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***Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände
and Berlin's Urban Nature***

In-depth text

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Berlin, the emergence of an urban nature

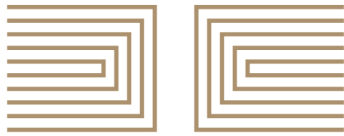
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Over the last fifty years or so, Berlin has developed a much-noted idea of urban nature that among cities represents a development of its own kind. Its distinctiveness is worth investigating and elucidating, also as a stocktaking of the results and achievements of this development. Because, more than thirty years after the fall of the Wall, in a time of dynamic urban development, Berlin is currently facing the challenge of redefining the culture of its open spaces.

Taking an interest in Berlin's urban structure is nothing new, and individual examples of its open spaces and diverse landscape architectures have been the subject of much debate both among experts and within the city itself. The *Park am Gleisdreieck* became the talk of the town at the latest after its western section opened in 2013. The community garden *Prinzessinnengärten* at Moritzplatz, at least until its migration in 2019 in the wake of the burgeoning development of the Kreuzberg neighbourhood, was frequently cited internationally as a model of urban gardening and thus of the social role played by the appropriation of open spaces by citizens' initiatives. The appreciation and aesthetics of public open spaces peculiar to Berlin was demonstrated in the 2014 referendum on keeping unchanged and not further developing the extensive open spaces of Tempelhofer Feld. The more or less untouched post-infrastructure expansion of the former airfield has now also become a defining image of the city of Berlin. Berlin has played a pioneering role among (European) cities and has shaped the discourse on landscape architecture, as posited in 2004 by Christophe Girot when comparing three park projects that had opened recently at the time – *Mauerpark* (1994), *Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände* (1999) and *Tilla-Durieux-Park* at Potsdamer Platz (2003). However, the particularity of Berlin's landscape culture appears to transcend individual signature projects and to have extensive cultural and disciplinary ramifications. It therefore seems appropriate to regard the individual open spaces as constituents of a broader culture of public space.

The 'Berlin mixture,' describing a mixed-use, dense urban structure (encompassing the facets of civic-mindedness, ecology and open space quality) and proclaimed in connection with the International Building Exhibition IBA 1987 as a hopeful post-modern model for life in the city, could perhaps serve as a figure of thought for further discussion in this context. Beyond the Wilhelminian block structure and, since 1989, beyond the particular historical spatial constellation of the divided city, the becoming and being of the open spaces could perhaps be termed as 'Berlin open space mixture'. A mixture that, beyond functions or typologies, by overlapping and combining aspirations and expertise in diverse disciplines, has translated wastelands into a web of coexisting and interacting vibrant open space. A mixture, emerging from collaboration and combined effects, whose success also appears to have overcome initial distrust and lines of demarcation. From its beginnings in individual experiments, this Berlin open space mixture has become a characteristic everyday constituent of the city's urban life.

These *Freiräume* (free spaces), most of which are open all the time, including at night, are accessible, usable and tangible. The interaction with these spaces is immediate. In Berlin, touch, play, a high degree of (social) appropriation and freedom of use are significant aspects of the way in which individuals utilise the open space. Private, communal and public living spaces are



intertwined. I recall the astonishment of visitors from abroad upon first encountering Berlin's parks, where naked people sunbathe, and picnics and parties go on into the night.

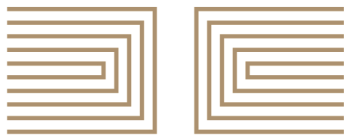
These open spaces seem to be everywhere, for one, because of their sheer quantity and wide distribution across the city. The city's extensive disused railway sites, the former border zone between East and West Berlin, the enormous tracts of land occupied by other infrastructure, such as airfields, as well as the post-war wastelands, facilitated the development of a public space network that has infiltrated the everyday lives of Berliners. Many of these locations remain derelict – a state that in Berlin, arguably unlike anywhere else, always presents both aesthetic and social opportunities. Here, the invention of a distinctly urban idea of nature is a matter not only of urban ecology, but also of an open-space culture that is a way of life and has become part of the city's essence. Berlin's urban nature or, to quote the title of the film by the geographers, urbanists and cultural critics Matthew Gandy and Sandra Jasper, *Natura Urbana*,¹ is a field of research and, in particular, a field trial of urban life with a broad temporal and spatial dimension.

The extensive open spaces and urban interstitial spaces in the metropolis, which in the European context is very young and has grown extremely fast, came to be appreciated as systematic urban space configurations at the latest when Berlin was formally recognised as a large city in the 1920s.² After the Second World War, urban structural reality was redefined by a plethora of open spaces and wasteland, the character of which was complemented by rubble sites in once dense city blocks and former industrial zones, and by the vast railway wildernesses – the remains of what used to be the largest rail hub in Europe – created by the combined forces of armed conflict and division. After the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, the structurally connected empty spaces remaining between the two cities and political systems were added to the mix, again over a wide area. Alongside the strip of land occupied by the Wall zone itself, these included numerous other areas whose historical functionality changed radically, such as airports, military facilities and the remnants of planned but suddenly obsolete infrastructure.³

Referencing the mid-19th century painting *Rear of House and Backyard* by Adolph Menzel, Matthew Gandy speculates that the aesthetic presence of urban interstitial spaces, wasteland and construction sites in the everyday life of Berliners is rooted in history.⁴ At this point, the reference must initially be seen as a presumption of historical depth, but that does not make it any less interesting.

In these subjects of Menzel, a painter who was a committed Realist, can be read an aesthetic pragmatism in the treatment of the facts. One could regard this quasi-fatalistically as dealing with the given circumstances, as grudging recognition of a predicament that was later to be described many times over in the famous dictum labelling the city of Berlin as condemned to become and never to actually be.⁵ But this aesthetic pragmatism can also be read as the basis of Berlin's good fortune, as in Albert Camus' reading of the condemned Sisyphus as a happy man. Or one can take a second famous statement about the city, the *bon mot* of the former mayor Klaus Wowereit, who in 2003 described Berlin as 'poor but sexy,' which at any rate also implies a shift towards a positive, creative treatment of the circumstances.

In the last thirty years, alongside the existing and developing urban interstitial spaces and areas of wasteland, a large number of different parks and open spaces have emerged 'officially'. They differ in size and character, form and function, and as regards both individual history and spatial typology. The clear-sighted study *Greening Berlin* (2013) by the sociologist Jens Lachmund is an illuminating account of the structural relationships underpinning the emergence of these open spaces in the city. Essentially covering the period after the Second World War, Lachmund details the historical, scientific, political and social conditions and influences of the 'co-production' of urban nature. The book refrains, however, from a closer examination of the role played by design and landscape architects, even though the design attitude and approach that has developed in the wake of this co-production is a defining characteristic of the Berlin open space mixture. Notwithstanding the idiosyncrasies of individual designers, in practically every case there is evidence of a highly specific response to the local circumstances, the integration of citizens and civic-mindedness, and a decidedly sensitive treatment of the sites' ecological factors,



especially their regularly encountered spontaneous vegetation. A minimalist design regime is almost mandatory in view of the challenges presented by the enormous footprint of the sites. The pressure of public use and a simple, reduced form of stewardship, care and maintenance are realities underpinning the design strategies here. This results in a rather cautious economy of intervention of the designs.

Landscape design and architectural experiments addressing the relationship between the city and ecology have been taking place in Berlin since the International Building Exhibition IBA 1987 at the latest. Many of the quite successful experiments can still be seen today. Reflecting on the topic of urban nature in Berlin has brought to my mind again the university lecturer and landscape architect Hans J. Loidl, who retired in 2005. His teaching and the projects he produced in the 1980s and 1990s (as yet not published collectively), on the threshold of an urbanistic turning point, in many respects incorporate key characteristics that continue to underpin Berlin's open spaces. These include a sensitive treatment of the site and its – also social – morphology (connecting pathways, spatial separation), giving consideration to the aesthetic relationship between ecology and design, and to the use of simple 'natural landscape' design themes which – as in the case of dense birch woodland – demonstrated a great aesthetic proximity to the then omnipresent 'undesigned' areas of wasteland. Early attempts at greening facades and roofs and at rainwater management in the immediate context of the residential environment touched on many of the issues that we now see as matters of urgency as we contemplate resilient urban redevelopment in the light of the climate crisis.⁶ Design and construction endeavours such as these, alongside city-wide ecological biotope mapping and the creation of a detailed environmental atlas, together provide the systematic common basis for investigating and inventing a vibrant urban nature, from which Berlin now appears to be benefiting – with a clear lead over other cities.

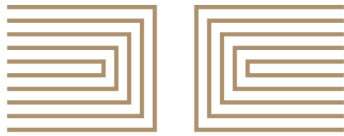
From a landscape architecture perspective alone, it would appear to be a good time to recognise the existing qualities of places and landscapes. A good thirty years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the city finds itself in a situation in which the presence and use of urban nature are now, to a large extent, accepted without question. At the same time, however, the city is undergoing accelerated development in response to substantial population growth. As a result, Berlin's urban structure is inevitably changing – marginal spaces are becoming rarer and public open spaces are being governed by a new – including social – economic order. Against this background, it is important to remain aware of and preserve the exceptional quality and potential of Berlin's culture of embracing urban nature as a way of life.

How can these insights be brought together, presented and shared? The history of the described open spaces is both complex and diverse, and in many cases it spans decades and continues to unfold.

The joint reflections on Berlin of the Scientific Committee of Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche culminated in a journey in September 2021. We embark on journeys perhaps in hope, on a hunch. We set off without knowing it for sure, without being able to know it, even without wishing to know it (entirely). And upon our return we report, share our experiences and disclose our findings. Is it possible even to regard travel, a journey, as a research technique in its own right? Isn't it precisely that by necessity as far as the landscape and its investigation are concerned? During a week of profound encounters with places and people – along the working title 'inventing urban nature' – we came to appreciate the extensive and multilayered interdependence of the places. But it was *Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände*, that stood out as quasi-avant-garde. For practically everyone we met on our journey, the Südgelände was a topic of discussion and reference point – if only for the sake of drawing a distinction.

That which is known, or ostensibly known, is only the starting point of our awareness. After a first pointer, we begin to see more, to make more connections between things.

The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens is a unique award. Its thematic scope extends beyond the particular place, the prize is not presented in recognition of a project that can be clearly defined in the physical or conceptual sense. *Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände* is not only spatially connected to a series of other examples of Berlin's 'urban nature culture,' but is also to be



seen in the context of the urban structure as a multidisciplinary, multipolar joint creation. In this respect, this publication on the Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände is not a conclusive report, but is intended to serve as the starting point for further research. It seeks to tell the story of, and evoke, the specific place, to give an account of its history, particularities and protagonists. However, it sets out to present this history as a gateway to a broader understanding of a city that has developed an exceptional relationship with nature and conveys a distinctive mental picture of 'urban nature'. Natur Park Schöneberger Südgelände holds the key to the characteristics and values of the ensemble of places in Berlin that now embody this concept of 'urban nature'.

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1. *Natura Urbana. The Brachen of Berlin*, written and directed by Matthew Gandy and co-authored by Sandra Jasper, United Kingdom-Germany, 72', 2017.
2. See also the contribution by Stefanie Hennecke, *Berlin: a brief history of its parks*, on the book, pp. 118-123.
3. "The Berlin voids are an inherent part of the city; and it seems that each time they get replaced or filled, the city falls out of balance. This fragmentation and fragility is perhaps the most perfect expression of our times, times where the comprehension of and attention to the *genius loci* of a place remains the only key to good landscape design," GIROT 2004, p. 39.
4. GANDY 2012.
5. SCHEFFLER 1910. See also the contribution by Juan Manuel Palerm, *The wild nature of the wastelands. On Berlin, 'urban nature,' architecture, art and the void as project material. The case of Natur-Park Schöneberger Südgelände*, on the book, pp. 217-230.
6. See also *Berlin and the development of contemporary landscape culture*, Gabriele G. Kiefer in conversation with Thilo Folkerts, on the book, pp. 163-172.

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