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The Bijlmer: a Dutch Approach to Multiculturalism

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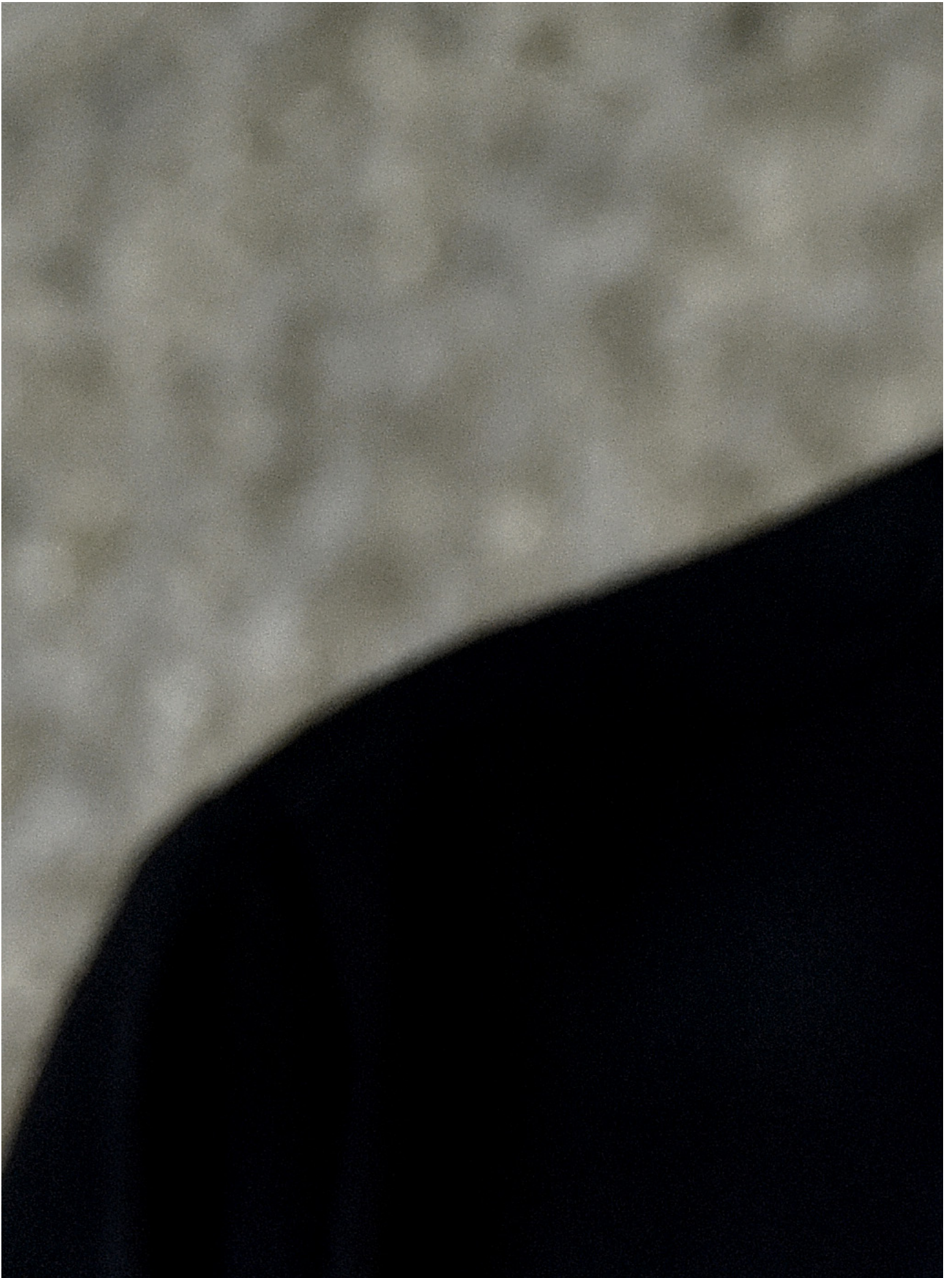
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## Article

When the sun is out, you can feel the energy in the air. The atmosphere on the Bijlmer streets is palpably different than the atmosphere in the city centre of Amsterdam. Walking around, you encounter different faces, hear different accents and smell different flavors. The shops sell products foreign to the Dutch, and at the market you can find vegetables, fruits and fish from all over the world.

Welcome to the Bijlmermeer, 'Bijlmer' for short or 'the Bimmer' for those in the know. This Amsterdam borough used to be synonymous with crime, drugs, unemployment and illegal immigrants. Many Dutch agreed that the Bijlmer was the first and only Dutch ghetto, the worst reputation a neighborhood can earn in Holland. The current chief of police of the Bijlmer district, Ad Smit, even went as far as calling the Bijlmer a "national disaster area."

Today it is better described as a quickly developing area where a vibrant multicultural community is shaping itself. How did this district change so much? Why were so many high-rise flats being torn down to build new houses? We went to the Bijlmer to find out who lives there now, what has happened to them and what they think of the new Bijlmer.

## History of the Bijlmer

After World War II, there was a great housing shortage in Amsterdam. Although expansion to the west and north was already foreseen in 1935, this did not solve the housing need. In 1966, when Amsterdam annexed the Bijlmerpolder in the southeast of the city, plans were developed to create a new city district which would house 100.000 citizens by the year 2000.

The Bijlmer was envisioned as a modern, functional, 'radiant city' for 'the new man.' Based on the concepts of Swiss architect Le Corbusier about urban design attuned to modernity and living conditions in crowded cities, the Bijlmer was meant to be a utopia that separated living, work, recreation and transport. It was a unique experiment of urban planning in the Netherlands, and according to Dave Wendt of the Architecture Centre of Amsterdam (ARCAM), when the project scale and the extent of innovations are considered, it is the only undertaking of this type in the world.

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The Bijlmer epitomized the futuristic lifestyle for the Dutch middleclass family, at least in the early 1960s.

The original design of the Bijlmer was characterized by large high-rise housing blocks with spacious, bright apartments. Motorised traffic was elevated above the living area, parking space was minimised by multi-story garages, and there were different roads for bikes and pedestrians. In this way, buildings were separated only by large green spaces; free from noise pollution, distraction and the dangers posed by motorised traffic, the green could at any moment become a playground or a space for leisure or recreation. Overall, living in Bijlmer would be far more comfortable than Amsterdam's city centre. With ten-story flats, traffic on elevated roads, nightingales in the trees and children playing in the green, the Bijlmer epitomized the futuristic lifestyle for the Dutch middleclass family, at least in the early 1960s.

## What went wrong?

Soon after the 1968 completion of the first flat in Bijlmermeer, the developers and the city authorities faced a surprise. Although the first residents were fairly enthusiastic, heavy criticism of the architecture as massive and monotone emerged before the construction was completed. People did not wish to move in as expected. Dave Wendt explains why: "Although the concept of futuristic living, as was envisioned in the design of the Bijlmer, was created in the early 1960s, by the



end of the 1960s the demand for housing indicated popular preference for smaller scale housing projects and less uniform neighbourhoods. The taste of the Dutch middleclass, for which the Bijlmer was developed, had completely turned around. The Dutch preferred the affordable houses built in the neighbouring cities of Almere, Lelystad and Purmerend, where one could easily find a house suited for a family, with a garden in the front and in the back of the house. With higher rents the Bijlmer was considered too expensive for what it had to offer. Instead of attracting middleclass families the Bijlmer carried certain appeal for single person households."

When the majority of the flats were finished in the early 1970s, building blocks remained almost empty. As a result, rent prices dropped and the Bijlmer started to attract the underprivileged, particularly large numbers of immigrants from Suriname, which became independent in 1975. The Dutch government placed these immigrants in the now-affordable social housing in the Bijlmermeer.

By the end of the 1980s the Bijlmer had the distinct profile of a poor black neighbourhood. Around 50 percent of Bijlmer residents were unemployed, relying on social benefits and the informal economy to make a living. The Bijlmer was far from the 'functional and radiant' city it was planned to be.

However modern the design of the urban area had been at its inception, the unforeseen social effects created very modern problems. Not only did the innovative elements of the original plan fail to meet needs and tastes of the residents, but they were also identified as a source of inadequate social control.

The Bijlmer ultimately felt huge and impersonal. The galleries of the high-rise flats seemed endless, the single entrances to the flats forced people to access the flats through one door. The flats' ground floor consisted only of storage space, preventing oversight of what was happening outside of the flats. The surrounding nature, meant to characterize the surroundings of an English landscape, contributed to the impersonal atmosphere and gave the whole environment a desolate and eerie touch.

In many ways the Bijlmer residents were socially excluded. For almost ten years the area was weakly connected to the rest of the Amsterdam municipality. Not until 1977 did the metro connect the Bijlmer with the centre of Amsterdam. Poor public transportation infrastructure in a remote neighbourhood translated into barriers to employment, education, social and cultural activities. The Bijlmer became an island outside of Amsterdam, with soaring crime rates, drug abuse and unemployment. Conditions were ripe for poverty and social exclusion to take root in this distinctly non-white neighbourhood.

The Bijlmer gained a negative reputation nationally. No longer applauded for its innovative character, criticism centered on the relationship of the district's spatial structure to the insecurity, vandalism and criminality of the community. Living in the Bijlmer became unfashionable and unadvisable. In the early 1990s, people with jobs and the means to move out increasingly did so, leaving behind apartments that were in turn occupied by dependants on social benefits.

But what would have happened to the Bijlmer if it had not been populated by ethnic minorities? According to Silvan Boer, architect and ex staff member of the project agency Renewing Bijlmermeer, the Bijlmer, like Buitenveldert and Amstelveen, would probably have become a suburb populated by the elderly, white middle-class. Silvan Boer states that "the physical environment of the Bijlmer changed drastically with the inflow of minorities."

## A Policy for Bijlmer Renewal

It was not until the 1990s that the Amsterdam municipality recognized the Bijlmer's rapid deterioration and decided to take action. Although the south east district, where Bijlmer belongs, came up with different approaches to improve the living conditions in the Bijlmer, none of them worked. A new tactic was needed.

"The Bijlmer is now a great place to live. The houses are nice and safe. The renewal of the Bijlmer has worked out perfectly"

In 1992 the municipality of Amsterdam, the city council of South East and the social housing corporations decided for a large scale renewing operation of the Bijlmer area. This plan combined renewal of the physical environment, socio-economic renewal and renewal of the administration of the area. Most crucial in this plan was the decision to depart from the ideal of the functional city and rather to reunite living, working, traffic and recreation. The new plan focused not only on the dissolution of the physical borderline but also on the divide created by the socio-economic bordering. Vanguard in this plan were raising the level of education (for instance through free Dutch language courses available for Bijlmer residents) and creating employment.

Gitty Amprimposh, a Ghanaian woman who has been living in the Bijlmer since 1989, sees the project as a success: "The Bijlmer is now a great place to live. The houses are nice and safe. The renewal of the Bijlmer has worked out perfectly: the criminality level has dropped and I feel secure walking around. The renovation of the flats has worked out, because the ones that have been torn down are replaced by low-rise family houses with more privacy. Although I had to relocate, this went all very smoothly. I could choose the place where I wanted to live and even received a relocation fee from the social housing corporation. It has become a successful neighbourhood!"

## Creating a New Bijlmer

According to Irene Ponec, project developer with the Ymere social housing corporation, the redevelopment of the Bijlmer aims to create an inclusive neighborhood in which opportunities are distributed through a focus on the Bijlmer's (black) middle class. Despite the middle class desire to stay in the Bijlmer, they are currently threatening to leave because, according to Ponec, "there are not enough facilities catering to them. These people should be able to choose, but right now have nothing to choose from. Housing, work and recreation are absent." However, the presence of the middle class links the poor and rich and is highly important for the social structure of the Bijlmer. "The middle class takes care of the rest of the community. They are independent but also stand up for the lower-class, which is elevated by the middle class. Therefore, Ymere aims to keep the middle class in the Bijlmer."

This is one contributing factor to the 1995 decision to clear the high-rise flats and build in their place low-rise family houses. The main incentive to start demolition was economic. Dave Wendt of ARCAM explains: "The empty apartments in the Bijlmer created a huge loss of income, which formed a strong economic incentive for remodeling the Bijlmer. But although it is tempting to believe that the new Bijlmer is being remodeled out of profit for the project developers, one must take into that several attempts were made to get the Bijlmer going before it was decided to start demolishing. However, none of these attempts worked."

Pierre Heijboer, a renowned journalist for the Dutch daily newspaper De Volkskrant, who has lived in the Bijlmer since 1966, paints a different picture: "The restructuring of the Bijlmer through the demolition of high-rise flats posed a lot of problems during 1995 to 1997. There was a vehement battle between residents that did not want to leave their apartments, and social housing corporations that wanted to tear down the flats they lived in. Some of these people got the notice that they had to leave a month in advance; others were forced to leave by order of the court after vehement judicial battles."

According to Heijboer, the social housing corporations acted in an "extremely rude and un-Christian way." The inhabitants of the flats scheduled for demolition were "kicked out of their apartments" because, as the director of one of the social housing corporations stated according to Heijboer, "they were too poor, too black and too criminal." Even though renters are protected by the Dutch law, these people received no judicial protection and no relocation fee. As this made relocation in the Bijlmer too expensive for them, many were forced to move to other parts of the province of North Holland (of which Amsterdam is part).

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Poor public transportation infrastructure in a remote neighbourhood translated into barriers to employment, education, social and cultural activities.

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Heijboer states that this happened because project developers had special plans for the Bijlmer. “The interest of the Dutch government was with the project developers, who wanted to tear down the empty, non profitable high-rise flats and replace them with low-rise family houses.” These project developers are financed by Dutch pension funds, which “have access to huge amounts of money and are always looking for large scale investments. And the real estate sector is known for its high return on investments.”

But instead of removing the “rotting parts” of the Bijlmer, the flats in the non-problematic areas were torn down first, in order to build new houses on the spots with no negative image. Heijboer chides: “Building new houses on the rotten spots will not result in new inhabitants, because the negative association with that spot will still be there. In this case, the project developers decide what will happen, for the government cannot solve such a problem since it does not have the funds.”

## Making the Bijlmer Hip and Happening

It cannot be denied that the image of the Bijlmer is undergoing some serious re-tooling. Step into the Information Centre of the brand new office building of the City District South-East Amsterdam, and you are overloaded with positive images, posters and flyers all stating how cool and hip it is to live in the Bijlmer.

Two-thirds of the people who have to move out of their house want to come back to the Bijlmer – a lot of people feel at home in this area.

In the new Bijlmer a “consumer oriented personal environment” is carefully being created, as Dave Wendt of ARCAM explains. After doing extensive research on what the Bijlmer inhabitant wants, the image of the Bijlmer is completely re-oriented to the wants and needs of the future Bijlmer inhabitants, thereby also positively influencing the image of the Bijlmer resident. The Bijlmer is focussing on smaller community life, which is the core quality of the district, as discovered by project developers after doing intensive market research. Joop de Haan, director of the Project bureau Renewing Bijlmermeer: “The aim of the reconstruction is to make ‘living careers’ possible for lower-income, middle-income and in the end even higher-income groups within the Bijlmer. South East is becoming an attractive city district, part of Amsterdam but with its own distinct characteristics.”

The big high-rise flats are either fully demolished and turned into family houses, or partly demolished and renovated. The people living in these demolished apartments are temporarily housed in other parts of the city and have the first pick when the new houses are ready. Joop de Haan explains that two-thirds of the people who have to move out of their house want to come back to the Bijlmer – a lot of people feel at home in this area. Some of them move into the renovated flats, some of them move into the newly built houses in the former high-rise areas, others move to houses in the surrounding areas of Holendrecht, Gein and Venserpolder. Among these people there are very little high-incomes.

The other focus of the urban renewal of the Bijlmer is to create more jobs and raise the employment possibilities within the Bijlmer. Also, the need for more social facilities and activities is recognized. Through subsidizing local entrepreneurship, the Bijlmer receives an economic revitalization. Also, project developers argue that building more houses for sale contributes to the diversification of the Bijlmer district and keeps the middle class from moving out of the Bijlmer to other surrounding areas. Up until now the project developers seem to be right: consumers seem to prefer a living environment catered to their wishes above a utopian community. The urban renewing of the Bijlmer has resulted in an outflow of poorer Surinamese and African residents and the inflow of the 2nd generation of Surinamese and Ghanese people. With these successful people moving in a new black middle class has risen, which has worked itself upwards.

## The Bijlmer Community – Human Rights Dimension of Rebuilding

Currently the Bijlmer hosts more than 130 different nationalities. This information in itself is impressive but the multiculturalism of the Bijlmer can be appreciated a lot more after chatting with people on the street who invariably point out the Bijlmer is their home.

But how does Bijlmer successfully accommodate all these cultures, or how is multiculturalism lived in Bijlmer? For most of its inhabitants it means living next to each other and being cordial to the neighbours but not entering their homes to share a cup of tea. Occasional communication between building residents of different origin is limited to saying hello because the neighbour does not speak Dutch, or as is the case in one of the flats marked for demolition in the Florijn neighbourhood of the Bijlmer district, it is not customary to greet each other because it is “too crowded,” according to local resident Mitchell.

It doesn’t take long to notice that there is local pride in living in a neighbourhood where “there are people from all over the world.”

Is it then at all possible to speak of the Bijlmer as a community? Yes. The community aspect is found in the common appreciation of life in the Bijlmer as it is. It doesn’t take long to notice that there is local pride in living in a neighbourhood where “there are people from all over the world.” And when the word “tolerance” is pronounced as an unquestioned virtue, it all appears very Dutch.

## Cashing in on Multiculturalism and the Second Chance

But as the renewal of the Bijlmer enters a final stage, local authorities wish to see the cultural exchange reach a higher level or, as cynics might see it, to cash in on multiculturalism through clever property marketing. Either way, the Bijlmer is reinventing its image.

A film about the renewal of the Bijlmer, readily played for anyone who walks into the Information Centre of the City District South-East Amsterdam is a good illustration. The film presents a dynamic multicultural community, where different traditions are celebrated in a number of festivals such as the Gospel festival, the Black Magic Women festival or the Kwakoe Festival, which is “one of the largest cultural festivals in Europe.”

The suburb that that grew out of a visionary urban undertaking, with the signatures of renowned architects, failed to impose the intended lifestyle on the community.

If the future of Bijlmer is to become the second center of Amsterdam—as stated in the film—it is not yet realized. For the moment, someone moving in to Bijlmer for the cultural life shown in the film may be let down. The liveliest areas of the Bijlmer today are the streets where people move about their daily business and shop. An outside visitor cannot easily find living public space. There are no squares and parks that are commonly recognized as locations to relax, “hang out” or protest. Cafés, bars and restaurants are not remotely comparable to the variety that the city center has to offer in spite of the cultural diversity of the Bijlmer and there are hardly any posters on the walls to inform residents of cultural event. Seeing Bijlmer as “the capital of art and culture” today seems more than just slightly a wishful exaggeration. Nonetheless, the film fits the genuine enthusiasm that is part of Bijlmer today. The enthusiasm is not about praying or eating together with fellow members of Bijlmer community of different ethnicities, but rather a sense of excitement about the process in which everyone is moving to nicer homes. For example, take the reaction of the people living in one of the high-rise flats in the

Bijlmer area Florijn, next in line for destruction, to the fact they are forced to move out from the apartments that were their homes for many years. Twenty-four year old Mitchell says: “Old people find it difficult, but for young people it is an adventure. For me it is an adventure.”

Without exception the people interviewed for purpose of this paper wanted the foreigner asking about how the rebuilding is affecting their lives to understand that the Bijlmer is not a “ghetto.” Perhaps the best way to comprehend how the physical landscape of the old Bijlmer affected community life is revealed in a fact that shuffling people about from still functional large apartments to temporary homes and again to new buildings is by many Bijlmer resident appreciated as an adventure.

In a way, the entire undertaking is about Amsterdam making peace with its part that did not turn out the way it was supposed to. The suburb that that grew out of a visionary urban undertaking, with the signatures of renowned architects, failed to impose the intended lifestyle on the community. After a decade of tolerating the



slow social deterioration, the city investment has made tremendous investment to provide the residents of Bijlmer the opportunity to live in a place that they like. In turn the city of Amsterdam is getting a second chance to reclaiming Bijlmer as its integral part with a multicultural face.

In the next ten years the Bijlmer will probably become the next hip area of Amsterdam, where the yuppies buy apartments because of the 'characteristic multicultural atmosphere'. Multiculturalism sells. Just ask entrepreneur Jan, who decided to cater to the wishes of the different ethnic population of the Bijlmer by selling tropical fish next to traditional Dutch fish. His profits doubled. Combined with the entrepreneurial mentality, multiculturalism has become a Dutch treat.

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