

University of Groningen

The relationship between the neighborhood built environment and physical activity

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Acknowledgements

When you are about to arrive at the end of a road, you cannot help but look back to the starting point. It was not a rainy day, which meant good weather in Groningen. I cycled to the OB34 building to have my PhD interview meeting with my potential supervisor. I was told the meeting room was on the second floor, but I spent time searching on the first floor because I was still very new to the European floor counting system. Luckily, I found the room on time. That day became the starting point of my PhD journey. Five years later, I am now standing here looking at the finish line, and I say to myself: hey, you have grown into a better self! And all the positive changes would not happen without a solid and caring support team.

I want to thank Prof. Cor Wagenaar, the potential supervisor I just mentioned, who later became my PhD supervisor. You introduced me to the world of 'Healthy urban planning,' the field I have been working on for five years and still find fascinating. You gave me guidance and also left room for me to grow. You showed care when I encountered difficulties. When I had the hesitation before conducting the fieldwork, you encouraged me to go ahead. When I experienced uncertainty during Covid times, you met me online to not only supervise my research but also tell me to go outside, walk more, and take good care. What I learned from you was more than academics-related. Your sense of humor made our meetings delightful and relaxing, and I hope I picked up some. You also taught me the importance of work-life balance. The fact that you introduced me to *La Chouffe* can be a very good example.

I also want to thank my co-supervisor Dr. Terry van Dijk. You joined us a bit later, but definitely not less. Meeting supervisors can be stressful, but I enjoyed every bi-weekly meeting with you. Those meetings efficiently helped with my writing process and also relaxed me through discussions with you. That's why the day you told me that 'Yufang, this will be our last meeting,' I was filled with mixed feelings: happy and relieved that most things were done, and also sad that there would be no such meetings anymore. Besides academic talks, you gave practical time management and travel suggestions. You told me as an urban planner, I need to take vacations and see real cities. I also enjoyed our

casual talks, especially when you introduced me to all your pet friends! It was also fun and nice that you tried to talk a bit in Chinese with me.

Also, great thanks to the ZonMw project team members, Prof. Menno Reijneveld and Dr. Jolanda Tuinstra from the UMCG, Prof. Manda Broekhuis from the faculty of Economics and Business, Dr. Stefan van der Spek from the Delft University of Technology, Marieke Zwaving from the Municipality of Groningen, Derk den Boer the chairman of the Paddepoel neighborhood council, and many others. You together made such a good team. Even though I was not a formal member, I gained a lot from working with you. Not only the academic and planning knowledge but also your kindness and care facilitated my PhD research. And I was lucky to make some really good friends on the team.

Dear Marijke Koene, It was November 2018 when Cor introduced you as my office mate. I didn't know by then how close we would become and how much support I would get from you. Soon after, we could already share many things despite our cultural differences. I remember the days we went for Cappuccinos in the city, the hours and hours we spent talking about all those small things. You became the one I could call when there was an emergency, and you would get me immediately. You kept me well-accompanied through my PhD journey, and I am happy to have you as my paranymp.

I want to thank my other paranymp, Patrick Klinik. We have known each other for five years. Interestingly, I found our friendship was built upon coffee - it was several coffee meets that got us to know each other better. Now I enjoy the Wednesday coffee gatherings you organize. We work in the same academic field, so you can easily understand me. There was this period we both struggled with our theses. It was not pleasant in general, but nice to have someone who could relate. Thank you for trusting and being supportive. Also, I liked the coffee and cake you got for my birthday!

I appreciate the help I got during my fieldwork. Thank Gaojing, He, Siwei, Yayi, and some local community members, who helped me collect data. Some respondents wrote 'good luck with your survey' on returned questionnaires. I appreciate their kindness. Also, thank the company De Zwarte Hond for making the urban analysis maps and the spatial expertise center of the University of Groningen for helping with gathering the GIS data.

Doing a PhD is a lonely journey. Therefore, I am grateful to have some PhD friends to share the joy and pain. Xiaoming, it's lucky to have you experiencing the same PhD stage as me, so we can easily relate. And thanks for inviting me to the trip to Iceland. I enjoyed it a lot! I also liked going to Heidelberg with He and Meng. I needed a vacation more than I realized, and you made it happen. Bo, Dejian, Jane, Jelle, Pauline, Robin, and Yang, thank you for generously sharing your experiences in doing research. And I appreciate the accompany of my Chinese friends Minmin, Shuai, Shun, Wangzhao, Xiaoyan, and many more.

Thank my dear neighbors Liping and Junjie, Kun and Xiangyuan. Those hotpots we had on the Chinese holidays made those days festive. Liping, we both graduated from the same university in Beijing and came to Groningen to do a PhD. More coincidentally, we share our birthdays! Thank you for inviting me over for a birthday celebration every year. Those are precious memories. And I wish your adorable kids Yulan and Zhijian grow up happy and healthy.

It's lucky to have a group of people that support you, let alone have two structured support groups. I thank the people in the PhD support group from the University of Groningen, who provided me with great mental support and valuable practical suggestions for carrying on my work: the group leader Annerieke, and group members Marleen, Osmaa, Pir, and Welmoed. I am also grateful for getting back in touch with my Chinese support group during the Covid times. Thank the group leader Jianxin and our lovely group members for their support. Besides, I also want to thank my running coach Rink and his wife Jani, for their kindness and help over the previous years.

The table tennis club *Idéfix* is an important part of my life in Groningen. The structured practices every week were a nice distraction for me from work and kept me living a healthy and sporty lifestyle. More importantly, I met nice people in the club. Coach Cramer introduced me to the regional table tennis tournaments, so I got the chance to win a champion trophy! Simone and Omar, who I spent a great board year with. Our cute club members who kept my Monday and Wednesday evenings filled with sweat and laughter: Benji, Benji2.0, Flavio, Hongyu, Hui, Ilia, Jacco, Jan, Jasper, Kaatje, Kyriakos, Luca, Marijn, Nadia, Renate, Ronald, Sander, Simon, Shuyao, Tuan, and many others. My *Idéfix* 3 competition teammates: David, Deanne, Niki, Thomas, and Tim,

thank you for making my last several months in Groningen fulfilling and fun!

The previous two years were the Covid years and also the last stage of my PhD, and my life was filled with more challenges and doubts than usual. Therefore, it meant a lot to me to be friends with two *Idéfixers*, Bas and Evan. When I was almost cut off from social lives due to Covid, those movie nights with you and Ilja cheered me up and brought me a sense of belonging. And I would not forget the accompany of the kitties Nala and Kiara! Soon it's time for 'bye' since we will live in three different countries, but let us say 'see you later' instead.

Thank my mom and dad for their support and trust in my decisions and the things I chose to do. Since I was little, they have told me that 'I am their proud,' only until recent years have I realized how precious that is. It must be difficult for them to live several thousand miles away from their only child for years, but they trust and respect my decisions no matter what. Mom and dad, I am also proud to have you as my parents.

I want to thank Chen, my significant other and my closest friend. You are someone I can talk to whenever there are ups and downs. You are the person I want to share every nice little thing with. I still remember the day I got my key to my office room. We were both so happy only because my room number 025 was the same as yours. These moments lighted me up. In the last two years, we have been more than 8.000 km away from each other, but the distance didn't weaken us. Because you were always there for me, and I hope you felt likewise. I am also grateful for your caring family. And happy anniversary!

Last but not least, I want to express my fondness for the city Groningen. Since the very beginning, I have liked the city. I even never hated the weather – which says a lot. I like the cute coffee places, crowded university library, everywhere bikes, surprisingly appeared rainbow... But eventually, it comes down to people. It's the smiles I saw when cycling, the compliments I got for my backpack, and the cheers I received for each small and big achievement that made Groningen *gezellig* to me. I dedicate this book to every kind heart I met on the way.

Forum Groningen, the Netherlands

18th February 2023