

# **Delft University of Technology**

## **MSc 3 AR3AT060 New Urban Questions or Minor Infractions Essay**

**Fall 2019**

**Title:**

**The Once Failed Arrival City – Zuid-Oost**

**Subtitle:**

**Reflecting and positioning the role of urban design and planning in arrival cities and for immigrants from the Renewal of Bijlmermeer**

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### **Abstract**

Amsterdam is a city that is well-known for her multi-cultural background of the population. Zuid-Oost, lying at the urban edge of Amsterdam, is one of the districts that hold a large share of the population with a non-western and migrant background, which is an indispensable part when it comes to the considerations of urban planning and policies. This essay aims to link closely to the target site of Complex Projects thesis design studio, as a reflection on how the district should be developed in the future with a position towards the role of multi-culturalism to both Amsterdam and the world. The main reference reading is based on the book "Arrival City" written by Doug Saunders. The starting point of the essay is understanding the perspective of Saunders towards issues of migration and social segregation in relation to urban design and policies, and to reflect on the initial failure as well as the recent fruitful redevelopment in Zuid-Oost Amsterdam, deriving a position on the role of spatial and architectural planning in relation to a good "arrival city".

### **Introduction and Background of Zuid-Oost**

Doug Saunders mentioned in the preface of the book "Arrival City" that in the 21st century, apart from climate change, the final shift of an unprecedented number of human populations with almost a third of them (De Brouwer, 2017), from a rural area to cities, would be the most notable page in human history. Indeed, the large-scale mass urbanization and migration had happened before in the late 18th century, leading series of revolutions, including Industrial revolution, overturning social, political and technological developments and demarcated the new page of human history. Until the recent decades, we notice another great shift of population, in an even greater dimension across every corner of the world, from the rural to urban internally or from the developing world to the developed world. The interaction between different parts of the world has evolved to another a new extent that has never been before. It is clear we have entered another era of globalization, with even more migration of population on a global scale when compared to the last century.

In recent years, the rise of nationalism and extreme rightist has the swept through the whole world. The European continent is shrouded by the refugee crisis originated in the Middle East and Africa, along with the rise of extremist political parties in the Netherlands, Germany, France and so on. Problems of social segregation of minority ethnic groups in the big cities have existed for decades, which can be fuelled by this

additional factor of the socio-political phenomenon.

Multi-culturalism has been discussed for a few decades since the last century since global migration is indeed not a new thing. However, with the current trend, we can foresee the multi-culturalism with migration would exert more influences in the built environment, since most of the migrated residents, no matter the advantaged working expats or the disadvantaged refugees, they all settle in the cities, especially the bigger cities of the migrated countries. For example, in the Netherlands, almost 80% of the immigrants are living in the 4 biggest cities in Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht and Rotterdam in Randstad (Nabielek, 2016, p.16) for abundant job opportunities, the network of compatriots and better public amenities.

In Zuid-Oost of Amsterdam, 70% of the population is having a non-western migrant background (Nabielek, 2016, p.22). There are 12,000 Ghanaians living in Amsterdam, of whom 9000 are in the Bijlmer of Zuid-Oost. Most of them came to the Netherlands in two stages. Between 1974 and 1983, due to the oil crisis in Ghana, and after 1990, due to drought in Ghana, political unrest and expulsion of Ghanaians in Nigeria. Besides, Surinamese form the third largest ethnic group in this district. Right after the independence of Surinam in 1975, nearly one-third of the Surinamese population emigrated to the Netherlands (Hylkema, 2013, p.25) and settled in Zuid-Oost.

The Bijlmermeer in Zuid-Oost was open in 1968 and was originally aimed to attract a large group of middle-class residents to move in, with the claimed futuristic lifestyle under the concept of the functional city with the influences from CIAM group and Le Corbusier's Radiant City planning. However, it did not happen since the people did not find the living environment of high tower blocks with no supporting social amenities attractive. Coincidentally, the influx of the migrants arrived in the 1970s, taking up all those empty apartments in the towers. Social segregation was a serious issue since then. The district of Zuid-Oost was described as the ghetto of Amsterdam. Unemployment rate and poverty rate were high. Crimes and drug nuisance were common. The situation persisted until the recent decade and has been greatly improved by one of the greatest scales of urban renewal projects in Europe which lasted for more than 20 years, which started in the 1990s after the El Al flight crash into a part of the Bijlmer blocks. (Sterk, 2007) However, even today after the great regeneration, many local people still have the impression that Zuid-Oost, the arrival city, is a problematic district.



Fig.1 (Left) Bijlmermeer in Zuid-Oost in the 1970s-1980s (ArtChist, 2016)

Fig.2 (Right) Model of Radiant City

## Arrival City – Upward Social Mobility

In fact, arrival cities are not necessarily ghettos and not always the sources of social problems. They can be successful urbanites who are able to get rid of poverty after a generation. That is why Saunders invented the

term "arrival city" rather using existing phrases "immigrant gateway" and "community of primary settlement" which simply stereotype them as "cancerous growths on an otherwise healthy city." (Loudis, 2011) Instead, the arrival cities are the neighbourhoods where the departure from poverty occurs, and where the next generation's dreams and social movements are created.

The arrival immigrants can be an indispensable part of the city. Arrival cities might be the transitional spaces where the next great economic and cultural boom will be born (Saunders, 2010, p.3), at least solving the problem of labour shortages in many of the Western countries such as the Netherlands due to the low fertility rate. There is only a fine line between a violent community or the rise of the new middle class. Whether they become a source of problems in society with extremist politics, violence and gang activities, or they contribute to the economy and social development, catching up economically and socially with natives in less than a decade to become prosperous middle class depends very much on the way we build and manage the arrival city. (Saunders, 2010, p.290) The arrival city is actually the gateway and very first step for the new-comers to integrate into the society.

There are successful cases of arrival cities, like New York's Chinatown, becoming attractive places to live in, inverting the urban migratory patterns, which can be usually described negatively as "gentrification". However, it is a result of an arrival city's success but not a failure. Indeed, it demonstrates the upward mobility as a cycle paradox mentioned by Dowell Myers (Saunders, 2010, p.82). When the generations can reach the lower middle class, they leave and the new group of arrival migrants come. (Saunders, 2010, p.315) However, the momentum of upward mobility was missing in many failed arrival cities built in the modern era and have been labelled as ghettos, in which they show a lot of similar characteristics in terms of urban and spatial design.

## **Urban Planning and Social Segregation**

Coincidentally, a lot of other examples of arrival cities established after the post-war period were designed with the vision of efficient collective housing with spacious green in-between public spaces based on Le Corbusier's utopian concept being set up at the edge of a big city. By that time, it was also the start of rural-urban migration with the migrants reaching the west. From the 1960s, this urban vision was failing socially and economically and are often associated with crimes and ghettos. Zuid-Oost was one of the typical examples.

Zuid-Oost is the first black-majority town in the Netherlands with only 20% Dutch-born population and others migrated from Suriname, Dutch colony Netherlands Antilles and sub-Saharan Africa. (Hylkema, 2013, p.28) Zuid-Oost in the 1980s was an example of failed arrival as described by Saunders with murder, drug addiction, idle poverty and casual violence, isolated physically and psychically from the society and economy of other parts of Amsterdam. Nevertheless, starting from the mid-1990s, many of the massive Bijlmermeer apartment blocks were replaced by mid-rise buildings, smaller and denser urban blocks, fewer restrictions on land use planning for shops and business. Together with more building management, security patrol, government corporation for support to entrepreneurs, job-related training to the youth, the picture of Zuid-Oost has changed a lot. More local business and small stores are opened by some of the neighbours. Street-life comes back. People start to walk in the street, use public space and interact with their fellows.

All the evidences have suggested that the utopian urban idea has gone wrong with creating very large spaces, low density and very strict zoning of functions. At the same time when we look at other most successful urban neighbourhoods in the world, they are neither low density nor highly zoned. During the post-war period with a population boom influencing urban development, many urban planners during that time regarded the greatly increased population density and overcrowding as a major threat to the poor. They held the belief that low-intensity development creates joyful residential neighbourhoods. Therefore, not only Zuid-Oost but many other newly developed residential districts in the West had very rigid zoning plans with

an almost absolute division of land uses, together with the use of roads and public spaces to create low density. (Saunders, 2010, p.297)

However, low density and high division planning hinder spontaneity in the city. (Saunders, 2010, p.297) Spontaneity is one of the urban elements in arrival cities that people relied on for survival in the case of social segregation with unemployment, discrimination and education, since the space for spontaneity allows combination from time to time to change and evolve, to be organic and flexible. For example, with certain degree of spontaneity, people would exchange information with compatriots, actively help each other who are also struggling, and know what the other needs and therefore run certain necessary communal functions in the community. (Saunders, 2010, p.316) Unfortunately, the neighbourhood of those arrival cities was rarely allowed the same space and creativity.

Throughout the two decades of renewal, the density of Zuid-Oost has been increased for safety and business opportunities for social cohesion and prosperity. Zoning restrictions were eliminated that we can notice now retail and commercial functions mingled with residential buildings. Loosen business and licensing regulations have enabled people to start shops and companies with less complicated paperwork and even without full citizenship status. (Saunders, 2010, p.293) Job Cohen, the mayor of Amsterdam at the time, held the belief that violent or threatening ethnic culture is indeed the temporary product of an ill-designed urban form or economic structure. (Saunders, 2010, p.295) In the approach of renewal of Zuid-Oost, we can notice the leading principle - less planned, less orderly, less preordained – so as to establish greater physical and economic bonding with the rest of the city which solve the roots of “arrival city” – social segregation. This idea of liberal and organic urbanism influenced greatly the urban renewal of many other “modern” planning in the 1980s, supported by a range of scholars, from sociologist William Whyte to the renowned urbanist Jane Jacobs.

Jacobs studied all the newly planned “modern” cities and stated that” they look good in the pictures with some little people, but all those people are not there in reality”. The post-war modern time was the time that architects and planners stressed on efficiency and functions for the constructing the utopian world in their mind. The outcome of a design which is different from what they have in their imagination suggests that they might have forgotten about the ultimate needs of people psychologically and socially as if they were working on visuals on the paper for architecture. In the book “the Death and Lives of Great American Cities”, Jane Jacobs suggested that “urban neighbourhood should be treated as organic entities that permitted to grow, change, develop functions as their residents’ desire, without restrictions on usage, intensity or change. “(Jacobs, 1961, p.221) In low-density development area like the former Bijlmermeer, mutual security, human mixing and entrepreneurship could never happen, let alone the formation of a community sense of self-surveillance and security. (Whyte, 1972, p.132)



Fig.3 (Left) Plan of Bijlmermeer, Zuid-Oost in 1980s Before Renewal (Olsson L. & Loerakker J., 2013)



Fig.4 (Right) Plan of Bijlmermeer, Zuid-Oost in 2010s After Renewal (Olsson L. & Loerakker J., 2013)

In contrast, a higher density would support the diversity of choices and promote city life by liberating their ideas. Ultimately an arrival city can be self-operational. Small business creation and higher quality schools become magnets for a mixed population. Arrival immigrants would no longer be trapped between two cultures. (Saunders, 2010, p.300) Indeed, when these so-called “slum communities” develop effective, non-corrupt, democratic administrative body from the inside, they can be even more than the official government since the arrival residents, after all, have been trying to find a way to govern their own affairs. In fact, these non-professional folk designers are able to find a way to make proper use of urban rules and space for their needs with horizontality that they recreate social bonds - cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid (MTD Allen and Khorasanee, 2004) among their communities.



Fig.5 (Left) Bijlmerdreef Before Renewal in the 1970s (Metroinde Bijlmer, 2010)

Fig.6 (Right) Bijlmerdreef with More Street Life After Renewal in 2018 (Self-taken photo)

Learning from the time that architects and planners might overlook how people truly feel and need when it comes to urban design, in the recent decade the idea of praxeology is adapted in architecture. Praxeology is the study of human action, based on the notion that humans engage in purposeful behaviours, as opposed to reflexive and unintentional behaviours. (Wikipedia, 2018) It was first mostly applied for the research in the field of economics. Later it was also extended to social sciences and psychology and a range of parties in sociocultural practice. By studying the praxis of architecture, one can develop an eye for the actual users of the building, and not the imagined ones. (Berkers, 2018) When we look back the utopian plan invented by the CIAM group, it was doubtful that if they did comprehend the actual need of the city and people but stayed on the utopian imagination.

When it comes to a perfect example to understand how people psychology tied with the use of urban spaces, we have to mention the work of the urbanist Jan Gehl. In the book “Cities for the People” by Gehl, for instance, he justifies that there exists a dimension of interaction with surroundings that the social field of vision. 25 meters is the threshold that we can notice emotions and facial expressions. (Gehl, 2010, p.35) Beyond that people may have much fewer interactions. Many old squares in Europe are found within 60-70 meters that people can recognize others and see who else is there. (Gehl, 2010, p.38) The dimensions of space offer the best overview and detail of the squares. Hence people have the opportunities to see with reasonable viewing distances with the aforementioned human dimensions. When we look back the enormously large open spaces in Bijlmermeer, they are neither in a comfortable human scale, nor the density is high enough to make space look thriving and safe. Those big open spaces and empty green spaces where the gangsters once occupied have seemed to mock the city’s utopian design. (Saunders, 2010, p.292) While it is true to say people enjoy open spaces, views, and great outdoors, we cannot forget the fact that people would also enjoy and need a sense of enclosure to feel comfortable as pedestrians and to feel physically contained by the walls of buildings. According to the research of another urbanist Jeff Speck, beyond the street profile of height and width ratio of 1:6, we do not feel protected anymore, (Speck, 2013) which we find the opposite in Bijlmermeer.



Fig.7 (Left) Market under Infrastructure nearby Kraaiennest in Zuid-Oost (Self-taken photo)



Fig.8 (Right) Activities organized by residents nearby Kraaiennest in Zuid-Oost (Open Art Route Zuid-Oost, 2015)

## Conclusion

Over the past decade, crimes and poverty rates in Zuid-Oost have fallen greatly but still, under shades of gang membership, Islamic fundamentalism and some newcomers still struggle. However, it is evident that their next generations have turned the fortunes around. With improve education and job opportunities for the Dutch-born children of migrants, the second-generation Surinamese now have rates of university education and income similar to the ethnic Dutch and their children the third generation are widely accepted as authentic Dutch citizens with little controversy. (Saunders, 2010, p.296) They almost form an arrival middle class, within two decades and a place where successful people and help the next generations of arrivals. With the creation of an internal economy, low-level shops and service, eventually a lower middle class is developing (Saunders, 2010, p.294). It forms a cycle that people whose business succeed can gain the social mobility to the middle class and this will attract further middle class from other districts, no matter native Dutch or new arrivals. The area would be then ethically integrated. Learning from the urban regeneration of Zuid-Oost, urban design and planning undoubtedly play a crucial role in providing desirable arrival conditions for newcomers to change and grow. Flexibility, non-rigid planning, intimate dimensions are the key elements for a city, especially an arrival city to be successful. And most importantly, architects and planners should comprehend thoroughly the elements of people and the genuine needs and behaviours of people, rather than basking themselves in renderings and only staying at an imaginary stage of design.

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