

Process sketch, January 2014.

## Garden Fence

Edward Clydesdale Thomson

For *The Non Urban Garden*, Scottish-Danish artist Edward Clydesdale Thomson carefully observed the landscape around Diepenheim. At the same time, he started writing a comprehensive essay on the history, cultural significance and aesthetic value of the garden, the landscape and 'nature' in relation to the concepts of time, memory and location.

[Introduction and summary  
by Marlies van Hak.  
Edited by Marnie Slater.]

According to Thomson, the way we create gardens reflects how we inhabit the world, how we distinguish ourselves and how society takes shape. In his view, gardens are a reflection of an ideal and, even more importantly, they also contribute to creating that ideal. Thomson takes as key examples of this the English landscape garden and the French formal garden, both of which can be viewed as symbols of the ruling ideologies of the eighteenth century. Alongside a historical exploration of the garden as a cultural construct, Thomson elaborates on the disputed notion of *enclosure*, which seems inherent in the process of occupying land. The demarcation of land is associated with *protection* against harmful external influences and provides a sense of *security*, but it also draws attention to *fencing*, to territory and to private property. It is precisely out of this thinking that the walled garden emerges as an important conceptual angle for Thomson's artistic research.

Thomson's text that is published here is both the starting point for a garden and a tool for ongoing reflection on his working process. There is a continuous interchange between thinking and making, between the incorporation of ideas both in writing and in physical form. The essay bears witness to theoretical considerations and subjective associations gradually developed during several phases of research, which eventually lead to a proposal for an artwork: the fencing of the village of Diepenheim.

### **Edward Clydesdale Thomson**

**Where Exactly is a Garden?** My first memory of a 'garden' was being told by my mother not to pick the apples off the trees, so, instead, I carefully bit my way around them as they hung in place. The apple trees were small, not more than a few years old, so even at the age of two and a half I could reach the fruit. In truth I probably don't actually remember the event or even the garden, but it's a story I've heard quite a few times and somewhere along the way I must have adopted it as memory and filled in just enough of an image to make it believable. I am of



Line of fence.

the opinion that gardens are equally elements of imagination and memory, physical place and cultural construct. As such, gardens are as much connected to prohibition as to transgression, as much a source of fear as of delight. Looking at an aerial view of the first garden I lived with, I see that it is in fact square and walled, rather than the long and narrow shape I remember.

The walled garden is almost certainly the earliest form of garden. The walls serve to protect the plants from a harsh environment, rather than being a defence against human intruders. Yet when I think of walls, fences and hedges, I think of 'enclosure' and the polemics of land use: private property, boundaries, defence, occupation, secrecy and war. 'Enclosure' is surely one of the most controversial land policies. The conversion of common land into private property defines the move into the industrial age. Still, a wall can provide shelter and warmth, it can frame a view, emphasise a transition, and make a dwelling possible.

Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture, The Allotments, Collage, 1972 (MoMA Collection ©2013 Rem Koolhaas).





For the last fourteen years, I've lived in urban flats without private gardens. Despite this or perhaps because of this, my interest in gardens, parks and constructed landscapes has steadily grown. This interest has led me to see 'idyllic' and so-called 'wild nature' as landscapes of urban imagination, as the projection of character onto nature through which two dominant yet divergent anthropocentric understandings of our relation to land emerge: the wilderness and the pastoral. Each engendering radically different ideologies.

My overwhelming sense from past experiences was that gardens and parks were, notwithstanding differences in size, equally aspects of landscape and landscape was primarily a cultural construct. In such a view, a garden is formed mostly in memory, as a cultural idea given form through its various representations in myth, poetry, music, painting etc. Through more recent thinking, however, I have come to look more closely at what is specific to a garden. I now see gardens primarily as physical places that can be enjoyed or detested; but they do instigate in the demarcation of land and its use, an ideology of how we inhabit our world. In this sense, what defines a garden as opposed to a landscape is the marker of its limits, the boundary, fence, wall, hedge or ditch. These demarcations are more than the physical manifestation or representation of a legal, practical or cultural boundary, rather, they are, indeed, productive in our wider understanding of what constitutes a garden.

Contained within the verb *to garden* is an intrinsic element of what a garden is or should be. The fashion within garden design over the last decades has been for hard surfaces and low maintenance plants. This implies a visual relationship rather than one of collaboration or participation, along with a reduction of the potential for the garden to be enjoyed by other forms of life. If a

The Topiary Exhedra with a View of the Obelisk, Hartwell House, Buckinghamshire by Balthasar Nebot. (Photo: Buckinghamshire County Museum).



garden is only to be looked at, it sets up a relationship based on a theatrical visual staging and puts the viewer-gardener in a passive position. Therefore, recently, the art of gardening seems an increasingly pertinent discipline to me. Especially in today's media-driven society in which perception increasingly becomes fragmented and truncated, there are two aspects of gardening that assume antagonistic qualities. Firstly, its time: it could take decades for trees to become established. Secondly, in its dedication and focus, the repeated action and the constant attention needed, a reciprocal relationship is formed between the garden and the gardener or caretaker.

A garden, then, is not instantly formed, but develops over months, years and decades. It is usually planned out according to an ideal of what its fully-grown form should resemble, but not always. You find gardens that take on an evolutionary design process, where as the plants grow, decisions are taken as to what to plant and where. This brings up some interesting questions, which hark back to an earlier discourse about landscape and its relation to the ideology by which society was structured. If we look closely at the political parties and ideas at stake during the eighteenth century, for example, we find the British Whigs and Tories at odds with Revolutionary France over how to landscape their gardens. On the one side, the Whigs and Tories advocated an idea of an evolutionary constitution in which law would evolve naturally from context, and, on the other, the ideals of the French Revolution sought an apostolate constitution in which

universal principle would dictate law. The Whigs and the Tories developed their ideology in the late model English landscape garden – a form that sought and ‘staged’ a vision of natural abundance akin to a pastoral paradise. Plants were positioned for their aesthetic value once overgrown or dead. This was the image of an abundant nature, a pre- or perhaps post-human dream. On the other side was an idea of absolute rule based on humanist principles manifest within the French formal garden. A mastery of ‘nature’ in which a stable utopia or arcadia could flourish. But what does this opposition mean for us now?

A garden is never sleeping or innocent. If it appears so something untoward must be at play. Gardens are places of brutal war, famine, destruction and death as much as they are places of reflection, relaxation, enjoyment and the creation of life. The garden is the demarcation of the battleground given form temporarily while the will of the gardener is pitched against the will of

Stick and wire fence, Scotland  
2012.



the plants, animals and other non-gardeners. The late model English landscape garden seems to offer an alternative relation in its embracing of abundance. A relationship of independence in that the plants and trees were allowed to develop and die as 'naturally' as possible. However this was countered by their insistence on theatrical staging, the garden then became nothing more than a backdrop for an illusion of abundant nature.

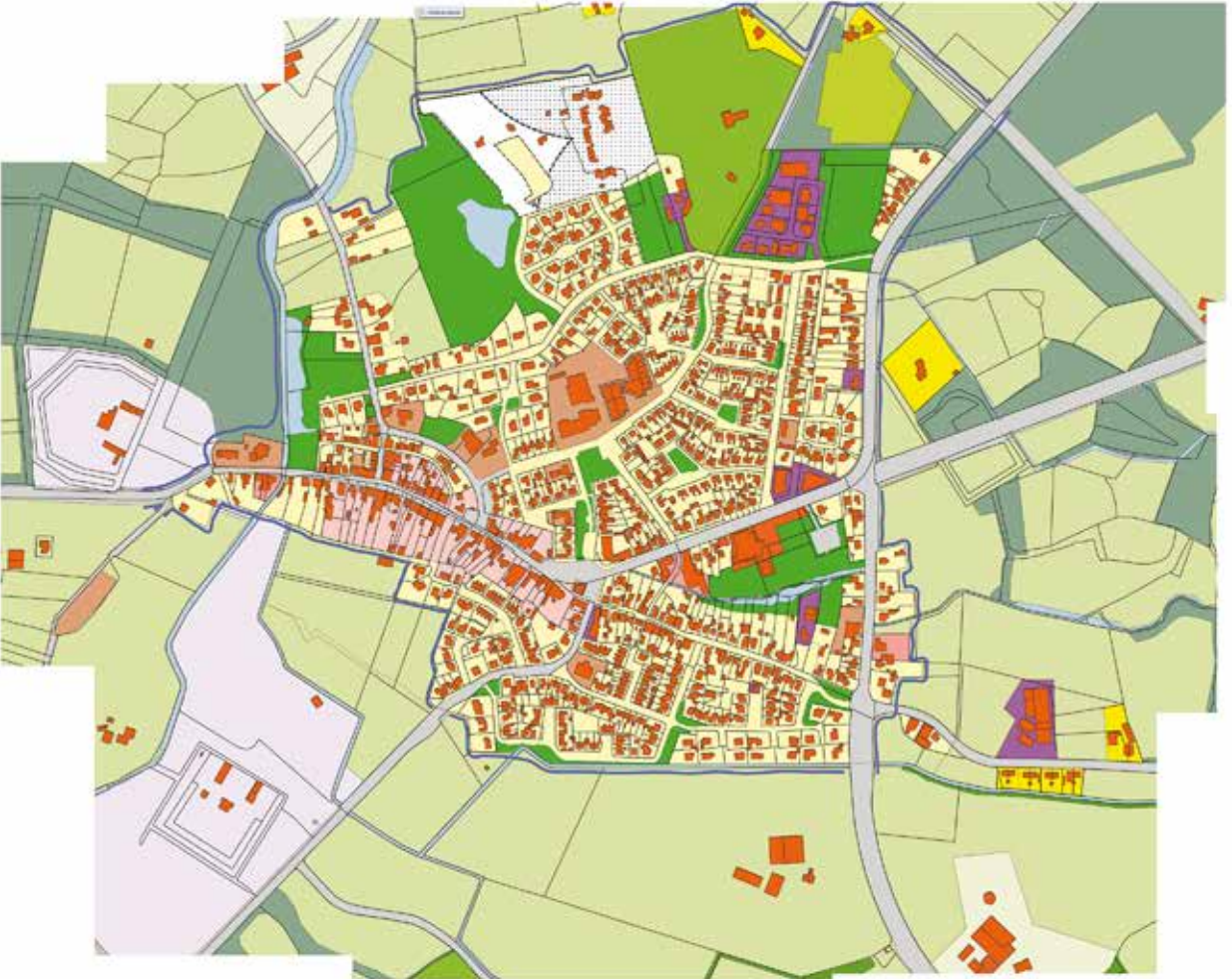
**A Fence** I arrive at around midday on a weekday and the streets of Diepenheim are deserted- I assume that most people living in the village work elsewhere. The quiet solitude is quickly interrupted by the heavy rumble of tractors and other agricultural vehicles driving through the main street. Mats on doorsteps line the streets. Neatly maintained gardens adjoin each house, topiary being a common theme. Window shutters are painted in mesmerising patterns. Beyond the town, as I head out into the fields, land demarcations become the dominant feature. Rows of tall trees, stick and wire fences, ditches and dykes, canals and streams. The estate-owned forests are open to the public during daylight hours. Each bird box is numbered.

There are many gardens in Diepenheim, there's the rose garden and the new butterfly garden beside it. There's the grassy square with the pond. There's the children's garden by the sports centre, many landscaped embankments and other public features, the garden around the well, the Kunstvereniging has a garden, not to mention the garden attached to almost every house here.

There appears to be no urgency or necessity in creating another garden in Diepenheim, in fact, to me, the whole village feels like a garden. Something in the way it's maintained, cared for. Equally the surrounding agricultural land is visually reminiscent of a landscaped garden in the way small clumps of trees create a sense of drama to the slightly undulating land. Foot and cycle paths make the land accessible. Because of the small scale of the fields and farms, compared to other parts of the Netherlands, the landscape feels somewhat like a museum of agricultural land. A fragment of history.

The motivation for my visit to Diepenheim was the development of a non urban garden, but what is non urban space? Clearly everything that is not urban, but this incorporates many specific places: agricultural land, villages, coasts, seas, ports, rivers, valleys, mountains, skies, deserts, car parks, power plants and military training areas. In general, the non urban is defined as not

being built up. This does not mean it is 'natural'- it could include anything from a mountain range to an industrial estate. Diepenheim is in fact a wealthy rural village, financially, culturally and aesthetically. So why make a garden in such a place where, at first glance, the necessity does not appear to exist?



One of the most striking observations from my first trip to Diepenheim was that the village seemed to merge into the surrounding landscape, the passage from the end of someone's garden to a field being denoted only by a small ditch. Returning with my maps and camera it became clear that some places made it easier than others to walk along the village's edge. For most of the village boarder there is no path, so tracing it entails walking along the edges of fields and negotiating various ditches and hedge-

Proposed line of fence, March 2013.



rows. But it is possible. There are very different edges that exist. Together with an architect, I looked through the various zoning regulations applicable to the area of Diepenheim. How exactly was the village defined?

We read about 'De Reconstructie', a large-scale plan for the sustainable restructuring of land use in the Netherlands. It appears that Diepenheim's surroundings fall under two of the zoning regulations. Most of the agricultural land comes under the 'verwevingsgebied', which places restricted possibilities on the expansion of industrial-scale agriculture. While other areas, mostly the forests, fall under 'extensiveringsgebied' where no further commercial development is possible. These forest areas and some of the smaller clumps of trees are, in turn, part of the 'Ecologische Hoofdstructuur': the nation-wide demarcation of a cohesive network of existing and developing nature reserves in the Netherlands. The architect and I then went on to look at the various zoning regulations within the 'Bestemmingsplan'. What I found fascinating was the subtle differences put into play to define an area of non urban land. Agricultural, Agricultural with values, Forest, Culture and leisure, Green, Green space, Community, Nature, Recreation, Recreation-Leisure Accommodation, Sports, Garden, Water.

Boundaries, zoning and the demarcation of territory began to circle within my thinking. Everywhere I turned, the idea of treating the whole village as a garden by demarcating it as a separate territory became increasingly appealing. Boundaries between fields in the countryside are known to be the site of the most diversity in plant and animal life. Could the perimeter of Diepenheim be such a place? What would it mean to occupy this boundary?

Would a fence around Diepenheim trap the inhabitants inside or keep the world out? Embedded in the national land policy is a desire to return the Dutch agricultural landscape aesthetically to a post-canal but preindustrial state, which opens the doors to a dangerous nostalgic polemic obsessed with an idealised past. Equally, there is a desire in many villages, towns and cities to preserve a historic ambience that, by looking negatively upon change, seems to move towards a predestined end composed of radical segregation, as more and more systems of control are introduced in terms of what can be done where. For me, the de-

sire to build a fence around Diepenheim is a questioning of this polemic, a reflection on the polemics and politics of land use. It is not about enclosing the physical site of Diepenheim. It is about actively participating in the debate around the idea of ‘the village’ and ‘the garden’ as abstract concepts. Is it possible to install a boundary that does not enact a literal form of protection? And could this boundary open up the question of how we potentially defensively occupy land even with our gardens?

On an abstract level, the form of the fence would have to stretch between two realms of thought. On the one hand, it must become a habitat. Those who live with it, the residents, animals and plants, would need to adopt it into their lives. It would need to be gardened, physically and/or mentally. On the other hand, for the gesture of occupying this space to have any critical voice, it must remain as an intrusion and as an abstract principle. To move beyond the polemics of land planning and use that I have sketched here, the fence’s agency must be principally split, being both conditional and absolute.

### Marlies van Hak

**The Artwork** The fence as a habitat and an intrusion; how does this manifest itself as a work of art? In Thomson’s first draft of the design, the fence consisted of individual forms, which, if you connected them, would draw a line around the village and mark



Dry Stone Dyke  
(photo: Pam Scott).

existing transitions in the landscape such as ditches, edges of fields and streets. The fence would not be continuous, the boundary would not be closed. For specific locations on the borders of the village several sketches were drawn up: of abstract objects, flat or three-dimensional, some inhabited by plants, some not. Their form was inspired by the garden designs of Robert Lorimer, a nineteenth-century Scottish architect who was drawn to the Arts and Crafts Movement and applied its distinctive style and approach in his work. Thomson used elements of Lorimer's visual grammar to reinforce the tension between sculpture and nature. From Thomson's proposal: 'The aesthetic language I will use comes from the language that Robert Lorimer used in the topiary at Earls Hall, Scotland in 1893. These unique trees could be considered a very early, perhaps visionary example of abstraction – more indicative of abstract sculpture from the first half of the twentieth century than classical topiary. In this abstract reflection on such a concrete subject, the tree, I find a pertinent example of how we could reflect upon the type of "nature" we are constructing. I have been studying the design of these trees and have started to build my own aesthetic grammar from it.'



Topiary by Robert Lorimer at Earls Hall Castle, Scotland 2012.

During conversations with the curators of *The Non Urban Garden*, this aspect of a specific, idiosyncratic visual language was thoroughly discussed. One of the most important concerns shared by the artist and curators was that the fence development should not lead to an autonomous sculpture that could be placed in any public space, but, instead, to one that would find its form in dialogue with the site. At the same time, the influence of sculpture on the art of gardening should not simply disappear.

This contradiction eventually became an important principle in the design of the garden. After many sketches and drawings, and after spatial and financial considerations, a proposal was developed for a single object: a thought-provoking sculptural garden of steel that marks a view of the hinterland and renders visible the contours of Diepenheim.

When the plans were presented, the residents of Diepenheim responded positively to the work; in fact, they immediately suggested assigning it the function of a point from which to look towards the surroundings. They proposed to install a bench at the site and remove a lamppost. Their initial involvement in the proposed plans indicate that they are keen on adopting the garden and are indeed willing to take on what Thomson refers to as an interesting contemporary position: that of the caretaker. One could say that the garden and the gardener are in a constant dialogue as soon as the gardener commits to dedicating his/her time and care, in this case to the edge of the village of Diepenheim. It is in the maintaining of the site in which the will to construct a certain reciprocal relation with the world we inhabit is articulated. And it is in the maintaining and caring for the garden that the thinking about demarcation – as well as the search for what it means to occupy land with gardens – will continue.

Presentation rendering,  
January 2014.

