group. Hence, I argue that the freedom to adapt private space has contributed to the sense of community that is present in Buurland.

Moreover, for many Buurlanders the adaptations have led to a greater joy in their living space. For Thomas and Esther, who live in Buurland with their children Arie and Joes, the freedom to adapt the layout of the house implied a more efficient way of living together with kids in a small family house. They extended their kitchen and constructed a separate room, inside another room, for their first baby Arie.



Figure 30 Thomas explains the adjustments Esther and he made in their house. Still by author.

³¹ A friend that helped us taking down the wall.

Figure 31 On the ceiling traces of the wall that used to separate the kitchen from another small room. Still by author.

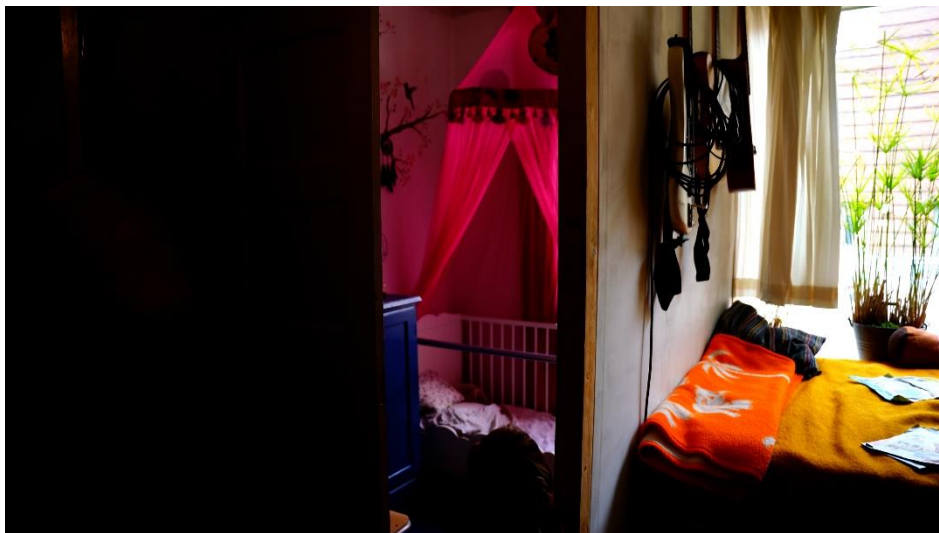


Figure 32 Aries' bedroom. A room in a room. Still by author.

Besides changing the layout of their house, several Buurlanders have adapted communal space throughout the years. Let me discuss some of these spatial adaptations and argue how this 're-designing' of space is a form of 'place-making'.

The Basements

I remember the day Piet gave me the key of the basement. "You can make a copy, and then give it back to me. You can just choose a quarter, fix the lights, arrange a lock and you're set." "How come we can use the basements?" I asked him. Piet began to tell. "Twelve years ago, when we³² came to live here, all basements were off-limits. Especially in winter, rain would

³² Harm, Richard, Carlo, Thomas and Piet; the 'Doetinchem' friends

enter and pools formed. The SSH³³ had decided to board up all doors that gave access to the cellars. We decided to open the doors. The large corridor comprised the whole row of houses. Lots of space for many possibilities... we thought. We bargained with the SSH and managed to get access to two doors.” The doors hide two large underground corridors, one in block A, another in block B. The managing of the basements shows a high level of ‘do-it-yourself’ mentality, brought in Buurland by the Doetinchem friends³⁴. Light was fixed, locks were changed and each of the friends made their individual quarter, where they were mainly occupied fixing their motorbikes. Throughout the years, the individual cellars turned into professional-looking technical garages.



Figure 33 Thomas van Sante working in his garage, 2017. © Talia Radcliff

The basements are an example of *place-making*. By creating their own hobby-space, the friends add meaning and practical convenience to the space. One of the quarters turned into a professional-looking hot-tub with levels and decorated by white tiles. During ‘special’ events, neighbors gather in the hot-tub. Additionally, the basements do not only add to private interest, they also serve communal use. Several quarters in the cellar of block A are used to store

³³ Student Housing Association

³⁴ ‘Doetinchem’ is a place in the ‘Achterhoek’, Eastern Netherlands.

materials for the yearly Buurland festival. Each quarter has its own name plate and contains items like wooden plates, craft supplies, costumes and a lot of construction wood. The basements radiate the practical attitude of the community. When I show new people around in the neighborhood, I always guide them through the basements. It adds to the identity of Buurland.

The Exchange Cupboard

In 2015, a cupboard was created where neighbors can exchange items such as books, cloths and furniture. Later, the cupboard gained a permanent place. It is located at the back of a door that gives entrance to one of the basements.



Figure 34 The exchange cupboard, created in 2015 © Biemans, 2015.



Figure 35 & 36 The exchange cupboard, situated in block A. On the right: “do exchange, don’t cry”. Photographs by author.

Re-designing as a Form of Place-making

In the creation of the exchange cupboard two spatial processes can be identified. On the one hand, there is the physical re-designing of space: the process of how we as neighbors ‘make’ or ‘rebuilt’ the initial space. At the same time, the re-designed space generates new usages, meanings, and memories. As we have seen before in Tanja’s, Menno’s and Justin’s drawing, they tend to take the route that passes by the exchange cupboard. It is a spot where four aisles meet (a matter of *design*). Justin states: “I pass there regularly to check if there’s any item I can use and then I often bump into Tanja or Malin.” Justin’s choice to take that route is a matter of the *use of space* (Spatial Practices³⁵). Moreover, the *re-designing* of space, in this case the creation of the cupboard, influences Justin’s daily itinerary. He stops at the cupboard because he aims to find items or a neighbor to interact with. Furthermore, Tanja’s meeting point is exactly located at the cupboard. The re-designed space generates new points of encounters, new memories and meanings. I call this as form of *place-making*. Jaffe & De Koning define ‘place-making’ as an active process of assigning emotional meaning to the physical environment (2016, 25). According to the authors, important in this process are the everyday use of a place and special activities happening in the place: “through our everyday uses and narratives, and through more spectacular experiences or interventions, spaces gain meaning and become places (Jaffe & De Koning 2016: 25).

³⁵ Lefebvre (1991), figure 17

Remarkably, even though I didn't specifically ask participants to draw material objects, all six drawings indicate Buurland's 'material culture'.



Figure 37 'Draw Your Garden' by Gerke Houwer.

Gerke's drawing, for instance, indicates the treehouse in block B, the deck of Thomas and Esther, the boulder wall in Menno's garden, the greenhouse in block A, the hot tubs and the communal vegetable garden. All these objects were made by Buurlanders over time. Gerke also indicated the wooden fence that he built at Tanja's garden after the last Buurland Festival in October 2021. He decorated it with wooden, painted animals that remained from the festival. Gerke told me he is really satisfied with the fence he made. It forms an important memory for him, captured in space. The fence symbolizes the last edition of the yearly festival and the activity of building the fence forms a warm memory. Place, here, gains meaning through memories and activities that happened in the physical environment.



Figure 38 A wooden animal attached to the fence. Photo by author.

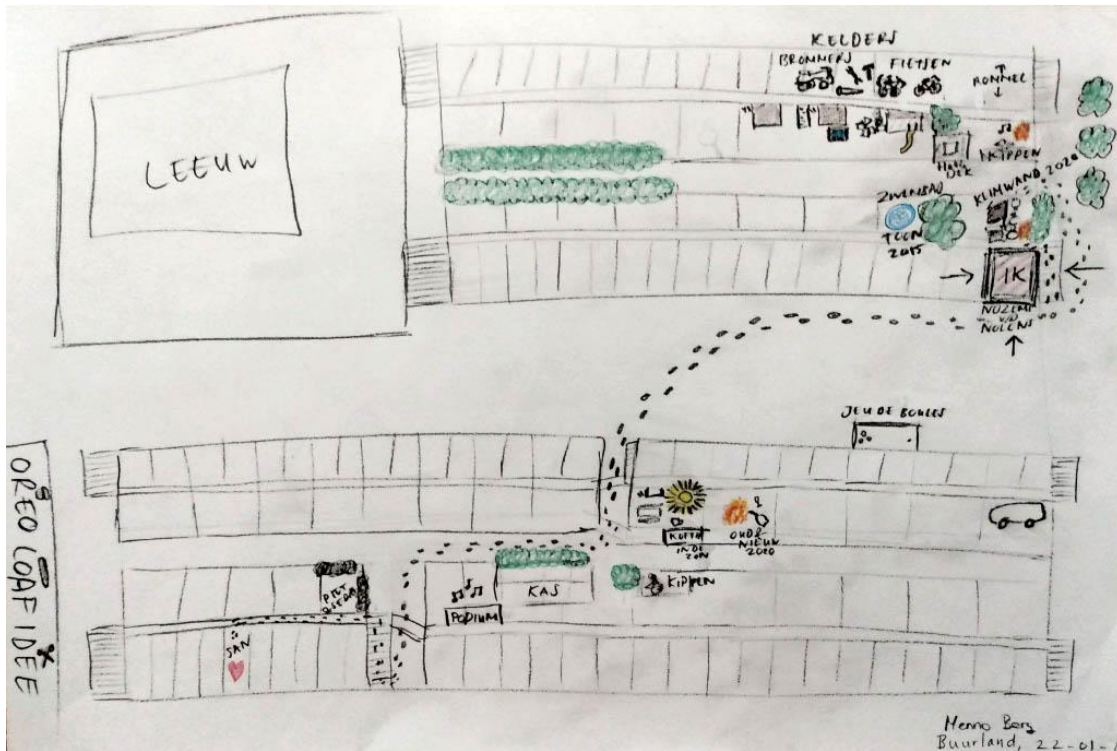
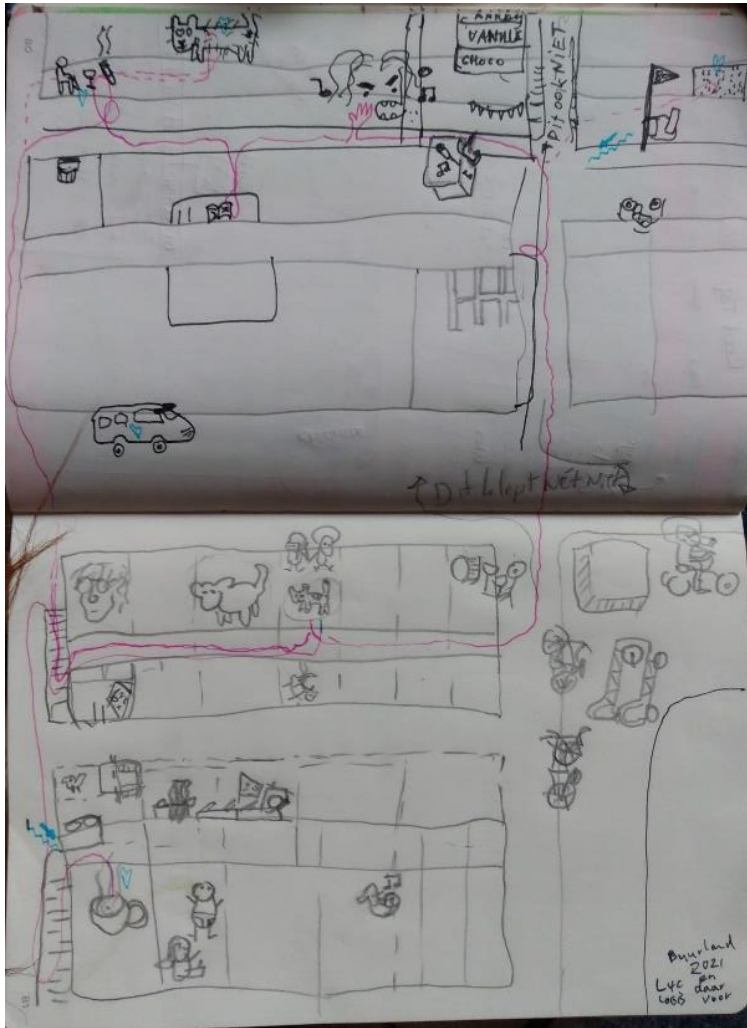


Figure 39 'Draw Your Garden' by Menno Berg.

Menno also indicated places that were re-designed by Buurlanders: the basements, the deck of Thomas and Esther; the Jeu de Boule alley; and the garden that is turned into a head stage during the yearly festival (left down, 'podium'). When we discussed the maps, Menno explained that to him important memories are fixing bikes with other neighbors in one of the 'garages' (basement) and constructing the boulder wall together with his neighbor Bouke. Both activities are indicated on his map. Memories, here, are mostly attached to places that are re-designed by Buurlanders. It shows how processes of re-design give meaning to residents' lived reality of Buurland as a place.

Contrastingly, Luc mainly indicated people and cats, instead of material constructions. He started from the neighbors that came up in his mind, and depicted them with their main characteristics, such as M with the glasses, L with the fat cat, R with the drums, T with the bike...



Luc seems to experience Buurland mainly through the people that live in the place. When I asked him about a regular trajectory he makes through Buurland, he drew the pink line. It starts from his house (middle), passes by Saskia’s house (up left) where Luc often stops to drink a glass of wine, then he passes by at Thijs and David’s house, he sometimes waves to me (the hand and face), he makes a round at the exchange cupboard and returns home. Another route he often takes, goes to Judith’s house, for a coffee (down-left). These routes reveal Luc’s main social contacts in the neighborhood.

Figure 40 ‘Draw Your Garden’ by Luc Loois

Outside Decks

Another major adaptation many Buurlanders made, was the construction of an outside deck. Neighbor Piet constructed one and several years later six houses had a similar construction. For many Buurlanders, the deck forms an extension of their living room:



Figure 41 Seda and Piet’s deck. Photograph by author.

Piet: *“This deck is an extension of our home. In the summer we sit outside, eat and play board games. It is our outside living room.”*

Thomas: *“First I thought, it’s a lot of work. When do we have to leave Buurland? Anyway, we made the deck and since the first day we are super happy with it.”*



Figure 42 Esther and Thomas’ deck. Photograph by author.



David: *“First we only constructed the floor. Later we constructed the corrugated roof with Thijs, and Tinus...”*

Thijs: *“Yes, with Piet’s drill.”*

Figure 43 Thijs’ and Davids deck. Photograph by author.



Figure 44 & 45 Thijs’ and Davids deck. A washing machine and some furniture. Photographs by author.

The construction of the decks shows the practical and collaborative attitude that characterizes Buurland. One Buurlander starts, soon other neighbors follow, using each other’s tools. The decks also represent a sense of self-control of one’s own environment. Without consulting municipality nor landlord, they could create their outside living room. “That’s how it works in Buurland: people do, and others get inspired” (Piet).

The Community Greenhouse



Figure 46 Greenhouse built by Richard Beumer. © Biemans, 2015.

Another item that characterizes Buurland is the greenhouse. It was made by Richard Beumer³⁶ and includes a small scale aquaponics system, an aquarium with fishes, and growth beds with hydro pellets. The system pumps water into the plants, they take out the minerals, and the fresh water flows back to the fishes. The greenhouse resembles how the use of space works in Buurland. Richard merely had to ask permission with the owners of the garden³⁷ if he could make a greenhouse in their garden. No consultation with the municipality nor the SSH was needed. Yet, what does the greenhouse add to residents lived experience of the place? Firstly, it clearly forms a reference point. I can see the greenhouse coming back in all of the drawings. Moreover, the greenhouse is adds to Buurland's identity. Outsiders who pass through the gardens often look surprised when they see chickens walking around and a huge greenhouse in the middle of the area. It also works as a reference when explaining where I live. The first thing I mention is... we have a huge greenhouse in our garden, in the middle of the city. Richard has always been the one maintaining the greenhouse. Since the last year, neighbor René helps him with this job and grows his own crops: the greenhouse becomes more and more a shared place.

³⁶ One of the 'Doetinchem' friends

³⁷ The owners were girls that lived in our house before I came to live there.



Figure 47 The gardens of Buurland block A, bird-eye perspective. Drawing by author.

Section 3 ‘Zwemfest’: a Binding Ritual

Section 2 discussed how temporality and the relative absence of policy gave neighbors the freedom to adapt communal and personal space. This freedom also allowed for organizing communal activities. And these activities form a big part of Buurland’s community: Christmas markets, flea markets, and garden clean-ups are organized each year. In this section I will zoom in on Buurland’s main activity, ‘Zwemfest’³⁸, and argue how the rituality of the organization of ‘Zwemfest’ gives meaning to Buurland as a community.

What was needed for ‘Zwemfest’ to develop?

As mentioned in the introduction, ‘Zwemfest’ started with the digging of a swimming pool, which formed the start of the community³⁹. The celebration that followed, developed into a yearly neighborhood festival. Two factors have been key in this development. Firstly, the spirit and attitude of the initial group. René defines this attitude as a “hands-on no-nonsense approach”. This practical attitude still characterizes the festival nowadays. With this attitude, the initial group built the foundations for the festival and paved the way for other Buurlanders to re-design space in Buurland. In that sense, the first group has been key in setting up a sense of community. And, according to Carlo, the groups that followed have continued this spirit: “After a long process of buying one of the blocks without success, the Buurland spirit deflated. New members that joined the community in that period⁴⁰ have revived this spirit. Nowadays, the group of Buurlanders consists of furniture makers, graphic designers, visual storytellers, catering owners, musicians, and people working in the festival sector. They have expertise that is relevant for organizing the festival, and a dose of practical spirit.

Secondly, the low level of intervention by SSH, Mitros and the municipality is an important factor that enabled ‘Zwemfest’ to develop. “You don’t have to request permission from the municipality if you want to organize something fun here. That is for me the benefit of Buurland [...] we just do” (Piet). The absence of bureaucracy makes that Buurlanders fully decide on the shape and character of the festival. In this creative process they are not restricted by any authority.

³⁸ Also called ‘Buurland Festival’

³⁹ The first encounter between neighbors Stijn and Corien and the ‘Doetinchem’ friends. This group would call themselves ‘Buurland’.

⁴⁰ 2013

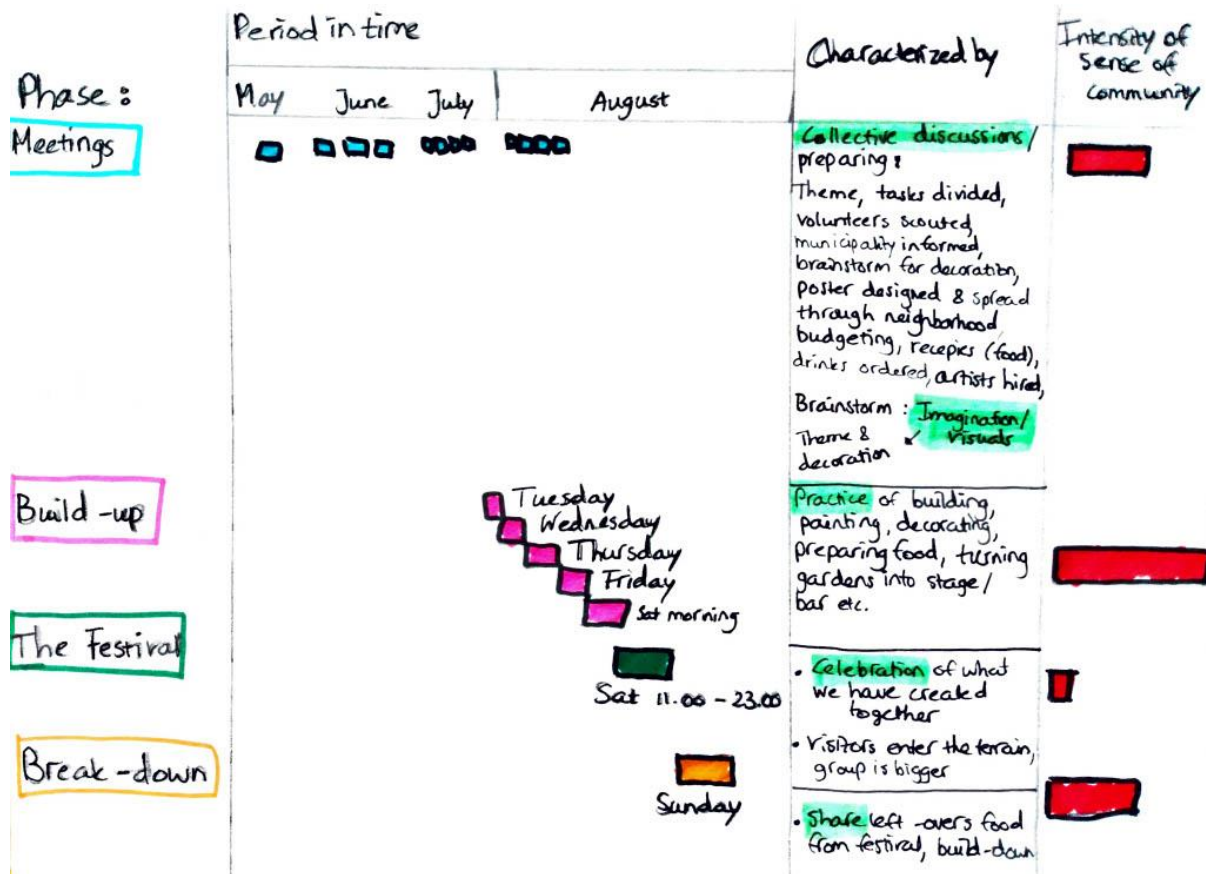


Figure 48 'Zwemfest' in phases

What makes Zwemfest a ritual?

Not every activity performed by a group can be considered a ritual (Bell 2009). One important condition seems to be that the activity is routinized and held by a specific group of people (Bell 2009, 71). Cain and Scrivner (2022, 492) define ritual as “actions with others that enforce boundaries, define meanings, and shape beliefs. [...] They are often temporally bound with a clear beginning and end”. ‘Zwemfest’⁴¹ has clear phases that fit in a bounded period of time (see figure 48). Moreover, ‘Zwemfest’ is a recurring activity, with a specific group of people: Buurlanders that live in the housing blocks.

When I asked Thomas why the festival is organized each year again, he answered: “It is a tradition. You can’t refrain from doing it without any clear reason.” Traditions in our society are often celebrations, and serve to maintain a certain stability, or preserve a ‘culture’ (Black Pete, Christmas). A ritual is more a conscious symbolic activity that is being ‘performed’ and has a clear function in society. Anthropologists have widely studied rituals and their function.

⁴¹ I refer here to the entire process: the meetings, build-up, festival, and break-down.

Although there has been a tendency in early anthropology to study rituals through a symbolic paradigm (Barnard and Spencer, 2002), Kitts (2017) argues how ritual cannot be grasped through a single lens. The author offers three paradigms to understand ‘ritual’: *discursive* (through text), *iconic* (the visual aspect & choreography) and *somatic* (bodily experience). In ritual practice these paradigms intersect (ibid.). This relates to the use of the audiovisual medium and the kind of knowledge that is being conveyed. As a researcher I can write about what the ritual entails, yet, by showing movements, emotions and collaborative gestures, I can convey more somatic and affective knowledge that is part of the ritual.

While we often think of rituals in institutionalized or religious settings, rituals are to be found in everyday practice, such as a yoga studio, or a volunteer training course (Cain and Scriver 2022, 491). The organization of ‘Zwemfest’ is a ritual that takes place in a neighborhood among a specific group of neighbors, without religious nor institutionalized intention. Analyzing the entire process using my journal and camera has given me insights into the distribution of roles among Buurlanders. Head of committees mostly stay the same throughout the years, because people have experience in organizing that aspect of the festival⁴². However, new Buurlanders are always invited to take on any job.

How does the rituality of the organization of ‘Zwemfest’ give meaning to Buurland?

Introduction into the Group

The yearly organization of ‘Zwemfest’ is a key moment where new community members are being introduced⁴³. Neighbor René: “I don’t remember who exactly, but someone knocked on my door asking if I wanted to participate in a festival they were organizing for the neighborhood. That was the first moment I heard about Buurland”. René lives in Buurland since October 2012. For quite some Buurlanders⁴⁴, ‘Zwemfest’ formed their introduction into the community. Every year the group spreads flyers in the two blocks to inform neighbors about the festival and to invite them to participate by building-up or being a volunteer during the festival. Justin: “Becoming part of the Buurland collective was for me intimately connected with attending neighborhood events, such as the yearly festival, the movie night, the flea

⁴² Fabian is head of the bar committee [16:49:23]

⁴³ One of the phases of ritual practice (Jaques 2015).

⁴⁴ Including myself

market, the Christmas market, and the construction of the vegetable garden. These events have contributed a lot to getting to know more people in the area.” One function of rituals is the initiation into societies (Whitehouse and Kavanagh 2022). ‘Zwemfest’ forms a low threshold for other neighbors to become part of the group.

Intra-group Bonding

Besides initiating new members, ‘Zwemfest’ unites the already existing group. Lonneke: “People you see very little all year round, work hard together during the build-up. In that week you see all Buurlanders together again. I think that's great.” Thomas: “You know everyone, but you don't see each other every day and certainly not lately. The festival is a good reason to meet each other again.” While throughout the year the subdivision in little groups can be more felt, during the festival intergroup divisions become transparent. Cain and Scrivner (2022, 493) argue: “When secular spaces include ritual actions, they can create increased intimacy between participants, binding them to one another and the larger group”. Moreover, the organizational process of the festival creates memories that strengthen the relationships between neighbors throughout the year. Gerke: “When I greet someone in winter, I remember we spent hours painting these plates.” Ritualization, here, serves “to secure better intra-group bonding” (Bell 2009, 73).

Practice & Collaboration

Although there has been a tendency in early anthropology to study rituals through a symbolic paradigm (Barnard and Spencer, 2002), the ‘practice’ of doing a ritual became an object of study (Kitts 2017). In ‘Zwemfest’ the practical aspect forms an important aspect and is often linked to collaboration. Harm: “If you see a neighbor walk by every day and say hi, that's nice, but when you're building something together with your neighbor, then you really get to know that person.” The bodily practice of constructing together creates a connection between the performers. Joint activities “produce shared commitment, loyalty and identity within a social group” (Barnard and Spencer, 2002, 173). This, in its way, creates meanings and memories in space. During ‘Zwemfest’ 2021, Gerke constructed a church tower together with Carlo. For Gerke, the tower became a concrete memory in space; he indicated it on his map. Moreover, it was the first time that Gerke joined Carlo as head of the build-up committee and I could sense a stronger bond between the two. Here, place creates feelings of belonging through embodied connections with people in that same space and social practices are important in this process

(Bennet 2012). The tower forms a concrete memory in place, resulting from a collaborative activity.

Place-making and Identity

As we could see in participant's drawings, 'Zwemfest' has created memories over the years that are connected to Buurland as a place. Gerke, for instance, indicated gardens not by the people who live there, but by the function they have during the festival in summer: the vinyl garden, the head stage... These specific spots constitute Gerke's connection to Buurland as a place. In my personal memory, the soundscape of 'Zwemfest' is really present⁴⁵. When I wake up during the build-up week and open the back door, I can hear sawing and hammering, while I see all neighbors walking around with wood, decoration, and food. During other times of the year that I hear someone sawing, it reminds me of Buurland's ritual. It has created a memory in my mind that consists of a soundscape, connected to the place. This resonates with the concept of 'place-making': "through [...] more spectacular experiences or interventions, spaces gain meaning and become places (Jaffe & De Koning 2016: 25). 'Zwemfest', here, forms a more spectacular intervention, through which Buurland as a space gains meaning and becomes a place.

Moreover, 'Zwemfest' has been important in defining Buurland's identity. The yearly festival clearly marks the area of 'Buurland' and the group of Buurlanders that collaborate. It is a form of "boundary-making" (Cain and Scrivner 2022, 493). And this main ritual reflects the practical attitude of the community. David: "What I learned most in Buurland is to *do*. When someone has an idea, it doesn't have to pass through committees, we just start doing it and see how it goes." This is the 'hands-one no-nonsense' approach René defined. When I asked Buurlanders during what moments they experience a sense of community in Buurland, all mentioned 'Zwemfest'⁴⁶ in the first place.

⁴⁵ I chose to open the film with this soundscape.

⁴⁶ I refer here to the entire process: the meetings, build-up, festival, and break-down.

Conclusion

Piet: *“A similar Buurland? That would only be possible if the municipality would turn a blind eye for some years.”*

Esther: *“You can’t create it beforehand, than it is already figured out.”*

‘Making’ Buurland

In 2023, current residents will have to leave their houses. After twelve years of postponed demolition, the 150 houses will make place for 285 new social housing apartments and several mid-market rental apartments (Mitros, n.d.). The aim of housing corporation Mitros is to ‘create’ a new community called ‘Nieuw Buurland’⁴⁷ with a similar communal character. As they explained to us in an online meeting⁴⁸, half of the new residents will be a ‘special group’; ex-homeless people, ex-detainees, or mentally disadvantaged people, while they aim the rest to be a motivated group that forms the fundamentals of the new community⁴⁹. This demands quite some commitment from the latter group. The question remains if Mitros will succeed in creating a similar community as Buurland. While policymakers often assume that communality can be created from ‘outside’ – a top-down approach, Buurland’s example demonstrates that a sense of community among neighbors has emerged organically without initial intentions nor policy intervention. “Communities [...] have to be constructed [...] through the materiality of the place and the actions of the people (Bennet 2015, 36). Actually, what was needed for Buurland to develop was a lack of policy: it created an atmosphere for residents to adapt the place and assimilate it to the groups identity.

⁴⁷ The name ‘Nieuw Buurland’ was born out of a question Mitros had set out to a group of local residents that have a say in Mitros’ construction plans. Mitros used this name without further consultation with the current community. The reactions among Buurlanders differed: some of them considered it an ode to Buurland, others were offended that Mitros hadn’t asked permission to use the name.

⁴⁸ ‘Us’ refers to the Buurland Advice Group (Buurlanders Justin, Piet, Marije, Rutger and me). In January 2020 Mitros entered into a dialogue with the Advice Group to find out what elements from Buurland could be incorporated into the new community. The Advice Group had one condition for this conversation to take place: enabling current residents to stay until the period of demolition. This succeeded.

⁴⁹ Because of the gap of two years between demolition and building, there is no possibility to rehouse the current community.

Buurland's Gradual Development

The lack of policy gave residents the control over their living place. This interconnected with the temporal aspect of the place: the fact that the place would be demolished, created an atmosphere of unboundedness in which creativity could flourish. Carlo: "You can try out more things, because if something goes wrong, the damage is relative". This unboundedness led to two important processes for the community. Firstly, the re-designing of space in Buurland has been important in re-defining Buurland's identity and creating a sense of community among neighbors through memories that are connected to the place. It created meeting points, extensions of people's houses, and places to jointly fix your bike. Secondly, the unboundedness enabled the emerging of 'Zwemfest'. The yearly organization of 'Zwemfest' has been important in creating and sustaining a sense of community among neighbors. For many of us, it formed the introduction into the group. Additionally, it fosters intra-group bonding, and creates memories. Specific spatial features – the access to a huge outside area and the architecture of the blocks – facilitated these processes.

In both processes, the attitude of the initial group has played a key role. They initiated the creative use of space and fully explored the boundaries in a place with limited bureaucratic rules. This group didn't have the intention to set up a community. Yet, through re-designing space, organizing activities, and actively involving other neighbors, they gradually found out what aspects work in a community. "People do not just learn a skill and somehow perform it", rather, it is the process of learning that gives them the embodied and practical knowledge (Harris 2007, 13). This is exactly why I agree with Piet and Esther⁵⁰, who mention that you can't just add some ingredients and 'create' a new community from scratch. Situated and practical knowledge cannot be recreated by policymakers nor can spontaneous creativity and intrinsic motivation.

Friendship, Homogeneity and Voluntarism

A last important factor are the strong friendships ties within the group. It forms the fundament of Buurland's community. It started with the initial group; later the arrival of a second big group of friends followed and brought already existing ties into the community. Yet, these ties effected the communities' composition: neighbors with a shared interest and attitude joined the

⁵⁰ See quotes at the beginning of this section.

group. “Communities come to exhibit homogeneity: members behaving similarly and working together, towards common aims [...]” (Barnard and Spencer 2002, 173). Contrary to Mitros who strives for creating a social mix⁵¹, Buurland’s community does not at all represent the demography of a city like Utrecht. On top of that, a certain ‘culture’ prevails in Buurland. Neighbors are welcome to participate in communal activities, and are each year invited to do so, but as neighbor René states, you need a pro-active attitude and fit in with the ‘hands-on no-nonsense approach’ to feel part of the group. Yet, the fact that participation is voluntarily, creates for newcomers an open atmosphere without obligations and without a high motivation being required.

Breakdown

When talking about the demolition of ‘Buurland’, city councilor Pepijn Zwanenberg⁵² stated: “The elimination of communities goes hand in hand with the destruction of social cohesion and creates non-affordable housing”. Pepijn touches here upon an important aspect. The breakdown of the blocks means the breakdown of a community. Not only a certain knowledge gets lost, also the social cohesion between neighbors that ‘Buurland’ has been able to build over the past twelve years, will perish. Hopefully, yet, the identity of the place will stay alive in its residents and perhaps this research can give us – residents, housing corporations and municipalities – inspiration for new forms of co-living in an over-crowded city.

⁵¹ Gemeente Utrecht, Mitros, HuurdersNetwerkMitros (2020, 8).

⁵² City councilor for GroenLinks. Pepijn is engaged with urban housing, urban development, heritage and green in the city. I aimed for integrating the perspectives of Mitros and the SSH in this research by conducting an interview with their representatives. Yet, both parties showed unwilling due to different reasons.



Figure 49 Filming Thomas. © Koen van Korlaar, 2021.

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Appendices

Ha Buurlander,
Heb jij ooit je buur
geportretteerd?
Of Buurland gevangen in een
lied?
Nee...
Doe dan mee aan de Buurland
workshop reeks!



Voor mijn onderzoek van de master visuele antropologie heb ik een aantal workshops ontworpen.

Het doel is om uit te vinden hoe andere Buurlanders bepaalde aspecten in Buurland (hebben) ervaren.

De focus ligt op creativiteit en het gebruik van audiovisuele middelen - tekenen, fotografie, objecten - om Buurland's bestaan te onderzoeken. Vet leuk!

©Eva de Jong 2021



De creaties die hieruit ontstaan, kunnen de basis vormen voor een Buurland fotoboek, expositie, scheurkalender, of (interactieve) website. Dat bepalen we samen tijdens de workshops.



1: Pluis-je-archieef-uit-Workshop

Denk eens terug aan die lichtshow. Of die BBQ met lichte jazz op de achtergrond van je burens die stonden te spelen. Wat zijn voor jou de écht memorabele momentjes uit jouw Buurland-bestaan? Was het met de hele buurt of jij alleen in de achtertuin?



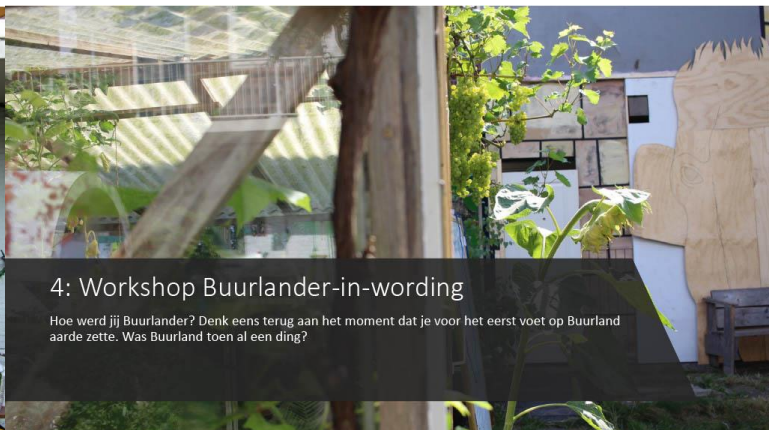
2: Teken-je-Tuin-Workshop

Tijdens deze workshop gaan we Buurland tekenen van bovenaf. Aan de hand van de tekeningen kijken we naar routes die de Buurlander aflegt en herinneringen die verbonden zijn aan de ruimte.



3: Portretteer-je-Buur-Workshop

Ga met je buur in gesprek. Welke veranderingen heeft je buur aangebracht aan huis en tuin? En hoe staat dit in verband met het grotere Buurland?



4: Workshop Buurlander-in-wording

Hoe werd jij Buurlander? Denk eens terug aan het moment dat je voor het eerst voet op Buurland aarde zette. Was Buurland toen al een ding?



We zullen tijdens de workshops tekenen maar vooral ook in gesprek gaan over het thema van de workshop. Je hoeft dus niet creatief te zijn om mee te kunnen doen ;)

Voor sommige workshops vraag ik je iets mee te nemen of voor te bereiden. Wanneer je je aanmeld, krijg je meer instructies.

Lijkt het je leuk om mee te doen? Meld je [hier](#) aan.



Vrijgaveformulier Research Audio Visuele Media

Als onderdeel van het onderzoeksproject *Buurland* (2021/2022) uitgevoerd door mij, Malin van Weerdenburg, masterstudent aan de Universiteit Leiden, maak ik foto-, audio- en/ of video-opnames van jou ten behoeve van mijn onderzoek waar jij aan deelneemt. Onderdeel van dit onderzoeksproject is een documentairefilm in samenwerking met Silke van Diemen.

Het doel van het project is om te onderzoeken welke factoren in Buurland een rol hebben gespeeld bij het creëren en vasthouden van een gemeenschapsgevoel. Hoe komt het dat in Buurland een verhaal is ontstaan over wie en wat wij zijn, waar meer mensen zich bij hebben aangesloten door de jaren heen? Ook probeer ik te onderzoeken wat Buurland precies is; hoe Buurlanders Buurland definiëren; en welke politieke en beleidsprocessen er op de achtergrond meespelen. De materialen zijn in het bezit van mij en Silke van Diemen en worden bewaard op twee harde schijven. De materialen worden ten eerste gebruikt voor dit onderzoeksproject, maar kunnen in de toekomst worden gebruikt wanneer er wellicht een vervolgfilm komt. Toestemming kan nog worden ingetrokken tot een week na de proefvertoning van de eerste montage. Dit kan door contact op te nemen met Malin (06-81884297) of Silke (06-10317122).

Geef hieronder aan door te paraferen met welk gebruik van deze opnames je instemt. Dit is helemaal aan jou. We zullen de gegevens alleen gebruiken op de manier (en) waarmee jij akkoord gaat.

1. De opnames kunnen door de onderzoeker worden bestudeerd voor gebruik in het onderzoeksproject.
Foto _____ Audio _____ Video _____
2. De opnames kunnen in lokalen van de Universiteit Leiden aan studenten worden getoond.
Foto _____ Audio _____ Video _____
3. De opnames kunnen worden gebruikt voor wetenschappelijke publicaties die niet toegankelijk zijn voor het publiek.
Foto _____ Audio _____ Video _____
4. De opnames kunnen worden getoond op nationale en internationale bijeenkomsten van wetenschappers die geïnteresseerd zijn in de studie van antropologie.
Foto _____ Audio _____ Video _____
5. De opnames kunnen worden getoond in openbare presentaties aan niet-wetenschappelijke groepen.
Foto _____ Audio _____ Video _____
6. De opnames zijn te gebruiken op internet, televisie en radio.
Foto _____ Audio _____ Video _____

Ik heb dit formulier gelezen en geef toestemming voor het gebruik van de gegevens zoals hierboven aangegeven.

Naam _____ Handtekening _____ Datum _____