

The new Dutch parks: relation between form and use

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Abstract

In recent decades, both the design of urban parks and their recreational uses have changed. This paper considers these developments and reports on an explorative study into the relationship between form and the potential for recreational use in contemporary park designs in the Netherlands. In so doing, we also try to explain how park designers can influence the use of their product.

Park Design / Recreational Use / Contemporary Dutch Parks

Introduction

This article looks at the relationships between form and the potential for recreational use in the design of contemporary parks in the Netherlands. Our reasons for investigating this theme are firstly, our own interest in the recreational use of parks and secondly, the signals in the design literature that park designs have recently begun shifting away from the functional towards the aesthetic, and that designers have thereby become more distant from understanding the real needs of potential users. The recent developments addressed here are different from those prior to the 1990s, which are already very well documented in Dutch professional literature (e.g. Boersma & Ter Haar 1991; Lörzing 1992; Vroom 1992). Recent developments, however, are not so well documented and this provides another reason for research.

In our search for a relationship between form and the potential for recreational use we began by studying the literature on developments in contemporary park design and on changes in the recreational use of parks. This was followed by an explorative study of the recreational use potential and form of 28 contemporary parks, all realised between 1990 and now. And of course we finish with conclusions.

Contexts

How park design has changed

The direction of park design in the Netherlands, as elsewhere, has shifted noticeably in recent years. This section describes the most striking changes, though these are by no means the only ones. It will be shown that modern Dutch parks tend to be incorporated into the urban fabric in such a way that they no longer present an enclosure, that building materials are increasingly replacing plants in park design, and that over the past 15 years far more emphasis has been placed on aesthetics than on function and recreation in the practice of park design.

From enclosure to open space

In landscape planning and urban design literature, parks are categorised as an urban open space (Lynch 1981; Woolley 2003) or, more specifically, as urban green space (Green Spaces Task Force 2002). Since it first appeared, the park has been considered as an enclosure [1] and as such has had a special place in the urban green system: as a place of peace and rest, where nature meets culture, and as a social focal point where people come to meet each



Figure 1 Rietlanden, Amsterdam. Design Sant & Co, City of Amsterdam, 2004.



other in a particular ‘safe’ setting, different and separated from other urban functions. One modern version of this description is the park as a ‘decompression chamber’, a space of convivial social control where, isolated from other parts of the city, people can rest and relax in a civilised and artificial ‘nature’. Older parks often have fences and gates, which provide conditions for physical control and a sense of security. This traditional concept of enclosure places them in the category of what Foucault (1986) describes as urban heterotopias: places which interrupt the apparent continuity and normality of ordinary everyday spaces, places which are self-sufficient and introverted.

Modern Dutch parks, though, tend to be incorporated into the urban fabric in such a way that they become a ‘disclosure’ rather than an ‘enclosure’. They are open on all sides and often used as transitional areas through which people pass on their way from one part of the city to another. Park Rietlanden in Amsterdam is one example of this (Figure 1). It incorporates several residential blocks, as well as playgrounds and sports fields, and is laid out around infrastructure for public transport and vehicles at a lower level. A network of footpaths connecting pedestrian destinations creates the openness.

Some contemporary parks even blend with public squares, the best example being Museumplein in Amsterdam (Figure 2 a, b). Although the name literally means Museum Square, most of its surface is grass. Squares are areas visually enclosed by surrounding buildings but functionally open from all sides; they are experienced as spaces of free movement in any direction, without the rules which apply in other urban spaces. The new Dutch parks often provide this feeling, too.



Figure 2 a, b Museumplein, Amsterdam. Design: Sven Ingmar Andersson, 1999.

Recent research has shown that “there is an emergent spatial structure of restorative urban open space which moves away from the idea of large discrete open areas that people purposefully go to in order to seek respite and rejuvenation, to more of a web or mesh-like structure that links together a system of smaller spaces, each of which has restorative properties, woven into the fabric of cities in a more holistic way” (Thwaites et al. 2004). Although recent, these ideas are not that far removed from the old concept of greenways invented by Frederick Law Olmsted to link the parks in New York and Boston. In the Dutch context, though, these have taken on a somewhat modified form.

Visitor data [2] generally shows that the most popular recreational activities in Dutch parks are walking and cycling. Because of this, some researchers have concluded that urban recreation is becoming more and more directed towards making linear connections and have questioned the need to creating large parks any more (De Josselin de Jong, 2006). As long ago as 1973, Grunfeld pleaded for parks in elongated form, modest in area



Figure 3a,b Chassé Park, Breda. Design: West 8, 2006/2007.



but as part of a larger system providing urban residents with a ‘greenway’ all the way to the countryside proper. De Josselin de Jong (2006) has adopted and adapted this concept to emphasise the creation of links between parks themselves and of routes emanating in various directions from individual homes. And combining these two systems should reinforce both. It would be very attractive for recreation seekers as, according to Goossen et al. (1997), appreciation of an area by cyclists and walkers increases with the number of possibilities they have in it.

Fewer plants

Whether they are called parks or squares, many of the urban green open spaces designed in the past 15 years hardly merit whatever title they are given. And this is only partly due to the shift from enclosure to disclosure. Another cause is the growing tendency to incorporate natural or artificial building materials such as stones, pebbles, bricks, wood, concrete, steel, glass etc. in their design. As a result, many new ‘parks’ are losing their ‘green’ character altogether and becoming urban built-up areas. Well-known Dutch landscape designer Adrian Geuze explains this trend in the following terms: “I want to unromanticise the landscape. There is too much unnecessary green.” The best-known and most extreme illustration of this is Geuze’s own design for the Schouwburgplein in Rotterdam. Another, more recent but less extreme, is the Chassé Park in Breda, which was also designed by his firm (Figure 3a, b).

According to Deunk (2002), plants are being marginalised in contemporary Dutch garden architecture and landscape architects no longer specialise in horticulture. Instead, other elements from the architectural world, such as structures and materials, are being employed in landscape and garden design.

Spatial quality and the park as art

After a period of neglect in the 1980s, urban open spaces received renewed attention in the 1990s. While ‘sport’ and ‘play’ were the key words used to describe parks between the 1920s and the 1950s, with ‘nature’ and ‘ecology’ supplanting them in the 1970s, the most important term in the design of today’s parks is ‘quality’. But since that is difficult to define, we will pause here to explain briefly what it means in the context of this paper.

‘Spatial quality’ is a term used frequently in Dutch planning policy circles. It was coined by the National Spatial Planning Agency in the mid-1980s as a principal policy goal and played an important role at a time when spatial planning was searching for an identity (Reijndorp 1998). Spatial quality is a broad concept which implies personal values and subjectivity; this puts it into the category of “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber 1984). Defining it depends on the case in hand and on scale, time and context; there is no quick or decisive test for the usefulness of any one definition.

Right from the start, the term ‘spatial quality’ as used in Dutch planning policies has never been properly defined (Tisma 2003; Tisma and Alphen 2003). Over the years it has acquired different layers of meaning depending on the context in which it is used.

Physical environment: diversity, sustainability, coherence.

Design: form, composition, integration and development.

Essential terms in spatial planning: pattern, structure and process.

Social needs: perception value, utility value and future value.

Usually, though, spatial quality is defined in terms of social needs. In these cases, the aim of spatial planning policy is to multiply the utility value and raise the perception and future values of space. More precisely, this means that space has a high functional value when land uses are complementary and do not conflict, it has a high perception value when the proper form is achieved and it has a high future value when the use of space is sustainable and can be adjusted to changing needs over time. It can be argued that these definitions are vague and can be interpreted in various ways by the different actors involved in spatial planning. But this situation has been useful because such freedom of interpretation allows different actors (such as policy makers or designers) to describe spatial quality in their own way, and in so doing to express their own values and interests. This implies that spatial quality can be defined more precisely only in specific situations, when the concept can be operationalized using a number of concrete and measurable effects.



Figure 4 Tivoli Park is situated directly behind the Interpolis head office, Tilburg. Design: West 8, 1996.

In park design praxis over the past 15 years, far more emphasis has been placed on aesthetics than on function and recreation. There are some, though, who believe that this threatens to bring about neglect of the social aspects which received all the attention in the early 1970s (Van Ewijk 1999): what space looks like becomes more important than such aspects as utility value and future value. Referring to Dutch park design between 1990 and 2000, Deunk (2002) calls garden art “pure artificial art” and describes the garden as an absolute luxury, park visitors as observers of a work of art and walkers as objects or as part of the scenery. At Tivoli Park in Tilburg (Figure 4, designed by West 8), greenery has been combined with architectural objects and works of art to create something which has caused even the designer himself doubts: is it a garden or is it an environment for a building (the head office of the Interpolis insurance company, Adrian Geuze, 2000).

The design of urban parks can become art for its own sake – which in some cases, the most extreme example being Museumpark in Rotterdam, eventually results in social failure [3]. The words of Jane Jacobs (1961) are still relevant in this respect: “City parks are not abstractions, or automatic repositories of virtue or uplift, any more than sidewalks are abstractions. They mean nothing divorced from their practical, tangible uses, and hence they mean nothing divorced from the tangible effects on them – for good or for ill – of the city districts and uses touching them”.

In her discussion of recommendations for the design of green open spaces in Dutch towns and cities, Van Ewijk (1999) says, “A good design is no guarantee of intensive use. There is an essential difference between the potential environment (what the designer wants it to be) and the effective environment (what the users actually do with it)”. According to Van Ewijk, form never determines activity. The logic of this statement, of course, is obvious as the use of a specific park also depends on the specific needs of those who visit this park; if these visitors are not interested in engaging in specific activities, these activities will definitely not take place.

However, this does not mean that the form of a park is totally irrelevant. On the contrary, the form certainly can have an influence, and this influence can be positive or negative. Some activities, for instance, need specific physical conditions and whether these conditions are present depends on the form of the park. Wherever form creates the right conditions it stimulates intensive use. However, the converse can also be true; an un-

fortunate form creates conditions which discourage potential park users. We will discuss some positive and negative examples in a later chapter.

How recreational needs change

This section describes the most important changes in the recreational needs of park visitors. It will be shown that leisure business is booming in general; that recreational park visits are decreasing in the Netherlands; that despite this, urban parks still remain important places for outdoor recreation by town and city dwellers, and that the demand for recreational facilities in parks is diversifying due to demographic changes and the rise of new leisure activities.

Booming leisure business

The recreational needs of the urban population are changing all the time. Naturally, this evolution is closely related to many other developments – particularly growing prosperity, increasing individualisation and the rise of the ‘experience economy’. Thanks to greater wealth, many people can now spend more on leisure and on travel for leisure purposes than ever before. And individualisation means that everyone is trying to find those leisure experiences which best satisfy them. Consequently, Dutch expenditure on leisure has soared in recent decades (Van den Broek et al. 2004) and the same is true for the amount of time spent on leisure-related mobility (Harms 2006). Leisure has become a booming business offering a very wide spectrum of opportunities. People nowadays can – and perhaps even have to – select those leisure activities they really want to pursue or the attraction they really want to visit. Making such choices has become even more necessary as the average available free time per person per week in the Netherlands has decreased, from 48 hours in 1975 to 45 in 2005, the main cause of this being rising female employment (Breedveld et al. 2006; Breedveld and Van den Broek, 2001). Remarkably, though, this situation has not led to a decrease in the number of different leisure activities undertaken in any one year. On the contrary: in 2000, the average person took part in more such activities than in 1975. However, the average number per week decreased. This implies that people are choosing to do more activities, but each less frequently, and that the diversifying leisure supply therefore suits their needs (Van den Broek et al. 2004).

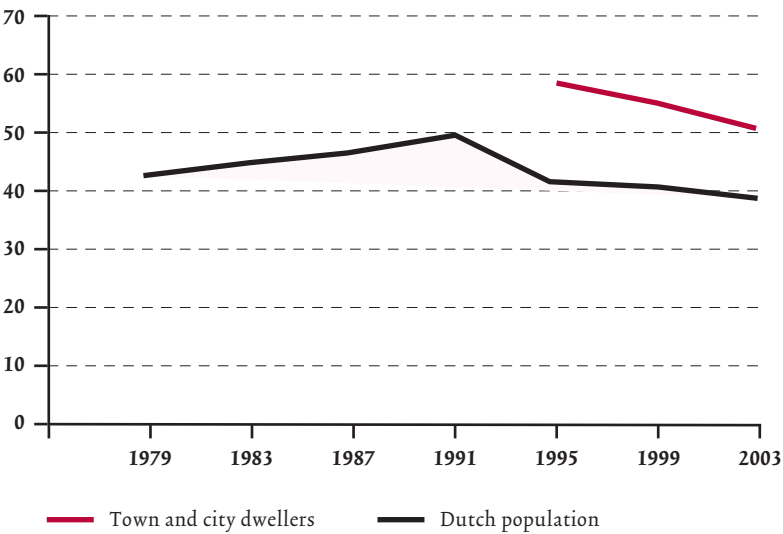


Figure 5 Percentage of people visiting urban parks or forests in the past year (AVO, own analysis).



Figure 6 Locations of the new parks.

Urban parks under pressure but still significant

In this context, the position of the urban park in the broadening leisure spectrum seems to be under pressure; it is just one of many places where a person may choose to spend some of their free time. This pressure has become especially visible in the past decade. According to the national population survey, AVO, the proportion of town and city dwellers who had visited urban parks or forests for leisure purposes in the past year decreased from almost 58 per cent in 1995 to 52 per cent in 2003. For the Dutch population as a whole, this decrease has been under way since as long ago as 1990 (Figure 5). Comparable figures at local level are scarce, but are available for Rotterdam, the second biggest city in the Netherlands and the only one to survey its population’s leisure behaviour every two years. This local data shows a similar decrease in the percentage of visitors to parks, although it began a few years later than the national decline. Until 2001, the percentage of Rotterdam residents visiting parks in the city rose year on year. Only then did it reverse in line with the trend for the country as a whole (Rijpma et al. 2006). Despite this, urban parks remain significant for many town and city dwellers. As already noted, roughly half of all townspeople still visit parks for leisure purposes. And according to the national leisure survey, CVTO, in 2004/’05 they were the sixth most visited environment for outdoor recreation lasting at least one hour.

Diversifying demand for recreational facilities in parks

The way people use parks has also changed and will undoubtedly continue to do so. These changes are already discernible, even though almost all surveys continue to find that walking, cycling and sunbathing are the activities most likely to be mentioned. Yet the apparent dominance of these fairly general pursuits disguises the fact that parks are already playing host to a far greater variety of activities, and also that changes in the urban population and the rise of new activities have consequences for the demand for park facilities. The influence of changes in the urban population was first observed in a survey of park visitors in Amsterdam in the 1990s (Gemeente Amsterdam 1996). The researchers analysed whether there was a relationship between, on the one hand, why people visited a park and what they did there and, on the other, the type of household to which they belonged. They compared two traditional household types – families and older childless single people or couples – with a third which was growing then and is commonplace now: younger childless single people and couples. The results were as follows.

Younger childless single people and couples (up to 55 years of age) tend to visit parks for social reasons like “meeting other people” and “being in a place where things happen”, and they are also more likely to attend events and use outdoor cafés in parks.

City	Park	Designer	Completion	Size (ha)
Almere	Meridiaanpark	Harm Veenenbos	1991	27.0
Amsterdam	Museumplein	Sven Ingmar Andersson	1997–1999	5.3
	Nieuw Franchendael 1	Bureau Sant & co.	1999–2002	21.0
	Erasmuspark 1	Urban van Aar, Bureau voor Water & Landschapsarchitectuur	2002	12.0
	Rietlanden	Sant & Co, City of Amsterdam	2004	1.7
	Westergasfabriek	Kathrin Gustafson and Mecanoo	2003–2005	13.0
Beverwijk	Overbos 1	Ank Bleeker	1991–1994	11.0
Breda	Zaartpark	Bureau H+N+S	1993–1994	13.0
	Chassé Park	West 8	1999–2006/2007	13.0
Delft	Abtswoudse Park	Department of Urban Development, Borough of Delft, D. Louwerse	1991	8.0
Den Bosch	Zuiderpark 1	Bureau Buys & van Vliet	1994–1999	22.0
The Hague	Koekamp 1	Public Works Department, City The Hague	2001	4.0
	De Verademing	City of The Hague	2004	9.2
Deventer	Rijsterborgherpark 1	Michael van Gessel	2000–2005	5.0
Groningen	Noordijk Park	B+B	1991	350.0
Hilversum	Neuweg	Pieter Arkenbour, Leo Boogerd and Landschappartners	1993–1994	0.63
Hoofddorp	Joannes de Doperkerk Garden	Bureau Alle Hosper and Groengroep	2002–2005	1.2
Lelystad	Zilverpark	B+B	1994	2.0
Rotterdam	Dokhavenpark	Dept. of Urban Development and Housing, City of Rotterdam	1987–1990	5.5
	Prinsenland	Bureau Bakker & Bleker	1991	36.0
	Rosepark	Bureau Quadraat	1994–1995	1.5
	Witteveenplein	Kop van Zuid Project Bureau	1998–2001	0.57
	Skatepark Westblaak 1	Dept. of Urban Development and Housing, City of Rotterdam	2000	0.67
Tilburg	Kromhoutpark	B+B	1993–1994	5.3
	Tivolipark (Interpolis)	West 8	1996	2
Utrecht	Fortis Head Office	West 8	1995	2.5
	Griftpark	Ingenieursbureau Utrecht	1999	7.3
Zoetermeer	Floriadepark	Michiel de Ruijter	1992	35.0

Table 1 Summary of the 28 parks in this study

By contrast, older childless single people and couples tend to visit “to enjoy nature”, “to see trees and plants” or “to see birds or other animals”.

Finally, families with children mentioned both social reasons and “nature”. Unlike the other two groups, however, they frequently participate in activities with or for children, such as playing and feeding ducks.

This divergence of motives and activities shows that different people are looking for very different types of experience in parks. More recently, such divergence has also been found in a survey of the growing proportion of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese people in the Dutch cities. Some of these groups would like to see more and better facilities in parks for barbecuing, sport and playing with children, as well as more water taps and toilets and fewer dogs walking in the parks (Jókövi 2000).

The demand for facilities in parks is also influenced by the rise of new recreational activities. Examples include Nordic walking, which has become increasingly popular in the Netherlands in recent years, the roller-skating craze which suddenly swept the parks in the 1990s, mountain biking and horse riding, which has been rising in popularity since the 1980s. In some parks, special routes have now been created to accommodate these sports. Likewise, there has been an increased demand for outdoor cafés in recent decades (Oosterman 1993), particularly among younger people (Jókövi 2000). Although some of these new activities can be catered for without providing additional facilities – Nordic walking, for instance – others require special equipment.

Explorative study: methodology and definitions

In addition to the literature study summarized in the former chapter, we wanted to do an explorative study into the recreational use potential and form of contemporary parks. For this purpose, we had to make a selection of contemporary parks as it was impossible to analyse all the parks developed in the Netherlands in recent years. We used the following criteria to select the parks.

- They had been newly constructed or extensively reconstructed since 1990.
- They had attracted attention from designers and architects as they were found interesting enough to merit debate in design literature, especially yearbooks of landscape architecture and urban planning in the Netherlands or the very scarce specialist literature about parks (Deunk 2002; Planbox 1995; Ridderbos 2005; Stichting Jaarboek Landschapsarchitectuur en stedenbouw 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004). This criterion led us to include parks with remarkable and often innovative designs in our project.
- They are open to the public; private gardens were not considered in this research.
- They are at least 0.5 hectares in size.

Twenty-eight parks were found that fulfilled these criteria, most of them in the two largest cities, Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Twenty-one are completely new, six have been reconstructed and one has been extended. Figure 6 shows where the parks are located in the Netherlands, while table 1 summarises the background information about them.



Figures 7 above and right De Verademing, The Hague.
Design: City of the Hague, 2004.



Figure 8a Benches, left, in De Verademing, The Hague.
Design: City of The Hague, 2004.



Figure 8b Benches in the garden of the Fortis head office, Utrecht.
Design: West 8, 1995.



Figure 9 Koekamp paths, nowadays.
Design: Public works department of the city of The Hague, 2001.



The first category is **varied experiences**: provision of at least seven different types of facility, such as paths for walkers, scenic gardens, a petting farm, playgrounds, open grass, cafés, bars and restaurants, open-air theatres, allotments and clubs for organised sports. Thanks to this variety, these parks attract many different users. Six of those surveyed fall into this category, one example being Nieuw Franckendael (Figure 10). Their areas range from 7.3 hectares to more than 300. The largest, outside the town of Groningen, even incorporates such facilities as an artificial ski slope, swimming pool and skating rink.

Culture is the second category and these parks either incorporate or are immediately adjacent to cultural institutions such as museums and theatres. Along with this they may also be intended to host cultural events and provide other recreational facilities. Because of the relationship with cultural institutions, these parks are often visited by people who come to the area primarily for culture. It may even be that the park is not particularly attractive to general recreation seekers, but that is not a necessary condition and other recreational elements may be present too though the attractive cultural institutions are the main feature. We categorised three parks under culture, all located in or close to a city centre. Examples are Museumplein in Amsterdam (Figure 2) and Chassé Park in Breda (Figure 3).

Parks that are classified as **walk and rest** feature good opportunities for shorter or longer walks and rest in a natural or attractively designed environment. Certain other recreational facilities may be provided, but not enough for parks to be classified as offering a varied experience. We found seven walk and rest parks, including Koekamp (Figure 9). They vary in size from 4 to 36 hectares. The smallest, Koekamp, is actually better equipped for rest than for recreational walking, as all its paths simply cross the park and so it is almost impossible to walk a circuit. But thanks to the location near large offices in The Hague, many people who are obviously making a short recreational visit, taking a stroll or relaxing on a bench are seen there at lunchtimes.

Play is the fourth category and parks in this category feature playgrounds, roller-skating facilities, grass area and sports fields for free use. One of them is even fully dedicated to sportive roller-skating. Most of

these parks are very small – less than 2 hectares – although one covers just over 5 hectares. Despite this, such parks can be very important for children and teenagers, especially in neighbourhoods of high population density which lack other open spaces. Incidentally, the ‘play’ classification does not mean that opportunities for play and unorganised sports are totally absent from the other parks; it is just that they are not so dominant in them. We identified six play parks, amongst them Rietlanden in Amsterdam (Figure 1).

The main quality of a park classified as **visual impact** is its attractively designed environment. The visitors of these parks primarily benefit from a good opportunity to enjoy ‘nature’ and in some cases artistic objects, though there may be some other recreational facilities. Five of our parks come into this category, amongst them Tivoli Park (Figure 4) and Kromhoutpark (Figure 11). Four of them are less than 2.5 hectares in size, just the Kromhoutpark is sizable at 5.3 hectares. It seems likely that the limited space available was a key factor in choosing to emphasise visual quality in the design, since this precludes most active forms of recreation. Moreover, three of these parks are actually semi-public gardens. These three function as public open space but are financed by private investors. Two of them, surrounding commercial offices, were designed primarily as ‘prestige’ gardens. And the third, adjacent to a church, has a contemplative function.

Only two of the five parks classified as **visual impact** are true public open spaces and, it must be admitted, one of them offers some playgrounds for children and the other a roller-skating facility. Nevertheless, these have also been classified as visual impact since their aesthetic qualities outweigh the recreational elements. Besides, the roller-skating facility was not planned in the original design, but was added later.

Finally, the sixth category is **organised sports**. Although our survey identified only one park in this category, De Verademing in The Hague (Figure 7), we believe that it merits a separate category as such specialist parks for organised sports are actually very common in the Netherlands. It is just that, since their design tends to be mainly a technical matter, they are rarely remarkable enough to attract attention from other archi-

Results of the explorative study

Recreational programmes

What kind of potentials for recreational use do the contemporary parks offer? The answer given in this paragraph is based on an inventory of the leisure facilities provided at each park [4]. In particular, we looked for thirteen items which are attractive to various groups of people: children’s playgrounds, petting farms, sporting roller-skating provision (half-pipes etc.), footpaths, benches, scenic gardens, allotments, public sports grounds for free use, members-only sports grounds, sports halls, festival sites, catering outlets and cultural facilities such as theatres, museums and galleries. From this list, only footpaths and benches are present in every park, whereas children playgrounds are present in a majority of the parks.

From this inventory, we devised the following system for classifying a park’s potential for recreational use or recreational programme (Table 2). Although the six categories identified do overlap to some extent, each class represents a specific recreational focus [5].

Recreational programme

Varied experiences
Noorddijk Park, Griftpark, Floriade park, Nieuw Franckendael, Overbos, Zuiderpark

Culture
Chassé Park, Museumplein, Westergasfabriek

Walk and rest
Abtswoudse Park, Erasmuspark, Koekamp, Meridiaanpark, Prinsenland, Rijsterborgher Park, Zwart Park

Play
Dokhavenpark, Neuweg, Rietlanden, Rosepark¹, Skatepark Westblaak, Witteveenplein¹

Visual impact
Joannes the Doperkerk Garden², Kromhoutpark², Tivoli Park, Fortis Head Office Garden, Zilverpark²

Organised sports
De Verademing

1 Could also have been classified as visual impact, but the playground seems to be more important for the leisure experience

2 Offers play grounds too, but the aesthetic character is more dominant.

Table 2 Recreational programmes in the parks



Figure 10 a, b, c Nieuw Franckendael, Amsterdam. Design Bureau Sant & Co, 2002.



pects, which was one of our selection criteria. De Verademing was an exception, however, since its design is fairly unusual. It combines a large area for organised sports with facilities for play, unorganised sports, cycling, walking and rest. This variety was provided after considering the wishes expressed by local residents. De Verademing shows that a non-standard design for a park of this kind can result in a remarkable facility which does more than merely satisfy the recreational demands of sports enthusiasts.

The above system of classification goes some way towards clarifying the various kinds of recreational programme provided by the parks surveyed. Admittedly, though, a few could quite easily have been placed in another category. In particular, it is sometimes troublesome drawing a distinction between parks classified as ‘play’ and those classified as ‘visual impact’. Some of the former have outstanding aesthetic qualities and some of the latter offer very good facilities for children to play. In these cases, our choice of final classification depended totally upon our subjective assessment of the primary leisure experience offered by the park. In the case of Zilverpark, for instance, we opted for ‘visual impact’ because its roller-skating facility is located in a remote corner where most visitors are unlikely to notice it.

Form of spaces and design of details

Earlier we already mentioned that despite Van Ewijks’ (1999) opinion that form never determines activity, we are convinced that form can influence the use of park positively or negatively. We believe that designers do have a huge impact on the way spaces can and will be used. After all, when shaping a park the designer determines its overall structure, content and facilities, chooses building materials and devises planting schemes. In doing so, their impact may go much further than the influence of the recreational programme offered, as this mainly influences what types of user may be attracted to the park. For instance, children’s playgrounds are at-

tractive for (parents with) children, public sport grounds for young people, scenic gardens for older people, and different types of catering outlets will be visited by different kinds of guests. In that sense, it is not the problem to attract certain groups of people to certain parts of the park [6]. The real skill, however, is in designing space so that the various facilities will function as a unity and create a real public space where people can mix, meet and socialise rather than remain isolated and aloof. How to create a vivid and socially rich space?

From our visits to contemporary Dutch parks we conclude that this appears to be difficult in the Netherlands. Many times during our visits, we noticed that some sections or even whole parks were empty (especially sections without facilities or even benches) whereas other sections featured real attractions (like children playgrounds, roller-skating facilities, cafés etc.). Partly, this will be caused by the design, though admittedly there may be other causes too, such as a rather generous supply of green open spaces in comparison to the population density in the neighbourhood (De Josselin de Jong 2004).

When it comes to design, we doubt whether the new design approaches, which are often based on straight geometrical forms, use of hard materials and a lack of massive vegetation such as groups of trees or bosquets cause a feeling of emptiness and create unprotected spaces. The way many parks are designed leads to a huge openness and therefore exposure to the unpleasant features of the Dutch climate – wind and rain. Even on sunny days those bare spaces wouldn’t attract many people. Here we will discuss two examples.

The first is the aforementioned Chassé Park in Breda, depicted in Figure 3. Our primary point of interest in this park was the section consisting of a huge paved empty space without any design elements. It has been built above an underground car park and planned as an event grounds. When there’s no festival going on, it is mainly a bare and windy place, devoid of attractions.

The second example of how design of the space and the use of the materials can influence its use is the De Verademing park in The Hague. It is situated on the edge of the city centre in a densely populated district, mainly with social housing or cheaper private houses. The park covers about 5.5 ha and there are no other parks in the vicinity, making it extremely important for this part of the city.

The residents in the neighbourhood of the future park were asked to provide input when the park’s recreational programme was designed. As a result of this consultation the space of De Verademing is largely devoted to sport playgrounds in the centre of the park. The edges around this central part are partly paved and partly planted with cedar trees randomly distributed over the grass fields. As figure 7 shows, the paved terrain mainly offers a large, over-dimensioned area at one side of the centre and does not offer any facilities for relaxed sitting while watching the game or waiting for someone. Not a single tree, not a bench – empty, bare, unpleasant.

Only in the green part of De Verademing are there benches for people to rest, but unfortunately these benches are not comfortable (Figure 8a, b). The black stone seat makes them too cold to sit on in the winter and too hot on warm, sunny days. Moreover, most of them are lacking a back and the iron rod which may function as such some benches does not really invite the visitor to lean back and relax for a while. Here, we have already come to the lower scale of the design story, namely the design of details. We could see another example of an unused bench in the park of the Fortis head office in Utrecht. Visually the bridge as a whole looks very attractive, and the bench looked so at least when it was new. But functionally the bench on the sloping parts of the bridge is useless.

Footpaths are another important detail in park design which, however, cause problems in several parks, mainly because of their surface. A good example is the extension of the existing Koekamp park. This extension is very frequently used by pedestrians and cyclists, as it is situated between

the central railway station and offices, governmental buildings and the cultural and tourist parts of the city. During rush hours it is a very busy transit area, and during lunch time many employees of the nearby ministries and offices come here to sit in the sun or eat their lunch. In both cases, the visitors of this park are well-dressed civil servants or business people, which means that they mainly wear nice shoes, and the women often wear high heels.

In the original design of the park there was one broad gravelled path laid down for pedestrians. Beside it, a cycle path made of asphalt was laid. Though it looked very nice, this situation mainly resulted in many pedestrians walking on the cycle path, as this offered far more comfort for their walk. For the cyclists, however, this was far less comfortable, as the pedestrians obstructed their path. Therefore, after some time, the municipality decided to add another asphalt path for pedestrians so they can now walk comfortably without obstructing the cyclists (Figure 9). Though it solves the practical problem it is a pity that the new path is very roughly added, so it looks as if it were made of plaster and it visibly spoils the original design of the walking path.

Despite these negative examples of park designs we have presented so far, one should be aware that there are many good examples as well, for instance Nieuw Franckendael and Rietlanden, both in Amsterdam, and the Kromhoutpark in Tilburg. Nieuw Franckendael (Figure 10 a, b, c) is a rectangular area of 21 hectares designed in an eclectic style. It includes various recreational facilities, namely a restaurant, children’s playground, a scout association facility, allotments, footpaths, benches as well as scenic gardens. Their arrangement within the modern, ecological and classical park areas of Nieuw Franckendael creates a patchwork of differently designed sections which offer an interesting variety of environments, inviting people to walk through and discover something new each time.

The designers of Rietlanden have really made the most of the space at their disposal, even though they had to do their work in a rather compli-



cated situation (Figure 1). Rietlanden does not consist of one continuous area, but is comprised of small spaces squeezed between the office and residential buildings on the one hand and the infrastructure for public transport and cars on the other. Yet despite all this, the designers have succeeded in creating a pleasant green open space which offers several playgrounds for children of various ages, various public sports fields for free use, as well as highly functional crossing footpaths for pedestrians coming from or going to public transport.. Their decision to elevate the green sections of the park by about a meter above the infrastructural parts was a very good idea because this has separated the quiet functions from the transit areas and improved the visual quality of the park remarkably.

The Kromhoutpark in Tilburg is the last, but not the least, positive example we want to present here (Figure 11 a, b, c). This park offers an interesting integration of form and use. Both the design of the whole space and the details are of equally high quality and balanced so that one has a feeling of unity and aesthetic appreciation. The recreational facilities are exciting and attractive for both children and adults. Though it is a little disadvantageous that one of the children’s playgrounds is surrounded by water, which presents risks for very little children, the design of the park and its playground is striking and inspiring.



Figures 11 a, b, c Kromhoutpark, Tilburg. Design: Bureau B+B, 1994.

Conclusions

In this article we have looked at developments in the design of parks in the Netherlands since 1990, and their changing uses. On the basis of the literature we have concluded that contemporary parks are often designed as an open part of the urban space meant for intensive use instead of an enclosed area meant for relaxation. Moreover, contemporary designers use fewer plants and more building materials such as pebbles, concrete and glass. Finally, a strong emphasis in the design of parks has been placed on aesthetics and less on function and recreation.

In the past 15 years the recreational use of parks in the Netherlands has changed too. The percentage of people visiting parks for leisure has decreased. Yet, for town and city dwellers, parks remain important places for outdoor recreation. About half of Dutch city inhabitants visit parks for leisure purposes. In addition to this a diversification can be seen in the demand for recreational facilities. It is caused by the changes in the composition of the population and the rise of new activities such as roller skating.

In our own explorative study of 28 contemporary parks we have seen that these parks combined offer a very diverse spectrum of recreational opportunities. Collectively, they are capable of satisfying the leisure needs of many different people. At the individual level, the same is true of the varied experience parks. Each of the other categories, however, is better suited to specific types of visitor – the category ‘play’ to children for example, the category ‘walk and rest’ to those seeking relaxation and nature, and the category ‘culture’ to lovers of the arts. This may seem to contradict the diversifying recreational demand as a general trend, but it must be said that this need not be the case in reality. Appreciation of these parks depends upon the preferences of those living nearby and upon what they add to the overall quality of all the public open spaces in the vicinity. Unfortunately, though, no appreciation-related information is available.

When shaping a park, designers determine its overall structure, content and facilities, choose building materials and devise planting schemes. The way facilities are distributed will influence whether different types of user – young children, teenagers and adults, for example – mix or stay sep-

arate. If rigid forms like large open spaces are used, visitors may be reluctant to remain there for long periods of time as this would mean that they would be exposed to the extremes of climate so typical of the Netherlands – not just wind and rain, but also direct sunshine.

Besides this, more attention to specific park details in the design is also advisable as these, too, can be very important for the recreational function. In our explorative study, we have especially noticed uncomfortable benches and footpaths. Though these may seem like mere details, they unneces-

sarily diminish a park’s recreational utility value. What is needed, therefore, is more user-led design of both the entire parks and their details. Our observations show that designers do have a huge impact on the way spaces can and will be used, and in our study we show positive and negative examples of this impact. The recent developments in park design in the Netherlands, though, emphasise form, therefore we believe that more attention should be paid to the relationships between form and recreation.

Notes

- 1 Etymologically, the words garden, hortus, orchard, garden court and park all refer to a space enclosed by a fence, hedge, wall or embankment (Van der Staay 2002).
- 2 For instance, data from the CVTO survey, 2004/’05.
- 3 Museumpark in Rotterdam was designed by bureau OMA and the French landscape architect Yves Brunier. It was laid out in 1990. Due to a combination of forced architecture and poor maintenance, within ten years the park was transformed into an unpleasant and unsafe space, a passage between museum buildings. In 2005 it was completely cleared, redesigned and rebuilt.
- 4 Originally, we wanted information about the real recreational use of the newly designed parks, but that proved very difficult. Reliable empirical information for particular parks is very scarce as surveys of actual and potential visitors are rarely conducted in the Netherlands.
- 5 Typologies are rarely perfectly exclusive.
- 6 Of course, many parks are mainly visited by people from the direct vicinity. Therefore the types of user visiting a specific park do not just depend on the recreational facilities but also on the needs of those living or working nearby.

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