Amsterdam, a former alternative metropolis in the global mainstream

Amsterdam has recently undergone major shifts in its spatial, economic and social fields. And many are still to come as a result of the global financial and economic crisis. In our map we try to show that Amsterdam is a flexible city organized at a relatively humane scale, with a mix of cultures and a still building creative sector. Despite the odd festivities and some growing socio-economic segregation. But the map is only a snapshot, indicating where what is at this very moment. More important however is in which direction the city is moving: in terms of spatial restructuration, economic development, social life and culture.

The city administration supports a growth scenario in order to meet international competition. It involves the up-scaling of its tasks from the present city of 760,000 inhabitants into a metropolitan area of 2 millions, including the satellite towns and suburbs, especially the new town of Almere. The concept of the city centre changes with historical part, but in the metropolitan region, the whole area within the ring road has been labelled as the centre of the Amsterdam region and should function as a city centre, with higher rents, scarce and expensive parking spaces (but more public transport) and selected commercial and cultural services.

The Zuiderzeewerken is a major investment project where private capital should be invested. The project is likely to feed speculation and the further decrease of urbanity in the new city centre. The Amsterdam squatting tradition limited vacancy and speculation with empty buildings and has facilitated many cultural initiatives. Sadly, despite the opposition of municipalities like Amsterdam, a recent legal reform in national law has turned squatting from a (regulated) right into a criminal offence. The deal involves some possibilities to claim vacant buildings but municipalities have not the financial means to implement that part of the reform. This is likely to feed speculation and the further decrease of urbanity in the new city centre.

The following table shows the scale of strategic urban infrastructure projects, both successful and unsuccessful, and the various forms of urban governance and ownership. The table is indicative and should be updated regularly. The table also shows the various forms of urban governance and ownership. The table is indicative and should be updated regularly. The table also shows the various forms of urban governance and ownership. The table is indicative and should be updated regularly.
Urban Region: Amsterdam Metropolitan Region

After earlier failures the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region started as a voluntary cooperation between Amsterdam and its surrounding municipalities. The initiative centered on first securing public transport and housing distribution. The processes of financial internationalization and economic globalization started to have a strong effect on the spatial development of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region. Municipalities and non-governmental authorities in the region joined forces in an informal and flexible way to create the Amsterdam Metropolitan Region. Planning studies indicated that the north wing of the Randstad area had possibilities for a growth scenario.

Significance for New Metropolitan Mainstream Activities

Fields of activity are:
- Infrastructure
- Public transport and highway planning
- Housing

Housing
Regional contracts on housing distribution give the city decision access to the housing market in suburban areas.

- Employment / Investments
- The Amsterdam region presents itself abroad as one entity to lower the threshold for foreign investors.

- Promoting geographic elements of the regional landscape.

Stakeholders and their interests

The stakeholders are the city of Amsterdam, about 35 other municipalities: participate, Schiphol Airport, the Port of Amsterdam and the AMISX Internet Exchange.

Deals

Examples of deals are: allocation of specific areas to specific sectors, like the financial sector (Zuidas), logistics (Schiphol), harbour related industry (Port of Amsterdam).

Creative industries such as art, media advertising and entertainment go in urban centres.

Regarding housing, the municipalities are not dominant anymore. Housing corporations are independent and work in cooperation on a regional scale. The city allows developers to access suburban areas and vice versa.

Impacts

Until the financial crisis struck, the already strong investment in the region could profit together from the profile of the area as an European metropolitan area. Because of the crisis, the competition between municipalities within the region has increased. As the decisions are taken by consensus, it is likely the process will be paralyzed in situations where there are not only winners.

Socio Housing

Social housing has a long tradition in the Netherlands. Different to other countries is that social housing is also open to middle income groups. After the Second World War a lot of governmental housing helped to build up a large social housing sector. In the 1990s housing associations became financially independent from the state and have to reorganize their own activities. The housing associations improved by building expensive dwellings and selling a part of their social housing stock. The basic idea of the social housing market is that social housing comes from the large post-war housing stock and its income potential falls back to the basic floor prices, and low wages result in considerable price export goods.

Deals and stakeholders

The local government signs conventions with housing associations about:
- the percentage of social housing in their housing projects
- the amount of dwellings reserved for low income groups
- activities related to neighborhood rehabilitation and development.

Tenant associations have some influence in the policy making of the housing associations.

In the past, housing associations had a lot of privileges like lower taxes and lower land prices. These privileges have nearly been lost. The corporations are treated more and more as ordinary developers (and some of them also behave more and more like them).

Recently the European Union asked the Netherlands to restrict the accessibility of social housing to households with a yearly income of 45,000 euros or less.

Financial crisis

In the past production of social housing was heavily influenced by the ups and downs of the market due to the concurrent-globalization of housing market. The decision on the investment margin of housing associations is getting smaller and there is profit from the sale of dwellings and lower opportunities to lend money from the commercial banks.

Impacts

As building in the city centre becomes more expensive and housing associations need to generate money by selling properties, the percentage of social housing declines in the city centre. It is possible that people who have to move get on top of the waiting list and have a broad choice for a new dwelling in the whole region.

The future

Is there a future for social housing in the Netherlands? What will be the role of the housing associations? Will these ‘divisions’ become a relic from the old times? Or will their social role be redefined and will they be able to do justice for those who for not reasons can not access housing on the commercial market? And will the profit margin is different as the groups not able to buy a house or rent on the private market?
The city centre is at stake for decades in most urban struggles in Amsterdam: is the city centre the reserve of the happy few that can offer its market price or is it for every Amsterdammer?

History
In 1965 the anarchical movement Provo reclaimed symbolically the Royal Palace (before 1808 and the Napoleonic occupation the City Hall) for housing for young people. More seriously, Provo fought against the transformation of the historical inner city into a central business district, the modernist functional segregation and the displacement of inner city residents to the periphery (Bijlmer) and new suburbs (Purmerend, Almere, Hoofddorp).
Tenant's movements in the 1970s and squatters in the 1980s and the 1990s also resisted the destruction of cheap housing in the poorer neighbourhoods of the inner city (Jordaan) and the 19th century belt (de Pijp) for offices, hotels and other non-residential uses. Thanks to them many urban neighbourhoods prospered since the 1980s. Often this improvement of the quality of life went hand in hand with a process of gentrification, although that was originally hampered by the social housing policy of the Dutch state and the Amsterdam municipality.
Unfortunately ideological changes from the 1990s onwards brought about a liberalization of the Amsterdam housing system. Home ownership was stimulated through the sale of (social and private) rented housing. Strict rent control was abolished. As a result, housing has become more and more expensive in and around the inner city: “in accordance with market prices”.

Structuurvisie 2040:
The municipal Structural Plan for Amsterdam was presented in 2009 by the leading coalition of Labour and the Green Left. It was entitled “Economically strong and sustainable” and goes one step further. It rolls out the central area, reframing the conception of the centre: not the historical city of Amsterdam, but the heart of the new Metropolis Amsterdam! In the North the ring road marks the separation between the urban and the rural landscapes; in the other directions it separates the first 20th century extensions from post WW II suburban residential neighbourhoods.

Impacts
There are two main impacts to this state-led gentrification policy. First it implies the exclusion of low income and lower middle class groups (teachers, nurses, bus drivers, civil servants…) and their “deportation” to the peripheral neighbourhoods and the suburbs in the Metropolis Amsterdam.
Second the up scaling of the centre affects the transport regime in the city and consequently the use of public space. The inner city is a space that can be walked and biked around. In the new expanded centre, walking is no option any more. The restrictive policies regarding car parking in the (expanded) inner city implies a high reliance on public transportation to make the new heart of the metropolis work. The delayed completion of the new underground line and the expected removal of the fine-meshed tramlines make this option less attractive. Overall the new centre ideology will have a strong impact on the city by reducing its urban (= mixed) character.