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Rotterdam, verstedelijkt landschap : drawing the groundlandscape urbanism today: the work of Palmbout Urban Landscapes

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## **Frits Palmboom**

Rotterdam, verstedelijkt landschap | Drawing the Ground—Landscape Urbanism Today.

The Work of Palmboom Urban Landscapes

*Rotterdam verstedelijkt landschap* ('Rotterdam Urbanised Landscape') is an investigation of the spatial development of the Rotterdam urban region, as well as a manifesto for the integration of landscape and urbanism in analysis and design. Frits Palmboom wrote the book in 1987, when working as a designer at the urban development service for the city of Rotterdam. Dutch urban planning in the 1980s, as Palmboom sketches in the introduction, inherited two traditions: the functionalist thinking of the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) striving for 'scientific' unitary concepts often starting with a *tabula rasa*, and the subsequent revaluation of the historical city, which resulted in a granulation of the designed urban fabric. The book offered a way out, an alternative way of reading and writing the city, by conceiving the city as a landscape. This was quite innovative in the 1980s, because urban planning and landscape architecture were two different disciplines that—especially when operating in the city—seldom overlapped.

By means of a series of maps and photos, the book leads the reader through decisive processes and events: the interplay between man and nature in the dynamic Maas Delta, the consolidation of the dykes, the polderisation of the hinterland and the subsequent urbanization of the agricultural structure, superimposition of highways and railways and fragmentation, the development of the harbour, the destruction of the city centre in WWII, modernist planning, and urban renewal. The result, Palmboom concludes, is an urbanized landscape consisting of superimposed layers interacting in a complex way. This 'layer approach' became a *leitmotiv* for many landscape architects and urban planners in the

decades to follow. Also in 1987, a group of young designers, among whom was Dirk Sijmons, developed the Plan Ooievaar, applying urban and landscape design on the scale of the region and taking the natural conditions of the rivers as a starting point for the development of the Dutch River Area. Both designers had in common that they undermined the traditional divide between cultural and natural landscapes, which contradicted the sectorial approach of landscape by involving planning services responsible for nature and agriculture, as well as urban planning.

The importance of Palmboom's work becomes clear when reading *Drawing the Ground*, in which he looks back on twenty years of practice in his office Palmbout Urban Landscapes, founded with Jaap van den Bout in 1990. Comparing both books, Palmboom's frame of reference and methodology are remarkably stable, anchored in his insights developed in the 1980s. The analytical framework has developed into a planning device, starting from the ground: a substratum formed by its geological layers, its natural dynamics, and human intervention of all sorts. The well-illustrated book explains how a reading of the historical and contemporary layers of the landscape is the starting point for design, ranging from the regional scale, over urban expansions and new residential areas, to interventions in the existing city and (re)design of infrastructure and public space. This methodical approach might seem the result of post-rationalization, as is often the case when designers look back on their work. However, Palmbout develops its method project by project, taking into account the peculiarities of each assignment and the uncertainties and programmatic changes over time. The drawing is thereby an essential tool, described by Palmboom as 'an instrument for connecting the smallest detail with the most distant horizon.' The designer's love of the drawing is further explained and celebrated in a playful 'sketchbook' with a selection of

Palmboom's drawings in the Moleskine series 'Inspiration and Process in Architecture', published in 2014.

As the subtitle of *Drawing the Ground* suggests, Palmboom feels—in my opinion unnecessarily—the need to qualify his office's work as 'landscape urbanism', thereby referring to the 'new discipline' developed in the 1990s by Charles Waldheim and Co. At the same time, he distances himself from landscape urbanism's arguments for a process-oriented, above a form-oriented approach, as the 'architectonic moment'—and this is reflected in the projects—has its own autonomy independent from process and programme. Creating his very own design vocabulary and methodology, Palmboom's work is, however, grounded in a broad field of design approaches: he mentions Bernardo Secchi's 1980s 'progetto del suolo', the urban extensions designed by Hendrik Berlage and Cor Van Eesteren, the reactions to CIAM functionalism by Team X and Aldo Van Eyck. If the reference to landscape urbanism teaches us anything, it is that there is little new about it.

**Bruno Notteboom**

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