

# Almere New Town: Dutch Planners Get it Right

David P. Varady

# Historical Overview

- Situated in the province of Flevoland and in the Amsterdam metropolitan area. After WWII housing was needed for the growing population of Amsterdam and two were planned in the polders.
- The town of Oostelijk Flevoland became Lelystad and the town of Zuidelijk Flevoland was called Zuidweststad (South West City) on the first sketches.
- In the 1970s it became Almere, after the early medieval name of the Zuiderzee.
- Designers of Almere drew their inspiration from garden towns of England
- In 1976 the first inhabitants occupied the area.

# Demographics

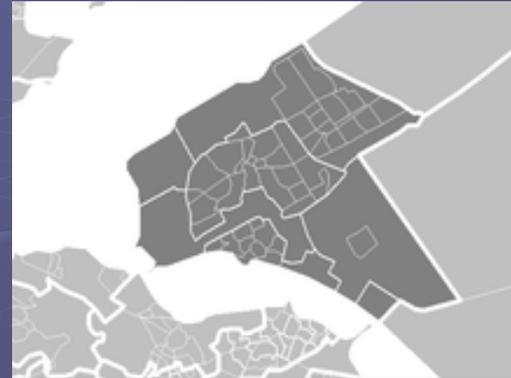
- Almere has a population of more than 188,000 residents making it the fifth largest city in the Raandstad.
- In 2007, the city council of Almere made agreements with the government to expand the city to 350,000 inhabitants by 2030.
- Diversity is high with a 27% foreign-born population. About 10% of the total population is Surinamese.
- The proportion of single mothers and the elderly is increasing.

# Planning Flexibility and Citizen Participation

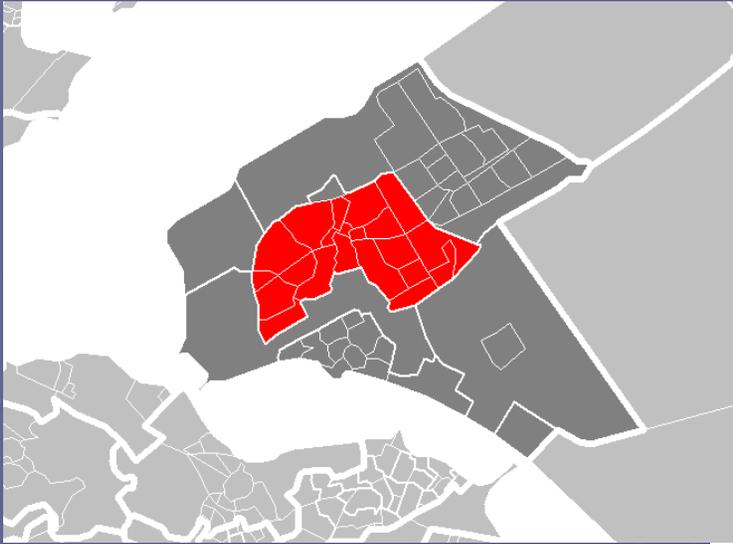
- Planners were unsure of what people wanted so they laid out several cores: Almere-Haven, Almere-Stadt, Almere-Buiten, Almere-Hout, and Almere-Poort
- The different cores reflect changing architectural and town planning ideas over the last 30 years.
- Two neighborhoods, “Fantasy” and “Reality” which were originally designed with temporary housing were so successful that the buildings are still standing
- Driven by the motto ‘Ik bouw mijn huis in Almere/ I build my house in Almere’, the idea is to deliver a more complex, unpredictable, and spontaneous city than the carefully engineered and controlled one of the present.
- In 2001, a third exposition was held in Elendenbuurt (part of Almere-Buiten) to get occupants involved in the design of their homes.
- A large number of architects have been involved in particular neighborhood developments; In some neighborhoods, each house is different. (This is similar to Amsterdam Docklands).

# Planning for Almere Centrum

- Although Almere is within commuting distance of Amsterdam, planners have sought to locate white and blue collar jobs in the city for residents.
- The center of Almere is being designed by Rem Koolhaas of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA).
- Shops, houses, pedestrian streets and squares are located on the upper level (the plateau)
- Vehicle parking and a bus station are located on the lower level.



Almere's location



Almere Centrum in Almere Stadt



Almere is less than half hour away from Amsterdam, Schipol Airport and Utrecht



Almere's main shopping street includes department stores typically found in US malls (H&M, C&A) as well as others likely to be found at distinct "big box" locations in the US. Toys XL sounds a bit like Toys R' Us.



Housing over shops helps to make such a high density of shopping, and so much variety, possible.



Unexpected street scenes, with cutting-edge buildings next to street stalls and markets, make Almere a fascinating place to visit or shop in.





I don't think you can find a Horn and Hardart cafeteria in New York City anymore (left) , but you can find an automat in Almere.



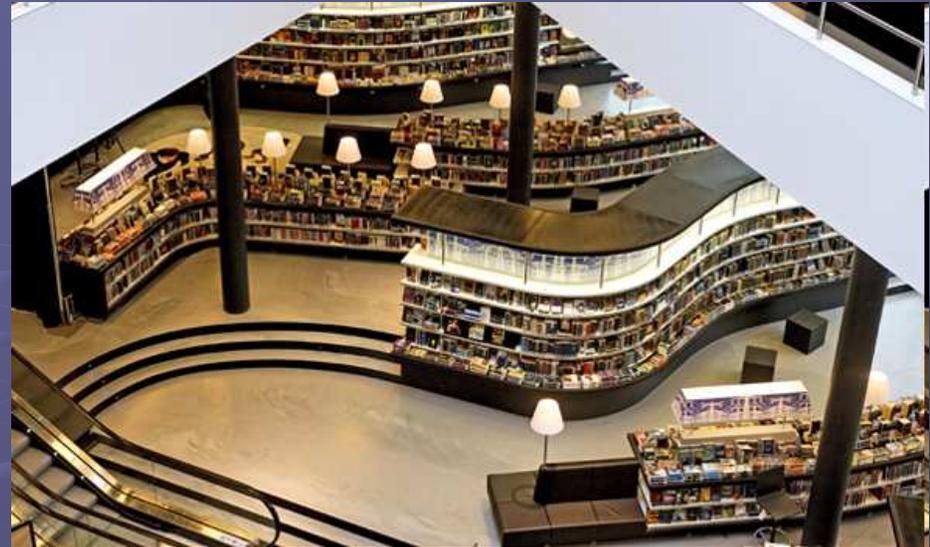
Hema, the ubiquitous mid-level Dutch retailer, makes a design statement. In most Dutch cities the Hema is in a very modest structure.



**Utopolis Almere, a movie theatre, was designed by  
Rem Koolhaas / OMA**



City officials thoughtfully have left beach chairs out for tourists and shoppers interested in taking in a little sun. When NYC closed off part of Broadway it provided chairs too.



As in the US city officials use the new library to “sell” the city.



Portal to the sea.



De Zoetelaar contains the types of unique “low-end” stores and restaurants, some serving an ethnic clientele, that one does not normally see in an American mall.



Ed's was the name of the lunchroom I ate at when I went to Penn; the name connotes a working class clientele. Garuda appeals to a variety of immigrant groups.



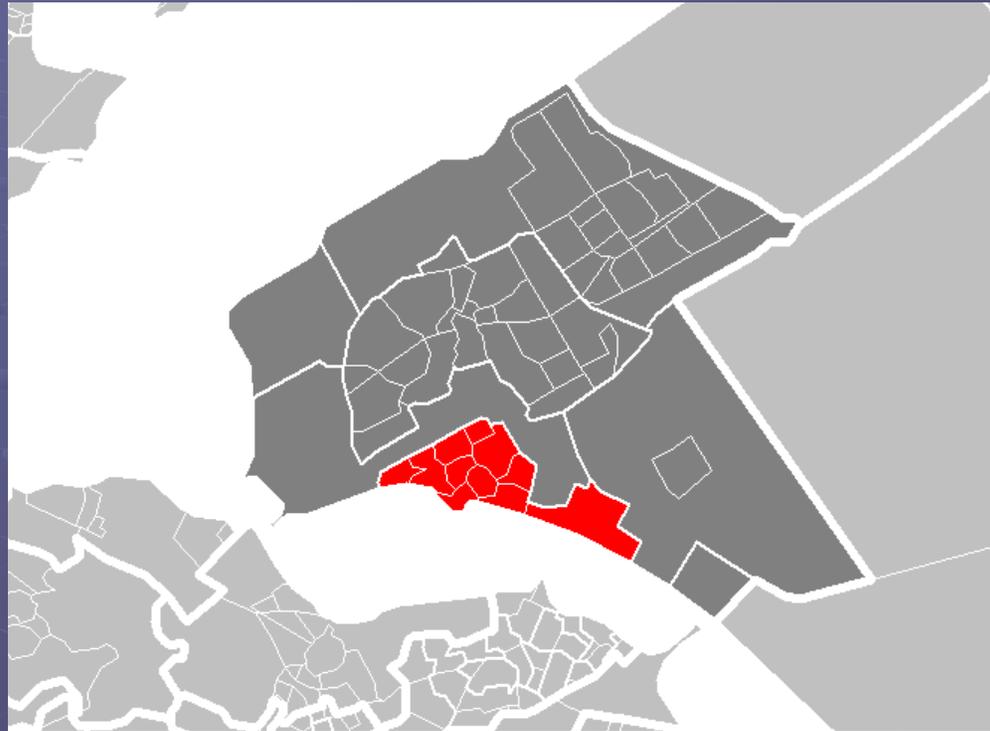
The day we visited the Grote Market was not Market Day so it was vacant except for this Vietnamese lunch truck.



Almere is economically and socially sustainable because it offers jobs for many of middle-class residents.



Getting from Almere Centrum to Almere Stadt is a breeze. These double busses run every five minutes from Centrum and run in their own designated bus lanes. One can live in Almere without a car but having a bike would sure be nice.



**Almere Haven**, the oldest part of Almere has a small harbor with ferry connections to the Dutch mainland,



Almere Haven contains the ubiquitous Albert Heijn grocery but also many specialty shops that one would hope to find in a large city—but which are often no longer present.



The harbor. What more could you want if you like boating?

# Conclusions

- Almere can be considered a success.
- It is now a city of about 190,000 with plans for continued expansion to 350,000 by 2030.
- Middle-class families with children have flocked to Almere because it offers the opportunity to pursue a suburban life style but with access to a highly urbane environment in the town center.
- Cutting-edge architecture has played a critical role in “selling the city.”
- Equally important is the utilization of a flexible, opportunistic planning process involving citizens in various ways.
- There is much that American planners can learn from Almere.