

TILBURG

SUB-URBAN JUNGLE

Weaving together ecology and human experience

‘Suburban Jungle’ offers a design-strategy for the strong interweaving of cultural and ecological realities, approaching nature-inclusivity from the perspective of daily lived experiences.

Over the last years, the climate transition has sparked strong progress in the fields of sustainable, biobased and nature-inclusive building. The wish to design environments for all kinds of beings and to connect them to larger ecological structures, has led to ambitious projects in which different ecologies can flourish. However, this solves only part of the problem.

The current situation of the planet requires a more far-reaching approach to change our relation with the natural environment. It is not just the environment itself that needs to change, but rather our behaviour within and connection to it. Besides proposing nature-inclusive buildings and urban spaces, the strategy is aimed at facilitating **nature-inclusive life**. To do so, it approaches the environment from the perspective of daily activities and lived experiences. It requires us to think how public and private spaces actually work, how the environment is experienced and what connections are offered. Instead of asking ‘What should the garden city of the future look like?’, it revolves around the question ‘What should life be like in the garden city of the future?’.

In our current anthropogenic situation, the natural environment has become a scarcity within a human-controlled system. It is the antithesis of previous hunter-gatherer, early agricultural and settlement-based periods in which human life formed exceptions in an otherwise natural environment, where the human dependency on ecological systems was visible. In order to weave culture and nature together again, we must retrieve and strengthen our connection to ecological rhythms and systems. The first step in this process is to get in touch with them.

The current situation in Groenewoud clearly illustrates how you can live in the midst of greenery without ever having to get in touch with it. Houses with closed-off front- and backyards offer the possibility to keep the natural environment completely out of sight: paved surfaces form the staging of living spaces. Moving through a door between the storage room and the sidewalk, you can walk onto a paved public space where your car is parked, taking you to your destination via other paved areas.



current situation

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The urban design of the neighbourhood encompasses some typical principles of the seventies 'bloemkoolwijken', which had their own approach to natural dwelling environments. It's setup is spatial and low dense, and staggered building lines and open corners offer the greenery to weave together with the buildings. The rotated houses offer long sightlines looking over the greenery and in some cases the buildings form collective spaces such as the car-free courtyards in the 'weides'. However, this domain is missing from the project area, where the private domain is directly next to public space, leading to hard boundaries. The position of the row houses and fences used to bar out scooters result in a strong separation of the park and the rest of the neighborhood. In total, the spatial and green character of the neighborhood is hardly experienced from a ground-level.

As a general approach, the solution could be to remove the row houses and introduce a high density apartment tower. This would leave as much space for public greenery as possible, and it would be possible to design an omni-directional volume, avoiding backsides. However, apart from a visual relation from the balcony to the park, for inhabitants the experience would not be much different from the current situation. The mental and physical distance for entering the environment would be long, encompassing several fire-proof doors in spaces deprived of daylight. A collective entrance to the apartments would typically be combined with a parking garage, which would make entering the park unnecessary altogether. Furthermore, the remaining park area would still consist of undefined spaces, that do not seem to belong to anyone.

As an alternative, the strategy in this project revolves around the interweaving of culture and nature on every possible scale, resulting in three main design principles:

1. The Silvrettapark as the green heart of Groenewoud

The Silvrettapark will function as a green and lively spot in the neighborhood, creating an exchange between daily routines and the natural environment. It will accommodate active in- and outdoor functions in which a connection to the collective as well as nature is key, such as a neighborhood kitchen, ateliers for makers and an open-air primary school with after-school facilities.

The area will be promoted for the intense relationship inhabitants will have with nature, attracting new target groups for which this is important. Several connections are made between areas in the public space, functions within the building and groups that are responsible



Silvrettapark as green heart

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for its maintenance: a food-forest is connected to the neighborhood kitchen where harvested goods can be processed, and is maintained by volunteers from the wider area; a tiny forest will be adopted by the new primary school and ateliers in the old school are linked to areas where materials can be cultivated and artworks could be showcased. Gardens within building blocks are owned by collectives of inhabitants, who can determine their destination. Other pieces of land that remain in ownership of the municipality will be maintained extensively, increasing biodiversity.

This results in a strategy for densification that is not simply 'less harmful' to nature, but leads to an **increase of intense nature and biodiversity**, precisely because of the added buildings. In that way, left-over green with only grass and trees can be transformed into a vibrant and intense natural environment.

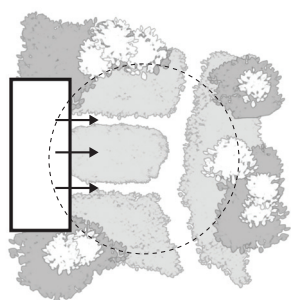
2. Public space defined by both buildings and greenery

The plan offers an alternative strategy to classical urban design in which buildings are placed in a clear and dense structure, sometimes widened to offer space for carefully confined areas of green. This system of continuous built fabric with dispersed nature is radically turned around into a natural environment in which buildings are guests. In its turn this natural environment is not an homogeneous territory, instead it consists of defined spaces with places to stay, to pass through or to not be entered by the passer-by, just like a conservative urban fabric consists of streets, squares and buildings. And like in conservative urban design this structure is based on functions, lines of sight, logistics and infrastructure, leading to a set of **defined spaces**.

These spaces are formed using different heights of greenery and the careful placement of buildings that create a sense of presence. The ground-based typologies (see next section) encompass front doors that address spaces, avoiding anonymous greenery. The primary paths consist of half-hardened 'cart tracks' for moving-activities and emergency services without compromising the natural character.

3. A ground-oriented approach to stacked typologies

The dwellings consist of specific housing typologies, in which the density of stacked housing is combined with the strong relation of ground-based dwellings with the environment. These typologies are stacked to a limited extend and therefore not all ground-based, but rather **ground-oriented**: each layer is considered for its specific



space defined by buildings and greenery

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relation to the park-level. Building clusters are composed with a clear front-side to the park and a back-side to a collective courtyard. The diversity in privacy between levels and between front and back is used to specify the relation with the environment for each activity in the house.

All ground-level units are part of typologies with two layers or more, resulting in very small footprints (only 30m²) so that as many people as possible can live at park-level. This small area accommodates the more active and less private functions, that are most likely to interact with outdoor areas. Cooking activities are located on the more public park-side. The placement of greenery, the plasticity of the façade and the location of the kitchen counter create a soft transition between the house and public space. The back side offers room for a dinner table and is linked to an outdoor area that facilitates a comfortable place to eat outside. The more private living room is generally located on the first floor, from which the relationship with the environment is more visual.



Impression

The stacked typologies above are designed with specific solutions to decrease the (mental and physical) **distance to the park**. The design of the building-access is aimed at facilitating a fast and easy access to the ground-level without obstacles, by means of nearby staircases, limited height and a routing through outdoor areas. Outdoor spaces are designed to **facilitate the care of flora and fauna** on a small scale, by means of integrated flower beds and voids in upper level spaces for light and water.

Implementation

The current project offers a strategy that remains adaptable through the implementation process. The proposal is to first create only one cluster that encompasses dwellings, the primary school and after-school facilities, at a location where no current buildings have to be torn down for. This cluster will function as a pilot project (ca. five years), from which lessons can be learned about the actual functioning of the new typologies. In the second phase (ca. ten years) the remaining building clusters in the project area can be realized, meanwhile the reputation of the neighborhood is changing towards its strong natural character. In the end, the project area functions as a catalysator for the rest of the neighborhood, where similar strategies can be implemented through smaller scale interventions. In each of the phases, the development of the design will take place in close collaboration with future potential inhabitants, to acquire insights in how the dwellings will be used and experienced.