

# Reflecting on Green Spaces: The 'Nature' of Community Building in Bouwlust

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**Tags:** #Bouwlust, #The Hague Southwest, #Urban Biodiversity, #Green Spaces, #Safety, #Urban Design Solutions, #Community Building, #Women of Bouwlust, #Cultural Diversity

We dedicate our work to the people and organizations of Bouwlust. Without their valuable insights and expertise, our research would not have been possible. Thank you!



## Week 1: An Expedition in The Hague Southwest

We began our research three weeks ago, interested in the relationship between urban biodiversity, green spaces and social relations in The Hague Southwest: How can we improve the function of green spaces to benefit biodiversity as well as the local community? Knowing what we know now, our first and last impressions of this area of The Hague couldn't be more different!

Bouwlust soon became the target of our research; having established our research curiosities, we began with a visit to the neighbourhood, an area we would soon become very familiar with. From the beginning, it was clear we had much to learn and discover not only about the urban environment and its green spaces but about the great diversity of residents who call Bouwlust home, each with their own needs, stories and experiences.

This first expedition set the scene for our research where we began by cataloguing local species that were found in a variety of green spaces (We used [Obsidentify!](#)), as well as, interacting with the community to identify local expertise that could give us further insights into the environmental and social realities of Bouwlust.

We found over 70 species of plants and animals present and thriving in just a small section of Bouwlust proper, both native and non-native, and even a few rare and uncommon ones! Yet some of our most important observations were unrelated to our ecological finds and continued to inform how we reflected on our project for weeks to come. There was a distinct separation of social housing, working-class residences and higher-income apartment buildings:

- Physically and geographically through infrastructure, the types of green spaces (courtyards vs. vertical gardens and trellises for example) that were available as well as their level of maintenance
- Socially, by the kinds of socioeconomic statements that different living spaces made (indicators of wealth, immigration status, etc.) which show a distinct divide between cultural communities.

This disparity within Bouwlust played a very important role in how we considered our research and went about encountering and including different organizations in the discussions we were having about core problems (and possible solutions!) for the neighbourhood. It was vital to us that as many different groups as possible were included and given the chance to meaningfully interact with our project.



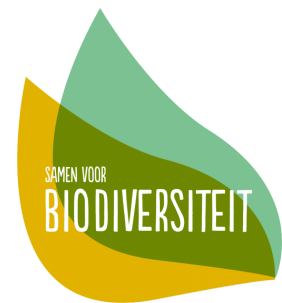
## Week 2: Meeting the Neighbours

After our first trip to Bouwlust, we began the task of reaching out to local community groups (thank you Melanie!) with a variety of backgrounds to learn more about the needs and concerns of residents related to green spaces and social dynamics.

We made contact with almost twenty different organizations and individuals who were all incredibly helpful and open to helping us learn about Bouwlust. Three key relationships emerged from these communications that we invested in for the duration of our project. Unstructured interviewing became our method for data collection, and the resulting consults with Samen Voor Biodiversiteit, Stichting Escamp Voor Vrouwen, and Palmbout Urban Landscapes each offered a different perspective that created a well-encompassing overview of the experiences of residents and actors in Bouwlust.

### The Hague Municipality: Samen Voor Biodiversiteit

We started off our interviews with Martin van den Hoorn with the [Samen Voor Biodiversiteit](#) initiative. *He is a policy advisor for the Hague municipality and an urban ecologist*, about the biodiversity in Bouwlust and the Hague. He discussed the overall challenge of balancing the needs of biodiversity with the needs of the local community to alleviate socioeconomic and environmental problems, especially as these two needs are often in opposition and are difficult to satisfy simultaneously. Solutions that represent the interests of one undermine the needs of the other.



For example, he mentioned that higher and larger bushes would be suitable habitats for insects to thrive. Yet higher bushes, especially in green spaces at night, reduce visibility and provide unobserved areas for illegal activities that make many local residents feel unsafe. Martin acknowledged that green spaces as they currently exist in the neighbourhood are not able to foster or improve conditions for urban biodiversity due to the isolation and lack of cohesiveness of the spaces, which is primarily due to the original design of the neighbourhood.

Martin emphasized the importance of **continuity** and **monitoring**, as crucial factors for biodiversity and community participation in the Hague. Continuity ensures not only the linkage of green spaces to foster thriving biodiversity but the long-term commitment to community projects to have positive local impacts. Greater monitoring will also reveal the true outcomes for biodiversity within green spaces that manifest over time.

### Stichting Escamp Voor Vrouwen

Our second interview was with Mina El Kadiri and Ronald van der Spiegel with the [Stichting Escamp voor Vrouwen](#). *Mina is the chair and founder of Escamp for Women located in Bouwlust and Ronald is the secretary for the organisation.*



Through our discussion, we found that the priorities that are focused on at the Stichting Escamp Voor Vrouwen are a greater need for monitoring and regulation to ensure the safety and well-being of women in green spaces. Specifically, with an emphasis on the importance of these areas as places of community building for women and their families. Mina and Ronald have also identified the need for improved oversight from the municipality in maintaining green spaces, for example, to ensure local tree species are healthy and do not pose safety concerns to residents.

### Palmbout Urban Landscapes

For our third interview, our group spoke to Ruben Hoek, *an urban planner and designer for [Palmbout](#).*

**PALMBOUT**  
Urban Landscapes.

Palmbout recognized many of the identified problems outlined by previous stakeholders and their interconnected nature. For Palmbout, there is a strong focus on designing and implementing solutions to the quality of green spaces for the community and improving biodiversity, including green roofs and intentional shared spaces for nature and the community. The greatest challenge posed to possible solutions is the ongoing complications with improving social housing in the neighbourhood.

## **Week 3: Future Thinking**

Our third and final week was a culmination of our research and collaborative knowledge to put towards possible practical solutions and consider future challenges in addressing such a complex problem.

We concluded that a lack of biodiversity is not the issue in this area of Bouwlust, instead, the main concern is the lack of use for the green space it occupies. Biodiversity struggles with the disconnected nature of the urban integrated design, and local populations do not feel safe using the space after dark despite how integral it is as a space for community gatherings otherwise. After consulting with the aforementioned stakeholders, we recognize the **social and environmental value of green spaces** and see the potential that these spaces have in improving circumstances for the whole neighbourhood.

However, different stakeholders have **different interests and priorities** in addressing the core problem, with possible solutions that clash or contradict. There are **deep-rooted and intertwined socioeconomic issues** in the area that **need to be addressed** before a complete focus can be placed on improving biodiversity and green spaces, and this will impact the success of projects and solutions if not considered as part of the overall landscape.

Therefore, it is vital to the community that the municipality of the Hague monitors and evaluates the biodiversity in Bouwlust, and the rest of the city. Therefore, making use of **local expertise and knowledge** will be a crucial step in creating an **equitable, safe and thriving** future for the Hague Southwest.

We also brainstormed several small infrastructure-based solutions that could address social and ecological needs in these spaces, like different coloured lighting or sensor-based street lights that can contribute to feelings of safety without interfering too much with nocturnal biodiversity patterns – we thought this struck the balance nicely (but we will have to ask our residents if they agree!)

Although our group has gathered a lot of practical information on Bouwlust for the last three weeks, we have yet to uncover everything that there is to discover about the subtleties and the quirks of such a lively and unique place – much is yet to learn, and we have only just begun!



## **Meet Our Team!**

### **Armand**

Not just a Leo, Armand is our resident design expert and proofreader! All of our visuals and formatting run through Armand. He is also a co-author of this post!

### **Isobel**

She has a way with words and is the powerhouse behind our writing! Isobel is the ideas generator and polishes the final draft to perfection. She is also a co-author of this post!

### **Kiki**

We would be lost without her to rally our team, sort logistics and draw up plans on her trusty tablet. She was indispensable during our interview phase!

### **Lena**

She has been incredibly flexible and bounces to wherever we need her next! Lena gives the best feedback and birds love her just a bit too much.

### **Melanie**

She became our go-to contact for all our stakeholder-related needs. Melanie single-handedly befriended half of Bouwlust and gathered valuable data through solo interviews!

### **Robert**

He is fashionably late with a cup of joe, but never fails to liven up our long meetings and work sessions!