

## **Chapter 4. Who are the strangers?**

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### **4.1 Introduction**

In the first sentence of her book, *The Lonely City*, British writer Olivia Laing (2016) asks the reader to imagine himself or herself standing at the window at night, when dark and illuminated windows compose the urban landscape. 'Inside', she writes, 'strangers swim to and fro, attending to the business of their private hours. You can see them, but you can't reach them, and so this commonplace urban phenomenon, available in any city of the world on any night, conveys to even the most social a tremor of loneliness, its uneasy combination of separation and exposure.'

As Laing suggests, urban anonymity might not mean that neighbours are totally indifferent towards and ignorant of each other. The lonely urbanite, standing at the window, is observing others living their lives. The particular loneliness he or she feels comes from the paradoxical situation of being alone, yet surrounded by thousands of people. But were urbanites 'blasé', as Simmel argues, would they be affected by the sight of other lives? In this paper, I seek to investigate the complex relation between interest and indifference between neighbours.

We might know people living alongside us as intimate friends or we might ignore their existence. Yet, as Olivia Laing suggests, neighbour relations often consist of both ‘separation and exposure’. What people learn from the exposure, and what remains hidden by the separation, will be the focus of the first part of this chapter. More specifically, I will look at the conditions under which urbanites learn about their neighbours, and the factors that contribute to maintaining their ‘strangeness’<sup>22</sup>. Do urbanites categorize their neighbours according to how different or similar they are? Since cities’ populations are heterogeneous in many respects, probably more than ever before (Tasan Kok et al., 2013), it raises the question of the extent to which categorical differences like ethnicity, race and socio-economic position contribute to the ‘strangeness’ between neighbours.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the consequences of overhearing and witnessing parts of neighbours’ private lives, while often not knowing them personally. Do people tend to find a plausible explanation for the ‘strange’ behaviour of their neighbours, in order to maintain a sense of normality and of intelligibility, as Garfinkel (1967), Goffman (1971), Mitzsal (2001) and Blokland (2017) argue? Or is it part of what makes city life ‘stimulating’? I will argue that the need for normality is balanced by an attraction to strangeness and diversity, seen as essential ingredients of a ‘lively’ urban neighbourhood. Finally, I will address the question of whether this attraction is specific to an urban-seeking (Lockwood, 1995) middle class that plays a central role in gentrification processes.

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<sup>22</sup> As used here, ‘strangeness’ conveys the qualities of being unusual and unexpected, as well as the quality of being unfamiliar. It refers to the figure of the ‘stranger as an unknown’ rather than to the figure of the stranger as an ‘outsider’ (Sennett 1992: 48).

My arguments are based on a study conducted in Geneva city centre. I draw from interviews with tenants of four apartment buildings, where I systematically investigated the wide range of relations between tenants, including those which do not involve face-to-face interaction.

## **4.2 Dealing with strangers in the city**

Anonymity in big cities inspired the early urban scholars: how do people live among people they do not know? As Simmel suggests, people adapt to urban settings by being indifferent to their environment. It would be impossible, he wrote, 'to behave like in the small town, in which one knows almost every person he meets and to each of whom he has a positive relationship'. As a consequence, city dwellers sometimes 'do not know by sight neighbours of years standing' (Simmel, 1903: 15). Simmel's argument is that mutual reserve and indifference allow the urbanite to feel free and independent, and that the social differentiation characterising cities is stimulating. In the first quarter of the 20th century, Park elaborates the famous metaphor of the city 'as a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate'. He emphasizes the stimulation caused by the possibility of passing from one milieu to another, which provides the 'fascinating but dangerous experiment of living at the same time in several different (...) worlds' (Park, 1925: 40-41). It introduces, he writes, an element of 'adventure, which adds to the stimulus of city life and gives it for young and fresh nerves a peculiar attractiveness'. Decades later, scholars like French philosopher Roland Barthes (1967) and Chicago political scientist Iris Marion Young (1990) refer to this aspect of urban life as the 'erotic' dimension of the city. From a social class perspective, this aspect of urban life is particularly valued by 'new' 'urban-centred' middle classes (as opposed to 'urban-fleeing' middle classes, Lockwood, 1995).

During the second half of the century, sociologists developed a better understanding of how urbanites navigate in a 'world of strangers' (Lofland, 1973). Lofland argues that city dwellers 'did not lose the capacity for the deep, long-lasting, multifaceted relationship' but 'gained the capacity for the surface, fleeting, restricted relationship' (Lofland, 1973: 177-178). For instance, they learned to practice 'civil inattention' by acknowledging another person's presence yet at the same time 'express[ing] that he does not constitute the target of special curiosity' (Goffman, 1971: 84). However, these observations regarding fleeting relationships concerned the public space, and the fate of neighbourhoods' communities was subject to different theories proclaiming their loss or their survival (Wellman, 1979). The emerging consensus was that although few neighbourhoods were 'urban villages' (Gans, 1962), most urbanites were not isolated. Their social networks, however, had become more geographically dispersed (Wellman, 1979 ; Fischer, 1982) and the neighbourhood's relevance as a context for sociability had diminished (Blokland, 2003).

At the end of the twentieth century, in France and Britain, studies confirmed the fading relevance of neighbours to urbanites' social networks (Abrams and Bulmer, 1986; Héran, 1987; Guest and Wierzbicki, 1999; Grafmeyer, 2001; Buonfino and Hilder, 2006). Globalisation and individualisation had weakened the relevance of place, and consequently of local ties such as neighbour relations. In Beck's words, contemporary urbanites are no longer 'obligated and forced [...] into togetherness' (Beck, 1994: 15). However, we shall reject the 'image of an emerging society of bad neighbours' (Abrams and Bulmer, 1986). Regarding neighbour relations, British scholars note that 'people lay emphasis on the need for privacy and reserve, alongside the general disposition towards friendliness' (Young and Willmott, 1986: 55). More recent works confirm that an ideal relation to neighbours is often seen as including a 'respectful

distance' (Savage et al., 2005) that has to be skilfully worked out (also see Crow et al., 2002 and for the USA : Rosenblum, 2016).

In the context of increasing attention being placed on the diversification of urban populations, due to new waves of migration and lasting inequality, neighbour relations came to be seen as inter-ethnic relations or as class relations (see for example Wise and Velayutham, 2009). More specifically, the impact of diversity on these relations was debated. The combination of physical proximity and social distance is double-edged, as Blokland has shown. On the one hand, 'some level of acquaintance, however superficial and fluid — creates a comfort zone that allows people to feel they belong, even though they may have no local friends or family, never talk to their direct neighbours, and not even like the place where they live' (Blokland and Nast, 2014: 1156). On the other hand, the limited knowledge of one another also allows for social distinction and identifications: 'they' are not as clean, tidy, respectable and civilized as 'we' are (Blokland, 2003, chap. 5.4; van Eijk, 2011).

The question is then: who are the strangers? Based on Elias and Scotson's (1965) case study in a suburb of Leicester, Wimmer (2004) investigated three neighbourhoods in Basel, Bern and Zürich. His interviewees were divided between a group of long-term residents from diverse origins, and newcomers – Swiss and immigrants – who they accused of being untidy and unruly. Like in Elias and Scotson's study, individual characteristics mattered less than the length of residence and the difference of cohesion between each group. Similarly, regarding the United States, Rosenblum argues that Americans typically try to establish whether their neighbours are 'decent folk' or not. This distinction would be based on a 'modest practical assessment that these neighbours intend us no harm, will take our elementary interests into account, and are available for the rudiment of give and take' and implies

‘disregard’ for other characteristics like origin or social status (Rosenblum, 2016: 12).

This brief overview on more than a century of urban theory shows that dealing with the proximity of the unknown and the strange is an essential aspect of life in a city, involving indifference, attraction and conflict. Yet, the status of neighbours remains unclear. Do they belong to the familiar or parochial realm, or are they also strangers, like those inhabiting the public realm (Lofland, 1986)? Moreover, fleeting neighbour relations have been described as involving indifference or as inducing social distinctions and potential conflicts (Van Eijk, 2011). But can they contribute to the urban environment’s appeal, whereby many find urban life more attractive than suburban life?

#### **4.3 Methods and data**

I chose to carry out interviews with inhabitants of four residential buildings in Geneva city centre, across various neighbourhoods. All four buildings are located in central and densely populated areas. They are socially mixed and the median income is lower than [the average] for the canton. 50 to 60% of the population of all four buildings are of foreign nationality, which is a little more than the city mean. I chose morphologically commonplace buildings: with five to six storeys and neither high status nor low status. Each building hosts between fourteen and twenty-one apartments, each with between two and five-and-a-half rooms, most of them costing between 2,000 and 3,000 Swiss francs (CHF) (1,870-2,810 €) per month. The exceptions were a few subsidized apartments available for around 1,000 CHF (930 €), and a loft costing around 4,500 CHF (4,200 €).

The aim was to meet with all residents, in order to avoid the overrepresentation of the individuals most willing to be interviewed. I was not able to meet with every tenant and had to try to convince

those who argued they knew neither their neighbours nor their neighbourhood. I conducted forty-nine interviews of around one hour each with representatives of forty-four households. I talked briefly with nine more, but could not interview them formally for different reasons, some of which could be considered as forms of refusal (constant rescheduling). Six people explicitly declined. The remaining seven households were simply never home when I knocked on their door or did not even open the door. Most interviews were one-to-one, though I occasionally met with couples and with families while children were present. On five occasions, I interviewed children and their parents, or tenants and subtenants, separately.

Families with children – including single parents – lived next to heterosexuals and same-sex couples, singles, and shared apartments. All of them were tenants, some of them subtenants. The youngest were in their late twenties while the eldest were over eighty. University professors lived side by side with bank employees, teachers, unemployed people, and recipients of disability benefits. My interviewees represented eighteen nationalities, and a majority declared an income between 70% and 150% of the national median, while a minority were either considered as low income or high income, following the Swiss Federal Office for Statistics' definitions. The most well-off earned as much as six times more than their most modestly earning neighbour, while some newcomers paid rent up to three times higher than long-term residents.

The interviews took place at the interviewees' homes, across 2015 and 2016. We talked first about their residential history, daily routines and use of the neighbourhood and wider city. In the second part of the interview, I used an A4 sheet of paper with a schematic representation of the building. Each apartment was represented by a square, and for each of them I asked 'do you

know who lives here?’ When analysing the transcripts, I paid close attention to the kind of relation interviewees spoke of. I additionally noted how they described their neighbours, the kind of information they knew about each other, and how they first became aware of each other.

#### **4.4 Neighbours are strangers**

The interviewees’ neighbour relations vary from anonymity – when someone does not know who lives in a certain apartment – to intimacy: in one particular building, two couples regularly go on holiday together, and in two of the buildings, tenants had become romantically involved, subsequently moving in together. This confirms the idea that ‘neighbours are simply people who live near each other’ (Abrams and Bulmer, 1986: 21). However, by asking systematically what interviewees knew about the neighbours they often claimed not to know, I discovered a range of different relation types varying from actual anonymity to ‘public familiarity’ (when ‘individuals are able to socially place others, to recognise them, and even to expect to see them’, as stated by Blokland, 2017: 126). The term anonymity, I believe, is often misused to characterise a situation where neighbours do not know each other personally. The following pages, however, should provide evidence of the important difference between not knowing someone personally but being more or less familiar and not knowing of his or her existence.

A large number of the neighbours were familiar with each other. Through fluid encounters (Blokland, 2017) and occasional chats with some of their fellow tenants, interviewees were able to recognise them. Occasional events were opportunities to learn more about people living in the building. A yearly neighbours’ party (Fête des voisins) was organised in three of the four buildings, gatherings which are encouraged by the city authorities, but are privately organised. People attending the party – more or less the



same group every year – know more about each other compared to the ones who never go. At these events, I was able to witness tenants asking for and sharing information about other residents, and circulating information and rumours in the process. Tenants also get to know and help each other in the exceptional case of a burglary or a flood. More ordinarily, they learn about their neighbours when facing an irritation or a conflict. They investigate individuals responsible for noise and disturbances, for leaving the front door unlocked, or for abandoning bicycles or bin bags in the hallway. Such tensions do not automatically result in face-to-face encounters with the guilty party: tenants often either resign themselves to the fact of an unwanted situation, or complain to other neighbours or to the building's management. However, these issues lead residents to investigate their neighbours. Apart from face-to-face encounters, familiarity was fostered via rumours, door decorations, names on the doorbell and voices heard through the walls.

Familiarity remains a limited and partial knowledge of the other. When describing their neighbours, interviewees most often used life cycle and household type as denominator (“an elderly woman”, “a young couple”). Observable features like visible ethnic characteristics or audible accent led interviewees to speak of “an Asian woman” or “an English-speaking man”. Surprisingly, the term ‘foreigner’ did not appear as a generic term, probably because of the heterogeneity of the foreign-originating population<sup>23</sup>. Some households were identified in reference to children, pets or possessions. For example: “the parents of the young boy”, “the owners of the cat” or “the guy riding a scooter”. With few exceptions, information known about the neighbours was too

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, half of Geneva's residents do not have Swiss nationality, and a third of the Swiss living in Geneva have an additional nationality or have had another nationality in the past.

limited to help in assessing how 'similar' or 'different' they are (for more detail, see Felder, 2016).

Rather than classifying them into groups, or according to an 'us' versus 'them' paradigm, tenants described their neighbours based on how they conform to the ideal of the 'good neighbour', following the triptych of 'friendliness, helpfulness, and respect for privacy' (Abrams and Bulmer, 1986: 30). The exchange of greetings serves as a test. As Rosenblum puts it, this ritual of civility is how, by 'gesture or word we acknowledge one another as neighbours' (Rosenblum, 2016: 13). Those who greet too briefly or fleetingly were considered "cold" or "shy", and those not smiling were called "grumpy". Then, anyone performing adequately – in interviewees' opinions – was considered "nice" or "friendly". Neighbours often know too little to classify each other into the binaries of 'similar' or 'different'. The classifications of 'friendly' and 'unfriendly' are both an alternative, adapted to the case of restricted knowledge, and a sign of limited expectations. 'Good neighbours', it seems, do not need to be like us, as long as they are friendly and do not threaten our interests and our privacy. This category is focused on the requirement of day-to-day coexistence.

Interviewees clearly differentiate between 'good neighbours' and 'friends'. Only a few of them have befriended a neighbour, and they referred to two main differences. Firstly, unlike friendships, neighbour relations are highly determined by proximity, and would most likely not be sustained if one of the parties moved away. When neighbours become friends, proximity loses some of its relevance. Secondly, friendship involves 'progressively breaking down the barriers of privacy', while those barriers are 'essential to mere friendliness' (Abrams and Bulmer, 1986: 94). The tenants I met were less interested in developing friendships than in preserving the efficiency of neighbour relations (Cousin, 2014). This would allow them to maintain privacy (as 'the control we have

over information about ourselves', Fried, 1984: 209) while having someone to ask for help if need be.

The main concern, then, is to distinguish, among more or less familiar strangers, who is 'friendly' and who is not. But because tenants tend to move in and out, this social exploration is never completed. Indeed, interviewees always consider a part of their building as *terra incognita*, not knowing anything about who lives in certain apartments. This contradicts the assumption that proximity alone leads to at least minimal contact. Simmel is right about the fact that urbanites 'do not know by sight neighbours of years standing'. However, his explanation based on the 'mental attitude [...] of reserve' (Simmel, 1903: 15) should not overshadow the influence of the configuration of the urban setting and how it is used by city dwellers.

For instance, no common space is to be found around the buildings I investigated. They are conjoined, so that the facade goes from one crossroads to the other with no interruption. The high density in Geneva comes from intensive land use rather than from building height<sup>24</sup>. This contributes to the fact that city dwellers do not spend time around their home and are not seen conducting their daily activities by their neighbours. Similarly, the lack of common areas within the buildings reduces chances of encounters as well as the visibility of each other's daily lives. One exception is the laundry room; its use is organised by the estate management, in a way that generally prevents conflict but also encounters between tenants.

As I was knocking on doors to meet tenants and ask for an interview, I realised why casual encounters in the stairways are as rare as interviewees had told me. On at least four occasions, I was

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<sup>24</sup> The investigated buildings are located in areas with a density of between 17,000 and 35,900 inhabitants per square kilometre.

staring at an apartment door, getting no answer, when I heard someone entering the building below me. I went down to 'casually' bump into the potential interviewee. Before I could even reach the ground floor, he or she was already in the elevator, which I could only see moving up, stopping at an upper floor. As I climbed up the stairs again, I could hear an apartment door closing, leaving me with no idea about who had just got home. This is one reason why some tenants have not seen some of their neighbours in several years, and it has little to do with an attitude of reserve.

Three buildings from my sample have the classic configuration described above: a main door directly on the street, a staircase and an elevator, and two or three apartments on each of the five or six floors. The fourth building, however, is built differently. It consists of two blocks with a courtyard in between and external walkways. Apartment doors and kitchen windows face each other, making it impossible to enter or leave without getting noticed. Consequently, tenants knew more about who lived opposite them, being able to observe whether they were home or not, and noticing prolonged absences. The more curious observer – or perhaps those spending more time in their apartment – even knew about the coming and going of lovers. In general, the tenants of this building could rely a lot more on observation, when compared with the other interviewees, which further underlines the role of architecture in promoting or hindering the creation of familiarity. I should add that some tenants from the fourth building have found it challenging to get used to this exposure. An elderly couple, for instance, never got used to it and while they chose not to move out, they keep their distance with other neighbours and rarely open their curtains. Public familiarity, in the case of immediate neighbours, is not positive *per se*: it also allows for social distinctions, gossip, and might imply dynamics of exclusion.

Architecture cannot be addressed without considering the practices and the kinds of lifestyles it hosts. Interviewees explained that home is where they seek to be alone, or with their partner or children, considering it a private area. When I explained my research project and asked for an interview, the discussions always took place on the doorstep. I was most often received in the kitchen and only ever by appointment. In my numerous visits to the four buildings, I never saw a door left open, nor witnessed a conversation on a doorstep or in a hallway. These observations reflect the idea of the home as ‘the place of peace, the shelter’ against the ‘anxieties of the outer life’, as described by Ruskin in 1865 (cited by Sennett, 1991). This idea, writes Sennett (1991: 20), symbolises ‘the modern fear of exposure’. Some of the interviewees have never even had a neighbour over for a coffee. Others had only been invited to one to three households with whom they have more contact.

Even neighbours who consider themselves good friends regretted the rarity of meetings. Indeed, work, hobbies and social lives kept my interviewees away from home for most of the day. Moreover, from both my attempts to get interviews and from the interviews themselves, I realised that each building had its ‘frequent travellers’ and its ‘multi-locals’ (Duchêne-Lacroix, 2013). The former travel for work a few days or weeks every couple of months, or spend their weekends elsewhere, for leisure or to visit friends and relatives. The latter have a second home, sometimes in the mountains, or live part-time at their partner’s place. Recent research showed that 28% of Switzerland’s residents live in more than one place (Schad and Hilti, 2015).

Based on these observations, I suggest that home is not necessarily surrounded by a parochial realm. Firstly, it varies from one setting to another. In the fourth building, for example, the degree of acquaintanceship is higher than in the three others, and

therefore closer to Lofland's definition of the parochial realm. Secondly, the perspective varies from one individual to another, depending on how familiar their neighbours are. For many interviewees, their doorstep is the only buffer zone between the privacy of their home and the public realm. Consequently, 'stranger' takes on a different meaning. In the context of familiarity, 'stranger' might refer to a person who is 'different', or belonging to an out-group. However, within a context of reduced familiarity, stranger would rather define those 'who [are] personally unknown to the actor of reference, but visually available to him' (Lofland, 1973: 18; see also Sennett, 1992: 48).

In other words, it is the combination of physical proximity and lack of acquaintance that turns people into strangers. As Abrams and Bulmer (1986: 249) noted, 'proximity enables one's neighbours to know things about one which one might much prefer not to have known'. Because of this forced intimacy, 'wanted or not, we may have bits of intimate knowledge without strong attachment, commitment, or trust', writes Rosenblum (2016: 42). In the next section, I will analyse how they deal with this incomplete knowledge of those with whom they share an address.

#### **4.5 The tension between normalizing and fantasizing**

Throughout my fieldwork, I was surprised by how much people could say about their neighbours, with the support of the schematic representation of the building, even if they effectively knew little about them. Much of what they said consisted of trying to make sense of the little they knew by fitting it into a coherent story or character. Based on the peculiarities and the incongruities they sometimes inadvertently observed or overheard, they 'vigorously sought to make the strange actions intelligible and to restore the situation to normal appearances' (Garfinkel, 1967: 47). To do so, people built coherent stories about others, turning them into characters, with the help of suppositions and extrapolations. One

resident talked about his neighbour upstairs, a woman he sometimes heard shouting and throwing things across her apartment:

*She's an alcoholic. [A neighbour] told me how he often finds her lying in the stairwell between two floors and has to help her get to her apartment. She has a troubled past... She's also invented a dead son, allegedly, at least... That's what I heard. We just say hello. If I have to help her I do it of course, but we don't have much more contact.*

Other interviewees told similar stories about her, adding some variations about possible mental illness. Gossip helped them form a coherent story about this woman, including a justification for her behaviour (alcoholism) and a reason for her alcoholism (a troubled past). This form of storytelling made her behaviour appear if not acceptable, at least understandable.

In a famous breaching experiment led by Milgram and Sabini (1978) in the New York City subway in the 1970s, an experimenter asked commuters to give up their seats, sometimes without justifying his or her request, and sometimes explaining 'I can't read my book standing up'. One of the results was that people were more likely to give up their seat when no explanation was given. Without explanation, people figured a good one out by themselves. By attributing meaning to the social norm violation – for example by supposing that the enquirer is sick and therefore needs to sit – the violation is normalized. In our case, labelling the neighbour alcoholic and attributing to her a "troubled past" is a way of normalising her behaviour.

Normalizing does not mean endorsing, however. Barbara Misztal reminds us that the idea of 'normality' has two distinct meanings. What she calls 'situational normality' is based 'on our perception of the regularity of events and people's behaviour (its factual dimension)', while 'normative normality' is based on our

‘classification of action as rule/norm following (its normative dimension)’ (Misztal 2001: 314). Her analysis is much inspired by Goffman’s framing theory. She considers trust to be an outcome of situational normality, since trust stems from the predictability and reliability of social order, which helps reduce the complexity of a situation (for more details, refer to Blokland 2017: 103-5). The example provided above shows that an otherwise deviant, disturbing or worrying situation can become a situational normality, when it appears predictable and legitimate. Interviewees never endorsed the woman’s behaviour, but neither did they fear it.

This tendency to normalise peculiarities and incongruities points to an ‘existential need for normalcy’, coming from a ‘desire to experience continuity and from defense against the pressure to make sense of everyday situations over and over again’ (Blokland, 2017: 104 based on Goffman and Garfinkel). Giddens, for instance, underlined the necessity of ‘basic trust’, without which one would live in ‘a state of mind which could best be summed up as existential angst or dread’ (Giddens, 1991: 100). And yet, it seems that unpredictability, to a certain extent, is part of the urban environment’s attractiveness.

Living among strangers, both in the sense of ‘unknown’ and ‘different’, appears in my interviews as a desirable feature of an urban environment. A young woman from France explains that:

*The atmosphere in the streets in Geneva is different from our small town in the north of France, where most people speak in French. It is something I like here, when you’re on the bus and you hear different languages. We do not interact, but it is nice hearing it, and you feel like you are not the only foreigner.*

Because she is highly educated and belongs to a desirable category of foreigners, she might belong to the ‘new middle-class’ which is ‘more inclined to find a diverse neighbourhood attractive’



(Blokland and van Eijk, 2010: 315). As stated in the literature review, in the context of gentrification, scholars have argued that middle-class groups value a diverse neighbourhood more than other social groups, but have rather homogeneous networks. Butler, for example, condemns the category of the gentrifier that 'values the presence of others (...) but chooses not to interact with them', treating them as 'a kind of social wallpaper, but no more' (Butler, 2003: 2484). This argument raises the question of whether the attraction for the 'unknown' and the 'different' is a form of 'cultural voyeurism', and whether it contributes to the reproduction of inequalities.

Firstly, as has been argued by many scholars, there is a general trend to preserve some distance from neighbours – no matter how 'similar' or 'different' they are – as a reaction to a relatively forced physical proximity. Moreover, research on working-class (Gans, 1962: 20; Devine, 1992: 75) and on upper-middle-class groups (Andreotti et al., 2015: 165-8) has highlighted this preference for friendliness over friendships with respect to neighbours. Instead of focusing on neighbour relations, scholars have suggested investigating neighbourhood institutions like schools (Nast and Blokland, 2013) and child care centres (Small, 2009) as settings where resources are shared and social capital is built.

Secondly, individuals with more resources are indeed more likely to be "diversity seekers" (that is to mention 'diversity' as a positive feature of their neighbourhood, as in Blokland and Van Eijk, 2010). At the same time, low income groups undoubtedly have less control over the kind of diversity they live in, compared to those whose resources allow them a greater freedom in the choice of their place of residence (like the managers studied by Andreotti et al., 2015). Yet, taste is probably not as determined by class as Bourdieu argues (on Frankfurt School theorists' argument about class-obscuring mass culture, refer to Gartman, 1991) and it

cannot be assumed that low income groups have a general preference for socially or ethnically homogeneous environments, and are less able to enjoy ‘the novel, strange and surprising’ elements that a city has to offer (Young, 1990: 239).

Less educated interviewees also value diversity as a cosmopolitan experience. Far from being ‘middle class’, an unemployed woman with no degree declares that residing in her neighbourhood “feels like travelling around the world, without leaving Geneva”. As a counter-example, she points out the homogeneity of some wealthy residential neighbourhoods in Geneva, just outside of the city centre. Repeatedly, interviewees contrast their ‘vibrant’ and ‘lively’ neighbourhoods with the same residential areas, which symbolise boredom and the toxic homogeneity of a self-segregating upper middle class.

Thirdly, the debate on the preference for diversity and whether or not people’s practices reflect their discourses<sup>25</sup> mostly focuses on a conception of diversity as a mix of ethnicities and social classes. I believe, however, that the appeal of ‘diverse’ urban environments has to do with a more comprehensive form of otherness. Following my first argument, I argue that much of ‘the novel, [the] strange and [the] surprising’ which provides ‘pleasure and excitement’ (Young, 1990: 239) to urbanites stems from the typically urban combination of physical proximity and social distance, and not only from categorical differences<sup>26</sup>. Living alongside people whom one does not know personally, but with whom one shares the same

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<sup>25</sup> Blokland and van Eijk 2010, among others, suggest that they do not.

<sup>26</sup> I am using the notion of social distance in reference to how intimate two individuals are, and not to how socially similar they are, like in the Bogardus social distance scale. Typically, neighbours can feel similar and yet keep a ‘friendly distance’ that I refer to as a social distance, as opposed to physical distance.

space, provides us with a glimpse of other lives, exposing and potentially amplifying their peculiarities.

Lyn Lofland considers the fact that 'one takes pleasure in the very incompleteness of the information one is able to gather exactly because incompleteness gives reign to imagination' (1998: 81) as a source of interactional pleasure in urban life. She adds: 'we overhear or oversee just enough to catch a glimpse of enticing real-life dramas; the filling out of the drama is a work of the imagination'. She explains that she likes watching people and found herself 'amused to elaborate stories that explained the behavior [she] had witnessed' (Lofland, 1998: 91).

Columbia sociologist Peter Bearman explains what happens when a CCTV system replaces the costly doormen in New York City. During his ethnographic work, he discovered that some tenants spent 'much of their time monitoring the traffic in the lobby' on their TV. Bearman notes that 'the absence of sound recording makes lobby videos more exciting to watch, since the triviality of most interactions one can observe makes it difficult to generate more interesting theories about what might be going on. The monitors then provide a shell for the fantasy life of tenants, which is almost always more stimulating than the real life they are observing. This may be one of the reasons that it is so much fun to watch essentially nothing' (Bearman, 2009: 107-8). This argument could be supported by more accounts of 'window watchers', like Gans' working class West Enders, for whom 'watching [the] social life from the window – elbows on a pillow – was a popular spare time activity' (Gans, 1962: 21), or like Mrs Jones and her husband, who 'soon after moving in [in Brooklyn] discovered what she has come to think of as the apartment's best feature: its view into the neighbours' private lives' (Scelfo, 2009).

My interviewees provided more examples. One of them asked me if we could do the interview in her office. She had an executive

position in administration. Meeting her had not been easy, since she did not participate in the neighbours' party where I introduced myself. As we were reviewing each square of the schematic representation of her building, she pointed at the apartment next to hers and explained:

*It used to be very mysterious... We could hear someone in there, but never saw him. In many years, we saw him once, a young man. It really fed fantasies. The same goes for the couple living next to him. I find them very strange, very strange. (Me: 'what do you mean?') I don't know, but I would not be surprised to learn that they... (Silence. Me, joking: 'do drug trafficking?'). 'Even worse.' (Me: 'could they be murderers?') Yes. They are extremely polite, and nice, but always stay in the background, just like you would do if you had something to hide.*

I did not have the chance to interview the 'mysterious couple', but I met them briefly. To me, they are an unremarkable couple in their fifties and I would guess that they are Swiss, like her, and with a similar social background. Paradoxically, similarity could be the very reason why a little oddity is incomprehensible to her. If they had been of different ethnic or social background, she might have explained their behaviour by these differences. Their strangeness stems from neither clashing values or practices – like she said, she finds them very polite – nor from categorical differences.

Moreover, their strangeness partly comes from her turning a trivial situation into an interesting story. In this case too, the incompleteness of the information is key and purposeful. If she had been seriously suspicious, she could have asked one of the few neighbours she knows quite well, "the one who knows everything", as she calls him. She never asked, admitting that she enjoys the thrill of uncertainty. "It's funny, she said, all the things we can imagine about neighbours". This concluding remark also signals

that she is not entirely serious when she says her next-door neighbours might be murderers.

The story about the “alcoholic woman” and the one about the “mysterious couple” illustrate the tension that arises in the void created by lack of acquaintance. Through suppositions and imagined stories, interviewees tried on the one hand to make sense of behaviours and actions they did not fully understand, and on the other hand they managed to keep the story interesting, maintaining the illusion that they are part of an interesting and diverse urban milieu. The ‘fascinating’ experiment of living in a ‘mosaic of little worlds’ – as Park (1925: 40-41) characterises the appeal of urban life – results probably as much from lack of acquaintance creating space for imagination as from urbanites developing very distinct lifestyles.

Not all interviewees valued this definition of the urban setting as a place where ‘things happen’ and where one encounters ‘the strange’ and ‘the different’. However, it seems that stories about neighbours’ peculiarities can be entertainment for everyone, be it in the form of complaints or as an object of curiosity and interest. More importantly, it shows that the interpenetration of people’s private lives due to physical proximity is not only a downside to city living. As long as this interpenetration does not diminish our sense of privacy, and as long as ‘home’ still feels like a safe space, it may contribute to ‘the stimulus of city life’, by adding an element of ‘adventure’ (Park, 1925: 40-41).

## 4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I hope to have contributed to the ‘effort to move away from the emphasis on face-to-face interaction’ (Wilson, 2016: 9) and show the relevance of other forms of relations<sup>27</sup> with the

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<sup>27</sup> In his seminal definition of a ‘social relationship’, Max Weber suggests avoiding the reification of the concept, positing that a ‘social relationship’

more or less familiar strangers with whom we coexist on an everyday basis. In the Geneva city centre apartment buildings where I conducted this study, tenants were prompt in declaring that they do not know their neighbours; therefore, it is tempting to refer to anonymity. During interviews, however, it became clear that tenants gather, willingly or not, some knowledge of the people living alongside them. The combination of exposure due to the proximity, and distance maintained in reaction to this forced proximity, results in neighbours becoming 'strangers'.

My argument challenges the notion of this 'strangeness' being the result of a regrettable decline in neighbourliness and a threat to social cohesion (see Dunkelman, 2014). The analysis of my interviews confirms that which has been argued by other scholars for decades: tenants have limited expectations regarding their neighbours. 'Good neighbours' are at best friendly and at least do not threaten our interests and our privacy. Except when it comes to the norms governing the brief and occasional encounters, being 'similar' or 'different' is of lesser importance regarding day-to-day coexistence.

Central to neighbours' coexistence is the norm of civil inattention which involves not showing interest in the affairs of each other, so that no one feels judged or observed. However, it does not mean that neighbours ignore each other (Lofland, 1998: 31). Therefore, civil inattention should not be mistaken for an absence of relations - quite the opposite. As this chapter has aimed at showing, relations made of both long-term proximity and lack of

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exists as soon as 'the action of each [actor] takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms.' Weber also considers as a 'mutual orientation' a situation where 'even though partly or wholly erroneously, one party presumes a particular attitude toward him on the part of the other and orients his action to this expectation' (Weber 1978: 26-27). This definition would encourage one not to underestimate the importance of non face-to-face interactions and even of imagined relations.

acquaintance can be meaningful. The lack of acquaintance leaves a grey area where imagination is used to fill a gap.

I have shown that tenants deal with the incompleteness of information about their neighbours in two ways. On the one hand, they manage to frame what they learn or observe in a way that makes sense to them. In doing so, they rarely express a moral judgement but rather try to establish whether they should worry and what they should expect in the future. Labelling a woman as alcoholic, and telling a dramatic story about her past is a way of attributing meaning to past and future incidents involving her. On the other hand, interviewed tenants enjoyed generating stories that explain what might be occurring. The incompleteness of the information opens up room for fantasy and stimulation. In this way, people moved back and forth between normalising deviance and making triviality interesting.

I recognise that neither civility – be it in the form of ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman, 1971) or of ‘civility toward diversity’ (Lofland, 1998: 32) – nor attraction to diversity guarantee mutual respect and address inequalities in power and resources. However, the close proximity of tenants is not only insufficient to create this mutual respect and to overcome inequalities, but it probably even prevents it to some extent. Because ‘good neighbours’ leave each other alone, apartment buildings are not likely to work as ‘micropublics’ (2002), as Amin defines spaces where stereotypes and boundaries are overcome, and perceptions are reshaped. Yet, anyone that has been involved in neighbour conflicts – which might range from mere inconveniences to sexist and racist violence – knows that civil coexistence should not be taken for granted. The question is then whether individuals’ privately held attitudes and opinions are of more relevance than the collective achievement of peaceful coexistence. As far as neighbour relations are concerned, I think the answer is no.

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