

IN BRIEF

What Public garden around a new government building.

Where Groningen, the Netherlands.

Size Nine acres.

Soil Main garden: 8cm-depth of specially formulated roof garden soil.

Climate Prone to high winds.

Hardiness zone USDA 8.

The building and its garden are situated at the edge of Groningen in the northern Netherlands; the main route through the space is used by hundreds of bicycle commuters.

A WORKER'S ESCAPE

Lodewijk Baljon has created a public garden around a new civic building in the Netherlands, providing employees and commuters with a vibrant green space

WORDS TIM RICHARDSON PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS



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Should a new government building have a garden, and one that is freely open to the public? Readers of this magazine will probably say ‘yes’, but that has not been the tradition – and not just because of a lack of money. In the 19th century neo-classical architecture was used to reinforce civic power (grand squares dotted with statues and fountain pools), while in the 20th century a bland and corporate Modernism became the standard style for official buildings, occasionally with a ‘plaza-style’ landscape design attached.

The city of Groningen in the northern Netherlands is demonstrating how different things can be with a large garden-park set around a striking new building, housing a government tax and education office with 2,700 employees. It is situated at the edge of ancient oak woodland next to a busy ring road, and incorporates well-used commuter walking and cycling routes. The routes taken by the local bird and bat populations have also been protected and enhanced; they were marked on all design plans. It is an actively used and appreciated public space.

Amsterdam-based landscape designer Lodewijk Baljon was commissioned to create this new ‘city garden’ to wrap around the striking, 92m-high main building. In effect he has created not a public park, but a massive garden, planted in the naturalistic style that is now so familiar. As he says, “It’s a public building but it feels like a garden – that has been our aim.”

Any landscape design first had to react to the building itself, with its strident black and white horizontal banding. Lodewijk extended the fluid lines and curves of the architecture into the landscape with sinuous drift plantings and groups of multi-stem *Amelanchier x lamarckii*, hornbeam and *Malus* ‘Evereste’ ▷

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Left The garden was designed to incorporate already established walking and cycling routes and even takes into account the flight paths of bats and birds. The green structures are ivy-clad steel-mesh windbreaks. These calm the wind in the garden, making it more peaceful, and provide an architectural foil to the building.

DESIGNING FOR PEOPLE

Sage advice from some masters of garden design, on designing spaces for public use:

‘The park has been established in the city to represent and recall the absent country.’

Jens Jensen (1860-1951), Danish-American naturalistic planting pioneer.

‘It should be a ground which invites, encourages and facilitates movement.’

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), designer of Central Park, New York.

‘Communities, cities, and most importantly individuals, derive their self-image as citizens from these public spaces.’

Martha Schwartz, contemporary American landscape architect.

‘Flow is an essential character of the landscape tradition of design, and one which is often ignored.’

Sylvia Crowe (1901-1997), English landscape architect.



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Planting combinations

1 Purple *Verbena bonariensis* plays off golden *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm' in this perennial planting, which morphs into the indigenous flower meadow visible in the background. Contrasting forms of *Heuchera villosa* var. *macrorrhiza*, *Panicum virgatum* and the daisy-like *Kalimeris incisa* 'Alba' add to the impression of burgeoning vitality.

2 The dead trumps the living in this combination. Here the dark, almost black, seedheads of *Phlomis russeliana* take centre stage, surrounded by *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune', *Eryngium agavifolium*, *Carex oshimensis*, *Carex muskingumensis* and *Pennisetum alopecuroides*. Just coming into bloom on the left is *Symphyotrichum* 'Little Carlow'. The metal structure is a light and ventilation unit for the underground car park, with *Calamagrostis* x *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' and *Aster trifolius* subsp. *ageratoides* 'Ezo Murasaki' growing on top.

3 The strong shapes of grass seedheads and late-summer flowers are the key here, creating an impression of shape and mass, which is not always associated with late-summer perennial plantings. Visible are *Sanguisorba obtusa*, *Aster* x *frikartii* 'Mönch', *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau', *Aster macrophyllus* and *Crocsmia* 'Lucifer' (after flowering). The stems and crab apples of *Malus* 'Evereste' form the backdrop.

4 Clipped hedges and a multi-stem tree, *Amelanchier lamarckii*, create structural interest in the late summer garden. This sense of form is offset by the complexity of a combination of *Echinacea purpurea* 'Alaska', *Persicaria*, *Panicum virgatum* 'Shenandoah', *Aster* x *frikartii* 'Mönch' and *Eurybia macrophylla*.



8 KEY PLANTS FROM THE CITY GARDEN

1 *Heuchera villosa* var. *macrorhiza*
The large, light-green leaves grab the attention in spring. Then follows a long flowering season, until frost, with pleasant cream-coloured flower plumes. The suitability for part shade and sun makes this *Heuchera* easy going. It is a plant that should be used more. 90cm. USDA 3a-8b*.

2 *Rudbeckia missouriensis*
The low version of 'Goldsturm' with an equally intense warm yellow bloom from late June to late September. When combining both, an interesting depth of perspective can be created. 50cm. USDA 5a-8b.

3 *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Transparent'
One of the taller varieties, it colours beautifully at the end of the summer to orange brown. Position so that the light comes from behind it. Works well in combinations. Lodewijk takes it for granted that it will fall over in the Dutch winds by the end of winter. 1.8m. USDA 5a-8b.

4 *Verbena bonariensis*
Lodewijk has used this frequently here. It does not live long, but is excellent for giving extra colour in the first years. If given the chance to self-seed, it will keep showing up. 2m. AGM*. RHS H4, USDA 7a-11.

5 *Pycnanthemum pilosum*
Lodewijk calls this a good 'filler'. It smells deliciously of mint. The plant blends easily between others, and is less rampant than real mint (*Mentha*). 1.5m. USDA 4a-8b.

6 *Vernonia arkansana* 'Mammuth'
The violet purple umbels create a good contrast to the dark-green ivy screens and it gives a nice upward silhouette. A bold plant that needs some years to fully develop. Its vigour is fascinating to watch. As with most plants used in this garden, it attracts bees and butterflies, adding to its interest. 1.5m.

7 *Echinacea purpurea* 'Maxima'
Perhaps the only *Echinacea* that doesn't let its petals hang down. A strong purple rose colour, selected in the Netherlands. 1.5m. USDA 3a-8b.

8 *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Firetail'
Ideal for the 'meadow look' when combined with ornamental grasses. It casually weaves a thread of crimson through other plants. On top of that, it has a long bloom period. 1.2m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-7b.



WHEN IT CAME TO PLANT CHOICE, SHRUBS AND TREES WERE TESTED IN A WIND TUNNEL

▷ trees. He says he chose multi-stem trees because “even a full-grown single-stem would always look small next to the building”. He likes the idea of the canopies ‘bubbling away’ in the garden and looks forward to their maturity, when their branches will frame lateral views across the space.

The designer also reacted to the architecture by means of a series of 3m-high, curved steel-mesh screens covered in ivy. These have the effect of creating a human scale against the building and make informal enclosures, while also acting as windbreaks: the site is beset by high winds, which the screens help to control, as do a series of clipped yew hedges.

The wind also proved a challenge when it came to plant choice – prospective shrubs and trees were actually tested in a wind tunnel. In the event some 55,000 perennial plants in 200 species were used, as well as 40,000 bulbs.

Key linking perennials, deployed in giant beds that morph into each other, include *Persicaria x fennica* ‘Johanniswolke’, phlomis, sedum, salvia, veronicastrum, euphorbia, achillea and coreopsis, as well as a palette of grasses. Even in this large acreage – the garden is 11,000 square metres, with substantial meadow and woodland areas adjacent – Lodewijk has managed to instil a feeling of intimacy, as his richly naturalistic plantings ebb and flow with the seasons and create their own sense of enclosure. The nearer one gets to the building, the more garden-like it feels and the more detailed the planting.

The fact that the main ornamental garden had to be situated on the roof of a vast underground parking garage was turned to the designer’s advantage. Beneath an 8cm-depth of specially formulated, roof-garden soil is a layer of nutrient-rich substrate. “The roots have to go so far down, we can be sure they will be anchored in the high winds,” Lodewijk says.

Water is also treated semi-naturalistically, in the form of a series of large pools. These pools are used to recycle rainwater and contain substantial waterside plantings including flag iris, lysimachia, *Menyanthes trifoliata*, juncus and equisetum. The smooth granite edges of the pools create informal sitting places popular with locals, who like to watch the fish. Who would have thought a visit to a tax office could be so relaxing? □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Address Stadstuin, Kempkensberg, Groningen, the Netherlands.

You can find out more about Lodewijk’s work at baljon.nl

Left above Lodewijk has introduced a range of multi-stemmed trees into the scheme, including *Amelanchier x lamarckii*, *Malus* ‘Evereste’ and hornbeam. The trees help to add height and structure to an otherwise flat site.

Left below The key principle in the design is repetition. Perennials, such as echinacea and coreopsis help to create a rhythm in the planting, which inspires a sense of tranquillity.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. *Hardiness ratings given where available.