

Almere

Arhitectura contemporana

John Weich - Almere: Last Exit to Utopia

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ends. Even the unattractive power lines that criss-cross the cityscape serve the greater purpose of keeping the ground on which they were built green and edifice free. These palpable anachronisms are not without charm; in fact, they make living in Almere much more attractive than the majority of Holland's VINEX neighbourhoods where there is either too little green and not enough urbanity. The atmosphere is undeniably Nick Cave ballad, and the happy glances of dog walkers, the ecstatic screams of children playing on front yard jungle gyms, the old men with poles caste into verdant ponds and all those bus stops every 400 meters reveal a city that is content with itself. Measured in complacency, Almere is a success.

Koolhaas's panache has so far proven great PR and, when the new centre is completed in 2005, will undoubtedly contribute to city's identity (though not necessarily make the residents happier). But one wonders if this is the timeless city Almere set out to be or could have become. In the end Koolhaas's new centre marginalizes Almere, turns it into a city just like any other, a predictable ville with its animated core and sedate outskirts. Almere as Generic City. With so much carte blanche to work with, couldn't Holland's cerebral theoreticians have contrived an entirely new entity that happily oscillates between metropolis and provincial village? A true City of the Future? 'Almere was a rare opportunity to create something new, something unique,' says architect Liesbeth van der Pol. 'No one seems to have asked the question of whether Almere should become a city at all. We could have approached it from an entirely different angle.' Van der Pol expresses a similar sentiment in her three fire-engine red 'Rooie Donders' apartment complexes that tower above Buiten's low-rise sprawl like Saraman's castle over trees in Lord of the Rings. In fact, Van der Pol's buildings are as close to monuments as this monument-less city has, with the exception perhaps of the four large elephant sculptures along the A6 freeway. There is an intrinsic polder-ness to the barn-like Rooie Donders that underscores Almere's most valuable asset, its landscape. Few structures express the area's correspondence between the built and unbuilt as well, and you can't help but question the logic in opting for a low-rise, low-density idyll rather than for a series of vertical polder villages with their elevated panoramas of seemingly endless fields of green and grain.

Of all Almere's epithets and appellations, Leisure City is the most picturesque and oft-used. It is also the most appropriate. Sailboats parked in driveways, joggers along the Weerwater, cyclists disappearing into autonomous forest paths, canoes tied up to backyard docks and quite possibly the highest per capita dog population in Europe which, coupled with the ubiquity of garden gnomes and plastic patio furniture, is also a symbol of middle-class gratification. The pretty little terraced home surfeit and cultural paucity may reek of suburbia, but Almereians are an active lot with their bikes and boats and have plenty of space to manoeuvre through town. Many homes are in position to enjoy the same vistas as from atop Van der Pol's Rooie Donders, such as the cubic villas in Norderplassen where enormous yachts are docked off backyard stages and kitchen windows look out over unadulterated liquid landscapes. Or in Hout, where substantial villas are camouflaged by foliage and exist symbiotically with their surroundings. Or the recreational paradise that the fifth and final core, Port, promises to become. Even the cultural czars in Amsterdam who gladly propagate Almere's obloquy - Almere as Culture-less City, as City Without History - cannot discount the city's serenity. 'People from Almere are no longer ashamed to say this is their home,' says Van Zuuk. While a quantum leap forward of the Koolhaasian sort, it is hardly the polder pride the founding fathers had in mind. 'Give us ten years,' Van Zuuk adds. 'In ten years Almere will be a completely different city. An exciting city.'

Book Description

Essays by Bernard Colenbrander and Michelle Provoost.