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de Wit, Saskia

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AFFECTIVE ENCOUNTERS: NATURE CLOSE TO THE SKIN

SASKIA DE WIT

In an era of globalisation, landscape architects and urban designers have learnt to think big: large-scale plans with far-reaching visions, saving the planet and solving urgent global challenges. Usually, we try to solve these problems in the same way that we created them: with advanced and generic technological methods, and with significant investments. Yet this bigness is still largely the domain of international players, and its effects do not necessarily foster the quality of urban spaces. On the other end of the spectrum is the small realm of a *terrarium*, intriguing because of the contradiction between their otherworldliness and the representation they offer of the world as we know it. They share this quality with gardens, described by Michel Foucault as “the smallest fragment of the world and, at the same time, represents its totality, forming right from the remotest times a sort of felicitous and universal heterotopia”¹. What if we learned to think small again? What do small gestures have to offer to reveal what is valuable and meaningful and to foster a novel understanding of the relation between humans and nature? How can they sharpen our view for the particular, identifying the places in the landscape in their structural, material, dynamic, practical, atmospheric, mnemonic, and discursive identities?

Terrariums teach us about nature. However, our understanding of nature is dominated by images of large natural landscapes untainted by humans, such as the Himalayas and the Arctic. And the way we have exploited nature has much to do with the resulting tendency to conceptualise a boundary between us humans, and nature. In order to move beyond this dualistic concept of humans versus nature as “the other” we need to appreciate the inextricable relationship between human and nature, and move past considering what we think of as “nature” through the lens of visual beauty or distant images, sublime ideals or technical ecology.

A deep reading of the Wasserkrater Garden (Bad Oeynhausen DE, Agence Ter 1996) will provide some clues to unfold novel perspectives on the relationship between humans and nature. This discussion is based on an analysis of this garden that was executed as part of a research on enclosed gardens in the metropolitan landscape². The analysis aims to capture the different qualities of the perception of the place, which means that evaluating the garden starts at my own perception in situ, now that the project has matured and “settled”, adding to the original intentions of the designer, and the historical context at the moment of design, intentional or accidental changes over time.

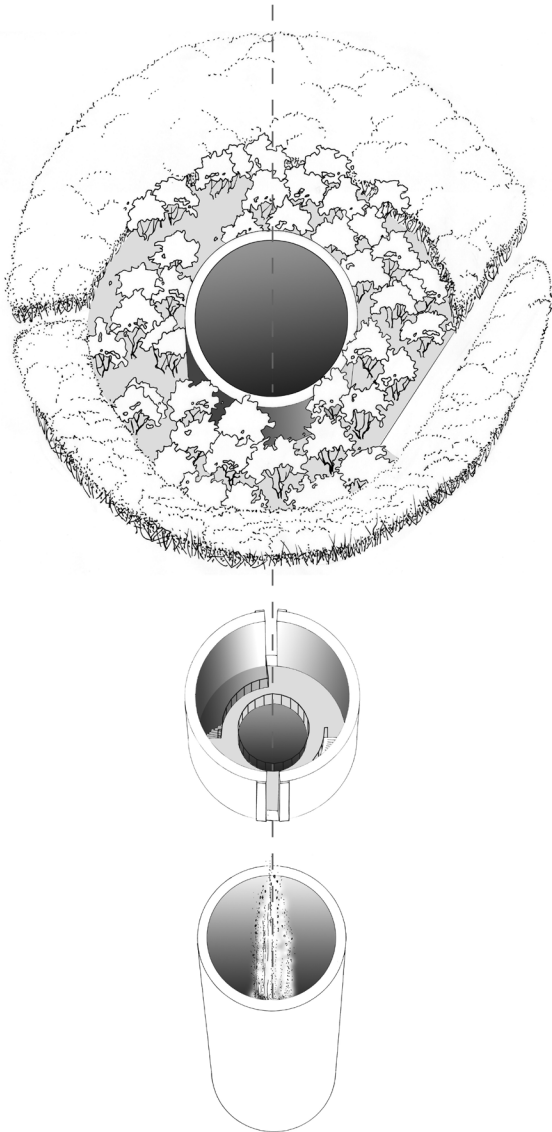
The Wasserkrater Garden is hidden underground, only to become visible when the water jet shoots into the air.
Photo by Sebastiaan Kaal, 2012.



The suburban landscape of Bad Oeynhausen.
Photo by Sebastiaan Kaal, 2012.



The various layers of the garden—valley, crater, spiral stairs, round pool and fountain—elaborate on the central organisation, materialising the vertical axis. Drawing by Saskia de Wit, 2012.



The Wasserkrater Garden is one of a series of gardens in the Aqua Magica Park, designed in 1997 by the landscape architectural office Agence Ter for the suburban agglomeration which includes the towns of Bad Oeynhausen and Löhne, near Hannover in Germany. Through an unbridled growth of suburban housing and infrastructure the landscape has been transformed into a discontinuous multipolar and fragmented landscape where structures of rural landscapes and urban settlements are converging with no recognisable borders, and spatial, visual, geographic, and programmatic differentiation seem to disappear. A “placeless geography,” lacking both diverse landscapes and significant places, seems to have replaced the localism and variety of places.

SUBTERRANEAN FAULTS

The fertile loess soils in the area are intensively used for agriculture, with forests at the steep slopes of the valleys, but the specificity of this landscape resides underground, invisible to the human eye. A prominent range of densely forested hills forms the edge of a zone where the earth’s crust was uplifted between 80 and 90 million years ago, followed by a series of disturbances. The thick layer of marine sediments from the Jura era (200-170 million years ago) was pressed together and raised to a more than a hundred-kilometre-long bulge. At present, the marine sediments lie hidden underneath a roughly 30 metres thick cover of quaternary deposits, but a range of underground faults—planar fractures in a volume of rock, resulting from the earth’s movements at that time—presses the water through the quaternary layer to the surface: carbonated salty water, rich in iron and minerals, up to 36 degrees Celsius. The water has travelled through the subterranean layers for thousands of years, incorporating these minerals. The thermal waters made the region known as the “healing garden” of Germany, with five spa towns—Bad Driburg, Bad Lippspringe, Bad Meinberg, Bad Salzungen and Bad Oeynhausen. Bad Oeynhausen was the result of the accidental discovery of a thermal spring, when searching for salt deposits for the salt industry. Soon after the healing abilities of this spring were recognised, the first baths were built, bringing about a wave of economic prosperity. The town was designed as a uniform composition around a central Kurpark. At the end of the twentieth century, after the hey-day of the bath culture, the number of attendances in the spa towns and the numerous health centres

and spa clinics dwindled. Nowadays Bad Oeynhausen is one of many smaller centres in the continuous suburban tissue.

The representation of the underground water, the basis for the regional economy and for the cultural identity of Bad Oeynhausen as a spa town, used to be ingrained in the architectural typology of the bathhouses, and in that of the surrounding architectural objects, like pump rooms and drinking fountains. These buildings were typically organised around long corridors, coming together in a *rotunda*, an octagonal or circular, dome-covered central space. Some salt springs emerge in the shape of large fountains, incorporated in the Kurpark.

The Wasserkrater Garden refers to both the fountains and the central spaces of the spa buildings, making the hidden underground accessible and showing the visitor where the water came from.

THE WASSERKRATER GARDEN

The garden is positioned exactly above one of the subterranean fault lines, which used to determine the form and position of the town but are now hidden underneath the suburban developments. The natural source of the subterranean water is made expressive again in the fountain that is the centre of the garden, enabling the visitor to explore a landscape that had remained hidden from the public eye. By carving vertically in the soil the suburban landscape is connected to the natural landscape underneath. The precise position of the garden on the subterranean fault line is emphasised by a concentric composition of the fountain, crater and sunken garden, a sequence that is experienced as consecutive layers of enclosure, while penetrating into the earth. The main enclosure is the earth itself, so the garden remains hidden and only becomes visible when the water jet suddenly shoots into the air. The double boundary of the sunken garden and the cone-shaped crater wall enables a sequence of entrances, as a rite of passage before entering the inner space.

The various layers—valley, crater, spiral stairs, round pool and fountain—elaborate on the central organisation, materialising the vertical axis. The contrasting materialisation of the valley and crater enhances the image of the underground garden. In the circular valley dappled sunlight through the canopy of densely planted Juneberries (*Amelanchier lamarckii*) evokes the image of a natural forest valley. Creeping willow (*Salix repens*) covers the sides of the valley and undergrowth of shade-loving plants forms a lush green carpet. The crater walls are made of Corten steel, clad on the inside with gabions. One enters the

crater through a narrow slit with heavy doors, to descend twenty metres to the bottom of the crater via a spiral staircase. The funnel shape of the space forces the visitor closer to the centre while descending, increasing the risk of getting wet. The noise of the fountain, the spray of water touching skin, the subterranean coolness, the change in equilibrium and muscle tension when descending under the surface of the earth, the effects of light and shadow create a multi-sensory experience, which emphasises the exposure of nature and involves a “feeling of being surrounded by or infused with an enveloping, engaging tactility”¹¹.

THE SOUND OF WATER

The water was pumped up from the aquifers about five hundred metres below the surface and is stored in an underground reservoir, fifteen metres below the floor of the crater. This reservoir feeds the fountain: a permanent field of small jets, and the thirty-five-metre-high geyser. Most striking about the water is its sound, rising and waning. The water bubbles from the bottom of the crater, drips down from the gabions on the stairs, their sound echoing in the depth, while from the black water surface the frothy water column ejects far above the craters' edge. Each time the water jet suddenly falls away, the space is wrapped in a dense mist. The choreography of water is accompanied by artificial rumbles and flashes of light, creating a spectacle that evokes the water's sheer force in the earth's bowels. The tangible water—erupting in uneven intervals like a living being—evokes an artificial image of the subterranean fault, making the invisible, underground natural force physically felt. Although its volume does not rise above the volume of the everyday sounds the fountain produces the most conspicuous sound on the field. Since the garden is below ground level, it is the sound and not the view which announces the garden from afar. Once descended into the valley the fountain is clearly audible. The sound level is only slightly lower here than in the surrounding field, but in the intervals between the eruptions of the fountain the valley appears to be much quieter. The high-pitched background sounds (the human vocals) are muffled; the bird sounds and the wind remain. On the other hand, the volume of the fountain becomes louder. The position of the entrances can be heard by the leaking of sound from inside the crater: 63 decibels near the entrances. Still the difference in sound level is only a few decibels. Within the confines of the crater walls the sound is retained, and the different stages of the choreography of the fountain can be clearly distinguished: starting from the stac-

The roughness of the walls, the contrasts of light and dark, the change in equilibrium and muscle tension when descending enhance the sensation of being underground. Photo by Sebastiaan Kaal, 2012.



cato rattle of the dripping, a heavy bubbling raises the sound level, and to a climax of 83 decibels when the fountain erupts. Already on the uppermost entrance platform the background sounds have disappeared altogether, and when descending the stairs, the sharp rattling sound of dripping on the metal stairs takes over. Down at the lowest level, the sound of the fountain is loudest: its 83 decibels prevent people from hearing each other's voices. In the intervals one can still hear the continuous dripping. This distribution of the sound levels in space and time reflects the centrally organised visual space of the garden. It also reflects the meaning of the underground space—the invisible landscape of the aquifers, the *genius loci* of Bad Oeynhausen.

IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES – PLAY AND CONTEMPLATION

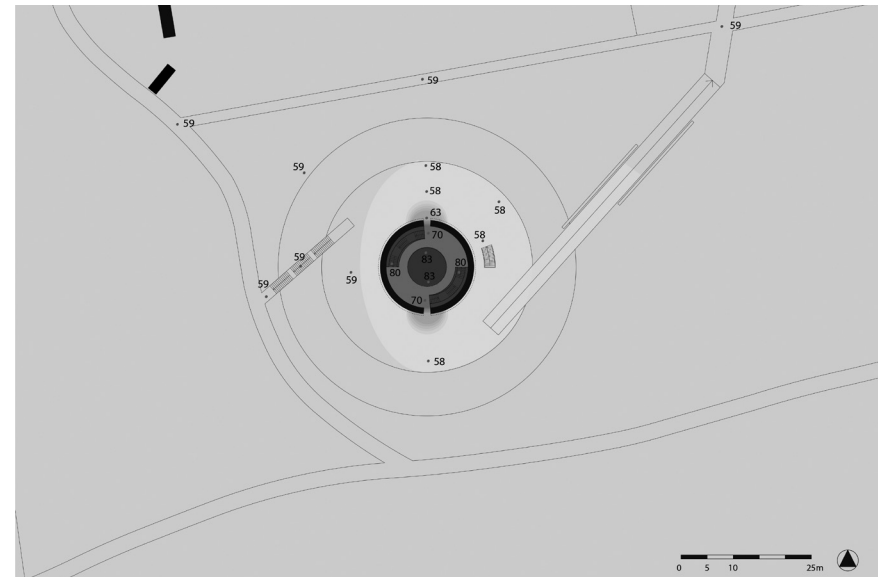
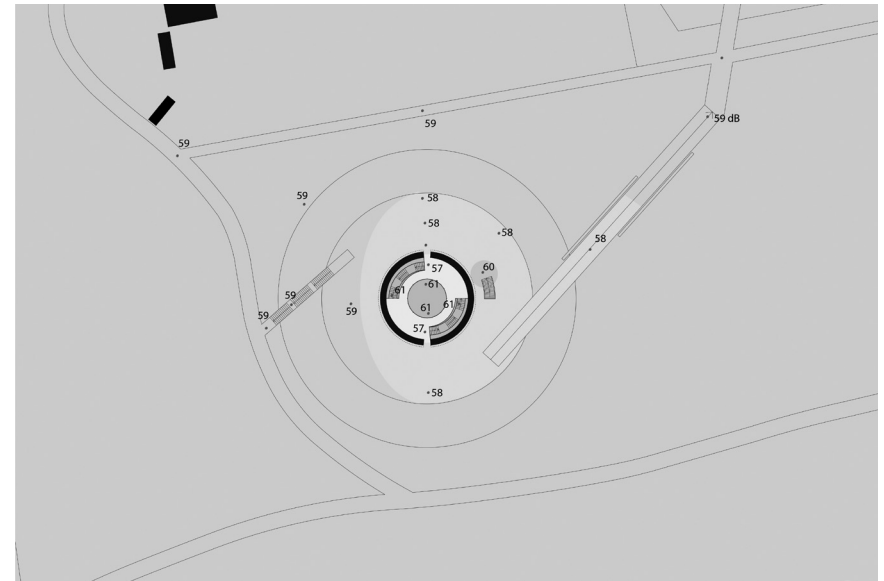
The horizontal plane of the park is the level of the everyday, public life. Retreating into the depths of the earth in the Wasserkrater is also retreating from public life into an individual experience of nature. The garden functions as a stage—a setting for the actions of the spectator, who moves through an abundant image and uses the space actively, impelled by sensorial effects. The physical thresholds of the consecutive layers of enclosure are supported by several management strategies. At the entrance a small fee needs to be paid (guaranteeing surveillance but not so high as to prevent people from entering). The outer ring is always accessible, but the doors in the wall of the crater can be locked at night and outside the season. These thresholds express the transition from the social park to the individual garden, setting apart a sequestered space for play, and evoking a temporary and limited, ideal world. Its adventurous quality—trying to find out how it works, the time intervals to move without getting wet—makes the Wasserkrater Garden a place for active engagement and discovery. This is counterbalanced by the contemplative engagement of perceiving the material qualities of the garden and watching others play.

The concept of play is an integral part of contemporary metropolitan culture,

a game without an overall aim, as play without a transcendent destination but not without the practical necessity of rules agreed upon and of (inter)subjective imagination; as a complex of games each one having its own framework, its own rules, risks, chances, and charms.]

The global aspect of the metropolis is inherently linked to the emergence and the success of digital media, which by their design encourage playful use. Digital media immerse the user in

Isobel maps of the garden during eruptions of the fountain (left) and during intervals (right) reflect the different stages of the soundscape. Sound level measurements were taken on an almost windless Sunday morning (13 May 2012, between 10.30 and 12.00). The floor of the valley remains a quiet space whereas in the crater the volume oscillates between 57 and 83 dB. Drawing by Saskia de Wit, 2012.



time and space set apart from physical space and real-time, and are characterised by new forms of freedom, rules and fun. However, the playful use that is generated by gardens such as this one is of a different order. This type of play does not set the users apart from physical space, but connects them to the *genius loci*, as actors being part of the play. The garden is a *hortus ludi*: a stage for the *homo ludens*. The visitor is an actor and a spectator at the same time, with the garden as the stage as well as the gallery from where one can contemplate the image of nature. The garden induces the visitors to actively engage in the space, moving, playing, conversing, which is triggered by multi-sensory stimuli. Play is a free act, it is not necessary, not a task. It is an intermezzo, complementary to and, therefore, part of life in general. But despite being enacted in a (consciously) imaginary world between different players, play recognises clear rules in terms of time, place and order, evoking a temporary and limited, ideal world †. As such, the garden is designed as a sequestered place, set apart from its surroundings by its sequence of thresholds.

PROXIMITY

In landscape architecture the emphasis usually is on what geographer Johannes Granö defined as *Fernsicht* [distant view], the part of our environment we mainly experience by vision: the landscape, determined by the horizon †. Visual experience detaches us from tactile experience, it dematerialises the world to a spectacle. To move beyond considering landscape and nature through the lens of visual beauty or distant images, and beyond sublime ideals or technical ecology, begins with enabling what Elizabeth Meyer called “affective encounters” †. For these affective encounters to happen, we need to be near, to experience our surroundings, to be immersed in them.

In the garden the scientific distance of a *terrarium* is replaced by the embodied experience of proximity. *Nahsicht* [proximity] is the environment we can experience with all our senses, making one attentive to the material reality of earth, plants and water, such as mass, grain, fragility or suppleness. Whereas terrariums can be understood as objects for observation, with us humans as the outside controlling agent, in gardens humans are part of the same environment, of the same ecology, both observer and participant. They interact with the space and its dynamics, simply because of their presence. The convex space of the enclosure, providing protection as well as engagement, is like a shell, intimately connecting the visitor and the surrounding space. The symbiotic relationship between a mollusk and

its shell is reflected in the geometry of the shell, which only becomes meaningful because of its mollusk, as Gaston Bachelard described. † This symbiotic relationship of proximity evokes sensory experience, which is, as Arnold Berleant argues, the key to environmental awareness. The conscious body does not observe the world contemplatively but participates actively in the experiential process, the experience of multi-sensory bodily engagement with the place † †.

The garden is a multi-sensory object, a space seen as well as felt, touched and heard. The enclosure and proximity of the garden space puts an emphasis on its materiality and its perception: a haptic perception, or an inducement for affective encounters.

CONCLUSION

The Wasserkrater Garden expresses an understanding of nature brought close to the skin: as an embodied experience. Though hidden underground, the Wasserkrater Garden is the pivot point of the park's composition, evoking a tension between being in the centre and being excluded or hidden, a tension that intensifies the experience. With the sunken garden as a filter between the suburban landscape on the surface and the tactile and rough crater that is dramatised as much in its artificiality as in its naturalness, the garden evokes contemplation as well as fun, with elements of the unexpected and surprise. The garden is a place for an intense experience of nature, condensed into playful ritual, which is ordered by the rhythm of the fountain, gradually building up to a dramatic climax and subduing into nothing, only to start over again, in an endless cycle. The reception of the haptic information of the garden by skin, muscles and joints reduces the distance between human and nature to within the body, internalising the experience. The emphasis in the Wasserkrater Garden has shifted from representing identifiable natural and cultural territories to exposing the spatial and temporal natural dynamics. It exposes wilderness not in opposition of, but as an integral part of the metropolitan realm, evoking an embodied experience as an immersive encounter with nature. The natural force of the underground water becomes perceivable, while at the same time all our senses tell us that it is brought up by human hands. In the classical design tradition gardens represented the first nature of natural processes and the second nature of cultivation and organisation, as well as the first and second nature as real places, outside the urban realm. In the continuously changing

metropolitan landscape, however, structures of cultural landscapes and urban settlements have converged into a field of forces and vectors that result in types of landscape that are hard to distinguish. Maybe this is why the emphasis in metropolitan gardens such as the Wasserkrater Garden has shifted from representing identifiable natural and cultural territories to exposing the spatial and temporal natural dynamics, and from representation to engagement. The layer of first nature is dissected and exposed in all its complexity. The garden exposes wilderness not as an opposition to the urban territory but as an integral part of the metropolitan realm.

The threshold between inside and outside, outside and inside, creates a sheltered place inside, a temporary refuge from the outside world, and at the same time a place outside, in the margin.

From this outside position, at a distance from the public domain, from daily life, from the regulated and programmed spaces of society, the embodied experience of gardens can evoke a new understanding of nature. Something that we are part of and is part of us, not emphasising identifiable natural territories but exposing the dynamics of nature, the spatial and temporal aspects of nature, and our own engagement.

In the Wasserkrater Garden there is no distinction between what is natural and what is manmade, and nature is exposed as something close to the skin, incorporated into the metropolitan fabric and our daily environment. It shows that the premise that we somehow stand outside (or apart from) nature no longer holds true. Nature is not only found “out there” but also “in here”, and in the shell-like space of the garden the boundary between human and nature is dissolved, emphasising the necessity of an attentive interaction with, and care for the living environment, which is not an abstract and inexhaustible force but interwoven with everything we do. To be fully engaged with nature means to come into a visceral and immediate contact with it. Addressing the proximate senses such as sound and touch removes the physical distance between us and nature, and nature as the object of appreciation dissolves as a separate and distant “thing” and becomes inextricably intermingled with the perceiver.

✠ M. Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, in N. Leach (edited by), *Rethinking Architecture. A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London-New York 1997, p. 354.

∞ S. de Wit, *Hidden Landscapes, The metropolitan garden as a multi-sensory expression of place*, Architectura & Natura Press, Amsterdam 2018, pp. 311-345.

∥ The position of the fault lines is derived from the map “Tektonische Übersicht” as shown in O. Deutloff, *Geologische Karte von Nordrhein-Westfalen 1:25000; Erläuterungen 3818 Herford*, Joh. Van Acken, Krefeld 1995, p. 94. In the southern half of the area, where the Wasserkrater is, is derived from the *Geologische Karte von Nordrhein-Westfalen, Blatt 3818 Herford*.

∧ C. Foster, *The Narrative and the Ambient in Environmental Aesthetics*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, 1998, p. 133.

∟ L. Minnema, *Play and (Post)Modern Culture. An Essay on Changes in the Scientific Interest in the Phenomenon of Play*, in “Cultural Dynamics”, 10, 1998, pp. 21-47.

⌊ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, Uitgeverij Tjeenk Willink, Amsterdam 1938, pp. 20-26.

* J. Granö, *Pure geography*, translated by M. Hicks, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1997, Original edition 1929.

∥ E. Meyer, *Sustaining Beauty—the Performance of Appearance*, in “Journal of Landscape Architecture”, 3, 1, 2008, pp. 6-23.

∩ G. Bachelard, *The poetics of space*, translated by Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, Boston 1994, pp. 105-107.

✠ A. Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence 1997, p. 12.