



Hofwijck – a landscape of country houses in Holland in the seventeenth century

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On February 12 1642, a cheerful group of people drove by carriage from The Hague to Voorburg to visit a newly erected country house. Between 1640 and 1643 Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687) constructed a small but extraordinary country house, which he called *Hofwijck*. This country house was special because its exterior, interior and garden, all was cleverly designed in a single composition and connected to the surrounding landscape. *Hofwijck* is exemplary for the small country houses, in Dutch called 'buitenplaatsen' (literally translated 'outside places'), built by wealthy 'burghers', the wealthy

merchants and leaders of the Revolt, in the landscape of Holland, the western part of which we now call the Netherlands during the seventeenth century. Most of Hollands country houses were not made for nobility, but for the new urban elite, *burghers*.

Hofwijck was situated next to two systems of public transport; the river Vliet as part of the barge canals and the main roads called *heerweg*. *Hofwijck* was not the only country house, as many other burghers had constructed their country houses, pleasure gardens and kitchen gardens close to the river Vliet, thus creating a 'country houses landscape' outside the city of The Hague in the province of Holland. This article will elaborate on the landscape, the architectural characteristics of *Hofwijck* and the close connection between country houses and rivers in seventeenth century Holland.

Design of Huygens Hofwijck¹

Hofwijck is considered to be an outspoken villa urbana, created for the pleasure of a wealthy burgher. It was built by and for Constantijn Huygens (1596-

Near the city of Voorburg, the country house Hofwijck was constructed next to the river Vliet and the main road from Delft, The Hague to Leiden. It was a relatively small, square formed house, surrounded by a pond and with the entrance across a bridge. The garden was elongated shaped and many trees were planted to strengthen this long character. On the piano nobile the house is focussed on the river Vliet and from the other floors, you can overview the garden as well. In front of the house and next to the river, a lookout was created by Huygens, to enjoy the vivid life on the river.

Photo: G.A.Verschuure-Stuip, 2017.



A statue of Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687) was positioned next to the former beach road (Zeestraet) from The Hague to Scheveningen, which he made the design for. Huygens was regarded as an erudite and charming man in his time. He was known for making music, writing poems, inviting friends to his house discussing architecture, literature and poetry. He was befriended with the most influential people in the Young Republic. Photo: G. A. Verschuure-Stuip, 2009.

1687) and his wife Suzanne van Baerle (1599-1637). His beloved wife died at a young age and Huygens never remarried. Constantijn Huygens, diplomat, composer, architect and a famous poet, was the secretary of the *stadtholder* (the chosen head of the

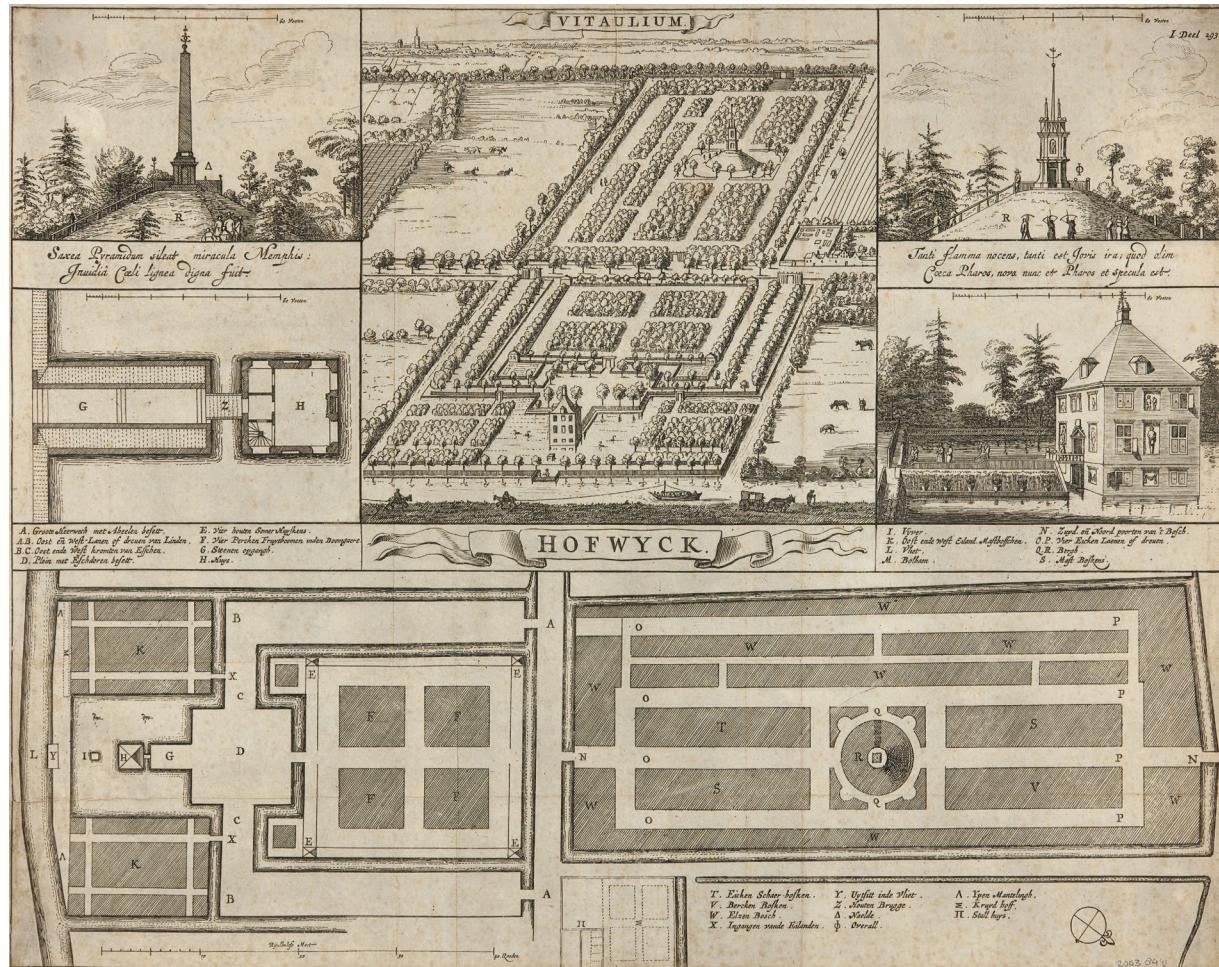
different provinces of the Dutch Republic), Frederik Hendrik (1584-1647) of Orange, one of the leaders of the Dutch Revolt against Spain in the Eighty Years War (1568-1648). Constantijn was also the father of the famous physicist and astronomer Christiaan Huygens (1629-1695).

For his own amusement Constantijn Huygens designed the gardens and house of *Hofwijck* between 1640 and 1643, in cooperation with the famous Dutch architect Pieter Post (1608-1669). We know of the original design and shape of this garden and Huygens' intentions to make it. A little more than ten years after he started to construct his garden, Huygens wrote a poem praising the country life and describing a walk through the gardens and reflecting on the way he had designed the garden; and he called it *Vitaulium* (1653), Latin for *Hofwijck*.² It became fashion to write about gardening and to have a poem written about your country house, called 'hofdichten'. The house of *Hofwijck* was comparatively small and square shaped, as can be seen on the picture. Four statues representing the four seasons were positioned next to the entrance as well as two statues which were citing to his alliance to the family of Orange. The latter two statues are gone now, but The Four Seasons are still present.

Hofwijck was situated in close range of the river Vliet. The plot measured 120 meters by 400 meters covering almost five hectare in size.³ The garden was designed as the human body.⁴ It was relatively small compared to other country houses in Europe for the



The entrance of the house, bridging the pond, was guarded by several statues. Statues of the four seasons are positioned next to the entrance, referring to fertility. Photo: G.A. Verschuure-Stuip, 2009.



The drawings of the original gardens of Hofwijck as they are found in the poem *Vitavlium* (1653). The garden was designed in the shape of a human body as van Pelt described. The house represented the head and the four square blocks of trees (F) formed the human chest. The aforementioned 'heerweg' (A) represented the belt. The long avenues of aligned trees in the lower gardens were considered to be the arms (B) and legs (O and P). The mount with the monument formed the knees. The sizes were determined by a metrical system, based on a singular square and this proportion was used throughout the garden. C. Huygens. *Koren-bloemen, Nederlandsche gedichten* (...) in XIX boecken. 's-Gravenhage, Adriaen Vlack, 1658. Library TU Delft, the Netherlands.

nobility, however for Holland country houses next to rivers or in the dried lake polders, it was an average size.⁵ The garden had an elongated shape, which is a logic structure in this peat meadow landscape with its small and narrow 'plots' next to each other at a right angle towards the river.

One of the two main roads between the cities The Hague and Leiden, the 'heerweg' (literal translation: 'lords road'), was crossing this parcel dividing the garden into two plots. Bordered by white poplars, it was called the most beautiful road in the region.

Huygens and Post used this small inconvenience (which was not uncommon) to create two separate gardens, which were connected to a central symmetrical axis.⁶ Two large structures were positioned on this axis, the house in the upper garden near the river, and a small mount with an obelisk in the lower gardens. After the obelisk was struck by lightning, it was replaced by a memorial building for his beloved wife as can be seen on the drawings. An avenue, a lookout over the water and a number of arches were smaller elements to support the central axis. As can be seen in the drawings and described in the poem, the garden was basically a garden filled with different sorts of trees and not decorated with parterres-de-broderie or a great variety of flowers between hedges. The planting of trees were not only for beauty, but also as a valuable asset for more difficult times to come. Other famous early seventeenth century country houses, like *Zorgvliet*, owned by the statesman and poet Jacob Cats (1577-1660), had a similar

percentage of trees planted; and many descriptions of country houses mention a 'plantation (*plantage*)' in the sense of a planted area of trees.

The garden was designed for the pleasure of gardening, strolling, ballgames on the bowling court and so on. A small kitchen garden was kept for herbs, fruit could be picked from the fruit trees in the garden and the pond provided fresh fish. In the house itself music and poetry played a central role. Huygens poem elaborated on one particular element in the garden: a lookout overlooking the river Vliet (Y) in the central axis next to the river. He called it his 'time spender' (*tijdverdrijver*), because he was spending too much time there, sitting and looking at the boats, ships and vessels passing by. We will return to this time spender later on.

New fashion of having a green country house *Hofwijck* is exemplary for a new fashion which started in the seventeenth century in the province of Holland: living outside of the city within a green area. These new houses were very different from the fortified 'castles' with towers, moats and large grounds around it, and were named differently in different parts of the Netherlands for example 'borgen' in Groningen, 'states and stinzen' in Friesland and 'havezaten' in Overijssel. These smaller castle-like structures were built to overview and rule over a particular area being situated in the middle of the possession. The new country houses of the 17th century were smaller and often formed part of a larger

group of estates. The fashion of having a country house was tightly linked to the urbanised elite of the wealthy and expanding Dutch cities, like Amsterdam, Haarlem, The Hague, Leiden, Rotterdam and Dordrecht.

The new country houses were created in the seventeenth century – a time usually considered as The Golden Age of the Netherlands. The Netherlands, or The Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, was formed after a successful Revolt against Spain (1568-1648) and was led by an elected stadtholder. It was a period of great wealth in which Dutch merchants and tradesmen sailed to all parts of the world and brought back exotic goods to be sold to the European elites. The seventeenth century was not only a period of great wealth, but it was also a period with all sorts of new inventions and changes in city and landscape. Urbanisation grew rapidly and by 1650 more than half of the population lived in cities, which was unique in rural Europe at that time. The countryside was changing rapidly by the reclamation of the Dutch lowlands by the construction of dikes and dried lake polders and by the introduction of a new method of public transportation: barge canals for public transportation. These developments and others changed the context of these country houses.

Having a country house became fashion for this new group of wealthy merchants and capitalists, who took over government in the new Republic. The new 'burgher' elites usually owned a luxurious

house in the city with large back-side gardens and trees planted in the new streets and squares, very different from the cities during The Middle Ages. The central government, 'Staten-Generaal' was situated in and around the castle *Binnenhof* in The Hague. Close to this place, the Habsburg monarch Charles V (1500-1558) started to plant lime-trees along the Lange Voorhout (street) in 1550. Huygens himself wrote a poem praising the quality of these trees and the planting of trees in cities.⁷

In the beginning of the seventeenth century, several parts of the inner city of The Hague were reorganised. Houses for the burghers of the wealthy urban elite were built around a new square, named 'Plein', planted regularly with trees, based on the design of the stadtholder Frederik Hendrik. Constantijn Huygens was able to claim a piece of the new city extension on which he built his well-known 'Huygens House' (*Huygenshuis*), which was demolished in 1867.

One of many

Hofwijck was not the only country house in the landscape. In most cases, one of four different locations was chosen to build a country house; next to the river, in the dried lake polders, on the sandy ridges or in the inner dunes. *Hofwijck* is an example of an estate connected to the river.⁸ A large number of country houses was constructed similarly to *Hofwijck*, like *In de Waerelt is veel gevaar* (In the world is much danger), *Middenburg*, *Arentsburg*, *Hoekenburg*, *Burchvliet*, *Leeuwendaal*



The landscape, in which *Hofwijck* is situated, is represented on the detailed waterboard map of the region of Delft and The Hague on N. and J. Cruquius, *het Hoogheemraedschap van Delfland* (fragment). It shows that *Hofwijck* is one of many landed estates which were erected next to the river Vliet, creating an amusing landscape to the river Vliet. *Hofwijck* was cleverly positioned next to two different methods of transportation; the barge canal and the heerwegen (main roads). Map: *Hoogheemraedschap Delfland*, detail by G.A.Verschuure-Stuip, 207.

and on the opposite side of the river Vliet *Den Hoon-aert*, *Leeuwenberg*, *Overburch*, *Zuyderburch*, *Zeerust*, *Drievliet*, *Vredenoord*, *Hoornwijk* and many others.

A little further from the river, situated on the smaller sandy ridges, three castle-like structures *Binckhorst*, *Mathenes/Te Werve* and *het Loo* were built long before these country houses popped up. Huygens called this river de ‘Vliet der Vlieten’, rivers of all rivers and described it as an amusing river. He even wrote that The Hague needed to choose, which area was the most important entrance of the city, the dunes or the river Vliet. The river Vliet was not only described as an easy and quick route to use between cities, but as an amusing experience. Sitting on his time spender looking over the water, Huygens must have had an amusing position overlooking the river and a wonderful view over the landscape.

Holland’s barge canals for public transportation

As described before, the country house of *Hofwijck* was positioned next to the river Vliet as well as the main road (Heerweg) between The Hague (Delft) and Leiden (going up to Haarlem and Amsterdam). To understand how country houses and these new public methods of transportation were cleverly connected to each other, we need to elaborate both transportation systems first.

The river Vliet was not part of the main trading route over water. The main trading route connected the cities Amsterdam, Haarlem, Gouda and Rotter-

dam. The Hague was situated on the alternative route during The Middle Ages, however in the seventeenth century public transportation over water was reorganised in a new and modern way; the barge canals. The river Vliet was part of this barge canal system, mainly to facilitate public transportation between two cities. Barge vessels were towed along the river by a man on horseback (‘hunter’) and paths for horses were made next to the rivers. The barge canal system was never a fast mode of transportation, but very stable and regular since the barge vessels had a fixed schedule of departure between two cities. This method of public transportation became very popular and was used by middle-class tradesmen, though not by the elites, who could afford their own horse and carriage.⁹

The system of barge canals started in 1631. In the first phase, between 1631 and 1647, two groups or connecting canals were made.¹⁰ The first system was situated around Amsterdam with connections to Haarlem, Utrecht (via the river Vecht), Muiden and Naarden. The second system had its centre in Delft with connections to Rotterdam, Delfshaven and Schiedam, as well as to The Hague and Leiden. Inhabitants and even foreign visitors were commending the advantages of this way of transportation. The river Vliet was not the only barge canal which was constructed in the first phase flanked with so many country houses. The same process occurred on the banks of the rivers Amstel, Vecht and in smaller numbers also the

Angstel, Gaasp and Schie and these were enriched with country houses.¹¹

Hofwijck was positioned at one of the very first barge canals, when the system was a novelty and an attraction. Huygens enjoyed the barge canal for recreational purposes: from his lookout, his time spender, he could see sailing boats and barge vessels passing along the canal. In his poem he called the Vliet one of the most crowded and beautiful rivers in the world, with 200 boats passing each day. And although he knew he was challenging his audience, he claimed that the rivers Rhine, Meuse, Dordt near Loevestein, Spaarne and IJ [important trading rivers in the Netherlands] and even the Sound between Denmark and Sweden were not being used by more boats, ships and other vessels than on the river Vliet.¹² Sitting at his hideaway, he wrote about people’s different opinions and verdicts about his property. Some people, Huygens described, understood his challenges to construct *Hofwijck*, but in the barge vessel a man, all full of himself, was saying that it was a waste of money.¹³

Not able to use the barge canal for transport because of the short distance, Huygens and his family used horses and carriages to get to *Hofwijck*. The system of main roads, or heerwegen, provided the main transportation routes between cities, used by poor people walking or wealthy people on horseback or in carriages.

Between The Hague and Leiden, three main heerwegen were created. Firstly, the heerweg close to the



The garden was transformed several times. Train station Voorburg was positioned at the place of the original memorial (‘knees’), as a ‘modern’ Belvedere, overlooking the area. This choice resulted in the fact that the garden is smaller than the plan originally was. The central axis was reshaped with the use of a pond. Garden and house are nowadays a museum and celebrating its 375 years of existence this year. Photo: G.A.Verschuure-Stuip, 2009.

inner dunes passing Wassenaar and Katwijk (not on the map). Secondly there was a heerweg parallel to the Vliet passing Voorburg and Voorschoten and passing through *Hofwijck*. Thirdly, on the east bank of the Vliet, the heerweg to Zoetermeer and Gouda as well as the hunting path to Leiden was situated there.

In the 1650's, two of the heerwegen were connected with a new heerweg bordered with trees, passing castle *Mathenes/Te Werve*. This road was bordered with trees on either side of the road. This heerweg started almost in the middle of the *Hofwijck* garden. Therefore the extra heerweg and the central axis of the garden, which was designed by Huygens himself for ordering the garden and connecting the two gardens (upper and lower) connected the garden to the landscape structure of the surroundings.¹⁴ The heerweg parallel to the river was even paved in 1658 as one of the first roads to be paved near The Hague, which strengthened the idea of modernism and luxurious appearance.

Final remarks

The study of the position and orientation of both types of infrastructure is providing additional information on the types of country houses. Huygens' *Hofwijck* is not only a pretty and well-known country house, based on the shape of the human body and the ideas of the poem. Its location was cleverly chosen and worked out by Huygens as well (like the other country houses next to his). The specific reasons for this particular position, located

along two main transportation systems, the river Vliet and the heerweg, and the deeper meaning of them, show how the location of his country house was influenced by the will (or need) to see and be seen, to set a statement in Dutch society in the seventeenth century.

Together with the neighbouring country houses they made this landscape into an amusing sight from the river, seeing all these civilian country houses with their well-maintained gardens, landing stages and boats lying next to the houses. Although the garden has lost a lot of its grounds, the small parts which are still there show this beautiful place and are well worth a visit.

Notes:

1. This article is based on: G.A. Verschuure-Stuip. *Well-situated, analysis of country houses and country houses landscapes in Holland (1630-1730)*. Delft 2018. Chapter 4 and 5 for full annotation.
2. K. van der Leer. *Hofwijck de buitenplaats*, in: T. van Strien, K. van der Leer. *Hofwyck, het gedicht en de buitenplaats van Constantijn Huygens*, Zutphen 2005, 73-77.
3. K. van der Leer. Zutphen 2005, 77-78.
4. R.J. Van Pelt. De wereld van Huygens; *Hofwijck* in: *Bulletin KNOB 82* (1983) 3-4, 116-123.
5. In different types of landscape, the size of country houses could change. Later on the sizes of the gardens in Holland and to the eastern and southern parts of the Netherlands can be much bigger.
6. Van der Leer. Zutphen 2005, 95.

7. C. Huygens. *Batava Tempe, 't Voorhout van 's Gravenhage*, Leeuwarden 1824 (heruitgave).
8. The different groups or types are elaborated in: P.Veen, P. van Baaren, M. Zondervan, G. Verschuure. *Visie Landgoederenzone, Noord en Zuid Holland*. Amsterdam 2007; G.A.Verschuure. Een vermaeckelijk uitzicht. Landschap en compositie in het ontwerp van Hollandse buitenplaatsen/A pleasing view. Landscape and composition in the design of Holland's country houses (Dutch and English), in: *Over Holland 12/13*, 2012, 81-98; G.Verschuure-Stuip, H. Renes. Hollandse buitenplaatsenlandschappen, buitenplaatsen en hun relatie met het landschap (1609-1672) in: Y. Kuiper, B. Olde Meierink, *Buitenplaatsen in de Gouden Eeuw. De rijkdom van het buitenleven in de Republiek*. Verloren: Hilversum 2015, 40-65.
9. J. de Vries. Barges and Capitalism, passenger transport in the Dutch Economy (1632-1839).Utrecht 1981, 26-34; R. de Neve, A. van Heezink. Verbonden door het water, binnenvaart en zeehavens in Holland; in: E. Beukers. *Hollanders en het water, Twintig eeuwen strijd en profijt* deel I. Hilversum 2007, 230.
10. De Vries. Utrecht 1981, 29-30.
11. Country houses next to the second phase of barge canals weren't so close as country houses to the first phase of barge canals, which resulted in a different and more splintered pattern.
12. T. van Strien, *Hofwijck* het gedicht in T. van Strien, K. van der Leer. *Hofwijck, het gedicht en de buitenplaats van Constantijn Huygens*, Zutphen 2005 Zutphen 2005, 56-57.
13. Van Strien. Zutphen 2005, 58-59.
14. Van der Leer. Zutphen 2005, 97.

Further reading:

Over the years, Ton van Strien and Kees van der Leer have written numerous articles on *Hofwijck*, for example: T. van Strien, K. van der Leer. *Hofwyck, het gedicht en de buitenplaats van Constantijn Huygens*, Zutphen 2005.

The meaning of the garden and the relation with the poem is described by W.M. de Vries: „The Country house Immortalised; Constantijn Huygens' Hofwijck“, in: J. Dixon Hunt et al. *The Dutch Garden in the Seventeenth Century*. Washington D.C, 1990 (81-97).

The connection between landscape, country houses and infrastructure can be read in influence of landscape, G.A. Verschuure-Stuip: *Well-situated, analysis of country houses and country houses landscapes in Holland (1630-1730)*.Delft 2018. This can be read in a condensed version. G.A.Verschuure. „A pleasing view. Landscape and composition in the design of Holland's country houses (Dutch and English)“, in: *Over Holland 12/13*, 2012 (81-98).