

If you lived in... de Bijlmer

Style



FIGURES

- Number of properties**
around 19,000
- Primary schools** 15
- Dentists** 17
- General practitioners** 24
- Pharmacists** 7
- Cafés** around 40

Transport
15 minutes to Amsterdam Central Station by metro. The Amsterdam Bijlmer ArenA Station, reopened in October 2007 after a major reconstruction, is an important hub, with a direct train connection to Utrecht. The neighbourhood also borders on the A9 motorway.

Addresses
Café de Pittstop, 1 Bijlmerplein 367
Surinaams Buffet Catering, Bullewijkpad 21

Rochdale housing corporation (Zuid-oost office), Bijlmerdreef 1169

Notable architecture
The original style of the de Bijlmer utopia has been preserved in the six blocks of flats known as 'The Bijlmer Museum': Grubbehoeve, Gooioord, Groeneveen, Kruitberg, Kikkenstein and Kleiburg. Another curious landmark is the Zandkasteel, which houses ING Zuidoost. 'Sand Castle' might not be the best name for a bank headquarters, but this fairy-tale creation of Dutch architects Alberts & Van Huut does resemble a beach construction with its organic rounded shapes and ten yellow towers equipped with solar generators. The building has recently been cloned in Second Life; in real life it can be found at Bijlmerplein 888.

Pros

With the UFO-shaped 51,000-seat ArenA football stadium right nearby, de Bijlmer is all about Ajax. But the stadium is not just for football fans: Pavarotti, The Police and The Rolling Stones have played there to sell-out crowds. The surrounding area is also worshipped by shopaholics on their Sunday pilgrimages to the Media Markt, IKEA or the Villa ArenA home furnishings mall, which offers a futuristic sunset vista from its rooftop car park. In 2010 this view will be enhanced by yet another high-rise: the ArenA Toren. Rising 150 metres above the Arena Boulevard, it will be the tallest residential tower in the Dutch capital.

Cons

The neighbourhood's a bit too lively for some people's taste. 'I pictured Holland differently before I came here four years ago,' Russian stage designer Anna Hodorovich says. 'It's hard to get used to the lifestyle of my neighbours, who get up at eleven and party until two in the morning, playing drums.'



Anti-quaint: highrises in de Bijlmer

Amsterdam's most internationally diverse neighbourhood is now sleeker, safer and more attractive, finds property reporter **Sophia Komienko**. Photography **Regina Kelaita**

Some people might argue that de Bijlmer is not quite Dutch. 'It's not Holland; it's Babylon!' newcomers have been known to exclaim. They're surprised by its diversity – only 18 per cent of the neighbourhood's population is ethnic Dutch. And if the 130 local nationalities weren't enough, on weekdays the area around the Amsterdamse Poort is flooded with an equally international business crowd. The architecture isn't typical either: those modern office towers and sprawling apartment blocks don't look anything like quaint Dutch canal houses.

'It's beautiful to contemplate the contrast, the business hustle and bustle in the middle of the relaxed Surinamese culture that characterises the area,' says ING Bank employee Cor-Jan Schrijver.

Property prices

'De Bijlmer has become more attractive for a broader variety of buyers, because of new construction projects offering a wider range of housing,' says Femke Risch, a spokeswoman for the Rochdale housing corporation. The total share of housing for purchase, as opposed to rentals, is on the increase,

Risch adds, with top-of-the-market single-family homes especially in demand at an average price of €2,200 per square metre. This is a novelty in a neighbourhood that, until a dramatic recent makeover, was dominated by high-rise social housing.

Good for: mixers and tasters

With Surinamers forming its largest population group, de Bijlmer is the place to savour Surinamese cuisine. Try the takeout at Surinaams Buffet, for instance, the catering business run by Mavis Hofwijk, who just brought out her own cookery book, 'Mavis kookt' ('Mavis Cooks'). 'This place is especially *gezellig* during the weekday lunch or *borrel* hours when the office people join the locals. It feels good with so many nationalities around you,' says graceful bartender Twiggy Hovestad at Bijlmerplein's Café de Pittstop as she refills glasses during halftime of an Ajax match.

Social experiments

Inspired by the ideas of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, de Bijlmer was built in the late 1960s as a shrine to the Swiss architectural god Le Corbusier and to functionalism, the urban planning philosophy that promoted strict separation of residential, work and recreational zones. Such strict division of functions proved disastrous, with some areas turning into ghost towns by night.

Even traffic was divided, as roads, bicycle lanes and footpaths were isolated on different levels. Although this system has largely been abandoned,



its remains still give some parts of de Bijlmer surprisingly 'hilly' contours.

Planted in the middle of luscious green fields, the neighbourhood was conceived as a beehive, with honeycomb-shaped apartment blocks. Bus stops were built at the same distance from the housing units as car parks, to encourage the use of public transport. Unfortunately, the covered walkways that connected the buildings soon turned into mugging zones. To make de Bijlmer more liveable for humans, at least half of the honeycombs have recently been torn down.

Fascinating fact

On 4 October 1992 an El Al Boeing 747 cargo plane crashed into two apartment blocks in de Bijlmer, killing 43 people. 'It was a Sunday afternoon and I was cooking dinner with a group of flatmates when we heard a banging noise and collapsed on the floor as the building started shaking and the front door caught fire,' recalls survivor Gordana Lucic, who, as an illegal immigrant from Belgrade, had to go into hiding after the crash. Thanks to a fierce media campaign, all illegal immigrants who survived the *Bijlmercrash* ('Bijlmer disaster') were later granted residence permits. De Bijlmer's short but turbulent history has been written about in a novel, 'Vluchtwegen' ('Emergency Exits') by Michiel van Kempen.