

Plan

Wilhelminapark, Amsterdam 1994-1998

The site is a former multipurpose terrain on the edge of the city. A large empty area is transformed into a new housing estate with public housing and owner-occupied apartments. Various architects were involved in this estate of highrise developments enclosing an area of about 3 hectares. No design had yet been made for this space, although the art committee had asked for a proposal for a serial art work along the diagonal axis.

The proposal was to develop an integrated design for a city-park; to combine the art budget and that for the public space; and to reflect on the design and function of the public space from the perspective of art. Instead of the site being treated as a tabula rasa, with ideas projected on it, the existing conditions define the area as a place.

First of all a path runs diagonally across the area, linking the express tram station with the business park behind the housing estate. This path had to be included in the design. The second group of users are the future residents; important here is their everyday experience of the space. They look out over it, their children will play there and their dogs will be let out.

A second condition of the site was that it was nothing but a large empty space. This is related to the idea of a park - that is the representation of nature in a city. Not like an updated version of a 19th century idea, but based on the question of what the significance of a park is today, also in terms of form. The image of emptiness and solitude as urban qualities, as can be seen in the paintings of Edward Hopper and Giorgio de Chirico. The design is based on the movement of creating space, of making a clean sweep. All the functions are swept to the edges. A green carpet with fringes.

On three sides of the park there are rooms formed by hedges for different park functions. Their form derives from the plans of the surrounding architecture. In every building each resident has a storage room. These rooms are not so much designed as split into equal areas. Their form is defined by the contours of the building.

On one side are rooms with two playgrounds with a rose garden in between. On the second is a path with rooms on both sides with various trees and bushes, like an encyclopedia of scents. Traditional fragrant varieties are selected, all of them with white blossom; different varieties are in bloom as the year passes. On the street side of this lane of scents is an area where dogs can be let out. Each of these rooms has a bronze tree trunk that will get a bright green patina from the dog urine.

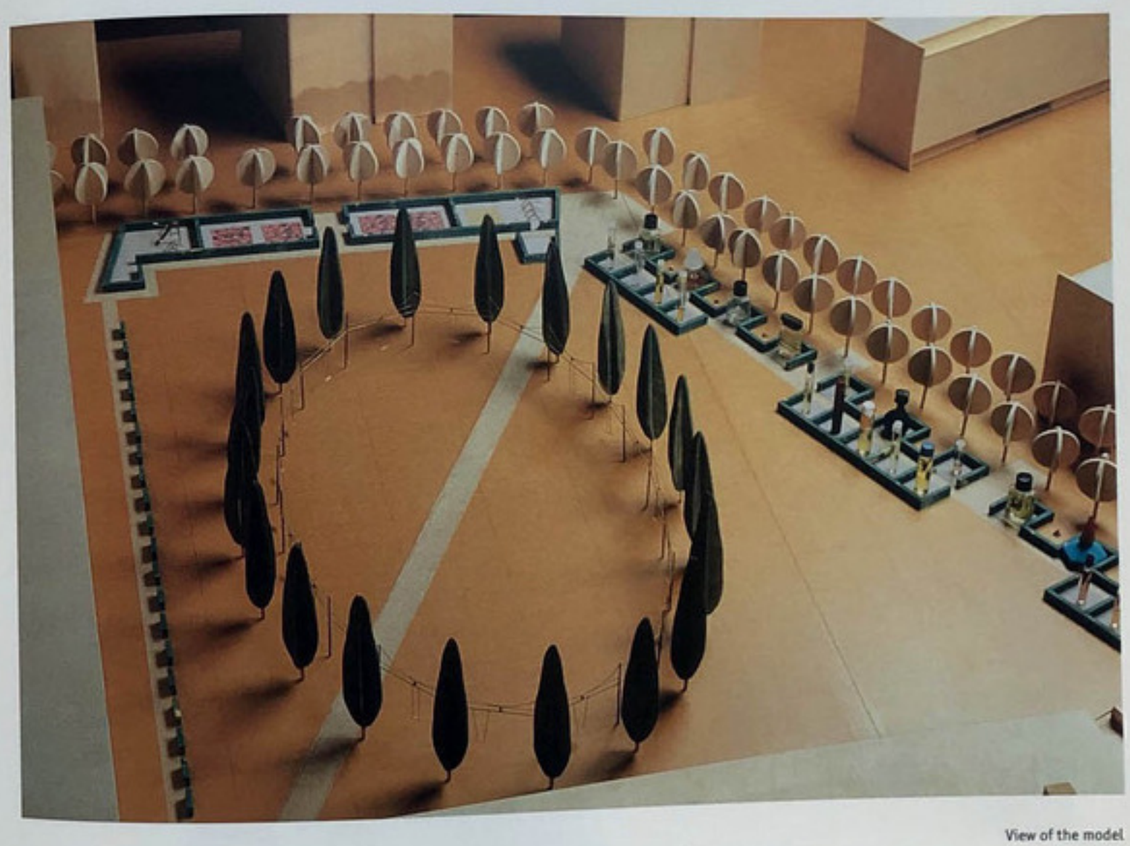
The southern wall is composed of open rooms, each with two benches. They are made of brick with wooden seats and in the centre is a concrete bolster that serves as a table. If someone decides to sit there, he can choose a bench with a view of the park or one secluded behind a hedge. Together all the benches indicate the form of an architectural structure. The fourth wall is cinematic: a series of low hedges forms a dotted line. Seen from the other side of the park, someone walking along that lane seems to appear and disappear. The park as a space in which you walk and are on show. In this way you're visible even on the edges - as a spectator.

The central area is an open field with an oval form defined by 22 Italian poplars. Inside it is an open steel construction with 22 masts and a lamp and a swing hanging in between. If you live on the park and look down and there's only one person sitting on a swing, your view already is set in motion. And even when no-one is there there are always the poplars rustling in the wind. This emptiness also has its beauty.

The final feature is the daffodils. They are all over the park. In the middle of the city you can see spring coming and then the whole park is suddenly in bloom. Once the grass is mown they are gone.

The image of emptiness and solitude is also related to the possibility of experiencing space. This is important certainly in cities, in densely populated areas. In Holland the public space is extremely structured. They even plan how you're supposed to behave, what is or is not permitted. In this sense this design is a counter movement. You have small sheltered paths and places, and you have the experience of a space that is not specified. In entering this space the passer-by is transformed from spectator to actor only to disappear again as a spectator. The experience of this passage is a mirror-experience. You are somewhere, self-evidently, and then you are there again, but this time you are positioned.

At the same time it must be a pleasant and welcoming place. When the swings were hung up the children came running. It worked like a magnet and there was a hive of activity. Suddenly the kids didn't have to queue to have a go on two swings in a playground; instead there were masses of swings with plenty of space between them too. And still you sit there alone on your swing in a vast space. Even for children this is a special experience, on top of everything that is there already, the fullness of information they are bombarded with. You are left to yourself, like a reflection. Of course, a swing is frivolous but it is also a form, an invention that belongs in a park. Just as a park is an invention that belongs in a city.



View of the model