



# AMSTERDAM

URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND ANALYSIS

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The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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# INTRODUCTION

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Located in the Netherlands, Amsterdam is home to a rich and intact historic city center. Networked canals and associated buildings create a distinctive water-centered cityscape. This pattern of water and land creates an infrastructure that both reinforces distinct boundaries and establishes a framework for connection.

At the Northwest tip of Europe, the Netherlands was founded as a sea-trade country and a portal to mainland Europe. This geographic location ensured a strong connection to other countries, as commerce was effectively routed through the Netherlands. Amsterdam quickly emerged as a hub for this unfolding trade, information and development.

Amsterdam's historic development spans several distinct phases. The medieval city consisted of a tight bundle of blocks, located at the edge of the water to accommodate thriving port business. In 1585, a major expansion project took place, enclosing the present Herengracht, Reguliersdwarstraat, Amstelstraat and Rapenburgerstraat areas. In the

17th century, the Singelgracht area unfolded in two separate expansions: the first began in 1613 and the second followed in 1663. Population and development remained stable through the 18th century, and it was not until 1880 that the city embraced another expansion effort. Finally, the early 20th century marks a series of overlapping urban plan developments, responding to population growth, an increasing reliance on automobiles, and efforts to modernize this historic center.

In the 17th century, canals were created in concentric rings around the city center, scoring the layout of Amsterdam into a lasting crescent shape. Narrow streets and canals fan out from the center of the crescent to traverse the network of concentric semicircular canals. These spoke-like streets dead-ended into squares at the city gates. Before vehicles were permitted in the city center, these squares served as parking areas as well as centers for community development and open public space. Because of this parceling of land by water, Amsterdam is actually a series

of islands, slowly sinking into the sea. According to the City of Amsterdam Municipal Department for Preservation and Restoration of Historic Buildings and Sites, "The Venice of the North consists of approximately 90 islands, separated by some 100 kilometres of canals and linked by about 400 stone bridges."

The city center consists of nearly 20,000 different buildings on approximately 800 hectares. Roughly one third of these structures precede 1850. According to the UNESCO World Heritage List, Amsterdam offers one of the most intact historical city centers of the world. Almost 6,700 "national monuments" here are actively preserved by the national government. (City of Amsterdam: Municipal Department for Preservation and Restoration of Historic Buildings and Sites)

Amsterdam is renowned for a cultural open-mindedness that has permeated several centuries. Progressive politics, social awareness, and civic activism have characterized this city throughout history. Amsterdam has been recognized for its savvy planning

policy that blends new development with a real concern and appreciation for the city's historical gems.

This dedication to progressive practice was both challenged and sustained in the 1980's, when squatters demanded improved living conditions. In the upcoming decades, Amsterdam will be forced to assess these housing shortages, as well as the racism, demographic shifting, and cultural changes that threaten the stability of this capital city.

