

SNAPSHOT - UTRECHT: ROERPLEIN POCKET PARK



KEY POINTS

- **Roerplein park reduces urban heat stress, and enhances neighbourhood attractiveness and social cohesion**
- **Roerplein park is a bottom-up NBS initiative managed by local citizens**
- **Roerplein park was implemented in response to the municipal “Neighbourhood Green Plan” policy**
- **A 3rd party funded the community engagement project of Roerplein**
- **A combination of political, financial, and social conditions was key for the success of Roerplein park**

ABOUT THE PROJECT

NATure-based URban innovATION is a 4-year project involving 14 institutions across Europe in the fields of urban development, geography, innovation studies and economics. We are creating a step-change in how we understand and use nature-based solutions for sustainable urbanisation.





Sustainability challenges and opportunities

Utrecht is a rapidly growing Dutch city with around 340,000 citizens currently, which puts pressure on urban green spaces.

The city expects to grow to 400,000 inhabitants by 2030, which will mainly be achieved by infill development. This growth, combined with climate change impacts, are the main sustainability challenges of the city. Utrecht has set itself the objective of creating a healthy and climate resilient city. It is taking a systems perspective to address this objective, and therefore actively seeks integrated approaches involving civil society. *"These new challenges call for a systems approach: we look for solutions at the level of the city as an (eco)system [...] we commit to 'nature-based solutions' and multifunctional use of green space to support an integral approach to address these challenges."*¹ The Roerplein pocket park fits within this perspective, as it is a multifunctional intervention within a highly paved neighbourhood with little green space, established through public funds, and managed by local citizens with support of the municipality. The final plan serves to reduce heat stress, enhance social cohesion and the attractiveness of the neighbourhood, promote biodiversity, and support recreation.

Solution story and key actors

The Roerplein pocket park is an example of a Neighbourhood Green Plan project, which is an initiative of Utrecht Municipality to support local urban green space interventions and engagement of people with green space locally.

Citizens can propose a variety of quite small-scale plans that enhance the neighbourhood and the municipality funds ideas meeting their criteria, which are mostly related to accessibility and policy congruence. In the case of Roerplein, the municipality funded an idea by a group of local citizens to turn a paved public square into a green square. The idea was developed through a participatory process orchestrated by a social entrepreneur, given the relatively negative attitude towards green spaces within the neighbourhood.

The main advantage was that: *"It was not the municipality organising something, it was us, enthusiastic women that they [Roerplein residents] had seen around before. Because in these types of neighbourhoods, they'll automatically go into resistance when they even hear the word municipality."*² They were paid through an environmental NGO – NMU – which sought to demonstrate the potential of green solutions to address the urban heat island effect in a pilot project. The pocket park was implemented in 2015 and is currently maintained by citizens.



Governance strategies

The Roerplein pocket park has been funded through the municipality's Neighbourhood Green Plan, while ongoing financial support for park maintenance is also provided.

The funds for the Neighbourhood Green Plan have been made available through the Multi-Annual Green Programme, which outlines concrete proposals to deliver the city's green space vision. An important strategic document is the Green Structure Plan, which was recently updated to reflect a stronger focus on nature as a solution to urban challenges as part of the healthy urbanisation agenda. Another important pillar of this vision is: "*to enhance ecological, recreational, and landscape quality of existing urban green spaces in Utrecht for people, plants, and animals.*"³ The Neighbourhood Green Plan clearly delivers upon these ambitions of the Utrecht municipality, as its projects provide healthy spaces and enhance neighbourhood quality. A clear vision and use of planning instruments to deliver this is therefore important in explaining the emergence of this nature-based solution.



Business models

To fund local green interventions as part of the Neighbourhood Green Plan, the Utrecht municipality made available €500,000 for each of the 10 neighbourhoods in the city.

€80,000 of this was reserved for drafting the strategies for selected projects, outreach, professional engagement, and process facilitation. The vast majority of funds were directly invested in green space interventions. This set-up was effective, given that each neighbourhood developed at least 10 initiatives based on resident proposals with sufficient community support. It is likely much more cost-effective than a more expert-led approach. "*Initially we wanted to get experts like landscape architects, ecologists, and social workers to analyse potentials and vulnerabilities in neighbourhoods. But we didn't choose to do this because we wanted the money to go directly to the citizens.*"⁴

Moreover, a third of these projects are managed by citizens which results in higher quality green spaces and lower maintenance costs. Green spaces are also less likely to be vandalised and more likely to be actively used since they have been developed together with residents. Finally, the Neighbourhood Green Plan facilitated external investment in Utrecht's green spaces as several organisations co-funded projects (e.g. NMU in the case of Roerplein).



Citizen engagement

Partnership working and utilising a participatory process have been crucial to the development and design of Roerplein park.

A social entrepreneur, paid by NMU, built upon an initial idea by a single resident to “green” the square by recruiting other local people to collaboratively develop a plan.

Using the input of local people collected at several sessions, she then made the final design for Roerplein. The current set-up with citizens maintaining the green space has the advantages of promoting social cohesion, higher quality green spaces, and community engagement with their local environment. However, there is a challenge around long-term continuity. **“We have tried many things – flyers... We had a summer get-together once to engage neighbours. We organised new year’s drinks, which attracted a little crowd. But the intention was to get neighbours interested in volunteering in garden maintenance, and that didn’t work out yet.”⁵** The municipality has engaged in contingency planning by making an agreement with the residents that they will take on maintenance responsibilities if the community can no longer provide this. However, they would replace current planting with relatively low-maintenance alternatives. The citizens have organised themselves into a foundation in order to support management continuity through clear allocation of responsibilities.



Innovation pathways

Roerplein is a successful example of a nature-based solution due to a combination of factors providing the right conditions for the initiative to emerge.

This includes a supportive policy context with funding for citizen-led green space initiatives. Other important success factors are the availability of a social entrepreneur with experience in participatory methods and landscape architecture, as well as an external organisation willing to fund her. Partnership working and engaging people with the right expertise was therefore also crucial to success. **“[The process] went quite well, because we at NMU were involved, as well as the social entrepreneur, and we wanted to get more out of it [than the usual Neighbourhood Green Plan policy projects]. We wanted to take some extra steps.”⁶** Therefore, we see mainly social types of innovation in this case. In the future, system innovation may be achieved as the municipality is planning to more directly support innovative greening solutions.

^{1,3} Utrecht municipality, 2017. *Actualisatie Groenstructuurplan 2017-2030*; ² Anne-Mette van Lieshout, landscape architect at AM Landskab, 2017; ⁴Jeroen Schenkels, Utrecht municipality, 2017; ⁵ Chair of self-management group, 2017; ⁶ Project leader at NMU, 2017; Photo credit: AM Landskab