

## DO RESIDENTIAL AREAS DISPLAY FORMS OF CONVIVIALITY?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *In suburban complexes, sociability is often understood through social minimalism and individualism. In reverse of this vision, based on various research conducted in the regions Burgundy-Franche-Comté and Grand Est, this article shows that residential life can give rise to a real conviviality built on dense and sensitive social relationships. Starting from different residential initiatives such as partial self-building, the setting up of shared gardens or the construction of a collective local memory, it is ultimately a matter of emphasizing that sociability and conviviality contribute to the well-being of life and to the exit from indifference by unifying the inhabitants, creating an identity of place and a feeling of belonging.*

**Keywords:** suburban complexes; sociability; conviviality; well-being.

The themes of local sociability and relationships with neighbours have been widely studied in sociology. Some works have even become classics in the discipline. We can mention the research by Michael Young and Peter Willmott (1957) or by Richard Hoggart (1957) on traditional working-class areas, as well as the research by Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson (1965) on gossip and the well-known analyses by Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Madeleine Lemaire (1970) on the relationships in high-density social housing developments. That being said, we are bound to note the small number of works produced on the social relations that develop within residential areas.

We must acknowledge that residential areas are badly thought of and that most thinkers see in them nothing but a social evil. Admittedly, it is difficult to deny how much the inhabitants of residential areas appreciate *minimalisme social*<sup>2</sup> (Baumgartner, 1988), which can even be a selling point for some estate agents. In the same way, it would be preposterous not to see that this social minimalism often goes hand in hand with a *cordiale ignorance*<sup>3</sup> (Charmes, 2005) which truly reveals the *bonne distance*<sup>4</sup> which actually often seems to be the norm among neighbours (Membrado, 2003). In some cases,

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<sup>2</sup> Social minimalism.

<sup>3</sup> Cordial indifference.

<sup>4</sup> Good distance.

however, the neighbourhood plays a role close to that of a provider of more or less diffuse social relations, even in residential areas (Forrest, 2007; Gateau, 2016, 2017). Thus, when neighbours get on well together, or – still more – when they hit it off, close social relations can emerge and provide residential areas and their inhabitants with a *supplément d'âme*<sup>1</sup> whose absence has actually been underscored by the many detractors of these residential areas.

So, far from conceiving of residential areas solely as spaces that are stages for *alienation désirée*<sup>2</sup> (Debry, 2012), where people withdraw into themselves and vote for the extremes, and counter to much media rhetoric (Marchal and Stébé, 2018), can't we see them as spaces notable more for instances of happy cohabitation and constructive neighbourly sociability? These two phenomena are clearly related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the people who take up residence there, to their own life paths and conceptions and representations of a *genre de vie*<sup>3</sup> (Emsalem, 1953), as well as to the spaces where such individual housing is situated. The analytical view defended here in this article calls for more refined and detailed analyses than the caricatural vision in vogue since the 2000s<sup>4</sup>.

Relying on several field studies recently carried out in suburban or peri-urban residential areas of the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté and Grand-Est regions, we shall show here in this article – once in a while does no harm – that life in residential areas can give rise to genuine conviviality referring to sensitive relationships, instances of collaboration, and inhabitant initiatives. We shall also deal with the relationships forged during partial self-build practices and with inhabitant initiatives which lead to the creation of community gardens and production of a shared collective memory. On the other hand, we shall also focus our attention on the diffuse conviviality that delicately and silently takes shape during spontaneous and more or less brief encounters occurring in the street and commercial areas.

## **1. 'The drink after the grind': partial self-build as a vector of convivial sociability**

Among the households we met in residential areas located in the four *départements* of Burgundy, a significant number chose to have a house built. However, many of them decided to complete the construction themselves or, more exactly, to put the finishing touches to the construction. Let us mention painting indoors, wallpapering, laying floorboards, as well as putting up fences around one's site or planning and materialising the layout of the garage or garden. Partial self-build is thus commonplace among people who have bought

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<sup>1</sup> Additional soul.

<sup>2</sup> Desired alienation.

<sup>3</sup> Life style.

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see the works by Christophe Guilluy (2010; 2014) or Jacques Lévy (2012) and – opposed to their interpretations – the publications by Violaine Girard (2017) or the collective one by Éric Charmes, Lydie Launay and Stéphanie Vermeersch in *La Vie des idées* (2013).

a house, especially among those who belong to the lowest social sections (Girard, Lambert & Steinmetz, 2013). In this undertaking, family solidarity is very helpful, as was the case with Fabrice and Stéphanie, a couple of primary-school teachers in their thirties, who had a house built in a peri-urban municipality near Mâcon:

*'What with the purchase of the site, the house and all the little expenses that had not been planned, we were on the skimpy side financially... So we decided to engage my parents and Steph's brothers in putting the final touches to the house after the main structural work had been completed. They are far better with their hands than I am and, in the end..., we must have saved several tens of thousands of euros! Thank goodness our family were there to help us...'*

We also met households who, beyond family solidarity, had recourse to a form of partial self-build based on mutual aid among neighbours. As we shall see, this aid very often goes beyond odd jobs and extends to the field of sociability and, *in fine*, conviviality. Thus, on several recently built individual housing estates, most – if not all – neighbours are social homogams: they are about the same age, are at the same stage in their lifecycles, have a similar housing project which has led them to be geographically close to one another, and are in relatively similar social situations. Thus, all or nearly all conditions are brought together for them to meet. In this perspective, then, the fact they meet very often during the construction of their houses triggers the initial exchanges. Thus, *homolalie*<sup>1</sup> (Héran, 1990), that is the action of speaking to people who resemble oneself, develops quite spontaneously. And when harmony and some sort of good feeling crop up, when people get on well, the idea of finishing the work together, of helping one another, emerges spontaneously. This is what Alexandre, a thirty-four-year-old marketing man who bought a house near Dijon five years ago with his wife (thirty-one years old, then pregnant with their first child), explains:

*'Every time we came to monitor the construction work, we'd see two or three couples of neighbours. They were doing the same as us, in fact. So we began to say hello to one another, then we'd talk a little and quite soon we hit it off naturally. So, one day, as we had a little talk, just like that, in front of our houses under construction, we said to one another that we might join forces to do odd jobs, such as erecting the fences, etc. For it costs a lot and it's not very hard to do, all you need is several people to do the work... And well, since we're all on the skimpy side financially, we said to one another that it might be a great idea for us all. We thought about it, but not for long. My wife and I said to each other that it was a very good way of beginning to fit into the neighbourhood, in fact!'*

As soon as their respective houses were delivered, the households in question began to meet on weekends to do odd jobs together. Thanks to strong

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<sup>1</sup> Homolalia.

elective affinities due to the proximity of their socio-demographic characteristics, they soon supplemented these times of collective work with times of relaxation that crystallised around aperitifs on Fridays and, even more, on Saturday nights. Thus, the four households in question in turn invited their neighbours to their house (among cement bags and visible electric wires), as a kind of ritualised practice that took the shape of an exchange organised around gift and counter-gift, with conviviality as a fuel. Stéphanie (thirty-six years old, married, living in her house under the French home ownership plan *accession à la propriété* for six years) makes this point very clearly:

*'In the beginning I was not very keen on the idea of... And then, actually, we became real friends, initially working friends, for one day we build the fence wall of the house at the end [of the estate], the following week they help us all with our fence and then it's the other neighbours' turn... So we got used to seeing one another to work at first. But that's not all. One day we go to their places, the following week they come to our place and it's always supercool, informal, effortless. So we relax, have a few drinks, and unwind after the working week and the construction work in the houses. So yes, we do have fun, it's a bit like a party every time and now I'm impatient for the occasion every week, even though the construction work is nearly finished, except for odd jobs that still remain to be done. But, mind you, we have not become alcoholics [laugh].'*

This informant emphasises the festive dimension and the habit that has grown around the convivial times. Here, reciprocity is the point. And this is true in times of collective work as well as in the convivial times that follow. As Alain Caillé and Jacques T. Godbout have shown, the gift – here in this case the gift of time, advice and other types of help – is not a *chose*<sup>1</sup> but a social relation that moves at the service of the bond (Caillé & Godbout, 1991). So much so that once the final touches were made to the construction work, these households continued, and still continue, to meet assiduously. The initial cooperation thus rapidly took on a convivial dimension that has not diminished. On the contrary, it has even turned into true friendship. At the time of the interviews, other collective times were established beyond the aperitif drinks and summer barbecues, for instance, around common sports practice for Sunday joggers, around the organisation of the annual neighbours' party, or, again, around the local associative life for three of the four women in question. In other words, the relational harmony that has taken hold rests on solid bases which are reinforced by a form of neighbourhood social life, where social and spatial proximity strengthens social ties, which in passing reminds us of the fact that neighbourhood spatial proximity does not necessarily entail social distance.

Such conviviality actually possesses another virtue, since it contributes to the sentiment of residential well-being which, according to the persons we met, firmly partakes of their local attachment. Indeed, comfortably settled in their 'new' houses, well surrounded in terms of relationships and well

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<sup>1</sup> Thing.

established locally, our informants feel well in their residential environment. This translates and materialises in their taking part in the associative life, and political for some, of the municipality, and, in two other cases, in their building extensions on their houses as they contemplate enlarging their family unit.

## **2. Inhabitant initiatives: between community gardens and places of memory**

In a residential area located near Metz, the establishment of community gardens captured our attention. A collective of about ten people took up the idea put forward by a town councillor, with the declared intention of proving that within a residential area itself it is possible to do gardening together and share convivial times. Thus meals based on a barbecue set up by a few people are organised, as well as aperitifs:

*'Here, we're not alone in our own gardens, we talk, give advice and tips to one another, that's good, for even here [in a residential housing estate] we have contacts, we don't just remain at home. Really, it's good to have a drink together!'*

(a seventy-two-year-old man who has been living in the neighbourhood for twenty-two years)

Located at the crossroads of several housing estates, the community gardens of the neighbourhood produce fresh vegetables, herbs and spices (chives, tarragon, etc.) and are non-profit-making, as the production is shared between those who devote time to them. These gardens are now very successful, so much so that they have become a local point of reference in terms of community gardening. As such, they are visited by representatives of other towns as examples to follow in order to promote citizen participation. The inhabitants committed to the community gardens have been given advice and help so as to facilitate visits by the general public and, ultimately, offer practical access to people with reduced mobility. These community gardens act as a *porte-parole*<sup>1</sup> (Latour, 1989) for a collective effort that has contributed to turning the neighbourhood into a place pleasant to live in, where 'there still is a village atmosphere', as a recurrent local saying goes.

These community gardens embody the will to have a hold on the neighbourhood and take part in its development, which also translates into other inhabitant initiatives whereby shared identities and affiliations emerge and memorial inscriptions and claims crystallise. For instance, at the beginning of this study in 2017, a collective of about twenty inhabitants had been engaged for a year in tracing the history of their neighbourhood, valuing it, so as to have it recognised by the decision-makers of the town. The construction

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<sup>1</sup> Spokesperson.

of a collective memory through the development of a local historical expertise has required strong commitment on the part of the inhabitants involved.

The construction of the neighbourhood's memory has been as earnest as possible thanks to the mobilisation of indigenous knowledge and the help of a former teacher of history and geography. A university student in history, the grandson of an inhabitant involved in the undertaking, has even done his Master's on the history of the neighbourhood since the Liberation. This just shows that the inhabitants have *équipés*<sup>1</sup> (Latour, 1989) themselves with legitimate references and solid knowledge on the subject. The equipment mobilised, however, is also material, inasmuch as panels tracing the history of the neighbourhood were installed for exhibition for several months at the sociocultural centre. Flyers had been thought of, designed, printed and delivered throughout the neighbourhood (shops, town hall, post office, etc.) with a view to communicating on this initiative which brought together an increasing number of inhabitants, especially the 'pioneers' of the neighbourhood, proud to display the narrative of their installation and to recount the social history of a place they are attached to. Often taken from family photo albums, the photos exhibited on the panels depict a local history which has been shaped by the inhabitants themselves.

On thinking it over, what is at issue here is a right to memory as regards a residential area that looks like many others and intends to extricate itself from indifference. By extension, as there is no heritage to defend, the aim is to have the quality of a living environment, of an art of living, and of an atmosphere, recognised:

*'It's plain that here the houses are of no interest, they're not very nice, really. They're not the reason why we like the neighbourhood, that's plain, but it's the living environment.'*

(a sixty-eight-year-old woman who has been living in the neighbourhood for eight years)

However, the history in question no doubt results from a collective construction that meets the interests of the present time. Behind the authenticity sought, here as elsewhere contemporary identity issues are at play which are used in order to strengthen and legitimize a specific image of the neighbourhood and a way of living there. As is well known, the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1950) is the first to have shown that collective memory is constructed not according to the past of groups, but instead, from their present, and more particularly, from the issues they are involved in. The collective memory produced here specially meets the expectations of inhabitants concerned that their places of living – a place which is seeing a significant ageing of its population – might be forgotten. Inhabitants thus arbitrarily unearth a local history to make it an accepted – and thus shared –

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<sup>1</sup> Equipped.

memory, with the final objective of showing that the neighbourhood has long been, and still is, a place of claims and struggles.

On this point the neighbourhood embodies a spatial framework which unifies inhabitants by contributing to stabilising not only a specific memory but also, more broadly, an identity of place. The neighbourhood thus corresponds to a kind of *lest* (Halbwachs, 1970: 185) in that it participates in strengthening a sentiment of belonging. The very materiality of the neighbourhood then has the virtue of endowing inhabitants with a clearer idea of what they are and of what they want to be. Unlike the rhetoric on general de-territorialisation (Urry, 2005), we can perfectly see that the shaping of identities requires territories, starting with the neighbourhood, a true support for sociality (Ramadier, 2006).

### 3. The neighbourhood as a place for the silent fabrication of sociability

The neighbourhood investigated here is all the more a support for the more or less silent fabrication of what is common to all as many places prove to be stages for sociability where people feel comfortable and know they will have a good time. This is the case at the chemist's:

*'Yes, it's a village here. We go to the chemist's. Christian, he uses tu with us, it's like a family. It's local, it's our place! That's why it's good for us, here, as we know the place, it's our world. And at our age, we don't ask for anything else.'*

(an eighty-six-year-old married man who has been living for forty-eight years in the neighbourhood)

Beyond this example, however, we are forced to notice that, in many respects the neighbourhood encapsulates forms of urbanity which are typical of what geographers have called *ville-village*<sup>1</sup> (Poulot & Aragau, 2012). It is like a set of informal micro-stages for sociability where people come across each other. This is the case at the supermarket:

*'Intermarché, it's like a village, we know one another, and that's what is good, we go there to do our shopping, there still is a village mentality.'*

(a sixty-seven-year-old woman who lives with her partner and has been living in the neighbourhood for fifteen years)

*'Here at Intermarché, we don't like change. We like to keep those we know! We like this little world, it's quiet, we know the place, that's good.'*

(a fifty-nine-year-old married man who has been living in the neighbourhood for thirty-six years)

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<sup>1</sup> Town-village.

These examples aptly show that the economic is embedded in the social. Beyond these commercial areas wrapped in sociality, however, the inhabitants, especially the oldest ones, underlined how important it is for them to go out of their houses in order to see people, not to become stay-at-homes, to be in contact with others. In this respect, the pavements and streets of the neighbourhood are the stage for improvised talks that are nonetheless very important in the everyday lives of inhabitants who sometimes suffer loneliness. The pavement and street sociabilities are all the more significant as some people do not or no longer have a car. These sociabilities give shape to a true, little social world.<sup>1</sup> This is built day by day through mutual visibility which translates into exchanges, here personalised, there simply customary, elsewhere a little more impersonal. Sometimes constituted by a mere head or hand sign only and as brief as they may be, these encounters prove to be most significant, since they turn the neighbourhood into a stage for daily and familiar sociability. No doubt, this is what is appreciated, for people feel they belong to a place of living that has a 'soul,' that is a certain social consistency synonymous with familiarity and emotional safety. Consequently, a social life based on known faces becomes possible. From this perspective, the neighbourhood is a social theatre with its figures ('Oh, he is a figure in the neighbourhood, but for him, it would not be the same!'), its stages, actors and scenery. Alongside statuses and formalised roles (shopkeepers, town services, etc.), many people embody an indigenous figure: 'the bloke from the street down there,' 'the old man who's always reading his newspaper,' etc. These occasional indigenous identities participate in the structuring of a shared little world organised by an ethic of inter-recognition, without any interference with anybody's privacy.

The pavements and streets are some of the places where at any moment improvised talks may emerge that can be lasting:

*'When I go out for some bread, I fall into traps. I don't know what their names are, but we talk!'*

(a seventy-four-year-old man who has been living in the neighbourhood for forty-eight years)

*'You talk to many people in the street, you don't even know their names, but well, we talk of this and that. But I like that, it takes me out of myself, that's not bad.'*

(an eighty-six-year-old man who has been living in the neighbourhood for forty-eight years)

These words remind us of studies which have shown that forms of sociability and identification of the other develop in the street. Hervé Paris (2005), for instance, has accurately described the extent to which the street is inhabited with a regulated play of avoidances and adjustments, respect and

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<sup>1</sup> This little world may exclude certain inhabitants, especially those who do not do their daily shopping in the neighbourhood or the newcomers. On this point, see Elias and Scotson's classic work (1997).

recognition, which allows for what he calls a *quête furtive de familiarité*<sup>1</sup>. This quest translates into the spontaneous search for a known face or figure, a gait already encountered, and thus participates in the silent elaboration of *identités collectives sensibles*<sup>2</sup>, that is tacit collaborations based on people's living in the same street which make the other an *inconnu familier*<sup>3</sup>. While these implicit and diffuse reciprocities rest on more or less formalised pre-existing arrangements, they are nonetheless displayed according to processes co-constructing an expressive order of individual and collective identities. The static and the dynamic, the past and the present, the instituted and the emerging thus combine to give shape to a way of living together within the public space, where the other, an intermediate figure, is more than a stranger and less than a friend or a loved one. Thereby, the street displays the silent elaboration of shared serenity.

While the street of today's town is no longer the place of community life it used to be in the 1950s and 1960s, it is still a basis for identity for a number of housing estate inhabitants, especially the oldest ones, but not only them, as children too have their effect on the neighbourhood through their many quasi spontaneous interactions (Héran, 1987). The street allows one to show oneself without any real commitment. The street makes it possible for anybody to see and be seen without taking the relational risks to argue, confront ideas, oppose. The thing is *'être là, dans le simple côtoïement ; d'être unique dans la banalité ; accueilli sans être nommé ; être avec autrui sans être engagé avec quiconque'*<sup>4</sup> (Hénaff, 2008 : 48). As shown by Georg Simmel (1981), in such situations the elements offered for discussion come up not for the sake of their content but for the sake of sociability. Talking, as with one's hairdresser, about the weather, the rising prices, rheumatic pains that set in too early, Mr so-and-so's death, or how children are becoming alert so much earlier – actually the content is not very important but is likely to be common to all. What is played out, then, is a soft sociability, a kind of unsociable sociability, revolving around conventional utterances devoid of hierarchical signification and personal considerations. While one sometimes confides a little more and gives an opinion, this remains quite rare and actually one's aim is to chat about this and that so as to establish a relationship of sociability with many individuals they know vaguely. In other words, here the relationship does not exist outside its very realisation, as it is not strengthened outside individuals, for instance by an institution which would formalise specific rules, well delineated roles and clearly established values. The little world of the street always remains informal – but not informed! –, so that it disappears as soon as the individuals who make it exist *in actu* stop communicating.

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<sup>1</sup> Furtive quest for familiarity.

<sup>2</sup> Sensitive collective identities.

<sup>3</sup> Familiar stranger.

<sup>4</sup> To be there, through mere encounters; be unique in banality; be welcome without being named; be with the other without being committed to anybody.

#### 4. Concluding remarks: the street as a stage for openness to the other

Let us also underline that street sociability, as casual as it may be, can be an occasion to open oneself to the other, to another person one does not know and who refers to the changes undergone by the neighbourhood. The street actually allows for a direct contact during which one talks while looking at the other, looks them in the face, is in immediate relation, sees their individual face. Thus some informants of ours stop seeing a stranger in the other, as is the case with the Turks, for instance:

*'I talked with Turkish children while I was cleaning the hedge in front of our place. Since then, I'm the Turks' friend. In a housing estate, everybody has to make some effort if they want to get on well together.'*

(a seventy-four-year-old man who has been living in his house for forty-four years)

*'Oh no! There are Turks near our place, we don't mind, we don't mind at all. We can see them when my husband and I have a walk and we never feel insecure! Occasionally we talk with them, there's no problem, they look happy with our stopping to talk.'*

(a fifty-eight-year-old woman who has been living in her house for fifteen years)

As a stage for informal and frequent contacts, the street can be a factor affecting the other, who is *a priori* different. It limits, even prevents the shock of different cultures. For the other is no longer seen from a distance and from above, that is they are not identified solely from their appearance and the personal judgements it gives rise to in oneself and which one shamelessly projects onto them. When a true encounter has been initiated, one is not content with seeing the other from a distance, one talks with them so as to discover them in their full reality. As Marcel Mauss [1993, p. 275] has noted, it is through reciprocal face-to-face encounter that *'les hommes prennent conscience sentimentale d'eux-mêmes et de leur situation vis-à-vis d'autrui'*.<sup>1</sup> Since respect for the other, both as a person and a human being, depends on this, should we not see in the analytical rehabilitation of the street, incidentally indissolubly political and symbolic, a convivialist necessity? This is true, even in residential areas, which are too often reduced to what one wants to see in them.

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<sup>1</sup> Human beings become sentimentally aware of themselves and of their situation with regard to the other.

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