Kidnapping the Bijlmer
Paalman, F.J.J.W.

Published in:
Locality, regeneration & divers(c)ities

Citation for published version (APA):
Paalman, F. (2002). Kidnapping the Bijlmer. In S. Bennett, & J. Butler (Eds.), Locality, regeneration & divers(c)ities (pp. 71-78). (Advances in art & urban futures; No. 1). Bristol: Intellect.

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Floris Paalman

Kidnapping the Bijlmer

Introduction

From the assumption that the built environment steers perception, determines human behaviour, and thus has an influence on certain concepts and social relationships, arose the rationalist idea of the ‘makable society’. Reality could be designed by means of architecture and urban planning. Man would be in a position to realise utopian ideas, particularly through large-scale housing projects like the Bijlmer area of Amsterdam. Architecture, however, does not determine just the behaviour of inhabitants. Inhabitants in their turn determine the function and meaning of architecture.

City of the Future

The enormous growth of cities during the period of industrialisation had given rise to an uncontrollable urban chaos at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a reaction to this, functionalist plans were developed which concentrated on the quality of life, the planned ordering of the environment and the combining of social interests. The first experiments were carried out worldwide between the First and Second World Wars. Only in the 1950s and 1960s could an actual start be made with the construction of functional housing estates on a large scale.

These neighbourhoods in the (...) metropolitan periphery have been developed as an urban concept based on architectural insights into the separation of functions and into ways of materialising these on the one hand, and ideas about social organisation on the other. That is to say, they usually consist of pre-fabricated tower blocks and are intended as housing — with a lot of light and fresh air — for people who want to move out of the inner city renovation areas and for middle-income households looking for a modern lifestyle with family-sized housing, balanced facilities and social equality. (Hulsbergen, 1995: 86)

A radical example of such a functional district is the Bijlmer in Amsterdam. The Bijlmer is characterised by large-scale, communal housing complexes connected to each other by footbridges and interior walkways. The buildings form enormous sculptures in a park landscape, with different levels of infrastructure. The first level is reserved for pedestrians and cyclists, the second level for cars and the third layer for the metro which whooshes through the air. In this concept, the pedestrian is not disturbed by fast traffic, but carefully guided through the environment via measured paths, viaducts, galleries and lifts. The cultural critic Marshall Berman wrote about this comprehensive environmental planning and the striving to make more efficient use of urban space:
The city development of the last forty years, in capitalist and socialist countries alike, has systematically attacked, and often successfully obliterated, the 'moving chaos' of nineteenth-century urban life. In the new urban environment...the old modern street, with its volatile mixture of people and traffic, business and homes, rich and poor, is sorted out and split up into separate compartments... (Berman, 1983: 168)

Where there is a lot of life there is also a richness to experience. When everything and everyone is in motion then different things, according to one's own knowledge and insight, can be combined with each other. There is a continuous stream of varying impulses that ensure that vision is activated. This creates new associations, new ideas, new plans, new strategies. Because of the attempts by policy makers and planners to prevent collisions and conflicts, the space for initiatives of one's own is minimised. The "anarchic, explosive forces" of "moving chaos" are suppressed, instead of them being used as a source of energy. Because of the resulting vandalism and crime, areas like the Bijlmer are labelled as "urban problem areas". (Hulsbergen, 1995)

The Bijlmer was built according to rationalist principles, as a city of the future. The problem is that, as an idealistic project, the Bijlmer has not produced what people had hoped it would. And that goes not only for the Bijlmer, but for countless suburbs in Europe's large cities. Reference is often made, explicitly or not, to East European cities! where systematic planning was implemented in a radical way. These cities are invariably described in the West as 'drab and grey, where people live piled up as static entities in impersonal, monotonous flats, in vast concrete suburbs'. In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union has also influenced how people think about 'Soviet architecture' in the West. The question, however, is whether this is correct if one looks at the actual situation in the former Soviet Union, as Bart Goldhoorn has done:

No less than 90% of Moscow consists of system-built flats. Admittedly, the blocks of flats cannot be described as architectural jewels, but given the objectives of Soviet city planning — building a lot of living accommodation cheaply and creating equal living conditions for everyone — the result is more or less successful. There is even a certain beauty in these vast landscapes of seemingly chaotic residential buildings, especially as many of the negative side-effects of their European equivalents are completely lacking. There seems to be no question of ghetto-forming and the segregation that goes with it. Everyone — worker, doctor, engineer — lives in a decent flat. (Goldhoorn, 1993: 33)

Goldhoorn goes on to observe that these areas are more lively than similar areas in Western Europe. His observations are important when one considers the magnitude of the number of systematically built houses in the vast suburbs of Soviet cities. What is more, these quarters were constructed across the entire Soviet Union, in regions with diverse cultural backgrounds. A major contrast exists between the homogeneity of the standard architecture and the cultural diversity of the various former Soviet republics. This contrast is overcome by the inhabitants themselves. Now that the government has withdrawn, the inhabitants are left to their own devices and are able to 'appropriate' the environment. The situation in Armenia is a striking example of this. In the Soviet period...
most of the flats there were rebuilt by their inhabitants. This development that has intensified even more since 1991: balconies are transformed into extra rooms, adjacent apartments are joined together by breaking down dividing walls, staircases are knocked up on the façades, cellars are converted into shops or bars and neighbours work together in adding a sort of platform to the building so that everyone can realise their own annex. Shops and markets arise in the public space around these flats, garages are built and little gardens and playgrounds for children are constructed. (Paalman, 1997)

**Restructuring**

It was recently announced that the Bijlmermeer Renewal Project Office intends to demolish three-quarters of all the blocks of flats in South East Amsterdam (Poorthuis, 1999). This, however, offers no solution to the problems of the Bijlmer, such as unemployment, vandalism, crime, lack of occupancy and rapid rates of moving on. These problems are simply ignored by policymakers and designers who are incapable of finding solutions, are not aware of the processes that are prevalent in the Bijlmer and have no notion of the role architecture really plays in this. “I think that the Netherlands is scared stiff of the form of urbanism present here”, writes the architect Endry van Velzen in a special issue of the magazine Archis devoted to the Bijlmermeer (Van Velzen, 1997: 39). Arnold Reijndorp writes in the same issue that the Bijlmer evolved out of the model of the welfare state and that, starting out from the same model, solutions were sought to “correct a Utopia that has run amok”.

With the envisaged corrections such runaway ambitions are pruned away in the hope that the Bijlmermeer can be slotted into the mainstream of Dutch public housing and urbanism after all, consisting as this does of developments in a well-considered mix of high-, low- and mid-rise architecture, spread over the public and private housing sectors. (Reijndorp, 1997: 62)

What is surprising in the discussion about the Bijlmer is the general lack of insight. Statements are often made on the basis of limited and one-sided research. “The argumentation usually rests on a mixture of facts, interpretations, guesses and the sort of things that are generally accepted as going without saying”, is the judgement that Edward Hulsbergen passes in his book Stedelijke probleemgebieden (Hulsbergen, 1995: 20). The problems go further than just the architecture. A large number of factors are of a socio-cultural nature. The social influence of architecture and architects, however, is grossly overrated. While in the 1920s it was thought that architects could design society, there is still a belief today that social problems can be solved by means of architecture, so that exactly what is labelled the big mistake is being repeated. It is often apparent that when there is no change in the future perspectives of inhabitants then renovation does little and at the most only helps temporarily, as Jan Willem Duyvendak recently made clear in de Volkskrant (Duyvendak, 1999). The origins of social problems are hardly ever of an architectural nature, and architecture offers virtually no solutions to social problems. Architecture is certainly important when it comes to consolidating
the social situation: it gives a society structure and concrete form. But architecture exists on a latent level: it facilitates, accommodates and conserves.

The restructuring of the Bijlmer is not so much about the improvement of the neighbourhood as about big money. Van Velzen noted already at an earlier stage that there are economic interests at stake:

> In the case of the Bijlmer it’s worth noting that a few years ago (...) demolishing 25% of the high-rise was considered a lot. But early in 1996 the debate was all about how 25% was nowhere near enough. These are powerful forces -- hundreds of millions in subsidies are involved. (Velzen, 1997: 38)

Arnold Reijndorp worked out in Archis that for the renovation of the Bijlmer there are 900 million guilders available for spatial interventions and 26 million for socio-economic development (Reijndorp, 1997: 63). In other words, 97% of the total amount involved in the renovation of the Bijlmer is being used for architectural solutions. Those who will benefit from this are not the inhabitants. The government is spending 10,000 guilders per head of the Bijlmer population. That’s 50,000 for an average family of two parents and three children. This is in stark contrast to the often very limited incomes of families living in the Bijlmer. Significantly, the liberal Secretary of State for Housing, Remkes, supports the demolition plans for the Bijlmer. Indeed, Remkes even sees it as an ideal model for the demolition of similar neighbourhoods throughout the Netherlands. “Cheap flats and houses in postwar neighbourhoods should be replaced by more expensive single-family dwellings and apartments.” Remkes literally wants to turn the underprivileged out into the street, demolish their homes and build expensive houses for the rich in their place. “He expects ‘emotional discussions’, since the demolition will make it more difficult for lower-income groups to find inexpensive housing” (Poorthuis, 1999). It is sad how short-sighted even the secretary of state can be. For had he gone into the issue of ‘gentrification’, then he would have been aware of recent developments in London, for example, where the same sort of social housing is not demolished but transformed into luxurious lofts for the well-to-do, and Peter Stuyvesanttown in New York, “which was just as vilified by architects and urbanists in the seventies as the Bijlmer”, where, in the words of Reijndorp, “despite the unassuming architecture of the housing blocks”, a “fantastic, traffic-free residential park” was created (Reijndorp, 1997: 63). Not that such an approach would help the present inhabitants of the Bijlmer very much. The examples only offer an extra perspective in order to look at the possibilities of the already existing architecture.

**Vision**

Writing in the NRC Handelsblad, Bernard Hulsman wonders how it comes that the Bijlmer can count on so much approval among architects. (Hulsman, 1999) The Bijlmer may or may not be seen as a total failure, but the fact is that the Bijlmer was built according to a clear vision: a city for the future. Whether one agrees with this vision, and whether this vision is outdated, is another story. The current restructuring plans testify in any case to no vision at all. The only thing that is currently being proposed is demolition and the
construction of nondescript low-rise buildings. There is no looking to the future whatsoever. On the contrary, the plans are a step backwards: safe and old-fashioned in intent. This contrasts considerably with statements by the urban developer Ashok Bhalotra in relation to his concept for a structural vision for the Bijlmer:

People must think about the future systematically and work for the long-term. I have proposed the year 3000 as the target. What do you want things to be like in the year 3000; what’s your ideal vision of the city? Then we have a thousand years to realize it. At least we know then what we’re letting ourselves in for. And let’s not be afraid to look beyond the limits of the present. But now you go from one meeting to another, and show up too late at both of them. Where’s the time for reflection? There isn’t any. It’s a general malaise. (Bhalotra, 1997: 44)

Hulsman calls the architects who admire the design of the Bijlmer “pathetic sociologists”. In his view it is a “miracle” that the Bijlmer was ever created; it was already an “anachronism” at the time, a realisation of Le Corbusier’s “absurd plans”. The Bijlmer is “with its endless repetition of the same dwellings the perfect expression of a riddled and already then outmoded ideal of equality”. Hulsman thinks it is “sick” that Siegfried Nassuth, the designer of the Bijlmer, was recently honoured with the Oeuvre Prize from the Amsterdam Fund for Art, Design and Architecture (Hulsman, 1999). The big mistake made by Hulsman, and many others, is that he sees architecture as something static, as something that is finished as soon as it is handed over by the builders. However, an architectural concept is not finished at the moment it is realised. Furthermore, a design is not the cause of a particular consequence. Architecture only comes to life when it is used and when it is appropriated and altered by the users. Architecture offers a framework in which to act. Within this, users create their own routes and structures, making use of available materials. To this extent architecture provides possibilities. The experience of architecture is thus dependent on what is possible rather than what has been completed. “The demolition of a quarter of the thirty honeycomb shaped blocks of flats and the renovation of some of the others have not brought about the improvements that the Bijlmermeer Improvement [sic.] Project Office had anticipated in 1992”, reports Hulsman (Hulsman, 1999). The conclusion that the Office draws from this is that three-quarters of all the flats have to be demolished – whereas they themselves acknowledge that the previous demolition has had no effect. The problem is the persistent belief that architectural interventions offer solutions. No account is taken of the actual habitation and experience of the architecture, of occupants and the way they experience the environment.

**Perception and Use**

Policy makers and designers should look at the way people organise their houses, as well as the way they deal with public space. Movements in the home and routes through the city need to be studied. People use mental maps for orientation. Specific elements form orientation points, while other elements are hardly noticed, even when they are prominent in a material sense. In experiencing the environment small-scale
things are of greater significance than formal structures, which can often only be identified from a distant view. A building is never experienced in its entirety. Users always pay attention to certain parts, such as their own home in a block of flats, which is furnished without paying any heed to the intention of the designers. The meaning of architecture is not determined just by the concept underlying it. Meaning is created through use, by the practice of everyday life.

We should look at the structures that inhabitants themselves develop in the environment, how they appropriate their surroundings. Something like this was already noted by Van Velzen, referring to the small-scale, semi-legal businesses, the so-called 'informal economy' of the Bijlmer. "I believe you have to think of a way of making space for that. I don't think it's enough to tackle the Bijlmer on the scale on which it was conceived" (Van Velzen, 1997:38). Bhalotra also talks about the informal economy,

where the Bijlmer residents have 'kidnapped the city'. We've checked out where the activities are. And then you see the most important points: a temple here, a meeting place there, or newly dug allotments. These are the things that need keeping as markers for the new city. You have to say to the inhabitants, 'these things are yours'.

(Bhalotra, 1997: 43)

But what happens when three-quarters of the surroundings are demolished? Then all the structures that the inhabitants have developed themselves are destroyed. The
ways of living the inhabitants have developed is denied and the diversity of cultures in the Bijlmer is ignored. If one really wants to make use of the 'multicultural society' then the very least that has to be done is to allow room for the inhabitants' initiatives to develop, according to their own ideas. At the moment, only solutions from outsiders are considered, ones that have been developed within the model of the welfare state. As Reijndorp writes,

\[\text{Along with an approach directed primarily at extending the mechanisms of the welfare state (more 'state'), greater attention is required for the Bijlmer's 'city potential', for the enterprises and activities often invisible to that 'state'. (Reijndorp, 1997: 62)}\]

Industrially manufactured housing arises out of general, universal ideas. Through appropriation, however, it acquires an identity of its own. A block of flats can therefore be regarded as a 'shell'. If policymakers were to give inhabitants a free hand in designing the individual residential units, then the architecture would adapt itself and diversity would be created. It appears that standard blocks of flats can easily change in this way. All in all, even the most monumental structures can be characterised to a large degree as dynamic.

If 900 million guilders were to be invested in research and stimulating the inhabitants' own initiatives, then the Bijlmer could grow into an economically and culturally healthy neighbourhood, according to its own model, and without radical changes to the existing buildings. In order to bring this about, insight has to be gained.
first and foremost into how inhabitants experience and appropriate the Bijlmer. The insight thus acquired can then form the basis for thinking, together with the inhabitants, about the way that policymakers and designers could support and, if necessary, streamline initiatives.

References


Van Velzen, E. (1997) 'Aesthetics doesn't interest me', in Archis, no. 3.

This text is reproduced with permission of Sites and Situations Publication, Willem de Kooning Academy, Rotterdam.