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It All Used to be Better? Different Generations on Continuity and Change in Urban Children's Daily Use of Space

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ABSTRACT *There is much speculation about children's changing space–time behaviour, yet little is actually known about it. The study reported on here, which was based on oral histories, statistical and archive research, and observations in Amsterdam, compared children's use of space during the 1950s and early 1960s with that of today. The public space of the street used to be a child space, but in two of the three streets studied it has been transformed into an adult space. Conversely, private home space—traditionally the domain of adults—has become a child space. Over time, children's geographies have become more diverse. In addition to the traditional childhood of outdoor children, we distinguish indoor children and children of the backseat generation. These two new types are characterized by a decrease in playing outdoors and an increase in adult supervision. Although this may be regarded as a loss, new children's activities have emerged, outdoors as well as indoors. Contemporary cities can be exciting places for children, but it is clear that inequality by class has become more manifest. Both new geographical childhoods have resulted in a decrease in children's agency, which may have a negative impact on segregation patterns.*

1. Introduction

Children's studies is one of the fastest growing fields in the social sciences. Over the last decade, this new interest in children's lives has been reflected in geography (Matthews, 2003). Today, children's geographies are broadly documented and the space-specific character of 'childhood' is widely discussed. Neighbourhoods differ in the way they accommodate children's life, especially when it comes to the possibilities for outdoor play. Space matters, particularly in children's daily lives (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). There is both academic and popular concern that contemporary cities pose many problems in/for children's lives (Bartlett, 1999). Pollution, safety problems, a lack of play and green spaces, and ill-considered social environments are a few of the problems frequently mentioned (Berg and Medrichs, 1980; Spek and Noyon, 1993; Huttenmoser and Degen-Zimmerman, 1995; Davis and Jones, 1996; Bjorklid, 1997; Faber Taylor *et al.*, 1998; Kong, 2000). Urban conditions are often depicted as being detrimental to children

(Chawla, 2002; Christensen and O'Brien, 2003). Notions about the negative aspects of cities are regularly coupled with comments that 'it all used to be better'. The question is whether that is true.

Recognition that childhood is a social construction has contributed to the flourishing of geographical studies, but detailed historical geographies about the changing nature of children's daily lives are scarce. This is a result of the more complicated character of doing research about past childhood, the lack of historical data about daily life and the methodological problems related to adults' memories of childhood. Only a few historical studies, such as those by Gastor (1991), Hillman *et al.* (1990) and Pooley *et al.* (2005), have focused on children's mobility, their shrinking territory and their decreasing freedom of movement. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative material, Valentine and McHendrick (1997) assume a drastic reduction in outdoor play over the generations, but conclude that there is need to explore more fully the different contexts and the different roles played by parents. Although it is clear that things have changed—considerably in some cases—there is a need for more detailed historical geographical studies on children's uses of space and time. An historical view may help us to contextualize contemporary childhood and thus to avoid romanticizing the past. There is an overall tendency in society to assume that things were better in the past. But as scientists we have to ask: in what respects were things better, what are the new elements and what definitely belongs to the past?

The Amsterdam study reported on in this paper intends to make a modest contribution to our knowledge of the changing nature of children's daily lives in urban contexts. This historical study is the product of an interdisciplinary group of researchers, including students, comprising sociologists, anthropologists, historical educationalists and geographers. We were all strongly motivated by the almost complete absence of historical data on children's daily lives in the Netherlands (Karsten *et al.*, 2001). In this paper, the focus is on issues of children's daily space–time behaviour and particularly on the changing relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces, and the related freedom of movement in three different streets in Amsterdam. In 2003, we talked to children and parents living in these particular streets and with adults who used to live there in the 1950s and early 1960s. We used the rich material we collected to derive space–time patterns that typify diverse geographical childhoods (Bouw and Karsten, 2004).

2. Changing Urban Context

With over 700,000 inhabitants, Amsterdam is the largest city in The Netherlands. There are almost 102,000 children aged between 0 and 12 living in the city, representing 14% of its total population. Many of the inhabitants of Amsterdam originate from other parts of the world. Children (0–12) with a Dutch background make up around 36% of the city's population of children (O + S Amsterdam).¹

There are many historical indicators to illustrate the changing socio-spatial conditions with which children growing up in cities have to deal. Here, the focus is on three of them, namely the increase in children's space indoors at home, the decrease in space outside and the sharp decrease in the number of children. The average number of persons living in each house in Amsterdam fell from 3.75 in 1950 to 1.98 in 2000; thus, the average number of residential square metres per person has increased considerably over recent decades. It used to be very common for a family with several children to have only a three-room apartment: the parents would sleep in the living room or an alcove, the daughters in one of the bedrooms and the sons in the other.

Thus, home space was limited. Outside, however, the streets were almost empty and this situation has now changed considerably. The loss of outdoor space is mainly a result of the

Table 1. Number of cars and number of children in Amsterdam

	1950	1975	2000
Number of cars	16,143	192,436	227,540
Number of children (aged 0–12)	186,245	113,139	102,742

Source: De Graaf, 2003

space lost to parked cars and motorized traffic, particularly between 1950 and 1975. Parallel with the rapid increase in the number of cars in that period, there was a rapid decrease in the number of children (Table 1).

Nowadays there are more than twice as many cars than children in Amsterdam, and most of these cars park in residential streets where children are 'supposed' to play.

The changing availability of space—that is, from outside to inside—was studied in more detail in the three streets we covered in our historical study, namely Wognummerstraat, Bankastraat and Van Breestraat. These three streets were chosen because each is representative of a type of neighbourhood built in Amsterdam before World War II (map X).

Wognummerstraat is in Nieuwendam, a lower-class white neighbourhood in North Amsterdam with semi-detached rented housing and spacious green back gardens typical of the urban villages built in the 1920s. Purmerplein, at the centre of the neighbourhood, is a square surrounded by small shops. In the middle of this square is a space used for skateboarding; nearby, there is a playground. The neighbourhood is bordered by Nieuwendammerdijk (a dyke) and the river IJ. The status of Nieuwendam has not changed much over the years: it is home to working-class families with a low level of education. Today, many older residents continue to live here, but over the last decade new families with children have settled here (Buijs, 2003).

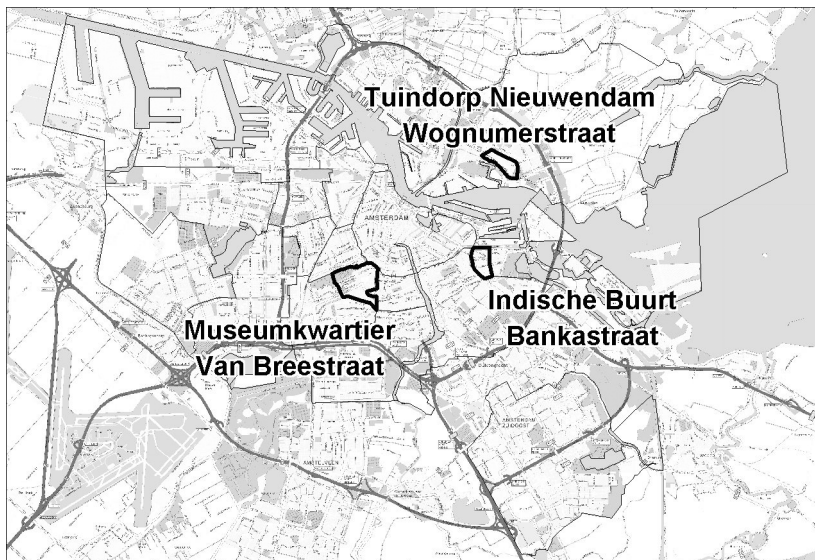


Figure 1. The three Amsterdam streets studied.

Bankastraat is in the Indische Buurt, in East Amsterdam. It used to have roughly the same status as Nieuwendam, but is now a multicultural neighbourhood. Residents are migrant families, students and older people with a Dutch background (Reijndorp, 2004). It is a rather crowded street overlooked by four-storey buildings of rented apartments. The pavements are narrow and often littered, and the road is lined with cars. In the middle is a primary school with a limited amount of public space in which to play. There are play spaces for children (a soccer square and a playground) at both ends of the street. When we began our study, a large renovation project had just been started: some housing blocks have now been demolished to make way for new, owner-occupied housing (Stroo, 2003).

Van Breestraat is in the Museumkwartier (South Amsterdam), which is and always has been one of Amsterdam's wealthiest neighbourhoods. Although this street too is rather crowded, large trees, several private benches and decorated pots of flowers create a friendlier atmosphere than is the case in Bankastraat. The dwellings (mainly two-storey apartments) are owner-occupied and quite large. Play space is practically absent, apart from two small squares not meant for playing but in actual use as spaces to play soccer. Vondelpark is within walking distance, but it is separated from Van Breestraat by a busy road (Koninginneweg) (Bos, 2003).²

Using the figures that were available at the street scale, we indeed established a sharp decrease in the number of children in all three streets. At the time of the research, children made up around 14% of the total population of the streets, which is comparable to the figure for the city as a whole. There were 45 children in Wognummerstraat, 60 in Bankastraat and 96 in Van Breestraat. Van Breestraat is about twice as long as Wognummerstraat and about four times as long as Bankastraat. The child density in Van Breestraat is therefore less than these figures suggest. In 2003, there were more cars (sometimes far more) than children in all three streets. Parking possibilities, however, are arranged differently: while in Van Breestraat and Bankastraat all cars have to be parked parallel to the kerb, in Wognummerstraat some small parking lots have been constructed to keep parts of the street free of cars.

In 1950 only a small minority of the children in Amsterdam had a migrant status, but in 2003 different backgrounds are obvious, although the number varies considerably from street to street (Table 2).

Children's life in Wognummerstraat and Van Breestraat is largely dominated by Amsterdam children with a Dutch background, in complete contrast to the situation in Bankastraat. In Van Breestraat, the category 'Other immigrants' predominantly includes children whose parents originate from countries such as the USA, the UK or Germany, while in Bankastraat this category largely consists of children from countries such as the former Yugoslavia, Sudan, Egypt and Afghanistan.

Table 2. Number of children according to ethnicity per street

2003	Wognummerstraat	Bankastraat	Van Breestraat
Surinamese/Antillean	1	4	2
Turkish/Moroccan	2	35	0
Other immigrants	8	20	22
Dutch	34	1	72
Total (0–12)	45	60	96

Source: O & S, Amsterdam)

3. Methods

In a methodological sense, we opted to focus upon the same streets to which all data and stories of the present and the past are related. Findings about the past were gathered primarily by methods of oral history. We held extensive interviews with 'former children'—that is, adults who were brought up in a particular street, mostly in the 1950s and early 1960s—and 'older neighbours', that is persons who have a long history of living in a particular street and who knew about different periods in the past and the present situation.

The big challenge of oral history is to help interviewees to recall all the different aspects of their childhood. It is well known that people tend to remember the nice things ('It never seemed to rain'), forget ages ('I must've been about ten') and need some help to be space specific. To prevent our study from becoming a nostalgic search of memories (Jones, 2003), we worked with topic lists in order not to forget important issues, continually tried to relate ages to experiences in the past ('Were you still at primary school then?') and worked with maps to focus on the spatial dimension of childhood. Sometimes we confronted interviewees with the experiences others had come up with. Consequently, we put great effort into performing archive research and statistical analyses of historical data (de Graaff, 2003). This allowed us to compare the 'facts' extracted from the interview data (e.g. 'There were hardly any cars') with historical sources, such as statistics (the number of cars in that period), and to derive generalities and trends.

An insight into contemporary childhood was obtained by carrying out the same extensive interviews with the children and parents presently living in each of the streets studied. The children and parents were interviewed separately at home. Parents not only reflected on their children's childhood, but also often compared it to their own childhood (Philo, 2003). Although this added to our knowledge, we had to pay special attention to the different growing-up contexts they referred to. Interviewing the children had its own complications (Punch, 2002). While some children did tell a lot themselves, others needed encouragement. We asked all the children (and their parents') permission to be interviewed. Some children preferred to be interviewed in pairs (mainly with a friend), while others asked to show us around their home and neighbourhood. These walks turned into fruitful and pleasant expeditions. We followed the children through their home territory and outside it, asking questions and listening to their stories and even playing with them. However difficult it is to really give children a voice, we felt a great commitment to the children we interviewed and hope that this is evidenced by this report (Table 3).

We worked most intensively in Bankastraart, as it seemed to us to be the most complex street. We carried out 99 interviews in total, each of which was fully taped and transcribed. Each interview was complemented with a short questionnaire concerning such features as

Table 3. Number of interviews per category and per street

	Wognummerstraat	Bankastraart	Van Breestraat
Children	11	13	10
Parents	7	9	6
Former children	4	8	4
Older neighbours	5	3	5
Professionals	4	7	3
Total	31	40	28

Source: Bouw and Karsten, 2004

age, gender, family size, parents' profession, membership of clubs, housing conditions, etc. To complete the fieldwork, we made 21 specific observations in the three streets and their immediate environs, which led to additional informative talks with residents, including children. These talks were particularly helpful in obtaining an insight into the lives of the families that did not want to be interviewed, as was the case with some migrant families in Bankastraet.

The respondents were identified by various means. Observational work required spending much time in the streets studied, and 'being there' helped enormously in gaining the trust of parents and children alike. During the observations we became acquainted with residents; we sometimes asked them to participate when we saw them walking with their children, and this had a snowball effect. We also approached families and former children suggested by professionals working in the neighbourhood, teachers at local primary schools and people in the researchers' own network. Making contact with former children turned out to be less complicated than expected. For example, older residents remembered many names and even addresses of families who used to live nearby.

4. The Striking Similarity of Children's Geographies in the 1950s and Early 1960s

One of the difficulties of oral research is that people do not remember all the details, and they are especially good at remembering the big events and the happy endings. Although that may become a bias, it is striking that many memories are pretty much the same. The very general conclusion from the interviews can best be summarized by what one of the former children told us, namely that *playing meant playing outside*. Weather conditions seemed to be of minor importance. All our respondents mentioned the dominance of playing outdoors, as well as the existence of large, mixed-age groups and the wide variety of outdoor activities (which comprised more than only 'playing' in the limited sense of the word). The absolute dominance of playing outside was reported in all three streets, including the middle-class milieu of Van Breestraet, as one woman (1954) who grew up in this street told us:

We played in the street a lot, often right in front of our house and on parking spaces, which were not fully used at that time. And we also went further away. I remember when the Hilton Hotel was being built. We used the sand and other building materials to construct our own things. And later, when the hotel was open to the public, we tried to reach the stairs when the porter was not paying much attention, and then from upstairs we could look through the skylight and see the cooks working in the kitchen . . . When they were in a good mood, they gave us biscuits and things.

The broad character of playing outdoors, as expressed in the above quote, was also made clear by comments made with reference to adults, shops and businesses in the neighbourhood. Interviewees often referred to the occupations of the fathers, for example 'the boys of Desmet from the cinema', 'Kees from the hostel' and 'the baker's daughters'. Many shops and small businesses closed their doors in the 1970s, but before then they functioned as 'good old places' for the children in the neighbourhood (Oldenburgh, 1989). Children's involvement in activities such as shopping gave them the chance to get to know the shopkeepers and the other customers, and to have intergenerational contacts.

The freedom of movement and the rather large territory described by the former children is striking. Walking to school alone, but more often with siblings and friends, was a very common practice. Many respondents reported that they had been escorted and instructed by their mother only on the first day of their school career (at the age of four or five). The interviewees told us stories about big groups of children crossing the

neighbourhood four times a day. Sometimes, usually on Wednesday afternoons (no school), the children explored other neighbourhoods, mostly on foot, because cycling was a luxury not all of them could enjoy. It is interesting to note that the freedom of movement mentioned was accompanied by frequent comments about the control exercised by various people, such as neighbours, family members, older siblings and even the police:

There was a lot of supervision. When we played in the street, there was always someone hanging out of the window. Not my mother, but others, yes. They were checking to see whether we were getting up to mischief. And if they thought something was up, they'd shout at us. Yes, there was strong supervision in the street, also from the police. Sometimes we really tried to challenge the police. Once we set fire to an old car, and I remember the excitement I felt. In my imagination the policeman, who we all knew rather well, would come round the corner on his bike any second ... (woman, 1951, Bankastraat)

Children used the outdoor space of the street for many different activities, and urban public space was regularly appropriated for their own games. They built tents and even huts on the pavements and defended these against intruders of all ages. Playing in the street with few toys or other means generally demanded a high level of creativity.

In contrast to the outdoor space of the street, the private space inside the home was hardly used as a space to play. Instead, home space was frequently mentioned as a place to be cleaned and kept properly. Some former children reported that they preferred not to be at home much, because being there meant an increased chance that they would be asked to help with household chores. Others admitted that they simply did not have the chance to spend much time at home. The generally small home was where parents—or rather mothers—exercised firm control. Families played board games or engaged in another 'calm and dirt-free' pastime only occasionally (usually on a Sunday). Thus, there were not many possibilities inside, and the former children emphasized that playing outside 'all the time' also had something to do with a restriction of choice related to poverty:

Our house was very small. We didn't have windows at the back, only on the street side. I can't remember playing inside much of the time. We had to go outside. When we came home from school, we had some tea and something to eat, and then we were supposed to go outside and stay there till at least six o'clock. We didn't have a key and we weren't allowed to call out before six. (woman, Bankastraat, 1951)

In Wognumerstraat and Bankastraat, the rather big families did not have much space, time or money to accommodate their children's playing needs. They were not allowed to play in the bedrooms, most of which were not heated and contained only beds. There was only limited space for each person and there were few toys to play with. Adventure had to be created by the children themselves, and that could only be done outdoors. At the time, parental authority was self-evident and part of a broader hierarchical society (de Swaan, 1979). Rules about where to play and what to do were clear and non-negotiable, although in South Amsterdam, the use of space at home was to some extent negotiable. Also in this middle-class neighbourhood, however, being quiet was considered to be a 'natural' condition for being tolerated indoors.

In The Netherlands, the first decades after World War II were characterized by strong 'pillarization', that is the vertical division of society along religious, ideological, and political lines. There were Catholic, Protestant, Socialist and—though much smaller—Communist 'pillars'. Daily life was to a great extent organized in and by the pillars and

in rather strict separation. Each child went to the school of the pillar to which his or her parents belonged, which meant that some children had to pass the neighbourhood school in order to reach the school they attended. This strict segregation also applied to membership of clubs. Children's clubs used to be related to, or organized by, the church or another institution related to one of the pillars. Such memberships, however, were not as common as they now are. Some former children referred to the dreams they had had of joining the scouts, a music class, etc., but only a few had succeeded. Generally, a child had to be much older than is the case today in order to join a club, and not all clubs were considered adequate:

I had to wait until I was ten before I was allowed to join a soccer club. I really wanted to join the Volewijkers, but we were Catholics and my parents didn't want to even think about that. So I went to RKVVV, a Roman Catholic club, while many of my friends with whom I played in the neighbourhood went to the Volewijkers. That was a quite a disappointment. (man, Wognummerstraat, 1949)

Different schools and different clubs resulted in segregated worlds. After school, however, when it was time to play in the streets, the segregated character of children's daily lives faded away:

I joined a steady group of children, who all lived in our street or one of the streets nearby. When we came out of school, out of our different schools, we used to meet on a small square nearby and played together: Catholics, Protestants, also Communist children, it didn't matter to us. (woman, Bankastraat, 1955)

It was in the public space of the street that children of different pillars played together (and quarrelled and even fought) and, if necessary, defended their street against 'outsiders' (Wirdt, 2004)—children from nearby streets who, for various reasons, 'had' to be fought. In such situations, the territory of the street was, at least temporarily, valued more highly than the religious background. This was closely related to the fact that all children played outdoors every day and claimed their street as their own—and common—territory. The street was a meeting place for all. The different backgrounds did not matter much to the children themselves. It did matter to some parents, however, although it was commonly understood that they would not (and in fact, could not) prevent their children from contact with other pillars. To a certain degree, the outdoors belonged to the children.

To summarize the main features of children's space-time behaviour in the 1950s and early 1960s, all interviewees were very clear about the dominance of playing outside, often in large groups, and about performing a wide variety of activities. Public space was constructed as the 'natural' place for children, while home space was primarily constructed as an adult place with stringent rules about housework. Playing outdoors was characterized by much freedom of movement in large territories, although the interviewees frequently referred to various forms of control exercised by various people. In addition, schools and clubs had a segregated character according to the pillar of the parents of the children attending them. On the level of the street, however, the integrated and intergenerational use of space—both harmonious and disharmonious—was striking. Childhood cultures in different neighbourhoods were quite similar, although in Van Breestraat there were more opportunities to play inside and more frequent negotiations with respect to children's behaviour than was the case in North or East Amsterdam.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the relation between inside and outside space started to change, slowly at first, but rapidly from the 1970s onwards. I have mentioned the decrease in the average number of persons per home and the consequent increase in space at home. The importance to children of the home as a place to spend their free time became greater

with the increase in mean income levels and the subsequent rise in consumer goods, including toys. The arrival of the television and the car were very influential events. Right from the beginning, the 'box' was very popular. It was 'magic' enjoyed in large groups of neighbour children:

Yes, I remember that first period very well. The Vellingas had a television, but they lived all the way out at Stadionkade. I'd walk to their home when there was a children's programme on, on a Wednesday or Saturday. There were often more than 10 children there, and we all got lemonade and cookies and so on. It was quite a happening. (man, Van Breestraat, 1949)

In the 1960s, children's programmes were on only twice a week, and for only 45 minutes at a time. The first televisions strengthened the feeling of being part of the neighbourhood community. Houses with a television served as a meeting point for groups of friends and acquaintances. Later, when almost every family had its own television set, watching the box became an individualized activity, albeit within the context of family life. At the same time that television ownership and use became more general, the ownership of cars expanded further. The first cars in each street were considered something special, something to be proud of, and because there were so few of them, they did not take up much space. Former children told us that car drivers would hoot at them and they would jump out of the way. As soon as the car had passed, they would continue playing on the street. But, again, the situation changed as the number of cars increased and the dangerous character of motorized traffic became clear. As one respondent (1949) recalled about South Amsterdam:

My old street changed a lot thanks to the cars. I witnessed the first cars coming into our street. It all happened rather fast. Then they put traffic lights up on Willemsparkweg, and when the light was green cars used to accelerate so that they wouldn't miss it. That caused many accidents, sometimes even a death, or they hit someone on the pavement.

Statistics confirmed this: there were a growing number of traffic accidents involving cars and children from the 1960s onwards, particularly in prosperous South Amsterdam where the cars arrived earlier and in larger numbers than in the other two streets (de Graaff, 2003).

5. Growing Diversity: The Childhoods of Today

Changing post-war spatial, social and cultural conditions—only partially mentioned above—have had consequences for children's space-time behaviour, although the impact has been unequal and diverse. First and foremost, playing outside has lost its dominant character. In line with the literature, we conclude that today's children play outside less frequently and for less time, have a far more restricted home range and are subject to far more interference from their parents. Concerns about children's increasingly eroded position in public space are rightly expressed, but the differences among children are large.

While children's time-space behaviour in the 1950s and 1960s can be roughly characterized by one type—namely 'outdoor childhood', with children playing outside almost every day—nowadays geographical childhood can be classified into at least three different types: namely, outdoor children, indoor children and children of the 'backseat' generation.

Outdoor Children

Outdoor children who play outside almost every day still exist, even in Amsterdam, the capital of, and the largest city in, The Netherlands. The children living in Wognummerstraat predominantly fit into this category. It is clear that the spatial and social conditions in this street explain the positive outdoor culture. The relatively quiet streets, the small green parts and the bigger playground all provide attractive possibilities for spending time outdoors. Children can easily cross the street or the green to make contact with children living in a nearby street. Therefore, the negative influence of the overall loss of playmates per street is less strong. Moreover, the backgrounds of the children in terms of class and ethnicity are not very diverse. These social conditions of propinquity and homogeneity create the basis for intensive social networks (Gans, 1968). Thus, children in Wognummerstraat enthusiastically use the different public spaces in their neighbourhood. From around ten years old, they are allowed to explore the reed beds along the water's edge (where they build tree houses), the dike (where they occasionally encounter a real vagabond), and Purmerplein (where they buy their sweets). The small number of migrant children living in the street participate in this outdoor life, as do most children in the neighbourhood. Children, including the migrant children, were able to name several playmates living in the same street, although they did not all attend the same school. Between them, the eleven children we spoke with were attending four different schools, for roughly the same reasons as in the past, namely academic and religious reasons. Besides these politically inoffensive reasons, some parents reported the wish not to send their children to a nearby 'black' school. But, just as in the past, going to different schools does not cleave the children's culture. They spontaneously gather, look out the window to spot each other or call to each other through the letterbox. The neighbourhood offers opportunities to appropriate public space for themselves in many ways, from just playing to hanging around and organizing picnics. One 12-year-old girl told us:

I think that playing outside is much nicer than playing at home. Because often everybody's outside, it's often nice. These days we play a lot with our elastic ropes. Together we make different jumping patterns. And sometimes we have our club in our hut in the bush behind our home. In the hut we have picnics, and sometime we go from there to Purmerplein to play on our roller-blades.

And from time to time, these children in North Amsterdam get a taste of the 'thrilling' experience associated with cities, namely the presence of shops, public transport and liveliness. When asked about their 'adventures', children related how they had followed homeless people who had been on their way to a nearby care centre. These were strangers intensively spied upon from a safe base: their familiar neighbourhood.

Parents and older neighbours reported positive feelings about children spending time outdoors. They value their neighbourhood as a place where social control still exists:

We, as neighbours, all look after the children. When someone notices something strange, something, which doesn't look okay, we don't hesitate to go outside and see what's going on. During the summer, I sit outside almost all the time, and so keeping an eye on things is a matter of course. I like that situation here very much.

Notwithstanding the striking continuity in Wognummerstraat, times have changed here also. Cars and traffic have become more disturbing, the number of playmates has decreased, and home ranges have shrunk considerably, particularly for children under ten. New ways to spend time after school have appeared and all children play in their own home more often than the former children used to. Compared to the past, possibilities to spend leisure time

at home and elsewhere have grown. When we asked the children how they value their neighbourhood, they were without exception very positive.

A second group of outdoor children live in Bankastraat. While we did not hear any complaints about children playing outdoors in North Amsterdam, we certainly did in East Amsterdam. The outdoor children of Bankastraat are all boys, mainly of large migrant (predominantly Moroccan) families. They play soccer almost all the time and make their presence known in many (often loud) ways. We met them during our observations and spoke with them several times. Their situation of being outdoors so frequently and of lacking alternative ways to spend their leisure time is very similar to that of the children of the 1950s. They grow up in poor families, in small apartments and rarely join a club. Only a few of the boys are a member of a soccer club. However, in sharp contrast to the children of the 1950s, they do not have many friendly contacts in the street. They told us that they are often bored. We saw that sometimes this resulted in negative behaviour towards smaller children. Many residents said that they felt that these boys colonize the street at the expense of others. In their opinion, Bankastraat has become a street that is only for children who are 'good for nothing'.

Indoor Children

Another group of children in Bankastraat live the second type of indoor childhood: they rarely play outside and if so only for short periods. They 'play' indoors (that is, mainly watching TV), and they do not participate in many other activities. In earlier studies we found that probably a quarter of all children in Amsterdam fit into this category (Karsten, 1998). These mainly lower-class children, many of whom have a migrant background, live in deprived neighbourhoods that in many ways are similar to the Indische Buurt: a shortage of nice spaces in which to play, crowded streets with many parked cars and a lot of rubbish. The street is not valued as a place to play outside, and certainly not as a safe place in which to wander around. Both parents and children report their anxiousness about being outdoors (Harden, 2000) not only about the 'big boys' mentioned before but also about strange people in general, as two Turkish girls (11 and 7) told us:

There are often strange people here on the street corner. That's why we only play outside on the sidewalk right in front of our door. The front door stays open, so that we can run inside if as something happens . . . It's really not nice here; it's often very dirty. And there's dog-poo on the sidewalk and in the schoolyard.

Some children added that their parents forbid them to play outside, which is a complete reverse of the situation in the 1950s. This is often the case with the children of two working parents, who are afraid that something might happen to their kids while they are at work (Hochschild, 1997). Other children reported that they spend a lot of time in the mosque. Parents consider the mosque as a safe place for their children, but the children themselves were not always very positive about spending time there. Some of them miss a 'time-out', particularly those who have to go every Saturday and Sunday, like this Egyptian girl (12):

Going to the mosque is really instructive. I learn a lot, but sometimes I feel really tired. I have to go to school every day of the week! Sometimes when I have a day off—because the Dutch school is closed—I really feel relieved. Going to school seven days a week is too much.

All the parents interviewed expressed their concern about the poor conditions in the neighbourhood, regardless of whether they have sons or daughters. Although the residents

agreed that there is not enough space for children, more importantly they stressed the lack of social safety. With the growing diversity among residents, social contact and social control have faded away. In addition, migrant parents consider it problematic that their children cannot socialize with Dutch children:

I want my children to play with Dutch children. But I never see Dutch children in this street. It would be good for their Dutch, but I only know Turkish people living here. And the Moroccan, German, English and whatever people living here, we don't talk to each other. Everyone's very much on his own.

The heterogeneity on the level of the street seriously restricts social life, albeit only because of language barriers. The social life of the families we spoke to is therefore very much organized along lines of ethnicity. Playing with nephews and nieces during a weekend picnic in the park was frequently mentioned by the children in Bankastraat. They know by name only a small minority of the children living in their own street.

Backseat Generation

Almost all children living in Van Breestraat fit into the third type, namely that of the backseat generation. These are the escorted children whose time-space behaviour is characterized primarily by adult-organized children's activities. Some of them play outside from time to time—and have scooters and skateboards to play on—while others hardly ever do. They attend music classes, sport lessons and so on every week, and go rather frequently to the cinema or a museum, or on another type of studious leisure outing:

I'm a member of the soccer club. On Wednesdays we have training exercises, and on Saturdays we play a match. In addition, I go to a piano class on Fridays. I have to study every day and I have to do homework every day. Every Monday a friend of mine comes to my home, because both of his parents work on that day. On Tuesdays, the exchange is the other way round. So the only day I don't have a programme is Thursday.

And Sunday, I thought—until this 11-year-old boy reported that his parents consider Sunday an excellent day for cultural outings. It is clear that children are not always enthusiastic about some of the outings their parents organize, but on the whole we had to conclude that children very much appreciate their diverse leisure life. Cities such as Amsterdam can be exciting places for children, because of the supply of a wide range of commercial and cultural children's activities and domains (Hengst, 1997; O'Brien, 2003). For the backseat generation, Amsterdam is an archipelago consisting of different places of which the own street is only one island in the chain. They move—escorted—from the one domain to another in their urban field, constructing their identities as modern young kids (Zinnecker, 1995; Karsten, 2002). These children are motivated to acquire the cultural and social capital that is considered to be part of modern childhood.

In this wealthy day-to-day context, it is almost surprising that parents are rather concerned about the lack of proper outdoor facilities. Van Breestraat parents value playing outside positively and openly regret the lack of opportunities in their street. As the mother of a ten-year-old boy told us:

It's only recently that we've allowed Mark to play outside on his own. But he rarely does. There are no other children from his school living in this street and there's hardly any space. He's still too young to go to Vondelpark on his own. I think that's very bad for children. We tried to improve the situation by buying an allotment in a big complex on the outskirts of Amsterdam. During the summer we often spend

the whole Sunday there. But he needs a friend who wants to come with him, otherwise he feels lonely. He doesn't know the other children at the complex and he finds it hard to make contact. So the only one who's really glad with that place is me!

Other parents also look for ways to compensate for the restricted opportunities to play outside. Some try to visit the nearby park (Vondelpark) as often as possible, while others buy a season ticket for the zoo or sign their children up with a sports club. Parents complain about the difficulty of playing outside not only in spatial terms (no space outdoors) but also in social terms (no playmates). Mothers make great efforts to invite friends to play with their son or daughter. In so doing, playing outside becomes an adult controlled and arranged affair (as opposed to a spontaneous one), an activity performed by a small group (which often comprises only two members) of good friends of a similar age, background and school. When we asked the Van Breestraat children about playing outdoors, some started to talk about rather exotic experiences related to holidays and campsites.

The changing character of indoor space at home as a place for children's play is best illustrated in the spatial and social context of South Amsterdam. First, it is illustrated by the presence of individually used and well-equipped bedrooms, which offer a lot of play possibilities and an escape from parental control (Solberg, 1990; Sibley, 1995). Behind the doors of their rooms, parents think of their children as being safe and the children themselves feel free: *'in my own room, I can do my own thing'*. Second, daily negotiations result in democratizing the access to other spaces (besides the own bedroom) where children's play is facilitated and even 'outdoor play' is tolerated. Parents and children alike negotiate the 'proper' use of the spacious rooms in South Amsterdam *'We put that little table over there to make two goal posts'*. Also in Bankastraat and Wognumerstraat we saw examples of 'outdoor play' performed indoors, such as hide and seek, and the building of huts. This phenomenon manifests not only the transformation of what used to be adult space into contemporary child space, but also the enlarging of the home space for play and the intruding of traditionally outdoor activities (soccer was the most extreme example we found) into home space: playing outdoors indoors.

6. Conclusions and Reflection

In our extensive research, we combined different methods in order to overcome the difficulties of mapping the past. With the help of oral history we studied the changing character of children's geographies in this locality, but we had to look for complementary methods to counterbalance the bias in positive memories, which seem to be part of looking back at one's youth. Notwithstanding the great effort we made to gain a full insight into patterns of the past, we are aware of the case-study character of this research project.

This study confirms the thesis that over time, public space has been transformed from a space that belongs to children (child space) into one meant for adults and accompanied children only (Valentine, 1996). The amount of time that urban children spend playing outdoors has declined considerably. While children used to be outside for hours at a time and often participated in large groups, nowadays playing outside is much more limited in time, company and activity. Their use of public space to play and to socialize and their freedom of movement have decreased, although not for all children and not for all neighbourhoods to the same degree. The impact of spatial limitations related to traffic safety and a lack of space to play differs: some neighbourhoods (Bankastraat and Van Breestraat) have had higher costs in this respect than others (Wognumerstraat). However, the influence of changed social conditions seems more important: the decrease

in the number of children, parents' and children's concerns about safety, and the middle-class culture related to the acquisition of cultural resources during childhood have all led to a reduction in the amount of time children play outdoors.

First, it is easy to romanticize children's traditionally high engagement in outdoor play. Notwithstanding the overall positive nature of such play, we cannot agree that 'it all used to be better'. In fact, this study demonstrates several examples of the opposite. Playing outside, socializing with neighbours and taking care of siblings was not always preferred by children and was not always a matter of choice. Children were supposed to spend time outside, both for their pleasure *and* out of necessity. In the first decades after World War II, many families struggled with poverty, a shortage of means and very small houses. Many children did not have any other way to spend their free time than to play outside. And although some dimensions of traditional outdoor childhood have disappeared, new children's activities that fit perfectly into the urban scene (such as skate boarding) have emerged (Karsten and Pel, 2000). Those children who can profit from the new urban advantages do not feel nostalgia for the past, but value the new pleasures that are available to them (Hengst, 1997).

Second, children's lives have become more home-centred (Sibley, 1995). The amount of time children spend at home has grown, and activities that used to be done outside have become part of the indoor children's culture. Smaller and more prosperous families are at the basis of this development. While private space at home used to be the domain of the housewife, today the situation is the reverse: private space at home has changed from an adult space into a child space. Children value this development differently. Most of the children we interviewed in North and South Amsterdam could easily sum up the positive sides of playing inside with attractive toys and, importantly, their freedom from parental control (Solberg, 1990). But some children, particularly those growing up in Bankastraat, do not profit so much, or not at all, from modern, home-centred child culture. They feel isolated and would very much like to have more friends with whom to play, as well as more safety outdoors (Harden, 2000).

Third, diversity among children has increased considerably, leading to more inequality among them. We can distinguish at least three geographical childhoods, each having different positives and negatives for the children themselves. Outdoor children represent the line of continuity with the past. This type is characterized by the frequent use of public space, some out of choice, others because of a lack of alternatives. The first group living in Wognummerstraat with its safe and attractive play spaces in fact have an enviable position: they enjoy the traditional profits of accessible outdoor space in combination with a welcoming and democratized indoor space. The second group find themselves only in the shadow of the traditional pleasures of street play. Social and spatial circumstances in streets like Bankastraat have changed so much that the present street only vaguely resembles the common children's territory it used to be. Two new geographical childhoods have emerged: indoor childhood and the childhood of the backseat generation. Both share parents' feeling of urgency to intervene to a high degree in children's free time and, as a result, the reduction of children's independent movement through urban public space (Valentine, 1997). Indoor children are the group we should perhaps be most worried about. Their domestication is not at all compensated for by means of alternative leisure activities. Their homes are small apartments, their streets are unattractive and their parents are poor, hard-working people. It is exactly these indoor children who suffer most: they have the least inside space in which to play, they have lost their access to outdoor space and they profit less from the modern amenities that make playing more pleasurable. The third type (the backseat generation) is the most privileged: the children have many alternatives for playing indoors and diverse leisure activities elsewhere. However, also these children pay a price: they have

fewer spontaneous meetings in the street with other children from the neighbourhood. It is remarkable that children growing up in deprived neighbourhoods and those coming of age in upper-middle-class neighbourhoods share the same marginal position when it comes to the freedom of movement in public spaces. But while the latter group of children is compensated in all kinds of ways, the former have no choice other than to wait until their parents come home. Over time, class-based patterns in the way children are growing up have become more manifest (Lareau, 2000).

In light of the conclusion that home is increasingly becoming a child space and supervision a more common practice, I wish to end with a reflection on the loss of children's agency. From the stories about the past we can learn that children as junior citizens can contribute positively to urban public life. Children's participation in urban public space used to be extensive, and children were able to make a difference and to build bridges. In The Netherlands, society was largely organized around pillars of different religions. In the mixed urban context of Amsterdam in the 1950s, children succeeded in partially breaking down the strongly separated worlds of families with different backgrounds. With the exception of such streets as Wognummerstraat, nowadays the bridging agency of children themselves seems to be diminished: they do not play outside that often; they have less freedom of movement; and they have a smaller territory. They simply meet a smaller number and variety of children. The home-centred and supervised culture of today's children's not only deprives them of real-life experiences (playing outside has become more focused in terms of time, space and activity), but also separates them from children with diverse backgrounds. Emphasizing this mechanism may contribute to the long list of arguments for putting child-friendly outdoor space higher on the policy agenda.

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Notes

1. All figures come from the Onderzoek en Statistiek (O + S; 'Research and Statistics') department of the city of Amsterdam. Many figures were collected especially for the purpose of this research. This applies in particular to the figures at the street scale (see Table 2).
2. From here on, I shall sometimes refer to Wognummerstraat as 'North Amsterdam', Van Breestraat as 'South Amsterdam' and Bankastraat as 'East Amsterdam'.

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