

Beneath the City Streets, the Beach

The Ideas and Work of Louis Le Roy

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I first came into contact with the work of Louis Le Roy (1924-) in the early 1970s, when I was a youthful Frisian. My primary-school teacher very enthusiastically told us about a long narrow roadside verge in Heerenveen where nature was left to go its own way. Sowing and planting were haphazard, rubble from roadworks was dumped at the site and local residents used it to create all sorts of structures and constructions. All this was presented in class as being an absolute free state where anything was possible and which ultimately was likely to evolve – visually at least – into utter chaos.

That was my first introduction to Louis Le Roy. Now over 80, he studied at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and became internationally famous from the early 1970s onwards for his innovative insights into the field of town and country planning, approaches to nature, garden design, and cohesion between man and nature. As a nine-year old, I obviously had no idea of the meaning of Louis Le Roy's work. I thought of wild gardens as fun and adventurous; but at the same time many people then associated these natural environments with innovative alternative ways of living – something which we nine-year olds found somewhat strange and disturbing. But the name Le Roy became a sort of 'brand' for us. Whenever we saw a garden that was totally uncared-for, where plants, shrubs and flowers were growing into and over each other, we called it a 'Le Roy garden'. We had no idea whether it was a garden deliberately conceived according to Le Roy's principles, or whether the owner had simply neglected it. Actually, to be quite honest, we usually assumed the latter.

At the beginning of the 1970s, a strip of land amounting to one and a half hectares (1 kilometre long and 18 metres wide) in the central reservation of the Kennedylaan in Heerenveen was made available to Le Roy. Le Roy had taught drawing at a secondary school in Heerenveen for many years. He took quite a prominent role in the life of the town, and regarded his own garden in Oranjewoud as a laboratory where natural processes could take their course unchecked. He was then already convinced that nature contains all manner of underlying structures that only become truly visible with the passage of time. None of these processes should be disrupted or stopped; interesting natural structures would evolve if all organic life forms were given unlimited time to develop.



The original plan was to fill the central reservation of the Kennedylaan with a monoculture of ground-cover plants. Le Roy, on the other hand, mobilised local residents to work with him at the site, sowing, planting, piling things up and digging without restriction. Once sown or planted, the green area had to be left to develop in its own way. The plant communities would organise and (re-)group themselves: the organisms themselves determined their own place. The aim was to create an ecological strip (with autonomous natural processes), a natural 'tongue' that would, as it were, reach into the city from the surrounding countryside. Building rubble was dumped at the site and a wild garden evolved with all manner of vegetation and structures made from paving blocks, drains and kerbstones. It was forbidden to use machines or remove any (natural) waste. The site's layout was not based on any form of strategic thinking; any intervention was spontaneous and carried out without a preconceived plan. This was always intended to be an open-ended project. Eventually nature began to cooperate, giving rise to ever more complex structures. Man and nature had only to use their free, creative energy for a fruitful interaction between nature and man to evolve. Le Roy had envisaged working with local residents for thirty years to develop the site, but the time came when the Heerenveen local authority decided the project had gone on for long enough and pulled out of the project. The strip of land has now become a real woodland area; the structures are still visible.

Louis Le Roy, Garden,
Kennedylaan, Heerenveen.
Photo by Peter Wouda.

Wild gardening

The age in which Le Roy was working in the early 1970s was one in which everything that had seemed impossible became possible. In the 1960s Guy Debord had spoken of the yearning for the beach that lay hidden beneath the asphalt of the city streets, in a statement that seems to sum up the period well. Many peo-

ple discovered new freedoms, new ways of living and, above all, their own energy and creativity. In that respect, it seemed, the sky was the limit. Experimenting, ideally in cooperation with others, gave rise to all manner of new perspectives on the reality that surrounds us. Given this growing mood of breaking established boundaries, it is not surprising that Le Roy's theories proved particularly appealing. A great deal was written about the Heerenveen project in newspa-

Louis Le Roy at the
eco-cathedral in Mildam.
Photo by Peter Wouda.



pers and magazines, and in 1970 and 1972 Dutch television broadcast documentaries about it. In 1973, Le Roy published his first book, *Switching Off Nature, Switching On Nature* (Natuur uitschakelen — Natuur inschakelen), in which he formulated and illustrated his ideas about 'wild gardening'. He discusses all manner of ecological principles and argues strongly against the current thinking on garden and nature management, dominated by neatly mown lawns and regimented planting schemes. Le Roy regards the prevailing views on man's relationship with nature as impoverished and above all unnatural. In his opinion, dispensing with design and control will lead to a world that is far richer and more true to nature.

Le Roy then wrote a series of articles for the journal *Plan* in which, among other things, he fulminates against the French architect Emile Aillaud's design for the 'La Grande Borne' housing estate in Paris (1967-1971). The architectural press extolled this design as an example of new and promising design and construction. For Le Roy, it was a funereal form of architecture from which all life had been expunged and which would stifle all the residents' creativity. He predicted that they would lose all consciousness of time and space and any sense of involvement with their surroundings. Ten or fifteen years later, this urban area was struggling with immense social problems.

As a result of his Kennedylaan project, Le Roy received many commissions in the 1970s – including some from abroad. Cities such as Bremen, Oldenburg, Hamburg, Kassel, and Berlin invited him to create areas within their communities. All these initiatives foundered at a fairly early stage. Either there were objections to the project time-scale of at least 30 years, or the public participation – which Le Roy thought indispensable – caused problems. It was clear that the local authorities in these cities were afraid of losing their control over the processes involved in such a commission. This has done nothing to improve Le Roy's opinion of civil servants.

In Brussels Le Roy worked with Lucien Kroll and a group of students on a project in the Brussels university district of Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe. It was not long before the project was demolished under police supervision. He was also commissioned to create green areas in the Paris suburb of Clergy-Pontoise but was sacked, according to the commissioning party, when it was discovered that he was concerned as much with people as with plants.

At the beginning of the 1970s, a six-hectare area of land in the new housing development of Lewenborg in Groningen was made available to Le Roy. Lewenborg was to be a green development, and Le Roy was deemed to be the person who could realise this in an inventive and cost-effective way. Again, public involvement was to be an important aspect. The area was to be created with, and above all by, the local residents. The process was somewhat slow to get off the ground. At first building walls and laying paths without any preconceived plan was too adventurous for many people. When one of the local residents impulsively built a model railway on the site, however, there was no stopping them. Suddenly Le Roy's plea to do away with all the boundaries between properties and gardens so that private and public land would be seamlessly integrated met with a massive response. People laid paths and extended their own grounds into the public areas. Many shared facilities were created, including tree houses, play areas, vegetable plots, a windmill and an apiary. The area burst into life and became increasingly overgrown. As often happened with Le Roy's projects, relations became polarised. There were more and more protests against this 'free state'; many people were afraid that this 'mess' would decrease the value of their houses. In 1983, ten years after the initiative had been launched, the Groningen local authority terminated its agreement with Le Roy. This led to heated debates, which were picked up by the media. A management group comprising local residents and local-authority officials was set up to manage the further 'development' of the area according to Le Roy's ideas. Against all the master's principles, however, the process had to be regulated.

A gardener with ideas

In the past Le Roy has often been described as a 'wild gardener'. Title of honour or not, this label does not do justice to the rich and complex thinking and ideas of this artist and cultural philosopher. One work that clearly demonstrates the complexity of his ideas and methods is his 'eco-cathedral' at Mildam, a village located a stone's throw from Heerenveen. This major project began in 1983. Le Roy had previously acquired the four-hectare site and with his own hands had built a studio out of scrap timber there.

On entering the eco-cathedral, the observer cannot immediately make out everything that is going on. Complications also arise if the observer decides to evaluate the whole thing directly as a work of art. Applying aesthetic criteria only leaves one somewhat disorientated; no regular design principles are apparent; rather, the overriding impression is one of formlessness. This area full of trees, bushes, plants and small piles of rubble does not reveal its true, intricate character until it has been observed in detail. In the specific area that used to be a simple monoculture, Le Roy set to work sowing and planting in his usual way. At the same time, lorries regularly arrived at the site to deposit rubble – ranging from road and paving materials to debris from a demolished



A piece of the wall of
Le Roy's eco-cathedral
in Mildam.
Photo by Peter Wouda.



prison. Le Roy carefully sorts and stacks all the material. This is a never-ending process. On the one hand he lets Mother Nature take her course, but on the other he enters into a dialogue with her by creating artificial structures such as paths and low walls. Le Roy is actually creating a network of broad stone strips on which are stacked two or more layers of stone, creating a network of thick stone ledges with a strong vertical emphasis. Le Roy uses his materials dry, without shaping or cement. The complex stacks and paths eventually enter into a fruitful relationship with burgeoning nature. They allow plants and flowers to grow in the gaps between the stones, and they 'regulate' the water balance. Le Roy has a strong predilection for complex arrangements. In his studio in Mildam there is a table covered with all sorts of apparently chaotic compositions of stones and rusty nails, while in his house in Oranjewoud the windowsills are piled high with coloured glass objects acquired from flea markets.

Once in the eco-cathedral, one follows a system of winding paths that leads through the trees, bushes and plants. It is often necessary to climb over the piles of stones to reach another part of the site. Most of the paths and stacks are overgrown with vegetation and the visitor can imagine himself in a realm of light-hearted and therefore free interaction with nature. One's movements are gently directed, yet there is a sense of enormous freedom of movement. Le Roy's ideas and mindset are partly inspired by the Frenchman mentioned above, Guy Debord. As early as the 1950s, this leader of international situationism formulated conditions which would allow people to move around freely and in a non-prescribed way. The Situationist International encouraged small groups of people to roam around cities at random. These wanderings were supposed to have no goal or function, so that they were free to experience their surround-



ings in an open and value-free way, and hence to develop into free creative beings. In the 1950s the artist Constant Nieuwenhuys designed the utopia *New Babylon*. Within this fantastic labyrinth of variously shaped buildings, bizarre routes and multi-level spaces humans would be able to rediscover their freedom, their unbridled creative potential and sense of play and so make the most of their lives. In *New Babylon*, man and his environment should form a single whole. The urban environment draws people in, while at the same time encouraging them to use their free creative energy to the full. Stimulating this free and creative energy is very important to Le Roy. This is evident in his participation projects mentioned above, but also in the challenging question he asks himself: what can a man achieve in time and space? This question provides an important basis for his work on the eco-cathedral.

Le Roy regards a number of concepts drawn from the French philosopher Henri Bergson as extremely important: *'Reason as an inheritance'* and *'Time as a Continuum and Engagement'*. *'Without free disposal over physical space, life cannot develop (...). Time is an equally essential factor. Short-lived actions or "spectacles" can indeed release creative forces for a brief while, but in the end they have to form part of a process, a temporal continuum, to bring about a true "creative evolution". Finally, commitment is an important factor; the investing of "free energy", of man's creative potential'*.¹

The Belgian biochemist and Nobel Prize winner Ilya Prigogine (1917-2003) focused on concepts such as complexity, interactions, chance, unpredictability and the phenomenon of 'self-organisation'. *'Why is there order in the world, when the Second Law of Thermodynamics states that, if you leave all the atoms to their own devices, this will result in disorder. Give the world unlimited time, and ultimate*

Louis Le Roy's
eco-cathedral in Mildam.
Photo by Peter Wouda.

chaos will result'.² Yet this is not the case. *'In the real world atoms are never left to their own devices, but are always exposed to a certain level of external energy and material. In a limited area, this can give rise to complex structures, which then organise themselves. Traditional science, which is geared towards predictability within closed and repeatable situations, had a blind spot as regards this type of self-organising system*'.³ According to Prigogine, this traditional view, with its blind spots, is to be found not only in science but also in our perception of organic processes and the way in which our society is structured. *'The elimination of chance and unpredictability seems to be inextricably linked to concepts such as power, planning, design, control, management and governance. Power promotes that which is equal, controllable and predictable, and is consequently in continuous conflict with anything that seeks to organise itself and thus departs from the prevailing order*'⁴ Prigogine campaigns against restriction and closedness, advocating open, dynamic systems within which time makes unpredictable possibilities possible. The thinking of Bergson and Prigogine provides a significant context for the ideas and work of Louis Le Roy.

As I already said, the visitor's first encounter with the eco-cathedral is not a particularly stunning visual experience. The beauty of the work lies much more in the concept of boundless space that underlies it and the time required for its completion. We associate the term 'cathedral' with generations of construction and with vast space, primarily in a spiritual sense but consequently in a physical sense too. Furthermore, a cathedral is unmistakably a construction. In principle, so is the eco-cathedral, in both an organic and a conceptual sense. It is a beautiful experience to pay regular visits to this cathedral and see how the natural processes, being cultivated by Le Roy's work, develop over time and begin to organise themselves. You observe how, within a biotope – because that is what the eco-cathedral actually is – there is a constant struggle between chaos and order. The TIME Foundation, which protects and disseminates Le Roy's work and ideas, will ensure that the processes set in motion in the eco-cathedral can be continued until the year 3000. People will continue to work on the eco-cathedral throughout that period. To date, more than fifteen hundred lorry loads of building debris – in total over fifteen thousand tons – have been incorporated into the eco-cathedral. And many more will follow.

A liveable society

In addition to working on his projects, in recent decades Le Roy has given many lectures and published a number of books, including *Little Jokers* (Uilenspiegeltjes, 1984) and *Mondrian and Back* (Retourtje Mondriaan, 2003), in which he sets out a wide variety of thoughts on a more liveable society. Le Roy also has very definite ideas when it comes to urban and rural planning. He believes that in urban environments there needs to be much more room for ecological awareness. He views the modern-day city as a low-grade ecosystem: in his view, life is being banished from the city to make way for shoddy and monotonous systems. Le Roy remains convinced that every city should have a number of zones where nature can flourish unrestricted, and where people can participate and play a completely free creative part in it. In short: areas where self-organisation predominates and nothing at all is designed. For Le Roy, a mere 1% of the urban area and participation by 1% of the population is

sufficient for this. And we have to say it again: self-organisation produces more complex – and therefore superior – results than designed systems. Le Roy formulated ideas for green, open cities as early as 1973, in his book *Switching Off Nature – Switching On Nature*. He believes that the city should be a green, ecologically sound oasis (with allotments, among other things), with the surrounding countryside functioning as an organic production (industrial) area. This, then, is where organic agriculture is to be practised.

Le Roy formulated these ideas during the period just after the Club of Rome had published its ominous report. Today, things look no better for the world. Environmental damage, globalisation, commercialisation and the sad fact that fewer and fewer people take the time to contemplate the world we live in: all these things mean that Le Roy's thoughts and perspectives remain highly relevant. His arguments and his interventions in our public spaces attest to a well-thought-out, layered, 'clean' vision for a liveable 'western' world.

In February 2008, Le Roy was awarded the Gerrit Benner Oeuvre Prize by the province of Friesland. In 2002 he was awarded a prize for his oeuvre by the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (*Fonds BKVB*). But I have to agree with the opinion of Huub Mous who wrote that it is not a good idea to offer Louis Le Roy a protected place within the canon of cultural or art history.⁵ He must not become known as a utopian, a self-willed individualist who can think in a free and creative way and create spaces where one can enjoy spending time. The eco-cathedral must never become a museum or a monument. Le Roy's ideas and work must remain live, current and therefore organic. ■

Translated by Yvette Mead

NOTES

1. Piet Vollaard, 'Time-based Architecture in Mildam. De eokathedraal van Louis Le Roy (ca.1970-3000)'. In: *Natuur Cultuur Fusie: Louis G. Le Roy*. Rotterdam: NAi, 2002, p. 22.
2. Huub Mous, 'Waarom krijgt Le Roy niet de tijd?'. In: *Dansen tussen fundamenteen; Essays over het kathedrale werk in Mildam*. Heerenveen: Stichting TIJD, 2004, p.15.
3. *ibid.* p.15.
4. *ibid.* p.15.
5. *ibid.* p.31.

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- Louis G. Le Roy, *Natuur Uitschakelen Natuur Inschakelen*. Deventer: Ankh-Hermes, 1973.
- Piet Vollaard, 'Time-based Architecture in Mildam. De eokathedraal van Louis Le Roy (ca.1970-3000)'. In: *Natuur Cultuur Fusie: Louis G. Le Roy*. Rotterdam: NAi, 2002, pp.18-26.

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