

# The Next Smaller Thing

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## Introduction

The work of Strootman Landschapsarchitecten represents an atypical concern for landscape design at both the large and small scales, projects that at either scale propose forms and spaces that use a carefully reasoned palette of plants and land form to materialize insightful planning ideas. Their landscapes question matters of idiom, materials, and influence—in particular the influence of historical Japanese gardens. Of the many subjects through which one might pay a particular regard to the Strootman landscapes, I will discuss only these three.

Every era of landscape design has condensed its prevailing ethos in a word or perhaps a phrase. In prior times, it may have been “formality” or “naturalism”; at the turn of the twentieth century, using an organic metaphor, the park was termed the “lungs of the city”; in the 1960s, the word was “ecology”; today it is “sustainability.” Given our scientific understanding of planetary problems of climate change, the diminishing number of animal and vegetal species, and atmospheric pollution, the current focus on sustainability can hardly be faulted. But one wonders about the appeal of landscapes derived from attention to only one set of concerns. The exclusive focus on any single aspect of landscape design—whether one dealing exclusively with natural sciences, social conditions, or even formal

invention—normally leads to designs which do not yield the full range of dimensions any landscape may offer; and they are often far less than engaging as experience. Landscape design, being rooted in site and society, is holistic by nature and the best landscapes emerge from addressing the full host of factors that inform their making—from the overarching regional plan, to the selection of species, to the details of construction, to the integration of maintenance. Most Strootman landscape designs reflect such a comprehensive regard.

It is only a slight generalization to assert that the field generally known as “landscape architecture” actually comprises two differing factions, with a gradient of subtle positions set between the two extremes. The first, landscape design, focuses on the making of tangible landscapes that tackle a plethora of parameters enfolding environmental, social, and even artistic issues. The second deals with the large scale: this is landscape or environmental planning as a practice that treats the management of cities, regions, and in some instances even states or entire countries. While designers almost always understand the need to consider the factors critical to planning, my own experience suggests that few planners admit to the important consequences of design, that is the spaces and forms in which we live our lives.<sup>1</sup>

1, Carl Steinitz, Professor of Landscape Architecture Emeritus, Harvard University, told the audience at the annual meeting of the European Council of Landscape Architecture Schools in Genoa, Italy, that bad planning kills people, but bad design doesn't. I disagree, especially if we consider the psychological as well as the physical consequences of poor design.

It would seem that the recently concocted, and somewhat vaguely defined, idea of “landscape urbanism” might be the link between these two primary factions. Yet most of what we read about this attitude (as little or no work using this approach has actually been realized) is far closer to planning than it is to urbanism—or what we in the United States, perhaps with an overly French association, refer to as urban design. Most of what landscape urbanism has proposed to this point I would qualify as environmental planning rather than urbanism since it has focused on site conditions, remediation, and natural systems with only a passing account of issues such as space, materials, and human culture. It is precisely in its joining of these two scales—the planned and the designed, the grand and the detailed—that grants the Strootman landscape notable qualities and interest.

### Strategies for a Sublime

Berno Strootman has offered that the ultimate goal of his practice is to create for the users of the landscape an experience of the sublime.<sup>2</sup> Historically, the sublime connoted something limitless, mysterious, even something frightening or literally terrible.<sup>3</sup> It was an emotion more easily linked historically to the grandeur of the Alps than the reclaimed polders of the Low Countries. Today we speak of the “technological

sublime” that accompanies efforts such as space exploration and colossal construction projects, or the “toxic sublime” that results from our contamination of air, water, and land. But if an effect of the sublime is the goal, a purposeful strategy lies behind the design of most Strootman projects. These strategies begin with the specific conditions of the natural environment (if we may use the word “natural” in the Netherlands, where virtually everything from the land itself to the buildings and garden upon it have been fabricated), but are almost always geared to human use. Hardly the work of a single person or discipline, these are often efforts assembling sizable teams of naturalists, hydrologists, cultural historians, historical geographers, and even archaeologists—a necessity for answering the conditions of the project as well as the dicta of the Dutch regulations. In extent, the largest of the firm’s commissions to date has been the design and management of the Drentsche Aa, a national park and what the Dutch term “national landscape,” in the northern Netherlands; their assignment encompasses roughly 34,000 hectares of land. The scope of the design work includes the modulation of water from the streams that feed the River Aa, the study of the shifts in vegetation that historically accompanied the use of commercial fertilizers and barbed-wire enclosures, and the considered removal of masses of trees that colonized the site after sheep grazing had been

2. These ideas and other observations discussed in this essay were derived from conversations with Bernardo Strootman from 9–12 May 2011, in his Amsterdam office or on site. Further information was taken from the Strootman office brochure and other materials provided me by the office.

3. The division of qualities into the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque—as well as the limitless debates those categories have engendered over the centuries—is well known. A standard point of departure is Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. On the effect of dimension and distance Burke notes: “Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime” (p. 67).

figure 1. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, Country estate, Grolloo, Netherlands, 2007-2009. Plan

figure 2. Sento Goshō, Kyoto, Japan, 17th century. The zigzag bridge roofed with a wisteria arbor.

figure 3. Kobori Enshū, Raikyū-ji, Bichū-Takahashi, Japan, early 17th century. The stone within the garden echoes the shape of the distant mountain in a classic example of *shakkei*.

figure 4. Katsura Rikyū, Kyoto, Japan, 17th century. Stepping stones in a sophisticated play of *shin-gyo-so*.

figure 5. Shugaku-in Villa, Kyoto, Japan, circa 1660. The narrow stairs, constraining the view, lead to the upper garden.

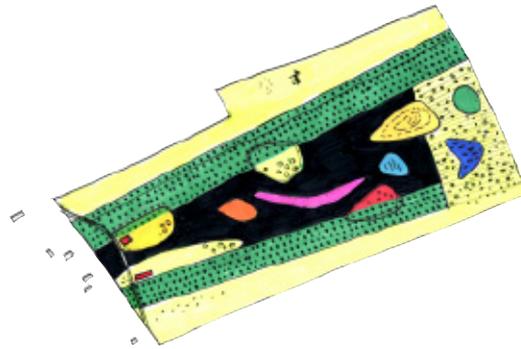


figure 1

terminated. The firm's guiding principle was "to increase the drama" in a landscape now wholly a human creation, to transform a landscape that had become homogenized and "gray" over the century since the departure of the sheep who had once grazed the land.<sup>4</sup> Working with an interdisciplinary team, the Strootman office developed strategies for treating the various zones of the landscape, in places recreating clearings long lost to volunteer growth, in other places clarifying ecotones, in other places still installing heavy timber platforms to heighten the aesthetic effect of views over the land.<sup>5</sup>

For projects of regional scale such as the Drentsche Aa landscape, the features of the existing territory—features such as vegetation and archeological remains—direct both the manner of design and the specifics of the interventions. The firm's designs for rural and suburban housing estates, on the other hand, develop from a highly detailed and systematic analysis that address governmental policies as well as the qualities of the site. Dutch planning laws prohibit the development of agricultural land for habitation or commercial purposes. However, those restrictions—somewhat curiously for those of us who live in countries with less flexible building policies—are negotiable: a developer may receive permission for new construction if terms can be established that satisfy both parties. In the case of landmark suburban developments designed by the

Strootman office—one in Grolloo, one in Steenberg— the authorities stipulated that the developer must "build nature" of an acceptable extent, while maintaining 90% of the developed land as publically accessible. In other words, new housing is possible on prior agricultural land only if it accompanies new parkland—with the private areas of the site severely restricted in dimension.

In the case of the Steenberg housing estate—which in the end will comprise only five dwellings—the law requires a minimum of five hectares for each unit. Cultivated land surrounds the site and one of the designers' intentions was to create a park and housing zone that that would comfortably join the large scale of the surrounding landscape. In response Strootman pushed the allowable forest mass, approximately seven hectares, to the perimeter of the 25-hectare plot, thus magnifying its impact. This resulted in the impression of a forest when viewed from outside the plot—while at the same time creating a "green wall" between the poetic, romantic world on the inside and the rational, large scale world beyond it. Between the two zones openings or "windows" support views from both inside out and outside in. The walnut trees from the site's existing orchard were transplanted to reinforce the effect of a romantic dike that encircled the center of the inner world.

4. The continued grubbing of the English oak (*Quercus robur*) shoots by sheep prevented the emergence of new trees while the land served as pasturage. When grazing stopped, however, the oaks grew vigorously—but in unusual multi-trunked and convoluted forms unique in the Netherlands. Conversation with Bero Strootman, 9 May 2011, Amsterdam.

5. Twenty-two of these belvedere structures, which recall the minimalist sculptures of the Americans Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt, have been designed; about six have been realized. For an overview of these artists' works see Gary Garrels, editor, *Sol LeWitt: A Retrospective*, San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 2000; and Nicolas Serota, editor, *Donald Judd*, London: Tate Publishing, 2004.



figure 2



figure 3



figure 4

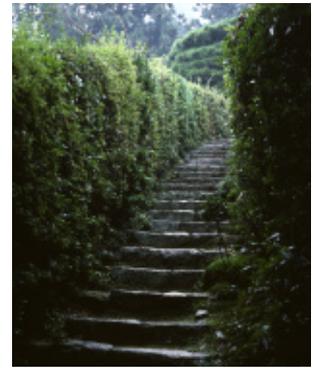


figure 5

A different strategy guided the planning of the site for only two houses in Grolloo: there Strootman laid down lines of American and English oak (*Quercus rubra*, *Quercus robur*) that run the full length of the plot—but with varied spacing between the trees. Punctuations in this arboreal field are freely shaped “events” such as the two house sites, their accompanying horse paddocks, a large mound, and even a carefully oriented and graded pool that purposefully dries out in summer to kill the fish that might eat the amphibians critical to the desired ecosystem [figure 1].<sup>6</sup> Typically for the Strootman firm the planting is carefully conceived: meandering bands of rhododendrons distinguish private from public zones; a ring of cherry trees that burst into color in springtime mark one house site; water lilies and bald cypresses strengthen the presence of water in a small pond. The precise shapes shown in the site plan will never materialize to their exact contours, of course, as nature does its best to soften all lines drawn by the human hand. But precise shapes are of less consequence than the considerations which they embody; as a totality they will produce an ordered, but sufficiently quirky, park landscape in harmony with the adjacent woods and road. In several of the larger projects circulation provides the initial armature—people and goods must comfortably enter the site, pass through its many parts, and connect with the greater territory. Spatial enclosures reinforce

these initial planning decisions; perhaps they derive from the management of water or the choreography of views. Topographic form supports the construction of these spaces; vegetation realizes the design intent. This is not to say that what I have written accurately records the office’s design practice—I have no idea in what order decisions have been made, and for that matter, no design ever follows a clearly linear path. I mention the span of interventions characteristic of Strootman designs only to record their involvement with the project at both large and small scales. Planning follows analysis and logic. But where might the ideas of form and space come from?

#### Influence or Parallels?

Most designers—whether landscape architects or architects, and certainly artists—are loathe to admit that they have been shaped by any external influence. Instead, they tell us, they have been completely original, *sui generis*, developing their tactical and formal practices independently over their formative and mature years. The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright was typical in his refusal to admit influence, although his concrete block houses in Los Angeles wear a costume with obviously Mesoamerican details. On the other hand, Wright did admit his complete embrace of things and thinking Japanese, most famously the idea that it is the space contained rather than the shape of the container

6. The amphibian pool’s south-facing slope facilitates the animal’s transition from water to land and offers ideal access to sunlight.



figure 6



figure 7



figure 8

that is of the greatest consequence. Berno Strootman has no qualms talking about influences from garden designs by other landscape architects, art, architecture, fashion, and automotive design. He tells of having been influenced, in particular, by Japanese gardens, although in reviewing projects by his office no real influence is readily evident: to foreign eyes they look completely Dutch and hardly Japanese.<sup>7</sup> How can we explain the interactions of influence from any culture upon another, particularly in its built environments? At what point in the design process is influence truly influential and how can we perceive its effect?

To sort that out we need to accept the presence of influence at the conceptual level as well as that of form-giving. Wright's understanding of space betrayed an affinity for a Japanese sensibility at the conceptual level; his houses in southern California, however, showed less an affinity with the East than with the shapes and forms of pre-European Central American cultures. Perhaps then, to understand the association between Strootman and Japan we need to look more at the ideas behind the forms of the landscape rather than focusing on the forms themselves. On the other hand, certain lessons were immediate, for example, the stunning visual effect of large masses of flowering trees Strootman experienced at the seventeenth-century garden of Koraku-en in

Okayama. He also acknowledges his interest in the garden's staged bloom: first the whites of the plum blossoms that pass into the vivid pinks of cherry; weeks later the deeper pinks of the azaleas came into prominence. Certainly, the gardener's use of staggered flowering is hardly restricted to Japan—Gertrude Jekyll's mastery of color and sequenced flowering in her borders is well known. But in this particular case, it was in Japan where Strootman encountered the phenomenon. He later applied this in the design of the Grolloo housing estate. For sequenced spring color one zone was planted with sumac (*Rhus typhina*) and rhododendron, a second with fritillaria and hyacinthoides. Juneberry (*Amelanchier lamarckii*) covers a neighboring hillock, while Japanese cherry trees surround a second. The planting design thus vigorously modulates the flow of springtime color with blooms bursting into prominence in some areas while others recede behind a screen of the green leaves that follow.

The restrained color palette characteristic of so much Japanese architecture and its interiors has also had an effect on Strootman's own sensibility, if in the more architectural work than in the large scale landscape projects. For example, the design of the Eusebiushof courtyard in Arnhem purposefully poses the muted tones of gray concrete paving and natural stones against the vivid red of a freely shaped seating/planting

7. Conversation with Berno Strootman, 9 May 2011, Amsterdam.

figure 6. Shagaku-in. The panorama revealed at the top of the stairs, in autumn

figure 7. Katsura Rikyu, Kyoto, Japan, 17th century. The *shoin* paviljoens revealed.

figure 8. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, Drentsche Aa, Netherlands, Belvedere, 2007-2010

figure 9. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, Kymmelsberg, Drentsche Aa, Netherlands, 2007-2010. Carefully positioned benches direct views of the managed landscape.

figure 10. Constable Country, Flatford, England

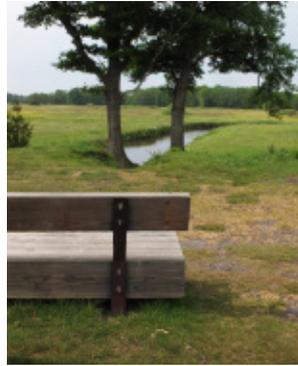


figure 9



figure 10

element—a pairing not unlike bridges and pavilions in Heian Period (794–1185) gardens.

Foreigners traveling to Japan have tended to discover on those distant shores exactly what they had set out to find. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, the American neo-gothicist architect Ralph Adams Cram travelled to Japan and found—perhaps no surprise—a reflection of Gothic architecture.<sup>8</sup> To Cram the clarity of exposed wood structure infilled with paper or plaster suggested the structural ribs of the great European cathedrals infilled with curtains of stone or stained glass. Half a century later, Walter Gropius embarked on those same islands and found the essence of the Bauhaus, among other aspects its belief in modular planning, prefabrication, planar construction, and an avoidance of symmetry.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Berno Strootman has also found in the great gardens of Japan a confirmation of ideas he had already held—or ideas that were revealed through the medium of the Japanese garden although endemic to more than one garden design tradition.

Unless the designer tells us so, however, influence is difficult to establish with any degree of certainty; at other times, it is even difficult to discern at all. In almost every instance it is nearly impossible to establish with acceptable accuracy that “this influenced that.” Rather than overt transferences from one culture or designer to another, I have found parallels in the work to be far more

common.<sup>10</sup> Similar responses to similar situations often condition similar solutions.

As noted above, Japan has often served as a mirror for foreign design ideas; at other times, of course, its gardens have provided a lens for Western landscape designers through which to focus on specific conditions—literal or abstract. There are the big ideas like the compression of scales and the miniaturization of forms, the reduced lexicon of elements and materials, and the overall simplicity and abstraction these may support. There are also the more detailed values like the acceptance of mineral rather than living materials and the management of vegetal form through highly selective thinning and pruning. And there are the methods by which these concepts have been realized.

Of the many techniques that have informed the making of gardens in Japan, especially in the Edo-Period (1603–1867), let us select only three: hide-and-reveal [*mie-gakure*], borrowed scenery (*shakkei*) and the mixtures of formalities, *shin-gyo-so*. Hide-and-reveal describes the orchestration of movement and view, a cloaking and subsequent revelation of prospects in a sequenced, choreographed manner [figure 2]. Borrowed scenery involves the design of an immediate landscape—a garden, for example—in such a way that it actively incorporates distant landscape features as an integral part of the composition [figure 3]. By the

8. These were recorded in Ralph Adams Cram, *Impressions of Japanese Architecture and Allied Arts*, London: John Lane, 1906.

9. Walter Gropius, Introduction to Kenzo Tange, *Katsura: Tradition and Creation in Japanese Architecture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.

10. On the notion of influence in landscape architecture see Marc Treib, “Evocative Parallels: Japan and Postwar American Landscape Design,” *Consultants in Landscape Architecture Journal* (Japan), January 2002; reprinted in Marc Treib, *Settings and Stray Paths: Writings on Landscapes and Gardens*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 170–183



figure 11

continuous play of simultaneous contrasts of shapes and materials from the smooth and regular to the rough and uneven, the use of shin-gyo-so enriches and landscape design and embeds within it a continuous sense of surprise [figure 4]. Of course, most often these three practices were integrated and used together rather than independently. For example, by pairing hide-and-reveal with the contrast of formal and informal elements, the experience of the landscape was at times mystified, at times intensified, at times muted. Or a mountain in the distance may have been hidden until a sudden opening in the vegetation brought it into view, borrowing the presence of the large mountain into the small garden [figures 5, 6]. Together, these practices formed a powerful triad of design techniques that enriched the perceptions—and rewards—characteristic of the designed landscape.

#### *Hide and reveal*

Many garden design practices popular during the Edo Period centuries were used to psychologically expand the limits of the site and/or to heighten the experience of the landscape with designs through a series of carefully orchestrated contrasts. While in earlier centuries the viewer had been banished to the veranda that overlooked the dry gardens characteristic of Zen monastic structures, the emergence of the tea

ceremony in the late sixteenth century reinstated the figure into the landscape. Tea gardens were small in dimension, reduced in their planting and mineral elements, and designed to support the psychological transition from the hubbub of the everyday world to the rarified and aesthetic environment of the tea ceremony. By a considered placement of elements such as walls, vegetation, and most of all stepping stones, the garden maker manipulated the movement of his guests and the consequent revelation of views. These lessons were amplified in the landscapes termed *kaiyu zukuri*, normally translated into English as stroll gardens [figure 7]. In comparison with the grand estates of the French aristocracy, however, these were gardens of relatively small size, perhaps no more than fifteen hectares, even for projects serving the imperial court. The aristocrats' restricted geographic and economic resources, purposefully limited by the reigning shogunate, forced their makers to look back wistfully to the Golden Age of the Heian Period. The once abundant resources of the nobility were no longer at their disposal during the Edo Period (1603–1867). Instead—paired with the influence of Zen Buddhism and the tea ceremony—the nobility, tea masters, and aesthetes supported an effete culture of “refined poverty.” Yet the simple materials and forms—often with rustic origins—belied their highly sophisticated shaping and use. This was hardly

figure 11. Strootman landschapsarchitecten, Drentsche Aa, Netherlands, 2007-2017. The Strubben Kniphorstborsch

figure 12. Katsura Rikyu, Kyoto, Japan, 17th century. *Shin* elements in *gyo* arrangement

figure 13. Katsura Rikyu, Kyoto, Japan, 17th century. A *shin* walk comprised of *gyo* and so stones

figure 14. Strooman Landschapsarchitecten, Water Treatment Park Het Lankheet, Netherlands, 2006-2008. Plan



figure 12



figure 13



figure 14

the acceptance of rural life as it was: it was, to the contrary, poverty elevated to the level poetry through sophisticated reworking.

One could find in several of the Strootman projects parallels to the conscious Japanese manipulation of movement, either along a sinuous dike, an urban “balcony” —like that proposed for Baena, Spain, or more simply as a promenade. Simple constructions supporting more static views complement the sequencing of views through movement. In the flatlands of the Netherlands even a small elevation may produce dramatically different vistas, an effect evident in miniature landscape etchings by Rembrandt van Rijn. The steps of the heavy timber belvedere structures inserted into Drentsche Aa are elegant in their minimalism yet nonetheless direct visitors to visually engage areas of the landscape that might normally go unnoticed [figure 8]. In their form they support rather than restrict, offering a small theater for enhanced viewing rather than an instrument aimed toward any one direction or feature. Here a simple intervention becomes consequential. If the larger Strootman landscape plans suggest the choreography of views characteristic of the Japanese hide-and-reveal, the well-positioned bench or timber viewing stand recalls the act of sitting on the temple or house veranda while contemplating the landscape, and perhaps life.

### *Borrowed scenery*

Given the essentially flat profile of the Dutch terrain, and the country’s relatively few elevated topographic features, borrowing scenery in the Japanese manner would be almost impossible to achieve. In fact, the Strootman designs normally condition or support views rather than borrow them. Pairing a slight rise at the Kymmelsberg in the Drentsche Aa with the extensive removal of wooded areas grown up since the cessation of grazing yielded broad vistas over field and stream that share qualities with the pastoral English landscapes celebrated in the paintings of John Constable [figures 9, 10]. Throughout the Drentsche landscape the act of removal has transformed dense concentrations of woodland into a visually choreographed play of open and closed, near and distant, light and dark.<sup>11</sup> This resulting effect is most dramatic in the Strubben Kniphorstbosch area of the national park where non-conforming species have been selectively, but comprehensively, extracted using sophisticated mechanical equipment and advanced forestry techniques [figure 11]. What had been a forest of intertwined mixed species has today become a sculptural landscape of twisting trunks and branches—enriched by their interplay with the burial mounds which contour the ground plane. Admittedly, this is less borrowed scenery in the Japanese sense of the term than an example of

11. On the aesthetic effects of removal see Marc Treib, “The Presence of Absence: Places by Extraction,” *Places* Number 3, 1987; reprinted in Treib, *Settings and Stray Paths*, pp. 74–85.



figure 15



figure 16

figure 15. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, Hellenikon Park, Athens, Greece, 2004. Plan

figure 16. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, Country estate, Steenbergen, Netherlands, 2007-2009. Aerial perspective

figure 17. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, Oostvaardersplassen Nature Conservation, Netherlands. Sketches showing the use of blackthorn to support the regeneration of the landscape

prudently opening viewsheds and seeking the genius loci through informed forestry aesthetics. Here, again, I would suggest parallels rather than borrowings from the Japanese.

### *Shin-gyo-so*

Of all the Edo Period design practices none is as rich as the play of formalities. *Shin-gyo-so* is normally translated into English as “formal—semi-formal—informal” and refers to both the nature of the elements as well as their interrelationships. Formal concerns the regular, the geometric, the smooth. Informal connotes the natural, the irregular, the freehand. Semi-formal is the least precise category and its definition normally derives from a lack of fit at either of the two poles. The relation of formal to informal manners is, of course, also characteristic of the West. The French formal landscapes of the grand siècle paired clipped shrubbery with bosks of trees with less human shaping, and the naturalistic English landscape gardens of the following century almost always included formal architectural punctuations somewhere on their grounds. The difference between these Western practices and those of Japan is in the embedding of one formality within another rather than its mere juxtaposition [figure 12]. For example, within the overall informal nature of the stroll garden imagine a walkway with an overall rectangular

profile. That stone path could be made entirely of stones cut as squares yielding a “formal-formal” character. Or it could be comprised of completely irregular stones (“informal-formal”) or a mix of all natural stones with those with one straight edge (“informal-formal”) [figure 13]. Thus rather than only three degrees of formality there are in at least nine-variants, and when these are applied at varying scales—from site planning to stepping stones—the design richness that resulted was limitless.<sup>12</sup>

This play of formalities is evident, albeit in a more characteristically Dutch way, in the 2006 project for the Het Lankeet water treatment park. The program for the project was experimental, testing the effectiveness of water flow through beds of reeds in purifying the polluted water that enters the site. Function determined the number of ponds, their proportions, and the clarifying movement of the water through them. As form, the field of rectangular settling ponds, themselves gridded and subdivided by dikes, play against the masses of alder and bird cherry that border them on two sides [figure 14]. One dike articulates the grid of earthworks, bending at an angle at each intersection: a *gyo* element that structures the scheme by linking the two sets of settling ponds. It serves as a semiformal element that links the formal settling ponds with the informal vegetation inside and outside them. The treated

12. Note that these same approaches also apply to shrubbery: shrubs may be clipped into formal shapes or allowed to appear more natural—although in fact every element of the Japanese garden is conditioned by maintenance.

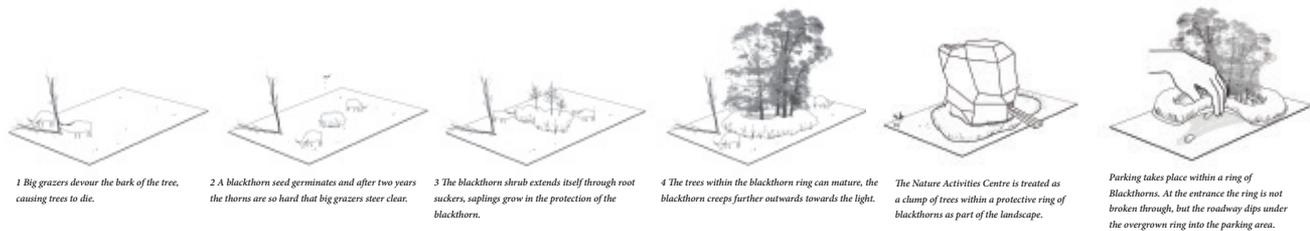


figure 17

water that filters through extensive beds of reeds fosters wildlife habitation as well as water remediation in a so manner.

The confrontation of formal with informal was unavoidable in the 2004 competition proposal to convert a former airport into Hellenikon Park in Athens. Accepting an existing runway as the design's primary armature suggested its opposition in the irregular plantings of local shrubs and grasses intended to transform the runway into a tapestry of species that cohere as a botanical garden [figure 15]. The country estate at Steenberg, introduced above, applies a simpler strategy: the landscape of the site is patterned as a tartan grid that surrounds a central farmland biomorphically shaped [figure 16]. This is a relationship more characteristic of the West, the simple play of one formality against another. In this case, however, the meandering earthen dike that marks their encounter—a meandering gyo shape—offers an unusual linkage between the formalities of the two zones.

### Water and Vegetation

Given that much of the Netherlands lies below sea level, it is no surprise—even to foreign readers—that water remains a primary concern for anyone designing landscapes there. Regional water boards dictate that roughly 10% of each building site shall be dedicated to

water storage as a means to mitigate the possible effect of massive flooding from storm surges. Virtually all of the Strootman landscapes turn this liability into an asset, using water as canals or ponds that—in conjunction with vehicular circulation and existing vegetation—structure and/or enrich the plan. Like those areas primarily earthen and vegetal, water is given a shape, a contour, most often irregular in profile. In other projects, for example the 2007 Dantumadeel new town, the existing network of trees, canals, and roads served as the basis for the planning scheme. But the existing pattern is never accepted in its existing state. Instead, it is subverted by rows of trees—extended or truncated—set between the roads and canals already present: some will “be reachable only by boat; others to be filled with water lilies.” Collectively, the plan “will play a major role in regional water conservation.”<sup>13</sup>

Impressive also is the Strootman office's selection and use of vegetation. Even for plans that encompass large tracts of land the species of tree plays a prominent role in the design. Rather than a general assignment of masses of green zones to “woods”—somewhat typical practice for preliminary designs—Strootman plans normally stipulate the particular trees to be used. In the open space plan for Meerstad 2009 the design calls for trees of substantial aspect: Horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), Persian walnut (*Juglans regia*) are

13. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten office brochure, no pagination.

figure 18. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, Eusebiushof, Arnhem, Netherlands, 2004-2009. Precast concrete paving units infilled with stabilized gravel

figure 19. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, Bekkerslocatie housing estate, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2004-2005. Site plan showing the cellular shapes of the dwelling sites

figure 20. Strootman Landschapsarchitecten, Rural housing estate, Steenberg, Netherlands, 2007-2009. Perspective sketch of a canal 'window'

figur

reinforced by species of willows, elms, poplar, and catalpa. In the strategic plan for Oostvaardersplassen conservation district the selection of planting became the crux of the scheme. "Hungry herds" grazing in the area will devour virtually any newly planted seedling, making any attempts at restoration futile. In response, the design team insightfully proposed plantings of black thorn (*Prunus spinosa*) which extend laterally to become protective thickets in which new plantings can thrive [figure 17]. In time, the newly planted trees—protected by the blackthorn in their infancy—will restore areas of forest long devoted to pastureland.

### Vocabulary

In striving for a contemporary expression for their designs landscape architects have often looked to the arts of painting and sculpture as sources. In the twentieth century the straight lines of constructivism and the biomorphic curves of surrealism provided a vocabulary easily applied to the mannered topography of the garden. American landscape architects like James Rose and Robert Royston developed a design vocabulary that in some ways shared aspects of both the geometric and the biomorphic idioms, what I have termed in earlier writings "biocubic."<sup>14</sup> This search for an appropriate design idiom has been long and difficult; the elements of the landscape are inherently conservative in the



figure 18

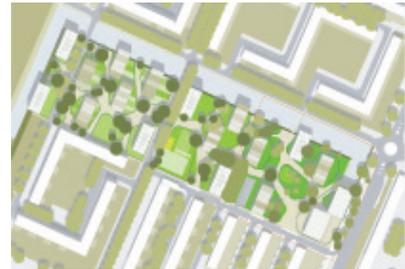


figure 19

historical use of that word. Trees may be left to grow as they would prefer or may be clipped by the gardener to a preordained shape. They may be planted in irregular clumps, in rows, or in grids. But all these manners have been used throughout history to such an extent that they have become timeless, without any specific connection to any one era, including the current one. The question then becomes how do landscape architects working today express current living conditions and aesthetic preferences in their designs?

The use of materials unavailable in prior decades is one way to express contemporaneity: most commonly durable materials have been used, for example, as railings and paving. Forms derived from the sister arts have been a second way by which to express the new. In Strootman designs however, we find another source: that of nature itself, nature without being naturalistic. The profiles and spaces of their landscapes suggest the cellular structures of vegetation in shape and relation to one another. These take form at both large and small scale. The deformed loops of the concrete units that pave the 2009 courtyard of the Eusebiushof in Arnhem are interwoven with gravel to create a durable carpet of cellular elements [figure 18]. At a larger scale the network of roadways for the 2005 Bekkerslocatie in Amsterdam defines building lots of cellular shapes, resembling the

14. Modern gardens based on orthogonal geometries often referred to the forms of Russian Constructivist tradition, while the freely curved contours of planting beds and swimming pools drew inspiration from the biomorphism characteristic of Surrealism. Extending those references, biocubic would lie between the angular and the curved, often appearing in gardens as rationalized contour lines.



figure 20

microscopic view of a leaf [figure 19].

The 2009 rural housing estate project at Steenberg, presented earlier, pairs a formal strategy of solid and void with a planning strategy that uses groves to enclose a central open space. Within a disarmingly simple conceptual plan the scheme develops remarkable richness by playing bands of woods or water against this freely-formed cultivated field. A dike densely planted with walnut trees—transplanting from a former orchard on the site—reinforces the snaking form of the earthwork. Certain of the plan’s bands remain flat, with the house positioned as the link between canal and pasture areas. Woods on either side of what the designers term “windows”—the views into the site—create spatial definition and assure privacy [figure 20]. A central green space recurs in many of the Strootman community plans, at ‘t Kavelt for example, although in this particular scheme dwellings are allowed into the central precinct. The new village green at Ugchelen (project 2004) employs a similar strategy, using a rectangular band of cherry trees to bond the two halves of the green bisected by a diagonal road [figure 21]. Carefully configured vegetation transforms an obvious liability. The houses, set perpendicular to the cherries, ring two-and -half sides of the green. The design, interestingly, requires that the homeowners must plant one large tree in their

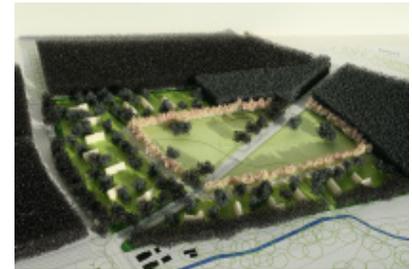


figure 21

front yards to reinforce the ring of cherries, although the selection of species is not restricted. Likewise they are instructed to plant large trees in their rear yards as well. Here we see how the smaller gestures, those of the individual, reinforce the design of the green as a whole, that is the collective.

#### A Final Thought

The Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen once instructed his architect son Eero to always consider the next larger thing.<sup>15</sup> If working on a furniture design, one should consider the room; if designing a building, consider the neighborhood and the city. The Strootman landscape plan almost always begins with the larger idea, the larger piece of land, the larger task. Unlike so many of their fellow practitioners, however, their interest does not remain solely at the large scale of the town or the housing estate. Instead, they begin with the overarching idea and carry it through to the level of plant selection and detail. Within this larger strategy or schema they always consider the next smaller thing—and how it relates to, and influences, the greater whole.

15. Cited in Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003, p. 121.