



IN 1991, WHEN EVERT Verhagen stepped into the post of project manager for Westergasfabriek, he also stepped into a mess. The old factory, which had made gas for streetlights in Amsterdam since 1883, had been closed for almost 25 years. It sat as a ghostly reminder of the ravages that nineteenth-century industrialism had inflicted upon cities.

The neighborhoods surrounding the park were clamoring for the remnants of the plant to be removed so that they could have a much-needed neighborhood park. The existing Westerpark—a pleasant if uninspired 12-acre green space—was inadequate to meet the needs of a dense urban population. They coveted the 34-acre industrial property located within a wedge bounded by the Haarlemervart Canal and the multitude of mainline railroad tracks leading to Amsterdam's Central Station.

The city wanted to create some sort of public use in this wasteland but was constantly being buffeted about by varying

AMSTERDAM OPENS A NEW CULTURE PARK

Kathryn Gustafson transforms a Dutch brownfield into an amazingly complex landscape. **By Mark Hinshaw**

interests who all demanded access. Because the municipal government was in the process of devolving many of its functions to district councils as part of a neighborhood empowerment policy, it did not want to dictate a direction.

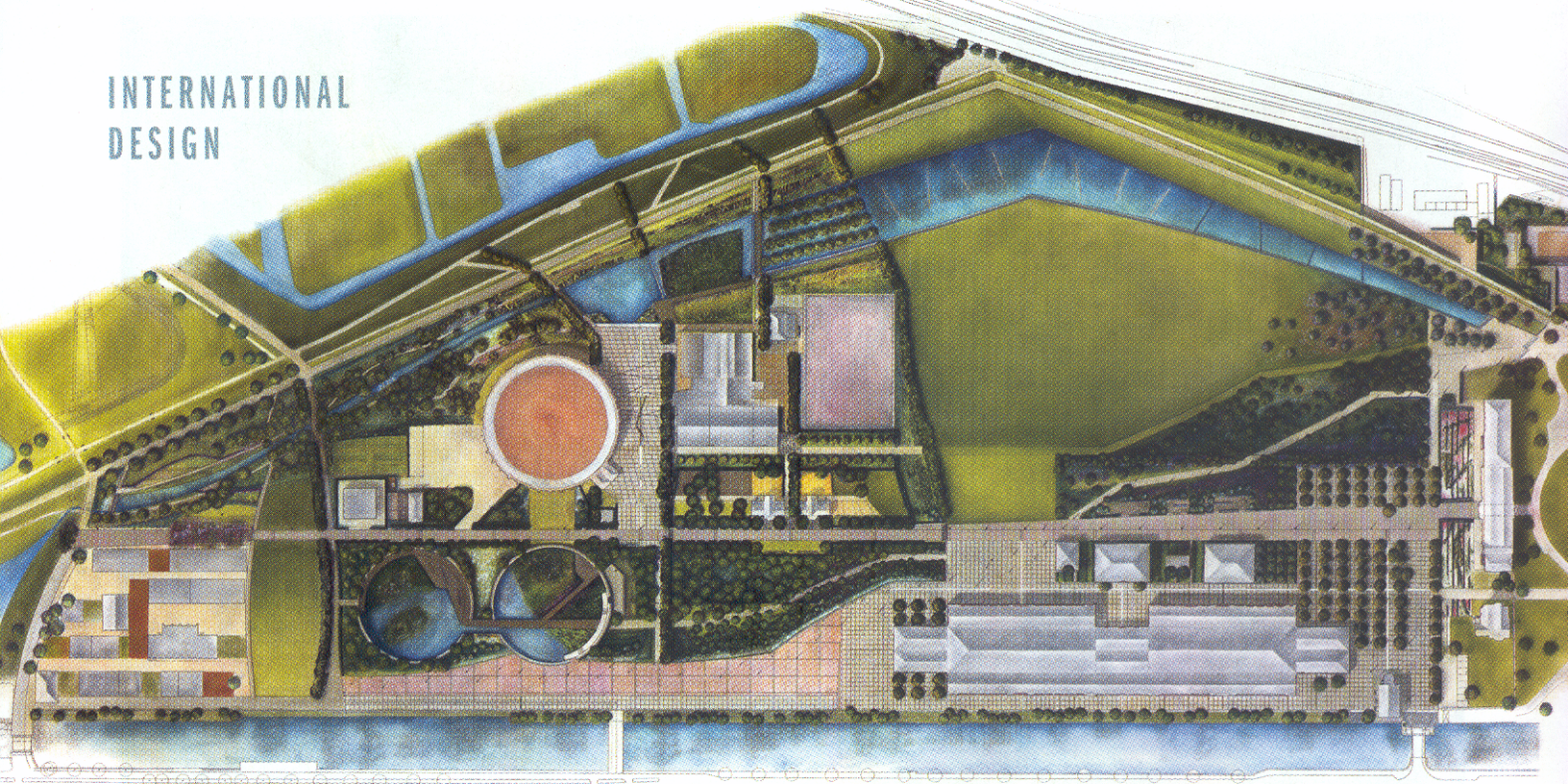
Residents who lived around the site wanted a peaceful respite from the density and commerce of the city. Artists and performers, some of whom had even begun to squat in the vacant structures, wanted active venues for music and theater. Environmentalists wanted to clean up the site and protect natural areas. There were plenty of ideas to go around. The trouble was that they could not all be accommodated on one site, even one as large as 34 acres.

Even more troublesome was the site it-

self. The ground surrounding an enormous round gasholder tank that dominated the site was essentially poisoned. After decades of heavy industrial use, the soil was so contaminated with heavy metals and chemicals such as benzene that human contact with it was unthinkable. Indeed, federal environmental authorities were demanding that all of the soil be removed and replaced before public use could occur. But the cost of such drastic correction was so far above any agency's financial resources that having a park on the site seemed impossible.

In the late 1980s, the city had determined that 22 of the old buildings were worthy of landmark status. They are without question extraordinary examples of the era of fanciful industrial architecture that preceded

A Dutch boy crosses a weir at Westergasfabriek's pool, which echoes Amsterdam's historic canals.



A linear spine links the park's various sectors, many of which adaptively reuse parts of the former gas plant, above. Water is used in a sculptural way to define a flexible central green.

twentieth-century modernism. Each is a glorious confection of brick and stone, with a rococo richness of rooflines, finials, and arched windows appearing to contain functions more religious than industrial. Their designation as national monuments dashed the hopes of some of the local citizenry to have a totally open, bucolic greensward.

The presence of so many protected buildings was itself a potential problem. They required major funds for repair and restoration. The long, wide proportions of some precluded many uses, and the tiny, almost dollhouse-like sizes of others presented their own limitations. And even if new uses could be found, how would all of the ongoing maintenance and operations be funded?

Verhagen and his staff had no shortage of either problems or proposals. Nonetheless they asked for even more ideas. From the numerous public meetings and workshops that were held

over the course of several years, they solicited ideas through a widely promoted "idea competition." Seemingly no one was ignored; all were invited to submit their dreams and schemes. At the conclusion of this extensive and inclusive process, a panel of experts sifted through the many ideas with the purpose of developing a program that could accommodate as many of them as possible. At the same time, the adjacent community was asked to develop its own program.

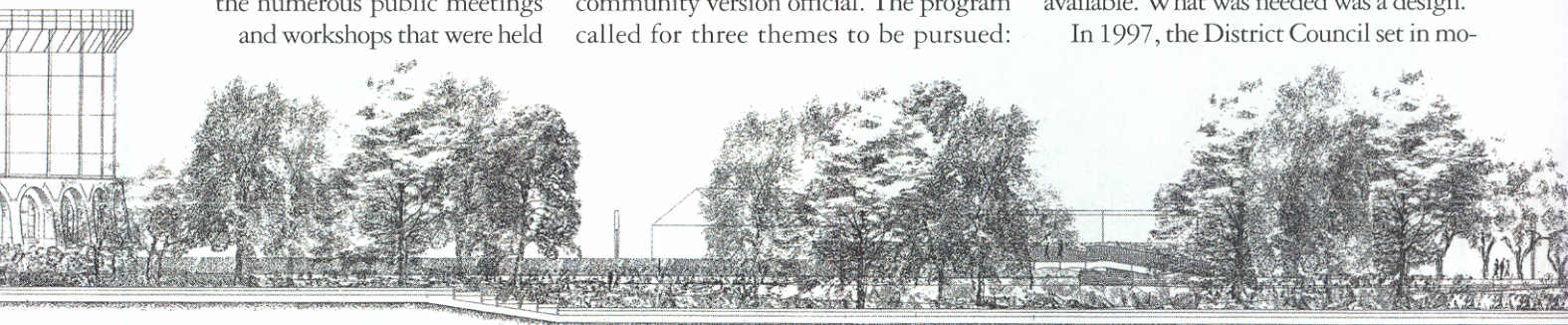
Turning Point

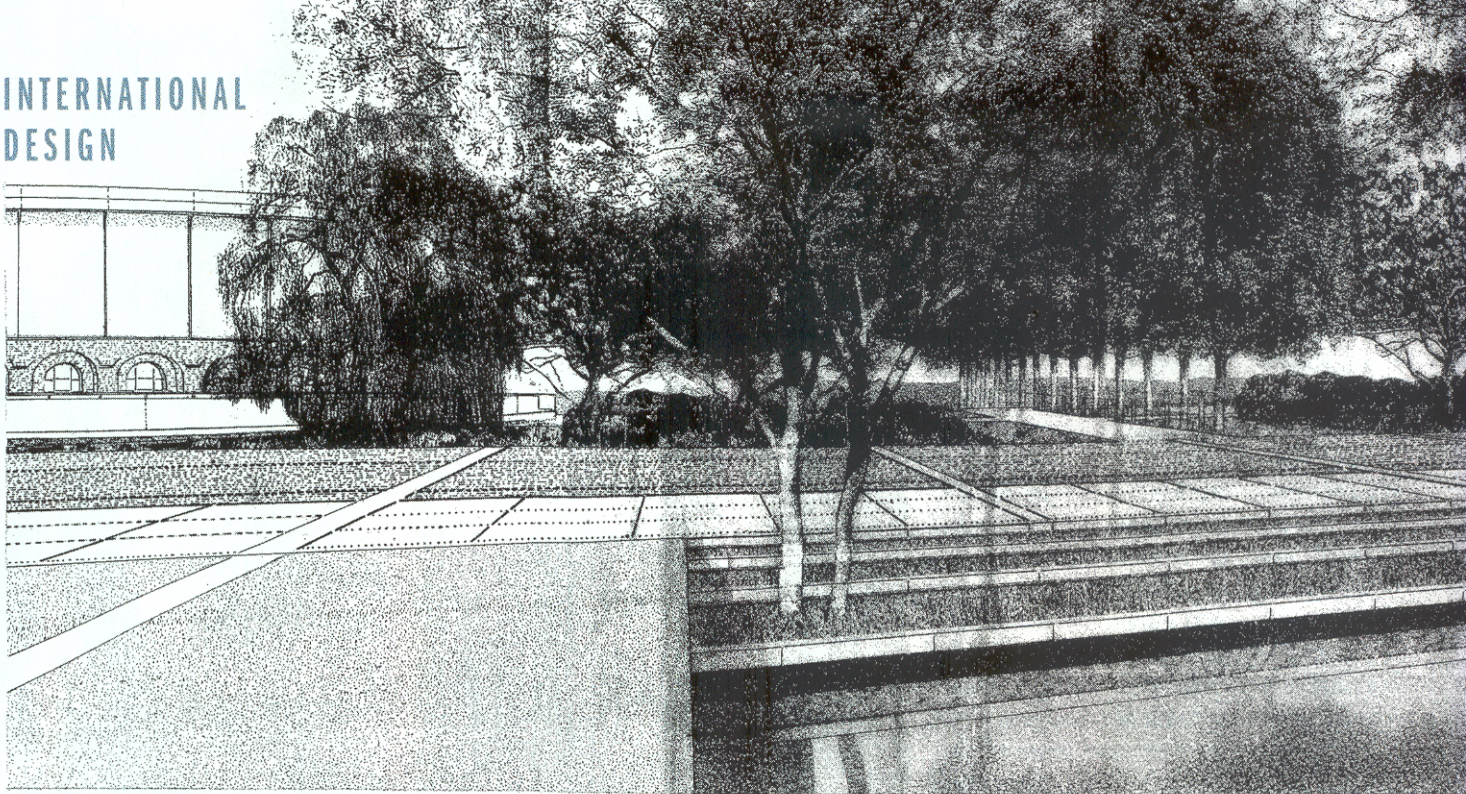
According to Verhagen, when the dust settled, the community's program was so close to the expert panel's version that a decision was made to simply make the community version official. The program called for three themes to be pursued:

green park space, places for culture, and opportunities for enterprise. The first would add badly needed open space to this sector of the city. The second would allow the buildings to be used for arts and entertainment. The third would provide sources of revenue.

In 1995, the national government modified its stance on environmental remediation in a new Soil Protection Act. Under the terms of this legislation, it would be acceptable to cap or cover the contaminated soil instead of removing it. This approach lowered the cost dramatically. What's more, both the local and national levels of government saw the merit in turning an industrial wasteland into an exemplary public amenity. Significant funding was made available. What was needed was a design.

In 1997, the District Council set in mo-





the community desired in a “natural” setting would require some degree of manipulation and artifice to produce that effect. And though this was a severely damaged landscape, it was an opportunity—on a grand scale—to explore the relationship between nature and urban life.

With so many buildings on the site, Gustafson teamed up with Dutch architect Francine Houben. As the design process stretched out over time, Houben lost interest and dropped out. Subse-

quently, Gustafson teamed with London-based architect Neil Porter. The result is a stunning combination of adaptive reuse and preservation, and the integration of both into a new landscape is as fanciful as it is logical.

Gustafson points to a successful technique of citizen participation during the yearlong design process. Verhagen and his management team were adept at organizing stakeholders so that interaction with the team could be expeditious and fruitful.

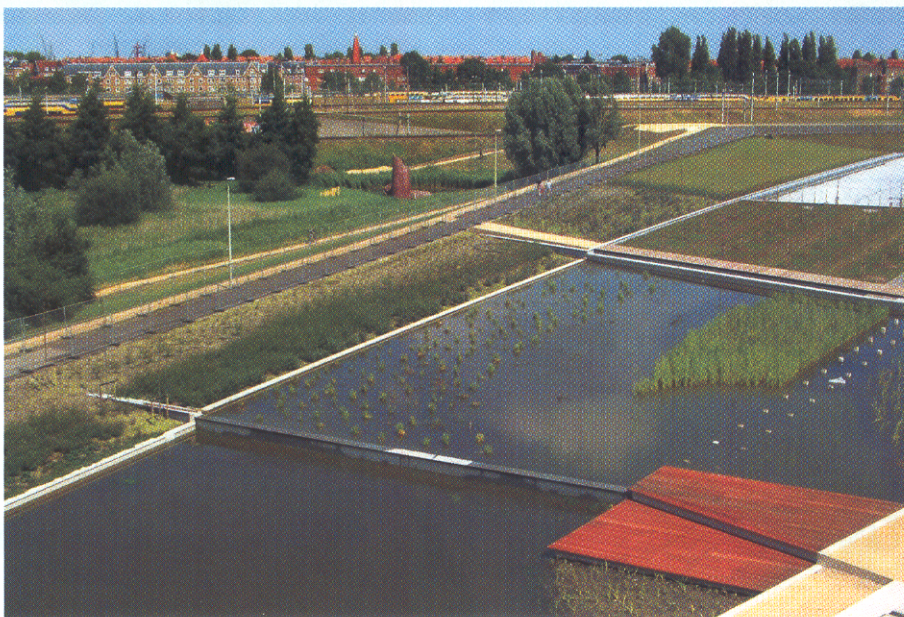
The design retains one of the aboveground tank structures, above, which is surrounded by a combination of hardscape and softscape, opposite bottom, that can be used for outdoor theatrical productions. The combination of historic buildings, tree-lined promenades, and canals is quintessentially Amsterdam. Footbridges cross shallow water areas filled with marshy plants, below, mimicking the pastoral setting surrounding the city.

Every other week, the designers met with a core group of five stakeholders representing clusters of interests. Gustafson praises Porter for his skills and diligence in dealing with the wide range of technical and artistic subjects that were discussed. Every few months, there were meetings attended by dozens of stakeholder groups, and a couple of times during the year, a meeting aimed at the broader public was held.

Although the park closely reflects the concepts embodied in the original competition design, Gustafson did make modifications to address issues brought up by stakeholders; for example, a playfield was added to allow for organized ball games.

Nurturing Culture

Extending across the park’s longitudinal dimension is an axial promenade, an element Gustafson refers to as the “vertebrae.” It begins at the existing Westerpark



tion an international design competition. After looking at the work of more than a hundred landscape architects and designers from around the world, the council invited five teams to create specific design concepts. A panel of citizens evaluated the proposals, which were submitted without designer attribution.

The clear winner in the review process was Kathryn Gustafson now of Gustafson Porter in London and Gustafson Guthrie Nichol in Seattle, Washington, the only American in the field. Although some folks were taken aback that such an important and large commission in the Netherlands would go to an American designer, Verhagen reminded everyone of the rules and notified Gustafson of the award.

For years, Gustafson had been building a body of work that was growing in scope and significance. She is not a landscape architect in the conventional sense of the word; she is as much an artist. She treats her sites as immense canvases on which to scribe great arcs and lines, shaping and shifting the landscape in a supremely artful way. Many of her drawings are stunning compositions in themselves, without any annotations regarding function or use.

Gustafson's design for Westergasfabriek is no exception. But in this case, the design is actually much richer when experienced on the ground than in plan view. Although it is not evident in the two-dimensional drawings, the ground plane slides, tilts, undulates, and shifts from softness to hardness. As Verhagen points out, this park is extraordinary in Amsterdam precisely because it is not flat but rather has a three-dimensional form.

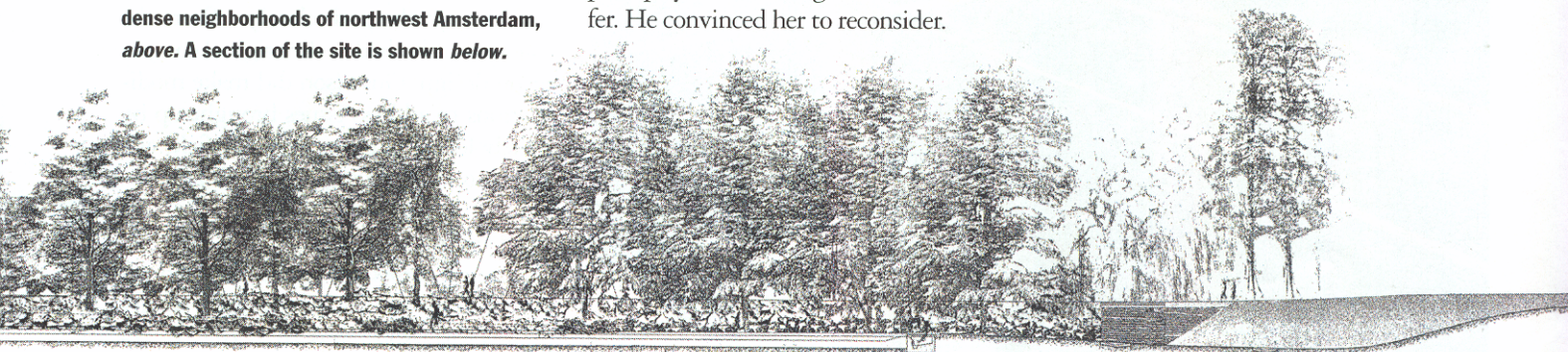
When Gustafson first visited the site, she

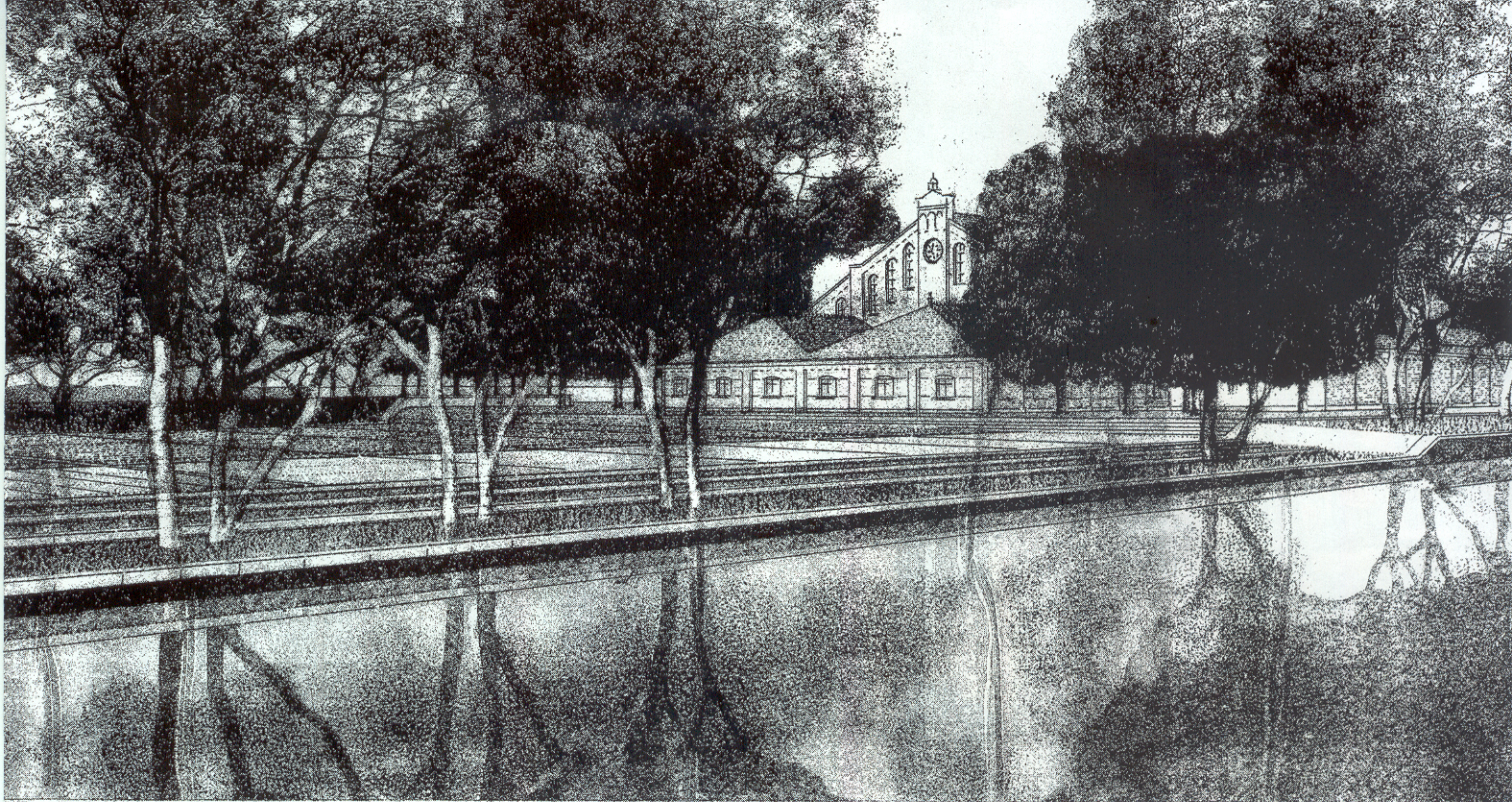
Westergasfabriek is a great wedge of public space lying between the historic polders and the dense neighborhoods of northwest Amsterdam, above. A section of the site is shown below.



was actually turned off. "Frankly," she says, "the place was simply butt-ugly. It seemed to me at the outset that the amount of work necessary to make it into a usable park was beyond the available budget." Gustafson promptly called Verhagen to decline the offer. He convinced her to reconsider.

Upon reflection, Gustafson became intrigued with several aspects of the site. Here was a place that was filled with contradictions and irony. Beautiful buildings had been designed to house an industry that had ruined the land. Notions of what





on the east side, passes through the town hall building occupied by the District Council offices, and continues westward to link all the major spaces and structures within the new park. It terminates in a collection of artist studios and lofts—a compact “city of arts” idea that Gustafson attributes to her initial partner Houben.

Parallel to this axis is another east–west

line that visually links parts of the park. On the plaza outside the council building is a point where one can look along the top of a low wall and see the huge gasholder tank at the far end of the park. The effect is not unlike peering through a telescope. But the wall is not a visual conceit. It served as “strike line” around which consulting engineers could balance the redis-

tribution of contaminated soil, since none could be removed from the site.

The east end of the park reflects a more architectonic, urban setting. The existing buildings, which form an ell, frame an urban square planted with a bosque of trees. The square is paved with large, rectangular stelcom panels—thick concrete slabs edged with metal bands—that were previously





used on the site for taking the weight of heavy trucks. The principal access point from the adjacent neighborhood is located here, via a bridge over the canal.

This area of the park is formal, organized, and orthogonal, much like the entry forecourt to the grounds of a French chateau. Gustafson refers to this part of the park as the “cultural village,” as it has an existing townscape scale and ambience and is intended to be used almost continuously for events, eating, and entertainment.

During the years that the design and construction took place, the District Council and Verhagen’s group allowed the buildings to be used for a wide variety of cultural and commercial functions. A couple of buildings were occupied by cafés and nightclubs. One was used for fashion shows. Theatrical productions have taken place around the big gasholder tank and in several of the former industrial structures.

Allowing the public access to the site early on proved instrumental in getting the nearby neighborhoods to



Since it opened last year, the park has been the site of numerous celebrations, events, and performances, *above*. The hardscape portions are large enough to accommodate festivals of substantial size, *left*.

accept cultural attractions and activities that would draw people from throughout the city. As they attended various events or patronized the businesses, people could observe the park taking shape right before their eyes.

The technique also helped garner support for increasing the budget. With Verhagen’s persistent and articulate persuasion, the original budget of 9 million euros was eventually increased to 12.5 million. By the same token, the budget for environmental remediation was increased from an initial 2 million euros to a whopping 12 million. The results of these funding increases are clearly evident.

Adding Nature

One of the consistent requests by the nearby residents was for the park to have ample areas of green. Gustafson’s



design includes a large, sweeping lawn. But no simple green is this. Contaminated soils were piled up next to the mainline railroad tracks to create a noise buffer. Gustafson shaped the landform in a sloping, grass-covered bowl so that people could sit and face open-air performances. As a part of the environmental remediation program, several feet of topsoil were added to any part of the site where people might come in direct contact with the ground.

Sweeping along the base of the slope is a long pool of water, shaped somewhat like a boomerang in plan, that echoes the canals found throughout the city. The bottom of the pool is slightly canted so that one side is a foot or more deep. This creates a razor-thin edge of water on the other side—a sort of urban shoreline. The edge of the water is adjacent to a low sitting wall clad with precision-cut stone. People can sit on the wall with their arms and hands propped behind them and their fingers in a few millimeters of water. It will surely occur to some people to simply hop up into the pool and walk barefoot in the shallow water.

Gustafson designed a series of structures she calls “water sails,” spaced evenly along the length of the pool to turn with the breezes. She intends for the pool to be occasionally drained to allow outdoor per-

Some areas, like the one *above*, are supremely serene and restful. The contrast between the former industrial use and the present public use is frequently sharp, as shown *below*.

formances to be held. The structure was designed to take the weight of staging and equipment. A nearby field was also specifically designed to accommodate television

equipment that will allow performances to be broadcast.

While the central green lawn will occasionally be used for events, it also has



INTERNATIONAL DESIGN

value as a simple, smooth open plane of grass. To keep it from being damaged by heavy use, the soil beneath has been structurally reinforced with a mixture of sand, compost, and plastic matting.

Meandering along the south edge of this central greensward is a walkway nicknamed "Broadway." In a manner similar to Broadway in New York City, it creates a diagonal route across the park, passing through planted areas and plazas and between buildings.

In all, over 1,100 trees will be planted in the park. In addition, some 250 of the more than 400 existing trees were saved—particularly at the west end, where soil contamination was not as severe. Clearly, the design for Westergasfabriek should satisfy folks seeking out combinations of grass, trees, and water.

A number of pedestrian walkways cross the park laterally, intersecting the princi-

pal axis and a parallel paved route along the south boundary of the park. These pass by or through various cultural venues and lead to footbridges over a waterway. Between two of the bridges is a pool filled with linear mounds of soil planted with bald cypress trees; as they grow, their roots will characteristically rise up and become exposed. The paths and bridges lead to a dike that allows views down on the undulating landforms, vegetation, and watercourses of a natural, protected polder immediately to the northwest of the park.

The farther one moves west and north within the park, the more natural the park becomes. One moves from experiences that are intensely urban and programmed to those that are pastoral and quiet. In a sense, this reflects the very image of Amsterdam as a whole—an intense, lively, hedonistic city surrounded by idyllic green fields, canals, and trees.

Infusing the former industrial site with new vegetation has been difficult. For example, in some areas of the contaminated site, new topsoil was overly compacted

and not well drained. Within the first year, dozens of new trees died. The problem has since been corrected, but it exemplifies the challenges of a severely damaged setting.

Nevertheless, Gustafson's work suggests that urban parks of the coming century—even if built on brownfields—can combine elements of urbanity with elements of nature. This is not the notion of "purifying" cities or infusing them with green lungs. Rather, it is an attitude that recognizes that urban culture is intimately dependent on nature.

Industrial Artifacts

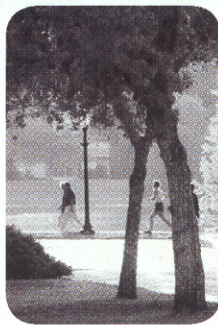
However delightful the buildings of Westergasfabriek are, the biggest structures on the site—the large round forms that held gas tanks—are purely industrial in nature. Three of these structures dominated the west side of the site and presented challenges with regard to adaptive reuse. One has been retained relatively intact, and it will serve as a venue for performing arts. The big, muscular walls and



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ruins-like quality create a dramatic backdrop for theatrical events.

The other two have been taken down to levels below the surrounding grade. The circular foundation walls will be filled partially with soil for vegetation and partially with water to create enclosed microenvironments. These two pure geometric shapes plunging into the ground serve as visual counterpoints to the shape that extends upward and resembles a coliseum—albeit rendered in industrial rather than classic form. The contrast between the big, raw concrete and steel drum and the soft, green cylinders slipping into the soil is certainly striking.

Gustafson's design celebrates the site's history, interpreting it as well as transforming it. The design is both thorough in its technical accomplishments and supremely elegant as landscape artistry. But Verhagen knew there was a real danger that Gustafson's design would get watered down. He fiercely protected her status as designer and insisted that, if any changes were made to accommodate community desires, she must feel comfortable

with them. His view was that once the community produced the program, the designer was in charge.

The Private Sector

This is an amazingly complex park. It is as much a cultural destination as a recreational one. And its many buildings, spaces, and unique physical features will require a high level of funding to maintain over time. To provide such funds, the renovation, programming, and management of the various buildings within the park have been turned over to MAB, a private company. The district council will continue to own the site and the developer will have a ground lease. MAB's intent is to fill the renovated buildings with tenants, events, and activities seven days a week.

Already, cultural organizations are beginning to occupy the buildings as they are gradually restored and renovated. Galleries and cinemas, music performances, film studios, operas, live theater, special effects, and cafés and restaurants will create a dense cultural community. In a sense,

Westergasfabriek will once again become an economic engine, producing not gas but art.

Westergasfabriek is a stunning example of the ways in which brownfields created in the nineteenth century can be transformed into animated and active public places in the twenty-first century. We have inherited an abundance of such sites in recent years as we have shifted from a production-based to an information-based global economy. This park vividly demonstrates that we can accommodate not only collective community interests but also individual artistry in the process.

It will be a few years before the place really looks good. The new trees will be filled out, and the bald cypress trees will have begun to reveal their bare knees. A myriad of artists and events will have settled into a new home. But even now, freshly minted, Westergasfabriek is fabulous. *LMN*

Mark Hinsshaw is director of urban design for LMN Architects in Seattle and contributes frequently to Landscape Architecture.



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