

3.4 Bijlmermeer: Praising Failures?

This subchapter will focus on the question: *‘How has the failure of the architect’s vision affected the monumentality of the Bijlmermeer?’* First, this essay will explore the failure of the architect’s vision through literature and by making an analytical comparison between the city centre of Amsterdam and the Bijlmermeer. After that, we must understand what monumentality implies in order to create a relation with the failure of the architect’s vision, which might define a new layer and insight regarding its monumentality.

The vision and its contribution to Bijlmer’s failure

Bijlmermeer is one of the most consistently implemented and largescale exponents of modernist and functionalist urban design (Heeling). The design of architect Siegfried Nassuth applied all of the ideas of Le Corbusier and the CIAM on modern living, as mentioned in chapter 3.1. Helleman and Wassenberg argued that three main categories of issues led to the downfall of this vision of the Bijlmer (Helleman and Wassenberg, *‘The Renewal of What Was Tomorrow’s Idealistic City’*). Firstly, a lot of ideas and planned facilities like spaces for sport and recreation, public transport and stores were either not realised due to lack of finances or were delivered with significant delay. The second category was the liveability problems. The numerous semi-public and collective spaces, such as the large-scale parks, led to blind spots rather than cosy places where people could meet (Helleman and Wassenberg, *‘The Renewal of What Was Tomorrow’s Idealistic City’*). Due to the lack of ‘eyes on the street’, this resulted in problems regarding social safety, manageability and maintenance (Heeling). Lastly, the demand and supply of the housing market did not match properly. The intended inhabitants, middle-class families, preferred single-family houses with gardens in other towns around Amsterdam. Furthermore, socioeconomic factors¹ encouraged a trend of individualisation, which did not suit the idea of collective living in the Bijlmermeer (Helleman and Wassenberg, *‘The Renewal of What Was Tomorrow’s Idealistic City’*).

1. Socio-economic factors like increased incomes, more free time and mobility led to this process of individualisation. For further details, consult: Helleman and Wassenberg, *‘The Renewal of What Was Tomorrow’s Idealistic City’*.

The vision is the failure

The architectural shortcomings were certainly factors that led to the failure of the architect’s vision. Yet I would argue that a deeper, underlying factor can be found in the modernist vision itself. The cause is that modernism neglects beauty², resulting in functional and meaningless architecture which people do not want. As figure 3.4A shows: the inhabitants of the Bijlmer agree that the Bijlmermeer should rather be demolished and rebuilt than revived or renewed (Helleman and Wassenberg, *‘Bewonersonderzoek Finale Plan’*). Contemporary public opinion in wider Amsterdam towards living in the Bijlmer was likewise negative. (Reformatorisch Dagblad 8).

2. I refer to beauty in the Scutonian sense, rather than in its neo-Platonist view as a feature of being itself. Beauty is not about things in the world but about a particular experience of them and about the pursuit of meaning that springs from that experience, which sets us free to see beauty as nothing more than a subjective preference. It may express its creator’s pleasure and taste, but it is pleasure that is valued by others and taste for their true ideals to last forever. See: *Scruton, Beauty*

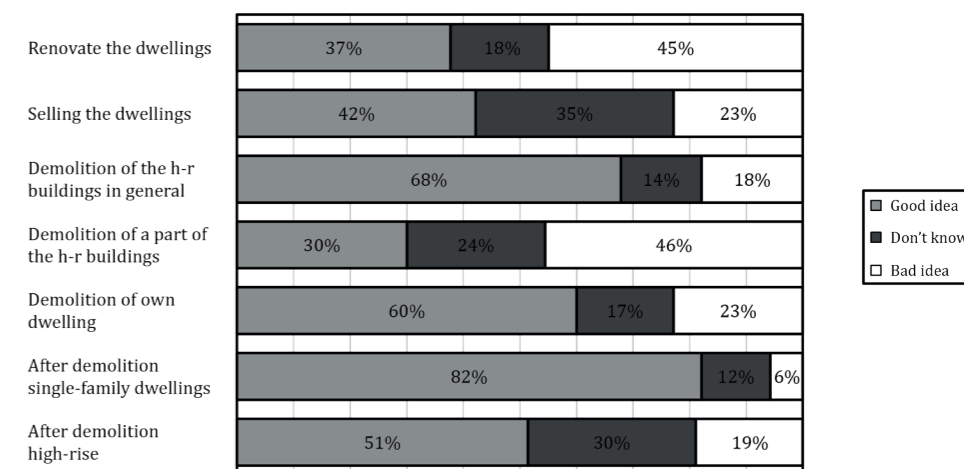


Fig. 3.4A: Survey results on whether the residents want the Bijlmer to be demolished and rebuilt or revived (Helleman and Wassenberg, *‘Bewonersonderzoek Finale Plan van Aanpak Bijlmermeer’*).

As philosopher Roger Scruton describes this in his documentary *Why Beauty Matters?*:

“Put usefulness (functionality) first and you lose it. Put beauty first and what you do will be useful forever. It turns out that nothing is more useful than the ‘useless’, which we see in traditional architecture with its decorative details. Ornaments liberate us from the tyranny of the useful and satisfy our need for harmony. They remind us that we have more than practical needs. We are not just governed by animal appetites like eating and sleeping, we have spiritual and moral needs too. And if those needs go unsatisfied, so do we.” (21:46 - 22:35)

Scruton showed that our built and protected world, which took many generations to build, was adapted according to human needs. To neglect such buildings and cities, after using them for so long and so successfully, would seem absurd. But by abandoning traditional architecture and urban planning, the city of stone (Grassi) became, to the profits of functionality, synonymous with the idea of deathly inflexibility (Krier, *‘The Blind Spot’*), as was the case for Bijlmermeer. The permanence of which Aldo Rossi talks about does not manifest itself in modernist architecture, whereas it does in the traditional buildings of stone, brick and traditional plaster (Kollhoff). By comparing the city centre of Amsterdam, to the extension of the Bijlmermeer, we can see that this is true (see fig. 3.4B).

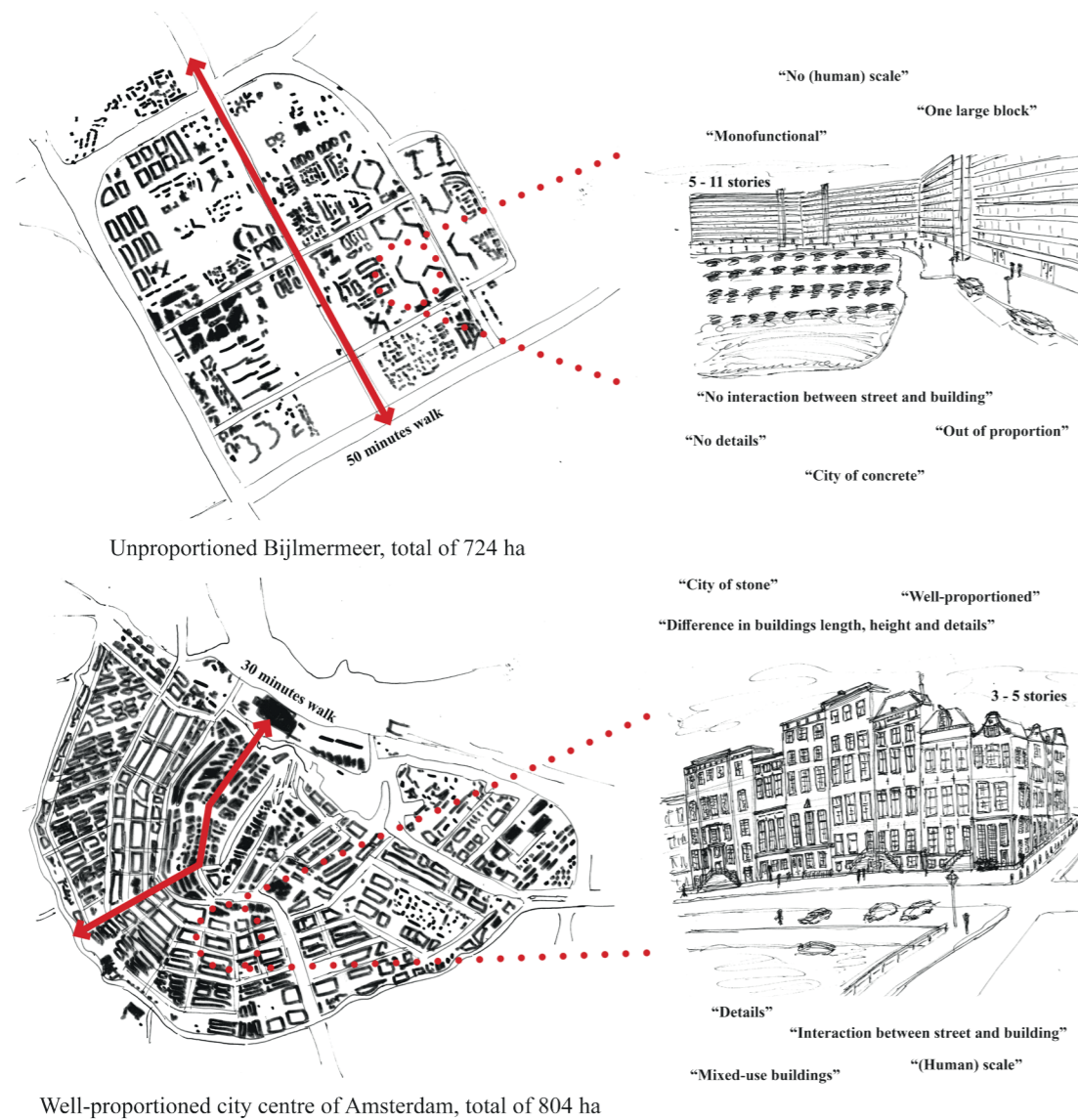


Fig. 3.4B: Comparison of the urban and architecture proportions and functions between the city centre of Amsterdam and the Bijlmermeer (Author's image)³

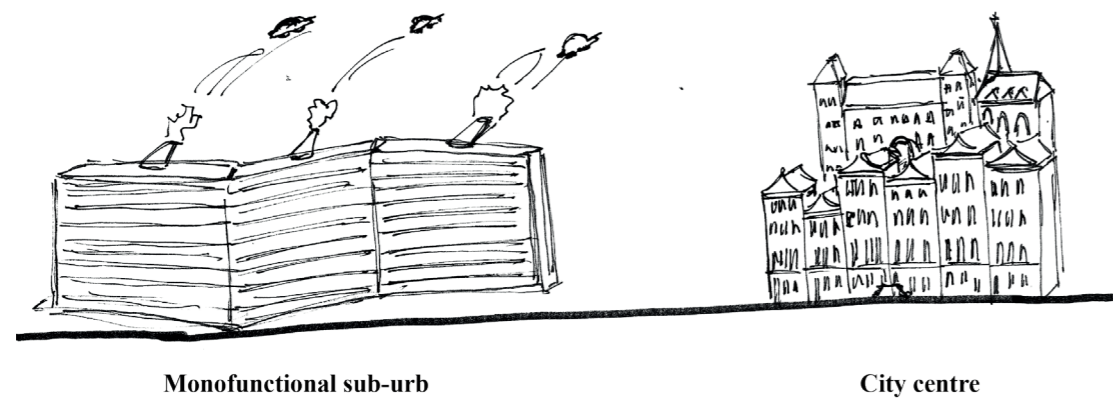


Fig. 3.4C: The monofunctional suburb, Bijlmermeer, mortar firing the city centre of Amsterdam (Author's image)

This modernist extension failed and changed, whilst the traditional city centre and extensions succeeded and remain the same. The city centre received financial support from the Amsterdam Municipality to maintain the status quo of its cultural heritage and monuments (Gemeente Amsterdam, 'Een monument in Amsterdam'). Nevertheless, according to Winterman and Gemeente Amsterdam ('Subsidies stadsdeel Zuidoost'), the financial support that the Bijlmermeer received superseded that many times, as it keeps relapsing into a state where it needs to be revived. This shows that, whereas the city centre is financially supported to maintain its widely appreciated cultural and architectural heritage, the Bijlmermeer needed financial support to simply deal with its unending social issues. Instead of a true city within a city — which provides residential, educational, recreational, and other necessary functions on a human scale within a designated space (Krier, 'The City Within the City'); the Bijlmermeer became a suburb of Amsterdam (see fig. 3.4C).

Monument or monumentality?

In *The Modern Cult of Monuments*, art historian Alois Riegl described two types of monuments: intentional and unintentional. Intentional monuments encompass artificial objects made to commemorate certain deeds or events, or both, for future generations. Whereas unintentional monuments, the more common kind, result not from their creators' will, but the modern perception of such objects — in other words through retrospective cultural memory (21-50).

Comparable to Riegl's line of view was anthropologist Felix Levenson's distinction between 'monuments' and 'structures with monumentality'. Levenson described monumentalization as a process arising from personal experience, or *lieu de mémoire*. Levenson theorised that every object has the potential to be a monument for a hypothetical person, yet it only gains monumentality through the collective acceptance of it as such (22-24). From these views, we may understand that a monument does not always imply monumentality and that the process of its generation will always be a subjective one. Furthermore, we see that even the abstract and subjective monumentality gains a degree of quantifiability, as its effect on people may be observed.

Through this degree of quantifiability, OMA claims that the Bijlmermeer has a monumentality equal to the Stonehenge and the potential of the Amsterdam canal belt (Stichting Bijlmermuseum), which is bizarre. The Bijlmer certainly contributes to the storytelling of the modernist architecture era, especially considering its utopian vision was ultimately a failure. As historian Maarten van Rossem mentions in an interview: *"it took us a hundred years to realise that this movement [modernism] was a dead-end"* (Rossem e.a. 03:43-05:30). It is therefore farfetched to claim that the Bijlmer's monumentality would be equal to the Stonehenge. The latter is a monument that showcases an enduring accomplishment

3. As mentioned in Chapter 3.1, these analytical criticizing points of view on the Bijlmer; lack of interaction between street and building (Jacobs), lack of human scale (Gemeente Amsterdam, 'Jakoba Mulder') and that it is an awful concrete monstrosity (Mingle), are supported by the architects Jane Jacobs, Jakoba Mulder and Aldo van Eyck.

of mankind, while the former represents a failed vision that is favoured by neither the mainstream society nor its own residents.⁴ It is the reason why the city centre of Amsterdam remains highly valued and maintained, whilst Bijlmer's failed modernist utopia was scorned by its contemporary society⁵ and continuously needs to be revived. So, unlike what was argued in the conclusion of chapter 3.1, this shows that the Bijlmer is part of the failed modernist utopian vision, whilst it did not fulfil the needs of the modern society of Amsterdam.

As mentioned earlier, anthropologist Felix Levenson makes a clear distinction between structures with monumentality and monuments (Levenson 26). Whereas his argument signifies that if a monument does not have to be monumental, one needs to ask if something monumental should be a monument. In this case it means that whether the monumentality of the failed modernist architecture and of the monumental values that affect a minor group of people, as mentioned in chapter 3.2 and 3.3, outweighs the lack of appreciation by the majority. Repeating failures and lack of qualities which are found in traditional architecture. Whether it should have monumental value or become monumental, in materialistic terms a monument, thus praising failure like something of an accomplishment.

Conclusion

Although many factors led to the downfall of the Bijlmer, modernist architecture and urban planning lacked the qualities that are found in traditional architecture and urban planning, as demonstrated in the comparison between the city centre of Amsterdam and the Bijlmermeer. These findings led to answering the subquestion: *'How has the failure of the architect's vision affected the monumentality of the Bijlmermeer?'*

The Bijlmermeer is monumental to the extent that its failure reminds us of what the utopian vision of modernist architecture turns into, but not in a materialistic sense that it has to become a monument, as it is not appreciated by the majority of the society. If we had to decide whether something monumental, again if we would compare the city centre of Amsterdam to Bijlmer, has to become a monument, it is certainly not the case for Bijlmermeer. The promises made by the modernist vision, that would make us all happy, turned out to be disappointments. This means that this failure should not be praised like an accomplishment, whereas the monuments of the monumental city centre of Amsterdam do.

4. *Society* referring to the general negative opinion of the time, as evident in the previously mentioned survey result and news article.

5. *ibid.*

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