Homing interview
with Peer Smets
Conducted by Milena Belloni[1]

(Amsterdam, November 2019)

Peer Smets (PhD) works in the Department of Sociology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), the Netherlands. As an engaged urban sociologist, he focuses on societal problems with the aim of finding solutions for better policies and their implementation. Smets is also involved in the VU's Community Service Learning (CSL) programme in which students use their academic skills to help solve societal problems to the mutual benefit of both the societal partners and the students/university. In doing so, he links scientific insights with societal impact.

What does home mean to you, in your work and in your disciplinary approach?

I grew up in the southern Netherlands where a group culture was dominant. Later, I moved to Amsterdam, where I was confronted with a more individualistic culture. Habits concerning home visits were also very different: for example, in Amsterdam, people cannot go to someone else's house without an appointment. So I started to ask myself what it means to move away from home. How can people settle in a place that is so culturally different even though it is within the same country! Before moving to Amsterdam, I went to Groningen and participated in the squatter movement. I also travelled a lot, for example to South Asia. Through a one-year youth exchange programme, I went to India (Tamil Nadu and West Bengal) and Pakistan. These experiences increasingly pushed me to explore how I and other people deal with issues of housing and home.

Once I moved to Amsterdam, I started studying cultural and social anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit. My life trajectory brought me again to thinking about the issue of housing and home and the relations between both. 'Housing' and 'home' are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same. Housing emphasizes the material object

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but could also include human activities around the physical house. Home is composed of both a material part and an immaterial part that is people or relation oriented. To shed light on these differences, I will tell you more about my experiences with the concepts of housing and home below.

While studying anthropology and completing my PhD in Amsterdam, I looked into development issues, especially in urban areas. I studied how poor sections of society finance the construction of dwellings in slum areas in India. Incremental housing construction – a step-by-step building process – is widespread in such areas. Construction activities include, for example, enlarging a room, building an additional room, or improving the roof. This way of building conflicts with the common view of what housing should be about. Housing is generally based on middle-class perceptions that include a ready-made house with a living room, sleeping room(s), sanitary units, and a kitchen. Therefore, a large sum is needed, which often requires long-term credit for a period of 10–20 years in combination with savings. However, people living in poverty face problems repaying loans, especially when they have to deal with long-term repayments in combination with unexpected urgent financial expenditures (e.g., medical treatment). These unexpected payments could force someone to sell their house, which may be under construction. To avoid such issues, people living in India's slum areas opt for an incremental construction approach in combination with small loans when required.

Another problem in slum areas is the (constant) threat of being evacuated. Settlers are never sure how long their house can remain in the same place, especially when the government decides to clear the settlement. In autumn 2019, I was in Delhi for the RC21 conference about urban and regional development. I saw that land in the city centre had become so expensive that people who were better off wanted to purchase it for their own use or investment. Moreover, the government evacuates the slums and relocates their inhabitants to the outskirts of the city. This displacement goes together with the destruction of the networks residents need for helping each other, finding income-generating activities, repairing demolished housing, and dealing with other habitat conditions. Relocated residents have to start again with the building process, often from scratch. In addition to housing, home and social networks have to be (re)developed.

What happened after that?

After looking into slums, especially in India, my focus changed to the Netherlands and Amsterdam in particular. I became interested in how neighbourhoods develop, including issues related to migration, social class, poverty, and ethnic segregation. I was also interested in the construction of public spaces such as streets, parks, and squares as well as citizens' participation concerning the management of the neighbourhood.

While investigating issues concerning social mix and super-diverse neighbourhoods, I came across the development of the drug trade in the Transvaal neighbourhood in Amsterdam East from 2008 till 2012. Several neighbourhood residents were anxious to stay in their homes because dealers were on the street. Some residents wanted to leave the neighbourhood, while others wanted to confront the dealers.

How did the drug dealing start?

The neighbourhood is bordered on two sides by train tracks, which hinders access to it. Only a few tunnels are available for people to pass through. During the Second World War, Jewish people were transported from this neighbourhood to concentration camps in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe. Today, one of the tunnels offers access to a metro station that connects to the Bijlmer area in Amsterdam South East. Surinamese drug dealers living in the Bijlmer came to the Transvaal neighbourhood to deal drugs. They occupied parts of the public spaces in the neighbourhood and managed to take over housing units from the locals. This usually involved tenants who were indebted due to drug use. The drug dealers would force them to open up their apartments for drug dealers and users. Neighbours felt threatened, but if they complained they could be confronted with violent retaliation. Drug dealers also recruited young people in the streets and used them as runners and watchers.

The Transvaal neighbourhood was an ethnically diverse area that included large Moroccan-Dutch families living in small housing units. Given the little space available, the young males tended to hang out in the streets. The house was seen as the territory of the girls and women, both of whom took care of household activities. Consequently, the youngsters were looking for a sense of home in the street, which goes together with a street culture, sometimes in the negative expressions of it, such as gang membership. Step by step they built their homing practices in public spaces and started selling drugs, such as cocaine and heroin. Usually, Moroccan-Dutch youngsters were employed by the Surinamese dealers from the Bijlmer. In the Transvaal neighbourhood, the police were active, but they faced difficulties with solving the problem of the drug trade.

Simultaneously, parts of the neighbourhood were gentrifying. Some people, mostly middle-class Dutch people with children, who had bought a house in the neighbourhood wanted to improve the safety of the social and physical environment. Others set up a community garden and built trust relations among neighbours. Due to this community garden, the social control increased, and it became inconvenient for drug dealing. Drug dealers moved to other places in the neighbourhood and again were chased out by police.

What do you think is the relation between housing and homing?

Housing and homing are not similar, but they partly overlap. As I said earlier, housing refers mainly to the physical elements of the house. Homing – a concept from Boccagni – refers in large extent to the micro processes of homemaking, which include cognitive, moral, emotional, and practical elements. Let's have a look at the micro processes of homemaking and unmaking with examples from my research.

Residents are often blamed for the bad maintenance of housing conditions, but in reality, housing conditions could be inferior due to humidity. One woman from my research lives in a bad-quality house has to deal with humidity and fungus. Clothing in her wardrobe becomes damp, so she has to dry it on the heating. Her bed also becomes damp. She told me in an ironical way that she has a waterbed, but not the luxury option. Moreover, she has to deal with noise pollution from the neighbours. The walls are so

thin that she can hear her neighbours having sex. Here the physical conditions impact the social and emotional conditions of home, and the other way around.

What are the main empirical and methodological challenges in studying home and migration?

It is very important to be a part of the community under research as much as possible. The researcher has to be present in the community – one interview on one day is not enough to build mutual trust. Moreover, participatory observation is needed to compare what people say they do and what they really do. Comparing interviews with observations offers the possibility of obtaining more in-depth information. If different ethnic groups are included in the research, it is important to understand the different norms and values they may have. It is therefore of great importance to be or to become more sensitive to understanding the habits of people from different classes, genders, and ethnic backgrounds.

And who makes the rules for shared spaces? Is public space a home for everyone in the neighbourhood?

A public space may become homely for its users but not for all. This becomes clear when different interpretations of public space create conflicts. On a street in Amsterdam East, different ethnic groups and classes live together. White newcomers, in particular, had problems with the noise produced by children playing football. A meeting was organized, but it was not attended by the children or their families. After the meeting, the white newcomers, who had formulated behaviour rules, pasted them on the wall. This shows who makes the rules for using a public space, who owns the public space, and whose home it is. In this example, it is the dominant white culture that defines the rules for public spaces. Mostly, the dominant group feels at home. This group tends to make the rules for everyone, which may be backed up by authorities. It is not easy to

take diversity into account and look for common solutions that bridge differences in age, gender, class, and ethnicity.

Does this mean that we rarely find solidarity among different ethnic groups living in a neighbourhood? How can you have positive interaction between different ethnic and migrant groups in public spaces?

Interaction is difficult. For instance, one of my PhD students, Kyohee Kim, researched an innovative project involving local (Dutch) and Syrian youngsters living in the same housing project. The groups faced problems concerning interactions in common spaces. The Syrians prepared their own meals and ate them in their own rooms. They liked to smoke shisha (water pipe), but they did not share it with the locals. But we saw connections between them and their families back home. They were calling their mothers to ask how to cook a meal, and they were connected to friends and relatives of their community abroad. At the city level, policy makers create community centres to increase opportunities for people with different backgrounds to meet. In reality though, creating a space is not enough to promote interaction. Guidance to steer intercultural social relationships is required.

When do the physical and the emotional aspects of home influence each other?

For people living in slums, housing does not always go together with a home. They may need a community and the surrounding environment to survive. In high-rise buildings, interactions with people living in other units are limited. The only opportunity to interact is in the elevator or in the hallway, but for residents on the ground floor, it is different.

Having some common space is great and produces opportunities for interaction, but the idea that interaction will just emerge spontaneously is not correct. Relationships need guidance, and there are so many obstacles and misunderstandings that hinder encountering each other. For instance, when a newcomer moves into a building, who

should take the initiative to meet the neighbours first? Should the neighbours greet the newcomer or the other way round? In the Netherlands, the dominant rule is that the newcomer will introduce themselves first, but many non-Western migrants expect that the established residents will welcome them. These different assumptions create so many misunderstandings and cause people to avoid meeting the others. One of the housing corporations in my research tried to forecast these problems, and they gave specific information to newcomers about how they should take drinks and cookies to the neighbours to introduce themselves. The organization and features of a physical space are also crucial for facilitating or hindering feelings of home.

As we have seen, the physical, social, and emotional elements of home often influence each other. Whether people live in a physical environment designed for community building or in individual units, emotions (positive or negative) can emerge when residents are either satisfied or unsatisfied with their house and living conditions. Such emotions can be an aspect of both the physical and social parts of home.

Suggested readings

Ferguson, B. and Smets, P. (2010) Finance for incremental housing: Current status and prospects for expansion. *Habitat International*, 34(3), 288–298.
Smets, P. and Sneep, K. (2017) Tenure mix: Apart or together? Home-making practices and belonging in a Dutch street. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment,* 32(1), 91–106.
Kim, K. and Smets, P. (2020) Home experiences and homemaking practices of single Syrian refugees in an innovative housing project in Amsterdam. *Current Sociology*, 68(5), 607–627.