

DISCUSSION DRAFT

THE VINEX STORY

new Dutch suburbs

Dutch Study Tour | Barton LLP
23 & 24 July 2012

Summary report



Dutch Study Tour Summary Report

**Barton LLP
23 & 24 July 2012
Produced by URBED
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This article draws conclusions from the recent Barton LLP study tour to new communities in the Netherlands.

Led by URBED, with advice from their Dutch associate Han Lörzing, Sector Head at the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research in The Hague, a group of outstanding places were picked which have similarities to Oxfordshire and could provide inspiration for Barton. As well as looking at innovative places, delegates met up with officers, politicians and experts and were given opportunity to discuss as a team some key issues. *“I thought that the visit was interesting at a number of levels and particularly felt that the time available to mix with colleagues from Grosvenor, and the consultancy team was highly beneficial in terms of developing those relations and being able to discuss the many sites and developments that we saw.” (SS)*

Delegates cycled around the communities of Houten and Vathorst by bike and on the second day hired a coach which gave a good feel for the wider area and enabled individuals to see the reclamation area of Almere with its self build suburbs as well as the outstanding new shopping centre there.

The tour highlighted how invaluable it is to **‘look and learn’** and drove home the sustainability principles which have been previously discussed. As one delegate noted, *“It was great to see what is possible; all those ideas we have of what is exemplary and there they were in the flesh, built. It has helped to set sights that bit higher and challenge perceived norms.” (MCB)*

Observations of delegates have been recorded under six key conclusions. Delegates were as follows:

Richard Burton, Technical Director, Terrance O’Rourke	(RB)
Van Coulter, Cllr for Barton and Sandhills, Oxford City Council	(VC)
Ed Skeates, Project Director, Grosvenor Developments	(ES)
Paul Comerford, Director, AECOM	(PC)
Andy Sharpe, Senior project director, Grosvenor	(AS)
Brian Plumb, Director, WSP Group	(BP)
Matthew Davis, Associate Director, Savills	(MD)
Steve Spencer, Head of Corporate Assets, Oxford City Council	(SS)
Jane Winfield, Major projects and disposals manager, Oxford City Council	(JW)
Peter Thompson, Chair, Oxford Civic Society	(PT)
David Edwards, Director, Oxford City Council	(DE)
Michael Crofton-Briggs, Head of City Development, Oxford City Council	(MCB)
Nicholas Falk, Founding Director, URBED	(NF)
Jessamy Bousie, URBED	(JB)

1. The Dutch have built large amounts of new housing in suburban extensions to help rebalance communities as well as to support local economic development, often next to main roads

- a) Communities are built extremely fast. In Vathorst the speed of building out once plans conceived, peaked at 1000 units plus per year, now still looking at 300 for this year. (AS)
- b) Traffic noise from any high-speed road (over 50kph) is screened either by commercial developments, or acoustic barriers – the latter very obtrusive in some cases. (PT)
- c) The role of commercial to screen / noise and sight of key transport corridors – indeed often the absence of homes in such locations is not an issue for schemes or that community’s identity but a positive statement about enclosure and defensible/owned space away from the negatives of the main route passing the site. (PC)
- d) Good examples of how the edge to A40 could be treated: Hedging and avenue trees provide green screen but not a barrier. On street perpendicular parking. 3 storey residential (RB)
- e) In contrast, land in Britain is more expensive, despite not having to be reclaimed from the sea or from being under water. Less building is taking place in the green belts adjacent to the major conurbations. The Dutch are more receptive towards the idea of building new homes within green spaces. The outcome is that the Dutch home is significantly bigger and significantly cheaper than the British equivalent. Is this a reason why, in particular, the Dutch are happier? (VC)

Overview of respective property prices: Oxford and Amersfoort, 2012 (£0.80 = €1)

Property type	Oxford (£) ^a	Property type	Amersfoort (£) ^b	Floor area*
		For discounted sale - 2 bed social apartment [§]	109,000	60-65 m ²
Flat or apartment	232,570	2 bed apartment	119,200	58 m ²
		3 bed apartment	138,400	60 m ²
Terrace house	317,605	2 bed terrace house	143,600	85 m ²
		4 bed courtyard house	157,520	90 m ²
Semi-detached house	413,725	4 bed canal side terrace house	174,800	111 m ²
		5 bed town house	280,000	149 m ²
Detached house	545,875	5 bed detached house	531,200	230 m ²

* Available for Dutch properties only and listed for illustration

[§] Available for qualifying residents as a social home at a discount of twenty-five percent - £ 109,000 includes discount

^a Historic average sales price by property type as reported by Land Registry for the 371 Oxford properties sold on and between 1 January and 31 March 2012

^b Asking price for new properties by type in Amersfoort, July 2012 – for conversion, assumed £0.80 = €1.00

2. New housing is designed to appeal to a much wider range of people than in the UK, and the neighbourhoods have distinct identities, from the very urban to the rural

- a) Occasional use of special materials such as thatched roofs, work well as landmark buildings and help provide distinctive character in the area. (AS)
- b) Soft and hard landscaping excellent – defines different character areas. (JW)
- c) Opportunities for variety came though variety between blocks of development not between units within a block. (MCB)
- d) Small builders on plots of ten homes, and self-commissioned houses add to visual variety and choice (NF)
- e) Apartments adjoin luxury homes, flats for elderly or disabled abut each. This allows for inclusion of those less-able and better balanced communities. I am encouraged by this mix (VC)
- f) The role for landmark / quirks to enhance identity (PC)
- g) The importance of distinctiveness and moving away from standard responses to create identity, pride and ownership amongst the new community (PC)

3. The quality of the architecture stands out due to the materials, workmanship and a variety of design from traditional to contemporary

- a) Larger internal spaces allow for greater flexibility in use, with scope for extensions (NF)
- b) Quality of houses lifted by quality and size of windows and doors. Areas that looked best had common colour pallet for doors/windows/shutters whilst the pallet of brick varied. (AS)
- c) The most effective designs seemed to be those which got the proportions right, rather than the variety. More effort seemed to be made to emulate the haphazardly-evolved city street rather than the classical uniform terrace (PT)
- d) Lessons for design code; no upvc and generous proportions for windows and doors (PC)

4. It is easier to reach jobs and services because the new communities are located near existing centres and railway lines, and it is safe and quick to get on your bike (with attractive underpasses and priority at roundabouts)

- a) Car is guest. Peripheral external roads with access to the main road network, but internal layout focused to the bike/ walking. (BP)
- b) The areas we visited were large enough to house numerous facilities (education, leisure, retail, commercial etc), more than we are expecting to provide at Barton. As such, travel connectivity seemed aimed at the daily commute to the city, rather than day to day living. This highlighted to me even more the importance of connectivity at Barton – it will be very easy to feel isolated and “locked in” at Barton if travel connectivity is not right. (MD)
- c) Interesting role of internal distribution roads and their ability to be separate from roads feeding homes (our mews’ etc) and those such as our middle street (PC)
- d) There are benefits of designing for cars only and not buses on roads (PC)
- e) There was no pre-occupation of having bus stops every 400m. (AS)
- f) Bus stops were located a distant from many residences (though bike parking was provided at some of them) (PT)
- g) Excellent integration and facilities for pedestrians and cyclists at rail stations (DE)

- h) Excellent approaches to underpasses and roundabouts for pedestrian and cycle safety (PC)
- a) Very good internal route system for walking and cycling within the development, no real barriers to movements. (BP)
- b) Good integrated parking solutions (DE)
- c) Each of the new communities in Holland illustrates a strict control of vehicles within the built up space. In the main, only residents and visitors have call to enter specific residential sectors in the new community – with all other motorized traffic referred to a ring road (VC)
- d) A large variation in parking methods used across project including underground, podium, undercroft, car port, on plot, integral, rear court and front court. (AS)
- e) Transport solutions are clearly very carefully thought out. Cycling is clearly the default mode for most journeys around neighbourhoods; it is simply that even car-owners seem to choose to use a bike for most of their journeys as a matter of preference. (PT)

5. The developments have a low carbon impact, as water is retained on site, energy comes from local sources (including heat pumps and CHP), and waste is sorted and recycled.

- a) Very effective use of landscaping, including hedges and water (DE)
- b) Other than a few key examples there was limited focus on the generation of renewable energy (PV cells, wind turbines etc), but rather on the reduction in energy consumption – this ties in very well with the “fabric first” approach highlighted and supported by the members of the Barton House Builder Forum (MD)
- c) Extensive greenery softens the buildings and helps keep them cool (NF)
- d) Modern Methods of Construction and high performance windows help reduce energy consumption (NF)
- e) Underground waste storage requires fewer trips for waste removal (NF)



Environments designed with children in mind - Houten, NL

6. Schools act as community hubs, with housing over the primary schools, and children grow up in a less sheltered environment (which may explain why surveys show they are much happier)

- a) Houten school yards can be used by all community out of hours – good use of space. (RB)
- b) No concerns of overlooking of school, residential apartments straight above school, also minimum fencing around the schools, say 1.1m high. (AS)
- c) The De Kamers community centre in Vathorst was a not only an attractive building but was a good example of a multipurpose building to attract people to the community (i.e. theatre, music, art, productions) as well as providing a space for local residents to hire for games, events, community evenings etc (JB)

7. Developments are undertaken through partnerships in which the local authorities play a leading role, including funding land assembly and basic infrastructure.

- a) Overall set a clear vision and master plan and initial tight constraints which can then be relaxed later rather than too relaxed initially and needing to tighten later. (MCB)
- b) Collaborative model of working between landowner and local authority using a joint venture with local authority funding infrastructure and promoting development (DE)
- c) 'Self-build' was successful where effectively controlled using design codes and high quality design. (DE)
- d) From the meeting we had with Bert Van Der Werff of the City Council at Vathorst, it appeared that the public sector remained part of the development process much longer than is usual in the UK and than we are anticipating at Barton. As I understood it the council bought up land it did not already own, secured outline permission and provides key infrastructure, and then formed JV partnerships with developers to develop the housing (and ancillary development). This allowed the development industry to share the market risk with the public sector - perhaps allowing house builders to take more risks with new products and ideas? (MD)
- e) I think it would be interesting to understand more fully the relationship in Holland between central and local government and other agencies in terms of bringing forward a development, I wonder if there may be some interesting lessons there in terms of developing city deal offers (SS)
- f) Detailed mapping of social groups before development identifies where demand will come from and can be translated into the type and design of properties provided. (JW)
- g) We must also acknowledge the role of upfront government funded infrastructure and the timing of community facility provision that might not necessarily be recreated at Barton (PC)

8. Make the public realm outstanding

- a) The Dutch make use of water. It should be possible to enhance the community facilities within the new Barton development by adapting the meadow and brook to provide for a leisure opportunity (i.e. Barton Children's Project) (VC)
- b) Importance of water in creating attractive settings (AS)

- c) Use of mature trees gives countryside feel. (JW)
- d) Generosity of space / maturity of green spaces that are fully exploited and provide huge 'softening' benefits (PC)
- e) Public realm, green areas not finely manicured but still well kept (AS)
- f) Excellent extensive use of low boundary hedges lend softness to the environment rather than using fences or walls which are harder (MCB)
- g) Widened 'high street' with parking good example of how Middle Street by retail could be configured. Market enlivens public space. Opportunity for taller residential building? (RB)
- h) Lack of signs and superfluous highway 'furniture' gave a clean and uncluttered effect (ES)
- i) Paving (especially smaller paved units) common throughout – this makes a big difference to the overall character of spaces (RB)
- j) Playgrounds were everywhere but were simple in design and materials providing a cost effective way of integrating the community (JB)
- k) Timber used a lot adding to feel of nature pulled into town - public parking courts become play areas and spaces to meet (RB)

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