

From Utopia to Vinex Estate

The Transformation of the Bijlmermeer District in Amsterdam

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[MARIEKE VAN ROOY]



Bijlmermeer. Renovated flats with metro.

Photo by Domenico Mangano.

'What our forefathers built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was splendid, and we hope that our descendants will also be able to experience what we are building here as splendid. Different in many ways, perhaps even impossible to compare, but after a century the citizens of Amsterdam should at least be able to refer with respect to the way the Bijlmermeer was built in the nineteen-sixties and seventies.'

Mayor Van Hall, on laying the foundation stone for the housing development in the Bijlmermeer district in Amsterdam on Tuesday 13th December 1966.

This quote represents the expectations its initiators had for the new Bijlmermeer housing district in its early stages. A city for the future, with spacious homes, free of traffic and full of greenery. Since then time has caught up with this utopian vision. If the people of Amsterdam are able to speak about

Bijlmermeer with any respect around 2066 it will be mainly due to the radical renovation work launched about twenty years ago. Anyone who had seen the Bijlmermeer in the seventies and revisited it today would look round in amazement. The modernist design of that time, characterised by the strict separation of types of traffic, extensive green public spaces and imposing high-rise blocks has all gone. Instead, the cyclist and the motorist travel alongside one another again, the honeycomb flats have been demolished or amputated and the more intimate scale of the new terraced houses looks like a way of uniting the inhabitant with his immediate surroundings. The Taibah mosque, near the Kraaiennest underground station, is designed like a Dutch fantasy of the one in the Orient, and leaves no doubt as to the faith practised here. It contrasts enormously with the very first places of worship under the parking viaducts, which had voluntarily conformed to the architectural restrictions of the all-embracing functionalist design.

The regeneration of the district is almost completed, and the proposals for the approach to the last original block of flats, the Kleiburg, and the Kraaiennest combined car park and shopping centre are currently under discussion. But when that is resolved, the last surviving link with the original informal Bijlmermeer will have vanished forever. This article will outline the construction and demolition of this radical housing project, which is an important chapter in the general and architectural history of the Netherlands.

The original design

The Bijlmermeer is a former polder which was used for agriculture before it was taken over. The area is about fifteen kilometres south-east of the centre of Amsterdam and was part of the boroughs of Weesperkarspel, Ouder Amstel and Diemen. The expansion of the city in a south-easterly direction was not part of the original 1930s expansion plan for Amsterdam. It was thought that the city would grow to about 960,000 inhabitants by 2000 and that they could be housed within the boundaries of the city. However, this view was revised after the Second World War. As a result of a reduction in the average number of people in each household, an increase in sites for industry and recreation and the renovation of run-down houses in the inner city and the nineteenth-century belt, more homes were needed than had been expected. In the revised version of the expansion plan, the idea of the concentric city was abandoned and replaced by the concept of an urban core with projecting lobes. One of these 'fingers' was the Bijlmermeer.

The state did not wish to agree to expanding the city's boundaries without some serious consideration, so the city council launched a campaign to gain support for the project. For example, a letter was sent to the 320,000 inhabitants of Amsterdam explaining why the development of the Bijlmermeer was so important to the city. Here is an extract from the letter, making clear the wretched state of Amsterdam housing at the time: 'Have you ever reflected on the problem of 25,000 Amsterdam families whom an in-depth study has shown have to live in unacceptable housing conditions, because their 'homes' are in fact slums? Did you know that 38,000 Amsterdam families still live in 'homes' with only two rooms? You can imagine that we – who run your city from day to day – are now extremely concerned that we may perhaps no

Bijlmermeer. Mosque.
Photo by
Domenico Mangano.



longer be able to carry out our plans to clear the slums and get rid of the almost inhuman housing conditions if the government continues to refuse to build new homes in the Bijlmermeer? Your fine city of Amsterdam – and who among us is not proud of this city? – has to be able to build new houses as soon as possible for at least 100,000 fellow citizens. (...) Amsterdam needs the Bijlmermeer! NOW!’ According to the Information Department it was the first time that the council of a major city in the Netherlands had addressed its citizens directly on such an important issue by means of a letter.

In 1964 the conflict between Amsterdam and Minister Toxopeus was settled with a compromise. Behind the scenes work was going on to put together a corporation for the conurbation of Greater Amsterdam, and Bijlmermeer might later become an independent borough within this framework. As a temporary solution, the Bijlmer could be annexed to Amsterdam for a period of 12 years. In 1966 the transfer was complete. (The administrative change never actually took place, and 12 years later the Bijlmer was definitively merged with Amsterdam.)

In terms of programme, architecture and urban planning, the Bijlmermeer is the most radical housing project to have been implemented in the Netherlands. 90% of the project consisted of high-rise structures and 70% was designed for the social sector. The project was based on the division of functions as designated in the Athens Charter (1933) formulated by members of CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*). It was very much influenced by the urban planner Van Eesteren, who was secretary of CIAM from 1930 to 1947 and worked in Amsterdam's Urban Development Department. Despite its huge scale, one of the sources of inspiration was the concept of the garden city. To quote from a brochure issued by the *Federatie van Woningbouwverenigingen* (Federation of Housing Associations): 'It may sound strange, but you will soon be able to live outdoors in Amsterdam. The Bijlmer will make this possible. The urban plan for the Bijlmer is not what we are used to. It will not be a city with some greenery in it, but greenery with some city in it.'

The design for the Bijlmermeer originated from the Urban Development Department, which developed it very largely independently. This department laid

down the basis for the greenery, public space, infrastructure and the division of land for housing. *The Woningdienst* (Housing Department) was permitted to work out the details of the housing, but they did not have much room for manoeuvre. On the one hand there were the Urban Development Department's guidelines and on the other the strict conditions laid down by the builders of modular housing, of whom the Housing Department had so far had little experience.

The heart of the project consisted of high-rise blocks of 11 storeys in a honeycomb pattern laid out in a park landscape. In line with the wishes of the Urban Development Department, the young Housing Department architect Kees Rijnboudt designed an arcade (also known as a 'dry walkway') that would link the high-rise with the car parks, which would also house spaces for communal activities. Eight storeys of homes were scheduled above this indoor street. Due to financial restrictions, Rijnboudt's plan was later watered down. An extra storey was added, taking the total to nine, and the number of waste shafts

Bijlmermeer.
Photo by
Domenico Mangano.



and lifts was reduced. This design formed the basis for the plan's remaining blocks. The solutions Rijnboudt had come up with to achieve the requested savings were repeated in each case, and sometimes implemented even more drastically.

The design for the infrastructure was decidedly progressive for the Netherlands; the different types of traffic were separated and the immediate surroundings of the blocks of flats were car-free. Elevated roads provided direct access to the car parks, which were located on the periphery of the housing areas. These were also the points where public transport, shopping centres and other amenities were grouped. Cycle and pedestrian routes were laid out in meandering patterns throughout the district, and the viaducts were essential in this respect. No traditional streets were laid, and addresses were to be located by means of the names given to the buildings. The following passage from the Collective Block Amenities Document gives a good idea of what was expected of the Bijlmermeer: 'With regard to the home and the

Bijlmermeer. Kleiburg.
Still to be renovated.
Photo by Domenico Mangano.



housing environment, the Bijlmermeer plan is intended to satisfy such general human needs as individuality and recognisability. In the plan, the endeavour is to achieve this by arranging the high-rise blocks so that the open spaces are differentiated by shape and by their location in relation to infrastructure elements, and furthermore by significant differences in the design of the open spaces. The plan provides clear contrasts whereby quiet living in green surroundings without motor traffic contrasts with the liveliness of the indoor street and neighbourhood centre. The plan is also intended to satisfy the need for both public openness and privacy. As a place exclusively for pedestrians, the indoor street is experienced much more as a communal amenity than is a traditional street. The same applies to the wide variety of possibilities for active and passive use of the large outdoor spaces, compared to the communal gardens in garden cities. In the layout of the blocks with an indoor street, several of the disadvantages of highly regulated working-class housing can be overcome by adding elements to the indoor street that increase the flexibility in the use of the home (e.g. guest rooms) and moving activities that are a nuisance to the neighbours outside the home. Such facilities as refreshment bars with patios will benefit the communal time spent in the indoor street and outdoors.'

Even though the Bijlmermeer was later often characterised as an anonymous concrete city, the designers had definitely devoted attention to the social aspects of the plan. For instance, a separate document was put forward on the uses to which the pavilions for communal activities would be put. A whole list of purposes was mentioned, of which these are just a few: refreshment bar with seating, hobby area, crèche, homework room, consultation room, rehearsal room, youth club, play area for children, and guest rooms. The neighbourhood centres combined with car parks were considered suitable for club activities, service centres for the elderly, spaces for doctors' group practices, crèches

and places of worship. For the main centre they planned such amenities as an indoor swimming pool and a theatre in addition to a shopping centre. The intention behind these amenities was clearly defined in the document, as was the cost of it all. But what was not made clear was how it was all to be financed. As far as the amenities in the pavilions were concerned, it was assumed that the inhabitants themselves would develop activities. It was suggested that rents be raised so that the residents would help pay for both the implementation and the development of the activities in the pavilions. But there was resistance to this among the residents. For the construction of the first pavilion, called *Hofgeest*, the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work gave a subsidy as part of welfare experiments in four cities: Rotterdam, Enschede, Apeldoorn and Amsterdam. But the grant given for this pavilion was the only one. The consequence was that through lack of funding the building of the remaining pavilions – the core of the collective element of the Bijlmer – was abandoned.

Exotic residents

Despite the fine promises in the brochures, criticism of the district soon snowballed. Its problems were raised at two public hearings, held in November 1970 and March 1971, at which time the work had not yet been completed, even though people had been living there since 1969. The residents, who had formed an action group, criticised the rent rises, the parking problem, the poor provision of public transport and the unfinished shopping centres. In the media the Bijlmermeer was soon portrayed as a disastrous project.

To make matters worse, the target group showed hardly any interest in moving into this suburb of the future. The Bijlmermeer was originally intended for working-class families, but because of the high rents and the alternative housing available in garden cities around Amsterdam, they failed to appear. The district became attractive to others who had trouble finding a spacious home in Amsterdam. In 1970, while the number of single-person households in Amsterdam was 18%, in the Bijlmermeer it was almost 40%. One of the very first doctors to practise there described the pioneers as follows: 'It is quite possible that a higher percentage of psychological conflicts occurs here. But this is not so surprising, because what the people here have in common is a certain non-conformism. Lots of people here are not married, lots of lesbians, lots of homosexuals, because here they can live anonymously, though they pay a lot for it. And lots of young intellectuals, who are also to some extent non-conformist. At the last elections (in 1970) we had one of Amsterdam's highest percentages of votes for the *'kabouters'* (an anarchistic countercultural movement).' The Bijlmer was a free state for non-conformist behaviour.

Another side to this story soon appeared. Apart from the eccentric Amsterdammers, the Bijlmermeer became a refuge for immigrants from Surinam who came to the Netherlands after the former colony gained its independence in 1975. It then became an attractive place for other immigrants to settle, both legal and illegal, since they found compatriots there and were able to live in relative anonymity. There are currently people of about 140 nationalities living there. An informal economy developed in the district. Some homes were used as soup kitchens or brothels. At the same time it became home to

about eighty different faith communities, a place where exotic products from all over the world could be found, and where young rappers honed their skills in their own Bijlmer style. This informality remained the custom until the buildings were literally demolished. The new plan provides hardly any space for such things as small improvised businesses run by immigrants.

In the eighties the district had a negative media image because of its criminality and the drug trade. The police appeared to have lost their hold on the area. There were a series of practical problems too: public transport did not operate properly, amenities were completed too late and the housing itself lacked the planned quality. The Bijlmer thus had a bad name and was the last place in the Netherlands where anyone who had any choice in the matter of housing would want to live. In the eighties all sorts of strategies were tried to bring an end to the criminality. Managers were appointed and flats restyled by, among other things, giving them new names. The future of the Bijlmermeer appeared to be in serious doubt.

Restyling the Bijlmermeer

But there were 'Bijlmermeer believers' too. In 1985, for instance, the architect Rem Koolhaas argued that the district should be upgraded. In his view, one of the biggest problems was the archaic nature of the public space, which did not comply with the wishes of the contemporary city-dweller. The problem would largely be remedied by intensifying the urban activities in the space between the blocks.

Koolhaas' ideas were not taken up. The privatisation of the housing companies in the early nineties gave the owners more freedom to radically update the site. The housing associations opted for demolition, and this came about sooner than expected as a result of a tragic accident involving an Israeli aircraft that crashed into one of the blocks, killing 43 people. Over the course of this radical redevelopment, which is gradually nearing completion, little of the functionalist urban planning and architecture has survived. Elevated roads were brought down to ground level, high-rise blocks replaced by terraced houses with front and back gardens, and the multi-storey car parks were demolished. The all-inclusive approach was abandoned. The district was divided into segments and, under the watchful eye of the municipal project group, this has resulted in a patchwork of urban planning and architectural visions reminiscent of the Vinex expansion districts that are appearing all over the country. (Vinex (*Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra*) is the title of a policy document issued by the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment in which large outer city areas were designated for massive new housing development to accommodate the increasing population near existing town centres.)

The only part to be preserved in its original state, apart from a few changes intended to breathe new life into the buildings, is what is ironically enough called the Bijlmer Museum.

It is not only the architecture that no longer has anything to do with the original design, but the programme too. Homes for sale and to let have replaced social housing. The percentage of social housing complies with the present requirements for expansion districts in the Netherlands, but now forms only a small part of the whole. The multicultural nature of the district has been

Bijlmermeer.
New Shopping Mall
Ganzenhoef. Photo by
Domenico Mangano.



retained, however. The origins of the residents of the new terraced houses correspond to the mixed population that previously occupied the high-rise buildings.

To the romantic fan of this remarkable housing district, which was founded on the international principles of the postwar functional city, this redevelopment – which he probably regards as a mutilation, is indisputably a thorn in the flesh. To the developer, the local authority and the administrators this radical renewal is undoubtedly a breath of fresh air. The residents have been given a safer environment on a more intimate scale, though the downside is that there is less room for their own unregulated initiatives. The rise and fall of the Bijlmermeer shows up the discrepancy between the drawing board and reality, between a visionary image of the city and the way a city and its inhabitants actually function. Large-scale anonymity has been swapped for small-scale cosiness. The regeneration of the Bijlmermeer signals the final end of the 'city of the future'. ■

Translated by Gregory Ball