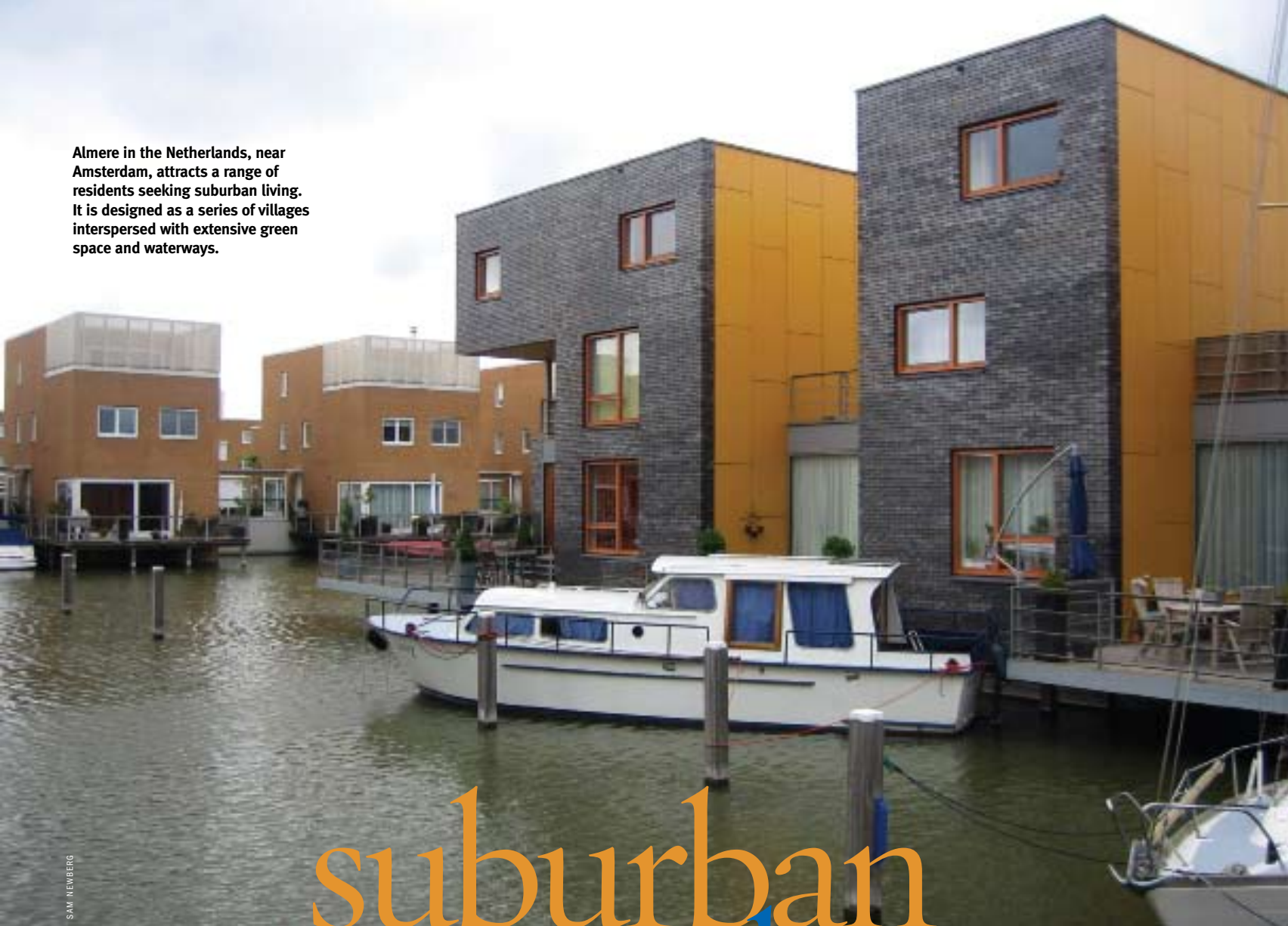


Almere in the Netherlands, near Amsterdam, attracts a range of residents seeking suburban living. It is designed as a series of villages interspersed with extensive green space and waterways.



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suburban snapshots

As the development and planning industry in the United States grapples with today's challenges of sprawl, congestion, climate change, aging infrastructure, energy prices, and a downturn felt across the industry, lessons can be learned from three longstanding master-planned communities.

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A NUMBER OF PLANNING and development ideas were pioneered back in the 1960s and 1970s when suburban development was more broadly accepted—before much of today's suburban backlash had bubbled up. Some of these include designing with the existing landscape in mind in order to preserve resources and enhance value, as well as creating self-sufficient suburbs with housing, shopping, employment, and amenities. As a result, many of these ideas have become the standard, while others—like the debate over culs-de-sac versus a more interconnected grid of residential streets, as well as congestion and sprawl in

general—continue to evolve, as is evidenced by movements such as the new urbanism.

These longstanding communities include Columbia, Maryland, outside of the city of Baltimore; the Woodlands in Houston, Texas; and Almere in the Netherlands, near Amsterdam. Columbia, for example, set a new agenda for social, racial, and economic integration in a suburban setting. The Woodlands set the bar for landscape design and sensitivity to the environment. And Almere, like many European examples of suburban development that Americans look to for inspiration, set a standard in terms of transportation and afford-

able housing. These three communities, as well as many others that came into being in the 1960s and 1970s, hold lessons for newer large communities, with regard to urban design, marketing/branding, diversity, amenities, town centers, transportation, and the role of communities in their greater regions.

Columbia, the Woodlands, and Almere are all large-scale developments by any of today's measures. Columbia and the Woodlands, for example, have just under 100,000 residents—although the Woodlands is expected to grow to around 120,000. Almere is larger, already with more than 180,000 residents—and could grow to 350,000. All three established developments have substantial employment, retail development, and entertainment, recreation, and educational opportunities that make them regional draws.

Marketing and Branding.

There are, of course, differences in the marketing and branding of Columbia, the Woodlands, and Almere. At Columbia, the developer sought to create an integrated community to serve housing, retail, social events, employment, and educational needs of a cross section of the population, and to do so in a bucolic suburban setting.

Columbia maintains a sense of community not just by branding and marketing, but also by having a strong homeowners association. Each homeowner pays \$0.75 per \$1,000 of the home's assessed value to the Columbia Association. The owner of a \$500,000 (€313,400) home pays \$375 (€235) per year, for example, which goes toward the maintenance and operation of parks, trails, tot lots, recreation centers, and activities and events for all.

The Woodlands, too, has cultivated a strong sense of community, but has a much more dominant ecological theme. Its plan emphasizes the value created by preserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the site, particularly the water and trees. The Woodlands was able not only to brand its theme around



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nature, but also to provide the right housing mix for the market over time.

Almere is, in many ways, a modern, well-connected alternative to older established Dutch cities such as Amsterdam and Utrecht. Its architecture, particularly in its town center, emphasizes the modern, and its branding and marketing reflect this. Almere has attracted a range of residents seeking suburban living, including a high percentage of immigrants. It has also attracted more than 30 foreign companies that have opened offices there, including seven companies this past year.

A strong marketing and sales effort is needed to keep a strong pace of development. For a time in the late 1960s, Columbia achieved 2,000 sales per year, which had not

been seen before. The Woodlands has fluctuated over time, but in recent years has been among the top-selling, master-planned communities in the United States, according to Robert Charles Lesser & Co., a real estate advisory firm. Almere has maintained a growth rate of 2,000 to 3,000 new housing units per year.

Planning and Design. Limited available land is a major constraint in land use planning in the Netherlands. In fact, Almere is an example of one of four large polders—new land created by building dikes and draining or pumping out water—created in the 20th century to accommodate growth. Almere is designed as a series of villages with a town center interspersed with extensive green space and waterways; in this respect, it is like a number of



Most residences and offices in Almere are less than 400 meters (or roughly one-quarter mile) from a transit stop of some kind. An extensive network of on- and off-street bike lanes makes Almere as bicycle friendly as other urban areas in the Netherlands. Its town center, which includes residences, offices, retail, entertainment, and civic uses, also includes an array of buildings by leading European architects.

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American communities. It also has less than one-quarter of the density of the major Dutch cities of Amsterdam, the Hague, Rotterdam, and Utrecht. However, because of considerable planning involvement by both national and local government, transportation options and affordable housing are more easily available than in most American communities.

Rail service in Almere began in 1986 when the community was just ten years old. Today, the city is well connected to the national rail system. Most residences and offices are less than 400 meters (1,312 ft, roughly one-quarter mile) from a transit stop of some kind. An extensive network of on- and off-street bike lanes makes Almere as bicycle friendly as other urban areas in the Netherlands. Roughly 30 percent of all trips in the Netherlands are made by bicycle.

By contrast, transit service is substantially more limited at the Woodlands and Columbia, and although both have extensive bike trails, they are more recreation focused than transportation oriented to and from homes, shopping, and employment. The parks and trail system are major amenities in all three communities.

Almere has a highly aggressive affordable housing policy compared with large master-

planned communities in the United States. More than 30 percent of all homes in Almere are affordable, as defined by households earning less than €27,000 (\$43,076) annually and with monthly rents that do not exceed €520 (\$830), as of 2007. Of those affordable homes, called “social housing,” two-thirds are rented and one-third is owned. Nearly all affordable rental housing in Almere is owned by three local housing corporations.

Ann Forsyth, professor of city and regional planning at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, has studied suburban development extensively, and wrote the book *Reforming Suburbia* (published by the University of California Press in 2005), which is an in-depth analysis of the planned communities of Irvine, Columbia, and the Woodlands. She is also familiar with Dutch planning and with the city of Almere, and notes that she appreciates the level of public sector involvement and the results it achieves. “I like [its] comprehensiveness,” says Forsyth, referring to the scale of transportation planning and the provision of affordable housing.

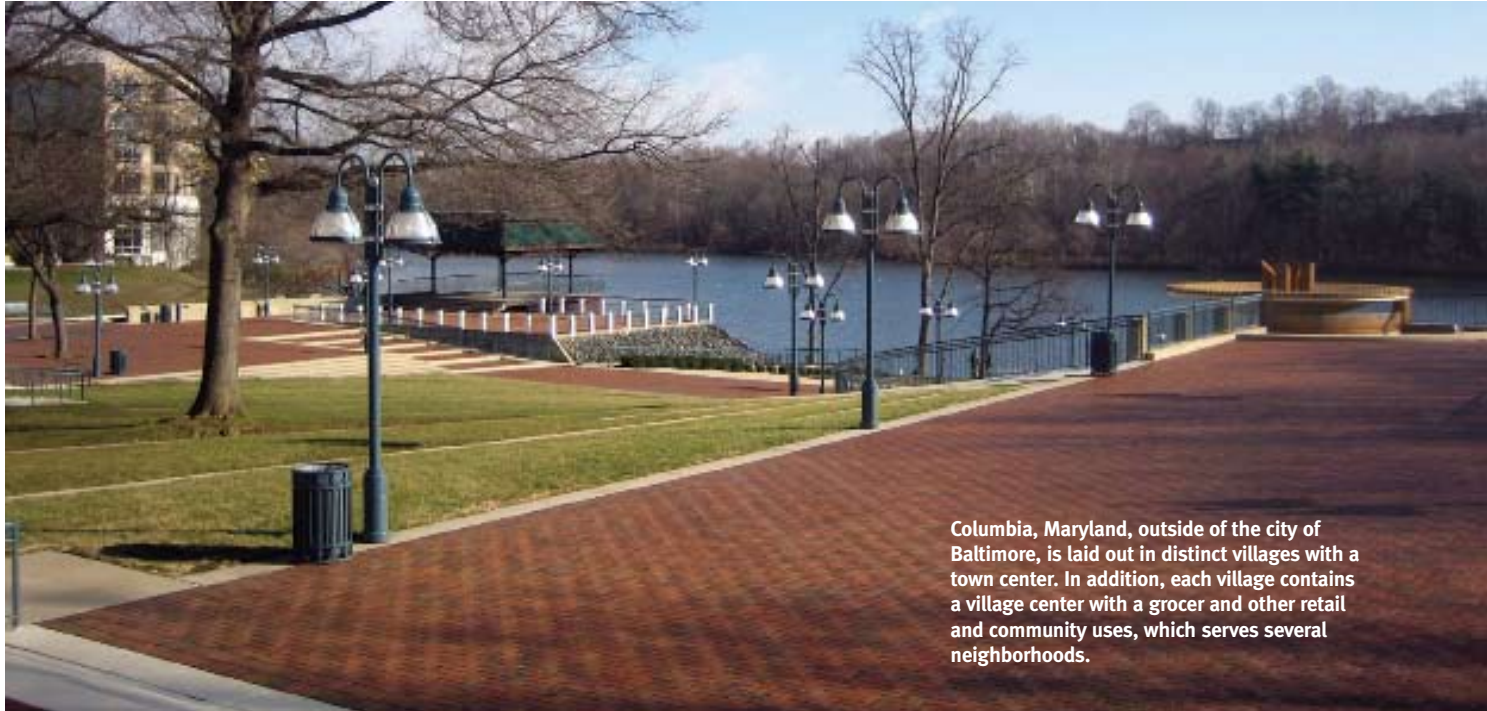
Like Almere, the Woodlands was created with water in mind, and is perhaps best known for its landscape architecture, designed by Ian McHarg, who established the

landscape architecture program at the University of Pennsylvania. A heavy emphasis was placed on preserving landscapes and living in harmony with the natural setting.

Water is everywhere in the Woodlands development, which uses a natural drainage system of ditches, streams, wetlands, and lakes for mitigating runoff. The natural system saved substantially on the cost of storm sewer construction. The Woodlands also sets an aesthetic standard for roads and commercial development. Arterial roadways are lined thickly with trees and undergrowth, so that drivers typically cannot see across medians or into commercial development. As a result, there is none of the visual blight of typical commercial strips.

Like Almere and the Woodlands, Columbia is laid out in distinct villages with a town center, but it takes the concept further. Each village contains a village center with a grocer and other retail and community uses, and it serves several neighborhoods. Each neighborhood contains a center with a park, an elementary school, and a convenience store.

Because of demographic shifts and changes in market forces, some of the schools and grocery stores have closed in Columbia



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Columbia, Maryland, outside of the city of Baltimore, is laid out in distinct villages with a town center. In addition, each village contains a village center with a grocer and other retail and community uses, which serves several neighborhoods.

over the years. However, the supply and demand for shopping and community amenities have remained in markedly better balance than has occurred in countless communities across the United States that overzone, and therefore, overbuild, commercial space. Columbia has very little vacant or deteriorating commercial space. Furthermore, the range of services provided in each village and neighborhood is noteworthy, enhancing the social fabric of the entire community.

Although Columbia is laid out on a system of winding roads and culs-de-sac, its idea of small self-sustaining villages and no commercial strip development has been adopted by the new urbanists, albeit in a much different layout.

Town/Regional Centers. “The Woodlands is beginning to function as a regional center for the north Houston metro area,” says urban historian Joel Kotkin, referring to the Woodlands’ town center and the regional draw it has become as it matures. Like the Woodlands, Almere, and Columbia have town centers offering retail, employment, and civic uses that have become regional attractions.

Both Columbia and the Woodlands have traditional interior malls, but the Woodlands also has a recently opened pedestrian-friendly retail center that is more akin to a lifestyle center.

By contrast, Almere has a town center known for its striking architecture, which sets

itself apart from all others. The master plan for the Almere town center, designed by architect Rem Koolhaas and his firm, the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) based in Rotterdam, contains a variety of uses such as residences, offices, retail, entertainment, and civic uses, but also includes an array of buildings by leading European architects.

The Woodlands has become a regional draw due to the public open space along the Woodlands Waterway, a canal running through its town center. Flanked by walkways on both sides and served by a shuttle boat, the waterway has attracted substantial development to its banks, including offices, residences, a hotel, and a pavilion for live performances.

Although Columbia has a town square with public space flanked by restaurants, a hotel, and offices, it is cut off from the regional mall by a large roadway. As a result, the town square suffers somewhat from lack of connectivity.

Lessons Learned/Lasting Solutions. “We lead regional lives,” explains Peter Calthorpe, president of Calthorpe Associates in Berkeley, California, noting that despite the best intentions of developers to provide retail, employment, and civic uses in master planned communities, the reality of today’s world is that people operate on a much larger scale. Kotkin agrees, and has long promoted his belief that the suburbs should be an “archipelago of vil-

lages” within a larger metropolitan area, or, in effect, town centers like those found at the Woodlands or Columbia.

Calthorpe notes that, as a result, a regional network of strong village centers connected by transit is important. “Is it walkable, is it diverse, and is it built at a human scale?” he asks, noting that many master-planned communities today lack these criteria that in his mind are the fundamental building blocks of good urbanism. “The solutions entail alternatives to the car and building denser,” he says. He notes that many new urbanism communities have achieved some of this, but maintains there is much to do.

Ann Forsyth concludes in her 2005 study that for all the planning and design that went into Columbia and the Woodlands, while certainly resonating within the industry and among buyers and renters, have not actually resulted in fewer miles traveled or, necessarily, in a measurable reduction of sprawl.

Planners and developers look to places like Almere in the Netherlands for inspiration, often returning home and wondering why the United States lacks the marriage of good transit planning and inspired urban and suburban design. It would be too simplistic to look to the Dutch and other European countries as holding all the lessons in planning and development. Forsyth reminds us that Almere is in



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The Woodlands in Houston, Texas, has a strong ecological theme and emphasizes the value created by preserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the site. A pedestrian-friendly retail center recently opened, and the canal running through the town center has attracted office development, residences, a hotel, and a pavilion for live performances.



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a different system, meaning that the level of government involvement with planning, transportation, affordable housing, and public financing create different opportunities and outcomes, making direct comparisons difficult. Architect Alex Garvin agrees, but nonetheless is staunch in his opinion on the matter. “I’d say the Dutch are way ahead,” he says. Kotkin is more measured. “There are positives and negatives in both countries.”

True, Almere is evidence that strong public commitment to nonautomobile traffic pays dividends. Early investments in bus, rail, and bicycle infrastructure have resulted in sub-

stantially higher rates of transit and biking compared with comparable developments in the United States.

“One thing we should take to heart is the ease with which you can go bankrupt,” says Garvin. Indeed, whereas master-planned communities in Europe and America hold many lessons on how and how not to develop, he reminds us of just how many moving parts and intangibles there are in development, and how much more exposed large master-planned communities are to market cycles, particularly those communities trying to break new ground.

A lot has to be said for the vision and level of risk it takes to create large communities that require decades to complete. The developers of Columbia and the Woodlands, Jim Rouse and George Mitchell, respectively, had very strong visions for what they wanted their communities to be. The social vision at Columbia holds true today, in the physical design and association, and the community has aged well, providing a variety of services for the diverse population living there.

“The vision thing matters,” is Kotkin’s opinion. As Garvin noted, the Woodlands, in particular, has been able over time to carry out its vision of developing within and embracing its natural setting, in addition to delivering the housing product and amenities that resonate in the market. “They took a great asset and did something with it,” says Kotkin.

Columbia, too, provides a lesson in master planning for the appropriate level of amenities, and has been mostly successful at not overbuilding, particularly retail space, at the neighborhood, village, and town center levels.

One lingering problem is, of course, traffic congestion and sprawl. Whereas communities like Columbia and the Woodlands provide a better aesthetic experience for comparable suburbs, they do not measurably reduce traffic congestion or sprawl. The levels of affordable housing, transit usage, and biking in Almere certainly provide an instructive model, as that community has achieved these levels while still offering distinct neighborhoods, a town center, and plenty of open space and amenities. The smart growth, new urbanism, and green development movements have been grappling with these continuing issues, as is evidenced by the creation of LEED for Neighborhood Development, for example.

The imperative is still to look to mature examples in both Europe and the United States. Almere, Columbia, and the Woodlands hold valuable lessons for the development community today. There remains much to learn, and it will take a greater level of maturity with newer projects before the development community will know what lessons apply to future development. **UL**

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