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Droevendaal

example or exception?

Copenhagen

A full coverage of COP 15

Theme: Sustainable living

Droevendaal

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Sustainable living is always something you see in plans for futuristic cities. But finding a environmentally friendly place to live may not be as far away as you think. It might just be at Droevendaal, which exists for almost twenty years now. But do the people themselves live more sustainably? And do we need to change our lifestyle to be more like the people at 'Droef'?

When you enter Wageningen from Ede, chances are big you will not notice it. Opposite of the new campus with the prominent Forum and Atlas buildings, lays the most remarkable student housing complex of the Netherlands: Droevendaal. Hidden among the trees and high bushes are 33 bungalows, each housing 6 students. As I cycle up the driveway (which says "Sex, Drugs and Droevendaal"), I am greeted by goats, cats and chickens. It feels like a Center Park with a management that abandoned strict rules and fired the gardener along with it. Pretty cozy, actually. To find out a bit more about what it's like to live at Droevendaal, I have an appointment with 3 students of environmental sciences living there:

Battle for survival

The history of Droevendaal goes back to 1977, when a housing problem not unlike today's forced the university to find temporary living space for students. In 1982 Droef had grown to house almost 400 students. The living conditions were primitive. Already a unique 'village' atmosphere had developed by then, according to the Wageningen

University paper in 1978. However, in the beginning of the 1990's the housing problem seemed to be solved, and it was decided that the temporary barracks were no longer necessary. Idealis (then called SSHW) stopped renting rooms in 1991. The barracks were to be demolished, to be replaced by an experimental vegetable garden. But this was of course not where the story ended. Droevendaal had become a community, and the students were not ready to give up this easily. They organized protests, and were let by a committee of five people that assisted the 'mayor' of Droevendaal. The committee negotiated with the municipality and the university, eventually even managing to plead their case on national television. After three years they succeeded in persuading the municipality not to close down Droevendaal. However, it took another three years of hard work to form an agreement on making Droevendaal a permanent settlement. The municipality, university, SSHW, and the committee would all cooperate to realize this. This was not easy, because by this time Droevendaal was located in the National Ecological Network, which meant that nature organizations were fiercely against it. The resulting court case was won by the cooperation, because an environmentally

friendly complex would be designed. A study (requested by the committee) by the University of Utrecht had concluded that such a complex would not affect the ecological structure much. In 2000 the Droevendaal you find today was built. The houses are more luxurious, have solar heaters, and the toilets and washing machines are fed by filtered rainwater. The community structure was kept alive, through various committees and a critical newspaper, the Droevendalia.

Droevendaal today

Droevendaal is different from most other Idealis complexes, because the students can choose their own housemates. This is a selection procedure called cooptation, and happens outside normal Idealis' rules. If a housemate is leaving, a new one can be chosen through various ways. An advertisement can be placed, and the respondents are asked to come and meet. Then the most favorable person is selected, depending on the wishes of the Droevendalers. But often a new housemate can be found through the many social networks of the residents. Many houses have their own atmosphere, no house is the same.

Are they all hippies?

Outsiders will often say it is still a place for a certain kind of people. Usually the stereotype of the grass smoking, alternative, left-wing vegetarian environmentalist comes up. But is this still the case? 'There is a lot of diversity between house cultures,' says Jouke. 'Some like to have a lot of parties, some don't clean at all, and some a really quiet and tidy. It really depends which house you live in.' Bart thinks there is a certain type of student. 'But it's not a stereotype anymore, it used to be like that. People are already selected before the cooptation process. Often people actively try to come in the community, and those that can't be bothered stay out.'

Naturally, there is no denying that there is a certain kind of atmosphere, but it is a mistake to confuse this with the modern hippie culture. What is displayed in Droevendaal when looking at their activities, protests, and other crazy things, is commitment. There is a sense that people are all in it together, and together you can make things happen.

'I'm not really into hippie culture, I don't smoke grass,' Bart laughs. 'The main difference

from other student complexes is that life here is more like in a community. We have a service which delivers organic vegetables from the wholesale. People have initiatives for eco-friendly things, and the Droevendalia is also concerned about what is going on.' Droef is definitely one of the most active student housing places, with its special parties and festivals, the use of the common barrack for all kinds of activities, and all those random initiatives that keep everything alive.

But it seems that this is also a matter of perspective. Kawire: 'I'm not an active Droevendaler: no committees or other stuff. It's not like super special. Some people who say that it's a real community are exaggerating.



I do like it how I can walk outside and have all the green around me, and my corridor is very social.'

Taking the test

The three Droevendalers took the Lifestyle Footprint Test (which can be found on page 14), and discussed their results.

Bart: 'I have 27 points. I try to live sustainable, but don't want to sacrifice anything. I like meat, but I already eat less meat because I live with 2 vegetarians.'

Kawire: 'I have almost 24 points, but it's difficult to draw conclusions from that. Growing your own food is a hippie thing. To do that, you must either be really devoted to the environmental cause, or be really fond of gardening.'

Jouke: 'I have only 16 points, which is not very much compared to Bart and Kawire. I can still improve though, but these are the necessary things I just need to do. Of course I can stop traveling and heating my room, but that is no solution.'

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Bart de Vreede



Study: MES, 1st year.

Specialisation: Water quality and aquatic ecology.

Lifestyle Footprint test result: 27

'In my first year as a Bachelor student I lived at Bornsesteeg. I wasn't looking for a room, but my corridor was not very social. I'm a member of the athletics association Tartledos, and through them I heard of an athletics house on Droevendaal. Only people from Tartledos live there, because that's how people are brought in. This is very convenient, because we all have the same training schedule. It has been an athletics house from the start of modern Droevendaal.'

Jouke Dykstra



Study: Bsc Environmental sciences, 3rd year.

Specialisation: Environmental Technology.

Lifestyle Footprint test result: 16

'At first I had a room at the Walstraat. It was a corridor which had only members of KSV, and they were not very tolerant towards outsiders. So I wanted to leave fast, and there was a room available on Droef. The rest is history. I like it very much here, I have good contacts with housemates, and there is always a good atmosphere. I think that is more common in Droevendaal because of cooptation.'

Kawire Gosselink



Study: Bsc Environmental sciences, 3rd year.

Specialisation: Environmental Quality and Systems Analysis.

Lifestyle Footprint test result: 23,8

'Before I came studying here in 2007, I was looking for a room. First looked at a starflat, but I didn't really like how the corridor looked. There were no girls and seven boys, and everything was dirty. Naturally I was a bit frightened, so I went looking for other places. I wasn't really looking for Droevendaal. But all the other rooms in Wageningen were taken by that time. On the message board of Droevendaal there was one room available, so I applied and I got it. Now I like it very much, even if I ended up here by chance.'

Sustainability

In 2006, students of Urban Environmental Management investigated the water use for all Idealis complexes. Droevendaal had by far the lowest water use, 25m³ per person per year (compared to the second lowest of Dijkgraaf, with 34 m³, and the highest of Eekmolenweg with 61.6 m³). This is not very strange, since all barracks flush their toilets with rainwater. However, there are large differences between barracks (and thus between the water use of students). In 2008 Barrack 37 (nicknamed “Baraka”) used only 15 m³ per person, while “Camelot” had the highest use with 51m³. The average of that year was 29.6. Similar differences are found in electricity and natural gas use. These figures show that while it is important to have efficient and environmentally friendly systems, this is just part of the whole story. Lifestyle, whether it is just habits or actively trying to be more sustainable, is key to having a lower environmental footprint.

Jouke: ‘More people here are aware of sustainability, they think about their consumption. But on the other hand, there are big vans parked outside the area. Not everyone pays attention to sustainability.’

Kawire: ‘Some students here are really proud that they live more sustainable and use less water and gas, but I don’t agree.’ She explains: ‘When I came to live here, I wasn’t looking for solar panels and rainwater collection, it was already there. And that’s good. But the statement that people here live more sustainable is rubbish. If they would have lived at another complex, they naturally would have used more.’

So maybe sustainability can’t be attributed to individuals, at least not totally. Rather, it might be your own social environment that forms your lifestyle. This can be the reason why the barracks on Droevendaal have such a differing consumption, because different people live in different houses. But without



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The history of Droevendaal was carefully compiled by Joost Hooghiemstra, in the article “Community life in Droevendaal: The self governing of a unique student complex” (2008).

proper study, it is hard to really get to the bottom of this.

Bart: ‘It works two ways. When you come here, you are inspired by the community itself. The veggie service for example. Because it’s provided, you hook up with it. You improve your lifestyle by support from the community. You need an initiative. The majority doesn’t have to have this way of thinking. If there are a few people, others will follow if they see the advantages.’

Let's build more Droevendaals!

The Droevendaal complex is in any case a great place for a more sustainable lifestyle. The partial self-organisation and community spirit seem to be pointing in the right direction. In the Netherlands and basically in all countries it is difficult to create environmental awareness and sustainability among the largest part of the population. Should there be more places like Droevendaal in the world?

Bart: ‘Yes, ideally. But we can’t put the whole world population in a Droevendaal, we need less people. Overpopulation is the core of environmental problems. In all systems this applies. Fewer people means less pollution, less strain. Then you can apply organic agriculture and use sustainable energy. We now can’t produce enough organically for this amount of people. However, you still need to convince as many people as possible they need to reduce their footprint.’ Kawire adds: ‘If more people are aware and think about it, automatically more people would like to live in this way.’

Time flies by while having interviews (and fun), but there are still some questions left unanswered. Jouke is very kind to offer me lunch, which I gratefully accept.

I ask him if, when he graduates, he would keep the environment into consideration when choosing a new home. ‘I think I would really like to see where it is possible to improve on energy use in my future house. If I would have the money available, I’d think about installing sustainable technologies in your house. You need to set your priorities.’ Bart adds: ‘It’s part of your raising and education to choose in that direction. But

only if a more environmentally friendly alternative is available, because being a starter in the housing market is difficult. Environmental housing is also more expensive.’ Kawire thinks a bit differently: ‘I’d like to live in a sustainable house, but if my house can’t have solar panels, so be it. I’ll try to live more sustainable in any case. I didn’t choose the grey water system here, so it’s nice to have these things, but not I won’t necessarily keep them in the future.’



Wrapping it up

After a chilly photo shoot on the grass (see cover photo) and at the big chicken run at Kawire’s house, it is time to go. As it’s the self study week, more important things have to be done.

I leave Droevendaal with an optimistic, inspired, and yet sobering impression. Is this really the way to go, or are other ways possible to change our consumption patterns? Droevendaal is certainly a level above average when it comes to sustainability, as long as you only look to that average. This is a mixed place with many different kinds of people. Others may not even like to live here at all. And as it turns out, the most important factor of sustainability is that you take it into account for yourself, in everything you do.