Sustainable urban design
The Next Step
Copenhagen and Malmö / New eco-cities between tactics and technique / Designing the carbon neutral town / Sustainable Olympics / The sensitive city / OKRA / Land meets water

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MTD
Zuid-Willemsvaart 142
NL-5201 GE 's-Hertogenbosch
The Netherlands
T: +31 (0)73 612 5033
F: +31 (0)73 612 5034
E: mtd@mtdlandschapsarchitecten.nl
The architects at OKRA landscape architects in the Netherlands are well-known for their designs in which distinct, often innovative ideas, are fashioned into practical, feasible plans. Whether it’s for a neighbourhood square in Rotterdam or an urban district in London, OKRA designs in detail but always leaves scope for flexible use. An interview with Martin Knuijt, one of the founders of OKRA, and his new office partner, Wim Voogt, on vital cities and the rise of homo ludens: “We want people to discover for themselves what they can do with a site.”

Cathelijne Nuijsink

OKRA has four founder members. What are your backgrounds and what drew you all together?

Knuijt: We were fellow students at Wageningen University. The idea of having our own firm of consultants originated when we were on a sketching trip to the Ardennes in our first year. There were four of us sitting in a caravan and fantasising over a glass of beer about starting our own office at some point in the future. After our studies, we all went our separate ways but, eighteen months later in 1994, we met up again and exchanged ideas about the first illusions and disillusion we had about working in the real world. That was when we decided to put our student idea into practice.

What was the climate of landscape architecture in the Netherlands at that time?

Knuijt: Everyone was convinced that the period of modernism was definitely over. In contrast with the Netherlands, serious changes were already starting to take place elsewhere in Europe; we could see that. Barcelona was a hot topic. The School of Versailles in France was...
To our mind, a lively city is made up of spaces, water and energy, not just to design a city. It must be given to cities by making them liveable. To make cities liveable, post-productive cities. The rural productive landscape in the Netherlands has grown out of its own past and has a kind of identity. It is not about making something that is already there, than knock the whole thing completely new. But we think differently. We would rather transform parts of a city are torn down because they are no longer functional and then replaced by something completely new. But we think differently about these things. We would rather transform what is already there, than knock the whole thing down and start again.

Is there a ‘OKRA’ way of working? Knuijt: We are fascinated by creating vital places, post-productive cities. The rural productive landscape in the Netherlands is rapidly changing into an urban network. Increasing urbanisation needs attractive landscapes and spaces around it. This is, more and more we need to understand what they are. Demolition on its own is a disaster. The urban culture has its anchors and you have to label every single square metre but you have to understand what they are. It is not about making something that is already there, but should each take advantage of the other. Second, there have to be programmes which are linked in with the cultural and historical landscape.

How do you design the transition between city and landscape for homes? Voogt: First, it is about making a change in the mindset. City and countryside must not turn their backs on each other, but should each take advantage of the other. Second, there have to be really good, high-quality connections between city and country so that they are both accessible. Third, the outskirts of the city must be made attractive so that you want to go there as well. Knuijt: The combination of urban sprawl and the extensive social networks common in the Netherlands means that everything is connected with everything else. You live in one place, work in another and spend your free time in a third. The networks of city and landscape are very closely interconnected here. You must not separate these networks; otherwise you would be dividing the Netherlands into small compartments. Even if the Netherlands looks like one large expanse of grass, you still have to recognise that this green area is part of the urban system. We search for the authenticity of landscapes. How can we present the landscape from before one has big amusement parks? Knuijt: We search for the authenticity of landscapes. You have to distinguish between places that are already programmed and places which people have to discover for themselves. Internally, we are pre-programmed landscapes with a couple of extra illumination parks – but leave the other places alone completely.

How do you design the landscape in such a way that it does justice to the dynamism of our quickly changing society? Voogt: Globalisation does not mean that everything coalesces and starts to become a homogenous mass. We can move around a lot faster nowadays and we travel to more places but, in contrast, we still yearn for our own familiar surroundings. In landscapes, however, we can discern the unmistakable signs of continental blurring: we can remedy this by taking the diverse identities embedded there and making them recognisable again.

What is the importance of your lighting designs for the city? Voogt: During the day, the city is shaped by man and space. At night, a completely different landscape is possible just by using light to hide or reveal spaces. By choosing whether or not to introduce illumination into projects, we can create particular sites and bring the ‘city of the night’ into an existence all by itself.

What is OKRA in one of their recently finished projects: OKRA in one of their recently finished projects: the Dutch Defense Line near by Utrecht.
of maintaining public green spaces.

Knuijt: It bothers us that the planting in public spaces has become so meagre since the sixties. Nearly everything is public space, but this is usually only a few grassy fields with the odd tree, preferably a plane tree because they grow so well in cities. We advocate a richer and more varied green picture. Specific to the place. This implies making choices about public spaces and asking ourselves whether everything should be accessible to the public. Having part of a public space which is not open all the time, but half-open or a private area that is open from time to time creates a much more varied city landscape. Just consider the huge buildings in New York whose occupants adopt green areas. What does the city get in return? Small pocket parks, atria and roof gardens which are looked after with zeal.

When is a design successful?
Voogt: It is not about making a pretty design for yourself, but about the person you make it for being able to adopt it and feel a connection with it. The new just must add something, and the design must link in with the existing surroundings.

What is the biggest challenge facing Dutch cities over the coming decades?
Voogt: The main problem is fragmentation. We have a network of cities intersected by infrastructure. Bending the city in balance as an urban system requires cohesion between all the separate projects. If there is no joint collective interest, there will only be individual developments. Cities may become more urban but, in contrast, they must have very attractive, green spaces. For OKRA, the key words are: vitality, contrast, they must have very attractive, green spaces. For OKRA, the key words are: vitality, contrast, they must have very attractive, green spaces.

What is left of the intimate characteristics of a project on the scale of a public square close to a theatre and other cultural buildings, like that at Holstebro in Denmark?
Knuijt: We want people to discover the possibilities that lie in a landscape for themselves. This may mean that we create a stairway which can become a row of tiers to sit on, or make a pleat in the landscape which provides cover so that people experience it as a more secluded place. The trick is not to design places which are fully pre-programmed and set up just for a single purpose, but to design places which lend themselves for spontaneous uses instead. Stairways along waterways which lead people to sit down, or go fishing, or play with boats in the water are all examples of sites where you leave the use of the area to the people themselves.

The master plan for Croydon in London looks like a prize example of sustainability. Is this a new direction for OKRA?
Knuijt: Sustainability plays an important role in the more large-scale remits. In the Croydon project, we can take a more integrated approach. Economics, mobility, the environment, social relationships are all very closely connected. In China, for instance, we are designing a model garden which focuses on the cycle of water, nutrients and energy. If you can develop a district in a city in a similar way - with production and consumption closely linked together - this creates very interesting correlations.

What is the driving force behind your success and how do you keep it in motion?
Voogt: A sharp concept in combination with the makeability of the plan remains the core quality of OKRA. We are driven by ideas: to develop our concepts on the basis of what we want, and then we work out how we can realise them. You need new visions to continue to develop, but the real fun begins when the project is completed and handed over.

How do you see the discipline of landscape architecture changing?
Knuijt: Landscape architecture as a profession has been very object-oriented but is now process-oriented: The discipline is now connected with the place and the underlying landscape. Rapid developments and countless sources of information make the identity of the place more important than ever. By taking the original situation and converting it into a revitalisation of an area, we are able to add something extra as landscape architects.

What are your ambitions for the future?
Knuijt: We started fifteen years ago as a company working on the revitalisation of public spaces. So that’s something we know how to do. Now we want to work on the revitalisation of cities.

Voogt: We want to work on the larger type of project, one which allows us to show our expertise from vision to realisation. At the very top of our wish list is an opportunity to make a large urban park and a cemetery.

What ideas have you still got up your sleeve?
Voogt: Expanding landscape cities. There will be a reevaluation of the concepts of city and landscape.
The Afrikaanderpark is an uncommonly large public realm in a multi-cultural, underprivileged area of Rotterdam. As alternative open spaces were lacking, this was the only place where the more than ninety different cultures could gather within their own district. However, intensive use and individual activities that did not tally with those of other user groups resulted in a run-down site with huge maintenance problems. With the makeover of the 5.6-hectare square within this true inner-city park, OKRA has given the neighbourhood a new dimension.

In order to define the renovation programme more closely, one has followed an interactive planning process. Residents, interest groups and civil servants began to participate early on in the design process by doing workshops on themes like the park’s accessibility, public nature and its use. On the basis of their wishes, OKRA sketched a masterplan that started out from providing space. The idea was to bring together cultural diversity – unhampered and without individual boundaries – through a functional renovation.

The park’s new layout is an incentive for a free and easy use. The central area is a large, open green turf where one may parade, stroll, play and horse around. Activities like the weekly market and sports and games are concentrated on the asphalted strips bordering this. The central green is framed by a promenade, planted with sizeable trees and fitted with thick retaining walls of a brownish orange. This forms the transition between the big central openness on the one hand and the organized events on the other.

The promenade’s retaining walls are conducive to an interaction between the use of the promenade and that of the park’s central area.

Afrikaanderpark
Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 2003-2005
Like in many European cities, the water in the Belgian town of Mechelen had been largely filled in. Due to the European programme ‘Water in Historical City Centres’, this has changed. Together with ‘s-Hertogenbosch, Ghent, Chester, Limerick and Breda, the programme afforded Mechelen with the opportunity to restore water storage within the town. OKRA has given its Mechelen commission an extra twist.

The old quay walls have been rediscovered and newly erected. The walls, fitted with a broad natural stone edge on top, now mark the border of the stream. By introducing a difference in height, however slight, it is now possible to experience the water. The high and low quays are respectively a through road and a promenade along the water where one can parade, walk the dog or play outside. Bridges of a modern design connect the new quays with the existing buildings.

The choice for black shiny granite and cobblestones is the outcome of an exploration into the effect of textures. These materials add an extra contrast between light and dark, giving expression to the designed spaces. Due to the historical location one has chosen a utility lighting with a warm hue. The blue lamps under the abutments of the bridges add an extra dimension to the lighting plan. This striking light creates a very special landscape at night. And, apart from enhancing the atmosphere, it also increases personal safety at night.

Thanks to this makeover, the Melaan has – next to being a water storage – attained an expressive function within the historical inner city.

Apart from bringing back the water in the town, they have simultaneously introduced an attractive and everyday living area with both high and low quays. Once again, this public space attracts people from the town as well as its surroundings to squish in this historical inner city.

The lighting makes use of the fact that it is reflected by the materials, so that at night the public realm also becomes a comfortable and safe space.
The Danish town of Holstebro used to have its back turned to the river Storaa. It was a situation in which many backdoors as well as the town’s districts north and south of the river were badly connected. Then OKRA used the water as a natural feature and transformed the existing car park into a square with the proud front of a riverside promenade and a large public outdoor stage.

Bringing together Schüll LandskabArkitekter from Copenhagen and Berlin lighting artist Asa Frankenberg’s lighting design, an artistic elaboration was created for this 2.3-hectare planning site. The present square was sized-down and provided with a strip of water and a lawn.

Along the relatively deeply situated river, inclines were raised that enable you to get from high to low without difficulty. By placing the retaining walls of the ramps also at a vertical slant, the waterfront appears ‘softer’.

A new bridge has been provided with ‘twists’ and ‘dents’, and does not only serve as a connective element, but also as a sojourning space. In two places, big wooden steps form real ‘grandstands’.

The lighting design gives the square a theatrical effect. Besides the lighting of the bridge and the stages, various circles of light have also been installed in the floor. The bottom of the foyer is lighted by computer-controlled waves of light. The dynamics of this night landscape are unique in OKRA’s portfolio. The building seems to hover above the square.

The space has become a hybrid between a park and a square, in which greenery and stone are combined effortlessly. Essential in the design is that the public realm is able to expand and shrink according to how it is used.

The space’s dynamics are enhanced by changeable elements. Mobile green element on rails, still to be realized, will form the wings of the outdoor stage. The water on the pavement in the theatre square is able to appear and disappear, and thus contributes to the public space’s ever-changing focal point.
A Fragmented Orchard
Kirchberg, Luxemburg, 2008-2009

Here, OKRA’s winning design for a competition is a daring plan on behalf of the public space between the office buildings within the Luxembourg borough of Kirchberg’s Grünewald area. The designers wondered how to give the fragmented neighborhood an identity of its own. By planting apple and pear trees, OKRA is now attempting to create a cohesion between the scattered spaces and buildings. The area lacks a clear programme, OKRA has chosen to come up with a programme of their own on behalf of the urban orchard. The fragmented layout of squares and passages will thus acquire a coherence around the theme of the edible city. Every little orchard has a different atmosphere of its own. But everywhere in this urban orchard, citizens are invited to pick the fruit. In this way, the public space becomes something accepted and nice.

The public orchard defines Kirchberg’s new identity. Green places in between the blocks are for resting and lingering.

A Fragmented Orchard
Kirchberg, Luxemburg, 2008-2009

The choice for the organic form language of these orchards contrasts with the present rigid development’s austere grid, and creates a coherence between the fragmented sections. In doing so, the entrances to the buildings, car parks and roads are not simply dimensioned in a functional way. OKRA makes this counter-form into a varied composition. By a gradual change in the planting’s type and density, there arises a link between the higher, more commercial parts of Kirchberg and the city’s green, southern part leading to the park Klosengroendchen.

The public sojourning areas each acquire a personal character, and are public and semi-public ‘urban rooms’. OKRA makes this counter-form simply dimensioned in a functional language of these orchards contrasts with the present rigid development’s austere grid, and creates a coherence between the fragmented sections. In doing so, the entrances to the buildings, car parks and roads are not simply dimensioned in a functional way. OKRA makes this counter-form into a varied composition. By a gradual change in the planting’s type and density, there arises a link between the higher, more commercial part of Kirchberg and the city’s green, southern part leading to the park Klosengroendchen.

The pedestrian pathways form a mesh of lines linking up different parts of public space in a narrative way. They have been laid out with prefab concrete elements in various modules which one designed oneself, facilitating a free innovation. The 2.8-hectare urban orchard clearly distinguishes itself from other places in the town, and is designated by its users as ‘the place with the apple and pear trees’. This formally anonymous spot is now turning into a significant public space with a strong identity.
The force of the volcano. The urbanized landscape is like a volcano which erupts time and again. The flows of lava erase all tracks, creating a palpable presence. There is danger and there is beauty. There is more under the surface than meets the eye. And the same holds true for society. What seems peaceful may all of a sudden erupt due to tension in the social structures. Our challenge is to revitalise and strengthen present structures, to unravel the existing field of force and to make possible the revitalization of structures.

Interventions in the jungle, Machu Picchu. In the various land art projects, it is the intervention’s acupuncture that stirs the imagination. The tension between human intervention interacting with the dynamics and the forces of nature becomes palpable again. The landscape changes in a protracted process – showing the forces of the vegetation, the wind or the sea – and nature once more takes over the gash in the raw landscape. In a poetic way, one can feel and see in ruins, meaningful relics, like for instance Marucho Prusa’s human activity consists of cultivation, development, flourishing, but decay is also an essential part of it.

Powaqqatsi. Recent documentaries on the threat that human activity poses to the climate, like Jennifer Badouin’s Manufactured Landscapes, are of topical interest. Interesting is also the more than twenty-year old trilogy of which Powaqqatsi is a part. The images of the old culture are sharply placed vis-à-vis those of contemporary life. In doing so, Powaqqatsi makes a powerful statement about the price of progress.

New York, the celebration of urban life. Every year we travel with OKRA to some destination abroad in order to draw inspiration from other cities. In all its complexity, New York represents urban vitality. Just before we were setting off for it, the city was hit right in its soul as 9/11. Yet six months after 9/11, it appears to have picked up the pieces and life has overcome destruction. Social networks and spatial networks appear to be so powerful that, after the catastrophe, the city is able to add a new layer to its history.

Human interaction: the temporary interventions. Just like the rhythmic tide of the sea, there is in the city a motion of ebb and flow on a human scale. Human interaction results in changing spaces, which is only possible if the space that has been shaped is changeable. The urban beat requires a rhythm both day and night, throughout the week and throughout the year. Within this constellation, temporary interventions play an essential part.