

Floating Future



Amsterdam Growing Island Climate Café

20 January 2026

Introduction to the case

The Amsterdam Growing Island (AGI) case aims to develop a design for a floating neighborhood in Amsterdam which can be used as a basis for further discussions with the local government about the potential for upscaling floating living in the city. Urban development plans for the future of Amsterdam do not yet include large-scale floating developments. As such, this case is primarily speculative in nature.

The case study group has identified a potential location where the municipality intends to dig out some existing land to use as additional water storage. The surface of this water could therefore be available to use for developing a floating neighborhood.

Societal Lead: Franco Pantano, Gemeente Amsterdam

Design Lead: Ankie Stam, Waterstudio

Academic Lead: Britta Restemeyer, University of Groningen

Action Research coordinator: Elizabeth MacAfee, University of Groningen

PhD Researchers: Eefke Huisman, Open University; Miao Yu, TU-Delft; Sonja Rombach, University of Groningen

Aim & activities of the Climate Café

The aim of the AGI Climate Café was to learn from the experiences of people who have relevant expertise, knowledge, and experiences with Amsterdam's floating neighborhood Steigereiland in IJburg. Steigereiland was built in 2005 as one of Amsterdam's first larger-scale floating settlements. Comprising 55 floating houses designed by an architect (Waterbuurt West), and 38 self-build plots on the water (Waterbuurt Oost), the neighborhood has introduced new housing typologies and holds a strong symbolic value:



IJburg is seen as a “pioneer” of sustainable, water-based urban development.

The main topics of the Climate Café were social, legal, and design aspects of floating life in IJburg which can be used to inform co-creation of the design for a future large-scale floating neighborhood in Amsterdam.

24 participants, including Floating Future researchers and consortium members, residents, designers, and authorities, gathered in IJburg at the Strandlokaal pavilion. Some of the participants have been living and working in and around IJburg since it was first created. It was a beautiful sunny day directly across the IJburgbaai, and we could see Steigereiland on the other side of the water.

To create a shared basis and understanding for the workshop we began with a series of presentations. Britta Restemeyer (RUG) welcomed the participants and presented the objectives and agenda for the day.



Franco Pantano (Gemeente Amsterdam) shared some context about the history and planned future of floating developments in Amsterdam, and Ankie Stam presented the approach and experience of Waterstudio in designing floating homes, along with some ideas about the development of the AGI case. Next, Kevin Wijtenburg (Waterschap Amstel, Gooi, en Vecht), who has been involved in the development of IJburg for many years, gave a presentation on water quality in Steigereiland and the impacts of floating homes. Then the three PhD researchers from Floating Future each presented their work as it relates to the AGI case. Miao Yu (TU Delft) shared her progress on studying the hydrodynamics of floating homes and their impact on local currents. Eefke Huisman (Open University) gave a short introduction to her work on the legal challenges for developing floating homes, especially with multiple owners. Sonja Rombach (RUG) shared some insights from her interviews on the topic of social acceptance in and around Steigereiland.

We then divided the participants into three groups for a World Café workshop. Each group started at one of three tables for discussions on legal, social, and design topics chaired by Eefke, Sonja, and Ankie. The groups discussed their assigned topics for 30 minutes before rotating to discuss each topic in turn. The main insights from each group are shared below.

Reflections from the researchers

Social acceptance

The table on social aspects and acceptance of floating living was led by PhD researcher Sonja Rombach (RUG). At this table, discussions focused on everyday lived experiences of floating living, with IJburg's Steigereiland as a concrete case. The table was structured according to the World Café format as a cumulative three-round process. Each round combined individual reflection, mapping and drawing, and guided discussion. Across the rounds, large base maps made it possible to visualize daily routines, social interactions, tensions, and future visions.



The first round addressed the question - *What happens where?* Inputs from the participants revealed how daily routines, social encounters, and feelings of belonging are shaped by specific places, particularly shared outdoor spaces. The second round - *Where do nuisances, conflicts, tensions or frictions occur in Steigereiland?* - made clear that many challenges, such as safety concerns, noise and water pollution, and accessibility, are spatially concentrated and that perceptions and experiences of these challenges differ between local stakeholders. In the final round - *What would you change and where?* - participants translated these insights into future-oriented visions. Discussions emphasized the importance of clearly coordinated responsibilities, inclusive and accessible public meeting places, and more integrated green space that supports both social interaction and ecological goals.

One of the main take-away messages from the workshop was that social acceptance of floating neighborhoods cannot be treated as an add-on: social experiences and the acceptance of floating neighborhoods are closely intertwined with spatial design and interfaces between land and water, private and public space, ecological and hydrological conditions, and the formal responsibilities across institutions. The Climate Café also demonstrated the value of participatory, experiential methods to bridge residents' knowledge and professional

perspectives for future floating urban development.

Legal table

At the table focused on legal aspects, led by PhD researcher Eefke Huisman (OU), the discussion was structured using post-its to collect and organize concrete legal problems that participants are facing in practice. Participants were first asked to write down issues they have encountered and then place them on the table under broader headings. We used this visual mapping to group problems into recurring themes, mainly related to property law qualification, allocation of responsibilities, and permitting. This approach helped to keep the discussion focused on practice, while still allowing the legal researchers to link individual problems to underlying legal concepts.

A key insight from the discussion was how central legal uncertainty in practice is for almost all issues. The question of whether floating structures are considered movable or immovable property came back repeatedly and was clearly connected to problems with financing, insurance and ownership structures. This is interesting, because among lawyers there is generally little doubt that floating dwellings qualify as movable property. However, this legal clarity does not always translate into the experiences of residents, where different actors still struggle with how to apply existing categories.

Participants also mentioned uncertainty about who is responsible for what, for example with regard to maintenance, dredging and safety requirements. The Climate Café format proved to be very useful.

Design for the future

The design table was led by Ankie Stam from consortium partner Waterstudio. Discussions at this table were based on a large printed map which included a preliminary design sketch by Ankie of a potential future floating development in the area. The design includes some floating and some fixed elements.

Here the discussions focused on three main themes: 1) a program of demands for a floating neighborhood; 2)

reflection on which functions should be floating and which should be on land, including re-designing and re-arranging the preliminary sketch to reflect changes; and 3) speculative imagining of what elements in a floating neighborhood could be modular, temporary, and mobile.



Participants emphasized that in their experience the aim should not be to consider the needs of a floating neighborhood as fundamentally different from any other neighborhood, but instead to think about what you always need and to what extent it can be translated onto water. They especially emphasized a need for recreational areas, green space and plants, and improved connectivity with the water in ways ranging from more swimming ladders to better orientation towards views of the

water for more people.



Many participants also emphasized the importance of orientation of the buildings. For example, they noted issues with maintaining regular water flow for water quality and aquatic life, and the role of light and shade in keeping homes warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

In terms of the temporal aspects of design, all groups were in favor of floating schools which can be moved into newly built neighborhoods where there are often many small children, and eventually moved away when they are less needed. There was also discussion about modular aspects of individual homes so that people can expand or contract their homes to facilitate aging in-place (contributing to a *levensloopbestendige wijk*).

Next steps

The topic of the social table was designed to build on and validate the cumulative data collection and analysis by Sonja. Findings from the discussion will be included in the third paper of her PhD, which will focus on co-creative methods for envisioning future floating developments.

At the legal table, the activities offered a way to test whether the legal bottlenecks identified during the desk research phase over the past year, and the solutions proposed for

them, correspond to what is experienced and needed in practice.

Insights from the discussions at the design table will be used to further develop the design concept for the AGI case. This design will be the basis for the activities in the Design workshop on 16 April, which aims to take the case forward to a more visionary and futuristic version.

As a part of the Participatory Action Research trajectory this Climate Café will also be studied as a part of the research of Elizabeth MacAfee (RUG). Later in 2026, she will be developing an article with researchers from the consortium which reflects on the design, implementation, and outcomes of all case study Climate Cafés. Elizabeth is also interested in the ways participants in Climate Cafés and other consortium activities conceptualize and understand floating developments as a part of different visions of the future of the Netherlands.

Questions remain about the technical, ecological and social aspects of realizing a floating district, along with the costs and timelines of such an ambitious project. In the coming phases of the project, Floating Future researchers will continue to work on these questions and share their findings within and beyond the consortium.

If you would like to learn more about this case and the ongoing case study research, please contact:
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