Buiten wonen in de stad : de place making van IJburg

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SUMMARY

The place making of new neighbourhoods

New development locations are often assumed to possess no distinguishing meaning. They are simply too new. However, the meaning of a place does not lie solely in physical structures, but in the social processes surrounding it. These make an abstract space, space, into an experienced space, place. Meaningful space is created when different groups, with different aims, attach value to a physical environment, and lay claims to it.

IJburg, the new residential neighbourhood in Amsterdam, is a good example. Everything about the place is literally new. In 2002, when the first residents moved in, IJburg was nothing but water. In its short history, however, IJburg has become a place with numerous meanings. The neighbourhood appeals to the imagination in general, both in national press and within the professional world of academics and urban planners and designers. This is not a given, but the result of sometimes turbulent developments involving a variety of players.

The exact way in which this process unfolds has barely been studied. Moreover, in the social sciences there are differing views on the importance of place in today’s network society. Originally, ‘place’ was approached from the context of the everyday acts of people in time and space. More recently, it has been asserted that the meaning of space is no objective given: rather, it is rooted in the political-economic structures in society. Under the influence of individualisation, mounting prosperity and globalisation, people are thought to have freed themselves from spatial curtailment at local level. Other academics argue the opposite: in a world of limitless choice, place is an essential basis for identity forming.

By studying the development of IJburg during its first few years, this research intends to explore the social processes that impart a new neighbourhood with meaning, and to contribute to knowledge of the importance of place. Here, the term place making is a key concept, on the basis of which the following, principal research question, was defined:

From the initial planning phase to the first years of residence, how has place making taken shape in IJburg? What meanings are being created, what is the
influence of various stakeholders and what is the effect of their individual characteristics and the structural context in which they are embedded?

Conducting the study

Because place making is a process that, in principle, has no end and the construction of IJburg is a very long-term prospect, a specific period was delineated. The research concentrates on the planning, construction and use of Haveneiland-west and the Rieteilanden between 1994 and 2006. The principle focus is on the professional developers and the first IJburg residents. The way in which these place makers assign meaning is researched, both separately and in relation to each other.

The professionals represent the organisations involved in planning, designing, building and managing IJburg. Their place making occurs at meso level and is measured by their spatial vision of the neighbourhood. This can be broken down into the physical structure, social characteristics, facilities and identity. In these visions, the professionals are influenced by their institutional positions, interests, sources and the authorities they bring with them from their organisation. However, they are also influenced by the structural context within which they develop a project, such as the general economic conditions and the local political situation. The professional place making of IJburg was researched through an analysis of planning documents and designs, and meetings with twelve key representatives of the organisations involved.

The place making of the first residents takes shape at micro level and is measured on the basis of their territorial ties. These stand for their overall use and experience of space on different scale levels. The territorial ties comprise an economic-functional, social, political and cultural dimension. They are assumed to depend on the characteristics of the first IJburg residents, on both the individual and household level. Additionally, the way in which the residents use and experience IJburg relates to the structural features of the neighbourhood: site & situation. A questionnaire on place making was put to residents; 321 households took part, representing a response of fifty percent. Further in-depth interviews were held with 27 of the respondents.

Place making by professionals

Planning

So many years in the making, IJburg still fires the imaginations of a new generation of professionals. The fact that everything is new inspires a sense of new ho-
rizons and limitless possibilities. Exploiting this myth of the ‘new land’, the plans proclaim that IJburg will be superior to any new development project ever built. This claim was heightened by the rapidity with which the urban property market swelled in the nineteen-nineties.

The plans hinge on the catchword ‘urban’, which is translated into a high degree of diversity. The building blocks on the Haveneiland and the Rieteilanden each serve a wide variety of types of homes and price classes, and space for facilities. With regard to social characteristics IJburg must be a mixed neighbourhood accessible to all, as this will promote social integration. The facilities for IJburg are also based on the idea of a diverse city neighbourhood similar to other neighbourhoods in Amsterdam: limited parking and basic facilities for the residents combined with leisure facilities with a supra-community reach. An unusual aspect is the schedule of requirements ‘IJburg without Boundaries’ which attempts to integrate healthcare, welfare and education within the neighbourhood as far as possible. Finally, the plans express identity with the slogan ‘suburban living in the city’ [‘buiten-wonen-in-de-stad’], promulgated as the best of two worlds. In the policy documents, Haveneiland is the most urban section while a more suburban mood pervades in the Rieteilanden. However, IJburg’s uniqueness is emphasised; it is far from being a dormitory town like so many other new housing districts and Vinex locations.

Typical of this vision is a deep-rooted belief in the makeability of place with schedules of requirements and urban planning. Paradoxically, this striving to dissociate from the so-called blueprint planning that created the new neighbourhoods of yesteryear leads to the dogmatic pursuit of diversity. In achieving the objective of a ‘real’ urban neighbourhood, the municipality of Amsterdam is even going as far as putting the urban design plans of the market parties with whom they are developing IJburg to one side because they fail to correspond to its own visions.

**Realisation**

In 1998 a start is made on raising land from the lake; two years later, construction begins. The municipality entered into partnership with a variety of project developers, investors and housing federations, which joined forces in four consortia. In urban planning literature, such a public-private partnership is considered a better system of area development than the old traditional hierarchical planning with the government in the director’s chair. When the housing market entered a low at the start of construction, there was rapid disagreement on the distribution of duties and agreements. The consortia assert that the municipal guidelines are driving up development costs, thus increasing house prices. The project developers specifically point the finger at the enormous variety of housing types and the large
number of architects working on a single block. The limited parking also comes in for criticism. However, the municipal professionals, supported by the housing federations, insist that the large amount of physical diversity is essential for an urban character. The institutional positions are thus played out against each other.

Under a constant barrage of negative media attention, in 2003 tensions become so bad as to generate the sense of a crisis. Under the banner ‘The Great Simplification’, a drive to simplify matters, the municipality retaliates with a new approach that bows to a number of the consortia’s wishes. Apart from the designers, this seems to placate all the professionals, certainly when, at the end of the year, sales spike and facilities are finally installed on IJburg. One of these is the beach tent Blijburg that is soon eagerly frequented by Amsterdam locals. As of 2004, progress with the neighbourhood picks up pace despite the plans being definitively delayed. The positive progress also appears to have damaged, rather than enhanced professional inter-relationships.

It can be concluded that the professionals are playing a major role in place making, but that it was not the smooth process that urban planning theories seem to suggest. On the basis of their institutional position, the parties have very disparate spatial visions that never converge. These plans nonetheless are the basis for place making, although the course of this process is highly dependant on inter-relationships and external circumstances in the realisation phase. Personal visions and coalitions between established institutions in the local context exercise greater influence than common interests.

**Place making by residents**

**Resident characteristics**

The first IJburg residents are a specific group of people. Not only because they are pioneers, but also because of their individual characteristics. Most of the pioneering IJburg residents are aged about 35 years and are starting to build a family; hence their move. With this, IJburg seems an average suburb, but other characteristics reveal a more urban population. The majority of IJburg residents come from Amsterdam where they have lived, on average, for sixteen years. A large number have come to the city as students or have just joined the labour force. Partly because of this, the level of education is exceptionally high: almost three quarters are highly trained professionals or university graduates; many IJburg residents are employed in commercial or creative services. A considerable proportion of residents are in paid employment; even mothers work an average of 30 hours a week. The group of respondents consists primarily of home-owners who can be catego-
rised as urban middle class. A second group comprises tenants in social housing with a slightly lower socio-economic status, who have often lived in Amsterdam since childhood.

A third group is made up of mobile tenants in the private sector. They tend to come more often from out of town, are frequently childless and do not expect to live on IJburg for long.

**Economic-functional ties**

IJburg residents are highly mobile, which is apparent from the number of cars they own and the importance they attach to location and accessibility. Nevertheless, these are no footloose network city dwellers who wander vast daily urban systems. They value closeness and, in their use of space, the residents are very Amsterdam-oriented. IJburg is still not being used intensively, although for families it is an important operating base. Such daily acts by these task-combiners is exactly what gives place its shape. Here, space proves not only to have instrumental value, but considerable emotional value too. Place is consumed both rationally and symbolically and it is from the latter that the residents derive particular meaning.

**Social ties**

The first IJburg residents have relatively extensive social networks in which, for the time being, the neighbourhood plays a subordinate part. The majority of their social contacts are in Amsterdam and most residents have family and friends in the region.

However, in a social context, IJburg cannot be typified as a rarefied zone. The pioneer phase creates openness among the residents, and almost everyone knows their neighbours’ face, and exchanges greetings. Almost all IJburg residents claim they ‘don’t just invite anyone round’ but casual contacts with neighbours play an important part in their place making. The families feel particularly attracted to this. Despite the fact that, as the neighbourhood further develops, the public space will become increasingly distant, people will continue to stay in touch based on similarity and closeness. Such a light community where freedom of choice and informal social contacts predominate is precisely where the residents develop a sense of home.

**Political ties**

Many of the first IJburg residents have been intensively following developments in the neighbourhood for years. They feel very involved with their new living environment and also want to play a part in its development. In the first phase, this leads
to setting up different block and community associations and organising many activities and initiatives.

As the neighbourhood grows and the residents settle in, political ties seem to be primarily based on personal interest. This can be referred to as a community of limited liability. The house-owners appear to attach especial importance to the state of their living environment, which they consider a paradise. They want to eliminate any threats to it as much as possible, but this rarely leads to collective actions. The difference between resident types promotes the formation of groups within the community. Friction is especially evident in the blocks typified by a high degree of physical diversity.

**Cultural ties**

The original IJburg residents consider themselves first and foremost ‘Amsterdammers’. Their preference for urban life meant that many of them were not keen on suburban living. In their search for a new place to live, these residents often did not consider IJburg as their first choice, although they did make an informed final decision. The residents, then, in an active place making process, gave meaning to an ideal combination of urban and suburban. A process that employs both the physical elements of IJburg, and the social characteristics. Living in the neighbourhood is even elevated to a lifestyle. It is striking to see the extent to which this approach is shared by the residents. Even those who make no use of local facilities, have little contact with neighbours and only moderate political involvement, identify with their living environment.

From the results of the survey of the residents, it can be concluded that, in a world of boundless freedom of choice, place is particularly crucial in identity forming. People consciously choose a place to live based on a broad socio-spatial reference system and construct meanings in line with their narratives of self. Place making by residents comes about in a subtle balance between instrumental use of space and the need for an emotional connection with a place. Their territorial ties are no longer motivated by a need for a traditional community or refuge from the outside world; this has been replaced by the need for a sense of belonging. Well educated urbanites with children are especially place-sensitive.

**Confrontation**

The professionals and residents each contribute to their own place making, but separately. In every new neighbourhood, a social dynamic evolves that transcends the original plans. In the past, professionals showed little awareness of this. Their
visions were typified by radical ideas about life in the community – a highly utopian vision.

These ideals have been abandoned although, also on IJburg, there are many discrepancies between plans and practice. However, the response of the majority of professionals to this is to observe that addressing this does not fall within their remit. Many believe that the problems lie in the fact that the plans are still under realisation, or in general social processes which are impossible to take into account. Only the administrators, specifically the local council, are considered responsible for dealing with the situation.

The development of IJburg in the first phase, however, leaves the administrators little scope for responding to the social dynamic. The agreements between the municipality and the consortia considerably restrict the flexibility of the neighbourhood. All the professionals have ideas to improve this, although their visions and interests are very different.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the confrontation between the visions of the professionals and the ties of the residents is that modern new neighbourhoods are dominated by an emphasis on planning procedures rather than people’s objectives. The result of place making, an attractive, liveable neighbourhood, is the long-term goal, making light of the meanings residents assign to their living environment. Due to the network structure that forges collaborations between professionals, there are no actual problem owners. The administrators have, on the whole, little involvement in the development and lack the sources and powers for a concrete, dynamic response.

Pioneering in the new land

Place making in a complex world

Although the research into IJburg is a single-case study in what is, in some respects, hardly an average neighbourhood, a number of general conclusions can be drawn from the findings. Firstly, new neighbourhoods transpire to be not so new when it comes to place making. Their meaning does not simply materialise, but always relates to the so-called place images and people’s socio-spatial reference system. In a social context, new neighbourhoods are, therefore, always places, rather than abstract spaces despite, in the view of critics, possessing no distinguishing features.

Secondly, with their plans and designs, professionals have enormous impact on the way in which places are used and experienced. In a mental capacity, they do this by investing the physical elements with their own meaning and, in a material sense, by creating the spatial structures which contextualise the residents’ behav-
The manner in which new neighbourhoods are planned and built is not a democratic process between professionals, but a struggle between political and economic interests set off against the context within which the project is developed. The structuralist vision of place is established with this, although this is only one of the aspects that steer the process of assigning meaning to space.

Thirdly and lastly, the study shows just how powerful place making by residents is. Although the ways in which they use and experience space are pre-structured, in everyday life they construct their own images of place. People's time and space actions and their face-to-face contacts still form the basis of this. Within the current network society, they nonetheless relate constantly to the world around them and the meanings these people assign to their living environment are highly dynamic and multi-layered. Furthermore, the relationship between instrumental choice of place and emotional identifications ensures diverse forms of place-sensitivity.

**Urban discourses**

An important basis for the place making of IJburg can be found in the relationship with the existing city. This places the neighbourhood within the context of urban development over the last few decades. In this context, the large city has undergone a transformation: no longer a place written off as a community with a deep-rooted lower class population, it has become a playground for the well educated, mobile middle classes. This urban renaissance has occurred primarily in Europe, and also typifies Dutch cities. Partly in light of this, when building new neighbourhoods there is a drive to create a sense of urban living, translated into a high degree of physical diversity and mixing of functions.

The urban discourse is part of IJburg's attraction, but it also contains a relatively abstract, restricted view of urban living. Because the better educated, urban middle class is the starting point, there is no space – literally or figuratively – in the new neighbourhoods for other city dwellers. The housing market keeps most of them at arm's length and, when they are welcome, they are framed as an injection of 'pleasant, urban colour' into the community. Thus, it is evident that the underlying processes involved in the development of a new neighbourhood implicitly employ exclusion mechanisms.

**The importance of the neighbourhood**

A new neighbourhood is not created only at the high level of structures. As the residents demonstrate, daily use at micro level is just as relevant for denoting the place making process. The study shows that the urban neighbourhood in today's network society is still an important element in people's lives. This does not lie in traditional community forming, as some scholars and policy makers like to think.
For city dwellers, the importance of the neighbourhood is their value for the assignation of mental meaning on the one hand, and their basis for every day use of space on the other. It is precisely this that creates a sense of home, something that people aspire to. Urban neighbourhoods are places in and of themselves and, however mobile some city dwellers are, they can always fall back on this. Good urban neighbourhoods facilitate their residents in this, also when they are still at the realisation process.