

# Facilitating 'light' social interactions in public space: A collaborative study in a Dutch urban renewal neighbourhood

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**Abstract** This paper examines the conditions for facilitating 'light' social interaction in public spaces in an urban renewal project in Delft, the Netherlands. The goal of this paper is threefold. First, using the concept of 'public familiarity', it offers a discussion of the value of public spaces and superficial interactions in relation to urban renewal and the aim of social mixing. Second, it discusses the implications for the design and programming of three types of public space: a park, a shopping street and a semi-public 'living deck'. Third, it offers insight into the pitfalls as well as the added value of collaborative research (integrating research and practice). The researchers and professionals collaboratively gathered quantitative and qualitative data through a mixed-methods approach (observations, on-site mini-interviews and walk-along interviews), in order to engage professionals actively in the research project and thus promote their involvement with the neighbourhood and its residents. Based on data on the use, experiences and needs of residents in relation to the public spaces in their neighbourhood, the paper examines which elements are important for facilitating 'light' social interactions. The implications are important for thinking about how to facilitate social mix, and for the design and management of public spaces.

**Keywords:** *Public space, light interactions, public familiarity, social mixing, collaborative research, mixed methods*

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## INTRODUCTION

In many western countries, urban renewal aims to transform deprived neighbourhoods into socio-economically and ethnically mixed neighbourhoods.<sup>1-4</sup> One of the concerns is how to create not merely spatial mix, but also social mix.

Research has shown that it is difficult to promote the formation of relationships across boundaries of class and ethnicity.<sup>5-7</sup> It may therefore be more fruitful to focus on facilitating more superficial or 'light' social interaction in public space.<sup>8</sup> Through short but repeated interactions

with others in public spaces, 'public familiarity' can emerge.<sup>5</sup> Familiarity, as opposed to public anonymity, provides people with information on the basis of which they can assess who others are and what their social position is in relation to themselves. In this way, public familiarity can contribute to a sense of social identity and safety.<sup>9</sup> (See below for further discussion of this concept.)

This paper argues that public familiarity is important, particularly in regenerated and mixed neighbourhoods. Such areas bring together people with different lifestyles, routines and appearances. In public spaces in mixed urban areas, people are likely to meet others they not only do not know, but who are also 'different' from themselves — they are biographic as well as cultural strangers.<sup>10</sup> As Lofland puts it, 'the world of strangers which is the city is located in the city's public space'.<sup>10</sup> Through public familiarity, biographic and cultural strangers may become a little less 'strange' to people frequenting the public spaces. Well-functioning public spaces are thus essential to the success of urban renewal and social mixing.

This idea was the starting point for research on public space in Poptahof, an urban renewal neighbourhood in Delft, the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> Originally a social housing area, Poptahof is now becoming more mixed, in terms of tenure, socio-economic status, ethnicity and lifestyle. The urban renewal process encompasses social, economic and cultural programmes, housing differentiation and redevelopment of various public spaces.

In October 2009, Projectorganization Poptahof funded a year-long research into local public spaces.<sup>12</sup> The objectives of the research were:

- to map the uses of the various public spaces in Poptahof;
- to examine how public spaces do or could facilitate 'light' social interaction;

- to advise on the development and programming in relation to the goals of the urban renewal project;
- to engage Poptahof professionals in the research process, in order to integrate research and practice and to promote their engagement with residents and the neighbourhood.

This paper reports the findings of this research. First, the concept of public familiarity is discussed, and why 'light' social interactions and public space are important for urban renewal. Second, the research approach is discussed: a mixed-methods study carried out by both researchers and professionals. Third, the main findings in relation to facilitating light interactions are presented, focusing on three types of spaces: a park, a shopping street and a semi-public living deck. Fourth, recommendations are offered for developing public spaces in mixed urban areas and for doing collaborative research.

## **SOCIAL INTERACTIONS IN PUBLIC SPACE**

The starting point is that public spaces matter because they can facilitate superficial social interactions, and that such 'light' interactions are especially important in mixed urban areas. The focus is on 'encounters' — not so much planned encounters between friends, loved ones and neighbours, but rather spontaneous and short encounters with familiar, not-so-familiar and unknown fellow residents. The conceptualisation of 'light' interactions is based on Blokland's concept of 'public familiarity'.<sup>13</sup>

### **Public familiarity**

Public familiarity sits between anonymity and intimacy and emerges in 'public' spaces that are in principle accessible to

everyone (as opposed to private and parochial spaces). According to Blokland, public familiarity is essential for the assessment of who 'we' and 'they' are. Through short interactions, one gains information about others and estimates whether or not one can trust them. That is, repeatedly running into the same people while shopping, picking up the children from school or walking the dog makes one familiar with initial strangers: without getting to know these people intimately, it does provide information about them. In modern cities, people usually do not get to know fellow residents intimately, and thus familiarity through regular encounters is essential for knowing at least something about them. Such familiarity provides categorical knowledge rather than biographic knowledge: 'one knows who the other is only in the sense that one knows he can be placed into some category or categories'.<sup>10</sup> Without even basic knowledge, one would have no idea how to 'place' others socially and whether to trust them. Note that trust here refers to being able to predict others' behaviour rather than being intimate.

In contemporary urban neighbourhoods, people are increasingly encountering others who are not only 'biographical' strangers (people who we do not know), but also 'cultural' strangers.<sup>10</sup> Opportunities to become publicly familiar with others lie in the presence and use of neighbourhood facilities.<sup>5,9</sup> Throughout the last half century, however, the overlap of the domains of neighbourhood, work, family and leisure has decreased, and the daily routines of different categories of people living in the same neighbourhood have become less integrated.<sup>14</sup> People thus have fewer opportunities to gain information — through observation, small talk or gossip — about their fellow residents. Furthermore, many urban neighbourhoods in western countries have

seen an influx of immigrants — of 'cultural' strangers — and have thus become ethnically mixed. And more recently, processes of spontaneous and state-led gentrification have added to this mix by drawing more privileged groups into formerly deprived areas. Many urban areas are thus seeing what Vertovec calls 'super-diversity': diversity along the lines of many characteristics.<sup>15</sup>

Based on Blokland's research, the authors argue that public familiarity is essential in providing people with a sense of social identity and safety amid such diversity. But in order to facilitate public familiarity, mixed urban areas need to facilitate social interactions between different categories of people. Such interactions need not be of the 'strong' or 'bonding' kind: public familiarity can emerge where there are short or 'light' interactions. How public spaces may facilitate such 'light' interactions is the main interest.

### Successful public spaces

So how would we assess the success of public spaces in facilitating 'light' social interactions? The Project for Public Spaces (PPS)<sup>16</sup> identifies four key qualities of successful public spaces:

- *Uses*: People are engaged in activities there (variety of activities, for visitors and passers-by).
- *Access*: They are accessible (linkages and connections, transport, free of obstacles).
- *Comfort*: These spaces are comfortable and have a good image (clean, well maintained, safe, good reputation).
- *Sociability*: They are sociable places (intentional and spontaneous meetings).<sup>17</sup>

The research findings and implications and how they matter for facilitating social

interactions are discussed below. The next section first introduces the research sites and briefly describes the research approach.

## THE RESEARCH

### The neighbourhood

The neighbourhood of Poptahof was built in the 1960s, offering spacious and luxurious apartments for working-class and middle-class households.<sup>18</sup> It was one of the first developments built outside the historic centre of Delft. Originally, 1,019 dwellings were built, of which only eight were owner-occupied — all other dwellings were social rental housing. The original development consisted of eight high-rise flats, six medium-rise flats and a few dozen single-family dwellings, which formed eight 'courts' ('hof' means 'court'). The architect imagined that the court-like structure and the high density of the development (about 11,000 people per square kilometre) would engage people with each other and their neighbourhood.

A process of suburbanisation meant that middle-income households were replaced by lower-income households. Among the new residents were many non-western ethnic minorities: first, guest workers from Turkey and Morocco and their families and, later, refugees from Africa and the Middle East. Today, about 55 per cent of the Poptahof population are of non-western origin.<sup>19</sup> In the last four years, the proportion of western ethnic minorities has increased from 8 to 16 per cent — perhaps because of the influx of students — while the proportion of non-western minorities has stabilised.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the current socio-economic status of the population is typical of high-rise social housing areas. Compared with an income distribution of 40 per cent low income and 20 per cent high income in the Netherlands, Poptahof

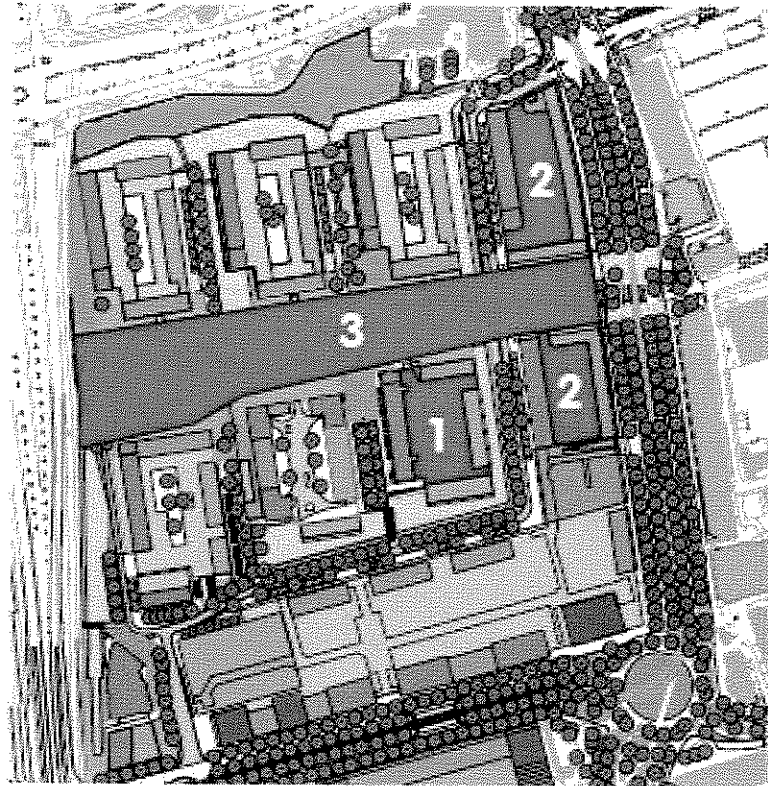
houses relatively many people with low incomes (48 per cent) and few with high incomes (8 per cent). Of every 1,000 people, 147 receive their income through social security (compared with 42 per 1,000 in the Netherlands).<sup>21</sup>

The urban renewal process in Poptahof, which took off in 2003, aims to transform the one-sided composition of its housing supply and its vulnerable position on the housing market, improve its bad reputation and decreased liveability, and redevelop outdated public spaces. Redeveloping and reprogramming Poptahof's public spaces is an important part of the integral approach which connects physical interventions with social, economic and cultural interventions.<sup>22</sup> Currently, one of the courts has been partly renovated, partly newly built and now offers mixed-tenure housing (completion, 2009). A second court is in the process of redevelopment (expected completion, 2011). Two green spaces have been redesigned (completion, 2008). Other courts and a shopping street are awaiting redevelopment. The renewal process is expected to be completed in 2017.

### Research sites

Figure 1 is a map of Poptahof showing the research sites: 1, living deck, located in the new mixed-tenure development; 2, shopping street along the Papsouwselaan; 3, Poptapark.

— *Park*: Formerly a small stream lined with large trees, the centrally located Poptapark was completed in 2008 and offers space for multiple functions: it has a children's playground, a lawn, and a green hill, which can be used for sunbathing and functions as a grandstand during festivals. A cycle/footpath runs through the park, connecting the park to a main street



**Figure 1:** Map of Poptahof showing the research sites: 1, living deck, located in the new mixed-tenure development; 2, shopping street along the Papsouwselaan; 3, Poptapark  
Source: Municipality of Delft (edited by author)

and a shopping area. Several annual festivals and activities are held in the park.

- *Shopping street:* The shopping area along one of the main streets (Papsouwselaan) bordering the neighbourhood will be redeveloped in the future. Built in the 1960s, its design is somewhat outdated. It offers a variety of amenities, among which are a large pharmacy, three international supermarkets, an Islamic butcher, two fast-food Döner restaurants, a regular fast-food restaurant and a fast-food Surinamese restaurant-cum-shop, a bookstore, a DIY-store, a Turkish teahouse, a 'One Euro' shop, three hair shops and a flower shop. There are several benches and play equipment for children. It is open air with an overhang.
- *Living deck:* This is a semi-public or

'parochial' residential space, located in the newly developed mixed-tenure complex, which was completed in December 2009. The terraces of the ground-floor houses border the deck, while the windows and balconies of the higher-ground apartments offer a view onto the deck. Stairs lead people from the central park onto the living deck.

### Collaborative research

Using a mixed-methods approach, the study gathered quantitative and qualitative data. Twenty-three professionals, ranging from secretaries, communication advisers and project managers to building managers and community workers, were actively involved in the research by collecting part of the data. While some were already regularly in contact with residents through



**Figure 2:** The Poptapark: an artificial green hill in the foreground, playground at the back and cycle/footpath on the left. Photo © Erwin Dijkgraaf

their work, others were less so, and the research thus stimulated active engagement. Data were gathered in three ways: on-site structured observations, on-site mini-interviews and walk-along interviews.

First, during four weeks in every season, professionals and students carried out observations in various public spaces, noting characteristics (number of people, gender, age category and ethnic category) and activities (eg playing, shopping, sitting on a bench) of visitors and passers-by on an observation sheet. To provide professionals with an easy tool and to ensure the collection of comparable and quantifiable data, observers used observation sheets with matrices on which they filled out what they saw happening.<sup>23</sup> A total of 23 professionals and five students were involved in observing at some point in the research and, together,

they carried out 378 observations of 30 minutes each, during which they recorded 6,412 people or groups of people visiting or passing-by.

Second, the first author and ten professionals held mini-interviews with visitors and passers-by in the park, the shopping street and the living deck and with elderly residents of the living- and care-centre located at the border of Poptahof. This method was based on the Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Procedure, which enables much information to be gathered in a short amount of time, reaching people who would be excluded from normal interviews (eg people not living in the neighbourhood).<sup>24</sup> Through three short questions, people were asked about the uses, the good aspects and aspects of the spaces needing improvement.

Third, the first author and a research



**Figure 3:** The shopping street: merchandise of one of the ethnic supermarkets and original high-rise in the background. Photo © Erwin Dijkgraaf

assistant carried out walk-alongs,<sup>25</sup> interviewing 31 residents during a walk through the neighbourhood, passing through the public spaces. Professionals and residents in the newly developed owner-occupied complex approached residents in social housing by visiting them directly. Topics were: daily routines, use (frequency, with whom, what activities), good aspects and those needing improvement, specifically in relation to design, programming, facilities, safety and other users.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The four key qualities identified by the PPS — use, access, comfort and sociability — guided the analysis of the data. The focus is on those findings that are relevant in relation to the research question: To what extent and how did the studied

public spaces facilitate 'light' social interaction?

### Park

People go to the park to play (children, some with their parents), to meet other people (planned or spontaneously) and to be outside. The observation data show that the public in the park is at most times mixed for age and ethnic background.<sup>26</sup> Diversity increases when there are more people in the park, and it is positively correlated with both the number of passers-by (going from A to B) and visitors (people who do something in the park). The visitors are thus usually a mixed group, which indicates that there is no clear domination of specific groups. The diversity also increases when there are more pairs and groups in the park. The diversity for age categories similarly



**Figure 4:** The semi-public living deck: The gardens of the owner-occupier single-family dwellings border the deck; not shown is the original high-rise bordering the deck opposite the dwellings. Photo © Erwin Dijkgraaf

increases when it is busier and is positively correlated to the number of both passers-by and visitors.

The central location of the park — in-between the flats — and the cycle/footpath running through the park ensure easy access. Respondents do not always know about activities, but hear and see soon enough when they are on their balconies or set foot outside their houses — and then usually go and see what is happening. This is a success factor of the park, because for people to be drawn to it, they should not have to walk too far.<sup>27</sup>

Attracting both visitors and passers-by is important for several reasons. First, diversity increases with the number of visitors and passers-by. Only places that attract a mixed crowd can be successful in facilitating interactions between different categories of people. Second, to draw visitors, a place needs a strong flow of

people.<sup>27</sup> Third, while visitors (might) meet up with others, passers-by interact with others mainly through observation. For some people, the park has a role in maintaining personal relationships with friends, family members and neighbours (strong interactions). Others enjoy the park because they can watch people there (light interactions). Still others rarely visit the park, but see the park and its visitors when they pass-by on their way to somewhere else. People then interact with others through observation. A public space that draws a flow of passers-by is thus successful in creating light interactions even between people who never actually use the park.

The design of the park enables people to use the park together, while simultaneously keeping a distance. Several professionals observed that the crowd in the park is very mixed, but that the

various 'cultural groups' rarely talk to each other and keep to their own circle (except the children, who often were observed playing in ethnically mixed groups). But for 'light' social interactions and public familiarity, it is less important that people engage in personal conversations. The groups are often within sight and hearing distance. A positive quality is also that people can 'live and let live': they come to the park to do their own things and while doing so they accept the presence of other groups.

Parents can sit on the benches near the playground; others can sit on the benches and ledges along the path or on the grassy hill. While there are usually enough sitting places, there is no protection from the sun: the trees were too small to provide shade, and there are no parasols or other equipment. This means that there is also no protection from wind and light rain, which may be one of the reasons why there are generally few seniors and adults in the autumn and winter.

The presence of adults is important for it provides 'apparent' supervision, that is, the presence of people who behave themselves enables assimilation of disorderly or strange behaviour.<sup>27,28</sup> The presence of adults gives at the minimum the impression that there are people supervising the park. A park should thus not be merely child friendly, but rather family friendly.<sup>29</sup> The observations show that, while the park is child friendly in autumn and winter (the park then functions mainly as playground), it transforms into a family-friendly place in spring and summer. In the course of spring and summer, the proportion of people sitting on benches increases, as well as the proportion of pairs and groups (an indication of people intentionally meeting and socialising) and age- and gender-mixed groups (an indication of families and couples).

In the spring, two park managers were

hired to maintain the park and deal with disorder (litter and nuisance). The park managers are recognisable (by their T-shirts), visible (often present in the park) and easily approachable (they introduce themselves to visitors). It was found, however, that there was uncertainty among visitors and park managers about the rules in the park, and therefore the park managers were not fully effective in managing the park.

To summarise, how does the park score on the four key qualities?

- *Uses*: Good in spring/summer, less in autumn/winter; the design makes simultaneous use by different groups possible.
- *Access*: Good because of the cycle/footpath and its central location.
- *Comfort*: Litter, safety and management need improving.
- *Sociability*: Intended meetings as well as 'light' encounters (observation).

### **Shopping street**

The shopping street along the Papsouwseleaan is the busiest of the public places studied. People come to the shopping street for shopping, to have a snack and, to a lesser extent, to 'see what's going on'. Not surprisingly, it is in the first instance a place for passers-by (90 per cent of the people observed), many of whom are shopping. There were few visitors in autumn and winter (mostly people waiting for shops to open and shop employees taking a (smoke) break). The number and proportion of people sitting on benches increased substantially in spring (36 per cent of the visitors) and summer (76 per cent).

According to several professionals, the area is often depicted as a 'foreign' shopping street. This is perhaps not surprising, given the many ethnic shops and restaurants and given the image of

Poptahof as a whole. The observation data, however, show that there are indeed relatively many non-Dutch visitors (62 per cent, compared with 55 per cent of the Poptahof population), but among the passers-by the proportion of Dutch:non-Dutch is 50:50. This suggests that the shopping street is an intentional meeting place more for non-Dutch people (who gather around the Turkish teahouse and fast-food restaurant), but that the public drawn to the shops is much more diverse. This is in part due to the fact that the shopping street attracts people who live outside the neighbourhood to do their shopping, who are drawn to the shopping street for its easy access (along the through-street and its open-air design).

Furthermore, the ethnic diversity of the public is highest here (compared with other places studied), and this is not dependent on the number of visitors or passers-by.<sup>30</sup> That is, even when there are not so many people in the shopping street, the public is likely to be mixed. The shopping street thus facilitates encounters between 'cultural' others during the busy afternoons and weekends as well as during the quiet mornings. In addition, people are likely to encounter different age groups, although age diversity is dependent on the number of passers-by.<sup>31</sup>

The interviews reveal that some residents appreciate the 'multicultural' character of the street: it offers something interesting to watch and pulls people in. Others appreciate the ethnic shops for the quality products (eg meat) for reasonable prices and friendly shopkeepers. Nonetheless, other residents feel that there is nothing there for them and that the shops are mostly for 'other' (ie non-Dutch) residents. They visit the shopping street only when they need something from the chain stores (drugstore and retail in furniture and

related products) or when they get a snack from the regular (ie Dutch) snack bar. The location of this snack bar at the end of the street, however, ensures that these residents walk past the ethnic shops every now and then. Yet, they feel hesitant to go in, some of them unsure what they should buy, as they are unfamiliar with many of the products.

A success factor of the shopping street is its accessibility: the location along the through-road and its open-air design make it easy for people in and outside Poptahof to drop by for shopping or a snack. The observation of many seniors with walking aids suggests that the street is accessible for them, too: it takes them from the living- and care-centre in the north to the enclosed shopping mall south of Poptahof. While they might not visit many of the shops, their route adds to the constant flow of passers-by.

In terms of comfort, the interviews reveal a mixed picture. It is apparently a safe enough place, as seniors do not seem to avoid walking through the street and neither do women alone. Besides this observation, the interviews show three strands of visitors' experience. First, those who visit the street for particular shops do not seem to care much about its outdated design: for them the shopping street has a functional meaning. Second, some visit the street for shopping and for watching: they appreciate the liveliness of the place, and while some think the place should be redesigned, it does not discourage them. Third, for some visitors the negative aspects stand out: the outdated design, lack of safety, caused mainly by cyclists on the pavement and young men hanging around the teahouse, and the questionable quality of some of the shops, notably the teahouse (people are not sure what happens inside) and a 'One Euro' shop. They find some of these facilities 'not appropriate' for the neighbourhood.

Finally, the number and proportion of

pairs and groups visiting and passing-by is highest in the shopping street, which suggest that it is a place for many planned and spontaneous encounters. Furthermore, the proportion of gender-mixed pairs and groups is highest, which indicates that the place draws many families and couples. This gives the place its sociable character — in a busy place where only people alone visit, there would be less chatter. It could be argued that drawing sociable passers-by is particularly important, because the shopping street, unlike the park, hardly functions as a place where people sit, play or hang around. Thus its sociable character has to emerge in a different way in order to make it attractive and comfortable enough for people, as people seem to be drawn most to sociable environments.<sup>27</sup>

To summarise, how does the shopping street score on the four key qualities?

- *Uses*: Good in terms of its function (shopping), which attracts many passers-by, less good in terms of drawing visitors.
- *Access*: Good because of its open-air design and location along the through-road, which attract people from in and outside the neighbourhood.
- *Comfort*: Design needs improving, image needs attention.
- *Sociability*: Mainly 'light' encounters (observation).

### **Living deck**

The living deck is not a 'public' space in the same way as the park and shopping street are. While it has an open entrance, and thus in principle is accessible to everyone, this space can best be characterised as 'semi-public' or 'parochial'. Studying such a space makes it clear that places are not inherently 'public' or 'private'. Rather, the ways in which

people interact with each other and their production and negotiation of relations, meanings and rules, define where places can be located on the public-private continuum.<sup>5,32</sup> Following Lofland, interactions in parochial space can be characterised as 'a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbours who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within "communities"', whereas a public space is 'the world of strangers and the "street"' (eg the park and shopping street described in this paper).<sup>5,32</sup> This means that living decks, in common with perhaps courts, shared gardens and other communal spaces, have a different role, if at all, in facilitating 'light' interactions across age, ethnicity and class. Nonetheless, these spaces can have a role in facilitating social mixing when located in a mixed-tenure development (such as the living deck described in this paper).

The research found that some residents experienced a tension between the open character, on the one hand, and the lack of privacy and/or problems related to management and order, on the other. In response to this, the living deck was very much 'claimed' by those residents who live alongside the deck — among them many who were new to Poptahof — through practices of informal social control. This 'claiming' of space is not so much a problem, as, in this case, it seemed to contribute to the management of spaces and to feeling comfortable. Residents exercised informal social control by keeping an eye on strangers and their own children. One of the professionals who observed the living deck experienced informal social control herself, when a resident walked up to her to ask her what she was doing there and told her that they prefer not to have strangers coming to the deck. Furthermore, the 'liveability committee' asked the housing association for a sign displaying several 'living rules'.<sup>33</sup>

The claiming of space, however, also led some residents to argue that the living deck should be closed off to keep non-residents out. One argument to close off the living deck — at least in the evenings and at night — was the lack of privacy. The dwellings that border the deck only had a terrace and a hedge separating the living room from the deck. As the deck has an open entrance, people could walk right up to their homes. On the one hand, for some, this design contributed to a sense of ownership, as the deck was practically the extension of the living room. On the other hand, the lack of clear boundaries prompted a desire to fence off their private (home and terrace) and semi-private spaces (deck). While the relationships between residents seemed friendly and in some cases even close, not all residents had realised that living alongside a living deck was very much like sharing a garden.

Sometimes children who did not live there played on the deck. This caused some minor and major nuisances. While cycling and skating are not allowed, some children did so, which damaged the floor of the deck. Residents appeared vigilant and reprimanded the children. When the children in question did not live there, they were sometimes told to play somewhere else. A major nuisance that occurred during the research was that several children — who, according to residents, live elsewhere in the neighbourhood — climbed on top of the roof and threw small stones onto the deck. Nobody got hurt, but it strengthened the idea to have the deck closed off for non-residents. Some residents argued for a gate or barrier to increase safety (also in relation to nuisance from the park next to the development); others argued that they did not want to be responsible for damage and wear caused by non-residents. The owner-occupier residents share in the costs of

management; were this not the case, they would not mind so much non-residents using the deck.

It is relevant to mention that initial drawings of the development depicted a fence: some residents thus expected a gate or barrier. Moreover, particularly those owner-occupier residents who were new to Poptahof had doubts about the success of Poptahof's transformation. In other words, they were not fully convinced (yet) that Poptahof had improved or improved enough. Many of them were well aware that the Poptahof had a bad reputation, and some even had to defend their choice to move to the Poptahof to their colleagues or family members. For some, the Poptahof appealed for its liveliness and multicultural character, while for others it was rather the only opportunity to buy a house because of the low mortgage payments, or the location of Poptahof near the city centre and shops that drew them. Small and larger concerns about safety and management thus should be seen in this perspective.

Finally, in relation to the doubts of the owner-occupiers who were new to Poptahof, there seemed to be a danger that the management of the living deck could happen at the expense of longer-term residents in social rental dwellings. Several newcomers expressed concerns about some of the renters. For example, a resident said she did not understand why the housing association had replaced some of them in the new development. Other residents maintained that the social renters should be educated on dealing with garbage and maintaining their dwelling. There thus were some, at that moment still latent, tensions which potentially undermine the ideal of social mixing in a mixed-tenure development. Furthermore, these (latent) tensions may be played out in the management of the parochial spaces, thus producing new boundaries.

To summarise, how does the living deck score on the four key qualities?

- *Uses*: The activities helped to shape a 'parochial' sphere in which the living deck became more or less the extension of resident's homes.
- *Access*: The semi-closed entrance (stairs) seems to signal that the living deck is semi-private space and prevents many non-residents from walking in.
- *Comfort*: The balance between privacy/management and open access needs attention; the semi-closed design made residents feel comfortable and safe, which is strengthened by practices of informal social control/vigilance of residents.
- *Sociability*: Neighbourly relations; relations between (longer-term) renters and (newcoming) owner-occupiers needs attention.

### **Collaborative research**

In total, 23 professionals made observations during one or several of the four seasons, while ten professionals engaged in one of the mini-interview sessions. Throughout the research it became apparent that the professionals should not have full responsibility for the data collection. Time needs to be allocated to ensure that professionals actually get involved. As it proved difficult to free up time for the observations in the first season, several students were hired to do additional observations during the other seasons.

For professionals, the process of the research and the input they get from watching, talking and experiencing should be most important. It proved difficult, however, for professionals to point out what, if anything, they had gained from observing. For example, one professional maintained that he hardly observed things that he had not expected or seen before.

Others did see the value of observing, for example in interacting with residents in a different way. Their observation notes do show that professionals experienced public spaces as users and were sometimes able to translate these into the core values<sup>34</sup> according to which they work. For example, professionals were greeted by passers-by (which shows engagement) and passers-by proved to be vigilant when professionals were asked about their activity. They thus experienced how public spaces met (or not) their aims. The gains in terms of concrete action points, however, often remained unclear.

The on-site mini-interviews were most successful in involving professionals, because they were coordinated by a researcher, and professionals worked together, they were easy to do, informative and often just fun. Furthermore, the mini-interviews were designed to ask visitors and passers-by about strong points and points for improvement and thus generated concrete action points. The professionals valued the mini-interviews because of the opportunity they offered to get in touch with residents outside existing structures. At the end of the research, the professionals agreed to integrate a series of mini-interviews into their three-monthly meetings.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

This final section formulates several implications for the three types of public spaces and for doing collaborative research, starting with several practical lessons and guidelines and then addressing two main themes that have broader relevance for professionals and researchers committed to social mixing and public spaces.

#### **Park**

- Simultaneous use is important: a design that offers different spaces for different

(categories of) users offers opportunities for observation when these spaces are within watching and hearing distance.

- A through-path for cyclists and pedestrians draws a flow of people and facilitates interaction through observation between visitors and passers-by, through integrating the routes and activities of different categories of people.
- Rules should not only be set up, but also made known to everyone and enforced, for example, by putting up a sign and employing park managers.
- The park should be made not just child friendly, but also family friendly: adults exercise if not actual then at least apparent supervision. Family friendliness may particularly need a boost in autumn and winter.

### **Shopping street**

- Easy access and a mix of facilities are essential for drawing a mixed public.
- A spatial (geographic) mix of facilities can ensure that people who never visit certain facilities (eg ethnic shops) become familiar with them just by passing-by: a spatial mix facilitates the integration of the routes and routines of the various publics.
- The quality of (new) shops signals the development of an area: shops need not be 'posh', but should be well maintained, attractive and appropriate in relation to the main public.
- Activities such as tastings and markets can be used to familiarise people with 'exotic' shops, people and products, and 'break the ice'.

### **Mixed-tenure living deck**

- It is important to engage all residents (owner-occupiers and social renters, newcomers and longer-term residents) in the management of parochial spaces.

It should not only be the owner-occupiers who appropriate such space. This is to prevent or solve latent tensions between new residents/owner-occupiers and longer-term residents/social renters.

- Decisions about gating a semi-public communal space should not be made before residents have moved in. Rather, the options should be discussed (keep open or close off), then wait and see whether and how forms of informal social control emerge naturally. It should be made clear who is responsible for management and what steps are to be taken when changes are desired.

### **Collaborative research**

- Coordination is key: investigate how much time each person can invest and then allocate this time; regularly check in with the professionals.
- Keep it simple and fun: mini-interviews, including three or four questions, on-site are informative as well as easy to do.

### **Broader relevance**

To summarise, two main themes emerge which have broader relevance: first, the importance of integrating the routes and routines of the different categories of people who use public spaces in different ways. One way to facilitate interactions is through facilitating simultaneous use; another equally significant way is to facilitate interaction through observation. Passers-by and visitors use spaces differently, but in well-designed spaces they interact through observing each other, which potentially leads to familiarity. This shows the importance of enabling segregated use, but on a small scale, so that people have their own space while remaining within watching and

hearing distance of others.

Secondly, the research shows how discomfort and social control may undermine light bridging interactions. The co-presence of different publics can cause feelings of discomfort, sometimes 'simply' related to physical disorder, but at other times based on 'deeper' doubts about the neighbourhood. Furthermore, while informal social control can positively contribute to creating comfortable and safe spaces, it may also work at the expense of some categories of residents and substantiate tensions. Such processes, when not addressed and adequately negotiated, may emphasise categorical differences along lines of tenure, ethnic background and age. In light of social mixing, it is thus important to investigate the causes of residents' discomfort and pay close attention to the ways in which they are addressed.

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11. Delft is a middle-large city with a population of 96.691 (1st January, 2010), located in the Randstad (a conurbation including the four largest cities in the west of the Netherlands).
12. The details and results of the research project are published in a report: van Eijk, G. (2010), 'De vier seizoenen van de Poptahof: Ontmoetingen in de publieke ruimte' [The four seasons of Poptahof: Encounters in public space], SEV, Rotterdam, available at [http://www.sev.nl/publicaties/publicatie.asp?code\\_pblc=1017](http://www.sev.nl/publicaties/publicatie.asp?code_pblc=1017), last accessed on 17th March, 2011.
13. The following sections on public familiarity are based on Blokland, refs. 5, 8 and 9 above.
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16. The PPS examines and advises about public spaces inspired by the work of American sociologist William H. Whyte (1917–1999). Since their foundation in 1975, they have completed projects in 2,500 communities in 40 countries. 'Project for

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19. Born, or with one or both parents born, in a non-western country.
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21. Statistics available at <http://www.cbsinuwbuurt.nl>, last accessed on 17th March, 2011.
22. Furthermore, the Projectorganization Poptahof works with 'lifestyles' and 'core values' which describe the 'identity' of the Poptahof. These are tools which guide the urban renewal process, projects and the work style of professionals involved. This was an important reason for actively involving professionals in the research process. The research further aimed to investigate how public spaces could be developed in such a way that they would express the core values and in such a way that they would fulfil the needs, desires and likes of people characterised by the two lifestyles. Owing to lack of space, this paper will not go into these topics.
23. Based on 'structured observation': Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007), 'Observation', in Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (eds), 'Research methods in education', Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 396–413. The observation sheet as designed and used by Clark, A., Holland, C., Katz, J. and Peace, S. (2009), 'Learning to see: Lessons from a participatory observation research project', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 345–360, was adapted, omitting the drawing of the public space. All data were entered into MS Access and analysed using SPSS.
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25. Kusenbach, M. (2003), 'Street phenomenology', *Ethnography*, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 455–485. Interviews normally lasted an hour. Ten respondents live in social housing, 21 live in the renewed complex, of which most in owner-occupied housing. The latter were particularly selected to get an idea of the experiences and needs of the first buyers that settled in Poptahof. Interviews were transcribed by memory immediately after the interview had finished. The first author also held walk-along interviews with seven professionals.
26. Two 'diversity indices' were constructed, ranging from 1 to 5 to indicate the diversity at each observation moment (duration 30 minutes). A score of 1 means that, during that observation moment, one ethnic or age category was observed; a score of 5 means that, during that moment, all five ethnic or age categories were observed. The average ethnic diversity score is 3.21, while the average age diversity scored 4.25<sup>1</sup>. The park scores second highest, after the shopping street.
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30. Mean score on ethnic diversity index: 3.70 (see ref. 26 above).
31. Mean score on age diversity index: 4.51 (see ref. 26 above). During 70 per cent of all observation moments, all five age categories were observed.
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33. Eg 'Skateboarding prohibited', 'After 20.00h no loud music or yelling', 'Clean up small accidents' [ie dog fouling] and 'No unauthorised entry' (with reference to Article 461 of the Code of Criminal Law).
34. See ref. 22 above on core values.