



# STUDY TOUR TO DUTCH NEW COMMUNITIES

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## Produced by

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# INTRODUCTION

This note summarises the reasons for visiting new communities in the Netherlands, and what we expect to learn from the ones we will visit. As well as looking together at innovative places that might provide inspiration for eco-towns, we plan to meet up with officers, politicians and experts.

From initial research and consultation a number of issues have arisen in regard to Barton (listed below) and it would be good to see places that have tackled these similar issues.

1. Connectivity;           How can you ensure that pedestrians and cyclists have primacy, so that the car is used as little as possible? (e.g. shared surfaces and underpasses, linkages across main roads, frequent and cheap public transport)
2. Community;           How do you make a mixed community work well? (e.g. allocation of social housing, role of the school as a community hub, management of the public realm and green spaces,
3. Character;            How do you create a sense of identity and difference without making homes unaffordable? (e.g. public realm and open spaces, house design and codes, sale of plots to builders)
4. Climate proofing ;    How do you minimise energy consumption, and promote use of renewables? (e.g. ground source heat pumps and energy networks/CHP, water retention on site, waste disposal)
5. Collaboration:        How do you secure ongoing community engagement? (e.g. funding of infrastructure, disposal terms, design control)

We would welcome suggestions regarding additional topics that are of particular interest to you and of concern to Barton. A fuller briefing pack and definite programme will be provided in advance of the visit once destinations have been confirmed.

## Why visit the Netherlands?

Previous study tours to Dutch Cities and new settlements have highlighted that they face some similar challenges, but also that they have taken very different approaches to the way houses are built and financed. A number of recent innovations in planning practice have taken their inspiration from the Netherlands, such as Home Zones, shared surfaces, and contracts between government and local authorities. Dutch professionals are keen to share their experiences and there is a lot to be learned.

Though the Netherlands is smaller and more cohesive than the UK there are also many similarities, including most people living in relatively dense towns and cities that are close to each other. The cities face the challenges of living in a global economy which is running out of natural resources, with people who come from different backgrounds Dutch settlements are much greener than UK housing estates, with, for example, the retention of water run-off on site in open canals and streams that add to the attractions of living in a new neighbourhood. There are also important cultural differences, as the Netherlands is much less class-conscious and a more equal society than the UK. According to the OECD, the Dutch have the happiest children and the UK some of the unhappiest. As in the other social democratic countries of Northern Europe such as Sweden, people are less individualistic and more considerate. It is common to live in rented housing in cities, and indeed 30 per cent of the population are eligible to live in social housing, which gives housing associations a strong role. There has also been a substantial devolution of powers and responsibilities to local authorities, and a greater tradition of regional planning to link transport investment and development.

The Dutch Ten Year Housing Programme called VINEX had similarities with the previous government's Sustainable Communities Plan however the Dutch have succeeded between 1996 and 2005 in building some 90 new settlements, which have increased their housing stock by 7.5%. Although objectives were similar to those of the Sustainable Communities Plan, the process was very different. Local authorities played a much more proactive role in both commissioning masterplans and providing infrastructure. There was a focus on 'branding' different neighbourhoods with distinct identities. Walking and cycling was favored and the settlements were much greener than UK housing estates.

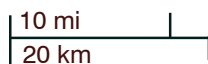
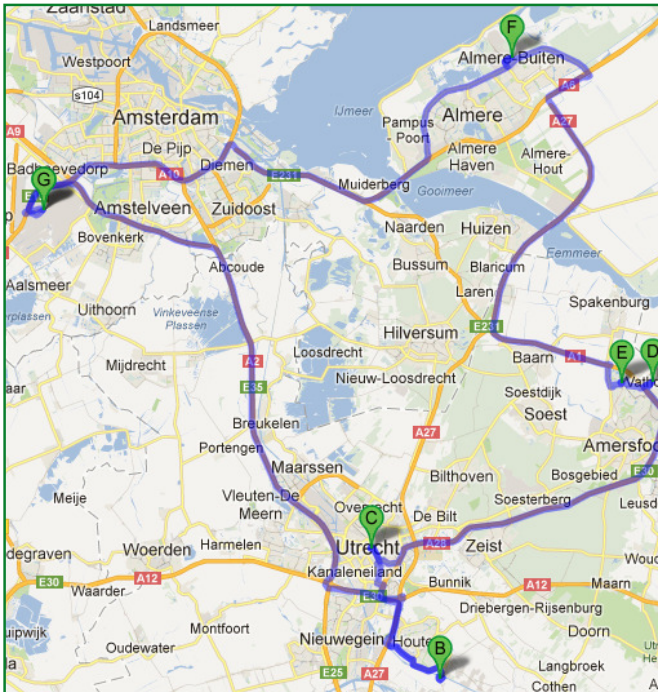
Common challenges to both countries include:

- Dense urban areas and a general shortage of land

- Pressures to improve the housing stock
- A rising population and high levels of immigration from abroad into the main cities
- Environmental pressures, including rising water levels and energy costs.

## Where we are going to visit?

Over the last few years visitors to new communities in the Netherlands have been impressed particularly with connectivity. With advice from our Dutch associate Han Lorzing, Sector Head at the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research in The Hague, we have picked a group of outstanding places which have similarities to Oxfordshire and will provide valuable lessons for Barton. The communities are in the province of Utrecht and a number are in close proximity to Amsterdam.

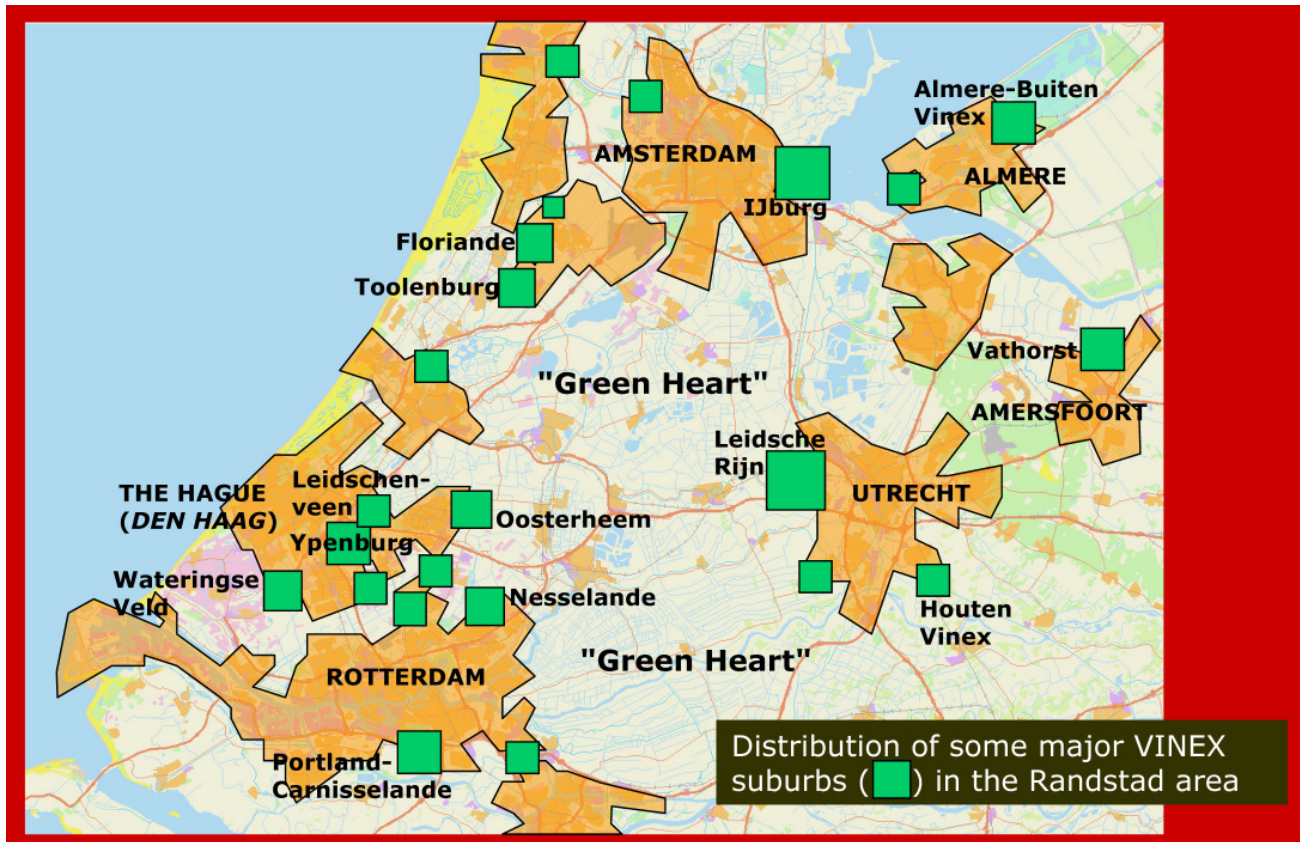


- A. Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam
- B. Utrecht, Hotel
- C. Houten (8000 homes)
- D. Vathorst, Amersfoort (11,000 homes)
- E. Nieuwland, Amersfoort (4,500 homes)
- F. Almere
- E. Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam

## Why not just read about it?

The study tour will not only allow us to look and learn from very different places but will also enable the team to discuss and resolve some key issues. Seeing sustainable design principles in action builds confidence in what can be achieved. Study tours certainly prove their value in raising sights and changing attitudes.





## WHAT IS VINEX?

The VINEX housing programme

In 1990/1 the Dutch government issued its "VINEX" report on spatial planning (VINEX stands for 4th Planning Report Extra). This document proposed the building of 455,000 new houses over the period 1996 to 2005. Of these 285,000 houses were to be built around cities in suburbs. In the end 90 new suburbs were built and 50 are in the Randstad area that lies within Utrecht, Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam.

A total of 750,000 houses have been built over the period 1996 to 2005, of which 60% can be classified as VINEX. VINEX sought to create places that were relatively compact (over 30 dwellings per hectare) in order to preserve the countryside, well-connected by public transport to jobs and services to keep car travel to a minimum, and with at least 30 per cent of the housing being 'affordable'. The national government provided incentives to local and regional authorities including assistance to ease procedures. It allocated 3.2 billion euros for transport and traffic measures and provided money for soil sanitation and other local impediments. This was only a fraction of the total cost but provided an incentive (perhaps like the Growth Area Fund in the UK).

Part of the success of the VINEX suburbs can be attributed to the variety of homes available, which was due to many factors:

- City planners and officials want their VINEX suburb to stand out
- Builders and developers believe 'variety sells'
- Prospective homebuyers want more choice

## What we can learn:

### Community

1. Build balanced communities in terms of income and age
2. Support community development through the arts and schools
3. Offer more interior space to live (for example through people building their own homes)
4. Anticipate high levels of renting
5. Maintain the public realm well

## Connectivity

1. Locate new developments on good transport nodes
2. Put pedestrians and cyclists first
3. Design for different patterns of movement e.g. separate bus and cycle ways, home zones
4. Create pleasant uncluttered surfaces
5. Provide enough parking but keep the car in its place

## Character

1. Design for greater variety and choice
2. Dare to be different
3. Build strong edges e.g. embankments and commercial uses that act as noise barriers
4. Secure quality construction
5. Use the natural landscape to create value

## Climate proofing

1. Make the most of natural inheritance, such as trees and farm tracks
2. Design for walking or cycling
3. Treat water as your friend, but manage it
4. Focus on cutting energy use through higher levels of insulation
5. Invest in advanced common systems e.g. energy, waste

*from the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods Network study tour in October 2011*

## Possible Itinerary:

### Day One

- 11.35 Arrive Amsterdam Schiphol airport from London
- 12.45 Train Schiphol to Utrecht. (3/4 hour journey)
- 13.30 Arrive in Houten
- 13.40 Arrive at Planning Department (Het Kant 3 – Postbus 30, 3990 DA, Houten) or nearby cafe for refreshments and short presentation on the community by Rolf Wijbrans, Houten planning.
- 14.40 Bike Tour of Houten
- 16.40 Train Houten to Utrecht Central (9 minutes)
- 16.50 Walk or taxi from Utrecht central to Hotel Janskerkhof, 10. 3512BL Utrecht (The Netherlands) Tel. +31.30.2313169 | Fax: +31.30.2310148 Email: nhcentreutrecht@nh-hotels.com
- 17.05 Check into Hotel. Free time to explore the city
- 19.00 Drinks with presentations from Han Lorzing and discussion on what we liked/disliked about Houten followed by dinner

### Day Two

- 8-8.30 Breakfast
- 9.00 Check out of Hotel. Coach to Vathorst Information Centre (Veenslagen 2, 3825 RV Amersfoort)

Presentation introducing Amersfoort's newest developments by Tom de Man, former Alderman for the City of Amersfoort, who led the development of three new extensions to Amersfoort and by Information Centre Manager Trudy de Mooy followed by a tour of Vathorst by bike.

- 13.30 Drive through Nieuwland
- 14.30 Coach to Almere
- 15.30 Coach to Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam
- 16.00 Coach drops group at airport





*Primary School with Housing above in Houten*

## Profile of Houten

The District of Utrecht

### Basic facts

- 38,062 population (includes old and new towns)
- 8000 homes planned through VINEX
- Houten is a commuter town about 9 km southeast of Utrecht
- Modern Houten started to take shape in the last decades of the 20th century (1966-1993). It was designated a 'Groei kern' - a centre of growth - to meet the needs of the growing city of Utrecht.
- The original target of 50% social housing has been reduced to 25%.
- There were also planned to be 1,000 jobs

### Sustainable urban design

Houten is world-famous for its urban design. Distinctive qualities include the excellent accessibility of the railway station, green and water zones throughout the whole city, numerous football and basketball fields, high standard of accommodation for different groups and the child-friendly bicycle paths. It is one of the safest cities in the Netherlands. Bike-riders and cars are able to avoid each other: an extensive network of bicycle tracks connects the different districts of the town, while cars have to go to the city ring road before they can go to another part of the city.

Up until 2008, some 7000 new houses were built in Houten-Zuid, following the same urban design principles as the existing Houten-Noord, but with some differences.

The body of water in the east is large in comparison with water bodies in the old parts of Houten. The pentagonal green zone in Houten-Zuid embracing the centre is different from the greenzone in Houten-Noord, which runs through the whole city in a linear structure, with parks at the ends. Another difference is in some places cars share the road with bicycle paths.

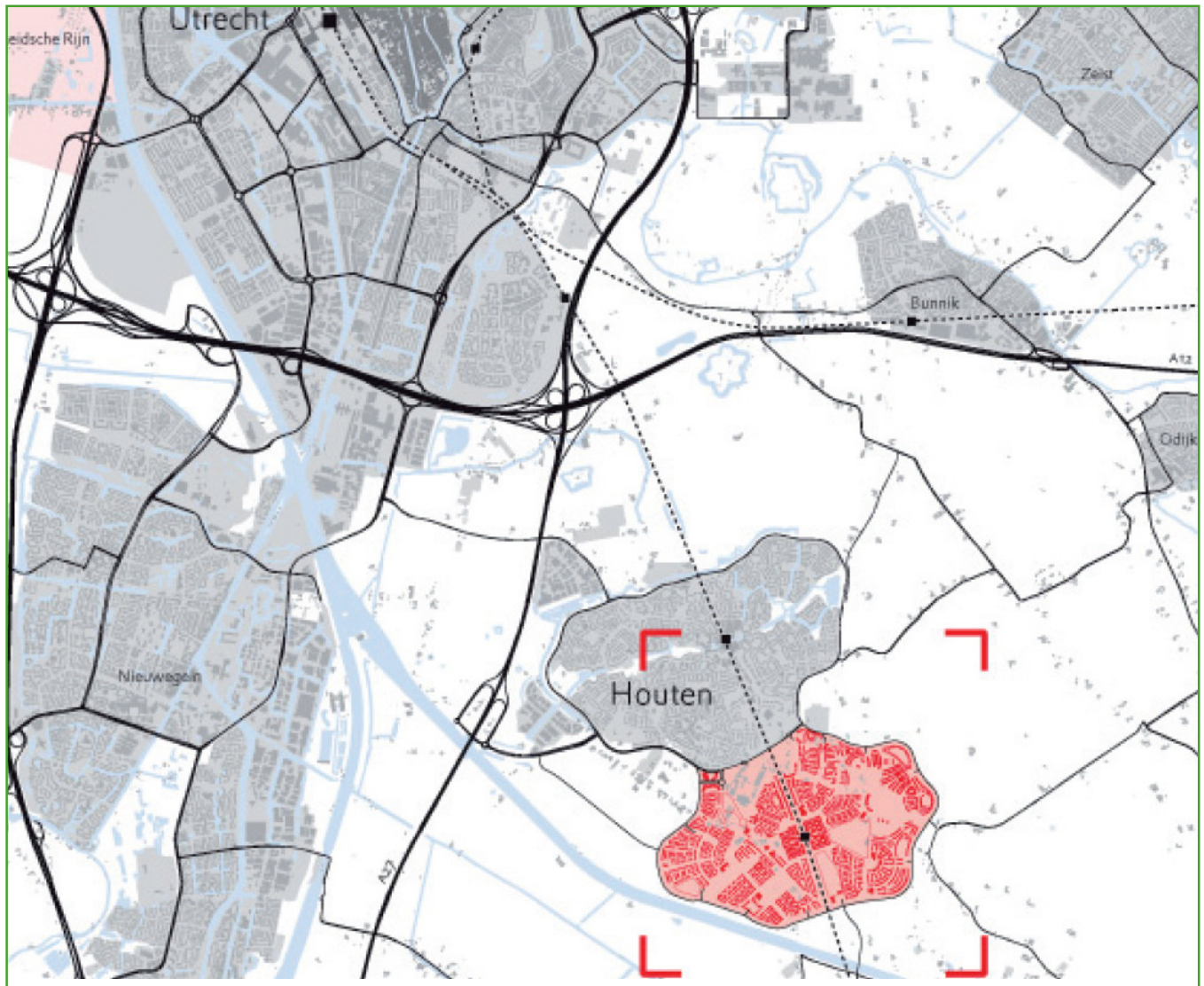
### Transport

Houten is very well connected to other cities. Twice or four times an hour trains leave for Utrecht and 's-Hertogenbosch. The railway was doubled, from two tracks to four to accommodate the new development.



*Housing overlooking a lake*





Source: Vinex! A morphological exploration produced by The Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research (RPB). The full report can be downloaded via <http://www.rpb.nl/nl-nl/?hrf=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.rpb.nl%2Fnl-nl%2Fcontent.aspx%3Fcid%3D589%26mid%3D18> ly ren



## Keeping the Car in its place

Until the early 1970s Houten was a village of 4,000 inhabitants. In the late sixties it was designated a centre for growth to help meet the needs of the city of Utrecht approximately five miles away. In the seventies 10,000 homes were built and the population grew to more than 30,000 by the nineties.

More recently in Houten Zuid approximately 8,000 new homes are being developed as part of the VINEX programme. Like other VINEX suburbs the different neighbourhoods have been 'branded' as distinct places, with one modelled after English crescents, while another has a French theme. When it is completed Houten will have a population of approximately 50,000 inhabitants.

In its early days Houten was too small to support a high quality public transport system of its own, and so when it was decided to grow the population the first step was to build a temporary tram line alongside the railway that runs through the town. Some years later after doubling the railway tracks, a new station on the main line has opened, alongside a new shopping centre, and the tram has closed.

Cyclists are given priority in the Council's spatial planning and mobility policy. In the early seventies a ring road was built around the town, which separates the main routes for motorised traffic from cyclists. Cars cannot drive directly from one residential area to another and only local traffic is allowed into residential areas. As soon as you leave the ring road, the roads become narrower and many of the streets are home zones. As in the rest of the Netherlands, cyclists have priority over cars at intersections, and a separate system of cycle ways makes it safe for people of all ages to get on their bikes. Space under the main station is now given over to a cycle park and repair facility, where you can also hire bikes inexpensively. Parking spaces in the neighbourhoods are mostly on street, often in side streets that are separate from the cycle ways. Houten now ranks 50th out of 450 municipalities in terms of its attractiveness as a place to live.

## The School

Houten attracted young families and so needed to provide a primary school that could be adapted to other uses as time went by. The resulting multi storey building with housing above looking out over open space will in time revert to housing, but currently provides a lively community hub. It looks contemporary, and strikes a good balance between hard and soft elements. Cars are excluded, and it responds well to the local environment.



*Bike stands and hire at the Station in Houten*



*Cycle paths are everywhere in Houten*



*Cycle underpass in Houten*



*The Primary School in Houten*





*Town and Countryside meet in Vathorst*

## Profile of Vathorst

Amersfoort, District of Utrecht

### 11,000 homes

Amersfoort is a pleasant historic town near Utrecht, and just over half an hour from Amsterdam by rail. Three new settlements: Kattenbroek, Nieuwland and Vathorst have been built as satellites totalling 12,967 new homes (20,967 when Vathorst is completed in 2014). Growth is now largely complete and Amersfoort is considered to be the 'greenest town' in the Netherlands, with new settlements complementing the historic core. Importantly growth was led by a local authority who wanted '*growth to be on their terms and to create balanced communities*'. The housing programme consists of 30% subsidized housing. The developing joint-venture is a Public-Private-Partnership (Municipality of Amersfoort 50% and five property developers).

Vathorst (VINEX) has been promoted under the theme of 'a world of difference' with a series of branded neighbourhoods each with a distinctive character including terraced housing overlooking new canals.

Infrastructure and community facilities have been developed hand in hand with the housing. Facilities are available as soon as residents move in through the use of temporary buildings to house shops, banks etc

When complete the development will include 5-6 primary schools, a secondary school and agricultural college, 10 football courts, 10 tennis courts, a skate board park, swimming pool, two health care centres, a library, a

theatre and five catering establishments and live work units to attract businesses such as osteopathy and dentistry

A new industrial estate and business park are being built which will deliver an estimated 5,000 jobs.

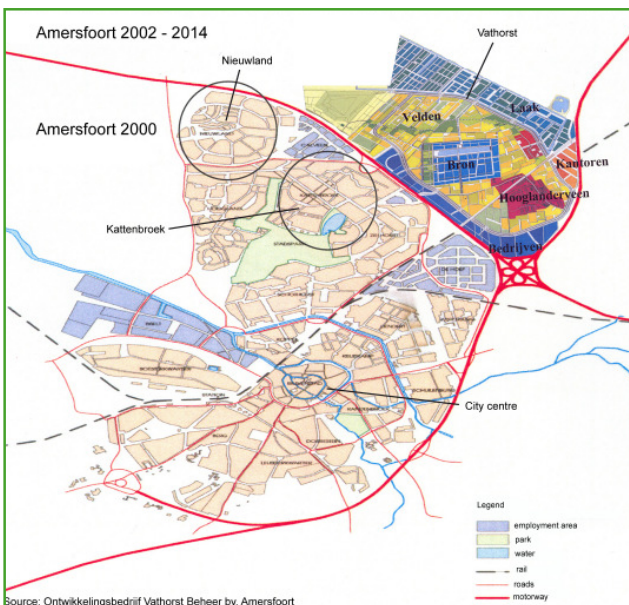
Key points for Oxford:

- learn how a successful joint venture has worked
- look at energy options
- see how the countryside meets the town
- see how parking is managed



*Waterside housing in Vathorst*





Top: Vathorst masterplan  
 Middle: The Vathorst context  
 Left: Amersfoort 2002-2014



# Profile of Nieuwland

Amersfoort, District of Utrecht

## 4500 homes

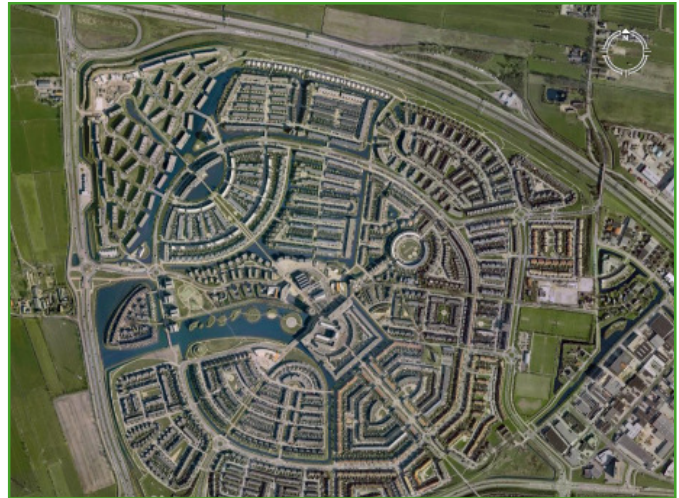
The sustainable suburb of Nieuwland has emphasised the extensive use of renewable energy.

Projects include;

- three low energy primary schools with displays which show the pupils how much energy the solar panels are generating
- solar energy on 50 rented dwellings via solar collectors and solar gas combination units,
- 19 luxury owner occupied homes with installed solar roofs
- a 1MW photovoltaic project for 500 dwellings achieving an optimal installation on as many houses as possible and two zero energy houses.

Energy conscious housing is using PV solar energy on a large scale to meet the strict environmental requirements set for the area by the local authority.

More than 12,000 square meters of solar panels are mounted on roofs and façades of 500 houses with a total capacity of 1,35 MW at peak times. The houses have been built in the northern part of Nieuwland, named Waterkwartier. The suburb is made up of mostly residential buildings, with some public facilities e.g. a sports centre, a school and a kindergarden. 4,500 houses had been built by the end of 2001.



*Above: Attractive residential buildings feature private outdoor space, greenery and water*



*Above: 500 dwellings in Nieuwland, Amersfoort were provided with a photovoltaic system, with a total project size of 1 MWp*



# Profile of Almere Poort and Almere Buiten

Almere, Flevoland

The district of Almere has some 50,000 citizens of which 35% are non Dutch. There are 13 neighbourhoods, and two stations which also serve the surrounding villages. It has been built over 20 years during which time development has become much more intense. Each neighbourhood is quite distinctive.

De Buitenkans is part of the new town of Almere, built on reclaimed land, and twinned with Milton Keynes. Huge clusters of windmills have been built to tap renewable energy. In the 'rainbow quarter' colour has been used to brighten up the town's image, and water is being used to create more attractive places in which to live. A site was provided for some 50 households to build their own homes, applying eco-principles. Significantly, the development was co-ordinated by a housing association, which underpinned the development risks, and then sold the homes on to individual households. The homes are all individual, and there is a strong community spirit, for example in landscaping the communal areas.

In Almere Poort, 2,000 homes have been built and around 5,000 people live there in what is effectively a building site that will eventually provide 14,000 homes. The idea of 'self-build' was promoted as a way of people getting to own their own home at a time when prices have become unaffordable for many. The city drew up the masterplan, and then dispensed with the need for self-builders to secure planning permission. The basic infrastructure has been put in by the municipality. Individuals, and in some cases groups, agree to buy a plot for which the price is based on size. They appoint an architect, in some cases choosing a design that is already approved, and they select contractors who are usually small builders. With plots still selling strongly at between three and five each week, these now account for one-third of the housing being developed in the city and, of the completed homes, 800 are 'self-build' homes developed by the owner-occupiers. Final property values are set by the level of comparable sites and the value of the land itself is set at 20 to 30 per cent of the final value, as at Vathorst (Box 15). Social housing plots are sold for 30,000 each, and the sales price is capped at 175,000, so that land represents less than 20 per cent of the total cost. There is a requirement to keep the property as social housing for 25 years.

*Right: Almere Poort; staged development means current residents live in what is essentially a building site; the self-build scheme creates a variety of architecture; residents have a sense of community and meet to celebrate a milestone.*

