

MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte, Bd. 51/1 (2020), 65-81

DOI: 10.60684/msg.v51i1.2020105

Tim Verlaan

Amsterdam Centre for Urban History

‘The city is collapsing under our very own eyes’. Spaces and emotions of the Dutch urban crisis

MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte

ISSN: 2941-6159 online

<https://moderne-stadtgeschichte.de>

Dieses Werk steht unter der [Lizenz Creative Commons Namensnennung 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Bei den Abbildungen sind eingeschränkte Lizenzformen möglich, Weiternutzungsrechte sind gesondert abzuklären.

© Tim Verlaan 2020



Tim Verlaan

“The city is collapsing under our very own eyes”. Spaces and emotions of the Dutch urban crisis

This article investigates both the physical and imaginary manifestations of the Dutch urban crisis of the 1960s and 1970s, taking Amsterdam’s inner city and the modernist Bijlmermeer estates as case studies. The main objective is to examine how political and planning elites as well as media outlets mobilised fear in their discussions of the crisis, and to a lesser extent how local residents responded. It will be shown that the actors in this article consciously and unconsciously contributed to a broader crisis narrative aiming at swift decision-making and delegitimisation of the protests against urban re-development. The article also shows how generational conflict, class struggles, and racist stereotypes significantly influenced the crisis discourse as well as policy and planning solutions.

1. Introduction

In 1985, the feelings of excitement and anxiety that came with the Dutch urban crisis were captured by child singer Danny de Munk who somewhat cynically sang the praises of living in Amsterdam at the time:

“Here you will find everything your heart desires
some fights and a burglary, and sometimes a murder
You get slapped in the face, your bike might get stolen
but what would you do, if it were not for Mokum
[Yiddish slang for Amsterdam, TV]”¹

De Munk’s hymn to his hometown was a vivid description of the spiralling crime levels and physical decay in larger Dutch cities. The song reached number two in the charts, demonstrating how the urban crisis had caught a wider public imagination. The seeds of this crisis were sown with the economic recession and suburbanisation of young families during the 1970s, when a net number of more than 10.000 residents and 250 companies annually exchanged Amsterdam for the suburbs. They left behind an impoverished population of students, senior citizens and migrants, who had to cope with a crumbling infrastructure

¹ Danny de Munk, *Mijn stad*, 1985.

and struggling public utilities.² At the same time, redevelopment schemes were put on halt due to a lack of financial means and protests from an increasingly hostile squatting movement and community action groups.

Amsterdam was not the only Western metropolis falling on hard times during the 1970s. In particular, conurbations in Anglophone countries were vulnerable to the twin forces of suburbanisation and inner city decay. Thus, the vast majority of the crisis literature focuses on American and Canadian (industrial) cities and towns, with a limited number of studies examining the fate of British inner cities.³ Therefore, the main objective of this article is to establish whether the Dutch urban crisis was real or imaginative, to examine how political and planning elites and media outlets mobilised fear in their discussions of the crisis, and finally to investigate the spaces associated with such fears.

By doing so, I will firstly demonstrate how a crisis is not only a moment of panic but also one of judgement and decision in which emotions play a major role. While the field of politics and planning is allegedly governed by dry procedures and conducted by target-oriented personnel⁴, it will become clear how politicians and planners, as well as their mouthpieces in the media, used emotions to convince others of the graveness of the urban crisis, and how those affected by the crisis responded. This requires us to take emotions seriously, or as Martha Nussbaum has observed: “We cannot plausibly omit them, once we acknowledge that emotions include in their content judgments that can be true

² Hans van der Cammen/Len de Klerk, *Ruimtelijke ordening. Van grachtengordel tot Vinex-wijk*, Utrecht 2003, p. 244.

³ Viktor Gruen, *The urban crisis. Diagnosis and cure*, New York 1964; Thomas J. Sugrue, *The origins of the urban crisis. Race and inequality in postwar Detroit*, Princeton 1996; Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of decline. The postwar fate of US cities*, Cambridge, MA 1993; Jon Teaford, *Cities of the heartland. The rise and fall of the industrial Midwest*, Bloomington 1994; Colin Gordon, *Mapping decline. St. Louis and the fate of the American city*, Philadelphia 2008; Steven C. High, *Industrial sunset. The making of North America's rust belt 1969-1984*, Toronto 2003; Kim Phillips-Stein, *Fear city. New York's fiscal crisis and the rise of austerity politics*, New York 2017; Themis Chronopoulos/Jonathan Soffer, Introduction. After the urban crisis. New York and the rise of inequality, in: *Journal of Urban History* 43:6, 2017, p. 855-863; Mustafa K. Bayırbağ/Jonathan S. Davies/Sybil Münch, Interrogating urban crisis. Cities in the governance and contestation of austerity, in: *Urban Studies* 54:9, 2017, p. 2023-2038; Otto Saumarez Smith, The inner city crisis and the end of urban modernism in 1970s Britain, *Twentieth Century British History* 27:4, 2016, p. 578-598; Alistair Kefford, Disruption, destruction and the creation of 'the inner cities'. The impact of urban renewal on industry 1945-1980, in: *Urban History* 44:3, 2017, p. 492-515; Aaron Andrews, *Decline and the city. The urban crisis in Liverpool c. 1968-1986*, Leicester 2018; Sam Wetherell, *Freedom planned. Enterprise zones and urban non-planning in post-war Britain*, in: *Twentieth Century British History* 27:2, 2016, p. 266-289.

⁴ Ute Frevert, *Emotions in history – lost and found*, Budapest 2011, p. 6.

or false, and good or bad guides to ethical choice.”⁵ In particular, the field of human geography has recently incorporated emotions into its analytical framework⁶, especially after Kay Anderson and Susan Smith called upon their colleagues to examine feelings and emotions as the producers of the world as we know and live it.⁷ While this article takes a different approach by historically focussing on emotions *about* rather than emotions experienced *within* particular neighbourhoods, there is a distinct geographical angle to my analysis as well.

This angle manifests itself in the second objective of the article, which is to determine the spaces of crisis and how these were tied up with emotions. The Dutch urban crisis revealed itself in concerns over what was yet to come as well as in the material conditions on the ground. This article considers both manifestations by investigating two very different urban landscapes that provoked discursive feelings of fear, albeit with different undertones and consequences: Amsterdam’s inner city areas and the modernist Bijlmermeer estates.⁸ By doing so, the history of emotions will be combined with insights from the spatial turn in the humanities, which has repositioned the understanding of space from given to culturally produced.⁹ Roey Sweet and Richard Rodger state that “[s]pace and buildings are increasingly recognised as non-neutral. They shape lives, behaviour, perceptions and ultimately policy.”¹⁰ According to Benno Gammerl and Rainer Herrn, analysing the interplay between spaces and emotions can provide us with a more critical perspective on urbanity past and present.¹¹ In line with this emerging scholarship, I understand emotions as social constructions that are largely learned rather than innate feelings.¹²

⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of thought. The intelligence of emotions*, Cambridge 2001, p. 1.

⁶ Deborah Thien, *After or beyond feeling? A consideration of affect and emotion in human geography*, in: *Area* 37:4, 2005, p. 450-454; Steve Pile, *Emotions and affect in recent human geography*, in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35/2009, p. 5-20.

⁷ Kay Anderson/Susan Smith, *Editorial: Emotional geographies*, in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26/2001, p. 7-10.

⁸ Hereafter abbreviated as ‘the Bijlmer’.

⁹ Barney Warf/Santa Arias, *Introduction. The reinsertion of space in the humanities and social sciences*, in: id. (eds.), *The Spatial Turn. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London 2009, p. 1-10, here p. 3.

¹⁰ Richard Rodger and Roey Sweet, *The changing nature of urban history*, in: *History in focus. The city*, URL: www.history.ac.uk/ihr/focus/city/articles/sweet.html [09.04.2020].

¹¹ Benno Gammerl/Rainer Herrn, *Gefühlsräume – Raumgefühle. Perspektiven auf die Verschränkung von emotionalen Praktiken und Topografien der Moderne*, in: *Sub\urban. Zeitschrift für kritische Stadtforschung* 3:2, 2015, p. 7-22, here p. 21.

¹² William M. Reddy, *The navigation of feeling. A framework for the history of emotions*, Cambridge 2001, p. XI; Jan Plamper, *The history of emotions. An introduction*, Oxford

Thus, the actors in this article consciously and unconsciously contributed to a broader crisis narrative aimed at swift decision-making and a delegitimisation of the protests against urban redevelopment. It will be shown that a generational conflict, class struggles, and racist stereotypes significantly influenced the crisis discourse. Amsterdam has been chosen as a case study for the considerable size of its nineteenth-century housing stock, which planners saw as a particularly problematic typology due to its mixing of functions and high building densities, its radical community activism, and its rapid transformation from a predominantly working-class city into a place of arrival for young people and overseas migrants.¹³ Due to the scarce availability and scattered nature of source material detailing the experiences of local residents, who were the main victims of this crisis narrative, the focus necessarily lies on government-produced reports and newspaper articles.¹⁴ This is where the knowledge and presumptions of the urban crisis were constructed and disseminated in public discourse. The findings of planners and other self-proclaimed experts obviously determined political decision-making and fed into ideological debates about the social and physical problems Dutch cities were facing during the 1970s.

2. The Dutch “urban crisis”

According to Janet Roitman, the term ‘crisis’ has not been as thoroughly deconstructed as other recurring terms in social theory and political economy.¹⁵ One characteristic of crises is their unpredictable, uncertain and often unresolvable nature.¹⁶ In a genealogy of the term, Timothy Weaver demonstrates that even in Anglophone countries the very idea of an urban crisis has been historically contested and ideologically charged. The term came into prominence in the 1950s to denote structural problems such as a dilapidated housing stock, deficient city services and rampant suburbanisation. However, it soon evolved into a catchphrase for conservatives to criticise state intervention in urban affairs on the one hand, and a tagline for Marxist scholars keen on demonstrating the intrinsic links between capitalist accumulation and dire urban living

2012, p. 5; Till Großmann/Philipp Nielsen, Introduction. Architectural history of emotions – emotional history of democracy, in: id. (eds.), *Architecture, democracy, and emotions. The politics of feeling since 1945*, Abingdon 2019, p. 1-17.

¹³ Fred Feddes, 1000 jaar Amsterdam. Ruimtelijke geschiedenis van een wonderbaarlijke stad, Bussum 2012, p. 294-297.

¹⁴ The newspaper articles were acquired through accessing the digital newspaper repository of the Royal Library of the Netherlands, Delpher.

¹⁵ Janet Roitman, *Anti-crisis*, Durham 2013, p. 95.

¹⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and crisis. Enlightenment and the pathogenesis of modern society*, Oxford 1988, p. 127.

conditions on the other.¹⁷ Robert Beauregard sums up the wide array of problems gathered under the crisis banner: “Population loss; the physical deterioration of housing, factories, and shops; the collapse of urban land values; rising property taxes and soaring crime rates; deepening poverty and unemployment; and the growing concentration of minorities.”¹⁸ It would be grotesque to equate the *Werdegang* of American cities to post-war developments in Western European cities, where the welfare state was more firmly established and racial tensions were not as profound. In their transatlantic comparisons of post-war urbanism, Christopher Klemek and Jan Logemann conclude that European planners remained strongly attached to the existing morphology and social fabric of the inner cities.¹⁹ If anything, the American landscape of segregated suburbs and decaying inner cities was a nightmarish sight of things to come without intervention.²⁰

While the circumstances were not as severe as in the United States, there was a widespread fear of urban crisis and urban unrest amongst Dutch politicians and planners. Paradoxically, this fear was instilled by the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s and its consequences for the inner cities. Increasing living standards, rising car ownership and a growing demand for office space and retail locations seemed wholly incompatible with the narrow streets and overcrowded tenement houses of central areas, for which ambitious redevelopment schemes were proposed. While Dutch planners mostly agreed on the heritage value of urban cores predating the Industrial Revolution, many of the structures built from the mid-nineteenth century onwards were considered obsolete.²¹ Echoing pre-war concerns about the relationship between undesirable behaviour and squalid living conditions, the consensus amongst planners was that the social fabric of the inner cities was not worth saving either. In 1955, director of The Hague’s planning department Frits Bakker Schut captured the prevalent mood by stating that Dutch working-class districts were confronted

¹⁷ Timothy Weaver, Urban crisis. The genealogy of a concept, in: *Urban Studies* 54:9, 2017, p. 2039–2055.

¹⁸ Beauregard, *Voices of decline*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Christopher Klemek, *The transatlantic collapse of urban renewal. Postwar urbanism from New York to Berlin*, Chicago 2011, p. 239–248; Jan L. Logemann, *Trams or tailfins? Public and private prosperity in postwar West Germany and the United States*, Chicago 2012, p. 219–226.

²⁰ Tim Verlaan, Mobilization of the masses. Dutch planners, local politics and the threat of the motor age 1960–1980, *Journal of Urban History*, 2019, p. 1–21, here p. 7, [DOI: 10.1177/0096144219872767].

²¹ Tim Verlaan, *De ruimtemakers. Projectontwikkelaars en de Nederlandse binnenstad*, Nijmegen 2017, p. 20–36.

by “high birth rates, low incomes, huge numbers of workers, unreligious people and extremist voters”.²²

In line with modernist ideals, the cityscapes of earlier epochs were to be re-ordered by the separation of traffic streams and rezoning of urban functions. Local residents would have to be rehoused in modern tower blocks, while old factories and warehouses had to make way for spacious office buildings and shopping centres – all connected by brand-new urban expressways and public transport facilities. In 1957, a national commission on slum clearance and urban renewal considered nearly 150.000 dwellings obsolete, which equalled 6 percent of the national housing stock.²³ These numbers were considerably higher in the larger conurbations. In Amsterdam, more than 40 per cent of the local housing stock was supposedly ripe for demolition. The Hague presented a car-centred blueprint that envisioned the redevelopment of nearly 1,500 acres of urban fabric over a forty-year time span. Utrecht designated a nineteenth-century district near its medieval city centre as a central business district.²⁴ These schemes were not only driven by sheer ambition, but nagging feelings of falling behind the pace of economic growth and technological progress as well.

This was in particular the case with regards to the increasing suburbanisation of people and businesses. Already in 1958, the First Memorandum on National Planning had predicted more urban sprawl and a loosening up of existing cityscapes due to growing car ownership.²⁵ Instead of the tower blocks and housing estates erected throughout the 1950s, in 1963 a national pollster concluded that 80 to 90 per cent of the interviewees preferred a single-family house. To fulfil this demand, towns and villages on the outskirts of larger cities had begun to develop lush suburbs within commuting distance of metropolitan areas.²⁶ Eventually the Ministry of Physical Planning considered the lure of the countryside irresistible, and in 1966 the Second Memorandum on National Planning advised to “bundle” the dispersing population into designated growth nucleuses.²⁷ When retailers and employers began joining the exodus, some planners believed Dutch cities were awaiting the same fate as their American

²² Frist Bakker Schut, *Krotopruiming en sanering te 's-Gravenhage*, in: *Bestuurswetenschappen* 9, 1954, p. 153-168, here p. 163.

²³ Herman de Liagre Böhl, *Steden in de steigers. Stadsvernieuwing in Nederland 1970-1990*, Amsterdam 2012, p. 17.

²⁴ Tim Verlaan, *Producing space. Post-war redevelopment as big business, Utrecht and Hannover 1962-1975*, in: *Planning Perspectives* 34:3, 2019, p. 415-437.

²⁵ Werkcommissie Westen des Lands, *De ontwikkeling van het westen des lands*, The Hague 1958, p. 61.

²⁶ Theo Quené, *Vraagstukken rond de verstedelijking van Nederland*, The Hague 1973, p. 8.

²⁷ Van der Cammen/De Klerk, *Ruimtelijke Ordening*, p. 214.

counterparts.²⁸ The signs were in the streets, where an increasing number of cars were rapidly deteriorating the quality of life. Enquiries from the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrate how people with children living in central areas adjusted their choice of schools to levels of road safety. Elderly people admitted they were too afraid to leave their homes due to the roaring traffic outside. Indeed, the car-centred society would increasingly exclude the less affluent and less mobile – poor families, the elderly and disabled – from everyday amenities.²⁹

Throughout the 1970s, it became increasingly clear that there was no quick fix available for the inner cities. Feelings of insecurity and pessimism began to surface in government reports on urban redevelopment. The Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning depicted Dutch cities as victims of the imminent downsides of economic growth and technological progress.³⁰ In a lecture held in 1974, its minister Hans Gruijters was remarkably honest about the problems his department was facing: “Certainties and uncertainties frequently change position, perspectives are continuously changing, the clarity of problems is diminishing and hence our decisiveness as well.”³¹ Such statements stemmed from the growing unrest amongst those who were left behind in central areas, who saw their living environment deteriorating without a swift execution of urban redevelopment in sight, but also a looming economic recession and increasing stagflation. This put an end to the relative stability and rosy prospects of the golden years, thus weakening the foundations of the welfare state.³²

While the dominant trend of the 1970s was suburbanisation, a crosscurrent began to flow of migrants from the Caribbean, Surinam, Turkey and Morocco and a younger generation of native young adults who arrived on the heels of departing middle-class families. The younger generation in particular soon began pleading for the conservation of older structures and the construction of social housing units. Initially their pleas were met with hostility by the heads of the larger cities’ planning departments who called their efforts to extend the life cycle of the inner cities “unnuanced and uninformed”. As the young adults were considered not able nor willing to renovate their newfound living environment, they would only spur the formation of ghettos and increase social

²⁸ Studiegroep bestudering stadskernen, *Steden in de steigers*, The Hague 1968, p. 34–76.

²⁹ Verlaan, *Mobilization of the masses*, p. 6.

³⁰ Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, *Stedebouw en sanering in Nederland*, The Hague 1970.

³¹ ‘Rede van de minister van Volkshuisvesting en Ruimtelijke Ordening, drs. J.P.A. Gruijters’, in: *Stedebouw en Volkshuisvesting* 55/1974, p. 122–124, here p. 122.

³² Duco Hellema, *Nederland en de jaren zeventig*, Amsterdam 2012, p. 50–54.

tensions.³³ This observation referred to violent clashes between Turkish migrants and long-term residents in Rotterdam during the summer of 1972, which led some observers to draw comparisons with American race riots.³⁴ Worsening the situation in the inner cities was a looming heroin epidemic and an accompanying increase in drug-related criminality, which left residents with the impression that the state had lost control over their living environment.³⁵ Around the same time, the peripheral housing estates built to rehouse the residents of the inner cities began to experience their own problems. The lure of suburbia, high costs of living and design shortcomings led to an increasingly negative image.

Looking back on the advent of the Dutch urban crisis, it becomes clear that politicians and planners framed the fate of the crumbling inner cities – and to a lesser extent the brand-new housing estates – as the ultimate consequence of consumer choice. For these elites, the urban crisis became a poignant symbol of their failing efforts to increase the living standards of the poor and marginalised. As observed by Christiane Reinecke, life in the inner cities during the post-war period became a signifier of an underprivileged social position: “[W]hile more and more inhabitants claimed to belong to the middle class by pointing to their (chosen) place of residence, ‘the poor’ became defined by the fact that they were tied to unwanted urban badlands.”³⁶ At the same time, the rhetoric of politicians and planners expressed broader concerns with societal collapse, or as Beauregard has observed for the American context: “The city is used rhetorically to frame the precariousness of existence in a modern world, with urban decline serving as a symbolic cover for more wide-ranging fears and anxieties.”³⁷ The latter not only concerned the incapability of designing and building a better urban future, but also the inner cities’ changing demographics. Renowned geography professor Jan Lambooy stated in 1974 that these

³³ Diensten voor Stadsontwikkeling te Amsterdam, Rotterdam, ’s-Gravenhage, Utrecht, De grote stad als probleemgebied. Een bijdrage van de directeuren van Stadsontwikkeling van Amsterdam, Rotterdam, ’s-Gravenhage en Utrecht tot de discussie over de Derde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening, Amsterdam 1973, p. 3-8.

³⁴ Frank Bovenkerk, *Vreemd volk, gemengde gevoelens. Etnische verhoudingen in een grote stad*, Amsterdam 1985, p. 9-30.

³⁵ Gemma Blok, *Heroïne en de stad. Een onderzoek naar de relatie tussen stedelijke omgeving en drugsgebruik*, in: *Stadsgeschiedenis* 11, 2016, p. 165-176, here p. 174.

³⁶ Christiane Reinecke, *Localising the social. The rediscovery of urban poverty in Western European ‘affluent societies’*, in: *Contemporary European History* 24:4, 2015, p. 555-576, here p. 557.

³⁷ Beauregard, *Voices of decline*, p. 6.

were attracting “the wrong kind of people”, a euphemism for migrants, drug addicts, students and other marginalised groups.³⁸

3. Mobilising fear of the inner city

How did the urban crisis, both as a real and an imagined phenomenon, play out on the local level, and how did politicians and planners mobilise feelings of fear in Amsterdam? The urban crisis affected the Dutch capital more deeply than any other Dutch city. The worst conditions could be found in the nineteenth-century districts, which were characterised by narrow streets, a lack of open space, and hastily constructed tenement houses.³⁹ During the early 1970s, media outlets frequently ran front page stories on how Amsterdam was looking into the abyss, and was engaged in an existential battle over its near future.⁴⁰ “Amsterdam still has many chances”, was the underwhelming response of the planning department to critical questions about the slow pace of urban redevelopment.⁴¹ In 1970, the city’s building inspector said he was “terrified” of the immense task ahead, which involved the redevelopment of up to 100.000 dwellings: “The skeleton is falling apart.”⁴² Observing the haphazard demolition works in one of the nineteenth-century districts, a local newspaper painted a bleak image: “A ghost town is looming behind the market stalls: truncated facades with hollow window frames, blistering sidewalls and heaps of rubbish.”⁴³ This dire situation not only affected the daily lives of local residents, but also harmed the business of shopkeepers who had to cope with an impoverishing and shrinking clientele.⁴⁴

During the 1950s and 1960s, the official policy had been to replace the city’s nineteenth-century housing stock with modern dwellings set in a green environment. In the meantime, residents were to be rehoused in the modernist expansion areas to the west and south-east of the city, amongst others the Bijlmer estates. In addition, a number of inner city neighbourhoods were designa-

³⁸ J[an] G. Lambooy: We staan voor de keus. Stadsvernieuwing of suburbanisatie, in: *De Nederlandse Gemeente* 27/1973, p. 113-115, here p. 114.

³⁹ De Liagre Böhl, *Amsterdam op de helling*, p. 20-28.

⁴⁰ *Amsterdam op rand van de afgrond*, in: *De Tijd*, 13 January 1970; *Wat willen wij met die stad, wat willen zij met die stad*, in: *De Telegraaf*, 26 September 1970; *Amsterdam kan verval van stad niet voldoende tegenhouden*, in: *De Tijd*, 28 August 1971.

⁴¹ *Amsterdam heeft nog veel kansen*, in: *Het Parool*, 1 April 1970.

⁴² *Problemen stapelen zich op bij de stadsvernieuwing*, in: *De Tijd*, 5 October 1970.

⁴³ *Saneren moet geleerd worden*, in: *Het Parool*, 13 March 1973.

⁴⁴ *Nood onder de winkeliers in saneringswijken*, in: *Het Parool*, 24 February 1971; Hendrik W. ter Hart, *Amsterdam denk om je hart. Rapport in opdracht van de Stichting Amsterdam City*, Amsterdam 1974.

ted as central business districts. Being the country's financial and commercial hub, Amsterdam was eager for central spaces accommodating the burgeoning service economy.⁴⁵ From the late 1960s onwards, it transpired that this policy of wholesale redevelopment was too expensive, consumed too much time, and led to anger and frustration amongst the affected population. Consequently, a more pragmatic and cautious approach to urban redevelopment came into favour. This, however, did not affect the crisis narrative prevalent in official policy documents and municipal meetings, which was slavishly repeated by the media. The tone of Amsterdam's Second Memorandum on Urban Renewal, published in 1971, was alarming when it came to the building stock dating from the Industrial Revolution. Planners spoke of an "emergency situation", estimating that 13.000 dwellings and 1.300 businesses had to be evicted immediately. Structurally sound buildings were to be renovated instead of torn down, and more attention was paid to those residents who were not able or willing to leave their living environment.⁴⁶

This more considerate approach to urban redevelopment was introduced by Han Lammers, a member of the New Left who was appointed alderman of urban planning in 1970 and remained in power until 1975. His first showdown over urban renewal concerned the construction of an office building on the Bickerseiland, a working-class area to the north-west of the city centre. Early 1970, a 55-year old concrete carpenter by the name of Joop Beaux founded an action committee protesting against the rehousing of local residents in estates on the city's outskirts. The municipality was accused of deliberately neglecting their living environment, which despite its shortcomings was praised by the committee for its unique atmosphere, neighbourliness and affordable rents.⁴⁷ In a compromise, Lammers proposed to renovate the existing housing stock while granting the property developer behind the office block planning permission.⁴⁸ The latter, annoyed by the concessions he was forced to make, showed little respect for his opponents: "I am a developer. I demand a certain standing. And now I have to discuss my plans with a concrete carpenter? He is no discussion partner. These people are screaming 'Stay out of our neighbourhood!' What is this, our neighbourhood? Are they owners of the island?"⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Verlaan, *De ruimtemakers*, p. 135.

⁴⁶ Stadsvernieuwing. Stadsvernieuwingprogramma voor de eerstkomende jaren, in: Gemeentebld, bijlage N, Amsterdam 1971, p. 5-20.

⁴⁷ Bewoners over de Toekomst, 1970, International Institute for Social History (hereafter: IISH), Archief Aktiekomité Westelijke Eilanden, inv.no. SAVRZ091, Box 6, Folder 2.

⁴⁸ De Liagre Böhl, Amsterdam op de Helling, p. 172.

⁴⁹ "Ik Ben Hier Bezigt met Iets Goeds," in: Het Parool, 24 November 1970.

From the late 1960s onwards, such emotional outbursts over the urban crisis were no longer reserved for traditional political and planning elites. Lammers himself was part of a younger generation of politicians who favoured a more emotional style of politics.⁵⁰ At the same time new social movements concerned with liveability and environment issues were gaining seats in the city council, most notably the anarchist Provo and later the Goblin movement.⁵¹ They took their confrontational action strategies inside city hall, as became clear during a council meeting held in March 1971 over the future of the Bickerseiland. In response to Lammers' political chicanery, one of the Goblins lit a smoke bomb inside the council chambers while fights broke out on the public galleries. The press described the boisterous council meeting as a unique moment in the history of local democracy.⁵² One newspaper attributed the explosive situation in the renewal areas to the insecure future of local residents⁵³, while the editorial of another daily discerned a "dangerous gap" between the people and their representatives.⁵⁴ Mayor Ivo Samkalden seemed to agree by observing a "growing undercurrent" of social unrest.⁵⁵ Despite his understanding of citizen concerns, alderman Lammers declined to give into such unrest and opposed participatory planning. In response to the Goblin movement's accusation that his urban renewal policies were strangling Amsterdam to death, he stated that the city had survived worse crises.⁵⁶

During his term in power, Lammers came back to such reassuring statements and began favouring an urban renewal agenda more in line with the *tabula rasa* modernism of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1972 he said the city was collapsing under his very own eyes, and called upon the national government to act swiftly: "If they are not prepared to stop the spiral of decay and consider the situation as a national emergency, serious social and political accidents will happen."⁵⁷ Lammers was not alone in connecting the wellbeing of local residents to their daily living environment. Whole neighbourhoods were experi-

⁵⁰ Cf. Joachim C. Häberlen, *The emotional politics of the alternative left: West Germany, 1968-1984*, Cambridge 2018, p. 3.

⁵¹ Virginie Mamadouh, *De stad in eigen hand. Provo's, kabouters en krakers als stedelijke sociale beweging*, Amsterdam 1992.

⁵² Vechtpartijen in raadszaal van Amsterdam, in: *Trouw*, 4 March 1971.

⁵³ Situatie in saneringswijken wordt explosief, in: *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 8 March 1971.

⁵⁴ Kloof, in: *De Tijd*, 4 March 1971.

⁵⁵ Burgemeester Samkalden: Contacten burgerij snel verbeteren, in: *De Volkskrant*, 8 March 1971; Onrust dreigt in steden als snel iets gebeurt, in: *Trouw*, 4 May 1971.

⁵⁶ Stadsvernieuwing, in: *Gemeentebld*, Amsterdam 1971, p. 2339.

⁵⁷ Wethouder Lammers van Amsterdam: "De stad valt in elkaar", in: *Vrij Nederland*, 11 November 1972.

encing the collapse of social networks, which is the reason why fellow party member Cees de Cloe in 1974 called for immediate action: "Every twenty years of delay means a new generation has to grow up under unacceptable circumstances."⁵⁸ Despite such assertiveness, urban renewal only really took off after the municipal elections of 1978. The pleas of community action groups such as the one representing Bickerseiland and urban social movements such as the Goblins had not fallen on deaf ears. From the late 1970s onwards, Amsterdam finally began building social housing units in line with the renewal areas' original street patterns and building styles.

Leaving questions aside about how the tides in politics and planning exactly changed, it is clear that fear was a dominating emotion in debates about urban redevelopment. While geographers usually associate fear with being afraid of particular urban environments and their inhabitants⁵⁹, in this case study fear was mobilised to declare a state of emergency for Amsterdam's inner city. Although contemporaries mainly focused on the physical deficiencies of the built environment, their observations reflected badly on its residents as well. They were continuously confronted with negative stigmas and crisis narratives, both in official policy documents and newspapers. Particularly offending were the comparisons of neighbourhoods to dying organisms – a metaphor often used by planners to make their profession more amenable to scientific research methods.⁶⁰ From the late 1960s onwards, residents began to criticise the fear and panic-mongering of their representatives, not by denying their problems, but by claiming an emotional attachment to their living environment. Threatened in their very existence, the Bickerseiland residents were highly successful in giving credit to their strong neighbourhood attachment which was fostered by a broader reappreciation of urban heritage and working-class culture in the Netherlands.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this case study is that the mobilisation of fear served multiple purposes. To Labour politicians such as Han Lammers, the nineteenth-century districts represented the absolute worst of *laissez-fair* capitalism, and the stalling of renewal operations here could drive voters into the hands of social movements and political fringe parties. Thus, not only the built environment and the social relations it allegedly reproduced were at stake, but the future of social democracy was as well. The alarming discourse was also aimed at persuading the national government to increase its spending on urban renewal, whereas the media were interested in news stories

⁵⁸ Structuurplan, in: Gemeentebld, Amsterdam 1974, p. 728.

⁵⁹ Setha M. Low, The edge and the center: Gated communities and the discourse of urban fear, in: *American Anthropologist* 103:1, 2001, p. 45-58.

⁶⁰ Verlaan, Mobilization of the masses, p. 8.

that would go down well with their increasingly suburban readership. Indeed, the crisis narrative was both pragmatic and moral, as it alluded to shared obligations in an increasingly affluent but unjust society.⁶¹ Eventually, cautious urban renewal and gentrification policies sealed the fate of Amsterdam's inner city. As the final section of this contribution will demonstrate, the Bijlmer faced a wholly different fate, both in physical and social terms.



Fig. 1: *De Pijp in 1975: a typical nineteenth-century district.*

4. Anxieties about Bijlmermeer

During the 1970s, the discourse of urban decline and fear was not exclusively reserved for the inner cities. A similar narrative unfolded with regard to the modernist expansion schemes that were laid out on Amsterdam's fringes, most notably in the case of the Bijlmermeer. This CIAM-inspired collection of housing estates, built and maintained by a conglomerate of housing corporations, offered residents spacious and modern equipped apartments, connected to the

⁶¹ Beauregard, *Voices of decline*, p. 9.

city centre by metro and an elevated road network. Despite its advantages over housing conditions in central areas, structural design failures, high rents and the suburban alternative deterred middle-class tenants from moving in. In their place arrived a rapidly growing cohort of Surinamese, African and Dutch Caribbean migrants.⁶² From the early 1970s onwards, the unpopularity of the Bijlmer led politicians and planners to frame the area's problems in exclusively negative terms. Some psychologists even proclaimed that its design was detrimental to mental health, and that the gargantuan scale of the estates was 'frightening' and 'incompatible' with the human scale. Such observations echoed the early warnings of social psychologist Rob Wentholt, who had already decried the social effects of urban modernism in 1968: "We live in an industrial age characterised by manifold and drastic technological changes, of which we can barely see the consequences. Interpersonal loneliness and social discontent are common problems for the urban dweller of the industrial age."⁶³

Similar to the inner cities, the Bijlmer estate soon gained a reputation as a place where people ended up who had no other choice and as cesspits of transgressive behaviour.⁶⁴ This is where allegedly the city's homosexuals gathered in droves, and where the Dutch capital would soon experience its own race riots.⁶⁵ The word 'ghetto' was frequently used to describe the area as different from the rest of the country, and its utopian promises were often juxtaposed with rising crime levels and its poorly maintained public spaces.⁶⁶ Popular culture only confirmed the reputation of the Bijlmer as a place where sexual deviance was commonplace.⁶⁷ By the end of the 1970s the bad press led a community action group to state that they were fed up with the misleading image, notwithstanding the serious problems they had to confront.⁶⁸ These were aggravated

⁶² Tim Verlaan/Petra A. Brouwer, Symbolic gestures? Planning and replanning Amsterdam's Bijlmermeer and new town Almere since 1965, in: *IMS* 1/2013, p. 48-59, here p. 50.

⁶³ Rob Wentholt, *De binnenstadsbeleving en Rotterdam*, Rotterdam 1968, p. 79-80.

⁶⁴ Ade Kearns/Oliver Kearns/Louise Lawson, Image, reputation, stigma. The role of newspapers in area reputations for social housing estates, in: *Housing Studies* 28:4, 2013, p. 579-598.

⁶⁵ Homofielen – dan moet je maar uitwijken naar de Bijlmer of zo, in: *Het Parool*, 21 November 1970; Bijlmermeer. Stad zonder kinderen, in: *De Telegraaf*, 7 March 1970; Rassenprobleem op komst. Wie doet er wat aan?, in: *De Telegraaf*, 4 September 1971; Rassen tegenstellingen in de Bijlmer groeien, in: *NRC Handelsblad*, 10 September 1973; Zwart en blank in de Bijlmermeer, in: *De Tijd*, 9 October 1971.

⁶⁶ Maar meneer... Getto Bijlmer, in: *Het Parool*, 6 June 1973; Het "zwarte getto" van de Gliphoeve, in: *Het Vrije Volk*, 23 May 1975; Gliphoeve II nieuw getto in Bijlmer?, in: *Het Vrije Volk*, 14 July 1975; Hoog en droog wonen. Voor de rest wegwezen!, in: *De Tijd*, 30 March 1971.

⁶⁷ Wim Verstappen, *Blue movie*, 1971.

⁶⁸ Stichting Wijkopbouworgaan Bijlmermeer, *Van de Bijlmer méér maken. Een Deltaplan voor de Bijlmermeer*, Amsterdam 1980, p. 5.

by the lack of manpower within the municipal planning department which had been forced to deploy a considerable amount of personnel on urban renewal issues in the inner city. At the same time, the commissioning of the metro line in 1977 and the gentrification of central neighbourhoods – and subsequent heavier policing – resulted in a relocation of drug trafficking to the Bijlmer estates.

Because the estates were only a few years old when the first problems began to surface, solutions were initially sought in small design interventions that could give residents more control over their surroundings. These were proposed by the American architect and planner Oscar Newman, who was invited to examine the Bijlmer's social and physical issues in 1979. His defensible space theory assumed a priori that there was something inherently wrong with urban modernism, and that it had led to anonymous living environments without a sense of community – a critique in line with the ideas of Jane Jacobs and Alice Coleman.⁶⁹ According to Newman, the mixing of people from different classes and backgrounds in housing estates such as the Bijlmer was not always desirable.⁷⁰ His proposals reflected the neoliberal backlash against state-led planning of the 1970s, or as Newman stated himself in a reprint of his work: "Defensible space relies on self-help rather than on government intervention, and so it is not vulnerable to government's withdrawal of support."⁷¹

Even more so than in the case of the inner cities, contemporaries were quick to blame the built environment for deviant behaviour. A local police superintendent said the estates' communal spaces, in particular the anonymous walkways and parking garages, were actually inviting criminal activity: "The Bijlmer's layout leads to anxieties. I would not want to live in one of those bunkers. [...] We have seen films about the situation in America. We face many of the same problems."⁷² To diminish feelings of anxiety and improve social control, Newman proposed to install security cameras and microphones, to fence off public spaces, and to eliminate green areas.⁷³ In addition, the planner called for a screening of future tenants and stricter allocation policies.⁷⁴ Although the Dutch planners seemed to agree with Newman, community action groups were furious about the discriminatory and reputation-damaging proposals, especial-

⁶⁹ Jane Jacobs, *The death and life of great American cities*, New York 1961; Alice Coleman, *Utopia on trial. Vision and reality in planned housing*, London 1985.

⁷⁰ Oscar Newman, *Defensible space. People and design in the violent city*, London 1972, p. 1-21.

⁷¹ Oscar Newman, *Creating defensible space*, Darby 1996, p. 9.

⁷² Criminaliteit in Bijlmer wordt teruggedrongen, in: *Het Parool*, 21 April 1979.

⁷³ Nog niet te laat voor de Bijlmer, in: *Het Parool*, 21 August 1979.

⁷⁴ Bijlmermeer moet huurders screenen, in: *De Volkskrant*, 18 October 1979; Een radicale afschuw van flats, in: *De Volkskrant*, 21 July 1979; Fortenbouwer vergroot oren en ogen, in: *De Volkskrant*, 4 August 1979.

ly from an American expert with little knowledge of local circumstances.⁷⁵ However, by the late 1980s it transpired that the design interventions and social policies proposed by Newman, which were only marginally implemented, were wholly ineffective. Ironically, throughout the 1990s and 2000s the Bijlmer was much more extensively redeveloped than the inner city neighbourhoods for which it once promised to offer a solution.⁷⁶



Fig. 2: The Bijlmer under construction in the early 1970s.

5. Conclusion

By comparing two distinct physical environments during the height of the urban crisis, this contribution has demonstrated which role emotions played in determining the problems and solutions of Dutch conurbations – Amsterdam

⁷⁵ Bewoners kwaad over onderzoek Bijlmer. Geen zin in stempel crimineel, in: Het Parool, 18 July 1979.

⁷⁶ Frank Wassenberg, Large housing estates. Ideas, rise, fall and recovery, Delft 2013.

in particular. It should be acknowledged here that most of the consulted primary sources were written from a top-down perspective rather than the everyday lived experiences of residents. What stands out from the crisis narratives resurfacing in official policies, council meetings and media outlets is that to contemporaries the crisis was real enough, which incited feelings of fear amongst a group of decision-makers and experts who have often been portrayed as the cool-headed purveyors of powerful visions and shapers of material progress. Still, they also knew how to mobilise fear to safeguard their own interests. In some instances, what was discursively framed as fear actually led to the othering of places and the people who were living there, as in the case of the Bijlmer. The media often played along and even incited xenophobia and prejudice against certain social groups, demonstrating that fear was often used to draw lines between what was considered normal and transgressive behaviour in urban societies.

A more thorough analysis of the Dutch urban crisis should incorporate an intersectional approach in which class, sexual orientation and ethnicity and their relationship to physical environments are investigated together. At the same time, this contribution has demonstrated that we should be wary of spatial essentialism. In both the inner city neighbourhoods and the Bijlmer, local government believed that the solution for their social problems was to radically alter the existing urban landscape, which proved only partially effective. The rather unexpected rediscovery of urban living by the middle classes, which began in the 1970s but really took off in the 1990s, proved to be more forceful in twisting the fate of Dutch cities. While this article has mainly used qualitative sources to investigate the experiences of contemporaries and thus establish the contours of the Dutch urban crisis, future research into quantitative sources could further define the thoroughness and extent of the social and physical decline usually associated with the 1970s.

Source of Figures

Fig. 1: De Pijp in 1975: a typical nineteenth-century district. Source: Amsterdam City Archives.

Fig. 2: The Bijlmer under construction in the early 1970s. Source: Amsterdam City Archives.