

# Amsterdam, NL

Savannah Hines-Elzinga

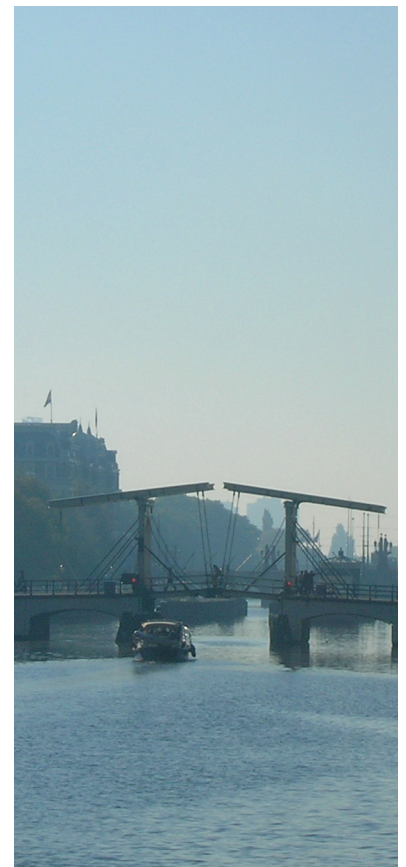
'Venice of the North'



“**A**msterdam, the greatest planned city of northern Europe, has always been a well-known name in world history. In the 17th century Amsterdam was the centre of world economy, and nowadays the city is known for its tolerant character. (<http://www.amsterdam.info/basics/history/>)” What is most remarkable about Amsterdam is that the city is almost entirely man made and yet is still seems to be sensitive to basic human and environmental needs. Unlike American cities, the car and train were not an important factor in the city’s original layout and of course did not even exist. Today, cars are present but seem a less favorable form of transportation. Bicyclists and trams have taken over the city and can be seen everywhere.

Amsterdam was originally designed for defense. It is composed of semi-circles that create tiny islands linked by bridges. Amsterdam’s city center is very compact. This, coupled with the fact that the city is made of a gently curving and very narrow street system, creates a highly walkable and interesting environment. The bends in the road create a sense of mystery and intrigue and can prove a little confusing until you figure out the names of all the canals. The concept for open space within the region was the idea of the five green fingers. Each finger leads to the heart of the city and allows people to use them as connectors. The finger that leads from Amsterdam is Bos Park.

“In the official list there are about 30 parks in Amsterdam, ranging from Wertheim Park which covers one hectare, to the fabulous Vondel Park which covers 48 hectares. In the number of parks makes Amsterdam a peaceful oasis even on a busiest day...” (<http://www.amsterdam.info/parks/>). Within Amsterdam the largest of parks act as green anchors scattered around the city. The anchors are linked by the street systems and are really what make this city feel like a network of open spaces rather than random spots for recreation. The streets around the canals are practical for human needs, creating linkages, as well as ecologically functional in creating habitat corridors.



## City Statistics

City Population: 736,045

City Area: 219 (km<sup>2</sup>)

Density Level: 3,361  
(p/km<sup>2</sup>)

Population Urbanized:  
66%

Park space per person: 42  
square feet

## Context

“The Netherlands is the most densely populated country in Europe and one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Planning strategies in the late Nineteenth Century sought to address the issue of how to accommodate a growing population with rising aspirations on a limited land area, much of which is below sea level” (Nancy’s book). The planner’s priority was to maintain the center of the country as the green heart of the Netherlands. In other words, the idea of urban sprawl was already a concern for the planners and densification was the only option. Luckily, quality of life was also a concern for planners and a city park system was in the works.



Top Left: Amsterdam after 1663

Above: Amsterdam end of the 19th century

Left: Current map showing Amsterdam's parks



## Major Components

### Connective corridors:

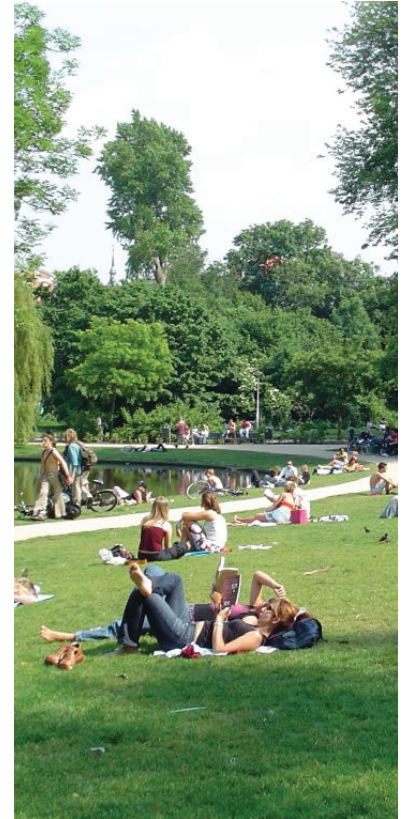
Transportation systems in Amsterdam were very well thought out in their conception. Trains connect Amsterdam to the Dutch countryside and to all of Europe. Trams within the city provide a cheap and fast intercity transportation. But the main form of everyday movement through the compact city is the bicycle. The bike is a quiet and environmentally good solution to the tiny street systems and a perfect way to enjoy the urban landscape. As mentioned above, it is the streets in conjunction with the parks of Amsterdam that act as the connective corridors within the city.

### Anchors: large parks, patches, & preserves:

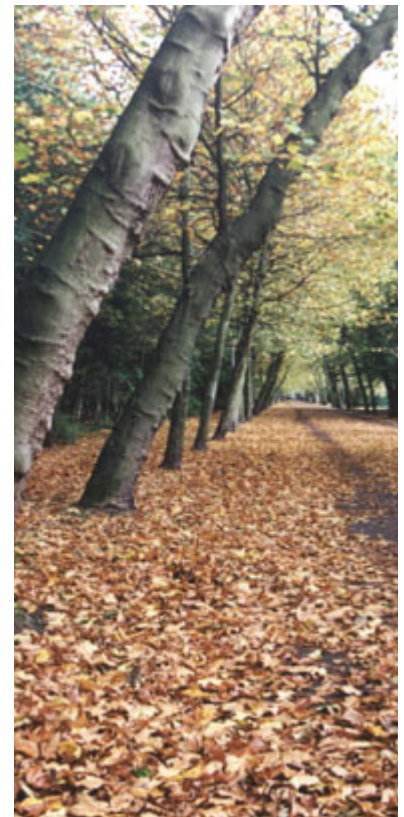
"Amsterdam has a wide variety of parks within the city limits. The parks offer respite from the hustle and bustle of the city and range from small green areas planted with trees and flowers, to large parks with amusements, picnic areas, sports facilities, water features, hiking trails and paths for cyclists" (<http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.world-guides.com>).

'In 1866 the city engineer designed a plan that called for parks at either end of the town, formally laid out suburbs to the south, and two other parks projected to the southwest (one became Vondel Park). A later plan in 1875 had two smaller parks within concentric rings of dense development (Ooster Park came from these plans)' (Nancy's book).

Vondel Park is "the largest city park in Amsterdam, and the most famous park in the Netherlands. Vondel Park welcomes about 8 million visitors every year, and is a very popular destination for locals for jogging, dog-walking, or just enjoying the view. Free concerts are given at the open-air theatre or in the summer at the park's bandstand. In 1864 a group of prominent Amsterdammers formed a committee to found a public park. They raised money to buy 8 hectares of land and the architect L.D. Zocher was commissioned to design the park as an English landscape. They used vistas, ponds and pathways to create an illusion of a natural area. The park was open to public in 1865 as a horseback riding and strolling park named Nieuwe Park. The name Vondelpark was adopted in 1867 when a statue of Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel was situated into the park. The committee soon raised money to enlarge the park and by 1877 it reached its current space of 45 hectares. At that time its location was on the edge of Amsterdam, since then it has become central in the city, close to Leidseplein and Museumplein. (<http://www.amsterdam.info/parks/>)"



Top: Summer day in Vondel Park  
Below: Fall in Vondel Park







Above: Map of Amsterdamse Bos

Amsterdamse Bos is a 2310 acre park and “the largest urban park created during the twentieth century anywhere in the world....It was conceived as a ‘green wedge’ of recreational open space for the people of Amsterdam, directly linked to the ‘green heart’ of Randstad” (Nancy’s book). Like most great urban parks it is not located in the city center. Instead its entrance is about 6 kilometers from Amsterdam Central Station. The park was designed by a team of people that functioned much like a current day firm that included such professionals as professors, botanists, biologist, engineers, architects, sociologists and town planners. “This woodland park is the largest recreational area in Amsterdam. Lying about 4 meters below sea level and laid out in 1930s in a project to reduce unemployment. Today, the marshy areas around Nieuwe Meer are nature reserves. A stretch of water called the Bosbaan flows through the park, and is the venue for rowing competitions in the season. At the west end of water is the Bos Museum which exhibits on natural and social history of the park, there are also temporary exhibitions. The Amsterdamse Bos is a home to about 150 variants of foreign and native trees and colorful collection of birds. Entertainment includes shallow swimming pools, a pancake house and a goat farm. (<http://www.amsterdam.info/parks/>)” Amsterdam has four beaches which provide joy to both residents and tourists. The beaches are great for lounging, enjoying the sunshine and culinary delights. Many other parks dot the city with green providing a variety of different functions and appeal to different kinds of people. This diversity creates a rich and complex park system.

**Civic, downtown and social spaces:**

The Leidseplein is an area of town that is made up of various cafes and restaurants all with large amounts of outdoor seating. This is a perfect place to watch live street entertainers such as jugglers and acrobats but even more entertaining is the people watching. Although it may seem an attraction that is possible on only warm days it is often crowded with local on the coldest of winter days. Dam Square is also an important social space. It provides a large area of space for various functions in the heart of the city. In the same week you can observe a political rally, and a live music concert.

**Neighborhood parks:**

Just as important as large parks are neighborhood parks. After World War II an amazing number of neighborhood playgrounds (around 860 by Aldo Van Eyck) were designed and built in the city of Amsterdam. Parks were fit in wherever space was available. This created small areas perfect for local residences. Although the spaces individually were small the effect they had on the city as a whole was enormous.



Above: Typical cafe seating



Above: Neighborhood parks in 1954



Above: Neighborhood parks in 1961



## 'Venice of the North'

### Other open spaces:

The Museumplein is an important open space within Amsterdam that consists of a concentration of museums in a park-like setting. Similar to the Mall in Washington D.C., monumental buildings are all situated around a symmetrical central lawn. This space is great because it combines the worlds of art and nature; two subjects that go hand in hand.

"The Hortus Botanicus (Botanical Gardens) was established in Amsterdam originally as an herb garden for doctors and pharmacists over three hundred years ago. The East India Company's ships brought back exotic seeds and plants from other countries that they traded with. The gardens nowadays boast plants from almost every country, climate and environment, with climate-controlled glasshouses. There is also a medicinal herb garden that attracts students from all over the world and visitors can view one of the world's oldest potted plants" (<http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.world-guides.com>).

The Amsterdam Zoo: Park Artis -The lush greenery is complemented by ponds, statues and winding pathways and the park is also home to the Artis Zoo which dates from 1838 and is one of the city's top attractions, housing over 6,000 animals. (<http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.world-guides.com>)

### Lessons Learned

Amsterdam is a very old city that has realized the importance of preservation of its culture and rich history. At the same time they have embraced the new and exciting innovations in technology, such as implantation of rapid transit. The major lesson to take away from Amsterdam is to remember as density increases here in America we still need to leave room for vital open spaces in places that make sense and are accessible in order to continue being a pleasant place to live.



Above: People at the Museumplein



Above: Photograph of Dam Square







## Resources

<http://www.amsterdam.info/basics/history/>

<http://www.amsterdam.info/parks/>

<http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.world-guides.com>

Koekebakker, Olof. *Westergasfabriek Culture Park*. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, NL. 2003

Read, Stephen. *Future City*. Spoon Press, London. 2005

Van Eyck, Aldo. *The Playgrounds and the City*. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, NL. 2002

Van Den Berg, Leo. *Growth Clusters in European Metropolitan Cities*. Ashgate, Burlington, USA. 2001





