

## New Environments for Education

For some people the term university campus may call to mind an academic environment, detached from hectic daily life and embedded in a lush green landscape where all types of students gather to exchange thoughts on well-tended lawns; a place where new ideas are born and a new generation of scholars emerges.

My associations with a university campus are of a large domain rejected from the city where the landscape is dominated by university buildings that have lost their architectural allure due to years of unorganised renovations and additions. The spaces between the buildings are taken up by parking lots or wasteland. In the evenings the campus is deserted and its reputation struggles with tales of female students being attacked in the evening dusk.

The phenomenon of the greenfield university campus has not done the postwar European city any good. The city centre and the university were increasingly separated due to expansion of the university. In the old cities the academic world was integrated into the urban fabric of the city via pubs, student residences, social venues, bookstores and libraries. In the suburban campuses, there seems today no suitable replacement for this collective scholastic life. Naturally the campuses contain well-equipped sports complexes. More recently also businesses and laboratories settle near to academic campuses, hoping to profit from their scientific image and knowledge.

With exceptions hopefully to be revealed in this book, we at West 8 ask ourselves as a team specialised in landscape design why a university in general cannot be a client for an excellent public space? The reason, I think, lies in the following: *the* university does not exist. It is merely a collection of faculties with their own agendas linked into a national and worldwide network. In recent years universities in a large number of European cities have tried to distinguish themselves through new iconic buildings. Unfortunately the spaces in between these buildings are largely neglected. These spaces are deemed unimportant by the university authorities compared to their own faculty facilities. Consequently no party takes responsibility for





**Aerial view of the existing Zernike Complex located on the outskirts of the city of Groningen. The WSN building in the middle flanking the waterfront was designed in 1971 by Architectenbureau Van Lingén.**

them nor is there money available to create worthwhile public spaces. Did this use to be different in the past? Probably not. Nevertheless, the urban fabric of the old city centre creates a cohesive framework allowing the academic culture to blossom. It is precisely this urban layering that is missing from the European university campuses today. I will present two projects that deal with the dilemma of campus design as a landscape or an urban environment.

### **Zernike Campus in Groningen**

The first one is the extension of the campus of the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen and Hanzehogeschool Groningen in northern Holland: the Zernike Campus, named after Frits Zernike, the inventor of the phase contrast microscope. However great the achievements of this Nobel Prize winner, the Zernike Campus is not worthy of the designation *campus*. In contrast to the inner city of Groningen, which is warm and cosy and where the



students fill the cafés and terraces, the campus to the north of the city is empty, the climate is rough and the grass is bleak. Although most of the students come from the surrounding suburbs and inner cities by bicycle, the spaces between the buildings are dominated by parking for cars and buses. The university finds itself in the favourable position of being able to add around 100,000 sqm of new building development to the existing complex, comprising new educational and research facilities as well as related external companies and institutions. These facilities will be integrated into the Zernike Campus and Zernike Science Park. This new development will also enable the university to upgrade the quality of the open green space within the campus.

West 8 is responsible for the design of the master plan and the open space for the campus as well as the supervision of the architecture of the individual faculty buildings. The open space design is implemented in a step-by-step process and coordinated with the construction of the new build-

**The composition of the different buildings was inspired by a game of chess, allowing varying perspectives and views.**

ings. The first step of the master plan is the improvement of the urban quality of the area. Inspired by the old country estates in the region, the campus has a thick wooden fence and a water border. The wooden fencing protects the open space against the rough winds from the polders. For the look of the buildings and composition of the open space we took our inspiration from the game of chess; the different buildings stand like stubborn pieces in the landscape.

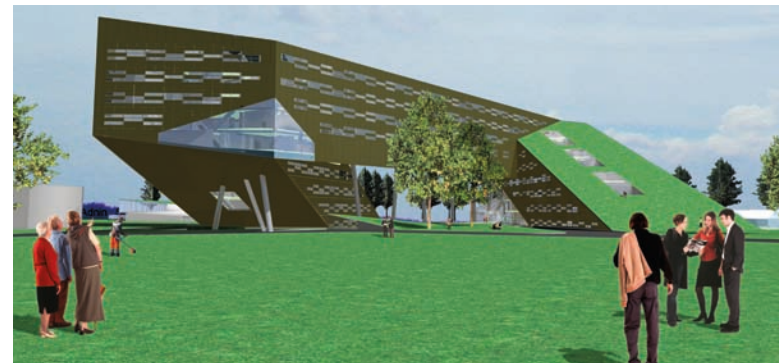
The egos of the faculties are encouraged to make unique buildings that maximise the contrast with their neighbouring building, supporting a differentiated form of image-and identity-building. The new buildings will be limited to the size of 10,000 to 20,000 sqm in order to make them human and to avoid mega structures. Another stipulation is that each building has a clear main entrance at ground level. Interior connections and bridges are taboo. Although the buildings are not hierarchical in their organisation, they have a homogenous position in the environment. The positioning of the plots is determined with consideration to sight lines in order to give the feel of a park. In addition, by placing the cars and parking lots along the perimeter of the campus the heart of the campus is released and freed to actually be arranged and used as a *campus* with grass and trees and with wide bike paths. New bike racks are placed behind the hedges. In the heart of the campus there will be a lily pond with a library and a social hall directly next to it.

### Leer Park in Dordrecht

The second project is Leer Park in Dordrecht. This site is dedicated not to university education but to remedial and adult education, therewith serving a particularly demanding group of students. The age-span varies from 11 to 23 years. This group is symptomatic of a large percentage of students who did not finish school and had to take on low-income jobs or are without employment, with vandalism, teenage pregnancy and drug usage a commonality. Yet at the same time, in society today there is also a great need for skilled workers. This was a cause of great concern at the city council in Dordrecht and ten years ago the city began discussing solutions to this problem. Under the guidance of the director of the Regional Education Centre the idea of Leer Park (learn park) was born. Simply put, the ideas



The inversion of car-dominated to slow(-moving) traffic is an essential component for the revaluation of the open space and for additive recreation areas and facilities.



The School of Life Sciences designed by Rudy Uytenhaak Architectenbureau bv.

brought forth are to improve the connections between the different schools; not to teach tricks of the trade, but rather problem-solving skills; to approach the students at their own level of ability by recognising that they are not high-flying scholars but practical thinkers; to make these aspects the focus of the education, for example, by creating courses on the restoration of classic cars or by opening a beauty school within the college; to create everyday situations where students are challenged to further their development; and finally to take the lifestyle of the teenage generation seriously.

Fate has it that these noble goals have no place in the centre of the city, but rather at its perimeter. In 2005 a competition was organised by the city and schools; teams of developers and architects were asked to develop a plan. This plan contains not only the construction of schools but also the creation of open spaces, businesses and residences. West 8 is committed to this project as the master planner, supervisor and designer of the open



**Master plan of Leer Park showing the mix of education and sports facilities, offices, retail, housing and multipurpose and open spaces.**

spaces. The programme consists of 50,000 sqm of educational and sporting complexes, 24,000 sqm of office space of which 9,000 sqm are for business curriculum; 11,000 sqm of office units, 2,000 sqm retail, 2,000 sqm multi-purpose space, 40,000 sqm open space, and 450 residences. The total investment is 175 million euros. Due to the fact that it was apparent from the beginning that different schools needed to be designed, various different architects were assigned from the start: SeARCH for the Samenwerkingsgebouw (the collaboration building), Studio Hertzberger for the Stedelijk Dalton Lyceum, Mecanoo Architecten for the Da Vinci College, DKV Architecten for the Insula College and NL architects for the Leonardo Plaza as well as a sporting palace and lounge.

We asked the director of the school for his opinion on education and what vision he had for the school buildings. His response was surprising and compelling: “In my eyes the ideal school should be compared to the village I grew up in. We had a butcher, a hairdresser, an office space, and a



**Aerial view of Leer Park in Dordrecht.**

factory. What you were destined to become was obvious, but what you were to do was a question of trial and error: which profession suits you. Naturally our modern employment process is more complex. But I believe that the school should work as a mini-continent, allowing the student to make mistakes along their path to adulthood.”

We took this statement as an argument to not design the school as a building or complex but rather as a village. The heart of the plan is formed by a green space. Along this park lie the different schools, each with their own character. Between the schools are clusters of housing complexes. In the base of these buildings are offices, which are rented out by the school. Here education is taught through real life professional simulations. For example, students run a restaurant, a hairdresser, a bicycle repair shop, a garage, a travel agency, a retail shop, a sports school, etc. These services can be used by students and outsiders alike. Aside from these functions the plan also provides a place for self-run businesses that can take advantage of the

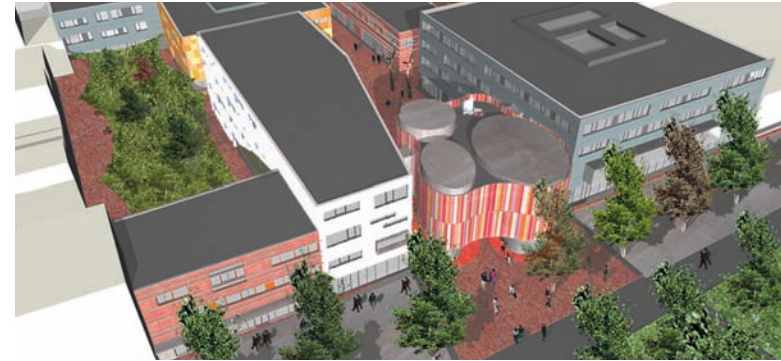
low cost of employing student workers. In addition to the activities the location of the school facilitates, it also provides a network of contacts in a region where business internships are often on offer.

In contrast to many universities, the board of Leer Park considers open space crucial. The aim is that the individual schools should work together in the park so that the phenomenon of learn-businesses continues to function, so that the younger generation receives a place in the open space, so that the interaction with the surrounding neighbourhoods is maintained and that the mix of schools, residences, and businesses is made possible. The task for the design is to create a space that is functional, not only during the week when thousands of students are present, but also at weekends and in the evenings. The park must therefore have a neutral composition of grass and trees, a bike path where students can cycle in groups ten abreast, and with unique attractions that can even be openly playful. In the park there is a pavilion designed by NL architects with an easily accessible concrete roof that serves as a combined bleacher and arena for skating. Under the roof there is a small expo space. The roof also has a video wall where movies, sporting events, clips and information about the school can be screened.

### Conclusion

Looking back at the two projects one can observe a significant difference in the role of the public space and landscape with respect to their surroundings. The Zernike project in Groningen can be considered as a traditional campus where buildings stand freely as objects in a park-like setting. The borders of the site reinforce its relative seclusion from the surrounding landscape. The connection to the city is an almost 'virtual' one, which makes it questionable whether students and staff would like to live there at all. Despite the high quality of the design, the basic conditions of the site cast doubt on its viability as a sustainable social environment.

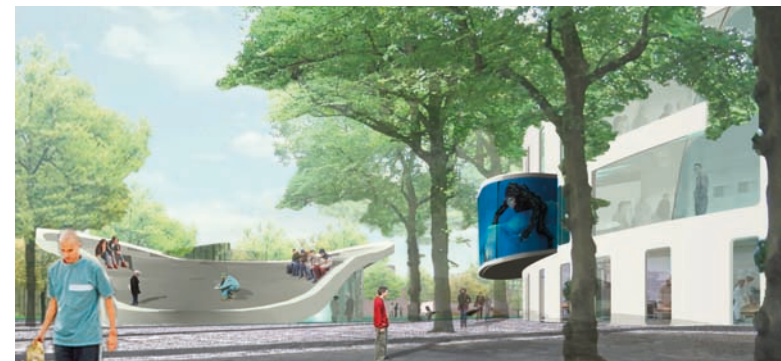
The Leer Park project in Dordrecht is a veritable social revitalization engine. The intimate public park clearly defines a centre, reinforced by a mixed use 'urban' façade of schools, housing and amenities. It becomes an oasis for the surrounding derelict structures. In the best case scenario this urban typology is able to reset the context and create a new social centre of gravity.



Da Vinci College  
designed by  
Mecanoo Architecten.



Sports palace with  
climbing wall  
designed by NL  
Architects.



Pavilion by NL Archi-  
tects, whose roof  
provides seating and  
serves as a skating  
arena.