

Landscape Perspectives | Amsterdam & The Hague
Activating SuDS

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What the UK can learn from the Netherlands | Activating SuDS

By Kate Astbury

Designing with water in the public realm requires a careful balance between technical performance and user experience. Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems are increasingly expected to do more than manage surface water; they are now integral to placemaking, offering opportunities for interaction, play, and ecological value. Understanding how these systems perform in practice, and how people engage with them, is essential in shaping successful and resilient landscapes.

All images:
Westergasfabriek, Amsterdam
Image credit: EDLA

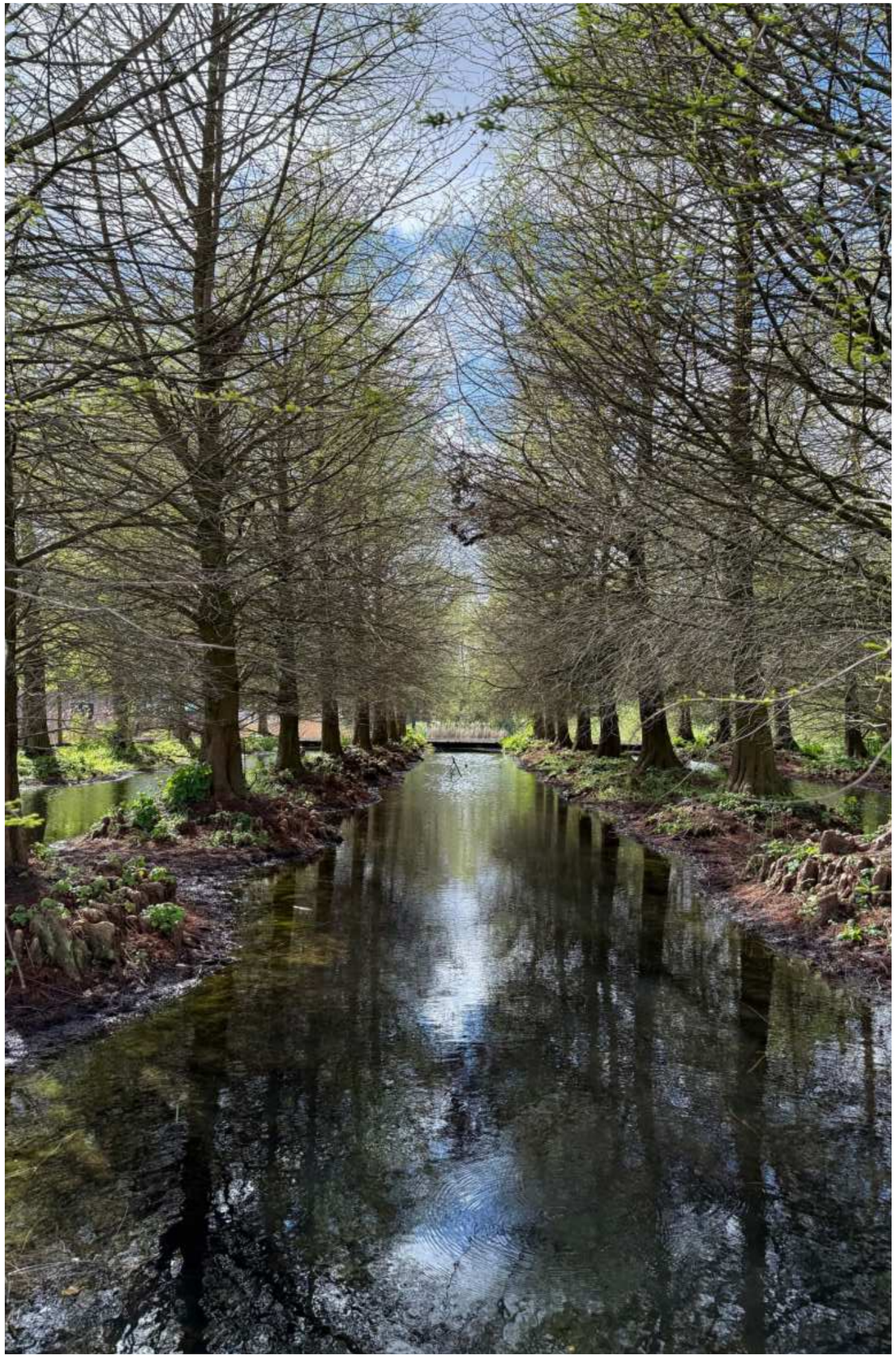
Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam has long been a reference point for this approach, and visiting the site provided valuable insight into how water can be embedded within a dynamic public landscape. Initially identified as a source of inspiration, the visit ultimately offered a more nuanced understanding, highlighting both successful design strategies and areas where alternative approaches may have strengthened the outcome.

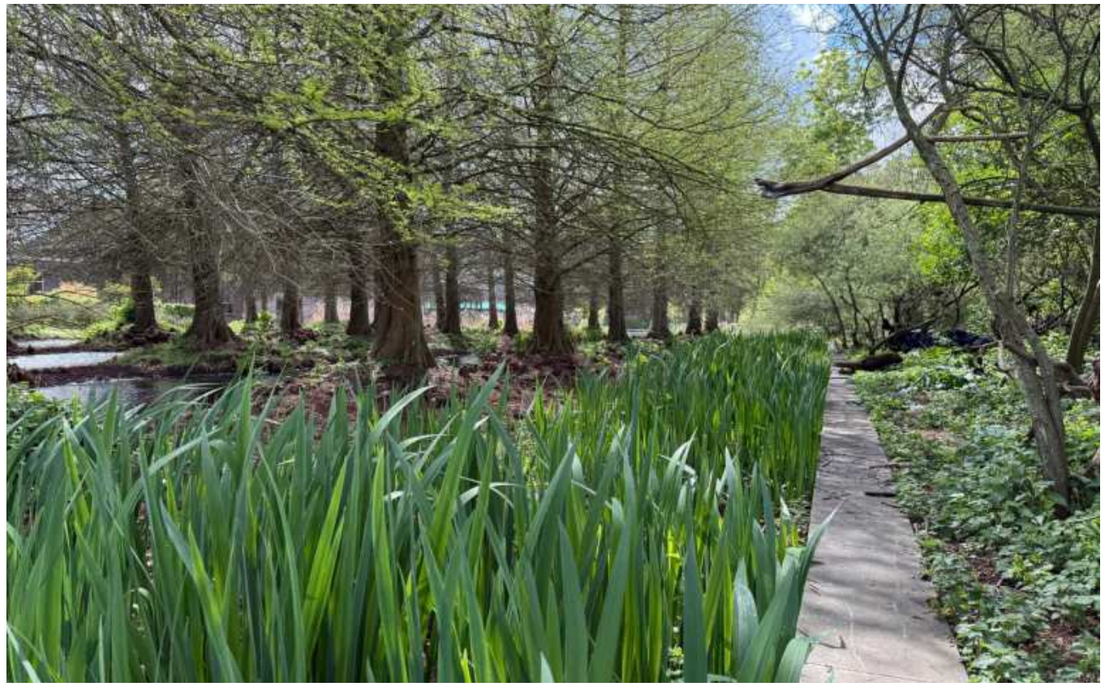
I have wanted to visit Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam for a number of years, having first come across it while working as a landscape designer on swimming pond projects. Since then, my interest in designing with water and Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems has continued to develop. At EDLA, we are currently working on several projects that seek to use SuDS not only for attenuation, but also as active, usable landscapes throughout the year. With this in mind, Westergasfabriek has remained a key precedent I was keen to experience firsthand, to better understand what works well and what lessons might be applied to our own work.

On arrival, the park immediately presented itself as a well used and social space. The provision of designated barbeque areas was notable, allowing for safe public use, and it was interesting to observe how this activity had become part of the park's character, even attracting local wildlife such as herons gathering nearby.

Moving further into the park, the relationship between the two primary water bodies became more apparent. The physical connections between them, including routes that allow movement across and alongside the water, introduced a sense of play and permeability. These interventions successfully link into the wider path and cycle network, encouraging exploration and offering alternative routes through the landscape.

Initial impressions of the western attenuation pond were less positive, as the water appeared relatively stagnant, which in turn affected the visual quality of the adjacent paddling area. Although the paddling zone was not yet in use during the visit, the intended function of both water bodies was communicated through signage but was not clear without reading in full. As we translated the Dutch sign it was evident that the western pond was designed for surface water





storage rather than recreation, with access undertaken at the user's own risk. This approach to risk is notably different from that typically adopted in the United Kingdom where water bodies that are not for swimming are often fenced off or excessively signposted with signage that are easily understood without the need to read.

While the current signage provides instruction, the distinction between the two ponds relies heavily on this information. A stronger visual differentiation through planting strategy or material treatment could further reinforce their respective functions, particularly for users who may not engage with the signage.

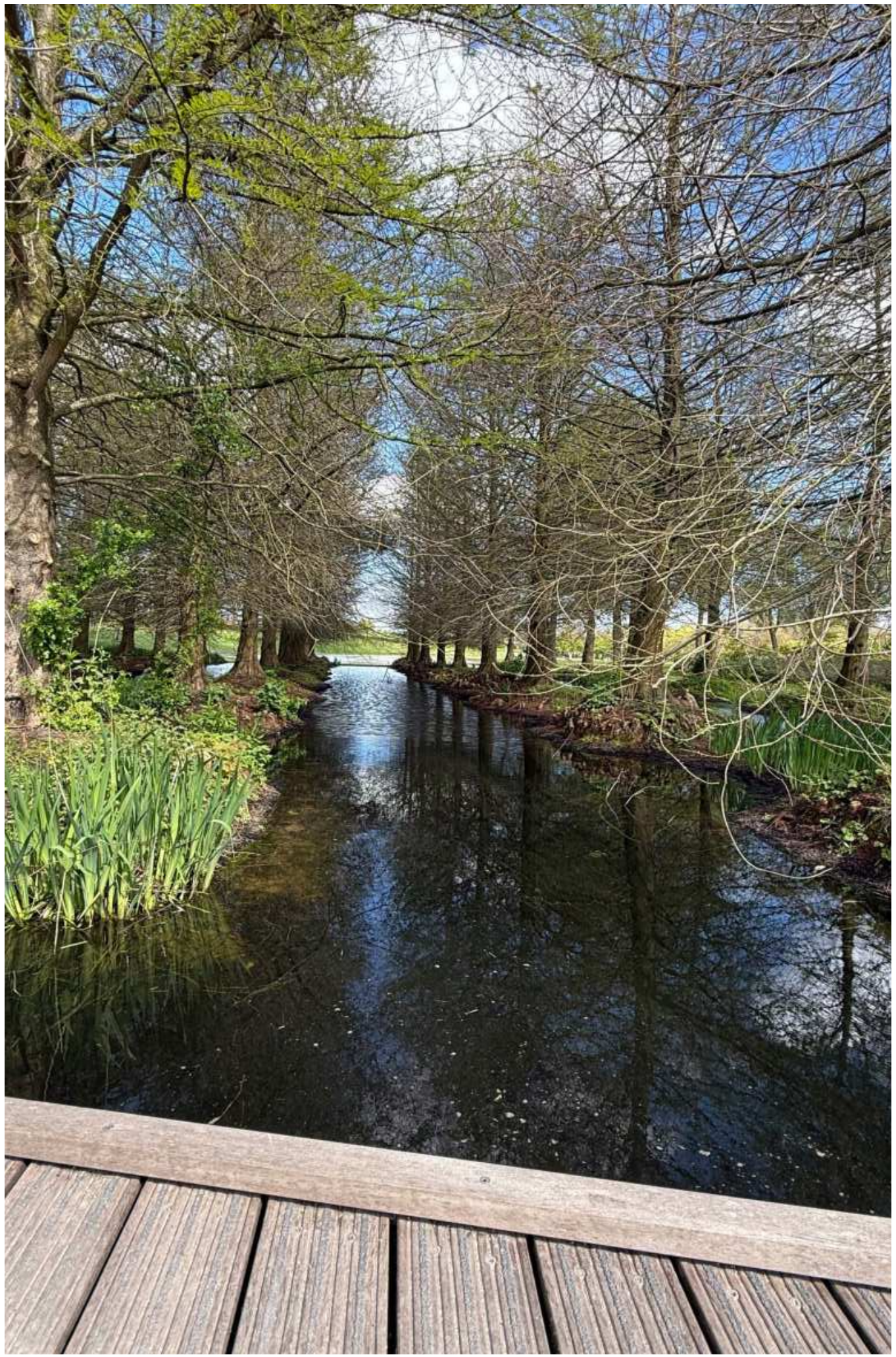
As the route continued through the park, the design approach became increasingly compelling. The water landscape is highly accessible, with a series of platforms and crossings that invite users to engage directly with areas that would otherwise be inaccessible. These elements encourage movement across the water in a way that feels both intuitive and exploratory. Taxodium distichum 'swamp cypress' stands in long water avenues that appear to the daily visitor as exotic floating trees. The use of naturalistic perennial planting and the awe inspiring submerged trees creates a distinct and immersive character that contrasts with more conventional park design and guides the eye through to the next section of the park encouraging the user to tip toe through the trees across a subtle yet playful copping stone path.

This sequence of spaces gradually transitions into more structured and urban conditions, with boardwalks and cafés reflecting the site's industrial heritage. The integration of playful elements, such as balance beams across flowing water, introduces a subtle sense of challenge and engagement, creating moments of interaction that appeal across age groups without feeling overly prescribed.
One aspect I found particularly compelling was the positioning of the boardwalks between open water bodies without the use of railings or extensive safety barriers.
In a United Kingdom context, features such as these are often heavily constrained by safety requirements and planning conditions. However, the absence of barriers here contributed significantly to the openness and immersive quality of the space. The experience of moving across what felt like floating pathways created a sense of excitement, awareness, and connection to the landscape. Rather than separating people from the water and surrounding environment, the design encouraged users to feel fully embedded within the layered relationship between water, planting, movement, and the built form.
Overall, the park demonstrates a confident and integrated approach to water within the public realm, successfully balancing technical function with social and experiential value. The way movement routes pass through and across the water creates a far more engaging relationship between people and SuDS infrastructure, transforming what could otherwise be purely functional spaces into playful and memorable landscapes. This is an approach we will continue to explore within our own projects, particularly in creating spaces that encourage movement, interaction, and a more playful engagement with the landscape for all age groups.

The visit also highlighted the importance of clearly differentiating active water spaces, such as paddling areas, from more naturalistic or non recreational attenuation zones. Future designs could strengthen this distinction through the careful use of planting, materials, and long term maintenance strategies rather than relying solely on signage.

Overall, the visit provided a valuable opportunity to experience a highly integrated water landscape firsthand and offered a number of strong precedents and lessons that can be taken forward into future landscape and SuDS design work.





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