



# OKRA landscape for a vital city



# architects

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Photos: Christiaan Krouwels

The architects at OKRA landscape architects in the Netherlands are well-known for their designs in which distinct, often innovative ideas, are fashioned into practical, feasible plans. Whether it's for a neighbourhood square in Rotterdam or an urban district in London, OKRA designs in detail but always leaves scope for flexible use. An interview with Martin Knuijt, one of the founders of OKRA, and his new office partner, Wim Voogt, on vital cities and the rise of *homo ludens*: "We want people to discover for themselves what they can do with a site."

Cathelijne Nuijsink

*OKRA has four founder members. What are your backgrounds and what drew you all together?*

Knuijt: We were fellow students at Wageningen University. The idea of having our own firm of consultants originated when we were on a sketching trip to the Ardennes in our first year. There were four of us sitting in a caravan and fantasising over a glass of beer about starting our own office at some point in the future. After our studies, we all went our separate ways but, eighteen months later in 1994, we met up again and exchanged ideas about the first illusions and disillusion we had about working in the real world. That was when we decided to put our student idea into practice.

*What was the climate of landscape architecture in the Netherlands at that time?*

Knuijt: Everyone was convinced that the period of modernism was definitely over. In contrast with the Netherlands, serious changes were already starting to take place elsewhere in Europe; we could see that. Barcelona was a hot topic. The School of Versailles in France was

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becoming successful once more after leading a moribund existence for years. The first unsuccessful copies of these very strong examples were then starting to appear in Europe. Consultancies in the Netherlands were either specialised in designing very strong concepts or in taking a very conventional approach with significantly few underlying ideas. Even then we wanted to design public spaces which had an extra significance for the city. Not just presenting innovative design concepts, but ensuring that they could be put into practice as well.

*How has OKRA made its mark?*

Voogt: In our first project, which was the redesign of the Van Heek Square in Enschede in the east of the Netherlands, we showed that we could create a public space which dragged the city right out of its doldrums. It was an innovation in itself – both then and now – and showed that by renovating just one square you could turn an entire section of the city into a driving force for the city as a whole. Nowadays, entire parts of a city are torn down because they are no longer functional and then replaced by something completely new. But we think differently about these things. We would rather transform what is already there, than knock the whole thing down and start again.

*Is there a typical OKRA way of working?*

Knuijt: We are fascinated by creating vital cities, post-productive cities. The rural production landscape in the Netherlands is rapidly changing into an urban network. Increasing urbanisation needs attractive landscapes and spaces around it. The city is no longer necessarily a place where you have to be, but must be one where you would really like to be. Quality must be given to cities by making them liveable. This implies that you must make use of the green spaces, water and energy, not just to design a climate-neutral city but primarily to improve its liveability. To our mind, a lively city is made up of places which function at different times of the day and whose accessibility is well organised. How can you create places which will function together as a network – for cycles, cars and public transport?

*As well as post-productive cities, do you think about the scale of a landscape as well, the post-productive landscape?*

Knuijt: Definitely. You can see agricultural landscape all around you, but is it really that? No, it isn't. The landscape in the Netherlands – and in other urbanised regions in Europe – is entirely urban, in fact. We use agricultural green areas for recreation at the weekend. The rural production landscape in the Netherlands has become the countryside for *homo ludens* or man the player. And this has far-reaching implications for urban design. We have to introduce urban programmes which are linked in with the cultural-historical landscape.

*Why is preserving this cultural-historical landscape so essential?*

Knuijt: Themes which are imposed are fatal. The theme has to emanate from the place. There are wonderful post-industrial landscapes – just think of the Ruhr Area. The parks there grew out of their own past and have a kind of purity, providing something that truly belongs to the economy of the area.

*City, landscape, nature and public spaces – there are more and more sensations and experiences. How can we prevent the landscape from becoming one big amusement park?*

Knuijt: We search for the authenticity of landscapes. You have to distinguish between places that are already programmed and places which people have to discover for themselves. Intensify those pre-programmed landscapes with a couple of extra amusement parks – but leave the other places completely alone.

*How do you design the transition between city and landscape for homo ludens?*

Voogt: First, it is about making a change in the mind-set. City and countryside must not turn their backs on each other, but should each take advantage of the other. Second, there have to be really good, high-quality connections between city and country so that they are both accessible. Third, the outskirts of the city must be made attractive so that you want to go there as well.

Knuijt: The combination of urban sprawl and

the extensive social networks common in the Netherlands means that everything is connected with everything else. You live in one place, work in another and spend your free time in a third. The networks of city and landscape are very closely interconnected here. You must not separate these networks; otherwise you would be dividing the Netherlands into small compartments. Even if the Netherlands looks like one large expanse of grass, you still have to recognise that this green area is part of the urban system.

*Is the post-productive city a sustainable one too?*

Knuijt: We have to make cities which can continue to modernise. You must see sustainability as something much wider than an urban ecology of green spaces, water and energy. We have to make cities which are also sustainable socially and economically.

Voogt: Do you know what sustainability is *not*? Consumption! Or imitating places which are not linked to a specific space, completely without identity. It is not about making something that we are going to demolish in ten years' time so that we can replace it with something else.

*What is your approach to urban culture in your designs?*

Knuijt: The interesting thing about a city is its mixture of functions; this is something we don't find in modernism. It is, in fact, about mixing groups of people and creating a city which is accessible to everyone, to older people as well as young people and families; this is what you would like to see in an urban culture. Breeding grounds, the attractive and vital places in a city – these are the places you must keep. The shop on the corner and the small local garage where you can still see them repairing a couple of cars outside – these are the features which disappear for good when a neighbourhood is pulled down. The urban culture has its anchors and you have to understand what they are. Demolition on its own ruins a city economically and spatially. Our motto is to revitalise the city, not amputate parts of it.

*How can we design a landscape in such a way that it does justice to the dynamism of our quickly*

*changing society?*

Voogt: Globalisation does not mean that everything coalesces and starts to become a homogeneous mass. We can move around a lot faster nowadays and we travel to more places but, in contrast, we still yearn for our own familiar surroundings. In landscapes, however, we can discern the unmistakable signs of continual blurring; we can remedy this by taking the diverse identities embedded there and making them recognisable again.

*What does this imply for a long-term design?*

Voogt: Don't impose a use but make it possible. Programming a place doesn't mean that you have to label every single square metre but that the space can be used by different users at different times. Our designs are extremely detailed, but the way that you can use them is made as flexible as possible.

*What is the importance of your lighting designs for the city?*

Voogt: During the day, the city is shaped by mass and space. At night, a completely different landscape is possible just by using light to hide or reveal spaces. By choosing whether or not to introduce illumination into projects, we can create particular sites and bring 'the city of the night' into an existence all of its own.

Knuijt: The idea behind a night landscape is based on the dynamics of the city. We want to create spaces with a rhythm of use. Public spaces have a day and a night-time rhythm and we would like, of course, to see these day-time spaces used in the evenings as well. There is also the weekly rhythm of markets, which fill up empty squares at set times. And finally there is the year's rhythm of the seasons. Using light you can determine which places you want to link to certain routes during these various rhythm cycles.

*What about green spaces in the city?*

Voogt: If we look at what is happening abroad, there could be a greater focus on our concepts of planting in the Netherlands. It's not that we lack the capacity to do this, but we are held back far too much by our clients and by the problem



OKRA in one of their recently finished projects: The Dutch Defense Line near by Utrecht.

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### Rapid developments and countless sources of information make the identity of the place more important than ever

of maintaining public green spaces.

Knuijt: It bothers us that the planting in public spaces has become so meagre since the sixties. Nearly everything is public space, but this is usually only a few grassy fields with the odd tree, preferably a plane tree because they grow so well in cities. We advocate a richer and more varied green picture. Specific to the place. This implies making choices about public spaces and asking ourselves whether everything should be accessible to the public. Having part of a public space which is not open all the time, but half open or a private area that is open from time to time creates a much more varied city landscape. Just consider the huge buildings in New York whose occupants adopt green areas. What does the city get in return? Small pocket parks, atria and roof gardens which are looked after with zeal.

*When is a design successful?*

Voogt: It is not about making a pretty design for yourself, but about the person you make it for being able to adopt it and feel a connection with it. The new part must add something, and the design must link in with the existing surroundings.

*What is the biggest challenge facing Dutch cities over the coming decades?*

Voogt: The main problem is fragmentation. We have a network of cities intersected by infrastructure. Bringing the city in balance as an urban system requires cohesion between all the separate projects. If there is no joint collective interest, there will only be individual developments. Cities may become more urban but, in contrast, they must have very attractive, green spaces. For OKRA, the key words are: vitality, liveliness, sustainability and accessibility for everyone.

*Your portfolio of projects is becoming increasingly international. What makes working outside the Netherlands so different from working here?*

Knuijt: The kind of remit! Assignments are often based on practical considerations in the Netherlands, and we are aiming for better than average. A lot of research is done here, but when

it comes to the implementation we are still trying to do too much with too few resources in the Netherlands. In response, we like to define the extent of the remit using our own initiative. In this way, we turned a remit for the design of six beach access points into a much more important assignment: a complete vision of the entire coast of Zeeland in the Netherlands. We think it is more interesting to know what the coast really looks like. Outside the Netherlands, the focus is much more on the actual remit. The client is also involved and, moreover, there is more respect for the architect's expertise. In London we are involved in the regeneration of the urban district of Croydon, an area which, after Westminster and the City of London, aims to become London's 'third city'. Without doubt, this is a comprehensive remit.

*What is left of the intimate characteristics of a project on the scale of a public square close to a theatre and other cultural buildings, like that at Holstebro in Denmark.*

Knuijt: We want people to discover the possibilities that lie in a landscape for themselves. This may mean that we create a stairway which can become a row of tiers to sit on, or make a pleat in the landscape which provides cover so that people experience it as a more secluded place. The trick is not to design places which are fully pre-programmed and set up just for a single purpose, but to design places which lend themselves for spontaneous uses instead. Stairways along waterways which lead people to sit down, or go fishing, or play with boats in the water are all examples of sites where you leave the use of the area to the people themselves.

*The master plan for Croydon in London looks like a prize example of sustainability. Is this a new direction for OKRA?*

Knuijt: Sustainability plays an important role in the more large-scale remits. In the Croydon project, we can take a more integrated approach. Economics, mobility, the environment, social relationships are all very closely connected. In China, for instance, we are designing a model garden which focuses on the cycle of water, nutrients and energy. If you can develop a

district in a city in a similar way - with production and consumption closely linked together - this creates very interesting correlations.

*What is the driving force behind your success and how do you keep it in motion?*

Voogt: A sharp concept in combination with the makeability of the plan remains the core quality of OKRA. We are driven by idealism to develop our concepts on the basis of what we want, and then we work out how we can realise them. You need new visions to continue to develop, but the real fun begins when the project is completed and handed over.

*How do you see the discipline of landscape architecture changing?*

Knuijt: Landscape architecture as a profession has always been very object-oriented but is now process-oriented. The discipline is now connected with the place and the underlying landscape. Rapid developments and countless sources of information make the identity of the place more important than ever. By taking the original situation and converting it into a revitalisation of an area, we are able to add something extra as landscape architects.

*What are your ambitions for the future?*

Knuijt: We started fifteen years ago as a company working on the revitalisation of public spaces. So that's something we know how to do. Now we want to work on the revitalisation of cities.

Voogt: We want to work on the larger type of project, one which allows us to show our expertise from vision to realisation. At the very top of our wish list is an opportunity to make a large urban park and a cemetery.

*What ideas have you still got up your sleeve?*

Voogt: Designing landscape cities. There will be a reassessment of the concepts of city and landscape.

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