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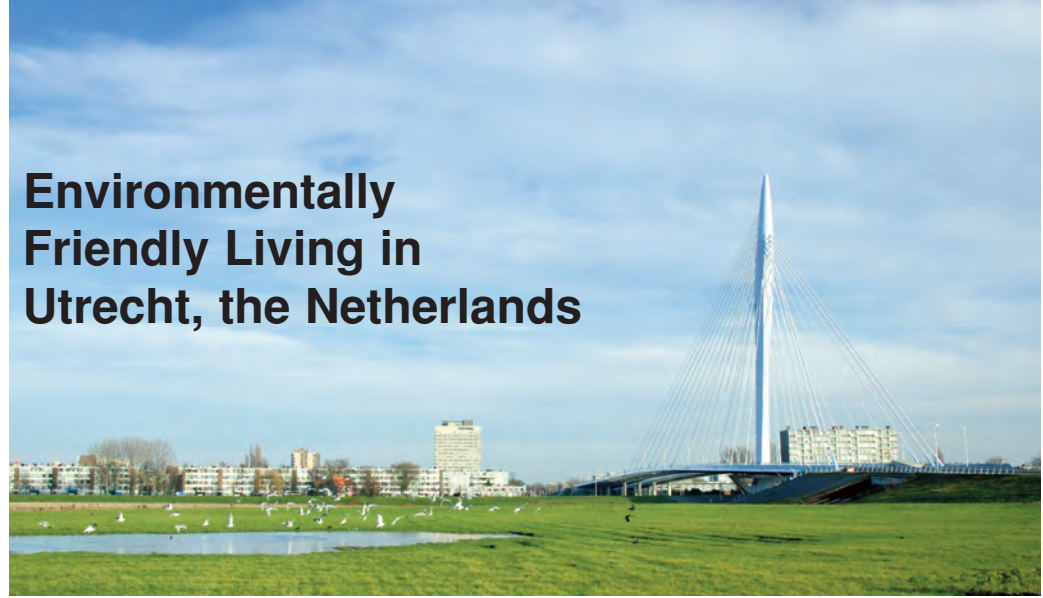
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The Kersentuin: Environmentally Friendly Living in Utrecht, the Netherlands

by
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Abstract

In the Netherlands, a country known throughout the world for its innovative approaches to meeting the needs of its citizens, several examples of innovative experiments with sustainable housing can be found. The Kersentuin (Cherry Garden), an environmentally, socially and economically friendly community in Leidsche Rijn, an urbanization-from-scratch area in the west part of Utrecht, has been founded and developed by the residents themselves. The area is very popular and is seen as an interesting best practice in ideal green neighborhood developments. This paper evaluates this attempt to create a sustainable neighborhood.

Introduction

With more than 300,000 inhabitants in a metropolitan area of about 650,000 inhabitants, Utrecht is a large town in the middle of the Netherlands. Though not formally included in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area, the proximity of the Amsterdam Area with its 2.1 million inhabitants results in strong relations between the cities. Leidsche Rijn, a region named for the Leidsche Rijn river, a branch of the Rhine, is one of the largest urbanization-from-scratch projects currently underway in the Netherlands with an anticipated 30,000 new housing units constructed by 2015¹. The development in the Leidsche Rijn area started about fifteen years ago and is now in full swing. In about a decade, 90,000 people will live and work – or commute out to Amsterdam and Utrecht – where until the mid-nineties cows grazed. Further, some 700,000 m² of office accommodation will be provided in four new business estates, and about 40,000 people will ultimately find employment in the new town (Municipality of Utrecht, 2006). Prior to development, about 500 houses were located in the area, apart from the villages of De Meern and Vleuten, with about 20,000 inhabitants. Leidsche Rijn is located at the west side of Utrecht, tightly positioned between two of the three major motorways in the Netherlands.

The new developments required the extension of urban zoning. In the Netherlands, with its restrictive spatial policy, the government had to exclude the area from the so-called Green Heart (Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, 1990).

After the decision to build the Leidsche Rijn in 1994, a project team was assembled that produced a masterplan, with only the main development structure decided on. The two municipalities — Utrecht and Vleuten-De Meern — cooperated in developing this plan. The masterplan formed – on the Utrecht side - the basis for the development-oriented zoning plan, issued in 1999. The community of Leidsche Rijn actually is now subdivided into many different communities, like Terwijde, Het Zand and Parkwijk. For each neighborhood, requirements have been formulated. Later this was developed into a global urban plan. It is the city's aim to create neighborhoods in which people with various backgrounds live next to each other.² Further, considerable attention is paid in the masterplan to visions for public transport and cycle lanes. Phasing of development of these services, however, is not included. The masterplan is regularly updated with development plans. In the development plan of 2003, for example, the problem of accessibility and lack of services was discussed in light of the financial deficit of the project caused by delayed development of houses. Measures are being taken to hasten housing production. Furthermore, according to the 2003 update, there will be more attention paid to social cohesion, participation and communication (Projectbureau Leidsche Rijn, 2002).

Leidsche Rijn is being built according to the principles of sustainable construction, and large investments have been made towards environmental protection and energy management - such as rain water collection systems, low-energy demand houses, and centralized heating systems.

An important intention of the Utrecht municipality for its greenfield development in the west was the wish to build a sustainable neighborhood, with a good mix of houses. One of the aims of extending Utrecht was that the city could become more balanced in terms of income of the residents. As mentioned above, the city's housing stock is now more in balance. Further, planners had important ideas about Sustainability issues.

Initially, the idea was to develop the whole community of Leidsche Rijn (with its 30.000 residencies), as a carless community. However, due to delay in the development of public transport services, many of the pioneers became very car dependent, forcing the planners to increase the amount of parking spaces per res-



idence from 0.8 to 1.4. The parking norms for schools, day care, and shops have not been adjusted. For example, no single parking place will be developed at schools for parents to bring their children by car with the intention of encouraging them to use bicycles or walk.

Within Leidsche Rijn, each neighborhood is being designed separately, predominantly by the municipalities of Utrecht and Vleuten-De Meern and constructed by private developers individually, allowing for distinct identity and flexible solutions to localized problems, needs, and circumstances (www.leidscherijn.nl). In addition to the large numbers of homes to be constructed in contracts commissioned by housing corporations and project developers, Leidsche Rijn will also offer latitude for groups of residents and individuals to experiment. The municipal planners encouraged these innovative experimtns and pro-actively sought residents who would take advantage of the opportunities. This has resulted in several projects, ranging from creating individual commissioners of housing and working projects, to initiating and maintaining virtual communication networks within the neighbourhood, to the organizing of cultural festivals. This “private development” is a frequently discussed theme that seems to have trouble getting off the ground, due to lack of land, lack of experience of people, architects and constructors. Private development involves only a small part of the total development, but some of the projects get more attention than others. The most famous project is the Kersentuin (Cherry Garden), a privately developed sustainable housing project.

The Kersentuin: the planning process

The Kersentuin is a unique neighborhood in Leidsche Rijn/Utrecht. It originated with a vision from a group of people, brought together by the municipality, who felt the need for an environmentally friendly living space, a kind of development not provided by traditional corporations and developers. The idea was to plan and develop a socially and environmentally sustainable place to live for diverse groups of people (families, elderly), with good contact between neighbors, lots of social activities, where everything is organized by the inhabitants.

Seven initiators started planning a neighborhood and discussed several options with the municipality of Utrecht. In the Netherlands, the municipality is the most important player in development. Quite often the municipality owns the land and issues the building permit. The ideas of the initiation group met the goals and objectives of the Utrecht municipality for a sustainable Leidsche Rijn, so the municipality decided to invest in the project and to cooperate. By this time, more participants, including future residents became interested. They founded the Kersentuin Neighborhood Association, which took over much of the bureaucracy. Through this association, the future residents negotiated with the municipality and builder, approached architects, and searched for suppliers of sustainable materials. The planning process took about seven years. One of the Dutch housing corporations, Portaal, joined the association in order to develop social housing. Portaal has also been involved in the building

phase. As project leader, pre-financer and buyer of the social housing units (and renting them), the housing corporation played an important role. It was able to take advantage of its expertise on builder selection and its knowledge of sustainable building processes. Unfortunately, there have been numerous changes in the representatives of Portaal, resulting in unanticipated transaction costs for the residents. Nevertheless, without the help of Portaal, the Kersentuin would never have existed. The construction of the project started just before the summer of 2002 and it was completed by the end of 2003. During the first years, Portaal was responsible for the maintenance of the buildings. Later on, the Kersentuin Association selected another independent organization for its maintenance.

The plan included 94 residencies, 28 of which are social housing and 66 are homeowner houses. All of the houses are different, but there are 9 different styles that can be customized. The residents decided to build a parking structure in order to enhance the quality of the neighborhood by avoiding crowded surface parking. The parking structure, with gardens on top, consists of about 50 parking places, which still does not accomodate all of the residents.

Some of the housing types are located on top of the parking structure. Because all the residents agreed not to have surface parking, and instead, agreed to have green public space with cherry trees, many of them have decided to share cars. Sixteen families share two cars, which decreases car use. However, not all households wanted to get rid of their cars. Those wanting to keep their cars have agreed on renting or buying a parking space, even though the car-owner is responsible for buying the space. If, in the future, the amount of parking space is still not enough, the inhabitants will use a part of the green area for parking space because their desire is to be self-sufficient and not have to park in another



Some of the housing types, also on top of the parking structure.



Low car use area.

neighborhood. All residents hope the green space will be more valuable by then, thus discouraging more cars. In the Kersentuin, about 40 percent of the households do not own a car. In Leidsche Rijn, only 11 percent of the households do not own a car. Sharing amenities is quite common in the Kersentuin. Instead of large lots, the inhabitants decided to open up part of the land for public areas, with room for play spaces for kids.

The group of residents also invested in shared facilities (washing rooms, project house). All of the houses were constructed with sustainable materials, solar power systems, special thermal insulation, a balanced ventilation system, extension structures to allow for growth as families get bigger, lots of green spaces, a community garden, and car-sharing. The residents are very self-sufficient and arrange new initiatives such as hand crafts, a carrier cycle, carshare, etc., from which both residents



Public garden meets private garden.

and the rest of the town now benefit (Van den Ouwenland et al., 2006). The North-South orientation of the houses increases the return of the solar system. All residents pay for the use of the services, as well as maintenance costs for having the facilities. The people who rent the social houses pay rent to Portaal.

Because the residents wanted their environment as green as possible, they decided to share one big garden instead of having smaller individual gardens. Now, the area consists of three large shared gardens. They also created green public space for multi-functional use (i.e. a playground and a meeting space). The carefully selected vegetation also offers space for birds and small mammals.

The Kersentuin: An Ideal City?

The Kersentuin is highly appreciated by its residents. The character of the neighborhood is quite unique and the residents all subscribe to the concept. From a social perspective, the benefits are considerable, particularly a more child-friendly environment, with lots of play space due to fewer cars in the neighborhood. The mix of residents is also interesting, with lots of activities organized to create a positive social cohesion of the neighborhood.

From an environmental perspective, the car-sharing project is seen as a best practice of sustainable neighborhoods. In addition, the amount of public and shared green space maintained by the inhabitants, helps to bring people together. Sharing facilities with



Play area in the shared public space.



Cherry trees and solar energy systems.

environmentally friendly washing machines also helps the environment. The investment in solar cells for energy and rain water for the gardens also contributes to the environmental quality of the village (Van den Ouwenland, 2006).

From an economic perspective, there is a significant benefit to the residents. Organizing certain services on their own and sharing facilities saves money and in the near future, they will be able to sell the overproduction of energy from the roof-top solar cells.

The Kersentuin is completed and probably will not be replicated, but overall, its development seems to be a success. The residents of Kersentuin perceive it as their ideal neighborhood, designed and maintained by the residents. They like the pleasure of taking care of and feeling responsible for their own environment, illustrated by the fact that they enjoy picking cherries from their own cherry trees each year.

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Endnotes

- 1 Of the planned 30,000 housing units, about 12,000 were ready for occupancy in May 2008 (36,000 Inhabitants, of which 27% under the age of four in the Municipality of Utrecht, 2008). The percentage of owner-occupied houses is above the Utrecht average of 42%. Most of the homes are single family houses (84% versus 43% in the remainder of Utrecht). As social homes were overrepresented and there was a lack of medium-priced homes, the municipality of Utrecht intended (and still intends) to build more expensive houses to increase house mobility in the city (Gomes et al., 2004). With an average housing production of 1,000 houses a year, the development of Leidsche Rijn will not be completed in 2015 (Municipality of Utrecht, 2008). Verduin (2007: 8) estimates it will be completed after 2020.
- 2 However, recently the newspapers mentioned that there are plans to increase the amount of expensive houses because of financial circumstances. On the other hand, some planned expensive housing areas are replanned to housing areas with higher densities.