

# “The erosion of the neighborhood”

On gentrification processes in the neoliberal and postcolonial context of Rotterdam-West, considering the role of artists, the representation of waste and acts of resistance

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- \* The photo on the previous page was taken by Jamea Kofi, at Little C, Coolhaven, on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021.
- \* The title is a comment made by a participant, Zoë on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

# **“The erosion of the neighborhood”**

On gentrification processes in the neoliberal and postcolonial context of Rotterdam-West, considering the role of artists, the representation of waste and acts of resistance

Well,  
I know that gentrification is  
a monstrous process.

- Sophia, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

Photographer: Kai, shared on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021.



## Abstract

Gentrification and neoliberal policy making have detrimental consequences for low-income residents in Rotterdam, specifically those with a migrant background. Gentrification can be considered “the erosion of the neighborhood”, when its original residents are disposed of to make way for affluent, and often white, people and green spaces. This thesis is the result of over three months of fieldwork in Rotterdam-West. It centers the meaning-making and experiences of residents in a neoliberal setting through a decolonial perspective. Artists and creatives are used by the municipality and housing corporations, through the implementation of the ‘creative city model’. The erosion of the neighborhood is also understood through waste management. Waste relates to the value and image of a neighborhood and can be a reminder of municipal neglect. Recently developed green spaces are perceived as signs of gentrification, as these are often made by and for the new affluent white resident. The symbol of gentrification, the ‘bakfiets’, represents these newcomers. Gentrification is resisted through spreading awareness, squatting, collective action, and silent resistance. While resisting gentrification, certain gentrification activities and artefacts are re-claimed, and imaginaries of alternative futures are revealed.

**Keywords:** gentrification, neoliberalism, decoloniality, creative city model, artists, creatives, waste, resistance.

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Jamea Kofi

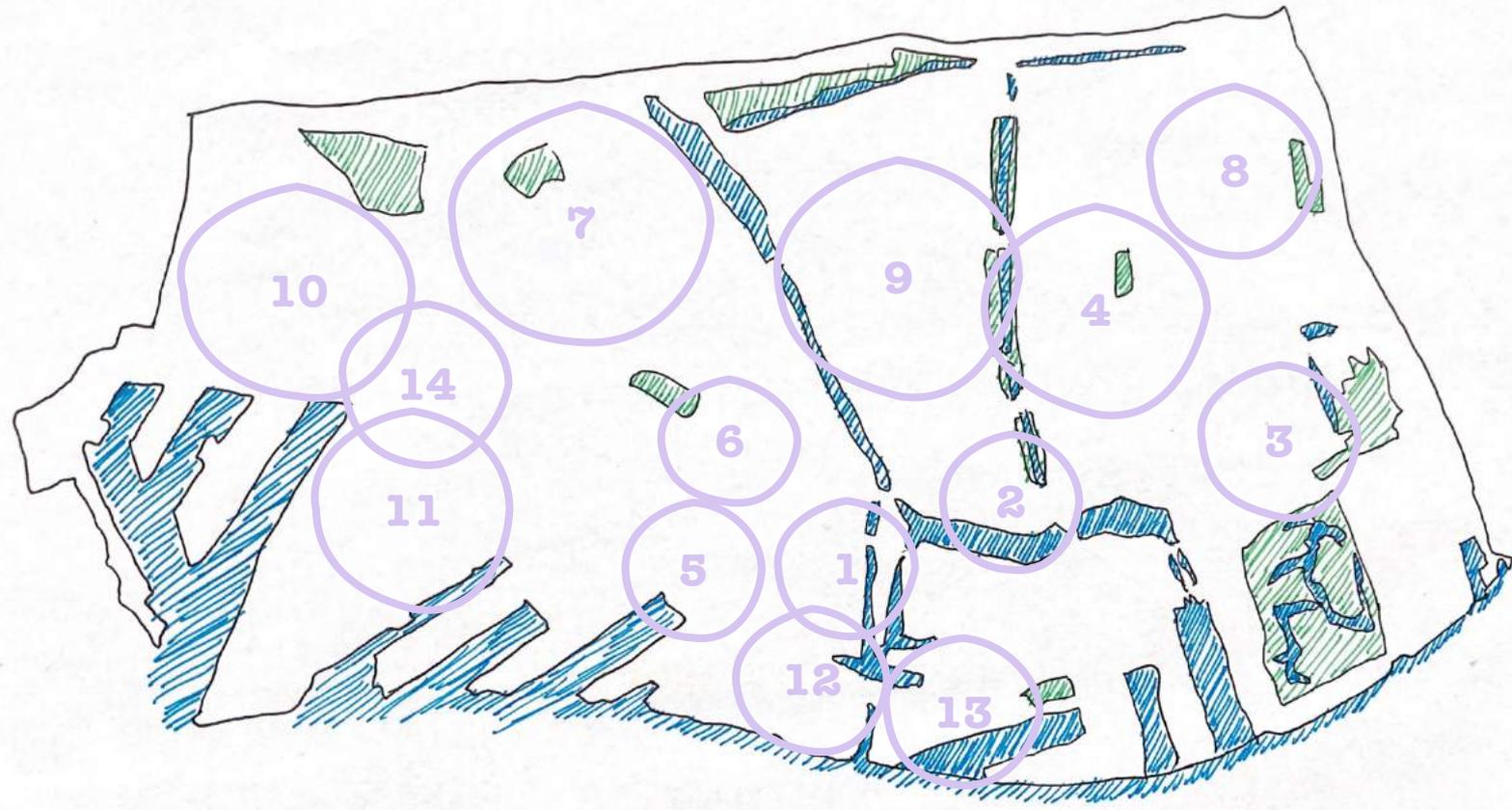
\* Name changed.



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## Map of Rotterdam-West



### Neighborhoods in Rotterdam-West:

- |                 |                      |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1. Delfshaven   | 8. Oude Westen       |
| 2. Coolhaven    | 9. Nieuwe Westen     |
| 3. Dijkzigt     | 10. Oud Mathenesse   |
| 4. Middelland   | 11. Nieuw Mathenesse |
| 5. Bospolder    | 12. Lloydkwartier    |
| 6. Tussendijken | 13. Schiemand        |
| 7. Spangen      | 14. Witte dorp       |



### Opgeknapd of afgeknapd

Hier op de Middelland,  
leeft een cultuur per meter,  
waarom moet dat anders,  
waarom moet dat beter?

Och wat knapt het op,  
dag slager,  
dag toko, dag belshop.

Uniformiteit als een communistisch allee,  
wie maak je er gelukkig mee?  
Eenheidsworst per plakje,  
onder het zelfde dakje.

Maak plaats, maak plaats, een overhemd,  
het wilde westen is getemd.

@donderbuik

'Opgeknapd of afgeknapd', by Donderbuik, Middellandplein, February 16, 2021.

# Introduction

This photo is made on my way to the poem, February 16, 2021.



With the sound of the tram alarm in the background, I cross the road towards Middellandplein, and think of how my home is feeling like home again. The sound, however, is a false familiarity, for the rest of my perceptions must be altered. My home is changing. The smells of meat have been replaced with the sour, nutty, pungent smell of coffee. Hardly, I recognize my face in that of the people I encounter on the street. I keep on walking. What will happen when I can't recognize anything anymore? What will happen when my childhood home will be bought, and my mother will be displaced? Where is the 'social' in social housing? Like the writer of the poem above, I should ask the question '*opgeknapt of afgeknapt*'?<sup>1</sup> Is Rotterdam-West going through the process of 'uplifting' or rather through one that is characterized by exclusion? One in means one out, doesn't it?

On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, several United Nations rapporteurs argue that the demolition of social housing can be a violation of human rights, in a letter to the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Rajagopal et al. 2021). Indeed, the demolition of social housing, without the promise of return in an affordable manner can make many homeless (Hutak 2020; Grigsby and Sojoyner 2018), especially when social housing is declining in Rotterdam (Van Bekkum 2021). Moreover, the UN rapporteurs recognize that the demolition of social housing would "undoubtedly affect disproportionately migrants and individuals and families of minority and immigrant background, and contribute to their further social vulnerability and risk of falling into homelessness" (Rajagopal et al. 2021, 1). Gentrification, the displacement of vulnerable residents to make way affluent newcomers, is related to the demolition and renovation of social housing. Policies linked to gentrification, created by the municipality of Rotterdam, are clashing with the constitution. The early design of the 'Rotterdamwet'<sup>2</sup> for instance is irreconcilable with Article 1 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which states one must not discriminate. The Rotterdamwet was originally designed to select residents on the basis of ethnicity (El Maroudi 2021). This was rewritten, and now housing corporations, landlords, and the municipality can select people based on having social benefits<sup>3</sup> (ibid.). However, many people with a migration background rely on social benefits<sup>4</sup>, as El Maroudi specifies (2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: 'refurbished or put off'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Rotterdamwet': Formally known as the 'Wet bijzondere maatregelen grootstedelijke problematiek' (WBMGP), [*Act on Extraordinary Measures of Urban Problems*], full text: <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0019388/2018-06-13>, visited on June 23, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Governmental assistance, for instance due to sickness and unemployment, [*bijstandsuitkering*].

<sup>4</sup> In 2020, of all '*bijstandsgerechtigden*' [government assistance for instance through unemployment] around 60% had a migration background. El Maroudi 2021 and CBS, accessed on August 13, 2021: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/cijfers/detail/82016NED?q=bijstandsuitkering%20etniciteit>

Hence, this policy is indirectly discriminating people based on their background, making this an exclusionary and discriminatory act in its fundament.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands has responded to the questions asked by the UN rapporteurs by June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021. In the response by the Netherlands, it is stated that the housing policies are chosen democratically and must comply with the Constitution and human rights treaties and must not infringe the right to equal treatment (Balbin 2021, 1). Yet, according to the response ten municipalities in the Netherlands are applying selective housing allocation through the WBMGP<sup>2</sup> (Balbin 2021, 8). They view the WBMGP as a far-reaching measure, but one that is needed where “quality of life and personal safety are at risk” (ibid.). Furthermore, they present statistics in which there were 12,386 housing permit applications in Rotterdam as of end-2020, of which 216 were refused. Then, why does it seem impossible that the housing policies in Rotterdam are conflicting the Constitution and human rights treaties, when housing is denied?

The reaction of the mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, to the critical analysis of the UN rapporteurs is to ‘refuse to accept’ that human rights might be violated (Groenendijk 2021). He then compares Rotterdam to South-Africa and Mumbai, where he has ‘seen homelessness,’ and he is ‘not the mayor of a city where human rights are violated’ (ibid.). Moreover, he suggests that if the UN rapporteurs would have asked for a city tour with him, they would have seen a mayor ‘that picks homeless people from the parc’ (ibid.). Not accepting or believing something does not necessarily mean the truth will adjust, or adhere, to one’s beliefs or acceptances. More so, one should question why policy makers’ priorities lie with their own beliefs, rather than with the needs of the people they supposedly serve.

The current debates show that housing policies in Rotterdam are observed by politicians, even outside the country, and are questioned for their legitimization of selective housing allocation. This master thesis is the outcome of over three months of ethnographic fieldwork in Rotterdam-West, in which I also question the housing policies and analyze how residents experience those policies within a gentrification framework. The research question I answer is: *How do young adults in Rotterdam-West experience and give meaning to processes of gentrification as a tool of neoliberal policy making?* Here, I not only want to grasp the lived experiences of residents in gentrifying areas, but also how these processes are facilitated by the municipality and which other actors play a role in the making of the ‘bakfietswijk’<sup>5</sup>. This research is based on several ethnographic methods, which include (in-depth) interviews,

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<sup>5</sup> Translates to cargo bike neighborhood.

walking ethnography, literature analysis, participant observation and photo analysis. I will now describe the ‘field’, thereafter I will delineate, briefly, the major concepts: gentrification, neoliberalism, the creative city model and the decolonial perspective. Then, I explain which methods were used and why. Lastly, I shine light on my personal ethics and positionality and present the outline of this thesis.

### **‘The field’**

The starting point of this research was the ‘Rotterdamwet’, which was introduced by the Dutch government in 2006 and was introduced specifically in Rotterdam. Through this policy gentrification is facilitated and shines light on the political climate of Rotterdam, as will be discussed in the next paragraph. The social relevance of this research concerns (unequal experiences of) citizenship and the right to adequate housing. Gentrification in Rotterdam-West discloses the societal and systematic power dynamics, which are framed within a neoliberal and post-colonial setting. What is seen as livable and how this is measured within policies play vital roles in this research. Furthermore, this research contributes to the awareness that people do not randomly live somewhere, but there is a motivation behind their choice, or a reason behind their allocation.

Rotterdam has a population of 651,446 residents in 2020 and is the poorest city in the Netherlands (Rajagopal et al. 2021, 2). More than 15% of its residents live below the poverty line and there is a shortage in social housing (ibid.). In Rotterdam 58% of all households, which are 185,600 households, qualify for social rental agreements, yet there are only 173,148 social rental units in 2020 (ibid.). Hence, social housing policies concern a great number of residents throughout the city. Rotterdam-West is not officially an administrative unit and exists within the districts of ‘Delfshaven’ and ‘Rotterdam Centrum’, and consists of several neighborhoods. The neighborhoods I walked through, and my participants live in are presented on a map of Rotterdam-West<sup>6</sup>.

The group of participants<sup>7</sup> is a very diverse group, in every sense of the word, and quite representative of what Rotterdam-West (still) is. By using photos throughout the thesis, the research location will be presented to grasp a glimpse of the street scenes. Many participants were artists and creatives that moved to Rotterdam for their studies, often at the Willem de Kooning Academie (WDKA)<sup>8</sup>. Others grew up in Rotterdam, but only a few in Rotterdam-

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<sup>6</sup> See page 1.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix I.

<sup>8</sup> Art school in Rotterdam.

West. The ethnicity (and sometimes nationality) of my participants is a combination of Dutch, Ghanaian, Surinamese, British, Greek, Cape Verdean, Chinese, Dominican, Japanese, and Curaçaos. The age ranges from early 20s to early 40s, with one woman that was in her 60s. Lastly, I do not assign the term gentrifier or gentrified to any of my participants, since the concept is binary and does not enclose the fluid reality.

### **Gentrification in Rotterdam-West: neoliberalism in practice**

Gentrification in Rotterdam-West exists in a neoliberal context. The term gentrification was coined by Ruth Glass (1964), a British sociologist. When first introduced, gentrification was focused on London in the 1950s and 60s. Gentrification can be understood as the replacement of lower income residents of a neighborhood with residents with a higher income and socioeconomic standing (Rose 1984, 195). These newcomers have other material interests than former residents, thus renovating and ‘upgrading’ the neighborhood (ibid.). Rose (1984) stresses the change of properties, and thus their value, which is very present throughout the years in Rotterdam and relates to the commodification of housing. The commodification of housing is a product of neoliberalism, which knows many different variants, and is considered to be a specific movement within capitalism (Aalbers 2013, 1053). Moreover, neoliberalism is a class project, masked by individual freedom, liberty, responsibility, privatization and the free market (2013, 1054). This ‘fairly successful project’ aims to resort and consolidate class power (Harvey in Aalbers 2013, 1054). It is argued that the neoliberal state is rather active, since it facilitates “the dominance of public life by giant corporations” and is in fact a “self-contradictory form of regulation in denial” (Peck in Aalbers 2013, 1054). The housing market and its crisis reveal the failure of market mechanisms and the provision of adequate and affordable housing for all (Aalbers 2013, 1055). Hence, the ideology of neoliberalism has failed, yet neoliberal practices are “alive and kicking” (ibid.).

Gentrification is a global phenomenon, and thus its exclusionary character is not only seen in Rotterdam (Atkinson and Bridge 2010, 51). Atkinson and Bridge emphasize the colonial character of gentrification, and how the privilege of whiteness is related to more class-based identities and preferences in urban living (2010, 52). The fact that many newcomers are white is noticed by the participants and seen through the usage of artists and creatives to attract more affluent residents to Rotterdam-West, as they make way for more affluent newcomers. This relates to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) conclusions on class, using cultural, social and economic capital as distinctions. Bourdieu’s theories will be discussed in chapter 1 and 2, and how it pertains to Richard Florida’s ‘creative city model’ (2004), which is implemented throughout

Rotterdam to gentrify neighborhoods. “Gentrification is sold as something that is creative” (Lees 2012, 160), hence the use of artists and creatives to sell this idea. Gentrification is presented as the “rebirth of the central city” and is successful in a neoliberal climate, because it is a “creative fix” (Peck in Lees 2012, 161). Yet, what exactly is it that needs fixing? When the municipality of Rotterdam displayed its new decorative flags on the West-Kruiskade<sup>9</sup>, some of them stated “making ugly people look better”<sup>10</sup>, which were quickly brought down after commotion by neighborhood residents and activists. Accordingly, some anthropologists have called gentrification as “far-too neutral descriptor,” and prefer the use of (Black) removal and forced relocation (Grigsby and Sojoyner 2018).

Gentrification, and taking up space, in Rotterdam-West is linked to the several concepts. This research contributes to academic debates about infrastructure, housing, and mobility in a neoliberal context. Furthermore, this research embodies the intertwinement between citizenship and infrastructure, through the lens of gentrification, with its prominent artifact: the ‘bakfiets’.

Gentrification is an infrastructure issue, since housing is embedded in infrastructure, which is related to mobility and can reveal the power dynamics at play. Brian Larkin defines infrastructures as “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space [...] they shape the nature of a network, the speed and direction of its movement, its temporalities, and its vulnerability to breakdown” (2013, 328). Furthermore, “infrastructures shape the rhythms and striations of social life,” and can reveal social inequalities according to Anand, Gupta, and Appel (2018, 6). Infrastructures provide a site wherein power structures and inequality are reproduced or destabilized, making them sites of vulnerability too (2018, 14, 29). Infrastructure and citizenship are for that reason intertwined and thus of importance while researching gentrification.

Moreover, this research considers a decolonial perspective, rather than merely the class perspective which has been dominant in gentrification literature and research. Within the decolonial perspective, used for analyzing discourse, the modern-capitalist-world-system is challenged, and recognizes its hierarchies and tools of oppression (Weiner and Carmona Báez 2018). Importantly, within this approach it is acknowledged that the marginalization of “people of color has never ended” (de Abreu 2018, 66). Often, people of color, immigrants, refugees, and people with a migrant background have a citizenship that is conditional (Martina and Schor 2018, 157), due to those same hierarchies they do not benefit from. As Quijano (2000) argues, the ‘coloniality of power’ did not necessarily end when colonialism ended, moreover, the

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<sup>9</sup> A busy shopping street in Oude Westen, close to Rotterdam Central Station.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix II.

modern-capitalist-world-system follows a racial/ethnic classification which is directly related to the division of labor.<sup>11</sup> This approach is relevant since Rotterdam has a colonial history, which was mentioned frequently during interviews and participant observation, as will become evident in the coming chapters. Framing the political climate through a decolonial perspective shines light on the mere tolerance of non-white Dutch citizens, and reveals the need for critical analyses of housing policies. Essentially, this research is based on the lived experience of the participants and considers the past as well as imaginaries of alternative futures.

### **Methodology and operationalization**

This research is based on several types of data: literature study, (in-depth) interviews, participant observation, walking, and photo analysis. I, like the rest of the world, had to deal with COVID-19 restrictions. For this reason, I moved to Rotterdam for three months, to be closer to participants and events, and to travel less. Unfortunately, I had to move three times within Rotterdam, from the city center to my mother's house in the west, and lastly to the north. Luckily, I was able to do most interviews in person, while adhering to the COVID restrictions. Over the course of three months, I interviewed 20 people, during 17 interviews, of which 3 were online. Additionally, and even more fortunate, I was able to conduct some participant observation. On several occasions I went to the squatted community center in Delfshaven and attended meetings or did interviews there. During two protests, about anti-racism and for International Workers Day, I also did participant observation. Lastly, I was invited to a teacher and activist conversation, between the squatters of the community center and teachers of Inholland<sup>12</sup>.

Different methods produce different kinds of data. Therefore, I wanted to align the creativity of my participants with my own research methods and chose to use photo analysis. By walking through Rotterdam-West by myself, photographing, and doing walking interviews, which was quite convenient considering the restrictions, I wanted grasp the sensory ways of gentrification. By 'only' writing, reading, and talking about gentrification I would miss out on the sensory part of it. Which smells appear or disappear? Why has a parc bench been removed? And why do we trip over these 'bakfietsen'? Has the sound of a 'Felyx' scooter<sup>13</sup> unlocking always been outside my window? Such experiences exist within the broad realm of the senses

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<sup>11</sup> Diego Ramírez, May 12, 2017: <https://www.researchgate.net/post/What-is-the-difference-between-post-colonial-and-decolonial-thinking>

<sup>12</sup> Applied university.

<sup>13</sup> Shared electric scooter one can rent via an application.

and sometimes go beyond words. The walking ethnography and photo analysis proved to be resourceful and showed the similar artefacts and practices my participants considered to be part of gentrification, such as the ‘bakfiets’ or green spaces. I believe both methods contribute to the feeling of ‘being there’ and shine light on the lived experience of the participants.

### **Ethics and positionality**

I am aware that I have several identities that are relevant within my field of research, such as my gender, ethnicity, and occupation. To specify, I am a Black woman, from a Dutch and Ghanaian background, who is able to enjoy academic education as a student. Importantly, I was born in Rotterdam and grew up in Rotterdam-West and left when I was 19 years old. These aspects of my being have all influenced this research to a great extent. Having these several identities means that I must be flexible in how I use these and when, and it will test my ability to ‘switch’ (Grassiani 2020). Because I grew up in my research location there is a history I know and experienced that other might not, yet also the risk of fixedness. However, I believe it also brings a unique perspective.

Subjectivity can be a flaw at times, but also a strength when it is recognized and implemented through the reflexivity of the researcher throughout the research, I believe. I want to acknowledge that I am subjective and biased, for I am human. Hönke and Müller argue that the engagement with interpretative ethnography is essential, which includes a great sensibility for reflexivity, and asks the ethnographer to keep in mind “what agents think from”, not only “what agents think about,” and to consider their own “writing from” (2012, 395-6). While undertaking ethnography it is important to acknowledge the role of our embodied self (O’Reilly 2012), and be critical in order to understand our own involvement in a changing world (Tsing 2000, 328).

Likewise, I acknowledge my positionality as “my academic work is, inherent to my subjective positionality as an anthropologist, deeply political” (Grassiani 2020, 249). This research is the extent of what I believe is important and needs to be addressed explicitly, while including a decolonial perspective, anti-racism, and anti-capitalism throughout this thesis. I recognize myself as a “part of a social, sensory and material environment and acknowledg[e] the political and ideological agendas and power relations integral to the contexts and circumstances” (Pink 2015, 25), more so, I am interested in these agendas and relations. Furthermore, I believe this awareness, of my impact on a situation, is vital to cultivate a safe environment for myself and my participants. My influence on the research was also discussed frequently during interviews, when, what happened often when the recording ended: I became

the subject of interest. I answered questions with honesty, which sometimes resulted in painful truths on my end. The subjectivity of a researcher in turn leads to different interviews, and thus different data.

Even though Rotterdam is a large city, it can feel like a small village. The choice of changing my participants' names was because of an ethics issue: many know each other, or friends or family of mine. For this reason, I have changed all my participants' names, and sometimes also decided not to portray some physical characteristics in fieldnote or interview excerpts. The small village feeling was also strengthened when I decided to live in Rotterdam for three months. When I moved to Rotterdam, I also had to ask myself, as Erika Robb Larkins (2015, 20) points out, "how different really is the process of obtaining anthropological data" from that of a gentrifiers' gaze? What was my own role in the gentrification process, when moving to Rotterdam? In a way, I was a bit of 'gentrifier' myself. I was subletting student housing and a room in a renovated house. Moreover, I was interviewing participants in coffee shops and taking up space in parks sipping on oat milk cappuccinos. Yet, when I moved back into my mother's house for a while, I felt 'gentrified' and 'skid eyed' the 'bakfiets' from across the street. This master research has been my legitimization of taking up space in Rotterdam-West for three months, which occasionally included visiting gentrification hotspots, while simultaneously writing this thesis as resistance to gentrification processes. Let this be clear, I believe gentrification in Rotterdam-West is problematic because it displaces marginalized people, oftentimes people of color, to make room for the already privileged.

On an even more personal note, my research ideas, topics, and locations have always been fueled by personal curiosity and attraction. When I did my fieldwork for my bachelor's in Ghana, I also went to seize the opportunity to live in my father's birth country when I had the chance to and explore the feeling of living where half of me is rooted. This master's research has been a return in another sense, more literal, since I was born and raised in Rotterdam-West. Now, and because of this research, I am far more critical of what I used to believe was just a very 'multicultural' city which was 'tolerant'. This research is personal; I wanted to discover how the city has changed since I left, and evidently time has not stood still. The realization that I could become a potential gentrifier if I ever were to move back frightens me and makes me want to resist gentrification even more. Currently, I cannot unsee what my participants have brought to the fore, for this I am thankful.

## **Outline**

Hereafter, in the first chapter three neoliberal practices will be discussed: exclusionary policies, gentrification as the ‘new urban colonialism’, and the ‘creative city model’. These three practices come together in ‘the symbol’ of gentrification in Rotterdam-West, the ‘bakfiets’. This symbol is linked to, often white, affluent people which in turn are attracted to the neighborhood through artists and creatives. In the second chapter the role of artists and creatives within gentrification processes is discussed. Artists and creatives are used by the municipality and housing corporations, through the implementation of the creative city model, to attract more affluent people. Yet, some participants claim artists and creatives are using this as well and lastly their accountability is questioned. In the third chapter waste and green spaces in relation to gentrification will be discussed. Participants relate waste to the value and image of a neighborhood and recently developed green spaces to gentrification. Through photo analysis waste became a prominent subject, and opposes the process of ‘green gentrification’, which both represent the “erosion of the neighborhood” in a different sense. Then, in chapter four the focus is on how one can resist gentrification. This chapter centers examples of squatting, awareness, silent resistance, and collective action to resist from gentrification processes and practices. Lastly, the conclusion is represented by a summary and a portrait of participants’ alternative futures.



# Chapter 1

## The Becoming of the 'Bakfiets' Neighborhood

How gentrification in Rotterdam-West is facilitated by exclusionary policies, can be considered the new urban colonialism, and follows the creative city model

'Bakfiets', Coolhaveneiland, July 28, 2021. Photographer: Jamea Kofi



Jamea: What is your impression of the word ‘bakfiets’<sup>14</sup>?

Zoë: A white mother that moves around her offspring. [...] Someone that doesn’t move aside with that ‘bakfiets’, who feels entitled to put it everywhere, even when it’s a very narrow sidewalk. Yes, really taking up space. A little white lady. A stressed little white lady, with dissociation from the neighborhood. I think they look like aliens, landed in a place they think is still a bit filthy, and doesn’t yet meet their standards. They think everything is exotic. They feel like an adventurer with their ‘bakfiets’. [...] I think you’re a bit of an intruder [...], with a superior attitude. It does not match with the bikes that are normally there, with the original resident. It’s such a prominent object. It wasn’t here before.<sup>15</sup>

What some regard as the symbol of gentrification in Rotterdam-West, the ‘bakfiets’, represents the (white) newcomer to many participants. Why does the accumulation of the ‘bakfiets’ occur in Rotterdam-West? Gentrification in Rotterdam-West is facilitated by the municipality of Rotterdam through neoliberal exclusionary policies, such as the Rotterdamwet. I advocate for a decolonial perspective since gentrification can be considered the ‘new urban colonialism’, in which the history of Rotterdam is essential. Moreover, through the creative city model, an articulation of neoliberal practices in Rotterdam, artists and creatives are used to attract a more affluent resident. I argue that these practices of neoliberalism are essential in understanding the complexities of the research location, for they disclose the unique mechanisms within the gentrification processes in Rotterdam-West.

### **1.1 Exclusionary policies**

In theory, gentrification revolves around the upgrading of a place, socially, economically, and culturally (Hutak 2020, 15). Yet, these neighbourhoods need upgrading because economically interesting people are arriving, whereas these same places used to be ‘no-go areas’, according to Massih Hutak when writing about gentrification in Amsterdam (2020, 16). Moreover, this upgrading entails the eviction and displacement of old residents, through which the ‘authentic’ character and original culture of the neighbourhood vanishes (ibid.). This process is not only seen in Amsterdam but is also present in Rotterdam and is facilitated by municipal policies, such

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<sup>14</sup> Translates to cargo bike.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Zoë, May 14th, 2021.

as the ‘Act on Extraordinary Measures of Urban Problems’<sup>16</sup>, widely known as the ‘Rotterdamwet’ since it was introduced in 2006 specifically in Rotterdam. According to Van Gent, Hochstenbach and Uitermark the diverse and dynamic group of low-income residents, who are targeted in this Act, are treated, and perceived as a burden (2018). The Act’s main goal is to improve the liveability through restricting unemployed newcomers from moving into rental dwellings in areas that are considered particularly vulnerable or distressed (2018, 2351). Municipalities that apply the Act can refuse a residence permit when the applicant has lived in the region for less than six years, does not receive an income from work, pensions, student loans, or has a criminal history<sup>17</sup> (ibid.). Hence, the liveability is measured through income and possible criminal background within the screening of the Rotterdamwet, revealing its exclusionary nature.<sup>18</sup> The municipality of Rotterdam expects the liveability of neighbourhoods to improve when poor newcomers are reduced and through attracting privileged residents, yet this has not proven to be so (Van Gent, Hochstenbach, and Uitermark 2018, 2339). Neighbourhood restructuring does not affect the cause of marginality, since poverty and deprivation are rooted in structural inequalities (idem).

Likewise, throughout the Netherlands the ‘Leefbarometer’<sup>19</sup> is used to measure liveability, which is divided in five domains: residences, residents, services, safety, and physical environment. Within these five domains there are a hundred ‘mainly objective’<sup>20</sup> indicators, such as number of rental or historic residences, and the number of Surinamese, Turkish or Moroccan residents, which are the only groups as distinct indicators. The ‘Leefbarometer’ connects liveability to its indicators, which raises questions, as Lauren asks, “are people with low incomes or a migration background necessarily a problem?”<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps, they are made one.

Some have argued that social mixing policies in Western Europe may be functions of statecraft (Hochstenbach 2017; Van Gent, Hochstenbach, and Uitermark 2018). Indeed, gentrification is often state-led, in which housing policies are at the centre of its implementation, and is closely related to social-mixing strategies, such as the spreading of migrants (Hochstenbach 2017, 204). Social mixing policies can be considered ‘cosmetic policies’, for they are not prepared to deal with the complex reasons why there are concentrations of poor

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<sup>16</sup> Wet bijzondere maatregelen grootstedelijke problematiek (WBMGP), full text: <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0019388/2018-06-13>, visited on June 23, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Residential nuisance is also included.

<sup>18</sup> Accessed on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021: <https://www.rotterdam.nl/wonen-leven/screening-huurders/>

<sup>19</sup> ‘Leefbarometer’ domains and indicators, accessed on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021: <https://www.leefbaarometer.nl/page/indicatoren>

<sup>20</sup> What is the ‘Leefbarometer’ accessed on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021: <https://www.leefbaarometer.nl/page/leefbaarometer>

<sup>21</sup> Interview on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

people in the city (Lees 2008, 2463). Through selling off, renovating or demolishing public housing and creating more luxurious residences current housing policies aspire to deconcentrate stigmatized and deprived population groups while attracting residents with more status and higher incomes, Van Gent, Hochstenbach and Uitermark state (2018, 2339). The authors substantiate their argument with the fact that there were 19,000 excluded residents in Rotterdam in 2013, and they are facing structurally decreasing options for affordable housing (2018, 2343-6). The Act has not provided a positive boost to vulnerable neighbourhoods, which was its official aim (2018, 2350). The Act represents “a further step towards a reliance on profiling and exclusion” (ibid.). According to Doucet, Van Kempen and Van Weesep the strategies that gentrification entails further the pre-existing social and spatial divisions within Rotterdam (2011, 1452). Moreover, these strategies “focus on wealth creation, rather than wealth distribution” (ibid.). Gentrification is thus detrimental to low-income households, who utilize social housing and to which housing policies are pivotal. As Loretta Lees notes, “[i]t is ironic that a process that results in segregation and polarisation— gentrification—is being promoted via social mix policies as the ‘positive’ solution to segregation” (Lees 2008, 2463).

The ‘Rotterdamwet’ represents the neoliberal approach of the municipality of Rotterdam, which is in line with neoliberal capitalist ideologies which favor exclusivity rather than inclusivity (Harvie 2013, 2). This ideology is concentrating privilege further for the already privileged and marginalize the already marginalized (ibid.). According to David Harvey inequality is a requirement for neoliberalism and necessary for its own growth, as he states “increased social inequality was necessary to encourage entrepreneurial risk and innovation” (2007, 34).



**NO  
ROTTERDAM  
ACT!**

Anti-racism protest, March  
21<sup>st</sup>, 2021. Photographer:  
Jamea Kofi

Exclusion through the displacement of residents was prevalent in the lives of my participants. Benny, who was soon to be a father, expressed a deep concern with finding affordable housing. His mother wanted to move and the only affordable housing she could find was in Spijkenisse, a neighborhood outside of Rotterdam, about 20 kilometers from Spangen, where he lives. He recognizes that her move is forced “because these houses are so expensive, you know”.<sup>22</sup> This is rather inconvenient, “I thought like shit”, since he wanted his mother to also care for and be close to his child. Benny explained how he feels the threat of displacement before it has even happened. One can be displaced without actually moving, when there are experiences of alienation and disconnection from a neighborhood while the characteristics of it change (Atkinson 2015; Doucet and Koenders 2018). Benny considers the newcomers in Spangen as “out of place” and connects them, to what Emma<sup>23</sup> has called, the symbol of gentrification: the ‘bakfiets’. The newcomers, who Benny calls “*Nederlanders*” and refers to Dutch people that are white, are coming in to Spangen to make the neighborhood a “bakfietswijk”<sup>24</sup>.

Benny considers the becoming of a ‘bakfietswijk’ a “weird” [*raar*] process, which “sucks” [*ik vind het kut*], yet he immediately states that he does think social mixing is good, since children can then learn from each other. However, he is quick to realize that in some instances white people want to live in diverse neighborhoods, to send their children to Black schools<sup>25</sup>, for them to be in separate classes with only white children. This relates to findings of school segregation in Amsterdam, wherein parents are indeed concerned with diversity and social mixing, yet tend to contribute “to the process that they politically opposed” and often send their children to white schools (Boterman 2013, 1144). Nonetheless, in the context Benny describes, the school segregation is on smaller level and within a Black school.

Furthermore, the social mixing of children was also mentioned by Jaïr and Renske, during our interview<sup>26</sup> at their house, which is located on a street where the Rotterdamwet is implemented through the screening and housing permit. We were all sitting on the couch, and I had just asked them what had changed in the neighborhood in the couple of years they were living in Tussendijken. Renske mentions that there are “many more white students” [*witte studenten*] now living on their street, and Jaïr continues, because “there was a lot of vacancy.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Interview on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Translates to ‘cargo bike neighborhood’.

<sup>25</sup> There is some debate on the term Black schools [*zwarte scholen*] and white schools [*witte scholen*]. The term Black schools is used when over 50 percent of all students has a non-Western background.

<sup>26</sup> Interview on March 12, 2021.

And you want to prevent that, so people will rent these houses. And so, who wants? The students.” Also, many houses were renovated, then sold and now have families living in them. Jaïr noticed that some of the gardens below their house where their children can play, in the courtyard, are now secluded. Renske adds, “they don’t have to go outside or anything,” they can stay in the courtyard and play without having to go into the street, where for instance the children from down the block do play in front of a mosque. Jaïr elaborates:

“They just have their garden [...] and there are three families, and one of their houses has this extended piece, which looks like a playground. And if I look at it, you know I’m smoking on the balcony and I think, this is just some sort of protected community [*beschermde samenleving*] in Rotterdam-West [laughs]. And I think like ‘how’ [*hoe dan*]? That’s peculiar [*bijzonder*]. You have this white [*blank*] family and they live among the savages, if I can put it like that, but they do have a protected courtyard where they grow up freely and safely [*lekker vrij en veilig*]. And then I think, ‘typical’.”

This excerpt represents the concerns many participants have shown, not only about children growing up, but the segregated environment that has been created by various actors within the process of gentrification in Rotterdam-West. These findings are in line with Hochstenbach’s conclusions, where he argues that gentrification may at first restrain segregation levels, yet after a certain point it will actually produce severe spatial divisions while simultaneously reducing housing options for disadvantaged residents (2017, 207). According to Hochstenbach, there will be a more polarized urban landscape, with a struggling periphery including stronger poverty concentrations and a gentrified core (2017). He stresses the intergenerational character of social inequalities and how gentrification reshapes “urban-regional social-spatial inequalities” (2017, 207-8). Hochstenbach explains that “[g]entrification processes are commonly conceptualized as taking place primarily through residential moves, with higher-income residents moving in, and lower-income residents displaced or excluded” (2017, 205). This process is connected to the ‘suburbanization of poverty,’ in which low-income households often move to suburban locations even before they are forced to leave due to gentrification (2017, 207; Hochstenbach and Musterd 2018). Jen Harvie draws upon David Harvey’s conclusions, as she writes, “the individualism of neoliberal capitalism is ‘bad’ not because it rewards some, but because it contributes enormously to the deprivations of many” (Harvie 2013, 180).

# The Accumulation of the 'Bakfiets'





Series of 'bakfietsen' in Delfshaven, Spangen, Middelland, and Bospolder, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, July 9<sup>th</sup> and (mostly) July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Photographer: Jamea Kofi

## 1.2 'The new urban colonialism'

Atkinson and Bridge argue that gentrification is the new urban colonialism (2010). This is in line with my argument and findings since the class perspective within gentrification processes is related to ethnicity and race issues. Atkinson and Bridge state that the new middle-class gentrifiers are predominantly white, which is an aesthetic as well a cultural aspect of the process wherein Anglo appropriation of the urban space and urban history is realized (2010, 52). Hence, some anthropologists have called gentrification a “far-too neutral descriptor” (Grigsby and Sojoyner 2018). Grigsby and Sojoyner observed micro-displacement and micro-migration among Black residents in South Central L.A. due to gentrification, in which families and community members are not leaving the city entirely but are rather pushed from street to street (2018, 153). They then propose a more nuanced conversation of gentrification in ethnographic research, wherein ethnographers should rethink gentrification as a practice of capitalist surveillance which is intertwined with social history (ibid.). Doing so, through telling stories, one can “consider the modes of gentrification as well as the outcome – the making of homelessness” (ibid.). This is in line with Massih Hutak’s (2020) concern, as he asks, ‘where will the forcefully displaced go?’.

The current housing policies are of a two-fold, wherein the history of (public) housing is still present today, and policymakers are cultivating ‘regeneration’ through gentrification, which is marginalizing the already marginalized. The exclusion of certain residents, ‘the racialization of urban space’ (Castles and Miller 2003, 35), is not new in the Dutch context. In fact, when almost half of the population of Surinam migrated to the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s there were designated neighborhoods, streets and even houses where they weren’t welcome, even though they were citizens with a Dutch nationality (Heilbron 2017). “The history of political debates concerning these post-colonial citizens illustrates that membership of the legal community of Dutch citizens does not necessarily lead to unconditional inclusion in the imagined community of the ‘Dutch people’”, Guno Jones writes (2012, 27). Additionally, ‘according to the law, Surinamese people in the Netherlands had access to the same rights as ‘autochtoon’<sup>27</sup> Dutch people’, Andre Reeder elaborates, ‘we were also Dutch citizens. But in reality, it was rather different, a lot was denied because you were Black’<sup>28</sup> (Heilbron 2017). The relationship between Surinamese people and native Dutch people is even more complicated than with other migrant communities, because of its past, including hundreds of thousands of

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<sup>27</sup> I do not use this term, but it was used in this text and used to be in the vocabulary of (social) scientists and politicians. Now, institutions often use ‘person without a migration background’.

<sup>28</sup> Translation is mine.

Africans that were enslaved by the Dutch (Marchetti 2015). Through considering the housing history of the Surinamese I want to illustrate that ‘spreading policies’ are not new and have a racist character. People do not just live somewhere, rather their chosen or assigned place of residence has meaning to it, it is all but random. Evidently, the ‘racialization of urban space’ has a history (Castles and Miller 2003, 35).

Along, Loretta Lees argues for a ‘post-colonial’ perspective for gentrification in the Global South (2012). However, I propose a decolonial perspective even in post-colonial areas of gentrification, such as Rotterdam-West. This I believe is suitable since the colonial history is very much prevalent to this day, and by some even celebrated. Many postcolonial migrants came to Rotterdam, particularly to Oude Westen<sup>29</sup> (Captain 2020, 428). In fact, one out of every eight people in Rotterdam has enslaved ancestors.<sup>30</sup> It shows that, for postcolonial migrants the history displayed in Rotterdam-West is rather confronting, as Jessica de Abreu phrases, “I am here, because you were there” (2018, 66). Moreover, auctions in Rotterdam from the VOC were the highlight of economic life in Rotterdam between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (de Kok 2020, 47). Residents of Rotterdam were influenced by colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the economic growth was rapid, as many traded in the colonies, went along on ships from the VOC<sup>33</sup> or were suppliers from colonial trading houses (2020, 36). Other ships in Rotterdam, from the WIC<sup>31</sup>, conveyed enslaved Africans to Brazilian colonies (2020, 56). It should then be no surprise that many buildings, street names and statues refer to this history. Importantly, ‘street names keep local history alive’ (van Roosmalen 2020, 198), and for this reason shines light on what one finds important enough to remember, or rather, to forget. It concerns who and whose history is allowed to take up space.

The colonial influence in Rotterdam-West was noticed by Jaz<sup>32</sup>, who moved to Delfshaven from the UK. She is an artist and activist, who has been involved in the squatting of a community center in Delfshaven. She states that she enjoys living in Rotterdam, however she was annoyed and disappointed by the glorification of the VOC<sup>33</sup>, during the ‘Delfshaven Festival’<sup>34</sup> and in her neighborhood. Jaz is one of the participants who takes action to express

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<sup>29</sup> Neighborhood in Rotterdam-West.

<sup>30</sup> Accessed on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2354635-rotterdam-zat-tot-over-zijn-oren-in-de-slavernij.html>

<sup>31</sup> The ‘West-Indische Compagnie’, major trading company from 1621-1734 that enslaved around 300.000 people, and more active in West-Africa. Accessed on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021: <https://www.zeeuwseankers.nl/verhaal/slavenhandel-in-cijfers#:~:text=Nederland,verscheepte%20ongeveer%20de%20helft%20daarvan.>

<sup>32</sup> Interview on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> The ‘Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie’, a major trading company from 1602-1799 that enslaved tens of thousands of people, and more active within Asia.

<sup>34</sup> Visited on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021: <https://delfshavenfestival.nl/>

her disappointment, “I was literally there at least once a week to write in chalk on the floor [...] like fuck this shit!”. She recognizes that some people in the municipality, specifically in the ‘gebiedscommissie’<sup>35</sup> were also concerned. However, she remained critical of their stance:

“Sometimes I wonder that this idea of everyone is included and participating, covers up the fact that actually for a long time a lot of people weren’t allowed to or included. And some people still aren’t. Just saying that everyone is included isn’t enough. Sometimes you have to really make a point of the fact that there are still a lot of injustices from the past and the present.”

Through this excerpt I want to illustrate the critical awareness that some participants have towards the colonial history of Rotterdam-West, and Delfshaven in particular. To draw on history is of importance since it can clarify uneven wealth distribution and (thus) power dynamics, which naturally affect class differences that are at play within the gentrification processes here. Along, I argue that class and ethnicity cannot be separated from one another, and neither should be the case while studying gentrification. Furthermore, I want to move away from the class perspective, which is common in studying gentrification, and rather move towards a perspective that includes ethnicity and race, since in multicultural urban contexts “class is often mediated by race” (Boterman 2013, 1132).

The colonial history of Rotterdam was also noticed by Julia. “Gentrification doesn’t damage white people”<sup>36</sup>, she states, not to the extent it damages people of color I would like to add. Julia illustrated that going to local spots is something many gentrifiers don’t do, for instance if she goes to a Turkish café, she feels “weird” and looked-at. Hence, most gentrifiers visit familiar places. She recognizes the ‘need’ for other white people to make white people feel safe. To Julia, this is a consequence of colonialism, and thus a “colonial left-over,” where people view people of color as dangerous. Furthermore, the colonial left-over Julia stresses, relates to the history of urban design and is in fact violence, she states. This violence hurts local livelihoods and is based on wrongful stereotyping and discrimination, which relates to the everyday and structural violence gentrified, or displaced, residents experience. Structural violence, a term coined by Jonathan Galtung, exists in the social structures of our society, through which the people and institutions with power prevent individuals from achieving their

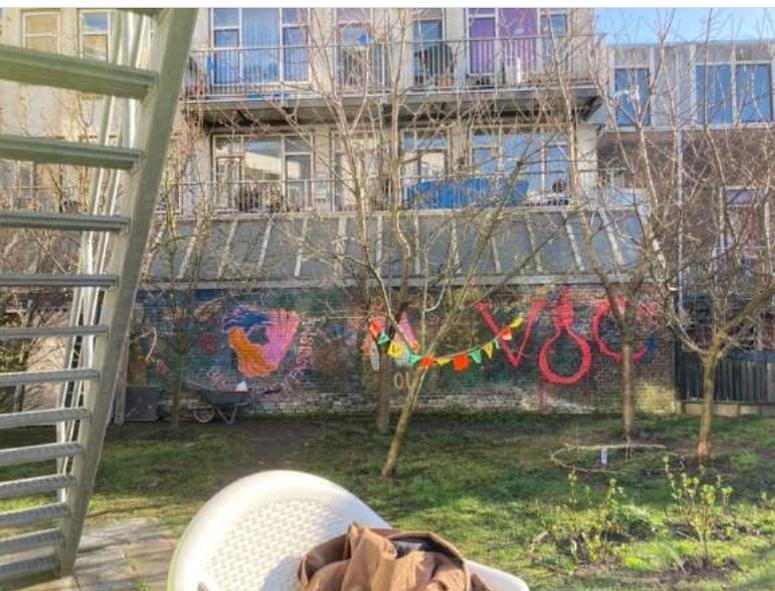
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<sup>35</sup> A ‘gebiedscommissie’ represents the residents from its area. “They are the eyes and ears of a region for the city council”, see <https://www.rotterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/gebiedscommissies/>, visited on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Interview on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

full potential (Dilts 2012). Julia’s conclusions shine light on the racist character of housing policies, which is still prevalent and proves the racialization of urban space (Castles and Miller 2003, 35).

Ergo, my suggestion for a decolonial perspective even in Euro-centric areas of gentrification, such as Rotterdam-West. For the municipality and scholars to apply a decolonial perspective when regarding urban design, and thus gentrification, would make their approach more inclusive. To admit wrongdoings is to imagine a different future, I believe. Anand, Gupta and Appel rightfully stress that “any given future is built on a past,” which became evident through the housing policies in the 1970s in Amsterdam regarding the Surinamese (2018, 7). Infrastructures are a product of their time and political moment in which they are situated (Hughes in Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018, 12), and so is the current gentrification process. Through placing gentrification in a neoliberal framework that focuses on political expressions through infrastructure I have shown the underlying power structures that are revealed in this process and the exclusionary and racist character of the housing policies at play. We shall then too keep in mind that “[i]t takes conscious willed and willful effort not to reproduce an inheritance” (Ahmed in Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018, 30).



**mural paintings** in the garden of the squatted community center in Delfshaven

Photographer: Jamea Kofi, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021.



## The statue of Piet Hein in Delfshaven



Photographer: Jamea Kofi, July 28, 2021.

Title: Seagull resistance to colonialism.  
Photographer: Jaz, shared on May 17, 2021.

### 1.3 Creative city ideologies in practice

In this paragraph I elaborate on another part of neoliberal practices in Rotterdam-West through considering the ‘creative city model’. This model is currently implemented by the municipality of Rotterdam, and includes artists and creatives, who attract a more affluent resident – the people riding the ‘bakfiets’.

The ‘creative class’ as a term and the ‘creative city model’ behind it was popularized by Richard Florida through his book ‘The Rise of the Creative Class: and How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life’ (2004). The book is considered to be provocative by some and triggered many academics and policy-makers (Hansen, Asheim, and Vang 2009, 99). According to Florida, the current economy is based on companies following people instead of people following a job, because people are choosing appealing cities they want to live in, and is more of a ‘lifestyle choice’ which satisfies them (Harvie 2013, 115). The creative class wants a ‘tolerant’ environment to live in (Florida 2004). Florida argues that cities must concentrate on attracting the creative class to become a successful creative city, with supplying technology and a climate of tolerance (Harvie 2013, 115). Though Florida argues that the creative city is a tolerant city, I want to stress that tolerance is not embracement. The creative city might be tolerant to diversity in sexualities and ethnicity, but merely accepting

diversity is not the same as implementing intersectionality. Yes, one must be grateful to be accepted, on a certain level at least, however wouldn't it be even better to be embraced? Additionally, as Harvie argues, Florida's "feel-good factor", is created in order to attract outstanding workers and to be affluent (2013, 118), which goes hand in hand with neoliberal capitalism.

Furthermore, anyone can potentially be a member of the creative class, which are creative thinkers and not necessarily artists (Harvie 2013). However, physical mobility is an important aspect of the creative class – one must be willing to move from city to city – which makes this class rather exclusive and not achievable for everyone (Harvie 2013, 116). Glass her predictions about gentrification, made almost sixty years ago, illustrate that living in a city is about the survival of the fittest, the financially fittest, are coming true (Glass in Slater 2009, 171). Tom Slater stresses that definitions of gentrification, both analytical and political, should center the fact that “class inequality is at the forefront of any consideration of gentrification” (2009, 173), which relates to the inequalities and mobility issues that Harvie points out in Florida's creative city model. Florida presents this model as if one always has the choice to move, or the choice to be mobile, while in fact many do not have an alternative when they are forced to move or stay. The people that have to make way for the hypermobile creative class “are presented with a false choice: they can either have decay or gentrification” (Slater 2009, 176). Gentrification reveals and represents a mobility issue that perpetuates social inequality, wherein “[t]he creative middle classes and the wealthiest can move where they want; disadvantaged classes are displaced or forced to move to where markets send them” (Harvie 2013, 135). Furthermore, these mobile capital flows are uneven, unstable, and unregulated, and reinforce class stability rather than class mobility (Brenner and Theodore in Harvie 2013, 135). Even though Florida's theory is focused on US setting, “his ambitions are clearly global”, according to Harvie (Harvie 2013, 116). The goal of Florida with this theory is the prosperity of the creative city, not necessarily its residents.

Importantly, Slater raises the question, “why does it have to be gentrification that brings better services?” (2009, 181). Additionally, Lauren asks why the municipality of Rotterdam is facilitating gentrification through housing policies, and she critical of this, “you have proof of what will happen [...] I think it's a bit lazy to be honest”<sup>37</sup>. If you want to improve a neighborhood you should treat the root of the problem, Lauren states, “and hope that the neighborhood, with its own people, will flourish”. Gentrification is a ‘cheap fix’ for

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<sup>37</sup> Interview on April 5, 2021.

neighborhood issues, such as poverty, unemployment, and vacancy, where the new residents themselves ‘uplift’ the neighborhood, and to which investment will follow, and thus an attractive strategy for policymakers (Slater 2009, 184; Patel and Moore 2018). Patel and Moore, explain in their ‘cheapening theory’ that capitalists try to address certain issues with “a range of cheap fixes” (2018, 27). The important task for policy makers then is to facilitate this process, as the municipality of Rotterdam does.

Here, we see that gentrification is embedded in neoliberal ideology, in which governments control citizens through ‘governmentality’ – “the dissemination of knowledge that people internalize so that they become self-governing” (Harvie 2013, 3). Neoliberalism relies on naturalized governmentality so state regulation and ‘interference’ is minimized (ibid.). This is combined with enhanced individual liberties through which self-reward can be realized in order to maximize private profit, while the welfare state is diminishing (2013, 12). A great industry to tackle these goals is in fact the creative industry, since it centers entrepreneurial innovation and risk-taking (Millar in Harvie 2013, 66).

During the fieldwork period, by walking through Rotterdam-West and interviewing its residents it became evident that the creative city model is alive there, and that it is depicted through artistic pop-ups. Gentrification as a ‘cheap fix’ for neighborhoods issues is related to the temporary use of places, which is illustrated through pop-ups. Artistic pop-ups can be site responsive, and can shape micro-utopian possibilities for cultural change, according to Jen Harvie (2013, 111). Some participants are quite critical of the pop-ups in their neighborhoods, and so is Benny when we discussed artworks and artistic pop-ups in empty buildings near his house in Spangen. He acknowledges that some artworks do not correspond with the residents’ desires, in fact, sometimes the residents aren’t even consulted about the coming of the artwork. “The neighborhood does not benefit from it. It doesn’t inspire the people from the neighborhood. It does absolutely nothing with their lives, it does not contribute at all”<sup>22</sup>, he states. According to Benny, these artworks could make more of an impression if the neighborhood residents were included in at least a part of the process. He made an artwork himself in the south of Rotterdam for the residents to draw on and saw that this sparked the feeling of ownership. The neighborhood residents are the ones that know the context of where the actual artwork will be placed, and through including them in the making of the artwork, it would have more meaning to them, Benny argues. For some, the artistic pop-ups are seen as a temporal placement of art, before the original neighborhood residents will be displaced and can thus provoke emotions, as Benny experienced during our interview:

“I mean, these things are just there, and nobody knows why. It’s like these hypnotic paintings, sometimes it flashes light in the evening. You have this whole building... you are doing nothing with it! There is a housing crisis in Rotterdam! There are people who do want to do things, there are people who want to engage. You closed a shop, why don’t you put a new shop there for the neighborhood or something? Because now, people must walk for the night shop, really fucking far. [...] And you just sense it, when things close there are no new things coming from the people here. I think they are just waiting until it empties. At least that’s how it feels.”

Benny’s observations and feelings are in line with Harvie’s conclusions, in which artistic pop-ups in gentrifying neighborhoods function as ‘guardians’ for properties that are temporarily unoccupied, and thus available for temporary arts interventions (Harvie 2013, 122). These pop-ups benefit artists, naturally, but also local residents and other local businesses in the area, and importantly property owners as well, by protecting and potentially improving the building’s cultural value (Harvie 2013, 123). Artistic pop-ups in gentrifying areas can be problematic for they “risks fetishizing the apparently authentic, creating a sense of neo-bohemian alternative culture that makes poorer neighbourhoods attractive to Florida’s creative class” (2013, 126). Further, this fetishization can lead to gentrification and contribute to neoliberal capitalist colonization of urban space since it facilitates “changes in people’s perceptions of an area that then make it productive for speculative investors to move in as private developers” (2013, 127). Harvie points out that this is almost never the artists’ ambition, it is rather a “mixture of under- and unregulated market-led development, insufficient social support for those most in need, and tolerance of social stratification and ghettoization” (2013, 111, 134). However, one must be cautious of pop-up’s tendency to lead higher-income inward investment and migration (Harvie 2013).

Hence, one should be wary of Florida’s model, Harvie warns, since it is driven by economic instrumentalism rather than by social commitment, even though it appears otherwise (Harvie 2013, 118). The tolerance that is showcased within the creative city attracts the highly desired creative worker which in turn will create prosperity and economic growth (ibid.). Florida’s creative city is in line with neoliberal capitalism since it exacerbates privilege for the middle class, which is already privileged, and will intensify disadvantage for others (ibid.). The creative class is able to choose where they live and work on a certain level, while the working class is pushed out of their neighborhoods to suburban areas (Harvie 2013, 119). In conclusion, ‘creative capitals exhibit higher rates of socioeconomic inequality than other cities’ (Peck in

Harvie 2013, 119). It now seems as though to live in the city is a privilege which requires mobility, however, who decides which people have “the right to the city” (Lefèbvre 1996)?

The problematic nature of the creative city model in Rotterdam-West was explained frankly by Zoë, a graphic designer and visual artist, when we were doing an interview at what could be considered a gentrification hotspot. “People are attracted to the image of artists, they make way for ‘new’ people,” Zoë explains to me. This is also one of the reasons Zoë chooses not to have an atelier, so they do not participate and contribute to gentrification. They don’t judge people who do, but it “feels wrong” to them. Julia explains why it might not only feel wrong but is wrong to her. There is a scarcity within this severe housing crisis, she states. There are artists that are white and mainly middle class, which are perfect because “they will make other white people feel safe,” Julia elaborates. “This is racism”, and it goes for “basically everyone that is not white” so not only Black people, which illustrates the racial power dynamics, she concludes.



Photographer: Jamea Kofi

## pop-ups pop up



After the interview with Benny on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021, near Marconiplein. On the ground floor you can see the pop-up spaces Benny described.

This is art space is in an atelier block on Coolhaveneiland, what used to be housing, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

## **Conclusion**

As James Hackworth writes, “gentrification is the knife-edge neighbourhood-based manifestation of neoliberalism” (2007, 98). In Rotterdam-West gentrification is embodied by the ‘bakfiets’ and acts as a symbol for many participants, as it represents the, often white and affluent, newcomer. It has become apparent that at least three issues cater to neoliberalism as a practice. Gentrification in Rotterdam-West is facilitated by exclusionary policies, can be considered the ‘new urban colonialism’, and follows the ‘creative city model’. Moreover, these practices contribute to a more polarized urban landscape, increasing segregation levels (Lees 2008), in which low-income residents will be forced to move out of the city (Hochstenbach 2017). Through considering policy making, the power dynamics within the gentrification process can be revealed. Gentrification and the design of who lives where, is more than a class issue, it is a colonial issue, that perpetuates discrimination.



## Chapter 2

### The role of artists and creatives within gentrification

How artists and creatives are used within and are part of gentrification processes, through their cultural capital and proximity to economic capital

Photographer: Jamea Kofi, Coolhaveneiland, July 28, 2021.



Artists and other creatives are being used by the municipality in their strategy to gentrify neighborhoods, wherein they collaborate with various actors such as educational institutions and housing corporations. Artists and creatives are often centered throughout gentrification, but especially during the beginning of the process to attract more affluent people, who are often white. Moreover, the role of artists reveals their proximity to power and the image people have of what an artist is and represents. However, some artists and creatives have a critical stance towards gentrification and question their role and accountability in it.

## 2.1 “They are the ones with good taste, you know”<sup>38</sup>

Never have I thought this part to be comfortable. I do not prefer a hard, cold, wet sink in my neck, nor do I like others to wash and comb my hair. However, I had started to look like my research population. My hair was getting so long, I was growing an unwanted mullet. ‘Going native’ was not my aim. So, I finally made an appointment at the hairdresser. I had also just finished a yearlong challenge of not buying any clothes, so I was running out of inventive ways to style my worn-out clothes. I needed a so-called make-over.

This hairdresser is a familiar place in a transforming city. It is on the border of my research location, Rotterdam-West, and right in the middle of where I grew up. The street on which it is located is a busy one and the frontline of gentrification. It is a long street that goes from the city center to Rotterdam-West and flows into the outskirts that come after.

Luckily, my hairdresser distracts me by talking to me and asking the usual hairdresser questions, such as my profession. “So, do you do anything with art?”, she asks.

“Not really. Why?”, I respond.

“Yeah, just the way you look, you know”, she answers.

“What do you mean?”, I reply with genuine interest.

“Well, when you’re here, after a while you just start to recognize people, and what they do for a living”, she explains.

“I see”, I say, and think of how she actually is doing some observation as well, “but, should I consider this a compliment?”, I ask while trying to hide my curiosity.

“Of course! They are the ones with good taste, you know”, she says.

I laugh. “Well, I do come from a creative family and my mom is an artist actually”, I respond.

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<sup>38</sup> Based on a hairdresser appointment on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

“Well, there you go!”, she says while she is needlessly shampooing my hair for the third time, as if I also had a year-long no shampoo challenge.

Later, when I come home, I can’t help but think about what she said to me. Were my hair and clothes the reasons why she thought I was an artist, or to exist in such an environment? I am curious how it resonates with what many of my participants have said in less blunt ways. My hairdresser had unknowingly confirmed what many of my participants suggested during interviews, and what the municipality is implicitly integrating into their neoliberalist policy making: ‘artists have taste’. Hence, the important role of artists in ‘uplifting’ neighborhoods.

Therefore, I am wondering, how should I perceive the word ‘taste’? Might the ‘good taste’ of artists be true or not, the consequences of it evidently are. And then, might this good taste come with a side dish of responsibility?

## **2.2 The artist as the starting point**

“Artists are being used”, Zoë states, “like pawns,”<sup>39</sup> by policy makers to make neighborhoods ‘friendlier’ and ‘trendy’. They claim that ‘uplifting’ the neighborhood begins with the artist. But how do artists and their place in the gentrification process relate to class distinctions?

By regarding gentrification as a process and relating it to Bourdieu’s capital concepts, a more dynamic and realistic view on class distinction and its influence on urban space is presented, as Willem Boterman proposes (2005). Creating distinctions is a fundamental part of social action, according to sociologist Bourdieu, which happens between ‘classes’ with vast differences he concludes in his influential book ‘La Distinction’ in 1979 (Bourdieu in Boterman 2005). Bourdieu argues that people have different forms of capital: social, cultural and economic (Bourdieu and Nice 2010). Cultural capital refers for example to style of speech and dress, education, and intellect (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu describes how distinction happens through taste and lifestyle (Bourdieu in Boterman 2005). Taste is strongly related to class and the distribution of wealth and cultural capital, and together play an important role in defining one’s group (Boterman 2005). Good taste, according to Bourdieu’s theory, is reserved for people with great cultural capital (ibid.). Bourdieu considers taste as a tool to acquire power to protect one’s position in society (ibid.).

Gentrification is often, wrongly, exclusively associated with ‘yuppies’ or other high-income groups that enter working class neighborhoods and change its characteristics, yet they aren’t the only relevant group in the gentrification process, Boterman argues (2005). He states

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<sup>39</sup> Interview on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

that gentrification is a continuing legitimization process in which the status of neighborhoods gradually changes from “déclassé to accepté” because of factual changes in the area as well as changing imaging (2005). Boterman’s research in Copenhagen revealed that the first ‘gentrifiers’ are often people with little economic capital, which includes students, artists and squatters (2005). For those with considerable cultural capital, which students, artists and squatters often have Boterman argues, it will not reduce their status when they decide to live in “shabby” neighborhoods (ibid.). More so, it will probably enhance their status and will (re)define their good taste (ibid.).

Then, the group that follows will have more economic capital but less cultural capital, because the neighborhood has now been legitimized which allows for a broader group of trend followers to take up residence, Boterman specifies (2005). Consequently, the house and rent prices will rise and the first signs of displacement will become visible (ibid.). Hence, this is a shift from cultural to economic capital, Boterman clarifies (ibid.). As Zoë stated<sup>39</sup>, artists make way for newcomers. Artists’ themselves are part of the gentrification process as well Boterman argues, since each group makes way for another (2005).

In Zoë’s view, ateliers and neighborhoods can go together, but there needs to be cohesion. They prefer ateliers to exist outside of residential areas and not instead of housing. Zoë recognizes that ateliers in a neighborhood that used to be ‘problematic’ can be a sign of gentrification, which is in line with Boterman’s findings (2005). Hence, I was interested to explore ateliers in Delfshaven when Andre took me on a walk<sup>40</sup> to show their view on gentrification there:

So, I was standing on the corner of the Culture Hub next to a bright red painted picnic table. After some minutes, and on time, Andre walks out of their house. They are as I remembered them; friendly, honest, and somewhat of a character. I like them, they are familiar. They are wearing black tight trousers, pink Nike air force, a black bomber jacket with underneath it a colorful knitted cardigan. They are around my height and have fashionable black framed glasses. They wear their smile with ease and frequency. They have acrylic nails, with a soft pink, white and black lines design, that are wrapped around a transparent bag, in which some type of fabric is crumpled.

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<sup>40</sup> Walking interview on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.

They quickly begin with what they want me to see: their street, a prime example of gentrification, where house prices have rocketed. They point at the wine bar, the ‘Culture Hub’, and a project of the WDKA<sup>41</sup>. Pretty much symbols that arise in every gentrification area in Rotterdam-West. It was clear, this location is a hub itself in my research, and Andre was making it obvious.

We walk towards the IJzerstraat, where they show me all the initiatives of artists and art students. I look up towards the houses, which have around four floors, that used to be occupied by people actually living there. Now, they mostly are empty and look abandoned. Andre explains that these houses are now filling up with artists and functioning as their studios and ateliers. However, they have another function as well, they place these artists in them to prevent squatters entering the building, they explain to me. Apparently, the building is or was owned by the Woonbron<sup>42</sup>, but is now linked to WDKA.

When we enter a small playground that faces a school and the building block where the ateliers are, we run into an acquaintance of Andre. She tells us about how the block is being divided in ateliers and who does that. Andre is interested in having an atelier there, but also in doubt. She explains that they want to work with the community and that it is free of charge to have a studio there. Apparently, on every floor or ‘house’ there are about four people that share it, with each a space of their own.

When walk away, we are still talking about the building and stop to look at it some more. We see one of the women that were over there just now, in a room in the building. Andre calls for her and asks if they have running water and electricity. She says they do, only cold water though, but it’s still for free. She then asks us if we would like to see for ourselves. We look at each other, and we’re both eager to explore the building because Andre would like an atelier and I am obviously interested in a gentrification hotspot. So, we say yes. She is down a few seconds and opens the front door.

We explore the whole ‘house’ with her, who I later learn is Julia, my future participant. She shows us the other two floors. On the top floor, which is a big attic, she tells us that they want to make this space a communal area, where people can

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<sup>41</sup> Willem de Kooning Academie, an art school in Rotterdam.

<sup>42</sup> Housing corporation.

meet. I am surprised by how big one unit is. Andre is too and they joke about how they are tempted to also apply for an atelier and send them their portfolio.

Through this elaborate fieldnote excerpt I want to illustrate how ateliers can be a sign of gentrification in a neighborhood. Moreover, my participants proved the reality wherein creatives are indeed one of the first people that make a neighborhood attractive to more affluent people, investors, and housing corporations. Yet this example also relates to the awareness and critical stance artists and creatives might have towards gentrification as a process and their own role in it. Such as, Andre was in serious doubt when they were looking for an atelier space and after we stumbled upon that block of ateliers, that was part of gentrification.



inside  
atelier  
spaces





Photographer: Jamea Kofi,  
Coolhaveneiland, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.

### 2.3 “You have proximity to power”

“We fit right into that gentrification image”<sup>43</sup>, Rose jokes. She and Mia are two creatives that I interviewed in Mia’s atelier in Delfshaven, around the corner from the atelier block Andre and I walked past. Rose continues, “we are the people that get asked for some kind of breeding ground in a neighborhood”. What stood out to me was her choice of words, *get asked* [*worden gevraagd*], demonstrating artists and creatives are invited, but by whom?

The fieldnote excerpt with Andre above reveals the gatekeepers that hold power and dictate who works or lives where. These gatekeepers in this example are the Woonbron, a housing corporation and the WDKA, an art school, which both work together with the municipality of Rotterdam. In fact, the artists, who were mostly students, were offered studio spaces in a whole block of what used to be social housing and was on the list to be demolished. Some art teachers were offering these spaces and are in collaboration with the housing corporation. Here we see how creatives are used as a cheap way to prevent squatters from

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<sup>43</sup> Interview on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021.

entering while simultaneously ‘uplifting’ the neighborhood’s cultural value and thus also its monetary value. Many times, artists have ‘antikraak’ studios, which are cheap to rent. These ateliers in former social housing buildings function as cheap on both ends, since it costs the housing corporation less than social housing, which needs more maintenance. This relates to the cheapening theory of Patel and Moore, wherein they argue that capitalists suggest cheap fixes for certain problems (2018, 27). Placing artists in what used to be social housing, concedes the temporary cheap fix within the housing crisis, and prevents squatting. Artists are accepting these cheap fixes, because it is very hard to find atelier spaces, as Sophia explains, “it’s like when someone dangles you these keys and like ‘you get three months for free and then you pay’, people take these opportunities.”<sup>44</sup>

When I asked Julia if she feels like artists are being used by housing corporations in the gentrification process, she told me that she feels like they are used versus using it as well, in Charlois<sup>45</sup> at least. Furthermore, she emphasized the fact that these are white artists that are gaining precarity while also making use of it and accepting it. To her, this is “some kind of segregation”, since Charlois used to be a predominantly migrant neighborhood. This comment by Julia is in line with Hochstenbach’s conclusion, wherein gentrification will eventually produce spatial divisions and thus contribute to segregation, with less options for disadvantaged residents (2017, 207).

Moreover, many artists who my participants know or are, come from middle class families but are now poorer, Julia explained, “but still artists”<sup>46</sup>. There is a “certain type of privilege” at play here, “the privilege to feel safe to do this”<sup>47</sup>, to be an artist, which often means living in precarity, Julia continues. She points out that there often needs to be “some family support at least”, to survive as an artist. Thus, “not everyone can be an artist, because of lacking privilege”, she concludes. This captures how indeed artists live in precarious situations. However, many times they can choose to live that way because of their privileges; their proximity to economic capital. More so, there are other privileges at play when being an artist, such as education, the coding of ‘this art world’ and being some level of intellectual, Julia points out.

The importance of the role of artists in gentrification processes does not only center around the first signs of gentrification, rather, artists hold a unique place in society, wherein

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<sup>44</sup> Interview on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Neighborhood in the south of Rotterdam.

<sup>46</sup> Comment by Sophia, interview on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Interview on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

they move between middle-class and upper-class environments, often due to vast cultural capital and not much economic capital. During my interview with Sophia, who is an activist and was involved in the squatting of a community center, explains how artists and creatives move within their unique place in society, since “they occupy different spots”. She states that artists have “proximity to power, because culturally [they] are more than working class.” This proximity to power relates to Bourdieu’s view on the ‘good taste’ people with vast cultural capital have, which includes artists (Boterman 2005). Sophia continues to explain artists’ unique position:

Sophia: So, you don’t have the same lifestyle as the single mom with three kids that lives next door to you, even though financially maybe you have the same amount of money in your bank account. You have proximity to power; you might come in contact with like really posh people, you might be invited to really posh parties, you might have these trips and residencies. You live the life of people who are like higher class, but still materially you stay working class. And I think that also puts, in my opinion, artists in this very difficult cognitive dissonance way, because you have this aspirational identity of not being working class, and it is harder for people to fight for housing rights because they don’t really see them struggling in the same way.

Jamea: Do you still think that artists are contributing to...

Sophia: Gentrification? Yeah, 100%. Yeah, with every little thing.

Ergo, the role of artists within gentrification is relevant because of their proximity to power. Likewise, what I heard during my walking interview with Andre sounded quite similar. We came to know that there are about three teachers of the WDKA that are in charge in giving these spaces to students and artists, when they show their portfolio. During the interview with Rose and Mia I heard a similar story. Mia, who is an artist, told me that she got her social housing apartment because one woman from the housing corporation was looking for artists to live in these apartments. She later heard from her neighbors that many neighbors then couldn’t return. The similarity here is in the certain gatekeepers in the housing and atelier assigning process. These gatekeepers design who lives and works where, and most importantly who does not. Thus, there are people and institutions that have the power to dictate the population of certain neighborhoods. Moreover, Emma coincidentally was declined a studio space in that same

block I walked by with Andre because they had “beef”<sup>48</sup> with one of those teachers. Emma is a student at WDKA too and knows the teacher that me and Andre heard about. Emma was quite offended by this. They are an active squatter and the teacher made use of that fact, stating he was afraid they would squat the building. At first, what they told me sounded like gossip, but I later realized this is the other side of the same coin: that teacher is also able to *reject* people from using that space as an atelier. Here, we see that (im)mobility is connected to one’s economic, cultural, and social capital. This also shines light the terms gentrifiers and gentrified, as people might be put in a position, or are restrained from it, rather than choosing it themselves.

## 2.4 The artists’ accountability

A prime example of artists questioning their accountability within gentrification was during a meeting organized by many creatives that work and live in the south of Rotterdam, which was held in the squatted community center in Delfshaven.<sup>49</sup> During this meeting people were able to express their concerns about the building and organization of the ‘Kunstcentrum’<sup>50</sup> in the south of Rotterdam. Many people at the meeting were from Charlois since that is where the center will come.

It is a “gentrification scheme”, the social housing in Charlois, according to many people present, who nod in agreement. The people present are aware of their status as an artist, as someone declares, “I’m an artist and that’s the reason I’m in this house” and “[we]’re all complicit” as artists in this “gentrification scheme”. According to the organization, and what people here know about the center, the aim is to centralize artists in Rotterdam-Zuid<sup>51</sup>. However, people wonder “why do you need to centralize?”. Centralizing artists in studios is not a new concept and has been done many times, others argue. Then, still, “what is the intention” of it, someone asks. According to Thomas<sup>52</sup> it is a “red flag” that someone from the municipality is present at the meeting, which everyone finds funny. He explains that the center is a gentrifying option for the municipality and is meeting their policy goals. Thus, it is impossible to have free space because the municipality is involved, he concludes. Someone online, that I later learn is Julia, stresses that this group is a “white group [that] needs to talk about racism”. ‘We are indeed whites taking up space in Black and Brown spaces’, she adds, ‘we are

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Emma on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2021.

<sup>50</sup> An art center people are planning to realize in the south of Rotterdam. Artists and creatives have been asked to donate 1000 euros and also pay contribution. The organization is also trying to get subsidies, next to the donations, to buy a building from a private landlord, as the gossip was during the meeting.

<sup>51</sup> South of Rotterdam.

<sup>52</sup> Name changed.

segregated in a certain way'. Julia continues by stating that through this culture center they are "trying to attract other whites that have more money". The group didn't really respond to her comments, it seemed as though none of them were against it either, but none of them engaged. According to the group, the Kunstcentrum is insensitive to minimizing its impact to rent raising because of gentrification. Just before the meeting ends, Sophia stresses that the displacement of people is something they should be against.

In her book 'Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism' (2013), Jen Harvie writes that artists and creatives can indeed contribute to gentrification. Yet, she argues, "this is probably almost never an intended consequence" (2013, 127). However, if the rent will rise because you have come into a neighborhood, one should critically analyze their impact. The 'Kunstcentrum' might have the perfect ingredients to become an excellent gentrification starter, since it has creatives, white people, and space. Artists and creatives must be aware of the fact that "space is socially contested" (Harvie 2013, 108). This awareness must be either thought at educational institutions, as some participants suggest<sup>53</sup>, or through personal interest in the neighborhood and its history in which your art will take place. How people and organizations make use of space impacts, or even disturbs, social relations of privilege and power (Harvie 2013, 108). Accordingly, artists and creatives should be aware of the effects of their art, and how it might partially contribute to 'social cleansing' (2013, 110). Artworks, and pop-ups specifically, jeopardize contributing to "neoliberal capitalist colonization" of urban space (Harvie 2013, 127). Artworks can facilitate a change in people's perceptions of a neighborhood and will eventually make it more attractive for investors and affluent people, Harvie argues (ibid.). Hence, there should be more awareness of this possible consequence of artworks in neighborhoods that are gentrifying or haven't gentrified (yet), as some participants plead.<sup>54</sup>

In line with Harvie, I am also not claiming that artists inherently create gentrification. However, gentrification can be a serious consequence of their art and potentially have in fact detrimental social effects (2013, 110; 134). Thus, we should be cautious about art in neighborhoods and its tendency to stimulate higher-income inward investment and migration (Harvie 2013, 134). To illustrate the importance of awareness I will compare two interview excerpts. The first excerpt is with Rose and Mia, and I had asked if they had seen or felt any changes in their neighborhoods since they had moved to Rotterdam:

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<sup>53</sup> Emma, Sophia, Zoë, Andre, and Julia.

<sup>54</sup> Zoë and Benny.

Mia: No, it isn't an extreme change or something. I know from back then, I had opened that flower shop [...] So, I had put the lettering up and stuff and then I ran into this girl who I know, and her boyfriend lives on that street, a bit further down, and she said [imitates voice] '[Mia]! What am I hearing! Is that trendy place *yours*?' And I was like yes, I don't know, flower shop, yeah. [imitates voice again] 'Yes I saw it and first I thought' [shouting] '*Who the fuck is gonna gentrify it here!?*'

Jamea: [laughs]

Rose: Yes, that's really true! Rotterdammers are really angry about the Urban Espresso Bar and...

Mia: Yes, exactly. And so, I had these white letters on my thing and then of course it's immediately also this hipster place or something. And then, she said like 'he is living there for decades, and I thought like oh no who is coming this way?'. So, then *I* was doing it! [...] It's really weird to blame each other this way. I thought like yes, she is also a musician, she is also on every trendy magazine. Like is that also...

Jamea: You feel like she is doing the same?

Mia: Yes, maybe. Yes. And she is also living on that street, like you are also defining the street scene.

Jamea: Yes.

Mia: How does that work, where is the responsibility? Who does that? Of course, there are things who do that more, and have more influence on things or people, or organizations, but if you're there you're also a bit part of it. [...] So, everyone is part of such a process on a different level. It's pretty weird to be some sort of guilty. I get it, but still.

Sophia, on the other hand, is more direct on the matter of responsibility of artists and creatives and argues for more awareness of the consequences:

Jamea: Yeah, but do you think that they feel a sense of responsibility?

Sophia: I think most of them are just clueless. Like, I feel that I think it's important. Maybe they do have a feeling. But I think in order to feel responsibility you need to know the consequences of your actions, and I think they just don't see the link. Like, for example, they are doing these community projects, like even if your neighbors have been evicted, but you don't know your neighbors, you would never

know that they have been evicted. Suddenly you just see there's only white people in the street [laughs]. Like, okay, that's like different [laughs]. [...] So, yeah, artists are definitely responsible, but I don't think they necessarily even know the consequences of their actions or sometimes I think selectively they just to decide not to.

Jamea: Because the opportunity arises and then just don't know an alternative?

Sophia: So, yeah, it is an option in a way. Sometimes you just don't want to hear the consequences because you're like okay I really need this opportunity. You think yourself as a pawn, you're like well I'm just being used in the same way as some other people that are being used etcetera, and that's true, like they're being used. But I feel there is a difference between being used and doing damage. It has to do with knowing the extent of what you're doing and consciously taking these decisions.

Through comparing these excerpts, I want to argue for more awareness, as is also shown in the pictures below and move away from blaming artists and creatives. Yes, art, artists and creatives can certainly contribute to the processes of gentrification and thus reproduce social inequality. However, I argue that mostly these are not intended consequences. Yet artists and creatives must be aware of their impact on taking up space, specifically in gentrifying neighborhoods. I believe that to be aware is a step in the right direction and for that one must come to terms with the fact that they, as an artist or creative, are used by the municipality, housing corporations and private investors to gentrify neighborhoods. When one is aware of that fact and decides to resist or assist, only then, can we decide on responsibility and accountability. Moreover, the structures and conditions under which people in the creative industry work and live, must be considered as well, for they are a product of neoliberal capitalism, which is entrenched with precarity.

## **Conclusion**

Artists and creatives hold a unique position in society, and so in the gentrification process. Artists and creatives are generally the first newcomer in the neighborhood (Boterman 2005). The good taste of artists is related to their cultural capital, which attracts other newcomers with more economic capital. The proximity to power that artists have reveals that they are indeed wanted and used within the gentrification strategy of Rotterdam, hence they *get asked* to





## Chapter 3

### The Representation of Waste

The relationship between waste, green space, and gentrification  
in Rotterdam-West.

Nieuwe Binnenweg, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021.



Waste is a mirror of humanity, a means or intermediary by which to reflect on ourselves. – Joshua Reno (2015, 558)

This chapter is cultivated mostly through the pictures of my participants, in some cases a series of garbage. Waste, particularly when visible, relates to the image of the neighborhood and represents the neglect of the municipality for many participants. The presence and absence of waste is related to gentrification, while the implementation of green spaces can contribute to gentrification processes. Through the lens of waste and ‘green gentrification’, one can grasp changes in the environment of Rotterdam-West. Waste is slowly transforming into ‘geveltuintjes’<sup>55</sup> when gentrification is on the horizon, ‘smoothing’ the street scene.

### **3.1 Waste as a ‘daily annoyance’ and the reminder of neglect**

The capitalist city, according to Lefebvre, is a “place of consumption and consumption of place” (in King 2019, 84). The infinite economic growth that capitalism and neoliberalism focus on is inherently not compatible with sustainability<sup>56</sup>, because at its core it will always place money over people. The concept of sustainability is then a great tool to rethink interactions across many domains such as nature and culture and the global and local, but also between the past, present and possible futures.<sup>56</sup> The language within literature regarding environmental sustainability resonates with social sustainability issues, which is understandable “when people and places become associated with waste, they may be seen as waste themselves, that is, as disposable and abject subjects without potential” (Bauman in Reno 2015, 562). How waste is understood and handled is socially constructed, and reflects social relations (Högberg 2017, 59), “rather than actual characteristics of things in the world” (Reno 2017b, 18).

Capitalism ‘naturally’ requires consumption; however, consumption is only possible when we dispose.<sup>57</sup> Now, when relating this to housing and gentrification, one might conclude the same. For new, affluent, residents to come in, other people must leave. Disposal is made possible through waste infrastructures, which are defined as socio-material systems that make things disappear by moving them elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> Gentrification can be considered a waste infrastructure considering the neoliberal perspective of housing in cities, particularly concerning the displacement of residents in the process. The original residents are treated like

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<sup>55</sup> Small garden at the frontage of a house.

<sup>56</sup> Henig, D. (2020) *Lecture 1: Sustainability contested*, Sustainability and Social Contestation 201500033, Utrecht University, delivered on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Henig, D. (2020) *Lecture 4: Waste and its discontents*, Sustainability and Social Contestation 201500033, Utrecht University, delivered on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

waste, something one can dispose. “Like most infrastructures of liberal governance, waste management is considered most successful to the extent that its workings and flows remain invisible” (Reno 2015, 561), which resonates with the displacement of residents in Rotterdam-West due to policymaking facilitating gentrification. Invisibility and silence, is what characterizes infrastructures that work properly, which is especially true for waste management, Jacob Doherty states (2018, 93). Spreading policies are not so much making original residents invisible, but rather less visible through spreading them across Rotterdam and its outskirts (Hochstenbach 2017), in the name of ‘diversity’.

Moving people elsewhere is necessary within the exclusionary policies of the municipality of Rotterdam, however, this is “not sustainable”, as Lauren states<sup>58</sup>. According to the response of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the UN rapporteurs, the Province of South Holland has made a regional agreement wherein its municipalities ensure that the social housing stock will be increased (Balbin 2021, 3). This might suggest that Rotterdam’s surrounding municipalities are preparing to take in the displaced residents. Additionally, are they then admitting that indeed the residents that live in the “small houses that are in poor condition” will not reap the fruits of “improvement in living standard” (Balbin 2021, 1)? As Joshua Reno elaborates, “if successfully managed and removed from inhabited areas, waste must go somewhere and be dealt with by someone” (2015, 562). If value is a way of determining what is important, then waste would be that which lacks value, Reno discloses (Reno 2017b, 17). However, he also reminds us, “nothing is waste in general but only in particular” (2015, 559). What we do with waste is essential, as it reveals what people are worth and what is meaningful to them (Reno 2017b). What one disposes of “makes other things appear more important, by comparison”, Reno adds (2017b, 18). Waste concerns the morality and ethics versus abstract conceptions of value, and for instance can explain how “Europeans today have separated cemeteries from landfills” (ibid.).

Moving people elsewhere and treating them like human waste is not new (Eriksen 2016, 99). According to Eriksen (2016) there is a double bind between neoliberal practices and human rights principles, which relates to the United Nations rapport (Rajagopal et al. 2021). Within human rights principles all human lives have value, however, the marketisation of social life indicates that activities can be ranked hierarchal through their economic significance (Eriksen 2016, 99). Consequently, activities which are ranked as economically useful have more value than those who make fewer valuable contributions (ibid.). Yet, “value is a mutable relation and

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<sup>58</sup> Interview on April 5, 2021.

not an inherent characteristic of things themselves” (Reno 2017a, vii), and one should ask who decides which residents get exposed to or are considered as waste (Thompson 2017, 106-7). Residents with fewer valuable contributions are then more vulnerable, and considered replaceable, or rather displaceable, and might be treated as waste. Moreover, waste can be perceived as a threat to specific forms of life, Reno specifies, while waste’s absence makes those forms of life possible (Reno 2017b), such as the lives of more affluent people. Hence, waste is not only connected to material, but has important and drastic social consequences and carries a human responsibility<sup>56</sup>.

The importance of waste and what it represents, was noticed by many participants. Waste was mentioned frequently, as participants connected waste to the value and image of a neighborhood. “It’s just disgusting! You notice where it is and where it isn’t”, Zoë states, “it’s just ridiculous”. When I asked in what ways they felt the municipality’s presence in their neighborhood, many participants answered that they felt the neglect of the municipality through the display of garbage on the street. Not only the right to affordable housing is being questioned here, but also ‘adequate waste services’ as ‘a basic human right’ (Reno 2015, 558), and reflects the social conditions and which lives are valued. By relating waste to citizenship, the struggle of a citizen is made visible and why residents want “the right to have a daily life in the city worthy of a citizen’s dignity” (Isin 2009, 245). The waste on the street, in front of participant’s doors, or seen from their balcony, was for some a day-to-day encounter with neglect and made them question if their neighborhood and its residents were worthy of clean streets. Nearly all participants that have shared photos, made photos with garbage in them, even when some did not mention it in the interview.<sup>59</sup> For instance, Karin named one photo of litter her ‘daily annoyance’ [*dagelijkse ergernis*], which represents how many other participants felt as well. Waste functions as a symbol of worthiness for many participants, which then in turn relates to gentrification and which people are ‘worthy’ enough and thus able to remain living in Rotterdam-West. Ergo, which citizen has a ‘right to the city’ (Lefèbvre 1996), or rather is *given* this right?

Often, garbage is outside of the containers that fill up with waste underground, as is shown in Karin’s photo<sup>60</sup>. The visibility of waste is essential in the image of a neighborhood and was illustrated by Benny<sup>61</sup>. When moving into Spangen, Benny was doubtful of his decision, as he tried to grasp what was on the street.

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<sup>59</sup> Nine out of twenty participants have shared photos with me, seven of which made photos of garbage.

<sup>60</sup> See page 53.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Benny on April 13, 2021.

Benny: I really thought ‘what the fuck’, the whole street, pretty wide, everywhere was garbage. [...]

Jamea: Why?

Benny: I don’t know. And the weirdest shit. A box of laundry detergent, diapers, a pack of pasta or something. Like what the fuck are you doing outside?

Benny compares the street scene, including litter, to poverty and less popular parts of Rotterdam, such as the south, where he grew up. As Benny states, “not even in Zuid<sup>62</sup> have I seen it this extreme”. Likewise, Renske<sup>63</sup> relates litter to “poorer neighborhoods”, as she points at the litter just outside her window, that supposedly comes from people that ‘hang’ in their cars there and shop owners. Renske is ashamed of the litter and views it as harmful [*schadelijk*] for the image of the neighborhood. Here, she and her boyfriend Jaïr connect the litter to the neglect of the municipality.

Renske: Nobody will pick it up.

Jaïr: Because there are so many shopkeepers here, they dump all of it in those containers. But if something is stuck, then the sensor won’t go off.

Renske: They don’t have a container, so they must, but then everything will be full.

Jaïr: Seriously, in the three years that I have been living here, I have never seen any street sweepers. You know these things, those cars? Never seen those here. But I have over the bridge, there at Mathenesserplein. [...] You have some people here that do it themselves, white people [laughs], they will clean it up themselves. But yeah, you can expect that if you won’t do it yourself, it won’t happen.

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<sup>62</sup> Refers to the south of Rotterdam, Rotterdam-Zuid.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Renske and Jaïr on March 12, 2021.



## Karin's daily annoyance

Title: 'Dagelijkse ergernis'  
Photographer: Karin, shared on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.

## CLEAN UP DAY

Initiative to clean up the neighborhood monthly.  
Photographer: Jamea Kofi, between Spangen and Tussendijken, July 28, 2021.



## TAKE YOUR WASTE WITH YOU

Neighborhood initiative due to litter in front of houses and car shops. Photographer: Renske, Tussendijken, shared on June 6, 2021.

### 3.2 The paradox of green gentrification

Certainly, not every participant was concerned with litter. Jaz, for instance, sees this concern rather differently, “people are obsessed with the trash”<sup>64</sup>. She explains how there are groups in her neighborhood who clean up trash, “like a citizen-led cleaning gang”, she jokes. The fact that there are residents taking ‘matters into their own hands’ might indicate that gentrification is happening or will happen soon. Changes in scenery, particularly green urban developments, can lead to gentrification or be a sign of it. As Jaz elaborates, “sometimes it’s hard to figure out whether some of it goes a bit too far into gentrification or into the middle-class people trying to make the poor neighborhood look nice”. She connects the coming of ‘geveltuintjes’<sup>55</sup> to gentrification and wonders what the intentions of the neighborhood volunteers was while making those. Jaz continues:

“Like what happens to the gardens after you leave, what happens next year. If the gardens aren’t made with people who live in the houses, then is it their garden? This idea of who then cares for it, or upkeep it, or feels like an ownership of that. And then why should there then be a garden? Whose vision of what makes a nice neighborhood is that?”

Green space stimulates one’s well-being and is thus beneficial to the public health of urban residents, moreover, it is considered to be an environmental justice issue Wolch, Byrne, and Newell argue (2014, 234). As Grove points out the ‘cultural practices through which nature is inscribed are always political’, and one should question ‘whose nature may legitimately be practiced’ (in Byrne 2012, 607).

‘Green gentrification’, coined by Gould and Lewis (2012), describes the process of how environmental improvements can increase racial and class inequality and decrease environmental justice in urban settings, which in turn is made possible by segregation in housing (114-5). Urban greening is understood as the creation and restoration of green amenities, such as parks, gardens, playgrounds, and other recreational spaces (Cole et al. 2017, 1118). Further, the segregation in housing is explained by the capitalist economy, in which housing is distributed based on wealth, a primary component of power in capitalist societies, even in supposedly democratic political systems (Gould and Lewis 2012, 117-9). Importantly, it is often difficult to know which causal direction is observed, “whether gentrification leads to

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<sup>64</sup> Interview on March 22, 2021.

greening or greening to gentrification” (2012, 140). Yet, Gould and Lewis are certain that gentrification can lead to greening (ibid.). Green gentrification, the “greening” of urban areas, can be code for “whitening” neighborhoods when it is combined with market-forces in urban real estate and institutional and cultural racism (Gould and Lewis 2012, 140). The greening of urban spaces should be closely monitored then, since it can bolster the making of predominately white environments as well, also called ‘smoothing’ (Boer 2018). Within the ‘Smooth City’ urban spaces transform into “clean, well-functioning, safe, maintained and prosperous” environments, which can also be oppressive and controlling (Boer 2018). Participating in the ‘Smooth City’ requires ‘exceptional privilege’, and those who cannot afford it are left behind, stuck, in the leftover urban zones, as Boer refers to as the ‘Unsmooth City’ (2018). The ‘smoothing’ of Rotterdam-West can thus have detrimental consequences for vulnerable residents, since they are the ones that will be left behind, or rather disposed of.

Urban planning is influenced by a hierarchy of organized interests, including policy making, which traditionally places economic growth-oriented interests at the top, while interests as social equity are left behind (Cole et al. 2017, 1119). This hierarchy is influenced by economic endeavors, reinforces existing power relations, and does not benefit marginalized and vulnerable populations (Pearsall and Anguelovski 2016, 1). Thus, when original residents will be displaced, they will not reap the fruits of “improvement in living standard” (Balbin 2021, 1). The fact that these dynamics of exclusion take place within municipal planning and interventions is recognized by Pearsall and Anguelovski (2016). They argue that these dynamics are “a prominent component of and new opportunity for urban economic development” (2016, 1). Green gentrification can thus reproduce processes of exclusion, marginalization and displacement (Gould and Lewis 2012; Pearsall and Anguelovski 2016, 2). Such policies represent a conflict between ecological sustainability and social justice (Hornborg 2015, 384), and raises concern about the consequences of such efforts for vulnerable people (Pearsall 2010, 883). Gentrifying neighborhoods may be paradoxical due to urban green space strategies which attract more affluent people, instead of keeping the residents the green spaces where supposedly designed for (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014, 235). Generally, gentrifying neighborhoods are paradoxical since a marginalized sociocultural space can suddenly become an economical opportunity for new capitalist strategies (Lloyd 2010, 18). Yet, this research demonstrates that changes due to gentrification are not quite that sudden and are noticed by residents. In the photo series beneath the awareness of green gentrification is illustrated, in which Zoë even titled pictures of greening “signs of gentrification”.

# “Signs of gentrification”



Both pictures are made by Zoë, shared on May 30, 2021.



Photographer: Jamea Kofi,  
Nieuwe Westen, July 9, 2021.



Photographer: Jamea Kofi,  
Tussendijken, March 12, 2021.



## This is a neighborhood deck



Photographer: Jamea Kofi, Delfshaven, February 24, 2021.

### Conclusion

Many participants experienced their exposure to waste as an insult or annoyance, and some related it to the value and image of the neighborhood and its residents. “The erosion of the neighborhood”<sup>65</sup> can be interpreted in various ways, foremost as gentrification and thus the removal of original residents, as Zoë intended with this remark. Yet, for many the garbage on the street represents erosion in a different way, relating to the neglect of the municipality and reproducing the ‘bad’ image of a marginalized neighborhood. By incorporating green spaces into marginalized neighborhoods, some of the circulated garbage might disappear, however, along with its original residents.

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<sup>65</sup> Comment by Zoë, interview with on May 14, 2021.

# GARBAGE

a series through the participant's lens



Photographer: Renske, shared on June 6, 2021.



Photographer: Tim, shared on April 28, 2021.



Photographer: Zoë, shared on May 30, 2021.



Photographer: Kai, shared on June 8, 2021.





## Chapter 4

### Resisting Gentrification

How gentrification is resisted in Rotterdam-West, through spreading awareness, collective action, squatting, and silent resistance

International Workers Day demonstration, Rotterdam-Centrum, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021.



Gentrification is resisted in various manners, often forms that suit a participant's lifestyle, profession, occupation, and personality. The participants resisted gentrification through collective action, squatting, becoming aware and spreading awareness, and silent resistance. The importance of solidarity and communities was illustrated through different groups, initiatives, and organizations.

#### **4.1 Awareness**

Many participants expressed a deep knowledge and awareness about gentrification and the housing policies which facilitate it. For Sophia, an important factor in resisting gentrification is knowing your neighbors and the history of the neighborhood, especially when you are a newcomer in a neighborhood. The history of a neighborhood is important to all residents. Ergo, newcomers or 'gentrifiers' must integrate into neighborhoods, Benny argues, as many migrants had to do many years ago in Spangen. "Spangen belongs to Spangen"<sup>66</sup>, Benny states when he explains the community in Spangen, "we in the same struggle, you know". For him, resisting gentrification should also be through participating in municipal conversations. Importantly, Benny would like these conversations to be available and accessible to all residents, hence in different languages and in their own neighborhoods.

Lauren also includes awareness of gentrification processes in their career, as she wanted to bring her knowledge into her future career, preferably through urban planning in Rotterdam. Her critical analysis of the housing policies at play demonstrates her frustration and confusion, "but has the neighborhood become any better, or just different?"<sup>67</sup>, she asks. Moreover, she is aware of her own role in gentrification, as she and her mother are gentrifiers since "we came here with the same reasoning as yuppies". In fact, her mother bought a house near West-Kruiskade as a "good investment" in "the place to be", as Lauren elaborates, "so in that sense I am part of that side, but that doesn't necessarily mean I approve". She also recognizes that "people won't assume I am [a gentrifier] since I am [Cape Verdean]", since most gentrifiers are white and often do not shop locally, as she does.

Along, Tim writes and spreads awareness about gentrification on media platforms and online magazines. He also is an active participant in conversations with the municipality and its departments. His resistance to gentrification is seen through participating in the public debate concerning housing, and by analyzing the policies surrounding gentrification. Tim is aware of

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<sup>66</sup> Interview on April 13, 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Interview on April 5, 2021.

gentrification processes and in close contact with the people and officials, who hold power over his beloved neighborhood, Delfshaven, which has been his home for over thirty-five years. Many participants understand the political climate of the city, which is “liberal and facilitates higher income household and vigor”<sup>68</sup>. Tim believes the solution to gentrification is to “reverse all neoliberal decision making”<sup>69</sup>, and to introduce better education, and honest housing and economic policies. Tim’s solutions correspond with other participants’ considerations. Likewise, Lauren suggests that the supply and demand of housing should equate. If higher income households want to leave, they should, as she states, “*ja doeit [...] jammer dan*”<sup>70</sup>. Others<sup>71</sup> express the need for better education as well, specifically within art education. By being aware of the role of artists within gentrification, they will hopefully resist it earlier on in their career, or at least know what they might be a part of, they argue.

#### 4.2 Squatting

Neoliberal policy making was resisted by many, and Emma did so through being an active squatter. “I became a squatter because I am against gentrification”, Emma states<sup>72</sup>. They are daily occupied with squatting, while they organize consultation hours for squatters or other interested people. Squatting is their way of expressing their feelings towards the political climate, that “what is happening is wrong” and to show alternative ways of living. Squatting is related to the decommodification of housing, in which social ownership of housing remains central and would limit the role of profit (Slater 2009, 191). Here, housing is regarded as a basic principle of socially determined need (ibid.). The decommodification of housing is in line with Lefebvre’s thinking, as he argues, “we do not merely reside and produce in the places we live; we inhabit them” (in King 2019, 82). However, this is yet to be realized in Rotterdam, as the municipality gives priority to the highest bidder, often real estate parties, such as housing corporations and private investors (van den Ende 2021).

Other participants also resisted gentrification through squatting, by collectively squatting a community center in Delfshaven. The importance of community based action is recognized by Fraser, as it “opens up possibilities for groups to come together and achieve what individuals might not” (Fraser 2013, 455). Moreover, taking risks in the pursuit of social justice (Essed in Esajas 2018, 12), might feel more secure along with a group of other likeminded

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<sup>68</sup> Lauren, interview on April 5, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Interview on March 8, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Translation: “yeah bye [...] too bad”.

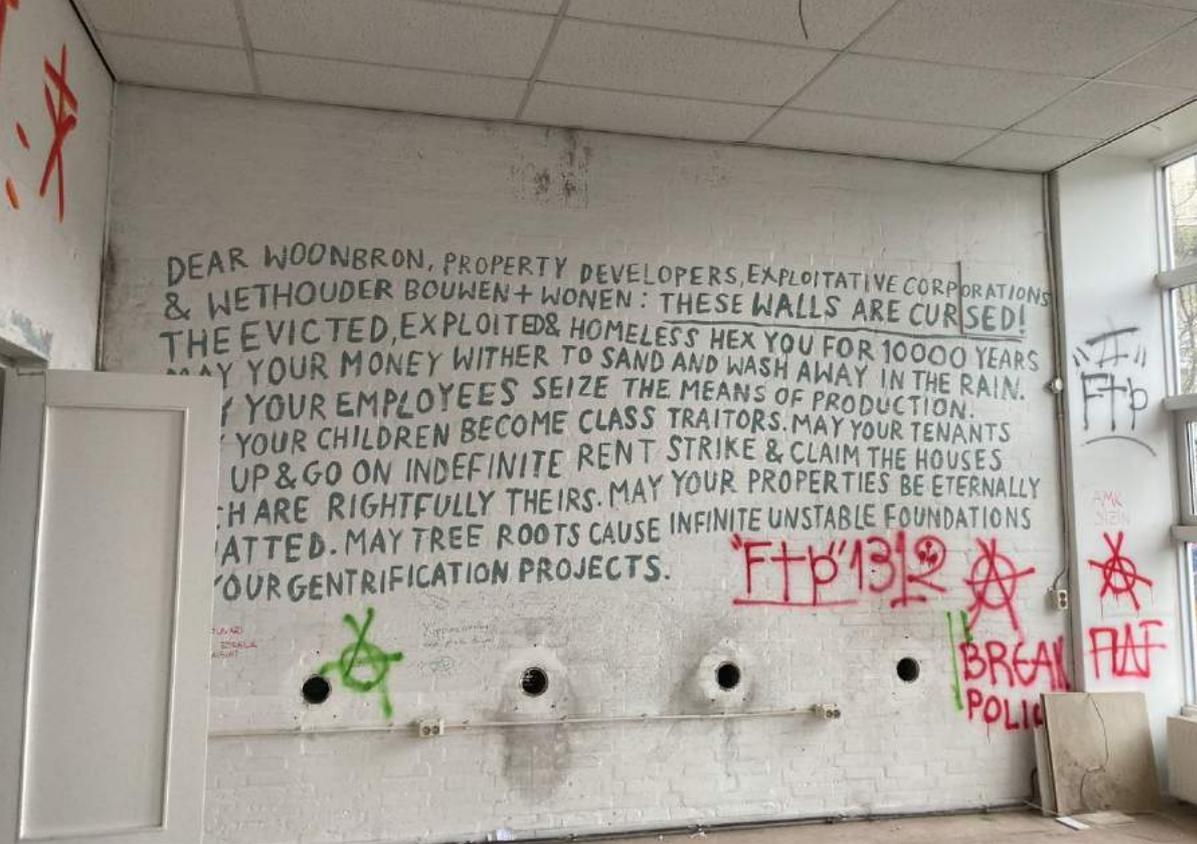
<sup>71</sup> Zoë, Emma, Sophia, and Julia.

<sup>72</sup> Interview on April 26, 2021.

people. Many times, I met Sophia and Jaz at the community center, for interviews, meetings and on the day of the supposed eviction. Through collective action they were able to squat the building for two months, however, they were evicted since the building was sold, ostensibly<sup>73</sup>. In the next photo series, the squatting of the community center is shown on the day of eviction, which eventually was postponed. The photos illustrate resistance to gentrification, and the fact that people are aware it happens in a neoliberal political climate.

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<sup>73</sup> No proof was presented of this during trial, according to Sophia and Jaz.



'Woonbron' is the housing corporation that owns the building, and it translates to 'source of housing'.

'LEEGSTANDBRON' translates to 'source of vacancy' and ridicules the Woonbron.



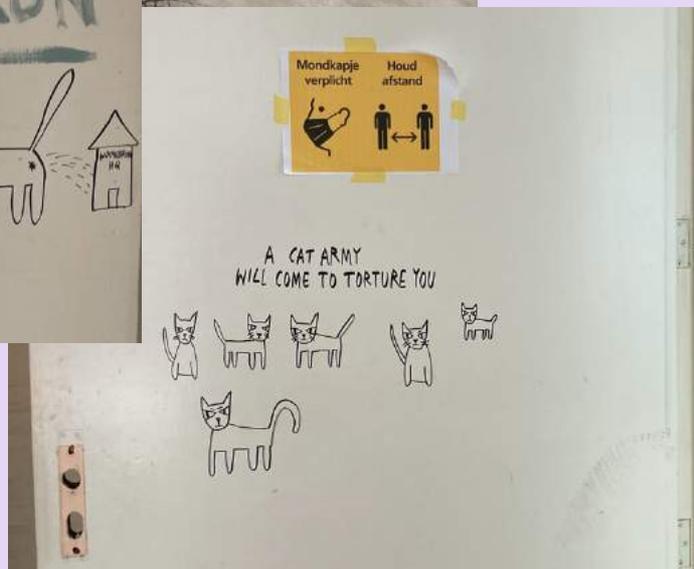
THIS GROUND IS CURSED



Fuck the real estate mafia

EVERT VAN VEEN YOU'RE A PIG





Photographer: Jamea Kofi, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021.



A gift I got from Jaz, as the garden would soon be inaccessible to the squatters.



### 4.3 Collective action and “silent resistance”

Many people that participated in the squatting of the community center were also present during protests. For instance, during an anti-racism protest<sup>74</sup>, some were protesting the ‘Rotterdamwet’ as well. One of the guest speakers during the protest was from ‘Recht op de Stad’<sup>75</sup>, an initiative by neighborhood residents from all over Rotterdam concerned with better housing policies<sup>76</sup>. He spoke about how housing policies are discriminating certain groups of residents. Karin, who is part of this initiative, explains the focus on housing as a fundamental right and the importance of the feeling of ownership regarding home and its surroundings. She has been living in Rotterdam-West for over 40 years and shared her views on all the changes she has seen. Karin is one of the founders of a ‘self-organization’ and public space in Rotterdam-West, where residents can read, work, and attend cultural events. She experienced how much effort it takes to cultivate such spaces. Gentrification is about “ideal residents”<sup>77</sup>, Karin elaborates, which is humiliating to other residents since it implies, they are not ideal. Gentrified residents become “second class citizens”, she states, which relates to the findings in chapter 1 and 3.

Additionally, newer collectives in resistance to gentrification have been formed as well, such as the ‘Anti-Gentrification School’. The organization is described as a “Rotterdam based school in process” and a “grassroots curriculum to collectively learn, unlearn and develop strategies to resist gentrification in our neighbourhoods”.<sup>78</sup> The school is educating about what gentrification is, how to be aware, as well as how to resist gentrification. Hence, the ‘Anti-Gentrification School’ and ‘Recht op de Stad’ are spreading awareness, in addition to coming together in their resistance to gentrification. Sophia who is involved in the school, illustrated the importance of collective resistance when she wanted to pause her rent, along with other residents, due to COVID and decreased incomes. Unfortunately, they failed because they were not allowed to take collective action according to the housing corporation that owns their homes, suggesting again that groups might achieve what individuals might not (Fraser 2013, 455).

Simultaneously, some participants prefer to resist in silence, or rather by ‘actively’ refraining from gentrification practices. This resistance is an act as well since refraining takes effort. One participant who is critical of their own resistance is Zoë, “the only thing I do against

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<sup>74</sup> On March 21, 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Translation: Right to the City.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Recht op de Stad’ website, accessed on August 9, 2021: <https://rechtopdestad.nl/>

<sup>77</sup> Interview on April 20, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Anti-Gentrification School website, accessed on August 9, 2021:

<https://antigentrificationschool.noblogs.org/post/2021/07/01/anti-gentrification-school-1-who-what-how/>

it is giving some sort of skid eye and that's it. [...] But it is my silent resistance to those kinds of activities”<sup>79</sup>. Benny refrains from gentrification practices as well, yet, it is hard to escape gentrification; “that expensive hipster shit”. As he explains, “sometimes I crave a chai latte [laughs], then I have to, especially in the winter”. Additionally, Andre was doubtful of getting an atelier in Delfshaven, in spaces that used to be social housing. This showed that they were aware of what gentrification was, and actively refrained from participating in possible gentrification practices.

#### **4.4 The return of the ‘bakfiets’**

As Pearsall and Anguelovski argue, there are overlapping tactics and strategies in green gentrification and environmental justice (2016). Photo analysis<sup>80</sup> and participant observation revealed that there was an overlap in tactics and strategies concerning social justice and gentrification in Rotterdam-West. For instance, the gift in the photo series above, a little plant from the garden at the squatted community center, illustrates that gardening was a community activity that was practiced by my participants. Through gardening, squatters and neighborhood residents would bond and spread the awareness of the housing policies at play, demonstrating the need for a community center. Many neighborhood residents were in solidarity with the squatters there, and even hung posters on their window. Furthermore, the ‘bakfiets’ also made its return, and was used when Emma would help neighborhood residents that were struggling to get a daily meal. This ‘bakfiets’ is not used for ‘moving around offspring’<sup>81</sup>, instead it is used to feed people. Moreover, a self-made ‘bakfiets’ was used while protesting during International Workers Day. Hence, certain gentrification signs may also be used to resist those same processes and practices, re-claiming those activities and artifacts.

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<sup>79</sup> Interview on May 14, 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Photos on the next page illustrate the examples given.

<sup>81</sup> Comment by Zoë, May 14, 2021.

## **Conclusion**

In this concise chapter various forms of resistance to gentrification have been delineated. Naturally, this is only a segment of the approaches one can take while resisting gentrification. The participants' resistance can be bold for instance through squatting, while others resist through spreading awareness and learning about gentrification processes, or by 'actively' refraining from those processes. These forms of resistance show that there is power in refraining and that communities and collective action are essential in resisting gentrification and noticing when it happens, and importantly, to whom.



Poster of support from neighbors of the community center. Delfshaven, February 24, 2021. Photographer: Jamea Kofi.

Photographer: Emma, shared on May 27, 2021.



Self-made 'bakfiets', International Workers Day demonstration, Rotterdam-Centrum, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. Photographer: Jamea Kofi.

## Spreading awareness



While walking through Delfshaven with Andre, I recognized this poster 'What is Gentrification' ripped of an artwork at ateliers, April 22, 2021.  
Photographer: Jamea Kofi

*Wat is*  
**GENTRIFICATIE?** #woningstand

= een groot woord dat een proces beschrijft waarin oudere (vaak multi-culturele) wijken van werkende klassen steeds meer worden vervangen door (voornamelijk witte) huishoudens met hogere inkomens.

**WAAR EN WANNEER**  
*gebeurt het?*

Het gebeurt in wijken waar mensen met lagere inkomens wonen & de huurprijzen lager zijn. Deze wijken zijn vaak voor lange tijd genegeerd door de gemeente. **Het begint wanneer rijke investeerders intrekken & de buurt 'divers willen maken' of 'upgraden'.**

**WAT BETEKENT DIT VOOR JOU?**

Nieuwe huizen voor een hogere huur en de opkomst van exclusieve bedrijven, zou het aantrekkelijk maken voor rijke huurders.

...> .. alles hiervan drijft uiteindelijk bewoners uit hun huis (soms ook de wijk/stad uit) en families en burens uit elkaar.

**Een wijk met een upgrade, klinkt dat niet als muziek in de oren?**

Meer voorzieningen, meer diversiteit en meer hippe bedrijven

**Dit klinkt goed, MAAR: het is niet voor de wijkbewoners!**

hun huur stijgt razendsnel, terwijl hun inkomens hetzelfde blijven...

Hierop staat: nieuw huizen bouwen, maar niet repareren om er ook betaalbaar woonruimte te creëren. Het is niet om er een plek voor te creëren die eruit ziet als een luxe, behoefteduid. Het proces van gentrificatie is compleet anders als de rijken er komen wonen.

The whole poster 'What is Gentrification', received after a meeting in the squatted community center, March 27, 2021.



# Conclusion

'Attention! Priority to the right', tram stop Heemraadsplein/Nieuwe Binnenweg, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021.



Renske: Everyone has the right to adequate housing, and it must be affordable.

Jair: That's it. Can you believe that there are people in this world that say, 'no I don't agree'? [everyone laughs] Welcome to this world! [shouts] 'Everyone should have equal rights!'... 'Erm, I beg to differ' [laughs].<sup>82</sup>

Gentrification can be considered the neighborhood-based manifestation of neoliberalism (Hackworth 2007, 98). In Rotterdam-West, there are three neoliberal practices that embody the complexity of gentrification. Firstly, gentrification is facilitated by the municipality through neoliberal housing policies, such as the 'Rotterdamwet'. The main goal of this policy is to improve the livability in certain neighborhoods, by restricting newcomers from moving into area that are considered vulnerable or distressed. The livability here is measured through income and criminal history. However, it has been proven that the livability of neighborhoods does not improve by attracting privileged residents, as the municipality does through the 'Rotterdamwet' (van Gent, Hochstenbach, and Uitermark 2018). The history of the 'Rotterdamwet' reveals the discriminatory nature of the act and how it clashes with the Constitution. Through the 'Rotterdamwet', the municipality, landlords and housing corporations can deny and select residents based on the source and amount of income. This is detrimental to low-income households, as policies like the 'Rotterdamwet' limit their options for affordable housing. More so, this disproportionately damages people with a migration background as they rely on governmental assistance to a greater extent than people without a migration background (El Maroudi 2021). Furthermore, policies that promote spreading and social mixing through selective housing allocation eventually create segregation (Lees 2008). This was also noticed by many participants who were concerned with the segregated environments. The arrival of more affluent and white residents is represented by the 'bakfiets'<sup>83</sup>, as Emma referred to as the symbol of gentrification.

Secondly, many participants noticed the relation between the colonial history of Rotterdam and gentrification and were critical of the glorification of colonial ramifications. Some participants considered gentrification a colonial left-over, which damages people of color to a greater extent than white people. Gentrification can be considered the 'new urban colonialism' (Atkinson and Bridge 2010), since it generates the racialization of urban space (Castles and Miller 2003) and produces higher levels of neighborhood segregation (Hochtsenbach 2017). Here, the importance of a decolonial perspective is disclosed, as

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Renske and Jair, March 12, 2021.

<sup>83</sup> Translates to cargo bike.

Rotterdam and particularly Delfshaven have a colonial history (de Kok, 2020; van Roosmalen 2020). Hence, class and ethnicity/race should not be separated while studying gentrification, when class is often mediated by race in multicultural urban context (Boterman 2013, 1132).

Thirdly, the implementation of the ‘creative city model’, by Richard Florida (2004), is attracting more affluent residents – the people riding the ‘bakfiets’. Within the ‘creative city’ a tolerant environment is created by advertising a ‘feel-good-factor’ to attract creative thinkers and affluent residents. However, Florida’s urban design is more concerned with the prosperity of the creative city, not necessarily with its residents. Moreover, one is expected to be hyper mobile to be able to live in a creative city, revealing the privileges its residents must have. The ‘creative city model’ represents a ‘cheap fix’ of the municipality of Rotterdam. To improve the neighborhoods’ livability, policy makers in Rotterdam facilitate gentrification processes to attract affluent newcomers, instead of treating problems in marginalized neighborhoods at its root, as Lauren suggests.

The ‘creative city model’ is driven by economic activity rather than social commitments and is in line with neoliberalism. The model exacerbates privilege for the middle class, which is already privileged, and will intensify disadvantage for vulnerable people (Harvie 2013). Through artistic pop-ups participants experience the creative city and find that many of those artworks do not correspond with neighborhood residents, as they are often not consulted about it. The coming of pop-ups is concerning since it can change people’s perceptions of a neighborhood and attract private investors and developers (Harvie 2013). Yet, this might not be the intention of the artists behind it (Harvie 2013). Nevertheless, for some participants pop-ups are a sign of gentrification and a warning of future displacement and rent increase.

Artists and other creatives are being used by the municipality in their strategy to gentrify neighborhoods. Some participants “get asked” to participate in “gentrification schemes”, which reveals the gatekeepers that hold power in dictating who lives or works where. Often, these gatekeepers are housing corporations, private investors, municipal officials, and (art) educational institutions. The role of artists in gentrification processes is complex since artists hold a unique place in society, wherein they move between middle-class and upper-class environments, often due to vast cultural capital and little economic capital. Ergo, the role of artists within gentrification processes is relevant because of their proximity to power.

Some participants claim that ‘uplifting’ the neighborhood begins with the artist. Artists are often the first ‘gentrifiers’, along with other people with little economic capital (Boterman 2005). For those with considerable cultural capital, which artists have, it will not reduce their status when they decide to live in ‘shabby’ neighborhoods (Boterman 2005). More so, it will

probably enhance their status and will (re)define their good taste (ibid.). Good taste, according to Bourdieu's theory, is reserved for people with great cultural capital and can function as a tool to acquire power (ibid.). Artists then make way for affluent newcomers, some participants argue, which is in line with Boterman's findings (2005).

Placing ateliers and studios in what used to be social housing, concedes the temporary 'cheap fix' within the housing crisis, and prevents squatting. Artists are accepting these cheap fixes, because it is hard to find atelier spaces, some participants affirm. However, other participants questioned their own role and accountability in the process of gentrification as artists and creatives, and therefore have a more critical stance towards gentrification. Artists and creatives must be aware of the fact that "space is socially contested" (2013, 108).

That space is socially contested was demonstrated through waste and its representations. Waste was repeatedly mentioned in interviews and captured in photos, as participants connected waste to the value and image of a neighborhood. Some participants were annoyed and ashamed of the litter and viewed it as harmful for the image of the neighborhood. Through their exposure to waste and the visibility of it they felt the neglect of the municipality. How waste is managed reveals what is meaningful. Moreover, what one disposes of makes other materials seem more important by comparison (Reno 2017b, 18). Furthermore, gentrification can be considered a waste infrastructure considering the neoliberal perspective of housing in cities, particularly concerning the displacement of residents in the process. Certain residents are moved elsewhere to make way for creative newcomers, and then for more affluent residents. Within gentrification processes original residents are treated like waste, for they have fewer 'valuable' contributions according to neoliberal policy makers. Spreading policies are not so much making original residents invisible, but rather less visible, through spreading them across Rotterdam and its outskirts (Hochstenbach 2017).

Besides the 'bakfiets' and artistic pop-ups, green spaces can also remind residents of gentrification. Garbage on the street is slowly making way for green spaces, such as 'geveltuintjes'<sup>84</sup>, to 'smoothen' the street scene. This process is called 'green gentrification', wherein urban areas gain more green spaces. Combined with neoliberal policy making and institutional and cultural discrimination, 'green gentrification' can be code for "whitening" the neighborhood (Gould and Lewis 2012, 140). Many participants also noticed this and questioned for how long they would enjoy the green spaces, and for whom it was made for. Furthermore, many participants mentioned and joked about how they only saw white people cleaning up the

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<sup>84</sup> Small garden at the frontage of a house.

neighborhood and planting gardens. Like art in neighborhoods, green spaces as well can change people's perceptions of an area and make it more attractive for investor and developers (Harvie 2013, 127). Green gentrification can thus reproduce processes of exclusion, marginalization and displacement (Gould and Lewis 2012; Pearsall and Anguelovski 2016). Yet, it is often difficult to know whether gentrification leads to greening or greening to gentrification (Gould and Lewis 2012, 140). Certainly, Gould and Lewis argue, gentrification can lead to greening (ibid.). Urban green space strategies may thus be paradoxical, since the green spaces were made for the residents that will eventually be displaced due to green gentrification (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014, 235).

Meanwhile, green spaces along with 'the bakfiets' were also used in resisting gentrification. Photo analysis and participant observation revealed that there was an overlap in tactics and strategies in gentrification practices and gentrification resistance, which is in line with Pearsall and Anguelovski findings (2016). Participants used the 'bakfiets' for volunteering and protesting, and squatters resorted to gardening to connect with neighborhood residents. Hence, certain gentrification practices are used to re-claim those activities and artifacts.

Many participants expressed a deep knowledge and awareness about gentrification and the housing policies which facilitate it. They then used their knowledge to spread awareness, for instance through incorporating it into their careers. Moreover, knowing your neighbors and the history of the neighborhood was seen as an essential part of being aware of gentrification, importantly when it happens and to whom. Engaging in conversations about a neighborhood should happen with its residents, participants argue, and should be available and accessible to all. The awareness was further demonstrated through consciousness about one's own role and position within gentrification processes.

Additionally, squatting is also used to resist gentrification. Through squatting participants express their feelings towards the neoliberal political climate and promoted the decommodification of housing. Squatting was done collectively as well, and showed that groups can achieve what individuals might not (Fraser 2013, 455). The importance of solidarity and communities was illustrated through different groups, initiatives, and organizations. Through 'Recht op de Stad', the 'Anti-Gentrification School' and protests many participants come together to resist gentrification. Yet, other participants prefer to resist in silence, for instance by refusing to get a cheap atelier in a marginalized neighborhood. Those participants 'actively' refrain from gentrification practices, which is an act as well since refraining takes effort.

In conclusion, gentrification as “the erosion of the neighborhood”<sup>85</sup> can be interpreted in various ways. Foremost, the interpretation as Zoë intended with this remark, which is erosion in the sense of removal of original residents from gentrifying neighborhoods. Nonetheless, for many participants the garbage on the street represents erosion in a different way. Here, the neglect of the municipality is felt, and the visibility of waste reproduces the ‘bad’ image of a marginalized neighborhood. By incorporating green spaces into marginalized neighborhoods, some of the circulated garbage might disappear, however, along with its original residents. Importantly, in both interpretations of erosion, the ‘whitening’ of urban space is noticed by participants. Furthermore, the symbols of gentrification, such as the ‘bakfiets’, ‘geveltuintjes’, and artistic pop-ups represent the daily confrontations participants have with gentrification. Participants are then reminded of ‘the new urban colonialism’, in which often residents of color and with low incomes face possible displacement and rent increase.

In future research about gentrification in post-colonial settings, notions of class in combination with ethnicity/race must be incorporated. The emphasis on class has been far too great and leaves other essential factors in obscurity. This disregards the lived realities of residents in gentrifying neighborhoods. Rather, to be ‘color blind’ is to ignore, or even worse deny, daily and generational struggles of people of color in post-colonial settings. Discrimination and racism are a reality, rather than only an individual experience (de Abreu 2018, 69). It has been proven that selective housing allocation does not improve the livability of neighborhood residents and (re)produces segregation (Lees 2008; van Gent, Hochstenbach, and Uitermark 2018; Doucet, van Kempen, and van Weesep 2011). Then, the fact that a discriminatory act, such as the ‘Rotterdamwet’, is implemented and facilitated by the municipality of Rotterdam is unjust. We shall not ‘refuse to accept’ (Aboutaleb in Groenendijk 2021) the lived reality of residents in Rotterdam-West, for it is a serious matter that human rights are indeed violated (Rajagopal et al. 2021). Many participants live the reality of this discrimination. More so, they recognize that this act must be withdrawn, and suggest the reversal of neoliberal housing policies as a possible anti-gentrification strategy.

Furthermore, for future research, comparative studies about gentrification on different levels, such as between cities or across displaced and new resident populations, would also be interesting and shine light on the “complexities of gentrifications (plural)” (Lees 2012, 164). Additionally, current circumstances regarding housing in other parts of Rotterdam could be explored. Particularly Rotterdam-Zuid could be research, together with its residents, where

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<sup>85</sup> Comment by Zoë, interview with on May 14, 2021.

other initiatives specifically designed for this area are at play<sup>86</sup>. Organizations, such as ‘Recht op de Stad’ and the ‘Anti-Gentrification School’, could be meaningful for future researchers since they are residents’ initiatives and focus on different parts of Rotterdam.

In this master thesis various gentrification practices in Rotterdam-West have been delineated and illustrate the complexity of gentrification as a process. Neoliberal policy making in Rotterdam has detrimental consequences for low-income residents, and those with migrant background specifically. The livability of neighborhood residents does not improve by replacing low-income residents with more affluent, and often white, residents; this will only increase segregation levels and create a more polarized and racialized urban landscape. Gentrification is “the erosion of the neighborhood”<sup>85</sup>, when its original residents are disposed of to make way for affluent people, who are often white, and green spaces. The resistance of many participants revealed that “if our urban world has been imagined and made then it can be reimagined and remade” (Harvey 2004, 239). Lastly, it is not the neighborhood and its residents that need ‘improvement’, rather the housing policies and its policy makers that supposedly serve the people.

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<sup>86</sup> Nationaal Plan Rotterdam-Zuid, accessed on August 12, 2021: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/regio-deals/de-regio-deals-van-10-regios/regio-deal-rotterdam-zuid>



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## Appendix I: Participant information and overview

Participant*	Age	Pronouns	Ethnicity/ Descent	Occupation	Language of interview
Rose	38	She/her	Dutch	Artist	Dutch
Mia	34	She/her	Dutch	Creative sector	Dutch
Tim	43	He/him	Dutch	Historian, writer, guide	Dutch
Renske	25	She/her	Chinese	Event management	Dutch
Jaïr	27	He/him	Surinamese	Education	Dutch
Susan	26	She/her	Dutch	Medical professional	Dutch
Bart	25	He/him	Dutch	Finance	Dutch
Jaz	31	She/her	British	Artist	English
Sophia	31	She/her	Greek	Creative sector/ Education	English
Veronica	36	She/her	Cape Verdean	Event management	Dutch
Lauren	23	She/her	Cape Verdean	Urban planning	Dutch
Noah	30	He/him	Dutch	Music industry	Dutch
Benny	29	He/him	Dominican	Creative sector	Dutch
Karin	50s or 60s	She/her	Dutch	Social science	Dutch
Andre	Early 30s	They/them	Ghanaian	Creative sector/ Education	Dutch
Kai	32	He/him	Japanese and Dutch	Artist/ Food industry	Dutch
Emma	23	They/them	Dutch	Artist/ Student	Dutch
Tony	21	He/him	Cape Verdean	Student	Dutch
Julia	20s or 30s	She/her – they/them	X	Artist	English
Zoë	28	They/them	Curaçaos and Dutch	Artist	Dutch

\* All names are changed.

## Appendix II: West-Kruiskade



1. Photo of the flag on the West-Kruiskade.

**Source:** Selina Kofi, then resident of the West-Kruiskade, made on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2019.



2. Screenshot of a Facebook post and apology by 'West-Kruiskade'. The Facebook page of the street includes shop owners and initiatives by them and the municipality.

**Source:** Selina Kofi, Facebook screenshot.<sup>87</sup>

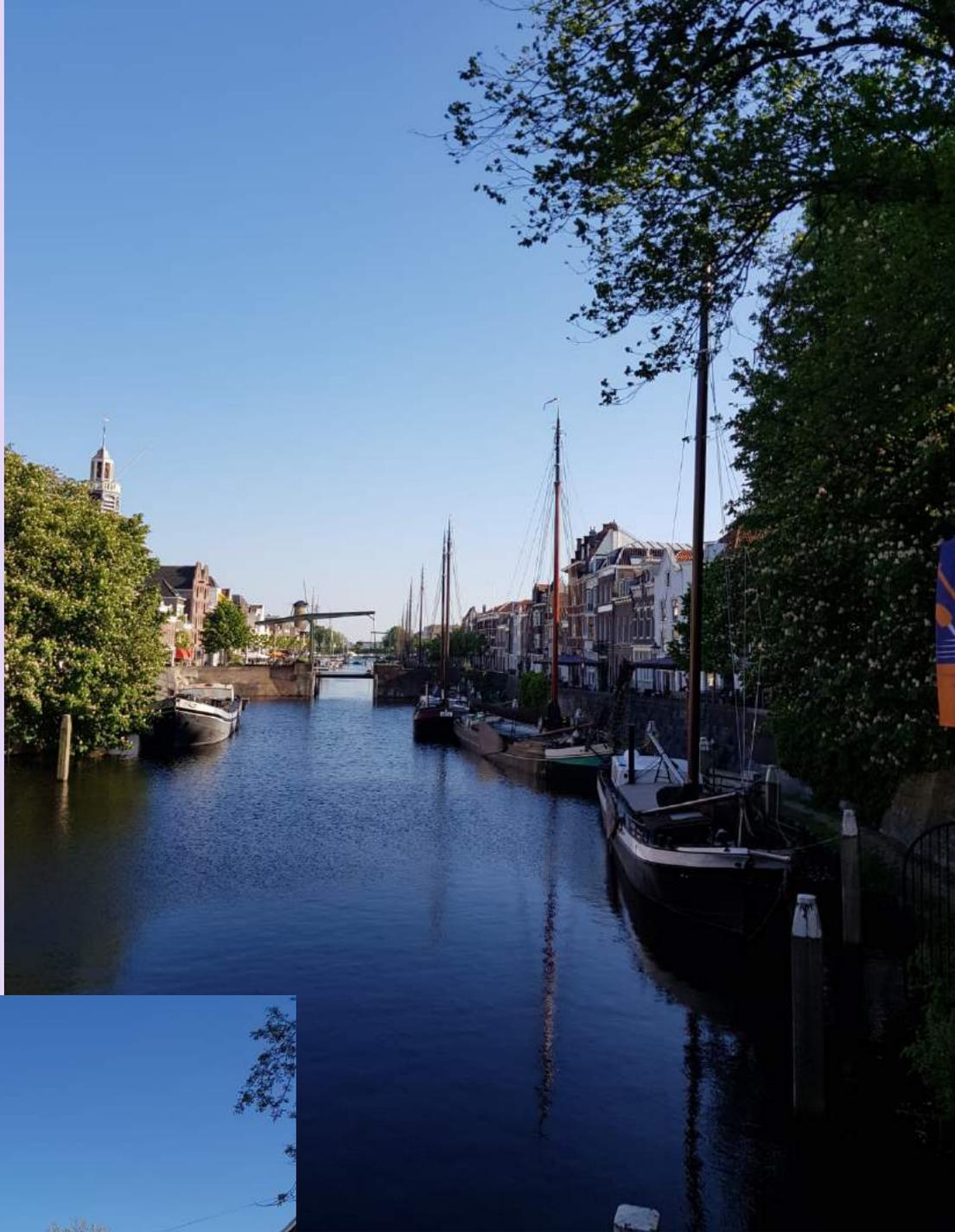
<sup>87</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Westkruiskade010/photos/2724926314192957>

## Appendix III: Photos of participants



Photographer: Noah, shared on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021.





Photographer: Bart, shared on May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021.



Photographer: Jaz, shared on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021.



Photographer: Karin, shared on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.



Photographer: Kai, shared on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021.





Photographer: Kai, shared on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021.





Photographer: Tim, shared on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021.



Photographer: Tim, shared on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021.





'Gentrification doll waves', Little C, Coolhaven, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Photographer: Jamea Kofi.

