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# Housing enclaves: Security in gated communities or mainly a pleasant living environment?

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**Abstract** Housing enclaves have become popular in countries all over the world. They may take the shape of courtyards, castles, estates or apartment complexes. Housing enclaves, especially in the US and to a lesser extent in the UK, have been criticised for being fortified neighbourhoods wherein a privileged group of people segregate themselves from society. Another criticism is that the privatisation of residential areas causes public authorities to lose their grip on public space. The question is whether such criticism holds true for other countries as well. On the basis of research in the Netherlands, this paper argues that the situation differs internationally. Dutch housing enclaves are mostly non-gated and not strongly segregated. Planners may take account of the fact that the residents seek a pleasant living environment rather than a fortified enclave. The paper also indicates that relationships between housing enclaves and authorities may change, but that authorities need not lose their grip on spatial planning. For authorities, much depends on the ownership of land in and the quality of their relationships with housing enclaves.

**Keywords:** *housing enclaves, gated communities, community development, governance*

## INTRODUCTION

Housing enclaves or privately managed residential areas can be described as living areas where at least some common space around the dwellings is owned, maintained and governed by the residents. One could think of new housing complexes with a central courtyard, new collective castles with walls and towers around a central square, or estates with multiple residences and common space managed by the residents. Typical for these housing enclaves is that residents themselves take part in the

management or governance of the public space (or even take over from the government). This makes this type of phenomena relevant for public managers and planners.

Housing enclaves are not a new phenomenon. Back in the 1990s, settlements characterised by features of a privately managed residential area could be found in many European countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain. The inhabitants of these settlements were responsible for a number of common

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facilities in an area that was partially open to the public. Many residential communities were inspired by ideological principles, such as sustainability or living in harmony with nature. The Little Earth Community in the Netherlands is an example, as is the model village of Bournville in the UK.

Privately managed residential areas are certainly not an exclusively European phenomena. Housing enclaves exist in almost all regions of the world, from Asia to Australia, North America, Latin America and Africa. In the US, in particular, many people live in housing enclaves. An estimated 40 million Americans live in about 230,000 housing enclaves or privately managed neighbourhoods. The majority of these US enclaves contain common space which is privately managed and publicly accessible, and about one-fifth of them are gated and not publicly accessible.<sup>1,2</sup> But Southeast Asia and China, as well as Latin America, also have housing enclaves. In these regions, most are gated communities, ie areas surrounded by a fence or a wall and with regulated access.

Europe shows a mixed picture. In the UK, a significant number of housing enclaves exist. Atkinson and colleagues reported more than 1,000 gated communities (excluding non-gated enclaves) in England alone.<sup>3</sup> Scandinavia, Germany and the Netherlands have relatively few housing enclaves.<sup>4</sup> In France, they are rare, although the number is growing. The explanation for the low numbers of housing enclaves in these countries may be found in the deep-rooted belief in many European countries concerning free accessibility to public space. A second explanation can be sought in the strong grip that governments in these countries hold on spatial planning. Governments set high standards for private developers and give them only limited space.

### **Privately managed residential areas: Threat or not?**

The tone of the international debate on housing enclaves is often critical to negative. The focus is generally on fenced neighbourhoods or gated communities, and there seems to be less attention on housing enclaves that are not fortified. Critical American literature on gated communities often cites negative aspects such as segregation and social inequality between housing enclaves and their environment.<sup>5</sup> Fear of crime and a wish for greater security is often seen as the main driver for people to live in housing enclaves.<sup>6</sup> Another issue often addressed in the literature critical of housing enclaves is the position of the authorities *vis-à-vis* private initiatives in housing enclaves.<sup>7</sup> In Anglo-Saxon countries or developing countries with a weak state, this may be different from many European countries. In short, it is yet to be established whether the analysis of fortified neighbourhoods in the US (and to a lesser extent in the UK and developing countries) is also valid for European countries, where housing enclaves may be less fortified, and where the authorities may have a stronger position *vis-à-vis* private initiatives such as housing enclaves than they have in the US or other Anglo-Saxon countries.

Dutch studies have shown that Dutch housing enclaves are often characterised by 'soft' borders in the form of ponds and dikes, and not by high walls or fences. Guarded barriers are a rare exception in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> Also, the Dutch authorities take a relatively strong position on spatial planning. Consequently, the Netherlands is an interesting case to study. This paper studies housing enclaves in the Netherlands and argues that housing enclaves may develop differently from those seen in most of the literature.

The literature highlights three issues which this study analyses with reference to the Dutch situation:

1. *Motivation for living in housing enclaves.* The discussion focuses on negative motivation for residents to choose housing enclaves. In particular, anxiety, lack of security and the desire to separate oneself from others are said to play an important role.<sup>9</sup> This paper discusses the motives of the residents of Dutch housing enclaves, and compares these with motives found in the US. It is shown that the motives of Dutch inhabitants differ from those often mentioned in relation to the US. This hints at internationally varying motivations, begs for a country-specific understanding of housing enclaves. The question addressed here is: What motivates people to live in housing enclaves in the Netherlands?
2. *Community development in housing enclaves.* Scholars have warned that housing enclaves are characterised by a weak sense of community and weak social relationships.<sup>10</sup> Residents of housing enclaves are said to regulate mutual relationships via rules and contracts rather than via social relationships and mutual contact. Private developers of housing enclaves sometimes determine detailed sets of rules by which residents have to live. The lack of social cohesion has been linked to a culture of fear where people lock themselves up in their houses and no longer interact. This paper explores the issue of social contacts among residents of housing enclaves.
3. *Relationships with the authorities.* Scholars in the US, but also in the UK, have reported loss of government power and public space as a consequence of the emergence of housing enclaves.<sup>11</sup> Space that used to be public comes into private hands, and sometimes the space is actively shielded. It has been argued that the role of (local) governments could be marginalised and that there could be

more tensions between housing enclaves and local governments. This issue is addressed through research into developments in the Netherlands. The question is: How can one characterise the relationships between housing enclaves and local authorities, and what kinds of tensions exist?

## RESEARCH DESIGN

To answer the above questions, multiple research methods were used: desk research, a survey and case studies. The aim of the desk research was to gain general insight into the international phenomenon of housing enclaves, and to gather data about the number of housing enclaves in the Netherlands.

Housing enclaves are defined here as residences (living domains) where part of the public or common space is owned by the residents. Housing enclaves are also characterised by residents who organise themselves as a collective in order to decide the rules and planning of their property, including the public space within their property. Housing enclaves can be characterised by defensive architecture, and they can be more or less gated communities, but they need not necessarily be gated. Via desk research, the authors obtained a list of 87 addresses of housing enclaves that fit this definition. A questionnaire was sent to the 87 enclaves, and this yielded 38 completed questionnaires. This means that a response of 43 per cent was achieved, which is reasonably good. The absolute number of completed questionnaires is not high, however, mainly due to the fact that they were dealing with a small population. For this reason, it was decided to complement the quantitative research with qualitative research.

Three cases were examined where 16 in-depth interviews and nine short interviews were carried out. In addition, a discussion meeting was organised with experts from public and private organisations to discuss

and check the findings of the research.

- *Case 1:* The Golf Residence Dronten consists of 450 residences (360 detached villas and 90 apartments) costing between €350,000 and €750,000. The development includes a golf course. The total area is 86 hectares. Around each villa there is a piece of private land, the rest of the site is common property. All residents own 1/450th of the golf course and other common property. The Golf Residence has a freely accessible entrance and exit. It is bounded by water and in some places by a fence.<sup>12</sup>
- *Case 2:* EVA Lanxmeer in Culemborg is a project on approximately 24 hectares. The area has about 250 houses and apartments in different price ranges and about 40,000 square metres of office space. The housing consists of 30 per cent social housing and 70 per cent more expensive houses. The project is an initiative of residents, and it was achieved in cooperation with the municipality. Environmental sustainability is at the core of the project and has been integrated in the building of the houses as well as in the spatial design of the enclave. The enclave has several common courtyards adjacent to the residents' private gardens.
- *Case 3:* Hennahof Almere consists of 72 colourful houses. There are two main clusters of houses: 'palaces' facing each other, each surrounded by its own fortress. Between the forts is a nature strip with a foot/cycle path. The nature strip is common property, as are several other spaces in Hennahof. There is a board of residents for the Hennahof as a whole.

## WHAT MOTIVATES RESIDENTS OF DUTCH HOUSING ENCLAVES?

This section discusses the motivations of residents to live in a housing enclave. The

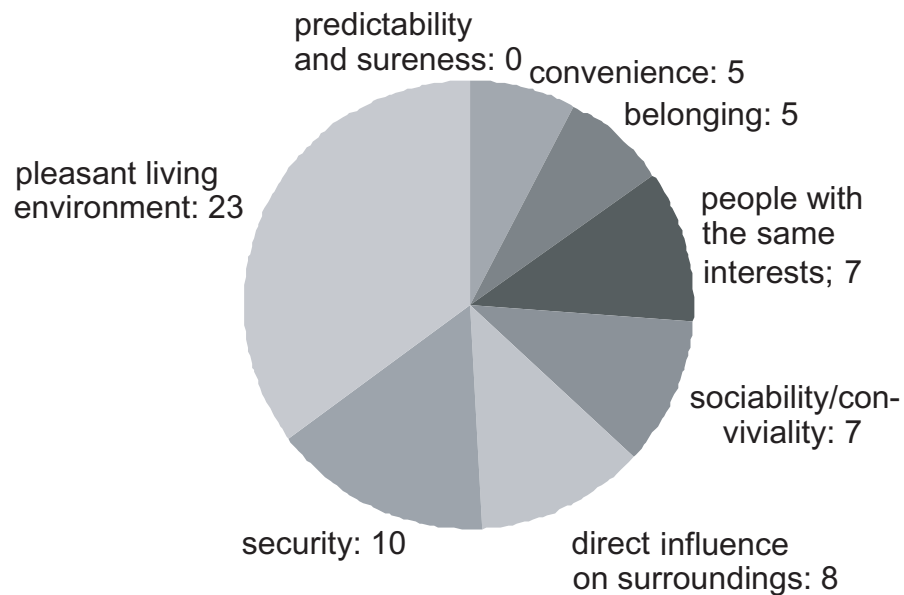
results of the survey are presented, and the result are checked with the data obtained during interviews, and explained.

The research shows that the most important motivation for residents is a pleasant living environment, not security (see Figure 1). This does not mean that security is not an important motivation in the Netherlands. More residents security than mentioned other motives, such as, for example, sociability, belonging or influence on the living environment.

The interviews confirm this analysis and clarify what people mean by 'pleasant living environment'. The quality of the physical surroundings is important. In two cases, the green qualities of the surroundings in the enclave were stressed. As one respondent says:

'We experience living here as living in a holiday park. Very positive. Also, there is no air traffic. With regard to nature in the surroundings, it is also beautiful. And it is set up spaciouly. Eighty to eighty-five acres including golf course, with spacious gardens.'

In housing enclaves with a particular, clearly defined concept or theme (eg golfing, sailing or environmental sustainability), the concept itself also contributes to the experience of a pleasant living environment. Residents in EVA Lanxmeer find caring for the environment within the housing enclave an important positive aspect. In the Golf Residence, the golf course forms a major motivation for the residents to live there. Also the amenities, for example a golf course or a peaceful and green environment, that are accessories to the concept are an important part of the 'pleasant living environment'. The enclaves researched are similar to the 'lifestyle communities' described by Blakely and Snyder<sup>13</sup> in the sense that the activities and amenities offered within the enclave are important to the experience of the enclave as a pleasant living environment. The importance of physical surroundings and



**Figure 1:** Residents' motivations for living in a housing enclave according to board members of housing enclaves ( $n = 38$ ). Note: Respondents could give multiple answers, and therefore the number of answers (65) is higher than the number of respondents (38)

amenities is confirmed by another study on housing enclaves, which mentions especially the importance of greenery, recreational facilities and parking facilities.<sup>14</sup>

The findings indicate that security is a motivation to join the housing enclave, but not the most important one. The following quote illustrates that safety is a motivation for some residents:

'Our second daughter lives in Rotterdam. There you have wonderful apartments as well, along the river Meuse. With very beautiful views. But in the apartment one is safe, but on the street one is not. You step out of the elevator, on the street, and you're being mugged. We saw it on the street. Two ladies just stood outside [when they were robbed]. At those pavilions at the Meuse. We were finished with searching for an apartment there immediately we saw that. Here it is safe.' But it is certainly not only about safety and security; privacy and belonging, as well as social contacts, are also important. Another quote from the same respondent clarifies this: 'We also wanted a place where we

could easily establish contact with the people around. The people here are golfers. There are about 18 or 19 people in these apartments. That is easier for contacts.'

As Atkinson and Flint remark, 'security is not aimed solely at protecting residents against serious crime but also meets an apparent desire to avoid day-to-day incivilities and random social contact'.<sup>15</sup> Some residents want to shut off the housing enclave from outsiders, for safety reasons but, in the cases investigated, that idea is rejected by a large majority of the residents. One of the respondents tells of a fellow resident who wanted a gate, but did not get any support: 'There are 900 residents and there are strange birds among them. At the general assembly there was somebody who stood up and said we needed a gate. For safety reasons. Because before you know it you get youngsters hanging around. M... Marocs he wanted to say but he did not dare to say that. Mm with scooters he then said. And narcotic drugs he said. Very funny. We had a good laugh.'

Other motivations that respondents have mentioned are a 'direct influence on surroundings', as well as 'sociability' and 'people with the same interest'. The aspects of sociability and people with the same interest are dealt with below, when the paper goes into aspects of community in housing enclaves. The aspect of 'direct influence on surroundings' refers to the fact that housing enclaves are largely managed privately instead of by the municipality. The private management provides opportunities for citizens to take the management of their surrounding environment into their own hands, and gain control over their surroundings. While it must be noted that this is an important motivation to only a limited number of respondents (8 out of 38), it does add to the picture that control over physical environment, amenities and social contacts is an important aspect of housing enclaves.

### Practical implications

If planners and developers want to accommodate the housing demands of potential residents of housing enclaves, the focus should be on a pleasant living environment in general rather than on safety. For a large group of residents, the living environment may be found less pleasant if the housing enclave is completely shut off from its environment by high walls and gates. In many cases, however, there may be overlap between 'pleasant living environment' and 'security'. Security measures may contribute to a pleasant living environment. Blakely and Snyder<sup>16</sup> point out that security measures can be designed to provide control of amenities such as the golf course and to keep the amenities pleasant and quiet, rather than security measures being designed as protection against crime.

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN HOUSING ENCLAVES

What is the practical impact of housing

enclaves when it comes to community development? Do they contribute it or not? Experiences in the US and the UK indicate that social cohesion in housing enclaves may be low. It has been argued that housing enclaves are characterised by living by contract rather than by contact.

The authors' own research indicates that residents of housing enclaves do know each other fairly well (see Table 1). The perception is that they interact in a pleasant way (Table 2).

The qualitative research in the three case studies confirms the findings from the survey. In particular, the interviewees from the housing enclaves with a clear theme (Golf Residence and EVA Lanxmeer) say that the residents feel they have things in common. One of the respondents said:

'It is the old-fashioned feeling of connectedness. It is not about having coffee together but about helping each other when something happens. Not because one is obliged to, but because it is possible and everybody thinks it ought to be like that.'

**Table 1:** Frequency distribution of reactions of housing enclave boards to the proposition that 'the people in this housing enclave know each other well' ( $n=38$ )

People in this housing enclave know each other well	Percentage
(Fully) Disagree	18.4
I do not agree, I do not disagree	23.7
I agree or fully agree	57.9
Total	100.0

**Table 2:** Frequency distribution of reactions of housing enclave boards to the proposition that 'the people in this housing enclave treat each other nicely' ( $n=38$ )

People in this housing enclave treat each other nicely	Percentage
I disagree or fully disagree	13.1
I do not agree, I do not disagree	18.4
I agree or fully agree	65.8
No answer	2.6
Total	100.0

And there is also another side of the coin: everybody knows everything about each other. Have you already heard about so and so?’

The third case, Hennahof, has a less clear concept, and hence it does not attract people who share an interest in a concept. People have no relationship or connection because of a shared interest in the theme. Social cohesion in Hennahof is lower than in the other two cases.

In general, residents of housing enclaves can develop interrelationships because they have to manage the common property together. This tends to enhance social cohesion when rules about individual rights and obligations are clear, but when they are unclear, this may cause free-rider problems and conflicts which weaken social cohesion.

### Practical implications

It is highly important that there are clear rules about individual contributions to the housing enclave, and that these are communicated well to potential and existing residents. This requires an association with sound regulations and a well-functioning board. The (private) developer of the housing enclave can play a role in setting-up (and even in maintaining) the regulations. Also local authorities can assist citizen groups with developing rules and regulations, which is in the authorities’ interest as well, because it helps to prevent social conflicts between citizens.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE AUTHORITIES

Normally, the authorities are responsible for the quality and management of public space, for which they use laws and regulations. In housing enclaves where the public space is owned by a group of residents, institutional arrangements created by resident-owners regulate the legal responsibilities and financial obligations of residents and other participants.

But even if the land is owned by residents, and the outside space is managed by them, the authorities have a responsibility towards the public space in a housing enclave. From the perspective of the authorities, managing the public space still involves a public interest, namely the quality of public space. The authorities are entitled and obliged by law to act as the competent authority. Collective management through a housing enclave does, however, imply a shift of control over public space from public authorities (local governments) to residents. This has consequences for the relationship between authorities and residents. This relationship is explored in the following.

### Relationship between local authorities and housing enclaves

How do the housing enclaves perceive the (municipal) government? Several tasks carried out by the municipality in ordinary residential areas are managed by the residents themselves in housing enclaves. This means that the municipality and the housing enclave need to determine who is responsible for which tasks. A large majority of the respondents describe their contacts with the municipality as pragmatic, while only a small proportion characterise the relationship as a warm relationship.

About 70 per cent of the respondents consider the commitment of the authorities with regard to their housing enclave as not very high (see Table 3). The research also

**Table 3:** Frequency distribution of reactions of housing enclave boards to the proposition that ‘the commitment of the municipality regarding the housing enclave is high’ ( $n = 35$ )

The commitment of the municipality regarding the housing enclave is high	Percentage
I disagree or fully disagree	71.4
I do not agree, I do not disagree	20.0
I agree or fully agree	8.6
Total	100



shows that there is a need for greater contact with the municipality. About 60 per cent of the boards of housing enclaves think it would be better if the residents had contact with the municipality more often (Table 4).

The role of the municipality is seen as problematic by residents, particularly in cases where the government owns no land and is not active in the management of the housing enclave, as evidenced by the case studies. Two quotes illustrate this:

‘Because we have to pay for our own infrastructure already, we have less to do with them [the municipality]. The only thing they do here is raise the taxes every year. And they collect the garbage. That is all.’  
‘The local authorities actually do not contribute anything to the park’.

So one can conclude that the new relationship between housing enclaves and local municipalities creates some tensions. Actually, both parties become more dependent on each other, and the relationship changes from a purely vertical one to a more horizontal one.

### **Dependence between local authorities and housing enclaves**

There are, however, differences in the extent to which housing enclaves depend on the municipality and have to work with the municipality. These differences relate to the ownership of the land (whether or not

the municipality owns land in the housing enclave) and who has the final word in decisions regarding the housing enclave.

From the degree of conflict in the relationship between local governments and housing enclaves, it appears that the relationship between housing enclaves and municipalities is best in situations where there is mutual dependence between the housing enclave and the municipality, and where dependence is not too strong.<sup>17</sup> Such cases show regular contact between the housing enclave and the municipality, because both parties need each other. Also, residents feel that they are taken seriously; this can be explained by the fact that the municipality needs to get agreement from the residents because it depends on them.

Greater reliance on the local authorities seems to lead to more conflicts in the relationship. In the case which depends on the municipality relatively strongly, residents find it problematical that many decisions are ultimately taken by the municipality and that decisions of the residents’ association have to be ratified in an annual audit by the municipality. Residents who wish to participate in the management of the housing enclave believe that the municipality does not listen to their ideas and that the municipality gives priority to economic interests.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between the enclave and the municipality seems to be deteriorating owing to over-involvement and control of the municipality in the housing enclave.

The reverse also appears to be true: low dependence leads to more conflicts. Housing enclaves that are independent think that they do not need the municipality and that they can largely ignore the it. They think the municipality should be very reserved when it comes to interfering in the housing enclave. The Golf Residence, for example, is relatively independent of the municipality. Residents feel the municipality is of little benefit, but only taxes them. This is an annoyance to

**Table 4:** Frequency distribution of reactions of housing enclave boards to the proposition that ‘it would be better if the municipality and the board of the housing enclave were in contact more frequently’ (*n* = 35)

It would be better if the municipality and the board of the housing enclave were in contact more frequently	Percentage
I disagree or fully disagree	20.0
I do not agree, I do not disagree	17.1
I agree or fully agree	62.9
Total	100

many residents. There have been conflicts with the municipality about taxation. Residents believe the municipality means little to them, although they are taxed as much as other citizens. The municipality points out that residents place high demands on the management and maintenance of the housing enclave, and that it has been agreed that the residents therefore take care of the maintenance themselves. The municipality further argues that the specific set up of the greenery and infrastructure in the housing enclave leads to additional maintenance costs, and that the municipality is not responsible for this. Also, the municipality argues that taxes are justified because the residents of the housing enclave make use of municipal facilities such as schools and roads. In short, residents' strong dependence on the municipality clashes with the residents' idea that they can regulate their own affairs, whereas low dependence leads to a feeling that the municipality should not interfere and that the municipality can be ignored.

### **Practical implications**

In order to develop a fruitful relationship between municipalities and housing enclaves, it is important to find a balance between, on the one hand, housing enclaves becoming autonomous and able to ignore local government and, on the other hand, municipalities becoming so dominant that residents feel that they are by-passed. Where the right balance lies will probably differ by country, because culturally defined norms about government intervention and private initiative will differ. No matter how the balance is chosen, the case studies indicate that regular contact between the parties improves the relationship, especially when there is a fixed contact person at the municipality

### **CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

This study shows that safety is not the most important factor for residents of housing

enclaves in the Netherlands. The Dutch cases indicate in particular that a pleasant living environment in a broad sense is an important factor. In addition, the security and design of buildings and surroundings play an important role, but are not the most common or serious factors.

Further, the cases show that motivations for living in housing enclaves may differ widely, depending on the housing enclave. In particular, in the case of the sustainable housing enclave, security is unimportant as a motive; rather, the concept and the qualities that come with the concept are most important. The cases show that housing enclaves cannot be lumped together if one wants to understand why people live in them.

The study gives reason for planners and developers in countries outside the US not to assume that fear of crime and a desire for security are the main reasons for moving to housing enclaves. This has implications for the type of housing enclaves that are developed. It might mean, for example, that citizens prefer non-gated housing enclaves, or housing enclaves with soft borders and gradual transitions between enclave and environment. Instead of gates with a road-block and a guard, planners may think of streams or gentle slopes that demarcate the beginning of the enclave, but do not form an obstacle in the landscape. Physical works such as streams or gentle slopes can make the difference between closed and segregated housing enclaves versus housing enclaves that bring about feelings of belonging and community. The study confirms the clear demand for living in housing enclaves that has been witnessed all over the world. This can be taken into account by planners if they want to accommodate the housing needs and wishes of citizens. Therefore, it is essential to keep an eye on the public interest, for example in terms of solidarity (tax-paying obligations of housing enclaves) and the quality of public space. Among other

things, this asks for conscious and timely policy making around taxes. In addition, municipal involvement in the spatial planning of housing enclaves gives opportunities to influence the openness and spatial embedding of the housing enclave in its environment (for example with soft or rigid borders, with infrastructure that interconnects the housing enclave and its surroundings).

### **Social contacts in housing enclaves**

The survey has shown that residents of housing enclaves in the Netherlands feel that they know each other fairly well, and that they have established a pleasant network of social relationships in their communities. In the housing enclaves with a specific theme that were studied (golfing and environmental sustainability), the theme provides a symbol that contributes to a feeling of commonality and social cohesion. The common property also binds people. Conflicts about common property, however, sometimes also lead to the weakening of social relationships, especially when existing regulations are unclear and provide ample opportunities for free-riding.

### **Relationship with local authorities**

Regarding the relationship with the local authorities, the research indicates that relationships with authorities become more difficult when the housing enclave knows itself to be so independent that it does not have to consider the authorities on matters. In countries such as the Netherlands, where governments are accustomed to exerting a lot of control, this can easily lead to tensions. The problems that can arise when housing enclaves are autonomous to a high degree are not unique to the Netherlands. In particular, American and British research has indicated similar tensions.<sup>19</sup>

The research also shows that tensions arise when the authorities exert a lot of control in the housing enclave. In that case,

the authorities have insufficient incentives to listen to the residents. The research indicates that it is fruitful to ensure a balanced distribution of control, and that it is helpful if the relationship is well managed, such as through designated contact persons.

### **Housing enclaves now and in the future**

Although security is not the most important reason why people in the Netherlands live in housing enclaves, the research shows that some of the residents do find safety important. The interviews also revealed that some of the residents would like greater seclusion of housing enclaves. In the housing enclaves examined, their influence was not great enough to ensure greater seclusion, but this could change if the environment changes and feelings of insecurity increase.

It is known from social psychological theories that groups become more closed when threat from the environment develops.<sup>20</sup> In the Netherlands, housing enclaves are still largely open, but this could well change if and when society changes. It is easy to place a barrier at the entrance to a housing enclave, and soft borders between an enclave and its surrounding can easily be made more rigid.

In short, if feelings of insecurity rise in the Netherlands, it is likely that existing housing enclaves will respond by building walls and creating more barriers. Furthermore, the demand for secluded and safe housing enclaves will increase. A reinforcing dynamic could develop between developments in society and housing enclaves, leading to more closed and secluded housing enclaves.

The conclusion of this reflection on the future of housing enclaves is that housing enclaves can still develop along multiple trajectories. This will depend on wider societal developments. Where it goes will be determined by everyone in the near

future. This is a reassuring, but perhaps also a frightening, thought.

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