# Social Engineering of the City and Urban Design

## Ideology as an Achilles Heel

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Essay – January 1, 2008

**Using two urban development plans for a new city grounded on ideological doctrine – one in a totalitarian regime and one in a democratic society – architectural historian Wouter Vanstiphout demonstrates how the identification of urban planning with a political societal system ultimately turns against itself. Urban planners would do better to see the city not as something that can be made out of nothing, but rather as an unruly reality for which they develop instruments so that it can grow in all its complexity and layeredness.**

In the cellar of the *Akademie der Bildende Künste* in Vienna, the same school where both Otto Wagner and Joost Meuwissen taught – and which expelled a young Adolf Hitler twice for his meagre talents at drawing as a student – is the *Anatomie Saal*. Rigid wooden benches stand in a steep gallery arrangement around a platform bearing a blood-encrusted slab of white marble. This is where corpses used to be dissected before an audience of art and architecture students. The dark and stuffy room is now used occasionally as a classroom, mostly by the architecture and urban planning programme of the academy.

It was here that a student, after my lecture was over, asked, 'Are you basically saying then that there is no point in studying architecture, and that we should become politicians or social workers instead?' 'No, no, no, on the contrary, you should . . . etc.,' I hastened to say, worried that I had seriously failed in my duty as a teacher. What had so bewildered this student? My lecture was yet another in a series in which a new-build city of the 1950s and 1960s was looked at, how it had been designed, what had happened to it subsequently, and how people now felt compelled to radically transform it again. The case study this time had been Toulouse – Le Mirail, the famed *Ville Nouvelle* by Candilis, Josic & Woods in the south of France. The student's question as to whether he would not do better to become a social worker or politician had come after a number of examples of how forces that have nothing to do with architecture ultimately turned out to determine the fate of cities like Toulouse Le Mirail.

The design for Toulouse Le Mirail, like other examples from the oeuvre of Candilis, Josic & Woods and that of the other architects who were part of the Team 10 movement of the early 1960s, were embarrassingly familiar to the students, even if many were seeing it for the first time. The organic metaphors, the endless stacks of rectangular units in geometric excrescences that evoke the computer game *Tetris*, the patio patterns, the fantasizing about the residents' individual uses of the space, the floating pedestrian platforms, the collages of abstract architecture with scenes from films and out of lifestyle magazines, and especially the harsh critique of technocratic and rigid building production matched what

they, in 2008, were producing in the studios of the academy, this time with computers. They blanched, like someone who suddenly recognizes himself in the face of a much older person, when they saw how little their idealistic projects differed from those of their forebears, which they had barely researched. When, quoting Karl Marx, I said that everything in history happens twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce, they were not reassured, certainly not when I described the tragedy.

The plan for Toulouse Le Mirail was presented by its architects at the time as a radical break from the technocratic urban design of the 1950s. They were inspired by sociological and psychological studies that demonstrated how soulless life among the tower blocks in a green setting could be, in comparison to that in the old cities. The organic, responsive, complex towers and megastructures that make up Toulouse Le Mirail were to be seen as a radical break from the conventions of the industrialized housing construction of the time. In spite of this break from the *grands ensembles* and *cités* built in the same period, Toulouse Le Mirail suffered exactly the same fate, decades later, as all those soulless blocks in green settings in the periphery of French cities: immigration, unemployment, crime, alienation, frustration, riots. The discontent reached a climax in the early autumn of 2005: Toulouse Le Mirail figured in the top five of the hotbeds, a list compiled by comparing the number of burned-out cars found in the mornings. In this light, the endless series of neo-Team 10 projects being produced by the students did have something of a farce about them.

This is not a plea for more teaching of history, or a lament about the superficiality of today's students. On the contrary, the reaction in the anatomy room indicates that this new generation of architects measures the success of architecture by the degree to which it actually improves society. When this fails, the disappointment is great. It is a symptom that shows that architecture still dreams of the social engineering of society. It still sees a direct and linear connection between the form architecture takes and the form society takes. Just as Candilis, Josic & Woods thought they could create an organic urban society with their organic city form, today's students and architects still think in architectonic terms about society, more than they think in societal terms about their architecture. But the fact that they think about society, and dedicate themselves to it with admirable tenacity, is certain.

The reaction to the story of Toulouse Le Mirail shows that it is difficult, certainly for young architects, to think in strategic and dialectic terms about their work. They generally see architecture as a means of changing society, but at the same time as the physical expression of an already changing society. This ambiguous interpretation of their craft makes them vulnerable to acute episodes of profound disillusion. It is ironic that this pure interpretation of architecture as the expression of the social order that drives the young architect should be shared by the very powers that seem to overrun architecture. It is precisely bureaucrats and technocrats who use the unity of form and content as an argument for generally radical physical interventions of which all sorts of immediate social and economic effects are expected for the residential areas and cities involved.

This architectonic interpretation of society – as a permanent reconstruction in the most literal sense – has placed the architect himself, however, in a generally marginal, dependent and purely servile role. By building a historic-looking city centre, people hope to produce the authenticity of the historic city. By building varied façades in a residential area, people hope, through the same logic, for a diverse and varied local culture. By demolishing the impoverished and monotonous high-rise districts, people hope to resolve the problems that exist there. The old technocrat and the young idealist seem to agree on one principle: architecture = society, society = architecture. The former does not really believe it, as a rule, but uses it as a rhetorical strategy to generate public support in a simple way for his generally clumsy actions; the latter usually genuinely believes it, so that he and his craft sometimes end up in a most peculiar position.

I would like to use two examples to illustrate that this is not limited to the disappointment of the young architect, but instead that the identification of architecture with a particular ideal of society can lead to bizarre situations and unexpected twists. The first in Tehran, the other in Amsterdam.

### Bad Urban Planning is Better than Good Urban Planning

On 1 January 1979, after months of fighting and riots, the Shah of Iran fled to Egypt. On 1 February, Ayatollah Khomeini, the spiritual leader of the rebellion, returned to Tehran after more than a decade in exile and called on the population not to listen to the interim government of Prime Minister Bakhtiar and to accept the Islamic government proclaimed on 11 February as the sole legitimate government. The referendum of 1 April resulted in 98 per cent support for the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, headed by a council of clergymen under Khomeini's leadership. This brought to an end 38 years of rule by Shah Mohammed Pahlavi, to 54 years of rule by the Pahlavi dynasty and – according to the Pahlavis – to more than 2,500 years of uninterrupted monarchy, since the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great in 529 bce.

It also brought an end to the White Revolution, one of the greatest and most comprehensive modernization campaigns ever undertaken. The Shah used his close ties with the usa and the billions of dollars in oil revenues to drag the country into the twentieth century in one fell swoop. Land reform, suffrage for women, literacy, nationalization of water and agricultural land and many other campaigns were encompassed in a 19-point plan that was put into operation at a breakneck pace starting in 1963. Every aspect of the country was considered engineerable, including the pace at which a country develops. The expansion and modernization of the capital was to be the most monumental demonstration of this extreme philosophy of social engineering.

In a country lacking any institutions for master planning, urban design, infrastructure and architecture, drawing up and implementing a master plan for Tehran was an immense undertaking. It resulted in an invasion of consultants, engineers, architects, planners and other professionals, who not only had to create a plan out of nothing, but also build up the organizational infrastructure to carry out this plan. The drawing up of the master plan, which was supposed to take Tehran forward by 25 years, and in the process multiply its area several times over, was entrusted to the Los Angeles-based firm of Victor Gruen, who worked with the Iranian architect Abdol Aziz Farman Farmaian. Gruen, a Viennese Jew, inventor of the shopping mall and designer of dozens of American downtowns, integrated the old Tehran into a hierarchical system of highways, parks and greenbelts, as well as satellite cities each accommodating hundreds of thousands of new inhabitants. The new Tehran, from the regional scale to the scale of the front door, was defined with precise allocations and typologies for each income class. The green valleys that ran down from the Alborz Mountains towards the more densely built areas below were incorporated in the plan, conducting air, greenery and water through the city in the process. The best American and European architects and landscape designers were employed to build new cities, landscape parks, universities, palaces, monuments and hospitals. In addition, a fully elaborated infrastructure was put in place for zoning plans and process management. Foreign consultants were hired to monitor building applications on behalf of the government and fill law books with new regulations. The construction of the city was subjected to a meticulous schedule of phases, with contours that were extended every five years, so that the city would expand outward in an even pattern. The planning horizon was 1991, the year when the new Tehran would reach its maximum extent.

When Ayatollah Khomeini landed at Tehran Airport after more than 14 years in exile, he must not have recognized the city: the framework of highways, the controlled expansion and in particular the huge and hypermodern, fashionable high-rise district of Ekbatan, right by the airport, with its glittering swimming pools among the tower blocs, must have left

him flabbergasted. It was more than astonishment: everything established and left behind by the Shah and the despised Americans was considered repulsive and evil and therefore had to be erased from memory. Sometimes this was done physically, such as with the mausoleums of the Shah's ancestors; sometimes it was done symbolically, by renaming monuments, or by covering the modernist buildings in murals depicting the Ayatollah and later the martyrs of the war with Iraq. But what to do with an entire city, and its attendant master plan, that could be seen, as a whole, as a monument to the hated deposed ruler?

At first the Islamic government did the predictable: it had a new master plan drawn up, one that did reflect the ideas of the Islamic Revolution. This plan, however, was never adopted, firstly because it contained no urban design ideas that could be considered revolutionary, and secondly because there were no resources to implement the plan. The war with Iraq meant there had to be cutbacks; municipal departments had to support themselves, and furthermore one of the promises of the new regime had been that every Iranian should be allowed to build his own house.

This led to a concept that can be called brilliant in its cynicism, or at least postmodern, particularly in the combination of neoliberalism and religious fundamentalism. The Gruen plan, with its regulations worked out down to the most minute detail, and its precise management of open space, building density, separation of functions, greenery, infrastructure and landscape, was thoroughly despised on ideological grounds. In spite of this, or rather because of it, it was decided to maintain the plan. The authorities, however, with the plan in hand, began to sell applicants the right to exceed maximum building densities, to violate the zoning plan, to build in areas designated as parks. The whole infrastructure of regulations, designs and monitoring agencies was in full swing, but as a giant supermarket of exemptions. To reinforce the influx of applicants with deep pockets even further, the city's contours were immediately extended to the final 1991 situation. Tehran's huge population growth did the rest. The master plan played a crucial and indispensable role in creating, in a matter of a few decades, one of the most chaotic, densely built, insalubrious and yet fascinating and spectacular cities in the world. In its spectacular location at the foot of the mountains, with the permanent blanket of smog that hangs over it, it resembles Los Angeles, but without the ocean, without palm trees and with millions of cars immobilized in one of the most chronic traffic jams in the world. The billions generated by cannibalizing the master plan served in part to pay the hundreds of thousands of municipal officials. They also paid for immense prestige projects like the construction of Navab Street and the still-unfinished Imam Khomeini Airport.[1]

If you fly over Tehran with the master plan on your lap, you can still make out, like an archaeologist, the lines and areas of the Gruen plan amid the endless mass of houses. Here and there, moreover, a modernist monument breaks through the chaos, like an abandoned temple in the jungle. This city, in a few years, has managed to do what it took medieval cities hundreds of years: to absorb the original grid in the unplanned chaos. For the ayatollahs of the Islamic Revolution, a hated and bad plan like Gruen's was far more useful and better for their objectives than a so-called 'good' plan that they would have had to implement and pay for. Because the plan aimed to provide the counterform for a society that was the opposite of what the ayatollahs believed in, they could use it not only to generate one of the biggest urban growth spurts the twentieth century had ever seen, but to make a huge amount of money out of it to boot. The degree to which the plan contributed to this is proportional to the degree to which its makers were aiming for precisely the opposite.

## The Best Urban Design Is No Urban Design at All

Tehran after the Islamic Revolution seems far too extreme to be instructive for us in Western Europe; yet the mechanism behind it can be seen in urban projects in our barely expanding democracies as well. The similarity lies in the use, in a negative sense, of the ideological passion that inspired the project of the previous generation, and in the sometimes violent dismissal of the whole discipline of urban design in the process of realizing the most recent type of social engineering.

We can find an interesting example of this in the Bijlmermeer. This satellite suburb of Amsterdam was built in the 1960s and inspired by an ideological urgency rare for the Netherlands. The Urban Development department was keen to show that, after the seventeenth-century ring of canals, Berlage's Plan Zuid in the early twentieth century and Van Eesteren's General Expansion Plan in the 1930s, it too was capable of making another giant stride forward. In addition, there were the actions of a very principled alderman, named Joop den Uyl, who felt the plan had to be implemented as an essential and therefore uncompromising statement about new collective housing – no hybrid forms of high-rise and low-rise buildings, in other words. The Bijlmermeer was therefore built as an ideological statement about how people should be housed. Unprecedented quantities of square metres of housing space, greenery, collective facilities, accessibility by car and public transport, would be available to everyone. People would be able to live together in high densities and establish a new collectivity in the common spaces and routes where they would encounter one another. The plan for the Bijlmer was influenced on the one hand by East German and Russian urban planning manuals, and on the other by Toulouse Le Mirail, and of course by the great fountainhead: Le Corbusier's *La Ville Radieuse*.

In part because of the delayed demolition of the Nieuwmarkt area and therefore the delayed influx of Amsterdam residents, because of the construction of Almere, because of Surinam's independence and because of immigration in general, the Bijlmer, instead of a hypermodern residential district for Amsterdam's white middle-class families, became 'the Netherlands' first Third-World City'. Instead of an unilaterally built statement about modern living, it became a fascinating amalgam of Caribbean and African communities, with hard cores of white believers, who all used the Bijlmer in all of sorts of ways its planners had never foreseen.

When the Bijlmer evolved in this way over several generations, the planners decreed that the 'experiment' had failed and that it was time to tear it down. Precisely when the Bijlmer was just getting somewhere. The many housing corporations that owned the Bijlmer high-rises had been privatized in the late 1980s, and they began to merge until in reality a single housing corporation owned the whole of the Bijlmer. It took the demolition of the Bijlmer high-rises and their replacement by single-family homes and market-dictated apartment buildings firmly in hand. [2]

Whereas the original urban development department, under the direction of head designer Siegfried Nassuth, and supported by Alderman Den Uyl, succeeded in exercising total control over the design of the Bijlmer, and was even able to go quite far in keeping to the concept during its implementation, there were two other levels over which they had far less control. Firstly, groups of Amsterdam middle-class families – for the reasons summarized above – did not snap up the flats in sufficient numbers, and entirely different people came in their place. Secondly, the urban development department had little influence over other departments, such as public housing, traffic and transport, economic affairs, so that many elements fell through the cracks of the plan and in general were either not implemented or implemented in a totally different way, such as the collective spaces and the parking garages. [3]

Things were very different for the housing corporations 30 years later. Because of their mergers and because of the fact that with the idea of demolition they presented the city authorities with a *fait accompli*, which the city, it must be said, quickly supported, there was far greater control over all aspects of the immense operation to wipe out the Bijlmer in favour of a more up-to-date city district. This time the corporations also had control over the influx and outflow of residents. More to the point, this was not simply a condition for the success of the operation, it was the objective of the operation. In addition, housing corporations are increasingly taking over the responsibilities of public housing. They build schools, they take part in the development of neighbourhood shopping centres, they have more and more influence on the organization and use of public space, they participate in job-creation programmes, they work with mosques and churches, they even build mosques and churches, they invest huge sums in information, identity campaigns and branding projects, under the label of reputation management. All of this is called the integral project, whereby there is a conscious affirmation that restructuring is primarily a socioeconomic project, in which the physical aspect is merely a means to an end. In addition, an elaborate arsenal of resources is applied to create a harmonious, socioeconomically profitable, ethnically varied but not excessively diverse residential area, with heavy emphasis on social cohesion, participation, integration and emancipation. Seldom has the apparatus for realizing a socially engineered society been so elaborate and been applied in such self-evident fashion. 'We touch your life in every way' is the terrifying slogan of the development agency of the Indian capital of Delhi; it would be better suited to the housing corporations that carried out the restructuring of the post-Second World War residential areas of major Dutch cities.

The regeneration of the Bijlmer was first and last an intervention in the demographic structure of the Bijlmer, whereby the physical interventions were merely an instrument. By demolishing the high-rises that housed concentrations of Ghanaians, Sierra Leoneans, Surinamese, Vietnamese, etcetera, where illegal and legal residents lived side by side, where there were significant levels of crime and little employment, a new socioeconomic reality could be established at the local level in a very short time. By subsequently allocating the new dwellings to those residents of the Bijlmer who did pay their rent and met all manner of requirements, and by putting the rest of the dwellings, in a sophisticated way, onto the high-pressure Amsterdam housing market, it was possible to construct, with great precision, a community that was radically different from that which originally existed, but which retained enough elements to be understood as a renewed and improved version of the old Bijlmer. This is social engineering on a massive scale, integrally implemented and, according to the criteria its planners had themselves set, extremely successful. Moreover, it is a form of social engineering that penetrates further into the personal living sphere of its residents and in the demographic composition of society than was possible in the time of Nassuth and Den Uyl.

Urban design played an important role in this massive and heavily ideologically charged intervention – by its absence. In the first phase of the regeneration, the sectional plans were still bound together by a largely metaphorical master plan by Ashok Bhalotra, who represented the multi-ethnicity of the Bijlmer, now acceptable only as a simulacrum, with his street for a thousand cultures. [4] Ultimately this planning perspective vanished from the regeneration, even from its representation. The housing corporations and the urban development department declared large-scale master plans relicts of a bygone era, when people still thought society could be socially engineered. It was asserted that we now live in an era of individualization, and that the city must therefore develop organically. The organic growth of the Bijlmer became the urban design statement that had to eclipse the statement of the satellite city of the future, or that derived its very power from its rhetorical contrast with the unity of form of the old Bijlmer. [5]

In the process, the Bijlmermeer is now being covered in buildings without a master plan, as a collage of sectional plans drawn up by developers and corporations, resulting in a generic

structure of low-rise neighbourhoods, depressing avenues of brick apartment buildings, shopping centres, and on the other side of the railroad tracks an office park deserted at night and on the weekends. It is precisely in the absence of urban design intention, in the automatism of its urban growth, in the banality and entropy of its results, that we can recognize the organic growth of the Bijlmer. This even goes so far that one of the project managers of the Bijlmer regeneration, Willem Kwekkeboom, in an essay about it, cheerfully relates how an architect was commissioned to design buildings that were supposed to effect the transition in scale from the new low-rise structures and the old high-rises, but that it was ultimately decided to tear down the high-rises, with as a result an unpredictable and incomprehensible ensemble of medium-rise tower blocks between two low-rise developments. This, according to Kwekkeboom, in fact shows how diverse and adventuresome the organic growth of a city can be. The dysfunction of the most elementary urban planning control is seen as evidence of how up-to-date the project is.[6]

The sweeping and intricate social engineering applied to the socioeconomic structure of the Bijlmermeer has been given a spatial counterform that is intended to express its very opposite: organic growth and bottom-up transformation. The absence of urban design camouflages the excessive presence of the corporations in the development of this area; the lack of spatial control is a smokescreen for the excess in socioeconomic control. The intelligent thing about this lies in the fact that it was clearly realized that the discipline of urbanism was not capable of presenting a convincing picture of organic growth, not even Ashok Bhalotra, but that the elimination of urban design control and the deliberate admission of generic, chaotic process do lead to the desired result.

### Achilles' Heel

The examples from Tehran, the Bijlmermeer and even Toulouse have in common that the profound identification of an urban planning project with a particular societal ideal or system ultimately turned against the completed projects themselves. This took place in the most perverse way in Tehran, by using the political untouchability of the plan to allow its cannibalization and to let the city expand with the greatest possible speed. With the Bijlmer and Toulouse Le Mirail, however, this took place in a much more refined way. There, with an appeal to the historical and cultural significance of the original project, an architectonic scapegoat for socioeconomic problems was found, thereby providing an immediate political spin to a radical intervention in the areas themselves, instead of revealing it as a coup by the corporations themselves, an imaginary liberation from a caricature of 1960s planning. In all three cases, the greatest power of these projects, their ideological energy, proved to be their Achilles' heel. But in all three cases, the city itself was also the real victim in this immolation of urbanist utopias.

In the case of Tehran we can only guess how the Gruen plan would have ultimately turned out, if it had been absorbed step by step over decades by Iranian urban life, which could have manifested itself in a variegated patchwork of dense and open, green and urban, park-like and commercial elements, in all sorts of ways. In Toulouse Le Mirail and the Bijlmermeer, however, it was evident that the so-called failures of the original concept – because entirely different people from those it was built for came to live there, who then used the complex in an entirely different way as well – had resulted in something that was far more layered, more complex, more organic and more flexible than in their wildest dreams, and also than what those in charge of their restructuring now say they want to create. And it is precisely this that is now being implacably demolished.

The problem of the new social engineering we find in urban regeneration and restructuring areas in Europe and in the Netherlands in particular, is that it is so unspoken and euphemistic, and yet so powerful, paternalistic and unavoidable. Because this new social engineering can no longer be expressed in unilateral and recognizable urban planning

models, it is now difficult to criticize. In this far-reaching postmodern phase of the urban project, in which social engineering is disguised in a cloak of 'unengineerability', and the absence of the urban design has taken over the role of the urban design, and private enterprises increasingly take on public roles, the reality of the contemporary city is steadily being relegated to the background.

If we reason from the very limited perspective of architecture and urbanism, it is imperative that these disciplines no longer be used as symbols, models or icons of a particular societal system or ideology. In most cases, after all, this will only end up turning on the projects themselves after a couple of generations. But most of all it means that architects are confusing the shaping of new icons for one political ideal or the other ('Creative City', 'Gem Area', 'Organic City', 'Sustainability') with the actual realization of a societal effect. If we defined social engineering as 'realizability', architects could then apply their inventiveness and tenacity and idealism to the development of instruments that, based on a very specific professionalism, can resolve particular problems and demonstrate new possibilities that no one else could have come up with. This would also mean that they would not see society as 'engineerable', in the sense of 'constructable', but would accept that it is an unruly reality, far more complex than anything socially engineered could ever be. The role of architects could be to supply this unengineerable palimpsest with new elements, impulses, lines and places, and thereby make it even more complex, better and richer.

But we must also resist the temptation to immediately formulate an optimistic new perspective. Perhaps the confusion that so easily arises in the minds of architecture students is the best the current design world as a whole could achieve. An openly acknowledged identity crisis, precipitated by three or four decades of ever more rapid cycles of societal embrace and rejection might perhaps lead at last to a reconsideration of what architecture and urbanism themselves want of society. With this article, I hope to have made a modest contribution to this.

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## Footnotes

1. See Ali Madanipour, *Tehran, The Making of a Metropolis* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1998); Soheila Shahshahani, 'Tehran: Paradox City', *IIAS Newsletter* #31, July 2003, 15; Wouter Vanstiphout, 'Teherans "Lost Civilization"', in: *Stadtbauwelt* (2005), 36, 2005, 76-81.
2. 'De Nieuwe Bijlmermeer', *Archis* (1997), no. 3, 8-84.
3. Wouter Bolte and Johan Meijer, *Van Berlage tot Bijlmer, Architektuur en stedelijke politiek* (Nijmegen: Socialistische Uitgeverij Nijmegen, 1981), 192-391.
4. Marieke van Giersbergen, 'Afscheid van een utopie, interview met Ashok Bhalotra', *Archis* (1997), no. 3, 43-45.
5. Anne Luijten, 'Een modern sprookje, de Bijlmer in verandering', in: Dorine van Hoogstraten and Allard Jolles (eds.), *Amsterdam ZO, Centrumgebied Zuidoost en stedelijke vernieuwing Bijlmermeer 1992 – 2010* (Bussum: Uitgeverij Thoth, 2002), 7-25.
6. Willem Kwekkeboom, 'De vernieuwing van de Bijlmermeer 1992 – 2002, Ruimelijk en sociaal', in: Van Hoogstraten and Jolles, ibid., 7-25.

## Tags

Architecture, Urban Space, Design

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