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# Designing for water: the sweet & the salt of it

Journalist **Tracy Metz** looks at the complex, changing and unescapable relationship between water and the Netherlands

Water is both life and death. As floods and droughts assume biblical proportions in many areas of the world, people are becoming more aware of the magnitude of the water issues we face, and the problems are penetrating political and spatial agendas.

Nowhere is that clearer than in the Netherlands, where mastery of water has always been a condition for survival. If there is one element that is crucial to the Lowlands – for its sheer existence, for its landscape, for its identity – then it is water. Ever since the first fishermen settled in this soggy delta around 1100, the Dutch have created land by pushing the water out with dikes and keeping it out with pumps. Now, however, the country that has refashioned its landscape so distinctly in order to keep water out is letting it back in.

This fundamental change to the Netherlands' approach to self-defence is the subject of the combined book and exhibition, *Sweet & Salt: Water and the Dutch*. The book shows the 'extreme makeover' of the landscape necessary to accommodate a new relationship with the foe of yore. The 125 works of art in the exhibition (which ran from February to June in the Kunsthal, Rotterdam) reveal the various ways the Dutch have related to water down the ages: from struggle to a close bond, from profit to pleasure and myth.

What is the impetus for this shift to an adaptive water management strategy? The answer is twofold. First, the Dutch landscape, both in urban and in natural settings, needs more flexibility as it confronts the vagaries of climate change: a rising sea level, heavier rainfall, .../



Above: Part of the plan for the southwestern delta, which won the first Delta Water Award in 2009

drier summers, rivers that are sometimes too full and sometimes too empty, salt seepage under the dunes and the 'salt tongue' pushing inland through the rivers. Second, there is an increasing awareness of the ecological consequences of the strategy of hard defence. After a catastrophic flood in 1953, the coastline was shortened and reinforced with an enormous new system of 11 dikes and dams. But, gradually, it has become apparent how damaging the separation of sweet and salt is for the estuarine life behind Holland's own aquatic Maginot Line.

**THERE IS NOTHING** like disaster to get decision makers moving. First in 1953, and again in the mid-nineties, the rivers nearly overflowed twice, necessitating the evacuation of 250,000 people and one million farm animals. For a country so attuned to the sea, it was a shock that the danger could come from 'behind'. In retrospect, of course, it needn't have been a surprise: to facilitate the economic interests of shipping, the Rhine alone has been straightened and shortened by 40 per

Below: Artist's impression of the new Scheveningen boulevard, designed by Spanish architect Manuel de Solà-Morales



cent, turning the river into a tightly corseted trough. The response was a €2bn programme called 'Room for the River', which aimed to prevent flooding with measures such as creating new bypasses and lowering dikes so that reclaimed farmland along the rivers can serve as temporary buffers.

In a country where space is at a premium, it is no wonder that this was perceived as a potential win-win situation. Not only would the Netherlands be a safer place if the water were admitted in a controlled fashion, it would also be more beautiful, more its own authentic watery self. 'Building with nature' is the new slogan.

And so it is that there are plans to reintroduce water all over the country. One of the 40-or-so Room for the River projects, for example, widens the Waal River with a new bypass. By doing so, it provides more space for high water – meaning that some people have to move – but also creates an attractive new residential area. In the southwestern delta, between Rotterdam and Belgium, ecology and economy meets safety in plans to reconnect the various basins, which had been artificially segmented, and make the water salt again. This will create new opportunities for recreation, fishing and the production of sustainable energy by tidal movement while, at the same time, restoring the delta's natural ecological resilience.

One of the oldest towns in the country, Dordrecht, where the river meets the sea, has plans to refurbish a former shipbuilding wharf on a manmade peninsula as a testimonial to the new water. On one side, the water will come and go with the tide; on the other, the new housing will be built on bulwarks that can resist the high water. It seems that all the new housing developments are equipped with variations on old water systems such as ditches and canals. Everywhere, at least on the drawing boards, clusters of floating houses, parking garages and even parks are appearing.

**IN THE CITIES**, new methods of temporary rainwater storage in parks, squares and underground are being devised to keep the sewers from overflowing after a downpour. Rotterdam has built a colossal basin under a parking garage and is constructing a new kind of public space: a 'water square' that can fill when it rains and will gradually release the water back into the water table. And at the seaside, for example in the former fishing town of Scheveningen near the Hague, the sea dike is no longer set apart in splendid isolation, but is incorporated in and under the new urban boulevard to the extent that it is invisible.



Above: A model of the new Scheveningen boulevard

Above-right, right, below: Images of the Scheveningen boulevard in action



The landscape engineering of dikes and polders has realised an ordered landscape, a 'cultural and technological product' on a scale unseen outside the Netherlands. Will all this change with the 'new water'? Yes and no. Water will assume a more prominent place in the Dutch landscape and cities, and it will be more flexible than the set-in-stone landscapes we know now. The relationship could be best described as an uneasy truce. There will be places that are sometimes dry and sometimes wet; there will be places that have different functions depending on the season and the weather. The Netherlands will always have to pump, there will always be reclaimed land – but there will also be places where the land has been given back to the water, if only temporarily. ●

Sweet & Salt: Water and the Dutch by Tracy Metz and Maartje van den Heuvel, NAi010 Publishers, £29.50

