Image not found or type unknown
LAPS
Gerrit Rietveld Academie
www.laps-rietveld.nl

PDF

2007

What Kind of City Centre Will the Zuidas Become?

Joost Zonneveld

The skyline on the south side of Amsterdam is slowly changing. Although it will be years before the Zuidas is ‘finished’, the new highrises provide a glimpse of what is to be a new city centre for Amsterdam in 20 years’ time.

At closer range, it is apparent that the Zuidas is still an incoherent whole. The WTC and the main offices of ABN-Amro and ING are juxtaposed with out-of-date stations, a university sports centre and vacant lots. In fact the Zuidas is merely at the beginning of an evolution whose goal is to redirect car and train traffic underground and to link Amsterdam-Zuid and Buitenveldert (the area next to Amsterdam-Zuid) through a new urban area dominated by high-rises. A new centre featuring one million square metres of office space, an equal amount of housing space and an additional 500,000 square metres for facilities are to be created on the Zuidas. Both Schiphol Airport and Amsterdam’s historic city centre are a stone’s throw away. Ultimately, the sports centre will disappear, there will be a major station for high-speed trains, regular trains and the metro, and there won’t be any vacant lots on this high-priced land.

One only need utter the word ‘Zuidas’ and one hears about the enormous potential of the area – as a business centre, as an opportunity to lure highly desirable knowledge workers to the city and as a new centre for Amsterdam and the Randstad urban conglomeration. The mega-project will give Amsterdam a contemporary face and make it economically viable for the coming century. It even seems the economy of the Netherlands depends to a high degree on the development of the Zuidas. Residents of Amsterdam will benefit as well, through increased employment opportunities.

The question remains, however, whether the various ambitions of the government and market players can be reconciled in a balanced way. And whether a business centre can be effectively combined with the function of an urban centre. For whereas a top-flight business centre is mainly a visiting card for businesses, an urban centre has a function for all sections of a city’s population. The presence of divergent functions such as housing, culture, business and sports does not necessarily mean that the Zuidas will actually evolve into an area embraced by the residents of Amsterdam as a city centre. Although the Zuidas is still mostly seen as an office location, more is needed than simply a mix of housing, culture and commerce.

Hustle and Bustle as a Selling Point

The Zuidas is supposed to grow into the new centre of Amsterdam, but the city authorities have not always shown much enthusiasm for the idea. In fact, Amsterdam was initially against the development of the Zuidas. The city was far more interested in the south bank of the IJ as a new location for office buildings. After all, as port activity declined, this area had to be given a new function. Moreover, the city feared for the competitive position of the inner city, because a location outside the old city centre might well carry negative economic consequences. However, market players involved in the development of the south bank of the IJ pulled out, and

from the early nineteen-nineties, more and more businesses moved to the Zuidas, making the development of the area inevitable. Major banks set up their headquarters there, and the city ultimately decided to go along with the development. According to former alderman and current commissioner of the Zuidas Enterprise, Duco Stadig, 'the government capitulated to the market'. The Zuidas was to be the new top location, but in a way that would deliver added value for the city. Along with offices, the area would have to include housing and facilities.

The market forced the development of the Zuidas. Although the term did not yet exist in the early nineteen-nineties, it is an example of what is now called 'development planology'. This is the new magic word when it comes to urban development, for the market and the government need each other to bring urban design projects to fruition. Thinking is based more on market demand, for the market, after all, knows what investors and consumers need. It is part and parcel of a society in which the demands of consumers are carrying increasing weight and the government is retrenching in all sorts of areas. Development planology is a method of development in which more of the emphasis is placed on implementation. In the past, many urban-design projects never got off the ground because the government made plans and then left implementation up to market players. Because this did not always come to pass, there is now an effort to take advantage of spatial and economic opportunities as they present themselves. The process no longer relies so much on a clear-cut plan as on visions, in order to be able to respond to changing factors. The aim is that urban-design projects be completed more quickly and that the spatial quality be increased. In the Netherlands, this way of working is a break with tradition, for Dutch spatial planning was long the exclusive purview of the state.

The involvement of private investors is necessary to finance a project like the Zuidas; the government cannot do it alone. As a result, the influence of market players on the development of urban-design projects like the Zuidas is significant. Sixty percent of the shares in the enterprise that is investing in installing the infrastructure underground are in the hands of private parties. The investors have already stipulated that their risk be fixed to a maximum figure. If financial setbacks exceed 350 million Euro, the loss is to be absorbed by the government. Recently, for fear of negative publicity, three banks have also offered to tie their profits to a maximum figure. Although this is a reasonable gesture, it is clear that the market has a major influence on the frameworks within the project.

Although it has been the wish of the Amsterdam city authorities, especially, that the Zuidas be more than simply a location for office buildings, it is inevitable that the representative quality of the area as a top location for business predominates. Precisely because the Zuidas is presented as an international top location, with the attendant real estate and rental prices, business interests have primacy. The urban environment that develops on the Zuidas, therefore, will be one dominated by these business interests. The proximity of a fancy restaurant and theatre make it attractive for businesses to take clients there. This makes the desired urban character a selling point for businesses on the Zuidas, and its urban functions will be dominated by economic interests.

What consequences this emphasis on representative quality can have is demonstrated by the irritation expressed by various businesses about the many bicycles randomly parked near the WTC. The typical Amsterdam bike spoiled the desired image; the bikes were said to make the Zuidas 'look messy'.

Function Mix on the Zuidas

Various reasons play a role in the ambition to turn the area into more than just a location for offices and to integrate it spatially into the city. At the moment, the area itself forms a physical barrier. The dike upon which the A10 motorway and the railroad tracks run draws a sharp line between Amsterdam-Zuid and Buitenveldert. Redirecting this – and future infrastructure underground offers an opportunity to create a linked urban area (the dock variant). In addition, many more housing units and offices can be built. It is not yet entirely certain that the dock variant will be implemented. If it is not, the Zuidas can still develop into a top-flight office location. But if the dock does go ahead, it will mean a green light for the development of the desired urban centre. This will have to feature high quality and high density, taking Amsterdam's inner city as a reference. Spatially, separate

sections of the city will be linked together. Whereas many other centres are becoming increasingly monofunctional by concentrating on one specific function, the aim on the Zuidas is to create a mix. This means, therefore, not a dull office park deserted after business hours, not a dormitory town containing only housing and not a centre devoted solely to entertainment, for instance. The added value of the area lies in the very combination of its functions. Moreover, it offers a chance to attract people from the surrounding region to the area with cultural facilities.

A mix in the area is important even based on purely economic interests. For if all that gets developed is an office park, the area becomes vulnerable to negative developments in the market. Linking offices to knowledge institutions such as universities and cultural facilities allows functions to complement one another, and there is a greater likelihood that the area will remain attractive as a location for the long term. Since the objective, moreover, is a topflight urban area and an international environment, highly educated knowledge workers the crucial target audience – from the Netherlands and abroad will be able not only to work on the Zuidas, but live there and spending their leisure time there as well. With the presence of restaurants, a musical theatre, museums, sports venues, parks and shops, they have at their disposal a complete package that suits their lifestyle. While there will also be facilities for day-to-day needs, the emphasis will be on an exclusive, high-quality assortment. You will not find cheap consumption stores on the Zuidas.

Targeting knowledge workers also means that a substantial portion of the housing stock is being developed in the top segment of the housing market. As Amsterdam is keen to have more such dwellings within city limits, this represents an opportunity to make up its shortfall. In addition to apartments, multi-story townhouses, penthouses and lofts, work-at-home dwellings, studios and publicly subsidized housing are being built.

In regard to the publicly subsidized housing, incidentally, the city has dropped its requirement of 30 percent publicly subsidized housing for the dock, bringing the percentage for the entire area down to just above 20 percent. Should costs rise, the publicly subsidized housing will be the first to see cutbacks. The Zuidas is primarily intended as an attractive area for international businesses and their employees. Amsterdam wants to establish a more prominent profile as a business, residential and cultural city. The Zuidas holds particular potential, as an icon in this domain, to counter the existing image of a city of drugs and backpackers.

Zuidas as a City Centre

Combining divergent functions plays an important role in the design of the new centre. Amsterdam’s inner city is being used as a model. A similar mix of housing, employment and facilities, with a comparable density, is being sought, in order to create a bustling area. It is too easy to think, however, that an attractive centre emerges as long as functions are mixed and spatial densities are copied. Based on the plans, the potential for socio-cultural mix is particularly limited. The assortment of shops, the cafes, dwellings and offices will be aimed at residents and visitors with above average incomes, turning the Zuidas into a centre for a specific group of Amsterdam residents. The park and the AFC football pitches may well attract a broader audience, but given the facilities on offer, it is difficult to imagine the average footballer sitting on the terrace in front of the WTC on a Sunday afternoon. Many different sorts of people will also use the area as a transit point, but that is of little predictive value as to the connection that people have to an area.

A city centre has a broader significance. One can only speak of such a centre once a section of the city appeals to people from the whole region, and people from different sections of the population live, work and spend their leisure time in that area. To put it concisely, in the way the Zuidas is being promoted, the diversity of functions is highlighted, but not the diversity of people. The minimum quota of publicly subsidized housing, for instance, is primarily a political necessity, but it will have no impact on the elitist character of internationally oriented knowledge workers and financial institutions.

Of course living in Amsterdam’s inner city is not within everyone’s reach either, but the percentage of publicly

subsidized housing is significant, there is a mix of high and low culture and various kinds of economic activity emerge that make the inner city a centre for all of Amsterdam's residents. Offering more groups room to live on the Zuidas and creating a more diverse assortment of facilities can bring about a more solid connection with the rest of the city. Whereas planners are currently banking on an 'exclusive and high-quality' assortment, an effort should be made to find a broader basis to realize a function like a city centre. Combinations such as an exclusive bookshop alongside a second-hand bookseller and a Moroccan bakery near an expensive sandwich shop increases diversity and lowers the threshold for a broader audience that has something to choose from and something to discover. In this way, the Zuidas can appeal to and serve different groups and in the process better connect to the rest of Amsterdam. If this does not happen, the Zuidas will eventually be spatially imbedded in the city, but it will form a socio-cultural island within it.

Forced Urbanness

Jan Winsemius, urban-design consultant, observes quite rightly that existing city centres like that of Amsterdam were never 'conceived' and certainly not with the question of 'how to bring urbanness into the area'. In today's urban development, this question does consistently come to the forefront, and attempts are made to add diversity in functions, so that the emergence of a multi-faceted and attractive urban environment flourishes as quickly as possible. By locating hospitality venues in the lower levels of buildings, by making intensive use of the space and by involving cultural institutions in the area, an urban climate is 'established' and an attempt is made to meet the needs of its residents and users. It is clear that the saleability of the Zuidas plays a major role. There is significant interest in creating a bustling city centre as quickly as possible. The consumer wants to live and work, immediately, in the attractive environment promoted in the brochures. Moreover, the Zuidas must meet the demands of representative quality, and money has to be made from the development of the area.

The result will be a forced urbanness, something that looks like the city centres we are familiar with, but that threatens to become a surrogate because of the significant economic interests involved. Not a centre that forms the nucleus of a great diversity of activities and people, but a cosmetic entity at the service of economic interests.

A desire to be a spotless billboard for the Netherlands and Amsterdam is strong. Because of the prestige associated with the Zuidas and the representative quality that the businesses located there want to exude with their office buildings, there will be no calls for more diversity any time soon. For the moment, visions for the future of the Zuidas still involve a new urban society of highly educated knowledge workers with a strongly international orientation, whereby the old Amsterdam, with its working-class neighbourhoods, immigrants and food-distribution banks, is completely taken out of the picture. The mix of functions may be borrowed from the old city, but preferably not its diversity of people. In so doing, the Zuidas, no matter how internationally oriented, will always lose out to the appeal of the familiar historic inner city.

Source

J. Winsemius, 'Economische maakbaarheid van stedelijkheid', in: Leve(n) de stad (The Hague: VROM, 2001).

Joost Zonneveld is on anthropologist and on independent journalist and researcher. The built environment and urban renewal projects are major themes in his publications.

Related posts:

1. Berlage Institute – Amsterdam Zuidas Transfer Node
2. The Dutch Neoliberal City and the Cultural Activist as the Last of the Idealists
3. A Cultural Approach to City Building
4. You Need Art When You Build a City
5. Space for Art at the Zuidas