

Almere

## Arhitectura contemporana

John Weich - Almere: Last Exit to Utopia

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Almere, the Netherlands's newest town, took a significant step towards maturity with its recently completed city center, designed by Rem Koolhaas, leader of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), the Netherlands's most internationally oriented architectural practice. Compared to such high-profile OMA achievements as Euralille and Generic City, Koolhaas' scheme for Almere is an interesting departure as it succeeds both in the contexts of old Dutch towns and contemporary metropolitan design. In addition to documenting the city center design, this book explores the design process involving the city, the property developers, and the project leaders. Also included are the designs made to flesh out the master plan, amongst them a theater by Kazuyo Sejima, housing by Claus & Kaan and Frits van Dongen, William Alsop's pop/rock center, Bentham Crouwel's business center, OMA's parking garages and cinema, and the public space design by DS Landschapsarchitecten.

Product Details

The Stadstheater in Almere, Holland, in progress since 1998, is one of SANAA's larger projects. The lakeshore site, part of a masterplanning scheme devised by Rem Koolhaas, calls for two large theaters and an office building and a number of smaller performance, rehearsal, administrative, and support spaces. Sejima focused on according the small spaces equal pride of place as the larger, dominant ones, and on devising a circulation that brings people into contact with each other and invites exploration of the building's various uses. SANAA devised three large masses, of three to five stories, which house the 600-1100 seat theater functions and offices, and surrounded them on the site with a warren of one-story smaller spaces for the more intimate or small-scale functions and studio spaces. "Even the small spaces need to have their own d'comfortability' . . . the big theater is of course important, but the little piano studio is just as important to the person who comes to the building for a piano lesson." These spaces connect through each other, without corridors or hallways. This, said Sejima, "allows people to choose their own experience and enjoy the other functions of the building."

The Dutch town of Almere was planned from the late 1960s on a true tabula rasa on the reclaimed Flever Polder to the east of Amsterdam. Three residential areas were soon established, each based on a different urban theme, but until recently there was no plan for the town centre. This booklet accompanied an exhibition held at the Netherlands Architecture Institute, which described how a public authority brought together (with, apparently, much gnashing of teeth all round) the Koolhaas office and the Dutch developer MAB: the latter desperately defending its not unreasonable aim of creating a pleasant residential environment, and the former trumpeting its disgust for anything bourgeois at every opportunity.

It's a useful little book, providing a valuable guide to a debate about public space in Holland which is both visionary and realistic. The architectural waffle is, however, frightful. The OMA proposal comprises a concentration of tower blocks and a curved mound of earth covering a car park with shops on top. This car park is presented in heroic terms, and is variously described with expressions such as Espace Piranesien and a playing field for the contemporary urbanite, although there is no reason here to suppose that there is anything that distinguishes it from any other underground car park. There is indeed no evidence that any of their design is based on anything but visual gesturing. This waving of inflated texts to describe what appear to be banalities, these concept models and these dead-blank computer renderings fall, in my opinion, into the category of irritating pretentious rubbish.

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