



Dumped in Almere

2nd Rate Urbanism Interview with Floris Alkemade

Beatriz Ramo and Bernd Upmeyer spoke on behalf of Monu with Floris Alkemade. Floris Alkemade is one of the partners of Rotterdam based OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture). He joined OMA in 1989 and has worked there as a project director for architecture and urban planning since 1996. As project architect and project leader, he worked in the early nineties on the Euralille master plan, a 70-hectare business, and civic centre in northern France hosting the European hub for high-speed trains. Since 1994, he has been leading the master-plan project for the City Center of Almere, which is currently under construction. The land where Almere sits today was part of the North Sea 50 years ago. At the end of the fifties, the construction of the polder (1) began. Today Almere can be categorized as a 2nd rate city with 180.000 inhabitants. The city is located 35 km east of Amsterdam. The first house was built in 1976, and just 8 years later, Almere was designated an official municipality. It is expected that the population of Almere reaches 210.000 inhabitants by 2015, making it the 5th largest city in Netherlands.

Beatriz Ramo: Was Almere ever planned to be a 2nd rate city?

Floris Alkemade: Almere, strangely enough, was never intended to be a city. Almere was planned at the time, when the Bijlmermeer (2) was constructed, that hardcore CIAM-kind of architecture. People started to realize, what the effects of that kind of architecture were and they decided to never do it again. Then they started to plan Almere and they decided that what ever they would do, it should not become a city. They planned Almere as five independent villages (Almere Haven, Almere Hout, etc), separated by vast amounts of green

spaces. They were planned as very small-scale areas, where the car traffic would always be located outside, in a ring road with only one road connection finishing in the area as a dead end. The intriguing thing was, even though Almere was never planned as an entire city, somehow its proximity to Amsterdam led to the effect, that it started to grow and grow, which first of all had to do with the availability of the area.

Bernd Upmeyer: In that sense, at the beginning Almere was purely a housing area? Like a dormitory city?

Floris Alkemade: Exactly. At the beginning, it was a real satellite of Amsterdam, also politically. So the people in Amsterdam told Almere what to do. Amsterdam also financed projects there. However, at a certain moment it started to become clear, that Almere was growing more rapidly than anybody had ever expected. At a certain point, they decided that they no longer wanted to be a part of Amsterdam but wanted to become independent. It is almost like when children turn 16 or 17 and say "well, forget about it, I am going to live my own life". Almere thought, "We don't need your money. We are big, we will become even bigger and we can determine our own identity".



Position of Almere, 35km east of Amsterdam

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Beatriz Ramo: And this happened just 10 years after having constructed its first house, so in the mid eighties.

Floris Alkemade: Yes, around that time. At that moment, the city also started to realize that if they wanted to promote themselves as an independent city, that they would need a kind of recognizable urban identity. They started to think, what they could do with their city center to make it recognizable as an urban element. At that time, which was in the late eighties, none of the developers actually believed in Almere. The city was almost powerless, as no money was coming in. But at that time Almere made a pretty smart move and thought: "if developers are not interested in investing in our city, we simply make a reservation for all these grounds, we stop any construction in the area and we start expanding outside the centre and once we are big enough we

give it a second try." And that was what happened in 1994, when the city organized a competition. The city realized, that it was big enough and that it was clear to everybody, that Almere would become a big city. The competition in which we participated, clearly asked, how Almere could get a clearly identifiable center and would produce a strong urban identity. Once you arrive, you should be evident that you are in Almere. Interesting to mention is also, that the city organized everything initially without developers, although the developers at that moment were really eager to participate. Almere first created their own agenda and once after they had selected their plan, they invited developers to participate. Now, Almere is again growing and the plan is to build 60.000 new dwellings in the coming twenty years.

Beatriz Ramo: I read, that Almere is growing every year by around 6.000 inhabitants.

Floris Alkemade: That might be true. The peak of Almere's building production was around 3.000 dwellings per year, which can be equalized with around 6.000 people. Currently, the building production has slowed down, due to the effect, that the infrastructure no longer is capable of providing enough capacity for the city. So the city said to the central government "give us a good highway system otherwise we refuse to build." The city is becoming more powerful and is creating its own agenda. The current government has made it a priority to double the A6 highway, which is the main connection to Almere. We were actually just commissioned to do a study about that -- to see how the doubling of the highway could be integrated best.

Beatriz Ramo: Will the highway fill the demand?

Floris Alkemade: Yes. The government has made it to a real priority project to make sure, that the machineries works. Currently, the politicians of Almere meet once a month with the politicians of Amsterdam to see how they should collaborate. Amsterdam now sees Almere as its "twin-city". They see that both cities have maybe nothing in common, but they base their idea on their complementary qualities. Both cities seek to collaborate so that at the end both can benefit from each other.

Beatriz Ramo: How can Amsterdam benefit from Almere?

Floris Alkemade: Amsterdam of course wants to expand. They want to build houses within their own territory, but this is proving to be increasingly difficult. There are of course several satellites apart from Almere around Amsterdam, but none of them has so much space and therefore so many opportunities to grow. Other satellites just remain satellites and grow just to a certain extent. Almere is the exception in the sense that they have so much territory and so many possibilities that it will not be like the other satellites. It will be bigger and have more meaning. Amsterdam realizes, that it can collaborate with the city of Almere and can somehow orchestrate, what programs will be established and where people will go. And they don't loose activities to other places, somehow by making communal operations out of it. They can orchestrate many of the forces they encounter.

Bernd Upmeyer: But for Amsterdam, there are probably still possibilities to a certain extent to grow without the satellites outwards the center. What is in general the great advantage of an A-list city like Amsterdam to grow through 2nd rate C-list cities like Almere?

Floris Alkemade: It is not necessarily an advantage. Of course, in the case of Almere it has a lot to do with the fact, that the landscape in that area has a lot of qualities, like having a lake and trees. The problem is typical of what a lot of traditional metropolitan areas face, that one single center has to create and provide an identity for an ever-growing circle. The center becomes too beautiful and too expensive to adapt to changes, and people are forced to escape to 2nd rate destinations, where they can develop qualities, which they could never establish directly in Amsterdam. There is of course a possibility to escape such limitations, which for instance the city of London does now. London's mayor Ken Livingstone clearly defines a certain congestion zone and charge zone to protect the central area. They define parallel a development area like for example in Kings Cross or White City, where we are also currently working on. We need to free ourselves from the principle, that only the center of a city has the highest value. We can also create a kind of strong urban identity in the periphery. As Amsterdam and Almere are aiming to become "twin-cities", Almere is not merely periphery anymore, but develops its own typical identity.

Bernd Upmeyer: That's kind of interesting, that apparently the main character and advantage of 2nd rate cities on the edge of A-list cities is based on their opportunity to become whatever they want without actually running the risk of losing their identity, because their identity is in most cases carried by the A-cities that are close by.

Floris Alkemade: In that sense, you could distinguish two identities. You can say Amsterdam has the identity of "what it is" and Almere has the identity of "what it got". Not in a sense, that Almere is a beautiful city, but in a sense that it has this power of production and the capability of being flexible and the ability to integrate new things in its very center. On the other hand, Amsterdam is basically completely paralyzed in its center. It only can make sure that beautiful buildings remain beautiful. The city of Almere has much more flexibility. The difficulty there of course is that masses and masses of houses can be produced without creating any sense of urbanity.

Beatriz Ramo: How is Almere dealing with that difficulty?

Floris Alkemade: Almere now tries to become more urban. The new scheme for the center plays an important role to create density and identity.

Beatriz Ramo: So Almere was somehow created "the other way round". The center was left empty until very late which allowed the city the biggest flexibility to choose the identity it wanted. In this sense, do you think that the original poly-nuclear organization of Almere was then the right decision?

Floris Alkemade: In a way, it is interesting to see, that on the one hand the land is artificially reclaimed and completely planned, so you have the idea that everything is controlled, but the bigness and form of Almere on the other hand, has never been controlled, what is a kind of weird condition for us planners, as we are trying always to anticipate everything that is going to happen.

Bernd Upmeyer: But the enormous growth of Almere had probably also a lot to do with the simple fact that housing costs were much lower?

Floris Alkemade: Absolutely. It was much cheaper. Time was also a factor. If you want to buy a house in Amsterdam, you have to be on a waiting list and to finally get something can take years. If you go to Almere, within two or three weeks, you can get a new house with a garden. What you also often see is, that people live in Amsterdam as students or youngsters and then they get married and as soon as they expect children, they get nervous and don't know how to handle their new lives in a city. Then they go to Almere and become happy. Amsterdam is very expensive; housing costs are twice as high as in Rotterdam for instance.

Bernd Upmeyer: So in the beginning the typical Almere inhabitants were young families. Is that still the case?

Floris Alkemade: It still is, although after thirty years, there are also already some elderly people living there.

Beatriz Ramo: Do these elderly people actually stay in Almere or do they move back to Amsterdam?

Floris Alkemade: I don't think, that there are many, who move back to Amsterdam. It is financially and also identity-wise difficult for most people. The weird thing is, that part of the population of Almere moved to Almere, because they thought, that Amsterdam had too much crime and too many foreigners, etc. And now you see, that in Amsterdam a lot of Turkish and Surinamese people who manage to make some money come to Almere, the consequence being, that actually a part of the inhabitants of Almere move further north to the next smaller and less urban city -- Lelystad. A substantial part of Almere's citizens is very suspicious about becoming really urban, with all the problems normal cities have to deal with.

Beatriz Ramo: Does Almere today already have to deal with such typical city matters as immigration, crime etc...?

Floris Alkemade: It is getting there, yes. That's of course all a part of becoming a city. Not everybody is ready for that yet, because what we see as a totally boring city, is paradise for some people.

Beatriz Ramo: Now people use Lelystad as an escape from the too urban Almere, as the people from Amsterdam used Almere before.

Floris Alkemade: Yes, but the weird thing is that the population of Lelystad went down quite rapidly for some time, but for the last four, five years it has been picking up again. What happened was the opposite to what was initially

intended: Lelystad was the city and Almere the village. Now the offspring of Almere moves to Lelystad.

Beatriz Ramo: Do you think, Almere benefits more from Amsterdam than Lelystad?

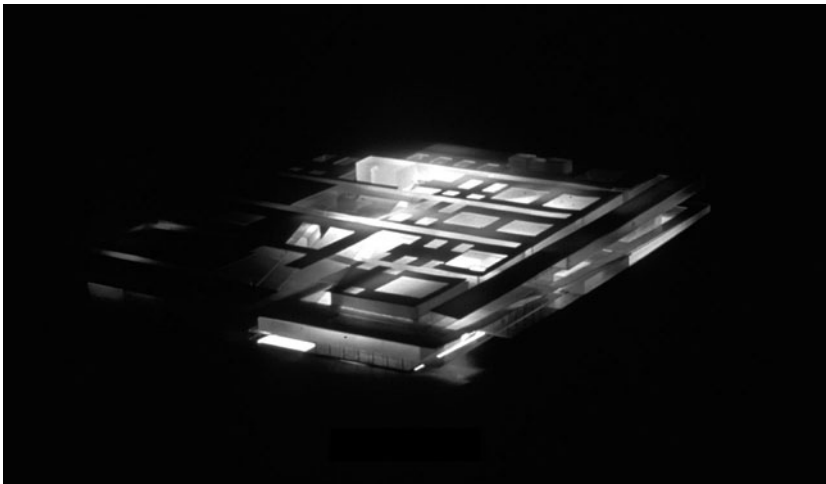
Floris Alkemade: Yes. People travel only twenty minutes from Almere to go shopping in Amsterdam. Apart from that, there is also a proximity to a part of the Randstad and it is close to Schiphol airport as well. As Schiphol airport has actually problems to grow, there are plans to develop the small airport in Lelystad. Almere is then of course very nicely positioned. That airport extension is also one of the major reasons to double the highway to Almere.

Beatriz Ramo: This would make Almere one of most privileged cities.

Floris Alkemade: Yes, exactly, so in this sense, being part of this land where everything is possible creates a lot of advantages.

Beatriz Ramo: And that might be the "Ryanair airport", as they usually pick secondary airfields.

Floris Alkemade: Yes, for instance.

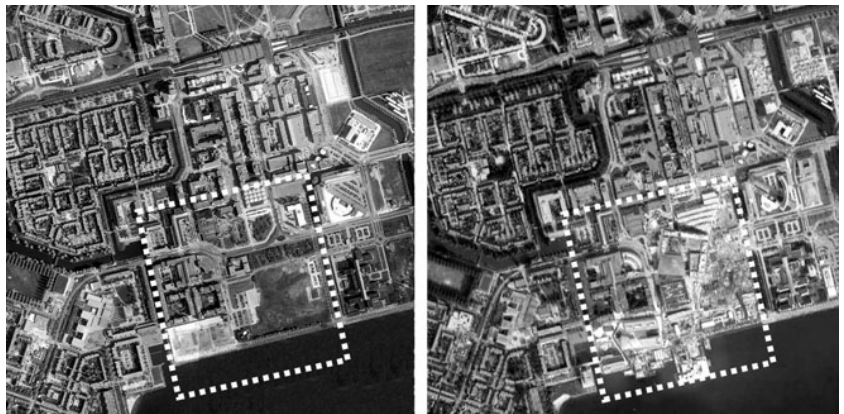


Original masterplan proposal as programmatic sandwich of housing, shops and parking with a size of 300m x 300m ©OMA

Bernd Upmeyer: You mentioned the competition, which was organized in 1994 and where OMA was successful. What did you propose?

Floris Alkemade: The first thing we did, was to propose to take all the program we needed and concentrated everything in two zones, one at the station and one at the lake to create a much denser city. Of course, we could have kept on copying whatever we found anywhere but in order to get a recognizable identity we created density first of all. The zone at the lake was a kind of programmatic sandwich of housing, shops and parking on top of each other, with a size of 300m x 300m. The zone at the station was supposed to become a city of high-rises with office buildings. Other teams came up with very classical proposals, trying to solve the problem with

Almere - like neat and connective streets. At that time the city realized, that if they would do the normal thing, there would be no way for them to become recognizable. They realized that they had to create something strong. They had to jump into a different level. But they were quite shocked by our approach - I have to say I myself was a kind of shocked too. It was a very short period that we could work on the masterplan, around six weeks, and it was very intense. We produced a very big model out of resins and aluminum...very modern looking and by the day of the presentation when we had to put it in that neat wooden model of the city, I thought, "How am I going to explain this!" But they understood the logic of creating density. The creation of this artificial hill in order to bridge the road...etc. So they told us: "We want you to win but we don't want this project. We like the logic behind it, but instead of making one big building of 300m x 300m, could you make little pieces, otherwise we cannot find investors and if the project fails not everything will be lost. Another advantage of our scheme was that we didn't consume all the empty spaces so the next generations could still fill them up with program.



Almere before and after

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Beatriz Ramo: Now the masterplan has been built and it seems to be working very well. What have been the key factors behind the success?

Floris Alkemade: I think a lot has to do with the way we have superimposed program. It was also not only about creating density, but we also managed in our scheme that every façade became a front façade. Normally the sequence would be: street, shop, loading area, parking and the back street where trucks can drive.

Bernd Upmeyer: Like in Rotterdam.

Floris Alkemade: Yes. And in order to animate the street you have to create a lot of back façades. In our scheme all the loading is done from underneath, which means, every façade is a front façade. So the density is not only a density of masses, but more important also a density of functions. It creates much more activities per square meter. For instance, the cinema block we designed, which has a lot of mega-stores, was only possible because of the huge amount of parking, which we integrated in the basement. At that time, such big cinemas were only found next to highways. Here we

dared to put it in the center. The cinema has 2,500 seats, which means that twice a day 2,500 people are not driving to the periphery, but 2,500 people enter the center. So we are creating conditions in the center that you would normally only find in the periphery.

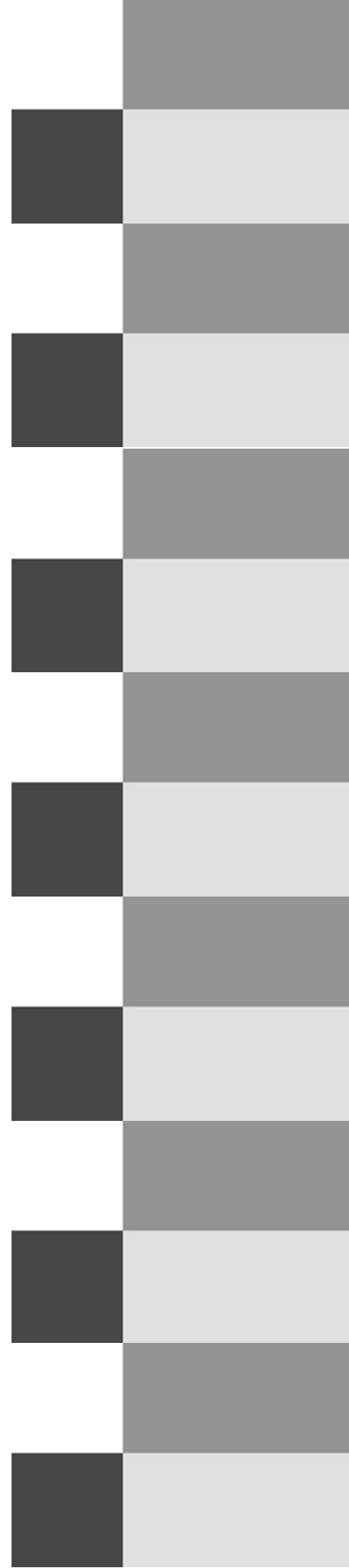


Masterplan

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Bernd Upmeyer: But what kind of city did we actually get in the end? What are the qualities of Almere today? Are we still dealing with a 2nd rate city?

Floris Alkemade: Today I would say, that one part of the city is actually urban, but other parts are still green and very suburban as they ever were. It is just, that there is now a kind of gravity point in this field of houses. This was actually the first question that we asked during the competition phase: "Why do you need a center?" Almere had actually proven that a city could exist without one because everybody had a car to drive to the supermarket and back home. People were happy at home entertaining themselves and repairing their houses. But then there was this kind of weird mechanism. When a city becomes bigger and bigger, it is like when "a star is born". From a certain moment on an own gravity field is being constructed. It happened that although Almere-Stad had the same shops and prices like Almere-Haven, people



from Almere-Haven preferred to go to Almere-Stad to do their shopping. Somehow, if the city becomes bigger, it needs a gravity point. To have just one well functioning center made also sense in an economical way, as the people before went to Amsterdam for shopping or entertainment. In the end, the creation of the center was pushed by the instinct of the people living there on one hand and economical factors on the other.



Almere today

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Beatriz Ramo: The brief of the competition also aimed for a postcard-like image, a unique logo for Almere. How important was that?

Floris Alkemade: Yes, the branding was from the beginning an important part of the competition. We also clearly tried to orchestrate that with the highway and the lake. You actually see the lake with the new center from the highway, while approaching the city. This idea of such an emphasis on the visual power of the center is actually based on a very personal experience. Before that competition I had actually never really been in Almere, except once, which was after midnight with some friends. We drove by Almere and since no one of us had ever been there before, we had that idea to actually have a beer there. I remember that we entered the city, it was like two or three o'clock in the morning, we passed by an endless amount of similar houses but didn't find any center. It just never became dense somewhere. It was a very fascinating experience, like being dumped, entering hell...

Bernd Upmeyer: Which could be a certain quality as well.

Floris Alkemade: It had a quality; I have to say, yes. All these nice houses with the beautiful gardens and all the cars – all this peaceful tranquility...

Bernd Upmeyer: Did you finally succeed in finding a bar?

Floris Alkemade: No, we did not...

Beatriz Ramo: So you had to go to Amsterdam...

Floris Alkemade: Yes at the end, we had to go to Amsterdam. And this was one of the reasons for proposing high-rise buildings around the station. So that somehow from everywhere you would have a kind of minaret-like point to direct everybody to the center. That is the nice thing about Almere today, that you have all these small houses, houses, houses... and then this center – as a kind of heartbeat.

Bernd Upmeyer: How many people actually lived in Almere, when the city decided to make changes? When became it necessary to transform the city of pure suburbia into an “urbia”?

Floris Alkemade: That had a lot to do with commercial calculations. I think when we started in 1994, Almere had around 80.000 inhabitants, and the planning we had to do was anticipating a city of 210.000 inhabitants. The city clearly played its cards right. Of course, they had checked with the developers. But for years everybody who wanted to open a shop in Almere was stopped and had to wait. And as soon as the scheme was ready they were invited in. Almere created a kind of shortage to make sure that they could create many shops in one go.

Beatriz Ramo: So the shopping, including the mega stores, were a very crucial aspect during the transformation process, right? And to have a multiplex cinema also enlarged the activity time frame, so the centre stays continuously alive.

Floris Alkemade: Exactly. We actually tried to increase that as an aspect. We tried to locate a typical periphery car-orientated shopping and entertainment culture in form of mega-stores in the very center. Along the enlarged highway, there will be also an Ikea placed directly on the lake and opposite the new center. So what you normally find at the urban periphery will be soon both, still part of the periphery, but also a part of a real center. Ikea is in that sense placed in a more urbanized way. We always explain that project as the emancipation of the periphery. Out of this culmination of urban dust, you can generate another identity, which is not trying to be like Amsterdam, but works with contemporary methods.



Section, showing the parking garage under the center

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Bernd Upmeyer: Probably emancipation not only from the city, but also from suburbia?

Floris Alkemade: Yes, an emancipation from both to create something new. The interesting thing about Almere was, that it had no historical center; it is just, what we produced. So we had to ask ourselves: What is our own culture actually producing? We could not lean on the production of former generations, but had to figure out, what kind of identity our own generation is able to produce.

Beatriz Ramo: Apart from shopping, how important was the fact, that many of the buildings were actually designed by superstar architects like Sejima, OMA, or Portzamparc?

Floris Alkemade: That is a very good question, which we also asked ourselves many times, since we as urbanists were involved in the selection of the architects. We were a part of a so-called quality-team together with people from the city. The city asked me to come up with some names, so I proposed some, and also the developers proposed some. But instead of saying, it should be this and that architect, we tried always to first discuss what kind of project we would want, what we would expect from the buildings and how the buildings should relate to each other. So the question was, what kind of characters do we need. After that, we had a look at names and thought about what kind of names we could imagine. Sometimes, we had up to three names for one building and invited them for interviews, but we did not ask them for a scheme, but just to think about it. They only got two weeks as to avoid that they would start to make real plans, as architects always immediately like to do, but they were invited to discuss the ways how they would approach the project and after that, we made the selection.

Bernd Upmeyer: How is actually the case of Almere representative for 2nd rate cities in Netherlands?

Floris Alkemade: I think it represents a way how cities are developed. When in the 19th and maybe in the 20th century cities were designed, the growth was also planned with it. Amsterdam for example had from the beginning plans about how the city should expand. Nowadays it is not longer the cities, that plan the growth, but it is all about developers. Cities today can't do anything without developers. That means, that in cases like Almere, you need developers to cooperate and developers are there to make money. Nowadays planning is not longer about the creation of a total thing, but small parts and these are done by the developers in collaboration with the city. And in that sense I think Almere is exceptional because it was a very big thing, what also created difficulties, because it was also a big thing done at one time. So you have to come up with a scheme, which protects yourself from being eroded from different insides or economical processes, etc. So one reason for the folded parking deck was, that once it was started being constructed, there was no way back. It was just not possible to do half of the deck. The scheme protected itself during the time. And as urbanist you always try to develop schemes with a strong logic to make it survive during the time.

Beatriz Ramo: Which functions does Almere actually still need to become a "real" city and to be less dependent on Amsterdam?

Floris Alkemade: I think one really important is the University. Amsterdam University actually needs to expand and they already seek collaboration with the city of Almere. So they want to locate some of their faculties in Almere. In our masterplan scheme, we already anticipated this and reserved some space. I think that the University is a very important thing, because the city needs functions, which are not merely commercial. As the city grew, the central located hospital had also to double in size. There were ideas to relocate it in the periphery, but we forced them to stay in the center. It was necessary to have a mix of functions that influence each other.

Beatriz Ramo: At the beginning, we talked about necessary urban elements like the university, the new highway, the hospital, and the Ikea in or around the new center of Almere. What is about the new plans of a high-speed train connecting several cities with Schiphol airport? Will Almere also be connected?

Floris Alkemade: No, but there is something planned for Almere, what is called the Hanselijn, which is not a high speed train, but it will connect Amsterdam, Almere, Lelystad and several more cities in the north. In a way, Almere is organizing now actually its own periphery. It is almost like a fractal. Usually you see always Amsterdam in the middle of everything, but the interesting thing is, that you can also position Almere in the middle of its own system.

Bernd Upmeyer: Is it possible to imagine Almere without Amsterdam?

Floris Alkemade: It seems to me a bit mentally forced to put Amsterdam out of the picture. I think the current system, where they see each other as twin cities is more the real condition.

Bernd Upmeyer: Was the "twin-city" idea originally initiated by Amsterdam or Almere?

Floris Alkemade: They both initiated it together. That has to do with the fact, that both cities have socialist Aldermen. They knew each other and started seeking collaboration.

Beatriz Ramo: In which urban league could Almere play?

Floris Alkemade: To us, this was always the question. When we planned the project, we always promoted the city as a player at the level of Amsterdam, without being Amsterdam-like of course... But then of course the developers did not agree on that, as the money they invested there, was never the money they would have invested in Amsterdam. For them Almere was not yet city enough. But Almere didn't accept this position so it always fought to get more importance.

Beatriz Ramo: Could you imagine an international Expo taking place in Almere?

Floris Alkemade: Yes, I think so. Some of these things are happening there already, but more in a certain illegal way. Computer hackers from all over the world for example are coming together on the Almere beach for some kind expo -

like festival once a year. It became actually so big, that they made an official event out of it. The whole thing is not imaginable in other cities and could be a truthful identity for the city. Whatever you can't do in other cities, is allowed in Almere. A similar thing to that is organized by a Dutch women's magazine called Libelle. Once a year all these women meet for an event there. The first Big Brother show was also produced in Almere. Of course, the Big Brother show is not something, what we consider as high culture, but it is one of the most successful export products of Holland.

Beatriz Ramo: It sounds a bit like what happens in the south part of Rotterdam, where people dare to do things, which are not possible in the north. In that sense, Almere could be the "south" of Amsterdam.

Floris Alkemade: That would be a great concept. That means in the end, that whatever is new and dangerous can be located in Almere, which could lead to a mix of total new program.

Beatriz Ramo: So if the mayor of Almere asked you to think a motto for Almere, which one would you propose?

Floris Alkemade: They have a motto already, which is "It is possible in Almere", in Dutch "Het kan in Almere", what means that they have already recognized these qualities. Amsterdam's motto is actually pretty much a contrast to Almere's and called "Amsterdam has it". But what Amsterdam actually does not have compared to Almere, is the capability to change.

Beatriz Ramo is an architect and director of STAR strategies + architecture (www.s-t-a-r.nl) in Rotterdam. Currently STAR is developing a study about the elements that are shaping cities in Europe today. She writes about it in this Monu issue in the article: "The Re-Creation of the European City". The study takes Zaragoza (Spain) as a case and is supported by the Government of Aragón and the City Council of Zaragoza.

Bernd Upmeyer is editor of Monu magazine and director of the Rotterdam based Bureau on Architecture, Research and Design (BOARD).

Notes:

(1) A polder is a low-lying tract of land that forms an artificial hydrological entity, enclosed by embankments known as dikes. The best-known examples are those polders that constitute areas of land reclaimed from a body of water, such as a lake or the sea, and are consequently below the surrounding water level.

(2) Bijlmermeer is one of the neighborhoods in the South-East of Amsterdam. It houses thousands of people, in nearly identical high-rise buildings. It was built for success, but never attracted many middle class families.