

Urban Conservation in a Social Space: Anna's Tuin en Ruigte

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20 November 2017

Key terms: Urban Ecology, Amsterdam, Biodiversity, Local Initiative

Word count: 1251

Conservation and Restoration Biology – AT&R SWOT analysis – Niels Brouwers

Anna's Tuin en Ruigte is an urban ecology project situated in the eastern part of Amsterdam, in the Science Park area. The project started out as a relatively simple student initiative, but has evolved into a dedicated effort to create a social space of high conservational and utilitarian value in a rapidly urbanizing environment. The project has, however, not been without struggle. The structure of the project and the interests of involved actors have made the initiative somewhat of an uphill battle. Despite this, the area is an interesting case study of urban ecology and may offer insights into the benefits, opportunities and difficulties that may arise from projects of its nature. To this end, this essay will critically analyze the project's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

One of the strengths of Anna's Tuin en Ruigte is the large variety of uses that the area has developed. The initiative has set ambitious goals for the park, both in a utilitarian and conservational sense. Consequently, the area has many goals that it is working towards. Primarily, Anna's Tuin en Ruigte aims to promote biodiversity, both in the social and ecological sense. One portion of the area is designated for social interaction and developmental activities such as food production, while the other part is dedicated to allowing nature to flourish and diversify (Anna's Tuin en Ruigte, 2017a). By combining the two areas, the project hopes to not only socially connect visitors, but also educate them while building a sense of value towards biodiversity.

Being a highly productive and biodiverse area, Anna's Tuin en Ruigte also offers a chance for research. The wild part of the area can be used as a 'living-lab', where researchers can study the emerging and diversifying eco-system (Anna's Tuin en Ruigte, 2017b). This diversification is spurred by the creation of a variety of habitats such as shallow and steep banks, and water bodies with different compositions. Some species are introduced, whereas others have naturally established in the park as pioneer species. The project's reference state is loosely based on how the ground was before the urbanization of the neighborhood began, yet many species currently living there have been introduced and the project does not focus on conserving specific species (Schutt and Corporaal, pers. comm.).

Apparent in the project's concept is its bottom-up management design. Some of the students that started Anna's Tuin en Ruigte still function as project managers, yet the gardening area is open for public use, allowing direct participation in the project on a wide

scale (Anna's Tuin en Ruigte, 2017d). Furthermore, the designing of the area is also a communal effort, with Anna's Tuin en Ruigte holding public design sessions where people can make suggestions for the layout and function of the area (Schutt and Corporaal, pers. comm.). These principles and goals fit well within Amsterdam's 'green agenda', established in 2015. In this agenda, the municipality encourages collaborative neighborhood efforts to sustain green areas, due to their benefits to health, resilience to extreme weather, and social climate (Ikin et al., 2015; City of Amsterdam, 2015). Furthermore, the project aligns well with the national 'rijksnatuurvisie'. This document, published in 2014, gives an overview of Dutch national, environmental policy and explicitly states that nature should be conserved in urban environments (Ministerie van Economische Zaken, 2014).

The initiative does contain some weaknesses, which have slowed down progression in some aspects. Firstly, the size of the gardening area is a limiting factor to the amount of food the project can produce. As an example, Anna's Tuin en Ruigte produced as little as 50 jars of mustard for commercial use during the summer of 2017, despite the entire park being filled with the pioneer species (Schutt and Corporaal, pers. comm.). Furthermore, the isolated nature of the park is a potential barrier to its conservational value. Though several green spaces are situated in the neighborhood, Anna's Tuin en Ruigte is unique to the area with respect to its focus on biodiversity and conservation. Consequently, the dispersal input from the surrounding area is minimal which has resulted in a high need for assisted colonization (Schutt, pers. comm.). The isolation of the park may also inhibit the outward migration of species to other areas. Nevertheless, Anna's Tuin en Ruigte could act as a stepping stone for species in the diversification of new projects in the area.

Another weakness of the project is that Anna's Tuin en Ruigte is largely dependent on volunteers. As such the number of volunteers can be a limiting factor to the progress in the park. A good example of this was the mustard seed harvest in 2017. The entire process had to be conducted by as little as 4 people due to a lack of volunteers (Schutt and Corporaal, pers. comm.). This reduced rate of development is exacerbated by the sustainable nature of the project, which may make development in the park more time consuming than would be necessary when using conventional methods of harvesting and developing.

Nonetheless, the project has proven effective on many fronts and offers several opportunities for future development. A good example of this are the small-scale collaborations that the area is attempting with other businesses and startups. The produce grown in the garden area is used in the kitchens of surrounding cafés and restaurants, and the park is currently involved in the cultivation of biological hops to meet the growing demand from micro-breweries (Schutt and Corporaal, pers. comm.; Anna's Tuin en Ruigte, 2017c). By acting as a launching pad for other initiatives, Anna's Tuine en Ruigte can demonstrate the utilitarian and economic value of the area. This may increase support from the municipality and surrounding stakeholders, while simultaneously demonstrating the benefits that urban ecology projects have to offer.

There are also opportunities to make sure the volunteer effort in the project grows. With the project being situated in an area with a large student population, Anna's Tuin en Ruigte can continue to establish and strengthen ties with the university and various relevant student organizations in the area. As the project grows, offering experience in the form of community projects and internships could encourage students to get involved in the development of the area. This would also fit well in the project's ideal of education. Additionally, Anna's Tuin en Ruigte has been established in a rapidly urbanizing environment. As such, the benefits to health and social climate that the project offers may become more apparent as the neighborhood and population in the area develop.

The largest threat that Anna's Tuin en Ruigte faces is a dissolution of the project by the municipality due to the resistance from surrounding actors. Businesses that have invested heavily in the neighborhood, by buying large plots for example, can influence development in the area. Some of these stakeholders have expressed discontent with the initiative, instead wanting the ground to be utilized for purposes that are more conventional in the urbanization process. Additionally, the ground on which Anna's Tuin en Ruigte is situated is still owned by the municipality of Amsterdam and the project relies, for the most part, on the municipality for its funding (Schutt and Corporaal, pers. comm.). Consequently, the project has been accompanied by a constant dialogue between the project's leaders, the municipality and the opposing actors. Due to the rapid development of the Science Park area, it is uncertain whether the ground that Anna's Tuin en Ruigte is situated on will be repurposed. It is possible that the municipality will disregard the health benefits that the

project offers, and convert the ground for efficient water storage (Schutt and Corporaal, pers. comm.). Furthermore, the progression of the project still depends heavily on volunteers. If volunteer numbers are low, progress will be minimal. This may contribute to the decision to repurpose the ground.

Ultimately Anna's Tuin en Ruigte is a good example of the potential of urban ecology. The area is strengthened by a variety of uses and its focus around a bottom-up design structure. This fits well within the emerging green agenda of the city of Amsterdam. Weaknesses like the park being relatively small and isolated and a large dependence on volunteer effort have slowed progress down in some areas, but the ability to co-operate with other small-scale start-ups creates chances for the project to demonstrate its economic value. The location makes an increase in volunteer effort possible, and the utilitarian and educational value of the project are likely to increase as the surrounding neighborhood develops. The project faces several threats such as resistance from surrounding stakeholders and a strong dependence on volunteers. In the light of these threats and the fact that the ground is still owned by the municipality, the future of the project may currently seem uncertain. Yet if the project's coordinators continue to capitalize on the opportunities that the project is presented with, it seems that Anna's Tuin en Ruigte will continue to do what it does best: educate and conserve.

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