Marketing the move to a poor neighborhood, researching consumer oriented housing development strategies in a Dutch urban renewal project

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Abstract

Urban renewal in Dutch deprived neighbourhoods often consists of demolishing cheaper rental dwellings to build more expensive dwellings for sale. This fits the planning consensus that poor neighbourhoods should become socio-economically mixed areas, which has become central to Dutch urban renewal policy. However, due to the gradual diminution of the post war housing shortage, the demand for more expensive dwellings in unpopular neighbourhoods has dwindled. In the last decade some developers and housing corporations have tried to tackle this by using consumer oriented design processes to increase the attractiveness of their product: the dwelling and its physical and social environment. This paper presents a research approach to investigate the relationship between the marketing techniques of ‘branding’ and ‘lifestyle profiling’ and residential satisfaction and its anticipation: decision to buy. Residential satisfaction is constituted by functional, social and symbolical qualities of the dwelling and its environment. Residents’ lifestyle plays a role in the appreciation of these qualities. Lifestyle consultancy firms try to inform developers and policy makers on target consumer groups and their preferences by describing lifestyle groups in psychological, cultural and sociological terms. Branding provides these professionals with leads for the symbolical qualities a lifestyle group appreciates. The case study of the development phase of Le Medi, a recently constructed middle class semi-gated community in a poor Rotterdam neighbourhood, makes clear in what ways developers and policy makers expect lifestyle profiling and ‘branding’ to positively impact residential satisfaction. Based on this a conceptual model is constructed of the intended relationships between lifestyle profiling, ‘branding’ and residential satisfaction, which we will test empirically.

Introduction

Differentiating the housing stock in poor urban neighborhoods by building more expensive dwellings in order to create socio-economically mixed neighborhood populations has been a policy paradigm in the
Netherlands for many decades. According to Kleinhans ‘housing diversification is the core of Dutch urban renewal policy’ (Kleinhans, 2004, p. 368). The success of this intervention in terms of dwellings sold was helped by a substantive qualitative housing shortage in the Netherlands, existing since World War II. However, in the last decade, this housing shortage is regarded to be less prominent for most categories of housing, creating a new challenge in Dutch housing policy (Advisory board of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, 2009). The fact that government subsidies for building new dwellings have been scaled down since the nineties further increases risks for builders (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2005). In reaction to these developments builders and planners feel that relaxed segments of the housing should be less steered by what professionals envision, but instead be more susceptible to buyers’ wishes. At the same time, these wishes seem less clear to developers, since old ways of housing market research no longer suffice, according to several Dutch sociologists and builders (Nio, 2000, Kromwijk and Scherpenisse, 2003) They state that socio-demographical characteristics have lost explanatory force in times of ongoing individualization and cultural heterogenization (Nio, 2000), making socio-cultural lifestyles all the more important. In the development process of dwellings, especially in unpopular areas, research into consumer groups along socio-cultural instead of (only) sociodemographic lines is therefore considered crucial.

Housing developers have responded to this challenge by seeking the help of marketing strategies that are well known in consumer goods marketing, but are new to the field of design and advertisement of real estate, namely the consumer research techniques of ‘branding’ and ‘life style profiling’. ‘Branding’ is often described as the ‘search for core values’ of a product. By knowing and strengthening these a product is thought to be more marketable. Branding is about providing an area with ‘a physical or socio-psychological theme with which various residents and visitors are able to identify themselves’ (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005). Life style profiling is adjusting a product, in this case a house and its environment, to the preferences of a target group that is demarcated along psychological, cultural and or sociological lines. Lifestyle profiling as a marketing strategy rests on the concept that people can be clustered not only on the basis of sociodemographic and behavioral characteristics, but also or solely on the basis of their attitudes. In this approach a product is fine tuned to the presumed wishes of a suitable cluster.

This paper is based on a literature and case study research into the workings of ‘branding’ and lifestyle profiling in urban renewal and housing allocation, titled ‘Branding en Leefstijlen in de wijk’ financed by NICIS, a knowledge institute for the Dutch cities, started in 2009. Dutch social scientists in the field of housing are only just beginning to investigate the interplay between consumer oriented design processes and residents’ perceptions and appreciation of the dwelling (environment)s (re)developed in this way (see Meier and Reindorp, 2010, Reinders 2007, Bouwmeester, 2005). However, now that lifestyle and brands are becoming more widely used in Dutch urban renewal, they become factors that influence neighborhood change. From a scientific standpoint it is important to better understand whether and how brands and lifestyle profiling influence perception and appreciation of the dwelling environment, since the manifold interactions between people and their environment are at the center of housing studies.

This paper presents a research approach to investigate how these marketing strategies may function to
improve the residential satisfaction for residents of new built dwellings for sale in poor neighborhoods. To do so I will first schematize the factors that influence residential satisfaction and its anticipation: decision to buy. I distinguish functional and social aspects of the dwelling and its environment, as well as symbolical qualities regarding appearance, atmosphere and representativeness. Especially preferences regarding the symbolical qualities of the dwelling and its environment can be connected to residents’ lifestyles. A short overview of the development of lifestyle in sociological theory is given, followed by a description of the current commercial use of lifestyle targeting, where lifestyles are seen as constructs that encompass functional, social and symbolical preferences for the dwelling environment. Next we move to the marketing strategy of branding, which is also used to distinguish, create and accentuate (mostly symbolical) qualities in a dwelling environment. In the next part I sketch how the methods of 'branding' and 'lifestyle profiling' were used in a case of urban renewal in a poor neighborhood in Rotterdam. This brings to the fore how the professional parties involved in the development process intended the methods to impact residential satisfaction. From there a conceptual model of the assumed relationships between ‘branding’ and lifestyle profiling and residential satisfaction is drawn, followed by conclusions from this part of the design of the empirical research.

**Functional, social and symbolical characteristics of the dwelling and its environment**

In this paper a model is devised to investigate whether and how 'lifestyle profiling' and 'branding' in a development process of new dwellings, can make residents anticipate (motivating their decision to buy) and experience higher levels of residential satisfaction. Many students of residential satisfaction pay attention to physical qualities of the house, (such as number of rooms, size of garden) locational attributes (distance to work, the city centre or facilities), dwelling costs and social and physical characteristics of the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood -the size and definition of which differs per study- is seen as an important determinant of the appreciation of the housing situation (Gruber and Shelton 1987; Howley, Scott et al. 2009). Neighborhood physical aspects that are of influence are for instance amount of greenery, cleanliness of public space, amenities in the area, average level of household income in the neighbourhood, its ethnical composition, discrimination, social cohesion in the area, crime levels, nuisance levels etc. (Max 1999; Américal 2002; Chapman and Lombard 2006) . Some of these characteristics of dwelling and neighbourhood can be regarded as above all functional (e.g. number of rooms, dwelling costs, travel distance to work), and are about user values (‘ease’ or ‘convenience’). There are also social factors, that deal with preferred frequency, intimacy and tenor of contacts between co-residents of a neighbourhood (e.g. social cohesion, discrimination, privacy in and around the dwelling). Still other aspects are more about appearance of a neighbourhood or dwelling type, its social standing, atmosphere and style. These are symbolical values that also influence residential satisfaction, for an important part because they are vehicles for expressing the social identity of the inhabitant. People express their identity and experience other’s identity not only through what they say and how they look, but also through the place where they live, the dwelling and its environment. As Lappegard Hauge and Kolstad (2007) put it: ‘Location, exterior and exterior have
something to say about the social group one belongs to, and provide information about one’s lifestyle and personal taste. People have surprisingly similar perceptions when assessing other people’s lifestyles, social status and social attributes based on information on the exterior or interior of people’s homes (Nassar 1989, Sadalla & Sheets 1993, Wilson & Mackenzie 2000). Not only do people express and read lifestyle through their dwelling and its interior, in times of growing wealth and housing choices lifestyle is also thought to be more and more important in choosing a place of residence. ‘Geographers and sociologists observe increasing spatial clustering of lifestyles in the spatial behaviour of people (…) In choosing a dwelling and its environment (…) cultural and social considerations play an ever more important role’ (Nio, 2000).

**Lifestyles as a theoretical concept**

Lifestyle and social groups can be linked to Webers ‘status groups’, who started a sociological tradition of seeing different patterns of behaviour and culture in connection to peoples’ socio economic positions in society. In Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (1922) Weber discerns status groups (‘Standen’) that correspond with certain lifestyles (‘Lebenstile’) which are ‘the behaviour and rules used within a certain status group in those social interactions that are outside the economic sphere, which one regards in order to belong to a social group and by which one can distinguish oneself from others’(Ouwehand e.a., forthcoming). This behaviour is led by the individual’s choices (Lebensführung) but these choices take place within a limited number of opportunities, depending on one’s structural position in society (Lebenschancen)(Abel and Cockerham 1993). Economic classes and status groups are in this way connected but do not completely coincide. Status groups reproduce society, and take shape through a shared lifestyle. (Van der Wouden and Kullberg, 2002).

Writing sixty years later, Pierre Bourdieu sheds further light on lifestyles as behavioural and cultural repertoires through his influential concepts of habitus, field and distinction. In his ground-breaking work La Distinction (1979) Bourdieu elaborates his idea that every individual has a habitus, which are the dispositions, tastes, and ways of acting that are acquired, consciously and subconsciously, through education, upbringing and daily practices and experiences. Since many experiences, such as those in relation to education and upbringing, are influenced by social class position of the household (one is born into), there are relationships between habitus and class. Fields then, are arena’s in which people use their social, cultural and economic capital to gain resources, playing by conscious and internalized rules and tactics encompassed in their habitus. According to Savage e.a. (2005) Bourdieu's fields ‘define hierarchical spaces of social and spatial positions’ and 'people are comfortable when there is a correspondence between habitus and field' (p.9). This results in people seeking spaces that fit their habitus, and consequently 'Mobility is driven as people, with their relatively fixed habitus, both move between fields (places of work, leisure, residence, etc.), and move within fields where they feel more comfortable’(Savage 2005). In other words, people look for places that feel right, maybe subconsciously, for ‘people like us’. Savage e.a. interpret that according to
Bourdieu ‘there is nothing intrinsic about what places one feels comfortable in’ (p. 9). All is bound to habitus. Their own qualitative research into home and belonging among residents of different neighbourhoods in Manchester leads them to conclude that in a globalizing world dwelling is an increasingly important field ‘in which respondents define their social position. (…) One’s residence is crucial, possibly the crucial identifier for who you are’ (p. 207).

Aesthetic taste is a special part of the habitus in Bourdieu’s theory. In La Distinction he focuses on how aesthetic taste is acquired in a social way, and finds that it is not innate but connected to social class (Jenkins, 1996). More strongly, taste is a means of distinction and thus taking distance, it is a mechanism that divides social classes, and strengthens social hierarchies, according to Bourdieu and many sociologists who have replicated his quantitative research into taste among social strata (Woodward and Emmison 2001). Blokland and Van Eijk (2010) stretch the realm of taste to place of residence and state that ‘once place is seen as expressing a sense of belonging (…) place of residence can then become a source for distinction much like other forms of cultural consumption. Tastes and preferences correspond, according to Bourdieu to education and class’.

Whereas Weber and Bourdieu connect lifestyle as bound to or bounded by socio-economic position, later scholars loosen this tie. According to Giddens individuals in the western, postmodern world, nowadays have to make lifestyle choices out of a great variety of possible styles, even those individuals with limited resources (Giddens 1991). Schulze posits in ‘Die Erlebnisgesellschaft’ that because of growing wealth and opportunities in (German) society lifestyles are no longer connected to hierarchical positions in society, but are freely adopted and discarded without consequence over time or for different domains of life, such as dwelling and leisure. Lifestyle adoption has become a matter of free choice, which enables people to find likeminded others in settings where they share their cultural consumption, so called scenes. Schulze sees a tendency to specialize spaces for scenes by theming them. (Van der Wouden and Kullberg, 2002). Places such as music venues, parks but also dwelling environments are made into spaces that appeal to scenes by using imagery, architectural styles or other symbolical qualities that they find attractive in the context of that consumption.

To conclude, in many current sociological conceptualizations ‘lifestyle’ has moved from a disposition largely shaped by one’s hierarchical position in society to an object of choice. Spatially, lifestyles can be facilitated by use of themes. However, other sociologists still fruitfully study lifestyle and residential preferences as connected to socio-economic position, following Weber and Bourdieu. They understand places of residence as fields, that should fit one’s habitus in order to feel comfortable.

**Operationalizing lifestyles for housing market research and housing design**
In the Netherlands, outside the scientific debate, lifestyles are operationalized to be used in consumer research in the field of dwelling since the beginning of this century. Pinkster and Van Kempen stated in 2003 that ‘lifestyles are considered a trend in housing development research’. Traditionally by market research preceding housing development, (local) governments or parties directly involved in building dwellings like housing cooperations, investors or developers use demographical population characteristics to estimate quantitative and qualitative housing demand. These demographical characteristics include age, household types and income of the population. By contrasting the demand on the basis of these characteristics with the existing dwellings in a region a quantitative description of the housing need is constructed. Lifestyle based researches move from socio demographic indicators of the demand side to socio-psychological and socio-cultural indicators, or from ‘hard’ indicators to ‘soft’ indicators (Nio, 2003). In their study on the application of lifestyles in housing Pinkster and Van Kempen (2003) defined lifestyles as ‘consistent sets of preferences (attitudes) and behavior in the fields of work, family, dwelling, consumption and leisure’. In Dutch housing market research and dwelling design several typologies of lifestyles are used, offered by as many specialized commercial lifestyle consultancy firms. These operationalizations are based on different conceptualizations of lifestyle. Some consultancy firms make cluster analyses of large N datasets consisting of individuals’ demographical characteristics (household type, age, income level), actualized consumption patterns (for instance in the field of leisure or dwelling), and also psychological characteristics based on attitudes, using for instance a test based on Rokeach’s concept of ‘end values’. The most well-known firm, SmartAgent Company, states its lifestyles are based on attitudes only and should be seen as ‘worlds of meaning’ rather than behavioral types. Each lifestyle is ‘a complex of needs and motivations that are ultimately drivers for people’s behavior’ (Hagen, 2002). A wide variety of psychological, sociological and philosophical sources (ranging from Bourdieu to Nietsche) are referred to as theoretical sources for the operationalization. SmartAgent Company uses closed category surveys to make inventories of attitudes of individuals as the input for their clusterings. These attitudes relate to hobbies and preferred dwelling environment, ideal profession (irrespective of one’s education) and descriptions of one’s character and that of the household.

After a phase of experiment with various survey questions and answer categories, SmartAgent Company has constructed a lifestyle typology and method that discerns four lifestyles. These four lifestyles are positioned on three axes, derived from the social sciences of psychology, sociology and antropology (Hagen, 2002). The first sociological axis represents a continuum for a person’s disposition regarding others’ interests. It denotes to what extent an individual minds the ego or the group. The second, psychological axis, ranges from extrovert to introvert personality, and impacts preferred sociability with others, for instance in the neighborhood. Lastly, the cultural axis describes to what extent the individual supports and behaves along norms and values of the ‘dominant’ culture in society (meaning that through this axis behavior is part of the lifestyles after all, as marked by Ouwehand e.a, forthcoming). After taking a survey test, individuals can be classified in one of these lifestyles through an algorithm devised by the lifestyle bureau.

The consultancy firms give developers advice with regards to functional and symbolical aspects of dwelling design, tailored to the preferences of a lifestyle group that is selected for the location. Lifestyle consultancy
firms state that most people enjoy living in a dwelling environment (a street or neighborhood) that is homogeneous in terms of lifestyle. The selection of a suitable lifestyle target group for a development can be related to market demand research (which lifestyle group shows most interest in this location?) or local government policy (which life style group is most desired here?) or other criteria (for instance, for which lifestyle group do we have little to offer here?). The advice can be based on the lifestyle firm’s ‘existing knowledge’ about the lifestyle group’s preferences, gained through years of surveying or interviewing people from this group. These are preferences about the functional aspects of the dwelling (for instance whether for this groups nearby parking spaces are important, or whether they like a shed in the garden), or about social aspects (should the design provide frequent social contacts between neighbors or not, for instance through benches in public space or collectively maintained greenery) or about symbolical aspects (which architectural style, how to deal with views on poor parts of the neighborhood). Reference to a lifestyle group’s position on the cultural, social and psychological axis informs these advisory statements. Feedback can also be provided through focus group discussions organized during the design process of the new dwellings. In that case people from the selected life style groups are asked to comment on the design and give their imput for improvement. Multiple panels can take place to gain feedback in different stages of the design process. This input is then directed to the architect, who may adjust his designs.

Social scientists that have researched the possible benefits of implementing lifestyle profiling in dwelling design and allocation (Pinkster and Van Kempen, 2003, Heijs e.a. 2005), point to several complications and question marks. They argue that lifestyles may be changeable during the life course of the individual. Having children, for instance, often changes one’s priorities and attitudes on aspects of life. Related to this argument is the claim that combinations of ‘classical’ demographical variables may provide as much information about an individual as his lifestyle profile. Furthermore, housing choices are often made between more than one person in a household. What is the value of lifestyles if attitudes -on for instance hobbies- differ between partners? Another criticism is that the assumption that people prefer to live among others with the same lifestyle, cannot be proven.

Brands operationalized in urban renewal

In the Netherlands, another more and more used consumer oriented developing strategy for dwellings is ‘branding’. A brand, according to students of marketing, is a sign attributed to a consumer good, that not only refers to the product itself but connects it to an identity- it affects the personality of a product, company or service. Through advertisement, stories or sponsoring featuring images of success, connotations with positive experiences and emotions larger than the product itself are invoked (Klein 2000). Marketing of cities and neighborhoods, however, is relatively new, starting in the nineties (Reinders, 2010, see also (Meere, Graaf et al. 2005)). Reinders estimates that about 100 Dutch neighborhoods have been branded so far. In the Netherlands branding, as a way of finding themes and core values of a (future) dwelling environment or neighborhood, often takes place through so called branding sessions, organized by a specialized branding
firm. Stakeholders in the development process, and often (potential future) residents, tell each other stories and ideas about the area. Often, a cartoonist draws images of their ideas, so that communication is enhanced. The outcome of the branding process is usually reported by the branding firm in a ‘brand book’, which describes the many aspects of the prospected atmosphere of the area, and formulates a set of core values, that fit the future area and are meant to direct the development process.

Although the idea of creating a brand for an area may resemble that of branding a product, intrinsically this is a new and less straight forward application of branding. This is because, as Meier (2009) points out, whereas marketing of consumer goods relies on a relatively predictable use and expectations of that use, use of space is in comparison more unpredictable and versatile. Furthermore, control over space in urban neighborhoods is usually divided over many institutions, while consumer good brands can be directed by their producer. Yet also spaces, especially in areas that have a negative image, are more and more branded as part of their redevelopment, in order to give them ‘a physical or socio-psychological theme with which various residents and visitors are able to identify themselves’ (Kavaratzis & Ashworth 2005 in Meier, 2009).

In many cases brands of urban renewal areas are built on both existing stories about the values of the place and its history, collected from residents and professionals involved in the renewal, of which some must be retained and some must be altered. In this way, Reinders (2010) analyses, brands in urban renewal are used to describe an ‘aspirational future’, of both the physical structure and the atmosphere and social climate of an area. In the case of urban renewal branding is often ‘re-branding’, helping potential buyers to gain knowledge over what the area’s atmosphere will be like in the future and who will come to live here and why. Reinders analyses that identity shaping strategies such as branding are always a search for concepts for reorganizing the urban space of a neighborhood but also for distinguishing social groups that will populate the future neighborhood.

Meier and Reindorp (2010) explain how developers translate the brands for these less popular urban renewal areas into design themes, which are exotic geographical area’s and / or historical periods that can be referred to in symbolical figurative architecture. The design theme and brand are further elaborated in positive slogans, imagery and stories that are repeated in advertisements and other publications. The themed dwelling environment provides the consumer with associations of positive experiences, which change the consumption into an experience (Schulze 1992 ). Furthermore, the translation of the theme into many aspects of the built environment makes this atmosphere predictable and constant, creating a sense of safety (Meier and Reindorp, 2010). Lastly, a themed area is different from its surroundings and as such creates a means of distinction. Meier argues that themed environments are means for middle income class households to accentuate their lifestyle and social identity, and in this way they inherently differentiate and distillate themselves from others. Reinders takes a critical stance when he points out that branding, as a symbolical intervention inevitably ‘starts up a process in which characteristics of the city are infused and others are wiped out, some are remembered and some are forgotten. In this way branding touches upon (…) controversies about shared definitions of public histories and public culture in heterogeneous society’(…) and
he quotes Zukin ‘who has the right to inhabit the dominant image of the city?’ (Zukin 1996 in Reinders 2010).

**Lifestyle profiling and branding in the case of Le Medi in Rotterdam**

**Fig 1: Final model of Le Medi**

![Image](image_url)

*Source: ComWonen, ERA Bouw en Woonbron*

By looking at Le Medi, a housing block of 93 dwellings in Rotterdam completed in 2008, we can see an example of how branding and lifestyle profiling in urban renewal are implemented in practice. The surrounding neighborhood of Le Medi, Delfshaven, was appointed one of the country’s 40 most deprived areas by the national government, and as such it is subject to many policy programs to improve it. It is a dense urban neighborhood, built in the early twentieth century for workers of the nearby harbors and their families. In the last 40 years native Dutch households have left the area and migrant families have come to live here, now accounting for 70% of the neighborhood’s population. Today joblessness, crime rates and poverty rates are relatively high in this part of Delfshaven.

The development process of Le Medi started in 2000. At that moment a Rotterdam based businessman of Moroccan descent pitched the idea to build an Arabian style neighborhood in Rotterdam, in order ‘to show to wealth and riches of Arabian culture (…) in a time when people spoke about migrants in a rather negative tone’ (Idrissi in Van Dael, 2008). Housing corporations that embraced the idea selected a site in the urban renewal area of Delfshaven for the plan. To get to know Arabian architecture of dwellings and to see which elements of this architecture would be applicable in a Dutch climate and urban structure, architects, representatives of the municipality and commissioners undertook an excursion to Morocco. This resulted in a toolbox of vernacular Arabian dwelling elements that was to be applied by the project’s architect in a mix with Dutch or modernist architecture.
As a next step the same parties held a branding session, organized by a specialized branding firm ‘to collectively determine the identity of Le Medi’ (KEI, 2008), in which they discussed their ideas, hopes and starting points for developing the block. Present at this session were the housing corporations, the architect and representatives from the local government, but also the real estate developer that was attracted to realize the plan and a manager of SmartAgent Company. The report of this day shows that the parties were particularly involved in how to find a balance between Arabian and Mediterranean and Dutch architecture, ‘without creating a Disney world’ (interview with housing corporation manager). From a marketing point of view the idea was no longer to make unique reference to the Arabian world (which had negative connotations owing to the Dutch crisis in the debate on multiculturalism, which had just been ‘given a strong push by the events of 9/11 and the assassination of the populist Islam-critical politician Pim Fortuyn’ (Horst and Ouwehand 2011)), but to refer to the Mediterranean in general. Also, Le Medi was not to attract only Moroccan families from the area itself, but instead to bring ‘a new type of urbanite’ to this neighbourhood, ‘who have all kind of nationalities’. As Horst and Ouwehand state, Le Medi ‘was designed in accordance with the architectural preferences of middle-class households, the kind of architecture they would like to encounter on their holidays’ (Horst and Ouwehand 2011).

In the Branding Report, the manager of SmartAgent Company gives a further description of the new urbanite that is the target group for Le Medi. These ‘new urbanites’ ‘do not disapprove of exclusiveness, enclave and distinction’ (…) ‘These people are individualists who nevertheless do appreciate each other’s nearness’. The further description reads: ‘they have a high education, they often work in public service and government. In their families they use modern male / female task divisions. (…) They drive French cars, like TMF [a pop music tv station] and Bach, fusion cooking, traveling to far off places, they are extrovert and communicative’ (Branding Report LeMedi, 2006)

This description of extrovert individualists and their tastes, fits one of the four lifestyles that SmartAgent discerns. The developer, who had incorporated lifestyle profiling as a standard component of its concept and design processes, decided to take this lifestyle group as its target group for Le Medi. The plan was to be developed with the ‘extrovert individualist’ in mind. Next, the developer and SmartAgent Company held an online survey, which was advertised in a local paper, to see what income categories, household types and lifestyle groups where interested in this branded concept and this location. They found that the chosen lifestyle group was indeed interested more than average (although introvert individualists were as interested), and decided they found the right concept for the right group (interview with developer). Later on it was decided they also needed to profile Le Medi towards ‘extrovert collectivists’, since Le Medi would be so socio-economically different from its surroundings that its residents would have to form a little community by themselves (interview with SmartAgent Company consultant). Even though the extrovert individualist would ‘appreciate each other’s nearness’ according to the developer and lifestyle consultancy firm, they believed introducing ‘extrovert collectivists’ would be nice to heighten the social cohesion in Le Medi (interview with developer).

During the first sketch phase of the design of Le Medi, the developing plan was tested in a new internet
survey. Furthermore the architect’s designs were discussed in several focus groups of potential buyers belonging to the selected lifestyle groups. Their comments were reported back to the developer and architect but not many alterations of the design have been made based on these comments. In an interview the developer mentioned the focus group and survey activities were also means to keep in contact with potential buyers and to make the project interesting for them through their involvement in the development process. “Consumers as coproducers’ is the developer’s slogan. Although the architect says the dwellings of Le Medi would fit residents of any lifestyle group (interview with architect) the developers feel they are particularly suitable for the two selected lifestyle groups. However, all parties are positive about theming and branding as a way to get different stakeholders involved and enthusiastic about developing an area, and very much appreciate the final physical result.

The final design of Le Medi contained 93 dwellings in six rows. The streets and rows of gardens between the dwellings do not connect to the public space of the rest of Bospolder Tussendijken but are separated from it by walls and gates. This corresponds in a way to the closed medina’s of Morocco. Le Medi’s streets and square are owned by the collective of residents, but are freely accessible to non-residents on workdays and Saturdays between 06:00 and 20:00. Le Medi’s outer facades are made of grey and brown stones, with small windows, whereas the facades of the dwellings on the inner side of Le Medi have Mediterranean colours (orange, red, yellow, lavender and white) resembling the more colourful inner courts of Arabian medina’s. Le Medi’s central square has a large fountain. Some of the architectural details (lamps, gates, mosaics) of le Medi are based on the geometric Islamic ornamentation of the orient, whereas other architectural aspects remind of Dutch modernism and the colours of the inner facades can be considered Mediterranean.

**Fig 2: central square of Le Medi**

**Fig 3: Street inside Le Medi**

The last step in the development process was the communication of the eventual product to potential buyers. To this end a brochure was made, containing many ‘artist’ impressions of Le Medi as well as atmospheric images of other Arabian and Mediterranean architecture and ornaments. It also shows Le Medi’s dwelling
types and the options to expand them, as well as the assets of the neighbourhood, which are portrayed in photos and text. These assets are the multicultural shops and restaurants nearby, the historical part of the neighbourhood that is a harbour since mediaeval times and also a soon to be constructed neighbourhood park. The brochure ends with pictures of the central cities’ attractions. Next to this brochure, and instigated by a disappointing sale rate, the project was presented to potential buyers during the building process at fairs, in a neighbourhood hotel, and at the building site itself. All these moments were presented in a Mediterranean atmosphere. The hotel lobby for instance was completely redecorated in Mediterranean and Arabian style. As the developers state: “Le Medi is based on atmosphere and identity so in everything we did regarding marketing and communication of the project, we gave it that feel’ (Van Dael, 2008).

**A model to study impacts of ‘branding’ and lifestyle profiling in dwelling development**

This case shows how much effort can be put into branding and lifestyle profiling of a new dwelling environment. We have seen that, although first social scientific studies are quite critical, developers value the applicability of lifestyles and brands as tools to understand and facilitate the preferences of targeted consumer groups, and they believe that in this way competing products can be created (see for instance Nio 2003, Van der Wouden and Kullberg 2002). In our research in Le Medi and 12 other cases in the Netherlands, we have interviewed developers, policy makers and lifestyle consultants and studied policy documents. From this data we can distinguish several ways in which policy makers and builders expect lifestyles and brands to positively impact residential satisfaction. Four chains of mechanisms that professionals hope will come about, are given in the model (indicated with four types of arrow lines).

**Fig 4: Conceptual model**

1: Functionally (→) It is expected that through lifestyle and branding the exploration of the target group’s preferences regarding functional qualities of the dwelling (environment) can be improved, and that
in this way more attractive dwelling products can be built. This will impact sales as well as residential satisfaction in a positive way. The preferences are known from the lifestyle firm’s ‘existing knowledge’, and/or from surveys or panel groups.

2: Symbolically ( ) Branding and/or lifestyle profiling are used to give the dwelling and its environment a ‘special’ theme or image, which is different from its surroundings. This image or style is attractive for the target group because it fits their lifestyle. This appearance is recognizable for the residents as matching their taste and lifestyle, which affects sales and residential satisfaction. Knowing their neighbors have made a positive choice for the same image helps buyers to identify themselves with co-residents, and this in turn helps people to feel at home.

3: Socially ( ) The dwellings attract buyers belonging to the targeted lifestyle group. Living among likeminded people contributes to identification with neighbors (co-residents). Furthermore, people of the same lifestyle group have the same preference for the intensity and frequency of social interaction with neighbors. They also share ideas about what kinds and levels of nuisance should be tolerated and what not, and act accordingly. All this leads to a better social climate and thus to higher residential satisfaction.

3: Participatory ( ) The process of exploration of preferences through focus groups and surveys is also a means to make and keep participants interested for the product: the dwelling. The potential buyers, who think along with the professionals, get personally involved with the development process. Also, they get to know other (potential) buyers through the gatherings. This makes the product more interesting and gives the social climate in the new housing block/area a head start. Lastly, the idea that one is co-producer of one’s own dwelling can improve residential satisfaction.

Our next research step is to investigate whether and to what extent these mechanisms are at play. This is done through surveys and in-depth interviews with residents. This phase of the research is now underway in Le Medi.

Conclusions

Now that shortages in the Dutch housing provision are made up, and the housing market is moving from a supply-oriented to a demand-oriented field, consumer oriented design strategies are becoming more important for developers and policy makers. At the same time, through cultural heterogenization and individualization the housing consumer has become a more difficult to grasp in traditional housing market research. Branding and lifestyle consultancy firms offer their help the builders focus on their buyers and facilitate the buyers’ wishes. Especially where sales are difficult, as in urban renewal projects in impoverished urban neighborhoods, the firms are called upon. However, from sociological theory on lifestyle following Bourdieu, it seems that for new residents, endowed with more (cultural, economic and social) capital, tensions can arise if the socio-economic profile of a neighborhood does not match their
They argue that in this juncture, in times of ongoing globalization, the local is important and 'one’s residence is crucial, possibly the crucial identifier for who you are' (Savage e.a. 2005). Other sociologists stress that people are interested to find scenes that facilitate and express their lifestyle, also in the area of dwelling, but that lifestyle today is less bound up with one’s socio-economic position, and is an object of free choice. What most sociological theories on lifestyle have in common, however, is the idea that people like to dwell among likeminded and this is also central to the advice given by commercial lifestyle and branding firms. It is interesting to see whether developers using the tools of branding and lifestyle profiling can create a dwelling environment that residents experience as fitting their lifestyle, despite, regardless of, or even celebrating the rest of the neighborhood. To research this we have developed a model of the ways in which builders intend these tools to impact residential satisfaction. We have discerned chains of mechanisms that are thought to exist between lifestyle profiling and branding and fulfilling people’s dwelling preferences in functional, symbolical, and social terms. Buyers’ participation in the development process may also strengthen their residential preference later. Our research challenge is now to test this model empirically.

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