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Bestaat de ecologische stad? Lessen uit 25 jaar stadsecologie: een evaluatie.

[Does the Ecological City exist? Lessons from 25 years of Urban Ecology: an evaluation.]

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Summary

With the initiation of the Dutch Platform on Urban Ecology in 1989, urban ecology was widely embraced as a new discipline. From then on municipalities developed policies for an environmentally sustainable city: the Ecopolis. However, the world has changed since then. New developments emerged, such as less involvement at the administrative level and an increasing flow of citizen initiatives. The public has become increasingly concerned about the impact of climate change on the quality of life.

Is our society more enjoyable after 25 years of focus on urban ecology? Do contemporary developments fit the original ideas of the ecological city? These were the questions that led to the present investigation. Eighteen cities have been examined and twenty-four experts in the field were interviewed. This report gives a snapshot view as it is now, based on information from only a limited number of selected stakeholders. However, we think it gives a good impression of what happened with urban ecology in a quarter of a century and subsequently what the opportunities are for the future.

The urban ecology in the 70s was focused on natural greenery. While working on the ecological city it has developed into a discipline with ties with almost all other areas. After the introduction of the Flora and Fauna Act in 2002 urban ecology has somewhat departed from its initial basis: greenery and nature. This has drastically changed the work of the urban ecologist. The emphasis was placed on maintaining protected species and the management of local natural data. Happily though, during the last decade the interpretation of urban ecology widened again. Usually it involves biodiversity, climate adaptation and health policies for sustainability and urban development.

The environmentally sustainable city does not always get the priority it deserves. This could be related to the way financing is organized because it is not the investor who benefits. Still, greenery and nature should have a prominent place in the municipal policy landscape. A vital city is in fact a green city. Nature with good connections with the surrounding landscape is necessary to maintain a liveable residential area. This also provides opportunities for regional cooperation.

Many municipalities have a blue green ecological urban structure. There are examples where that structure is legally well anchored. In other municipalities clear rules are lacking, such as rules for compensation and the duty and obligation to include wildlife and greenery when environmental changes occur. Natural greenery requires ecological management; continuity and customization are crucial here. This appears difficult to achieve in practice in many municipalities. When aiming at blue green networks as structural elements one should include the social dimension involved. Lifestyle research shows that people from different cultures have different needs with regard to the greenery. This is an important factor in citizen participation, which also means that municipal officials should be replaced by concerned citizens. Working on 'Nature and Society' needs a blue green central angle. New labels such as circular economy can play a positive role. Pilot projects and local initiatives should be given more attention and should be mainstream.

In addition to new housing, the future challenge particularly lies in refurbishment, renovation and major repairs. Especially here opportunities arise to improve environmental facilities. Unfortunately, many of those opportunities remain unexplored. Exemplary facilities of the ecological neighbourhoods of the 1990s have not systematically been monitored. That deprives us of the ability to learn from mistakes; a missed opportunity. In the examples of 25 years ago communal facilities disappear just as the ideals of the first residents after they moved to other locations. However, there still remains a need for low-energy or neutral housing in an attractive blue green environment. Currently we can see again the pursuit of circular cities. Delft University of Technology for example develops concepts around water issues which should lead to an alignment with the city needs and at the same time reduce their vulnerability to climate change. This implies further integration of green and blue in spatial planning, the aim being the Hydropolis rather than the Ecopolis.

Remarkably the connections between urban ecology on the one side and welfare and health sectors on the other are rather cumbersome, although at project level there are examples of successful cooperation. There was already a call from the umbrella organization for municipal health care to cooperate in 1989 but this idea never materialized. Maybe this is caused by differences in culture and the organizational structure in municipalities. The municipal health care organization is usually part of the Welfare sector, while Urban Ecology and Green are often classified as 'hard' sector Urban Development.

Communication is essential in the work of an urban ecologist. Yet cooperation with natural allies such as municipal communications staff, nature and environmental education and environmental associations is not a matter of course. However, many urban ecologists do have their own communication network locally and increasingly use social media.

The experience of urban ecologists and others show that multidisciplinary and integrated work is necessary to achieve an ecologically sustainable city. The challenge is to achieve a win-win plan by clarifying the different interests. In this way you can come up with solutions to effectively improve the environmental quality and quality of life in the city. Yet this approach is disappearing. Evaluation is desperately needed to gain real insight into the value of these multidisciplinary and integrated processes. Although evaluations are part of the policy process, in practice they get little attention. Society must understand that money is needed for this.

Success of urban ecology depends on personal and official networks, an integrated approach and political support. For a firm foundation of urban ecology there is a need for trained ecologists, generalists as well as specialists. An integral thinking generalist makes connections with other disciplines. A specialist has sufficient knowledge of flora, fauna, aquatic ecology and nature legislation.