Solving Problems – or Merely Shifting them Elsewhere? Contradictions in Urban Renewal in the Bijlmermeer, Amsterdam

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Abstract

The urban renewal of the Bijlmermeer – a high-rise estate in south-east Amsterdam that is populated mainly by low-income immigrants – started in 1992 and is expected to be completed in 2009. This elaborate programme of demolition, renovation and construction is one of the largest urban renewal projects in the Netherlands. In this paper the focus is on the goals and strategies of the politicians, renewal managers and architects involved in the operation. The author discusses several ambiguities and contradictions in the renewal strategy and concludes that although the demolition of buildings is continuing, the building and selling of new houses has stagnated, leading to a 20 per cent decrease in especially the poor population. This process raises the question whether the Bijlmermeer has indeed become more liveable, safe and attractive as a result of the renewal process, or whether the process is simply shifting the original, 'problem' population elsewhere.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, a large-scale urban renewal project was launched in the Bijlmermeer – a neighbourhood in south-east Amsterdam with around 40,000 inhabitants, most of whom are from Africa, Suriname or the Caribbean. An elaborate programme of demolition and rebuilding is meant to transform and improve this squalid neighbourhood. The renewal of the Bijlmermeer is one of the largest Dutch restructuring projects. The goals of the operation were summed up by the urban renewal manager of one of the local housing corporations:

> Strengthening the position of the Bijlmermeer in the housing market by creating a greater diversity in dwellings and living areas; retaining social climbers and 'advanced' residents, because the Bijlmermeer, a neighbourhood with a population of 40,000, cannot do without its own middle class (albeit of racial or ethnic minorities); strengthening the social-economic position of the present population; attracting new residents who are more representative of the average in the Amsterdam region in their demands for housing (Kwekkeboom, 2002, p.79).

From the beginning, the goals of the renewal operation have affected not only the physical structure of the Bijlmermeer but also the composition of its population. The planners developed a threefold strategy: to improve the socio-economic position of the residents, to retain social climbers and to attract new residents. A central theme in the ideology behind these plans is the idea of creating diversity, both in dwellings and in the composition of the population.

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Social mixing has been a key element in the Dutch policy of restructuring neighbourhoods (Kleinhans, Veldboer & Duyvendak, 2000; Uitermark, 2003; Helleman, 2005). Helleman (2005) analyses the different stages of the Dutch urban renewal policy and points out that in the first years of urban restructuring (i.e. in the 1970s and 1980s), this policy was focused primarily on the existing residents by creating qualitatively better dwellings for them. Although these mainly physical renewal operations resulted in better housing, they did not lead to a major reduction of such social problems as unemployment, crime and school drop-out rates. An attempt was made in the 1990s to counter urban segregation by demolishing old houses and building more expensive ones in poor neighbourhoods in order to attract wealthier residents. This restructuring policy was focused on the city as a whole: the idea was that a combination of social mixing and qualitative improvements in housing would solve the growing problems of segregation and pauperization. The success of this strategy has, however, been disputed (Blokland-Potters, 1998; Kleinhans, Veldboer & Duyvendak, 2000). Helleman (2005) states that the focus of the restructuring policy is now on the neighbourhood again, with the aim of offering more affluent residents the opportunity to stay. This means that the renewal is intended to encourage social climbers to remain in the neighbourhood by offering them better housing.

Several researchers have questioned the Dutch policy of mixing poor and wealthier households as a solution to the problem of urban segregation. In her research in a deprived urban neighbourhood in Rotterdam, Blokland-Potters (1998) found that encouraging someone with a good job to live next door to a poor household did not help the latter to improve their living standards. What poor people need are jobs and good schools. The problems of the economically weak neighbourhoods are the problems of people and should be tackled as such, and not by giving them a rich neighbour.

Uitermark (2003) took a closer look at the presuppositions behind the ideology of social mixing. What exactly do policy makers expect the benefits to be? In the first place, they seem to think that the mere presence of affluent households will have a positive influence on poor neighbourhoods. Mixed schools are supposed to be better for deprived children than schools attended by only disadvantaged children. Another motive for promoting social mixing is the expectancy that successful households will function as role models. In addition, affluent households are expected to contribute to an increase in social cohesion. These households 'are supposed to deliver the stock of "social capital" necessary to maintain social cohesion' (Uitermark, 2003: 544). This role of affluent households might be even more important if it is played by ethnic households. Such households can take part in both formal and informal neighbourhood organizations while adhering to the dominant social norms and values. According to Uitermark, another motive for social mixing is the wish to disperse the problems of poor and ethnic households over a larger area. Housing corporations, which own the majority of rented properties in poor neighbourhoods, seek to achieve a kind of balance or harmony on their housing estates. The restructuring policy can function as a way for housing corporation managers to attract desirable elements and to exclude undesirable elements (ibid, p.543).

Leeming and Shakur (2004) looked at the role of ethnicity in the renewal strategy, and found that many of the black residents of the Bijlmermeer mistrust the government and fear that they will be relocated. The authors' respondents expressed feelings of being unwelcome and unwanted. The conclusion was that although the multicultural neighbourhood envisaged by urban renewal managers is one that 'welcomes different cultures and nationalities' (ibid.: 70), the actual policy is aimed at creating a more harmonious neighbourhood, one in which there is no room for poor black immigrants or for ethnic resistance. The authors use a quote to

stress this point, namely that 'urban renewal = Negro removal' (ibid.: 70). Although Leeming and Shakur do not support their findings with figures, they do suggest that there is a policy of 'wily' dispersal of poor black residents:

> The implications for the high-rise parts of Bijlmermeer are that urban restructuring is both welcoming difference *and* utilizing (perhaps not so) wily dispersal techniques that ensure that ex-residents cannot move back into social housing in Bijlmermeer once they have moved away (Leeming & Shakur, 2004, p.70).

The present paper is based on fieldwork carried out in the Bijlmermeer (or, colloquially, the 'Bijlmer'). I held interviews with local residents, social workers, associates of the housing corporations, politicians, youth workers and the police. My central research questions were: what do policy makers want to achieve and how does social mixing fit in their plans? Are they trying to create a more liveable environment for the socially and economically deprived residents of the area, or are they following a strategy of wily dispersal? In other words: are they trying to solve problems or are they simply shifting them elsewhere?

I shall first discuss some important aspects of the history and problems of the Bijlmermeer and argue that the renewal strategy contains several important inherent contradictions. Moreover, different parties in the process pursue different goals: builders and housing corporations, which are market-oriented, do not always pursue the same goals as policy makers. These different agendas, together with the inherent contradictions in the renewal strategy, are contributing to what in many respects is an unforeseen and unwanted outcome of the renewal operation.

From 'city of the future' to Urban Jungle

The architect Siegfried Nassuth was in charge of city planning in Amsterdam when plans were made to build a residential area on reclaimed land where the Bijlmermeer ('Bijlmer lake') used to be. Nassuth admired the work of the famous Swiss architect and city planner Le Corbusier and especially his plans for the 'city of the future'. Nassuth's vision was a vast green space dotted with large, honeycomb-shaped, ten-storey buildings. The architects who designed the high-rises favoured modern materials such as concrete, steel and glass. The apartments were spacious, light and well built. Traffic was routed along elevated roads that were connected with parking areas, from which footpaths led to the apartments. In this vast green space, numerous winding walkways and bicycle paths linked all the places in the area and allowed the residents to move around without having to cross a road. On the ground, there was a quiet, green, safe, trafficless area where – an advertisement promised – one could hear the nightingales sing.

At the time, Amsterdam was still a predominantly white city, and the new neighbourhood was intended for the white urban working and middle classes. The first building was finished in 1968; within a few years, there were more than 12,000 high-rise apartments. By 1980, there were 50,000 people living in the Bijlmermeer. Ten years later, the number of people living in the Bijlmermeer combined with the number living in low-rise flats and single-family houses in the adjacent new neighbourhoods Gaasperdam and Venserpolder gave the district a population of nearly 90,000 (Tamboer, 2004, p.73).

However, there were problems right from the start. The infrastructure arrived much later than envisioned. The metro – a crucial link between the former polder and the centre of Amsterdam – was not finished until 1980, while the Bijlmermeer shopping centre was finished as late as 1988. In the 1980s and 1990s, the high-rise apartments in the Bijlmermeer had to compete with an increasing number of new neighbourhoods on the outskirts of small cities in the province, such as Purmerend and Almere. In these new neighbourhoods, single-family dwellings were built, as the middle class prefers these to high-rise buildings. Because of the lack of infrastructure and a preference for the new quiet, green living areas, the first residents started leaving the Bijlmermeer even before all the high-rise buildings had been completed.

Streams of new residents took over the empty homes left by the departing population. In 1975, Suriname gained its independence from the Netherlands and many Surinamese emigrated to the Netherlands, where they soon found their way to the spacious, empty apartments in the Bijlmermeer. Not only Surinamese but also immigrants from the Dutch Antilles and other non-western countries increasingly populated the area.

The Bijlmermeer also became one of the places where drug addicts and the homeless gathered. They found a 'home' in one of the many empty garages and storage spaces beneath the high-rise buildings. The neighbourhood was soon labelled unsafe and dirty. In 1996, the unemployment rate was nearly twice as high as in Amsterdam as a whole (van Heerwaarden et al., 2004, p.55). Crime rates were – and still are – among the highest in Amsterdam. This is signalled by recent figures on stabbing and shooting incidents in Amsterdam: in 2004, the number of such incidents in the Bijlmermeer exceeded, for the first time, the figure for Amsterdam's notorious red light district (Amsterdam Centraal, 2005).

Most of the children in the Bijlmermeer grow up in poor, single-parent households (van Heerwaarden et al., 2004, p.114). The high percentage of single-parent households in the neighbourhood reflects different migration histories. The largest immigrant groups – namely the Surinamese (and especially the Surinamese creoles) and the Antilleans – traditionally have a matrifocal culture. In such cultures, women are important as mothers, educators and breadwinners. Many marriages break down and the majority of children are born out of wedlock. This relatively fragile marriage structure is rooted in a history of poverty and slavery (Bijnaar, 2002). Many African immigrant groups in the Bijlmermeer, especially those from Ghana or Nigeria, also have a high incidence of single parenting as a result of their matrilineal culture and the process of migration (Kraan, 2001). Immigrants from Suriname, the Antilles and Ghana comprise more than 50 per cent of the residents of the renewal area, which explains the high incidence of single-parent households. These single-parent households are among the poorest in Amsterdam: more than 40 per cent of the children in the Bijlmermeer are brought up on the poorest level of the Dutch income structure (Dienst Onderzoek en Statistiek, 2004, p.3).

Raising and educating a child in the Bijlmermeer is not an easy job. The anthropologist Bowen Paulle (2005), who did three years of in-depth field research at a 'black' lower secondary vocational school in the Bijlmermeer, found that adolescents in this environment are very vulnerable. He describes the learning environment as chaotic: a lot of pushing, spitting and shouting, with the teacher spending most of his or her time trying to keep the class under control. An important problem in the lives of many teenagers is the fact that they come from poor, often unstable households. Neither school nor parents are always able to control or guide the children, and many of them – especially the boys – end up spending their time on the street. Their most important reference frame is not school or home, but the group of peers with whom they associate.

Educational levels in the Bijlmermeer are lower than in Amsterdam as a whole: in 2003, for example, only 4 per cent of the pupils attended pre-university education, compared to the figure of 19 per cent for Amsterdam as a whole. The percentage of children receiving a lower vocational level of education was greater than in Amsterdam as a whole (van Heerwaarden et al., 2004, pp.64-65).

Many mothers complain that it is difficult to raise children (especially boys) in the Bijlmermeer. I was told by a 32-year-old woman of Surinamese origin who lives with her two sons in one of the high-rises that are slated for demolition, that:

> My eldest boy will soon be eleven. I'm so worried; it's so difficult to have a boy in these surroundings. Will he keep away from bad company? Will he keep away from drugs? What can I do? I wish I could move. That would be better for my boy. Otherwise, he'll end up on the corner – you know, where they deal drugs.

Despite intensified efforts on the part of the police and the district council to combat criminality, crime rates in the Bijlmermeer are still high. The *Bijlmer Monitor* concludes that crime, especially that committed by youths, is increasing rather than decreasing (van Heerwaarden et al, 2004, p67). Other sources, however, mention the recent successes achieved by the district council and the police in their struggle against drugs, drug addicts and drug-related crime (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2006).

The large empty garages and the anonymity of the high-rise buildings shelter not only drug addicts but also a whole range of (sometimes illegal) informal activities, such as small shops, international call centres, car repair shops, black hair salons, restaurants, churches and brothels (Tamboer, 2004; Mauer United Architects, 2005). It is estimated that the informal economy in the Bijlmermeer comprises around 200 black hairdressers, 150 car mechanics, 35 restaurants, 5 children's day care centres, and a unknown number of couriers and sweatshops (Mauer United Architects, 2005, p56). An estimated 300 self-employed illegal taxi-drivers ('*snorders*') operate in the Bijlmermeer. The number of brothels and street prostitutes is unknown, but if one Googles 'Bijlmer babes' one gets 67,700 hits (25/03/06).

The Bijlmermeer has, all in all, acquired a somewhat ambiguous image: it is criminal and dangerous but also wild, lively, young and international. Although crime (especially that related to drugs) flourishes, so do Hip Hop, street dance and gospel music. Some of the Bijlmermeer's markets and shops are famous for their international merchandise. The anthropologist Ulf Hannerz describes the neighbourhood as a fascinating melting pot of cultures from all over the world, a melting pot that offers a window on the world and is a special place in the global ecumene (2000, 186, p.187).

The apparent paradox of the Bijlmermeer's history is that it was intended to be a well-organized, functional city, but became a place 'with the almost indescribable character of *urban jungle*' (Luijten, 2002, p.9). The largest housing corporation (Patrimonium, now Nieuw Amsterdam) had increasing problems with collecting rent in this 'urban jungle'. It feared bankruptcy and proposed demolishing some of the high-rise buildings and renovating the remaining ones. This plan marked the start of a thorough programme of urban renewal.

Urban Renewal: Towards Differentiation, Safety and Control

When the urban renewal programme started in 1992, the high-rise buildings were blamed for the neighbourhood's problems. The uniformity and the anonymity of the buildings were seen as a reason for the lack of social control and social cohesion. The kasbah-like structures under the elevated roads and in the local shopping centres were blamed for attracting drug addicts and dealers. Other aspects of the earlier concept of 'the city of the future' were also criticized: the vast green space (which was accused of harbouring 'unsafe' bushes and trees), the separation of living and working, and the separation of different kinds of traffic on different levels (Luijten, 2002).

The planners' keywords were differentiation, mixing, accessibility and safety. Single-family houses and lower buildings should replace the high-rises, the exploitation of which led to a financial loss each year. The elevated roads should be lowered, and the separated working areas and living areas should be replaced by a mix of living and working. It was decided to develop workshops on the ground level of the high-rise buildings. The environment was to become safer, more controllable; people in the new buildings would be able to watch the streets and each other from their windows. The abundance of green had to be removed and cars were to be parked in front of the houses instead of in the anonymity of large collective garages, which should be demolished.

The guiding principle in the renewal plans was differentiation: 'Differentiation was the key word: the buildings must be recognizable, varied, socially safe and easily accessible by car' (de Haan & Keesom, 2004, p.132). The planners envisaged a mix of rented and owner-occupied houses, and of high-rise, low-rise and single-family dwellings (van Heerwaarden et al., 2004, p.82). It was decided that only 30 per cent of the newly built houses would be social housing; the other 70 per cent would be used to attract more affluent residents.

The population of the Bijlmermeer should not only become more affluent, but also increase in number to sustain the infrastructure. It was proposed to demolish about 50 per cent (6500) of the original high-rise apartments, to renovate the remaining buildings and to replace the demolished buildings with 7200 new houses (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2002).

The renewal of the Bijlmermeer is one of the largest Dutch urban restructuring projects. The total investment up until 2002 was EUR 1.6 billion (Kwekkeboom, 2002, p.79). The contributors to the project are the Dutch government, the European Union, the city of Amsterdam and the district of Amsterdam South-east. Although the operation was started by the housing corporation, it was soon embraced by the district council. The leading political party (the Dutch Labour Party; PvdA) sees the operation as an accomplishment achieved under its guidance. Harry Verzijl (a local Labour Party leader for the last twelve years) writes that at the beginning of the operation, his party was hesitant, but has now taken over the leadership of and responsibility for the urban renewal programme. He claims that the renewal process is a success, thanks to the brave role played by his party, which never feared to demolish houses or to cut down trees in order to create a more normal, safer place for the local people (PvdA Amsterdam Zuidoost, 2005).

Adjusting the Renewal Strategy

In its initial stages, the renewal operation was criticized for its focus on building and rebuilding, on stones and concrete, rather than on people (Braam, 1996, p.1). Moreover, the intended differentiation was seen a means to remove poor (i.e. black) people and to attract rich (i.e. white) people. In 1996, a group comprising mainly Surinamese people who attended Kwakoe – a local community centre for Surinamese people – united themselves in the *Zwart Beraad* ('Black Consideration'). They protested against the fact that nearly all the members of the renewal management, the political parties and the district council were white (Braam, 1996, p.2).

There was also protest, from both inside and outside the Bijlmermeer, against the destruction of capital – that is, the destruction of high-quality, spacious apartments that were not yet 30 years old – without a clear plan to deal with the social upheaval inflicted on the neighbourhood. Demolishing houses was thought to be nothing less than shifting the problems elsewhere. In a critical article, two journalists suggested that the real reason behind the renewal was the nearby presence of Schiphol Airport and the World Trade Centre, which make the Bijlmermeer a potentially desirable location. Poor people have to be removed to make room for well-to-do employees of Schiphol and South Axis offices (MacDonald & Wijks, 1996).

During the 1990s, the urban planners adjusted their policy. Although the main focus remained on building, social components (e.g. education, culture and empowerment) were given a more prominent place in the programme. One of the explicit goals was to strengthen the social position of the residents of the Bijlmermeer. In 2000, a sports school and training facilities for the youth of the Bijlmermeer were realized, and the district council managed to receive considerable European funds to build a Cultural Educational Centre, which was finished in 2002. More attention was given to keeping the neighbourhood free of litter and dirt. EU funds amounting to millions of euros were invested in a programme to make the Bijlmermeer 'clean, whole and safe' (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2005a).

A further adjustment of the renewal policy was the emphatic promise that nobody would be forced to leave the Bijlmermeer. The adjusted plans (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2002) state that the urban renewal is intended for the people who live in the Bijlmermeer: their wishes, as established by surveys and comments made at meetings, were to be the guiding principles for urban renewal. In 2004, the chair of the district council, Elvira Sweet, declared in her New Year's speech that nobody would have to leave the Bijlmermeer, because the programme of urban renewal would provide a home for all the current residents. She said that other Dutch cities, for example Rotterdam, might use forced removals to create a mixed population, but this would not happen in the Bijlmermeer.

According to the adjusted plans, the pace of the renewal should match the pace of the relocation of the residents of the high-rises. These new plans provide figures that showed that it would be possible to meet the needs of the residents who were to be relocated: between 2002 and 2008, around 2500 new houses would be needed to accommodate those who had been moved out of the high-rises, and in that period more than 3500 new controlled-rent houses and renovated apartments would become available – more than enough (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2002, p.11).

The consultation of residents – especially by means of a large survey carried out in 2001 among the residents of the high-rise buildings – is seen by several politicians and social

scientists as a source of the 'success' of the renewal operation (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2002; Helleman & Wassenberg, 2001, 2004). The survey showed that the majority of the high-rise residents supported the demolition of their high-rise buildings, even if it concerned their one. Helleman and Wassenberg have several explanations for this support:

> For example, the present inhabitants of the high-rise blocks are given preference for the newly built houses in the Bijlmermeer. If they prefer to leave the Bijlmermeer, they are given high priority to choose from almost every vacant dwelling in Amsterdam suitable for their type of household, instead of waiting years for vacant social dwellings. For many, this is a great opportunity (Helleman & Wassenberg, 2004, p.7).

Relocation is a great opportunity to get not only a new house but also EUR 4500 in compensation – which for the poor residents of the renewal area is a large amount of money.

Another change in the renewal strategy was related to the explicit recognition of the ethnic background of many of the residents, especially those from Suriname. The protests of the *Zwart Beraad* resulted in 1996 in the creation of an agency for participation and multiculturalization, which was to represent the black residents and advise the district council. All political parties put immigrants on their election lists. The local Labour Party (PvdA), which triumphed in recent local elections, proposed a Surinamese woman, Hannah Belliot, as chair of the district council. At present, the majority of the members of the council have a Surinamese, an Antillean or a Ghanaian background.

The growing attention paid to the ethnic background of the residents was also expressed in the designs and forms of some of the new houses. Architects oriented themselves towards the wishes of different groups of immigrants, which resulted in a study on how 'to create a pleasant and comfortable home for different people with different cultures' (Coombs, 1997: 5). The results of interviews of Ghanaian, Surinamese and Antillean residents, and the reflections on architecture in especially Ghana, were used by different architects in their designs for Bijlmermeer low-rise estates. They designed 'compound houses' (houses around a shared courtyard) and houses with a patio, instead of a garden (de Haan & Keesom, 2004).

Contradictions in the Bijlmermeer Strategy

The Bijlmermeer urban renewal strategy – with its threefold goal of encouraging social climbers to stay, attracting new, more affluent residents, and strengthening the position of the present population – has some inherent contradictions, some of which are rather obvious. For example, how will it be possible to let everybody stay *and* have a new, more affluent population? How can you achieve a different mix in the population *and* keep the same population? The planners want the local population to increase, and they want more diversity, more urban liveliness and more activity. However, demolishing densely populated high-rise estates and replacing them with lower buildings, even with single-family dwellings, does not create a city-like atmosphere, nor does it help to accommodate more inhabitants.

Another ambivalence concerns the attitude towards what was once a lovely, lush environment. The developers need the space to build lower buildings (two to four storeys) to replace the high-rises (ten storeys), and they want to build ten per cent more houses than there used to be. Space is also needed for the change from collective garages to individual parking. As a result of the renewal, a large area has been asphalted over and thousands of new piles have been driven into the ground. It has been concluded that in the future, three quarters

rather than one quarter of the site will be covered with buildings and streets (de Haan & Keesom, 2002: 50-51). By 2005, at least 17,000 trees had been felled; many thousands more will follow before the operation is finished in 2010 (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2005a). This large-scale felling of trees has not helped to attract new, more affluent inhabitants, because most residents of Amsterdam (and other parts of the Netherlands) prefer a quiet and green environment (Dienst Onderzoek en Statistiek, 2005a: 72). Recent advertisements have pitched the new dwelling projects as attractive green neighbourhoods, but the proposed buyers are not convinced. According to a sales manager of the Rochdale housing corporation, interest in buying the new houses exists only among those who are already living in the south-east: 'In the south-east, the willingness to buy is large, but many people have difficulty getting a mortgage. Outside the south-east, the willingness to buy is very low.'

The sale of new houses in the Bijlmermeer has been stagnant since 2002. The number of unsold houses is increasing and nearly all construction projects are delayed. Several groups of buyers complain that the old problems (drugs, drug dealers, groups of youngsters hanging around, noise, garbage in the streets, etc.) have not been solved, despite the promise that the new houses would make everything better. They also complain that they paid too much for their houses and are unable to sell them in the present housing market (Koningshof, 2005).

With respect to the residential projects based on the 'compounds', the proposed residents (former high-rise inhabitants) turned out to be too poor to buy the new houses once the project had been realized (de Haan & Keesom, 2004: 135). Other, more affluent buyers bought them. The architects have concluded that the compound dwellings are not being used in the way they hoped they would. They doubt whether there is a future for such experiments (i.e. building for different ethnic groups) in the Netherlands (ibid.: 124).

The planners want to create a neighbourhood with allure, which means that everything that smacks of the urban jungle has to be eliminated, especially the large collective garages and the dark spaces beneath the elevated roads. However, demolishing the garages and lowering the roads threatens the informal economy, because these structures provide a space for hundreds of hustlers, shopkeepers, mechanics, money changers and travel agents. The new, modern, clean workshops are simply too expensive for the neighbourhood's relatively poor population, even though some are subsidized. Many of the new work places and offices remain empty. Besides, not all the residents are happy with the cleaning up of the urban jungle. A 28-year-old female singer with a Surinamese background told me that:

> When I was a child it was like a village here; we had so much fun! Now,
> with this renewal, it's starting to look like some kind of suburbia. No more
> vibes, no more thrills; you know, they're kind of killing it.

Although the district council is working together with the housing corporations, their goals differ somewhat. In 1994, the Dutch housing corporations were privatized, which meant that the builders of controlled-rent dwellings for the working class had to become independent entrepreneurs. Although the housing corporations have retained some of their traditional social mission and cooperate with the district council in social projects (such as a community centre for ten to fifteen local churches that used to congregate in the now-demolished garages), only a small fraction of the total budget is allocated to these activities (Nieuw Amsterdam, 2005).

However eager local politicians and the district council might be to produce as many new houses, shops and dwellings as possible, they still depend on housing corporations and construction companies to implement their plans, and the corporations have become reluctant to invest in difficult projects. The district council is not able to force housing corporations and building companies to implement all the renewal projects. According to a manager of the Rochdale housing corporation, in 2005 only just over a quarter of the proposed 7200 houses (i.e. 2000) had been built (Commissie ROVB, 2005). Although the building delay is increasing, there is no delay in demolishing. The district council feels the need to proceed with the demolitions as a response to a concentration of problems related to poverty, drug abuse and crime in the remaining high-rise buildings. More than 4000 apartments have already disappeared (ibid.).

Another factor that slackens the pace of constructing new houses is the fact that the economic tide has turned and selling houses has become more difficult. In the early years of the renewal process, and especially in the second half of the 1990s, it was relatively easy to sell the newly built houses, even the more expensive ones. Those years are described as 'a time of rising prosperity, plenty of subsidies and easy access to a mortgage' (de Haan & Keesom, 2004: 127).

The fact that the demolition of high-rise buildings has continued while the construction activities have stalled has influenced the population of the Bijlmermeer. Between 1994 and 2003, the population of the renewal area decreased from 41,710 to 36,736 (van Heerwaarden et al., 2004, p.114). The Amsterdam population statistics reveal that a further decrease (of over 3000 persons) occurred between 2003 and 2006 (Dienst Onderzoek en Statistiek, 2006). Thus, between 1994 and 2006 the population of the renewal area decreased by more than 8000 persons, or nearly 20 per cent. This decrease accounts for the major part of the decline of the population of the district as a whole, which dropped from 88,373 in 1990 to 78,907 in 2006 (a decrease of more than 9000 persons).

Instead of the planned increase (building 10 per cent more houses than were demolished), the population has actually decreased. Some planners seem to be worried, while others belittle or even deny this development. One of the contributors to the policy paper on the future of the district – 'Zuidoost Open Huis' (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2005) – explained:

> Of course it worries us that people are leaving, and that the number of residents is decreasing. We believe that it's important to have an increase in population to sustain the infrastructure of shops, schools and neighbourhood facilities. We hope to turn the tide in the near future.

At a local meeting organized to discuss this policy paper, the alderman responsible for housing and public space in the district, Els Verdonk, presented the population decrease as a temporarily, minor incident:

> The decline is only temporary, just a little dip. Next year, in 2006, there will be hundreds of new houses, social housing, too. We will push the builders to start building even before the desired percentage is sold. The general development of the urban renewal is positive, very successful. We're achieving our goals: people are staying now, instead of leaving.

Despite the growing attention to social goals, the main focus of the Bijlmermeer urban renewal project is still on bricks and concrete. The success of the renewal programme is

judged by the district council in terms of the number of buildings, houses and construction projects. In her 2006 New Year's speech, the chair of the district council, Elvira Sweet, emphasized the overwhelming success of the programme, and claimed that in 2005 more than a thousand houses had been built. Nobody objected, or remarked that this figure might be inflated, even though the actual figures show that fewer than one hundred new houses were delivered in 2005 (van der Molen, 2006).

The authors of the *Bijlmer Monitor* remark that policy makers do not make it clear what exactly they want when they say that 'the Bijlmer must attract new residents who are more representative of the average Amsterdammer' (van Heerwaarden et al., 2004: 17,18). Do they want the Bijlmermeer to be the same as other Amsterdam districts in terms of educational levels, income or ethnicity? The authors point out that although the Bijlmermeer is becoming more like other districts in terms of unemployment and education, in other respects it is becoming even more different. The growing difference is expressed in two fields of social change: the increase in the percentage of ethnic minorities and the increase in the percentage of single-parent households.

Table 1. Ethnicity in the Bijlmermeer renewal area (per 1 January, in numbers)

	1994	1997	2000	2003
Dutch	8 773	7 182	6 648	5 675
Surinamese	14 133	13 648	13 507	13 347
Antillean	3 424	3 177	3 523	3 292
Turkish	689	454	360	336
Moroccan	871	642	632	745
Southern European	798	665	654	578
Other non-industrialized countries	10 907	10 423	10 743	11 478
Other industrialized countries	2 125	1 651	1 400	1 285
Total	41 720	37 847	37 467	36 736

Source: van Heerwaarden et al., 2004, p.114.

The above table shows that the number of residents from the Netherlands and other industrialized countries (e.g. countries in Western Europe or North America) declined, while the number of residents from non-industrialized countries (e.g. Asian, Latin American and, especially, African countries) increased. It seems that the inflow of mostly poor immigrants from non-western, especially African countries continues, while the white exodus has never stopped. This development is the opposite of what the planners envisioned.

The district council stresses that in the near future, the Bijlmermeer should open itself up to the outside world, which means – in the present context, and for the present district council – that the Bijlmermeer must become more attractive to middle-class, more affluent residents (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2005b). It is proposed in the plans for the near future to build luxury villas in the remaining park area near the local lake. In order to attract buyers for the yet unsold hundreds of new houses, the district council has reserved EUR 2 million for a campaign to improve the Bijlmermeer's image (ibid.)

The urban renewal manager of the Rochdale housing corporation, Willem Kwekkeboom, remarked that in the earlier stages of the renewal project, many local residents, and especially the Surinamese residents, were very eager to buy their own house, but that this pond of

potential buyers has now dried up. Especially the sale of the more expensive houses has stagnated (Operation Bijlmer, 2003). The director of the renewal project bureau, Joop de Haan, emphasizes that it is absolutely necessary to attract new buyers from outside the district:

> At the moment, the new houses that have been built have been taken by people who were already in the area. We haven't yet attracted outsiders, but we're hoping to do so with the remaining buildings. More than anything, we're looking for people to move to the area, and to stay there, for positive reasons – because it is exciting and a good place to build a future (Shared Spaces, 2005).

However, instead of attracting new, more affluent people or retaining social climbers, the exodus of the white residents is continuing. This exodus, which started even before the renewal operation began, has recently been followed by a modest but growing exodus of the more affluent Surinamese and Antillean residents (Dienst Onderzoek en Statistiek, 2005b: 90). Especially young Surinamese couples prefer to live a house in one of the nearby small cities, where crime rates are lower and school results are higher. A young physiotherapist of Surinamese origin stated that:

> We're going to move to Almere, my husband and I. We've just bought a house. We both work in south-east Amsterdam, but Almere is nearby. The houses in Almere are less expensive, and my mother lives there. The house has a small garden that's already paved, and the neighbourhood is quiet. If we have children, God willing, the place will be all right.

A second way in which the renewal area is becoming increasingly different in comparison to other Amsterdam districts is related to the composition of households. While in Amsterdam as a whole the percentage of couples with children exceeds that of single-parent households, in the Bijlmermeer this situation is reversed: the percentage of single-parent households is greater than that of couples with children. Moreover, the number of single-parent households is increasing, while that of two-parents households is decreasing (van Heerwaarden et al., 2004, p.18).

Relocating the Residents: **a 'waterbed strategy'**

Several surveys provide data concerning the destinations of the relocated residents of the demolished high-rise buildings. Kleinhans and Krijthof (2002: 15-19) put together data on three different relocation periods between 1993 and 1997. They found that the majority of the relocated residents moved into social housing, while less than 20 per cent moved into a newly built house.

A survey by de Kool (2005) covered 2363 households that had been relocated between 2001 and 2004. Of these households, only 8 per cent had moved to one of the new houses. The majority had moved into social housing in other parts of the district or elsewhere in Amsterdam. As few as 2 per cent had bought a house (ibid, p.11).

Table 4. Destination of relocated Bijlmermeer residents

Destination	1993-1997	2001-2004	Both periods
Newly built Bijlmer	182 (18%)	198 (9%)	380 (11%)
High-rise Bijlmer	209 (21%)	642 (27%)	851 (25%)
Other part of the district	257 (25%)	682 (29%)	939 (28%)
Other Amsterdam district	366 (36%)	589 (25%)	955 (28%)
Other region of Netherlands	-	102 (4%)	102 (3%)
Other (refused/evicted)	-	96 (3%)	96 (3%)
Bought own house	-	54 (2%)	54 (2%)
Total	1 014 (100%)	2 363 (100%)	3 377 (100%)

Sources: Kleinhans & Kruythof, 2002: 19; de Kool, 2005, p.11.

As these figures show, nearly 90 per cent of the relocated households did not find a new home in one of the new, single-family low-rise houses. De Kool (2005) remarks that the employees who guide the residents through the relocation process report a huge demand for single-family dwellings. This demand is unrealistic, they say, because there are simply not enough newly built social housing units in this category (de Kool, 2005: 18). This shortage is in sharp contrast with the plans and promises of the district council, who stated beforehand that there would be more than enough new houses to meet the demands of the relocated residents (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2002, p.11).

There is also a sharp contrast between the image of the Bijlmermeer renewal project and actual practice when it comes to the policy of demolition and relocation. The 'success' of this project is attributed to 'close consultation with the residents' (Helleman & Wassenberg, 2004: 7) and to the strategy that the pace of the renewal must be the pace of the relocation of the residents, so that no-one would be forced to leave the Bijlmermeer. In practice, however, there has been continued demolition while the construction of new houses has stagnated. This pace of renewal turns out to be the pace of the market rather than that of the inhabitants, and it is questionable whether the wishes of the people in the high-rises are taken into serious consideration: their desire to move to the promised, newly built houses is not only called unrealistic but is also ignored (de Kool, 2005, p.18).

De Kool's survey also shows that the relocated residents come from all over the world (the main residents were born in one of 80 different countries).

One third of the main residents were born in Suriname, while more than one fifth were born in Africa. Some 16 per cent were born in the Netherlands, 3 per cent in Pakistan and 3 per cent in the Dominican Republic (de Kool, 2005: 9); the remainder originate from over 70 different countries spread throughout the world. The survey also shows that the majority of the relocated persons had been in the Bijlmermeer for less than ten years, while nearly 50 per cent had been there for less than five years (ibid, p.8). This means that they arrived when the renewal operation had already started, indicating that the stream of immigrants to the Bijlmermeer from non-industrialized countries is continuing.

Table 2. Country/continent of birth of main resident

Country/continent	Number (n=2363)	
Netherlands	369	(16%)
Europe	114	(5%)
Suriname	752	(32%)
Antilles	262	(11%)
Africa	505	(21%)
Asia	195	(8%)
Latin America	111	(5%)
Other/unknown	55	(2%)
Total	2 363	(100%)

Source: de Kool 2005, p.9

De Kool's survey also shows that the relocated residents are poor: only 11 per cent can live without the government subsidizing their rent and/or their health insurance premium (de Kool, 2005: 6). Most residents live alone or in a single-parent family; the number of single-parent families exceeds that of two-parent families.

Table 3. Composition of households

Composition of households	Number (n=2363)	
Single person	1098	(47%)
Couple	164	(7%)
Single-parent family	761	(32%)
Two-parent family	340	(14%)
Total	2 363	(100%)

Source: de Kool, 2005, p.7

The picture of the relocated residents that emerges from these data is that of a mass of recent immigrants from a diversity of cultures and countries, most of whom live alone or in a single-parent family. They are poor, and many belong to a small minority. No political party or group represents them. One Somalian resident said that:

> I came here. You have given me a house. You let me learn your language. You give me money to live. You talk about me. But you do not talk *with* me. Only about me. So I live alone. So I stay alone. In the apartment.

What almost all the high-rise residents want – namely to live in one of the new, clean, safe streets – is available to only a few. The majority have to be content with a house that is similar to the one they left, as they are relocated to social housing elsewhere in the district or elsewhere in Amsterdam. The EUR 4500 compensation is paid out only once (de Kool, 2005), which means that poor residents most likely will not be able to move back, because it would be too expensive. This regulation supports the argument of Leeming and Shakur that poor residents are removed from the renewal area and cannot return (2004, p.70).

The relocation process brings into question the success of the Bijlmermeer renewal programme. The majority of the relocated high-rise inhabitants are poor, recent immigrants – and their relocation is contrary to the district council's statement that the renewal must be

based on the wishes of people, especially those living on one of the high-rise estates (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2002, p.11).

De Kool's report has been discussed by the district council's commission on housing and public space. According to the minutes of the relevant meeting, both the responsible alderman (Verdonk) and two managers of the Rochdale housing corporation were present. The council members did not make many critical comments, although one did question why only 2 per cent of those who had had to relocate had managed to buy a house. The alderman and the Rochdale managers assured the commission that many more houses – thousands of them – would be built in the near future, and that the newly built houses, even the more expensive ones, were selling well. According to the minutes, the commission was satisfied with this answer (Verslag ROVB, 2005).

The actual implementation of the renewal policy raises questions about the proclaimed success of the renewal programme. Not only the district council but also the Dutch government present the programme as a great success. Several reports point to a recent decline in both crime (especially drug-related crime) and unemployment, and to the residents' increasing satisfaction with their neighbourhood (Dienst Onderzoek en Statistiek 2006). However, taking into account that the population of the renewal area has been reduced by nearly 20 per cent and that most of the relocated residents are poor, unorganized immigrants with a low level of education, the proclaimed successes might simply reflect the dispersal of marginalized residents and their problems. Similarly, a decrease in unemployment might reflect the relocation of unemployed people to elsewhere, and an increase in satisfaction with the neighbourhood might reflect the fact that the most angry or dissatisfied residents have been relocated.

Thousands of people have left the renewal area. Many moved from social housing in the Bijlmermeer to social housing in an adjacent part of the district (e.g. Venserpolder or Holendrecht) or in another district of Amsterdam. Several parts of the district that received many relocated residents from the renewal area have recently been identified as problem areas. Especially Venserpolder and Holendrecht-West are seen as deteriorating and in need of transformation (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2005b, p.5). In these parts of the district, both the percentage of poor residents and their dependence on subsidies are increasing (Stadsdeel Zuidoost, 2005b, p.59). In Venserpolder, where around 9000 people live in low-rise buildings, violence and drug-related problems are increasing.

The plans for the future of the district propose the restructuring not only of the high-rise but also of some of the low-rise buildings in various parts of the district (Stadsdeel Zuidoost 2005b). The plans include the increased differentiation of dwellings, an increase in owner-occupied houses, the transformation of public space and the creation of small-scale workshops (ibid.: 18).

These plans echo those for the Bijlmermeer. Although in Venserpolder and Holendrecht-West there are no high-rises, the proposed solutions to the problems are almost the same. Mixing appears to be a central solution, not only in the Bijlmermeer but also in Venserpolder and Holendrecht. Just like the Bijlmermeer renewal, especially physical renewal is supposed to be the solution to such problems as poverty, welfare dependency, educational problems and drug-related crime.

As a result of this renewal policy, people simply circulate – as do their problems. The present strategy of solving problems in the south-east works like a waterbed: push on one spot, and it

pops up at another. Helleman and Wassenberg (2004) signalled this 'waterbed effect' earlier in the Bijlmermeer renewal operation: the improvement of some blocks of flats in the 1990s resulted in a concentration of crime and drugs in other blocks. The solution to this problem has been sought in intensifying the renewal operation: more demolition and on a larger scale (2004: 13). However, intensifying the renewal operation and increasing its scale might well result in an even larger waterbed effect, one that would affect not only the renewal area but also other parts of the district and other parts of Amsterdam. This 'solution' tends to merely transfer problems from one area to another.

Conclusion

Although the renewal plans are based on surveys among the residents of the high-rises, and although the architects orient themselves towards the wishes of these residents, the new housing estates are not accessible to the majority of the high-rise residents. The district council has not been able to keep its oft-repeated promise that there will be enough new social housing for all the residents of the high-rises who want to stay in the area. Policy makers increasingly have to take into account such market parties as construction companies and housing corporations, which in times of a declining housing market contribute to the stagnation of the construction of new building projects. These unforeseen developments have influenced the population of the Bijlmermeer. The demolition of the high-rises and the relocation of their residents has led to a 20 per cent decrease in the population of the renewal area, instead of to an increase.

Compared to the different renewal strategies followed in the Netherlands (Helleman, 2005), the Bijlmermeer programme is unique in that it pursues not only such strategies as social mixing and the retention of social climbers, but also the development of an urban black middle class. The actual practice of renewal, however, reveals ambivalence: although it is intended to create and empower a black urban middle class, actual practice entails moving poor immigrants to other parts of the district and to other Amsterdam districts. Leeming and Shakur (2004) are right in discerning this ambiguity in the planning strategy: you cannot welcome immigrants and send them away at the same time. The contradictions and ambiguities in the renewal strategy have turned out to be even more complex than these authors perceived. While one category of immigrants – the urban black middle class – appears to be welcome, another category – the poor and poorly educated – appears to be not so welcome and is relocated.

The exodus of the white population is being followed by a growing exodus of the black middle class, many of whom – especially those with children – are looking for the same quiet, green neighbourhoods. The only group that is growing in the Bijlmermeer consists of mostly poor, recent immigrants from a variety of non-industrialized countries. Despite the relocation policy, which pushes them out of the area, the inflow of these recent immigrants is larger than the outflow.

Leeming and Shakur (2004) rightly stress that ethnicity plays a greater role in the renewal strategy than the planners admit. However, their supposition that there might be a 'wily' dispersal strategy cannot be supported. Rather, the dispersal should be interpreted as the unforeseen outcome of the retardation of projected plans and of the influence of the market.

The planners might object that had the housing market not collapsed and had the housing corporations not been privatized, the outcome of the renewal operation might have been different. Also, had the stream of poor immigrants from non-industrialized countries not

continued, the outcome of the renewal process might have been different. Moreover, until now the Bijlmermeer has not turned out to be the top location some people expected it to become. However, even if the economic tide turns and the housing demand increases, and this leads to the sale of the new houses, it is doubtful whether the Bijlmermeer renewal strategy can be applauded. Would the renewal projects have received the large national and EU subsidies if they had proposed to relocate 10,000 residents and to replace them with 10,000 new ones? It is not hard to imagine that such a proposal would have been met with the question: what will happen to the thousands of people who will have to go? Is this project intended to solve problems – or merely to shift them elsewhere?

The conclusion must be that 14 years of urban renewal supports the views of the earlier critics. They were right after all: replacing old bricks and concrete with new bricks and concrete merely shifts the problems elsewhere. Social problems should be solved by investing in people, education and employment, instead of in stones. Better houses for some of the people do not provide the majority of poor immigrants with a better income, better work or better education.

In the new policy paper presented by the district council in 2005, it is stated that the Bijlmermeer should open itself up and attract other, wealthier people. In order to attract these new people, it is proposed to build villas in parts of the remaining green area. The ambivalence of the renewal strategy is once more expressed in the pitching of the remainder of the once green environment from which thousands of trees have disappeared, as an attractive green place to live, while the renewed area no longer is green or attractive. The policy paper also proposes solutions to the old 'Bijlmer problems', such as increasing crime rates, increasing drop-out rates and increasing dependence on social welfare, problems that have now spread to and are growing in adjacent areas. The same 'cures' – namely mixing, creating allure, and attracting and retaining more affluent residents – are now proposed for these adjacent areas. Apparently, it is not only problems that tend to go in circles: so too do the proposed solutions, whether or not they actually work.

Acknowledegements

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