



### From Wasteland to a Compact Urban Environment: Amsterdam's Eastern Harbour Waterfront

This beautiful volume offers a comprehensive presentation of the process and outcomes of urban transformations in Amsterdam's Eastern Harbour areas. As a major stage in the redevelopment of the former production and storage sites on the northern edge of the historical urban fabric of Amsterdam along the river IJ, and as a paradigmatic case of urban waterfront redevelopment, the Oostelijke

IJ-evers have been the object of attention of the architectural world since the very beginning. Many of the architectures that compose this urban environment have gained a life of their own in the architectural press – like Hans Kollhoff's soberly poetic brick block, Frits van Dongen's "walfish," or Sjoerd Soeters' scheme for Java Island. However, the book *Eastern Harbour District Amsterdam: Urbanism and Architecture* is certainly the best and most complete single work presenting the whole of the interventions that have been recently completed in this part of the city. The volume devotes much attention in particular to the originality of the urban design concept. The multiplicity of morphological and typological solutions at the micro-scale – with plenty of architectural interpretations of the waterfront situation and to the "island" character of the neighbourhoods – contributes to a highly varied, architecturally rich and experimental environment at the scale of the urban sector, while unified by the clear will to realize a high and typically "urban" density and compactness.

The extensive and broadly detailed documentation of plans and realizations – in which full colour photographs prevail – is accordingly the most attractive asset of the volume. This is not to say that the written contributions are negligible. Besides the information they offer about the planning process and the urban design conceptions adopted, the essays – almost all written by architectural critics and historians – highlight the change in urban lifestyles associated with the creation of these new urban landscape. An appendix with interviews with inhabitants offers interesting insights in this new population of urbanites.

The volume is realized in collaboration with the planning department of the City of Amsterdam and carries inevitably – as in most cases like this – a flavour of public-relations strategy attached to it. All in all, the book appears in fact as a celebration of this epochal stage in a process of "socially cautious gentrification" of large parts of the city that is so typical of Amsterdam. It is less strong, conversely, in critically putting it in context. Developments like those along the IJ waterfronts – like the new residential neighbourhood being realized on the island of IJburg, the redevelopment of the central and western harbour areas, and that of the waterfront of Amster-

dam North – are better understood on the background of Amsterdam's recent housing policy and of its role in the city's development strategy. They in fact represent important urban pieces in a strategy aiming at strengthening the city's attractiveness by raising the city's stock of private property housing – historically largely below the national average – to at least 35%, in particular, by increasing the offer of new attractive high quality middle-class housing. This policy – introduced by the retreat of the state from social housing and by the privatization of housing corporations in the early 1990s – was backed by new entrepreneurial potentials in the housing market and was meant to introduce more dynamic in it in order to contrast as far as possible the inevitable trend to a regionalization of Amsterdam's urban daily urban system. It has also been accompanied, however, in the late 1990s and in the beginning of the 2000s, by a historical high in housing prices and by an unprecedented shortage in housing supply. In this sense, further developments along the IJ waterfront currently going on are already faced with quite different conditions, and a much more uncertain urban market.

Unfortunately, by concentrating mainly on urban design and architecture aspects, the book does not offer much support for understanding the broader context in which the Eastern Harbour project has taken place. Admittedly, this is clearly not the aim of this book, which remains an outstanding source of documentation. For this purpose, it might be useful for the reader who is not acquainted with Amsterdam to consult the recent volume *Planning Amsterdam*, devoted to the history of the city's strategic spatial planning, which – as the volume here discussed – is published by NAI and is also available in an English version.

Jaap Evert ABRAHAMSE et al.: *Eastern Harbour District Amsterdam: Urbanism and Architecture*. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2003, ISBN 90-5662-307-9, 224 pages.

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