

## NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FREEDOM OF CHOICE IN DUTCH SOCIAL HOUSING

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**ABSTRACT:** Housing associations in The Netherlands have participated in a more general trend in society to increase the freedom of choice for customers. This has however not meant that house seekers experience they have had a choice when they moved to a (social housing) dwelling. There is a lot going for the argument that experiencing little choice relates to dissatisfaction with the residential situation of an individual. This is problematic when house seekers with little choice concentrate in (often poor) neighbourhoods that have experienced a rapid change in population and deteriorating living circumstances. The liveability of these areas is at stake as dissatisfied residents are prone to feel less responsible for the way the neighbourhood develops. Housing associations should therefore not only increase the ‘negative freedom’ of choice for customers in social housing, by expanding the range of dwellings customers can choose from, but make a better effort in stressing the positive dimension of freedom by allowing more customers to effectively make use of the range of dwellings on offer.

**KEYWORDS:** freedom of choice, neighbourhood appreciation, social housing, housing associations, The Netherlands

### INTRODUCTION

One of neo-liberalism’s defining aspects, more freedom of choice for consumers, has spread widely across many sectors of society from the 1990s onwards. In education, health care and energy supply clients have turned into assertive consumers who are able to choose how they want their services to be delivered. Housing associations in The Netherlands have been adept followers of this trend. Predominantly, contracts for social housing are nowadays no longer simply assigned to house seekers, but allocated according to preferences for specific dwellings, which has strongly increased the freedom of choice of social housing customers. Many have applauded this as a great achievement. Sceptics however point at what Hugo Priemus called ‘the iron law of the housing market’: those with lowest incomes at their disposal will always end up in the least popular dwellings. This sorting mechanism is based on the unequal distribution of social housing over neighbourhoods, as in many cities the least popular dwellings are concentrated in the most badly reputed neighbourhoods. This reduces the number of neighbourhoods that house seekers on low incomes can choose from and increases the chance that they end up in a neighbourhood where do not want to live and settle out of negative motives, despite the increased freedom of choice they are supposed to enjoy. The difference between how these customers define their housing ambitions and how they end up can lead to a negative appreciation of the neighbourhood (cf. Glaser, Parker & Li 2003). For people on low incomes this can be an extra burden, as they make much use of the neighbourhood in their daily lives (Logan & Spitze 1994). If many residents experience the neighbourhood negatively this might moreover affect their propensity to take care of the neighbourhood and feel responsible for its liveability. This paper investigates this claim by asking to what extent customers in social housing have freedom of choice, how this affects the way they appreciate their neighbourhood, and how this in turn might impact on the degree to which people contribute to the liveability of their residential area.

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## **POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE FREEDOM OF CHOICE**

More choice is good for every individual and boosts economic growth. This neo-liberal slogan has been applied in many areas of modern life, also in social housing - or more properly maybe - the market of social housing. Housing associations attach great importance to offering their customers maximum degrees of choice with regard to their housing choice. It is not always clear however what exactly housing associations mean with freedom of choice. "Freedom seems easier to die for than to define", the philosopher Langerak once claimed (cited in Blokland, 1991, p. 54). The distinction between positive and negative freedom, by Berlin and elaborated upon by Blokland (1991), is useful for the purpose of this paper (see also Reinders & Klaufus, 2007).

The negative conceptualization of freedom refers to the private domain where the individual can do whatever he or she likes, without interference from outside. This is the more popular meaning of freedom that we encounter in many popular debates. With regard to social housing however, the positive conceptualization of freedom referring to the possibilities to actually make use of the alternatives on offer, is of more importance. According to Berlin, freedom should be about the actual alternatives available, not if these alternatives are used. He who has many alternatives to choose from is a free man (Blokland, 1991, p.30/31). Taylor (1979) on the other hand connects freedom to the degree of autonomy and self-realisation of people. It is clear he stresses positive freedom: someone is free if he or she can actively shape the course of his or her life. The availability of alternatives alone does not suffice, one has to be active to be free.

Putting the positive-negative distinction into practice means to be faced with a so-called emancipation dilemma (Blokland, 1991). One dimension of this dilemma is the subtle balance that must be struck between the privacy of the private domain on the one hand and the wish to empower those who inhabit that domain to take the course of their lives in their own hands on the other. The second dimension refers to the need to weigh individual preferences of customers against collective goals. As we will see below, this dilemma surfaces in the system of allocating housing based on freedom of choice for customers.

There are important political reasons for housing associations to increase freedom of choice among their customers: responsibilities for the liveability of residential areas are diffused. Citizens who make their own choices are also - at least partly - responsible for the outcomes of those choices. Customers of housing associations are expected to feel more responsible for the liveability of the area they live in when they have been able to make a conscious choice to settle there. Currently, the space for customers to make choices in social housing is limited by policies and rules set by housing associations and local governments. These policies and rules are the result of a decision making process in which the importance of offering customers a certain degree of negative freedom is weighed against the interest of those who - in the name of social justice - should be protected and given more freedom, like people on low incomes (cf. Blokland, 1991, p. 39).

## **HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS AND FREEDOM OF CHOICE**

While they weigh the pros and cons of a residential move against each other, the freedom of choice of individual house seekers is highly conditional on powers beyond their reach, as they can hardly influence both housing stock, its price levels, allocation procedures and contracts with housing associations. The current dominant model of housing allocation, the 'choice based' or 'advert' model (a.k.a. the 'Delft' model), transfers a certain degree of choice to housing seekers, because they can indicate themselves which dwelling they would prefer to move into (if the dwelling suits their household size, income etc.). Compared to its predecessor, the 'distribution' model, house seekers can exert more control over their housing choice (cf. Van Daalen & Van der Land, 2008). By offering their customers more choice, housing associations hope to achieve a more efficient allocation of housing and more customer satisfaction. The advertmodel has certainly sorted positive effects on freedom of choice for customers in social housing. By selecting a preferred dwelling the house seeker is in theory enabled to determine his or her place to live, whereas the distribution model only offered a wide range of dwellings - be it hidden from the customer - and no choice with regard to the actual dwelling.

The advert-model as put into practice also has several disadvantages however. One is that currently so many alterations have been made to the original model - in order to protect certain groups of customers - that the system has lost transparency and become increasingly difficult to manage. Another major

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disadvantage is that the model has ‘eaten itself up’: so many people have subscribed to the system anticipating for a future need that waiting lists have expanded enormously and the number of people who reject an offered dwelling has increased (because they do not have an immediate need). In reaction to these systematic difficulties housing associations have started experiments with new ways to allocate social housing and implemented new rules and procedures.

An example of creating more (negative) freedom of choice is to expand the number of available dwellings by opening up a regional housing market and abolishing rules stating that those who seek a house in a certain locality should also be economically tied to that place. In other experiments, selection criteria with regard to applicants for a dwelling, like income, household size or age were abolished (e.g. the KAN experiment in the Arnhem-Nijmegen region, the Overvecht experiment in Utrecht). Although this experiment increased the supply of dwellings on offer, it decreased the freedom of choice among the low income groups for whom the earlier, abolished system offered some protection (see for an overview of experiments Van Daalen & Van der Land, 2008 and [www.kei-centrum.nl](http://www.kei-centrum.nl) for an overview). A growing number of housing associations has also implemented other experiments - apart from the housing allocation system - e.g. enabling customers to choose between renting or buying a social dwelling, offering different rent levels according to income level, dividing dwelling contracts into a contract for the interior (bought by the customer) and the exterior (that stays with the housing association) or dividing land and dwelling, or varying in price levels and other conditions.

These experiments and alterations all have to deal with paradox inherent to freedom of choice (Van Daalen, Van der Laan Bouma-Doff & Van der Land, 2007). Housing association must manoeuvre very carefully between empowering (by promoting that customers make more conscious choices) and patronizing their customers. Some housing associations offer more negative freedom of choice to their customers by abolishing restrictions (e.g. the KAN experiment), while others decrease negative freedom of choice, but stimulate positive freedom. An example of the latter are housing associations who make a careful lifestyle match between characteristics of house seekers and the social climate of residential environments where house seekers can apply for a dwelling (the ‘POL model’ as applied in the city of Dordrecht). Increasing the negative freedom of choice supposes that house seekers know what they want, what to expect when they settle in a dwelling and - automatically - in a neighbourhood, and that they will make use of the extra possibilities offered to them. By decreasing negative freedom and increasing positive freedom, housing associations are supposed to know what is good for the customer. The POL model e.g. is legitimated by referring to a pseudo-scientific method of determining the lifestyle of individuals.<sup>1</sup>

## **FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND RESIDENTIAL SATISFACTION**

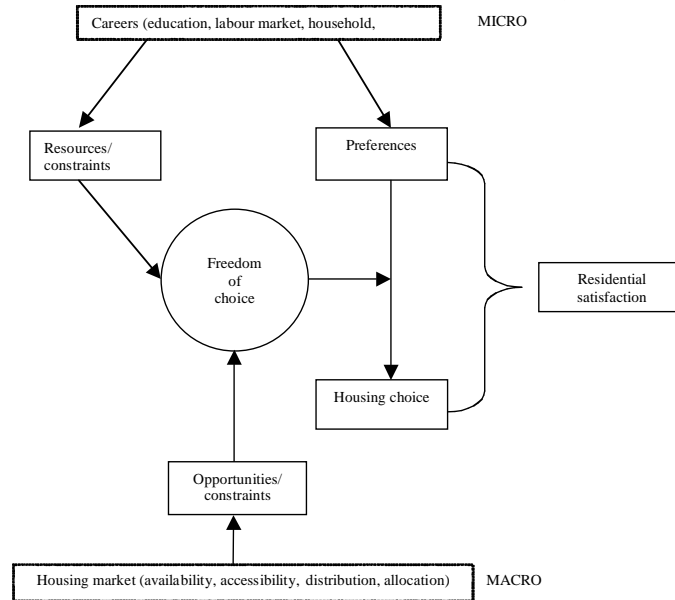
There is a large body of literature on both residential satisfaction and housing choice, but the association between them has not been thoroughly examined, with some exceptions like a study conducted by Srebnik et al. (1995) on experienced housing choice of mentally ill residents. Sometimes residential satisfaction is used as an indicator for a voluntary housing choice (see Glaser, Parker and Li (2003). However, freedom of choice and residential satisfaction are not exchangeable concepts and a limited degree of choice is certainly not always associated with residential dissatisfaction (Van der Land et al., 2004).

This paper deals with the way freedom of housing choice is experienced by customers in social housing. Research on the housing choices that people make and how they are sorted into the housing market traditionally focuses on the role of housing preferences, opportunities/resources and constraints. On the individual level important factors in this regard are demographic features such as age, household composition and household financial resources (e.g. Mulder; 1996; Clark & Dieleman, 1996). However, housing choice is also the outcome of macro-level factors constituted by the housing market, such as the geographical distribution of dwellings and allocation rules for social rented dwellings (Clark & Dieleman, 1996; Clapham & Kintrea, 1984; Kullberg, 2002). Mulder & Hooimeijer (1999) conceptualized both micro

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<sup>1</sup> Housing associations using the POL-model concentrate people whose behaviours are thought to fit well together into particular streets or buildings, leaving the customer no choice other than to accept a dwelling earmarked for a particular lifestyle. The company responsible for determining lifestyles does not provide transparency in the method and database they use, but claim they base their method on scientific insights.

and macro factors in their model to predict residents' propensity to move. We modified their model and added the concepts of housing choice and residential satisfaction (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of housing choice and residential satisfaction

The model shows that housing choices start with preferences of households as outcomes of their individual life-careers (Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999). However, in order to explain housing choices, not only preferences are important but also the intervening freedom of choice households possess to realize their preferences, constituted by resources and constraints on the individual level. Financial resources are e.g. important in taking a position on the housing market, but almost equally important are cognitive resources, political resources, social resources and the current housing conditions (Van Kempen & Özüekren, 1998). On a macro level freedom of choice is determined by the opportunities and restrictions on the social housing market. Households have to cope with the geographical distribution of dwellings, the availability and accessibility of those dwellings as well as the allocation rules in the social rental sector. To sum up, resources, opportunities and constraints influence the degree of choice households can exert, which in turn determine the extent to which households are able to convert their housing preferences into their desired housing situation. It is assumed that in general a good match between preferences and housing choice results in residential satisfaction and that a mismatch results in dissatisfaction.

Often house seekers consciously choose a dwelling, but pay less attention to examining the neighbourhood in which the dwelling is located. To measure residential satisfaction we have to take into account both the dwelling as well as the neighbourhood. Although the dwelling serves as the most important indicator to determine residential satisfaction (Priemus 1984, Ministerie van VROM 2000: 155) the neighbourhood becomes a more important factor once the dwelling becomes less satisfactory. How is the neighbourhood appreciated? Do residents feel at home? Do they feel connected? The meanings residents attach to the population, the social climate, the degree of safety, and physical characteristics like buildings, green spaces, the quality and use of public space, and the reputation of the neighbourhood are at the basis of the way the neighbourhood is appreciated.

## METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

In this paper we want to find out how residents in social housing experienced their housing choice and to what extent that affects their evaluation of the residential environment. We use empirical data to examine the following questions: Do residents of predominantly social housing neighbourhoods experience less freedom of choice than residents of other neighbourhoods? How does residential satisfaction relate to the experienced freedom of housing choice? Which patterns can be observed with regard to experienced housing

choice, residential satisfaction and neighbourhood location? We are also interested in finding out if experiencing little choice sorts effects on a collective level. Could it be that when there are many dissatisfied residents, this effects the liveability of an area? Although specific evidence lacks, the available literature suggests that those who are unhappy with their residential situation feel less inclined to actively participate in maintaining the liveability of an area and show a greater propensity to move out of a dilapidating area (see Foster-Fishman et al., 2007).

Our empirical data was gathered as part of the Housing Choice Survey we held in 2006. Based on the degree of social housing, the mean level of residential satisfaction (either high or low) and (the absence of) plans for restructuring, we chose two neighbourhoods in Amsterdam and two in The Hague. In the Van Lennepbuurt (Amsterdam) and Moerwijk (The Hague) residents were relatively satisfied, whereas in the Indische Buurt (Amsterdam) and The Hague (Transvaal) residents were relatively unsatisfied. The response on the survey we held was 28 per cent, totalling 1.098 questionnaires. In addition, we did 40 in-depth interviews (ten in each neighbourhood).

Following from the research questions of this paper, we have shaped the remainder of this section in three sub-sections dealing with the following statements: 1) low income households experience little freedom of choice, 2) little freedom of choice is related to a low neighbourhood appreciation, and 3) negative neighbourhood appreciation causes decrease in neighbourhood liveability.

### Low income households experience little freedom of choice

Often it is assumed that the choice for a neighbourhood with predominantly social housing must be more or less involuntary. But to what extent do the residents in these areas themselves consider their degree of housing choice as insufficient? In the survey we asked if the choice for a dwelling was consciously taken or that one accepted the first dwelling available (like it was asked in the National Housing Demand Survey) and if the resident planned to stay in the neighbourhood for a long time after having moved. We also asked if a choice for a neighbourhood was based on the mere fact that there was dwelling on offer there, or because there was no other choice.

**Table 1:** Degree of choice by income category

		Not a conscious choice (first dwelling available)	Want to stay long*	No other choice*
Less than 1.000 euro p/month	44	47	54	
1.000-1.500 euro p/month	39	46	48	
1.500-2.000 euro p/month	47	57	39	
More than 2.000 euro p/month	42	56	41	
* significance (p<0,05)				
Source: Housing Choice Survey, 2006				

Table 1 shows that about four out of ten households claim not have made a conscious choice. We also see that low income households did not choose less consciously, i.e. they did not choose the first dwelling available more often, than households with higher incomes. Their idea of staying in the neighbourhood for a long time or not however differs from those who earn higher incomes. It seems that low income households have a realistic idea of the dwelling they can afford: they often make a more or less conscious choice to live in a poverty neighbourhood. Poor households did however more often state that they did not have another choice than to settle for the particular dwelling that they chose. It seems that especially low income groups experience little choice, be it that they choose a dwelling just as often consciously as house seekers in higher income groups. We should not look at these poor households as helpless victims with regard to finding a place to live: they might have no other choice, but that choice is often a conscious choice.

Having said that, the fact that these customers experience their freedom of choice as being constrained, expresses their weak position on the social housing market. In the end they are more often

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‘trapped’ in badly reputed neighbourhoods. Those who experienced their ‘choice’ as the result of having had little choice also evaluate their new neighbourhood as a step backwards instead of a step upwards the housing ladder (35 per cent experienced their new neighbourhood as worse than their old neighbourhood, whereas only 20 per cent of those who did experience freedom of choice made that same claim). (From the survey sample one family from the Moerwijk neighbourhood in The Hague make for a good example. They wanted to leave the aligning Schilderswijk neighbourhood in The Hague so badly, because non-western immigrants had changed the face of the neighbourhood and they felt increasingly out-of-place. They swapped their new built single family dwelling for an apartment in an adjacent area, the Moerwijk neighbourhood, but soon found out that their new neighbourhood was undergoing a similar wave of (mainly Moroccan) migrants settling in the neighbourhood. Now, they feel trapped in the neighbourhood: “I lived in the Schilderswijk and because the neighbourhood deteriorated we switched places with a family in Moerwijk. But in the end we went from bad to worse.”)

Residents who experienced little freedom of choice are relatively often young and/or are single parents. Changes in household situation are an important factor that put pressure on the degree of housing choice, as these changes often make a move to a different dwelling very urgent. Other reasons often have to do with extreme nuisance from neighbours. Such factors do not stimulate a well-considered move, in which pros and cons are carefully weighed against each other. Instead a sense of urgency prevails. Other reasons make the situation even worse. Residents who experienced little freedom of choice also have less ‘allocation resources’: they build up less registration time than people who did experience choice. (Maybe many made a recent move and then found out that they wanted to leave the person they share their dwelling with). For that reason, many customers try to illegally keep their registration time. If the new housing situation does not live up to expectations, their registration can secure a way out. As one of the respondents claimed: “No, we did not try to keep our registration. We did everything like we should. Well, that turns against us now. I feel very sorry about that. Why did not we do like all the others who kept their registration time?”

Registration time plays such an important role in the chances to find a dwelling that many aspiring house seekers register years in advance, which has led to long waiting lists. The ironic effect is that for those who a dwelling the most urgent, the chances of finding one that suits their preferences are nihil (OTB & RIGO, 2007). This is exactly the group of customers who surfaced in our empirical studies as vulnerable and unable to profit from the increased freedom of choice the advertmodel should have brought. A divorce e.g. was often mentioned as a reason to move. Often, in such a situation, dwelling characteristics are considered more important than neighbourhood characteristics. A dwelling is sometimes even accepted without any knowledge of the neighbourhood the dwelling is located.

More than half of the respondents claim they planned to stay for a long time when they settled in the neighbourhood, especially those who came to live their in the early days of the neighbourhood. Recently moved residents often plan to stay for a shorter period of time. The neighbourhoods we looked at gradually changed reputation over a period of about thirty years and are nowadays more often seen as temporary places while climbing the housing ladder. Although less than half of the respondents did not chose the neighbourhood to stay for a long time, only 30 per cent claimed to have made a conscious choice for the neighbourhood. The results confirm the idea that the neighbourhood is less important than the dwelling when choosing a place to live. Still, the neighbourhood is the important reason to leave, but it is not easy for many to find a better area. The wide range of possibilities that many Dutch housing associations claim to offer their customers is not experienced as such by these customers.

A large share of the residents in our four poverty neighbourhoods states a wish to move out, but 16 per cent of our sample claims they see ample possibility to do so. Often they feel trapped in the neighbourhood. They want to move but cannot find a suitable dwelling, often because other dwellings are expensive and they cannot spend more on housing costs than they do now: half of the sample claim they would not be able to pay a 10 percent higher rent. Another reason why many of our respondents feel trapped is because they think many of the neighbourhoods are not much better than their own neighbourhood. Often a clear picture lacks of other neighbourhoods and it is the reputation of those neighbourhoods that shapes their opinions and keeps them from moving.

### **Little freedom of choice is related to a low neighbourhood appreciation**

The survey included several questions with regard to they way residents experience and appreciate their neighbourhood. We asked respondents to rate the neighbourhood on a 1-10 scale and they were asked

to react on statements about the neighbourhood (taken from the National Housing Demand Survey). Those who claimed to have experienced little freedom of choice rated the neighbourhood lower than those who claimed otherwise (5,4 versus 6,5). Their dissatisfaction highly correlates with not feeling at home in the neighbourhood. They more often agree with the statement that it is a nuisance to live in their neighbourhood, they feel less attached to the neighbourhood, less often claim that people in the neighbourhood interact in a pleasant way, and they have less contact with their immediate neighbours.

**Table 2:** Neighbourhood experience and perceived freedom of choice (“I had no other choice”)

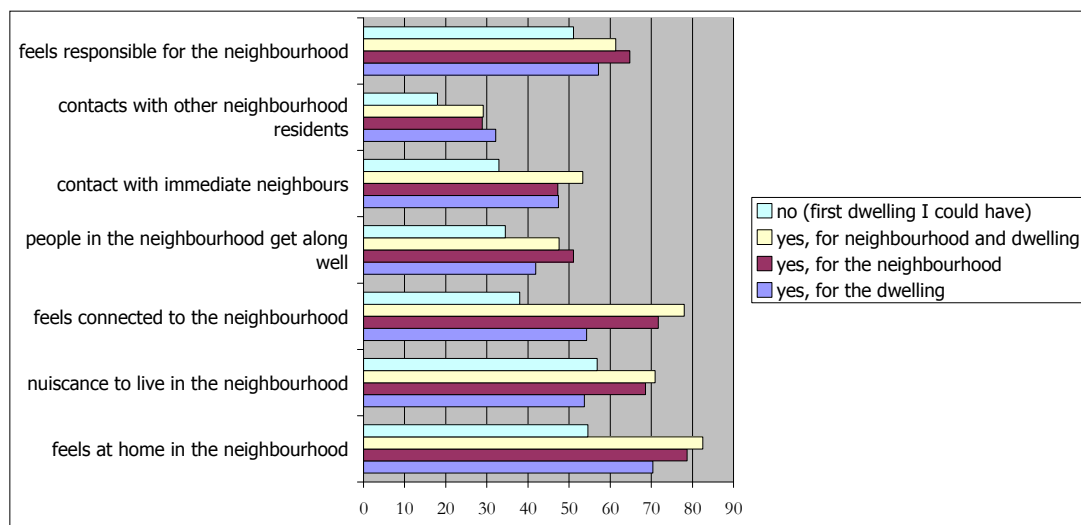


Table 2 suggests that little freedom of choice (“no, chose the first dwelling I could get into”) relates positively to an unfavourable appreciation of the neighbourhood. Especially, they feel less at home and less connected to the neighbourhood. The correlation between perceived freedom of choice and neighbourhood experience holds when we control for a range of other related variables such as the period of time residents have been living in the neighbourhood (see Table 3 for the results of a multivariate analysis of feeling at home in the neighbourhood).

Despite a strong correlation between lack of housing choice and residential satisfaction, many residents with little choice are nevertheless satisfied with their residential situation. 48 per cent of the unsatisfied residents claims to be satisfied with the dwelling and 37 per cent says they are happy with their neighbourhood. These can e.g. be residents who have been placed in the neighbourhood by medical or judicial institutions. Also, there are residents who are able to exert a high degree of choice, but who have become dissatisfied with the changes occurring around them, but whose close bonds with the neighbourhood keeps them moving out (‘stress’ versus ‘inertia’, see Huff & Clark, 1978). There is little evidence to claim that constraints in choice automatically produce dissatisfied customers (and vice versa).

Looking more closely at what caused dissatisfaction with residential circumstances in our survey sample, it appears that of primary importance are opinions about the social quality of the neighbourhood and the individual social contacts. The debate on the negative aspects of living in social housing neighbourhoods points at the rapid changes in the neighbourhood population and its consequences for the social climate and use of public space as important factors that influence the way residents experience their area (see e.g. Reijndorp, 2004). Especially residents who spend a long period of their life in the neighbourhood can start to rebel against other neighbourhood residents, as they recognize themselves less and less in newcomers in the area. Second, more general neighbourhood characteristics play a role, e.g. the presence and quality of amenities, public (green) spaces or the location relative to the city centre. Factors related to freedom of choice are in the third place.

**Table 3:** Logistic regression analysis of neighbourhood experience

	The chance that a resident feels at home in the neighbourhood	Legenda: n.s. = not significant + = positive correlation, significance at 0,1 p-level ++ = positive correlation, significance at 0,05 p-level - = negative correlation, significance at 0,1 p-level -- = negative correlation, significance at 0,05 p-level
Gender (male)	n.s.	
Age	+	
Household composition (ref: single household)		
Couple w/o children	n.s.	
Couple w children	n.s.	
Single family	n.s.	
Migrant	++	
Education (mbo+)	n.s.	
Low income	n.s.	
Rental dwelling	n.s.	
No other choice	---	
Length of stay	n.s.	
Potential support in the neighbourhood	n.s.	
Feels safe in the neighbourhood	+++	
Neighbourhood (ref: Van Lennepbuurt)		
Indische Buurt	---	
Moerwijk	--	
Transvaal	n.s.	
Explained variance (pseudo r <sup>2</sup> )	36%	
Source: Housing Choice Survey OTB, 2006		

**Negative neighbourhood appreciation causes decrease in neighbourhood liveability**

The results of the survey also seem to support the third step in the line of reasoning set out in the end of the former section (freedom of choice - neighbourhood appreciation - liveability). Residents who feel at home in the neighbourhood do feel more responsible for neighbourhood liveability. Despite the fact that many other factors will influence feeling responsible for the neighbourhood, multivariate analysis shows a strong correlation between feeling at home and feeling responsible (see Table 4 for the results of that analysis).

Feeling at home in your neighbourhood seems to be important for liveability, as these residents more often take responsibility for the way the neighbourhood is developing. Another indicator that sustains this claim is the correlation between feeling at home and the willingness to move (see Table 5). Those who feel at home are much less inclined to move than others.

**Table 4.** Logistic regression analysis of neighbourhood liveability

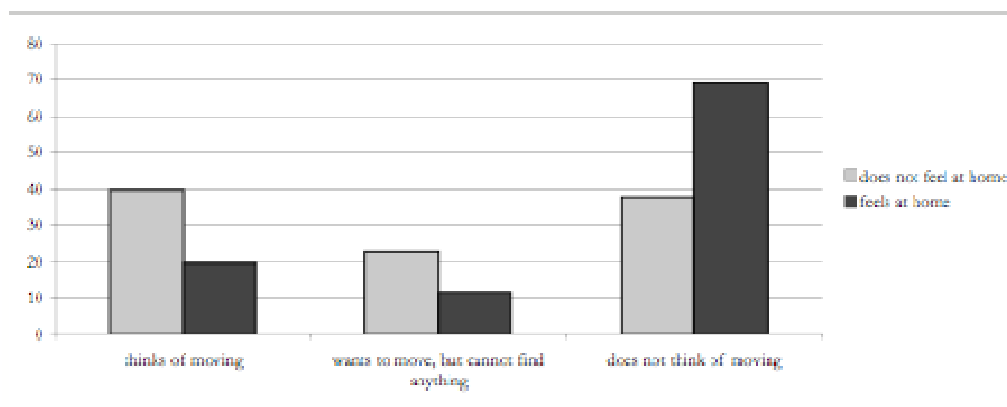
The chance that a resident feels responsible for neighbourhood liveability		Legenda: n.s. = not sign. + = positive correlation, sign. at 0,1 p-level ++ = positive correlation, sign. at 0,05 p-level - = negative correlation, sign. at 0,1 p-level -- = negative correlation, sign. at 0,05 p-level
Gender (male)	n.s.	
Age	++	
Household composition (ref: single household)		
Couple w/o children	n.s.	
Couple w children	n.s.	
Single family	n.s.	
Migrant	n.s.	
Education (mbo+)	++	
Low income	n.s.	
Rental dwelling	n.s.	



Length of stay	n.s.
Feels safe in the neighbourhood	n.s.
Feels at home in the neighbourhood	+++
Feels connected to the neighbourhood	n.s.
Thinks people get along well	n.s.
Contact with immediate neighbours	n.s.
Contact with other neighbourhood residents	+++
Neighbourhood (ref: Indische Buurt)	
Van Lennepbuurt	n.s.
Moerwijk	++
Transvaal	n.s.
Explained variance (pseudo r <sup>2</sup> )	13%

Source: Housing Choice Survey OTB, 2006

**Table 5.** Willingness to move and neighbourhood experience



## CONCLUSION

Freedom of choice has become common in many areas of life and so it has in the domain of social housing. Although housing associations claim they offer their customers much more freedom of choice (in our opinion 'negative choice') when they seek a dwelling than they did before, this does not immediately reflect in the experiences of customers in social housing (which point at 'positive choice': the way alternatives are used). Little academic interest has been shown into this positive dimension. For our paper it has been useful to demonstrate that the way people experience choice has repercussions for the way they experience the neighbourhood. Particular groups of house seekers, especially those on low incomes, urgent house seekers or house seekers who do not understand the system of housing allocation well, are less able to profit from the freedom they might theoretically have. They do have negative freedom of choice, but only little positive freedom. This paper investigated the question if customers of social housing in poverty neighbourhoods experience a certain freedom of choice, if that is related to the way the neighbourhood is experienced and what that might mean for the liveability of the neighbourhood. We can conclude that social housing customers on low incomes less often experience freedom of choice than other residents, and that those who did experience choice are more satisfied, more connected, interact more with others in the neighbourhood, are more positive about others in the neighbourhood, and feel more responsible for the neighbourhood. However, not every customer who experienced little choice becomes a dissatisfied resident and the experienced degree of choice is not even the primary factor causing dissatisfaction, the combination of dissatisfaction and little freedom of choice is a major cause for people to feel trapped in their neighbourhood. Finally, those with a low appreciation of the neighbourhood feel less responsible for the

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liveability of the area where they live than the others. On a collective level, this might have repercussions for the way neighbourhood develops.

This paper shows that residents who did not 'freely' choose their dwelling and/or neighbourhood are less satisfied with their residential environment, which might have implications for the whole neighbourhood. A very basic recommendation for those institutions who can influence housing choices of customers in social housing would be that the system of social housing should allow residents to make choices as deliberately as possible. If it is not the more ethical argument that residents of social housing should have the decisive say in their place of residence, then the social and material consequences of 'forced' housing choices for the liveability of neighbourhoods should certainly be a matter of concern. If residents who choose their dwelling and/or neighbourhood feel more dedicated to the neighbourhood, freedom of housing choice might not only benefit residents of social housing, but the neighbourhood as a whole as well.

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