

Do you have a minute to talk about the green spaces in your neighbourhood?



The green field at the heart of Bouwlust. Own Image

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These days, with an ongoing military conflict in Europe's backyard, increased living costs, and a potential recession, it seems that nature talks can wait. However, if we learned anything from the COVID-19 crisis, it was that our relationship with nature has deteriorated severely, and it's time to [rethink](#) it urgently before more harm is done. Since the beginning of this century alone, our built environment has [expanded](#) by more than 66% and is only expected to grow. With this development, nature's key feature – biodiversity, has suffered severely, wiping out hundreds of species on an almost daily basis. Until recently, this was seen as an unfortunate [tradeoff](#), urban development plus housing needs came first, and nature second. However, if this were to continue, a recent UN [report](#) warns us that more than one million species risk extinction in the next thirty years. Moreover, the sanitised environment that will be created in the process will have [little](#) strength to fight back against the upcoming climate extremes, growing pollution and human well-being.

During the last four weeks, our group of 5 students from Leiden University was tasked to explore potential solutions to the growing problem of biodiversity loss in

Bouwlust - a small, tranquil and ordinary neighbourhood in the Hague, Netherlands. To make matters worse, how would one translate the issue of biodiversity loss to what is known locally as 'the greenest part of the Hague'? Below is a brief overview of some of our findings intended for anyone interested in creating more sustainable cities, as well as for any future researchers in the area.

Green does not mean biodiverse, and community does not mean uniformity. As soon as our assignment started, we headed over to Bouwlust to see if our initial ideas about the neighbourhood matched the reality on the ground. We knew beforehand that this is a relatively poor part of the Hague, with the majority of the residents coming from outside of the Netherlands, and living in social housing. Therefore, we did not expect extensive engagement with the local green spaces (aren't there bigger things to worry about?), but very soon we were proved otherwise. Both members of the local community centre, as well as residents that we approached on the street were very enthusiastic about the topic. The private gardening parcels bordering our area in the northeast; the expansive public green patch (about a football-field in size) at the very centre of it; and the greenery around the canals - were used extensively by the community either for relaxation, social gatherings, or playing. The local produce from the communal gardens was proudly presented in a cooking competition that celebrated the wealth of culinary diversity in the neighbourhood. It all seemed to make perfect sense: the neighbourhood truly gives an air of extraordinary greenery, and it deserves its title.

However, we knew that this is rather illusory. The green canvas was absorbing the reality that such spaces harbour little diversity in terms of species richness or habitats. On top of the language barrier that we were fighting against (only half of our group spoke Dutch, and many of the residents spoke no English), how could we proceed to dig deeper? People were often hesitant to discuss biodiversity per se, the term was viewed as an unnecessarily confusing synonym for *nature*. Halfway into our project, it seemed we were further away than when we started. Shall we abandon our focus on biodiversity and simply look into green space use?

The difficulty in community research projects is not to change course, but to continuously reflect and adapt as you progress.

Week 3, back to the drawing board. How did we get into this mess? Who is responsible for this lack of awareness regarding the monumental loss of natural diversity? And most importantly - if green spaces are amply used by people, can we combine their social function with more preservation efforts to increase biodiversity? It was time to amplify the scope of our research, to include more voices from outside as well as within. The list of crucial actors, apart from residents, must include voices from

the local municipality and the housing companies that are collectively responsible for the management of green spaces.

We started where others left off: the year before, a group of students from the Technical University of Delft explored the area in an ethnographic/architectural seminar. They focused on the experiences of the residents concerning the streets, their houses, and daily life. When contacted, the leading scholar Dr. Alejandro Uribe had little to say about biodiversity. But, he seemed to have reached similar conclusions about the area overall:

"Most green spaces in the area (apart from Uithofpark) are simply extensions of grass with a few trees standing in the emptiness. As such, they work well enough in an urban-functional way, since they allow for the buildings to have enough sunlight and air ventilation. However, they are uninteresting and homogeneous, normally the same tree species. As we've learnt from interviews with the neighbours, they prefer to move to the big park for recreational activities, even though there are, for instance, small playgrounds in the nearby green areas. I suspect the reason is the homogeneity of these green spaces, contrary to the interesting ecosystem at the Uithofpark, created with the help of water and different types of plants."

A brief survey we did in the neighbourhood had matching insights - people saw the green spaces in their proximity in terms of their functionality, but for a true *Nature* experience, the majority of respondents would leave the area for the nearby large parks or the dunes by the sea. As to our main concern, Dr. Uribe seemed equally convinced - "Can there be (today, in our ecologically endangered planet) something "social" without "ecological"? In fact, ecology is the study of the relationship between living things, including humans, and their environment. To me, it seems impossible to speak about the social urban function of an urban space without strong links to its' ecological function, since it's one that allows for the other."

But was the municipality - the actor most actively involved in managing the green spaces in the area - equally convinced? In an interview with Jacco Schuurkamp, head of *Agenda Groen voor de Stad* we discussed how the municipality viewed biodiversity needs plus social functions in all types of green spaces, and how citizens are involved in urban planning. The *Agenda* is a key policy document on how green spaces in The Hague should be managed to include social, ecological and cultural heritage objectives. In Jacco's experience, he seemed to be one of the only very few people who value biodiversity in urban planning in relation to social value. He explained how people often only consider simple indicators to express biodiversity, like the number of trees. For Jacco,

"If people truly want to address biodiversity in cities, ecosystem-wide indicators are the ones that need to be monitored, like the number of biotopes or the services that ecosystems provide to humans."

This valuation can also open doors for assessing both costs and benefits in the design of green spaces, rather than just costs. Citizens, on the other hand, often associate nature and biodiversity with designated large areas like the dunes or large parks. That being said, citizens can be decisive in determining the design of the green spaces, as they should be adapted to the situation of the citizens."

Is the greatest change happening already? Despite Jacco's perspective, we knew that current urban development practices favor economic cost-efficiency, and are far from a meaningful inclusion of biodiversity objectives. The most significant shift in local biodiversity conservation came from a female-led group of local volunteers, the *Groene Matties*, that is working on better integrating natural ecosystems into the built environment. The team seems to be a driving force in the neighborhood aiming to create a "social food landscape where we work together and harvest together, towards an active, healthy and proud neighbourhood." We spoke to the *Garden Coach* Yolanda Brouwer. With a background in biology, she helps residents create community gardens on the grass fields owned by the social housing corporations. Residents are assigned little parcels where they can plant vegetables, flowers or whatever else they prefer. She guides people on which native species work best, and stresses the importance of including more flowers that attract bees and pollinators. Just like a keystone species ensures the overall health of an ecosystem, the efforts of *Groene Matties* are crucial to the area. Their work and passion are critical in engaging the citizens of the Hague South-West to create a space for biodiversity.

This was a stark contrast to a brief conversation with some of the school teachers from the local primary school. It seems they make extensive use of the green field next to the school, but rarely with an educational purpose in mind. A lot of the kids don't have any resources to do extracurricular activities, so the school uses the extra time they have for art, sport and music. During classes, they pay attention mostly to Dutch and mathematics, and rarely to nature education. Nevertheless, they said that if materials would be provided, they would gladly include it.

Just as **Bowlust** is presently considered the 'greenest part of the Hague' it could become a true blueprint for integrating biodiversity into urban planning and growth. The neighbourhood already harbours a variety of green spaces that could facilitate an extraordinary symbiosis of urban life and the natural environment. However, presently that objective is only carried out by a group of local volunteers. Such efforts need to be celebrated and included as part of a systemic change of nature-first urban transformations. Key to this transition will be the ability of urban planners, developers, and investors to work with local actors that can leverage the highest positive impact for the local context. Instead of prioritising economic costs and seeking quick fixes, the municipality should not be weary of working together with residents to build a strong biodiverse backbone for the city. Just as we have learned in

our brief experience in Bouwlust, more often than not, they all have the same final objectives, but efforts need to be endorsed while the motivation is there.