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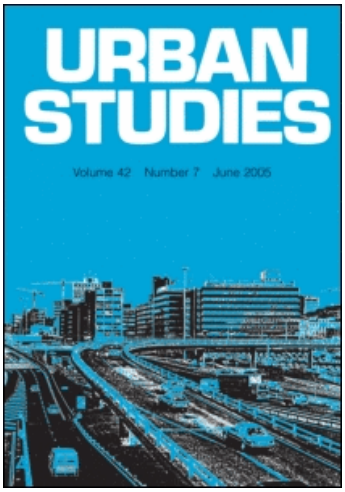

Urban Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713449163

The suburban 'community question'

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To cite this Article Lupi, Tineke and Musterd, Sako(2006) 'The suburban 'community question'', Urban Studies, 43: 4, 801 — 817
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/00420980600597723
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00420980600597723

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Urban Studies, Vol. 43, No. 4, 801–817, April 2006

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Suburban 'Community Question'

Tineke Lupi and Sako Musterd

[Paper first received, September 2004; in final form, October 2005]

Summary. In academic debates on neighbourhoods and social cohesion, there has been ample attention paid to processes in old urban residential districts as well as in the massive housing estates built from the 1960s until the 1980s. Newly developed suburban districts have always been in question, maybe even more so than inner-city areas, yet they have never had a prominent place on the research agenda. This article focuses on what we actually know about social cohesion and territorial ties in newly built suburban settlements, and is based on a literature survey and two recent empirical studies carried out in the Netherlands. Paraphrasing the 'classic community question', which referred to urban contexts, this paper's focus is on whether social cohesion in suburban areas is indeed causing a 'suburban community question'.

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Introduction

In academic as well as societal debates over recent years, there has been growing concern about social cohesion in local residential settings. Many of those who take part in that debate assume a 'loss of community' and believe that this will have a negative impact upon society. As Forrest and Kearns (2001) discuss, these concerns have a long history in both social theory and research. In relation to questions about segregation, integration and participation, there has been ample attention given to social processes in urban residential districts which are either old and deprived, or characterised by somewhat newer but massive post-war housing estates, built in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This is especially true of government-funded studies on local social cohesion, among them several EU programmes, which have focused on these areas (such as URBEX, UGIS and RESTATE).[1] However, while the fear of social crisis in urban neighbourhoods is great, worries about insufficient social cohesion seem to be expressed with even more intensity if new, especially suburban, residential settlements are involved. As with processes in urban areas, debates about the effects of suburbanisation have been around for some time. Ever since suburbanisation became a mass process in post-war North America, critics from all over the world have stated that the rather uniform residential developments are actually aggravating the social cohesion problem (Mumford, 1961; Sennet, 1977; Riesman, 1957). In Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*, it is suburban neighbourhoods, where private life is extremely dominant, that are identified as one of the scapegoats for the loss of social capital (Putnam, 2000). The perception that suburbanites are becoming more and more atomised and therefore, in his view, endangering the stability of society, has also found its way into politics and government, both in the US and in Europe. In the Netherlands, this is illustrated by the fact that since the last municipal

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DOI: 10.1080/00420980600597723

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elections (2002), some suburban new towns now have their own alderman responsible for social cohesion. The alderman provides subsidies for residents who would like to organise community activities—for example, a neighbourhood party, or the communal painting of garden sheds. Politicians and scholars alike fear the rise of suburban gated communities, widely considered to be the next dramatic step in the development of the individualistic society based on socio-economic and cultural homogeneity. Many regard these as further damaging social cohesion at local level (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Minton, 2002; Atkinson and Blandy, 2005).

Despite severe criticism, a very large share of middle-class households in the Western world is currently living in more or less suburban settings and we cannot assume that the majority is doing so on an involuntary basis. However, the data on life and social cohesion in new suburban residential areas are scarce, certainly in comparison with dynamic and deprived inner-city neighbourhoods. As Baldassare stated, suburban communities are understudied, relative to their size and importance. They are also not well understood and are subject to urban biases and cultural myths about suburban living (Baldassare, 1986). There is a literature about the process of suburbanisation and the differences between countries and types of suburbs (Fishman, 1987). In England, there is a focus on urban planning, while in America life in suburbs has especially been seen from a political economy perspective (Duany *et al.*, 2001; Dreier *et al.*, 2001; Clapson, 2003). Clearly, in most texts we can read that politicians regard a stronger social cohesion to be a condition *sine qua non* for the future of local societies. However, there is hardly any recent research on the experiences of suburban dwellers and this is even truer for the European situation. So there appears to be a lack of data on local social cohesion and territorial ties in suburban areas.

This article deals with the issue of social cohesion in suburban areas, based on a review of a selection of the literature and on the presentation of some empirical data. We will focus on the question of whether the social situation in newly developed suburban areas is indeed different from what we know from the debate on longer established urban areas. And, if so, whether we should be worried about the—lack of—strength of local social ties. The suburban areas we will refer to were built after World War II in the form of large residential districts on the fringes of or close to a larger city. The theoretical discussion and empirical illustrations centre on the daily lives of people and on the local social cohesion in suburban communities.

We will divide this paper into two parts. The first part deals with a discussion of selected international literature on suburban life. Drawing on the work of Wellman (1979) who focuses on the academic debate on cohesion in an urban setting, we will describe the suburban community discourse along the same Lost, Saved and Liberated or Transformed visions he used. The second part of the paper consists of an empirical illustration of some of the ideas we have developed on social cohesion in suburban areas. Recently, the social cohesion of the suburban new towns of Almere and Zoetermeer has been studied and we will use some findings of these studies to show changes regarding both actual behaviour and the perceptions of residents with regard to suburban life over the recent decades. We will conclude the paper by arguing that local social cohesion, in neighbourhoods in general and in new suburban neighbourhoods in particular, has been transformed, with an outcome that gives reason to be rather optimistic. However, before we start dealing with these two parts, we first have to pay some attention to the concept 'suburb' itself.

'Suburb' as a Concept

We acknowledge the fact that the meaning of 'suburb' is disputed. Not only is there a wide variety of suburbs, ranging for example from luxury upper-income residential annexes of cities; socially mixed suburbs in which commuters to the donor-city predominate; through to established suburban new towns

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with mainly lower-middle-class family households. There are also differences between suburbs that are created through their own histories. Some are still rather new and 'pure' residential settlements in which the vast majority of households share similar values and norms with regard to residential life and where the family is still the most typical form of household; in these suburbs, the dependence on the cities where people came from or where they have their work is extremely important. Other suburbs, however, are older and have developed towards a more varied stage, moving away from simply being an appendage of the city to being a 'city in their own right' (Pahl, 1965). This reflects a process that is referred to as the 'urbanisation of the suburbs'. Masotti and Hadden (1974), who described that process, argued that suburbs should not be seen as just green ghettos dedicated to the élite, and not even as just a family place. Growth in employment in the suburbs—not just services to the residents, but also jobs in offices and other firms serving much wider markets—contributes to the change of some of the suburbs. That change has parallels in social terms, because many of these suburbs attract a wider variety of lifestyles; moreover, many of those who have grown up in the suburb do not automatically leave the suburb, as once was the case. These changes will also be reflected in the housing stock, which is no longer simply a mass of low-rise single-family dwellings, but now includes apartments and other forms of residence. In fact, we might say that all suburbs are urbanising from the moment they are built; therefore, suburbs will always, and probably increasingly, also show urban characteristics. It therefore seems appropriate to think of a continuum between urban and suburban.

However, it is important to emphasise that, simply because the suburb as a concept is rather diffuse and cities and suburbs may share some similar characteristics, this does not imply that suburbs rapidly and inevitably become similar to urban settlements. The differences in terms of population composition and in terms of lifestyles between cities and a wide variety of 'relative' suburbs are still substantial. The 'relative suburb' that is predominant in current scholarly and political debates may be a stereotypical form of the very homogeneous, city-satellite settlement in which the privatised family household and a commuting majority are key characteristics, yet this stereotype still has its value. The two cases we selected to illustrate and support our ideas on the 'suburban' community question are variants of that stereotype. The two settlements, Almere and Zoetermeer, developed as typically suburban growth centres in the metropolitan areas of Amsterdam and The Hague respectively. They are both just a few decades old, but have grown tremendously and now are starting to get more and more urban traits. Yet, their main character is still that of a fairly homogeneous residential and suburban area where, indeed, the majority of workers commute to the major economic centres in the rest of the metropolitan area of which they are part.

The Suburban Community Question

Suburbanisation as a social-spatial process is not a recent trend. In the Netherlands, it has been common among the higher social classes since the 17th century to have a second home outside the city. The attraction of living in a healthy and spacious environment in small, rural and peaceful environments as opposed to living in overcrowded and often unsanitary conditions in modern cities became a popular ideal in the 19th century. Through the Garden City movement this romantic ideal of living in the countryside was transferred to the lower middle and working class (Howard, 1889). Suburbanisation became a mass movement from the 1950s in America and some 10 years later also in Europe. From a sociological point of view, the move to the suburbs is described—at least partly—as the result of the social process of growing domesticity, influenced by a variety of modern developments: the increase in wealth and technology which allowed people to do more things at home, individualisation and the growing importance of the nuclear

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family. Because of these facts and because society became more and more complex, home developed a new meaning in the post-war period, from just a place to sleep, into a refuge, a place where people can relax, be with their family and have autonomy and control (Clapson, 1998; Morley, 2000). The new ideas towards housing also brought about a demand for more living space in and around the house, which was provided in the new suburban estates. And because of increased mobility opportunities and affluence, suburban living became accessible to broad social categories. As a part of modernisation, the suburb presents an element of the social sphere that Castells called the 'spaces of flows' (Castells, 1996).

From a geographical point of view, residents moved out of the city as a sign of social mobility, searching for detached single-family housing with a garden. People preferred the suburb for its absence of urban characteristics such as high-density building, small-stacked houses, heavy traffic, air pollution and litter, but also to escape from social attributes such as crime, poverty and ethnic minorities. Suburbanisation was also primarily considered to be a positive development from a professional point of view. The first American suburbs, built by big private investment companies such as Levitt, were initially seen as social experiments, celebrating the best of the urban and rural way of life. However, they soon began to be perceived as a threatening social process and critics started to contrast negatively the new suburban areas with cities and villages (Gans, 1967; Jackson, 1985). The way the suburban debate developed from that time onwards resembles—in our view—what Wellman has called the 'community question'. From the different views on local social life and social ties in suburbs, we see the same 'Lost', 'Saved' and 'Transformed' argument emerging both in academic debate and public opinion (Wellman, 1979).

Lost

In general, the 'Lost' concept of the community question refers to the negative and frequently permanent consequences ascribed to the changes in social ties, the move to rationality and efficiency and 'contracts' between individuals. Anonymous, non-interacting local societies would be the outcome of these changes. Tönnies' dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* and Putnam's analysis of the loss of social capital are both examples of this view. The suburban 'community question' can be characterised by William H. Whyte's description of 'the organisation man', the typical individualised, rootless suburbanite. In his journalistic observation of Park Forrest during the 1950s, Whyte pictures the suburbs as a freely chosen prison where a new type of people emerges, bored and lonely, alienated and dehumanised (Whyte, 1956). However, the inhabitants seem to engage themselves in all sorts of social activities and organisations; to Whyte, this is superficial and mere conformism, certainly not a sign of local social cohesion. This analysis received support by many critics in America, many also from an academic background. From the 1950s on, scholars have stated that the suburban way of life, largely privatised and devoid of any form of place attachment, has contributed to the current American 'drive-in culture'. The mass-produced, monotonous surroundings are believed to put down all natural creativity, individuality, sense of quality, beauty and being in touch with nature (Riesman, 1957; Stein, 1960; Jacobs, 1961). According to Jackson, cities may have social problems, yet overall cohesion is strong because urbanites are still active and outgoing (Jackson, 1985). This, according to Putman (2000), contrasts with the suburbs. Suburbanites are almost constantly commuting between their home, workplace and shopping mall. This creates a 'civic penalty' leading to the loss of community (Putnam, 2000).

In Europe, major suburbanisation took off later than in the US and the suburban 'community question' did not develop into the same severe cultural critique. However, suburban life in Europe is still confronted with Lost views about the downgrading effects on social ties between people and attachment to

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place (Thorns, 1972). Sennet (1977) for instance, claims in *The Fall of Public Man* that suburban life presents a false promise of community. In his view, suburbanites express a compulsive craving for *Gemeinschaft*, but in reality they retreat from public social life. In many countries, critics followed this argument, talking about 'new town blues'. However, their comments rarely became subject to real academic scrutiny. In recent times, critics who expressed a 'suburban Lost' view did not so much stress the social and cultural characteristics, but merely the spatial and geographical assets of suburbanisation. These include urban sprawl, the division of functions, the segregation of social groups and the residential mobility of suburbanites. According to both American and European scholars, such as Kunstler (1993) and Auge (1995), modernity and town planning in the past 50 years have created places without identity—non-places. They state that bad human habitats have come out of new suburban residential areas, being without history and tradition. The representation of suburbs by this Lost approach as an abscess paralysing society has become deeply rooted in public opinion, the media, cultural representations and even the academic world. As Silverstone (1997) shows in his account of 'visions of suburbia', public culture in England—for example, pop music and television—is strongly influenced by the image of either suburbs as utopia or suburbs as total institutions. The suburban Lost view has also had profound effects on policy and town planning. This is illustrated by the rise of the 'new urbanism' movement which strives for the creation of more valuable communities in the form of traditional neighbourhoods and has much influence on both sides of the Atlantic (Duany *et al.*, 2001). However, reviews of suburban development today show that Lost views are based on myths (Lang and Miller, 1997; Martinson, 2000; Palen, 1995; Philips, 1996). Berger (1960) was the first to clarify that the Lost approach, in his terms 'the myth of suburbia', had been presented as an oversimplified view reflecting the preoccupation with urban affairs and upper-middle-class cosmopolitanism. Berger developed this view based on his observations in working-class suburbs built during the 1950s. This work provided the momentum for further work which set out to investigate the 'truth' about suburban life and community development. Out of these accounts, the 'Saved' approach to the suburban 'community question' developed.

Saved

As in the general 'community question', the suburban Saved view states that communal solidarity still persists in contemporary society. Some suburban community studies put emphasis on the original idea of suburban living as an ideal lifestyle for the lower middle class. It is pictured as an improvement of both the urban and rural way of life. Bell's (1958) description of suburbanites having chosen 'familism' as an important feature of their lifestyle versus urbanites placing more value on careerism, has contributed substantially to the suburban Saved argument. Familism as a factor in suburban residence is linked with a favourable attitude towards community participation and a sense of belonging. Other studies add to this the finding that suburbanites are more content with their residential environment, which makes them more positive towards community involvement and creates more place attachment (Rothblatt, 1986).

Suburban community research has mainly been undertaken in Northern America, but some English and Australian suburbs and new towns have also been studied, although this work was mainly carried out in the 1960s and 1970s (Seeley *et al.*, 1963; Clark, 1966; Willmott and Young, 1967, Schaffer, 1970; Bryson and Thompson, 1972). By far the most influential of these suburban studies is the account of Levittown by Herbert Gans (1967). According to Gans, suburbanites have similar characteristics to many people living in cities—in terms of age, life stage, social background and work situation, for example. It is the fact that it is predominantly young and middle-class families that have

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chosen a suburban life that has created a relatively suburban homogeneity. The facilities and social characteristics of their residential surroundings are of secondary importance, but according to Gans this does not mean that suburbs lack social cohesion. People do relate to their neighbours and there is a considerable amount of mutual trust and aid among them. He also states that suburbanites develop a sense of community in terms of loyalty for the place and identification with the local organisations and sports teams (Gans, 1968). In addition to Gans, several researchers in both North America and Europe found suburbanites actively engaged in local social contacts, sometimes even more so than in the old city (Fava, 1956, 1958). A Dutch study concluded that suburbanites were able to maintain their relations with family and friends outside their place of residence, while important new local contacts were also made (Blauw, 1986).

Transformed

The Lost and Saved arguments present contrasting views of the outcome of modernisation processes, in this case suburbanisation. However, both approaches encounter the 'community question' as preoccupied with small groups and the local, and with normative views about the value of social cohesion. Since the 1970s, several scholars have come to the conclusion that the suburban Lost and Saved views are in fact both based on myths, putting too much focus on suburbs as supposed to *Gemeinschafts*. This more critical community argument, the liberated or Transformed view, focuses on privatisation, control and social mobility as general characteristics of suburban life. It is stated that the suburban dream does set the picture of a cosy, almost rural, lifestyle of the old days, but the choices people make in housing are—in the first place—based on individualistic and functional needs and demands. Suburbanites seek a good way to live with their family, not their neighbours. Several studies point to the fact that suburbs, like urban areas, are actually communities of limited liability (Suttles, 1973). The strong local social cohesion found by the suburban community studies is a function of what Kelly in her re-examination of Levittown (1993) calls the 'pioneer saga'. Studies into the early days of both American suburbs and European new towns show high degrees of neighbouring and formal social contacts. The fact that everything and everyone is new creates common problems and issues. This highly stimulates mutual contact. But the intense local contacts of the early periods ease over time, showing their strong functional aspects. However, as Miller, Baxandall and Ewen have observed, amongst the few remaining first residents the pioneer saga can create a strong imagined community (Anderson, 1983; Miller, 1981; Baxandall and Ewen, 2000).

As adherents of the Transformed approach state, the collective organisation of individuality is a function of the suburban dream itself. Many accounts of suburban living expressing the Transformed view, stress the fact that suburbanites are very keen on their privacy. As the Australian sociologist Richards (1990) states, the suburban definition of a good neighbour is someone who is there when needed, but not at your back all the time. This does not differ from the way most urbanites see their neighbours. The moral order Baumgartner (1988) found in studying a suburban community near New York is based on 'peace and quiet', being normal and acting inconspicuously. She sees suburbanites as having high standards concerning the look of their neighbourhood, wanting it to appear nice and clean. Unknown elements, people or objects are often seen as offensive, deviant and potential threats. Many suburbanites have seen a steady growth of these nuisances over the years. As observed by many scholars, the classical suburbs and new towns have been expanding over recent decades, becoming more and more self-sufficient and also acquiring more urban characteristics. This 'urbanisation of the suburbs' which has already been referred to in the discussion of the concept 'suburb', is especially true in a European context, where urban regions are more compact and suburbs

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tend to be much more tightly connected to the central cities compared with American suburbs (Masotti and Hadden, 1974). The changing geographical position of the suburbs has also altered their spatial and socioeconomic characteristics. Suburban settlements nowadays are less homogeneous in terms of residents and landscape as they are perceived by the Lost approach. Since the 1970s, many scholars have analysed this change, concluding that suburbanisation as we know it has come to an end or—according to some—is in crisis (Fishman, 1987; Baldassare, 1986, 1992; Harris and Larkham, 1999).

With a bigger and indeed more diverse population, all sorts of 'social problems', from crime to loitering youths, have reached the suburbs as well, despite the fact that residents go to great lengths to keep them at bay. Residents often call the police, protest at local government offices and some, even in Europe, do not hesitate to go to court. As stated by Baumgartner (1988), this collective hypersensitivity, protectiveness and anti-violent attitude on the one hand leads to order and unity but, on the other hand, the far-reaching means of control cause fragmentation and distrust. This has resulted in the installation of cameras and fences and even the creation of real gated communities, especially in newly built areas (Low, 2003). As Blakely and Snyder describe, suburban areas, gated or not, do appeal to the ideal of the *Gemeinschaft* and most residents living in controlled areas present their neighbourhood as such to the outside world. However, the actual reasons for living in such an area, as well as the community spirit, seem predominantly based on functionality (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Blandy *et al.*, 2003). These processes, together with debates on the influence of globalisation processes and the 'culturalisation' of housing, have given rise to a lively discourse on social cohesion focusing on the middle class living in mostly suburban towns (Hampton and Wellman, 2003). Interesting in that regard is recent research on middle-class housing estates in suburban Manchester in which it has been shown that residents express as much cosmopolitanism as local belonging, attachment, social ties and identity (Savage *et al.*, 2005).

Two Dutch Case Studies

Neither urban nor suburban neighbourhoods are tightly knit communities. In fact, it is questionable if they ever were the *Gemeinschafts* as pictured by the Lost and Saved views. Studies into the local context from the early 20th century onwards show that residents still have contact with each other, but that ties are often weak (for instance, Mann, 1954). The local cannot be seen as the only place where social cohesion can develop, nor is this the context where community is naturally created. People nowadays are socially integrated through differentiated, looser networks occurring at different scales. These may be found in an urban or suburban context (Fisher, 1982). Yet, neighbourhoods tie people both socially and spatially, if only on functional grounds. The extent to which the residential environment plays a role differs among different social categories and is also influenced by the state a neighbourhood is in. Ideas about communities of the past can create a strong sense of imagined community, while policies affecting the area can also give rise to a sense of community—for example, through residential associations and actions (Blokland, 2003). This, however, remains free and limited, based on people's own choices and interests. Janowitz and Suttles refer to this as a 'community of limited liability' (Janowitz, 1952; Kasadara and Janowitz, 1974; Suttles, 1973). So, whilst the Transformed view of the suburban community question seems to prevail, both the Lost and Saved views remain strong in the public opinion, often with support from the academic world. As scholars like Berger and Gans found out from their suburban community studies, the normative myth of suburbia is hardly affected by empirical research. Moreover, the current situation in suburbs lacks detailed investigation, especially in countries like the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, suburban development at a significant scale started relatively late and gained momentum in the 1960s. Because of a policy response to control it, suburbanisation

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never developed into anything like the American mass movement. Nevertheless, many Dutch people moved from the old cities to a new home in one of the suburban growth centres. Many of them were attracted by the same suburban dream, whilst for others settlement in the suburbs was because of lack of choice or alternatives elsewhere. The rapid growth of these suburban satellites of the big cities triggered lively debates on the effects of suburbia on Dutch society, with most of the criticism being played out in the media.

While the process of suburbanisation itself has been of interest to many Dutch researchers, suburban life as such received only moderate attention as both sociologists and geographers preferred to study the old urban cores. This changed halfway through the 1990s when the Dutch government launched a new approach to suburban development, captured under the name of the VINEX policy. At the same time, debates concerning social cohesion arose in politics. This led to new discussions about suburban life in which the Lost view had a prominent place. Besides worries regarding the old, heterogeneous inner-city neighbourhoods, both public and political debates expressed great concern about social cohesion in the new suburban settlements. This situation initiated research into the social situation in existing and newly built suburban areas and some of these studies, especially those undertaken since the end of the 1990s, will be used here to add to the knowledge on the suburban 'community question'.

As already mentioned, the focus will be on the suburban new towns of Almere and Zoetermeer (Deben and Schuyt, 2000; van Ginkel and Deben, 2002; Lupi, 2002). Both Zoetermeer, near The Hague, and Almere, not far from Amsterdam, are suburban growth centres. When they were first developed, the special aim was to offer new housing as an answer to new and growing demand for housing, which was present in the metropolitan areas and especially the core cities of The Hague and Amsterdam. Initially, Zoetermeer, one of the oldest new towns, established new housing in high-rise flats. At that time, this was regarded as appropriate, modern housing. However, the majority of residential developments in both Zoetermeer and Almere have been in single-family dwellings, as can be seen in Table 1. Dutch policy was aimed at controlling suburban sprawl. Both Zoetermeer and Almere are results of that policy. The original village of Zoetermeer grew in less than 40 years from a typical Dutch rural community into a suburban new town with currently 116 000 inhabitants. The local government aims to add an extra 20 000 to this, although some population prognoses predict a decline in the coming

Table 1. Some basic characteristics of the two suburban new towns and The Netherlands

	Zoetermeer	Almere	The Netherlands
Youth (under the age of 20) (percentage)[a]	27	31	26
Elderly (65+) (Percentage)	11	7	14
Ethnic minorities (percentage)[a]	26	31	19
Low education 15–64 (percentage)[b]	34	41	38
High education 15–64 (percentage)	25	22	23
Average household income (Euros)[c]	28 800	26 900	25 900
Owner-occupied (percentage)[d]	46	60	54
Single-family dwelling (percentage)[a]	58	78	69

[a]2004.
[b]Three-year average 2000–02.
[c]2000.
[d]2002.
Sources: Dutch CBS (Central Statistical Bureau) and the municipal research departments of Zoetermeer and Almere, Zoetermeer Uitgerekend 2004, Sociale Atlas 2004 Almere.

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years. Almere shows an even more striking history. This town developed out of nothing in the late 1970s, and it is now among the largest cities in the Netherlands with a population of 180 000. With a growth figure of 500 inhabitants per month, Almere will reach the target of 250 000 in 2015, only 40 years after the first residents moved in. Yet, a suburban character is still very much present in both towns. Almere has the most suburban traits, with the majority of the housing stock consisting of owner-occupied and single-family dwellings and youth still making up almost a third of the population.

The findings on social cohesion and territorial ties in Almere and Zoetermeer will be based on interviews, surveys, observations and secondary data. The studies were conducted in 2000 and 2001 respectively. In Almere, over 150 people were interviewed and 418 residents participated in an Internet survey. In Zoetermeer, 255 people filled in an on-line survey. We also used large datasets on social cohesion gathered by the municipal research departments of Zoetermeer and Almere (Gemeente Almere, 2003; Gemeente Zoetermeer, 2003). These are surveys based on a random sample of inhabitants over 18 years old. Almost 3000 interviews were collected in Zoetermeer and somewhat less than 10 000 in Almere. In Zoetermeer, the response rate was very high, 72 per cent, while in Almere only 37 per cent of the residents participated. The different response rates were probably due to differences in approach strategies—the Zoetermeer survey applied a very intense strategy.

The constant growth of both towns is an aspect that the local governments of Almere and Zoetermeer firmly believe in. The construction of new neighbourhoods and more houses, transport connections, the creation of employment, the provision of higher education and the attraction of visitors or tourists, is considered to be of vital importance. However, the social aspects of these developments, called the social infrastructure, are of growing concern. The city councils in both towns express the view that in an environment of such rapid and continuing growth social progress might be inhibited. Since almost everything is new and no traditions exist, social cohesion and civic pride would be extremely low. In addition, due to rapid growth and their orientation towards different socioeconomic household categories, both Zoetermeer and Almere have also experienced substantial diversification. This has probably speeded up the process of the urbanisation of the suburbs. As can be seen in Table 1, Almere has a population that has been educated to a relatively low standard and a substantial ethnic minority population has also settled there, mostly Dutch citizens from Surinam and the Dutch Antilles. In Zoetermeer, a large share of the population lives in rented dwellings and more than a quarter of the population receives housing allowances. In both towns, crime rates were extremely low for many years, but have increased rapidly over the past decade. More recently, it has been offences which are not usually associated with suburban environments—such as murder, violent robberies and severe vandalism—which have also been growing. Although the figures remain below the national average and living in these towns is still regarded as 'suburban', these changes have had a significant impact on the residents. People feel less safe, which results in a growth of distrust. This is especially directed towards youngsters and ethnic minorities. It is generally believed that both the cause of these problems and their solution can be found in the state of local social cohesion. The question that both city councils were interested in was the extent of cohesion in Almere and Zoetermeer, at both the city and the neighbourhood levels.

Yet, just as the concept of 'suburb' is not unambiguous, so the concept of social cohesion is not clear-cut. Since it originates from the vast changes in Western society under the influence of industrialisation, it has normative associations with social crisis. In this sense, it is a macro concept referring to the vague and invisible forces that produce social order and stability by bonding people in groups. However, as Granovetter (1972) pointed out, social cohesion has two sides: bonding within tightly knit, small groups and bridging where people are connected to the

rest of society through weak ties with others outside their inner groups. As stated above, cohesion is not bound to one single territory or social sphere, certainly not just the neighbourhood. People can be integrated at several societal levels. Moreover, having weak ties to one's own residential environment may create more stable, enduring cohesion than a few manifest relations (Mann, 1954). So social cohesion is a complex societal force and should not be measured solely at a local level. In particular, the aspect of a shared system of norms, values and beliefs is hard to connect to a restricted territory. Although many residents have common principles and behavioural codes, this is often due to their common social-structural background, not necessarily to their place of residence. For the purpose of the research, we refer to the concept of local-level social cohesion which has been translated into the measurable notion of territorial ties. Studying the way people are integrated in a certain area through the ties they have there has been common in Dutch sociological and geographical research since the 1950s. Several scholars have come up with various categorisations of types of ties. In the Almere and Zoetermeer research projects, five types were considered: the economic tie, the social tie, the cultural tie, the political tie and the habitual tie (see Table 2). All types are in a way interconnected and can be studied at the level of the residential environment and the city as a whole.

Table 2. Types of territorial ties

Type	
Economic	Relations concerning the basic aspects of living and time–space patterns; ties are based on functionality, social-economic status and needs
Social	Relations based on communication in actual social contacts or imagined communities
Cultural	Relations based on identification with fellow residents and built environment, pride, identity, status
Political	Relations based on voice, concern for the place and involvement in organisations and initiatives, both passive and active
Habitual	Relations based on the fact that one is used to living somewhere; behaviour is based on these habits

Empirical Evidence on Dutch Suburban Life

If we follow the Lost view of the suburban community question, suburbanites are people with almost no territorial ties, certainly not at the local level. They constantly move from suburb to suburb, motivated by individual needs. Whereas this may be the case in Northern America, the data from Almere and Zoetermeer show that the picture is quite different in the Dutch suburban new towns we selected. In Almere, motives behind the move to the new town were often related to fundamental changes in the lives of the movers, such as marriage, household expansions, getting a better job. Most new town residents came from a large city. However, the majority of current inhabitants of Almere and Zoetermeer have been living there for more than 10 years. In Zoetermeer, a considerable part of the population has been living there almost their entire life and, in Almere, 14 per cent were born there. This has important implications for the frame of reference inhabitants have. In both new towns, it is common practice to leave the current neighbourhood for the newest suburban development. Of the Almere residents who move, 62 per cent stay within the municipality, often even in the same quarter. Residential mobility, a vital point in the Lost approach, is actually high, but generally people remain in the same suburban new town instead of going from suburb to suburb

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or moving back to the city. They are certainly tied to the suburban life they have become used to.

Both in Zoetermeer and Almere, there is a local social infrastructure that facilitates local social cohesion. However, as is common to suburbs, residents use the entire urban region to work, to shop and for recreation. Especially when looking for a job, going to a restaurant, movie or theatre, and for finding a specific product, the two suburban new towns of Zoetermeer and Almere do not provide all that is required. Local employment especially is relatively underdeveloped and most residents are working somewhere else in the region. The economic ties based on location of work therefore are weak, but not non-existent. Many residents express a desire to have all facilities nearer to their home. This local orientation is also present in social participation, in the sense of playing sports, enjoying hobbies and participating in social organisations. Local facilities and many organisations can be found in their own residential environment. Both Zoetermeer and Almere have many socially relevant organisations, ranging from sports clubs, through religious communities, to residential groups and cultural foundations, making up a relatively big civil society. Social capital in the definition of Putnam can certainly be said to be strong; yet only a few residents are actually active in organised networks. The share of residents who say they are active as a volunteer in both towns is approximately 27 per cent. Moreover, data from Almere show that the same group of people is in fact running several organisations.

The suburban new town also serves as the main basis for social contacts, the social ties. Over the years, people have met new friends in the new town, in the neighbourhood, in a sports club, at their children's school, in an association and at work. In Zoetermeer, an exceptionally large share of the population has friends in Zoetermeer itself (Table 3). They meet in their own home, but also while going out (35 per cent) or doing sports (28 per cent) and on the street in the neighbourhood or central mall (25 per cent). Some people (8 per cent in Zoetermeer) state that they have fewer social contacts than they would want, mainly because of a lack of time. In Almere, this is stated by 12 per cent of the respondents. Just a few of them show characteristics of social isolation.

Table 3. Where are friends located, Zoetermeer? ($n = 2862$)

Location of friends	Percentage
Mainly in the neighbourhood	29
Outside the neighbourhood, but in Zoetermeer	45
Mainly outside Zoetermeer	26

Source: Leefbaarheid and Veiligheid (2003, Zoetermeer).

Residents in both Zoetermeer and Almere show considerable place attachment, part of the cultural and political ties. Only a small number of residents say they are actually proud of their place, but this certainly does not result in indifference (Table 4). Most inhabitants follow the local news and are interested in municipal affairs. As expected, most positive responses are given regarding the quality of the dwelling and the peaceful, spacious, green and clean surroundings. In many cases, this appraisal is followed by a complaint about increasing urbanisation and the disappearance of the rural character. In Zoetermeer, over 40 per cent of the residents

Table 4. Place attachment and feeling unsafe in Zoetermeer and Almere (percentages)

	Zoetermeer ($n = 2862$)	Almere ($n = 8714$)
Feels connected to the town at large	64	55
Feels connected to the neighbourhood	65	59
Feels sometimes unsafe in town at large	25	28
Feels sometimes unsafe in own neighbourhood	54	58

Sources: Leefbaarheid and Veiligheid (2003, Zoetermeer); Monitor sociale cohesie (2003, Almere).

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think the city has lost quality over the past year and believe it will continue to do so in the future. Both in Zoetermeer and Almere, the unsafe conditions on roads and streets, around train stations and in the centre are stressed. On a 1–10 scale measuring the perception of deterioration in the city (1 most deteriorated, 10 not deteriorated), the average score was 5. The actual reported nuisance and feeling of threat is small in comparison with larger cities, but because of groups of youngsters, unclean streets, noise and signs of vandalism, residents do from time to time feel uneasy in public spaces.

The political ties with respect to trust in local authorities are relatively weak. People state that there is a lack of control by the police and the local government. In order to prevent burglary, nuisance caused by loitering youth and traffic accidents, it is believed that the police should be on patrol day and night. There is also a great deal of opposition against attempts by the city council to make Zoetermeer and Almere more attractive to the outside world by expanding their urban characteristics and the local leisure economy. In the eyes of many residents, who clearly still adhere to the suburban way of life, the towns can do without large firms, universities and a high-status cultural centre. Local authorities believe that projects such as building a Chinese theme park or a large skyscraper, as were suggested in Zoetermeer, or building an ultramodern city centre and a medieval-like castle in Almere will stimulate civic pride, the cultural ties. In reality, however, it stimulates the residents' disbelief in the local government and feeds frustrations about the misuse of local finances. As shown in many other studies, physical developments do not influence social cohesion *per se* and certainly not always in the desired direction.

Where in general the active political and social organisational ties are not very strong, in both Zoetermeer and Almere the concern with suburban values has given rise to the development of new political parties on a municipal level based on local interests. While suburbanites in the Netherlands never expressed traditional voting patterns as shown in the US, they are now increasingly becoming right-wing conservatives. It is striking that during the most recent Dutch parliamentary elections, the largest numbers of LPF voters (regarded as being genuine protest voters) were not coming from inner-city inhabitants, but from former urbanites now living in places like Zoetermeer and Almere. This supports the Transformed attention to fear as a suburban characteristic.

While place certainly matters to the residents of Zoetermeer and Almere, overall identification with the city is not very strong. Only a few residents call themselves 'Almeerder' or 'Zoetermeerder'. As Table 5 shows, residents of Zoetermeer put great value on the neighbourhood they live in, or more precisely the small area surrounding their house. When thinking about the town at large, neighbourhoods play a big role in the residents' mental maps. Both Zoetermeer and Almere are made up of distinctive, somewhat segregated areas, each of them representing a world of their own to the residents. Near to the centre are the first-built areas that no longer fit current suburban housing needs and which are now occupied by White lower-class households and ethnic minorities. Most inhabitants regard these neighbourhoods as no-go areas; they are believed to be full of crime, litter and all kinds of social problems. Further away from these old neighbourhoods are the more recently developed quarters with a population most fitting the suburban myth. Because of their outdated architecture and lack of facilities, some of the older neighbourhoods are seen as being a bit boring.

Table 5. Opinions regarding living conditions in Zoetermeer ($n = 2862$)

Mark for the neighbourhood (0–10 scale)	7.3
Mark for the residential sphere (0–10 scale)	7.6
I enjoy living in this neighbourhood (percentage)	78
If you live here, you are privileged (percentage)	68
If it is possible, I will move (percentage)	4

Source: Leefbaarheid and Veiligheid (2003, Zoetermeer).

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The most recently built areas generally stand for higher standards and even 'posh' lifestyles.

At the most local level, in both studies cohesion and territorial ties were regarded as not being very strong, but as shown in Tables 5 and 6, residents did express that they felt at home in their neighbourhood and that they valued the daily interactions. In social and cultural terms in particular, residents are in some way connected to the local environment. People feel that it is important to know their neighbours and most of them actually do. In Almere, 60 per cent of the residents say they give help to other people in their surroundings. However, the contacts remain weak, superficial and instrumental. With the exception of the elderly, only 3–5 per cent help neighbours on a structural basis—in the sense of providing care or going shopping, for example. Also neighbourhood centres are rarely visited; only 18 per cent of the population in Almere did so over the past year. These figures vary according to age, distance and type of neighbourhood. The lower-class, ethnically mixed population in the older areas of both Almere and Zoetermeer shows strong bonding and social cohesion at a neighbourhood level. The ties they have outside their own social group and residential environment are actually weak and superficial, a situation which differs strongly from that of the majority of the population.

The fact that local relations are especially valued for social control purposes, is also expressed in their valuing of responsibility for the local environment and neighbourhood activities, part of the political ties. In Zoetermeer, 89 per cent of the residents say they feel responsible for the neighbourhood, against 84 per cent in Almere. Aspects of the community of limited liability and of the defended neighbourhood are shown in the fact that these types of local involvement are most of the time passive: only 15 per cent of the people in Zoetermeer and 10 per cent in Almere have actually been involved in neighbourhood affairs during the past year. But figures were considerably higher in neighbourhoods where the residential area was at stake. In both towns, people regarded the public space surrounding their dwellings as part of their property, giving rise to strong feelings of nimbyism. Plans, ranging from creating a 'hang-out' for youngsters, through to building a community centre, or expanding a graveyard at the edge of town, received strong resistance from local residents. Statements such as 'what about us, we have paid good money for our residential property' echo the sensitivity and lack of tolerance Baumgartner (1988) has observed among suburbanites. In both Zoetermeer and Almere, residents do not simply complain to each other, they send numerous appeals to the city council stating their fear for loss of property value and increase in nuisance and crime. They even go to court, if necessary. In the most recently built neighbourhoods, in particular, there is a large amount of professional

Table 6. Relations with neighbours and the neighbourhood (percentages)

	Zoetermeer ($n = 2862$)		Almere ($n = 8714$)	
	Agree[a]	Not agree[a]	Agree[a]	Not agree[a]
People in this neighbourhood get along well	65	9	65	7
I feel at home with the people in this neighbourhood	52	15	44	14
I live in a cohesive neighbourhood	38	23	32	24
People barely know each other in this neighbourhood	28	46	38	35

[a]The in-between category 'not agree/not disagree' has been omitted.
Sources: see Table 3.

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knowledge that can be very effectively put into action.

These data support the theoretical claims about the creation of 'residential spheres' or 'domains', as described by the Dutch geographer van Engelsdorp Gastelaars (2003). As he states, these domains are not set by their formal neighbourhood boundaries, but are the outcome of a process of mental mapping and identification with specific places which have a certain 'identity' themselves (see Musterd and van Zelm, 2001). If these processes are very strong, their residential territories can become defended neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods may even be defended with more radical means of social control—for example, the construction of fences and gates. The so-called residential parks, to be found in Almere, are sometimes called 'gated communities'. However, they differ substantially from their American counterparts. Prestige, property value and common lifestyles play a role in the Dutch case as well, but crucial for the Dutch case is the collective organisation of privacy. Some people initially moved into a 'residential park' in search of *Gemeinschaft*, solidarity and responsibility. When describing the area to outsiders, they give the impression of a cosy environment. But in reality most residents don't 'play community'; for them, functional aspects of the residential domains are predominant. They choose the place on the basis of quality of the houses, while the closed structure of the settlement is mainly an extra feature that might not have even been present when they originally moved in. The data do provide some evidence for the supposed 'culturalisation' in housing and people do value the local social control that exists. In that respect, the collectively managed 'residential parks' can be described as imagined communities.

The empirical studies we referred to were also aimed at getting insight into the territorial ties of adolescents in Zoetermeer and Almere. According to the community Lost view, youngsters would be extremely unhappy in suburban areas and have no other desire than to move away to the exciting big city (Wyden, 1962). However, the data show that only a very small proportion of youth in Zoetermeer and Almere share this view, mainly those with an upper-class background and in higher education. Suburban youngsters appear to be ordinary adolescents and not the multiproblem kids they are often thought to be. They are very happy with their living situations and express the desire to stay in a suburban environment when they settle on their own, expressing strong social and habitual ties. It is striking to see how strongly the suburban ideology is passed on to them, along with the sensitivity towards degeneration and nuisance. Youngsters do differ from their parents in their complaints about the boredom and lack of good shops, bars and discos. However, they only want these urban facilities to come to their own place of residence. Another difference is their embeddedness in strong and cohesive networks and their place attachment at a city level. Neighbourhoods do play an important role in their mental map but, in comparison with their parents, a considerably larger proportion of adolescents show identification with Zoetermeer or Almere as a whole. The social networks they engage in are also stronger and more evenly spread across town.

Conclusion

In this concluding section, we turn back to where this article began. The question we raised was about the belief held by many in the academic world, political domain and public debate, that newly built areas are experiencing the so-called crisis of community even more strongly than older city districts. Robert Putnam has expressed this view most loudly in his much discussed book *Bowling Alone* (2000). In his view, suburbanisation must be regarded as one of the main contributors to the loss of social capital. This perception has found its way into politics and government. However, these claims are often made without significant reference to their empirical basis. The question set in this paper is: what do we

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actually know about social cohesion and social ties in newly built suburban neighbourhoods? Do the existing literature and research data support Putnam's claims?

To answer these questions a selective view of the literature and original empirical data were presented. The long-term debate about the crises of modern society, social cohesion and the locale is examined along the lines of the 'community question'. As Wellman (1979) has described, there are three different approaches to this issue: community 'Lost', community 'Saved' and community 'Liberated' or 'Transformed'. The Lost view, expressed for instance by Putnam, and the Saved view, apparent in suburban community studies, both seem to present inaccurate descriptions of solidarity, social ties and place attachment in modern suburban society. They hold to normative, outdated views of social cohesion as being the degree of community spirit at a local level. Suburban life has not led to social crisis, neither has it preserved *Gemeinschaft*. Rather, it is emblematic of modern, transformed social cohesion. In new suburban neighbourhoods, the modern value of individual residential enjoyment, privacy and environmental control becomes most clear. Over time, the settlements have become more urbanised, but the predominance of the suburban ideology is what still sets them apart. The clash between the increasing urban characteristics, due to the constant growth, and the suburban dream most residents cherish, has given rise to new forms of community involvement and local social control. Symptoms of this process, like gated communities, are evidence of the suburban transformed local cohesion called 'the collective organisation of privacy' *par excellence*.

The literature overview of the suburban community question provides many theoretical insights; yet the empirical foundation of many ideas is rather weak, especially within Europe. In this article, we used recently gathered data regarding two Dutch suburban new towns to illustrate and support our ideas about the Transformed approach to the suburban 'community question'. Social cohesion in Zoetermeer and Almere, as measured by the territorial ties of the residents, is not unlike what we can find in other—also urban—places, while life in the towns we considered is still very much regarded as suburban life. People participate in associations and organisations and have many social contacts in their own suburban new towns. Identification with the municipality is not very strong, but this is due to the preoccupation people have with their personal residential situation. At the local level, one feels attachment and responsibility to the place. Social ties in the neighbourhood are mainly of the weak, bridging kind; only residents in lower-class, ethnically mixed areas show a large degree of bonding. The research also points to aspects of the transformed social cohesion that are regarded as less favourable. The growing urban characteristics coming into conflict with suburban values of residential enjoyment put a great deal of strain on local solidarity and confidence. The fact that the residents of Zoetermeer and Almere show a growing mistrust in their fellow inhabitants, the local government and the police, and put every strategy in action to keep others 'out of their backyard', is alarming. Part of this comes from the Transformed beliefs incorporated by the residents. However, to a large extent their attitude is also influenced by the Lost and Saved views held by city councils and suburban critics who constantly try to make new areas more urban and who enforce civic pride and *Gemeinschaft* relations. If they would just let new neighbourhoods develop on their own and focus on reducing individual social problems and poverty, a lot of frustration might disappear. Over and over, newly transformed social communities would develop.

Note

1. URBEX—the Spatial Dimensions of Urban Social Exclusion and Integration; UGIS—Urban Governance, Social Inclusion and Sustainability; and RESTATE—Restructuring Large-scale Housing Estates in European Cities.

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