

## Building an Open Horizon

### The Vision and Work of Landscape Architect Adriaan Geuze

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[ J A N - H E N D R I K B A K K E R ]

The stretch of water called the Vlaarding Vaart is spanned by a structure called the Twist. This bicycle and pedestrian bridge connects the new urban residential area with the Broekpolder nature reserve and recreation domain, with its tennis and hockey, which serves as a starting point for city residents who might like to take a long walk through the bird-rich peat fields and new nature areas. The bridge consists of a conventional path for walking and cycling, encased by an unorthodox robust steel frame. Just like the design for railway bridges at the beginning of the last century, but now a little more honed, in red, and sporting a cheeky twist halfway across; this is what gives the bridge its name. The local people used to call the bridge “*De Wokkel*” (a spiral-shaped crisp), but you won’t hear that mocking tone these days. The Twist has become a defining part of the local community; it marks the transition from the city to the outside world. Much of the work and ideas of landscape architect Adriaan Geuze (1960) are characterised by robustness, sympathy for craftsmanship, and love for landscape and nature.

The Twist is one of the smaller-scale projects by West 8. This Rotterdam firm is currently one of the most well-known and successful design agencies in the Netherlands. It was set up by Adriaan Geuze in 1987 after he graduated from Wageningen. The firm combines landscape architecture with urban planning and has had some success in this area, with commissions for the major Dutch cities and also high-profile projects abroad, where West 8 usually works with local firms. As far as international fame is concerned, Geuze and his office seem to be on their way to succeeding Koolhaas and his office OMA, but with an entirely different approach. West 8 provided the Canadian city of Toronto with a new Waterfront on Lake Ontario, replacing the former industrial harbour site with a lively public area. Next to the New World Symphony Building in Miami Beach, a small, open palm garden grew up, and now serves as a podium for performances, as well as being a place where you can wander around a mosaic of paths. And since last year the Spanish capital Madrid has had a ribbon of green space and a recreation area in the heart of the city above the motorway along the Rio Manzanares. West 8 took part in an ambitious project to rejuvenate the river banks.

There is an increasing need for designers who can adopt a practical and integrated approach to urban chaos. Urban design needs landscape architecture.



There was once a world in which romantic designers busied themselves with gardens, estates and parks, while in another urban planners earned the money with their grand artistic developments. Now these two worlds are joining forces. The combination is relatively new. What is remarkable is that there are more landscape architects than urban architects working at West 8. This also reflects the realisation that the gap between town and country is being bridged.

Governor's Island New York  
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### **Catastrophic idleness**

The career of Adriaan Geuze (1960) is a result of this development. He is a typical 'doer', but one with ideas about nature and landscape. Geuze combines a love of land and nature with modern urban design and planning. He and his firm radiate optimism and confidence in their own abilities. The optimism is a well-considered component of the ideology. As far as Geuze is concerned, this ideology is accompanied by sharp criticism of the lack of spatial planning, systematic thinking and cultural awareness of the generation that changed the face of the Netherlands after the post-war reconstruction period: namely, the baby boomers. Geuze holds this generation responsible for a catastrophic idleness which, chiefly in the Randstad, destroyed both urban and rural areas. More about this later.



The intellectual status that he enjoys seems to suggest that Geuze's integrated approach works. A professor at TU Delft and Harvard, he is often asked by the media to explain his vision of urban planning and cultural developments. His work has won several prizes. But he was also the leader of a group of critical architects and property entrepreneurs who united under the name "*Laten we Nederland mooier maken*" (Let's make the Netherlands more beautiful) to take a stand against the laissez-faire policy in spatial planning.

### Waste processing

One of Geuze's most prominent and high-profile projects to date is the Schouwburgplein in Rotterdam. Later there was much criticism of the way the square functioned, but the bold Rotterdam-ness of it, with allusions to the intensive work in the harbours, was praised. The idea of combining housing and a waste-processing company on one site won him the Prix de Rome. Geuze continued to make a name for himself with the idea of transforming the Amsterdam neighbourhood of Borneo/Sporenburg into a compact residential area by moving the cars underground, exposing the open water of the IJ to everyone, and allowing a whole host of different building styles to preserve the openness of the public space as much as possible. Other projects that set him apart include the Leidsche Rijn Park (now Máxima Park) in Utrecht and the park on Governors Island in New York. In 2007 West 8 won a competition with the design for a 'world park' on the island, which is a national monument eight hundred metres off the coast of Manhattan. In 2005 Geuze was the curator of the Second International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam. The Dutch polder was the central theme of this event. Previously, at the Venice Biennale, he had taken a critical look at the Vinex culture in the Netherlands.

Geuze's international successes seem to run contrary to his thoroughly Dutch orientation. But it doesn't matter, because, as Geuze himself constantly reminds us, it was in Holland that the *landschap*, whence the English word landscape



Governor's Island New York  
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derives, was more or less discovered; first by the great hydraulic engineers, who slowly but surely drained the marshland delta, and then quickly thereafter by great painters like Rembrandt, Ruysdael, Potter and others, who went about portraying this new country. From a Dutch point of view, the landscape is something to be constructed. And that's also how Geuze sees his task as a landscape architect. Geuze has no qualms about contributing to a major symposium entitled *Towards the Megacities Solution*, with a talk that focused mainly on the landscape artists of the Dutch Golden Age. Moreover, Geuze is a direct heir of Dutch polder country. He was born there, in Dordrecht.

Adriaan Geuze comes from a family of engineers: people who make things. His grandfather was an important man at the Lopikerwaard district water board. His father, a mechanical engineer, often took him and the other children to the mud-banks, the dike areas and the pastures around Dordt. 'He taught me this: the landscape is yours', a key notion in Geuze's world view, as was to be seen later. The expression makes a strong claim about being rooted, and it also reflects an active attitude. Reporters have often asked Geuze if he isn't a little too attached to the landscape of his youth, and whether his stance against the looting of the countryside is not just a bit idiosyncratic. He tells these reporters that a man has a right to be rooted and that the profound indignation that resonated throughout the Western world when the Taliban desecrated old Buddhist statues in Afghanistan should likewise greet the building over of the Netherlands' Green Heart. In his view, this is an equally huge cultural crime.

## Footloose

Geuze's diagnosis of the current discomfort in Dutch culture is that the suburban person has become footloose. Unable to identify with the city, he sees less and less of the landscape of the surrounding areas. He is not at home anywhere. 'People don't function well if their social and physical environment caves in... It is a fact that people panic when their spatial orientation is turned upside down.'



Waterfront on  
Lake Ontario Toronto

Although Geuze likes to provoke, the comparison to the Taliban is fairly close to the mark. The Green Heart of the Dutch 'Randstad' makes up a considerable part of the urban and personal identity of North and South Holland. Cities like Gouda, Haarlem, Dordrecht, Leiden and Delft have always been halfway houses in an area of water and pasture. It is a collection of cities around emptiness and openness. The filling in of the Randstad, as is happening now around Gouda with the construction of a second new town like Zoetermeer, called Zuidplas, is the worst of all possible urban planning scenarios and not even necessary if better use were made of the inner urban space, according to Geuze. 'Who decided on our behalf that the empty space is up for grabs? Did you read about it in a memorandum? Were you consulted about it? We, the makers of landscape, have allowed this happen to us!' he says in a conversation with colleagues.

There is a lot at stake for Geuze. 'The landscape that was shaped on the seabed forms the soul of Dutch culture. In this country with its polders and water cities, a unique landscape has developed: the 'Randstad'. Without the presence of an effective urban planning strategy, this metropolis will lose its vitality and, as a consequence of an inexplicable self-loathing, its magical empty centre with its horizons and low overcast skies. Without the panoramic polder land, the inhabitants will be spiritually lost, powerless like the Swiss without mountains and lonely like Italians without their culinary culture', says Geuze in his *Megacities* lecture.

## Identity

Geuze is convinced that there is a close bond between people, culture and landscape. Dutch history is one of land-makers. Famous hydraulic engineers, polder pumping stations, low horizons, heroic projects such as the *Afsluitdijk* ('enclosure dam' that closed off the former Zuiderzee to form the IJsselmeer) and the Delta works, landscape builders, long skating and cycling trips into a headwind: they're all part of the Dutch identity. According to Geuze, this heritage has been lost because of two interrelated factors: the laissez-faire mentality of the generation that took control in the post-war period, and immigration.

As far as the baby-boomers are concerned, Geuze is convinced that they are to blame for cluttering up the Dutch polder landscape and selling it off at knock-down prices. Those responsible are a large group of administrators and politicians who, from the eighties onwards, refused to believe in the dynamism of the forefathers. In their soft, anti-authoritarian meeting-based culture they demonstrated that they were pampered and lazy, and had no intention of imposing any further visions from above. In the spirit of Thorbecke, the federal government left spatial planning to the provinces and municipalities, so that every village got its own industrial park and Vinex neighbourhood. Short-term vision and specific interests ruled public affairs. The bill for all this was presented in the nineties, when the cluttering of the Dutch man-made landscape spread all over. This sums up Geuze's vision of the generation before him.

## Green heart

Geuze denounces these predecessors as the large group who took early retirement and are now enjoying the peace and quiet of their second homes in France, which they earned by ruining the peace and quiet of the Randstad. And those who saw Geuze recently in a VPRO documentary in conversation with Wim Derksen, director of the Spatial Planning Bureau, will have seen how the relatively young – or at least young-looking – architect heard from a former administrator that the Green Heart no longer exists, except in Geuze's romantic imagination. This cynical argumentation confirms Geuze's picture of a generation conflict. It is as if Derksen is retrospectively legitimising the lack of vision and drive of his generation. But in the same 2010 documentary, Geuze also met the young Dutch Minister of Logistics and Environment, Melanie Schultz van Haegen: 'Adriaan, it's not my job to make the Netherlands more beautiful,' she says. Apparently the problem is not just a generation conflict.

Here we see two views of the task of government in conflict. One, that of Schultz van Haegen, holds that the government must ensure that business and citizens can get around as easily as possible in order to earn money, while the other believes in a totality of economy, ecology, climate and landscape. In his polemic, Geuze emphasises the value of the open character of the Randstad for the purposes of setting up business there. If the Randstad is going to end up looking like Los Angeles, international institutions and businesses, and the more highly educated inhabitants of the country, will no longer show any



Vlaarding Vaart ©West8

interest. In addition to that, he proclaims, filling up the low-lying land is about the most stupid thing you could do at a time when the sea levels are rising and the major rivers are facing more and more intensive rainy periods.

For Geuze it goes without saying that the quality of the surroundings, city and landscape has an impact on the human condition of the (post-) modern Dutchman. In his analysis he traces a lot of the current unease back to the immigration of foreigners in the sixties and seventies and the consequent departure of the middle classes from the cities. They left the inner cities and went to suburbia. The inner cities lost their diversity, but Vinex developments also lack vitality. Furthermore, every day commuters have to travel long distances, losing valuable time that could be spent with family and friends. Geuze reiterates this sort of analysis again and again. His architectural attitude is holistic.

Miami Beach  
©Robin Hill



## Maximá Park

This integrated approach can be seen in the Leidsche Rijn Park project, which connects the Vinex area of Leidsche Rijn in the west of Utrecht with the history and culture of the place. Alongside existing elements it also introduces new features such as a Victorian teahouse, a pergola wall, sports fields and a Japanese garden. The whole project is still ongoing, but even on a wet and windy day in January you can see that it works. It is the kind of park, at the crossroads of urban functions (living, working and recreational activity), for which Jane Jacobs – the advocate of the living city – would gladly have returned to earth: a couple of walkers from adjacent neighbourhoods, school kids on their way home, a little activity on the peripheries, a group of joggers braving the weather. You can reach it by bike from the centre of Utrecht in ten minutes.

Now called the Maximá Park, it is the size of Central Park in Manhattan, with its three hundred hectares. It creates an enormous free space in an area which would otherwise have soon fallen victim to urban sprawl. In fact it is made up of

a great many snippets of residual waste ground and hamlets. It runs under the railway line and motorway, giving the impression that it is divided again. Geuze's invention is to hold all this together by means of a huge walkway and cycle path meandering for eight kilometres like a ribbon around the whole area.

The 'Ribbon' is an open invitation to joggers, cyclists, skaters and walkers. In the park itself old elements of the landscape from its polder history are combined with new elements. Original historical building meets nostalgic construction. Geuze also opens up the course of the Rhine bed, along which the Vikings entered Utrecht long ago. This Viking Rhine, which will eventually be openly connected with the Leidsche Rijn, is a vital section of the park; it invites people to go boating, but also reminds visitors of the old stories from Carolingian times.

In conclusion: Adriaan Geuze is a leading proponent of a new movement in urban



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planning, in which the concern for space as a totality is key. Not the single iconic building as an autonomous artwork or the garden as its rural counterpart, but the interplay of the two. In Geuze's book, city and country are no longer at loggerheads. Attention to the social and cultural aspects of living, such as connection to place and history, is a constant theme. Openness and horizon are key concepts that Geuze has brought with him from his own life in the Dutch polders. ■

[www.west8.nl/adriaan\\_geuze](http://www.west8.nl/adriaan_geuze)

#### FURTHER READING

Adriaan Geuze, 'The Necessity of Melting Polar Ice', *Towards the Megacities Solution* no. 10, TU Delft, 2008

*Translated by Gregory Ball*