

# Avoiding Architecture, a Manifesto

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## ABSTRACT

*The article is a stream of thought and realizations concerning the métiers of (internationally practiced) interior and landscape design today. It addresses two of the subjects that became Inside Outside/ Petra Blaise's specialisms through the past thirty years: curtains and gardens. Each section starts with a personal definition, followed by an added flow of thought or an argument. The piece does not draw conclusions or express opinions; it merely triggers awareness of topics that seem important at this moment in time.*

**Radical:** Supporting change.

**Design:** To make or draw plans for something.

**Strategy:** A detailed plan for achieving success in situations such as war, politics, business, industry, or sport, or the skill of planning for such situations.

Cambridge Dictionary (on line edition, 2016).

## INTRODUCTION

*The time we live in needs radicalism: there is no time to loose on 'wellness' and 'security' as these only go so far in a world that is in turmoil. All design work needs to be radical and support change: what else! The digital era sucks us collectively into a tunnel of blue light from which streams of un-hierarchical information flow like lava, an endless choice of media networks, apps and data that only few can unravel and digest. No way to discern what is true and what is false in the mountain of knowledge, experiences, drama's, lies, studies and analyses offered in all fields. Everything is for sale: services, shops, clubs, opportunities, meeting points, digital landscapes, countries, products, shares, people and objects – a global materialistic Walhalla. Nothing is tangible, tactile or true to scale. No smell, no vibes, no sound, no life, just loads of images to choose from for any purpose, and all up for grabs.*

## THE GARDEN

*Paradise (lost?). Feast of colour, fragrance, light, water and air under the universe. Theatre. Living room. Meeting place. Place for thought and wonder. Representation of the wild. Home to mammals, insects and birds, with carpets of foliage, fountains of light and waves of fluttering sounds. Place of growth and decay, of seasonal change. Microclimate. Biotope.*

*Trees for volume, verticality and visibility, protection (shade and wind), health (filter for polluted soil, air and sound), seasonal change (colour, scent, shape); for edible fruits and the attraction of birds, insects, fungus, moulds and other organisms;*

*for stability (anti erosion), cleaning and fertilizing (soil); and for fun (climbing, collecting leaves, flowers, fruit, etc.). Designed landscapes – taking European tradition as example – are either a synthetic mimicry of 'wilderness' or a form of manicured nature that mimics interiors.*

*All garden-types are dependent on maintenance and human interaction. Actually, gardens and the plants that shape and inhabit them need love and attention, an almost daily visit during which eyes and hands touch each detail. As gardens perpetually change, study of these changes is crucial to understand the biological processes; and to plan what actions need to be undertaken to maintain its quality. Flowers, fruits and ponds will attract birds, insects, frogs, toads and water-salamanders; fish will appear as by miracle and in your soil and rotting leaf layers milliards of micro-organisms, fungus, worms, beetles and sow-bugs will do their work to improve your garden condition. Drainage and irrigation and the occasional mulching and composting, trimming and grooming are part of the deal. Of course one should not forget to sit, read and entertain in one's garden – to wonder through and take in the scenting morning air.*

## THE PARK

*A cultural presence, representing the city and its values; economic tool to augment the value of neighbourhood and adjacent buildings; social tool, giving free space to inhabitants for encounters, sports and social interaction; connector, to bind*

different areas to one another; provider of infrastructure, to improve pedestrian flow in urban settings; political tool, to sooth negative emotions of citizens during building developments; strategic tool, to hide underground infrastructures and/or to seal polluted soil and garbage dumps.

Planting for the sake of positive emotion, for educational purposes, for consumption or use. Planting used as spatial tool: screen, filter, window, enclosure, boundary and connection. Planting as organizer of movement, views and experiences. Pavement and topography as facilitator for traffic, drainage, pedestrian flow, parking spaces, way-finding purposes; topography to overcome height differences, boundaries, and to open up views to the surroundings. Typography/graphics for information, wayfinding, for communicating site-specific regulations and education. Five trash-bin typology 'bouquets' for the various trash-types: glass, cans, plastic, paper and mixed garbage. Fences and gates for control and safety. Lighting for atmosphere and night visibility. Cameras for security. New: Low and transparent planting for the sake of overview and safety.

We can state that a landscape design – whether for an urban development, a public park or for a private garden – can no longer only be seen as a romantic embellishment of city or family house. It is truly an architectural, political and economic presence to be taken seriously!<sup>(1)</sup> Public gardens and parks are highly demanding environments, in the sense that they lay a claim on the care of several generations to achieve their intended form. A tree, for example, takes about 30 to 50 years to develop a convincing, effective size; and many trees reach 'adulthood' (i.e. forming seeds for the next generation) only after 100 years. This duration needs official recognition and financing. Professional staff needs

to be hired and the yearly acquisition of the necessary tools, soil, nutrients, plantings and materials is needed. So, stable support of collective and/or private funds is essential. Take for instance the Roberto Burle Marx gardens (Sítio Roberto Burle Marx), in Barra de Guaratiba near Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). A board is appointed to judge how such garden can be maintained. The master gardener has a hard time convincing the board of the garden's biological necessities and horticultural demands... now the board is the Boss. It will decide what actions can and cannot be taken to keep the garden in its 'original state'. Take away a tree that overgrows others or is weakened by age or sickness? Impossible! Trim an oversized shrub or thin-out seeded trees or multiplied plants? Very difficult indeed! Propagate through seeding? Suspect (because variations might occur)! Restore built structures such as walls, pergolas or garden pavilions? Only under the highest preservation regulations, meaning that technical improvement is almost out of the question (unless invisible). 'Preservation' is very often indistinguishable from falsification.<sup>(2)</sup> And then a bold 'realization' when practicing both interior and landscape architecture: Where architecture (and the curtain) is on its way to ruin from the moment it is born, landscape slowly grows toward an apotheosis that the author will never be able to enjoy!

## PLANTS

Naturally competitive, selective, multiplying and spreading, plants develop, grow and mix, forming spontaneous areas of 'wilderness' or 'nature'. In urban conditions plants represent nature. As composed patches and fields, plants organize space and define places. They provide sensual enjoyment through their aesthetic, seasonal

metamorphosis and scent. On a more cultural level, a plant can represent a tradition or country. Plants are used for cleaning polluted soil (through secretion of fluids via their root systems) and air (through photosynthesis). Their debris provides nutrients that improve soil conditions and stimulate animal life. All living organisms depend on soil conditions, water levels and climate, and on their position in relation to sun, moon, wind and draught; and, in the more urban context, on human care and protection.

Although we have learnt a lot about plants, their natural habitats, behaviour, qualities and composure; and although we have manipulated their basic 'families' into ever more attractive and varied species for use in our gardens and vases for centuries, their true characteristics and qualities are not yet fully understood. More and more, we learn of their sensibilities, their interactions and 'social behaviour' in relation to one-another, their communication with insects, animals and humans and their intelligent 'radical strategies' to develop successful recipes for self-defence and survival. What really goes on inside the earth's crust deeper than, say, 50 to 100 cm below the surface is also quite unknown, and it is a fascinating challenge for all of us to find out more about both The Plant and The Soil.

## THE INTERIOR

Architectural. Cultural. Economical. Educational. Functional. Private. Personal. Political. Public. Sensual. Spatial. Structural. The sum of things. The organization of life's scenarios. Composition of solids and voids. Place for human interactions. A protected place. A self-contained world. A series of experiences influenced by sequence, smell, light, sound, colour, material, airflow, temperature and scale. A composition of

transparent and opaque planes in vertical, diagonal and horizontal position, supported by ground and structural elements, with or without openings in all directions, both vertical and horizontal. Home to humans and pets.

All over the world people visit private houses, mansions, castles or studios that are left 'un-touched' for a greater public to visit and study. This form of voyeurism is intriguing: what makes it so attractive for us to go back in time and move into another person's world and social environment? Is it not just for educational purposes but also, maybe, a form of identification and consolation? In any case: the whole concept is deceptive, because it is simply impossible to leave everything as it is: take the curatorial responsibilities (UV light, moisture and temperature levels, dust, dirt, decay); the security requirements (camera's, cords, gates, covers, alarm systems;), the information necessity (boards, desks, folders, books); the economy (ticket office, shops); and, lately: the artist's interventions! What clutter and ugliness – exceptions aside!

## TEXTILES

Textiles protect our bodies, cover our beds, furniture, windows, floors, walls and ceilings. Cover the dead, the coffin and the altar. Represent a country, a religion, a culture and a moment. Protect the land from erosion. Structural material for machines, buildings, airplanes, space shuttles and broken limbs. Healing our trees, wounds and pets. Repairing the broken and supporting the damaged. Integrated in architecture, space technology, agriculture and sports; used for lightweight strengthening and household purposes.

Ah! Textiles. What richness, what meticulous craft, what unequalled artistry, what better tool to carry heroic, religious or romantic stories; exotic landscapes, cultural symbols and secret messages. What better reason for global travel, transport and exchange; for competition and improvement; for local job-creation and production, by hand and mechanically, in every culture through history. Originally only made with yarns spun from roots, bark, silk, wool, seed and leaf, and coloured with pigments produced from insects, flowers, bark, leaves, roots, bulbs, dung and minerals, the urban streetscapes of today could become quite animated and inviting if filled with all of these living organisms, creatures and materials that, essentially, form the base of textiles!

## CURTAINS

Curtains cover windows for shade, darkening, cooling and privacy. Organize movement, form rooms, divide or define spaces, veil and unveil views, spectacles and objects of value, filter or reflect light. A temporary presence, sensitive to UV light, drought, moisture, dirt and mismanagement. Dependent on maintenance and human interaction.

Their Achilles heel: fragility. Where plants grow in strength, textiles weaken.

When curtains catch air, they become walloping volumes, changing from one rounded, sensual shape to the next. Never repetitive, always a surprise. In this sense they transcend the 'blob architecture' of the eighties and nineties, where computer technology helped architects to design buildings and facades with 'fluid' forms, which in fact were frozen. Frozen and hard!

To talk about curtains is to defend their emancipation from servicing, obedient, passive objects to self-regulating, active and independent actors that improve the performance (spatial, theatrical) and physical (audible, visual, climatic) quality of a space or building. To talk about curtains also triggers a discussion about value: why?, this cannot cost so much?, can it?! No indeed, curtains cost much less than architectural interventions with the same functions would. But curtains need supportive structures, place for storage and smart machinery, alas!<sup>3)</sup>

## DIPLOMACY

Interior or landscape design and architecture are service disciplines. They are immediately connected to (and dependent of?) the context in which the work takes place: culture, time, context, program, budget and agenda. They are interwoven with architecture, urban planning and nature, and in service of future users, the client and the environment. The disciplines need to invent and make use of the newest forms and materials of the *métier*, integrate the latest technology and fashion; yet they need to be aware of tradition and cultural protocol, and of personal taste and visions of architect, client and future users. They have a responsibility as style-icons: trigger new directions of thought and creation, introduce new perspectives on the field of work, a new language to describe or 'tag' the work and its effects.

The paradox of the two servicing professions of interior and landscape architecture is that you need to give your vision plausibility from a situation of relative weakness, of subjugation. Tons of often contradictory wishes, demands and regulation threaten to compromise a designer's intent, and

*thus one needs to develop answers and solutions – like in a puzzle – that transcend the situation to develop an original work of quality and intelligence. So the art in both disciplines is to impose your ‘will’ – or vision – without making it obvious.*

### LANGUAGE

*Both verbal and visual: the art of illustration and explanation, the way to express and communicate the design intent and quality, to predict the future results and forms of uses, the design’s social, political and economic consequences. Language as a bridge to understanding and acceptance, as a means to interact internationally – if combined with body language, facial expression and physical presence.*

*In this visual profession, work can only be as good as your ability to convey it into words, images and body language. Each culture has a different tradition of communication. Some understand the most minimal, conceptual language immediately (a sketch, a few words, a smile), and trust that the outcome will represent what is asked for. Others need meticulous and detailed, ‘real life’ representations to begin to trust what is to come; and yet others can only envision the future work if physical, ‘one-on-one’ examples are built to be reviewed.*

### SUSTAINABILITY

*Political strategies, awareness, care for the environment and the influence of the human on the quality of the environment, the earth. Compare it with cooking: if one understands the ingredients in combination with the circumstances and the biology of things, one can create fantastic results and new experiences by introducing new combinations of existing ingredients – as we do with our textile works. To reach*

*the best result, the design strategy is to study and understand each different site and situation, the local crafts, industry, ground materials, plant communities, work methodology, social and professional hierarchy. Then we build up a network of contacts for the exchange of knowledge and ideas – to start fruitful collaboration.*

*None of us knows exactly how to go about it, all found information and studies notwithstanding, so each of us can only do what we understand and are able to digest and invest. In our profession as landscape architects, we try to create environments that use as little water and as many varied and local plant and tree species as possible. Preferably, we ‘re-locate’ local plant communities into urban settings, where we create circumstances (soil, moist, nutrients, micro-climates) in which they can thrive. Of course, to achieve good results we need not only to teach ourselves all ins-and-outs of local circumstances and species, but we also need to involve the local specialists and communities: universities, professional labourers, residents. After all, any garden, park or green urban infrastructure needs generations of support and input. The landscape designer or architect and his/her vision is but the beginning of an endless string of events that need to be defended, financed, realized, continued, improved, etcetera, for many years to come. What one draws up – and later hopefully builds and plants – is the starting point of an initiative that takes at least 50 years to reach the intention of the designer.*

*In our work: the combination of logical spatial organization (=architecture) and pure lyricism (=rich plantings with colour, scent, seasonal change; element of surprise!)*


### CRAFTS

*General fascination for manual work, the concentrated, professional actions. The intelligence of planning the sequence and timing of things to be done and under what circumstances actions can best be undertaken for a better result of what needs to be achieved. The beauty of tools. The maintenance of tools. The storage systems to keep everything in order and to keep each tool in good shape. The familiarity between tools and the craftsmen, the designer or the artist.*

*The art of crafts is definitely in the lift. The world is yearning for time for thought and meditation, for depth, human exchange, content and meaning. Each object has its own energy and value, and each living creature has its own unique intelligence and importance and both should be therefore respected and cared for. With the fear for the future of our planet, the fear of the raging wars and growing forms of aggression and immigration flows, of nanotechnology and gen-manipulation, of our loss of privacy and anonymity; and with the starvation for physical closeness in this digital era, the belief in hand-work with hand-tools and natural materials, ‘slow food’, ‘slow clothes’, collective aims and inter-disciplinary collaboration is growing. Collective ‘vegetable’ and play-gardens; work-spaces and dinners; neighbour and family help; shared food, houses, networks, tools and cores; local shops, products, specialisms, feasts, meetings; agro-tourism, home-exchange initiatives; natural energy collecting techniques, self-sustainable living and conscious building methods. And connected to this: the general disbelief in the political theatre and the shrinking faith in the capitalist system; the revival of the various religions*

and of the search for the basic, 'down to earth' values of life, connecting mental and physical health through diets, meditation and life style recipes such as Mindfulness, Yoga and others – all these currents are developing expansively here in the West.

## EPILOGUE

When one's life's work is avoiding architecture by creating spatial effects with other means; when these effects tend to be more flexible, less costly and easier to realize; when they introduce narrative, tactility and unpredictable, un-stable, ever-changing volumes and shapes to a place; when the work connects inside to outside or forms a flexible membrane between the two; when it enhances perspectives and view-lines or creates openings; when it organizes movement, use, climate and acoustics; when it adds softness, colour, structure and scale; when it filters, spreads or obstructs light or sound; when it introduces the aspect of time and change, of life and decay; when the work mimics the constructive intelligence of earthworms and the strength and persistence of the bumble-bee, combined with the social qualities of the ant; when pavilions can be carried by one person and attics are punctured by a glass house at the scale of Philip Johnson's; when walls can float and biotopes can thrive; when gravity and logic are questioned and the wheel is re-invented at every turn; when this work can complement, question, challenge, contradict or extrapolate the program that is offered and the architecture they inhabit, customized to the given context and moment in time; and develop in parallel with architecture differently manner with each new project, inside or outside of it – or independent from it... then we can speak of a radical design intent. 

This text, which has been written as one continuous movement, has intended to put in new words the 'dry' definitions of the various fields (landscape architecture, textile design and interior design) that converge at studio Inside Outside, a firm based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands founded in 1991 by Petra Blaisse. As a manifesto, each chapter defines a significant design concept, which then it is addressed by some topics that are –nowadays- relevant to the subject.

## NOTES

(1) In our public park project for the city of Milan called *Biblioteca degli Alberi* (10 ha in size) political arguments (safety, fear of homeless immigrants) dictate the height of the plants to not surmount 50 cm, so that no one can hide or sleep behind the vegetation. The park is not just for the health and wellbeing of its users, it is also an attractive looking thin layer that hides, and at the same time makes accessible, complex underground infrastructures. As an area that contains polluted soil to a degree that does not allow residential buildings, the best possible decision is to turn it into a park that overlays a sealed, polluted layer at 200 cm depth. Last but not least: the park is co-financed by developers and adjacent business companies because the value of their real estate increases remarkably because of its presence.

(2) These ideas are based on the author's conversation with Roberio Dias in 2011, at that time director of the Sitio Roberto Burle Marx at Barra de Guaratiba (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).

(3) Inside Outside is currently working on the curtain's price-technical and physical emancipation from architecture. As an example, the design studio developed in 2014 a large-scale fleece-like silver curtain for the chamber music performance of *Narcissus* (a composition by the young Greek composer Calliope Tsoupaki). This curtain needed to adjust its height in each different theatre venue; its elegant, softly radiating and pleated presence was suspended in any space from a row of dancing helium balloons. Another technical research work of Inside Outside is the integration of solar cells into large-scale curtains that, often, cover enormous glazed facades or are positioned outside such facades. The aim is to integrate the necessary energy-transporting metal yarns into the weave or knit that composes the textile. Parallel to this, the studio is looking for ways to attach the cells themselves to the cloth, in such a way that the cloth stays supple and soft to sway in the wind and to fold up into storage position. Nothing that is integrated in the design process should undermine the aesthetic effect and fluid behaviour of the curtain: quite a big challenge!

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