

URBAN CULTURE IN NEW TOWN ALMERE

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ABSTRACT: A New town, in theory, should be fundamentally different from homogenous residential suburbanization. The big question we ask in this paper is, therefore: how can an artificially planned new city achieve self-sustained social-cultural vitality and real urban quality? We will first give a concise analysis of the main top-down planning and strategies that serve for this purpose and then evaluate the actual effects by means of interviews and questionnaires. The aim is to understand the city's urban culture through the angle of daily life of local people. Valuable, first-hand opinions and suggestions can be utilized as references for future urban transformation in the new town.

KEYWORDS: social-cultural vitality; interviews, spatial planning and design, daily activities

1. INTRODUCTION TO ALMERE

Almere is a city in the middle of the Netherlands, built on reclaimed land in 1976. Therefore, it is a New Town that has been designed from scratch; on the basis of an empty, open field. The city was originally planned as a solution for housing shortages in the western provinces of the Netherlands, particularly for the city of Amsterdam. [1]

1.1. Why moving to Almere – interviewee's opinions

The most obvious reason for moving to new town Almere is because of the availability of relatively cheap and spacious housing, especially single-family housing. The fast increase of Almere's population has proved that the strategy is successful. People indeed choose to come and settle. Except for a student who was born in Almere, the rest of our 11 interviewees moved to Almere from elsewhere. Most of them lived in the provinces of Noord-Holland or Utrecht before, e.g. from Amsterdam and the Gooi area. A 25 year-old immigrant mentioned that, when his family was looking for housing in the Netherlands in the 1980s, they considered Amsterdam as "a dark, unsafe and chaotic place". They preferred new housing and a new urban environment; they first lived in Lelystad and moved to Almere in 1990. Another engineering student said that she had a long wish to move to Almere, because she felt excited to see the growing process of the new city. The atmosphere of people building the city and starting to settle down together is special, especially in the case of Haven. Since there are many housing choices in the new city, people are often changing their residence within the city; moving to new neighbourhoods. These people are called 'wijk-hoppers' ('neighbourhood-jumpers'). The municipality Almere is obliged to provide housing for disabled people. The wife of one of the interviewees is disabled and needs, therefore, a house that is adjusted to her needs. They moved to Almere because such a house was available quickly, compared to other cities.

2. MAIN PLANNING STRATEGIES

The Structure Vision of 1961 contained the first sketches of the New Towns Almere and Lelystad; both to be build on the man-made province of Flevoland. In 1966, the governmental document 'Tweede Nota over

de Ruimtelijke Ordening' ('Second Memo on Spatial Planning') recommended housing for half a million inhabitants from the Randstad and Gooi conurbations in Flevoland. In a subsequent document in 1975, the 'Third Memo', Almere was further designated as one of ten 'groeikernen' ('centres of growth'). [5]

In the 1970s, western planners no longer believed in the possibility of designing a detailed urban structure for the long term. The first concept for Almere was based on a central node, with a maximum of 100.000 inhabitants, surrounded by smaller nodes. Instead of defining a coherent image for the city, the 'Draft Structure Plan for Almere' (1977) of the 'Rijksdienst voor de IJsselmeerpolders', described an urban district containing five separate centres of growth. [5] This structure of multiple nodes (Fig.1) is an element that has stayed throughout the development of the plans. This structure provides the city with the possibility to grow in a flexible way in a green structure. [6] The separate nodes were being designed in order to complement each other; each with a different character. There would be one main city centre, but each residential area would have its own facilities as well. Differentiation of the nodes would be reached by differences in size, character, location, density and perhaps even population. [4] Additionally, this polycentric structure gives the different cores the opportunity to create their own identity. This is indeed what has happened; Haven is village-like, Stad is urban and Buiten is rural.

Almere became an individual municipality in 1984. The city's Mayor of that time, Han Lammers, made sure that Almere became one municipality, even though it is constructed of separate districts. [6]

The areas between the nuclei consist largely of greenery and waterways for recreational purposes (Fig.1). These zones penetrate deep into the nuclei, thereby serving as many houses as possible. Ring roads are provided to keep through traffic out of the residential areas. The links between the nuclei are reserved for public transport and cyclists. [5]



Figure 1: Urban and Green/Water Structure of Almere

2.1. Housing typology

The city of Almere consists mainly of low-rise buildings. With the British New Towns in mind, the designers of Almere decided that this Dutch city would not be developed as an area with high-rise buildings. Interestingly, this decision was made in the 1970s; when high-rise was still the main form of residential building in the Netherlands. And, in this time, it became obvious in the county that the commonly preferred housing typology was low-rise building. The key reasons for choosing for low-rise building were social and financial; low-rise provided the living conditions preferred by potential future inhabitants (mainly youngsters) and it was to build cheaper as well. [4]

The housing typology in Almere varies, but terraced housing is dominating; it encompasses 62% of the total housing stock. The city has a relatively high percentage of private housing ownership (over 60%), compared to the average in the Netherlands (under 54%). The older neighbourhoods of Almere (especially Haven) show a higher number of rental houses than the newer areas. [3]

2.2. Almere Haven

Almere Haven is the first node; its construction started in 1977. Haven consists mainly of a multiplicity of small, relatively compact and individually designed living areas. As the city lacks natural diversity related to time periods, the planners decided that this diversity should be created. Therefore, a strict, systematic description of the urban plan was being developed. Foreign designers were invited to make neighbourhood plans. Different from other nodes, most of housing clusters in Almere Haven encompass inner yards where own facilities can be found. (Fig. 2)

Haven is the 'village' of the city. This is not only because of its urban design, but also for its peripheral location. It is positioned at the southern side of the highway A6 and at the edge of the lake Gooimeer. Also, the city district of Haven has no train connection. [4]

Compared to the common Dutch urban design, Haven has been designed in a very different way. In that time (the 1970s), straight, strict lines were accepted as Modernist design; a milestone even though it had its problems in use. Contrastingly, Haven was designed with an irregular, quasi organic structure, called Cul-de-sac. [6]

A minimum of straight lines was used in the urban design, together with hardly any division of living and working. Bus stops, shopping centres and car parking are all on a short distance of the residences. The design was based on studies of old cities at the waterside; that atmosphere and cosiness should exist in Almere Haven as well. [4]

The press was the first to start criticizing this new concept, but soon other people took over the complaints. Except for the inhabitants of the new neighbourhood; they loved their new city core. The centre of Haven is probably still the most popular one in the current city of Almere. [6] However, the centre of Haven was never meant to become the main centre of the city. Therefore, this centre is not allowed to grow too large.



Figure 2: Structure vision of Almere Haven and Neighbourhood Typology (1977) [7]

2.3. Almere Stad

The first tree in the future district of Almere Stad was planted in 1978, while the first families arrived in their new homes in 1980. Just like the inhabitants of Almere Haven, the new inhabitants of Stad had to contribute to the development of the city; like pioneers. The first inhabitants of Stad were not very content with the quality of their homes. There had been a hard pressure on finishing the houses on time, what caused failures in the quality. [6]

This main core of the city of Almere was designed in the middle of the city area on purpose; to stimulate an even division of traffic over the city, to limit the average distance for inhabitants and to have a strong position in the region. (Fig. 3)

The houses in this district were designed with a clear front- and backside. The front (the public side) is situated at a street or square and the backside (the private side) is provided with a garden. Also, a marginal zone was introduced; Oscar Newman's 'defensible space'. This is a zone of one meter width, situated at the front of the house, providing a small space between public (the city) and private (the house). [4]



Figure 3: Structure vision of Almere Stad and Neighbourhood Typology (1977) [7]

2.4. Almere Buiten

The first neighbourhood of Almere Buiten was designed in 1982. At that time, the city was growing rapidly. This new city district, of which the building started in 1983, is popular among the future inhabitants. However, professionals doubt whether Almere should grow this quickly; perhaps the development of Buiten is coming too soon. [6] This city district was planned in the north-eastern part of the city, as the train to Lelystad was already crossing this area and it was close to both the main centre and the first large business district of Almere. (Fig. 4)

The plan for this district was to create a true ‘outside’ area, with lower densities than Almere Stad, much greenery, large gardens and more possibilities for housing ownership. Almere Buiten has developed as the ‘green’ node. [4]

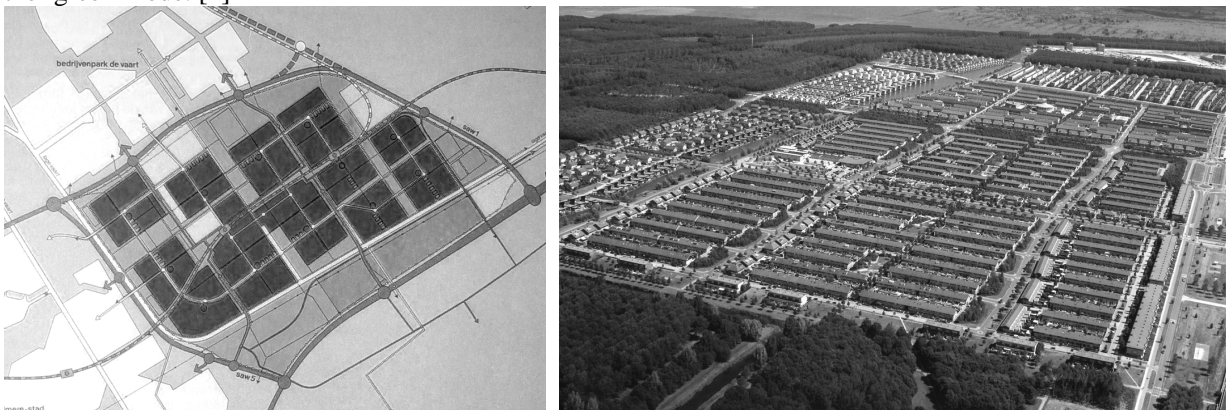


Figure 4: Structure vision of Almere Buiten and Neighbourhood Typology (1977) [7]

2.5. City Centre by O.M.A.

Instead of city a centre, the lake ‘Weerwater’ was designed in the geographical centre of the Almere Stad. It is a deliberate signal that Almere is an untraditional city without a real centre. Also, the name of the lake refers to the reclaimed land on which the city is build; ‘Weerwater’ can be translated as ‘Water again’.

In 1997, the municipality of Almere decided that it was time to start the development of a new centre; as the city would grow in the coming decades. A program of requirements was being produced. The new centre, ‘Stadshart Almere’ (City heart Almere), should become the main core of the whole city. [8] The northern part of the centre, above the railway line, would become a business centre. The southern part, between the railway and the artificial lake ‘Weerwater’, would become an area of shops, housing, cultural facilities and entertainment. (Fig. 5) [9]

The key element of O.M.A.'s (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) design is the vertical separation of functions. The public facilities and housing are situated at ground level; while basements, parking and service entrances are located at a lower level. The ground floor level is lifted above the parking garages that are positioned underneath. The design contains two main axes, crossing each other at the highest point. [8]

The area located near the lake is mainly in use as an entertainment zone; this is where the cultural centre, cinema, theatre and cafés are located. The main axes, linking the train station and the lake, are only accessible for pedestrians and contain shopping facilities. Cafés and restaurants are concentrated at the squares 'Grote Markt' and 'Belfort'.



Figure 5: Aerial and street views of the new city centre

2.6. First Image of the City

Almere is characterized mainly as a residential town. However, it strives to be different than other types of suburban development, e.g. VINEX, by creating and promoting urban cultural life in the town. The sub-centres of Haven and Buiten seem not to serve this purpose enough, according to the interviewees. The municipality expects to establish a distinct urban identity by building up the large-scale new city centre. Has it become the single most essential element to recognize the town? Or what are the first mental pictures when people referring to their own town.

The result shows that only about a quarter (27%) of the interviewees clearly pinpoint the city centre. Two of them are young students, who enjoy the new facilities; the other middle-age person had in mind the silhouette of high-rises of the city centre viewing from Weerwater and highway A6. The two interviewees who are living in Almere Haven have the strongest impression of their own neighbourhood centre, which proves that the urban design of that centre is effective. About 1/3 (37%) said the general feelings, such as brand-new, modern, spacious and clear spatial organization are most impressive. About a quarter (27%) mentioned the feeling of witnessing the growing and changing of Flevoland Polder. Obviously, panorama views of the polder from surrounding open water are memorable. Some also notice other elements, like fenced bus lanes running through the city and an art work in public space (e.g. an elephant statue next to the highway). And, naturally, some think of their own house (and garden) as a first mental image.

In conclusion of the interviews, we can see that the city centre is more popular with youngsters. When talking about their city, people tend to think of the new town as a whole picture. It means that the special way of urban development – all at once from empty land - and the way of spatial organization have become trademarks of the town. We can also see that all the cognitive impressions of the city are spatially attached.

2.7. Character of the City

About two third (64%) of the interviewees prefer a combination of city-like quality and quiet suburban life. In other words, a mild degree of vitality, with activities especially fit for suburban living. The rest prefer urban quality, e.g. a bustling city centre and sub-centres, so that they can find activities and facilities in their vicinity. All women interviewees and, surprisingly, 3 out of 4 students voted for a combination of both qualities. This means that students can find their place in the suburb new town; for example, the engineering student is socially active and taking a part-time job in the city. She thinks Almere is turning into a real city where she can get everything she needs.

People should stop asking Almere to become the same city like Amsterdam; the young artist enjoys staying with a group of friends who are commonly interested in making art works in the centre of Almere Haven where art is the key element in the urban design. The 52 year-old male from Buiten voted for more urban quality, but he added that he is satisfied with his country-side like neighbourhood and peaceful living atmosphere. At the same time, the sub-centre of Almere Buiten gives a sense of livelihood. The 57 years old male who lives also in Buiten points out that people should be brought together; otherwise there will be too much individualism.

Concluding, we can say that suburban living quality is the unique quality of Almere, but a certain extent of urban quality should be integrated.

2.8. Feedbacks on New Centre

When further asked about their opinions towards the new city centre, group's reactions are diverse. On the one hand, 9 of 11 of them agree that new urban centre makes Almere a livelier city than before; but more than 1/3 of them have strong negative opinions about it. These middle-age interviewees described it to be too modern, boring and sterile, exciting outside but invisible inside, appreciated by youth but not by elderly. According to them, this opinion is shared by more inhabitants. The couple who lives in Literatuurwijk find that the old centre becomes downgraded and emptier and not integrated with the new centre. The facilities indeed provide people with more activities: sports, dining, meeting friends, going to the cinema or the casino and of course shopping. It is told that the centre is especially busy on Thursday evening because it is the premier day of new movies. It is very crowded and even difficult to find a parking space. The father enjoys accompanying his daughter to play harp in the new theatre (Kunstlinie). However, people also notice several unsatisfied or unpleasant factors in the new centre. For example, the young artist notices the emptiness of the main city centre at certain periods of the day. The interviewee who lives near city centre cared about the increase of robbery convicted by youth lately. From the first glance, programs are mixed in the centre, but how to explain the emptiness? Further observation is needed. Other complaints include no cover for bad weather, some steep and slippery part of the ground surface, too formal and lacking of diversity. So far, nobody notices downgrading of their own neighbourhood centre.

To conclude, the new city centre is indeed a positive boost for the urban life of Almere citizens, especially among young people. But not everyone likes its modern style, and they miss the cosy atmosphere of a traditional city centre. The new centre also brings social nuisance. It has not become a major worry so far, but the CCTV system (camera surveillance) all over the new centre shows planners' concerns.



Figure 6: Separation of different traffic modes

2.9. Opinions on Infrastructure

The city is designed to be pedestrian/cyclist prioritized (Fig. 6). Besides the main roads, the local street networks in each smaller neighbourhood are designed in a Cul-de-sac way. The connections to the main road system are limited, not explicitly shown and not directly connected. An interesting phenomenon is shown:

for visitors/outsideers it is difficult and confusing to find orientation; but once you get familiar with the structure, it is safe and easy to get everywhere, which all the interviewees agree upon. Except for two interviewees who live in Haven and Muziekwijk, they consider it is easier to get lost in Almere Haven as the roads are curved. Interviewees also have consensus on the convenience and safety of public transport and bike routes. Everything seems to be easily reachable by bike; however, the routes are sometimes experienced as boring. The separation of car, bus, bike and pedestrian route makes driving in this city easier than in an average city. Car drivers do not experience normal traffic situations that occur on a mixed use street. This is the reason that Almere is not qualified for driving license tests. For example, there are no crossings with trains in the whole of the province of Flevoland.

Although the internal traffic network is fine with local inhabitants, they do experience many traffic jams; mainly concerning external connections between Almere and the ‘main land’. There are often traffic jams on, for example, the highways A6, A1 and A27 and the Buitenhoude Dreef. There are also complaints about the congestions on main roads and bad circulation in city centre. The dull, blocked (by trees) and unrecognizable views along the main roads is also a noticeable issue.

3. URBAN CULTURE – URBAN VITALITY

Almere does not intend to stay merely as a vast residential town. It is eager to reach real urban qualities, that is, to allow its inhabitants to have normal urban life as in a traditional city. In fact, the top-down efforts have taken effect. 8 out of 11 interviewees agree that Almere is already a lively city; 1 person said it is turning into a real city, but not yet; only a middle-age couple who both work outside Almere and dislike the city centre consider Almere not lively.

To specify the reasons why they think it has become a lively city, four of our pre-set answers – shopping, indoor cultural and sports activities, and urban design of public spaces and city centre - received equal percentages (36%). People tend to appreciate the outdoor recreational activities more (55%), e.g. holiday in the nice green and water. And outdoor events like festivals, city events count less for liveliness (27%).

When people settle down with their new home, they naturally go out looking for social cultural and leisure activities. One of our key criteria to quantify if the new town is vital is to measure the participation of out-of-house activities of local inhabitants. Each of the 11 interviewees was questioned about what kind of activities they take part in, the locations, frequencies, and transportation modes. As a result, we not only obtained maps of individual daily life patterns (Fig.7), but also statistical results of their preferences (Fig.8).

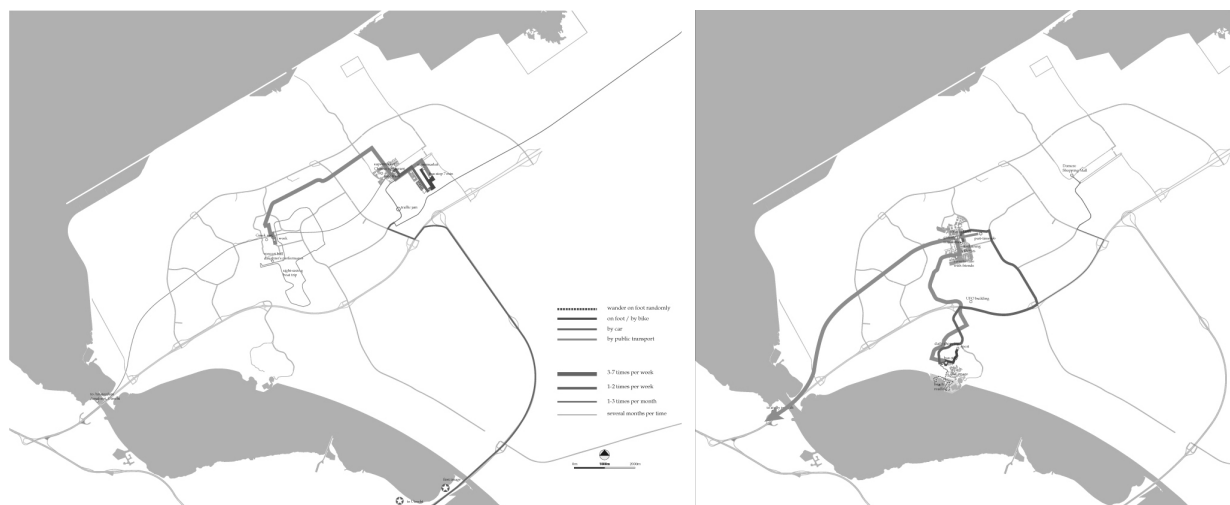


Figure 7: individual daily life pattern

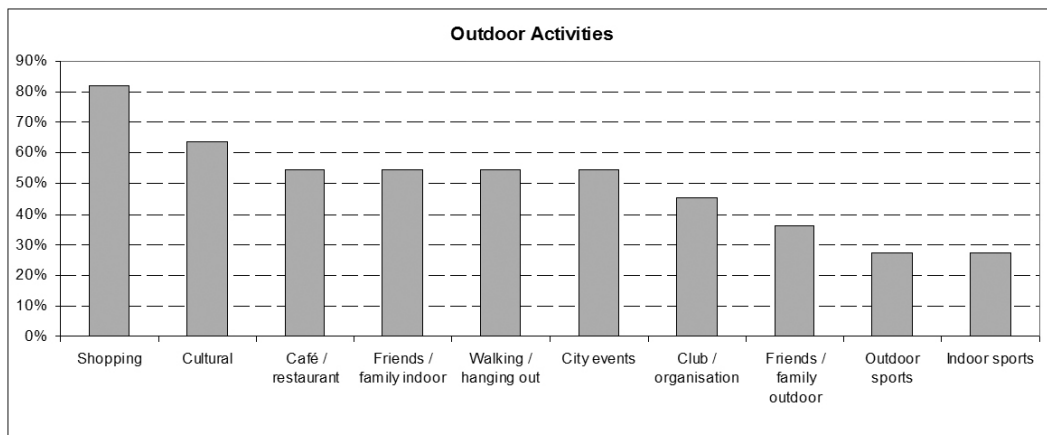


Figure 8: Preferred outdoor activities in Almere and its surroundings

From the maps we can see that people make use of and fit themselves into the spatial conditions that are given to them quite well. Most of their daily activities happen around their homes. They do grocery and daily shopping in their local centres; they visit the green park and open space nearest to their house. Many people visit the city centre on weekly basis. Activities in far locations take place once every several months. When travelling into the city, people prefer to use public transport or bike. But as can be expected, cars are the most frequently used transportation tool. It will be more revealing to compare the data from a new town with a traditional city to evaluate whether or not the new town has achieved an average stage.

3.1. Suggestions for Future Development

Then we come to the core question of the whole research, that is, how to improve the urban vitality in new town Almere. It was observed that the interviewees had to think harder and be more creative and subjective about the answer than the rest of the questionnaire (Fig. 9).

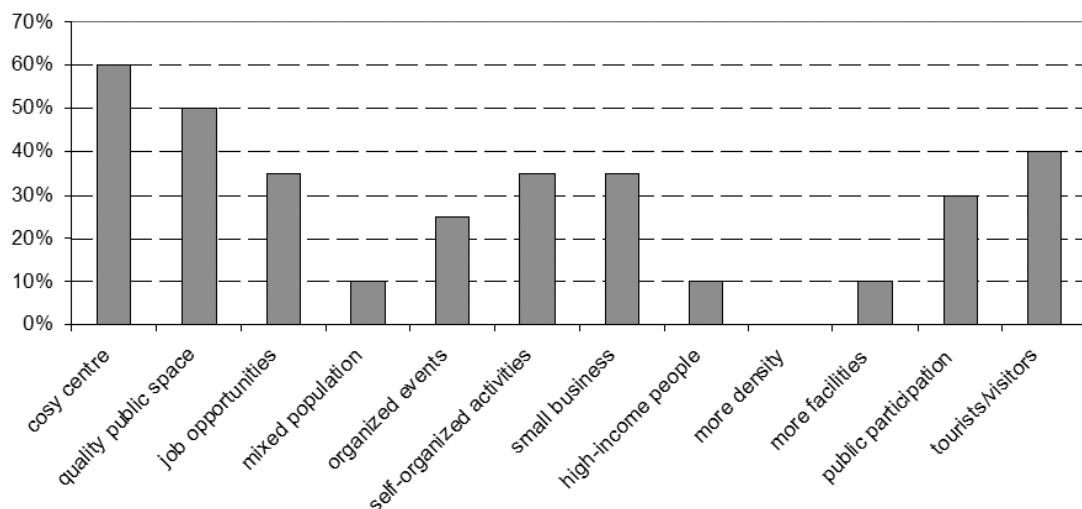


Figure 9: Suggestions for improving urban vitality of Almere

The most wished change from the group of interviewees is to have a cosy city centre and better quality public space. The wishes are specified that a cosy centre with greenery, cafe, restaurants, small fun stores

and terraces. People also strongly agree on the idea of encouraging more small shops/business and self-organized activities. They suggested creating more job opportunities in Almere, e.g. lowering the rent for small business; high-standard job and educational facilities to attract highly-educated people. The young artist emphasized that the municipality should support more cultural events that are initiated by locals. There are plenty of top-down organized activities in the city but they tend to be too formal, and not always generate interactive communication. Besides, people in Almere Haven seem to be afraid of changes; except for the emerging young generation who desire a more urban live style.

Interestingly, there is less demand for new facilities than expected. Two students mentioned there should be more facilities for the youth. Currently, a lot of activities are mainly for the elderly. It makes an interesting, paradoxical statement. The older inhabitants consider the new city centre as less interesting for them than for young people; while the young think there are fewer activities for them than for the elderly. We can conclude that they are both true. There should be more consideration for traditional elements and atmosphere in parts of the new centre for the 'imported' inhabitants; and more organized or self-organized and less-formal, active facilities or events for younger generation.

Concerning the social composition, only two of the interviewed students agree to have a more mixed population with different cultural backgrounds. Most of the people find the current mixture (higher ratio of immigrants than in average Dutch cities) not problematic, but have no wish to have more social diversity. The same goes for density. Although they would like to see more people on the streets and welcome more visitors to their town, no one in the group voted for increasing current housing density as a means to achieve that goal.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As a new town built from scratch, Almere has gradually become a lively city with real urban quality; after a little over 30 years of development. Urban planning and design has become the most distinct feature and identity of this town. The 'hardware', spatial organization, provides conditions for the growth of 'software', social cultural life in the city. People are basically content with the combination of their suburban living environment with a certain degree of urban liveliness.

However, they desire for further improvements of their urban lives, no matter which social groups they belong to. The main requirements include integrating traditional urban quality (cosiness), more facilities and activities for the youth and encouraging self-initiated social cultural events and small, local businesses. People are not only concerned about how to enjoy their environment better, but also wish to see the sustainable development of the city.

In order to achieve social economical development in the future, suggestions are given for the municipality to create more jobs and attract more highly-educated people. More than one of them warned that attentions should not only be concentrating on new expansions, but maintaining and uplifting the existing urban fabric as well as 'old' inhabitants. This research provides such an evaluation on urban culture in Almere after the build-up of the new city centre. Future recommendation would be to expand the poll of interviewees to get sound statistical results; participatory workshops can also be organized to transform ideas into spatial terms as the next step of this research.

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