

SUSTAINABLE URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS NETWORK (SUNN) LEARNING FROM THE NETHERLANDS





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Report of the SUNN Dutch Study Tour 6th – 7th October 2011

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LEARNING FROM THE NETHERLANDS

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Introduction

The SUNN two day study tour to the Netherlands visited three quite different places, one of which involved the extension of a historic city (like Cambridge or York), another was a new suburb a few miles from a major city (like Dickens Heath or Telford), and the third was the final part of a major new town (like Milton Keynes). They exemplify the way new neighbourhoods are being designed to be truly sustainable and happen to be close together. Deliberately we did not look at experience in the major cities, such as Amsterdam or Rotterdam, where developments tend to be much denser.



Top: Vathorst, Amersfoort
 Middle: Almere Poort
 Bottom: Houten

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. It was also clear that the Netherlands is much less class-conscious, and that most people behave in a more collective or less individualistic way, for example preferring



to cycle rather than show-off their cars. Research has shown that children are much happier, and there are much lower levels of social malaise such as teenage pregnancy or drug dependency.

Discussions among the members, which covered most types of new settlement, brought out a number of inspiring ideas or principles for the UK, which might be summarised as '*let's go Dutch*'. In summary here are some points that were made during the trip, which have been organised around the five Cs used in the Cambridgeshire Quality Charter and Beyond Eco-towns, to provide a possible checklist of 25 features you might expect a sustainable urban neighbourhood to offer:

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

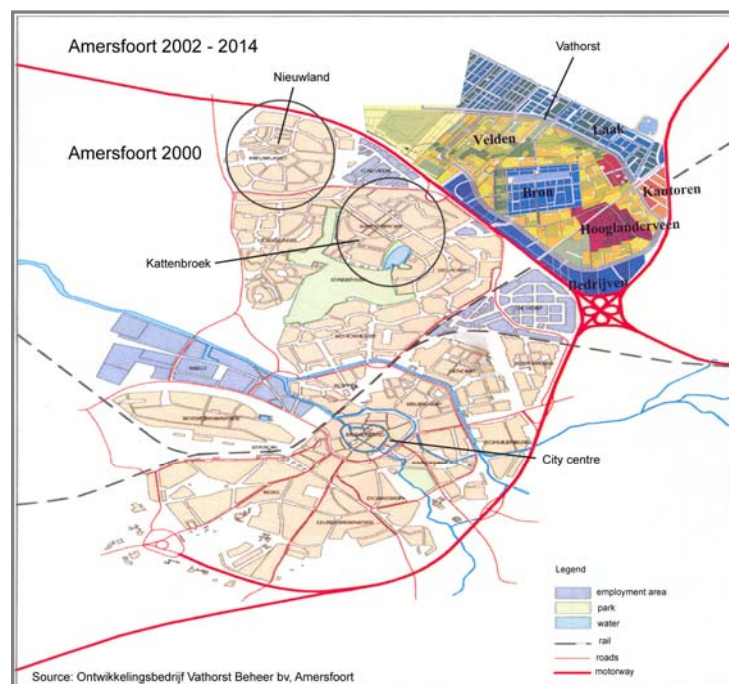
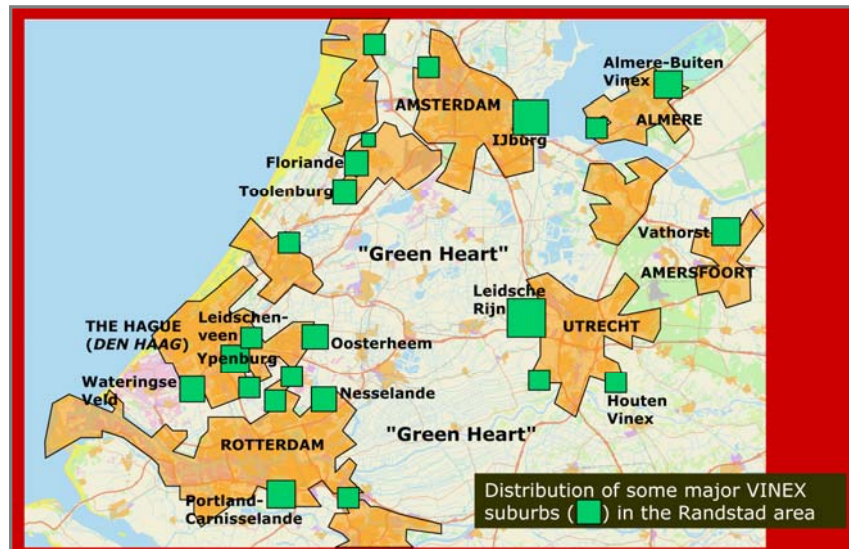
Collaboration

1. Install up front infrastructure through low cost finance
2. Get the financial foundations right (let's go Dutch)
3. Exercise local leadership
4. Keep learning
5. Expect some failures

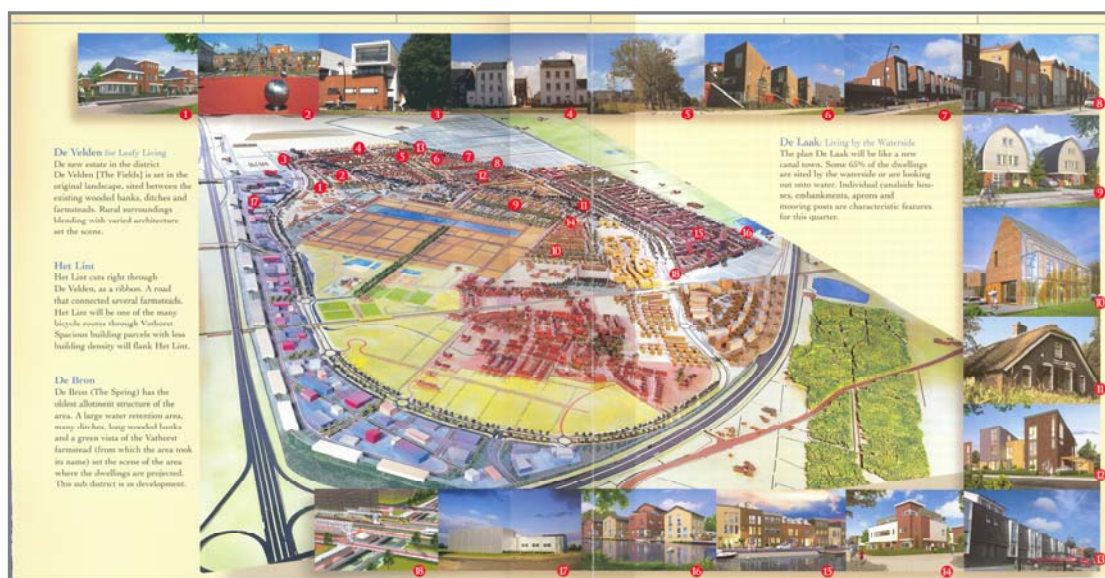
Dare to be different - Vathorst: a world of difference

Amersfoort is an attractive old town on a motorway junction; which has doubled in size over the last 30 years to some 160,000 residents. It is one of a number of growth cities benefiting from the Dutch VINEX plan, which has supported building new suburbs with 30% affordable homes, at densities of over 30 to the hectare on sites that are well-connected with established towns and cities that offer a choice of jobs and services.

Vathorst is the third extension that the municipality has promoted, this time with a consortium of private developers and landowners. It forms part of a vision to make Amersfoort the greenest town in the Netherlands.



Unlike the rest of Amersfoort the site is the other side of the motorway. Only 20% of the City's residents were in favour of housing in Vathorst, and the main political parties opposed but after a year of discussion nearly one hundred percent of people agreed. There was the requirement that Vathorst should pay for itself. The most compelling arguments was that if the municipality did not take the lead, then the County of Utrecht might take over.



Vathorst masterplan and character areas

Community consultation was important from the beginning. 'Theme groups' were set up to develop policies for *'how we are going to live in the next era'*. Followed by workshops with the architects to see how these ideas could be fed into the masterplan. Regular market research has since been used to find out the kind of 'atmosphere' people want.

Two designers drew up masterplans for a town of over 10,800 homes, with distinct character areas. Thus one was like a traditional Dutch city, with terraced houses overlooking canals, while another is more countrified built along the existing farm track. A range of housing has been



built, partly through lots of builders and architects working on sites of around 80 homes or two hectares, thus offering a huge choice. The highest densities are near the new station. The Municipality also required that each neighbourhood of 500 homes would offer a balance of homes to serve all the different income groups. Often the homes are built out of simple perimeter blocks, which can be prefabricated, but with individual facades, and different coloured brickwork.



Business built into the motorway embankment

Two areas are developed at any one time. Putting funds into a new station at the start, encouraged new residents to use public transport rather than rely on their cars (and the municipality should start receiving pay back next year). Similarly the municipality hired an expert on sustainability from Delft University to draw up a menu of options for developers to choose from. In practice it was no more expensive, though grants from the government were used to pioneer new construction methods and materials, and to decontaminate part of the site.



An arts foundation Vario Mundo has helped built a sense of community from the start and has supported a community group to open their own building, which houses a café and theatre. Schools also function as community centres. Half the new housing in Netherlands is developed by housing associations (corporations), and those on lower incomes are enabled to buy a



Top: Vathorst railway station
 Bottom: De Kamers Community Building

stake as well as to rent on terms that they can afford. So though there is a strong stress on equality, in fact the variety of housing in every neighbourhood is much greater than in a new settlement in the UK, and houses are also more spacious. This encourages people to stay if their circumstances change, and avoids the sense of one part of town being 'better' than any other. There is something for everyone.

To date 6,000 of the 10,800 homes have been built. Due to the downturn the building programme for the last two years has been half of what was planned. A lot of these houses are empty and taking up to two years to sell. Prior to the downturn they would sell 800 houses a year but they are selling around 200. Vathorst should have been completed by 2012 but they are now looking at 2020.

A selection of architecture from Vathorst



Let's go Dutch - Vathorst Joint Venture Company

The Netherlands has long led the way in spatial planning and development. In part this stems from having to reclaim land from the sea, but also is due to the leading role played by the municipalities in promoting local economic and housing development. Like most European countries, the municipalities have set up their own bank (Bank Nederlandse Gemeenten or BNG) which provides funding for drawing up plans and installing basic infrastructure. In the case of Vathorst, the municipality set up a joint company with a consortium of private developers and landowners, with one director each. Risks and profits are shared 50:50. The company's chairman was a well-respected Alderman who had successfully led previous urban extensions, and though he was from the minority Labour Party. The chief executive came from the private sector.



Above: Vathorst centre
 Below: Vathorst District Heating Station

To fund the €750 million required for acquiring and servicing all the land, the company borrowed €250 million for a period of 15 years, with interest payable of 5%. A builder was appointed on a fixed price to install all the roads and infrastructure. The land was pooled and sites allocated to different developers. The method of valuation is a curve based on expected sales value, ranging from 20-30% so on average it is 25%. Sites for social housing are transferred to the local authority at a discount, and then passed on to one of the two housing associations that are partners in the development.

The partnership with the private sector had a number of benefits. The scheme was attractive to the private sector because it took out the major risks, and provided a greater level of security that Vathorst would be delivered as planned. The company with its small staff (around 15) and information centre provided a single point of contact, which simplified decision making. It was attractive to the municipality because it gave them more control over quality and enabled the city to out perform its competitors. Also the city had the basic skills, as it had already developed the successful extensions of Kattenbroek and Nieuwland, and had hired a distinguished Indian architect as masterplanner.

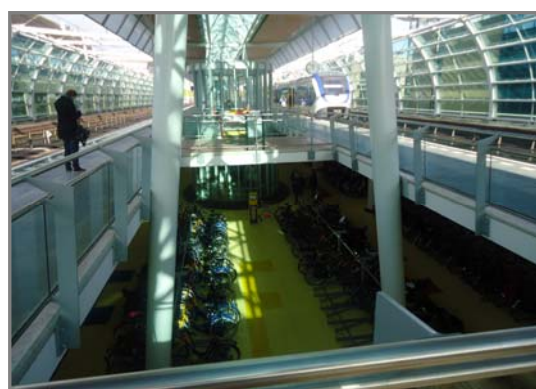
Keep the car in its place – Cycle town Houten

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.



Houten Town Centre and train station

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.



Houten Rail Station cycle park, hire and repair facility

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.



Separate cycle paths in Houten

Houten now ranks 50th out of 450 municipalities in terms of its attractiveness as a place to live. Development is flexible. Thus a new primary school has been built with housing above, and is designed so the ground floor can be turned into housing as and when demand falls off.

A selection of architecture from Houten



Design for adaptability – Houten school and shopping centre

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.



In contrast the new shopping centre, which arrived after most of the housing had been built, looks unwelcoming. Naming a place 'Piazza' is not enough without the right proportions and linkages, and shows the difficulty of combining commercial requirements with community needs. Getting the balance right is key, and emphasises the importance of design briefs and competitions for key elements.



Above: Primary school in Houten with apartments above. Separate cycle paths mean children can ride their bikes to school

Bottom: Houten's new centre 'Castellum' and train station

Enable people to build their own homes - Almere Poort: self-build on a big scale

The new city of Almere to the North of Amsterdam is already as large as Milton Keynes, and is planned to grow much larger. In the past municipalities in growth areas effectively '*rolled out a carpet of development*'. However the international financial crisis has also led to cutbacks in house-building in the Netherlands, and so the municipality has pioneered providing serviced sites for people to commission and build their own homes. In Almere Poort which is one of the last areas of the city to be developed, 2,000 homes have been built, and 5,000 live there in what is effectively a building site, and will eventually provide 14,000 homes.



Piling ceremony in Almere Poort



A selection of self build homes in Almere Poort

The idea of 'self-build' or 'ensemble development' was first promoted by a Labour Alderman and former Dutch MP, who saw it 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, which links Almere through to its attractive coast, but has dispensed with design controls. The basic infrastructure has been put in by the municipality, and all the homes have to be piled. Individuals, and in some cases groups, agree to buy a plot at a price based on its size. They appoint an architect, in some cases choosing a design that is already approved (and costs no more than €170,000), and select contractors, who are usually small builders.



Residents are living on a building site until the development is completed

With plots still selling strongly at 3-5 a week, these already account for some one third of the housing being developed in the city at the present time, as completions in the city as a whole have dropped from 3,000 to 1,200 a year. Property values are set by the level of comparable and competing sites, and the value of the land is determined from a curve, based on some 20-30% of the final value, with a higher price for the most expensive properties. Social housing plots are sold for €30,000 each, and the sales price is capped at €175,000, so land is under 20% of total cost, with the requirement that it is kept as social housing for 25 years. The municipality is transparent in its dealings.



Klokhuis Children designed this building as part of a project to get them more involved in the construction industry. The building is used as an educational centre for construction, housing and healthy living. The building is full of sustainable technologies, including solar panels and a windmill to provide energy.

Creating a place of such distinctiveness has helped generate positive publicity for a city that has suffered from being over-shadowed by a historic town, and which has attracted a higher level of immigrants. It has reinforced the city's image for innovative design, and, for example, children designed the



Almere's redesigned city centre

imaginative Klokhuis, which provides a landmark. A commitment to good design is also shown in the way the city's shopping centre has been re-designed by Rem Koolhaas with housing above sloping streets, with a new theatre overlooking a lake, while exciting housing has been built overlooking new waterways. The combination of contemporary and traditional design side by side helps overcome the sense of everything being new, and also attracts a wider mix of people.

As well as enabling people to get more space than they would otherwise have, and build the home of their dreams, the new homes cost much less to run. This in part stems from higher levels of insulation, but also every home is connected to the district heating scheme, which soon will use waste heat from a power station in Amsterdam. Extensive use is being made of solar power in Almere, including a 'sun island' with an array of solar collectors feeding heat into the district heating system.



Solar panels in Almere Poort

Messages for the UK

Everyone who visits the new Dutch settlements is impressed not only with their quality with comments such as *'I could live here'*, but also by the speed and scale of construction. As their cities face similar challenges to parts of the UK, the experience of the VINEX programme is particularly relevant. Discussions among members suggested five main conclusions:

1. The UK has a long way to go to catch up. Dutch successes have been due to a more collaborative approach to planning, in which the local authority

typically plays a more proactive role. This includes not only commissioning the masterplan, but also investing in the infrastructure. The missing element is a municipal bank that provides funding for infrastructure.

2. Imaginative masterplans, based on neighbourhoods with distinctive characters, and where the car takes second place to walking or cycling, create places with wider appeal. The infrastructure needs to be in at the start, along with the management to make the most of it.
3. UK housebuilders are missing out on a number of potential markets including self-commissioned homes and various forms of cohousing, as well as social housing that appeals to a wider market.
4. The results of planned urban extensions have greatly broadened housing choice, but house prices have still escalated. The places left by people moving out of cities have been taken by immigrants from elsewhere. Hence we should not assume that simply building more homes will tackle the problems of inequality without associated efforts to improve education and child care.