

Almere

Arhitectura contemporana

John Weich - Almere: Last Exit to Utopia

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Almere: Last Exit to Utopia

by John Weich

God created the world but the Dutch created Holland.

Anyone familiar with urban planning in the Netherlands knows the wry Dutch saying – God created the world but the Dutch created Holland. One need only inspect the country's topography to verify some truth in this; there's no questioning Holland's land reclamation ingenuity. Driven largely by necessity – Holland ranks amongst the most populous nations in the world – the Dutch take a certain amount of pride in their ability to conjure real estate by non-violent means. Nowhere is this more evident than in Flevoland, a province located 20 kilometres east of Amsterdam and which consists entirely of land reclaimed from the murky waters and sludge of the former Zuiderzee. Even before the sod had completely dried planners were premeditating the rise of an organic suburb city to Amsterdam's urb, a low-rise paradise for city dwellers looking to trade in their cramped urban quarters for the anti-urban bourgeois idyll: a modest-sized house with a modest-sized garden. That city became Almere.

Almere was erected on a bed not of ideology but of need. There were no edicts to ring in a new national identity, no fell swoops to upgrade the amenities of the teeming destitute, no sweeping boulevards to accommodate totalitarian military parades. Almere promised lebensraum without the Nazi sub context; its pretty plots of land drew middle-class Dutch pioneers in a way not entirely dissimilar to the pull the Texan plains had on 19th century Americans who abandon their perfectly sound but invariably small Appalachian farms for something bigger and cheaper. But whereas the Texans braved the danger of a Comanche Indian scalping, the Dutch risked only suburban boredom. The Dutch government envisioned a polder city of between 150,000 and 250,000 residents within 25 years' time and set a quota of 3,000 new homes per annum to achieve this. Little time was allotted for architects to pontificate Corbusierian urban grandeur; Almere's role as an architecture testing ground like Casablanca was for France or Wiessenhofsiedlung for Stuttgart would come later. The agenda was to build and to build quickly – the land was drained in the summer of 1968, a master plan submitted in 1972, initial construction in 1974 and the first residents arrived in 1975 – circumstances more in tune with Soviet satellite cities than with Holland's randstad conurbation.

To accommodate this rapid-fire building spree Almere's founding fathers created a flexible, polynuclear scheme comprising five homogenous cores spread across 132 square kilometres of pristine land. The decision to shun the modish compact city model (compact = prosperous) is indicative of the cum laude swagger with which the young architects of the responsible Projektburo strolled into the Zuiderzee wastelands and planned the new town. It also assured that full-blooded urbanites would revile Almere for its suburban façade right from the very beginning. The Projektburo's open-ended approach was tinged with pragmatism and the euphoric dogma of the early 1970s. The flexible model that designated a high street, city hall, business district, public facilities and communal space for each self-sufficient core, would enable future planners to mould and shape the city over time as the demographics became more specific. Moreover, they would avoid typical new town snags that saddled pioneer residents with sterile and amenity-less environments. One-third of the city would be dedicated to industry, one-third to housing and one-third to parks and open space. Eighty percent of the dwellings would be devoted to single families, and