

Chapter 8

The Inside and Outside of High-Rise Social Housing: The Broken Institution



Simon Allemeersch

You may complain about how our towers look from the outside, but we have the view.

Abstract This article is based on an ethnographic report of a long-term artistic workplace in the inside world of a social high-rise ensemble. The communal ‘atelier’ functioned as a repair workshop (Allemeersch et al. 2014) concerned with re-negotiating the relation and knowledge between the inside and outside world. Through a synchronic ethnographic report on the inside world of the housing ensemble, this article aims to characterize the lived citizenship (Warming and Fahnøe 2017) of residents, formal and informal, based upon the opposition between formal and informal order (Goffman 1966; Scott 1998), the notion of ‘underlife’ (Goffman 1963/1996) and hidden and public transcripts (Scott 1990). As the deserted stronghold of a previously ‘pillarized’ welfare state, this article pictures an inside world that is unbalanced between formal and informal order, and lacking the latter (Scott 1998). This results in a social closure between the inside and outside world, and the loss of self of residents. Essentially, residents are caught in the double bind between isolation and social closure (Wacquant 2008) on the one hand, and the loss of façade (Goffman 1959/2019) on the other. Without a qualitative understanding of the inside world of high-rise social housing the outside world institutions act without any knowledge of ‘the community that many residents were able to create in such adverse conditions’ (Goetz 2011, p. 270), and the difficult relation these residents have developed towards their own environment and housing, state intervention and the public services (Wacquant 2008).

Keywords High-rise social housing · Marginalization · Formal and informal order · Incapable tenant · Urban ethnography

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8.1 Introduction

When I started working in the social high-rise ensemble of the Rabot neighborhood in Ghent (Flanders, Belgium), a janitor told me that the only communal space provided when the three towers were finished halfway the 1970s was a mortuary in the basement of the second tower. The first time I heard this, I thought it was a grim joke. Next to apartment 019, which was a meeting place run by social workers and residents in the third tower, my workspace in the first tower was the only communal space. The idea of organizing a workspace started in 2009 when it was officially announced that these towers would be torn down. One year later, in November 2010, I was able to occupy it. Deliberately having no preconceived project, I was curious what would happen if I decided to do all my work as a theatre maker from that location. In 2012, I moved out of the first tower with the last two residents, and moved the workspace to the second tower, which was then still fully occupied. Officially, the atelier closed in February 2013, but I continued to work with this network of residents up to 2014, when a theatre performance and a book about these towers premiered at the Vooruit Arts Centre (called Rabot 4–358; Allemeersch et al. 2014). I kept in touch with residents and ex-residents—and organized working periods in the second tower and the third tower—up to 2018. The research was gradually structured into (ongoing) doctoral research. In June 2020, the last residents left the third and last tower, which was finally torn down in spring 2021.

Throughout the years, the workspace had been an atelier and working place for different artists, a meeting point, a kitchen, a welcoming shelter for informal residents, a workspace for researchers, a meeting point of an arts festival, a coffee table after a funeral, a small cinema, an exhibition, etc. At the back of the apartment, I had put up a wall-to-wall picture of a theatre stage, an *infini* of a forest. At night, when you stood outside in front of the first tower, you could see a forest through the window (Fig. 8.1).

8.2 Urban Narratives and Symbolic Violence

Revealing the existence of an insider's perspective on social housing and an outside world surrounding these communities may seem self-explanatory. Yet, my goal here is to characterize the opposition between insiders' experiences and the images the outside world tends to project on the communities within the towers. Inside-world problems of social housing residents often differ from the outside world's discourse around social housing: Sahlin (1996, p. 168) argues that the public definition of social housing problems is partly independent of what residents may experience or think. These same residents have been cast as 'the incapable tenant' (Sahlin 1996), 'labelled as deviant, noisy, dirty, dependent, ungrateful and above all, incapable of living together with other people' (De Decker and Pannecoucke 2004, p. 294). Yet, without a qualitative understanding of the inside world of high-rise social housing, the



Fig. 8.1 The infini at Rabot 1

outside world's institutions act without any knowledge of 'the community that many residents were able to create in such adverse conditions' (Goetz 2011, p. 270), and we risk missing a deeper understanding of the difficult relationships these residents have developed with their own environment, with state intervention, and with public services (Wacquant 2008).

Therefore, Vervloesem (2019) points at the agency of these urban narratives and their epistemological relevance to urban planning: 'The (re)writing of stories about the city is, in an epistemological view, a necessary step to look critically at the role of urban planning', which brings us 'to another, more diverse and layered scope of action for the urban planner' (own translation 2019, p. 42). Vervloesem thereby cites Leonie Sandercock: 'The way we narrate the city becomes constitutive of urban reality, affecting the choices we make, the ways we then might act' (2019, p. 42). This epistemological awareness in studying the complexity of urbanism contextualizes knowledge as a 'lived experience' (Warming and Fahnøe 2017), 'as a part of human experience and as growing out of human practice' (Harvey 1973, p. 296). This is not necessarily the same as a unifying and simplistic counter-discourse against dominant social groups, because 'different power relations may also be at play within marginalized groups, and "the government" may be a multitude of contradicting voices' (Vervloesem 2019: 44—own translation).

Both Dehaene (2008, 2011), Vervloesem (2019) have drawn attention to the work of urban sociologists Jean Remy and Lilliane Voyé and their understanding—in *Ville, ordre et violence* (1981)—of the interstitial space in the dialectic relation between *first order* and *second order* spaces. Remy and Voyé (1981) state how a heightened perception of symbolic violence can arise when this interstitial space cannot function in between the functional efficiency of the first order and the less coded, uncertain, fluid spaces of the second order. This interstice is a 'space of communication that

serves to construct collective identities [and] thus introduces a better understanding of local and regional dynamics' (Remy 1993, p. 272, as cited in Vervloesem 2019, p. 133). It is part of a larger 'ecology of weak integration', 'a determining factor for the capacity of an urban environment to accommodate different social groups and their divergent ambitions' (Dehaene 2011, pp. 1–2), in which Remy finds a transition 'from urban configurations which consist out of [sic] spaces that could have changing meanings over time, to an increasingly specific and specialized world in which singular places have singular functions' (Dehaene 2011, p. 12).

Remy and Voyé argue that urban configurations tend to allocate specific groups to specific places (Remy and Voyé 1981, p. 103), which results in reduced spatial indeterminacy, and therefore, 'reduced "room to play" for those groups that exist off the radar, those groups that do not fit the categories explicitly catered for'—in particular the disenfranchised groups. This leads 'to the suppression of the opposition of front and back stage' (Dehaene 2011, p. 12). Hence the symbolic violence in the title *Ville, order and violence*, which is imposed on these groups.

8.3 Erving Goffman and Informal Order

Perhaps Erving Goffman is mostly known for his dramaturgical theory (Goffman 1959/2019). Historically, the *theatrum mundi* analogy is often distrusted (Rancière 2010; Sennett 1978). But Goffman used this analogy to explain face-to-face social interaction between individuals and has often been misquoted¹: his dramaturgical theory does not state that individuals are merely actors, or that the realities they experience are part of an illusional make-believe world, as Goffman made clear himself (Goffman 1974/2004, p. 1). Humans live an often all too real reality, albeit we frame this experience differently. The different ways in which individuals realize their social *self* within social interaction through impression management can best be understood using the terminology of actors working on a theatre stage (Goffman 1959/2019, p. 270).

Therefore, the work of Erving Goffman offers a valuable framework for an ethnographic perspective on face-to-face interaction, micro-sociology, and the effect of institutional frames on the individual self. Wacquant, with a motto to his ethnography *Body and Soul* (Wacquant 2004, p. 2), pays his respects to the ethnographer Goffman: 'Any group of persons [...] develop[s] a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it', (Goffman 1963/1996). Goffman's analysis of stigma (1963/2018) remains one of the cornerstones of Wacquant's oeuvre (Wacquant 2019) and is still relevant to critical thinking on social work (Garneau and Namian 2017) or the analysis of the coping strategies of marginalized individuals (Rondelez et al. 2018).

¹ Too often, Goffman's dramaturgical theory is linked with the partially quoted lines from Shakespeare's 'As you like it'. The quote has an entirely different meaning, and Goffman himself rebukes the reference in the introduction of *Frame Analysis* (Goffman 1974/2004).

Goffman's (Goffman 1959/2019, p. 66) *façade regions* can be understood as any space that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception and which offers the necessary boundaries to perform the roles of social identities. Goffman defines 'social institutions' as spatially bordered and shielded from the outsider's gaze (Goffman 1959/2019). This leaves open ample analysis opportunities, outside of the classic examples of asylums or prisons and their inmates: 'A social establishment is any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place', and therefore, 'any social establishment may be studied profitably from the point of view of impression management' (Goffman 1959/2019, p. 252).

Throughout his ethnographic works, Goffman's main focus has always been on the realization of the social self through social interaction, be it in everyday life (Goffman 1959/2019), in the extraordinary circumstances of stigmatized or mentally troubled individuals, or in the lives of the inmates of total institutions (Goffman 1963/1996, 1963/2018, 1963/1966). Goffman defines *stigma* as a disqualifying social attribute, regardless of its intrinsic value, that weighs upon the social relation and prevents the stigmatized person from realizing the intended social identity. This leaves the stigmatized person with a *spoiled* identity (Goffman 1963/2018). The individual that is subjected to a *total institution* risks losing the notion of *self* and *mortifies*, having nothing left but to accept the ruling vision that the social institution imposed upon his or her social identity (Goffman 1963/1996, p. 134). A critique of Goffman would picture humans as being overdetermined by the social relation and a totalitarian power (for this discussion, see Rondelez et al. 2018), but one can argue that throughout his work, Goffman always leaves room for the virtuosity and gameplay of individuals: his self-acknowledged attachment to players, cheaters, and the like (Goffman 1974/2004) makes clear how much he values the relevance of a non-formal order and of individual agency. Goffman refers to the non-formal not as 'informal', because he reserves the notion of 'informal' for the looser customs within the formal order. (He is not easily fooled: *your boss asking you to go out for a drink* may seem informal, but remains part of the formal order.) The set of rules, customs, and communication that does lie outside the formal itself is the *underlife* of institutions (Goffman 1963/1996), in which the inmates find roles, contacts, and powers that are not permitted by the formal order in itself but through which these individuals may escape these powers.

I hereby rely on the opposition between formal and informal order as it was described by Scott (1998), and I understand this informal order as the *underlife* or the unofficial order as denoted by Goffman (1963/1996, p. 140). In a critique of high-modernist schemes and formally organized social action (which includes the modernist CIAM high-rise architecture), Scott (1998) points to the simplifying formal rules that can never generate a functioning community. Therefore, these formal schemes remain inadequate 'for creating a successful social order'. Scott continues: 'Formal order, to be more explicit, is always and to some considerable degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognize, without which it could not exist and which it alone cannot create or maintain' (Scott 1998, p. 310). We can also trace this relevance of the informal order for the urban

environment in the work of Richard Sennett (2018)—already prepared in his earlier work (*The Uses of Disorder*, Sennett 1970)—and ultimately to Jane Jacobs: ‘Formal public organizations in cities require an informal public life underlying them, mediating between them and the privacy of the people of the city’ (Jacobs 1961, p. 57). The informal order renders services that ‘cannot be formalized’, such as mutual trust among residents of public housing projects (Jacobs 1961, p. 60).

Finally, I remark how Scott, in his *Weapons of the Weak*, makes a Goffman-like distinction between *onstage acts* and *off-stage* activities (Scott 1987, p. 41), which results in his later analysis of ‘public’ transcripts (Scott 1990) as the hegemonic ‘self-portrait’ of the dominant elite (p. 18). This is opposed to the ‘hidden transcript’: a whole of stories, gossip, conduct, and off-stage activities of the dominated groups, not just ‘evasive but often inaccessible altogether’ (p. 19).

8.4 Then What is This All About?

In this article, I will focus on the communities in the social high-rise ensemble of the Rabot towers in Ghent as seen through the daily activity of an on-site artistic workspace (Allemeersch et al. 2014). The active observation period ran from November 2010 to February 2013, and this article focuses on a more synchronic description and ethnographic report of the small worlds that resided in these towers during this period. This qualitative research is based on the field notes gathered during the observation period, a book published about this period (Allemeersch et al. 2014), and semi-structured interviews with participants and professionals working in social housing.

In qualifying the opposition between the formal and the informal order, the shifting symbolic borders between the inside and the outside of social institutions, and the hidden transcripts through which individuals handle unequal power relations, I will show how these oppositions reveal the specific situation that marginalized social high-rise residents find themselves in, marked by ‘the spatial denigration [...] that affects the subjectivity and the social ties of their residents as well as the state policies that mould them’ (Wacquant 2019, p. 40).

8.5 Findings

8.5.1 *The Loss of Façade*

The small communities in the social high-rise ensemble in Rabot are much more heterogeneous than is suspected from the outside. As we find in Wacquant (2008, p. 172): ‘What appears from the outside to be a monolithic entity is experienced

by its members as a finely differentiated congeries of “micro-locales” centered on buildings and even on different stairwells inside the same building’. Residents are brought together in a divided way while being treated as one whole by the outside world. The heterogeneity of their world is not known or not sufficiently recognized. Participants feel condemned to each other, even more than to the place itself, and maintain ‘micro-hierarchies’ (Wacquant 2008, p. 183) within this inside world: ‘This building doesn’t work, but our floor is doing just fine’ (participant B3a). Or: ‘In the third tower things are really bad’. They often blame the collective shame on a specific infamous category of fellow residents (Wacquant 2008, p. 183). In Rabot, the graffiti in one of the elevators read: ‘Kill pedos Kill moslims [sic]’.

From the participants’ view, their isolation appears to have a double, paradoxical meaning: they experience a loss of symbolic façade combined with social isolation. Both are aggravated by the physical building itself. This becomes especially clear in the lack of acoustic insulation, which not only hinders the daily life practically (the usual quarrels about loud neighbors) but also makes it impossible to establish a façade amongst neighbors. The walls in Rabot were infamously thin, and residents could hear their neighbors in all directions. As a consequence, ‘all the neighbours knew they know too much’ (Goffman 1959/2019, p. 129). This lack of acoustic insulation worked in one other specific way in Rabot: the intercoms in the entrance hall were broken, and they never disconnected. Private sounds, such as household arguments, private conversations, or children crying, could always be heard in the entrance hall.

The loss of façade also occurred in relation to the outside world, e.g. the feeling of shame residents felt in front of family members or outside-world professionals (e.g. medical personnel) who visited the building and with whom residents had to share a dirty elevator (B3a, B3b, B7). But a symbolic façade is about more than just the concealment of private life.² It is also about the possibility of a public appearance on the individual’s own terms, as this is the pre-requisite for the construction of a social identity (Goffman 1959/2019). Quickly, the atelier was used by residents as a façade region for the necessary negotiation between inside and outside—between private isolation and a much needed more public appearance:

D. regularly visits the atelier in the morning, casually bringing and opening the mail he received that morning. He then reads the mail out loud, which is often news from his probation officer, or is about the alimony settlement. Then he can give his opinion, e.g. cursing the justice department. When the atelier is closed, he goes to the social worker and 019 meeting place – for the same small act. The social worker says he is ‘too afraid to open his mail on his own’ (own translation).

This lack of symbolic façade was also experienced because the only contact residents had left was with professionals, who gathered there only because of social problems. These professionals held a lot of private information about the residents. Residents were isolated but lived amidst an abundance of welfare organizations,

² For a critique of dealing with privacy in planning and a more subtle understanding of this as a balance ‘made up of small, sensitively managed details, practiced and accepted so casually that they are normally taken for granted’, see Jacobs (1961, p. 59).

which led to a general *fatigue* regarding welfare and social work. Although the question ‘Are you a social worker?’ always made me feel uncertain in the beginning, it turned out that my exceptional position was in my advantage, because new roles became possible.

8.5.2 *The Informal Order*

Whereas social workers for the housing company could still be considered street-level bureaucrats (Allemeersch 2022a; Lipsky 1980), in a difficult split between their official task and the playing rules of the field (Sahlin 1996), the janitors were key figures in this inside world. Being employees and tenants at the same time, the border between their official task and their status as residents was blurred. Different janitors from different periods also described the heavy mental weight of the job in the building where they lived. This was combined with hardly any specific selection or training for the job: ‘The training was one day, showing you around and showing where the expansion vessel was’ (B7a).

These janitors held informal power, next to their official responsibilities. Some janitors regularly asked for additional ‘payment’ from residents for completing their official task. ‘They wouldn’t move if not...’ (participant makes a gesture of money between index finger and thumb, B4). I knew I had become an insider when a janitor asked me for this informal payment, because I needed help after locking myself out of the apartment.

One janitor was convicted for cheating an older lady out of her money when he went shopping for her groceries with her credit card. He gave this lady the receipt, but she could not read. This janitor was convicted for a proven 20,000 euros (Luyten 2014) and lost his job but kept his apartment. Officially, he was no longer a janitor, but informally, he continued to exercise his role as key figure. In an interview with an art collective that worked in the third tower from 2017 onwards, this same janitor was still regarded as being a most important key figure, although the project occurred three years after his dismissal. In the reality of the inner world, his dismissal made no difference: he still exercised the same powers and occupied the same role in the inside world. And even more: he devoted himself all the more to organizing activities through city neighborhood subsidies.

Another participant recalled how the widow of a janitor ‘inherited’ the knowledge and memory of her late husband and informally held a similar position among the neighbors ‘because she knew a lot’ (B11). This inside knowledge was crucial, as social tenants dealt with a landlord who looked more closely to private life:

One older couple always visits the workplace together. Both are widow and widower of separate marriages, and both have their own apartment – but since years they form a couple. Out of fear of losing the luxurious situation of the two nearby apartments in the same tower, they hide the relationship.

Because of this pressure on private information, retreating in the hidden transcript of an inside world may not be that surprising, ‘for suspicion and fear of trouble often outweigh any need for neighbourly advice and help. For these families the sense of privacy has already been extensively violated’ (Jacobs 1961, p. 67).

8.5.3 *A Morbid Atmosphere*

Participants often referred to what I can only describe as a morbid atmosphere. For several reasons this may not be that surprising: old age and weak health of some residents, several incidents of drug-related, sexual, or domestic violence, or the risks and consequences of addiction in itself. In evaluating the work of the atelier, one participant gave an uncomfortable compliment:

What you did was great. The simple fact that you were there for years and never had a fight with someone. No black eyes, no window thrown in – in that place... You know that that wasn’t evident at Rabot (B10).

Violence, and the fear of violence, often became part of the default situation. In addition, the towers were infamous for several suicides, since they can easily be entered without keys and the staircase to the roof is always open because of fire regulations. Most participants witnessed one of these suicides directly: ‘He wore a raincoat and it was like a balloon. Before I could say “What’s that?” he was already on the ground. Blink with your eyes and he was down’ (B7b). This person’s husband immediately had to call a doctor, because she ‘saw one coming down’ (B7b).

One participant declared to have been asked by the police to identify a body in order to find out whether the deceased person was a tenant (B3a). These suicides, together with sometimes violent incidents caused by the presence of informal residents (Allemeersch 2022b), reinforced the divide between the inside world and the outside world: for the outside world, these incidents were part of the infamous character of the place, while residents themselves perceived these incidents as problems that came from the outside, for which they themselves could not be held responsible.

Next to these tragic incidents, the decision to tear down the buildings confronted residents with their own life expectancy:

That was really a fear of death and that has a special scent. [...] Not pleasant. But that was really there. Like there’s suddenly more grey in the colours. People who weren’t already pondering their death were suddenly all collectively in that block reminded about their death. People of my age, who knew they had to leave there in seven years, then they’re in their seventies. Moving house at that age, am I going to survive that? And there were many people living there who were older (B10).

Care for isolated older residents was often absent, and together with failing building maintenance and unwanted visitors from outside, this affected many residents:

A resident who passes away in the solitude of his own apartment during a heatwave, and is only discovered several weeks later, causes dismay. As well as the fact that the apartment is left uncleaned for another few weeks, then is opened up by squatters, and finally the fouled mattress of the man is left for several days in hallway on that floor (A6).

Although many of these incidents had causes in the outside world, these visceral experiences divided individual residents, as they caused some of them to disconnect from their immediate surroundings and their neighbors (B10).

8.5.4 Assistance of Organizations from the Outside World

When residents needed assistance, I noted a striking distrust in outside-world organizations. Even as one resident (B10) experienced insecurity and violence, she was clearly distrustful of police interventions, expressing concern for vulnerable tenants:

So, you couldn't call the mobile team [mobile assistance team for psychiatric patients], you had to be a nurse, or a doctor. As a citizen, you had to call the police. But that was when the police had beaten a psychiatric patient to death in the cell [refers to the case, well known in Flanders, of Jonathan Jacob in 2010]. This happens, and you just don't call the police for people like that. The police are not trained for that. And I also think it's wrong to have psychiatric patients in a building like this, they need rest. I know about a patient who got a beating... (B10).

Participants attributed the possible success of these organizations to the merit of individuals, without any positive judgement of the organization itself. Statements like 'The police are scum, but this neighborhood officer was a good one'; '(*Name of social organization) is worthless, but (*name of social worker) was great' are very common. Residents truly understood Scott's observation of how formal order relies on informal personal knowledge and contact. But this meant that these organizations left no lasting positive impression. When there was a reorganization of the team, when a specific individual professional disappeared, the organization as a whole was disqualified.

As stigma and social identity are located in the social micro-relation and face-to-face communication (Goffman 1963b) or are only fully expressed within the hidden transcript, official institutions often remained unaware of the stigma, which they tended to downplay, having only 'a paper relation' with the residents, as described by one professional (A7). The divide between the housing association and its tenants often resulted in disciplinary reactions and strategies:

After a traumatizing death of a close relative (who was a tenant in the same building), one resident puts up a letter in the hallway – a salute as well as an attempt at gossip. The letter is removed, because it is against regulations to put up messages in the hallway (B10).

Apart from distrust and a disciplining attitude towards tenants, I found a remarkable difference in the framing of the same reality by tenants and housing company officials.

When the demolition was announced in 2009, the housing company organized a meeting with tenants to announce the demolition. For well-intentioned reasons of accessibility, the housing company chooses the auditory of a newly built university across the street, unaware of the intimidating effect a new university has on residents of the neighbourhood, who are not that 'schooled'. When the residents enter the auditorium, they are met with police presence, because the housing company asked for assistance beforehand.

If we compare the report of the director of the housing company (who led the meeting) and the report of one engaged resident about this event, we notice an important difference. The director expressed disappointment at so few residents showing up, which remained a mystery for him (Allemeersch et al. 2014, p. 170), while the resident described the same event and said that the venue was 'packed', stressing the fact that 'a lot of people showed up' (B3a). The director compares the number of people who showed up with the official number of tenants living in the entire ensemble. The resident had been engaged in tenant meetings for years and volunteered in social work. Therefore, he was pleased with the turnout, because he compared this with the difficult work over the past years.

8.5.5 *Lost in Translation*

Residents had a similar distrust of media and the arts, to whom they referred by one category: 'People with a camera'. This could have referred to journalists, photography students, or filmmakers. All too often, students of different academic backgrounds showed up with intimidating questionnaires. Ironically, for the workspace, this was the start of the interdisciplinary aspect of the work, because residents started to send these various students to the workspace ('You go and ask there...'). There was a remarkable curiosity from the outside world about these towers. When we organized a photography exhibition, visitors openly said 'we're not really interested in the pictures, but we just wanted to see these towers from the inside'.

My work as an artist and with theatre in general was greeted with curiosity by the residents ('How do you earn you money? Is this really your job?'). But some suspected a different reason for my presence, which reveals a lot about the distrust of the housing association:

I am met with hostile looks in the elevator. Apparently, the gossip is that I am filming and interviewing old people on behalf of the housing company. On the basis of that material, the housing company will decide whether those people will get a new address, or will have to go to a home. When I'm interviewing A. at her apartment, a friend comes to warn her during the interview about my 'real' intentions: I'm here to see if she needs to go to a retirement home or not.

It should be noted that at that time, I had already written a letter to the residents, which could be seen and read everywhere. Apparently, as a sign, it was not powerful enough to clarify my background. At several moments, the lack of a habit of reading or literal illiteracy became clear:

He entered the atelier with a sweater on which was written in big letters: ITALIA. He asked me what country the sweater was from. I asked him: how do you manage if you can't read? And he told me that he has his own system.

Seven lines are the days of the week (Fig. 8.2). A small mark above the second line is Tuesday. When this mark is below the line it is the afternoon. He draws a small camera and says: that's you. I must write it as '3' instead of '15'. His address book is a series of hieroglyphs that represent the history of families, the sex of family members or ways to reach them (train e.g.)—combined with the telephone number (see Fig. 8.3). When there is a coffin drawn, or a line through it—then they have died. He says: I am not stupid, just not 'schooled'.

For the outside world, this illiteracy resulted in residents not having a lot of information and, for example, basing their information on gossip and hearsay. But illiterate residents themselves were also easy victims of gossip or abuse, as was already mentioned in the example of the janitor. When a vulnerable resident asked his neighbors to read his mail, because he was unable to, the residents learned about his past conviction. This illiteracy again echoes differently in the outside world, where the problem is too often uniquely attributed to the migration background of social tenants. But stating that the problems in the social high-rise had to do with

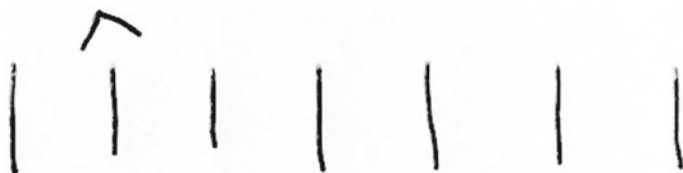


Fig. 8.2 Meeting on Tuesday morning

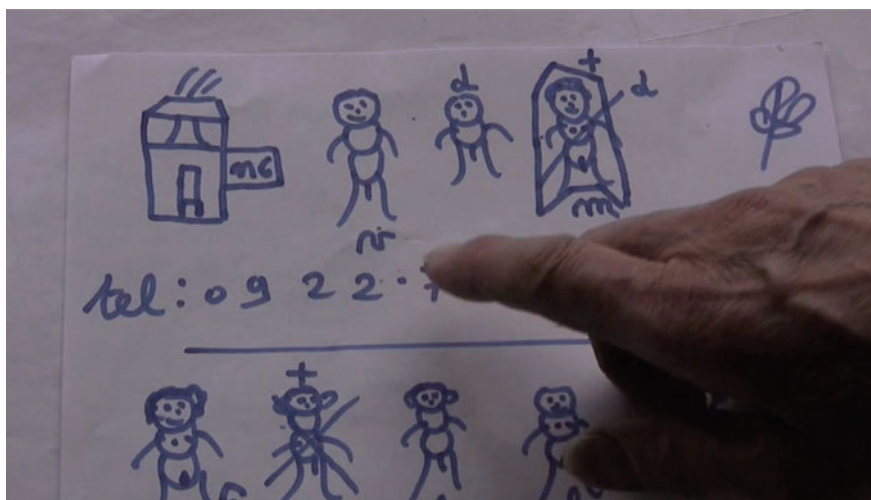


Fig. 8.3 Families and their telephone number

‘the migrants who don’t speak Dutch’ is the ultimate way to be recognized as an unexperienced outsider in Rabot. For example, the Turkish community in the Rabot towers displayed strong social bonds, at least stronger than the network many of the white residents could rely on. These Turkish families had their own informal translators (often their children), whereas white residents combined their illiteracy with social isolation, which made their situation far more problematic.

Even within the framework of racist reasoning, participants acknowledged more urgent and pressing problems in the inner world of the building than cultural differences: foremost the psychological need and loneliness of some white tenants. As was said, ‘Let’s be honest: the biggest problems we had with our own kind’ (in talking with B3a)—an opinion which denounces the typical racial slur which portrays tenants of color as the main source of all problems but acknowledges at the same time the difference between ‘them’ and ‘our own kind’.

8.5.6 *Pride, Knowledge, and Agency*

A too deterministic view on these spaces would remain blind to the solidarity and care residents showed with and for each other and their surroundings. As impressive and emotionally disturbing as some of the incidents were, the daily life of residents displayed laughter and sometimes harsh humor while they kept the meeting place open or had morning gatherings in the hallway, waiting for the letter carrier. Residents took care, but they did this quickly and quietly. A loaf of bread was passed between neighbors in the hallway. People moved through their apartments without a sound, always thinking about the sick neighbor one floor down (B10). When there was a burglary in the workspace and even the copper cables of the speakers were stolen, a group of women came by. The next morning, I had all the cleaning material I needed and new speakers. Amid the bleakness of the alienating space, a lot of place-making was going on, alongside the gathering of social capital, as ‘dis-identification did not mean withdrawal’ (Blokland 2019, p. 54). During numerous interviews, residents talked about all the problems and always ended with concluding, ‘I really like living here’. Pride was hardened by the conditions, rather than diminished. The attention in the newspaper for the demolition of these ‘ugly towers’³ only added insult to injury.

From the early start, the workspace linked up with the informal order and drew on the solidarity of residents and their network that held this knowledge (‘If you want to know more about... go and see her’). But as we have seen, this commitment of residents was first of all part of the daily ‘hidden transcript’ of the inside world, concealed by its informal or illegal status. Or, second, the individual agency was shrouded in the singularity and isolation of the mentally troubled, and was easily misunderstood:

³ The title of the article in the newspaper was ‘Belated love for ugly towers’, an article about the workspace and an exhibition that was organized. The article is reproduced in Allemeersch et al. (2014, pp. 222–223).

At first glance, O.'s apartment is filled with garbage. Empty plastic bottles are everywhere. Only after a long time I learn that O. has heard a rumour about the government introducing a deposit on plastic bottles. He is focused on his plan: he's preparing to cash the deposit of these bottles.

As one social worker remarked: 'A homeowner can have the craziest hobby or obsession in his basement, but when our tenants dream about something, it's immediately a problem' (A11). 'The symptomatology of the "mentally ill" may sometimes have more to do with the structure of public order than with the nature of disordered minds', (Goffman 1963/1966, p. 242). Moreover, their agency is often problematized and seen as 'improperties' symptomatic of the mental illness (p. 232). To put it bluntly: only 'normal' people have the right to act out of the ordinary without repercussions.

8.6 Discussion

Ironically, an architectural typology that followed a high-modernist ideal of legibility (Scott 1998) produced a marginalized inside world which became largely illegible to the outside world. As such, residents were caught in a double bind between social isolation on the one hand and being exposed through the lack of symbolic façade on the other hand. The necessary formal order 'left the building', which left residents in the all too personal arbitrariness of an informal order. It made residents' agency difficult to notice, let alone support, for organizations or institutions were often isolated from the informal order of the inside world of these buildings and lacked the practical local knowledge, or *mētis* (Scott 1998). This broken formal order marked the social high-rise as a *broken institution*, with an effect similar to the one Goffman noticed within the total institution: the loss of self and mortification of its residents (Goffman 1963/1996).

Knowing this, outside-world initiatives should not only focus on the agency of marginalized residents, urging them again and again to participate. This is comparable to shouting 'don't be nervous' to someone who is nervous; it simply does not work. Rather, outside-world initiatives should try to acquire a 'critical lens' (D'Cruz and Jones 2004) on the circumstances under which the agency and knowledge of residents came about, and act upon this knowledge. The renegotiation between the outside and the inside world of these marginalized spaces has to include the question of to what extent, and how, the systemic outside world *participates in residents' life worlds* and whether outside-world projects are ultimately part of either 'the reproduction or the transformation of existing social relationships' (D'Cruz and Jones 2004, p. 9).

These effects on the residents of an unchecked informal order may be read as a warning against an all too naive understanding of the informal order as an answer to lacking institutional responsibilities. The formal and the informal order should

be understood as a communicative balance. The interstitial space is not a counter-space, but a space of communication (Remy 1993) that has to be *marginal* in the best sense of the word: always relating to both inside and outside, to formal and informal (Vervloesem 2019).

Vervloesem (2019) points furthermore to the possible danger of essentializing the difference of the urban margin and marginalized residents, who are portrayed ‘rather one-dimensionally as if they, as human beings, are essentially different from others and pathologically so’ (Blokland 2019, p. 73). An outside world often understands the stigma as inherent to the stigmatized residents themselves. On this point, we reach the core of Goffman’s interactionist view on stigma: the ‘normal’ and the ‘stigmatized’ are interchangeable roles (Goffman 1963/2018). The stigmatized person is by definition normal precisely because he or she strives to live up to the virtual and ‘normal’ social identity but fails and is failed in doing so, which results in a strained social relation, a spoiled identity, and the resulting stigma. This interactionist understanding of stigma is the main reason to always look at the inside *and* outside world of social housing when addressing the problematic status of social tenants. *Social high-rise residents are first of all normal people.*

Yet, finally, we are left with an ethical question, which applies to this very text and the research as a whole. To what degree may we disclose the hidden transcript and informal inside world—knowing that an individualist, essentialist reading often prevails in the outside world? *Probably not all of the outside-world public has the same view on stigma as Goffman.* This makes it hard to get the more complicated, interactionist interpretation of events across. Some professionals then conclude that ‘it’s better to keep quiet about things’. Furthermore, throughout the research, it has been shown that the anecdotal, vulnerable, personal, and ‘one valley’ knowledge of residents (Scott 1998, p. 317), in discussions with e.g. housing company officials, is often rejected as merely casuistry: unfortunate individual incidents, without relevance to general policy.

8.7 Conclusion

As an interstitial space, the Rabot atelier offered the practical and mental space for residents to stage identities on the threshold of their formal and informal position in social housing. In this way, the communal atelier functioned as a symbolic repair workshop (Hillaert 2014; Sennett 2009), renegotiating between the inside and outside world and deciphering the different encoding of both. For a brief moment, the workspace offered a symbolic façade, within the inside world as well as towards the outside world, and therefore, the possibility to stage new social identities through which meaning and authorship of narratives could arise.

Interstitial spaces and façade regions are necessary conditions for social housing tenants to escape the reproduction of stigma and the social closure of their living environment. Only then is there a possible co-creation of roles and knowledge between the inside and the outside world of these buildings, thereby valuing the experience of all tenants—capable or otherwise.

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