

BOTTOM-UP INITIATIVES AND THE LOCAL SPATIAL AGENDA: UNDERSTANDING LOCAL INTERESTS IN THE FUNCTIONING OF PUBLIC SPACE

Robin Houterman & Germaine Sanders***

* Kristal Projectontwikkeling, P/O Box 13042, 3004 HA Rotterdam, The Netherlands,
email: robinhouterman@hotmail.com

** Kristal Projectontwikkeling, P/O Box 13042, 3004 HA Rotterdam, The Netherlands
email: germainesanders@planet.nl

ABSTRACT: The paper introduces a bottom-up initiative in Mariahoeve, The Hague. In the changing context urban planners and designers must work in, we reflect on the potential value of bottom-up initiatives and the skills and roles planners and designers should have in order to be able to achieve positive outcomes in these kind of initiatives.

KEYWORDS: bottom-up initiatives, roles and skills of planners and designers, public space, stakeholders

1 INTRODUCTION

Urban planning and design is always a question of balancing top down and bottom up approaches, however, over time one approach is usually dominant. Since the heydays of blueprint planning in the first post-war decades, more democratic policymaking has for decades now been a topic on the agenda of policymakers. Numerous methods and instruments have been developed to integrate the opinion of local residents, organisations, and users into the processes leading to new urban policies, spatial plans, etc. Considering the vast amount of information concerning this topic, it may be concluded that it is now widely recognised that for urban planners and designers alike, considering these opinions while making plans is key to delivering better places.

It can be argued however, that in many of these processes it is still the planner or designer who takes the initiative for change, and so defines the local spatial agenda. The question therefore remains what scope this leaves for initiatives that come out of the community; initiatives that, in this paper, will be referred to as bottom-up initiatives. Bottom-up initiatives are those that originate from inside the community to improve the physical, economic and social conditions of that community's own living environment (Houterman & Hulsbergen, 2005). As the case being described in this article shows, new stakeholders may enter the discussion on the local spatial agenda. Stakeholders, whose interests increasingly have to be taken into account when defining this agenda.

During the last three years, the authors of this paper have been involved in a bottom-up initiative in the area of Mariahoeve in The Hague, the Netherlands. Here, a group of local organisations, amongst them a secondary school, a housing association, and a local health institute, all of whom have a vested interest in a well functioning neighbourhood, have taken the initiative to put a park on the local spatial agenda. Being closely involved in this process from the perspective of the initiators, but with our view as an urban planner and designer, it has been interesting to see how this process took shape and developed. The process made us think about the way planners and designers should be able to obtain a positive outcome from such initiatives. Although the specific spatial outcome of the process in our case is at this moment not yet clear, in this paper we would like to present three statements based on our experiences and reflection on the process. The statements comment on the planners' and designers' skills, methods, and roles, which we believe are essential for urban planners and designers today.

2 MARIAHOEVE AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PARK: EXPLAINING THE CONTEXT

2.1 Mariahoeve

Mariahoeve is a housing area on the north-eastern edge of The Hague, The Netherlands. Built predominantly in the 1960's, its form is characterised by modernist design principles of light, air and space. The area consists of six housing neighbourhoods, organised around a central area. In this central part, important neighbourhood functions such as the shopping centre, a secondary school, and two neighbourhood centres are located. The area has a large amount of public housing, owned by three housing associations: Haag Wonen, Staedion and Vestia. The main characteristic of the area is its full-grown vegetation, which makes the area a very green environment. Until the 1990's, the area was seen as a rather good living area, especially compared to other post-war housing estates in The Hague. In comparison to other areas the quality of the housing stock, both in its mixture of typologies and its technical state is, with a few exceptions, good, and continues to meet demand relatively well. A large portion of the population has lived in Mariahoeve for a long time, mirrored in the numbers by a large share of senior residents (those aged over 55).

However, as a result of developments in other neighbourhoods in The Hague, Mariahoeve has in the last decade seen an influx of new residents; the ageing population being replaced by households with a lower socio-economic status. This process has of course been seen in many post-war areas, but which started rather late in Mariahoeve. For the municipality and the housing associations this lead to questions on how to deal with the area and prevent a decline in physical, social and economic 'sense'. Besides formulating a number of social policies, the four parties agreed in 2008 on a scheme for physical change. The scheme defines approximately 20 projects which must be developed within the next five years. The projects are coordinated by a steering group formed by representatives of the municipality and the three housing associations.

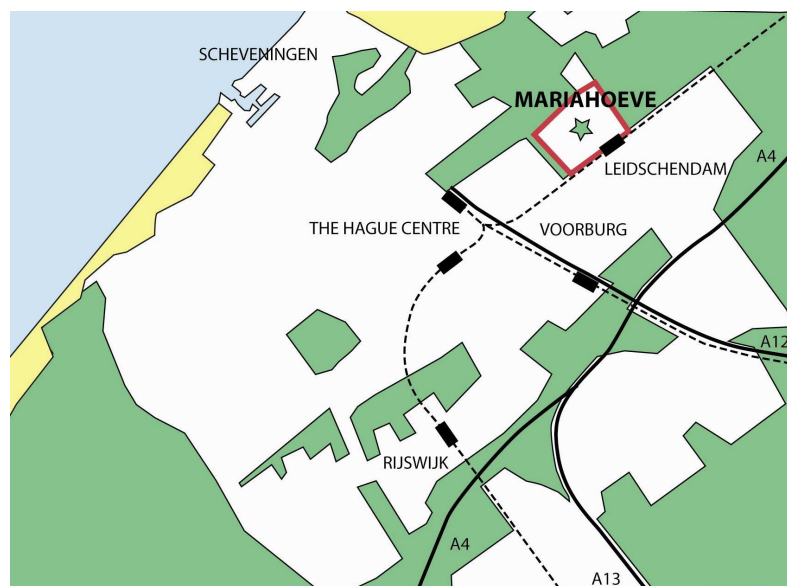


Figure 1 The location of Mariahoeve in The Hague

2.2 The neighbourhood park

The neighbourhood park is, geographically, the central green area in Mariahoeve and located next to the neighbourhood shopping centre and other facilities. Most of the buildings these facilities inhabit are placed with their back facades to the park, lacking a clear visual and functional relation with the park. The park itself houses activities like a small urban farm, a small neighbourhood facility for women, and a play ground for older children. Much of the space of the park is occupied by full-grown vegetation and not suitable for other use. It also gives the park bad opacity and gives an insecure feeling when walking through.

Due to this outdated design the park is not being used as a place to stay or commence activities and thus is not recognised by the local population as an interesting place to go. In addition, it does not provide a safe cycling and walking route to the shopping centre from the surrounding housing areas.

Inside and in the direct surroundings of the park, there are several neighbourhood facilities. A summary:

- Mariahoeve shopping centre. The shopping centre functions as the main place for shopping for daily needs for the residents of Mariahoeve. There are around 40 shops, which primarily attract people from Mariahoeve and with few from other areas. The shopping centre functions as a social meeting place, and is by many considered to be the “heart” of Mariahoeve. The design of the shopping centre is outdated and plans have been made for redevelopment, including new apartments above the centre.
- Diamant College, a school for secondary education. The school attracts students from Mariahoeve, and from other areas of The Hague. Besides regular education, the school also organises activities after regular school hours.
- The Ametisthorst, a nursing home for aged people. The building is considered to be somewhat outdated and is owned by the housing association Vestia. Facilities inside the building are run by Meavita, a national care-facilitator.
- A neighbourhood facility for women and children, run by “stichting Voor Welzijn”. This place in the park is a well-visited facility, in spite of the bad accessibility. They wish to contribute to activities in the park in the future.
- The Francois Vattelschool. This school offers secondary education in bakery, tourism, hotel and catering, and ICT.
- Two churches
- Social housing owned by Haag Wonen.



Figure 2 The neighbourhood park with the facilities surrounding it.

3 THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PARK INITIATIVE

3.1 Instigation of the initiative: The “vital neighbourhood” network

In 2006, a group of representatives of organisations based in The Hague and working in such diverse fields as housing, education, and health care, organised a common meeting with the goal of discovering what they could mean to each other in a professional sense. Participants in this session were: Haag Wonen (housing association), Kristal (real estate developer for Haag Wonen), Parnassia (an organisation for mental health care), Meavita (an organization for senior health care, including housing) and SCO Lucas (a regional organisation for second grade education).

The central question of this meeting was how the parties could work on place-specific collaboration in order to improve their services to the local population with the goal of contributing to vital neighbourhoods. Quickly, Mariahoeve came up as an area where all parties had an interest and the area was assigned as a test-case area for collaboration. Discussing the challenges and opportunities we saw in Mariahoeve in later sessions, we published a common vision on the future of Mariahoeve as a vital neighbourhood in January 2007. The core of the vision was the belief that we could revitalise Mariahoeve without demolishing any houses (a method commonly used in The Netherlands to revitalise neighbourhoods).

As a next step, the parties in the network developed a list of potential collaborative physical and non-physical projects. It then was decided that the neighbourhood park would be the pilot project for our collaborative approach. Haag Wonen, Meavita and SCO Lucas are physically represented in the area surrounding the neighbourhood park (see Fig 2. of stakeholders and their locations) and showed an individual interest in the well-functioning of the neighbourhood park. Kristal had an interest in developing methods for area development and possible real estate development on the longer term, while Parnassia had an interest in Mariahoeve as a whole.

The vision and the aim to organise a pilot project were presented in June 2007 to a steering group of the district authorities and housing corporations. The reactions to the story were threefold:

- some parties were immediately enthusiastic
- some parties were engaged and a little irritated, but curious
- some parties did not share the networks opinion

The meeting however, ended with the shared conclusion that the ambitions of the parties matched; the central area of Mariahoeve was also a theme within the steering group. The initiative was welcomed as a potential complementary process to the “formal” process of renewal headed by the three associations and the borough/ municipality.

It was decided to organise another meeting in September 2007. The result of this meeting was to organise a meeting with representatives of a variety of stakeholders and to focus in this meeting on a concept for the park.

3.2 Developing a shared ambition: the ambition document

In the autumn of 2007 a series of workshops was organised for which a broad range of stakeholders with an interest in a well-functioning park, including representatives from project management, the social & education department, and the planning and design department of both the borough and the municipality. The goal of these workshops was to make an inventory of the visions of the stakeholders and to investigate if a shared ambition could be formulated. The outcome of the workshops was an ambition document in which the stakeholders portrayed the desired future of the neighbourhood park.

At the core of the ambition were five distinctive qualities for the future park:

- attractive as a place to relax in a way that suits Mariahoeve
- a place to meet other Mariahoeve residents
- neighbourhood facilities that collaborate
- an attractive place to stay
- hosting activities for all residents

Furthermore, a number of necessary investments in public space and buildings were proposed as well as outlining a number of socio-economic challenges.

The contents of the ambition document were ready at the beginning of 2008. Behind the scenes, officers from the local borough were promoting the initiative through the responsible alderman. In a presentation in December 2007 for residents he stated that the park should be the new heart for Mariahoeve. In the vision on the future of Mariahoeve, published in April 2008, the neighbourhood park's ambitions were described.

Just before the ambition document was finally printed in April 2008, the neighbourhood park was placed as a project on the scheme for physical change of the local government and housing associations for Mariahoeve, mentioned before.

At this point, it could be said that the initiative was successfully brought to the attention of local policy-makers, managers, and decision-makers of the various stakeholders. Parties committed themselves to the initiative by signing the ambition document. The commitment did not go further than sharing the contents of the ambition document, leaving open the concrete contributions (organisational, financial, etc.) each party could make.



Figure 3 The ambition document

3.3 Turning the ambition into plans

Now that the neighbourhood park was on the local agenda, time had come to turn the ambition into plans. Three tracks of development related to the ambition document were initiated concurrently. This phase continues today, as the initiatives continue to evolve, with varying speed. The three tracks are:

- 1) A social track, in which the social organisations with an interest in the neighbourhood park are looking for possibilities to collaborate. The group is chaired by the very active borough's manager for social projects. The Diamant College is particularly active in this track. With the opening of the new school in December 2009, they have created space on their building's ground floor to initiate a neighbourhood restaurant, which is utilised by a local social entrepreneur. This is the first step for the school's ambition to become a centre for the neighbourhood with not only activities for its pupils, but local residents as well. It could be said that it is also the first real project within the neighbourhood park philosophy of the ambition document.
- 2) The integration of the neighbourhood park within the design study for the "Kleine Loo". This study involves the transformation of the buildings and public space along the Kleine Loo boulevard, including the neighbourhood shopping centre. The purpose of the study is to define the possibilities for physical change of this area and should lead to a framework of the physical boundaries for transformation. Kristal is, among the three housing associations and the developer of the shopping centre, a participant in the working group for this study, but none of the social organisations (Diamant College, Meavita etc.) are. The study must lead to a transformation of the whole area in the long term.
- 3) A study for a possible investment strategy, commissioned by the steering group to Haag Wonen/Kristal. This study was mainly focused on the possibilities for physical change and how to organise this. The study included the following:

- An analysis of the potential role of three groups of stakeholders: real estate and public space owners and thus potential investors, organisations which can “organise” functions and activities, and the residents and users. The analysis included a further inventory of the interests of the different stakeholders in the location and the importance of the park for the goals of their organisation.
- An analysis of the design assignment based on a scenario study: images of potential spatial outcomes of the two different development scenarios were sent by postcard to the stakeholders who were asked to advise their preference and the reasons behind their preference. This made it possible to gain insight into the way the different organisations looked to the future identity and program of the neighbourhood park
- A study into the costs and proceeds of investments into the neighbourhood park
- A proposal on how to initiate the participation of residents into the planning process

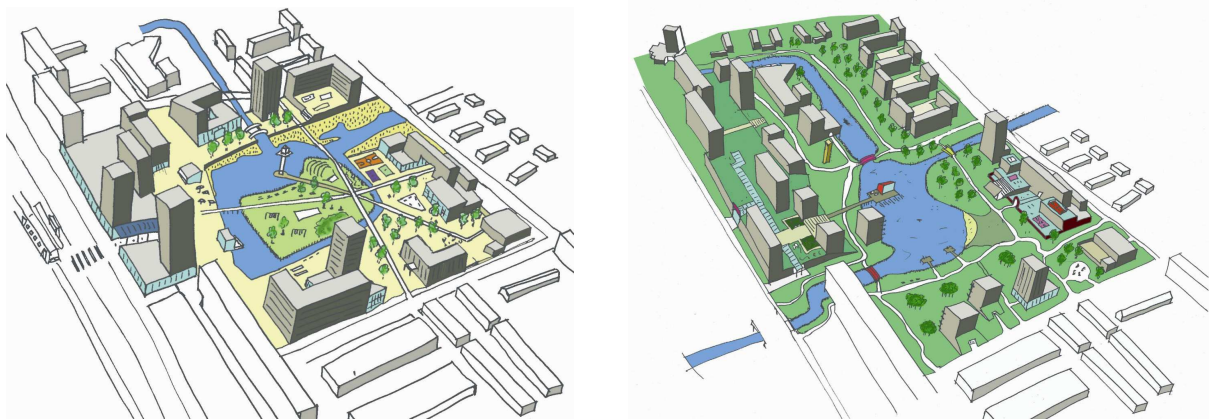


Figure 4 Two scenario's for the park

Based on the studies, the elaborated strategy proposes a series of smaller interventions for the park, as well as the organisation of an ‘event’ in the neighbourhood park. The proposal for smaller interventions, and not to make an overall plan for the park, was a result of the conclusion that none of the potential investors (housing associations, municipality, developers) had made a promise to make substantial investments into the public space of the neighbourhood park or to redevelop their real estate surrounding the neighbourhood park in the short term.

The aim of smaller interventions is to make improvements in the park's function in the short term. An example of such an intervention is to cut down the trees between the Diamant College and the neighbourhood facility, which would give the Diamant College a front towards the park, supporting its ambition to become a neighbourhood centre.

The ‘event’ should show the possibilities of the neighbourhood park to become Mariahoeve's central public space and present Mariahoeve's residents the neighbourhood park ‘philosophy’, inviting them to join in the making of plans for the park. With the opening of Diamant College, the momentum for both the first spatial interventions and the event is there. The combination of these two first steps is crucial, however, although the budget and time to organise an event is there, so far, it has been difficult to organise physical interventions. Although the local public space officer is enthusiastic about the ideas, the budget cannot be organised in the term that is needed, due to predefined budgets for 2009 and part of 2010. In addition, even these smaller interventions are subject to local planning procedures which take many months to complete.

4 A REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS: THREE STATEMENTS ABOUT ROLES AND SKILLS OF URBAN PLANNERS AND DESIGNERS

Today, although the neighbourhood park is definitely a topic on the local spatial agenda, the transformation of the ambition into concrete plans and actions is a time-consuming process. From our experiences in this process, we have developed three statements. Although we present the statements here as

conclusions on our reflection, they should be read rather as questions to which the answers should be discussed with the experience of many other cases.

4.1 Statement 1

In Mariahoeve, we see many social organisations broadening their ambitions towards a more open relation with the neighbourhood. The organisations appear to be aware that the success of this is also dependent on well functioning public space, as shown by the instigation of the initiative itself, and the commitment at the workshops that were held before the ambition document and the results of the stakeholder analysis. Diamant College, especially is a clear example of this. They have already organised new neighbourhood activities in their school because of the value those activities may have for the education of their pupils. But, the success of these activities and the functioning of the school as a neighbourhood centre is considered to be strongly related to the functioning of the neighbourhood park as a central meeting place for the neighbourhood. In other words, without physical improvements to the park and establishing new spatial relations with the park, the school does not expect to fully achieve their goals in relation to the education of their pupils.

In addition to this, an interesting conclusion after the scenario study was that there was a significant difference in the way the social organisations judged the scenarios and the way stakeholders with a more physical background (housing associations and the municipality) judged them. The social stakeholders responded on the image of the park full of activities (scenario 1), while the other stakeholders responded most to the physical image of the green park sketched in scenario 2. Of course, this may be very specific for the case of Mariahoeve, but we found this quite a remarkable conclusion. We believe it says something about the way these organisations look at the functioning of public space.

Planners and designers should be more aware of new stakeholders showing an interest in the local spatial agenda, the development potential these stakeholders have within their own organisations and the way public space enhances the interests of these stakeholders and the goals of their organisations. An analysis of this should be part of any planning process on the transformation of public space.

4.2 Statement 2

In the neighbourhood park case, we see a strong connection between the proposed physical interventions for the neighbourhood park and the social and economical goals of revitalising Mariahoeve that is enhanced by all the parties involved. The neighbourhood park as a connective theme acts almost literally as a metaphor for both the physical and social organisations working on the realisation of the ambitions outlined in the ambition document. This is, in our view, a result of the way the social organisations were part of the initiative from the outset of the process. The ambition document proved to be a successful product to communicate both the aims of the stakeholders and the actual needs for physical intervention.

We consider this a very strong aspect of the initiative in Mariahoeve and we suspect that this could be the true value of bottom-up initiatives in general. Therefore, bottom-up initiatives should not only be judged by planners and designers on the way they contribute to the physical environment, but also on how they potentially contribute to the social and economic revitalisation of the broader neighbourhood.

Interventions in public space and buildings can be an important means to obtain better functioning (or more vital) neighbourhoods, especially when they are a result of bottom-up initiatives. The key to judging bottom-up initiatives lies in the recognition of their wider (social and economic) meaning for revitalisation of neighbourhoods. This requires knowledge from planners and designers on how to relate physical and socio-economical aspects in revitalising neighbourhoods.

4.3 Statement 3

Within the neighbourhood park case, we see that there is a gap in timing between the procedures in the physical world and the social world, especially when it comes to making quick improvements. While the school has been able to organise, finance and rebuild their ground floor into a restaurant, it is very difficult to make the first steps in making the school and new restaurant accessible from the park. Although the benefits of such an intervention might be obvious for all parties, juridical and financial procedures are such that the interventions needed cannot be expected in the desired time period. In the neighbourhood park case, we are

afraid that the momentum for a strong signal, combining the physical and social interventions to be made, will now be lost.

Another topic we experienced is that the “ownership” of the project is not always clear, and following this an answer to the question of who is setting the agenda for the project. Starting as an initiative from the vital neighbour network, however, this group is lacking the means to take the lead when transforming it into a real project. This begs the question on if and how the municipality should take over leadership, while keeping the original intentions intact.

There is a task for urban planners and designers to develop methods to quickly integrate bottom-up initiatives into the local spatial agenda. These methods include:

- Planning for more flexible budgets
- Designing less blueprinted spatial frameworks
- Stimulating faster legal procedures
- Inspiring open participatory ways of planning and design

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The case of Mariahoeve was, for us, an interesting example of how the local spatial agenda can be influenced by very specific processes – processes that cannot easily be planned and which, as in this case, can be initiated in a very spontaneous way, starting with quite abstract goals but ending up in the making of concrete plans. Processes as well, of which the outcome seems to depend much on the contribution of the different stakeholders and the vision of key persons working for these stakeholders. Within this context, urban planners and designers should be able to value these visions, understand the interests of these stakeholders (which are very likely to have a social or economical character, rather than a physical one) and to translate both of them into proposals for spatial interventions. This requires the development of creative methods to analyse these interests and relate these to the functionality and identity of public space.

Our aim for this paper was to contribute to the discussion about the role of planners and designers in a playing field with many emancipated stakeholders, with the bottom-up initiative as an example. A playing field, in which the urban planner and designer may act as a ‘secretary’ who is capable by profession to define and guard the outlines of an initiative, as a strategist to define projects on a path to realising ambitions, and as a specialist on the quality of our built environment.

Finally a word on the value of bottom-up initiatives. In Mariahoeve, we believe that our initiative, although inspired by the ambitions of the participating organisations, contributes to the vitality of the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood park has inspired many to think about their position and contribution their organisation has today to Mariahoeve and may have in the future. Mariahoeve will shortly have a new neighbourhood restaurant, with hopefully more to be achieved in the near future. For us, this shows the potential bottom-up initiatives may have for the functioning of cities and neighbourhoods.

For these reasons we believe that urban planners and designers should find ways how to respond to these kind of processes and know how to integrate them into their policies. This will help enrich the profession of urban planning and design and allow it to both profit from, and contribute to, the dynamics and vitality of our cities and neighbourhoods.

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The description of the process is based on various reports of meetings and our own participation in the process.