

# P2 Report

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## **Abstract**

This research aims to provide insight into strategic housing management of a Dutch housing association from an actor-network theory (ANT) perspective. With this objective the contribution of the research is threefold. First on a theoretical level the research will build upon current systems/network approaches in housing studies and propose a housing specific ANT. Second on a methodological level the research aims to operationalize the developed ANT perspective in housing studies to lay out the actors/actants that shape and are shaped by the management practices. Third on the practical level the research will address the way the research insights can inform/improve responses to current challenges Dutch housing associations are facing. In all, the research aims to introduce a network understanding of social housing management, and illustrate this understanding in inclusive neighbourhood planning. The case that serves this illustration is the housing association Woonstad Rotterdam and the neighbourhood Oude Westen in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

**Keywords:** *actor-network theory, network approach, social rental housing, Dutch housing association, housing management, neighbourhood renewal*

## **Preface**

This thesis is part of a larger project; an expedition in the field of Science and Technology Studies and the worlds it can relate to. My interest in developing a conceptual framework for an actor-network theory (ANT) approach in housing studies stems from an interdisciplinary outlook throughout my academic career. In fact, I believe that ANT allows me to take my experience with interdisciplinary approaches to a next level; that of trans-disciplinary. For a first graduate research project I have conceptualized ANT for the study of consumption spaces, and analyzed the topologies found in the festival market place. In this research I hope to take this understanding further by looking at the performance not in urban space but in decision-making arenas.

An arena that particularly attracts my attention is the social rental housing. The challenge of pursuing a social mission while not overlooking the economic objectives intrigues me. First of all, due to their size housing associations in the Netherlands have considerable power and responsibility which make their decisions highly intricate. Second, I believe that in the neoliberal context, characterized by a retrenchment of the welfare state and an increased socio-economic polarization, these decisions have become more contentious. In turn, the challenge of combining economic efficiency and civic duty has become more true. Above all, I think the challenge inspires a form of creativity that triggers a revisiting of current practices. This might have the potential to redefine the economy and its regimes. I see the emergence of, for example micro-credit, social businesses and the sharing economy as precedents for rethinking the way we live, we do business and the way we take care of each other.

In this theoretical and social light I foresee that new understandings of the performance of housing associations can help to rethink the role of these actors in the public and private sector. My focus here is on the policy/practice complex of housing management, and how this complex interacts within a larger context of space, politics and economics. For housing management on the grounds this can have implications of how policy is envisioned, with whom and for what ends. A demonstration of the lay out of the intricateness of housing management can prompt decision-makers to look for and to look at the most significant factors in the complex environment. Thus, untangling the complex and deploying it in the larger environment is my mission; the goal is to trace the trajectory of policy implementation in an environment of influences.

With this goal I will challenge myself in getting more familiar with ANT, to gain experience with ethnographic research methods and to learn how housing associations do their housing management. An important learning goal is to gain an economic understanding of operating the social rental housing sector. This is not only to develop myself in a, for me, new direction of research but also to account for the economic situation that is most dynamic today, and to verify the position of social housing in the public-private sector. I am eager, as part of a larger project, to explore the viability of affordable housing in the realm of the private market.

Marko Marskamp

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## Introduction

At a Princeton graduation ceremony the chairman of the Federal Bank Bernanke stated: "If you think that the bad or indifferent results that too often come out of Washington are due to base motives and bad intentions, you are giving politicians and policymakers way too much credit for being effective" (Bernanke 2013). The road from policy to implementation is a bumpy one; the bumps are the influences in the real environment that were not explicitly included when 'making up' the policy. After all, the policy-making happens in the safe and plain environment of the technocrat's office and not always in the complex and contingent reality.

Any understanding of the reality comes forth of a reduction of complexity, and by the same token, any policy is primarily designed for a simplified version of reality. Above all, to account for the dimension of time policy can only rely on mere projection models or anticipations. The flexibility of policy down the path of implementation is thus an important feature. In the management literature Mintzberg (1985) concept of the 'emergent strategy' is often quoted, and for urban politics Flyvbjerg's (2007) study of infrastructure projects illustrated that policy shifts are at times desirable.

The academic debate on policy implementation, or strategy implementation for that matter, has received substantial attention in the last two decades. Yet the conditionality of policy has been emphasized by De Certeau (1984) with his discussion of *strategies* and *tactics*. While taking into account the spirit of the French 1960s environment, the insight of the variation between technocratic policy-making and policy-actualizing by users remains relevant to today's debate. Of particular relevance is the consideration that De Certeau (*ibid.*) wrote this discussion of everyday life in the light of planning French public housing.

It was at the time of writing that the State played an important role in the provision of housing, and in the planning of social policy in general. By some argued with the moment of Reagan and Thatcher coming to power (Starke 2006), a large number of policy areas formerly belonging to the state are now located in the realm of the market (Kersbergen 2002; Brenner 2004; Peck et al. 2009). In the Netherlands, this trend of deregulation, decentralization and privatization has been expressed, among others, in the area of housing provision (Gruis et al. 2003). Increasingly, and specifically since 1993, have the providers of public housing gained independence in fulfilling their civic role. Yet, this greater independence came in both the form of decision-making empowerment as well as financial self-control.

For the Dutch housing associations this has meant an adoption of a market orientation to the social mission (Priemus et al. 1999). With a greater emphasis on performance, the sector has resorted to strategic forms of management; strategic housing management has since emerged in the lexicon of housing associations (*ibid.*). Consequently, in the last decade scholarship has been developed around the theory and practice of housing management (Scott 2000; Mullins 2001; Van der Flier et al. 2002; Gruis et al. 2003). At the same time, with the shift from the 'providing state' to the 'establishing state' (Doherty 2004; 256), the discipline of housing management has been given centre stage in the operations of housing associations.

In addition to the theorization and modelling of housing management, a line of research has been developed in the direction of studying the practices of housing management. This literature has looked at the implementation of social housing policy (Malpass 2001) in general, and housing stock policy in particular (Nieboer 2003). Further research has been done on the obstacles of housing stock policy (Eskinasi 2008), and the way these could be dealt with when encountered (Nieboer 2009). Finally, the link between policy-making and implementation has been investigated in more detail by others (Dankert 2011). In his doctoral research, Dankert (*Ibid.*) has looked not only at the policy, but has also considered the decision-making by lower-level bureaucrats, and the factors they are exposed to in their everyday operations and environment.

## **Problem statement**

For a study of housing management, a contextual analysis has become increasingly significant. After all, 'inadequate knowledge on the nature of complex decision-making in a network environment can lead to dysfunctional blockades, stagnations and conflicts that are damaging the performance of local housing networks and the swift solution of housing problems' (Van Bortel 2006, 7). The increased operational independence still comes with a certain responsibility housing associations hold to the State and civic society at large. Therefore it can be said that the increased independence has highlighted the interdependence; the environment in which housing associations operate has become more prominent. In other words, strategic housing management is increasingly intricate. This is especially true in the Dutch context where housing associations have large portfolios compiled of dated objects and mixed tenants. As a result, strategies for housing regeneration, tenant policy and financial security are gaining saliency in contemporary housing management.

To understand the complexity in which housing management is situated is the subject of this research. First, following the work of Gruis et al. (2003), housing management is here understood as asset management. Above all strategic housing management is approached as being context oriented (*Ibid.*), this in addition to the features mentioned by Van den Broeke (1998). Then, the 'situatedness' is addressed by looking at the practices of housing management; i.e. the formation and implementation of strategic housing management in context. Thirdly, these practices are understood widely and at different scales: ranging from national government directives and housing association strategies to everyday bureaucracy and participatory implementation. Finally, accounting for the intricateness and layering, the research is inspired by actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 2005). From the ANT perspective the trajectory of policy/strategy implementation is approached as a series of translations (Callon 2005).

At this point it should be mentioned that 'network theory has yet to emerge as a widely used theoretical approach within housing studies' (Rhodes 2006, 14). Little research has looked at housing studies from an ANT perspective; only few have highlighted and/or illustrated its potential (Smith 2006; Franklin 2007; Ruming 2008; Dankert 2011). In pursuing the ANT research direction this study believes that it can contribute to 'a better understanding of complex phenomena through a wide and differentiated basis of evidence' (Oxley 2001: 89; in Van Bortel 2006, 19).

Thus, the task of this research is twofold: first to develop the theoretical framework for an ANT study of (strategic) housing management, and second to understand the complexity in which strategic housing management is practiced. Combined these two can account for the increasingly intricate environment of housing management, and can give direction both to future housing management research from an ANT perspective as well as to optimizing strategic housing management in complex environments.

For the sake of scope and depth, this research will look at the strategic housing management of the existing stock in relation to neighbourhood renewal. This subject has been developed in the literature (Kleinhans 2004; Van Bortel 2007; Dankert 2011), yet the starting point in these discussions has been, inside-out, the housing association. Consequently, the discussions have a dominant singular scale of analysis. To remember Latour's (2005) conclusion:

The choice is thus clear: either we follow social theorists and begin our travel by setting up at the start which kind of group and level of analysis we will focus on, or we follow the actors' own ways and begin our travels by the traces left behind by their activity of forming and dismantling groups. (29).

It is in line with this statement that the present research aims for a multi-scalar understanding of neighbourhood renewal by housing associations. The writings on 'collaborative planning' by Healey (2003) are of particular interest to this relational understanding.

Then, the search is for the policies, interests and stakes that are at play in the renewal projects of housing associations, and how these constitute contingent networks of neighbourhood renewal. Subsequently, this search is guided by the main question of *what is the implementation process of housing renewal policy by strategic housing management on a neighbourhood level, and in what way can this process be optimized to account for the complexity and contingency by anticipating on network changes?* This main question is guided by the following five detailed research questions:

- 1. Which policies are at stake in housing renewal and by whom are they asserted?*
- 2. To what extent do the envisaged policies get actualized, or are attempted to be actualized by situated practices of actors?*
- 3. In what way do the actors perceive the network, and are they strategic in maneuvering within it?*
- 4. How do the policies and actors interact in the network, and what does this mean for the achievement of policy goals?*
- 5. What are the features of actors that are able to actualize the network closest to the policy intended reality?*



## Literature review

The literature on strategic housing management has primarily been developed in a normative and pragmatic direction. According to Gruis et al. (2003), “strategic housing management lacks a sound theoretical basis” (4). In addition, Jacobs et al. (2008) have highlighted how much of the housing research is policy focused and that limited funding is available for scholarship to develop in a theoretical direction (157). On a more alarming note Smith (2004) has expressed her awe in relation to the “tired state of housing studies” (89). A call for more theorization seems to be made, not the least because “it is argued that past approaches to the research of housing policy and housing organizations are now inadequate and unable to provide a clear explanation of modernization and change” (Mullins et al. 2001; 599).

As Mullins et al. (2001) point out, housing policy research has approached ‘central-local relations’ with a hierarchical view on the public sector. In other words, research tended to be focused on analyzing ‘structures’ and systems’. (604). Only recently has research been developed to account for the agency of local authorities in policy implementation, and has herewith highlighted the contingency dimension. It is the organization responses to a shifting reality that are “rendered invisible by the central-local relations and public administration paradigms” (*Ibid.*). It is in this light that a special issue of *Housing, Theory and Society* appeared on the theme of *Network Theory and Housing Systems* (2007). Moreover, the issue was preceded by a working group of the *European Network for Housing Research* (ENHR) on the topic of *Institutional Change in Social Housing Organizations* (2006).

The call for housing theorization seems to have a candidate with research in the direction of network theory. On this topic, Rhodes (2006), has traced back the origins of network theory and tracked down the influence of this approach in contemporary housing studies. The five fields identified are policy networks, network governance, supply chains, organizational fields, and complex systems (*Ibid.* 3). Subsequently, she identifies five main research interests ranging from network behaviour, network formation, policy-making for networks, network change, and network boundaries (*Ibid.* 11). The synthesis of network approaches and research themes is based on the articles collected in the special issue of *Housing Theory and Society* (2007). Therefore this holistic yet concise review could be found to be representative of the developments of network theory in housing studies only to the extent the special issue could have succeeded in this.

A large number of the articles included in this issue are stemming from the “Governance Club” (Rhodes 2006, 5) from the Erasmus University with “a strong practical focus” (*Ibid.*). Consequently, network theory is operationalized for the end of network management. In this form of management tools are discussed for the steering of networks to particular goals (De Bruijn and Ten Heuvelhof 2000; in Dankert 2011). Following this line of research, Van Bortel (2006) has emphasized the way horizontal network relations, complexity and bounded rationality requires a rethinking of public sector decision-making. Consequently, Van Bortel’s research has focused on complex decision-making in social housing networks (2006), and the way this is played out in the actual situation of urban renewal (2007). Despite the emphasis on network complexity, the research starts from a normative perspective of steering instruments in dynamic environments

(Van Bortel et al. 2007, 38). This 'normative strand' has also been observed by other scholars (Rhodes 2006, 5).

Still, network uncertainty is an important component of the approaches developed (Kickert et al. 1997; O'Toole 1997; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004). It is in this uncertainty that also Dankert (2011) finds his inspiration yet he makes a significant advancement. Again as Smith (2004) on housing studies states:

traditional literature draws, almost by accident, on the realist and materialist thinking that is increasingly in vogue. Yet it has not embraced the Deleuzian creativity of matter. It has not explored the Latourian networks whose spidery tensions bind actions, emotions, technologies, people and things in novel and intriguing ways. (90)

This observation is in line with a commentary on the special issue of *Housing, Theory and Society* (2007) that states that 'the absence of a detailed discussion of actor-network theory is remiss given its growing recognition in the post-structural social sciences more broadly' (Ruming 2008, 1).

Current network approaches seem to consider the network as a given and draw upon the ways actors can exert influence within it. This structural approach differs from alternative readings of networks as being contingent and just one of many virtual realities. One of these alternatives is actor-network theory that posits that reality is an actualization of moving networks of human and non-human actors. In these networks 'the complexity of interactions and agency is inevitably beyond the vision of actors themselves' (Ruming 2008, 4). The result is an outlook that recognizes network (de-)stabilization by which actors in networks are capable of creating alternative realities. Following these features Ruming concludes: '[t]hus it is not a stretch for housing research to position social housing provision as the results of shifts in state funding, residential housing markets, increased social polarization, poor dwelling quality and maintenance, inter alia (5).

The literature seems to anticipate the advent of network theory, and ANT in particular. Motivated and reassured by these claims, this research will be embarked on in the less Cartesian and non-Euclidean way advocated by ANT. Methodological implications are occurring and will be addressed accordingly as well as a brief discussion of ANT writings. In this discussion, however, a few ANT concepts will be dealt with in more detail: black boxes, immutable mobiles, enrolment, and network (de-)stabilization.

## **Methodology**

As mentioned above, the methodological implications of ANT will be addressed in the research; these go beyond the purpose of the present work. In this part on methodology it is believed to suffice to address the methods and tools that will be used in the research.

As for research methods, the study will consist of a literature review on strategic housing management, and will resort to a textual analysis of policy documents at different levels. In

addition, expert interviews will be held with those specialized in the academic field of strategic housing management, and network theory in housing studies. Another category of interviewees are the actors identified to play a role in the networks of housing management; these will range from municipal policy-makers to housing association employees and local community advocates. Finally, the study will rely on ethnographic research which will entail a visit to the arenas in which housing management is practiced (e.g. the local housing association office) and possibly attend meetings by decision-makers or participatory meetings.

The tool for generating information out of these mentioned forms of data collection are in line with the post-structural character of the research. Consequently, the tools are derived from Clarke's (2005) discussion of grounded theory after the post-modern turn. In her book Clarke (*ibid.*) builds upon grounded theory, and eventually proposes three tools for data analysis: the situational map, the social/world arena map, and the positional map. A detailed discussion of the roots and features of these tools will be part of the discussion on methodology in the research. In brief, first the situational map is an exploration of who and what make up the situation (*ibid.*, 94). Second, the social worlds/ arenas map takes a closer look at how the actors define the situation, and how these definitions of the situation varies within and between arenas (*ibid.*, 113). Finally, the positional map represents the position and roles actors ascribe to themselves in the neighbourhood renewal network (*ibid.*, 128).

Based on this methodology and analytical tools, the research is schematically represented below (*Figure 1: Conceptual Model*). Here the housing association and the city (-district) are identified as key actors with defined policy goals. They are both implementing this policy in their shared environment; shared between themselves and with many other human and non-human actors. The interest of the research lies in both the area of practice where policy programs are interacting in different ways, in the environment shaped by the the policy implementation, and finally the way the policy is shaped by the environment.

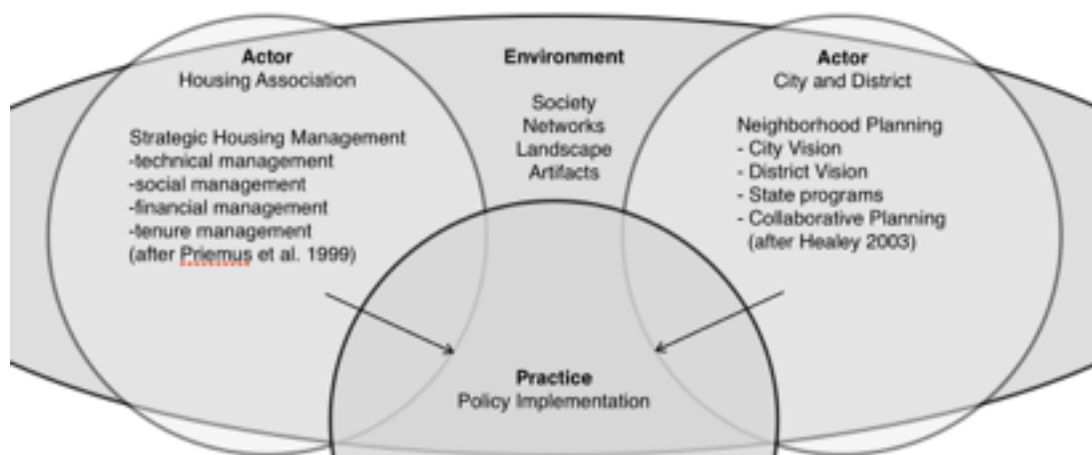


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

## **Case study**

The case central to the ANT investigation of strategic housing management in neighbourhood renewal is the housing portfolio of Woonstad Rotterdam in the Oude Westen in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. This case is of interest for a number of reasons. First of all, this neighbourhood is located next to the city centre, and falls within the central city district of the city of Rotterdam. This central location gives an importance to the development of the neighbourhood, one that is closely related to the image the city of Rotterdam has set for itself. Furthermore, with a total 3.200 dwellings Woonstad Rotterdam is an important player in the district (website Woonstad Rotterdam). With current strategies of putting dwellings on the market, the selling of DIY dwellings, and renovating the existing affordable rental units, the housing association has a considerable effect on the neighbourhood. Of particular interest are the recent collaborations between the retail owners, the residents, the city district, central government, and the housing association. These collaborations seem to be motivated by an inter-city competition of the city of Rotterdam, an intra-city competition of the district and, possibly a market-orientated strategy by Woonstad Rotterdam.

## **Relevance**

The relevance of this research plays out on two levels. First, in the field of housing research this thesis aims to set a theoretical framework for ANT in housing studies, and demonstrate the value of this outlook for future research. The second main contribution this research hopes to make is to the practice of strategic housing management by focusing on performance. This entails that the research will untangle the complexity of practicing neighbourhood renewal, as it is played out and deploy it in the larger environment. Not only would this offer a new understanding of the practice, it might also shift the attention to factors formerly misperceived, or completely invisible.

Thus, the projected outcome of this research is, on the one hand, a sound actor-network theory understanding of the strategic housing management in neighbourhood renewal. This understanding is supported by the exploration of first a literature review on strategic housing management and urban renewal processes. And second, the theoretical discussion of actor-network theory, its methodological implications, and its relevance to the object of study. On the other hand, this research will aim to derive practical instruments that can optimize strategic housing management in renewal networks.

## **Research plan**

The research is divided up in six stages ranging from literature review, setting the theoretical framework, a methodological discussion, the case study research, its analysis, and finally the reporting of the findings and recommendations. The present document is a draft version for the research proposal and will be polished up in the coming weeks; in particular the scoping of the research. This will be the result of more in depth reviews of the existing literature for both the object of study and network outlook. While the theoretical considerations and methodology are

being developed, a start will be made with drawing up a contact list of potential interviews. In addition, a plan will be made for approaching the field research.

It is planned to have the first three stages (see *Figure 2*) in draft version by mid-January, also the period the P2 report will be presented. The interviews and field research are, as far as possible, planned for March 2014. Directly after the collection of data the analysis will be started with, and a feedback to the earlier stages is allowed for.

Due to other activities and for reasons of logistics, the researcher is motivated to develop theory and methodology by the end of this year, plan the interviews and field research beginning 2014, and execute the research in March and part of April. Consequently, a large part of April is used for analysis, and May will be used to finalize the previous stages, and further work out the analysis and draw the conclusions and recommendations.

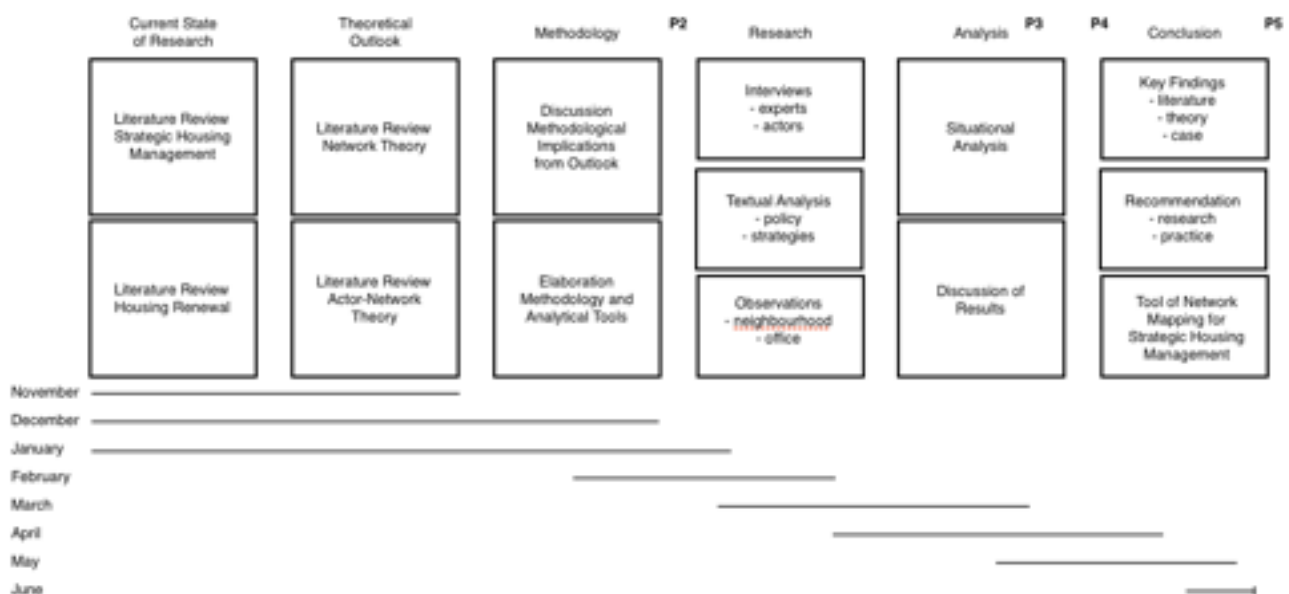


Figure 2: Research Plan

## Related research domain

With an interest in housing renewal by housing associations at the scale of the neighbourhood level, the research can be positioned at the interface of housing studies and urban area development. In the latter field urban renewal is a much theorized concept, in particular its organization between parties to achieve the goals in an just and efficient manner. With the emergence of public-private partnerships and urban entrepreneurialism, strategic management and network theory have emerged in the study of urban development processes.

## Second mentor

Against the background of strategic management of urban development processes, the second mentor suggested here is dr. Tom Daamen from the department of Real Estate and Housing of the Delft University of Technology. It is believed that Daamen's expertise in the field of strategic urban area development (2010), and experience with the city of Rotterdam is a constructive contribution

to the research and its supervision. It should be noted that Tom Daamen has not yet been approached for this role in the research.

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