



# Merovingian Ring-Fort

An ambiguous memorial and a site design response.

by Julian Raxworthy

opposite  
The floating viewing platform looks out  
towards the Rhine.

below, top to bottom  
Looking along the circular-shaped bench;  
the existing path through the rampant has  
been dramatised; approaching the  
Coreten steel steps.

■ One could argue that there are as many approaches to site specificity as there are specific sites. Each site has a variety of influences such as visibility and natural and cultural histories. Human impositions that endure do so because of some canniness, some appreciation of how the current will live with the past.

In the aftermath of postmodernism, being “sensitive” to sites has become a mantra. This sensitivity is characterized by a preservation of the old and juxtaposition of the new, using the difference between the two to “highlight” the passing of time. Such an approach presents the past as made up of a series of contemporary situations. Over time history is revealed by the accumulated differences. From this methodology, a form and material language has developed, particularly in Europe, that has become a “sign” for specificity. In the early 1990s architects Torres and Lapeña used “precise insertions” of function within antique contexts to deal with contemporary requirements for access, inserting stairs and ramps through medieval cityscapes. These insertions were mass forms made from contemporary materials such as concrete and steel. Their relative crudeness stood in contrast to the fineness of the historic forms and materials, and these materials also lent themselves to the development of a patina, to a finish somehow sympathetic to age.

Dutch landscape architect Michael van Gessel, working with Wim Wijsman (also a landscape architect), used this language to great effect in their recent renovation of a Merovingian ring-fort on the Rhine. On an alluvial hill overlooking the delta, near the south-eastern border with Germany, the Netherlands site has a long history of combat. Between the fifth and eighth centuries BCE it was a strategically located fort for a Merovingian community, a Frankish people who ruled the lowlands and traded with the Romans. A half circle of elevated mound remains, two metres high, ending at a cliff overlooking the flood plain. The Battle for Grebbeberg with the Germans in 1940 was an important loss for the Dutch, and it is remembered with a monument on the adjacent highway leading out from the town of Wageningen. The project comprises clearing the site back to the topography and trees to reveal the mound and insertion that cross it and activate it. The project is interesting both as an ambiguous memorial and as a site design response, with an emphasis on minimal intervention and maximum site expression.



## Merovingian Ring-Fort

below

The arced timber bench is a node on the circular space it inhabits.



project  
Merovingian ring-fort  
renovation  
landscape architects  
Michael van Gessel  
Wim Wijsman

Circulation is not governed by the carefully choreographed sequence that one has come to expect of the contemporary memorial, but rather has developed on the basis of the physiology of the land and its historic occupation. As a visitor one chooses a direction based on the way the landscape moves one, and the design then presents one with a vehicle for movement. An entry path from the memorial on the highway takes one through a pine forest to meet the mound perpendicularly. The mound is crossed with a cutting retained by a Coreten steel wall. The walls conceal a set of steps on each side, leading to the top of the mound. The profile of the steel is not a highly formed wall; rather, it is cut to the clunky shape of the mound. The proportion of the space and detail is slightly off, making the space quite intimate, and the form the result of the site's shape rather than any design imposition.

Further along the top of the mound a set of steps, also made of steel, climbs from one side, crosses the path and descends down the other side, into a large, open, grassed area in the centre of the ring mound. The path stops at the edge of the escarpment. Hanging over the edge is a lookout beautifully detailed to be very thin, with a view out over the Rhine. From the escarpment lookout one moves into the centre of the circle, past an exaggerated arced timber bench beneath trees. Compared with the restraint of the insertions along the mound, the geometry of the seat creates a node on the circle rather than working strictly with the shape of the space. On the other side of the enclosed area an existing brick building has been incorporated into the mound, with a similar set of steps climbing beside it. The project's formal language is slightly uncomfortable but the project is exemplary in the way it engages visitors and then moves them through the space.

We have seen many examples of this language as a template for dealing with the old, but that does not make such a strategy inappropriate. The recent co-winner of the Rosa Barba European Award for Landscape Architecture – the Parc de Pedra Tosca in Olot, Spain, by RCR Pigem Vilalta Architects – and, locally, the BP Park in Waverton by McGregor and Partners both use a similar approach effectively. It is interesting to note that an approach to specificity has become, in itself, unspecified. As with music genres, we have to be careful that it does not become a universal formula thoughtlessly used by less skilled designers. ■