

[Presentation by Adri Duivesteijn \(Dutch Senate representative for Almere\)](#)

Brief background:

- Adri became involved in the urban renewal project in the Hague, the Netherlands, 40 years ago and then became responsible for urban planning and architecture.
- He subsequently became the Director of the National Dutch Museum for Architecture and then a Member of Parliament for the Social Democratic Party.
- He is now a member of the Senate and was responsible for City Planning in the City of Almere for seven years. Almere is a new city – 35 years old – and part of the Amsterdam metropolitan area.

There are a lot of opportunities in city planning and in thinking about the future, whether that be in terms of sustainability, the economic possibilities, or social policies. The most important part of policy is a consideration of how to involve the people in the city itself. People are creating the city, but in society as it exists – as we experience every day – there are many obstacles for the people to really get involved. A very important consideration is how to establish a new commitment of the people to the city. The most important developments in city centres tend to be very commercial. There is nothing wrong with commercial activities, but this influences the design and architecture of the city. In the Netherlands most of the city centres are very similar – the same structures, architecture, the same shops and so on. It is difficult to change that, but when the people of the city are involved in the economic activities or in the social activities or in the building process, then you are able to create neighbourhoods; it changes the quality of the city itself. Almere is complex because it is a completely new city and everything in that city was planned and is still planned. Seven years ago there was a change in policy, from working with blueprints to a more organic growth in the city – more organic development. The people of the city were given the first right to build their own homes; more than 2,000 households took up the opportunity to do so. As a new city, Almere does not have a city centre like Amsterdam and with the organic growth – the organic way of planning – it has more layers than would normally be the case and that is most important.

Adri referenced the “Almere Principles” (attached) - a manifesto written with William McDonough (founder of the ideas of Cradle to Cradle) in 2008 when the ideas for Almere were being developed. It is a Manifesto for sustainable development with seven Principles such as (i) ‘Cultivate diversity’ – important at each step and level; and (ii) ‘Combine city and nature’ – not ‘integrate city and nature’ but combine it: sees them as two different but important parts of city life; (iii) ‘Design healthy systems’ – the whole concept of Cradle to Cradle for city planners is to create meaning and sustainable cities. To design healthy systems is very difficult; it is easy to say, but trying to create something that is really sustainable and diverse is not necessarily so. (iv) ‘Empower people to make the city’ – it was a positive surprise to find that so many people like to be involved in creating the city. A DCLG delegation visited Almere and produced a [report on future policy regarding housing supply](#) in the UK, using Almere as an example in social terms, but also in economic terms because its approach contributes, for example, to the building

industry; not with large-scale contractors, but a large number of small-scale contractors and it creates bottom-up development.

Response to key questions (written response sent in prior to the 16/10/13 workshop):

Q1. What are the major challenges facing future urban living in the UK?

In the next couple of decades, cities will face substantial growth; by 2050 70% of the world population will live in cities. The quality of life therefore is increasingly dependent on the quality of our cities. This process of urbanization is apparent in the Netherlands – in the city of Groningen, for example, the city continues to grow, while the province as a whole is shrinking dramatically. Increasing numbers of people are moving to the city; cities will remain the heart of economic life into the future.

Urbanization means that the shape of our cities will change. There will no longer be (more or less) isolated cities, as the red counterpart of the green countryside. Instead, we see a more metropolitan development, leading to large urban fields or conglomerates. In economic perspective, these fields or conglomerates will function as a whole, but their inhabitants will not necessarily consider them as coherent areas.

Another important trend, visible in both the Netherlands and abroad, is the desire to create cities that are sustainable and self-sufficient. This is ideologically driven rather than based on pragmatic grounds; over the years we have become alienated from what is traditionally close to us, and people seem to want it back. It is not just about housing, but also about our food production or the way we generate energy. There is a growing resistance towards the often-inefficient ways these processes are organized, to the large-scale production and the anonymity that is the inevitable result.

The biggest challenge to future urban living, both in the Netherlands and in the UK, will be to give the responsibility of making cities (back) to the people that live in them. Let the city be the property of the population; stimulate people to build their own homes, to grow their own food and to contribute to the provision of their own (sources of) energy.

Q2. What is your vision for your city (or cities generally) for 2050?

Unlike other countries, the Netherlands never made people the driving force in urban planning. We are used to living in a welfare state, where people are taken care of – even where hundreds of years of education, emancipation and individualization makes these people perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. Even today, the policy of housing is in the hands of government, while housing associations and urban developers are responsible for the actual implementation.

In qualitative terms, this tradition has brought little good. The product that is created by institutions is fundamentally different than what people would create when they get the possibility to shape their own living environment. We see that in countries like Belgium and the United States, where citizens have always played a major role in urban development; they created neighbourhoods which are more than the sum of houses, and where the appearance of each house tells us a lot about the identity of the resident(s). When we look further back into our own history, we also see it in the city of Amsterdam. The Canal Zone might be the best illustration of the fact that people are capable to make the city. Although there was a strict grid, formed by the town council, the actual creation was left to the people. Enterprising citizens built a house or workplace that represented their own needs and met their own budget. The Canal Zone grew organically. Sometimes it took years for a plot to be filled. All in all, the

Amsterdam Canal Zone shows an unprecedented diversity, and has proven to be resistant to changes over time.

The Dutch tradition in urban planning has taken the soul out of housing. Housing has become a mass product, a commercial activity, and the people are reduced to (being) housing *consumers*. As indicated in response to the first question, I think the major challenge is to end this alienation; people must be given the opportunity to be housing *producers*.

The city of Almere (> 200,000 inhabitants) shows that this is possible. A programme called 'I build my house in Almere' implied – and still does – a direct relationship between the municipality and the inhabitants. In the policy of housing, the demand is the focal point. It is about what people want; about their ideas, desires and fantasies. We have renounced blueprints, and created a framework instead – like they did in Amsterdam centuries ago. The results are starting to emerge. Since 2006, over 2,000 plots were sold. This number includes 500 so-called 'I build affordable in Almere' plots, meant for lower income households (households with an annual income between € 20,000 and € 36,500).

Please see attached 'Eleven Experiences of Almere's daily practice' for further information on the self-build housing programme.

Q3. What are the risks and uncertainties around achieving your vision for 2050?

I believe that cities are malleable. Time and again it is human decisions that shape our cities. It gives urban planners the possibility to bring their ideals into practice. This is also a risk: the creation of the city is never without obligations. Generations to come will grow up in cities that are made today, and the responsibility of city making must therefore be handled with great care. Against this background, the question is not whether cities *can* be made, but *how* they are made and by *whom*.

The biggest risk around empowering people to make the city is that institutional powers are too strong to give way to self-organization. It can be expected that commercial parties hold on to housing *for* the people; even in times of financial crises, housing is a moneymaking machine. I would rather see the institutional world let people participate in urban life; that the focus is on creating physical and mental space for housing *by* the people. This requires a fundamentally different attitude from politicians and urban planners (see Q5). It's a real risk that decision-makers are unwilling or unable to make this change in attitude.

Q4. What characteristics should future urban centres have if they are to be effective places to live, work and play?

Many urban developments are taken over by 'large-scale economy', meaning that our city centres are primarily built on formal economic structures; the same chain stores are dominating almost every city centre. This leads to a decrease of the adaptive capacity of cities. There is hardly any space (left) for small and medium-sized businesses, and a gradual, more organic transformation is no longer possible. As a result our city centres become interchangeable, colourless, anonymous – and thus less attractive.

In order to create attractive urban centres, I do not think we should focus on commercial functions; instead, I believe that art and culture are important ingredients for living and liveable cities. Public space therefore plays a major role in future city life – it is where art and culture are put into practice. Public space also functions as social cement; it gives people the opportunity to meet each other. Even in a time in which it is easy to stay in contact without actually leaving your house, direct encounters remain the basis of society. This is why we should focus on creating an infrastructure that stimulates people to meet

– basically a motor behind informal structures. The most important question is how we are able to do this in a way that adds quality to the city, i.e. using art and culture as key ingredients.

The new Birmingham library is a good example of a positive intervention. It restores the city in a non-commercial way. The library is primarily built for the people of Birmingham, and functions as a place that appeals and contributes to a person's knowledge and creativity. It illustrates that good use of the public domain can make people want to engage and participate.

Q5. What changes need to be made, in for example governance, policy, public/private sector relationships, to ensure an acceptably good quality future urban living can be achieved for all?

An important assignment that politicians and urban planners face nowadays is to search for a new planning culture and forge new coalitions. The key, I think, is to aim for *facilitating cities*; in my opinion, the facilitating city should be the main principle of urban planning.

The city of the future is a city that respects the existing initiatives of citizens and stimulates them to come up with new ones. Aristotle described the citizen as *citoyen* in society. Society is not something that happens to them; it is shaped by them, individually or collectively. Richard Florida, Professor of Business and Creativity at the University of Toronto, puts it as follows: "Our most important resource is us. Or to be more precise, the creative potential that is in every human being."¹ More than ever people are capable of giving meaning to their own lives, to shape their own physical and social environment. The Zeitgeist brings (the domination of) top down planning to a halt. Instead, we need to develop structures or mechanisms – basically a more adaptive way of urban planning – that challenges people to be active and creative.

How can we do that? The main condition for a different planning culture is an open mind-set of politicians and urban planners. They must be welcoming the paradigm shift, meaning letting go of traditional patterns (large-scale versus small-scale, all at once versus gradual, inflexible versus flexible, supply-driven versus demand-driven, impersonal versus personal, maximization of profit versus maximization of living/housing).

In summary: when it comes to housing, people should be considered producers. DIY or the right to self-organize should structurally be a guiding principle. This means that the scale of spatial interventions must be adapted to the investment possibilities of private entrepreneurs. It also means that the role of the government should be limited to setting frameworks, basically the boundaries of the playing field in which people can be active, and breaking down barriers – for example by reducing the amount of laws and regulations. Empower people to make the city.

Q6. What might be expected of us, collectively or individually, to make future urban living work?

See former answers.

Response to supplementary questions:

Chris Rogers: How you measure success of the achievement of your vision and how might you consider that success to be continued into the future?

¹ Richard Florida, *It's Up To The Cities To Bring America Back*, Business Insider, February 2012

Adri: Almere was a big change from the traditional Dutch spatial policy, because the Netherlands likes to plan every detail; there has been planning process for more than 60 years from after the Second World War when the city planners and the architects took responsibility for almost everything. There is no tradition of the people themselves being involved in the planning process. Involvement in participation process as real actors, real participants was introduced in Almere seven years ago – for the first time in the Dutch context. They designed the physical structure and gave the people the possibility to commit to their own situation – to build their own houses or shop or so on. This involved simplifying the Regulations of the Municipality to just one sheet. This started as an open process and is now better than seven years ago. There is the possibility to design the developments as a planning process – as a more consensual process – the organic development of the city, avoiding over regulation.

Chris Rogers: [Do the people like the outcome?](#)

Adri: When people individually are involved and take the responsibility for creating their own house, even when the house is not a huge architectural statement, it is more interesting than the commercial properties. Everybody builds their own house and nobody builds the same as any of the others. But ask a developer to build a neighbourhood and all the houses are more or less the same. The Almere principles call for diversity – it is the first principle – and the people themselves create that diversity.

Brian: [I am interested in those things in a new city such as Almere that have to be centralised in order to provide “infrastructure services” – disposal of waste, management of clean water, provision of the national grid, the electricity supplies – those things that even if people did want to build their own house, they would expect to be provided centrally. They will want regulation, governance and confidence of resilience of supply over these sorts of issues and yet they want the governance of the local things for themselves, whether that is the housing they live in, or the businesses or the retail parks that they go to – they want these to be open to a much greater level of engagement – you have just described that. Can you say a bit about how the tension between the governance of centrally provided services \(either by the city or the nation\) and the local provision of those things is working out in Almere? It is what the individuals expect the State to do – they expect the State to provide the electricity supply and the water supply and the waste water management – and yet they also want the freedom to do what they want to do. There is an interface which is to do with regulation, safety, governance, finance, business models and so on.](#)

Adri: Reference to Villa El Salvador, Lima – a neighbourhood with 100,000 houses and shops and so on and all the houses are built by the people. The government was responsible for the services; city government took responsibility for the fiscal plan and the water supply and all those things. Another good reference is Donald Olsen’s [“The City as a Work of Art”](#) which gives the opportunity to look at city planning at a different level: city councils have a responsibility to create more than just a commercial activity or cultural activity and therefore. The library of Birmingham is a fantastic example of a city council intervention creating more cultural and social infrastructure. The most important task for a city councillor and for the mayor is not only taking responsibility for the economic progress of

the city but especially for the cultural and social progress of the city. That is more difficult than the measurable forces of economic processes.

Chris Brown: I'd be grateful if you could say something about the different trust relationship between planners and individual custom builders (as opposed to big development companies)?

Adri: Experience over the last seven years suggests that it is very difficult for city planners and civil servants to accept the idea of giving control to the people. The education that city planners and architects receive is about deciding almost everything. The biggest change is about developing different attitudes and creating situations where the mayor, the city planners and so on take responsibility for the basic structure, but not for everything else. How can you create a structure where people are invited to act? In the economic process, it is quite normal that you stimulate people to start their own small companies. Everybody understands that that is important for the city, for the economy and for the people themselves, but to have the same attitude in city planning – that is not normal. It is a struggle. I have invited people who took the initiative to build their own homes to discuss the problems that they face and they are largely to do with wrong attitudes; wrong in the sense that you have commitment to planning everything and that is not necessary. How can you create freedom? That is an important question.

Richard: In the system described, people can take control, particularly of their own domestic properties, they can choose to build, they have freedom and can engage. How does this work for commercial and public buildings? How does that process work in a city like Almere so that those buildings are also part of this human-developed and human-owned cityscape?

Adri: When I was responsible for urban planning in The Hague, I took the initiative to build a completely new town hall and library and it was very controversial, but it is an icon in the city now. The city council is responsible for the overall planning and can use large- and small-scale interventions like building a city hall or a library or opera house for the good of the neighbourhoods. I'm not only arguing for more freedom for the people, but the city itself must take responsibility for creating such interventions. It is important to stimulate small-scale commercial activities; it is necessary to combine large-scale commercial activities with small-scale commercial activities, because those small-scale activities create a different atmosphere and that is positive in cities.

Corinne: Is the process of community development – a sense of public-spiritedness – improved after self-build? Do communities weld together faster? Do they become more active citizens, involved in their local community and perhaps with local politics?

Adri: We planned our cities in an organic way for hundreds of years; every city started from an organic basis. City planning gained importance after the Industrial Revolution, especially in the UK, with a lot of problems associated with combining cities and factories and the mines and so on. We are going back now (made possible with the technical advances) to a much more organic way of city development and that creates an atmosphere that is more connected to the people. With only seven years' experience, it is difficult to say how the society has changed. More research is necessary, but looking at how much money people

are putting into their own houses and therefore into their own neighbourhoods suggests that the connection and their commitment is greater than it otherwise would have been.

It is worth noting that lower-income people have also built their own homes in Almere without any subsidy. More than 500 households are building their own homes; people who were normally dependent on housing associations and extra money from the government are now building their own homes without subsidy and each house is different. This proves that it is possible for people to solve their own problems and create their own structure, with a little help.

Phil: What principles were used to design the transportation network for Almere? Has transport worked in the city? Almere is connected to some of the highly congested motorway networks within the Netherlands; how do you feel about road user charging as a mechanism for dealing with the congestion on the highways? What effect do you think it will have for the quality of life within the city?

Adri: The Almere Principles call for a need to ‘connect place and context’ at each level – social and cultural, but also with the area surrounding Almere; Almere is not an isolated city. It is connected to Amsterdam, to Utrecht ... and it is therefore important that it is connected by public transport. The public transport connection was bad but is now improving, making Almere part of the metropolitan area of Amsterdam. Thirty or forty years ago there was really open land between the Dutch cities – cities had a border. In the west of the country today there is almost no difference between the open land and the city because it has become like London – more and more a metropolitan area. That also means that the definition of city is changing. And what is the “city” in London? It is important to work with this new idea or new definition of the city. People still respond to the term “city” with the old idea of what a city was, but the city is completely changed and how do you handle that?

He noted that Almere is unique in that all parts of the city are connected by bus lanes. It works well, but is very expensive and probably not the option one would take if planning the system today.

Paul: How important an enabler is a well-educated society to be able to understand and support the principles of Cradle to Cradle? If we were trying to apply the principles in London or in other parts of the UK cities, how much education would be required before people would accept those principles?

Adri: Cradle to Cradle is an assignment for design and that is the problem; how can you design a table or a house, for instance, cradle to cradle? It is difficult for everybody – for professionals, inhabitants, city councillors or for commercial bodies – because it is so attractive to go for the cheaper options. It is a red line through the whole spatial planning, but it’s difficult for all who participate in the process.

Susan: If a developer wanted to build 300/400 houses in Almere, what weight does that developer and the planning process give to integrating with the existing town? Is it allowed? In the UK, very little weight is given to the impact of a new development on an existing town. Do the city planners have a requirement when giving planning permission to look at the impact on

the rest of an existing town? Is there a process of having to look beyond the site to the impact on transport, water, flooding, on the rest of the town? When giving planning permission, do you only consider what is happening on the site itself?

Adri: A more organic approach to spatial planning creates better possibilities for integrating into the existing situation, because the scale of each intervention is much smaller. In some ways the large spatial planning process and the city council have a responsibility for issues that correspond to a higher level than just building one's own house or community or neighbourhood. The problem is that we do not trust people to be involved in a process that has become a process for professionals and for commercial enterprises and for social institutions. Even in the Netherlands – a well-educated country – we do not trust people when we are talking about city planning and that was what we changed in Almere; first of all you trust the people – their fantasies for the city, their dreams and so on – and then you can discuss the limitations and your recommendations and so on.