

## Encounters with an Open Mind

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# **Encounters with an Open Mind: A Relational Grounding for Neighborhood Governance**

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## **Running head**

Encounters with an Open Mind

## **Abstract**

Neighborhood governance has become a widespread approach to improving the quality of life in cities. The idea is that sustained interactions between public professionals and residents will better meet the needs of local areas and people. However, neighborhood working approaches purporting to provide tailor-made policies and solutions tend to perpetuate habitual practices and hegemonic institutions of hierarchy and competition. This chapter enquires how conditions can be created for different kinds of conversations and relationships to emerge that lead to innovative practices and sustainable change. I argue that public professionals need not only interact extensively with residents but should engage in encounters with an open mind. Empirically illustrated with an innovative approach to neighborhood working in Amsterdam (the Netherlands), I explain how they can go beyond habitual practices by letting new shared views and actions emerge in-between them. Doing so fosters deeper institutional transformations towards a relational grounding for urban governance and public administration.

**Keywords:** neighborhood governance; public encounters; relational process philosophy; social innovation; interpretive research; the Netherlands

## Introduction

Neighborhood working is nowadays a common aspect of urban governance across Europe (Blokland, 2003; Durose & Lowndes, 2010; Horak & Blokland, 2012). Over the past fifty years, neighborhoods have become envisaged as crucial sites for addressing socio-economic inequalities and promoting democratic participation and social innovation. Making space for such processes requires fundamental changes in the relationships and interactions between local authorities, citizens, and other actors (Kokx, 2011; De Wilde et al., 2014; Bartels, 2017a). While this is a welcome development and looks good on a policy level, the “promise of the neighborhoods as a foundation for democratic practice ... depends on the available opportunities to develop and exercise skills at that level” (Horak & Blokland, 2012, 255). In practice, it proves highly problematic to engage in authentic interactions and make a sustainable difference due to the absence of fundamental institutional transformations and capacities for collaborating productively.

The extensive increase in interactions between local professionals and communities has led studies of neighborhood governance to identify a range of exemplary practices for relationship building and joint problem solving (e.g., Van Hulst et al., 2011; Durose et al., 2015; Laws & Forester, 2015). This has greatly enhanced our understanding of what happens in the unfolding relational and communicative process ‘in-between’ local professionals and citizens (Bartels, 2013, 2015, 2016). Besides innovative practices and transformative processes, their encounters often continue to be characterized by habitual practices and hegemonic institutions that inhibit sustainable change. Yet, a perspective is still missing for discerning the difference between these types of dynamics and improving the quality of the relationships of local professionals and citizens.

Therefore, the main purpose and contribution of this paper is to conceptually and empirically develop the notion of *encounters with an open mind*. It enables us to assess whether encounters take on unproductive dynamics in which decisions are *hierarchically* imposed or individual interests are *competitively* sustained, as often happens, or, instead, allow for new views and actions to emerge through a responsive process of *integrating* with one another and the situation at hand. Whereas hierarchical and competitive institutions spawn habitual practices of prioritizing own interests, defending positions, rushing to interpretations, and upholding the status quo, encounters with an open mind follow an integrative and experiential learning process that embodies a relational ethic of joint learning, genuine inclusion, and reciprocal change.

This argument is grounded in the case of the *Neighborhood Practice Teams* (Buurt Praktijk Teams – BPTs) operating in Amsterdam-West (the Netherlands). Their approach to the local policy of “area-focused working” has generated unprecedented success in facilitating a change process in neighborhoods characterized by alarming problems of deprivation and anti-social behavior. During four months of fieldwork and eight months of further involvement, I used a mix of ethnographic and action research methods to actively participate in the daily practices of the BPTs. My research project aimed to enable public professionals, residents, and policy makers involved with BPTs to better understand and improve its practices. I did so by conducting an evaluation of a BPT, co-organizing a resident initiative in another neighborhood, and collaboratively analyzing the needs of youngsters with a team of youth workers in a third area (methods are reported in detail in Bartels, 2017b).

As I have previously outlined the BPT approach and how it differs from habitual practices of interactive governance (Bartels, 2016) as well as critically analyzed the constant resistances and challenges BPTs face to innovating (Bartels, 2017a), here I examine what we can learn from their approach in terms of the capacities and institutional transformations needed for more effective and sustainable neighborhood working. In the next section, I review the development of neighborhood working in Europe and the Netherlands and identify the need for a relational framework. I then explain what I mean by ‘encounters with an open mind’ and why this provides a helpful perspective. Third, drawing on my field notes, I will present three vignettes to illustrate how BPTs engage in encounters with an open mind, what differences this makes, and how it affirms a relational grounding for urban governance that challenges habitual practices driven by hierarchical and competitive institutions. Finally, I reflect on the implications and limitations of my argument for urban governance and public administration more widely.

### **Neighborhood working in Europe and the Netherlands**

Neighborhoods and the people who live in them have for long been the object of public policy across Europe (Horak & Blokland, 2012). In the 1960s, large scale urban regeneration and welfare state expansion turned neighborhoods into key sites for spatial intervention, civic mobilization, and socio-economic change. The idea that spatially targeted initiatives create opportunities for ‘deprived’ people to escape poverty and unemployment and build social capital has never quite withered since then. It is in neighborhoods that social, economic and

political exclusion become manifest, innovative initiatives emerge through the cracks in the system, and conflicting policy rationales collide (Blokland, 2003; Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008; Durose & Lowndes, 2010; Moulaert et al., 2010). Notwithstanding significant differences between the governmentalities of post-war social welfarism, neo-liberal property led regeneration, and the ‘third way’ of social inclusion, neighborhood governance has become firmly embedded in the institutional organization of European welfare states (Imrie & Raco, 2003; Buck et al., 2005; Denters & Rose, 2005; Garcia, 2006; De Wilde et al., 2014).

This institutionalization should be understood in the context of cities becoming increasingly important to the transformation and governance of European societies as visible spaces of interdependence, conflict and cooperation (Le Galès, 2002). Local bodies now have significant responsibilities for social welfare, including poverty, unemployment, housing, safety, health, and public spaces. Partnership working and community engagement are the primary modes of governance through which holistic solutions to these complex, structural problems are pursued (Imrie & Raco, 2003; Buck et al., 2005; Denters & Rose, 2005). Parallel to these processes of decentralization runs a discourse that reframes citizenship (Garcia, 2006) and welfare (Bartels, 2017a) as *local* practices rather than pertaining to the national welfare state. Individuals and communities are now expected to take more responsibility for their own lives and living environment. Taken together, urban governance has been undergoing a widespread reconfiguration of the relationships and interactions between local bodies, citizens, and regional and national governments towards long term collaboration, inclusive participation, and sustainable change (Moulaert et al., 2010; Kokx, 2011; De Wilde et al., 2014; Bartels, 2017a).

The Dutch experience reflects European developments and discourse towards integrated, area-based interventions coordinated in networks of local authorities, partner agencies, and citizens (Denters et al., 1999; Korthals Altes, 2002; Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004; Denters & Klok, 2005; Musterd & Ostendorf, 2008; Aalbers & Van Beckhoven, 2010). Since WWII, the Netherlands has been characterized by a strong tradition of urban renewal, with a prominent role for social work and collaboration alongside physical interventions. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s a series of ‘Big Cities Policies’ (BCPs) decentralized significant responsibilities for urban governments to municipalities and housing associations<sup>1</sup>. The aim was to develop integrated, tailor-made responses to the physical, economic and social qualities of neighborhoods.

Neighborhood working was a key element of this policy, as public professionals from city administrations, housing associations, and social work agencies set up area-based teams

to encourage community participation and improve living conditions (De Graaf et al., 2015; De Wilde, 2015). Under the auspices of current austerity-driven neo-liberal discourse, local bodies have received further responsibilities for collaboratively delivering social welfare and health care, while community self-organisation is promoted over government-driven participation. Neighborhood working is one of the primary approaches to facilitating this transition toward adapting organizational goals, structures, and procedures to the needs, strengths and dynamics of specific areas and individuals (see Bartels, 2016, 2017a).

On the surface, these seem like favorable developments. Urban governance actors have greater powers and flexibility to address local needs, collaborate across organizational and geographical boundaries, and work in and with communities. All of this is indispensable for finding new and better ways to make a real difference to structurally disadvantaged, excluded, and marginalized people and areas. Both in policy and theories of interactive governance and social innovation, neighborhoods are seen as “seedbeds of civic practice” (Horak & Blokland, 2012, 255) and neighborhood working as key to facilitating the mobilization, empowerment, and transformation of communities. Indeed, in numerous instances sustained, reconfigured relationships between residents and local officials or subversive grass-roots action have generated unprecedented change (Fung & Wright, 2003; Barnes & Prior, 2009; Moulaert et al., 2010).

Innovative practices and effective solutions emerge when people affected by a problem come together to practically engage with its many emergent complexities and generate pragmatic solutions. They develop new ways of relating through ‘participatory rituals’ (e.g., site visits, eating together, storytelling), negotiating courses of action everyone can agree to, and doing a lot of hard work together (Wagenaar, 2007, 2014; Laws & Forester, 2015; Phillimore & McCabe, 2015; Verloo, 2015). Engaging in such “informal modes of organising space, livelihood, and citizenship ... [generates] alternatives to the official order, in which new understandings and practices are hatched and from which new, creative solutions to intractable urban problems may emerge” (Griggs et al., 2014, 36). It builds and thrives *relational capacities* for learning who to talk to, how to manage expectations, and where to acquire resources and operational leeway (Bartels, 2017a).

However, despite an overwhelming amount of policies and funds, the overall results of neighborhood working and urban regeneration have been disappointing. Conducive political discourse masks the continued role of hegemonic institutions and power relations (Rose, 2000; De Wilde, 2015) as (Davies, 2009, 84)“‘depressingly predictable’ ... plans often [said] much the same thing about much the same goals in the same abstract, aspirational

language” (Davies, 2009, 84). Crucially, the alleged ‘shift’ toward more networked, collaborative, and participative modes of governance has been characterized by a continuation of hierarchical control and competition for resources and influence (Beaumont, 2003; Fuller & Geddes, 2008; Davies, 2009; Blakeley, 2010; Kokx, 2011). For example, Rowe (2006) highlights that “efforts to maintain control of the arrangements while presenting the impression of genuine partnership working” (211) fostered “projects that show no signs of innovation or of joint-working and are often the continuation or extension of existing initiatives” (213). As a result, little positive effects on socio-spatial inequalities materialized, fostering debate about whether there is any sense in projecting causes and solutions on the neighborhood level (Blokland, 2003; Horak & Blokland, 2012).

Dutch urban governance reforms have offered no guarantee for new relationships, practices, and solutions to emerge (Denters et al., 1999). Urban policies have been criticized for upholding a hegemonic discourse grounded in engrained beliefs about the causes of and solutions to urban and welfare problems while neglecting academic evidence and actual effects in practice (Priemus, 2002; Blokland, 2003; Musterd & Ostendorf, 2008; Uitermark & Duyvendak, 2008; Van Kempen & Bolt, 2009; Lub & Uytterlinde, 2012). Abilities to integrally address the needs of people and areas are fundamentally hampered by detached, hegemonic “rationalities of hierarchy or market” (Kokx, 2011, 1043) driving partnership dynamics at the strategic level. Core elements of integration and innovation exist primarily on paper rather than in practice as vertical control and horizontal fragmentation continue to persist (Korthals Altes, 2002; Aalbers & Van Beckhoven, 2010). Capacities are usually lacking to navigate the increased complexities of collaboration (Van Bortel, 2009) and transform socio-political inequalities in community participation (Beaumont, 2003; De Wilde et al., 2014).

In conclusion, this section has reviewed the movement toward neighborhood governance in Europe in general and the Netherlands in specific. I recognize that there are beneficial aspects to this approach in theory and practice but also observe that its inherent tensions and challenges are often not managed well due to a lack of fundamental institutional transformations and capacities for transcending habitual practices (Bartels, 2016, 2017a). Without careful attention to hierarchical control within existing institutions and competition for scarce resources under austerity, then, neighborhood governance cannot bring true grassroots change or sustainably address social inequalities. As the latter requires a reconfiguration of relationships and interactions, “[a]ccounting for the differences in success [are] the relations and interactions between [community] groups and local institutions” (De

Wilde et al., 2014, 3372) and “the dynamics in local partnerships over time” (Kokx, 2011, 1027). Therefore, the next section develops a perspective on how we can assess and improve relational capacities and dynamics enacted in local interactions as well as the institutional arrangements enveloping these.

### **Encounters with an open mind**

In the previous section I proposed to approach neighborhood working as “an interactive and relational endeavour” (Vandenbussche et al., 2015, 4). Contemporary urban governance places local actors in interaction and interdependence and challenges them to mutually adapt to each other and the needs of the situation at hand. Studies of neighborhood governance have picked up on this development by analyzing how front line workers build interpersonal networks with communities and negotiate practical courses of action to intricate local problems (Hendriks & Tops, 2005; Durose, 2009; Van Hulst et al., 2011; Durose et al., 2015). However, Laws and Forester (2015) argue more is going on in such situated practices than developing discretionary responses to local needs based on local knowledge and informal resources: it is a creative and responsive process of improvising to enhance urban democracy. The complex social and political realities of urban public space all too often foster conflict, exclusion, and hegemony, but street level workers can remedy this by improvising new ways of relating, communicating, and problem-solving that enhance the democratic quality of local interactions (see also Verloo, 2015). Yet, this approach is still characterized by a focus on the relational practices of individual practitioners rather than relational processes in themselves.

A more fruitful approach therefore is to examine the nature and quality of *public encounters* (Bartels, 2013, 2015, 2016). Encounters involve face-to-face communication between governance actors as well as relational processes that holistically shape their interaction beyond direct contact—e.g., anticipating what others might do, neglecting someone else, or reading messages and documents. Analyzing encounters means looking at what happens ‘in-between’ individuals while conceptualizing the world as existing *in their relating* (Follett, 1919, 1924; Stout & Love, 2015). It is not individual interests, fixed positions, or autonomous (inter)action that determines what happens but “that reciprocal adjustment, that interactive behavior between the situation and ourselves which means a change in the situation and ourselves” (Follett, 2003, 49).



However, encounters in urban governance do not automatically imply productive relationships (Bartels, 2015). As Stout (2012) and Stout & Love (2017) explain, underlying philosophical assumptions can either inhibit or foster collaborative capacities and institutional transformation. First, encounters can be driven by *hierarchy*: an actor dominates by making authoritative decisions, imposing institutionalized policies and procedures, and controlling others. Second, they can be driven by *competition*: a plurality of self-interested actors engages in divisive posturing, protecting fixed interests, and, at best, compromising. Finally, they can be driven by *integration*: a participatory collective unifies their differences into a genuine consensus and new shared practice. Although hierarchy and competition are inevitably part of “the situation” of mutually influencing and evolving factors, they should only be insofar as they foster integration: a qualitative change in what all actors want and shall do together. Thus, we can evaluate the degree to which encounters are shaped by integrative capacities and hierarchical and competitive institutions are transformed.

Based on the research conducted for this paper, I suggest that local actors can foster integration by engaging in *encounters with an open mind*: not prioritizing their own views, beliefs, or experiences over those of ‘others’ but letting new shared understandings and practices emerge in-between them which all find better than previous ones. As

we tend to listen in an ego-driven way, shaping what comes to us so that it fits our existing ideas, channeling it according to our needs and desires, ... [we should] relinquish oversimplification and the urge to impose premature diagnoses of our own on complex problems” (Stivers, 1994, 366).

Opening our mind as we encounter others means that we do not defend our own position, rush to interpretation, or uphold the status quo, but jointly learn what is going on, practically organize the possibilities for achieving change, and nurture the relationships and trust needed to make this happen and engage in ongoing joint inquiry and action (Follett, 1934, 2003; Forester, 1989, 2014). Comparing the relational ethics of Martin Buber (1970) and Emanuel Levinas (1991), Arnett (2004) calls this “responsive attentiveness to the Other and to the historical situation” (76) based on “a dialogic ethic steeped in responsibility, not dependent upon one’s own personal preferences or the dictates of outside principles and agents” (87).

To be sure, opening our minds does not mean emptying our heads, but critically yet respectfully engaging with others and our interdependence. As Mary Follett (2003) reminds us, “open-mindedness ... needs just as great a respect for your own view as for that of others, and a firm upholding of it until you are convinced. Mushy people are no more good at this than stubborn people” (48). It means going onto “the rough ground” (Mouffe, 2000, 98) in

which difference, power, and contestation cannot be eliminated but should be accommodated. This means critically engaging with actual disputes and political struggles through “constructive conflict” (Follett, 2003)— a practice I will return to in a moment. It also involves modifying, contesting, or transforming hegemonic practices of governance through “practices of freedom” as they resist and accommodate one another (Griggs et al., 2014). It “is precisely in the inevitable slippage between intention, action and outcome that the ... [relational potential] to accommodate the encountered resistance in novel and unpredictable ways [resides]” (Wagenaar, 2014, 240) and transformational ideas and practices emerge.

Encounters with an open mind, then, are more than a one-off productive meeting of the mind and extend into an ongoing experiential learning process. In a pragmatist tradition, we participate in such processes through *embodied* and *ethical* practices of coming to an understanding of the world by responsively accommodating the resistances it produces when we intervene in it (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Wagenaar & Cook, 2011; Wagenaar & Wilkinson, 2015). We engage in “situated performances that unfold within the *particularity of a given setting* and in response to the particular dignity of those who are involved” (Laws & Forester, 2015, 345, emphasis in original). Our experience of others and concrete situations transcends boundaries between the outside world and individual cognitive and affective states and generates a dialogical interaction or relational process “in-between”. Encountering with an open mind thus sets us up for surprise, fosters mutual understanding, and redraws interpersonal boundaries (Hunter, 2003; Wagenaar, 2007; Bryer, 2009; Wagenaar, 2014). This can be done through a range of situated, relational practices.

Crucially, encounters with an open mind ask for what Forester (1989) calls *critical listening*. This is a “mode of practical interpretation in the face of power” (114) in which “we ‘take the other seriously,’ rather than treating him or her as a tool or an object or a numbered client” (112). We habitually tend to engage in passive hearing, which allows us to choose what to ignore or listen to, and hence whether or not to recognize and respond to others’ concerns. Critical (or active) listening, instead, asks for looking beyond words to what others really care about, showing humility, recognizing emotions, not rushing to interpretation, and appreciating socio-political contextual blinders—all in the service of critically redirecting attention and practically negotiating what is possible (Forester, 1989, ch. 7; Stivers, 1994; Forester, 2006).

Encounters with an open mind can also be cultivated by exercising “communicative capacity” (Bartels, 2015): the ability to recognize habitual patterns of (mis)communication and adapt these to the needs of the situation. Local governance actors tend to have the same

types of conversations over and over again, which limits their ability to solve the joint problems they face. By for example, engaging in *dialogue* in a situation of adversarial conflict, they can suspend the urge to respond while listening to others and hence become more aware of their own assumptions and emotions. This requires joint capacities for sharing experiences, slowing down thought processes and feelings, and developing relational bonds (Spano, 2001; Schein, 2003; Bohm, 2004). But, depending on the needs of the situation, *conflict* can also be used or even encouraged as a critical moment for acknowledging latent misunderstanding, renegotiating narratives, building mutual commitment, and changing power relations. This turns on joint capacities for engaging in constructive conflict by acknowledging diverse experiences, expressing emotions of anger, passion, and vulnerability, integrating informality and formal institutions, and creating a sense of interdependence (Follett, 1942/2003; Forester, 2009; Laws & Forester, 2015, 297-301; Verloo, 2015)<sup>2</sup>.

Another practice for engaging in encounters with an open mind is the “*presence approach*” (Baart, 2001; Wilken, 2010; Laws & Forester, 2015, 109-125). This open-ended approach is focused on cultivating caring relationships rather than immediate problem-solving. By ‘just’ being present for a long time in neighborhoods or helping with concrete, mundane tasks, local professionals make themselves physically, mentally, emotionally, and practically available and adjust to the rhythms and patterns of residents’ lives. They enact “an *open (mind)* and a hospitable attitude” (Wilken, 2010, 174) by faithfully offering themselves in unplanned encounters and treating everyone with dignity and care. In contrast to the dominant “intervention approach”, the presence approach works without predetermined agenda, professional focus, or preconditions but still leads to interventions, but only insofar as these are driven by the needs and strengths of the people or community involved. It entails a fundamental transition “from a role of experts repairing dysfunction to appreciative allies helping [others] envision and develop desired lives with the active support of their local communities” (Madsen, 2009, 104).

To conclude, the heavily referenced and densely quoted nature of this section shows that ‘encounters with an open mind’ is not a sketchy, nebulous notion; instead, it is firmly grounded in sophisticated philosophical foundations and embodies a range of innovative practices. However, it is still somewhat of an anomaly in the face of habitual practices and hegemonic institutions of neighborhood governance. By analyzing how encounters with an open mind are enacted in neighborhood working in Amsterdam, therefore, the next section will demonstrate how creating conditions for different kinds encounters can actually

reconfigure relationships between local actors, generate more effective and sustainable change, and illuminate routes to more fundamental institutional transformation.

### **Relational neighborhood working in Amsterdam**

Following national policy developments of decentralization, neighborhood governance, and community participation (WRR, 2005, 2012; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 2006, 2009, 2013; RMO, 2009, 2013), the Municipality of Amsterdam developed its own approach of *Area-focused working (gebiedsgericht werken)* (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2013). Area-focused working means making and implementing policy driven by a problem, issue, or challenge in society. The dynamics of the problems and the forces and strengths in an area have to be leading rather than municipal policy norms or organisational standard programmes. This approach reflects popular academic thinking about the emergence of a network society in which the government participates by operating as a network too (Beunderman et al., 2012; Hilhorst & Van der Lans, 2013; Van der Steen et al., 2014). Rather than inviting citizens to participate in urban governance, for instance through participatory planning or neighborhood meetings, the key to effective and sustainable change is now believed to be that local professionals actively participate in the life worlds of citizens and facilitate community self organization. Grounded in a fundamental critique of hierarchical and market-driven governance, this approach of ‘government participation’ means transforming organizational needs and habitual ways of working based on the needs and strengths of specific areas and groups.

When area-focused working was adopted as a framework for the entire city in 2013, much remained unclear about how to *do* it in practice. Besides an outline of the conceptual rationale and some exemplary, the policy did not provide much direction other than to develop the actual design and daily practice of area-focused working in response to the conditions of specific areas. While such a high level of discretion and dependence on local interactions is both conceptually consistent and practically desirable, the absence of criteria to evaluate the quality of relationships and innovations also left room for upholding the status quo. As a result, many local actors continued to enact habitual practices that prioritized organizational needs and procedures, such as having meetings and drafting documents to coordinate responsibilities and activities before actually going into the neighborhood and doing something (Bartels, 2016). In addition, deeply institutionalized forms of hierarchy and competition were not transformed as innovations were, for example, still subject to

rationalistic evaluation methods and struggles for power and funding (Bartels, 2017a). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to clarify how area-focused working can avoid habitual practices and what institutional transformations this implies.

One of the case studies on which the policy was modelled, and probably the most successful example of cultivating truly innovative practices and institutional changes of area-focused working, is the approach of the Neighborhood Practice Team (*Buurt Praktijk Team - BPT*) in Amsterdam-West. The first BPT was created in 2011 in response to the alarming anti-social behavior and criminal activities of a group of troublesome youngsters. Fourteen street level workers had been hovering around them for ten years, each with their own assumptions, analyses, support plans, and objectives, while also regularly meeting to coordinate their efforts. Nevertheless, the youngsters developed into a well-organized criminal network that dominated the neighborhood with intimidation, burglaries, and smoking marijuana and urinating in porches. In less than two years, the BPT managed to dissolve the group's hold on the area, revive public space, and address numerous other related issues. Its unprecedented success and innovative approach triggered national media attention and widespread local support (De Telegraaf, 2013; Het Parool, 2013; NRC, 2013; Stadsdeel West, 2013).

As explained in more detail elsewhere (Bartels, 2016, 2017a), key to the BPT approach is “doing what’s necessary” (*doen wat nodig is*). This does not signify a mandate to cut corners and bend the rules but, instead, a commitment to shared, situated inquiry into what is going on in an area and joint development of responses that fit the dynamics, needs, and opportunities of the situation at hand (for an overview see table 1). By engaging in encounters with residents, the team members can

“jointly discover and follow the law of the situation: the dynamics and needs of the social, political, economic, cultural and material circumstances they are in (Follett, 1924, 1926[2004]; Stout and Love, 2015). Emergent practical experiences, personal relationships and informal solutions with the situation will determine what is the best thing to do.” (Bartels, 2016, 358)

Such encounters emerge as team members are constantly *present and approachable* in the neighborhood. By walking around, they *observe and listen* to what residents have to say and offer, and, as such, develop an in-depth understanding of what is going on and could be done to trigger change. This emergent understanding is further developed by *formulating a shared focus* with all stakeholders in participatory meetings, *organizing many small scale activities* in public spaces that bring people together and generate small yet significant changes, and

*constantly reflecting* on what works, how emergent resistances could be addressed, and what it would take to break through engrained patterns (Stadsdeel West, 2013, 2014; Bartels, 2014). This, in a nutshell, is how the BPT approach enables all those involved to engage in encounters with an open mind.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The fundamental difference between the BPT approach and habitual practices of area focused working generates tensions with those invested in upholding hegemonic institutions. BPT members operate in close vicinity to a dense network of neighborhood managers, community policy officers, social workers, truancy officers, and youth workers who regularly encounter residents. These area-focused workers have a network of relationships with residents, organize consultation meetings, support community activities, and develop a range of tailor-made solutions in response to local needs. Those with no direct or only peripheral involvement in BPTs claim they are already doing what BPTs do and often feel unfairly criticized by BPTs for not doing their work properly. However, I will now go on to show that habitual practices of creating conditions to encounter residents are insufficient for making a difference to socio-spatial deprivation, whereas engaging in encounters with an open mind leads to more sustainable change.

A first example is a seemingly innocuous encounter in the neighborhood Landlust that opened the minds of several area-focused workers who just joined the BPT in the area to underlying problems and alternative solutions.

One evening I join four members of the BPT Landlust and one resident for a ‘social walk’. In one of the side streets of the main square we run into three kids playing football and the mother of one of them. She tells us she’s mad with a neighbor who filed a nuisance complaint against the kids because of noise and the ball being kicked against her wall and window. The kids ask whether they could get a small football pitch in the street. When asked why they don’t just go to the pitch on the main square, their mother responds that they are not allowed to because it isn’t safe over there. Ron, the experienced team leader, explains that the group of youngsters which dominated the square with anti-social behavior before is gone (thanks to the efforts of the BPT) and that children should actually reclaim the space. It is a friendly conversation which ends with Ron exchanging Facebook contact details with the mother and inviting her to come by for coffee at the community centre sometime.

At the end of the street we reflect on the encounter. It turns out this is more than a small neighborly dispute. The neighborhood manager, one of the new team members, says that when the issue was discussed at resident meetings he convened some time ago before joining the BPT, it stirred up a fight and strong pressure to do

something. Therefore, he had a bicycle rack, three small statues, and a playground facility for small children placed on the sidewalk, so there is no more space to play football. But now we have experienced that the issue has not been resolved by this physical intervention. Ron says it is one of many cases he has encountered of low social cohesion in the area. (field notes October 2013)

This story demonstrates how habitual practices of area-focused working can fail to resolve conflicts and address underlying issues. In response to swelling conflict at resident meetings he already organized, the neighborhood manager opted for a quick physical and technical intervention rather than recognizing emotions and critical listening for residents' underlying concerns and issues (Forester, 1989). Such office-based neighborhood working follows ill-conceived prescriptive models of community interactions and sustains *hierarchical* relationships. Instead, the BPT's presence approach of "making contact, listening, and learning" (Laws & Forester, 2015, 343) enables joint experience of the actual situation and informal conversation with some of the stakeholders. Being present and engaging in "connection before correction" (Madsen, 2009, 106) provides a better, yet admittedly preliminary sense of what is actually going on as well as hints about the nature of a potential solution. Based on a range of similar *integrative* encounters, the BPT ends up facilitating neighborhood mediation in specific streets to enable residents to address their immediate disputes as well as enhance social cohesion.

The next story about adopting the BPT approach demonstrates how an open mind can turn an escalating conflict about anti-social behavior into sustainable solutions and restored relationships.

A meeting between local professionals and residents about anti-social behavior on a square explodes. Some residents utter harsh complaints about Moroccan youngsters smoking marijuana under their windows and intimidating them when they said something about it. City District officials hasten to promise a marijuana smoking prohibition and have a sign placed, while youth workers suggest that residents should learn to address youngsters differently. Both "solutions" are met with contempt and further derided by an inflammatory article in the (nationally distributed) local newspaper, stating that "the neighborhood" is "sick and tired" of this "permanent anti-social behavior" and calling for this "scum" to be met with a zero-tolerance approach (Damen & Pen, 2013).

To reverse the tide, the City District chair asks several agencies to form an exploratory BPT to examine the situation. For several weeks, I join local professionals who sit with coffee and tea on the square to talk to residents and observe what is actually happening. Not a single resident echoes the image that emerged from the meeting and the newspaper article. It turns out that the complaints were made by a few notoriously hot-headed residents, while anti-social behavior is caused by two young men living there with their mother. We also discover that every afternoon a group of kids plays on the square without any parental supervision. Social and youth

workers are sent to talk to the hot-headed residents, the young men and their mother, and the kids' parents. We also observe how the physical lay-out of the building welcomes (occasional) smoking of marijuana by customers of the coffee shop across the street. We therefore propose specific physical changes and more social activities on the square. When these findings and solutions are fed back to residents at another meeting, they respond positively and feel that they have been listened to. (field notes September 2013)

The political pressure to resolve emotionally and ethnically charged conflicts can drive local officials to resort to habitual procedures (placing a sign, communication training) and hierarchical solutions (prohibition, police enforcement). The consultation meeting does not offer a good platform to learn about the actual situation and its significant rather than dramatic features (Follett, 2003), acknowledge and process emotions (Verloo, 2015), or enquire into daily communicative practices (Bartels, 2015). In contrast, the BPT's presence approach facilitates local professionals in (critical) listening with more than their ears (Forester, 2006) by seeing, feeling, and experiencing how residents, youngsters, kids, and passersby actually use the square. This *integrative*, experiential learning process fosters responsive attentiveness to the stories and needs of a wide range of stakeholders as well as the intricacies and opportunities of the situation. As a result, the initial antagonistic situation is overcome, targeted and holistic solutions are provided, and relationships are restored.

This final example, in which I facilitate two youth work agencies in adopting the BPT approach, reveals how encountering youngsters with an open mind can trigger collaborative inquiry and a participatory solution.

A team of youth workers from two agencies is charged with conducting an analysis of the needs of youngsters in a neighborhood for which the City District has made additional funds available. After a prolonged and messy planning process, the team opts for a pre-structured approach (using focused questions, surveys, and SPSS) to quickly identify youngsters' needs and legitimize the extra services and projects the agencies can offer within existing policy guidelines. The team leader and I propose to use the BPT approach instead by having open-ended conversations and identifying underlying issues. For almost two months, we talk to youngsters in the streets. At some point we start to notice that their first response is always to ask for a new youth center. In a pre-structured approach this would have been our main finding and recommendation. But our conversations and experiences in the streets reveal the underlying issue: they feel there is no place for them in the neighborhood not just in a physical but more fundamentally in a social sense. All youth centers have been closed over the past years, benches where they regularly hang out are removed as neighbors file nuisance complaints, and when they walk or hang out in the street people look badly at them or the police stops them and asks for their IDs. Our final report thus recommends collaborating with youngsters on improving their image and place in the area. (field notes November 2013-January 2014)



Even though outreach work, collaborative working, and participatory youth work are in the remit of these youth work agencies, the team initially enacts *hierarchical* routines (provide standard activities, pre-structure encounters) and *competitive* interests (obtain funding, legitimize expertise). This would have facilitated a “rush to interpretation” (Forester, 2006, 144) and superficial recommendations that would not have made any difference to the youngsters. Instead, the BPT approach leads us to have open-ended conversations and “look beyond words” (ibidem, 142) to identify the real demand behind youngsters’ posturing (Follett, 2003). This leads us to discover how their demands for a new youth center are driven by a deep feeling that there is no place for them in the neighborhood and society at large. A new physical place would not necessarily have changed anything about this underlying problem of social exclusion and discrimination, or the hegemonic hierarchy and competition of the youth work agencies. Hence, after the needs analysis the team keeps on *integrating* with youngsters by co-organizing activities to trigger a sustainable change in their image and position in the area.

To summarize, in all three stories the BPT approach fostered encounters with an open mind. This not only helped to better understand and address the situation at hand than habitual practices but also affirmed a relational approach to neighborhood working that challenged hierarchical and competitive institutions. Instead of imposing routine solutions or sustaining frail relationships, the BPT approach fostered an experiential learning process of *integrating* a range of views, practices, interests, emotions, and issues into new shared understandings and ways of resolving the situation that everybody found better than before. To be sure, it was a struggle to include local professionals and residents invested in the status quo and only a first step towards transforming hegemonic institutions. However, it is only by continuing to enact relational practices and meeting resistances with an open mind that more sustainable change can be pursued.

## **Conclusion**

Neighborhood governance has become a widespread approach to improving the quality of life in cities. The underlying assumption is that sustained interactions between local professionals and residents will better meet the needs of local areas and people. However, neighborhood working approaches purporting to provide tailor-made policies and solutions tend to perpetuate habitual practices and hegemonic institutions of hierarchy and competition. I have analyzed how conditions can be created for different kinds of conversations and relationships

to emerge that lead to innovative practices and sustainable solutions. In essence, I argue that local professionals need not only interact extensively with citizens to generate practical results and meaningful change but should do so through encounters with an open mind.

Instead of policy that just stimulates encounters in urban governance and studies that only look at what happens in-between local professionals and citizens, then, we need to assess the quality of these interactive processes based on a perspective on how these can be improved. The notion of *encounters with an open mind* helps to do so with a view to more sustainably addressing socio-spatial deprivation and fostering more fundamental transformations in underlying governance institutions. Encountering should lead to the emergence of new shared understandings and practices that progressively *integrate* people's differences rather than *hierarchically* imposing these or sustaining frail *competitive* compromises. This requires a shared and reciprocal ability to “listen” to (see, hear, sense, feel) what others really (intend to) say and establish a genuine connection aimed at nothing more than “responsive attentiveness” to each other and the situation. Doing so instigates creative processes of learning, improvising, and transforming that ultimately foster a relational grounding for urban democracy.

There are a number of limitations to this argument. First, I have illustrated how BPTs engage in encounters with an open mind with stories about some parts of its approach (being present in a neighborhood, observing and listening, developing a shared focus) and not others (organizing activities, reflection and learning)—for a full overview, see Bartels (2016). It is nevertheless important to note how these parts interdependently and iteratively foster an experiential learning process. Second, I have treated BPTs rather monolithically, while there actually was great variety in capacities for engaging in encounters with an open mind within and between teams. Indeed, processes of individual learning and debate over (in)competences permeated their daily practice and were a constant source of tension. Third, the BPT approach and the notion of encounters with an open mind has been developed within the context of Dutch urban governance. Even though their relational grounding and critique of neo-liberal institutions of hierarchy and competition suggests a wider applicability, it would need to be explored whether and how they would work and make a difference in other urban settings and public administration more widely.

The move towards neighborhood governance through notions of ‘government participation’ and policies like area-focused working certainly provide much needed space for learning how to reconfigure interactions and relationships and building capacities for responding to local needs and strengths. However, leaving such challenging change processes

to their own devices based on a neo-liberal discourse of deregulation and state withdrawal creates a counterproductive situation in which successful innovations are kept in the margins of a system of habitual practices and hegemonic institutions. Their ultimate failure to generate more systemic change is then likely to be seen as evidence of their limited potential rather than of hegemonic resistance and the absence of fundamental institutional transformations. Therefore, I recommend governments to adopt policies that stimulate innovations like the BPT approach and studies to analyze what we can learn from such cases, but to do so in ways that embody a relational philosophy to (urban) governance. As I have formulated several concrete steps towards this previously (Bartels, 2016, 2017a), here I would like to emphasize the importance of more systemic efforts at articulating, upholding, and defending this integrative alternative to neoliberal hegemony if we do not want to ultimately set up exemplary practitioners and radical innovations for failure (Stout, 2009).

The notion of encounters with an open mind should be understood in this context as affirming relational thinking and practices across a number of fields and integrating these in a new perspective on what happens in-between (urban) governance actors and how to evaluate and improve their interactions and interdependence. I hope that it will help to further articulate and raise awareness and adoption of a relational view for urban governance and public administration. Joining it with other contributions in this book is a step in that direction, triggering curiosity and enthusiasm amongst practitioners and academics for encounters with an open mind and how these are both inhibited and fostered in practice. Undoubtedly, there will be many resistances on the way but by encountering these with an open mind we might just develop new ways of integrating with the existing institutional order and transforming it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Housing associations play an exceptional important role in Dutch urban governance as social housing accounts for about one third of the total housing stock (compared to less than 10% in most other European countries). Housing associations are NGOs with political and financial autonomy along with shared responsibilities for the physical, social, and economic quality of local areas (Priemus, 2002; Van Bortel, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> This communicative approach is rooted in alternative dispute resolution and works along the lines of Follett's (2003) "method of integration": bring differences out in the open; break up wholes into constituent parts and examine these; identify the real demand behind

ineffective postures and focus on their significant rather than dramatic features; revalue interests, desires and methods for achieving these.

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| <b>BPT approach</b>                | <b>Practices</b>  |
|------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Creating a sense of urgency</i> | Legitimizing the need for a BPT and obtaining political mandate by making a diagnosis that institutionalized practices are inadequate for resolving an alarming situation.  |
| <i>Being present</i>               | Developing an in-depth understanding of what is going on and could be done by walking around in the area to observe and experience everyday activities, be physically and emotionally approachable, and listen to what residents say they need and have to offer. |
| <i>Developing a shared view</i>    | Using facilitation techniques to bring together all stakeholders and formulate concrete goals and activities as well as regularly evaluating and adapting these.  |
| <i>Taking small steps</i>          | Organizing a range of small scale activities in response to signals from the area in order to make big issues visible and a broader change process tangible.  |
| <i>Embedding change</i>            | Including more and more people in a learning and change process and embed the BPT approach in their work and organizations as to transform their habitual practices and hegemonic institutions.   |

**Table 1. Overview of the BPT approach (adopted from Bartels, 2016).**