

Regenerative Landscapes

Designing the Transition

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Almere Oosterwold

A self-organised foodscape

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Introduction

Oosterwold is a new peri-urban settlement situated at the fringe of the city of Almere in the Netherlands. It can be considered as a prime example for a self-organized foodscape and as pinnacle in Dutch urban planning with two key features. The first feature is the “self-organisation” ethos of the new community, which means that residents take the lead in organizing and developing their property, whilst the role of the authorities is to check that the residents keep to the rules. The second unique feature of this area is that 50% of the land, that is about 2,000 ha, is earmarked to urban agriculture. Oosterwold is regarded as a next practice example for an adaptive and self-sufficient planning culture and therefore nicknamed “The Netherlands most planned unplanned area”. This article will explain both key features and their functionality in setting up and managing a regenerative and self-sufficient foodscape.

Planning regenerative Foodscapes

Oosterwold is a large, peri-urban area in the Dutch city of Almere, where the municipality has designed a planning strategy that allows residential development while retaining agriculture. In addition, Almere has set itself the goal of producing ten percent of its future food needs in this new area. Oosterwold therefore offers an interesting opportunity to observe planning practice when it comes to overcoming the conventional dichotomy of urban design and

agriculture. It is also a unique case study for observing planning with and for urban agriculture. There are almost no other examples at this scale level, which have comparable features. Against this backdrop Oosterwold can be regarded as a prototype of Howards’ Garden City concept, which remained mostly a utopian vision although it was critically acclaimed and gained international renown (Howard 1902).

Oosterwold is located on the eastern outskirts of Almere, the eighth largest city in the Netherlands and was established in the 1970s on the reclaimed Flevopolder. The Flevopolder was originally intended for large-scale conventional agriculture, primarily arable farming and livestock breeding. Due to the urgent need for housing, urbanisation is increasingly expanding in this agricultural area. Today, around 210,000 people live in Almere, the population density is almost 1,700 inhabitants per square kilometres and further population growth is planned. The Almere 2.0 master plan (Almere 2009) envisages around 15,000 new homes on an area of around 4,300 hectares by 2030, which are to be located on the Oosterwold polder close to the city. Prior to the planning of Oosterwold, spatial planning in Almere was a conventional top-down process that resulted in an urban expansion that was strictly separated from the agricultural hinterland (Jansma and Wertheim-Heck 2021). The first years of Oosterwold’s planning were still in line with conventional planning practice, which is reflected in the official planning documents.

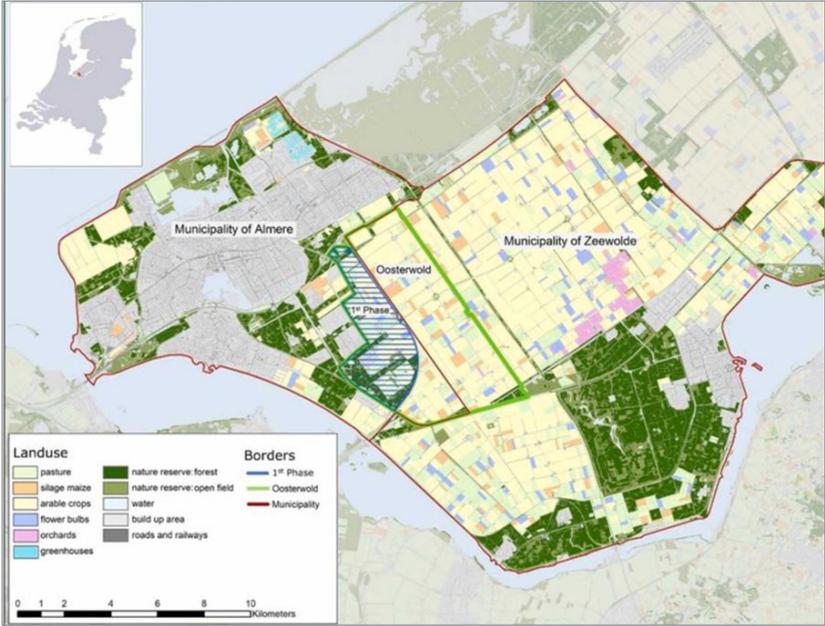


Figure 1: Basemap of Almere Oosterwold

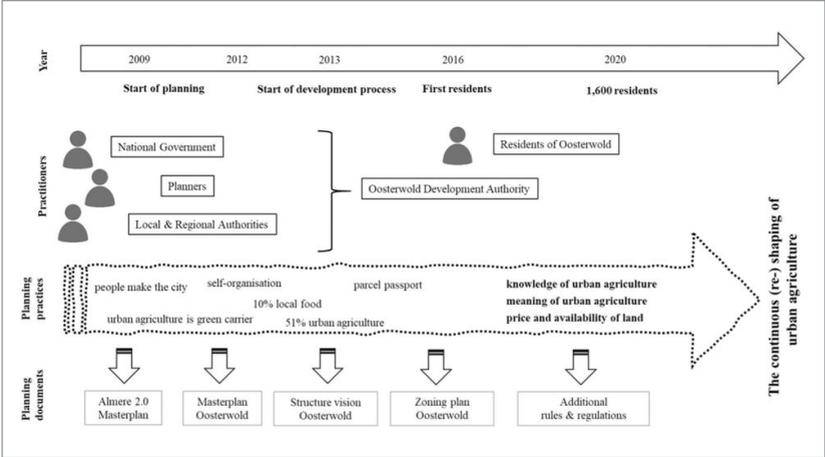


Figure 2: Planning Process in Oosterwold, derived from: Jansma and Wertheim-Heck, 2022



Figure 3: Drone Shot of Almere Oosterwold (Daniel Munderlein)

However, the planners paved the way for a participative and co-creative planning process, which is open-ended and iterative. Oosterwold's planning process has two unique features.

Firstly, the development of Oosterwold is not determined by a detailed and descriptive plan, but by the self-organisation of the residents. Oosterwold includes not only the planning and building of the residents' houses, but also the individual or cooperative self-organisation of all kinds of infrastructure and facilities that are normally provided by municipal institutions. This self-organisation process is governed by a set of formal rules and regulations.

Secondly, the planning of Oosterwold aims to combine rather than separate agriculture and housing. The master plan for Oosterwold (Almere 2012) integrates urban agriculture in the local green infrastructure and aims to produce ten percent of Almere's future food needs in Oosterwold. This goal resulted in a spatial plan that allocated 1,869 ha, or 51 percent of the available 3,645 ha, to (urban) agriculture. This means that every new resident in Oosterwold is obliged to dedicate at least 50 percent of his/her plot to urban agriculture.

A Parcel Passport for Ecosocial Diversity

To support the development of a diverse landscape with different forms of urban agriculture, the planners have divided the polder into different types of plots

that residents can purchase and farm themselves. Buyers of an agricultural plot, for example, must reserve approximately 80–90 percent of their plot for urban agriculture and may use no more than seven percent of the plot for a house, shed and yard. When purchasing a standard or commercial lot, a buyer should set aside approximately 50–60 percent of the lot for urban agriculture. The exception is the landscape plots, which do not require urban agriculture. In order to manage and control the development of urban agriculture in Oosterwold, a parcel passport was developed, which can be understood as a contract, that legally binds the new plot owners to all spatial and plot-specific development rules. For example, the parcel passport defines the spatial division of the different functions of the plot (Jansma and Wertheim-Heck 2021).

Managing Self organisation

With the self-organisation of the future residents, an innovation was introduced in planning practice. Originally, the professionals of the Oosterwold Development Agency (ODA) were the only stakeholders. Since 2016, however, a new and fast-growing and diverse group has been involved in the planning process in Oosterwold. These new residents organized themselves in formal and informal groups to share data, experiences and knowledge and to collaborate on the development of roads and housing, but also to negotiate with the ODA on the interpretation of rules and regulations. An example of a formal group is the street association, where



Figure 4: Drone Shot of Almere Oosterwold (Daniel Mürderlein)



Figure 5: Self-sufficient building with kitchen garden (Daniel Munderlein)

residents using the same street must organize to coordinate construction and maintenance. An example of an informal group is the Oosterwold platform, which is considered by residents to be their unofficial interactive learning community and consists of several working or learning groups. Despite its informal status, this platform meets regularly and officially with the ODA. Negotiations with residents and their interpretations have in some cases led the ODA to reformulate or adapt the rules and regulations. The interactions between the actors involved in the planning process – the ODA and the residents – have shaped the planning practice and thus the way agriculture is being transformed in Oosterwold.

Planning with and for Urban Agriculture

Although many studies recognize that peri-urban agriculture is important for food supply and food security in the urban region, its potential is often overlooked or marginalized by urban planning. Concepts like Garden City (Howard 1902) or Broadacre City (Wright 1944) proposed ideas for agri-urban settlements, which were rarely realized on a larger scale.

Prevailing planning practice and planning paradigms are still based on the dichotomy of agriculture and urban development. Agriculture should take place in

areas reserved for it and several studies highlight that dealing with (peri-)urban agriculture is a challenge for urban planning. It is assumed that there is a lack of strong visions beyond political traditions in order to overcome the dichotomy between urban and rural areas. Spatial planning focuses primarily on the aesthetic qualities of the green urban fringe rather than the agricultural functions (Munderlein and Pszola 2024). The development of updated and comprehensive agri-urban visions is still up in the air (Munderlein and Pszola 2022). Against this backdrop it can be stated, that convincing spatial images for foodscapes are a necessity to activate new types of public policies and innovative forms of governance (Pszola et al. 2021).

As a basis for spatial planning with urban agriculture, a comprehensive typology is proposed that describes and characterizes it (Jansma et al. 2024). For the development of foodscapes such as Almere in peri-urban areas, it can be stated that peri-urban farming is characterized by a heterogeneous pattern of holdings with intensive and specialized production, high participation in diversification, and low-intensive hobby and lifestyle-oriented farms. Against this backdrop, three generic types of peri-urban agriculture can be extracted: (1) garden farming, (2) multi-functional farming, and (3) conventional farming (Jansma and Wertheim-Heck 2022).



Figure 6: Exemplification of the three types of farming in the peri-urban area (derived from: Jansma and Wertheim-Heck, 2022)

These basic types are cleverly combined in different ways and characterize the foodscape of Almere Oosterwold. The associated planning for peri-urban agriculture requires participatory processes to develop sustainable local foodscapes from these agricultural patterns with the involvement of numerous stakeholders. Three aspects of this participatory process in Almere had a major influence on the design of the foodscape.

The first aspect is related to the planning practice, which is based on basic development rules as the parcel passport, instead of imposed prescribed regulation. This stimulates and facilitates creativity in different ways. In Oosterwold we can observe creativity in a spatial sense as well as in entrepreneurship and building style. It shows that integrating agriculture into urban planning is possible and contributes to a multifunctional, productive and attractive landscape. The planning practice stimulates new types of entrepreneurs (e.g. a farmer developing housing on his property), which result in new communities such as an area cooperative in food.

The second aspect is related to the distribution of land, in particular the measures for pricing the land and the spatial allocation of the different types of plots. It can be assumed that the rising land prices have had impacts on the acquired cultivation area per plot, as the investment capacity of the new residents has not increased to a comparable extent. The resulting smaller cultivation area means fewer opportunities for farming per plot, which inevitably contributes to residents concentrating on small-scale cultivation (kitchen garden as type 1 garden farming).

The third aspect is related to the skills and knowledge of the new inhabitants of the foodscape. The residents appeared to be predominantly newcomers to (urban) agriculture, which still must gain agricultural know-how. It is not to be expected that these non-experts would immediately start and experiment with new forms of agriculture on their plots. For example, the inexperienced gardeners and farmers who are at the forefront of the first phase of Oosterwold could benefit from more experienced actors and infrastructure that support the local development of know-how and skills in agriculture.

This would be the basis for the multifunctional agriculture in Oosterwold, which was foreseen in the masterplan.

Influenced by the three aspects mentioned above, the planning practice in Oosterwold can be considered as an open and iterative process, which still offers opportunities to include a wider range of agricultural activities in the area. Unique in the planning with and for urban agriculture process is the shared effort of residents, farmers and planners. This is based on a redistribution of responsibilities and involves negotiating each stakeholder's position in the process of development. This goes way beyond defining and drawing a new productive area, which is traditionally considered a task of landscape planners.

Conclusion

Oosterwold can be understood as a unique breeding ground for the development of a self-organized foodscape, which produces new spatial images, a hybrid of urban and rural structures as well as governance structures, which emphasize self-organisation. The context of Oosterwold is not easily comparable to many other urban regions, and its planning practice is not yet a universal blueprint for the simultaneous development of urbanisation and the promotion of agriculture in peri-urban areas. But the scale level on which Oosterwold operates is unprecedented and daring. The merit of its planning practice is the exploration of new principles for

planning peri-urban agriculture and broadens our understanding of self-sufficient neighbourhoods. Oosterwold expands the toolbox of urban design and landscape planning for the sustainable and participatory development of foodscapes.

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