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State-sponsored gentrification or social regeneration?

Symbolic politics and neighborhood intervention in an Amsterdam working  
class neighborhood.

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# State-sponsored gentrification or social regeneration? Symbolic politics and neighborhood intervention in an Amsterdam working class neighborhood.

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses state interventions in a poor former-working-class area in Amsterdam – Van der Pekbuurt. Even though the residents have been successful in resisting redevelopment and renovation plans, state and housing association continue their efforts to change the area through symbolic politics. By introducing and facilitating cultural entrepreneurs and artists in the area - as part of regeneration and gentrification strategies -, the representation of what the neighborhood is, and ought to be, gravitates towards the planners' future vision. As such, these representations undermine the legitimacy of long-term residents. Interviews with residents reveal that the change in the neighborhood instill a sense of loss of place, exacerbated by cuts in local service provision.*

## 1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, urban policies in Western Europe have employed area-based strategies to regenerate deprived neighborhoods. Local authorities have sought to improve social and physical conditions in various ways, including initiatives in employment, health, safety, and education to improve the social situation of residents, and redevelopment and renovation to improve housing conditions. These latter physical interventions are also often seen as an opportunity to transform neighborhoods socially; by altering the housing stock and introducing new amenities, more affluent households may be accommodated in poor areas (Andersson and Musterd 2005; cf. Goetz 2013). Various scholars in Europe and the US have argued, however, that these policies favor middle class residents to the detriment of the poor, who may be displaced or relocated from the neighborhood, or may no longer feel 'at home' because of the changed environment, new amenities, and social differences between them and newcomers (a form of indirect displacement) (Davidson and Lees 2005; see also Pinkster 2016; Chaskin & Joseph 2012; Van Gent et al. 2016). Consequently, these regeneration strategies have been cast as a stealthy form of state-sponsored gentrification (Bridge et al. 2012). Not all regeneration efforts constitute gentrification, however, with *ipso facto* displacement and 'loss of place'. Relocation may be absent or negotiated, and rather than feeling displaced, some remaining residents may (cautiously) appreciate the arrival of new neighbors and amenities (Chaskin & Joseph 2012; Freeman 2006; Kleinmans and Kearns 2013; Ernst and Doucet 2014).

The aim of this chapter is to understand whether and how neighborhood interventions may constitute a form of state-sponsored gentrification, meaning that the state and its regeneration partners actively promote social change. Specifically, we focus on interventions and service provision in a particular working class area in Amsterdam. As large-scale redevelopment is not possible in this case, the municipality and a housing association rely on the symbolic politics of ‘quarter making’ to make the area attractive for middle class residents. Symbolic politics refer to the ways in which regeneration efforts are framed and experienced by politicians, policymakers, civil servants, administrators, and residents groups. Together with financial capital, organizational power, juridical power, and technical resources, the ability to dominate visions of reality (symbolic power) allows actors to impose that vision on reality (see Bourdieu 1989).

Sakizlioglu and Uitermark (2014) outline two forms of symbolic politics: classification of the area and its population, and the politics of timing. The former refers to stigmatizing discourse, which may normalize the necessity of social change and divide residents between the deserving and undeserving (see also Paton et al. 2016; Nguyen et al. 2013; Goetz 2013). The latter refers to the strategic use of time by the state; i.e. keeping residents in uncertainty for long periods of time to break the momentum of collective action (see also Gans 1962; Wallace 2016). We propose another – related – form of symbolic politics in regeneration: middle class quarter making, which refers to policymakers catering to middle class preferences through social policies, initiatives, and service provision. We distinguish this from place making, because it is done mostly *in anticipation* of their arrival.

The symbolic politics of middle class quarter making may therefore constitute a ‘soft force’ approach to state-sponsored gentrification, but this is not a foregone conclusion. Even when middle class residents are catered to, efforts may also be directed at long-term residents, potentially preventing the instilling of a sense of loss or impending displacement. Kleinhans and Kearns (2013) argue that any appraisal of displacement requires an understanding of an area’s population and housing market, policy aims and instruments, and the interface between the state and residents, including the level of community empowerment.

To understand how middle class quarter making may amount to symbolic politics and how it is received by residents, we present our case study of the Van der Pekbuurt (VDP-buurt)

in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. This relatively poor area, situated close to the city center, was scheduled for large-scale redevelopment to allow for more private forms of housing and a new social mix. Faced with relocation, tenants effectively resisted the redevelopment plans, which led to renegotiations. But while the large-scale physical interventions have been forestalled, the area remains subject to multiple policy initiatives for regeneration. Our study focuses on how the municipality and housing association are continuing their efforts to make the area and its nearby docklands more attractive to new middle class residents. At the same time, however, the municipality seeks to empower long-term residents through service provision, which may counterbalance middle class quarter making efforts. This combination of approaches offers a strategic case to investigate whether state efforts may promote or ameliorate indirect displacement.

The next section briefly discusses state-sponsored gentrification and the involvement of artists, culture, and other amenities, in order to introduce our concept of quarter making. After discussing the urban and policy context, we present our case study in three steps. First, we chart the organizational structure of neighborhood initiatives and identify organizations that are (partly) directed at a middle class audience. Second, we discuss these middle class symbolic markers in further detail. Third, we present data on policymakers' and long-term residents' attitudes towards regeneration initiatives, with a focus on symbolic politics. We end the chapter with a discussion of state-sponsored gentrification and offer tentative explanations of our findings.

## **2 Gentrification, policy, and quarter making**

Originally, gentrification was conceptualized as a bottom-up process of small-scale investment in housing. But in their seminal paper, Hackworth and Smith (2001) shifted the scholarly focus to large-scale, capital-intensive redevelopment curated, and often also initiated, by the state. The restructuring of the housing market through liberalization, the sale of public land, and the facilitation of large-scale private investment in inner city areas are now part and parcel of what is referred to as state-sponsored, or state-led, gentrification. The use of state power in the Atlanta Yards/ Pacific Park project in Brooklyn, New York is a recent example (Sze 2009; cf. Paton et al. 2016). Yet state-sponsored urban redevelopment characterized by highly visible capital interests and the physical displacement of poor residents is more prominent in cities in the Global South (Lees et al. 2015); in continental Europe, on the other hand, the social and state context has

arguably made the process less relentless and more negotiated. Moreover, local urban and housing policies often play a decisive role in the process and outcomes.

In Amsterdam, for instance, despite liberalization trends in housing, direct displacement is rare as tenants' legal rights remain strong. Nevertheless, while the speed and depth of gentrification is limited by housing rights and a large share of social housing (Van Gent 2013), policy reform, the sale of social rental housing, and the rising demand for housing have all led to marked changes in Amsterdam's geography (Boterman and Van Gent 2014; Hochstenbach and Van Gent 2015). Although poor households may not be directly displaced through forced evictions, affordable housing is dwindling (leading to exclusionary displacement), and while some may welcome change, others may feel a loss of place because of changes in the built environment and the arrival of new amenities and more affluent residents (Ernst and Doucet 2014; Pinkster 2016).

Western European accounts of the role of the state in promoting gentrification have generally focused on housing tenure as a key lever for engineering social change (e.g. Murie 1991; Millard-Ball 2000; Boterman and Van Gent 2014). Notwithstanding the importance of housing, the state may also promote neighborhood change via other means. In the wake of Richard Florida's creative class paradigm, policymakers have increasingly employed 'culture' and 'creativity' in regeneration strategies and neighborhood development (Rota and Salone 2014; Grodach, Foster and Murdoch 2014; Lees and Melhuish 2015). This may imply introducing artists and art to a neighborhood or changing the commercial landscape to suit middle class tastes (Mathews 2010; Cameron & Coaffee 2005).

Artists can be key agents in the commodification of place due to what artistic production and consumption represents in wider society (i.e. art as exclusive and excluding) (Harris 2012). 'Importing' such notions to places may, however, conflict with local tastes and interests and may be an instance of symbolic politics. Harris (2012) suggests that regeneration through arts may occur without displacement, yet he notes that "artists can be caught, intentionally or otherwise, in processes of gentrification with important social consequences" (p.237). Furthermore, as early gentrifiers, the 'pioneering' artists may themselves be displaced or feel a loss of place when the gentrification process matures and high income residents become dominant (Ocejo 2011).

Another form of cultural intervention is the modification of the commercial and amenities infrastructure of a neighborhood. Typically, gentrification manifests itself most visibly in the changing commercial landscape. High-end retail, restaurants, bars, and particularly coffee places are central to the iconography of gentrification (Bridge and Dowling 2001). While usually associated with market-driven processes, state actors may also facilitate or initiate the makeover of an area's commerce. Sharon Zukin argues that "in numerous cases state intervention has reinforced the cultural claims behind gentrification's market forces" (Zukin 1991:194). Her account primarily refers to the realization of economic value through the symbolic reconstruction of areas into places of cultural consumption, partly through an emphasis on the authenticity and historicity of place. Local authorities may seek to capitalize on cultural activities through regulation, legal arrangements, and subsidies. However, she states that "gentrification has received its greatest boost not from subsidies but from the state's substantive and symbolic legitimation of the cultural claim to space" (ibid.:194).

Introducing art and artists and favoring some commercial activities over others are part of the politics that symbolically reconstitute places so as to pave the way for their appropriation by new groups. This could be seen in terms of place making by state actors, together with the new middle class (see Elwood et al. 2015). In situations where the commercial infrastructure is deliberately modified *in anticipation* of the arrival of desired groups – that is, middle class gentrifiers – we should perhaps rather talk of quarter making. Here, state actors create the conditions for newcomers by making the area palatable and safe for middle class consumption.

### 3 Study area

The VDP-buurt (3.1 km<sup>2</sup> area) is a neighborhood of Amsterdam located on the northern bank of the river IJ directly opposite the historic city center. Administratively, it is part of the 'North' borough of the Amsterdam municipality. Constructed in the 1920s for dockland workers, it was innovative for its working class housing, red brick architecture, and garden village design. Canals, low-rise buildings, ample greenery, small squares, and crooked streets provide a village-like atmosphere. The eponymous Van der Pekstraat is its main thoroughfare.

The VDP-buurt's housing market has been dominated by social housing since the 1920s (in 2014, social housing made up 88.9% of the neighborhood's 2,406 dwellings). Dwellings are relatively small: three rooms on average, and 59% of houses are smaller than 60 square meters. In 2013, housing tax values averaged at €158,000, well below the city average of €244,000. In recent times, values have been decreasing, mainly due to deteriorating housing quality. Many dwellings are badly maintained, and a significant number lacks central heating and adequate insulation, leading to low housing satisfaction among residents.

Single-person households are in the majority, yet given the average housing size it is remarkable that about a quarter of households have children. Despite its reputation as a white working class area, the VDP-buurt is ethnically quite diverse. Finally, about a third of households was subsisting on a minimum income<sup>1</sup> in 2013, a proportion that has been on the rise since 2003.

#### *Social change*

The VDP-buurt's location close to the ferry crossing to the city center and to the nearby waterfront redevelopments have led to spillover demand for housing. Despite the large share of low quality social housing, there has been an inflow of young residents of native Dutch and Western descent from outside Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup> This group constituted twenty per cent of the neighborhood's population in 2013 and is increasing at an above-average rate, both compared to the North borough and to the city. Consequently, the area has seen modest increases in its share of single-person, higher educated, and native Dutch households. This is indicative of new demand, but is also the result of the housing association's policy of placing students and other short-term renters in vacant houses awaiting renovation.

#### *Protest, renovation, and new amenities*

Since the mid-1990s, the attractive location of the VDP-buurt together with its poor social and housing conditions have spurred regeneration plans. These plans foresaw comprehensive renewal with social mixing, which was the *modus operandi* for regenerating

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to the municipality's poverty line, which is set at an income of 110% or less of the amount received in social benefits. Some households may earn this amount through part-time and/or low wage employment. In 2016, these thresholds are €1264 for single-person households and €1685 for couples (per month, before tax).

<sup>2</sup> In Dutch ethno-national classification, when one or both parents are born abroad, a person is classified as allochthonous. A distinction is made between 'Western' and 'non-Western': 'Western' encompasses North America, Europe (excluding Turkey), Oceania, Japan, and Indonesia.



deprived areas in Amsterdam at the time. Despite the area's cultural-historical value, the housing association maintained that renovation was neither worthwhile nor feasible. For the housing association – a heavily regulated private organization that owns nearly 78,000 dwellings – it made more financial sense to redevelop, to sell newly developed dwellings as owner-occupied units, and to collect more rent to cover the costs. Fearing increasing rent levels, both short and long-term residents organized into tenant and neighborhood organizations and mobilized to protect the neighborhood's cultural-historical value.

In 2014, the neighborhood became a 'protected townscape', which meant that housing blocks could not be demolished but had to be renovated. After sustained resident protest, a deal was struck to renovate a small part of the neighborhood (150-170 dwellings). Renovation would proceed piecemeal, allowing existing residents to move to a renovated house without experiencing a large rent increase. Of the renovated dwellings, 40% would be private rental or owner-occupied. As the renovation is costly and 60% will remain social rental, the municipality is also contributing through a reduction in land development costs (Nul20 2014). It is as yet unclear what will be done with the rest of the neighborhood.

Despite the thwarted redevelopment plans, the area is undergoing a noticeable transition. This is mostly visible through the emergence of new shops and cafés. Especially in the Van der Pekstraat, new businesses aimed at a middle class clientele are starting to replace shops and cafés that catered to long-term residents. Another major change is the physical renovation of the Van der Pekstraat and the relocation of the market to this street. This market has also received a makeover and now includes stands offering organic and local produce as well as antiques.

The area surrounding the VDP-buurt is also changing rapidly: a new neighborhood called Overhoeks that consists of expensive, mostly owner-occupied, housing, is being built next to the VDP-buurt. North of the area, where the local market used to be located, a new shopping center has been built. On the south side, a large hostel and entertainment facilities are being added to the redeveloped waterfront. The redevelopment of the northern IJ waterfront has arguably brought new attention to the North borough, as well as new residents, amenities, businesses, and visitors. As the area had long suffered from the closure of the shipping wharfs, these new developments are welcomed by many. The question is whether and how the old residents may benefit from these changes.

## 4 Policy context

The pressure on Amsterdam's housing market offers the municipality and housing association ample opportunities to draw more affluent residents to the neighborhood. Yet regeneration efforts are not unilaterally aimed towards social transformation. Three types of policy are important in understanding the policy goals at work.

First, Dutch housing policies have been promoting homeownership since the early 1990s, and since the 2000s housing associations have been pushed to sell their dwellings as a financial strategy to invest in new development. After the 2008 financial crisis and the following budget crises, new policies imposed taxes on housing associations to raise state income, forcing them to sell housing at a premium in order to remain financially solvent (Boelhouwer and Priemus 2014).

Second, the municipality's growth agenda aims to secure Amsterdam's position as a competitive European metropolis through population growth and by accommodating highly skilled workers (Bontje and Lawton 2013). To attract more residents and visitors, the city seeks to expand the high density of cultural and commercial activities found in the center to other centrally located residential neighborhoods. Policy texts have literally cited gentrification as a positive process that should be pushed further (Van Gent 2013). Furthermore, liberal politicians and senior planners publicly advocate for the social transformation of relatively poor urban areas to accommodate new gentrifiers at the expense of social housing tenants (e.g. Gadet 2015; Capel 2016). In addition to developing high density housing, this policy supports new amenities, like cultural and entertainment venues, restaurants, cafés, and small specialty shops. Such municipal policies affect the VDP-buurt, as well as the nearby waterfront revitalization (Savini and Dembski 2016). These local policies are linked to more general tendencies towards the sale and liberalization of social rental dwellings.

A stronger focus on economic growth has also transformed the municipality's cultural policies, including its best known initiative of *broedplaatsen* ('art factories'), the idea for which originated in 1999 in response to concerns over the affordability of art spaces. *Broedplaatsen* policies entailed the conversion of vacant industrial, housing, and office buildings into temporary facilities for starting artists and small creative-cultural companies.

The municipality thereby subsidized exploitation costs for a limited period. Policy expectations, however, increased over time: artists and start-ups were not only expected to produce art or commercial products and services, but also to contribute to the socio-economic development of the neighborhood where they were located (Bontje and Lawton 2013).

The third type of policies are area-based and aim to improve the situation of poor residents and help integrate immigrant communities. Since the 1990s, there have been several national programs to tackle urban social issues. The most recent one, the ‘40 neighborhoods program’, also included the North borough and VDP-buurt. It employed budgets for resident initiatives to improve livability and social contacts between residents, alongside physical interventions. When the national policy was discontinued in 2012, the municipality stepped in and used the remaining two years of funding to develop resident competencies so that Amsterdam residents could effectively run and fund neighborhood initiatives through community-based projects or trusts. When a new liberal-socialist coalition came to power in 2014, community-based initiatives were still seen as a primary agent of regeneration, yet their funding and administrative support were largely retracted. The only neighborhood funding available is earmarked for livability projects in neighborhoods like the VDP-buurt.

## **5 Our analysis**

The municipality’s growth agenda, the overall high demand for housing, and the housing association’s financial imperatives have put pressure on the working class neighborhood of the VDP-buurt, yet its current housing market structure and conditions have so far prevented an influx of higher income residents. Tenants have effectively stalled renovation and redevelopment, yet the municipality and housing association are continuing their efforts by other means: introducing and supporting new amenities and commerce, as well as supporting and funding community-based organizations to work on livability projects. To understand how these efforts may produce social change through symbolic politics, and to assess their social effects, we ask the following questions:

1. What organizations are involved in the transformation of the VDP-buurt, and which of these are focused on middle class residents?

2. How is the area and its regeneration represented, both by local organizations with a middle class focus and by policymakers?
3. How is the regeneration viewed by residents?

Our analyses are based on various studies conducted by the authors. Between September 2015 and January 2016, we conducted an extensive social network analysis of the people involved in the regeneration of the VDP-buurt, based on publicly available data in policy documents and on professional and personal websites. Individuals were identified and related to one another based on their organizational membership. This analysis was used to chart the overall organizational framework and to see which organizations are supported by the municipality and the housing association. Furthermore, in February 2016, a content analysis was performed on the public communication of organizations to assess how the neighborhood's inhabitants and character are portrayed.

To assess the interface between policy and residents and how residents perceive the changes, we draw on interviews with five locally active civil servants and twenty-seven residents.<sup>3</sup> These interviews, which were conducted between November 2014 and February 2015, focused on the area's regeneration. In addition, interviews were held with local representatives of six political parties, including members who were part of the borough administration in January 2016. These interviewees were also asked to comment on our network analysis to provide context to our findings.

#### *Organizational framework*

Our social network analysis and interviews identified 24 organizations that play a role in the regeneration of the VDP-buurt. Some of these, particularly cultural cooperatives, are also active in other areas in the borough. The housing association and various municipal departments are the most important actors in terms of competencies and funding. Some organizations also have active members from political parties, notably the Social Democratic, Social Liberal, and Social Green parties, which are among the largest parties representing the area. While these parties generally endorse the organizations' activities, the shared memberships that we found do not constitute party strategy. Conversely, the other

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<sup>3</sup> Of the twenty-seven residents, sixteen had lived in the VDP-buurt for more than 20 years. Twelve of these 'long-term residents' may be classified as working class; eleven were native Dutch and five were non-native Dutch.

large party in the area, the Socialist Party, actively opposes the current social transformation and has close ties to the tenants' association and their protests.

Fifteen of the organizations that we identified are either commercial, non-profit, or community-based. Of these, four are residents associations (one is mostly active in Overhoeks). Two are new community-based organizations (trusts); one is focused on public space and social care in the VDP-buurt, while the other seeks a broader audience and has been successful in obtaining multiple sponsors to organize cultural events in the adjacent park. The latter organization – Noorderparkkamer – is strongly connected to the four cultural cooperatives and two of the three commercial associations. These six form a cluster of artists and creative entrepreneurs, who live in Amsterdam North but not necessarily in the VDP-buurt.

Interviewees from the local administration and politics were generally positive about these cultural activities, as they provide a boost to the area's image. Because of this, interviewees designated this cluster of cultural entrepreneurs as a 'secondary circuit' of regeneration, meaning that while their activities differ from those of the municipality and housing association (constituting the 'first circuit'), these organizations and entrepreneurs are helping to transform the neighborhood. Most of these organizations have received direct or indirect support from the municipality through creative city and social policies that seek to establish community-based organizations in vacant spaces, or are actively working in partnership with the housing association. Moreover, these seven organizations – including a group of urban designers – are the most active in producing symbolic markers that are typically middle class (see Table 1).

We defined the symbolic markers through an analysis of the discourse and content of the websites of the various organizations active in the neighborhood. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1984, 1989) and Zukin (1991) on how consumption and taste signify class position, we labeled the organizations that exhibit a clear focus on specific forms of consumption, which in the literature and public debate are linked to middle class tastes (such as specialty coffee, 'authentic' products, or yoga), as carrying 'middle class symbolic markers'. Furthermore, we also labeled as middle class those organizations that employ a discourse that stresses a pioneering attitude, as if the VDP-buurt is 'undiscovered' and exciting, a *terra nullius*. To be clear, these criteria do not mean that the organizations' aims

are to make the VDP-buurt a homogenous area. On the contrary, diversity is often celebrated as an interesting and exciting neighborhood trait. The next section discusses the representation of the state-supported organizations.

Table 1. Overview of identified organizations per group, including partnerships with the municipality and housing association, and organizations that produce middle class symbolic markers.

Type of organization	Number	Partnership with		
		housing association	municipality	Middle class symbolic markers
Cultural cooperative	4	1	2	4
Residents association	4			
Local commerce and economy	3	2	1	2
Neighborhood trust	2	1	2	1
Forum for regeneration	1	1	1	
Urban designers	1		1	1
Housing association	1			
Municipality	5			
Political parties	3			
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>

### *Middle class representation*

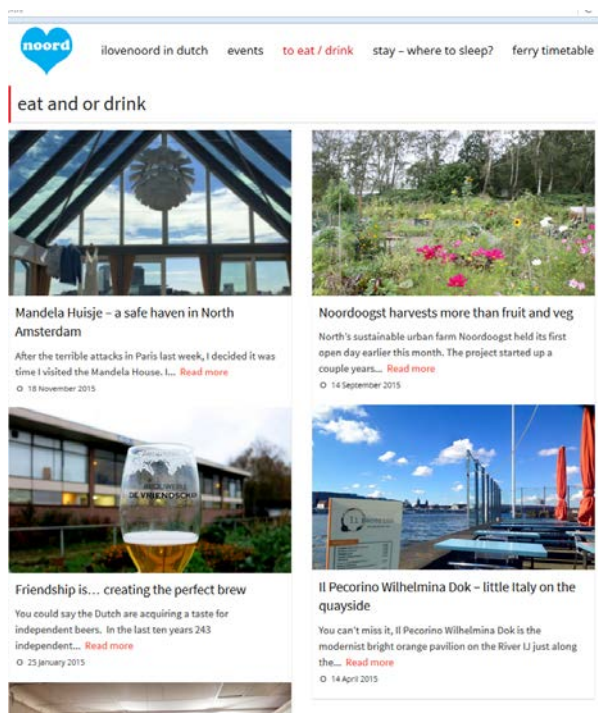
Among the organizations, a substantial number exhibits middle class symbolic markers.

The most extreme, and highly prominent, example is the weblog *I Love Noord*. The editorial board of about 10 people posts text and media about “everything that makes you happy in Amsterdam North” (Founder, quoted in Virtueel Platform 2012), including performances, exhibitions, restaurant reviews, and community-based initiatives. It not only covers the VDP-buurt, but explicitly aims to highlight all positive aspects of Amsterdam North as the ‘forgotten’ borough of the city. Its English and Dutch postings have been successful in raising attention in new media (with 10,000 Facebook followers) and old. A *New York Times* article that celebrated the borough’s transformation from “blue collar to red hot” quotes an editor of the *I Love Noord* weblog as follows: “[The borough] is loaded with open spaces where wild entrepreneurs can start their own business. [...] There is a lot of raw energy here” (Williams 2012). This quote fits well with the content and style of the blog.

Particularly the ‘Eat & Drink’ section of the blog features stylish locations geared towards

middle class tastes: craft beers, organic and Italian food, and cultural spaces “where interconnectedness is celebrated, restored and nurtured” (*I Love Noord* on March 4, 2016).

Figure 1. Screenshot of English homepage of *I love Noord*, March 4, 2016.



Another interesting case is the Noorderparkkamer (NPK) trust, also mentioned in the *New York Times* article. Like *I Love Noord*, NPK is a platform for local culture that expresses an inclusive discourse while mainly being managed by middle class professionals. The website states: “What makes the Noorderparkkamer special is the quality programming made in close collaboration between artists, performers, volunteers, and local residents from all walks of life” (NPK website, March 4, 2016). Yet an analysis of participants shows that the professional and cultural middle classes constitute the vast majority (NPK website, April 14, 2016). A short research film about NPK confirms that it is primarily a site where artists and professionals organize cultural events (Ong-Alok et al. 2014).

NPK and *I Love Noord* are not the only active organizations in the VDP-buurt, yet their activities and discourses exemplify what the neighborhood needs and ought to be in the eyes of the ‘secondary circuit’ of regeneration. It is dominated by a rather specific group of middle class professionals, who typically have a background in the creative and cultural industries. They have the skills and institutional capital to shape the representational frame to their tastes. Their framing is not conducted with malevolent intentions, and it cannot be regarded as crude revanchism. Social and ethnic diversity is appreciated and the individuals worry that gentrification may be pushed too far and lead to displacement (cf. Tissot 2014). Yet they also dominate neighborhood activities and their framing of what the neighborhood and wider area ought to be is very close to what state actors envision, which is why NPK and other cultural cooperatives receive subsidies and support from the municipality and housing association.

Interviews with borough officials reveal that the middle class view and aesthetic of these organizations is in line with the borough’s vision for the neighborhood. In its most ambitious form, this entails transforming the VDP-buurt into an “extension of the inner city.” A first step is to facilitate a different commercial infrastructure in the neighborhood, whose primary purpose will be to draw visitors from other – wealthier – areas. In this way, the borough hopes to create a virtuous cycle spurring further investments in the area: “The renovation of Van der Pekstraat, the new shops and creative entrepreneurs are not for the neighborhood itself, but to draw more people from Overhoeks [the waterfront development] and to realize [a new] shopping center, and thereby improve the neighborhood’s image [...] also the organic market is heavily subsidized, to draw a different clientele” (Interview, district civil servant and area manager of the VDP-buurt). In short, quarter making through the support of cultural initiatives and the introduction of middle class forms of consumption are believed to be necessary for ‘upgrading’ the VDP-buurt. As such, this constitutes a ‘soft power’ approach to social transformation.

Not all local officials state that changing the social composition is required in the process. Yet they do see that the neighborhood’s changing image and new consumption patterns will have their effects. When asked about residents’ views, local officials were very much aware that many residents would prefer different kinds of amenities. One official argued that most residents do not understand the effects of middle class amenities and renovations on their own ability to stay. For the officials, however, it is inevitable that the population



will change as low income residents will no longer be able to afford their rents after the completion of renovations.

### *Residents and displacement*

The previous sections showed that middle class claims to space are legitimized symbolically by specific groups and organizations, which are in turn supported by the state. These efforts may be counterbalanced by initiatives that focus on the social betterment of residents. While administrators and service providers tend to characterize long-term tenants as socially detached or too preoccupied with life's problems, there are many active residents who seek to be involved in 'their' neighborhood through community-based organizations. Their efforts are often supported by the municipality and the housing association, in the belief that such participation is key to achieving social mobility and to fostering a sense of collective responsibility for the neighborhood. Local officials and residents agree that activities undertaken should benefit 'the whole neighborhood'. Institutional support (often subsidies but also advice and coaching) seems a key precondition for initiatives to succeed, as many new community-based organizations have ceased to exist after support was withdrawn.

Despite the area's social diversity, the allocation of resources has been uneven. This is the outcome in part of ideas about the neighborhood's character and potential among policymakers, as well as the ability of some middle class residents to strategically respond to these ideas. Such residents are able to speak the language of the institutional apparatus and are thus seen by policymakers as embodying 'good' participation. Rather than distinguishing between 'active' and 'inactive' residents, we highlight how different kinds of residents have been involved over time as a result of changes in resource allocation.

Active long-time residents mostly identify themselves as working class, either from Dutch or migrant origin, and historically they have been active in informal networks. They are motivated by a sense of ownership of the neighborhood, which they argue was built and is meant for "people like them" ("ordinary folks," "the working class"). The social life of many white working class residents used to revolve around neighborhood centers (one of which was called "our home," while another was simply known as "the neighborhood center"). Due to budget cuts, these have all closed in the period following 2008. As one long-term resident stated: "Many of the neighborhood centers are gone. It's a pity though.

Because well, it affects things, a bit of social control. That's gone now." These residents described losing not only specific meeting places but neighborhood life in general: "This neighborhood has been completely shut down." Another argued that "It's no longer a working class neighborhood, now there's distance between people."

Some of these residents remain involved in informal ways. Some also apply for subsidies to organize neighborhood-wide activities. However, they find that local institutions are not responsive to their needs and requests. Long-term active residents from migrant backgrounds have similar experiences. For instance, a group of residents of Moroccan descent, known as 'the men's group', has several members who are involved in the area, and they organize a variety of small events on topics such as debt prevention, domestic violence, and radicalization. Yet they claim that their applications for financial support are routinely denied (this was backed up by the social worker coaching the men's group). Both Dutch and migrant working class groups voiced sentiments of abandonment by institutions that used to support them but are now said to favor other groups, in particular middle class residents.

Local officials argue that the activities of long-time residents lack a broad appeal, as they involve only part of the residents. Moreover, they expect these groups (non-middle class, non-native) to become less relevant once the regeneration efforts are completed. According to them, the neighborhood's changing population calls for different kinds of activities and a different kind of active resident (cf. Baum 1998). These assessments of what kinds of participation are legitimate also reflect officials' own class identification. For example, the neighborhood's area manager (who lived in the neighborhood for a while) uses her own experience to argue that the old working class neighborhood centers were not 'real' neighborhood centers but catered to "a specific group of long-term 'working class' residents who quit when the money stopped." To illustrate her point (and ours), she continues: "I used to live opposite [the center], I never went there either." In contrast, she speaks positively about the newly established neighborhood trust, describing its participants as "active residents who take responsibility." The initiator of this trust (which seeks to provide social care and improve public space), agrees that his organization is better able to "take responsibility" for the neighborhood than the closed neighborhood centers, which he describes as inefficient and marginal: "The ideas are nice, but if you look closer, it's too open-ended, they don't know how to make connections, how to reach their target group."

Local officials mostly agree with this assessment, stating that “There are few people in the neighborhood who are willing and able [to participate],” partly due to requirements such as having to have a written budget and having to gain support from fellow residents.

In addition to NPK, the municipality and the housing association now support two organizations to improve the area: the local neighborhood trust that aims to become self-sufficient, as well as an organization for local entrepreneurs to develop the neighborhood’s economic potential. These two organizations are the only surviving community-based organizations in the area itself following the 2012 policy changes. This is mostly because the residents involved have the skills and social capital to negotiate with the municipality and the housing association. These residents – mostly white middle class Dutch – are able to strategically rehearse the broader discourse of the VDP-buurt’s transformation from a closed working class community into an ‘up-and-coming’ area with a wide appeal. Active middle class residents are better able to explain the relevance and timeliness of their organizations by referring to the current policy wisdom of bringing government closer to citizens and coping with budget cuts by relying on self-organization. Furthermore, in contrast to other residents groups that often have a limited online presence or none at all, these residents are communicative and have put up websites, making it easier for local officials and service providers to contact them and monitor their activities. In contrast, the lack of a contact email address among (active) poorer residents is not only seen as inconvenient but also strange. Thus both symbolic and social advantages permit middle class residents to raise “money to organize things differently,” allowing them to steer – and benefit from – regeneration at the same time. For example, the initiator of the neighborhood trust, even though he initially opposed regeneration, has lobbied the housing association to reserve some of the housing stock as ‘fixer-uppers’ for young middle class couples, after it became apparent that renovation would take place in negotiation with residents.

## **5 Discussion and conclusion**

For many years, urban and housing scholars have debated the issue of state-sponsored gentrification. Critical perspectives have been instrumental in highlighting the role of the state in urban change. Yet much of the critique seems to lose sight of the complexities of the state and the intricacies and context specificity of class relations (Tissot 2014; Brown-Sarracino 2016). To add to these debates, we have asked the question of whether we may

view the state interventions and service provisions in the VDP-buurt as social regeneration or as a form of state-sponsored gentrification.

The municipality and the housing association have launched and supported multiple initiatives in and around the neighborhood. By funding community-based initiatives, commercial change, and cultural cooperatives, the municipality and housing association are effectively paving the way for social change. We found that social regeneration efforts are also biased towards middle class residents and professionals working in the area. So despite residents' protests against redevelopment entailing social change, the municipality and housing association have continued to engage in middle class quarter making, mostly through what has been called a 'secondary circuit' of regeneration. Consequently, we view state intervention in the VDP-buurt as a soft force approach to state-sponsored gentrification. While some working class residents may welcome the changes, our interviews reveal that most feel dissatisfaction over the changes in the allocation of funding, express uncertainty about the future, and experience a sense of loss of place.

There is a certain tragedy to this situation, because both middle class residents and local civil servants and professionals show genuine social involvement and have expressed concerns over displacement. The middle class residents, artists, and professionals are not very wealthy individuals and they themselves may be subject to displacement at a later stage. This is illustrated by a newspaper report on students who were selected by the housing association (through a local cultural entrepreneur) to temporarily move into vacant dwellings. Even though they knew it was a temporary arrangement, they grew fond of the area and complained that "First we had to make the area more attractive to outsiders, but now that there is sufficient spending power in the neighborhood, we can bugger off" (Segaar 2015).

State officials demonstrate an awareness of the (future) negative effects for long-term residents, yet point to the municipality's growth agenda. As this agenda envisions a new population, policies and planning are perhaps biased towards accommodating these newcomers (see Baum 1998). In addition, middle class residents are better positioned and have better access to public services in a number of ways (see Baum 1998; Elwood et al. 2015; Matthews and Hastings 2013). Well educated and well connected individuals, either alone or organized in groups, are able to exert pressure on and influence service providers.

This may be done through protest and ‘enraged response’, through their ability to navigate formal rules and regulations, but also informally as they have the social skills and knowledge to vocalize their needs and demand better services. This points to the importance of social and cultural capital when individuals interact with state officials and civil servants. Service providers (‘street level bureaucrats’) are not detached agents but are embedded in society. Most officials, civil servants, and non-profit service providers hold a class position nearer to that of middle class residents than to poor and working class residents, often leading to uneven outcomes. When interactions between service providers and residents take place, class positions may produce ‘empathy from similarity’.

Finally, many local policymakers view the neighborhood’s transformation as inevitable, and as noted above, economic change, housing market pressure, and national housing policies are all putting a strain on the area. Yet we would like to point out that the transformation of areas like the VDP-buurt is neither a natural occurrence nor accidental, but the outcome of political ‘choices’ made at various levels of government at different points in time. The (neo-)liberalization of housing may inform some of these choices, but cultural, integration, and social policies and politics have also been relevant, resulting in an inconsistent and even contradictory set of initiatives. Recent public debates in Amsterdam and the Netherlands have led to political parties questioning the growth agenda and the continued demise of social rental housing. As politics may change, we may therefore see a shift in neighborhood interventions towards more care in dealing with social housing and population change.

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