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Beyond the urban-suburban dichotomy: shifting mobilities to and from Almere, Holland

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Beyond the urban-suburban dichotomy: shifting mobilities to and from Almere, Holland

Yannis Tzaninis and Willem Boterman

Abstract

Suburbanisation has been a prevalent process of post-war, capitalist urban growth, leading to the majority of citizens in many advanced capitalist economies currently living in the suburbs. We are also witnessing however the reverse movement of the increasing return to the inner-city. This contradiction raises questions regarding the socio-spatial production of current suburbanisation. This paper draws on the case of suburban, new town Almere in the metropolitan region of Amsterdam to cast light upon the changing suburban-urban relationship, by investigating the mobility to and from Almere for two decades through municipal data. We demonstrate that Almere has developed from a typically suburban family community in the 1980s, to nowadays a receiver of both international unmarried newcomers and families, emphasizing alternative types of mobilities emerging in concert to the more typical suburban migration. The town’s transformation challenges the urban-suburban dichotomy, pointing to alternative explanations of contemporary urban growth and metropolitan integration.

“Over the engines oily rumble and the caresses of the river small sounds, house sounds, are building. Timbers whisper and the wind strokes thatch, walls settle and floors shift to fill space; the tens of houses have become hundreds, thousands; they spread backwards from the banks and shed light from all across the plain.”

*Perdido Street Station* – China Mieville

1 Apollonian and Dionysian

On 30 November 1976 the first inhabitants of Almere, Lia and Henk de Clerk, received the keys for their new home in Almere Haven (harbor) from the minister of Transport and Water, Tjerk Westerterp. Soon after, they took the bus from Amsterdam to Almere, walked for a few minutes in the rain, on paths surrounded by muddy sand, and entered their house. The de Clerks were joined by 24 other households, together the “pioneers” of Almere Haven. In an interview, Sylvia de Boer, one of the four children who followed their parents
to the new town, recounts her first days in their big, new home and the strangeness of being the sole household in a whole block. She remembers the excitement of having a whole elementary school for only four children. Filmed at the same time, the then recently built large supermarket appears eerie while the families are shopping for the first ever Christmas dinner in Almere. Those early settlers were surrounded by large expanses, empty at the time and fully planned for future development.

Thirty-six years later, on Friday 20 July 2012 around 11 in the evening, a couple of dozen Caribbean-Dutch youngsters with percussion and drumming equipment were playing music at the post-modernesque centre of Almere Stad (city), an array of large, broad buildings amongst a wide pavement. The music of the Caribbean rhythms reverberated loudly throughout the thoroughfare, bouncing from building to building, easily heard from hundreds of meters away; only there was hardly anyone around to hear them. Apart from a group of drunken teenagers, and one of the authors, there were just a few people walking around at that time. The centre of a city of almost 200,000 people, designed by renowned architect Rem Koolhaas with considerable attention to its social life, was almost empty except for this group of enthusiastic youngsters parading and playing Afro-caribbean music.

Almere’s ambitions are currently incorporated into “Almere 2.0”, the local government’s recently conceived catchphrase for the future of the town. The urbanization process in the town is well under way, at least as the local authorities frame it: Almere will “transform itself as it evolves from a young city into a mature one”. Simultaneously, connectivity and complementarity with Almere’s ‘twin city’, Amsterdam, is promoted. Such planning raises questions about the new town’s identity, and whether the relationship with the Dutch capital may also be one of competition. The council’s Apollonian approach to urban growth, embodied in control, individualism and order, is often in opposition with the actual Dionysian drive of intuition, chaos and unpredictability. There is a contradiction in the town between the municipal planning and what actually happens, pointing at social forces beyond the control of the local government. As we argue, Almere’s urbanization has developed distinct from any expectations, while tensions are emerging between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements not only in the town but in contemporary suburban spaces in general.

1 Interview in http://www.geheugenvanalmere.nl/page/432/nl (2005)
2 http://eeuwvandestad.nl/archives/169
3 http://english.almere.nl/the-city-of-almere/almere-principles/
2 Urbs

With the post-WWII boom of western capitalism and the increasing emphasis on consumption by the newly formed, socially mobile middle classes, consumption paradises were embodied in suburban settlements. In the decades that followed the war, urban growth manifested through suburbanisation, with the contemporary “middle class” itself emerging with the development of the suburbs. Moving away from the mounting urban inequality and class violence concentrated in run-down, unsafe inner-city neighborhoods, the continuously forming middle class flocked to the suburbs massively. “Leaving the city” grew rapidly from a middle-class dream to a general trajectory for many, perpetually reflecting a seemingly unending class elevation. Despite the diversity of such communities, from the mass-produced housing in Long-Island’s Levittown in the U.S. to the utopia-driven ‘new towns’ such as Milton Keynes in the U.K. and Almere in the Netherlands, “a collective effort to live a private life” (Mumford, 1938) became widespread ideology (Fishman, 1987).

In the advanced capitalist world, suburbs have been at the hyphenated intersection between utopian “arcadian values” (Knox 2008) and dejected forms of urbanity. Ideas and ideals of pioneering have pervaded suburbanisation, especially during its early, Fordist phases, while contemporary suburbs are often characterized as “nowheres” without history and culture, only developed for and through consumerism. Suburbanisation gradually replaced older, traditional urbanization processes as the dominant form of habitation; people living in suburbs are now a majority in the advanced capitalist world (for a historical analysis of US suburbs see Jackson, 1985 and Hayden, 2009). Urban growth is, nonetheless, dynamic and the city-to-suburb migration seems to be currently reversing. A US census showed that, as of 2011, North-American cities are growing faster than suburbs⁴, while in Europe, inner-city gentrification and successful city branding have rendered the urban environment popular again (Smith, 1996; Buzar, 2007; Uitermark et al, 2007; Boterman et al., 2010).

Suburbs nowadays have acquired a myriad of definitions in academic literature: exurb (Spectorsky, 1955), boomburb and cosmoburb (Lang and LeFurgy, 2007), edge city (Garreau, 1991), technoburb (Fishman, 1987) and exopolis (Soja, 1996) are just few of those terms, while in relation to the wider regions where they belong, the suburbs are discussed as integrated parts of metroburbia (Knox 2008), penurbia (Goddard, 2009) and

post-suburbia (Kling et al., 1995). What these concepts share and indicate is the increasing complexity of urban regions. Simple understandings of the past between rural-urban-suburban seem transcended. The call for a new comprehension of urban regions, which has been taken by many a scholar, from the classics of Lefebvre (1974/1991) and Harvey (1985) to Allen et al. (1998), Massey (2005) and Knox (2008), points to transitions from the binary urban-non-urban to a perpetually forming reality, and to relationality between cities and regions.

The undertaking of unpacking such increasing complexity has occasionally been formulated as *new metropolitan reality* in the American context (Hanlon et al., 2010), and *polycentricity* in the European context (Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001). On the one hand, the former study touches upon the rising heterogeneity of metropolitan regions by incorporating political, economic, social and spatial aspects. In the beginning of their book the authors explicitly refer to the problems of the urban-suburban dichotomous thinking (Hanlon et al., 2010: 59), a critique, as we explain further on, their analysis does not fully satisfy. Polycentricity, on the other hand, is based on the idea of multiple centres existing in one area, and, for instance, in the case of Holland’s Randstad “a political capital, a financial capital, a cultural capital, a world port, a world airport, headquarters of important transnational companies (including banks and producer services), and a highly skilled, cosmopolitan labor force”, while “reciprocity and equivalence between these cities” is emphasized (Kloosterman and Lambregts, 2007).

Both these integrated approaches share the merit of addressing different scales and layers between areas. They are also based on relationships between areas in terms of demographic dynamics, shifting functions and hierarchies. However, in the case of the American literature, suburbs are seen simply as suburbs. Each ‘new’ suburban assemblage is given a certain quality, be it “black”, “immigrant”, “manufacturing”, “gothic” or “declining” (Hanlon et al., 2010). Hence the urban-suburban dichotomy is preserved albeit in different, new forms. The transition from the earlier suburbs to these new forms is explored but what the authors discuss as new types are exactly that, assumed *types* with distinct characteristics. In particular the idea of the suburban “gothic” and the transition of once booming suburbs into desolate and decaying places (Short et al., 2007) formulates transformation dynamics in the singular dimension of “either/or”. Our article
demonstrates that the typologies which are based on these dichotomies are empirically questioned in the contemporary relation between the city and the suburb.

In terms of the polycentricity discourse, while the discussion is still developing (Musterd et al, 2006; Vasanen, 2012), certain assumptions are already present. This body of literature could, as in the previous case, gain from similar critique. Every region is often taken as a definite place with certain functionality, while reciprocity is recognized as instrumental in the whole integration process. What requires attention though is whether such reciprocity and equivalence indeed exist, and if they do, what form they take. Even when the Randstad agglomeration in Holland is developing in an integrated manner, it is not surprising that interruptions emerge, a phenomenon Kloosterman and Lambregts (2007) recognize although only in the form of “political pitfalls and institutional obstacles”. In addition, Cowell (2009) argues that the complementarity of the Randstad regions has been in fact decreasing over time, while Van Oort et al (2010) question the phenomenon altogether, at least in terms of economic integration. The whole ‘fuzziness’ of the polycentricity concept/process is promoting the development of new methods for measuring it (Vasanen, 2012) or even explicitly doing away with conceptual matters and focusing on “is it good or bad” questions (Burger and Meijers, 2012).

It is perhaps surprising that in-depth analysis of the actual transformation process is largely not considered. Analysts tend to ignore the process of transition between forms and focus only on the actual result. Focusing on the dynamics behind such a transition, however, allows the comprehension of the mechanisms behind urban growth at large. This paper focuses mainly on the historical and demographic changes that have taken place in Almere since its early years. The aim is to shed light on the urban transition’s dynamics and to demonstrate that Almere, apart from being a-typical, is not being but constantly becoming. Such exploration may also allow us to look beyond the urban-suburban dichotomies and beyond the essentialization of places as complementing, categorical, absolute parts but instead to stress their contradicting, competitive and dynamic nature. Drawing from Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1991), we demonstrate how his theory of space as a product fits with contemporary processes of urban-suburban integration. Lefebvre’s philosophy of space, when it comes to urbanization, is commonly discussed in theoretical terms (Merrifield, 1993; Merrifield, 2011; Wapshott & Mallett, 2012; Fraser, 2009) but we show evidence that it can be refined if we analyse empirical studies too, at least as a starting point. Our
questions for this paper are: How have Almere’s demographics changed the past two decades? What do these dynamics/shifts tell us about the relationship between Almere and Amsterdam, and how can they help us problematize the urban-suburban dichotomy?

3 Urban-suburban mobilities as socio-spatial homologies

The changing nature of social space implies a type of human mobility that incorporates both physical and social elements. In terms of people’s social mobility, there have already been for some time arguments of connecting mobility in space with mobility in socio-economic terms (Savage, 1988). Such analyses have however been conducted primarily by relating mobility to agency while concentrating on physical movement instead of the interaction “between actors, structures and context” (Kaufmann et al, 2004: 749). Rerat and Lees (2011) implement such an alternative approach by analyzing the simultaneous hyper-mobility and hyper-fixity of gentrifiers in Switzerland; mobile because they have plenty of “spatial capital” to activate and fixed because they are rooted in central city areas. Similarly Cresswell (2011: 551) emphasizes the “mobility turn”, a multi-scalar, inter-disciplinary and relational perspective which places “moving” at the centre “of constellations of power, the creation of identities and the micro-geographies of everyday life”.

In our study, the process of shifting urban dynamics was investigated by focusing on the mobility between the urban and the suburban (and the no-more suburban). What we attempt is to consider spatial mobility as homologous to social mobility. This approach focuses on the possible changes of a person’s social positioning when she is spatially mobile. In this paper we employ this homology as a heuristic tool for a whole town in terms of longitudinal demographic changes, discussing the changes of the social positioning of space itself as a result of the spatial mobility of thousands of persons. At the epicenter of the analysis is the increasingly blurred relationship of gentrification and suburbanisation (Butler, 2007). Instead of thinking of “social ladders” however, the changes are analysed in relation to two main intersecting dynamics: Almere’s (sub)urbanizing process and the wider regional and global flows of movement, reminiscent of Swyngedouw’s “glocalization” (1997), raising the question of whether we are experiencing something similar in contemporary suburbanisation patterns.
4 The plan: Suburban Almere

The settlement of Almere was designed as a planned community in the 1970s, basically to counter city expansion. Inspired by the garden city movement, the new town of Almere (among other towns in Amsterdam’s metropolitan region) was planned to accommodate mainly former residents of Amsterdam who sought an alternative place to live instead of the intensely urbanizing capital. In all respects, Almere became a suburb of Amsterdam, retaining the characteristics of new towns, namely the design for deconcentration and decongestion. In particular, the plan for such towns was that of ‘grouped deconcentration’ (Constandse, 1989), meaning that their growth was to be controlled through the development of several centres. While discouraging suburban sprawl, such a “poly-nuclear” settlement was introduced to offer its residents small-scale communities separated by green belts (Constandse, 1989). Still, the plan for Almere’s development (a municipality since 1984) has changed several times since the humble beginnings of the eerie elementary schools and supermarkets. Constant demographic changes, regional and national economic restructuring, and even international migration trends have all played a role in Almere’s shifting dynamics and have brought dramatic changes to this 1980s Amsterdam suburb.

Even though the muddy sand is still present in all the newly-built places (i.e. Almere Poort), Almere’s character is currently unclear. Every district has its own character, reflecting particular socio-cultural production of spaces. Almere Haven was the first area to be developed, an Ebenezer Howard-esque planned ‘utopia’ with curved roads and access to green for every housing block. Not long after, the idealistic designs were abandoned and Almere Stad became a second core, planned as a more typically suburban borough, with straight streets, garages and a limited number of apartments, but often with experimentation in the
architecture. Similarly, Almere Buiten, literally the ‘outside’ of the town, became the third nucleus, retaining some of the post-modernist design of Stad but overall resembling mostly typical western suburbs, and accommodating VINEX areas (housing complexes often aimed at affluent residents). Two more areas are being currently constructed, Poort (gate) and Hout (wood), but they are still in development. What we can already see, at least in Poort, is the gradual construction of standard low-rise housing along with personally designed homes by residents.

Assuming a suburb is an outlying part of a city, developed mainly for consumption and living, Almere is a-typical and far from a simple suburban extension of Amsterdam anymore. The majority of the incoming population has transformed from the relatively middle- and low-class young families, moving mainly from Amsterdam and the Gooi region during the first couple of decades, to singles who often migrate from abroad and move directly to Almere. This shift is, at the same time, unexpected for many (planners), undesirable for some (old inhabitants) and overall surprising. And while Harvey (2000) emphasizes that “the materialization of spatial utopias run afool of the particularities of the temporal process”, Almere is far from a utopia but also far from simply “running afool” of particularities; it is still running, so to speak. Before proceeding to the analysis of Almere’s shifts and growth, let us consider how the town came to be.

5 The miracle of birth: Amsterdam metropole

In the late 1800s, Amsterdam’s relative prosperity gave rise to an increasing working-class net immigration to the Dutch capital. Modest industrialization and especially increased international trade brought Amsterdam a “second golden age”, and with that came intense urbanization (Bontje and Sleutjes, 2007). In the interwar period, Amsterdam’s population increased by almost 200,000. Although this increase was partly due to the annexation of outer municipalities, the increasing working class migration to the city was evident. Simultaneously there was also a ‘migration of income’ away from Amsterdam, an early phase of middle- and high-class suburbanisation (long before the ‘new-town’ suburbanisation of the post-war period). Despite the fact that Amsterdam’s housing was then fashioned to accommodate a large working-class population in high density, land costs were still high compared to outlying settlements. Hence the ones who could afford moving,

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5 Etymology: Μήτηρ or mētēr means literally 'mother' in Ancient Greek and of course πόλις or polis means city.
were not often convinced by the city council to stay and instead chose to move the suburbs (Terhorst and Van de Ven, 1997).

Amsterdam’s urbanization persisted after World War II, during another “Golden Age”, that of western capitalism. Wage and rent control became important aspects of state intervention and economic growth was planned through the introduction of cheap products in the world markets. Subsequent industrialization and the Dutch economy’s integration into the world market in the 1960s led to the heydays of Fordism. Wage control was no longer possible due to increased labour demand, and with it came almost full employment, the welfare state and mass consumption, catching Amsterdam in a ‘growth mania’, its population reaching all-time high around 1960 (Terhorst and Van de Ven, 1997). The city started looking progressively outwards to new land for development. And despite Amsterdam’s egalitarian characteristics due to the Dutch welfare structure (Fainstein, 1997), around those times was when the city started being branded by modernist planners as a “hopelessly dysfunctional, chaotic and ugly mess” (Uitermark, 2009).

By the late 1970s the capitalist economies had started to go into recession and this was particularly experienced in the Dutch capital. Between 1960 and 1985 half the jobs within Amsterdam’s historical centre disappeared (Terhorst and Van de Ven, 1997). During those decades massive emigration from the Randstad’s major cities took place, people moving to other smaller municipalities or the surrounding suburbs. The suburban migration continued also during the 1980s, especially in the case of Amsterdam (Musterd, Jobse and Kruythoff, 1991). The capital’s population decreased by 200,000 residents during those decades while suburbanisation was booming; most of the former residents from Amsterdam were moving to new settlements in the inner suburban ring, especially in Flevoland, in places like Almere and Lelystad (Musterd, Bontje and Ostendorf, 2006).

6 Leaving the city

Almere has been one of the fastest growing new cities in Europe, its population having constantly grown until recently. From the aforementioned 25 families in 1976, the city grew

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6 The densely built and poorly zoned new construction caused the city to consider even ‘exporting’ the poor (Terhorst and van de Ven, 1997).
to 6,872 persons in 1980, almost 45,000 in 1985 and almost 150,000 in 2000\textsuperscript{7}. Currently there are 196,209\textsuperscript{8} persons living there, making Almere the 8\textsuperscript{th} largest city in the Netherlands. Between the early 1980s and the late 1990s the town’s population was steadily increasing, averaging between 5,000 and 8,000 more inhabitants per year. However, since the early 1990s the number of persons moving out of Almere has been constantly increasing, and there are now more people moving out than in (table 1).

\textbf{Table 1 – Migration to/from Almere, 1990-2013}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>People moving in per year</th>
<th>People moving out per year</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>Total population (beginning of the year)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>8656</td>
<td>2770</td>
<td>5886</td>
<td>71103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>9335</td>
<td>3629</td>
<td>5706</td>
<td>84911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>8912</td>
<td>4122</td>
<td>4790</td>
<td>98447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>9967</td>
<td>5114</td>
<td>4853</td>
<td>112615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>13884</td>
<td>6056</td>
<td>7828</td>
<td>126715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>12274</td>
<td>6419</td>
<td>5855</td>
<td>142797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>11794</td>
<td>7750</td>
<td>4044</td>
<td>158849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>10928</td>
<td>8448</td>
<td>2480</td>
<td>170725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>10398</td>
<td>9716</td>
<td>682</td>
<td>178458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>9760</td>
<td>8907</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>183322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>9021</td>
<td>8126</td>
<td>895</td>
<td>188077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>8596</td>
<td>8067</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>193156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>8169</td>
<td>8753</td>
<td>-584</td>
<td>195191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almere has also been economically a growing city, especially compared to other settlements in the metropolitan region (Economische Zaken Amsterdam, Kamer van Koophandel Amsterdam, 2011). Its gross regional product has been constantly increasing since the mid-1990s, and even in times of general negative growth, it was still positive (i.e. in 2009 the Dutch economy declined by 3.9% whereas in Almere and Lelystad together it increased by

\textsuperscript{7} The data are from Almere’s municipal database. Till the year 1988 the demographic data are from reports on Almere’s labour force and between 1989-2013 from individual data for every inhabitant.

\textsuperscript{8} 01-04-2014
Similarly its workforce, together with that of Lelystad, has been increasing above the country’s average by three or four times the past two decades. The two towns have even been euphemized as the ‘growth-motor’ of the regional economy. Almere’s economy and labour-active population are both growing beyond the average indicators of the country and Amsterdam itself. Nonetheless Almere’s unemployment levels are not lower than the country’s average (especially among young people) and are simultaneously increasing, while its economic growth has decelerated (Economische Zaken Amsterdam, Kamer van Koophandel Amsterdam, 2012). Despite the similarity of the plans behind them, these two new towns have a contrasting recent development history. Lelystad came first (1967), planned as an Amsterdam suburb, and after its initial population rose to 60,000 residents in 1986, its demographic expansion has halted to fewer than 80,000 people today. Around the end of the 1980s, 8% of Lelystad’s dwellings were vacant (Constandse, 1989), whereas such stagnation is far from happening in Almere.

In the 1980s, Almere was a fast growing suburb of commuters but it has since become a town with a growing economy of its own and with many commuters to Amsterdam who would rather avoid the daily commute. Until recently around 50% of the new town’s labour force commutes outside to work, more than a third to Amsterdam, making commuting from Almere the largest daily move-to-work to the Dutch capital (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2008). On average more than 50% of the commuters spend longer than 45 minutes on the way, with indications of increased stress due to such a commute (ibid). Consequently more people are gradually working and living in Almere, increasing from 34% in 2000 to 38% in 2007 (ibid), adding to several thousands of workers who work but do not also live there. Commuting from Almere outside of Flevoland decreased from 64% to 59% between 2000 and 2007, while Almere is currently the least ‘out-commuting’ town in the Amsterdam region (ibid).

Population decline in Almere is partly caused by economic downturn and, although it could be argued that this is a life-course effect of the youngest generation of Almere growing up and moving out in order to study and work, the demographic profile of Almere’s outmigrants points to more fundamental changes. The next sections describe three of the

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9 Although the data refer both to Almere and Lelystad, Flevoland’s two largest towns, if anything they should be accentuated in Almere’s case since that town is more active economically.

10 [http://www.flevoland.nl/wat doen we/grote projecten/gebiedsontwikkeling/nieuws-feeds/almere-lelystad-groeimoto/](http://www.flevoland.nl/wat doen we/grote projecten/gebiedsontwikkeling/nieuws-feeds/almere-lelystad-groeimoto/)

11 Lelystad was fashioning its own vacant shopping mall in the centre in 2012.
most striking changes in Almere’s demography: declining national immigration; increasing international migration; and changing household structure.

7 From Amsterdam to Almere… and back again

Suburbanisation from Amsterdam peaked in 1973 when the city had a net loss of 25,000 inhabitants in just one year. Almere’s new residents originated traditionally in large part from Amsterdam, and during the decades of Amsterdam’s decline in population (1960-1985), suburbs like Almere grew spectacularly. For the first two decades of Almere’s existence, thousands would arrive every year from the capital comprising more than half of all the newcomers. Suburbanisation also meant a loss of relatively affluent households: where Amsterdam was much richer per capita than the region by the end of the 1950s, in 1994 the city of Amsterdam had an average income per income earner that was almost 20 per cent lower than that of the surrounding wider metropolitan area (Musterd and Ostendorf 2005).

In the late 1980s, when the Dutch economy recovered as in other advanced capitalist economies, Amsterdam gradually saw its population grow again. Initially this growth was primarily caused by international migration from former colonies and Mediterranean countries. However, some inner city neighbourhoods showed first signs of gentrification (Musterd and Van Weesep 1991). This sparked debates about re-urbanisation in the Amsterdam region. Most scholars of early gentrification however claimed that no actual re-migration of suburbanites could be identified (Van Weesep 1994, Van Criekingen (2010)). Throughout the 1990s the Almere-to-Amsterdam migration increased, while the reverse movement has been gradually declining (Figure 1).
What should not be missed here are not only the cyclical migration patterns, observed in Amsterdam and the areas around it, but also the increasingly complex characteristics of such migration. During the early industrialization period (1870-1940) working classes moved into the capital, while most affluent families started moving out towards the suburbs (Schmal, 2003). Ever larger groups of middle-class families followed the same suburbanisation pattern during the post-war period. Although the suburbanisation of middle-class families is still the dominant pattern, Amsterdam is experiencing a quite rapid re-urbanisation and even a considerable growth of middle-class families (Boterman et al., 2010). To a large extent the population growth is not a literal return of individuals to the central city from the suburbs but is mainly caused by swelling numbers of young households finding work or study in the city and the strategic managing of time-space budgets of dual income families (Karsten, 2007, Boterman, 2013). Furthermore, international migration of higher educated workers is also a significant factor in the city’s growth.

Notwithstanding the fact that most of the re-urbanisation is an endogenous process, an actual ‘return’ to Amsterdam seems increasingly more of a reality now as well. In fact, in terms of total settlement to Almere, the Amsterdam-Almere migration share has decreased to around 20% (from 45% in the early 1990s). The reverse, the movement from Almere to Amsterdam, is almost 25% of total out-migration from Almere nowadays, making the capital an increasingly popular destination for many in the new town. To some extent this
is facilitated by the capital’s suburban expansion within its borders. When we consider e.g. Iburg, the latest expansion of Amsterdam, built on reclaimed water at the city’s outskirts, it is unclear whether it is a suburb or a part of urban Amsterdam. In a similar vein Almere’s suburban status is similarly unclear and it is important to ask ourselves what it is that Almere is changing into.

8 The new melting pot?

Concurrent to the economic boom of the 1960s in the advanced capitalist world, plans were being developed by governments to accommodate the new consumerism. Several ‘new towns’ were planned, especially in the Netherlands, often driven with the vision of affordable, egalitarian garden-cities, based on ‘utopianist’, consumerist and functionalist plans. What actually happened in socio-demographic terms however is often a different story; emerging income inequality and unemployment, manifesting particularly in southeast Amsterdam, in the Bijlmermeer quarter, showed that “Fordism was over before the Fordist city was completed” (Terhorst and Van de Ven, 1997: 299).

In Almere’s case, during the initial stages Amsterdam’s council was prescribing tenure types and price ranges (Terhorst and Van de Ven, 1997) and houses were allocated primarily to people moving from Amsterdam (64%) and the Gooi area (16%) (Constandse 1989). As we showed earlier, the migration from Amsterdam has been gradually decreasing and, in its place, international migration has emerged (table 2). Almere has changed from being an extension of Amsterdam, having received many young families since its beginning, to a city of international immigration from all over the world. Amsterdam’s ratio of newcomers from abroad is by far larger than that of Almere, although the recent change in Almere has been more acute (table 2).

12 Towns like Dronten, Lelystad and Emmeloord, all developed in the post-WWII period.
13 Aalbers (2011) demonstrates how revitalization improved living standards for many inhabitants in the Bijlmermeer but often for the cost of revanchist urbanism against the less privileged (e.g. exclusion from public space uses).
14 This refers to the place of previous dwelling and not to the place of birth or origin.
### Table 2 – International migration in Almere and Amsterdam, 2001-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total new settlers in Almere</th>
<th>To Almere from Amsterdam</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>To Almere from abroad</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>To Amsterdam from abroad %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>13312</td>
<td>4142</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>1537</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>12036</td>
<td>4010</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>1315</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>11014</td>
<td>3224</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>1206</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>9650</td>
<td>2557</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>1123</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>8672</td>
<td>2083</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>9080</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>2027</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>8121</td>
<td>1712</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding their previous location, these new settlers moved from a very diverse pool of countries. Suriname, Poland, Spain, UK, Somalia, Germany, Belgium and China are just a few of those places, and none of them is the main source of settlers. In 2011, only around a hundred persons moved from each of these countries, creating an elaborate mosaic of international mobility, pointing away from simple understandings of (chain) migration waves. Likewise, recent literature suggests that the suburbs are increasingly immigrants’ entry points (Dawkins, 2005; Waters, 2005). Apart from this being clearly the case for Almere, what remains to be explored is what type of migration that is. The diversity of countries (Figure 2) of previous dwellings suggests complicated explanations, calling for further research regarding the drives and mechanisms behind such migration.
In terms of the place of birth of Almere’s total population, by 2011 20% of Almere’s population was born abroad, while in 1991 it was around 10%. In the whole Netherlands the same indicators increased from slightly less than 10% in the mid-1990s to only 13% in 2012. It remains to be seen if the trends described above will persist, but in-depth research is necessary to unpack the mechanisms behind the international migration to the suburbs.

9 A place for bachelors

Another way in which the population of Almere is becoming more complex is the dynamics of household composition. In 2012 around 53% of all the adult new settlers of Almere moved in without a registered partner, a result of a consistent trend for almost 20 years in the town: already in 1995 more than 40% of the newcomers were single, resulting in currently almost a third of the town’s households being single-person (figure 3). These trends raise questions about the traditional suburban ideas of ‘family’ or ‘bedroom’ communities, and particularly about the scope of the whole modernist project which culminated in Almere. As Knox (2008) stresses, the “white, upper-middle-class, family-oriented” suburban image, representing the traditional ideal of the American suburb, is generally changing drastically, and this is happening especially in the case of Almere.
Since the early 1990s the traditionally suburbanising nuclear-family households have been increasingly moving out of Almere, while being gradually replaced by two atypical for suburbs types of households, singles and single parents. To demonstrate the process of the town’s household transformation we use the yearly migration of children as an indicator (figure 4), and we can clearly see that there are more children moving out of than into Almere nowadays. Concerning in particular the Amsterdam-Almere family migration, in 2011 there were almost as many children moving to as coming from Amsterdam. Returning to the earlier question of whether moving out of Almere is linked to a life-course effect, we can now argue that the answer is definitely not that simple. Although our data imply an ‘urbanization’, or at least a ‘de-suburbanisation’, of Almere, the complexities of the town’s mobilities and demography run deep and are intensifying, rendering straightforward life-course explanations questionable.
10 Discussion: One Almere, many Almeres

In a recent paper, Walks (2013), discussing the emerging hybridity of the suburban way of life while drawing largely on Lefebvre, defines suburbanism as “an inherent aspect of urbanism… constantly fluctuating and pulsating as the flows producing its relational forms shift and overlap in space” (Walks, 2013: p. 1472). He claims that metropolitanisation is “the synthetic product of the tension between the forces of urbanism and suburbanism, one that varies in character depending on the local strength and mix of their different forms and flows” (p. 1478). Similarly in this paper, we provide (empirical) evidence of the porosity between the ‘urban’ and the ‘suburban’, while focusing on the process of their fusion. Our attention however is not on suburbanism but suburbanisation and its antithetical urbanization, which can together synthesize the understanding of the new mobilities and metropolitan integration processes. We think that “the forces of urbanism-suburbanism” can indeed be “separate from the spaces they produce” (2013: p. 1478), so it is also necessary to focus on the relation between the two syntheses: urbanism-suburbanism and urbanization-suburbanisation.

In this paper, we have identified three demographic trends transforming the character of Amsterdam’s former suburban new town Almere. While the main origin of settlers used to be the Dutch capital, we have demonstrated that international immigration has now
become a major driving force behind the town’s, until recently, consistent growth. Many of these settlers come from unstable countries, others from new EU states, emerging economies, as well as advanced capitalist economies. A second important demographic trend is that outmigration to other parts of the country is increasing up to a point that domestic migration does no longer significantly contributes to its growth. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Almere’s new inhabitants are mostly single, and families are increasingly moving out, many of them towards Amsterdam.

These three major demographic shifts could be seen as an urbanization of Almere and in contrast with existing stereotypes of the classical middle-class family suburb. Suburbanisation has thus been gradually declining as the main fuel of Almere’s growth, and the town is no longer a suburban “arm” of Amsterdam as it was in 1976. Notwithstanding the continued predominance of (middle-class) family households, the suburban character of Almere is challenged by an increasingly “urban” demographic and sociocultural profile. In addition, Amsterdam’s high(er) cost of living often contributes to people moving to Almere, while still commuting to the capital for work. Simultaneously, the increased gentrification of Amsterdam, the construction of quasi-suburban newly-built areas such as IJburg and Oostelijk Havengebied, and the reorientation of middle-class families to the capital contribute to what may be conceived of as a “suburbanisation of the city”. These parallel developments in central city and former suburb are blurring our understanding of space and challenge urban-suburban dichotomies (see figures 5a and 5b).
The erosion of the suburban character of Almere fits into broader and longstanding debates about the future of suburbia (Masotti & Hadden 1973; Baldassare, 1992; Harris & Larkham 1999). Despite the contextual differences between the American and European suburbs, indications of decline are generally present. Almere’s oldest parts, such as the VINEX areas, are increasingly identified by scholars and policy makers as neighbourhoods witnessing concentrations of poverty and problems (see the discussion in Reijndorp and
Moreover, Van Gent and colleagues (2013) have even linked the downgrading of Almere and its urbanization to rising xenophobia and political right-wing radicalist voting. Still the town is also the manifestation of aspirations for home-ownership, suburbanisation away from urban problems and social mobility.

Our discussion of the relationship between Almere and Amsterdam demonstrates the increasing complexity of dynamics in and of urban space. As the starting point to understand these dynamics, we propose Lefebvre’s conceptualization of space as a product (Lefebvre, 1991) and his idea of the “urban fabric” (representing all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the country) (Lefebvre, 1970). Furthermore, instead of focusing only on the result, we propose refining Harvey’s historical-geographical approach (1973) which favours a dialectical view of varying fluid scales, involving both urban and suburban environments. Such an analysis is reminiscent of Smith’s (2008) discussion of geographical scales, reflecting the differentiation and equalization contradiction taking place in contemporary suburbs which have not only neat, integrated dimensions but also discontinuities and fragmentations. Space is better perceived as full of interrelations, heterogeneity and processes (Massey, 2005), instead of path-linearity by virtue of inevitability (‘modernization’, ‘development’, ‘revitalization’). This allows for a processual analysis of the formation of new urban regions, be it “new metropolitan realities” or “polycentric”.

The emerging multifaceted and increasingly complex position of settlements within metropoleis demonstrates the need to look deeper into each part of a region (i.e. the “centres” in the polycentricity discourse) and understand it in relation to the other parts. Our study of regional demographics also shows how the importance of scales shifts according to temporal processes, and how the “glocal” character of a place emerges, and that the interplay between scales is critical in the regional metropolitanisation processes. Most importantly, in this paper we show that the Lefebvrian conception of space is suitable to approach contemporary processes of urban growth, and that Lefebvre’s theories can be refined with empirical studies. What is proposed as a next step is to understand these demographic shifts and “glocalization” through people’s experiences.
To achieve this, further research is needed into how wide social processes are reflected on the drives and ideologies behind the urban-suburban mobility. One method is by investigating the process of mobility/migration in terms of motivations and aspirations of new settlers, and their ideology of relocation. Places like Almere need not be essentialized as “things”. Even though one may argue that there is internal variability within Almere between its different neighbourhoods, its diverse elements exist ‘cheek-to-jowl’: families live next door to singles, natives to immigrants, freelance professionals to manual workers, disadvantaged asylum seekers to the privileged middle class, while flats are raised next to family houses, and a Manhattan-esque centre close to the suburban homes. To understand the character of such transforming places we propose researchers to ask for people’s interpretation of their relocation process: is it a suburbanising move, a re-urbanizing or something else? Such narratives will help us grasp the incremental nuances of contemporary urban transformations.
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