

Landscape Perspectives | Amsterdam & The Hague
Coastal edge

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A recent team study trip to The Hague offered a reminder that some of the most effective infrastructure is the kind that feels almost invisible.



All images:
Westduinpark, The Hague
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Along the Dutch coast, the dune landscape operates simultaneously as ecology, public space and coastal defence. Parts of the system are ancient and naturally formed through wind and tidal movement over thousands of years. Other areas have been carefully engineered and reinforced through sand nourishment, planting and long-term landscape management.

What's striking is how seamlessly those systems sit together.

As a team, we spent time cycling through the dune landscape along the coast, moving between sheltered valleys, exposed ridgelines and long stretches of shifting sand. In a country associated with flatness, this part of the Netherlands feels unexpectedly 'hilly', particularly on heavy hire bikes, with at least one bike with a persistent squeak announcing our arrival well in advance.

What becomes immediately apparent is how access and ecology are balanced. Extensive cycle routes and walking paths are woven directly through the landscape, allowing people to experience the dunes closely without overwhelming the systems that support them.

The dunes also perform critical environmental functions beyond coastal protection. Beneath the landscape sits a freshwater aquifer system that contributes to regional drinking water supply, with the dunes acting as a natural filtration landscape.

The planting strategy is equally instructive. Native dune grasses, particularly marram grass, are established at scale to help stabilise sand movement and support dune formation over time. What makes marram grass remarkable is its ability to thrive in conditions that appear almost uninhabitable; dry, nutrient-poor sand exposed to constant wind and salt spray. Its success comes largely from an extensive rhizome root system that spreads both vertically and horizontally through the dunes, binding sand together while continuing to grow as new sand accumulates around it.

Rather than resisting natural processes entirely, the Dutch approach works with them, allowing wind, water and sediment to continue shaping the landscape while strengthening its resilience.





This thinking is perhaps best represented by the Sand Motor project. In 2011, a vast volume of sand was deposited along the coastline near to The Hague to create an artificial peninsula extending into the North Sea. Rather than continually reinforcing the coast through smaller, repeated engineering interventions, the project set out to test whether wind, waves and tidal movement could gradually redistribute the sand naturally along the shoreline and into the dune system over time.

What makes the project particularly interesting is that it was conceived as a long-term experiment rather than a definitive solution. Its success is still being monitored through changes in coastal form, ecology, recreation and flood resilience, recognising that landscapes like this are never truly static.

There's something important in this level of patience.

Too often, climate adaptation infrastructure is expected to deliver certainty through fixed engineering solutions. The Dutch approach suggests a different mindset: one that accepts uncertainty, works with natural processes and understands resilience as something adaptive rather than permanent.

These landscapes are not hidden behind barriers or reduced to technical infrastructure. They are ecological systems people move through daily, cycled across, walked within and experienced as part of the public realm.

As pressures around climate adaptation continue to grow, it feels increasingly important to ask not just how infrastructure performs, but what kind of long-term relationship it creates between people, ecology and landscape. And when working with nature, to be patient.

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