

“The all-dividing Amsterdam ring road: emphasising social divisions to justify state-led gentrification

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The all-dividing Amsterdam ring road: Emphasising social divisions to justify state-led gentrification

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Introduction

Gentrification has morphed from a marginal counter process occurring in a select number of cities and neighbourhoods into a widespread phenomenon and a major “global urban strategy” in cities’ attempts to attract talent and capital (Smith, 2002). Consequently, in major cities gentrification is no longer limited to a few neighbourhoods, but stretches increasingly far from the urban centre to simultaneously effect various neighbourhoods (Hochstenbach and Van Gent, 2015).

This also applies to Amsterdam, where the vast majority of “inner-ring” neighbourhoods are currently undergoing some form of gentrification. This is not to say differences do not exist: while some neighbourhoods were previously considered disadvantaged and are now signs of early-stage gentrification, other areas (like the Old

South area or the canal belt) are traditionally affluent and are showing sign of gentrification further maturing – neighbourhoods where we can arguably speak of “super gentrification” (cf Butler and Lees 2006).

Governmental strategies and interventions play a key role in advancing gentrification in the case of Amsterdam. Official white papers explicitly mention gentrification as a key opportunity for the city and local planning agencies hence seek to spur the process (Van Gent, 2013; De Koning, 2015). A key issue here is that the Amsterdam housing sector boasts a comparatively large social-rental sector owned by (semi-public) housing associations (some 45% in 2014). Governmental interventions, in coordination with these associations, is necessary to advance gentrification. While the issue of gentrification – and relatedly housing affordability and accessibility – was largely absent from public debates in Amsterdam for a long time, it has recently come to the fore as a hot topic in the local media and among local politicians.

This paper investigates how in this changing context, gentrification is normalised and justified. Particularly, I aim to illuminate how the image of an “all dividing” Amsterdam ring road is construed and deployed in order to justify state-led gentrification and the sale of social rental housing. The Amsterdam ring road, an elevated freeway cutting through the city, has become an increasingly dominant symbol to describe Amsterdam’s spatial configuration (e.g. inequalities). The ring road is, as such, not only used by popular media to describe differences, but also by policymakers to frame, present, and justify their urban policies.

Before delving deeper into the Amsterdam case study, the next section presents a brief outline of relevant literature regarding gentrification and shifting social-spatial inequalities, the role of the state, territorial stigmatisation, and the use of particular symbols in the gentrification process.

Literature

Gentrification and changing social-spatial inequalities

Although most studies of gentrification tend to focus on individual neighbourhoods or a limited set of neighbourhoods, some recent studies have linked gentrification to changes

in the social-spatial configuration of cities as a whole (e.g. Hedin *et al.*, 2012; Hochstenbach and Van Gent, 2015; Skaburskis and Nelson 2014). Other recent studies have investigated the notion of a suburbanization of poverty (e.g. Randolph and Tice, 2014; Zwiers et al 2015). These studies show that, partly as a consequence of gentrification processes, poverty concentrations are, in high demand urban contexts, shifting away from inner urban areas towards the urban periphery or (inner) suburban locations. Inner urban neighbourhoods become increasingly middle or upper middle class areas.

In contexts like the Dutch larger cities boast comparatively large amounts of social rental housing and tenants are well protected from large rent increases or eviction. As a consequence, direct displacement through gentrification is limited. Instead, gentrification progresses more gradually as housing may become more expensive and/or converted to homeownership after the previous tenant leaves. As mentioned in the introduction, the Dutch housing system also gives (local) authorities and housing associations a key role in promoting gentrification – for example via the sale or liberalisation of social rental dwellings (Teernstra, 2014).

Supportive governmental policies can play an important role in allowing and promoting gentrification to progress. Yet, governments may promote gentrification as part of their urban policies for a variety of reasons. First, gentrification can play a role in attracting talent and capital to cities which has become ever more important in the international competition between cities, often linked to neoliberalization (Smith, 2002; Peck 2005). Second, gentrification may be pursued to increase the social mix of certain low income neighbourhoods (Lees, 2008). Changing the residential composition of certain neighbourhoods towards more middle- and higher-income residents may fit in urban policies aiming to reduce existing negative “neighbourhood effects” or impose positive ones (evidence for these neighbourhood effects remains inconclusive at best however). Third, following Uitermark and colleagues (2007), gentrification can also be a key governmental strategy to regain and retain control over certain neighbourhoods and ensure social order in these neighbourhoods.

These different underlying motives for promoting gentrification are not mutually exclusive. Governments may aim at several of these goals simultaneously. Furthermore,

as shown by Teernstra (2014), local authorities may promote gentrification – at the same time – in different (even adjacent) neighbourhoods for different reasons.

Recent studies have focused on the potential role territorial stigmatization may play in the run up to neighbourhood gentrification (Wacquant et al 2014). Spatial defamation may be carefully constructed in order to subsequently be able to point at the unruly and problematic state of certain neighbourhoods (Kallin and Slater 2014; August, 2014). Subsequently, gentrification and intensive neighbourhood restructuring become normal and justified instruments to tackle the perceived problems of these neighbourhoods.

Empirical data

Amsterdam is like many other western cities currently undergoing housing-market liberalisation and with it gentrification (Uitermark, 2009). Gentrification has, in recent years, progressed to such an extent that almost all inner-ring neighbourhoods are now experiencing one form or another of the process. Although the population of these neighbourhoods, particularly the current gentrification frontiers, remains highly diverse, looking at changes in average incomes or real estate values show very clear patterns of social-spatial polarization where the inner ring neighbourhoods become more wealthy and the outer-ring areas (primarily the peripheral boroughs North, Southeast and New West) increasingly lag behind.

These developments are also increasingly mentioned in current debates about the city and its current developments. Debates about social divisions (“tweedeling” – dichotomization) between lower income and higher income residents and how this is reflected in space are now at the foreground of these debates. Particularly, in the run up to the municipal elections in March 2014 the topic received much attention – not in the last place from local politicians.

Amsterdam’s social-spatial configuration is ever more often described using the image of an all-dividing ring road. The continuously gentrifying inner-ring neighbourhoods are pictured as successful, diverse, liveable and architecturally attractive. The neighbourhoods located outside the ring road, however, are pictured as poverty

concentrations, unattractive, and in need of intervention. A symbolic image is thus construed that divides Amsterdam in two halves – one ‘desirable’ and one ‘problematic’. To be clear, nuances and variations to these general trends and differences between the inner- and outer-ring areas do exist, but often ignored.

This image of the ring road is a particularly strong one as it conveniently redraws the city in a simple dichotomy of good versus bad. On both sides, however, gentrification is presented as a suitable form of urban policy as I will sketch out below. Furthermore, these two opposites feed off one another.

Outer ring neighbourhoods

The outer ring, more peripheral, areas¹ mostly consist of post-war housing, including the modernist Bijlmer area in the Southeast with high-rise “honey rate” tower blocks from the 1960s and 1970s. These areas were often built as housing for the middle classes and indeed, during the 1980s and into the 1990s boasted relatively high incomes compared to many of the city’s inner ring, nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century neighbourhoods (Meulenbelt 1997). However, over the years their relative position (in terms of average income or real estate value) has worsened (cf. Zwiers et al 2015). Many of these neighbourhoods were thus part of large urban restructuring schemes which included the demolition of old areas and the provision of newer owner-occupied dwellings in order to attract a new population.

Nevertheless, despite efforts, these neighbourhoods continue to lag behind the development most of the inner ring neighbourhoods currently experience. In policy documents from the local planning agency (DRO), and communications from their head employees, it is often stated that these neighbourhoods are “not urban enough” because they lack the liveliness, urban fabric and the potential for human interaction most of the inner ring neighbourhoods do have. These neighbourhoods are, according to a head planner, deemed to lack “real streets” (Gadet, 2009, p.132, author translation) – let

¹ Boroughs North, Southeast and New West

alone real urban streets – and deemed to suffer from monotonous, mono-functional urban layouts². This is problematic and is assumed to influence local residents:

“You can’t take part if you live in an area that looks as if you can’t take part. If you wake up in Geuzenveld [a neighbourhood in New West], with only satellite dishes, than you feel a lot worse. From the moment you look outside, you will see that it won’t be a success [...] the area where you live should not be a vast area where you are confronted on a daily basis with this hopelessness”

(interview planner DRO, author translation).

This quote by a planner from DRO seems to imply a negative neighbourhood effect, but as we will discuss later on, also relates to the ability of these neighbourhoods to attract so called “new urbanites”³.

Following the line of reasoning by DRO, this makes these neighbourhoods unlikely, if not impossible, candidates to gentrify. And this, gentrification, is what is deemed absolutely necessary for these neighbourhoods to catch up with those in the inner ring. This implies large scale renovation and restructuring projects since the physical characteristics of these areas are deemed unfavourable. The financial crisis of 2008 has, however, put a brake on such projects as is also recognised in recent policy documents (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2013, p.15).

I argue that most outer-ring neighbourhoods are subject to some form of territorial stigmatization, often deployed or (implicitly) endorsed by local planning authorities. They consider these neighbourhoods ill-suited for the interaction economy or for attracting (future) members of the creative class/new urbanites:

“Students should not become depressed in Geuzenveld, everyone wants to be as close to the expanding city centre as possible. You have to accommodate this or else they will leave. Graduates and starters have little access [on the housing

² This vision has been subject to criticism: DRO is said to have a very middle class vision of what constitutes urbanity and urban environments and discards the liveliness and facilities present in those outer ring boroughs (Nio, 2012).

³ This is a term often used in local policy documents. It refers to higher educated Dutch people who moved to Amsterdam from elsewhere. The term can more or less be equated with the creative class.

market] here. They can't find their way. They can in the Bijlmer, but you don't go there" (planner DRO, also quoted in Hochstenbach 2014).

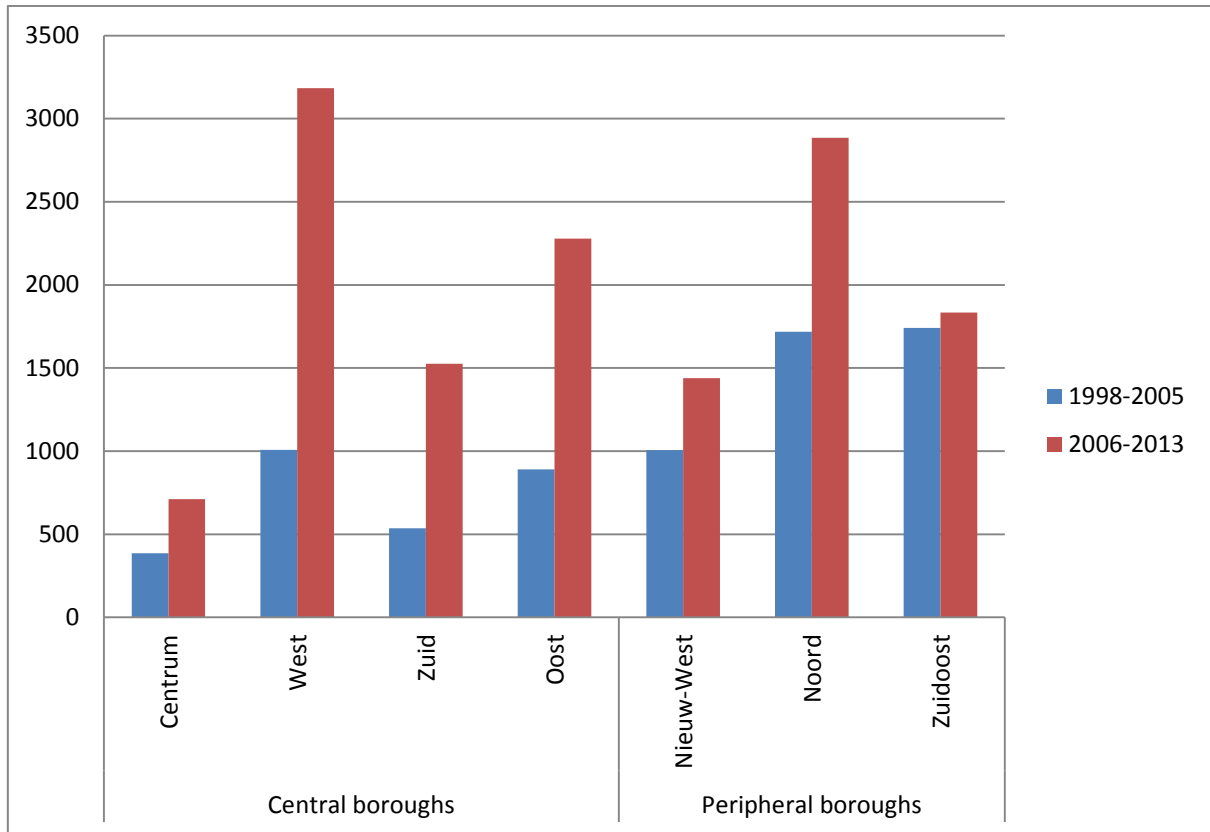
As other studies showed (e.g. Kallin and Slater, 2014; August, 2014) this territorial stigmatization is often the precursor of renovation and state-led gentrification. In Amsterdam this is not yet the case although this is partly due to the financial crisis. Nevertheless, the gradual sale of social rental dwellings and increase of owner-occupied housing (and to a lesser extent more expensive free-sector rental housing) is continuing. Furthermore, as we will see below local authorities currently focus on the "ring zone" – the area around the ring road – where there is deemed to be room for new-built housing as well as the enabling of gentrification.

Thus, since it is currently considered impossible/too expensive to accommodate these new urbanites in the outer ring boroughs, they have to be accommodated in the inner ring as the quote above highlights. If not, Amsterdam will lose the intra- and international competition for talent it is argued.

Inner ring neighbourhoods

To accommodate these new urbanites and the creative economy, the local authorities explicitly and enthusiastically embrace gentrification as a highly beneficial process for the inner city. Not eschewing the term gentrification (like elsewhere, see Bridge et al 2012), current urban policies aim at "expanding" and "rolling out" the city centre milieu via policies of state-led gentrification (Uitermark, 2009; Van Gent, 2013). This rolling out of the inner city includes giving new urbanites – particularly high educated young graduates – more room on the housing market by increasing the owner-occupied and free-sector rental markets at the cost of the social-rental stock. Figure 1 shows that between 1998-2005 and 2006-2013 particularly the sale of social rental dwellings increased dramatically in the inner city boroughs. Meanwhile, outer ring boroughs also saw a small increase and here too yearly sales remain steadily high. Nevertheless, sales in West – together with East the borough where the current gentrification frontiers is to be found – have surpassed those in peripheral boroughs. Also East has seen a substantial increase – surpassing New West and Southeast.

Figure 1. Number of sold housing association dwellings per borough 1998-2013.
Source: AFWC, 2014.



Since the city centre and the surrounding nineteenth-century belt have experienced subsequent waves of gentrification, current urban policies focus on the ‘ring zone’ (the areas directly bordering the ring road). The old nineteenth and early-twentieth century neighbourhoods located within the city’s ring road are appreciated by the “creative” middle class. It is easy to make these neighbourhoods attractive to these residents. In doing so, gentrification of the inner-ring boroughs is promoted as “normalising” the Amsterdam housing stock. It is argued that the inner city, one of the most popular parts of the Netherlands, still hosts too many social rental dwellings. Consequently, many of their inhabitants are labelled as living “skewed”: that is, paying not enough considering their income. Interestingly, liberalising part of the housing stock is thus framed as being just (although after liberalising even higher income residents are likely to move in).

Again, the image of the ring road plays some role here: we are frequently reminded that inner ring neighbourhoods are the en vogue neighbourhoods and contributing to Amsterdam's current success. Hence, it is depicted that it is completely normal to pay more for these neighbourhoods. Subsequently, the social rental sector is framed as an outdated tenure form that in its current size hampers the development of a normal housing market with suitable prices and housing costs. A reduction of the housing stock within the ring road is thus part and parcel of this so-called normalisation. Making way for the new urbanites is considered an essential part in Amsterdam's growth as a creative, service oriented city. In the run up to the municipal elections of 2014 a frequently recurring theme was how "talents" were unable to move to the city. City aldermen from the right-wing liberal party VVD argued the large social rental sector was responsible for "keeping talents outside the city walls" (Wiebes and Van der Burg, 2014). Interestingly, this notion apparently normalises the idea that talents are also able to pay these higher rents or acquire a mortgage for an expensive home – accommodating these talents within the regulated social rental sector is left undiscussed. Also, underlying these arguments also seems to be a notion that these talents, even when having major difficulties in finding suitable housing within the ring road, would not even consider moving to one of these boroughs and would rather move to another city as the quote above suggests ("Graduates and starters have little access [on the housing market] here. They can't find their way. They can in the Bijlmer, but you don't go there"). Although this may be exaggerated, previous research did show that higher educated young people and students consider the ring road an important mental and physical barrier (Hochstenbach and Boterman 2015).

Also, housing associations are currently in a tight financial situation, partly due to recent national policies posing additional financial constraints (Priemus 2014). Consequently, they are pushed to sell part of their stock. The stock in gentrifying neighbourhoods then proves to be most interesting to sell, given the fact that returns are relatively high here. Furthermore, it fits within municipal ambitions.

Facilitating market dynamics is considered logical, good for the competitive position of Amsterdam, and not too costly. In the process, increasingly pressing issues of housing-market affordability and accessibility are not addressed. Instead, current urban policies

aggravate these issues and threaten to deepen social-spatial divisions as an increasingly large share of the Amsterdam housing stock becomes unaffordable to lower income groups. By activating the symbol of the ring road, an ever-expanding frontier of state-led gentrification is normalised and justified. Hence, despite a recognition and emphasis on sharpening social divisions in current debates, municipal policies exacerbate them by fuelling gentrification (Uitermark and Bosker 2014). Simultaneously, developments in the outer ring neighbourhoods are due to the financial crisis only facilitated, rather than actually pursued despite a policy and public narrative that this is necessary.

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