

The case of Lerup versus Le Roy

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The book was written at a time that I had not yet even mastered the art of walking, but it was at crawling height in my parents' bookcase: *Natuur inschakelen*, *Natuur uitschakelen* (switch on Nature - switch off Nature). It is primarily the cover of this book by Louis G. Le Roy that I remember: an ominous black snarl of cogwheels, levers and machinery taking on an army of colourful insects. The insects are clearly winning, forcing the machine parts to retreat to the back of the book. That one image clearly reveals the contents of the book: the struggle between Nature and culture.

The book, published in 1973, was an indictment of the denuded, treeless cultural desert that our living environment was becoming, and a manifesto calling for a radically different view of Nature. Mr. Le Roy argued for a dynamic form of nature management, which in essence could be defined as a careful *laissez faire*.

The book, long forgotten and no longer available, had a modest impact in the 1970s and has indubitably made some contribution to the popularity of the many "wild gardens." However, that was not the point for Mr. Le Roy. He argued not for an attitude of adoration, but for a fundamental change in our position on Nature: Nature as a company, as a mechanism. And man as a supervisor in this company, to which he is organically linked.

That was 1973. Suburban Nature in the year 2005 has, according to Mr. Lerup, evolved in the opposite direction, having become "an amalgamation, a meeting halfway, with artifice." And again there is the cry for a radical paradigm shift: "we remain far from nature's home and will not draw closer unless we rethink our relations radically." Mr. Lerup also rejects technology as a possible solution, but – and this is where Mr. Lerup directly opposes Mr. Le Roy – looks for the solution in man. In doing so, Mr. Lerup places himself *linea recta* in opposition to Mr. Le Roy, who opens his twelve-

point manifesto by saying: man is the product of culture and nature. “In a dynamic approach that man takes to Nature, the word dynamic should not be associated with the work that must be done by the people in that Nature, but with the work done constantly in space and time by all creatures except man.”

This was also how Mr. Le Roy shaped the construction of his life’s work, the Ecocathedral: he initially sowed and planted it randomly. However, when a large pile of rubble became available after a prison was demolished, Mr. Le Roy gave lie to the first line of his manifesto and used the rubble in the layout of the area. 1500 truckloads have followed since that time. His constructions are meticulously stacked structures of ordered debris, organised in complex patterns with a pure regularity and discipline. It is a clear act of culture. The dictatorship of natural dynamics is only for show; in the end, Le Roy is the King who reigns gently over the wilderness of Mildam. The cathedral is in essence a natural ecosystem that is simultaneously also artificial, owing its existence to the efforts and energy of a single individual. The struggle between Nature and culture has been turned into a marriage here.

But in creating his stacks, Mr. Le Roy also sets the terms for his Nature. The holes, joins and cracks give purchase to the roots; the open structures offer better moisture levels for plant growth than the Frisian soil. This brings the Ecocathedral closer to Mr. Lerup’s goal than Charles Durande’s spiders or Olafur Eliasson’s streams of water. Where Mr. Le Roy merely facilitates and creates the ideal circumstances for the natural processes to develop, Durande and Eliasson initiate processes without having created the circumstances to control them.

“We are clearly not there yet!” Mr. Lerup writes, describing the quest for a “trading zone of oscillation.” He goes on to say, “However, the outlines of

this desirable, possibly attainable future are there: dynamic, self-correcting processes where the ‘highly artificial’ cohabits and sometimes fuses with the ‘almost natural’ endless alternation – building, erasing, and rebuilding vistas of astonishing beauty and intelligence.”

We are not there yet, but Louis Le Roy is close. His Ecocathedral is supposed to be ready in the year 3000, and that’s only the day after tomorrow on Nature’s calendar. If Mr. Lerup can’t wait that long, the Ecocathedral is already open to the public 7 days a week, at the Yntzelaan in Mildam, The Netherlands.