

The Future of Young Senior Citizens in Old Amsterdam

| KEES DIGNUM

A special phase

The city centre of Amsterdam is in a special phase. It is lively as a result of its varied functions and is comfortable to live in thanks to the excellent living quality and the picturesque setting. The situation in terms of the combination of physical quality and population characteristics – life stage and lifestyle – is now optimal. Just a few decades ago, large parts of the city centre were run-down and its main inhabitants were the underprivileged. Nowadays, the city centre is becoming the domain of young senior citizens (i.e. those aged 55-69) who as they grow older will have to deal with specific inconveniences posed by the city centre.

The growth of Amsterdam and the development of the city centre

The population of the centre of Amsterdam was almost 80,000 around the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century, which is over 10 % of the population of Amsterdam as a whole. It is not unusual for historic city centres to accommodate but a small percentage of the total urban buildings and the population. Yet only a relatively short time ago – some 130 years – the area which is now called the centre or the city centre constituted the entire city. For two centuries, the area within the Singel canal – which dates from the seventeenth century, when Amsterdam was the fourth largest city in Europe in terms of population – sufficiently accommodated the entire population of Amsterdam. Amsterdam broke through its historic defences with the economic revival around 1870. It was truly what one would call a population explosion.

The city, which had been the largest in the Netherlands for centuries, saw its population double between 1870 and 1900, from a quarter to over a half a million inhabitants. Amsterdam continued to grow in the twentieth century, partly due to the incorporation of a number of residential areas outside the municipal boundary, to more than 870,000 around 1960. Since then, Amsterdam is understood to include a number of neighbouring municipalities. The scale of the economy and the housing market has continued to increase; the region of Amsterdam now has approximately 1.5 million inhabitants.

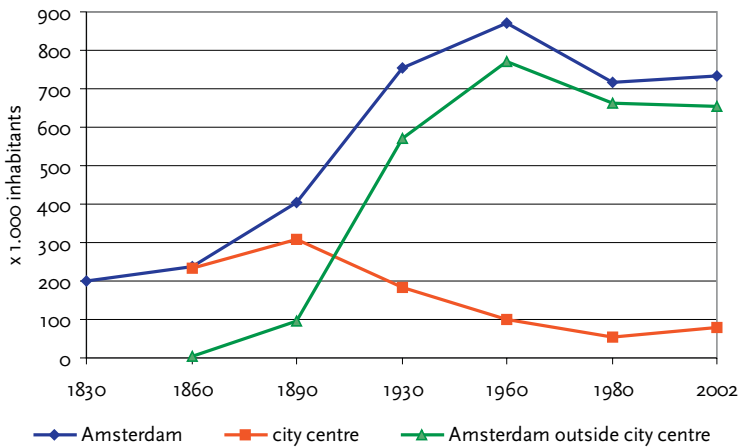


FIGURE I *Development of the population of Amsterdam and the city centre, 1830-2002*

The downgrading and upgrading of the city centre

The growth of Amsterdam is roughly proportional to the decrease in the population of the city centre. The number of inhabitants of the city centre was three times as high as that of the rest of Amsterdam around 1890, but this ratio was exactly the other way round as early as 1930. During that 40-year period, the city centre lost around 130,000 people. It was a time of structural changes and expansion. Homes gave way to shops, department stores, garages and wider roads. Grand residences were transformed into offices. In the 1930s, these developments were referred to as city forming. The significance of the residential function decreased and the quality of the old homes fell further and further behind that of the newly built houses elsewhere. The downgrading probably reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. By then, virtually all of Amsterdam was feeling the competition from the suburban region with its growing supply of spacious, single-family dwellings. Neighbourhoods in the city centre, such as the Jordaan, wrestled with unoccupied homes and decay.

As from that time, the old, small homes became the target of a new group. The liberalisation of the education system led to a rush of students without means. Modernisation and emancipation processes resulted in a growing contingent of young, non-family households. In terms of the housing market, the labour market and the household cycle, the people in this group are in a starters phase, but they quickly make careers and move to places offering a higher living quality. As a result, the turnover rate in the city centre was extremely high for many years.

The significance of the city centre as a residential area has further increased since then. The city forming did not expand enormously, and developments to that

end were brought to a halt at an early stage. The public and private sectors switched from rigorous demolition/new development to small-scale, high-quality renovation. This is thanks to the 8,000 monuments and the cityscape that still strongly pervades the atmosphere of the golden age of Amsterdam. The city centre currently accommodates a unique combination of functions and the municipality wants to consolidate these in about the same proportion. The scope of employment (there are now 93,000 employed) and the differentiation of the employment are such that a lot of liveliness is generated. In addition, the city centre is an important cultural and recreational area. Thousands of people from home and abroad come to Amsterdam every day to shop, visit a museum or attend one of the many extraordinary events that take place in the city. As a result, the pressure on the public space is such that there is tension with the living function, which is considered a vital function of the centre.

The housing stock has improved considerably since the 1980s. Houses have been replaced by newly developed homes and high-quality renovation projects have been carried out on an extensive scale. Yet there are two aspects concerning the housing stock that have not undergone any major development for a long time now: the housing stock is still predominated by small homes, and by Amsterdam standards, the social housing associations offer but a small number of homes in the city centre, because many of the homes were already there before the state began to dominate the housing sector. These two aspects contribute greatly to the extraordinary composition of the population.

Home characteristics and population typification

Small homes and small households

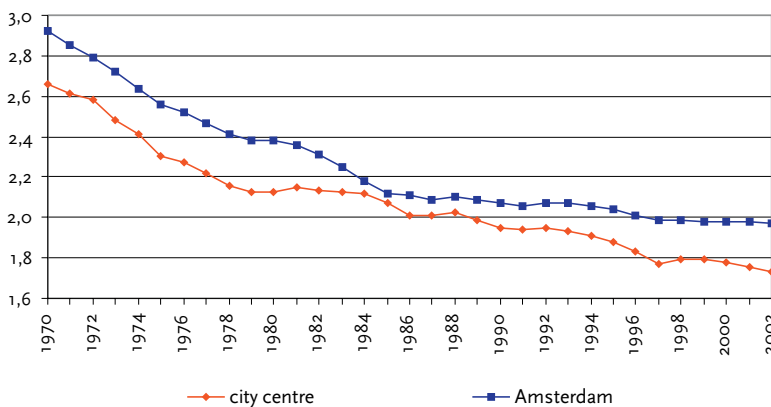


FIGURE 2 Average home occupation (persons per dwelling) in Amsterdam and the city centre, 1970-2002

The development towards a residential area for predominantly small, non-family households has progressed the farthest in the areas with the most old and small homes, namely the city centre and the nineteenth-century belt. Currently there is a functional division of roles in Amsterdam between the central, older parts of the city with mainly small homes and the post-war residential areas outside the ring road with the – by Amsterdam standards – larger homes. The level of home occupation in the post-war parts of the city has been decreasing less rapidly since the middle of the 1980s due to an increase in the birth rate, particularly in the growing number of ethnic minority households.

Dutch citizens and Western foreigners

This division of roles is further intensified by the spatial distribution of the ownership categories. The social housing sector dominates the post-war residential areas. The financially weak groups – which include more than the average number of ethnic minority households with many children – are strongly represented in this sector due to income requirements. Owner-occupied homes and privately rented homes constitute a larger part of the housing stock in the older parts of the city. The owner-occupied sector accommodates the group with a higher income. Starters who are willing to accept relatively high living expenses for a short time must often rely on privately rented homes, after which they move to homes with a more favourable price-quality ratio.

The fact that ethnic minorities are not strongly represented in the city centre does not mean that only a few live there. Western foreigners, rather than other foreigners, have pre-eminently discovered the city centre as their living domain. Western foreigners represent small households as often as the Dutch do, many are highly skilled and they have a good income. These are often the conditions for a lifestyle that is aimed at the urban culture. Although Western foreigners do not readily qualify for a rented home in the social housing sector due to their level of income and the short time during which they live in Amsterdam, they are an important target group for the amply present privately rented homes and the owner-occupied sector.

The extraordinary composition of the population of the city centre becomes even more distinct if the population is broken down according to nationality. Moroccans and Turks comprise the largest groups of non-Dutch nationalities in Amsterdam as a whole, whereas Britons and Americans comprise the largest group in the city centre. Germans, French, Italians, Spaniards, Belgians and Israelis are also over-represented in the centre.

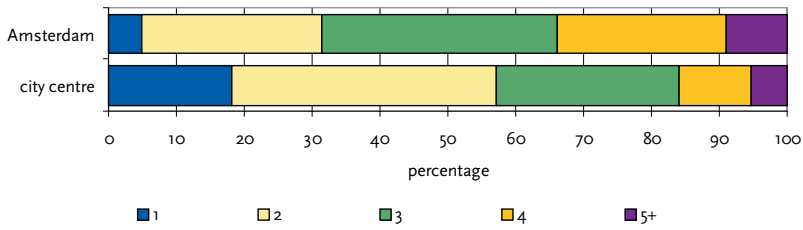


FIGURE 3 Housing stock Amsterdam and the city centre according to number of rooms, 2002

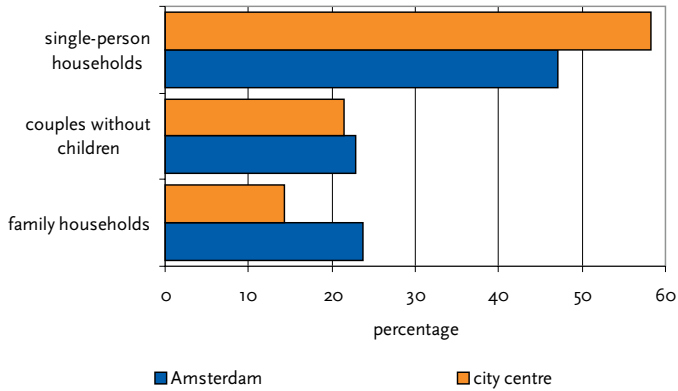


FIGURE 4 Household types Amsterdam and the city centre, 2002

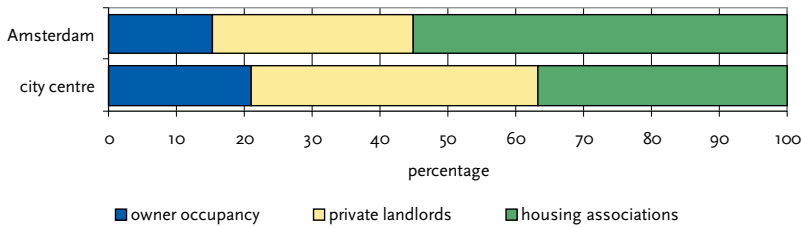


FIGURE 5 Ownership distribution housing stock Amsterdam and the city centre, 2001

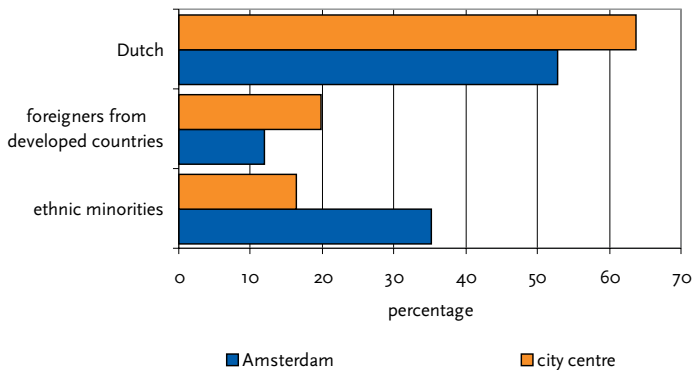


FIGURE 6 Ethnic groups in Amsterdam and the city centre, 2002

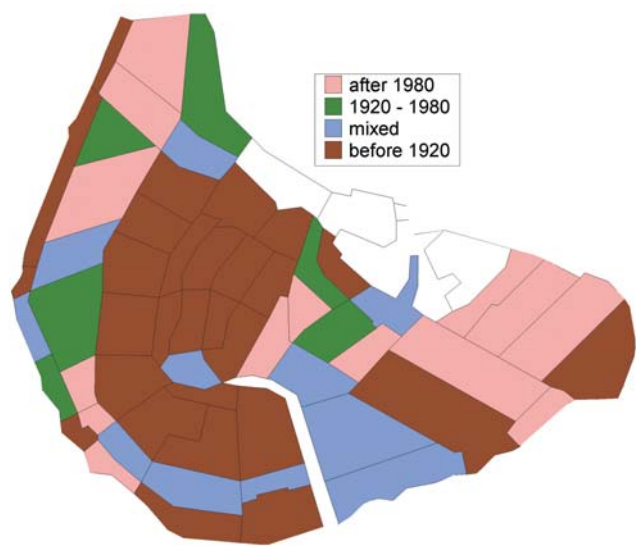


FIGURE 7 *Neighbourhoods in the city centre according to construction period typification*
Explanation: neighbourhoods are categorised as the types mentioned if:
pre-1920 > 70%, 1920-1980 > 15%, post-1980 > 35%.

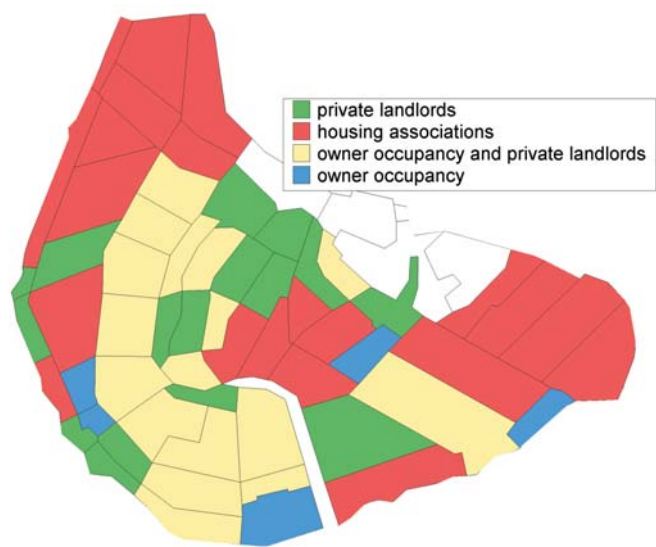


FIGURE 8 *Neighbourhoods in the city centre according to ownership typification*
Explanation: neighbourhoods are categorised as the types mentioned if:
owner-occupancy > 25%, private landlords > 48%, social housing > 35%.

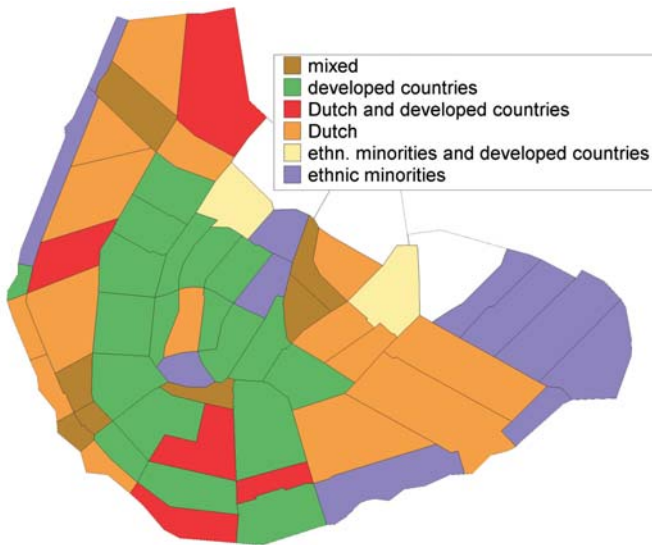


FIGURE 9 *Neighbourhoods in the city centre according to ethnic typification*

Explanation: neighbourhoods are categorised as the types mentioned if:
ethnic minorities > 19%, western foreigners > 19%, Dutch > 66%.

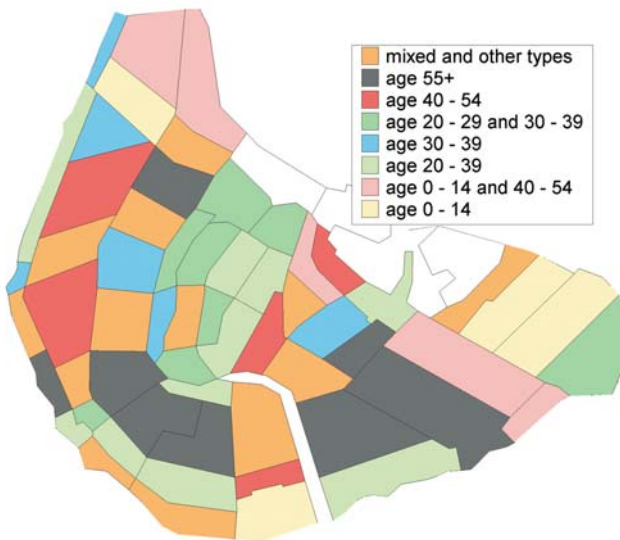


FIGURE 10 *Neighbourhoods in the city centre according to age distribution*

Explanation: neighbourhoods are categorised as the types mentioned if:
0-14 years (families) > 11%, 20-29 years (starters) > 22%, 30-39 years (people in their thirties) > 28%, 40-54 years (middle-aged) > 28%, and 55+ years (young senior/senior citizens) > 20%.

TABLE I *Most common nationalities in the city centre*

<i>Rank (Amsterdam)</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1 (3)	British	2069	2.6
2 (6)	North American	1676	2.1
3 (1)	Moroccan	1229	1.6
4 (5)	German	1043	1.3
5 (10)	French	705	0.9
6 (2)	Turkish	654	0.8
7 (8)	Italian	646	0.8
8 (14)	Spanish	351	0.4
9 (16)	Belgian	325	0.4
10 (19)	Israeli	260	0.3

Spatial differences in the city centre

The special features of the housing stock in the centre – which are strongly related to the historic character – lead to an extraordinary composition of the population through processes in the urban and regional housing market. Differences of this kind exist in the city centre as well. Owner-occupied homes and privately rented homes are mostly found in the parts of the city centre in which the pre-1920 housing stock dominates (see the charts regarding ownership and construction period). The most important areas are the central (and oldest) part between Singel and Kloveniersburgwal and the ring of canals. Smaller areas with these features include Lastage, Weteringschans and the Plantage.

The social housing associations generally dominate those parts of the centre where the historic buildings have been entirely or partially replaced (as is the case in the Jordaan and in the Nieuwmarkt/Waterlooplein area) and areas that were not developed until later (Eastern Islands). Owner-occupied homes are only strongly present in those areas with a lot of recently newly built homes (Oranje Nassau Kazerne, VaRa strip, southern part of the Jordaan).

Due to the above-mentioned factors, ethnic minorities constitute but a small group in the city centre. There are relatively more ethnic minorities in a certain part of the Oudezijds burgwallen, Marnixstraat and the Eastern Islands/Czaar Peterbuurt. The largest group of Western foreigners is found around the ring of canals, in large parts of the oldest and most central part of the city centre, and in the vicinity of Waterlooplein. There are a lot of Dutch in the Jordaan, the Haarlemmer neighbourhood and in large parts of the eastern city centre.

Families are literally and figuratively a marginal phenomenon in the city centre. There are only a limited number of areas in which the proportion of children (0-14 years) is higher than 11%. These areas are mostly found in the eastern city centre and the most northern part (Haarlemmer neighbourhood). The oldest, most central part of Amsterdam is mainly dominated by starters (20-29 years) and people in

their thirties. The ring of canals is strongly dominated by people in their thirties/forties and young senior citizens. Among the other areas with a high number of senior citizens are the Plantage and the ring of canals to the east of the Amstel.

The city centre: a place to remain living

For a long time the city centre was pre-eminently the domain of young starters who quickly moved away to better neighbourhoods. In the 1990s, however, the duration of residence increased and the turnover rate decreased. This is related to the limited extent of new development in Amsterdam and the surrounding region, meaning that there is little possibility of buying a larger house. It is also related to the improved living quality in the city centre, as a result of which people become more attached to where they live.

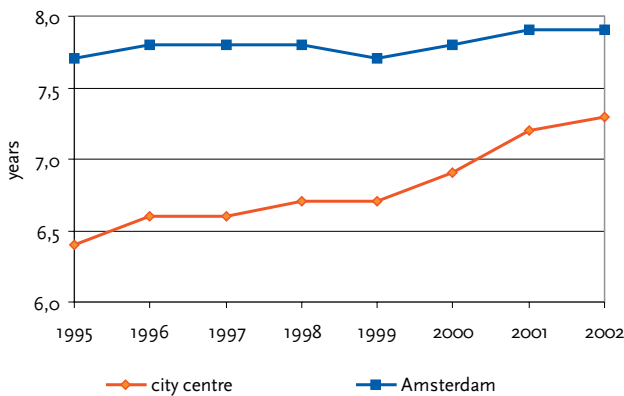


FIGURE II Average duration of residence at one address in Amsterdam and the city centre, 1995-2002

This development has manifested itself in housing as well. The term ‘confined housing’ refers to the situation in which the number of rooms in a house is less than or the same as the number of people in the household. Because of the many small homes, this situation occurs more often in the city centre than elsewhere in Amsterdam, but what is unusual in this respect is that the phenomenon is mainly expanding in the city centre. This trend may be seen as an intensification of the habitation. The dynamics are declining and an increasing number of people are meanwhile gathering together in the houses in these areas.

Supposedly, the intensification in these areas rarely has to do with poverty. Based on the pattern in the city, this phenomenon is mainly a manifestation of home appreciation. At an average of 7.7, the report mark for the living environment

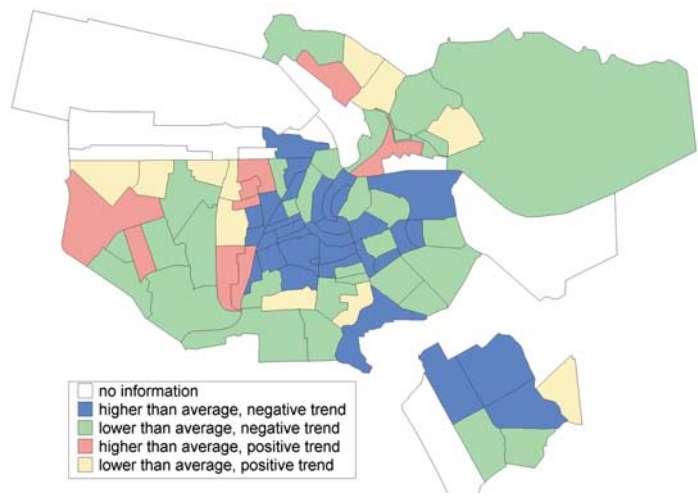


FIGURE 12 *Development of turnover rate 1996-2000*

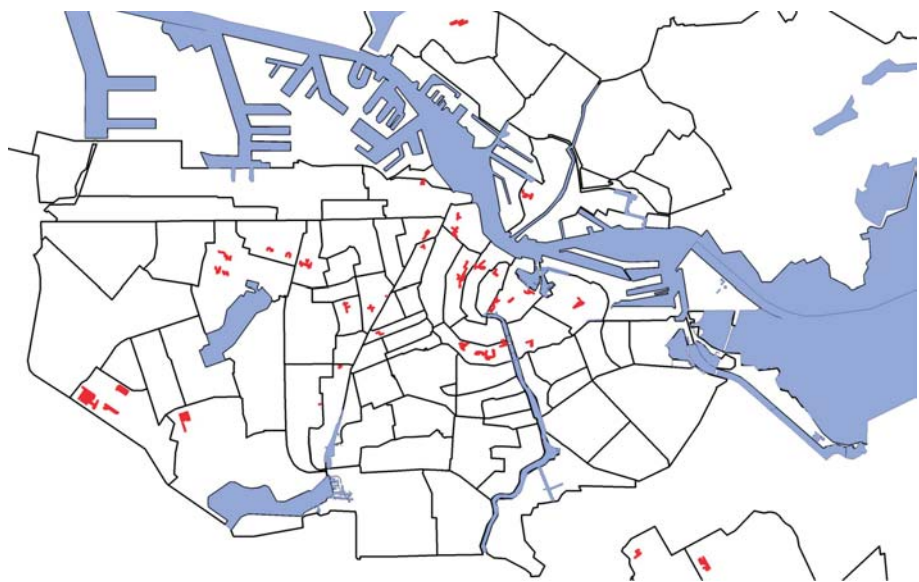


FIGURE 13 *Expansion concentrations of confined housing 1996-2001*

Explanation: The concentrations of confined housing were generated with Stadsmonitor Amsterdam – a cooperation between the Geography and Planning Department at the University of Amsterdam and o+s (The Amsterdam Bureau for Research and Statistics). Spatial distribution is based on the six-character postcode areas, of which there are 17,000 in Amsterdam. Each postcode area was studied to see whether the proportional distribution of the population was in line with the city-wide distribution or whether there were significant pockets of over-representation. Neighbouring postcode areas in which a population group was over-represented were then combined to form a larger area (for this technique, see Deurloo & Musterd 1998).

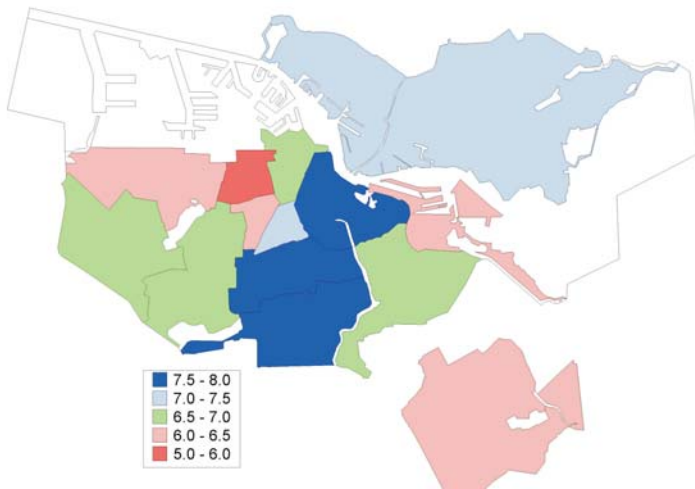


FIGURE 14 Report mark for the living environment (score range 0-10) according to district
Source: Teune et al. (2002)

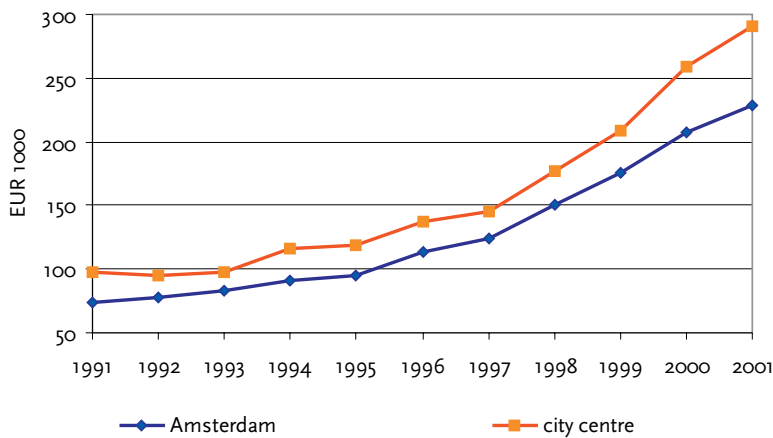


FIGURE 15 Price development existing houses Amsterdam and the city centre, 1991-2000

in the city centre is higher than that given for any other area in the city (Teune et al. 2002, p. 67). In addition, the price of a house in the city centre is invariably higher than that of an average house in Amsterdam, even though the houses in the centre are often older and smaller. The price difference has increased in recent years due to the overheated housing market in the city centre.

The city centre: the new living domain of young senior citizens

Owing to the changed nature of the housing stock, family households have become a minority in the city centre and, following from that, the proportion of senior citizens has also become small: at the moment, 5.9% of the population of the city centre is 70 or older and the prognosis is that the falling trend will continue for a few more years to come. Concerning the young senior citizens, the situation is totally different. The life phase between 55 and 70 years is often described as the 'golden years'. These are the years in which people retire from work, the children leave (or the last child leaves) the house and one is generally still in good health, and many will have built up sufficient financial reserves with which to carry on their life comfortably and actively (Dignum 1997, p. 13). It is precisely this group of young senior citizens that is now rapidly growing. After all, the post-war birth generation is now reaching the age of 55. The real post-war baby boom only concerns the years 1946 and 1947, but the birth rate in the Netherlands remained high until the middle of the 1960s (the 'pill dip'). The group of young senior citizens will therefore continue to grow for the next 20 years.

Although the increase in the number of young senior citizens will occur throughout the Netherlands, there is something unusual going on in the city centre. As it is, the young senior citizens are now much more inclined to remain living in the city centre than was commonly the case for many years. According to the prognosis of o+s, this will mean an unprecedented transformation of the population of the city centre. The percentage of young senior citizens has been increasing since 1993, when at 7.9% it was one of the lowest in Amsterdam. In just ten years' time, the city centre will be the district with the greatest number of young senior citizens, and in 2020 they will account for almost 19% of the population of the centre.

Incidentally, this increase will result not only from the fact that the young senior citizens are more attached to their homes: now that living in the centre has become so popular, the middle-aged group and the senior citizens pre-eminently have a better chance of settling down there. The price increase in the Amsterdam owner-occupied housing market is so sharp that less well-to-do groups no longer have a chance. Owner-occupied homes in the city centre are becoming more and more a niche market for well-to-do, non-family households and these are pre-eminently the young senior citizens. Something similar is happening in the social housing market. The duration of residence that one has acquired at a previous address is one of the most important criteria when it comes to being eligible for a rented house. So many people react via Woningnet (the regional supply system) to the homes of the housing associations that become available in the centre, that only those with an extremely long duration of residence are eligible – and these can only be people who are no longer young. People who cash in on their valuable duration of residence for a house in the city centre are generally not planning on leaving any time soon.

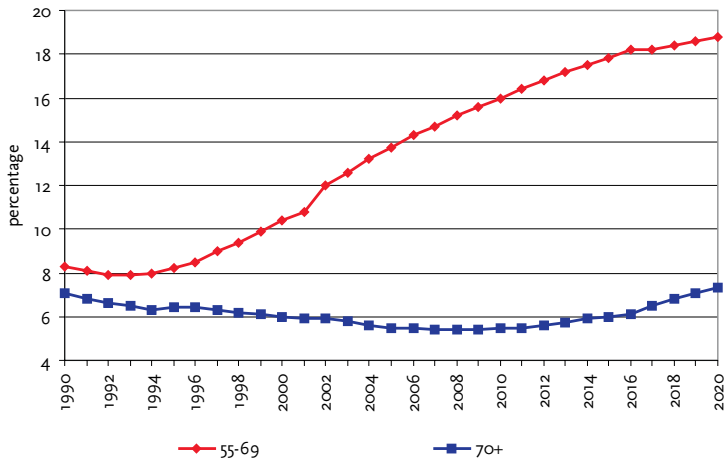


FIGURE 16 Development age groups 55-69 years and 70+ years in the city centre, 1990-2020

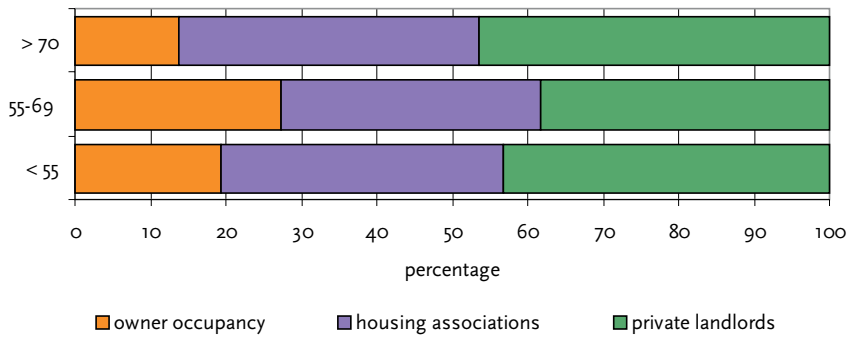


FIGURE 17 Ownership distribution according to age of principal resident in the city centre

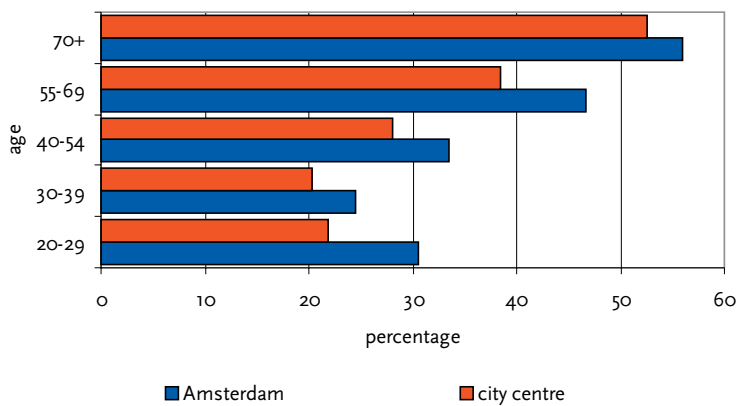


FIGURE 18 Inhabitants born in Amsterdam according to age group, Amsterdam and the city centre, 2002

Still, the extent to which the increase in the number of young senior citizens is due to settling in the social housing sector is only limited. There are two reasons for this: the income of a significant percentage of the middle-aged and senior citizens is too high for them to be eligible to settle down in the social housing sector; and senior citizens and middle-aged groups with a low income will not generally have adopted the lifestyle that renders living in the city centre appealing.

It is clear that particularly the owner-occupied sector offers accommodation to the young senior citizens and expectations are that this role will increase as the owner-occupied sector in the city centre becomes stronger. A consequence of this development will be that a group that until recently played only a minor role in the city centre will in the future play a leading role. This group is, for the most part, not from Amsterdam.

The obstacles posed by the historic city centre to those of diminishing vitality

The question is what these young senior citizens will do once they reach an even greater age and their vitality begins to diminish. Two special features of the city centre may then obstruct daily life. The first is that the facilities structure is not evenly distributed throughout the city.

A recent inventory showed that in parts of the city centre, three basic facilities for senior citizens (service/social services centre, supermarkets and post office) are not within walking distance of the home. The second obstacle concerns the internal and external accessibility of the houses. Only a small percentage of the housing stock is without staircases and high doorsteps at the entrance to the house and between the rooms. Particularly members of the middle-aged group (who are on the threshold of becoming a young senior citizen) often occupy a home that offers insufficient accessibility for people who have trouble walking.

It is striking that, despite building regulations, the accessibility of the homes built in the last 20 years is scarcely better than that of those that make up the historic housing stock, even though it is easier to make adjustments to the new homes that can improve the accessibility. This is precisely the problem where it concerns historic, monumental homes. The large number of staircases and steps between pavement and front door becomes evident from a brief trip through the city centre. Virtually all of these obstacles constitute part of the monumentality of the homes concerned.

A number of the senior citizens will in any case come to experience that their home is no longer suitable for a life with physical limitations. And due to the lack of space in the city centre, it will not be possible to build enough alternative homes specially tailored to the elderly.

The growth of the elite group of young senior citizens in the centre constitutes a shift in culture. The city centre had grown accustomed to a population consisting of much younger and middle-aged people, which gradually included an increasing



FIGURE 19 Combined areas served by service/social services centres and supermarkets (both colours) and by a post office (grey-brown) in the city centre, 2000

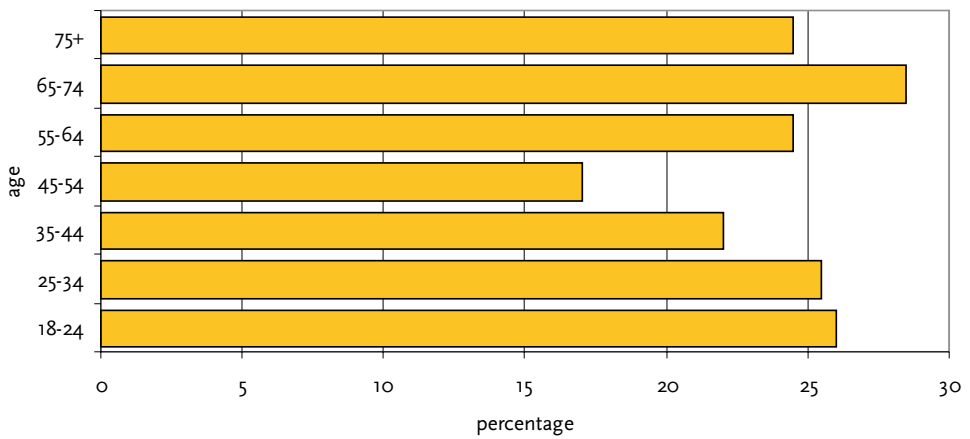


FIGURE 20 Inhabitants of the city centre living in a well-accessible home, according to age

number of well-to-do persons. The beginning of the 1980s marked the beginning of gentrification and the term 'yup' came into fashion (Cortie & Van de Ven 1981). In this new century, it is no longer the young and middle-aged career makers who give the city centre an elitist accent, but the growing legion of recently arrived people in their 50s and 60s who have a lifestyle that is oriented towards the urban culture. A little further along the line, these young senior citizens will become senior citizens. At that point, some will probably come to find the urban culture less attractive. A waning action-radius due to a diminishing vitality may play a role in this respect. A diminishing orientation towards the urban culture will supposedly go hand in hand with a lesser degree of acceptance concerning the pressure exerted on the public areas by tourists, vacationers, traffic and the working population. As long as the city centre maintains its urban beauty, the recreational and cultural activities remain intact as a function of the centre, and the city centre remains a trend-setting working environment, the intensity with which the city centre is used will not diminish.

The question is how the ageing young senior citizens will react when their needs become less in line with the above-mentioned features of the city centre environment. Some will remain in the centre – although they will be less satisfied – while others will look for an alternative place to live. It remains to be seen whether the latter will opt for Amsterdam or for somewhere outside the city. As far as status and lifestyle are concerned, they will probably feel more at home with their contemporaries in the more luxurious residential areas in the region (De Wijs-Mulkens 1999) than would be the case with their contemporaries in the post-war city districts of Amsterdam where many elderly people currently live. On retirement, they may even venture migrating to more peaceful parts of the Netherlands or to somewhere abroad.

Incidentally, it is not likely that this future need to move on the part of the senior citizens will have any major effect on the housing market or on the population profile of the city centre. Vacant homes will probably remain expensive and thus will not offer any possibilities for the starters category. The policy of the current district council is aimed at a 'maximum mix of urban lifestyles and inhabitants, but it will probably prove difficult to prevent elite groups from dominating the population profile of the city centre for a few more decades to come.

References

Amstelodamum

- 1935 Amsterdam van 1830 tot 1930, haar bevolking en bevolkingsdichtheid. In: *Amstelodamum*, jrg. 22, p. 93-96.

Cortie, C. & J. van de Ven

- 1981 'Gentrification. Keert de woonelite terug naar de stad?' *Geografisch Tijdschrift*, xv (5), p. 427-444.

- Deurloo, M.C. & S. Musterd
 1998 'Ethnic Clusters in Amsterdam, 1994-1996: A Micro-Area Analysis', *Urban Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3, p. 385-396.
- Diepen, A. van & S. Musterd
 2001 *Stedelijke leefstijlen en woonmilieus in Amsterdam*, Amsterdam: Instituut voor Stedelijk Onderzoek en Ruimtelijke Beleid.
- Dignum, K.
 1995 *Funciemenging in de binnenstad van Amsterdam*, Amsterdam: Bron UvA BV.
 1997 *Senior en Stad. De betekenis van stedelijke woonmilieus voor de sociale netwerken van minder draagkrachtige ouderen*, Amsterdam: AME.
 2001 *Bewoonbaar en begaanbaar. Toegankelijkheid van woningen en bereikbaarheid van voorzieningen voor ouderen in de Binnenstad*, Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam, Bureau voor Onderzoek en Statistiek.
 2002 *Doorstroming of verstopping? Dynamiek in de Amsterdamse bevolking en woningmarkt*, Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam, Bureau voor Onderzoek en Statistiek.
- Dignum, K. & M. van der Meer
 2001 *Ruim wonen in Amsterdam: wens of werkelijkheid?* Fact sheet nummer 6, Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam, Bureau voor Onderzoek en Statistiek.
- Janssen, M.F.M.
 2000 *Amsterdamse bevolkingsprognose 1999-2020, stadsdelen en etnische groepen*, Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam, Bureau voor Onderzoek en Statistiek en Dienst Ruimtelijke Ordening.
- Schyns et al.
 2001 *De Staat van de Stad Amsterdam 1, Sociaal Structuurplan*, Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam, Bureau voor Onderzoek en Statistiek.
- Stadsdeel Amsterdam Centrum
 2001 *Trendrapport Amsterdamse binnenstad, 2001*, Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam.
 2002 *Strategische visie Amsterdamse binnenstad*, Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam.
- Teune, W., L. Uittenbogaard & I. Jeurissen
 2002 *Wonen in Amsterdam 2001. Stand van zaken, ontwikkelingen en trends*, Amsterdam: Gemeente Amsterdam, Stedelijke Woningdienst.
- Wijs-Mulkens, E. de
 1999 *Wonen op stand: lifestyles en landschappen van de culturele en economische elite*, Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.

About the author

KEES DIGNUM is a social geographer and wrote a dissertation on the personal social networks of elderly people in urban neighbourhoods. He now works as a policy advisor for the Amsterdam Housing Department and concentrates on residential housing preferences, urban development and liveability.