

“To know the Path is to Rule the System”: Case Study – New Town Almere (NL)

Ir. Peter de Bois

Delft University of Technology
Faculty of Architecture
Urbanism and Building Sciences
Berlageweg 1 P O Box 5043
Delft
2600 GA
The Netherlands

Tel: +31 152 785 964

Email: p.g.debois@tudelft.nl

Co-Author: Ir. Karen Buurmans

ABSTRACT

The discrepancy between serial planning and vital city

The Dutch New Town of Almere does not exist in the capacity of “city”. It is a collection of mono-functional, introverted elements with little interaction or coherence and few distinguishing qualities as to their internal organisation. Almere is the result of a singularly efficient house-construction engine. However, the existing structure, the urban “frame”, lacks an integrating “intranet” of paths and places that facilitates an optimum implementation of both public and private investments.

Throughout different levels of scale little exchange occurs, there is no overlap and flows of people and goods rarely coincide which prevents socio-economical spin-off from taking its natural and self-evident course.

Even though sometimes – and in case of New Town Almere, literally been built on New Land, inevitably – the situation underlying large scale urban developments appears “tabula rasa”, there never truly is a question of a contextual vacuum. Plans and designs are always, irrevocably, the result of (con)temporary social considerations, ideology, on the one hand and economical production motives on the other.

New Towns are a special category in the field of spatial planning and design. They are bound by a number of very specific characteristics that are determining for their genesis, design and functioning, both short and long term. Planners and designers naturally gravitate towards a spatial concept that aims at facilitating similarities, consensus and the social average instead of distinction and potential conflict.

In the case of Almere, the notions of that time concerning green, space, social coherence and traffic safety were vital to the town’s lay-out. Predominating motivation for choices made sprang from an enforced to extremes spatial-programmatic compartmentalisation, a progressive division of territory into ever smaller units, from the highest to the lowest level of scale. Infill of these “bite-size chunks” consisted of primarily architectonical quirks.

The lack of really distinguishing factors causes both public and private investments to scatter incoherently if they even occur at all. For, where do opportunities lie when every district, neighbourhood, street in essence is the same, clear and without conflict? But therefore also static, singular and confined within the original design parameters? Where can be found the exception, coincidence, encounter that distinguishes places, charges them with potential? In this respect, the town is not legible for its inhabitants, users and potential investors. The assignment that follows upon realisation of the original plans therefore concerns the following questions: how does the existing “Frame” of the city (the system of public spaces such as streets, squares, parks etc.) facilitate the necessary socio-economic dynamics of its use and users? And what interventions should be implemented in order to initiate corresponding self-generating processes that are so specific to the notion of “urbanity”, vital city?

Key Words: planning, transformation, intranet