

# Proud of Nature: a Look at Biodiversity in Moerwijk North

## Moerwijk 1 Project Blog

Transdisciplinary Skills

MSc Governance of Sustainability

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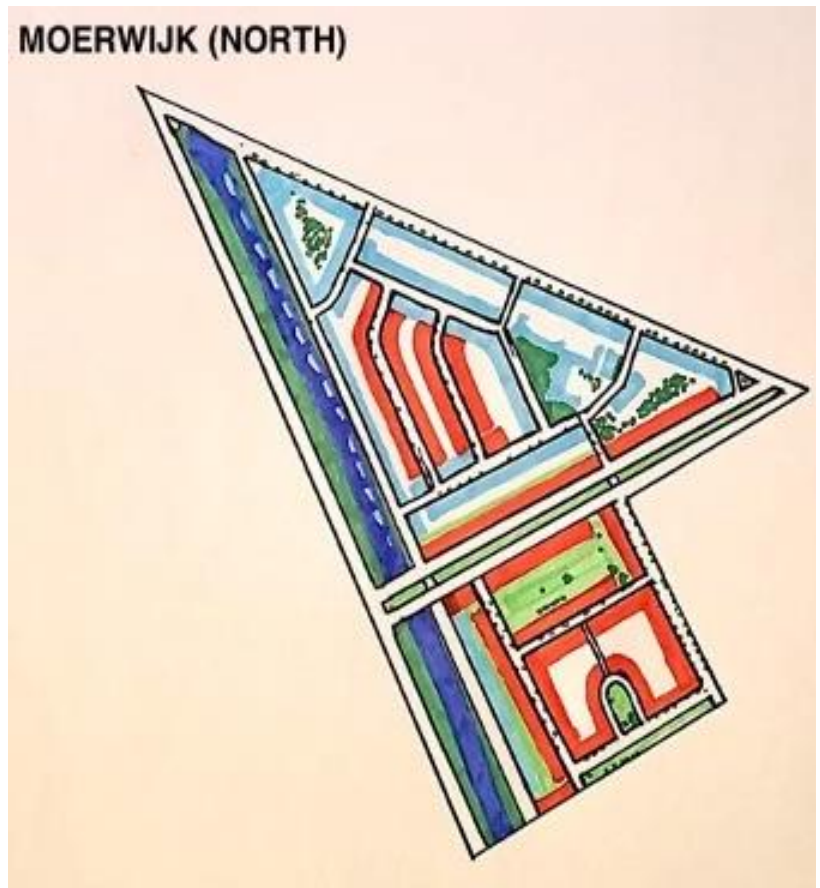
Tags: *biodiversity, waste, social cohesion, attitudes, pride*

## Introduction and First Visit

*“People in this neighbourhood do not really care and will just leave their waste anywhere”*, responded a long-time resident from Moerwijk 1 when we asked her what she considers the biggest problems in the neighbourhood. Her statement sounded familiar. We had gotten similar responses during previous encounters that day. Yet, we were somewhat surprised and confused by her answer as, about thirty seconds before our encounter, we saw this same lady walking off while her dog was taking a big dump on the sidewalk. *What did her statement about people in the neighbourhood mean? Does she consider herself different from those people? How does she think this problem should be solved if she contributes to it herself?* This anecdote illustrates some of the issues we faced while investigating problems surrounding (hidden) biodiversity in the area of Moerwijk 1.

**Moerwijk 1 is a part of Moerwijk North's charming inner city area in the Hague southwest, home to around [7000 inhabitants](#).** We first visited Moerwijk 1 on a grey afternoon and explored the neighbourhood's spatial use. Although Moerwijk is considered one of the Hague's greener districts, it still surprised us with green sites, having a biodiversity-rich canal area and natural surface patches throughout the neighbourhood. Upon closer examination, the area was replete with overdue maintenance of the residential buildings, littered pavements, and poor infrastructure appearance preservation, which is partially explained by the neighbourhood [building](#) activities having mainly occurred during and shortly after WWII.

**That day, we came across a building that turned out to be a squatter settlement, which would eventually become crucial to our tale and the Moerwijk story.** The massive structure appeared abandoned, but the lights were turned on. We have returned there three times over two weeks, but no one ever answered.



Despite this overall positive neighbourhood image, the benefits biodiversity offers to the urban environment, such as [climate change resilience](#), highlight the importance of striving to preserve and augment it. This is explicitly more relevant today with the municipality's increasing ambition to use the available land to build new living spaces. Thus, our team set out to conduct transdisciplinary research in Moerwijk 1 in the form of semi-structured interviews with a mission to work with local stakeholders and engage them in the discussion of urban biodiversity. Our team is pleased to present this blog. You will follow our journey from encountering the stakeholders of the Moerwijk 1 area and learning about its dynamic environment to designing the core biodiversity problem and its solutions following the Theory of Change.

**This blog is intended for stakeholders involved in Moerwijk 1, such as civil servants, business owners, and the Moerwijk North residential community, to create an interface where the Moerwijk community values and parties' interests are shared.** With this, we aim to engage stakeholders in comprehending their decision-making impacts on biodiversity in Moerwijk and catalyse the learning process for all parties to learn from one another's perspectives and interests in the area development.

## Conversations with Residents

**Conversations with shop owners and residents disclosed the neighbourhood's safety as the most common concern.** The stories shared by our participants reflect that Moerwijk has been, and often still is, an unsafe area. Although this is outside the realm of biodiversity, understanding

our stakeholders' concerns is critical since it creates the framework in which we function.

**Through our encounters, we observed that residents are concerned with biodiversity in its more visible form, such as plants and other greenery.** The residents we talked to are content; some mentioned the landscaping as the aspect they liked best about living in Moerwijk. Moreover, vegetation serves as a social cohesion tool in some measure, as residents working in the nearby flower greenhouses bring plants for other residents.

**Furthermore, locals distinctly consider biodiversity from the waste perspective, expressing discontent with litter on the streets and criticising the others' attitudes and lack of social cohesion and control as a source of the problem.** The area has only one waste worker, and the trash is not collected in his absence. The waste worker shared with us that the amount of waste in Moerwijk 1 has remained chiefly consistent over the years and highlighted that this part is among the cleaner ones in Moerwijk. Some locals suggested that Moerwijk 1 could have more bins and regulation policies, but with an emphasis that people's attitude needs to alter for visible improvements. Yet, this is a challenge to the neighbourhood with cultural differences. For example, people with a Muslim background are not allowed to throw food away, so they dispose it back into Moerwijk nature, attracting rats to the neighbourhood.

**The table below summarises our discoveries from the locals' stories.** The light green column represents residents' opinions on their neighbourhood, while the dark green column represents their wishes for it.

Residents' Opinions	Residents' Aspirations
Main problems: crime and waste	Sufficient waste collection, more regulation in relation to waste
Feeling satisfied with Moerwijk's biodiversity	Sufficient maintenance of green areas
Feeling proud of Moerwijk as an area with rich biodiversity	Clean streets and green spaces would advance the social cohesion in Moerwijk 1

*Table 1: Moerwijk 1 residents' opinions and aspirations for the neighbourhood.*

**We find the aforementioned responses focusing on waste and visible vegetation reasonable, as many individuals not academically involved with flora and fauna may be unfamiliar with urban biodiversity manifestations.** It is fair for them to be all abroad believing that a green space represents high biodiversity, even though this is a misconception. We realised that future conversations should use synonyms for biodiversity to improve the quality of conversations, such as "local plant and animal life."

## Moving Towards the Core Problem

**It thus became evident that residents in Moerwijk 1 have other prominent, more visible and pressing problems on their minds when they think about their neighbourhood.** Locals generally seemed happy with the area's greenery or at least satisfied enough. Yet, as people did not seem to consider this to be a very important issue, we were highly unsure whether this meant the neighbourhood was not only green but also rich in biodiversity. Our conversation with the Hague's city ecologist, who works on increasing biodiversity in the city, shed light on this question. She pointed out the harms of litter and the importance of large [green structures](#) and explained that these are not found in Moerwijk, making the neighbourhood an unideal environment for biodiversity to flourish. She also explained that the increasing space that is required for housing with the growing population is pressuring biodiversity more, which was also emphasised by one of the municipality's project leaders in the neighbourhood.

**At some point, we were torn between the long-term benefits of biodiversity and the short-term needs of the residents.** *Should we really discuss biodiversity here if people have all these other problems they are worried about?* Saskia, the community manager in Moerwijk 1, who is well aware of what is happening in the area, recognized our dilemma. She explained that, on top of the safety and waste problems, many residents have their own issues, such as simply getting through the end of the month, leaving them with little time to think about the variety of species in the neighbourhood and its potential to

make it more climate-change resilient. Therefore, she encouraged us to think small and develop relatable solutions for residents.

**With these new insights we formulated the core problem, namely the increasing pressure on biodiversity in Moerwijk 1 stemming from one, incorrect waste disposal which is not only harmful in a physical sense, but also reveals some residents' attitudes towards their natural environment, two, the decreasing space for green structures and three, the narrow window of opportunity to act on biodiversity because of the more prominent, visible and short-term problems in Moerwijk 1.**

## New Samenscholing Building Plan and Theory of Change

**Based on the needs of our stakeholders, we concluded that, to create better conditions for biodiversity to flourish, solutions should bring about physical and cultural changes.** As a method of co-production, we went back into the neighbourhood to consult with locals and receive feedback on potential solutions we developed. Upon our last visit to the area, we learned about the municipality's renovation [plan](#) for the mysterious building and realised our solutions aligned nicely with the municipality's vision. We believe that this building can serve as a space for building community and stronger social coherence and attachments to the neighbourhood. We also believe that the renovation of the building generates momentum for making the site more biodiverse. Alongside more systematic waste collection and maintenance of green spaces, this can create an upwards spiral in which residents will treat their natural environment with more care and in which the green space will grow as something to be

proud of, leading to better conditions for biodiversity to flourish.<sup>1</sup>

**In conclusion, although sometimes unfamiliar or even a little uncomfortable, conducting research in Moerwijk 1 while encountering and eventually engaging different stakeholders has been a highly insightful and inspiring experience. We**

**sincerely hope that, in return, this blog can, in one way or another, be insightful and inspiring to the reader as well. In the words of community manager Saskia:**

*“The neighbourhood might not be ready for a conversation about biodiversity, but it can become a conversation when you keep it small.”*

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<sup>1</sup> For our complete theory of change, we would like to refer the reader to the poster that accompanies this blog