# EVERYONE SHOULD FEEL AT HOME. THE PITFALLS AND POSSIBILITIES OF INCLUSIVENESS

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In the scholarly fields of migration and integration on public health and welfare-states, and in urban and globalization studies, social scientists generally agree that feeling at home, being rooted and socially embedded in the environment where one lives is of great importance. Feelings of safety, familiarity, being embedded in a community, as well as having a sense of control over one's own life, and a place of dwelling, are not only regarded as a prerequisite for well-functioning individuals, but also for self-supportive local communities, neighbourhoods, and cities. Society at large will improve as it stands on such well-balanced building blocks.
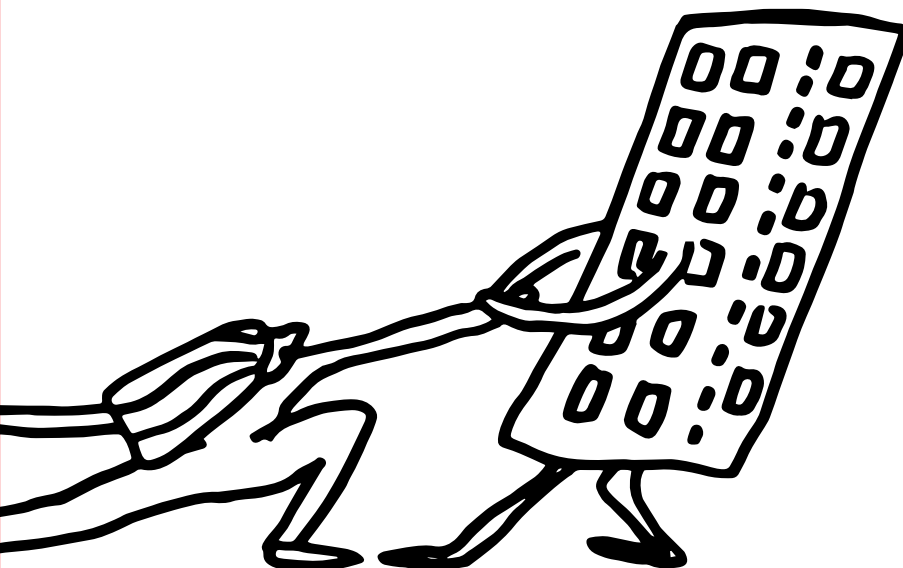
At the same time, classical sociologists such as Georg Simmel, Emile Durkheim and the by-now classical author Jane Jacobs, have argued that feelings of home and belonging in urban settings are not self-evident at all. They claim that city life is defined by its opaque and chaotic nature. It is marked by the ongoing presence of 'strangers', tourists and temporary inhabitants. Therefore, instead of providing a natural basis for feelings of safety, familiarity, community and a sense of control over space among urban dwellers, city life tends to produce quite the opposite: feelings of anxiety, estrangement, anonymity and a loss of control. While some urbanites are attracted to city life precisely because of its lack of social control and community life, others suffer from feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

This essay deals with the possibilities and pitfalls of attempts to enhance feelings of home and belonging among urban dwellers. These exist precisely because policies and social interventions in contemporary Western societies that aim to strengthen local communities and create inclusive cities also involve processes of exclusion. Therefore, before embracing the ideal of inclusive cities where everyone can and should be able to feel at home, it is important to take into consideration the complexity and politics that are at stake in building inclusive heterogeneous urban settings.

An inclusive city where every single resident can feel safe, accepted and recognized by others, embedded in a community, and with a sense of control over social and physical environment, is not easily established. Whereas feelings of home can be regarded as universal and important to all human beings, those very same feelings can generate tensions and collisions between (groups of) residents when normative ideas of what a good home is and should be differ.

Policy-makers, urban developers, housing corporations, and social organizations that attempt to build inclusive local communities often encounter difficulties and resistance when they try to govern or enhance feelings of home and belonging in urban settings. It often transpires that when one group of residents feels strongly rooted and embedded in the physical and social environment, other groups tend to withdraw from this space. The question therefore arises, whether it is possible for everyone to feel truly at home in settings that are marked by difference and fluidity.

Between 2010 and 2018, I conducted several ethnographic studies on feelings of home and belonging in heterogeneous urban settings. Around 120 people were thoroughly interviewed and asked about their feelings of home with regards to the place where they live. Although everyone seems to know what home means and why feeling at home is so important, I found that home for every individual refers to a very specific situation. What a good home entails for someone, encapsulates all the sensory, physical and social aspects of the situation one has experienced as a child. Back then, things were self-evident and 'normal'. As a child, home was simply 'good' as it was, because we did not know any better. Home was the environment in which we knew what was expected of us, in which the sounds, smells, people, faces, bodies and customs were familiar; an environment in which we could navigate safely and blindly, because we knew the place by heart. In sum, the ability to navigate blindly through a physical and social environment creates feelings of home. It provides a sense of safety, familiarity, community and control over the (social) spaces people find themselves in.

Exactly which situational aspects create such feelings of home thus vary per individual. Home-feelings draw on very early memories. And even when those memories are filled with fear or despair, they refer to what is familiar and thus, sometimes in a paradoxical way, to what is perceived as 'normal,' and thus 'good'. Some of my respondents were born and raised in violent or unsafe domestic environments, but still recalled the home of their youths with a sense of longing. Even bad memories of home can continue to carry a certain touch of nostalgia, simply because they refer to a time and place in which you were a child, the time and place in which things were just 'normal' as they were.

Since notions of home are so strongly sensory and related to our earliest memories, knowing what home means becomes a second nature: we have completely internalized those notions and are always able to recognize a-situation-like-home, even though it is hard to explain in words. We just know when we are home. Moreover, this knowing-by-heart evokes a feeling of being at a place that is good just as it is. As I learned from my respondents, early memories of home can provide comfort and guidance

in times when people feel temporarily out of balance; it provides comfort in times of change and identity crises. Personal normative ideas of home help people remember who they are, where they belong, and to recall a collective identity.

On the other hand, knowing what 'a good home' is, but not finding it in the situation at hand, can also evoke very negative feelings of discomfort, unbalance and up-rootedness. Social scientists have shown that moral ideas about what is 'good' and 'bad' only become clear and visible once those ideas are violated. In other words, the moment moral boundaries are crossed, we become aware of them. The word 'normal' obviously encloses the word 'norm', because that what is perceived as 'normal' is implicitly seen as the right thing to do. Thus, when the situation where one lives is considered 'abnormal', it is also hard to regard it as 'good', let alone to feel at home in such a situation.

One of my respondents, who became painfully aware of the unbalance between his normative ideas of home and the situation he found himself in was William, as I will call him. William was born and raised in Ethiopia, but had lived in the Netherlands for a decade. He shared some despairing thoughts with me, in which he explained how it felt not to be at home: "I have lived in Hoofddorp for ten years now, and I don't even know the name of my neighbours. In Ethiopia, that would be impossible, it would be a shame. And I do really feel ashamed about it, because I do not know the people I live amongst." (William, 61) As William explains, it is the discrepancy between the memories of his home situation in Ethiopia and his living situation in the Netherlands, that makes it so difficult for him to feel at ease: "You start to think 'am I not good enough, not sociable enough?' You really start doubting yourself. Yeah, and then, after a while you start to feel so isolated and down, you know. How can I improve myself? What did I do wrong? It is really hard to get used to it, to adapt here."

William's self-consciousness, his experience of not-being-at-home, is a typical example of what Jared Zigon has called 'a moment of moral breakdown', which is the moment in which one becomes stunningly aware of his or her own morality and normative ideas. While William sees his inability to adapt to his new home-situation as a personal failure, I would rather suggest it is a social one. Many of my informants who were not born and raised in the Netherlands reported such 'moral breakdowns.' Even after many years of residency, they found themselves unable to become comfortable with the detached social behavior of their native Dutch neighbours.

Recently however, many native Dutch citizens have also begun to report moral breakdowns. In both public and political debates, nostalgia rules supreme, proclaiming the loss of a country in which people could 'count on each other', and feel part of a national community. Many of my native Dutch respondents stated that they did not 'feel at home' in their neighbourhood any more, or that they felt like 'a guest in their own street.'

One respondent worried about the fact that his street had turned 'black' – by which he explicitly referred to the 'abnormal' presence of non-white people in a setting he used to call 'home'. Bert (75) said: "Those foreigners dominate our lives. My street has turned black completely. And it is going to get worse. We'll be strangers in our own country." As I found, in order

for people to feel at home, very specific normative elements have to be combined. Home, then, is a combination of 'the right' place, with the right practices and the right people. Ultimately, the idea of home connects certain places, bodies and minds to what is perceived as normal, and therefore, morally good. Following these insights, I suggest the normative idea of home must be regarded as a moral category; a mental framework that helps people distinguish between what is good and bad, between those who can be included and those who should be kept at bay.

In an era of globalization, refugee crises and mass migration, polarization, as well as collective feelings of anxiety and unsafety rule supreme in Western societies. In an attempt to counter the increasing lack of social cohesion, politicians and policy-makers, as well as social organizations, now emphasize the importance for all citizens to 'feel at home', independent of their background and social position. Cities should become inclusive spaces where all inhabitants can feel safe, accepted, and embedded in the local community. However, every single individual needs very specific aspects for feelings of home to emerge.

For example, while William only feels at home by having contact with neighbours, Bert indicates he feels less at home because his neighbour William is black. How to solve this impasse? Both William and Bert are longing to feel deeply at home. They crave a sense of community and familiarity in the environment where they live. On the other hand, both persons embody the reason why the other one feels deprived of home.

The paradox that presents itself in the call for feeling at home in the city, is that although the feeling might be universal and familiar to everyone, the normative idea of what home is and should be is unique to everyone. No one can feel at home everywhere, with everyone. Home, as a moral category, is an exclusive notion. A situation-like-home has to exclude 'others', in order for the insiders to feel safe, socially embedded and surrounded by those who are familiar to them.

## TOWARDS A 'LIGHT' FEELING OF HOME IN HETEROGENEOUS URBAN SETTINGS

Instead of aiming to create cities that allow everyone to feel at home, I suggest it is more feasible to strive for inclusive cities in which every single individual is aware of the fact that no-one can recreate their specific normative ideas of the 'good' home to the fullest – in public and semi-public spaces that is. Just like the social fabric of city life itself, being at home in the city is multi-layered and fluid. While one can feel at home in certain spaces and among certain people, the situation can become unfamiliar and unsafe when entering other spatial and social settings. Home can be created in private spaces and with familiar others who share similar notions of home. The rest of city space will always have to be shared with 'strangers', a fact of urban life that can bring about feelings of insecurity, anxiety and of being out of place – as in both William's and Bert's case.

Instead of encouraging urban dwellers to feel deeply at home in their street, their neighbourhood, their city, I argue it is more congruent with urban reality to limit such social interventions to encourage 'light'

feelings of home only[1]. Not just because individuals and households in heterogeneous settings differ greatly when it comes to normative ideas of what a good home is, but also because such interventions carry the danger of excluding those who do not apply to dominant normative ideas of home. The danger of enhancing feelings of home from the top-down, is that a moral category for belonging and citizenship can be created. When emphasizing the importance of feelings of home, exclusive ideas of home are unwittingly and wittingly transmitted. Since such dominant notions are embedded in national and local policies, as well as social institutions such as law and education, a very specific type of morality to which all citizens should adhere is imposed top-down. It becomes very likely that certain groups and populations will not be able to fit this category of belonging to the local and/or national community.

1. See also: Duyvendak, J.W. (2011). The Politics of Home. New York: Palgrave McMillan.

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The aim of policy-makers, municipalities and social organizations to enhance feelings of home among city dwellers and create inclusive cities, is not easy to achieve. While their intentions are to improve social cohesion and include all citizens despite their differences, building a local home involves processes of exclusion. No one can feel, or be coerced to feel at home everywhere, with everyone. Based on early and sensory memories, unique and specific normative ideas of home become a second nature for individuals. In their current social and physical environment, residents try to re-produce and establish such homey spaces and normative ideas.

In dense, heterogeneous urban settings, dwellers occasionally experience moments of moral breakdown, in which they become (sometimes painfully) aware of the fact that home is something deeply personal and therefore hard to share with all fellow residents. I suggest, instead of trying to change urban dwellers' feelings and normative ideas of home, it might be more effective to enhance the acceptance of a simple urban fact of life: no group or individual can fully claim a street, neighbourhood or city to be their home, since it always has to be shared with 'others'. Dealing with moral boundaries that are breached by the lifestyles and normative ideas of those others, is part and parcel of city life. Learning not to feel fully at home in urban settings, therefore, might contribute more to the emergence of inclusive cities, than being encouraged to do the opposite.