

# **Resourceful Cities**

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## **„Don't buy the house, buy the neighbor”**

**Influence of local social ties on neighborhood selection and neighborhood use  
of middle class Turkish-Germans**

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## **Extended Abstract**

According to the Turkish proverb “*ev alma komşu al*” (*don't buy the house, buy the neighbor*), the decisive factor in residential choice is not first and foremost the quality of housing, but the neighbors. If the residents are decent people and you are likely to establish good relations with them, this is more important than whether or not the house exactly matches your wishes. The saying suggests that social ties play an important factor in residential choice.

A large body of research, however, suggests the opposite, namely that social ties do not play a role in neighborhood choice, due partly to modern means of communication as well as transportation, which render spatial proximity less important for the establishment and maintenance of personal relationships. This ‘community lost’ position bemoans the loss of local ties since it claims that local, communal ties are characterized by intimacy, and encourage commitment. Hence, the vision of local communities as ‘authentic’ communities (Fischer et al., 1978; Gans, 1962; Stack, 1997; Zukin, 2009). According to the community lost thesis, communal and intimate ties developed in and through the neighborhood have lost significance. Rather, urbanites are loose members of several communities. There is no singular, dense network, contacts are not very sustainable. Hence, the neighborhood as community hardly matters anymore.

On the other hand, the neighborhood as a place for identification continues to play a role, as many recent studies suggest (Atkinson, 2006; Blokland, 2003; Butler and Robson, 2003; May, 1996; Savage et al., 2005; Watt, 2009). Through drawing boundaries to other residents (ethnic others or socially weaker groups) or certain sections of the neighborhood, people develop forms of belonging. In these accounts, emphasis is put on the process of boundary drawing, on the exclusion of other groups, through which belonging only becomes possible.

In this paper, I want to first of all argue against the community lost thesis, and show that strong ties – particularly those to parents – continue to play an important role in residential choice of Turkish-German middle classes. Moreover, not only do strong ties play a role, but weak ties, based on public familiarity, play a role as well, as they influence residential comfort. This is also a shift from the perspective stressing boundary drawing and exclusion.

In contrast, I will stress the importance inclusion, of developing ties to other residents. Without such ties, residential comfort is rather low.

In order to highlight the benefits of primary as well as secondary relationships, it is necessary to look at the kinds of ties that are formed within the public and parochial realms (Lofland, 1998). Routinized encounters in the streets or in third places lead to public familiarity and sometimes to more intimate relations (Blokland, 2003; Jacobs, 1992; Lofland, 1998; Oldenburg, 1997). In order for public familiarity to develop, people have to use their neighborhood in daily life, and there must be meeting opportunities in the form of foci or third places where people meet on a more or less regular basis (Feld, 1981; Oldenburg, 1997).

With the example of middle-class Turkish-Germans, I will show that family ties directly influence whether or not a person will move out of or stay in a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhood. Crucial for subsequent residential comfort are less tangible ties, those located in the public and parochial realm. If a neighborhood has high levels of public familiarity, if there is sociability between residents –in the streets and third places – residential comfort is high, and the neighborhood is used practically as well as symbolically. Stayers more often than movers live in neighborhoods characterized by such sociability. Movers rather end up in neighborhoods with more distanced relations between residents and little possibilities to meet other people. That is the reason for their continued focus on the old neighborhood, which still plays a major role in neighborhood use.