

The Wilderness Within

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The potential of landscape to solve the spatial woes of the contemporary (urbanised) world is a notion that has preoccupied designers for some time now. Its attraction stems from an increasing inability to understand and shape contemporary urban environments. The machinery of globalization has taken control of even the most remote urban areas and, despite our finest efforts, rendered us spectators in a game involving a complex web of infrastructural, commercial and planning issues. This game is played out in the vast, interstitial spaces between and around urban cores. Even in the Netherlands, despite its strong tradition of national and regional planning, the characteristic division between city-scape and countryside has all but disappeared, replaced by a 'peripheral development', which settles like a mist across the territory. This undefined landscape (which no longer can be termed peripheral as the city/landscape dichotomy has disappeared) now extends across much of the western half of the Netherlands. Landscape is championed as a device to regain some of the lost ground in this new reality: in this flat, extended sub-urban territory, landscape is the last physical and conceptual 'ground' for new development.¹

Planning versus Design

The reshaping of the world through landscape - and by Landscape Architects - has to date however, not taken on

anything like structural proportions. Global capitalism can be blamed for much of the problem, but the division between Landscape Planning and Landscape Design within Landscape Architecture stands as much in the way of the 'breakthrough' of landscape. For Landscape Planners the visual and metaphorical quality of space is but a by-product of the planning process. Landscape Design firms on the other hand, put metaphoric and aesthetic qualities before instrumentation: the landscape designer develops a composition with spatial and sensorial qualities. Given its facilitative (as opposed to built) nature, the scope of the planning project is able to bypass the sensibilities of the Landscape Architectural discourse. On the other hand, the systems and complexity of the Landscape Planning project are invariably beyond the capacity of the design repertoire. This rift between planning and design - between art and science - would on the face of it seem unbreachable.² One firm however, in a small country In North-western Europe, is attempting to bridge this gap. The office of Strootman Landscape Architects is possibly unique in the extent to which it consequently attempts to crossover this divide. From very early on, the Strootman office began combining the 'art' of design with the 'science' of planning. They understood that the fragmentation and discontinuity of these vast new peripheral landscapes would remain unresolved if the two positions did not

1. Kelly Shannon, "From theory to resistance: Landscape Urbanism in Europe", in Waldheim, ed., *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, 2006.

2. Richard Weller, "An art of instrumentality: thinking through landscape urbanism", in Waldheim, ed., *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, 2006.

come together. In their award-winning proposal for the Drentsche Aa stream valley project, they consistently applied the agency and semantics of design within the context of a complex planning commission. The proposal is based on an exhaustive spatial analysis of the stream valley of the river Aa, going back 6000 years. Distilled from this analysis, the key spatial and visual phases of the historical situation are used to define the framework of the plan. The proposal also proposes a pro-active strategy involving stepping up of certain kinds of development - as opposed to the scaling down and conservation of the area. Agriculture, housing, nature, recreation and water storage are zoned and then detailed, right down to critical scales. At each scale, the repertoire of the landscape designer is apparent: the picturesque compositions of meadows and copses along the river Aa, the serial composition of spaces and views along routes, the use of colours, textures and patterns, and the distribution of metaphoric landscape elements. In doing so the office has managed to transform a complex planning brief into a 32,000 ha. design project.

Instrumental Design and the Dutch

Placed in an historical context, the appearance of a successful synthesis of planning and design in the Netherlands is no mere accident. That created landscapes could also be 'instrumental' (as opposed to just

'designed') is a notion that has been around in the Dutch delta for quite some time. More than any other country on earth, Landscape Architecture in the Netherlands is a profession with a double history. As in most other cultures, the roots of contemporary Landscape Architecture in the Netherlands lies in the European Garden design tradition. At the same time designed landscapes also began 'appearing' in the Netherlands not as a result of explicit designed intent (*otium*), but as a result of agricultural engineering technology (*negotium*).³ The delta marshlands and lakes of the Dutch lowlands have been successively drained and brought under cultivation over a period of more than a thousand years by co-operative communities. The first recorded synthesis of engineering and art occurred at the start of the 17th century. The Beemster polder - now a World Heritage Site - was created during the height of the Renaissance period and was the first polder to explicitly deploy design principles in its layout. The modular block structure - based on a grid of squares - was unique for its time. The square (and the straight line) was a product of aesthetic ideals inspired by new sciences such as geometry and mathematics and was made possible by the precision of newly developed surveying and cartographic techniques. Geometry was seen to be able to conceive garden, city and the landscape simultaneously. For the first time, aesthetic ideals merged with functional

3. Steenbergen, C.M. et al, *Composing Landscapes*, 2008.

figure 1. Reh, W., Steenberg, C.M., Aten, D.:
Sea of Land. The polder as experimental atlas of Dutch Landscape Architecture. Amsterdam 2007
(page 134) Drawing: H. Van der Horst

figure 2. Willem Roelofs, *Landscape in an Approaching Storm*, 1850. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

requirements in polder form [figure 1]. The synthesis of planning and design reached another highpoint in the 20th century polders. The Wieringermeer, the Noordoostpolder and the Flevopolder all made use of (Landscape) Architectural techniques (and Landscape Architects) during their creation. The work of Strootman Landscape Architects can in a way be seen as a definitive moment in a longer tradition of 'instrumental' design. Since the Drentsche Aa project, the office has taken on five major commissions in which this tradition is carried through: the Westflank of the Haarlemmermeer, Twente Airport, Meerstad Groningen, Wieringen Passage and Bloemendalerpolder. Most of these projects are driven by urban pressures and are located in the sub-urban territory in the west of the country. Driven by public-private partnerships, these complex briefs involve housing, infrastructure, forestry, ecology and hydrology. As in the Drentsche Aa project, the 'designed' is omnipresent: architectonic and recognizable. In the design for the new Twente Airport, Strootman developed two proposals based on different programmatic scenarios but using the same spatial concept. The vast openness of the former airport is transformed into a series of architectonic voids. By contrast, a maze of small-scaled forests and estates define the look and feel of the spaces between the voids. The whole is the setting for the accommodation of an as yet

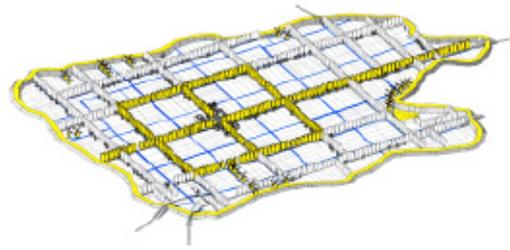


figure 1

undefined urban programme – devised to 'clot' into the landscape fabrics over time. The proposal is inspired by the design for the French Ville Nouvelle Melun Senart by OMA (1987). The difference here is that the scheme does not restrict itself to the voidal structure in its definition of their development process, but also broadly defines the texture and structure of the entire territory using landscape devices.

Naturalness and the Sensorial

The synergy of design and planning in the work of the Strootman office has also had a definitive effect on the design repertoire of the office. This repertoire is highly influenced by the formative years of practice of its founder, Berno Strootman. After seven years at Grontmij, a Landscape Planning and Engineering firm, he moved to the design office of B+B where he spent the next six years in practise. While his experience at Grontmij focused on the more technical aspects of landscape architecture: hydrology, ecology and forestry, at B+B the design aspects of landscape - spatial and visual form and the sensorial - took centre stage. Working with designers like Mathieu Derckx, Marieke Timmermans and Michael van Gessel introduced Strootman to the experiential and emotive power of landscape and the manipulation of space, atmosphere and form to create effect. The Strootman office still works in this manner but links the



figure 2

experiential resolutely back to the technical capacities of nature. Because of this, and regardless of the scales and type of project the office is involved in, the work shares an overpowering sense of naturalness – firstly in the way it exudes a sense of nature or ‘earthiness’, but also in the way it accommodates natural forms and systems. Their kind of ‘natural’ works sensorially (spatial, visual, tactile) but is at the same time technically correct (botanically, hydrologically, ecologically). The office applies itself with scientific attention to understanding the cultural and physical conditions of the site, and the technical demands of an engineering brief - before radically transforming them with the tools of design.

Chasing Romanticism and the Sublime

The preoccupation with naturalness and the sensorial first made its appearance in the Romantic period, a time when landscape became intensely admired for its emotive rather than its rational value [figure 2]. In this period, the power of nature was rediscovered and described in terms of beauty, albeit paired with an existential fear. The Strootman office attempts to harness the emotive power of landscape, by intensifying the drama of a landscape, and by doing so, the emotions of the user. Strootman’s goal of influencing a persons ‘état d’être’ references Romanticism and brings the philosophical notion of the Erlebnis to mind. This term

was introduced at the beginning of the 19th century by the German philosopher Hermann Lotze as a reaction to the age of rationalism. It expresses the longing for immediacy and the return of a natural reconnection between the self and the world, which typified the period. An intense physical or emotional experience was a pre-requisite to achieving this reconnection.⁴ The longing for reconnection to the ‘world’ and the revival of interest in nature and the environment has reappeared in the 21st century, not as a reaction to the rational but rather in reaction to the discontinuity and loss of meaning in an increasingly disconnected world. In this context, the intensification of nature and the landscape experience in the work of the Strootman office does not so much concern a ‘renaissance’ of the romantic, but more a response to a contemporary Zeitgeist. The concept of Erlebnis matches other design devices the office regularly uses. In the design for the Wieringen Passage, the use of contrasting forms and patterns, sometimes on a massive scale, surprise the visitor as opposed to subduing and tempering. A four kilometres long and two hundred metres wide dike on one side of the passage contrasts with the intricate patterns or wetlands, woodlands and waterways on the Wieringen side of the passage. Magnifying the landscape experience is also visible in the design for a new estate in Grolloo. Inside a thick frame of woodland and tree-lines, a set-

4. Gerard Visser, *De druk van de beleving: filosofie en kunst in een domein van overgang en ondergang*, 1998.

piece of feature plantings with alternating flowering periods 'light up' different corners of the estate throughout the year.

Romance for the office however, is not so much a formal question, but has to do with an intensity of life, related to another idea of the Romantic period, the Sublime. The Sublime, according to Edmund Burke, is the overpowering sense of nature devoid of human interference – the wilderness. The Sublime is about greatness or vast magnitude, whether physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical, aesthetic, spiritual or artistic. The term especially refers to a greatness with which nothing else can be compared and which is beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement or imitation. In short, the Beautiful, according to Burke, is what is well-formed and aesthetically pleasing, whereas the Sublime is what has the power to compel and destroy us.⁵ Burke's description would not immediately classify man-made or created landscape into the category Sublime. This is especially true given the period: design in the Romantic era involved picturesque, arcadian compositions, which prefigured the 'Beautiful' in contrast to the Sublime. To be overwhelmed however, is a mental construct, which occurs within us. As such it is theoretically possible to undergo a sublime feeling through experiences other than wilderness. The overwhelming effect of mass planting (such as in the Japanese stroll-garden) may

arouse feelings of the Sublime in us.

The potential of the 'wilderness within' is a thematic the office used to effect the Sublime in the plan for the Lankheet Estate project. An extensive water channel system is formed in such a way as to create an almost meditative environment. Beginning as a water purification system, the intensely shaped watercourse is configured to almost poetic proportions. Stepped filtration ponds link the two systems and are given form with weighty, metaphoric figures. The visitor is guided through the complex on a serpentine dike that moves and weaves its way through the misty channels, permanently back-dropped by monumental woodland. The omnipresent mist created by the water constantly changes the depth of views, and distorts light, sounds and smells across the estate. These landscape effects force themselves onto the visitor with a mesmeric monumentality; if allowed they can overwhelm, an experience, which for some may very well verge on the Sublime.

5. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757.