

Building Utopias on Sand. The Production of Space in Almere and the Future
of Suburbia

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Summary

Typical suburbia has been commonly understood and depicted as a collection of houses surrounded by picket fences and garages. The most recent example of such production of spaces was the suburbanisation process that took place in the Post-WWII period in advanced capitalist countries. This was a suburban ‘golden age’, when social mobility was prevalent, creating to a large extent the contemporary white middle-class by providing a fitting space: the suburb. Processes of social mobility going hand in hand with spatial mobility have persisted for decades and have happened simultaneously with the rejection of urban environments. The city eventually became the representation of social problems and escaping it was considered natural for the socially mobile, leading globally to many cities shrinking, at least a few decades ago. In the Netherlands, suburbanisation became especially popular in the 1960s due to social democratic and New Leftist visions of engineering a better society. The spaces for such a new society were developed in the form of New Towns, utopia-driven settlements in the periphery of cities, designed from scratch in every detail.

Perhaps the most famous new town in the Netherlands is Almere. First developed in 1976, and thought of already much earlier, Almere is built on an artificial island east of Amsterdam. It was ‘new land’ in the physical sense, as there was literally only water there until the 1950s. But it was also new in the social sense, lacking the character of a ‘place’ until its first inhabitants arrived. The initial intention of Almere’s planners was for the town to become a city of 250,000 inhabitants by the year 2000, perpetually hosting mainly socially mobile, former Amsterdammers. What has transpired in the 40 year-old history of the town however is a different story, best understood in David Harvey’s words from his 2000 book ‘Spaces of Hope’: ‘Materializations of spatial utopias run afoul of the particularities of the temporal process mobilized to produce them’, as well as from James Scott’s 1998 book ‘Seeing like a State’: ‘We must never assume that local practice conforms with state theory’. In other words, plans for making a perfect settlement not only fail due to unseen, structural factors but are based on the flawed premise that an oligarchy of figures can conjure the perfect place for others to inhabit. In this dissertation I unravel the past, present and future of Almere by analysing its demographic and structural changes, and especially the perspectives of current and former inhabitants regarding life in the town. My purpose is to shed light on historical processes of space production and the ‘everyday’ through the experiences of residents. The main questions of this study are:

How have urban-suburban mobilities in the Amsterdam metropolitan region evolved since the 1970s, and how have the shifts been experienced by residents in city and suburb alike?

How has space been produced in Almere since the town’s conception, and what does this production of space tell us about contemporary metropolitanisation processes and the future of suburbia at large?

Almere and other suburban places are nowadays finding themselves in a complex dilemma. There are mobilities developing globally in many metropoles which can be seen either as a crisis or actually a thriving of suburbia. Cities are growing again, attracting capital and people, and suburbs are receiving less investment and underprivileged inhabitants. Yet, this new ‘urban’ growth is often suburban growth, rather peripheral or focused on suburban ways of life; even the archetypically ‘urban’ New York is showing such signs according to Jerilou and Kingsley Hamnett’s edited volume ‘The Suburbanization of New York’. As I show in chapter one of my dissertation, Almere and the metropolitan region of Amsterdam are very much part of these processes. For one, Almere’s population has yet to reach 200,000 and it has been rather stable lately. In fact, not only are there more people moving away than towards the town, but the traditional mobility from Amsterdam to Almere has almost reversed by now as there are almost as many people moving to Amsterdam from Almere. Among the new movers there are many international migrants, coming from more than a hundred countries directly to Almere. In addition, the typically suburban households of partners with or without children have decreased. These developments have made Almere’s formerly homogeneous demographical profile rather complex, pointing beyond dichotomous understandings of city and suburb.

One of the most prominent and symbolic terms used to describe Almere’s early residents is ‘pioneer’. Mainly used for the 25 families who first moved to Almere, and sometimes to signify any

'Almeerder' who moved there early enough, we see in chapter two how the concept of pioneering as moving to new land has shaped placemaking processes since the early days of the town's empty spaces. Envisioned as settlers moving to a promised, new, empty land, these former Amsterdammers were embodying the new, suburban, socially mobile household widely manifesting in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, Almere's spaces were rather prepared for their arrival, such as the infrastructure for family-building and their commuting for work. Their suburbanisation thus has not been a journey into the general unknown but mostly into the social unknown. Eventually, the early focused attempts at placemaking shifted to more individualised trajectories by the newly arrived native Dutch residents; this shift coincided with the emergence of neoliberalism and the veering away from modernist, utopianist projects. The way in which this shift is articulated by residents is through their reasons for moving to Almere. At first they were looking for better housing and nature, considering Amsterdam's poor housing stock, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, and the opportunity to live in a far from densely populated space like Almere. In recent years however residents discuss affordable housing and work as the main reasons for moving to Almere. In this contrast, and through the interviews, we can see that placemaking processes are currently capturing trajectories of people trying to 'make it', often in the sense of acquiring large housing space for less money, and producing space in the process of these new styles of social mobility. Community building and placemaking are not their focus anymore, and their aspirations fit contemporary neoliberal, economic motives.

Probably the most unexpected development in Almere, at least in the public eye, is its increasingly international population. The new residents who are not native Dutch move from many countries in the world, often directly to Almere. Ostensibly this represents an attempt to be close to Amsterdam, a more traditional destination for migrants, but in more affordable housing than in the capital. Nonetheless, chapter three shows that the internationals are a very diverse population, in terms of origin, class and aspirations. In fact several respondents chose Almere over Amsterdam, appreciating the former's 'softer' urbanity, its newness and innovative character. Such preference may make them consider the increasingly urban character of Almere a disturbance and would rather it remain a quasi-suburban space.

Other migrants are less happy however to be in Almere instead of Amsterdam. They see the new town as a stepping stone, a temporary necessary evil, allowing only for the potential to eventually move to Amsterdam. These are especially young persons who were aspiring to move to Amsterdam but 'ended up' in Almere with fewer prospects to realise their goals. For some it actually led to return back to their country of origin without success. This diversity of aspirations among international newcomers adds one more layer to Almere's transforming character, widening the scale of the town's existence to the international level, and challenges monodimensional understandings of suburbs and cities. This chapter calls for an investigation beyond the dichotomy when analysing international migration, urban growth and metropolitan integration. It also demonstrates the diverse nature of space when examined through the experiences of persons with different histories, experiences and aspirations; this can be especially the case for the internationally mobile. The comprehension of space's symbolic character especially is widely enriched when considering the factor of mobility on many levels: the local, the regional and the international. Different mobilities inform different views on space, and the multiplicity of domestic and international migration to suburbs is a telling case of their transformation.

The last empirical chapter of the dissertation offers a somber note regarding suburbia's future. The last couple of decades in the Netherlands and beyond, suburban settlements are going through a demographic crisis; the households that have traditionally moved there are doing so less and less. Instead, the gentrifying historic cities have established their hegemonic position as rather attractive places for middle- and high-class, family households. Consequently places like Almere, which have been quite monodimensional in their initial conception, are less adaptable to wide transformations. In such a context, this chapter focuses on the experiences of residents who consider to or have indeed moved away from Almere.

The few residents who have been considering moving away from Almere are disappointed with the way in which the town has transformed. They mostly refer to issues of criminality, built environment deterioration and 'asocial' persons. Overall they are dissatisfied with the creeping 'urbanity', as they often frame it, which is upsetting their expectations of what should have remained a suburban environment. When looking through the interviews however, there are two major elements:

there is clear diversity regarding the aspirations when moving away from Almere, and people may express xenophobic attitudes despite being vocal against the xenophobic Party for Freedom. The latter contradiction can be particularly strong for those who feel disillusioned with the ‘promised’ suburbia, which, in their eyes, turned both too diverse and too racist.

We can discern four main processes, based on two categorisations according to the spectra function-symbols and push-pull. These archetypes of leaving the suburb can represent the meanings of contemporary mobility between city and suburb, and allow for a wide understanding of metropolitan level integration. The four types of mobility are intertwined processes that may characterise even a single resident as an assemblage of being pushed and pulled, and looking for spatial symbolisms while constrained by practical concerns like the size of housing space. In such a complex process of emerging mobility, a place like Almere may lack the necessary resources and political capacity to adapt accordingly, its future in threat of becoming a shadow of its utopian, modernist plan.

In conclusion, in this study I problematise processes of suburban production of space through a Lefebvrian lens. I analyse the interplay of the spatial elements that Lefebvre suggested, and I show the importance of the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of space production; space as a conceived realm where social practice should be played out *vis-à-vis* space as an experienced milieu, produced through, and producing, social practice. Almere has been a place of intensive planning and widely spread idealism, reflecting post-WWII times in the advanced capitalist world, but it has closed its (or at least a) circle, so to say. Now it is impacted by international migration trends, global economy restructuring, city branding and gentrification. It has provided a case through which we can advance our understanding of contemporary (sub)urban growth and the development of ways of life in both cities and suburbs. Above all, the investigation of Almere has shown that the production of space is a matter best approached relationally, processually and temporally. Hence the urban-suburban dichotomy is best examined critically, and not seen as a seemingly straightforward binary. Furthermore, the ‘global’ character of settlements is as of late not an exclusive characteristic of cities but also suburbs, which are susceptible to international phenomena. Lastly, mobility is constituted by a collection of factors, such as material constraints and branding of places, elements that can help formulate illustrations of demographic transformation and the aspirations that emerge.