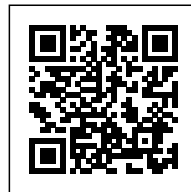


Bottom-up: Towards a
New Urban Spontaneity
Flavio Martella

BOTTOM-UP: TOWARDS A NEW URBAN SPONTANEITY STARTING FROM THE OOSTEWOLD MODEL

Posted on June 23, 2021 by martabuges



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The reintroduction of spontaneity in contemporary architectural processes can represent a new form of interaction to create a new urban environment and lead to a rebalancing of internal hierarchies. The city of Almere is a pioneer in this field, especially in the experimental district of Oostewold, where it seeks to promote a new system of building the city based entirely on bottom-up processes. This initiative radically reverses the consolidated urban development processes, starting the creation of relationships based on a contemporary understanding of the city. It is an understanding that includes the citizen in the construction of the city, integrating the participatory process model with that of the construction of the city itself. As such, it aims to arrive at the creation of a more vital, inclusive neighborhood in which the inhabitants not only feel belonging but give the city its real identity – a new way to build the city.

ISSN : 2575-5374

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Blake Wheeler, Suburb, 2018.

In the Netherlands, as in many other Western countries, the financial crisis of the end of 2008 and the economic recession that ensued had enormous effects on local development plans. Many proposals were postponed, or even canceled, given the tremendous drop in requests for new homes, offices and shops.

The resulting loss led investors to withdraw from public-private partnerships, leaving local

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governments with numerous undeveloped plots, but with rising interest costs, and with many intensively built areas that did not meet the contemporary needs of the population.

This change in demand led to the formulation of new hypotheses and new housing theories that might more effectively respond to the new needs. Many of these hypotheses aimed to reconstruct the worn-out relationship between the population and the urban environment, restoring the individual possibility of choice and intervention in the architectural context.

Today, a more organic development process based on the theory of spontaneous actions seems to be a completely possible alternative approach (Feddes, 2008). It is a methodology that not only enables a new potential for citizens but requires the complete reformulation of architectural roles, starting from the municipalities. Urban development would thus become less dependent on a public-private partnership between municipalities and investors, putting the end user directly into the relationships. The role of municipalities is therefore to organize and facilitate private initiatives, rather than to design finite spatial configurations.

The case of Oostewold, in the Dutch city of Almere, is one of the first attempts that tried to organize a city with a completely bottom-up organic development, without a master plan drawn up a priori, but with guidelines called the "Almere Principles" and with the incentive of "the right to build", introduced by the Dutch parliament in 1998 (Feddes, 2008).

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Paolo Manzo, Le Vele di Scampia, 2019.

The shift from rigid planning to spontaneous development transformed the city of Almere from a city like every other one, with a strong top-down character, without much space for private initiatives, into a place also defined by private actions. The government and its projects are no longer in the lead, but the administration remains the central entity of the system. It builds the basic infrastructure of the city, and it provides the guidelines that can activate the small private actors.

The intent is to give people power over the city, instead of favoring corporations or builders. Private individuals must respect the rules concerning, for example, the height of buildings, distances, energy performance and sanitary and structural qualities, while they are totally free to build what

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they want, as they wish. What has emerged to date from this urban policy is that the architectural variety typical of stratified cities (and often associated with a better quality of life) has been re-established and, above all, it has led to an unexpected lowering of construction and maintenance costs.

The growth in Almere since 2008, the year in which the experimental project started, is clearly superior to that of its first years of intensive development (starting from 1976) following a canonical modern urban development plan. In fact, from the forecasts obtained from the initial results, it is estimated that by 2030 the city will have 60,000 new homes, 100,000 jobs and about 160,000 new inhabitants (MVRDV, 2011). This highlights how organic urban development is a viable strategy that can lead to even better results than traditional techniques.

On the one hand, the municipality tries to give maximum freedom to small private investors, while on the other it tries to make a manifesto of the new agricultural utopia for a "productive landscape" (MVRDV, 2011). The government, in addition to national laws, promotes some principles to keep the planning structure as clear as possible and aims to find a balance between total freedom and responsibility towards others and the environment, experimenting with forms of spontaneous development.

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MVRDV, Almere Oostewold Plan, 2011.

The idea for Oostewold is that the entire area will be developed gradually, with an unpredictable and bottom-up character: the end result will be the aggregation of all the human initiatives. One of its peculiarities, which also differentiates it from cities of the past, is that all the participants will also have to provide for the structures of the area, organizing everything themselves under the supervision of the municipality. The role of the government is minimized, limited to general control and the promotion of opportunities for new investors, in a strategy that is completely oriented toward flexibility and the users' needs.

The first major difference between the approach chosen for Oostewold and the traditional one is the greater emphasis on demand instead of supply. In the traditional approach, planning (and

sometimes even construction) starts before buyers and tenants enter the general framework of architecture; they are completely cut off, and they buy a standardized product that is designed a priori. In Oostewold, instead, anyone interested in participating (individuals, groups, constructors or associations) in the city is welcome to do so, not only by entering but by creating the principle of the city itself (Cozzolino, 2017).

The second main difference between the two approaches is directly related to the first one. Instead of organizing, financing and regulating urban development only at the level of the project plan, the individual is placed as the fulcrum of development, participating in the active foundation of society. Development is focused on the small scale, adjusting small-scale actions instead of the larger result; it is emergent rather than global.

In the "Oostewold Plan" there is no predetermined division of the territory; the main goal is to avoid the onset of conflicts between the various initiatives and to protect the relations between private actions and public intervention. Generally, this concerns the perimeter of plots, the quantity of uses permitted, the proportion of the built area and the sustainability of the interventions. However, the general plan is sufficiently clear and specific to allow entrepreneurs to apply for a building permit. Projects are then developed in accordance with the "development rules", and once it is demonstrated that the rules have been respected, a contract is signed with the municipality, with which the entrepreneurs can finally start building on the property (Cozzolino, 2017).

The general condition for Oostewold is that at the end of the development, the land subdivision should be: 20% residential, shops, offices and service buildings; 6.5% infrastructure; 20.5% public green; 2% water, 51% agricultural land. A general restriction is that all Oostewold's lands are available to small private entrepreneurs except for three specific areas that are allotted for future collective projects: one area (Eemvalley) is for landscape design, another is destined for a future railway, and further small scattered portions will be forests.

With Oostewold, Almere is clearly promoting, in a radical and extreme way, the realization of an urban-agricultural lifestyle based on a large-scale urban development plan, general guidelines and spontaneous self-organization (RRAAM et al. 2012). The role of the architect in this system is the opposite from that of the modern and post-modern intellectual hero who shapes the world all alone. There is more direct contact with the real needs of the population for which the architect is designing, trying to mediate between users' needs and the will of the government.

Oostewold is an extreme case that does not aim to become a new architectural dogma. It could

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simply be a first step to pave the way for a series of actions to transform and make livable and identifiable the impersonal parts of contemporary cities. New variables have been introduced into modern urban-architectural theory, enabling a characterization of the new areas with the vitality and personality pursued by most architectural projects.

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