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# Urban redevelopment of a new town: The case of Zoetermeer in the Netherlands

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**Abstract** The success factors contributing to the development of Zoetermeer, a former Dutch new town, into a contemporary city include dedicated public leadership, long-term commitment from social housing providers, private developers, institutional investors, timely and transparent communication with residents and the need to act and outperform the city benchmark. Zoetermeer was designed and built as a new town close to the government centre at The Hague and celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2022. It is now home to more than 125,000 residents. For decades Zoetermeer's growth took place in the surrounding green fields. Therefore, the existing capacity-building methodology was not fit for the purpose of the 'brownfield' urban redevelopment challenge. The city authorities were also reluctant to engage in pro-active real estate stakeholder leadership. Since 2017, however, RITTERWALD pan-European residential strategy consultancy has supported Zoetermeer's urban redevelopment strategy, including leading the preparation of a 10,000+ homes Urban Development Agreement (*Stadsbouwakkoord*) which is now being delivered to provide mixed tenure neighbourhoods. This achievement involved educating the municipal administration in the practice of urban redevelopment, including hosting regular masterclasses with high-level public and private sector actors. How a new town grew up and reinvented itself is explored in this paper.

**Keywords:** *new town, sustainability, place-based investments, public-private partnerships, city deals, affordable housing delivery, capacity-building municipal administration*

## INTRODUCTION

Zoetermeer (see Figure 1) is a new town located 15km from the government centre, The Hague, in the Netherlands, with more than 125,000 residents, 56,000

homes and providing 53,000 jobs. In 2022 the city celebrated its 60th anniversary.

Today, new towns are becoming residential destinations of choice for the simple fact that the adjacent historical



**Figure 1:** Skyline of Zoetermeer

Source: Arno van Berge Henegouwen

cities have become unaffordable for low- and middle-income households. New towns, however, benefit from pull factors as well as the affordability push factor: easily accessible by public transport; extensive amenities including retail, schools, parks and recreational facilities; and with most of the new towns accommodating business districts providing local employment.

Over the past six decades Zoetermeer's growth has taken place in the surrounding green fields, with agricultural land being rezoned for residential, commercial and recreational uses. Today, with multiple often conflicting land use claims (green buffer zones, excess water storage, recreation, energy transition infrastructure among others) greenfield land is scarce and highly valued. Urban development policy has therefore refocused on brownfield redevelopment, land or

properties within existing city boundaries that have previously been used and are now being redeveloped for alternative use: the success of this policy is key for the city's sustainable future. Large-scale brownfield redevelopment is, however, more complex and expensive in terms of land use planning, capacity building and funding, as summarised:

- *Land use planning:* Greenfield development on the outskirts of a former village or small town requires comprehensive planning (starting from scratch); however, it is relatively easy from a (linear) planning methodology perspective compared with brownfield redevelopment, cyclical in nature which has to address land and property conversions, rezoning and environmental remediation, as well as conflicting interests from residents,

businesspeople and, more recently, environmental activists.

- *Capacity building:* Greenfield development was facilitated by a norm-based planning and development process. Nationally dictated norms applied for land values, social housing construction cost, construction specifications for infrastructure (above and below ground) and zoning laws, among other considerations. Usually, local government with active land policies bought the farmland and, acting as a strategic land developer, sold it to private developers under strict land use conditions. Therefore, greenfield development was easily scalable, and the municipal administration could repeat the planning methodology multiple times. Brownfield redevelopment requires a customised approach, however, within certain bandwidths of planning and development conditions. This requires different competencies and negotiating skills from the municipal administration: in most cases the city does not own the land and properties.
- *Funding:* Greenfield development was a profitable business model for local governments that applied active land acquisition policies and regulating land use planning. Until the early 1990s, the standards were set by national government due to the deployment of large public subsidies to develop social housing and infrastructure. With brownfield redevelopment, local government must negotiate with the private developer about changes in zoning (often from commercial to residential and mixed-use) and private financial contributions for the refurbishment of public space and other necessary public investments to enable the private development.

To make this paper and its case study relevant for an international readership, I

explore five themes: (1) a brief historical background from village to contemporary city to provide context; (2) the birth of the city's redevelopment strategy s from 2016 to the present; (3) seeking public-private partnership, including the Permanent Market Dialogue (PMZ) using the Urban Development Agreement (*Stadsbouwakkoord*) as an umbrella; (4) capacity building, supporting new skill sets and competencies; and (5) the conclusion, which highlights some personal observations and lessons learned.

## ZOETERMEER: FROM VILLAGE TO CITY IN 60 YEARS

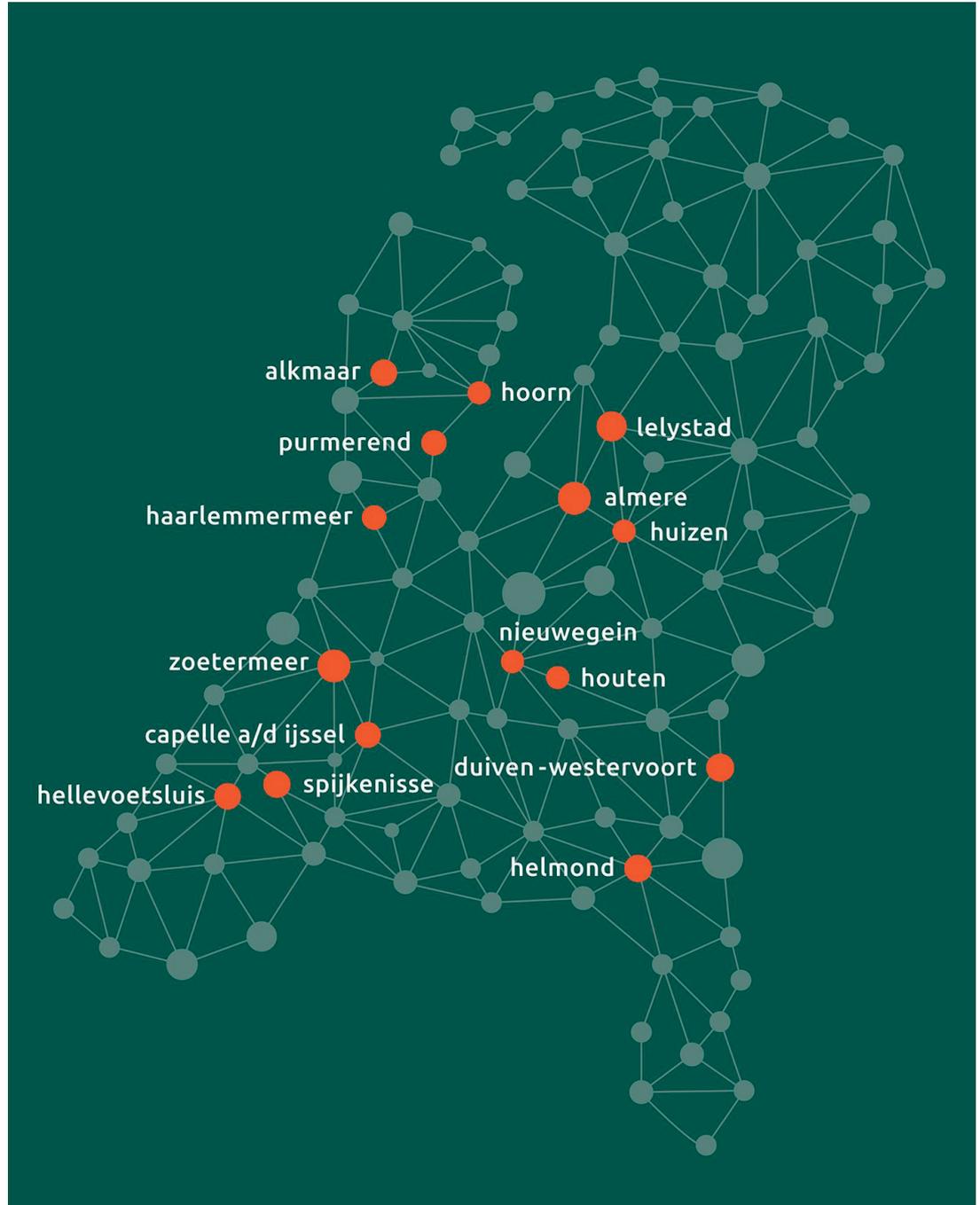
### New towns in the Netherlands

Over the past 60 years, urban growth has been made possible by a strict national new town planning policy. Between 1960 and 1990, 17 villages or small towns were designated by national government for population growth and to support major urban renewal in the historical city centres. Today, almost 1.5m Dutch people from a total population of 17.6m (2023) live in new towns (see Table 1 and Figure 2).

**Table 1:** Resident population in new towns in the Netherlands

	Number of residents
Alkmaar	91,000
Almere	216,000
Capelle a/d IJssel	67,000
Duiven-Westervoort	40,000
Etten-Leur	44,000
Haarlemmermeer	158,000
Hellevoetsluis	40,000
Helmond	92,000
Hoorn	73,000
Houten	50,000
Huizen	41,000
Lelystad	80,000
Nieuwegein	64,000
Purmerend	81,000
Spijkernisse	72,000
Zoetermeer	125,000
Total	1,334,000

Source: Provoost, M. (2022), 'Een onvoltooid project: over de toekomst van onze groeikernen', nai010, Rotterdam



**Figure 2:** New towns in the Netherlands

Source: New Town Alliantie, 2022

Today, the physical condition of new towns is characterised by: (1) uniformity in house archetypes (mostly single-family homes in low-density suburban setting and high-rises from

the 1960s and 1970s) and an ageing population; and (2) a major maintenance challenge: from housing stock to infrastructure (above- and below-ground sewer system).

### Zoetermeer new town

In 1962 Zoetermeer was designated as a new town. Over time it developed into a contemporary comprehensive city more than other new towns that typically became commuter suburbs to historical cities. Zoetermeer's maturity into a city is demonstrated by great connectivity by rail, enabling transit-oriented developments, residential and commercial land use, the creation of a local employment base in logistics and trade, e-health and IT-cyber security and a strong tradition of experiments in urban design and architecture.<sup>1</sup> This also gives the city a competitive starting point in promoting its future development potential (see Figures 3 and 4).

Residential real estate values (expressed in registered house asking price) are 10–15 per cent lower in Zoetermeer and its downtown area compared with The Hague/Rotterdam metropolitan area and the surrounding region (*provincie Zuid-Holland*), thereby acting as a pull factor for Zoetermeer. This is explained by the relatively large share of social and

mid-rental housing in downtown (Figure 8 gives more details). Home buyers get more value for money as long as Zoetermeer is improving the quality-of-life factors that affect real estate values.

**Zoetermeer today:** The demographic forecast towards 2040 in Figure 5 shows that the number of family households (*gezinnen*) remains about the same. Smaller households (*klein hh*) up to the age of 55 and age category 55–74 are decreasing, while the number of smaller households 75 years and older is increasing. This translates to increasing demand for homes for older people.

Figures 6 and 7 show selected characteristics of the city's population and the downtown area. More young people live downtown (24 per cent versus 6 per cent); this could be explained by the early office conversions dedicated to young people. As expected, family households are lightly represented in downtown (9 per cent versus 35 per cent). Annual income of downtown residents is lower, and this could be explained by a relatively

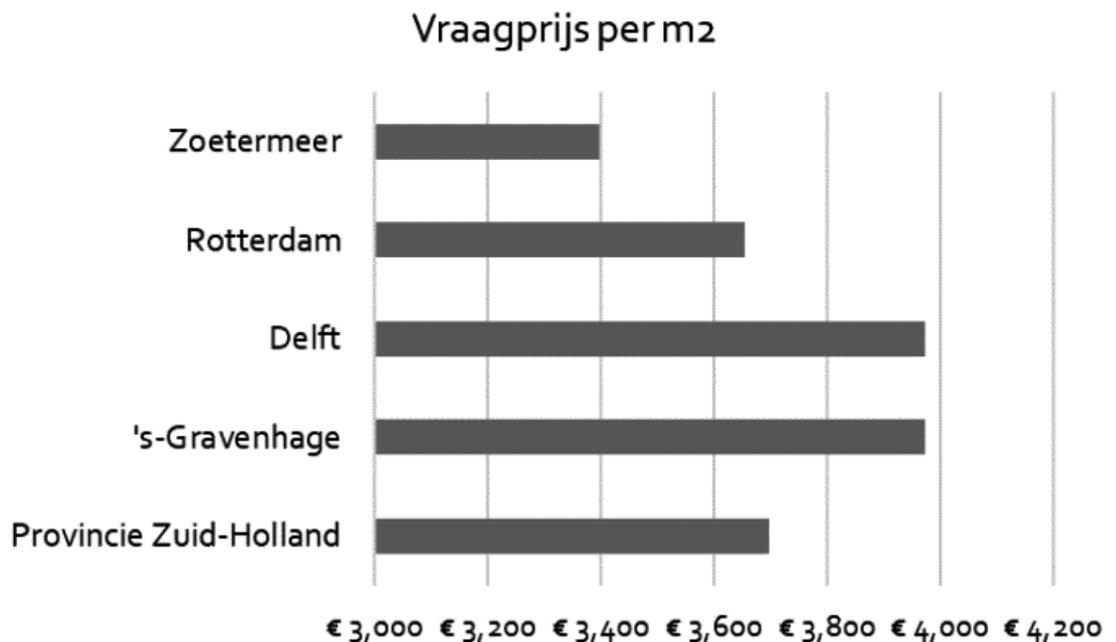
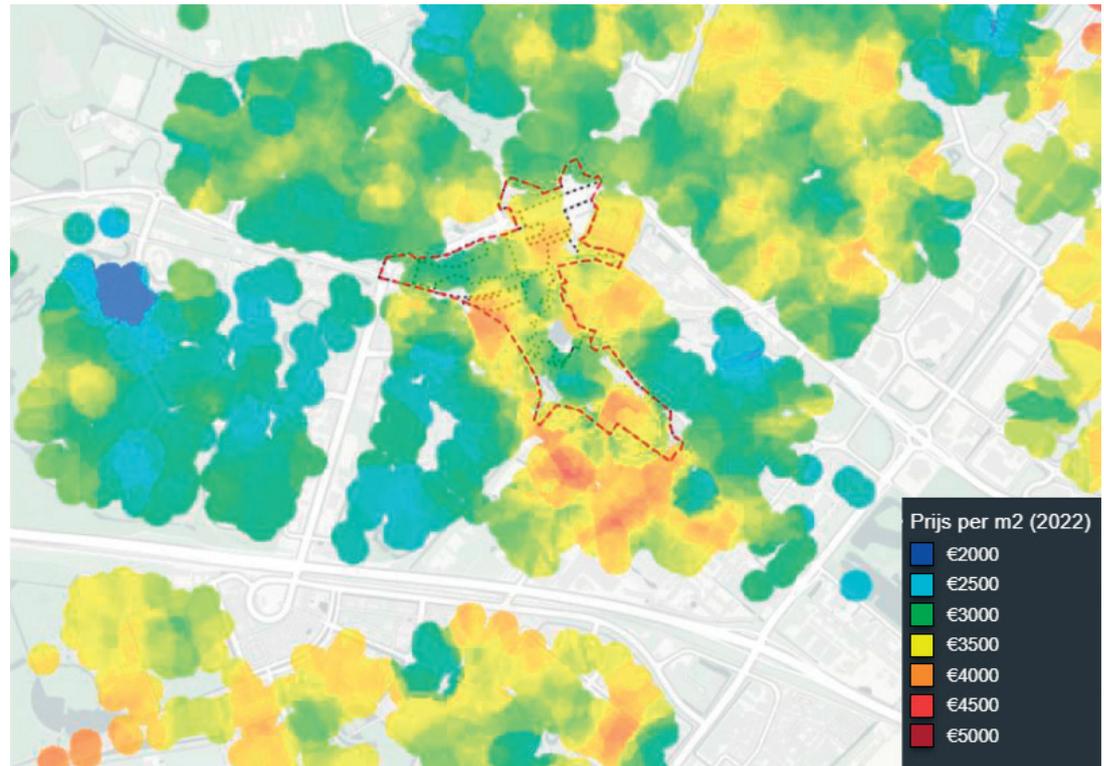


Figure 3: Residential real estate values per m<sup>2</sup> in different cities in the same region



Vraagprijs per m<sup>2</sup> van woningen (Bron: BAG, 2022; Springco, 2022)

**Figure 4:** Map illustrating residential real estate values per m<sup>2</sup> in different cities in the same region

high share of young households at the early start of their career or still in further education.

Figure 8 shows that 55 per cent of the city's housing stock is for homeownership, with the majority (57 per cent) having a market value of less than €400,000. Rentals are over-represented in downtown where most of the housing stock is social housing with monthly rent levels up to €750.

### THE BIRTH OF ZOETERMEER'S URBAN REDEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

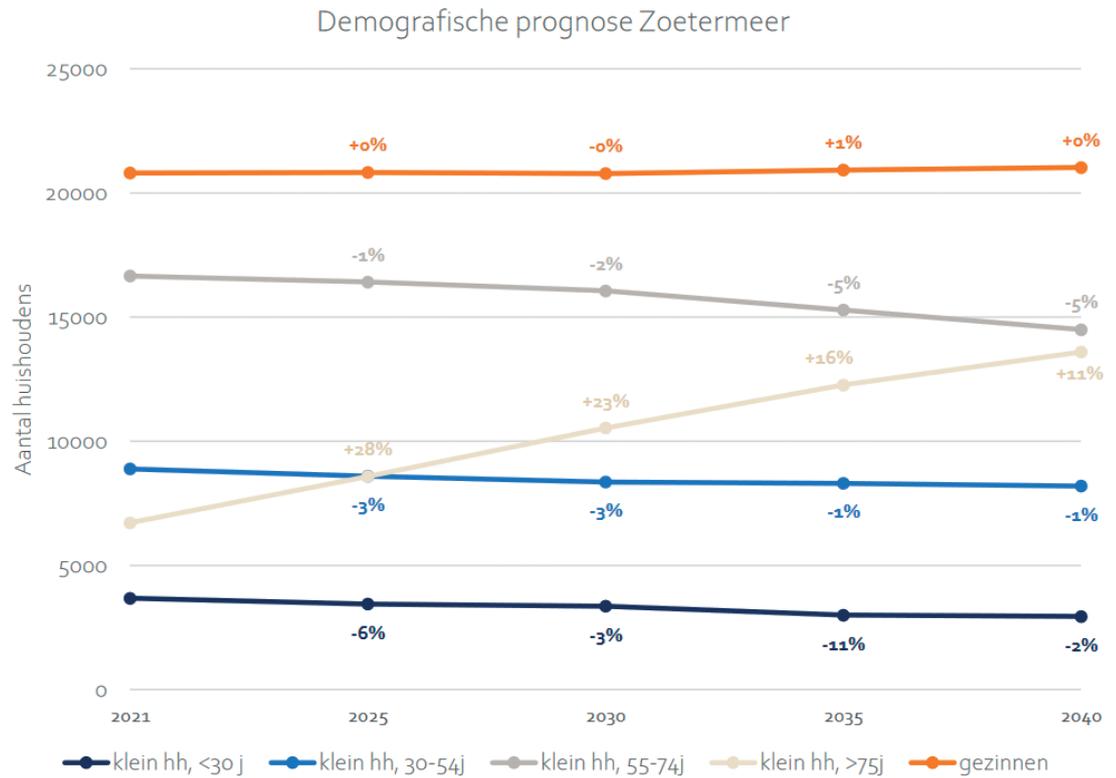
#### Urban growth strategy 2016–2017: Zero growth is no option

Around 2012 Zoetermeer undertook its last greenfield development at Oosterheem, involving 8,600 homes in a primarily suburban layout with

a neighbourhood shopping centre, and became aware of the need for an alternative future growth strategy. A city's development is never finished, and zero growth was not an option: most amenities such as schools, cultural facilities, health centres and retail centres assumed a growing number of customers and users. Without growth, the share of the current population in the older age groups would increase faster and place great pressure on social services and the healthcare system.

The awareness that future growth had to be accommodated within the existing city boundaries resulted in a housing programme for 10,000 new homes for the next decade,<sup>2</sup> and with the option to create an additional 6,000 homes.

Zoetermeer also started rethinking its urban growth strategy, with consideration of more redevelopment and regeneration



Demografische prognose (Bron: WBR Provincie Zuid-Holland, 2019)

**Figure 5:** Demographic forecast in Zoetermeer for under 30-year-olds, 30–54-year-olds, 55–74-year-olds, over 75-year-olds and families

to address current challenges of today, including more inclusive neighbourhoods, climate adaptation and the energy transition. This rethink also implied higher quality in urban design and architecture, not only of buildings but also of public spaces. The challenge was how to define the next steps in urban growth.

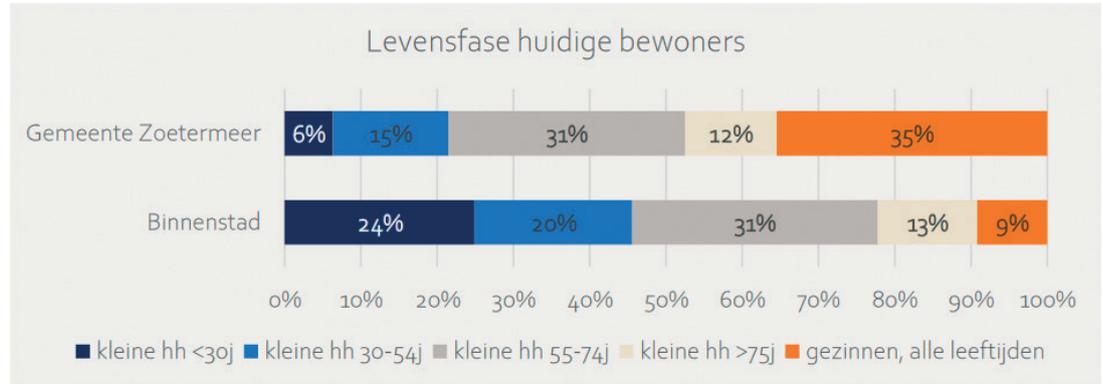
In summary, the city authorities concluded that a new approach was required and the challenge was how to bring this new approach into practice.

**Urban growth strategy 2018–2019: Volume (*schaalsprong*)**

The first concern was how the city could accommodate its growth ambition. This stage, in Dutch cities with growth

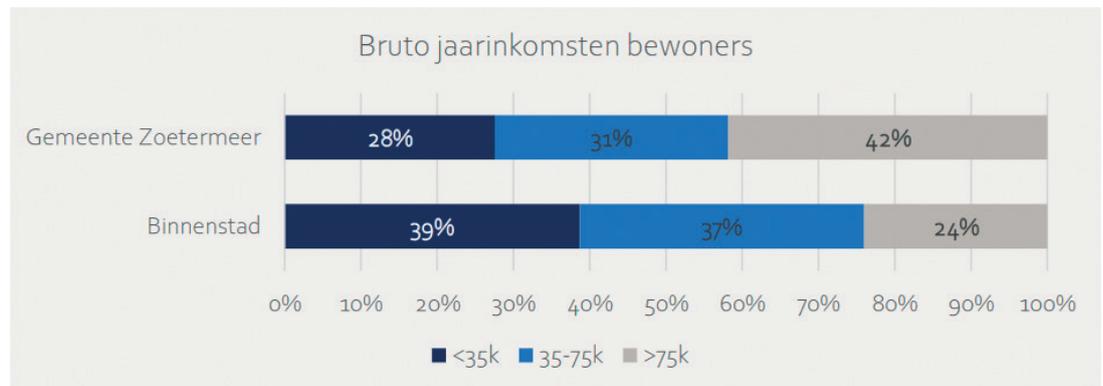
ambitions often called *schaalsprong* (spatial scaling), focused on identifying redevelopment locations. This made a distinction between the ‘low-hanging fruit’ (no rezoning required) and the mid and long-term locations (rezoning, remediation, redesigning infrastructure, business relocations). And it should be noted that the city did not have to start from scratch: due to obsolete offices in its downtown area, it already had built experience with office conversion into residential housing for young people (see Figure 9).

Next to the ‘low-hanging fruit’ (which already proved that urban redevelopment was not easy and led to unexpected setbacks and delays), seven areas were identified to accommodate approx. 15,000–16,000 homes, of which 10,000



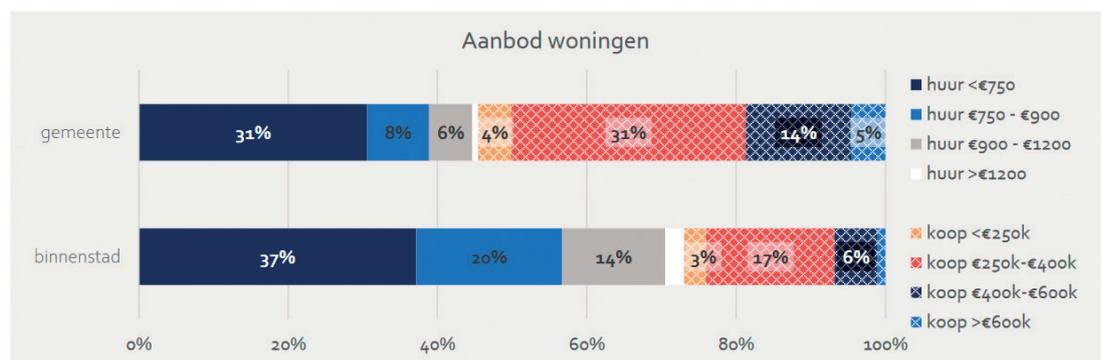
Levensfase bewoners Zoetermeer (Bron: EDM, 2022)

Figure 6: Life phase of population in city and downtown Zoetermeer



Bruto jaarinkomsten bewoners Zoetermeer (Bron: EDM, 2022)

Figure 7: Annual income of population in city and downtown Zoetermeer



Aanbod woningen (Bron: EDM, 2022; Springco, 2022)

Figure 8: Housing supply in city and downtown Zoetermeer

are scheduled to be built by 2030. As Figure 10 shows, the areas involved are: *Entree* (Gateway with 3,300 new homes), *Binnenstad* (Downtown with 2,000 new

homes), *Groene Stadsas-Australieweg* (Corridor with 2,000 new homes), *Dwarstocht* (adjacent to latest greenfield Oosterheem, with new 400 homes), and



**Figure 9:** Downtown office conversion into residential housing served by RandstadRail (tram system) urban transport

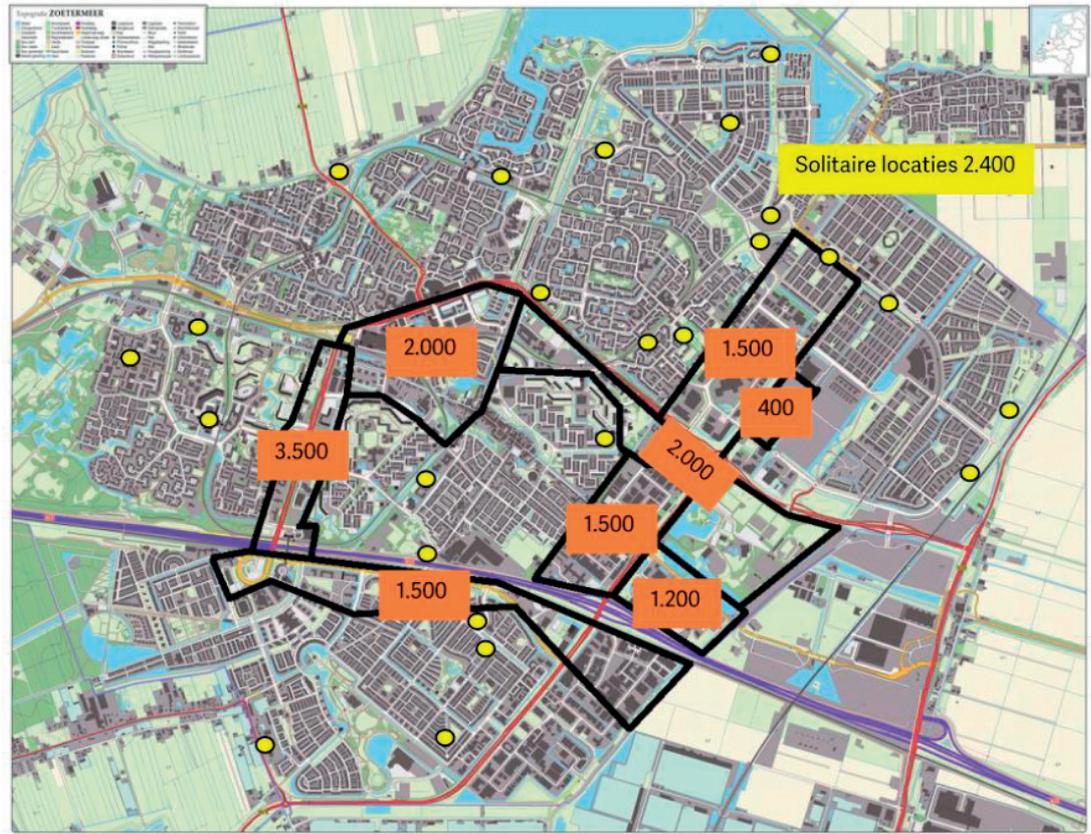
Source: Theo Baart

the transformation of older industrial sites *Rokkehage, Hoornhage and Zoeterhage* (5,000 new homes). In addition, 2,400 new homes are planned on single, smaller sites across Zoetermeer.

In summary, this stage focused on identifying the potential locations for housing delivery in the short, medium and long term. This stage also was agenda-setting for the development strategy and what it would require, ranging from the municipal administration to accomplish these ambitions in terms of budget, competencies and skill sets (quality urban design, procurement) to commitment from the private sector and housing associations.

### **Urban growth strategy 2019–2021: Balanced urban growth (Vision Zoetermeer 2040)**

After the ‘great leap forward’ with ambitions translated into planned volumes, a research report ‘Staat van Zoetermeer’ (State of Affairs in Zoetermeer) was commissioned in 2019 to review progress. This report showed that the residential attractiveness of Zoetermeer lags behind surrounding cities, the socioeconomic strength is vulnerable and disparities between neighbourhoods are increasing. This review acted as a wakeup call and led to a two-year intensive participatory process with all stakeholders. The result<sup>3</sup> was



**Figure 10:** Overview of potential sites for accommodating 10,000–16,000 additional homes

Source: City of Zoetermeer 2017

a comprehensive vision for the social, economic and land-use development of Zoetermeer; in other words, growing the city by strengthening the existing urban fabric (see Figure 11).

For the benefit of a balanced, more organic urban growth, Vision Zoetermeer 2040 identified three guiding principles:

- *Coherence:* The new town was built using a separate land use approach; today an integrated and comprehensive land use approach is necessary.
- *Diversity and quality:* The new town was built on uniformity, with many of the same archetypes built quickly. Today, there is a recognition that diversity in the design of housing and community

buildings helps attract new residents and businesses.

- *Partnerships:* The new town was originally built using top-down blueprints. Today, active engagement and stakeholder management takes place from the initial stages of planning and development through to finalisation.

In summary, Vision Zoetermeer 2040 brought together all stakeholders, internally and externally, in sharing the future directions and setting the agenda on how to improve the management of urban growth. Vision Zoetermeer 2040 laid a solid foundation for area-based (large-scale) brownfield redevelopment of Zoetermeer, as explained in the following section.



**Figure 11:** Retrofit of current housing stock

Source: Theo Baart

**Urban growth strategy today:  
Area-based approach taking off in  
downtown**

The area-based approach is conditional on several distinct but linked elements, including projecting housing need, rethinking quality, creating awareness about balanced growth and identifying planning principles. Although the city is working on multiple area-based projects, including the existing residential neighbourhood Meerzicht (1970s residential), a recent example of implementing the new growth strategy is downtown Zoetermeer.

Downtown Zoetermeer is one of the city's priority areas for urban redevelopment. The ambition is to

co-create a livelier city centre. Projects should align with Vision Zoetermeer 2040: larger and diversified supply of homes (c. 2,900) and social, cultural and business facilities (c. 27,500m<sup>2</sup>). Market research<sup>4</sup> shows that the annual demand for urban living is between 1,120 and 1,620 homes (existing and new built), primarily for affordable rentals and homeownership. Because the existing housing stock in downtown is primarily social housing apartments, the task is to add mid-rental and market rental and sales apartments.

Vision Zoetermeer 2040 has demonstrated that a high-quality balanced growth approach is the key for achieving the vision's ambition. Therefore,

redevelopment is not only about more (volume), but also — and even more importantly — better (quality). This all starts with safety in the public domain and improving the connections between the different destinations: expanding opportunities for pedestrianisation and dedicated cycleways as priorities over car parking.

The municipal administration adopted a structured and comprehensive urban redevelopment planning process in the downtown area; this area alone counts for nine area-based projects. The planning and decision-making process has three consecutive steps:

- Feasibility phase, resulting in an area-based vision;
- Business case, with CAPEX and OPEX (as a living document); and
- Development strategy — how to get to the next step, including defining the roles and responsibilities of public and private stakeholders.

The progress of these steps relies heavily on private sector initiative (about 50 per cent of land and properties are owned by the private sector), expected financial results (sensitive to interest rates and construction costs, among others) and available capacities in municipal administration. The population will change due to the addition of new homes (see Figures 12 and 13).

## PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

### Background

When Zoetermeer became aware that the future growth, involving 10,000+ additional new homes, had to take place primarily by redeveloping locations within the existing city boundaries, the city also realised that it needed better conditions for unlocking private sector investments. After all, most land and properties are privately owned, the city has limited resources, and the urban redevelopment

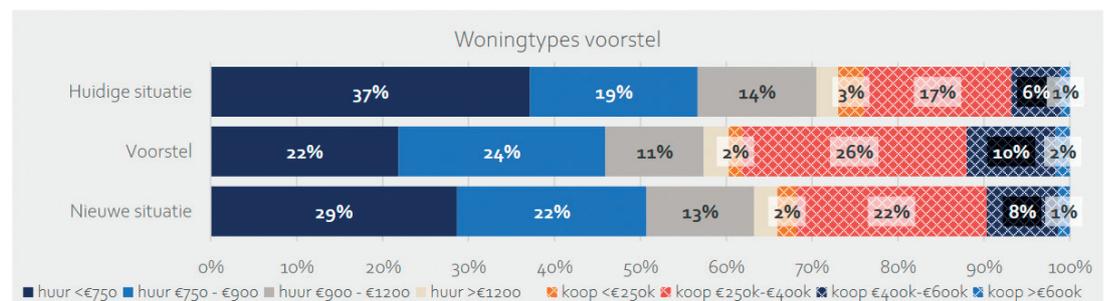


Figure 12: Current and planned project residential typologies in downtown Zoetermeer

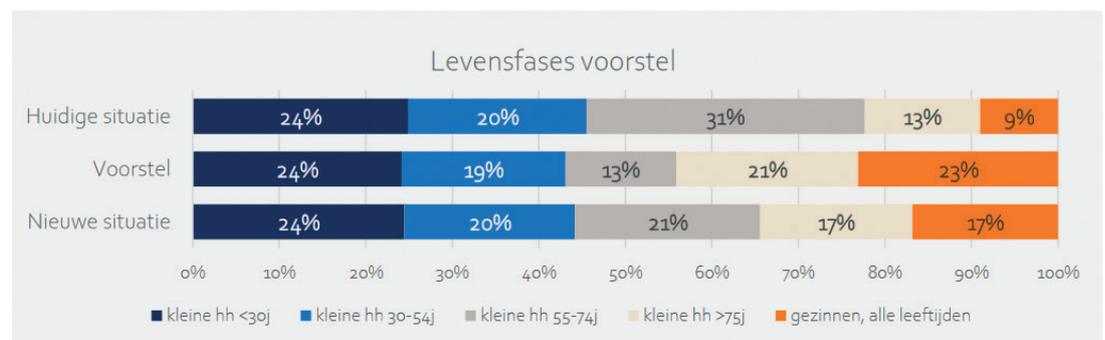


Figure 13: Current and planned project life phases in downtown Zoetermeer

strategy will take at least 10–15 years to implement, with two economic downturns anticipated during that period.

Initially, the city was uncomfortable developing a strategy that better enabled private investment at scale: there was very limited experience of engaging with the private real estate sector. Indeed, the relationship was coloured by a recently failed and, with hindsight, over-ambitious downtown retail project (Holland Outlet Mall). In the city council, negative views were rife: can private developers be trusted? Are they in for long-term involvement? Can they provide affordable quality homes? With a few exceptions — for example, nationwide operating developers based in Zoetermeer, a residential asset manager of a pension fund, and the owner of the large retail centre in downtown — Zoetermeer was lacking (inter)national developers and institutional investors. In addition, Zoetermeer did not have a high-level network of urban designers and architects on which to draw.

There was, however, *Onze Zoetermeers Bouwsociëteit* (OZB), a ten-year-old network initiated by the city and the local real estate sector involving construction, real estate agents, architects, installation and construction education. Its main purpose was sharing knowledge, professional networking and identifying new trends. For scaling the relationships with private real estate to the next level, OZB was too permissive and would later have its representative in the Permanent Market Dialogue Zoetermeer (*Permanente Marktdialoog Zoetermeer* [PMZ]). In the period from late 2017 to mid-2021, the city followed a two-step approach that ultimately resulted in a sustainable public–private partnership (PMZ) supported by an urban development agreement (*Stadsbouwakkoord*) with a concrete implementation agenda.

To familiarise itself with the goals and mindsets of the private sector, the city

hosted a roundtable with former (semi) public sector directors with extensive and successful experience working with the private real estate sector. This public–private partnership resulted in an improved comfort level, and the city commenced individual consultations with nationwide private developers and institutional investors. Some of them already worked in greenfield developments. These conversations were open and frank and gave the following outcomes:

- Urban redevelopment in Zoetermeer is still an unexplored market; however, its central location, great accessibility and expected continued shortages in the housing market shows the relevance for the involvement of major developers and investors.
- New housing delivery in existing neighbourhoods should show a relationship with the decarbonisation challenge of the legacy housing stock of housing associations and homeowners.
- The city should start relationship management with involvement of city management and city commissioners.
- The city needs a realistic urban growth vision for next 10–15 years.

The outcomes of all consultations so far strengthened all parties and assisted the city in commencing the Urban Growth Investment Agenda (*Schaalsprong*), which ultimately resulted in the comprehensive Vision Zoetermeer 2040. To engage and commit the private sector more deeply, the city then started working on building and sustaining a public–private partnership (PMZ) that would be supported by an Urban Development Agreement (*Stadsbouwakkoord*).

### PMZ

When a city decides on an ambitious growth plan (700–1,000 additional

new homes per year was ambitious for Zoetermeer), it becomes more aware that it requires investments from the private real estate sector, including developers, investors and housing associations. But how to approach this if, for decades, the city's relationship was primarily with public authorities (provincial and national government) and there is no tradition of public–private partnerships?

Zoetermeer drew inspiration from Rotterdam, the international port city located 30km to the south. In 2010, Rotterdam decided on implementing an ambitious (at the time) growth target of 3,000 homes per year. For increasing its housing delivery, Rotterdam established a development platform *Platform Ontwikkeling Rotterdam* (POR) that still exists today.

POR's success factors are in the city's active policy support and 'learning by doing'. Board level representatives from the private sector were engaged by invitation, but only if they showed both a commitment to the growth ambition and a willingness to share their knowledge and expertise in support of the city's socioeconomic development. Weekly meetings were established during the construction phase of projects to problem-solve and overcome obstacles. Collaboration between the public and private sectors extended to an annual visit to a foreign city to learn lessons on programme management and delivery. The last 15 years have shown that POR is key in economic crises, enabling support to counter-cyclical policies and maintaining housing delivery (although at lower volumes).

Zoetermeer designed the PMZ in line with the POR; however, there were three additions. First, the mission of PMZ is more than creating the conditions for delivering new homes; it is also about broader urban redevelopment, as well as simultaneously redeveloping the existing

residential neighbourhoods developed in the early days (1960–1970) of the new town. Secondly, the housing delivery should also inform a new Zoetermeer socioeconomic strategy. This goal became obvious and urgent for Vision Zoetermeer 2040 through analysis. Thirdly, membership of PMZ is explicitly open to representatives with expertise from crossover domains, including health and social care, housing for the elderly, social impact companies and utility companies.

An important principle of the PMZ is freedom to act in partnership without a legal entity. Members of the PMZ engage on an equal footing, on the understanding that each member's role and responsibility in the public and private sector differs, but the overall goal for the future directions of the city are the same.

The PMZ meets four times per year and operates with an independent chair who is also responsible for overseeing the regular progress report and work plan. The chair is supported by a secretariat and delivered by the city. PMZ is funded by all participants, with the city covering 50 per cent of the annual budget.

### **Urban Development Agreement (Stadsbouwakkoord)**

Simultaneously to the formation of the PMZ, the public and private partners prepared the Urban Development Agreement Zoetermeer, bearing the subtitle 'Building strong neighbourhoods together: better (quality) and more (volume)'. The partners adopted several principles:

- The city of Zoetermeer is directing the implementation of the agreement and pursues incentive policies where possible and regulatory policies where appropriate.
- The agreement expressly does not identify any development and building

projects. These are subject to specific project-based agreements which address state aid and procurement law.

- The PMZ is subject to regular evaluations and monitoring by the independent chair and, based on these considerations, the city considers its future role.

Content-wise, the agreement addresses the residential programme supported by a detailed appendix on house archetypes and urban lifestyles, and the notion of quality in the built environment. There is agreement upon a set of common grounds to work together to achieve better living conditions for current and future residents. This is accomplished by new housing delivery in primarily large-scale redevelopment locations and in existing neighbourhoods on a smaller scale.

### **CAPACITY-BUILDING MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION**

In its previous 60 years, the municipal administration became a well-oiled planning authority supporting the delivery of suburban housing. This ended with the last greenfield development, Oosterheem. Over recent years, the city started transitioning its administration from a norm-based new town planning authority to a customised negotiating urban redevelopment-oriented planning authority.

How to make the transition from suburban planning to urban redevelopment? This does not happen overnight and requires a different mindset, because, as we have shown in the introduction, land use planning, capacity building and funding are different. Now we focus on capacity building of the municipal administration.

Zoetermeer developed three work streams simultaneously, with each requiring a different mindset:

- *Vision*: for Zoetermeer in 2040 describing balanced growth.
- *Rezoning*: accommodate locations for planned growth and setting the agenda (*Schaalsprong*).
- *Capacity building*: educate city staff, commissioners and politicians in a wide scope of activities.

One aspect relevant to the implementation of the city's growth ambition involved lectures from experts (passive involvement) and masterclasses (active involvement). Each format is described below.

#### *Knowledge-packed lunch meetings with motivational speakers on crossover themes*

These were 45-minute lectures organised four times per year for two years. These lectures during lunch hour (noon–1.00 pm) were popular from the start (they came with free healthy sandwich lunch), typically drawing a crowd of 60–90 participants.

The session commenced with an academic introduction, highlighting strong links to the urban planning consultancy: what it is about, the language, roles and responsibilities, emerging themes and best practices.

The following themes were addressed:

- *Budget challenge*: This was translated to the daily practice in Zaanstad, another new town north of Amsterdam. This financial backgrounding explained the planning and financial challenges: the need for budgets to be committed per project, and the difficulty of committing financially for longer than a couple of years.
- *Place-based investments*: Successful urban redevelopment requires a long-term area-based approach with commitment from both municipal government, private developers and institutional

investors. A very tangible example of the best practice is Holland Park in Diemen (next to Amsterdam), involving a full conversion of an old office park into a new residential community (2,000+ apartments).<sup>5,6</sup>

- *Spatial densification potential:* When a city is making the transition from greenfields to brownfields, it is important to know how many homes the existing neighbourhoods could accommodate in a qualitative manner. This was illustrated by an architectural company.
- *Green public space as public utility:* Quality of life is determined by the quality and ease of access to green areas (parks).

Moreover, a green environment is important in achieving climate targets (carbon emission reduction, water storage) (see Figure 14).

Urban redevelopment is not only about the bricks and mortar and planning techniques; it is also important to consider how the residents enjoy daily life in their communities (see Figure 15). Zoetermeer invited three experts to talk about this theme in different ways, namely *demographic trends in urban areas* and how that affects the (lack of) *quality of life in existing residential neighbourhoods* and the refreshing view on *positive healthcare*.



Figure 14: Central Park in Zoetermeer

Source: Theo Baart



**Figure 15:** Town hall square in Zoetermeer

Source: Theo Baart

### *Masterclass in urban redevelopment*

This one-day masterclass involved a morning programme with a diversified range of lectures and an afternoon programme where all participants were involved in an urban redevelopment game featuring an existing neighbourhood (Meerzicht) developed in early years as a new town. Meerzicht (c. 15,000 homes, 7,300 residents and a share of rental a little above 50 per cent<sup>7</sup>) is located adjacent to one of the prioritised redevelopment areas Entree (Gateway) planned for 4,500 new homes. This was a suitable case study to learn about how to approach balanced growth. Examples included redeveloping a shopping centre in

Meerzicht instead of adding retail space in Entree; reference to the extent of mixed-income and mixed-use programming; and physical connections between existing neighbourhoods and new developments with better accessibility (walkways and bike lanes).

### *Zoetermeerse aanpak in municipal administration*

During preparation of Vision Zoetermeer 2040, the city realised that the municipal administration needed a more structured process of managing the increasingly larger and more complex area-based projects. This resulted in the *Zoetermeerse werkwijze*

*projectmatig werken* (Zoetermeer project-based working method) which addresses the decision-making process (internally), project phasing (initiative, feasibility, preparation, implementation and aftercare) and monitoring (budget, risk, time, information and quality).

This method is also relevant in achieving compliance with a set of new regulations under the Environmental Law (*Omgevingswet*) that came into effect on 1st January, 2024. Vision Zoetermeer 2040 may be considered as the required environmental vision for the entire city.

## PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

### Observations

As a housing economist and urban planner, it was my pleasure to work with several great people from the public and private sectors to transform Zoetermeer. My role has given me a unique insight into the redevelopment process, and I would like to share some personal observations with the larger international audience:

- *Daily urban system has become effective in a metropolitan area:* New towns are traditionally located at commuter distance from the historical cities, supporting their economies. While the largest and most diversified employment base is in the historical cities (in the case of Zoetermeer, these are The Hague and Rotterdam), Zoetermeer has developed its own employment base in logistics and trade, e-health, IT-cyber security, among other sectors. One can notice more balanced commuter flows within and outside Zoetermeer (38 per cent of employees in Zoetermeer live in the city<sup>8</sup>), reflecting improved accessibility, both by car and by light rail, bus and dedicated cycle routes.

This outcome accommodates the urban lifestyle of many residents of the former new towns. For residents, the easily accessible central location of the new town in the metropolitan area has become an important quality of life factor from which they can easily organise their daily lives, including daily travel to and from the place of work.

- *Unknowing makes unloved:* For a long time, living in a new town has often had negative connotations; however, increased wealth and changing social patterns (including the move away from the nuclear family) are transforming the way we live. This is having an impact on expectation for our communities. In the early days, households in new towns relied on the historical city for their (non-food) shopping needs and entertainment, such as theatres, cinemas and restaurants. New trends were first seen in historical cities: that was where the action was and where private developers did exciting projects (with glamorous international architects) and (global) pension funds invested their capital; however, with improved accessibility and by addressing the persistent housing shortage, this situation is now changing. Among middle-income households the historical city is often seen as too expensive, too crowded, too unsafe, too ... (please fill in yourself). From the perspective of a positive market outlook, spreading risks, and social responsibility of investing closer to home, new towns become attractive places for developers and investors. Overall, the public appreciation for great urban design and a sustainable living environment will make Zoetermeer known and loved. In that respect it is key that the city is leading by example.
- *And finally, politics:* As a consultant I aim to stay away from politics. That

is difficult, however, with politically responsible topics such as housing, infrastructure, urban planning and, nowadays, environment, social and corporate governance (ESG) and sustainability. Mostly, the elected city councillors and commissioners are born and raised in Zoetermeer and the ‘seniors’ have seen their former village expand into a new town and now a city. It is then quite a challenge to oversee the bigger picture. The intensive stakeholder process of Vision Zoetermeer 2040 increased the level of comfort for accomplishing the growth ambition in a more self-conscious way. As a professional, it is important to guide the commissioners and municipal administration with the expertise they need for making well-informed decisions that can achieve broad support in city council.

In summary, over time the city of Zoetermeer has learned how to become resilient, how to develop its own pathway of growth and, more recently, how to communicate these achievements successfully to the outside world, with the slogan: *Zoetermeer is de plek* (the place to be).

### LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons are to be learned from constructively supporting the urban growth strategy. For this paper I have selected three lessons that, in my opinion, also apply in comparable situations across Europe.

- *Outcome of urban redevelopment only becomes visible after ten years:* Long-term vision comes with long-term commitment in the municipal administration. This may sound obvious, but it is easier to write down in a policy paper than to put it into

practice. It takes time before successful policies become visible to the world; however, there is good news. In the Downtown Implementation Strategy 2024–2030, the city council committed the capacity and resources for the entire period. Now the dedicated project team can and should stay on track.

- *Urban redevelopment requires permanent relationship to management:* Delivering a project is good, but it is only the start, because it requires permanent relationship management. Let me explain with an example which readers may recognise. Everyone is always very focused on the closing of an agreement (the signatures), while we all know that the day-to-day management of a contract is the determining factor for a successful final outcome. On top of that, the municipal administration should retain qualified professionals.
- *Every new town/city must do its own soul searching:* Fortunately, Zoetermeer can now leave the ‘unknown is unloved’ tag behind; however, a new identity does not happen overnight. The urban growth strategy — with its balanced growth ambition and focus on quality of urban design — provides the opportunity to create a new urban tradition, integrating the local architecture from the past into its cultural heritage. Zoetermeer should continue to develop its own identity and not copy others. One of the ways of achieving this goal is to cherish Zoetermeer’s post-1965 architecture, which is now enjoying growing interest from larger audiences.

### CONCLUSION

As highlighted in this paper, downtown Zoetermeer is one of the city’s priority areas for urban redevelopment where the ambition is to create a livelier city centre. To achieve this outcome, the essential

tasks — as identified in this paper — are to:

- promote an integrated and comprehensive land use and development approach;
- recognise that diversity and quality in the design of housing, community buildings and public spaces attracts new residents and new businesses; and
- ensure active engagement with stakeholders is achieved as a first step in the planning and development of the town transforming into a modern city, through to finalisation of the plans.

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