

# From counter culture to eco-cathedral. The continuing legacy of Louis Guillaume le Roy

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**A**bstract. Louis le Roy (b.1924), an artist and former arts teacher at a secondary school in Heerenveen, has been one of the main Dutch cultural philosophers of the post war era. His theories, which criticised contemporary environmental behaviour, proposed a utopian two-tiered society in which dynamic small-scale cultural systems would interconnect towns and counter large-scale monoculture. In practice however the one aspect which has provided more publicity than any other and which has made him well-known, is the creation of one tiny aspect of this; the example of the physical materialisation of these cultural systems as represented in so-called Le Roy gardens. Through these Le Roy became known as a 'wild gardener' or the 'Billy Graham of weeds' and he became 'more popular than any professional landscape architect.'<sup>1</sup> However few of the community-based projects he initiated in the 1960s and 70s are still active today. A short-sighted analysis of these projects might conclude that there were considerable flaws in his concepts. However Le Roy's work has had a profound impact on a more general level, which is being investigated in this paper. It explores his continuing legacy and its relevance with respect to early 21st century issues such as sustainability, community involvement and art, which he integrated in a meaningful manner in the design process, rather than considering them as separate and distinctive add-ons.

## Context

While postwar housing in the Netherlands was generally spaciouly designed with generous greenspace, the overwhelming presence of the state in the welfare society as a provider of the common good and the large-scale nature and anonymity of housing developments ultimately caused alienation from the various processes of life. This led to a response and calls for a counter culture (the Orange Free State),<sup>2</sup>

that aimed to restore primary relationships to the land and processes, producing home grown foods and home made clothing, but also building one's own house. While these initiatives of the mid to late 1960s did not develop into a revolution with any immediate results, we now recognise they did gradually alter the relationship between the state and its people. This was not in the least assisted by the economic recession of the 1980s, which required some important readjustments.

The movement of the 1960s was linked with a general concern about the environment. The pre-war Dutch landscape iconised in the various publications by Jac. P. Thijssen and particularly through the Verkade albums showed ideal landscapes unaffected by herbicides, pesticides and without the car. These landscapes became subject to large engineering projects and land exchange schemes, which encouraged large-scale agricultural practice and specialisation after the war. It was not long till the effect of pesticides became an important issue, best illustrated through Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962).<sup>3</sup> More general issues, such as the use of resources, despoliation of the soil and pollution also became general concerns, which is most profoundly summarised in *The Limits to Growth* the report for the Club of Rome published in 1972.<sup>4</sup> The increasing dominance of the car first became a popular issue in cities such as Amsterdam in the 1960s.

### Le Roy's proposals

Le Roy sought solutions for the various environmental issues, devising a comprehensive theory published in *Natuur uitschakelen natuur inschakelen* [switch off nature switch on nature] (Deventer, 1973) (Figure 1). This reassessed the human being as a product of culture and nature and thus as part of the global ecosystem. While accepting that large-scale monoculture would domineer the countryside, this would further cease to provide the main habitat for flora and fauna. As a contrast the city would serve as an oases for human beings and wildlife. Cities would be surrounded by mixed and varied artificial ecosystems, which contained a diverse range of cultivation and penetrated deep into the centre. Allotments would also be included here and all this would link with areas containing organic farms and be separated from monocultures with dense vegetation screens containing public walks (Figure 2).

The first opportunity to bring aspects of this theoretical model in practice occurred at the Kennedylaan in his home town of Heerenveen (Figure 3). Here Le Roy had the full support from an enlightened head of the parks department and managed to convince politicians of his proposals in 1968 after six years of debates.<sup>5</sup> The site, a long narrow strip of grass between two new housing estates with a width of 18 meters and a length of just over one kilometer, stretched from an area of

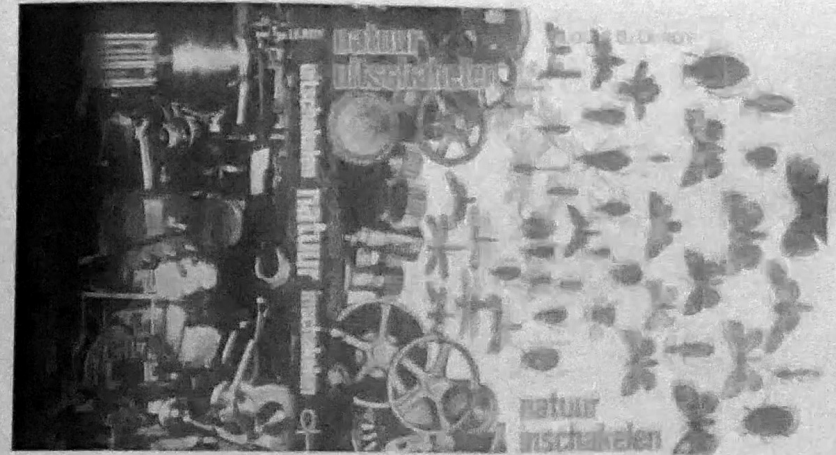


Figure 1 Louis le Roy's book *Natuur uitschakelen natuur inschakelen* (1973) [switch off nature switch on nature] profoundly highlighted human beings as part of the global ecosystem.

woodland and penetrated into the centre of Heerenveen (Figure 4). This, Le Roy argued, was a favourable condition in order to provide nature with the best opportunities for development. To further increase ecological opportunities he foresaw a great variety in vegetation, which would also be attractive visually (Figure 5).

### Manner of working

Rejecting the traditional way of designing parks by having these designed by a landscape architect, carried out by contractors, and maintained afterwards by the parks department, Le Roy envisioned them to be laid out by the citizens. This not only prevented alienation from nature, but ensured a continuing relationship with it and also encouraged creativity. Thus participating volunteers took decisions of how to proceed and what to do. As there were no valid prototypes prior to commencing with the project on the Kennedylaan, Le Roy suggested to recycle demolition materials (primarily bricks and brick rubble) as a base material in order to create differences of height and thus provide a range of ecotones/ecological habitats.

This way of working with volunteers and creating ecologically valuable green-spaces, rather than the sterility of many designs, caught the mood of the times. As a result Le Roy and this project received considerable publicity, which generated invitations to lecture and for new projects, both in the Netherlands and abroad (in



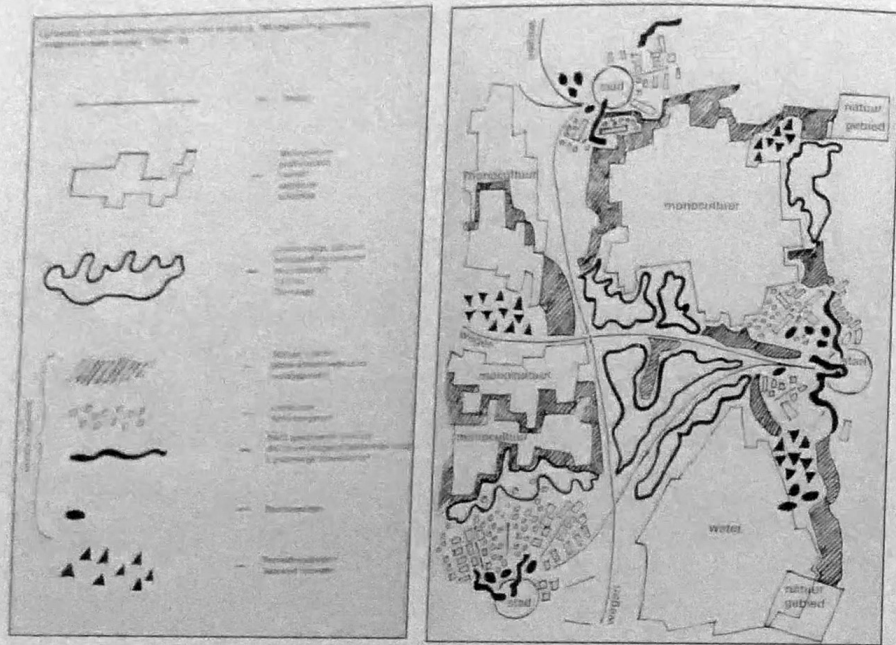


Figure 2 Le Roy's schematic diagram envisioned cities to be surrounded by mixed and artificial ecosystems. Allotments and organic farms included here would be separated from monocultures with dense vegetation screens containing public walks. (Source: *Natuur uitschakelen natuur inschakelen* (1973)).

Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and France). The main interest in the popular press however was in his 'wild gardens' resulting for example in a Le Roy garden at the former Floriade site in Amsterdam in 1973. This borrowed what were by then the clichés of elements incorporated in his project on the Kennedylaan, without taking the underlying philosophy or considering it as part of a continuous process.

One of the earliest projects in which Le Roy was consulted was by the architect Lucien Kroll, a Belgian pioneer in community architecture, who commenced the design of the Big Bazar in 1969, a student building at Woluwe-St Lambrecht being an extension for the Catholic University in Leuven.<sup>6</sup> From around 1973 Le Roy advised the architect on the process of developing the grounds that had commenced in 1971 with planting of trees by students, and all came to a sudden and unscheduled halt in 1977. In 1973 he was commissioned to guide the development of the landscape at Lewenborg, a new housing estate in Groningen, for a ten-year period.<sup>7</sup> Also in 1973 he commenced a project at the Technical University in Eindhoven and one in

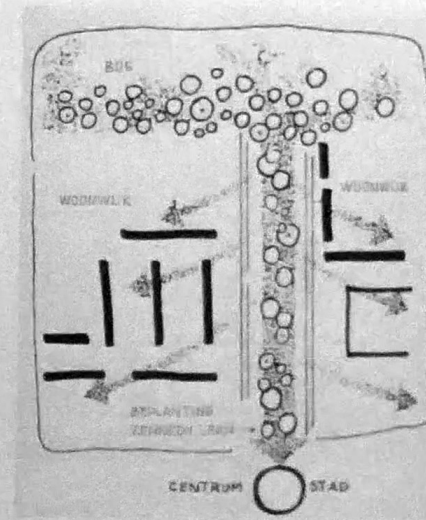


Figure 3 Le Roy's project at the Kennedylaan in Heerenveen served to bring aspects of his theoretical model into practice, with nature penetrating deep into the city. (Source: *Natuur uitschakelen natuur inschakelen* (1973)).

Enschede, both of limited duration, whilst also working at a church, the Regenboogkerk in Leeuwarden. There were other projects abroad, particularly in Cergy Pontoise, the Parisian new town (1978), and Hamburg-Veddel (1983).<sup>8</sup> These projects provided Le Roy with practical experience in working with groups of people and valuable insights into political and planning processes.

From 1971 onwards Le Roy would use these insights and experiences in series of articles he prepared for *Plan*, a journal for design and environment representing official bodies of architects, town planners and landscape architects, interior designers and engineers. Written as entertaining exposés, they resemble the adventures of folk hero Till Eulenspiegel<sup>9</sup> in that they criticise contemporary (consumption) society by means of exposing its misconceived rules and regulations. This independent but undiplomatic approach reveals the dealings and failures of the official system with respect to individuals and groups of people and environment, and show it to be pre-occupied by maintaining power, rather than finding better solutions (Figure 6).

Like Eulenspiegel in the end Le Roy's exposures did little to enamour him with the establishment, which relished in the failure of his projects, not being able to see that they were the main cause of this. Thus unable to change society with ironic criticism, Le Roy decided to do it by example instead. In the 1960s he had



Figure 4 The Kennedylaan consists of a long narrow strip of 18 metres wide and just over a kilometer long, which was transformed from a bland grass area into a varied range of ecological habitats.



Figure 5 With no valid prototypes Le Roy suggested to recycle demolition materials to create varied opportunities for plant growth. During the 1970s the giant hogweed became largely associated with the so-called 'Le Roy gardens'. Here an example at Kennedylaan, Hesterween.

bought a plot of land in Mildam, where he had built himself a studio (Figure 7), and commenced with dumping some building rubble. This was largely extended from the later 1970s onwards when the self-named 'ecotect' (from ecology and architect) devised the concept of the eco-cathedral (Figure 8). It was based on the idea that the time scale of present day thinking was too short, but that within religion the concept of time is eternity is well accepted, which is also the basis for sound ecological thinking. Thus he envisages ecological processes which as natural processes take place in space and time, and the cathedral which serves as a metaphor 'for the evolutionary processes of human beings' creative potential'.<sup>10</sup> He foresees a process that will take place over many centuries. Thus he commenced with stacking of recycled paving material and building rubble, creating towers and structures of increasing complexities (Figure 9). These assist in retaining and drawing up water, speeding up processes of decomposition with higher temperatures, and by creating a range of different conditions they thus ensure increased variety. While he has been primarily responsible for building work himself, Le Roy has been assisted in this creative process by others, particularly in the year 2000, when Mildam provided one of the venues for creative participation of expatriate Frisians returning for a reunion (Figure 10).



Figure 6 The landscape project at the Lewenborg, a new housing estate in Groningen, became a success when a resident with a miniature train was encouraged to set this up through the area. However after ten years it succumbed through political in-fighting, after which Le Roy used it as a basis for writing some pertinent exposes.





Figure 7 Le Roy's longest running project is that on the area surrounding his studio in Muidam that he built himself.

### Exploring the legacy

Explorations of Le Roy's work have tended to concentrate on assessments of his success, or investigations of his philosophical and intellectual framework. Rather than exploring why projects have failed it might be worth trying to provide a more general analysis to establish where he did have an influence, and to attempt a preliminary assessment in the light of other contemporary developments.

Le Roy's general theory positions man as part of the ecosystem, which although not new as a standpoint, provided a counterweight to contemporary attitudes towards nature conservation. These understood nature as somewhere, which happened without human beings. However within the past twenty years or so there has been a substantial shift in this attitude, particularly with respect to the creation of 'new nature', which has taken off considerably everywhere in the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> While it will be difficult to attribute this completely to Le Roy, it is likely however that he contributed substantially to a shift in popular opinion towards acceptance of 'created' nature.

Besides this understanding of man's position towards nature, Le Roy also re-defined the meaning of nature. To him anything subjected to natural processes is nature, whatever the provenance of its components. This differed from contemporary nature



Figure 8 The ecotect Le Roy deliberating over a new supply of rubble for the creation of his eco-cathedral, which embodies his various theories on sustainability, community involvement and art.

conservation practice, which looked at classification of plant geographical districts, which investigated the native plants for specific areas.<sup>12</sup> These districts have long been used as a basis also for planting design by recommending local species for a specific area. Possibly due to Le Roy's heretic approaches there presently appears to be a lesser reactionary response with respect to the use of exotic plants.

Le Roy's all encompassing philosophy sees various aspects of nature and culture to be integrated as one, as symbolised with his concept of the eco-cathedral. Rather than the current fashion of placing of art objects, he sees art as an integral part of the creative process, which means that the eco-cathedral is art as well as nature. However the artistic is not emphasised but instead is taken for granted, it is natural, and left to the observer. This is possibly one of the most profound lessons from Le Roy's efforts, but it may also be the cause of it not having been noticed in surveys of landart, a position in which it would comfortably qualify.<sup>13</sup> Le Roy's worldview also affected the idea and purpose of ecological gardens. Traditionally the main purpose of them in the Netherlands was to be 'instructive', i.e. to serve as educational resources for school children. The first of these had been Thijssse's Hof in Bloemendaal opened in 1925, named after the school-teacher Jac. P. Thijssse who had instigated it. It was intended to include the whole local dune flora in order to create an awareness of conservation issues. While



Figure 9 Recycled paving and building materials are stacked in artistic arrangements and form the foundations for Le Roy's eco-cathedral in Mildam.

other gardens such as the Scientific Garden in Zuiderpark in The Hague laid out between 1933 and 1936 emphasised scientific purposes, they represented national plant communities, and similarly were mainly used for educational purposes.<sup>14</sup> Le Roy, who had rejected the elaborate maintenance required in these traditional ecological or 'heem' gardens, proposed a different kind of ecology, as a continuing creative process that involved human beings. Le Roy is therefore seen as one of the main pioneers in participation of citizens in public greenspace.<sup>15</sup>

In his theoretical model Le Roy foresaw interconnecting systems of green networks, both through the countryside and inside cities. While the importance of green networks in the Netherlands has been officially recognised in the Ecological Framework (1990), this ceases at the edge of cities. Current city planning still emphasises the compact city, a densely built urban environment, while Le Roy's ideal foresees a green environment. The new interest in establishing a prototype of a sustainable city is however probably closer to the ideals of Le Roy. In the countryside large scale agriculture has substantially diminished wildlife, while cities have gradually become habitats for larger numbers of species. The latter could be substantially enhanced with larger greenspaces, with design and management regimes that have ecology in mind. There is still much to learn and advance with reference to this aspect.

Le Roy's plea for more creative involvement of the citizens in architecture and



Figure 10 While building is continuing elsewhere on Le Roy's site in Mildam, nature is overtaking the first stages of the eco-cathedral whilst awaiting further building work that is intended to continue during the third millennium.

urban design can be recognized today as 'inspraak' and 'samenspraak' as ways to enable this process. Also there are currently more own designed houses built than there were in the 1960s. While this desire appears to have achieved its objectives with respect to participation, it is unlikely that he foresaw these as the bureaucratic processes they have become.

## Conclusion

After more than 30 years of theoretical debate and physical toil in his protest against the consumption society it is clear that Le Roy has contributed substantially to put environment on the political agenda. Although he was not solely responsible for getting and maintaining it there, his controversial views encouraged and inspired discussion without which the Netherlands would have been culturally poorer. By ensuring this richer debate he contributed and acted as catalyst to ensure a greater environmental diversity than it would have been without him.

The above shows that besides perhaps the terminology with respect to sustainability, community involvement and community art, there is not much that is real-



ly new today. Most of these aspects had been considered by Le Roy who foresaw a flexible dynamic environment that remained vibrant through change. His philosophy anticipated this would happen as an alternative way of living and he showed how this underpinned the 'design' process.

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## Notes

1. Han Lörzing, *Van Bosplan tot Floriade. Nederlandse park- en landschapsontwerpen in de twintigste eeuw* (Rotterdam: 010, 1992), 62
2. 'Het saldo van '66', HP (51-52), 22 December 1979, 10-13
3. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963)
4. Club van Rome, *De Grenzen aan de Groei*, English version as the Club of Rome, *The Limits of Growth* (London: Earth Island, 1972)
5. I have relied on dates given in Lörzing, *Van Bosplan tot Floriade*, 63
6. Louis le Roy, 'creatie-re-creatie', *Plan No 7* (1978), 26-53; Louis le Roy 'Onze spectaculaire samenleving' *Plan No 4* (1975), 29-65
7. 'Brieven van Louis G. le Roy: Groningen' *Plan No 3* (1983); *Plan No 4* (1983); *Plan No 5* (1983); *Plan No 6* (1983); *Plan No 7+8* (1983); L. le Roy, 'Het ware verhaal over het Le-Roy-Project' *Loeks*, 10 August 1983, 17 August 1983, 24 August 1983, 31 August 1983, 14 September 1983, 28 September 1983, 5 October 1983, 12 October 1983
8. 'Brieven van Louis G. le Roy: Hamburg 1', *Plan No 11* (1983), 'Brieven van Louis G. le Roy: Hamburg 2', *Plan No 12* (1983).
9. One of Le Roy's books draws this conscious connection to Eulenspiegel: Louis G. le Roy, *Uilenspiegelijes: Onze creatieve potentie misbruikt?* (Deventer: Ankh-Hermes, 1984)
10. Le Roy in: Esther Boukema and Philippe Vélez McIntyre, *Natuur Cultuur Fusie/ Nature Culture Fusion* (Rotterdam: Nai, 2002), 27-39
11. Tracy Metz, *Nieuwe Natuur: Rapportages over veranderend landschap* (Amsterdam: Ambo, 1998)
12. Chr.G. van Leeuwen and H. Döing Kraft, *Landschap en Beplanting in Nederland: Richtlijnen voor de soortenkeuze bij beplantingen op vegetatiekundige grondslag* (Wageningen: H. Veenman, 1959), 55-56
13. See e.g. John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary art in the landscape* (New York, London, Paris: Abbeville, 1998)
14. See Jan Woudstra, 'Jacobus P. Thijsse's influence on Dutch landscape architecture' in Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, *Nature and Ideology: Natural garden design in the twentieth century* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997), 155-185
15. Jan te Velde, *Meedoen met het Groen: Samenwerking tussen overheid en burger bij het beheer van de openbare ruimte* (Haarlem: Schuyt, 1995), 15