

MOERWIJK

The greener, the
merrier?

A blog about green space
safety for Moerwijk

GROUP 10

Picture 1

*A majestic tree on one of
Moerwijk's main streets*





THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

KEYWORDS:

- Green spaces
- Security
- Urban development
- Social cohesion
- Biodiversity

MOERWIJK-ZUID

The first time we set foot in Moerwijk we came with our notepads and an agenda.

Following our instructions, we – that is a group of six Leiden University students, Ceel, Cocó, Jet, Michel, Sofia and Tim – were on a mission to find ways of boosting biodiversity in a neighbourhood we barely knew. For us students of sustainability it is a paramount goal to have many different species of animals, plants and fungi living among us even in our modern cities. Our journey thus started with investigating all flowers, leaves and bugs we could find in our allocated area of Moerwijk Zuid to get a first glimpse of the urban nature present.



Picture 2

Ceel happily posing for a picture in Moerwijk



Picture 3

A glimpse of a green area in Moerwijk



The first time we set foot in Moerwijk we came with our notepads and an agenda...

While passing community gardens, biodiverse shrubbery and even insect hotels, we were impressed by the sheer amount of greenery in the area. We counted a couple of playgrounds for children as well as parks inhabited by parrots, ducks and a heron.



*Picture 4
The Alpaca Farm*

After unexpectedly encountering an alpaca farm we could not help but wonder what proposals could make this area even more biodiverse.

We hence developed expectations of the stories we would hear when talking to dwellers: would it be parents expressing their joy in having playgrounds nearby for their children to play? Would older inhabitants tell us how glad they were to have so many beautiful trees and plants around? And would we witness workers coming back home after an intense day and immediately feeling relief at the sight of calming canals? We were certain to hear stories of citizens who might encounter different problems in their lives, but green spaces not being one of them.



*Picture 5
The heron of Moerwijk*



*Picture 6
A picture of a particular plant in Moerwijk*

Yet, on the streets the world looks different than from an academic ivory tower

The reports of real people showed a world completely different from what we expected.



Mothers

"I am afraid to let my children walk and play outside alone"

Whilst waiting in front of the elementary school to connect with a teacher, we got into a conversation with two mothers with small children. These women mentioned mixed feelings they have about their quarters. On the one hand, they enjoy living there with good access to the school, large parks and overall good maintenance. Several incidents, however, make them feel uncomfortable in their own neighbourhood. The most striking example was about a woman that got attacked by someone hiding in the greenery.

When we asked if they miss something in terms of green space, one mom responded that there is a lack of playgrounds suitable for children under the age of ten. There is one larger playground; however, it is dominated by older children and the facilities are not suited for younger children. A reoccurring story in Moerwijk-Zuid is that children have fallen into a stream next to the playground, meaning that they cannot play there unsupervised anymore.

Lastly, they mentioned tensions among residents caused by differences in culture. Food waste is regularly thrown on the balconies, causing rats and mice to relish. "I cannot let my children on the balcony", one mother said. "In previous years my kid would have a kiddy pool on the balcony, this is not possible anymore."



Business owner

"They don't clean green spaces as they used to"

Bob Donnars - Shoe and Keys repair shop owner.

Bob has had his shop for around fifty years but he does not live in the neighbourhood anymore. This mainly had to do with his dissatisfaction with the changes that happened in the area over time. The greenery used to be cleaned every two weeks, but now he has not seen it happen in a long time. According to Bob, this is due to the negligence of maintenance by the municipality. Bob's main complaints are the trees in front of his shop, which were more than fifty years old. During storms, they often break down and it takes the municipality a long time to clean this up.



Picture 7

A small water canal in Moerwijk

Resident

"these fences don't make me feel at home, more like I'm in a graveyard"



We encountered a man standing in front of his house enjoying the sun. We decided to ask him a few questions about the neighbourhood.

He told us he often feels unheard: "We have nice shared gardens, however, they are not used. The housing corporation told me to remove the fence in my dooryard so they could place uniform fences. However, these fences don't make me feel at home, but more like I'm in a graveyard." The housing corporation also promised benches to foster interaction. "But in the end, all that is left is a badly maintained fence, an unused shared garden, and a lot of litter that I'm left to clean up myself."



Picture 8

One of the community gardens initiated by Participatie Keuken

Participation Kitchen

Ben Lacchab - Director

"Our aim is to develop a feeling of community and safety"



Ben Lachhab is the founder of the Participation Kitchen which mainly delivers meals to people in need but also initiates community gardens in Moerwijk. Ben told us the neighbourhood is troubled in many aspects. Not only are people facing economic challenges, but they also struggle to maintain a positive mindset. Community gardens are therefore very important in engaging citizens with their community and increasing the social cohesion among themselves. This elevated engagement will then lead to increased respect among neighbours and for the area itself. Ben mentioned that the PK was inspired by the Blue Zones, areas across the globe where life expectancy and quality of life are exceptionally high. Among other things, this is due to the high level of community within these areas.

After this inspiring story, we wondered how the PK was able to engage the inhabitants in their projects. Ben told us that the strategy of engagement was to give the citizens a present: a community garden. The PK built the gardens and provided the supplies and then the citizens had the agency to plant what they would like and to maintain the gardens. At first, it was a bit difficult to enthuse people, but after the first successful gardens the ball started rolling. Lastly, Ben told us he was aware of the security problem and already lots of measures are being taken by the PK and Staedion. They are working together to remove high bushes and replace them with fences and low flower beds. This alone, according to Ben, already improves safety significantly.

As it became clear, understanding the situation means talking to people.



Picture 9
Michel during the BioBlitz

After hearing their stories, it soon became apparent what the main concerns of the inhabitants are. Due to a lack of proper maintenance of green spaces, such as parks, sidewalks, playgrounds and gardens, residents often feel unsafe in their own neighbourhood. They are unable to let their children play outside because playgrounds are not fenced appropriately. Residents, particularly women, fear walking alone at night alongside high bushes, because they possibly conceal attackers.

There is not enough sense of community within the neighbourhood to prevent the littering of public spaces.


Littering causes plagues, and also can harm children.

At the moment, several measures are being taken by some stakeholders to address these concerns. Participatie Keuken and Staedion are working on the issues of insecurity by replacing high bushes with fences and flowers.



Picture 10
A beautiful plant photographed in Moerwijk

Biodiversity isn't the people's problem, but it might be part of a solution.



We departed our journey with the outsider's objective of establishing a larger variety of species to Moerwijk. When invading the neighborhood with this agenda, one could easily neglect what really is at stake. We have witnessed in the progress that to people actually affected, biodiversity is not of utmost importance and untouched – or more realistically spoken, unmaintained – nature can constitute a problem itself.

When basic needs such as security are perceived as threatened, a research by a group of strangers on a topic which inhabitants don't relate to seems redundant until their actual problems really are addressed. As we have seen however, bringing people together is a crucial action which can be the butterfly that with its wings initiates a powerful wind of change. Community gardens developed by Participatie Keuken and aiming at strengthening the sense of community and belonging are the perfect example to show how important it is to empower people, entrust them and let them be part of the change. These are the best ingredients to achieve desired societal results. After all, increasing biodiversity might be part of a solution to solve the problems people actually perceive in their daily lives.

