From ideas to concrete

Perceptions of the built environment and ecological practices in the VINEX-location Leidsche Rijn, Utrecht.

Claudio Pieri

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Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

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Claudio Pieri

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1. Introduction

"A million more houses

Affordable new housing estate must solve a housing shortage

With a new building plan for 100,000 homes per year, builders, brokers, housing associations, municipalities, and provinces, among others, want to show the next cabinet the way. More than 300,000 homes are currently in short supply. New VINEX neighbourhoods in greenery are part of the solution, according to the *Actieagenda Wonen* (Living Action Agenda)."

(Van Erven Dorens and De Jong 2021)

As the quote shows, in the first weeks of February 2021, simultaneously with the beginning of my fieldwork, many Dutch newspapers dedicated at least one title to the housing shortage in the Netherlands. The projections of population growth foreseen in the main Dutch cities, especially due to domestic and international migration, provide an argumentative basis for developing new dwellings (Statistics Netherland 2020). On the other hand, according to Statistic Netherlands (2014), more than 400 thousand houses, about 2.5% of the total dwellings in the Netherlands, are unoccupied (Statistics Netherlands 2014). However, the drive to build new houses near major urban centres is not new in the country. For example, in 1991, the Dutch government drafted the policy 'VINEX', directed to build 650.000 houses in the following ten years (Boelhouwer 2005; Lörzing et al. 2006).

1.1   The context and the research question

The Netherlands is already one of the most densely populated countries in Europe. As a result, the construction industry has an intense environmental impact on biodiversity loss, air pollution, waste production and material extraction (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken 2016).

This thesis is based on ethnographic research between February and May 2021 in Leidsche Rijn, the largest VINEX-location in the Netherlands. The theme of this research was chosen because I moved to *Hoge Weide,* a sub-area of Leidsche Rijn, in September 2020. I was immediately interested in its appearance and atmosphere.

The acronym 'VINEX' stands for *Vierde Nota over de Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra* (Fourth Memorandum on Spatial Planning Extra), a policy intended to implement residential

neighbourhoods by keeping them close to urban centres. Leidsche Rijn is located in the western part of Utrecht. Here, 30,000 new homes and more are on the way, have been built in a former agricultural area.

The research question that guided my investigation is:

How does the neoliberal spatial planning of the VINEX-location Leidsche Rijn influence residents and organisations daily activities, their experience of the place, and their sense of community?

To learn more about the perceptions of spatial planning in Leidsche Rijn, I started engaging with residents and organisations involved in different activities in the area. During fieldwork, I observed and participated in urban gardening activities, through which I learned experiences and views about the planned dimension of the neighbourhood. I did this via different qualitative research methods, such as participant observations and structured and informal interviews. Through this approach, I understood their perspective of exercising ecological practices in a newly urbanised area and in a changing landscape.

In the last decades, sustainability and its implications have been studied and explored due to the increasing challenges of anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation. In parallel, interest has been raised from consumers, scholars, and political organisations on the inclusion of sustainability discourse in the neoliberalization process (Tulloch and Neilson 2014). This is relevant for the context of my research as the theme of sustainability was one of the three values on which Leidsche Rijn was conceived (Spangenberg 1995).

Moreover, walking with residents stimulated interesting reflections about the built environment, its form and how they perceive it (Ingold and Vergunst 2016). Being able to reflect with research partakers on issues related to (urban) growth, the need for a house, or the transformation of the landscape was a central point for the theoretical development of the thesis.

Additionally, through photo-elicitation, conducted over different images and in different settings (aerial and historic photographs, architectural renderings of buildings, advertising billboards), research participants could express comments that evoke emotions, memories, and experiences of the environment of the area. I engaged with partakers through these ethnographic methods to learn their perspectives and shed light on the 'production of locality' (Appadurai 1996; 2018) in Leidsche Rijn.

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in the anthropological debate about architecture, spatial planning, and the built environment's materiality. Therefore, architecture has been recognised as a central constituent of cultures, and its active role in shaping social relationships has been explored (Appadurai 2018, Buchli 2013, Ingold 2007; 2011). Thus, in anthropology and other (social) disciplines, 'space' is often distinct by an abstract scientific, mathematical, or measurable conception that lacks social connections (Tuan 1977), while 'place' refers to the elaborated cultural meanings people invest in or attach to a specific site or locale (Lawrence-Zuniga 2017). Furthermore, anthropologists explored humans' agency and 'meaning making' by reflecting on the production of 'place', framed as "space that is meaningful to a person or group over time" (Thornton 2008, 10 in Aucoin 2017). This direction of anthropological research serves to "understand what cultural worlds exist, how meanings are created and attached to these worlds and how they change" (Aucoin 2017, 397).

Anthropologists also suggest reflecting on temporalities, complexity, power, and resistance (Abram and Weszkalnys 2016, 4) to understand the values and the significates constituting a 'place'. In the case of VINEX-locations, spatial planning emerges as an ideology and as a practice that (re)shapes space, identities, and meanings (Gunder 2010). For this reason, by recognising the practice of spatial planning as an act of governance (Olesen 2014; Peck 2011; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002), it is also possible to analyse its ideology and purpose (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Gunder 2010; Humphrey 2005). Urban and economic growth are today extremely connected and dependent on the process of urbanisation (Harvey 1989; 2007). The VINEX-policy can be seen as a case of neoliberal urbanism (van der Krabben and Jacobs 2013; Pauwels and Boie 2013) that aims to strengthen the city-region economic development due to the ability to gain public and private support for large-scale infrastructure and housing projects, advancing particular forms of capital accumulation (Jaffee 2019).

Following reflections on the relationship between society and the built environment (Buchli 2013), this research aimed to explore the academic gap between the relationship between neoliberal forms of spatial planning and residents' perceptions.

1.2 Research location and population

This section contains information on the context of the research and the population that participated. Leidsche Rijn, located in the western outskirt of Utrecht, is the largest VINEX-district of the Netherlands (Hoeven 2012). This area has seen the expansion of VINEX-locations since the early 2000s. Until those years, cattle fields and farms were the main characters of the landscape. Furthermore, Leidsche Rijn has an extension of about half of Utrecht's municipal territory. Therefore, it is not correct to speak simply of a neighbourhood but rather a cluster of areas with their character and specific identity, often reflected in their built environment. Like in other VINEX-locations, in Leidsche Rijn, new housing was, and is, developed by building entire new neighbourhoods (Netsch and Kropman 2011).
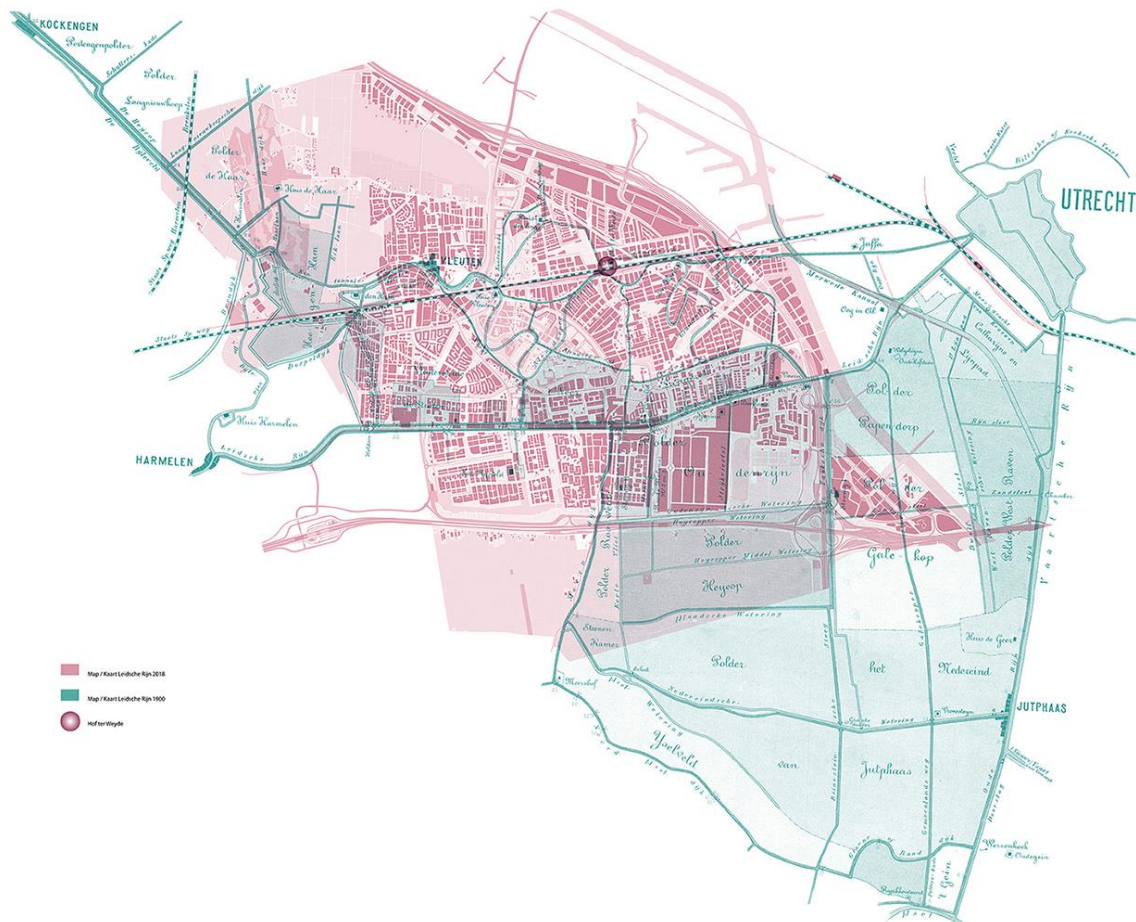

Figure 1: Two overlapping maps with the same scale. In green shades, the map of Utrecht in 1900; in red, the urban extension of Leidsche Rijn in 2018. (Weikamp 2018)

During my fieldwork, I engaged and participated in several activities with organisations in Leidsche Rijn. Herewith, I provide a brief introduction of the research locations.

The Metaal Kathedraal

Situated along the stream of the Leidsche Rijn, the river from which the district takes its name, stands the Metaal Kathedraal, a former church that once also served as a sidecar factory. Today, this historic building is the home of a cultural and ecological centre. Here, Marianne and Adam, the initiators of the project, organise cultural and educational projects to invite neighbours to 'learn from nature' and reflect on contemporary ecological and social issues. The Metaal Kathedraal consists of artists, makers, and volunteers who join the cultural centre to develop their projects and connect with residents in Leidsche Rijn.

The 'Nursery'

In the garden of a historical farm, a green oasis in the middle of the concrete jungle of *Leidsche Rijn Centrum*, there is now a plant 'nursery'. Boris, Jane, Kevin, and Robert deal with urban agriculture and all the practices necessary to develop this activity. For the past ten years, Boris used to live on the old farm. However, the farm surroundings underwent a landscape transformation, from farmland, hosting plants and animals, to (sub)urban areas. Nevertheless, Boris and his team continue to engage in ecological practices in the garden. While helping on the farm, I understood the meanings and perspectives of the 'nursery' members regarding the rapid change in land use in Leidsche Rijn.

The Natuur (Nature) Playground

The *'natuur'* playground in *Hoge Weide* (High Meadow) is a medium-sized supervised playground with children's equipment. The playground, which is enclosed and surrounded by houses, stands close to another historical farm. Parents and family members accompany children to the playground and, in doing so, create opportunities for children to have fun and for them to relax and meet neighbours. By volunteering at the playground, I had the chance to engage with residents and staff members in their daily settings and activities. Here I encountered Paul and Dirck, two active residents who shared their perspectives about the area. Furthermore, at the playground, I also had lengthy conversations with Sanne, a staff member interested in urban agriculture and 'placemaking'. The term 'placemaking' emerged in the 1970s from an organisation named 'Project for Public Spaces'. It refers to a holistic approach to urban design, which emphasises cultural, economic, social, and ecological principles, and the importance of citizen participation in the design process (LeGates and Stout 2016).

1.3   Thesis structure

The second chapter of this thesis contains reflections on methodology and positionality during fieldwork. The following section consists of the theoretical framework. In the first of the four sub-chapters of the theoretical outline, the reader is informed of the relation between anthropology and architecture and several reflections on the societal role of the built environment (Buchli 2013). Secondly, drawing from the work of anthropologists and geographers, the author analyses the planning practice as inherently ideological (Gunder 2010) and as a tool for normalisation (Olesen 2014), control and surveillance (Yiftachel 1998).

In the third sub-chapter, through examining the experiences of planning in the Netherlands, I provide reasons and observations to comprehend why the VINEX-policy is inextricable from the political-economical neoliberalist ideology (Pauwels and Boie 2013). Subsequently, in the last section, I present the framework of neoliberalization of sustainability (Tulloch and Neilson 2014) to understand how several actors adopt meanings of the term 'sustainability' in Leidsche Rijn to portray their practices.

Successively, through three ethnographic chapters, I give an account of my fieldwork experience and encounters. The first of these chapters is dedicated to presenting some activities and organisation of the area. With this, I describe the (different) meanings of sustainability held by members and participants. In the second ethnographic chapter, I focus on theories of 'space', and 'place' (Tuan 1977), 'non-place' (Augé 1995), and 'production of locality' (Appadurai 1996; 2018) to understand residents' perceptions about the built environment and the design of the area. Observing the outcomes of the planning practice stimulated conversations with participants and reflections on community bonding, social activities and 'sense of place' in Leidsche Rijn.

Finally, in the third and last ethnographic chapter, I describe two types of 'greening' in the area. Urban greening has been defined as the promotion of "planning and management of all urban vegetation to create or add values to the local community in an urban area" (Kuchelmeister 1998; Konijnendijk and Randrup 2002 in Nilsson et al. 2007). The first type of 'greening' involves the marketing strategies of the construction industry and architecture sector. The second representation of 'greening' concerns ecological initiatives promoted by residents and organisations in Leidsche Rijn. Through these activities, participants can stimulate a 'sense of place', a feel of a community, and a reconnection with nature.

I conclude this thesis by summarising my findings and suggestions for interdisciplinary research about the built environment and (urban) sustainability.

2.   Methodology and positionality

To gain residents and organisations viewpoints on the socio-spatial dimension of the VINEX-location Leidsche Rijn, I engaged with them in several everyday activities, using different qualitative research methods. While carrying out my research, I informed the participants involved of my role as a researcher. All respondents in recorded conversations gave verbal consent before the interview. To maintain the anonymity of research participants, all names of research participants have been changed. Research and analysis of ethnographic materials were conducted in accordance with the Dutch Anthropological Code of Ethics (Koster et al. 2019). In the following section, I present and describe the research methods that I used during the fieldwork. Furthermore, I provide some reflections on positionality encountered during fieldwork.

2.1   *Participant observation*

Being a resident of *Hoge Weide*'s area helped me create a network of acquaintances that often came through word of mouth among the residents interested in participating in the research. With them, I conducted participant observations to and participating in their day-to-day activities (O'Reilly 2012). Participant observations constitute a significant part of my ethnographic approach to research. All the participants of this research live or work in Leidsche Rijn. I got to know them by joining the activities of cultural and community centres of the district. Before engaging with residents in their activities, I informed the participants of my research and asked for their consent to use the information acquired.

Moreover, taking part in different activities run by organisations in Leidsche Rijn allowed me to learn members perspectives and experiences of 'place'. During participant observation, dialogue with the participants was usually informal and usually more like a casual conversation among acquaintances (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). Throughout these conversations, I followed the lead of the informants, letting them talk and express, while also reflecting on the activities we were carrying out and possible links with the research question.

During the observations, depending on the settings, I also made extensive notes in my diary, which I analyzed by the end of the day's work in the field. Other times, when it was not possible to take notes due to the manual tasks of the activity carried out, once I left the field, I would record myself by telling the new impressions of the experience. Furthermore, participant observations allowed me to learn explicit and tacit aspects (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002) of the perceptions of the built environment and the meanings attached to this element of material

culture. The different settings of the participant observations permitted me to observe different types of practices and meanings linked to them. The activities promoted by organisations or individuals during the fieldwork, and the deriving reflections, were relevant for my research because they provide significant data to reflect about the (built) environment and social relations of the district.

2.2 *Set of interviews*

The research process continued using structured, semi-structured, or open format interviews, depending on the interviewee and the circumstances of the meeting (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). When interacting with residents, I conducted open or semi-structured interviews. After mentioning the research topic and asking for consent, I was usually able to record the interviews. Interviews took place in several locations within the district: in parks and gardens, community buildings, in the streets of *Leidsche Rijn Centrum*, *Hoge Weide* and *Rijnvliet*, but also in a historical museum and different resident houses. I conducted interviews with residents and organisation members to understand the meanings of their activities in Leidsche Rijn.

The method and register of interviews lied between semi-structured and open-ended interviews. As observed by O'Reilly (2012), these types of interviews allow participants to explore ideas and the researcher to follow an outline of topics. Conversations with participants often resulted in lengthy dialogues carried out during daily activities and interactions. For this reason, even during these conversations, I used to jag notes. When that was not possible due to other physical activities, I tried to remember the most important passages and transcribe those later at home.

2.3 *Walking Ethnography*

During fieldwork, I invited some of the residents involved in the research to participate in walks around the neighbourhood. Walking is a practice that simulates reflections on human environments, embodiment, place, and materiality (Ingold and Vergunst 2008). The walking interviews took place within the neighbourhood: at Maximapark, in the Leidsche Rijn Centrum, in front of construction sites where advertising boards stand, and in public zones in residential areas. During these walks, participants described the surroundings while reflecting on the built environment, materiality, and everyday mobility (Yi'En 2014). This method allowed to see how residents perceive and navigate the materiality of the built environment and what meanings, feelings, and affective relations they shared with these elements of material culture.

2.4   *Photo-elicitations*

Photo-elicitation is a visual method used in qualitative research to understand and interpret images (Barbour 2014; Boeije 2010). With the assistance of different types of visual supports, I encouraged reflections with residents and members of organisations, enabling the expression of emotions and tacit knowledge (the unspoken or unexpressed) (Glaw et al. 2017). These included aerial pictures, satellite maps, architectural renderings, and spatial plans representing the neighbourhood. These visual representations were often shared and brought by residents themselves. With this method, I stimulated and supported conversations oriented to the emergence of meanings and representations. As Bigante (2010) indicates, through visual supports, participants can include additional validity and depth, new opportunities, and new viewpoints (Bigante 2010). Therefore, photo-elicitations proved to be an effective technique for studying aspects of the built environment and production of locality (Appadurai 2018) by highlighting social and visual elements of material culture.

2.5   *Diary, fieldnotes journal and log*

Throughout fieldwork, I kept a diary for fieldwork notes, comments, and experiences. Furthermore, I daily updated a personal journal of field notes, in which I included data from the diary, conversations addressed during the day and online research material. Through extensive notes in the diary, I wrote the first impressions, what I observed, and what the participants told me during fieldwork (Rock 2001). In addition, the diary was used as material support to capture comments and relevant (verbal or non-verbal) interactions during observations and interviews. Also, the diary was a fundamental tool to annotate fragments of data from non-recorded conversations that I subsequently included in the personal space offered by my journal of notes. Finally, I also kept a log to maintain the schedule, contacts, and fieldwork events. These three tools helped me sustain the research process, understand the study's progress, and keep a safe space for fieldwork information.

2.6   *Positionality*

I did not find any ethical issues during the research. However, my lack of knowledge of the Dutch language limited the possibilities of this study to a certain extent. In particular regarding the consultation of official documents not translated into English. Furthermore, it is worth noting my limited knowledge of the Dutch socio-historical context, which I nevertheless tried to compensate by informing myself through secondary data and through interviews with the participants.

3. Theoretical Framework and Societal Relevance

3.1 Anthropology and architecture

The perspective offered by the anthropological approach to material culture has led many social scientists to reflect on the meanings and values that people attribute to material productions. As a result, particular attention has been historically paid to material objects and architectural forms (Appadurai 1986; Bourdieu 1990; Ingold 2007; 2011).

In the last decades in anthropology, there has been a growing interest in material culture and, consequently, in architecture (Vellinga 2007). Recently, scholars like Tim Ingold, Victor Buchli, and Setha Low, to name a few, have contributed significantly to an increasing anthropological theoretical and empirical interest in architecture and space (Stender 2017). In addition, numerous studies explored the notion of the embodiment of the built environment (Amerlinck 2001; Blier 1994; Egenter 1992; Humphrey 2005; Lawrence and Low 1990; Waterson 1990). These showed the fundamental part played by architecture in processes of cultural identification (Vellinga 2007). These studies and the reflections they provided helped us understand how architecture is a central constituent of cultures and how it has an active role in shaping social relations.

In his book Anthropology and Architecture (Buchli 2013), drawing upon the works of Levi-Strauss and Foucault, and many other scholars from the anthropological discipline, Buchli (2013) retraces the interpretative discussion surrounding the relationship between humans and nature, the status of built forms, and their relation to the production of social life. Buchli (2013) sheds light on the link between societies and housing, with particular attention to materiality, understood not just in its evident concrete physical form. Instead, for materiality, Buchli (2013) emphasises how architectonic forms might be understood in different registers, such as the societal, symbolic, functional, and how the specific material conditions of these registers enable human relations.

By this, Buchli (2013) means that the built environment regulates the use and experience of space and, therefore, reciprocally shapes and is shaped by the life they support. In line with this theorisation, Tilley et al. (2006) argue that people and things create and define one another in a continuous process of objectification. He defines this as "the construction of meaning and values about social relationships and self-understandings of those meaning and values through material forms" (Tilley et al. 2006, 28 in Vellinga 2007). This reflection promotes understanding of the relation between people and things and how they mutually

constitute one another. Furthermore, Buchli (2013) argues that dwellings, buildings, and infrastructures, shape social life and shape power relationships within society. Relying on several case studies, Buchli explores the concepts of power and social life along with notions of urban planning as a form of governance (Buchli 2013, 95; 106-107).

Drawing from this, in my research, I explore the relationship between residents and the built environment of Leidsche Rijn, and especially Hoge Weide, a sub-area of the district. I did this to understand how the planned space might influence social relations and cultural activities in an area. In fact, parallel to the renovated interest for materiality in anthropology, the discussion moved towards the 'agency' and material culture's societal role. Considering the reciprocally constitutive relationship of people and things means understanding the active role of materiality and its influence on social, political, and economic power relations and identities (Vellinga 2007). Buchli (1999) studied the relationship between an element of material culture and the society associated with it (Humphrey 2005). Buchli (1999) and Humphrey (2005) suggest that the built environment can gather 'possible' meanings. Still, these result from people's interaction in, and with, the material-built form.

Moreover, this thesis project is grounded on the relationship between the built environment, planning ideology, and people's agency. Through participation in neighbourhood's (ecological and cultural) activities, residents give (new) meanings to the place they navigate. Under this reflection, it is useful to acknowledge the theories that describe the production of 'place' emerging from 'space'. In fact, by reflecting on the production of 'place', framed as "space that is meaningful to a person or group over time" (Thornton 2008, 10 in Aucoin 2017), anthropologists shed light on humans agency and 'meaning making' to "understand what cultural worlds exist, how meanings are created and attached to these worlds and how they change" (Aucoin 2017). It is through long-lasting relations and experiences that a 'place' emerges from a 'space'. In other words, the connections and the meanings that humans reproduce in a 'space' transform it into a 'place' (Tuan 1977). In my ethnographic fieldwork in Leidsche Rijn, a newly-built large scale housing development, 'space' and 'place' emerge as a conceptual tool that can integrate the "materiality and meaning of actions and practices at local, translocal and global scales." (Low 2016, 2) (Chapter 5).

This reasoning is relevant for my research because VINEX-locations, such as Leidsche Rijn, received attention from planners and designers on the production of neighbourhood identity. Throughout the Netherlands, heritage was used to thematise the new neighbourhoods as a basis for variety and for the development of a new local identity (Renes 2016). This strategy has been described as an attempt to develop a local identity and a 'sense of place'

(Renes 2016). However, as noted by (Ellery and Ellery 2019), the 'sense of place' mostly depends on the symbolic relationship people have with a geographical setting (Low and Altman 1992), individual environmental perspectives (Low and Altman 1992), historical and emotional perspectives (Tuan 1977), and sociological perspectives that consider community attachment (Jackson 1994). These reflections are helpful to understand how residents develop a 'sense of place' in Leidsche Rijn.

As demonstrated by this section, the encounter between anthropology and architecture provides one of the main academic debates in this thesis project.

In the next section, to understand the contemporary relationship between space and society, I present the conceptualisation of neoliberalism as an ideology that influences different social spheres and permeates spatial planning tools and practices.

3.2   Neoliberal Urbanism

Gunder (2010) argues that planning is inherently ideological because ideology constitutes our chosen and dominant beliefs, value, or systems (Gunder 2010). In his understanding, urban, regional, or spatial planning is specifically about making choices about land use, which, in this sense, is about governing space (Cowell and Owen 2006, in Gunder 2010; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002). Therefore, planning is the ideology that also affects how we define and use space. Humphrey (2005) reminds us that ideology is found not only in texts and speeches; it is also a political practice that manifests in material forms (Humphrey 2005). In her study of the Soviet infrastructure and architecture (Humphrey 2005), the author underlines how material structures bring about a certain character to social life. However, this does not just represent a simple reproduction of the values and meanings instilled in the built environment (Humphrey 2005). This perspective is relevant to my research because it gives the conceptual tools to reflect on the production of alternative meanings and outcomes to the dimension of planning.

By drawing upon the idea of the role of ideology in the practice of urban planning, it is possible to argue that it is largely deployed as a mechanism that shapes our identities, relations, and activities within space. Using the ideological critique derived by Žižek (1989) for understanding planning's contemporary and evolving role, Gunder (2010) reflects on the use of space. The author argues that urban (and suburban) space is currently dominated by neoliberalism's values and logic (Gunder 2010). According to Harvey (2007), as an ideological

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project, neoliberalism requires "both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism" (Harvey 2007, 42). This theorisation justifies the effort to place neoliberalism at the centre of scientific attention and, beyond, at the heart of the explanatory urban transformation system. By naming these processes and deciphering their various effects on cities, scholars have drawn attention to a frowning body of studies regarding the neoliberal city's idea (Harvey 2007; Pinson and Mourel Journel 2016; Spencer 2016).

In the Netherlands, over the last thirty years, there has been a decisive turn regarding spatial planning and policy, being transformed from a "bastion of the welfare state into a playground for market forces" (Pauwels and Boie 2013). As Pauwels and Boie (2013) suggest, the neoliberalization characteristics of the Dutch context include the "possibility of spatially engineering market success, a market-based model of social housing (since the privatisation of housing associations), cross-fertilisation of neoliberal and creative city measures, as well as the incorporation of artists and designers in large-scale real estate developments" (Pauwels and Boie 2013). This reasoning is relevant to recognise the alleged housing shortage presented by the Dutch media.

Moreover, in the last decades, neo-liberalisation policies on urban space have come to take centre stage in the academic debate (Béal 2017; Brenner and Theodore 2002; Jaffe 2019; Peck and Tickell 2002; Schuyler 1997; Tasan-Kok and Beaten 2012). These works suggest going beyond the traditional definition of neoliberalism by trying to construct *neoliberalization* as a genuine analysis category. This agenda seeks to understand the (ongoing and ambiguous) restructuring of the state and local governments in the extension of market-like rules, deregulation, and the dismantlement of pre-existing institutional frames (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002).

The neoliberal turn in the Dutch housing and spatial planning context ensured that the state no longer seeks to decommodify housing through redistributive measures. Nevertheless, its new role is to actively promote and supporting market principles in housing markets to maximise economic growth and competition. The housing shortage in the Netherlands can be read under the lens of redistributive housing policies, which operate under three main pillars: supply-side subsidies, rent regulation, and allocation regulations (Kadi 2011). Therefore, the neoliberalization of housing associations in the Netherlands is central to understand the Dutch housing market.

As Tsing (2000) suggested, the researchers should look at the peculiarity of globalisation as what she calls 'projects'. Any global project should be interpreted within a

localised context, and the particularity of local dynamics should be traced into history (Tsing (2000). Through this groundwork, the notion of neo-liberalisation can be understood not only as an ideology favouring laissez-faire and the dismantling of the (welfare) state but, above all, as a process of adjustments "whereby modes of action, public policies, and forms of regulation are partially, gradually and selectively challenged and replaced" (Béal 2017). Béal (2017) suggests that this framework aimed to highlight the growing influence of private actors and market dynamics in producing urban policies. Furthermore, it has also stressed the reorganisation of the state and local authorities under neoliberalization processes (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Olesen 2014; Peck and Tickell 2002; Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2013 in Béal 2017).

The year 1989 marked a turning point in Dutch housing regulation (Boelhouwer 1990; Salet 1999; Ronald and Dol 2011). This year, a new housing memorandum was released by the Minister of Housing. The memorandum created a rupture with earlier traditions that some commentators referred to as a "revolution" in Dutch housing policies (Dieleman 1996; van Kempen and Priemus 2002). Central to the memorandum was the idea that, instead of the government, the market should take primary responsibility for housing (Salet 1999). Notably, the extensive state involvement in the provision of low-income housing was considered inappropriate in light of rising public expenditures for housing. Additionally, the fact that some high-income households were living in inexpensive units (inexpensive mismatch) and some low-income households in rather expensive units (expensive mismatch) was considered a misallocation of resources (Dieleman and van Kempen 1994).

Under this premise, through the VINEX- policy, about 80% of the newly built dwellings were in the owner-occupied sector. In comparison, merely 20% were designated to the (private) social housing sector (van Kempen and Priemus 2002). Thus, Kadi (2011) suggests that the Dutch state, through the VINEX policy, achieved to increase the number of expensive housing (to increase the supply of housing for middle- and higher-income households) and, therefore, provided the houses left behind to the social rented sector (Kadi 2011).

A critical reflection of the uses of the framework of the neoliberal city is offered by Pinson and Mourel Journel (2016). The author noted the definitional, descriptive, analytical, and normative limits of the concept (Pinson and Mourel Journel 2016). Its descriptive limits lie in the fact that an important share of scholarship on the neoliberalization of urbanism is purely theoretical and does not consider all the different political processes at the local level. The analytical limits prevail in the tendency to aggregate different processes of change under the name of neoliberalization by making it 'omnipresent' and 'omnipotent'. The last limit stand

in the normative nuance of neoliberalization. Pinson and Mourel Journel (2016) argue that the neoliberal thesis provides an unequivocally obscure view of the possibilities for social, economic, urban, and political change. Nevertheless, the authors do not downplay the insights offered by the framework of neoliberalization on urban spaces by presenting these critiques. Instead, they believe that conventional definitions of neoliberalization should be stabilised to evaluate its specific effects and help identify other forces of change (Pinson and Mourel Journel 2016).

In the following section, drawing from the framework of neoliberal policies on urban transformation (Peck, Theodore and Brenner 2009), I will present how spatial planning in the Netherlands has undergone a specific neoliberal turn in the last thirty years.

3.3   Spatial planning & *suburbia* in the Netherlands

In the context of the land organisation and spatial planning, it would be inattentive not to consider the precedents the Dutch have met within this matter, particularly land reclamation from the sea. From that stems the famous Dutch saying, "God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands" (Clingerman and Treanor 2014). The idea of *maakbaarheid* (make-ability) is a concept that extended the skills of own engineering field (e.g., large-scale waterworks and land reclamation) to the belief in the malleability of society itself (Salewski 2010). Since the 1960s, most planners and designers in the Netherlands were trained in this spirit of 'make-ability'. The use of the idea of 'make-ability' of society ('*de maakbaarheid van de samenleving*') meant engineering in the broadest sense: both physically and socially (Salewski 2010). Therefore, planners did not need to question their methods, values, or physical designs beyond their evaluation methods (Salewski 2010). In other words, the scenarios of the Netherlands' future were no longer comprehensive engineering plans but an exercise in planners and designers' new fields of engineering consent (Salewski 2010).

Drawing from Foucauldian theory, scholars investigated how "urban governmentability was achieved through the infusion of societal concepts such as normalisation, surveillance, and the construction of 'population' as a meaningful entity to be studied" (Yiftachel 1998). Adopting a Foucauldian perspective on urban and regional planning analysis allows us to observe planning "as fundamentally concerned with controlling, manipulating ruling and oppressing" (Allen 1996; Boyer 1983; Coombe and Weiss 2015; Lewi and Wickham 1996 in Yiftachel 1998).

Furthermore, Yiftachel (1998) argues that (urban) planning governance was also often embraced to allow elite and state interests to control the rapidly modernising and growing city (Yiftachel 1998). Through this conceptual reading, and in the light of the context neoliberalization of planning, it is interesting to observe the Dutch spatial planning and infrastructural organisation turn in the 1990s. In that decade, the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment approved several policy notes on spatial planning, among which VINEX. Compared to tradition, the VINEX-policy marks a change in urban development regulation, emphasising the issues of decentralisation, greater flexibility, and operability of urban planning tools (Fratini 2014).

The VINEX-policy pursues the following goals depending on the operational context. In an international, Western European context, it aims to develop a competitive urban climate for new businesses, stimulate distribution activities (transport of goods and passengers), and offer a good tourist product, particularly for water-based recreation (Galle and Modderman 1997). Second, when considering urban areas, it seeks to regulate mobility, strengthen the carrying capacity for urban amenities, and protect nearby open areas (Galle and Modderman 1997). Third, it pursues increasing spatial diversity in rural areas, maintaining and improving environmental quality, and preserving life quality (Galle and Modderman 1997). Finally, its goal is to improve urban design and planning quality (Galle an Modderman 1997).

In particular, in the Masterplan Leidsche Rijn (Spangenberg 1995), sustainability, especially sustainable design, is included in the project through water retrieval, retention of precipitation, energy management, and low energy street lighting (Cousin 2008).

Furthermore, one of the central arguments for implementing the policy VINEX was to keep the new districts close to the city centre, following the model of the 'compact city' (Galle and Modderman 1997). This urban planning model was considered a solution for cities to reduce the impact on the environment (Burton, Jenks, and Williams 1996). The concept of 'compact cities' has been at the heart of national, regional, and local urbanisation policy in the Netherlands since the 1980s (Dieleman and Wegener 2004). The core idea was to increase the use of land within existing urban centres. This choice implies redevelopment of inner districts and concentrates new development on agricultural land adjacent to the old built-up areas. Compact cities and restrictive building policies are turning moments of the national spatial policy to prevent uncontrolled urban sprawl (Van der Valk 2002). To absorb the expected growth in the number of households and compensate for the housing shortage, the VINEX-policy aimed to construct 650.000 new homes for the decade 1995-2005 (Boelhouwer 2005). The VINEX-policy, through decentralisation of decision, also gave more autonomy to

municipalities that could determine, on the guidelines set by the government, which could be the most suitable opportunities to develop VINEX-locations.

Markets and market institutions such as corporations and stakeholders are often seen as formally separate and outside the state. The advantage of the 'neoliberalization' approach is to avoid "reproduce a reductionist view of power in which the relationship between states and capital is simplistically be defined in terms of their antagonistic or external positioning against each other" (Tombs and Whyte 2009 in Atiles-Osoria and Whyte 2018).

Due to the decentralising turn of the VINEX-policy, the public sector became more interested in 'enabling development' rather than 'providing development' directly, and 'stimulating development' rather than 'regulating development' (Korthals Altes 2002). Hence, the public sector plays a more active role in interactions with non-state actors and is no longer the centre of decision-making (Korthals Altes 2002).

Moreover, parallelly to the promotion of the VINEX-policy, as commented by Scalbert (1998), some Dutch architects developed an interest in low density, low rise, low-cost construction housing development, which he and other authors in the Dutch context denote as suburbia (Scalbert 1998, Karsten, Lupi, and de Stigter-Speksnijder 2013). The rapid growth of these suburban satellites of large cities has sparked debates about the effects of suburbs on Dutch society, with most of the criticism brought by the public, media and scholars. The criticisms were mainly aimed at the homogeneous construction and the lack of consideration regarding the relationship between work, home, and leisure (Spangenberg and Reijendorp 2011).

Dutch suburbs differ from inner-city neighbourhoods both in physical terms (low density, low level of facilities, including work) and social terms (dominance of family, middle class and native households) (Karsten, Lupi, and de Stigter-Speksnijder 2013). However, Dutch suburbs are considered not to be very problematic environments, making limited academic attention (Karsten, Lupi, and de Stigter-Speksnijder 2013).

Karsten, Lupi, and de Stigter-Speksnijder (2013) shed light on the debate over the 'community question' in Dutch suburban areas. The authors argue that the social dimension of VINEX-neighbourhoods is highly influenced by childrearing and established forms of childcare exchange (Karsten, Lupi, and de Stigter-Speksnijder 2013). Residents have a busy social life and use childrearing to connect and interact with like-minded neighbours. Suburban social life in the Netherlands also deals with the rise of several resident associations and community groups (Veen et al. 2015). Some of the neighbourhood activism involves the interest in the creation of a child-centred and family-friendly community. Karsten, Lupi, and

de Stigter-Speksnijder (2013) underlined how middle-class 'suburbanites' might use their professional skills in taking action for neighbourhood improvement, shaping the ideal family community in which they wanted to live (Karsten, Lupi, and de Stigter-Speksnijder 2013). Studies found that the Dutch suburban community derives from the element of 'choice' (Watt 2009), which makes social life in the suburb a form of "selective belonging" (Karsten, Lupi, and de Stigter-Speksnijder 2013). This finding suggests that residents tend to connect and interact with like-minded neighbours, thus reinforcing the lines of uniformity, with the class as the predominant variable (Karsten, Lupi, and de Stigter-Speksnijder 2013).

To date, and despite a growing general interest in the use of spatial and environmental design as a tool for the enhancement of neighbourhood sense of community (Moustafa 2009), relatively few studies have actually investigated the relationship between physical characteristics of the residential built environment and sense of community (Cochrun 1994; Katz, Scully and Bressi 1994; Talen 1999 in Moustafa 2009). This body of research suggests observing the links between the construct of the psychological sense of community and the symbolic roles of the built environment to understand how environmental design may impact a sense of community (Moustafa 2009).

This section of the theoretical framework highlighted some of the neoliberal peculiarities of the spatial planning practice in the Netherlands. Moreover, I underlined the shift brought by the VINEX-policy in terms of decentralisation, flexibility, and operability to allow new housing developments. Lastly, drawing from the limited body of research in the Dutch suburban context, I suggest that my thesis project can add knowledge to understand how the planned built environment of a VINEX-neighbourhood influences residents' perceptions of sense of place and community.

3.4   Neoliberalization of sustainability

The evident speeding up of human interventions on a global scale has been called a Great Acceleration (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007, 614 in Eriksen and Schober 2018); furthermore, the ever-expanding human activity in a number of interconnected domains has been described with the metaphor overheating (Eriksen 2016). Within such debates over a globally accelerated change of society and environment, among all Anthropocene and Capitalocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, Moore et al. 2016), the exponential growth curve has become the key symbol of our overheated times (Eriksen 2001). Under this premise, sustainability was incorporated into global intergovernmental agreements and filtered into

"common sense" and is now the dominant environmental discourse globally (Tulloch and Neilson 2014).

However, the radical critique of capitalism that crystallised in movements of both the South and the North in the 1970s turned out to be articulated in a tripartite discourse about environment, society and economy (Purvis, Mao, and Robinson 2019). Moreover, the discourse has been dominated by a focus on the economic and environmental sphere, while the social dimension remains underdeveloped and unclear (Partridge 2014). This articulation can be found in the *Masterplan Leidsche Rijn* (Spangenberg 1995), where sustainability emerges as one of the three pillars of the plan. However, the economic sphere of sustainability is emphasised in the document (Chapter 4).

This articulation of the meaning of sustainability has made that economy and ecology become 'equivalent', and therefore strictly binding, components of 'sustainability' (Tulloch and Neilson 2014). The ecological sustainability project is therefore bound by parameters of economic sustainability (Tulloch and Neilson 2014). Nonetheless, the rise of public environmentalist awareness in the late twentieth century, as a challenge to the capitalist pattern of production and consumption (Napolitano 2013), has led to the inclusion of sustainability discourses in more marketing strategies. This phenomenon was observed by van der Berg (2016) as a neoliberal strategy that both sustains the neoliberal principles and agenda and reproduces the illusion of sustainable choice-making on a consumer level.

In recent decades, more and more scholars and the public have begun to denounce "greenwashing", defined as strategies that mislead "consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service" ('Sins of Greenwashing' n.d.; Parguel, Benoît-Moreau, and Larceneux 2008). As noted by Balluchi, Lazzini and Torelli (2020), greenwashing is based on companies legitimisation and lies in the perception that a 'company's actions are desirable, correct, or appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs' (Suchman 1995). Corporate communication refers to communicated corporate identity and is supposed to play a crucial role in creating ethical corporate perceptions (Balmer, Fukukawa, and Gray 2007; Fukukawa, Balmer, and Gray 2007 in Parguel, Benoît-Moreau, and Larceneux 2008) and social legitimacy (Wæraas and Ihlen 2009; Vanhamme and Grobben 2009 in Parguel, Benoît-Moreau, and Larceneux 2008).

However, whether well-founded or not, the abundance of corporate social responsibility claims creates difficulties for consumers who endeavour to distinguish between truly virtuous firms and companies taking opportunistic advantage of sustainable development trends. This

notion is relevant in the context of my research because, in the last decades, the issue of housing sustainability gathered momentum in political attention in the Netherlands (Priemus 2005). Recent studies (Klunder 2002; Sunikka and Boon 2003 in Priemus 2005) suggest that the main focus of this agenda was on the method in which new buildings are constructed. Priemus (2005) suggested that there are several contradictions in government planning policies (e.g., larger size one-family homes with higher ceilings and a lower housing density) that hinder and reduce possibilities for housing sustainability.

Moreover, Priemus (2005) argues that market-led developments, which made it possible to develop VINEX-locations, have almost certainly reduced housing sustainability. Research about housing sustainability defined the latter as "housing with a minimum of negative impacts on the environment" (Priemus 2005). This definition makes it possible to identify a difference of objectives between the ecological and economic sustainability project.

Consequently, the framework of neoliberalization of sustainability helps to understand the limits of the idea of economic sustainability: the ability to sustain and continuously generate growth and wealth. The proponents of "green growth" share the belief in decoupling economic growth - defined as growth in the gross domestic product (GDP) - from natural resources at the basis of the idea of (economic) sustainability (Sandberg, Klockars, and Wilén 2018). On the other hand, 'degrowth' scholars suggest that the growth model, compared to historical data and modelled projections, demonstrate that GDP growth cannot be decoupled from growth in material and energy use (Ward et al. 2016). It is, therefore, misleading to develop a growth-oriented policy around the expectation that decoupling is possible (Ward et al. 2016).

This brief overview provided concepts to frame multiple meanings of sustainability under the guise of neoliberalism. Presenting the framework of the neoliberalization of sustainability is necessary because, during my fieldwork experience, I heard and encountered different perspectives about sustainability, according to the actors involved (Chapter 4).

With this theoretical framework, I introduced a perspective to observe the case of VINEX-districts in the Netherlands as a localised example of large housing development. This premise at the intersection of anthropology and built environment offers a ground to reflect on the ideology of planning, meanings of sustainability, and perceptions of the built environment. Furthermore, this research explored the academic gap concerning the implementation of VINEX-districts and the influence of neoliberal spatial planning on residents' daily activities, their understanding of the surrounding environment, and community bonding.

4.   Sustainability Lost

What does sustainability mean? Today, given the growing environmental awareness of citizens, more companies have started to claim their businesses under a sustainable façade. Thus, it does not seem absurd to talk about sustainable oil or sustainable coal, sustainable mining, sustainable industry (Kirsch 2010). In short, it appears that the word sustainable can be attached to almost everything, becoming more of a label. It is no coincidence that the master's course I study is called Sustainable Citizenship. Is it maybe because we, as anthropologists, are asked to produce sustainability discourses in an environmentally unsustainable society (Hirsch 2020)?

The main focus of this chapter stands around discourses and meanings of sustainability in the local context of Leidsche Rijn. In the first part of the chapter, I will briefly describe how I entered the field and my positionality in the fieldwork. Secondly, through the lens of land ethics and the 'state of exception' (Agamben 1995), the reader is informed about the recent history and landscape transformation of Leidsche Rijn.

The last section of the chapter is dedicated to the meanings of sustainability that different stakeholders, members of organisations, and residents attribute to the newly developed built environment and their connection with ecology and sustainability.

4.1   Where am I?

In September, when I was looking for accommodation in Utrecht, I found a shared room in a house in *Hoge Weide* (High Meadow), a smaller area within Leidsche Rijn. During the first weeks, I was surprised and impressed by the precision and spatial organisation of the area. Everything seemed perfect and well taken care of. The colours of the houses were consistent with each other, the light poles precise and aligned, the young trees supported by other wood-poles to grow straight, street bumps to decelerate cars and allow the children of the neighbourhood to play freely; in short, everything seemed so organised and peculiar to me.

One day in December, one of my Dutch fellow students visited my house. On this occasion, I had the chance to ask him how he perceived the neighbourhood or to explain to me more about it. I remember us talking in the backyard of my house, having a look at the canal flowing by. At my question, he smiled, opened his eyes and exclaimed: "*This is a VINEX-wijk* (neighbourhood)!". At first, I did not understand what he meant by VINEX-neighbourhood. Later on, I learned that the acronym of this spatial planning policy had become a very famous

word in the Dutch context, used almost like a synonym for new and neat large housing projects, in positive as well as negative judgments (Renes 2017).

To better understand the context of Leidsche Rijn, I started researching through the 'historical imagery' function of Google Earth (that allows seeing the same satellite picture in different years) and through '*Het Utrechts Archief*' (The Utrecht Archives). From these sources, I found a different landscape than the one I had in front of my eyes. It was a moment of discovery, like when I realised that *Hoge Weide* (High Meadow) had this name for a clear geographical meaning- it was former farmland. Today, *Hoge Weide* has around 1100 houses, most of them are one-family terraced houses, each with its own private backyard.

4.2 Land Ethics in the field

Before the *Masterplan Leidsche Rijn* by the Dutch urban planner Riek Bakker (1995), Leidsche Rijn was a buffer zone between Utrecht and two smaller villages, Vleuten and De Meern. This was an area where farms, greenhouses and meadows were the main characteristics of the landscape. The *Masterplan Leidsche Rijn* (Spangenber 1995) introduced a number of land modifications and infrastructure adaptations to host the largest VINEX-location in the Netherlands.

Drawing from Appadurai (1996) and his invite to the study of the production of locality, "which is a structure of feeling that is produced by particular forms of intentional activity and yields particular sorts of material effects", it is also valuable to reflect on the material setting through which social life is reproduced (Appadurai 1996, 182).

The farmland in the West of Utrecht, where Leidsche Rijn arose, has become a residential, urbanised area after centuries providing food and hosting farmers and animals. The spatial policy VINEX, in the socio-economic environment of growth, represents the legal-driven 'state of exception' (Agamben 1996) that made possible the transformation of the farmland and its land-use function.

The following excerpt gives an impression of the neighbourhood's appearance when the first residents moved in:

> *"Well, actually, there was nothing because this was all just like wasteland. Yeah, only the social housing where there, and we were like the second project. So, it was one big construction area. It was dusty; it was all day sound.* [Dirck laughs]. *Like you see it now, it was just completely bare wasteland. You can't even imagine it now, how fast they put*

out the houses, right? If you were at that moment, we were like, well it's taking long, it's taking long, but once it's all built, like wow, that's pretty fast."

QUOTE FROM INTERVIEW WITH DIRCK

Dirck is a young professional who moved with his family to *Hoge Weide* in 2016. He moved to the area because he and his partner needed more space and a new house that did not need repairs, close to the centre of Utrecht. When he moved to *Hoge Weide*, other neighbourhood blocks were still under construction. Dirck has been involved in several initiatives to promote the installation of sports facilities in the area of Leidsche Rijn. He believes that the neighbourhood has improved since the initial plan, and the project resulted in a pleasant outcome.

My attention in this interview was captured by his use of the words "*bare wasteland*" to describe the neighbourhood setting. What Dirck described regarding the construction of *Hoge Weide* reminded me of what can still be observed today in other areas of Leidsche Rijn. In fact, soil and land are removed and readjusted to satisfy the construction needs in the construction sites. After this interview, I began to reflect on the transformation of the landscape and the use of the area.

Therefore, I turned to Linde, a historian and former member of the Board of the Municipality of Utrecht at the time of Leidsche Rijn's development. Linde commented on the idea of VINEX and about the infrastructural adjustments that were needed for the construction of the 30.000 houses:

"The idea behind VINEX was… you have to build quickly and much, because housing was very much needed. So, I think, in a way, some things maybe didn't go well, but I think… And that was, for example, the first couple of years… that was quite difficult. Uh, because the thing is, with all those developments you see the end picture. But wait towards the end picture is rather difficult. And so, especially with infrastructure, you know it was chaos sometimes, everywhere. And, of course, we have a lot of cyclists, a lot of bikes, and that was also difficult. And also, they didn't know that there were so many young families who came here. Who had a lot of children. So, they didn't have enough schools, and you know… like those sports areas. So, some things weren't so well. But I think all in all it was, it was quite good."

QUOTE FROM INTERVIEW WITH LINDE

In this excerpt, Linde pointed out the land restructuration and modification to allow the infrastructural adjustments for housing and transport. To the positive result that Linde observes today, she contrasts the memory of the change and chaos present when this transformation occurred.

The landscape transformation of Leidsche Rijn brought by the VINEX-policy can be framed through the lens of the 'state of exception' (Agamben 1995). For Agamben (1995), the 'state of exception' represents something fundamental to state power. The intensification of the form that exception takes in contemporary states reveals details about the law's structure and the limits of legal authority (Atiles-Osoria and Whyte 2018). The 'state of exception' occurs typically under the guise of necessity. Agamben argues that the concept of necessity – derived directly from Carl Schmitt (2005) – is the figure that enables the state of exception to appear "as an 'illegal' but perfectly 'juridical and constitutional' measure, that is realised in the production of new norms (or of a new juridical order)" (Agamben 2005, 28 in Atiles-Osoria and Whyte 2018).

With 'state of exception', Agamben (2005) imply the "suspension of rules and conventions […] where the law, the norms, and the political order can be (re)constituted" (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Deprived of its political value, the biological body, which can be stripped of dignity and therefore de-symbolised, become thus 'bare life' (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Drawing from Agamben (2005), Shield (2012) suggests a link between genocide and ecocide, thus between 'bare life' and 'bare nature'. The production of 'bare nature' is evidenced in the evisceration of vast areas of nature at an unprecedented scale in the history of human civilisation (Shields 2012). 'Bare nature' conditions emerge when lands are surveyed and zoned for resource extraction and are reduced to a singular economically intelligible material (Arnold 2018). The systems that reproduce both 'bare life' and 'bare nature' are legitimated by capitalist policies and supported by sovereign force, allowing for the incremental processes of exception to unfold, embedded in day-to-day interactions (Arnold 2018).

Through the 'state of exception', brought by the VINEX-policy and directed to economic growth, agricultural land lost (part of) its heritage, use and access, thus becoming 'bare nature', or more specifically 'bare land' (a term derived from the interview with Dirck during fieldwork). The author suggests that 'bare land' depends on how neoliberal urbanisation relies upon the machine of growth. In contemporary trends of planetary urbanisation, 'bare land' is produced by depriving the land of its particular history, socio-political context and non-human relations, making it subject to spatial schematisation and anthropic transformations

(Ruddick 2015). Therefore, the 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005) is a powerful theoretical tool that can be adapted as a valuable means for understanding the relationship between nature, law, economics and sovereignty in the neoliberal era.

This sub-chapter showed how the state of exception operated in the development of Leidsche Rijn, creating a link with the legal framework of the VINEX-policy and the local socio-spatial context. The adoption of the notion of 'state of exception' and the production of 'bare land' is driven by conversations with residents addressing the transformation of the landscape under the premise of the *Masterplan Leidsche Rijn* (Spangenberg 1995). Moreover, walking through the streets of Leidsche Rijn, it is very common to come across construction projects. In the early stages of these projects, the concept of 'bare land' emerges more clearly. Indeed, excavators and other large construction machinery make manifest the magnitude of human impacts on the environment, and the large scale of the Leidsche Rijn project makes this prospect even more palpable.

4.3 Who said it is sustainable?

In the last years, urban planners, housing developers, cultural and community centres, art collectives and residents in Leidsche Rijn produced a whole series of distinct discourses about sustainable practices. Due to the different meanings of sustainability, it is stimulating to observe how actors and stakeholders use this concept for their practices.

4.3.1 *Economic sustainability*

The *Masterplan Leidsche Rijn* (Spangenberg 1995) embraced the concept of *duurzaamheid* (translated in the document as 'durability') as one of the elements in the tryptic of the project's vision; the other two being compactness and identity. Furthermore, the authors of the document referred to the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development *'Our Common Future'*, also known as the Brundtland Report (1987). This document mentions the concept of "sustainable development" to balance human activity, the depletion of natural resources, and the environment's pollution. Furthermore, the *Masterplan* also mentioned environmental controls as important features of the development program. In particular, attention was paid to water management and energy supply. The meaning of *duurzaamheid* (durability), as expressed in the *Masterplan*, "refers to the need to find a balance between the ecological and economic aspects - to prevent opportunities being wasted" (Spangenberg 1995). This passage suggests that the idea of

duurzaamheid (durability) is no more bonded to the ecological meaning of the environmental approach. Instead, it stresses the increasing intertwinement of ecology and economy, where the first is seen as a resource to allow the expansion of the second (Spangenberg 1995). Tulloch and Neilson (2014) argue that by giving for granted the ideology of neoliberal capitalism as 'economy' and then making it equivalent with ecology, sustainability is "depoliticised and rendered inert" (Pitcher 2011 in Tulloch and Nelson 2014). The framework of the neoliberalization of sustainability is constructive to unpack the different interpretations that actors and stakeholders attribute to this term. In the case of the *Masterplan Leidsche Rijn* (Spangenberg 1995), the author indicates that the meaning of sustainability was adopted to further expand economic growth by adopting the concept of 'sustainable development', making sustainability a much-taken-for-granted model of growth (van der Berg 2016).

4.3.2 *Social sustainability*

In a rainy and windy day of March, I biked to the museum of the *Historische Vereniging Vleuten, De Meern, Haarzuilens & Leidsche Rijn* (Historical Association Vleuten, De Meern, Haarzuilens & Leidsche Rijn). Waiting for me is Linde, who welcomes me and, respecting the COVID-19 safety distances, offers me a seat and a tea. I introduce myself and explain the theme of my research. Linde has a background in history. She begins by describing relevant moments of the history of Utrecht and Leidsche Rijn, mentioning Bronze Age and Roman settlements. Furthermore, she provided an account of historical information about the area in later times. Then, she began to inform me about the modern 'making' of Leidsche Rijn:

Linde- "*And it was here and the first plans about, uh, Leidsche Rijn came around 1995. Then it was the… uh, I think you know it, the master plan of Riek Bakker. Do you know Riek Bakker? Have you met her?*

C- *Not yet…*

L- *Oh, OK. Well, she's quite a character, I can tell you.* [Linde laughed].

And, uh, she had fantastic ideas. This wasn't tried before, that inside an area, next to a city, and because, uh, inside the area also lived inhabitants, uh, with quite a difficult soil, with a lot of water and it was… quite difficult to do. And also of course it was Utrecht, and the rest was split in two by the canal and the highway. So, what to do? And she… she said, 'Well, I develop this program and it has to be this flexible. The idea should be people live there, people work there, people recreate there, and it all has to be sustainable.' And that was really, really new back then. For example, the park,

Maximapark, that was actually really the way she has [thought]. *Because all those developers said: 'Come on and build houses, build houses', but she said: 'No, there has to be a park. And if you don't want to pay it, I'm gone. Somebody else does it* [the project]*'. And that was of course not possible because she was certainly back then, she was tipped off the bill."*
QUOTE FROM INTERVIEW WITH LINDE

In this conversation, Linde shares her positive standpoint about the development program of Leidsche Rijn. What emerged from the interview was the belief that planners included complexity and flexibility to the project, which, in Linde's opinion, was kept in mind and maintained throughout the development of the area.

Linde considers sustainability achieved thanks to the attention given to public spaces and environmental features included in the spatial plan. In particular, she emphasised the satisfaction with the realisation of the large *Maximapark*, which offers residents an area for recreational, social and sporting activities in the heart of Leidsche Rijn. This perspective of sustainability stresses the social sphere of the concept. Social sustainability is generally coupled to several ideas. Dempsey et al. (2011, 291) identified a comprehensive list of indicators which includes: participation and local democracy; health, quality of life and well-being; social inclusion (including the eradication of social exclusion); social capital; safety and more social-related factors (Dempsey et al. 2011).

According to Linde, Leidsche Rijn is a successful project and a model for other housing projects. Possible meanings of Linde's perspective of the achievement of social sustainability might depend on her position as a resident of Leidsche Rijn and former politician involved in the development of the area.

4.3.3 *Environmental sustainability*

At the beginning of fieldwork, I started to look for ways to engage with residents and organisations in Leidsche Rijn, one of the first places that caught my interest was the Metaal Kathedraal. The Metaal Kathedraal is a former church that hosts artists, experts, and practitioners who can experiment and innovate from an ecological-driven perspective. In the months of fieldwork, I worked in the garden, having conversations and moments of reflection, with volunteers and initiators of the Metaal Kathedraal. One of the primary purposes of the Metaal Kathedraal is to activate people to "restore the balance with nature from the way we

produce, work, live, go to school and recreate" ('Metaal Kathedraal' n.d.). Since 2011, the Metaal Kathedraal has been active in Leidsche Rijn and has focused on several projects concerning the relationship between people and the environment. Adam and Marianne, the 'keepers' of the Metaal Kathedraal, have repeatedly expressed their intention to pursue an educative function in the area. This happens by sharing knowledge of ecological practices and reconnection with the soil, its properties and its values (excerpt from fieldnotes). Furthermore, through their activities, members of the Metaal Kathedraal invite people to reflect critically on their way of living.

Figure 2: One of the descriptive panels at Metaal Kathedraal. This panel describes the vision for the new neighbourhood Rijnvliet and includes a famous citation from the American ecologist and philosopher Aldo Leopold. - Photo taken by the author

Reflecting on different activities and projects carried out at the Metaal Kathedraal allowed me to gather perspectives about sustainability and its relationship with housing, spatial planning, construction industry, bio-inspired innovation, and greenwashing.

For example, on a sunny morning in April, while working in the permaculture designed garden at the Metaal Kathedraal, I had the opportunity to talk about my research with Elmo, a professor of Bio-Inspired Innovation at Utrecht University. After introducing my research topic to Elmo, we started talking about the construction methods in the neighbourhood. Elmo gave me insight into biomimicry and alternative methods of construction. Biomimicry is the emulation of strategies of the living world as a basis for design and innovation (Pedersen Zari and Hecht 2020). Elmo suggested that this field of study can potentially contribute to the creation of less impactful architectures and the built environment. While preparing the garden plot and arranging it with sand and compost for the next sowing, Elmo told me:

> *"Claudio, you have to make it clear in your research. In this case* [referring to the construction sector]*, economic sustainability comes first, that is, making a profit; then social and environmental sustainability comes. It's like eating a potato, then planting it and letting it grow."*

QUOTE FROM INTERVIEW WITH ELMO

I had to stop digging. I had met Elmo for just about fifteen minutes, but there was a strong connection and a pleasant understanding between us. Elmo pointed out that construction companies aim to profit without thinking about the socio-environmental structure that sustains us. In his opinion, placing ecological sustainability on the same level as economic sustainability makes the environmentalist value of the sustainability agenda to be lost since natural resources become a commodity for economic expansion (Tulloch and Neilson 2014). In a nutshell, he translated my reflections and my thoughts about the commercialisation of the term sustainability. In fact, throughout this academic year, I broaden my views about the importance of "discursivity, framing, and language ideologies in the debates that shape the narratives about sustainability" (Henig 2020). These considerations about the languages of sustainability have been instrumental in developing the research design and fieldwork.

By participating in Metaal Kathedraal activities, I learned a critical perspective on past and contemporary construction methods. The members of the cultural centre share a holistic stance on sustainability which includes the environment, the way of building (materials, energy use, and waste), and living in Leidsche Rijn.

The members of the plant 'nursery' share a similar perspective to that of the Metaal Kathedraal near the *Leidsche Rijn Centrum*. One day, walking around the Leidsche Rijn Centrum area, I stopped in front of the plot currently under construction. I stood for a few minutes in front of the construction site, with my back to the historic farmhouse, impressed by the soundscape of the construction machinery and operations.

TON…TON…TON…TON…TON… TON… TON…TON…TON…TON…TON… TON…TON…

When I turned to the farm, I saw the smiling face of Boris, all intent with his gardening work. So, I decided to walk towards him. When we were already close enough to hear each other, I remember that he said to me: "*there is really a lot of noise*". He was wearing a blue sweater with winter motifs in the shape of white snowflakes and a flared blue wool cap, beige cargo pants and working shoes put on loosely.

In the last years, with the help of Jane, Kevin and Robert, Boris started a plant 'nursery' project in the garden of the historical farm where he lived. "*I was the first inhabitant of Leidsche Rijn*", Boris told me once. "*I was here during all the construction works*". At the heart of the construction site, the central position of the farm allowed Boris to observe the transformation of the surrounding landscape. However, Boris regards this transformation and the pace of construction as something that happened too fast, leaving him with feelings of disconnection with the area.

One day, during a break from repotting some plants, I had the chance to ask some questions about Leidsche Rijn to everybody at the garden table of the 'nursery'. First, I asked how they perceived the buildings in construction all around us. Kevin, a friend and collaborator of Boris, lives in a smaller village in the West of Leidsche Rijn. With a bitter tone, Kevin said that around ten years ago, he used to bike to Leidsche Rijn when it was still mostly farmland. He also mentioned that instead of clay statues of rabbits (today found in many places in Leidsche Rijn), there were plenty of those animals all around. Kevin's reflection on sustainability has a more ecological nuance, which observes the loss of biodiversity and the rapid transformation of the territory due to the urbanisation of Leidsche Rijn. By the end of our break, Kevin added: "*Has there ever been anything sustainable to do with Leidsche Rijn?*". With a critical perspective, Kevin suggested that the fast change produced relevant shifts to land use at the expense of pre-existing nature and embedded relations.

For the members of the 'nursery', the meanings related to sustainability and agricultural practices in Leidsche Rijn are a response to the pace and intensity of the construction activity in the area. Therefore, their understanding of sustainability is more radical and grounded in the

concept's ecological sphere, critically recognising capitalism's expansionist logic (Tulloch and Neilson 2014).

This first ethnographic chapter illustrated how neoliberal spatial planning and sustainability in Leidsche Rijn are experienced differently depending on the respondents. The actors involved in the research express conflicting feelings regarding the construction process of the area. Those who own a house or have been involved in some decision-making processes are quite satisfied with the lifestyle that the neighbourhood offers. Above all, they emphasise the social side of sustainability (safety, leisure, public space, flexibility, participation) achieved by the planning. On the other hand, the associations I joined in ecological practices understand the neighbourhood spatial plan as a factor that has drastically changed the landscape. In their opinion, the *Masterplan* is hardly reconcilable with the term sustainability, which they understand more critically, adopting the ecological value of the term.

The following chapters will deepen a perspective on the 'production of locality' (Appadurai 1996) of Leidsche Rijn. This perspective will be analysed under two perspectives: the first concern residents' perceptions about the activity of planning and the 'space' resulting from it. The second perspective concerns residents and organisations 'placemaking' activities. These will provide more insights into day-to-day activities and experiences, reflecting on the meanings attributed to them.

5. Planning spaces, making places

It has been said that one of the tasks of the anthropologist is to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (Myers 2011). During my first weeks in *Hoge Weide*, I perceived the design of the area as something modern and very much organised. Later in the field, I learned that the modern history of Leidsche Rijn is closely related to the practice of planning.

Following Appadurai's (1996) suggestion on the study of technologies of production of locality, it is necessary to reflect on the exercise of planning and its implementation as a tool of governance (Lewi and Wickham 1996, in Yftachel 1998).

Thus, this chapter will focus on two perspectives about the 'production of locality' (Appadurai 1996) in Leidsche Rijn. The first concerns the tools and the ideas of spatial planning. Through observations, interviews, and secondary data, I draw a reflection about the built environment and safety in the neighbourhood *Hoge Weide*. Secondly, in this chapter, I present the perceptions about the planning practice that I learnt from residents and the meanings they associate with the *bestemmingplan* (zoning plan).

The second focus of the chapter concerns issues of 'identity' and 'agency' in Leidsche Rijn. To understand more about these matters, I followed residents and organisations members in their activities, recognisable as practices of 'placemaking'. Residents and organisations members gather in different places in Leidsche Rijn and participate in ecological and cultural activities. These activities are significant acts that give meaning to the neighbourhood 'space', thus transforming it into 'place'. These activities are also crucial for stimulating social contacts.

5.1 Eyes on the VINEX

By the time I moved to *Hoge Weide*, some peculiarities of the built environment had caught my attention. These concerned the design of the houses, the street furniture, such as the light poles, the young trees and the hedges, which gave me the impression of an organised and tidy neighbourhood. Moreover, the red asphalt, which in the Netherlands indicates a cycle-friendly path, and the speed bumps allow for a safe street space for pedestrians.

From my observations and interviews with residents, *Hoge Weide* is mostly a pleasant and child-friendly area, and a relatively large number of families with children live here. During an interview with Mike and Sarah, a young couple with children that live in the neighbourhood, I asked their perspective about the relationship between their residence preference and the design of the built environment of the neighbourhood:

I think they are very much linked together. So, if you don't have any open spaces, or it's not safe for traffic, or no kindergartens, or play playgrounds, I mean, parents will not come, right? That, I think, it's a starter. And here they [municipality and builders] *are really putting focus, there need to be playgrounds every x meters. And you need to have this, this and this, not too many cars, like safe road, planning, you know… But they* [municipality and builders] *know the people that want to live here. Residents want those sorts of things, so they accommodate it, in advance as well, so yeah, this area is really built for a certain type of people. So, they design it in a certain way.*

QUOTE FROM INTERVIEW WITH MIKE

As the passage shows, Mike points to the spatial planning of the neighbourhood's built environment as a quality designed to attract a specific target population, mainly young families with children. Thus, according to Mike, there is an assumption that residents want those features of safety and child-friendly space included in their living environment. Considerably, Dempsey (2008) observed that safety is an accepted and well-recognised feature of high-quality environments and an indicator of social sustainability (Carmona et al. 2003; Cozens 2002; 2011; Jacobs 1961; Newman 1973; Llewelyn-Davies 2000). Moreover, Cozens (2011) indicates that a sustainable urban environment is one where the inhabitants "should not have cause for fear for their personal safety and the safety of possessions" (Du Plessis 1999, 33).

In the last decades, there has been growing attention concerning security and crime prevention in neighbourhood design in the Netherlands. During fieldwork observations and interviews, I had the chance to reflect on determinant factors for safety in *Hoge Weide*. Asking residents about security and supervision gave me insights into the functions of having 'eyes on the street'. This concept and its influence on public safety (Jacobs 1961) are recurrent topics in urban geography and architecture. It has to do with the role of the community in surveillance mechanisms and their function in enhancing a safe environment (Jacobs 1961; Timan, Galič, and Koops 2017). Dutch houses are internationally famous for their large windows. The topic of visibility through the windows is often related to cultural Calvinist values, which asserts that honest citizens have nothing to hide (Brokke 2020). Another common interpretation is the possibility of letting more light into the house. As a result, there are overall fewer reflections on the influence of large windows on public and private space.

The design peculiarity of large windows on the street level is implicitly correlated to the natural or environmental surveillance mechanism. Natural surveillance is central to crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED). It is not 'active' surveillance by guards

and surveillance cameras but rather informal surveillance by community members as they carry out their daily activities (Timan, Galič, and Koops 2017). Having eyes on the street and, up to a certain point, from the street inside the houses, ideally, promotes a double regulatory system.

Through the implementation of CPTED canons, the subject of surveillance is being watched with a particular purpose, which can be controlling and disciplining the subject into a certain behaviour or a set of norms, but also—possibly at the same time—protecting and caring for that subject (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017).

An example of this is what Jan, a nice gentleman in his fifties, passionate about the history of Utrecht, beekeeping and urban agriculture, told me about his experience in the neighbourhood:

> *"…and I feel a bit responsible for the playground in front of my house; for example, a kid was throwing rocks at my window, and that's something he shouldn't do. So, I walked out and asked why he was throwing rocks. He had no reason, so he stopped doing that, and now he greets me when he sees me, because now he knows me. And also, a man was taking pictures of children in the playground… because he said that they bothered his kid. I went out with a neighbour and said that he could not take pictures of the kids… because of privacy and, you know…"*
>
> QUOTE FROM INTERVIEW WITH JAN

The view from the windows to the street level allows residents to observe what is happening in their vicinity. Moreover, this passage illustrates that surveillance does not have a single purpose, such as social control; in fact, he also pointed out more social functions, such as caring for the neighbours and strengthening community cohesion. Hence, it is possible to understand how the built environment, through the features suggested by the framework of CPTED, contributes to the maintenance of a socially accepted behaviour, and a safe environment, in the neighbourhood.

Dutch media and statistics represent crime recorded in the VINEX neighbourhoods as significantly below the average in the Netherlands (Jongejan and Woldendorp 2013). In 2015, at a national level, the police recorded 57 crimes per thousand inhabitants. In the VINEX neighbourhoods, this was 28 per thousand inhabitants. National statistics also report that VINEX residents also feel safer in their neighbourhood than on average (Statistics Netherlands 2016). Furthermore, evaluating the effectiveness of crime prevention design suggests that crime rates have dropped by 95 per cent in new estates and 80 per cent in existing environments (Nauta 2004). Since the 1990s, the Dutch police adopted the Police Label Secure Housing

(*Politiekeurmerk Veilig Wonen*) (Jongejan and Woldendorp 2013). The suggestions included in this document were followed for the design of *Hoge Weide* (Lopez et al. 2013). In the Dutch context, extensive literature has been dedicated to the relationship between social safety and the built environment (van der Voordt and van Wegen 1991). The main criteria of the *'Delft checklist'* (van der Voordt and van Wegen 1991), a systematic review on the relationship between crime prevention and environmental design, are visibility, noticeable presence of residents, social involvement, accessibility and escape routes, attractiveness and maintenance and soundness of the material (van der Voordt and van Wegen 1991). According to the authors of this manual, these built environment features are important for promoting social safety. The CPTED feature broadens the 'panopticon' concept as a uniquely disciplinary apparatus (in the Foucauldian sense). Moving towards Foucault's concept of governmentality (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017), a type of power—initially called *sécurité* (safety)— which is different from discipline, planning can be understood as a practice that no longer seeks to manage individual bodies but rather manages whole populations, trying to optimally regulate social behaviour (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017).

These reflections, brought by observations, media representation and interviews, suggest that architectural designs operate as a model for governing the behaviour of individuals and groups and the operations of social practices or institutions, and have the potential to function in non-disciplinary public environments, such as a neighbourhood (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017). This perspective makes it possible to reflect on the design of roads, houses, and public spaces and how this is a central argument for planning safe neighbourhood 'spaces'.

In this section, drawing from observations, interviews and articles, I shed light on the embedded nature of social control in the emergence, institutionalisation and development of urban and neighbourhood planning (Yiftachel 1998). Furthermore, this section showed how surveillance is a consistent element of the 'production of locality' (Appadurai 1996) and how it was embedded in the exercise of planning of *Hoge Weide*.

The following section will support with more insights concerning the planning practice and the perceptions of the built environment *Hoge Weide* and *Leidsche Rijn Centrum*, two sub-neighbourhood of Leidsche Rijn.

5.2 Built environment and *bestemmingplan*

Drawing from the theory framed by the relationship between anthropology and architecture, it is necessary to reflect on how the built environment and its ideologies emerge in the perceptions of those who inhabit them (Buchli 2013; Humphrey 2005).

One day, I received from Jan, one of the residents of *Hoge Weide*, a 168 pages document from the Municipality of Utrecht, where the plans for the design of the district were drafted. Some days before this message, walking through the district, I learned Jan perspective about its appearance and design. He told me that the colours and materials of the houses, the distance from the playgrounds, the height of the buildings and other aspects were carefully designed by the municipality and architects. Now, I could look at these documents and observe how the neighbourhood where I live was conceived.
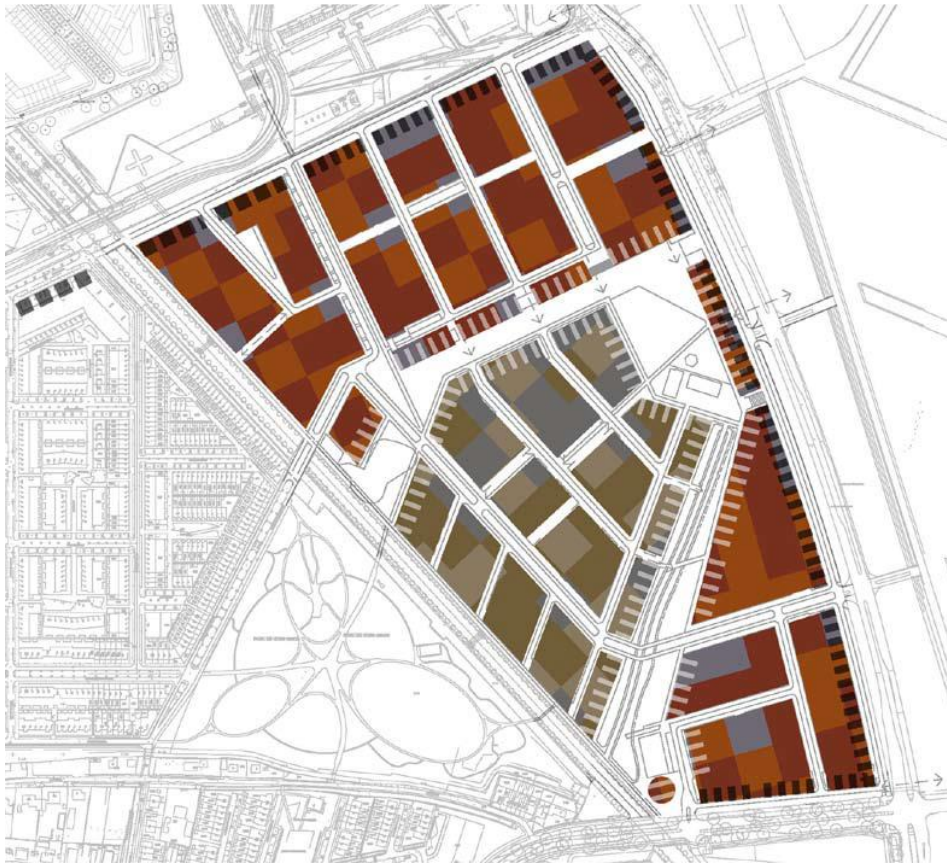

Figure 3: Colours and Materials. Urban development plan Hoge Weide. (Gemeente Utrecht 2010)

Albeit by that point, I understood that the area's design had been studied and planned until I had not framed the scope of the decisions and their material outcomes. To deepen my understanding of residents' perspectives about the *bestemmingplan*, later on, I asked Paul, another resident of *Hoge Weide*, which meanings he associates with the zoning plan.

Questioning him about his perceptions, he explained to me:

"Yeah, even if your neighbours agree (to build something on your property), *you still risk the chance of the 'welstandscommissie'* (aesthetic commission) *telling you that you have to break it down because they didn't approve it. So, it feels a little bit dictatorial, or a little bit tyrannical. Like… how am I not able to enjoy the freedom of my own bought house, or my own bought property, and I still have to listen to the law of other people? That's it's very frustrating, and a lot of people are very angry because of this. Because they feel trapped inside their own cage."*

QUOTE FROM INTERVIEW WITH PAUL

This quote from Paul offers important reflection points about the possibility for residents to shape and modify the exterior of their houses or install small-scale structures in their properties. Anthropologists and scholars used the concept of 'agency' for several reasons, one of the most prominent being to explain human creativity (Rapport and Overing 2000). Therefore, it is possible to create a link between the regulations of the *bestemmingplan* and residents perceptions of a limited 'agency' in the ability to influence their surroundings. Their stance is that the requirements indicated by the *bestemmingplan* and the Masterplan seem restrictive, especially those limiting personalisation of their property and defining what type of activities should be carried out in a 'space'.

This finding well relates to another interesting perspective shared by most of the residents. In fact, many of them told me that they perceive the *Masterplan Leidsche Rijn* (1995) as 'drafted from Den Hague'. This perspective indicates a lack of connection and relation with this document and some of its outcomes. Furthermore, the perceptions of limited agency derived from the zoning plan are not the only peculiar feature of the built environment of Leidsche Rijn. In a walk with Paul in the streets of the *Leidsche Rijn Centrum*, I could hear a quite interesting perspective about the appearance of this recently built area.

Paul*: "Yeah, I, I think it's, uh, it's urban, but it's not defined by Utrecht. This place could be anywhere, so there's nothing Utrecht about it. To be honest.* [We continued walking from the *Leidsche Rijn Centrum* to the canal that delimits the area] *I want to offer you... So, standing right here, you just take a picture. Then, I will drive you through, let's say, three or four cities; like Amersfoort, or I don't know, some cities which are not too far from here. And you will see identical buildings that, that's why I'm... I'm... I'm making the statement that this could be anywhere. It's that… if you tell me: it's Utrecht, OK, I'll believe it, but it could also be Amersfoort or...*

C*: Ohh… that's interesting. That's very interesting. Why do you think so?*

P*: Yeah... same colours, materials, development. You even see... Like, the movie theatre there, Pathé… it's like a chain, so you can find that also everywhere. So that makes it very not unique, in any sense; only living in the centre of Utrecht makes it unique. Because of the canals, and the Domtoren, and all that kind of stuff… Yeah, and also the food here. We just walked past The Domino's Pizza, De Beren, which is also a chain where you can get fast food, so all these stores are not unique, so they don't give you the unique feeling."*

QUOTE FROM WALKING INTERVIEW WITH PAUL

Paul suggested that *Leidsche Rijn Centrum*, albeit presented by the Municipality of Utrecht as "the second centre of the city" (Gemeente Utrecht n.d.), does not really look or feel connected with the old city. This perception depends on the materials, the colours, and the atmosphere of the area, making the 'space' of *Leidsche Rijn Centrum "not unique*". Actually, according to Paul, it could even be in other cities. From this comment, one might think that for Paul, Leidsche Rijn Centrum resembles more a 'non-place' rather than a 'place' (Auge 1995; Tuan 1977).

The French anthropologist Marc Augé in his book *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (1995), defines 'non-place' as a place of transitoriness that does not hold enough significance to be regarded as a 'real' place (Auge 1995).

Augé argues that a 'place' can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity; therefore, a 'space' without this characteristic will be a non-place (Augé 1995). Thus, according to Augé, not only spaces of transport and transit could be defined as non-places, but also spaces of shopping and leisure can be non–places. What they have in common is that they produce solitude through their transitory character (Augé 1995).

According to Paul, the non-originality of the shops, the novelty and the branding as a centre, without however an organic growth, are the characteristics that make the 'space' of *Leidsche Rijn Centrum* a non-place. In accordance with Augé (1995), many of the central sites within city centres are far from organic places that embrace social action's spontaneity. On the contrary, these planned centres are artificial environments, carefully constructed, governed, and maintained so that they seem to have "escaped the social" (Augé 1995 in Raymen 2016). Besides, Augé's work provides more language and concepts to reflect on the nature of super-modernity and the relationship between society and space in an epoch of

globalisation. The shopping mall — perhaps the archetypal milestone of late modernity— is regarded as a "sterile and homogenised environment which is carefully maintained and governed in such a way that does not embrace the organic natural texture of public life" (Raymen 2016).

During another walk, Jan shared a similar perception to Paul's about the built environment of *Leidsche Rijn Centrum*. He told me, referred to the centre's built environment and atmosphere: '*It is not gezellig*'. This famous Dutch word has more meanings which go from cosy to friendly, from comfortable to relaxing, and from enjoyable to convivial ('Gezellig - a Word That Encompasses the Heart of Dutch Culture' 2007). With this word, Jan meant that he could not perceive the subjective emotion of connection and familiarity, expressed by the word *gezellig*, in the streets of *Leidsche Rijn Centrum*.

Through the lens offered by the concept of spaces of super-modernity (Augé 1995) and the material influence of architecture in daily life (Buchli 2013), it is possible to trace and analyse perceptions of *ongezellig* (the opposite of *gezellig*) and ordinariness of the built environment of Leidsche Rijn Centrum. In particular, the perception of 'lack of familiarity' is crucial in learning about residents' understandings of the built environment of this area.

5.3   Identity and agency in Leidsche Rijn

Identity and heritage are central ideas in the development of Leidsche Rijn and other VINEX-locations throughout the Netherlands (Renes 2016). In the case of Leidsche Rijn, the Municipality of Utrecht and the planners intentionally used identity and heritage to give the new environments unique stories (Renes 2016). Following this argument, Salewski (2010) emphasises the component of *maakbaarheid* (make-ability) in planning policies in the Netherlands. Thus, through the use of heritage and identity, planners have created the complex interdependencies of values, societal structure, and physical environment proposed to elaborate sets of comprehensive 'social-spatial constructions' (Salewski 2010).

Coombe and Weiss (2015) suggested that the critical study of cultural heritage requires an anthropological approach to the 'technologies' of neoliberal restructuring of heritage (Ong 2007). This field, which delineate dimensions of the critical study of neoliberalism, is particularly relevant to understanding heritage governance under conditions in which culture is a resource for new forms of capital accumulation (Coombe and Weiss 2015). In this sense, it is necessary to note how heritage conservation has been integrated into the sustainable development framework of cities. This context emphasises the landscape and the enhancement

of the quality of life, social cohesion of local people, and intangible aspects of heritage pertaining to diversity and identity (UNESCO 2011 in Wang and Aoki 2019).

For example, during excavation works to develop various areas of Leidsche Rijn, various archaeological objects, including a Roman ship, have been extracted from the ground. Those archaeological findings, and other forms of architecture, were used to thematise the area and give the new neighbourhoods an identity (Renes 2015; Spangenberg 1995). Hence, in neoliberal spatial planning, the process of commodifying heritage goods and/or promoting socio-economic development in competitive global economies should be noted (Coombe and Weiss 2015).

However, neighbourhoods are contexts in the sense that they provide the frame or setting within which various kinds of human action (productive, reproductive, interpretive, performative) are initiated and conducted meaningfully (Appadurai 2013). Moreover, different people perceive the same area or neighbourhood in different ways (Adams 2016).

A common point in many conversations with the residents was a lack of sense of identification with the neighbourhood and the scarceness of social and cultural activities in the area, for themselves and teenagers. Those who mentioned this fact explain it with the lack of 'agency' in personalising their surroundings and the paucity of 'social spaces' (and therefore 'places') in the neighbourhood to interact with other residents.

During my research, I heard these voices from residents and organisations engaged in ecological practices in Leidsche Rijn. I suggest that, through participation in ecological initiatives, residents find alternatives to express 'agency' and create new meanings to 'place' (Tuan 1977). An example of this is what I observed at the '*Natuur*' (nature) playground in the neighbourhood of *Hoge Weide*. Volunteering at the playground allowed me to observe residents' contacts, especially at the beginning of a gardening activity. Although proposed by the playground staff, the initiative was a great success among the residents, who immediately went into turmoil on the WhatsApp chat, as Sanne told me (informal conversation with Sanne).

Throughout my experience at the playground, I saw residents coming together to meet and plant vegetables in assigned plots. Since the establishment of the gardening activity, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of food production and neighbours' contacts that arose from the project. Studies analysed the importance of 'green' spaces because they allow children and parents to interact, thus creating a sense of community (Arnberger and Eder 2012). The gardening activity in the playground can be observed as an act of 'placemaking' because, through actively participating in the project, residents gave meaning to the 'space' of the playground. Walstra (2017), in his study of urban agriculture in Utrecht, revealed that

ecological initiatives connecting people and space created a shared 'place' to which people feel they belong (Walstra 2017).

In *Hoge Weide*, the micro-scale project of gardening can be understood as a way to connect residents but also as a response to the lack of community in an accelerated society (Rosa 2003, in Walstra 2017). Combining this fact with the concept of 'sense of place' that Tuan (1977) discusses, it becomes evident that gardens provide residents with the opportunity to connect to the 'space' they live in and the community with whom they share it. This perspective will be further explored in the following chapter, where I provide more details about residents' reasons to engage in ecological activities in Leidsche Rijn.

Involvement and participation in the community are a major reason why people join the activities in these gardens, and that the food production in some cases is secondary (Holland 2004, 290). From my personal experience in ecological initiatives in Leidsche Rijn and other ethnographic studies in Utrecht (Walstra 2017), although the value of gardens as sources of food supply and reconnection with nature is central, social aspects are at the core of the gardens' values.

In addition, to explain the dynamics of social connection and 'agency', some of the partakers of my research mentioned 'participation' as a driver to stimulate neighbouring and improve the features of the area. For example, when I started fieldwork, Paul and Dirck rang my house's bell. They were looking for signatures to promote the installation of a '*pétanquebaan*' (a pétanque court, an outside space to play bowling) in the neighbourhood, to date not yet completed. Later on, through interviews and informal conversations, they also informed me about the participation mechanism in the area. Dirck underlined the 'snowball' effect deriving from the proposal of an idea to use a determined space. That is to say that once some residents propose an initiative, more residents also suggest more interventions, which they consider preferable. These agency dynamics, emerging especially in new and often unfinished surroundings, were also observed by Karsten, Lupi, and de Stigter-Speksnijder (2013), who mentioned that middle-class residents in VINEX-locations feel the necessity of taking action to shape their ideal community.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown different perspectives regarding spatial planning activity and the relative perceptions of residents. In particular, the chapter highlighted the ideas of planners and the Municipality of Utrecht of a planned 'space'. Furthermore, through interviews and secondary data, I shed light on the adoption of CPTED to design the built

environment of the neighbourhood and the underlying spatial planning purposes. This section highlighted the governance aspect related to spatial planning.

The second unit offered reflections on the indications of the *bestemmingplan* (zoning plan) and how the planned 'spaces' of specific areas of Leidsche Rijn are perceived as 'non-places' by several residents. These perceptions stem from uniformity, lack of relation and personal connection with the built environment. Lastly, I offered a reflection about the inclusion of identity and heritage in the Masterplan. Although these elements' addition aimed to create a 'sense of place', it emerged that most of the residents show a lack of connection with them. Instead, they indicate that 'placemaking' arises through dynamics of agency and participation in neighbourhood activities.

Perception of neoliberal spatial planning in the context of Leidsche Rijn encompassed feelings of non-familiarity with the built environment, a lack of agency in shaping their surroundings and lack of 'place' for the community, understood as "space that is meaningful to a person or group over time" (Aucoin 2017).

6. Greening Leidsche Rijn

Being cities responsible for around 70% of global CO_2 emissions from final energy use (Elmqvist et al. 2021), in recent decades, the idea of 'sustainable cities', which is identified as models of 'sustainable urban forms', has been the leading global paradigm of urbanism (Bibri and Krogstie 2019). One of the concepts of sustainable cities is the integration and promotion of vegetation in the built environment. *Urban greening* has been defined as the promotion of "planning and management of all urban vegetation to create or add values to the local community in an urban area" (Kuchelmeister 1998; Konijnendijk and Randrup 2002 in Nilsson et al. 2007). Therefore, green or sustainable urbanism holds a central position in the sustainability debate given the contemporary and future challenges represented by the social and environmental role of the built environment.

For years now, Leidsche Rijn has been subject to exercises of 'futuring', which can be seen as practices of attempting to shape the space by identifying and circulating images of the future (Oomen, Hoffman, and Hajer 2021), among all the *Masterplan Leidsche Rijn* (Spangenberg 1995). What types of images circulate now, and what do they 'do'? How do the residents perceive them?

In this chapter, I will discuss two trajectories of 'greening' in the district Leidsche Rijn. In the first part of the chapter, I will present residents' perceptions of new construction projects in the area by analysing the influence of hyper-realistic renderings. In the second part of this chapter, I will move to residents' gardening and urban agriculture activities; residents who engage in these practices are motived by the sense of 'place' (Tuan 1977), reconnection with nature, and the sense of community that the gardens provide.

6.1 (Un)sustainable concrete

In the period of fieldwork in Leidsche Rijn, I observed the construction process of several buildings. Usually, after having cleared the ground of any leftovers, machinery begins to insert long metal poles of about thirty meters deep into the ground, creating a distinctive construction site soundscape. The poles serve to stabilise the soil below before proceeding to the foundations. Then, wooden structures are erected to make the concrete pours. Otherwise, prefabricated concrete blocks that will form the skeleton of the building arrive directly at the construction site on trucks. After pouring or installing concrete blocks and assembling window frames, insulation layers and finally bricks are applied to the structure.

Concrete is one of the most widely used construction materials. Second only to water, it is the most consumed material in the world (Gagg 2014). The embodied carbon emissions of buildings, defined as the total energy required for the extraction, processing, manufacturing and delivery of buildings (Dixit et al. 2010), represent a significant portion of global emissions. Concrete, iron, and steel industries alone produce around 9% of annual global greenhouse gases (GHGs) emissions. Embodied carbon emissions from the building sector produce 11% of annual global GHGs emissions (World Green Building Council 2019). The production of Portland cement, an essential constituent of concrete, leads to the release of significant amounts of CO_2; the production of one ton of Portland cement produces about one ton of CO_2 and other GHGs (Mahasenan, Smith, and Kenneth 2003). The environmental issues associated with GHGs will play a leading role in the cement and concrete industry during this century.

In recent decades, there has been a growing stakeholder interest in ecological awareness and inclusion of natural elements in the urban landscape (Nilsson et al. 2007). Following this architectural trend, trees and vegetation have become an inseparable part of building projects or so-called 'sustainable buildings'. To make buildings more attractive for people, roofs, terraces, balconies, facades, and other eye-catching elements are decorated with big trees and plants.

In my fieldwork experience, strolling in Leidsche Rijn, I often happened to walk in front of construction sites. For example, one morning, I was walking with Paul towards the *Leidsche Rijn Centrum*. On our path, we encountered several construction projects, and we stopped by commenting on one of them:

> *And this is also a nice example.* [Paul indicates the skatepark between Leidsche Rijn Centrum and *Berlijnplein*]. *They built this. A lot of kids, I don't know if you've been here before, a lot of people play here. But now, even this is going to be gone. Because they're going to build more stuff here! This is really a sad case… Because this area was so, so functional for kids. And to attract people with the idea that stuff* [building] *is green… that's why they call this, this large building… This building is called Greenville! To give the commercial idea that there's something green, but it really isn't.*

QUOTE FROM WALKING INTERVIEW WITH PAUL

In this passage, Paul refers to a plot of land with a skatepark, a football pitch and some concrete walls where local artists meet to carry out graffiti sessions. However, following the construction plans, this plot will soon be built in a high-rise fashion, following the same style as the neighbouring Leidsche Rijn Centrum. Paul says it is a sad case because one of the few

lively places in Leidsche Rijn will be redeveloped to extend the Leidsche Rijn Centrum. Additionally, Paul refers to the name of the building to suggest that construction companies are committed to presenting their designs as sustainable, as a marketing strategy to attract buyers.

Figure 4: Architectural Rendering of GreenVille (Leidsche Rijn Centrum South). (Stedenbouw 2019)

In the growth cycle in which it reaches maturity, which can last from 20 to 40 years, a tree absorbs on average between 10 and 30 kg CO_2/year. Therefore, it is necessary to recognise the contrast between the emissive impact of concrete and the positive effects of the inclusion of natural elements in buildings. It is essential to acknowledge this perspective because an inexperienced citizen might believe that the trees included in the project could be enough to offset the carbon footprint of the building's construction.

Walking through Leidsche Rijn, large billboards for the new constructions that will arise can often be seen. These advertising panels offer residents and passers-by an idea of what will soon be erected, whether a building, a whole neighbourhood, or an infrastructure project.

GreenVille, Parkwatcher, Roots, Specerijenvallei (Valley of the Spices), De Groene Steegjes (The Green Alleys), The Nature. These are some of the names of the construction projects in Leidsche Rijn. The names of these edifices have assonance with 'green' and, for instance, nature. These projects are always accompanied by rendering images that portrait the future appearance of the building. In architecture, sketches, physical models, 3D visualisations

and renders are essential for the visualisation of the project, especially when it comes to people who are not familiar with technical drawings (Moreira 2021).

As hyper-realistic rendering techniques evolve, images reach very elaborate levels of detail. Moreover, by adjusting settings such as roughness, light reflections, and other aspects of the texture in the environment and combining it with precise camera positioning, renderings result in a scene that almost looks like a photograph. While all these features contribute to creating a sense of reality, on the other hand, they also form a new perception of it. Thus, through renderings, the boundaries between real and virtual become distorted (Moreira 2021).

Romee, a young woman engaged in the organisation of cultural activities in Leidsche Rijn, told me during an interview:

> *"Someone once told me that the people that are moving to Leidsche Rijn and buy a house that doesn't even exist yet, they have a very hopeful idea of the future. They buy a promise instead of a house."*

QUOTE FROM INTERVIEW WITH ROMEE

This quote represents a perspective on the expectations of buyers when purchasing a house in Leidsche Rijn. According to what Romee mentioned, some citizens are enticed by glossy images that 'sell' an idealised architecture to the public. This circumstance happens, for example, when real estate developments fail to depict the surroundings in their advertisements, making people believe that the building offers wide views of natural landscapes to boost sales (Moreira 2021).

Figure 5: Architectural Rendering of Parkwatcher. On the left side of the image, the presence of the Madridstraat school building is missing. The other two buildings currently under construction are not represented in the background (VORM 2018)

In these renderings, nature (trees, shrubs, greenspaces) is often over-represented, both from a visual point of view and from a narrative perspective. This practice is understood by many of my fieldwork interviewees as an attempt to commercialise, under a sustainable façade, the usual way of building with concrete but presenting it as 'green' thanks to elaborate architectural renderings. Some of the residents mentioned the term 'greenwashing' to refer to these advertising strategies.

Despite growing interest from academics, professionals, and political organisations, there is no generally accepted definition of greenwashing in the current literature. However, this does not mean that definitions and perspectives adopted by scholars in the analysis of greenwashing practices are lacking (Guo et al. 2017; Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, and Paladino 2014; Roulet and Touboul 2015; Seele and Gatti 2017 in Balluchi, Lazzini and Torelli 2020). On the contrary, engaged scholars mainly recognised greenwashing as the wrong and misleading communication practice concerning the environment by the organisations that want to establish a positive social image (Balluchi, Lazzini and Torelli 2020).

It is interesting to reflect on the marketing strategies that property developers adopt to match consumers' current expectations and market needs (Sivadasan and Basiruddin 2019). These strategies contribute to the creation of what many research partakers also mentioned, that is the fact that people moving in the area buy "*a dream instead of a house*". The production of these hyper-realistic images, so to say, alters the perception of reality, becoming more of a commercial product than an instrument for the client's comprehension of the architectural form (Moreira 2021).

Moreover, it is interesting to analyse how a growing number of construction companies rely on international 'Green Building Certificate Systems' such as 'BREEAM' (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) or 'LEED' (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) (Meyer 2009). There are many reasons behind obtaining a green building certificate for a project. Green building certified projects are more prestigious than other projects for environmentally conscious investors and users in terms of marketing. Obtaining one of the Green Building Certifications is also a way to make marketing easier for companies and more preferable for people (Kurnaz 2021).

Donovan (2015) noted that rating systems and certifications have been developed worldwide to prevent misleading sustainability claims and quantifiably verify a building's 'greenness' (Donovan 2015). However, although rating systems have been developed to add coherence to the complexity of sustainability, they could actually exacerbate the greenwashing risk. This fact could happen if they become the target themselves instead of a means to achieve

sustainability targets (Kurnaz 2021).

In conclusion, this type of 'greening', promoted through architectural rendering, presents two main implications: from a societal perspective, the challenge is related to greenwashing practices and the 'dream' effect that architectural rendering fosters. From an ecological point of view, the issue stems from the impact of concrete and the high embodied energy of the built environment, which adds more pressure to contemporary issues related to urbanisation, resource degradation and biodiversity loss.

6.2   Ecological practices in Leidsche Rijn

This second section of the chapter on 'greening' will illustrate the reasons why residents in Leidsche Rijn engage in urban gardening initiatives. Considering the restrictions due to COVID-19, outdoor gardens appeared as appropriate places to carry out research activities. Therefore, I followed urban gardening and agroforestry practices to understand the meanings of these activities in a recently urbanised area.

Following Jansson's (2013) argument about the relationship between urbanisation and ecology, urban agriculture should be seen as a response to the urbanisation phenomenon to restore the socio-ecological interaction. Furthermore, ethnographic research in Utrecht suggests that urban agriculture is perceived as a response to processes of commodification, urbanisation, and individualisation, which are linked to a lack of socio-ecological connection (Walstra 2017). Walstra (2017) argues that this process is related to the logic of an accelerated society and a loss of connection to self and the community.

Engaged residents in Leidsche Rijn organise and join ecological initiatives for different reasons. The gardens where I conducted fieldwork and actively participated come in various shapes and sizes; moreover, gardens are fostered by different communities. The gardens I visited during the fieldwork are generally experienced as 'places' (Tuan 1977) where participants can reconnect with nature, share ecological knowledge, and stimulate a sense of community. Each of these elements will be analysed in the following section.

6.2.1 *Sense of place*

Taking a final reading to Appadurai's suggestion to reflect on how communities transform 'space' into 'place' (Appadurai 2013), it is necessary to reflect on the ecological initiatives and environment in Leidsche Rijn. In mid-February, I began engaging with residents and organisations in the area to learn more about their stories and initiatives.

In the garden of the historical farm, I helped Boris and the team of the 'nursery' in different activities: arranging flowerbeds with woodchips, creating walkable passages, repotting, sowing, and watering the plants in the garden. I have also witnessed other processes, such as the preparation of grafts, labelling of plants, and arrangement of plants and pots in the space for sale. In addition, the 'nursery' provides advice in the design of edible gardens (gardens in which plants provide food). Edible vegetables and fruit-bearing plants are always combined with plants and flowers attractive to insects.

Having a plant nursery in the middle of a construction area advances some interesting reflections. Even if the landscape around it has undergone a notable transformation, the urban garden of the 'nursery' produces and stimulates the practice of agriculture into the everyday environment, creating a 'place' for the transmission of ecological knowledge (Walstra 2017). The members of the 'nursery' consider the activities of gardening and small-scale food production as contributing to supporting the vegetation and the biodiversity in the neighbourhood. Moreover, the meanings connected to the gardening activity in this farm, its heritage, and location are a strong remark of the fast change of the landscape in Leidsche Rijn.

For the members of the 'nursery', ecological practices in Leidsche Rijn respond to the fast landscape transformation and massive urbanisation of the area (informal conversation with Boris). The meanings of 'place' produced by the team of the 'nursery' are also strengthened by participants long-time relation with the area, which entails a relational connection (Tuan 1977). Furthermore, through gardening activities, the team established a relationship with this 'place' in the neighbourhood to feel connected. In fact, the plant 'nursery' could be associated with the 'oases of deceleration' mentioned by Walstra (2017). Walstra (2017) indicates that gardens operate as 'places' where people can take refuge from the acceleration in everyday life induced by societal and economic concerns (Lobel 2014, in Walstra 2017). In addition to this argument, I suggest that gardens also offer a material setting where participants can restore a socio-ecological interaction (Jansson 2013). As a matter of fact, the garden of the 'nursery' remains one of the few cloves of the land untouched by the landscape transformation in Leidsche Rijn.

6.2.2 Reconnecting with nature and sharing ecological knowledge

During fieldwork, I volunteered at the Metaal Kathedraal to prepare some garden plots hosting medicinal plants. These plants are well regarded for their medicinal principles or edible purposes. Furthermore, the volunteers pay attention to the way the plants interact with each other, following principles of agrobiodiversity and permaculture (Thrupp 2000). For example, instead of just having the same type of crop from each plot, multiple plants that work well together are sown in the same garden bed to help keep away animals or invasive pests (participant observations and informal conversations with Jan). Assisting in preparing this garden allowed me to understand perspectives about urban farming held by the participants.

One day, I was reflecting in the garden with one of the initiators of the Metaal Kathedraal. Marianne has a very active and spontaneous personality and embraces a powerful narrative about the activities organised by the Metaal Kathedraal. I was trying to understand the relationship between the ecological activities promoted by the Metaal Kathedraal and the suburban landscape of Leidsche Rijn. She told me that the Metaal Kathedraal existed in this area to tell a story. The story that the Metaal Kathedraal wants to convey concerns the need for balance between society and ecology, with a tendency to restore biodiversity. In this sense, the organisation emphasises a holistic perspective on human practices and their influence on the environment. Additionally, Marianne pointed out how the Metaal Kathedraal represents an example for other residents who can emulate what they see and learn in their homes (excerpt from fieldnotes).

For these reasons, the Metaal Kathedraal stems as a fertile ground to experiment, get 'hands dirty' and participate in many workshop activities. It is no coincidence that the signs affixed to the facade of the building recite: ***DOE IETS, DOE HET NU*** (DO SOMETHING, DO IT NOW). Participation and engagement are promoted by organising outdoor learning activities and seminars to teach young and adults ecological ethics and principles. During these activities, members of the Metaal Kathedraal share knowledge about edible plants in the area, tenets of permaculture, and expertise about bio-inspired innovation (excerpt from fieldnotes).

The ecological practices that I observed and assisted at the Metaal Kathedraal should be understood in the context of the rising environmental awareness and complex challenges related to mitigation and adaption to climate change and biodiversity loss (Malhi et al. 2020). These initiatives, which are not only informative but also practical, have a relevant potential in fostering pro-environmental behavioural change and engaging a wide public into climate action

(Burgess et al. 2003; Seyfang and Smith 2007; Ockwell, Whitmarsh and O'Neill 2009 in Riou and Carvalho Diniz 2017).

The role and educational commitment of the Metaal Kathedraal, in the localised context of Leidsche Rijn, can be seen as a response to contemporary socio-environmental challenges. Furthermore, the activities they organise influence participants so that they can reconnect with nature, metaphorically and empirically, through the sharing of knowledge and engaging in ecological practices.

6.2.3 *Sense of community*

Extensive literature argues the importance of urban gardens for creating a sense of 'place', social ties, and community building. Several studies indicate that gardens can function as meeting places (Veen et al. 2015). The availability of meeting places is essential for social cohesion since spontaneous meetings often happen in public spaces, and the quantity of social contacts is critical in the formation of ties (Carr et al. 1993). According to a study conducted in the Netherlands (Veen et al. 2015), people experienced public space more positively due to community gardens; they actively influenced their living environment and gave the neighbourhood an identity (Veen et al. 2015). Veen et al. (2015) suggest that, by promoting social interactions, gardens are believed to develop a sense of community (Hanna and Oh 2000; Schmelzkopf 1995), enhance social life in urban neighbourhoods (Sharif and Ujang 2021), and stimulate bonds between residents (Madaleno 2001; Armstrong 2000).

These reflections resonate with what I observed while attending the gardening initiative promoted by the staff and residents who attend the playground. At the beginning of April, Sanne informed me that a gardening initiative was about to kick off at the *Natuur* (nature) playground. She has been active in urban agroforestry projects in Utrecht and wrote a book titled *Proef Eetbaar Utrecht*! (Taste Edible Utrecht!). In this book, Sanne and her collaborators wrote about urban beekeepers, cattle farmers, and gardeners in Utrecht. With Sanne, I had the chance to discuss the relationship between agriculture and the urban environment, referring to edible forests, community gardens, urban permaculture, and how these activities are vital to stimulate ecological consciousness and a sense of community (informal conversation with Sanne) (Hanna and Oh 2000). In addition, Sanne reinforces her perspective on the positive effects of urban gardening through examples and stories of other experiences in other districts of Utrecht.

When the proposal of a gardening initiative in the playground was advanced, many residents responded enthusiastically. Residents with their families gathered on a sunny April Saturday morning to start the initiative together. They were busy with shovels and tools and extremely active and in turmoil. Some of them greeted each other and introduced themselves. Paul and I helped remove the excess soil from the vegetable gardens by transporting it with a wheelbarrow to another side of the garden.

After assisting in the activity, I asked Paul why, in his opinion, residents adhered so enthusiastically to the project. Paul indicates that neighbourhood social contacts are fostered when "*people actually do something*" (informal conversation with Paul). In the case of the *Natuur* playground, engaging in ecological practices is a way for residents to come together and strengthen selective community bonds. This way, active residents with their children can experiment with food production while fostering community contacts in the playground. Through this small-scale ecological activity, locals created new stimuli for participation in the community and encouraged local food production. Making a connection with what was observed by Karsten, Lupi and de Stigter- Speksnijder (2013), community gardens can be seen as social and physical interventions that bring people together in a public space and allow them to feel active and connected with like-minded people, thus stimulating a sense of community.

In conclusion, this last ethnographic chapter illustrated two trajectories of 'greening' in Leidsche Rijn. In the first part, I shed light on residents' perceptions of greenwashing in the construction industry. I did this by analysing the meanings they attribute to advertising images of new buildings. Residents' perceptions were primarily gathered through walking in the neighbourhoods (Ingold and Vergunst 2016) and photo-elicitation of billboard construction projects. Learning their perspective was relevant for the aims of the research question; in fact, some characteristics of neoliberal spatial planning have been highlighted. For example, the images of the new buildings, marketed through hyper-realistic architectural renders and descriptions that emphasise their 'sustainable' characteristics, are perceived as a 'dream' or 'promise' that someone will buy.

In the second part of the chapter, I deepened the analysis of ecological practices and associated discourses and expressions in Leidsche Rijn. Different groups of residents engage in 'greening' practices, and for different reasons. The main reasons to engage in ecological initiatives are that gardens offer participants a physical setting where they can produce a sense of 'place', act a (re)connection with nature while sharing ecological knowledge and foster a sense of community.

7. Conclusion

This research offered a perspective to observe the context of urban growth through the analysis of meanings and perceptions that residents attribute to the built environment of Leidsche Rijn. Furthermore, the context of urbanisation of this area of Utrecht was inserted in the framework of a neoliberal spatial planning policy, the so-called VINEX (Pauwel and Boie 2013).

During fieldwork in Leidsche Rijn, I heard residents perspectives about the built environment and learned their opinions and views about their activities, sense of 'place' and sense of community.

Neoliberal spatial planning influence residents perceptions and organisations activities in different ways. Distinct interpretations are influenced by the social status and personal viewpoints of the participants. However, the influence of neoliberal urbanism emerged especially under two aspects. The first factor is residents perception of a lack of connection with their living environment. This was emphasised by feelings of lack of agency in influencing their surroundings. Residents pointed out the regulations of the *bestemmingplan* (zoning plan) to indicate their feelings of limited agency concerning interventions in the built environment.

Although the Municipality of Utrecht and planners attempt to integrate heritage elements, thus using discourses of history and identity, many of the residents struggled to recognise connections with these elements. In fact, residents perceived the Masterplan and the design as drafted "*from Den Haag*". In addition, some of them emphasised a disconnection with the built environment of some areas of Leidsche Rijn sharing feelings of 'non-place' (Augé 1995) (Chapter 5).

For these reasons, theories of 'space' and 'place' were adopted to observe how, through mechanisms of participation, residents in Leidsche Rijn make 'places' emerge from the planned 'space' of the neighbourhood (Tuan 1977; Appadurai 1996). Drawing from this reflection, I followed residents in ecological initiatives in the area. As a result, urban gardens, understood as social and physical interventions, develop into 'places' where participants engage with other residents in the neighbourhood, reconnect with nature, and share ecological knowledge (Chapter 6).

The second way residents perceive the effects of neoliberal spatial planning is reflected in their viewpoints about new buildings in the area of Leidsche Rijn. Involving residents in commenting on architectural renderings and billboards of building projects allowed them to share perceptions of greenwashing in the construction industry. Herewith, greenwashing was

identified with marketing strategies adopted by construction companies to booster their environmentally friendly image, albeit issues of pollution and ecological degradation. Furthermore, residents suggest that hyper-realistic architectural renderings give the citizens an impression of 'buying a dream'. However, residents' perspective on new construction is mostly uncontested, mainly because of the alleged housing scarcity.

Additionally, what emerged from my fieldwork are the different meanings and uses of the term 'sustainability' employed by different actors in Leidsche Rijn. This was shown and highlighted in *Sustainability Lost* (Chapter 4), where I presented different beliefs and perspectives that actors attribute to sustainability. This was observed within the framework of growing environmental awareness and the notion of neoliberalization of sustainability (Tulloch and Neilson 2014). This concept, adopted in the theoretical framework, allowed us to understand the adoption of sustainability languages to further expand (urban) growth (Tulloch and Neilson 2014). Moreover, this approach helped investigate the structural dynamics (changes in capitalism, uneven development processes, sustainability discourses in urban development, etc.) that influence spatial planning and urbanisation policies (Peck and Tickell 2001).

Therefore, drawing a link from Agamben (1998; 2005), the policy VINEX was identified as a 'state of exception' which allowed urban and economic growth. To shed light on the effects of this 'state of exception', the author indicates a connection between the production of 'bare nature' (Smith 2012), or rather 'bare land', and 'bare life' (Agamben 1995). With the concept of 'bare land', I indicated the process of depriving the land of its function and heritage, thus reduced to its biological, material essence, that can be adjusted to the needs of the expansion of capital. In the case of Leidsche Rijn, 'bare land' was produced to develop the former agricultural land into a new urbanised area. Hence, the concept of 'bare land' can be a valuable tool to understand the dynamics between economic growth and environmental degradation, and the legal framework that allows them.

This thesis project suggests a further investigation of at least two research fields. The first concerns additional interest towards residents' perceptions of the built environment. In this way, it will be possible to establish connections between how the forms of spatial planning and the built environment influence the experience of those who inhabit and use them.

Besides, further research suggestions include observing the sustainability rhetoric used by actors and stakeholders from different industries. Anthropologists and scholars from other sectors are invited to collaborate to give more complex and *concrete* meanings to sustainability discourse, avoiding it being translated into rhetoric to expand growth at the expense of

ecosystems. Furthermore, by raising the domains of research and sharing the results, more citizens would be informed of the current problems of the current language conferred on sustainability, which momentarily operates as a much-taken-for-granted model of growth (van der Berg 2016).

In conclusion, this research, developed in close contact with residents and organisations of Leidsche Rijn, explored the conjunction between people, planet, and profit in the light of the globalising overheating of economic expansion (Eriksen 2016), bringing a reflection on a particular case such as Leidsche Rijn.

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