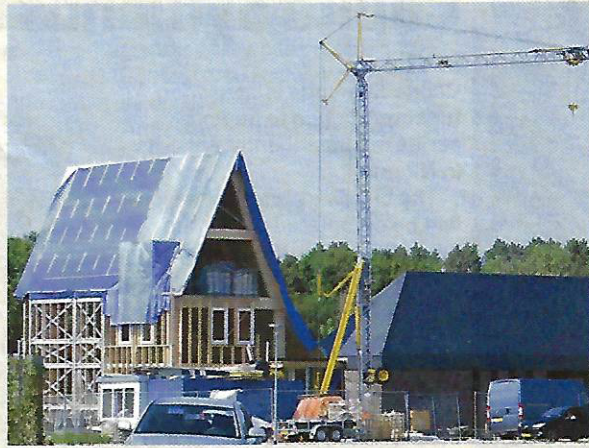


NEWS ANALYSIS: ALMERE HOUSING

Dutch lead the way on self-build communities

As the UK government promotes self-build as localism's answer to the housing crisis, **Elizabeth Hopkirk** reports from the Dutch town conducting the biggest low-cost self-build experiment in Europe



I BUILD LIVE-WORK

These nine plots are reserved for people who want to build a home and a workplace.

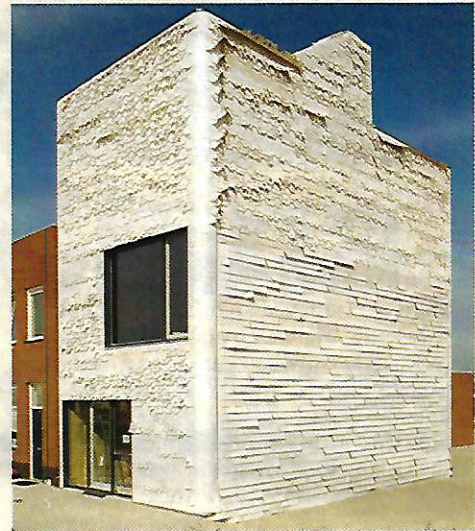
The owner of these two buildings took the concept of self-build literally. A carpenter by trade, he is building the house (left) and a workshop (right) himself.

Of course most people hire a builder and every Monday morning streams of vans bring workmen to Homeruskwartier. In contrast to normal developments, the project is a real boost to small construction businesses.

I BUILD EXTRA

This canalside area is divided into narrow plots with a second strip at the back for a granny flat or workshop. Owners can buy neighbouring plots if they want a wider house.

Client and artist Rob Veening developed a facade composed of perforated Teflon strips with his architect, CC Studio (pictured). To the west it faces the developer area over the canal and to the east it faces larger individual plots.



DEVELOPER AREA

The southern ring of Homeruskwartier was offered to developers in the hope that they would experiment with new ways of working with customers. With the notable exception of VMX Architects, which developed the Ithaka flats (pictured right) in close consultation with future inhabitants, this has not been a great success.

One scheme (pictured left) was offered to market for the same price and terms as the self-build area



directly across the canal.

As the recession hit, the density of the developer's scheme had to be intensified

and many of the flats switched to rental, while the self-build area carried on unchanged.

If Grant Shapps is serious about turning Britain into a nation of self-builders he needs to do more than provide the land, necessary as that is.

The housing minister will need advocates in town halls up and down the country with the vision and determination to turn his dream into reality.

Without them pushing against the entrenched culture, local authorities simply won't take the risk of trying to meet their housing targets in an unproven way.

Such is the experience of Jacqueline Tellinga, the force behind a fascinating self-build experiment in Almere, a 1970s initiated new town half an hour east of Amsterdam.

Now the Netherlands' fifth largest city, and the one with most potential for growth, it was built on polder land reclaimed from the Zuiderzee. For a long time it was, intentionally, a suburban sprawl, but a high-rise city centre has been created over the last 15 years, masterplanned by OMA and filled with buildings by big-name architects.

Yet, despite boasting arts centres by Sanaa and Will Alsop, housing by David Chipperfield and offices by UN Studio, Almere is considered the Milton Keynes of the Netherlands. As Tellinga puts it, the cultural elite do not live here.

It is due to almost double in size over the next 20 years, but the latest and perhaps most interesting phase of Almere's ongoing development is the 100ha self-build zone in the south-western Poort district.

Named Homeruskwartier after the Greek poet, it has been propelled from drawing board to part-built reality in just five years thanks to the drive of Labour politician Adri Duivesteijn.

Homeruskwartier presents a model for self-building, sustainable cities — not just villas for the wealthy

As an MP in the Hague 10 years ago, he was responsible for a law demanding that a third of houses be self-built by 2040. When it became clear the target was being ignored he quit Parliament and became alderman for Almere. He felt he had the best chance of implementing his own law here because the municipality is in the unique position of owning all the land. He headhunted Tellinga from the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam as project manager and they hired OMA again to work on a masterplan.

This divided the land first into 15 districts and then into 720 individual plots of varying sizes, plus a higher-density, mixed-use central area where people (some organised by architects) club together to build apartment blocks, retail and office space.

The land was released in three stages between 2008 and 2010 and already 300 families are living there. Eventually there will be 3,000 homes.

Every detail of infrastructure was specified beforehand so buy-



Almere's 100ha self-build experiment was built on land reclaimed from the Zuiderzee in the 1950s and 1960s.

ers would know whether they were building beside shops, an electricity sub-station or even a road hump.

Tellinga gave each residential district a theme prefixed with the branding "I Build". Popular areas include: sustainable; live-work; low-rise; terraced; timber-clad; and the hugely over-subscribed

shared-ownership area for people earning less than €36,000.

The revolutionary thing about Homeruskwartier — and the aspect that should attract Grant Shapps's attention — is that it presents a model for self-building sustainable cities, not just a scattering of villas for the wealthy.

The individual plots vary in size

from 86sq m to more than 1,200sq m. Because the city doesn't have to make a profit, the price of plots in phase one was fixed at €375/sq m. Some buyers managed to keep their construction costs to less than €100/sq m, making self-build a very attractive option.

All this is creating genuine diversity, both in the backgrounds of the



I BUILD SUSTAINABLE

This area, backing on to a lake, has been reserved for buildings boasting significant sustainability credentials.

The 12 plots of varying sizes are attracting some of Homeruskwartier's more interesting designs. On the far side of the water a park will eventually be planted.



I BUILD FREE

This area has just five rules: that you build a dwelling, that you build within the plot and on the street line, that you do not exceed 14m in height, and that you park on your own land.

Such freedom could have inspired some of the community's wackier designs but in fact the buyers of these plots have all built kit houses.



I BUILD TOWN CENTRE

The heart of the district has been reserved for high-density developments that will include retail and office space. Buyers must form "building groups" to create apartment blocks. The first building starts on site this month: an entrepreneur is creating a DIY store and flat for himself with several other speculative units on top. The council estimates around 300 people may eventually live in the town centre.

I BUILD CANAL HOUSES

This area is being developed in much the same way as Amsterdam in the 17th century. The ground floor of the houses forms the canal wall. One of the rules here is that your house must abut its neighbours. Architect-designed homes are found side-by-side with kit houses.



I BUILD GARDEN HOMES



The idea here was to encourage market gardening or at least self-sufficiency. This house (pictured above) is owned by a member of the

Homeruskwartier team. Some of the plots are very small, allowing for an 8mx8m house and allotment. Another of the first residents

is a 19-year-old man who is delighted with what amounts to a bright red beach hut but which meant that he, and his cats, could afford to leave home.

people who choose to live here and the houses they build. Their ages range from 19 to over 70 and many races are represented.

Interestingly, the experiment has shown that people are prepared to live in far smaller homes than architects and sociologists might predict. There are youngsters, divorcees and pensioners living here who could only afford their independence because they could build a 40sq m apartment for €60,000. The smallest dwellings a Dutch housing association would offer are probably 80sq m, says Tellinga. But then one of her guiding principles was keeping rules to a minimum.

All you need is the money and a building permit. Each plot comes with an A4 passport specifying the dimensions and a handful of other restrictions. But architecturally, anything goes.

"We wanted to give the people complete freedom in aesthetics as part of our ideology of trusting people. Who are we to decide what kind of aesthetic they have to use?" asks Tellinga.

She stands by this decision, despite rolling her eyes as we pass some of the worst examples of kit houses. But even the area reserved for architects-only is not without its disappointments. It appears that at least one architect was more interested in the resale value of his house than in creating a masterpiece.

Elsewhere the classical names of the streets — such as Zeus Straat, Aphrodite Straat and Agamemnon Singel — betray the fact that many are partially developed sandy strips dotted with a hotch-potch of styles.

A lot of people choose to build kit houses; others sketch out their own design; but plenty also hire architects and the city council held "meet the architect" events every time it released new plots.

"People know what they want," says Tellinga. "For example, one family drew a plan with an open fire, space for a piano and a garage big enough for their boat. Price and practicality come first; materials and aesthetics second."

As many of the residents move

WHO LIVES HERE?

Michiel van Kooten, a 40-year-old insurance executive, moved from elsewhere in Almere with his family after building one of Homeruskwartier's most distinctive houses for €500,000.

The curved yellow building with a cantilevered upper storey involved close collaboration between architect and owners. "We were living in an anonymous row of houses and we wanted something more extravagant," said van Kooten. "But we never imagined it would be such a statement."

Living on a building site has pros and cons, he adds. The children love the "adventure playground" on

here from elsewhere in Almere, they may have been exposed to a limited architectural stylebook.

Ekim Tan, an architect and researcher at Delft University of Technology who is studying



their doorstep but it's impossible to keep the house clean because the wind blows sand into every crevice.

Homeruskwartier for her PhD, explains: "When you ask anyone in Almere to come up with their own home you get a cheap, ugly reproduction of a Hollywood villa from a catalogue. Dutch society

hasn't had to build its own houses for 100 years and when you haven't seen your parents do it, of course you can't do it yourself."

She is a fan of the project, but says: "I feel they should be fed better information so they come up with more interesting ideas. I find the process more intriguing than the physical outcome."

For Tellinga the results are just as interesting. Who could have predicted, for example, that the people choosing to build pastiche traditional Dutch farm houses would be Homeruskwartier's sizeable population of first and second generation immigrants?

Or that the district with fewest rules would attract the most boring houses?

"We didn't know what to expect because it's never been done before," she says.

"You shouldn't come here to judge the architecture. Do that in Amsterdam. But that's why I like this better: it's a melting pot."

Tellinga, who lives in Amsterdam "because I don't have time to build my own house", argues that

self-building leads to more socially cohesive cities whose inhabitants have a much stronger attachment to their surroundings.

She is fiercely proud of the fact that the self-build experiment has ridden the financial storm far better than volume house-builders. In the ultimate vindication, some of the areas originally reserved for developers had to be reclassified for self-building before they sold.

"There are still plenty of people with savings," she says. "It's a revolutionary idea to sell the land to individuals, but it's not more of a risk. The developer only starts work if he has buyers and he only pays us [in full] if he starts work."

"Every country can do this but you need the right people. Only a few will have the guts and be in a position to make it happen," she adds.

"If this is the moment in your country, recognise it. But go for a programme that will allow a city to expand and invent itself. Don't start with single house plots: that's no ambition."