

Prospects for large housing estates

- A position paper -

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Abstract

Large housing estates have been an issue for research and policy interventions for the last couples of years. This is curious, as most of these neighbourhoods were built during the post war decades with hopeful perspectives, glorious idealistic ideas. Modern dwellings, well thought and designed, in open areas with plenty of common amenities: future housing for the present population. Large housing estates are locally rather different, varying from low rise family housing to high-rise estates, a culmination of the functionalist planning ideas. A common characteristic is their local size: large neighbourhoods with uniform distinct housing.

We all know that the idealistic ideas didn't get true. In reality, many large housing estates became problematic, varying from second choice and temporarily housing to sink estates and stigmatized ghettos. However, other estates are doing well on the local housing markets.

Many large housing estates have been topic for renewal programs, some on a smaller scale, other resulting in demolition and rebuilding of complete areas.

In this paper I want to conclude about renewal approaches of problematic large housing estates.

Which measures and strategies are working under which conditions? What are successes, where are failures, and what are results? What can be concluded about prospects for the numerous large housing estates all across Europe?

The aim of this position paper

This paper is meant for the ENHR conference ‘Changing Housing Markets: integration and segmentation’ in Prague, 2009. However, beforehand I have to state that this paper is not an ordinary paper, with a problem definition, research overview and results of an own survey. In this paper, what I have called a position paper, I will anticipate on a PhD project I am working on. This project is about the rise, the fall and renewal prospects of large housing estates and is based on my experiences with twenty years of a range of projects in this field, both in the Netherlands as in Europe. The PhD project won’t describe the results of one research project, but tries to combine twenty years experiences. Therefore, it will be more contemplative and reflexive. I want to analyze developments, but also try to analyze policy interventions. I won’t stop with policy evaluations, but I will also try to formulate policy conclusions.

The PhD project tries to set the Dutch developments concerning large housing estates into a wider international context. I will try not to stop with the - true – conclusion that every situation has to be considered within its own local or regional context, but I try to formulate some conclusions that might be transferable to other situations. These won’t be the do’s and don’ts, because of the same particularities, but could be transferred into local or regional interventions.

In this paper I will focus on preliminary conclusions. I won’t exaggerate on underlying hypotheses, experiences or results, but go straight into the last preliminary section of my PhD project. I hope the reader of this paper:

- will react to this conclusions
- consider what is worth for his or her own situation, country or experience
- consider what untrue for his or her own situation
- help me with some own experiences, literature, surveys, conclusions that can put my results into perspective.

The formulation of the problem

I am fascinated by the fact that so many large housing areas in Europe were built after the Second World War with such idealistic and optimistic societal ideas, and that those same estates proved to be so problematic only a couple of years later. Obviously, something went very wrong. Moreover, present large scale urban renewal schemes focus on these same estates. Whereas other areas function for decades and show more gradual, organic changes when circumstances change, these large housing estates appear to react fast, massive and on a large scale.

I have three questions:

1. What were the ideals behind those large housing estates?
2. Why turned large housing estates to be problematic after realization so fast? What did go wrong, and why? And what kinds of different measures were tried to tackle problems, but without major results?
3. How are large housing estates involved in present large scale urban renewal policies, and what are effects?

These questions will result in policy options for the approach of problematic large housing estates, and questions for further research.

Definitions

I focus on housing built in cities in the decades after World War II. Most large housing estates were built in those days as being:

- a large share of multifamily housing, with dwellings in apartments (flats)
- large sizes: a concentration of long blocks with flats, or long rows of single family housing
- built with a large share of state support
- built in social sector housing, rent protected housing

High-rise housing can be considered as the end, and the culmination, of mass housing in large housing estates. In many countries, a high-rise wave can be determined, rising somewhere in the 1960s, and stopping somewhere in the late 1960s (Britain), during the 1970s (Scandinavia, Netherlands, France), or even the late 1980s (Eastern Europe). Reasons differ, but in many countries at some time the construction of large housing estates stopped rather suddenly.

The Bijlmermeer high-rise housing estate in Amsterdam is one of world's most famous and well known examples of large housing estates. It is the leading example for my project. It was designed to be a glorious housing area, future housing built for mankind of those days, but it proved to be disastrous soon. All kinds of thinkable measures have been taken to tackle all problems, but with no results. Bijlmermeer turned out to be the worst neighbourhood in the Netherlands for many years. The last decade it has been, and is, the largest urban renewal project in the country. The results of the large scale renewal are promising.

The Bijlmermeer case is the leading example in all three parts of my project. Personally, I have been doing a range of research projects in this area for twenty years, seeing the area changing.

It is important to state that by far not all post war housing are built as large housing estates, nor that all these post war large housing estates are in trouble. In every country, and in every city, better and worse estates can be found. In general however, there are surprisingly many rather new housing areas, that prove to be problematic, and currently are subject to major renewal schemes. Often even without severe technical or physical shortages.

One of the characteristics of large housing estates is their size. A large area is fine when the living environment is appreciated. The Manhattan high-rises, or the tower blocks in Hong Kong are well appreciated large housing estates. However, the *grands ensembles* in the Paris' *banlieue*, the Bijlmermeer high-rise, Ballymun in Dublin and the Hope VI projects in Chicago are or were not appreciated. Size matters, according to the local circumstances, habits and culture. Large housing estates prove to be less problematic in Southern Europe than in Western Europe. In countries such as the Netherlands, average families prefer single housing, where in other countries multi family housing is appreciated more.

In the Netherlands, about a third of all housing is built between 1950-1975. In this period large housing estates dominated in the cities. However, it is good to mention that most estates are not Bijlmermeer high-rise style. In most cities there are large areas with long blocks of three or four storey walk up flats, or with long rows of simple single family housing. All of these are built in large quantities, top down planned: these are considered as large housing estates as well. Some of these show the same features: idealistic planning in the 1950s and 1960s, increasingly problematic and unpopular from the 1980's onwards, being part of renewal schemes at present. I am also dealing with these kinds of large housing estates.

Structure

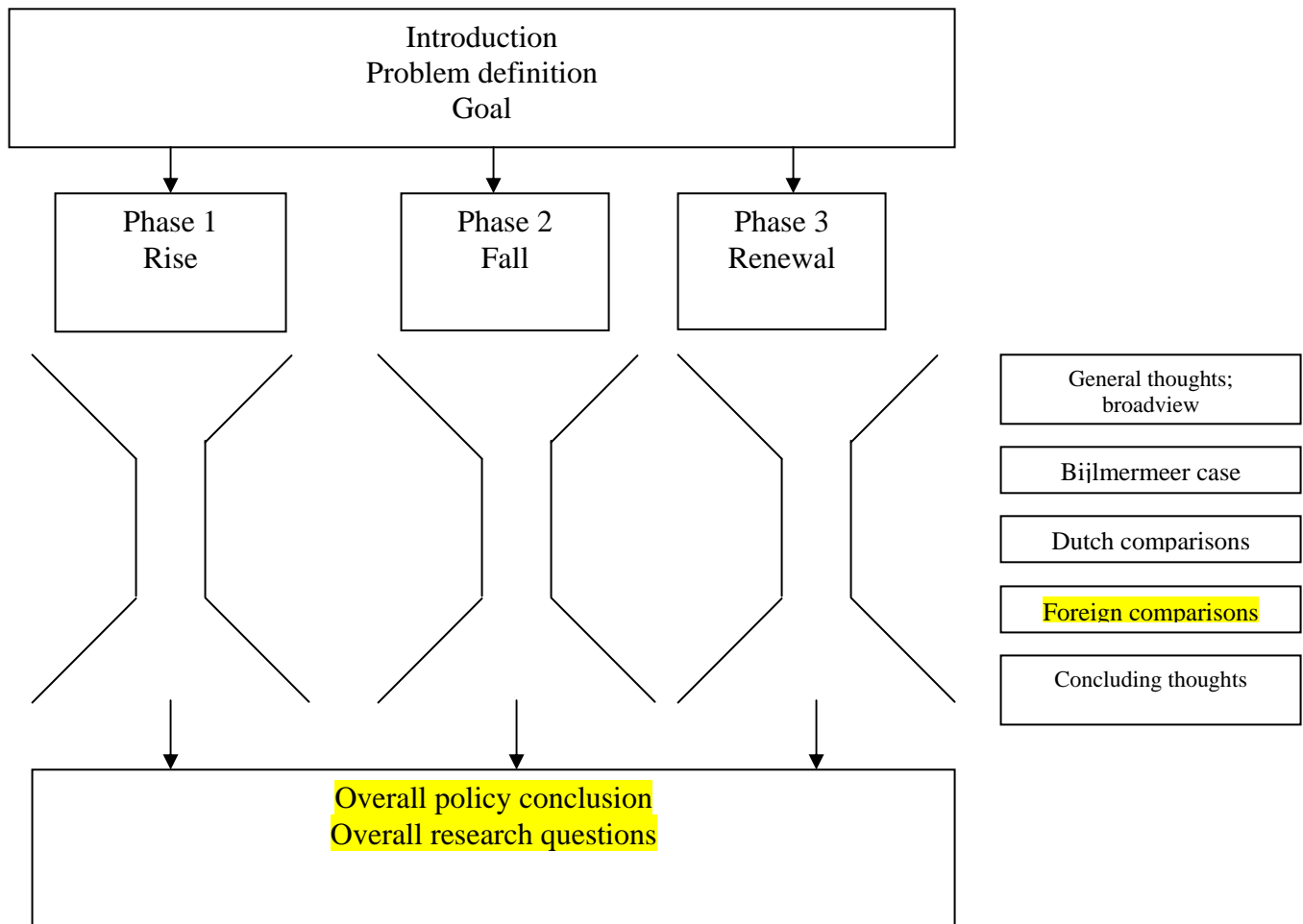
My PhD project has three phases:

The **Rise** of large housing estates: post war ideas and expectations, future expectations
The **Fall** of large housing estates. Growing problems after inhabitants showed (with their feet) not to appreciate the provided mass housing. Several small scale measures have been taken.
The **Renewal** of large housing estates.

Each phase starts broad (general developments, backgrounds, etc). Then it narrows to a specific case. This will be in each phase the same area: the Bijlmermeer high-rise area in Amsterdam. In phase 1 the idealistic thoughts are described, in phase 2 the real developments afterwards, with the deep problems, the numerous small measures, etc. In phase 3 the large urban renewal schemes are dealt with.

Then, in each phase I will put the Bijlmermeer experience into perspective. I will compare the Bijlmermeer high-rise area with several other Dutch areas (which differ per phase), and with some relevant foreign experiences.

After those external qualifications, I will widen the phase again. The figure shows the structure. There are three such phases, with three 'funnels': The Rise, the Fall and the Renewal.



In this paper

In this paper, I won't exaggerate on the 'body' of the PhD-project. I won't tell about the general thoughts, the ideals, the problems, the measures, the urban renewal schemes, the Bijlmermeer experience, or literature. This all is documented elsewhere, will be documented in my PhD, is somewhere in my head yet and has to be written down.

What I will focus on, are the conclusions. And, not all conclusions, but some of them.

The focus in this paper is on the parts in yellow in the figure.

What I ask

I ask the reader two things:

1. whether they can subscribe these conclusions, from their own experiences, or they might have amendments or recommendations.

2. Whether you know comparable projects, experiences estates in your own country or knowledge. Those experiences I can use to put the Bijlmermeer and Dutch experiences in a wider perspective.

Some conclusions

Conclusion 1: Make a good analysis.

You can look at a neighbourhood from several points of view. Each actor will use his or her own point of view, maybe missing other points of view.

Points of view are:

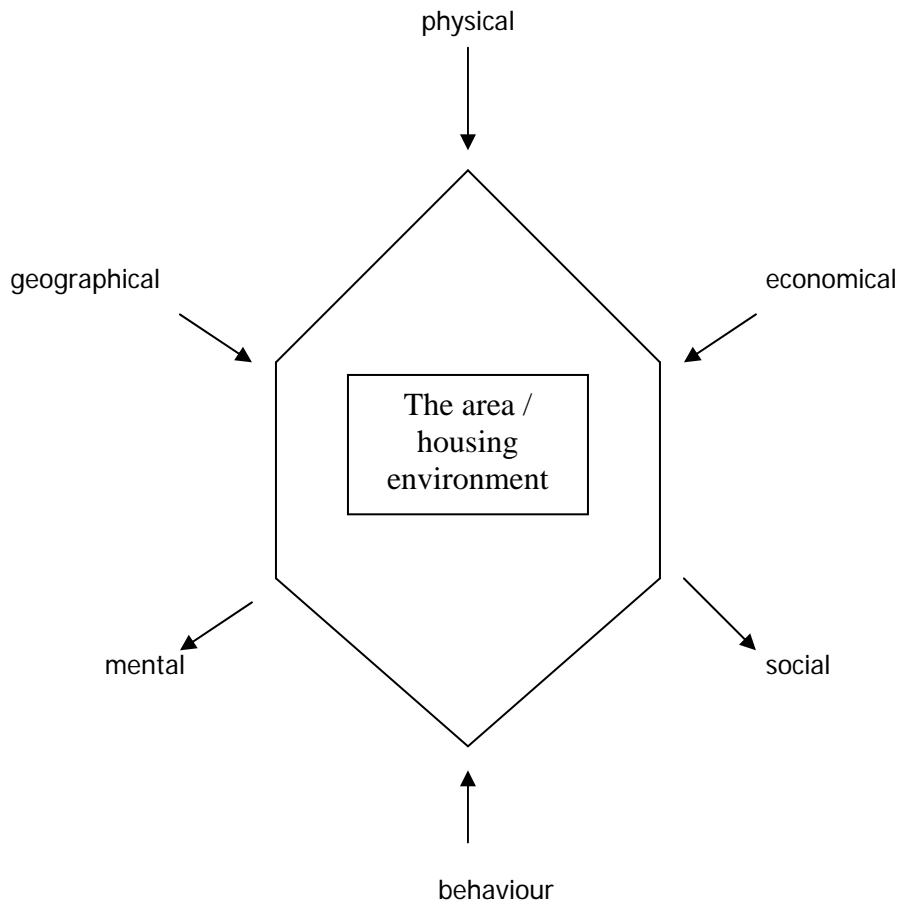
- geographical: about the location (in the wider area, connections to the rest of the city)
- physical (houses and environment)
- economical: (tenure, exploitation losses, housing prices, costs)
- social: (individual qualifications (social capital), and social cohesion)
- behaviour: use of the environment. Life styles? Non social behaviour? Safety and crime
- mental: identity, fashions, image; the subjective issues

Identify actors to these points of view: who is looking on which way?

Then: analyze the situation, address problems, formulate goals, identify (alternatives) measures, evaluate results

Sectoral problems always can be solved on the sectoral way (physical problems can be solved by physical measures), but sometimes other sectors can do as well, or results effect on other sectors/points of view as well.

Figure 2 **The six points of view to analyse a neighbourhood or area**

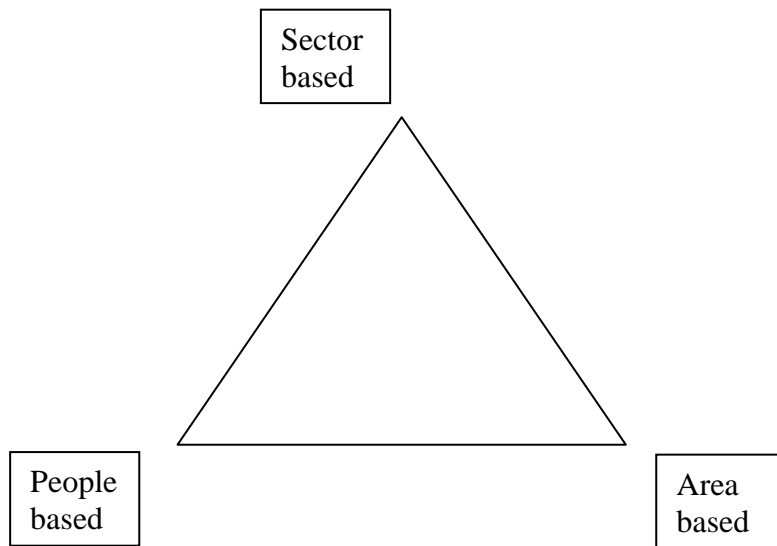


Conclusion 2: Look to the relation between types of measures and strategies

There are three kinds of strategies:

- Sector based: (=supply side based, organization based): approaching problems by an organization. Make a well functioning service
- People based policies (= demand side based, client based): approaching problems of a family. Make a social-economical strong family
- Area based policies (= territorial policies): approaching problems in an area. Make a vivid area.

Figure 3 Three kinds of strategies



Analyse in which circumstances what type of strategies could be most effective.

Some not effective strategies are (and: have been major policies!)

- focus on improving the housing stock, result: people stay poor in better houses
- focus on improving individual qualifications, result: people move to a better place
- focus on improving the area, result: problems move to an adjacent area
- focus on improving the sectoral approach, result: tunnel vision approach and no relationship to other sectors
- focus on everything altogether, integral approach, result: nothing happened in practice

In all strategies there has to be a balance between short and long term policies; sector based, people based and area based policies, preventive and curative measures, small measures for daily annoyances and long term improvements.

There is a balance between ordinary maintenance in an area, and an integrative approach. When problems are large, or are rising fast, often an area based approach is more effective, varying from – according to the problem analysis – getting the area connected to the city on a high scale level, towards a coordinated scheme to solve all problems of one single family.

Area based initiatives could be a good way to approach a problem, often because the problems are not caused by the area, but they happen concentrated in the area, and a particular area is a clear and convenient vehicle for any approach, both for consumers (their neighbourhood) as producers (municipality, housing association, police, school, etc)

Conclusion 3. Size matters

This project is about *large* housing estates. Large has to be considered in its local context. This could be a 5.000 dwelling estate in a major city, as well as a 100 dwelling estate in some village. Size is relative.

One major, but inescapable aspect of a large estate is its size. This makes it vulnerable. It is like agriculture: when a farmer only grows one crop, say when type of apples, he is doing well in times when his apples are preferred, but very vulnerable when the harvest fails, or when external factors cause problems (in his case a large import from abroad), or when his crop is out of fashion, when customers prefer another taste of apples.

This is similar to large housing estates. When the customers prefer another taste of housing, and there are alternatives available, a large size housing estate is more vulnerable than some small estate.

When large housing estates appear to be problematic, simple measures often do not work any more. Large problems in large estates ask for measures on a large scale. Naturally or organic grown areas are more differentiated, and

When problems are large, measures should be large as well. The cases show that taking small measures, however successful they prove to be per flat, altogether they hardly had any results on the whole neighbourhood. When the situation seriously is problematic – people who can afford leave, crime and safety occur, housing prices drop or vacancies occur, and as a result, the estate is stigmatized - only large scale renewal remains.

Strategies always are dependent on local circumstances, but also on external developments, reaching outside the estate. These can be policies on a higher scale level, like national law, subsidies or regulations, or external megatrends, like the economic cycle or the pressure on the overall housing market. Or they can be the result from technological innovations, demographic changes or cultural movements. Major trends are individualization, education, emancipation, rise of prosperity and focus on individual demands and quality. All external developments, hardly or not to influence, but only to anticipate on.

The housing areas built in the post war decades were mass built, universal, general, sober and top down planned. The larger the mass housing is, and the less flexible the type of housing is – like blocks of flats - , the smaller the possibility that a flexible adaption to changed circumstances is possible.

Conclusion 4. No guaranteed successes

So, large problems in large estates need implicate large approach programmes. However, even these are not a guarantee for success. The Bijlmermeer example shows that it may take a very long time. After fifteen years of intensive renewal – with mass demolitions, mass renewal, mass new constructions and mass social programs – the promising results are vulnerable. Other areas

however are still on the 'wrong lists' (areas with major problems) for decades, despite all smaller and larger programmes.

Some features prove to be hard to change. A large housing estate with the wrong kind of housing, i.e. housing that customers judge as unpopular, is difficult and only with major costs to change. A bad reputation even is harder to change, especially a bad external stigma. And their definitely are limitations on possibilities for policy: even major urban programmes sometimes are hard to prove successful. And when oversupply is very pregnant, like in Eastern Germany, the less popular housing types and areas are exposed: often the large housing estates. In these circumstances, a sound balance on the housing market only can be reached by cutting down the supply of housing.

Conclusion 5. Market demand fails in the Bijlmermeer high-rise estate

The Bijlmermeer case is not treated in this paper, but is well known in the urban world. One conclusion about this whole case that the major reason for the drastic urban renewal is an economic one. There was a structural oversupply for this kind of housing: in history, at the moment renewal measures were taken, and in the future. And, as being a (very) large housing estate, very much of the wrong kind at the wrong place. The expected target group – working class families with children – preferred other kinds of housing, and most new inhabitants only came as a second (or less) choice. This despite the very strong housing market in the region: the Amsterdam housing market is very tight.

Conclusion 6. Offer people perspectives

Perspectives. Perspectives are shown to the inhabitants. It is important to continue changes, and keep progress going. These could be moderate, or extra dependent on local circumstances and overall economic conjuncture, but the progress should be maintained.

One of the most important explanations for the - fragile – success of the Bijlmermeer are the perspectives that are shown to the then present inhabitants. Even while they belong(-ed) to the most vulnerable, and social-economical weakest groups, they were offered perspectives. For another kind of house they really wanted (a single family house, an apartment), another environment (a street instead of a gallery), another social life (social, not anonymous). People could see what possibilities they had, and they really had a choice. The new or renewed area should be advertised that it is for positive people with priority. We like to have inhabitants that choose to live here. These people get priority.

When several people apply for the new or renewed dwellings, priority is for the present inhabitants, secondly for other locals. Perspectives should be rewarded.

When time passed by, and pretty alternatives were realized, the natural aversion against demolition and change decreased and the enthusiasm for the renewal rose. Moreover, all kinds of accompanying social and economical measures were taken, like schooling programmes, debt restructuring, immigration facilities and leading people to jobs.

The customers, the group of inhabitants targeted on, who prefer to live in this, and many similar, large housing estates is limited. Large flat blocks are seldom preferred by families with children, the groups these were built for. There is a limited group of people who wants to live in blocks of flats in a suburb. Moreover, living in a block of flats requires a way of living not everybody shows. It is hard to hurt neighbours by non social behaviour in a farmhouse or villa, but in the middle of a flat block there are plenty of neighbours.

There is no reason to believe that housing preferences differ in other countries. Sure, there are climatologically or historic-cultural peculiarities, but when dwellings are occupied, it may point to a lack of alternatives. When these come available, and inhabitants can afford those alternatives, there is a threat of oversupply. And, the larger the estate, the larger the concentration of oversupply. When incomes will grow, this might be a fear for large estates in the countries in Eastern and Central Europe, but also in France.

Conclusion 6. Create urban connections

Urban. Connect the neighbourhood to the city. Make the area part of the city, make connections, make traffic connections with adjacent neighbourhoods, with the central city, and with surrounding suburbs. Open up the area towards the wider area, and make it a logical part of the city.

Reasons for visiting. Many now problematic areas are built in times of separation of functions. A consequence is that in most areas there is no other reason to come there than to visit people who live there. It should be considered to plan some major urban attractions or reasons to enter the area. Examples are a high school, a major shopping centre, a sports stadium, a swimming pool, a music hall, etc.

Local circumstances always differ. Strategies therefore never can be just copied. Otherwise, this warning may not be a reason not to listen to external initiatives and alternatives. Knowledge always is transferable, and experiences from outside always can be analyzed for a particular situation.

Last remark

I want to repeat the aim of this position paper. I want to ask the reader two things:

1. Whether you can subscribe these (preliminary) conclusions, from your own experiences. Amendments, comments or recommendations are welcome.
2. Whether you know comparable projects, experiences estates in your own country or knowledge. Those experiences I can use to put the Bijlmermeer and Dutch experiences in a wider perspective.