

ANTWERP: Exhibition *Tamed Nature* exposes the hidden mechanisms behind urban greenery for the first time.

City greenery as a microcosm for urban change

What forces, ideals and dreams determine the place that nature occupies in a city? The exhibition *Tamed Nature* offers a unique perspective on the roots and future of urban greenery through the lens of Antwerp. Curator and researcher Bart Tritsmans: “For many, greenery in the city is a valuable bonus. Everyone takes it for granted, but in reality it often falls victim to multiple other interests.”

Opening lecture and vernissage on 16.09.2025 at 20:00

Exhibition | from 17 September 2025 to 1 February 2026

VAi in De Singel, Antwerp

Green as a solution to global warming

Cities are getting hotter and hotter due to the climate emergency. Bart Tritsmans, Dennis Pohl and Hülya Ertas, curators of the exhibition *Tamed Nature*, are convinced that the solution lies in a new alliance between nature and people. Nature, they argue, needs greater authority. According to Bart Tritsmans, global warming is forcing us to rapidly develop a vision for more green public space. He says: “It’s actually very simple: the best form of climate resilience is to plant trees. They provide natural shade and improve soil permeability.” But the reality is that we’re still rapidly densifying our cities through excessive programming and the privatization of open space. “Pervasive commercialization and market-driven visions stand in the way of a greener city,” Tritsmans continues. “Nature and its users deserve more say; they must be given the opportunity to reclaim public space.” Dennis Pohl further emphasizes the social aspect of urban greenery: “Green zones play a major role in the social cohesion of a city. They create places where people from different backgrounds and social classes can meet. It makes them almost automatically inclusive.”

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Centuries–old friction between nature and people

The exhibition focuses on the complex relationship between nature and the built environment. It opens with a historical overview from 1860 to the present day, showing that the tension between humans and nature is centuries old and still unresolved. *Tamed Nature* offers a unique perspective on how architects and urban planners have, over time, devised solutions and experiments in response to all manner of social challenges. Tritsmans: “Today’s climate crisis is having a major impact on metropolitan life. Whereas in the nineteenth century, it was the burgeoning population that led to urban expansion.” The year 1860 marked the start of what was then called modern urban planning, in which green spaces became part of urban planning and development for the first time. “The focus back then was on taming nature so that it could be integrated into the cityscape,” explains Tritsmans. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, nature was often feared – seen as a source of pests and disease – and therefore had to be controlled. To combat vandalism and undesirable behaviour, the authorities sought to inform people about how to conduct themselves in natural surroundings. As a result, urban greenery was strictly regulated. Many residents consequently sought out vacant lots beyond Antwerp’s walls, appropriating them for activities that were prohibited in the city. The exhibition reveals today’s debates are part of, and a consequence of, tensions that have long existed between the various users of public space. The curators are critical of how green spaces are currently managed in the city, yet they remain hopeful for change.

“You can clearly deduce what is happening in a society by looking at its green spaces.”

– Bart Tritsmans, curator, *Tamed Nature*

Greater agency for nature and its users

One of the exhibition’s propositions is that nature should be a determining factor in how we shape and experience our cities and surroundings. *Tamed Nature* is a call to change our perspective on the living world. “We need to move away from the romanticized view of green spaces, where humans determine the ideal image, and instead look at what nature needs,” says Pohl. The exhibition shows how citizens are advocating for green spaces, thereby giving agency to nature – something that has always been the case. “Throughout history, people have taken to the streets to defend green spaces,” notes Tritsmans. “A prime example is the construction of Antwerp’s Stadspark in 1860, when a large promenade had to be removed. The city council received a petition from 6,000 Antwerp residents demanding that the promenade on the city ramparts be preserved. It shows that activism is nothing new and that people feel emotionally attached to public green spaces.”

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Antwerp as a microcosm

From the first city parks in the nineteenth century to the rise of climate activism in the second half of the twentieth, Antwerp's transformation reflects global shifts in power relations, spatial and social ideals, and attitudes to nature and ecology. Antwerp serves as an ideal case study. "By taking a closer look at Antwerp's history, we get a fascinating cross-section of how nineteenth- and twentieth-century European cities dealt with green spaces," says Tritsmans. "In the nineteenth century, there was even a network of European cities that influenced each other in the construction of parks. A number of exhibits refer to exchanges between London, Paris and Antwerp, for example." Hülya Ertas notes the parallels between the evolution of Antwerp's historic city walls and those of Paris: "In both cities, the surrounding walls were transformed into what later became the green slabs, the canal and the ring road." The exhibition also examines the influence of colonialism on urban greenery. "Many exotic plants were introduced to the city via the port of Antwerp," Pohl explains. "This had a major impact on the composition of the vegetation."

"Architecture exhibitions almost always focus on the built environment. This exhibition is a plea to look instead at places where nothing is being built. By focusing on open spaces, you begin to see your surroundings differently."

– Dennis Pohl, Director of VAI and co-curator of *Tamed Nature*

Hidden green stories

De Singel, where you can discover *Tamed Nature*, is itself exemplary of the exhibition's theme. When you step outside, you literally come face-to-face with one of its key elements: the Antwerp ring road. It appears in the exhibition three times, each from a different historical perspective – first, as a city wall with large green areas, then during the demolition of the ramparts with a competition for the construction of a green ring road, and finally during the controversial building of the motorway. "With *Tamed Nature*, we break through the gallery walls," says Tritsmans. "For the opening weekend, we've organized guided tours that start at De Singel and lead through the surrounding green spaces. Via anchor points and desire paths, you will discover fascinating stories behind seemingly mundane green spaces in the vicinity of De Singel."

Six contemporary art interventions

The curators have invited six contemporary artists to present new work reflecting on historical events or artefacts in the city. Biodiversity, a theme with pressing contemporary relevance, is addressed by **Maria Thereza Alves**. In her installation, she shows how plants can, in their own way, be self-determining. During the colonial period, seeds from all corners of the world were transported by ship – often via the port of Antwerp – where they

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took root and grew into plants. Alves maps this process in a unique way. **Mirja Busch** analyses Antwerp's ponds, testing them for harmful substances. Busch's work shows that our perception of nature diverges from reality; what we consider 'natural' is frequently highly polluted. **Feifei Zhou** takes an entirely different approach. In her speculative drawing *Acceleration*, she offers a unique perspective on the impact of large-scale urban and port developments on nature. **Dieter Van Caneghem** formulates a response to the well-known Hypsos map – a panoramic view developed for the 1913 World Exhibition in Ghent – which charted Antwerp's green spaces and their limits in terms of size and use. As a counterpoint, Van Caneghem maps how people informally claim and transform certain urban locations. Looking ahead, the Spanish architectural firm **TAKK** presents a speculative installation imagining how the plant life of a city, thirty years from now, will differ from today – and how this shift will transform the experience and appearance of our cities. *Tamed Nature* is multisensory. The curators have also commissioned an intervention by two sound artists, **Maarten Buyl and Raphael Malfliet**, who compose music using field recordings from the locations featured in the exhibition. This allows visitors to hear the sound of nature from these sites. An album will be released, especially for the exhibition.

“The exhibition is not a nostalgic return to a greener past, but a way to understand the present-shaped by decisions made by various actors in power. Central themes include the tension between wilderness and control, speculation, the conflict between preserving nature and exploiting it, and the instrumentalization of “green” as a tool for image-making.”

– Hülya Ertas, co-curator of *Tamed Nature*

Green activism

Contemporary interventions in the exhibition bridge the gap to the theme of activism. “Take Mirja Busch's research into the state of pond water, for example. In the nineteenth century, park ponds became polluted, posing a major risk for various diseases,” explains Tritsmans. “The city council decided to clean them up. The conclusion at the time was that wild nature is dangerous and must be strictly regulated and contained in an urban context.”

Maria Thereza Alves's work on biodiversity also has a historical precedent. In the 1920s, activists campaigned for the city to maintain its parks less frequently, allowing them to become more overgrown. They opposed the excessive planting of flower beds and recognized the value of leaving dead leaves on the ground to nourish the soil. Even then, there was a sense of giving nature more control.

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Dries Jageneau's slide collection is another striking part of the exhibition. An urban planning official and passionate activist, he used his camera to document the green activism and civic movements of the 1960s and 1970s. His slides capture the destruction of green spaces and the resulting civil protests – often involving highly playful actions. They form a unique record of the era and its spirit.

Green is political

In his book *Bomen zijn waardevolle bijkomstigheden* [Trees Are Valuable Extras], which inspired this exhibition, Bart Tritsmans argues that while everyone takes green spaces for granted, other interests tend to have the upper hand. "Throughout history, interests change," he says, "but one constant, unfortunately, is the continual sacrifice of green spaces for other purposes."

The curators point out that green spaces are often politically charged due to the presence of statues or other symbols, and that their meaning or value can change over time. "In Antwerp's Stadspark, there is still a column that celebrates colonial trade. Today, its appropriateness can be called into question," Tritsmans notes. How should we address the shifting meanings of politically charged symbols in our green spaces? How can we give them a more inclusive interpretation? *Tamed Nature* seeks to open this discussion.

"Every green space in the city is the result of a decision or a power struggle – whether politically, ideologically or economically driven. Tamed Nature reveals these underlying stories and mechanisms for the first time."

– Bart Tritsmans, curator *Tamed Nature*

The Nachtegalenpark opened in 1911 and its backstory is a prime example of real estate speculation. The city struck a deal with several wealthy families: in exchange for purchasing a swathe of green areas they owned, the families were granted control over the development plots surrounding the new park. As a result, the park is now encircled by chic villas. It is a clear example of how some people have agency over others when it comes to green spaces – and it also speaks volumes about the high economic value of urban greenery.

Exclusion/inclusion

Tamed Nature also highlights the importance of green spaces during times of crisis, such as a pandemic, the climate emergency, or war. Archive material shows how parks and verges were transformed into vegetable gardens during the Second World War to help supplement scarce food supplies. These spaces also offered people refuge from the pressures of

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occupation. “At the same time, it exposes mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, such as closing parks to Jewish citizens. This shows that green spaces in a city are a mirror of social tensions,” Tritsmans emphasizes.

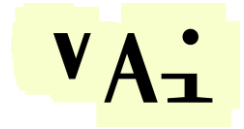
“Today, it goes without saying that parks are off-limits to cars. That wasn’t always the case. In early twentieth-century Antwerp, you could still drive your vehicle or carriage through all the parks. Thanks to three courageous women on Antwerp’s city council, that all changed in the 1930s.”

– Bart Tritsmans, curator, *Tamed Nature*

The need for more public swimming facilities is now a recurring theme in the news. Antwerp currently has only two outdoor swimming pools. The exhibition contrasts this with the past: in the 1920s and 1930s, outdoor recreation was widespread, taking many forms and scattered across the city. “We’re displaying unique archive material that immerses you in the world of yesteryear,” says Tritsmans. “Hopefully, it will inspire designers and policymakers to focus in earnest on this question.”

A gallery as a park

Architect Aslı Çiçek created the scenography, designing it as a meandering walk. Visitors move through the exhibition as if following a winding path in a park. The route is chronological, guiding them through the history of greenery in the city. At the centre of the gallery is a space to sit and relax, much like resting on a park bench. In the section entitled *Wild Growth*, visitors can reflect on the exhibition’s themes and displays in a more interactive way. “The layout contains elements of landscape design, such as ‘rooms’ or ‘vistas’ that offer a view, just as you would find in a park,” says Tritsmans.



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Exhibition

Getemde Natuur / Tamed Nature

From 17 September 2025 to 1 February 2026

DE SINGEL exhibition space

Desguinlei 25, 2018 Antwerp (BE)

Open Tuesday to Sunday

From 14:00 to 19:00, for evening performances until 22:00

€5 (tickets online and on site)

€0 (students, under 19, reduced rate/OMNIO and ICOM, tickets only available at the venue)

➤ [tickets](#)

Opening

Getemde Natuur / Tamed Nature

With a lecture by Eva Pfannes, OOOZE architects & urbanist

On 16.09.2025 at 20:00

DE SINGEL, Blue Hall

Desguinlei 25, 2018 Antwerp (BE)

€0 (registration required)

➤ [tickets](#)

Performance

The Sound of Tamed Nature

Esohe Weyden, Antwerp city poet

Maarten Buyl and Raphael Malfliet, sound artists

On 09.10.2025 at 20:00

DE SINGEL, Music Studio

Desguinlei 25, 2018 Antwerp (BE)

€0 (registration required)

➤ [tickets](#)

Press contact, VAI

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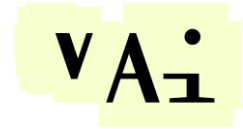
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Getemde Natuur / Tamed Nature

17.09.2025 – 01.02.2026

VAi in DE SINGEL

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Co-curators Hülya Ertas and Dennis Pohl

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With work by Maria Thereza Alves, Mirja Busch, Maarten Buyl & Raphael Malfliet, TAKK, Dieter Van Caneghem, and Feifei Zhou

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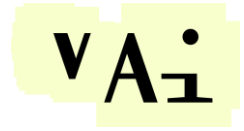
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