

Eelco Hooftman: DESIGN AGAINST NATURE

'Everything is in constant flux on this earth. Nothing keeps the same unchanging shape.... Our earthly joys are almost without exception the creatures of a moment'.

Reveries Jean Jacques Rousseau

Why suffocate on an overdose of chlorophyll if we can boost our level of adrenaline instead? During the seventeenth and eighteenth century Great Britain was the testing ground for many experiments in landscape architecture. Landscape was the topic of intense aesthetic discourse and philosophical enquiry. The essence of British landscape architecture was to reshape nature according to fashion and taste; the cult of the cultivar, the art of the artefact...! Landscape was the domain of dandies, hermits, painters and poets. The folly, the ha-ha, the hot-house, the line of beauty.... Aesthetic constructs born out of curiosity and passion. During the nineteenth century nature became the topic of scientific enquiry. The colonial empire became the exotic discovery zone into the dark secrets of nature. Scientists behaved like hyper active squirrels; collecting, dissecting, cataloguing nature into encyclopaedic classification systems. Books became libraries, trees turned into arboretums, wild animals into zoological gardens. In comparison the twentieth century produced landscapes of little or no interest. The specific became general, the norm became rule, landscape turned into environment. A delicate green tissue turned into a monstrous green blanket. By the end of the 20th century mankind's relationship to Mother Nature displayed all the pathological symptoms of a collective Oedipus complex

How to turn towards a new landscape architecture? Landscape Architecture as skilful, accurate, and magnificent interplay of assembled vegetation under light....Landscape not as moral crusade (nature perverted) but, once again, an aesthetic experiment (nature perfected). Landscape architecture as the ultimate public realm of the senses....

Prisoners at Guantanamo Bay used their bare hands and most basic tools to create a secret garden where they grown plants from seeds recovered from their meals. Adolf Speer created a miniature garden – a rockery of ruins - in the windowsills of Spandau Prison. The act of gardening is an act of resilience and resistance. Voltaire proclaimed “We must cultivate our garden”. One of our formative projects – The Concrete Garden – is not designed but *objet trouvé*. This manifesto project is created by joined forces of warfare and nature. In-situ concrete cubes are carefully aligned across the undulating coastal landscape. The cubes are the relics of the British coastal defence system to stop an eminent German invasion during World War II. With the passing of time the brutal concrete cubes have become plinths for fragile pockets of nature: spontaneous Zen gardens created by immaculate-conception blurring the boundaries between divine enchantment and divine terror. Our works – either found or designed – act as circumstantial evidence in our ongoing enquiry into the ideas of the sublime and beautiful.

We once proclaimed that we would like to reveal the different layers in the landscape not unlike the sensuous act of striptease. Landscape architects should become as seductive as Mata Hari and as inquisitive as Miss Marple. Whilst no longer angry young polemicist we still believe that the act of design is to reveal and to seduce.

Nature in this respect can be regarded as a kind of aphrodisiac; a stimulus of the senses. In one of our projects – a winter garden for the city of Rotterdam (1), we envisioned an organic orgy of orchids. The idea here was to upgrade the flowers to monstrous proportions with the application of “cosmetic surgery” techniques as found in the Dutch horticultural industry. For another project we intended to display a collection of fluorescent plants created by the latest scientific techniques to transfer fluorescent protein of the Pacific Ocean jellyfish (*Aequorea Victoria*) in the plant tissue (2). Together with artist Alan Johnston we explored the possibility to make a living wall drawing composed out of a variety of lichens. Such wall drawing would indicate clean air and disappear with polluted air. Our ideal nature is a “Wundergarten der Natur”; a contemporary cabinet of curiosities.

We admire the wanderlust and sense of wonderment of the early naturalist explorers. Their travelogues often reveal a remarkable sensitivity towards visual observations; not only the obsessive accumulation of specimen and data but also exploration of the feeling towards nature:

‘The day has passed delightfully: delight is, however, a weak term for such transports of pleasure; I have been wandering by myself in a Brazilian forest. Amongst the multitude it is hard to say what object is most striking; the general luxuriance of the vegetation bears the victory, the elegance of the grasses, the novelty of the parasitical plants, the beauty of the flowers, the glossy green of the foliage, all tend to his end. A most paradoxical mixture of sound and silence pervades the shady parts of the wood....’

The above diary notations are by the young Charles Darwin and are more in tune to Immanuel Kant’s ‘Observation on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime’ than a prelude to the ‘On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life’ (3).

Nature is never static, but a movable feast of continuous transformation. Landscape architecture contributes to shape a world in constant flux and evolution. The shock and awe of climate change is an example of 21st century sublime. We proposed to counter attack the effect of global warming by proposals for a nuclear powered iceberg (3). The heat generated to cool the iceberg would be utilised to create a series of hot water lagoons in a nearby quarry. The actual site of the existing nuclear power station is near Siccar Point, Scotland where James Hutton discovered in 1785, visual evidence to prove his theory on ‘unconformity’. In his theory Hutton described the Earth as a system without beginning or end, always changing, yielding to the powers of wind and water, heat and cold.... (4) Nietzsche, one century years later, would reiterate that the world is a monster of energy, without beginning, without end.

The representation of nature as a cultural and aesthetic construct is arguably the most defining aspect of landscape architecture. Ultimately our works evolves around nature as visual pleasure and play; not unlike the cat tossing the mouse into the air. Landscape as aesthetic experiment was invented by the landscape painters of the early seventeenth century. The design of the actual landscape became subsequently inspired by the painted landscape; a double mirror image of endless reflexions, optical illusions and magic tricks (5). From Claude glasses and Camera Obscura to camcorders, multi task mobile phones, video blogs and the divine eyes of Google Earth we screen the landscape through the eyes of a voyeur. The new picturesque is defined by excess of visual stimulation. Landscape has become screensaver. Whilst

for many architects the plan and diagram remain the starting point of their designs, for us, the image, or more precise the mental picture of the image, is point of departure into further exploration. In our works the image is not so much artist impression (presentation) but rather the image as artist expression (speculation). David Hume distinguishes perceptions into impressions and ideas. Impressions comprehend sensations, passions and emotions whilst ideas comprehend thinking and reasoning (5). Ideas are derived from impressions; thinking follows feeling. For us the image represents, layer by layer, stratification in space and time. We like to compress the project as instantaneous atmosphere. With reference to Andre Breton: Landscape should be convulsive or should not be at all.

We live in a period of dramatic transition in which for the first time more people live in cities than in the countryside. The arranged marriage between town and country has ended in divorce. Nature - that murky pool of genes - has lost both its virginity and innocence; a double whammy of de-flowering. Wilderness has become the stuff of fairytales and storey books; a reminder of the forbearers of the original Walt Disney characters. Mark Dion, artist friend and occasional collaborator, developed the concept of the Survival of the Cutest (6). Nature is not longer natural; on the contrary in order to survive nature will need to be artificially constructed, man made and mass produced. Landscape Architecture interacts in a complex continuum between man and nature, town and country, land and architecture. We not longer reconcile the duality of opposite forces but orchestrate and choreograph a multitude of dynamic and hybrid interaction. Here the Apollonian and the Dionysian, are not mutually exclusive but bedfellows in creative evolution. Can we creatively create conditions for nature to colonise our cities, can we grow and cultivate a city – from pioneer urbanisation to climax urbanisation - according to the model of ecological succession? We developed the concept of “The Ecological Wonderbra”; an uplifting support mechanism for fragile ecosystems in tense urban areas. The garden city of tomorrow will not only produce flowers but clean air, purify water and produce renewable energy: Phytoremediation, rhizofiltration, hyperaccumulators..... the garden as machine for living. Our attitude towards ecology is inspired by Bob the Builder: “can we fix it yes we can...”. In our Masterplan for Zorrozaure Bilbao in collaboration with Zaha Hadid the urban fabric is interwoven with a tapestry of landscape activated by the dynamics of rainfall, tidal fluctuation and floods (10). For Cumbernauld New Town we developed the concept of how to grow your own town; including roof top sheep farming and drive in allotments (11). Applied ecology provides the software to be downloaded on the hardware of the city. Landscape architecture as delirious experiment of sustainable optimism.... this, of course, should be not confused with the recent fashion to exploit nature as ornamental pattern book to decorate all kinds of objects ranging from quirky product design to perforated building facades.

Notes

1. Architecture International Rotterdam, proposal for Hofpleinlijn 2001
2. Garden for a Plant Collector Art Park Glasgow
3. Charles Darwin Diary notes 29 February 1832, Brazil
4. 'Wundergarten der Natur' Translates as Magic Garden of Nature; after the title of Karl Blossfeldt second book of Photographures of plants, transforming them into "objects of unexpected aesthetic delight"
5. The proposals were part of an exhibition about Scotland's coastline entitled 6000 Miles organised by the Lighthouse, Scotland's Centre for Architecture, Design and the City. Of course people hold a deep desire for climate change; it is after all the most important reason in selecting a holiday destination
6. Immanuel Kant in "Criticism of the Aesthetic Judgement" divided the Art of Painting into a Siamese twin of pure painting and pleasure gardening; both concerned with the representation of nature as sense appearance (Sinnen-schein) artistically united with ideas.
7. James Hutton Theory of the Earth made public appearance in the year 1785 when it was read to the members of the Royal Society Edinburgh
8. David Hume, A treatise of Human Nature. David Hume's grave is a stone throw away from our Edinburgh based design studio.
9. In collaboration with Mark Dion we designed a Vertical garden in London (completed 2008) and a Carboniferous Garden, Doncaster (unrealised).
10. Zorrozaure Masterplan, Bilbao 2003 -2005
11. New Town / New Nature Cumbernald revisited 2002