

## Paradises along the A10

At the exits of the A10, in the no man's land between the motorway and the city, are places of unexpected beauty. The association with a series of paradisiacal gardens springs to mind: inaccessible, tranquil, lush and unique, but nonetheless everyday and universal. Between 2001 and 2003, photographer Judith Jockel made pictures of these 'gardens', in which she exposes the magic of these everyday landscapes.

### *The Amsterdam ring road*

We use the Amsterdam ring road 24 hours a day. But who has ever set foot in the area just one metre behind the crash barrier? We race past it. At most, we wait there safely and patiently for help after our car has broken down. Next to the lanes of asphalt lies an unfamiliar, diffuse area, full of bushes and trees and tall sound barriers, an anonymous strip that separates the world of the elevated motorway from the city below. The width of this strip adapts to its context. A tall building is only occasionally visible above the green amorphous mass or the sound barriers that accompany the motorway. The pollution and the noise make any specific use of this strip impracticable, nor does an overall, spatial concept seem to exist either.

Yet, this buffer strip contains magnificent places. Their design is especially evident at the various exits: planting has been carefully arranged, sometimes accented with water. Something has been accomplished here with simple means that has not been achieved at other locations along the motorway: the areas have an unpretentious layout, as pure and as pragmatic as the lanes of asphalt, the bridges and the tunnels. Not meant to be accessed, they simply exist, beautiful in all their innocence. Amid the din of traffic noise, we hear the silence!

The genesis of these gardens is closely connected to the genesis of the motorway. Following the building of the German *Reichsautobahnen*, the first motorways were built in the Netherlands in 1937: from The Hague to Utrecht, from Utrecht to Vianen and from Amsterdam to Oegstgeest. After this ambitious start, motorway construction was essentially suspended until 1968, though there was a rapid increase in car traffic after the Second World War. The 1968 Dutch National Road Plan provided 1,850 kilometres of motorway, to be built in ten to fifteen years, in line with the planned allocation as formulated in the Second Urbanization Policy in 1966. As the capital, Amsterdam assumed a central position in the motorway network, despite the fact that it is not, geographically speaking, centrally positioned in the Netherlands. Amsterdam is like a spider in a web, with a ring around the city and from there a pattern of seven radial motorways extending to all corners of the country. In the meantime, the ring road has become one of the busiest motorways in Europe.

In the early seventies, the plan was further elaborated, and the motorway network was renumbered. The principle is simple and at the same time incredibly naive. The ring around Amsterdam was accorded the easiest number: 10. Subsequently, all the radial motorways from that point were

numbered counterclockwise: A1 to Amersfoort, A2 to Utrecht, A3 to Rotterdam, A4 to Den Haag, until the A7 to Hoorn.<sup>1</sup>

The Amsterdam ring road was only completed in the nineties and is entirely elevated. This means the road does not hinder local traffic. But due to its elevated position, the motorist's view is highly restricted. Almost everywhere, at least in those areas where there are no sound barriers, we look into the dense treetops instead of through the tree trunks. Low-lying green clouds travel along with us. Grand views, such as those of the landscape of Waterland seen from the northern ring road, or of the Amsterdam skyline seen from the Zeeburger Bridge, are exceptions.

The radial motorway structure around Amsterdam drafted in the National Road Plan was strikingly similar to the radial patterns of the regional green plan. The urban population's new mobility, after all, went hand in hand with the discovery of the countryside as a recreational facility. The radial city, as proposed by the General Expansion Plan (AUP) of 1935, assumed that the outline of green would act as a mediator between city and countryside.<sup>2</sup> Green fingers, designed as a recreational, urban park landscape, penetrated deeply into the city's body. Embedding the motorway was key in achieving this. In the road scheme that was already devised for Amsterdam West in 1928, the radial arterial roads are nestled in green.

#### *The motorway as parkway*

But infrastructure and planting have a tenuous relationship. During the course of history, they have complemented each other, rejected each other or, even worse, existed indifferently side by side. When in 1762 Giuseppe Garampi, Prefect of the Vatican Archives, travelled through the Netherlands, he was astonished to find the care and attention given to the infrastructure here: *'Travelling through these areas is very comfortable: perhaps unique in the world (...) The streets are paved with stone in the middle, and there are brick paths for pedestrians on both sides, as well as a small canal for drainage. The widest streets also have beautiful rows of trees, which make for a pleasant view, and which also provide the opportunity of protection from the sun while walking (...) The taste for objects of nature in these areas is highly refined, and these constitute a major part of Dutch luxury.'* The planting along canals, arterial roads and on squares was already taken seriously by Dutch cities' municipal authorities since the seventeenth century. They were seen as 'Jewels' of public space. The planting offered protection against the wind, provided shade, fragrance and colour. The vertical nature of the trees provided order and ornamentation to streets and squares.<sup>3</sup>

The construction of the early motorways was also closely linked to the ambition of reconciling infrastructure and planting, in a heroic attempt on the part of Modernism to give asphalt a place in Arcadia. The first motorways were the Italian *autostrade*, a toll-road network that was privately built and run starting in 1924, and the *Nur-Autostrassen* that were built in Germany in the late twenties.

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<sup>1</sup> Van der Bijl, 2004, pp. 42-44. In the meantime, it is clear that the numbering system did not lead to coherent and understandable motorway numbering. The A5 was curiously short in distance for such an important motorway number, and it is now called the A200. The number A5 has now been assigned to the recently opened connecting stretch between the A4 and the A9 past Schiphol. And the A3 was never built. The radial number system does work on the scale of the city itself, however: the city's radial main roads that connect to the A10 are numbered from s 101 to s 118, again counter clockwise, but this time beginning on the east side, with the s 101 running along the docks.

<sup>2</sup> The General Expansion Plan for Amsterdam was developed by urban designer Cornelis van Eesteren in order to accommodate the anticipated expansion of the city, which meant a doubling of its surface area, with one grand gesture.

<sup>3</sup> de Jong 1993, p.191

These were built with an emphasis on traffic-specific guidelines, but this was soon no longer the only objective. The aim according to Dr. Todt, *General Inspector for German Road Engineering* in 1934, was that *'we will ensure that the national motorways become not only the fastest, safest and most modern, but also the most beautiful roads in the world.'* He wanted the motorway to be viewed not as a feat of engineering but first and foremost as a cultural task, which, thanks to the almost limitless freedom offered by the motorway, would allow everyone to discover for the first time *'the beauty of his German home country.'* The motorway had to blend into the landscape, and the purely technical planning had to be provided with an 'emotional' design component.

His advisor was the landscape architect Alwin Seifert, who devised guidelines to make the integration of the motorways a permanent part of motorway design. Instead of the deep ditches that were usually present on both sides of the road, Seifert aspired to construct broad and level shoulders, as well as planting that was characteristic of the area. Trees were preserved or planted in groups in the median strip to suggest a park landscape. And he argued in favour of routes that weren't comprised of long, straight stretches, connected by sharp bends, but rather a continuous line, in which vistas of churches, castles and mountain peaks were incorporated in the landscape composition, and detours were constructed enabling motorists to drive over a beautiful hilltop.<sup>4</sup> To enable the staging of the landscape, it was even prescribed by law that on both sides of the road, a strip at least forty metres wide had to be purchased.

Initially, the aesthetic construction of a motorway, coupled with the idea that one could enjoy nature while driving on the motorway, also played a role in the Netherlands. In 1935, G.A. Overdijkink, forester at the Dutch Forestry Commission and in charge of providing advice about the layout and maintenance of planting along roads and waterways, wrote: *'The view that the motorway and its position in the landscape and its presentation have to meet certain aesthetic criteria is increasingly gaining ground. Slowly, the idea is taking root that the motorway, as a traffic artery, and the beauty of the landscape do not necessarily have to constitute a conflict of interest. The function of the planting can be described as forming a connecting link between the road, as an engineering work, and the landscape, through which the road traverses.'* His emphasis on the relationship between the roads and the planting was derived from the phenomenon of recreation, originating in the United States, and the role that was assigned to the so-called *parkways*. These recreational motorways interconnected parks and park areas into a coherent system, in such a way that motorists could also enjoy nature while in transit.<sup>5</sup>

#### *The motorway as traffic machine*

But somewhere along the line, this romantically tinted way of thinking got lost. Since 1965, it is no longer permitted to park on the shoulder, and in the seventies the idea took root that the motorway had no direct relationship with its surroundings. Since then, the infrastructure has detached itself from both the morphology of the natural landscape and of the city. The infrastructure has physically taken up an increasing amount of space and has become visually dominant. Cars are becoming faster all

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<sup>4</sup> Johannes en Wölki 2005, p. 10-15; Seifert 1962

<sup>5</sup> de Visser 1997, p. 12

the time and the motorways more congested, so that the world of speed and the world of 'standstill' are moving further and further apart from each other. Although they exist in proximity to each other, they barely interact. Thus, a purely functional traffic space has evolved that does not contribute to the public network of space in a city, even though it's part of it.

The relationship between the urban landscape and the motorway is even more tenuous than the one between the agrarian cultural landscape and the motorway, perhaps because the cultural landscape has for so long been part of the motorway design. An open polder can still be situated right against a motorway without this causing problems, and it may even lead to spectacular scenes.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the city and the motorway do indeed need each other, but close proximity inevitably causes confusion, as a result of which they turn their backs on each other. Noise, pollution and speed, after all, do not go hand in hand with the functions a city has to accommodate, such as living, visiting and working. Moreover, the motorway is like a substantial groove in the more refined urban network of public spaces.

### *Landscape plans on the fringe*

In the oft-cited *Non-lieux* by Marc Augé, the motorway is viewed as a space that is in itself meaningless, a 'non-place'. And for the motorist, the passing landscape is equally meaningless. When racing through a landscape at a hundred kilometres an hour, one becomes disassociated from it.<sup>7</sup>

In order to make the motorway a meaningful space again, major resources are being deployed at the beginning of the twenty-first century: mandatory landscape plans for all Dutch motorways, the introduction of the Route Design for national roads – one of the ten Great Projects that constitute the core of the Dutch Policy Document on Architecture 2001-2004 – as well as a Government Advisor on Infrastructure. '*The road network is a major factor in determining the appearance of the Netherlands,*' according to the Policy Document. Unfortunately, until now this has yielded few concrete design tools. For example, the only Route Design to have been resolved until now, for the A12, goes little further than displaying good intentions and big words. And although a landscape plan is mandatory for every Dutch motorway, its role has been hitherto restricted to that of a guiding principle for potential future plans, on the one hand, and policy management on the other.

The plans to reduce the speed limit – due to environmental standards – to eighty kilometres an hour on the whole of the A10 could be an excellent reason for transforming the ring into an urban boulevard, thus creating a more intimate relationship between city and motorway, enabling the ring road to become an intermediary between city and landscape.

The design of the motorway landscape as a coherent entity will inevitably meet with obstacles, especially in the case of an urban motorway like the A10. The division of responsibility for the already narrow strip on both sides of the road between various parties such as the Department of Public Works, city and railway, makes itself felt in a lack of coherence that even a coordinated landscape plan seems unable to solve. In fact, in the urban area the Department of Public Works, the only party

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the point at which the A4 dives into the Haarlemmermeer at Roelofarendsveen, made even more dramatic by the narrow passageway under the ring canal, and the turn the motorway makes in order to merge into the pattern of reclaimed land. In the polder, greenery has not been planted along the A4, but the turn in the road is flanked by poplars, as a supporting gesture.

<sup>7</sup> Ibelings 1999, p. 49-56

involved in the entire motorway trajectory, has to work with a narrower zone than elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The only places where they do not share responsibility with other parties are the junctions and exits. So why not tackle precisely these spots to express the relationship between motorway, city and landscape, especially in light of the hidden beauty that already exists in these places and which is simply waiting to be revealed?

### *Landscape of flows and landscape theatre*

In order to turn motorway design into a spatial issue again, it has to be viewed as one of the components of the (urban) landscape, not as an autonomous design or a traffic problem. This component could, detached from the programmatic connotation of the word 'road', be called a 'landscape of flows':<sup>9</sup> the staging of the urban locomotor apparatus, using kinetic perception as the starting point. From a car, train or aeroplane, the (urban) landscape passes the viewer in a fleeting and fragmentary manner. The experience of motion is determined by the way in which the city and country are transected. The nodes in this 'landscape of flows' – the construction works and roundabouts, the intersections with railway lines and waterways, and the plastic effect of both the shapes of the buildings and the ensemble of the motorway décor – form a *topology* of their own. They are not directly connected to the topography of landscape or city, and precisely for this reason they are places where various worlds have the opportunity to interact.

The design of the 'landscape of flows' revolves entirely around the accommodation of speed. The motorway itself is completely oriented towards cars, purely functional. It is impossible to design a public space more efficiently. It remains astonishing that a few chalk lines, some asphalt, signs and crash barriers can control so many road users.

Another issue is the composition of the view as seen at high velocity. *'The quick telescoping of views, the smooth, liquid lines made by a series of objects joining into one continuous image, add to the sense of speed and exhilaration.'*<sup>10</sup> A fluid pattern of lines, the avoidance of abrupt transitions, a limited variety of elements, powerful, simple gestures and the sheer size contribute to perception as well as safety. The classic means of design that play a role in movement, such as transitions from light to dark, contrast between open and closed, framed views and focal points are translated into a scale suitable to high speeds. It is essentially a magnification of the principle of the route as a basis for a tableau composition, as found in eighteenth-century landscape gardens.

An additional component of the urban landscape is the 'landscape theatre', which, as the counterpart to the programmatic excess of the urban fabric, makes it possible to experience the vastness, the horizon and the natural processes within the city. Here, the horizon of the landscape is inverted towards an inner horizon in the urban domain. The planting can be used as a mediator between the autonomous landscape of the motorways and the landscape it transects, like embankments along a river. As, for example, the four stately double rows of ashes on both sides of the A7, where the vast

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<sup>8</sup> The landscape plan being devised for the A10 is also attempting, as one of its starting points, to make the meeting of city and motorway visible, but is not successful due to a lack of designing freedom.

<sup>9</sup> Steenbergen and Reh 1995

<sup>10</sup> Crowe 1960, p. 33

expanse of the Beemster polder becomes visible through the tree trunks. The ashes, acting as wings of a stage, transform the Beemster into a landscape theatre, with the motorist as audience. These landscapes are not very plentiful in the Netherlands and are frequently unconnected to the motorway's landscape of flows. The motorway's surroundings increasingly consist of an expanding periphery of offices, sound barriers, car show rooms and golf courses: neither empty nor crowded, neither city nor landscape.

It is therefore a happy coincidence that the motorway landscape itself generates empty and tranquil places, which – like the eye of a hurricane – are both the consequence of, and in contrast with, the speed of a hundred kilometres an hour. These places are the left-over areas between the motorway and exit ramps, inconspicuous places that we as yet have no eye for. However, if they are recognized and designed as potential landscape theatres, then they can make a meaningful contribution to the urban landscape.

On the one hand, these places could play a role in enhancing the experience of the route: in order to experience motion, rhythm is essential. A bland motorway with no variation is boring and hence dangerous: *'A stimulus has to be created, one which works better and is more enduring than coffee or cola.'*<sup>11</sup> The motorist needs landmarks by which to measure his progress. When exits are no longer recognizable by signs alone, but when the unique character of the location reveals itself to the road, they can create, together with wide vistas and striking landmarks, a diverse series of images, the rhythm of which enhances the experience of motion and makes the progress measurable. Secondly, these empty and tranquil places can function as a gate to the city and mark the meeting point between city and motorway. The task here is to make the place visible from the road again by removing the vertical planting around it and by relocating the sound barriers that currently seem glued to the contours of the road. Spaces through which the road moves can thus open up so that road and garden, the landscape of flows and the landscape theatre, merge for a moment's time.

### *Impenetrable paradises*

The enclosed landscape theatres are cut off from the landscape itself by the motorways. This isolation makes these places special, like a *temenos*, a sacred place within the natural landscape, where gods reside and where mere mortals cannot set foot. Indeed, the word *temenos* is derived from the Greek work *temno*, to cut. They are autonomous spaces, inaccessible and impenetrable, surrounded by a gallery. Gallery or walkway – derived from the word 'walk' – conveys movement around a motionless centre, with the act of circling emphasizing timelessness. Instead of a deliberate stroll, the motion occurs in the car, and at great speed, so that motorists can physically feel the centrifugal force of the midpoint. The deity that resides here is nature, represented by the image of a place untainted by human beings, a paradise. A paradise, however, created by human hands. The natural elements (trees, fields, a pond) are meticulously arranged to evoke the image of an Arcadian idyll, but within the grammar of motorway design. The space's size and shape are determined by the motorway fork and

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<sup>11</sup> Seifert 1962, p. 85

its curvature, tailored to sixty to eighty kilometres an hour. Within is a design of astonishing simplicity, defined by functional requirements such as dike stability, maintenance, obstacle-free zones and visibility: a dense group of trees and an empty space. The planting is characteristic of the region. The pattern of lines is fluid, an echo of the exit's contours.

These gardens become part of a motorist's experience in two ways. When driving along the A10, the experience is like a series of snapshots that divide the ring road into quantifiable segments, counterpoints in the flow. But when motorists take an exit and move around the space as if in the gallery of a monastery garden, they momentarily become part of it, and a tableau unfurls before their eyes, with the motorway as horizon. Then these gardens appear to be composed like a tableau from a landscape garden. Such as the s 116 exit, where the slope resulting from the uneven intersection has been exploited to create a foreground and a background: grass with a pond, a fringe of reeds and a group of poplars with magnificent, silver trunks.

The potential of landscape theatres becomes clear in the pictures Judith Jockel made of the gardens in the nooks of the A10 exits, miniature landscapes that, more than elsewhere, are landscape theatres of their own. The photographs show how carefully designed and absolutely untouched these gardens are. The rhythm of zooming in and out, always within the same frame, photographed in neutral weather conditions, always during the day and never at night, in an indefinable season of the year, reflect the generic character of motorways. On the other hand, every visible reference to the motorway and the world that belongs to it (crash barrier, electricity pylons) is absent in the photos, and the camera position, incidence of light, the details of the pictures, are carefully geared to the unique character of every location. The small pictures, like medieval miniatures, show a glimpse of impenetrable paradises.

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