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(accessory illustrations are available on demand)

**BIJLMEER / COMPRESSED URBANISM
(the subtitles refer to illustrations during the lecture)**

1. Bijlmer demands happiness

Bijlmermeer, part of the South-eastern extension of Amsterdam, was conceived in the fifties of the last century, designed in the sixties, built and inhabited in the seventies; it ran into trouble in the eighties, was redesigned in the nineties; redevelopment is currently in full swing and if all goes according to plan, that job will be finished in the zero years of our present century.

To understand what is going on, what the Bijlmermeer means to its inhabitants, to Amsterdam and to the Netherlands in general, one has to evoke the past, follow the biography of this very special district and assess its present shape to get some inkling about what its future may be.

2. title

What I will do in this lecture is first of all to give you a short history of the Bijlmermeer and what were the ambitions of its founders. Secondly I will tell you what went wrong, why it ran into trouble and what came up to do about that. That will be the main part of my story. Thirdly I will tell something about the urban redevelopment of the Bijlmermeer itself. I will show you how the various neighbourhoods of the Bijlmer are being transformed and how the centre of Amsterdam - South-east is becoming a regional centre in its own right. I will also add a few words on the organisation and the financial engineering of this redevelopment. I will then conclude with the evaluation of this urban redevelopment project and give some thoughts on the perspectives for the Bijlmermeer in the future.

3. regional context

The South-eastern extension of Amsterdam was conceived in the nineteen fifties. It had become clear by then that the famous General Extension Plan of Amsterdam of 1935 would not offer enough capacity for city growth. As the growth of population went up and urban densities went down, as compared with the forecasts of the thirties, a sizeable urban extension of some 100.000 inhabitants was thought to be necessary.

Regionally Amsterdam South-east is neatly linked to national and regional road and railroad networks and directly connected to the urban core of Amsterdam by a subway system, at that time a completely new type of transport for Dutch cities. South-east is also embedded nicely into the surrounding landscape that features natural rivers and historical canals of high recreational value. Nothing wrong with the concept on this level of design.

4. Amsterdam Southeast

The original plan for the Bijlmer as part of Southeast may be seen as an excellent example of modernist urban design. It has surely been the ambition of the urban development office of Amsterdam to produce a plan that would fit into the great planning tradition of that city, a plan that in its modern approach could be compared to the famous General Extension Plan. The well known modernist approach to urban design is to construct the urban fabric with regard to the functional interaction of four main components: places to live, to work and to spend leisure time as well as the space needed to move around. The original design is according to modernist principles of integration of landscape and housing in areas of leisure, spaces to relax; and integration of infrastructure and business and commerce as networks of production, spaces to work. This integrated approach to a modern urban environment is consistently followed through all levels of design.

On the scale of the city one sees the interaction between city and landscape by the use of urban bands penetrating into the rural environment, leaving large green wedges that penetrate deeply into the city. On the scale of the South-east extension as such one sees economic development wedged between major national roads and railroads in the west and social development on the soft side of the landscape in the east.

On the scale of the Bijlmermeer as an urban district, integration is attained by introducing two levels of urban presence. On the ground level one finds a landscape of leisure, a park like environment crisscrossed by footpaths and cycle tracks. On the first floor the network for motorized transport is available interconnecting the commercial centres in the neighbourhoods and the main commercial district of South-

east at the same time as connecting the high-rise apartment blocks in the park via parking garages to these neighbourhood centres and the road network.

On the scale of the building integration is attained by conceiving the apartment blocks as series of individual towers with some 30 to 40 dwellings per elevator. These give easy access to what were aptly if rather matter of fact named 'dry-walks', that is open corridors or arcades, really halfway between ground level and first floor, giving direct access to the park on one side and to several social and cultural facilities on the other; a new interpretation of a street in a neighbourhood.

5. typical highrise environment (1)

At that time, I am referring to the early sixties now, high rise apartments with elevators were considered to be quite a luxury, compared to the traditional four-story walk-ups elsewhere in the city, even in the modern Western Garden Cities. High-rise apartments also offered the opportunity of a more park-like leisure environment as against the rather lifeless common gardens in the traditional four-story parcellation, that offer green spaces only to look at, not to play in. With the rise of the motorcar in the sixties and people nor the city yet accustomed to the dangers of motor traffic, the plan for the Bijlmermeer aimed to solve this problem at the root by allowing no interaction whatsoever between pedestrians and motorised vehicles.

6. Gaasperplas, a regional park

In the normative approach, typical for modernist urbanism, there is a hierarchy of facilities, according to the size of the population that is needed to let it function, either socially or economically and, of course, preferably both at the same time. Thus there are norms for education from kindergarten up to university, for public health from individual physician to academic medical centre, for corner shop to shopping mall, and so forth. This normative approach also is applied to the amount of green space an urban dweller is entitled to, from public playing fields in the neighbourhood via district - and city parks up to regional and national parks and landscapes. Like the commercial centre in the west, southeast has a huge park in the south. It is created around an artificial lake, used as a sandpit to cover the whole south eastern extension with a layer of sand, a necessity in the weak soil of these wet polders.

7. clearance site

Now why, with all this energy and creativity invested in what was to be a striking example of modern urbanism, did this dream not come true? Why did the proverbial nightingale, that inhabitants of the Bijlmermeer might listen tot from their balconies, promised by the brochures of municipality and housing corporations, not materialize?

What went wrong?

For indeed, things wrong more ore less right from the start. The first inhabitants moved in at the end of November, 1968. Already in January 1969 they held their first protest meeting. Many would follow. In 1982, less than fifteen years after the start, the Municipal Council of Amsterdam set up a Project office Highrise Bijlmermeer to tackle mounting problems. In 1985 the vacancies in the flats reached an all-time high of 25%. Something indeed went seriously wrong.

What went wrong? As you may guess when something goes seriously wrong there is not one and only one reason. Many things went wrong or at least not as expected. And as all of these interacted, one will never be sure what triggered what.

Nevertheless, one can never hope to find a remedy for all these ailments and complaints if one does not analyse what exactly is the problem and what causes it.

From all the many years of discussion on this subject, I think five main causes of the problems that the Bijlmermeer encountered can be distilled.

8. typical highrise environment (2)

First of all, there are flaws in the design, aggravated by economizing on its execution in reality. A clear example is the difference between the original concept of the high-rise apartments and the real thing. The concept was an apartment block consisting of a series of towers, one elevator per 40 dwellings, a common dry walk or arcade, lined by social and cultural facilities and an open access to the park outside. The real thing became common gallery apartments with one elevator per 120 dwellings, a closed corridor on the first floor, mainly lined by small apartments with no access to the park outside. As the arcade to be used by many became an enclosed corridor that felt scary and began to stink, what was envisaged as a nice walk of a few hundred meters to a neighbourhood centre and your car, in reality had become a half mile

dreary distance between your front door and a decrepit concrete garage. And this, mind you, is just but one example.

9. private commercial initiative

Second, the concept of community organisation that was part and parcel of the urban concept proved to be utopian. In a way, to simplify the matter in a rather black-and-white scheme, the inhabitants of the Bijlmer were expected to spontaneously organize their whole social and cultural life together as soon as the facilities became available. People were expected to have a high level of self-organizing capacity they could sustain on a voluntary basis. This concept succeeded only locally and temporarily.

10. a flat

Third, the housing corporations had their doubts on the manageability of these high rise blocks from the very beginning. The buildings were so large that many small corporations would have to cooperate in maintenance and administration. This they did not like. And, later on, many of them did prove indeed not to be able to. Generally speaking, the urban concept of the Bijlmermeer posed quite a lot of problems with regard to maintenance. I will give just two examples.

The many long corridors in the apartment blocks could not be normally policed, because they were private property, but the housing corporation did have no doormen or caretakers, as this was not provided for in subsidy-regulations for social housing.

The large public parks had to be maintained by the municipality whereas in the four storey walk-ups the gardens were owned or leased by the housing corporations and maintained by them. So the concept of the Bijlmermeer was not only completely new in its physical organisation of urban space but also in its organisation of maintenance and its allocation of administrative and financial responsibilities. Some of them have not been overcome to this very day, such as garbage collection in the apartment blocks.

11. garbage thrown over balconies

Fourth, the population that had been foreseen for the Bijlmermeer was the 'modern skilled labourer' that was the icon of modernist social democracy. In the fifties we did not yet live in a consumer society and people were not yet referred to as consumers nor thought of as clients of governments. They were seen as producers economically, working to earn a living; and socially, participating in society to maintain democratic government. And indeed, this type of inhabitants did show up in the beginning.

But when Surinam became independent in 1975, many thousands of its inhabitants preferred to remain inhabitants of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. They flew to Amsterdam. The Bijlmermeer, at that time still completing new apartment blocks that had not yet been up for rent, offered an opportunity to settle. This solved a problem for the migrants themselves as well as for local and central government that had to cater for these refugees from independence.

12. high in the air

One can scarcely imagine what the culture shock must have been for these new inhabitants to have to live in this cold climate in high rise apartments, severed from their home country and many of their family and friends, living in a brand new district not yet integrated in the urban fabric of Amsterdam and isolated from the ground in their anonymous flat somewhere high up.

Of course these refugees from Surinam and, later on, also from the Antilles, had no easy access to the labour market either. Even if language was no serious problem, they missed all the connections and information anybody born and living in the same society all her life normally has and will use naturally, that is unconsciously.

So, in the years following the independence of Surinam, the population of the Bijlmer shifted by and by from white and working to black and unemployed.

13. high rents, few neighbours

To sum up, the trouble the Bijlmer ran into right from the start was a combination of revolutionary urban design, an utopian view on human society, a lack of experience in management and maintenance of such an experiment and a completely unexpected population, quite unfamiliar with Dutch society; a population that, uprooted and having to survive in a society that was mainly indifferent to its fate, had other priorities in life than to invest socially in an urban experiment of Amsterdam. The sheer size of the project in combination with its experimental character is probably the main cause of its undoing.

14. drifting on a raft

The eighties saw various initiatives to tackle what had become one of the main headaches of the municipality: how to overcome the mounting social problems of the Bijlmermeer and the bad reputation it had. The Dutch media always took the Bijlmermeer as the example of everything that can go wrong in urban design, the outstanding example of technical arrogance neglecting social reality. At the end of the eighties all initiatives, interventions, discussions and proposals had boiled down to what may be considered the heart of the matter: should Amsterdam treat the Bijlmermeer for what it was, the least attractive district of the housing market, and follow a policy to spend extra money on maintenance but downgrade any ambition to really improve the situation? Or should Amsterdam be more ambitious and regain for the district a position of attractiveness, that is follow a policy of upgrading the Bijlmermeer? At the end of the eighties, there has been a short period that Amsterdam lost courage and seemed to settle for a policy of mere maintenance, and accept defeat. It is by the intervention of Heerma, a Christian-Democrat that had been alderman of Amsterdam and was a deputy minister for housing at that time, that this loss of courage was overcome. He talked the municipality into a policy of redevelopment.

15. redevelopment program (1)

This intervention did result in a report, called 'The Bijlmermeer stays, changing' that advised to demolish a quarter of the high rise apartment blocks and replace them by one family type of housing, to upgrade another quarter and sell it to private owners and to improve maintenance of the remaining half, aiming to improve its attractiveness on the housing market.

This advice resulted in the Steering Committee Renewal Bijlmermeer that got one and a half year to translate this advice into practical proposals what to do and where to begin.

The Steering Committee proposed three lines of action: Firstly, it changed the thrust of the renewal policy from a focus on housing only to the urban environment in general. This expressed itself in the proposal to start with the redevelopment of the neighbourhood centre Ganzenhoef, that is: (1) bring down the road for motor traffic to ground level, (2) tear down the parking garages and the dark and seemingly underground shopping centre below, (3) redevelop the shopping centre and introduce traditional street parking and (4) replace a few of the high rise blocks in the neighbourhood by more traditional housing patterns of medium high apartment buildings and one family type of housing.

16. redevelopment program (2)

Secondly, it changed the focus on the social composition of the population into the wider realm of its socio-economic composition and more specifically, to the amount and variety of jobs available in the district. This expressed itself in the proposal to use the garages and the space below them for small businesses; in general to promote this type of small business in the Bijlmermeer as this was quite underdeveloped compared to the city at large. To understand how important the reduction of unemployment would be, not only socially but economically, one example may suffice. When the Steering Committee started its work, the annual loss on the high rise apartments was 10 mln. guilders, whereas the annual social security allowances for its inhabitants amounted to 125 mln. guilders.

Thirdly, it followed the advice in stressing the importance of improving the maintenance of public space. As easy as this sounds, so extremely difficult it is to achieve. Very many organisations are responsible for public space: various departments of local government, who have independent responsibilities, budgets and political leaders. Various utilities, also independent and with their own responsibilities and priorities. Public Transport Company, Public Lighting, Urban Garbage Collection, the police, etc. But also various residents-associations, welfare institutions, shopkeepers-associations and whoever has a stake in keeping clean staircases and elevators, corridors, garages, streets and parks. The situation at the time was so chaotic that the police initiated monthly meetings at all of the high rise apartment blocks, summoning all organisations responsible for maintenance of these buildings and their environment to control and repair. The proposals of the Steering Committee were accepted by the district council for Southeast, but at the same meeting the local board was dismissed after a vote of no-confidence. They were also accepted by the city council. And they were accepted by the housing corporation Nieuw Amsterdam. It took then one or two years of bargaining between the municipality and the so-called Central Fund, a mutual fund of all housing corporations in the Netherlands, about who should foot the bill.

17. Ganzenpoort: market

So, where do we stand today, 10 years on?

Ganzenhoef, the neighbourhood centre to be redeveloped first, has been completed and renamed Ganzenpoort (Geese Gate).

18. Ganzenpoort: upgrading

The same is true for the upgrading of the high rise apartment blocks directly south of the centre.

19. the tree that saw everything

The shock of the airplane crash, the fourth of October 1992, is of course remembered by many of its survivors and memorized by a monument around 'the tree that saw everything'. To the west, open spaces and apartments blocks have given way to traditional residential neighbourhoods.

20. a new subway station

A completely renovated subway station - in reality an upway station - will be officially opened today. A new cultural and educational centre to the east just opened the other day. Another apartment block at the east side will also be torn down and replaced again by a traditional residential neighbourhood. The centre, for long a dark and desolate place where nobody liked to be, has been replaced by a nice and busy neighbourhood centre with shops, office space and cultural facilities and a Saturday market, surrounded by a wide variety of residential areas.

21. bird's eye view on Amsterdamse Poort

A kilometre to the west, redevelopment of the area around the main shopping centre, called Amsterdamse Poort (Amsterdam Gate), is in full swing. Here the roads stay on their first floor level because the whole centre is based in this double-level access: pedestrians and cyclists on ground level and motorists on the upper level.

22. upgrading highrise blocks

But otherwise, the redevelopment policy is the same: upgrade some high rise blocks and offer the apartments to owner-occupiers.

23. redevelopment site

.replace some high rise blocks by low rise residential neighbourhoods and intensify the commercial land use by shops, offices and cultural facilities. Just last week the first pile for a new city hall for Southeast was driven here into the ground.

24. regional centre: Arena Boulevard

Another kilometre to the west, a completely new centre of regional importance is getting shape. A new stadium for Ajax, the city's football club, opened a few years ago.

25. new railway station

A new railway station, necessary because of high speed connection between Schiphol Airport, Utrecht and further on to Arnhem and Düsseldorf, is presently under construction. A multilevel furniture strip, Villa Arena, is a regional attraction. A shopping mall, lined with a series of entertainment facilities, connects Amsterdamse Poort as the local commercial centre with the regional centre west of the railway station.

26. Amsterdam multi-centred city

At the time of the Steering Committee, in 1992, the municipality of Amsterdam was still firmly convinced that the one and only centre of Amsterdam was the historical centre, maybe to be extended to the northeast into former harbour territory. In an incredibly short time this concept of the urban structure had changed completely: Schiphol, South Axis and Southeast are recognized as urban centres in their own right. Amsterdam now is conceived as a multi-centred city and the so called North-South Line, now under construction, is already revitalizing the area in between the historical centre and the south axis.

27. demolition in progress

Back to the Bijlmermeer proper, the neighbourhood centre of Kraaiennest (Crows Nest) is the next area of redevelopment. Demolition on a grand scale of four apartments blocks is under way, one completed, one being torn down this year, the two others in the two years to follow. Originally, this neighbourhood centre

was to be renovated only, but keeping its two level access like Amsterdamse Poort. The attractiveness of the redeveloped Ganzenpoort is such however that the private owner of the shopping centre has decided he has to do a comparable thing to be able to compete.

28. plan for K-neighbourhood

So now the planning is to redevelop Kraaienest also, bringing the road down to ground level and develop a multi-functional neighbourhood centre, catering for the surrounding low rise residential areas that have been there from the start, the new areas to be developed and the high rise upper level apartment blocks at the other side of the Gaasperdammerweg, at the northern end of the regional recreational area around the Gaasperplas.

29. bird's eye view on Daalwijkdreef

The last part of the Bijlmermeer to be redeveloped are the high rise residential areas at the north-western end, along the Daalwijkdreef. Here again, most of the high rise blocks will be demolished. However, along the Daalwijkdreef itself they will be replaced by new high rise buildings, but this time catering for residents at medium and high market levels.

30. Bijlmer monitor

It is time to evaluate the redevelopment policy and take a look at what has been achieved by now. At the start, more than 10 years ago now, the Municipality and the Central Fund decided to define and clarify the aims of the project, to translate them in quantifiable results and to monitor annual progress to control if these results were attained.

31. population

Generally speaking, the aim for the Bijlmermeer is to become an average district of Amsterdam. This aim has been specified in characteristics of its population with regard to ethnicity, age, type of household, employment and income.

It has been specified in features of the housing stock with regard to type of dwelling, rents and prices, mutation of residents, percentage of vacancies and so on. It has been specified in general feelings of wellbeing and satisfaction with regard to safety, cleanliness, maintenance, etc.

32. unemployment Amsterdam: Bijlmermeer

Up till now, the policy looks rather successful. However, the predominance of a population of foreign descent does grow, unemployment is still relatively high and even if safety is improving, drug-related danger for the inhabitants is three times as high as the average of the Amsterdam region. Educational results are at a par or even better than average, but then Amsterdam does badly compared to the national average. Positive is that people are more satisfied than before about their home and environment, on many scores more so than the average inhabitant of Amsterdam.

33. brass band

Another way to evaluate redevelopment policy is to check whether the original plans are still valid. Since 1992, the year of the first agreement on the renewal policy for the Bijlmermeer, there have been three reappraisals, in 1995, in 2000 and recently in 2002. The general trend of these changes in the program has been that the share of high rise blocks to be demolished was raised from 25 to 50 %. As more high rise was replaced by traditional neighbourhoods more public parks were replaced by private gardens. Another change has been that the organisation of traffic became more traditional: less division between pedestrian and bicycle routes and motorized traffic, more roads and streets on ground level, more street parking. As time goes by, traditional urban environments seem to become ever more popular. A further change has been more attention to and thus more money allotted to maintenance of public space. Also, 50.000 sqm. of commercial space for small businesses, offices and starters have been added to the program to bolster job opportunities.

34 - 43. happy to live in the Bijlmer

All in all, the Bijlmermeer seems to become more and more an average district of Amsterdam, according to the aims agreed on 10 years ago. This may be called a great success if one remembers the rather hopeless situation at the start.

The weak spots evidently are the high rate of unemployment, the less than average income position and

the high rate of drug-related safety problems.

However, what is happening and seems to continue and become sustainable is that the Bijlmer is becoming more and more a predominantly coloured society with more or less the same socio-economic characteristics as elsewhere in Holland. This of course is a huge and very important change. The Bijlmermeer ten years ago had become a concentration of losers. Then the black middle class left the Bijlmermeer to settle in Almere or elsewhere. Now many of them come back.

44. residential variety

Looking at results with an eye to urban design and architecture, one sees a mix of parcellations and postmodern gimmicks that give shape to a rather traditional type of urban environment on the scale of the neighbourhood. The Bijlmermeer as a homogeneous (90%) high rise apartment blocks environment is transformed within a period of 10 to 15 years into a differentiated district with quite a variety of urban neighbourhoods.

45. park and water system

On the scale of the Bijlmermeer as a whole, the original structure in a way is enhanced by the rectangular layout of the parks and the water system and, of course, the redevelopment of the neighbourhood centres at the crossroads of subway and road network. A conspicuous improvement is the emergence of a regional centre around the Bijlmermeer station, directly connected to the local centre Amsterdamse Poort.

46. Kwakoe - festival

Summing up this biography of the Bijlmermeer, I hope you will agree with me that the outstanding and remarkable feature of the story is that notwithstanding a more or less hopeless situation at the start of a failing urban concept, failing management and maintenance and a predominantly refugee population that had to fight for social, economical and cultural survival while meeting with more or less total indifference to their fate by the natives, none of these parties gave up or backed down.

47. Drumband at Kwakoe

It is fashionable nowadays to think lowly over multicultural integration and to call policy on this issue quite unsuccessful. For the Bijlmermeer at least, this is completely untrue.

48. picknick in the park

What redevelopment of the Bijlmermeer makes clear is that where economic necessity, social ambition and cultural diversity and creativity combine with an old fashioned sense of responsibility and seemingly boundless resources of human energy, miracles may happen.

49. ice-cream vendor

It is against this background that we may see in the near future that the aim for Southeast to be just like the average of Amsterdam, to just be an ordinary district of that city will change.

50. women of the Bijlmermeer (1)

It will change into a more self-confident attitude in which the similarities between all the people living there, working there and entertaining themselves will be taken for granted.

51. women of the Bijlmermeer (2)

At that moment the differences, between the Bijlmermeer and other districts, its peculiar and sometimes hilarious history and the way all the troubles have been overcome, may give the Bijlmermeer a special identity and image, a special flavour of public life; and it may give its inhabitants a sense of civic pride.

DHF

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SOME FACTS

table 1 bijlmermeer redevelopment 1990-2010 ¹

	existing situation 1990	redevelopment program 1992	redevelopment program 2000
high rise social housing	12.500	8.200	6.000
high rise private housing	500	2.000	3.000
medium high housing	1000	2.000	2.500
one family housing	1.500	4.500	6.000
total stock	15.500	16.700	17.500

¹ approximate numbers, as programs show margins

table 2 population according to ethnicity in % 1994-2002

	Amsterdam		Bijlmermeer	
	1994	2002	1994	2002
Netherlands	61	53	21	16
Surinam + Antilles	9	12	42	46
Turkey + Marocco + S. Europe	13	15	6	4
Other non-industrialised	7	10	26	31
Other industrialised	10	10	5	3

table 3 unemployment in % 1996-2002

	Amsterdam		Bijlmermeer	
	1996	2002	1996	2002
Unemployed	16	9	32	15
Of whom:				
Directly available	.	19	9	14
Training necessary	.	21	58	26
unemployable	.	48	32	39
unknown	.	12	1	19