

Making Eco-towns Work: Developing Vathorst, Amersfoort NL

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MAKING ECO TOWNS WORK: Developing Vathorst

One of the key issues for building many more homes at higher environmental standards is how to make them economically viable. As part of the *Eco-towns and Beyond* research project, a team of experts from the UK spent time with the Vathorst Development Company in Amersfoort to understand how the Dutch system worked. This summary report deals in turn with the local context, challenges, features, steps taken and conclusions. Further information is set out in the case studies supporting the final report.

Context

The historic town of Amersfoort near Utrecht in the Netherlands is a good model for how to manage housing growth to achieve attractive new settlements and create balanced communities. It also illustrates how the Dutch have managed to increase the housing stock by 7.6% in ten years in some 90 new settlements. The Dutch have not only built better housing at a much faster rate but have also created communities where children grow up much more happily than in the UK. There is none of the stigma associated with social housing. Facing similar issues, such as living in a crowded country, the Dutch have taken very different approaches to tackling common problems. For example, their traffic engineers have been the inspiration behind innovations like 'shared surfaces' and 'home zones'.

For several years URBED has been running study tours to Amersfoort as part of a wider programme aimed at learning from European 'success stories', and the Dutch approach has been judged to be particularly replicable. Visitors from Cambridgeshire have praised the character and connectivity of the new settlements. Visitors from Harlow liked the way water was used to add value, and how shopping centres are designed to secure mixed uses. Neighbourhoods look distinctive and are 'branded' with different themes. Masterplans make the most of natural features and local history. Brick faced terrace houses with front gardens in a natural setting appeal to British tastes. So how do they manage to build on such a scale?

The *Eco-towns and Beyond* study tour focussed on how the public sector manages growth. A multidisciplinary group met key players from the municipality and the Vathorst Development Company, and toured three new developments as well as seeing the old town. They visited new homes, talked to residents, and then discussed their conclusions.

Challenges

Amersfoort is an attractive historic town within easy reach of the main employment centres in Randstadt, and therefore facing huge growth pressures. The historic core with its canals and ancient buildings has been well conserved. New commercial development has been concentrated around the stylish railway station built some 15 years ago. However, the city needed to grow further if housing was to be affordable to its existing population.

Targeted as a growth point by the government in 1981, the plan was to increase the population from 130,000 to 160,000, which is by almost 40%. The city wanted to stay '*small, beautiful and modest*' and hence to ensure that the extensions were:

- Balanced in terms of population, avoiding disparities between income groups.
- Compact and well linked to the centre, avoiding unnecessary use of the car.
- Attractive and in keeping with the town's traditional character.

The success of their first planned extension of Kattenbroek, which successfully mixed 40% social housing with private housing in units of 300, gave the local authority the confidence to plan the next one, Nieuwland. This focussed on developing sustainable buildings, with an extensive use of solar panels, and was the first scheme they built under the Dutch VINEX Housing Programme, which benefited from incentives from government towards the cost of access and decontaminating land.

Vathorst differs from the earlier urban extensions in being a free-standing settlement of 11,000 new homes complete with a large business park and shopping centre and with community facilities from the start. The municipality had to overcome four main challenges:

- Extending beyond the motorway that had formed a clear boundary.
- Incorporating an existing rural village.
- Building on land occupied by farming and industry.
- Dealing with polluted and low-lying land that was liable to flooding.

Features

The Council believed that if there was to be growth, it should be on their terms. But they did not want growth to cost the existing community anything. The Alderman in charge (a paid Councillor with executive responsibilities) convinced the community over the course of several years that growth would bring benefits. For example otherwise housing would be quite unaffordable for young families, or they might have a scheme imposed by the regional council. Using the same internationally renowned Indian planner who had produced the earlier masterplans, and who was now a Council employee, they planned Vathorst with the idea of providing something for everyone – '*a world of difference: where city and countryside meet*'.

The appeal of Dutch new settlements like Vathorst comes above all from the quality of the public realm. The masterplanner's view is that *'housing does not end at your front door but also involves how you get to the shops'*. Features include:

- Though free standing, the location is accessible both to the old town and to a wide choice of jobs and services.
- Connections were provided to two motorways and a new railway station on the line to Amsterdam.
- Primacy is given to walking and cycling, with the traffic tamed and kept to the periphery.
- There are at least five main neighbourhoods with very different styles from traditional style Dutch town houses on canals to detached houses in rural settings.
- Densities as high as 40-100 units/ha overlooking new canals with on street parking but lower densities of 30/ha in other neighbourhoods.
- Special housing; on the corners create 'pearls in the crown'.
- Social housing is designed to the same high standards as housing for sale and cross-subsidised, and spread amongst each area of 500 units. Generally the most expensive units are not located next to the cheapest.
- Developers choose sustainability features from a range of options, so for example there is a Ground Source Heat Pump scheme heating 600-700 homes and a natural gas district heating system. In all 7% of energy comes from renewables.

Steps taken

A number of steps were taken over the 4-5 year period before building started in 2001. Once agreement had been reached with the government on the size of the extension, the contribution they would make to reclaiming contaminated land and on connecting the settlement to the two motorways it adjoined;

1. Theme groups were set up to develop ideas, such as how people might live in the 21st century. A major idea has been to support cultural development including the idea of people living and working from home.
2. A Joint Development Company was set up between the Council, as one shareholder, and a consortium of five companies as the other. The private investors included those who had bought land in the area but also those who the city wanted to involve because of the good work they had done previously.
3. The Vathorst Development Company (OBV) employs a small staff of under 15 with a Chief Executive from the private sector and a Chairman appointed by the municipality. It works through developers and house-builders, most of whom are

- members of the company and through two social housing companies. It is responsible for;
- a. Land acquisition
 - b. Urban planning
 - c. Engineering
 - d. Commissioning infrastructure
 - e. Allocating sites.
4. The company formally commissioned the masterplan with the City's planner working alongside a notable Dutch urban designer. All the partners were involved in the process. The masterplan is based on four separate districts in very different styles (for example the area known as the Lake uses a modern version of canal side housing with 60% of the homes having views of water, while another is designed to feel like living in the country).
 5. On the basis of the business plan for development of infrastructure and disposals the company borrowed 750 million euros from the Dutch municipal bank Bank Nemeenten (BNG), which is the largest financial body in the Netherlands after the state, at relatively low rates of interest (5%) to be repaid over 15 years.
 6. The borrowings are repaid out of the proceeds from land sales, and the company has built up a 'buffer' which allows it to act entrepreneurially; for example it funded the railway company to open a station several years before the population justified it and it underwrote an entrepreneur to open a restaurant.
 7. Eight different builders and some 50 different architects are involved, with no one architect designing more than 80 units to ensure choice and variety. The social element, which covers both subsidised renting and housing for sale, is allocated through the municipality.
 8. Each shareholder/developer carries out the detailed architectural work for an area which is allocated by the company. The company then use the information to provide the services and infrastructure. When this is ready the site is sold to the developer to construct within an agreed programme. The land value is based on the estimated sales proceeds.
 9. The development company runs an impressive information centre with a large model and information on all the housing that is available at any one time as well as on how the community is developing.
 10. It has set up the Vario Mundo Foundation to promote community development through commissioning artists. It has, for example supported the building of an

impressive community arts centre. It also encourages entrepreneurial businesses, such as the restaurants that provide places to meet.

The Vathorst Development Company was formed in 1998 with the local authority as one shareholder and a consortium of landowners and developers as the other. There was a 2-3 year period in going from the masterplan to detailed design. Once agreements had been secured the building work preceded rapidly, the first houses started in 2001 with occupation in 2002. On average they have delivered 600-700 new homes a year, which is several times the current British rate. Construction of each block of housing took about one year, though this is increasing to two years with more complex designs. They have already finished 4,000 homes and the construction method is generally brick clad concrete tunnel form or precast slabs.

Reasons for success

The Vathorst Development Company considers that successful places, like old towns, are ones *'where different kinds of people want to live together without too sharp contrasts'*. The Chief Executive sees the role of the Development Company as *'facilitating living in a stressful world'* and is therefore not just concerned with achieving housing targets or producing a profit. He stressed the importance of upfront community infrastructure - such as providing a good bus service from the day of the first occupation of a home at a cost of one million euros.

Though agreeing the plans took as much time as it can take in Britain, construction and occupancy in Vathorst has been much quicker. This can be explained by a number of factors, some of which could readily be replicated, but others stem from the Dutch 'polder' mentality of working together for the common good;

1. The initial vision comes from the public sector with the local authority acting as the main champion in response to a challenge set by the national government through their ten year Housing Programme (VINEX).
2. Leadership is provided by a respected local politician, an Alderman, who sees himself as responsible for *'convincing the council about the quality of the plan'*. The political leader works closely with a *'charismatic planner'* who understands how to create memorable places with a spirit of their own. The scheme was not subject to political whims or changes of government.
3. Continuity of senior officers ensures lessons are passed on; the project manager on Vathorst, who has also been with the Council for 20 years, is now working on the growth of the area around the main railway station.

4. A public private partnership provides the basic infrastructure using low cost finance. The Vathorst Development Company has produced a '*mind-shift in working together*' with a Chief Executive from the private sector. The public private partnership was able to tap low cost finance for infrastructure through a national bank which would not otherwise have been available to private developers.
5. The focus is very much on social sustainability. Ensuring a balance of housing at a neighbourhood level (originally 300 now 500 units to reflect four different price ranges plus social housing) helps create cohesive communities. The model Amersfoort pioneered has since been adopted nationally. Achieving a range of price categories not only promotes social integration but also provides a way of cross subsidising the cost of the social housing.
6. Enough developers are involved (around eight) to ensure healthy competition. They in turn employ over 50 different architects (from a panel drawn up by the municipality).
7. Serviced sites are sold to developers on a formula based on 30% of the expected value, and are allocated by the Chief Executive so that each shareholder gets a roughly equal amount.
8. A Quality Panel of recognised experts is used to comment on designs and helps ensure that the principles of the masterplan are continually being applied.
9. Social development has been promoted by a Foundation through an extensive cultural programme that is funded as part of the development. For example an internet system links all the Vathorst pioneers, with a great party to launch building works.
10. Success is monitored both in terms of quantitative performance indicators and attitudes. As a result the Development Company is continually learning from experience, and is able to exert influence on developers because it knows best what the community wants.

Conclusion

The most important innovation as far as the study tour was concerned was that the Joint Venture Company was not dependant on always going back to the government for more funds on a regular basis, nor were they entirely dependent on developers' sales - although they are in the long run. Hence they can determine their priorities within overall objectives such as balancing community issues with delivering new homes.

As they control the land, they are able to fund the provision of infrastructure. They also have a greater degree of flexibility over how the masterplan is implemented than in the UK. Thus plans have had to be revised to take account of a greater than expected use of cars due to a relatively high number of incomers from outside the Amersfoort area who have moved there because of the convenience of the new settlements. This has required more space for parking than was planned. It has caused particular problems around the schools, which are in the centre rather than the edge. They have also had to modify the plans as developers were finding it easier to sell homes priced at less than 300,000 euros.

