

Community life in Droevendaal

The self governing of a unique student complex

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Droevendaal is a unique student complex with a rich history and a well known concept within the city of Wageningen. Since its foundation in 1977, many preconceived ideas have grown up around this '*small community village*' of about 200 students. A headline of the Wageningen University paper back in 1978 stated: '*Village atmosphere in barrack camp*'. Despite a huge reconstruction at the time of the millennium, it is still considered to be a livelihood combination between a Center Park and a gipsy camp. The setting and level of self organised maintenance surely make it to be a unique student-complex within the Netherlands.

Droevendaal often gives the impression of a modality style of community constructed within an anarchistic form of groupism. One of the reasons for this is the selection procedure of new housemates. They are chosen by co-option rather than being selected by the housing cooperation Idealis (SSHW until 2006). For that reason residents are said to be different from other students in Wageningen. Although certain indisputable characteristics, assuming the existence of one indistinguishable group of students with a homogeneous lifestyle is especially nowadays far too simplistic.

A simplification of lifestyles should lead to shared rules and like-minded actions which isn't always the reality in Droef. Although it remains different from other student housing (in Wageningen) it seems to have lost some of its original appearance. The wooden barracks have changed into buildings of stone (Idealis nowadays likes to rename them bungalows), vegetable gardens are now optional and the population has changed from Dutch to multi-national. Something that has not changed and which is still a matter of contention is the fragile balance between (local) rules and having no rules at all. As well as the issue of common property versus private ownership. For these matters it is probably preferable to talk about the Droef mix. Just as the architect who designed the rebuilding of Droevendaal in 2000 Van Eerenbeent stated: "I tried to create order by repetitive use of metric lines. Room for individual expression and a personal atmosphere can be created within this order where each barrack will have its own property".

Droevendaal

It was the local council and the Wageningen University who were responsible for erecting 24 wooden barracks on the outskirts of the city, meant as temporary solution for the student housing problem. The housing-cooperation SSHW gradually took over the ownership of Droevendaal as they did likewise with other student-housing facilities and nowadays basically run all student-housing facilities in Wageningen. With 15 additional temporary buildings constructed in 1982, 'Droef' grew to its largest number of almost 400 students.

In the early 90's the local council decided to end the temporary housing designation and consequently the SSHW stopped renting rooms in '91. They seemed to have agreed to end Droef and the student housing was to be replaced with an experimental vegetable garden for the University. Just before Droevendaal was to close down many residents organised to agitate and plead for its survival. It was especially in this period, between 1991 and 2000, that residents organised themselves. The role of the so called 'mayor' of Droef whose task is to represent the residents became very important and so highly fortified during this period. Whereas task forces had to be combined, the mayor was assisted by the 'Daily Living Council' (DLC). This commission of about five students, with the help of many others, worked for three years to persuade the local council, the Wageningen University and the SSHW to extend rather than eliminate Droevendaal. They wrote many protest letters, organised discussions and managed to get themselves on television to call for attention to their case. Eventually they succeeded in getting the

support of the local councillor responsible for planning who decided to rezone the project making it permanent rather than temporary.

After the local council changed its mind in 1993, it took another three years, till 1996, for the local council, the SSHW, the Wageningen University and the DLC of Droevendaal to agree what the contribution of each should be for the realisation of a permanent settlement. Once all main parties had agreed to a permanent Droevendaal, it was Droevendaal's task groups who became highly involved in the objection that followed. Because the area is situated within the National Ecological Network, there was disagreement about a permanent housing designation and some nature organisations brought it to the court. The DLC asked the University of Utrecht to conduct a comparative study between the environmental impact of an environmentally-friendly constructed student-complex and an experimental vegetable garden. With the help of this report the case was won and the last legal step was taken. The SSHW assigned an architect who, in consultation with the DLC, designed a permanent ecologically friendly designed Droevendaal. In April 2000, after a decade of stormy affairs, a permanent designation for Droevendaal was established.

Residents

The often recalled as primitive circumstances in earlier days may have resulted that prejudices about residents once have been valid but are now outdated. The Wageningen University paper often could not resist making jokes about these prejudices. They concluded in '91 that the diversity of residents was increasing: "Being veggie isn't a strict necessity any more where only 90% of the residents are vegetarian". They raised the question of whether it is a defined group of people that is attracted by the atmosphere of Droevendaal, or if it is the influence after arrival that creates a kind of mould for its residents; referring to the so called 'mere exposure effect' (the more you are surrounded by something, the level of identification and appreciation increases). Ex-Mayor Patrick Jansen responded with: "This is not a relevant question. The only thing which matters is the pleasant atmosphere generated by a group of people that enjoy living in Droef because of its features".

Several sources on 'the internet', Wikipedia and some current booklets give newcomers at least enough ideas about the characteristics of their new neighbours. People on Droef are 'critical-minded', 'very social', 'do many things together', 'like to feel free', 'enjoy being outside', 'love animals', 'like green surroundings', are 'more relaxed', 'self-conscious', 'practical researchers', 'independent people' and 'active citizens'. Former part-time Mayor Hanneke Oosterbaan agrees that there is some common ground of interest but stresses that there is no such person as an average Droevendaler. "There is luckily a lot of diversity amongst the residents. Living in Droef remains a choice".

Organisation

Shortly after its foundation the SSHW appointed a contact person who became known as the mayor of Droef. And not much later 'Droef' published its own official magazine of Free State Droevendaal the so called 'Droevendalia' (Officiële Vrijstaatskrant). Since Droevendaal was intended to be a temporary housing scheme, residents were easily able to move around freely and mix with one another in order to organise themselves as community. Many were attracted by the ambience of this relative primitive and communal way of life with a high level of student involvement. But not everybody was always equally amused. Sometimes this accounted for the owner of the the student-complex SSHW, which once wrote about the way Droevendaalers (mis)use the freedom they have: 'If you teach a monkey to climb, it will quickly end up at the wrong place'.

Organising common activities, monitoring the ideology of Droef and watching over the rules and freedoms became the tasks of the 'mayor' wherefore resident students always have been volunteering. The mayor nowadays receives a small payment of the complex owner for its efforts. The DLC was set up in the early 90's to support the mayor and to

share commonly agreed tasks. They have had some hard times together fighting for the survival of Droevendaal in the early 90's and in the late 90's they involved themselves with the architectural plans for the reconstruction of Droevendaal. With an environmental friendly mindset it is (partly) to their credit that Droef re-used old foundations and nowadays re-uses rainwater, has solar driven boilers, is constructed with environmental friendly building material and water saving showerheads are fitted. Within the new remit of Droevendaal, it was agreed that 30% of the area would become 'private' garden or common ground maintained by residents. The SSHW policy of accommodating only Dutch students was dismissed on the request of the DLC and international students have been integrating into the community since then. Africans and Asians are rarely to be seen but there are now many Droef residents from other European or North and South American countries.

Since the reconstruction in 2000 Droef's own organisational team has increased in size. A Commission of Groundsmen, a General Barrack Commission and an annual commission to organise the in September celebrated Droefparty have been added since. The Droevendalia has always been the main medium of communication for the residents. Nowadays also a notification board at the front of Droevendaal is used for small and more temporary messages and a website containing all sorts of information has been used as communication platform since 2003. As well as governing committees and communication methods, Droef residents are also responsible for running an annex of the fair-trade shop ('coffee barrack') and sharing the use of garden equipment such as a grass mower or transport devices such as a transport bike.

Whereas Droef functions like a small community, like any other group, it needs common rules and continuing governance. When Droef was at risk in the 90's, many residents willingly collaborated and contributed to tasks for the common good. The own voluntary management team of Droevendaal is still vibrant but to find committee members is becoming more of a problem. At the moment of writing this paper the DLC has one vacancy while two others are already occupied by the Groundsmen; One of the part-time mayors just left and the Common Barrack Committee has two vacancies for five needed; there is a vacancy for the webmaster and the Droevendalia is only published because of the efforts of a few. And the two common 'grounds maintenance days' attract nowadays just enough people to do the job if there is good weather and free firewood available.

Droevendaal is not an island on its own. Now and then unwanted visitors arrive and vandalise a harvest or steal a computer. For this reason collective action may be necessary. Shared management is also required when disputes between residents and the student-complex owner have to be settled. Read the Droevendalia and you often come across issues dealt by the DLC that relate back to the housing cooperation. The SSHW or nowadays Idealis, from their standpoint, 'try to keep the monkey in its cage'. Because they own the housing complex, they may set rules and they do so. For instance, officially you may not sleep anymore on the second floor of your own room and campfires are forbidden within seven meters of each barrack. Seven meters is oddly enough also the depth of any garden. However, these rules are not taken so seriously.

Issues between residents are also dealt by the own task groups of Droevendaal. These issues concern for instance whether or not twenty weed plants in the back garden are not too many, how loud a party may be, where the new ping pong table should be situated or whether or not there should be a stork nest or not. Some like to grow cannabis, others don't like the crime attracted by it; some like to give parties all night long, others feel they can't get no sleep; some like to live in the middle of the bush, others prefer a well kept surroundings with the sun reaching their bedrooms and some feel that animals should walk freely where others prefer growing seeds and vegetables above hungry chickens wandering around.

An increasing diversity of residents simultaneously generates a community with a more diversified mindset. Next to animals, gardens, noise and participation to common tasks car parking is also one of the continuing debates within the community.

Front-door parking

Cars and Droevendaal seem to bring out a dualistic relationship between the official rules and the vision of a 'freedom state'. The position of the DLC is clear: 'cars are only allowed on Droevendaal in order to move things; otherwise no cars'. This can be found under the heading 'internal rules' on the internet site of Droevendaal. It also states: "Parking your car on Droevendaal is anti-social and forbidden by law".

In the 70's almost nobody in Droevendaal owned a car and so this issue didn't exist. Although there are clear rules, the issue of parking can be seen in the Droevendalia from 1999 to the present day as an unresolved issue. The number of car owners increased when Droevendaal transformed from humid barrack camp into a convenient bungalow park; as the national newspaper NRC•next describes it. The current 37 parking spots situated before entering Droevendaal show an ownership of one in six. One of the requirements for reconstructing Droevendaal was to build an environmentally friendly housing area which meant that Droevendaal should become a car free ('autoluw') area. Only when moving or transporting goods, would cars be allowed to enter.

The parking problem seemed to arise simultaneously with the first barracks being constructed. The Droevendalia of 1999 published the minutes of the last DLC meeting:

"There is still a lot of irritation about the cars parked next to the new barracks and talking does not seem to help". Several measures were announced to tackle this problem: "When building is finished, including all 18 parking spots, the DLC will be stringent in enforcing the rules. The DLC will also ask the SSHW to act upon this problem. To show that Droevendaal has limited car traffic, a gate will be erected, which can easily be passed by bikes but will need to be opened by car drivers; just like in the forest".

The DLC acknowledged that not all houses were finished yet and the parking places were still under constructions but at the same time showed their displeasure about the front-door parking and said it would enforce the rules after completion of the parking spots. The announcement of their own actions and request to the SSHW show the level of responsibility taken by the DLC. But while it is officially the task of the police to enforce parking rules, it was at the same time a slightly inane announcement. The SSHW did not comply with the request from the DLC and the gate never arrived. It is apparent that the helping hand of the complex-owner is often late or absent. This of course, brings Droevendaals own management in a conflict situation when trying to enforce rules without the backup of an organisation that could help with additional measures. The lack of enough parking spots was reason enough for many residents to regularly park their car by their front-door. This apparently caused much frustration to some of the DLC members. The same Droevendalia in 1999 also contained the following article:

"Dear Droevendaalers,

I would like to make a tirade about wrongly parked cars but I understood that others have already made a statement for why I will withdraw. We made sure that roommates, neighbours, the DLC and dr Ruys (caretaker of SSHW) will persist in asking people not to park cars in Droef. Dr Ruys said that for the time being he will take no further action because there will soon be a ditch, which will prevent cars from easily entering. While awaiting for other solutions, I will refrain from putting gem clips with glue in your car keyhole, I will not stick metablocks on your tyres and for now, I will also refrain from decorating your car with paint removal. Sender X".

Almost a year later, November 2000, the Droevendalia reports the assistant of the SSHW is not what it hoped for. It stated: "Even after the welcome task of Pol (rabbit) acting as natural barrier, there is still any obstruction for cars to enter. Interesting suggestions to stop cars from coming into Droef are welcome". The problem did not disappear and the absence of a barrier was a thorn in the eye of the DLC and Commission of Groundsmen.

Although building was completed and the parking spots in place, the stringent act of enforcement of the rules did not come even though the DLC could announce that some extra parking spots have been created by the complex owner. "It remains for the SSHW to put a no parking sign". But the common operational mindset that the DLC had hoped for seems not to have been achieved. One year later, December 2001, the Droevendalia states:

"The damaged road shoulders seem an unresolved problem whereas the issue keeps arising. The Commission of Groundsmen has put posts along the road side to prevent cars from parking, but the problem seems more stubborn than we thought. The first posts were knocked down within a week of placement and will now have to be replaced from the budget the DLC is given to organise nice things for the interest of all Droevendaals. It remains for the DLC to ask again if visitors and especially the residents will park their cars in the front of Droef. As you know; fines may be given".

It was up to the DLC to take the initiative when the input of the SSHW was lacking but still did not yet succeed in making all residents comply with the set rules. Although the posts failed to survive the local resistance, the DLC created a situation in which parking wrongly was affecting the community economically and as a consequence it made front-door parking a major anti-social act. Although this was a highly strategic measure, it did not resolve the problem. Half a year later, March 2002, the mayor wrote the following:

"Illegal parking is still happening and the shoulders of the road are suffering heavily. Traffic limitations are not pointless statements but form an important aspect of Droevendaal. The DLC likes to make its contribution to maintain these rules but can't do it without the help of fellow residents. We have to do it together. I will try to come up with a broad approach to hopefully tackle this problem once and for all. We need knowledge, willingness, facilities and enforcement. Meeting these conditions will ask for energy and persistence from the SSHW, the DLC and every single resident".

The following is a summary of a two pages 'broad approach' explanation:

"Why shouldn't people park in Droef? One reason is the ecological condition for the rebuilding of Droef. The second reason is what most residents see as the aesthetic aspect. The third reason is the national parking laws and the fourth reason is the commitment made in 2000 by the DLC with the municipality, SSHW and University to agree upon a Droef without cars. People tend to use the excuse of not enough parking places. This indeed could be true when cars are parked wrongly or there are many visitors. But even then, parking elsewhere is still an option. Every resident and visitor should be acquainted with and comply with the rules. The DLC will talk to the SSHW and will insist on another five extra parking spots, a new sign in the front and a line of green that should clearly separate Droef from the parking area. When people have no excuse to park wrongly they may be reprimanded. This can be done by talking to them or by phoning the police. Droef can be without cars! The effort it takes is definitely worth it. Neither the municipality, nor the SSHW, but the environment of your fellow residents would be improved".

The problem was not solved and Droef committees had to keep exploring ideas. The Droevendalia of November 2002 reports about a new approach used. The DLC organized a discussion evening and invited all residents, especially car owners, to have an open discussion about the problem where different views could be shared and common 'points of action' could be made. The Droevendalia of April 2003 reports on one of the decisions made during this meeting; a car ownership and parking inventory. It was noted that 31 cars are owned by residents and another 41 cars visit Droevendaal on a weekly basis. It was also noted that the current amount of parking spots are 25. The January version of 2004 has another two pages on the issue whereas the March version reaches an emotional climax with reports about cars being marked with twisted mirrors, punctured tyres and scratches on the paintwork. The May version of that year is slightly more positive and states that only three cars are still regularly found to be parked wrongly. The DLC had a temporary respite in September 2005 when they announced that twelve extra parking spots have been created. But when in November of that year cars were still to be found in Droef, the housekeeper stated that if leaving a note doesn't work he will actually start phoning the police.

Conclusion

When an ex-mayor was asked if Droef would be better off without any rules; she answered: "Of course there should be rules in order to keep the area livable. But if some of those rules are not always taken seriously, I'm fine with that too: a little bit of flexibility may be expected from a free-state!" Other reactions of ex-mayors about the parking problem were: "I do not want to choose sides. I just want the car-lovers to park their cars a bit more often in the dedicated parking area and I think that the fanatic car-haters should complain less" or "Come on people, walking from the parking area to your barrack isn't really that far! But also: cars may be an ugly sight but looking the other way is also an option".

It is October 2008 and cars can still be found in Droevendaal. It is hard to say if it is the same people who consistently park in Droef as those who did so when this discussion started. However, it seems to be one of the ongoing issues in Droevendaal. But maybe you should be expect to have some what unresolved issues when you call yourself a free-state which can be interpreted in many different ways. And neither is it strange that you can get frustrated being a volunteering member of a management team needing or choosing to enforce rules when you are dealing with a diverse group of fellow students, who don't always easily cooperate.

Maintaining the balance between individual responsibilities, tasks and interests versus those of a larger community can be quite challenging. The dualistic perceptions when dealing with and enforcing rules is at least something which most residents, including own management, seems to share. Let us just hope that ex-Mayor Patrick Jansen was right when he said that living in Droevendaal has pedagogic and educational value. It would make the commitment to discuss different views so much more valuable and would create opportunities to solve problems in one way or an other. And for those cases where the community is not able to agree together, there is always the option of a helping hand from the state.

Epilogue

I have been living now for 2 years in Droevendaal and I thoroughly enjoy it. It has made a big impression and has influenced my life in many ways which make it an interesting topic to write about. I would like to thank several people for their contribution to this paper. First of all I would like to thank the current mayor of Droef, Luc Steinbuch, for our discussion prior to writing this paper, giving me insider information in the functioning of the Droef committees. I would also like to thank my friend and ex-housemate Bjurn Snel for his lively stories. He lived in Droef for more than six years which gave him a wide variety of informative and entertaining information to tell. I also like to thank (ex-)Droevendalers Nina Becker, Maria Naranjo and Thijs van den Bergh for commenting on my writings. I thank Idealis for publishing the book 'Droevendaal 1977-2000' which I enjoyed reading and used as a source of information. And last, I would like to thank my teachers from the Wageningen University, Paul Richards and Sietse Vellema, for teaching and showing me how to write a technography paper.

Sources of information

References have not always been clearly identified for the ease of reading. All sources of information that have been consulted are as follow:

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