

Reclaimed, recycled and reinvented

A derelict industrial site in the Netherlands has been reinvigorated by its restoration as a hotel and restaurant. Central to the philosophy of the project is the series of gardens that surround it

WORDS CAMILLA PHELPS PHOTOGRAPHS WALTER HERFST

In brief

WHAT Villa Augustus – a garden, hotel, restaurant, café and meeting place.

WHERE Dordrecht, the Netherlands, about 15 miles southeast of Rotterdam.

SIZE 3.7 acres.

CLIMATE Westerly winds, but the walls create a sheltered environment; although winters are very cold.

SOIL Imported clay-based loam and compost added.

POINTS OF INTEREST Kitchen garden that provides food and flowers for the restaurant and hotel and acts as an open air lounge area for guests.



The red brick, former water tower was part of Dordrecht's once neglected industrial riverside. Now the restaurant's kitchen gardens occupy the site of four large basins that once stored water for the tower.

When you enter Villa Augustus, you step into a unique world. A 19th-century water tower of extravagant proportions at the centre of an abundant walled garden dominates the flat Netherlands skyline, like a giant's castle in a brothers Grimm fairy tale. It is now run as a hotel, restaurant, café and shop. But whether you are dining, getting married or doing business, the garden is the living, beating heart of it all, inspiring the menu, providing food and cut flowers – as well as a beautiful setting.

Food-growing is central to the Villa Augustus ethic. You wander through the vegetable garden on your way to the restaurant, spotting treats that later appear on your plate; lemon trees flourish on the terraces, while fruit trees trained in various forms clad the walls. But as well as looking beautiful, it is a busy, productive garden. There are 70 ornamental vegetable beds and a further 750 square metres of growing space, with around 400 plantings each season and a rigorous organic regime of crop rotation. This supplies just five per cent of the food served there, but it's not all about quantity.

"It's the inspiration for both chefs and customers," explains Daan van der Have, the man behind the garden and one of the three partners who created Villa Augustus. "You can see what's in season by sitting on the terrace and I'm always talking about taste combinations as I walk through the garden with the chef." Herbs and edible flowers are integral to the menu and Daan works hard to give his kitchen staff interesting vegetables to cook with all year round – resulting in delicacies such as tempura sea kale florets with chive pesto.

Builders and broad beans

Daan and his partners were smitten by the dilapidated tower in 2003 and in 2006 they embarked on a scheme to transform it. "It was always about making a garden first," he explains. "And in that garden we wanted to make a restaurant and a hotel. The outside and inside are all part of the same idea."

The trio have a reputation for urban regeneration following the success of Hotel New York in Rotterdam. Dorine de Vos designs the look and feel, Hans Los manages



The restaurant building overlooks the ornamental vegetable beds and swathes of herbaceous perennials in the foreground.

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the construction, and Daan masterminds the garden. Daan recalls that it was the most complicated project he has ever worked on: reconstructing two buildings and a garden at the same time. He was organising the planting of broad beans while the builders were finishing the restaurant and tower.

"I don't call myself the designer, more the maker," he says. "I couldn't design a garden for someone else. When we work on a project we don't think about what other people like and that's how I was able to create this garden – I just did what I wanted to do." Self-taught through the restoration of his own garden in nearby Dordwijk, Daan is a passionate believer in the power of gardens. "Whether it's the feeling you get when you grow your own radishes, or when you are sitting in a ▶

BOTTOM, FAR LEFT Cavolo nero and sweet corn are among the crops in the kitchen garden.

BOTTOM CENTRE Set amid the productive beds is the Limonaia, a hothouse for lemon trees, which is used as a function room in summer.

BOTTOM RIGHT The vegetable garden comprises 12 areas, each divided into six to eight beds rotated each year, but all including at least one flower bed.

BELOW Daan says these red Batavian lettuces are "very crispy and with a very good taste".



“Daan’s philosophy is that a gardener should be a bit of a chef and a chef should be a bit of a gardener”

▷ beautiful landscape, it makes you feel different – revitalised. When a garden is well done it’s a statement of care and when people see personal care, it has a profound effect on them.”

Chaos and conformity

The garden was created out of four 50m by 30m water basins that surrounded the tower. The complex grid of vegetable beds is inspired by this geometry. Beyond, there are formal and informal areas to suit every mood. From Italianate gardens you move through to the orchard via more natural planting, where pockets of meadowy lawn and self-sown wildflowers are allowed to find their own rhythm. It’s an intriguing layout, balancing chaos and conformity. But always you return to food, echoing Daan’s philosophy that “a gardener should be a bit of a chef and a chef should be a bit of a gardener.”

Recycled materials are integral to the whole aesthetic. “We wanted to stay true to the industrial atmosphere of the tower,” explains Daan. So walls, paths and paved areas combine new and old materials from original structures. Furniture indoors and out is mostly vintage, plant supports and pergolas are made from rusted steel building rods. Even the greenhouses were rescued from demolition. The original architect of

the water tower, JA van der Kloes, was fired for overspending on his construction, but clearly he had a singular vision. It’s not hard to imagine him smiling at how Daan and his partners have revived his folly and tapped into that same vein of passion to create a post-industrial pleasure palace.

On midweek afternoons the terrace is packed and a neighbouring factory is soon going to be converted into an arts centre, which will further regenerate this once-neglected riverside. Dordrecht is filled with a new optimism thanks to the influence of Villa Augustus. But Daan’s work has only just begun. “Making a garden is about enjoying the process,” he says. “It’s a little like building a medieval cathedral that takes 300 years to finish. You can look at it and watch it develop and maybe one day you’ll see the result of all your work.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS Villa Augustus, Oranjeslaan 7, 3311 DH Dordrecht, the Netherlands.
TEL + 31 (0)78 6393111
WEBSITE www.villa-augustus.nl
OPEN Visitors are free to explore the gardens daily from 7am (8am at weekends).

BBC Camilla Phelps is a gardener, writer and website editor, currently working across the BBC Dig In and Breathing Places learning campaigns.

Selecting and growing fruit trees for flavour

“The first parameter is good flavour,” says Daan. “Secondly, we choose cultivars that ripen in succession, so we have fruit through summer, autumn and winter. Thirdly, we want trees that can be grown organically. And last but not least, cultivars that can be trained into the shape we want.”

Daan has planted mature and young specimens, which has proved useful for the pruning courses he runs with fruit-training expert Jan Freriks, as students can practise on trees at different stages of growth.

Pears are Daan’s favourite. The selection in the garden all fruit on short wood, which is easier to train into more unusual shapes. Cultivars grown include

‘Doyenné du Comice’, ‘Conference’, ‘Bonne Louise d’Avranches’, ‘Comtesse de Paris’, ‘Packham’s Triumph’, ‘Triomphe de Vienne’ and ‘Gieser Wilderman’.

Daan’s other orchard favourites include the peach ‘Peregrine’ (“the most delicious I know”) and the fig *Ficus carica* ‘Brown Turkey’. He likes the cherry ‘Early Rivers’, “because the tree has such beautiful blossom – the cherries are early and have a rich taste,” and plum ‘Reine Claude d’Oullins’: “It takes years to fruit, but it’s worth waiting for.” He also enjoys apple ‘Engelse Bellefleur’: “A beautiful tree, with late fruit that are hard but have a good flavour and can be stored through winter.”



vegetable garden



ABOVE The Villa Augustus shop sells produce from the garden and other foods, including bread from its own bakery, plus books and garden-related gifts.

FAR LEFT Daan (on the right) with Jan Freriks, the Dutch authority on fruit tree pruning and training. Villa Augustus occasionally holds short courses on pruning and other aspects of gardening.

MIDDLE Fruit trees are trained traditionally. Daan recommends peach, fig, mulberry and apricot for fan training, while pear trees respond better to more complicated, free-standing shapes.

LEFT Kitchen staff have an interesting range of fresh ingredients to choose from, including herbs and edible flowers.