

Almere

## Arhitectura contemporana

John Weich - Almere: Last Exit to Utopia

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70% to low to middle income residents. Sidewalks wide enough for children to play on. One job for every three residents. One company for every 100 homes. Industrial areas would be situated close to the home to accommodate a female workforce. Bus stops erected every 400 meters, train stations every 800 meters, every home within a five minute's walk a large park or forest. It was a heyday in methodical planning, and today many of those distances can still be pinpointed to the meter.

Up till a few months ago most Dutch associated Almere with the type of freakish Anglo-Saxon new towns that often creep into the songs of singer-songwriter Nick Cave; the suburb with zero crime and no fear and a police force whose primary purpose is to rescue kittens out of trees. Like almost everyone else, the Dutch have adopted tract-home denigration as party punch lines and consider the complacent cadence of their own hi-density VINEX neighbourhoods as indistinguishable plankton. Which is why many were forced to double take when the city's mayor announced in January that crime in Almere was up 20%. Almere's population, apparently, was outpacing its police force and its infrastructure – it is currently on pace for 400,000 residents by 2030, far exceeding original estimates. Moreover, the first generation of teenagers, the children of the pioneers, are bored. Twenty-seven years after the sod was first turned Almere still has only one nightclub and only a handful of bars and cafes. The dearth of entertainment is so disheartening that many don't consider Almere is a city at all, just a expansive stretch of homes surrounding by a whole lot of agricultural areas and ecological zones.

Almere's many designations and marketing jingles indeed reveal a city still trying, in accordance with New Age precepts, to find itself. Boomtown. Dutch Town. Transit City. Edge City. Leisure City. Nebulous City. City of the Future. City on the Water. Dormitory Town. Boringville. Some of the early planners pictured a Spiritual City full of cloisters and meditation activities, but things didn't pan out. Similarly, early attempts to create a University City by opening a branch of the University of Amsterdam fell through, as did ambitions to become a Media City by luring television and radio studios from nearby Hilversum, Holland's Hollywood. More recently, Almere added its name to the long list of faceless towns that can boast a World Trade Centre, and what to make medieval castle replica, complete with romantic moat, being built along the A6 freeway which, when finished, will house a swank hotel and conference facilities? The castle is the type of uncouth statement Amsterdammers loath but Almereians love and further underscores the alien-ness of a city whose vast tracts of empty land and the large distances between cores are much more akin to American towns than to Dutch ones. Almere is neither here nor there, neither urb nor suburb, as much ersatz mini-city as it is a low-density agglomeration of middle-class homes.

Almere is only now acquiring the girth to warrant major investment in cultural institutions (hence its dullness heretofore). And who better to assign the task to than Rem Koolhaas, an architect who has earned a reputation for metamorphosing urban environments into entertaining fun zones. In 1994 Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Art (OMA) landed the commission to redeveloped Almere City into a compact city with urban verisimilitude. Just like Almere's forefathers who looked to architectural idioms elsewhere when modelling their city – to H.P. Berlage's Amsterdam South, to piazza San Marco, to Montreux, to Barcelona's Ramblas – Koolhaas's centre is derived from the functional suburban mega malls that are increasingly characterizing the peripheral boundaries of American and Asia cities. OMA's master plan, a self-titled 'shock treatment', aims to rejuvenate Almere City in one 'quantum leap' by way of a hi-density mega structure that neatly compartmentalises the city's parking, traffic, commercial, cultural and living needs into folded layers piled atop one other. In 'Dutchtown: OMA's Almere Master plan' (NAI Publishers, 1999), the agency explains: 'The plan is to a certain degree an attack on everything Almere is: Almere is low, the plan is high; Almere is a grid, the plan is full of diagonals; Almere is low density, the plan is hi-density. More than anything else, it [the plan] wants to be different than Almere.' The new city centre contrasts 'the routine of suburbia' with 'urban block patterns...to achieve a place of maximum public interaction.'