Redefining the border between public and private in ambiguous modernist areas: The case of Amsterdam Nieuw West

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ABSTRACT

Modernist areas represent the ambivalent idea to live in a green city, which can provide light and air of open landscapes, and on the same time host facilities of an urban environment. Modernist areas as the Western Garden Cities in Amsterdam are also ambiguous spaces, their form shaped mainly by flowing open space. The ambiguity of space is related to its organisation, if the territorial order is missing, urban space tends to become non-legible.

Recent fieldwork in Amsterdam showed that more businesses than assumed are located in this large area, which was planned and is generally still thought of as widely separated in functions. The infiltration with new businesses took also place at locations that were not used by businesses before. The changing use of built material changes partially also the territorial depth. Businesses can currently be found in four different types of territorial depth regarding the distance from the public street to the individual user unit, creating sometimes even more overlap between public and private. The ambiguity of the large open green spaces is affected only little by the higher activation of the area.

KEYWORDS

Amsterdam Nieuw West; micro-businesses; border public private; redefinition

1 AMSTERDAM'S WESTERN GARDEN CITIES UNDER TRANSFORMATION

Modernist areas represent the ambivalent idea to live in a green environment, which can provide light and air of an open landscape, and on the same time host facilities of an urban environment. Modernist areas in cities are also ambiguous spaces, as their form is mainly shaped by flowing open space. The *Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan (AUP)*, General Extension Plan, of Amsterdam (Fig.01) developed by Cornelius van Eesteren is an early example for modernist planning, which was approved in 1935, only two years after he led the CIAM congress in 1933 with the motto 'the functional city'. The so-called Western Garden Cities of Amsterdam, the *Tuinsteden*, were planned along the principle of separation of functions with a clear distinction between residential, working, recreational and transport areas. Van Eesteren mainly fixed the transport infrastructure and big green structure, but left the architectural details of the residential islands unspecified (Barbieri & Boekraad, 1982). The plan was realized in two steps. During the first part, before the Second World War, mainly the areas connected to the old city were developed. The garden cities of Amsterdam were built between 1950 and 1970.



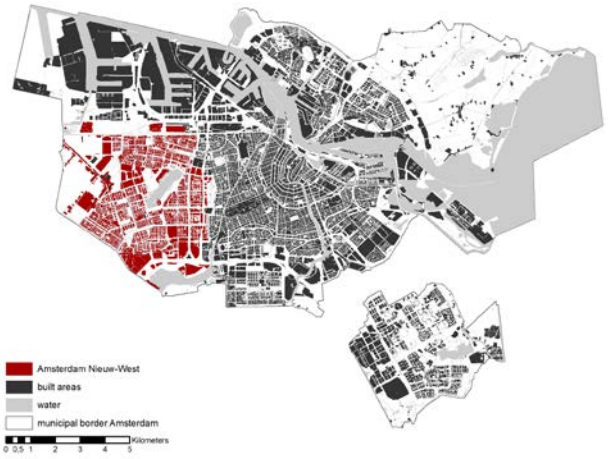

Fig.1 (left): General Extension Plan of Amsterdam from 1935 by van Eesteren - the extension is represented in red, the main visible features are the main roads as well as the large urban green system. Source: http://www.bronnenuitamsterdam.nl
Fig.2 (right): the area in red represents the district Amsterdam Nieuw West, which is the investigated area.

1.1 Public and private in Amsterdam Nieuw West

The urban block dissolved gradually, when the individual residential islands were designed. Whereas the areas connected to the old city were still built with closed urban blocks, the more to the west, the more open the building configurations were designed. The area covered with green open space increased substantially in relation to the area covered by buildings. Green space in the area of the AUP was planned from the perspective of a metropolitan park, on the city level. The level of the

'public-realm green space' (Komossa, 2010, p.185) was missing. The distinction between public and private was diminishing as well, supported by the huge amount of open space between the buildings, being either in public or private ownership. Especially the space between the public street and the (private) building is currently often very ambiguous, thus difficult to read. This ambiguity is mainly based on the non-legibility of what is public and what is private. What might be interpreted by one person as area for public use, might be considered private by another.

What is understood as public and private? The open space is usually more related to public space, whereas the inside of a house respectively user unit is considered private. Habraken (1998) explains that 'the structure we find is a reflection of patterns of control'. This means that the actual organisation of public and private is underlying the control by the users of a territory , it is continuously changing and is thus not static. Madanipour (2003) defines public space as 'that part of the physical environment, which is associated with public meanings and functions'. The organisation and division of public and private space shapes on the one hand how people use their urban environment, on the other hand the agency of people transforms the use of space, and we can constantly investigate '…how a society divides its space into public and private spheres, and how this division controls movement from one place to another and access to place and activities' (ibid).

Madanipour (2003) refers to the boundary between the public and the private as 'an expression of power that can subdivide space'. One important aspect of the border between public and private is the continuity of territorial depth, as Habraken (1998) describes the gradual change from public to private space. Territorial depth can be 'measured by the number of boundary crossings needed to move from the outer space to the innermost territory' (ibid). Territorial depth refers in this research to the steps between the public street and the individual user unit.

In this paper it is assumed that in periods of active transformation or under-use of space, territories can be perceived ambiguous. The ambiguity of space is related to its organisation: 'when we think of spaces as units of control we have defined a territorial order' (Habraken, 1984: 16). If the territorial order is not clear, urban space tends to become non-legible, whereby territory can be defined as Foucault (1980) states as an 'area controlled by a certain power'.

Ambiguity creates uncertainties or vagueness, if it is not clear, whether a space belongs to the public or private, it can be used differently by different people. Whereas Rapoport & Kantor (1967) emphasise the possibilities of the state of being uncertain that can produce freedom and opportunities, Ståhle (2008) points out the component of confusion and conflict of the 'Ambiterritory', as he calls these territories. Along the definition of Rapoport and Kantor it is interesting to explore how the change in program of this ambiguous area affects the territorial order and the location of the public-private border, whereas the definition of Ståhle sets the task to critically investigate the qualities appearing through the change of these vague areas.

1.2 Small scale businesses in Amsterdam Nieuw West

A lot has been written on the lack of amenities and shops of the modernist areas to satisfy daily needs, a lack of life on the streets, which often is connected to unsafe neighbourhoods. Taking a general look, one or the other aspect is true, which is why the modernist areas are currently under reconstruction in many cities. These ambiguous urban areas are then often transformed by densifying them into closed urban block neighbourhoods, with varying results. Taking a second look, as undertaken during recent fieldwork in Amsterdam Nieuw West, this picture starts to blur. Large areas are covered with residential buildings, which were not intended to host economic activities on the small scale in other than the originally planned locations. In the AUP, facilities were generally provided throughout the new districts. Retail and other micro-businesses (Fig.03) were concentrated in separate buildings laid out next to the residential buildings, in the ground floor of buildings at street corners or sometimes concentrated in one to three building strips along main roads in central nodes with access to public transport.

In spite of the non-legibility of space and the non-existence of small scale working spaces, the buildings are today though infiltrated with new uses. Other that what Madanipour observed when stating in his book on *Public and private spaces in the city* (2003) that 'domestic space has moved from an integration of work, leisure and living to ever more precarious, mono-functional intimate and exclusive spaces of ever smaller households', more businesses than assumed are located in this large area, which is generally thought of as widely separated in functions. Numerous micro-businesses can also be found on the upper floors of multi-family houses (Fig. 04 and 05), occupying spaces that were initially intended to host apartments only. Micro-businesses in general are seen in this research as public function. They are located in the threshold between public and private, extending temporarily the public component of this threshold during the opening time.

Comparing the present location of micro businesses with the originally planned ones is the starting point to investigate, if and how the territorial order changed through the change in use and whether this process changed the territory to be less ambiguous.



Fig. 3: Location of businesses planned 1934. Source: Amsterdamse Raad voor de Stedebouw 1985



Fig. 4-5: Location of businesses existent in 2010 (left: ground floor; right: upper floors). Source data: DRO 2010)

2 INVESTIGATING LOCATIONS OF MICRO-BUSINESSES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

The method includes two main steps in order to describe whether the territorial order changed due to the infiltration of the built material with new uses. The first is tracing the location of micro-businesses, the second is defining four types of territorial depth.

The location of micro-businesses was traced on the ground floor as well as on the upper floors of the buildings of Amsterdam Nieuw-West. The current situation was further compared with the one

initially planned by van Eesteren. This was done in order to identify a possible changing spatial organisation of functions (see also Fig. 3-5). The investigation is targeting micro-businesses, because they are more easily combined (Grant 2002) and thus found in residential areas.

The maps of the current business locations are based on observations and use of digital databases as well as plan material. Observations in field research were in the first place necessary to understand that these territorial changes take place, and if or how the infiltration of private or collective spaces with temporary public functions affects living together. The data on business locations used for this research was retrieved via the spatial planning department of Amsterdam (DRO 2010), and exemplarily verified in field research.

Two aspects of the location of businesses are used to define different types of territorial depth. The first is the location of businesses either on the ground floor or on the upper floors, and the second is the distance of the building to the public street. As already explained in the first chapter, the territorial depth describes the number of boundaries to cross from public to private. The first possible crossing defined here is the direct entrance from the public space of the street to the building, including a maximum distance of one meter to the street. The second crossing defines the situation when the building is in a distance to the public street, representing a setback with a minimum distance of one meter from the public street. The third crossing is the door leading from the collective stair case to the individual user unit. Thus, four different types of territorial depth regarding the business locations were distinguished:

1) directly along the public street, on the ground floor (1 territorial step)
2) in a distance of at least 1 meter from the public street, on the ground floor (2 territorial steps)
3) directly located along the public street, on the upper floors of buildings (2 territorial steps)
4) in a distance of at least 1 meter from the public street, on the upper floors of buildings (3 territorial steps)

These types of territorial depth are used to interpret if and how the infiltration with new uses changed the ambiguity or legibility of these urban areas.

3 MICRO-BUSINESSES AND FOUR TYPES OF TERRITORIAL DEPTH

Since the development of the AUP the inhabitants have appropriated the built material, using it for their individual needs. Due to this, the location pattern of businesses changed significantly (see Fig.

3-5). Looking at these maps, the businesses on the ground floor seem to follow different location pattern than the ones on the upper floors. The location for the ground floor businesses can be explained by two factors: one the one hand they host different types of businesses, which have different requirements (Hausleitner 2012) than those located on the upper floors. On the other hand it can be explained by the strict planning of new facilities for business locations in Amsterdam as well as the unsuitability of the ground floors zones of most existent building stock in this district.

Certain planned business locations on ground floors were not very successful, for example when being located deeper inside residential islands. They became empty and were partially occupied for residential purposes. Not only working facilities were turned into apartments, but also businesses use apartments as work place, other than originally intended by the planners. Private might therefore currently be located close to what is public space, whereas public or collective functions are now also located within privately owned areas. We can see the latter also when comparing the maps of planned and existent location of businesses in ground floors.

Four different types of territorial depth were distinguished for the analysis. Two being located on the ground floor, and two on the upper floors. Both categories are located in buildings either directly along the street or with a setback in between the public street and the building. The maps in Fig.6 show the different spatial distribution pattern of these four types. Type 1 can be related to the businesses, which were originally planned in the area (compare Fig.3). They show concentrated location pattern according to the original plan: the corner shops along the main streets, shopping strips and local shopping centres. Type 2 can be found only very scarcely spread throughout the whole area, and doesn't allow to conclude on a location pattern. It is visible that this type of territorial depth is not related to retail at all. This means that retail locations in ground floor areas of Amsterdam Nieuw-West are always located directly along the street, without the building having a distance to the public street, thus are related with a lower territorial depth. Type 3 represents the biggest category, and is homogeneously dispersed throughout the whole area, whereas type 4 is found more closely related to the exit roads and highway in the western part of the city. The location pattern of the forth type indicates that businesses located there profit from good regional car accessibility.

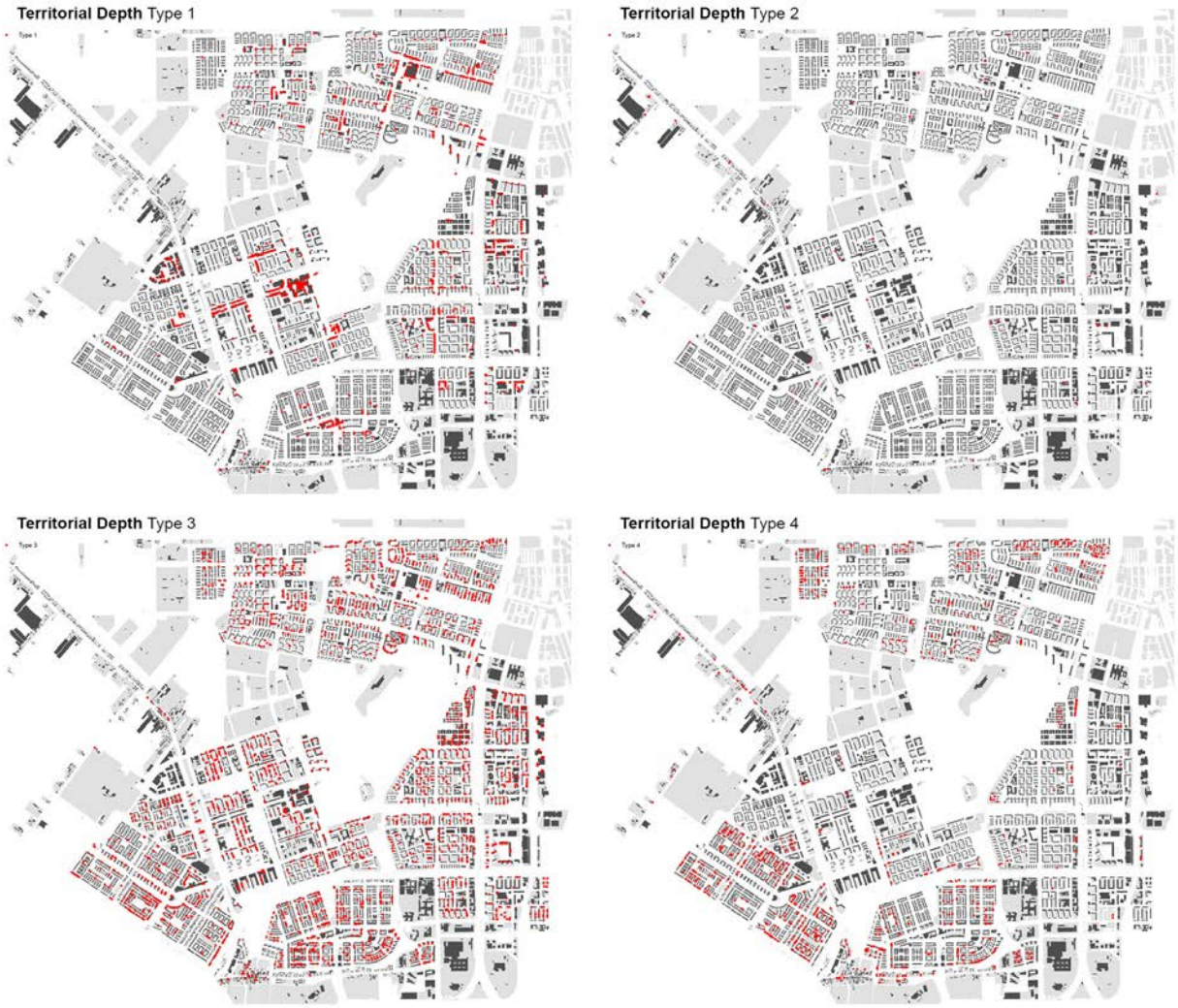

Fig. 6: Businesses located in Types 1-4 of Territorial Depth regarding the public street. Each red dot represents one business.

The amount of micro-businesses in Amsterdam Nieuw-West is with 6143 respectively 8% of the total amount of micro-businesses in Amsterdam in 2010 a relatively small share compared to 21% of the total inhabitants of Amsterdam living in this district. Nevertheless, this amount is substantially higher than expected. When looking at the areas businesses were originally planned in the ground floor zones of buildings, during this research 1944 businesses could be found (Fig.7, Type 1 and 2). Thus the infiltration of businesses in the upper floors of the buildings contributes substantially to enhance the mix of uses in this area planned to strictly separate functions.

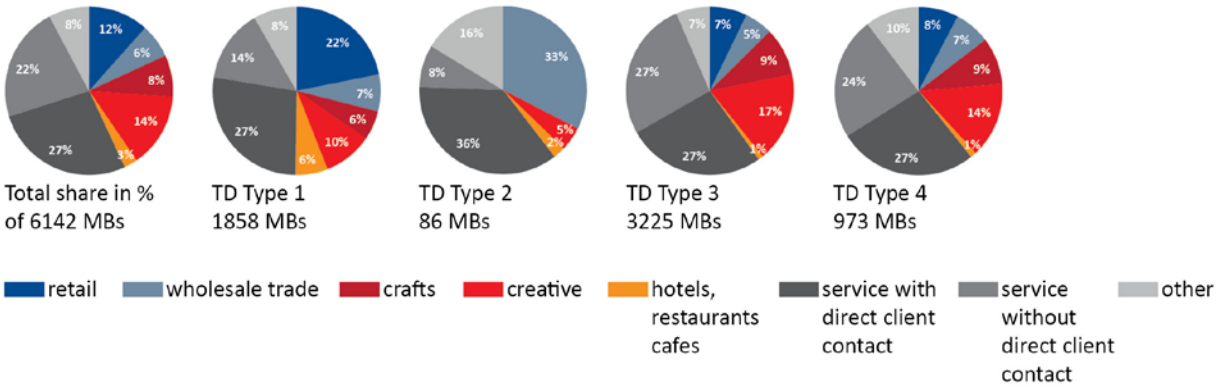

Fig. 7: share of different types of businesses related to the different types of territorial depth

Generally we can see, that on the ground floors of the buildings rather businesses with customers passing by are located, with a higher amount of services with direct contact with clients and retail or wholesale trade. On the upper floors of the buildings the share of businesses without direct contact with clients on site is higher. Remarkably is that the share of hotels, restaurants and cafes is very low in the whole district.

The diagrams of businesses regarding the territorial depth in Amsterdam Nieuw West (Fig.7) shows that on the upper floors of the buildings (Type 3 and 4 in Fig.7) between 24 -27% of all micro-businesses are service businesses without direct contact with clients on site and between 14-17% are creative businesses. Both either don't have direct contact with clients or don't meet them on site. That means that even if they are located on upper floors of buildings, their existence won't bring many non-residents into the building. The businesses of course can have employees, who enter and leave the building via the collective stair case, but they are regular users of the building, probably known to the residents of the building. There are no customers coming into the collective space usually dedicated to the residents. These businesses don't contribute substantially to the life on the streets, as they activate the public space only in short periods of time as no customers are passing by.

Services with direct contact with clients include for example beauty services, different forms of life coaching or repair services. They have customers passing by on site, which means that people unknown to the residents use the collective space of the stair case in higher or lower frequency to reach a business. This can interfere with the residents' needs for control of that space. The circulation space within a building is usually not considered to be a public space, as it shows restrictions of use and underlies the control of a certain group of users, the inhabitants of a building.

The quality of this kind of in-between zones is influencing whether it can be a space of interaction, enabling the residents with a certain amount of control over it, as van Dorst (2012) states. It is further also depending on the amount of people related to one distribution unit of one main entrance. The types of businesses located in a territorial depth of 3 steps need to be known to be found, they are not used by people accidentally passing by. Due to people coming and going more frequently, they contribute more to the life on the streets than the above mentioned businesses without direct contact with customers on site.

4 DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the initial questions, it is visible that Amsterdam Nieuw-West is definitely used differently than 50 years ago. The process of integrating more businesses over time in the dominantly residential area, and thus enhancing the mix of uses, did change the territorial order though only marginal. The transformation of use probably is supported by a change in modes of work since then, enabling more people to work from home. 'The office is no longer a place, it is a system' (Tapscott 1995) could be the reason for at least a part of the location pattern of territorial depth type 3, referring to the reduced importance of having an address, but rather a mere location, digitally well connected to its business partners or clients. These types of businesses can also exist in locations with higher territorial depth, other than traditional retail or services.

The ambiguity of the territory caused by an overlap of private and public space, be it in ownership or sphere, can partially be improved through the activation of space due to more people on the streets. An aspect that needs to be investigated further, is, if these businesses of type 3 and 4 could contribute better to the public realm. Maybe they could be facilitated in a different way, in buildings on the ground floor of the areas. This does not necessarily mean a lining up along the streets on the ground floors of buildings, but it is interesting to think about facilities, that could accommodate both, temporary working places, but also meeting places for the local community. Maybe this would not only be beneficial for both different purposes, but also contribute to the liveliness of the public space, thus activate the currently still ambiguous space. Joaquin Sabate Bel (2000) stated in his book on the *Qualities of the Western Garden Cities*: 'The AUP has never aimed to be a definite plan … we should therefore consider it to be a design of a process, a process that is open and subject to continual transformation'.

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