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The need for quiet in Amsterdam: a survey

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ABSTRACT

As part of a project on possible policies for quiet areas in cities, a survey was held amongst citizens of Amsterdam. The purpose of the survey was to find out: 1) which (public) quiet places there are, according to Amsterdam residents; 2) what characterizes a 'quiet place'; 3) to what extent do residents want peace and quiet; 4) how do residents realize these needs.

The survey showed that most respondents (N = 1045) knew at least one quiet place in their neighbourhood. These were predominantly green areas (ranging from a small lawn to large city parks) and places close to water (ponds, canals, rivers). Respondents also mentioned courts, small streets and the canals in the densely built old city.

A quiet home is important for most respondents and home is the most important place to quiet down. A quiet neighbourhood is less, though still important, especially for the noise sensitive (one third of the respondents) respondents. Quietness further away, elsewhere in the city, is not that important to many respondents, even not for the noise sensitive ones. Quiet indoor and outdoor places are important to relax or recover from the city's bustle.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2008 the Amsterdam Quiet Areas project started. The project aimed to investigate the value and appreciation of quiet areas in urban agglomerations and to explore the possibilities to protect quietness in urban practice and policy. This pilot project was initiated by the Netherlands Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment and executed by a project team including persons from several departments of the city of Amsterdam. An overview of the project and its results are presented in a separate paper.¹ The present paper is about the survey amongst Amsterdam residents that was part of the project. The questionnaire questions were drafted by the project team and the survey was performed by one of the partners, the Department for Research and Statistics.

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2. SURVEY

2A Questionnaire

The aim of the survey was to understand which places in the city were considered as quiet places by Amsterdam residents and what part these places play in finding tranquillity and relaxation in the city. The survey was based on three main concepts: *peace and quiet* as a mental state, *quietness or tranquillity* as a situation without disturbing sounds and the presence of pleasant or neutral sounds, and a *place* where these can be experienced.

In the questionnaire the following items were addressed:

- Everybody has to rest now and then or needs rest to feel well. Every person has his ways and preferences how to do this. Quietness can play a part in this, but not necessarily for everybody.
How do Amsterdam residents find relaxation and rest?
 - what do people do to relax?
 - where do people go to relax?
- For tranquillity people do not go to town, but for those living in the city some peace and quiet is welcome. But does this apply to city dwellers? Didn't they choose to live in the city?
What influence does the hustle and bustle of city life have on the need for peace and quiet?
To what degree do Amsterdam residents need peace and quiet?
 - how sensitive are people to bustle and noise?
 - how busy are people in Amsterdam?
- *What are the quiet areas in the city, according to the Amsterdam residents?*
 - is or has each neighbourhood a quiet area?
 - are the urban green areas (parks, public gardens, courts) quiet areas?
 - are there paved places that are perceived as quiet?
- *What characterizes these areas, why are these areas perceived as quiet?*

2B Respondents

One of the problems of a big city survey is that there is no single method to include a representative sample of all residents, as different social and cultural groups react differently to a request to take part. There are differences in literacy, language, accessibility by a specific means of communication (telephone, internet, newspaper, mail, direct personal contact) and willingness to take part. Therefore, to achieve a response as much as possible representative for the Amsterdam population, different supplementary survey methods were used. Members of an online panel were interviewed (390 respondents), residents were taken randomly from the telephone directory (478 respondents) and finally a number of people were interviewed on the streets (177 respondents). Apart from these 1045 respondents the remaining members of the online panel were asked to only name their favourite quiet area in the city, yielding an extra 1280 responses (for only this question). In the survey women, people of Dutch origin and highly educated are slightly overrepresented when comparing the Amsterdam population.

3. RESULTS

3A. Need for quiet

Peace and quiet at home is most important for respondents: 74% find it important or very important and only 10% find it (very) unimportant (see figure 1). Peace and quiet in the neighbourhood has a lower priority, but still 50% of the respondents think it is (very) important. Peace and quiet elsewhere in the city is important to only 23% of the respondents, and 48% find it unimportant. As figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents in the older, more densely built and central part of the city that find peace and quiet important is somewhat higher than respondents in the predominantly post-war suburban parts of the city.

In response to the question “Please describe in short what you do to recover from the city’s hustle and bustle” (open question, no choices given), being at home & relaxing is the sort of answer most often given (by 24% of respondents). Second to this is going to a park, wood or beach (15%) and also cycling, sitting in the garden/on balcony, gardening, go out of town, and walking are popular (each 11%-13%).

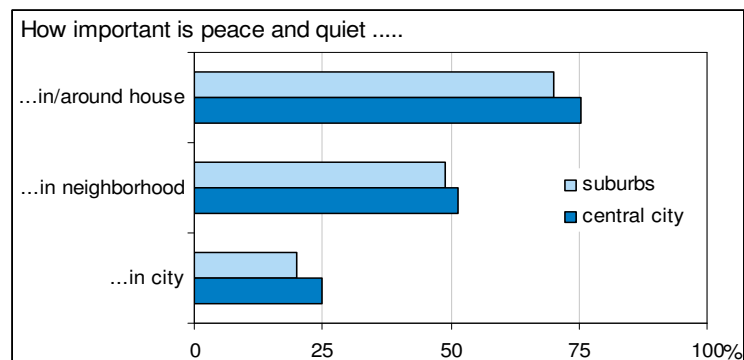


Figure 1: importance of peace and quiet in/around the house, in the neighborhood and elsewhere in the city

Of the respondents 30% feel they do not have enough leisure time, and this is more often the case for people that have children (46% vs. 22% of those without children), work (32% vs. 10% of those are unemployed) and/or are younger (35 years or less: 43% vs. 12% of 56 years and older). For 47% of those that have little leisure time peace and quiet in the neighbourhood is important, compared to 27% of those that have a lot of leisure time.

Some people are more sensitive to noise than others. Partly this comes with age: younger people are less sensitive than older people. 37% of the respondents said they were (very) sensitive to noise. For younger people this is 25% but for those aged over 35 almost 40% is sensitive to noise. Noise (in)sensitivity per age group is plotted in figure 2. As figure 3 shows, for people who are sensitive to noise, quietness at home and in the neighbourhood is more important than it is for people who are not sensitive to noise.

When taking noise sensitivity into account, other factors such as age, gender, education, having children, being employed or having sufficient leisure time do not determine the need for quiet. Age in itself only has an influence because young people are less noise sensitive than older people.

Sensitivity to noise appears to be not only the most important factor in the need for quiet, but also in knowing to

find a quiet place and being interested in quiet places. Respondents that were noise sensitive also thought relaxing activities to be more important.

When at home about one in five respondents is disturbed or annoyed by noise from road or air traffic and less than one in ten by rail traffic. As some of the suburban areas are below air routes to/from Amsterdam Schiphol

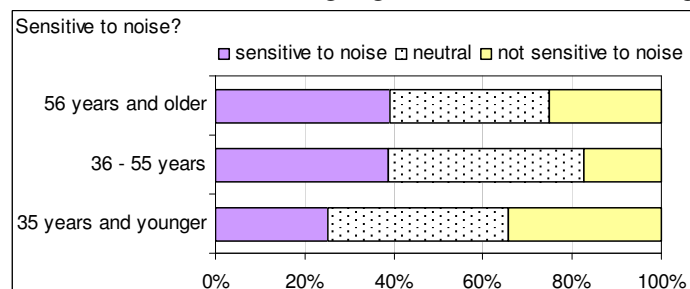


Figure 2: sensitivity to noise by age groups

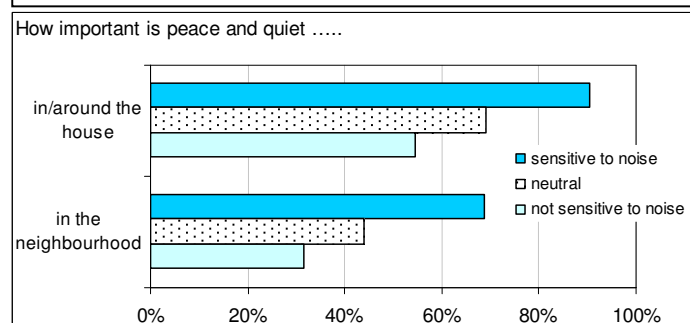


Figure 3: influence of noise sensitivity on importance of peace and quiet at home and in neighbourhood

Airport, there is more annoyance caused by aircraft noise in the suburbs than there is in the central part of the city (see figure 4). For the other noise sources a somewhat larger proportion of respondents in the central part of the city seem to be disturbed compared to respondents in the suburbs.

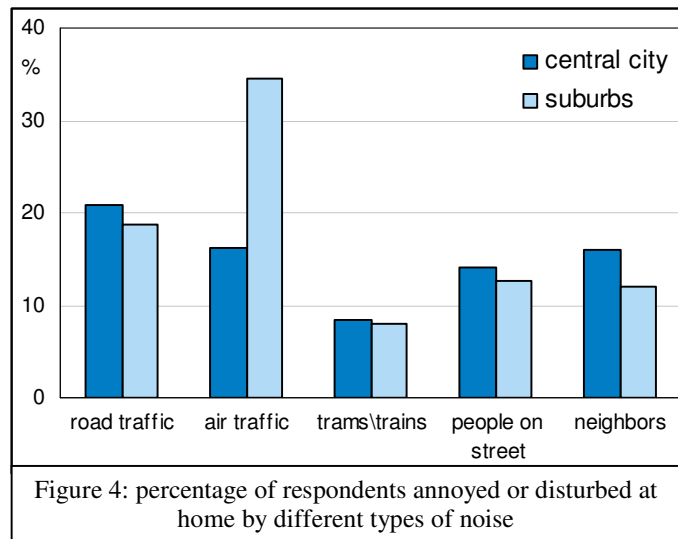
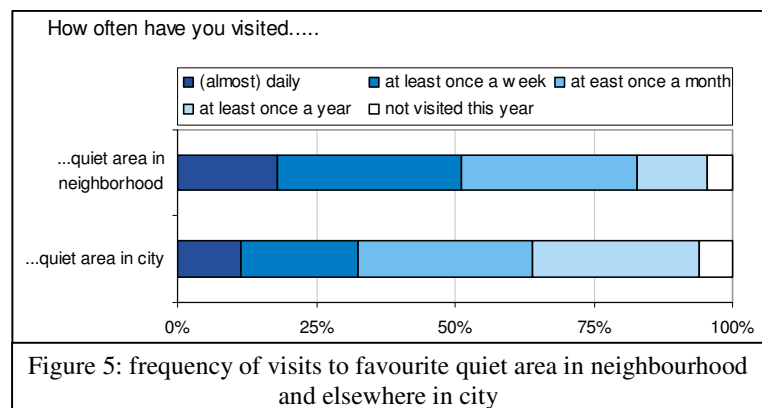
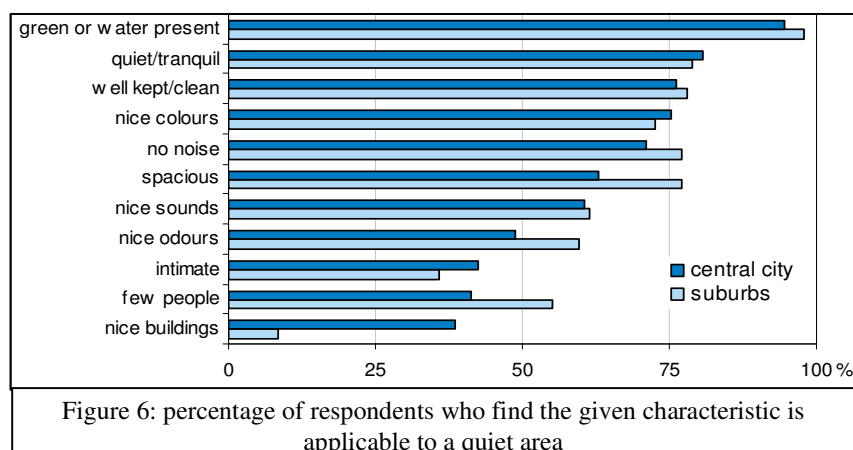


Figure 5 shows the response to the question how often respondents visited the quiet area in their neighbourhood (at walking distance from home) they most liked to visit or elsewhere in the city. It shows that a quiet area in the neighbourhood is more often visited (51% at least once a week) than a quiet area elsewhere in the city (32%).



3B. Characteristics of quiet places

Respondents were asked what characterized the nearby quiet area (at walking distance from home) they most liked to visit. They could rate the importance of eleven different descriptions. In figure 6 the percentages of respondents are shown who thought that the description did apply entirely or in part.



When asked what they preferred to do in a quiet area, choosing from seven items, most items were mentioned by the majority of respondents (figure 7). Only reading and picnicking/talking/being together scored below 50%. In figure 7 the response is plotted for three categories of noise sensitivity of respondents: (very) sensitive, neutral, and (very) insensitive. It

shows that noise sensitive people find quiet areas more important for relaxing activities than not sensitive people do. This is not or less the case for feeling free/no obligations and picnicking/talking/being together.

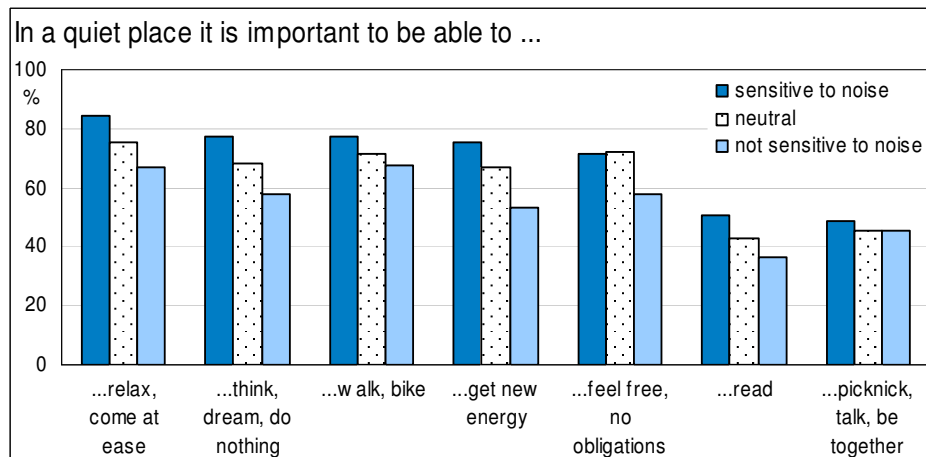


Figure 7: importance for quiet area with respect to fulfillment of personal needs

3C. Quiet areas in the city

80% of the respondents could mention a quiet place in their neighbourhood. Fewer city centre inhabitants (63%) and fewer people of primary education level (66%) knew a quiet place in their neighbourhood. The most often mentioned and perhaps most iconic quiet

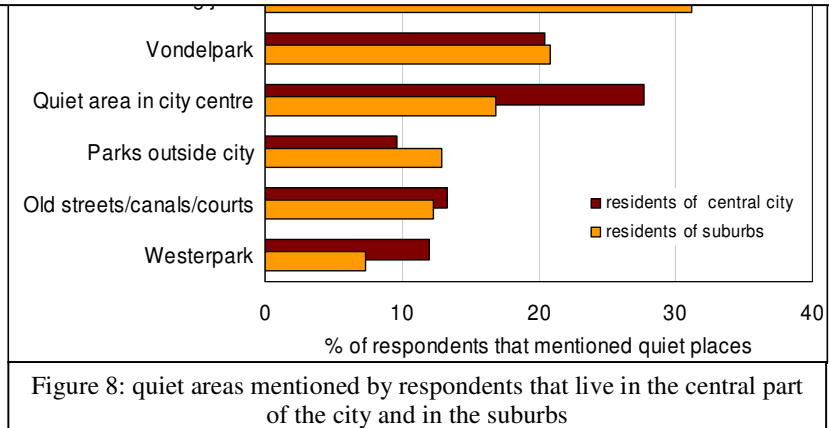


Figure 8: quiet areas mentioned by respondents that live in the central part of the city and in the suburbs

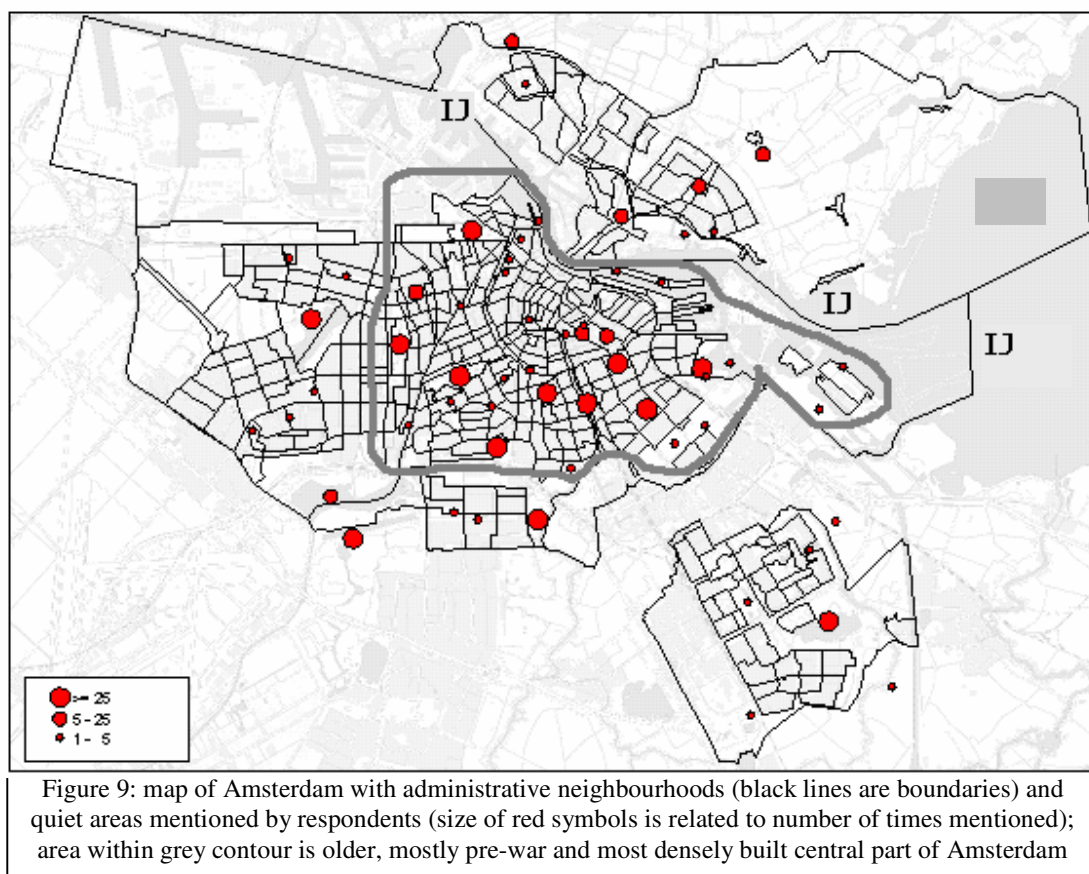
place in the city is in the heart of the city centre: the Begijnhof (Beguine's Court). This courtyard with the chapel of the 'Beguines' is just around the corner of the busiest shopping street of the city. City centre dwellers think of this less often as a quiet area, perhaps because of the number of visiting tourists they always see there. Second favourite is the Vondelpark, most of it lying between old houses on quiet streets, but with one end next to a main street and the Leidseplein area, one of the top entertainment centres. Figure 8 shows the percentage of respondents that mentioned a specific area or a specific type of area. Here respondents are classified into those that live in the central part of the city (the mostly pre-war part within the city's ring road) and those that live in the suburban areas.

Respondents could mention a quiet area 2315 times, distinguishing 145 specific areas. Some were mentioned very often, such as the Begijnhof (423 times), Vondelpark (232) and Westerpark (126 times), but most (≈ 100) were mentioned by no more than five respondents. Most of the quiet places mentioned are green places: small and larger parks and recreational areas and along ponds, canals and rivers. A map with all areas is shown in figure 9. A map including the noise contours from transportation and industry is presented in another paper¹ and is published on the Amsterdam digital maps website: www.atlas.amsterdam.nl (in folder Stille Gebieden, in Dutch only).

The quiet places in Amsterdam can be categorized in four types:

- areas with nice colours, sounds and smells; respondents mentioning such an area –parks, the botanical garden or zoo- often visit it and want to renew their energy
- spacious areas with nice architecture; respondents mentioning such an area -modern architecture next to the broad water surface of the IJ- find the feeling of being free important.
- abandoned areas with no people around; most of these places –big parks and agricultural areas- are at the edge of the city and in quiet hours one hardly meets other people.
- spacious and green areas; here spaciousness again is important, but in combination with vegetation, not buildings; these are the medium sized parks in the city and the green zones along waterways.

The map in figure 9 shows that most quiet areas are in the central part of the city, which is the busiest and most densely built part. Many of the places mentioned are parks, but especially in the central part there are also quiet ‘havens’ such as small and quiet streets, courts and squares.



4. CONCLUSION

The survey results show that residents in Amsterdam find peace and quiet important: most so in and around the house, but also in the neighbourhood, and least so elsewhere in the city. In the suburbs, parts of which are below aircraft routes to Schiphol International Airport, sounds from aircraft is what most disturbs respondents in their home. Sounds from road traffic, people on the street, and neighbours disturb less respondents.

Respondents sensitive to noise find the availability of quietness clearly more important than those not sensitive to noise. This sensitivity is age related: 25% of the respondents aged 35 or less think of themselves as (very) sensitive, but 39% of the older respondents do (in age groups 36-55 and 56 and up).

Most respondents find a quiet place important as a place where they can relax, think or dream, get new energy or feel without obligations, or walk or cycle. Again, respondents sensitive to noise find this more important than those not sensitive to noise.

Most respondents could name a quiet area in the city. Some of the 145 quiet places were mentioned by hundreds of respondents, most (≈ 100) by less than a handful. Half of the respondents visited a quiet area at least once a week.

Outdoor quiet places are predominantly green or blue (water) areas. City parks and places next to water were mentioned most often. In the central parts of the city also quiet streets and small courts and squares are important: quiet havens in the hustle and bustle of the city.

REFERENCES

- [1] Van den Berg F, Brand A, "Recommendations for public quiet places in Amsterdam", *Proc. Euronoise2009, Edinburgh* (2009)