

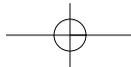
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Confessions of a Bridge Builder

The Design Studio as a Place of Seduction

ARIE-WILLEM BIJL _ interview by Bart de Zwart



1. This text is based on an interview with Arie-Willem Bijl, Amsterdam, 14 May 2009.

2. The core of Atelier IJmeer consisted of a design team led by urban planners Teun Koolhaas and Ellen Marcusse. The studio also received weekly visits from a range of guests who were invited to add their input to the design process by clients Almere and (from 2004) Amsterdam. The list of participants includes over 500 people, ranging from civil

servants, public administrators, politicians (at local, regional and national levels), scientists, designers and technical advisers, to representatives of nature and environmental organizations, water management, infrastructure and project developers. Gert Staal (ed.), *Atelier IJmeer 2030+. Amsterdam, IJmeer, Almere*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2006.

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From 1998 to 2006, Arie-Willem Bijl was a city councillor in Almere. Responsible for the Urban Development, Land Use and Culture portfolio, he initiated Atelier IJmeer. Since 2006 Bijl has been the owner of strategic consultancy firm Titaannetwerk. Currently, he is setting up a floating exhibition in Almere around the theme of building a city on water.

It was a bold move.¹ The young city of Almere took the initiative to set up a studio on the De Ruyterkade in Amsterdam – in the heart of the harbour that had once put Amsterdam at the centre of global trade – in order to design a bridge between Almere and the Dutch capital. A permanent connection across the IJmeer (IJ Lake) that had been the subject of a heated debate on ecology, recreation, housing, mobility and water management issues for many years, with land-use claims coming thick and fast.

For a period of two-and-a-half years, a turret-room-turned-workshop was the place where, far from the usual conference tables, dozens of public administrators and external experts met over large models to design what was cryptically called 'Almere's leap in scale into the water' (*de schaal-sprong van Almere in het water*).²

A challenge informed by the past, present and future

Former city councillor Arie-Willem Bijl believes that, broadly speaking, Atelier IJmeer was founded on three sociospatial issues. The first of these was the development of Almere's position as an overspill town within the context of the national physical planning policy. This means that the municipality is once again given a central role in the housing development of the Northern Randstad conurbation and should double in size to more than 400,000 inhabitants in less than 30 years. Secondly, there was the still topical old challenge of creating an individual urban identity and culture in the city erected on the tabula rasa of Zuidelijk Flevoland (one of the IJsselmeer polders) in the 1970s. According to Bijl, this combination of challenges can be compared to 'the construction of a city on top of a city', whereby the new development phase rolls up before the previous one – as far as spatial and social cohesion, proper urban facilities and a civil society are concerned – has even been finished.

Finally, there were concerns about the sustainability of Almere's urbanization. European examples show that the explosive development of many new towns often results in large-scale decline after some 50 years. Such decline has not happened yet in Almere, but poses a serious future risk.

Atelier IJmeer can therefore be interpreted as a challenge shaped by the past, present and future. The commission that Bijl formulated on the basis of this tripartite challenge can be divided into two parts. In the first place a designerly exploration of a large-scale development of the Almere-Pampus suburb that is to accommodate new high-quality residential areas

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3. This was formally implemented when Amsterdam became the studio's joint client in 2004.

and a substantial part of the national housing assignment outside the city's dykes. Secondly, the design of an iconic connection between Almere and Amsterdam in the form of a bridge across the IJmeer.

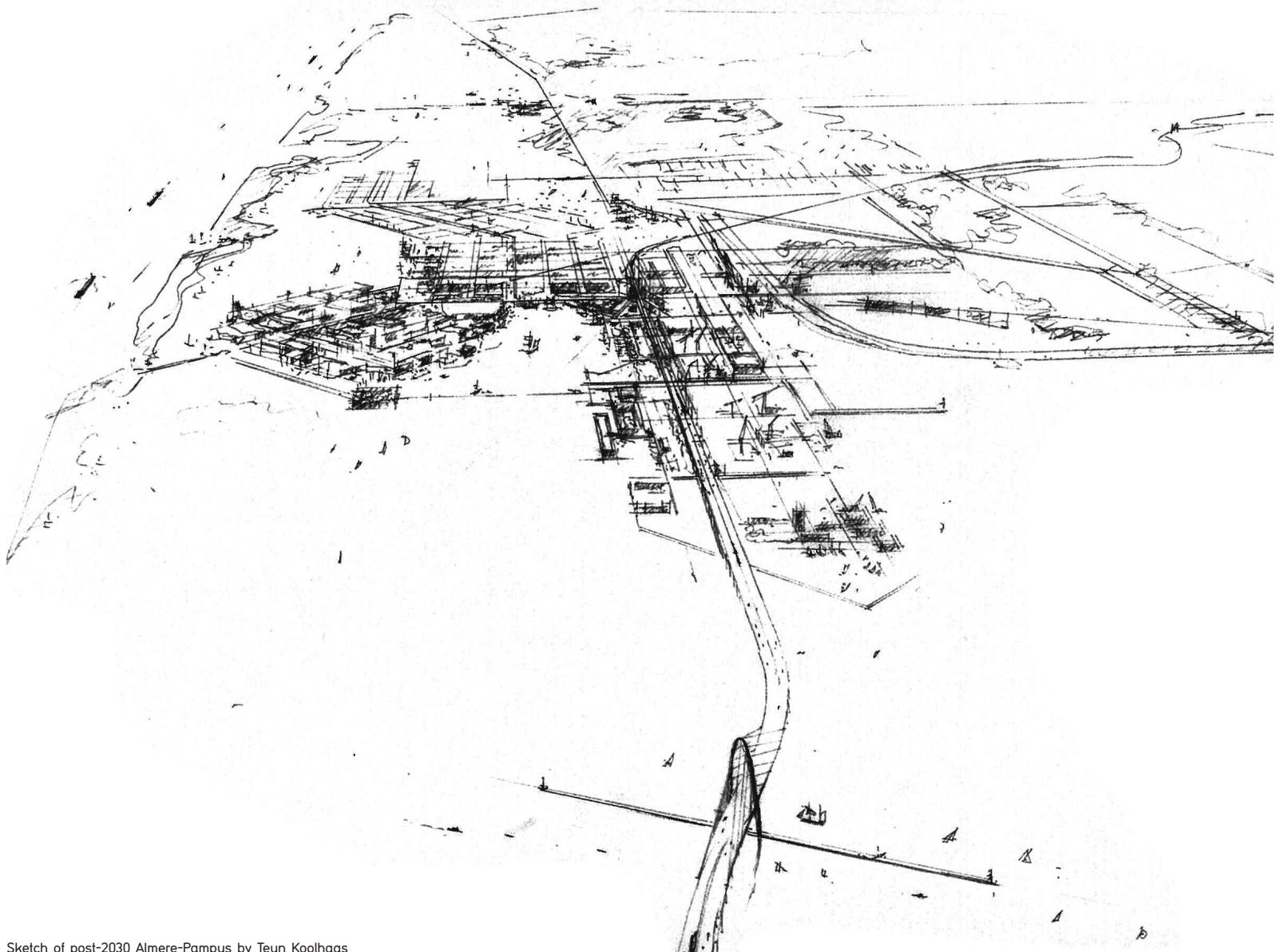
Outpost, embassy and lobby

The former city councillor knew from the outset that a transparent planning process was a prerequisite for bringing administrative parties together. A conventional strategy, which would have seen the entire design developed in the 'black box' of the public administrative organizations, would never have yielded a ground-breaking solution, for the simple reason that the IJmeer dossier is too politically sensitive. Bijl speaks of a 'seduction manoeuvre' on three levels, with the studio playing a specific role in each situation.

First of all the Almere administrators themselves had to be seduced in order to give the development of Almere-Pampus outside the city's dykes any chance of success. The city, which had 'turned its back' on the capital over the years, had to be persuaded that Almere's economic and spatial future could not be seen in isolation from its relationship with neighbour Amsterdam. In this respect the studio facilitated preliminary talks, serving as a kind of *outpost* of the city's potential westward development.

Next, the capital Amsterdam had to be sold on the idea that Almere's leap in scale outside the dykes and a permanent connection across the IJmeer could be the starting points for a coordinated approach to a joint spatial project. To achieve this, the studio brought together civil servants and public administrators from both cities, with the space accommodating combined city council meetings. As a result the studio gradually changed from a workshop that focused on preliminary work into a place that served as an *embassy* to the mutual interest in the development of Almere's west side.³

But because it was inconceivable that the spatial developments around the IJmeer could ever get off the ground without support at state level, other administrative bodies had to be involved in the studio's process. The outcome of this was an extensive *lobby* coordinated from the studio, aimed at securing the state's recognition that a connection between Almere and Amsterdam is important to the region's future.



Sketch of post-2030 Almere-Pampus by Teun Koolhaas

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Large models of the IJmeer were at hand in the studio. They could be doctored on the spot

4. The official client for this parallel exploration was the Vereniging Deltametropool (Delta Metropolis Association). The Verkenning IJmeer (IJ Lake Exploration) was carried out by ANWB (the Dutch Automobile Association), Vereniging Natuurmonumenten (the Society for the Preservation of Nature in the Netherlands), the Dutch Forestry Commission, the Department of Waterways and Public Works and the cities of Almere and Amsterdam.

Designing an iconic bridge

Although the main subject of the design process was Almere's leap in scale, it soon became clear that the design of the bridge and the urban extension should not be isolated from the social and political dynamics surrounding the spatial problems posed by the IJmeer itself. But instead of incorporating these complex items into the studio's assignment, it was decided to launch a parallel project from which stakeholders could contribute to the studio's planning process.⁴

The merit of this approach was that design interventions gradually revealed connections between the individual stakeholders' various interests. For example, the design explored the possibility of linking the sand extraction for the housing development outside the city's dykes to the excavation of silt beds that could contribute to the lake's water quality. The extension of the planned light rail connection between Amsterdam and Pampus also proved to be an interesting option for a southern access route into Almere.

As for the studio's seduction agenda, the bridge concept was a crucial factor from the outset. The bridge, which prompted the involvement of Amsterdam in the planning of Almere's leap of scale, was first and foremost a welcome metaphor for the future relationship between the two cities. The concept of two independent elements entering into a balanced – or at the very least complementary – relationship, while retaining their identity and mutual distance, turned out to be a successful formula for getting parties to start negotiations.

However, by physically substantiating the connection between the two cities the bridge also brought about an actual change. Unlike an invisible tunnel under water, the bridge inevitably challenged the positions taken up around the IJmeer and forced all stakeholders to confess their claims to the area. Presenting the cross-IJ connection as a concrete and, thanks in part to the models, very tangible object of negotiation thus formed an open invitation to a productive discussion and a trigger for the various parties to exchange knowledge and means.

