

Reinventing Suburbia in The Netherlands

HAN LÖRZING

The Netherlands has been building planned new communities for centuries, and their recent experience in developing new suburbs is particularly relevant to the English Sustainable Communities programme. This paper shows the importance of branding and distinctive design in encouraging people to move to new houses, and provides a new typology for thinking about suburbs in terms of character as well as position.

Late 2004, a small group of researchers at The Netherlands Institute for Spatial Planning (NISR)¹ started an inquiry into the urban form aspects of the latest generation of Dutch suburbs. There were two main reasons for their study. In the first place, 2005 was to be the final year of an ambitious housing scheme that started in 1995 as an initiative of the national government. And secondly, there had been an extraordinary amount of criticism in the press, from politicians and by the public, directed against these suburbs. With the scheme soon coming to an end, we felt that an evaluation would be appropriate. But we were also intrigued by the fierceness of the scheme's critics. Could things really be that bad?

In the final report, we set ourselves two main research questions:

- ♦ What are the characteristic features (in other words: the most important morphological aspects) of these new suburbs?
- ♦ What kind of contribution do these suburbs make to the Dutch tradition in urban planning?

In this article, I can only describe the basic

outcomes of the research. The full report (Lörzing *et al.*, 2006) has been published in Dutch with an English summary.

For the research, 13 (out of more than 90) new suburbs nationwide were studied extensively. They were selected for their diversity and geographical distribution.

A Most Ambitious Scheme

The ideas that led to the housing scheme that became object of our research originated in 1990. In that year, the Dutch government issued a report on spatial planning *Vierde Nota over de Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra* (Fourth Report on Spatial Planning Extra). Because this mouthful was hard to say even for Dutch policy-makers, the report became immediately known under its acronym 'Vinex'. The aims of 'Vinex' were quite ambitious. The government suggested that over the period 1995–2005, 455,000 new houses should be built, an increase of 7.5 per cent of the total number of dwellings in The Netherlands at that time. Of these, some 285,000 were to be built in greenfield areas at the edges of the cities, places better known in other countries as 'suburbs'.²

To ensure that its ambitions would

materialize, the government held out the prospect of large sums of money to the local and regional authorities involved. In total, some 4 billion euros in present-day money were made available for land acquisition, improvement of infrastructure, and soil decontamination. Of course, all that money was not to be spent at random. As befits a 'planning state' like The Netherlands, the government wanted to have a say in the allocation and layout of the new suburbs. Firstly, the new 'Vinex' suburbs could be realized only in designated urban areas, in general near cities with a population of at least 100,000. Then, they should be built as close to the existing cities as possible; preferably right up against the built-up area. Also, the design of the new suburbs should be compact, meaning a minimum housing density of 30 dwellings per hectare and higher where possible. Reasonably detailed maps in the Vinex report showed the sites for these new neighbourhoods; with hindsight, this turned out to be a boon for land speculators who started to buy agricultural lots right after the report became public.

Before the actual planning, designing and building started, the government formed panels made up of local and regional authorities (politicians and civil servants) for each of the areas where Vinex suburbs were to be built. At first sight, this seemed a new layer of bureaucracy, but in fact these rounds of consultations proved to be an advantage. Not only did they work wonders to win over towns, cities and intermunicipal bodies to the scheme, but they also turned out to be a tool to bring much-needed diversity into the layout of the suburbs. With a substantial degree of independence, the regional panels spent the first half of the 1990s drawing up contracts ('covenants') in which the exact numbers of houses, the allocation of the suburbs and the conditions for receiving government money were detailed. By 1995, all 18 contracts were signed. The work could begin.

Mocked, Feared and Applauded

From its beginning, the Vinex project met with criticism from a variety of opponents. Even before the first houses had actually been built, some municipal representatives objected to the term 'Vinex' as they believed such a generic name could only suggest undesirable monotony. Later, when the first suburban blocks appeared, they were criticized and ridiculed. 'Vinex neighbourhoods' wrote Ids Haagsma and Hilde De Haan, two well-respected Dutch architecture critics, 'are destined to become 21st century's ghettos. At first sight they offer a variety of forms, but these only act as cover-up for a numbing monotony'. Former 'national architect' Wytze Patijn rejected Vinex suburbs as 'minimalist' and a prominent Labour MP, having visited neighbourhoods-under-construction during summer recess, became so disappointed with what he perceived as 'lack of spatial quality' that he raised the matter in Parliament.

An important issue in the Vinex debate became the question where these neighbourhoods stand on the urban-suburban scale. The original government report from 1990 demanded a relatively high density, but for many critics a target of 30 dwellings per hectare could hardly be called urban. Others argued that, as the preferences of prospective homebuyers had shifted towards a greener, more suburban environment, Vinex neighbourhoods were an inadequate answer to these preferences. 'High density does not make a city' (a real estate developer), 'we are building hybrid villages on the edge of town' (a historian) and 'half-hearted solutions with an atmosphere that is neither urban, nor truly small-town' (the director of the Dutch Incentive Fund for Architecture). As an opposing voice, Carl Weber, a well-known non-conformist Dutch architect, called for lower densities and more individual freedom for the homeowner to design and build a house according to his or her personal wishes. As was to be expected, Weber did not design any of the 285,000 suburban Vinex houses.

For many years, critics concentrated on the presumed monotony and lack of urban character of the new suburbs. Recently, opinions have been slowly changing towards a more positive point of view. When interviewed, residents who had moved to 'Vinex' emphasized the advantages of their new living environment. Of course, their views could easily be attributed to the fact that most of them had just taken out substantial mortgages for their new homes, which is hardly the right time to tell a perfect stranger what a lousy buy you just made. But also in professional circles, the tide was turning. Foreign commentary definitely helped. A much-needed boost from abroad came when in 2004 British cabinet minister Keith Hill visited The Hague suburb of Ypenburg. Hill told his hosts that he definitely admired what he had seen: 'This is high-level architecture. I take a keen interest in design and I can tell you that I am truly impressed by the design here in Ypenburg'.³ Reluctantly, even the Dutch professional press began to see Vinex in a different light. In late 2004 *Blauwe Kamer*, the leading Dutch magazine for urban and rural planning, after years of critical commentaries devoted a special issue to the latest fashion in Dutch suburban design in which 'Vinex' received a highly favourable treatment.

After many years of overt criticism, the comments on the Vinex neighbourhoods have begun to mellow. Still, this does not mean that the latest generation of suburbs can count on whole-hearted applause from public, press and politicians. For many Dutch, even the thought of a visit to (let alone the idea of living in) a Vinex suburb brings up bad dreams of barren tracts of land where skeletons of houses are exposed to the winds; in short, the last place to be for urbanites and country folk alike. But all the praise and loathing shows how much 'Vinex' has become a household word in The Netherlands within a period of hardly more than 10 years. The term, originally attributed to a specific kind of new suburbs, is now

used indiscriminately in the Dutch language for all newly built suburban areas, even those that go back to well before the eponymous government scheme. The power of a well-chosen acronym could not be demonstrated better.

A Drastic Shift in Policy

The Netherlands has always been known as a well-planned country. Visitors, professional planners and ordinary tourists alike, were intrigued by the neatly laid-out residential districts and the coordinated design of the rows of houses. One of the reasons for this deeply rooted sense of order can be found in the origins of the planning system, which go back to the early twentieth century, a time when architects and local politicians shared a passion for improving workers' living conditions. The combined idealism of mostly left-wing designers and aldermen resulted in a series of conscientiously laid-out city districts, characterized by the repetitive use of similar urban blocks. Fine examples can be found in all major cities in the country, from the famous 1920s *Berlage Plan* in Amsterdam to 1970s new towns like Zoetermeer and Nieuwegein.

In spite of differences in size and style, these urban extensions had one thing in common: they were to a large extent designed, developed and owned by the city or by housing corporations. Practically all housing units were rented out to the occupants. Cities like Amsterdam used to have large departments that bought land, prepared it for building (which in the lower parts of The Netherlands meant dumping several metres of sand on the original soil) and collected ground lease from residents or builders. This kind of centralization, hardly different from the practice in communist countries, was taken for granted throughout most of the twentieth century. Only in the 1980s, did this collectivist mood begin to change. Centre-right cabinets began to promote privatization, deregulation and home-ownership. Housing

corporations sold their dwellings to the occupants by the thousands. In new urban extensions, houses for sale soon outnumbered those for rent. Until well into the 1980s, home-ownership in the largest Dutch cities accounted for a mere 20–30%; in the post-1995 suburbs 60–70% rapidly became the norm. Clearly, the increase of home-ownership called for a more individual design of houses and residential environments.

The cities' role in the planning process also changed substantially. In most cases, overall urban plans and more detailed neighbourhood designs are no longer drawn up by civil servants; they were contracted out to private design studios. A city like Amsterdam still buys and prepares land for new suburbs, but many smaller cities leave this to the developers. The once common notion that a city should own whole new neighbourhoods had become obsolete; following the new ideology, all houses are to be built and owned by private parties. The new role of the city planners and officials lies in orchestration, rather than realization. Local authorities set up general guidelines for the layout of the suburb-to-be, hire architects and developers (often in teams) for the design and then oversee the planning process to make sure the guidelines are met. Normally, several designer teams are involved in the design process; in the example of Ypenburg, a district of 10,500 housing units, 75 groups of developers, urban planners, architects and landscape designers were called in, competing for the contracts for 15 neighbourhood designs. This practice of hiring more than one design team for the job is used by the cities as a means to obtain more variety within the new suburbs.

The Compact City Meets Its Limits

For many decades, Dutch spatial planning has been known for its pursuit of high density in cities. In fact, towns and cities were compact from their medieval beginnings to their twentieth-century extensions. In national spatial policy, an economic use of

space was seen as the only way to maintain urban amenities and to preserve surrounding landscapes. In the 1980s, a planning report issued by the national government favoured a phenomenon dubbed 'the compact city', where shops and parks would be at walking distance and where public transport and bicycles would be the preferred means of transportation. In the real world, car ownership in The Netherlands had risen to average West European levels, which meant that there was a car for practically every household. While the planners still thought in terms of restricting motor traffic, car use had become an inevitable part of urban life.

When 'Vinex' suburbs were introduced, planners and politicians still promoted the idea of the compact city. In the 1990 government report, the new generation of suburbs was seen as the next shell of urban extension, a continuation of an uninterrupted urban fabric. In reality, many sites for new suburbs did not border existing urban areas because of infrastructural barriers. What the idealistic planners had overlooked, deliberately or not, was that by 1990 many urban areas in The Netherlands were not bounded by open farmland, but by the nearest motorway. Building a new suburb as an extension of the city meant building it towards or even on the other side of the motorway. The compact city had literally met its limits.

In an age of double-income earners, it became clear that for many people a suburb on the edge of the motorway had many advantages. For work, shopping or pleasure, they now had more options to choose from than the nearby city. This of course was at odds with the compact city philosophy, which was in part based upon the idea that people would be oriented towards the urban centre of their region, no matter how far from that centre they were living. A research report (Snellen *et al.*, 2005) by The Netherlands Institute for Spatial Planning made clear that the new residents of the latest generation of suburbs took full advantage of the nearness

of the motorway. The report showed that in particular young couples with high car ownership and high car use were attracted by these new suburbs. The 'compact city' policy, for many years a cornerstone of national planning, had been superseded by reality.

A New Typology

In our research into the morphology of Vinex suburbs, the position of the suburbs relative to their nearest urban area turned out to be very important. Contrary to the official policy, many suburbs could hardly be considered as part of a contiguous urban area. On the contrary, their detached position on the other side of a motorway or a shipping canal made these suburbs potentially independent urban entities. In a way, this independent position is reminiscent of the new towns that were *in vogue* in the 1970s, especially in those cases where the new suburb has central amenities of its own. A difference, however, is that these new suburbs were never planned to become anything like a new town; they just grew into it. We first characterized new suburbs in terms of their position within urban areas:

- ♦ A group of suburbs directly adjacent to cities, which contains the usual kind of districts and neighbourhoods; this is the category the 'compact city' advocates had in mind.
- ♦ A group 'near the city', comprising districts and neighbourhoods that are separated from cities by infrastructure. The new urban entities belong to this category. Ypenburg (built on an abandoned military airfield near the Hague) and IJburg (built on an archipelago of artificial islands near Amsterdam) are the finest examples of these potential 'new towns' of the twenty-first century.
- ♦ Finally a rather unexpected category, which is made up of suburbs that are an extension to an earlier new town or to

small towns. These suburbs sometimes lie at considerable distances from the central cities.

It will be clear that the last two categories can hardly be seen as supportive of the compact city philosophy. A more complete version of this typology can be found in the report.

The Unexpected Urban Character of Suburbia

How urban do we expect our new suburbs to be? Is it necessary for them to have something like an urban character⁴ at all? These questions are far from hypothetical. In its 1990 Vinex report, the Dutch government was rather ambiguous when it came to defining the urban character of the proposed new suburbs. On the one hand, they should be as compact as possible, because the government clearly favoured new railway stations, light rail links and other forms of public transport for the new urban extensions. On the other hand, Vinex suburbs would have to compete for homebuyers with small-town extensions that did not belong to the Vinex scheme. This called for a moderate housing density; although the report was not explicit about this, most of the contracts with local authorities took 30 dwellings per hectare (12 per acre) as a reasonable average. Some architects, urban planners and sociologists openly doubted that such a density could even remotely create an 'urban atmosphere'. In professional journals, the early Vinex suburbs were criticized for their supposed lack of urban character.

For our research, it was clear from the beginning that we needed to discuss the urban character of the new suburbs. To do this properly, we needed to define the components of 'urbanity'. Based on generally accepted research, we discerned three types: social urbanity (variety of people using urban space); functional urbanity (variety of amenities in the urban space); and visual urbanity (variety in urban form). As it does

Urbanity in the suburb:
shopping street in the central
area of Stadshagen (Zwolle).



High-quality public transport:
guided bus on reservation,
Meerhoven (Eindhoven).



not make much sense to study the use of space in a suburb under construction, we decided that only functional and visual urbanity would be object of research. We defined these two concepts as follows:

- ◆ Functional urbanity refers to the presence of amenities in the built-up area, as well as their nature, location, variety, concentration and also the degree to which they are mixed and/or integrated.
- ◆ Visual urbanity refers to aspects of the

appearance of the built-up area, especially the way in which an area is perceived as 'urban'; density, compactness and variety in form are important indicators.

An interesting question was, if functional and visual urbanity represented two completely different ideas, could they overlap or even coincide?

The study revealed some interesting and rather unexpected findings. As for the functional urban character of the new suburbs, no less than 6 out of the 13 suburbs studied

showed at least a reasonable degree of 'urbanity'. The indicators used were the level of amenities in the suburb, as well as their distribution over the area.

- ♦ In one example, the Amsterdam suburb of IJburg, a high level of amenities (more than 10,000 m² shop floor area plus other kinds of amenities) go hand in hand with a certain degree of decentralization (shops, offices and small businesses can be located on the ground floor along many streets throughout the area).

- ♦ Five other suburbs showed a medium or high level of amenities, but in this case almost totally concentrated in a small, centrally located area.

This high degree of functional urbanity in these suburbs is surprising, especially when we remember the criticism of the supposed lack of urban character of Dutch suburbs in general. Of course, the high number of 'urban centres' could be attributed to biased sampling. But even more surprising to the researchers was the clear overlap of functional and visual urbanity. In all six aforementioned suburbs (and in these six only), the functional urban character was found to be strongly supported by visual means. The following visual characteristics could be distinguished:

- ♦ One suburb, IJburg near Amsterdam, has a completely urban atmosphere (here defined by a high housing density, an abundance of enclosed residential mid-rise blocks and compact street sections) in most of the area; in contrast to other suburbs, IJburg has (so far) no clear central area.

- ♦ The suburbs of Nesselande (Rotterdam), Meerhoven (Eindhoven) and Stadshagen (Zwolle) have a clearly visible central area (a compact urban core of high-rise and mid-rise buildings in which all amenities are concentrated) which contrasts sharply with the surrounding low-rise residential areas.

- ♦ In the suburbs of Ypenburg (The Hague) and Brandevoort (Helmond), the concept is more complicated. These suburbs have a relative large area with visual urban characteristics, of which only a part serves as the 'urban centre' with the corresponding amenities.

The other seven suburbs examined have no or very limited urban characteristics, functional nor visual (in one of them, Houten Vinex near Utrecht, a central area in the shape of a Roman Castellum was planned but its realization is still unclear).

As these findings show, there seems to be a trend in recent Dutch suburb design towards a 'new urbanity', the creation of an urban atmosphere in at least part of the suburban area. In a number of examples, a central area with the urban amenities has been shaped as an almost American-style urban core: a compact area with mid-rise and high-rise blocks. In some cases, like in Ypenburg, with its seven high-rises from 12 to 18 floors, the urban core practically towers over the surrounding low-rise residential areas. Obviously, suburbia is more than just an endless sea of single-family houses.

The Branding of Suburbia

Until well into the twentieth century, urban districts were designed to look alike. The unwritten laws of functionalism dictated a generic kind of architecture that deliberately shunned any ties with its local background. In the situation that prevailed during most of the last century in The Netherlands, with the majority of housing units built to be rented, this uniformity met little criticism. But in the 1990s, with the percentage of owner-occupied dwellings on the rise, attitudes began to change. Discriminating buyers wanted more than just a couple of square metres of floor area; instead, they opted for an expressive house in a recognizable residential environment. Developers and city officials were more than happy to meet these wishes. The

trend towards a more varied design in urban planning and architecture began to change the appearance of Dutch suburbs.

Back in the late 1980s Kattenbroek, a new district on the edge of the city of Amersfoort, rose to international fame because of its experiments in creating residential environments with a theme. The designer-in-chief, Dutch-Indian urban planner Ashok Bhalotra, wanted each neighbourhood within the district to have its own unique atmosphere. To achieve this, he invented identities like 'The Hidden Zone', 'The Fortress' and 'The Enclosed City',⁵ each with matching architecture. In its time, this approach was no less than revolutionary within the egalitarian tradition of Dutch urban planning. In the early 1990s, other cities began to adopt similar ideas. An extreme example is the Eindhoven district of Blixembosch, with its Italian, French, American and English neighbourhoods, where the appearance of streets and houses is meant to evoke the atmosphere of residential areas in these four countries.

When the first Vinex suburbs were planned, 'theming' or 'branding' of neighbourhoods had become an accepted way of design in The Netherlands. Therefore, we were hardly surprised to find themed neighbourhoods

among the 13 selected Vinex suburbs. What really surprised us, was that practically all these suburbs sported one or more identities in their design; only in one case could we not find any theme at all. For our research, we distinguished between three kinds of identities:

- ◆ Area-specific identities, direct references to the area in which the suburb is developed, often consisting of the preservation of old landscape or village elements; a special example is the main boulevard in Ypenburg (The Hague) which is called (in translation) The Runway, in memory of the old airfield that had to make way for the suburb.
- ◆ Borrowed identities, referring to urban or rural elements or names that were not part of the area but exist in similar situations; town landscapes elsewhere serve as a source of inspiration for the suburb's design, like the typical 'village streets' that define the identity of the small suburb of Stellinghof in an open polder south-west of Amsterdam.
- ◆ Chosen identities, which are meant to give a suburb its own unique identity, often in contrast with its surroundings; an obvious example is the 100 hectare 'residential

Branding Suburbia: Medieval-style residential castle in Haverleij (Den Bosch).



forest' that is being planted in the heart of Zuiderburen suburb near the northern city of Leeuwarden, in a landscape that is widely known for its absolute lack of timber.

As we found out, the three most popular identities attached to the new suburbs are water, woods and history. The choice for 'water' is hardly surprising in a country like The Netherlands. More interesting are the many ways in which the 'water' theme has been treated. In the most predictable cases, existing water served as a basis for the design as in Nesselande (Rotterdam), where the shoreline of an artificial lake is being used as a beach boulevard. In other examples, historical polder canals and ditch patterns were used more or less metaphorically in the design of park areas and street patterns (Stadshagen, Zwolle offers fine examples of both). The 'woodland' theme, by contrast, seems to be introduced not as a reference to existing elements but as a way to make up for the lack of them. In the Bosrijk ('wood-rich') neighbourhood in Meerhoven (Eindhoven), existing groves are to be supplemented by further planting in order to provide a fuller, forest-like experience.

But it is the 'history' theme that offers the most unexpected urban environments.

Again, the use of historical elements does not stop at the integration of existing old farmhouses, polder dikes or country estates into new suburbs. On the contrary; some of the newest suburbs are living proof that history can be tailor-made. The best known example, one that shocked the Dutch architectural world when the first plans were presented, is the Helmond suburb of Brandevoort. Here, history is all over the area. Brandevoort, designed by the famous Luxembourg postmodernist Rob Krier, has a walled pseudo-medieval town for a centre. Around this almost Disneyesque experience, a ring of low-rise neighbourhoods are developed in styles ranging from garden-city to village traditionalism, making Brandevoort a seemingly historically-correct town with a medieval heart and suburban outskirts.

Other suburbs touch upon the 'history' theme, too. Haverleij, near Den Bosch, also refers to the Middle Ages but in a completely different way to Brandevoort. Haverleij, designed by the Dutch postmodern architect Sjoerd Soeters, consists of a group of loosely scattered 'residential castles', each designed as a semi-private building in fake-medieval style, some surrounded by moats. In recent discussions, the Haverleij castles are often mentioned as a potential experiment in



A neotraditionalist suburb: town houses in the walled 'fortress' of Brandevoort (Helmond).

creating gated communities in The Netherlands;⁶ closing the entrance gates or raising the drawbridge at dusk would effectively close off these housing complexes to 'undesirable aliens'. A less controversial 're-invention of history' can be found in Haven-eiland (Harbour Island), so far the largest neighbourhood of the Amsterdam suburb of IJburg. This area has been designed as a twenty-first century version of Old Amsterdam (or, more precisely, late nineteenth and early twentieth century Amsterdam) with enclosed, rectangular residential blocks set in a network of canals. Although the architecture of Haven-eiland is far from nostalgic, the urban plan evokes memories from a famous past.

Since the introduction of themed environments in urban areas during the 1980s, theming (or branding) has almost become standard practice in new Dutch suburbs. Although some themes are rather far-fetched, attaching a theme to a new district or neighbourhood seems to be a promising idea in order to give the area an individually recognizable identity. In this way, themed suburbs can be a powerful tool in fighting the dreaded monotony of new residential areas.

A 'New Dutch Vernacular'?

We found some interesting design features in the new suburbs. On the level of residential environments, certain details seem to be borrowed from different periods of the twentieth century. Practically all suburbs investigated show a variety of small-scale solutions like courtyards, little squares and home zones. The most spectacular examples are residential islands, small groups of houses surrounded by moats that are accessible by a narrow bridge. In itself a very Dutch approach in creating a semi-private environment, this could easily become a stealthy way to introduce gated communities in the country, something which actually happened in an island complex in Houten Vinex suburb. Many features in the new suburbs refer back

to the 1920s and 1930s when, especially in garden-city type neighbourhoods, green squares and courtyards were used to create recognizable open spaces between the mostly uniform blocks. The same practice can be seen in early twenty-first century suburbs. But these days, semi-private environments are not just a tool to create more visual variety; they also contribute to a contemporary need for public safety and individual control over the direct surroundings of one's home.

The abundance of home zones in the new suburbs is another remarkable phenomenon with twentieth-century roots. The idea dates back to the 1970s, when as a reaction to the extremes in functionalist planning, architects and their patrons favoured a more modest approach. Almost overnight, low-rise houses with pitched roofs became the new fashion in urban planning. In a car-unfriendly atmosphere, streets were almost uniformly laid-out with absolute priority for pedestrians and playing children. This concept of traditionally designed houses on a pedestrianized street became internationally known under its Dutch name of *woonerf* (literally: residential court, usually translated as home zone). As a surprise, in the latest generation of Dutch suburbs the *woonerfs*⁷ are making a massive comeback. In urban design and traffic measures, many streets in Vinex suburbs follow the 30-year old example. From an architectural point of view however, the expression of these new *woonerfs* is different. There is much more variety to be found in the latest generation of pedestrianized neighbourhoods; sometimes houses on both sides of a street are completely different in their architecture, something that would have been unthinkable in the 1970s.

Finally, we also assessed the architecture of the new suburbs. For those who are not familiar with the Dutch situation, it is good to know that functionalism and its clones were the generally accepted style in The Netherlands for most of the twentieth century. Although many urban districts, village extensions and individual houses were built

in a much more traditional style, architecture schools and official clients were unanimous in their preference for modernism. It is hardly exaggerating to say that this stubborn attitude accounts for much of the monotony that can be found in twentieth-century city districts all over the country. The architecture of the new suburbs clearly shows that the modernist era has come to an end. What we find now is a wide variety of styles, ranging from ultramodernism to hypertraditionalism and practically everything in between.

The extremes are the easiest to describe. On the one side of the spectrum, we see the conspicuous use of geometrical, often colourful shapes that refer to modernist in an almost ironic way. This 'modernist eclecticism' is relatively rare, but its buildings are often spectacular, like the odd-shaped houses in Almere-Buiten Vinex. Equally spectacular is 'traditionalist eclecticism' on the other extreme: here, designers make references to medieval stereotypes like archways and donjons, actually building kind of twenty-first century follies. The entrance gate to the main residential castle of Haverleij suburb is one of the most striking examples. More common design styles in the new suburbs are 'neofunctionalism' and 'neotraditionalism'. These two more or less

represent the two main (and opposing) styles from the last century; still, their details are sometimes quite different from what we became used to before. Large parts of Almere-Buiten Vinex are neofunctionalist in their architecture; in itself, this is hardly surprising in a new city built in an artificial polder landscape. More surprising is a choice for the same design in the Eindhoven suburb of Meerhoven, which is built in a more traditional small-scale environment. For neotraditionalism, the Helmond suburb of Brandevoort undisputedly has become the ultimate example. Here, all neighbourhoods around the (fake-medieval) core have been designed to radiate a small-town atmosphere, supported by the generous use of brick walls, pitched roofs and walled front gardens.

Spectacular as they can be, the aforementioned styles are not 'mainstream architecture' in the suburbs that we examined. In most examples, the predominant design appeared to be an approach that succeeds in combining characteristic features of both extremes; something that was practically impossible during the last century. This means that the newest generation of Dutch suburbs are dominated by a rather unexpected mixture of brick, stucco or concrete walls, crowned by flat, pitched or



Extreme architecture:
modernist eclecticism in
Almere-Buiten.

pent-roofs. The overall appearance of this 'middle-of-the-road' architecture is plain, almost austere. As this approach relies on details that have been typical of Dutch architecture of the last century, it seems apt to give it a (provisional) name that refers to its vernacular characteristics. For the moment, we suggest a term like *New Dutch Vernacular*, subdivided into a clearly urban variant and a more garden-city version. In the 'urban vernacular', mid-rise brick façades are typical (see, for example, the Singels neighbourhood in Ypenburg), while 'garden-city vernacular' is characterized by a simple, not-too-traditional version of pitched-roof houses and the ample use of bricks and roof tiles (see for instance the suburbs of Houten Vinex and Bergschenhoek Vinex, among many other examples). Even within the general framework of this new vernacular, there is a lot of variety to be found.

Conclusions

According to the media, the latest generation of Dutch suburbs offers nothing but endless boredom. In our study, we beg to differ. Certainly, there is a lot of repetition and monotony to be found at the edge of town. But, especially when compared with urban developments during most of the twentieth century, an unexpected variety lies hidden in these new suburbs. In urban character, residential environments, identity and architecture, there is a lot more to see in the New Dutch Suburbia than in its predecessors.

What are the most obvious lessons that can be learned from the 'Vinex' scheme and its materialization in many suburbs all over the country?

- ♦ In the 'Vinex' scheme, the national government confined itself to issuing simple guidelines and providing money without attaching too many strings. This relatively unbureaucratic approach has worked out well, not only in terms of quantity (most of

the foreseen dwellings have actually been built) but also in terms of quality. The low degree of government coordination has in fact stimulated cities and regions to make their own, individual plans for their respective suburbs.

- ♦ In most cases, the overall plan for the new suburb was divided into smaller parts for which one or more design teams (consisting of architects, planners and developers) were invited. In the most extreme example, in the Hague suburb of Ypenburg, a total of 75 teams competed in groups of five for the commissions of 15 neighbourhood plans. This practice has been a successful tool in increasing the level of variety within the suburb.

- ♦ Branding, by devising a specific theme for an area, has helped to create an identity for suburbs and neighbourhoods within them. Examples show that, even as the choice of themes is often rather limited, the actual appearance of urban areas with similar themes can be quite different. In the most far-reaching examples, the consistent use of a strong theme for the whole suburb has produced urban areas with a unique identity.

- ♦ The new suburbs offer a variety of small-scale solutions for neighbourhoods. Home zones, courtyards and other semi-private open spaces can be found all over the studies suburbs. They cater for the need for socially safe and controllable residential environments, while they also contribute to more diversity in urban design.

It is too early to conclude whether this new generation of Dutch suburbs can be seen as the beginning of a recognizable 'early twenty-first century' style. What is becoming clear, however, is that in terms of urban planning and design the twentieth century has become history. The collective monotony that has been the hallmark of so much architecture

and urban design in the recent past, is giving way to a more individual and diverse type of planning that allows for more than just one taste, style or identity.

NOTES

1. The Dutch name for the NISR is *Ruimtelijk Planbureau* (RPB).
2. In the Dutch parlance, 'suburb' has a negative connotation; the Dutch prefer the word *buitenwijk*, which roughly translates as 'outskirts' or 'edge district'.
3. As quoted in *Cobouw* magazine, 2 September 2004 (translation from the Dutch by the author).
4. The Dutch word would be *stedelijkheid* which literally translates as 'urbanity'
5. For a thorough description of the district, see the bilingual book *Kattenbroek*, SCW Amersfoort 1994.

6. Unlike in some other countries, most notably the US, the phenomenon of gated communities is still a taboo for many Dutch architects and critics.

7. Actually, this plural form is not correct in Dutch, where it would be *woonerven*.

REFERENCES

- Blauwe Kamer (2004) *Hybrid landscapes, designing for sprawl in the Netherlands*. Special issue, Autumn.
- Lörzing, H., Klemm, H., van Leeuwen, M. And Soekimin, S. (2006) *VINEX! Een mor-fologische verkenning*. Rotterdam: RPB/NAi Publishers; a summary in English (*Vinex! A morphological exploration*) can be found on the institute's website www.rpb.nl.
- Snellen, D., Hilbers, H., Hendriks, A. Hans van Amsterdam, H. and Peeters, P. (2005) *Nieuwbouw in Beweging*. Rotterdam: RPB/NAi Publishers.