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Land of Chabot

A Highway Landscape as a Monument to a Painter

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Abstract

In the contemporary metropolitan landscape of Rotterdam, the open landscape spaces that once surrounded the city have been reduced to components in a hybrid field. When the polders were still expansive, with an omnipresent horizon, and big skies, they were depicted extensively by the Dutch landscape painter Henk Chabot (1894-1949). Chabot is the Rotterdam painter of an oeuvre that is associated with angular, realistic expressionism of many layers of paint in hard colours, who painted heavily emphasised skies over poor countryside, or monumental portraits of refugees or farmers. For fifteen years, he lived and worked in a studio by the river Rotte. Now, only a relic of the farmland where he lived remains: an interstice between motorways, recreation parks, and suburbs that seemed to be overlooked in the frenzy of urban planning processes. The reason this interstice still exists is that it has been reserved for a future motorway for the last 30 years, and in the not-so-distant future will become the tunnel entrance for the new A16 motorway. As a left-over space, the terrain seems non-descript. However, it does have the implicit characteristics of a 'landscape theatre': introducing the processes and the scale of landscape as self-evident elements of the city, and heralding the open polder landscape twenty minutes away. It borrows its physical boundaries from the Rotte river dyke, the heemtuin (botanical garden) adjacent to the Ommoord apartment blocks, the access road to Ommoord, the industrial estate, and residential area in Terbregge. Such a "borrowed boundary" can be seen as a defining trait of the landscape theatre. The open space that is defined by this borrowed boundary and the central point of the tunnel entrance, is a secluded, self-contained place, removed in time and space, insulated against the everyday reality and, aside from the public realm of streets, squares, and parks, from the hustle and bustle of urban life: a place "outside".

Keywords

Land of Chabot, interstitial space, metropolitan garden, Henk Chabot, highway, landscape theatre

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Introduction

In the contemporary metropolitan landscape of Rotterdam, the open landscape spaces that once surrounded the city have been reduced to components in a hybrid field. As Bijlsma and Bakker wrote when discussing the work of the Dutch landscape painter Henk Chabot (1894-1949), the polders that he depicted extensively were still expansive, with an omnipresent horizon, and big skies. Chabot is the Rotterdam painter of an oeuvre that is associated with angular, realistic expressionism of many layers of paint in hard colours, who painted heavily emphasised skies over poor countryside, or monumental portraits of refugees or farmers. For 15 years, he lived and worked in a studio by the river Rotte (Bijlsma & Bakker, 2012).

Now, only a relic of the farmland where he lived remains: an interstice between motorways, recreation parks, and suburbs that seemed to be overlooked in the frenzy of urban planning processes. The reason this interstice still exists is that it has been reserved for a future motorway for the last 30 years, and in the not-so-distant future will become the tunnel entrance for the new A16 motorway.

As a left-over space, the terrain seems non-descript. However, it does have the implicit characteristics of a 'landscape theatre': introducing the processes and the scale of landscape as self-evident elements of the city, and heralding the open polder landscape twenty minutes away. It borrows its physical boundaries from the Rotte river dyke, the heemtuin (botanical garden) adjacent to the Ommoord apartment blocks, the access road to Ommoord, the industrial estate, and residential area in Terbregge. Such a "borrowed boundary" can be seen as a defining trait of the landscape theatre. The open space that is defined by this borrowed boundary and the central point of the tunnel entrance, is a secluded, self-contained place, removed in time and space, insulated against the everyday reality and, aside from the public realm of streets, squares, and parks, from the hustle and bustle of urban life: a place "outside".

The tunnel project might mean the end of this remnant of open space, or it could be the moment at which a sensitive design intervention can expose the hidden qualities of this meadow. In 2018, the Chabot Museum in Rotterdam commissioned the artist group Observatorium to reflect on a monument for the painter near the location of his studio on the dyke along the river Rotte. Familiar with the work of Observatorium, director Jisca Bijlsma did not expect a sculpture or a plaque, but a design for a landscape that offers an invitation to stand still and see through the eyes of Chabot.

One of the conclusions of a workshop with all parties involved was the (re) naming of this terrain to "Land of Chabot", bringing back to life a long-forgotten toponym, coined by people who had a warm heart for the painter. "Words alone [...] can have the power to render objects, formerly invisible because unattended, visible, and impart to them a certain character." (Tuan, 1991, p. 684)

Next, Observatorium followed up on the other important suggestion to do as little as possible, keeping the meadow a meadow under the condition of free access. The artists proposed a series of acupunctural earthworks, sculptures, and a pavilion as *lieu de memoire* for the Land of Chabot, as an ode to his work and his view of the distant expanses of Dutch landscape in the midst of the suburban potpourri. Two years later, the future of the Land of Chabot is still undecided, but we might try to imagine the effect if such an intervention were to take place. The "borrowed boundary" creates the enclosure which helps us to read the space as a garden, with the subtle artworks as its attributes. These marks transform the space into a garden, they direct the view and make the visitors aware of their sensory perception, they expose the space as a valuable landscape. The mouth of the tunnel might become the centre piece of this space, like a grotto connecting the sky and the underground.

The sculptural and architectural scenography constitute a sequence from visual panorama to sensory experience of “wilderness”, sky and underground, seducing the passer-by to experience this landscape by moving through it. Movement brings the landscape qualities close, transforming the visual perception of space into a multi-sensory engagement with “place,” where location, locale, and memories live, and all components of this metropolitan landscape are exposed: city, landscape, and infrastructural landscape. “In the city, the vastness of the sky is only to be experienced occasionally. Here, it surrounds you and lies like a roof over the Land of Chabot. On a good day, clouds and sun, it’s magic realism.” (Observatorium, 2019, p. 39)

Inviting a close observation of the surrounding landscape, the design aims to draw attention to Chabot’s landscape painting. Those who withdraw from the flux of life, as the painter did, see the world moving around them. As Steenbergen described the notion of the landscape theatre, this void between the urban tissues could enable the apprehension of landscape space by bringing it within the visual, physical, and conceptual scope of the city dweller, standing face to face with natural processes, the *longue durée* of evolution and natural growth, silence, and emptiness (2011, p. 422). It is the quality of “outside” that is celebrated here, “disjointed from the spatial structure of the programmed city, from function and direction, from the regulated space of society, from the generic reality of the metropolitan condition, from the ‘everywhere.’ [...] The quality of ‘outside’ which can be found in the cracks of the metropolitan tissue thus can [be] transformed, translated and made expressive into perceivable space [...] As an architectural elaboration of the specific characteristics of the interstice—the outside, the other space, the in-between—the metropolitan garden can create its own conditions to expose specific landscapes. Using the generative structure of the landscape, it marks access points to the genius loci within the metropolitan landscape, connecting them.” (De Wit, 2018, p. 369-371)

The design is brought to the attention of the urban planners and welcomed as valuable research and design. As a citizens’ initiative, its aim is to change the view of the urban planners and to negotiate between a functional layout and landscape of imagination and memory. The design and process are an example of Observatorium’s motto “First art, then urban planning” and as such, it has already fulfilled its promise.



FIGURE 1 Fire of Rotterdam, 1940. The painter Henk Chabot stands with his work in a rich tradition of Dutch landscape painters. He captured the Dutch landscape in a special way, contrasting small flat forms under a low horizon with large volumes in the skies. The turbulent sky above the calm earth was his theme. (Painting by Henk Chabot, 1940. Oil on canvas, 120 x 140 cm, Collection Chabot Museum Rotterdam / long-term loan Municipality of Rotterdam.)





FIGURE 2 House of Henk Chabot. In his dyke house and studio on the Rotte, surrounded by the polders, he painted a large number of monumental landscapes from 1934 until his death in 1949. (Collection Chabot Museum Rotterdam)



FIGURE 3 View of the river Rotte and the polder from where the painting studio stood. In the photograph components of Chabot's paintings are recognisable: river, dyke, row of houses, roof landscape, and overarching sky - the components of a landscape theatre. (Photograph by Observatorium, 2020)



FIGURE 4 Telephone poles along the Rotte. In Chabot's monumental paintings, slightly slanted telephone and lantern poles appear again and again. They attach the land and the sky, and direct the eye to the distance. These poles appear here and there along the Rotte and indicate very precisely the amount of subsidence of the land. (Photo by Observatorium, 2020)



FIGURE 5 Location of the design area between recreation area, village, suburbs, and highway. Most of the surrounding residential areas were built in the 1960s and 1990s in an extensive peat meadow area, two to seven metres below sea level. Almost the entire area was used for peat extraction, creating the large lakes. Bottom left is the bend in the river Maas in the centre of Rotterdam, the motorways connect Rotterdam to Breda in the south, Utrecht in the east, and The Hague in the west. The leftover piece of land on the river Rotte had already been reserved in the 1970s for an extension of the motorway, and was used as municipal storage, amongst other things. (Image from openstreetmap.org, edited by Michiel Pouderooijen)

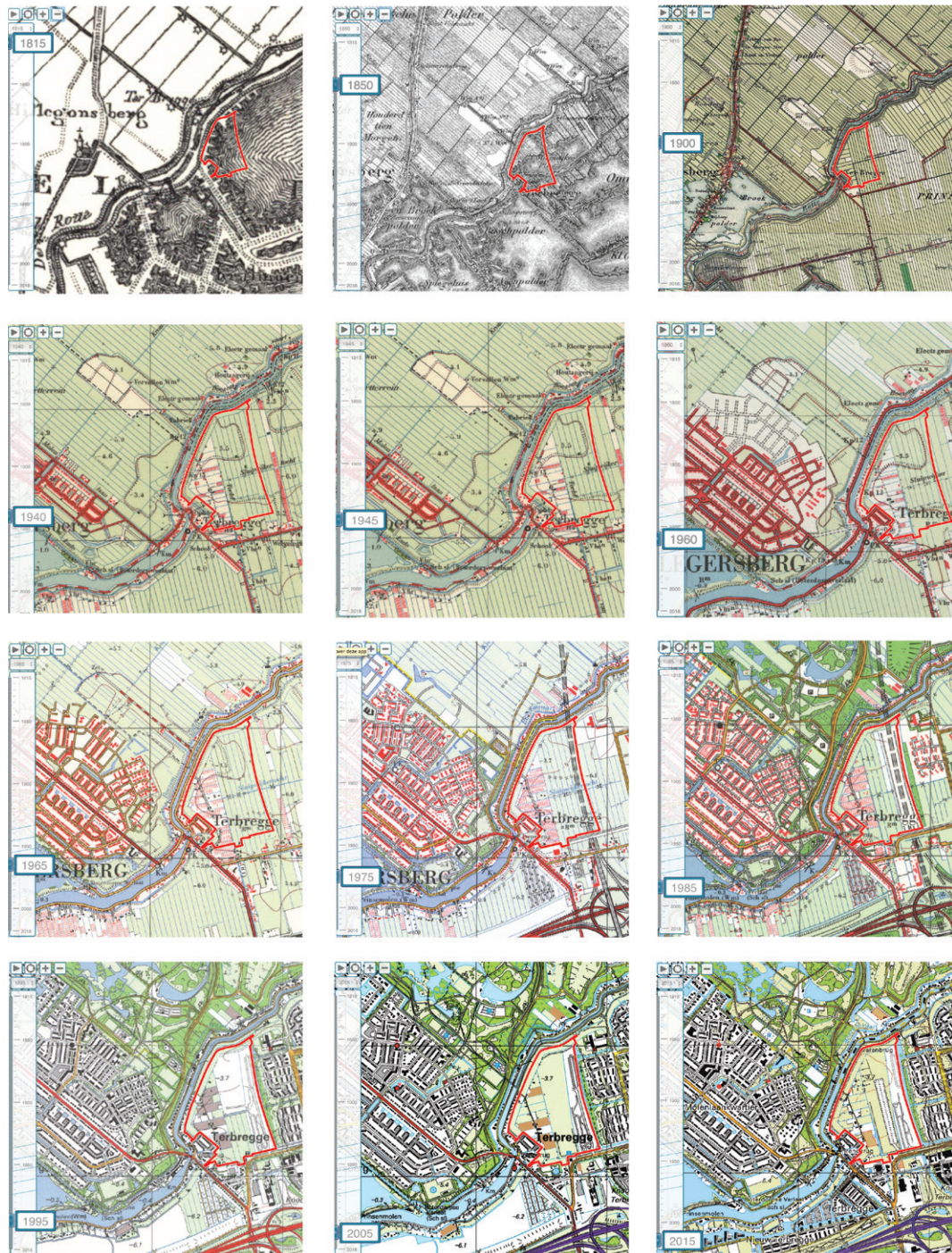


FIGURE 6 The transformation of the landscape from 1815 to 2015. The topographical maps of the past decades show the urban fabric gradually replacing the farmland. The last remaining piece of land that the painter Chabot saw and painted escaped urbanisation, an open space surrounded by buildings and highways. The square kilometre of peat meadow polder opposite Chabot's house is an exemplary summary of the inner edge of the Randstad conurbation: a reclamation polder on a peat river, remnants of farmland, village edges, urban expansions, motorway sites, and recreational areas. The unintended by-product of these independent developments is the borrowed boundary. (Images from Topotijdreis.nl, edited by Michiel Pouderoijen)

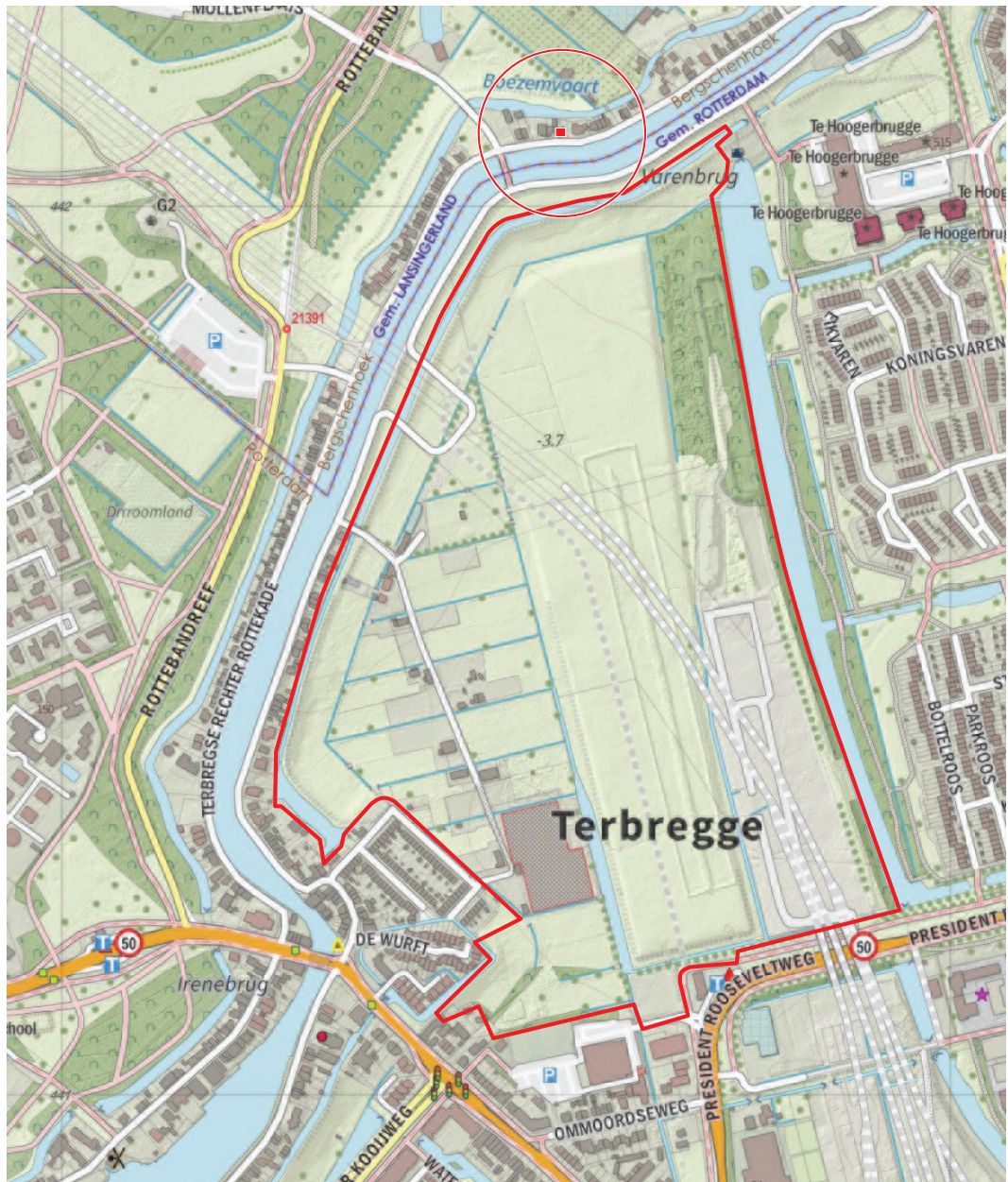


FIGURE 7 Leftover land between Rotte and A16. Lowland between river, village, and suburbs, intersected by the mouth of the tunnel. As early as fifty years ago, people were speculating on large traffic axes that would connect Rotterdam through the Green Heart to Amsterdam. The piece of land, which lies in line with the axis of the Van Brieneoord Bridge, was reserved for the national road plan. Soon it will be possible to drive straight through the Terbregseplein, where the north-south axis splits in two directions, and disappear in a motorway tunnel in the centre of the fields. The rest of the land will be like a horseshoe around the mouth of the tunnel. At the moment, there are no definite plans for the land on either side of the tunnel entrance. The area coincides with the view from the painter's studio on the right side of the river (indicated in the red circle). Observatorium sees an excellent opportunity to baptise the area "the Land of Chabot" and preserve what is so characteristic of the paintings: the horizon and the high sky above it, visible from the dyke of the Rotte. (Images from Opentopo.nl, edited by Michiel Pouderoijen)

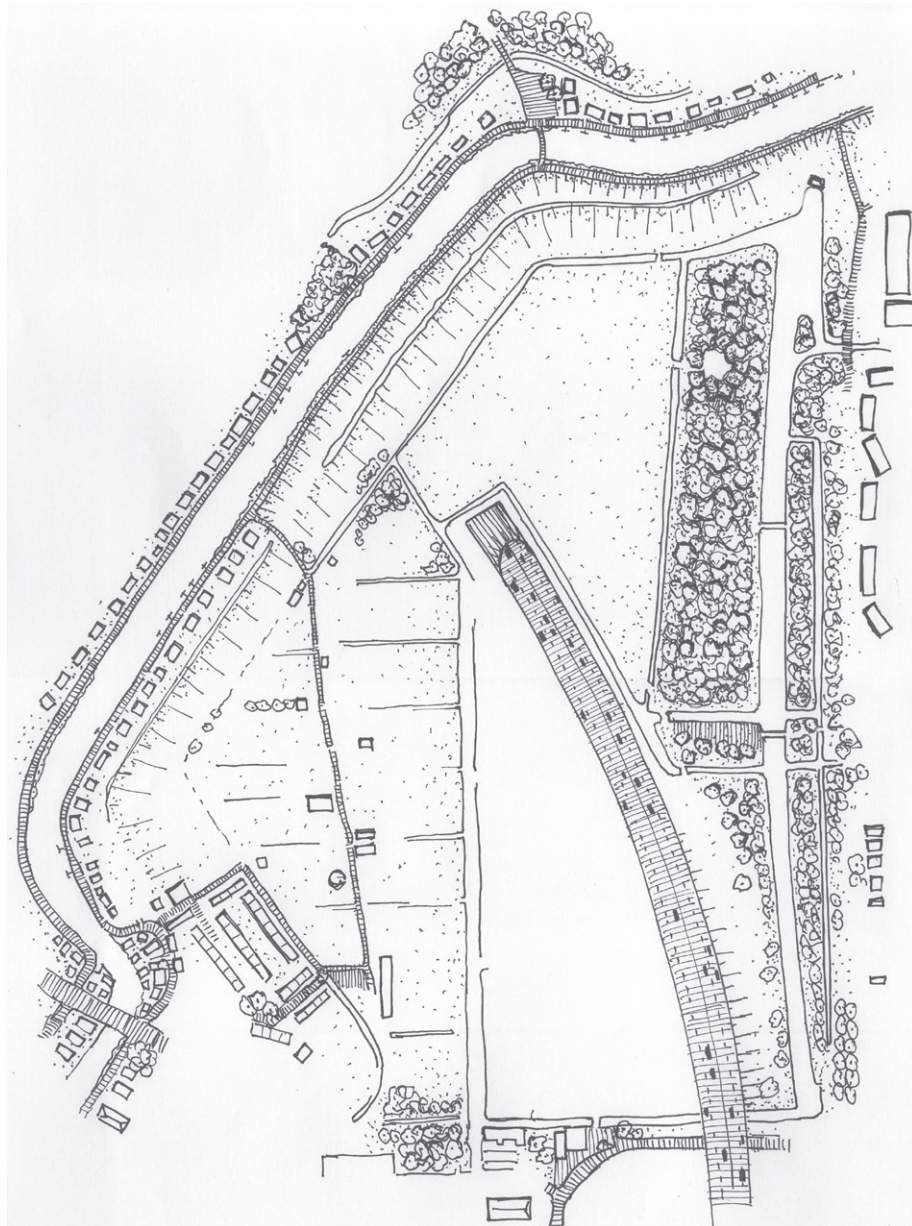


FIGURE 8 Basic plan drawing for the Land of Chabot. The boundary is formed by existing buildings and infrastructure, as a *jardin trouvé* amid large-scale metropolitan developments. As few facilities as possible will be built in the area between the painter's studio and the tunnel entrance. The drawing shows the existing dykes, infrastructure, and buildings serving as "borrowed boundary". Just as some countries are bounded by seas, rivers, and mountains, so the borders of the Land of Chabot appear to be physical boundaries: dyke, ditch, traffic road, and village, all preventing access. "The Land of Chabot provides for moments of standstill in the cogs of the metropolis. How can one recognise the Land of Chabot as a landscape theatre after this area has been bisected by the new ring motorway of Rotterdam? How can one look at the 21st century metropolitan landscape with Chabot's 20th-century view of the farmland? We can outline, describe, name, and mark it, like a garden in a metropolitan landscape. But how do we create a sense of wonder in this already magical place?" asks Observatorium. (Drawing by Observatorium, 2019)



FIGURE 9 Walking symposium in the Land of Chabot, led by Observatorium (September 1, 2018). In response to the request for a monument for Chabot, Observatorium began by observing that space where Chabot saw the meeting of the earth and the skies. Together with a group of experts - who know Chabot's work, who live here, who are building the motorway, who design the urban expansion, who protect nature - they strolled through the meadows for a day. People did not look from the road towards a landscape but found themselves roaming the land. Their resulting recommendations to Observatorium can be summarised as: a *struinpolder* (rambling polder) rather than a recreational area; priority for plants and animals; a living monument. These are inspired by the feeling of freedom in the absence of design and infrastructure in the meadows. (Photograph by Observatorium, 2018)

6 ROTTERDAM-OOST

donderdag 30 augustus 2018

‘Weer horeca ouderen dicht’

ROTTERDAM Leestbaar Rotterdam is bezorgd over het feit dat in de stad opnieuw een zorgrestaurant dicht moet. Dit keer gaat de horecazaak in wooncomplex Kristal in Nieuwlandse sluis. Zorginstelling Humanitas heeft laten weten dat de vergoedingen per 1 oktober niet meer open is. „Het is vreemd, want dat 300 ouderen in Hasselende deze gewaardeerde voorziening kwijt dreigen te raken”, zegt raadslid Michel van Eick. Hij heeft een raadsdebatele aanhangende dat 6 september moet worden gehouden.

Wethouder bij Strektemuseum

KRIMPEN A/D IJSEL De kerstveerwethouder Kirsten Jaarsma mag Open Monumentendag 2018 openen. Jaarsma (Stem van Krimpenerwaard) wordt zaterdag 8 september de officiële opening bij het Strektemuseum aan de IJsseldijk 312. Tijdens Open Monumentendag zijn er allerlei activiteiten rond het museum. Om 10.00 uur begint een bronzenmarkt waar veel vintage spulletjes zijn te vinden. Bovendien wordt er in de tuin. De historische vereniging verzorgt een lezing en er wordt een film vertoond over de Algenbrug. De Open Monumentendag duurt tot 16.00 uur.

IJssel Armada krijgt vervolg

CAPELLE De IJssel Armada op de Hollandse IJssel krijgt volgend jaar een vervolg. Dat melden de organisatoren van de Stichting Hollandse IJssel Alrijd Anders. De eerste editie van afgelopen zondag trok eigenaren van tientallen boten en schepen.

EERBETOON GROOTSE PLANNEN ROND ROTTERDAMSE SCHILDER

‘Herdenk Chabot met eigen land’

Met een eigen ‘Land van Chabot’ in Rotterdam-Ommoord en -Hillegersberg én een tunnel in de nieuwe rijksweg A16 moet schilder Henk Chabot worden herdacht. De eerste aanzet ligt er al.

Gert Onnink
Rotterdam

Ook wordt voorgesteld de tunnel onder de Rotte alomte te vernoemen naar Chabot.

„Hij is misschien wel de beste schilder van Rotterdam”, zegt initiatiefnemer Ruud Reuveling, spreker van Observatorium over de plannen. „Hij woonde aan de Rotte, daar rond ook zijn atelier”. Uitgeroemd op die plek komt de stuwweg A16 (oetervak) te liggen, die ook een tunnel onder de Rotte krijgt. „Het gebied gaat de komende jaren toch al flink op te schieten. Daarbij krijgen we te maken met partijen als Rijkswaterstaat, de gemeenten Rotterdam en Lansingerland en de gebiedscommissies. Dit is het moment om iets te doen, want we de kans dan ook grijpen.”

Het Chabot Museum wil het 75-jarig bestaan van de instelling dit jaar aanpakken om de schilder en beeldhouwer te eren. „Chabot is bekend van zijn schilderijen, maar heeft ook beelden gemaakt, zoals de voorballe in de Kuip”, zegt Angela Verschelling. Het museum doemt al jaren van een herdenkingspunt in het gebied waar Chabot woonde en veel werkte. Renowned is zijn schilderij van de brandende stad in mei 1940, gemaakt vanaf de Rotte. „Hij was een bescheiden man en woonde in een bescheiden huisje aan de Rottekade.”

Het beoogde nieuwe Land van Chabot in het Terbregerveld zou een blijvende herinnering moeten worden aan de kunstenaar Chabot. „Wat kan een kunstzinnige en ook recreatieve bestemming worden langs de Rotte”. Het gemeentebestuur wil de bebouwing van Ommoord weer bij de herontwikkeling ook opgehangen met beelden. Reuveling spreekt deels aan een uitzichtpunt met vandaar zicht op de stad Rotterdam, de Rotte en de verdere omgeving.

Naamgeving

De man van het Observatorium gaat nog verder. „Ik heb begrepen dat die tunnel Rotterdamtunnel moet gaan heten. Dat willen we veranderen in Chabottunnel. Dermedoos wordt het de Prins Alexander-tunnel.”

De plannemakers zijn al in overleg met de gemeente Rotterdam en Rijkswaterstaat. „Wij hebben het idee dat dit wel kan zand. Rijkswaterstaat was vroeger een club van ingenieurs, tegenwoordig kijken ze ook wel verder”, aldus Reuveling. Ook het Centrum Beeldende Kunst (CBK) en de cultuursprekers Hillegersberg.

Rijkswaterstaat was vroeger een club van ingenieurs, nu kijken ze ook wel verder

—Ruud Reuvelingspreker

Hillegersberg speelt voorname rol

De plannen voor het herdenken van Chabot bestaan niet alleen uit Rotterdam-Ommoord en Hillegersberg, maar ook in de gemeente Lansingerland. „Het eerste Chabot Museum stond in Hillegersberg, Chabot had namelijk veel contact met mensen die hier woonden. Hij ligt hier ook begraven”, zegt Angela Verschelling van het museum. Voor de herdenking van de plannen is er contact met verschillende partijen, de gemeente Rotterdam, Hillegersberg en de gebiedscommissies. „Zeker de cultuurspreker Hillegersberg heeft dit mogelijk gemaakt”, aldus Verschelling.

Schieboek en Prins Alexander werken mee aan het project. Zaterdag is er een wandeling met symposium door het gebied van Chabot. Daar doen zij mensen aan mee. Bij een succes volgen meer bijeenkomsten, vertelt Chabot Museum en Observatorium. „We willen alternatieven in gesprek met bewoners, belanghebbenden en betrokkenen, waar kan dat beter dan in het gebied zelf? De wandeling begint om 10.45 uur aan de Varenhof in Rotterdam-Ommoord.”

FIGURE 10 Newspaper article Gert Onnink, *Algemeen Dagblad*, 30 August 2018. An important component of the design for the Land of Chabot is communication, allowing the idea to land before it comes to fruition. ‘First believing, then seeing’, is Observatorium’s motto when it comes to integrating art into public space. During the design phase, *Algemeen Dagblad* regularly published about Observatorium’s suggestion to name the motorway tunnel Chabottunnel. A walking guide will be presented in the Chabot Museum in the Autumn of 2020 on the occasion of the celebration of 750 years of Dam in de Rotte, the dam that disconnected the river Rotte from the Maas and the North Sea.



FIGURE 11 The new world under the sky of Chabot. The illustration shows the ambition of the Land of Chabot: a landscape theatre of meadows and ditches and horizon in an urban environment. The Dutch landscape of vistas of dykes, fields, and farms gives way to a metropolitan mosaic of suburbs, recreation parks, and highways. Would Chabot paint this too? How would his skies look above the motorway landscape? Undoubtedly, he would paint life on earth again as a staffage of the skies. In Chabot's paintings, people live under high skies. Their existence takes place in a distance. These two dimensions of height and distance barely touch each other in Chabot's paintings. The horizon is not the place where the skies and the land meet, but where the sky continues beyond the horizon: "Where the wide skies dome over the vast landscape". (Diary Kees Stortemeijer, collector of Chabot) (Drawing by Ruud Reutelingsperger, Observatorium, 2019)

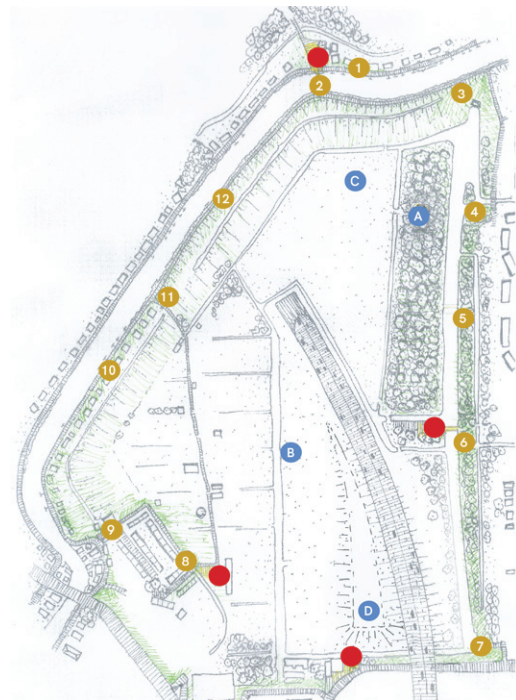


FIGURE 12 Pages from the walking guide *Rondom en Binnenin* (Around and Inside) for the Land of Chabot.

LEGEND

Around

1. The view from the painter's house
2. White bridge over the Rotte
3. Pump station Ommoord
4. Island in the woods
5. Wood across the river
6. Bridges and crossroads lead to wilderness
7. Intersection
8. Rubbish along the Rotte
9. Water is everywhere and nowhere
10. Bel air and no entrance
11. Horses and gardeners
12. Fresh water mussel

Within

- A. Roof landscape
- B. *Struinpolder* Minus seven metres
- C. Sound barrier with 360-degree pavilion on a noise barrier

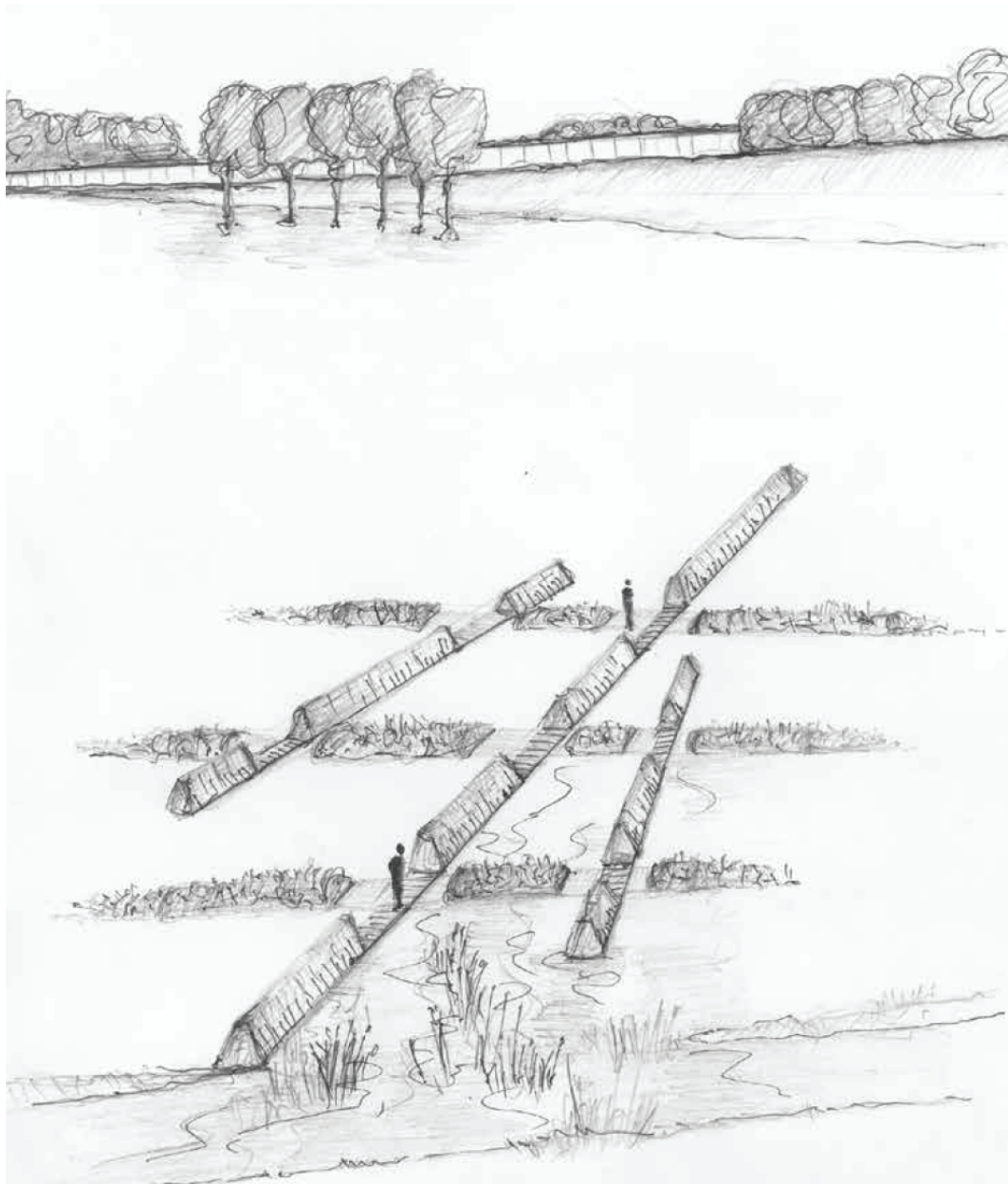


FIGURE 13 Impression of a *stopspot*: subtle earthwork embedded in the landscape, symbolically referring to Chabot's paintings, and translating the recommendations of the walking symposium: *struinpolder*, priority for plants and animals, and a living monument. A *struinpolder* is a meadow grazed by cattle where you can roam freely. The fields inside form destinations where you can see the elements of Chabot's paintings—river, dyke, row of houses, roof landscape—and experience the painting's ingredients intensified: the sky above, the earth below, the vegetation in the distance, and the water present in everything. Coming from the city, the Land of Chabot is the first place with a view of the horizon as a promise of the vastness (height x distance) of the polders further on in the Green Heart of the Randstad.

Inside 1: Roof landscape (Stopspot B). The orthogonality of the polder ditches is intersected by a system of thatched roof points. They refer to the time when houses were made with local materials and to the fact that so many paintings offer a view of thatched roofs as landscape. (Drawing by Ruud Reutelingsperger, Observatorium, 2019).

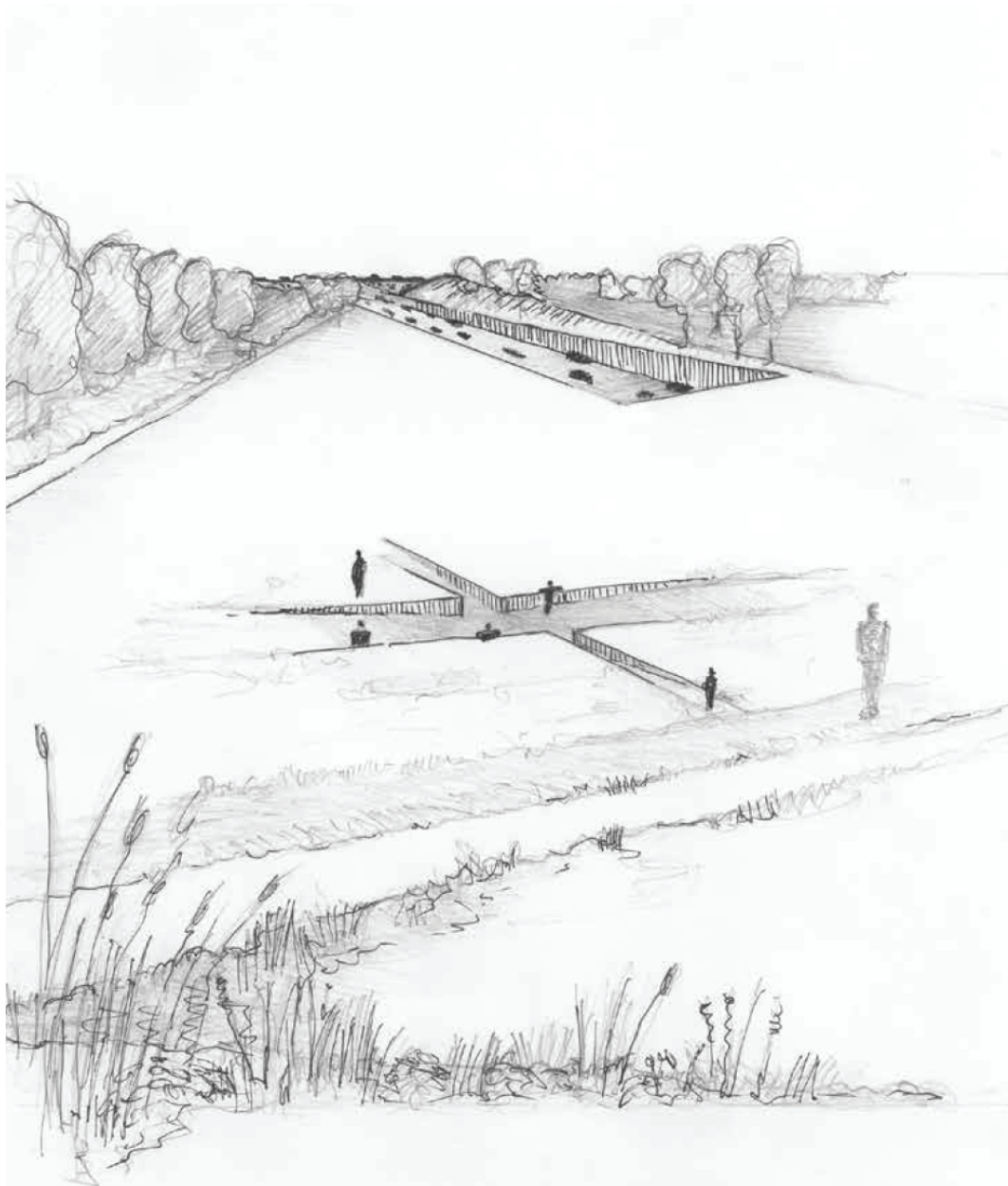


FIGURE 15 Impression of a *stopspot*: subtle earthwork embedded in the landscape, symbolically referring to Chabot's paintings, and translating the recommendations of the walking symposium: *struinpolder*, priority for plants and animals, and a living monument. A *struinpolder* is a meadow grazed by cattle where you can roam freely. The fields inside form destinations where you can see the elements of Chabot's paintings—river, dyke, row of houses, roof landscape—and experience the painting's ingredients intensified: the sky above, the earth below, the vegetation in the distance, and the water present in everything. Coming from the city, the Land of Chabot is the first place with a view of the horizon as a promise of the vastness (height x distance) of the polders further on in the Green Heart of the Randstad.

Inside 2: Minus seven metres (Stopspot C). Part of the meadow is deepened so that the visitor has an unobstructed view of the horizon from the lowlands. The depth connects to the phenomenon that the land here is more than seven metres below sea level. It could become the lowest point in the Netherlands. (Drawing by Ruud Reutelingsperger, Observatorium, 2019)

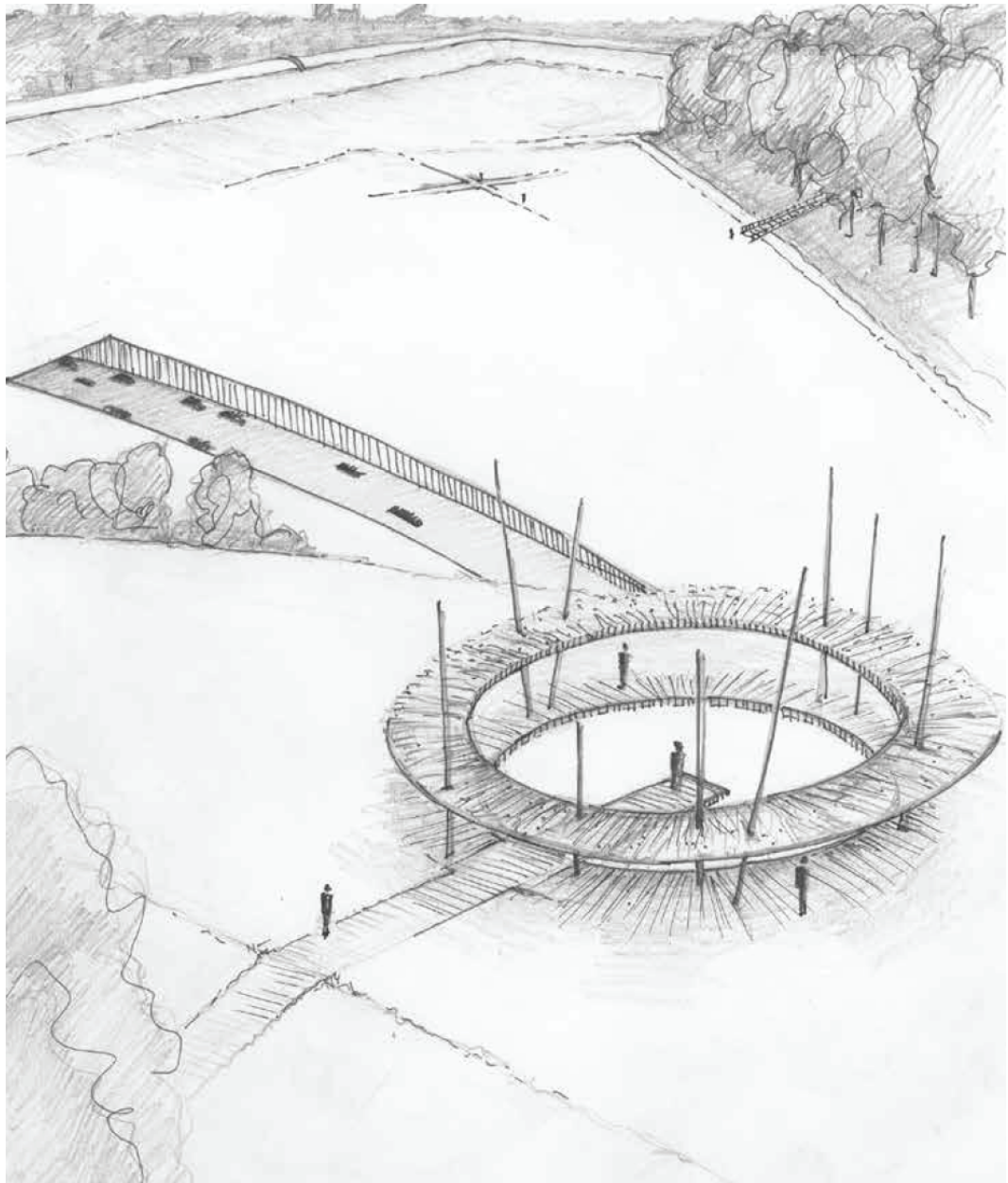


FIGURE 16 Impression of 360-degree pavilion on a noise barrier along future A16 (Stopspot D). The pavilion is a panopticon of the metropolitan horizon. From the relative emptiness of the Land of Chabot you get a view of the skyline of Rotterdam, the flyovers of Terbregse Plein, the apartment buildings of suburban Ommoord, and the remnants of the river landscape of the Rotte. It is part of a circular walk around the *jardin trouvé* of one square kilometre in a metropolitan mixture of suburb, rural village, and remnants of farmland on a subsurface of peat meadow polders far below sea level - the Dutch condition par excellence. (Drawing by Ruud Reutelingsperger, Observatorium, 2019)

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