

## Designing Urban Experiences for a Suburban Population The Case of Almere (Netherlands)

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### Abstract

The Dutch city Almere was founded in 1976 in the “polder” in the eastern periphery of the densely populated *Randstad*; an urban belt connecting the four largest cities in the western part of the Netherlands. The city was developed to provide decent housing for people leaving the old cities and was planned according to the ideals of the New Towns movement. The idea was to find a durable regional solution preventing “urban sprawl” in rural areas while at the same time satisfying the longings of many urban inhabitants for “a place of their own” (e.g. a house with a garden instead of a rented flat). Building rigorously planned “new urban settlements” or *groeikernen* (“kernels of growth”) was conceived as *the* way to reach this goal for the national policy for spatial development. Almere was one of these new kernels.

In the planning of Almere special attention was paid to establishing attractive surroundings for modern middle class living. Accordingly the city was developed as a network of suburbs with ample space for gardens, parks etc., and with an infrastructure aimed at keeping different forms of transportation separate. For years the main attraction of the area was, that it provided comfortable housing in a relatively cheap way. Hence the population of Almere has grown to 185.000 inhabitants over the last 30 years, and it is now amongst the 10 largest cities in the Netherlands. Moreover, as a consequence of the governmental policy for future regional development, agreed upon in the 1990es, Almere remains a kernel for future growth. The population of the city is expected to extend further in the next decades. In 2030 it should thus have 350.000 inhabitants, becoming by then the fifth largest city in the country.

Presently, the population’s satisfaction with living in Almere is relatively high, and emigration from the region to the “old mainland” is sparse. So the city faces the challenge of remaining an attractive place for its present inhabitants, while at the same attracting new dwellers, and also new segments of citizens with other preferences and more pronounced expectations (esp. upper middle class, which at the time being are largely absent). To face these challenges, the city council in 1995 decided to develop a new city centre, which should enhance Almere’s regional appeal and create a truly modern and attractive urban environment in what used to be a symbol of suburbia. The plan focused not only on building office space and commercial sites but also explicitly on generating opportunities for urban experiences. The famous Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas (OMA) was commissioned to make the master plan and supervise the project. By now the project is reaching completion, and the aim of our paper is thus to evaluate in how far the plan has succeeded in creating urban experiences.

Urban design increasingly implies designing versatile venues to visit (shopping, leisure or cultural sites), excellent health and educational facilities and good labor environments for creative and knowledge intensive industries in order to bring about a “feeling” or experiences typical for urban life: density, intense interpersonal contact and feelings of surprise and security. Most studies on urban experiential design have stressed the importance of creating attractions for either tourists or for a “creative class” (Florida 2002, Clark 2004), who are believed to be the drivers of the new economy. Our paper on the contrary discusses how creating interesting and relevant experiences for a suburban population may contribute to regional development. What the new city centre of Almere apparently is all about is precisely to create urban experiences for present and future suburban inhabitants. We will try to justify this claim by analyzing the architectural features of the plan and by elucidating the differences between urbanites’ and suburbanites’ experiential preferences.

**Keywords:** Urbanity, suburbanism, urban design, experience design, Almere, Rem Koolhaas.

### **Almere, the development of a suburban region**

The planning of Almere is a direct consequence of political concerns about the future of the built environment in the Netherlands. These concerns became manifest in the early 1960s. The most densely populated area of the country, the *Randstad*, an urban belt connecting the cities of Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague, had increased its inhabitants with 25% in only 15 years: from 4.3 million in 1945 to 5.5 million in 1960. The staggering birth surplus in the first post-war decades was expected to continue, increasing the Dutch population to 20 million citizens by the 2000. These concerns led to a national policy on spatial ordering emphasizing the need to regulate the development of urban and rural regions on a national level and hence reduce the risks of “urban sprawl”. The second bill on spatial ordering, passed by parliament in 1966, planned to stimulate urban development in carefully selected areas, thus preventing an unregulated suburbanization of the rural areas, which were considered crucial for the national economy (van der Cammen and de Klerk 2006). “New urban settlements” were to be developed in the periphery of the *Randstad* safeguarding the “green heart” of this belt (the core area for the production of flowers and vegetables) from urbanization. Moreover, the establishment of *groei-kernen* (“kernels of growth”) in proximity to existing cities – e.g. Zoetermeer (The Hague), Purmerend (Amsterdam) and Nieuwegein (Utrecht) – should prevent a loss of workforce for the industries of the *Randstad*, which at that moment still were competing fiercely with other industrial regions (notably Ruhr/Rhine). The *pièce de résistance* of this ordering was to be Almere, which had ample space for meeting the desires of a new generation of city-dwellers. Research had shown that people apt on leaving the crowded cities longed for low-rise suburban housing in green environments.

Even before this suburban ideal was realized it came under severe attack from a new generation of architects, who inspired by the “New Urban Movement” stressed the importance of revitalizing the old urban centres for socially balanced modern living (Jacobs 1961). The building of endless suburbs was seen as stimulating social isolation and promoting egocentric and hence anti-social behaviour. From the start, Almere was thus the target of the young cultural elite. Almere was believed to become an architectural token of monotony, symbolizing the boredom and consumerism, inherent in modern petty bourgeois existence. Its critics believed it would become a perverse parody of what a city ideally should be like (*Città Ideale*), and this prejudice has ever since remained the stable basis of the public opinion of Almere. In a newspaper poll in February 2008, 2900 Dutch readers nominated the city of Almere as the ugliest place in the Netherlands (Heijmans 2008). A close runner up was Nieuwegein, south of Utrecht, which like Almere is one of the *New Towns* established in the 1970s. The rest of the top 5 was made up of cities, which had developed during the industrial boom in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: Den Helder, Heerlen and Eindhoven. A common feature of these nominees is, that they are known to the Dutch public but rarely visited by people not living or working there. Their negative public image is thus in all probability largely based on hearsay, stereotypes and prejudices, and not so much on facts.

This might hold especially true for Almere. Actually, in 2006 a report showed that 45% of its inhabitants were not only satisfied with but also proud of their city – an increase from 35% in 2002 (Wagendorp 2008). The steady growth of the city during the last 30 years, and the fact that only relatively few settlers leave Almere on a later stage in life bears witness of a very probable level of satisfaction amongst its population.

In November 1976 the first 200 residents moved in to their newly built homes in Almere. The city is located approximately 25 km east of Amsterdam on the dammed up area, Flevoland. Flevoland is part of a large-scale land reclaim project, poldering the IJsselmeer initiated early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Almere was built as a means of re-housing citizens from especially Amsterdam and Utrecht. In contrast to the old cities Almere offered more attractive family housing, green surroundings (parks, wide lanes, sports facilities etc.), new schools, and a more efficient and safe infrastructure, with separate roads for public transportation, cars, bikes and pedestrians. The key inspiration to developing this new city was the British “Planned Urban Settlement” trend in urban planning, which in 1946 had resulted in the *New Towns Act* (cf. Osborn and Whittick 1977). These new settlements – e.g. Stevenage (1946), Peterborough (1967), Runcorn (1967) and Milton Keynes (1971) – were attempts to realize

the ideals of the *Garden City* movement, spurred by Ebenezer Howard (1946/1902) and Raymond Unwin (1996/1909) at the turn of the last century. Here towns were to be developed as autonomous organisms, distinct from the urban sprawl by rejecting high-rise buildings and instead stressing the importance of gardens and sumptuous parks for the qualities of authentic living. *New Towns* were meant to be a modern version of *Città Ideale*, a haven from “megapolis” (Osborn and Whittick 1963).

From the beginning the planning of Almere deviated in one important aspect from the ideals of the *Garden City*. People were to be re-housed but not rigorously re-located: i.e. they still had to commute to the big cities to work. Almere was in that particular aspect, like so many other post-war suburban environments, to become a place for spare time and family life. But Almere has apparently been very successful at that. The number of residents has increased steadily since 1976, reaching a population of 184.000 in 2008.



Figures 1 & 2. Almere-Haven, est. 1976: a typical Dutch canal town – or perhaps not?

Although the city is in the top 10 of the larger Dutch cities, it differs from the others in at least two key aspects. The first is its demographic profile: Almere has the lowest number of higher educated citizens (20% of the population), the highest percentage of children (23% of the population), a relatively large number of citizens of non-Dutch origin (25%) and the lowest crime rate of all larger cities. The disposable income of the average citizen is higher than in any other large Dutch city, while the prices of real estate are moderate compared to most cities.

But being a *New Town*, Almere also differs from “ordinary” cities by being meticulously planned in regard to infrastructure, the lay out and aesthetics of the built environment as well as to the profile of the population. The blueprints of the city defined geographically distinct areas of settlement (Almere-Haven, Almere-Buiten, Almere-Stad and Almere-Poort, the last one currently under construction), each operating independently of one another but still connected on both an administrative and an infrastructural level. This endeavour resulted in a network of suburban settlements without a distinct city centre. By being a poly-nuclear city, Almere is geographically different from a typical Dutch large city. This feature – almost from the start – gave it the nickname *Los Almeres* by critics of suburbia. To the perhaps prejudiced outsider Almere may seem as an endless suburb, or rather: a confusing sprawl of precincts, which probably to a large extent explains its negative evaluation in the 2008-poll. To the general Dutch public, Almere seems like ultimate suburbia. An image, strangely at odds with the profile nurtured by the municipality: i.e. of being the *New Towns’* capital of the world – the largest experiment with new urban settlements, and hitherto rather successful at that.



Figure 3. Tenement housing in Almere-Buiten (Regenboogbuurt), approx. 1995.

The local residents evidently hold a view of their city, which is more in accordance with the local authorities. Re-emigration has been sparse during the last 30 years and there is a constant influx of young families to support the ideal of still being a “new” town, despite having come to an “adolescent life stage” (Berg, Franke and Reijndorpp 2007). Many people move within the city limits to newly developed neighbourhoods thus up- or downgrading their dwellings to meet their actual housing wants and needs. On the level of national housing policy, Almere has also been recognized as a prospective environment for living. In fact, in the amendment to the fourth bill on spatial ordering (“Vierde nota extra”, *Vinex*), passed by parliament in 1990 and very much inspired by environmentalist concerns about the future of rural areas, a number of new locations were pointed out as locations to solve future housing problems: e.g. Leidsche Rijn, west of Utrecht, with a population of 100.000 inhabitants (van der Cammen and de Klerk 2006). These new cities and towns – called *Vinex*-precincts – were planned not to house a dramatically increasing population but to serve new consumer demands more efficiently: i.e. more space for living per capita but also more diverse types of housing to cater for the versatility in the size of families (e.g. the staggering growth of one-person households). Despite being an older settlement, Almere was selected as one of the dominant *Vinex*-precincts. This implies that Almere must grow to approximately 350.000 inhabitants 2030, becoming the country’s fifth city in terms of population.

To meet such expectations Almere had to develop and redefine its identity. Compared to other cities however, Almere still lacks institutions for higher education, significant local industry and businesses especially in the creative and knowledge intensive fields (only 40% of the working population is employed in the city), seminal cultural attractions (e.g. a professional sport team, museums of national reputation), bars, cafés and restaurants as well as hotels. It henceforth had to become a place, where it is not only nice and comfortable to live, but which also is exciting and inspiring to visit and work in.

This urge for re-thinking its identity became even more pressing as the conceptions of what a *Città Ideale* really should be like, changed around 1990. Whereas the 1970es had favoured the cosiness of small scale city centres with many small forums creating opportunity for private encounters in public space and the 1980es had stressed the city as a place for leisure and relaxation, the paradigm now shifted towards (re-)creating the metropolitan ambience of “real cities” (van der Cammen and de Klerk 2006: 321). Paris as conceived by Baron Hausmann in the 1860es once more became the ideal city. Monumental high-risers, wide boulevards and an unmistakable physical identity (e.g. lamppost, waste baskets) became parameters for city centre planning and/or redecoration. The ideal city should be impressive.



Figure 4. Canal houses built in Almere-Buiten (Eilandenbuurt) as part of the housing Expo 2001 *Gewild wonen* (a pun implying "Wild Living" as well as "Intentional Living"). On this expo, supervised by Carel Weeber, 11 different plans for housing, allowing more consumer influence on design, were presented.

The municipality recognized this agenda as early as 1994 when it decided to force "a quantum leap forward" with the explicit goal of invigorating the city's identity and strengthening its brand image for the existing and future residents, prospective businesses and the general Dutch public. To reach this objective an ambitious planning project for a high profiled city centre was launched. This centre, consisting of high-rise office buildings, a distinctive shopping mall and various cultural institutions, is currently under construction. It is supervised by the renowned Dutch architect firm OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture, lead by Rem Koolhaas) and consists of a number of architectonic landmarks adding up to a remarkable skyline, which mentally as well as visually should put Almere on the urban scene. This ought to be taken quite literally. As a matter of fact, the city was until recently hardly visible from the motorway traversing the area, because of the low-rise paradigm and the preoccupation with creating ample green environments, guiding the early planning of the city.

Almere is thus currently re-inventing itself, transforming a New Town into something that in a perhaps nearby future might qualify as a "real" city. Put on a simple form the endeavour is to infuse the qualities of suburban life with urban experiences in order to increase its population's satisfaction and attract new businesses and future residents, especially settlers with high incomes, which until now have preferred to settle in the neighbouring Gooi-region on "the mainland" (the wealthiest area in the Netherlands). In the future Almere should become not only a comfortable and convenient place to live for middle class citizens, but also an exciting and stimulating place to work, dwell, shop and even visit for all kind of groups. In the following we will discuss this attempt to mix suburbia with more metropolitan-like qualities by focusing on how the urban design may support these quite different forms of spatial experiences.



Figure 5. Parts of the new “skyline of Almere-Stad seen from the shore of lake *Weerwater*. Left to right: *Silverline* (Claus and Kaan (2001), owner condominiums), *The Wave* (van Zuuk (2004), owner condominiums), *Apollo Hotel* (Alsop (2004), part of the Urban entertainment Centre), one tower of *Side by Side* (Architekten Cie. (2006), tenement apartments) and the theatre (SANAA (2007)).

Our analysis starts out by highlighting the differences between suburban and urban forms of experiencing, and in which way spatial experiences could be meaningfully generated by urban design.

### **Urban and suburban experiences**

Urban sociologists and economic geographers have identified two main indicators of urbanity. Firstly, big cities are the loci of administration and of economic power. They are “central places” with a high concentration of agents engaged in the production, distribution and consumption of information, goods and services as well as in decision-making and counselling (Bahrtdt 1961). Secondly, big cities are characterized by density. Historically cities were compact units crowded by people engaging in the many activities implied by the concentration of power and money. This made cities attractive for supply companies, specialized in supporting core industries with goods and information. Thus the larger and more compact a city, the more specialized functions does it provide, and the more attractive it is for visitors, residents and new settlers (Wirth 1957).

Important urban experiences are derived from these two indicators. Urban life is firstly characterized by versatility due to the mix of specialized providers of goods and services and differentiated groups of customers. Cities are crowded with people frequenting the many opportunities for doing business, shopping, socializing and education and thus contributing innovation and exploration. But the mere amount of people and perceptual impressions secondly favour a blasé and reserved attitude in the city-stroller to safeguard inner feelings and thoughts from the turbulence of public life (Simmel 1903). One important consequence of this attitude is a clear conception of the distinctions between public and private life. Urbanity

sets the scene for public life (cf. Sennett 1977), which is seminal for explaining the positive re-evaluation of urban life since the 1970es. Another consequence is the ability to utilize surprises and challenges in public life to develop private sentiments (Lofland 1998). Urbanity creates niches for private life in the turmoil of the public sphere, and is as such a driver for creativity and novelty. It propagates new forms of living, new ways of behaving, and new perspectives on one's identity.

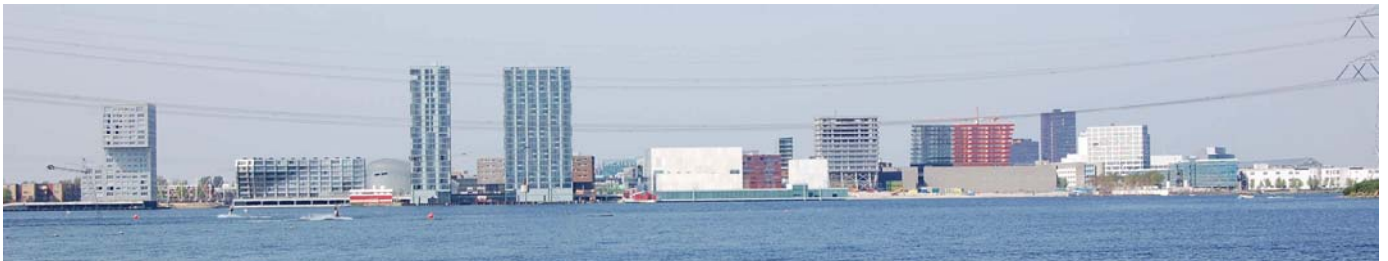


Figure 6. The “skyline” of Almere-Stad, seen from the opposite shores of lake *Weerwater*, close to the highway. The shopping mall, *Citadel*, consists of the buildings on the right hand of the picture.

Thirdly and closely connected to the inherently creative and experimenting aspect of urbanity, a main attraction of urban life is undoubtedly the opportunity for face-to-face interactions with (other) strangers in the crowd. To manage this contact in a both correct (informal or courteous) and emotionally satisfying or even exciting way is essential for experiencing urbanity. These opportunities for having this kind of contact set the urban experience apart from other forms of spatial experience (van Engelsdorp-Gastelaars and Hamers 2006). The rural experience, by contrast, is characterized by an aversion and distance towards strangers. It focuses on commonly shared traditions and routines instead of innovation and development, and aims at stability instead of variation. Surprises and challenges are most often dealt with as threats to existence.

The suburban experience on the other hand is characterized by a professional or rational attitude towards strangers. Intensive face-to-face contact belongs to the realm of work and is not a resource for personal development, whereas the realm of leisure is founded in contact with intimates, with family, friends and sometimes neighbours serving to maintain a proper definition of the self. The suburban experience focuses on privately based traditions and routines, and aims at relaxation and “recharging” in the private sphere.

Urban and suburban experiences hence spring from separate ways of dealing with the distinction between the public and the private sphere. Urban experiences are generated by utilizing public life for private purposes of self-development, fuelled by the manifold options for interaction and exchange (“the market”, versatility and poly-functionality). Suburban experiences, on the other hand, cultivate private life in the secure and secluded space of the house (“home”) or the local community of intimates (“neighbourhood”). The suburbs are in effect the actualization of Le Corbusier’s dream of creating “machines for living” (Marcus 2001): i.e. they are designed to be – ideally speaking – mono-functional, rationally serving the purpose of providing decent housing and hence only providing those other functions that contribute to this single purpose (e.g. a local shopping mall, elementary services like dentists, hairdressers, medical practitioners or a local police station). The fact that many post-war suburbs have been planned to target specific lifestyle groups contributes to confirming the world-views, wishes and habits of the suburban residents.

The charm of suburban life is therefore that it confirms existing values and ideas, thus stabilizing identities and social roles. Urbanity on the contrary questions such stable notions, pointing at dreams not yet fulfilled or generating longings, one never even suspected to possess. Interactions and exchanges on the urban scene do in other words often have an erotic tinge. They often are sensually challenging, inciting and luring (e.g. window shopping), happen unexpectedly, involve surprise and excitement – and may be seductive: i.e. they can

make individuals question their identities and self-conceptions. Whereas the quality of suburban life is emotionally underpinned by feelings of comfort, safety and being in control, the emotional qualities of urban life consist of surprise, joy or even elation, and the sensation of temporarily losing (self-)control. Table 1 summarizes some of the differences between urban and suburban experiences.

	<b>Urban experiences</b>	<b>Suburban experiences</b>
<b>Public/private sphere</b>	public	private
<b>Density</b>	high	low(er)
<b>Functions</b>	poly-functionality	one dominant function
<b>Metaphor</b>	market	home
<b>Interaction</b>	strangers	intimates/neighbours
<b>Contacts</b>	developing identity	affirming identity
<b>Self-actualization</b>	creativity, change	stability
<b>Positive emotions</b>	surprise, joy	comfort, safety
<b>Control</b>	temporarily lacking	confirmed
<b>Arousal</b>	stimulation	cosiness

Table 1. Differences in spatial experiences

On the physiological level suburban life aims at well-being and sociability (cosiness), while urban life is directed towards more erotic or pleasurable qualities (stimulation). To develop places that advances the opportunity for such stimulating contacts and encourages self-development and creativity is paramount in designing urban experiences. This practice is in no way an easy one, partly because the nature of experiencing makes it impossible to plan and predict experiences with any kind of certainty, and partly because designing experiences in cityscapes is a costly as well as precarious affair.

Firstly, cityscapes are built not only to satisfy a whim of the moment, but actually investments are made aiming at a very long-stretched and hence unforeseeable future. The planned environment has to be emotionally gratifying and/or physiologically appealing also in 20 or 30 years time. Secondly, building public places like city centres implies catering for the needs and wants of a general public, and not merely of one or a few well-defined target groups. Cities are, like broadcasting, libraries and (at least in some countries) health systems public service. The designer hence cannot afford to disregard all the various publics, who take a direct or indirect interest in the city. The design should appeal to the experiential make-up of urbanites as well as people living in the suburbs, and often s/he cannot ignore the wants of companies or visitors either (see Jantzen and Vetner 2008a for more on this issue). But before discussing how design might actually enhance urban experiences for such various target groups, we have to elaborate on the psychological structure of these distinct ways of experiencing.

### **The structure of urbanite experiences**

To facilitate design practice we have elsewhere proposed a model of how the structure of experiencing should be understood (Jantzen and Vetner 2007a, 2007b, 2008a). We will only briefly sketch this model here. It is based on two core assumptions. In the first place having an experience is the outcome of an organism's way of responding to some specific input (stimuli) *and* of an organism's motivation to seek out particular new inputs in its environment. Experiences are thus produced in a dynamics of processing signals and searching for signals. In this respect, our model combines neo-behaviorist and motivational stances in the field of psychology. In the second place having experiences and dealing with them in a gratifying manner is essential to being a psychologically and socially competent agent. An important part of individuals' autobiography consists of episodic memory, i.e. our actual recollections of past experiences. Experiences are thus formative for our own

understanding of who we are, where we come from and what we are moving towards. Recollected, they convey meaning, which creates coherence and identity and also may (or must) be communicated to others to make social sense (Vetner and Jantzen 2007). In this respect our model combines insights from behavioural science with a hermeneutic position.

What characterizes a “good” experience, i.e. an experience that is pleasurable, emotionally gratifying *and* inherently meaningful, is that it implies alterations on all or most of the various psychological levels of dealing with information from the environment. An experience of “good” quality must firstly be touching, arousing or relaxing. It must bring about physiological change (Pfaff 2006). Secondly it must be emotionally satisfying, implying that it must lead to some change in our actual doings: in attracting us it activates us for new actions, thus diverting us from our previous preoccupations. Emotions are basically warning systems, signalling that something dangerous or beneficial is about to happen (Frijda 1999). Thirdly, a “good” experience affects our way of thinking, behaving, wanting or longing. It changes our habitual ways of “doing”: i.e. our pre-existing cognitive schemes, scripts, frames and maps, to a high degree formed by previous experiences. Fourthly, such changes on the levels of the organism may also contribute to developing our identity and give us new perspectives on who we are and what we are aiming at. Such new insights into our own life projects create meanings that can be communicated to and exchanged with others. A “good” experience should thus be understood as a relation between largely unconscious biological levels and a reflexive and socially comprehensible level.

Having a “good” experience relies crucially on our mood and on a host of situational factors. Whereas these situational factors are psychologically contingent, mood is to a considerable degree depending on personality traits, which motivate individuals for certain actions and thus are formative for preferences, predispositions and specific routines for generating personally meaningful experiences. Some people may be more driven by anxiety, others more by ingenuity. These drives are relatively stable motivations for future behaviour, which may be predicted by observing actual doings. Many theories on personality prevail, but we adhere to a theory based on neurophysiology (Eysenck 1967, Gray 1981) and neuro-endocrinology (Panksepp 1998). According to such theories some people qualify as extroverts, others as introverts. Moreover some people may be driven by more egocentric motives, while others are motivated by social concerns. Precisely because such differences are systematic, one can distinguish between seeking behaviour, status, sociability and comfort as some of the basic motives for behaviour (cf. Häusel 2006, Jantzen and Vetner 2008b, 2009).

In this respect, the essential attraction of urban experiences is that they contribute to self-development by being challenging and versatile and by relying on intense face-to-face interactions in the public sphere. The dominant emotions in this type of spatial experience are thus those related to the brain’s “seeking system” (Panksepp 1998): the joy of discovering something unexpected, the urge to explore new fields and the play with other sides of one’s identity than those habitually staged.

Physiologically pleasure is derived primarily from stimulation and excitement, i.e. from increased arousal by being confronted with something unexpected. But points of rest and relaxation are necessary to counterbalance the risks of too much arousal (i.e. stress). Attractive urban environments are therefore characterized by ample space for “time-out”: parks, plazas, cafés, etc., which in addition offer possibilities for socializing with strangers. Moreover landmarks and a clear grid may prevent the city-stroller from getting lost in the crowd. The urge for intensity does not erase a need for orientation and feeling safe. Negative emotions (anxiety, fear) have to be controlled or prevented, for the impression of the urban environment to be positive.

On the level of habits the urban experience is very much a matter of “accommodation” (Piaget 1980): of integrating new impressions in existing cognitive schemes in order to expand one’s knowledge of the world and/or to refine one’s gamut of feelings. For this to happen, the interesting inputs must in some way match the relevance structure established by previous experiences. At this level urban experiences presuppose a dialectics of transgression and affirmation, essential to the innovative quality of urban life. At the reflexive level such dynamics are mandatory for an ongoing identity project favouring self-development. In this

perspective personal identity is a process continuously in the making rather than a stable fix-point for outer directed actions. These characteristics of the urban experience are summed up in the following table:

<b>The urban experience</b>	
Physiology	Stimulation
Emotions	Spontaneity, curiosity
Habits	Accommodation
Identity	Self-development

Table 2. The Structure of Urban Experiences

The people actually populating city centres belong to two very different categories. On the one side some groups have to live there in lack of other (i.e. better) opportunities. The “death of cities” (Jacobs 1961) and the pauperization of centres over the last century is the result of an ongoing emigration of its previously diverse population to segregated suburbs. In many cases the old centres have become ghettos, predominantly housing those people who cannot afford to move. On a mental level this process may result in a “ruralization” of urban centres.

On the other side the old centres have become attractive for gentrifiers, who move to this place voluntarily precisely because centres provide ample opportunities for urban experiences. These experiences could therefore with some right be named the *urbanite’s* experiences. Being the primary driver of the knowledge intensive economy this “creative class” has become increasingly interesting for local policy makers and is consequently targeted by urban planners (Florida 2002, Clark 2004). The hidden problem in this planning and policy-making is of course that the total percentage of potential “new urbanites” in a country at any given time is relatively small in terms of psychographics, approximately 20% – hardly enough to populate all the exciting new (real or micro-)metropolises being planned and built (van Engelsdorp-Gastelaars and Hamers 2006).

### **The structure of suburbanite experiences**

In contrast to urban experiences, the essential attraction of suburban life is that it contributes to existential stability in affirming the significance of everyday life. It aims at providing ample space and time for strengthening intimate relationships and the contact with peers (neighbours, acquaintances, friends). Two quite distinct types of emotions prevail. On the one hand those related to the brains “nurture system” (Panksepp 1998): the satisfaction derived from bonding with and caring for or being cared by significant others. Life in *New Towns* is highly sociable, at least according to the ideals of the “New Urban Settlements” movement. It should be oriented towards “peace, love and understanding” and rely crucially on empathy. Being able to mean something to others and share their preoccupations, worries and delights is in such cases a strong motivation for choosing a suburban life form. On the other hand suburban experiences are also related to the ability to tackle the “anxiety system” (ibid.): the comfort of feeling secure in an otherwise uncertain or unsafe world. The reality of suburban life is often to safeguard its residents from external dangers and disturbances, which has turned many upper middle class suburbs into gated communities or “ghettos” for the happy few. Being able to control the surroundings is in such cases a strong motivation for choosing a suburban life form.

On the physiological level “good” suburban experiences is a result of a decrease in tension or stress. Such a decrease is either a goal in itself (the control motive) or a means to reach a higher goal (the sociability motive). A common thread in these two motives is a well-arranged environment easy to survey for each individual inhabitant. The ideal suburb is hence characterized by low-rise housing. But whereas anxiety-reduction relies on surveillance, sociability presupposes common grounds (parks, playing fields, village halls, cafés) to meet. Another common thread is the necessity of creating an environment with a balanced population. Put rather simplistically, the ideal suburban neighbour is either somebody to share

important values and features with (sociability), somebody not to worry about (anxiety-reduction) or somebody who contributes to your own standing (status). In this respect, the ideal suburban neighbourhood is characterized by homogeneity, in stark contrast to versatility and heterogeneity of ideal urban life.

Whereas input has to be interesting in order to be relevant for urban experiences, impressions have to be relevant in order to become interesting for suburban experiences. On the level of habits the suburban experience is thus very much a matter of “assimilation” (Piaget 1980): of being able to find already established and hence recognizable patterns in new information in order to process it comprehensibly. New input should thus contribute to confirm the stability of existence on the reflexive level. Experiencing something unexpected and interesting should in the end contribute to re-affirm a relatively fixed identity: i.e. tension may be utilized to bring about a stronger equilibrium. The characteristics of suburban experience and their differences with the urbanite experience are summed up in this way:

	<b>The urbanite experience</b>	<b>The suburban experience</b>
Physiology	Stimulation	Stress-reduction, comfort
Emotions	Spontaneity, curiosity	Pride (status) Nurture, compassion (sociability) Security (control)
Habits	Accommodation	Assimilation
Identity	Self-development, innovation	Confirmation, stability

Table 3. The suburban experience compared to the urbanite’s

As this table illustrates, there is no such thing as a univocal suburban experience. On the level of emotions three distinct clusters of motives prevail, appealing to quite different groups in terms of psychographics (Häusel 2006, Jantzen and Vetner 2008b, 2009). These differences may be illustrated by the groups’ way of tackling disturbances. Some people do their best to avoid disturbances as much as possible (control motive), others use disturbances as opportunities for demonstrating their own ability to master turmoil (status motive), and others again use disturbances as inspiration for meaningful social contact (sociability motive). This last group has important similarities with the gentrifiers, who are in the market for urban(ite) experiences, in that both groups are motivated by a need for development either individually (“the creative class”) or socially (“the sociable class”). In terms of personality both groups qualify as extroverts (Eysenck 1967, Gray 1981). Those groups motivated by either control or status on the other hand qualify as introverts. They are either egocentrically (status) or socially (control) oriented.

Interestingly, such psychographic differences were attended to in the initial planning of Almere in the 1970es. When sketching the lay-out for Almere-Haven, the first settlement, planners designed specific neighbourhoods for extroverts, and other ones for introverts and individualists (Provoost, Colenbrander and Alkemade 1999: 9). Taking the individual differences of the future residents into account from the start perhaps helps to explain the relative success of this *New Town* (e.g. in terms of satisfaction or in figures of re-emigration) compared to other new urban settlements. All too often such “ideal cities” were planned with regard to what planners thought socially desirable – i.e. targeting “the sociable class” – and not in respect to the needs and wants of those who actually went to live there. In many instances this malpractice has led to a sorting out of people, resulting in precincts populated by residents with no other place to go.

Before analyzing how Almere’s new city centre matches such psychographic differences and which kinds of suburban experiences might be generated by the centre’s urban flavour, we will provide some more details on the political ambitions leading to this plan as well as on how the plan was eventually realized architectonically.

### ***The quantum leap: Policies, plans and practices***

As already mentioned the passing of the new plan for the city centre by the city council in 1994, marked a decisive break with the prior principles for developing Almere, which had been guiding the planning since the early 1970es. With this new plan the council for the first time opted for high-rise buildings. Furthermore the previous goal to develop a network of equally important centres was replaced by a new ambition to develop one core centre. The five guiding principles in this centralization were the following (Architekten Cie. w.y.: 4):

1. Almere should have one overarching City Heart
2. This City Heart should become a *complete* centre providing all aspects of urban life: i.e. a varied mix of entertainment, culture, offices, housing, services
3. New concepts of urbanity should be integrated with traditional ones by connecting the existing centre in Almere-Stad with the shores of lake *Weerwater*
4. The City Heart should have a regional appeal, giving Almere a distinct identity in the northern rim of the Dutch network of cities (*Randstad*); this identity should emphasize the new, innovative and experimental qualities of Almere
5. Combining mainstream with periphery, small scale with large scale, the City Heart should be attractive for everybody: versatile, heterogenic, high quality and coherent.

Becoming an attractive city, a truly urban environment, was clearly the council's penultimate priority. And as indicated by the last two principles, this goal was stated explicitly in terms of urban experiences. The new City Heart should be visible, audible and tangible to its users (inhabitants as well as visitors), and it should consist of a sufficient number of landmarks to convey an urban impression. Almere was to make a "quantum leap" (Municipality of Almere 1994) from being a fairly large provincial town to becoming a mini-metropolis, mirroring itself in the image of Amsterdam on the opposite shores of *IJmeer*.



Figure 7. Map of the City Heart, 2008. The old city centre's grid structure is clearly visible in the upper part of the map. The oblique road structure of the new mall in the lower part of the map forms a remarkable contrast to the rectangular streets in Teun Koolhaas' original plan.

These bold ideas were to be realized on the arable land north of Almere's artificial lake and south of the existing centre. This centre had been designed in the early 1980es by Teun Koolhaas with a grid structure, inspired by the lay-out of Barcelona, but with building blocks of more moderate proportions (i.e. 5 storeys high). Teun Koolhaas was one of the four candidates invited to make a proposal for the final master plan. However, the winner of the competition was eventually his cousin, the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), whose very name must be said to resound the council's ambitions. OMA, renowned for its neo-modernist theories on urban planning (e.g. Koolhaas

1994/1978) but also for having implemented the master plan for a new city centre in Lille successfully (cf. Koolhaas e.a. 1996), had presented an outline that negated the existing layout of the centre in a provoking way. This proposal conceived of a high-rise business park just north of the centre's railway station, landmark cultural institutions (a theatre, an urban entertainment centre, museums) and apartment buildings at the lakeside and an open-air shopping mall in connection to the grid of existing shopping streets.



Figure 8. *The Wave* by the local architect van Zuuk, 2004.

By now most of these elements of the master plan have been realized, although with considerable changes compared to OMA's original outline. The business park, though, is still under completion, as the first of the three 100.000 m<sup>2</sup> office skyscrapers of L'Hermitage, the highest (Carlton, also housing a hotel) being 120 metres, will not be finished before 2010. But some of the office buildings are already functioning as clearly visible landmarks. The WTC/Alnovum-building (by Benthem Crouwel, 1999) and the La Defense (by UN Studio, 2004) form a stark contrast in both shape and colour to the existing built environment, which must be said to be rather pale (predominantly using yellow bricks) and traditional. Most projects on the lakeside being completed, Almere has by now a distinct skyline visible from the A6-highway and from the air. Apartment buildings like the Silverline (by Claus and Kaan, 2001, 17 storeys), the twin towers Side by Side (by Architekten Cie, 2006, 22 storeys) and not least the sculpturally curved *The Wave* (by van Zuuk, 2004, 7 storeys) together with the theatre (by SANAA, 2007) and the Urban Entertainment Centre, harboring a music-hall, bars, restaurants, retail outlets and a hotel (by Alsop, 2004), have turned Almere into a hot place for architects to visit, thus defying the city's general public image as being ugly. By their height, shape, color and the materials used (e.g. metal) the new buildings also defy the surroundings built in the 1980es.



Figure 9. *La Defense* by UN Studio (van Berkel and Bos), 2004.

The *pièce de résistance* of the master plan, though, is the open-air shopping mall, Citadel, designed by de Portzamparc and completed in 2006. The Citadel is located between the old grid of shopping streets and the landmarks at the shore, and its road map diverts considerably from the pre-existing infrastructure by being twisted obliquely thus creating sharp angles with blind spots as well as wider places for public display. Built on an artificial hill, the roads of the Citadel rise to 6 metres above ground level and as the whole area is restricted to pedestrians some “foot-work” has to be done, when entering the mall from either the lakeside or the old centre. Another way of entering the mall is by escalators from the parking lot for 2400 cars underneath. This space, aptly named “the Underworld” by its planners, is built at the actual ground level and is also being used for transporting goods to the shops above, on base level, implying that the backstage of commerce – i.e. the “hell” of supply – is efficiently kept away from the customer, who is set free to indulge in the delights of demand.

Figure 10. Sketch of the *Citadel's* “Upperworld”, with housing at the fringes of the “park”. The top of the hill is 3 metres above the lowest point.



With its walls in patterned brown concrete (resembling rocks) and its slopes, the Citadel appears to be a fortress of consumption, controlling its surroundings. In that case the masters of this fortress are neither the shopkeepers nor the customers but the inhabitants living on the

upper level of the mall, what consequently must be the “Upperworld”. How life might be in this heavenly sphere one can only glimpse from a roof terrace in the mall’s department store, V&D, as there is no public access to the upper layer. Surprisingly, the main part of this area is laid out as a mildly sloping park landscape of 11.000 m2 with housing at the fringe of the field (52 dwellings) and footbridges suspended not over a pond or brook but over the abysses formed by the two streets traversing the area at base level some 15 or 20 metres below. The bridges connect the roofs of the four blocks to form what might seem like a small countryside village, but quite ironically located on top of what pretends to be the very heart of the city. These very distinct “worlds” contained within the Citadel may be summarized in this way:

	“Underworld”	“Middleworld”	“Upperworld”
<b>Visibility</b>	Kept out of sight	Fully visible	Only partially visible
<b>Function</b>	Backstage of consumption	Front stage of consumption	Hidden world of Olympic living

Table 4. The three layers of the Citadel

The design of this multilayered mall thus keeps some aspects out of the pedestrian’s sight (i.e. the banalities of commercial life), while others are only partially visible for all others than the happy few or “superhumans” (i.e. the pleasures of being on top of the “World”). The effect being, that the world of leisure (shopping, consumption and entertainment) is separated from the subterranean realm of toil but also from the heavenly sphere of luxurious living. On the one hand the mall corresponds with the ideals of contemporary urbanism: namely versatility and a mix of functions (cf. Jantzen and Vetner 2008a). These functions are on the other hand kept sharply segregated. They are not meant for mixing, which implies that the design lacks or refuses flexibility. Taking this mall to be emblematic for the entire plan, we will now discuss, which kind of urban experiences “the quantum leap” generates.

#### **An urban centre for suburban residents**

Having visited Almere’s City Heart on three separate occasions during 2008, we have made two basic albeit rather trivial observations. Firstly, the city centre is spectacular: it is indeed everything that the surroundings are lacking. It is varied and heterogenic, whereas the environments are harmonic or even monotonous. Its high-rise buildings contrasts remarkably with the moderate proportions of the older grid’s low level building blocks. Erected on an artificial hill the sloping profile of the mall at base level furthermore negates the flatlands of the polder. The new centre is spectacular in the sense of being awesome. But it is also spectacular in a literal sense: it is a place for having dazzling vistas of the cityscape or nature (the lake), for watching other people hurrying by or for window-shopping. This also indicates that the built environment to a much lesser degree supports intensive interactions between people in the crowd. Its spacious layout does not favour surprise encounters.

Secondly, and closely connected to the first observation, the centre is never really crowded, not even on market days (i.e. Saturdays). Most people passing through appear to be shoppers. And after shopping hours these people apparently withdraw to the suburbs. This is of course for a large part caused by demographics and economic infrastructure. Almere does not have a sufficient amount of young well-educated people nor does it have a considerable number of knowledge intensive businesses to generate a mass of urbanites actively seeking contact. But the design of the master plan does however not support such urban behaviour either. Functions are kept apart in separate blocks or on segregated layers, and the ample space between blocks as well as the fact that the different forms of traffic (public transportation, cars, bikes and pedestrians) are still strictly separated, preventing an impression of the city as a pressure cooker or a combustion engine, bursting with energy. The architecture and urban design hence impede the urbanite experience, physiologically relying

on stimulation (arousal) and emotionally on impulsivity and spontaneity, from being evoked (cf. Jantzen and Vetner 2008a).

The City Heart is not an intensified urban interior for producing surprising experiences that may challenge or even change its users' identities. On the contrary, it is a sumptuous décor intended at enhancing the qualities of suburban living. It might even be very successful at that. This is precisely due to the spectacular character of the design. It is aimed at visibility: i.e. at creating an image of Almere as more than a network of suburban settlements – a “real” city. In the experiential economy, visibility is increasingly becoming a token of existence (Have 2004), implying that the city needs to convey a prolific image in order to exist. It adds to the attractiveness of the city as such, making it easier to persuade prospective settlers to move. This visibility also contributes to the identity of its (middle class) inhabitants. They don't live in the middle of nowhere, but can take pride in belonging to a highly visible place. The City Heart might thus have a significant branding effect and at the same time increase the self-esteem and social status of Almere's residents.



Figures 11 & 12. The *Citadel* with footbridges and the roof terrace (left). The artificial slope on base level is clearly visible.

View from the roof terrace with houses on the fringe of the “park landscape” and a footbridge connecting two blocks on the upper level (above).

But visibility is not only an issue of cool cash (branding) or of some reflexive work on identity (self-esteem, status). The highly visible décor grants the stroller invisibility or anonymity as partaker on an urban stage without having to perform him or herself. It safeguards the pedestrian from having to take a stance, at the same time giving him or her an overview of the situation. In other words, the spectacular City Heart enables its users to play the role of the spectator: of the bystander seeing the public display without actively engaging in the public performance. The spectator is bodily part of the scenery yet emotionally detached from it. This spectator can be interpreted as a suburban descendant of the *flâneur*, once walking the arcades of Paris, “the capital of 19<sup>th</sup> century modernity” (Benjamin 1999, Harvey 2005). The charm of this role being, that it puts the spectator in control of the situation (i.e. anxiety reduction), simultaneously allowing him or her to engage in an activity (e.g. buying, talking, eating) at will. Spectatorship is in other words comfortable. It does not question the relevance or significance of lives led, although it contributes to the flavour of existence. It is a time-out from the routines of quotidian life, which does not challenge the

values and qualities of this life. Urbanity hence becomes a source of inspiration for continuing everyday life in suburbia.

Ironically, the only thing really blocked from the spectator’s perspective is a full view of the existence lived by the residents on top of the mall. The roof terrace only allows a partial glance at life in this microcosmic (superior) suburban heaven. What probably is most similar to the spectators’ actual life might thus very well become the most luring and attracting image, because of its hidden character. With the danger of over-interpreting the significance of this architectonic element, it could be said to result in a *voyeuristic* worshipping of ordinary life. From his or her vantage point the observer may furtively glance at the “superhumans” without being seen by them. But what potentially stimulates the observer is seeing moments and situations that very much resemble his or her own life.

Voyeurism and *flânerie* are both detached ways of experiencing the urban scene. As pointed out by Cox (2008), *kinaesthesia* is a third way of relating experientially to situations. The kinaesthete is actively participating in the scene. He or she is contributing to the performance and bodily engaged in, interacting with as well as affected by the situation. The kinaesthete’s movements in space may leave traces behind transforming it into a *locus*, a place marked by (personal) history. Such movements may furthermore alter the interaction and the other participants’ way of partaking in the interaction. And they will almost inevitably affect the kinaesthete physically e.g. by demanding an effort, leading to fatigue or attenuating sensual perception. The Citadel only faintly allows for such kinaesthetic experiences. While going uphill on the slope is physically demanding, going downhill demands attention. Both movements may generate kinaesthesia. But the City Heart as a whole does not invite to interactions with neither the physical surroundings nor the crowd of shoppers and flâneurs. The new city centre is primarily a vehicle for seeing and a décor for being seen, and not so much for being physically touched. The following table summons up these three ways of relating experientially to the urban scene.

<b>Voyeur</b>	<b>Flâneur</b>	<b>Kinaesthete</b>
Observer	Onlooker	Participant
Distant from the scene	Placed in the scene	Part of the performance
Seeing what ought to be hidden	Interpreting what is public	Absorbed by the action
Not intended to be seen by the object	Visible to the object	Interacting with the object
Emotionally aroused	Emotionally detached	Emotionally aroused
Satisfaction	Learning	“Acting out”

Table 5. Three ways of relating experientially to the environment

These three experiential attitudes can be related to psychographics. Voyeurism and *flânerie* are introvert acts. Both attitudes keep a distance to the object being perceived. They voyeur may be emotionally aroused (e.g. tickled, exited or angered) by the situation observed, but the physical distance both prevents him or her from actually interacting with this object *and* safeguards the voyeur from repercussions or retaliation from the object spied upon. The gratification generated by voyeurism is the satisfaction of seeing “the other” being revealed, while being safe from having to relate to this “dangerous other”. So voyeurism is driven by anxiety(-reduction) and the relative certainty of being in a secure position.

*Flânerie*, on the other hand, is the act of strolling for the pleasure of perceiving and being perceived. The *flâneur* is part of the scene without engaging actively in it. He or she is socially as well as emotionally detached from and superior to the object. The world of objects is a field to be interpreted, thus enabling the *flâneur* to demonstrate his or her intellectual capabilities, as well as a catwalk allowing the *flâneur* to show of his or her mastery (i.e. social status). Whereas the voyeur is in control because he or she is out of reach, the *flâneur* is in control because he or she is on top of the situation.

Kinaesthesia is on the contrary an extrovert act. It requires a personality driven by an urge to take actively part in the setting and to interact physically, emotionally and socially

with others. This acting out serves identity purposes either by sharing with others (sociability) or by using interactions for challenging one's own preconceptions and routines (egocentric motives). Kinaesthesia defies fixed social norms either to reach more profound social goals or to get kicks that might contribute to personal development. The bodily sensations and emotional gratifications derived from such acts bear witness to their degree of authenticity. The body tells whether this kind of experience was "good" or not.

The new city centre of Almere predominantly lends itself for *flânerie*. Its centrepiece, the mall, is designed to make goods as accessible to consumers as possible, thus serving the interactions between customers and products. The surroundings and the other customers are primarily a décor for consumption and not a stage for new intense interpersonal interactions or chance encounters. The City Heart may be a spectacular or admirable setting, thereby being a "perfect match" for the *flâneur*, who in his or her self-conception is equally admirable. It is certainly not a prop for interactivity, which actively engages agents to "co-create" experiential frames (Boswijk, Thijssen and Peelen 2007). Kinaesthesia is restricted to the physical challenges posed by the slopes and the positive and negative sensations of falling prey to seasonal conditions in an open-air mall. In an almost postmodern vein the lay-out of the mall mocks voyeurism by hiding from sight what is obvious for most observers: namely the "superior" delights of suburban living.

The people populating the City Heart and especially the mall are by and large visitors from the city's suburban precincts. They could be called tourists, allegedly another modern descendent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *flâneur* (cf. Urry 1991), touring their own hometown: i.e. people having a break from their ordinary shopping outlets, while pursuing activities confirming the relevance of their everyday life. It is very well possible that the accompaniment of friends and acquaintances adds to the meaning (reflexive level) and gratification (emotional level) of the experience, turning it onto a sociable event. It is a learning process restoring or re-affirming the importance of everyday existence. In other words, the city centre adds urban flavour to suburban living, which can be visualized in the following manner.

Urban experience	Suburban experience	Almere's "City Heart"
Public sphere	Private sphere	Privacy in public
Plurifunctionality	Monofunctionality	Zoned functionality
Interaction with strangers	Interaction with intimates	Interaction from a distance ( <i>flâneur</i> )
Creativity	Stability	Controlled creativity
Change	Control	Stable alterations
Surprise	Comfort	Comfortable surprises
Stimulation	Safety	

Table 6. Creating urban experiences for suburbanites in Almere

As stated earlier, there is no such thing as a suburban way of experiencing. At the emotional level at least three different clusters of motives prevail, and two of them are in the market for experiencing urban space. To the extroverts motivated by sociability, the inner city is a source of inspiration that supplements everyday life by generating new impressions. The possibility for having a time-out from the ordinary surroundings and experiencing something "extra" together with close friends and family adds flavour to life. The urban stage is attractive because it promises variation, while at the same time leaving the relevance of existence intact. The introverts motivated by preserving or increasing personal status and self-esteem are gratified by the spectacular décor. The inner city is predominantly a space and an ambience that feels good to be associated with in terms of their own identity. The city brand is in a way entangled with the way, in which they want to be seen and known by others. If they actually visit the place, it is to be inspired by its *grandeur* or to learn about its *couleur locale* or its

*genius loci*, which obviously in the case of the City Heart is still largely absent. Those introverts motivated by control will on the other hand reject a visit to the inner city as relevant for their life project. City life is an unnecessary disturbance that should better be avoided.

### **Designing the unique, making it quotidian**

With the completion of the Carlton hotel and office tower sometime in the next decade, Almere will have an even more pronounced skyline. This tower will be among the top ten skyscrapers in the Netherlands and only 3 metres smaller than the largest building in the neighbouring Amsterdam, the Mondrian building. But it will not transform Almere into a metropolis, although it without a doubt will strengthen the city-like look and image of the municipality. The urban ambitions of the city council may influence the physical shape and appearance of the city, but it cannot alter the demographics radically nor change the mental predispositions of its population. Commissioning, planning and implementing an urban environment in what used to be a suburban network of settlements will not generate a sufficient amount of urbanites to create a truly metropolitan ambience. Although the master plan emphasizes the new, innovative and experimental qualities of Almere, it does so solely in terms of materials used, forms shaped and buildings erected. It does not and cannot in and by itself produce a versatile, heterogenic and wildly creative population.

This, however, does not imply that the whole endeavour is a mistake or failure. On the contrary, one might argue that the City Heart is a splendid realization of the suburban dream or image of how a relevant urban environment should feel, look and be like. If this should be the case, the master plan may prove crucial in gaining a stable position in the larger Amsterdam region as the most attractive place for living and an acceptable place for working. Such an image may contribute in fulfilling the ambition of becoming the country's fifth city in terms of population in just a few decades. To reach such goal Almere must foremost continue doing what it is best at: i.e. offering opportunities for gratifying suburban living, matching distinct tastes, preferences, income levels and life stages. But next to that, Almere has to continue working at becoming visible as a place that offers something "extra" to suburban life: i.e. something that adds to the quality of this existence without questioning its value or legitimacy.

The master plan seems highly suited for this purpose. It is a unique ensemble of landmarks, some of them showpieces of contemporary architecture (e.g. La Defense, Citadel, The Wave). Products only become "extras", however, if they allow their users to appropriate them physically, mentally or experientially, meaning that city-strollers should be able to exert a way of behaving that seems relevant or interesting to them, when confronted with the built environment. The cityscape must fit its users life projects and support their personal goals. In this regard, it is our contention that this master plan although perhaps pretending to aim at residents with urbanite tastes and preferences, is well-suited for catering for the habits and emotions of a substantial part of the municipality's middle-class suburban population. The new City Heart conveys a relevant image of their hometown, thus leading to an increased pride in living in Almere. As indicated by the increase in the population's pride, the master plan appears to have been extremely successful in branding the city for its own residents, who in the end are the owners of the brand. Furthermore, the master plan seems to fit the emotional make up and behavioural predispositions of many users in a relevant way. They can go about in a quotidian way, although they are strolling through a unique cityscape.

The mall being relatively new, its novel frames for shopping and strolling may suffice to generate something "extra". But this will certainly change in due course. When we visited the site some of our informants actually expressed their dissatisfaction with the choice of stores at hand. Firstly many stores are located in the new mall as well as in the old main streets leading to redundancy. Secondly most stores are typical main street stores (chains) to be found in any other Dutch city of comparable size. And thirdly many of the locally based speciality stores (e.g. delis focusing on ethnic products) have disappeared since the opening of the mall, as they are not able to pay the increase in rent, which the whole area has experienced. It thus seems appropriate that the investors in the area start considering the

content and the formula of the site, if the City Heart is to remain a relevant and interesting provider of urban experiences for suburbanites.

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