

## Tower Renewal Project Series

VIBRANT, DIVERSE AND UNIQUE

### Amsterdam success story

By Michael McClelland and Graeme Stewart

Toronto can learn how its apartment neighbourhoods could evolve by looking at the successes of other cities. Take the Bijlmermeer, for instance, a large tower block district outside of Amsterdam. It is reminiscent, in certain respects, to modern communities in Toronto.

In 1966, the Bijlmermeer was an ambitious housing experiment built on vacant farmland south-east of the city. It was envisioned as a secondary centre for the region and planned for 40,000 dwellings and 60,000 new jobs. It was promoted as Western Europe's most completely functional satellite community.

However the plan was never fully realized. The jobs and amenities never came and it remained in a gradual process of decline for nearly 30 years. It was quickly dismissed as a planning and social failure.

In the 1990s the area garnered renewed interest. The City of Amsterdam designated the Bijlmermeer as a priority investment zone and began a process of implementing the original mixed-use intentions. It began by providing rapid transit

and promoting a large commercial and entertainment district adjacent to the housing. In just over a decade, the aging housing development itself has undergone rapid and remarkable transformation.

A master plan, completed in 2002, set the framework for massive changes within the housing district. The master plan conforms to these key principles:

- establishing varied zones of uses
- encouraging a differentiation of building types
- maintaining a cohesive 'district'

Once noted for its homogeneity, the Bijlmermeer has been transformed into a series of neighbourhoods and commercial areas of vibrancy, diverse use and unique character. Basic zones include mixed-use commercial, market and housing zones positioned near metro stops, as well as residential areas of 'historic zones' of refurbished slabs, and new high-, mid- and low-density housing.

A cohesive public realm programme including way-finding, pedestrian and cycling paths, paving patterns and street

furniture provides continuity within the sprawling district. New building arrangements frame boulevards, courts and plazas, creating a series of human scaled spaces.

New amenities and improved access to services has improved quality of life for current residents while attracting new ones, making the Bijlmermeer one of the most culturally diverse areas in Europe. Multiple uses, the natural setting and quality housing have made the area popular for all ages, household types and tenures.

Overcoming its previous life as a poorly serviced and isolated housing district, today the Bijlmermeer is one of the Netherlands' more popular communities, as well as, a regional cultural and entertainment centre for greater Amsterdam.

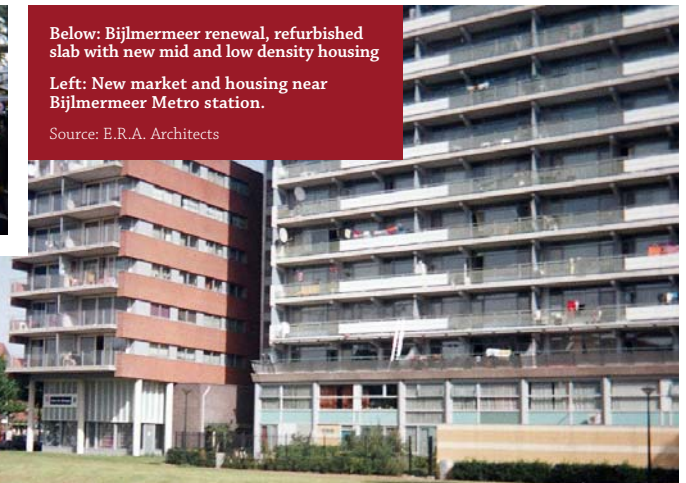
While Toronto's apartment neighbourhoods have opportunities and challenges specific to the Canadian context, international approaches such as Amsterdam's Bijlmermeer are models worth examining.



Below: Bijlmermeer renewal, refurbished slab with new mid and low density housing

Left: New market and housing near Bijlmermeer Metro station.

Source: E.R.A. Architects



Michael McClelland is a principal and Graeme Stewart is the project architect for Tower Renewal with E.R.A. Architects. The Tower Renewal Project, spearheaded by the mayor of Toronto, is being developed in collaboration with E.R.A. Architects and an interdepartmental municipal staff working, City of Toronto agencies, the University of Toronto and CMHC and the Clinton Foundation, among others.

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