

# High-Risers in Amsterdam

## Introduction

In 2040 the silhouette of Amsterdam will show a densely built-up metropolis, surrounded by an open landscape with an abundance of water and in the middle the UNESCO world heritage site, the Canal District in the historical centre of the city. At prominent regional and urban nodes there will be clusters of skyscrapers. As part of the landscape, which can penetrate deeply into the city via green wedges, high-risers act as landmarks for important places in the city and they provide for recognition of the various areas. The really tall buildings are suitably distanced from the inner city with its centuries-old, small-scaled urban structure. Along the river IJ a few skyscrapers landmark the water squares in a continuous flow of this ancient watercourse.

High-rise buildings have been carefully positioned – individualistic or in clusters – so that a beautiful silhouette is created for those approaching the city from the countryside or for those observing from a random spot within the city limits.

Keeping this silhouette in mind, the policy on high-risers has been set up as part of the Amsterdam 2040 Structure Vision. This vision assumes the densification of the inner urban area and the keeping open of the metropolitan landscape. The policy on high-risers is geared to be answerable for the culture historical features of the inner city and the surrounding areas and in this way high-risers can contribute to the quality of the cityscape.

The manner in which high-risers are perceived in the landscape of the city of Amsterdam, has everything to do with the location and the character of the surrounding buildings. In the development of an initiative for a high-riser, it therefore means keeping account of the impact that this can have on the direct vicinity and the skyline of the city as a whole. High-risers along the ring road in the North would influence the wider landscape and is therefore undesirable, whereas the same high-risers in the south (Zuidas) would become part of an already existing high-riser skyline.

The municipal Office for Monuments & Archaeology (abbreviated by the Dutch acronym BMA) and the Spatial Planning Department (abbreviated by the Dutch acronym DRO), jointly drew up a policy document about high-risers, with recommendations for the blending in of the high-risers in the city.

The high-rise policy includes an assessment framework for high-risers. From such an assessment framework one can establish whether a High-rise Impact Assessment (abbreviated by the Dutch acronym HER) is necessary. On the basis of the High-rise Impact Assessment, the Spatial Planning Department (DRO) and the Office for Monuments & Archaeology (BMA) will evaluate the high-riser initiative and will provide a recommendation to the Municipal Executive. The high-rise policy and the High-rise Impact Assessment contributes to a high level of quality in new developments, which appropriately suit the stature and the image of Amsterdam.

## High-risers in historical perspective

The history of the urban development of Amsterdam is marked by a rather horizontal landscape of differing heights interspersed with accentuations. In the 16th and 17th century these were the church steeples, windmills on the bulwarks, city gates and medieval fortification towers. The other buildings, on average, were six to twelve metres tall. Before 1850 the towers symbolised the importance of the religion, the economy (in the case of the stock exchange) and the presence of a public governance in the city (the city hall and the city gates).

In the 19th century, an increase in scale took place in the inner city which included voluminous, high office buildings and warehouses such as the Bijenkorf. The building height for the most part remained restricted to about 20 metres, with the exception of the Nederlandse Handels Maatschappij [Netherlands Trading Society] (currently: the De Bazel building) which measures 32 metres in height.

The warehousing along the river IJ introduced a building height of about 30 metres. In the same period maritime cranes and chimneys also formed part of the skyline. Many of these historic, industrial high accentuations have subsequently disappeared, just like most of the traditional windmills. In the harbour and industrial areas such as those along the IJ, tall new buildings have replaced them, which are often of an even larger scale, like the power station, the container terminal cranes and windmills.

The building named: 'skyscraper' of 40 metres which, in 1931, was the first height accentuation which didn't have a public function. It was built purely for aesthetic considerations, being the end point of the line of sight from the river Amstel. Prior to the construction there were hefty discussions about whether you could accommodate people in such a high building or not.

The demand for high-risers before the war was mainly propagated by those in favour of the International Style, inspired by architects such as Le Corbusier and Ludwig Hilbersheimer. They saw it as symbols of a new age the possibility to offer many people a view on a panoramic green environment.

The composers of the General Expansion Plan of 1935 (abbreviated Dutch acronym AUP) assumed a 'flat city in a flat landscape', albeit that the flatness would be enlivened at a number of places by way of tall residential buildings. At that point in time the significance of high-risers didn't only lie in the marking of a public social function. The application of high-risers for housing and office buildings was also started up again for aesthetic reasons. Tall buildings were erected as part of a street design, to be experienced from a car or other high speed transportation methods. This strategy continued until the 1970s. Cheaper high-risers were made possible in the 1960s through serial construction systems and light constructions of stairwells and galleries. The high-risers in the suburbs which were built immediately after the war, like the Westelijke Tuinsteden [western garden suburbs] and Buitenveldert, are part of the spatial, urban design composition. Building heights up to about 70 metres

still correspond to those of the 17th century spires. The building mass, however, is of an entirely different order.

Due to the negative association with the Bijlmer, high-risers were considered to be a taboo in the 1970s and early 1980s. A counter-movement, in which the pursuit of small-scale character was predominant, dominated the architecture debate of the seventies and eighties of the 20th century. However, with the idea of the compact city, which stems from the beginning of the 1990s, high-risers were reintroduced. By densifying the city, the aspiration was to get people to live in the city for as long as possible.

This is in contrast with the pursued policy advocated for decades until then, in which the establishing of expansion cores outside the municipality was stimulated. High-risers, however, were also looked upon as a symbol of a new kind of urbanism. Many businesses that established themselves in the Southeast or at Sloterdijk Station and along the A10, used high-risers as a 'corporate image' for the manifestation of their presence. By the end of the 1990s the building heights increased, mainly for offices surrounding the public transport nodes.

The Rembrandt Tower near Amstel Station, standing at 135 metres, is the tallest. Yet the lion's share of the compact city policy was being realised in building typologies that don't exceed the 'warehouse height'. The building height of around 30 metres is no exception anymore. This is evident from the waterfront development along the IJ. In the last two decades of the 20th century the number of extremely large buildings has also grown, such as the RAI Congress Centre, the AMC hospital and the ArenA stadium. The latter having a height of 85 metres. They significantly influence the skyline of Amsterdam both in terms of scale and in height.

### **high-risers, different in every city**

The category of buildings that are to be considered as high-risers is different in every city. Amsterdam is a 'flat city' with an average building height of 15 metres in the historical city centre. In the urban development over the last few decades the average building height in the city has increased to 30 metres. The building heights along the IJ and along Wibautstraat illustrate this. In the UNESCO area (core area and buffer zone) a metropolitan effect takes place where buildings are higher than 22.5 metres or 25% higher than the direct vicinity. For the other areas, a metropolitan effect takes place where buildings are higher than 30 metres or at twice the height of those in their direct vicinity. When it concerns a metropolitan effect, it's the city's Municipal Executive who determines whether a new development plan is acceptable or not. So the following definition is maintained: High-risers in Amsterdam are understood to be buildings higher than 30 metres or twice the height of those in their direct vicinity, and medium-rise developments are understood to be buildings of 22.5 to 30 metres in height or 25% higher than those in their direct vicinity.

Three commonly used categories have developed within the types of high-risers in Amsterdam. The category which is by far the largest in numbers rises to a limited degree above the warehouse height (30 to 60 metres). This range includes most of the historical accentuations in height, as well as local compositorial accentuations. Visible from the surrounding landscapes, but often falling away in the street view.

The second category concerns high-risers from 60 to 100 metres. These are common at the most important nodes, but also include a large part of the utilitarian properties. Finally, the category up to 150 metres in height. This is the maximum height which, for a large part of the city, emanates from the height restrictions put in place for the airport operations. Within these restrictions, the Rembrandt Tower at 135 metres, appears to have been accepted by many of the people of Amsterdam as a fitting height emphasis within the city skyline.

## **The major movements**

The structural concept portrays the most important spatial development for the core city of the metropolitan region of Amsterdam, in four major movements: the expansion of the central city area, the waterfront, the south flank and the metropolitan landscape. The policy on high-risers is explained further in terms of these four movements.

### *High-risers and the expansion of the central city area*

The medieval and 17th century city forms the core of Amsterdam. It is the DNA of the city, marked by the medieval urban structure surrounded by the inner city canals and the Jordaan (since 1999 this area has enjoyed the status of being an urban conservation area. Since 2010 the inner city canals in Amsterdam have been incorporated in the World Heritage list of UNESCO). Obviously the policy on high-risers is protective for the area within the Singelgracht zone. It is for this reason that a zone of 2 kilometres around the Singelgracht area has been included in the chart. The starting point for this zone is that where the historical layered cityscape has grown into a single entity, this may not be affected by new buildings which deviate in size and scale.

For a long time now the urban city centre environment is no longer restricted to only the historical city, but gradually expands itself up to the orbital motorway of the A10. Along the A10 the economic value is so high that, in the course of the time, a zone of buildings up to 60 metres has developed, with higher accentuations at some nodes. Zuidas and Teleport are the most obvious. These buildings can be seen from the A10 and in the direct vicinity. In the streetscape of the city centre area, due to the distance, this height falls away in the silhouette. This size has no impact on the perception from within the city centre, but is indeed of major economic value. Hence the development of high-risers between 30 and 60 metres is stimulated in this zone, and at important nodes preferably even higher. An exception to this is the A10 in the North, directly opposite Waterland, along which high-risers are undesirable.

### *High-risers and the metropolitan landscape*

The urban high-risers can specifically be perceived from the open wedges. That's not so bad, on the contrary, that's part of what makes up a metropolitan landscape and what makes it so interesting. The high-risers are not only experienced as static images, but as one moves forward, indeed show a changeable perspective. That's why it's important to preserve depth in an urban landscape of heights. Building heights bordering directly onto the landscape should therefore be limited to 30 metres in height, with high-risers up to 60 metres as accentuations, preferably in the

second row of buildings. Parts of the south flank could be an exception to this. The nodes with greater heights offer a third height level.

With the policy on high-risers as described in terms of four movements, the heads of some wedges are accentuated by high-risers, where the city and the wedge meet: Amstel, Zuidas, the Bretten zone and Zeeburger Island. The *fringe* is understood to be: that part of the wedge that borders directly onto the city and which lies outside the main green structure. The *head* of the wedge is understood to be: that part of the wedge which extends the furthest into the city, bordering onto the built-up area of the city and is part of the main green structure. Although high-risers in the green wedges are naturally out of the question, it is conceivable to place high-riser accentuations at the heads of wedges if there are no nodes. Here it specifically concerns carefully fitted-in accents.

### *High-risers along the IJ*

Due to the construction of the railway lines, Central Station and new islands, the 17th century open harbour waterfront was radically changed in the 19th century. The historical city was closed off from the IJ by the new areas for businesses and transportation. On the other hand, for the historical city it was perhaps the saving grace against urban decay. Maritime cranes came and went. A few high-rise accentuations remained, such as the tower at Overhoeks by Arthur Staal (design 1966) measuring approximately 75 metres. Directly opposite Central Station this tower marks the narrowest point of the IJ. The objective of the ongoing redevelopment of the banks of the IJ, is to recreate city fronts along the IJ and to create inner urban qualities on both sides of the IJ waterfront.

The modern business areas, in the meanwhile, shifted in a westerly direction along the North Sea Canal. Due to the scale of the power station, terminal cranes, oil tanks and windmills, the harbour landscape can be 'perceived' from within its surroundings, and visually forms part of the city. Tall new utilitarian buildings or extremely large buildings (colossuses) would only enhance this image even further.

In the redevelopment of the newly available southern banks of the IJ, it was sought to give the city a front along the IJ again. The dimensions of warehouses are adopted with high-rise accentuations here and there. These accentuations have two purposes: the design of the space along the IJ and the creation of spatial relationships with the city inland. Some additions of tall buildings enrich the cityscape and others don't. This policy is continued along the northern banks of the IJ. The high-rise strip at Overhoeks, at a height of up to 120 metres marks the cape in the IJ. The tower by Staal is the accentuation at the narrowest point in the IJ. At the same time the strip is not visible from the western side of the inner city canals. Other high-risers along the northern banks of the IJ, up to 60 metres tall, will not be erected directly along the banks, but in the second row of buildings along the route of the Van Hasselt Canal. At both ends of that canal the IJ is at its widest. Besides, these are nodes in the network of waterways: the one is at the transition with the North Sea Canal and the other is at the transition with the IJmeer. As is the case for Overhoeks, the aim is to emphasise these scenic features with high-risers in excess of 60 metres.

Here that doesn't happen by way of concentration, but specifically through placing individual towers to catch the space on both sides of the IJ. The impact on the inner city is comparable with that of the Rembrandt Tower, which is approximately two kilometres away, and thus falls away in a perspective sense. In the Buiten-IJ the waterfront is made up by the suburb of IJburg along the open water, opposite the green coast of Waterland. Here the aim is a compact urban environment in the grandness of the landscape, without accentuated high-risers, extremely large buildings (colossuses) or utilitarian properties (windmills). The ending of IJburg on the east side will mainly be given a natural character; not a stony front along the water, but a scenic transition between the city and IJmeer.

### *High-risers on the south flank*

The south flank of Amsterdam is a zone that has major dynamism and development pressure, which is caused by its central positioning in the network of metropolitan links. A number of important nodes are very recognisable because of either the high-risers or some extremely large buildings (colossuses): Schiphol, Zuidas, Amstel Station and Bijlmer ArenA Station. At these nodes the building heights are about or in excess of 100 metres. The Zuidas is a special location because of the size of the high-risers, through which a genuine skyline is developing.

What applies around the A10, applies even more so for the south flank along the A4, A10 and A2: the pressure of development can easily be interpreted into high-risers of up to 60 metres, and at important nodes this could even be higher. Hence a differentiated high-rise environment can come about in the indicated zone. The high 'number of colossuses' in this zone enhances this image, but doesn't allow for many very broad new buildings. It goes without saying that, in the strip between the A4 and Sloteweg, at the place of the main green structure, no high-risers are envisaged.

## **Conclusion**

In the illustrations of the city of Amsterdam in the 17th century, the city clearly shows its pride in the alternating silhouette. Spires which determined the city landscape from afar, were emphasised even more by portraying them higher than they were in reality. In the centuries thereafter high-risers continued to be the subject of many discussions. That's not surprising, because in the flat landscape in which Amsterdam is located, a building doesn't even need to be very high to be able to be seen from afar. Since the emergence of the idea of a compact city in the late 1980s, high-risers play an inextricable role in the appearance of Amsterdam. Whether high-risers add something to the cityscape in a certain place or whether it specifically disturbs valuable urban development systems, always remains a point of discussion. In this high-rise building document all the ingredients have been covered to achieve a careful blending in of high-risers in the existing metropolitan urban landscape, both in terms of the urban development as well as of the culture historical values.

When high-risers form part of an urban development plan then, on the basis of a high-rise survey, determine the correct positioning and the relationship within the context of the planning area and the (urban)landscape as a whole. For the placement of a solitary high building in an existing urban design context, analyse the culture

historical character of the location beforehand, and so too the role that high-risers have played in the past in that area.

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