

Walk

Ann Meskens – February 28th 2020

Column 5: Week theme 'Symbolic city'

The Neverending Park. De Grond der Dingen.

The never-ending park in modern and post-modern cities

Walk.

Please.

It remains the most beautiful and most human way of moving, and this way you can easily take in yourself and the city. Stroll along the sidewalk, jump over a mud puddle, take a narrow road and if you want to leave the dynamic life on the sidewalks behind, you can walk into a park. Every pleasant city has spots where residents and commuters can enter a different space and time in just a few steps.

A space where our inner nature is touched, a time that refers to a primordial time that lies deep within us.

There is a primordial craving for nature in our post-modern urban body, according to American biologist Edward O. Wilson. This love of nature nestled in us while we were still roaming the East African savannah. Across our long biological evolutionary process, it never left us.

Modern urbanity is still so recent. Only ten thousand years ago people started living in settlements, only a hundred years ago we stepped into modern cities. That means that on the historical timeline, people are for the time being ninety-nine percent a hunter and a collector. That same hunting and gathering could still be reflected in our buying and shopping behavior today. In our consumerist society we still collect like crazy, driven by cunning publicity and marketing people who subtly respond to our oldest nature.

But also outside of this, in city life, they are appealing to our biophilia every day; flower beds and fountains, rivers and parks make a city pleasant for people. This love of nature is so deeply embedded in us that it even plays a role in our virtual existence. The American psychologist Peter H. Kahn investigates virtual nature. Why do we love playing gardener in successful computer games such as Farmville? Tell me, what is the meaning of virtual sowing, planting, harvesting?!?

Why do we become happy as a hospital patient or as an employee in an office garden, when we see forests or meadows on a plasma screen? It turns out, green makes us happy anyway, even in pre-programmed digital images of nature or via walls painted in this color.

Buy a houseplant.

Plant a tree.

It helps.

Urban nature keeps a distant past alive within us, today it keeps us grounded, but it also shows us a livable future. As long as we want to remain human, communal urban gardens and natural green spaces are just as needed to survive as pure water and clean air.

We live in cities more and more, what do we need in our future parks? Trees, shrubs, grass. What else? A silent place, a concert stage, a bench with Wi-Fi, a communal vegetable garden, a trendy bbq area, a natural swimming place, a playground for the little ones, a chill-out meadow for the teens, a memory bench for the elderly?

The Turkish state forest management decided years ago that they would replace the old prohibition signs in parks with new ones: Please walk on the grass! It was believed that the previous prohibition was outdated. Walking, sitting, lying down and playing on the grass are all part of our enjoyment of nature. Physical contact with nature, and through all the senses, was essential for people, certainly for the urban dweller alienated from nature.

The American philosopher and artist Mara Miller cites the garden as a metaphor for the good life. Her book *The Garden as Art* already appeared in 1993, and is just as relevant inside as outside the city.

A garden is both nature (wild) and culture (tamed) and in that sense also reflects human existence. Us humans are nature - we are hungry and mortal, but we are also always culture - we can change ourselves and our environment. People need nature – like the indispensable oxygen, water or food, - but we also die because of a lack of culture, at the very least protection against the cold, and in the future, more and more, against the heat.

In our cities too, human happiness often pertains to the search for this balance between nature and culture, and allowing and reconciling the contradictions. We need spontaneous developments but also structure in our lives, as human beings we want straight lines and whimsical forms to be happy, we love freedom but also need safety,... we are and continue to be in anything and everything, nature and culture.

Classic parks can be found in every European city, their layout and design often show park history. This is also the case for the Mechelen Botanical Garden, an inner city small public park, which has a whole history behind it.

Medieval monastic gardens or elegant private estates were often fully constructed or arranged differently in cities over time. In early modernity, they often presented themselves as strict French gardens and in the nineteenth century they appeared as fashionable English landscape gardens with trees, hillside lawns and ponds, with or without a fountain. It was a fashionable design that remains visible in many contemporary city parks.

Mechelen purchased the Pitzemburg estate at de Bruul at the beginning of the 19th century. A society for its care and operation was founded. By the middle of the century, the public walk was already part of the modern plan. In 1840, police regulations still stipulated that the park was accessible to strangers and Société members - and their ladies. Ordinary citizens of Mechelen were only allowed into the park on Tuesdays and Fridays, and that from April to October.

According to the fashion of the time, people soon found more occasions to walk into this small park, they found a cast-iron kiosk, a liquor house and a toilet. There were exhibition rooms, greenhouses and statues. The playground for children was only created much later, far into the 20th century, when more social attention was given to children's play.

The public parks originated in Europe and in America as a result of the modern city, and they often lay in the middle of it. They frequently counterbalanced urban industrialization and a feverish consumerist society. Together with the factories, money and capital were often still placed central in the city in the 19th century. As a result, the city became crowded, the air polluted and therefore the need for a Sunday walk in better air arose.

The modern city park took over specific elements from the formerly elegant private park and from the rural allotment gardens, but transformed both.

Look. Less fruit and vegetables for the people, but from now on more flowers and visual beauty.

Hear. A garden that not only existed for a lord and his guests, but one that became a shared democratic space for everyone, including ordinary people.

The new masses that emerged along with urbanization mainly consisted of people who worked hard in factories and workplaces throughout the week in the name of progress. On Sundays, they wanted to educate and civilize this crowd - and also wanted to keep them healthy so that they could continue to work hard.

It was decided that on Sunday the masses should look around, listen in silence and walk obediently. Sowing, harvesting or digging was for the countryside. It was even forbidden to get onto the grass in the parks, some signs solemnly said: these plantations are entrusted to the protection of the public. Yes, but that public had to submissively follow the paths, preferably in a Sunday walking outfit with a hat, walking stick or umbrella and just stand still for music that echoed from the music kiosks.

Old postcards or black and white photos beautifully portray the park philosophy of the past. The remaining plantations and structures today also show this vision.

The New York Central Park was one of the first 19th century city parks. The design is by Olmsted, the founding father of American landscape architecture. For the pieces of wasteland with some pig farms and settlers' cabins, a modern cultural destination was conceived. Culture, because a garden or a park is a devised and maintained defined space, but with enough wild nature that the visitor felt connected to his origins in the middle of the city.

This modern New York "folk park" opened in 1876, demonstrating in everything the way of life; the dreams, ideals and goals of the modern American man. But, destinations or activities changed over time. Ice skating, open air theater, chess, reading, jogging, meditation, a cafe, cycling, picnicking, walking the dogs, urban dancing, pokemon hunting, ...

City dwellers all over the world now want to leave the beaten tracks, they want to invent the parks themselves. The city services sometimes listen or don't, but they are at least challenged to think about what a park can be in the future.

Community gardens where people grow fruit and vegetables? Places for community work or inclusion of minority groups, spots for healthy veggie dining, yoga or Aikido? What do we need? Fit-o-meters, stages for open-air performances, nature that stimulates sensuality, health, silence or a little bit of rest? ... it's mainly exercising new ways in old parks to find out what makes us happier in this advancing century.

Citizens have been experimenting with this in cities for years. Together they plant lettuce and carrots in parks, on uncultivated land or on rooftops. They practice guerilla gardening alone or together; throwing seed bombs illegally for more flora diversity, breaking up pavement tiles to create a mini garden, building

beehives or insect hotels on balconies and uncultivated lands, organizing organic / exchange / give-markets in unexpected public places ...

Who knows what the future city people will look like, but it seems that the traditional city people are more and more becoming rurbanists - citizens with a passion for country life but who do not intend to leave the city.

Those different types of urban experiments are better and more urgent for the global climate anyway, but one does not need any scientific research to see that city people also just become happier citizens from this.

Luckily, today's architects are thinking of city forests on apartment roofs or vertical façade gardens; the cities themselves are slowly realizing the importance of this for their citizens.

In the 19th century they designed in New York the modern city par excellence, Central Park, it remains one of the places that deeply shapes the city. Today, you can also walk on The High Lines, a city park set up on a raised old railroad track. At the start of the century, this new concept was literally based on the remains of the past industrialization.

Two local residents founded The Friends of the High Line to save the run-down railroad tracks from their neighborhood from being demolished in 1999. Today, it is a fantastic green space with a view of New York. Nine meters above street level, there are a lot of greenery, water features, food and drink stalls, sitting areas, flower beds and art. This newly arranged High Line ensured the revaluation of the entire western part of Manhattan. It is hyper contemporary, it is a park, it is a panorama but most of all, it is a promenade (from French se promener, meaning: go for a walk), so it is above all, a hopeful walking path in the middle of the city of the futures.

Walk.

Please.

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