

# Earth Pilgrimages, Europe

A road of passage to a sustainable future



Gerry Dobbelaar - 'Naar de stad'

**Come, walk with us**

## **Background**

### ***"a planet in peril..."***

In his acceptance speech US president-elect Barack Husein Obama called the state of our planet "in peril". In danger. A broad consensus of scientists and NGO's agree.



They point to:

- Global warming - climate change
- A rapid depletion of resources (minerals, fuel, fertile land)
- A massive destruction of habitats and species.

These problems are attributed to an unsustainable pattern of consumption and production in the developed world. The developing world is emulating this pattern, thus exacerbating the problem.

There is momentum building up to make a change to sustainability. A growing number of companies is `going green`, an increasing number of people buy eco-products and governments around the world are starting to respond.

These efforts are encouraging, but not enough. The changes are too slow, while the problems are growing too fast.



→ We need a rallying call, a magnet for change that energizes all other efforts to make the passage to a sustainable future.

## **A rite to save the planet**

*A focuslens on what is important* – that's a definition of ritual from the scholar J.Z. Smith. *A unique means of communication* – that's another from the scholar S. Tambiah.

A team of ritual scholars with links to the Radboud University Nijmegen is looking into the potential of ritual as an inspiration for change to a green future. Ritual has served mankind to sanctify kings, bind communities and communicate with the Gods – why not look to ritual to save the planet?

This was the challenge put forward by Radboud's professor of Ritual Studies Ronald L Grimes. His student Damiaan Messing followed up with a bachelorthesis. Damiaan's brother Martijn then connected the Dutch NGO *De Kleine Aarde* (the small planet), which assigned the design of:

### **Earth Pilgrimages Europe: the basic idea**

The suggestion is to construct a pilgrimage route that embodies the value of sustainability. This is done by marking a road that leads to the most sustainable city of Europe where a symbol of sustainability is built: the Earth Landmark. This is a building uniquely designed for the pilgrimage and paid for by everyone who buys a symbolic stone. A tribute to the planet that you can touch and enter, inspiring a sense of connection and respect.

**Why pilgrimage?** Pilgrimages mark a new phase in

people's lives and connect to values that are important to them. For example, muslims pilgrimage to Mekka to strengthen their beliefs and become better muslims. Nowadays also non-religious people walk pilgrimages (such as the christian Santiago de Compestella) after study or recovery from disease to reorient themselves to what is important to them.

*Earth Pilgrimages Europe* is designed to do just that. It wants to mark a new phase in consumption and production and orient people to the value of sustainability. Everyone who wants to connect to the world and a sustainable future can walk the road. The more inspiring the Landmark, the more people that walk the road, the more forceful the cause of sustainability will be broadcast to the wider world.

The project has two phases:

### 1. **Earth Pilgrimages Europe 2009-2012**

In 2009 two open challenges are issued: one for cities and one for architects.

*Cities* across Europe are challenged to put forward their candidacy for the title `most sustainable city of Europe`. There will be clear benchmarks (e.g, public transport, energy, eco-planning etc.) and the nomination can be based on the `green` status quo of the day, but also on comprehensible plans for the future. A qualified jury will make a decision at the end of 2012.

*Architects* all over the world are challenged to put

forward a design for the Earth Landmark. Both the construction and the maintenance of the Landmark should be a showcase of sustainability. The building must inspire a sense of connection with the world and be open for people of all or no religion. The final design will be voted for at the end of 2012 by everyone who buys a symbolic stone, but a qualified jury will safeguard a set of minimum standards.

Thus, we have a three year process in which the best minds of architecture can inspire the best in cities. The winning city will be rewarded a monumental building, an image maker that attracts tourists and investors around the world and is paid for by everyone who buys a symbolic stone.

- Every Earth Landmark design is a media event for sustainability
- Every city that candidates for the site is a media event
- The green city eco-benchmarks work whether a city candidates itself or not. They serve as policy banners for local political parties, pressure groups, media, etc.

### 2. **Earth Pilgrimages Europe 2012+**

The pilgrimage road to the Earth Landmark offers individuals a physical opportunity to connect to the world and the value of sustainability. By walking, cycling or wheelchairs the road they show themselves and others they really care about a green future (`walk the talk`).

In addition, they will meet others on the road who share the same value, thus strengthening each other's commitment. A platform of meaningful encounters.



Last but not least, each pilgrim on the road is a signal to the wider community that such a commitment is important. The same signal function applies to the Earth Landmark, which can attract tourists not interested in sustainability and thus possibly engage them into a green future as well.

- The Earth landmark becomes a continuous signpost for sustainability that attracts both pilgrims that walk (part of) the route and tourists that visit the site.
  
- The route itself is a venue for the cause also, e.g.:
  - a string of licensed eco-hotels along the route;
  - personalized Hermes mileage stones, analogous to the Romans who put stones every so mile to mark the road. We can let people make their own stone or buy one with their name or footprint on it.
  - a `green` art project or pilgrimage peace trees adorning the road. People can buy these trees 2009+, the trees will first exist online on the Pilgrimage website until they can be planted somewhere.

## **Two important elements of the project**

Above is the baseline of the design. But there is more:

### **I. Sustainability commitments: `the walk of change`**

We want the pilgrimage road to make a difference and inspire people to cross the threshold of sustainability. For this, the project invites people to make a concrete commitment to such a passage by means of a `green` step.

The `green` step refers to the `global footprint` by which *De Kleine Aarde* measures the ecological impact of people on the planet. Worldwide there is 1.8 hectares available per human being (food, housing, fuel and minerals). The average Dutchman uses 4.4 ha. and the average American 9.5. With most developing countries aspiring to similar living standards, estimates are we soon need three planet earths.

To make an affluent livelihood available for everyone the footprint of developed nations must come down. Thus, the pilgrimage road engages with the effort of NGO's like *De Kleine Aarde* to (1) have people measure their global footprint, (2) advise them to adjust their lives to reduce this footprint. The `green` step is one's official commitment to implement adjustments and thus embark on `the road of change.`

### **What does a `green` step imply?**

Although we have to experiment with the precise format,

the basics look like this: [this can be done at home or at an NGO/media-stand] take off your shoe and sock, dip your feet into easy washable ink or paint and put your footprint on a piece of paper. This is your `green` step.

When dry, the step will be scanned and uploaded to the Pilgrimage website, where a virtual `walk of change` comes into being. Each step represents one extra individual making a `small step for man, but – together with all the others - a giant step for mankind`.

A less messy `green` step is to draw the contours of your foot. No scanner? Send it to a NGO in the network.



- The start will be slow, but once a momentum catches on, it can become something of which you just need to be part of...
- Each celebrity that uploads his or her `green` step is a media-event.
- People can have their `green` step eternalized in the real Pilgrimage road for a small fee. After 2012 their footprint will then be put with name on mileage stones, walls of eco-hotels or pavements along the road.

## II. Eco-fund Africa

There will be a number of opportunities to raise funds for the project, such as the purchase of symbolic stones for the Earth Landmark or the `green` steps eternalized along

the road after 2012. It would be a waste to use these and other opportunities only for symbolism, we can direct part of it to a concrete contribution to sustainability as well.

The proposed focus to do this is Africa. Africa is urbanizing fast. While European cities are mostly already built and need to reduce their footprint, most African cities and neighborhoods of the future are to be built yet. This is an opportunity to do it eco-right from the start.

Thus, the proposal is to found Eco-fund Africa immediately with the start of *Earth Pilgrimages Europe*. Every **50%** of income via purchases of stones, steps, etc. will be donated to the fund. With this fund we can do several things:

- Co-finance the building of eco-villages and eco-towns across Africa.
- Co-finance a showcase eco-neighborhood in an African city (and challenge cities for candidacy).
- Open an urban planner competition for an affordable plan to build such a neighborhood.

This way *Earth Pilgrimages Europe* works both for the promotion of sustainability in the developed world as in the developing world. The more success in the former (good-will, cash, etc.), the more potential to do eco-good in the latter.



### **Supporting rites and symbols**

To draw attention to the project and the cause of sustainability, we are designing the following supporting rites and symbols:

#### **A green Passage logo: the Green Gate**

The physical beginning of the Pilgrimage road will be the eco-park of *De Kleine Aarde* in Boxtel. But the symbolic beginning can be everywhere. Every home or company that makes a commitment to sustainability is the begin of a `road of change`.

Thus, while the physical road comes into being only after 2012, the symbolic road exists right from the start. It would therefore be a clever move to construct a `green` Passage logo, an icon that can be put in gardens, on city plazas, websites, etc.

One way to do this is an open gate. An open gate is like the door of a house: once you enter it, you step into a different space, another world if you like. The Green Gate is your passage to the `green` road. A step away from the path of destruction – “a planet in peril” - towards a sustainable future.



The advantage of choosing a gate or arc is we can use it both as logo and in `real` life. The minute we establish a Green Gate at the entrance of the eco-park of *De Kleine Aarde*, the Pilgrimage road has come into being.

→ Instead of designing a detailed Green Gate, a `plug-in` might do: an object you put in a gate/ doorway thereby transforming the existing one into a Green Gate.

For example, if you hang a small earth ball from the post or arc, the symbol transforms the entrance. An alternative is a flower pot in the shape of an earth (out pops a happy flower) you put at one or both sides of the entrance, like guards standing post.

→ A sophisticated green Passage logo can be licensed to eco-consultancies that survey the footprints of companies and sign contracts with them to reduce it. The company then officially is on `the road of change`.

#### **Engage children: Earth Day rite (+)**

*`We did not inherit the earth from our parents, we have borrowed it from our children` - Indian saying*

A sustainable livelihood is an act of responsibility to later generations (children, grandchildren etc.). We should therefore engage these generations. One way to do this is by letting children make small, fragile clay earth balls

which they give to (grand)parents, family members, neighbors, etc. It is a ritual gesture symbolizing the above Indian saying.

This can be done annually on Earth Day (22. April). If we suggest this rite to the global Earth Day network it may become a global annual rite. While the rite can be done at every home, it would be smart to have official versions where a small clay earth ball is presented by a child to a mayor, a business leader or even the prime-minister.

The rite is open to all sorts of `green` messages, such as the invitation to adults to measure their global footprint and take appropriate action. This way, the annual rite works as a target, an annual check date on your progress in footprint reduction.

- It would be nice to have the clay earth balls made by children in developing countries. The earths are then colored by children in developed countries.
- We can organize an `earth ball relay`, comparable to the Olympic torch relay, where a small earth is given from adult to adult along a route right across Europe. It should be an honor to carry the earth further.  
Extra: to make this earth ball special we could fill it with a little bit of earth from all countries in Europe.

## Earth Walks

To draw attention to the project and start the `walk of change` from the beginning, *Earth Walks* might be a good idea. These walks are inspired by Dutch prix-de-Rome artist Yvonne Wendel Dröge, who set lose a *Black Ball* in cities around the world from 2001 till now. This four meter big felt ball found its way through cities spontaneously, carried on by happy by-standers and tourists cherishing photo-ops.



The *Earth Walks* would employ an *Earth Ball* of four meters big, that will be the axis of a green rally, a cheerful demonstration where the ball is zig-zagging across the heads of the crowd. The rallies should be merry with music, people dressed up in green, led by respected public figures etc. A veritable rallying call for sustainability and an open invitation to step onto `the road of change`.

- We can have one unique *Earth Ball* that tours across Europe or several national versions that are marched across countries.



- In the first option the *Earth Ball* will be more precious and probably grab more crowds and media attention everywhere it goes. In the second option more people are able to get involved and `walk the talk`.

A 2006 **pilgrimage success story**

The German tv-comic Hape Kerkeling made a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella after a disease. He wrote a book about the importance of the road for his life: the contemplation, the encounters with other pilgrims. His book sold millions of copies and many people - religious and non religious - followed his steps.

