

## **‘EXEMPLARY URBAN PRACTITIONERS’. PROFESSIONALS WHO MAKE THE DIFFERENCE IN URBAN RENEWAL**

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### **Abstract**

*In our research, a joint project with Tilburg University and commissioned by NICIS, a scientific knowledge centre for the Dutch cities, our aim was to investigate the qualities of selected practitioners in their working context, namely deprived urban districts.*

*Our research will connect both in method (observation, interview and text analysis) as in chosen perspective (daily and intersubjective interactions in institutional settings) to two current and lively debates in mainly British and American research on urban policy.*

*The first one deals with the emergence of new forms of institutional arrangements (governance) and neo-liberal strategies of urban policy. The second debate is on the use of a social constructionist paradigm in 'housing studies'. In this debate urban renewal is not seen as a neutral and value-free domain, but as an expression and result of political influence and power strategies. Professionals and residents working in community organizations (proto-professionals) try to find ways to express their personal ambitions and qualities and to shape the space around them.*

*In our paper we give a theoretical description of this ‘new (proto-) professional’ and illustrate this practice with empirical case studies of 3 of these (proto-) professionals working in deprived districts in The Hague, The Netherlands. What they have in common is their attention to everyday life (in deprived urban districts) and a holistic problem orientation. They take part in relevant governance processes of policy making, but are not detained by the systematic and logic of their organization or by bureaucratic rationality. In the actual policy of neighborhood renewal this ‘exemplary urban practitioner’ gets/takes a new, integrated task to solve complex problems bottom up, and finds challenges in the everyday life in urban communities.*

### **Introduction**

In urban disadvantaged neighborhoods, it is not always the standard procedure that gets things done. In the Netherlands decades of urban renewal in its various forms have not solved problems permanently. This does not mean that success is never attained. What seems to have helped in some cases is the presence of a type of practitioner who goes beyond standard procedure. These are people who do not to give up and who are able to succeed where others have failed. Most likely these are experienced practitioners who learned how to cope. Most likely these are actors who inspire others. In the Public Administration literature and the literature of related disciplines we find examples of such exemplary urban practitioners (Van Hulst, et al, 2009). In this research we are looking for people who seem to be successful in pursuing the social goals they set

together with their partners<sup>1</sup>. What we ask is how these practitioners in urban districts do their job in controversial, politically sensitive policy processes that might develop in unintended and surprising ways. In other words we ask as a central question: *'Through what ways of working and relating do exemplary urban practitioner (try to) get things done?'*

The (proto-) professionals we call *exemplary* are not always taking the common routes to realize their goals. They will not automatic follow the routines of problem solving and because of that they can make a difference. They are critical about 'main stream' practices and try to find solutions starting from the perspectives of citizens. When we talk about *'ways of working and relating'* we refer to the qualities these professionals put to use in the planning and decision making processes of urban renewal. It has to do with personal qualities like attitude and experience, but also with strategic skills such as networking with policy partners. *'Getting things done'* will mean solving problems or better stated exploiting opportunities. More broadly is their aim to transform what is called 'urban problem districts' into 'livable neighborhoods'.

### **Opening the black box of urban renewal**

The context of practice is the Dutch urban renewal in deprived neighborhoods; the working place of the exemplary urban practitioners. Urban renewal is no longer merely large-scale demolition and new construction. In policy circles urban renewal is seen as a profound form of comprehensive social, physical and economic renewal. This broad-based policy intervention includes both physical interventions in the housing stock and living environment as well as measures and activities to improve the social, cultural and economic conditions in deprived areas. Vulnerable situations should be adjusted in such a way that residents have more opportunities for social integration or even social mobility. This means that professionals who are involved in urban renewal come from several areas: local government, housing corporations, residents, police, education, health, welfare, art and media. It has long seemed self-evident to see urban renewal as a process of rational planning led by one dominant and controlling party, the (local) government. Urban renewal is then seen as a linear development process in successive stages over time, or viewed at the least as an attempt in this direction, in order to reduce structural uncertainties (knowledge, organizational and institutional) (See: Van der Pennen, 2005). But these uncertainties are also the reasons why urban renewal is termed complex, calling for a more flexible and context sensitive approach. If we regard the current developments in planning practices in the Netherlands, we can see that this leads to a more important role for citizens in decision making processes and that especially the social conditions of the citizens living in deprived districts, become increasingly central. So it can be stated that the relationships between practitioners and residents become crucial in urban renewal (Van der Pennen, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> The exemplary practitioners we studied are part of a research pool of 45 practitioners spread over 5 cities, which we observed in their daily routine and interviewed afterwards. For the selection a so called 'scouting' procedure was started in which an independent researcher tried to find 'exemplary' practitioners. Through recommendations and snowballing he found in each city a group of practitioners that were named by many for doing inspiring and exemplary work in urban renewal.

The exemplary urban practitioners seem to have a ‘good’ impact on complex policy problems, by working more bottom-up, bringing in social and citizen-focused orientations and experiences.

The exemplary urban practitioners are not driven by the logic of the institutional world, logic of rational planning in the time, to get a grip on the unexpected and uncertainties. They are driven by the logic of ‘the everyday world’, that is the notion that urbanity is a dynamic process that does not stop with planning urban space, with designing and realizing a building, a street, a square. Once realized there are the citizens who give their signature to the urban space, their expressions of their ways of life (Reijndorp & Reinders, 2010).

## **Research context**

The theoretical origin of researching practitioners in public services can be found in the work of Michael Lipsky. Since the end of the 1960s Lipsky has researched the collective acts of public service agencies, resulting in his well-known book on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980). Lipsky’s focus was on the professional practice of street-level bureaucrats – e.g., police officers, teachers, social workers and judges- and on the way they (personally) experience their work. In general, street-level bureaucrats are motivated to serve the common good. Inspired by and in his line of thinking, other researchers came with new types of practitioners. Hulst, et al (2009) did a literature scan and distinguished characters like the Reflective Practitioner (Schön, 1983); the Deliberative Practitioner (Forester, 1999); the Everyday Maker (Bang & Sorensen, 1999; Bang, 2005) and the Everyday fixer (Hendriks & Tops, 2002; 2005).

The research question is connected to an assumption that is more and more heard in policy administration and in policy scientific debates. Effective neighborhood interventions would need a certain kind of professional. Several researchers have demonstrated the importance of such professionals as a result of increasing social and administrative complexity (Schön, 1983; Healey, 1992, Forester, 1999; Bosch & Van der Pennen, 2009). Like these other researchers, we are interested in their way of looking at the world around them, their problem definitions and aims, their qualities, the methods and strategies these ‘new’ professionals use in their practices / projects.

Talking of exemplary urban practitioners we think of individuals in various formal or informal positions (cf. Kingdon 1984/1995:179). They might be working for the local government as a public manager, a policy maker or as a front-line worker. They might be working for a housing association, a community center or welfare organization. They might also be an active citizen working as volunteer. We think that the label of *exemplary urban practitioners* fits this category of individuals. We do not think that these practitioners do their work all by themselves. Nor do we believe in fairy tales of strong leaders who single-handedly dominate the discourse and fix problems once and for all. We think these practitioners are part of and work together with groups, teams and organizations. Moreover, the socio-political work of forming what has been called ‘vital coalitions’ (Hendriks & Tops, 2005) – that is, coalitions of people who are able to get things done and keep things going in and around urban districts - might be a central part of their practice. At the same time, we also believe that individual actors through their deliberative, reflective and/or credible acting can make important contributions to the way the collective tries

to deal with its problems. In sum, we believe that some individuals, alone or in collaboration with their partners, are able to positively influence the course of processes.

## **Qualities**

What have these persons in common? If we add what we know about (working in) disadvantaged neighborhoods to what researchers like Schön (1983), Bang & Sørensen (1999), Forester (1993), Hendriks & Tops (2005) tell us, a first crucial conclusion is that practitioners working in this field are confronted with uncertainty and ambiguity. Reality does not fit the rules. These conditions are also the conditions in which many practitioners can make the difference. In other words, these situations potentially offer the possibility for ‘making a difference’. Whether practitioners do exemplary work, however, depends on their (inter)personal qualities. Moreover, practitioners need a keen understanding of what is needed, taking into account that they will have to find out the specificities of problems and solutions every time they come into contact with new people, issues and situations. In other words, local knowledge (Yanow, 204) is needed to be able to connect the generic solution strategies of policy practices to problems experienced by residents in their everyday life world. Furthermore, we expect that in order to create these connections the practitioners have entrepreneurial ways of working; they have to start creating new solutions. This necessitates networking and management skills as well as a willingness to take initiatives. Lastly, these practitioners are no rookies. They are experienced practitioners. They have learned a craft and developed a ‘repertoire’ (Schön, 1983). On the other hand, even if experience has led practitioners to develop a repertoire, they maintain a receptive and involved attitude toward the changing life worlds of the people they work with and to which they respond. A particular part of practice where all these elements seem to come together is the way in which problems are approached. Problems are regarded as challenges, solving them is always on the mind of the practitioner. If that is not a simple short term opportunity, strategies are deployed that work on the long term.

## **Three examples of exemplary urban practitioners**

### **Ahmed. A Coaching Resident**

Ahmed, a resident of the neighborhood Transvaal in The Hague working as a tram driver, started eight years ago to organize activities to create a cleaner, more attractive street, with a group of local youngsters and mothers. In the beginning they mainly joined others’ street activities, but in the time an active, independent organization “Jongeren4You(th)” had come into being. Today activities are organized by and for youngsters living in the neighborhood, who are mostly Moroccan. This old working class neighborhood has nowadays a relatively high share of young people (10 % more than is average in The Hague) and a large share non-western immigrant (80%). Ahmed wants to help and activate the youngsters, since boredom and lack of scope to develop one’s talents are major problems for them. Activities range from sweeping the streets together, homework support, building a website, discussion groups for adolescents, supporting youths with their family problems, school internships and work, and celebrating new years’ eve together on the streets. Many of these activities aim to connect the life worlds of Jongeren4You(th)’s members and that of other resident groups in the neighborhood. Ahmed shows young residents that it isn’t strange or hard to make an effort for your neighborhood and

to take part in the world outside your social circle. Moreover, in his view, the neighborhoods' problems and the individual problems of the youths living here are connected. *"If things go wrong in this kind of neighborhood, a 'ghetto' atmosphere arises."* In this ghetto 'atmosphere' youngsters lose perspective on how they can take their lives in their own hands. On the other hand, loitering youngsters who misbehave in public space can be quite detrimental to public life in the neighborhood. He therefore strives to help the youngsters in many areas of their lives, and also work with them to improve the neighborhood. For this he cooperates with many organizations in and around the neighborhood.

Ahmed regards education as very important and sees a clear role for him to stimulate the youngsters. This can be very basic. Ahmed says that boys in the neighborhood often do not know what to do and where to go for certain things. *"They don't get a side job, they don't know the social procedures involved either. Shaking someone's hand, introducing yourself and things like that."* Part of his daily routines is walking the streets of the neighborhood. While visiting the streets and squares he has shorter and longer chats with older residents, but mainly with youngsters. Subjects can be anything, from fashion to the weather, but almost always education is a topic. Ahmed casually asks youngsters how they are doing in school. If there is a problem he listens and gives a word of advice. Interestingly, we overheard members of Jongeren4You(th) share educational success stories with each other. Also, youngsters use their educational assets for the club: one built a website, another uses his law degree to help Ahmed in his struggles with the municipality, a student of engineering gives homework support classes.

Even if youngsters help out with their capacities, Ahmed's qualities are still very much called upon. Ahmed guides and takes part in many activities and as the club's president he is the contact person for other organizations in the neighborhood. Based on his acts we perceive a strong empathic attitude towards the youngsters. Besides his job as a tram driver, he spends a lot of time doing voluntary work to help and accompany youngsters. Listening and giving attention is crucial according to Ahmed. He told us: *"The power in our organization is attention. You have to have quite a bit of patience and an attentive ear. Listening to many stories."* At the same moment we see him practice this statement. He goes to Abdel who is in the office of their organization and wants to talk about his exams of that morning. But Ahmed is not only a listener, he is also very much a doer.

His walking around in the neighborhood is not a passive happening because he gives a helping hand to several events in the public domain. Anonymous public spots in Transvaal become familiar through his performance in the public domain. His encounters are short and fleeting with passersby and other residents but they are trustful in its kind (See: Sztompka, 1999). The comparison can be made with the theoretical concept of the public familiarity. (Milligram, 1977; Fisher, 1982; Soenen, 2006; Blokland, 2009;). Public familiarity stems from the repeated encounters of the same people in the public space through which we can more easily assess who we can trust and who not, which in turn can be related to Jane Jacobs' statement: "The trust for a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts." Familiar places can also be meeting points for people with a common history. Places where they recognize a personalized treatment and feel them at ease and at home. Common trusted places make a sense of kinship between people possible. Based on this power of repetition is the quality of life and the social environment of an area served by various trusted sites for various mixes of user groups

across the area so the streets and squares, vibrant public spaces can be. (See: Van der Zwaard, 2010).

During a day of observation we saw Ahmed participating in a football tournament with the youngsters and a school class, climbing on the roof of the club house to catch a dog, walking the streets to see the neighborhoods' youngsters, and sitting in a square to hear from other parents what is going on in the neighborhood and watch the safety of the kids in the playground at the same time. His strategies are for the most part everyday actions together with others in the neighborhood. Many of them are solution oriented. During the activities with the youngsters he shows management skills. Ahmed, who knows how to take someone else's perspective, seems to enjoy it as well when his own efforts and the clubs successes are recognized. He enjoys praise and knows how to mobilize attention for the club. Apart from benefiting society, doing volunteering work can create its own rewards for the volunteer. It is nice to have a framework for your own talents and interests, which creates also respect for your efforts and ideas. As you will see tangible results of those efforts and ideas, the project can be a rewarding task and a vehicle for self-realization (Bosch, 2010). The role of 'active citizen' requires according to Wijdeven & Oude Vrielink (2008) a significant degree of organizational skills, perseverance, communication skills, bureaucratic skills and a personal network. Residents (groups) in whom these skills are well developed, are limited in problem areas. Since Ahmed, our practitioner, is operating in Transvaal, he is in any case for this aspect exemplary. Nevertheless, Ahmed does encounter problems with obtaining subsidies from local government, that sees the value of his organization but cannot make structural payments to volunteers because of its internal rules. Ahmed would like to see a more transparent discussion about how subsidies are distributed over the volunteering organization of the neighborhood but this is hard to achieve.

### **Hans. A Casting Cop**

Hans is a police officer working in Escamp, more or less the southern quarter of The Hague. This part of the city was mainly built in the early post-war period. The now problematized walk-up apartment buildings where at that time part of a utopian vision on urban design. They were seen as the opportunity to create light, air and space in the living environment of every household; it was the expression of a new perspective of a post war generation. Today the residents of Escamp have on average a moderate income. Half of the population is of non-western descent; largest groups among these are Moroccans and Turks.

Escamp today is an environment that offers its residents possibilities for social mobility on the one hand, and social tensions on the other. The yearly bonfires around New Years' Eve are the public symbol of these social tensions. Ever since the nineteen fifties residents have organized bonfires, by setting fire to thrown out Christmas trees and other inflammables like cars and furniture they have collected in the streets. These bonfires are often moments of an urban conflict through fights among youths or between youths and the police. The escalations have earned political attention, and were explained through the decades by discussions that were part of the public debate at that time. In the eighties anti-social group behavior was the main explanation, in the nineties the focus was on the trend of individualization. In the last decade the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood is mirrored in the composition of the groups of youth having the bonfires, and today the New Years' Eve situation is connected to the debate on cultural integration. Following Leary (2004) the bonfire conflicts can be seen as 'critical moments' in which the

relations between groups are redefined. At critical moments an appropriate interventionist approach is of great importance.

Hans has developed the 'role models' project to address problems with youths in public space. According to him youths 'cooperate with professional partners to contribute their part to keeping the neighborhood clean, safe and free of vandalism. They are not police officers but stand together with police and youth workers on risk locations and speak to other youths if they misbehave. In this way they correct and direct the youths in the street so that little or no damage or nuisance will occur'. It is part of his strategy to go to youths that are threatening public order. *'This means that sometimes you have to drop by them, talk informally with them 'over a cup of coffee' etcetera. Also at night. They live at night'*. Hans' role models come from the mosque, the Moroccan cultural club, the football club, organizations that are formed along ethnic lines, but according to Hans they are people 'of flesh and blood', by saying this he means to put their ethnic background in perspective.

The disruption of public order in Escamp centers on youths. Hans sees results with his project: *'We have not had as much damage with New Years' Eve as other years. We almost had no car fires'*.

The youths in Hans' area do not only ask for attention around New Years' Eve. On several sites in the neighborhood there is trouble: they commit burglary, theft, muggings, arson, mischief, violence, drug dealing, intimidation, noise nuisance, fights, urinating in public etc.

Typical for the strategy is that the police call upon active citizens. Police and residents are put into action to correct known nuisance givers and to offer them alternatives for their behavior. In this way Hans also tries to attain a larger role for community police officers within the The Hague police force. With more and better community police officers citizens will get to know their police officer again, Hans claims. He characterizes his neighborhood based police work in this way: *"The police can act, but it always acts in ways of arresting people, fining people, or whatever is at hand (...) the only way in which it will work in the neighborhood is by doing it together. Let the police do its job, but in cooperation with you"*. 'You' is the neighborhood residents, which he addresses to make an effort for the neighborhood during a kick off meeting - we attended - for the role model project. *"Everyone is talking about that things are going wrong in this or that neighborhood. But the only one, who can change that, is you. That has to be understood. You are the one who will have a better neighborhood or will have a miserable neighborhood. The neighborhoods we now have are not miserable, but good. And that is because there are a lot of people living here that want it to be good."*

The way of intervening Hans promotes is known as the community police officer model. In this model the police are present in the neighborhood on a daily basis and keeps close contacts with the residents, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, and teachers. It is not generic policy making, but 'fine tuning'; measures are taken at places and times when that is needed according to perception. This strategy to maintain safety in public space is not characterized by hiding behind shields, but by meeting potential threats openly, by listening and entering into conversation. *"No circumlocutions, but go straight to the matter. Just go and listen to what is the problem for once."*

Hans is given the freedom to do it in another way because of his personal qualities. He is an 'every day fixer' because of his focus on action in practice, his solution-oriented approach to occurring problems. But he also has the strategic ability to form appropriate working coalitions, which is typical for the figure of the 'deliberative practitioner' as known from scientific

literature. His project was not always understood and appreciated by his colleagues. He had to battle to get it through. But like a social entrepreneur Hans managed to put together his role model project. It is a 'police project' but it does not bear the dominant culture of that organization. Hans talks in this respect about three types of police professionals: "Managers, people who work with the police and cops". He counts himself as someone from the last category, which is people with a certain professional passion, which means among other things that he cannot work 'nine to five'. He says about the other categories: *"They talk about the everyday reality of the street in abstract, in terms of rules and policy. They are remote from the people and speak a completely different language."* His role model project furthermore transfers an approach known in social work – where it has proved to be effective- to the domain of the police. This gives it a different angle. Hans is trespassing domain boundaries. Among many youths seeing the police as an institution of repression, the distrust is broken down. In trust, through confidants, these youths are approached.

### **Gerben. A Liaison Officer.**

After working as a researcher of urban renewal for many years, Gerben took a job with housing corporation HaagWonen as a 'manager of social projects' for the Schilderswijk in The Hague. The corporation owns many of the dwellings in this large, deprived and dense central district (about 33.000 residents). Gerben is coordinator of the many social projects the housing corporation undertakes and / or is (co-) financier. In addition he is a member of the "Krachtwijkteam Schilderswijk", a project organization for realizing national policy goals in deprived urban districts. His activities centre on liveability issues and the emancipation of the residents and their participation in (the wider) society. Gerben stresses that it is important not to expand the great number of independent social projects even further; the problem of the so called 'merry-go-round of projects'. Many organizations take good intentioned initiatives, but are mostly realizing their own aims and don't know about the others. Knowing this, Gerben searches for connections and opportunities for cooperation between existing initiatives and organizations. This boils down to matching interests, needs and persons on many different levels. A clear example is his activities to support new resident participation processes. Here a large group of organizations works together to create more contemporary forms of resident participation consisting of more creative forms and more active involvement of residents. The Schilderswijk Communication bureau is an important project for him: it connects and strengthens existing forms of communication about what is going on in the district, made for and by its residents.

Gerben grounds his problem definition on the one hand in existing documents (the policy document 'The treaty of Schilderswijk' from 2007, which is the basis for the national governments' interventions in this district), as well as a independent study that investigated the possibilities for resident participation in Schilderswijk. This study is based on stakeholder interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in (semi-)public space, and concludes that the neighborhood is characterized by mono-ethnic communities living alongside but not with each other. Another conclusion is that Schilderswijk has a great number of resident (self)help- and participation initiatives, which show overlap, inefficiency and a lack of continuity. The second starting point for Gerben's problem definition are his 'treks through the neighborhood'. Gerben: *"By listening well to the residents and professionals who put their shoulder to the wheel. In other words, by using the eyes and ears of concierges and people*



*working in maintenance and mediation in the neighborhood. In this way you can connect to the needs and the possibilities and impossibilities of the neighborhood and its residents'.*

The way Gerben formulated his problem definition seems to catch up with The front-line worker. A selection of quotes: "Implementation cannot be prepared in advance and from a distance" (...) "One has to be able to 'read' the situation" (...) "Every situation is different" (...) "One has to act in accordance with what the situation demands." (Tops & Hartman, 2003).

Gerben characterizes himself as a 'liaison officer'. In a more theoretical sense he can be typed as a boundary spanner (Steadman, 1992; Richter, et al, 2006). It's all about creating meaningful connections and this is the challenge and aim for a boundary spanner. Gerben explains that in many researches, advices and projects not enough connection is made between content and process. *"We know what we need to do and we write in memoranda that we will work demand-driven, area-based and integrated, but at the end of the day we go back to working in our old traditions and ways of working and thinking. (...) So in our thinking we should not so much start from a sector or organization, but start from the neighborhood and its residents."* In other words: connect to the life world of the neighborhood. Stop thinking activity-oriented and start thinking goal-oriented. For Schilderswijk this means to his opinion for instance that you have to deal with the Dutch culture of organizing official meetings in another way. Sending a letter to invite residents to a meeting will not yield many reactions in this neighborhood with a high rate of analphabetism. *"That seems logical, but nevertheless there are still a lot of organizations that offer their products in this way. (...) It also means looking for gains of working together, in stead of all working by ourselves. It is this mindset that has to change. That is a lot more difficult than just setting up a few new projects overnight."*

Gerbens strategy to connect organizations and people is, in his words, to seduce them. The descriptions he gives of his seductions make clear that it involves approaching other parties as equal to the corporation, and asking them to think and create ideas together, instead of forcing them into a structure. Gerben uses the words "looking together", "thinking together", "talking with our legs on the table", "sticking post-its". By giving other parties space, he tries to generate enthusiasm and corporation to eventually produce better, more efficient plans.

The Schilderswijk Communication Office which Gerben initiated is located in the neighborhood. *"That is more easily accessible for residents than city hall or the Haag Wonen office"*, Gerben says. The office acts as a hub that connects small-scale but potentially very interesting resident initiatives about communication into a coherent whole that is usable for the whole district. There were already initiatives when the office started, but these needed a professional impulse and support. For example: *"(...) there was a paper called 'The Little Bridge', that wrote about a certain part of the neighborhood. These people wanted to grow bigger and they were interested in professionalizing. There also was a website HaagWonen had offered to residents but nobody was updating it. And then we said, ok, let's try and professionalize and expand that, together with the residents that are already involved. So use that existing power. Without doing new things, try to connect."* The office tries to reach all (ethnic) audiences in Schilderswijk through different media (text, sound, image, word of mouth). Additionally, these channels serve the many organization working in the neighborhood well. The office has many advantages, according to Gerben. First of all it works with the (initiatives of the) residents: In this way, from the start there is coherence in and support for the communication. It is close to home for the audience, it speaks

their language, it is reliable. Because for the main part they made it themselves. In addition the media reinforce one another, since they are made in the same place and are compatible. This creates synergy, effectiveness and efficiency. Lastly the communication office offers a future: it draws people out of their isolation and if needed educates them” according to Gerben. *“The office is close to our central thought: residents participate instead of consume. We give space to talent development and we strive for structural improvement and the structuring the jungle of existing projects.”* This seems a thought that is not core-business to a housing corporation. Gerbens insistence on practicing cooperative and sector exceeding urban renewal, underlines his boundary spanning activities.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have introduced the concept of the exemplary urban professional. They get their freedom in the policy network. They pick it up to realize their aims. Doing this by using their exemplary qualities. They are respected and seen by their governmental actors/colleagues and scientists analysts as a constructive and positive ‘impulse’ to get things done. In a literature scan we recognized qualities of these exemplary practitioners, we added to these and illustrated the practices of exemplary practitioners with three cases. Three projects in well known Dutch urban problem districts, in which they were involved and acted as such.

In the line of the literature scan we distinguished some relevant qualities for exemplary urban practitioners such as the solution oriented stance of the everyday fixers (Hendriks & Tops, 2005) and the aptitude for reflection of the deliberative practitioners (Forester, 1999). The three practitioners described here reflect on the role of the police (Hans), of the housing corporation and media (Gerben) and of volunteering organizations (Ahmed). However, they also have the entrepreneurial ways of working that involve looking for new opportunities and making connections a variety of people within and beyond the boundaries of the area in which they work. Often, we noticed, they have initiated their own projects. However, they are not entrepreneurs in managerial sense (Lowndes & Sullivan 2008). Being effective is just a part of what they are after. These practitioners are more likely driven by a wish to move society in a certain direction (Ahmed wants to prevent a ghetto atmosphere, Gerben wishes to connect citizens and stop the merry go round of projects, Hans wants to cooperate with residents to make the neighborhood as livable as the residents want it to be than by their professional standards or institutional rules of some sort. Their interest is not in keeping the system intact, they want to bend the system if needed. This is because they acknowledge that reality – the every day reality of citizens - does not perfectly fit the rules and policy traditions of problem solving. Our exemplary practitioners in the case see it as a challenge to make the difference and connect policy and interventions to the life worlds of citizens. Gerben in this vein stretches the professional domain of the housing cooperation, Hans tries to create more space for community police officers in his organization, Ahmed asks for transparency and professionalization in his own organization and in its relation with the local government. Furthermore, these exemplary professionals are more engaged with the life world of residents in need than most other practitioners. Their way of relating to the world is characterized by empathy, and frequent (everyday) social interactions with other professionals and residents are important to them. They ‘talk over a cup of coffee’ with youngsters creating nuisance in the neighborhood (Hans), visit them in the street on a daily basis (Ahmed) or talk to them ‘with the legs on the table’ in order to

find out about their interests and capacities (Gerben). It is mainly through these interactions that they gain local knowledge, which is essential to their work. Local knowledge is ‘the very mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience’ (Yanow, 2004: 12). The contact these practitioners have with people in and around the areas in which they work give them access to local knowledge and help them to develop their own local knowledge.

This translates in trying to understand the problems of the residents ‘inside out’, e.g. when investigating the challenge at hand they make an effort to take on the perspective of the residents they work with. In doing so they find out about the different problems a person has and the ways in which they are related, but also about this person’s motivations and capacities. In the ‘system’ world of public help provision help is parceled over different professions and trajectories. In the ‘life world’ of residents problems and people are complex. By actively looking at the ‘whole’ problem owner, the (proto-) professionals are often brought to new, more integrated help strategies. We use the term holistic problem orientation to indicate practitioners’ receptivity to the full extent of residents’ problems and opportunities, and the willingness to bend the systematic of public services in such a way that they match these problems and opportunities. As a result, not only the exemplary (proto-) professionals problem orientation but also his or her interventionist actions can be seen as generalistic rather than specialized, they go outside of their domain and take on a variety of tasks ranging from watching over a kindergarten to creating a media centre. So, in order to deal with both uncertainty and complexity, our practitioners become creative. This creativity can involve matching rules with situations, but sometimes practitioners even need to cross institutional or professional rules and borders. In this sense, exemplary (proto-) professionals act as boundary spanners.

To sum up:

1. Their reality (problem definition and aims) does not fit the rules and regulations.
2. They move society in a certain direction than by professional standards or institutional rules of some sort.
3. They have a strong engagement with the life world of residents (empathic).
4. They gain local knowledge, which is essential to their work.
5. They have entrepreneurial ways of working.
6. Their context / orientation of handling can be labeled as ‘every day urban world’ versus the planned / institutional ‘system’ world.
7. In the ‘system’ world of public help provision help is parceled over different professions and trajectories. In the ‘life world’ of residents problems and people are complex. By actively looking at the ‘whole’ problem owner, the (proto-) professionals are often brought to new, more integrated help strategies.
8. They are generalists.
9. Their creativity can involve matching rules with situations, but sometimes practitioners even need to cross institutional or professional rules and borders. In this sense, exemplary (proto-) professionals act as boundary spanners.

Our list, however, is not intended as a full profile of an exemplary urban practitioner. Context of acting and qualities are different. Every situation, each district requires its own approach and therefore specific properties. “Good practice can never be bottled and applied somewhere else

like an ointment. There are no one-size-fits-all, magic solutions to complex social problems. The public sector is highly heterogeneous: entrepreneurial solutions will vary for different organizations, with different histories, cultures, users and political leadership” (Leadbeater & Goss, 1998: 22).

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