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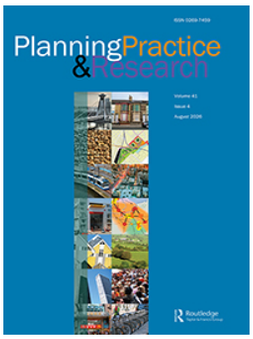
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Neighbourhood ties: a social and spatial capital approach

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how residents use and experience their living environment, focusing on the social affordances of neighbourhood places. Through narrative mapping in group sessions in a case study neighbourhood in Rotterdam, nineteen residents, including less-heard groups, mapped their living environments and reflected on their experiences. While residents primarily engage within their neighbourhood, perceptions of safety and territorial claims shape how places are used, particularly in parks and community hubs. By foregrounding lived experience, the study shows how social affordances take shape in neighbourhood places and give rise to uneven potentials for social and spatial capital formation.

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social affordances; social infrastructure; narrative mapping; public space; Social cohesion

1. Introduction

Growing urban pressures, such as rising socio-economic inequalities, urbanisation and climate-related crises, are reshaping public life in cities (UN-Habitat, 2022). While these pressures are global, their impact is experienced locally (Adger, 2003; Wilson, 2012). Recent studies have therefore turned to local capital-based approaches, focusing on the resources that individuals and communities draw upon to maintain wellbeing and navigate change (Magis, 2010; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Matarrita-Cascante *et al.*, 2017).

Among the various forms of capital, social capital, defined as the networks, norms, and trust that support cooperation and mutual aid (Putnam, 2000; Aldrich, 2012), has been widely recognised as a driver of local responses to urban pressures (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Norris *et al.*, 2008). In neighbourhoods, social relations and support networks contribute to social cohesion, wellbeing, and residents´ capacities to cope with shocks and stressors (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Norris *et al.*, 2008). They are formed and sustained through situated practices within specific spatial environments (Blokland, 2017). In times of crisis, people tend to fall back on familiar places and routines (Klinenberg, 2018),

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illustrating how everyday living environments help build the familiarity and social ties through which support can later be mobilised.

Despite growing attention to the importance of social capital in local contexts, questions remain about how local environments shape residents' capacity to develop social capital. While neighbourhood research increasingly acknowledges that social relations are embedded in place, spatial environments are still often treated primarily as context, rather than as constitutive of social relations (Lefebvre, 1991; Blokland, 2017). As a result, despite a rich body of urban scholarship on social interaction in public space (Whyte, 1980; Jacobs, 1961), empirical insight into how spatial environments enable or constrain capital formation in everyday life remains limited (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019; Enneking *et al.*, 2025).

Building on Bourdieu's (1986) broader theory of capital, this study explores the concept of spatial capital, understood as the resources and advantages individuals derive from their ability to access, navigate, and appropriate space (De Decker, 2023). Spatial capital provides a framework for understanding how environments afford access to social ties and support. Rather than mapping or measuring social and spatial capital as outcomes, this study focuses on where and how neighbourhood environments afford social interaction through which such capital may become activated, or remain latent over time. The central research question guiding this study is: *How do social affordances at neighbourhood places take shape in residents' everyday experiences and practices?*

This study focuses on the experiences and practices of residents of Bospolder-Tussendijken (BoTu) in Rotterdam. Through four group-based narrative mapping sessions with nineteen residents, including less-heard groups, we explore how people use and perceive their everyday environments. The analysis looks into how social affordances at neighbourhood places take shape through these experiences and practices, and how this shapes uneven potentials for the formation of social and spatial capital.

2. Background: social capital and spatial capital in neighbourhood living environments

2.1. Capital-based approaches

Capital-based approaches, initially developed by Bourdieu (1986), help explain how individuals and communities mobilise economic, social, and cultural resources to sustain well-being, and how uneven access to these resources reflects broader structural inequalities. Later scholars expanded Bourdieu's framework by introducing additional forms of capital, such as human, political, natural, and built capital (Emery & Flora, 2006; Norris *et al.*, 2008; Magis, 2010). Meanwhile, communitarian approaches, most notably Putnam's, foreground trust, norms of reciprocity, and collective dynamics in understanding community-level social capital (Putnam, 2000).

This study builds on this discussion by foregrounding the concept of spatial capital. While built capital refers to the physical resources of a neighbourhood, such as roads, buildings, and public facilities (Emery & Flora, 2006), spatial capital concerns residents' capacity to navigate these resources and benefit from them in everyday life. There is a risk of treating spatial resources as if their presence alone makes them available to residents. Capital-based approaches often leave implicit how such resources become meaningful in

everyday life. As a result, capital risks being treated as a latent property of places rather than something that emerges through situated engagement.

2.2. Social capital in urban contexts

Social capital refers to the actual and potential resources embedded in social networks and relationships that individuals and communities can draw upon for support, information, and cooperation (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). This concept has been approached from different theoretical traditions.

Putnam understands social capital primarily as a collective property of communities, emphasising shared norms, trust, and reciprocity as foundations for cooperation and social cohesion (Putnam, 2000). Two key dimensions of social capital are commonly distinguished. Bonding capital refers to ties within relatively homogenous social groups and is often associated with dense, close-knit relations that support solidarity and mutual aid. Bridging capital, in contrast, involves connections that span social differences and provide access to new resources, and is typically, but not exclusively, carried by weaker ties (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001).

Bourdieu approaches social capital as relationally constituted and unevenly distributed across actors' positions within social space. Its value depends on recognition and social positioning, as well as the ability to mobilise ties (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2000). From this perspective, social capital is shaped by broader power relations. Building primarily on Bourdieu's relational understanding of capital, this study uses Putnam's distinction between bonding and bridging as a lens to explore, through residents' individual accounts of their living environments, how neighbourhood environments afford different forms of social interaction and shape the potential for social and spatial capital formation.

2.3. Spatial capital in urban contexts

Spatial capital refers to the accumulated set of spatial resources that individuals can draw on to pursue their goals (De Decker, 2023). The concept of spatial capital has been developed in relation to research on mobility, gentrification and residential change (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2004; Rérat & Lees, 2011). Spatial capital helps explain how spatial arrangements shape residents' access to resources and opportunities for interaction.

Spatial capital includes both position capital, understood as the locational advantages associated with a place, and situation capital, referring to the capacity of individuals to access and benefit from spatial resources in practice (Barthon & Monfroy, 2010). This study bridges positional and situational perspectives to explore how neighbourhood environments offer spatial resources that residents access and engage with differently. In line with Bourdieu's perspective, spatial capital is framed as an individual capacity to benefit from the spatial dimension of society and is treated here as a distinct but interrelated form of capital alongside economic, social, and cultural capital.

Spatial capital is shaped by both environmental conditions and individual capacities, including aspects of social position such as gender, class, and ethnicity, as well as competencies related to navigating and interpreting space (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2004; Barthon & Monfroy, 2010). An individual's position in social space is

closely related to their position in physical space, shaping their action space and capacity to access and appropriate spatial resources (Rérat & Lees, 2011; Wyckaert *et al.*, 2023). While some studies emphasise individual capacities, this study focuses on the lived experience of places as the primary unit of analysis.

The concept of affordances helps explain how spatial resources become meaningful and actionable in everyday life (Gibson, 1977). This study understands spatial capital as a relational capacity that is carried by individuals but emerges through their interaction with neighbourhood environments. This perspective emphasizes that spatial capital is co-shaped by physical design and the individual who perceives and experiences space. These dimensions are closely intertwined: how a space is designed affects how it is navigated and felt, just as individual capacity and social position influence one's interpretation of a space's accessibility. The same spatial setting may therefore create opportunities for some while signalling exclusion to others.

Social and spatial capital are treated in this study as analytically separate but empirically interdependent. Social capital circulates through social relations and networks, while spatial capital is materially situated and place-bound. Their intersection cannot be assumed: social ties do not automatically translate into accessible physical resources, nor do spatial opportunities necessarily generate social interaction. Instead, their relationship is mediated through everyday practices that shape who encounters whom, where, and under what circumstances.

2.4. Social and spatial capital interacting in living environments

Neighbourhoods are not merely collections of buildings or fixed administrative units, but lived environments shaped through material arrangements, social practices, and meanings (Lefebvre, 1991; Blokland, 2017). Spatial configurations condition opportunities for social interaction, while social networks influence who can access and feel entitled to occupy certain places. Therefore, this study takes residents' living environments as the central unit of analysis. This is the immediate physical and social surroundings in which daily life is experienced and interpreted (Gibson, 1977; Lefebvre, 1991).

Everyday routines are particularly important in this regard, as they structure repeated encounters with people and places over time and help stabilise everyday social life (Lefebvre, 1991; Blokland, 2017). In moments of disruption or crisis, residents often fall back on familiar routines and trusted environments, making these socio-spatial practices especially relevant for understanding neighbourhood resilience and the mobilisation of social and spatial capital (Klinenberg, 2018). The concept of social infrastructure helps specify the spatial settings through which such interactions occur. Social infrastructure refers to the network of places that support social interaction, such as public space and recreational facilities (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019).

2.5. Social affordances in neighbourhood environments

Affordances provide a lens for understanding how neighbourhood environments enable or constrain social interaction. Affordances refer to the situated possibilities for action

that emerge in the relation between an environment and a perceiving user (Gibson, 1977; Chemero, 2003). They are neither inherent properties of space nor purely subjective interpretations. As such, affordances may exist without being perceived or acted upon, and may be accessible to some users while remaining hidden or inaccessible to others (Hinton, 2014).

Social affordances are understood as situated possibilities for social interaction (Rietveld *et al.*, 2019). These affordances shape the (potential) development of local social and spatial capital. Repeated, low-intensity encounters afforded by shared spaces may give rise to relations of familiar strangers, which support social orientation and situational comfort without constituting bonding or bridging social capital in themselves (Rietveld *et al.*, 2019).

3. Research design, area, and methods

This study was part of a larger project: Collaborative Research on Neighbourhood Resilience Enablers (CORNER), which aims to unravel local resources for resilience. The project aims and methods are pre-registered (Doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/MVJ2W). The project and the data collection procedures used for this paper were evaluated and approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Psychology, Education, and Child Studies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam (ETH2324-0558).

We employed a narrative mapping method, drawing from generative design research that elicits personal and collective interpretations of space (Sanders & Stappers, 2012). Unlike semi-structured interviews or conventional participatory mapping, narrative mapping captures both spatial behaviours and their underlying meanings. Rooted in cognitive mapping traditions (Lynch, 1960), the method extends beyond physical features to include emotional associations, social routines, and symbolic boundaries (Reijndorp & Reijnders, 2010). Narrative mapping aligns closely with our relational understanding of spatial capital as the capacity to access, appropriate, and feel entitled to use space, which emerges in the interaction between user and environment (Blokland, 2017; De Decker, 2023). We focus on one specific neighbourhood case study in BoTu, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

We extended the definition of the neighbourhood by applying a radius of one kilometre from the core of the official neighbourhood boundaries (Figure 1). The buffer is not completely circular, considering spatial barriers, and accounts for a maximum of 15 minutes of walkability. Data points located within both the original boundaries and this buffer zone were classified as 'within the neighbourhood', while those beyond this combined area were categorised as 'outside the neighbourhood'.

3.1. Case study neighbourhood

The neighbourhood Bospolder-Tussendijken (BoTu) contains 14,500 residents and approximately 7,100 households. Many young people live in BoTu, and more than 20% of the neighbourhood is under the age of 18 years old, while the percentage of older people (11%) is below the city average (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2020). Almost 80% of the residents have a migration history, including large communities of residents with a Turkish or Moroccan background (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2020). Furthermore, it

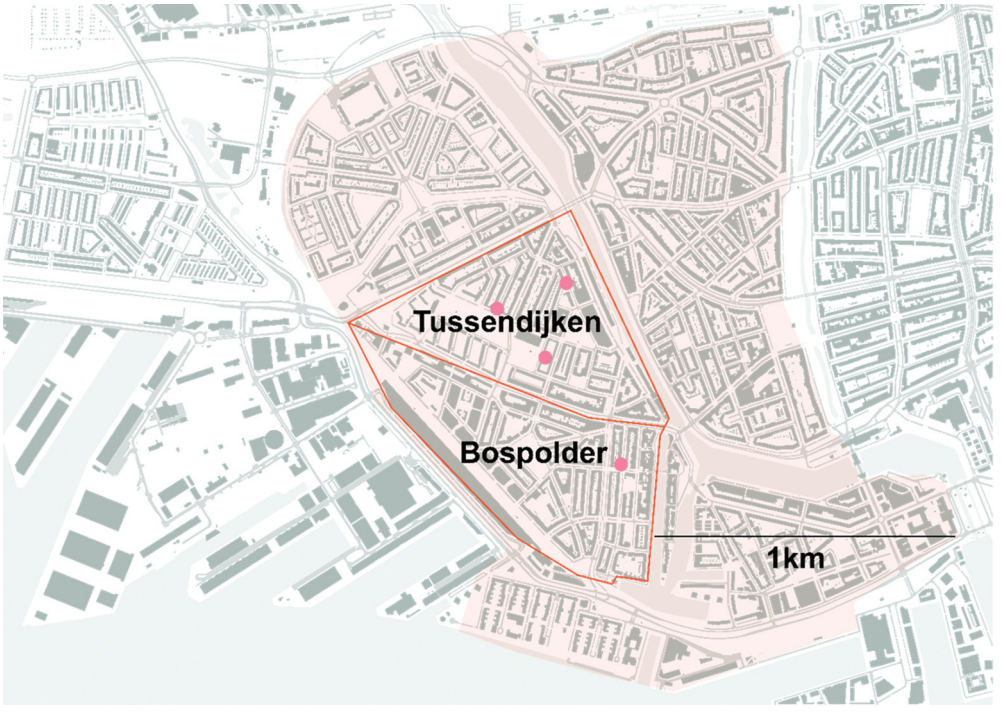


Figure 1. Administrative boundaries of the neighbourhood and the study area (1 km buffer), including workshop locations.

has among the highest number of residents with a low or very low income in The Netherlands. Due to a high concentration of challenges residents face, such as unemployment, high indebtedness, and low quality of housing, BoTu is often described in policy discourse as a 'disadvantaged' area, and its residents 'underserved'.

BoTu is located in the Delfshaven district of Rotterdam. While it includes two parks, Dakpark and Park1943, the streets and squares are predominantly paved and lack greenery. The area is bordered by roads, traffic junctions, and waterways, which serve as physical barriers. BoTu is valued for its rich cultural identity and vibrant local amenities, including public transport, elementary schools, and the Schiedamseweg shopping street that connects Bospolder and Tussendijken. Numerous local initiatives actively contribute to enhancing the living environment (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2020).

3.2. Data collection

3.2.1. Drawing narrative maps in group sessions

We organised four group sessions with residents in different life stages and household situations: two with mothers of young children, one with fathers and grandfathers, and one with young women without children. Each session lasted about two hours and was audio-recorded. The sessions were hosted at four different community hubs within the neighbourhood, with 3–7 participants per session (Figure 1). Partner organisations (i.e. community-based organizations and welfare organisations) and key community figures

acted as intermediaries in recruitment, helping to build trust and lower participation barriers, particularly for residents facing language or trust constraints. These figures were present during the sessions; in one session, a key community figure also provided informal interpretation where needed.

A total of 19 residents participated in the study. While some lived outside the administrative boundaries of the neighbourhood, all resided within the adjusted demarcation defined in this study (Figure 1). Their inclusion was facilitated through local intermediaries who identified them as neighbourhood residents.

Mapping was conducted in homogeneous group settings at familiar locations. Participants already come together and knew each other. This trusted environment encouraged open and honest dialogue, especially when discussing sensitive topics, and enabled the exploration of both shared and divergent spatial experiences. Participants were encouraged to express their views freely, providing insights into their firsthand experiences.

The respondents used A2 sized papers to draw their living environment. The A2 papers included two circles that marked three areas: the inner circle (the neighbourhood), the middle circle (the city), and the area outside of the circle (outside of the city). The respondents were given envelopes with coloured stickers and different coloured pencils.

After drawing, the respondents used stickers to indicate how they perceive the places that they had drawn with coloured stickers (blue: social; yellow: health; green: pleasant; red: unpleasant; black: avoid). The categories were selected to reflect commonly recognised experiential and behavioural responses to environments (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Gifford, 2007). All respondents had a maximum of five stickers of one colour and could use as many as desired. The participants were invited to select up to three cards from a curated set, each illustrating a potential addition to their neighbourhood (Figure 2). These cards, generated using Adobe Firefly, featured a mix of tangible amenities (e.g. community hubs) and intangible experiences (e.g. a sense of safety). The cards are available via https://osf.io/y6bg7.

The respondents presented their maps to the group, which was followed by a brief discussion of their experiences and ideas, reducing the researchers' bias in the interpretation of the drawings. A semi-structured interview guide, which included open-ended questions, was designed to stimulate the presentation and elicit detailed responses.

3.2.2. Consent procedure

Before data collection, participants were asked to sign a consent form outlining the study's purpose, methods, and their rights. Further details on the consent procedure are provided in the supplementary material.

3.3. Data analysis

The analysis was conducted in two distinct steps, including analysis of the narrative maps and transcripts from the drawing sessions (Figure 3). The analysis was performed by a group of researchers; the three who had been present during the group sessions, and three researchers who had not been there. This combination supported triangulation and a critical discussion on the interpretation of the results.



Figure 2. Selections of the card set used by participants to express wishes and desires for the neighbourhood, ranging from more tangible amenities to intangible experiences.

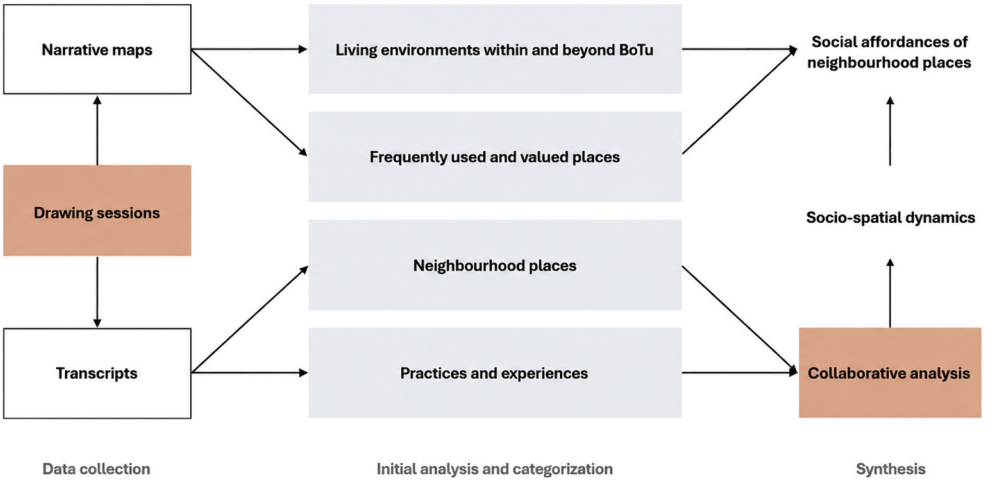


Figure 3. The research design: from narrative maps and transcripts to social affordances of neighbourhood places.

3.3.1. Narrative maps

First, we analysed the narrative maps by counting the number and types of places that respondents had drawn and evaluated with stickers. We distinguished between places inside and outside the neighbourhood, correcting the data for all locations within a 1 km radius around BoTu. Respondents' needs were further explored through the three cards they selected to represent their vision for the future of the neighbourhood. The living environments were assessed on the maps residents drew and through the stickers they used to assign value and meaning to specific places.

3.3.2. Transcripts

Next, transcripts from the narrative mapping sessions were analysed in two phases. A coding process was used to categorise lived experiences in places and perception categories. Locations were grouped into ten neighbourhood asset types, such as public spaces, commerce, and community development, drawing on community asset mapping (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003) and social infrastructure literature (Klinenberg, 2018; Enneking *et al.*, 2025). Perception categories included safety and accessibility (Carr *et al.*, 1992; Errante, 2020).

4. Results: residents' living environments and social affordances of neighbourhood places

We begin by analysing residents' spatial practices within the neighbourhood and across wider urban geographies, based on the narrative maps generated during group sessions in BoTu (see Figure 4). We then focus on how neighbourhood places are used and experienced, exploring the social affordances that emerge there.

4.1. Neighbourhood-oriented living environments

The narrative maps offer insight into how places are perceived and valued. We identify ten key place categories: educational institutions, work and volunteering spaces, public spaces, religious and spiritual hubs, domestic environments, commercial zones, recreational and sports facilities, healthcare centres, community and cultural hubs, and transport and connectivity points (see Table 1 and 2). As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of valued places ($n = 211$) are located within the neighbourhood boundaries. Table 2 shows that fewer individuals are situated outside BoTu ($n = 46$), indicating a strong orientation toward the immediate living environment. Residents primarily leave the neighbourhood for educational activities, recreational opportunities, or to visit public spaces such as parks and coastal areas that they perceive as safer, greener, or more relaxing. The strong orientation toward neighbourhood-based places indicates that residents' living environments afford locally situated forms of engagement.

4.2. Neighbourhood places as settings for social life

The following sections explore more closely how these places are experienced and what they afford socially.

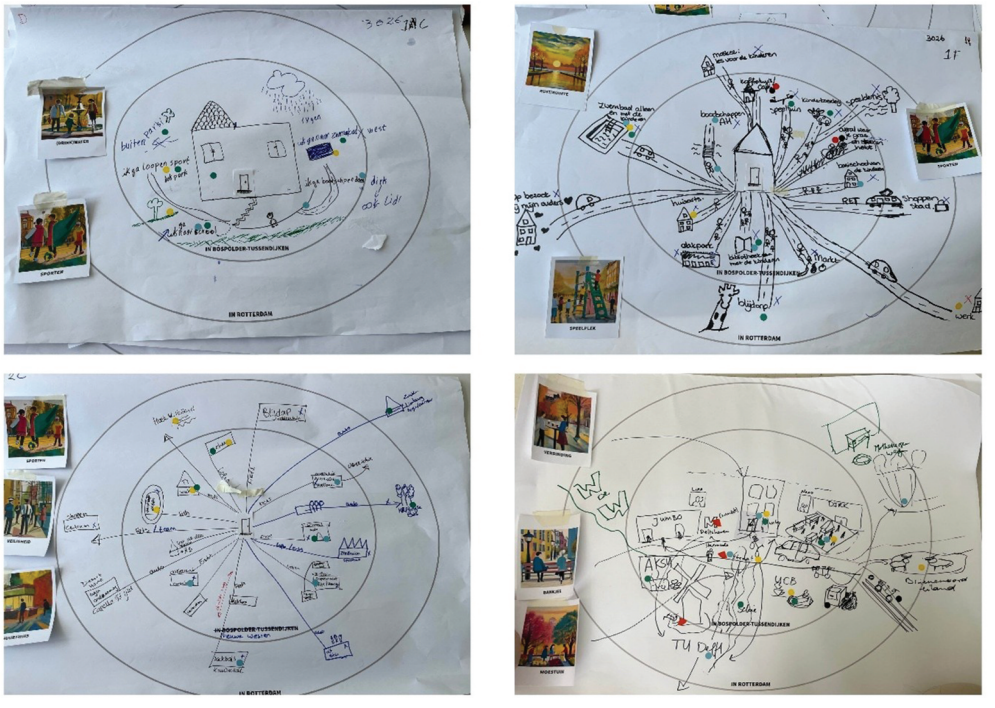


Figure 4. Impressions of the narrative maps from various sessions.

Table 1. Overview of places identified by participants within BoTu, categorised by their place type and perceived value.

Inside neighbourhood	Social value	Health value	Pleasant	Unpleasant	Avoid	Total
Educational institutions	9	2	5	0	0	16
Work and volunteering	7	6	5	0	0	18
Public space	10	13	15	18	7	63
Workshop	4	5	4	0	0	13
Domestic	6	10	6	1	0	23
Commercial	12	6	12	10	9	49
Recreational and sports	5	5	4	0	0	14
Health care	1	4	1	0	0	6
Community development	1	2	0	0	0	3
Transit	1	0	2	2	0	5
Unknown	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	**56**	**53**	**55**	**31**	**16**	**211**

- Public spaces ($n = 63$ inside, 14 outside)

Public spaces were the most frequently marked and also the most ambivalently perceived environments. Inside BoTu, playgrounds, streets, squares, and small parks were valued for their sociability (10), health benefits (13), and pleasantness (15). Most participants identified green and blue spaces as pleasant environments, associating them with opportunities for both social interaction and time alone. Yet public spaces also received the highest number of unpleasant (18) and avoid (7) ratings, largely due to safety concerns, territorial claims, poor maintenance, and

Table 2. Overview of places identified by participants outside BoTu, categorised by their place type and perceived value.

Outside neighbourhood	Social	Health	Pleasant	Unpleasant	Avoid	Total
Educational Institutions	7	0	1	0	0	8
Work and volunteering	1	1	0	0	0	2
Public space (e.g. squares)	2	5	7	0	0	14
Worship	0	0	0	0	0	0
Domestic	0	1	3	0	0	4
Commercial	0	0	3	0	0	3
Recreational and sports	2	4	5	0	0	11
Health care	0	0	1	0	0	1
Community development	0	0	0	0	0	0
Transit	0	0	0	0	1	1
Unknown	0	1	1	0	0	2
Total	**12**	**12**	**21**	**0**	**1**	**46**

crowdedness. As one mother explained, 'I definitely don't let my children be out on the street alone. Not even to play. I always keep an eye on them' (Respondent 2C, mother). Perceptions of safety varied widely, particularly between sexes. Moreover, it was mentioned that most playgrounds are small, broken or closed off.

> There are quite a lot of playgrounds here. But they are really, yeah, not complete or anything. And then you have one here with opening hours, and then the gate is closed. So, there is just not enough, and when they are there . . . there is just very little, and the children get bored quickly because there are only two pieces of play equipment or so. So, I do miss that, just a park where you can have fun. (Respondent 2A, mother)

Although some parks are designed to be shared public spaces, several participants experienced them as socially divided, with particular groups dominating the space and shaping who felt welcome to use it. This dynamic reduces the opportunities for social interaction between groups. As one respondent tells: 'There is a park, but I actually never use it. [. . .] It's a place for communities which I'm not part of.' (Respondent 3B, young adult without children). Public spaces outside BoTu, including coastal areas and parks, were valued for their tranquillity, health benefits (5), and natural beauty (pleasant = 7).

Spaces such as football fields were described as places of active social mixing. They provide settings where existing relationships are strengthened and new connections are formed. The football field serves as a hub where friends meet regularly, and at the same time, these spaces encourage interactions between diverse groups, such as children and young adults from different cultural backgrounds, through shared activities like matches or the exchange of football gear. The football field therefore illustrates how social affordances may emerge through repetition and shared activity: the weekly rhythm of play made the place familiar, while the rules and roles of football offered a low-threshold way to interact beyond existing friendship groups.

> There is a football field where I play with my friends every Wednesday. I really enjoy that. We've now been playing there with friends for a year. We have so much contact with everyone, especially boys. And just kids from the neighbourhood. And young people from the neighbourhood. Against whom we just play matches. And also share things. Share football gear and stuff like that. So that's really fun. (Respondent 3A, young adult without children)

- Commerce (n = 49 inside and 3 outside):

Commercial spaces, including supermarkets, shops, and the local market, played a key role in everyday interactions and were associated with both social value (12) and pleasantness (12). Residents combined nearby supermarkets with regular visits to the local market, making situational choices based on time, cost, convenience, and whether the route was pleasant. Social aspects were also mentioned, including seeing 'nice people' or having brief conversations during shopping. 'In the supermarket, I often have a short chat with people' (Respondent 2C, mother). The central market, in particular, brought together people from diverse backgrounds in casual contact and recurred across all groups. Social interaction extended beyond casual encounters to organised outreach activities: 'At the market, you see many different people and neighbourhood volunteers are sometimes providing health information, such as about vaccinations and diabetes' (Respondent 4B, grandfather). Commercial spaces afforded everyday sociality because interaction was embedded in practical routines: residents came primarily to shop, but repeated visits created opportunities for recognition, brief conversations, and exposure to a wider mix of people. Some cafés and coffee shops were linked to unpleasantness (10) and avoidance (9). Participants reported that they would not enter these venues and, where possible, avoided passing them when accompanied by children, even when this required taking longer routes. These places were perceived as inappropriate environments for children and as dominated by adult male presence. One mother explained that 'that café is full of men [. . .] I avoid them when I'm with my children' (Respondent 2C, mother). A few residents visited commercial areas outside BoTu, for specific shopping and dining needs.

- Educational facilities (n = 16 total: 8 inside, 8 outside)

Local schools were recognised as important drivers of social engagement (social = 9), particularly for the mothers with young children. Participants emphasized the role of schools in creating opportunities for interaction. One participant explains: 'I didn't really have any friends in BoTu yet. My world here was just very small. Things changed when my children started going to school. I started chatting with people at school or during swimming lessons, and through that, I met a lot of new people' (Respondent 2C, mother). Another mother noted: 'I usually meet others at the school. Through my children, I get to know many people there' (Respondent 2A, mother). Engagement at school also included informal roles, such as volunteering: 'School is nice for social contacts. I'm very active at school. I hand out fruit in class' (Respondent 2C, mother). Other mothers told that as children grew older, this form of engagement faded. Several participants pursued educational activities outside BoTu, such as the university.

However, in one group, participants observed that schools appeared socially and ethnically clustered, which limited opportunities for cross-group interaction. One mother noted that during joint events involving multiple schools, 'you can easily see which schools have mostly Dutch children and which have mainly children from migrant backgrounds.' Participants in this group also reported that some Dutch families enrolled their children in schools outside the neighbourhood, even when this required longer travel distances.

- Recreational facilities ($n = 14$ inside, 11 outside)

Swimming was frequently mentioned as an important recreational activity. Some residents used recreational and sports facilities outside BoTu, such as swimming pools, because of higher quality amenities or single-sex spaces. Some facilities were experienced as effectively unavailable despite formally existing. Overcrowding, distance, and limited time due to caregiving responsibilities made regular use impractical: 'There is simply nothing nearby. If you want to swim, the pool is so crowded you can barely move, and then you need transport. I only have an hour away from home, what am I supposed to do?' (Respondent 1 G, mother). While some residents travelled to swimming pools outside Rotterdam, for others this was not feasible due to time constraints and lack of access to a car. The way sports and swimming were used as social activities differed across residents. While some described swimming as a collective activity, where they encountered many other people, others experienced it primarily as an individual practice, valued as personal time and space. One participant explained: 'For me, swimming is really important. I like going alone, it's really a place for myself' (Respondent 3A, young adult without children)

- Community development ($n = 3$ inside, 0 outside)

Community hubs within BoTu were rarely marked as central to everyday social life. While some respondents acknowledged their function as sites for social interaction and information exchange, they were not widely experienced as inclusive or inviting. Several participants felt that these spaces were claimed by specific groups, which limited their accessibility and social relevance. 'There is a community centre, but activities are mostly organised among the same group of people. I just couldn't get in. It felt very much like an insiders' space. I wanted to organise activities for children, but there was no way in' (Respondent 2B). Participants linked this perceived exclusivity to programming and governance practices: respondents noted that the presence of keyholders, staff, or regular users reinforces group-specific control over the space.

At the same time, other hubs served as bases for community action and support, for example as preparations point for outreach activities in the neighbourhood. A centrally located hub was mentioned to benefit from its location next to the market and the presence of a diverse range of users. Relatively few community hubs were stickered while there are many in the neighbourhood, in part because respondents primarily marked places where they are personally active. For some, this included community hubs, but these were classified under work or voluntary engagement.

4.3. Shared and selective use of neighbourhood places

By comparing which places were mapped and how they were marked, this section identifies shared and selective patterns of neighbourhood use that shaped opportunities for bonding and/or bridging capital.

Some locations appeared on the maps of all four groups, indicating widespread use across social circles. These places included the local market, Schiedamseweg (central shopping street), and the metro stations (Figure 5). The extent to which these places were



Figure 5. Frequently mentioned places serving as shared focal points and landmarks (e.g. metro, parks, market, supermarkets).

experienced as meaningful varied. The market stood out, marked by participants from three of the four groups, and across all three positive sticker categories (sociability, health benefits, and pleasantness). The Schiedamseweg was also commonly mapped, but the ways in which it was perceived reveal its ambivalent character, shaped by varying comfort levels and associations. Several women linked parts of the street to discomfort, and some avoided particular places or routes. This was linked to the atmosphere around cafés and coffeeshops, including groups of men lingering outside, feeling watched or judged, and concerns about unpredictability or appropriateness, especially when accompanied by children. Feelings of safety were also shaped by being out after dark, previous negative experiences and wider neighbourhood incidents, such as fights or explosions.

Despite its centrality and functional importance, these perceptions led some participants to experience parts of the street as uninviting. The metro was used by participants from all four groups, underscoring its functional relevance in daily life. Yet it was rarely marked as personally meaningful and was also described as unpleasant by some of the participants from two groups, particularly young women without children and those in one of the mothers' groups.

Some practices were shared across groups but took place in different locations. For example, swimming appeared on all group maps, but each referred to a different facility, such as swimming outdoors in the Schie (canal bordering BoTu) or in a municipal pool, or particularly during women-only sessions. These patterns reflect how similar routines may unfold in parallel spatial circuits. By contrast, the football fields function as hubs of

active social mixing, where relationships are strengthened and new connections are made.

Certain places, such as religious sites and cafés, were drawn and valued by one or more groups, yet expressed as culturally specific. For instance, mosques were marked as meaningful by three of the four groups, but their social and spiritual significance lay with participants of Muslim background. Certain cafés featured only in one group, holding social value within that circle while remaining insignificant to others. These examples show that spaces that afford bonding are anchored in particular cultural or social identities.

4.4. Social affordances of neighbourhood places

This section analyses what neighbourhood places afford in terms of social practices, and why these affordances are unevenly taken up across residents (Table 3).

Table 3. Social affordances of neighbourhood place types: facilitators and barriers to uptake.

Place type	Social affordances	Enactment	Mechanisms limiting uptake / producing selectivity
Educational Institutions	• Interacting socially • Active participation	• Children as catalyst for local connections • Community roles (e.g. fruit mum) • Proximity to home, Proximity to other activities	• Limited social mix among students and parents
Work and Volunteering	• Building routines pre-sence in neighbourhood • Expanding local networks	• Access to meaningful role and presence • Sense of purpose	
Public spaces	• Interacting socially • Seeking solitude • Avoidance	• Pleasant walking routes • Proximity to home • Familiarity with the space	• Territorial claims • Poor maintenance / litter
Worship	• Interacting socially • Spiritual practice	• Programming activities	
Domestic	• Interacting socially • Seeking solitude • Studying • Hosting guests	• Safety, privacy and comfort	• Poor maintenance • Lack of affordability
Commercial	• Low-threshold sociality (co-presence, brief talk) • Gathering and sharing information		• Crowdedness • Lack of affordability • Territorial claims by specific groups • Distance from home
Recreational and sports	• Interacting socially • Seeking solitude • Sharing resources	• Subsidised access	• Limited quality • Crowdedness • Limited opening hour • Lack of single-sex or gender-sensitive spaces
Health care	• Interacting socially • Accessing support systems	• Proximity	• Long waiting lists
Community development	• Interacting socially • Gathering and sharing information • Community action and support		• Territorial claims

4.4.1. Afforded forms of social practice

Neighbourhood environments were experienced as offering a range of social affordances. These affordances ranged from low-threshold sociality, such as co-presence and casual encounters (e.g. supermarkets) to more sustained forms of engagement with family and friends, affording bonding social capital. Other places afforded both bonding and bridging social interaction by bringing together residents from different social and cultural backgrounds through shared activities (e.g. football fields). Neighbourhood places also afforded more organised or supportive forms of social practice, including care-related activities accessing information (e.g. the market), and opportunities for collective action and civic engagement (e.g. community hubs), and, for some residents, spaces for retreat or being alone.

4.4.2. Conditions shaping uneven uptake

The uptake of these affordances varied because they arose from the fit between residents and their environment. The same place could afford interaction for some residents while being avoided or overlooked by others. This depended on how environmental conditions interacted with residents' responsibilities, resources and previous experiences to lower or raise thresholds for social interaction. Spatially, this concerned both how places fitted into everyday routes, through walkability, connections to other destinations, pleasant routes and perceived safety, and the quality of places themselves, including adequate facilities and maintenance. Practical needs and obligations, including shopping, school drop-off and work, drew residents into shared spaces. At the same time, caregiving responsibilities, time, costs, opening hours and mobility resources shaped whether presence was feasible. Temporally, recurring rhythms, such as market days, school routines or weekly football, increased the likelihood of encountering the same people, allowing recognition to develop and making interaction easier. Whether through playing football with friends, volunteering as a 'fruit mother' at school, or joining women-only swimming sessions, shared activities and formal or informal roles provided socially comfortable entry points that made participation more accessible. By contrast, public and community spaces, such as parks and community hubs, became difficult to enter when regular user groups or managers shaped who felt welcome and what could take place, creating experiences of territorial claim. These conditions shaped whether residents used neighbourhood places, avoided them, or sought more suitable settings elsewhere.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study explored how residents' everyday experiences and practices shape social affordances at neighbourhood places in Rotterdam, and how these affordances shape the potential for local social and spatial capital formation. Using narrative mapping with 19 residents across four group sessions, we analysed where and how such affordances take shape. The following research question guided the study: *How do social affordances at neighbourhood places take shape in residents' everyday experiences and practices?*

Four empirical findings stand out. First, residents remain strongly anchored in the neighbourhood, both functionally and spatially. While some participants travelled to other parts of the city for work, education, or recreation, most everyday activities (e.g.

shopping, childcare, leisure, and social interaction) took place in the neighbourhood. Although neighbourhood use varied significantly between individuals and groups, certain places, such as the central market, the main road running through the neighbourhood, and the metro station, were commonly referenced across all resident groups. These sites functioned as spatial anchors, structuring a shared mental map of the neighbourhood.

Second, perceptions of safety and territorial claims strongly shaped the social affordances of neighbourhood places. These tensions are felt across urban spaces, including streets, but become especially evident in parks and community hubs. These resources, although designed to be inclusive, were at times experienced as unsafe, poorly maintained, or socially dominated by specific groups. Such perceptions limited the social significance of these spaces, constraining their potential to foster both bonding and bridging capital. Accessibility emerges as a layered, context-dependent experience, co-produced in the interaction between people and their environment, and shaped among others by individuals' previous encounters and interpretations of the social and physical environment.

Third, the central market emerged as a place affording co-presence and public familiarity across resident groups. Centrally located and embedded in everyday routines, it served as a space in which informal encounters across social groups emerged (Hiebert *et al.*, 2015). This finding shows that seemingly overlooked places, such as open markets, can hold significant social value. Unlike formal community hubs designed for engagement, its role in the informal circulation of information underscores the importance of recognising and strategically embedding such everyday spaces within urban planning and, for instance, crisis response frameworks.

Fourth, for families, children played a crucial role in driving neighbourhood use and social connection. It has been previously found that residents with dependent children living at home often have higher social capital (Wood *et al.*, 2013) and sense of community (Ross *et al.*, 2020). Proximity-based social networks provided parents with instrumental assistance, emotional comfort, and stress-buffering support, which indirectly benefitted their children (Crockenberg, 1988; Horvat *et al.*, 2003; Fletcher *et al.*, 2018). However, participants suggested that this dynamic varied among socio-cultural groups: families described as white and highly educated tended to use facilities outside the neighbourhood, such as schools with a specific curriculum. This pattern may reinforce socio-spatial segregation and limit opportunities for neighbourhood-level cohesion.

Rather than treating social and spatial capital as directly observable outcomes, the findings show how neighbourhood places shape the potential for capital formation through social affordances that are unevenly taken up by residents. Their uptake depended on the spatial, practical, temporal and social fit between neighbourhood places and residents' everyday lives, including their responsibilities, resources and previous experiences. This fit could lower thresholds for presence and interaction, but also raise them, making some places irrelevant, difficult to enter or actively avoided. The findings further specify how familiarity, connectedness and agency operate as mutually reinforcing processes in neighbourhoods: practical reasons and recurring rhythms brought residents back to shared settings, making people and places recognisable; shared activities opened up low-threshold encounters; and informal or formal roles gave residents a recognised position from which to remain present and engage. By foregrounding

residents' perceptions of their living environment, and the concept of social affordances, this study contributes to existing debates on social and spatial capital by shifting attention from capital as an individual attribute or network resource to the relational and experiential processes through which the potential for local social and spatial capital formation takes shape in everyday neighbourhood life.

These findings empirically ground spatial capital in residents' everyday engagement with neighbourhood places, showing how it is mediated through social affordances rather than residing solely in material resources or individual capacity (De Decker, 2023). Viewed through an affordance-based lens, spatial capital emerges through situated possibilities for action that take shape in ongoing interactions between residents and their environment (Chemero, 2003; Gibson, 1977). This perspective emphasizes that spatial capital is both individually embodied and socially structured (Hinton, 2014).

These findings point to several design and governance considerations for strengthening neighbourhood ties. They underscore the importance of investing in soft infrastructure, including programming, coordination, and the everyday management of shared spaces, to mitigate territorial claims. Rather than relying on a single formal intervention, such as a formal community hub, the data suggest the value of diverse and distributed public settings. Strengthening local ties in heterogeneous contexts, asks plural infrastructure of accessible, everyday spaces where informal presence and local activity, such as parenting, volunteering, or working, drive social interaction and familiarity. Involving residents in the programming and spatial organisation of these sites can enhance a sense of ownership and reduce feelings of exclusion (Manzo & Perkins, 2006).

While narrative mapping revealed rich, situated insights into residents' lived experience (Lefebvre, 1991; Reijndorp & Reijnders, 2010), the group format and limited session time occasionally constrained deeper individual reflection and may have introduced social-desirability bias (Bryman, 2016). Recruitment through active local networks successfully engaged less-heard groups, but may have also introduced selection bias, as some participants, such as mothers, may be more engaged in neighbourhood life (van Ham, 2021). Language and trust barriers further limited participation from some. The findings reflect subjective perceptions of a subset of residents and do not capture how places are actually used by the wider neighbourhood.

While this study focused on how social affordances shape the potential for social and spatial capital formation, the findings also suggest a reciprocal dynamic: existing social and spatial capital may influence how residents perceive and engage with affordances. Future research could explore how capital shapes residents' capacity to recognise social affordances and access neighbourhood resources, and whether this generates reinforcing feedback loops.

In addition, future research could investigate whether and how these feedback loops vary across social positions, including gender and caregiving responsibilities, which were not the primary unit of analysis but appeared in the data, echoing literature on gendered spatial practices and the role of social position in spatial capital (Fenster, 2005; Rérat & Lees, 2011; Wyckaert *et al.*, 2023). Future work could also extend this research across different urban contexts and develop a typology of social affordances that distinguishes those fostering bonding from those enabling bridging social capital.

This study contributes to debates on neighbourhood development by showing how social and spatial capital are shaped by social affordances at neighbourhood

places, which are experienced differently across individuals and social groups. The findings demonstrate that the same settings may afford safety, familiarity and bonding for some residents, while being experienced as exclusionary or unsafe by others, emphasizing the need for planning and governance approaches that explicitly engage with these divergent experiences. Moreover, the findings suggest that child-friendly spaces may act as a catalyst for the formation of social and spatial capital beyond families alone. By advancing a social affordance perspective, the study extends capital-based approaches by providing a vocabulary for how uneven formations of social and spatial capital emerge through everyday interactions with place. This is offered as a step towards more context-sensitive and resilient approaches to neighbourhood futures.

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Ethical considerations and consent

The project and the data collection procedures used for this paper were evaluated and approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Psychology, Education, and Child Studies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam (ETH2324-0558). All participants gave active written consent for the use of audio-recorded data or active verbal consent for the use of field notes.

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