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The Wasserkrater as entry for an intimate relation to nature**

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Figure 1: The Wasserkrater Garden is hidden underground, only to become visible when the water jet shoots into the air.



Figure 2: Position of the garden in the Aqua Magica park and the two routes that connect it to the urban cores, the park and the valley.

## Supernature in the Age of The Anthropocene The Wasserkrater as Entry for an Intimate Relation to Nature

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### ABSTRACT

In a globalised world under pressure of climate change, nature remains at the centre of societal concerns and the appreciation of nature by urban communities presents a critical challenge for the landscape architecture agenda. But nature is a dynamic concept, transforming in accordance with societal changes. We now live in what can be called the Anthropocene, and this far-reaching influence of man on natural processes should result in a revised vision of the concept of nature. A reading of the Wasserkrater Garden (Agence Ter 1997, Bad Oeynhausen, DE) will illustrate such a new understanding of nature: as a force of abundance, showing existence to its full extent in which humans are only a small part, and at the same time something close to home, incorporated in our daily environment. Merging an architectural

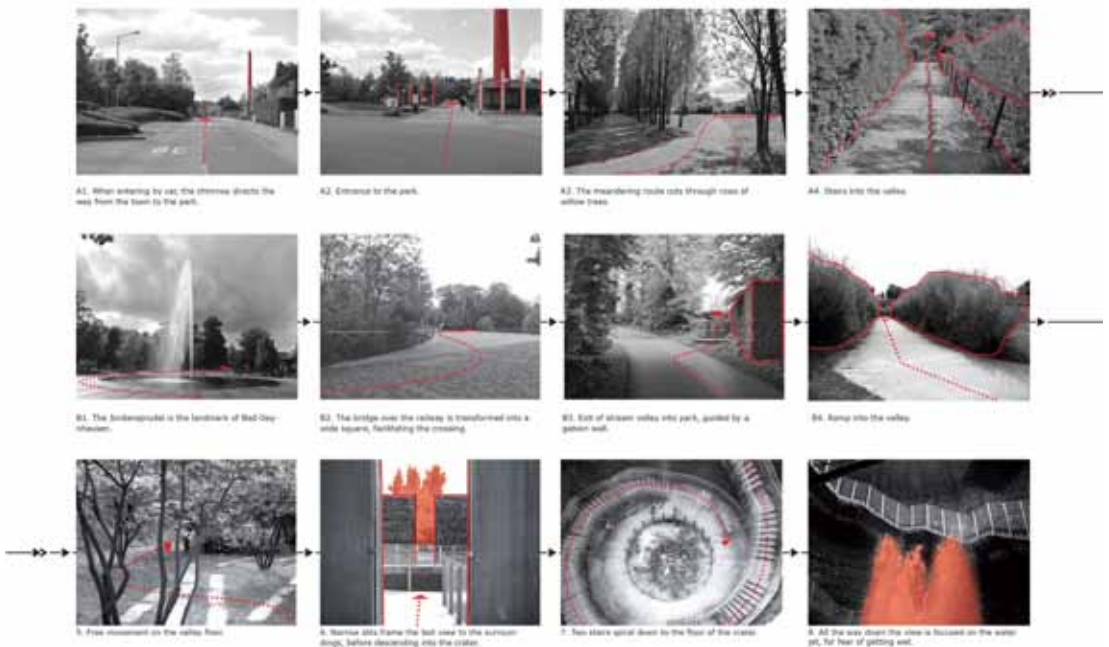


Figure 3: Visual scores of the two routes.

and an ecological view, this understanding of ‘supernature’ brings together the natural and the artificial. The premise that we somehow stand outside (or apart from) nature no longer holds true.

## INTRODUCTION

In a globalised world under pressure of climate change, nature remains at the centre of societal concerns and the appreciation of nature presents a critical challenge for the landscape architecture agenda. While many green infrastructures focus on functional considerations, their elaboration as places where concepts of nature are represented, and where aspects of nature can be experienced and understood, has received little attention in research and praxis. Urban societies entertain varied ideas on nature and their relationship to it: nature as resource, as model, as process, as co-creator, as ideal. But we will never move beyond the dualistic concept of humans versus nature as ‘the other’—which in the past has led, and still leads to extreme exploitation of natural resources—if we do not begin to appreciate the inextricable relationship between man and nature. For this to happen we need to move

beyond considering what we think of as ‘nature’ through the lens of visual beauty or distant images, sublime ideals or technical ecology.

A reading of the Wasserkrater Garden might provide some insights into the comprehension and experience of a contemporary understanding of nature. (Fig. 1) The discussion follows a research method that was developed in my newly published book *Hidden Landscapes*, in order to address the formal expression of site-specificity in landscape architectural design. In this book, the Wasserkrater Garden is studied as one of six ‘metropolitan gardens’, in order to gain an insight in the relation between metropolitan conditions (such as globalisation, suburbanisation and infrastructure) and a contemporary understanding of place and nature (De Wit 2018). The research methodology builds on the Delft method of layer analysis that specifically addressed the spatial, visual aspects of the composition (Steenbergen 2014). But the complexity of today’s design challenges, often with a particular geological, industrial, agricultural and social history, demand analysis and design approaches that

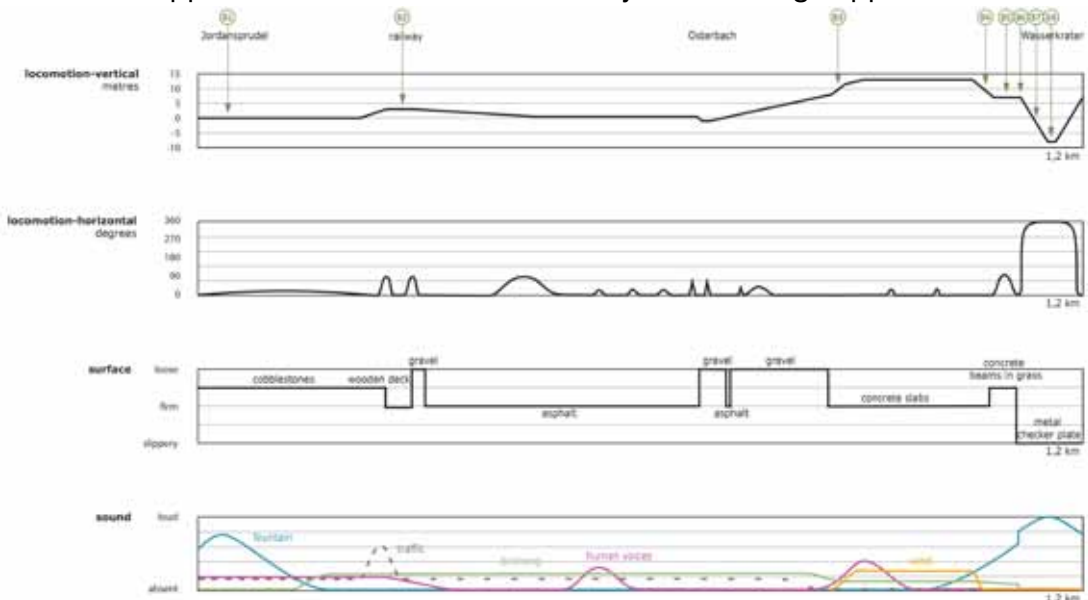


Figure 4: Haptic score of the route through the valley, representing the different sensory stimuli: vertical and horizontal movement, texture of the surface and sound.

take into account the experience on the ground, the 'sense of place', the different layers and meanings of a site, the experience of movement and time. Therefore I extended the method with the phenomenological, multisensory dimensions of landscape. I documented experiences on site in measurements, photographs, notes of sounds and smells and other sensory perceptions, notes of my own movements and of the other visitors. Researching the perceived situation rather than the intended design, I then redrew the site in interpretative drawings—reconstructed from the impressions gained and measurements taken during this visit, design drawings, topographic information, and technical drawings provided by the landscape architect



Figure 5: A lush green carpet and dappled sunlight through the tree canopy evoke in the sunken garden the image of a natural forest glade.

and the client—in order to objectify the experiential components as attributes of the place.

## THE WASSERKRATER GARDEN

In 1997 a garden show took place in the suburban agglomeration of the German towns of Bad Oeynhausen en Löhne, designed by Agence Ter. The show grounds remained as an urban park, with the Wasserkrater Garden as the pivot point. The garden is positioned exactly above one of a series of subterranean fault lines, which

used to determine the relationship of the urban development of the spa town of Bad Oeynhausen, but which are now hidden underneath the suburban developments. The natural source of the subterranean water is made expressive again in the fountain that is the centre of the garden, enabling the visitor to explore a landscape that had remained hidden from the public eye. By carving vertically in the soil the metropolitan landscape is connected to the natural landscape underneath.

The vertical elaboration of the garden, and the aural expression of the fountain set apart a sequestered space for play, temporary and limited.

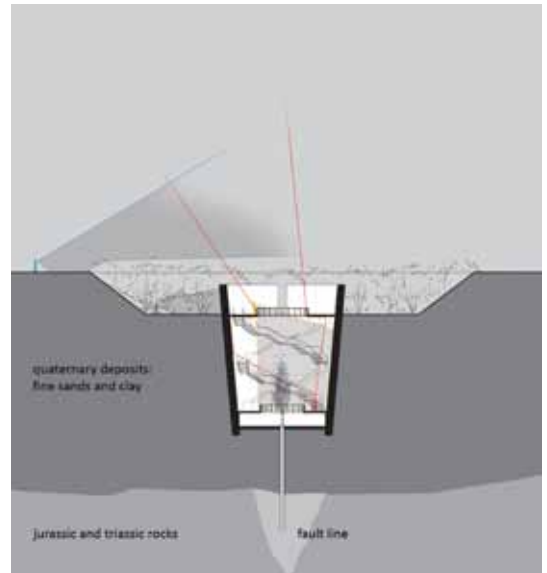


Figure 6: The different slopes and the tree canopy direct the view top the horizon, then downward and finally upward, visually connecting the layers of the design and the natural landscape.

The outer ring of the garden is a circular valley, which is open all year, allowing the visitor to perceive the seasonal effects of the planting. The central crater however, only opens in the summer season (May-October). Its peak is during the summer holiday, when little boys in swimming trunks play here all day. To enter the garden the visitor passes a ticket booth, where a small entrance fee is charged (and rain coats can be purchased). The fee guarantees surveillance but



Figure 7: The roughness of the walls, the all-enveloping mist, the contrasts of light and dark, and the change in equilibrium and muscle tension when descending enhance the sensation of being underground.

is not so high as to prevent people from entering. The position of the garden within the Aqua Magica Park is elaborated as an interaction between social and individual, and between play and contemplation. In the park the interaction between active play and discovery on the one hand, and passive viewing and relaxation on the other, is a social phenomenon. The same interaction in the garden is transformed into an individual and private (multi-sensory) experience. The horizontal plane is the level of the everyday, public life. Retreating into the depths of the earth in the Wasserkrater is also retreating from public life into an individual experience.

The garden is key to the kinetic structure of the park. (Fig. 2 and 3) A meandering park route strings together a sequence of delineated park spaces and urban fragments and ends abruptly at the edge of the park. The route exposes the contemporary, generic landscape of urban, rural and suburban fragments, directly connected to the A30 motorway, the spine of the metropolitan landscape. The garden, to be entered via a small exit and steep stairs, escapes from this fragmentary landscape and creates its own private world. In the second route the narrative of the underground water unfolds in a sequence of images, the rising and falling of the topography, the meandering of the path as well

as in a sequence of sounds with the grand finale of the roaring Wasserkrater fountain. Descending under the earth's crust in the garden is anticipated as the path moves up and down along the natural relief of the valley. In the garden the path spirals downward, first in a path of stepping-stones, then more forceful in the spiral staircases. Loose and hard materials underfoot alternate, giving the route a rhythmic undertone. (Fig. 4)

The precise position of the garden on the subterranean fault line is emphasised by a concentric composition of the fountain, crater and sunken garden, a sequence that is experienced as consecutive layers of enclosure, while penetrating into the earth. The main enclosure is the earth itself, so the garden remains invisible apart from the moments when the water jet shoots into the air. The double boundary of the sunken garden and the cone-shaped crater wall enables a sequence of entrances, as a rite of passage before entering the inner space.

With its gentle slopes, planted with a carpet of creeping willow (*Salix repens*), its transparent canopy of serviceberries (*Amelanchier lamarckii*) and its open centre the six metre deep circular valley is a calm and pleasant place. Shade-loving plants form a lush green carpet to be crossed via a pattern of irregularly placed concrete beams, as if they were tree logs in a river. The dappled sunlight through the canopy evokes the image of a natural forest glade. (Fig. 5) It is not a natural site however, but clearly designed as a garden, hidden from view by its position, sunken in the ground. The crater in the centre of the garden is like an artificial grotto: an ambiguous place that is both art and nature, and both a frightening experience and an agreeable shelter. The funnel-like space forces the visitor closer to the centre while descending, increasing the risk of getting wet. The horizontal and far view of the (suburban) landscape is drawn

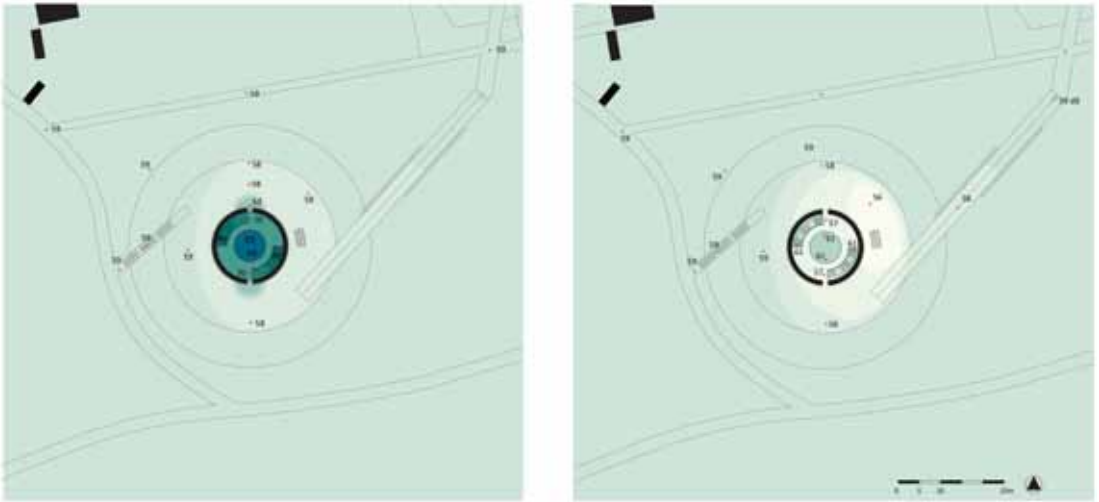


Figure 8: The different stages of the soundscape—during and in-between eruptions—can be clearly distinguished. Sound level measurements taken on an almost windless Sunday morning (13 May 2012, between 10.30 and 12.00), show that from the rattle of the dripping (61 decibels) the heavy bubbling raises the sound level to a constant 65 decibels, rising to 73 decibels when the music swells and in between 79 and 83 decibels when the fountain erupts.

downward in the crater, into the earth, and then upward following the erupting fountain, evoking a vertical axis between enclosing earth and open sky. (Fig. 6) The defined space creates a connection to the natural space (both above and below ground level) in the field of undefined and fragmented space of the suburban landscape.

The spectacle of the fountain that gradually builds up to a dramatic climax and then subdues into nothing, only to start over again in an apparently endless cycle, evokes the force exerted by the pressure of water in the subterranean fault line, the force that led to the genesis of the spa town Bad Oeynhausen in the first place. From the black water surface a frothy water column erupts at irregular intervals, building up to a climax that is accompanied by computer-generated rumbling sounds and atonal music, and flashes of light. When the water jet falls away suddenly, everything is wrapped in a dense mist. (Fig. 7)

Outside the garden the volume of the fountain does not rise above the volume of everyday sounds: the almost continuous roar of aircraft, bird singing and background sounds of children playing and people talking.

In the surrounding garden the sound is still muffled by the tree canopy, and in the intervals between the eruptions of the fountain the garden appears to be quieter than the surrounding plain, even though the sound level is only slightly lower. The fountain is only clearly audible inside the garden and down at the crater floor the different stages of the soundscape can be clearly distinguished. The thundering sound of the fountain is echoed by the hard materials of the crater (rock-filled gabions and metal), and is so loud it prevents people from talking and allows them to retreat into themselves. Within the intervals the rattle of the dripping on the metal stairs continues and gradually lessens until the fountain starts again: a heavy bubbling raises the sound level, rising even more when the music swells, followed by a sound explosion when the fountain erupts again, retained by the enclosure of the space. The impact of the fountain on the soundscape is to a great extent determined by the geometry and spatial differentiation of the garden. It makes the spatial form not only visually but also aurally perceptible and draws the attention from the visual towards the multisensory qualities of the garden. (Fig. 8)



The stages of entrance into the garden mark the transition from the horizontal suburban field to the vertical sub-urban space, literally under the city. This sequence from outside to inside, from surface to subsurface, is simultaneously a progressive sequence of stimuli, intensified by the proximity of the perceived space and the enclosure that blocks sensory information from outside the garden. The roughness of the walls, the dampness on the skin, the strong smell brought about by the constant dampness of the space, the darkness, the coolness resulting from the lack of sunlight and the change in equilibrium and muscle tension when descending enhance the sensation of being underground. Visually the crater is explicitly artificial but these specific stimuli induce the sensory experience of being in a natural cave, evoking an augmented experience of nature and of place, condensed into playful ritual, and orchestrated by the rhythm of the fountain. The reception of the haptic information of the garden by skin, muscles and joints reduces the distance between man and nature to within the body, internalising the experience.

In landscape architecture the emphasis usually is on what geographer Johannes Granö defined as *Fernsicht* [distant view], the part of our environment we mainly experience by vision: the landscape, determined by the horizon (1997). However, visual experience detaches us from tactile experience, it dematerialises the world. The world becomes purely a spectacle. To move beyond this, and to move beyond considering landscape and nature through the lens of visual beauty or distant images, sublime ideals or technical ecology begins with enabling what Elizabeth Meyer called 'affective encounters' (2008). For these affective encounters to happen, we need to be near, to experience our surroundings, to be immersed in them. *Nahsicht* [proximity] is the environment we can experience with all our senses, making

one attentive to the material reality of earth, plants and water, such as mass, grain, fragility or suppleness. Bernard Lassus suggested that the difference between the tactile scale and the visual scale corresponds in many respects to the distinction between garden and landscape (1998). The garden is a multisensory object, a space seen as well as felt, touched and heard. The enclosure and proximity of the garden space puts an emphasis on its materiality and its perception: a haptic perception, or, an inducement for affective encounters.

## GHOSTS, PLACES AND SUPERNATURE

The garden has always been an artificial (artistic) reflection of nature. However, in the Wasserkrater Garden the version of nature that is exposed, in itself has become as much artificial as natural. The quality of nature that can be encountered here is not the sublime wilderness of the Himalayas or the Australian outback, frightening and immeasurable, nor the visual and representational image of beauty that we see in the classical garden.

In the classical design tradition gardens represented the first nature of natural processes and the second nature of cultivation and organisation, as well as first and second nature as real places, outside the urban realm. In the contemporary metropolitan landscape however, structures of cultural landscapes and urban settlements have converged into a continuous field of forces and vectors that result in types of landscape that are hard to distinguish. Maybe this is why the emphasis in the Wasserkrater Garden has shifted from representing identifiable natural and cultural territories to exposing the spatial and temporal natural dynamics, and from representation to engagement. The garden exposes wilderness not in opposition of, but as an integral part of the metropolitan

realm, evoking an immersive encounter with nature: an embodied experience. With the pleasurable sunken garden as a filter between the suburban, uneventful landscape on the surface and the tactile and rough crater that is dramatised as much in its artificiality as in its naturalness, the garden evokes contemplation as well as fun, with elements of the unexpected and surprise. It is about the body's immersion in the world, guided by emotions, interaction, performance, 'things', technology, experience, and the feeling that a place can evoke.

In the 19th century such an integral connection between nature and experience was already brought forward in the romantic concept of the 'supernatural': a ghost that is rooted in a place but is not physically present. The 19th-century author of supernatural fiction Vernon Lee wrote:

*The ghost [...] is the damp, the darkness, the silence, the solitude; a ghost is the sound of our steps through a ruined cloister, where the ivy-berries and convolvulus growing in the fissures sway up and down among the sculptured foliage of the windows, it is the scent of mouldering plaster and mouldering bones from beneath the broken pavement [...] Each and all of these things, and a hundred others besides, according to our nature, is a ghost, a vague feeling we can scarcely describe, a something pleasing and terrible which invades our whole consciousness. (1898: 310).*

The ghost that Lee describes is a 'substrate of potential bodily responses' (Clough and Halley, 2007: 2) present in a location, connecting the physical reality of nature to the ephemeral plane of the supernatural and collapsing the boundary between what is out there and in here.

A century later Rem Koolhaas re-introduced the supernatural, but this time as an integral component of the metropolitan landscape, making a direct connection between artificial nature and metropolitan conditions (1978). In his double coding super-nature implied both larger-than-life nature and fake, plastic nature. Koolhaas used the prefix 'super' ironically, suggesting a promise of the possibility to transcend late-modern dreariness without lapsing into nostalgia or conservatism. The image he presents nonetheless strongly reminds us of the modernistic, architectural vision of a generic, shapeless landscape (flowing and park-like) of unmanipulated nature, an image light years away from the ecological view that lived among landscape architects in the same period. In 2010, Malene Hauxner introduced a more mature version of supernature into the metropolitan landscape architecture debate as an intensified version of nature that is deeply embedded in history, culture and technology and brings together the architectural and the ecological view of the 20th century.

In the Wasserkrater Garden the natural force of the underground water becomes perceivable, while at the same time it is clearly visible that it is brought up by human hands. There is no distinction between what is natural and what is manmade and nature is exposed as something close to the skin, incorporated into the metropolitan fabric and our daily environment. The premise that we somehow stand outside (or apart from) nature no longer holds true. Nature is not only found 'out there', but also 'in here', and in the shell-like space of the garden the boundary between man and nature is dissolved, underlining the necessity of an attentive interaction with, and care for the living environment, which is not an abstract and inexhaustible force but interwoven with everything we do. To be fully engaged with nature means to come

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into a visceral and immediate contact with it. The articulation of sound, light, humidity, colour, texture and height differences can create a multi-sensory experience, which emphasises the exposure of nature and involves a 'feeling of being surrounded by or infused with an enveloping, engaging tactility' (Foster 1998: 133). Addressing the proximate senses such as smell and touch reduces the physical distance between us and nature to zero, and nature as the object of appreciation dissolves as a separate and distant 'thing' and becomes inextricably intermingled with the perceiver (Parsons 2008). Thus, stimulating a multi-sensory perception of nature becomes a critical aspect of landscape architecture.

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