Have the Dutch become too space hungry for living in a country without much space? Dutch cities are expanding into the “green heart” of the country, an important and vast landmark of Dutch civilization. This slow shift from density-oriented culture to space-hungry individualists on the move is both alarming and controversial. The birthrate in the Netherlands is below average, thus part of the fuel for this building expansion comes from not traditional Dutch citizen, but the new immigrant. (Shorto) Long standing Dutch traditions such as bicycling and reliance on dense urban living could be fading away. But the Dutch are now employing solutions. There are benefits and downfalls to each attempt, and so I will compare two Dutch projects that offer insight into how this culture might be changing. I will look at how these projects attempt to address bicycling and reliance on dense urban living. The last step is to apply these lessons to American architectural problems.

Holland is a densely populated country. On the western seaboard the population density is higher than Japan. (Lootsma 11) With little excess space, they are forced to plan their new development very carefully. In fact, up until the late 20th century the Dutch have firmly regulated development legislatively. As the boundaries of private development widened, so did the physical boundaries. This began to put strain on the valuable “green heart.” In Holland this central landmass has been traditionally seen to encourage density and maintain balance between city and agriculture. (Sijmons and Dooren) This new development is contradictory to the historical legacy that the Netherlands hold, where they have preserved the green heart in favor of density building. But even the new VENIX developments that are planned to strive for sustainability and density, we see the detritus of suburban consumer culture in the programmatic isolation of retail space vs housing. What seems to disconnect these new developments are the weak attempts at urban core-as-landmark style planning that mimic
cities like Amsterdam and Den Hague. The Dutch admittedly love their historic city centers, but attempt to almost humourously re-create them.

In Almere, under direction by Dutch firm, Office of Metropolitan Architecture, we see one such example. Koolhaas and company have separated programs in a simple method: housing on top, and retail below. It sounds like a simple copy of traditional housing/retail stacking that happens in most all urban city centres. The problem with Almere is the relative disconnect that happens when the housing on top of the retail attempts to exist as a green-laden utopia. It feels like a new urbanist development in Liche Rijn, only on top of a supposed city center. The disconnection is too great; the residents imagine themselves enjoying the suburban green space on top of another clothing retail store, and then whisk themselves away via automobile. The connection meant between resident and commercial is lost due to the automobile and increasing consumerist desire. But this is also a global trend.

The Dutch are embracing this global trend of expansion. This growth is coming from both within the country and from other places in the world. The Netherlands are home to many new populations of people. As the birthrate of the Dutch declines, immigration maintains a steadily growing Dutch population. This growth in population is forcing the creation of new places to house people. In typical Dutch fashion, the new communities are being carefully planned and cautiously built. These new developments are more than just housing. The Dutch plan for all kinds of different uses for new cities. They base their development on cities that work, cities that favor density, cities that, essentially, cannot be copied, but the Dutch manage to re-interpret the ideas of the urbanism that has come before them....and urbanism that can be used in the future.

One such development outside of Utrecht is Leidsche Rijn. This VENIX development is the largest of its kind in the Netherlands. (Bosse) Its main objective was to house the growing population of Dutch while maintaining sustainable building and operating practices. The development of housing at this scale is vast and difficult to monitor. The strategies for development include assigning many
different architects to design different neighborhoods to increase diversity and maintain a feeling of urban eclecticism. Each neighborhood is designed as the suburb grows, with no concrete final plan in place. The only absolutes in Leidsche Rijn are the infrastructure that include roads, rail and bicycle transitways.

Another development in the Netherlands that creeps into the green heart, however sustainably, is the east dockland development of Ijmere. Planned in the late 1960’s, Ijmere was cited to house new Amsterdamites as well as beautify the former shipping port. The land was created by pumping water out, by definition a polder city. Ijmere was planned almost in its entirety before it was built. This has proven to be one of its downfalls, or at least inconsistencies. As the project moved from design to built form, parts of the development were redesigned to fit the shrinking budget.

In Ijmere, the housing seems to maintain density while affording the residents a defined private space. This is in opposition to the idea of public space. In the Netherlands, the definition between private and public seems to blur. But the residents of housing projects in Ijmere have chosen to define their private space on their own terms. The understanding of public vs. private in the Netherlands is more loosely defined.

The Dutch have interpreted these “new cities” in many different forms of architecture. The massive-ness of modernism gave way to a more streamlined modernism. Hans Iblings noted that the Dutch skipped post-modernism in favor of a refined modernism. He noted the interesting relationship between the desire for neo-traditionalism and the revolt against traditional housing. Iblings’ mixture of Modernism and new urbanism becomes a sort of anti-modernism.

America seems to be searching for the reason to densify. But the plentiful open land has the American dream written all over it. It is now a matter of conviction. America must plan for its population rather than giving free reign. The liberal politics come closer to socialism when you give
permission to the government to control the development of land. Our transition will bring many
different ideas into a difficult clash, but this wide spectrum of opinions will create varied solution.

As the people in the Netherlands show backward motion from density oriented people to
suburb hungry individualists the question becomes: How far will they shift towards the American-style
suburbs? It seems that American mentality with relation to urban density is conversely headed toward
the Dutch mentality, albeit a shifting one itself. But the lessons of each, failure or success, can guide the
other to a smarter future where planning and urban living will become very important elements of life.

Bibliography

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