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ROADS



The furnished highway

Ginette Blom

It is becoming increasingly common these days to view public spaces as urban interiors and to equip such spaces with furniture which is appropriate for the particular location. Even motorways have not been left out; the noise barriers which encapsulate motorways are being given interiors where design is in evidence. There is now a rapidly increasing need to adopt a cohesive approach towards fitting out motorways.

Numerous objects are springing up along the sides of Dutch motorways. Large-scale constructions, like noise screens have an immediate impact because of their size, and they are now receiving the full attention of designers in the Netherlands. The primary role of the screens or barriers is to reduce the traffic noise in the areas they protect, but their disadvantage is that they also block out any view of the landscape. So noise barriers are becoming increasingly important as indicators of landscapes that are no longer visible. By re-interpreting the absent landscape into the design used on the screen – by citing it, providing a framework for it or by using it as a source of inspiration in some other way – expressive designs are developed so that road users can identify where they are driving: they recognize where they are from the design on the barrier.

The way the countryside is symbolized on a screen or barrier can vary greatly. A number of constructions have been erected in a line along the A2 highway – the Netherlands' most important traffic artery. Although the ways they have been made are very different, their theme is a coherent one. UNStudio's design is a massive concrete construction. Its huge size is partly compensated by an abstract pattern of migrating birds executed in relief, with the transparent spaces between them made from neon-yellow plastic. The countryside or urban landscape behind the barrier shines through in a penetrating yellow colour. It is just like looking through a sweet wrapper which intensi-

fies some of the colours and blocks out others. The yellow colour reminds one of rape in full bloom.

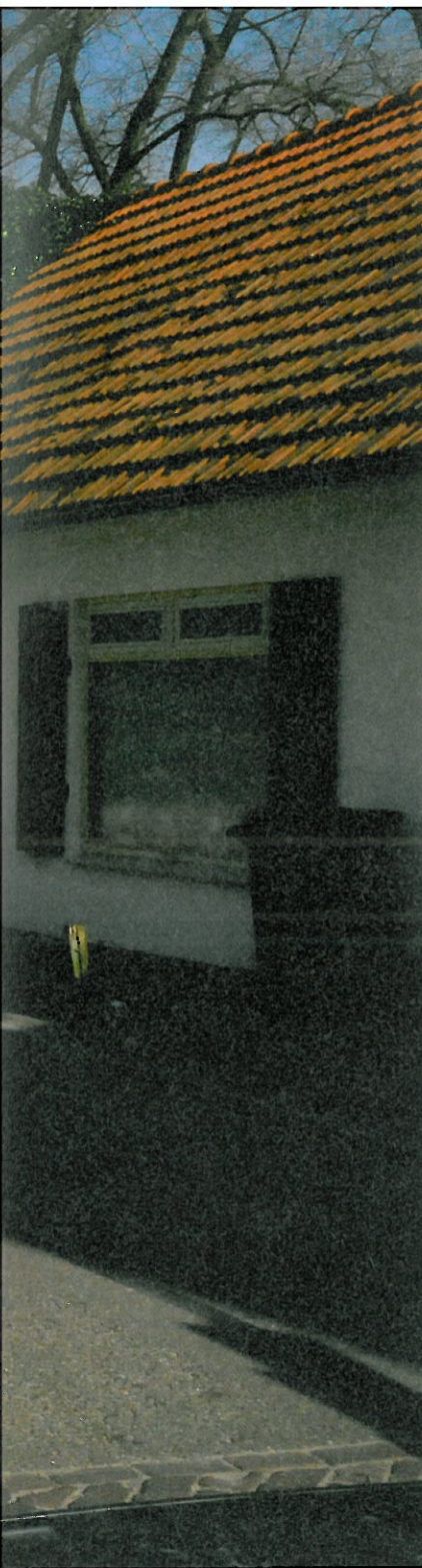
Oversized balconies

Corten steel barriers of horizontal, slightly slanting slats have been erected along the same motorway on the stretch between Zaltbommel and Everdingen; these were designed by MTD landschapsarchitecten. During the passage of time, the steel slats will eventually disappear from sight as they are steadily overgrown by hedging, and road-users' perceptions will alter as they see the barrier being slowly transformed from a rusty red steel wall into a vibrant green one. This more modest design is an allusion to the fruit-growing areas by the sides of the highway, where tall alder hedges have long been used as a traditional method of protecting the orchards from the wind.

The screen barrier on the A58 highway at Goirle-Tilburg, designed by Bureau Lubbers in cooperation with Crepain-Binst architecture, also incorporates a striking reference to the landscape that it conceals. Oversized balconies are attached to the noise-reducing wooden facades of the houses behind the barrier, planted up with Scots pine. Almost surreally, the trees form a signpost highlighting the woods surrounding the residential areas. All these designs develop pre-existing relationships with nature – either directly by incorporating a countryside theme into the barrier or indirectly by transforming the landscape into a frozen metaphor.

Thoughtless

The fact that so much consideration is now given to the design of motorways, including the noise barriers, does not necessarily mean that everything is hunky-dory. The countless, less noticeable objects sited along the motorways also have a part to play in the road environment and are very often not included in the design. Gantries (the steel constructions mounted overhead on highways carrying signs with traffic information), power cabinets, lighting and the



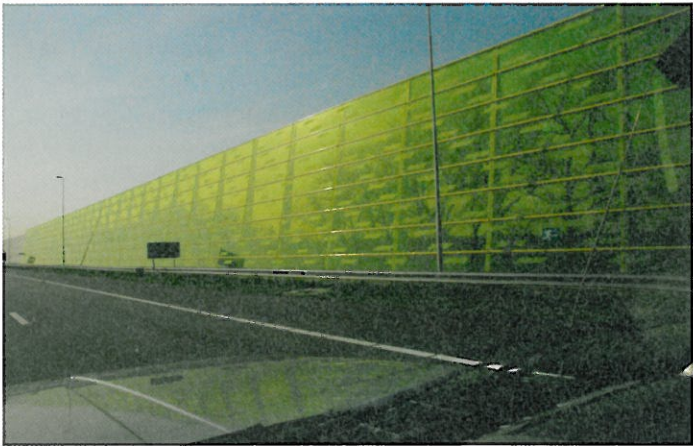
Photos: Frank Meijer

Neon-yellow plastic noise barriers by UNStudio along the A2 motorway.



never-ending miles of crash barriers often seem almost neglected, apparently out of reach for designers.

UNStudio's design has actually included the purely functional objects like gantries and power cabinets in its design and has coloured them in the same bright yellow as the transparent screen sections. At first glance this appears to illustrate that some coherence between the screen and the utilitarian objects has been sought, but the effect is, in fact, quite the opposite. Objects which were once grey or neutral and melted into the background of the grey sky or the verges are now very visible and present in the motorway environment because of their yellow colour. And they are



of furniture developed by UNStudio. The concrete barriers have a relief pattern of migrating birds.



Noise barriers by MTD landscapsarchitecten.



even more noticeable in the daily perception of people who live in the area. Where motorways cross urban environments, these once invisible objects are now brutal intrusions into residential areas. This approach is similar to that of adopting a company's house style, where a corporate identity is stamped on everything related to the company, from the letterhead and company vehicles, to the employees' clothing. This makes sense for a large organization which wants to be identified in every situation, but it is superfluous for the recognition of a road which has a beginning and an end, and which already disrupts the tranquillity of residential areas.

Museum route

More harmony will be achieved if the experience of people living close to the motorways is incorporated in roadway design, and not only the traffic aspects. A better balance can also be found between 'visible and invisible', on the basis of what is 'important and unimportant' in the road environment. Only the maintenance services need to know where the power cabinets are. For road users and residents, this is of no importance whatsoever.

The interaction between the road and the artefacts along it requires choices to be made which guarantee a balance between function and design, and between stillness and dynamics.

More and more motorways are being walled in or fully canalized and within a few years there will be little real countryside or few real cities which are still visible from the road. The road will have become a museum route with artistic references to the cities and landscapes which exist behind the screens, but which might just as easily be figments of the designer's imagination. Our onboard computers will tell us all about the numerous features of the places we are passing, and then the artificial motorway landscape will be the only environment offering an air of stillness.

Ginette Blom (1961, The Netherlands) is a designer and partner in Blom&Moors design for public space. She is working on several public design projects like the refurbishment of the Dutch railway stations and is a core tutor at the Master Programme PublicSpace Design at the Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design.



The screen barrier along the A58 motorway, designed by Bureau Lubbers and Crepain-Binst Architecture.