

# Pivotal Position for Large-Scale Urban Agriculture in Bottom-Up Development in Almere

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*Today's Oosterwold area features large scale world market oriented agriculture. Photo by Jan Eelco Jansma*

**The complexity of planning food-producing cities can be witnessed in the development of a new greenfield extension of 4,300 hectares on the eastern side of the Dutch city of Almere: Oosterwold. Authorities intend a pivotal role for urban agriculture as a placemaking instrument in the area; at least 50 per cent of the planned area needs to be farmed. Oosterwold embraced the initial ideas of a co-habitation between urban and rural life as suggested in the Agromere plans (more about Agromere: Jansma and Visser, 2011).**

Oosterwold is a unique example of do-it-yourself urban planning with few regulations and much space to develop. In this article, we would like to offer two suggestions to support the development of urban agriculture in Oosterwold.

## Almere

Almere is a new town designed with an unique polynuclear layout that is completely different from most Dutch cities. This layout was inspired by the English garden cities of Ebenezer Howard. In a period of 40 years, Almere developed into a city with approximately 200,000 inhabitants. Due to

the growing need for new housing in the Amsterdam metropolitan area, Almere will have to double in size over the next decades. This intended expansion was conceived in the Almere 2.0 programme. Oosterwold, part of the Almere 2.0 programme, is expected to house approximately 15,000 households. The area should also be sustainable, carbon-neutral and as self-sufficient as possible (Almere, 2012).

The transformation of Oosterwold is expected to ensue as a so-called “organic” (in terms of step-by-step) urban development approach based in the “Do-It-Yourself Urbanism” paradigm (Ilieva, 2013). The authorities provide future residents with a set of 10 principles (see box). Each potential settler is provided with a “road map” which consists of 6 stages: how to navigate from initial idea to realisation. Although the authorities have a relatively small role to play in Oosterwold, still some legal procedures and permits are obligatory. To facilitate the settlers and supervise the area’s development, a subsidiary has been founded. This subsidiary is a legal organisation approved by regional and national authorities; it consists of an area director and a small staff.

## What happened since?

By autumn 2015, more than 180 initiatives applied for a site in Oosterwold. Most initiatives (private persons, groups, families and commercial developers) focus on the development of real estate. They opt for land with the urban agriculture qualification (more space than the standard for urban agriculture, see principle 4) because it is less expensive to purchase. So far,

## 10 Principles of Oosterwold (Almere, 2015)

1. *People make Oosterwold; not the government, but future residents create their own house, estate, neighbourhood, enterprise or urban farm.*
  2. *Each settler has the freedom to choose the location, size and shape of his site, in consultation with the landowner. Some locations are allocated for infrastructure or nature development.*
  3. *Oosterwold has a fixed standard division of space: at least 50% of the area is designated for urban agriculture, the remainder is allotted for housing and commercial activities (20%) and infrastructure, nature development, water infrastructure and public or other green space (30%).*
  4. *It is possible to deviate from the standard (see principle 3). If you plan more space (than the standard 20%) for real estate on your plot, this has to be compensated with land for urban agriculture elsewhere in the area. Settlers who opt for more than standard urban agriculture or public green on their plot can purchase their plot for a lower price.*
  5. *To maintain the green character of the landscape, every property must be surrounded by green space. The floor air ratio (FAR) is 0.5, i.e., with a one-storey property a maximum of 50% of the site can be developed.*
  6. *The settlers develop their own supporting infrastructure: authorities will only provide the main infrastructure in the area.*
  7. *At least two-thirds of Oosterwold will remain green: future Oosterwold will harbour different kinds of green (public and private): forest, agriculture, gardens and leisure areas.*
  8. *The sites are as self-sufficient as possible: each settler – individually or with others – is responsible for their own (tap)water supply, wastewater and sewage treatment and energy supply.*
  9. *Each site is financially self-sustaining: this requires that less profitable developments like nature and agriculture have to be sustained with more profitable initiatives like real estate development.*
  10. *Public investment follows private investments: settlers invest in advance in future public facilities. With enough settlers in the area, the government will use these funds for the development of public facilities and the expansion of existing infrastructure.*
- The Oosterwold subsidiary is responsible for the execution of these principles.*

there are few initiatives with the intention of developing urban agriculture at professional (and larger) scale. A conference, organised in the autumn of 2015, highlighted the fact that prices for land (approx. EUR 90,000/ha for an urban agriculture site) combined with high investment costs and an uncertain development pathway discouraged professional urban farmers to settle in the area.

Although local policy has high ambitions for changing the planning process in Oosterwold, the reality is unruly. Oosterwold sharply contradicts with the strict spatial organisation, blueprint development plans, and institution-alised approach to planning in The Netherlands. The Oosterwold conference emphasises that authorities as well as settlers struggle with their new role and position in the development process. Settlers have to take care of procedures like archaeological and ecological pre-research at their potential site as well as the construction of roads and utilities like tap water and electricity. Normally these are executed by professionals, not by private persons. Settlers also have to put a lot of effort into involving the authorities in their ideas and intentions. Civil servants of crucial departments at the municipality and involved utility institutions are not always prepared to engage in this way of participatory planning practice. Inherent to this kind of innovative manner of area development is that rules and procedures evolve, affecting both authorities and potential settlers. One of the first settlers keeps a blog on the progress of their property since the very first ideas (Almere, 2016). One of the important lessons for new settlers is that this means of development is time-consuming; a “part-time job”,

as one of the settlers called it at the 2015 conference. There is also a need to share experience and lessons, not only among the settlers but also between settlers and authorities, and between the involved departments and institutions. Settlers and authorities both feel the need for some room to experiment outside the standard. Nevertheless, the expectation is that the procedures will take less time in the future, when authorities and settlers are more accustomed to this new situation.

### Prospects of urban agriculture

Today, Oosterwold harbours mostly large-scale arable and dairy farms; they produce for the world market. A survey in 2011 among these farmers showed that only 25% of them were potentially interested in converting to urban agriculture; they do not feel the urge to change their profitable practices. Hence, the area will need urban agriculture pioneers from outside who are willing to invest in the area. But, as mentioned, the costs of investment are high and the development pathway uncertain. Without incentives, the development of urban agriculture to the required 50% of Oosterwold's area will be difficult. We propose two incentives that could stimulate urban agriculture initiatives: a land conservation trust and an incubator.

A *public farmland conserving organisation or trust* could mediate between land supply and demand but could also actively purchase land from incumbent farmers who want to leave the area. This could provide new entrepreneurs, or other initiatives, from outside the area with land to establish

### Cooperation between a real estate agency and an urban farmer

Over the last decade, real estate developer AM has acquired several sites throughout the Oosterwold area. Eva Hekkenberg, development manager at AM, sees opportunities for new real estate development in the area in collaboration with urban farmers. The first collaboration takes place at a location of approximately 40 ha. "Some people want to develop their property by themselves, but others are less interested in taking care of the whole development procedure themselves. Here we see a role for AM. The real estate developer facilitates the development of roads, utilities, the legal hurdles and developing urban agriculture. Residents then purchase a site, sometimes even with a house. For the agricultural part, AM has teamed up with an urban farmer. Of course the urban farmer takes care of the agriculture at the location, but his role is more than that: the farm has a key role in the placemaking of the location. If they wish, future residents can even cooperate in the farming." It is expected that in 2016 this collaboration between AM and the urban farmer will start in Oosterwold.

their urban farm. This trust could evolve into a modern kind of publicly owned land, a kind of agricultural commons. Funds to establish the trust could be derived from property owners in the area who have no interest in establishing urban agriculture on their acquired plot (and would be happy if someone else cultivates it). The trust could also derive funds from stakeholders of the Almere area, which might help to tighten the bond between the city and Oosterwold. Moreover, placing the land, as public property, beyond the economic pressure, could preserve the land from future urban development. Establishing such a trust would be novel in the Netherlands.

The second suggestion we have that might stimulate the development of urban agriculture is to create *protective places* which encourage and facilitate start-ups with product or business development. Incubators could be locations where start-ups can experiment, adjust and mature new products or services before scaling up. Incubation occurs in learning networks of pioneers with experts, online or on-site. An example is the Vermont Food Venture Center in Hardwick (VT Food Venture Center, 2016). This centre was established by local farmers, food businesses and the local community of Hardwick with support of regional funds. In Almere, the Almere 2.0 programme offers possibilities for the funding of these kinds of initiatives.

In this initial phase of change we believe that the Oosterwold subsidiary plays a crucial role as an intermediary – to reflect on the lessons, establish an organisation, facilitate the initiatives and networks, acquire resources and broker knowledge. The initiatives could also profit from the relative proximity of the Oosterwold subsidiary to authorities in voicing their

Eva Hekkenberg, development manager at AM.  
Photo by Xander Remkens, Oosterwold Conference 2015



needs and wishes. We expect that the involvement of this intermediary will decrease over time, when a growing group of initiatives take the lead in Oosterwold.

### Final remarks

In this article, we leave a lot of issues connected with the further development of urban agriculture in Oosterwold untouched. Questions like how to organise and integrate local food production and related services in the region, how to integrate agriculture in the local circular systems and how to balance between urbanisation and agriculture will emerge sooner or later. Although today's settlers and authorities encounter hurdles that are part of an innovation of this dimension, the intended development of urban agriculture in Oosterwold is unprecedented and puts this area in the front line of innovative urban planning.

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