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NEW SUBURBIA'S IDENTITY CULTURAL ASPECTS OF RECENT DUTCH SUBURBS

INTRODUCTION: A NEW SUBURBIA IN THE MAKING

In 1990/1, the Dutch government issued a report on the spatial development of the country, the fourth of such reports since 1960. The official name of the report, quite a mouthful in Dutch (in translation: Fourth Report on Spatial Planning Extra), soon became shortened to its acronym VINEX. One of the most important decisions in VINEX was an ambitious housing program, aimed at building some 455,000 houses over a ten-year period (1995-2005), with generous financial support for the municipalities involved. Nearly two third of the total number, 285,000 housing units, were to be built in new neighborhoods on the edge of existing cities or beyond. In international parlance, these neighborhoods would be called suburbs; a term that the Dutch try to avoid as much as possible as they attribute merely negative connotations to it.

In total, the national government has spent the amount of 4 billion euros in subsidies to support the building process of these new suburbs. The largest part of the money was allocated to the construction of transit links to the suburbs; the rest was set aside to subsidize the acquisition of land and the cleanup of polluted building sites. In return for this substantial sum of money, the government demanded that the new suburbs should meet a number of requirements. The most important of these were:

- The suburbs should be as compact as possible, in order to minimize the use of the surrounding landscape (but there were no strict, nation-wide applied standards for average density).
- They should be developed as close to the existing cities as possible, keeping distances to a minimum. This was to support the role of the cities as centers for shopping, employment and services. Also, this should encourage the use of bicycles by commuters.
- They should be developed around existing or new transit links, in order to discourage car use to and from the new suburbs. This called for a large variety of solutions, ranging from dedicated bus lanes to streetcar extensions, additional railway stations and, in one case, a new subway viaduct.

It is interesting to note, that none of these requirements applied to the layout or design of the suburbs. Local and regional authorities were practically free in their choice of densities, use of green areas, distribution of amenities, building height and other important planning decisions.

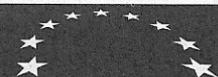
STUDYING SUBURBAN MORPHOLOGY

In spite of its national origins, the VINEX housing scheme ended up as an array of local planning decisions. Almost inevitably, this decentralization led to delays: each of the local and regional authorities had to find their own way through the necessary procedures. On the positive side, an approach with minimal (if any) central guidelines in the area of planning and design helped to create a maximal variety in suburban architecture. In spite of the delays, roughly three quarters of the projected houses were built by 2005. For the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Planning, this seemed the right moment to start a research into the morphological aspects of these suburbs. This research has resulted in a publication (Vinex! Een morfologische verkenning; Lörzing et al., NAi Publishers 2006).

From the beginning, the VINEX scheme met with a lot of criticism. Even before any of the houses were built, and the projects existed on paper only, the term VINEX became a household word to denounce contemporary urban design. Many critics pointed at the alleged monotony of the planned suburbs. For our research, this widely supported feeling became an important starting point. We wanted to learn more about the morphology of the new suburbs, and make a comparison with urban design from different periods of the twentieth century. Therefore, our central research questions were:

- Which morphological qualities are characteristic for these new suburbs?
- What is the position of this generation of suburbs within the history and the tradition of the Dutch regional planning, urban design and architecture?

More in detail, we wanted to study four aspects that, in our view, were indispensable for a broad description of suburban morphology. These aspects were: 1) the position of the suburbs in a wider context; 2) the urban character of the suburbs; 3) the identity of the suburbs; and 4) design aspects of the suburbs. In all these aspects, the study produced interesting findings. As for the position in the urban field, for instance, a striking conclusion was that many of the suburbs that we studied could not be regarded as being 'part of the urban area'. Rather, they had become independent urban entities in their own right; a situation that was absolutely in contradiction to the official guidelines in the VINEX report. Exploring the urban character of the selected suburbs, we found that in almost half the cases at least a significant part of the suburb had both functional and visual characteristics that fall into our definition of 'urbanity'.



This was surprising, because part of the criticism directed against the new suburbs was based on the allegation that they were anything but urban.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect, used in our study of urban morphology, was the search for urban identity. Although this aspect is in many ways related to other aspects (especially the 'urbanity' and 'design' aspects), we believed that there were legitimate reasons to treat 'suburban identity' as an aspect in its own right. The main reason was the rise of thematic urban planning, a phenomenon that came up rather unexpectedly in the late 1980s. We wondered if the idea of creating areas with a distinct identity played a role in the design of contemporary suburbs, and to which extent.

FROM COLLECTIVITY TO A MORE INDIVIDUAL APPROACH

For most of the twentieth century, urban districts built in the same period looked very much alike. This was hardly surprising, as design ideas throughout this century were in favor of functionalism, an approach deliberately aimed at eradicating local and national differences in architecture and planning. The results can be found all over the world: at first glance, housing projects from New York City to Bratislava and from Amsterdam to St Petersburg seem easily interchangeable. Even in the 1970s, when Dutch urban planners opted for a 'human-scale' approach with low-rise houses and traffic-calmed streets, neighborhoods from that decade still were hard to tell apart. Uniformity in urban design seemed to be the basic principle of the twentieth century.

In the Netherlands, the characteristics of the housing market almost guaranteed the perpetuation of large-scale, undistinguishable neighborhoods. Especially in the decades after World War II, when population was booming, the housing shortage called for an enormous building effort. With the national housing program surpassing the 100,000 units in peak years, mass production was inevitable and little attention could be paid to individual architectural expression. The fact that the Dutch housing market traditionally had been dominated by rented units, certainly helped this situation continue, even when the housing shortage was declining. Even today, in a city like Amsterdam the percentage of owner-occupied houses is still well below 25%, while the national average is now around 55%. These percentages are rising rapidly, as home-ownership, with averages above 80%, is becoming the norm in the latest generation of suburbs. This increase in ownership certainly influences the design of houses and neighborhoods, as homebuyers tend to be much more critical about their residential environment than tenants.

The changes became clear in the late 1980ies, in the design for Kattenbroek, a new district on the edge of the city of Amersfoort. The designer-in-chief, Dutch-Indian urban

planner Ashok Bhalotra, wanted each neighborhood within the district to have its own unique atmosphere. To achieve this, he invented themes like 'The Hidden Zone', 'The Fortress' and 'The Enclosed City', each with its matching architecture. After so many years of functionalist and egalitarian planning, this thematic approach was unheard of within the tradition of Dutch urban planning. In the early 1990ies, other cities used similar ideas when they were developing their own new neighborhoods. A striking example is the Eindhoven district of Blixembosch; here, an Italian, a French, an American and an English neighborhood have been built in the style of residential areas in these countries.

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT SUBURBAN IDENTITY

For our research, we used the term identity in an urban or suburban context as the spatial characteristics of a place or area, as promoted and/or given by the authorities, developers, planners and/or designers. Also, the identity of a place or area can be perceived by the population, but in our case of brand-new suburbs where the first generation of residents has just settled in, it does not make much sense to add this to the definition. Thus, the intended efforts by professional actors to give a place its (supposedly) unique character are decisive in our idea of 'suburban identity'.

Our three most important research questions in the field of suburban identity were:

- Which types of identity can we find in the latest generation of Dutch suburbs?
- Which spatial elements support these identities?
- What is the role of landscape and history in the selection of suburban identities?

As for the types of identity, we distinguished between three kinds:

- Local identities, direct references to the area in which the suburb is developed, often consisting of the preservation of old landscape or village elements;
- Borrowed identities, referring to urban or rural elements or names that were not part of the area but exist in similar situations and serve as a source of inspiration for the suburb's design;
- Chosen identities, selected at random to give the suburb an atmosphere of its own, unrelated to distinguishable local or regional situations.

See figure 1 (the table) for examples of these three kinds of identities.



types of identities elements and references examples:

<p>local identity (area-land infrastructure old roads, dikes specific elements) water infrastructuur lakes, rivers, canals old buildings castles, ruins, farmhouses planting groves, orchards, rows of trees, hedgerows</p>	<p>borrowed identity (referring to similar references to historical urban elements canals, villages, garden cities situations elsewhere) references to old landscape elements land patterns, water patterns</p>	<p>chosen identity new land infrastructure artificial ponds and canals (selected at random) new landscape elements newly planted groves and forests special effects architectural forms and colours foreign countries architectural references</p>
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Figure 1: table showing examples of the three kinds of identities

Our definition of 'identity' draws upon the deliberate action of developers and designers to create a specific atmosphere. The activity of 'creating the identity of a place' can be compared to the efforts in advertising, where visual (and other) means are being used to create the identity of a product or a brand. It is therefore admissible to speak of suburban 'branding'; just like any product can be placed in the market by creating a unique image for that product, suburbs can be branded to give them a character that is supposed to stand out between other suburbs. Another term that presents itself here is 'theming'. This refers to the practise of distinguishing neighborhoods by providing them with a 'theme', which (as we saw earlier) came up in the late 1980s.

EXPLORING LOCAL, CHOSEN AND BORROWED IDENTITIES

For our research project, we selected 13 suburbs (out of a total of nearly 90). They were neatly distributed over the country, over several types of landscape and over the four size categories that we used (smaller than 1,500 housing units, 1,500-5,000, 5,000-10,000 and larger than 10,000 units). In all honesty we can say that these 13 suburbs differ as much as possible in terms of location, urban design and architecture.

Some of the selected suburbs show remarkable examples of the three types of identity that are described earlier:

- A typical local identity can be found in Ypenburg suburb (The Hague), where the main boulevard is called (in translation) The Runway, in memory of the old airfield that had to make way for the suburb. Another clear example is the Vijfhoek suburb (near the city of Deventer in the East), named after and built around five old country roads that now form the heart of the bicycle path network for the suburb (see figures 2 and 3).

- Borrowed identities turned out to be less obvious. One of the few examples is Stellinghof, a small suburb set in an open polder Southwest of Amsterdam, the identity is defined by the typical 'village streets' that resemble the street pattern of small towns in the surrounding area.
- A rather curious example of a chosen identity is the 100 hectare 'residential forest' that is being planted in the heart of Zuiderburen suburb near the Northern city of Leeuwarden, planted in an open landscape that is widely known for its absolute lack of timber. In a different way, the experimental neighborhoods in the suburban parts of Almere new town (a fast-growing city in the new polders near Amsterdam) are showcases of chosen identities; one is known for its exuberant architecture, another for the explicit use of primary and pastel colors.

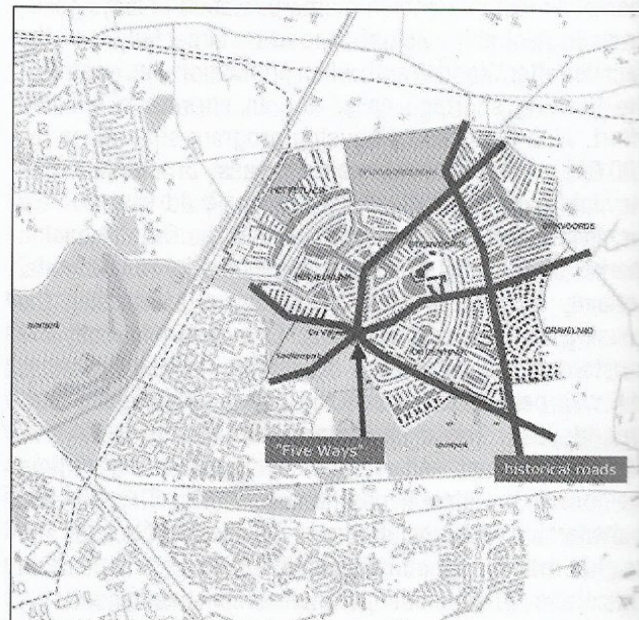


Figure 2: map of Vijfhoek suburb near Deventer; note the use of old country roads

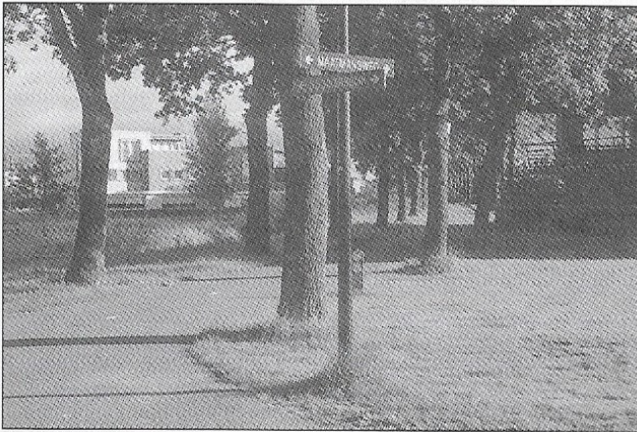


Figure 3: the intersection of five old country roads, hub of the bicycle path network

Talking about spatial elements, the three most popular ones used in suburban branding turned out to be water, woodland and history. The choice for the water theme is hardly surprising in a country like the Netherlands, especially in the low-lying Western and Northern parts. The water theme has been treated in many ways. In the most predictable cases, existing water served as a basis for the design, like in Nesseland suburb (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 (in Stadshagen, near the Northeastern city of Zwolle, an old drainage canal had been converted into the central green artery of the suburb). The woodland theme seems to be introduced not so much as a reference to existing elements but as a way to make up for the lack of them. In the Bosrijk ('wood-rich') neighborhood in Meerhoven (Eindhoven), existing groves are to be supplemented by further planting in order to provide a fuller, forest-like experience. And in Ypenburg (The Hague), part of this large (11,000 units) suburb consists of exclusive residences set in a newly created woodland area.

But it is the history theme that offers the most unexpected urban environments. It soon became clear to us that 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 suburb of Brandevoort (near the Southeastern city of Helmond). Here, history is all over the area. Brandevoort, designed by Luxembourg postmodernist Rob Krier, has a walled pseudo-Medieval town for a centre (see figure 4). Around this ramparted core, a ring of low-rise neighborhoods are developed in styles ranging from garden-city to village traditionalism, making Brandevoort seemingly historically-correct town with a Medieval heart and suburban outskirts.

Other suburbs touch upon the history theme, too. Haverleij, near the Southern city of Den Bosch, also refers to the Middle Ages but in a completely different way than 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 creating gated communities in the Netherlands. And indeed, closing the entrance gates or raising the drawbridge would effectively shut out undesirable aliens. A less controversial 'reinvention of history' can be found in Haveneiland (Harbor Island), so far the largest island of the Amsterdam archipelago suburb of IJburg (see figures 5 and 6). This area has been designed as a twenty-first century version of Old Amsterdam (or, more precisely, late 19th and early 20th century Amsterdam) with enclosed, rectangular residential blocks set in a network of canals. Although the architecture of Haveneiland is far from nostalgic, the urban plan evokes memories from a famous past.

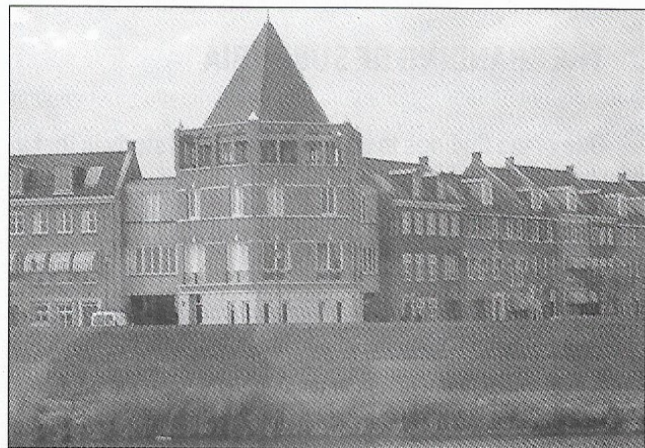


Figure 4: a bastion in the ramparted center of Brandevoort suburb near Helmond

In an interesting example, we found elements of local, borrowed and chosen identities together in one suburb. The suburb is a recent extension of the 1970s new town of Houten (South of Utrecht). The local elements are country roads, farmhouses and a castle ruin, all neatly preserved and integrated in the overall plan. The borrowed identity can be found in the 'Castellum' area, of which the name refers to the existence of the historical boundary of the Roman Empire (the 'limes') which ran not far to the North from Houten town. As a fine example of a chosen identity, the design for suburban Houten shows a 5 km long, pentagon-shaped dike that serves as a spatial reference and a recreational element alike. This 'Green Pentagon' is in fact a huge folly, an object of pure fantasy designed to give the suburb a distinct character of its own. For a schematic idea of these identities, see figure 7. Figure 8 shows the Green Pentagon.

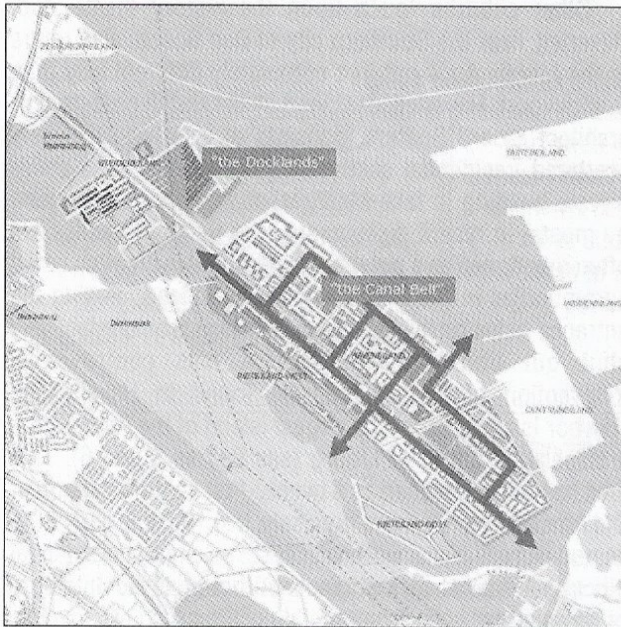


Figure 5: map of IJburg suburb near Amsterdam with the canals of Haveneiland

THE BRANDING OF SUBURBIA

One of the findings in our morphological study is that in practically all the suburbs that we explored, theming (or 'branding') of districts, neighborhoods or even smaller residential environments has become an integral part of the design. This is a rather new phenomenon, at least in the Netherlands. For most of the twentieth century, urban extensions were designed as uniform entities, fitting in the fashion of their building period. The stand-alone concrete slabs of apartment buildings, so typical for the 1960ies, make an outstanding example (and not just in the Netherlands). With the percentage of home-ownership in new neighborhoods on the rise, this kind of design was seen as monotonous and faceless. Buyers, developers and architects called for a more individual identity in suburban design. In this respect, themed suburbs can be a powerful tool in fighting the dreaded monotony of new residential areas. Although some of the themes that we found seem rather far-fetched, attaching a theme to a new district or neighborhood turns out to be a promising tool to give a housing area an individually recognizable identity.

As researchers, we had expected to find some 'theming' or 'branding' of neighborhoods in the new VINEX suburbs. What really surprised us, was that practically all 13 selected suburbs sported one or more identities in their design. In only one case we could not find any theme at all; this seemed to be a deliberate choice by the municipality in question. Some of the themes we came across during our study were:

- a modernist urban atmosphere;
- a mid-20th century city atmosphere, especially reminiscent of the 1930s;

- a dense and compact urban atmosphere, using canals, boulevards and closed residential blocks;
- a garden city atmosphere;
- an imitation Medieval atmosphere, using castles, fortresses and moats.

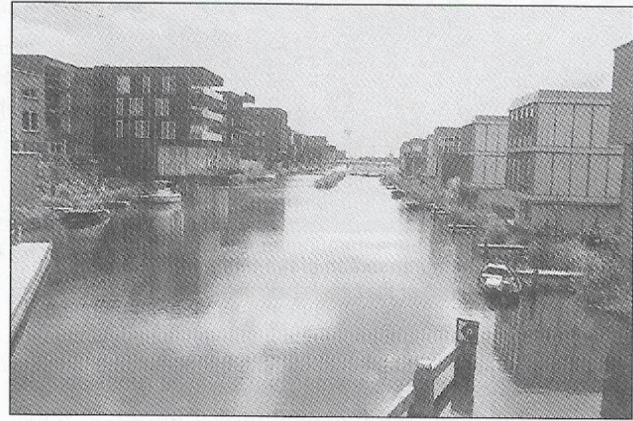


Figure 6: residential blocks on one of the canals of IJburg suburb

This list is not really complete. In fact, practically every suburb had (or at least tried to have) a unique theme of its own, and in a number of cases more than one theme. An obvious example of a 'multi-theme' suburb is Ypenburg (near The Hague), which shows a variety of themes ranging from a dense urban area with high-rises to a colorful modernist low-rise neighborhood to a forest area with 1930s residences.

At the end, one intriguing question remained. Why has branding suburbs become so popular as it obviously is? It was not easy to find a conclusive answer. Three explanations frequently came up during interviews and in various sources:

- Homebuyers want a recognizable and controllable residential environment, and with the rise of home-ownership in the Netherlands, this need is felt stronger than before in the last century;
- Answering to this demand, developers expect that using the right themes will attract buyers; this is especially noticeable in the sudden popularity of 1920s and 1930s houses and street patterns in recent suburbs;
- And last but not least, local authorities want their new suburbs to stand out between others; some of the most extreme designs that we found could only be realized because of the strong preferences of city politicians and/or planners.

Theming is not the universal answer to suburban monotony. Some of the experts that we interviewed expressed their doubts regarding the frequent use of certain themes, which in their opinion could lead to a new kind of monotony. However, in the suburbs that we explored, we found that similar themes could be used in

completely different ways; in fact, none of the 13 suburbs from our study looked the same. Planners and designers quite successful in creating diversity between and within the suburbs. We found that theming can be an important first step to provide a background for more detailed design solutions. In the most convincing examples, one theme was pervasive throughout the suburb's design, from the first sketches to the last detail. In such cases, theming is a successful tool in creating a real strong cultural identity.

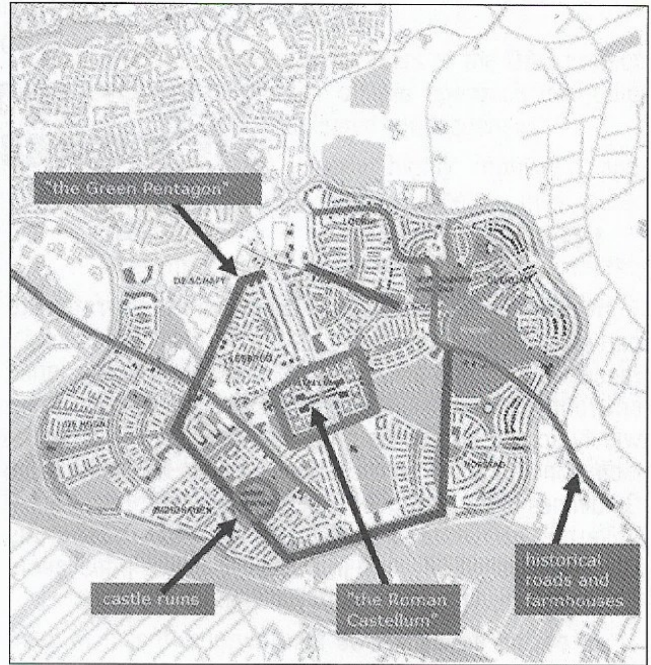


Figure 7: map of Houten new town extension: old roads and ruins, the Castellum, the Green Pentagon