

The value of a neighbourhood

1.



The value of the neighbourhood

Ah, the good ol' days: a roast in the oven, kids playing in the street, parents chatting over the fence, grandad mowing the lawn... Back then, the local community took care of its members. The good old days – better times indeed.

As soon as we are old enough to observe any potential downsides to social evolution – whether because of pollution from industrialisation, overconsumption from globalisation or information overload from digitalisation – we revert to the idea of the 'good ol' days'. It's a **tempting cliché, to blame change for the decline of our communities and social life**, and yearn for faded memories of a 'supposed' golden era.³

Our relationship with our neighbourhood is undoubtedly different today than it was in the past, but **the neighbourhood itself is by no means any less valuable**. Later in the paper, we will illustrate that the local community holds a wealth of potential, perhaps now more than ever. But first we look for the cause behind this change in relationship with the neighbourhood. We'll find it within a **transformation of our personal networks**.

1.1 The role of our personal networks in the neighbourhood

Networked individualism

Sociologists Rainie and Wellman coined the term '**networked individualism**'.⁴ In the past, our network used to consist of a few close-knit social groups in our physical proximity. Today, we are more likely to be part of numerous diverse groups with well-defined purposes. We may never even talk to or meet face to face with anyone in these groups. They may be groups with whom we explore our musical tastes, another that shares our political preferences or area of work

³ R. Forrest, A. Kearns, Social cohesion, social capital and the neighbourhood. *Urban Stud.* 38, 2125-2143 (2001); D. Schiefer, J. van der Noll, The essentials of social cohesion: a literature review. *Soc Indic Res.* 132, 579-603 (2017).

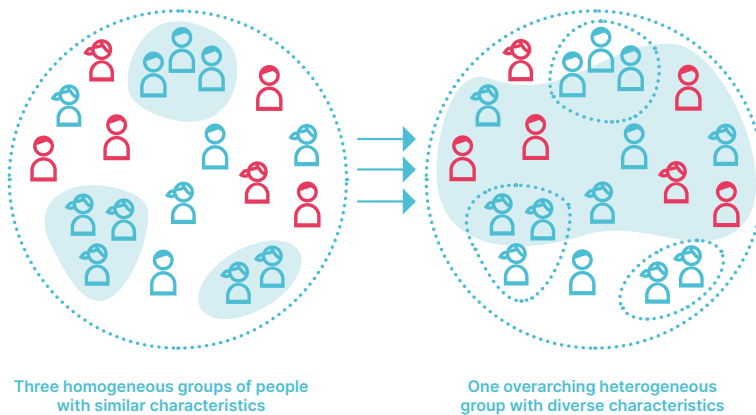
⁴ H. Rainie, B. Wellman, *Networked: the new social operating system* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2012).

expertise. Today's society offers an immense buffet of communities, both online and offline, satisfying our conflicting hunger for both individuality and a sense of community.

Local diversity

As our identities and roles in society become more fragmented and not as intertwined with our local communities, **neighbourhoods are becoming increasingly diverse**. People with completely different backgrounds end up living next door to each other. The neighbourhood becomes a rich patchwork of diverse interests, talents, and cultural or religious beliefs.

In other words, under the influence of globalisation, urbanisation and the internet, the local community has evolved from a **homogeneous group** (where members have lots in common and behave similarly) to a **heterogeneous group** (with much diversity).⁵



5 K. N. Hampton, B. Wellman, Lost and saved . . . again: the moral panic about the loss of community takes hold of social media. *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*. 47, 643-651 (2018).

1.2 Social capital of the neighbourhood

Social capital

Every individual network and community contains a certain amount of social capital: the sum of **resources that can be called upon, based on social relationships alone**.⁶

Think of a friend who offers tickets to a concert when they can't make it or a neighbour who drives you to an appointment if your car breaks down – **it is everything your network can do for you (from an individual perspective) or the community for each other (from an aggregate perspective)**.

Bonding versus bridging

Both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups possess social capital, albeit in different forms.⁷ In the case of a homogeneous group, we speak of **bonding social capital**. It contains important value in the form of security and social support through a sense of belonging, among other things.

However, studies show that mainly capital within a heterogeneous group, namely **bridging social capital, has a positive effect** not only on individual outcomes, but also on economic growth and acceptance for diversity.

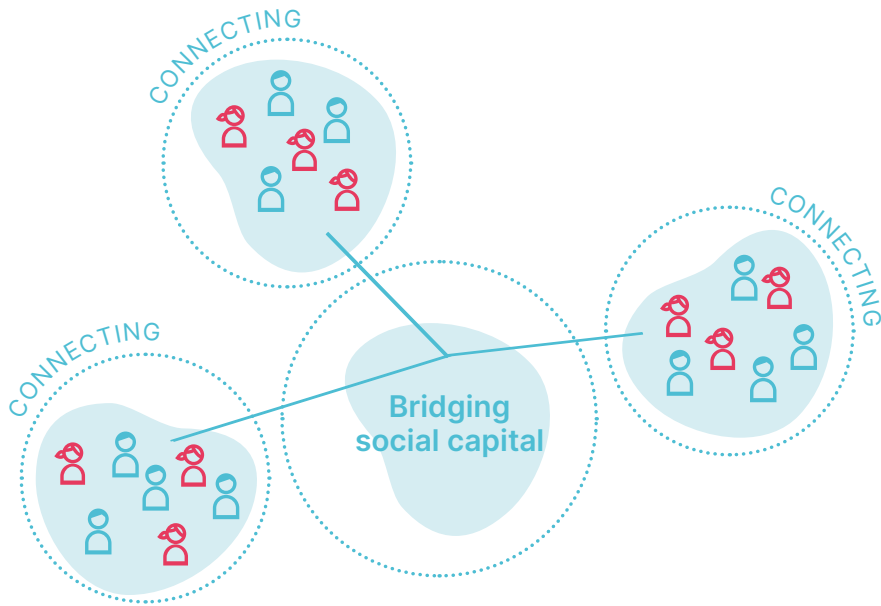
Bridging social capital of the neighbourhood

Back in the day, local residents used to rely on each other as a close-knit (homogeneous) community. But now, each member can **tap into their individual networks to better their neighbourhood**.

After a house fire turns the lives of some residents upside down, the community rolls up its sleeves to provide some relief. One resident creates a website where people can donate online. Another makes little soaps that neighbours sell to colleagues and family members to fundraise. Someone else is asking for insurance information at work. And the whole neighbourhood collects clothes and other useful items from friends and family.

6 J. S. Coleman, Social capital in the creation of human capital. American Journal of Sociology. 94, 95-120 (1988); N. Lin, Social Capital: A theory of social structure and action (Cambridge university press, 2004).

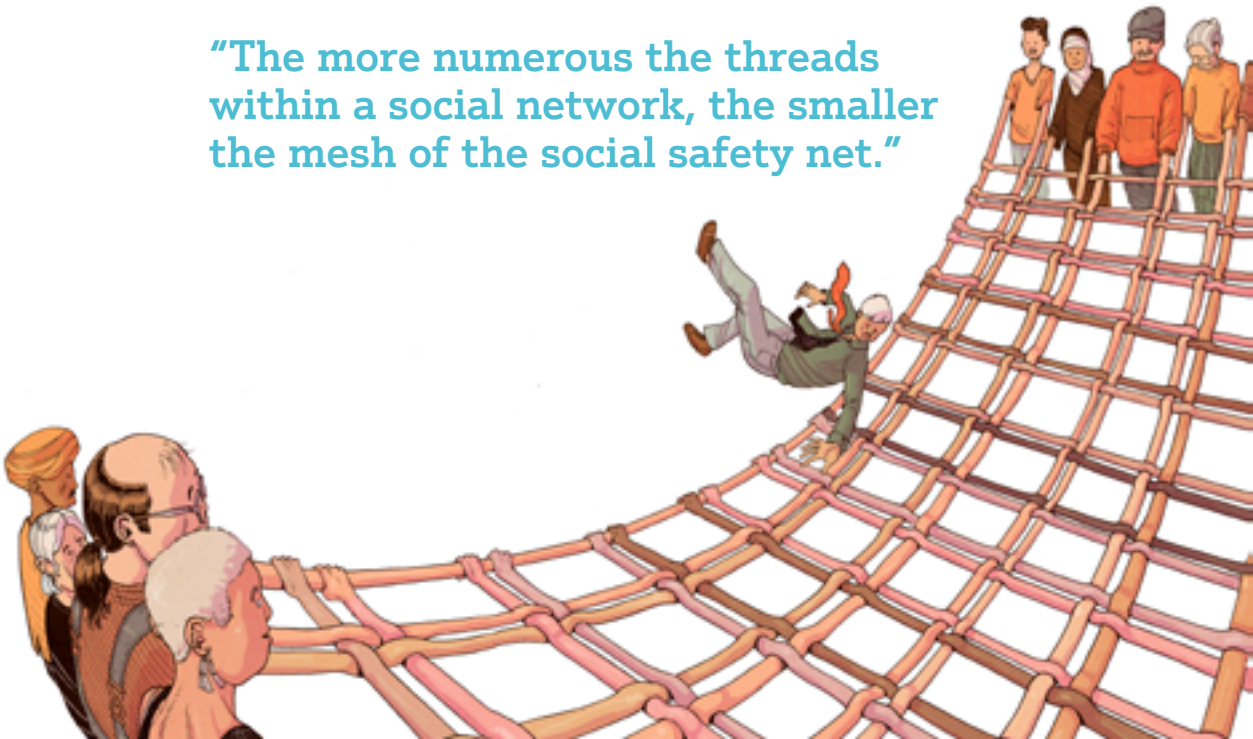
7 R. S. Burt, Brokerage and closure: an introduction to social capital (Oxford University Press, Oxford; New York, 2005).



Not only does the neighbourhood hold a wealth of bridging capital; its **physical, social and civic context** provides members with a unique twofold value.

- On the one hand, imagine the potential for **vulnerable and less mobile people** – older, isolated people in particular. For those who have no friends or family to lean on, the neighbourhood may provide an important network of social relations and support. For those who are immobile, the neighbourhood forms an indispensable part of their care network.

“The more numerous the threads within a social network, the smaller the mesh of the social safety net.”



- On the other hand, there is the unique **common interest** for various local themes. Think of the initiatives that local residents set up together in the physical space: from car sharing to litter picks. Some of these initiatives even go on to address worldwide challenges on a local level, such as the global plastics, litter and climate crisis.

Why local community building?

Caring neighbourhoods of the future are committed to tackling city-wide or even global problems on a small scale. Local community building is therefore an investment in:

Welfare

- + The relationship between the strength of the social fabric and both psychosocial and physical well-being has been well documented.⁸ In neighbourhoods of the future, residents look after each other by offering social support and providing informal help. Vulnerable groups, too, learn that they can make valuable contributions to the community, allowing them to step out of their role as the ones in need of help. Older people live independently for longer, and the community actively fights social isolation.

Safety

- + Various studies show a strong link between a sense of community and a feeling of security.⁹ In neighbourhoods of the future, residents keep an eye on things, keep each other informed of any issues such as criminal activity, and call on each other when needed.

8 P. A. Thoits, Mechanisms linking social ties and support to physical and mental health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. 52, 145-161 (2011); A. M. Ziersch, F. E. Baum, C. MacDougall, C. Putland, Neighbourhood life and social capital: the implications for health. *Social Science & Medicine*. 60, 71-86 (2005).

9 C. M. Fourie, in *Collaboration, Communities and Competition: International Perspectives from the Academy*, S. Dent, L. Lane, T. Strike, Eds. (SensePublishers, Rotterdam, 2017)
J. D. Lichterman, A "community as resource" strategy for disaster response. *Public Health Rep.* 115, 262-265 (2000); R. J. Sampson, S. W. Raudenbush, F. Earls, Neighborhoods and violent crime: a multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*. 277, 918-924 (1997); C. van Eijk, T. Steen, Why citizens want to be co-producers, 10 (2013).

Citizen participation

- + The willingness of residents to work for the collective good of the neighbourhood is more present in connected communities.¹⁰ In neighbourhoods of the future, residents feel involved in both the community and local policy. They are more likely to take initiative, to volunteer and participate in projects run by neighbours, organisations and the government.

Mobility

- + In sustainable neighbourhoods, residents will travel less often by car, because there is plenty to do in the local area and because sustainable travel is the norm.

Climate and environment

- + In sustainable neighbourhoods, residents gladly exchange items, make group purchases and consume locally. Together, they get involved in developing and maintaining green spaces.

“Investing in local community building means investing in social issues such as mobility, environment, welfare, and citizen participation.”

¹⁰ A. L. Kavanaugh, D. D. Reese, J. M. Carroll, M. B. Rosson, Weak ties in networked communities. *The Information Society*. 21, 119-131 (2005); Y.-C. Kim, S. J. Ball-Rokeach, Civic engagement from a communication infrastructure perspective. *Communication Theory*. 16, 173-197 (2006); J. M. McLeod, D. A. Scheufele, P. Moy, Community, communication, and participation: the role of mass media and interpersonal discussion in local political participation. *Political Communication*. 16, 315-336 (1999); C. Talò, T. Mannarini, A. Rochira, Sense of community and community participation: a meta-analytic review. *Soc Indic Res*. 117, 1-28 (2014).

1.3 Challenge

Disconnection

If today's neighbourhoods really hold so much value, why doesn't it always feel that way? It seems as if we no longer judge the neighbourhood by its potential to enrich our lives, but rather by its **ability to accommodate our individuality**. 'They are quiet neighbours', 'we leave each other alone' and 'they come to water the plants when we travel' seem to be the most desirable qualities of the modern neighbour.

Is this all we can expect? Is this what present-day life has done to us? Have our virtual friends on the other side of the planet and online clubs distracted us so much that we **find it difficult to connect with our actual neighbours**?

Tapping into the social capital of the neighbourhood


The potential may be immense; that **does not mean that the neighbourhood's value is there for the taking**. Let alone that it is accessible for all members to the same extent.

Clichés such as 'things were better in the old days' are tempting to think, but they are most likely false and, at the very least, not constructive. What if we **were to use the beautiful aspects of our current reality to connect more with each other**? Then the neighbourhoods of the future would become caring, connected communities that not only bridge our differences, but embrace and use them.

"The secret of caring neighbourhoods of the future? Local community building, here and now."

A formula for social capital

In this white paper, we propose a **formula** that provides insight into the dynamics of a neighbourhood's social capital. With it, we aim to help you both map and develop the local community's value.



« Our relationship with the neighbourhood looks vastly different today than it has in the past. In this white paper, we illustrate that the local community still houses great potential, perhaps now more than ever. »





« Caring and sustainable neighbourhoods of the future are committed to tackling city-wide or even global problems on a small scale. »

Wat en wanneer je wil
abonneren!

BOEREN
& BUREN

De Meulekar
• Since 1865 •
Zeeuwse bloem
vermalen meel, brood en bakm

BOEREN
& BUREN

ZOETE
APPELDRAGEN
LOVE

LOKALE PRODUCTEN VIND JE HIER

1 BESTEL ONLINE

Kies uit een ruim aanbod
lokale en verse producten op
boerenburen.be

2 OP DE BUURDERIJ

Ontvang je producten
rechtstreeks van de boer

A formula for caring
and sustainable
neighbourhoods

2.



A formula for caring and sustainable neighbourhoods

So, the neighbourhood has an undeniable value, in theory. Intuitively, however, we can often feel that **one neighbourhood offers its members more value than another**. For example, there may be an area that is known as 'arty' or a town that has a good reputation for having a dynamic community due to social activism. Does that mean we can calculate the social capital of a specific neighbourhood? And perhaps more interestingly: does that allow us to make some adjustments here, twist a button there, and set the neighbourhood to **a maximum social capital**?

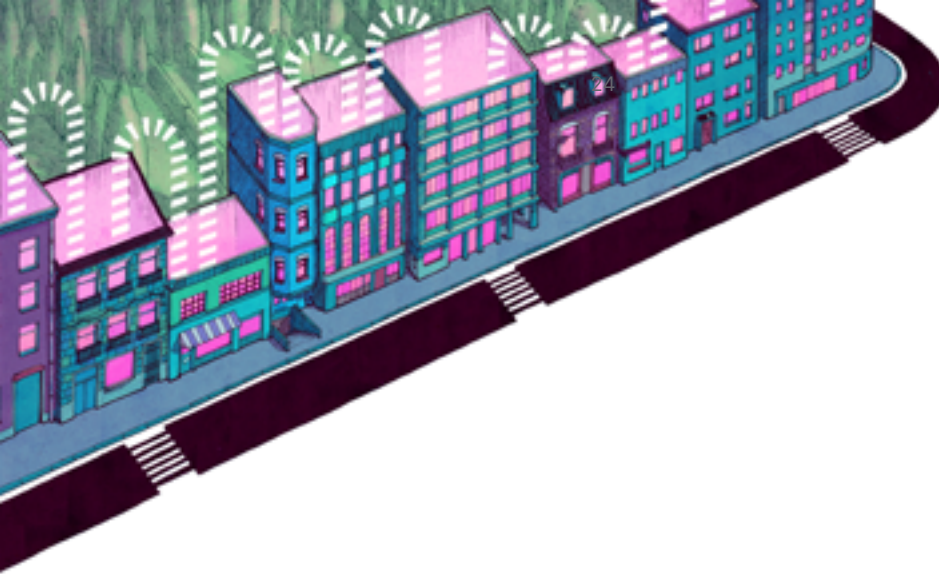
2.1 Social capital formula

On an individual level, a person's social capital is usually described as the sum of **resources that are available because of social relationships**. Think of the drill you borrow from next door, the ride a friend offers you, the local tradesperson recommendation someone gives. Add it all up and there you have it: your social capital!

The collective level is more complicated when it comes to social capital, as the neighbourhood's social capital doesn't **simply equal the total resources of its residents**. In our opinion, the formula for determining – or influencing – the social capital of a neighbourhood consists of two elements: **the potential of, and the access to, the neighbourhood's resources**.



Complicated social concepts cannot be expressed in a simple formula, but a formula helps us navigate through the concepts of this white paper and, more importantly, it will inspire you to get started.



2.2 Potential

The neighbourhood's **potential**, or 'urban surplus', consists primarily of the sum of resources or assets in a local community. These take many forms:

- time
- talents
- finance
- material
- knowledge
- space
- connections
- emotional support

Demographics and socio-economic status largely determine the degree to which these assets are present. How many people live in the neighbourhood? How diverse is its community? Is there vibrant local commerce?

Besides the assets in and of themselves, the extent to which the assets allow for **collaboration**, too, determines the potential of the social capital. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Diversity is an important factor for this connective potential.

One neighbour may be a retired dancer (talent), another has a large space that's unused on weekdays (space), and a third is a member of a local senior citizens' association (connections). These are elements that, on their own, mean little to the community. But once these three residents come together, dance classes for senior citizens can bring more connection and well-being to the neighbourhood (connective potential).

In other words, the potential of a neighbourhood consists of its citizens resources, plus the **added value** that arises from possible collaborations.



It can be extremely valuable **to map these opportunities**. By listing the main stakeholders in a neighbourhood, it quickly becomes clear how collaborations can provide answers to a variety of challenges. At the end of this white paper, we'll briefly talk about a method to carry out this analysis within the neighbourhood, called 'Neighbourhood Capacity Mapping'.

2.3 Access

The fact that certain assets exist within the neighbourhood does not mean that they can be used freely by the whole community. For this to happen, there must also be **access to the assets**.

This access is determined by the extent to which **members can, and want to, connect to the community and its resources**. Connecting refers to both supplying, managing, maintaining and using resources.



The ability to connect to the community and its assets is largely influenced by the **spaces** within the neighbourhood, which either hinder or stimulate exchanges between neighbours.

Some isolated local residents might benefit from each other's company. But perhaps the neighbourhood lacks **public meeting places**, which makes it difficult for these citizens to come together.

The desire of local residents to connect to the community forms the last piece of the puzzle. We attribute this desire to the **social cohesion of the neighbourhood**.

A local sports club may have a space where young people can meet after opening hours. That does not mean that its board members **trust** them to take care of their infrastructure.

How strong are the ties between the local residents? What values and norms does the neighbourhood uphold? How inclusive is the local community? These **social dimensions** greatly impact the access to the neighbourhood's social capital.

With the right tools, you can **not only evaluate, but even influence** this access. This, as far as we are concerned, is the definition of community building. And here lies the key to social capital.

"A neighbourhood's resources are what they are: an abundance of potential to enrich the neighbourhood and its members. But the extent to which local residents can and want to make use of those resources... that's where you can make a difference."

Being able to connect
to the social capital

4.



Being able to connect to the social capital

Quick reminder

Do you recall the **two elements** that determine access to social capital?



So far, we have looked at the desire to connect, which is largely determined by social cohesion. Now we will look at the **ability**, the extent to which we can connect to the resources of the neighbourhood.

Communication infrastructure

A neighbourhood's communication infrastructure includes the **physical and virtual spaces** within which local residents interact.

To a large extent, it is the quality of this **communication infrastructure** that determines whether the neighbourhood is able to:

- **share** their own resources with the community
- turn to the neighbourhood **when needed**
- **work together** to create a better neighbourhood.

The importance of spaces

Without the presence of quality, accessible spaces where residents can systematically come into contact, it is **difficult to make use of the social capital of the neighbourhood**.

For without physical or virtual spaces, how could we:

- know **who** lives nearby
- know what **resources** are available in the neighbourhood
- **ask** for help
- **provide** help
- talk about **challenges and solutions**
- **join hands?**

Role of a government

Often, providing a space where neighbours can come into contact, amounts to an investment of time, money and energy. In this respect, the **role of a local government** is threefold:

- understanding **the needs** of the neighbourhood
- **providing** the required spaces
- **maintaining** the existing spaces.

Getting local residents involved in these processes is beneficial for the **end result, the engagement in the project and the social cohesion in the neighbourhood**.

..... A survey shows that there is support for the development of a new playground. If the neighbourhood can use its talents to design the playground (developing a garden, creating a piece of art for the playground, inventing a name etc.), the residents will undoubtedly feel proud. This promotes both the community feeling of belonging and the chance that they will later help with the playground's maintenance.

4.1 Physical spaces

Third places

With physical spaces, we mean all places in the neighbourhood that offer members the opportunity to interact with each other (such as a footpath), but even more so the **places that stimulate interaction**. Think of a local café, community centre or park.

Ray Oldenburg talks about third places.²² Where your home serves as first place and your work environment as second place, third places are:

- **accessible** to all
- aimed at **informal** conversations in a comfortable setting
- **familiar**, perhaps because there are often familiar faces
- a non-compulsory stop – visitors are there **because they want to be**.

Third places are **important for the social life of the neighbourhood**. They offer residents the opportunity to discuss community issues, exchange opinions, learn from each other etc., which can lead to relationships and actions.

Parochial room

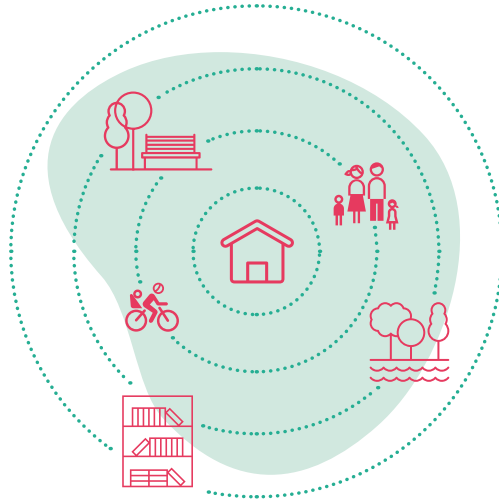
Over time, neighbours can **parochialise** these places.²³ The parochial space is a layer between the private and public space.

Within the parochial space, people behave slightly differently towards each other. These exchanges do not have the intimate character of a friendly relationship, but neither do they have the detachment that exists between strangers. The parochial space invites **friendly recognition, light-hearted conversation and other expressions of neighbourliness**.

..... In a city centre neighbourhood, there are some busy shopping streets. Passers-by avoid each other's gaze. Only a stone's throw away, you find a small park. Residents see this as a place for the community. Passers-by almost always greet each other here, and they often stop to chat.

²² R. Oldenburg, *The great good place: cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community* (Marlowe, New York, 1999).

²³ M. Kusenbach, *Patterns of Neighboring: Practicing community in the parochial realm*. *Symbolic Interaction*. 29, 279-306 (2006); L. H. Lofland, *The public realm: exploring the city's quintessential social territory* (Aldine de Gruyter, Hawthorne, N.Y., 1998), *Communication and social order*.



Subjective experience

Whether a space is public or parochial, **depends on the viewer**. A customer of a local café who does not live in the neighbourhood will see the café as a public space and will behave neutrally. A local resident might be more inclined to approach other customers and strike up a conversation.

The meaning that a space carries also varies **among residents**. The physical neighbourhood can be divided into concentric circles around someone's home.²⁴ The closer a place is, the more meaning it carries. For example, just by looking out the window, a person could learn a lot about their immediate neighbours.

A community bench can be worth a lot to someone who lives right around the corner, but not so much to a resident from the other side of town. **Strategic placement of such meeting places** can therefore be of great value.

Finally, the **history and associations** attached to a place are important.²⁵ A park where many pleasant neighbourhood activities have taken place in the past will be well loved and cherished. One that is associated with frequent nuisance will gain a bad reputation. For this reason, the usage and maintenance of a place are of great importance.

24 M. Kusenbach, A hierarchy of urban communities: observations on the nested character of place. *City & Community*. 7, 225-249 (2008).

25 T. Mannarini, A. Rochira, C. Talò, How identification processes and inter-community relationships affect sense of community. *Journal of Community Psychology*. 40, 951-967 (2012); Y.-F. Tuan, *Space and place: the perspective of experience* (Arnold, London, 1977).





4.2 Virtual spaces

The meaning of virtual space

Every space that allows exchanges between residents provides access to social capital to a certain extent. Besides physical meeting places, it could also be a noticeboard or a **digital neighbourhood network** such as Hoplr.

Virtual spaces provide **insight into the identity, resources, and challenges of the neighbourhood**. Like physical spaces, they allow residents to ask and answer questions, exchange information and form collaborations.²⁶

Persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability

Virtual exchanges are usually less suitable for forging strong ties. In the context of community building, on the other hand, they do have some **valuable features**.

Online exchanges (such as neighbourhood messages on Hoplr) are registered and saved, allowing them to be **accessed and shared by other neighbours, now and in the future**.

In other words, the exchanges that take place online have a great potential to make an impact on **residents who were not directly involved in the initial interaction**.

²⁶ J. De Meulenaere, C. Courtois, K. Ponnet, in Routledge companion to local news and journalism, A. Gulyas, D. Baines, Eds. (Routledge, Oxford, UK, 2020), pp. 398-407; C. López, R. Farzan, in Proceedings of the 7th international conference on communities and technologies (ACM, New York, NY, 2015), C&T '15, pp. 59-67.

This, in turn, has an **exponential effect** on:


- the development of **neighbourhood identity**²⁷
- the likelihood of members crossing paths with **relevant resources** (e.g., an invitation to a community activity, information, help, etc.)
- **observational learning** (gradually learning the norms of the neighbourhood, and finding it easier to ask for help).

Moreover, some local residents might find neighbourhood contact within the virtual space **more accessible** than the physical space.

27 De Meulenaere, J. D., Baccarne, B., Courtois, C., & Ponnet, K. (2020). Neighborhood hotspot and community awareness: the double role of social network sites in local communities. *Communications*, 1(ahead-of-print), <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2019-0135>.



« Involving local residents in the development of physical spaces is beneficial for the end result, the involvement in the project and the social cohesion in the neighbourhood. »



« Virtual spaces provide insight into identity, resources and challenges of the neighbourhood. Just as in a physical space, residents can collaborate and exchange information. »

