

# GREEN VISION

As an anarchist, populist, ecosystem activist and artist, Louis Le Roy is, appropriately, the first of four visionaries of the 'city green' movement portrayed over the next 13 pages. His vision is an instructive alternative to the technocratic culture that threatens to suffocate so much of our environment.



# LOUIS LE ROY

George Orwell was wrong. Throughout the world, and especially in Germany, people are not cowering before a totalitarian state, but are discussing and implementing the return of Mother Nature to the city. Nature is now a major economic and political issue—we are realising that man is a part of nature and that the city is part of an ecosystem, or if not the whole city, at least the suburbs. To paraphrase the British zoologist, Denis Owen, the city centre can be to the suburbs what the bare mountain top can be to the wooded foothills.

Ecologists cannot isolate themselves and look at a nature only in nature reserves, because isolation does not make an ecosystem: the individual must be made to feel that he is part of nature and that nature is part of him. My approach to this is the making of wild gardens, which are the foundations of an alternative lifestyle to the present technocratic culture.

The wild garden must be built, and must consciously be part of the ecosystem, but it is vital that the self-conscious act of construction does not become an act of planning. It must never lose its 'wild hairs', for if it does it becomes part of the static and human-dominated environment. The wild garden should be constantly changing, subject to all the forces of nature and society, for it is a result of nature's evolution, which is a sum of weak forces rather than the strong forces of social revolution. It should not be imposed on areas, but should rather harmonise. If we do not do this the garden will be seen as an invading force from outside. Politicians and planners mistrust the wild garden because they see it as an anarchic force opposed to the idea of a well planned and organised city. The wild garden is not orderly or simple, but is as many-sided as any entire culture. The adage of François Jacob, the French biologist and social philosopher, 'Plus l'organisme est complexe, plus il est libre' ('The more complex the organism, the freer it is') is true of the wild garden.

Cities must now no longer be seen as artificial centres, devoid of nature, but as power stations of their own ecosystems. ♪

Louis Le Roy describes himself not as an ecologist, nor as an architect, but as an 'ecotect'. He is not concerned with producing beautifully designed gardens, but with helping people to take what he sees as their rightful place in the urban ecosystem. Of course, this kind of philosophy flies in the face of convention and of professional landscape architects and designers. Many are quick to criticise his 'limited' success rate and point to his projects' shortcomings. But to Le Roy this is all the more reason to keep going: the battle creates the kind of controversy about the environment which leads to his real goal—to make people think.

#### Minimum planning

Le Roy's premise is that traditional forms of parks are sterile, unecological environments where nature has only a limited chance of flourishing. He 'designs' parks with the minimum of planning, leaving the majority of decisions to be made by people on the spot while they're planting — a spontaneous combustion of ideas. Mechanisation is discouraged and Le Roy limits the participants to three tools: a spade to plant and a saw and secateurs to redistribute dead material for humus generation.

Le Roy, despite the

criticism, has been able to test his philosophy on the ground. His first opportunity came in 1966 when the town council of his native Heerenveen, in northern Holland, made available a strip of land known as the Kennedylaan, 1,2, 15 kilometres long and only 18 metres wide, for the formation of the first of his wild gardens. It was a daunting task to take this sliver of land and improve it for the local authority. Eventually it cost more than four times as much as a comparable traditional park to complete. The planting was intentionally as diverse as Le Roy could imagine. Over 1000 plant varieties were used and the construction was anything but conventional, as he used cast-off building materials for the walls and terraces of the planting areas. Much of the blame for the high cost could be placed on the town council which insisted that the work, which was intentionally to be done without any drawings, be carried out by its own parks department rather than Le Roy's volunteer workforce.

Le Roy's 'un-plan' for Kennedylaan consisted of areas for walks, for building and maintaining the gardens, for biology and botany lessons, for growing young plants to be used elsewhere, and for statues. The maintenance section wasn't developed as well as the production area for new



plants and this was disastrous for the park. Some of the more robust species engulfed the weaker varieties and to some observers it appeared that horticultural havoc reigned. Through it all the parks department continued to be in charge, much to Le Roy's dismay, as he felt it became too tidy. Consequently the Kennedylaan has not achieved the diversity it promised, but in its prime it possessed a quality rarely found in the conventional municipal park, and which derived from the real aesthetic of nature.

#### Landscape opposition

Although Le Roy's ideas came up against strong opposition from landscape designers and park officials, there was widespread acceptance from the public. 'Le Roy gardens' and

playgrounds sprang up, not only in Holland, but elsewhere in Europe. They have been made by community groups, schools and even some local authorities. Le Roy himself has been active in the construction of a major housing estate project at Lewenborg, Holland, in Le Jardin Ecologique at Cergy-Pontoise, France, and other 'wild', 'unplanned' schemes. To him this work is of less importance than what he believes to be his success in changing attitudes and in awakening a knowledge in people that they could be responsible for their own environments. In 1973 Le Roy published *Natuur witschakelen, natuur inschakelen* (Nature unchained, nature chained) and is now working on a new book as well as lecturing extensively.

**1** Le Roy's wild garden project with the local people at Kennedylaan, in Heerenveen, northern Holland; defeated by the bureaucrats, is not necessarily ecologically sound. Education and user control through participation are the key constituents of his approach to greening.

**2** A section of the Kennedylaan wild garden. Le Roy stresses the importance of using materials and tools that come to hand—here whole sections of a demolished wall are used as paving and wall materials. The professional planner might call it anarchy, but local people call it theirs.

