The strategy for one of the most beautiful areas in the Netherlands, the Drentsche Aa River valley, brings the drama of the existing landscape to life and reveals its historical layers.

Revealing the Landscape Qualities

The river basin of the Drentsche Aa, in the northeast of the Netherlands – considered by many to be one of the most beautiful areas in the country – has escaped the wave of post-war land consolidation that exists in the rest of the country. Ever since, the area is slowly fragmenting and developing. A new landscape master plan, commissioned by the National Forestry Commission (Staatsbosbeheer) & the National Bank & Environmental Agency Drentsche Aa restores the landscape to its former beauty by making its historical layers more visible.

The plan works at all scales and delves into important aspects of the area’s future – archaeology, management, new country estates, traffic control, recreational facilities, water retention, scenic viewpoints, village extensions and agriculture – under the motto “conservation through development”.

After creating the overall plan for the Drentsche Aa, we were called upon to design a 295 hectare portion of the Drentsche Aa River basin known as Staalbos. This hilly area, with its steep slopes, is one of the most beautiful areas in the Netherlands.
Drentsche Aa design concept

The 30,000 hectare Drentsche Aa River area is comprised mainly of three landscape units: stream valleys, old cultivation mounds, and fields (both heathland and recent transformation to agricultural lands and forests). This structure has become more and more obvious in the last few decades. The amount of forests, trees and shrubs has increased substantially, which is why, for example, the contrasts between large-scale open areas and small-scale closed areas have weakened. Hence the region is not only gradually losing its organizing structure, but also its beautiful dramatic potential.

The design brings back that structure and drama, amongst other things, by enhancing the contrast between the three units. The stream valleys will become the dominant carriers of the spatial structure. They will be made more attractive by developing the edges and by removing trees and shrubs in the middle of the valleys. In that way, views will be created in the longitudinal direction of the valley. The sections of the stream valleys which have cultural or historic value, where necessary, be provided with tree lines of alder trees planted at right angles to the stream. Those sections with lesser cultural and historic value will see nature development on a larger scale.

The cultivation mounds will remain wide and open, and will be accentuated with trees and shrubs at their edges, placed to preserve the view of the stream valleys and prominent points. The link-up between the cultivation mound and the village will come about by creating more beautiful village fringes, visual relationships and hiking links.

In the fields the focus will be on the perception of grand scale, in the (former) heathlands as well as in the forests and agricultural zones. The open areas will be made as open as possible, only cut through by thin avenues that accentuate the straight lines. Forests will be made more diverse through a varying composition of trees and shrubs, the creation of wetland habitats, and new open spaces. Large areas of young (mainly conifer) production forest lie in the southern and eastern part of the plan area. These forests are especially attractive for recreational use because of their size, but otherwise they are incredibly monotonous and dull. The landscape plan envisons the potential for increased amenity in these areas through the integration of woodlands and meadows.
forests, while at the same time increasing ecological value and revealing historical and cultural elements.

The Drentsche Aa is dotted with characteristic villages, some of them almost completely intact. However, beautiful old parts of the villages are expansions in the previous decades have been, almost without exception, ugly. Making beautiful expansions possible will be a major problem in the face of the prevailing trend of new settlement and villas on tiny blocks in the open landscape. The landscape plan offers a number of design principles for village edges, village expansion and new buildings in the existing landscape. It is based on an in-depth, visual, integrated analysis of the landscape and its historical development. That development doesn't begin in 1895, but rather goes back approximately 6,800 years. Design principles are based both on historical and natural values. These principles outline solutions for contemporary conflicts and dilemmas.

The landscape plan for the Drentsche Aa proposes measures for each landscape unit individually in order to achieve the desired layout. In addition, the plan makes recommendations about dealing with regional infrastructure, water storage, archaeology and country estates. The plan will ensure that the Drentsche Aa will be in a position to effortlessly absorb new development and landscape changes.

The landscape plan is predominantly a design approach and contains a large number of proposals at all scales, each consistent with the others. A thorough analysis of the current landscape is accompanied by specific ideas to accentuate the landscape and improve the legibility of historical elements. Using a number of trial projects, a provocative perspective on the future is presented.

The plan at times even allows for substantial interventions at places where modifications to the landscape had already been quite significant. For the Ballouwer, for example, it is proposed to physically cut through the wooded banks between the stream valley and the cultivation mounds in order to improve the relationship between the two places. The Noord-Willems Canal will serve as a strong, obvious line to guide the positioning of country estates and country residences. The design for the Strabben Kniphorstbosch shows how beautiful the landscape becomes when a large portion of forest woodland development disappears.

Images of these design ideas are important for the further implementation of the plan. Eventually it is the parties in the area who have to tackle that implementation. By showing them how an abstract plan can work in different places, clients, the public at large, public authorities and interest groups can better understand its intentions. In addition, during and after the planning process the designers travelled all over the planning area to present the ideas in person to the local communities.

**Forest Design Strabben Kniphorstbosch**

Strabben Kniphorstbosch is by far the largest archaeological national monument in the Netherlands and one of the gems of the Drentsche Aa River basin. With its many megalithic graves, Celtic fields and burial mounds, it is sometimes referred to as the Pompeii of our country. Until recently the area was managed as a nature reserve by the Ministry of Defence. The management was so extensive that the heather is overgrown by trees in many places. Heather in the Netherlands is a man-influenced natural vegetation. If it is not mowed or grazed by sheep, nature will replant it by forest. Therefore today the landscape is rugged with a great deal of forestry. The entire 295 hectares is owned and managed by the National Forest Service of The Netherlands (Staatsbosbeheer).

The area's national claim to fame is the presence of various cultural and historical relics, both prehistoric and from more recent times. Of the four prehistoric megaliths there are still two present, and there are also about sixty barrows (underground burial chambers). The soil is rich with traces of old settlements. The wide clusters of cart tracks and other visible landscape elements date to a more recent past. Due to its importance, the territory is considered an "archaeological reserve."
We created a detailed development and management plan for the site of Struinen Kniplenhofbosch, which focuses on the image of this area. As with the master plan for the large Drentsche Aa basin, it relies on strong contrasts, to dramatize the differences between the culture.

The physical vastness and deep history of this landscape provide a setting that extends well beyond aesthetics alone. The plan strives to see the visibility and spatial coherence between various historical periods to allow visitors to be impressed and overwhelmed by the historical material in this sublime landscape.

Woods in the area are from very different origins. The northern and part are natural forests; the rest are re-plantings because of the zing of sheep in the 19th century. The central part is reclaimed e 100 years ago the heather was removed and pine forest was planted. A straight avenue cutting through the past decades the planting area has become densely overgrown extensive control. The design dramatizes the contrast between these and the non-reclaimed sections by accentuating each characteristic shape versus rational lines.

Two open spaces between these characteristic forest sections are individually recognizable. In the central forest area are the rectilinear planted coniferous woods is accentuated. Degraded paths will be removed. In the northern and southern forest sections the Il be left alone to develop further.

In the middle of Struinen Kniplenhofbosch lies the farmers of the family Kniplenhof. The country estate is derelict. It forms the rectilinear forest area. In the design, that rectilinear cleared and derelict pathways will be removed.

The ecological diversity and aesthetic quality of this area are affected by the degree of openness of the landscape. With overgrowth of the area in the past few decades, the natural values diminished and rare plant species have disappeared. The next and management plan for Struinen Kniplenhofbosch envisions a number of gradients between dense and open areas, thereby natural values.