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The Contested Positioning of the Suburb Almere as a Key Node of the Metropolitan Network

by Sophie Leblanc-Van Neste

- PhD student at INRS-UCS, Montreal, Canada, supervised by Gilles Sénécal
- co-supervised by Virginie Mamadouh from the University of Amsterdam

Email address : Sophie_Leblanc-VanNeste@UCS.INRS.Ca

Current address : Bethlehemstraat 20a, Rotterdam. 3061 GB, Netherlands.

Abstract

This paper discusses how public and civic actors are concretely involved in the discursive construction of a selective metropolitan network of connectivity, particularly actors from suburban locations. The case studied concerns the growth and connectivity of the suburb Almere, a suburban location 30 kilometers away from Amsterdam, which aims at becoming a key actor of the metropolitan area. While public authorities strive to set up a competitive metropolitan network, and the municipality of Almere works actively to be part of it, other actors from peripheral locations consider their participation to this re-scaling project in a completely other way, working against the connections instead of in favor of it. This counter-discourse coalition brings together an interesting mix of territorial affiliations, and propose another perspective on the belonging to the metropolis.

Introduction

This paper examines how public and civic actors are concretely involved in the discursive construction of a selective metropolitan network of connectivity, particularly actors from suburban locations. The case studied concerns the growth and connectivity of the suburb Almere, a suburban location 30 kilometers away from Amsterdam, which aims at becoming a key actor of the metropolitan area.

Projects to improve mobility and connectivity between Amsterdam and Almere have been in discussion for some years. They have raised public debate, especially since one option is the construction of a new bridge across the lake Ijmeer which separates the two municipalities. Projects to improve public transportation at this regional level are also planned. Many public authorities, environmental groups, architects and citizens from Amsterdam, Almere and surrounding sectors have gotten involved on the best options. In front of an almost consensual discourse from the part of public authorities at different levels, groups and residents with different territorial affiliations, but all from peripheral locations within the city-region, have provided a counter-discourse to the Almere connection.

If the main discourse for the growth and connectivity of Almere within the Dutch metropolis can be interpreted as a project of metropolitan re-scaling presented in a context of economic competitiveness, the counter-discourses show a much more complex picture. While public authorities strive to set up a new metropolitan network of connectivity and the suburb Almere works actively to be part of it, other actors consider their participation to this scalar project in a completely other way, and their positionnality with regard to the same territory and its network articulation questions the classic interpretation of the winners and losers of re-scaling projects. *In some cases, actors want to stay out of the projected metropolitan network.*

This paper is based on preliminary results of my ongoing research in the metropolitan area of Amsterdam. It comes out of a discourse analysis of planning documents, civic organizations pamphlets, documents and websites as well as from a press review from local and national newspapers.

The paper goes as follows. I start by sketching out my analytical framework, a discursive politics of space, with three related dimensions of socio-spatial discourses. I then discuss further the scalar dimension and introduce what I mean by the construction of a selective metropolitan network of connectivity. My analysis will then go on with the presentation of the main discourse for the growth and connectivity of Almere, with the major public actors involved, and the counter-discourse for the preservation of the distinct existing elements.

A discursive politics of space : studying discourses on metropolitan connectivity

The choices on the further development of Almere and its connection within a larger Metropolis are far from being natural and/or technical choices arising solely out of the expected population growth, the market demand for space or infrastructure or from sustainable models of transportation (albeit the fact that there are certain trends and expectations, which are part of the arguments deployed). The raise in mobility within and between urban regions has challenged our conception of territory, from the focus on bounded places to inter-connected ones (Urry, Amin 2004). Planning ideals and narratives of the good city now concern not only proximity (mixed and dense urban areas) but also and perhaps foremost connectivity (polycentric metropolises). But this new focus on connectivity in the planning and public schemes is not simply a respond to a stronger demand for mobility – it also has larger motivations and implications, linked to a broader politics of infrastructures (McFarlane and Rutherford 2008). Projects of metropolitan connectivity include particular priorities and specific configurations for the urban and metropolitan space, which can bring greater fragmentation (Graham and Marvin 2001) or at least value certain sub-territories, while leaving others out of the network (or "in-between" : Young and Keil 2010, Herrchrel 2011).

In this paper, planning schemes and reactions to them, whether they come from public authorities or from civic actors, are considered discourses which offer a certain representation of the urban and metropolitan network, to justify particular political projects. Interpreting planning transportation schemes as discourses does not mean that mobility practices and transport infrastructures do not have any material implications; on the contrary, my empirical findings show how much concrete material things and practices are important figures in the discourses. The social construction of narratives refer to the game through which certain elements are emphasized in the explanation of phenomena, and in the justification and appraisal of certain solutions.[1] Hajer argues that this process is particularly important for the building of political coalitions : "finding the appropriate story line becomes an important form of agency" (Hajer 1995 : 56, 2005). I will present two types of discourse coalitions in this paper : one in favor of the proposed Almere connectivity, and one against it.

The discourses on the inclusion of Almere into a metropolitan network will be interpreted with the lens of a discursive politics of space. Jensen and Richardson (2004) have made particular analytical propositions on this while studying the politics of transport infrastructures in Europe. Inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre, they propose within their framework three analytical dimensions to study discourses on mobility and transport configurations, which I propose to summarize as follows : 1) the spatial and mobility practices emphasized 2) the symbolism attached to each place and its connectivity 3) the scalar politics involved (Richardson and Jensen 2003: 10-15, Jensen and Richardson 2004 : 45-54).

In urban studies, scalar politics (the 3rd dimension just outlined) has particularly been discussed in regard to the metropolitan scale, with which my case study is concerned. I will thus spend some time on describing further the thesis of a metropolitan re-scaling (Brenner 2004), and the related hypotheses on

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[1]   As Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 108) argue : "The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God', depends on the structuring of a discursive field."

inequalities and selective connectivities. My own use of scalar politics as an analytical tool will not be done in relation to state restructuring, but rather in relation to the first and second dimension of the discursive sociology of space proposed by Richardson and Jensen. How are metropolitan discourses developed from valued spatial and mobility practices, and from special symbolism given to each place and its preferred connectivity in a metropolitan network?

The metropolis as a scalar project : the constitution of a selective network of places

A particularly dominant discourse in the case studied is the importance of global economic competition between metropolises, which would make certain decisions necessary, particularly in regard to the metropolitan scale. This type of discourse is far from being unique to the Dutch case and has been observed and analyzed in diverse regions of the globe; although in diverse degrees and leading to different implications in different contexts[2]. The scholar Neil Brenner has argued that this movement of increasing metropolitan projects and city-regional governance schemes is to be interpreted in the context of a restructuration of capitalism.

> "The resurgence of metropolitan reform projects since the early 1990s, both in the USA and elsewhere, must be understood in direct relation to these ongoing worldwide rescalings of political–economic space, […] their common denominator is their concerted attempt to resolve place-specific forms of "governance failure" (Jessop, 1998b) by shifting the scale at which the regulation of urban development is organized (Brenner 2002: 10)."

Brenner's theory of re-scaling is based upon the idea that actors will reposition themselves within the restructuration of capitalism, which is in search of a new « spatial fix » (Brenner 2002, 2004). The Marxist theory of regulation postulates that the capitalist accumulation regime needs, in order to reproduce itself, a series of norms and compromises that ground social conflicts within fixed spatio-temporal frames (Brenner and Theodore 2002, Jouve 2005 : 329-330). These fixes change when they no longer allow the accumulation of capital. For Brenner, the metropolitan scale has become the scene of these regulations. Within this global restructuring, the metropolis is more and more valued as a pivot for global economic competitiveness. The metropolitan scale can also be a valued action space to respond to social inequalities and the spatial fragmentation in metropolitan spaces, phenomena which Brenner describes as consequences of the transition to a post-fordist economy and the rise of neoliberalism.

One of the main worrying issue brought about by the development of the metropolis as a new "structured coherence" of capitalism is indeed its expected consequences in terms of rising social inequalities : the winning economic regions being further supported while the old industrial zones lag even more behind; similarly, the zones participating to the creative economy of the metropolis are connected into a success network while the other urban and surburban places are kept out (Herrschrel 2011, Keil and Boudreau 2010, Brenner 2002). The metropolis, with re-scaling processes, is not anticipated to become a flat playing field, but a reorganization of power relations and social networks, through specific selective connections within and outside of the city-region (Swyngedouw 2004). "As a consequence, therefore, new peripheries and exclusions may be created, whether deliberate or not, and they may be within as well as between the core areas (Herrschel 2011: 88)".

In practice however, how do local and national actors participate to those scalar constructions? What

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[2] For example diverse degrees of institutionalization of metropolitan governance, and for diverse political projects (Boudreau et al. 2006, Keil 2000).

dynamics take place in the inclusion and exclusion of certain places from the metropolitan network? One of the main critics which has been formulated to the theory of re-scaling is indeed that too much seems to be determined by economic factors : the analysis under-develops the political aspect of a metropolitan re-scaling, the re-scaling struggles and political conflicts from the point of view of the actors involved (LeGales 2006). This re-scaling is little studied in terms of practices and perceptions of actors (Moore 2008). Since those critics however, some authors have analyzed re-scaling projects directly from the point of views of actors and the scalar discourses they solicit, in practice, to justify certain political projects (Sonn 2010, Gonzalez 2006, McGuirk 2004, McCann 2003). But these rich discursive studies have not focused on the issue of the construction of a metropolitan network.

In this paper, I propose to study how actors are involved, through the formulation of discourses and the formation of discursive coalitions, in the construction of those selective metropolitan connectivities. I start by describing the projection of Almere as a key node of the Dutch metropolis. I then present the discourses of public authorities which justify this project. Finally, I present a counter-discourse which gives a whole other picture on the preferred connections in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area.

The ambition of Almere as a key node of the Dutch metropolis : a future "dubble city" with Amsterdam

In 20 years, Almere will have more than dubbled. Almere and Amsterdam will have become a "dubble city" forming a strong metropolitan area. Although 30 km away (which is a lot in the Dutch context, it is the distance between the two other largest cities Rotterdam and The Hague), they will be linked by fast and sustainable transport connections : Almere will be a sustainable public transport city (Gemeente Almere 2009: 19). *"The Schaalsprong Almere will not only involve building the city, but also the metropolis – and with it, the future of the Netherlands."* (idem: 7) In contrast to this vision, as of now, Almere has a population of less than 200 000 inhabitants while Amsterdam close to 800 000 (but Almere is indeed the second biggest city of the region). What drives this project, the scaling-up and greater connection of Almere to position it as a key player of the metropolitan region?

The town of Almere was created in 1976 on reclaimed land from the North sea. One of the fastest growing town in Europe, the city has grown from 0 to 190 000 inhabitants from 1976 in 2010, and continue to grow (Gemeente Almere 2010, Musterd et al. 2006). This is in part explained by the housing market : while there was a vibrant construction program in Amsterdam in the last 20 years, the latter focused on rental houses and many of the owner-occupied houses were rather built in Almere, explaining the leave of many middle-income families (Salet 2003 : 177-178). The daily commuting from Almere towards Amsterdam is high, although jobs have been increasing in Almere in the last decade (Musterd et al. 2006). While a good part of the circulation in Amsterdam is made by slow modes (walking and cycling), connections from and to other cities of the metropolitan region, such as Almere, are mostly made by cars (Bertolini 2006, Gemeente Amsterdam 2009).

The Almere project involves two components : the development of new housing and employment sites as well as the improvement of the transport connection with Amsterdam. With regard to the residential and commercial development, three options are presented : 1) building on the water, on the west side of the existing Almere, this water-neighborhood bringing Amsterdam and Almere, separated by the lake Ijmeer, closer to each other; 2) building on available land on the east side of the existing Almere; 3) a

project in-between the two, which will combine some building in the west and some in the est. The first option is clearly the favored one by the municipality of Almere, but has also received the support of the national government who has announced they saw no reason to be against the building over the lake. With regard to the transport connection, there are also several alternatives, the main ones being : the construction of a new bridge over the lake Ijmeer; the improvement of the existing infrastructure or the construction of a tunnel for a metro line between Amsterdam and Almere (the more recent alternative).

The construction of a scalar project for a competitive region :
Randstad, the metropolitan region of Amterdam and the "scaling-up" of Almere

The project of better connecting Almere to Amsterdam is closely linked with a larger project of developing exponentially the population of Almere and the different functions of the city, so that it becomes a "mature and complete" city contributing fully to the metropolitan area of Amsterdam. This project is greatly stimulated and promoted both by the national government (which will finance the large infrastructures) as well as by the local municipal authorities and the voluntary metropolitan institution. It is thus the product of a complex intertwine of top-down and bottom-up alliances between different public authorities, which want to be involved in the definition of the future metropolitan network.

The municipality of Almere positions itself as a key node of the "metropolis". What is particular in the Dutch context is that there is no one obvious "metropolis". In all city-regions of the world, the delimitation of what counts as a metropolitan area is in some ways a socio-political constructions. But in the Dutch context, this is even more striking, since different ranges, in terms of area sizes and territorial levels, could apply. As Salet (2006 : 968) describes it :

> "Considering the density of social and economic interaction, three main levels of scale are relevant in the emergent metropolitan configuration of Randstad Holland: the urban agglomeration level (the core cities and their neighbouring municipalities); the conurbations in the northern Randstad (including the urban agglomerations of Amsterdam and Utrecht) **[this is now more or less the Metropolitan Area of Amsterdam]** and those in the southern Randstad (including the agglomerations of Rotterdam and The Hague); the Randstad itself (including the whole urbanized region of the western Netherlands)."

This is the reason why I have been talking loosely, up to now, of a Dutch Metropolis. The positioning of Almere into a metropolitan network is both advocated in relation to the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area (which is relatively recent politically) and much more largely within the Randstad[3]. Public actors, including particularly Almere, goe easily from talking of the Randstad to the Amsterdam metropolitan area as the unit of economic performance and competitiveness; as we will see.[4]

The involvement of the national government through Randstad urgent
The national government is directly involved in promoting what they call a "step change in scale for Almere" (Randstad 2040: 54, Randstad urgent 2011). This step change in scale aimed at is 60 000 new houses, for about 200 000 new residents, and 100 000 new jobs. The government justifies the focus on

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[3] Ironically, Almere was not originally included in the perimeter of the Randstad. The "Randstad" regroups the provinces of South and North Holland (the most urbanised part of the country), and not the province of Flevoland (in which is Almere), Flevoland being a polder taken from the see only in the 1970s. Still today, the inclusion or not of Almere into the Randstad depends of the perimeter chosen, but national programs for the Randstad has included it in practice (as I talk about in the text).

[4] In the last two years however, the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area as been very active and got more and more visibility as *the* project of metropolitan building in the Netherlands.

this project principally by the need to strengthen the international competitive position of the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area (idem), in which Almere is expected to play a greater role. The narrative formulated is that there needs a critical mass in the Northern part of the Randstad for the Randstad and/or Amsterdam to play a role in the competitive battle with other European metropolis such as London and Paris (Atelier Ijmeer 2005: 23; Gemeente Almere 2009, Randstad 2040). While there is a shortage of houses in the northern Randstad, it is difficult to build in many parts of the region, notably in the protected green areas forming the symbolic Green Heart of the Netherlands (Randstad 2040: 54, Gemeente Almere 2008, 2009). This Green Heart is formed of green areas in the center of the urbanized ring of the largest Dutch cities (the Randstad, which means ring city). Much of the Dutch planning doctrine since the 1960s has been focused on controlling urban growth to protect this Green Heart (Faludi 1994, Faludi and van der Valk 1994, Zonneveld and Hajer 2000). Concentrating growth in Almere is thus also presented as a way to preserve the Green Heart, while allowing for a growth of the city-region of Amsterdam and of the Randstad in general, which appear necessary to take part in the club of large European metropolises[5] : "*The international competitive strength of the Randstad is under pressure. The Randstad needs space to expand. Almere has this space*" (Gemeente Almere 2009: 6).

In the national plans, the project of scaling-up Almere is also linked in another way to the competitiveness of the Randstad. The national government wants indeed to improve the accessibility of the urban regions of the Randstad : accessibility being perceived a key problem for the performance of the Randstad, with the important traffic jams in the highways linking the largest cities of the Netherlands (Randstad 2040: 48). Commuters between Almere and Amsterdam have been particularly insistent in voicing their complaints to the national government.

Both the growth project for Almere and these intentions to improve regional transport infrastructures are part of a specific program called *Randstad urgent*, a key national action program which comes out of a planning vision for the Randstad, *Randstad 2040*. The Randstad 2040's objective is to "turn the Randstad into a sustainable and internationnaly competitive region" (10). Key strategic projects for the competitiveness of the Randstad were chosen in cooperation with local authorities and form the program *Randstad urgent,* funded and coordinated by the national government. Four of the twenty-two projects concern directly the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area and Almere : the scale-step development of Almere, road widening as well as public transport improvements between Amsterdam, Almere and Schiphol, and finally the further development of the airport Schiphol.[6]

The collaboration with Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area
The city of Amsterdam has had a regional organ of municipal collaboration for some years, called Stad Regio Amsterdam, of which Almere was not taking part in. It is only recently, with the formalization of the much larger Amsterdam Metropolitan Area, that municipal authorities from Amsterdam and Almere are engaged in regular exchanges and partnerships. The 'Amsterdam Metropolitan Area' was founded in 2008 by the initiatives of local and regional actors, in total 27 local authorities and 2 provinces. Formely joined in a loose structure of the Northern Randstad, they agreed to intensify their collaboration to stimulate Amsterdam in becoming a real « metropolis » (Gemeente Amsterdam 2009b). The ambition is to set a space for coordination and discussion of joint metropolitan issues, such

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[5]   Although the enthusiasm and sense of need for such large residential developments have decreased in the last months following the financial crisis, this having been discussed in recent parliamentary debates ().

[6]   A fifth Randstad urgent project for this region originally figured in the plans, but has disappeared since : the protection and valorization of the Ijmeer-Markeer natural area. I come back to the issues associated with the preservation of the Ijmeer lake later in the text.

as housing, employment, transport and the preservation of the countryside (Metropool regio 2008). This bottom-up initiative does not have its equivalent at the Randstad level (Randstad is much more a creation of the National government) (Lambergts et al. 2008).

But the collaboration of Amsterdam and Almere pre-dates the formalization of the Metropool regio Amsterdam. Already from 2003-2006, a workshop had been organized (by the initiative of Almere) in a building on the banks of the lake Ijmeer which separates the two cities, the *Atelier Ijmeer 2030+ : Amsterdam Ijmeer Almere,* with many officials, planners, architects and some citizens and groups visiting and commenting. After several discussions around evolving plans and maquettes, the workshop ended up with a book which was enthusiastically commented and signed by both mayors of Amsterdam and Almere. The imaginary of a dubble city, Amsterdam-Almere, was then proposed. The other main product of this workshop was the recommendation of a new direct bridge between Amsterdam and Almere, a bridge which would make concrete the connection desired between Amsterdam and Almere, and which would become a visible landmark in the landscape of the city-region (Koolhaas and Marcusse 2006, Molenaar 2004). Plans for a new Almere district over the water, Almere Pampus, were also sketched out.

The planning scheme of Almere 2.0

The municipality of Almere continued to envision its development in synergy with Amsterdam and the metropolitan region, arguing in terms of complementarity :

> "On the one hand, Almere's economy is totally interwoven with those of the Amsterdam metropolitan area and the Noordvleugel Utrecht. On the other hand, the Northern Randstad will also depend on the possibilities of what Almere can offer. This mutual interaction between the region and Almere can only take place on condition that there are optimum connections between the areas (Gemeente Almere 2009: 19)".

In its new structural planning vision, the municipality of Almere offers a plan for a new Almere, an Almere 2.0. To become Almere 2.0, Almere is to double its population to meet the needs of the region; it is to diversify its population (more young, students, new families and prestige houses) and to diversify its activities (more employment, a higher institution of education). In brief, the objective is to become a full and complete city, one which will be strongly connected to form a "coherent metropolitan region" (Gemeente Almere 2009: 15). The municipality does not lack ambitions.

Almere 2.0 is also proposing a distinctive character for Almere, a special character which, according to some, was still missing. The plan of building over water is not only expanding Almere in the direction of Amsterdam, it is also giving it a new neighborhood with attractive amenities (Koolhaas and Marcusse 2006, Gemeente Almere 2009). The foreseen dense and diverse developments of Almere Pampus is imagined to give a touch of urbanity to Almere which they are looking for. It is, in short, an effort of place-making.

Almere Pampus : the proposed islands on the water

Building on the east side
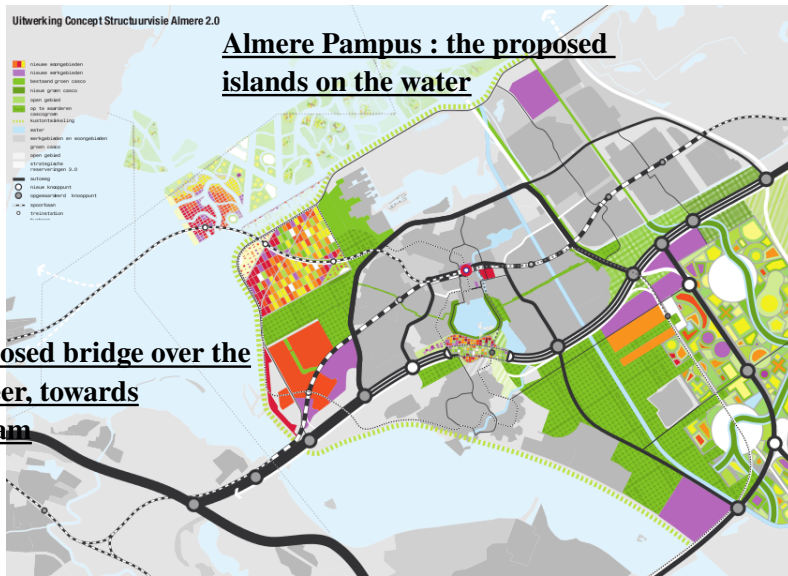
The proposed bridge over the lake Ijmeer, towards Amsterdam

Counter-discourse : keeping the lake out of it; but old Almere neighborhoods in

While public authorities strive to set up a competitive metropolitan network, and the municipality of Almere works actively to be part of it, others actors (many from peripheral locations) consider their participation to this re-scaling project in a completely other way, working against the connections instead of in favor of it. This counter-discourse coalition brings together an interesting mix of territorial affiliations, and propose another perspective on the belonging to the metropolis. Their discourse is structured around the preservation of distinctive symbolic elements : the lake Ijmeer and the distinctive urban neighborhoods of Ijburg and Almere.

Keep the lake open

The main counter-discourse to this scalar project – growth of Almere and further connectivity with Amsterdam- can be summarized by this motto : "keep the lake Ijmeer open"! The lake Ijmeer sits indeed in between Amsterdam and Almere, where the bridge, and new residential islands from Almere are projected. The lake Ijmeer has been recognized as a natural asset of importance which needs to be not only preserved, but protected and restored, its quality having diminished in the last decades. It is protected under national and European law. The bridge and the projected new neighborhoods over the water are viewed by environmental groups and near-by residents as a denial of this engagement and as the death of the lake as a natural preserved area and landscape. For them, planning schemes should not only be about protecting the Green Hearth, but also about protecting the now called "Blue Heart" of the Randstad. What is particularly interesting is how the coalition building around the motto of keeping the lake open has been played out.

The more dedicated and active group to protect the Ijmeer is Kwade Zwaan (Black swaans) formed of three woman living in the village Uitdam on the opposite bank of the lake Ijmeer in relation to Almere. They have been involved in contesting projects threatening the lake for more than ten years. The group, with the support and involvement of a large national

environmental organization in the Netherlands, Milieudefensie (Friends of the Earth Netherlands), has managed to create a community of belonging to the lake, a sort of community of fate (Hajer 2003), opposed to construction on the lake. With the support of Milieudefensie, the campaigns of the Black Swaans, which were viewed by some as a NIMBY-type militancy to protect for their own view toward the lake, became considered a broad environmental and recreational coalition.

The first actors which the Kwade Zwaan (Black Swaans) and Milieudefensie reached were the residents and representatives of the towns and villages on their side of the Ijmeer, getting some mayors and green elected officials on their side. The natural and recreational values of the lake as well as the view on the open water, were prime reasons for their support. Milieudefensie organised an event on the shore of the lake, with a huge billboard of what the view would become with the foreseen projects (see figure above). Associations of recreational navigation also became partners within this coalition, since the bridge on the lake threatened their boating activities on this broad open lake. Also for them did the bridge represent a threat for one of the few remaining natural landscape (with no human construction) in the Randstad which they could enjoy. In June 2009, more than 200 boats navigated in a circle around an island of the lake Ijmeer; protesting against projects to build on the lake.

Keep the lake open... also for the suburban residents already living on it!
Another key actor joined in the coalition: the residents of Ijburg, the only residential neighborhoods developed on man-made islands on the lake Ijmeer, in proximity to Amsterdam. Faced with an important housing shortage in the 1990s, even with the move of families toward surrounding suburbs like Almere, the city of Amsterdam had to think of new residential developments. The project of constructing on the lake Ijmeer created (just like today) much oppositions. A referendum was held with a majority against it, but with fewer voters than required (Buurman and Kloos 2005: 153-160). The project went on, with the first buildings on the two first islands being constructed 10 years ago (a second phase of Ijburg is still planned). Environmentalists (including the Black Swaans) had opposed themselves to the construction of the neighborhood Ijburg.

But now, those Ijburgers (residents of Ijburg) wish to preserve the rest of the lake, to preserve the lake and their own view towards the open water. There is also another reason to their involvement in the campaign to keep the lake open. If Ijburg is seen by some as a suburban Amsterdam quarter built on the lake, it was on the other hand thought as a new green and sustainable neighborhood, designed for individuals and families using little the car (it is linked with a direct tram to the center of Amsterdam). Residents of Ijburg are thus little enthusiastic about being one node of passage of a car-bridge between Amsterdam and Almere (see map below).[7]

This positioning of Ijburgers is very interesting in regard to the presumed interest of being better connected to other parts of the metropolitan area. Many planners and elected officials position Ijburg as an interesting future node in the network-axis of Amsterdam-Almere (Buurman and Kloos 2005, Koolhass and Marcuse 2005, Gemeente Almere 2008, press). But this connection is far from being valued by all Ijburgers (Forum Ijburg 2009, Milieudefensie 2009b, press), for the reasons outlined before. If many do wish an even better public transport connection, thus being in favor of a public transport tunnel, the linking up with Almere does not appear, pragmatically the most efficient and quickest option : improving local connections with Amsterdam, such as the tram, being presented by

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7   Whether it is because of this pre-inclination for little car transportation or rather to preserve their calm living environment.

the environmental coalition as better alternatives when talking about the connectivity of Ijburg (Milieudefensie et al. 2009: 10-11).

Map from an environmental coalition showing the potential connections of Almere within the region : a brigdge accros the lake Ijmeer (Almere's favourite option) or a widening of the existant Hollandse bridge and an increased service on the Stichtse train line towards Utrecht (the environmentalists favoured option). Source : Milieudefensie et al. 2009.

Contesting the proposed connections and the focus on new neighborhoods of prestige

This positioning of Ijburg within the metropolitan project of Almere is not the only connection which was put in doubt by environmental organizations. Lead by Milieudefensie (a national group), a coalition of environmental organizations (many from the provincial level) have produced a study on alternative connections for Almere which would leave the lake out of further development. Their stronger proposition is to increase the capacity of the existent bridge between Almere and the Amsterdam region, the Hollandse Bridge (which has car and rail traffic), in place of constructing a new one.[8] The argument is that strengthening the current line of rail transport on this existing bridge will save the Ijmeer, while offering a quicker and more sustainable transport connection. The argument that this option is much more easily technically and politically, and would thus have much better chances of being implemented rapidly, has brought it some support in Almere. It is useful to recall here that Almere commuters to the mainland are desperate to have better transportation links implemented. When Milieudefensie organized a debate in Almere over this, they received many sympathetic comments from the public which wanted realistic and pragmatic transport connections, implementable rapidly (Milieudefensie 2009c).

Another aspect of Almere's connectivity ambitions were criticized by both environmentalists and some voices within the municipality of Almere (planner and residents). The proposed connection of Almere within a metropolitan network is done through the west side of the municipality, by the building of a new sector over water. The old neighborhoods of Almere are not included directly in this connection. In opposite, it is taught that strengthening the current rail lines would help them better (Milieudefensie et al. 2009).

From an urbanistic and social point of view, an urban planner from Almere also argued, in a booklet

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[8]   The municipality of Almere proposed in its structural plan (2009) to do the three options showed on the map : to contruct a new bridge over the Ijmeer, to widen the existent bridge and to better connect with the rail line towards Utrecht. More emphasis was however put on the first, because of its symbolic manifestation of the Amsterdam-Almere connection (Koolhaas and Marcusse 2006).

called "The Other Almere", that all the attention given to the scaling-up of Almere might be at the cost of the existing neighborhoods of the municipality (Breugem 2010). He warns of the competition between the older sectors and the planned newer sectors of Almere, which could lead to deterioration and social problems in the old suburban neighborhoods (at least if necessary investment for revitalization does not come). This is parallel to another social criticism which has been made to Almere : that the building on the water is only justified by prestige reasons. Almere Pampus has been called the Dubai of Almere. If Almere only wanted to respond to building shortages, it could more easily build on the easter side, but without the view and amenities of the lake which promise a prestigious neighborhood. With those points, some actors were thus able to express and diffuse in the press a tension between the ambition of the new Almere 2.0 and the cost and consequences for the old Almere.

In sum, the counter-discourse to Almere's growth and connectivity to Amsterdam is varied. It first includes a community of fate around the preservation of the lake Ijmeer. Second, it also includes preoccupied citizens and planners who considered the proposed connectivity with much caution and even suspicion, whether because they do not wish to become a node in the Amsterdam-Almere axis (Ijburg) or because they fear the consequences of this new connection for old neighborhoods that would fall in-between.

Conclusion

In this scalar metropolitan project of connecting Amsterdam and Almere, there is a clear sense that the definition of the metropolitan network matters. For Almere, it seems to be crucial to be part of it, the municipality having even bluntly defined itself as a future dubble city with Amsterdam. Other public authorities (national government and the Amsterdam metropolitan area) have also supported such increased connectivity between Amsterdam and Almere. It is considered, because of increased housing, employment opportunities and improved accessibility (and the preservation of the Green Hearth), a favorable and necessary step for the Amsterdam metropolitan area, or the Randstad, in order improve its competitive position in relation to European metropolises.

This proposed connectivity is not consensual. For its opponents, it threatens one binding element which links together many residents from the metropolitan area of Amsterdam : the lake Ijmeer. The lake is a joint asset, one which is valued for its natural and recreational value, on which the construction of a bridge or residential islands are contested. The protection of the symbolic Green Heart of the Randstad is not a reason to forget the Blue Heart, the environmentalists argue.

From the suburbs' points of views, the ambition to take part in the selective network of connectivity is not shared by all. Rather, the ability to stay out of it, and to define themselves rather around the icon of the lake (or by some other connections or the distinctiveness of their neighborhood which they value), has been emphasized. Even in Almere, residents and the planner Breugem have been worried not of their connectivity within the metropolis, but of their livability as old neighborhoods within a booming town which could leave them behind.

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