

details



## Folding Gravel

Innovative use of ground plane is seen in a Dutch courtyard. BY MARC TREIB

Over the past decade, computer-generated images of new Dutch landscapes have filled the pages of magazines and books, striking in their materials, their geometries and, well, their seeming artificiality. To a profession still weaned on what in the pages of this magazine one practitioner chest-thumpingly termed a transcendental Olmstedian tradition, these designs are probably about as hard to swallow as a stale Martha Schwartz poppy-seed bagel. But fortunately, I think, there is a real difference between the computer rendering and the photograph, and even greater differences between both these forms of representation and the realized landscape. Construction seems to knock the edge off the most edgy projects as the harsh realities of clients, materials, climates, and budgets intrude upon the realm of the rendered pipe dream.

Many of these Dutch projects, in reality, are neither as weird nor, alas, as engaging

as they appear in publications, and a handful of them are actually thoughtful and appropriate, as well as visually stunning. One of the latter is the courtyard design for Rijksmuseum Twente in Enschede, set in the eastern Netherlands near the German border. Outdated climate management instigated an overhaul of the existing structure that dates from 1929; revisions to visitor circulation and the need for a lecture space and café accompanied the call for technical improvements in 1994. Shortly after the renovations were completed, however, an explosion in a nearby fireworks factory leveled a surrounding residential neighborhood, destroyed parts of the museum building, and peppered the garden with broken glass. Renovations began again.

The museum was constructed of brick in a revivalist Dutch Romanesque style,

winding the galleries around the perimeter of an irregularly shaped site and forming an internal courtyard that had never fulfilled its potential as a vital space. Ben van Berkel of the UN Studio had been commissioned to recast several of the galleries and make the required additions; these included a café that now intrudes upon the sanctity of the garden court. Two years later, in 1996, landscape architect Lodewijk Baljon was faced with a design task complicated by revised accessibility requirements, changes in museum-floor levels that positioned access to the court at differing elevations, and the basic irregularity of the courtyard perimeter.

In addition, the directorship had requested a landscape that would speak of today rather than of yesterday, to signal renewal and, perhaps, a phoenix-like rising from the ashes into greater public prominence. "The director of the museum, Ms. Cannegieter, did not want a sculpture garden," Baljon says, "although occasionally a statue might find its place there. I thought a flower garden would be superfluous, because the visitor's attention

**The Rijksmuseum Twente in Enschede, Holland, features sloping planes of gravel edged with galvanized steel strips.**



should be directed to the objects within the museum." Obviously, this idea would be open to further discussion—the landscape can be its own art object—but the specter of maintenance made the issue moot. More important to the landscape architect was that the courtyard should be a more welcoming "bright place" in contrast to the inherent darkness of the galleries and the building's somewhat grim brick exterior.

The landscape scheme is designed to resolve these problems, the elevation changes being used to generate a series of ramped planes that allow sunny areas entered from several points in the courtyard. Perhaps taking an additional cue from the now (in)famous study *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988) by Gilles Deleuze, folding also informed the new design, with gravel planes executed in two colors continuously interleaving with one another. In shape and in slope they complement the leaning geometries of van Berkel's café, asserting their own independence in a relatively quiet way. Occupation of the entire court was encouraged by the brief, and the lacy leaves of a bosk of *Koelreuteria* (Golden Rain tree) to the southeast offer a soft counterpoint to the dark masonry wall surfaces. The rhomboidal pool intermediates between the café building and the field of planes, using reflection to virtually extend the vertical dimension of the inclined facade while capturing clouds and skies from above.

Gravel is used throughout, intermixing tan and gray materials in a manner that appears almost to have been airbrushed. Plastic gridding underlays the sloping planes, facilitating handicap access while retarding the intermixing of the gravel colors. (Baljon

**A rhomboidal pool, above, intermediates between the field of planes and the museum café. In plan, at right, museum buildings wrap around the irregular courtyard.**

the museum ambulatories that surround it.

Lodewijk Baljon's small courtyard design is precise in concept and execution and, for the most part, avoids overworking and awkward unresolved pockets. The use of interwoven planes is ambitious, proposing a contemporary geometry rather than one parroting existing conditions. As such, it demonstrates that a landscape sympathetic to historic structures need not always retreat to the historicist approach so common after the unquestioning, and often anemic, return to historical forms in the 1980s. LA

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