

## Sportheldenbuurt Amsterdam NL

### Informal city district with strong neighbourhood culture

\_ Marlies Rohmer + Iris van der Helm text by Peter Paul Witsen

[www.rohmer.nl](http://www.rohmer.nl) | [info@rohmer.nl](mailto:info@rohmer.nl)



**Marlies Rohmer Architects & Urbanists** is an experienced architecture and urban planning firm, based in Amsterdam NL, which has been operating to much acclaim since 1986. The practice has a wide portfolio of commissioned work, in the Netherlands and abroad ranging from residential to industrial functions and from conversions of existing buildings to complex urban renewal projects. MR A&U has a particular reputation for designing schools, health care facilities and similar projects with social and cultural content. The practice has won many awards for its designs.

She has written a number of publications, including *What Happened to my Buildings* (NAI010, 2016) and *Building for the Next Generation* (NAI010, 2007).



**Iris van der Helm** is a designer public space at the Amsterdam department of Urban Planning and Sustainability. Iris has been working on the realisation of the public space of IJburg and Sloterdijk with new housing ambitions in an office surrounding. She designed the greensquare of the Sloterdijk station, the second largest trainstation in Amsterdam. She is participant in the walkable city initiative and teacher in the Puccini course 'a beter public space' which includes a beter planning proces, sustainable, attractive and consistent use of materials, cost effectiveness and technical detailing. She has been, and still is, working on the public space of the Zeeburgereiland.

#### Palabras clave

**'wild' neighbourhood, unity in diversity, encounter, physical activity**

#### Abstract

A new residential district close to the centre of Amsterdam combines living comfort with informal, inviting public space. 'Sportheldenbuurt' will be a distinctive urban neighbourhood with a high density of housing and a mixed population. But the anonymity of the big city is avoided. Urban designer Marlies Rohmer, who also acted as supervisor, deployed various design tools to create a vibrant street culture.

Housing engages emphatically with public space. 'Margin zones' have been designed in front of each residential building. That is a 1.5-metre-wide strip where residents interact with public space without leaving their personal domain. Lots of attention was also devoted to balconies and terraces.

The Urban Sport Zone, with a big skate park as most spectacular element, and three redeveloped silos form the main eye-catchers. By contrast, streets and squares are calm in layout. The continuity of public space strengthens the cohesion between the various building blocks.

The municipality regularly organizes meet-ups with residents to discuss new developments and issues.

Residents can share their ideas and give meaning to their surroundings in the process. Results are clearly demonstrable.

## Sportheldenbuurt

Zeeburgereiland, Amsterdam-Oost

Programme:	2500 dwellings (440 public sector rental, 460 student housing units 1640 owner-occupied dwellings of which 99 self-build dwellings) 2 care buildings 3 schools (1 primary school and 2 secondary schools) sports complex with sports hall multifunctional reuse of heritage community areas
Area:	21.5 hectares
Planning:	2009 – 2019
Completion:	2013 – 2021
Urban design:	Municipality of Amsterdam, Dept. of Space and Sustainability, with Marlies Rohmer – 2008-2013
Urban design guidelines and supervision:	Marlies Rohmer (Architects & Urbanists) – 2008-2020
Design of public space:	City of Amsterdam, Space and Sustainability (Iris van der Helm)

A new residential district is being built on the site of a former sewage treatment plant in the east of Amsterdam. The ambition is to generate an authentic sense of community like that in the older neighbourhoods of the city. Urban design and architectural tools are being deployed to combat the proverbial anonymity of the big city, and thus also the social consequences such as loneliness and obesity. It will be a neighbourhood where public space really is community space. A crucial factor is not only the design of public space itself, but more importantly the design of transitional zones to private spaces. All developers involved and their architects had to support that ambition, but enjoyed freedom in how to achieve it.



Figure 1 City centre Amsterdam and location Zeeburgereiland

Figure 2-4: Former sewage treatment plant. Photos Municipality of Amsterdam

## 1. History

A new city road meant a drastic change in the position of Zeeburgereiland within the urban fabric of Amsterdam. This former fringe area lay just a few minutes' drive from the city centre, and that was the immediate reason for realizing a sizeable housing programme here. The first result is Sportheldenbuurt, on the site of a disused sewage treatment plant.

Zeeburgereiland was for a long time an isolated area on the eastern edge of the city. The island was originally an embanked area for dumping silt dredged from rivers, at the spot where the River IJ meets the large IJmeer lake. The area only became useful in the early twentieth century when the dredge had dried and compacted sufficiently, although development was not immediately possible. It was originally used for military purposes. In the course of time, a motorway was built across the site and then over one of the few bridges over the River IJ to the northern part of the city. That road attracted all sorts of freebooters to the still empty expanse. An informal city fringe started to develop on part of the site, and in 1982 a sewage treatment plant was built.

Major inland shipping waterways extend along two sides of the triangular island. The third side is bordered by IJburg, a residential district that started to be developed around 20 years ago, with a planned total of 18,000 dwellings on artificial islands. The development of IJburg was a reason to build a second road across the island, thereby radically altering the position of Zeeburgereiland within the city. From then on, the old centre of Amsterdam was just a few minutes away by tram or car. A long tunnel along this route runs beneath a recently redeveloped dockland area. In 2003 it was decided to build a new city district here with thousands of dwellings. Sportheldenbuurt ('Sports Hero Neighbourhood'), on the site of the disused sewage treatment plant, is the first phase. It will be home to some 2500 dwellings, as well as schools, sports facilities and other amenities.



Figure 5: Urban design by Marlies Rohmer. (Masterplan municipality of Amsterdam)



### 1.1. Building blocks around sports park

The municipality of Amsterdam designed the main urban layout. The idea was to construct monumental development in an urban density of over 100 dwellings per hectare. The development was designed in an orthogonal pattern, grouped around three football pitches. The city based the neighbourhood on Olympiaplein in Amsterdam South (1927) by the celebrated architect H.P. Berlage. There, too, sports pitches occupy the centre of the square, surrounded by imposing blocks of apartments. Today, almost a century after its construction, it is still a very popular residential area. Putting sports areas back at the heart of residential developments brings life to streets and stimulates children and other residents to take part in sports and get exercise. That is the plan. The sports park (now called Urban Sport Zone and intended for a variety of sports) lends the neighbourhood a strong impetus.



Figure 6-9: Six level development with views along the traffic routes to contain the noise from traffic. Drawing: municipality of Amsterdam. Photos: Wouter van der Wolk

Six-level development was planned along the two traffic routes on the edges to contain the noise from traffic. These elongated walls were divided into forty-metre-long segments to articulate the development but were to form a unified architectural entity with views through to the courtyards behind. Strips of self-build homes were planned along the side immediately overlooking the open water. Private individuals could build or commission their own house here, without having to respect any aesthetic criteria.

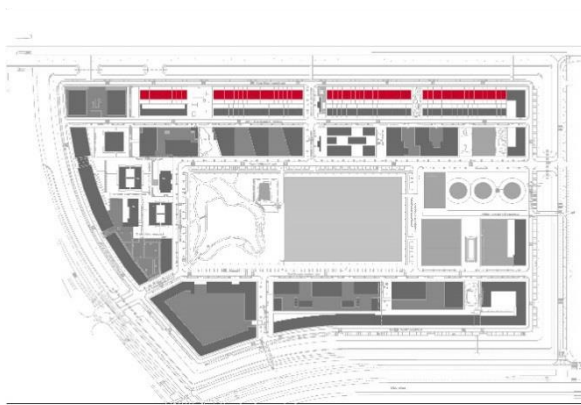


Figure 10 and 11: Strips of self-build homes. Drawing Municipality of Amsterdam

The former sewage treatment plant left behind traces that lend themselves perfectly as place-makers: a row of three silos, each 23 metres tall and 22.5 metres in diameter. After a competition, the winning idea was to turn these into a children's paradise in combination with cultural functions. Two smaller buildings also remain: two low and curiously shaped concrete silt mortar pumps. They were also set for redevelopment. Street life was to be ensured by the presence of three schools (two for secondary education and one for primary education, also intended for pupils from outside Zeeburgereiland).



Figure 12 and 13: Sewage treatment plant after transformation. Jan van Erven Dorens. Figure 12 photo: Wouter van der Wolk. Figure 13 photo: Martijn van den Dobbelsteen. Figure 14 photo: Egbert de Boer

## 2. Reconsideration during crisis years

The economic crisis between 2008 and 2015 prompted a rethink of the project. This was why the municipality brought Marlies Rohmer on board. The urban design became more informal. The guiding principle was to create a neighbourhood with a vibrant street culture. A neighbourhood where the diversity of the city is clearly present, including families with children.

By around 2009 the project had reached the stage when the building plots could be released to developers. That was when the crisis hit hard. The housing market collapsed, and construction ground almost to a halt. The trust that wanted to redevelop the silos failed to secure the necessary funding. Developers hesitated. The building sites were put on the market block by block, but no company wanted to take on the risk of building large numbers of dwellings at the same time. A big monumental gesture was no longer in keeping with the times.

So the municipality asked architect and urban designer Marlies Rohmer to transform the design. The choice itself was a statement. Some years previously, Rohmer had published a book called 'Building for the Next Generation'. That book was a call to give children more space for physical activities in the city: at home, on the sidewalk, and at school. Not only organized spaces (such as demarcated playgrounds on rubber tiles), but also space to develop and mature. Space to escape momentarily from parental supervision and make one's own discoveries.



Indeterminate patches of land, for example, 'wild fields' and places where various groups can play alongside one another. Children should be able to go to and from school on their own, and not have to rely on their parents to bring and collect them. In her book, Rohmer contended that the only free and unregulated space that children still had in recently built neighbourhoods was the space of the internet.



**Building for the Next Generation** is a publication by Marlies Rohmer in which she reveals how her architecture studio has tackled the task of building for young people during the last ten years. It is based on research into contemporary youth culture and its social context.

Building for the NEXT GENERATION uses words and images to present an analysis, with a focus on design practice, of recent phenomena such as the experience economy, cultural diversity, changing family relationships, new forms of education, the rise of "white" and "black" schools and the problem of increasing childhood obesity. The book couples these social issues to design projects which range from urban environments to schools. The concepts include networks of playing and sports fields, the climbable school, the broad school (a school with additional community functions), the school as a landmark and as a place of encounter and social control, the school playground as a neighbourhood plaza, and the flexible school with *à la carte* space. The author presents a diverse and colourful study of the subject matter using her own built projects and models, examples by other architects, newspaper clippings and passages from various academic studies.

Figure 15: Book Marlies Rohmer **Building for the NEXT GENERATION** (NAI010 2007)

## 2.1. Reviving street culture

In line with this, she advocated a renewed focus on street culture. In a society that threatens to compartmentalize further and further, it is important for groups to engage with one another. That means first and foremost that residential areas should be mixed in terms of composition: families, young people, singles, couples, seniors: everybody should feel at home there. The street should be a place where various groups encounter one another and together form a lively neighbourhood network. Designers can stimulate that, for example by orienting dwellings towards the street and ensuring that the design of public space aligns with the intended quality. The first residential area of Zeeburgereiland had to be such a neighbourhood. A neighbourhood right outside the city centre, urban in character, yet relatively wild and informal. That was the mutual agreement reached between Rohmer and the municipality of Amsterdam, which commissioned her, when she took on the project in 2009.

Now, a decade later, the housing market in Amsterdam has exploded and the housing shortage is acute. The price per square metre is increasing hand over fist. Buyers have to bid well above the asking price. Investors are on the lookout for opportunities. The situation was very different in 2009. Back then, developers were trying to keep the asking price for new-build low. That resulted in, among other things, cheap building materials and a preference for standard solutions. There was little desire to experiment. The housing market was in danger of becoming uniform, with relatively small city apartments, also at Zeeburgereiland.

## 2.2. Unity in diversity

In order to create a special neighbourhood character, Rohmer made a number of amendments to the urban design. She refined the design with developers in four workshops. The main conclusion: the urban framework from 2009 was too rigid. More flexibility was desired, especially in the monumental blocks grouped around the sports pitches, in terms of building height, parking solutions and appearance. So Rohmer introduced the 'varied ensemble'. This principle allowed for greater variation in building height, by trading high-rise and low-rise off each other. Building higher than originally required was possible if something was offered in return. For example, more investment in collective spaces. That was another of Rohmer's changes: courtyards and other spaces for collective use, fostering contact among neighbours.





Figure 16-19: Aesthetic criteria unity in diversity. Figure 16: rendering Marlies Rohmer/A2. Figure 17 and 18: renderings M3H Furige 19: rendering Paul de Ruiter Architects

Developers shared their inspiration on a summer excursion to Rotterdam, where they showed examples of the intended atmosphere, the creative solutions applied there, and the resulting quality. Rohmer believed that a freer architecture would enhance life on the street and the informal nature of the neighbourhood, though not at the expense of quality.

Rohmer sought that quality through 'unity in diversity'. 'Unity' did not arise spontaneously. Each developer selected its own architect, drew on its own preferences and insights, and made its own assessments. But architectural guidelines and supervision of the design elaboration were needed. Rohmer proposed to formulate the design guidelines according to a manageable set of principles, the clearer the better, to capture and create the intended informal mood.

### 2.3. Concise urban design guidelines

This phase culminated in a set of 'urban design guidelines' that were ratified by the city council in November 2013. The desired architectural quality was described on just two A4 pages of text and one page of references. They elaborate the principle of 'unity in diversity': "Unity is expressed in the use of colour and materials, ornamentation, tactility, facade plasticity, spacious bay windows and balconies. Diversity is expressed in the various applications of these principles." In many cases, the rules challenged architects and their clients to come up with creative solutions ("The buildings have striking double-height entrances that make a difference", "Eaves are permitted but must form a logical part of the building", "Ornament is not shunned, nor is greenery on the facades"). With respect to colours and materials, the guidelines prescribe stone materials in lighter tints as the main building materials. The building as a whole should "age beautifully". Rohmer's supervision had to ensure that all building proposals complied with the guidelines.



Figure 20-22: Striking entrances. Figure 20 NWA Architecten photo: Luuk Kramer. Figure 21 Arons en Gelauff photo: Egbert de Boer. Figure 22 KOW photo: Wouter van der Wolk

Most of the housing had been completed by mid-2019, though the public areas will only acquire definitive form once the construction transport has disappeared, in 2021. Public areas have only been completed in the first neighbourhood to be built (the Theo Koomen neighbourhood in the west, built for De Alliantie housing association, in collaboration with urban designer Thijs Asselbergs and under the supervision of Marlies Rohmer). Time will tell whether the idea of giving meaning to public spaces as communal spaces proves successful. What is clear is how the urban design guidelines and the accompanying supervision have turned out, and which solutions architects have found to give substance to the shared ambitions. They are recognizably present on the streets.

### **3. Contact between dwelling and public space**

*If public space is to develop into collective space that residents can appropriate, then the dwellings must explicitly engage with that public space. That has been acted upon in Sportheldenbuurt, mainly in the 1.5-metre-wide 'margin zones' in front of almost every residential building, and in balconies and terraces.*

Rohmer attaches great importance to the relationship between private dwelling and public space. Home and street must engage with each other directly. She advocates dramatizing the transitions from public to private with verandas, niches, bay windows, doorsteps and balconies. Inside and outside, private and public, overlap. That ensures eyes on the street and life on the street, an urban design that fosters the idea of the 'street as a village'. The prospect is that of parents with their laptop on their knees, keeping an eye on children at play, thus combining the worlds of living, working and caring.

Many design tools have been deployed in Sportheldenbuurt to encourage the emergence of a vibrant community feeling in an urban environment. Collective areas are important elements, but so too is the function at ground-floor level. In many cases the spaces here are made higher than usual (about 3.5 metres), so that they can accommodate other functions apart from housing, thereby ensuring a lively plinth. The positioning of eat-in kitchens or other living spaces next to the street side also contributes, certainly if occupants can open up these spaces with large doors. Particular attention is given to individual outdoor spaces (balconies, terraces) and the transitional zone between private domain and public space (the 'margin zone').

#### **3.1. Margin zones at the foot of the residential block**

The margin zone is a space accessible, or at least visible, for everybody. It's where residents can place benches, stools, small tables or flower pots, plant small front gardens and so on. It's also where residents maintain contact with life on the street without leaving their own domain. Pavements in Amsterdam can serve as an example. They offer residents an opportunity to occupy the public zone in front of their home and enjoy the sun and street life. Such an intermediary zone must be deliberately created in new-build developments.

The margin zone in Sportheldenbuurt is a 1.5-metre-wide strip between the facade and pavement. The strip forms part of the development plot and is issued to the developer. The architect is expected to integrate its design into the building design. According to the urban design guidelines, margin zones have a green or hard surface, and must differ from the material used to surface the pedestrian zone. Outdoor steps leading to a sunken (or half-sunken) basement or a raised ground floor must be contained within this zone. The only exceptions to this obligation apply to the blocks of low-rise development on the edge overlooking the open water.



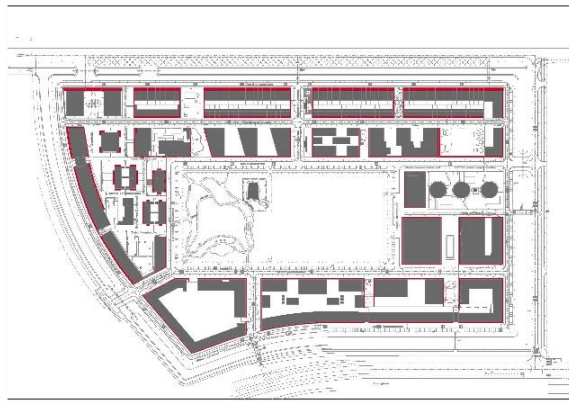


Figure 23-27: Drawing: municipality of Amsterdam. Figure 24 photo: Egbert de Boer. Figure 25 photo: Wouter van der Wolk  
Figure 26 photo: Egbert de Boer. Figure 27 photo: Wouter van der Wolk

Some architects commit themselves fully to the idea of the margin zone. Buro Ruim, for example, which was commissioned by a residential collective, designed a real Amsterdam pavement, like that along the canals. Homes at ground-floor level are slightly raised to create space for a half-sunken parking basement. These homes are accessed by private steps placed in line with the facade, creating a raised platform in front of each house, a mini veranda that residents can occupy to enjoy the view over their street. Elsewhere, public benches are incorporated into the strip, or the building is simply placed on a green platform – simplicity can be highly effective.



Figure 28-29 Reference margin zone: Amsterdam side walk. Photos: Reinier Gerritsen

In many cases, morphological conditions unintentionally shaped the design of margin zones. Ground water flows restricted the depth to which could be built. Fully underground car parks were not possible. The solution of a half-sunken garage has been applied to many blocks. Sometimes the garage is located beneath a raised collective area, and sometimes beneath the ground-floor apartments, the main floor of which is then raised about eighty



centimetres above ground level. The edges between those raised gardens or homes and the street are ideal for use as margin zones.

### 3.2. Sunny, spacious balconies

A second element that expresses the relationship between dwelling and street is the balcony. Much new-build development in Amsterdam features sleek facade planes to the street. Balconies are kept to the rear or are contained within the volume like loggias. That is not the case in Sportheldenbuurt. The urban design guidelines for the dwellings in the central area read: "Building blocks feature lively, expressive facades with staggered balconies or bay windows oriented to the sun". In practice, bay windows are rarely chosen, but balconies and terraces are plentiful. Good orientation to the sun, spacious balconies and terraces entice residents to sit outside. And because most residential complexes accord equal importance to all facades rather than having a clear front and rear facade, those balconies strengthen contact between the dwelling and surrounding public space.

They protrude up to three metres from the facade, affording residents a wide view of the surroundings from the balcony. Conversely, from the street one can see what is happening on the balconies. Balconies are living spaces and should be free to express that. They introduce a visual playfulness and informality to the streetscape, lending colour and character to Sportheldenbuurt..

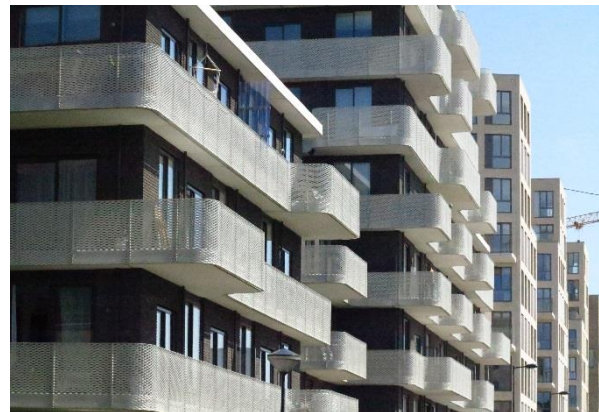


Figure 30-32: Sunny, spacious balconies. Figure 30 ATA Photo: Luuk Kramer. Figure 31 photo: Ton van Namen. Figure 32 Rowin Petersma photo: Luuk Kramer

Here, too, differences emerge in architectural approach. In a number of residential complexes the balconies have been carefully and professionally integrated into the facade. In other cases the balconies lend a sculptural quality to the facade. An example is the Terrazza complex by developer BPD. Architecture office M3H designed a complex full of staggered elements in the facade and building height. Many apartments have their outdoor space on a roof terrace, with an irregular pattern of protruding balconies for the remaining apartments. By contrast, other buildings underline regularity. This is illustrated by the complexes by developer Synchroon, designed by Arons and Gelauff Architects. Spacious balconies are arranged in playful yet regularly staggered rows on slanting facades. All overlook courtyard gardens, which are open to the public and clearly visible from the street and sports area. The complexes have a stepped building height, with the residents on the upper floors availing of a sheltered roof terrace.



Figure 33-35 Urban heroes courtyards for collective use. Arons en Gelauff Figure 33 and 34 photos: Egbert de Boer. Figure 35 photo: Wouter van der Wolk

A striking solution has been deployed by architecture firm Studio Nine Dots. Commissioned by Van Wijnen, they designed the 'Smiley' complex, with 364 student apartments. It is situated on the edge of Sportheldenbuurt, along the road to IJburg. The urban design guidelines offer the possibility to deviate, in consultation with the supervisor, from the prescription concerning bay windows and balconies in the case of student apartments. Studio Nine Dots deviated by grouping all balcony space together in one single stepped roof terrace for communal use. Space for it is created by a kink in the middle of the elongated building. As a result, the roof line takes the shape of a smile. The stepped shape offers a vibrant and cheerful platform open to the city.



Figure 36 Smiley, student apartments. Studio Ninedots photo: Peter Cuypers. Figure 37 Urban Heroes Arons & Gelauff. Photo: Wouter van der Wolk

### 3.3. A bit messy

The whole composition reflects the wish to create an informal residential environment that offers plenty of residential comfort while also allowing it to look 'a bit messy'. Sufficiently organized to create unity, but also not organized to the extent that the environment becomes a straitjacket. The ambition is that residents feel the freedom to do as they please without any temptation to engage in vandalism or misbehaviour, that residents play attention to their residential environment and make extensive use of it. In these 'village streets' children learn to experience public space as their own space. They can find their way to and from home and school on their own.

## 4. Supervision

Urban design supervision was an indispensable factor in fulfilling all these ambitions. It was a precondition for a high-quality, lasting residential environment. In development processes, however, good supervision may generate tension.



The built result reflects the combined efforts of many parties, held together by the urban design guidelines and the accompanying supervision. In hindsight, it can be concluded that the role of Marlies Rohmer as supervisor was vital. In the best cases, if the developer had a healthy ambition and the architect had sufficient affinity with the assignment, Rohmer turned out to be an effective sparring partner. In other cases, more was demanded of her. Some design proposals were repeatedly rejected, to the disappointment of the architect and the frustration of the developer, because the layout, detailing or quality lagged behind the character of the surrounding development or did not respect the urban design guidelines.



Figure 38-39: Supervisor Marlies Rohmer at work in her office. Figure 2. Workshops with developers and municipality of Amsterdam in Rohmer office. Photos: Martijn van den Dobbelsteen

#### 4.1. High standard and sustainable

Urban design supervision, in a situation where plenty of developers work on a relatively small area, is a precondition for achieving a high-quality, lasting residential environment. Even so, it is often viewed as an annoying obstacle in the development process — by developers with other priorities (i.e. building and selling); by authorities who emphasize high speed of development and maximum returns on land lease; and sometimes by architects too. Architects who endorse and adopt the ambition can receive support from the supervisor in their dealings with their client. But there are of course architects with divergent views who hope to get through the design review stage or who rely too heavily on their client.

All these scenarios unfolded in Sportheldenbuurt. That was partly down to the crisis that hit the construction industry. Developers felt pressure not to make their project too expensive, and therefore not too complicated. This situation had an effect on the selection of architects, the selection of building materials, and the quality of finishes. An example is the proposal from one developer to locate storage units at ground-floor level. That might be efficient in terms of construction but is disastrous for the result. It is in stark contrast to the principle of making lively plinths with additional heights for spaces on the ground floor.

The municipality of Amsterdam also felt pressure to build quickly and relatively cheaply. Some figures within the city planning system were determined to keep construction in progress and were therefore open to making concessions when it came to the urban design guidelines. One could legitimately ask whether that would be very different in the current housing market. During the crisis the housing shortage became so severe that the situation was often described as a 'housing problem' in the city. That might also be a reason to call for efficient buildings that are constructed quickly. In other words, standardization for the sake of speed of development.

#### 4.2. Not dogmatic

Supervision can also fail if the urban design framework is too rigid or is adhered to too strictly. That is partly why the framework in Sportheldenbuurt took such a concise and clear form, with more freedom of movement than in the initial urban design. In her supervision, Rohmer did not want to be dogmatic. She was tough on concessions (such as the rule not to build visible technical installations on the roof, unless designed as part of an integrated roofscape, for example, or combined with other rooftop structures and roof terraces), but accommodating when it came to alternative solutions with potential. An example of that is flexibility in building height, with additional investment in collective spaces in exchange.

#### 4.3. Heritage as landmark

Three settling silos from the former sewage treatment plant form a landmark for Sportheldenbuurt. After the first redevelopment scheme was scrapped during the crisis, the city held a second competition in 2018. An important advantage of this second opportunity was that neighbourhood residents could also join the jury.



Figure 40 and 41: De Drie Koningen by Tank, silo's after transormation.

The winning project was called De Drie Koningen ('The Three Kings'), submitted by Vink Bouw and designed by architecture office TANK. The silos are given a timber structure to make new public functions possible. The varied programme includes a cinema, children's play facilities, wellness area, cafés and restaurants, office space and a public terrace on each silo. The expectation is that the silos will draw visitors from the entire region and beyond to this new residential neighbourhood.

The outdoor space around the silos was designed by the municipality. It will be a green, landscaped space with a number of pathways of brushed concrete. The choice of materials is in keeping with the silos, which will retain their rough appearance. Seemingly randomly combined planting creates the impression of a wild field of greenery, matching the adventurous character of the silos.

## 5 Public space

The Urban Sport Zone, the most spectacular element of which is the big skate park, forms the social heart of the Sportheldenbuurt. Streets and squares are calm in layout, in keeping with the intended use by residents. Public space strengthens the relationship between the various blocks.

The continuity of public space is of vital importance in a neighbourhood where so many developers and architects are active. It is designed by the municipality, as is customary in Amsterdam: ninety percent of new or redesigned public space in the city is designed by landscape architects working for the municipality. The same design principles apply throughout Amsterdam, with just a few exceptions. In Sportheldenbuurt, not only the streets and squares but also the Urban Sport Zone came off the drawing tables at the city, with landscape architect Iris van der Helm as lead designer.

### 5.1. Connecting element

In line with the urban design philosophy behind Sportheldenbuurt, usability and child-friendliness were decisive factors in the layout of streets and squares. Moreover, streets had to exude a sense of calm, as elements that tie together the different building blocks. The urban design guidelines offer possibilities for this by allowing for differences in detailing from place to place.





Figure 42-45 Zeeburgereiland: green as connecting element. Drawing: municipality of Amsterdam. Figure 43 Studio Ninedots photo: Laura Mieziite. Figure 44 Studio Ninedots photo: Peter Cuypers. Figure 45 Steenhuis Bukman photo: Wouter van der Wolk

Redbrick clinkers were chosen to surface the footpaths, roadways and the sparse car parking spaces along the streets. This uniform material emphasizes the relationship between traffic spaces and spaces for people: cars are guests on site. The expectation is that free parking spaces will spontaneously become extensions of the footpaths. The intention is to use the same surface material for future neighbourhoods of Zeeburgereiland to create coherence among all neighbourhoods. Rows of trees line the orthogonal street pattern, with a wide variety of species. Soon the Urban Sport Zone will be enclosed by a square of lime trees.

Programmatically, public space gives substance to the principle of the 'active city': playgrounds, sports facilities, walking tracks and cycle paths that encourage physical activity. A few playgrounds from small children will be built around the neighbourhood, in places that can be observed from margin zones and balconies. The image is that of adventurous play areas, more than half of which are not hard-surface areas. Research has shown that children stay play longer -- and hence get more physical exercise -- on green play areas than on hard-surface play areas. In the process, urban children encounter at an early age aspects of nature -- fertility, insect life, the influence of the weather and so on. Moreover, that is why not all play areas are green. Even when play areas turn into pools of mud, outdoor play areas should be available.

A green edge of grass and water encircles Sportheldenbuurt -- the neighbourhood is accessed by two bridges for cars and a number of bridges for cyclists and pedestrians. This edge encourages residents to take short walks from their homes and offers a jogging route. On the northern side the green edge runs alongside the river dike, which has recently been strengthened to create a safe residential environment. Cyclists, joggers and walkers enjoy wonderful views of the river, passing vessels, the arched bridge with the locks behind it, and the village of Durgerdam across the water. Behind the dike an emergency jetty extends invitingly into the water. The green edge is part of the water barrier that encircles the whole Zeeburgereiland area. Over time, the barrier will form a five-metre-long recreational route that offers exciting and varied views.





Figure 46-49 Network of playgrounds. Drawing: Municipality of Amsterdam. Figure 47 rendering: zesXzes. Figures 48-49 photos: Egbert de Boer

The chief ingredient of the outdoor space in Sportheldenbuurt is, however, certainly the Urban Sport Zone. This has been part of the design since the very start, but its elaboration has drastically altered. Three football pitches were no longer required because the planned relocation of a football club was cancelled. Some small-format pitches for very young children have survived. A larger pitch with artificial grass can be used for various ball sports such as korfbal, baseball and hockey. In addition, there is a batting cage, a hundred-metre-long running track, and amenities for typical urban sports such as paddle tennis and basketball. All amenities are free to use, outside the hours that clubs make use of them. Management is in the hands of the nearby sports hall.

## 5.2. Biggest concrete-surface skate park

The most spectacular part of the Urban Sport Zone is undoubtedly the skate park. After the cancellation of the football pitches, skater Stan Postmus approached the municipality with the idea to construct a skate park. Not simply a skate park, but the biggest concrete-surface park in the Netherlands, 3400 square metres in size. This is therefore sure to attract youths from outside the area, although locals are of course also welcome. Seasoned skateboarders, inline skaters and BMX riders from far and wide will discover Zeeburgereiland as a hot spot. Olympic athletes will train there. It will become the main arena for skaters in Amsterdam, a venue not to be missed by a select community of enthusiasts whose aim is to visit all the leading skate parks in the world.

It is the only part of the public space not designed by the municipality. The specific requirements of such an international attraction called for a specialized designer. That was found in Denmark, home of Glifberg-Lykke, an office that specializes in the design of skate parks. Its ambition is not only to construct amazing parks for skaters, but also to deploy them to establish social links with other sections of society. Surrounded by so much brand-new building development, the Amsterdam Urban Sport Zone lends itself perfectly for this aim.



Figure 50 and 51: Urban Sport zone with skatepark, renderings: zesXzes

To emphasize the social connection, the skate park is set in park-like surroundings. With grassland, trees, perennial plants and flowers, the almost romantic setting forms a pleasant contrast with the concrete surface for skaters. A gentle relief responds to the slopes of the skate park. Surrounding the skate park are winding paths (covered in gravel to discourage skating) and an old-fashioned playground featuring a slide, swing and carousel. The result is a traditional park composition with a far-from-traditional heart. Visitors and residents can enjoy the acrobatics on the skate park from numerous vantage points.

## 6 Participation

*The involvement of residents for the neighbourhood allows them to help shape the course of development. The municipality regularly organizes meet-ups to discuss new developments and issues. Residents can share their ideas and give meaning to their surroundings in the process. Results are clearly demonstrable.*

A neighbourhood with a strong social structure and a heightened sense of community is being created in all sorts of ways. The design tools deployed must demonstrate their effectiveness over the coming years. But design alone is not enough. Almost ninety percent of the dwellings have already been built and the schools are open. That means that the residents and other users are no longer an anonymous mass of people. They are people with ideas, initiatives, preferences and interests. Designers and public authorities whose ambition is for residents to appropriate public space should be receptive to the wishes of residents.

### 6.1. Periodical meet-ups

Right from the moment the first residents appeared, they were invited to help think about the further elaboration of the collective spaces in particular. For example, secondary school pupils helped to decide on the layout of the school playground, which becomes a neighbourhood square outside school hours. When a second competition for the redevelopment of the silos was held, after the first winner had withdrawn owing to the crisis, a neighbourhood jury was formed alongside the professional jury. More structurally, participation has taken the form of periodical meet-ups. They were originally held every six weeks. Now that by far most choices have been made, four meetings a year are sufficient. The municipality updates everybody on progress and discusses issues that have arisen. Residents can express their views and offer feedback. Attendance is normally high among all sections of the community. Students and young people also take part, as do the residents of a senior home. An added benefit is the sense of community. Neighbours get to know one another at the meet-ups, offering to help one another if the need arises.





Figure 52 - 55: Meet up. Photos Wouter van der Wolk

Requests that fall with the limits of reason and feasibility, and that go beyond personal interests, are honoured whenever possible. For example, the wish to create a neighbourhood vegetable garden prompted the municipality to allocate a piece of land for that purpose. Although the Sportheldenbuurt itself had no available space, the as yet undeveloped adjoining site did. So the vegetable garden will be realized, on condition that the residents themselves look after it.

It is partly down to this open attitude that the skate park proposal met with enthusiasm. Because residents, city officials and initiators gathered to discuss the issue seriously, the understandable fear of inconvenience (noise, light, disturbances) could be dispelled. A few measures were required, for example to determine when the lights would be switched off in the evening, but of greater importance was the surrounding park area, which everybody has a stake in. The design principles for this area reflect the preferences of surrounding residents. Even people who are not sports-loving, or whose age or health prevents them from doing sports, can now enjoy the Urban Sport Zone. Much more than the original three football pitches, the zone will develop into the heart of the neighbourhood, both spatially and socially. Exactly in the spirit of the street culture and mutual interdependence, the core values of the new Sportheldenbuurt.





Figure 56 - 58: Studio Ninedots. Figure 55 and 56 photo: Peter Cuypers. Figure 58: photos Laura Miezite

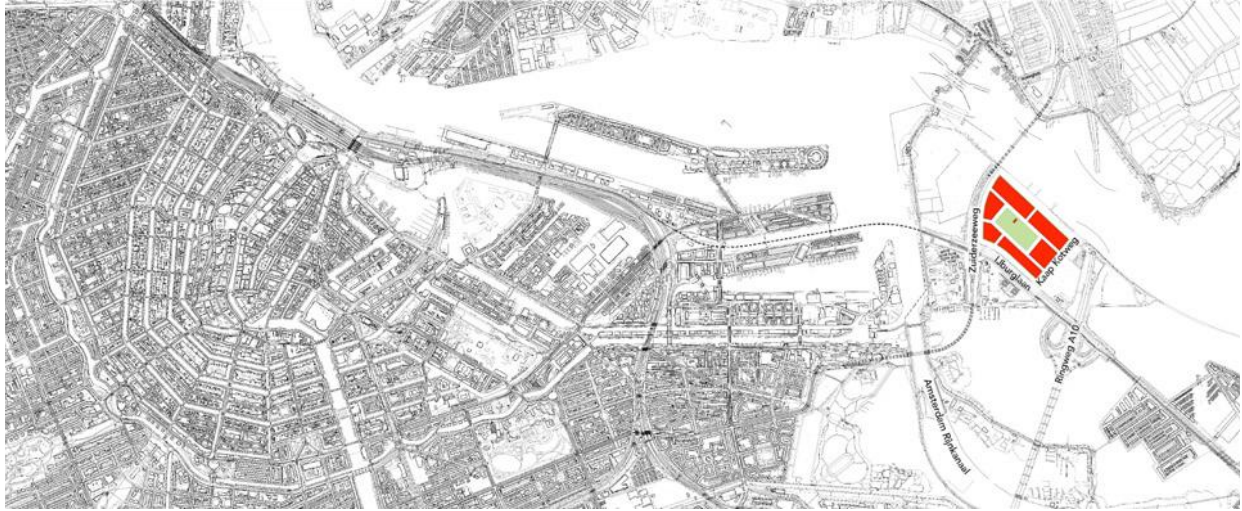


Figure 59 drawing Municipality of Amsterdam. Figure 60 NWA photo: Luuk Kramer, Figure 61 Rowin Petersma photo: Luuk Kramer