

FINAL REPORT

WRITTEN BY : H.H.J. BODEWES

Before the minor Urban Regeneration started in February 2022 I rarely visited the Oosterhoogebrug neighbourhood, most of the times it was because of practical reasons. I either passed through the area by car, or due to the practical reason that the supermarket in the neighbourhood is rather accessible by car, which was an advantage during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic because I could do a week worth of groceries all at once.

Over the course of the last weeks though, during the months of March and April 2022, I have paid numerous visits to the Oosterhoogebrug neighbourhood in a different context. A study related professional context to be exact. By conducting fieldwork for the modules Spatial Transformation and Resilient Communities, for which this report is the concluding assignment. With the sole purpose to get a better understanding of both the physical and social structures which are present in the area, and how these are linked to each other.

In the next few pages a description is given of how I have experienced the contact moments with local residents, what approach and skills I have used during the conversations I have had with them, and what I have learned from the way my fellow group members approached the inhabitants of the area. The report will be finalized with an analysis of the Oosterhoogebrug in terms of social stratification theory.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF INTERACTING WITH RESIDENTS

As mentioned in the introduction, I have had a different motive to visit the Oosterhoogebrug neighbourhood over the last few weeks. Mainly to obtain information from inhabitants about their opinion of the neighbourhood. What aspects of the environment they like or dislike, how their relationship with their neighbours and other residents is, which of the available amenities they make use of, and how they like to see the neighbourhood to be developed to improve the quality of the environment.

In general I can say that I have found my conversations with the residents very pleasant, mostly because they felt heard to. They gave sincere answers to the questions I had for them, and they were very eager to help me with getting a better grip on their environment. Most of them started to talk about other things as the conversations continued, like details and complaints about neighbours for example. Surprises to which I did not have an immediate response to, maybe the lesson expect the unexpected can be learned from this.

The hardest part for myself often lay with making the first contact. It always feels somewhat awkward to disturb other people during their daily routine, or during the activity they are engaged in, because I do not want to be a nuisance in their life. It feels like psychological hurdle you have to overcome at first, and after a while it feels more natural. In the worst case scenario residents do not want to talk to you, simply because they lack time at that moment. Explaining who you are, and why you want to talk to

them, often helped in breaking the ice between myself and them.

In hindsight I think that the conducted fieldwork during the module Initiate & Interact also helped a lot in preparation for the Resilient Communities assignments. Back then it felt that we were thrown into the deep, and that we had to figure out on our own how to start a conversation, but also to keep it going so we could use the information told to us.

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS USED IN CONVERSATIONS

During my previous study and multiple jobs I have had, I picked up quite a few techniques which have been helpful during the conversations with residents of the Oosterhoogebrug. And this module was the perfect moment to put the previous lessons into action.

The most important thing according to me is to be focused at all times. Not only on what the interviewee tells, but also on the intonation people speak with and the non-verbal communication they use. As this gives an indication of their feelings about certain subjects. Making eye-contact as a way of active listening has been helpful in this regard, as this makes me aware of my own non-verbal expressions and makes empathizing with the other persons easier as well. Even during short conversation you need to build a trust-relationship with them, as this can open up a conversation to a higher level.

I have learned to be patient when the other person was talking, by not finishing their sentences or assume that I understand what they said. I would rather summarize what they have said, to verify if my interpretation has been correct. This often made it easier to ask follow-up questions. I deliberately extended a pause in some conversations, a moment of silence in order to provoke the other person to break this silence so they would continue with their story. People want to talk, you only need to give them the space to do so.

Overall I have seen the contact with the residents as a valuable experience.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM MY GROUP MEMBERS

During the module I went twice to the neighbourhood to specifically seek interaction with the inhabitants the Oosterhoogebrug. The first time with Teide and Lidia, where I did the conversations in Dutch and Teide translated everything for Lidia. And the second time with Teide, where we both spoke to the same residents during multiple conversations.

As I conducted a few interviews during the module of Initiate & Interact in Leeuwarden together with Teide, I have seen him grow in his interviewing skills. Where he found it difficult to make the first contact with residents during those visits, he clearly felt more comfortable with the conversations in the Oosterhoogebrug. This really proves that conducting interviews is a skill which you have practice to gain confidence.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN THE OOSTERHOOGEBRUG

When seen in the light of social stratification, I have found the Oosterhoogebrug neighbourhood rather diverse. Either through desk research or field work. The main differences between people can be seen in the categories of employment, income, level of education, political preference, marital status, home ownership, and social participation.

A few of the mentioned categories can be linked to each other, as a higher level of education (which is a source of power through the *access to knowledge and information*) often leads to higher paid jobs, which in turn gives people more financial security and possibilities to become a home owner. Whereas a lower education often causes the opposite to happen. This is the difference people have based on *material rewards*, as posed by Wilterdink and van Heerikhuizen (2012), which benefit their lifestyle. But owning a home is a choice, as this also binds a person to a mortgage which reduces certain freedoms in life.

Categories such as age and cultural background are rather homogeneous. As most people are Dutch natives, and nearly half of the population is 45 years or older (and within this group nearly half is pensioned already). (Alle Cijfers, 2022). These two categories can be linked to *social status* within the community, as they invoke a certain respect or stance towards others (i.e. people with a migration background or younger people).

The residents of the Oosterhoogebrug can be put in different social classes, as mentioned by Wilterdink and van Heerikhuizen (2012), as well. Especially the four lower classes, out of five, are seen in the neighbourhood. Namely the *entrepreneurial class*, *professional middle class*, *employee class*, and *underclass*. There are plenty of enterprises within the area, of which a lot are located in the vicinity of people's homes. The data which is accessible also shows a high amount of highly- and middle educated persons, which can be linked to the third and fourth class as mentioned above. As 7,60% of the households has an income around the social minimum we can see a clear *underclass* in the neighbourhood.

If there is a *upper class* within the area, it cannot be researched through accessible quantifiable data, and I see it unlikely that people of this class choose to live in this neighbourhood since it is a working-class district and elitist in the slightest.

REFERENCES

Alle Cijfers. (2022). Héél véél informatie over de buurt Oosterhoogebrug (update 2022!). AlleCijfers.nl. Retrieved 21 April 2022, from <https://allecijfers.nl/buurt/oosterhoogebrug-groningen/>

Wilterdink, N. A., & van Heerikhuizen, B. (2012). *Samenlevingen* (7th ed.). Noordhoff.