

Amsterdam and its puffballs

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More than 20 years ago, I took a stroll through Amsterdam Zuidoost, an Amsterdam expansion from the 1960s and 70s. I was in that neighbourhood with several highly-ranked officials from the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, and we came across a giant wild mushroom in the grass. As a wild mushroom aficionado, I recognised the rare “Giant Puffball” (*Langermannia gigantea*), a delicious species from the Lycoperdaceae family. My mouth started watering, so I picked that wild mushroom and carried it with me throughout the rest of the tour; I ate it that evening with savoury delight. A taste of nature from your own home town.

When I read Lars Lerup’s article on Houston and its suburbs, it made me think back on that incident. Mr. Lerup compares suburbs to honey fungus, or *Armillaria* root rot. This mushroom – edible, but best preserved in vinegar first – is a ubiquitous organism that pops up all over the place. Moreover, *Armillaria* is a parasite that can sometimes causes serious damage to forests. Not a particularly cheerful comparison.

Mr. Lerup isn’t too happy about suburbs in general. In his article, he describes suburban Houston as a city that has eaten up nature one little bite at a time. In his eyes, the power that developers and investors have over urban development is responsible for the gradual destruction of an age-old landscape and ecosystem. A morphology was created of “solitary buildings embedded in more or less artificial planes, occasionally erupting into megashapes.”

Amsterdam does not have such transitional zones at the city’s edge. In contrast to the periphery of most metropolises, where density drops off sharply and the urban environment slowly fades away, there is an abrupt separation between city and nature in Amsterdam. You can walk right out

of a densely built-up area and into the pastures. The real suburbs are in concentrated areas some distance away from the city, in impoldered “old ecosystems” like the Haarlemmermeer and Flevoland.

Mr. Lerup argues on behalf of more central urban direction in suburban Houston. In his view, developers and their private, short-term interests have such a stranglehold on urban development that unbridled suburbanisation and the accompanying destruction of important ecosystems are inevitable. In The Netherlands, the government has always had a firm grip on the reins of urbanisation. Consequently, suburbanisation in the increasingly regional housing market of Amsterdam was a controlled process, toward planned and developed growth centres at some distance from the city. These growth centres have always been independently operating municipalities, making their own unique choices on property development policy.

The city of Amsterdam maintains firm control of urban development. Within the boundaries of its own municipality, Amsterdam owns more than 80% of the land itself. Moreover, the leasehold system means that the land will remain city property. The land ownership offers the city tools for both financing and control.

It offers tools for financing because the proceeds from land can be used to realise projects. Moreover, if a ground rent is reviewed or there is a zoning change, the community profits from the increasing value of the land, bringing in money for new urban development.

In addition, the system gives the city the necessary tools for control, because land ownership gives a city optimal say when developing an area. The city can prevent speculative development, because zoning changes automatically affect the land price, and therefore also the ground rent. The leasehold system also offers options for supplementing incomplete or absent statutory

legislation: additional provisions can be incorporated in the leasehold contract, naturally without going against public law. Finally, it is easier to terminate a ground lease than to go through a complete expropriation procedure, which is useful in many cases of area development.

Amsterdam accordingly chooses to build within the existing city. Intensification and increased density, rather than expanding out into the pastures, which are in any case no longer so well-represented within Amsterdam's own boundaries. To achieve these goals, former industrial and port complexes are being converted into residential neighbourhoods and mixed residential and business districts. A complex operation at the edges of the city involves refurbishing the deteriorating post-war residential neighbourhoods. These areas, which tend to lack diversity both socially and physically, have declined in the past decades, and the city is putting major investments into grand restructuring projects.

The only urban expansion that did not take place in an existing urban area is the costly development of the new city district on IJburg, "conquered" from the water. However, this development would be difficult to characterise as a cheap urban expansion into pastureland.

This choice to intensify, modernise and maintain the old city, although it may be very expensive in the short term, offers many more benefits in the longer term. It deals with the deterioration of city districts, prevents additional problems relating to mobility and the environment, and preserves the "open green spaces" in the surrounding area. Such open green spaces in close proximity are becoming increasingly important to the people of the city.

This gives Amsterdam residents twice the fun: they live in a differentiated, compact, diverse and dynamic city that has a great deal to offer them, and

they can benefit from the varied and open outskirts in immediate proximity to the city.

Mr. Lerup's Armillaria root rot has not yet been seen nibbling at the Amsterdam city limits. We prefer the Giant Puffballs here: tasty pearls that enrich the existing city.