

Almere

Arhitectura contemporana

John Weich - Almere: Last Exit to Utopia

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'Koolhaas was more a political choice than a popular one,' says Barbara Nieuwkoop, director of Almere's Centre for Architecture and Urban Planning CASLa. 'In Almere architects have a lot of power, and Koolhaas's international allure has enabled him to bring an all-star cast of architects to a city with architecture ambitions.' Similar to the University of Utrecht campus De Uithof, under Koolhaas Almere City has become a prestige project for architects both local and foreign: in addition to OMA's master plan and Koolhaas's multiplex cinema, there are theatres by Wiel Arets, Studio Liebeskind, Neutelings Riedijk, MVRDV, Kazuyo Sejima and William Alsop, apartment complexes by Frits van Dongen, Rene van Zuuk, Claus & Kaan and commercial venues by Christian de Potzampare, Gigon & Guyer and Benthem & Crouwel. They will all be channelled into a dense urban corridor between the main train station and the lake on which the city is contingent, the Weerwater. While OMA's plan does not necessarily focus on the waterfront, idealistic oppidans have noted a similarity to Chicago, albeit a diminutive one (Holland often looks Westwards for its municipal mimicry, i.e. Rotterdam is 'Manhattan on the Maas'). Architecture aside, when finished the City will also be kitted out with a 10 million euro offal transportation system that can displace waste at 70 km/h via underground vacuum tubes and make both trash collectors and traditional trash containers obsolete. While Stockholm has had such a system for thirty years, it lends a bit of hypermodern credence to the residents of Almere, and more importantly the pride that goes with it. When finished in 2005, the new Big City will centralise Almere's current polder anarchy and provide a viable entertainment alternative to the increasing legion of bored teenagers who currently get their kicks by vandalising mailboxes and terrorising bus stops.

Within a decade of being founded, Almere's insatiable thirst for more homes and profusion of space turned it into an architectural playground for expressive, and experimental, catalogue structures. In addition to the plethora of individual villas and civic structures built by Holland's Who's Who in architecture – Job Coenen's pizzeria (now a bank), Cees Dam's City Hall, Rene van Zuuk's Villa van Diepen, Paul Robbrecht and Hilde Daem's De Paviljoens, Herman Hertzberger's four 'Woonwerkhuis' blocks – avant-garde competitions like De Fantasie (theme: unusual living) and De Realiteit (theme: temporary living) encouraged architects to apply to suburban living Carl Weeber's principle of spontaneous housing. Benthem Crouwel's Hard Glass aquarium, a cubic villa wrapped in 12mm of glass on three sides; Teun Koolhaas's industrial metal and glass Polderblik; Jos Abbo's splinter-thin Golfhuis; Dan Holvast and Flip van Woerden's transparent amphibian home. Today, Almere's only tourists are archi-tourists, bussed in for the afternoon to visit neighbourhoods devoted to quirky themes like film, music, pastels, flowers and fauna that where the outspoken translations of Weeber's spontaneous housing principle relieve the somnambulant ennui. The most expressive experiment to date can be found in the Eilandbuurt, or Island neighbourhood, in Almere Buiten where the amalgamation of volumes and materials interjected with canals, green space and medium-rise apartment complexes are at once anti-suburban and visually chaotic. Many critics have denigrated this neighbourhood for its lack of unifying identity, which may be true but is also beside the point. Few other cities would have offered itself up as a guinea pig to theory. It is a wonder such a large-scale experimental venture was built in the first place.

'The pace of development in Almere is so rapid that each neighbourhood has become a map of time-specific visions, ideologies and styles,' says architect Rene van Zuuk, who moved to Almere a decade ago and whose curvaceous Block 16 apartment complex will soon rise in Almere City. The 'human' tints of brown and postmodern provincialism of Haven, for example, exude 1970s urban planning, just as Teun Koolhaas's City neighbourhoods exemplifies 1980s building culture and his brother Koolhaas's new centre bares all the markings of contemporary architecture dogma. The panoply of autonomous bicycle paths and bus lanes that slice through the city with the ease and arrogance of a presidential motorcade still express the anti-automobile sentiments of the post-1968 generation and today force Almere's residents, more than 80% of which commute by car, to juke myriad roundabouts and tolerate leafy cul-de-sacs and sudden dead-