ARCHITECTURE IN LIMBO
A short history of public, private and collective spaces in the Bijlmermeer

by

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History Essay MSc 3
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Photograph showing a flat in the H-
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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis project focuses on the use of public and collective spaces in the Bijlmermeer and the conditions the built environment creates for certain behaviour, usage and activities. While architectural interventions may not necessarily generate certain situations or specific behaviour, they can certainly inhibit, prohibit or counter them.

The original Bijlmer plan was the culmination of the ideas of malleability and the Dutch welfare state. Its basic premise was the idea that if one would build a certain way people would behave accordingly. Dwellings, infrastructure, commercial functions, public and collective spaces were all designed to generate a specific way of living. Things turned out differently and the problem stricken Bijlmermeer earned the reputation of first Dutch ghetto. Because the results differed so greatly from what the designers had envisioned it is the perfect location for our design research.

Our hypothesis is that both the original Bijlmer plan and the current interventions do not correspond with the actual use of the inhabitants. As a result there are a lot of desolate in-between spaces. Spaces which are not clearly defined and not appropriated by inhabitants; a sort of no-mans-land as it were, for which no one feels responsible. We feel this in-between condition is the source of a lot of the frequently identified problems of anonymity, lack of liveliness and lack of social safety. In this essay we want to investigate specifically the architectural factors that influenced or were supposed to influence the use of private, public and collective spaces. We want to investigate how those spaces were designed, subsequently how they were used (or left un-used) and finally how architects and planners responded to this in the renewal plans. In the end we want to use our findings in the design part of our thesis and formulate a better answer to the current problematic of the Bijlmermeer; we want to design an alternative housing project for the Bijlmer based on research into the use and activities in public space.

We will first look at the original urban plan of the Bijlmer: what was its historical context and how was it supposed to function? In the third chapter we will elaborate the design of the Bijlmer flats, from their place in the infrastructural system to the individual apartments. Then, in chapter 4, we will go into the complications that the initial design had to cope with and investigate what went wrong on the level of the built environment. The next steps are more focused accounts of the aforementioned in-between (chapter 5) and collective (chapter 6) spaces, which describe

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1. Public spaces are defined as spaces that are accessible to everyone, not to be mistaken with 'public domain' which implies interaction and exchange between people and a certain appropriation of space. Collectivity here can be simply understood as the use and appropriation of space by a limited amount of people (for instance inhabitants of a certain neighbourhood).
in more detail the effects of certain decisions on public space and the emergence of collectivity in the Bijlmer. The following chapter (7) deals with external factors that contributed to the problems; things that were outside the control of the architects and planners involved with the design of the Bijlmermeer. In chapter 8 we will look at the current renewal of the area and how this relates to the problems we discerned in the previous chapters.

Finally we will draw some comparisons with similar and dissimilar neighbourhoods outside and within the Bijlmer (chapter 9). In the conclusion we will try to untangle knot and discern the role architecture and urban planning played in the social development of the Bijlmermeer.
2. THE ORIGINAL BIJLMER PLAN

The original Bijlmer plan was a large scale urban plan for the expansion of Amsterdam. It was designed to house over 100,000 people in some 35,900 dwellings in the recently acquired Bijlmermeerpolder. It was the next step in the renowned urban planning tradition of Amsterdam. After the concentric canals from 17th century, the plantages from the 19th century, the famous plan Berlage from 1915 and the AUP (General Expansion Plan) from 1935, the Bijlmer was to be the epiphany of Dutch urban planning.

When it became clear that the garden cities, built under the AUP, would not be sufficient to deal with the increase in population (the post-war baby boom) and the higher living standards (less people in bigger dwellings) a new solution had to be found. There was a huge housing shortage and the municipality and the planning department were under great pressure to come up with a quick, cheap and at the same time prestigious solution. In 1962, after some small scale tryouts in the north of Amsterdam (on which later more), the department of Stadsontwikkeling (the Department of City Development, abbreviated SO) started formulating the program and the initial concepts of a new South-eastern expansion. SO had been founded in 1928 to investigate future city expansions of Amsterdam. City councillor Florentinus (Floor) Wibaut formulated its job description as follows:

“It includes in the first place the most precise study of the existing needs of all the parts that together form the city. These studies have to be constantly confronted with the (social) developments that can reasonably be expected. Ongoing research has to be done on the possibilities and probability of further developments, i.e. the tendencies and directions these developments will probably follow.” (De Wit 1998: 27)

Amsterdam Southeast was designed for the upcoming middle class who were living in the Western Garden Cities but needed more space and more luxury. In the vision of the municipality all the middle class families (with 2 or 3 children) would move to the Bijlmer: the city of tomorrow. SO designed a plan which would embody a radical ‘modern’ way of life.

The design team of SO was led by Siegfried Nassuth, who today is still seen as the father of the original Bijlmer plan. The ideas of SO at the time stemmed directly from principles formulated by CIAM and functional modernism. One of the primary instigators of Het Nieuwe Bouwen – as functional modernism was called in Dutch – was Cornelis van Eesteren.
**fig. 1** The centre of Amsterdam in the 18th century; the concentric canals and the Jordaan are clearly visible.

**fig. 2** Plan Zuid (Plan South) from 1915 by H.P. Berlage.

**fig. 3** The AUP (General Expansion Plan) from 1935 by Cornelis van Eesteren amongst others.
Van Eesteren (or simply Ees for his contemporaries) was chairman of CIAM from 1930 until 1959, head of SO from 1929 until 1959 and one of the designers of the AUP, which as we will see was very influential on the Bijlmer plan. The modernist ideas were a strong reaction on the impoverished and overpopulated 19th century city expansions, which were rapidly turning into slums. Instead of small, crowded, polluted, unsafe and noisy city parts, new neighbourhoods were devised based on principles of light, air and space. The original Bijlmer plan was a modern city expansion in its purest form; the large dwellings were arranged in high-rise flats (optimal for light, fresh air and privacy), the flats were placed in a lush and green environment with an abundance of leisure possibilities, the motorized traffic was completely separated from pedestrians and cyclists, and there was a strict segregation of program.

The urban plans of Berlage were rejected by the upcoming Modern Movement. The architecture of the Amsterdam School was, according to the Amsterdam architect Ben Merkelbach, too focused on good facades and did not produce good housing. The new shining examples for this modern expansion were allegedly the works of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier. Especially his urban plans for the city of tomorrow, La Cité Radieuse (the radiant city, 1930-1935), and later his designs for social housing flats, called Unités d’Habitation (1946 onwards), seem to have been a big influence on planning and architecture in the Bijlmermeer. The first Unité in Marseille was a housing unit consisting of 330 maisonettes in one big block which was suspended above the ground by sculptural pilotis. In addition to the dwelling program there were collective functions within the building so it would form a community, a little village, in itself. There was an interior shopping street on the 7th and 8th floors, furthermore the program consisted of sporting facilities (a running track and a pool on the roof), medical facilities, a kindergarten, a theatre and a hotel.

The building was part of Le Corbusier’s broader vision of big high rise flats in a lush green environment. Because the flat stood on columns the landscape could flow freely underneath the building. This resulted in one continuous landscape and also solved the problem of the privacy of the lower apartments.

Even though most sources agree on the influence of Le Corbusier and CIAM on the design of the Bijlmer, Kees Rijnboutt strongly contests the notion that Nassuth was inspired by Le Corbusier directly. Though – considering the impact of Corbusier’s plans on architectural positions at the time – it might be hard to hold this position, Pi de Bruijn comes
**fig.4** Wohnhaus der Neuen Lebensweise by Kollektiv Osterman. This collective dwelling block housed 2242 people and included communal dining areas, an art club, daycare, a solarium, open-air theatre and work places.

**fig.5** Collective dwelling complex for 10,000 people by G.A. Gradov. In between the flats (each housing 1260 people) there are facilities like: sport fields, vegetable gardens, schools, an open-air theatre and a community centre.

**fig.6** Plan Voisin by Le Corbusier (1925). Plan for the reconstruction of the historic city centre of Paris.
with an alternative story. De Bruijn, who worked directly under Nassuth, states that Nassuth was especially driven by a strict egalitarian vision. He draws comparisons with the communist housing projects as seen in the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Block where the new avant-garde dwelling buildings were a direct translation of communist ideals. These big Communal Dwelling Blocks with all their collective facilities should have relieved the workload of the worker and stimulated communal life and emancipation of the masses.

In the Bijlmer there should have been equal opportunities for everyone and ample possibilities for the personal development of its inhabitants; the urban fabric expressed and facilitated these values. De Bruijn argues that all design decisions were based on this egalitarian ideal more than the direct translation of the ideas of Le Corbusier.

CIAM, however, was initiated before the Second World War when communism was not yet a taboo in Western Europe and the US. Le Corbusier definitely shared some values with the communists. Both the Modern Movement in the West and the Soviets in the East were set on the emancipation of the citizens (or workers), and believed that this could be achieved through architecture:

“For modern architects and urban planners, the ideal lying behind this was that people, and therefore society, was malleable. ‘Good’ dwellings in the ‘right’ environment would elevate the people. Alcoholism and idleness were sins from old neighbourhoods; in a functional city residents would be occupied purely with useful and healthy activities.” (Bruine et al. 2002: 11)

The final plan of Nassuth and SO (plan Nassuth) then, was based on two very prominent CIAM design principles: (1) industrial production (of for instance the flats, roads and bridges) and (2) a very detailed infrastructure scheme. Besides these two aspects it is important to look at the Bijlmermeer as the continuation of (and a reaction on) specifically the AUP (part 3). At the scale of the urban master plan these three factors were dominant in the further development of the Bijlmer.

1. **Industrial production**

The first important element was the unwavering faith of the Modern Movement in technological progress; it was through technological innovation that mankind would be enlightened and emancipated. It was a thoroughly optimistic view on life which entailed a typical belief in linear progress.

By 1963 the then Dutch Minister of Housing, Bogaers, wanted to tackle the housing shortage by stimulating industrial building techniques.

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9. Interview with Pi de Bruijn conducted by authors on 17-01-07.

10. Pi de Bruijn referred to a book from the DDR by Silvio Macetti called *Grosswohneinheiten* (1967).

11. Rem Koolhaas also elaborates on this political ideal, he describes the Bijlmer as follows: “What Las Vegas is to late capitalism, the Bijlmermeer is to the Welfare State. Like Las Vegas the Bijlmer is essentially a strip. But instead of Las Vegas’s sensual overkill of meaning and information – however trivial – the Bijlmer represents the signs and language of socialism: elevated highways reveal identical housing slabs of gray concrete bent into colossal hexagons. ... The themes – however latent – displayed along the Bijlmer strip are equality, Puritanism, physical and mental health, a New Age.” (Koolhaas 1995: 863)
Modernist architects at the time definitively shared this belief in industrialization which offered equal possibilities for everyone: spacious housing of high quality with modern equipment. The whole Bijlmer was designed and built with the latest industrial techniques. Nearly everything would be build with (relatively cheap) pre-cast concrete elements which would leave money for the apartments and collective facilities. The typical honeycomb structure of the Bijlmer was derived from the possibilities of the industrial production methods, extensive light studies and the infrastructural concept, which resulted in the optimal angle of 120 degrees. The honeycomb flats were interconnected by interior streets and together formed the ‘new’ community.

2. **Infrastructural scheme**

Because the negative effects of cars became more and more apparent in the 60s, traffic was one of the central theme’s in the design for the Bijlmer. The noise, pollution, congestion and unsafe environs caused by cars were reasons to totally ban them from the residential areas, resulting in the ‘safest’ neighbourhood in Holland. The primary roads and the metro were elevated 6 to 9 meters from the ground, the secondary roads (called *dreven*) with the bus lines 3 to 4 meters, the ground floor was reserved for pedestrian and cycle paths. 

There were three secondary traffic arteries (the *Daalvijkhdreef*, the *Bijlmerdreef* and the *Karspeldreef*) cutting horizontally across the plan, from these roads big parking garages could be accessed. The garages were to play a central role in the neighbourhood; clustered around three of them so-called ‘subcentres’ were planned. In contrast to the residential parts which should be quiet and green, the subcentres would be the central hub of public transport and commercial and cultural activities on local scale. From the subcentres and garages people would be able to reach their house via a dry walk or ‘interior street’. The movement of people through public space was described in three systems:

- **Front door** → **Dry walk** → **Parking garage** → **Freeway**
- **Front door** → **Dry walk** → **Subcentre** → **Subway**
- **The (mostly) recreational foot and cycle paths**

These infrastructural diagrams were essential to definitive layout of the plan. The parking garages were situated next to the main roads and the flats were organized in a more or less north-south direction with the dry walks substituting ‘regular’ city streets and connecting the parking spaces with the individual dwellings. The paths on ground level were hereby reserved for recreational use.

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12. The honeycomb shape was introduced by the architects of the designated B and C sub-plans: Kromhout and Groet.

13. These subcentres were to be small *Kalverstraatjes*; the *Kalverstraat* being the busiest shopping street in Amsterdam.
fig. 8 Model of the final Bijlmer master plan. Located in the centre (left of the straight flats of the H-buurt and under the Bijlmer park) is the Amsterdamse Poort, the main (shopping) centre of the whole borough of Amsterdam Southeast.

fig. 9 Model of a typical Bijlmer area. Located at the top-right corner is the subcentre Kraaiennest. This model hints at the ideal of a continuous landscape flowing underneath the flats.

fig. 10 At the subcentres all the different traffic flows would come together; underneath the roads there would be kiosks and shops.
Besides the (local) subcentres one big main centre was planned for the Bijlmer. Here the bigger commercial and cultural facilities, offices, a railway station and governmental institutions were located. Totally in tune with the principles of segregation of program this main centre was planned separate from the residential areas. In addition with the subcentres and main centre, the flats were the last part of a threefold hierarchical order:
- Borough – the Bijlmer (or actually Amsterdam Southeast) as a whole, with facilities like the big Bijlmer park and the main shopping centre
- Quarters/areas – the Bijlmer was divided into different areas, numbered A to L, serviced by subcentres
- Neighbourhoods – substituted by the high-rise flats which each had collective block facilities

3. The AUP and the Western garden cities
With this clear emphasis on the community (for instance by means of collective spaces) and the abundance of green areas, the planners tried to counter the criticism on the planning principles of the Modern Movement. More specifically they tried to respond to the criticism on the AUP, which according to many people at the time was not entirely a big success. SO had experimented with ‘new towns’ like the Bijlmer on smaller scale in several expansions of the AUP in the 1950s and 1960s like Bos en Lommer, Slotervaart, Geuzenveld and Osdorp. But especially the later additions of Molenwijk and Het Breed in the north (built after the AUP) experimented with the principles that would later be used for the Bijlmermeer. In these neighbourhoods interior streets and connected parking garages were introduced on a smaller scale. It was carrying the principles of the AUP even further. Essential aspects of the Western garden cities of Amsterdam that had to be improved were infrastructure, quality of the housing, privacy and the fragmentation of the parks. The Western garden cities had, even more so than the Bijlmer, to deal with the enormous pressure of the housing shortage:

“The plan, that was already finished before the second world war, was not designed for the future. Due to the massive housing shortage after the war there was little or no time to revise the plans. The plans were built as soon as possible.” (Van Gaalen 2005: 7)

This rush had some important consequences on the living conditions. In West, according to SO, cars were much too dominant, the quality of the houses was very poor (no central heating or elevators, little insulation, etc.), the walk-up flats did not offer enough privacy and the green spaces were not really suitable for recreation. In the Bijlmer the blocks would
have to be higher and further apart, the green areas in between bigger and less divided and cars would be totally banned from the living areas.

Opponents of these new plans said the very segregation of functions and the large scale approach (which were the fundamental principles of the Modern Movement) destroyed the basic workings of the traditional city. Jane Jacobs was a great antagonist of modern town planning. About interior streets (dry walks) like designed in the Bijlmer she wrote: “The interior streets, although completely accessible to public use, are closed to public view and they thus lack the check and inhibitions exerted by eye-policed city streets.”

Oscar Newman introduced the concept of ‘defensible space’, i.e. “the physical layout of communities which allow residents to control the areas around their homes”. (Newman 1996: 9) The theories of Newman show some links with the work of Jacobs: “A families claim to a territory proportionally diminishes as the number of people who share that claim increases.” (Newman 1996: 17)

Without going further into these critiques at this point, it is important to note that the planners were aware of this and tried to formulate an answer within their own planning strategies. They were fully aware of the importance of the collective facilities and the continuity of the infrastructural network and its connection to the city centre of Amsterdam.

15. Two of the strongest opponents of modern city planning were Kevin Lynch and Jane Jacobs. Jacobs elaborates on the importance of lively city streets and neighbourhoods in her book ‘The death and life of great American cities’ (1961).

fig.11 By building 11 storey high-rise flats, public space could be created to facilitate the recreational needs of ‘modern man’.
3. **THE ORIGINAL BIJLMERFLATS**

“According to SO the collectivity of the new form of living should be emphasized in the design of the dwelling units. Not the individual house but the repetition of the collective elements should be accentuated.”
(Bolte & Meijer 1981: 262)

The rigid implementation of the modern concepts of city design on such a large scale had, of course, huge implications on the working of the public life in the neighbourhood. The urban principle of the ‘city street’ was eliminated in the Bijlmer and most of the functions it had to fulfil were placed within the community of the flat. The concept of the dry walk, which was a key element of the urban infrastructural scheme, was therefore essential to the design of individual flats. This link between ‘house’ and ‘road’ was planned on the ground floor, though it soon was moved to the first so pedestrians and cyclists could pass unhindered at ground level. The ground floor consisted furthermore of double height apartments. Initially two dry walks were designed per flat: one as an open gallery on the sunny side and one as an indoor corridor on the east side of the block. Between the walkways there would be elevators, staircases and more importantly the collective spaces, on which later more.

In the initial plans the apartments were accessed by means of an elevator and a small vestibule or portico for a maximum of four houses (see fig.7 on page 24). In the few cases where this would not be possible short, separated galleries would have to be the alternative. This access system was very important because it concentrated the horizontal movement in the corridors, which would add to the experience of a real street (see images 11 and 12 on page 34).

The most important elements of the interior street were the collective spaces. Between the two dry walks the communal life of the whole flat should have taken place. The architects and planners envisioned bars, child care and sports facilities, playgrounds, meeting points and conference rooms. Just as these things find their place in ‘regular’ neighbourhoods there was space in the blocks for the bridge club, the elderly committee, stamp collectors and the occasional block party. Not only was there room for these collective activities inside the flats, at some points little pavilions were designed to house extra neighbourhood facilities. These pavilions were accessible from both the interior corridor and the ground floor.

The importance of the collective facilities is stated clearly in the document *Kollektieve Blokvoorzieningen* (lit. collective facilities for building blocks) by SO from 1968:
**fig. 2** Impression of the Bijlmer (H-buurt).

**fig. 3** Impression of a park, a flat, an interior street and a collective pavilion.

**fig. 4** Impression of a collective pavilion in the Bijlmer.
“The several drawbacks that accompany the strongly regulated social housing can be compensated within the concept of dwelling units with an interior street by adding elements to the corridor which can increase the flexibility of the apartments (guest bedrooms for instance), or can relocate bothersome activities at a distance from the dwelling. Facilities such as cafés with terraces can be beneficial to the usage of interior street and outside spaces.” (Ter Horst, Meyer & De Vries 1991: 57)

The program for these collective facilities had been written down meticulously by SO in the memorandum *Kollektieve Blokvoorzieningen*. For each dwelling unit of 250 to 700 apartments there would be:

- a diner with ‘places to sit’
- hobby spaces
- childcare
- a room for sports and play
- a ‘homework’ room
- a ‘conversation’ room
- a rehearsal studio
- a ‘musical studies’ room
- a play room for smaller kids
- guest bedrooms

These collective spaces, together with the interior street and the garages formed an intricate system. The architects of the Bijlmer had it all planned out, per flat there would also be a caretaker, an electric lorry, communication systems and a grocery delivery express in the corridor. So it was not only by architectural means that they tried to give shape to this new and ‘modern’ community.

Though there was a clear emphasis on the collective facilities the individual apartment were also crucial in the plan. The houses in, for instance the Western Garden Cities, were considered much too small for the new middle class families (3.3 people) and needed to be radically improved. Where a typical 4-room apartment in West measured about 80m² new dwellings in the Bijlmer would range from 100 to 125m². The apartments in the Bijlmer were also equipped with modern technology, including kitchens, laundry rooms and garbage chutes. Besides quite generous measurements the apartments were (in most cases) fitted out with a play corner for kids, spacious storage, combinable kitchen/living and a balcony over the full width of the bay.

The privacy that was guaranteed by the height of the flats and the distance between them (some 180 meters) was also something that was considered to be a big improvement compared to the apartments in West.
**fig.5** Impression of an interior street and its connection to the ground floor. Note the lorry on the left hand side.

**fig.6** Plans of a four- and a two-room apartment. Note the play area (speelhal), the big balcony, the kitchen with garbage chute and the generous dimensions.

**fig.7** Plan of the flats in the *Gouden Leeuw* area (on which later more) where the apartments are accessed through a portico instead of a gallery.
and other parts of the city. “I have got nine upstairs neighbours but when I look outside it looks like I live in het Gooi. And you get that for half the money you pay for a house in Buitenveldert!” says Henk van de Belt. (Amsterdams Peil: Bijlmermeer stad van de toekomst 2006)

In the entire history of the Bijlmer the dwellings themselves have always been mentioned as one of the most positive aspects of the plan. To this day people are rather satisfied with them, they even “hold their own in comparison with new low-rise row housing.”

1. Interview with Herman (a long time inhabitant of the Bijlmer) conducted by authors on 05-01-07. He spoke for some time about the layout of the apartments. The only thing that was bothering him was the huge dimensions of the toilet, space which he rather would have used otherwise.
4. COMPLICATIONS

It might be known that the Bijlmer did not turn out exactly the way the planners envisioned it. A multitude of problems arose causing a downward spiral from which the Bijlmer still has not been able to fully recover. In the mid 80s the area was the closest thing to a ghetto Holland had ever known. To this day the public opinion of the Bijlmermeer is still very negative, though large groups of inhabitants still have a firm belief in their neighbourhood.

Around 1980 the major problems were: criminality, filthiness, social unsafety, unemployment, overcrowding in certain parts, vacancy in other and drug abuse. Because the problems were so many and all interrelated it is hard to tell if things could have worked out differently under different circumstances. For our research the most interesting question is to which extent the built environment and the urban plan contributed to the social problems that arose. But we can never entirely separate these issues from their political and historical context.

“Nowhere in the world, to this date, has a more beautiful and more modern city of this scale been built. The opportunity is here: the project for the nicest town imaginable.” – mayor Van Hall, 1964 (Groen, Manshanden & Tamboer 2004: 70)

This ‘sales pitch’ during the presentation of the Bijlmer plan by the then mayor of Amsterdam indicates the expectations the Bijlmer had to live up to and the pressure on the team of Siegfried Nassuth. Not only was there a pressing demand for adequate, cheap dwellings to cope with the post-war housing shortage, also the planning department (SO) had a reputation to uphold. In an article of Wonen TA/BK the Bijlmer is described as “a product of a glorious history of urban planning.” (Klaren et al. 1974: 15)

These three factors – time, money and prestige – would play an essential role in the further development of the project and its complications. The haste felt by the municipality led to problems concerning the building process (part 1 of this chapter), which contributed in its turn to necessary budget cuts (part 2) and problems with the planning process (part 3). Finally, the prestige involved is touched upon briefly in part 4.

1. Building process

There was quite a rush to start building. As an indication, SO started with the first basic planning principles of the Bijlmer in 1962, in 1966 mayor Van Hall broke ground for the first flat which was going to be built: Hoogoord. The whole of the northern part of the Bijlmer was built in one go. Nowhere in the process did they stop and rethink:

1. In certain flats of the Bijlmer the storage boxes on the ground floor were apparently inhabited by people who had no other choice. These boxes were small, separated by chicken wire and had no windows. In other parts of the Bijlmer apartments were vacant because they were too expensive and/or nobody wanted to live there. Later on some of these houses were squatted.
“And when someone insisted on a possible evaluation and revision of the basic principles SO pointed out again the need to make haste, there would be no time for such an evaluation.” (Bolte & Meijer 1981: 245)

To speed up the process SO had started in 1964 with the architectural design for the sub-plan A – which would later on become the H-buurt – while still working on the overall urban plan for the Bijlmer, this explains the difference in the shape of the flats. More importantly very early on in the planning process – long before the designs were finished – the municipality made agreements with contractors specialized in concrete prefab systems in order to cope with the time schedule. The firms IndecO-Coignet and Intervam were given guarantees that they could build respectively 6000 and 7000 apartments. This was a decision that would become very significant for the overall development of the Bijlmer. As we have seen in chapter 2 the national policy of minister Bogaers played an essential role here as well. The minister offered a 25% allowance for projects built with prefab systems. Furthermore if built with an time-efficient system (i.e. if they saved 40% on labour costs) corporations were allowed to exceed their quota and build more houses, which meant more profit.

The consequences of this rash action by the municipality were multiple. First of all it gave the contractors a far going influence on the design process and at the same time limited the design possibilities of the architects.

Secondly it led to the bizarre situation that even when it became clear that there were too much apartments being built in the Bijlmer the big companies kept building because they were contracted to build a set number of houses, and no less. The reasons for the dwindling demand for housing in the Bijlmer will be treated in chapter 6 on ‘external factors’.

Finally the premature contracts gave the big contractors a very strong bargaining position. The first offers for the flats in sub-plan A by Intervam, for instance, were unreasonably high and way off budget. This, combined with the initial discrepancy between budget and ambition and the unwillingness of the new government to give more financial aid, meant that the design had to be stripped to its core…

2. Budget cuts

The role played by the building firms – along with other developments like a general increase in building costs and an explosion in labour wages around 1964 – had serious consequences. The changes necessary to make
the design for sub-plan A (by Kees Rijnboutt) affordable were quite drastic:

- Instead of servicing three or four apartments on each floor with one elevator and a small forecourt, a **gallery** was devised with one elevator for +/- 24 houses. In the end the ratio went down to 1 on 45.

- An extra floor was added, bringing the total to 9 (initially Nassuth wanted no more than 6) plus a double ground floor.

- Two of the initially planned dry walks were eliminated, the only one remaining was a corridor on the north side of the flats.

- Instead of collective facilities on the first floor more apartments were built to generate more revenue. Only a few collective spaces were realized in the sub-plan A.

- On the ground floor the housing had to make way for storage and the double height underpasses were lowered to single height.  

When sub-plan A was finished SO continued with sub-plans B and C. Here the honeycomb structure was introduced, the blocks became larger and the honeycomb pattern formed big courtyards between the flats. For the final design of the flats themselves the reference (i.e. starting point) had become the stripped down version of the original plans. But for sub-plans B and C even more budget cuts had to be made.

- The number of lifts was reduced to 1 on every 86 houses. In sub-plan D the elevator-house ratio was further reduced to 1 on 90.

- Where first the idea was to vary the design of the flats to a certain degree, now the same flat typology was used in both sub-plans B and C.

Due to the financial problems SO had to set priorities; from all the qualities the original Bijlmer plan had the apartments were eventually given priority. Considering the overcrowded and dilapidated state of the working class neighbourhoods this might seem a logical choice, but there are other reasons behind this. First, the government had issued a document called *Voorschriften en Wenken* (lit. Regulations and Suggestions) in 1951, which regulated the minimum requirements for dwellings in Holland. This meant that not much money could be saved on the apartments so they had to cut back on all the collective facilities that were essential to the concept of the Bijlmer. 

Secondly, the aforementioned deals with the industrial contractors had the side effect that the bay width was fixed very early on by choosing one certain building system. Consequently the dwellings could not be reduced in size to save money.
fig. 1 The Bijlmerflats as they were originally envisioned: interior street on the ground floor.

fig. 2 Interior street on the ground floor with collective spaces and storage room.

fig. 3 Interior street on the ground floor with an underpass for cyclists.

fig. 4 Interior street on the first floor with ramps connecting it to the ground floor.
fig. 6 Interior street on the first floor, storage rooms on the ground floor.

fig. 7 Interior street on the first floor with slopes on one side reattaching it to the ground floor. The ceiling height of the corridor is reduced.

fig. 8 Interior street on the first floor, storage rooms on the ground floor, no slopes.

fig. 9 The way the flats were actually built: interior street on the first floor, more apartments instead of collective spaces, storage rooms on the ground floor.
The cost reduction in the plan had also been effect on other things besides the flats. The parking garages – which were the all important links in the ‘front door’ to ‘outside world’ connection – were also the victim of budget cuts. The next passage describes what the garages should have been like:

“Every flat has a parking garage where the car owner has to go. If a visitor arrives there he can call the resident, high and far away, on the intercom and tell him he has arrived. In every garage there is a caretaker to provide information and for heavy parcels there will be an electric lorry which can ride, via special lanes in the interior street on the first floor, into the flat.
This interior street is a nice place where residents meet each other in one of the many collective rooms which are planned between all the little shops and public services. Every forty meters there is an elevator so that dragging across the galleries will be a thing of the past.”

All in all it followed a historical French model, says Dirk Frieling, of collective building blocks with a janitor and families with wives which stay at home or around the house with the children. Conditions which, as we will see in chapter 7, did not correspond with the situation in the Bijlmer in the 70s. The article goes on:

“That was how it should have been. But the only thing a visitor ever saw was empty parking garages, empty hallways, elevator every hundred meters and on the wall empty tubes meant for the intercom.” (Ter Horst et al. 1991: 48)

The idea of caretaker for every flat also never made it to the final stage of the development, he was cut from the budget along with the collective spaces, the elevators, the intercom and the lorry. The fact that the prediction that soon everybody in the Bijlmer would have one car or more did not come true was another thing that led to the desolation of the garages, which would eventually become the most unsafe places in the Bijlmer. Initially there were also little shops and kiosks planned underneath the roads nearby the garages which would attract more users, these also were never realized.

Some of these cutbacks obviously conflicted with the very principles of the Bijlmer, most notably the emphasis on collectivity and concentration of movement and activity on the interior street. Hardly any of the planned collective facilities were actually built. As stated above, the spaces available for communal activities were mostly taken up by additional residential program. There was some room for collective activities in

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7. The lorry actually did work for some time, there are pictures from around 1970 which show it functioning.

8. Besides some collective spaces in the flats themselves, only two of the collective pavilions were realized: Hofgeest and Kraaiennest.

fig.10 Photograph of the interior street of a Bijlmerflat, showing a resident and the milkman.
**fig.11** The original plan: a lot of elevators which concentrate the horizontal movement in an interior street on the ground floor.

**fig.12** Building fewer elevators leads to a concentration of horizontal movement in the galleries.

**fig.13** A recently renovated corridor: still no activity.
the corridors but these spaces were built bare (no gas, electricity or furnishing) and too expensive for most people. Of the cafes and other public places that did sprung up most were squatted.

*Pierre Heijboer:* “This is one of the original ‘interior streets’!”

**Question:** “What is wrong with it?”

*Pierre Heijboer:* “These blind facades. Here all kinds of activities should have taken place. Here should have been the bars and the day-care... and the elderly society and the bridge club. That should all have been here.”

(Amsterdams Peil: Bijlmermeer stad van de toekomst 2006)

The problematic nature of the collective facilities in the Bijlmer will be explored further in chapter 6 on collective spaces.

Another very important consequence of all these financial problems was that the rents ended up to be much higher then planned. Although designed for fairly well-to-do middle class families, the rent – initially estimated on 170 guilders – of more than 300 guilders was steep for most people. Later on the rent was further increased with 46 guilders for the use of the parking garages.

Not surprisingly the Bijlmer has had a long history of protests, legal actions and civil disobedience. The high rents had, along with a couple of other issues, a huge impact on the demography of the neighbourhood, on which more in chapter 7 on external factors.

### 3. Planning

Besides the premature deals with big contractors the haste installed by the municipality had another effect. Because of the housing shortage in the centre of Amsterdam from the start there was a clear emphasis on building a lot of housing fast. In 1962 SO started with formulating the main principles of the Bijlmer, in 1966 they started building and already in 1968 the first sub-plan was finished and others were on the way. The dwellings were indeed coming along fast, other parts of the plan took considerably longer.

The construction of the parking garages started four years after the first flats were finished. The subcentres, which were closely linked with the garages and the infrastructure, came along after eight years (subcentres *Ganzenhoef* and the smaller *Fazanthof* were finished in 1975) and for the big shopping centre (the proposed heart of the Bijlmer and the second centre of Amsterdam) the *Amsterdamse Poort* people had to wait till 1985, 17 years after *Hoogoord* was finished.

With other (essential) facilities similar problems arose: schools, public transport, public and cultural institutions all were finished much later than the residential parts, if they were finished at all. The subway, for
example, which connected the Bijlmer with the rest of Amsterdam was not opened until 1977.

As a consequence of this bad planning the public and collective spaces in the Bijlmer where people were supposed to meet did not become the lively, thriving places the designers had envisioned. Because of the (partial) absence of facilities, program and infrastructure the social chain of collective instances never functioned properly in most cases (i.e. sub-plans or individual flats).

It is striking that very early on (in 1964) the department of Social Affairs came with a report on the potential social problems in a new neighbourhood the size of the Bijlmer:

“The remarkable thing with this report is that it advocated an integral approach, which emphasized the simultaneous development of facilities like shopping centres, community clubs and social services alongside the habitation of the flats. Earlier experience had shown that the absence of these facilities in the starting up phase of a neighbourhood caused a lack of ‘identity’ and offered the residents no possibilities to orientate themselves.” (Van Diepen & De Bruijn-Muller 1976: 42)

A political reason for this was the organization of the different parts of the building process. The overall design (the urban plan by Nassuth indicating infrastructure, parcelling, etc.) was fixed by municipal decree (ordinance). The quality of the apartments was also guaranteed by the Voorschriften en Wenken, but the collective and public spaces (green spaces, facilities, garages, etc.) were not controlled by the planners and left to third parties. The parking garages, for instance, were designed and built by another contractor in the cheapest (and according to many the ugliest) way possible. The collective spaces were left to the inhabitants themselves.

“Most participants did not feel responsible for the ‘additional’ elements (the dry walks, block facilities, garages, sub-centres, etc.) but primarily for the elements that were their core business.” (Bolte & Meijer 1981: 276)

While the essential public facilities were absent, the first inhabitants of the Bijlmer had to cope with makeshift provisions in far from ideal circumstances (hardly any infrastructure, big sandpits and no greenery). The Bijlmer pioneers felt cheated by the municipality which did not keep their promises concerning public and collective facilities. The complaints of the inhabitants already found their way to the national media by July 1970, only one and a half years after the first flat was completed. (Heijboer 2006: 32) The negative media attention was in itself a big problem. Author August Willemsen wrote: “I wonder whether the press,
which is so keen to call the Bijlmer a ghetto, realizes that it has itself helped to create that ghetto image.” (Kloos 1997) A couple of examples: In an article from 1970 the author wonders if the Bijlmer is “...a huge failure where flat-neurosis thrives and where slowly every initiative is smothered in the honeycomb shaped concrete blocks?” Or if it is “...the city of the future where one can finally really dwell, communicate and most importantly live, and where cooperation and public participation overcome?” (Verhagen 1987: 35) These questions both illustrate the frustration with the situation as it was and the hope for an alternative future.

Pierre Heijboer, who was (and still is) a firm believer in the Bijlmer, wrote an article with the title ‘This way the Bijlmer will go to hell’. (Verhagen 1987: 38) And in 1974 a seminal article was published in Wonen TA/BK by Maurits Klaren, Theo Steemers and Tom van Voormal. The three authors tried, for the first time, to find out what went wrong with the Bijlmer.

Due to all this negative attention in the media it was even harder to get commercial investors and new inhabitants to come to the area. And in the ‘tabula rasa’ approach as was practised in the Bijlmer there were no facilities to fall back on. There needs to be a basic level of liveliness (i.e. a certain amount of residents) to allow for such functions to thrive. This liveliness is in itself the best attractor for more liveliness.

“Basically the Bijlmer was completed stripped down” says Henk van de Belt an inhabitant of Bijlmer since 1970. Or as many argue the Bijlmer was never actually finished. We start to see a distinction here between the Bijlmer as it was designed and the way it was built. Pierre Heijboer makes this issue very clear:

“It is like designing a house for someone but when you start building – because you have to make budget cuts – you leave out the telephone connection, or the TV cable, or the sidewalk... It was not the fault of the design itself.”

4. Prestige

Another factor that should not be underestimated in the development of the Bijlmer is the prestige involved with the conception of the project. As mentioned before, Amsterdam had a rich planning tradition to uphold. In the design phase the plans already got national and international attention and acclaim. The planners were designing ‘the city of tomorrow’ and were strengthened in their belief by the media. J. Mastenbroek wrote in Amsterdam Werkt the following article with the title ‘Amsterdam confirms a reputation’:

fig.15 A much published photograph of a woman waiting on the bus, indicating the bad connection with the city by public transport.
**fig.16** A collage of the new metro running straight through the Bijlmer.

**fig.17** Model of plan Nassuth: a radical proposal for 90% high-rise. The iconic honeycomb shape of Kromhout and Groet has been implemented in the whole Bijlmer.

**fig.18** Model of plan Mulder: proposing more differentiation in dwelling types.
“We believe that the Bijlmer plan meets all high hopes and expectations. It is much more than a plan, it is a creation, the creation of a totally new dwelling and living environment, which deals with all the oppressive results of car domination once and for all, and annuls all consequences of traditional housing.” (Bolte & Meijer 1981: 278)

When the first critique on the plan was heard SO and the municipality were able to mostly ignore it.

Early on Jacoba Mulder came with an alternative plan which took the basic aspects of plan Nassuth but proposed more differentiation in dwelling types, in low- as well as high-rise. This plan (dubbed Plan Mulder) was therefore much more ambiguous and maybe less iconic, it consisted of only 50% high-rise compared with the 90% of plan Nassuth. SO never considered Plan Mulder as a serious option. The major reason for this immediate rejection was the prestige involved for the municipality and SO. Wouter Bolte en Johan Meijer state the following: “The most important cause seems to us, that especially on a governmental level there was need for the unanimous choice for an ambitious project that would show Amsterdam could handle a task of such large scale.” (Bolte & Meijer 1981: 261)

Maarten Mentzel described the design process of the Bijlmer as blikveldvernaawend. He meant that the designers suffered more and more from a sort of tunnel vision. The designers of the Bijlmer worked on the project as one team and were not affected by outside criticism, dogmatically holding on to their own ideas and concepts. Leading ultimately to an illusion of inviolability.

One of the causes for this tunnel vision is what has been called ‘group think’. Working under high pressure on the same project with the same people can lead to one collective vision, deviating from this vision is not an option anymore. An illusion is created, and only when it is finally confronted with reality it shows its weaknesses. This has also been described as ‘collective irrationality’, a subconscious psychological process that kicks in to avoid facing difficult problems.
5. IN-BETWEEN SPACES

In the vision of SO the flats were to substitute an entire traditional city neighbourhood. The big advantage of these vertical communities was the enormous stretches of land that could be used for parks, forests and gardens. The city street was eliminated and replaced by a corridor (interior street) on the first floor. This enormous change in the structure of public space deserves more attention.

The view on public space of Nassuth was totally egalitarian; every square inch of public space was to be available for everyone. It was still the spirit of socialist doctrine. The famous Dutch architect Van Tijen, a contemporary of Nassuth, is famous for saying “private ownership of land is a crime!”, which illustrated fairly well the planning principles of the public spaces in the Bijlmer.¹ To make sure everyone would have equal opportunities and equal claims to all facilities, the public sphere was made as big as possible and the private domains were kept to a minimum. Everyone would be able to use and enjoy the large stretches of public parks. It turned out quite differently. Pi de Bruijn: “the fact that the ground floor was owned by everyone, led to the fact that it was appropriated by no-one.”² Oscar Newman, who was quoted in the second chapter on the original Bijlmer plan, holds a similar notion on modernist high-rise projects in general:

“The grounds around the buildings are not assigned to particular buildings. The residents, as a result, feel little association with or responsibility for the grounds and even less association with the surrounding public streets.” (Newman 1996: 20)

In this light the transfer of the collective street from the ground floor to the first might be one of the most consequential decisions in the development of public space in the Bijlmer. By minimizing the interior street to a badly orientated hallway on the first floor and filling the ground floor up with storage boxes, the flats became autonomous objects with no connection to public space. Some notes on Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation might apply even better to the Bijlmer. According to Jean Castex the Unité “…has no ground. It rejects it, withdraws from it, sits on pilotis and is literally abstracted from it.” Like Bijlsma and Jochem Groenland elaborate in their book ‘The Intermediate Size’:

“In the detachment of the sublimely composed white-walled building, notions as the ‘corner’, ‘across the street’ or ‘next door’ suddenly loose all meaning and the notion of the intermediate becomes redundant.” (Bijlsma & Groenland 2006: 17)

¹ Willem van Tijen was an architect deeply involved with post-war reconstruction and social housing. In 1944 he published together with P. Verhagen, J.F. Berghoef, S.J. van Embden, B. Merkelbach en H. Postel a paper called Architectenprogramma voor de Woningbouw (lit. the architects program for housing projects). It was a study on better and more equal housing opportunities for the working class, parts of which were later integrated in the Voorschriften en Wenken issued by the government. (Jansen, Ruitenbeek et al. 2005: 81)

² Interview with Pi de Bruijn conducted by authors on 17-01-07.

fig.1 A typical plinth of a Bijlmerflat in 2006, clearly showing lack of use and program.
**fig.2** Diagrammatic sections of a typical Bijlmerflat and an Unité d’Habitation by Le Corbusier.

**fig.3** Comparative diagram showing the infrastructure of the Bijlmer and a ‘traditional’ city grid.

**fig.4** Entrance to the interior street on the first floor of a Bijlmerflat.
This detachment from the ground floor results in what has been called the ‘schizophrenia of the pedestrian domain’. (Ter Horst, Meyer & De Vries 1991: 81) Because people, in their daily coming and going, had no reason to be on the ground floor and the plinths consisted of mostly blind facades there was next to no social control on the public (outside) space. The so-called ‘eyes on the street’ were absent. This is an essential factor in the emergence of what we named in-between spaces. These spaces lack clear definition and therefore clear usage and appropriation by its supposed inhabitants. More concrete Heijboer explains: “...But because of the blind walls the ground floor around the flats turned into a sort of no-mans land where no poison ivy could be of any help. It seemed in those days a minor problem in the overall design of the Bijlmer, but it was a minor problem which would become bigger and bigger.” (Heijboer 2006: 21)

The dislocation of traditional outdoor ‘city life’ to the first floor was the starting point of the deterioration of public (outdoor) life; the ‘schizophrenia’ mentioned earlier. There is no reason for people to be on the ground level if not for specific activities or functions. The subcentres, together with parking garages and subway stations, were to be centre of ‘city’ life in the Betlmer and mediate the relationship between the individual apartments and the infrastructure that connected the Bijlmer with the rest of Amsterdam. The aforementioned diagram (see page 15) shows the circulation concept. There are three clearly separate streams: one from house to subway, another from house to street and thirdly the paths on the ground floor. The streams do not cross. As an effect the liveliness was already cut in three because the streams did hardly have any relation with each other.

The urban model, then, of large flats in lush green surroundings was better served with blocks on pilotis. That way the landscape would flow continuously underneath the buildings, there would be no dark edges, corners or niches and the clarity of the overall plan would be enhanced. In most flats in the Bijlmer the ground floor was entirely built up, only at certain points there were low passages for cyclists and pedestrians. In the northern part of the Bijlmer the effect was that the intended courtyards became closed off entities and the sense of the continuous landscape was lost.

The spaces between the buildings that were entirely reserved for pedestrians and cyclists had no direct links with the rest of Zuidoost or the rest of the city. The paths crossing this public domain went every which way (see figure 6 on page 48). The original plan was a logical grid system, this was later on turned into a more picturesque layout of
twisting and turning paths which had no logic to it at all. The fact that these paths had no links with other infrastructural systems added to the desolation of an area that has also been cut off from its basic condition for liveliness, namely the flow of inhabitants going to and fro.³

“The difference between main and secondary pathways and between cycle and pedestrian paths are, especially for visitors, hardly or not at all recognizable and the haphazard order of the tracks makes it impossible to predict in which direction one will eventually go.” (Beheersgroep Bijlmermeer 1982: 28)

Another thing that should be realized here is that one of the basic premises of the design of public space in the Bijlmer was an imminent increase in leisure time. Due to the ongoing mechanization and emancipation the planners predicted an enormous shift in the way people would live their life. In 1961 civil servants got Saturdays off and from 1962 primary school children would be free on Saturday too. It seemed a sign of the times, predictions were made that within twenty years time the concept of ‘work’ would be a thing of the past. New leisure activities had to be accommodated and were therefore an important aspect of ‘modern’ town planning. It partly explains the modernists love for large green expanses, since parks were seen as the ideal place for collective, healthy and modern recreation.

The radical change in recreational habits, however, did not occur and society as a whole took a more individualistic turn. What is more, in the end nothing much was designed in the public spaces in the Bijlmer to facilitate these leisure activities. As a result the public spaces in the Bijlmer were sadly under-used. The only thing the residents could do was stroll around, paddle in the water, fish and play. This was not nearly enough, exclaimed architect Rem Koolhaas who was outraged by the lack of ‘urban’ program and facilities in the Bijlmer. (Heijboer 2006: 138)

Already in 1982 the Beheersgroep Bijlmermeer did research on the social and planological problems in the Bijlmer. Regarding the use of public space (i.e. the parks, paths, facilities, etc.) they came to the following conclusion:

“One could speak of a change in preferences and needs, which is expressed by the squatted pony farm, the illegal petting zoo, the attempts to built a playground and to preserve the south-central park in its original state. The small playgrounds will also have to be revised per flat and bigger ‘play elements’ like tennis courts, skate parks and basketball courts should be located closer to the dwellings because they will be used

fig. 5 A typical un-used and un-appropriated ‘in-between space’.

3. In an interview Joop de Haan proposes the following thought experiment: pick up the entire Bijlmer, move it to the north and place it on the location of Watergraafsmeer. This would create a radically different situation where Waterlooplein would only be five minutes away. In this alternative scenario the Bijlmer could be easily embedded in the existing city fabric. It would be a connected and integral part of the rest of Amsterdam.

Interview with Joop de Haan conducted by authors on 22-01-07.
All in all the relocation of the standard city and neighbourhood traffic flows resulted in a rather abandoned ground floor which was used mostly for walking the dog... and paddling.

Beside the reasons mentioned earlier that contributed to the abandonment of the ground floor, there was also a matter of density which played a role. The Bijlmer was designed for large, middle class and outgoing families. In reality a lot of single intellectuals and later on more eccentric individuals found their way to the Bijlmer, most of them before the downward spiral had begun. But the population density was much lower than initially planned. Some of the landscape architect tried to correct the design for the public space accordingly by, for instance, flooding parts and concentrating all the traffic on as few pathways as possible. But these initiatives where not always appreciated by SO and few of them made it to the final design.

Furthermore the greenery in-between the buildings was designed in two phases. First a lot of trees were planted to avoid erosion and wind hindrance and provide the promised parks for the inhabitants. To compensate for the desert from which the Bijlmer arose, the trees were planted very densely. Later on about half of them should have been cut down to give the other trees more room to grow and create the envisioned effect of ‘solitaire trees in the grass’. But when it was time for the trimming and maintenance of the trees the money reserved for these tasks had already been used up one other things and the parks were left unattended. This led later on to dark, unsafe places and a further degeneration of social control.

The public green spaces apparently were used for a short period. Heijboer says his children had a marvellous time playing in the playgrounds in the parks between the buildings. This was in early days of the Bijlmer when then big problems had not surfaced yet. And there are numerous accounts of early inhabitants of the Bijlmer who had a very nice childhood there.4

Another related issue is the much heard complaint of the anonymity of the Bijlmer. The design (the adequate expression of collective dwelling) intended to express equality and the ideals of social housing had become, according to many, an anonymous labyrinth were no one could find his way. Anonymity would produce people who had no affection with the space or area. A lot of the problems of the Bijlmer have been explained this way; lack of responsibility (resulting in disuse and the deterioration of public space), lack of social control (resulting in unsafe places)

4. See for instance *Binnen in de Bijlmer* 2006, a publication accompanying an exposition with the same name. Both the publication and exposition were issued by the municipality in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Bijlmer. In the booklet a few of the first inhabitants tell stories about the pioneering years in the Bijlmermeer.
**fig. 7** The two phases of the design for the parks between the flats (in this case the N-buurt).

**fig. 8** Design for the public spaces between the flats.

**fig. 9** Impression of the public spaces between the flats.
and lack of liveliness (resulting in dull and abandoned areas). “The monotony also created an almost inescapable feeling of disorientation.” (Bruine et al. 2002: 15)

Kees Hund gives another explanation for this disorientation: the human mind does not think in 120°, but in 90° angles. Once you have made a couple of turns in the honeycomb grid of the Bijlmer a lot of people cannot get their bearings straight, since it is very difficult to estimate the total angle you have made.5

All this stuff about disorientation and monotony is absolute nonsense says Heijboer, it is all journalists and so-called ‘experts’ repeating each other:

“The Bijlmer might be boring for someone driving on the elevated roads, watching down you think it is all the same. But that is not true, for the people living in the Bijlmer the area is not monotonous at all. You easily get lost there? Outsiders maybe, but people who are living there have no problems at all.”6

Heijboer and other ‘Bijlmerbelievers’ strongly feel that the problems of the area were (and still are) projected on the iconic honey comb flats (which in themselves are not the cause of the problems) by outside media. The Bijlmermeer, indeed, did soon became a synonym for dilapidated flats, walls filled with graffiti and unused, abandoned spaces as shown on TV and in the newspaper.

5. Interview with Kees Hund conducted by authors on 12-01-07.
6. Interview with Pierre Heijboer conducted by authors on 04-01-07. Kees Hund reacted on this by saying: “He might be right, but if you need signposts to point out the ‘exit’ of a neighbourhood there is something wrong with the design.”
6. COLLECTIVE SPACES

The second element (the first being public space) that is essential in our research are the collective spaces and facilities. We have explained why they were so important to the workings of the original Bijlmer scheme (socialist ideals, compensation of drawbacks high-rise, anticipation on radical modern way of life, etc.), now we will focus on the actual implementation of the collective spaces in the flats and deal in more detail with the problems inherent in the concept.

We have seen that the collective facilities as they were designed in the original plan severely suffered from the budget cuts that had to be made to make the Bijlmer affordable. This ‘stripping’ of the original plan (not just of the collective facilities) has in multiple sources been diagnosed as one of the main reasons for the failure of the Bijlmer (Van der Belt, Bolte & Meijer, Heijboer, Koolhaas, Rijnboutt and Verheijen among others) causing among other things the interior streets to become the desolate places they turned out to be and a severe lack of social cohesion (or ‘community feeling’ if you like). The H-buurt, however did have a short history of an active neighbourhood community.

In the very beginning (around 1968) life in this first part of the Bijlmer can be characterized best as optimistic. There was a sort of pioneer mentality and the hope that indeed in this new neighbourhood a new way of living and a new relation with the government (it was also the time of the demokratisering) would be possible. In the 60s large numbers of people strove for more direct and democratic influence on politics, education and their work environment. Heijboer elaborates that in 1968 people very consciously chose the Bijlmer and its collective ideals hoping to form a more democratic society. This explains that action groups and committees in those first years were easily organized.¹

“The design had a certain size – the size of a new, rational designed city next to the crowded, historically grown city that was already there. The Bijlmer was the model of the new society of the future. New Babylon!” ²

(Brunt 1990: 12)

So not only the press and the municipality were almost unanimously enthusiastic about the Bijlmermeer, people also wanted to live there resulting in long waiting lists for apartments in for instance Hoogoord. (Heijboer 2006: 165)

In the H-buurt there were some collective facilities and a community pavilion Hofgeest that were being used. Here all sort of communal facilities and activities sprung up, mostly inspired by this pioneer

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1. Interview with Pierre Heijboer conducted by authors on 04-01-07.

2. A quote from Bijlmer pioneer Harriët Haakma Wagenaar. Indeed the original Bijlmer plan breathes the spirit of Constant’s New Babylon: the assumption that soon labour would be a thing of the past, the importance of leisure and culture, the hands on mentality and the slightly anarchistic tendencies.

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fig.1 Drawing of the landscape design for the flats Hakfort en Huigenbos. Here the designers tried to reduce the amount of public space by introducing large bodies of water.
fig.2 Model of the collective pavilion Hofgeest.

fig.3 Photograph of the communal pub De Nachtegaal in the flat Grubbehoeve.

fig.4 Photograph of the LOB in action: an interview with Hans Wiegel conducted by Henno Eggenkamp.
mentality and lack of other facilities but also partly by idealism. There was a neighbourhood paper (the *Bijlmer Post*), an (informal) soccer club, a bar and for a short time even a local TV station: the *Lokale Omroep Bijlmermeer* (better known as LOB).

Another flat with some small scale collective activity was *Grubbehoeve*, here there was also a café ran by residents called *De Nachtegaal* (the nightingale), as well as a small movie theatre and an active women’s club.

In other parts of the Bijlmer there were supposedly also some collective initiative but sources are somewhat contradictory on this point. A report from 1982 by the *Beheersgroep Bijlmermeer* states: “This overview shows that the number of vacant collective facilities is limited.” (Beheersgroep Bijlmermeer 1982: 26) Other sources though (Van der Belt, Bolte & Meijer, Eggenkamp and Heijboer) indicate a clear lack of liveliness in the interior streets. We can conclude that though some collective spaces were (temporarily) in use the system never functioned as it was intended by the designers, apart from maybe the *H-buurt* in the early years.

But the initial success of this area did not last very long either. Somewhere in 1977 the funding for the Bijlmer TV station was stopped.³ (Heijboer 2006: 79) In *Hoogoord* and other parts of the Bijlmer more and more initiatives like pubs and billiard and card clubs were closed down due to lack of funding, bad management, lack of patrons, nuisance caused or a volunteer treasurer running away with the cash register.

So the collective vision did work on a small scale for a short time. Was its demise caused by purely external factors or was there some fault in the physical layout? Already in 1975 Dijkhuis, Ferf - Van den Broeke, Van der Maesen, Melger and Klaren wrote a report on the collective spaces in the Bijlmer titled *Collectieve ruimten Bijlmermeer: analyse van een verschijnsel*. They explain that people have a basic need for privacy as well as social relations with other people. In order for relations to form in neighbourhoods people must be able to see, meet and finally to get to know one another. (Dijkhuis et al. 1975: 5) These social activities have a specific need for certain types of informal public and collective spaces were people can observe each others behaviour, say hello and maybe have a brief chat. Machiel van Dorst wrote his dissertation on precisely this subject: the influence of this public-private dichotomy on the liveability of a neighbourhood. He stresses the delicate nature of social contacts and privacy in any living situation:

“Social contacts are only then possible when residents can regulate their own privacy. This desire is generally applicable to every neighbourhood,”
fig.5 A newspaper article on the opening of a new collective space in the flat Grubbehoeve (probably from 1970).

fig.6 Interior street, September 2006: no activity.

fig.7 The top floor of a Bijlmerflat: note the apartments directly bordering on the gallery.
but it has a dynamic character. The want for social contacts not only differs from person to person but also changes over time. Privacy is nothing more than the control over the interaction with others.” (Van Dorst 2005: 285)

In the high-rise flats in the Bijlmer this informal and natural socialization process of observation and small-talk was inhibited (or at least not stimulated) by a couple of factors of more or less architectural nature. First of all there was the choice for high-rise, which in itself is not ideal for neighbourhood contact. Because a large part of the community lives either under or above one particular gallery these people do hardly ever meet in their day-to-day lives. 4 Though the interior street should have compensated this, the vertical layering and the length of the blocks offer little overview and insight in the daily life of the neighbourhood (or of the gallery; the substitute of the traditional city street) and makes perceiving something like ‘social cohesion’ rather difficult. 5 The biggest drawback of the galleries was their position directly next to some of the private quarters of the apartments. Since the galleries were heavily used public spaces residents tend to close their curtains all day in order to ensure some privacy, resulting in anonymous galleries that lack liveliness and social control.

Secondly, the designers had envisioned for all social activities to take place in the collective spaces on the interior street, there was hardly any other place for it. These spaces were designed for specific social functions, like the aforementioned card club, which inherently excludes or alienates other people who do not share a particular interest or hobby. The collective rooms did not allow for the casual passing by that precedes more focused and formal activities. Communal facilities as designed in the Bijlmer appeal “…only to a small percentage of the inhabitants, namely those who are used to meeting people in this way. The lack of influx and ambiance impede more people visiting the collective spaces, which therefore are not able to thrive.” (Dijkhuis et al. 1975: 24)

The third factor was the mono-functionality of the collective spaces and interior streets, a problem already diagnosed on urban scale. Since the corridors were rather far removed from other public facilities and public transport, no commercial activities were allowed, and hardly any visitors passed by, they were totally reserved for small scale activities by the residents themselves. This lack of diversity we pointed out on a larger scale had its influence on the scale of the building block as well:

4. In the booklet *Binnen in de Bijlmer*; Long-time inhabitant Harry Kemps says the following: “I also found it alienating to see, when I looked from Hoogoord to Hofgeest, how people walked above and underneath each other on the galleries, instead of on one level and side by side. How could people meet and communicate here?”

5. The European Committee for Social Cohesion defines social cohesion as “the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization.”

On Wikipedia the following definition can be found: “Social Cohesion is a state in society in which the vast majority of citizens respect the law, one another’s human rights and values, and share a commitment to retain social order.” (Wikipedia 2007)
“In areas where a number of different functions are intertwined the chance of meeting other people is far bigger than places with one designated function. In the first case there is not only more freedom of choice, there is also a better chance on social control which, to a certain degree, helps enforce the norms and rules that apply to public spaces.” (Dijkhuis et al. 1975: 6)

This basic need for places where people can encounter and meet each other is closely related to the notion of Van Dorst that “privacy is the control over interaction with others.” It means you have the freedom to choose between more private and more public spaces and to choose whether to meet and talk to someone or to refrain from social contact and keep to yourself. In a more differentiated environment there are more places to choose from.

“This freedom of choice is determined mostly by a differentiation in the physical environment (a random mix of function of different nature). Numerous researchers name this multi-functionality a critical precondition; an area with multiple functions can more easily offer people an alibi to be present somewhere. Someone looking for contact does not have to be seen explicitly so. His presence is then ambiguous, one does not need to take note of others, at every given moment you can make contact with someone and built out this contact or cut it off.” (Dijkhuis et al. 1975: 6)

When we look again to the avant-garde communist housing projects in the Eastern Block we see examples that are somehow related. Especially in the Soviet Union architects and planners experimented with new forms of (communal) living. Like in the Bijlmer the private domains were kept to a minimum and very large collective spaces were designed to accommodate all activities of the community. There was a strong ideology somewhat similar to the egalitarian vision of Nassuth.


Far going communal activities were proposed, such as dining areas instead of kitchens, boarding schools for children, study rooms, hobby spaces, etc. But these facilities were, just like in the Bijlmer, not used as much as anticipated:

“Aus alledem kann erfolgert werden, daß Kollektivwohnhauser für familien mit kinder nicht so genützt werden und nicht den Vorstellungen

fig. 8 Mixed functions in the Kraaiennest area with the market in the middle, the elevated metro on the left, and in the back the mosque. The flats Kruitberg and Kleiburg are located respectively to the right and the left just outside of the picture.
entsprechen, wie sie den Erbauern dieser Objekte vorschweben.”” (Macetti 1967: 88)

In these pilot projects especially the collective dining halls, meeting rooms and work and hobby spaces were, to a large extent, left unused. Residents preferred to retreat to the small kitchens and private quarters allotted to them, which were kept to a basic minimum to stimulate communal activities. This illustrates again the need of people for privacy and the freedom to choose to engage in collective activities.

Next to these three factors (the typology of high-rise flats, lack of informal meeting places and mono-functionality) which were in the hands of the designers there were other things that did not contribute to a strong community feeling.

Although the planners designed the collective rooms in great detail they never considered the management needed. It never became clear who was to pay for the exploitation and who was to supervise it all. So everything came down to the residents who, of course, had little experience with such things or no time to do them.

Furthermore the collective spaces were often built without central heating, toilets or furnishings. This was of course an extra barrier for people to initiate something, since it would take extra time and money to make something of the spaces available.

Next, the plans did hardly respond to the needs of the inhabitants, day-care, mini markets, diners and laundry rooms were eventually not realized. (Dijkhuis et al. 1975: 39) This had of course for a large part to do with the fact that commercial facilities were out of the question.

Finally the high mutation rate (people moving), caused by the cumulative problems in the Bijlmer, was hardly a stimulus for a solid neighbourhood community.

We can conclude that the circumstances for an thriving communal life in the Bijlmerflats were far from ideal. As we stated in the introduction: while architectural interventions may not necessarily generate certain situations or specific behaviour, it can certainly inhibit, prohibit or counter them. Dijkhuis et al. share this opinion: “A favourable built environment is a necessary precondition for the emergence of communities it however not enough. ... Consequently the characteristics of the inhabitants are most important when the emergence of relations and the resulting community are concerned.” (Dijkhuis et al. 1975: 25)
7. **EXTERNAL FACTORS**

Although the focus of this research is on the physical (built) environment in relation to the problems that arose in the Bijlmer, the external (i.e. non physical) factors that contributed cannot be ignored. There were four major non-architectural issues that had direct consequences for the public and collective spaces in the area that must be considered: First there were changes in government ideology and government policy concerning urban planning which directly affected the Bijlmer (parts 1 and 2). Next, the corporations encountered problems of demographic nature (part 3). And finally there was an intricate combination of factors of political nature with regard to the maintenance of public and collective spaces in the Bijlmer (part 4).

1. **Government ideology**

In an interview Pierre Heijboer exclaimed that 90% of the problems of the Bijlmermeer had nothing to do with the urban plan. He considers the budget cuts a political problem. Though this is very true the spatial consequences are, for us, a real architectural issue.

The political side of the matter is that the Bijlmer was designed with a clear social-democratic ideology, but just when the construction started there was a shift to a more (neo)liberal doctrine. From 1945 until 1966 there had been only two cabinets without the social-democrats (PvdA) and the ideal of the welfare state was widely supported politically. In the night from the 13th on the 14th of October 1966 the social-democratic orientated cabinet Cals (PvdA, KVP and ARP) fell during the so-called *Nacht van Schmelzer*. The next three cabinets that followed included the the liberals (VVD) and the christian democrats (ARP and KVP), this was the start of a much more market-orientated course.

Social-democracy in Holland knew a very direct influence of the government on public housing, up until the 60s the government was the driving force behind the post-war reconstruction program. The Bijlmer also was initiated by the the municipal government who after completion turned the housing stock over to the housing corporations. The new liberal course let the market dictate the production. The stripping of the Bijlmer flats was directly influenced by the changing of the Dutch government in 1966. The new minister of housing and spatial planning Willem Schut was responsible for a lot of the budget cuts. The government stepped back and turned the responsibility for the production of dwellings over to market driven corporations, only to supervise their financial and legal position. Some people reflect on this change as the end of political ideologies and the emergence of the post-industrial society.
This would translate roughly as ‘designated core for growth’. Around the major cities smaller towns were selected that would be expanded to house the growing population in the cities. This resulted in large low-rise row-housing areas near, for example, Purmerend, Alkmaar, Almere, Capelle a/d IJssel, Amersfoort and Zoetermeer.

Of course this was in addition to the existing problems already discussed: high rents, bad planning of everything but the housing, criminality, filthiness, unemployment, etc.

The corporations (like the rest of Dutch society at the time) were strictly divided according to world-view: either catholic, protestant or socialist. This strict division of society is known as the verzuiling. One of the results of this division in three ‘columns’ were rather homogenous (and stable) living environments.

The housing corporations in Holland had a strong tradition of carefully selecting ‘decent’ families for their projects. In this way they could more or less build up a neighbourhood. Several factors inhibited this procedure in the Bijlmer. First of all, there was the speed of the building production; there simply was not enough time to make a selection. Later on when the Bijlmer started to get less and less popular there was no choice, the apartments had to be rented out. Furthermore, the Bijlmer appeared to be popular under different kinds of people than the middle class families that everybody foresaw. The first idealistic inhabitants were largely single intellectuals like journalists, artists and writers. The corporations were not able to carefully and gradually select the large middle class families that they wished; i.e. families with children that would contribute to the nice lively living environment that the Bijlmer was envisioned to be. The Bijlmer became a sort of refuge for singles, single families, homosexuals and later on immigrants. (Van Diepen & De Bruijn-Muller 1976: 41)
4. **Maintenance and management**

Because of the big stretches of public space, the upkeep of modern high-rise neighbourhoods requires more attention than traditional low-rise areas. In the Bijlmer this situation was complicated even further by the arrival of indigent socio-economical groups, most notably Surinamese immigrants.

The Bijlmer was designed to house middle class families from other parts of Amsterdam, the so-called *doorstromers*. This way other parts of Amsterdam (besides West also the dilapidated parts of the city centre) would become available for the working class and city renewal. Consequently the housing in the Bijlmer (most of it rental) was placed in the so-called ‘free sector’. Holland knows a division in a ‘free’ and a ‘social’ housing sector. The free sector is available for everyone who can pay for it. The social sector is heavily subsidized by the government and meant for specific groups (unemployed, people with minimum wages, people with state benifits, etc.) who are in need of housing but cannot afford the free sector. ‘Urgent cases’ have priority but in order to be listed as urgent you have to comply to certain rules and criteria. These criteria, however, turned out to be inadequate in the light of the new developments in the Dutch society.

These houses in the free sector in the Bijlmer were put under the care of housing corporations. This marked a change in the role of the housing corporations which used to be emancipatory institutions focused on facilitating good housing for working class people. Now they were commercial businesses that strived for profit, which is a radically different aim.⁷

We have already pointed out that there were a lot of financial problems concerning the Bijlmer. Besides the budget cuts another consequence was that the rents kept getting higher with every financial setback, and therefore the apartments were becoming unaffordable to more and more people.⁸ Given the aforementioned problems regarding building process (the influence of the contractors), national policy (Second Memorandum on Spatial Planning), process planning (lack of public facilities) and infrastructure (bad connection to the centre of Amsterdam) this resulted in a far from ideal situation with high rents and a high vacancy rates.⁹

Anticipating the imminent independence of Surinam – a long time Dutch colony – the stream of immigrants increased drastically in the beginning of the 70s, foreseeing a better future in Holland. When Surinam indeed became an independent republic Surinamese people were given the choice between the Surinamese and Dutch nationality, that year alone some 40.000 people moved to Holland. The Dutch government initially

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7. Nowadays the word ‘social housing’ is basically used for every dwelling under the care of the housing corporations. (Ouwehand & van Daalen 2002: 3)

8. Initially the rent was set at fl.170 after a while it had increased to fl.324, not including the obligatory costs for the parking garages of at least fl.34. Not until 1983 were the rents somewhat lowered.

9. The high rents were an important factor in the negative chain of events in the Bijlmer. Some people argue it was the most important: "The rents were not lowered soon enough. If it had been done years earlier the negative spiral would never have set in." (Verhagen: 1987: 47)
handled the integration of this group of new citizens with a policy of dispersal. This policy was based on the assumption that immigrants in small communities spread out over the country would better adapt to Dutch living culture.

Arriving in Holland the Surinamese people were often housed in temporary pensions which were often in bad shape and very expensive. The newly arrived, often poor, Surinamese were very certainly in great need for housing in the social sector but they did not fit the criteria of the ‘urgency’ policy of the municipality – one criterion being that you have to be a resident for two years in order to apply. (Van Diepen and Bruijn-Muller 1976: 29) Consequently they had to find living quarters in the ‘free sector’, which meant more expensive housing. As we have seen the Bijlmermeer was being abandoned by its Dutch inhabitants and was the next best option to settle. This meant that these Surinamese newcomers were now potential clients of the housing corporations.

Initially the municipality and the housing corporations tried – in line with national policy – to spread the Surinamese people out over the Bijlmer by limiting the number of immigrants that could live in one flat. The rule was no more the 30% Surinamese people per flat. Some housing corporations acknowledged this was racial discrimination but the alternative was ghetto forming. It was “choosing the ‘lesser’ of two evils.” (Heijboer 2006: 93)

The corporations however were not able to cope with the high vacancy rate indefinitely and with the statement ‘we do not discriminate’ housing corporation ‘Ons Belang’ was the first to abandon the dispersal policy. This resulted in a concentration of people who, because of their socio-economic position, where not able to maintain their living environment. At the time intensive social-economical guidance and help from the government did not exist yet. The pure focus on survival caused a disinterest in the living environment and its collective spaces. Survival was more important to the inhabitants than the maintenance of their neighbourhood, resulting in the gradual ‘slumming’ of the Bijlmer.

The inhabitants that were already settled started complaining about the situation in the Bijlmer, first about the technical condition of the flats but after a while more and more about the social problems. The Municipality was in general not really interested in the social economical situation of the people in the Bijlmer; the flats there were, after all, free sector and therefore not their problem.

The problems were directly being associated with the high rate of immigrants, which led in a lot of cases to an ethnic discussion instead
of a debate about the social and economical issues that needed to be addressed. In the media nasty words like ‘Negro-ghetto’ and ‘monkey-mountain’ popped up and stable households kept on moving out.

Other corporations however were still enforcing the standing policy and kept out Surinamese of their flats. Furthermore at a certain moment both Ons Belang and the municipality felt that the concentration of Surinamese was too big in Gliphoeve (one of the flats owned by Ons Belang), and they did not want any more Surinamese to move to Gliphoeve. The goal of the municipality shifted from “helping people to get adequate housing to speculating where this house should be.” (Van Diepen & De Bruijn-Muller 1976: 47)

This situation, where these Surinamese people where discriminated against and rejected on grounds of their ethnic background, was not acceptable anymore, especially when so many apartments where empty. The situation was taken up by the municipality but no efficient policy or act was initiated.

At this point Surinamese people start to organize themselves in an action group called the Beheersraad. They did not understand that Surinamese people were kept out of the Bijlmer while the municipality spent lots of money on pensions in other parts of the city. On the 5th of June 1974 a subdivision called ‘Housing for Surinamese and Antilleans in the Bijlmermeer’ was founded. They planned actions purely to gain publicity in the media about the discriminating policy and the great need for proper housing for this group of people. They warned the corporations and municipality for squatting actions if they did not improve the situation. Their protests led to nothing and they started to squat of 80 apartments for 80 families.11

The evictions decreed by the municipality were of no use since squatters kept occupying new apartments. In the end the corporations and the city council gave in and left the squatters alone.

This particular part of Bijlmer history is interesting for our research in several ways. First it functions as another illustration in the turbulent past of the Bijlmer which can teach us something about the situation as it is now. The events of the 70s and 80s are part of the collective memory of the inhabitants of the Bijlmer and therefore must be considered. Also it might be an indication for the wants and needs of the people in the Bijlmer then and now, since the problem of adequate affordable housing still has not been tackled. At present there is still a problem with overcrowded Bijlmerflats sub-rented to newly arrived immigrants.12

Secondly it shows the failing management on local as well as national
level. From the beginning the municipality did not take up the responsibility for the situation in the Bijlmermeer. In addition the housing corporations were either ill-equipped, too inexperienced or unwilling to handle the kinds of problems that surfaced in the 70s. Finally, it is an instrumental piece of history in understanding the current multi-cultural character of the area and maybe different perceptions on space. The Bijlmer is indissolubly associated with especially its Surinamese and Ghanaian inhabitants.

All the problems notwithstanding, the Bijlmer has in recent years evolved into the multi-cultural blueprint for Holland. The tone is getting more and more optimistic. Hans Mooren proclaimed that in terms of ‘integration’ the Bijlmer is ahead of the rest of the country by ten years.13 Pierre Heijboer explains that the Bijlmer residents found out early on that if ‘living with each other’ was rather difficult ‘living alongside each other’ was the best alternative. (Heijboer 2006: 132) As we have seen there were (and still are) a lot of complicated problems in the area but notably ethnicity, culture or religion were never really hard issues for Bijlmer residents, it was just part of their daily life. Furthermore the Bijlmer has spawned a number of multi-cultural institutions like the Kwakoe Festival, Blij met de Bijlmer, Breathing Bijlmer and numerous smaller initiatives aimed at the celebration and emancipation of cultural minorities.

13. Interview with Hans Mooren conducted by authors on 17-11-06.
8. **RENEWAL**

During the 70s and 80s the problems kept piling up in the Bijlmer without any adequate response from the housing corporations, the municipality or the government. The responsibility for the management of the flats lay, of course, with the housing corporations. Almost all of the corporations, however, were nearly bankrupt, and they were incapable of doing anything about the downward spiral the Bijlmer was caught in. In 1983 the government offered 100 million guilders to ‘save’ the Bijlmermeer. The only condition was that all the housing corporations involved in the Bijlmer would merge into one big corporation.

There were a couple of benefits to one big corporation. First of all the overall coordination would be much easier. Secondly, it would be able to ensure the same quality in all the flats. Over the years the situation in the different flats started to vary greatly, but all the flats had more or less the same rent. And finally, it would be able to have one efficient allocation policy, preventing the problems to pile up in one place.

In 1984 all corporations but one merged into *Nieuw Amsterdam*. With the money now available, *Nieuw Amsterdam* lowered the rents and together with the municipality made a list of action points published in the booklet ‘*De Bijlmer in de lift*’. The list of improvements included:

- demolishing some of the parking garages
- placing shops and other facilities close to the parking garages
- closing off staircases to the public
- separating galleries and closing them off to the public
- removing some of the interior streets
- adding elevators
- splitting 4-room apartments in two 2-room apartments
- adding apartments on the ground floor
- introducing a few parallel roads to improve the accessibility of the flats

Though these alterations were indeed improvements it proved to be too little and too late. Especially the negative image could not be changed and the vacancy rate crept up to 25%. Finally in 1992 a steering committee under the management of Dirk Frielings drew up an action plan for future development of the Bijlmer which was approved by the municipality. After years of discussion, small renovations, numerous renewal plans and fresh coloured paintjobs some radical decisions were made. Some of the original flats were going to be demolished and low-rise housing was going to be rebuild instead. This wish for low-rise

![fig.1](image-url)
**fig. 2** Urban renewal in the Bijlmermeer: the area of Koningshoef.

**fig. 3** Urban renewal in the *F-buurt*: new low-rise housing and in the background partly demolished and partly renovated Bijlmerflats.

**fig. 4** Urban renewal in the Bijlmermeer: the *Floriën* area.
housing types was already articulated in the plans directly following the sub-plans A through D in the form of the more traditionally built areas of Gaasperdam, Holendrecht and Kantershof. The Stuurgroep Vernieuwing Bijlmermeer (lit. steering group renewal Bijlmermeer), however, focused on the high-rise part, of which 25% was to be demolished. The plans for the demolition of some of the Bijlmerflats caused a renewed interest in the original concept. Among all the Bijlmerbashing that was going on since the early 70s people proclaimed themselves ‘Bijlmerbelievers’ and argued that the flats where not the reason for problems in the area. Rem Koolhaas, for instance, exclaimed that the concept of the Bijlmer was “as sturdy as Stonehenge” (Luijten 1997: 19) and it was “the only good experiment from the post-war rebuilding era.” (Van den Bergen 1998)

In our research on public and collective spaces two developments in the renewal of the Bijlmer are of importance to us. The first thing is the change in attitude towards dwelling and its implications on the urban planning of the Bijlmer. The second thing is the new Arena area, which is quite defining for the whole borough of Amsterdam Southeast.

1. Social and spatial renewal

For the intended renewal the Bijlmer was divided in three ‘action areas’, Ganzenhoef, Kraaiennest and Amsterdamse Poort. For these areas plans were made by several different architects, the starting point in all cases was demolition, rebuilding low-rise and the implementation of an ‘integral approach’. The basic ingredients for the renewal were differentiation of dwelling types, more easily manageable public space and mixing social-economic groups by ‘repositioning’, on which later more.

Following the egalitarian ideals of the Bijlmer almost all the dwellings had the same typology: high-rise apartments. Though the apartments were (and still are) greatly appreciated by the inhabitants, those apartments were practically the only dwelling type available in the Bijlmer. Since a lot of people prefer low-rise to high-rise, the market dictated a lot more standard row houses with a garden. Ashok Bhalotra characterized this process as a change from “maakbaarheid naar marktbaarheid”, from malleability to marketability. (Laat op de avond: RE-TOPIA, Bijlmer 1998) The housing corporations had become more and more commercial institutions and therefore were keen to comply, the municipality saw a good opportunity to create more low maintenance areas. Though maintenance in low-rise areas is on short term higher (people complain more about garbage or nuisances on their doorstep than in so-called no-man’s-land), in the long run less problems (and

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1. The Bijlmer was to be improved on three points at the same time: the maintenance of flats and public space, the social-economic situation and spatial conditions.

[On the next page from left to right]

**fig.5** Demolition of the flat Echtenstein, on the foreground the first new row houses are visible.

**fig.6** Demolition of the flat Dennenrode/ Frissenstein.
fig.7 The squatted petting zoo near Ganzenhoef is another example of 'informal' activities in the Bijlmer.

fig.8 A church community located in a transformed parking garage.

fig.9 From the beginning the Bijlmer has known large informal economic and cultural sectors.
consequently less investments) are expected by the municipality. Moreover the Bijlmer consisted almost entirely of rented apartments. By introducing private property (the low-rise houses with private gardens) the planners hoped to establish more attachment to the neighbourhood and individual property, a mix of different socio-economic groups, and a decrease in the huge amount of public space (i.e. the desolate in-betweens spaces). The main point was answering the question of which spaces are taken care of by whom.

Although the renewal process has been fairly successful in creating a more liveable environment it is by no means ideal. “There can be various plausible reasons to create more differentiation in the housing stock, also in the Bijlmer, but the simple relation that is being suggested between the so-called one-sided composition of inhabitants in terms of ethnicity and unemployment and the liveability of an area is scientifically disputable – and perhaps more important – counterproductive when developing new strategies for social renewal.” (Reijndorp 1997: 60)

It is therefore essential to take a critical look at the downside of the renewal process.

First of all, one of the instruments frequently used by the municipality to achieve the new socio-economic mix in the Bijlmer is the so-called tactic of ‘repositioning’. When flats are being ‘repositioned on the market’ parts of it are demolished and other parts are upgraded to a higher segment, either high rent or privately owned. As is the case with total demolition and rebuilding, inhabitants get assurances that they can come back to their old neighbourhood. But most of them will not be able to afford it. In this way people can be relocated without direct eviction procedures. Which in turn means only a relocation of an existing problem to another neighbourhood.

Secondly – though there is some truth to the fact that ‘traditional’ low rise neighbourhoods form less fragile social systems – this replacement of the existing buildings also disrupts and destroys entire social structures. The Bijlmermeer has a large informal (grey) sector. Parking garages have been converted to churches or homeless shelters, private apartments function as restaurants, snorders (crawlers) have driven out the regular taxi service, hairdressers, callshops and import-export companies spring up everywhere, etc. This is often the case in other post-war neighbourhoods as well:

“... Provoost shows that something is lost with the demolition: a big informal economical and social circuit, which has established itself
**fig.10** Diagrammatic section of Hoptille: narrow streets and a distorted front-to-back orientation.

**fig.11** Diagrammatic section of Koningshoef: distorted front-to-back orientation.

**fig.12** Diagrammatic section of Geinwijk: the ‘eyes on the street’ are blocked by storage sheds.

**fig.13** Diagrammatic section of Groeneveen: an original flat and new walk-ups bordering on the public parks.
under the ground floor over time. The urban complexity keeps developing independently of the planned reality. The demolition and rebuilding approach, which is the most common instrument in the struggle against these problems, denies this complexity and thinks the future can be rebuilt." (Teerds 2006) In other words the planners today want to start from the same ‘tabula rasa’ as the modernists in the 50s and 60s. This process of demolition and rebuilding has been described as the ‘Almerisation’ of the Bijlmermeer, referring to the ‘overflow’ city of Almere.

Thirdly, though the socio-economic factors are being taken much more in hand in these VINEX areas in the Bijlmer, some of the same architectural mistakes are being made. First of all the total separation of functions in the Bijlmer is still maintained, resulting in neighbourhoods with just housing, only this time low-rise. In addition the density decreases which is not beneficial to overall liveliness. The much heard complaint that ‘there is nothing to do in the Bijlmer’ is not addressed. As an example there is only one proper pub in the Bijlmer (not counting the Amsterdamse Poort) and there are no bakeries on the corner or proper restaurants.

Another issue that is not properly tackled is the problem of the blind facades on the ground floor. Although the new low rise blocks are directly connected to the ground floor the curtains are nearly always closed. There two reason for this. First, the design of the new low rise blocks is often quite poor. There are hardly any front yards so the transition between house and street is rather abrupt causing people to screen of their private domain. In some cases the front facade of one house borders directly on the backyard of another, inhibiting privacy regulation. The second reason is a certain difference in living culture. Dutch are known for keeping the curtains wide open and keeping an eye on the street, other cultures do not always share this custom. As a result of these things the streets are nearly as unheimisch as the original plinth and the galleries of the flats.

Another (the fourth) negative effect of the current renewal approach is indicated by Adriaan Geuze:

“In the present view there is a feeling that the blocks with major management problems should be demolished and replaced by low-rise. This would give a better mix of dwelling types; the ground floor would be privatised and management more clearly organized. However the results
fig.14 The ‘Bijlmerstrip’ by OMA: functions are spread out over the Bijlmer, the Bijlmerdreef is envisioned as the urban axis of the area.

fig.15 Map of the Bijlmermeer showing on the left hand side (on the other side of the railway) the first office blocks and the location of the Arena.

fig.16 Model of the Arena area and Arena Boulevard, the ‘real’ Bijlmer is on the other side of the railway track on the bottom of the picture.
of such an operation may be questioned. Admittedly, a few of the current problems would be solved, but the remaining high-rise blocks would forfeit their quality.” (Giersbergen 1997: 37)

Besides the green open spaces are – despite their ‘malfunctioning’ – still one of the most important qualities of the Bijlmer as a whole. Finally, since the apartments in the flats are still in a good state and up to current standards, demolition is simply a waste of capital and a waste of material.

It is interesting to note at this point that when the demolition of the Bijlmer was initiated the first flats that were torn down were not at all the ones that were the most dilapidated or problematic. The first flats to be demolished (Geinwijk in 1995 and Gerenstein in 1996) were chosen on basis of their strategic position in the area which would make redevelopment much easier.

Furthermore surveys taken by the residents regarding their housing preference were rather distorted. Surveys showed a general tendency in favour of demolition of the flats, even of the people living there. What is less well known is that the municipality offered buyouts to the residents of the flats in order to be able to proceed with the demolition plans. A lot of people were in favour of the money rather than the actual demolition and took the monetary offer from the municipality only to look for an apartment in another Bijlmer flat.  

2. Arena boulevard

The second focal point of the renewal of Amsterdam Southeast was the Arena area. When Rem Koolhaas was asked to make a final ‘rescue’ plan for the Bijlmer he concluded that one of the most important issues of the area was its mono-functionality. Dwelling made up the entire program in most parts of the Bijlmer, other functions were – all in line with modernist/CIAM planning principles – segregated from the living areas. The green spaces in the Bijlmer were OK for strolling around but that was not enough, Koolhaas proposed all sorts of new program to be mixed with all the high-rise flats: restaurants, cultural institutions, banks, gas stations and parking places. Only with these additions would the Bijlmer become a real city. This new program was to be concentrated along the Bijlmerdreef, running from east to west through the heart of the Bijlmer.

The plan of Rem Koolhaas was largely ignored by the municipality. Only his call for programmatical diversity was picked up. But the new facilities for the Bijlmermeer – which had always been part of the original plan – were not built in the centre of the area. Instead the new

4. Information taken from interview with Henno Eggenkamp conducted by authors on 23-03-07.

5. Other aspects of his plan were reintroduction of the car on the ground floor, parallel roads and the demolition of the parking garages.
fig.17 Diagram showing so-called ‘courts of honour’: the concentration of public functions on one location.

fig.18 Diagram showing the mixing of public functions generating a more dynamic city life.

fig.19 Impression of the Bijlmer plan by OMA; a call for more diversity and activity.
`centre` of Amsterdam Southeast was planned west (on the other side) of the railway connecting Amsterdam with Utrecht, in the middle of the business park *Amstel III*. This change of location was inspired by the excellent connections of the area to the railway, the highways and to *Schiphol*, and the negative associations with the Bijlmer proper. Also the construction of the new stadium of the soccer club of Amsterdam – AFC Ajax – was a huge boost to the area. Next to the stadium there are, among other things, huge media and sports stores, a big music venue, a big cinema complex, a theatre and some (two at the moment) cafes.

The downside of this new location is its relative position to the `actual` Bijlmer. The `other centre of Amsterdam` is separated by a wide railway, huge office blocks and the shopping area *Amsterdamse Poort*. Recent interventions have tried to reconnect the two areas; the new railway station, for instance, has a much broader and higher underpass between the Arena `boulevard` and the *Amsterdamse Poort*. The result to this day is, however, that the residential area (the real Bijlmer) lacks liveliness and the Arena area is completely abandoned at certain hours. Planners nowadays see that this one-sided programming of business areas leaves much to be desired so they start building luxury apartments in hopes of creating more liveliness.

This concentrated planning of the Arena area has a parallel in America where in the 60s planners, municipalities and investors started planning so-called civic centres. Many cultural, commercial and governmental facilities were bundled in what Jane Jacobs calls `courts of honour`, separate from residential areas. Jacobs explains:

“One of the visions – the sorted-out `courts of honour` – contradicts the functional and economic needs of cities and their specific uses too. The other vision – the mingled city with individual architectural focal points intimately surrounded by the everyday matrix – is in harmony with the economic and other functional behaviour of cities.” (Jacobs 1961: 173)

In essence Koolhaas pleas for the same thing as Jacobs in the previous passage: more mixed use in the Bijlmer and programming of the landscape. A side effect (or maybe it was very intentional) of the planning of this separate office and entertainment centre is that the new and improved Arena area is not really associated with the Bijlmermeer. The fact that the municipality named it `Amsterdam Arena` – and not Bijlmer – says enough in itself.

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6. `The other centre of Amsterdam` was a promotional slogan pitched by the municipality to improve the reputation of Amsterdam Southeast and especially the Arena area and the *Amsterdamse Poort*. 

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*[On the next page from left to right]*

**fig.20** The big shopping mall (Villa Arena) in the Arena area on a Saturday afternoon.

**fig.21** The new office buildings in the Arena area are strictly segregated from the residential part of the Bijlmer.
zondag open
11.00 tot 17.00 uur

Woon Waanzin
Waanzinnige Woonweken
www.villaarena.nl
9. COMPARISONS

Another way to come to a better understanding of the workings of the Bijlmermeer is comparing it with other towns and neighbourhoods. We can discern two types of case-studies that are relevant to our research: (1.) projects that are similar in concept but have developed differently over time and (2.) projects that differ in urban plan but have had to cope with similar problems as the Bijlmer.

In this chapter we will briefly discuss a couple of projects. In the first category we looked at De Gouden Leeuw, Molenwijk, Ommoord and Peter Stuyvesant Town. In the second category there are for instance notorious neighbourhoods like Hoptille and the Schilderswijk in The Hague, but we want to focus on more general observations.

1. Similar concepts

The modernist urban concepts that formed the basis of the Bijlmer have served as a starting point for numerous other neighbourhoods all over the world. These projects of course all differ to various degrees and can therefore be used to gain more insight to specific aspects of modern urban planning and in the end support (or negate) our findings in the Bijlmermeer.

Let's start in the Bijlmer itself. The Gouden Leeuw is an area of the Bijlmer designed by Joop van Stigt in 1975. It differs from the honeycomb structured flats in several ways. First of all, the blocks here are more tower-like and differ in height. The plans are star shaped and the dwellings are accessible by means of a vestibule. There are four apartments on one floor with one elevator, very much like the original plans. The dry walk is located on the ground floor along with some more apartments (instead of just storage) and some private gardens. Finally the houses here are for most part private property.

1. As the story goes, the apartments were sold rather than rented out because the plan by Van Stigt was much too expensive. Joop van Stigt himself, however, insisted that everything was built on budget. According to Van Stigt the real reason for selling off the apartments was that SO could and would not admit that something like the Gouden Leeuw could be built with the same budget as the ‘standard’ Bijlmerflats.

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fig. 1 A revamped flat in the neighbourhood Molenwijk (1966), a predecessor of the Bijlmer.
**fig. 2** The star shaped flats in the Gouden Leeuw area.

**fig. 3** The front of a flat in Molenwijk; there is a more direct connection between the gallery and the ground floor. In the back one of the parking garages is visible.

**fig. 4** The back of a flat in Molenwijk; the plinth is partly hidden by plants and direct contact is possible between people on the balcony and people in the parks.
layout of the public parks are also aspects that seem to have turned out better in the *Gouden Leeuw*.

*Molenwijk* has been mentioned before. It was one of the exercises done by SO preceding the large scale plan for the Bijlmer. *Molenwijk* consists of four clusters of four flats in a cross (‘+’) shape with a parking garage in the middle. The garages are connected with the flats via dry walks. The similarity with the concept of the Bijlmer is obvious. The composition of the flats is also quite similar, namely apartments accessible via a long gallery on top of a plinth with blind walls.

In the *Molenwijk* though we do not encounter these in-between spaces – at least not as many and as striking as in the Bijlmer. Three aspects are of importance here. First, the plinths in *Molenwijk* are designed in one line with the galleries. What is more, the backsides of the plinths have been overgrown with different types of plants, the entrances are located at the front sides. This prevents to some extent the emergence of dark and unsafe corners. Furthermore the ground floor here has a direct relationship with the first floor where respectively the galleries and the balconies are located, instead of a closed off interior streets or blind walls.

Secondly, the flats have a clear front (access paths and more ‘urban’ character) and a clear backside (parks and recreation) making the public space surrounding the buildings more readable and usable.

Finally the positioning of the parking garages in the middle of a cluster of flats (at the centre of the cross) minimizes the distance between the apartment and the access roads to the city, limiting the stretches of badly accessible, tucked away no-mans-land from which the Bijlmer seems to suffer. The designers of the Bijlmer saw this as a negative thing since pedestrians and cyclist could still encounter cars.

Interestingly enough *Janson en Adriaanssen Architecten* made an analysis of the area in 2005 and came with the following conclusions:

“*Central point of the analysis: the connection between public and private is missing*

*monoculture with undifferentiated spaces*

*metamorphosis from backyard to city park: everything seems public*

*elaboration semi-public space per flat: the ‘door mat’*

*together with residents, accessible to cars, not for parking*”

(Janson & Adriaanssen 2006)

This analysis shows quite some resemblances with our research on the Bijlmer. Especially the issues concerning public versus private space are very much applicable to the Bijlmer, still the problems in *Molenwijk* have never grown to proportions as seen in the Bijlmer. The most obvious
fig. 5 The urban plan of Ommoord; the high-rise in the centre is separated from the surrounding low-rise. The maximum distance between the flats and the infrastructural systems is considerably smaller than in the Bijlmer.

fig. 6 Four flats in Ommoord form one clear unit enclosing a courtyard.

fig. 7 Aerial view of Manhattan, with in the foreground Peter Stuyvesant Town.
reason for this (besides those mentioned earlier) is the difference in size of the two projects. Molenwijk consists of 15 flats (some 1256 apartments in total) surrounded by more ‘traditional’ urban tissue and facilities to fall back on. In comparison, the Bijlmer in the late 80s counted more than 50 flats which were also much bigger than those in Molenwijk.

Another reason is that Molenwijk did not suffer from some of the ‘external factors’ that had such an influence on the Bijlmer. There were no problems with competing new towns, bad publicity, high vacancy rates or a big influx of immigrants. All of this resulted in a (in comparison) rather steady and homogenous population composition.

Ommoord is a post-war housing area in the north-east of Rotterdam. It is smaller than the Bijlmer though much bigger than Molenwijk. It houses around 25,000 people in 12,500 dwellings. Construction started in 1965, one year before Hoogoord. Ommoord consists of 36% low-rise and 64% high-rise. The low- and the high-rise are strictly separated and the high-rise part of the neighbourhood is rather similar to the Bijlmer. Here for the first time the infrastructural scheme was a very important factor in the urban plan. Cars were banned from the green parks and the subway was essential in the accessibility of the area.

“The subway connects Ommoord with the city centre of Rotterdam. Stam-Beese3 understood the huge advantages. Through this relation with the ‘city’ the inhabitants of Ommoord could be part of a ‘bigger living environment in its totality’ which would, so she hoped, prevent that Ommoord would turn into a dormitory suburb.” (Jansen, Ruitenbeek et. al. 2005: 231)

The big difference with the Bijlmer is the fact that apparently 86% of the inhabitants of Ommoord are happy with their neighbourhood. (Wikipedia 2007) There are several possible reasons which might be relevant to our research. First of all – as is the case in Molenwijk – the access roads for cars are drawn deeper into the area making parking close to your flat possible thereby (together with the subway) reducing the amount of unreachable middle-of-nowhere spaces.

Next, Ommoord is clearly divided into units of four flats positioned in such a way that they enclose a collective courtyard. These units are repeated each of them forming a more or less separate entities with a clear orientation. In the Bijlmer one flat is usually the delimitation of two courtyards on either side and in some places the buildings continue to enclose the next courtyard. This principle confuses the front-back orientation of the flats and the overall orientation of visitors.

The size issue might also be relevant here. At about 25% the size of Bijlmer, the one-sided housing typology is less susceptible to the whims of

3. Lotte Stam-Beese was an urban planner who was deeply involved in the rebuilding of Rotterdam. She was the designer of the urban plans for Overschie, Pendrecht and Hoogvliet among others.
of the market and consequently vacancy.
In the current renewal plans for Omtoord there is another big difference
with the Bijlmer. Instead of demolishing high-rise and rebuilding low-rise
extra high-rise is planned to be added along with extra commercial space.

Peter Stuyvesant Town (or simply Stuy Town) is a private residential
high-rise ‘project’ in Manhattan, New York City, which was instrumental
in the slum clearance at the time. It was planned during and built after
the Second World War for middle income families and war veterans.
The first building was completed in 1947. It has become one of the most
successful post-war housing communities and to this day remains popular
among its inhabitants. (Wikipedia 2007)
Stuy Town consists of 8758 apartments and, together with the adjacent
Peter Cooper Village, counts 110 buildings, housing over 25.000 people.
The buildings are straight forward red brick housing towers of about 12
floors standing in car-free parks.
One of the biggest differences with the Bijlmer is the maintenance of the
area. From the start the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company used strict
application criteria. Since it was a privately owned property, Met Life
could discriminate as it saw fit. This meant for instance that hardly any
African-Americans were accepted to Stuy Town.4
Also the management of the grounds were taken firmly in hand. The
project was closed off from the rest of the city, so public space became
collective. The parks between the buildings are only accessible to the
residents and are furthermore patrolled by a private security force. And
this is, of course, the downside of such a strictly regulated system. Jane
Jacobs quotes a letter from the New York Post from 1959:

“The other day for the first time my pride at being a resident of
Stuyvesant Town and of New York City was replaced by indignation and
shame. I noticed two boys about 12 years old sitting on a Stuyvesant
Town bench. They were deep in conversation, quiet, well-behaved – and
Puerto Rican. Suddenly two Stuyvesant Town guards were approaching
– one from the north one from the south. The one signalled the other
by pointing to the two boys. One went up to the boys and after several
words, quietly spoken on both sides, the boys rose and left. They tried to
look unconcerned… How can we expect people to have any dignity and
self-respect if we rip it from them even before they reach adulthood? How
really poor are we of Stuyvesant Town and of New York City, too, that we
can’t share a bench with two boys.” (Jacobs 1961: 49)
Nowadays regulation is being extended with photo ID-cards, security
cameras and security sensors.
2. Similar problems
There are of course numerous examples of traditional city neighbourhoods that also cope with social problems like criminality, filthiness, social unsafety, unemployment, overcrowding and drug abuse. An example of the former can be found even in the Bijlmer itself. **Hoptille** is a small neighbourhood in the Bijlmer designed in 1981 by Kees Rijnboutt and Sjoerd Soeters. It consists of mostly two storey row housing with private gardens and one block of five storeys separating it from the **H-buurt**. It was one of the first attempts to create a bigger differentiation in dwelling types by building one family houses and houses with a front door on street level. Nowadays it is one of the most notorious places in the Bijlmer, with robberies, drug dealing and youth gangs being the biggest problems.

In **Hoptille** Soeters and Rijnboutt introduced a smaller scale to the Bijlmer, let cars back on the street level, eliminated the gallery and brought back private property. It was such a break from the original concept that it was dubbed an anti-Bijlmer. This radical change of direction did not, however, have the desired effect. Apparently the bullet holes were in the walls before construction was properly finished.⁵ Though not accounting for the bullet holes, the design of **Hoptille** does have some of the same ‘flaws’ as the Bijlmerflats, i.e. the effect of the physical layout on the behaviour of people is similar. For instance, the front facades of the row houses border **directly** on the small streets.

Nothing separates the private from the public spaces, resulting in the same closed curtains as on the galleries of the flats. In another part of the neighbourhood the private gardens are only separated from the public street with a low and flimsy fence. This design also does not create an ideal situation regarding privacy regulation and consequently social control.

The **Schilderswijk** in The Hague is another example of a neighbourhood that has for a long time been a synonym for a ‘problem area’ – at least in the eyes of the public. The **Schilderswijk** was built in the late 19th century and consists for a large part of (traditional) enclosed building blocks made of red brick. It is one of the ten poorest neighbourhoods in Holland. It has a high unemployment and low income rate. From the 33,000 inhabitants some 87% are from foreign origin, mostly Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese.

This area also had (and still has) a lot of problems like criminality, dilapidation, filthiness, youth gangs and lack of social safety. Even though this neighbourhood has, contrary to the Bijlmer, a clear division in public and private space (it does not have the abundance of collective
fig. 8 The return of low-rise row housing, streets and private gardens: the neighbourhood Hoptille.

fig. 9 The 'buurtvaders' from the Schilderswijk in The Hague.

fig. 10 The demolition of the late modern housing complex Pruitt-Igoe was hailed as the end of Modernism.
and public spaces and parks), a lot of these problems are issues regarding management of public space. In an attempt to tackle some of these social problems and increase the leefbaarheid (lit. liveability), housing corporation Haag Wonen, the municipality and the residents of the Schilderswijk initiated a couple of projects. First they assigned janitors or caretakers to the big dwelling blocks. These ‘neighbourhood caretakers’ are to “supervise the correct use of the collective spaces in the housing complexes and their direct surrounding.” (www.haagwonen.nl)

Secondly they sponsor the ‘night-prevention’ teams, which started as a resident initiative. A group of around 30 inhabitants started to patrol the streets between 24.00 and 04.00 in the morning. They observe and report to the police. Apparently this is a successful approach and crime rates seem to have dropped somewhat. Thirdly a group of Moroccan men started a similar patrol of the neighbourhood, be it without police support. These buurtvaders (lit. neighbourhood dads) also keep an eye on the streets and squares but their effectiveness derives more form a natural respect that they enjoy from the youth. Also this initiative seems to have a positive effect, and apparently decreases trouble on the streets and increases the feeling of safety.

But what might be even more interesting than these case studies is a slightly broader perspective. In America in the 60s the big cities were fighting against steadily spreading slums in central city districts. Old, traditionally built city districts were slowly deteriorating and people who could afford it were leaving the city in favour of the newly built suburbs. As we have seen in the case of Peter Stuyvesant Town modernist planning principles were used as a tool in ‘slum clearance’. In other words high-rise and fresh clean parks would replace dilapidated, unhygienic low-rise and the problem would be solved. Unfortunately not every project turned out as successful as Stuy Town. The infamous housing project of Pruitt-Igoe is probably the best know example as its demolition is hailed by many as the end of modernism. (Jencks 2002: 9) The same rhetoric is now being used in the quest for more low-rise VINEX-like dwellings in Holland. The government now believes that, as Wouter Vanstiphout puts it, “by turning New Towns into suburbs suddenly everything will be alright.” Furthermore “things are demolished with exactly the same attitude as they were built.” We must not forget that, indeed, the modernist housing plans were built with the same agenda. Modernist urbanism turned from the salvation of the late-industrial city into the cause of the social problems in problem areas. In this
light the recent actions of the Dutch government regarding ‘big city policy’ are rather interesting. The new PvdA (labour) minister for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Integration selected forty problem areas (neighbourhoods) which in the coming four years require more attention. Of the forty problem neighbourhoods seventeen were to a large extent built according to modernist planning principles, i.e. mostly walk-up or high-rise flats in collective gardens. The outcome of this quick survey is twofold. Of course, modernist expansions make up for a large part of the selected problem areas, but it also indicates that there are plenty of ‘traditional’ neighbourhoods that have to cope with serious problems.
10. CONCLUSION

In this essay we tried to unravel the complicated history of private, public and collective spaces in the Bijlmermeer. We wanted to separate the architectural factors from political ones. What role did the actual physical surroundings play in the emergence of all the social problems in the Bijlmer? The fact that the Bijlmer was not built the way it was designed complicates the matter considerably. We now have to make a distinction between concept and intent on the one hand and the realization on the other.

We focused on three things: the buildings with their private and collective spaces on the one hand and public space on the other. This conclusion is composed accordingly. We will first deal with the flats themselves: the apartments – the private part of the flats – in part 1, and the collective spaces in part 2. Next, we will consider public space (and the in-between spaces we diagnosed early on) in part 3. In addition the external factors will be considered briefly (part 4) and finally we will comment on the current renewal plans and the inevitable question of physical determinism.¹

We must start this conclusion with the fact that before the first flats were finished there was a considerable waiting list for the apartments in the Bijlmer. And the first years of the *H-buurt* at least are described by the inhabitants as adventurous and happy. People appreciated basic qualities of the Bijlmer (big apartments, a lot of green and space, modern equipment and a whole new community) and were agitated only by the fact that the promises made by the developers and the municipality were not kept. The Bijlmer was appreciated and liked for what it was: an attempt at a new and ‘modern’ way of living.

1. Private spaces
The flats in the Bijlmer were designed as better and more luxurious alternatives for the standard post-war reconstruction developments (most notably those in Amsterdam West). In this the designers succeeded fairly well in what they set out to do. The apartments are spacious, of good quality and appreciated by their inhabitants.

However, problems did arise with the chosen access system, i.e. the elevators and galleries. Lack of elevators caused the galleries to become over-used and anonymous; they were used purely as infrastructure and lost all potential quality as living space. The fact that the apartments bordered directly on the narrow galleries resulted in the closed curtains which added to the desolation of the galleries. Even so, the apartments

¹ ‘Physical determinism’ is a term coined by Herbert Gans in an article ‘Urban Vitality and the Fallacy of Physical Determinism’. Gans argues against the position that architecture or physical form can solve social problems. This is, of course, the bottom line of our research: to what extent are social conditions determined by physical conditions.
**fig. 2** A typical unused ‘in-between space’.

**fig. 3** The typical relation between the ground floor and the interior street.

**fig. 4** The market under/near subway station Kraaiennest.
themselves can be considered as the most successful part of the Bijlmer plan.

There is one more thing that might be of interest here are the renovation projects executed during the 90s. A couple of tactics were frequently used during the restoration and renovation of Bijlmer flats: extra housing in the plinth, more elevators, making shorter galleries and adding collective and small (sometimes non-profit) business spaces. Ironically these redesigned flats started to look more like the way they were initially designed…

Compared to the refurbishments done in the 80s (which consisted mostly of colourful paintjobs and new signposts) the more constructive interventions of the 90s indicate that these physical alterations did make a difference on the social situation. The renovated flats of the K- and G-areas make for a rather nice living environments these days.²

2. Collective spaces

We gave an extensive overview of all the things that went wrong in the development of the flats in the Bijlmer alongside a whole list of physical factors that may have played a role. We analysed the plans and compared them to similar neighbourhoods to verify these findings.

The collective spaces had a hard time from the beginning. They functioned for a short period of time but never to the extend they were envisioned to. Both physical and non-physical factors played a crucial role here. The design, layout and program of the collective places proved to be far from ideal but also the management and the budget cuts had a negative influence on the development.

Our conclusion on the level of the collective spaces is that there were certainly physical (architectural) factors that, although not the cause of the problems, created circumstances in which problems could more easily arise. The long galleries with few elevators, the blind facades on the ground floor, the interior street on the first floor, the absence of program in the corridor, the lack of ‘informal’ meeting spaces and the mono-programatical nature of the blocks are all factors which did not create optimal conditions for the emergence of community, social control and liveliness.

3. Public space and in-between spaces

On the level of public space we diagnosed what we called in-between spaces. These un-defined, un-used and un-appropriated public spaces are in our view caused by four things: a lack of program, the missing connection between public space and the built environment (the buildings that enclose or surround the public spaces), the non-functional

2. These redeveloped flats (Kruitberg, Kikkenstein and Groeneveen amongst others) are now part of the ‘Bijlmer museum’: the only part of the Bijlmer that will be preserved. Though the flats are visibly renovated the area at least offers a glimpse of the original Bijlmerplan.
infrastructure running through and connecting the spaces and the issue of
density of use.

The lack of activity has been pointed out before. The diversity of
program Rem Koolhaas argued for can be verified; people on the streets
do complain about lack of facilities, the Arena area does attract people
and inhabitants of the Bijlmer tend to prefer the Amsterdamse Poort
to the centre of Amsterdam. Moreover there is a clear difference in the
usage of several public spaces between the flats. At some places there is
nothing more there then a sandpit and a climbing frame. Consequently
nothing much happens and people do not go there because they feel
unsafe. In another specific part of the Bijlmer (between Kraaiennest and
Kruitberg, see image 4 on page 100) there are all sorts of facilities: a
running track, tennis courts, fitness material, playgrounds, a monument
and a market place. Most times this is the liveliest place in the Bijlmer.

The disconnection of public space and the flats is a consequence of
the design of the interior street on the first floor and the segregation
of different forms of flows of people. The photo on the left taken in
January 2007 (after parts of the internal infrastructure were already
demolished) shows the strange consequences of this system. Although
the infrastructure was one of the most important starting points for the
Bijlmer plan it turned out to be rather problematic at certain points.
Since the Bijlmer was designed as a finished closed system with its own
radically different typology, the connectivity with the surrounding areas
is low; limiting contact, interaction and flows of people going to and
fro. Furthermore the pathways that were there (linking the Bijlmer with
itself and the rest of Amsterdam) were designed in an English garden
style; a counterweight to the rigid, orthogonal, concrete shapes of the
buildings. These paths did not provide a clear system for movement
(and for visitors also no clear system for orientation) and did certainly
not strengthen the concentration of liveliness that was needed at certain
important locations.

In addition to this lack of program the user density of the public spaces
turned out lower than planned. The large families stayed away; the
post-industrial utopian vision of healthy out door recreation was more
or less replaced by a more individualistic indoors attitude and the public
spaces were simply too big. Maybe they were not too big in relation to
the buildings but they were certainly too big for human usage. This too
is an aspect in the hands of the planners. Proposals have been made to
decrease the amount of accessible public space by for instance flooding.
This has a direct impact on the concentration of people and consequently

fig. 5 Photograph
of the flat
Kleiburg taken in
January 2007. Due
to demolition and
renovation this
emergency staircase
is needed to
make the corridor
accessible.
influences maintenance, social control and safety. So even if the physical surroundings, again, do not directly result in certain behaviour, social problems or situations it goes to show that it can produce rather fragile systems. On the other hand it can also create the conditions where in people are allowed to thrive, as shown by the short lived success of, for instance, the H-buurt.

4. External factors
Still the external (non-physical/non-architectural) factors played a role we cannot ignore. Who is to say that if the government did not change planning policy or if the Bijlmer had continued to attract people who believed in the new way of life or if the facilities and infrastructure would have been finished on time, this area of Amsterdam could not have been a very nice quiet green living area?

The most crucial external factors can be roughly summarized in the following cycle of events:
- Changes in governmental policy (most notably the ‘liberal turn’ in 1966 and the second memorandum on spatial planning) and the role of the contractors in the building process had a drastic influence on the realization of the Bijlmer.
- Due to budget cuts and bad planning the collective and communal facilities that should have been built along with the housing were either built too late or not built at all.
- Inhabitants started complaining and more and more media paid attention to the problems in the Bijlmer.
- The negative image of the area caused more people to stay away from an area that was too big in the first place.
- When Surinam immigrants came to Holland the Bijlmer was the designated place to house them.
- Problems arose due the dominance of specific socio-economic groups (without any aid or guidance) and cultural differences.
- The government and the housing corporations failed to act efficiently during the 70s and 80s.
- More bad publicity. Etc.³

5. Physical determinism
Pierre Heijboer is of the opinion that no other neighbourhood faced with the same problems would have coped any better. As we have seen, there are numerous slums and problem areas consisting of ‘standard’ urban tissue and conversely there are modernist high rise projects that are considered the nicest places in town.

It can be concluded though, that in the end high-rise needs far more
management and maintenance than low-rise housing. Pi de Bruijn has said (only half joking) that “living in high-rise is an art in itself; people should take a course on it.” Not just the flats, though, also the public and collective spaces need to be maintained, kept clean and supervised. “The plan needed a lot of luxury” in order the function properly is, again, the opinion of De Bruijn. More to the point, the “…consequences of the concept on which the Bijlmer was founded – like intensive management of the collective spaces – were not foreseen at that time.” (Heijboer 2006: 145, Bruine et al. 2002: 78)

This brings us to the current renewal plans. To a certain extent the new low-rise areas in the Bijlmer do what they were planned to do; they create more easily manageable public spaces, introduce more differentiation, and bring wealthier people to the Bijlmer. We have seen the negative aspects as well. A historical monument is gradually being demolished, the quality of the flats that remain is drastically reduced, capital is being wasted since the apartments are still more than adequate and greatly appreciated, the amount of nature and green spaces is radically reduced and worst of all a big part of the problem is just being moved to other parts and not really solved at all.

“Asking the question if these neighbourhoods – consisting of large collective parks, walk-up and high-rise flats – have intrinsic properties that lead to social problems, has been asked since the moment of their construction. Today asking the question is the same as answering it: if a problem area is demolished the moving of its residents to another neighbourhood is a logical consequence and the problem has indeed been solved, at least in the place where it originally surfaced. Maybe the inhabitants of these problem areas will cause less problems if they are spread in lower concentrations over the city. Maybe, maybe not.” (Vanstiphout 2006: 22)

Since the aim of more differentiation in dwelling types has already been achieved we see no need for the further destruction of the Bijlmer. It only increases the risk of making the same mistake as the Modern Movement made; radically destroying 19th century neighbourhoods and planning on a blank canvas only to discover that reality is more complex than the most intricate schemes made on the drawing table.

The reasons for the destruction of the Bijlmer, however, are clear. Even though the problems were clearly visible to all, it was not until 1991 that really something was initiated by the corporations and the municipality. It has been said that the Bijlmer disaster was the immediate cause, it might also have been the economic situation at the time or just the realization.
**fig. 6** Physical interventions that directly influence the usage of the flats: splitting up galleries and placing additional elevators (see chapter 8 on renewal).

**fig. 7** A proposal for an alternative use of the interior streets: only residential program.

**fig. 8** In order to reduce the amount of strangers on the galleries and to create a less anonymous living environment, several galleries were cut in two (or more) parts only accessible to the residents.
that something had to be done. As a result of this neglect the problems were so out of control that the municipality saw no other options than an rigorous approach and large scale demolition of the flats became the only feasible solution. Even if it was just to show that something drastic was set in motion and things would change for the better.

The Bijlmermeer is a immensely interesting study case. It has such a complicated, multi-layered history that if you have some insight in the matter you can read the neighbourhood like a book. Besides the political and socio-cultural aspects of the utopian vision a lot can be learned here about the effect of architecture on our daily lives. Things which are widely applicable to a whole range of late-modern housing areas and fit a broader picture of the belief that society can be made (and designed). Can we build society through architecture? Maybe not directly, but on the other hand “society is being made every day.” We tried to gain some insight in these effects of the built environment on small things, that might just make a small difference.

6. Interview with Henno Eggenkamp conducted by authors on 23-03-07.

[On the next page, from left to right]

Fig. 9 The metro running straight through the ‘Bijlmermuseum’, the designated area where the original flats will be preserved.

Fig. 10 Ducks in the Bijlmer; parts of the area have retained their park-like quality.
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Other


12. SOURCES OF ILLUSTRATIONS

All images are sorted by chapter. Most of the names refer to corresponding books in the bibliography with the notable exceptions of Bureau Kees Hund and the office of Rijnboutt, van der Vossen, Rijnboutt who kindly gave us permission to use to their archives. Furthermore some images are taken from websites or made by the authors. If someone feels his or her name should be mentioned here please contact the authors.

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   fig.7 Werkgroep SO and Municipal Office for Public Housing
   fig.8 Wouter, B. & Meijer, J.
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13. APPENDICES

The next few pages contain seventeen schematic maps of the Bijlmer. They show the history of the built fabric in chronological order from 1966 until 2006.

In 1966 the polder was ready for development, the roads and dreven (elevated roads on dikes) were layed out and the construction of the first flats in the H-buurt started. In the beginning of the 80s all the high-rise parts of the Bijlmer were finished. A decade later the first flats were torn down and replaced by new low-rise rowhousing. The maps and adjacent texts show the precise transformation of the Bijlmer and illustrate the immense scale of the project.

The last figures (fig.18 and 19) shows the division and the designations of the different parts and phases of the Bijlmer plan. Note that the indicators of the building phases do not correspond with the names of flats. Hoogoord and the rest of the H-buurt for example are located in the first part of the Bijlmer, called phase A. The K-buurt (the flats Kruitberg and Kraaiennest, etc.) is spread out over phases D and E. Another complicating factor is the fact that sometimes long flat slabs have a different name on either end, like Dennenrode and Frissenstein which is basically one building. In other cases different buildings have the same name. Dennenrode, for example, is not only the name of part of the Dennenrode/Frissenstein building but also of another separate building slightly to the north.

Legend:

- high dreven
- low dreven
- city fabric
fig.1 1966; car traffic was isolated on the dreven allowing fast and fluid movement and separating it from the cyclists and pedestrians on the ground level. The dreven were connected with the flats' parking garages through a system of hallways, galleries and elevators.

fig.2 1968; phase A is completed. The H-buurt is finished and the first inhabitants get the key to their apartment in Hoogoord.

fig.3 1971; phases B, C and the F- and G- neighbourhoods are finished. The first criticism on the urban plan appears in the media. Inhabitants organize themselves to protest against the absence of promised facilities such as public transport, collective spaces and shops.
Fig. 6 1975; De Gouden Leeuw and Groenhoven, the flats Harkfort and Huigenbos and the low-rise areas Kantershof and Geerdinkhof are finished, as well as the sub-centres Ganzenhoef, Kraaiennest and Fazantenhof.

Suriname becomes independent and a lot of immigrants come to the Bijlmer. Fig. 5 1973; phase D and the flats Kikkenstein and Kruitberg are finished. Preparations for the first shopping centers are initiated.

Fig. 4 1972; phase E and the G- and K-neighbourhoods are finished. Shopping centers are still absent, temporary shopping facilities are put into place. In the south the first neighbourhood is realized: the first 'anti-Bijlmer'.

In the north the new districts of the Bijlmer are finished. Fig. 3 1971; the G- and K-neighbourhoods are finished. Shopping centers are still absent, temporary shopping facilities are put into place. In the south the first neighbourhood is realized: the first 'anti-Bijlmer'.
fig.7 1982; in 1980 the metro connection with the city centre is realized. Hoptille, Haardstee and Heesterveld are built: smaller and more diverse living area's. 'Projectbureau Highrise Bijlmermeer' rallies against the emerging dilapidation of the flats.

fig.8 1984; the Venserpolder is built: a large dwelling area reintroducing large enclosed building blocks consisting of four or five storeys.

fig.9 1987; almost 20 years after the first people moved to the Bijlmermeer the main shopping and business centre is finished. The Amsterdamse Poort is located next to the Bijlmer train station in the West of the Bijlmer, 20 minutes by foot from the eastern part.
The ‘Steering Group Renewal Bijlmermeer’ makes plans for the demolition of 25% of the flats, causing a renewed interest in the original concept. The first parts of Groeneveen and Kruitberg are torn down after the Bijlmer plane crash.

'Bijlmerbelievers' and argue that the flats are not the reason for the problems in the area. Meanwhile the urban renewal focuses on differentiation of dwelling types, easily manageable public space and mixing social-economic.

More flats are demolished to be replaced with low-rise to offer 'a better mix of dwelling types'. On the west side of the railway an entertainment centre with a cinema, a concert hall, a theater and shops is realized to provide work, entertainment and tourism.
fig.13 1997; more and more ‘Almerisation’ takes hold of the Bijlmermeer. Low rise neighbourhoods, Guldenkruis, Gerenstein and Geinwijk are finished. The Bijlmerdreef that separated the cars from ground level is lowered in this area.

fig.14 1999; the renewal of the shopping centre Ganzenhoef in the east is finished. The new centre is built instead of the old subcenter: the combination parking garages/shopping mall (like Kraaiennest still partly is today) which was full of dark unsafe places where junkies often hung out.

fig.15 2001; the Karspeldreef is lowered even further. De Vogeltjeswijk is realized and labeled as the first safe living environment of Amsterdam. Flats like Koningshoef Frissenstein and Fleerde are demolished. In 2000 K-buurt was demolished and the Gaasperdammerweg lowered.
fig. 16 2003; The Elsrijkdreef and Gravendijkdreef are lowered. This is necessary because of the demolition of the garages which connected the dreven with the ground level. The ground floors of some flats are turned into apartments and shops improving the relation with ground level.

fig. 17 2006; a housing program for junkies, artists and students is initiated in the renovated part of Echtenstijn. Part of Daalwijk is demolished, the remaining part might be turned into a hotel. A compound is built for people from tropical countries who have different living habits.

fig. 18 Diagram showing the Bijlmer in the 80s, before the demolition. The phases of execution are indicated by letters.
fig.19 Map showing the Bijlmer in the 80s, before the demolition. The first letter of the names of the flats indicate the buurt or area; H, D, E, F, G and K. The smaller names indicate other relevant neighbourhoods or areas.