

# **Citizen-Led Place-Making for Encounters Across Diversity in Rotterdam**

Chiao-Jou Lin

Master thesis  
Urban and Economy Geography  
Utrecht University  
August 2018

First Supervisor  
Dr. Kei Otsuki

Second Reader  
Dr. Gideon S. Bolt

Contact: [c.lin3@students.uu.nl](mailto:c.lin3@students.uu.nl)  
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## 1. Abstract

While citizen-led semi-public spaces have been regarded as the alternative and better approach to increase social interactions between people who are mostly unknown to each other with organized encounters, little has been empirically shown how grassroots initiatives activate and establish the social connections through certain codes of conducts in the shared places in a mixed neighborhood. This research examines the socio-spatial conditions of the organized encounter by examining (1) the interactions between strangers in a semi-public space, where people of different backgrounds encounter, mutually recognize and build connections with each other and (2) the interactions between citizens and local governmental agents for reinvigorate a previously vacant site into the semi-public space for the organized encounters. Drawing upon the fieldwork in both het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin, two shared places mainly developed by citizen-led initiatives in Rotterdam, I suggest three crucial codes of conducts to trigger interpersonal contacts in the citizen-led semi-public spaces: regularly tactile engagement with materials, sharing materials and knowledge, and multiple space use. Moreover, I illustrate that place frames, which citizen-led initiatives use to make their claims over the meaning and the use of the specific place, are continuously affected by the strategic agendas for enrolling politically powerful actors in the processes of place making.

**Keywords:** semi-public space, transformation of vacant site, community center, community garden, place-making

## 2. Introduction

Concerns about how people of different backgrounds live together and share urban spaces have long been introduced into ongoing urban (re)development and neighborhood regenerations in Rotterdam, a port city in the Netherlands where multiethnic makeup and multicultural lifestyles have long flourished for decades (Peterson, 2016; Long, 2011; Spierings et al., 2016; Tersteeg et al., 2014). Within this context, scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of the experience of sharing a space with the diverse others, which holds the possibility of establishing a feeling of belonging and community (Vincent et al., 2018; Ye, 2018; Peterson, 2016).

In the meanwhile, community-based and citizen-led initiatives have been increasingly identified actively participating in neighborhood regeneration with alternative solutions to social segregation in the neighborhood mainly through reinvigorating an underutilized site into a shared place with certain codes of conducts (Larsen and Brandt, 2018; Finn, 2014; Foo et al., 2014; Hou, 2010; Pierce et al, 2016; Longhurst, 2015; Håkansson, 2017). Under the mottos of active citizenship and participatory urban design, such bottom-up place-making

initiatives have been institutionalized into urban governance to increase social cohesion in a diverse neighborhood (Andersen and Van Kempen, 2003; Özdemir and Tasan-Kok, 2017; Dekker and van Kempen, 2004; Boonstra and Boelens, 2011).

While a proliferation of grassroots place-making movements has been recently noticed for their actual efforts of shaping the neighborhood environment, literature on citizen participation in governance argues opportunities are far from sufficient for residents to actually involve in decision-making process, (Finn, 2014; Larsen and Brandt, 2018; Peterson, 2016; Hoekstra and Dahlvik, 2017; Teernstra and Pinkster, 2016). It is therefore critical to uncover the certain codes of conducts, organized by citizen groups, to stimulate interpersonal contacts as well as an the networked processes that link citizens and local governmental agents together to repurpose vacant urban properties into the socio-spatial conditions for the organized encounters across difference (Teernstra and Pinkster, 2017; Özdemir and Tasan-Kok, 2017; Silva, 2016; Finn, 2014).

This paper explores the set of social, material and political processes by which citizen-led initiatives work against social segregation and address their claims to shaping and to managing urban spaces especially in recently popular public-civil participation projects. The two research questions of this research are: *first, what are the certain codes of conducts that citizen-led initiatives use to mingle unknown others for increased social contact and meaningful exchanges? Second, how citizen-led initiatives strategically gain support from governmental actors to appropriate vacant urban properties into the share urban spaces where unfamiliar others are intermingled and diversity is encountered and negotiated?*

I draw on a case study of two sites, het Wijkpaleis (a community center meaning 'the neighborhood palace' in English) and de Spoortuin (a community garden translated as railway platform garden), in a diverse neighborhood of Middelland, located in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin are both established and managed by a group of residents who voluntarily organize a series of group activities with a multicultural group of people, across the boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, gender and age. Furthermore, het Wijkpaleis and de Spportuin are both integrated into local governance since they worked on a public-civil participation project, Mooi Mooier Middelland (Beautiful, More beautiful, Middelland) in 2016.

In what follows, I review recent literature on the spatial setting of encounters with unknown others and on citizens' participation in spatial redevelopment. In this literature review, the first strand focuses on the use, design and management of a shared place that stimulates social contact and meaningful exchanges between apparently disconnected groups. The second strand of the review then highlights the 'bottom-up' mode of space production and later illustrate the place-frames, which citizen-led groups strategically define the meaning and the use of a specific space, for gaining supports from other (groups

of) actors who share similar interests and goals. In order to analyze the processes through which different actors negotiate over the use of a place and to attend to the relationship between the actors who are enrolled into the network/alliance of physically and symbolically re-ordering the place, I draw on the relational approach to the collectively and strategically selected frames of a place. Next, I explain the research design including methodological considerations, choices of research methods and the research relations in the field. I then use a case study to explore the socio-political processes and the actor networks of place making regarding the forms and meanings of encounters.

Acknowledging the scope of my research is restricted to my limited language capacity of Dutch; therefore, I am aware there might be something lost in translation while I was collecting and interpreting (first hand and second hand) data. Within a qualitative approach investigation, the process of gathering and evaluating information are not strictly linear. Furthermore, although a strong local public power is well identified in the neighborhood socio-spatial organization, I focus on the perspectives of active citizen-led organizations in the neighborhood of Middelland and therefore pay less attention on the governmental strategies and administrative agenda.

### **3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 Encountering Difference in Shared Spaces**

The potentials of meeting and intermingling unknown others are underlined across social sciences to document how increased social contact and meaningful exchanges between apparently disconnected groups can stimulate a sense of familiarity with difference, establishing a feeling of “we” and improving social cohesion in diversity (Wilson, 2017; Phillips et al., 2014; Mayblin et al., 2016; Vincent et al., 2018; Ye, 2018). Research on encounters has increasingly recognized the importance of the dual relationship between the social practices and the spatial influences (Vertovec, 2007; Loopmans et al., 2017; Cassiers and Kesteloot, 2012; Oosterlynck et al., 2016; Wilson, 2013). As such, scholars have been increasingly interested in particular spatial and historical contexts where unfamiliar others are intermingled and diversity is encountered and negotiated (Peterson, 2016; Berg and Sigona, 2013).

Studies on spaces of encounter further represent a dynamic interaction between spaces, social practices and politics, arguing encounters with unknown and diverse others do not automatically lead to a sense of familiarity (Hoekstra and Pinkster, 2017; Valentine 2008; Askins and Pain, 2011; Wilson, 2017; Oosterlynck et al., 2017). For instance, bringing people into close physical proximity such as

on buses, trains, streets, squares, playgrounds, parks or other public space, do not necessarily increase social contact or promote meaningful exchanges (Low, 2013; Askins and Pain, 2011; Wilson, 2013a; Blokland and Nast, 2014; Ye, 2018).

An accumulating number of studies have critically and vividly pictured how structured inequalities and power relations embedded in the public spaces decrease the meeting chances with unknown and diverse others: a lack of access to transportation as both a cause and a consequence of social exclusion (Kenyon et al., 2002); an uneven distribution and a dominant preference of green space use leading to under-represented groups in the recreational use of publicly available green space (Kabisch and Haase, 2014); a fearful sense of crime resulting to a restricted use of public space as the strategy of preventing from a risk to corporeal safety (Valentine 1989; Wagner and Peters, 2014); physical deterrents, discriminatory ways of behaving and/or strict supervision in public spaces deny certain groups of visitors such as children (Day and Wager, 2010), persons with disabilities (Rosenberg et al., 2012), persons with different religious faiths (Spierings et al., 2016) and persons with queer identities (Ruez, 2017; Anderson, 2017). In short, encounters with diversity are remarkably influenced by different patterns of boundaries, selections and enclosures through prejudicial policies and tacit rules of interaction in public spaces (Valentine and Harris, 2016).

The nuanced work of filtering, sorting, managing and organizing diversity has been remarkably identified in literature especially about the use, design and management of privately owned public space, as an actual or potential threat to diverse visibilities and voices in a material and spatial context (Carmona, 2010a; 2010b; Németh and Schmidt, 2007, 2011; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2004). Issues of access and surveillance in ‘public’ space have lowered the possibilities of encounters across differences (Bodnar, 2015; Low and Iveson, 2016; Atkinson, 2003). In conclusion, spatial proximity alone is not enough to bring about increased social contact and meaningful exchanges between strangers (Amin, 2002; Horgan, 2017). Thus, encounters with difference in a shared place will not necessarily nor automatically generate feelings of interdependence and a commitment to an imagined inclusive community (Oosterlynck et al., 2017).

### **3.2 Citizens Creating Semi-Public Spaces for Organized Encounters**

Citizen-based initiatives have recent emerged to re-design public spaces—especially the formerly vacant or underutilized ones— into places that accommodate a wide range of community activities and foreground a variety of contacts (Lobo, 2017; Hou, 2010; Long, 2011; Longhurst, 2015; Matejskova and Leitner, 2011). In other words, citizens enact engagements with otherness through making a ‘new’ place with particular types of encounters.

In the citizen-led shared place, particular narratives, visions and conducts are identified to serve as the means to direct or regulate the interactions between visitors who are mostly unknown to each other (Peterson, 2016; Teernstra and Pinkster, 2016; Vincent et al., 2018; Longhurst, 2015; Håkansson, 2017). Such shared places often represent semi-public spaces that provide particular social interactions and physical surroundings for serendipitous encounters, diverse social ties and new attachments (Peterson, 2016; Oldenburg, 1989; Lobo, 2017). These shared places present concrete settings with relatively easier access for people to confront and interact with one another across their differences. However, semi-public space is not completely ‘a world of strangers’ (Lofland, 1973) because the fear of unknown and the hostility to different others can be obscured by what Blokland and Nast (2014: 1148) term ‘public familiarity’— an understanding of the rule of conducts and what to expect from others in a shared place where people can serendipitously run into each other (Jones et al., 2015; Peterson, 2016).

Community-center-like meeting places, community gardens or cafes are common semi-public spaces as a site of sociality and recreation led voluntarily by citizen groups to make prolonged, intense and regular engagement possible (Peterson, 2016; Lobo, 2017; Frangos, 2016; Askins and Pain, 2011). In line with Amin’s (2002:959) thesis about ‘micro-publics’, these semi-public spaces present the micro scale of communities and focus on particular topics, opening up the possibilities of turning strangers into acquaintances and initiating new attachments with purposeful organized group activities for people who are differently socially situated (Peterson, 2016; Wessendorf, 2011; Lobo, 2017; Frangos, 2016).

Drawing on an empirical research in a community art space renovated from a disused car park in Darwin, Australia, Lobo (2017) addresses the critical role of tactile engagement with the mediation of material objects (i.e. craft making such as painting pots with paints, brushes and canvases) not merely in seeding co-presence of White Australian, migrant newcomers, asylum seekers and indigenous peoples regardless of their genders and ages. The sensory engagement of making crafts and using craft-related materials also enable personal and affective bonds, which result from acts of kindness from and amicable relations with other participants in the group activities (Lobo, 2017:634; Askins and Pain, 2011).

Community gardens are portrayed as the places that build social ties with particular social patterns, norms of sociality, and physical infrastructures (Aptekar, 2015; Pottinger, 2017). With tactile experiences of ‘getting their hands dirty and growing food’, gardeners in Denver, Colorado, build a sense of connection to the garden and other gardeners because the gardeners regularly interact with each other such as observing, asking questions, learning about biophysical processes of the garden and sharing the fruits of their labor (Hale et

al., 2011). In order to maintain the community garden, the gardeners regard their dedication to garden activities as a social agreement and built accountability to the garden and to other gardeners (Hale et al., 2011).

McRobbie (1998) suggests senses of community and friendship are enacted not merely through borrowing/ lending of materials—mundane but crucial for every stage of cloth making— but also through the sharing of craft art skills which are often deemed as a gift or favor related to an ethic of care and reciprocity. Under such circumstances, cloth-making practices and gardening can be understood not merely about the mending of the material but also about social and emotional connections (Hall and Jayne, 2016; Okvat and Zautra, 2011). Presented as an opportunity for the cloth makers and gardeners to reconnect with each other, a community art center and a community garden have the potential to generate an increased sense of community (Hall and Jayne, 2016; Hale et al., 2011).

Encounters in a shared place are taken as wide-ranging and varied contacts with differences in lifestyle, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or religion (Wilson, 2017c; Peterson, 2016; Lobo, 2017). While each scholar has a different understanding and opinions about which types of encounter establish social connections in a neighborhood, Peterson (2016) highlights both fleeting encounters and those in depth and of longer duration have the potentials for connecting with others who have been differently socially situated (Ince, 2015; Wilson, 2017c; Brown and Pickerill, 2009). Fleeting encounters—recognize one another but only in a mundane way—can bring about multi-culture in the form of conviviality with ‘a fine balance between building positive relations across difference and keeping a distance’ through which people begin to reflect upon their identity in relation to others and in the mean while having some autonomy for their life styles from being encumbered by others (Wessendorf, 2014b: 393;Ye, 2016). Continuous exposures to others enhance a deeper intercultural understanding and increase communications, thus creating meaningful interactions and producing lasting relationships with the other (Amin, 2012; Valentine, 2008).

In conclusion, the settings of encounters with different and unknown others at the local level play a key role in the experiences and outcomes of encounter (Ye, 2018; Askins and Pain, 2011). Citizen-led spaces of encounter are characterized as semi-public spaces that are open to the public but should be identified as ‘familiar points’ where an individual can feel comfortable in others’ presence (Peterson, 2016; Jones et al., 2015). Thus, encounters with the potential to foster social cohesion need to be socially and spatially mediated so that interacting with ‘strangers’ would seem to be normal and encouraging (Leitner, 2012; Wilson, 2017c; Jones et al., 2015). Moreover, tactile engagement with the mediation of material objects is argued to enact relationships of difference along ethnic, gender and age through friendly acts from others in the group activities (Lobo, 2017). Such friendly interactions— no matter ephemeral or durable —are an



important source of social cohesion (Lobo, 2017; Wessendorf, 2014b; Jones et al., 2015).

### **3.3 Collectively Framing a Place with Enrolling Local Governmental Agents**

Citizens' participation in spatial transformations—resident-generated, low budget and often designed to be creative solutions to inadequate public services—has caught the attentions of many urban theorists and planning practitioners as it provides a more inclusive alternative to top-down, capital-intensive, and bureaucratically sanctioned urban change (Devlin, 2017; Talen, 2015; Silva, 2016; Finn, 2014). Such micro-spatial urban practices are also defined as a part of 'informal' planning initiatives (or urban 'informality' and DIY urbanism in particular), which attribute a skeptical attitude toward the state-led planning regime and city governance for desirable urban changes (Devlin, 2017:3; Silva, 2016).

Informal planning initiatives, from community gardens to self-organized art center, are characterized by small-scale place-making efforts to adapt urban landscapes based on needs of the residents and improve the public's urban experience (Devlin, 2017; Finn, 2014; Lobo, 2017). The informal planning initiatives mostly take place through repurposing vacant urban properties, either holding temporary lease or circumventing laws regulating (Larsen and Brandt, 2018; Finn, 2014). Challenges therefore arise when the citizen initiators and the transformed space users face the precarious condition of place use and possible displacement (Devlin, 2017; Groth and Corijn, 2005; Talen, 2015; Silva, 2016).

Informal planning initiatives seem apparently to be in conflict with formal planning process but the effort of micro-scale place making initiatives and their possible antidotes to urban challenges have caught increasing attentions of the press, academics and governmental agents (Finn, 2014; Devlin, 2017; Silva, 2016). Within this context, studies on informal urbanism also underline the strategies that an individual or citizen-led groups use to incorporate the grassroots place-making activities into urban governance, management and planning, which has become a social movement for the individual or citizen-led groups to work on a range of urban issues (Teernstra and Pinkster, 2017; Özdemir and Tasan-Kok, 2017; Silva, 2016; Finn, 2014).

Drawing upon on studies about place, place making and social movement, scholars suggest place fosters social connection and triggers collective action through sharing the identity, meanings and lived experiences related to the specific place (Martin, 2003; Pierce et al., 2011; Zhang, 2018; Foo et al., 2014). Place is not simply a territorially fixed site derived from political and planning jurisdictions and settlement patterns (Amin, 2007). In relational understanding, place is a site a material environment that is constituted by relationships between economic, social, and political structures within and beyond the site (Zhong, 2018;

Pierce et al., 2016; Massey, 2005). In this sense, a place is always loaded with multiple meanings, which can be viewed and reclaimed from different perspectives (Pierce et al., 2011; Massey, 2005). Place making is to selectively frame a place with a particular meaning and a set of conducts attached to the place, which only reflects a part of various perspectives of the same place (Martin, 2003; Pierce et al., 2011; Van Neste and Martin, 2017).

### **3.4 Relational Approach to the Processes and Associations of Place Making**

In the context of neighborhood regeneration, residents have emerged to transform underutilized sites into such semi-public spaces for encounters, which is widely regarded as a creative alternative to conventionally designed public and shared space (Lobo, 2017; Hou, 2010). In line with the relational approach, strategically framing the specific place with their selective vision and experiences in/of a place can help citizen-led organizations trigger collective actions in order to assert their right to the use of places and to restore the problem-solving potential of the place (Zhang, 2018; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). In other words, place-frame is therefore a discursive process of physically and symbolically re-ordering the place. This discursive process also enrolls targeted individuals or groups of people who share the place frame as the alliance in the mobilization (Martin, 2003; Pierce et al., 2011; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). In short, the relational approach puts a special emphasis on processes and associations (Hale et al., 2011).

Some scholars unpack the linkage between informal place making initiatives and their broader social, political, and economic contexts to discover opportunities for civic agency and structural limitations of broader political economic forces (Foo et al., 2014; Zhang, 2018). Zhang (2018) provides a detailed account of how artists in 789 arts district in China strategically frame the place of 789 arts district, a previously vacant factory floor now rented by an art community, as the agenda of collective action against their possible dislocation when there are conflicts about the future use of 789 arts district. In this case study, Zhang (2018) also shows that the place frames are always in the making and emphasize the impact of enrolling targeted partners on the changing place frames. For instance, the place frame of 789 arts district were selectively picked so that the municipal government, whom the artists targeted to enroll, would be more probably to accept the place frame and willing to form an alliance with the community of artists. However, this place frame of 789 arts district was later 'hijacked' and reshaped considerably by the municipality, bringing unforeseen result of the place making (Zhang, 2018:92).

In summary, the analytical framework of relational place making is not merely about the negotiations over the use of physical space but also about the struggles over enrolling which actors for place making (Zhang, 2018; Van Neste and Martin, 2017).

## 4. Research Approach

### 4.1 Research Context

This research draws on two grassroots initiatives related to the collective appropriation of urban vacant land and intergroup contacts attached to the spatial processes in Rotterdam Middelland neighborhood (see figure 1) in the Netherlands. In the following paragraphs, I pinpoint the socio-spatial development of the city of Rotterdam and the neighborhood, Middelland, where the two case studies are located. The current management and governance of public space as the ways to foster social cohesion in Rotterdam are described as follows.

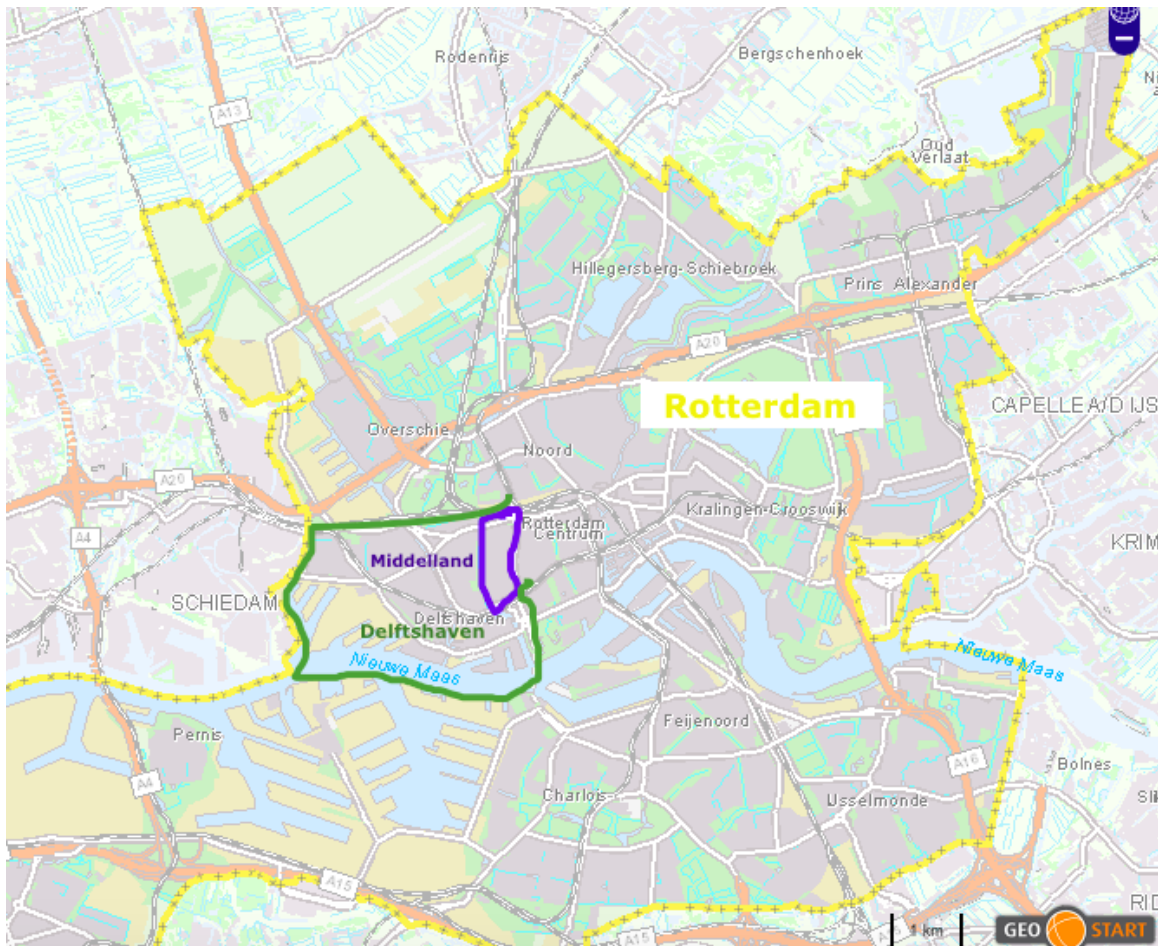


Fig. 1 Location of the neighborhood of Middelland  
Map from Kaart Stadsplattegrond van Rotterdam.nl, adapted by Chiao-Jou Lin

The spatial development of a city is influenced by a combination of economic, social, demographic and environmental factors. The dominant transport function and favorable digital connectivity make Rotterdam attractive to many

corporate headquarters, knowledge-intensive business services and creative sectors, accelerating influx of foreign investments and foreign talents (Otgaar et al., 2017). Rotterdam has long been home to immigrants from around the globe with forty-five percent of the residents are foreign born (CBS StatLine, 2018; Entzinger and Engbersen, 2014). Compared with other major cities in the Netherlands, Rotterdam can however be considered a relatively poor city with relatively large shares of lower-income and lower-educated groups and ethnic minorities (Otgaar et al., 2017; Aalbers, 2005).



Fig. 2 Locations of de Spoortuin and het Wijkpaleis  
Map from Google Map, adapted by Chiao-Jou Lin

Post-war overseas immigrants have contributed to changes in ethnic composition of Rotterdam since the 1960s (Aalbers, 2005). Guest workers, first from Mediterranean countries in and then from Turkey and Morocco, were recruited to alleviate the labor shortage in this traditional manufacturing city well known for its large port. (Van Amersfoort and Penninx, 1994; Bontje and Latten, 2005). In the mid-1970s, Rotterdam has also seen additional impetus to a significant share of the non-Western immigrant from the former Dutch colonies of Surinam and the Dutch Antilles (the islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao, which are situated near the coast of Venezuela) (Bontje and Latten, 2005; Van Amersfoort and Penninx, 1994). Between 2014 and 1 October 2017, Rotterdam

had second largest immigrant community from countries suffering unrest, mainly from Syria (CBS, 2017).

Issues about social cohesion and integration of ethnic minorities are faced by many Dutch municipalities, but particularly in Rotterdam (Entzinger and Engbersen, 2014; Tersteeg et al., 2014; Otgaar et al., 2017). The spatial concentration of low-income households and above-average share of ethnic minorities is regarded as problematic, posing a substantial threat to minority integration and the social cohesion of society (Van Kempen and Bolt, 2009; Dekker et al., 2015). Such ‘problematic’ neighborhoods with concentrations of low-income households and ethnic minorities are predominantly, but by no means exclusively, located on the South of Rotterdam (Aalbers, 2005b). A distinct division between the northern and the southern side of the Rotterdam is not merely marked by a physical boundary, the Maas River, but also by an uneven distribution of the population and economic activities (Otgaar et al., 2017; Tan and Spies, 2014). The average taxable value of houses in the South bank is much lower than their counterparts on the other side of the river (Aalbers, 2005).

It is noteworthy that the socio-economic disparity of the North bank is nevertheless significant as well (Aalbers, 2005). The Delftshaven district, which is located in the west part of the North bank of Rotterdam, has generally been characterized as a decayed area in social as well as in physical terms. Most of the residents in this area earn lower than average income and have inferior socio-economic status. The crime rates— mainly drug related nuisance (addicts, drug dealers, homeless and street prostitution)— are higher than other districts (Aalbers, 2005; Lub and De Leeuw, 2017; Barendregt and Van De Mheen, 2009). A downgrading of the housing, public space and facilities (including public/medical/social/cultural services, shops, public transport) is also noticed as signs of neighborhood decline (Aalbers, 2006). It is also the area in which ethnic minorities are concentrated, which can be traced in line with a substantial number of social rented dwellings originally built for guest workers (Tillie et al., 2016; Aalbers, 2006). Such low maintenance and the prevalence of crime cast a generally infamous reputation for the Delfshaven district (Aalbers, 2006).

Located in the district of Delftshaven, Middelland— the area bounded in the north by railway of Rotterdam Central Station, in the east by ‘S-gravendijkwal, in the west by Heemraadssingel and by Rochussenstraat in the south— shares similarly unfavorable representation but shows a rather ‘mixed’ landscape. In physical term, mixing socially rented flats and owner-occupied housing can be seen within a block. The Heemraadssingel is a quiet street along a canal and lines of trees. Along this street, houses mainly for wealthy middle class (gouden rand) stand. Rochussenstraat, Nieuw Binnenweg and Middellandstraat, the three high streets within the area illustrate different types of land use, bringing flows of people for shopping and/or traffic jam during rush hour. In the social perspective, the composition of residents differs in terms of income, ethnic, age, life styles and educational level. According to the demographical data in 2017

(<https://allecijfers.nl/buurt/middelland-rotterdam/>), approximately 43% of the registered residents in Middelland were born abroad in non-Western countries or had at least one of their parents who was, while 41.3% of the residents are indigenous Dutch (and the rest of 26.9% are immigrants from western background). Within this picture of population about ethnic background, residents with western background make up 26.9% while 45.2% of the registered residents have either Suriname (15.2%) or Turkish (14.4%) or Macaroon (11.4%) or Antillean (4.2%) background. Almost 20% of the households in Middelland are categorized as low income.

Within the context of diversification in social backgrounds of residents and in land use patterns, Middelland has witnessed a number of ‘negotiations of diversity in semi-public space’ (Peterson, 2017:1071). Moreover, groups of social entrepreneurs, civic volunteers, local activists and people living or working in Middelland (Tan and Spies, 2014)— separately or together— have emerged to address unsolved social issues and tackle the social challenges by reconfiguring the socio-material fabric of the neighborhood. Within Middelland, het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin are the two cases examined in this study are organized respectively by Stichting Het Wijkpaleis and Stichting Goed Wonen aan het G.W. Burgerplein.



Figure 3: Het Wijkpaleis and the sign of ‘selling;’



Figure 4 : De Spoortuin

Het Wijkpaleis actually has a long full name, ‘het Wijkpaleis: de plek om het te maken’, literally meaning ‘the neighborhood palace: the place for makers’. It is located on 1e Middellandstraat, one of the high streets in Rotterdam. The location of het Wijkpaleis is in the basement of a building that once served as a neighborhood center (Wijk Centrum)<sup>1</sup>. The size of this meeting place is around 400 m<sup>2</sup>. Located in the ground floor, het Wijkpaleis has a special entrance:

<sup>1</sup> This is an article about the future of het Wijkpaleis. Due to the issue of land ownership, het Wijkpaleis faced relocation. In this article, there are some information about the building on 1e Middellandstraat in the past. <http://www.graafflorisstraat.nl/2017/12/toekomst-wijkpaleis-stuk-zekerder/>

visitors enter through a window, which is on purpose set to attract the attention of pedestrians who walk past the high street. Otherwise, people walking through the street, 1e Middellandstraat, less frequently stop by and hardly see through the windows (due to sunlight glare).

The indoor layout in het Wijkpaleis can be categorized as five parts: the table section (with some toys and shelves for children books), the coffee/tea bar-like storage table, L-shaped kitchen, a big rectangular table area for workshop, and two separate studios. Although certain activities take place in a specific section, generally speaking the spatial arrangement in het Wijkpaleis is made for mix-use. The table section, for example, functions as dining tables (for the 'neighborhood dinner' or tea/coffee drinking), as meeting desks (for groups of civil servants, students or volunteers of het Wijkpaleis to discuss and gather) or as working desk (for individual to work in het Wijkpaleis as a co-working space).

De Spoortuin is literally translated as 'the railway platform garden' and it is located on the west side of Rotterdam Central Station, a quite area surrounding by a canal, lush vegetation, a playground and a number of townhouses. This area was a railway platform years ago. Later a tennis court and a one-story house were built. However, this place was once a gathering spot of junkies and drug-related nuisance was common nearby. This was therefore the place residents would avoid visiting. De Spoortuin was initially established for two main causes: claiming the right of citizen to participation in urban planning and promoting an open access to urban nature.

Adjacent to the railway, the spatial layout of de Spoortuin can be simply divided into two sections: the outdoor and the indoor. In the outdoor section, there is a piece of communal garden with a size of 1,5 hectares. A canal and riverbank, piles of sidewalk tile (stoeptegél) as a sitting area, two beehives and swings tying to a big trunk are near the garden. In terms of the indoor facility, there are several chairs, a bench, a round table, a fridge, a stove for making fire to keep warm in winter and a facet. There was no water utility until the middle of February in 2018. Besides, the toilet renovation managed by volunteers in de Spoortuin has just finished in April 2018.

Both het Wijkpaleis and de Spportuin are the shared place of intermingling diverse groups where encounters with diversity can possibly occur, challenging the fear of the 'other' and opening up space for reflections and changes through the tactility of collaborative act (Lobo, 2017; Askin and Pain, 2011; Amin, 2002). Tracking the socio-spatial development of Het Wijkpaleis and De Spoortuin respectively provides a heuristic case about how grassroots initiatives maneuver place making and community building through not only transforming physical environment but also designing social interactions. There are three reasons to select and compare het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin as the research cases.

First, het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin both address a perceived lack of social contacts, low participation in social activities and social segregation as the problems in the neighborhood of Middelland. Both grassroots initiatives aim to encourage and invite residents of diverse backgrounds to co-design and jointly run het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin as a solution, which enables participants to have routine encounters of cultural difference.

Second, het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin both exemplify a combination of resistances and creations in terms of challenging the dominant ways of managing space: the two places took much effort to claim the right to participation in spatial planning in the neighborhood and both of them end up being settled in vacated public space (partly) owned by the municipality. Het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin both started from periodic waves of activism and mobilization of active residents for specific values respectively (more details in the section of case description). Therefore, it is workable to analyze the strategies that both het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin are physically and symbolically constructed through place frames and coalition building.

Third, as the spaces of encounter, het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin work so well that a gathering of ethnic, socio-economic and cultural difference can often be seen. Het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin have officially been recognized by the municipality with formal agreement of using the public space and they have been incorporated into a public-civil participation project, Mooi Mooier Middelland, specifically the program of Huize Middelland since 2015. Thus, examining the interactions between the two grassroots initiatives and the municipality lend insight into opportunities as well as constraints about citizens involvement, a broader socio-political context and the networks of actors involved in such spatial transformation.

Mooi Mooier Middelland project works to enable collaborations with residents, private enterprises, policy makers, academics or professionals from difference backgrounds to build more inclusive, democratic and sustainable communities (Schipper and van Steenbergen, 2017). With the main issues about neighborhood safety and liveability, Mooi Mooier Middelland project was put into practice in 2016. Under this project, Huize Middelland program (House Middelland) is a network composed of twelve existing initiatives and places in Middelland, which provides several shared places for the neighborhood with different themes and focuses.

## **4.2 Entry and Access to Research Participants**

It was actually through my personal network to acquire information about what and how het Wijkpaleis has done to change the social fabrics in the neighborhood, Middelland. During my internship at DRIFT (Dutch Research Institute for Transition) from July 2017 to the end of May 2018, my supervisor, Flor Avelino,



introduced me one initiator of het Wijkpaleis. I learnt the development of het Wijkpaleis and the context of grassroots initiatives in the neighborhood of Middelland. The interviewee recommended me to check a public-civil participation project, Mooi Mooier Middelland, specifically the program of Huize Middelland since 2015. After my first interview for data collection in 2017 in het Wijkpaleis, I sent interview request to the info mail of Mooi Mooier Middelland. One of the civil servants who are in charge of this project accepted my interview and introduced me to some other initiators of the citizen-led organizations in Middelland (including de Spoortuin).

### 4.3 Data Collection

In order to uncover the dynamic mechanism of transforming vacant land into a semi-public space where individuals unknown to one another come together and develop social relationships, I adopt qualitative approach, which allows for a more meaningful and holistic understanding of embedded experiences that occur in particular settings (Strydom and Puren, 2013).

A combination of research methods was used to subsequently get an overview of how residents were involved in a collective appropriation of urban vacant land and how intergroup contacts develop during such forms of spatial practices. Data collection includes document analysis, the conduction of semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Two types of documents related to the development, functions and meanings of De Spoortuin and Het Wijkpaleis as well as of Mooi Mooier Middelland project and Huize Middelland program were reviewed:

(1) Primary sources from the two grassroots initiatives that organize De Spoortuin and Het Wijkpaleis, and from the two public-civil policies such as printed briefs (Mooi Mooier Middelland Krant, flyers, posters), and online messages posed on social media (the district administration website, Twitter and Facebook). The focus was on the introductions, visions and objectives of these organizations and of the selected policies respectively.

(2) Secondary sources written by others such as reports, articles and master theses about the two grassroots initiatives and/or the two places, De Spoortuin and Het Wijkpaleis, and about the two public-civil policies with regard to describing and analyzing how citizens are involved in the transformation of the vacant space into zones of encounter and how social relations, meanings and rules are produced and negotiated within the spatial transformation.

Being aware that a possible characteristic of 'sales-material' and the suppression of disagreements over the claims and practices in the selected document (Flick et al., 2004), I conducted semi-structured interviews with 1 governing actors, 2 program managers of Huize Middelland, 1 former community worker, 4 current

leaders and 1 former leader of the researched grassroots initiatives and 25 regular participants in De Spoortuin and Het Wijkpaleis. Among all interviews, four (interviews with regular participants) were conducted in Dutch and translated in the meanwhile by another regular participant who speaks English and Dutch while one interview was conducted in Mandarin, which is the native language of the researcher and interviewee, since the interviewee cannot speak English. The rest were conducted in English.

The interviewees were categorized based on their positions and the roles in the process of transforming the vacant space into the spaces of encounter (the process of making a place): the initiators, the regular event managers and the regular event participants of het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin as well as the governmental actors.

In terms of De Spoortuin and Het Wijkpaleis, major actors who construct and engage in place framing can be further divided based on their degree of involvement: initiators, regular event managers, regular event participants (for at least two months). Interviews with the initiators and the event managers focused on their initial motivations to take part in making De Spoortuin and Het Wijkpaleis the zones of encounter in the neighborhood, their strategies to mobilize residents' engagement in such socio-spatial transformations and their experienced and expected struggles to collaborate with different actors to strengthen the selected meanings and practices associated with De Spoortuin and Het Wijkpaleis. Interviews with the participants aim to understand their motivations of participation, their experiences and expectations of interacting with other actors in the place (De Spoortuin or Het Wijkpaleis), and their interpreted relationship to the place and to other actors in the place. The governmental actor in the interview expressed his experiences working with residents and relevant grassroots initiatives with regard to the purpose, design and resource allocation of the two public-civil participation policies while the two program managers in the interview gave contextual details about how the program developed and functioned. Similarly, the interview with the former community worker provided examples about how she worked as a bridge to connect residents and local governmental agencies especially about the management or the transformation of public space in operational terms.

In this way, it is identified who participates, under which circumstances, and what this means during the selected socio-spatial transformation in the neighborhood, Middelland. As the making of places not only influences physical form of urban space, but also the way communities are created and interact with one another (Strydom and Puren, 2013), the information from the interviews was used to analyze (1) the governance context of neighborhood public space planning and development; (2) the process of negotiating with multiple actors about the spatial, functional and organizational layout of a neighborhood space; and (3) the spatial settings and the associated social interactions for the possibility to foster the solidarity that takes account of individual agency and

public recognition and action for the marginal whose interests are rarely considered.

Interviews were mainly conducted indoors: in the researched places (De Spoortuin or Het Wijkpaleis) or interviewees' homes or cafes in the neighborhood under study (Middelland) while four interviews were in the form of 'walk-along' for richer data about the personal living experiences and social interactions with others especially those elicited by the surrounding environment (Evans and Jones, 2011). Interviews were conducted in the period during November 2017 and May 2018. Each interview has a length from around one hour to almost two hours.

In addition, I also gathered data through participant observation for around five months (from November 2017 to March 2018). I involved in weekly Atelier Textiele Werkvormen (textile workshop) and Annschuiven (community dinner) at Het Wijkpaleis while I took part in gardening work (including cleanup) on a weekly basis and attended an annual event, NL Doet<sup>2</sup> (Netherlands act, or 'The Volunteering Day') for two main reasons. First, I established rapport within the researched community so that its members would act naturally in my presence and they would more willingly accept the interview (Kawulich, 2005); Second, I could acquire a degree of certain how-how, appropriate conducts and common knowledge of the researched places and the interactions between actors (leader, workshop manager and participants) under study; for example, how a workshop is organized, how gardening work is assigned, how things are prioritized, and how people are interrelated. These phenomena under study allow me to check the behaviors, intentions and situations that researched actors described during the interviews (Clifford et al., 2016).

#### 4.4 Positionality

Mullings (1999) underlines the critical influence of researcher's positionality—his/her unique intersections of ethnicity, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and other attributes—on the ways of interacting knowing and interpreting the world. In addition, the dynamics of identities and power relations between researcher and research participant have become a key focus in the process of qualitative data collection and analysis (Ganga and Scott, 2006).

As a Taiwanese, who was raised up in a different socio-cultural context and regarded as an 'outsider' to the population of study, I was not rapidly and completely accepted by the study participants (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). While an argument that being an insider grants researcher a degree of social proximity and enhances the depth and breadth of understanding the population under study, it is overly simplistic to assume a researcher either an insider or an

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<sup>2</sup> This is an annual event with an aim to encourage residents to do voluntary work in their neighborhoods so that meeting neighbors or new people as well as contributing to the residential area can at once be done. This event often comes with financial sponsored by Het Oranje Fund (During et al., 2014).

outsider (Merriam et al., 2001). The fluidity and multilayered complexity of human experience have been emphasized and appreciated to understand peoples, cultures, and practices because 'not all populations are homogeneous, so differences are to be expected' (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009: 56). Based on Dwyer and Buckle's (2009) dialectical approach to researchers' membership roles in relation to situational identities, I could certainly relate to the social life of a neighborhood with my access to the literature on social cohesion, resident participation in spatial governance and the impact of local policy legacies and local politics on neighborhood redevelopment in Rotterdam. My previous research experiences on ethnic minorities' (Burmese Chinese community living in an ethnic cluster) social ties with majority group members and a case study about the role of an urban temple in facilitating mutual cooperation between the impoverished and aged dwellers in Taiwan, put me in a position that could no longer be truly considered outsider.

Furthermore, the concept of positionality in the research framework of Merriam et al. (2001) is used to explore to the complexity of similarities and differences that develop personal understanding and experience of conducting research. Positionality is dynamic in time and through space: it is thus determined by where one stands in relation to 'the other' (Merriam et al., 2001). The complexities of my own attributes – an East-Asian woman in her 20s, from a research university in the Netherlands—shifted my position to more of an insider where I found it took less time for me to be recognized as an accepted member by female research participants than their male counterparts. I was also more at ease and actively to initiate conversation or ask for interview to female research participants across ages and ethnicities and young male participants in their 20s or 30s. The research participants, whom I was more familiar with, hold at least a bachelor degree and have a good command of English.

Challenges in the interpretation and representation of meaning was sometimes experienced when cultural contexts differ (for instance, 'volunteering culture' in the Netherlands). However, these challenges can be solved by reading related articles or literatures. In terms of language during the data collection, few of the research participants had English as their native language but English is the only language that researcher and research participants had in common. Most of the research participants were willing to explain their individual experience fully to me to help me understand what they meant.

Since active participation in meetings or events were neither forbidden nor requested in de Spoortuin and het Wijkpaleis, I determined to be more of in the observer stance: I took part in the group activities on a regular basis, yet my role as the researcher in this stance is to collect data rather than intervening in any situation (Kawulich, 2005). The research participants both in de Spoortuin and het Wijkpaleis were aware of being observed. "She is observing and studying us" said by some research participants when they introduced me to their friends or to other newcomers. I attempted to be clear about the role and purpose of my

presence, as both a volunteer concerned with community building and a researcher seeking to examine the relationships between spatial settings and social interactions. My role as a research-program student was highlighted especially when the leaders in the two grassroots initiatives introduced me to people I met at the first time.

## 5. Case Descriptions

Het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin are the two cases examined in this study, which have been framed as ‘the shared meeting place with specific genres of encounters to foster solidarity in difference’ and respectively organized by Stichting Het Wijkpaleis and Stichting Goed Wonen aan het G.W. Burgerplein. These two researched sites are both renovated from vacant lots to communal spaces where people in the neighborhood of Middelland are welcome to visit and participate in group-activities no matter his or her ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin both attract diverse participants including Surinamese, Moroccans, Turks, Indo-Surinamese, Indonesian, Bosnian, Hong Kongese, Chinese, Caracas-Venezuelans, Antilles, Cape Verdean, Westerns (such as Italian, French, American and New Zealander) as well as indigenous Dutch, ranging from youngsters to older people.

Het Wijkpaleis was founded for stabilizing a citizen-organized and outdoors summer event, Singeldingen. Het Wijkpaleis was therefore expected to serve as an indoor communal space that is open all year around. Singeldingen and het Wijkpaleis both aim for organizing neighborhood-level events, which had been regarded as an unfulfilled need. Initiators of het Wijkpaleis argue that residents in the neighborhood, Middelland, have lived a parallel life due to a lack of comfortable and accessible communal space where residents can routinely meet and build social ties with each other.

The idea of building a community garden next to the railway platform—de Spoortuin— was realized with a mobilization for preserving the urban nature and with a critical discovery about the vacant land ownership. In 2011, the railway companies, Nederlandse Spoorwegen and ProRail, plan to cut down the old trees in the vacant land next to the station of Rotterdam Centraal without considerable discussion with neighbors. A group of people, mainly living in this area, stood against this plan and expressed their concerns about the easy access to ecosystem services and about the right to participating public issues. The right claims on public participation and urban space appropriation were reinforced when the initiators of de Spoortuin found out almost half part of this vacant land has been owned by the municipality of Rotterdam. Since this vacant site with a lush ecosystem is a public property, *“we have the ground to deal with the issue of*

*cutting down the tree*” (An initiator of de Spoortuin, I-5).

Almost the same group of people who stood against the mast protection decided to form a formal organization (stichting<sup>3</sup>) as a way to fight for a greener and a more inclusive urban living.

Initiators who run Het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin are main active residents in Middelland who also have experiences of organizing neighborhood projects, fund application and connections with citizen advocacy groups as well as with the authorities in the neighborhood. The initiators of the both organized groups are predominately from Dutch White background, urban middle class with high educational achievement—many of them are architecture-related professionals.

Besides initiators, many different actors in het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin can be categorized based on different levels of participation into at least two groups: the event managers and the event participants. These actors are from different backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, age, migration history, economic status, life styles and education. However, relatively higher participation of women is evident in het Wijkpaleis and this gender difference is related to the main themes and the goal of this organization. In de Spoortuin, gender differences in participation are seasonally patterned with a balanced male-female ratio in summer and autumn especially seen at the garden patches. In winter and early spring, men overwhelmingly attend weekly gatherings, do gardening work or repair tools and machines for gardening.

Voluntary work plays a crucial role in the organization of het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin. Activities in het Wijkpaleis are mainly initiated by people who share what het Wijkpaleis advocates about encounter and making. The active people voluntarily combine the ideas of encounter and making with their expertise. For instance, there are also DIY wooden furniture workshop, a textile-related Q&A service and having ‘neighborhood meal’ together. All of them are regularly and voluntarily run. In the case of de Spoortuin, the gardening plot area, its hallmark, was built and maintained by volunteers who mainly live nearby. Besides gardening work, participants in de Spoortuin voluntarily provide technical guidance and resources for repairing specialized tools (since most of the tools in de Spoortuin are second hand and dominated from friends or family members of participants) and restroom remodeling. The main goal of voluntary work is being less dependent on governmental subsidy. Voluntary work is one of the practical and low-cost reactions to the possible cutting of subsidies and welfare services.

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<sup>3</sup> Stichting is one type of Dutch legal form of entity with limited liability, which is possible to separate functions of ownership and control.



Figure 5: De Spoortuin Won the Price



Figure 6: Plot Made by Volunteers

In terms of the financial resource for running het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin, writing proposals to apply funding is the primary source of financial supports for het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin. For example, het Wijkpaleis received the fund from DOEN stichting in Oct 2015. De Spoortuin won and received the price of twenty thousand euro from Icon project in 2012. However, het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin have been entitled to the funding from the municipality to pay for the monthly rent, utility fees and some other basic expense since both of them were the partners of the public-civil participation program of Huize Middelland in 2015.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Organized Encounters in Semi-Public Spaces

In this section, I present the interactions between unknown others in het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin— both of which are characterized with particular social interactions, norms of sociality and physical surroundings. As semi-public spaces, het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin are open to people of different backgrounds encounter, mutually recognize and build connections with each other. Regularly tactile engagement with materials, sharing materials and knowledge, and multiple space use are the three crucial codes of conducts to decrease the fear of unknown and to trigger interpersonal contacts in het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin.

#### 6.1.1 Regularly Tactile Engagement with Materials in making semi-public spaces

Het Wijkpaleis aims to create encounters across diversity in the neighborhood through the mediation of material objects and with an emphasis on tactile engagement. ‘Making things together’ is the main goal and means of encounter according to initiators of het Wijkpaleis. Making is seen as a special form of gathering and *“making things together makes it possible to pick up knowledge and skills and to extend your social network. You feel good when you finish a piece of work and you are sometimes inspired by other participants who are probably your*

*neighbors but you might not have any contact with them if you didn't come here"* (an event manager, EM-1).

Het Wijkpaleis has several attempts to initiate interactions between residents in the neighborhood. In order to enlarge the participation in the 'making things together', het Wijkpaleis formulates 'making together' into several DIY workshops with three characteristics. First, the DIY workshops take place on a regular basis in order to sustain participants' activity-based encounter. Furthermore, these workshops are mainly free of charge or asking very low-cost material fee to be attractive. Third, participants in the DIY workshops have freedom to decide what to make and therefore the participants can express his or her needs or ideas, share his or her experiences and customize his or her workflow. Textile workshop, as an example, takes place on a weekly basis. Although it charges 10 euro per month, participants in the textile workshop are welcome to use sewing machines, crochet hooks, fabrics, iron, other equipment and tools. A one-piece dress made of ties, skirt for daughter, and several headbands with African fabric pattern are all made for different reasons (a party costume, daughter's present and small craft business) by three women with demographically diverse backgrounds and in different phrases of the life course.



Figure 7: Textile Workshop in het Wijkpaleis



Figure 8: Weekly Gardening

In de Spoortuin, gardening is the main approach to gathering a diverse group of people and the way to sustain the social interactions with sensory engagement mediated through material objects. Gardening is particularly labor-intensive work with a wide range of materials such as axe, pitchfork, plants, seeds, soils etc. (especially for a small-scale garden) and it is well recognized for stimulating people's senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound.

Furthermore, gardening always reveals diverse preferences, knowledges and attachment between plants, place and people (Poe et al., 2014). For example, the



selection of what to plant in individual allotment is sometimes described as culturally rooted sets of traditions: *“I am amazed when walking through the garden. You see! This herb is the crucial ingredient in one of the traditional Turkish dish. And that allotment is now managed by a Chinese woman. She teaches me a lot. Hao seems to be a common type of vegetables. She said there are Qing Hao, Lee Hao, Tung Hao”* (an event participant, EP-5).

Transformed from one vacant lot to a community garden, de Spoortuin has been shaped from scratches through regular and collective labor work. A group of residents have gathered and built the path and the layout of garden on a weekly basis since 2013. *“Every Sunday, we were doing work for the path and that was also fun. We didn’t know where to go. ‘Should we go left or right?’ We were there with an axe to cut through the berries. It took quite long to have a clear path”* (An initiator of het Wijkpaleis, I-3). Participants who initially and continually build up de Spoortuin are prioritized to use the allotment. The allotment in de Spoortuin is free of charge. Soil and gardening tools are prepared and shared. All the participants need to do are two points: preparing the seeds/plants they would like to have in their allotment and taking care of individual allotment. Having their own allotment in de Spoortuin, some participants said they come more frequently (almost everyday) to de Spoortuin to water their plants: *“I come to de Spoortuin quite frequently because watering and weeding must be performed routinely. I sometimes help watering the plots adjacent to mine”* (an event participant, EP-6).

### 6.1.2 Sharing Materials and Knowledge to Reinforce Friend-like Interactions

In the production of cloth making, participants in het Wijkpaleis share tools or knowledge and they also share gossip or their private spheres. Feeling connected and relaxed is one of the reasons that keep many of the participants regularly taking part in the textile workshop for a long time. *“I am quite busy recently but if I have time I will come to the textile workshop. I know that would make [textile workshop manager] happy since she enjoys doing textile with all of us. I will also miss all of them if I don’t come here for a while”* (an event participant, EP-1).

Some of the participants even build family-like ties with one another and offer support when needed: *“ [An event participant] seems to be my sister in Rotterdam. If [An event participant] hasn’t found a place, [An event participant] can stay in my place”* (an event participant, EP-2). Acts of kindness and affective interactions are recognized as another way to make het Wijkpaleis a more accessible place. Several event participants are impressed by a warm greeting from the event managers and initiators, who are almost present at duty every open day. *“I didn’t expect our interaction could be in this way: [an initiator] gives me a hug whenever I leave het Wijkpaleis. I was actually not used to it but the hugs make me feel warm and now I seem to develop a new habit: I hug people as a way to show my care”* (an event participant, EP-3).

Nice conversations with sincere care are proposed by one participant as one of the main reasons why he keeps visiting het Wijkpaleis: *“I participated in many activities in the neighborhood but I find het Wijkpaleis is different than other because this is the only place where I can have nice and personal conversations with people here especially [naming some of the event managers and the initiators]. They are nice and sincere people. Although I talk about different topics with each of them, I trust them. I can also feel their enthusiasm during our conversations about textile, techniques and neighborhood activities”* (an event participant, EP-4).

At de Spoortuin, maintaining a garden strengthens contacts between participants. Hands-on demonstrations of urban agricultural techniques and share of practical knowledge of herbs as well as extra produce take place, opening up opportunities for participants to identify each other together as residents of a neighborhood, to act in cooperative manners and to generate social bonds.

*“I am quite new for gardening. Last week, [a participant] came to tell me the ways to organically prevent from uninvited insects. I think the conversation between us just naturally happen. I also like this relaxing way of meeting people and doing something together”* (An event participant, EP-7).

*“I come here for mainly two reasons: doing physical work and enjoying working together with [names of other participants]. I like de Spoortuin and especially people here are not nagging all the time. Instead, they do the work. I have tried and experienced several things I otherwise won't do such as using axes to cut the fallen wood into pieces. I also brought my girlfriend here to meet [names of other participants]”* (An event participant, EP-8).

Through frequently gaining support from others and regularly engaging in urban natures (such as cultivating practices related to plants, soil and water; fishing along the canal; walking dogs), participants develop an attachment to de Spoortuin.

During the weekly meeting, participants mostly sit around and have cups of coffee or tea. This type of gathering engenders not merely fleeting personal contacts but possibly also deeper social and emotional connections. *“[Two of participants] were in a big fight for different opinions about ways to maintain a community garden and the way to interact with other gardeners before. They are both bad-tempered, getting angry and annoyed easily. But I just saw them sitting next to each other this afternoon. [One of the participant] was telling [the other of the participant] his experience how to hold his temper. And both of them were in chill manner”* (An initiator of de Spoortuin, I-4). The sense of connection is reinforced when participants exchange the act of kindness with one another. This way of interaction distinguishes from conventional shared spaces in the neighborhood such as park or plaza.

### 6.1.3 Multiple Use of the Space

Multiple space use is another way to bring a variety of people together in het Wijkpaleis. *“When the use of the place is too clear, it might cause some segregation for example, like children go to kindergarten; youngsters go to club. Here we try to mix them together”* (an initiator of het Wijkpaleis, I-3). The spatial layout of het Wijkpaleis is characterized as a flexible furniture arrangement for different social purposes. Het Wijkpaleis can accommodate a variety of small group activities at the same time. For instance, when DIY workshops take place in a corner, the tables at the other side function as a social venue for residents coming by for a cup of tea or coffee. Sometimes, het Wijkpaleis serves as a meeting room for local governmental agents to discuss recent issues in the neighborhood. Het Wijkpaleis can also be a small exhibition for sharing information about another grassroots initiatives in Middelland. It is also workable for residents to rent het Wijkpaleis for private group activities such as group writing class, presentation of improvisational play or birthday party (the hourly rent is 20 euro). In other words, ideally and implicitly it is the residents who decide the type of encounters het Wijkpaleis to expand their social life.

De Spoortuin is a shared place with multiple functions for different groups of people. Encounters take place not merely through gardening. Walking dogs, fishing and wandering along this green space are also some of the ways to foster encounters and to draw together residents who live nearby. De Spoortuin play a significant role in bridging formal and informal environmental education and mental health therapy. Some sets of allotments respectively are used by classes of two elementary schools nearby and by a mental health care institution. One of the elementary teachers suggests, *“students learn from the process of planting. They now understand harvest is not a guarantee. There are unexpected consequences. They also have an opportunity to think how to fix problems”* (An event participant, EP-11).

## 6.2 Vacant Public Space Transformation into Semi-Public Spaces

Based on the relational place-making framework, the place-frames of het Wijkpaleis and these of de Spoortuin— the meaning and the use of a specific place— are constructed through networks of actors: the place-frames are socially and politically selected, shared and negotiated. In this sense, the place frames of het Wijkpaleis and these of de Spoortuin are open to re-articulation and can serve as the tool to communicate with and gain supports from different audiences such as landlords, governmental agents or residents in the neighbourhood.

In this section, I outline the development of het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin, the two citizen-led semi-public space, to highlight the dynamic of place frames and the influence of enrolling (certain) actors on place framing/ making. I first focus on the ‘place conflicts’ over the use, the meanings and the right to occupation of het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin. Next, I bring fore the strategies for these two citizen-led organizations to encounter their difficult situations through gaining

support from governmental agents. Last, I demonstrate how the enrolling processes affect the place-framing of het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin.

### 6.2.1 Place Conflicts

Temporary use/lease is the main challenge for both of these citizen-led place making initiatives in the case of Middelland. While the organizations, which run het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin, are currently legal to use city-owned vacant sites for community-generated art center and garden, the place-based conflicts started with the right to access and to use the specific vacant site in the neighborhood. Het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin both face precarious situation due to the temporary access to the selected vacant sites. *“Many grassroots initiatives in this neighborhood hold the space temporarily... There is a Dutch word, Leegsland, to describe the situation. It is legal but in a short term. The landlord can end the contract very quick”* (an initiator of het Wijkpaleis, I-3).

The deserted building, where het Wijkpaleis has been located for almost three years, is owned by the municipality of Rotterdam while the vacant land, where de Spoortuin is built, belongs to the railway companies (Nederlandse Spoorwegen and ProRail) and the municipality of Rotterdam. Similar to what Foo et al. (2014) and Zhang (2018) suggest, the rental of vacant sites is viewed as a temporary solution to the physical signs of decay, which would catalyze a drop in property values. And when more desirable— from the viewpoint of the site owners— land use opportunities become feasible, the site owners will withdraw the lease. *“The paper about the access to this land from the municipality actually have no meaning at all because it just said ‘you can use the terrain but we can still send you away for any reason with a notification of relocation in three months beforehand’”* (an initiator of de Spoortuin, I-4).

In the case of het Wijkpaleis, the conflict over the right to the vacant site became clear when the vacant site landlord, the municipality of Rotterdam, planned to sell the whole building in 2017. At that moment, het Wijkpaleis has been established there for around two years. The same vacant public building has different meanings in the views of grassroots organizations (most of which had very few financial resources) and the local government (most of which own the property). For het Wijkpaleis, the vacant urban site on 1e Middellandstraat — in particular the one owned by a governmental and public body— appear attractive for an affordable rent and its location near downtown Rotterdam. For the municipality of Rotterdam, this vacant building can be a burden since the maintenance is costly. The arrival of the grassroots initiative contributes to protecting the building from further deterioration and fostering resident participation in neighborhood-based activities, thus to some extent was initially welcomed by the government. However, despite that het Wijkpaleis serves as a new open space with potentials for urban vitality, this spatial use is seen as a short-term solution. The municipality of Rotterdam made a decision and sold this building for commercial use.

In the case of de Spoortuin, its vulnerable and instable situation about the access to the selected vacant site is related to the access to utility (such as electricity and running water). For instance, the access to running water: it took a long time to negotiate with governmental agents in different departments and not until February 2018 did the pipe-laying installation complete. With the running water, there come a series of tricky situations related to the legal status of de Spoortuin: *“Something related is the issue of registered address. To certain degree, de Spoortuin does not administratively exist. We don’t have an address. However, for delivering the water billing, there must be an address”* (an initiator of de Spoortuin, I-4).

The place-based conflict also present that place frames—as discursive and rhetorical constructions of a place—are not separated from the material aspects of place making but are embodied in (Zhang, 2018; Van Neste and Martin, 2017).

### 6.2.2 Network-Building and Place-Framing Strategies

The following are three examples about how the place-frames of het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin have been constructed and negotiated through networks of actors. The first example shows both het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin participate in a neighborhood-scale governmental project to support their place-making claims. The second example focuses on how the initiators of het Wijkpaleis strategically gain support from governmental actors and select elements for place frames when they faced relocation. The third example turns to how initiators of de Spoortuin mobilize selected place-frames with local government and other citizen-led organizations to secure the resident-generated spatial transformation.

#### **Example 1: Participating in the Program of Huize Middelland**

The cases of het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin show the need to gain supports and receive more public visibility through enrolling the local government into the place framing/making. In late 2014, het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin participated in a competition in order to become the members of a public-civil participation project, Mooi Mooier Middelland, specifically the program of Huize Middelland. And since 2015, het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin have officially become the members of the public-civil participation project. However, as the groups running het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin tried to enroll these politically powerful actors, they had another moment to reframe het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin in order to blend the visions of these semi-public spaces together with the goal of the program of Huize Middelland.

And the program of Huize Middelland is regarded as an alternative way to run the neighborhood community center, ‘huis van de wijk’ (meaning ‘house in the neighborhood’ in English). *“The purpose of this program, Huize Middelland, is to have a quite innovative house in the neighborhood because here in Middelland, the local government cooperates with twelve local and already existing grassroots organizations rather than with one of the specialized companies that provide*

*welfare-like services*” (An governmental actor, GA-1).

The overarching “Huize Middelland” narrative to some extent affected the place-frames that het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin construct for a claim of coherence and unity. What a typical huise van de wijk provides but het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin did not is to relieve the influence of debt on residents’ living conditions.

In this sense, het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin develop new activities and alter their place frames. *“We see some people coming here have problems filling the forms or have no idea whether they are eligible to receive subsidies. We see the problem so we facilitate the service. The reason why we have an intern, [name], is that she can help us to deliver this need. But solving problem is not our priority. We don’t want to go to that area too much and we don’t have the skill for that”* (an initiator of het Wijkpaleis, I-3). Conforming to this social welfare narrative, the place frames about de Spoortuin is also added new elements. *“We think being socially active in a green public space would be better to cope with your problems. You give me your time and your work. If you give something it is easier to ask something. There are many people coming here and they are in some kind of problems, physically, mentally, and financially. By gardening and working together, it is easier to help in a more equal level and as neighbors”* (An initiator of de Spoortuin, I-4).

In summary, het Wijkpaleis and that of de Spoortuin, as the examples of citizen-led, place-making efforts in neighborhood regeneration, face challenges in trying to claim their right to access and to use a specific vacant site in the neighborhood. The place-making actors of the citizen-led group seek to politically powerful support for legitimacy by enrolling local governmental agents, thus negotiating the place frames with the enrolled politically powerful actors.

### **Example 2: Turning from a Community Organization to a Community Business**

The current understanding of a place and what it will possibly be in the future are continuously constructed. The place-frames about het Wijkpaleis is not an exception. The near future of het Wijkpaleis further demonstrates an ongoing process of place framing.

When facing relocation disputes over their rights to use, initiators of het Wijkpaleis purposefully utilized the place frames that highlight ‘fostering sense of community’ and ‘social values’ as a means for collective actions and toward a political ends. Het Wijkpaleis took part in the bidding of the building that the municipality planned to sell. *“For selling the building, the local government had an ambition that they want this place has a huge impact on connecting people in the neighborhood. However when they showed which party and the criteria to give the point, you found there is no point for ‘making impact for the neighborhood’. We addressed this critically missing part to the municipality”* (an initiator of het Wijkpaleis, I-1). The place frames are strongly tied with tactile activities, which is the hallmark of het Wijkpaleis and this framing is believed to be consistent with

the goal of municipal governance and spatial planning. *“We meant to create the grey area that we said we are also a part of the municipality. What het Wijkpaleis do is create encounters, which the municipality finds important and the direction for better development in the neighborhood... the municipality and we have the same agenda...”* (An initiator of het Wijkpaleis, I-3).

Although het Wijkpaleis did not win in the bidding of the vacant building, the place framing of het Wijkpaleis as a community art center with a promising method of alleviating social segregation has received supports from some local (district-level) politicians and civil servants (mainly due to the project of Mooi Mooier Middelland). Besides the advocacy of local politicians and governmental agents, initiators of het Wijkpaleis tried a different way to frame their place-based practices and the associated values. *“We made a list of all the things we do. And everything we do we put the price next to it”* (An initiator of het Wijkpaleis, I-3). Turning the goals and outcomes of het Wijkpaleis into numbers as the measurement of the values, which is the common criterion for government to evaluate a case of cooperation but this way of communication is seldom used for citizen-led organizations.

The municipality has reached an agreement with het Wijkpaleis that the current building will not be sold until het Wijkpaleis has the new place. It is a four-stories building with the size of around 2000 m<sup>2</sup> including a large outdoor space. However, if het Wijkpaleis takes over the building, the way of management requires some changes in terms of how ‘tactile encounters’— the main purpose of the shared place— are practiced because the rent in the new location is much higher than the current one. *“We need to maintain this big building with more makers by signing the contract and making it more like a community business”* (An initiator of het Wijkpaleis, I-3). Emphacizing the element of ‘community business’ for the place frame of het Wijkpaleis, the initiators opened a pop-up store, Made in West, that serves as an exhibition of art and craftwork done by the makers in the neighborhood in March 2018 to connect potential supporters for their selected place-frames.

### **Example 3: Forming a Coalition, Groen Connectie, for Essenburgpark**

De Spoortuin identified itself as a meeting place for residents not only to improve the physical environment, but also to improve physical and mental health. Initiators of de Spoortuin have been eager to promote the reciprocal relationship between green environment and health so they participating in conferences with related topics and they work with some psychiatric clinics.

An idea to collaborate with many other citizen groups and some related private sectors as a coalition comes into being at one gathering mainly for grassroots initiatives in the neighborhood of Middelland. *“We were then thinking how to make an entire 8-kilometer-long linear park, which followed the old rail infrastructure. And we called it Groen Connectie”* (An initiator of de Spoortuin, I-4). Groen Connectie is translated in English as ‘Green Connection’ and this name

pinpoints the shared frame and values among the members, which mainly are also initiators of community gardens in the area of Delfshaven. Essenburgpark is a newly built park located along the railway and next to de Spoortuin. And it is named after the road it is located. Actually, Essenburgpark is still in the making because it is also another citizen-led case of transforming a deserted site into a larger park with lush landscape. De Spoortuin has been nominated as the official manager of Essenburgpark and recognized by the municipality.

Building the coalition of Groen Connectie and managing the place-making of Essenburgpark help to configure 'de Spoortuin' in terms of its materiality, meanings and spatial practices. Furthermore, this coalition of Groen Connectie empowers citizen-led organizations because the members can enlarge the range and the amount of participants by hosting events with each other. *"Some of the participants who came and joined gardening work in de Spoortuin know this place from mouth to mouth"* (An initiator of de Spoortuin, I-4). Moreover, the form of coalition can represent all of the group members as a whole to negotiate with government and it is possible to give individual members the freedom and space in terms of their own ways of doing. For instance, the structure of organizing de Spoortuin is purposefully designed as less formalized as possible (no formal meeting, no membership and no hierarchical scheme of decision making system) so to keep de Spoortuin more inclusive for anyone and less bureaucratic to interact with each other.

In short, initiators of de Spoortuin mobilize the widely shared elements such as 'urban green' and 'reciprocal relationship between green environment and health' with many other citizen-led organizations to collectively express the claims from citizen groups so that governmental cannot easily ignore the voice and the place-making of grassroots initiatives.



Figure 9: Pop-Up Shop



Figure 10: Mapping the Members of Groen Connectie

Figure 11: A Side of Essenburgerpark





## 7. Conclusion

First of all, it is concluded that het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin are two insightful cases of citizen-led semi-public space, which offer people of different backgrounds the concrete settings to interact with unknown others in a less fearful environment. The setting in het Wijkpaleis is a shared space with many DIY-related activities host by volunteers while de Spoortuin has a community garden setting. In other words, micro-scale communities based on particular topics are presented in het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin. Drawing on the fieldwork in these two semi-public spaces, sense of community and amicable relationship are able to be built through three codes of conducts: regularly tactile engagement with materiality, sharing materials and knowledge, and multiple use of the shared space. These three codes of conducts not only trigger and sustain social interactions. The organized encounters with the three elements mentioned in het Wijkpaleis and in de Spoortuin can also reveal diverse preferences, knowledges and ways of attachments, which enhances a deeper intercultural understanding.

Het Wijkpaleis and de Spoortuin have both illustrated citizens' participation in spatial transformation and have served as creative solutions to inadequate public service. By transforming underutilized sites into the semi-public space that foregrounds intercultural contacts, the citizen-led place making initiatives in Middelland suffer a precarious situation due to the temporary access to the selected vacant sites. In order to claim the right to using vacant lots, the initiators of het Wijkpaleis and those of de Spoortuin gain support from governmental actors through strategically drawing upon a certain understanding and a particular claim of places. In line with the relational approach of place making, I demonstrate how the initiators of het Wijkpaleis and these of de Spoortuin frame their understandings and claims of the places respectively to become consistent to the views of politically powerful agents.

As a strategy to gain legitimacy and to receive more public visibility, citizen-led place making actors (1) take part in a public-civil participation project; (2) reframe a specific understanding of the place, which is relevant to what the target actor propose, in the concept with which the target actor are familiar; (3) form a broader coalition with other citizen-led organizations with similar interests. These three ways to receive support from governmental agents all show that place-framing processes are formally and informally negotiated with and affected by different types of governmental actors.

## 8. Discussion

In this research, the examination of citizen-led place-making activities, which increase social contact, is consistent to what Askin and Pain (2011) propose the critical role of sharing a place and objects (i.e. tools) in fostering encounters in embodied and affective ways. In the citizen-led semi-public space, the processes of developing public familiarity, which provide particular social interactions and physical surroundings to lessen sense of uncertainty and build new attachments with strangers, can add insights to work the dual relationship between the social practices and the spatial influences (Vertovec, 2007; Loopmans et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is worthy to explore the interaction and specifically the power relations between different types of actors (for instance, volunteers, initiators, event managers and participants or governmental agents) in the semi-public space since such 'coworking and sharing mediated with materiality' are delivered and required committed and participatory practices.

The importance of socially and spatially mediated encounters demonstrates an alternative epistemological starting point in understanding social connections. This type of encounter can be attributed to the emerging research on geographies of friendship, as a mode of social connections that is infused with both practical and affective meaning for actors involved (Kathiravelu, 2013).

A geographical understanding of citizen-led encounters across differences has also much to offer insights into debates about the right to the city and about the redevelopment of a mixed neighborhood. Through the analytical framework of relational place making and the focus on civic actors, the case of Middelland highlights the negotiations over the use of physical space and the disputes between the participants who co-frame the meanings of the chosen site. Place frame, as a way for mobilization and collective actions, is not stable but elaborated through interactions (Pierce et al., 2010; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). The selectivity of place frames that occurs in networked politics points out different moments of place making and the converging/diverging interests among different (place making) actors (Zhang, 2018; Van Neste and Martin, 2017). This approach thus enables a detailed account of when it is the moment for the actors are situated in an uneven power relation to make a place.

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