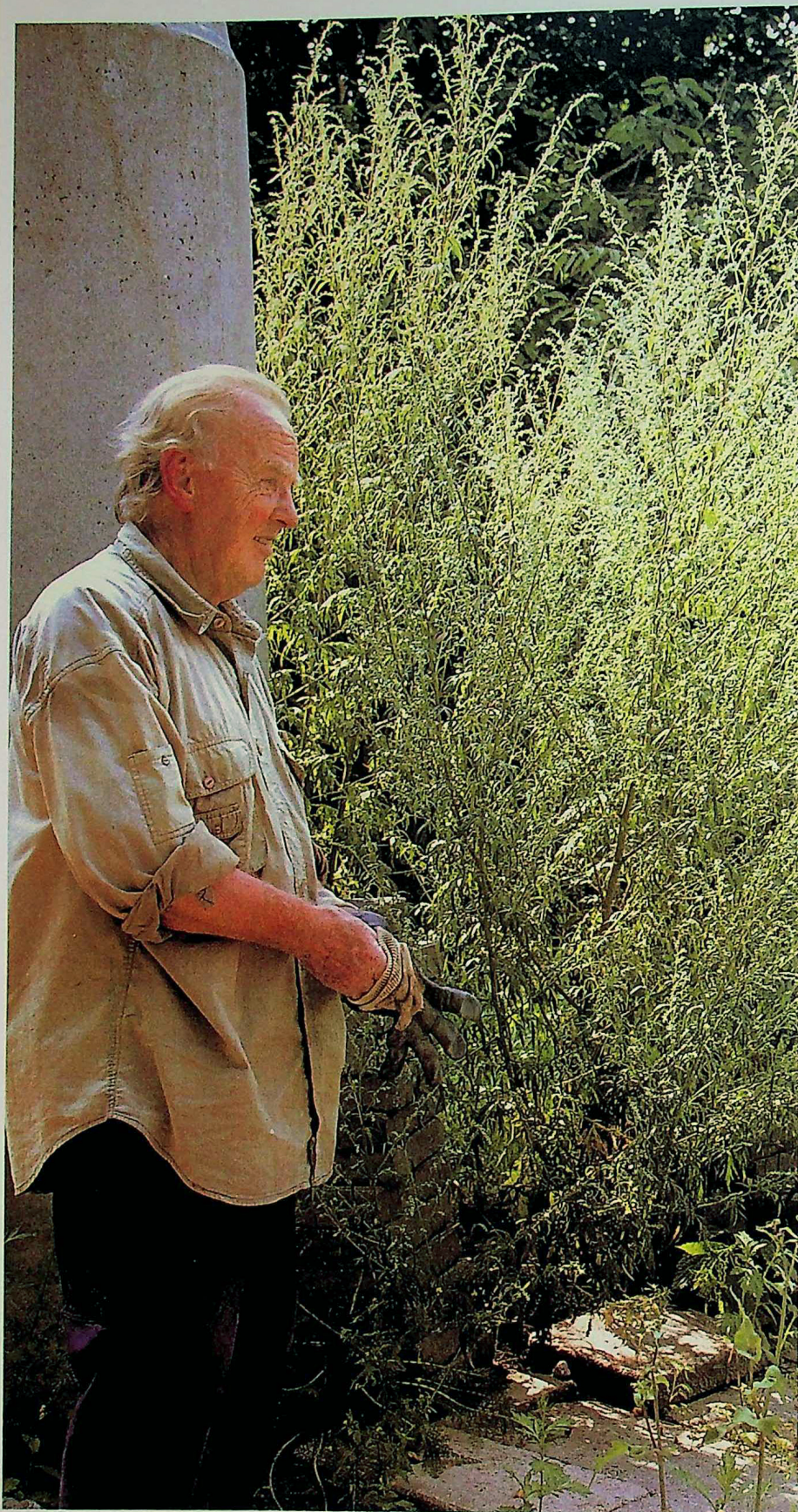


Paradise reclaimed

Louis G. Le Roy's life's work is celebrated in the book 'Nature Culture Fusion': his Ecocathedral is a unique structure of recycled building materials left to nature to reclaim.

By Alan Powers





the photographs on the following pages show various aspects of the Ecocathedral. Made by Louis G. Roy, over more than 30 years, at Mildam in the Netherlands, the Ecocathedral uses waste building materials, which nature has then been allowed to take over.

If Louis G. Le Roy were English, we should no doubt feel satisfied in calling him an English eccentric. The Dutch, on the other hand, we view as typically practical and unromantic. Le Roy, born in 1924, with a career as a teacher of drawing and art history behind him, embarked over 30 years ago on his project to build single-handedly an Ecocathedral at Mildam, a small town in the Netherlands, using entirely waste building materials, which is an unusual thing to do in any country.

The Ecocathedral is built as the foundation for a much taller future structure, which Le Roy thinks might require a further 200 years of work. Unlike Antoni Gaudí's church of Le Sagrada Família in Barcelona, there is no pre-ordained scheme for the completion of the structure. Le Roy looks forward to the idea that what he has started will increase in complexity as it grows, in line with the great religious structures of the past that were also built by hand. In evoking complexity, so different to the minimalism of Carl André or the Danish sculptor of brick walls, Per Kirkeby, currently the nearest comparable figures, Le Roy reveals his openness to process. The changes brought by working in partnership with nature are part of the definition of an Ecocathedral as more than just a secularised version of a religious building. As Le Roy says, 'It is totally unscientific to claim to be able to fix life. To do so means that you exclude a number of factors in every prognosis you make.' While the term Ecocathedral might be glibly applied, say, to the Eden Project, this is not a 19th-century Botanic Garden writ large. To quote Le Roy again, 'I plant as large a variety as possible and let nature decide what gets eliminated and how these plants will get interwoven.' He is interested in the insects and wildlife generated by his work, but also hopes that 'there will be chances for kids to play and people will also be able to pick both fruit and flowers, so that almost paradisiac situations can occur.'

If we did not call Le Roy an eccentric, we would need to call him an artist. If he is no André or Kirkeby, then the long time-span of work on the same site may remind us of Ian Hamilton Finlay's construction of Little Sparta. With his criticism of society and its values, Finlay has much in common with Le Roy, who is also concerned with a big message, though he delivers his in a more sober fashion. In fact, nothing could be more practical, more rational and therefore – according to stereotype – more typically Dutch, than his project.

The book, with its fine, mostly black and white, photographs and selection of dual-language Dutch and English texts by Le Roy him-



self and three commentators, sets out the didactic and critical dimensions of the project in a clear and helpful way and enhances its significance and status. What is especially exciting about Le Roy's thinking is the link he makes between the physical condition of the developed world, with its increasingly passive population – with necessities of life provided, at nearly all economic levels, but by unseen and unknown hands – and the anxiety that most people now rightly feel about the overall condition of the natural environment. Le Roy's building scheme is a demonstration model for rectifying these situations in a practical and spiritual way, by using the waste products of urban building to capture new energies from nature, combining the aesthetic with the use-

ful. He disposes of the damaging but widespread assumption that nature is a separate category from humanity, and emphasises their interaction. He is showing how creativity, in a realm entirely distinct from the market economy, can be a cure for the impoverished reality of modern life, and open to all. It is, in its way, a piece of pure Arts and Crafts thinking, provided one interprets this as driven by social and philosophical ends (repairing the damage of materialism) rather than mistaking its means (making and selling stuff) for the ends. ○ *Nature Culture Fusion*, by Louis G. Le Roy, is published by NAI, Rotterdam, price €38. The Ecocathedral is situated on the Yntzelaan in Mildam, the Netherlands, and is always open. For details see <http://www.ecokathedraal.nl/>

