



Photo: Christiaan Kooijmans

A plea for the one fell swoop

Landscape architect Ronald Rietveld

Landscape architect Ronald Rietveld combines spectacular designs with provocative opinions. He's not afraid of taking a 'one fell swoop' approach to tackling the serious landscape planning challenges the Netherlands presents. The single-minded professional with a mission: 'I want to rise above the run-of-the-mill solutions and show what is possible too, what is feasible.' This autumn, his firm Rietveld Landscape is set for its international breakthrough with the curatorship of the Dutch Architecture Biennale.

Mark Hendriks

When Ronald Rietveld speaks, a passion for his profession shimmers through. One moment the landscape architect is showing his magnificent designs: meticulous and beautifully visualized large-sized drawings. Visualizations of a green river transformed into a dyke park, of a health spa against the background of the Corus steelworks, of a lit up motorway in a nocturnal docklands. The next moment, in an ardent tone of voice, Rietveld criticizes the way in which the Dutch landscape is laid out. He is angry at the spineless behaviour within town and country planning. 'People are just all talk – about the Dutch water management problem, about sustainability, about how tacky our country is becoming. But no one is actually doing anything about it. All things considered, these questions really don't seem to count at all. Where are the designs for infrastructure, large-scale natural habitat, lively public spaces, or those curbing the unbridled urbanization and rising water level?' Precisely because of his commitment to the social issues, the Netherlands' Architecture Institute (NAi) invited the young landscape architect to be the curator of the Dutch contribution to the twelfth Architecture Biennale in Venice. Rietveld and his team were given the task compiling an exhibition, that shows how architecture helps to draw attention to and solve the complex questions the world is faced with. Rietveld certainly considered the invitation a great honour, although he did not actually jump for joy. 'I was over the moon when I won the Prix de Rome in 2008 – an architectural award for young designers – because it was the reward for many months of hard work. By contrast, this curatorship for the biennale feels like a heavy responsibility. In a very short time,

we had to produce new work that would be on show to the entire architectural community. Raising a question was not enough, we also had to provide an answer.'

New office

As we enter, 35-year old Rietveld is relaxed sitting at a table by the window in the café of the Amsterdam concert hall *Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ*. He points across the river IJ to the Westerdoksdijk. 'We've just moved. That red building there, that's where our new office is.' 'Our' refers to Rietveld Landscape, which Ronald has been running together with his brother Erik – a philosopher, economist and researcher at Harvard – and the artists' collective Atelier de Lyon.

For the rest, his firm is augmented per project by specialists from various disciplines. As to the why and wherefore, Rietveld is quite clear: 'Sometimes a messianic status is attributed to the design, as if designers are capable of solving any problem. But we cannot do so on our own. The knack is to form a team of experts who approach the task from various angles.' Even while studying at the Amsterdam Academy of Architecture, Rietveld took a critical view of the role of landscape architecture. 'I understand that pure craftsmanship, the designing and fitting out of our public spaces, is an important matter. But I find that in the work of many firms the design has got too much of the upper hand. There's a lot of designing going on, while very little research is done. For the layout of an urban space, cooperating with for instance an urban geographer may offer new insights.'

Then: 'Within a multi-disciplinary team, we tackle themes and assignments in a conceptual way. In this manner, we rise above the run-of-



Photo: Rob 't Hart

The Dutch pavilion on the site of the Venice biennale is regularly vacant for long periods of time, because architect Gerrit Rietveld's building from 1954 – on Dutch territory – is only used during three months a year. For the exhibition about the potential of unused buildings, Rietveld Landscape decided to leave the building unused for once. The hidden installation is suspended three metres above floor level: a gigantic scale-model of over 4000 vacant public building ready for interim use.

the-mill solutions, through which we show what is possible too, what is feasible. We make use of the surroundings, of developments that are already taking place. Those we interconnect, so that areas attain a new meaning.' So, Ronald Rietveld has gathered a special team for Venice. Apart from himself and his brother Erik, this crew consists of designer Jurgen Bey, graphic designer Joost Grootens, visual artist Barbara Visser and NAI project leader Saskia van Stein.

The exhibition brings together two urgent questions. One refers to the cabinet's ambition to realize the Netherlands' breakthrough into the world's top five of new information economies. These are the countries where innovations are effected. Rietveld mentions three hallmarks of innovation: stretching the boundaries of disciplines, realizing radically new perspectives or finding unconventional solutions. Next, he describes the circumstances under which innovations initially see the light of day. 'Great discoveries may arise from the cross-pollination between people within the creative industry (architects, artists, web designers, designers) and scientists. If they work together, new solutions will be found to social problems,' Rietveld, himself a member of the creative sector, is not alone in stating this. He picks up the report on a think tank of Dutch high-brow

aces like Alexander Rinnooy Kan, chairman of the main socio-economic advisory body (SER), and Robbert Dijkgraaf, a prominent physicist and president of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (KNAW). They confirm that the creative industry plays a key role in the Dutch aspirations towards a fully fledged knowledge-based economy.

Disuse

In the biennale, this ambition is linked up with a very tangible problem: the disuse – sometimes for a week, sometimes for a decade – of around 10,000 government and public buildings, like town halls, schools, prisons, monasteries, churches, water towers, barracks and hospitals. Rietveld explains: 'Not that they realize this, but the Dutch authorities are sitting on a gold mine. On average, a medium-sized municipality has 50 to 80 places at its disposal where science and the creative sector could meet, being ideal settings for concocting ideas and doing experiments. Take for instance a military air base which might be used for tests by the international solar team of the Delft University of Technology. Some buildings are in the middle of nowhere, so that there is no noise nuisance or fire hazard. Lighthouses are good sites for writers and climatologists.' He mentions the former post office in

Amsterdam, which after four years of disuse was temporarily put at the disposal of architectural firms, artists and a museum. 'Here, as yet no researchers were included, though they would love to leave their little islands at the universities in order to work on concrete assignments together with others.' He gets out a photograph of the former radio station Kootwijk, which at one time was the contact point with the colony of the Dutch Indies (Indonesia). 'You wouldn't believe it, but the fact that this fantastic building is vacant costs 200,000 euros annually.'

Ronald Rietveld emphasizes that for him it is not a question of 'filling' empty buildings, as was done in the recent past with the so-called *broedplaatsenbeleid* ('innovator policy' – opening up empty buildings to artists). It is a question of bringing about entrepreneurship and stimulating interdisciplinary collaboration.

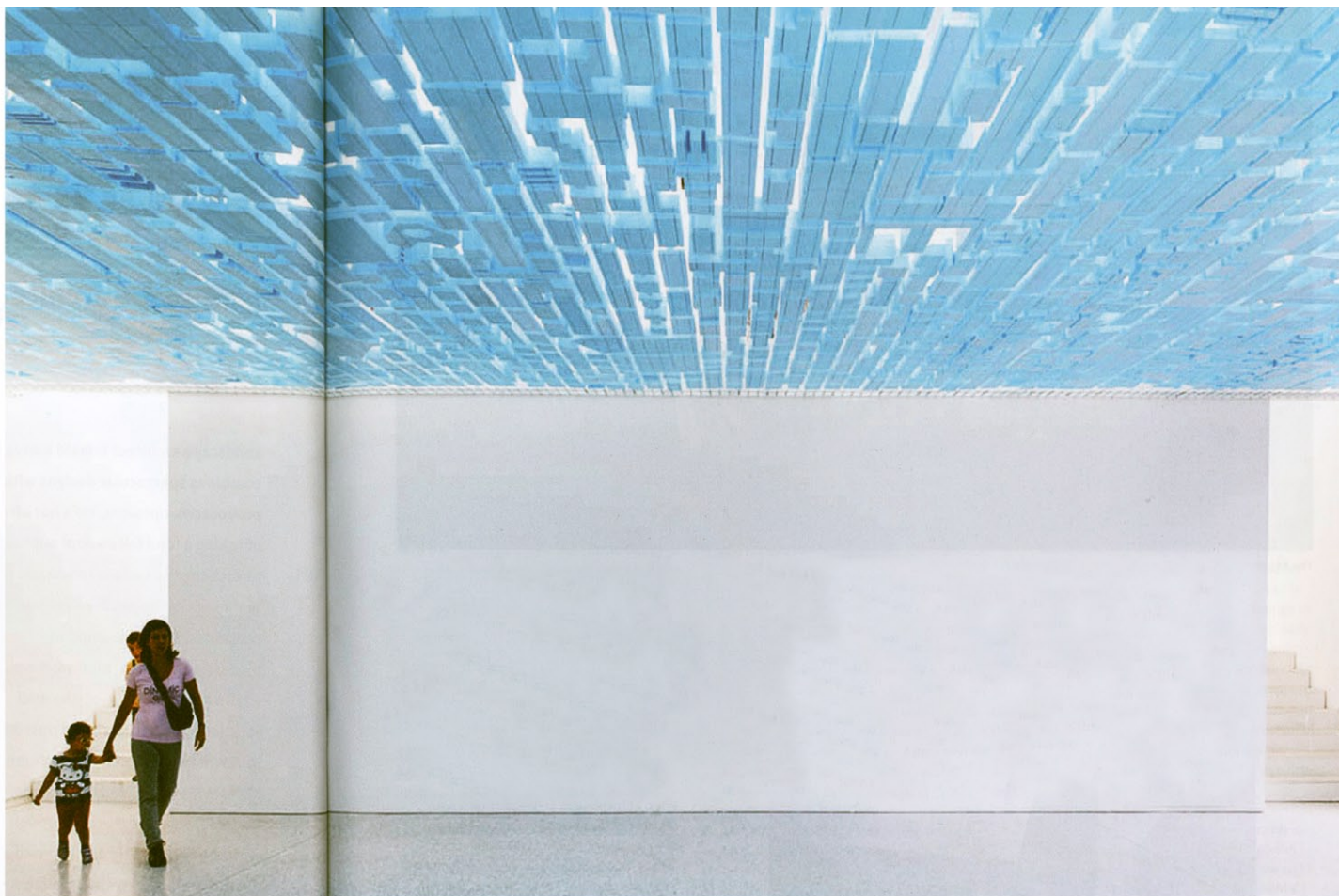
At the biennale, Rietveld and his cronies will in fact present a model of reasoning which approaches two topical problems in different ways. Eventually, this will have to result in what they themselves call 'strategic interventions'.

'We very rarely design a definitive image', Rietveld declares. 'It is a question of interventions that get a development going towards a final conclusion. This model of reasoning will for instance have to see to it that vacant premises become affordable for young entrepreneurs, and that a minister of innovation is appointed. All in order to fulfil the following ambitions: a strong new information economy and putting vacant buildings to use.' Though the exhibition is about the Dutch situation, this model of reasoning is certainly interesting for

other countries as well. Rietveld: 'Vacancy is an international phenomenon. And it goes for all countries that inspiring buildings are of benefit to innovation.'

A new view

The question is whether this model of reasoning is characteristic of a (landscape) architectural approach, as the NAI wishes to underline by this exhibition. Rietveld thinks it is. 'Because we looked at the questions on a larger scale and in different connections, a new view





The A15 motorway through the Rotterdam docklands: lanes above the present road.



Water Moss Rocks, a botanical sculpture in Amsterdam.

came to the fore. If we want to be among the top five of new information economies, we will have to use all those inspiring empty buildings. A connection has never been made between these two questions, not by planners or by geographers, or by economists either.'

Colleagues characterize Ronald Rietveld as being intelligently optimistic – see for instance his design for a motorway through

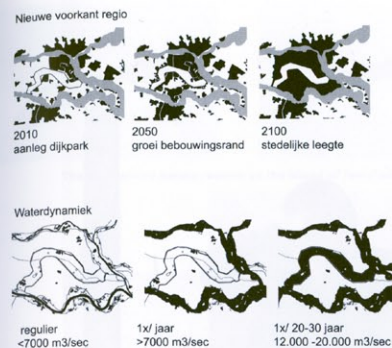
the Rotterdam docklands. Where normally transportation programming prevails, Rietveld Landscape uses the necessary capacity increase to gain more perceptual value in the industrial docklands. The idea is to add 3 + 3 lanes above the present road, built on a row of columns. By removing the planting, the motorist is afforded a view of the hitherto hidden dock landscape. Due to LED lighting along sections

of the track, the A15 takes on the appearance of a floating runway.

A 'botanical sculpture' in the heart of Amsterdam, a sawn-in-two bunker in the *Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie* (a former defence line), a proposal for a floating capital city, the design of a big marsh in the Province of Overijssel, and a 42-km long dyke park between Arnhem and Nijmegen. Most things on Rietveld Landscape's growing list of projects are 'studious' in character. This approach makes the firm a representative of the up-and-coming generation of young design studios in the Netherlands. 'That's what we're good at', responds Rietveld. 'What our clients in fact ask us to do is design research, to come up with new ideas, visions and new strategies, to provide inspiration. Though this does not mean that none of our designs are carried out.' And: 'Never underestimate the impact of an unrealized plan. Take for instance the bar code pattern which Rem Koolhaas introduced in his plan for the *Parc de la Villette* competition in Paris. That design was not a winner then but now, 25 years later, you see this form of language all over the place.'

Vacuity

His own design idiom is recognizable from the landscape's subtle emptiness, 'vacuity' with a horizon. 'Too often design is about adding things. I try to bring the necessary questions to



Deltawerken 2.0: a huge green river park between Arnhem and Nijmegen. The cities and the region become a new front, and the design is a response to the water management problems the Netherlands faces.

a conclusion by way of simple and minute interventions', the design says. 'But I do not shy from the extreme. Sometimes clients are shocked by our proposals. Saving a monumental bunker in two in order to make the 400 others in the row understandable is rather radical. And getting rid of a hectares of public woods along the motorway, to optimise drivers' view of the docklands, is no chicken feed either.'

According to Rietveld, important questions are still being swept under the carpet – how do we realize new large infrastructure, the rational ecological network, how do we contain the advance of hard surfacing and buildings? For instance, there is a lot of talk about our water management, but serious solutions fail to materialize. The ambitious Room for the River policy programme, with which the government hopes to tackle the water concerns, he calls 'pottering about on a square metre'. 'Raising the dykes every ten years and grubbing around in water meadows, that's all it is. This is not what the river land needs. What it takes here is the one fell swoop, the guts use massive interventions to tackle our water management problems.'

Rietveld is not the only voice heard here. His colleague Adriaan Geuze has been sounding the alarm for years now about how the Dutch are dealing with the rising waters. Like Geuze, Ronald Rietveld points to the period of the land reclamations, to the era of the civil engineer Lely and the strong civil service that had a lot of say about landscape matters. His appeal to adopt an integral approach to tackling the

water question – so including housing, nature and recreation – has been uttered many times before.

Green river

However, Rietveld stands out among the many faultfinders for actually being able to translate such an appeal into concrete plans – for instance Deltawerken 2.0, his graduation project completed in 2004. In this design, Rietveld proposes to link up the water management between Arnhem and Nijmegen with the large-scale regional urban planning. Over a stretch of 42 km, a green river would be able to cope with the extreme peak discharges occurring once every 20 to 40 years. The rest of the time, the green river bed could serve as a phenomenal empty and spacious park, as a recreation centre for the urban region of Arnhem and Nijmegen. Rietveld about his design: 'At this moment, there is an attempt with Lingezege Park to keep the two urban backs separate from each other. My plan in fact creates fronts, a spaciousness at the heart of an urban-planning system.'

As a concept this many kilometres-long dyke is original, but for administrators and policy makers it is something quite unheard of. Or isn't that true? Rietveld shakes his head. 'We do not make utopian plans. But it does take ambition, vision and guts to carry them out. We always show what the idea will look like, how and in what stages something is to be realized.' *Through-and-through design* is what he calls this. 'Many regional plans tend to get bogged

down in smudges and arrows, so that no one knows what they are up against. The dyke park is divided into zones that reflect the character of the surroundings and its new functions.' Is this through-and-through designing enough to convince the administrators? Rietveld seriously doubts it. In his opinion, municipalities only think about their own city fringes and the cash benefits from urbanization. There is no appreciation that the villages and towns in the Arnhem-Nijmegen urban region are bordered by beautiful green space with an urgent water problem, nor that it would be possible to create a golden fringe more than 40 kilometres wide.

Rietveld has found his supporters mainly in professional circles. 'An inspiring chapter in the Dutch struggle against the water', was architect Carel Weeber's description of Rietveld's design. The former Government Architect Mels Crouwel saw Rietveld as at last another designer who believed in the landscape's adaptability, someone who is prepared to take on the responsibility for a country which through the ages has always been designed. Urban development planner Rick Bakker praised the dyke park as a sustainable solution to structural problems. 'Maybe we will need new Delta Legislation, not only compelling the authorities to take action in emergencies, but in fact in advance', Rietveld argues. And then, cautiously: 'Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but in 1995 the dykes should have burst. A calamity would have made us think differently about living within a delta.'

New Amsterdam Park



The floating park in the river IJ: barges will offer room for different initiatives.

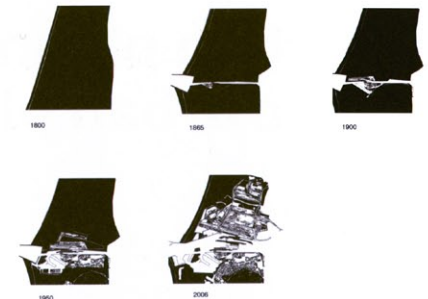
Stichting Amsterdam Waterexpo tackles water problems worldwide. Rietveld Landscape was commissioned by the organization to design a temporary floating park for the river IJ in the Dutch capital.

The New Amsterdam Park (NAP) island will move with the water, and will connect the port with the city, offering Amsterdammers an exciting new public space. A grid of 30 barges will offer space for different initiatives, from residents in the neighbourhood, local authorities and cultural establishments.

The barges vary in height and the distance between them, creating an exciting labyrinth of water alleyways and squares, which will be further enhanced by the vistas created. From the grass hills rising out of the barges visitors can enjoy the Amsterdam river skyline and the cloudy Dutch skies.



Generating Dune Scapes



Generating Dune Scape



Generating Dune Scape: a new urban dune area.

In 2006, Ronald Rietveld won the Prix de Rome for his entry *Generating Dune Scape*, a plan for the transformation of the existing dune landscape around the IJmond region into an urban dune landscape, with space for living, nature and recreation.

The heart of the plan, which is intended as an investigative study, consists of extending the dunes as far as the IJmuiden redevelopment area called *Rivierenbuurt*. In the empty spaces the layer of the soil will be scraped away, exposing the calcareous dune sand. The annual 1.4 million cubic metres of surplus sand from IJmond's harbour entrance will be used to lay down new dunes. Due to natural succession a zoning will arise within the new urban dune area: from wandering dunes on the outside and a middle dune area with thickets, to wood-

land dunes on the inside. This zoning will offer all sorts of possibilities for a variegated use. The lake called Kennemermeer in the outside dunes will change into a hot spring through the residual heat from the Corus steelworks, while the nearby disused *Atlantikwal* bunkers can house spa establishments. Behind this, an escalator will take visitors up to the top of a 40m-high dune, offering a panoramic view. This new dune landscape around and on top of the world's largest lock – still to be constructed – will offer nesting sites for protected sea birds. Close to IJmuiden, Sand Wall District will be built: living in sandstone dwellings in the dune area, accessed by pathways that are only suitable for four-wheel drive vehicles.