

Thilo Folkerts
**Berlin – Another Space,
Another Place**

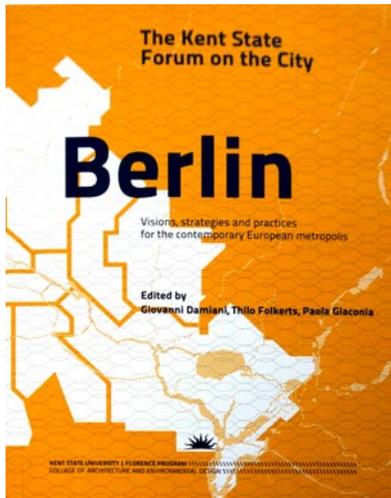
Introduction

*Paola Giaconia,
Thilo Folkerts, Giovanni Damiani (Ed.)
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When Luka Skansi lectured at the Forum on the European City he quoted the famous Prussian architect Karl-Friedrich Schinkel with a drawing that depicts the transposition of the Milan Cathedral into a picturesque natural setting. The well known church's spires protrude thinly through the canopy of a wooded hillside. The projected slide image also read a quote by Schinkel that calls for a changing perception of "the classic monument" through envisioning it in the context of a natural environment. With this introductory call from history, Luka Skansi nevertheless pinpointed the underlying theme that informed the conference on contemporary Berlin and that kept resurfacing among the individual contributions.

One might expect that the post-war, post-Cold War metropolis Berlin bustles with building sites, amassing formative architectural monuments by the dozen. The outlook of the invited architects, landscape architects, urban planners, journalists and historians, however, convenes in stating, that Berlin's urban fascination and potential is largely based on urban and open space; its context, content, and process validating the architecture. Where we might consider architectures' natural environment – some two hundred years after Schinkel – as almost necessarily being an environment of urban space, dedicating the 2013 edition of the Kent State Forum on the City to Berlin also means to cast an eye on a shift in perceiving the city—and on the role that architects and architecture might play in it. In observing the city's structural background, its opportunities and strains of recent developments, the invited speakers presented, interpreted and discussed their outlook on a broader idea of the city beyond individual practices.

Luka Skansi laid out the very conscientious mise-en-scène of Schinkel's architectural projects within and through its spatial context and recognized the historic continuity of this practice in the projects of German avant-garde architects of the 1920s. Jeanette Kunsmann with her journalistic background sent out provocative warning signals about today's urban culture in Berlin. For her, hipness and the city's promise of being a land of possibilities is not only lately betrayed by a general lack of ambition that keeps Berlin chafing at the bit: a city always at the beginning. Architect and urban planner Ali Saad tells two well rooted stories of the same city, comparing "urban visions and realities". He looks at the broad and structural



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A Point of Departure

Is Berlin an exemplary city? Why might it be interesting to look at Berlin when studying urbanity? It is long past being a shocking headliner that our world has globally become urban. The *total urbanization* that Henri Levebvre forecast in the 1970s has become real. As of 2010, for the first time in history, more people world wide live in cities than in rural settings¹. By the middle of this century their share is forecast to reach 80 percent.² This immanently creates a plethora of urgent issues, including economics, social justice, infrastructure or sustainability. It also pressingly poses cultural questions about how we want to live in the cities.

Central part of the process of urbanization is the dissolution and reformulation of the dialectic relationship between the city and the landscape, between man and nature. As a city that has characteristically been full of open space, Berlin might be considered a point in case. While very young among the venerable European cities, Berlin's becoming a metropolis happened very fast. It was based on the amalgamation of a great number of different settlements. On top of this, the various historic and political ruptures have added greatly to its fragmented character that features and fosters an intricate engagement of landscape and the city. Nature and landscape *within* the city are an integral part of Berlin's urban structure.

After Containment

When then wall came down in 1989 it was easy to suspect that—especially West Berliners—would flock to enjoy nature and landscape in the surroundings, finally accessible after the years of containment. But the changes in the relationship of the city with the Brandenburg *Umland*, were relatively small. The Berliner has everything right around him; he finds relaxation and leisure venues *within* the city, a kind of urban inner emigration.

This immediate relationship of the city with its open spaces can be traced back quite a while. Even before Berlin had any sizable stature as a city, the now centrally located *Tiergarten* was opened to the public as early as the end of the 17th century. With the advent of modernism and its new urbanistic programs, Berlin was one of the foremost experimental terrains in the

ideation of the *Volkspark*, a concept that structurally provided openly accessible green spaces³ and included a wide scope of programs that included any thinkable urban outdoor activity. As a city building commissioner in the late 1920's, the architect Martin Wagner conceived the *Strandbad Wannsee* as a "Weltstadtbad", a metropolitan public bath, which is still the largest inland lido in Europe, featuring a kilometer long beach and a facility building that spans some 540m.⁴ The *Siedlungen*, the residential estates of the *Neues Bauen* movement,⁵ at the beginning of the 20th century, deal with the question of how the inhabitants relate to nature and landscape – essentially within the building structures. In *Mr. K. and Nature*, one of the *Stories of Mr. Keuner*, written between 1934 and 1956, Bertold Brecht writes: "Asked about his relationship to nature, Mr. K. said: 'Now and then I would like to see a couple of trees when I step out of the house. (...): 'Why, if you want to see trees, do you not simply take a trip into the country?'" he was asked. Mr. Keuner replied in astonishment: "I said, I would like to see the when I step out of the house.""⁶

Urban Agriculture

The estates' urbanistic design became trail-blazing for the city planning of the entire 20th century. Beyond schematic, open green spaces the landscape architect Leberecht Migge had qualified the modernist urban nature to include gardening as part of the socially ambitious urbanistic programs. Migge, a central figure in the conception of some of the most important of these settlements⁷ propagated privately usable gardens as an extension of the living space, self-sustenance and social collaboration.⁸ While Berlin has never been short of gardens that have used and reverted fallow lands and interstitial spaces within the city, such ideas have recently found well-publicized reverberation in the iconic *Prinzessinnengärten* project in Berlin-Kreuzberg. This popular social and ecological initiative has since 2009 turned a centrally located brownfield into an urban agriculture, notably under the premise of being an "urban" laboratory⁹—*not* promising a moment *away* from the city.

Discovery of Ruderal Aesthetic

Paired with the Berliners' penchant for their immediate surrounding, the enclosed city island of West-Berlin with its many post-war gaps, and disconnected, fallow infrastructural sites was a haven for the study of urban habitats. Not surprising, that West-Berlin was one of the early hubs of the new science of urban ecology towards the end of the 1970s. The agile activities of interest groups for nature protection, substantiated by scientific data and the synchronous informal annexation of numerous brownfield sites by residents brought a strong focus on the ecological, social, cultural and not least economic functionalization of these sites as part of Berlin's urban fabric.¹⁰ Where in 2000, after twenty years of negotiation, the eighteen hectares of the *Natur Park Südgelände*¹¹ could be officially opened as a hybrid of a park, yet landscape and nature protection zone, fitted with striking metal path constructions and artworks, many other parks followed closely in its footsteps. The ruderal aesthetic and functionality of the reclaimed post-industrial and post-infrastructural nature has since become integral part of the Berlin green space policy. The more important ones are the seventy hectare *Landscape Park Adlershof* (2003) on a pioneering airfield of the 1910s, or the *Park am Nordbahnhof* (2009) on part of the former wall zone. Two years after Tempelhof airport was closed, the *Tempelhofer Freiheit* on Berlin's former joined the club in 2010—essentially by simply opening the fences to the former airfield. The some three-hundred hectares (larger than Tiergarten (210ha) and almost as large as New York's Central Park that covers 340ha) are now fiercely fought over for urban qualification and development (largely based on the given ruderal aesthetic of the site) versus the dogmatic 100% conservation of the post-infrastructural status-quo.¹²

Negotiating Urban Ecologies

The latest opening of a large official open space was *Park am Gleisdreieck* (2011/2013).¹³ Centrally located, directly next to Potsdamer Platz, on twenty-six hectares of a former

railroad track field, the park successfully merges design for sports and leisure, nature protection and the integration of authentic relics of the site's infrastructural past. The designers, Atelier Loidl, used self-conscious, yet matter of course measures to integrate the necessities of a highly frequented new park with the manifold interjections of the residents, of whom many opted for ruderal nonchalance over conventional lawn and trees. The park features private allotment gardens, unaltered nature experience zones for kids, and—without any fences—the industrial relics of the railway tracks that are grown over by ruderal vegetation. Only small signs communicate that these areas are not covered by the city's liability. At Gleisdreieck Park, the visitor is given his own responsibility to define and interact with nature. In essence, this means committing to the negotiation of an urban ecology that acknowledges urban nature to not be just a cultural artifact on its return to a humanly uncontrolled state. Rather, it is valued as something much more: as an integral, and adaptable part of urban live.

Guarding the Riches

In 1908, the Berlin architect, designer, writer, and teacher August Endell wrote: "... the city as landscape, as colorful permanently changing image provides a wealth, an abundance that long sequences of mankind will never exhaust."¹⁴ Berlin, a city that has lacked strong economic protagonists, is renown for its cultural as much as spatial openness. This seems to be the city's currency, as the Berlin mayor, Klaus Wowereit is constantly being re-quoted: "Berlin is poor, but it is sexy. Our pockets are empty, but we have all the possibilities. That is our luxury."¹⁵ While the city may possibly rely on its inexhaustible wealth, the urban tissue is apt to change, or as Karl Scheffler put it in 1910, Berlin is a city *condemned forever to becoming and never to being*.¹⁶ In this dynamic openness is something worthwhile guarding. It is one of the reasons for the exemplary character of Berlin.

As designers we can learn from Berlin: The acknowledgement of the unfinished makes our urban world more adaptable to change. It will make our cities even more livable. Speaking with Lucius Burckhardt by always looking for the *smallest possible intervention*¹⁷ we can keep spaces open.

1 www.who.int/gho/urban_health/situation_trends/urban_population_growth_text/en/

2 Ralf Fücks, Vorwort. In: Heinrich Böll Foundation (ed.), *Urban Futures 2050 - Szenarien und Lösungen für das Jahrhundert der Städte*. Schriften zur Ökologie, Bd. 18, Berlin, 2011, p.7. www.boell.de/sites/default/files/Endf_Urban_Futures_2050.pdf

3 as manifested f.e. in the CIAM's "The Athens Charter" (1933) call for light, air, and sun. The 26ha Volkspark Humboldthain (designed by Gustav Meyer from 1869-1876) was one of the earlier examples of a park for recreation of all citizens. Another important example is the 146 ha Volkspark Jungfernheide (designed by Erwin Barth 1920 -1926).

4 Rolf Lautenschläger, *Baden in der Großbaustelle, die tageszeitung* 28.06.2006 . <http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/archiv/?dig=2006/06/28/a0270>.

5 Listed among the UNESCO World Heritage Sites since 2008.

6 A story frequently quoted by the Swiss landscape architect Dieter Kienast. Bertolt Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner, City Lights*, San Francisco, 2001

7 among others the Horseshoe Estate in Berlin-Britz, 1925 with Bruno Taut and Martin Wagner, or Onkel Toms Hütte development in Berlin-Zehlendorf, 1926 1929 with Bruno Taut, Hugo Häring, Hans Poelzig and Otto Rudolf Salvisberg.

8 David H. Haney: *When Modern was Green: Life and Work of Landscape Architect Leberecht Migge*. Routledge, London/ New York 2010

9 <http://prinzessinnengarten.net/>

10 For an extensive research of the historic and scientific development see: Jens Lachmund, *Greening Berlin – Co-Production of Science, Politics and Urban Nature*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA/London, 2013

11 ÖkoCon, *planland, Odious*, 2000. <http://www.gruen-berlin.de/parks-gaerten/natur-park-suedgelaende/>

12 initiative 100% Tempelhofer Feld. www.thf100.de

13 <http://www.gruen-berlin.de/parks-gaerten/park-am-gleisdreieck/>

14 August Endell, *Die Schönheit der grossen Stadt*, Stuttgart, 1908. www.cloud-cuckoo.net/openarchive/Autoren/Endell/Endell1908.htm#TM33

15 <http://www.berlindesignblog.de/index.php/leere-taschen-arm-aber-sexy/>

16 „Berlin ist eine Stadt, verdammt dazu, ewig zu werden, niemals zu sein“ Karl Scheffler, *Berlin: Ein Stadtschicksal*, 1910

17 Note the recent release of selected writings in English: Jesko Fezer, Martin Schmitz (eds): *Lucius Burckhardt Writings: Rethinking Manmade Environments. Politics, Landscapes & Design*, Springer Vienna, 2012